LEADING THE PUBLIC: THE MEDIA'S FOCUS ON CRIME SHAPED SENTIMENT

By Jeffrey D. Alderman

The media's recent mega-focus on crime offers an excellent opportunity for measuring the effect a print and TV blitz can have on public opinion.

The media emphasis on crime began sometime last fall and seems to have been bred from and nurtured by a series of violent crime stories which were covered in considerable detail. Among them:

- The Colin Ferguson killing of six people (and wounding of 19) with a semi-automatic weapon on a Long Island commuter train.
- The Menendez brothers parent-killing trials.
- The Reginald Denny beating trial.
- The Richard Allen Davis kidnapping and subsequent murder of 12-year old Polly Klaas in California.
- The attack on Olympic skater Nancy Kerrigan.

Perhaps inspired by these and other cases (and nudged along by sudden Congressional attention to gun control), the media responded with a series of special editions and broadcasts on the subject of violent crime. A short sampler from the covers of the news weeklies:

- 1/10/94 Newsweek: Growing Up Scared: How our kids are robbed of their childhood.
- 12/27/93 Time: Child Snatchers.
- 12/20 Time: Does America Need More Gun Control?

- 11/8 US News: Guns in the Schools; When killers come to class.
- 10/4 Time: The Making of a Terrorist (World Trade Center bombing).

The newspapers and magazines were hardly alone: This past fall and winter two TV networks devoted a full week on all their news programs to various aspects of crime in America. That emphasis was matched in other ways by the other networks and complemented by local TV's predilection for crime news. Add to that mix the so-called "reality-based" police programs on the entertainment side, and you have a very steady stream of "news" no matter where you look.

The recent emphasis on crime news may seem ironic or even misplaced to some who have looked at recent crime statistics and found them declining. (National Crime Victimization Survey statistics have shown a drop in serious crime, for example). But even though crime is declining a bit, it is dropping, as Woody Allen might put it, from "extremely horrible" down to "very horrible." In 1973 there were 124 crimes against the person (includes rape, robbery, assault, and larceny) per 1,000 people 12 years and older; by 1991, the rate had dropped to 92 per 1,000. I don't know about you, but those statistics aren't going to cause me to leave my doors unlocked any time soon.

The Effect of Media Coverage

Polling data gathered during this past fall and winter shows that the news industry (with help from government) can reshuffle the American agenda (at least temporarily) by deciding to focus on a topic such as crime.

Until this fall, no ABC/Washington Post poll (dating back to 1981) had ever shown more than 5% of the public naming crime as the most important problem (MIP) facing the country. But in November, 21% suddenly called crime the nation's biggest concern. By the end of January the figure had jumped to 31%, establishing crime as the
most mentioned national problem, and
pushing economic issues off the top spot
(see Figure 1).

In discussing the current crime focus
with John Brennan, polling director at the
Los Angeles Times, we were both re-
mingled of the media’s attention to illegal
drugs in the late 1980s. The
media zoomed in on the prob-
lem for sustained periods at least
twice, beginning in 1986, fol-
lowing the death of college basket-
ball star Len Bias from a
cocaine overdose. (Remember
“48 Hours on Crack Street”?)
By October of 1989, ABC/Post
polling showed illegal drug use
named by 5% of Americans as
the biggest problem facing the
United States.

“Ironically, studies showed
that drug use among teenagers
was generally down then,”
wrote Brennan referring to the
University of Michigan’s on-
going drug tracking study. “It
is rising now, but the nation is
transfixed with violent felons,
not drug offenders.”

Though crime gets the largest num-
er of votes for the top national
problem, it does not appear to be a big concern at the
neighborhood level. Seventy-nine per-
cent told ABC interviewers in November
that crime is one of the nation’s biggest
problems, but only 14% said that about
their own neighborhood. Seventy per-
cent, in fact, said it was one of the smallest
problems where they lived.

And only a relatively few people—
disproportionately from urban areas—felt
crime was a growing problem in their
neighborhoods. In the November ABC
poll, nine in ten Americans said they be-
lieved violent crime was on the rise in this
country. But only one in four thought it
was on the rise in their neighborhood.

One reason for the public’s divergent
opinions on crime as a national versus a
local issue may be how Americans say
they base their feelings about crime. The
LA Times January poll showed that nearly
two-thirds based their feelings about crime
on what they read and see in the media.
Only one in five relied more on what they,
their families and acquaintances “experi-
ence personally in the community” (see
Figure 2). Apparently, the public has
been convinced by media reports that
vince the public that the economy was
coming back—not President Bush, not
upbeat government statistics, not the of-
quoted economists on both sides of the
political spectrum. The reason: the pub-
lic kept saying that not only was the na-
tional economy in bad shape, but so were
their own personal finances. Only re-
cently, when most started feeling better about their
own pocketbooks, did they
begin to say that things in
general are getting better.

Experience suggests
rather strongly that the me-
dia can only make the pub-
lic focus on a problem they
are not feeling in their own
lives only for as long as that
media attention is
maintained. As soon as
the spotlight moves on, the
problem drops down on
the public’s MIP list. But if the
public has a sharp stone in
its shoe (reduced disposable income, for example),
no one is going to con-
vince them it feels good to
walk on it.

Finally, experience also suggests
that the media have an easi
time focusing the
country’s attention on such topics as crime
and drugs because pictures are available
to illustrate the stories—victims, suspects,
and vials. More abstract issues—those
in education, foreign policy or politics—
are harder for the media, especially TV, to
illustrate dramatically. For example, take
the Los Angeles earthquake with its pic-
tures of broken freeways, collapsed build-
ings and injured people. Now that is
clearly a problem. But try to illustrate
Whitewater or the Iran-Contra cases some-
time.

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