

Market-Driven News Media and Crime Policy

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General Trend of “Punitiveness”

- Laws requiring longer sentences – in general, and specific offenses
 - Drugs
 - Firearms
 - Violent offenses
 - Sarbanes Oxley and other financial crimes

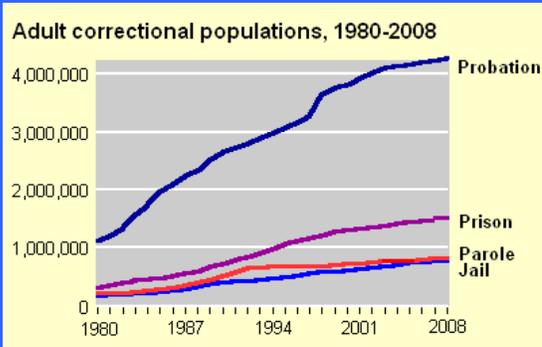
Sentencing Reforms

- Mandatory minimum sentences for many offenses
- Sentencing Guidelines reducing judicial discretion
- 3 Strikes and other recidivist sentencing statutes
- Determinate sentencing -- elimination of parole

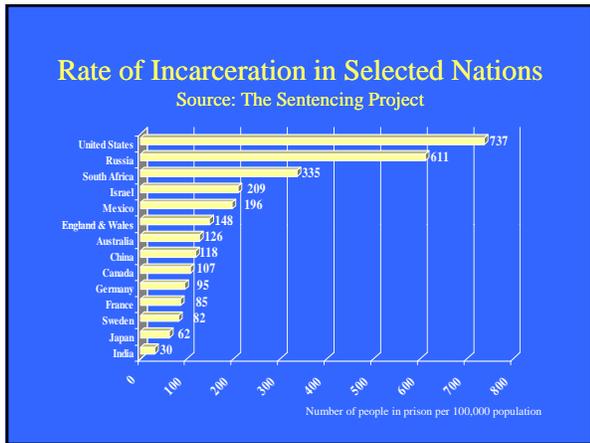
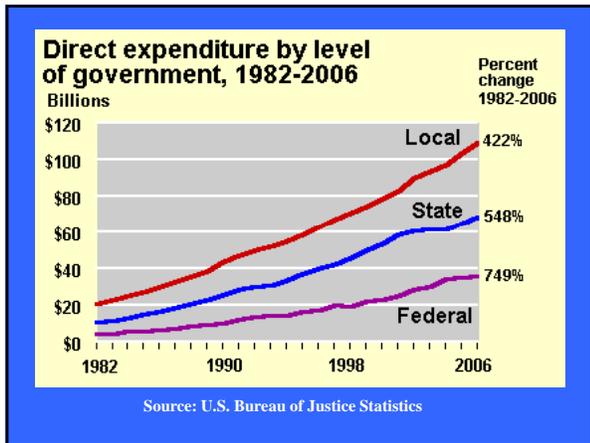
Other forms of “Punitiveness”

- Harsher conditions of incarceration, e.g., elimination of programs for education, recreation, family visits, etc.
- Reintroduction of chain gangs – 8 states

National Trends RESULTS



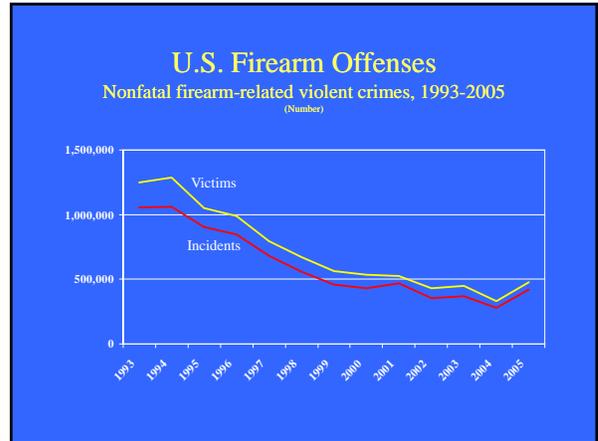
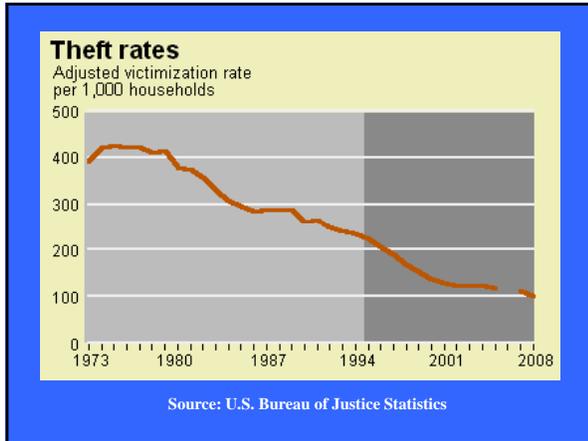
Source: U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics



