

How crime dramas expose our anxieties about those on the frontline

May 21 2020, by Barry Richards



French crime drama *Spiral*. Credit: BBC, CC BY

Being a parent and a police officer is a dangerous mix, or so crime dramas continuously tell us. In particular danger, it seems, are the children of these fictional police officers, who are either neglected by their parents or are in harm's way because they risk becoming victims of the criminals their parents are chasing. They may be abducted, even murdered, as criminals strike back at law enforcement.

Over several decades, the central police characters in television drama have become [psychologically more complicated](#) and often have stressful [family](#) lives. This more realistic turn—one of many examples of [our psychologically-minded culture shaping entertainment](#) – expresses our ongoing anxieties about whether the [police are able to protect us](#) and, if they can, at what cost to themselves and their families. Must they be damagingly obsessed with their work and fail their families? And might the violence we need them to get close to, so they can contain it, ultimately afflict their children?

The recurrence of this story line exposes our [feelings](#) about the police and also points to the broader emotional context of present anxieties about frontline health and care workers.

Crime fiction and audience feeling

Children of police officers becoming victims may or may not be frequent occurrences in reality, but they are in box-set drama. Whether it is maverick policewomen (The [Killing](#), [Spiral](#), [The Team](#)) who struggle as mothers or neglectful fathers ([Wisting](#), [Trapped](#), [The Break](#)), their children seem to get into harm's way.

The popularity of crime fiction rests, [like any fictional form](#), on our emotional involvement with its stories. These stories are about guilt and justice. They tap into our pleasure in seeing wrongdoers apprehended and our safety protected.

The frequency of this subplot may well exaggerate the risks, but it expresses and draws attention to important emotional dimensions in our attitudes towards policing.

Both individually, and collectively as a public, we are vulnerable to intense anxieties about threats to our safety. In political debates about

policing, this [anxiety](#) usually focuses on questions about resources and competence: are there enough police, are they properly trained and equipped, are they well-managed, and so on. These are, of course, issues which we may well be anxious about, because they are vital to our safety.

But there are other channels along which anxiety and other feelings about safety may flow. These may not appear much in policy discourse but can surface elsewhere, including in entertainment. With the frequency of this sub-plot, one of the messages of today's crime fiction is that police work not only puts police personnel at risk, but their families as well—especially the most vulnerable of their kin, their children.

Another national debt

We are shown how the lives of individual [police officers](#) are at risk of being damaged, if not destroyed, by the violence at large in society and by the efforts needed to control it. This evokes not only our anxiety (who will protect the protectors?) but also our gratitude, and guilt, around the costs which the [police](#) and their families may face.

The current surges of gratitude towards health and care workers, and the concern around [their deaths](#) and the safety of their families, are a real world expression of very similar feelings. One potential post-pandemic societal gain could be a more permanent recognition of that kind of "national debt."

Crime fiction returns us to the fundamental gratitude owed to all those employed in risk-laden public service, but it can also remind us that our gratitude is always shadowed by anxiety, and by some measure of guilt at the sacrifices of others.

Those are less comfortable feelings to have than simple gratitude, and

there may be a temptation to turn away from them once the fear of COVID-19 has subsided. Awareness and acceptance of these feelings, however, may help to keep that debt at the centre of national priorities.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: How crime dramas expose our anxieties about those on the frontline (2020, May 21)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2020-05-crime-dramas-expose-anxieties-frontline.html>

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