

Study shows how metaphors shape the debate about crime fighting

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Imagine your city isn't as safe as it used to be. Robberies are on the rise, home invasions are increasing and murder rates have nearly doubled in the past three years.

What should city officials do about it? Hire more cops to round up the thugs and lock them away in a growing network of prisons? Or design programs that promise more peace by addressing issues like a faltering [economy](#) and underperforming schools?

Your answer – and the reasoning behind it – can hinge on the metaphor being used to describe the problem, according to new research by Stanford psychologists. Your thinking can even be swayed with just one word, they say.

Psychology Assistant Professor Lera Boroditsky and doctoral candidate Paul Thibodeau have shown that people will likely support an increase in police forces and jailing of offenders if [crime](#) is described as a "beast" preying on a community. But if people are told crime is a "virus" infecting a city, they are more inclined to treat the problem with social reform.

Their findings are published in the Feb. 23 edition of *PLoS ONE*.

The study stems from curiosity about how subtle cues and common figures of speech can frame approaches to difficult problems.

"Some estimates suggest that one out of every 25 words we encounter is a metaphor," said Thibodeau, the study's lead author. "But we didn't know the extent to which these metaphors influence people."

While their research focused on attitudes about crime, their findings can be used to understand the implications of how a casual or calculated turn of phrase can influence debates and change minds.

"We can't talk about any complex situation – like crime – without using metaphors," said Boroditsky, an assistant professor of psychology. "Metaphors aren't just used for flowery speech. They shape the conversation for things we're trying to explain and figure out. And they have consequences for determining what we decide is the right approach to solving problems."

In five experiments, test subjects were asked to read short paragraphs about rising crime rates in the fictional city of Addison and answer questions about the city. The researchers gauged how people answered these questions in light of how crime was described – as a beast or a virus.

They found the test subjects' proposed solutions differed a great deal depending on the metaphor they were exposed to.

In one study, 71 percent of the participants called for more enforcement when they read: "Crime is a beast ravaging the city of Addison." That number dropped to 54 percent among participants who read an alternative framing: "Crime is a virus ravaging the city of Addison."

Along with the metaphors, the crime reports also included some alarming statistics. One mentioned that there were about 10,000 more crimes reported in 2007 than 2004, and the number of murders had gone from 330 to more than 500 in that period.

When the 485 participants in that study were asked to highlight what they thought was the most influential part of the report, only 15 identified the metaphor, while almost everyone else said it was the statistics that swayed their decisions on how to curb crime.

"People like to think they're objective and making decisions based on numbers," Boroditsky said. "They want to believe they're logical. But they're really being swayed by metaphors."

To get a sense of how much the metaphor really mattered, Thibodeau and Boroditsky also examined what role political persuasions play in people's approach to reducing crime. They suspected that Republicans would be more inclined to catch and incarcerate criminals than Democrats, who would prefer enacting social reforms. They found Republican participants were about 10 percent more likely to suggest an enforcement-based solution.

But the difference was substantially less than the difference triggered by the metaphor. Participants who read that crime was a beast were about 20 percent more likely to suggest an enforcement-based solution than participants who read that crime was a virus, regardless of their political persuasion.

"That shows that you don't have to have immediate political polarization on every issue," Boroditsky said. "You can figure out how to communicate your message and find the right set of analogies and metaphors that will lead people to the same conclusion."

Provided by Stanford University

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