Media Portrayals of Crime

This fact sheet is extracted from an Australian Psychological Society Position Paper entitled Media Representations and Responsibilities, which can be found on the APS website: www.psychology.org.au.

Introduction

- Research shows that in general people overestimate the level of crime in their community, and media representations of crime are thought to be partly responsible for this; and
- the media over-represent the level of some sorts of crime, in particular violent crimes, crimes by youth, and crimes by people with a mental illness.

What are the concerns?

- There is widespread concern that the level and type of crime reported in the media presents a distorted view of the real level of crime in the community; and
- that this misrepresentation may lead to prejudice towards certain groups, stereotyping of certain groups, people becoming isolated from their community through fear of crime, and the imposition of draconian measures to fight crime.

What does the research tell us about the portrayal of real-life crime by the media?

- Official crime statistics indicate that most crime is non-violent, but media reports in many instances suggest the opposite;
- changes in the amount of crime news coverage seem to bear little relationship to variations in the actual volume of crime between places or over time;
- in Australia homicide statistics have remained remarkably stable over the last 20 years despite the public's perception of there having been an increase; and
- recent research has found that the amount and type of crime reported on Australian news bulletins, when compared with data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Report of Crime statistics), shows:
  - an over-representation of violent crimes,
  - an over-representation of children and the elderly as victims, and
  - an over-representation of youth as perpetrators of crime.

What is the media's role in shaping public constructions of crime and criminality?

- Television is a primary source of values, agendas and perspectives and helps to shape the meaning of crime and criminality for the public;
- television cultivates a view of the world as a mean and scary place;
- media reporting often highlights random and unexpected crimes, with the consequence that individuals readily identify themselves as potential victims;
- television plays a crucial role in the creation of moral panic (outrage directed at certain groups e.g. youth or particular ethnic groups) by depicting crime in a sensationalist format;
- media reporting of crime can be selective with the focus being on "newsworthiness". Research in the US found that a consistent predictor of newsworthiness was if the victim was under 18 or over 62, if the victim was white, and if the victim was female; and
- media reports seldom analyse underlying causes of crime.

What can parents do?

- Parents can know what their children are watching;
- set and enforce clear rules about the amount and type of programs watched; and
- watch with their children whenever possible, and help their children interpret and critique the viewed material by means of family discussions.

What can educators do?
Media education curricula should be developed and widely disseminated in schools. A key element should be the provision of skills in monitoring and analysing media content; professional development seminars should be made widely available for teachers to enable them to increase their own media literacy skills; and media education should be made widely available for parents as well as for children.

What can journalists, journalism educators and media producers do?

• Consider the impact on the community of the way in which crime is reported;  
• report on the underlying causes of crime;  
• be responsible in reporting crimes committed by those who are mentally ill;  
• balance the need to report crime with the privacy and dignity of the victims of crime;  
• consider the public health perspective not just the "newsworthiness" of the item;  
• include best-practice examples in journalism education; and  
• make professional development courses available for currently practising journalists.

In conclusion

Consumers can undertake a range of activities to influence the type and quality of media viewed:

• complain to appropriate bodies about material or policies of which they disapprove;  
• praise programs they admire to organisations such as those listed below;  
• boycott certain programs or media outlets; and  
• join and support lobby groups.

Organisations for further information

Australian Broadcasting Authority, Level 15 Darling Park, 201 Sussex Street, Sydney NSW 2000. Ph: (02) 9334 7700; Fax: (02) 9334 7799; email: info@aba.gov.au

Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS), 44 Avenue Road, Mosman, NSW 2088. Ph: (02) 9960 2622; email: facts@facts.org.au

Young Media Australia, 69 Hindmarsh Square, Adelaide SA 5000. Ph: (08) 8232 1577; Fax: (08) 8232 1571; email: info@youngmedia.org.au

For further information contact:  
The Australian Psychological Society  
Level 11  
257 Collins Street  
Melbourne Victoria 3000.  
Ph: (03) 8662 3300  
Fax: (03) 9663 6177  
email: contactus@psychology.org.au

© The Australian Psychological Society  
August, 2000