

MEDIA INFLUENCE ON ATTITUDES TOWARD GUNS AND GUN CONTROL

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ABSTRACT: *This study employs the 1995 National Opinion Survey of Crime and Justice to examine the effect that media consumption (hours of television viewing per week, regular viewing of crime drama, and primary source of crime news) has on attitudes towards guns and gun control. Logistic regression results indicate that regular viewers of crime shows are more likely to oppose gun control and believe that firearms prevent crime. Respondents who receive their primary crime news from the print media are more likely to disagree with making it easier to conceal firearms. The author suggests that violent depiction of crime on television may influence viewers' attitudes toward guns and gun control.*

INTRODUCTION

Gun control is an ideological issue that is hotly debated. While a number of studies examine firearms ownership and gun control attitudes, there are no investigations into the influence of the media in these matters. This oversight is surprising given that the media molds public attitudes toward crime and justice (Surette, 1998). As a result, the purpose of this paper is to examine whether media consumption affects attitudes toward gun control.

Firearms ownership is widespread in the United States. Approximately 38% of all American households contain a gun and 23% have a handgun (Smith, 1999). Many citizens view gun ownership as a fundamental right. However, there is strong support for some form of gun regulation (Adams, 1996; Blendon, Young & Hemenway, 1996; Carter, 1997; Kauder, 1993; Kleck, 1991; Kleck, 1997; Maguire & Pastore, 2001; Smith, 1980; Smith, 1999; Tyler & Lavrakas, 1983; Wright, 1981; Wright, 1988). A recent survey indicates that 62% of Americans favor stricter gun control, while 22% prefer less strict gun control (Maguire & Pastore, 2001). Nevertheless, most people oppose a ban on private ownership of handguns (Carter, 1997; Smith, 1999).

The literature reveals that gun ownership and gender are important indicators of gun control attitudes. Firearms ownership routinely

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emerges as the most important factor in gun control opposition (Adams, 1996; Carter, 1997; Kleck, 1996; Smith, 1999). A recent survey indicates that 72% of females, compared to 51% of males, favor stricter gun control (Maguire & Pastore, 2001). Other analyses suggest that women are more likely to support gun control measures (Adams, 1996; Carter, 1997; Smith, 1999). However, it may be that the differences between males and females are mediated by gun ownership. For instance, Kleck (1996) controls for gun ownership and finds that gender is not related to one's stance on gun control. He speculates that women are more likely to be pro-gun control because they are less likely to own a gun or hunt. Nevertheless, Smith (1999) contends that men and women have deeply varied opinions about firearms and their regulation for three reasons. First, women generally are opposed to violence and the use of force. Second, women are much less likely to own and use guns. Finally, women are more concerned about guns and, thus, favor their regulation.

The impact of race upon attitudes toward gun control is unclear. A recent survey reveals that 78% of African Americans favor stricter gun control compared to 59% of Whites (Maguire & Pastore, 2001). However, there are mixed findings about the effects of race on gun control attitudes. Some research reveals that African Americans are more likely to support gun control measures (Adams, 1996; Kleck, 1996). For instance, Kleck (1996) conjectures that African Americans are more likely to support gun permits because they are responding to a rise in crime rates (Kleck, 1996). However, other research reveals that race is not an important indicator of gun control attitudes (McClain, 1983; Smith, 1999).

Studies examining the relationship between fear of crime and gun control attitudes yield mixed results. Some research indicates that fear of crime is not related to gun control attitudes (Adams, 1996; Kleck, 1996). However, other studies reveal that fear of crime or a perceived increase in crime is directly related to pro-gun control attitudes (Carter, 1997; Heath, Weeks & Murphy, 1997; Smith, 1980; Smith, 1999; Stinchcombe et al., 1980). Respondents who are afraid to walk in their own neighborhoods favor gun control restrictions in one report (Carter, 1997), but similar results do not materialize in another similar investigation (Smith, 1999).

Some research examines the relationship between police and gun control attitudes. Confidence in the police to prevent, protect, and solve crimes is related to pro-gun control attitudes (Adams, 1996), but this support appears to be stronger in cities where there are more police officers (Kleck, 1996). Finally, Smith (1999) finds that individuals whom the police ticket for moving violations are more likely to oppose

gun control, while individuals who have never been arrested support more firearm regulation.

