

Police, Offenders and Victims in the Media

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OVERVIEW

Chapter 6 provides:

- A discussion of the relationship between the media and public fears about crime, and the rationality or irrationality of such fears.
- A comparison between 'critical criminological' and 'left realist' perspectives on fear of crime.
- A consideration of the changing role of the police and of the powerfully symbolic place of the community police officer in the British psyche, exemplified by the fictional television character *Dixon of Dock Green*.
- A discussion of the symbiotic relationship between the police and the media.
- An analysis of the origins and genre conventions of long-running 'reality' BBC series *Crimewatch UK* and its constructions of victims, offenders and the police.

KEY TERMS

- critical criminology
- fear of crime
- left realism
- legitimacy
- police and policing
- rationality/irrationality
- representation/misrepresentation
- victimization

Recorded crime is falling year-on-year. The Crime Survey for England & Wales, published in April 2014 by the Office for National Statistics showed that overall crime rates fell by 15 per cent in 2013, and violent crime dropped by 22 per cent. Yet many people believe that crime is rising inexorably and that personal safety is in decline. Politicians and senior police personnel have charged the police service with closing such 'perception gaps' via measures designed to reassure the public, including high-visibility policing and enhanced police communications strategies (Mawby, 2010; Lee and McGovern, 2014). This chapter will explore the proposition that media *representations* of crime make certain individuals and groups feel more vulnerable than their likelihood of actual *victimization* suggests they should be, and it will discuss the relationship between the police and the media, including dramatized images of policing. We will consider the ways in which the media and the police have become accustomed to working together, a partnership that serves to legitimate the police's power and authority, but which has been put under pressure by events including the transmission in 2003 of an undercover documentary disclosing racism among police recruits, footage filmed by 'citizen journalists' in 2009 of heavy-handed police tactics during a G20 protest in London, which resulted in the death of a protester, and the police shooting and killing of a 29-year-old man in Tottenham in 2011 which sparked the worst

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street riots that Britain had seen for twenty years. We will consider the implications of these events and the police service's attempts to counter the negative publicity and bolster its image through its own use of mobile and social media. Finally, the chapter will discuss public fears of crime in relation to *Crimewatch UK* which consistently over-reports the most serious but statistically uncommon offences, constructs particular and polarized views of victims and offenders, and portrays the police as calm and efficient crime fighters who are unwavering in their commitment to bring criminals to justice.

The mass media and fear of crime

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 fueling public fears. Studies carried out in the UK and US indicate that crime reporting in the press is more prevalent than ever before, and that interpersonal crimes, particularly violent and sexual crimes, are consistently over-reported in relation to official statistics. Some studies have also found that newspaper readers overestimate the proportion of crimes solved, and that the police sometimes reinforce journalistically produced concerns about a 'crime wave' by feeding reporters stories based on previously reported incidents. This can sometimes provoke fear of a crime surge at a time when statistically incidents of that crime are on the decrease (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994). The reasons for the media's preoccupation with certain types of crime may be largely pragmatic and economic (they are, after all, in the business of selling newspapers and gaining audience ratings), but the dual outcomes of their portrayals of crime and violence are heightened public anxieties and a greater public mandate for increasingly punitive punishments.

Within criminology, discussions of public fears about crime tend to be polarized along theoretical lines. Marxist-inspired *critical criminologists* argue that politicians, the media and the criminal justice system set the agenda for public debate about crime and the implementation of criminal justice, and collude in perpetuating notions of 'enemies within'. These agendas then shape public perceptions, not only about their likelihood of being a victim of crime, but also about who they should fear. Steven Box (1983) suggests that the picture of crime that the public receive is manipulated by those in power, and that there is an over-concentration on the crimes of the young, the black, the working class and

the unemployed, and an under-awareness of the crimes of the well-educated upper and middle classes, the socially privileged and those in power. He argues that the processes by which the public receive information about crime via the mass media result in perceptions about criminal justice being determined by very narrow legal definitions that tolerate, accept or even applaud the crimes of the privileged, while criminalizing the disadvantaged (see also Tombs and Whyte, 2007; Walters, 2010). Signorielli (1990) goes further, claiming that the way the media constructs crime and violence encourage populations to accept increasingly repressive forms of social control: 'fearful people are more dependent, more easily manipulated ... more susceptible to deceptively simple, strong, tough measures and hard-line postures ... they may accept and even welcome repression if it promises to relieve their insecurities and other anxieties' (1990: 102). In all these expressions, crime is viewed as an ideological construct; it protects the powerful and further marginalizes the powerless.

