Criminological Highlights

Criminological Highlights is designed to provide an accessible look at some of the more interesting criminological research that is currently being published. There are six issues in each volume. Copies of the original articles can be obtained (at cost) from the Centre of Criminology Information Service and Library. Please contact Tom Finlay or Andrea Shier.

Contents: "Headlines and Conclusions" for each of the eight articles. Short summaries of each of the eight articles.

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This issue of *Criminological Highlights* addresses the following questions:

1. Why has the rate of imprisonment in the Netherlands increased since 1990?
2. Why has the rate of imprisonment in Ireland increased since 1970?
3. Is there pressure to change American imprisonment policies?
4. Does the belief that racial profiling takes place affect the way in which the police are seen?
5. How is race related to punitive criminal justice attitudes?
6. What predicts whether a crime prevention program will work?
7. What predicts whether a woman will be the victim of violent crime?
8. Does watching violent television cause criminal violence?

Traditionally, the Netherlands has had a relatively low imprisonment rate – similar to that of other northern European countries. Events have recently transpired such that its imprisonment rate is now the same as Canada's.

The changes that have occurred in imprisonment policy in the Netherlands appear to have had dramatic effects – shifting the country away from its position as a country with relatively low rates of imprisonment to its current situation of having an imprisonment rate which is almost exactly the same as that of Canada. No single factor accounts for this shift and, of course, it is equally unclear whether these changes are likely to remain.

Ireland's imprisonment rate increased from about 25 to 81 prisoners per hundred thousand residents between 1970 and 2002 in part as a result of a "successful" prison construction policy.

In the end, the increase in imprisonment in Ireland appears to have occurred because "when law and order issues became politicized… the finances of the state were sufficiently healthy to accommodate the expectations placed on them. During previous law and order crises, the system did not have the capacity to respond… A punitive streak has always existed among Irish legislators, but in the past this was tempered by a cold fiscal climate… This may be a very simple explanation for why penal expansion occurred when it did." More recently, however, there are concerns about the costs and as a result "the bottom line, rather than any desire for penal reform, may force a reconsideration of what constitutes an appropriate scale of imprisonment."

Negative impacts of U.S. imprisonment policies are evident. The public is beginning to understand this. The question is whether political decisions will be made to change crime policies.

There are viable alternatives to high imprisonment policies. A shift in orientation from a prosecution to a harm reduction approach for drug problems, or a focus on punishments outside of prisons (and a focus on reintegration rather than incarceration) would all appear to be more productive uses of scarce resources. For these to work, however, politicians have to realize that there would be public support for such approaches.

The perception that racial profiling by police takes place can have broad effects in the community at large: It can reduce both citizens' assessments of the legitimacy of police actions and citizens' general support of the police.

It would appear that the belief that profiling takes place can undermine the perceived legitimacy of the police. However, these same data suggest that "the police can maintain their legitimacy by exercising their authority fairly." The data do not support the view that the public thinks that profiling is the result of prejudice: only 12% of whites and 33% of nonwhites thought that "when the police do stop minorities more frequently than whites, they are doing it out of prejudice." However, for both white and black respondents, if a police officer profiles, that officer's behaviour is seen as less legitimate. "When people indicate that they have experienced fairness from the police and/or when they indicate that the police are generally fair in dealing with their community, they are less likely to infer that profiling takes place." Three aspects of procedural fairness – quality of decision making, quality of treatment, and inferences about trustworthiness – were found to significantly affect the inferences people make about their interactions with the police."

How is race related to punitive criminal justice attitudes?

