

ARE REALITY TV CRIME SHOWS CONTINUING TO PERPETUATE *CRIME MYTHS?*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the portrayal of gender and race in the USA reality television program COPS. Fifty one police officers apprehending sixty perpetrators were content analyzed into four categories including race (of both officer and perpetrator), gender (of both officer and perpetrator), US Uniform Crime Report (UCR) type offense (type I or type II), as well as the specific type of crime depicted. The vast majority of police officers shown on COPS were white male (92%) and the majority of offenders were nonwhite males (62%). Black men were most likely to be shown engaging in a crime of burglary or theft or crimes involving drugs. Hispanic men were most likely to be involved in UCR Part I offenses; however, they were in a distinct minority on these episodes. On the other hand, the most likely scenario for white offenders is to be shown committing an alcohol related offense or causing, or being part of, a domestic disturbance. Few white women were included on the show. One was a police officer and among the other five, one was looking for a lost child and the others were picked up for a variety of relatively minor violations (driving under the influence, drug possession, stolen bike, animal disturbance). No minority women were shown on COPS during this period of evaluation - as either an officer or perpetrator of a crime. The authors argue that media images depicted in COPS are at odds with UCR official crime statistics and reinforce stereotypes and myths about the nature of crime in the United States.

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INTRODUCTION

There has been a considerable interest in how real “reality” television shows are as well as how such programming creates and reinforces gender and racial stereotypes (Cavender and Bond-Maupin 1993; Eschhotz et al 2002; Estep and Macdonald 1983; Oliver 1994; Prorise and Johnson 2004). Many researchers focus on crime-based reality television because this type of television programming blurs the line between entertainment and fact. Televised police offers are theoretically sent on real life calls to interact with actual criminals. More than two decades ago, Sheley and Ashkins (1981) documented that the officer and perpetrator most likely depicted on police television dramas was far from reality (see too Oliver 1994; Oliver and Armstrong 1998). Oliver (1994), in a content analysis of reality based police shows, found that white characters on these shows were more likely to be portrayed as police officers than perpetrators of crimes; whereas, black and Hispanic characters were more likely to be shown as criminals than police officers. If viewers appreciated that this was Hollywood entertainment albeit it docudrama, such images might not be so troublesome. However, as Prorise and Johnson (2004) write, most people report that their knowledge of crime, as well as their understanding of law enforcement generally, comes through the media rather than from direct experience (see too Oliver & Armstrong 1998).

This work analyzes differences in gender and racial portrayals of officers and perpetrators shown on the television crime reality show titled COPS. We note differences in representation of officers and perpetrators by gender, race, Uniform Crime Report (UCR) offense (type I vs. type II), as well as the specific type of crime depicted. We also look at

how accurately this compares to UCR crime statistics by race. We expect that white police officers will continue to be over-represented on COPS and that blacks will be over-represented as perpetrators of crime. Further, like others have observed, we expect that UCR Type I offenses (violent crimes) will get more airtime than Type II or property offenses (see Anderson 1994; Carmody 1998). We also expect that black men will be more likely than white or Hispanic men to be shown engaging in a violent crime.

Reality based television shows have gained such popularity in the United States that every major station has at least one reality based program. ABC has offered Average Joe, Extreme Makeover and the Apprentice; CBS featured the Survivor series; NBC ran Fear Factor, For Love or Money and the Bachelor series (Fox television contributed The Simple Life and Joe Millionaire). These shows often portray “average” citizens placed in extraordinary circumstances, situations they would not typically face in their ordinary routine. Despite such contradiction, this type of programming has drawn a strong audience. One sign of the significance of this television genre is the introduction of university classes designed to better understand this modern phenomenon.

In the 1990s, crime based reality television, including shows like COPS, were leaders in ratings (Coe 1994; Eschholz et al 2002). COPS premiered on the FOX network in March 1989 to critical acclaim and record ratings. The program continues to rank number one in its time period. The series has received four Emmy Award nominations and, in 1993, won the first American Television Award for best reality show (Audition Agency 2000). COPS brings the viewer into the arena of action as actual police officers are called out to

apprehend real life criminals. Because this show helped give rise to popular crime television dramas, it has been critically acclaimed, and because it is not geographically restricted (like LAPD: Life on the Beat), we chose COPS to explore gender and race stereotypes in one reality television crime drama.

Many researchers (Graber 1980; Oliver 1994; Prosis and Johnson 2004) note the overrepresentation of violent crimes, such as murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault (all UCR Type I offenses) on reality television. Nationally, approximately 29% of crime arrests make up violent crime; whereas, the vast majority of crimes the UCR tracks are property crimes (burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, arson, forgery, fraud, embezzlement, stolen property, weapons violations, sex offenses, gambling and drug offense violations) (U.S. Department of Justice 2003).

