

Setting the Public Fear Agenda: A Longitudinal Analysis of Network TV Crime Reporting, Public Perceptions of Crime, and FBI Crime Statistics

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Public perceptions of crime as the most important problem (MIP) facing the country jumped tenfold, from 5% in March of 1992 to an unprecedented 52% in August of 1994. This study analyzed the effects of three network television news predictor variables and two FBI predictor variables to determine what statistically accounted for this "big scare." Based upon data from 1978 through 1998, results suggest that the 1994 "big scare" was more a network TV news scare than a scare based upon the real world of crime. The television news variables alone accounted for almost four times more variance in public perceptions of crime as the MIP than did actual crime rates.

When it comes to public perceptions of crime, does the real world matter any more, or has network TV crime news become the American public's virtual crime reality? Media scholars have known for more than half a century that audience perceptions of reality can at times outweigh the effects of reality itself. Public reactions to the 1938 fictitious "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast illustrated this point (Cantril, Gaudet, & Herzog, 1940). In other words, people's perceptions of reality based upon the mass media are sometimes more powerful than reality itself.

The *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 1997* (U.S.) presented evidence of a striking example of a major shift in public perceptions of crime as "the most important problem facing this country today" (p. 100). Table 1, based upon data from the *Sourcebook*, presents the relevant crime/violence perception data from 25 different Gallup surveys. As one can see, public perceptions of crime and violence as the most important problem (MIP) facing the country were relatively low between 1978 and 1992 and then rose to 9% in 1993. In 1994, however, there

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Table 1. Gallup Report: "What Do You Think Is the Most Important Problem Facing This Country Today?"

Poll date	Percentage	Poll date	Percentage
May 1978	3	November 1989	3
May 1979	2	April 1990	2
January 1980	1	July 1990	1
September 1980	2	March 1991	2
October 1981	4	March 1992	5
October 1982	3	January 1993	9
October 1983	5	January 1994	37
February 1984	4	August 1994	52
January 1985	4	January 1995	27
July 1986	3	May 1996	25
April 1987	3	January 1997	23
September 1988	2	April 1998	20
May 1989	6		

Source: *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 1980*, Table 2.13, p. 178; and *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 1997*, Table 2.1, p. 100.

was a striking jump in public perceptions of crime as the MIP. This leads to a simple question: What caused this "big scare"?

One point is evident from an examination of the complete table presented in the *Sourcebook*: The 1994 jump was not reflected in any other important problem listed in the table. There was no evidence of a generalized jump in public perceptions of the MIP facing the country. The jump was specific to crime. This leads to a follow-up question: Could there perhaps have been a huge increase in the actual number of crimes in the United States during the relevant time period?

A look at the *FBI Uniform Crime Reports for the U.S. 1997* indicates that the answer is no. The crime index total for 1978 was 11,209,000, and the comparable total for 1994 was 13,989,500, an increase of 7.8%. In the same time period, the U.S. population went from 218,059,000 to 260,341,000, an increase of 19.4%. The net result was that the crime index total increased considerably less than the rate of population growth. Therefore, the sharp jump in public perceptions of crime as the MIP facing the U.S. could not have been caused by the increase in the actual total number of crimes. This led us to examine the scholarly literature concerning public perceptions of events in society versus actual events—or, as Lippmann (1922) referred to it, "the world outside and the pictures in our heads" (p. 3).

Studies of Media Crime Reporting

Everyone seems to like a good crime story. Crime is a common theme in books, films, television entertainment programming, and, of course, in the news media. In fact, during the 1990s, crime was the number one topic on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts (Center for Media and Public Affairs, July–August 2000). The two questions most often addressed by scholars in this area, however, are (a)

do media portrayals of crime accurately represent actual rates and types of crime, and (b) what are the effects of crime portrayals on audience members?

Statistical Disparities in Crime News

Scholars have established that the amount of crime coverage bears little resemblance to reality. Antunes and Hurley (1977) found, for example, that “the distribution of crime news in the Houston press is inversely related to the distribution of crimes reported to the police” (p. 760). Graber’s (1980) major study of the *Chicago Tribune* likewise found a poor match between crime news and actual police crime statistics. In general, these and other scholarly studies show that media coverage exaggerates certain crimes, especially homicides. Sheley and Ashkins (1981), in their study of New Orleans news media, found that police statistics indicated that 0.4% of all crimes were homicides, but 46% to 50% of all crime stories on local TV news were about homicides.

