

CREATING A CRIME WAVE: THE 1990

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Abstract

This study examines the emergence of crime as the nation's "most important problem" for the first time in U.S. polling history in 1994. By comparing polling data, news coverage waves, and crime statistics, the analysis challenges the argument that shifting media coverage is driven by public sentiment. It does so by demonstrating that a dramatic change in public opinion polls was precipitated by an unprecedented news coverage wave at a time when crime levels were actually falling. The study thus underscores the leading role media can play in the emergence of social problems and casts doubt on the notion that escalating expenditures for the American criminal justice system are driven principally by public demand.

INTRODUCTION

In August 1993 U.S. news outlets began running stories about a national crime wave. By the end of 1993, coverage of the alleged crime wave occupied center stage across all major media outlets. Polls recorded an unprecedented proportion of Americans citing crime as the country's number one problem. However, the index crime rate during this period was actually falling. How this contradiction came about offers an important insight into the ways media can affect social opinion and influence social policy.

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS IN MEDIA EFFECTS RESEARCH

Media effects — the exploration of media's effect upon public opinion — is an area of research within media studies. Three theoretical strains of media effects can be identified: media effects as persuading (changing attitudes); as framing (defining or interpreting conditions); and, most recently, priming (foregrounding certain events and associated issues)(Klapper 1960; Cohen 1963; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Funkhauser 1973; Kraus and Davis 1976; Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979; Cook, Tyler, Goetz et al 1983; Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller 1980; Surette 1998). After a period of dormancy, media effects research in recent years has been reinvigorated, with researchers focusing on identifying the frames employed by media and/or analyzing media priming. In a few instances,

researchers have further attempted to link the frames and/or priming with the making of public policy (e.g., MacKuen and Coombs 1981; Beckett and Sasson 2000).

Showing that media have a "maximal" effect — that is, that media shape public opinion — has proven surprisingly difficult in prior research. Because of this, the debate over whether media exert a "maximal" effect over public opinion, or merely a "minimal" one (i.e., merely reflective of public sentiment) is an ongoing one (Klapper 1960; Chafee 1975; Gitlin 1978; Hall 1982; Cook, Tyler, Goetz, et al 1983; Beckett 1994a). This study is one of the few to demonstrate a "maximal" media effect. It does so using data from the 1993-1994 crime wave coverage in print and television media. To demonstrate this effect a review of the problem of demonstrating media effects will be undertaken, followed by a discussion of methodological weaknesses of prior research, a discussion of the methodology employed in this study, and finally, the results generated by the data.

METHODOLOGICAL WEAKNESSES IN MEDIA EFFECTS RESEARCH

Tracing the precise role of various protagonists (media, advocacy groups, mass sentiment, political officials and so on) in a media effects study has been done infrequently, in part because it presents difficult methodological problems (Price 1992). Except for experimental studies with pre- and post-test ele-

ments (Iyengar 1987), all other media effects studies have been hampered by using only a partial record of polling data. One cannot trace the inception of a social problem adequately without a complete polling record.

In addition, most media effects studies have employed either a cross-sectional or panel approach. However, neither strategy adequately addresses the causality issue: cross-sectional approaches do not provide a heuristic model that allows for the determination of underlying relationships, thus making it impossible to establish with confidence whether a public agenda actually originated from a media agenda. Furthermore, cross-sectional studies are snapshots in time, and therefore cannot account for longitudinal media lag effects. Panel studies are a better tool for making a case for media effects, but problems remain in determining the possible duration of time-lag effects and in controlling for alternative causal factors outside of media effects (Cook, et al, 1983). The failure to satisfactorily resolve these methodological problems has severely limited the advance of media effects studies and their possible use in the analysis of social problems.

Excluding those studies that have adopted cross-sectional methods (and, therefore, simply assumed that the causal order runs from media to the public), the only studies that have shown fairly clear indications of media effects are Beckett (1994, 1994a, 1997), MacKuen and Coombs (1991), Iyengar (1987) and Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder (1982). In the Beckett and the MacKuen and Coombs studies, the demonstration of a media effect required regression analysis because the data compiled did not lend themselves to an obvious, and unequivocal, interpretation.¹ In the Iyengar and the Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder studies, an experimental approach was employed.

METHODOLOGY OF THE CURRENT STUDY

The present study corrects for some of the methodological limitations of prior studies by incorporating data drawn from several decades. Examining data over time compensates for the restrictions and potential errors inherent in cross-sectional studies and panel studies. This study looks at three factors in determining media effects vis-à-vis the

1993-4 crime wave: 1) "Most Important Problem in the Nation" (MIP) data from national public opinion polls; 2) crime incidence and prevalence data; and 3) quantitative and qualitative measures of crime news coverage.

The MIP poll provides researchers with a powerful tool for examining longitudinal shifts in public opinion (or at least public attention) because it has been administered for several decades in precisely the same format. It thus serves as an appropriate instrument for measuring possible agendasetting effects. For researchers, one of the distinct virtues of the MIP polls is that the question: "What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?" has been posed in precisely the same way since 1935. This obviates framing effects problems that would compromise the reliability of longitudinal data comparisons.

The MIP data used in this analysis was drawn from the entire polling record (unpublished and published polls) available through the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research and accessible via the Internet.² Using the entire polling record proved valuable for two reasons. First, it permitted the rigorous implementation of a controlled repeated cross-sectional methodology - indispensable in a media effects study. Second, it showed that the published record of poll results was not only incomplete, but at times, inaccurate. Without a database as complete as this, it simply cannot be determined with any reliability what came first, media attention or shifts in public attention/interest. (An important caveat is that because individual-level media consumption is not available - outside of the confines of an experimental study - researchers cannot truly distinguish media effects as media treatment from self-selection by individual consumers. Traditionally, nearly all media effects studies have employed aggregate level data. This study follows that tradition).

In addition to the polling data obtained, crime statistics were obtained and analyzed, using both the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). Finally, media examined included four major newspapers (the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*), the three

major newsmagazines (*Newsweek*, *Time* and *U.S. News and World Report*),³ and the three major networks' nightly national news broadcasts — ABC, CBS and NBC).⁴ I used the Information Access Company's index to the four newspapers, the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* for the newsmagazines, and the *Television News Index and Abstracts* (commonly known as the Vanderbilt Index) for the network broadcasts. I also utilized the Film and Television Archive at the University of California at Los Angeles to view the network broadcasts in person.

