5-2015

Media Effects on Attitudes Towards the Criminal Justice System

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honor's in Discipline
East Tennessee State University

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of media on attitudes toward the criminal justice system. A survey was administered to 167 undergraduate students at East Tennesse State University in criminal justice and fine and performing arts classes. Respondents were asked how much television they watch, what their primary news source was, and how accurate crime-related television programs are. Multivariate analysis showed that age and major affected attitudes more than media consumption.

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Chapter 1:Introduction

In this technological age, the media is constantly expanding its reach to consumers. One area that has quickly grown in the past decade is television. People now can watch live TV, DVR their shows, and watch them online or on DVD. The addition of services such as Netflix and Hulu Plus have greatly added to the television library that is immediately available to the public. With all of these additions, television is easily and constantly consumed. Therefore it is very important to look at any effect television has on the public, especially concerning the criminal justice system. The criminal justice system is supposed to protect the public and give justice to criminals, but its mission could be undermined if the public does not accurately understand it.

Description of Study

This study will measure the amount of television watched and the attitudes toward the criminal justice system to see if any significant relationship exists. There have been many studies that look at the correlation between television programs in connection to violence, but not many on attitudes towards the criminal justice system. The sample population is undergraduate students at East Tennessee State University. The study focused on courses taught in the criminal justice as well as the fine and performing arts departments in an attempt to uncover any differences in perceptions that might be linked to a students' academic major.

Attitudes Towards Criminal Justice

All criminal justice officials have been portrayed certain ways by the media. These images have changed over the years, often very drastically. False portrayals of these professions can be damaging to both the professionals and the people they are

supposed to be serving. Many have been portrayed both positively and negatively, depending on what is happening in society at the time. These portrayals are particularly influential for individuals who have little or no contact with the criminal justice system, as they may easily rely on the media images to form their view of the criminal justice system.

Lawyers are common in television and film, as they can and do generally appear in any genre. In dramas, they are typically portrayed as attorneys willing to do anything to win the case, even if it is illegal or allows a criminal to walk free. In comedies lawyers are often greedy and take advantage of other characters. Lawyers used to be portrayed as honest, moral individuals, but the rise of divorce and the verdict of the OJ Simpson trial changed their depiction. Divorce allowed more and more people to come in contact with lawyers, which allowed them to be seen as more everyday and less idealistic. The OJ Simpson trial first caused people to see that lawyers can get off suspects that most people would see as clearly guilty, and many trials since have proved the same point. The commonality of lawyers in each genre makes them a prime candidate for false stereotyping (Surette, 2015).

Police officers also have been portrayed several ways. They have been shown as silly and incompetent, harsh and commanding, dirty cops, or an average citizen who rises in the ranks honorably (Surette, 2015). Now, it seems that actual coverage of police officers on the news is eclipsing the fictionalized versions. The few stories that are being shown have the same effect; officers are now viewed either very negatively or very positively, but only based on the few stories being shown. Individuals are more likely to have actual contact with police officers, so their prior perception of them can shape how

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the interaction occurs (Surette, 2015). This can lead to perpetuations of a certain stereotype, which feeds into inaccurate views.

Correctional officials have been portrayed minimally, but are generally shown as harsh and abusive (Surette, 2015). They aid prisoners in smuggling in contraband, unjustly punish, and blackmail prisoners into doing work or favors for them. This is a criminal justice profession in which most people will never have contact with, even more so than all other officials. Television's portrayal of correctional officers might have a stronger effect given the fact that the public has less frequent contact with these professionals.

All of these different portrayals are very important, as they can shape what the public attitude toward the criminal justice system is. Inaccurate portrayals lead to stereotyping and false perceptions of the world, which can be very dangerous.

<u>Types of media</u>

Television and film have become some of the most popular and far reaching forms of media. They are where most of the false stereotypes about criminal justice officials arise. Even though they are mostly fictional portrayals, people will assume they are correct due to little experience with criminal justice professionals.

Print publications have been an important type of media for societies for centuries. Although declining in popularity, they still provide a lot of information for subscribers. Unfortunately, these magazines and newspapers often favor a political party, which skews the information for readers (Covert & Washburn, 2007).

