

Media Coverage of Crime and Criminal Justice

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Preface

Every citizen, every day, has contact with the media in some form. Whether it is in the form of advertising, news or entertainment, and whether it is television, Internet, newspaper, radio, or some other form of media, the media are inescapable. As a result, the media impact our world in very important ways.

For many Americans today, relatively new forms of media have even greater impacts on our lives. For example, we often rely heavily on websites, social network sites, blogs, and so forth for both news and entertainment.

From the very founding of the press in America, crime and criminal justice have held a prominent place in the media. Today, news about crime and criminal justice and entertainment centering on it are widespread. Thus, crime and punishment are often on the forefront of Americans' minds.¹

Unfortunately, images of crime and criminal justice in the media tend to diverge from reality in important ways. This explains why people who rely on media for their information about crime and criminal justice tend to hold misconceptions about crime, criminals, and criminal justice practice. *Media Coverage of Crime and Criminal Justice* critically examines media coverage of crime and criminal justice to help correct these misconceptions and shed light on important realities of crime and criminal justice in the United States.

While there are other texts on the market focused on the impact of mass media on criminal justice, this text is the only one that starts with the issue of corporate ownership of the mass media as a potential problem for gaining an accurate understanding of the realities of crime and criminal justice. Further, this text presents basic information about the media in the introductory chapters and then applies this information to specific issues of crime and criminal justice in the rest of the book, thereby focusing on the same issues and themes throughout the book.

In this book, the reader will learn what is meant by the terms "media" and "mainstream media" and also will learn about alternative sources of media information. Topics analyzed include how the media are organized, how they operate, and to what degree citizens are exposed to the media. Additionally, the book analyzes competing explanations of media coverage of crime and criminal justice, using examples from the real world to show why the media cover topics (and ignore others) the way they do.

The book deals with media coverage of law-making and crime, policing, courts, and corrections. There are separate chapters of media coverage of each branch of criminal justice, with reviews of the literature focused on the most recent and influential research on these topics. The book also examines how the media both help and hinder effective crime control and crime prevention efforts. The book concludes with a summary of the book as well as suggestions for media reform, based on major findings of the book.

The book focuses mostly on images of crime, but an additional chapter is also devoted to how terrorism and the war on terrorism are covered in the media; the chapter is offered online as a supplement to the book for those who are interested in expanding their examination beyond crime and criminal justice. This material is relevant for the book because of the overlap and parallels between the war on crime and the war on terror.² Recent laws and policies aimed at reducing and preventing terrorism (e.g., the USA PATRIOT Act) have actually been more widely used to pursue ordinary, everyday street criminals, and serve as evidence of the increasingly punitive nature of criminal justice in the United States.³

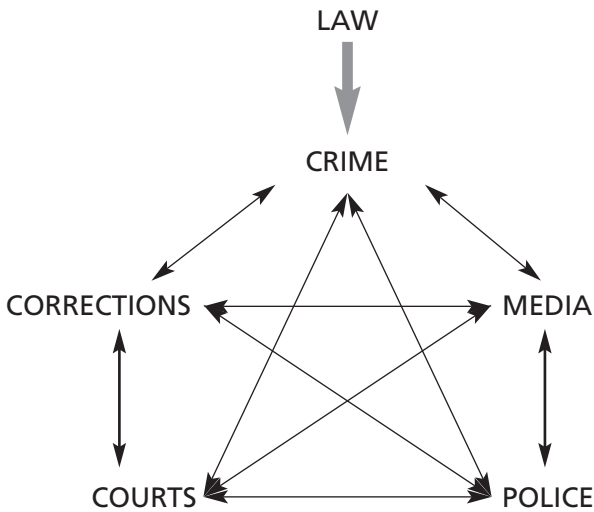
Most of the book deals with media that are aimed at providing information to citizens (the news, for example). Yet, the book also analyzes literature on entertainment media and how issues of crime and criminal justice are depicted on television, in movies, music, and so forth. This is important for at least two reasons: First, crime is very popular in modern entertainment; and second, most U.S. citizens spend more time interacting with entertainment media than with news media.

In my teaching and writing about criminal justice reform in the United States, I've learned that little criminal justice reform is possible without considering needed reforms in the way American media are organized and operate. One goal of this book is to provide the information necessary to understand how to achieve such reform. While the book can thus be considered "activist" in nature in that it clearly has an agenda, the material is presented in a fair and objective manner. First and foremost, the goal of the book is to tell the truth about the media.

I start with this important point: It is impossible to fully understand criminal justice—the law, crime, police, courts, corrections—without studying the media. This is because the media play such an important role in criminal justice policy. The media impact criminal justice policy directly (e.g., by featuring criminal justice officials in stories) and indirectly (e.g., by impacting public perceptions of crime, justice and injustice). Ray Surette agrees, writing "crime, justice, and the media have to be studied together because in twenty-first century America they are inseparable, wedded to each other in a forced

marriage. They cohabitate in an often raucous, sometimes riotous, but ultimately unavoidable relationship.”⁴

Given the numerous interrelationships between the media and criminal justice agencies, it is not possible to fully understand criminal justice practice without understanding the media. If you are a student of criminal justice, reading this book will not only teach you about the media but will also help you gain a more complete understanding of the realities of criminal justice practice.



Each arrow in the figure represents a relationship between some aspect of criminal justice and the media. For example, when crimes are committed—especially certain types of crimes (e.g., random, violent crimes against innocent victims)—they are often broadcast in the news media. The media also rely on police personnel for information about crimes after they occur as well as allow the police to appear in their stories. At each stage of the criminal justice process, the media play an important role, as when the media cover a high profile criminal trial or an escape from a prison.

Finally, it is important to note that there are new examples of media coverage of crime, criminal justice, and related topics literally every day. For this reason, it is important that you pay attention to the news and entertainment media as you read this book. By doing so, you will see the most current examples of issues and topics raised in this book. It is also recommended that you visit the website related to this book. Here you will find many more examples of

media coverage of crime, criminal justice and related topics, as well as links to media organizations and groups working to change the media. You will also find links to blogs about the media, crime, criminal justice, and related topics. Look for this symbol throughout the book.

 This symbol will alert you to additional information on various topics that have been placed on the website: www.pscj.appstate.edu/media/
