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THE MEDIA AND FEAR OF CRIME: A SURVEY OF THE RESEARCH

*Sarah Eschholz**

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I. INTRODUCTION

Crime in the United States has been declining since 1980.¹ The Uniform Crime Reports estimated an 11% decrease in the rate of violent crime between 1980 and 1995.² This decline is also reflected in a 4% reduction in violent crime between 1980 and 1992 reported by the National Crime Victimization Survey.³ While crime rates remained relatively constant, the incarcerated population increased by 242% between 1980 and 1995.⁴ Why, then, with crime rates declining, do we continue to pursue an increasingly punitive criminal justice agenda? The increase in the incarcerated population is, in part, a result of more prison sentences being given for nonviolent crimes than previously. This is partly a policy response to a substantial level of fear of crime informed by media representations of crime.

Americans spend one-third of their leisure time watching television.⁵ Both television and newspapers have been found to greatly overrepresent the

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1. U.S. GOV'T PRINTING OFFICE, U.S. DEP'T OF JUSTICE, CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES — 1995 (1996).

2. *Id.*

3. BUREAU OF JUST. STAT., U.S. DEP'T OF JUST., BULL. NCJ-151658, CRIMINAL VICTIMIZATION, 1993, at 6 (1995). Methodological changes in collecting victimization data in 1993 make comparisons between earlier years unreliable. *Id.* at 2-3.

4. BUREAU OF JUST. STAT., U.S. DEP'T OF JUST., BULL. NCJ-161132, PRISON AND JAIL INMATES, 1995 (1996); BUREAU OF JUST. STAT., U.S. DEP'T OF JUST., BULL. NCJ-151654, PRISONERS IN 1994 (1995).

5. Scott Stossel, *The Man Who Counts the Killings*, ATLANTIC MONTHLY, May 1997, at 86, 91.

incidence of violent crime.⁶ Crime stories are inexpensive, flashy, and politically safe.⁷ Because they provide television viewers with the drama of a crime scene, they are good for ratings. Crime stories also are easy to report, rarely require extensive investigative reporting, and can be readily shared between news outlets. In addition, they feed politicians' need for safe topics when campaigning.⁸

Despite declining crime rates, politicians have found that a "get tough on crime" stance helps win elections. In recent years, few differences could be detected between Republican and Democratic Party platforms concerning crime: former Presidents Reagan and Bush promoted the War on Drugs, and President Clinton touted his Crime Bill. In addition, state and local elections have been filled with both Republican and Democratic politicians posturing on the issue of "law and order."⁹ The candidates seldom debate substantial issues, such as the root causes of crime, but instead battle over who can be the toughest on crime, who will build more prisons, who will execute more inmates, and who will incarcerate more juveniles.¹⁰ Fear of crime energizes the public sector and can be an impetus for social reform, but when the public is misinformed, so, too, may be our lawmaking processes and public policies.

It is well documented that both the print media¹¹ and television, including drama, news, soap operas, and cartoons, greatly exaggerate the incidence of crime in the United States, particularly violent crime.¹² Both the news and entertainment media consistently convey a more violent and dangerous view of our world than exists in reality.¹³ Because most of us lack direct experience with many social problems, such as violent crime, television and

6. STEVEN CHERMACK, *VICTIMS IN THE NEWS: CRIME AND THE AMERICAN NEWS MEDIA* (1995); RAY SURETTE, *MEDIA, CRIME, AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE: IMAGES AND REALITIES* (1992).

7. BEN BAGDIKIAN, *THE MEDIA MONOPOLY* 130 (1990).

8. DAVID ANDERSON, *CRIME AND THE POLITICS OF HYSTERIA: HOW THE WILLIE HORTON STORY CHANGED AMERICAN JUSTICE* (1995); see also SURETTE, *supra* note 6.

9. Peter Kerr, *Anatomy of the Drug Issue: How, After Years, It Erupted*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 17, 1986, at B6.

10. Ted Chiricos, *Moral Panic as Ideology: Drugs, Violence, Race and Punishment in America*, in *JUSTICE WITH PREJUDICE: RACE AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE IN AMERICA* (Michael J. Lynch & E. Britt Patterson eds., 1996).

11. Jeffrey Hubbard et al., *Mass Media Influences on Public Perceptions of Social Problems*, 23 SOC. PROBS. 22, 34 (1975); Norman Issacs, *The Crime of Crime Reporting*, 7(3) CRIME & DELINQ. 312, 320 (1961); see also F. James Davis, *Crime News in Colorado Newspapers*, 57 AM. J. SOC. 325 (1952).

12. George Gerbner et al., *TV Violence Profile No. 8: The Highlights*, 27 J. COMM. 171, 180 (1977) [hereinafter Gerbner, *Profile No. 8*]; George Gerbner & Larry Gross, *Living with Television: The Violence Profile*, 26 J. COMM. 173, 179 (1976); George Gerbner et al., *Cultural Indicators: Violence Profile No. 9*, 28 J. COMM. 176 (1978) [hereinafter Gerbner, *Profile No. 9*]; see also CHERMACK, *supra* note 6; SURETTE, *supra* note 6.

13. See sources cited *supra* note 12.

newspapers may serve as our primary frame of reference for these issues. Exaggerated emphasis on violent crime at the expense of coverage of other social problems and of social triumphs may produce a distorted image of what is important and how social policy should be developed.

