Making the Case

The popular TV show *Law & Order* is in its 20th season of entertaining viewers with stories that are “ripped from the headlines.”

But what if a show that claims to be influenced by reality is actually influencing reality itself?

Whether it’s *Law & Order*, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, *Cold Case*, or *NCIS: Naval Criminal Investigative Service*, less than an hour is needed to solve a case and put the bad guys behind bars.

“The reality is that you don’t just collect a DNA sample, put it in a test tube, push a button and in seconds have your results,” explains Tippecanoe County prosecutor Pat Harrington (BA 1980, Political Science). “It may take weeks or months before test results are returned.”

But not everyone who sits in a jury box understands the behind-the-scenes process. Instead, Harrington is hearing from more and more jurors who expect the same high-tech science forensics to be used in every case, or hidden cameras to follow every undercover officer.

“The reality is that these TV shows are distorting viewers’ perceptions about the judicial system,” he laments.

**The offense**

Professor Glenn Sparks and doctoral student Susan Huelsing Sarapin discovered that people who regularly watch crime dramas, as well as crime reality programs, are more likely to overestimate the frequency of serious crimes, misperceive important facts about crime, and misjudge the number of workers in the judicial system.

“These shows have always been popular, even going back to *Perry Mason* in the 1950s and 1960s,” says Sarapin, who remembers how much her mother enjoyed watching Mason. “But these shows, especially about forensics, just exploded in the 1990s.”

*CSI*, or a CSI spin-off, and *NCIS* are often ranked in the top 10 of the Nielsen ratings. “Because they are some of the most popular shows today,
it is important to understand how they might influence people," Sarapin explains.

As a result, researchers around the world are looking at the "CSI Effect," a phenomenon where careers in forensics and cyberforensics are perceived by students as glamorous and exciting, spawning new classes and degrees at colleges and universities. "CSI has increased the number of students pursuing careers in the judicial system as well as just heightening the general interest," says Harrington, who notices more people, especially young people, visiting the courtroom just to observe a case. "That is positive because the key to our democracy is making sure that people are involved."

The evidence
Sparks and Sarapin, who presented their findings at a conference last fall, refer to the CSI Effect as a tangible influence. "Some of the TV shows are even cited in attorneys’ closing arguments," Sparks says.

While other researchers have been tracking how the CSI Effect encourages people to study forensics and criminal justice, little attention has been given to what it means in the courtroom. Conventional wisdom suggests that people are frequently acquitted by juries when there is not much physical evidence and are convicted more often in trials that have such evidence. But the reality is that few crimes have hard, scientific evidence such as ballistics, gunshot residue, or DNA evidence, the researchers say.

Sparks and Sarapin had a chance to talk with some of these viewers when they interviewed 103 of them last summer about their crime-television viewing and their perceptions of crime and the judicial system. Sparks and Sarapin discovered that heavy TV crime viewers, about a little more than a third from the sample, estimated two and a half times more real-world deaths due to murder than non-viewers.

"People's perceptions were off in regards to a number of other serious crimes," says Sarapin. "Heavy TV-crime viewers consistently overestimated the frequency of crime in the real world."
The verdict

Harrington, who has been an attorney since 1983, estimates that 150 of the thousands of cases he has handled have eventually gone to a jury trial. When selecting the jury, he always pays attention to what individuals say about their television viewing habits.

"It often gives us an idea about people's perceptions of a courtroom," he says. "Some people realize it's entertainment, but others think a crime is solved in 42 minutes. Other people think we can get DNA off of anything, and some think we have access to technology that is not even in use yet."

From the 150 cases that have gone to trial, Harrington remembers only 10 of them using fingerprints as evidence. "On TV everyone leaves fingerprints," he says. "Most crimes involve someone that knows the person, so often fingerprints are irrelevant. Even if it is an unknown person, it's not helpful information unless you have a person to match."

The other reality with crime scene analysts is that most forensic experts need to decide quickly which tests are most likely to reveal the best evidence. Spraying and dusting for fingerprints, for example, may damage DNA information, or testing for DNA may distort fingerprints.

Harrington is not the only one who will be following Sparks and Scarpin as they continue to look into this topic. When the researchers released their findings to the media in October, not only did reporters want to talk with them, but public defenders, law students, attorneys and police representatives wanted to know more about their research.

"Their interest surprised me, but it's great to see this reaction from the legal community because it reminds us that the research we are doing has a practical edge as well as theoretical," Sparks says. "That's the most rewarding kind of research to conduct. As scientists we want to develop and further theoretical ideas about the way mass communication works, and this topic allows us to tap into areas where there is a lot of practical interest."

By Amy Patterson Reubert.

BOYS WILL BE BOYZ

The iconic 1955 Rebel Without a Cause movie poster memorializes James Dean. This rebel, dressed in jeans with his tousled hair, was the poster boy for trouble 60 years ago, but now this persona would just blend in with today's crowd.

In the poster's bottom right corner, the film's tagline reads "... And they both came from good families!" The movie also was promoted with catchy quips like "Teenage terror torn from today's headlines," "Warner Bros. challenging drama of today's juvenile violence," and "The bad boy from a good family."

Those descriptions probably seem overblown today. At least that's the reaction Jack Spencer, an associate professor of sociology, experts when he shows this black and white classic next to the 1991 Boyz in the Hood to students who are studying "Crime, Deviance and the Mass Media."

"The most obvious differences between these films are race, class, and place," Spencer points out. "In the 1950s, the demographic targeted for deviancy was middle-class white kids from the suburbs. More recently, Boyz in the Hood is about the inner-city youth minority. That's quite a difference."

These movies, or cultural texts as Spencer calls them, are visuals that bring concepts from academic readings to life. For example, students can learn about juvenile delinquency and urban-area trends from academic journal articles and then compare them to what they see in Boyz in the Hood.

"It's a great way to learn and apply theory," says Spencer, who is working on a book about how youth violence during the 1990s was portrayed in the news and entertainment media.

The corporate greed in Wall Street, dynamics of mental illness in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and police culture and identity in LA Confidential are other topics the students explore.

"Our class discussions encourage students to think about why the characters are doing what they are doing," Spencer says. "How does CSI portray victims? Do you see a sense of community in America's Most Wanted? What are the gender differences in Thirteen and in Boyz in the Hood? The goal is that they will never be able to watch a film again without thinking about what they learned in sociology."

By Amy Patterson Reubert. Photo by Stock.