

# Media representation of elderly and young offenders



The paper presents a fundamental chapter in the thesis by examining the role that media depiction of crime plays within society. It addresses the question by firstly introducing the connections between the media and crime. The paper addresses three core issues on the impact of media depiction of crime, firstly the impact on human behaviour, secondly the impact on generating a fear of crime and thirdly the role in generating moral panics. This chapter sets the paper up for further consideration of how the media represents youth offending differently and then subsequently elderly offending. The next half of the paper will turn to deal with the latter two issues and will present a final conclusion with a redrafted introduction setting out the overall aims and goals of each chapter.

Youth offending; elderly offending; fork devils; victims; media depiction; crime.

## **The differences in the media representation of elderly offenders opposed to young offenders?**

### **Table of Contents:**

Abstract 4

Chapter One: Introduction 5

Chapter Two: The Relationship between Crime and the Media

2. 0 Introduction

2. 1 Media Depiction of Crime and Human Behaviour

2. 2 The impact of criminal images and deviance on fear of crime

<https://assignbuster.com/media-representation-of-elderly-and-young-offenders/>

2. 3 The role of the media in moral panics

2. 4 Conclusion

### **Abstract:**

This thesis explores the differences in how elderly offenders are represented in the media in comparison to young offenders. The thesis highlights the differential approach adopted by the media in portraying elderly offenders to how they represent young offenders. The thesis firstly considers the role media plays in reporting crime by considering the relationship between crime and media. The thesis then progresses to consider youth offending and elderly offending in separate chapters. The final chapter draws conclusions on whether there are differences and considers the rationales for a distinction between a young offender and elderly offender in news reporting. Additionally, consideration is also given to the myth of victims always being elderly and whether this plays any role in the media depiction of elderly crime.

### **Chapter One: Introduction**

**The central aim of the thesis is to explore the differences between how elderly offenders are represented in the media as opposed to young offenders. The key underlying objective is to firstly highlight if there is a distinction and then secondly to go to question the basis for a distinction between the representation of young offenders and elderly offenders in the media.**

The thesis will begin in chapter two by considering the relationship between crime and the media. This chapter will provide the background context to

discussing youth offending and elderly offending depiction in the media. In particular, chapter two provides an insight into three aspects on how media reporting on crime can impact and influence society. The chapter specifically focuses on the impact of the media depiction of crime in three ways, firstly by examining the impact on human behaviour, secondly on the impact of criminal images and deviance on the fear of crime and thirdly on the role of the media in moral panics. The conclusion that can be drawn from chapter two is that the mass media selects the reporting of crime in a way that sensationalises crime by creating sound bite headlines directly designed to target the general public for sales. From the perspective of human behaviour, fear of crime and moral panics, the media play a fundamental role in representing crime to the masses. The public is susceptible to media messages in a passive context which directly influences the public perception of particular crimes reported. The interconnection between law and order media depiction and politics is strongly linked from the 1970s when successive governments have used the media representations of crime to facilitate policy swings and shifts to target crime control.

The third chapter investigates the way in which the media represents youth offending. The first half of the chapter primarily focuses on establishing the specific ways in which the media represent youth offending. In particular, reference is drawn to the impact of core criminal acts which have involved young adults and children. The second half of the chapter will investigate the role of media in demonising children in the aftermath of the Jamie Bulger case.

The fourth chapter investigates the way in which the media represents elderly offending and in particular focuses on the myth of the perceived stereotype of elderly people as being the 'victim' and never the offender. The second half of the chapter deals directly with how the elderly are reported in the media and draws upon the literature to identify the rationales for how elderly crimes are represented in the media.

The final chapter draws together the previous and presents a conclusion firstly on whether there is a distinction between the media depiction of youth offending in direct comparison to elderly offending. The bigger question this chapter presents is whether there are any rationales for the distinction between the reporting of youth offending and elderly offending. This question is answered by examining what the impact has been from the distinction between the media depiction on youth offending and elderly offending. This is examined by dealing with how youth offenders are dealt with in comparison to elderly offenders in the criminal justice system.