However, there is an implicit assumption in this proposal that *fear of crime* is *irrational* and unreasonable – that it is a kind of false consciousness produced by those in authority. *Left realist* criminologists hotly dispute this suggestion, arguing that there is a *rational* core to images of crime and to the public concerns they generate. Young, for example, claims that popular perceptions of crime and justice are largely 'constructed out of the material experiences of people rather than fantasies impressed upon them by the mass media or agencies of the State' (1987: 337). Crawford et al. concur, arguing that 'in inner city areas mass media coverage of crime tends to reinforce what people already know' (1990: 76). Of course, these are valid observations, and left realist criminologists have been right to point out that it is not just the media who are to blame for instilling fear of crime. Actual risk of *victimization*, previous experience of victimization, environmental conditions, ethnicity and confidence in the police and the criminal justice system are among many of the factors interacting through complex processes to influence public anxiety about crime. And as we have already seen in Chapter 1, the notion of passive audiences soaking up media influences in isolation of their lived experience is regarded as reductive and untenable.

Our interpretation of statistics on fear of crime may thus have to go beyond their face value. For example, crime survey findings that fear of crime greatly outweighs likelihood of actually being a victim is sometimes associated with wider insecurities that are provoked during prolonged periods of economic recession. Furthermore, the fact that the readers of popular newspapers (that is, those that report crime in a sensationalized and salient fashion) have the highest levels of fear of crime may simply reflect their actual risk of victimization. Put simply, readers of tabloid newspapers are concentrated in the lower socio-economic strata of society, and are more likely to live in areas, and behave in ways, that expose them to greater levels of risk of crime and greater surveillance by the police.

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But while a specific media effect may be difficult to isolate in a world that is increasingly characterized as 'media-saturated', we should not dismiss the idea that the media play some part in the distribution of fear. Media use, while not reducible to crude 'effects', is centrally implicated in the routines and practices of everyday life and is inextricably interwoven into people's biographies and the stories they tell about themselves. It is impossible to separate situated experience from mediated experience and so, while women and older people may have genuine grounds for being fearful of male violence, their anxiety is constantly and pervasively reinforced by a media that recognizes and perpetuates the newsworthiness of violent crimes against women and the elderly. Quite simply, media coverage of crime and deviance is rarely grounded in fact. Crime has been exploited as commercial entertainment since the earliest days of cinema and remains the most salient theme in television dramas and 'reality' shows, which enthusiastically mix fact, fiction and titillation. Meanwhile, as we have seen in Chapter 2, news about crime and deviance has a strong social control element - 'watch and beware'. Consequently, media images of crime perpetually reinforce people's anxieties: we are, at one and the same time, fascinated by representations of crime and alarmed by them. It is little wonder, then, that those groups who become most over-sensitized to their risk of victimization are the same people whose victimization is over-reported and over-sensationalized.

Interestingly, children and young people's fears about crime are rarely discussed, although parents' fears for their offspring are part of the currency of everyday media discourse. For many decades, television was regarded as a multi-coloured narcotic, depriving children of more healthy forms of interaction and making them vulnerable to ideological manipulation. Music has also been seen as a bad influence since Elvis Presley made his first record and periodic concerns about musicians - the Rolling Stones, Beastie Boys, Eminem, Marilyn Manson, Lady Gaga and Miley Cyrus, to name just a few - have always made the headlines. In the second decade of the 21st century, rarely a day goes by without some new scare-story about young people's use of mobile technologies and social media. But rarely is media content discussed in relation to youngsters' anxieties about real-world crime. In 1998, Bok suggested that a growing trend in the US for news reporting of child abduction, kidnapping and murder was responsible for creating a climate of fear linked to an increase in child depression and suicide (cited in Keating, 2002). In both the US and the UK, concerns have been expressed about forms of music which glorify gun and drug cultures and promote homophobic and misogynist attitudes. But any link between gang-related offences and wider cultural statements legitimating or glamorizing gang life and gun crime has not yet been adequately researched.

Fear is notoriously difficult to define. Often conceptualized as a tangible quantity which we possess in smaller or greater amounts, fear may be more

accurately thought of as a mode of perception consisting of a range of diffuse anxieties about one's position and identity in the world (Sparks, 1992). Furthermore, it is very difficult to generalize about 'fear of crime "effects"'. A high-profile crime might cause people to modify their behaviour for as long as the offence is newsworthy, but this amplification of anxiety may be periodic, short-lived and confined to the environs where the crime took place. On the other hand, the relationship between fear and the media might be best conceptualized in more subtle and pervasive terms as contributing to a cultural climate which normalizes male violence and reinforces notions of female submissiveness. Ultimately, the long-term effects of exposure to mediated images of crime are virtually impossible to gauge. But as already noted, while we should be cautious when making statements about the media 'causing' fear (Sparks, 1992), it is also worth bearing in mind that fear of crime is a much more widely experienced phenomenon than victimization. Although victims of crime will probably become more fearful about the likelihood of future victimization as a result of their experiences, many more individuals will experience fear as a result of indirect contact with crime. These vicarious experiences of crime will encompass personal observations, private conversations with victims, second-, third- and fourth-hand accounts passed down through multifarious flows of communication; and, of course, the media. Attempts to measure the impact of media reporting on public fears about crime are notoriously problematic. Historically, the majority of people have attributed their knowledge of the risk of crime to information received from television and newspapers (Williams and Dickinson, 1993; Surette, 1998). In a 1995 MORI poll, 66 per cent of people interviewed said they got their information from television, and 33 per cent claimed their fears about crime are increased by news and documentary coverage of crime (Keating, 2002). Now, of course, the Internet and social media give us continual access to news which can be constantly updated and, in this frenetic news hypermarket, even traditional news organizations such as the BBC will report news stories in an exaggerated and potentially anxiety-inducing manner, in an effort to grab audience attention. As Lee (2007: 165) comments, fear of crime can, perversely, be *attractive* to audiences, if it is 'invoked with just the right editorial zeal'.

