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BREAKING NEWS

HOW LOCAL TV NEWS AND REAL-WORLD CONDITIONS AFFECT FEAR OF CRIME

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Fear of crime is a ~~major problem~~ in the United States. In 2000, for instance, ~~40%~~ of Whites and 47% of Blacks reported that they were afraid to walk alone near ~~their homes at night~~ (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001, p. 120). At the same time, there has been growing public concern about the role of the mass media—especially television—in promoting violence in American society. While public beliefs about crime and fear of victimization come from various sources, the media appear to play a substantial role in shaping these beliefs and fears. As one review concluded, the "evidence on public perceptions of crime and media distortion of crime news is strikingly corroborative" (Warr, 2000, p. 468). Most Americans identify the media as their primary source of information about crime—95% in one study (Graber, 1980, p. 50)—and the media may also be a major predictor of fear of personal victimization. This study examines the effect of several types of news consumption on citizens' fear of crime. The findings address four theoretical perspectives on the relationship between media and audience perceptions.

Theoretical Background

People's fear of crime may be influenced by several factors, including their personal victimization, city or neighborhood levels of crime, and mass media coverage of crime. Competing theoretical perspectives highlight different sources of fear. We begin by briefly describing two general approaches to fear of crime, and then turn to two more complex perspectives.

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One major approach—the real-world thesis—portrays fear of crime as largely or entirely shaped by objective conditions such as criminal victimization, neighborhood characteristics, or city-level crime rates. According to this perspective, the media play little or no role because media reports are typically far removed from the audience's everyday lives and often cover atypical, serious, or spectacular crimes, whereas personal victimization and crime conditions are more immediate and salient (Rubin, Perse, & Taylor, 1988; Tyler, 1984). Regarding victimization, some studies find that prior victimization is positively associated with fear (Skogan & Maxfield, 1981; Stafford & Galle, 1984; Tyler, 1984). Paradoxically, however, most find that persons who have the lowest victimization rates (such as women and the elderly) express the greatest fear of crime, whereas those with higher rates (e.g., young Black males) express less fear (Warr & Stafford, 1983). Regarding type of neighborhood, it appears that racial compositions of a neighborhood influences residents' fear, with residents of minority communities more likely to fear crime (Eschholz, Chiricos, & Gertz, 2003). Another neighborhood factor thought to influence fear is the amount of crime or disorder in the community (Covington & Taylor, 1991; LaGrange, Ferraro, & Supancic, 1997; Lewis & Maxfield, 1980). Disorder includes both signs of physical disorder (e.g., graffiti, abandoned cars) and low-level street deviance (rowdy youth, panhandlers, public drinking)—conditions that may cause residents to fear for their safety. One review concluded that “nearly all studies report a significant relationship between incivility [disorder] and fear of crime” (LaGrange et al., 1992, p. 313).

The role of the media is not considered in some of these studies, making it impossible to determine if the apparent real-world effects on fear of crime persist once media exposure is factored into the equation. In other studies that examine both real-world and media variables, some have found real-world effects, indicating that researchers should continue to test the real-world thesis.

The role of the media is the focus of the second major perspective—the cultivation thesis. This approach portrays the media world as very different from the real world, with the implication that heavy consumption of media messages distorts audience beliefs about the world and influences cognitive and emotional states (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; Morgan & Signorielli, 1990). In this view, the greater one's exposure to the media, the more likely it is that one's perceptions of the real world will match what is most frequently depicted in the media. With regard to crime, the media disproportionately report on violent crime (especially murder), largely neglect crime patterns, give little attention to the causes of crime, and leave the impression that crime is often random and inexplicable (Surette, 1998). This media world, especially television, differs greatly from the real world of crime and may cultivate a perception that the world is a scary place. Repeated exposure to media coverage of crime may thus generate fear and insecurity among viewers (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

While some empirical support exists for cultivation (Gerbner et al., 1980), critics—now including Gerbner himself—regard it as somewhat limited because it assumes that media messages have a uniform effect on audi-

ences. Audience characteristics (race, gender, age, etc.) and experiences (e.g., victimization) may play an important role in how media content is received. The field of communication studies has increasingly regarded the reception of media messages as a dynamic process in which viewers actively interpret and perhaps reconstruct those messages in light of their personal backgrounds and experiences (Dahlgren, 1988; Gunter, 1987). While relatively few studies of media and fear of crime examine audience characteristics, those that do have found that media messages are variably interpreted by persons with distinctive social characteristics (Eschholz, 1997; Heath & Gilbert, 1996).

Audience differences are central in two other approaches, which specify the conditions under which media messages may contribute to fear of crime. One approach—the substitution thesis—is a variant of the cultivation perspective that is sensitive to audience and contextual differences. The substitution thesis predicts that heavy exposure to media portrayals of crime has particularly strong effects on those with no direct experience of crime; for these individuals, media images of crime become a surrogate for real-world experience (Gunter, 1987). This view is consistent with the larger “proposition that media effects are most powerful for issues that are outside a subject's personal experience” (Surette, 1998, p. 205). Persons who are well insulated from crime (e.g., the affluent, the elderly, women, residents of low-crime communities) should therefore be more susceptible to crime messages in the media. Few empirical studies have tested the substitution thesis. One found that crime victims were not influenced by crime-related television viewing (television dramas and documentary programs), whereas nonvictims were, and developed greater fear of crime (Weaver & Wakshlag, 1986). In accordance with the substitution thesis, “greater exposure to exaggerated depictions of crime on television, in the absence of other more direct sources of information, may lead to the assimilation of elevated crime-related perceptions” (Weaver & Wakshlag, 1986, pp. 153–154).