The exaggeration in volume as well as in dramatic coverage can be attributed in large part to news values. A crime story has all the elements that make it a perfect fit for a news story. Crime stories are easy to write because of the nature of the story and the reporters’ accessibility to sources and information. A crime is an event or an occurrence with a beginning, middle, and an end that can be easily reported in newspapers and on television. Reporters keep abreast of the latest happenings through their scanners and their contacts with public officials.

Hughes (1968) asserted that crime stories fit one main criterion of news value, and that is human interest. She believed that a news value does not signal importance but rather what appeals to the largest number of readers, and that “criminals are always interesting to the ordinary man” (p. 157).

Lotz (1991) blasts the coverage of crime: “Crime runs rampant in the American press; papers do such a brisk business in crime that they are, in effect, advertising disorder” (p. 2). In his examination of newspapers in four American cities, Lotz claimed that the press did not reflect crime trends and that “crimes may make the front page whether or not they are great in some absolute sense” (p. 34). He attributed the distorted coverage to the definition of what constitutes news and to newspapers’ needs to fill their news holes.

Windhauser, Seiter, and Winfree (1991) examined the relationship between actual crime rates and crime coverage in 22 Louisiana cities and did not find a clear relationship between actual crime and crime coverage. Sheley and Ashkins (1981) also found that media crime reporting bears little resemblance to police statistics. They found that people tend to overestimate the amount of total news space devoted to crime. Roshier (1981) explained that the overestimation could be a result of people’s interest and likelihood of reading about crime.

Marsh (1991) went beyond the boundaries of the United States and conducted a comparative analysis on the literature of crime coverage in newspapers in the United States and other countries during 1960–1989. He found four areas in which the coverage was similar. An overrepresentation of violent crimes and an underrepresentation of property crimes seemed to be the norm in many countries. He also concluded that the percentages of violent crimes reported in newspapers did not match official crime statistics.

Television crime coverage is not more representative of reality and is not less violent or less dramatic than newspaper coverage. The guiding principle in television newsrooms for a long time has been "if it bleeds, it leads." Goodman (1994) observed, "Violent crime is made for the tube . . . the small-screen world is composed largely of villains and victims" (p. H33).

The *Tyndall Reports* (ADT Research, 1994) recorded the amount of network TV news time devoted to crime reporting. Results showed a steady increase in the number of minutes the three national network evening newscasts devoted to crime coverage, growing from an aggregate of 956 minutes in 1991 to 2,058 minutes in 1994. Chiricos, Eschholz, and Gertz (1997), using data from 26 newspapers and CBS, NBC, and FOX newscasts, found a 400% increase in crime stories between June and November 1993 (p. 342). Similarly, the Center for Media and Public Affairs (2000) found that network TV crime stories doubled from 830 in 1992 to 1,698 in 1993. The number of stories increased to 1,949 in 1994 and to 2,574 in 1995. Thus, from 1993 through 1995, the networks devoted more stories to crime than to any other topic.

Other researchers such as Fennel (1992) went beyond the daily TV news to examine the "reality shows." He found that there was an increase in the number of reality TV shows, such as *Unsolved Mysteries*, *Top Cops*, and *I Witness Video*. He suggested that their popularity may be due to economic forces, in that the cost of producing one episode of these shows is approximately half the cost of producing a drama series like *Star Trek*. Oliver (1994) content-analyzed five reality-based police shows and found that violent crime was overrepresented in these shows, and the percentage of crimes that were portrayed as solved was quite high.

Effects of Crime Coverage

The constant diet of crime and violence in our daily news is not without impact. An early study of the effects of crime news coverage found a positive relationship between newspaper coverage of violent crimes and people's perceptions of the amount of violent crime (Davis, 1952). Gordon and Heath (1991) found that the proportion of news hole devoted to violent crime was associated with fear of crime. They found that those readers of newspapers with a larger portion of their news holes devoted to crime were more fearful of crime than were readers of newspapers in the same city who had a lesser proportion of space devoted to crime coverage. Jaehnig, Weaver, and Fico (1981) also concluded that "newspaper emphasis upon relatively infrequent violent crimes may contribute to a fear of violent criminal attack in some communities" (p. 95).

