

**Mean World Syndrome and the Perception of Crime in Chicago**

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MATX 603: Mass Media

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March 8, 2020

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Cultivation theory, which was developed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross, is meant to explain the effects on television watching and how it affects (or explains) what viewers perceive, how it develops attitudes, and shapes values. A number of studies and critical analyses have been done since Gerbner and Gross created their theory. Cultivation theory suggests that prolonged exposure to television violence induces fear of crime, a symptom of what he termed the mean world syndrome. Mean world syndrome, which is grounded in Gerbner's cultivation theory, argues that viewers exposed to violence-related content that experience increased fear, anxiety, pessimism, and alertness in response to perceived threats. This is because viewers' consumption of television has the power to directly influence and inform their attitudes, values, and views about the world (Potter, 2014).

When Gerbner and Gross began their cultivation theory and research, there were only three television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC). Now, television consumers are inundated with content from five major networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, CW), pay cable networks like HBO and Showtime, cable channels such as USA, TNT, and TBS, and, most recently, streaming networks such as Hulu, Amazon, and Netflix.

In addition, with more available television formats comes the accessibility of being able to focus only on preferred genres. For example, the SYFI network caters to people who enjoy watching science fiction and superhero shows. The ID Network and Oxygen focus on crime documentaries, and MTV has become less and less about music and more about reality television. Viewers also have access to DVR technology so that they can watch their favorite programs at their leisure. And, while networks compete for viewers, with DVR technology,

consumers can record multiple shows at the same time, therefore, they are able to create their own television playlists, so to speak, about their taste in television shows.

Gerbner wrote in 1998 that television differs from other media in its concentrated mass production of a cohesive set of images and messages generated for total audiences, and in its use by most viewers in a relatively non-selective, almost ritualistic way (Gerbner, 1998)

The most popular version of the cultivation hypothesis is that those who spend more time watching TV are more likely to perceive the real world in ways that represent the world's most famous and repeated fictional television messages (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). The 2014 study *Disaster Media Coverage and Psychological Outcomes: Descriptive Findings in the Extant Research* found that 36 studies “met the criteria” and corroborated Gerbner's findings that moderate to heavy consumption of material related to violence on television has increased depression, fear, anxiety, rage, pessimism, post-traumatic stress and drug use (Pfefferbaum, et al, 2014).

Although cultivation theory is more widely known for measuring attitudes about violence, other theorists have used it to study racism, alienation, and gender stereotypes (Nabi & Sullivan, 2001).

It is the purpose of this essay to attempt to correlate the perception of violence in Chicago and the recent focus by television networks, in particular NBC and Showtime, in the creation and airing of crime dramas based in the city (*Chicago PD*, *Chicago Med*, *Chicago Fire*, *Chicago Justice*, and *The Chi*). Unlike other studies, this project will focus on the insights of violence and crime one major American city.

**Keywords:**

Cultivation theory; mean world syndrome; crime rates; TV violence; police procedural dramas; perception; attitudes, values, cultivation analysis.

## **Literature Review**

Mean world syndrome is the perception by heavy television viewers that the world is more dangerous than it actually is (Hanson, 2017). In addition, heavy television viewers are more likely to: overestimate chance of experiencing violence; believe their neighborhood is unsafe; say fear of crime is a serious personal problem; and assume the crime rate is rising (Hanson, 2017). When Gerbner testified before a U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee in 1981, he stated that violent themes in television had created a new phenomenon. "Fearful people are more vulnerable, easier to manipulate and influence" (Jamieson & Romer, 2014).

One survey question found that when heavy viewers were asked if they were "afraid to walk alone at night in their neighborhood," they were more likely to reply yes in comparison to the light viewers (Jamieson & Romer, 2014). Gerbner also coined the term "mean world index" (Gerbner, et al, 1980), which has three major characteristics in the terms of long-time exposure to television violence. The three characteristics are: most people are just looking out for themselves; you can't be too careful in dealing with people; and most people would take advantage of you if they got the chance (Gerbner, et al, 1980).

Gerbner and Larry Gross began their research into cultivation theory and mean world syndrome in the late 1960s and early 1970s. "Gerbner framed mass communication as the mass production of messages" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). The goal of their studies was to track the most stable, omnipresent, and recurrent images in network television content over long periods

of time, in terms of portraying violence, gender roles, race and ethnicity, occupations, and many other topics and aspects of life (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010).