Race-specific arrest *rates* for nonwhites are higher than for whites for both violent and property crimes (510.2 for all other races vs. 164.7 for whites for violent crimes in 2001 with an average of 230.9 for all races; and 1,024.7 vs. 450.4 respectively for property crimes with an overall average of 560.4) (U.S. Department of Justice 2003). Clearly, of those arrested, nonwhites are over-represented in official UCR crime statistics data. Criminologists and sociologists have long debated how representative arrest data is of crimes actually committed (Hanby, 2005; Geekan 1994). The question we want to better understand is this: *given official arrest data, do reality television programs dramatize this race difference in their programming?* In other words, are minority men, black men in particular, more likely to show up on COPS as perpetrators of crime to an extent that

we know is unrepresentative even of the considerable race and ethnic biases that are reflected in the official crime statistics? We are also curious about how women perpetrators are depicted on televised crime drama. Little research addresses this concern. While female officers are in a distinct minority nationally, we expect that their representation on televised crime drama will be even lower. In 2000, in cities with a population over 250,000, women comprised 16.3% of the police force (up from 12.1% in 1990) (U.S. Department of Justice 2003). These questions merit further investigation, in part, because the stereotypes we hold, which are nurtured by images on reality television, may well shape actions taken. Thus, Prosis and Johnson (2004) suggest that televised imagery on crime based reality television implicitly builds support for controversial police practices like racial profiling. If viewers continually see minority men depicted as perpetrators of crime, then public support for suspecting these men as possible criminals is established. Thus, as Rogers (2000) notes, although blacks comprise about 13% of the population in the United States, they make up almost three-fourths of all routine traffic stops.

Carmody (1998), Fishman (1999) and Kappeler et al (1996) have argued that crime based reality television reinforces myths of crime and law enforcement. The primary myth is that black men commit more crime than others, which leads to fears of being victimized by African-American men (see Oliver and Armstrong 1998; Robinson 2000). Crime based television programming does not aim to educate the general public about criminological and sociological theoretical understandings of crime causation which are based on the recognition that crime is not primarily the result of *crazed individuals*. It

does not make for good entertainment to explain to audiences that crime rates are heavily influenced by social and economic conditions. Thus, it is important to track the types of crimes depicted in such crime based reality television shows, as well as how the perpetrators of these crimes are portrayed. Finally, Oliver and Armstrong (1998) argue that such shows reinforce fears of being a victim of violent crime by over-representing the occurrence of violent crime in the society. This is especially troublesome, perhaps, in light of the fact that violent crimes have generally declined in the past ten years (see too Merlo & Buenos 2000; Oliver 1994).

METHODS

Our analysis rests on a content analysis of the television drama COPS. During a week in June 2004, we taped all of the half-hour television episodes of this program resulting in eight hours of airtime. These episodes included fifty-two different police officer and perpetrator combinations. Our unit of analysis was the character and we coded the race and gender of the police officer and the perpetrator. We defined the police officer as the individual who was driving the squad car that included the camera crew. The perpetrator was the individual the police officer was called out to apprehend or the person the police officer approached during normal duties. If a police officer apprehended more than one perpetrator while out on a single call, the characteristics of each perpetrator were recorded. The race of both the officer and the perpetrator were coded as either white or nonwhite (we did distinguish between African Americans and Hispanics). This is in line with how the UCR data is recorded. The type of crime committed was coded as either a UCR Part I offense (murder, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny-theft (over \$500), motor vehicle theft and arson. Part II UCR offenses include all other crimes.

RESULTS

In our eight hours of programming, we noted the presence of 50 police officers and 61 perpetrators. The majority of the characters shown were white (62% of all characters on the show) and most of these characters (67%) were portrayed as police officers. Among our nonwhite characters on COPS, the vast majority (90%) were shown as crime perpetrators. Virtually all (93%) of the black and Hispanic (83%) characters on these episodes were offenders. We found a significant difference in the representation of type of character portrayed (officer vs. perpetrator) and the race of the individual (whether that was recorded as white and all others or white, African-American and Hispanic) ($\chi^2 = 34.78$; $p = <.0001$). Virtually all of the police officers shown (92%) were whites (4% were black and another 4% were Hispanic). A little over a third of all offenders shown were whites (38%). The most likely offender was black (45% of all offenders).

The vast majority of the characters on COPS were male (94%). We recorded one white female officer among six women shown on these episodes of COPS. One female officer, out of the fifty officers shown on eight hours of network programming, leaves the televised representation of female officers at odds with their actual proportion in police forces nationally. The vast majority of women on COPS were depicted as offenders not officers. There were no minority women characters on these episodes whether officer or perpetrator.

