

# The media influence on public perceptions of crime



## Introduction

“ The public’s knowledge of crime is primarily derived from its depiction in the media. The media affects the public’s opinion of crime and punishment, and its perception of the police. If the media is responsible for the headlines, the conclusion is that it influences the public’s attitude regarding crime incidents.” (Muraskin and Domash 2007). Crime stories are covered extensively by the print-based media seemingly because they help to sell newspapers. Stories are often ‘sensationalised’ with the intent to make attention-grabbing headlines that do not always represent the true facts; but do these articles play a part in needlessly fuelling the public’s fear of crime? This dissertation will attempt to answer this question by conducting primary research in the suburban village of Stannington in Sheffield.

### Aims/Objectives/Hypothesis

The objective of this research is to analyse the relationship between crime and the media, more specifically fear of crime levels and print-based media articles. Due to the geographic location in which the research will be conducted, two specific crime types have been chosen; personal crimes such as burglary and theft and community-based crimes such as vandalism and anti-social behaviour. These crime types were chosen as a result of the suburban area in which the study will be conducted. These crimes are those which are more likely to be of a concern to the respondents of the study and are therefore more suitable for this particular piece of research if I wish to collect an accurate data set. More serious crimes like rape, murder and assault are less likely to occur on a private, middle class housing estate and

thus these crime types would probably not be a major concern to residents living in the area. Prior to conducting any research; the hypothesis chosen which predicts the outcome of the research is that respondents who are female and who read print-based media more frequently will have an increased fear of crime in comparison to males who don't read print-based media articles.

## Literature Review

### Fear of crime

Garofalo (1981: 840) defined fear of crime as an 'emotional reaction characterized by a sense of danger and anxiety... produced by the threat of physical harm... elicited by perceived cues in the environment that relate to some aspect of crime.' The definition of fear of crime can vary depending on the individual and their own personal experiences of crime; and this is in fact similar to how people have differing levels of fear. An individual's level of fear could be influenced by several factors. Personal experience of crime is one of many factors which can significantly increase the level of fear which a person has, with the fear of repeat victimisation a key issue in this. Balkin (1979) and Hough (1985) argue that a commonly accepted belief is that people who have been victimised, particularly in their neighbourhood, or who know others who have been similarly victimised, will tend to be more afraid. Similarly, a report published by the Beth Johnson foundation in 2006 looked at the fear of crime in people over the age of 50. It found that several respondents who had been mugged and/or burgled had a particularly high level of fear of crime as a result of their previous experiences. This

publication shows many interesting opinions of the elderly, however it does not take into account the opinions of a larger demographic of people with varying ages. As a result it allows an opportunity to conduct research on a broader scale to investigate fear of crime from people of all ages. Jewkes (2010: 155) acknowledges that victims of crime will probably become more fearful about the likelihood of future victimization as a result of their experiences, however many more individuals will experience fear as a result of indirect contact with crime.

Fear of crime has become a major social problem and although some of this fear can be accounted for by the actual amount of criminal activity, particularly in the neighbourhood (Kinsey et al. 1986). ' People may come to be fearful of criminal victimisation because they perceive their immediate environment to be threatening, thus noisy neighbours, teenagers hanging around street corners and flats with broken windows may all signify to some individuals that their neighbourhood is threatening' (Baumer 1985; Hunter and Baumer 1982), however much of it is caused by other subjective/perceptual and social structural factors. A substantial amount of research has already identified several factors which appear to make a contribution to fear. Box, Hale and Andrews (1988: 341) classify these under the following headings: vulnerability, environmental clues and conditions, personal knowledge of crime and victimisation, confidence in the police and criminal justice systems, perceptions of personal risk, and seriousness of various offences. The research for this piece of work will be carried out by households in close proximity to each other; consequently the environmental conditions should be very similar for each respondent. However other

factors, in particular vulnerably; personal knowledge of crime; and confidence in the police and criminal justice system should be different for every respondent. As a result, the findings of the research should be particularly diverse.

