Contemporary Comments

Born in the USA - Importing American Fears of Random Crime[*]

> Take a predisposition toward simplicity and anecdote, add unsophisticated reporting, a degenerating peer culture, an overworked news staff, the rapture of sex and celebrities, and – poof! – you've got today's crime journalism.
>
> Krajicek, 1998, p 180.

Introduction

Criminologists generally accept that ideologies of crime control are constructed (and packaged) for both domestic and export markets (Cohen 1972; Israel 1997). Americans, of course, have played a key part in this trade. However, the export of American fears of crime has been a less recognized phenomenon. In this short paper, we argue that contemporary American culture has a tendency to stimulate panics about lesser matters. In following the American lead, not only are Australians scared about problems that may not exist in Australia, but many are scared about problems that barely exist in America. Countries with lesser crime problems, such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom watch American television shows, read American books, see American politicians, and seem all too frequently to develop an American desire to panic about crime.

Fear of Crime in the United States

Of course, politicians need to campaign for votes. In that context, many American, British, Canadian and Australasian politicians have discovered that campaigning against criminals makes good politics (Taylor 1980; Saunders 1982; Pratt & Treacher 1988; Cunneen 1989; Reiner & Cross 1991; Hogg & Brown 1998). After all, who is *in favour* of criminals? Who will stand up to contradict you when you call for three strikes and you're out, even if they don't know what sport you are talking about? Of course, fear-mongering would not work unless there was already some support for harsh social policies. But where does such support come from? We know that a country's leadership and media play an important role in the creation and sustenance of attitudes. One of the things criminologists have discovered in the United States is that when politicians and the media create crime scares, people tell pollsters that they are highly concerned with crime. Yet, during the quiet years, when the media is busy with other things, people rate crime far down on their list of concerns. This creates an interesting circle – people seem to be highly concerned with crime only when the media and politicians tell them that they should be highly concerned with crime. This is particularly salient in North America, where the media are exceptionally crime oriented. Crime remains the top topic on local television news broadcasts (Moore 1999), and some studies have shown that crime consumes as much as 50 per cent of all local television news, and about 25 per cent of newspaper coverage (Ericson et al 1987).

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* A substantially different version of this paper was given as the Annual Justice Studies Oration in Adelaide, October, 1999, and published in *The Age* (Schwartz 1999).

For many years the dominant image of the criminal in the West has been the unpredictable stranger, who probably targets women (Barak 1994). What has changed more recently, Joel Best (1999) argues, is that Americans are becoming more and more convinced that crime is random. What many contemporary panics have in common is a sense of melodrama. A scare starts with the media discovery of a totally innocent victim who had suffered badly in a sudden unexplained stranger attack. The attack seemed random. Thus, the connection is made: all similar persons might be vulnerable to similar unprovoked attacks.

Best suggests that this fixation on 'random violence' both distorts understanding of crime and makes it harder for American governments to address crime problems. For example, America is currently panicked over the notion that shooting sprees are possible in any of its schools at any time. Hundreds of millions of dollars are being spent on expensive school security (Bayles 1999). With security guards, surveillance cameras, mandatory identity cards on neck cords, metal detectors, and a ban on book bags not made of clear plastic, American schools are looking more like prisons than many minimum-security prisons. Even schools that rarely have the money to fix leaking roofs or boilers, purchase library books, or hire a sufficient number of trained teachers seem to have the money for security guards. Yet, when the United States Department of Education (1997) was ordered to survey a representative sample of 1,234 public schools, they did not find a single report of a murder in a school. Rapes and fights with a weapon were extremely rare. With 64 million children, and more than 110,000 schools, it may sound callous to say that *only* six or seven out of these tens of thousands have been under attack. However, should we be putting this much money and effort into schools when there is so little actual risk in any individual case? In a country where the National Adult Literacy Survey ranked 23 per cent of adult Americans functionally illiterate, and where the school dropout rate remains at 29 per cent, some of this education money might be better spent on education.

One of the bigger campaigns of the 1980s in the United States concerned missing and exploited children. The media took up claims that thousands of children were kidnapped and missing, and everyone joined in. Such reputable sources as *Time* magazine (1996: 57) fairly recently reported that more than 800,000 children are reported missing each year in the United States. The amount of media attention to such claims was extraordinary (Best 1999). In the 1980s, many local television news broadcasts included a daily or weekly picture of a missing child. Such pictures were ubiquitous on milk cartons and junk mail wrappers. The end result was that 75 per cent of America's parents now claim that they live in fear that a stranger might kidnap their child.

The problem is that these children were not for the most part kidnapped and missing. The overwhelming majority were children thrown out of their home ('throwaways') or runaways, often leaving a physically or sexually abusive household. Others were in the custody of one of their parents, possibly in violation of a court order. Eliminating runaways, throwaways, and those who are discovered within hours, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has always maintained that there were no more than 200 to 300 open cases a year of missing children out of a total of 64 million children.

Why, then, the terrible fear? One reason is the media emphasis. It was random, it could happen to anyone. Parents across the country began to consider tattooing their children with identification marks or numbers, deep pressure was put on the government to do something, and Congress devoted resources to setting up a Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Of course, since there were few missing children, it became essential to expand the centre's mandate to deal with exploited children, so that the newly hired bureaucrats could keep their jobs.