Gerbner recognized television's impact as early as 1978. In the study, *Television: The New State Religion*, he made the following two observations that hold true in 2020:

*“Television consumes more time and attention of more people than all other media and leisure time activities combined.”*

*“Unlike the other media, you do not have to wait for, plan for, go out to, or seek out television. It comes to you directly at home and is there all the time”* (Gerbner, 1978)

Cultivation theory contains three core assumptions. The first assumption emphasizes the medium, the second, the viewer, and the final assumption addresses the audience role of the medium and its ability to react to it. The first assumption is that television is fundamentally different from other forms of mass media. The second assumption is that television shapes the way individuals within society think and relate to each other. And, the final assumption is that television's effects are limited (Gerbner, et al, 1978).

Cultivation analysis is the process that investigates the independent relation of television viewing to the interpretations of social reality by viewers. In Gerbner and Gross' early studies survey methods were used to determine how much television was being watched by viewers and the affect it had on real world perceptions. Their goal was to determine whether those who spend more time watching television are more likely to perceive the natural world in ways that reflect those specific messages and lessons (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010).

In his 1968 study, Gerbner divided the survey respondents into three groups: "light viewers" (less than 2 hours per day), "medium viewers" (2–4 hours per day) and "heavy viewers" (more than 4 hours per day). Gerbner found that heavy viewers held similar beliefs and opinions

to those represented on television rather than those based on real-world situations, showing the compound impact of media influence. Individuals categorized as "heavy viewers" encountered shyness, isolation, and depression much more than those who did not watch as much television (Potter, 2014).

However, in 2014, a study by the Neilson Company found that heavy TV viewers in the U.S. spend an average of 705 minutes a day—almost 12 hours—in front of their televisions (States & Logan, 2014). It should be taken into consideration that due to media convergence many people are walking around with a screen—smart phone, laptop, iPad, etc.—nearly 24 hours a day. In regards to the current COVID-19 pandemic, Neilson is reporting that television consumption via streaming has increased by 60 percent (States & Logan, 2020).

With all the options one now has for viewership, the numbers of violence viewed could be considered astounding. Researcher Michael Morgan said in the 2010 documentary, *The Mean World Syndrome: Media Violence & The Cultivation Of Fear*, that “Children now see about 8,000 murders by the end of elementary school, and about 200,000 violent acts by the age of 18” (Morgan 2010). The aforementioned documentary was about Gerbner’s work in cultivation theory and mean world syndrome. In the documentary, Gerbner went as far as to say that, “when you see violence, you’re going to conduct violence; you’re going to commit violence” (Morgan, 2010).

Gerbner did have his critics. Bryant Jennings noted that while cultivation theory may explain certain “common subjective observations,” it does not mean that “prove” that the theory is a “sound idea (Bryant, 1986). Bryant also questioned the societal-level effects versus the personal ones and the conditions of long-term fearfulness versus the short-term (Bryant, 1986). Moving forward with cultivation theory studies, Bryant stated:

*“What I hope to see omitted is a helter-skelter, nontheoretical examination of the potential cultivation impact of consuming heavy versus light doses of specified television programming”* (Bryant, 1986).

He continued stating that cultivation theory was “too important” to “yield such a fate.”

Other critics, such as Doob and Macdonald (1979), challenged Gerbner’s work with the finding that survey respondents’ heavy TV watching no longer expected fear of their society after accounting for the amount of crime in their neighborhoods in Toronto, Canada. Further criticism of the cultivation hypothesis came from Hughes (1980) and Hirsch (1980, 1981), who reanalyzed the surveys studied by Gerbner and his colleagues and reporting that after demographic influences had been applied cultivation effects were no longer present. Instead, they proposed that signs of exploitation could be clarified by patterns of television viewing by different demographic groups (e.g., low-income or low-education groups), which were also more likely to mistrust others (Jamieson & Romer, 2014).

Crime dramas are not new to television, but with the expansion of the medium, there are certainly more violent television show out there. In fact, in the study, *The “CSI Effect” in an Actual Juror Sample: Why Crime Show Genre May Matter*, researchers questioned whether the popular genre of crime forensics was affecting how jurors now viewed criminal trials (Mancini, 2013).