An important role of the media is to place isolated events on a general "map" so that they may begin to "make sense." The media link individual events to create themes. These themes often give the viewer or reader the impression that the behavior emphasized in a particular theme, such as juvenile crime, sex crimes, or murder, is increasing.¹⁴ Order is shaped from disorder.¹⁵ But does this order reflect actual patterns in the world, or does it thematize issues in a way that best sells the medium?

In addition to focusing audience attention on particular topics and events, the media offer interpretations of "how to understand these events."¹⁶ The media help to define crime and shape the discourse on crime in the public realm. Reporters are aided by the ready availability of crime reports to news outlets from official sources, including law enforcement agencies and the courts.¹⁷ Moreover, satellite communication provides a ready supply of crime stories from anywhere in the country, thereby simplifying the reporting of "distant" news on local outlets. This may contribute to the creation of "crime waves," that is, "heavily reported" crime themes, in the news even when crime is steady or declining.¹⁸

This article examines the research on the relationship between the media and fear of crime. Among criminologists, there is some debate over the definition of "fear of crime." Studies of fear of crime have used variables, such as the perceived risk of victimization, worry or concern about crime, and anxiety about being alone at night, as well as affective expressions of the fear of specific crimes, to measure fear of crime.¹⁹ All of these variables have been referred to as fear of crime in the research literature.²⁰ Affective measures may tap into fear more directly, while cognitive measures may tap into notions of security and safety, which have been shown to be precursors to more emotional expressions of fear.²¹ Because the issue remains unsettled, this article includes research that considers a number of measures

14. Mark Fishman, *Crime Waves as Ideology*, 25 SOC. PROBS. 531, 533-35 (1978).

15. *Id.* at 534.

16. STUART HALL ET AL., *POLICING THE CRISIS: MUGGING, THE STATE AND LAW AND ORDER* 57 (1978).

17. SURETTE, *supra* note 6.

18. Fishman, *supra* note 14, at 531-43.

19. Ted Chiricos et al., *Crime, News and Fear of Crime: Toward an Identification of Audience Effects*, 44 SOC. PROBS. 342, 348 (1997); Kenneth F. Ferraro & Randy LaGrange, *The Measurement of Fear of Crime*, 57 SOC. INQUIRY 70, 71 (1986).

20. Ferraro & LaGrange, *supra* note 19, at 71.

21. KENNETH F. FERRARO, *FEAR OF CRIME: INTERPRETING VICTIMIZATION RISK* (1995).

of crime-related anxiety and their relationship to newspaper and television accounts of crime.

II. NEWSPAPER READING AND CRIME-RELATED ANXIETY

Studies of newspapers have concentrated on how the frequency of reading relates to fear of crime and how the specific content of newspaper articles, such as random violence, local stories, or sensationalism, relates to fear.²² There have been fourteen studies of the relationship between newspaper reading and crime-related anxiety in the past two decades.²³ Table 1 provides an overview of the methodology and findings of each of these studies. In particular, Table 1 illustrates the measures used for both fear of crime and for newspaper reading, and whether there was a significant relationship between newspaper reading and fear of crime. Also included in Table 1 is the year the study was conducted, the method of data collection, and the size of the sample.

Nine of the studies measured the frequency of total newspaper reading.²⁴ Of these, four found no evidence of a relationship between newspaper reading and fear,²⁵ perceived safety,²⁶ or avoidance behavior.²⁷ Three studies demonstrated that regular newspaper readers were *more fearful* than respondents who did not read the newspaper or did so infrequently.²⁸ Two studies reported significant *reductions* in fear among those who report reading newspapers.²⁹ One of these studies found that these anxiety-reducing results were strongest for residents who live in high-crime areas.³⁰ This suggests that in some instances, newspapers may possess an anxiety-reducing quality, or that people who are less fearful also read the newspaper.

22. Linda Heath & Kevin Gilbert, *Mass Media and Fear of Crime*, 39 AM. BEHAV. SCIENTIST 379, 382-83 (1996).

23. See *infra* app. tbl. 1.

24. See *infra* app. tbl. 1.

25. Mohsen Bazargan, *The Effects of Health, Environmental, and Socio-Psychological Variables on Fear of Crime and Its Consequences Among Urban Black Elderly Individuals*, 38 INT'L J. AGING & HUMAN DEV. 99, 106 (1994); Chiricos et al., *supra* note 19, at 349.

26. Allen E. Liska & William Baccaglioni, *Feeling Safe by Comparison: Crime in the Newspapers*, 37 SOC. PROBS. 360, 366-67 (1990).

27. Ian M. Gomme, *Fear of Crime Among Canadians: A Multi-Variate Analysis*, 14 J. CRIM. JUST. 249, 255-56 (1986).

28. George Gerbner et al., *Television Violence, Victimization, and Power*, 23 AM. BEHAV. SCIENTIST 705, 713-14 (1980); Garrett J. O'Keefe & Kathaleen Reid-Nash, *Crime News and Real-World Blues: The Effects of the Media on Social Reality*, 14 COMM. RES. 147, 155-56 (1987); Frans Willem Winkel & Aldert Vrij, *Fear of Crime and Mass Media Crime Reports Testing Similarity Hypotheses*, 1 INT'L REV. VICTIMOLOGY 251, 258 (1990).

29. Anthony N. Doob & Glenn E. Macdonald, *Television Viewing and Fear of Victimization: Is the Relationship Causal?*, 37 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 170, 175-76 (1979); Gerbner & Gross, *supra* note 12, at 192.

