Media Representations of Criminal Behaviour

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The media has a strong tendency to sensationalize criminal behaviour, particularly violent crime and crimes committed by youth. In Canada, violent crime is over-represented. According to the Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime (CRCVC), “while homicide makes up less than 1% of crimes committed in Canada, it garners a significant amount of media coverage of crime” (n.d., “Focus”). This is exacerbated by cultural developments such as the “twenty-four-hour” news cycle in the United States (Moriearty, 2010, p. 851) and in Canada (CRCVC, n.d.). News reports often create harmful associations between criminality and particular social groups or activities. This is referred to as “moral panic,” which is “an exaggerated response to a type of behaviour that is seen as a social problem – the term indicates an over-reaction on the part of the media and/or other social institutions” (Marsh & Melville, 2014, p. 39). Moral panics often focus on deviant behaviour in youth and emphasize individual rather than societal causes such as economic inequality. Greer argued that youth are depicted as “a problem to be solved” and as a consequence “proposed solutions tend to involve more punishment and control than wider change” (2008, para. 4).

The popular perception of rising crime rates in Canadian society is not supported by the evidence. A report published by the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University concluded that crime has declined over the past two decades such that the “crime rate is about half of what it was at its height in 1991” (Roeder, Eisen, & Bowling, 2015, p. 3). This trend of declining crime rates is similar in Canada. Statistics Canada “the crime rate increased steadily” between 1962 and 1991 but has since declined significantly. While this decline “is most notable for property crime…it is also the case for violent crime and other Criminal Code offences” (2015, para. 7). The following chart illustrates how as of 2013 the police-reported crime rate was
at its lowest point since 1969:

(Statistics Canada, 2014).

Despite these developments, the public typically inflates current crime rates. According to Jung, Ahn-Redding and Allison (2014), research studies that seek to determine the accuracy of public estimates of crime have “consistently found that the public tends to give estimates well above reported trends and numbers” (p. 344).


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