Most public knowledge about crime and justice issues is derived from the mass media (Roberts & Doob, 1990; Surette, 1998). However, media presentations may provide consumers with incorrect beliefs about crime and justice (Roberts & Doob, 1990). The media often present distorted or erroneous images of crime and justice (Garofalo, 1981; Marsh, 1991; Pandiani, 1978; Sheley, 1985; Sheley & Ashkins, 1981; Tuchman, 1978). As a result, the media may be an important source of false beliefs towards crime (Fishman, 1978; Kappeler, Blumberg & Potter, 1993). Similarly, it is argued that public knowledge about gun control is limited (Kleck, 1996). Gun control attitudes may be influenced by media exposure. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to examine the influence of media consumption on attitudes toward gun control.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Cultivation theory is one approach used to examine the ability of the media to shape perceptions and mold attitudes. The basic premise of cultivation theory is that persistent long-term exposure to television content has small, but measurable, effects on the perceptual worlds of audience members. The emphasis is placed on the effects of television viewing on attitudes rather than the behavior of viewers. The belief is that the medium creates a negative social reality or a "mean world view" for consumers. Gerbner and associates (1980) report that individuals who watch a large amount of television are more likely to feel a greater threat from crime, believe crime is more prevalent than statistics indicate, and take more precautions against crime. They find that crime portrayed on television is significantly more violent, random, and dangerous than crime in the "real" world. The researchers argue that viewers internalize these images and develop a "mean world view" or a scary image of reality. This view is characterized by "mistrust, cynicism, alienation, and perceptions of higher than average levels of threat of crime in society" (Surette, 1990, p. 8).

Cultivation theory is especially useful to the present study. Audience members may be exposed to a number of violent images, which may affect their perception of the level of danger. Viewers may believe that guns are a viable alternative to the danger reflected in television portrayals of crime. On television, both villains and heroes employ guns to achieve their desired goals. More often than not, heroes prevail and villains are defeated. This depiction may lead viewers to believe that guns are necessary for protection and justice. As a result, the pre-

sent study examines whether heavy television or crime show viewers are influenced by media consumption.

Sample

The data are derived from the 1995 National Opinion Survey on Crime and Justice (NOSCJ). The NOSCJ is a random telephone survey of adults ($n = 1,005$) who reside in the continental United States. The project, designed and commissioned by the Criminal Justice Center's Survey Research Program at Sam Houston State University, was administered by the staff at the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University. The survey is cross-sectional and samples are stratified to all U.S. counties in proportion to each county's share of telephone households in the target area. The survey employed random digit dialing (CATI) and achieved a 62% response rate. Interested readers can consult Sims (1995) for further details.

The purpose of the NOSCJ is to provide knowledge about American attitudes toward crime and justice issues, which may lead to more informed criminal justice policy and practice. The survey examines a number of issues, such as attitudes toward the courts, police, neighborhood problems, juvenile gangs, drug laws, death penalty, gun control, prisons, and worries about crime. In addition to basic demographic characteristics, NOSCJ captures information about hours of television viewing, crime show viewing, and source of crime news.

The NOSCJ has provided policy-makers with an understanding of public attitudes. However, there are no documented studies that employ data from the NOSCJ to examine cultivation theory or media effects. As a result, the purpose of this study is to conduct a secondary analysis of the NOSCJ data to examine the influence of media consumption on attitudes toward guns and control. The National Archive of Criminal Justice Data, through the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, provided the data (Flanagan & Longmire, 1995).

Gun Control Attitudes

Three survey measures tap respondent attitudes toward gun control. These items included the following questions:

- Armed citizens are the best defense against criminals.
- It should be easier for law-abiding citizens to carry concealed handguns.
- In general, do you feel that the laws covering the sale of firearms should be made more strict, less strict, or kept as they are now?

The available responses for the first two statements are “strongly agree,” “agree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree.” Answers were collapsed to form a dichotomy reflecting either agreement (coded as zero) or disagreement (coded as one) with the question. Respondents who answered “neither agree nor disagree” were excluded from the analysis. This procedure resulted in the exclusion of 81 cases from the “armed being the best defense” item and 77 cases from the concealed handgun question.

Mass Media Indicators

The mass media variables include crime show viewing, television hours, and crime news source. Crime show viewing was tapped by the question “Are you are a regular viewer of television programs that deal with crime or criminal justice issues, such as COPS, Real Stories of the Highway Patrol, Justice Files, or America’s Most Wanted?” Regular viewers were assigned a score of zero while non-regular viewers received a value of one. Respondents were also asked about the number of hours they spent watching television every week. Finally, subjects identified their primary source of crime news as television, newspaper, radio, and other sources (such as friends, neighbors, co-workers, and police officers). These categories were dummy-coded with television as the reference category.