1 of every 100 U.S. residents is now in prison or jail

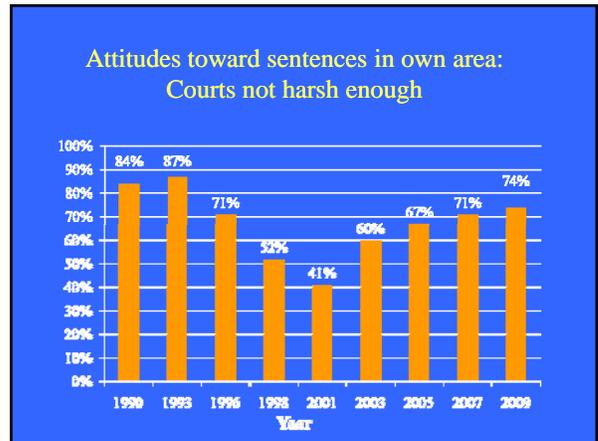
Does skyrocketing U.S. rate of imprisonment reflect an increase in crime?





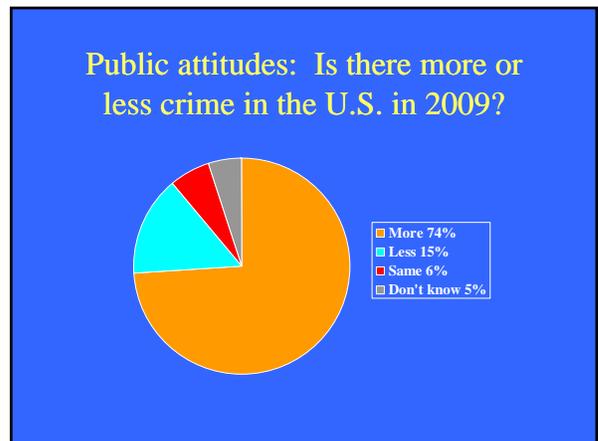
What does the U.S. public think?

Does the public think sentences are too long, or too many people are in prison?



What does the public think?

Is there a general awareness that crime rates are down, and are in many cases less than in other Western democracies?



How important is crime as a political issue?

Did it fall off the political radar once crime rates began to fall so dramatically?

National Polls

What is most important problem facing U.S.?

1994-1998 Crime #1

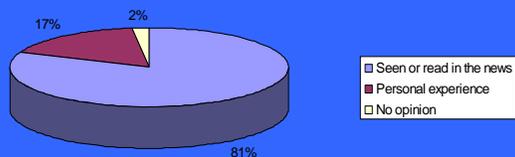
1999-2000 Crime #2 or #3

Since 2001, crime has not been chosen by more than 3%

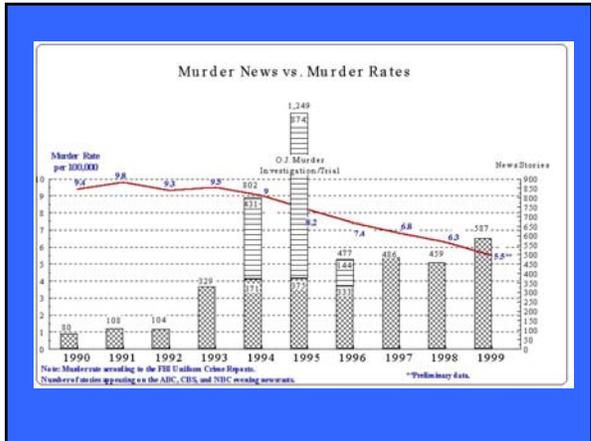
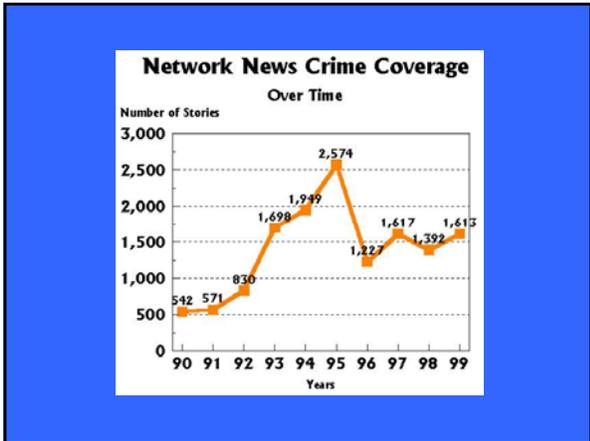
Since U.S. crime rates have fallen to 40 year lows, and our sentences are already the longest in the world, why does the public think crime is increasing, that sentences are too low, and that this is a very important issue?