The internet has combined different types of media and made everything much more accessible. Even though it is relatively new, it has made everything more

accessible much faster. This rapid spread of information has been pivotal in the spread of

events as they happen. Both fictional portrayals and actual news stories can be spread

around, in small clips that can be easily taken out of context. This combined with

political stances of shows or publications can scramble the truth and further contribute to

false stereotypes.

<div align="center">Hypotheses</div>

The main purpose of this study is to determine if there is any relationship between

media consumption and attitudes towards the criminal justice system.

Hypothesis 1: Students who watch more television have a different perception of the

criminal justice system than students who do not watch television regularly

Hypothesis 2: When controlled for audience traits, differences in media effects will

impact attitudes toward criminal justice system.

Hypothesis 3: Differences in perceived reality of crime media will impact attitudes

toward the criminal justice system.

Hypothesis 4: Type of crime media will have significantly different effects on attitudes

toward the criminal justice system.

Chapter 2:Literature Review

<u>Media Effects on Viewers</u>

Most studies looking at the correlation between media and crime focus on the cultivation theory. This theory, written and researched by George Gerbner and Larry Gross (1976), lays the foundation for all media and crime studies. Gerbner and Gross (1976) hypothesized that an increase in TV consumption would result in a distortion of reality, as the "TV world" either exaggerates or understates different aspects of society. Gerbner and Gross (1976) found ample support for this hypothesis. After surveying adults, they found that heavy TV viewers were more likely to give TV world estimates as real world estimates, representing the idea that TV programs can cultivate their own realities for viewers. (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). This theory has been the foundation for most studies that look at TV and effects on viewers.

Several studies have gone on to further expand upon the cultivation theory, but have applied it to the criminal justice field. Carlson (1985) conducted a study on 619 sixth through twelfth grade students, as this is an important time in development, and the addition of television could impact this development. Carlson (1985) found further support for the cultivation theory, and found that heavy TV viewing can alter how the criminal justice system is percieved. The study found serious misunderstandings about the system and an increased fear of the world due to the crime portrayed on television (Carlson, 1985). Appel (2008) also found that higher television consumption leads to a greater fear of crime and mistrust of the world. Many studies have found that the more crime related media an individual consumes, the more fearful of crime they are (e.g. Dowler, 2003; Kort-Butler and Sittner Hartshorn, 2011)

Another effect of the media on the criminal justice system is support for justice and preventative measures. Carlson (1985) found in his study that those who have a heavy TV consumption thought that support for the criminal justice system was desirable, but also found a mistrust of government officials and spending. Nabi and Sullivan (2001) also found a correlation between high amount of television watched and taking protective actions against crime.

The cultivation theory goes beyond a general amount of television viewed and estimates of the real world. Watching too much television can cause an overestimation of rates of crime both in reality and on television (Hetrosini and Tukachinsky, 2006). Hetrosini and Tukachinsky (2006) asked participants to provide their average amount of televsision watched daily and choose from three options the rates of crime portrayed on television and in the real world. They found that participants fell into five distinct categories, ranging from no cultivation to overcultivation. Those who had watched the most television were most likely to over estimate the crime rates in the real world and in the television world, while those in the medium category simply over estimated the rates of crime in the real world. (Hetrosini and Tukachinsky, 2006).

<u>Attitudes Towards Criminal Justice System</u>

Attitudes towards the criminal justice system play an important role in society. Confidence levels can change the support for the system and certain policies. The lower the confidence levels, the more likely citizens will not respect the system (Indermaur and Roberts, 2009). Respect for the system and public opinion are closely tied. Public opinion is largely connected with pressure to change crime policies (Toch and Maguire, 2014), especially when there is a high fear of a certain crime (Dowler, 2003). Public

attitudes can shape important policies and laws, even if the public opinion is not an accurate reflection of reality.

Race

Race has a large impact upon attitudes towards the criminal justice system, particularly with white and black individuals. A 2012 poll showed that overall, white citizens have more confidence in the criminal justice system than black citizens do (Dowler, 2003; Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics Online, 2012). Black citizens also have an increased fear of being victimized (Sims and Johnston, 2004). The combination of a lack of confidence and a fear of crime can lead to unrest and a complete distrust of the system. Black citizens also have a greater support for early intervention programs than incarceration or more punitive attitudes (Dowler, 2003; Hart Research Associates, 2002; Sims and Johnston, 2004). White citizens are also more likely to have a more punitive approach to crime than black citizens, who have a tougher approach to the causes of crime, meaning that they would like to deter crime before it happens, as opposed to punishing offenders after they have committed the crime (Hart Research Associates, 2002). This difference shows how important race is in attitudes towards the criminal justice system.