Liska and Baccaglini (1990) examined the effect of structural and cultural characteristics of cities on fear of crime. They noted that media coverage was unaffected by crime rates. They also concluded that homicide stories showed by far the strongest relationship to fear and pointed to the fact that, although homicides constituted only .02% percent of all index crimes, they constituted 29.9% of all crime stories. They also found that local stories had a higher correlation with fear of crime than nonlocal stories.

Pritchard (1986) examined the effects of media coverage of crime beyond the relationship between personal fear and crime. He studied the agenda-setting ef-

fect of crime news on prosecutors in the district attorney's office in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, and found that the average length of stories about a case was the strongest predictor of whether prosecutors engaged in negotiations for homicide cases.

Similar effects were also found for television. Gebotys, Roberts, and DasGupta (1988) found a significant positive relationship between media use and perceptions of crime seriousness. High television news viewing was associated with high ratings for crime as a serious public policy issue. They also noted that female judgments of crime seriousness were higher than those of males.

Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1994) looked at the public's perceptions of crime as one of the factors in their extensive cultivation analysis work. They found that threats abounded in prime time. Crime in prime time was at least 10 times as rampant as in the real world. An average of five to six acts of overt physical violence per hour menaced over half of all major characters (p. 26). According to the researchers, heavy viewers of television and its violent content suffer from the "mean world" syndrome, where people cannot be trusted, and where most people were just looking out for themselves. In a large telephone survey ($N = 2,092$) of residents of Tallahassee, Florida, Chiricos, Eschholz, and Gertz (1997) found evidence of a "resonance" effect—but for women only, not for men. TV news was "significantly related to fear among white women *with* recent victim experience, and for those with *low* income or living in disproportionately black neighborhoods." (p. 353).

Finally, Einsiedel, Salomone, and Schneider (1984), based on a survey of Syracuse, New York, adults, found that "individuals exposed to a greater amount of crime news are more likely to show concern with being a crime victim" (p. 133). O'Keefe and Reid-Nash (1987) used a panel of respondents ($N = 1,049$) in three cities. They concluded that "individuals who pay greater attention to televised news about crime are more fearful of crime and are more concerned about protecting themselves from being victimized" (p. 158). Thus, the consensus of the above body of literature is that, to paraphrase Lippmann (1922), the news media portrayals of crime outside really do tend to influence the pictures of crime in our heads.

Agenda-Setting Theory

As Cohen (1963) stated almost 4 decades ago, "the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (p. 13). In the context of the present study, the public has demonstrated a striking increase in thinking about, and perhaps being fearful of, crime. What remains to be demonstrated, however, is the extent of the linkage between network TV reporting of crime and public perceptions of crime as the MIP facing the country.

An agenda-setting perspective is useful because it offers "an explanation of why information about certain issues, and not other issues, is available to the public in a democracy; how public opinion is shaped; and why certain issues are

addressed through policy actions while other issues are not" (Dearing & Rogers, 1996, p. 2). There have been two general approaches to agenda-setting studies, those using a hierarchy approach and those using a longitudinal approach. Hierarchy agenda-setting studies examine multiple issues involved in the public agenda at a certain point in time. Longitudinal agenda-setting studies, on the other hand, tend to trace "the rise and fall of one or a few issues over time" (p. 41).

McCombs and Shaw (1972) were the first to give a name to the agenda-setting process. They conducted a hierarchy study of the 1968 presidential election and found nearly a perfect rank-order correlation between the issues in the media and the public agenda. Four years later, the study was replicated during the 1972 presidential election and obtained similar results.

In a hierarchy-type agenda-setting study, Funkhouser (1973) used a macrolevel of analysis by comparing the trends in public perceptions of the most important problems facing America with media coverage during the 1960s and with real-world indicators. As did other scholars, he also found a high correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda. Winter and Eyal (1981) compared the public agenda and media agenda on civil rights issues from 1954 to 1976. They found that the public agenda mirrored the coverage in the media. For a period of over 42 months in the 1980s, Eaton (1989) traced the salience of 11 different issues on the public agenda. The results indicated that the salience of 10 of the 11 issues on the public agenda was positively correlated with news coverage of those issues.