A fourth perspective—the resonance thesis—predicts the opposite of the substitution thesis (Gerbner et al., 1980). The resonance thesis holds that when media images are consistent with lived experience (e.g., criminal victimization, residing in a high-crime community), media and experience mutually reinforce citizens' fear. As Eschholz (1997) writes, “individuals who live in high-crime areas may be particularly sensitive to crime on television because of their direct knowledge of a crime problem in their neighborhoods” (p. 47). Because many high-crime communities are predominantly African American and because African Americans are disproportionately victimized by crime, the resonance thesis would predict a stronger media-fear relationship among Blacks than among Whites (Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000). That is, exposure to crime news in the media, coupled with greater personal vulnerability or experience of neighborhood crime, should produce a heightened fear of crime among Blacks.

The resonance perspective is supported in a few studies. One found that fear increased with greater television watching, but only in high-crime neigh-

borhoods. Television exposure had no effect on fear in low-crime neighborhoods, leading to the conclusion that television only becomes salient when it interacts with neighborhood crime conditions (Doob & MacDonald, 1979). A similar finding is reported by Heath and Petraitis (1987), who studied the effect of exposure to television crime dramas. Viewing such programs increased fear for residents of high-crime but not low-crime neighborhoods in Chicago. Similarly, a study that examined the effect of city-level crime rates in 242 Florida cities found that local television news consumption had the strongest effect on fear in cities with high crime rates, lending further support to the resonance hypothesis (Chiricos et al., 2000). "These people receive a 'double dose' of messages that the world is violent," as Gerbner et al. (1980, p. 20) state, "and consequently show the strongest associations between viewing and fear."

If the media do influence fear of crime, there are reasons to expect that media effects will be strongest for those who are exposed to local television news, compared to other news sources. The following section indicates why this might be the case.

Disaggregating the Media

One problem with much of the literature on media and fear of crime is that most studies examine the effects of only one medium. The few studies that examine two or more media indicate that "the media" need to be disaggregated and examined separately and comparatively (Eschholz, 1997; Heath & Gilbert, 1996). In these studies, some media appear to influence consumers' perceptions, values, and concerns, while other media do not.

Why should this be the case? First, the style and content of reporting differs across the various media. Stylistically, television is a highly visual format, and seeing something on television may have a much stronger emotive impact than hearing about it on the radio or reading about it in the newspaper. Second, the resources available to different media vary considerably, which has implications for depth of investigation and for how news stories are packaged. Pressure for ratings and advertising revenue is greater for television news than for newspapers, which leads to a greater stress on marketable, shocking news in television (Chermak, 1995, p. 111). Third, some media sectors experience greater internal competition than others (e.g., several local television stations vs. one major newspaper in a city), which can lead to more crime coverage and more sensationalized coverage on television news (Chermak, 1995; Sheley & Atkins, 1981). Fourth, the audience is able to take a more active role in relation to some media than others. Newspaper and Internet readers exercise considerable selectivity in what they read, whereas television and radio news audiences are more passive and less selective in their reception of newscasts (Heath & Gilbert, 1996).

The research literature suggests that the different media vary in their capacity to influence audience feelings and beliefs. Only a couple of studies find that exposure to television crime dramas affects fear (Eschholz, 1997).

Regarding newspapers, some research finds that newspaper consumption increases readers' fear, but others find no such effect (Eschholz, 1997; Heath & Gilbert, 1996). Newspapers, however, vary significantly in the amount and quality of their coverage of crime. Readers of tabloids (which tend to be sensational) are much more likely than readers of broadsheet newspapers to perceive violent crime as being common and to feel unsafe walking alone at night (Williams & Dickinson, 1993). Similarly, fear is more strongly associated with reporting on crime in one's own city rather than elsewhere in the nation; in fact, "coverage of crime in other cities makes people feel safe by comparison" (Heath, 1984; Liska & Baccaglini, 1990, p. 372). In other words, "news of distant, sensationalistic, random crime allows people to reduce their anxiety about local crime by allowing them to compare themselves with others who are seen as worse off" (Surette, 1998, p. 208).

Most researchers study a single medium in isolation from others; very few compare two or more media. Single-medium studies are limited by their inability to determine whether some types of media are more consequential than others. The few existing comparative studies point to substantial variation in audience effects by media type, with some sources having greater effects on audience perceptions than others. A comparison of newspaper and television news consumption found that fear of crime increased only with exposure to television news (O'Keefe & Reid-Nash, 1987). Another study found that fear of crime increased with frequent exposure to television and radio news, but not to newspapers or television news magazines (e.g., *60 Minutes*) (Chiricos, Eschholz, & Gertz, 1997). A third study found a positive association between fear of crime and frequent exposure to local television news, crime dramas, tabloid shows (e.g., *Hardcopy*), and reality crime programs (e.g., *COPS*), but not to national television news or news magazines (Eschholz et al., 2003). One problem with these studies is that they only assess the frequency of exposure to each medium and neglect salience—that is, which medium is most important for the respondent. This is problematic when individuals, for example, watch both local and national television news and read newspapers, but form their impressions about crime based largely on one medium. Regardless of this shortcoming, it is noteworthy that the few studies comparing local and national television news find that fear increases with exposure to local but not to national television news (Barzagan, 1994; Chiricos et al., 2000; Eschholz et al., 2003; an exception is Gross and Aday's [2003] finding that neither medium affects fear).

