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Primetime Crime and Its Influence on Public Perception

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If you turn on your television around nine o'clock tonight and flip through some of the channels you will no doubt come across a crime drama show or two. In fact depending on your service plan, you might be able to choose from fifty or more different episodes of different crime dramas, that is of course after you watch *Dancing with the Stars* or *American Idol* or whatever reality television show you're secretly addicted to, and there's just so many crime shows these days, aren't there? Each season it seems like two new ones make a debut.

What is the effect that these shows have on our lives? We know that the media has a way of shaping our perceptions and opinions, like making us think that mullets in the 80s' were a good idea or that anyone larger than a size two is disgusting fat, so what effect do these crime drama shows have on our public perception of crime and the criminal justice system? Yes crime drama shows are fictional and we supposedly know everything we see on them is not to be believed, but we also still believe models look like they do in their pictures despite knowing that photoshop is used liberally these days on every picture. At least we know the shows are fictitious, but all those inaccuracies being reinforced episode after episode, from show to show, some of them must get embedded into our minds as facts. Once we acknowledge them as facts our perception of the criminal justice system and crime will change, and might even cause our interactions with the criminal justice system to be different, after all we are now experts on how crime solving works.

Before we can look at our perceptions and interactions with the criminal justice system, we must first identify the inaccuracies that we are shown week after week. In order to pinpoint at least some of the inaccuracies being shown to the whole of the United States as well as several other countries from around the world, I chose to watch three episodes from twelve different highly rated/popular crime shows and gather information. I watched *Bones*, *Criminal Minds*, *The*

Closer, *Southland*, *The Mentalist*, the *Law & Order* franchise (except *LA* and *Trial by Jury*), *NCIS* and I

suffered through nine episodes from the *CSI* franchise. I recorded all sorts of information, such as

the crimes committed for each episode, the number of forensic methods used to solve the crime,

the number of detective methods used to solve the crime, use of force, number of male law

enforcement agents, victims and suspects, number of female law enforcement agents, victims and

suspects, the original air date, if the crimes were premeditated, average length of time spent on a

case, the network, and what day and time it airs. I also recorded specific information about the

law enforcement agents, the victims and the suspects.

For all of the main law enforcement characters, the victims and suspects I collected the

following information: gender, age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education, profession,

attractiveness and appearance. For the female characters attractiveness was defined as the

characteristics of conventional beauty are such: tall, slender (typical hourglass figure), long hair,

clear complexion, large chest, relatively small buttocks, symmetrical facial features, straight and

small nose, straight white teeth, high cheekbones, long eyelashes, luscious lips and medium or big

eyes. For male characters attractiveness was define as conventional beauty by society's standards.

The characteristics of conventional beauty are such: tall, broad shoulders, small waist, well

defined muscles, symmetrical facial features, short well-kept hair, clean shaven, white straight

teeth, clear complexion, well defined jaw line, slightly tan. Both were rated on the same Likert

scale with respect to their gender, from one to four with one being rather plain or ugly (possessing

none of the characteristics of conventional beauty) and four meaning that the character was

pretty or beautiful (possessing most or all the conventional characteristic of beauty).

For female law enforcement agents their appearance was judged on the appropriate dress

versus inappropriate dress. Appropriate dress is considering to be conservative, proper attire, not

to form fitting and no accessories, inappropriate is revealing, skin tight clothing, a loud color palette and accessories. This was also rated on a Likert scale from one to four with one being conservatively dress, two- business casual, three- very relaxed business casual (a dress, high heels, some accessories) and four being inappropriately dressed. For the male law enforcement agents appearance was also judged on appropriate versus inappropriate but with a slightly different meaning. Appropriate dress for males is conservatively dressed in a suit and tie in neutral colors, inappropriate dress for males would be wearing shorts or jeans. Again this was also rated on a Likert scale from one to four with one being conservative, and four being inappropriate.

Law enforcement agents were also ranked on sensitivity, involvement in the case and professionalism. Involvement was another measure that the agents were rated on using a scale from one to four. One meant that the agents sole purpose was to give orders and that they were little seen during the episode, a rating of two meant that the character seemed to appear in the episode and accompanied a character who received and ranking of four, but never contributed to the case. Three showed that the agent did contribute to the case but was not a major player in solving the case. For an agent to receive the rating of four the had to have contributed the majority or an equal share of effort or information required to solve the case.

Professionalism was the last category on which the law enforcement agents were ranked again on a scale from one to four. One could be interpreted as the agent being a rouge agent, operating almost solely outside the justice system, two was an agent who works alone and reports to a superior every now and then. Rank three represent agents who more or less follow the rule but occasionally will use 'creative' methods to obtain critical evidence and four represents the agent that strictly follows the law.