Major news media were treated herein as a differentiated whole. In so doing, it became possible to investigate the collective impact of the different major media, as well as potential interactive effects between the different media. By comparison, the customary technique of sampling an exemplary media source (e.g., the *New York Times* alone) cannot, except by chance, apprehend a news coverage wave's inception and course of development.⁵

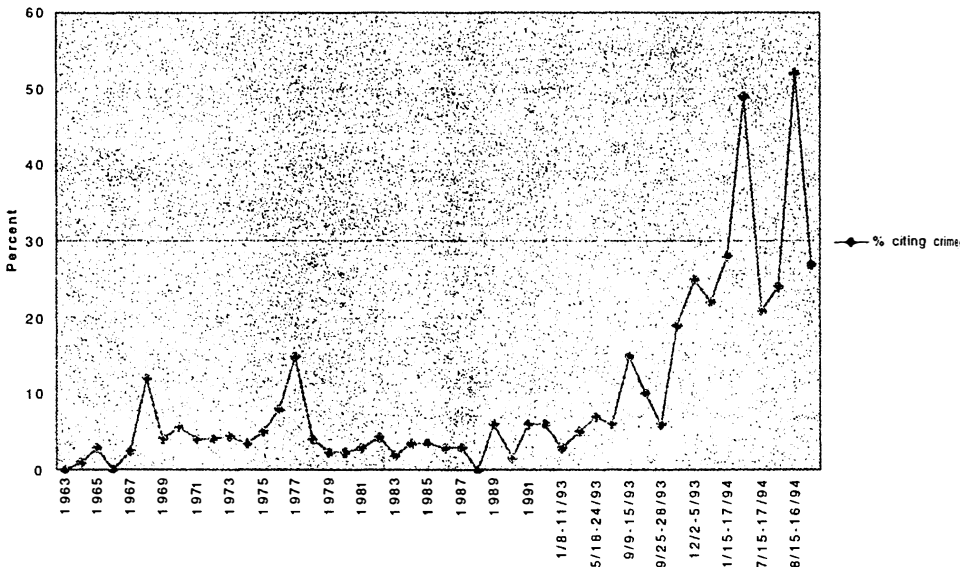
1993-1994 CRIME WAVE: THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

In a January 28-30, 1994 Gallup poll 49 percent of respondents cited "crime" as their choice for the "most important problem" (MIP) in the nation. This 49 percent reading capped an unprecedented escalation in poll-measured crime concerns, rising 43 points over the span of only four months. This represented the first spike in crime concerns since 1977. See Figure 1.

This dramatic spike in crime concerns occurred at a time when index crime rates were declining (UCR; NCVS). One subcategory of index crimes, however, did rise between 1985 and 1993: juvenile homicide. Some observers explain the exceptional levels of crime concerns registered in the 1990s' polls on those grounds. Juvenile homicides fell from 1980 until the mid-1980s at which time they began a steep rise. In 1992, 2,428 minors were killed in index crimes. In 1993, 2,697 were killed. This represented an increase of eleven percent between 1992 and 1993 (or a total of 167

Figure 1.

Percent citing Crime & Juv Delinquency in the Most Important Problem in the Nation Poll 1963-1994



more victims). There does not seem to be any doubt that the growth of child murders and child murderers, or "kids killing kids," between 1985 and 1993 was a significant factor in 1990s crime worries.

As displayed in Figure 2, however, juvenile homicides had been rising at alarming rates for seven years before polls registered a change in public concern about crime. At the point where polls took off, juvenile homicides had actually stopped rising, and began to fall a bit. The fact that more and more juveniles were dying violently was evidently not by itself enough to spike the polls. If juvenile homicides do not account for the crime alarm, then what can?

The most spectacularly publicized incidents of 1993, the kidnapping and murder of Polly Klaas in California and the Long Island Commuter Railroad killings by Colin Ferguson were reported in December of 1993, prior to the peak recording of crime concerns in January 1994. But these occurred after the dramatic rise in poll-measured crime concerns was already underway beginning in September 1993 and continuing through the end of 1993 and into 1994. Thus, while it seems very probable that the Klaas and Ferguson cases played a role in the 49 percent reading in January 1994, they do not

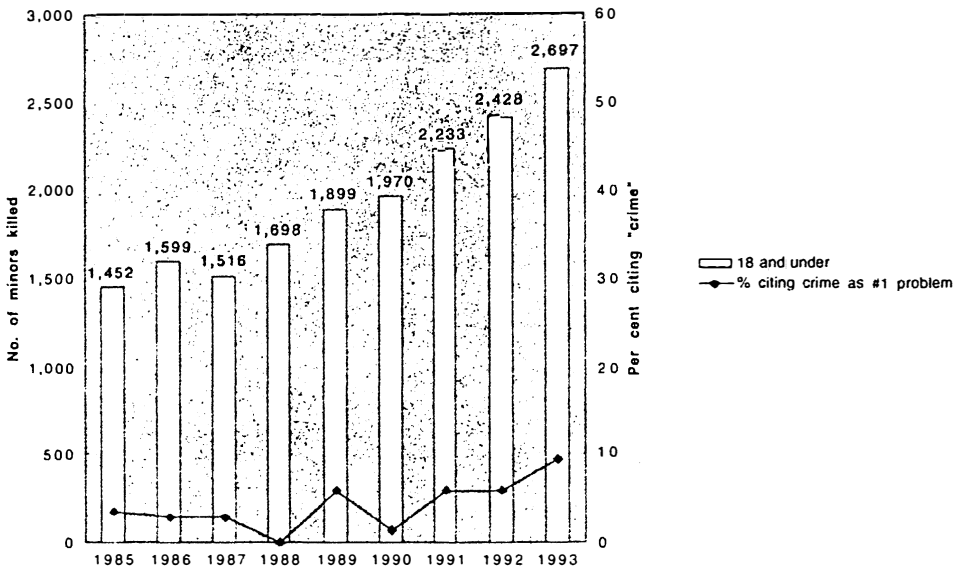
help to explain the early stages of the crime scare in the fall of 1993.

Further, crime rates continued to fall throughout 1994. Subsequent to the Ferguson shootings in December of 1993, no criminal incidents of comparable magnitude, nature, or attention marked the months January 1994 through September 1994. (Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman were murdered on June 12, 1994, but this case was not treated, nor was it perceived by the public, in the same manner as a "random" killing).