The "results linking punitive attitudes to the racial typification of crime suggest that there may be a racial overlay to the crime salience issue. Indeed, it is when concern about crime and the perception that crime is violent are "low" that racial typification of crime is a significant

predictor of punitiveness. In these contexts a racialized crime threat may be substituting for a generalized threat that is presumed by crime salience." These results may reflect a "modern racism… [that] eschews overt expressions of racial superiority and hostility but instead sponsors a broad 'anti-black affect' that equates blacks with a variety of negative traits, and crime is certainly one of those." For example, "James Q. Wilson's assertion that 'it is not racism that makes whites uneasy about blacks moving into the neighbourhoods… it is fear. Fear of crime, of drugs, of gangs, of violence' … in one short sentence simultaneously disavows white racism while equating blacks with a list of negative attributes."

You get what you pay for: An important predictor of the success of various burglary prevention programs is how much effort went into implementing them.

The findings suggest that the benefits from a crime prevention program are likely to be roughly proportionate to the efforts put into crime prevention. There are, it seems, few if any magic potions to rid a neighbourhood of crime with minimal effort.

The risk that a woman faces of violent victimization from various types of offenders – strangers, non-strangers, and intimate partners – appears to be related in similar ways to her age and family structure as well as to the community in which she lives.

"Family structure and community family composition appear to have more consistent and direct effects on women's violence risk than race, ethnicity or socio-economic status… Family – the most immediate social context of individuals' lives – represents an important source of either protection from or risk of violence." Furthermore, "different forms of violence are similarly located in communities." One explanation for this strong "family" effect is that "women raising children on their own… have less time and energy to devote to the development of community networks." Such

networks can – for the individual and for the community – provide protection.

After four decades of research, one cannot conclude with any confidence that there is a causal relationship between the viewing of violent media and criminal violence.

It is clear that if there is an effect of exposure to violence in the mass media on criminal violence, that effect is small and almost certainly limited to a subset of the population that is hard to identify. Factors that are known to have an effect on the likelihood of violence in children (parental supervision, association with violent peers, parental violence, various early childhood experiences) typically show more consistent effects. The question one is left with in a world in which exposure to violent mass media is almost certainly uncontrollable is a simple one: given the inconsistency of the findings in this area, does it not make sense to search for factors that are more important in determining the level of criminal violence and that might be affected by local, provincial, or national policies?

Traditionally, the Netherlands has had a relatively low imprisonment rate – similar to that of other northern European countries. Events have recently transpired such that its imprisonment rate is now the same as Canada's.

The Netherlands is typically seen as a "country not obsessed by crime" (p. 284), in large part because its policies have not been crisis-driven. Since 1990, however, "crises in governance and in criminal justice in particular occurred with such frequency that [crimes] were no longer viewed as isolated incidents but as components of a 'grand problem'" (p. 285).

During a 40 year period ending in 1990, the prison population in the Netherlands remained more or less constant, while the population of the country slowly increased. One of the reasons for the stability of the prison population is that there was a policy of not placing more than one prisoner per cell. During the 1980s, however, there was increased pressure on the prison system to accommodate greater numbers of people being sentenced to prison. In order to accommodate this pressure and to avoid building more prisons, those convicted were forced to wait to serve their sentences until a cell became vacant. At the height of this practice, approximately 5000 offenders were on a waiting list to serve their sentences (in a country which, then, had a prison population of about 3000). But early in the 1990s, new prisons were built and prisoners were quickly found to fill these new institutions (See also, *Criminological Highlights, 1*(2)#1; *7*(1)#2).

Having acquired a taste for imprisonment, the government was unable to eliminate the problem of overcrowding simply by building more prisons. The population of those detained pending trial was also increasing, and special detention facilities were built. But the policy of holding prisoners in single-prisoner cells was maintained until a number of critical events (two explosions linked to criminal negligence on the part of the owners of the facilities, unease and anti-Muslim sentiments after 11 September 2001, and the killing of a populist political leader in 2002) helped create an atmosphere in which most residents of the country believed that greater prison capacity was required. It appears that in the early 21st century, an increasing portion of the population of the Netherlands thinks that sentences are too lenient and believe that the government is not doing enough to prevent crime. Indeed, crime and security were the principal issues in the 2002 general elections. The populist political leader murdered during the campaign had made much of the fact that 40% of the inmates in Dutch prisons were of non-European origin. Even though a Dutch born environmental activist was convicted of his killing, crime and the need for prisons were linked to immigration policies in residents' minds. Crime became linked to issue of "cultural-security" (p. 293) rather than simply personal security as it had been in earlier decades. Finally, as Garland (See *Criminological Highlights, 3*(5)#4) has noted with respect to the U.K. and U.S., experts in the Netherlands apparently have less influence on crime policy than in the past. No longer, for example, are "correctionalist objectives" prominent in the development of policies related to crime and punishment.