For both male and female suspects and victims appearance was rated on a scale of one to four, one being business attire, two- business casual, three- casual and four inappropriate such as partial nudity.

Suspects were also rated on sympathy, involvement, cooperation and level of criminality, in addition to their mental statuses, guilt and criminal history. Sympathy was to rate if the suspect felt any remorse for the victim/victims of their crime. The scale was from one to three, one was if the suspect did show remorse or sympathy for the victim, two was if they felt the victim got what they deserved and the third rank was for suspects who were indifferent about their crime and its victims.

The suspects' involvement in the investigation was also noted on a scale of one to four. One- the suspect was interviewed once briefly, two- the suspect was interview a few times briefly, three- suspect interviewed at length may have been subject to a search, and four- the suspect interviewed for a length of time, perhaps briefly detained, test ran etc.

The suspects' cooperation was another factor on which data was collected on scale from one to four. One- suspect is reluctant and insists on their innocence, two-suspect cooperates to prove innocence or appears to want to help, three- the suspect's cooperation is force (perhaps by detaining them or showing them a damning piece of evidence and a deal is on the table) and four- the suspect lawyers up and does not cooperate.

The level of criminality was intended to draw out what type of criminal the suspect is portrayed as being. One- the suspect is not a criminal at all, two- this crime is the first the suspect has every committed, three- the suspect has committed a few crimes before but is no criminal mastermind and four- the suspect is a professional mastermind criminal.

Victim's mental status, whether or not they knew their attacker and if they were a victim of a planned crime, in addition to their involvement, cooperation and portrayal were other items of data gathered. The portrayal of the victim was a measure how victims are being shown on television on a scale of one to four. One- the victim was an innocent random victim, two- the victim was an innocent not so random victim, three- the victim was not so innocent, or had something to hide (perhaps they knew a secret about their attacker) and four- the victim was 'asking for it.'

Involvement in the case was rated on a scale of one to three. One- the were only shown once in the episode or they were dead for a majority of the episode, two- shown two or three times, three- becomes actively involved in the investigation.

Cooperation with the investigation is the final aspect that victims were rated on using a scale from one to three. One- reluctant to participate in the investigation, two- provides only basic information, three- cooperates completely with the investigation.

The results from this little study were quite interesting. As expected the majority (84%) of the crimes shown in the programs were murder, only 2.1% of crimes were nonviolent, but according to official crime statistics murder is over represented as property crimes are the highest rated crimes in the country. However some of the data was ignored because there was simply nothing to be discovered from it. For most victims such little information was given that the only data that proved interesting with victims was gender, socioeconomic status, if they knew their attacker or not and if the were a victim of a planned crime or unplanned crime.

Table 1.1

	Female Victims from Lower Middle and Lower Classes	Female Victims from the Middle Class	Female Victims from Upper Middle and Upper Classes
Crime was unplanned	66 2/3% (4)	23% (9)	44% (4)
Crime was planned	33 1/3% (2)	77% (30)	56% (5)
Total	100% (6)	100% (39)	100% (9)

N=54

Table 1.2

	Female victims who knew their attacker	Female victims who did not know their attacker	Male victims who knew their attacker	Male victims who did not know their attacker
Crime was unplanned	55% (11)	18% (6)	36 2/3% (11)	50% (4)
Crime was planned	45% (9)	82% (28)	63 1/3% (19)	50% (4)
Total	100% (20)	100% (34)	100% (30	100% (8)

N= 92

Table 1.1 shows that the majority of female victims were from the middle class, in fact since the majority of victims were female in this study, the majority of victims overall were middle class women. This is contradictory to actual crime statistics that show that young African-American males are the most frequently victimized demographic, in fact the number of minority victims was so little that it was not significant enough to be shown. Table 1.2 shows more contradictions between television and reality, it shows that most female victims did not know their attacker and they were victims of a planned crime. The reason that is number is so high is because of the number of serial killers that are shown on these shows (not just no *Criminal Minds*), in fact homicides committed by serial killers actually account for less than 1% of murders. The truth is females are far more likely to be attacked by someone they know in and unplanned crime.

For males on the other hand, it shows the majority of them knew their attacker, when in reality

males are more likely to be victimized by someone they don't know.

For suspects the only significant data was gender, socioeconomic class and race/ethnicity.