According to British Crime Surveys, peaks in 'worry about crime' often coincide with falls in recorded crimes. Using data from the 1996 BCS, Hough and Roberts (1998) found that, when asked how much crime involves violence, 78 per cent of those surveyed replied 30 per cent or more - Home Office statistics recorded it at just 6 per cent. Conversely, substantial underestimates were routinely made about the extent to which the courts use custodial sentences for convicted offenders. Relying on statistical measurements to gauge the extent of crime is in itself a problematic endeavour, but the key point is that public perceptions reflect the view propagated by much of the media, that is, of a continually spiralling crime rate and an over-lenient

criminal justice system. Neither view is accurate and Hough and Roberts blame the media for such public misunderstanding:

Media news values militate against balanced coverage. Erratic court sentences make news and sensible ones do not. As a result, large segments of the population are exposed to a steady stream of unrepresentative stories about sentencing incompetence. (1998: x)

While the media frequently focus on relatively uncommon issues and report them in a sensationalized, overblown manner with demands for harsher and more uncompromising punishments, local responses to anxieties about crime are often much more immediate and micro in orientation. Two examples serve to illustrate the point. In the immediate days following the murder of Damilola Taylor, the demand of local people in the area of Peckham where he lived was on community policing – an appeal for more visible patrol officers to allay people's fears. A similar response was forthcoming following the murder of Sarah Payne. Although the *News of the World's* 'Name and Shame' campaign reported that the majority of people (76 per cent of those questioned) wanted to know if there was a convicted paedophile living in their neighbourhood, a closer look at the MORI poll on which the newspaper's campaign was based reveals a rather different picture:

Asked what could be done to improve the safety of children in their local area, 24 per cent said more policing, 23 per cent suggested speed restrictions and 16 per cent more safe areas for children to play in. Only three per cent offered the public naming of paedophiles as a solution, the same proportion who felt more parking wardens were part of the answer. (Garside, 2001: 32–3)

The issue of community policing remains at the heart of debates about fear of crime and the public appetite for more 'bobbies on the beat' is unflagging, despite a general decline in respect and faith in the police. Although criminological studies have repeatedly shown that providing more police officers on the streets is unlikely to reduce offending, the perception that community police officers patrolling the streets are a highly visible deterrent persists in the public imagination. It has become a key issue over which politicians fight to prove their 'tough on crime' credentials and is one of those powerfully emotive 'common sense' subjects over which it is almost impossible to publicly debate. The lazy and misinformed link that is popularly made between police officers on foot patrol and reductions in crime reflects the journalistic priorities that shape news reporting and the more general limitations of 'fear of crime' debates. As Downes remarks:

That the 'fear of crime' ... remains most developed in relation to certain forms of street crime is probably more to do with collective representations of unpredictable violence than that which more frequently occurs in the home,

or that which is normalized as accidental, or where victimization is indirect and dispersed, as with corporate crime. (1988: 182)

Public demands for bobbies on the beat may be linked to unconscious fears of 'others', including immigrants, political refugees, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, Gypsies, Roma and travellers, and the homeless. It may be a more widespread manifestation of the 'fortress mentality' visible in many modern cities where some areas have been turned into fenced, guarded, middle-class ghettos (see Chapter 8). This would certainly help to explain why fear of crime is disproportionately felt in the relatively comfortable, low-crime areas of 'middle England' (Girling et al., 2000, 2002). Public support for beat officers might also be taken as evidence of the critical criminological proposition that citizens are likely to support more visible and repressive forms of social control if they soothe their anxieties and insecurities about crime (Signorielli, 1990). Public demands for visible police patrols may further reflect a lack of faith in the bureaucratization of the police service. In 1990 a report was published that looked at the weakening in public confidence in the police and at Home Office plans to impose new efficiency targets. The Operational Policing Review was commissioned by the police and it was essentially designed to consider the fundamental tension that was – and still remains – at the heart of the relationship between the police and the public whom they serve, namely that the police are chasing the elusive goals of economy and efficiency, while the public are demanding more community policing, which is costly and inefficient.

The role of the police

One aspect of the Operational Policing Review was that both individual police officers and members of the public were asked to choose between two mediated ideals: a *Dixon of Dock Green* character called PC Jones, who spent most