Conclusion. The changes that have occurred in imprisonment policy in the Netherlands appear to have had dramatic effects – shifting the country away from its position as a country with relatively low rates of imprisonment to its current situation of having an imprisonment rate which is almost exactly the same as that of Canada. No single factor accounts for this shift and, of course, it is equally unclear whether these changes are likely to remain.

Reference: Pakes, Francis. (2004) The Politics of Discontent: The Emergence of a New Criminal Justice Discourse in the Netherlands. *The Howard Journal, 43,* 267-283.

Ireland's imprisonment rate increased from about 25 to 81 prisoners per hundred thousand residents between 1970 and 2002 in part as a result of a "successful" prison construction policy.

Imprisonment has increased recently in a number of countries including the U.S. [See *Criminological Highlights, 2*(6)#2, *6*(4)#8], the U.K. [See *Criminological Highlights, 6*(6)#6] and the Netherlands [See *Criminological Highlights,7*(1)#1]. Since the size of the prison population and crime rates appear to be quite independent of one another, understanding the determinants of the size of the prison population is not simple. From the founding of the Irish state in 1922 until the early 1970s, prisons operated in "a marginal area of public policy" (p. 253). In the early 1970s, "the penal system came under increasing strain" (p. 253-4), and more prisons were opened. The use of prison sentences had more than doubled by the early 1990s. At that point, because of the high and unpredictable use of temporary absence passes from prison, "there was a poor relationship between the penalty imposed by the court and the time actually served, and there was considerable judicial and public frustration with what became known as the 'revolving door' syndrome." (p. 254).

The challenge facing the government in the mid-1990s was how it should respond to overcrowded prisons, increased official crime rates, and temporary absence programs that had come into disrepute. In 1994, the government projected that it could set a cap on the prison population of about 2250 prisoners (which would not have necessitated the building of new cells). However, a series of new governments "dispensed with talk of a cap" (p. 254). The number of *additional* prison spaces that were seen as being "needed" escalated from 210 to 840 to 2000. The politicization of imprisonment had begun around the time of the general election in 1997 and coincided with a moral panic related to two high profile killings. Prisons were built and they were filled. By 2002, Ireland's rate of imprisonment (81) was one third higher than it had been in 1990 (60) despite the fact that from the time that the prison building program was in its infancy, officially recorded crime rates had begun to decline at a rate

that was the steepest in the European Union (a drop of 21% between 1995 and 1999).

The increase was accomplished notwithstanding advice from "a number of high-level review groups [that] emphasized the need to rebalance the system away from imprisonment" (p. 258). The largest proportional increase in the prison population was due to those on remand awaiting trial. The opening of a new prison allowed recently legislated changes in bail laws to be fully implemented such that bail could be refused to prevent the commission of offences. As has been shown elsewhere (see *Criminological Highlights, 1*(2)#1*)*, building new prisons tends to cause an increase in prison populations. The portion of prisoners on temporary absence dropped by half as there was no longer a need to release prisoners due to overcrowding. There is also some evidence that sentence lengths increased and that those sentenced to life remained in prison for longer

periods of time.

