

The Effects of Violent Crime Media on College Students' Fear of Crime

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Abstract

Previous literature indicated that fear of crime can develop through overconsumption of the media. Fear of crime is the ideology that crime rates are rising in a specific area, while the rates are the same or going down. Specifically, this design focuses on how various media sources may affect different individuals' fear of crime. Participants completed a voluntary survey with multiple Likert-scale questions to accurately gauge their fear of crime. The hypothesis was that the amount of media pertaining to crime that an individual observed would negatively affect how an individual perceived the rate of crime in their area or increase their fear of crime. In addition, low economic status among college students was expected to increase the chance of developing a fear of crime. The results illustrated a positive correlation between social media exposure to crime, level of crime experienced, and fear of crime. The results did not find a positive correlation between economic status and fear of crime. Implications of this study include questions that were not asked that could influence the participants' fear of crime. The questionnaire did not ask participants for information regarding their local police chapter. Likewise, the questions did not cover the surrounding environments of participants in great detail.

Keywords: Fear of Crime, Crime News Media, Economic Status

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Fear of crime can be developed through the influence of the media, how much an individual is exposed to media related to crime, and their environment. High fear of crime may cause students' grades to fall, their class attendance rates to decrease, or their mental health to decline. Today, people seemingly have a higher fear of crime that has worsened from previous years. This could be due to the high amount of coverage that crime receives from news media and entertainment that is related to criminal activity.

Terror Management Theory and Media

Regarding our research, a previous aspect of literature lays the theoretical foundation for our proposal. Terror Management Theory (TMT) is a concept that defines how fear of death can have a negative impact on individuals. Specifically, traumatic, or dangerous events like natural disasters, war, or pandemics can cause terror. The terror that is experienced may cause a state of obsession in some individuals regarding victimization probability and mortality. Psychological well-being and high rates of anxiety are common implications for those who experience this phenomenon (Juhl & Routledge, 2016). TMT can also affect how an individual may perceive a given situation. A study conducted by Florian and Mikulincer (1997) concluded that perceived social transgressions were influenced by the way people perceive the consequences of their own death. This illustrates the fear outlined in TMT can have considerable influence over one's judgement. The same theory was utilized as a framework to gauge the fear of crime that people may acquire due to depictions of violence or even death in some crime stories. In comparison, a study that looked at how global catastrophes can impact mental health describes how catastrophes such as pandemics can instill a manic state in some individuals that increases their fear of mortality (Dimoff et al., 2021). The same idea could be applied to how media coverage of

violent events could also instill a fear of mortality in some individuals. These ideas were used as a baseline for explaining the fear of crime developed through the media.

The development of more crime-related shows on television, as well as violent electronic games, has made an impact on the way we view crime around us and the way we fear these crimes. In another article, Eschholz (1997) stated that both television and the news media portray crime and the view of our world as much more violent than it is in reality. The news media conveys crime dramas to the public because they are easy, politically safe, and good for ratings. Eschholz (1997) pointed out that Americans spend one-third of their free time watching television and media plays an important role here in making sure that the public sees a consistent theme in violent crimes when they are watching.

Media Coverage and Fear of Crime

Other research has been conducted that directly investigated the relationship between media coverage and its effect on the public's fear of crime. In March of 2001, a team of researchers (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2004) administered a survey to the residents of Washington D.C. and gathered 480 responses via telephone. Participants answered questions regarding their exposure to news coverage through local and national television and newspapers. They were then questioned about the sense of security they felt when walking through their neighborhood alone. The researchers concluded that fear of crime is a result of the media shaping an individual's beliefs (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2004). In addition, those who reported local television as their primary source of news were found to have the lowest sense of security in their neighborhood (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2004). Though this study is slightly outdated, it is still worth noting that the relationship between media and fear of crime has existed in the past. A similar study was published in 2020 (Haara et al., 2020) that explored a very similar topic. The goal of this study