In addition to the results of the latter studies, there are sound substantive reasons to expect local television news to have a stronger effect on perceptions than other types of news media. Local television news coverage is literally "close to home" for viewers,¹ whereas national television news stories tend to be far removed from viewers' everyday lives. Local television news also operates by the maxim, "If it bleeds, it leads." A 1997 study of 100 local television stations found that 72 began their evening newscasts with a crime story (Klite, Bardwell, & Saltzman, 1997). Approximately one-fourth of all

local television news stories deal with crime (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 1999, 2001), and, compared to newspapers and radio, local television news broadcasts are often televised live from crime scenes and presented in a graphic, sensational, or disturbing manner. The public sees this local television news reporting as believable. When asked in a 1996 Harris poll ($N = 3,004$) what percentage of local television evening news they "believed," the mean for a sample of Americans was 74%; the mean for national network television evening news was 69% (cited in Center for Media and Public Affairs, 1997). It is understandable, therefore, why local television news has been thought to have the most pronounced and ongoing effects on audience perceptions of crime, victimization, and criminal justice (Lipschultz & Hilt, 2002). Compared to other types of news media, local television news is both proximate to the audience and realistic. Other sources may satisfy either the proximity or realism test, but not both—i.e., national news (distant), crime dramas (fictional)—while others such as newspapers and radio programs lack the visual dimension of local television news.

In sum, the literature offers mixed support for the hypothesis that exposure to the media increases fear of crime. Findings vary by type of medium, by audience characteristics, and by the control variables examined (Eschholz, 1997; Heath & Gilbert, 1996). Yet, there are also a number of deficiencies and unanswered questions in the media-fear literature. Many studies fail to examine both real-world and media variables. In studying media and fear, it might seem obvious to control for crime (e.g., prior victimization, neighborhood crime conditions), but only a handful of researchers have done so. Analyses of two or more media are rare, but without comparative studies it is difficult to determine which media type has the strongest effect on audience perceptions. And, finally, few studies examine the effect of audience characteristics on the reception of news media reports, though some find that race, gender, and age influence the reception of media messages (Chiricos et al., 2000; Eschholz et al., 2003).

The present study builds on, and fills some gaps in, the literature by (1) examining several types of media genres (local television, national television, newspapers, radio, the Internet), (2) assessing whether demographic factors (e.g., race, gender) and real-world conditions (e.g., neighborhood crime, personal victimization) interact with media exposure to influence fear of crime, and (3) using two measures of media exposure—both frequency of consumption and salience (i.e., the "most important source of news" to respondents).²

The study will address the theoretical perspectives discussed above. Support for the real-world perspective would be found if objective crime conditions (i.e., personal victimization, neighborhood crime), but not media exposure, increase fear of crime.³ Support for cultivation would be found if media exposure (i.e., frequency or salience), but not real-world crime conditions, increases fear. Support for the substitution thesis would be found if fear of crime is heightened among individuals with high media exposure and low personal or neighborhood experience with crime. Support for resonance would be found if

fear of crime is increased among those with both high media exposure and personal and/or neighborhood experience of crime. The data analyzed in the present study do not permit an exhaustive test of these four perspectives, but the findings may be interpreted as evidence in support of one or another thesis.

Methods

Data for the study come from a telephone survey of 480 residents of Washington, DC.⁴ The survey was conducted in March–April 2001 by the Center for Survey Research at George Washington University. Random digit dialing was used to contact households. When a call was answered, an interviewer asked to speak to the "youngest male, 18 years or older, who is now at home." If no eligible male was present, the interviewer asked to speak with the "oldest female, 18 years or older, who is now at home." This selection technique has been used in Pew polling, and prior research has established that it produces more demographically representative samples than alternative techniques and also increases the proportion of attempted interviews that are completed (Keeter & Fisher, 1997; Srinivasan, Christiansen, & Tortora, 1996). The demographic characteristics of the sample, with comparable Washington, DC population data from the 2000 census in parentheses, are as follows: 57.7% Black (60%); 62.5% female (53%); median age 43 (35). The slight oversampling of female and older respondents is not uncommon in telephone surveys (Lavrakas, 1993).

Our dependent variable—fear of crime—has been operationalized in several ways in previous studies, including respondent's concern about crime or proxies for crime (e.g., safety concerns), perceived risk of victimization, and anxiety about being outside during the day or at night (Ferraro, 1995; Warr, 2000). Although some measures do not explicitly mention crime, crime is often implicit in the wording of the question, as it is in the present study. Our respondents were asked, "How comfortable are you walking alone at night within two or three blocks of your home? Are you very comfortable, somewhat comfortable, somewhat uncomfortable, or very uncomfortable?"⁵ Being "very uncomfortable" or "somewhat uncomfortable" are rough measures, in the present study, of concern about crime. People who feel uncomfortable are likely to be concerned with becoming a victim of crime. We recognize that such anxiety is not equivalent to fear of crime, but it arguably taps into emotional concerns about personal safety when "walking alone at night," and safety concern has often been used as a proxy for fear in other research (Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987). For instance, one of the most frequently asked fear-of-crime questions is the NCVS question, "How safe do you feel or would you feel being out alone in your neighborhood at night?"

In our sample, 36.5% ($N = 175$) stated they were very comfortable while walking alone at night near their homes, 30% ($N = 144$) were somewhat comfortable, 16% ($N = 77$) were somewhat uncomfortable, and 14.8% ($N = 71$) were very uncomfortable.