Conclusion. In the end, the increase in imprisonment in Ireland appears to have occurred because "when law and order issues became politicized… the finances of the state were sufficiently healthy to accommodate the expectations placed on them. During previous law and order crises, the system did not have the capacity to respond… A punitive streak has always existed among Irish legislators, but in the past this was tempered by a cold fiscal climate… This may be a very simple explanation for why penal expansion occurred when it did" (p. 264). More recently, however, there are concerns about the costs and as a result "the bottom line, rather than any desire for penal reform, may force a reconsideration of what constitutes an appropriate scale of imprisonment" (p. 264).

Reference: O'Donnell, Ian. Imprisonment and Penal Policy in Ireland. (2004) *The Howard Journal, 43,* 253-266.

Negative impacts of U.S. imprisonment policies are evident. The public is beginning to understand this. The question is whether political decisions will be made to change crime policies.

U.S. imprisonment rates have increased from about 200 prisoners per hundred thousand residents in 1980 to about 700 in 2002. [Canada's rate is about 100.] This change has "disproportionately affected young African Americans and Latinos" (p. 3). Women also have been increasingly imprisoned. In 1980 women constituted about 4% of the prison population; by 2001 their portion in the prison population had increased to about 6.7%. Research has suggested that politicians led public opinion in the war on crime, convincing people that "tough on crime" policies would reduce crime. The "war on crime" approach, however, is important in part because it appeals to the "ongoing [American] popularity of individualistic understandings of and solutions to complex social problems" (p. 7).

This book presents data showing that high imprisonment is not a result of particularly high crime rates in the U.S. Only America's homicide rates are exceptionally high compared to other western countries. The high homicide rate might be explained as the "catastrophic interaction of… the ubiquity of guns, high rates of economic and racial inequality (especially in the form of concentrated urban poverty), the trade in illegal drugs, and the emergence of a 'code of the streets' that encourages the use of violence" (p. 7). However, "by emphasizing the severity and pervasiveness of 'street crime' and framing the problem in terms of immoral individuals rather than criminogenic… social conditions, [American] politicians effectively redefined the poor – especially the minority poor – as dangerous and undeserving" (p. 8). The media supported rather than examined or challenged this view.

The public does not completely accept this explanation for crime, nor is the public content with imprisonment as a solution to crime. Popular attitudes and beliefs about crime in the U.S., as in Canada [see, *Criminological Highlights, 4*(1)#5], are ambivalent and contradictory: "Even when the get-tough mood was at its peak, most Americans were still eager to see a greater emphasis placed on crime prevention and were willing to support a variety of alternatives to incarceration" (p. 9; See also *Criminological Highlights, 1*(5)#8; *2*(4)#5).

Nevertheless the war on crime continues unabated in the U.S. and its consequences have been profound. Drug arrests and incarceration have increased dramatically during a period when drug use appears to be down (p. 163-165). Although illegal drug use rates appear to be similar across racial groups from 1979-2001, the proportion of drug possession charges involving African Americans is about 3 times their proportion in the population. The other proximate causes of American prison growth are well established: changes in sentencing laws, in particular various forms of mandatory minimum sentences and, in many jurisdictions, the virtual elimination of parole release. All of this is taking place at a time when "the historical evidence… shows no correlation between patterns of incarceration and patterns of crime" (p. 181).

Conclusion. There are viable alternatives to high imprisonment policies. A shift in orientation from a prosecution to a harm reduction approach for drug problems, or a focus on punishments outside of prisons (and a focus on reintegration rather than incarceration) would all appear to be more productive uses of scarce resources. For these to work, however, politicians have to realize that there would be public support for such approaches.

Reference: Beckett, Katherine and Theodore Sasson. *The Politics of Injustice: Crime and Punishment in America (Second edition).* 2004. Sage Publications. (Chapters 1, 8, 9).

The perception that racial profiling by police takes place can have broad effects in the community at large: It can reduce both citizens' assessments of the legitimacy of police actions and citizens' general support of the police.