## **Chapter Two: The Relationship between Crime and the Media**

### 2. 0 Introduction:

It is argued by Dowler et al (2006) that the most significant and potentially illuminating area of criminological inquiry is the analysis of crime, media and popular culture. (Dowler et al 2006; 837). The relationship between crime and the media becomes intertwined with a number of disciplines including criminology, psychology, sociology, cultural and media studies. (Carrabine 2008; 2). Initially, academic studies have focused on cinema, radio and

television before moving to focus on video gaming and music videos until currently focusing on new advancing technologies such as the internet. The advancing technologies over the past five decades have led to a radical transformation in the way media is reported and in particular, the way information on crime is accessed by the general public. In the wake of the internet, information is readily available to the public on a global scale. The accessibility of vast tracks of information has been fundamental in influencing public perception on issues of politics, crime and contemporary issues. The public perception of crime is heavily influenced by the way in which they are exposed to various forms of media including television, film, video and the internet. (Ibid). The advancement of technology has undoubtedly invoked an 'information age' with a desire to be informed of reports and information. Media arguable occupies a dominant role becoming a 'central institution' of modern life which increasingly centres on television and in more recent times the internet. (Garland 2001; 85). It is argued by Wykes (2001) that a major concern about media reporting on crime centres on the way in which the media can select to report a crime. Although the media is not the cause of crime, it is the way they can choose to exaggerate and sensualise crime which creates and invokes emotions among the public of frustration, anger and fear. (Gerbner 1995; 547-550).

Media portrayals of crime and violence have become part of everyday life. (Kidd-Hewitt 1995; 1). It is important to point out that crime manifests itself in many different forms of media. It is ever present in film genres, television shows and gaming genres which have become an entertaining aspect of modern life. Many film productions from the 1920s have used crime plots to

entertain the masses, similarly, books have used crime plots to the same extent. Increasingly television production has used ‘reality television’ shows and soap operas to highlight criminal themes. Crime is central to the production of news in society and is considered newsworthy being produced as informative but plays an entertaining role. (Dowler 2004; 574, Fleming 1983). Although crime is considered ‘newsworthy’ it is the way that the mass media can present its stories on crime that can become the focus of criminological inquiry. Headline news in the mass media in both the digital and print forms scream for our attention. (Jewkes 2008; 3). Editors and journalists design these headlines to grab our attention by shocking, frightening and most of all entertaining our senses. It is an appeal to occupy the mainstream space for public attention. However, the focus of this chapter is on the mass media obsession with reporting crime and whether this reporting has become harmful. The first half of this paper will concentrate on dealing with the impact media depiction of crime can have in influencing and impacting society. The second half of this chapter will progress to deal with the specific role media plays in generating a sense of fear of crime in a society which has been played out in the mass media over the past six decades.

The investigation of the ways in which the press and mass media report crime is firmly an established field within criminology. (Carrabine (2008); 2). A study conducted by Reiner (2007) highlights that after an extensive review of media content he found that the press and broadcast media concentrated their reporting of crime on two particular categories of crime, violent crime and sex crime. (Reiner 2007; 303-15). Reiner’s study identified that a pattern

of news reporting is identifiable in the press and broadcast media which overwhelmingly focuses on violent and sexual crimes. A further study conducted earlier by Williams and Dickson (1993) found that 65 per cent of reported news media dealt with violent crimes where individuals were affected. (Williams and Dickinson (1993); 40). It is important to note that Williams and Dickinson (1993) cross referenced their study of the reported news against the British Crime Survey (Mayhew 1989) which identified that only 6% of crime involved violence. Williams and Dickinson's study highlights an imbalance between actual crime and the reported crime within the mass media in favour of violent crime. It is important to note that other studies have also been conducted which has found similar patterns of publication within the content of press and broadcast media. For example, in Smith (1984) a survey of local papers reporting on crime against actual crime in the area found a similar imbalance towards the media reporting primarily crimes of robbery and assault. (Smith 1984: 290). Smith found that whilst assault and robbery only represented 6 per cent of crime in Birmingham, it occupied a 52.7 per cent of space devoted to crime reporting in the local press. A further study of Scottish papers found that the Scottish media dedicated 45.8 per cent of printing space to violent crimes and sexual crimes but when violent crime and sexual crimes are combined they only represented 2.4 per cent of actual crime in Scotland. (Ditton and Duffy (1983); 164). These studies represent an indication of how crime is reported in the press both at a national and a regional level during the 1980s and early 1990s. It is arguable on the basis of these studies newspapers may be selective in the types of crimes it seeks to publish with a heavy tendency towards crimes that are either violent or sexual in nature. Even though these <https://assignbuster.com/media-representation-of-elderly-and-young-offenders/>