Could it be that crime as a social problem rose so high in 1994 because of the end of the Cold War and the absence of an international conflict? Undoubtedly the MIP poll has been and will in the future be affected by international events. However, in the 1990s, the U.S.-Iraq war had been over for nearly two years before crime showed a sudden increase of concern in the MIP poll. Hence, contrary to conventional wisdom, the crime issue's emergence at the top of the polls in late 1993-94 cannot simply be attributed to the Cold War's end.

What, then, was happening in the period before and during the ratcheting up of crime concerns at the end of 1993-94? A review of news media in that time period reveals a

Figure 2.
Homicides under 18 y.o. v. Per cent naming crime in MIP poll



crime news coverage wave of exceptional proportions across major news outlets, initiated by the newsmagazines, and not by the activities and influence of any primary claimsmakers (such as middle-range advocacy groups).⁶ Politicians and various public officials assumed significant secondary roles in this news coverage wave – as analyzed later on in this article, their pronouncements, particularly in August 1994, received substantial news media attention. Taken as a whole, this coverage wave preceded the changes in pollmeasured crime concerns.

TURNING POINT: AUGUST 1993

A turning point in media coverage of crime came in August of 1993 when the three major newsmagazines ran a total of four crime cover stories. All three newsmagazines opened the month simultaneously with crime covers. *Newsweek's* August 2, 1993 cover was entitled "Teen Violence: WILD IN THE STREETS." The sub-headline (kicker) read: "Murder and Mayhem, Guns and Gangs: a Teenage Generation Grows up Dangerous—and Scared." *Newsweek* cited law enforcement and public health officials who reportedly described "a virtual 'epidemic' of youth violence in the last five years, spreading from the inner cities to the suburbs."

On the same day, *Time's* cover also raised the youth and guns issue: "Big Shots: Guns. An Inside Look at the Deadly Love Affair between Kids and Their Guns." Finally, *U.S. News and World Report's* August 2, 1993 cover was entitled: "Super Cops: Can They Solve America's Crime Problem? The FBI's Tough New Chief (with a picture of LAPD's new chief Willie Williams)."

Then, in its August 23, 1993 issue, *Time* followed up with a dramatic cover story: "AMERICA THE VIOLENT: Crime is Spreading and Patience is Running Out." The cover graphic featured a menacing figure done in collage style, wearing stereotypical gang attire. The cover story featured Clinton's crime bill and began "President Clinton could not have known, of course, that the week he picked to talk about crime would be the week crime was what everyone was talking about. On Tuesday, there was the man in fatigues who shot up a McDonald's in Kenosha, Wisconsin. The same day in

Kansas City, Missouri, a 15 year-old went to the movies with his mother—and shot her as they watched the film. 'I don't know why I did it,' he said. On Thursday in Burlingame, California, a man walked into a real estate office, shot one broker and wounded another before trying to kill himself. He had just been evicted from his home." The next paragraph in the story noted the murder of Michael Jordan's father, James Jordan.

Fishman (1980) discusses this thematic style of reporting — taking disparate incidents and pulling them together to create the appearance of a trend. In this case, none of these incidents involved a gang member, despite the fact that a gang member was portrayed on the cover. What the incidents did have in common, however, is that they were instances of incidents in places commonly considered safe and places frequented by the middle class: McDonald's, the mall, and a professional office. The story of the 15-year old that shot his mother at the movies pushed a number of powerful emotional buttons. These acts were depicted as random, senseless, rising and expanding in their targets. Certain central themes and narrative structures, rather than incidents themselves, played the key role in crime news during this crime coverage wave. As Joel Best put it, speaking more generally about contemporary crime coverage:

"Random violence is a central image in the construction of contemporary crime problems. This imagery ignores the patterns in criminal activity, implies collapse in the social order, and denies rational motives for criminals. These images are consequential; they promote intense public concern while fostering punitive social policies." (Best 1996)

These themes were very clear in the August 23, 1993 *Time* issue. One of the accompanying stories in the issue was headlined: "DANGER IN THE SAFETY ZONE: As Violence Spreads into Small Towns, Many Americans Barricade Themselves." The theme sounded here was that urban crimes were now invading the previously safe sanctum of the suburbs and small town America: "The broadening of targets to include suburban and rural preserves—and the savageness of the crimes that fill the news—has left far more Americans feeling

vulnerable." However, index crimes in the suburbs and rural areas did not increase in the 1990s (Donziger 1996: UCR). This story derived its punch from the perception that small towns and the suburbs were previously safe from crime and were only now being invaded by the type of crime seen in the inner city. In 1994, murders were actually down by two percent in the suburbs as compared to 1993, and down by ten percent in rural regions over the same time period (UCR).

CRIME COVER STORIES IN THE NEWS-MAGAZINES

This attention to crime by the news-magazines on their covers in the 1990s, particularly in 1993 and 1994, is unprecedented. By way of comparison, throughout the whole of the 1960s (1960- 1969), there was only one cover story devoted to crime among all three newsmagazines. In the decade of the 1970s, there were a total of eight crime cover stories among the newsmagazines. In the 1980s there were also only eight crime cover stories. In 1990 there was one crime cover. In 1991 there was one. In 1992 there were four crime covers. In 1993 there were eleven crime cover stories, with nine of them concentrated between August 1993 and December 1993. And in 1994, there were sixteen crime cover stories (three of them in January 1994). Thus between the years 1960-69, a cumulative total of .0006 percent of the three newsmagazines' covers were devoted to crime compared to eleven percent of their covers in 1994 alone. Clearly, in the 1990s, and especially beginning in 1992, crime became a hot topic for newsmagazine cover stories.⁷

CHANGES IN NEWSPAPER CRIME COVERAGE

The dramatic August 1993 newsmagazine cover stories did not go unnoticed. Two major events followed. First, public opinion polls registered the *first spike in crime concerns since 1977*. The numbers citing crime more than doubled from the June 1993 figure of six percent to 15-16 percent in September 1993, the month immediately following the four newsmagazines' crime cover issues (MIP polls were not taken in August 1993). Second, following the newsmagazines' August coverage spike, both newspapers and TV followed in kind beginning in October

1993. Newspaper stories on the crime issue in the four papers examined leapt upward some 250 percent in one month, going from 21 stories in August 1993 and 22 stories in September 1993 to 55 stories in October 1993. Then, in November, newspaper coverage rose still further to 71 stories, and stayed high through the next year, peaking at 202 stories in August 1994, an increase of over 900 percent compared to September 1993's crime news. See Figure 3.