Table 1. UCR Offenses Committed on COPS among Male Characters by Race

	Racial Ethnic Group			N
	White	African-American	Hispanic	
Type I Offense	7 39%	18 64%	7 70%	33
Type II Offense	11 61%	10 36%	3 30%	28
N	18 100%	28 100%	10 100%	

Most (54%) of the crimes shown on COPS were UCR Part I offenses. Most (55%) of the perpetrators of these crimes were African-American men; while, white and Hispanic men committed another 21% each. Among African-American perpetrators shown on these episodes, 64% were shown committing UCR Part I offenses. The most common offenses shown were burglary and grand theft. There was one murder committed, by a black man, during this period of programming. Of Part II UCR offenses committed by black men, most were possession of drugs, domestic disturbances or soliciting a prostitute. When white offenders were apprehended, they were most likely (61%) involved in a UCR Part II offense. Interestingly, the most likely offense for these men is related to cars and alcohol (DUI, drag racing, and two were driving with a suspended license). Drinking in public, drug possession and domestic disturbances round out the offenses that white men tended to find themselves in trouble for committing. While Part I UCR crimes among black offenders on these episodes tended to be burglary and grand theft, white men were shown in a variety of situations (aggravated assault, vehicular battery, felony fleeing).

Even though there were fewer Hispanic men on these episodes, and only ten portrayed as offenders, than African-American or white men, when they appeared Hispanic men were most likely (70% of the time) to be shown committing a Part I UCR offense (felony fleeing, evading arrest, grand theft). When women were shown as perpetrators, they were white and most likely (80% of time) engaging in a Part II UCR offense (possession of drugs, DUI, animal disturbance).

We expected our data to show that black men were over-represented as perpetrators of crime. In the COPS episodes analyzed, this pattern holds. Black men are shown most often as violent offenders and viewers see little representation of black men as police officers. Women are under-represented as either police officers or offenders. As expected, UCR type I offenses were over-represented on COPS.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our data support the hypothesis that police officers on television crime based drama continue to be depicted as white males; perpetrators of crime were most likely black males. When African-American characters were shown, they were portrayed as offenders 93% of the time. Most of the characters on these shows were white and their most likely role is to appear as a police officer (67% of the time). Only one of the 50 officers observed was a non-white female. No other minority women appeared as police officers. Even fewer (4 overall) of the perpetrators were women. Thus, women were not featured in a major role of any type on COPS. Ten of sixty-one offenders shown were Hispanic men, which put them in a minority role on this show. When shown offending, Hispanic men were most likely engaged in UCR Part I offenses. This pattern holds for black offenders as well. Only among white offenders were crime perpetrators shown primarily engaging in UCR Part II offenses.

If televised images on crime based “reality” television shape the public perception of who commits crime, as well as what types of crime they tend to commit, then “reality” television is doing a poor job relating the facts. If one based their understanding of crime, law and law enforcement on “reality” television, one would believe that virtually all police officers are white men. They would also believe that black men committed most crimes as well as the most serious ones. Hispanic men might be perceived as a threat because, even though their representation is low, the types of crimes they commit are more serious ones (Type I offenses vs. Type II URC offenses). White men, one might imagine, engage in what might be perceived as less serious offenses (including being drunk in public, driving with a suspended license and drag racing). One would

have to recognize that white men did commit some serious crimes, such as assault and battery, but it would not seem like all that much comparatively. Finally, women would not be perceived as either police officers or crime victims. On COPS, the few less serious offenses women engage in get lost in the midst of all those other crimes being committed by men. Neither should one forget that most of the crimes that are committed are serious offenses. Luckily, police officers appear rather efficient at quickly and entertainingly wrapping up problems of crime.

Knowing that COPS has received critical acclaim as one of the best crime dramas on television, one does not have to wonder long why myths about crime persist in the United States. The big myth, as noted earlier, is that black men are the typical offender, that black offenders are most likely engaged in serious offenses and that offenders break the law for reasons known only (usually) to themselves (certainly one does not appreciate any larger structural problems that may shape the incidence and pattern of criminal activity). If one is interested in women and crime, reality based television dramas like COPS are at a loss to provide any understanding of this issue. Women, as either officers or perpetrators, are largely ignored on COPS.

Still, it was surprising to us that crime myths continue to be portrayed in such starkness on COPS. We did not expect to observe as biased a representation of either race or gender on this critically acclaimed series in the early part of the twenty-first century. It was not surprising to see an over-representation of UCR Part I offenses depicted on COPS. Future researchers must continue to track race and gender representation of

police officers and offenders in televised crime dramas. If these shows shape public views about crime, it is important to understand what kind of images viewers tune into each week.

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