There is substantial evidence that "racial profiling" takes place in many locations (see *Criminological Highlights* 5(4)#2). In any police questioning of a citizen, it seems likely that the citizen will make attributions on why the stop took place. This paper looks at two questions: What are the consequences that flow from a situation in which a citizen explains police behaviour by attributing it to profiling? What factors shape a citizen's conclusion that profiling takes place?

Using four separate surveys, this paper examines the hypothesis that "people will evaluate police actions using procedural justice criteria" (p. 255: See *Criminological Highlights* 4(4)#1). In the first study, roughly equal numbers of whites, blacks, and Hispanics who had recently been stopped by the police took part in the survey assessing the citizen's willingness to accept the legitimacy of the police actions. The predictors of the assessment of the police actions were the same for both minority and white respondents. Not surprisingly, those who attributed the stop to profiling (on the basis of race, age or sex) were less willing to see the stop as being legitimate. But those "who experience high quality interpersonal treatment [from the police] – politeness, respect, acknowledgement of their rights – are also less likely to feel that they have been profiled" (p. 259).

A second study (of 18-26 year olds in New York) showed that both white and non-white respondents believe that profiling is prevalent and unjustified. For non-white respondents, the belief that they themselves had been racially profiled led to poor ratings of the police. The perception by young people of whether they had received

respectful treatment at the hands of the police shaped both their views of whether they had been profiled and their views of the police. The third survey (of New York residents) showed, not surprisingly, that minorities were more likely than whites to believe that profiling takes place. This survey also demonstrated that for whites and non-whites the quality of the treatment that they felt they could expect from the police affected their view of whether profiling takes place. Finally, a telephone survey of New York residents found, once again, that "support for the police is undermined if the police are believed to engage in profiling" (p. 273).

Conclusion. It would appear that the belief that profiling takes place can undermine the perceived legitimacy of the police. However, these same data suggest that "the police can maintain their legitimacy by exercising their authority fairly" (p. 273). The data do not support the view that the public thinks that profiling is the result of prejudice: only 12% of whites and 33% of nonwhites thought that "when the police do stop minorities more frequently than whites, they are doing it out of prejudice" (p. 275). However, for both white and black respondents,

if a police officer profiles, that officer's behaviour is seen as less legitimate. "When people indicate that they have experienced fairness from the police and/or when they indicate that the police are generally fair in dealing with their community, they are less likely to infer that profiling takes place" (p. 276). Three aspects of procedural fairness – quality of decision making, quality of treatment, and inferences about trustworthiness – were found to significantly affect the inferences people make about their interactions with the police" (p. 277).

Reference: Tyler, Tom R. and Cheryl J. Wakslak. (2004). Profiling and Police Legitimacy: Procedural Justice, Attributions of Motive, and Acceptance of Police Authority. *Criminology, 42,* 253-281.

Those Americans who hold the most punitive attitudes about crime are most likely to see crime as being disproportionately committed by blacks.

Some have suggested that for many middle class white Americans, crime is seen largely as a black phenomenon and have argued that "the support for an increasingly punitive response to crime is grounded in a belief system that constructs crime in terms of race and race in terms of crime…"(p. 360). However, such statements are often made without strong supportive evidence, even though there is some evidence linking fear of crime to the actual or perceived racial composition of a neighbourhood (See *Criminological Highlights*, *1*(1)#7).

This study examines punitive attitudes of a national sample of Americans, focusing on a complex measure of punitiveness (e.g., support for making sentences more severe, making prisoners work on chain gangs, sending repeat juvenile offenders to adult court) and relates this measure of punitiveness to a measure of the extent to which respondents see crime as a disproportionately black phenomenon.

Focusing largely on white respondents, the study shows that those who view crime as disproportionately involving blacks as offenders are more likely to hold punitive attitudes even when the following factors (in addition to demographic factors such as age, education, gender) are statistically held constant: concern about crime, the respondent's estimate of the proportion of crime that is violent, fear of crime, racial prejudice, and whether the respondent lives in the southern U.S.

