

Researchers rest their case: TV consumption predicts opinions about criminal justice system

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People who watch forensic and crime dramas on TV are more likely than non-viewers to have a distorted perception of America's criminal justice system, according to new research from Purdue University.

"These kinds of shows, such as 'CSI: Crime Scene Investigation,' 'Law & Order,' 'Cold Case' and 'The Closer,' are some of the most popular programs on television today, so it's important that we understand how they might influence people," says Glenn Sparks, a professor of communication who studies mass media effects. "We know they have inspired people to pursue careers in forensic science and law enforcement, but what are some of their other effects? We found that people who watch these shows regularly are more likely to overestimate the frequency of serious crimes, misperceive important facts about crime and misjudge the number of workers in the judicial system."

Sparks and Susan Huelsing Sarapin, a doctoral student in communication, conducted 103 surveys with jury-eligible adults about their crime-television show viewing and their perceptions of crime and the judicial system. Their research was presented earlier this month at the International Crime, Media, and Popular Culture Studies Conference: A Cross Disciplinary Exploration at Indiana State University.

"Many people die as a result of being murdered in these types of shows,

and we found the heavy TV-crime viewers estimated two and a half times more real-world deaths due to murder than non-viewers," Sarapin says. "People's perceptions also were distorted in regards to a number of other serious crimes. Heavy TV-crime viewers consistently overestimated the frequency of crime in the real world."

Viewers of crime shows also misjudged the number of law enforcement officers and attorneys in the total work force. Lawyers and police officers each make up less than 1 percent of the work force, but those surveyed estimated it at more than 16 percent and 18 percent, respectively, Sarapin says.

The viewing of crime drama also can shape opinions about the world in general, Sparks says.

"This kind of television viewing can lead to 'mean world syndrome,' where people start to think about the world as a scary place," Sparks says. "Some people develop a fear of victimization, and this belief can affect their feelings of comfort and security."

The researchers plan to focus on how attitudes and beliefs formed by watching crime shows translate to actual proceedings in the courtroom.

"Conventional wisdom in law enforcement suggests that people tend to be acquitted by juries when there is not much physical evidence and are convicted more in trials that have such evidence," Sarapin says. "The reality is that few crimes have hard, scientific evidence such as ballistics, gunshot residue or DNA evidence. And some states even allow the juror screening process to include questions about their television viewing. There are more questions for us to ask regarding what kind of an effect this has on people, especially jurors."

Source: Purdue University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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