Similar exaggerated fears exist for adults. There have been thousands of stories in the United States about workplace violence, with the national media constantly talking about co-workers or former co-workers with sub-machine guns invading the workplace. Yet, the chance of being hurt by a co-worker in the United States are rather significantly less than the chance of being hit by lightning – less than one in two million. Out of 121 million working people in the United States, about 1000 are killed each year on the job, and a disproportionate number of these are police officers and taxi drivers (Glassner 1999).

Senseless violence as a motif has very broad appeal, to the point where it has become a central theme in contemporary American culture. However, crime is *not* random. It is patterned (Best 1999). The way that people become offenders is patterned, and the way that people become victims is patterned both in the United States and in Australia (Hogg & Brown 1998). Some people, with certain kinds of backgrounds, are more likely to become street criminals. Other people, with certain kinds of backgrounds, are more likely to become the victims of street criminals. To believe in the idea that crime is random, one must ignore thousands of research studies saying exactly the opposite.

The Trade in Fear

Needless to say, the media is part of the problem (Hogg & Brown 1998). The local television news in big cities does not report mundane daily violence as much as the spectacular, the extraordinary, the shocking or the outrageous. Such extra-ordinary events are portrayed as representative or typical examples of modern violence (Roshier 1973; Chibnall 1977; Ditton & Duffy 1983; Schlesinger & Tumber 1994; Chermak 1995), leading to Best's concern that the public sees the melodramatic good media story as a normal and typical event.

This focus serves other functions, such as enabling politicians on all sides to ignore problems of race and class. When political elites can talk about criminals, they are excused from other awkward topics. Barry Glassner (1999) argues that folk devils further allow us to take our mind off problems we do not wish to face, such as gun proliferation, illiteracy, disease and hunger. Kenneth Thompson (1998) makes much the same point for the United Kingdom. He argues that 'politicians may find it easier to focus attention on moral issues than to come up with solutions to some of the more intractable problems, such as lack of education and skills, unemployment, housing conditions, crime, and poverty' (1998:88). His basic argument is that by attacking the morals of other groups, politicians get to argue that the blame for society's problems lies with bad parents and poor teachers. Australians have witnessed similar attempts to shift attention (Saunders 1982; Cunneen 1989; Hogg & Brown 1998) from such basic problems. One example might be the 1999 Victorian election campaign, which seemed to revolve around the redistribution of resources – cut spending on medical services; cut spending on education; cut spending on welfare services. At the same time, there were calls to increase spending on locking up badly educated poor children with troubled mental and psychological health.

Conclusion

Why is all of this important? In an excellent analysis in England, Reiner (1997) argues that a major result of media scares and public fears was that fearful people are more easily manipulated and controlled. They may even welcome political repression if it relieves their own insecurities. When these insecurities are not real, however, but are manufactured, there are important questions to ask about our future. If people have first hand experience with

violence and crime, that will of course colour their views. But, in both the United States and Australia, the overwhelming majority of people have no experience at all of stranger violence (Chermak 1995; Chilvers 1999). Much of what they know comes from the evening news and political rhetoric (Clear 1994; Weatherburn et al 1996; Maguire et al 1999).

The key is what we do with our national resources. There are only so many dollars available to throw at social problems. If we are going to waste millions of dollars and person-hours every year on largely mythical hazards, then we have fewer dollars and less time to spend on real dangers. If we insist that enormous policing efforts be made to eliminate road rage, if we fill up our prison cells with people who pose little or no danger to others, if we spend enormous amounts of money to protect youth from dangers that few of them will ever face, then what is left for other problems?

At least in America, the prominent question is what to do with hunger, dilapidated schools, gun proliferation and deficient health care for much of the population. This is a country with 12 million children undernourished or malnourished, and where a similar number are without health insurance (United States Bureau of the Census, 1997). Should Americans spend their time chasing after folk devils, or devote time and money to dealing with the most difficult problems they have? If it is children that Americans care about, is it security guards they need, or better education and health?

Although a few American commentators have raised these questions, perhaps Australians should be asking similar questions of politicians and policy makers. The issue is to attempt to spend limited resources in the wisest ways possible. In the United States, Marc Reidel (1999) recently argued that academics, legislators and policy makers have a responsibility to examine social science research before enacting legislation. His concern was that people who watched news broadcasts might think that stranger violence was America's greatest problem, when in fact it was not commonplace at all. We know that many Australians are also troubled by the dangers of random violence from unpredictable strangers (Lupton 1999). We would suggest that Australian academics, politicians and policy makers should be equally concerned to be sure that parliamentarians and policymakers are devoting their attention to the most pressing problems, rather than to expanding what Braithwaite and Barker termed the 'internationalization of folk devils' (1978:27).

Martin D. Schwartz

Visiting Scholar, Department of Criminology, University of Melbourne. Presidential Research Scholar and Professor of Sociology, Ohio University

Mark Israel

Senior Lecturer, School of Law, Flinders University of South Australia

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