There are several problems or gaps in the literature that our research design addresses. One serious problem, mentioned earlier, is that prior studies on the relationship between media exposure and fear of crime have typically examined only one medium at a time. The present study incorporates several media (national and local television, newspapers, radio, and the Internet). Another design deficiency is the common practice of measuring respondents' overall exposure to a medium (e.g., newspapers) without considering the content of what people take in. Broad measures, such as overall exposure to a medium, may thus include people who watch the local news section of the newspaper or television viewers who watch the local news simply for sports or weather—thereby limiting their exposure to crime news. Our design specifically captures exposure to the news content of the media. A final problem is that researchers have measured media exposure solely in terms of frequency (e.g., hours of television watching, days of newspaper reading), and have not considered news source salience. To our knowledge, ours is the only study to use both frequency and salience measures (Potter & Chang, 1990).

Respondents were first asked how frequently, if ever, they: (1) "watch national evening news programs such as *World News Tonight* with Peter Jennings or cable news programs like CNN;" (2) "watch local television news for information other than weather and sports;" (3) "read the news or editorial sections of a daily newspaper;" (4) "listen to radio shows that invite listeners to call in to discuss current events, public issues, and politics;" and (5) "go online to get information on current events, public issues, and politics." Respondents were then asked: "What would you say is the most important source of news for you? Would you say it is national television news, local television news, daily newspapers, radio, or the Internet?" Not surprisingly, there was substantial variation in which medium was the most important news source for respondents with 19.2% of the sample answering national television, 30.2% local television, 26.7% daily newspapers, 7.1% radio, 12.3% Internet, and 3.1% "other medium." This distribution underscores the importance of disaggregating the media into subtypes when studying whether media exposure influences fear of crime; more than 20% of respondents indicated that the radio, Internet, or other medium—sources almost never examined in the literature—was most important. The question regarding respondents' most important source of news is the independent variable of primary interest in this study.⁷

Because some studies find that certain demographic attributes (such as gender and race) influence fear of crime, we include the following independent variables in our models: respondents' age (measured continuously), age² (because the slope for age is nonlinear), gender, race (Black, White, other race, with White as the omitted category), education (college graduate or not), family income (seven categories),⁸ and victimization by violent crime (ever) or property crime (in the past year). Respondents were asked: "Have you ever personally been a victim of a violent crime? By violent crime we mean, for example, assault, mugging, rape, or battery." Respondents were

also asked: "During the past year, have you personally been a victim of a property crime such as having your house or car broken into?"

Another variable of interest is perceived risk of criminal victimization. It has been argued that risk of crime and fear of crime are different constructs that may vary independently or be causally related. Risk of victimization is a cognitive perception whereas fear of crime is an affective state (Ferraro, 1995). This conceptual distinction is supported in research that treats risk of crime as an independent or control variable: a review of 20 studies found that perceived risk of crime was a predictor of fear of crime (Ferraro, 1995, p. 31; cf. Chiricos et al., 2000; Rountree & Land, 1996). The present study, accordingly, treats perceived risk of victimization as a possible predictor of fear, using three risk measures.⁹ Respondents were asked: "Now I am going to read you a list of items relating to safety risks to you and your family. Would you say that you and your family are at almost no risk, slight risk, moderate risk, or high risk from [violent crime/property crime/street drugs]?"¹⁰ Respondents may associate "risk from street drugs" with the violence surrounding street-level drug markets, concerns about children getting involved in the drug trade, or other by-products of street drug markets, such as disorderly behavior or intimidation of residents. Street-level drug use is among the "incivilities" that have been found to increase perceived risk and/or fear of crime among neighborhood residents (LaGrange et al., 1992; Lewis & Maxfield, 1980).

Finally, we control for the respondent's local crime conditions: violent crime rate (murder, rape, robbery, and assault) and property crime rate (burglary, larceny, auto theft, and arson). These rates are measured at the police district level, unlike some prior studies that measure crime at the city level (Chiricos et al., 2000). The respondent's zip code was matched to one of the seven police districts in Washington, DC whose crime rates vary significantly. The Metropolitan Police Department provided police district crime data for 2000, which we used to compute local violent and property crime rates.

Results

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for each independent variable and its bivariate correlation with fear of crime. Of importance are the significant positive relationships between frequency of exposure to local television news and fear ($R = .15$) and between local television as respondents' most important news source (i.e., salience) and fear ($R = .15$). No other news source is significantly positively correlated with fear, and some sources (daily newspapers, radio, Internet, and other medium) are negatively associated with fear. Other significant positive correlates include age and age² ($R = .14$, $.17$), female ($R = .21$), Black ($R = .24$), perceived risk of violent and property crime and street drugs ($R = .16$, $.17$, and $.18$), property crime victimization ($R = .18$), and the local violent crime rate ($R = .21$). Other significant negative correlates are college graduate and family income logged (both $R = -.14$). Sur-

prisingly, being a victim of violent crime is not significantly associated with fear of crime.