Gender

Several studies have explored the differences between genders concerning attitudes toward the criminal justice system. Males are generally more confident in the system than females (Sims and Johnston, 2004; Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics Online, 2012). Females also tend to have a greater fear of crime (Dowler, 2003; Kort-Butler and Sittner Hartshorn, 2011). A lower level of confidence and a higher fear and

crime can lead to a mistrust and lack of respect for the criminal justice system. Females are also more likely to support rehabilitation programs than incapacitation (Sims and Johnston, 2004). Gender has an affect on how individuals view the criminal justice system.

Age

There are differences in the attitudes towards the criminal justice system across age ranges as well. In 2012, a survey showed that 40% of individuals surveyed who were 18 to 29 years old were very confident in the criminal justice system, while those 30 to 49 years old were overall the least confident in the criminal justice system (Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics Online, 2012). These differences can affect how policies could change with each generation. The more age increases, the more conservative the view of crime and punishment (Hart Research Associates, 2002; Sims and Johnston, 2004). Age has an evident affect on attitudes towards criminal justice.

Major

An individual's academic major in can also affect their attitudes towards the criminal justice system. Little research has been done on the differences in attitudes between majors, but the strongest affect is a major in criminal justice. Those who have more classes that involve criminal justice issues have different viewpoints of aspects of the criminal justice system, such as a more liberal view of punishments (Mandracchia et al 2013). It is unsurprising that taking classes that deal with criminal justice subjects have an affect on how those students see the criminal justice system.

Experience With Criminal Justice System

        Experience with the criminal justice system can have varying effects. Those who have been victimized or have family that has been victimized or arrested are more likely to support rehabilitation than the general public (Hart Research Associates, 2002; Rosenberg and Callanan, 2011). This suggests that those that have had direct or almost direct contact with crime are more likely to support measures that can stop crime before it begins, instead of punishing the criminal after the crime.

Chapter 3: Methodology

<u>Sample</u>

The sample consisted of undergraduate students enrolled at East Tennessee State University. A convenience sample was taken of Criminal justice and fine and performing arts classes. Instructors were contacted via email and asked if a survey could be given to their classes. The email stated the purpose of the survey and approximately how long the survey would take to be completed. Eight professors were emailed, and six responded that they would participate. A total of nine classes were surveyed, and 167 students participated.

<u>Data Collection</u>

A self-administered survey was used to collect the data. The survey was two pages long and contained twenty-one questions. The dependent variable, attitude toward criminal justice system, and independent variables, exposure to the media and contact with the criminal justice system, were measured through this survey. The control variables included age, gender, race, and major. Age was measured at the interval level. Gender, race, and major were categorical values. Race options included white, black, Asian, Hispanic, and other. Major options included criminal justice, digital media, music, theater, visual arts, and other.

<u>Outcome Measures</u>

The dependent variable, attitude toward the criminal justice system, was measured in the survey through ten questions on a five item scale. Participants were asked how much they agree or disagree (1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=neutral, 4=disagree, 5=strongly disagree) with a given statement. Measured statements included "the criminal

justice system effectively punishes offenders" and "my local police department does a good job." This scale was designed to examine several dimensions of the criminal justice system, such as police and courts (see Appendix).

Variables

The independent variable was exposure to the media. As such, several media related questions were included in the survey and include hours of TV per day, primary news source, TV shows watched, and media exaggeration of crime. Hours of TV per day were measured at a ratio level. Primary news source was categorical, and included television, newspaper, radio, social interactions/words of mouth, Internet, and other. TV shows were categorical, and included crime drama shows, crime reality shows, local news, and national news. Media exaggeration was measured through two questions: News program crime exaggeration and TV crime drama crime reality. They were both categorical (see Appendix). News program exaggeration options included exaggerate crime a lot, exaggerate crime a little, get it about right, and underestimate crime. TV crime drama reality options included are very realistic, are somewhat realistic, are somewhat unrealistic, and are very unrealistic.

Contact with the criminal justice system was also an independent variable. It was measured through two questions at the ratio level. Participants were asked how much contact they have had with the criminal justice system in the last twelve months, and how much contact family and friends had with the criminal justice system in the last twelve months.

