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The Media, Crime Prevention  
and Urban Safety: A Brief  
Discussion on Media Influence  
and Areas for Further  
Exploration

Prepared by Vivien Carli

Under the Direction of Valérie Sagant  
and Laura Capobianco

Montreal, December 2008



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**COMPARED  
ANALYSIS  
REPORT**



# **The Media, Crime Prevention and Urban Safety: A Brief Discussion on Media Influence and Areas for Further Exploration**

Under the Direction of Valérie Sagant and Laura Capobianco  
Prepared by Vivien Carli

## ***Resume***

This paper aims to describe the impact of the media on crime prevention by providing an integrative approach for exploring the multiple roles of the media. National and independent studies continue to maintain that the media holds an important position for communication, and information sharing and dissemination in society: "people rely on images of trends and prevalence made available by the experts and official sources" (Sacco 2000, p.208). However, due to the complexity and multi-dimensional framework, which encloses the impact of the media, its interactions and links, these roles remain largely undefined. Therefore, **the impact is more complex than a causal link or simply media conforming to dominant news values**. In the end, through an inclusive, interactive and democratic relationship with a variety of media sources, there is space for positive results in terms of crime prevention, and thus for preventing media misuse, misconceptions and stigmatization, and for promoting successful strategies and policies.

## ***Introduction***

The media is a prime source of information on crime and safety for a significant proportion of the world's population. Within the context of Canada, Judith Dubois, a researcher at the Université du Québec à Montréal, refers to several national studies recorded by the Canadian Sentencing Commission that reveal 95% of interviewees use the media as the main source of information on crime-related issues. Despite the impressive figure, there have been endless debates on the degree to which media coverage of crime-related events influences public opinion and policy<sup>1</sup>. Whether the influence is strong or weak, this paper outlines several critical studies, practices and partnerships in the field of crime prevention and urban safety, which suggest that the media exerts both negative and positive influences on public opinion and policy and is most relevant in our focus on crime prevention. In order to examine this role, it is important to recognize that the 'media' is not a single source of enquiry, but includes a series of elements which require their own separate analysis, from news papers, to radio, internet, television, alternate media in the investigation of the influence of crime media on public opinion and criminal justice and prevention policy and practice. Given the scope of this preliminary piece, the media's impact will be largely discussed in relation to news media, given the interactions and complexities, that have been identified and questioned, yet still remain to be tested and proven<sup>2</sup>.

## ***Media may hamper crime prevention policies***

In the process of collecting and disseminating information on crime, media representations can negatively influence perceptions on crime-related issues, and interfere with the implementation of crime prevention strategies and policies. Media coverage of crime can be inaccurate, biased and promote inappropriate and harmful policies on crime control "the portrait of random, violent crime...that is communicated by the news media leads to an understanding of crime and justice that translates into public policies that often seek simple solutions to complex problems" (Yanich 2001:222). There is a growing concern that the main characteristics of the media are not necessarily conducive to the knowledge of crime prevention.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Cavendar 2004; Dubois 2002; Ericson, R., P. Baranek and J. Chan 1991

<sup>2</sup> This paper is based on a presentation by Valérie Sagant, Director General of the International Center for the Prevention of Crime (ICPC), completed for the International Public Safety Seminar, which was held on June 19-20 2008, in Santiago, Chile.

The processing of media information on crime is based on short-term, fast-paced and 'surface-level' research, which can limit the types of information disseminated, and disregard crucial issues. Often news reports of crime read like a police blotter of information including information on the offender, place of crime, and victim, with little devoted to the context of how offending or victimization occurs. In addition, the media's rapid analysis and assessment of crime trends and outcomes of the implementation of public policies at the local level can hinder effective and successful prevention. Crime prevention practitioners emphasize the importance of prevention strategies which are characterized by long-term action, and based on a solid diagnosis that takes into account the complexity of the causes of crime and their interactions. Therefore, news reporting of crime is not conducive to these approaches.