30. Doob & Macdonald, *supra* note 29, at 173.

Several studies either did not measure frequency of reading or found the "effects" of the media to be dependent on, or enhanced by, the specific characteristics of the various stories and the message they convey.³¹ Both Perkins and Taylor,³² and Jaehnig and associates³³ found that coverage of *violent* crime was related to elevated levels of fear. In a study of British newspapers, Williams and Dickinson found that sensational journalism termed "low-market tabloids," like *The Sun* and *The Star*, was associated with higher levels of fear than broadsheets, like *The Times* and *The Independent*.³⁴ Liska and Baccaglini found that *local* homicide stories appearing in the first fifteen pages of the newspaper were correlated with higher levels of fear.³⁵ In addition, these researchers discovered that homicide stories appearing at the end of the newspaper were associated with reduced fear levels.³⁶ Other crime stories were unrelated to fear of crime.³⁷ This is consistent with findings that local stories, especially those reporting random violence, may increase fear, while stories about crime in distant settings may reduce fear levels.³⁸ Liska and Baccaglini describe this phenomenon as "feeling safe by comparison."³⁹ In other words, when crimes occur in distant localities, we may be somewhat reassured of the safety of our own surroundings.⁴⁰

More recent newspaper-reading studies⁴¹ tend to find a significant relationship between the frequency of reading newspapers and fear of crime less often than earlier studies.⁴² This incongruity may be due to the increasing availability of television, cable, and videos as sources of information and entertainment.⁴³ Television may be replacing newspapers

31. Walter B. Jaehnig et al., *Reporting Crime and Fearing Crime in Three Communities*, 31 J. COMM. 88, 90 (1981) (discussing findings of studies concerning reporting of violent crime and the level of fear of crime).

32. Douglas D. Perkins & Ralph B. Taylor, *Ecological Assessments of Community Disorder: Their Relationship to Fear of Crime and Theoretical Implications*, 24 AM. J. COMMUNITY PSYCHOL. 63, 92, 101 (1996).

33. Jaehnig et al., *supra* note 31, at 95.

34. Paul Williams & Julie Dickinson, *Fear of Crime: Read All About It?*, 33 BRIT. J. CRIMINOLOGY 33, 50 (1993).

35. Liska & Baccaglini, *supra* note 26, at 366.

36. *Id.*

37. *Id.*

38. Linda Heath, *Impact of Newspaper Crime Reports on Fear of Crime: Multimethodological Investigation*, 47 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 263, 273 (1984); Winkel & Vrij, *supra* note 28, at 260.

39. Liska & Baccaglini, *supra* note 26, at 367.

40. Heath, *supra* note 38, at 274.

41. Chiricos et al., *supra* note 19, at 349; Bazargan, *supra* note 25, at 106.

42. Doob & Macdonald, *supra* note 29, at 175-76; Gerbner et al., *supra* note 28, at 713; Gerbner & Gross, *supra* note 12, at 192.

43. Heath & Gilbert, *supra* note 22, at 379. Fewer people are reading the newspaper in the 1990s than in the 1970s and even those who do read newspapers have alternative news

as a primary source of information about crime and also as a producer of fear of crime.

While several studies support the premise that the frequent reading of newspapers is related to higher levels of anxiety about crime,⁴⁴ the balance of evidence suggests that the message within newspaper stories may be more important than overall newspaper reading.⁴⁵ Local, random, and sensational stories appear to produce more fear than distant, specific, and less sensational stories.⁴⁶

III. TELEVISION VIEWING AND CRIME-RELATED ANXIETY

In 1967, under a grant from the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, George Gerbner and his associates at the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania began to investigate violence on television. This work later developed into the Cultural Indicators Project, which was funded by the National Institutes of Health.⁴⁷ Gerbner and his associates with the Cultural Indicators Project developed the "cultivation hypothesis" which predicted that television viewing, regardless of the types of programs watched, would cultivate an image of the world as a scary place.⁴⁸ Therefore, it would be expected that individuals who frequently watch television would fear crime more than individuals who seldom watch television.⁴⁹ This was described in terms of the cultivation of a consistent and scary view of the world.⁵⁰ Because the medium of television requires that most plots or stories be resolved in a half-hour to an hour, violence is frequently used to demonstrate power. Use of violence to resolve conflicts on television may be incorporated into viewers' assumptions about crime in the real world, and therefore lead to elevated levels of fear.⁵¹

sources. BAGDIKIAN, *supra* note 7, at 195-98; *Stop the Presses*, NEWSWEEK, Aug. 18, 1997, at 12 graph (citing NAA Market & Business Analysis).

44. Doob & Macdonald, *supra* note 29, at 173; Gerbner et al., *supra* note 28, at 713; Gerbner & Gross, *supra* note 12, at 192; O'Keefe & Reid-Nash, *supra* note 28, at 155-56; Winkel & Vrij, *supra* note 28, at 258.

45. Jaehnig et al., *supra* note 31, at 95.

46. Heath, *supra* note 38, at 273. The results of these studies do not appear to vary consistently by survey method used, that is face-to-face interview versus telephone survey, or other methods. See *infra* app. tbl. 1. The several crime-related anxiety measures (*i.e.*, fear, risk, safety, concern) that were used to assess fear did not seem to consistently alter the results. See *infra* app. tbl. 1.

47. Gerbner & Gross, *supra* note 12, at 174.

48. Gerbner, *Profile No. 9*, *supra* note 12, at 178, 184; Gerbner, *Profile No. 8*, *supra* note 12, at 172-73; Gerbner & Gross, *supra* note 12, at 174.