Control Variables

A number of variables are employed as controls to account for possible mediating effects. They include such indicators as race, gender, age, income, residence, education, marital status, fear of crime, perception of police effectiveness, party identification, gun ownership, and perceived neighborhood problems. According to Smith (1999), prior research shows that these variables may influence gun control attitudes. For example, some studies suggest that respondents from a rural background are more likely to oppose gun control, while non-Republicans are more likely to favor gun control measures. In addition, past analyses have found that older Americans are more likely to oppose gun control measures. However, the influence of marital status on gun control attitudes is mixed (Adams, 1996).

Scales were created to measure attitudes toward neighborhood problems, fear of crime, and perception of police effectiveness. Respondents were asked to rate the seriousness of a number of issues in their neighborhood. The items included trash and litter, loose dogs, unsupervised youth, graffiti, vacant houses, noise, people who are drunk or high, and abandoned cars. Scores range from eight to 32 ($n = 979$).

Lower scores indicate high levels of neighborhood problems, whereas higher scores reflect low levels of problems in the neighborhood. Reliability analysis yields an alpha of .80, which means the scale is consistent.

Fear of crime consists of seven items that reflect concern about a variety of offenses. Respondents were asked if they worried about sexual assault; car-jacking; getting mugged; getting beaten up, knifed or shot; getting murdered; being burglarized while at home; and being burglarized while no one is at home. Each question had four possible responses ("very frequently," "somewhat frequently," "seldom," and "never"). Responses to the seven items were added together to establish a fear of crime index that ranges from seven (high worry) to 28 (low worry). Reliability analysis produced an alpha of .86, indicating the scale is highly consistent.

Police effectiveness was measured by using seven items that examine the respondents' attitudes towards police. Three questions addressed respondent confidence in police ability to protect, solve, and prevent crime. Each question had four possible responses ranging from "great deal," "some," "little," to "none at all." Three questions assessed police promptness, friendliness, and fairness. The responses included ratings of "very high," "high," "average," "low," and "very low." The last two categories ("low" and "very low") were combined into a single category for scaling purposes. The final question asked respondents if they believed police use of force was a problem in their community. Possible responses included "serious problem," "somewhat of a problem," "minor problem," and "not a problem at all" (use of force is reverse coded). The seven items were added together to form an index of perceived police effectiveness that ranges from seven to 28. Lower scores indicate positive appraisals of police effectiveness, while higher scores reflect negative assessments. An alpha coefficient of .83 revealed acceptable scalability.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents a descriptive analysis of the variables employed in this study. The media variables are of particular interest. The data show that 42.5% of the respondents are regular viewers of crime drama. Television is the primary crime news source (66%), as opposed to newspapers (20%), radio (7.1%) and other (5.2%). In addition, 32.6% of the sample agree that it should be easier to carry concealed weapons, while 33.7% feel that being armed is the best defense against criminals. Finally, 38.7% of the study group believes that firearms sales laws should be relaxed.

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics, Non-Scaled Variables

Variable	Concealed Firearms		Defense		Laws Less Restrictive	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Race:						
Black	73	7.9	69	7.5	76	7.8
White	755	81.4	758	82.0	786	81.1
Other	100	10.7	97	10.5	107	11.1
Sex:						
Male	492	53.0	484	52.4	501	51.7
Female	436	47.0	440	47.6	468	48.3
Income:						
\$60,000 or More	184	22.0	190	22.8	196	22.3
\$30,000 – \$59,999	317	37.7	309	37.0	325	37.1
\$15,000 – \$29,999	217	25.8	213	25.5	229	26.1
\$14,999 or Less	122	14.5	123	14.7	127	14.5
Education:						
College	541	58.7	531	58.0	564	58.9
No College	380	41.3	385	42.0	394	41.1
Residence:						
Rural	339	36.5	343	37.1	357	36.8
Urban	589	63.5	581	62.9	612	63.2
Marital Status:						
Married	501	54.0	496	53.7	521	53.8
Not Married	427	46.0	428	46.3	448	46.2
Political Affiliation:						
Republican	282	30.4	284	30.7	296	30.5
Not Republican	646	69.6	640	69.3	673	69.5
Gun Owner:						
Yes	405	43.6	401	43.4	417	43.0
No	523	56.4	523	56.6	552	57.0
Regular Crime Show Viewer:						
Yes	400	43.3	392	42.6	406	42.1
No	524	56.7	528	57.4	559	57.9
Source of Crime News:						
Television	614	66.2	607	65.7	644	66.5
Newspaper	189	20.4	188	20.3	192	19.8
Radio	64	6.8	62	6.7	68	7.0
Other	61	6.6	71	7.6	65	6.7

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the scaled variables. The results are consistent across the dependent variables. Respondents average approximately 15 hours of television viewing per week. They are also less likely to be fearful of crime and more likely to rate the police positively. Finally, respondents are more likely to report there are few problems in their neighborhoods.