On another note, print media can present an inaccurate portrait of crime<sup>3</sup>. According to Jeffrey C. Hubbard et. al. (1975), print media influences public opinion on crime trends by increasing coverage of certain crimes disproportionately to the amount of crime in a community (p.22-3). Judith Dubois recalls O'Connell's study (1999) in Ireland, whereby he directly blames the media for its misrepresentation of crime. The way the news media represents crime often includes 'sensationalistic' aspects of crime events, whereby 'newsworthy' stories act on emotion more than on fact, and focus on negative images of crime in communities. James C. Hackler, in his *Canadian Criminology: Strategies and Perspectives* (2007) refers to examples of crimes that are often overlooked by the media, such as 'white collar' and environmental crimes. He relates the intentional absence of these crimes to the **hyper-publicized** and **over-politicization of crime, security and crime prevention** and the harmful control of the private sector in lobbying politicians. The result can be inaccurate perceptions on crime and inappropriate policy decisions, which hinder effective and sustainable crime prevention strategies.

Media effects on public perception are often discussed, yet are difficult to measure. Several authors, like Tom Rogers, who have conducted studies and in-depth literature reviews on the subject, discuss how certain aspects of print media reportage generate a fear of crime in society, yet such a causal link is difficult to evaluate. Rogers' "Towards an Analytical Framework on Fear of Crime and its Relationship to Print Media Reportage," reviews how media coverage is found to contribute to increasing victimization and feelings of insecurity, in terms of locality of crimes, moral decline and neighbourhood degradation: "disorganization and physical / social disabilities of contemporary urban life, typified by symbols of disorder and crime, teenagers on the streets, abandoned buildings, graffiti, illegal drugs, public drunkenness and vandalism are thought to increase urban unease and consequently fear of crime."

Crime news has situated crime as a 'problem frame' which fuels a 'fear of crime' mentality, feeds on public opinion and perception, and strengthens repressive and 'tougher' public policies on crime and criminal penalties. Kenneth Dowler (2003) asserts that the media's obsessive focus on crime has resulted in over-exposure and therefore individuals who are highly exposed to violence in the media perceive crime as threatening, which increases a fear of crime, and therefore punitive attitudes. The John Howard Society's "Is Youth Crime Out of Control?" (1998) agrees and suggests that misconceptions of crime lead to intolerance and harsher attitudes. For example, increasing media coverage of youth crime has been linked to more repressive criminal justice policies, such as the adoption of Canada's Youth Offenders' Act. The Act permits 16 and 17 year olds to be tried in adult court, even for minor offences ("Criminalité chez les jeunes"). Media coverage can negatively influence the implementation of new measures, whereby an isolated event can influence large scale changes even if previous measures have not yet been evaluated or produced their effects. However, to assert that media reports prompt the adoption of 'tough' crime policies and punitive attitudes remains a challenging task.

There are ongoing debates on the extent to which the media plays a role in the 'production of violence'. The direct influence has not yet been proven, however assumptions suggest a more or less causal link. According to Melanie Brown from the Australian Institute of Criminology, studies

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<sup>3</sup> See Barak, G 1995; Chermak 1994.

on television and film violence do not suggest a direct causal link between media exposure and aggressive behaviour, but instead refer to a complex relationship which identifies 'interacting variables'(1996, p.2). The 2002 WHO report on violence and health states: "brief exposure to violence on television or film...produces short-term increases in aggressive behaviour...the effects seem to be greater for youths with aggressive tendencies"(p.39). The media can play a role in facilitating aggressive behaviour, yet evidence remains vague and unconfirmed. Studies demonstrate **a stronger relationship between media exposure and the desensitization of certain criminal acts**. S.K. Srivastva and Sweta Agarwal (2004) envision the media as a powerful tool for "communicating ideas" (p.63). Their study focuses on Indian cinema and television, in which they find that images of violence against women are desensitizing viewers to rape and murder against women. They deem this situation as a 'dangerous effect' which must be checked (p.64). In the end, they claim that the media holds a highly influential role and therefore by removing media images of women as victims and helpless, violence against women will reduce.

### ***Stigmatization of Groups and Places***

Within the debates, several studies suggest that **the media can reinforce the stigmatization of certain groups** (youth, ethno-cultural communities and indigenous peoples) and of certain geographical locations or neighbourhoods. The problem, as discussed by Bernard Schissel (1997), is that most people learn about the justice system mainly from the media, "dominant cultural understandings about young offenders are developed in complex interplay between media, political players, audiences" (p.220). Thus, inaccurate or inappropriate media coverage on specific individuals and places can lead to harmful policies and generate stereotypes about certain groups as offenders (Hall 1978). For example, media reporting on youth crime has increased over the past decade, however incidences of violent youth crime have remained stable (John Howard Society 1998). A law professor at the University of California refers to this phenomenon as the 'juvenile crime storm' or youth stigmatization, whereby there is an increasing tendency by the media to exaggerate youth crime and to link images of crime to the youth (Portner 1999).