Chapter 4: Results

Univariate Statistics

Frequency tables were used to find the frequency and percentages of the subgroups of the variables (see Table 1). Race was distributed as follows: White (86.7%), Black (7.3%), and Other (6.1%). These proportions are fairly similar to the makeup of the host institution (Michael Hoff, 2014). Criminal justice majors consisted of 60.2% of respondents. Predictably, this was not representative of the institution from which the data was collected. Primary news source was mainly Internet (67.3%), followed by Social Interactions/Word of Mouth and Television (13.5%), Radio (3.2%), and Newspaper and Other (1.3%).

Table 1
Frequencies

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Race		
White	143	86.7
Black	12	7.3
Other	10	6.1
Major		
Criminal Justice	100	60.2
Non Criminal Justice	66	39.8
News Source		
Television	21	13.5
Newspaper	2	1.3
Radio	5	3.2
Social Interactions /Word of Mouth	21	13.5
Internet	105	67.3
Other	2	1.3

In order to establish some baseline measures for important variables within the sample, frequencies were also computed for respondents' age, television consumption, and contact with the criminal justice system (see Table 2). The minimum age was 18, and the maximum was 36, with a mean of 21.02. The average amount of TV watched per day was 2.3 hours. The average direct contact with the criminal justice system in the last twelve months was 1.93, while vicarious contact with criminal justice system was 2.51.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mode	Median
Age	18	36	21.02	2.50	20	21
Hours of TV Watched Per Day	0	8	2.30	1.62	2	2
Direct Contact with CJ System	0	25	1.93	3.29	0	1
Vicarious Contact with CJ System	0	30	2.51	3.56	0	2

Scores for the attitude toward criminal justice scale ranged from 10 to 50, with lower scores indicating a negative attitude toward the criminal justice system. The mean was 28.77, indicating that the respondents had a moderate view of the criminal justice system. The distribution of scores were normally distributed (see Figure 1).
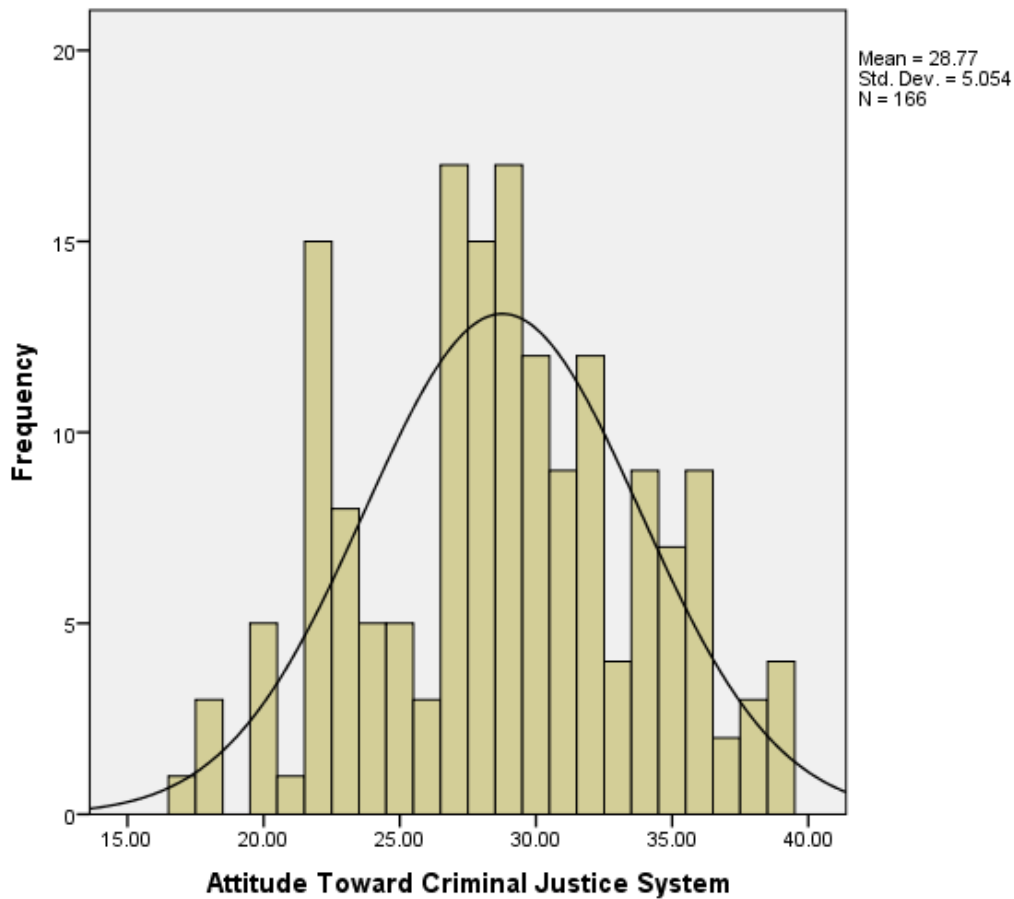
Figure 1: Attitude toward criminal justice system