CRIME STORIES IN NEWS MAGAZINES POST OCTOBER 1993

On November 8, 1993, *U.S. News and World Report's* cover story was entitled: "Guns in the Schools: WHEN KILLERS COME TO CLASS. Even Suburban Parents Now Fear the Rising Tide of Violence." In their next issue, November 15, 1993, *U.S. News & World Report* stated "The voters' cry for help: Clinton, governors and mayors try to respond to the wave of crime fear gripping Americans." The article asserted that "Fear of crime has become the most urgent issue in the country." *Newsweek's* November 29, 1993 cover featured rapper Snoop Doggy Dog. The cover read: "When is Rap 2 Violent? His Album Hit the Top of the Charts This Week. Last Week, He Was Indicted for Murder."

Time's December 20, 1993 cover featured a handgun with Colin Ferguson's eye staring back through the trigger hole. The headline capsulate the thrust of media's crime news coverage with the big bold letters: "ENOUGH! The Massacre on a Suburban New York Train Escalates the War on Handguns. Colin Ferguson, who Shot 23 People, Killing Five, on the 5:33 Train from Penn Station to Hicksville, Long Island."

Newsweek's January 10, 1994 cover reiterated the children, guns and violence theme: "Growing Up Scared: How our Kids are Robbed of Their Childhood." The headline kicker read: "Guns for Toys: the New Anti-Crime Crusade." Then, on January 17, 1994, both *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report* ran crime covers. *Newsweek's* had a close-up of the agonized face of Nancy Kerrigan: "First Monica Seles. Now Nancy Kerrigan: 'WHY ME?' The New Fear of Stalking." *U.S. News and World Report's* cover marked a kind of high point in news-

magazines' crime covers: "The Truth About VIOLENT CRIME: (in red:) What You Really Have To Fear." The cover graphic was of a bullet-ridden windshield from the driver's perspective.

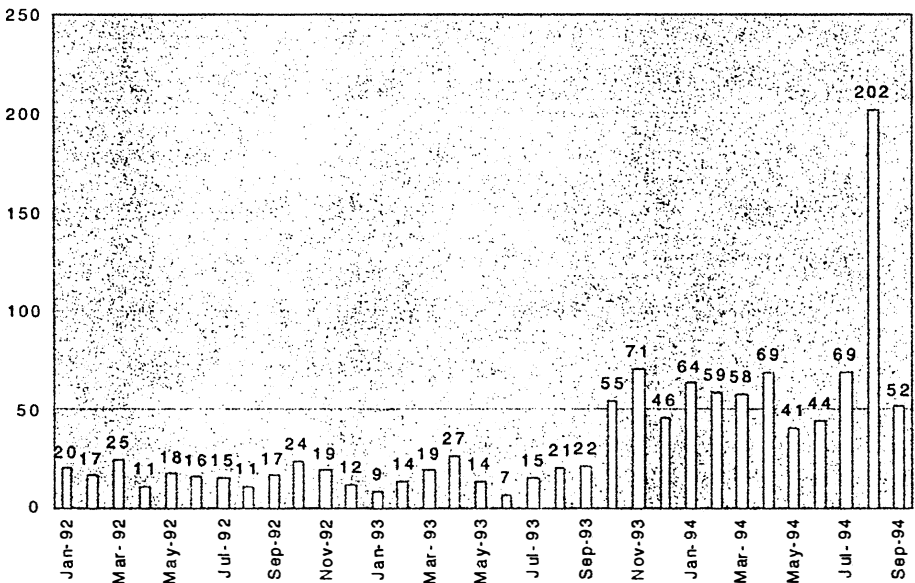
This article and the accompanying pieces totaling fifteen full pages was the archetype of this particular genre of reporting. It was rife with contradictions sitting side by side to each other and deliberately alarmist in tone. "The drumbeat of news coverage has made it seem that America is in the midst of the worst epidemic of violence ever. That sense is not supported by the numbers. The latest evidence is that crime levels actually fell last year. But that does not mean that last year wasn't the scariest in American history." It thus began with an acknowledgment of media's role, and followed by stating that the data does not support widespread crime fears. Then it proceeded immediately to contradict itself by asserting that last year was the "scariest in American history," because, "[o]verriding the statistics is the chilling realization that the big crime stories of recent months have invaded virtually every sanctu-

ary where Americans thought they were safe: their cars (James Jordan's murder); their public transit (the Long Island Rail Road murders); even their bedrooms (the kidnap and murder of young Polly Klaas in Petaluma, Calif.)."

The article went on to point out that random killings like the Long Island Rail Road massacre and post office shootings were not increasing sharply. Cases where four or more people were killed in a single incident varied from ten to thirty annually between 1976 and 1991. Criminologist James Fox was quoted as stating that "[m]ost mass murderers do not kill at random in public places." Further, the article noted that mass killings at workplaces were relatively rare and "hardly at epidemic proportions." The authors noted that child-snatching incidents in 1993 would probably come in at the low end of the average. Finally, they stated: "Family strife. This is one problem that doesn't get the attention it deserves. There are 800,000 or more violent incidents within families each year, but the terror of living in many homes is largely overlooked..." After noting how overlooked

Figure 3.
Newspaper Crime Stories 1/92-9/94
 (LA Times, NY Times, Wall SJ and Wash Post combined)

□ Total Articles



this domestic violence was, the report does not elaborate, essentially repeating the sin of omission they have just identified. None of the three graphs in the articles, for example, included these 800,000 or more violent incidents in the family.

CHANGES IN TELEVISION CRIME COVERAGE

A word of explanation will help to clarify the startling data that follow. Late 1993-94 witnessed a major shift in the number of stories by networks on the crime *issue*. That is, these were stories about crime-as-a-social problem as opposed to stories about a specific criminal incident. While criminal incidents were mentioned in these crime issue stories, the specific incidents were employed as illustrations of crime as a larger problem, rather than as the point of the story itself. What the reader will see displayed in Figure 4 will look, therefore, surprisingly low initially. (Since these network stories were about the crime issue, and not specific crimes per se, the numbers cited here do not include any O.J. Simpson stories).

Network crime issue news increased tremendously beginning in October 1993 as did crime news in the four surveyed newspapers. Network news coverage of the crime issue had been relatively low throughout 1992 and into 1993 (See Figure 5). These crime issue stories up until October 1993 were almost invariably a report about the latest national crime statistics — usually the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports.