crimes are arguably not representative of the criminal picture of crime committed, news media selects news that will sell papers by playing to the senses of the general public in generating sensational headlines. However, it should be noted that these studies can be criticised as being too narrow by comparing actual crime rates with news reported crimes rates. It is argued by Ericson (1991) that the actual crimes rates and statistics do not represent the reality of crime in practice as many crimes go unreported. (Ericson (1991): 220). In particular Ericson argues that the statistics produced by the police are primarily for their organisational management and cannot be reliably used to compare media reporting. (Ibid) It can be counter-argued that whilst the studies may be imperfect from the perspective of verifiable data, they do go somewhat to comparing the popularity of crime within the headlines against the proportion of reported crime. It facilitates a snap shot in time of how media report crimes albeit imperfect. Initially, therefore it can be argued that a core problem inherent within news, media and crime reporting is a tendency on the part of the mass media to focus on news or crime that will sell their papers and stories that will intrigue readers. The wider effects of this type of reporting will be discussed below in greater detail.

The principal architects within criminology on the study of news reporting were Stanley Cohen and Jack Young work. (Cohen and Young (1973)). Their work proposed two polarised views of news reporting traditions. Firstly their work proposes a ' Mass Manipulative Model' which argues that the public is passive receptors of information and messages waiting to be influenced by the news media. (Ibid: 10). This model proposes that the media is the all-

powerful influence on society that serves to reinforce dominant views.

(Carrabine (2008); 3). Secondly, this model is contrasted with a ‘ Commercial Laissez-Faire model’ which takes a more varied approach and is viewed as being less manipulative of public perception but rather is seen to further a diversity of opinions. (Cohen and Young (1973): 11). The commonalities within Cohen and Young’s work and the vast array of subsequent literature on media and crime are the focus on the assumption that media reporting may be potentially damaging or detrimental to society. There are three main areas of research interest within the literature on the effects of media reporting on society. (Greer 2010: 379). Firstly the effects of media violence on human behaviour, the impact of media images of crime and deviance on fear of crime, and the role of the media in the production of moral panics. (Ibid).

The concerns about media reporting influencing and impacting society detrimentally have developed in the literature along two lines. Firstly, research occupies a traditional “ right” view that media reporting and representation of crime influences society by the way it glamorises crime through television programming, film genres, printed and digital press, music and gaming mediums. The focus of the traditional right view is on the message delivered through the media to society and how that message, in turn, is interpreted. In particular, the traditional right concern is centred upon the message being delivered and the likelihood that recipients will engage in violent or criminal behaviour. Secondly, research literature also occupies a ‘ left’ approach. The ‘ left’ approach concentrates concern on the media images of crime and violence which increases the fear of crime within

the general public. If media depiction of crime results in a society which is more fearful it will legitimise the state's role in creating new legal frameworks designed to tackle and deal with the law and order issues.

Altheide (2009) argues that the media regularly uses its reporting on law and order to invoke 'moral panics' amongst the general public. (Altheide (2009): 79). Moral panics are intense media fuelled bursts of collective concern or outrage directed against particular 'folk devils'. (Ibid). In particular moral panics occur when the media spotlight particular issues which give rise to national concerns which require swift action by the government to implement a policy to counter-act the concern.

This chapter will divide into three sections, the first section will discuss the impact of the media depiction of crime upon human behaviour, secondly the impact of the images of crime and deviances upon the fear of crime and thirdly the role of media in creating and generating moral panics.