In terms of fear of crime, the British Crime Survey offers an in depth insight into the British publics perception of crime, in comparison to actual crime statistics. The BCS is a face-to-face victimisation survey in which people inhabiting households in England and Wales are asked about their experiences of crime in the 12 months prior to interview. The 2009/10 BCS shows that a large proportion of people (sixty six per cent) believe crime has risen across the country as a whole in the last few years. There has been a large majority of respondents who think crime has risen at a national level since the questions were first included in 1996. Statistics provided by the Home Office (2010) show an actual decrease in a large number of crimes between 2002 and 2010. The total of sexual offences, robbery, burglary, fraud, drug offences, and the total of all recorded crime have decreased every year for the past 8 years. These figures would suggest that the public's fear of crime is unjust based on the number of crimes which have fallen throughout Britain in recent years. It would appear that the public's perception of these high crime levels is influenced by more than just official statistics released by the Home Office, the most obvious contributor to this fear of crime being the media.

Fear of crime and the media

It is often argued that the media exaggerate the extent of crime in Britain. This includes newspapers, news and entertainment on television and radio, as well as crime fiction (Greer, 2005). These exaggerations of crime stories which are in the public eye daily can have a substantial impact upon the public's perception of crime, but more significantly their fear of it. As previously mentioned, personal experiences of crime can often result in victims becoming increasingly fearful of being victimised; while accounts of crime from family, friends and neighbours may also have this effect. However as previous research has discovered; the most influential source to fuel fear of crime is usually the media. As Jewkes (2010) states " numerous writers have examined the proposition that the media present crime stories (both factual and fictional) in ways which selectively distort and manipulate public perceptions, creating a false picture of crime which promotes stereotyping, bias, prejudice and gross oversimplification of the facts. Their conclusion is that it is not just official statistics that misrepresent the picture of crime, but that the media are also guilty of manipulation and fuelling public fears." Roberts and Doob (1986) and Surette (1998) reaffirm this view of crime and the media in their analysis of how influential the media can be. " The public's perception of victims, criminals, deviants, and law enforcement officials is largely determined by their portrayal in the mass media. Research indicates that the majority of public knowledge about crime and justice is derived from the media. Western society is fascinated with crime and justice. From films, books, newspapers, magazines, television broadcasts, to everyday conversations, we are constantly engaging in crime ' talk'. In this sense; the mass media play an important role in the construction of criminality and the criminal justice system."

Research conducted by Ditton and Duffy (1983) came to a similar conclusion to Jewkes in regards to coverage of crime stories in the media after their analysis of three Scottish newspapers. An analysis of the crime content of the newspapers (in terms of the numbers and page areas of crime reports) was completed and found that six per cent of the news involved crime, with forty five per cent of this being violent or sexual crime. This figure was then compared with actual police statistics which showed just two per cent of crime in the locality to be of a violent and/or sexual nature (Williams and Dickinson 1993: 35). As a result of their findings, Ditton and Duffy came to the conclusion that this research exemplifies the level of sensationalism and exaggeration of crime stories which appear throughout print-based media. Consequently, they called for further research to be conducted to determine whether the misrepresentations of crime in newspapers influence the general perceptions of readers. Despite a large percentage of violent or sexual crimes covered in the newspapers, it is arguable as to whether a percentage of just six out of the total of all articles in them is substantial enough to conclude that print-based media exaggerate and sensationalise as Ditton and Duffy suggested.

This research took significant steps to examine the content of crime stories in print-based media and be regarded as a successful study, however it was conducted almost thirty years ago which means in terms of quantity and coverage of crime stories in modern Britain, it is somewhat outdated. In addition; the research fails to determine any links between media coverage and fear of crime, so with this in mind, the study which will be conducted for this piece of work primarily aims to investigate if there is any sort of

correlation between print-based media and fear of crime in an attempt to come to a conclusion which Ditton and Duffy were unable to achieve.

When the discussion takes place surrounding how influential the media can be on crime levels and fear of crime; the theory of moral panics often surfaces. This model made famous by Stanley Cohen in the 1970s with the publication of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The creation of Mods and Rockers* refers to “ public and political reactions to minority or marginalized individuals and groups who appear to be some kind of threat to consensual values and interests.” (Jewkes 2010: 74) By labelling certain groups as ‘ deviant’; missing out key facts and extensively covering crime stories; the creation of moral panics by the British press has becoming arguably one of the more damaging aspects of crime coverage, causing unnecessary for fear and apprehension amongst the public. These fears when compared to actual crime statistics do appear to be uncalled for, but figures from the British Crime Survey suggest that they are still present in the minds of newspaper readings.