The media's portrayal of youth as rising criminals is in fact false media coverage, and as Portner suggests, has resulted in unnecessary tougher criminal policies on youth crime with increasing numbers of incarcerated youth. Other targeted groups are ethnic and cultural minorities, as well as foreigners, immigrants and refugees.

Travis Dixon and Cristina Azocar (2007) discuss the overrepresentation of such groups in media coverage on crime statistics, which in turn lowers public perceptions, instills a false fear, stereotyping and racism, and increases intolerance and implementation of race-related social policies: "exposure to the *racial element of the crime script* increases support for punitive attitudes to crime" (Gilliam & Iyengar 2000:560).

Such attitudes have led to increasing repressive criminal penalization such as Switzerland's legislation on crime committed by foreigners. The law states that "any foreigner who undermines the security and public order will be revoked", or deported ("Nouvelle loi sur les étrangers").

In the United States and Canada, increasing attention to terrorism has led to stereotyping of Muslims and Arabs as criminals. The result has been the adoption of the Anti-Terrorist Act (securities certificate), which permits the government to detain and possibly deport any individual suspected of a terrorist act or an affiliation with a terrorist group, without the need to present confirmed evidence ("Examen parlementaire de la Loi antiterroriste"). These laws, in fact, violate basic universal human rights and unfairly stigmatize certain groups.

Stigmatization reaches as far as locality, whereby the **"inner-city" and city-perimeter settlements have become major targets for media reporting on crime**. Danilo Yanich (2001) argues that news media presents an "urban-suburban dimension of crime", in which the city is

deemed as dangerous (p.222). The “inner-city” has become a common label used in media reports on crime.

The outcome, as noted by Robson Sávio Reis Souza (2007), is a fear of certain communities, which can be counter-productive to prevention strategies since it marginalizes individuals living within the targeted community. He asserts that “reduction in the real estate prices in that place: deterioration of the population’s quality of life due to fear and the increased perception of local violence; greater fragility in social relations” (p.287). Moreover, it builds on feelings of isolation and devalued self-image, and hinders future investment and services into the area.

The role of the media as main providers of information must be seen in the onset and evolution of crime prevention policies, and in shaping public perceptions about crime and its response. However, it is important to note that the impact or “effects” of the media on the development of feelings of insecurity, and stigmatization **remains difficult to accurately assess**.

### ***Media coverage on crime can contribute to crime prevention strategies***

**Media exposure to crime and crime-related events can be an effective crime prevention strategy, and useful tool for sensitizing and educating the public on underestimated or overlooked social problems.** In an interview with Joe Friesen<sup>4</sup>, a Canadian journalist at the Globe and Mail, Mr. Friesen explains that the media’s role in crime prevention could be as a source of information on the causes and trends of crime. Public education campaigns are another example, whereby the media can play an active role in mobilizing support and advancing nationwide and international commitment to crime prevention, while distributing information to a vast audience at a fast pace.

Several campaigns on human trafficking, victim’s support, mobilization for women’s safety and child sexual abuse cases have all contributed as successful crime prevention initiatives, which have promoted improvements in the quality of facts and dissemination of information. In the 1990s, increasing media coverage on human trafficking resulted in the expansion of resources, awareness and support towards the sexual slavery of women and girls. It triggered a ‘world-wide’ response to the crime: “portrayals of prostitution through media discourse, and anti-trafficking legislation make a difference in the effectiveness that these governments have in the fight against trafficking in women for sexual exploitation” (Burrows & Lagos 2005). Moreover, internet initiatives are increasingly emerging, such as *Statesafe* and *humantrafficking.org*, which offer tools, discussion space and prevention information. There has also been enhanced attention of crime victims in media coverage, which has impacted on the increasing number of victim support movements and training manuals for the media (Rentschler 2007). In this case, the Ethical Guidelines for the Media’s Coverage of Crime Victims aims to avoid harmful media construction of crime and victims, as well as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) ‘Victim Empowerment Programmes’ (Simpson & Cote 2006).