## 2. 1 Media Depiction of Crime and Human Behaviour:

There have been a number of studies conducted to consider the impact of crime depiction within the media over the past five decades. A study conducted by Bandura et al (1963) considered the impact of portraying violent and aggressive films. (Bandura et al (1963): 3-4). The study focused on determining whether objects who are subjected to the depiction of aggression would after watching the film re-enact the aggression from the film or at least be influenced by the aggression. The authors conducted a scientific experiment to investigate whether children who were subjected to aggressive filmed cartoon scenes would display aggressive tendencies after

watching their film. The results of the study allowed the authors to conclude that there was strong evidence to suggest that exposure to filmed aggression heightened aggressive reactions in the children under the experiment. The study demonstrated that those children who were subjected to the filmed aggressive behaviour exhibited twice as much aggression in the aftermath of the watching the short cartoon as those children who were not subjected to aggression. (Ibid: 9). Additionally, the study found that not only were the children who were subjected to the aggressive cartoons displayed aggression afterwards but those same children were influenced by the type of aggression. (Ibid). The authors selected children as the objects of their experiment as they believed that children represented the most passive receptors for their film which would provide a fertile ground for their experiment. However, it is important to note that many academics have criticised the approach employed by Bandura et al (1963) in the way they conducted their experiment. Many critiques question the methodological and theoretical validity of the study with particular concern in linking the effects of aggression on children to adults. (Gauntlett (2001): 47-49). Although much criticism can be levelled against the study, it does however demonstrate that people are capable of being passive receptors of media messages and within this passive state they can potentially become susceptible to media influence.

Despite considerable criticism in the literature on the methodological and theoretical limitations of empirically assessing the connections between media effects and actions, there remains an insistence on a link between media consumption and criminal behaviour. (Borden (1975), Browne and

Pennell (1998), Gauntlett and Hill (1999)). For example in the aftermath of the murder of Jamie Bulger by two ten-year-old boys in 1993 films such as *Child's Play III* and other violent video games were identified as being the cause for influencing young adults in acting out violent intentions. (Barker (2001)). Although no connection can empirically be made in the Jamie Bulger case to explain why two ten-year-old children would exhibit such violent tendencies. Similarly in Columbine in 1999 when two teenagers shot 12 classmates and one teacher, and further injuring 21 others, the music of Marilyn Manson, the film "The Basketball Diaries" and violent video games were all identified by various media sources as contributing to the cause of such a massacre. (Muzzatti (2003)). Additionally, when a spate of black killings emerged in Birmingham in the 2002/2003 the Home Secretary, David Blunkett, firmly blamed the media for creating a culture of killing as a 'fashion accessory'. (Mueller (2003)). Although logically it may be inferred that increasing violence in films, television and computer games all may contribute to invoking violence tendencies to those who watch them and in particular children and young adults may be more susceptible to the message of violence than adults. However, it should be noted that no connection be made empirically due to the difficult nature of investigating such a connection between crime depiction and criminal behaviour. Nonetheless, in a time of explanation such as the Jamie Bulger case, the Columbine massacre and other instances crying out for the explanation, many point towards the influence of media messages invoking violence.

It is demonstrated by Barker and Petley (2001) that it is possible to good research on media violence and audiences if it is conducted in accordance

with rigorous concepts, theories and methods. (Barker and Petley (2001)). It is interesting to note that Barker and Petley consider that by simply trying to count violent scenes/acts or conduct and then to measure them against an effect on an audience purely within a quantitative framework is setting the experiment up to fail. (Ibid: 5-10). The authors argue that a more coherent approach is to explore the meaning that different forms of media violence may hold for different audiences in different contexts. (Greer 2010: 403-404). The authors draw upon other qualitative works and attempt to explore the meanings that different forms of media violence may hold for different audiences. The net effect of Barker and Petley's work is that it demonstrates the possibility of exploring how media may effect different audiences in different ways. Although it is not empirically legitimate in that it inferences meanings from other empirical works, it goes somewhat to explaining the connections between human behaviour and media depiction of crime.