Each of these other factors also predicts punitive attitudes: for example, those who are politically conservative, those who have high concerns and fear about crime, those who think that much of it involves violence, and those who are prejudiced also are more punitive. However, the overall effect – that those white people who link race to crime (seeing crime as disproportionately caused by blacks) believe that the criminal justice system should be more harsh – holds only for certain types of people. Generally, it is only those from less punitive groups (e.g., from northern states rather than southern states, those not prejudiced rather than more prejudiced) who show the effect. For those already relatively punitive – those more concerned about crime, those who think that a high proportion of crime involves violence, those high in racial prejudice, or from the southern part of the U.S. – there was no added effect of believing that crime was disproportionately caused by blacks.

Conclusion. The "results linking punitive attitudes to the racial typification of crime suggest that there may be a racial overlay to the crime salience issue. Indeed, it is when concern about crime and the perception that crime is violent are "low" that racial typification of crime is a significant predictor of punitiveness. In these contexts a racialized crime threat may be substituting for a generalized threat that is presumed by crime salience" (p. 379). These results may reflect a "modern racism… [that] eschews overt expressions of racial superiority and hostility but instead sponsors a broad 'anti-black affect' that equates blacks with a variety of negative traits, and crime is certainly one of those" (p. 380). For example, "James Q. Wilson's assertion that 'it is not racism that makes whites uneasy about blacks moving into the neighbourhoods… it is fear. Fear of crime, of drugs, of gangs, of violence' … in one short sentence simultaneously disavows white racism while equating blacks with a list of negative attributes" (p. 380).

Reference: Chiricos, Ted, Welch, Kelly, and Gertz, Marc. (2004) Racial Typification of Crime and Support for Punitive Measures. *Criminology, 42*, 359-389.

You get what you pay for: An important predictor of the success of various burglary prevention programs is how much effort went into implementing them.

When decisions are made about how to prevent certain kinds of crime, the natural tendency is to search for programs that have been shown to be effective. In recent years, there has been increasing interest in the cost effectiveness of different programs. "Cost effectiveness" can be measured in two ways. One method would be to make estimates – usually involving some rather arbitrary assumptions about the true costs to the victim – of the cost of victimizations and to measure these costs against the costs of prevention. A second would be to evaluate how many crimes of a particular kind would be averted with an expenditure of a certain amount (e.g., crimes prevented per million dollars spent).

In this paper, the *intensity* of efforts to reduce residential burglaries was assessed. The intensity of a program can be measured in two quite different ways. In the first place, one can look at the amount of funds put into a program (per household, for example). Alternatively, one can look at the "outputs" of the crime prevention efforts – what actually gets done as part of the crime prevention program.

This paper looked at 21 burglary reduction efforts. All were designed to reduce the number of burglaries in a particular geographic area. Two measures of intensity were used: *input intensity* (the total cost of the program including "levered in" costs such as police time, or the time spent by local government employees in publicizing a program) and *output intensity* (the efforts spent actually doing the crime prevention during the relevant time period).

For two of the programs, inputs were impossible to estimate with any precision because of other activities that were implemented simultaneously. For the other 19 programs, there was a clear and positive relationship between the overall intensity with which the prevention programs were implemented and the number of burglaries that were prevented. Generally speaking, it appeared that it is the output intensity – the measure of what actually was done rather than simply the amount that was spent or the equipment or personnel costs of the program – that predicted the reduction in burglary rates.

Though it would appear that the amount of resources actually expended on crime prevention predicts the success of a program in reducing burglaries, the most "intense" programs were not necessarily the most "cost effective." The relationship between "cost effectiveness" (value of burglaries prevented/cost of the scheme) and output intensity was insignificant. This should not be terribly surprising: if one imagines the difference between a minimally expensive program (e.g., getting people to lock their doors) and a very expensive program (providing guards for a neighbourhood), it would not be surprising to find – no matter how costs are calculated – that guards were not "cost effective."