<div align="center">

Bivariate Statistics

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Correlation

A correlation test was used to see if there were any direct correlations between variables (see Table 3). The variables tested were attitude towards the criminal justice system, hours of TV watched per day, direct contact with the criminal justice system, and vicarious contact with the criminal justice system. No statistically significant correlations were found.

Table 3:
Correlations

	Attitude Toward Criminal Justice System	Hours of TV Per Day	Direct Contact with Criminal Justice System
Attitude Towards Criminal Justice System	–	–	–
Hours of TV Per Day	.081		
Direct Contact With Criminal Justice System	.103	.031	
Vicarious Contact With Criminal Justice System	.154	-.062	.584

N = 167

Chi Square

The Chi Square test was used to see the dispersion between variables and attitude towards the criminal justice system. The differences between primary news sources and white and black individuals were tested. While no significant relationships between race and the independent variables were found, the results indicated that there were some minute differences. White individuals were more likely to have a positive attitude (32.2%) then black individuals (18.2%). Those who watched TV were more likely to have a positive attitude (47.6%), as were those who listen to radio as their primary news source (100%).

Table 4
Crosstabs of attitudes toward criminal justice system and important independent
variables

	Attitude Toward Criminal Justice System		
	Negative	Moderate	Positive
News Source			
Television	3 (24.3%)	8 (38.1%)	10 (47.6%)
Newspaper	0	0	2 (100%)
Radio	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)
Social Interaction/Word of Mouth	7 (33.3%)	9 (42.9%)	5 (23.8%)
Internet	27 (25.7%)	49 (46.7%)	29 (27.6%)
Other	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0
Race			
White	36 (25.2%)	61 (42.7%)	46 (32.2%)
Non White	7 (31.8%)	11 (50%)	4 (18.2%)

T Test

The T Test was used to show the differences in means between variables and their

significance (see Table 5). The most significant finding is the difference between

criminal justice and non-criminal justice majors. Criminal justice majors had statistically

higher means, indicating a more positive attitude of the criminal justice system (29.790),

than non-criminal justice majors (27.212). Although the others had no statistically

significant differences, the some variables did have a difference in means.   White

respondents overall had a slightly higher score (28.979) than Non White respondents

(27.318). Respondents with direct contact with the criminal justice system overall had a

slightly lower score (28.495) than those with no direct contact (29.127).

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Table 5
Attitude toward criminal justice t-tests

	Mean	Degrees of Freedom	Significance
Race		163	.453
White	28.979		
Non White	27.318		
News Programs		162	.302
Exaggerate	28.818		
Not Exaggerate	28.095		
Direct Contact with		164	.388
Criminal Justice			
System			
Contact	28.495		
No Contact	29.127		
Major		164	.937
Criminal justice	29.790		
Non Criminal	27.212		
Justice			

Multivariate Analysis

<u>Regression</u>

A regression model was used to find the significance of variables and attitude toward the criminal justice system (see Table 6). Two variables, age and major, had statistically significant impact on attitude toward the criminal justice system. Age was found to have a .097 significance, which is significant on a .10 significance level. It was found to have a negative correlation, so the older the respondent, the more negative the attitude toward the criminal justice system. Being a criminal justice major was found to have a significance of .002, which is significant on a .05 significance level. It had a positive correlation, as criminal justice majors had a more positive attitude toward the criminal justice system than non criminal justice majors.