Based upon a review of more than 100 agenda-setting studies, Dearing and Rogers (1996) derived six generalizations about agenda setting, one of which is particularly relevant to the present study:

Issue position on the media agenda determines that issue's salience on the public agenda. Of the 112 empirical studies of the agenda-setting process that we reviewed, 60% support a media agenda-public agenda relationship. Most of these studies were cross-sectional. Subsequent longitudinal investigations continue to support this generalization. . . . When the media give heavy news coverage to an issue, the public usually responds by according the issue a higher salience on the public agenda. This relationship of the media agenda to the public agenda seems to hold under a wide variety of conditions, for a diversity of issues, and when explored with diverse research methods. (p. 92, italics in original)

Focus of the Present Study

Purpose. The overall purpose of this study, then, was to attempt to explain the striking statistical increase in public perceptions of crime as "the most important problem facing this country today" from 1978 through 1998. After 19 Gallup surveys between 1978 and 1993 indicated that from 1 to 9% of the public considered crime to be the MIP, why did the percentages suddenly increase to 37% and 52% in two 1994 surveys, followed by 27%, 25%, 23%, and 20% in the next 4 years? What caused the "big scare"? In particular, this study focused on network TV crime news reporting between 1978 and 1998 and examined the relationship between the crime news coverage, public perceptions of crime, and FBI crime

statistics of actual crimes. The focus was on network TV news because that is still the news source from which most people get most of their information about what is going on in the nation.

We formulated two hypotheses:

H1: The violent crime rate will account for more variance in crime as the MIP than will the rate of all other crimes.

The rationale for this hypothesis is simply that violent crimes would be more likely to stand out in people's minds than would, for example, property crimes, larceny, and motor vehicle theft. Also, this hypothesis was supported in an earlier, more limited analysis (Lowry & Nio, 1999) dealing with the same topic.

H2: The number of TV crime stories will account for more variance in crime as the MIP than will the other TV news predictor variables.

Members of the viewing public can easily recognize that the frequency of occurrence of a particular type of story on the network TV news is one of the primary indicators of what the networks consider to be important. Clearly, for example, 20 network TV news stories about crime in a month send an implied message that crime is more important and perhaps occurring more frequently than some other topic that is reported only once or twice in a month. This hypothesis was also supported in Lowry and Nio's (1999) smaller pilot study in this area, and therefore it is reasonable to predict that the same results will be found in the present large-scale study.

The most important hypothesis of this study has to do with the relative effects of network TV crime news reporting versus the real world of actual crimes on the criterion variable of public perceptions of crime as the MIP. Based upon studies reviewed above, which indicate that media images (especially TV images) often shape public attitudes more than do real-world facts, it is hypothesized that:

H3: In a test of all five predictor variables, network TV news predictor variables will account for more variance in crime as the MIP than will the actual crime rates.

This hypothesis is also suggested by Dearing and Rogers's (1996) generalization discussed above that "the position of an issue on the media agenda importantly determines that issue's salience on the public agenda" (p. 92).

Method

The criterion variable for this study (crime or violence as the MIP) was taken from the *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics* (see Table 1). For a number of years the Gallup Poll has asked respondents, "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" In addition to crime/violence, answers to this

Table 2. FBI Variables Explaining Crime as the Most Important Problem Facing the Country (N = 25)

Unique R^2	Variable	Type III SS	df	MS	F
.15	Violent crime	627.34	1	627.34	6.09*
.39	Other crime	1619.91	1	1619.91	15.71***
	Error	2268.22	22	103.10	
	Total	4177.84	24		

Note. $R^2 = .46$ ($p < .001$). * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

question have included such things as the high cost of living, unemployment, the economy, poverty, drugs, abortion, health care, and education. Crime/violence as the MIP data were obtained from 25 surveys taken between May 1978 and April 1998 (Gallup Organization, 1999).

Network TV news predictor variables were compiled from the *Vanderbilt Television News Index and Abstracts*. The procedure was to review all newscasts for 4 weeks prior to each of the 25 Gallup survey dates to locate all crime stories dealing with murder, robbery, rape, assault, civil disorder, kidnapping, gang/juvenile crime, and bombings, as long as these crimes occurred in the U.S. or directly affected U.S. interests overseas. Stories pertaining to white-collar crimes, burglaries, and thefts were excluded. This produced a total of 622 crime stories.

For each crime story, we tabulated two measures of news emphasis, the story's length and rank position in the newscast. Traditionally, story position in a newscast is considered to be one indicator of story importance, with the most important story coming first, the second most important story coming second, and so on.