To further test the relationship between exposure to news media and fear of crime, the data are analyzed using OLS regression.¹¹ The first analyses assess whether local television news influences fear of crime, controlling for other factors, and compares local television news to the other types of news media. The second analyses examine the effects of local television news for Blacks and Whites separately, given the finding of race differences in previous research (Chiricos et al., 1997; Chiricos et al., 2000). The final analyses determine whether real-world factors (local crime rates, personal victimization) interact with local television news to affect fear of crime.¹²

Table 2 displays the results of the first regression analyses. Model 1 excludes all media types except local television to determine whether this media source, relative to all others combined, is significantly related to fear of crime. Results show that salience, but not frequency, of exposure to local television news is a significant predictor of fear. Those who list local television as their most important news source are significantly more fearful of crime ($\beta = .097$; $p < .05$). The relationship between salience of local television news and fear holds after controlling for the respondents' characteristics (age, race, gender, education, income), perceived risk of violent and property crime and street drugs, prior violent and property victimization, and local violent and property crime rates.

Turning to the other predictors, Model 1 shows that females ($\beta = .192$; $p < .001$) and Blacks ($\beta = .150$; $p < .05$) are more fearful. The negative coefficient for age and the positive coefficient for age² suggest that fear of crime initially decreases with age and then increases for older respondents, as one would predict. Those who believe that they are at a higher risk for property crime ($\beta = .128$; $p < .05$) as well as those who have been victims of property crime in the past year ($\beta = .154$; $p < .01$) are also more fearful. Finally, the local violent crime rate is significantly associated with increased fear ($\beta = .124$; $p < .05$) but violent victimization is not. The adjusted R^2 for the model is .20.¹³

Model 2 provides a more nuanced examination of the role of local television news relative to each of the other media types; in this model, local television is the omitted category. As such, one can assess whether those who

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Regression Model Variables

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.	r Fear	Description
Local TV	.30	.46	0	1	.15*	Local TV most important news source for R
National TV	.19	.39	0	1	.01	National TV most important news source for R

Daily Newspaper	.27	.44	0	1	-.06	Newspaper most important news source for R
Radio	.07	.26	0	1	-.05	Radio most important news source for R
Internet	.12	.33	0	1	-.05	Internet most important news source for R
Other Medium	.03	.17	0	1	-.12*	Other medium most important news source for R
Frequency Local TV	4.04	1.34	1	5	.15*	Frequency of watching local TV for R
Age	45.15	16.95	17	86	.14*	R's age
Age ²	2325.02	1668.59	289	7396	.17*	R's age squared
Female	.63	.49	0	1	.21*	R is female
Black	.58	.50	0	1	.24*	R is Black
Other Race	.11	.31	0	1	-.04	R is race other than Black or White
College Graduate	.41	.49	0	1	-.14*	R is college graduate
Family Income	10.55	.73	9	12	-.14*	R's family income logged
Risk Violent Crime	2.31	1.02	1	4	.16*	R's perceived risk for violent crime
Risk Property Crime	2.50	1.02	1	4	.17*	R's perceived risk for property crime
Risk Street Drugs	2.07	1.16	1	4	.18*	R's perceived risk for street drugs
Victim Violent Crime	.28	.45	0	1	-.01	R ever violent crime victim
Victim Property Crime	.22	.42	0	1	.18*	R property crime victim in past year
Local Violent Crime Rate	16.53	6.28	3.37	23.30	.21*	R's police district violent crime rate per 1,000
Local Property Crime Rate	61.93	33.01	36.77	136.20	-.04	R's police district property crime rate per 1,000

* $p < .05$

list, say, daily newspapers as their most important news source are less likely to be fearful, compared to those who list local television as their most important source.

Findings from Model 2 further support the effects of local television news on fear, but they also suggest that local television news significantly increases fear only when compared to certain other media sources. Those who identify

Table 2 Regression of Fear of Crime on News Media

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	Beta	b (SE)	Beta	b (SE)
Local TV most important news source	.097*	.222 (.107)	—	—
National TV most important news source	—	—	-.096*	-.264 (.139)
Daily newspapers most important news source	—	—	-.116*	-.277 (.127)
Radio most important news source	—	—	-.041	-.174 (.208)
Internet most important news source	—	—	-.026	-.081 (.167)
Other most important news source	—	—	-.107*	-.667 (.281)
Frequency local TV	.010	.008 (.040)	.010	.008 (.040)
Age	-.939***	-.060 (.017)	-.889**	-.057 (.017)
Age ²	1.079***	.0007 (.000)	1.041***	.0007 (.000)
Female	.192***	.419 (.098)	.190***	.414 (.098)
Black	.150*	.323 (.139)	.149*	.320 (.139)
Other Race	.040	.139 (.171)	.035	.120 (.172)
College Graduate	.045	.096 (.119)	.051	.109 (.119)
Family Income	-.036	-.052 (.071)	-.040	-.058 (.073)
Risk Violent Crime	.028	.029 (.057)	.018	.019 (.057)
Risk Property Crime	.128*	.133 (.052)	.130**	.136 (.052)
Risk Street Drugs	.085	.078 (.048)	.087	.080 (.048)
Victim Violent Crime	.015	.084 (.107)	.038	.090 (.107)
Victim Property Crime	.154**	.393 (.118)	.158**	.402 (.118)
Local Violent Crime Rate	.124*	.021 (.010)	.133*	.023 (.010)
Local Property Crime Rate	-.025	-.0008 (.002)	-.038	-.001 (.002)
Constant	2.161**	— (.795)	2.370**	— (.813)
Adjusted R ²	.200		.203	
N	433		433	

*p < .06 **p < .05 ***p < .01

national television as their most important news source are less likely to be fearful than those who select local television news ($\beta = -.096$; $p < .06$). The same is true for those who list daily newspapers as their most important news source ($\beta = -.116$; $p < .05$) as well as those who select the "other" category ($\beta = -.107$; $p < .05$). Those who list the radio or the Internet as their most important news source also tend to be less fearful than those who select local television, though the findings are not statistically significant.