Conclusion. The findings suggest that the benefits from a crime prevention program are likely to be roughly proportionate to the efforts put into crime prevention. There are, it seems, few if any magic potions to rid a neighbourhood of crime with minimal effort.

Reference: Bowers, Kate J., Shane D. Johnson, and Alex Hirschfield. (2004). The Measurement of Crime Prevention Intensity and its Impact on Levels of Crime. *British Journal of Criminology, 44*, 419-440.

The risk that a woman faces of violent victimization from various types of offenders – strangers, non-strangers, and intimate partners – appears to be related in similar ways to her age and family structure as well as to the community in which she lives.

Much research on violent victimization focuses on a single type of violence (e.g., violence carried out by intimate partners or violence carried out by others). Furthermore, most studies examine either the characteristics of the victim, the offender, or the community. In general, it has been found that younger single women who are poor or members of minority groups have a relatively high likelihood of victimization. Serious violence against women appears to be more likely to occur in areas of concentrated poverty, and in areas that have high numbers of unemployed males and high concentrations of households headed by women.

This study used the 1995 U.S. national victimization survey data which were linked to census data such that characteristics of the respondent's neighbourhood could be described. Violent victimization of women is known to have quite different characteristics than violent victimization of men; this study focuses solely on women's victimization by intimates, strangers, and non-strangers.

For all types of violence (stranger, non-stranger, and intimate partner), single women with children were more likely to have been victimized than were single women without children. This latter group was, in turn, more likely to be victimized than were married women. This relationship was found even when household income, race, and the amount of time the woman spent at home were controlled statistically.   However, younger women, poorer women, and women who moved recently, were also at greater risk of being victimized. Again, these results tended to hold across types of victimization.

The research suggested that "the area [neighbourhood or census tract] characteristic with the strongest direct effect on violence against women [was] the percent of households with children headed by women" (p. 341). The size of this effect was similar for stranger, non-stranger and intimate partner violence. Race, poverty, and the percent of households with children that were headed by women were highly inter-correlated, and hence their effects were difficult to disentangle.   Nevertheless, in terms of predicting where violent victimizations of women would occur, it was reasonably clear that the woman's own family structure and the characteristics of the neighbourhood (e.g., the percent disadvantaged or the percent of women-headed households) had independent effects on violent victimizations.

Conclusion. "Family structure and community family composition appear to have more consistent and direct effects on women's violence risk than race, ethnicity or socio-economic status… Family – the most immediate

social context of individuals' lives – represents an important source of either protection from or risk of violence" (p. 349). Furthermore, "different forms of violence are similarly located in communities" (p. 349). One explanation for this strong "family" effect is that "women raising children on their own… have less time and energy to devote to the development of community networks" (p. 350). Such networks can – for the individual and for the community – provide protection [see *Criminological Highlights*, *1*(2)#2, *3*(3)#1].

Reference: Lauritsen, Janet L. and Robin J. Schaum. (2004). The Social Ecology of Violence Against Women. *Criminology, 42*, 323-357.

After four decades of research, one cannot conclude with any confidence that there is a causal relationship between the viewing of violent media and criminal violence.

The research on the effects of the mass media on violence is sometimes confusing. In part, the confusion arises because variables are operationalized in very different ways. Many studies, for example, focus on imitated aggression (e.g., a child imitating what he or she sees on television). In addition, many studies suffer from the possibility that factors other than media exposure might account for an apparent relationship between exposure to violence and subsequent behaviour. Nevertheless, many individuals and groups have glossed over these important details and have concluded that the media – in particular television – *causes* criminal violence.