**The media can help to improve the state of violence and crime in society, especially for women and children.** Media coverage of violence against women began taking force in the 1970s. Such coverage has led to heightened social awareness, policy for protection of women and girls (adoption of CEDAW), expansion of social services for female victim support, and a rise in the number of reported cases. Groups like Isis-International, the National Criminal Justice Reference Service and Women’s International Network offer online and hardcopy toolkits and reports on this issue. Media coverage on child sexual abuse has also been proven to have a positive impact. Jane Divita Woody (2002) states that the media can be useful for providing responsible coverage of sexual behaviour and raise awareness of issues on high-risk sexual behaviour. It supports open dialogue within the family and community, encourages awareness and helps therapists offer services and information to families and children. In Switzerland, the government has partnered with independent initiatives, like La Prévention Suisse de la

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<sup>4</sup> ICPC conducted an interview with Joe Friesen on July 16, 2008.

Criminalité, to provide online information and a system that tracks child pornography on the internet: “the media makes sense of intimate experiences of violence within the domestic space”(Kitzinger 2001, p.93). The media can also affect cultural standards on child sexual abuse and incest in order to help victims confront the issue, and to reduce stigma (Kitzinger 2001).

**The media equally participates in disseminating public information on self-protection and safety strategies against crime.** Due to the impressive amount of individuals who rely on the media for crime information, the media can therefore be highly efficient for denouncing certain types of crime. Media campaigns on prevention against residential burglary and information on the risks of using illegal drugs and alcohol, exemplify the means by which the media can have an important role in crime prevention. Initiatives such as Crime Concern, the 411 Initiative for Change and Internet Watch Foundation provide up-to-date information on prevention strategies against crimes such as residential burglary and a space to report incidents.

Governments and independent groups in the U.S., Canada, France and Belgium have launched media campaigns to spread awareness on the risks of consuming and distributing drugs (prescription and illegal) and alcohol (specifically ‘drinking and driving’). Such initiatives include national anti-drug media campaigns and information networks on drug and alcohol abuse. On an international level, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and in France, the Mission Interministérielle de Lutte Contre les Drogues et la Toxicomanie both launched media campaigns on prevention of drug abuse.

**The media can play a democratic role when it comes to the question of crime prevention.** With more information being made public, the media educates the population on certain issues, which therefore encourages critical thinking on the part of the population and promotes responsibility on the part of institutions, agencies, organizations and the government. The government of South Africa’s Communication & Information Systems Department suggests that the media has a key role to play in strengthening democracy.

The media can help to guarantee transparency of institutions specializing in crime prevention and safety. For example, in 2002 Nacro, an independent UK organization, called upon government, police, judiciary and the media to be “honest with the public about crime” and to collaborate in order to “inform, not mislead”. Therefore, the media may advance the surveillance or monitoring of the police system; for cases of abuse and corruption, the justice system; on arbitrary treatment and discrimination, and the education system. The media’s role in crime prevention may encourage proper policies as well as government initiative to allocate resources to local communities or crime prevention agencies that lack the means to implement prevention strategies. In the end, the media plays an active part in encouraging accountability of decision-makers who control the design and implementation of public policies.

The **media can help promote ‘civic journalism’**, which fosters responsibility on the part of the media to provide reliable information and engage in positive crime prevention initiatives. Joe Friesen began reporting on the community of Jane-Finch, with an aim of testing public perception of an increase in gun crime among Afro-Caribbean communities, located north-west of Toronto. Friesen’s work represents a new trend among journalists who, like Brazil’s Anabela Paiva, work within communities to encourage more in-depth and responsible reporting on the causes and effects of violence, with the goal of reducing stigmatization of communities, highlighting success stories and preventing inaccurate media reporting.

**Conclusion: *Strengthening crime prevention by building partnerships through a Communications Policy***

Certain conditions are necessary in order for government and other stakeholders to formulate a successful partnership with the media. One successful method is the adoption and integration of a ‘Communications Policy’ for crime prevention and safety. This ‘policy’ suggests that the government sets up a framework for opening a discourse on the role and relationship between

communicators and the media, and for creating ongoing communication, exchange, assistance and training for a diversity of media representatives. Furthermore, creating a communications policy suggests changing the mindset of government and community groups, in order to enhance openness and proactive interaction with the media, to understand communication implications and to make communication a strategic issue<sup>5</sup>.

**A communications policy aims to build partnerships between the media, government and communities**, and thus requires several processes. First, by working within a democratic system, free and diverse media is essential and allows for alternative perceptions and information, and therefore critical thinking (Alat 2006). Second, government and partners in crime prevention must work with local level media representatives in local crime prevention and safety strategies. Such a partnership may involve governments and NGOs engaging journalists in local coalition public events and meetings in order to stimulate 'civic journalism' and participation in crime prevention. The government should foster exchanges with key media people, and collaborate with journalists who share interests in developing 'civic journalism'<sup>6</sup>. In this case, "[government] needs to develop a relationship with the media – one that goes beyond using them as simple advertising tool for public announcements...they with the help of diverse scholars in multiple disciplines need to work to influence general reporting practices on crime-related issues throughout the development and implementation of the strategy".