To test the relative effects of each media source, we ran additional analyses (now shown here) where each source served as the omitted category. The findings show that, in comparison to the other types, no media source is significantly associated with fear of crime (that is, aside from local television news). The only significant finding is that, relative to those who mention the Internet as their most important news source, those whose most important news source is "other medium" are less likely to be fearful ($\beta = -.103$; $p < .05$).

Race and Local Television News

Consistent with previous research, we uncovered significant race effects, with Blacks being more fearful than Whites, even after controlling for other personal characteristics and prior victimization. Of interest is whether there are race differences in selection of the most important news source, and whether these differences help explain, in part, why Blacks are more fearful. An examination of the data reveals that 40.8% of Blacks in the sample report that local television is their most important news source, compared to only 11.2% of Whites (a plurality of Whites—37.1%—selected daily newspaper as their most important news source).

The resonance thesis would predict a significant interaction between consumption of local television news and membership in a group that has high vulnerability to crime (e.g., Blacks). The substitution thesis would predict an interaction for those who are not vulnerable to crime (e.g., Whites).

Results from regression analyses disaggregated by race are displayed in table 3. With the exception of the measure of salience of local television, predictors that were nonsignificant in all models are not shown in the table. The results confirm that local television news matters most for Blacks. Local television news is significantly related to fear of crime for Blacks ($\beta = .139$; $p < .05$) but not for Whites. This finding is underscored when considering that prior violent victimization and local violent and property crime rates matter less for Blacks than does local television news. Other predictors of fear for Blacks include age, being female, property crime victimization, and perceived risk for street drugs. For Whites, the single most important predictor of fear is the perception of being at risk for violent crime (but not actually having been a victim of violent crime). The effect of this variable is quite large ($\beta = .317$; $p < .01$). Although fewer of the predictors explain Whites' compared to Blacks' fear, the adjusted R² is much greater in the model for Whites (.239) than Blacks (.111).

Do demographic characteristics besides race interact with local television news to increase fear of crime? The substitution thesis predicts that the effects of media on fear will be greater for groups least vulnerable to victimization—women, the elderly, and the affluent. To test this thesis, we ran additional interaction analyses disaggregating the sample by gender, age, and income.¹⁴ The results reveal no interaction effects, and thus provide no support for the substitution thesis.

Crime and Local Television News

The final analyses examine the interactions between two possibly salient real-world characteristics and local television news exposure. The resonance thesis predicts that people who (1) live in neighborhoods with high violent crime rates or (2) have been personally victimized, and for whom local television is their most important news source, will be especially fearful of crime. Living in such neighborhoods or having been a crime victim is likely to affect residents' experiences, observations, or perceptions of crime, which may amplify the effect of local television news on fear.

First, we grouped respondents into low, medium, or high violent crime communities based on the violent crime rate of the police district in which they lived. Given the city's average violent crime rate of just over 15 violent crimes per 1,000 population, police districts whose rates were less than 14 were classified as low, those whose crime rates were between 14 and 19 were classified as medium, and those whose rates were greater than 19 were classified as high. The results from the interaction analyses are shown in the third, fourth, and fifth columns of table 3. In communities with high violent crime rates, the significant positive relationship between local television news and fear ($\beta = .150$; $p < .05$) indicates that—controlling for personal and other factors—people who live in such communities and who rely on local television as their most important news source are especially fearful of crime. Results from regression analyses for residents of communities with low levels of violent crime show that local television news does not affect fear of crime in such communities. Residents of communities with medium levels of violent crime are more likely to be fearful but the interaction is significant only at the $p < .10$ level.¹⁵ Other important correlates of fear in areas with high violent crime include age and age² ($\beta = -.906$, $p < .05$ and $\beta = .949$, $p < .05$), property crime victimization ($\beta = .248$, $p < .01$), and perceived risk for property crime ($\beta = .194$; $p < .05$). In neighborhoods with low violent crime rates, age and gender are the only significant predictors of fear.

Second, interaction analyses (not reported here) reveal that criminal victimization does not interact with local television news exposure to influence fear. This finding, like the earlier finding that property crime victimization, but not violent crime victimization, influences fear (see table 2) is inconsistent with the resonance perspective. But, as noted above, the literature is inconclusive regarding the association between victimization and fear of crime; some

Table 3 Regression of Fear of Crime on News Media for Subsamples

Variable	Blacks	Whites	Low	Medium	High
Beta	b	b	b	b	b
(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)	(SE)
most important news source	.139*	.313	.021	-.054	.300
	(.142)	(.142)	(.220)	(.305)	(.170)
Age	-.847*	-.057	-.069	-.141	-.062
	(.024)	(.024)	(.029)	(.049)	(.024)
Age ²	1.008**	.0007	.0007	.0006	.949*
	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)	(.000)
Female	.155*	.359	.440	.610	.128
	(.144)	(.144)	(.146)	(.226)	(.150)
Black	—	—	.101	.348	.121
			(.500)	(.500)	(.216)
College Graduate	.063	.166	-.122	-.264	-.064
	(.184)	(.184)	(.187)	(.259)	(.187)
Risk Violent Crime	-.058	-.061	.332	.197	-.047
	(.078)	(.078)	(.099)	(.136)	(.093)
Risk Property Crime	.103	.110	.111	.060	.125
	(.074)	(.074)	(.092)	(.126)	(.086)
Risk Street Drugs	.133	.120	-.079	-.084	.146
	(.063)	(.063)	(.086)	(.138)	(.078)
Victim	.183**	.507	.256	-.079	.305
	(.177)	(.177)	(.179)	(.297)	(.193)
Property Crime	2.557*	.111	.239	.196	.193
	(1.239)	(1.239)	(1.124)	(1.589)	(1.397)
Adjusted R ²	.253	.129	.065	.181	.187
N	253	129	65	181	187