TABLE 2
Descriptive Statistics for Scale Variables

Scales	Concealed Firearms	Defense	Laws Less Restrictive
Hours Watching Television:			
Mean	15.14	14.93	14.78
Standard Deviation	11.66	11.54	11.40
Minimum	1.00	1.00	1.00
Maximum	100.00	100.00	100.00
Fear of Crime:			
Mean	21.34	21.37	21.27
Standard Deviation	4.95	4.99	4.97
Minimum	7.00	7.00	7.00
Maximum	28.00	28.00	28.00
Police Effectiveness:			
Mean	14.93	14.83	14.85
Standard Deviation	4.44	4.43	4.42
Minimum	7.00	7.00	7.00
Maximum	28.00	28.00	28.00
Neighborhood Problems:			
Mean	28.17	28.23	28.29
Standard Deviation	4.41	4.34	4.39
Minimum	8.00	8.00	8.00
Maximum	32.00	32.00	32.00

Two media variables emerge in Table 3 as significant predictors of one's position on carrying concealed weapons. Crime drama viewers and respondents who rely upon television as their main source of crime news favor eased restrictions on carrying concealed guns. In addition, females and wealthier respondents are not inclined to support fewer restrictions on carrying concealed guns. On the other hand, gun owners, Republicans, and respondents who rate police effectiveness lower are more likely to agree that it should be easier to carry concealed guns.

Only one of the three media variables is significantly related to the belief that being armed is the best defense against criminals. Crime-drama viewers are more likely to think that being armed is advantageous. The source of crime news and hours of television viewing are not related to this belief. Furthermore, respondents who own guns, report low incomes, and harbor a negative impression of the police are more likely to endorse this position. Female, black, and college-educated respondents tend to believe that being armed is not the best defense against the criminal element.

Crime drama viewers and television news consumers are more likely to oppose gun control efforts. In addition, gun owners, Republicans, and respondents who fear crime are more likely to oppose restric-

TABLE 3
Logistic Regression Models

Variable	Concealed Firearms			Defense			Laws Less Restrictive		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	Exp(β)	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	Exp(β)	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	Exp(β)
Black	.378	.325	.685	.665	.354	.514*	.624	.327	.535*
Female	.418	.171	.658*	.722	.175	.486*	.739	.166	.478*
Age	.001	.005	.999	.002	.005	1.002	.002	.004	1.002
Income \$60,000 or More	.464	.220	.628*	.174	.218	.841	.527	.213	.590*
Income \$15,000–\$29,999	.020	.218	1.020	.056	.284	1.057	.103	.212	.903
Income \$14,999 or Less	.020	.289	.907	.611	.284	1.842*	.091	.278	1.014
College	.032	.176	1.034	.263	.176	.769	.043	.170	.958
Rural	.042	.174	1.042	.170	.176	1.185	.290	.169	1.336
Married	.008	.177	1.023	.113	.180	.893	.105	.170	.901
Republican	.535	.174	1.701*	.251	.177	1.285	.496	.170	1.642*
Gun Owner	1.094	.175	2.986*	1.238	.179	3.485*	1.081	.169	2.928*
Regular Crime Show Viewer	.277	.172	1.319	.492	.175	1.635*	.395	.169	1.484*
News Source Newspaper	.442	.214	.642*	.015	.943	1.015	.048	.202	.953
News Source Radio	.449	.305	1.567	.184	.327	1.202	.555	.309	1.741
News Source Other	.539	.375	1.714	.322	.378	1.379	.073	.377	.930
Hours of Television	.004	.007	.996	.004	.008	1.014	.005	.007	1.051
Fear of Crime	.002	.017	1.002	.018	.018	.992	.047	.018	.954*
Neighborhood Problems	.019	.020	1.019	.018	.021	.992	.010	.020	1.091
Police Effectiveness	.044	.220	.957*	.050	.019	.951*	.019	.019	.980
Cox and Snell R^2		.124			.153			.155	
Nagelkerke R^2		.171			.210			.209	
Sample Size		786			780			819	