Data concerning actual crime rates were taken from the *FBI Uniform Crime Reports for the U.S. 1997* and from the FBI on-line archive for 1998. The two predictor variables taken from this source were the rate of violent crimes and the rate of all other crimes. Using the rates per 100,000 inhabitants, rather than the raw scores, had the effect of adjusting the crime data to account for population growth over the 2 decades. Multiple regression was the ideal statistical method for this study because there was one criterion variable (perception of MIP), three network TV news predictor variables, and two crime data predictor variables.

Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the violent crime rate would account for more variance in crime as the MIP than would the other crime rate. This hypothesis was not supported. Table 2 presents the regression summary table testing this hypothesis and shows the comparison of the unique sums of squares explained by the violent crime rate over and above other crime rate, and also the unique sums of squares explained by other crime rate over and above violent crime rate. These unique

Table 3. TV Variables in Explaining Crime as the Most Important Problem Facing the Country (N = 25)

Unique R^2	Variable	Type III SS	df	MS	F
.17	Length	688.93	1	688.93	12.02**
.00	Rank	.01	1	.01	0.00
.01	No. of stories	48.75	1	48.75	0.85
	Error	1204.16	21	57.34	
	Total	4177.84	24		

Note. $R^2 = .71$ ($p < .001$). ** $p < .01$.

sums of squares are known as Type III sums of squares. Dividing these Type III SS by the total SS yields unique R^2 values. Although both FBI predictor variables accounted for significant amounts of unique variance in the regression equation, $R^2 = .46$, adjusted $R^2 = .41$, $F(2,22) = 9.26$, $p < .001$, other crime rate uniquely explained more of the variance (.39 for other crime rate compared to .15 for violent crime rate).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that the number of TV crime stories would account for more variance in crime as the most important problem than would the other TV news predictor variables (length of the stories and rank of the stories). Table 3 presents the regression summary table testing this hypothesis, which was not supported by the data. It can be seen that story length accounted for more unique variance (unique $R^2 = .17$) than did either the number of stories (unique $R^2 = .01$) or rank of stories (unique $R^2 = .00$). The overall $R^2 = .71$ (adjusted $R^2 = .67$) was significant, $F(3,21) = 17.29$, $p < .001$.

Hypothesis 3 was the most important hypothesis and represented the heart of this study. It predicted that the three network news predictor variables (length of stories, mean story rank, and number of stories) would account for more variance in crime as the MIP than would FBI predictor variables (violent crime rate and other crime rate). Table 4 shows that this hypothesis was supported at the .001 level. The TV variables uniquely explained .34 of the variance in MIP, while the FBI variables uniquely explained only .09. Although both proportions are statistically significant, the TV variables explained almost four times (.341/.086 = 3.96) as much variation as did the FBI variables. The overall $R^2 = .80$ (adjusted $R^2 = .75$) was also statistically significant, $F(5,19) = 15.01$, $p < .001$.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study began with national polling data (Table 1) indicating that, from 1978 to 1992, the public did not consider crime to be the most important problem (MIP) facing this country. Instead, the problems perceived to be most important during

Table 4. TV and FBI Variables Explaining Crime as the Most Important Problem Facing the Country (N = 25)

Unique R^2	Variable	Type III SS	df	MS	F
.34	TV variables	1424.16	3	474.72	10.69***
.09	FBI variables	360.09	2	180.20	4.05*
	Error	844.07	19	44.42	
	Total	4177.84	24		

Note. $R^2 = .80$ ($p < .001$). * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

that period were unemployment (5 years), drug abuse (4 years), and other problems, such as fear of war, excessive government spending, and the economy. In 1993, crime as the MIP increased to 9% and then jumped dramatically in two 1994 surveys to 37% and 52%. This study further demonstrated from official *FBI Uniform Crime Report* statistics that the dramatic increase in crime as the MIP could not have been due to an increase in the overall number of total crimes over the 2 decades because the data were adjusted to account for U.S. population growth (i.e., using crime rate data per 100,000 inhabitants).

Network TV news was, of course, the dominant source of news during the study period and, thus, the most likely source of influence of public perceptions about crime. Indeed, this study demonstrated that a very high proportion of the variance in public perceptions of crime as the MIP facing the country was accounted for by the sheer amount of time devoted to crime stories on network TV news. Therefore, this study provides strong confirmation for earlier studies that have also found positive statistical relations between crime news coverage and public perceptions about crime. In short, it can be said: Crime impacts some people directly, but network TV crime news was certainly successful in telling many more people what to think about crime.