49. Gerbner et al., *supra* note 28, at 712; Gerbner & Gross, *supra* note 12, at 193.

50. Gerbner & Gross, *supra* note 12, at 193-94.

51. *Id.*

Although the cultivation hypothesis is still being tested empirically, several critics, including Gerbner himself, have presented alternative models of how the media may be related to fear of crime.⁵² While the original cultivation hypothesis assumed that media messages were homogeneously received by the population, the field of media "reception research" now considers that diverse audience types may receive and interpret messages differently.⁵³ This approach argues that the audience plays an active role in decoding media messages, and this decoding process is shaped by unique characteristics of individuals.⁵⁴ While one message may produce fear in certain types of individuals, it may actually be comforting to others.⁵⁵

If audiences interpret messages differently, it is not enough to measure the time spent watching television. It also may be necessary to explore the content of the televised messages and the traits of television watchers before researchers can reasonably assess who is afraid of what type of behaviors and programs. Individuals who share similar traits, such as ideological commitments, religious beliefs, political affiliations, gender, and race, may be more likely to interpret media messages in a similar manner than those with different personal and social traits. More recently, studies exploring the fear of crime have begun to weigh the possibly variable effects of the media on diverse audiences.

Recent attempts to identify types of individuals who may be more receptive to, and affected by, media messages have taken four approaches to explain differences in audience reception. These approaches are substitution, resonance, vulnerability, and affinity. First, individuals who lack victim experience or have minimal risk of being victimized, may *substitute* the experiences with crime of characters portrayed on television for their own experiences and therefore, may be more fearful as a result of television viewing.⁵⁶ These individuals may be part of groups such as whites, the elderly, women, and nonvictims, who have a low likelihood of being victimized in comparison with other groups.⁵⁷

The *resonance* approach hypothesizes that individuals may relate to television messages about crime either because they have been victimized previously or live in dangerous areas, or because they possess the characteristics of individuals who are most often victimized.⁵⁸ Resonance is most

52. Gerbner et al., *supra* note 28, at 715.

53. *Id.* at 713-14.

54. Kevin M. Carragee, *Interpretive Media Study and Interpretive Social Science*, 7 CRITICAL STUD. MASS COMM. 81, 81 (1990).

55. *Id.* at 84-85.

56. BARRIE GUNTER, TELEVISION AND THE FEAR OF CRIME 32 (1987).

57. U.S. DEP'T OF JUST., *supra* note 3.

58. See George Gerbner et al., *The "Mainstreaming" of America: Violence Profile No. 11*, 30 J. COMM. 10, 15 (1980).

likely to involve males, younger individuals, minorities, and individuals living in urban, high-crime areas.⁵⁹

The *vulnerability* approach suggests that individuals who see themselves as vulnerable to victimization may increase their attention and responsiveness to televised messages concerning crime.⁶⁰ Criminologists Wesley Skogan and Michael Maxfield predicted that fear levels of women and elderly persons would be influenced more than those of other groups because of their perceived vulnerability.⁶¹ The fourth approach, *affinity*, involves seeing individuals like yourself victimized on television and drawing the conclusion that you are more likely to be victimized because you share their characteristics.⁶² Studies of television news and crime drama content show that women, particularly white women, are depicted as victims more frequently than men.⁶³ Each of these diverse and sometimes contradictory approaches offer explanations for the correlation between television viewing and fear of crime among groups with particular characteristics such as sex, age, and race.

IV. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON TELEVISION VIEWING AND CRIME-RELATED ANXIETY

The literature review, summarized in Table 2, explores the relationship between television and fear of crime. Twenty-five studies of "television effects" on crime-related anxieties have been published since 1976.⁶⁴ These studies are reviewed here with the objective of discerning patterns that support the cultivation hypothesis or several alternatives, including substitution, resonance, vulnerability, or affinity. Table 2 summarizes the methodology and findings of twenty-five television studies, focusing on the type of fear, media measures used, and whether the authors found a relationship between fear of crime and television viewing. Table 2 also reports the data-gathering techniques utilized in each study and the year the sample was collected.

Of the twenty studies that tested the cultivation hypothesis by using a

59. *See id.* at 15-17, 20.

60. WESLEY G. SKOGAN & MICHAEL G. MAXFIELD, COPING WITH CRIME: INDIVIDUAL AND NEIGHBORHOOD REACTIONS 177 (1981).

61. *Id.*

62. Gerbner et al., *supra* note 28, at 712.

63. Chiricos et al., *supra* note 19, at 352; Stossel, *supra* note 5, at 91.

64. *See infra* app. tbl. 2. Five studies not specifically cited in the text but included in Table 2 are: Jennings Bryant et al., *Television Viewing and Anxiety: An Experimental Examination*, 31 J. COMM. 106 (1981); Robert J. Gebotys et al., *News Media Use and Public Perceptions of Crime Seriousness*, 30 CANADIAN J. CRIMINOLOGY 3 (1988); Paul M. Hirsch, *On Not Learning from One's Own Mistakes: A Reanalysis of Gerbner et al.'s Findings on Cultivation Analysis, Part II*, 8 COMM. RES. 3 (1981); Elizabeth M. Perse et al., *Cultivation in the Newer Media Environment*, 21 COMM. RES. 79 (1994); J.M. Wober, *Televised Violence and Paranoid Perception: The View from Great Britain*, 42 PUB. OPINION Q. 315 (1978).