* $p < .05$

tive laws against guns. Similarly, participants who believe the police are ineffective also oppose gun regulation.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with cultivation theory, crime show viewing influences attitudes toward guns and gun control. Viewers are more likely to disagree with gun control and agree that being armed is the best defense against criminals. Crime drama is rife with violent images and there are mixed messages about the use of firearms. For instance, villains or criminals employ firearms to terrorize and intimidate “innocent” victims. Conversely, crime fighters use guns to foil crime and to defend justice. However, in reality, police officers rarely deploy firearms (Cox, 1996). Furthermore, the portrayal of guns on television may desensitize heavy viewers. In other words, heavy viewers may become so accustomed to the use of guns that gun control measures may seem unnecessary or implausible in a violent society. Viewers may believe that gun control measures will not restrict the use of guns and not be effective in

reducing crime or violence. In essence, the amount of violence on television, specifically crime dramas, may “cultivate” attitudes towards gun use and gun control measures.

Individuals who receive their primary crime news from the print media, as opposed to television, are more likely to disagree that it should be easier to carry concealed firearms. Although limited, newspapers provide more detailed information than television accounts of crime. Newspaper coverage of crime is more informed and presents a more balanced picture of crime and criminal events (Chermak, 1995). As a result, newspaper readers may be more informed about the reality of gun violence, which may produce anti-gun attitudes. However, there is heated debate about the nature and reality of gun violence (Alba, Kleck, & Messner, 1995; Hemenway, Kleck, & Smith, 1997). Some researchers argue that concealment laws deter crime and actually protect innocent victims (Kleck, 1997; Kleck, 1999; Kleck & Gertz, 1998; Kleck & Patterson, 1993; Lott, 1998; Southwick, 2000). Others believe that gun ownership is a cause, as well as a consequence, of violence (Clarke, 2000; Cook & Ludwig, 2000; Hemenway & Azrael, 2000; Ledwig, 2000; Zimring & Hawkins, 1997). Although both sides in this debate make important points for their positions, it may be that the print media are more likely to provide greater coverage of the detrimental effects of firearms as opposed to the deterrent and defensive benefits of gun ownership (Lott, 1998).

Radio listeners, as opposed to television viewers, are more likely to favor less restrictive firearms laws. This finding is inconsistent with cultivation theory which suggests that prolonged exposure to television will distort consumer conceptions of the world. However, there is a lack of information regarding the nature and content of radio crime news. Nevertheless, some research reveals that radio presentation of crime news is similar to television in that it is short-term, visceral, and emotional (Surette, 1998). Radio broadcasts may conjure images of crime that delve into the greatest and most profound fears of listeners, whereas television visually presents images for viewers to evaluate.

A few limitations surrounding the measures of media consumption need airing. First, the data do not reveal what type of crime dramas the respondents watch. Crime dramas may concentrate on different aspects of the criminal justice system. For example, these shows may focus on crime scene investigators, the police, the courts, private investigators, lawyers, and sometimes even the criminals. In addition, some dramas are more realistic, while others routinely portray violence, and consistently misinform viewers about the nature of the criminal justice system and criminality. It would be prudent to know which dramas the respondents are viewing. Second, the current study assumes that only the pri-

mary source of crime news affects perceptions. It would be naive to suggest that respondents are immune to other sources, such as such as films and personal experiences. Third, there are weaknesses associated with using just three measures of gun control. Attitudes toward gun control are complex and may require more specific or direct questions. Finally, the relationship between gun attitudes and media consumption may be more complex than inferred in this project. Respondents with pro-gun attitudes may be attracted to crime dramas that portray the use of firearms which, in turn, strengthens or reaffirms these pro-gun attitudes.

CONCLUSION

Despite various limitations, the current results reveal that media consumption habits affect beliefs about guns and gun control measures. Future research should focus on unraveling the mechanisms which underlie this relationship. A more extensive survey with detailed questions on both gun control attitudes and media consumption could illuminate these issues. In addition, it may be useful to conduct a content analysis on the nature and scope of gun use on television or film. Both criminals and crime fighters often deploy guns in the most violent manner. Future research should examine the content of crime dramas to explain this "dual" relationship between the use of guns for protection and illegal activity.

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