

# Crime rates and perceptions of crime

[Law](#), [Crime](#)



Sociological Problem The public perception of crime is that it has increased whilst official statistics show that overall, crime has decreased over the years. In this 'risk society', a fear of victimisation has become part of our lifestyle and we are constantly reminded of the potential dangers of becoming victims of crime. The famous study by Stanley Cohen (Folk Devils and Moral Panics (1972)) is a prime example of how society is encouraged to worry about certain groups and use them as a scapegoat to blame society's problems on.

Sociologists are concerned with this topic as the fear of crime is becoming a bigger problem to tackle than crime itself. 1. 2 Research Question Why has the fear of crime increased when statistics indicate a fall in crime? What influences people's perceptions of crime and to what extent do these perceptions impact on society? The central concern of my research is to discover the reasons behind the growing fear of crime and if there is a causal link between newspaper readership and perceptions of crime.

As (Blackie 2009: 77) suggests, my research question is to understand, explain and evaluate the reasons behind this problem. This is a topic of interest to sociologists as media's 'construction of reality' creates a distorted view of crime, with people more out of touch with the reality of crime than ever. 2. Data Selection The first table I have selected shows the sources most influential on the changes of perception of crime over the past few years (see Appendix 1), and the second table reflects the correlation between newspaper readership and perceptions of crime (see Appendix 2).

I collected these tables from the Home Office's British Crime Survey on ('Perceptions of crime, engagement with the police, authorities dealing with anti social behaviour and community payback' (Chaplin et al, 2011)). This information was gathered by a national face to face victimisation survey of people aged 16 and over from households in England and Wales where people were asked their experiences of crime.

### 3. Methodology

The data I am analysing is quantitative data, since 'it is not possible to become a social scientist without an understanding of statistics' (Diamond and Jefferies, 2001: 1).

It is also a form of secondary data analysis as the data I am looking at are derived from official statistics. When analysing table 3. 02 (see Appendix 2), I discovered a bivariate relationship between the type of newspaper read, and the public's perception surrounding the amount of crime. There is a causal relationship here; depending on what newspaper you read your perception of crime is likely to differ. As (Bryman, A and Cramer, D 2000) note, it is important to establish the cause prior to the effect. An effect cannot come before a cause. In table 3. 01 (see Appendix 1) there is a dependent variable and an independent variable.

The dependent variable is the public's perception of crime and the independent variable is the type of source they hear it from. From analysing the variables within the tables I have come up with a hypothesis that media representations of crime can influence people's view of crime. What I want to discover is if this amplifies people's fear of crime. Firstly, I will be using formal content analysis to measure the amount of space devoted to crime

and the types of crime covered in newspapers. I will then use thematic analysis to look for themes which underlie the content.

My third and final analysis will be textual analysis where I will be closely examining the text used in newspapers to see how it encourages a particular reading and creates an impression. Some of the advantages of using secondary data analysis include firstly it is more structured and standardised which gives us more reliable and repeatable results. It allows us to study larger numbers which gives results that are more representative of a population. As it is a detached and objective method, the researcher merely manipulates the variables and records the results.

Their subjective feelings have no effect on the outcome of the experiment. If subjectivity becomes involved it could interfere with the outcome. In the British Crime Survey they used interviews to find out people's views. This made the results easy to quantify especially when answers are pre coded. This also makes them suitable for hypothesis testing. However, there are also disadvantages to using quantitative data. As we are analysing from a secondary source, there is a lack of familiarity with the data which may cause confusion with the data presented.

It does not allow the researcher to be personally involved, thus they produce a more superficial understanding. The British Crime Survey 2010/11 gives us an overall view of the statistics involved; however it does not give a deeper understanding and a more valid picture of the other factors that may be relevant. The results of quantitative data are limited as it produces numerical descriptions as opposed to a detailed narrative which gives us a less detailed account of the public's perception on crime.

have become a dangerous place to live, there is a 'fear of crime' and a 'fortress mentality'.