measure of the total amount of television watched, nine found no significant results, nine found a relationship between television viewing and an increase in crime-related anxiety, and two found television viewing associated with lower levels of crime-related anxiety.⁶⁵ When total television watching makes a significant difference in fear levels, that difference is usually increased levels of fear. The evidence, however, is inconclusive. Interpretations of these results are complicated by the fact that the authors utilized several different measures of both fear of crime and total television viewing in their studies.⁶⁶

Several of the studies that found no relationship between overall television viewing and fear found that fear was significantly related to viewing television news or drama programs.⁶⁷ Therefore, measures of total television viewing may actually dilute the effects of viewing crime-specific programming such as crime drama and television news. The four studies that measured the effects of television news found that regular newswatchers were more fearful than those individuals who seldom or never watched the news on television.⁶⁸

Eleven studies measured the amount of time spent watching evening drama programs such as *Law & Order*, *Cagney & Lacey*, and *Hill Street Blues*.⁶⁹ Three studies found no relationship between the viewing of drama programs and fear of crime.⁷⁰ Six studies found *increased* anxiety in relation to drama viewing.⁷¹ Two studies found that drama programming

65. Alan M. Rubin et al., *A Methodological Examination of Cultivation*, 15 COMM. RES. 107, 125 (1988); Romeo Vitelli & Norman S. Ender, *Psychological Determinants of Fear of Crime: A Comparison of General and Situational Prediction Models*, 14 PERS. & INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES 77, 83 (1993).

66. See *infra* app. tbl. 2.

67. Robert P. Hawkins & Suzanne Pingree, *Uniform Messages and Habitual Viewing: Unnecessary Assumptions in Social Reality Effects*, 7 HUM. COMM. RES. 291, 295 (1981); Garrett J. O'Keefe, *Public Views on Crime: Television Exposure and Media Credibility*, 8 COMM. Y.B. 514, 523 (R. Bostrom ed., 1984); O'Keefe & Reid-Nash, *supra* note 28, at 158; W. James Potter & Ik Chin Chang, *Television Exposure Measures and the Cultivation Hypothesis*, 34 J. BROAD. & ELECT. MEDIA 313, 330 (1990); Dan Slater & William R. Elliott, *Television's Influence on Social Reality*, 68 Q.J. SPEECH 69, 79 (1982).

68. Bazargan, *supra* note 25, at 106; Chiricos et al., *supra* note 19, at 349; O'Keefe, *supra* note 67, at 523; O'Keefe & Reid-Nash, *supra* note 28, at 158, 159.

69. See *infra* app. tbl. 2.

70. Gerbner, *Profile No. 9*, *supra* note 12, at 207; O'Keefe, *supra* note 67, at 523; O'Keefe & Reid-Nash, *supra* note 28, at 158.

71. Hawkins & Pingree, *supra* note 67, at 296; Linda Heath & John Petraitis, *Television Viewing and Fear of Crime: Where Is the Mean World?*, 8 BASIC & APPLIED SOC. PSYCHOL. 97, 117 (1987); Rubin et al., *supra* note 65, at 126; Ron Tamborini et al., *Fear and Victimization: Exposure to Television and Perceptions of Crime and Fear*, 8 COMM. Y.B. 492, 508 (R. Bostrom ed., 1984); James Weaver & Jacob Wakshlag, *Perceived Vulnerability to Crime, Criminal Victimization Experience, and Television Viewing*, 30 J. BROAD. & ELECT. MEDIA 141, 153 (1986).

may actually *reduce* fear.⁷² On balance, when a significant relationship was reported, television dramas were usually linked to higher levels of fear.⁷³

Several of the research studies disaggregated their samples based on specific audience characteristics, such as age, sex, and race, to determine if television affected specific groups of people differently in terms of fear.⁷⁴ Two studies found elevated fear levels associated with television viewing for women.⁷⁵ Television effects for men were found in three studies.⁷⁶ Significant increases in fear associated with television viewing could be interpreted as the result of substitution, vulnerability, or affinity in the case of women, whereas similar results may indicate a resonance effect for men.⁷⁷ There are several reasons why television may make women more fearful. Substitution suggests that women may substitute the victimization of individuals on television for their own low actual victimization risks.⁷⁸ Women who see crime on television may feel more vulnerable and therefore be more fearful.⁷⁹ Finally, the affinity approach suggests that women's fear is linked to the fact that women are shown as victims more frequently than men on television.⁸⁰ Results linking television viewing with fear of crime for men are indicative of a resonance effect. The viewing of televised crime resonates the higher crime risk that men face on a daily basis and therefore elevates their fear levels.⁸¹ Chiricos and his associates found added support for affinity in their study of television news because white middle-aged women were the only audience types for whom fear was related to television viewing,⁸² and middle-aged women also were most likely to be depicted as victims on television.⁸³ Only those individuals who shared several characteristics with television victims had elevated fear levels associated with television viewing.⁸⁴

Several researchers explored how living in different areas may impact television's effect on fear of crime. Individuals residing in high-crime areas⁸⁵ or low-income areas⁸⁶ were more likely to have elevated fear levels

72. Potter & Chang, *supra* note 67, at 313; Slater & Elliott, *supra* note 67, at 75.

73. *See infra* app. tbl. 2.

74. *See infra* app. tbl. 2.

75. Chiricos et al., *supra* note 19, at 353; Gerbner, *Profile No. 9, supra* note 12, at 203.

76. Gerbner, *Profile No. 9, supra* note 12, at 203; *see also* Heath & Petraitis, *supra* note 71, at 110.

77. *See infra* app. tbl. 2.

78. GUNTER, *supra* note 56, at 32.

79. *Id.*

80. Gerbner et al., *supra* note 28, at 712.

81. *See* Gerbner et al., *supra* note 58, at 15.

