Crime and the Media
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• The prevalence & nature of crime news
• Coverage of CJ system
• Understanding media coverage
• How media coverage affect CJ policy
The Prevalence of Crime News

• Principle component of news reporting
• Crime news also more likely to be read/viewed and remembered by consumers
How the Media Distort Crime

1. Media gives impression crime is increasing

2. The media suggests that violent crime is more common than actually is

3. The media presents crime as committed by sociopathic predators

4. Media suggest elderly, women, and whites are most frequent victims of crime

5. The media portray crime as becoming more random and more likely to be committed by strangers
Media Coverage of the CJ System

- Historical function of the press:
- Today little coverage of system v. crime news
- Highly selected, distorted, and generally uncritical
- Westfeldt & Wicker - *Indictment: The News Media & the Criminal Justice System*
Media Coverage of the Police

• Emphasize “crime fighting” role
• Show police as more effective than they actually are in solving crimes
• 90 percent of media covered crime are solved
• Criticism of the police is rare
Media Coverage of the Courts

• Coverage has increased with court rulings allowing cameras in courtroom
• Still, selected coverage: cover what is judged “newsworthy”
• Greater coverage to D’s who get off on technicalities
• Fosters impression courts are too lenient
Media Coverage of Correctional System

• Least amount of coverage
• Coverage of new prison or some particular problem in a prison
Media Coverage of Correctional System

- Lack of coverage due to . .
  - Perceived lack of public interest
  - Difficulty of access
Understanding Media Coverage of Crime

• Three explanations or models
  1. Market model
  2. Manipulative model
  3. Production model
1. The Market Model

• Media gives public what they are interested in \textit{and} what is in the public interest

• Two often not in harmony
Why is the public interested in crime news?

1. Complex psychological process
   - *downward comparison*
   - *feel better @ self by seeing other worse off*
Why is the public interested in crime news?

2. **Speaks to profound moral questions**
   a) tells us @ limits of *human nature*
   b) informs us @ *moral integrity of community*
Why is the public interested in gore?

3. **Consumption a collective ritual experience**
   - Emile Durkheim, 19th century sociologist
   - all societies have “collective consciousness”
   - At some level, crime is “good”
   - Our daily reading/watching of crime news serves similar purpose
   - Experience moral indignation
2. The Manipulative Model

- Media acts in direct in the interests of owners (Marxist theory)
- Capitalist societies are maintained through coercion & consent
- Dominant class has control over the intellectual means of production - including media
- Use media to make us believe greatest threat comes from street criminal
- Deflect attention from their activities
3. The Production Model

- Extent/nature of crime news function of how news is collected
- Large number of crime stories
- To make production of crime news manageable . . .
  - take positions giving easy/cheap access to crime news
  - set up in “source organizations”
  - the police
  - who becomes a “police reporter”
• Media retain some autonomy
  – Decide what stories are **newsworthy**
  – Generally, the novel, unexpected, or dramatic

- Crime stories are used in the editing process
Crime News and Fear of Crime

• Exposure to crime news does influence perceptions of crime
• Mixed research findings regarding the effects of media consumption and fear
• More rigorous studies do find a link
Impact of newspaper crime reports on fear of crime

(Linda Heath)

• Content analysis of newspapers in 26 cities
• Recorded number of crime stories
• Recorded whether those stories were
  – sensationalized
  – random or
  – local
• Interviews conducted with residents about their fear of crime
Heath’s major findings

• **Total number** of crime stories did not affect fear

• In cities where papers carried more **local** crimes stories which were
  • sensationalized or random
  • residents *more fearful*

• Reports of nonlocal crime that were sensationalized or random were associated with *lower levels* of fear
Ideological Effects of Crime News

• Consumers learn that the causes of crime are individualized
• Broader social causes are unexamined
• Traditional law and order response affirmed and supported
How the Media Can Affect Criminal Justice Policy

- Media can influence policy by **focusing attention on specific issues**
- Media can determine what **policy alternatives** are given serious consideration
- Media can be **used by policy entrepreneurs** (“claims-makers”) to further own org./personal interests
The Media as a Cause of Violence

• A historical concern
• Today, 70% of public believe there is a link between media violence and the crime rate
• In 1990s, concern that the media markets and advertise violent products to children
• Studies confirm concerns
Marketing Violent Entertainment to Children (FTC)