The increased sense of insecurity makes many unable to deal reasonably with the problem of crime. One of the reasons crime has decreased is the privatisation of public space in recent years. CCTV are used to control how people access these public areas. The police have also become confined to certain parts of towns and cities due to 'tipping' which allows them to keep a watchful eye on a specific area. Baldwin and Bottoms (1976) looked at the process of 'tipping', which is when councils put all antisocial together in the same place.

This leads to concentration of crime in a given area, which can also have the opposite effect of creating more crime. The process of tipping is similar to the broken window theory of Wilson and Kelling (1982). It's a zero tolerance where there is no acceptance even of the smallest crimes. This will not allow them to grow into bigger problems. The media devotes a great deal of time and coverage to crime and deviance. They are accused of giving a distorted image of crime, criminals and policing. There are studies that indicate that the proportion of news devoted to crime has increased over the past 50 years.

An example is a study that found the proportion of space given to crime reports in the Daily Mirror and the Times from 1945 to 1991 increased from 8% to 21% (Reiner et al. , 2000). The coverage of violent and sexual crimes is significantly greater than their incidence as measured by official statistics, victim studies and self report studies. Homicide accounts for one third of all crime news. William and Dickinson's (1993) study of 10 national newspapers  
<https://assignbuster.com/crime-rates-and-perceptions-of-crime/>

in 1989 found 64.5% of crime stories were about violence against a person, whereas the British Crime Survey only showed 6% of crimes reported by victims in 1989 about violence.

The amount of violent and sexual crimes tended to be more frequent the more 'down market' the newspaper. Although murder stories attract much of the public eye, it only accounts for 600 or 700 offences a year, with most of these being domestic violence. Table 3.03 (see appendix 2) shows the difference between tabloid newspapers and broadsheet newspapers and people's perception of crime. 81% of people who read 'popular' newspapers believed crime had increased, in comparison to 59% of people who read 'broadsheet' newspapers.

This shows how the type of newspaper affects people's view of crime and how the media want certain groups to worry about crime more than others. If the working class are living in fear of crime, they are less likely to rise and revolt, as they are too busy fearing the 'vicious' streets. Crime news focuses on the actual incident of the crime rather than the causes. However broadsheets such as the Guardian are more likely to contain an analysis of the causes of crime (Carrabine et al., 2002). Tabloid readers are mostly working class as they tend to prefer the cheaper and less intellectual types of newspapers.

(Simmons and Dodd, 2003) discovered tabloid readers are twice as likely to be 'very worried' about burglary, mugging, physical attack and rape. An important fact is that the victims of crime are mostly the poor, working class and ethnic deprived groups. Much crime is done by the working class on the working class. Ironically, the media shows victims being mainly women,

<https://assignbuster.com/crime-rates-and-perceptions-of-crime/>

white people and high status individuals. This shows how the media are manipulating our view of crime, making us believe the working class are committing the crimes whilst the privileged are suffering from the crimes.

However, there is another view. The British Crime Survey found that people who live in inner-city areas and council estates are particularly concerned about crime, particularly violent crime. These are the areas where most working class people live and the areas where violent crime is more likely to happen. Tabloid newspapers may merely be reflecting their concern with crime rather than shaping it. As Crawford et al. , (1990) says, ' in inner city areas, mass media coverage of crime tends to reinforce what people already know. ' From looking at table 3.

01 (see Appendix 1) it shows the major sources that influence people's perceptions of crime is news programmes on TV/radio, local newspaper and tabloid newspapers. Different sources of information affected the different perceptions of crime. The people who thought crime had increased nationally were most likely to find out about crime through TV programmes or radio (62%), local newspapers (35%) or tabloid newspapers (35%) as their source of information. Both tables are ordinal data as the events are ' placed in ordered categories along a single dimension' (Fowler Jr., 2004).

