

# What your TV habits may say about your fear of crime

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What's your favorite prime-time crime show? Do you enjoy the fictional world of "CSI" or "Law & Order," or do you find real-life tales like "The First 48" or "Dateline" more engrossing? Your answers to those questions may say a lot about your fears and attitudes about crime, a new study finds.

Researchers from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln surveyed hundreds of adults about how often they watched various kinds of crime TV – made-up dramas, documentary-style "real crime" programs, and local and national news. They found that how each type of program depicts crime was a factor in viewers' opinions on everything from their fear of crime to their confidence in the justice system to their support of the death penalty.

"The results support the idea that program type really does matter when it comes to understanding people's fear of crime and their attitudes about criminal justice," said Lisa Kort-Butler, UNL assistant professor of sociology and the study's lead author. "The audience appears to negatively evaluate the criminal justice system while also supporting its most punitive policy -- which this study suggests is due to the types of shows people watch."

Among the study's findings:

- The more frequently people watched non-fiction crime

documentaries like "The First 48," the more fearful they were of becoming a crime victim. They also were less supportive of and less confident in the criminal justice system and said they believed the national crime rate was climbing.

- Frequent viewers of fictional crime dramas were not affected by the programming to believe they would become crime victims, and their support of and confidence in the criminal justice system also was unaffected by their viewing habits. Interestingly, though, the more frequently they watched crime dramas, the more certain they were in their support of the death penalty.
- The more often people watched crime coverage on the local news, the more they believed that the local crime rate was increasing.

Why does watching different strains of crime TV result in such different feelings? While both crime dramas and non-fiction crime programs focus on serious and usually violent crimes, Kort-Butler said, the non-fiction programs offer more realism and may have more psychological impact than fictional dramas.

Non-fiction shows, she said, add more context than dramas -- interviews with victims, families and friends can be used to point out how crime could happen to anyone and play on fear for dramatic impact. They also convey a sense of proximity: Fictional crime dramas are often set in big cities, but non-fiction documentary shows are often set in smaller cities or suburbia.

Non-fiction documentary shows also often delve into a criminal's personal history to explain his or her behavior and highlight, for dramatic purposes, his or her ability to evade detection, indirectly casting doubt on law enforcers' competence, Kort-Butler said.

"This narrative structure is nothing new to storytelling about crime, but it may lead to a heightened fear among viewers because it seems like such a crime could happen to them or their loved ones," she said. "Because the criminal is often portrayed as one step ahead of the law, viewers may be less confident in the authorities' ability to stop the crime before it's too late."

Crime dramas, meanwhile, are more straightforward, portraying offenders as evil and the [criminal justice system](#) as a moral authority, assuring that cops and prosecutors will protect the public and punish criminals.

"To the extent that crime dramas focus on the most serious crimes and criminals getting their just desserts, dramas may serve to reinforce viewers' support for the death penalty," Kort-Butler said.

**More information:** The study, which appears in the current edition of *The Sociological Quarterly*, was authored by UNL's Kort-Butler and Kelley Sittner Hartshorn.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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