* $p < .10$ ** $p < .05$ *** $p < .001$

studies find that victimization increases fear while other studies find no such relationship. In addition, the different effects of property vs. violent crime victimization in the present study may be explained, in part, by the time period for the question. Respondents were asked if they had ever been a victim of a violent crime. If earlier violent victimization, which may have occurred many years ago in other cities or states, is less salient for respondents than more recent victimization, then this would explain the nonsignificant relationship between violent victimization and fear. Still, we find some support for the resonance thesis in our findings on neighborhood crime effects.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that the media play a substantial role in shaping beliefs and fear of crime. We found that those who identify local television as their most important news source are more fearful compared to those who selected national television, daily newspapers, and "other medium." This is consistent with a body of literature described earlier in the paper, which predicts that local television news should have a particularly strong impact, compared to other media, on audience perceptions and fears. The results speak to the importance of disaggregating the media when studying its effect on audience perceptions. Similarly, the findings confirm the need to disaggregate audiences; media messages are not received in the same way by different people. Our analysis shows that media and real-world conditions have different effects on White and Black respondents and on respondents from communities with different levels of violent crime.

These findings bear on the four perspectives discussed earlier. The real-world, cultivation, substitution, and resonance theses predict different kinds of outcomes from exposure to the media. The real-world thesis holds that objective conditions trump media messages and that the latter have no appreciable impact on the values, beliefs, or fears of the audience. By contrast, the cultivation approach predicts that media messages overwhelm all other possible influences. The assumption is that heavy exposure to the media is such a powerful influence that it overshadows other factors, including audience characteristics or contextual variables. Both substitution and resonance assert that the impact of media messages is conditional, depending on whether those messages are consistent with audience members' experiences and living conditions, such as past victimization or neighborhood crime conditions. Substitution predicts that media messages will have the greatest effect on those who lack personal or neighborhood experience with crime, while resonance predicts the opposite.

For the total sample, the results show strong support for neither the cultivation nor the real-world thesis, because both media and real-world conditions influence fear (table 2). Furthermore, the interaction analyses suggest a more complex and conditional relationship among the media, real-world factors, and fear of crime (table 3). When the sample is broken down by race, the

findings lend support to both the resonance and the real-world theses, depending on the racial group. Whites' fear of crime is influenced not by the media but instead by their perceived risk of violent criminal victimization. Insofar as perceived risk can be considered a "real-world" indicator (see Footnote 3), the real-world thesis is partially supported for Whites, though other real-world factors such as personal victimization and risk of other types of crime are not significant.

Blacks are influenced both by local television news and by real-world conditions—namely, property crime victimization and perceived risk of street drugs to themselves and family members. That Blacks are concerned about street drugs is understandable in a city like Washington, DC, where street-level drug markets are concentrated in poor Black neighborhoods. For Blacks, the combined effect of local television news and the above crime factors provides support for the resonance thesis.

When the sample is disaggregated by neighborhood violent crime level, residents of communities with high violent crime rates are especially likely to be affected, in their fear of crime, by local television newscasts. By contrast, local television news exposure does not increase fear for residents of low violent-crime communities. The finding that local news effects are stronger for residents of high violent crime areas is consistent with findings from some previous studies (Chiricos et al., 2000; Doob & MacDonald, 1979; Heath & Petraitis, 1987), and lends further support to the resonance thesis.

No support is found for the substitution thesis, which predicts that groups that have a low victimization risk—women, the elderly, and the affluent—will be especially susceptible to media influences. In the interaction analyses disaggregated by each of these characteristics, local television news was not a significant predictor of fear.

There are three possible limitations of the study. The first has to do with the interpretation of the findings for the interaction analyses. It should be kept in mind that the interaction analyses did not yield statistically significant interracial and neighborhood differences, as reported in Footnote 13. That is, while the effect of local television news on fear of crime was significant for Blacks and not for Whites, the coefficients across the Black-White models were not statistically significantly different from each other. Similarly, while local television news was associated with increased fear in high violent crime areas but not in low violent crime areas, differences across the models were not statistically significant. These results, therefore, should be interpreted with caution.

Second, our measure of fear of crime differs from that employed in other studies, including those that operationalize fear as perceived "safety" or as being "afraid." We believe that our measure—level of comfort while walking alone at night near one's home—taps into the same emotional state as measures that ask about one's safety concerns and fear, but we also recognize that these variables are not equivalent. This means that similarities between our findings and those reported in some other studies must be qualified, even as

they point to a similar relationship between media and other factors in their influence on audience perceptions.

The third limitation has to do with generalizability. Although our results are limited to one city and therefore cannot be generalized to other contexts, we have no reason to expect that the nature of the city or its media would produce unique patterns in the findings. While the city's dominant newspaper, the *Washington Post*, gives somewhat more coverage to national political events than might be true for other cities, it also has plenty of local crime coverage. Also, despite being the nation's capital, local television newscasts in Washington focus almost exclusively on the city, and much of that reporting is crime related.