## 2. 2 The impact of criminal images and deviance on fear of crime:

It is demonstrated by Ditton et al that there have been at least 73 attempts to establish a connection between media consumption and fear of crime with only 23 per cent of studies finding a positive relationship and 73 per cent fail to make any connections. (Ditton et al 2004: 595-598). Ditton et al argue that one reason why the connections between media consumption and fear of crime may not be found in the studies more frequently is that much of the pre-existing studies do not approach the question from a methodologically suitable approach. (Ibid). All the studies ask the correct the question, whether there is a connection to be made between media consumption and fear of crime, but they fall down on the methods employed to arrive at the <https://assignbuster.com/media-representation-of-elderly-and-young-offenders/>

answer. The authors in their work approach the question by attempting to overcome the identified methodological weaknesses of previous studies by employing a mix of quantitative and qualitative approaches in the exploration of media consumption and fear of crime. Ditton et al's work firstly demonstrates that much of the existing literature on establishing a connection between media consumption and fear of crime uses only quantitative approaches to validate their results, to which the authors refer to as 'amateurish'. (ibid: 595). The authors argue that in order to make fuller more substantiated connections between media consumption and fear of crime quantitative and qualitative research approaches are necessary to engage adequately with media reception and influence. They use qualitative approaches including, interviews and focus groups to explore fully how the media consumers can be influenced by media messages. Their study concludes that there is some fear of crime by media consumers who are subjected to violent crimes through the media depiction of crime. (Ibid: 606-607). Interestingly their study concludes that the fear associated with the media depiction of crime does not result from the localness of the report or the sensationalist headlines but rather the individual's interpretation of the media content. (Ibid).

The importance of the Ditton et al study highlights that individuals who are exposed to the media depictions of crime can and do evidence levels of fear of crime as a result of that exposure. It also highlights that by employing quantitative and qualitative research approaches it is possible to demonstrate that individuals' fear of crime is primarily located within their interpretation of the media story.

Another important aspect of the impact of criminal images and deviance invoking fear of crime is Cavender's (2004) work on applying David Garland's culture of control theory. (Cavender (2004): 335). Cavender argues that by applying Garland's theories on the shifting of criminal policies over the past century to the development of media studies can provide further support for Garland theories. (Ibid). The author argues that in the 1970s the public perception both in the USA and the UK was centred upon the belief that society in general was becoming more risky which were grounded in the reports of rising crime rates, political manipulation of the media and media representations of crime. (Ibid: 336). The argument being made by Cavender is that during the 1970s media representations in addition to political representations of a rising tide of crime required swift action plans by the government. The various governments from the 1970s used the media representations of crime as the basis to develop their policies for election and implementation to 'manage' and 'control' crime. Various political parties used these media representations of criminal activity to present solutions to deal with law and order issues. Cavender points to the 1970s in line with Garland as the turning point for public fear of crime which allowed successive governments to employ varied strategies which were perceived as effective at managing crime. (Ibid: 337). Goode (1989) identifies that the media depiction of crime in the 1980s focused on the drugs problems which later precipitated into policies which were designed to deal with the 'war on drugs'. (Goode (1989)). By employing Cavender's hypothesis it possible to argue that the media depictions of criminal activity in 1970s invoked a fear of crime particularly focusing on both young and adult offenders. The 1980s media depiction of crime represented a fear of drugs and spotlighted the <https://assignbuster.com/media-representation-of-elderly-and-young-offenders/>



need for tougher laws on dealing with the specific issues surrounding drugs wars. The 1990s can be characterised by a focus on youth crime and serious offending.

Cavender's work demonstrates somewhat the impact media depiction can have upon crime and in particular, it can facilitate the use of draconian policies which are perceived to be effective at dealing with crime.

Additionally, Ditton et al highlight that media depiction does contribute towards a general perception that crime in the media can contribute towards a fear of crime with drastic effects upon society both in terms of a risky perception and secondly upon the laws governments may enact to counter-act the risk perception. Each decade since the 1970s has focused policy on tackling particular crimes which the media has spotlighted through its depiction of crime.

### 2. 3 The role of the media in moral panics:

A moral panic is an intense burst of public outcry at particular issues which are primarily media fuelled. Essentially the issue under a moral panic invokes a public outcry which is perceived to be a threat to societal values and interests. (Cohen (2002): 1-6).