82. Chiricos et al., *supra* note 19, at 352.

83. *See id.*; *see also* Stossel, *supra* note 5, at 91.

84. Chiricos et al., *supra* note 19, at 352; *see* Stossel, *supra* note 5, at 91.

85. Doob & Macdonald, *supra* note 29, at 177; Heath & Petraitis, *supra* note 71, at 121.

associated with television viewing than individuals in areas with lower crime levels or living in more affluent neighborhoods. According to the resonance approach individuals who live in high-crime areas may be particularly sensitive to crime on television because of their direct knowledge of a crime problem in their neighborhoods. The vulnerability approach offers a similar explanation, in that individuals who reside in high-crime areas may see themselves as more vulnerable to victimization. This vulnerability may be reinforced by viewing crime on television. Subjects who perceived television to be more real or credible were more likely to suffer from increased levels of fear than individuals who viewed television programs as fictitious or unbelievable.⁸⁷ In contrast, two studies found that those who perceived television to be realistic were *less* fearful.⁸⁸ Weaver and Wakshlag found that nonvictims were the only individuals who reported positive and significant television effects.⁸⁹ This could be interpreted as an example of substitution.⁹⁰ These individuals may substitute the experience of victims on television for their own inexperience with crime.

While we are far from unraveling the complexity of television effects, it appears that they are dependent not only on the quantity of television that is viewed, but also on the content of the programs and the characteristics of the audience.⁹¹ These findings are consistent with what was found in the review of the effects of newspaper reading on fear of crime. Reviews of the literature on the relationship between both television and newspaper consumption and fear of crime indicate a need for more research to explore the many facets of media messages and audience interpretation of these messages. This adds to the importance of measuring "characteristics of the message, of the audience and of the dependent measure."⁹²

V. MORAL PANICS AS AN EXPRESSION OF FEAR

The media not only consistently exaggerate violent crime but also selectively focuses on particular crime issues during specific time periods.

86. Gerbner et al., *supra* note 28, at 713.

87. O'Keefe, *supra* note 67, at 523; W. James Potter, *Perceived Reality and the Cultivation Hypothesis*, 30 J. BROAD. & ELECT. MEDIA 159, 171 (1986).

88. Rubin et al., *supra* note 65, at 127; Slater & Elliott, *supra* note 67, at 75.

89. Weaver & Wakshlag, *supra* note 71, at 154.

90. Among television studies, the data-gathering techniques did not appear to make a difference in the significance or direction of the results. *See infra* app. tbl 2. The different measures used to assess fear were about equally split between positive and insignificant results, with *fear* producing slightly more positive effects and *risk* producing slightly more insignificant effects. *See infra* app. tbl. 2.

91. *See infra* app. tbl. 2. This task is further complicated by the numerous measures of both fear and television viewing. *See infra* app. tbl. 2.

92. Heath & Gilbert, *supra* note 22, at 384.

Sabato has described a “feeding frenzy” as a kind of “pack journalism” that focuses on one issue, while ignoring other relevant and timely stories.⁹³ Political feeding frenzies may occur around election time,⁹⁴ or when there is a lull in sensational news stories.⁹⁵ Shrinking news budgets increasingly require different news outlets to depend on the same sources for their news.⁹⁶ This trend increases the likelihood of a media feeding frenzy. Crime waves or themes created by the media also may serve the interests of those in power by distracting attention away from pressing economic or social concerns.⁹⁷ Stanley Cohen, the author of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, defined a “moral panic” as follows:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions⁹⁸

Because moral panics typically involve an exaggeration of a social phenomenon, the public response also is often exaggerated and can create its own long lasting repercussions for society in terms of drastic changes in laws and social policy.⁹⁹

Moral panics and everyday overreporting of violent crime have significant consequences. They are an effective way to raise profits in the news,¹⁰⁰ to start organizations for particular causes,¹⁰¹ to justify increases in social control,¹⁰² and to boost political campaigns.¹⁰³ However, they also may have the unwarranted side effect of elevating fear levels in the general population.

93. LARRY J. SABATO, *FEEDING FRENZY: HOW ATTACK JOURNALISM HAS TRANSFORMED AMERICAN POLITICS* 209 (2d ed. 1993).

94. ANDERSON, *supra* note 8, at 27.

95. SABATO, *supra* note 93, at 79.

96. BAGDIKIAN, *supra* note 7, at 8.

97. Chiricos, *supra* note 10, at 26-28.

98. STANLEY COHEN, *FOLK DEVILS AND MORAL PANICS: THE CREATION OF THE MODS AND ROCKERS* 9 (1972).

99. *Id.*

100. See BAGDIKIAN, *supra* note 7, at 124.

101. PHILIP JENKINS, *INTIMATE ENEMIES: MORAL PANICS IN CONTEMPORARY GREAT BRITAIN* 6 (1992).

102. The Corrections Yearbook reported that “as of 1995, 124,962 new prison beds were under construction, and an additional 113,080 were being planned to be built over the next few years.” JOHN IRWIN & JAMES AUSTIN, *IT’S ABOUT TIME: AMERICA’S IMPRISONMENT BINGE* 3 (1997).