Borrowing *Time's* August 23, 1993 cover headline, NBC entitled its violent crime series in January 1994 "America the Violent." This was NBC's successor to its "Society Under Siege" series of October and November 1993. NBC's Tom Brokaw began the nightly national news broadcast of January 21, 1994, for instance, with the words: "Crime and violence. The focus of so much attention across the country these days. Next week, all of our NBC news broadcasts will focus on the problem and solutions, what can be done about it. Tonight, NBC Chief Financial Correspondent Mike Jensen sets the stage by adding up the staggering cost of violent crime."

The other two networks also featured their own versions of a crime focus that week. Connie Chung began CBS's January

28, 1994 broadcast this way: "In Washington, President Clinton today delivered his first speech since ... his State of the Union address this week, and it was no accident that Mr. Clinton decided to show up for this one. White House correspondent Rita Braver reports why. [Rita Braver:] In Miami this week, a drug agent and a police officer wounded by a drug dealer. In Cleveland, a stabbing at a high school, and in Washington today, over one hundred mayors met to talk about the subject that's uppermost in their mind: crime." Peter Jennings introduced ABC's January 28, 1994 broadcast with: "We're going to begin tonight with law and order and politics and perceptions. It is the perceptions driven by all the headlines about guns and sensational murder trials and conspiracy that are driving much of the political agenda. Today, the Menendez murder trial is over in California. The Tonya Harding saga in Oregon continues to fascinate. Most Americans tell us crime is out of control, and that's why politicians are having another meeting in Washington today." In that same week — between a poll sampling taken between January 20-23, 1994 and January 28-30, 1994 — public concern about crime rose by 18 points, from 31 percent to 49 percent.

Between January 1993 and September 1993, the three networks together averaged about three crime issue stories per month.⁸ In October 1993, the three networks broadcast 25 crime issue stories, 58 stories in November 1993, 65 stories in December 1993, and 74 stories in January 1994. January 1994's coverage of the crime issue was up, therefore, by a factor of more than 24 over the level of crime coverage in the first nine months of 1993.⁹

In October 1993, when the networks and newspapers launched their part of the coverage wave, political actors' statements played a secondary role in the news stories about crime. Of the 25 stories concerning the crime issue that month on network nightly national news, only three specifically concerned the Crime Bill and one "Three Strikes, You're Out." The remaining 21 stories concerned crime as a general issue — with the youth angle being uppermost. These stories appeared primarily on NBC's *America Close Up* series, CBS's *Eye on America*, and

Figure 4.
8/93-9/94 Crime Issue Stories v. "Crime" in MIP polls

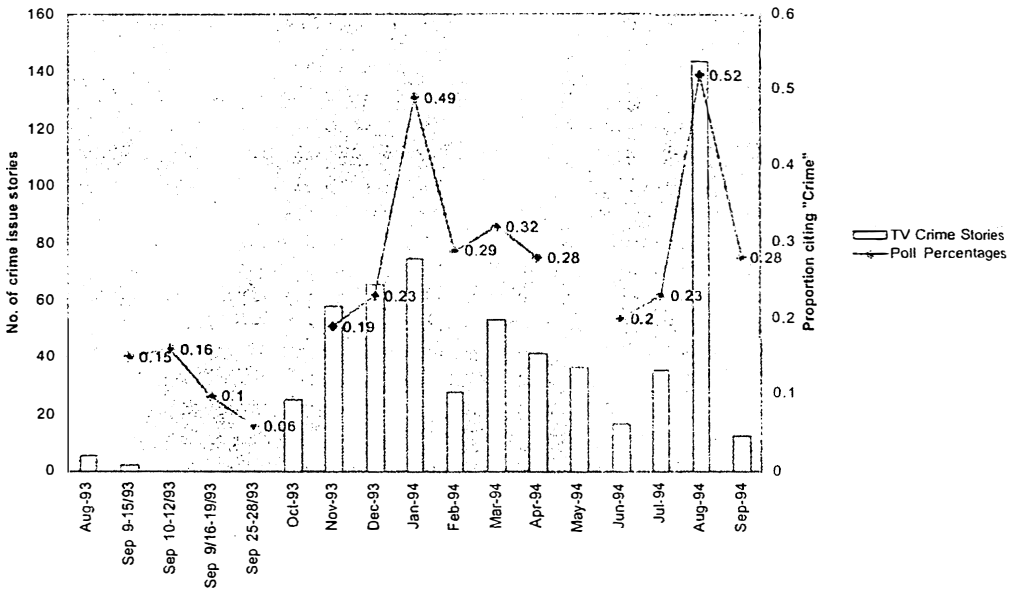
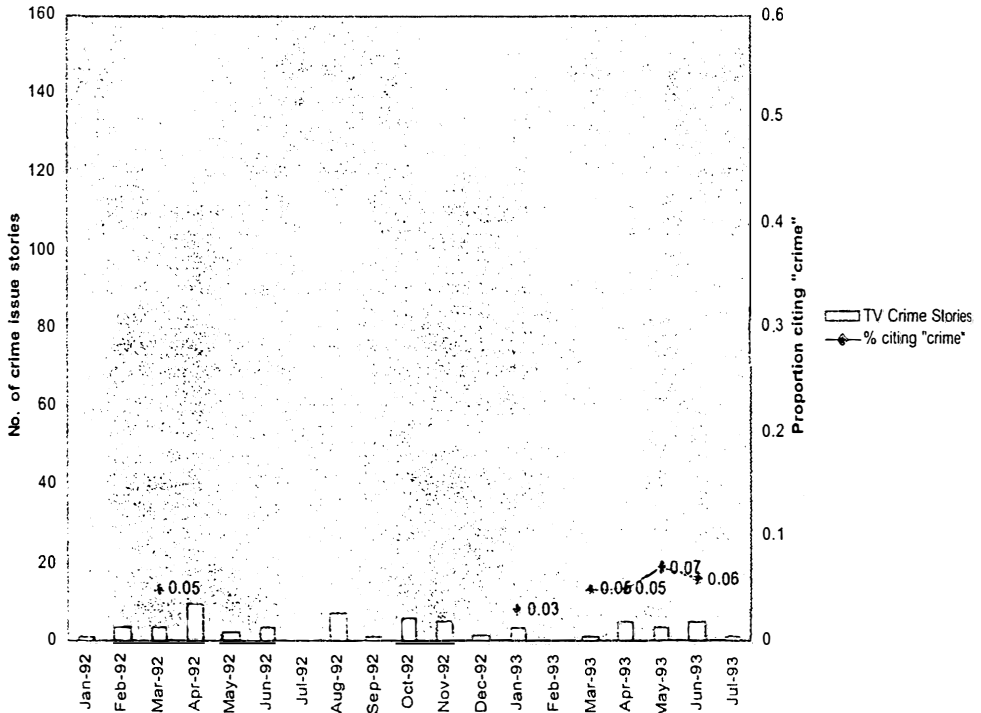


Figure 5.
1/92-7/93 TV Crime Issue Stories v. "Crime" in MIP polls



ABC's *American Agenda*. NBC's *America Close Up* series, for example, was entitled "Society Under Siege" and began in October 4, 1993. Originally scheduled for a five-day run, NBC ended up extending "Society Under Siege" into a two-month run.