Bryant and Thompson (2002, p. 150) stated, "One serious problem that agenda-setting researchers face is the control of extraneous variables. Agenda-setting effects are clearly indicated only when researchers are able to measure public opinion before and after media coverage of specific issues." Given the research design used in this study, with longitudinal survey data and network TV news data both preceding and following the big scare in 1994, the agenda-setting results seem somewhat striking.

Limitations. Although this study did cover a 21-year time span, it studied only a limited number of predictor variables—three network TV news variables and two crime variables. Also, although it studied the dominant news medium in terms of national news, it did not study newspapers, radio news, or news magazines.

Even in terms of network television itself, this study covered only newscasts and not prime-time entertainment programs portraying crime, or reality-based police shows such as *Cops*, *Top Cops*, and *America's Most Wanted*. Oliver (1994)

found that such reality-based police programs follow the patterns of the news media by greatly overrepresenting violent crimes.

Another possible limitation of this study in terms of generalizability is that the time period for this study included several highly unusual and sensational crimes, the most important of which was the O. J. Simpson murder trial. For example, the murders of Nicole Simpson and Ron Goldman occurred on June 13, 1994. O. J. Simpson disappeared temporarily and was charged with the murders on June 17 and the infamous slow-speed chase of his white Bronco took place on June 18. There was an unprecedented amount of television news coverage of the entire O. J. Simpson case. This raises a question as to how the results of this study would generalize to “normal” times.

As a post hoc test of this question, we dropped the O. J. Simpson stories from 1994 and 1995 and ran our regression model for Hypothesis 3 again. After the O. J. Simpson data were dropped, the unique R^2 of the TV variables decreased from .34 to .19, while the unique contribution of the FBI variables increased from .09 to .21. Both of the unique contributions were significant at the .05 level. The R^2 of the model without the O. J. Simpson data was still a substantial .65 (adjusted $R^2 = .56$), compared to .80 (and .75) for the full data set. Therefore, when we analyzed the full data set, including the O. J. Simpson stories, just as presented to the network TV news viewers, the TV variables accounted for almost four times more variance in MIP than did the FBI variables. With the O. J. Simpson data eliminated from the data set, the TV variables and FBI variables accounted for almost equal proportions of variance in MIP. Thus, it can be said that the “O. J. effect” provides some support for Dearing and Rogers’s (1996) notion of the importance of “trigger events” in agenda setting.

One additional limitation of this study is that all of the public opinion fear index data were aggregate data from the Gallup Poll. It could be argued that, for some research purposes, it would be more precise to use individual-level fear scores and thus be able to control for other individual demographic and psychological variables.

Suggestions for future research. From the limitations discussed above, it is clear that this study should be replicated in different time periods and in different contexts to test the robustness or generalizability of the findings concerning the impact of network TV news. Several refinements and extensions come to mind. First, future studies should include both print media and broadcast media. Second, future studies might be able to extend the time period covered by this study by including data from earlier in the 1970s. Third, it would be advisable to replicate this study using other polling data concerning public fears of crime rather than relying exclusively on Gallup data. Fourth, replicating this study in other countries that have extensive television news services and comparable polling data would be highly desirable, in order to make cross-national comparisons. Fifth, it could be revealing to incorporate separate TV news predictor variables for coverage specifically of murders versus coverage of other types of crimes. Finally, the statistical effects of the news coverage of other trigger events, for example, the JonBenet Ramsey murder case and the various school shootings, could be studied.

Conclusion. It is beyond debate that public perceptions of crime as the number one problem facing this country jumped precipitously in 1994. The overall conclusion of this study is that the network TV news variables accounted for almost four times the amount of variance in people's perceptions of crime as the most important problem facing the country than did the actual crime rates. Secondly, of the three network TV variables studied, the sheer amount of time devoted to crime coverage was much more influential than the number of crime stories; story rank was unimportant.

In short, crime affects millions of people directly, but network TV crime news affects many more millions of people indirectly. The 1994 scare was more a network TV news scare than a scare based upon the real world of crime. To some extent, then, network TV crime news has indeed become the American public's virtual crime reality as it influences the public fear agenda.

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