103. ANDERSON, *supra* note 8, at 3.

In recent years, several examples of media-induced moral panics have occurred that have created severe consequences for criminal justice policy. For example, in 1993, there was a 400% increase in media coverage of violent crime and juvenile violence.¹⁰⁴ In reality, though seldom mentioned, the violent crime rate was declining slightly during the same time period.¹⁰⁵ Consequences of this panic included a jump from 9% to 49% in the percentage of Americans ranking crime as the most important problem in the United States.¹⁰⁶ In addition, increasingly punitive measures for juvenile criminals were passed into law in many states. The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 proffered a variety of "get tough" measures, ranging from longer prison sentences to an expanded use of the death penalty.¹⁰⁷

In a similar manner, a media panic over crack cocaine and supposedly related random violence struck the nation in the late 1980s.¹⁰⁸ The drug-related deaths of Len Bias and Don Rogers, two prominent sports figures, added fuel to the fire.¹⁰⁹ While drugs were, and continue to be, a real problem in the United States, particularly in inner cities, the phenomenon described by the media depicted a plague creeping out of the ghetto into previously safe neighborhoods.¹¹⁰ In fact, during the time period in which the media were focusing heavily on crack cocaine,¹¹¹ drug use did not rise. Both Democrats and Republicans rallied around the drug issue, and Reagan's War on Drugs was critical in the 1986 congressional elections.¹¹² The price paid as a consequence of the draconian legislative response, highlighted by the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986,¹¹³ is reflected primarily in the disproportionate incarceration of black males for drug offenses, particularly those involving crack cocaine,¹¹⁴ and in a substantial increase in the use of

104. Chiricos, *supra* note 10, at 30.

105. U.S. GOV'T PRINTING OFFICE, U.S. DEP'T OF JUST., CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES — 1993 (1994).

106. Chiricos, *supra* note 10, at 19; *Clinton Uses Bully Pulpit to Build Support for Crime-control, Health Care Reform*, 341 GALLUP POLL MONTHLY 3, 6 tbl. (Feb. 1994).

107. U.S. DEP'T OF JUST., FACT SHEET: VIOLENT CRIME CONTROL AND LAW ENFORCEMENT ACT OF 1994 (Oct. 24, 1994).

108. Henry H. Brownstein, *The Media and the Construction of Random Drug Violence*, 18 SOC. JUST. 85, 85 (1992); Eric L. Jensen et al., *The New War on Drugs: Grass Roots Movement or Political Construction*, 21 J. DRUG ISSUES 651, 661 (1991); James D. Orcutt & J. Blake Turner, *Shocking Numbers and Graphic Accounts: Quantified Images of Drug Problems in the Print Media*, 40 SOC. PROBS. 190, 190 (1993).

109. Jensen et al., *supra* note 108, at 661.

110. Brownstein, *supra* note 108, at 91.

111. *Id.* at 94.

112. See Jensen et al., *supra* note 108, at 656.

113. Peter Kerr, *Anatomy of the Drug Issue: How, After Years, It Erupted*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 17, 1986, at A1, B6.

114. IRWIN & AUSTIN, *supra* note 102, at 7, 29.

prisons as a means of handling the nation's perceived drug problem.¹¹⁵

In *Crime and The Politics of Hysteria*, David Anderson describes how media coverage of the Willie Horton case dramatically changed the 1988 presidential election.¹¹⁶ News accounts picked up on campaign commercials that typified Massachusetts' Governor Dukakis as being lenient on violent criminals.¹¹⁷ To this was attached the face of Willie Horton, a black man convicted of aggravated rape while on a furlough from prison.¹¹⁸ It is difficult to measure the damage done to race relations by the commercials and stories showing Willie Horton and revolving prison doors with young African Americans walking in and out of them.¹¹⁹ The message, which eventually triumphed in the campaign, was "get tough on crime," and it was used to justify more punitive prison sentences, increased use of the death penalty, and a reduction in the availability of furloughs and parole.¹²⁰

Moral panics are driven by fear of crime and require public participation for their viability.¹²¹ The media play a critical role in energizing public fear by decontextualizing crimes and publicizing certain crimes in disproportion to their actual occurrence.¹²² Moral panics provide researchers with a historic snapshot for studying the causes and consequences of dramatic fluctuations in media coverage and fear of crime.

VI. CONCLUSION

Over the past twenty-five years, there has been a surprising lack of empirical exploration of the relationship between fear of crime and the media. The inconsistency in the measurements of both media use and fear of crime have added to the difficulty of unraveling this relationship. Studies obtaining significant results suggest that for newspaper consumption the character of the message is important: local, random, and sensational stories evoke the most fear, whereas, distant, specific, and less sensational stories may have a calming effect on individuals. For television, the quantity of television viewed in general, violent programming in particular, and certain audience characteristics are generally associated with higher levels of fear. Moral panics indicate the importance of historical context in the study of fear of crime. The media play an important role in creating modern history. While most of what is reported by the media is factual, many stories are

115. *Id.*

116. ANDERSON, *supra* note 8 *passim*.

117. *Id.* at 4.

118. *Id.* at 5.

119. *Id.* at 245.

120. *Id.* at 248-49.

121. COHEN, *supra* note 98, at 9.

122. Fishman, *supra* note 14, at 533-35.

taken out of context, and the presentation of several of these decontextualized stories may create the impression that a relatively constant problem is spiraling out of control.¹²³ Brief periods of intense crime coverage by the media may elevate fear levels and may be related to dramatic changes in public policy. Cumulatively, these studies suggest the importance of further research into media consumption patterns, content of programming, audience traits, and the historical context that surrounds different reporting behaviors.