was to examine the association between consumption of news and information on violent crime and fear of violence in the forms of street violence, avoidance behavior, and perceiving terrorism as a threat to oneself in the contemporary context of the current cross-media landscape (Haara et al., 2020). This was completed through the Finish National Crime Survey conducted in 2017 and a survey administered to 6201 participants within Finland. The survey asked participants about their sociodemographic characteristics, fear of street violence, and participation in avoidance behavior. The study's findings demonstrated that fear of crime was caused by several factors and cannot be traced to one specific source. However, the study also found that though the crime had dropped within the country, many believed it had significantly risen due to an increasing number of violent news stories portrayed within the media (Haara et al., 2020). A more relevant study was conducted by Shoulders (2021) and focused on understanding the relationship between the exposure of crime in the media and how it relates to fear of crime, and social interaction anxiety. Shoulders used a quantitative correlational survey including data from 150 residents of a major west coast city. They found a positive correlation and concluded that the residents' social interaction anxiety was impacted due to media exposure and levels of fear of crime (Shoulders, 2021). Although this study was more aimed at understanding the social anxiety caused by fear of crime, it is still beneficial to see the correlation-between crime in the media and fear of crime.

Our study focused on college students and how crime news affected their lives.

In another article written by Dowler (2003), he stated that the relationship between media and crime depends on who is watching and the characteristics of the message. He also mentioned that local and national news has a strong effect on the public, and the fact that people in higher urban areas that watch a lot of television are more likely to be afraid of crime. However, local news broadcasts are more likely to affect those in high crime areas and those that experience

crime themselves (Dowler, 2003). This illustrates that the media can significantly affect how individuals perceive crime, even in other countries. There have also been studies where students claim that the United States uses the media to falsely convey crime rates. In Louisville, Kentucky, researchers examined the fear of crime between international and non-international students. The data showed that the international students reported higher rates of fear. The international students also said that the United States tends to depict itself as a crime-filled country through the media (Daglar, 2009). This is important, because students are realizing that the media may be purposely controlling the way we fear crime, based on the way they expose crime in the media. Although these students know the crime rates in their area, they are still fearful of crime occurring around them based on what the media tells them.

According to a study conducted in Milwaukee, WI, (O'Hear 2020) news sources' coverage of violent criminal activity seemed to be published at a higher rate than crimes were occurring. This yearlong study was conducted from April of 2017 to April of 2018 and pulled data from constant observation of crime news stories (O'Hear, 2020). These crime stories were being published on a local Milwaukee news website and a major Milwaukee newspaper. The statistics from the data illustrate the imbalance between the degree of violent crime coverage in the media and the statistics of crime occurring in the city. The major newspaper's violent crime coverage dominated their overall news stories, consisting of 62% of published articles within the year timeframe. The local news website covered violent crime stories 80% of the time. When the data was compared to crime statistics in Milwaukee for that year, it was shown that violent crime occurs about a fraction of the time that property and petty crimes occur (O'Hear, 2020). Due to the perpetual increase in social media and media platforms, many students may also utilize news

sources. Therefore, we assume that more crime media a student observes would directly affect their fear of crime due to the sheer number of crime news stories being shared.

A study conducted by Loxton et al. (2018) showed that fear of crime/violence was one of the top five fears among 544 first-year psychology college students. The study employed a cross-sectional design with convenience sampling and data was collected via a self-report questionnaire. The study found that conditioning experiences was one of the most prominent pathways in the acquisition of all these fears (Loxton et al, 2018). A conditioning experience is when somebody's behavior is due to an experience or multiple experiences they have had in the past. This shows that the students' fear of crime was partly due to their own experience with crime. This study is important in understanding how students may have developed a fear of crime and how it affects their college lives.