The series focused on violence among young people, with reports of incidents in cities such as Salt Lake City, New York City, Sacramento, Topeka, Portland, San Francisco, Raleigh-Durham, Buffalo, etc. Each segment led with crime statistics, with the main body of the story about a specific city, and ended with references to violent incidents in other towns or cities. NBC's technique of stringing references to other places at the end of each report created the image of an epidemic of violence gripping the nation. Needless to say, the title for their series — *Society Under Siege* — employed warlike imagery as if crime was threatening to overrun society.

After January 1994, the number of television stories about the crime issue subsided somewhat, though the number of stories remained very high by pre-October 1993 standards. Poll levels also dropped down to lower levels when the media dropped their overall level of crime coverage. In August 1994, network crime issue news hit an all-time high of 143 stories. Out of those 143 stories, 54 were devoted to covering the Clinton Crime Bill. Thus, while the explosion of stories in August 1994 can certainly be attributed in part to the Crime Bill, the majority of stories were not about the Crime Bill.

In that same month of August 1994, poll-measured crime concerns also reached an all-time high of 52 percent.¹⁰ Figure 3 also includes the MIP poll results contemporaneously. *Notably, this unparalleled leap in newspaper and television crime issue news was not associated with any specific preceding or contemporaneous crime events.*

INTRA-MEDIA INFLUENCE

Were the newspapers and television networks responding to the newsmagazines when they increased their crime coverage in October 1993? In the absence of significant criminal events and/or changes in the crime rate in September and October 1993, the rea-

son for the extraordinary leap in newspaper and television news coverage begs for explanation. There are compelling reasons to suggest that the newsmagazines triggered the other major media's coverage wave.¹¹

Intra-media influence is not solely, or even mainly, measured by size of audience share. The fact that the newsmagazines have in recent times suffered decreases in readership therefore does not undercut their intra-media influence. In fact, they have adjusted their strategies to accommodate their declining readership:

"*Time* and *Newsweek* send faxes to key executives every Sunday, boasting of the stories in the forthcoming issue of their magazines, 'increasingly trying to show that they're not just rehashing the news but that they're breaking it,' in the words of Evan Thomas, assistant managing editor of *Newsweek*...."

"Equally important, newsmagazines want to beat the competition on trend and social issue stories, stories that first identify or put into perspective an emerging subject or problem." (*L.A. Times*, August 6, 1998, A-1, "New Media Playing Field Opens Way to More Errors.") Indeed, their August 1993 cover stories on crime were researched weeks ahead of publication in an effort to name a trend — random, violent crime, especially among youth.¹²

An alternative interpretation to the above is that the TV and newspaper outlets were responding to some factor other than the newsmagazines. Perhaps they noticed the mid-September 1993 polls and decided that the public was now more concerned about crime and therefore expanded their coverage in response. To answer this question, it is useful to look at the four polls taken that month. See Table 1.

The first two polls in September 1993 show a nearly identical 15 percent and 16 percent reading, which conforms to what one would expect since the polling dates were almost identical. The last two polls in September 1993 showed a decline in crime being mentioned, from 10 percent in the September 16-19, 1993 sample, and then in the September 25-28, 1993 sample, down to six percent, the same reading as in June 1993. This pattern is consistent with some factor

Table 1: Most Important Problem Polls - Sept. 1993

Date of Sample	Poll Sponsor	% citing crime as #1 prob.
9/9-15/93	L.A. Times	15%
9/10-12/93	Gallup	16%
9/16-19/93	CBS/NYT	10%
9/25-28/93	L.A. Times	6%

Source: Roper Center

causing a temporary bump up of crime concerns in the first two weeks of September 1993, with crime concerns then settling back to their previous level of six percent. Note further that this bump up to 15 percent and 16 percent, with the exception of a single poll in 1977,¹³ was the first spike in crime concerns since 1968. This doubling of crime concerns in September 1993 should not, therefore, be treated as random "noise."

This pattern supports the hypothesis that the four August 1993 newsmagazines crime cover stories had a temporary effect on public crime concerns, inasmuch as there was no outstanding criminal event or government action in that time period which coincided with this jump in the polls. If the *L.A. Times* was following its own polls here, and made decisions based simply on popular sentiment, then it would likely have decreased its crime coverage based on the fall in public concern at the end of September 1993. Instead it increased its coverage. While the news media had ready access to the *L.A. Times'* polls, and to the CBS/*New York Times* poll, Gallup's September poll was not published until December 1993. So the only poll data readily available to the media indicated that public interest in crime was actually declining through September 1993.

If the September 1993 polls were compared to the June 1993 polls and prior levels of six percent or below, one would see a momentary jump in September 1993. But it is highly unlikely that all four major newspapers and the three major television networks noticed this shift in the polls. Even if they had noticed this, the available evidence indicates that journalists do not in general take their cues for what stories to cover, and how to cover them, from the public (see Tuchman

1978 and Schudson 1978). Rather, they generally make news judgments based on what they think will please their superiors, and look to other media to judge whether they are covering the right stories (Gans 1979; Winerip 1998).

Because audience feedback is difficult to obtain other than the occasional phone call and letters to the editor (which Gans found journalists universally dismiss), public feedback tends to consist of family members, friends and neighbors. *Time* Managing Editor James R. Gaines, for example, explains the magazine's conclusion in 1993 that Americans were fed up with crime as coming from "talk over the barbeque. It is a gut thing, a sense that, though maybe it's from a middleclass commuter's perspective, this craziness has even invaded the sacred precinct of a 5:33 p.m. commuter train." (Braun and Pasternak 1994: A16). (See, also, Cohen 1963, Sigal 1973, Epstein 1974, Tuchman 1978).