Television violence isn’t just a genre trend. In a 2008 study by Dagmar Unz found that violence in television news triggers anger and other emotions. “participants reported feelings of anger, sadness, disgust, and contempt” (Unz, et al, 2008). In addition, Unz also stated that how violent news was presented affected how people reacted.

What should be noted are the facts about crime in the United States. According to a report from the Pew Center, the FBI reported that the violent crime rate fell 51 percent between 1993 and 2018. Using the Bureau of Justice Statistics data, the rate fell 71 percent during that span. Violent crime, according to both agencies, includes offenses such as rape, robbery and assault (Gramlich, 2019).

The annual national rate of violent crime from the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports has been releasing data since 1972 for every year. It calculates the rate of violent crimes reported to U.S. police per 100,000 individuals. This index contains murders, non-negligent crimes, manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault (Jamieson & Romer, 2014). One question that needs to be asked is do the reported national crime rate numbers align with the perceptions of the viewers of violent crime dramas (see figures 1 and 2).

For the purposes of this study, the violent crime rates in Chicago was observed. According to the Chicago Police Department, since 2016, violent crime in the city are down nearly 25 percent. And yet, in that same time period, five crime-based dramas about Chicago have been developed and aired on television.

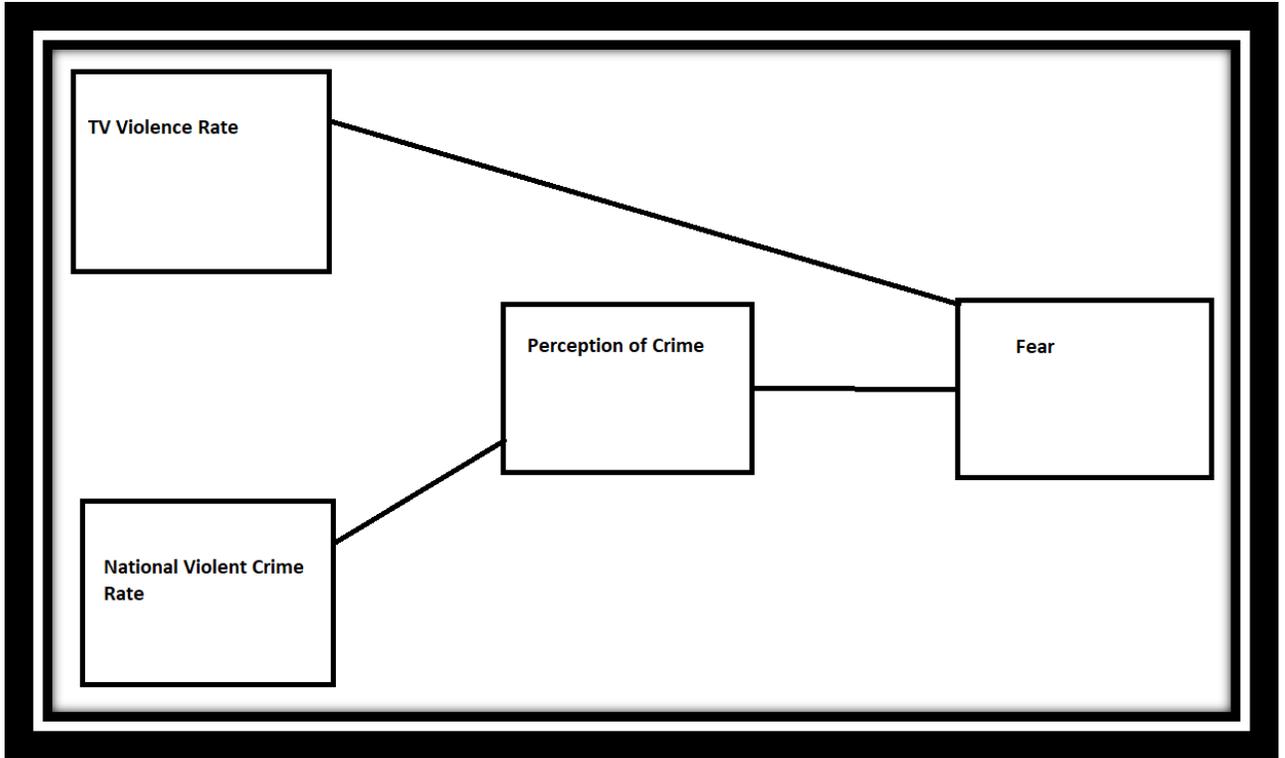


Figure 1

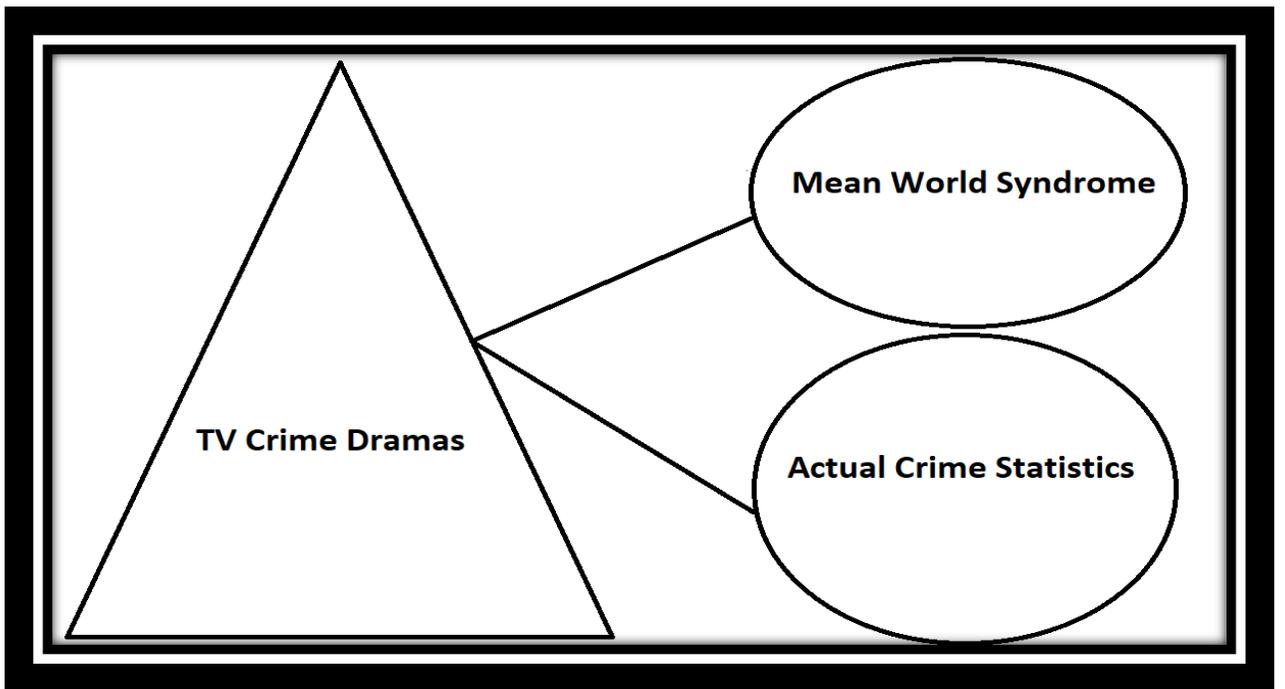


Figure 2

### **Hypothesis/Research Questions:**

For the purposes of my study, I propose the following hypothesis and research questions:

*H1: Amount of TV watching of crime shows based in Chicago increases perceptions that Chicago is dangerous.*

*R1: How does the amount of time spent watching Chicago-based crime television shows affect how you view the crime rate there or in other large U.S. cities.*

*R2: How does the fictional portrayal of crime in Chicago affect your perception of crime in Chicago or in other large U.S. cities?*

### **Variables:**

*V1: Amount of time watching a set of television shows based in Chicago.*

*V2: TV violence rate*

*V3: National crime rate*

*V4: Chicago crime rate*

### **Independent Variables:**

*IV1: Perception/fear of crime*

*IV2: Mean world syndrome*

### **Methods**

This study will use an IRB approved questionnaire format that will allow researchers to poll students at a southern university for extra credit. Answers from students who do not watch the list of shows (*Chicago PD*, *Chicago Med*, *Chicago Fire*, *Chicago Justice*, and *The Chi*), will be included to establish whether there are outlying factors that may or may not affect attitudes about Chicago's crime rate. Ideally, the questionnaires will be administered to students who represent a sample of the general population.