The main sources of crime news derive from the police and courts. However, it is important to note that the way the statistics were collected may affect the data. There is a dark figure of crime that does not get reported and that the police consider not worthy to be recorded. Not all crimes are reported and the police record an even smaller proportion of property crime. The official crime index excludes for offences ranging from drunk driving to white

collar violations. Marxists believe capitalism exploits the working class and this gives rise to crime.

Capitalism encourages the middle class to be greedy and self interested. This sometimes leads to corporate and white collar crime however this is not the media's main focus. Marxists also argue street crime is disproportionately prosecuted, that the poor commit compared to the white collar crime that the middle class commit. Stuart Hall's (Policing The Crisis (1978)) study applied a fully social theory of deviance to the study of mugging. Hall's study shows how the media will focus on a particular minority and create a moral panic, often to cover another problem.

The myth of the black mugger served as a scapegoat to distract attention away from the real causes of problem such as unemployment. The black mugger came to symbolise the disintegration of the social order. This is also apparent in today's society as we are encouraged to fear the 'hoody' youth and believe the majority of them carry a knife. Journalists are dependent on official sources for their information. These sources have become primary definers - they define what counts as crime, what counts as justice and what they believe to be significant.

In doing so, they reflect the concerns of the powerful - the agents of social control and the state (Hall et al. , 1978). The British Crime Survey includes questions about perceptions of crime and the concerns. It also asks questions about newspaper readership. Findings from the surveys from 2001 to 2003 show that over the three years, a growing proportion of respondents thought that the national crime rate had risen ' a lot' (25% in 2001, 30% in



2001/02 and 38% in 2002/03). In comparison, the British Crime Survey indicated a steady fall in crime over these years.

The 2002/03 survey shows that 43% of those who read a tabloid newspaper believed the crime rate had increased ' a lot' compared to 26% of broadsheet readers (Simmons and Dodd, 2003). The news media tend to portray a positive picture of the Criminal Justice System. Things such as the success and justice of the police are often exaggerated. There are some stories of the corruption of the police however this is presented as an individual's failings, rather than the Criminal Justice System (Chibnall, 1977). The legitimacy of the Criminal Justice System is protected.

This underlies many news reports on crimes. The mean ' is the average of the distribution of the variable' (Seale C 2004: 327). The most common expression for the mean of a statistical distribution with a variable is the average of all the terms. In order to discover the mean, you simply add up the values of all the terms and then divide by the number of terms. There are other expressions however these forms are hardly used in statistics. ' The median is the number positioned in the middle of a distribution, below which half the values fall' (Seal C 2004: 328) The median for table 3.

01 (see appendix 1) is Broadsheet newspapers at 20% . The mean for table 3. 03 (see appendix 2) for the tabloid newspapers are The Daily Mail and The Daily Star both at 81% saying crime has increased. The median for the broadsheet newspapers are The Times and The Financial Times at 60% and 50%. The mode is defined as ' being the most frequently occurring value in a distribution' (Seal C 2004: 328). The mode for table 3. 01 (see appendix 1) this is the variable that occurs most often. The variable that occurred most

often in both tables was the newspapers and more specifically tabloid newspapers.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the tables and data provided have proved there is an obvious causal relationship between newspaper readership and perceptions of crime. It has effected society as we have almost become reliant on sources of secondary data such as newspapers to feed us with knowledge of crime, which has created a distorted view. We become sucked into the manipulation of the media and believe what we read to be fact, even if we do know at the back of our minds it is an exaggerated version of the truth.

Crime has always been a staple ingredient of human's fascination and it will always make headlines. The main influence of people's perception of crime comes from the media. The media has a huge part to play in shaping the way we think and hear about things, therefore they are also able to manipulate our view, but ultimately it is our choice to believe it or not. For Durkheim (1893) ' Crime is normal and an integral part of all healthy society. ' It is also important to realise that we do need crime in society as it affirms our cultural values and norms and promotes social unity.