

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 semiautomatic 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:

- 2/17/94 *US News*: The Truth about Violent Crime; What you really have to fear.
- 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

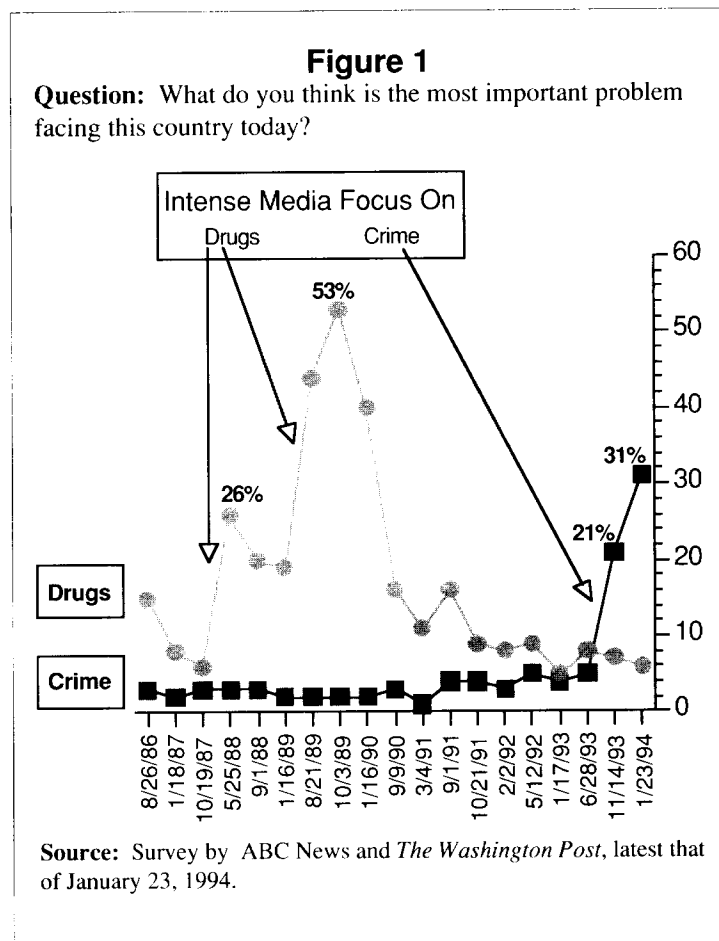
"news" no matter where you look.

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



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 crime

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 reminded of the media's attention to illegal drugs in the late 1980s. The media zoomed in on the problem for sustained periods at least twice, beginning in 1986, following the death of college basketball 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 53% 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 ongoing drug tracking study. "It is rising now, but the nation is transfixed with violent felons, not drug offenders."

Though crime gets the largest number of votes for the top *national* problem, it does not appear to be a big concern at the neighborhood level. Seventy-nine percent 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 percent, in fact, said it was one of the smallest problems where they lived.

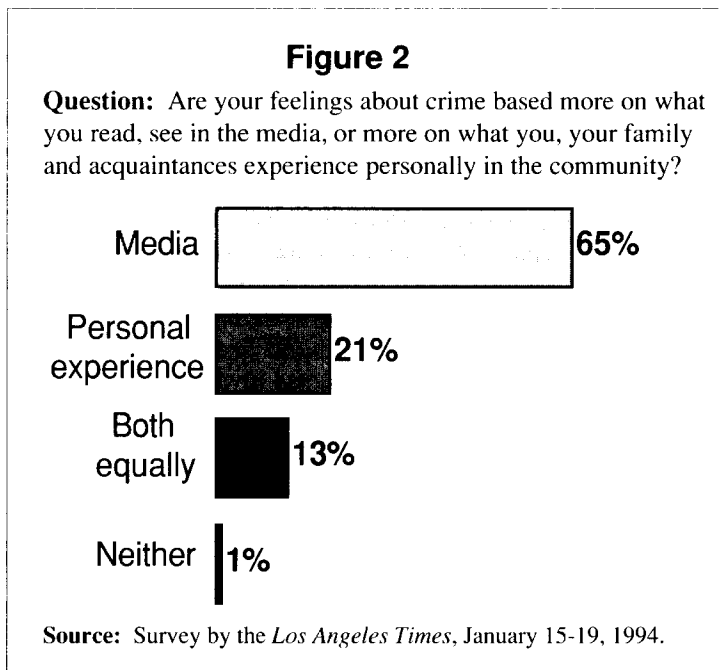
And only a relatively few people—disproportionately from urban areas—felt crime was a growing problem in their neighborhoods. In the November ABC poll, nine in ten Americans said they believed violent crime was on the rise in this country. But only one in four thought it was on the rise in their neighborhood.

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 "experience 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 oft-quoted economists on both sides of the political spectrum. The reason: the public kept saying that not only was the national economy in bad shape, but so were their own personal finances. Only recently, 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 media can only make the public 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 convince them it feels good to walk on it.



crime is one of the biggest problems the country faces, but based on their own experiences most feel the troubles are in somebody else's backyard.

This media-induced phenomenon can also be seen in recent coverage of the nation's healthcare. From September of 1992 until June of 1993 the percentage of the public naming healthcare as the most important problem never got over 7%. Then came President Clinton's heavily covered speech introducing his healthcare plan in September. Public concern over healthcare rose to 16% in an *LA Times* poll right after the speech, only to dip back to 8% in the wake of the government-media shift to crime.

Such ups and downs for items on the ABC MIP list are common, and not all are media-inspired. Many, in fact, are media resistant. During the recent recession and its languid recovery, nothing could con-

Finally, experience also suggests that the media have an easier time focusing the country's attention on such topics as crime and drugs because pictures are available to illustrate the stories—victims, suspects, crack 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 pictures of broken freeways, collapsed buildings and injured people. Now that is clearly a problem. But try to illustrate Whitewater or the Iran-Contra cases sometime.

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