Criminologists use their research to try to produce an accurate definition for the "*fear of crime*." While it has changed, in one article, Warr (2000) stated that the phrase has been associated with many different emotional states, perceptions, and attitudes. Fear can result from cognitive processing or the evaluation of perceptual information. However, fear is not a belief, attitude, or evaluation as much as it is a feeling. The feeling of danger is caused by being aware of the possible danger surrounding you. Warr (2000) stated that psychologists can use anxiety and fear to describe the different reactions to immediate threats and past reactions. It is believed that fear describes a threat happening in the moment while anxiety is used to describe past events (Warr, 2000). However, this idea has not been fully adopted into the research of fear of crime but when measuring fear, researchers are still looking for anxiety over the fear of the victim. This is important for our research because it is necessary to understand the definition of fear of crime when trying to examine its effects on college students. Fear of crime can be operationally defined

as an ideology that crime in one's local area is rising or that crime rates in the area are higher than they really are.

A study conducted by Bodford (2017) emphasized how the digital world influences our physical safety and seems to blur the line between online threats and physical ones. Therefore, the digital world has been noted as a powerful influencer upon how students may view the physical world and the crime within it. According to the study of Dowler, Fleming, and Muzzatti (2006), heinous or violent crimes have a high appeal to media outlets, politicians, and society as a whole. Both media and entertainment relating to crime often harbor a large number of viewers, and the vast amount of crime coverage allows for an overestimation of the prevalence of violent crime as well as the dangers of becoming a victim of these crimes (Dowler et al., 2006). Crime media refers to news outlets such as Fox, NBC, or CNN. There are a multitude of television shows and movies that relate to crime such as *Criminal Minds* and *48 Hours*. News outlets can also include the radio, local newspaper, and the internet. A study was conducted on the media coverage of violent crime (Kohm et al., 2012) using these news outlets to see the relationship of fear of crime among Canadian college students and American College students. This study found that Canadian college students had a higher fear of crime due to the higher media coverage of violent crime. It was found that while the Canadian students exhibited a higher fear of violent crime, the media tended to exert a broader range of influence on American students (Kohm et al., 2012).

Several other studies have examined the relationship between crime coverage and impacts the media may have on law enforcement. One of which (Levan & Stevenson, 2019) consisted of an interview of 41 different students from undergraduate universities on the topic of police and community. The interviews include many student descriptions of recent crime stories

like the Black Lives Matter Protests or the Trayvon Martin shooting. The study also split participants into groups based on what types of media each student used. There are multiple different ways to access crime media and these are reflected in these groups. Most were categorized by watching television news, reading online news articles, watching newspapers, or using any social media. The implications for this study show that if media platforms continue to be on the rise, they may cause more crime coverage to be displayed on them in the future (Levan & Stevenson, 2019). The fear that can arise from this increase of violent news coverage impacts how individuals view law enforcement. As illustrated by the death of George Floyd, unjust and obsessively violent actions taken by police officers are posted across media outlets almost immediately after they occur. A group of researchers (Cauffman et al., 2020) wanted to test if this has affected the younger population's view of law enforcement. Using data from the Monitoring the Future survey, the researchers examined the change in 12th graders' view of the police from 1975 to 2016. The results concluded that the relaxed, positive perspective on law enforcement that was present during the early 1990's was only present in today's white youth, while youths of minorities have grown more afraid of both the police and of crime, as a whole (Cauffman et al., 2020).

Sociodemographic Factors and Fear of Crime

Past studies have also explored sociodemographic characteristics, and results have shown that minority groups experience more fear of crime than demographic groups that often constitute most of the student population (Grinshteyn et al., 2020). The implications of this study suggest that minority groups are more at risk of experiencing or acquiring a fear of crime on their campuses. Additionally, these fears can develop into severe health concerns for minority students such as depression, anxiety, low sense of well-being, and low physical functioning (Grinshteyn

et al., 2020). Furthermore, a study was conducted (Shi, 2021) using 398 international students that were attending universities in the United States. Using structural equation modelling (SEM), the study was able to find that international students were more fearful in the United States than in their home countries (Shi, 2021). The results also concluded that the attention paid to crime media is positively correlated with international students' fear of crime (Shi, 2021).