In order to simplify the process, the questionnaire will use a Likert Scale for the majority of the answers, but there will be a place where subjects will be allowed to provide a few detailed answers.

### **Sample Questions**

Respondents will be asked a number of questions. First, they will be asked about their viewing frequency. Although the questions will use the term television, it is understood that television is equal to any type of screen. No data will be dismissed. If a respondent does not watch the crime-based genre, their attitudes are just as important.

Frequency will be judged by the current numbers provide the Nielson Company, which estimate high frequency users at eight to 12 hours a day. Four to eight hours of watching will be considered medium and zero to four hours will be considered light watching.

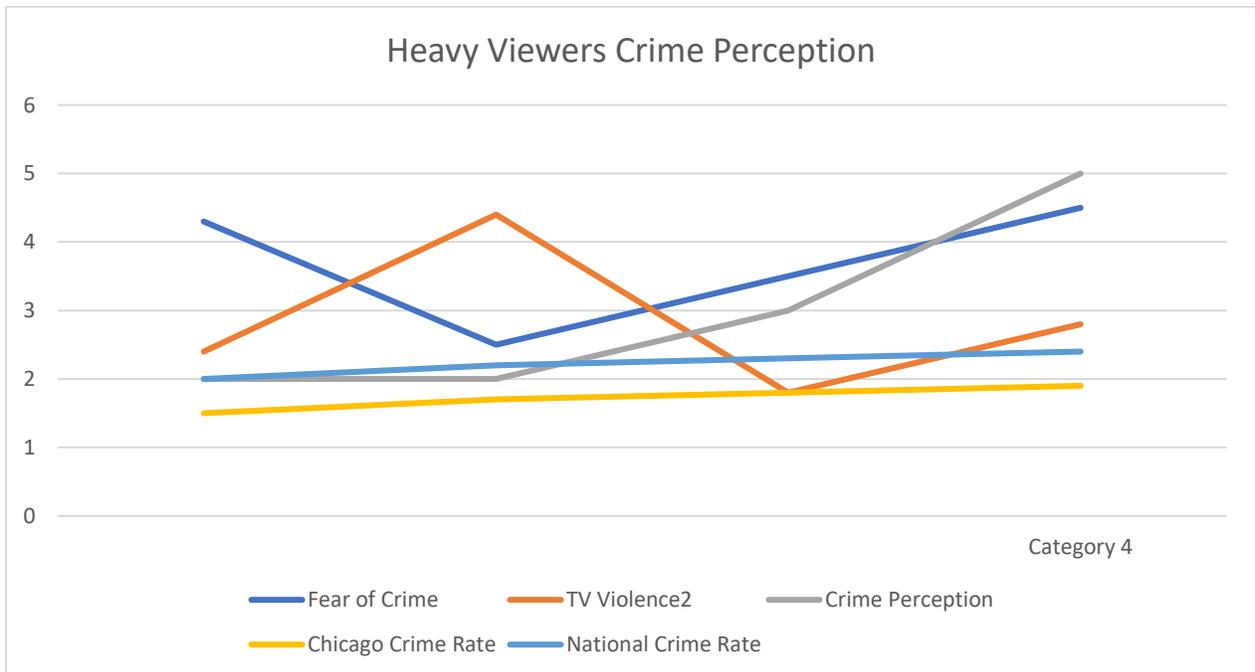
The next subset of questions will address watching habits. For example, on a scale of 1-5, one being the least indicator, how often to you watch... This subset will focus on genres like crime dramas, medical dramas, sports, news, documentaries, reality television, science fiction, and misc.