123. *Id.*

VII. APPENDIX

— Table 1 and Table 2 following —

| TABLE 1. NEWSPAPER READING AND FEAR OF CRIME | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|-------------------|--|-------------------------|---|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|--------|-------------------|
| | | Measure | | | | | Content Specific Effects | | | |
| Author(s) Date | Study | Sample | Outcome* | Newspaper | Control | Total** Effects | Local | Murder/ Violence | Random | Sensational |
| Chiricos et al. 1997 | 1994 | Telephone N=2092 | FEAR | Frequency of Reading | A,G,RC,CP R,TV,DV | NO | | | | |
| Perkins & Taylor 1996 | 1987 & 1988 | Telephone & Face-to-Face 1) N=492 2) N=305 | COMBINED MEASURE | Content Analysis | %G,%A, %RC,%V | | | YES | | |
| Bazargan 1994 | 1989 - 1990 | Face-to-Face N=372 | FEAR HOME FEAR AWAY | Frequency of Reading | A,G,E,H, DV,IV,TV | NO NO | | | | |
| Williams & Dickinson 1993 | 1989 | Mail Survey N=290 | RISK SAFETY WORRY | Content Analysis: three types of newspa- pers | | | | YES YES YES | | YES YES YES |
| Liska & Baccaglioni 1990 | 1975 | Telephone 26 cities (aggregated) | SAFETY | Frequency of Reading Content Analysis: crime stories & place- ment | A,G,RC, %RC | NO | YES | YES | | |

TABLE 1. NEWSPAPER AND FEAR OF CRIME (cont.)

| Author(s) Date | Study | Sample | Outcome* | Newspaper | Control | Total** Effects | Content Specific Effects | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------|---|--|----------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------|-------------|
| | | | | | | | Local | Random | Sensational |
| Winkel & Vrij 1990 | | Experiment N=267 | RISK CONCERN | Frequency of Reading Local/nonlocal rape story | | YES | YES | | |
| O'Keefe & Reid-Nash 1987 | 1979 & 1989 | Face-to-Face 1) N=1049 2) N=426 | RISK (general) SAFETY RISK (specific) | Frequency of Reading Attention to crime stories | | YES YES YES YES burglary | | | |
| Gomme 1986 | 1980 | Telephone N=640 | AVOIDANCE | Frequency of Reading Index of exposure to news in print, audio, and audiovisual | G,DV, SES | NO | | | |
| Heath 1984 | | Telephone N=335 36 cities | SAFETY CITY SAFETY | Proportion of local, random & sensational crimes | A,G,I,E, DV | | YES | YES | YES |
| Heath 1984 | | Experiment | SAFETY RISK | Reporters notes read (crime locale, random) | G | | YES | YES | |

| TABLE 1. NEWSPAPER AND FEAR OF CRIME (cont.) | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|-------|-----------------------|---------------------|---|----------------|--|--------------------------|-------|--------|-------------|
| Author(s) Date | Study | Sample | Outcome* | Newspaper | Control | Total** Effects | Content Specific Effects | | | |
| | | | | | | | Murder/ Violence | Local | Random | Sensational |
| Jaehnig et al. 1981 | 1976 | | CONCERN | Percentage of stories about crime & violent crime | | | | YES | | |
| Gerbner et al. 1980 | 1979 | Telephone | RISK SAFETY | Frequency of Reading | A,G,I,TV, E | YES NO | | | | |
| Doob & Macdonald 1979 | | Face-to-Face N=300 | COMBINED MEASURE | Frequency of Reading | A,G,TV | YES Inverse: high crime areas | | | | |
| Gerbner & Gross 1976 | | Telephone | RISK | Frequency of Reading | TV | YES Inverse | | | | |

LEGEND: TABLE 1 & TABLE 2

* Respondents questioned about specific measures.

** Effect of newspaper measure on fear; inv. = inverse relationship; Real. = program considered realistic; (w)=white.

A=age; CP=perceived crime; DV=direct victimization; E=education; G=gender; H=health; I=income; IV=indirect victimization; M= marital status; RC=race; R=risk; S=safety; SES=socio-economic status; TV= television viewing; %A=age composition; %G=gender composition; %RC=racial composition; %V=victim composition.

TABLE 2. TELEVISION VIEWING AND FEAR OF CRIME (cont.)

| Author(s) Date | Study | Sample | Outcome* | TV | Measure | | | | | Audience Specific Effects | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|---|---|--|---------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|-------------|----------------|-----|------|--|
| | | | | | Control | Total | News | Drama | Female | Victim | Real. | High- crime | Age | Race | |
| Rubin et al. 1988 | 1986 | Pencil & Paper N=400 | SAFETY | Total TV Program types | A,G,E, SES | YES inv. | | YES | | | YES inv. | | | | |
| Heath & Petraitis 1987 | | Telephone N=372 | RISK URBAN RISK | Total TV Program types | S,E | NO YES | | YES NO | YES inv. YES inv. | | | | | | |
| Heath & Petraitis 1987 | | Paper & Pencil N=192 | COMBINED MEASURE URBAN COMBINED MEASURE | Total TV Crime drama | S,CR | NO YES | | NO YES | YES inv. YES inv. | | | YES | | | |
| O'Keefe & Reid-Nash 1987 | 1979 & 1980 | Face-to- Face 1) N=1049 2) N=426 | RISK (gener- al) SAFETY RISK (specif- ic) | Total TV Crime drama Attention to news | A,G,E I,DV | NO NO NO | NO YES YES burg- lary | NO NO NO | | | | | | | |
| Potter 1986 | 1983 | Paper & Pencil N=329 | RISK | Total TV Program types | A,G,RC | NO | | | | | YES | | | | |