Furthermore, some minority groups suffer from economic issues that limit their financial ability. This may lead to high poverty areas commonly associated with higher levels of crime and lower educational opportunities. However, economic stability is not widely covered regarding fear of crime in college students alongside the effects of media regarding crime. Chiricos et al. (2014) used a survey consisting of 2,092 adult participants in Tallahassee, Florida. This survey was aimed at understanding the media's effects on fear of crime. Chiricos et al. (2014) found that television news consumption was significantly related to fear of crime only for white women between thirty and fifty-four years old. Due to Tallahassee being a larger city in Florida, the economic standpoint of these women is both low and high. Another study (Rader et al., 2020) focusing on fear of crime on college campuses at night reported that male college students have been shown to have less fear than female college students, and younger students were shown to be more afraid than older students. This study confirms that women may have a higher fear of crime than men. This is important when looking at gender and how this may influence students' academic performance as well. If women are reporting a higher fear of crime, then fear of crime will have a more direct impact on their college life.

School Life and Fear of Crime

More specifically, another research study (Schildkraut et al., 2015) analyzed the effects of violent crime on college students and their acquired fear of crime. It focused on how school

shootings may elicit a feeling of moral panic in some students (Schildkraut et al., 2015). The study noted that the multitude of attention that school shootings garner in the media greatly influences students and their fear of crime. Additionally, the researchers from this study stated that these types of violent crime can be perceived as a breakaway from the social order and may increase a state of moral panic that is disproportionate to the actual threat facing the students (Schildkraut et al., 2015). In addition, Poole (2014) found that most students do not utilize sources with information on campus crime statistics when they are choosing which university to attend, such as the Clery Act. This study illustrated how college students may be more largely impacted by violent crime in the media because they are unaware of the Clery Act's criminal statistics for their specific college campus. Without being aware of the currently available statistics on crime, many students are at risk of developing a warped perception of crime in their area. Not only does the fear of crime affect their social perceptions, but it also has a major impact on their attendance and grades at school.

Barrett et al. (2012) investigated the relationship of fear of crime related to school in youth. This study used data found from the 2007 National Crime Victimization Survey's School Crime Supplement. The results suggested that fear increased the number of students that will skip class and decreased students' grades (Barrett et al., 2012). The results demonstrated that the fear of crime directly impacted a student's school life and had a drastic effect on their grades and their attendance. If the fear of crime among youth students impacted their school life, then the fear of crime among college students may have the same impact.

Lastly, our study analyzed the independent variables of media consumption and economic background. The dependent variable is fear of crime, and we define fear of crime as an individual believing that crime is rising or that crime in their area is worse than actual statistics

reflect. Media consumption can also be defined as the regular use of any form of media (at least every other day), including social media. These media platforms may consist of television news networks like Fox or NBC, newspapers, or crime news accessible through social media like Facebook, Snapchat, or Instagram. This study did not consist of data related directly to social media, but rather the amount of crime news that a student may experience through social media or any of the prior stated medias.

In addition, our independent variables include personal and family-based economic status, crime news and media coverage of violent crime, and experience with crime. Personal economic status can be defined as the amount of accrued wealth that includes occupational wages, savings, and assets such as a house or a car. Family-based economic status is defined as the amount of accrued wealth within the family of the participant including occupational wages, savings, and assets. Crime news and media is defined as any news outlet that consistently covers violent crime stories. Violent crime is defined as crimes that include physical injury, harm, or extreme danger. Experience with crime is defined as any amount of crime that has been directed toward you, happened around you, or was done by you. Our dependent variable is fear of crime. This can be defined as an ideology that crime in one's local area is rising or that crime rates in the area are higher than they are.

Purpose of the Present Study

The present research design evaluated the impact of crime news media on college students and their fear of crime. Particular attention was paid to the economic background of the participants as well as other demographic factors because of the role they can play in developing a fear of crime. According to Grinshteyn et al. (2020), minority groups commonly develop a fear of crime more often than other groups, and we examined whether this holds in this proposed

study. The implications of our findings can assist college students in becoming more cautious around criminally related media. Suppose students coming from a lower economic background are exposed to overly negative crime portrayals in the media. In that case, they will begin to form unrealistic and negative attitudes regarding the safety and security of their surroundings. Our hypothesis stated that higher levels of crime news in the media will be associated with higher levels of fear of crime. Fear of both crime and victimization could be lowered if students are further educated on the dangers of high crime media consumption. Students may also become more inclined to lightly research the crime rate on their campuses through the Clery Act instead of through crime coverage by the media.