What role has the news media played?

When you say the crime problem in the country is bad, is that based on what you've seen or read in the news, or is it based on your own personal experience?

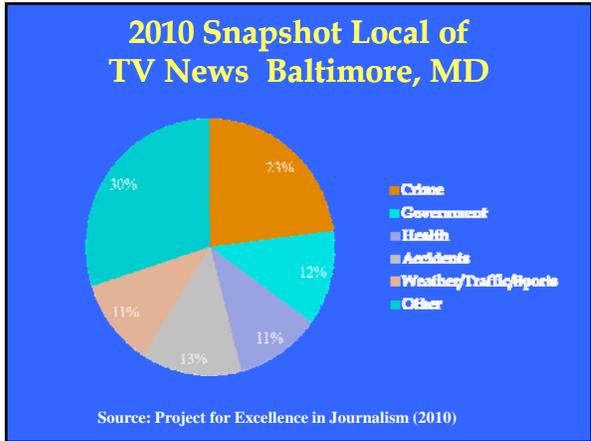


HOW DID TV NETWORKS COVER CRIME?



Snapshots of Local TV news

- Nationwide studies found 17-42% of local newscasts were crime stories
- 7-70% of crime coverage was for murders
- No correlation with crime rates in areas
- Correlates with viewer interest in violent programming and local station's marketing strategy



What determines content and style of news media coverage?

- Not a "mirror"
- More like entertainment programming than traditional concept of journalism

What determines content and style of news media coverage?

- Networks and stations sell audiences to advertisers
- Content and style adjusted to attract audiences, especially audiences sought by advertisers

Does the news media's treatment of crime really matter?

Does the amount and type of coverage of crime affect the public (voters)

- Perceptions about crime?
- Support for punitive policies?
- Preferences among candidates?

AGENDA SETTING – directing public attention to certain issues

- Placement
- Frequency

PRIMING

Affecting the criteria by which viewers judge candidates, public officials, and public policies

Agenda setting and priming increase salience of crime.

What mechanisms increase support for punitive policies?

Hypothesis: Framing

Internal structural emphases that promote certain definitions of a problem, causal assumptions, and/or treatment recommendations

U.S. news typically frames crime in episodic rather than thematic frames

Episodic frames encourage view that crime is the product of individual choices, not social conditions

Stock stories or “scripts”

Effect of framing and scripts – experimental simulation

- 60% of subjects who saw no perpetrator (falsely) recalled seeing one
- 70% of those subjects (falsely) recalled the perpetrator as black
- Subjects who saw a white perpetrator were 50% less likely to recall having seen a perpetrator

Racial element to “stock scripts” -- White subjects who saw a black perpetrator or no perpetrator)

- Were more likely to attribute crime to individual factors, not general social causes
- Were 6% more likely to support punitive policies

Survey research supports a cause and effect relationship with news

- Daily viewers of local TV news were 16% more likely to support punitive policies
- Daily viewers of local TV news who had “new racist” attitudes were 28% more likely to support punitive policies

Hypothesis: Racial Typification

- Content studies have found skewed portrayals of blacks as perpetrators and whites as victims

E.g., Chicago local TV news

- White victims over represented and given longer coverage than black victims
- Result a 3:1 disparity in total time devoted to white victims
- Black suspects disproportionately shown in menacing contexts (mug shots, prison clothing, custody of police)

Hypothesis: Media increases fear and fear increases support for punitive policies

- Research -- inconsistent findings
- Evidence of different effects in various subgroups, and from different types of media

News media is NOT the only factor

- American culture – e.g., values of individual responsibility
- American politics
- News media interacts with American culture and politics

Conclusions

- Market forces shape news media, and unintentionally inflate support for punitive policies
- Major countervailing force is budgetary, especially at state level
- Profound changes in news media mean network and local TV news have less impact