The British Crime Survey has been conducted by the Home Office since its introduction in 1982 and from 2001 it has run continuously each year. The survey of around forty thousand adults is conducted to gain an insight into public attitudes to crime as well as other criminal justice issues, with the findings often used to assist the Government in their policy formations (Home Office 2010). The 2003 edition of the BCS was the first to ask respondents directly about their newspaper reading habits. The results showed that attitudes to crime are very much influenced by newspaper reports. Forty three per cent of tabloid readers believed that crime has

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increased ' a lot' with seventeen per cent also claiming to be ' very worried' by the threat of physical attacks (Guardian 2003). These findings are based on a very large scale with the respondents geographically located across most parts of Britain. They offer an accurate representation of the population's fear of crime and how this is influenced by newspapers articles, however due to its large scale, a more appropriate approach to use in order to get a localised view on crime would be a study of households in one particular part of a city. This method then allows the researcher to investigate if the immediate area in which the respondent resides is influential in their levels of fear.

Several other pieces of research have been carried out to understand fear of crime in both the elderly and in women respectively. A recent Age Concern reported entitled ' The Fear Factor: Older people and Fear of Street crime' reported that forty seven per cent of those over 75 years of age and thirty seven per cent of those over fifty no longer take part in social and community activities after dark because of fear of street crime (Help the Aged 2006). Similarly an article in the Independent (2005) entitled ' Women and Crime: Fear in Suburbia' goes into depth about the fear which single women have about being attacked in their own homes. In this article many women interviewed agreed that the media has a role to play in increasing women's fears despite official Home Office statistics suggesting total recorded crime is down by six per cent year-on-year (Independent 2005). Both pieces of research gain insight into two separate groups of society with valid and reliable data collection, however they fail to make comparisons of fear of crime levels with other groups of people. By conducting research from

both men and women of varying ages, this allows for more in depth analysis, where comparisons and correlations can be made between all respondents to determine if age and/or sex are an influential factor in fear of crime levels.

There has been extensive criticism of the empirical and theoretical validity of the claims that media images 'cultivate' a misleading view of the world of crime (Howitt 1998; Ditton et al. 2004); and according to several critics, there is still not enough sufficient evidence to suggest that exposure to the media as well as other variables such as class, gender, race, place of residence and actual experience of crime can and do effect an individual's fear of becoming a victim of crime (Reiner 2006). Despite these criticisms; the research carried out for this piece of work will attempt to gather enough evidence to show that the media along with other variables does in fact influence fear of crime.

### Methodology

The data collection method which will be used for this research is a cross-sectional questionnaire consisting of both qualitative and quantitative questions. The questionnaire will be given to twenty four randomly selected respondents living on a housing estate in the semi-rural village of Stannington, in Sheffield. At the last census (2001), the population for Stannington village was listed as 16, 600 ([www.stannington.org.uk](http://www.stannington.org.uk)). This number is far too large as it would require a significant amount of questionnaires to be produced which is unrealistic given the resources and time-frame available; therefore a combination of both cluster and systematic sampling will be used to select certain roads and houses within a small

geographical location. Kalsbeek (1998) defines cluster sampling as: “sampling in which sampling units (that is, households) at some point in the selection process are collections, or clusters, of population elements.” For the primary sample group; eight roads on the housing estate will be selected as part of the cluster sampling process, then house numbers two; five and eight are to be chosen systematically. This approach eliminates any potential bias, allowing the validity of the research to be increased. Similarly; for the secondary sample group, four roads will be selected with house numbers one and ten chosen to receive the questionnaire if not all twenty four primary respondents decide to complete the questionnaire. In order to be courteous when addressing the respondents, the electoral register will be accessed at the Sheffield Town Hall to gather the names of those chosen to participate in the study. Doing this should allow for the respondents to be contacted formally whilst making it more manageable to record which households responded and those who declined.

When the collection of data from the primary sample group commences, personal introductions will be made informing the randomly selected respondents what the research study is for and how they have been chosen. If the respondents then decide to take part in the study they will be given the questionnaire along with a cover sheet, outlining the instructions on how to complete the questionnaire and a brief letter explaining the purpose of the study. If there is no one in at the chosen addresses; the questionnaire will be posted to the respondents and will be collected a week from that date.