The following subset will ask about the viewership of each of the shows (*Chicago PD*, *Chicago Med*, *Chicago Fire*, *Chicago Justice*, and *The Chi*). Participants will be asked on a scale of 1-5, with 1 meaning never or rarely to 5 meaning on a regular basis, the frequency of watching these shows. The next question would ask on a scale of 1-5, 1 being the lowest, how realistic is the violent crime rate on the five Chicago shows compared to their own perceptions of violent crime in Chicago, and then in the United States. Finally, the participants will provide their perception of crime in Chicago and the United States. The participants will be asked if violent crime rates in Chicago are up or down from 2016. Their answer options will be yes, no, I don't

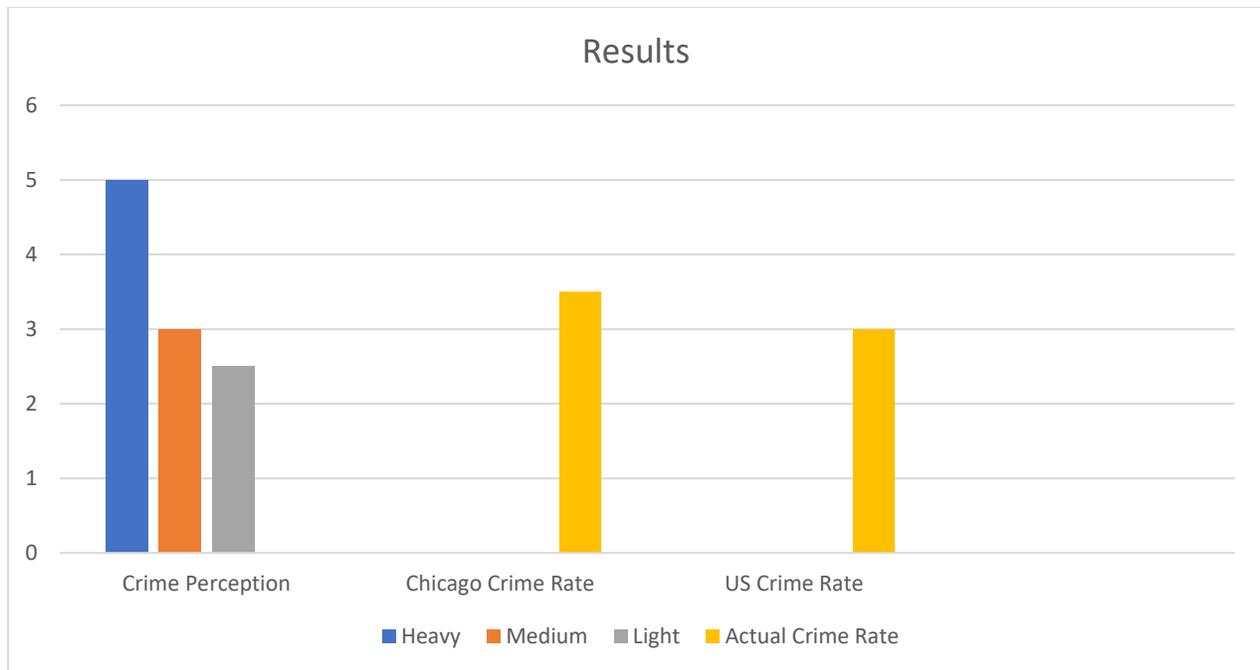
know. The same question will be asked about the U.S. to establish if their sense of fear (or no fear) correlates. The final results of the survey would be put into a chart (See Table 1) and then the scores would be used in a series of graphs for each of the three levels of viewer frequency. One final chart would compare the results from the three levels of viewer ship (See example 1 & 2).

	Fear of Crime	TV Violence	Crime Perception	Chicago Crime Rate	National Crime Rate
Fear of Crime					
TV Violence					
Crime Perception					
Chicago Crime Rate					
National Crime Rate					

**Table 1**



**Example 1**



## Final Notes

A similar study could be done for the crime rate perceptions of New York and Los Angeles, which also have a high volume of police/crime dramas on television. In addition, a study can just be done on a national scale. For that study, it would be ideal to have participants spread out through the country.

It should also be noted that this study's results might provide insight from its results about people's perceptions from watching different genres of television. For example, if there are a number of respondents that watch mostly reality television but share traits with those who have mean world syndrome, that could possibly lead to another study.

Thought should be given to how many respondents, no matter their amount of viewing time that is involved, have a realistic view of actual crime due to how they perceive fictional television violence. This question could be a follow up study to find out why or how respondents came to this conclusion.

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