Method

Participants

For the current study, the intended participant pool was college students. This was done via random sampling, so that there was a wide variety of races, ethnicities, and genders. There was a total of 64 participants used in this study with a mean age of 18.8 ($SD = 1.34$). These participants were recruited using the college's human participant management system. The human participant management system gives individuals the ability to volunteer for studies they would like to participate in, in exchange for course credit. The participants were provided credit in their psychology course after taking the survey. Media consumption, violent crime

Measures

Level of Crime Experienced. Participants answered questions focused on the level of crime the participants experienced or known about around them or with friends/family. Examples of these questions were, "Rate the level of crime you experience on other college campuses", and "Rate the level of crime you have witnessed directly. This may include crime

such as assault or theft that you may have observed but not intervened upon.” Participants answered using a Likert-type scale, the range is from 1 (None) to 5 (Very Severe). There were seven total questions pertaining to this section.

Academic Concerns Related to Crime. The next set of survey questions focused on their academic performance crime. Questions such as “Rate the level to which your academic performance has been affected by criminal activity or by fear of crime” were used. The participant’s current GPA was asked as well. Participants answered using a Likert-type scale, the range is from 1 (None) to 5 (Very Severe), multiple-choice, and a text entry box. There were three total questions pertaining to this section.

Social Media Exposure to Crime. Next, the survey questions centralized on social media and how much crime the participants see portrayed throughout social media. Media consumption can be defined as the regular use of any form of media (at least every other day), including social media. These media platforms may consist of television news networks like Fox or NBC, newspapers, or crime news accessible through social media like Facebook, Snapchat, or Instagram. For example, “How often do you come into contact with social media or local news pertaining to crime?” Participants answered using a Likert-type scale, the range is from 1 (None) to 5 (Very Severe), as well as multiple-choice. There were five total questions pertaining to this section.

Fear of Crime. In this section, questions concerning the participant’s level of fear of crime on their college campus and in their surroundings were asked. An example of this includes, “Rate the level of fear you feel on your college campus.” These questions aimed to understand the participant’s level of fear pertaining to their college campus as well as social

media. Participants answered using a Likert-type scale, the range is from 1 (None) to 5 (Very Severe), as well as multiple-choice. There were four total questions pertaining to this section.

Demographic Questions. Participants answered questions about their economic background, this included whether they have a high, middle, or low economic status. Participants answer questions pertaining to their economic status, family income, and demographics (race, ethnicity, and gender). Participants answered using multiple choice and a text entry box. There were six total questions pertaining to this section.

Procedure

The participants answered the survey questions using Qualtrics. The participants first read through the study information and then read the consent section and decided whether they would like to continue or not. Next, the participants began to answer questions in this order: Experience with Crime; Academic Concerns Related to Crime; Fear of Crime; Social Media Exposure to Crime; and Demographic Questions.

At the end of the survey, there was information for the participants pertaining to the study and resources for mental health help.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using SPSS Statistics, a software package used for statistical analysis. First, we cleaned that data by removing any unanswered or blank questions in the survey. Then a multiple regression test was conducted with social media exposure to crime and level of crime experienced as our predictor variables and fear of crime as our outcome variable.

Results

There was a total of 64 participants for this study. First, our missing data was removed ($n = 3$), and responses with 25% or less missing data had their responses replaced with the series

mean. Our descriptive statistics showed that the gender of participants were women with 65.6% women ($n = 40$) and 34.4% men ($n = 21$). The mean age was 18.8 ($SD = 1.34$). Most participants did not identify as Hispanic/Latino (96.7%). Most participants identified as white (81.7%), while 10% participants identified as Black or African American, and 8.3% identified as Asian.

Our predictor variables were social media exposure to crime and level of crime experienced, while fear of crime was our outcome variable. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the variables of interest.