An example of a partnership is found in the collaboration between the Ontario Police and Fire Services and the media by using commercials, public advertisements, and special activities, such as a magazine publication, to spread awareness on crime and reduce incidents in neighbourhoods<sup>7</sup>. The government of Canada recently set up a 'Safe Communities Kit: Working with the Media' toolkit for community groups, local government and the private sector on how to work with the media to prevent crime. The toolkit offers support and information for media sources on how to build connections. The U.S. National Youth Network has set up a similar online project. Another initiative is the "Taking back our Neighbourhoods", which was founded in the City of Charlotte, U.S., in 1993. The city was highly stigmatized due to its drug and violence problems.

Therefore, the local government and Chief of police collaborated with the media to improve the situation. The project encouraged the media to work with the community to partake in local reporting on crime and help draw out more positive stories ("The Key to Safer Municipalities"). This strategy was successful in building community cohesion and trust between parties. It demonstrates the effectiveness of partnerships between multiple groups in order to open dialogue, encourage collectivity, promote responsible reporting and dissemination of information, and reduce stigmatization.

Government and crime prevention agencies should create a pedagogical framework in order to provide ongoing information, assistance and training to a diverse range of media representatives outside the media context. This tactic will facilitate communication between parties in order to disseminate accurate and consensual information on crime-related events. By expanding contact with the media and by better informing media representatives of their role in crime prevention, the way in which crime is currently represented can begin to shift. International and governmental agencies, such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the National Crime Prevention Council, have been active in engaging the media in seminars and trainings on positive and responsible media reporting, appropriate sensitization, crime prevention campaigns and roundtable discussions. Therefore, building relations with media representatives through dialogue and technical cooperation can advance effective strategies for prevention and awareness. However, according to Joe Friesen, the government needs to be more transparent and open with media representatives, and do a better job of getting out information.

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<sup>5</sup> See: "Have we lost the battle with the MLO's"

<sup>6</sup> See: "Have we lost the battle with the MLO's"

<sup>7</sup> See : "Relations avec les médias et sensibilisation du public"

Within this framework, the government could focus on **media literacy education as a necessary crime prevention tool**. The increasing impact of different media sources on youth has drawn attention to media literacy education, in other words, using the media to educate and change attitudes and behaviours concerning media coverage on youth crime. According to a publication by the Australian Institute of Criminology, “children should critically evaluate the images which are presented to them on an everyday basis, in all forms of electronic entertainment, including video and computer games and the Internet. This could take a similar format to traditional literature classes, or drug and sex education classes.” In the case of Canada, *Media-Awareness.ca* is an online tool, which teaches the youth on being critical with different media sources and offers information on how to attain accurate and unbiased crime information. This initiative further encourages media sources to be more reliable, and accountable.

It is important to note that the communications policy remains largely a ‘work in progress’, yet requires a two-way exchange with long-term goals and a consistent supply of reliable information.

As the media continues to be a socializing agent, discussing the complex links and relations between the media and crime prevention and urban safety is important for government, private and public sectors and communities. Media literacy education also deserves more attention, as it can help encourage and inform the ways future generations interact and make use of the media in crime prevention and urban safety efforts.

## **Additional Information**

Media Awareness Network [www.media-awareness.ca](http://www.media-awareness.ca)

Partnering with the media to build safer communities. Toolkit, 1995.  
National Crime Prevention Council, Washington, DC, [www.ncpc.org](http://www.ncpc.org)

The Communication Initiative [www.comminit.com](http://www.comminit.com)

B.C. Crime Prevention Awards  
[http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/community\\_programs/crime/awards.htm](http://www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/community_programs/crime/awards.htm)

The 411 Initiative for Change <http://www.whatsthe411.ca/>

Cybertip <http://www.cybertip.ca>

INHOPE <http://www.inhope.org/>

National Child Exploitation Coordination Centre <http://ncecc.ca/>

Internet Watch Foundation <http://www.iwf.org.uk/>

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children <http://www.ncmec.org/>

National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign. <http://www.mediacampaign.org/>

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