This paper focuses on all published research on the relationship between violent media viewing and criminal behaviour that met certain basic methodological criteria. One criterion was that the research should focus on measures that are close to what is normally considered to be criminal violence (as opposed to, for examples, measures of aggressive play among children). Another criterion was that the study had to establish a temporal order (media exposure *before* the violence measure) consistent with the hypothesis that media exposure causes violence. Studies also had to attempt to control for spurious factors. A range of different types of studies were examined including the following:

- Cross-sectional studies. For example, one study demonstrated that, controlling for a number of different factors, those cities in the U.S. where TV ratings indicated that people watched the highest number of violent TV shows had the *lowest* crime rates. Another study showed increases in thefts, but not violent crime, were associated with the introduction of TV in the U.S. Other studies are more

problematic. For example, one study attributes the increase in homicides involving white victims in Canada and the U.S. during the 1960s to television by arguing that there was no such increase in South Africa, a country that did not have television at that time. However, various likely competing explanations were not examined in this study.

- Individual level studies. The findings of these studies are mixed: some showing positive, some negative, and some showing no effects. All measured only short term effects of exposure to violent media.

- Longitudinal studies. Some of the best known studies (e.g., those carried out by the Eron/ Lefkowitz/ Huesmann group of researchers) use "peer-nominated aggression" as a measure. These measures include questions like "Who starts a fight over nothing?", "Who pushes and shoves other children?" (p. 113) or "Who does not obey the teacher?" (p. 114) and in some instances *preferences for* rather

than *exposure to* violent television were used to predict aggressive behaviour.

- Another well publicized study published in *Science* in 2002 looked at the number of hours of television viewed (not violent TV *per se*) when the youths were, on average, 14 years old, and related this measure to self-reported (and maternal reported) violence when the youths were, on average, 16 and 22 years old. The results were not completely consistent, but there did seem to be a positive effect of TV viewing on violence. However, the controls appear to be inadequate; hence it is difficult to know whether a "third factor" might be responsible for the relationship. In particular, "Previous research has been very consistent in suggesting that aggressive children prefer violent television so it is very important in any study of this type to control for early tendencies for violent aggression if the outcome to be examined later is violence" (p. 120). This was not done in this study. "A careful reading [of the longitudinal studies] suggests

that evidence for an effect on criminal behaviour is practically non-existent and the evidence for an effect on aggression is very weak at best. If peer-nominated aggression is proximate for violent behaviour as is presumed by many, the evidence suggests, instead, that viewing violent television does not affect it significantly" (p. 120).

Looking at all of the studies, it appears that "for boys, there appears to be no more evidence for a positive effect than there is for a negative effect of media violence on violent behaviour" (p. 123). Of the 23 studies that were relatively sound methodologically that were examined in this paper, seven found positive effects for the TV-violence-leads-to-violent-crime hypothesis, but 3 of these studies showed effects for girls only.

One problem is that violent television is common and real-life serious violence is (thankfully) rare. If the effects are interactive, weak, or indirect (e.g., affecting attitudes or beliefs that may or may not lead to violence later) then there could still be effects that research that has been carried out over the past 40 years of research has not yet uncovered. "It would be hard to deny that television *could* have an effect on [violent] behaviour" (p. 124). But the same could be said for many things that have not been proven to be causes of violence.

Conclusion. It is clear that if there is an effect of exposure to violence in the mass media on criminal violence, that effect is small and almost certainly limited to a subset of the population that is hard to identify. Factors that are known to have an effect on the likelihood of violence in children

(parental supervision, association with violent peers, parental violence, various early childhood experiences) typically show more consistent effects. The question one is left with in a world in which exposure to violent mass media is almost certainly uncontrollable is a simple one: given the inconsistency of the findings in this area, does it not make sense to search for factors that are more important in determining the level of criminal violence and that might be affected by local, provincial, or national policies?

Reference: Savage, Joanne. (2004). Does Viewing Violent Media Really Cause Criminal Violence? A Methodological Review. *Aggression and Violent Behaviour, 10*, 99-128.