An unanswered question has to do with how the media, and local television news in particular, increase fear of crime. There is considerable speculation in the literature about this, but little research on the mechanisms involved—e.g., whether fear is triggered by the visual images portrayed, by a particular kind of (dramatic) story line, by the types of crimes most frequently covered, or by the episodic nature of the coverage, leaving the impression that crime is a random, unpredictable event. We know relatively little about how crime stories are interpreted, a question that could be explored with more qualitative and experimental research on audience reactions to media messages.

The finding that local television news is the medium with the greatest effect on fear, coupled with what we know about the selective and distorted presentation of crime on local television newscasts, raises some policy implications. Critics frequently argue for less sensationalized and more contextualized reporting, as well as for less coverage of atypical and predatory crimes and more coverage of corporate crime. An important policy question has to do with the role of media crime reporting on the public's preferences regarding crime control. The limited existing literature indicates that people who are "heavy viewers of television crime shows . . . are disposed to support the law enforcement system . . . and favor crime control over due process policies" (Surette, 1998, p. 213). The same may also be the case for heavy viewers of local television newscasts, but research is needed to determine whether exposure to television news has this same effect on crime policy preferences.

Notes

- 1 One study reported that 84% of local news coverage of crime dealt with local crime and the remainder dealt with crime elsewhere in the country (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2001).
- 2 A study using the same database tested only the frequency measure, neglecting the important issue of media salience (Gross & Aday, 2003).
- 3 One question is whether perceived risk of crime qualifies as indicative of real-world conditions or is purely a subjective assessment. Risk of crime may be viewed as a quasi-objective phenomenon, which is apt to be strongly associated with real neighborhood crime conditions or personal victimization, but is clearly more subjective than either of these.
- 4 These data are part of a larger survey of the greater Washington, DC metropolitan area (N = 921). For the entire sample, 8,199 phone numbers were called, 59% (N = 4,878) of which were reached. Of those, 42% were viable while the remaining numbers were either disconnected or were linked to businesses or fax machines. For numbers that were not initially reached, up to

five callbacks were made. The final response rate, defined as completed interviews / (completed interviews + refusals), was 45%. We use only the DC portion of the sample (N = 480) because neighborhood crime data were not available for the surrounding suburbs. Although we cannot calculate the response rate for just the DC sample (because the phone numbers were pooled), the Center for Survey Research has informed us that the response rate is likely to be very similar.

5 This variable is coded as 1 = "very comfortable," 2 = "somewhat comfortable," 3 = "somewhat uncomfortable," and 4 = "very uncomfortable."

6 Coding of this variable ranges from 1 to 5, with 1 = "never," 2 = "several times a month," 3 = "once or twice a week," 4 = "most days," and 5 = "every day."

7 Distinguishing between local and national news is not always simple. Most crime news stories carried on national news are "local" stories somewhere and more importantly, local newscasts sometimes report crime stories from elsewhere in the state or nation (16% of the time, see Footnote 1) that have no direct connection to the local news market (Chiricos et al., 2000, p. 764). While it is difficult to control for such overlap, the measures used in the present study clearly distinguish local from national television broadcasts. In reading the question on national television news, the interviewer stated: "We are interested in national news programs; this is different from the local news shows about the area where you live."

8 The log of this variable is used to correct for skewness.

9 A recent study using the same database unfortunately combined the three risk items with the fear measure to produce a fear of crime scale (Gross & Aday, 2003). In accordance with the literature, we treat risk of victimization and fear of crime as qualitatively distinct variables that should not be conflated because the former is a possible predictor of the latter.

10 This variable is coded as 1 = "almost no risk," 2 = "slight risk," 3 = "moderate risk," and 4 = "high risk."

11 Given the nature of the dependent variable, we also ran ordinal regression in SPSS, which allows one to model the dependence of a polytomous ordinal response on a set of predictors (see McCullagh, 1980). The results from these analyses were nearly identical to the results from the OLS analyses. For ease of interpretation, we report the OLS regression results. Results from the ordinal regression analyses are available from the authors upon request.

12 We considered using HLM to model contextual effects, but one important limitation of this approach is the rigid requirement concerning the size of the nested files. In order for HLM to operate successfully, the number of individual-level cases per aggregate unit must be sufficiently large; small numbers of cases make it difficult to obtain reliable measures, and aggregate units with too few cases are dropped in the analyses. Because of our relatively small sample size, there were too few cases per aggregate unit to successfully run HLM models.

13 Collinearity diagnostics suggest that there are no problems of multicollinearity in the regression analyses. None of the VIF scores were above the conventional threshold of 4.

14 Income was broken down into three categories based on the distribution of the variable. Low-income respondents were classified as having incomes of \$25,000 or less (N = 140), medium-income respondents \$25,001 to \$87,499 (N = 256), and high-income respondents \$87,500 or greater (N = 84). With regard to age, the sample was broken into three categories—young (ages 18–30, N = 116), middle-aged (ages 31–59, N = 253), and elderly (ages 60 and over, N = 100).

15 We used the equation $t = b_1 - b_2 / \sqrt{(SEb_1^2 + SEb_2^2)}$ (Paternoster, Brame, Mazerolle, & Piquero, 1998) to test whether the local television news coefficients were significantly different from one another across the models (i.e., Blacks vs. Whites and low violent crime neighborhoods vs. high violent crime neighborhoods). The results indicate that they are not significantly different at the $p < .05$ level.

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