The decision to utilise a cross-sectional questionnaire was made because this method allows data to be collected relatively quickly and at a single point in time. These characteristics of data collection are very much suited for this type of research study due to the time and transport limitations which apply. A questionnaire is preferable over other designs such as a longitudinal survey or case study as it lends itself well to quantifiable data, allowing for variations to be established which may appear throughout the different variables. According to Bryman (2008: 45) cross sectional studies are very effective in terms of replicability because “ the researcher can spell out procedures for selecting respondents, designing measures of concepts; administering research instruments and analysing data.”

When the questionnaires have been collected from all respondents and the required amount of data has been gathered; it will then be analysed using the data analysis software SPSS. This software allows complex data to be interpreted very easily through the use of bivariate and multivariate crosstabulations as well as frequency tables. This data can then be used to create graphs which allow for patterns of correlation to be identified. SPSS was elected due to its capability to eliminate any issues regarding inter-coder reliability. It also lends itself well to quantitative closed-ended question data (which I intend to collect) because this form of data requires very little coding and can therefore be inputted into the programme with ease.

### Data Analysis

Following the collection of twenty four questionnaire responses; the data was inputted into the SPSS software and the variable values were coded. After

compiling frequency tables and crosstabulations it appears that the research has identified some interesting findings, which do not necessarily agree with the original hypothesis stated at the beginning of the study.

Table 1 (below) shows how participants responded to the question ‘ Do newspapers influence your fear of crime?’ It appears that only 37. 5% of people felt that their fear of being a victim of crime was influenced by newspapers. 50% stated that they weren’t influenced which is reasonably more than those that answered yes to the question; however it is not significantly high enough to suggest a majority because there were 3 respondents (12. 5%) who were undecided.

(Table 1) Do newspapers influence your fear of crime?

Frequency

Percent

Valid Percent

Cumulative Percent

Valid

Yes

9

37. 5

37. 5

37.5

No

12

50.0

50.0

87.5

Dont know

3

12.5

12.5

100.0

Total

24

100.0

100.0

When the variable of gender is factored into the same question, it appears that men are more influenced by print-based media than women. A crosstabulation of the two variables shows that 6 males in comparison to just

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3 females stated that their fear was influenced by newspapers. This figure at first appears to be a surprise when compared to the Independent (2005) article (referred to earlier); which stated that the media has a role to play in increasing fear of crime levels amongst women. However when a crosstabulation was formed which analysed the 'gender' and 'how often do you read national newspapers?' variables; it appears that the male respondents in the study read newspapers more regularly than the females. Table 2 (below) shows that half (6) of all male respondents read a national newspaper once a week in comparison to only 2 female respondents. It also illustrates that all of the male respondents read a newspaper at least once a month in comparison to 5 females who stated that they never read a newspaper.

(Table 2) How often do you read national newspapers? \* Are you male or female? Crosstabulation

Are you male or female?

Total

Male

Female

How often do you read national newspapers?

Every day

2

3

5

Several times a week

2

1

3

Once a week

6

2

8

Once a fortnight

2

0

2

Once a month

0

1



1

Never

0

5

5

Total

12

12

24

With this in mind; the statistics appear to suggest that those who are subject to newspaper articles more frequently appear to be influenced by them more in terms of fear of crime.

Lichtenstein et al (1978: 575) state ‘ Fear sells.’ Past research by Ditton and Duffy (1983) amongst others, primarily focused upon newspaper content analysis. Some evidence was found to suggest that certain crime types; in particular violent or sexual crimes appeared continuously throughout newspapers articles. This research along with several other studies has collectively suggested that sensationalism of crime stories does occur in order to sell more copies. The questionnaire given to respondents asked them ‘ Do you think newspapers sensationalise crime stories?’ The pie chart above shows the overwhelming majority (91. 7%) of participants felt that

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sensationalism does occur in British newspapers. This figure is particularly high considering that 5 out of the 24 respondents stated that they didn't read newspapers. In this case the assumption could be made that those who don't read newspapers would not be fully aware of the extent to which sensationalism appears to occur. However this statistic confirms that this is irrelevant.

In a similar manner, many newspapers (and the media in general) have been accused of creating moral panics. These accusations have especially