Table 2

	Caucasian Female Suspects	Non-Caucasian Female Suspects	Caucasian Male Suspects	Non-Caucasian Male Suspects
Lower Middle and Lower Class	26% (6)	0%	34% (16)	64% (7)
Middle Class	39% (9)	50% (1)	30% (14)	9% (1)
Upper Middle and Upper Class	35% (8)	50% (1)	36% (17)	27% (3)
Total	100% (23)	100% (2)	100% (47)	100% (11)

N= 83

Table 2 echos the same lack of minority representation shown in the data on victims.

Interestingly the female and male Caucasian suspects are relatively equally distributed amongst

the three classes. However the majority of non-Caucasian male suspects are in the lower

socioeconomic bracket. Official crime statistics tells us that this table is different from reality in

that the majority of offenders are young African-American males, if you made it so this table

only showed this statistics for the guilty suspects, you would find that the number of male

minority suspects drops to four and the there are no minority females that are guilty.

However for law enforcement agents several factors proved to be quite interesting upon

closer analysis.

Table 3.1

	Caucasian Females	Non-Caucasian Females	Caucasian Males	Non-Caucasian Males
Uniform Officer/Lab Tech	35% (7)	16 2/3% (1)	22% (9)	46 2/3% (7)
Detective	50% (10)	50% (3)	54% (22)	53 1/3% (8)
Supervisory	15% (3)	33 1/3% (2)	24% (10)	0%
Total	100% (20)	100% (6)	100% (41)	100%

N= 82

Table 3.2

	Female	Male
Plain	12% (3)	39% (22)
Attractive	88% (23)	61% (34)
Total	100% (26)	100% (56)

N= 82

Table 3.3

	Caucasian Females	Non-Caucasian Females	Caucasian Males	Non-Caucasian Males
Inappropriate	60%(12)	50% (3)	10% (4)	73 1/3% (11)
Appropriate	40% (8)	50% (3)	90% (37)	26 2/3% (4)
Total	100% (20)	100% (6)	100% (41)	100% (15)

N= 82

      In Table 3.1 it is obvious that minorities again are underrepresented, especially since none of the male minorities are in a supervisory position. However, the majority of female minorities are in detective positions or higher. For Table 3.2 race/ethnicity was not a significant factor in determining the attractiveness of the law enforcement agents. No surprise here really that the majority of females were rated as attractive, people don't tune in every week to look a someone who's plain. Table 3.3 shows that there is a significant difference between the genders and race/ethnicity in regards to appearance. The majority of Caucasian females dress inappropriately

while for minority female law enforcement agents it was fifty-fifty. The majority of Caucasian males were dressed appropriately whereas the majority of minority male law enforcement agents were dressed inappropriately.

The results clearly show that what is portrayed in the crime drama as very different to what occurs in real life. One explanation for this could be that the networks are creating shows for a certain demographic, middle class white people. An article that appeared in *The Wall Street Journal* on April 22, 2011 entitled "USA, the Happy-time Network" by Amy Chozick gives you the formula used by the creative team at USA for creating new shows. For example all of their shows must take place in an upbeat happy-go-lucky kind of setting, the USA original series *Burn Notice* was pitched as taking place in Newark, New Jersey but those of you who watch the USA network know that it takes place in Miami. Moreover the 'good guys' must be attractive and intelligent and the shows cannot show any 'sad' crimes such as child molestation. According to the article this type of branding is really benefitting USA for it had become the most-watched cable network, they clearly know their audience.

Most of you who watch crime shows are not representative of actual crime victims or offenders and you can't pretend that what you see on television doesn't help shape you reality. If the media can shape other areas of your reality why not shape how you perceive crime. If you then believe that DNA evidence can be found in almost every case and the results of the test are delivered in under an hour and you're sitting on a jury where they don't have DNA evidence or GSR (gunshot residue, not like you didn't know that already, you closet *CSI* fans) or not even fingerprints like in the Robert Blake case, you might feel that the evidence is not sufficient enough to convict since 'important' forensic evidence is missing. Or perhaps you've been the victim of a crime and are extremely frustrated as to why the offender has not been apprehended yet because

cops only work one case at a time and you're sure there's some kind of forensic evidence they could use to speed up the case, maybe the paint chips that were on the floor at the time of the crime. Incidences like these are becoming increasingly frequent and its starting to put pressure on the criminal justice system to make some changes, murderers might be walking free because there is no irrelevant forensic evidence or citizens become increasingly agitated with the police for failing to solve a crime that the cops on the TV could solve, as a result the police are becoming frustrated with the public's unrealistic expectations. It might not be a free-for-all yet, but the more the you and me believe in the reality of these shows the closer they get to having an effect on the criminal justice system.