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Fear of Crime	7.65	2.69	64
Social Media Exposure	125.71	77.21	64
Level of Crime Experienced	13.69	4.03	64

We ran a multiple regression test to examine the impact of our two predictor variables and our outcome variable. The regression equation was significant, $R^2 = .364$, $F(2, 61) = 17.42$, $p < .001$. Social media exposure demonstrated a small trend as a predictor of fear of crime (beta = .176, $t = 1.54$, $p = .129$) and level of crime experienced was a significant predictor of fear of crime (beta = .504, $t = 4.42$, $p < .001$). There was no positive correlation found between economic status and fear of crime.

Discussion

Our hypothesis stated that higher levels of crime news in the media would be associated with higher levels of fear of crime. If crime news in the media is constantly reported, then fear of crime will increase. Economic status was also thought to play a role in the students' perception and fear of crime. Our regression and correlation analyses showed a correlation between social media exposure to crime, level of crime experienced, and fear of crime. There was a positive correlation between social media exposure to crime and fear of crime, as well as level of crime experienced and fear of crime. Our analyses did not show a positive correlation between economic status and fear of crime, therefore economic status did not play a significant factor in the fear of crime among participants.

Our hypothesis was supported by our analyses. Social media tends to be a powerful influence on how much media, pertaining to crime, students may have the possibility to see (Levan & Stevenson, 2019). Previous research by Eschholz (1997) identified that Americans spend one-third of their free time watching television and media plays an important role in making sure that the public sees a consistent theme in violent crimes when they are watching. Therefore, the media plays a huge role in the way many people view and feel about crime, especially in their area. There is a consistency between the amount of media seen and watched and the fear of crime outcome. A study conducted by Florian and Mikulincer (1997) concluded that perceived social transgressions were influenced by the way people perceive the consequences of their own death. This illustrates the fear outlined in Terror Management Theory can have considerable influence over one's judgement. The same theory was utilized as a framework to gauge the fear of crime that people may acquire due to depictions of violence or even death in some crime stories. Our analyses showed a positive correlation between social media exposure to crime and fear of crime, meaning that social media exposure to crime

increased fear of crime in an individual. This is important because many college students use social media daily and may be over-exposed to crime through social media. This in turn may start to increase their fear of crime over time.

Limitations

Our number of total participants was small, which is a limitation to our results. With a larger number of participants, there may be a change in the correlation outcomes and possibly a stronger correlation between social media exposure to crime and fear of crime. The self-report nature of the data collected could also be considered a limitation as there was no way to validate reports of crime experienced or social media use. This study also solely focused on college students from one single university; therefore, this data analysis information cannot be generalized to other populations or ages. Another limitation includes little diversity among economic status.

Implications

Other contributors, such as the police and environmental factors, may influence fear of crime that has not yet been taken into consideration. For example, a study conducted by Lytle and Randa (2015) concluded that the lesser degree of ‘police satisfaction’ in an area will lead to an increased fear of crime. Additionally, Burgess and Doran (2011) proved a direct relationship between fear of crime and environmental factors, such as visible disorder and threatening stimuli. This information alone introduces several sources of error that may appear within the study. For example, the questionnaire did not ask participants for information regarding their local police chapter. Likewise, the questions did not cover the environments of participants in detail.

Future Research

Future research into this topic may include reaching more populations, ages, and college campuses. Future research may also include a longer time span for participants to sign up and take the survey so that more participants will be involved. To mitigate the issue of validity in the future, it may be better to do in-person survey interviews. Factors such as economic status and experience with crime should be used within future studies, as well as new factors such as police presence and environmental factors.

Conclusion

This study and its data analyses supported the hypothesis and showed a positive correlation between social media exposure to crime and fear of crime. These results may persuade some students to be more careful when they utilize social media as well as be more educated about crime in their area. The Clery Act, which collects information on crime on several campuses, is often overlooked as a resource for students to use for obtaining accurate crime statistics for their area (Poole, 2014). Our results will hopefully help those who are interested in the reality of crime within their area acquire true crime statistics.

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