In fact, Gans (1979) points out that journalists generally reject feedback from the public, and are particularly suspicious of polls, generally judging the public unfit to make decisions about what stories should be covered and how those stories should be covered (cf. Tuchman 1978). The media simply do not decide what they will cover on the basis of polls. Even if they did, in the case of the September 1993 polls, a 15-16 percent reading is not very high, compared to the higher levels of concern being registered for other issues in the same polls at the time. Health Care was named by 28 percent of respondents, the Economy by 26 percent, Unemployment and Jobs by 20 percent and the Federal Budget by 15 percent.

OTHER CRIME COVERAGE WAVES?

Have there been other periods in U.S. history when news attention to crime was very high, but did not result in elevated concerns in the polls, thus casting doubt on the hypothesis that media acted as an extraneous variable to poll responses? As I have already indicated, as far as the newsmagazines, there is no precedent for the level of their attention to crime coverage in the 1990s. Figure 6 displays the level of television crime news stories between 1968 and 1994¹⁴ and shows that the network nightly news broadcasts' attention to the crime issue in late 1993-94 has no precedent.

It is not possible to reproduce with the same methods a comparison of crime news in the four newspapers I selected for this study prior to 1982.¹⁵ The television data, however, are probably the most indicative and persuasive by themselves since television is the most heavily consumed news form of the three media forms. Employing the Information Access Company's index of articles from January 1, 1982 through December 31, 1994 in the *Los Angeles Times* (home edition), *New York Times* (late and national editions), *Wall Street Journal* (eastern and western editions), and the *Washington Post* (final edition), one finds, with the partial exception of the *New York Times*, a

generally uniform and parallel pattern of rising crime coverage for the four papers between 1987 and 1994. As can be seen from Table 2, the number of crime stories increased dramatically in 1994 for all four surveyed newspapers, and for three of the papers from 1993.

CONCLUSION

The evidence adduced here for a media effect is very strong. It would, of course, be reductionistic to assert that simple shifts up or down in media attention to an issue automatically result in a corresponding shift in poll results. In this study, the poll shifts related to both the coverage wave's magnitude (the sheer number of stories and the diversity of outlets involved), and the story themes emphasized. The levels of juvenile violence actually began to drop off before this coverage wave began, and cannot, therefore, be seen as proportionately responsible for the coverage wave's magnitude or timing. Public officials' statements, linked primarily to pending proposed legislation such as "Three Strikes..." played an important secondary role in this coverage wave. Key overall was news outlets' exceptional attention to the problem of youth violence which focused public attention, leading to the historic spikes in the polls. The polls were not a sim-

Figure 6.
No. of TV Crime Stories 1968-1994

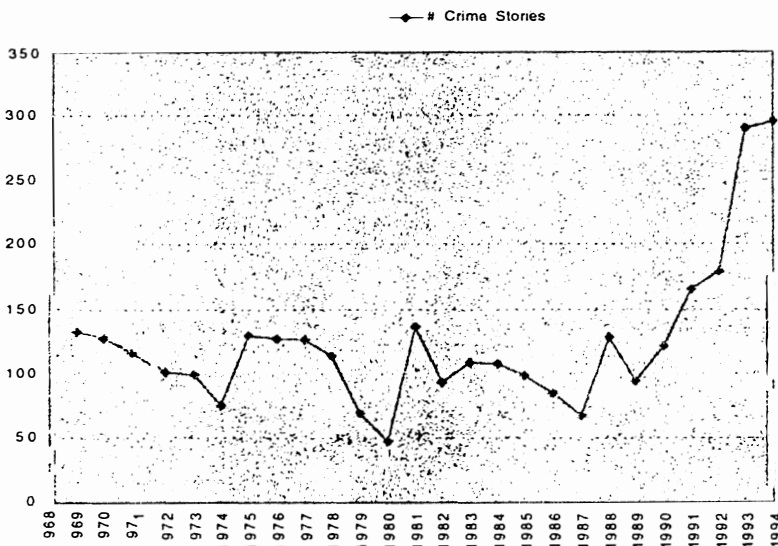


Table 2: Crime Stories in the L.A. Times, New York Times, Washington Post and Wall Street Journal

Year	L.A. Times	N.Y. Times	Wash. Post	Wall Str Jrnl
1982	20	229	30	19
1983	82	111	42	25
1984	42	101	41	35
1985	43	98	47	19
1986	29	88	28	19
1987	19	70	23	14
1988	21	45	29	9
1989	33	60	48	10
1990	47	118	30	14
1991	46	82	69	12
1992	58	63	74	13
1993	116	81	105	26
1994	239	231	231	75

Source: Newspaper Articles Database in Melvyl, indexed by Information Access Company, covering 1/1/82 through 3/01/95, using exact subject search term: "crime."

ple reflection of public sentiment. Rather, media activity, together with public official statements, acted as extrinsic variables vis-à-vis the public and the polls.

The persuasiveness of the current study's analysis of a media effect grows out of the novel methodology employed. That is, all three major media outlets — television, newsmagazines, and newspapers — were analyzed as a differentiated whole, allowing me to track which media outlet initiated the coverage wave. Using the entire polling record then allowed me to trace in very discrete time segments the causal sequence of media coverage vis-à-vis public opinion polls. The full record of polling data uncovered here challenges the collective memory about crime concerns as a consistently dominant public issue. Further studies of media effects should seriously consider employing a study design that includes the major news outlets as well as the complete polling record. This study argues for a wider appreciation of the role that media frequently play in initiating a social problem. Finally, in the example of the 1993-94 crime wave, record levels of public monies were devoted to the criminal justice system in the name of public demand. A demonstration that that public demand was manipulated challenges the validity of such expenditures (Scheingold 1995; Roberts 1992).

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(Endnotes)

¹I did not use statistical techniques such as regression or time series analysis on this data because it was unnecessary. Regression, and similar statistical methods, are necessary when the data is more oblique than that presented here. As Tracy (1990: 77) argues: "There is a tendency in social science research today ... to apply very sophisticated statistical models and multivariate analytical procedures to reaserch data. In many instances, these highly advanced procedures are desirable, if not absolutely necessary. Despite this tendency, there is no substitute for a thorough descriptive analysis of one's data accompanied by a well-conceived presentation of tables and figures. The most simple analyses, effectively displayed, are often the most convincing and communicative to the reader."