- Two-thirds of all marketing plans for R-rated violent movies expressly said target audience was children under 17
- 85 percent of children age 13-16 are able to purchase music with explicit lyrics or violent video games
- 50 percent of children age 13-16 can gain access to R-rated violent movies
Research on the Media-Violence Link

- Studies focus on television violence. Why?
- Because of high level of violence
- Because exposure to TV violence is great
Summary of Research Findings

• Consumption of high levels of violence associated with increased aggressive behavior
• Media exposure increases aggression through **modeling** and **desensitization**
• Viewing violence increases fear of victimization, mistrust of others, and the use of self protective behaviors
• Worst 3 offenders
The Policy-Making Process
What is “Public Policy”

• The sum of all government activities - private or public - that impact the lives of citizens

• Three points of emphasis
  1. Includes all levels of government
  2. Includes public and private agencies
  3. Includes intended and unintended effects of policy

• To understand how crime policy made, need to understand “policy cycle”
The Policy Cycle

Inputs → Policy Adoption

Policy Feedback → Policy Outputs
Inputs: Two Parts

1. Agenda Setting

- The initial step in policy cycle
- The *agenda* is the set of conditions or problems that officials are paying attention to at any given time
- Items accepted on agenda tend to remain on the agenda for long periods
- Some problems do go on and off
- Generally, things come on the agenda quickly
Inputs:

2. Policy formulation

- Alternative policy responses or initiatives are presented and debated
- The chances of a policy alternative being selected are enhanced by . . .
  1. the merits of the plan,
  2. its budgetary feasibility,
  3. whether the plan is incremental,
  4. and the political resources of advocates
Policy Adoption

- the adoption of a particular policy
- decision dominated by legislative branch
  - the role of standing committees
  - affected by relationships with administrative agencies and special interest groups
  - primary source of info & lobbying
- Executive branch exercises only informal influence over policy adoption
Policy Outputs

– how policy actually implemented
– sometimes, **new administrative component** created
– more often an **expansion of existing bureaucracy**
– given authority to implement the policy
– also modify policy as necessary
Policy Feedback

• policy assessment
  1. What were effects of policy?
  2. Did it have the desired effect?
  3. Recommendations to adjust/terminate the policy/program
The Primacy of Input Stage

• Agenda setting most important stage
• Manner a condition conceptualized determines policy alternatives considered
• Also, determines what orgs. given responsibility and resources to implement policy
• So, how does a condition get on agenda?
• How does condition become accepted as “social problem”? 
How Conditions Become “Social Problems”

Two explanations

1. Objectivist model
2. Constructionist model
The Objectivist Model

- A social problem represents an **objective, concrete, and damaging or threatening condition**.
- A social problem can exist even without people’s knowledge
- **What’s important:** does condition causes large-scale death, disease, etc.
- The greater the number of people affected, the more important the social problem
- More likely to be placed on the agenda
The Constructionist Model

• Harmful condition not necessarily a social problem
• Instead, **a social problem is a product of group or collective activity**
  – Role of advocacy groups or “claimsmakers”
  – Groups champion a particular putative condition
• Need not be the worst condition - or exist at all
Competition for Recognition as a Social Problem

- Large pool of potential social problems
  - A select few are picked out by ‘claims-makers’
  - presented as social problems
- But public agendas, attention, resources limited
  - means intense competition
- Understanding zeal of claims-makers
  - A problem for some is a benefit to others
What “Winners” Gain

• Recognition of their condition as social problem
  - gives claims-makers leg-up on policy alternatives
  - Brings *power/resources* to address the problem
    – jobs, promotion, status
Types of Claims-Makers:

1. Insiders

- **Public bureaucrats** (political appointees & civil servants)
- Success due to resources . . .
  - *Expertise of bureaucrats*
  - Tenure
  - Lobbying budgets
- Incentives of public bureaucrats to influence agenda
Types of Claims-Makers:

2. Outsiders

- Special interest groups
  - Corporate interest groups
  - Membership-based interest groups
Six Techniques of Competition

How claims-makers distinguish their condition

1. Narrative stories
2. Atrocity tales
3. Metaphors
4. Convergence
5. Concern for children
6. Manipulation of numbers