Table 6
Regression

Variable	Beta	Significance
Age	-.144	.097*
Hours of TV Per Day	-.003	.969
Direct Contact with CJ System	.026	.802
Vicarious Contact with CJ System	.096	.347
Watched Reality Crime TV Show	.003	.969
Watched Local News	.014	.877
Watched National News	.019	.834
White	-.020	.875
Black	-.082	.504
CJ Major	.280	.002**
Gender	.092	.265
R^2	.119	

* $p = <.10$
** $p = <.05$

Chapter 5: Conclusion

<u>Discussion</u>

Previous research has found a correlation between media consumption and fear of crime or attitudes towards specific criminal justice professionals. However, not much attention has been given to the effect on the criminal justice system as a whole. The purpose of this study was to determine what effects, if any, television viewing has on attitudes towards the criminal justice system. This research was directed by the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Students who watch more television have a different perception of the criminal justice system than students who do not watch television regularly. **This hypothesis was not supported.**

Hypothesis 2: When controlled for audience traits, differences in media effects will impact attitudes toward criminal justice system. **This hypothesis was not supported.**

Hypothesis 3: Differences in perceived reality of crime media will impact attitudes toward the criminal justice system. **This hypothesis was not supported.**

Hypothesis 4: Type of crime media will have significantly different effects on attitudes toward the criminal justice system. **This hypothesis was not supported.**

<u>Limitations</u>

There are several limitations to this study. First, the sample is both nonrandom and very small, and taken only at one university in one part of the country. It also focuses on students enrolled in criminal justice and fine and performing arts courses, so these make the sample non-representative of college students as a whole. The sample

will also mainly consist of young college students, which is not representative of the general population outside of college students.

<div align="center">Suggestions for Future Studies</div>

Future studies could survey a bigger sample, which could give a more accurate reflection of the population surveyed. Studies also could use a broader sample, and survey individuals outside of college to show the attitudes of the general population. The scale used had a low alpha level, which indicates that the survey was measuring more than one dimension. A different scale could be used to be more comprehensive. Questions could be asked to cover more aspects of the criminal justice system.

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Appendix
Section 1

What is your age?

What is your gender?
   ☐ Male
   ☐ Female

Which best describes your race?
   ☐ White
   ☐ Black
   ☐ Asian
   ☐ Hispanic
   ☐ Other (please specify) _____

What is your current major?
   ☐ Criminal Justice
   ☐ Digital Media
   ☐ Music
   ☐ Theater
   ☐ Visual Arts
   ☐ Other (please specify) _____

Approximately how many hours do you spend watching television on an average day?   _____Hours

Which of the following is your primary news source?
   ☐ Television
   ☐ Newspaper
   ☐ Radio
   ☐ Social Interactions/Word of Mouth
   ☐ Internet
   ☐ Other (please specify) _____

Do you watch any of the following on a regular basis? (Check all that apply)
   ☐ Crime Drama TV shows
   ☐ Crime Reality TV shows
   ☐ Local News
   ☐ National News

Would you say that news programs:
   ☐ Exaggerate crime a lot
   ☐ Exaggerate crime a little
   ☐ Get it about right
   ☐ Underestimate crime

Would you say that TV crime dramas:
   ☐ Are very realistic
   ☐ Are somewhat realistic
   ☐ Are somewhat unrealistic
   ☐ Are very unrealistic

Approximately how many times in the last 12 months have you had direct contact with the Criminal Justice system? (Example: Police officers, lawyers, courts, etc.)

_____

Approximately how many of your relatives or close friends have had direct contact with the Criminal Justice System in the past 12 months? (Example: Police officers, lawyers, courts, etc.)

_____

Section 2

Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements by circling the number that best represents your opinion

1=Strongly Agree 2=Agree 3=Neutral 4=Disagree 5=Strongly Disagree					
My local police department does a good job	1	2	3	4	5
I am comfortable in asking the police for assistance	1	2	3	4	5
Criminal sentences for drug related crimes are too harsh	1	2	3	4	5
The criminal justice system effectively punishes offenders	1	2	3	4	5
The criminal justice system respond to minorities fairly	1	2	3	4	5
Wrongful convictions are common	1	2	3	4	5
Criminal sentences for property crimes are fair	1	2	3	4	5
The police always have a good reason to stop someone	1	2	3	4	5
The criminal justice system effectively rehabilitates offenders	1	2	3	4	5
Criminal sentences for violent crimes are too lenient	1	2	3	4	5