²The Roper Center houses polls from all the major polling organizations. These polls were all asked in a closed format. Respondents were allowed to give more than one choice. Thus, the individual item choices (e.g., "crime") when added together total more than 100%. (In a few polls conducted in 1992 by the Wirthlin Group and by Gallup, respondents were asked separately, but in succession, in essence: What is your first choice for MIP? What is your second choice? What is your third choice? The results from these polls were consistent with the results derived from the primary format for the MIP polls in which respondents are allowed to give more than one answer).

³Because I was interested in major media impact, I chose to concentrate on crime cover stories in the newsmagazines instead of the sum-total of their crime related articles. My decision to select newsmagazine cover stories was based in part on a shift in recent years in newsmagazines' marketing strategy. In retrospect, an analogous strategy of concentrating on front page newspaper stories only, rather than their sum-total of stories, would have been possible and probably desirable.

⁴In part, my decision to use these national broadcasts as opposed to more local or regional broadcasts was due to the fact that national broadcasts are indexed, whereas local broadcasts are not, and because tapes of those broadcasts are more available than

local ones which are almost impossible to obtain. In addition, the national broadcasts were generally a better source of information about national crime initiatives.

⁵Another compelling reason exists for a larger sample size of media outlets chosen for a media effects study: news media's self-referential nature. Several observers of journalistic practices (Cohen 1963; Gans 1979; Fishman 1980), as well as professional journalists themselves (e.g., Steffens 1931; Winerip 1998), have noted that journalists regularly decide what is "newsworthy" by monitoring what stories competing media are covering. Fishman (1978; 1980), notably, observed first-hand New York newspapers fueling a fictive crime wave against the elderly as they vied with one another to come up with more crimes against the elderly incidents. The newspapers did this even though they knew that, according to police statistics, crimes against the elderly were actually in decline. The story, however, was too "juicy" to pass up (Fishman 1978).

⁶Social problems theory (a subdiscipline within sociology) commonly employs the term "claims-maker" to refer to those who make claims about a putative condition. The designation "primary claims-maker" generally refers to interest group advocates (Spector and Kitsuse 1973; Best 1990; 1995).

⁷What if I had counted the number of covers during the 1960s that were about social disorder? Would this have made the contrast between the amount of attention given to the crime issue by the newsmagazines in the 1990s less dramatic as compared to the 1960s? Yes, a bit, but with a very important caveat. The issue of crime in the 1960s had a different character to it than in the 1990s. That is, "crime in the streets" was a contested matter in the 1960s in which the liberals (e.g., most notably President Lyndon Johnson and members of his cabinet such as Vice-President Humphrey and Attorney General Ramsey Clark) attacked the conservatives (e.g., notably, Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew) on the express grounds that those touting "law 'n order" were using crime as a codeword for race. This debate at the highest levels was also evident in the debate in the streets where the social movements of the day argued that civil rights was the key issue. Crime, was, in

this view, by comparison, at best a secondary issue and at worst, a red herring. The media coverage in that time reflects that debate and the crime issue as a result did not attain the levels of attention in the polls or the level of media attention to street crime that it did in the 1990s. There is, unfortunately, not room here to fully pursue these points.

⁸These figures are taken from the *Television News Index and Abstracts*, known generally as the Vanderbilt Index. The dramatic increase in network stories in late 1993 and 1994 about crime as a general and distinct category reflects a shift in network treatment rather than a shift in Vanderbilt's procedures. In a personal conversation with Vanderbilt in April 1995, I was informed that they attempt to classify stories according to the story's own "bucket" (i.e., if they can categorize a story specifically, for example, "O.J. Simpson," as opposed to "crime" or "murder" they will do so.) Thus, the figures cited in Figures 4 and 5 do not include, for example, any stories on O.J. Simpson.

I double-checked each of the daily broadcast entries in the abstracts portion of the Vanderbilt Index to verify the numbers displayed in the Vanderbilt monthly index. These daily entries list all stories presented on that day's nightly news broadcasts, and the exact time they were presented within the broadcasts. Thus, the numbers I use herein of stories concerning the crime issue are all accounted for individually, and are not an artifact of the Vanderbilt Indexer's indexing system. In a small number of cases, the Vanderbilt Indexers missed some crime issue stories in their monthly subject category totals. I have corrected these errors in the data shown in this article. As another cross-check, I used the Internet version of the Vanderbilt Index, employing a search strategy of keyword "crime." The pattern of very low numbers of stories prior to the coverage wave compared to the very high numbers of crime stories during the coverage wave was also very evident using that alternate search strategy. In addition, as is evident from the text discussion, I viewed many of these broadcasts in their entirety.

⁹The February 1994, Tyndall Report (cited by *Extra!* (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting's magazine), May/June 1994, Vol. 7, No. 3, p. 10) reported that in the 3 years

ending in January 1992, the 3 major television networks spent 67 minutes per month on crime stories in their nightly network news. By comparison, between October 1993, and January 1994, they devoted 157 minutes per month to crime stories. This represents a greater than 234 percent increase in crime stories on network television national news.

¹⁰Did other factors, such as the prevalence of "reality-TV" crime shows such as *COPS*, have something to do with this attention to crime in late 1993/4? Undoubtedly. These shows, however, cannot account for the volatile polls given the timing. These docu-cop shows began with "Unsolved Mysteries" in 1987, followed in 1988 by "American Detective" and "America's Most Wanted." "COPS" began broadcasting in 1989, "Top Cops" and "DEA" in 1990, and "FBI: The Untold Stories" in 1991.

¹¹Skeptical readers might not be convinced by this specific hypothesis. The major thrust of this case study does not require acceptance of that hypothesis.

¹²In the case of *Time's* August 2, 1993 cover story "Big Shots: An Inside Look at the Deadly Love Affair between America's Kids and their Guns," the principal author, Chicago bureau chief Jon Hull, spent five weeks in Omaha preparing the story.

¹³The 15% reading in 1977 was only in one poll. But it did occur coincident with a plethora of news stories on crime, and law and order issues across major local papers (see Jacob 1982; Scheingold 1991).

¹⁴The scale on this Figure 6 is slightly different than Figures 4 and 5 because the search strategy looked for crime stories as opposed to crime issue stories. I used the Vanderbilt Index's Internet version for the data displayed in Figure 6. Thus, the magnitude of Figure 6 is greater than Figures 4 and 5.

¹⁵This is because the Information Access Company whose indexing system I have used herein does not index these papers earlier than 1982. It would be possible to use the *New York Times'* own index for earlier years, but it is not comparable to the search and indexing system employed by the Information Access Company's that I employed for the rest of my newspaper data.