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# *THE UNREALITY OF "REALITY-BASED" POLICING: AMERICAN TELEVISION, IMAGES OF CRIME AND LAW ENFORCEMENT*

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# The Unreality of "Reality-Based" Policing: American Television, Images of Crime and Law Enforcement

by
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## *ABSTRACT*

The American television show *COPS* has been the precursor for what is rapidly becoming an expanding form of popular television programming. This quasi-documentary-styled television show contains a combination of both news and entertainment formats.

The main purpose of this thesis is to assess the degree to which this so-called "reality-based" television police program reflects "real-life" or typical representations of crime and police work in the United States. This study critically examines and draws attention to the many biases, stereotypes, inaccuracies, and distortions contained in "reality-based" television depictions of crime and policing.

The study is based on a media content analysis of thirty-six episodes of *COPS*, airing over a period of six months during 1993. These thirty-six television episodes can be further broken down into 123 individual cases or incidents to which police responded. Official crime statistics serve as the primary benchmark for comparison to the television episodes. Likewise, the television results are compared with the findings of selected academic studies. The analysis probes several key areas including: the types of crime portrayed on television; the manner in which police work is depicted; the racial and gender make-up of police officers, suspects, and victims appearing on the program; solution or clearance rates for television crimes.

The method of observation and measurement for the television police shows was content analysis. Between January 1, 1993, and June 31, 1993, episodes of the program were video-recorded weekly. Data were then coded according to predetermined categories as set out in the coding instrument developed by the author.

Among some of the findings, it was found that: (a) the television shows overemphasized violent "street" crimes such as aggravated assault, robbery, and murder, while under-representing property crimes such as theft; (b) very rarely, did the television crimes go unsolved; in real life, however, crime often goes undetected, unreported, unrecorded, and/or unsolved; (c) less than ten percent of the total incidents shown on *COPS* dealt with non-criminal calls; this television finding runs contrary to the findings of time-use studies which suggest that much of the police officer's time is spent conducting routine traffic patrols, completing paperwork, responding to traffic accidents and animal complaints, and responding to other incidents of a non-criminal nature.

These television shows are by no means veridical accounts of reality. Rather, they are social constructions created by the television industry. As demonstrated throughout the study, the television images of crime and policing have little to do with the realities or complexities of crime and police work.

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# *TABLE OF CONTENTS*

# *LIST OF TABLES*

**Page Number**

# *I*

# *INTRODUCTION*

Questions have arisen as to the extent to which television presents accurate representations of crime and justice. The main purpose of this thesis is to assess the degree to which so-called "reality-based" television police shows reflect "real-life" representations of crime and police work in the United States. That is, do these television programs present typical images of crime and policing, or do they in fact contain stereotypes and highly distorted, sensational representations?

This thesis is based on a media content analysis of thirty-six episodes of the American "reality-based" television police show *COPS*, airing over a period of six months during 1993. For the purposes of this thesis, official data sources, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Crime Index, serve as the benchmarks for comparison to the television shows. Likewise, the television results are compared with the findings of selected criminological and police science studies.

The primary research question is as follows: **To what degree is the overall portrayal of crime and police work in the television shows *different* from that of the crime and policing situation suggested by official statistics and social scientific studies?**

To begin to answer this fundamental question, the analysis probes several key areas including:

- What types of crime are portrayed in "reality-based" television police programs? For instance, are they predominantly violent "street" crimes such as murder, armed robbery, aggravated assault, or rape? Are they so-called "victimless" crimes such as prostitution or drug-dealing? Or, are they "white-collar" crimes such as embezzlement, insider-trading or corporate fraud? Have the crimes of the rich and powerful been understated or excluded altogether?

- What percentage of the police officers represented in "reality-based" television programs such as *COPS* are women or members of visible minorities? In turn, how

does this compare to the gender and racial make-up of police departments on a national level as indicated by official data sources?

- What percentage of the victims and criminal suspects portrayed in the television episodes are male, female, caucasian, black, Hispanic, oriental, or Native American? How do these figures compare with what is known from official statistics?

- At the conclusion of each criminal incident, is a suspect apprehended and subsequently charged by police? How does this compare to actual clearance rates for American police departments nationwide?

At this juncture, a clarification is in order. It is important to distinguish between fictional crime-police dramas and "reality-based" television police shows. The term *"reality-based"* is a fairly recent one in the context of television programming; to the best of my knowledge, there is no one definitive meaning. It is reasonable to assume, however, that if something is described as *"reality-based"*, or claims to be such, then one would infer an accurate, objective, factual account. A principal goal of this thesis is to ascertain the validity of the term when referring to television police shows of this particular genre. Thus, quotations are used around the term throughout the entire thesis.

## *OVERVIEW*

As previously stated, one of the main purposes of this thesis is to examine and draw attention to any ambiguities, inconsistencies, or misrepresentations in selected "reality-based" television depictions of crime and police work.

This topic was chosen for several reasons. First, as Reiner (1992: 171) suggests, "Mass-media images of the police [and crime] are of central importance in understanding the political significance and role of policing" in society.

Secondly, previous research conducted specifically in the area of "reality-based" television police programs is quite scarce. To date, the majority of criminological and

mass media research conducted on the relationship between television programming and the police has primarily focused on how police are presented in the news media (see Garofalo, 1981; and also Ericson *et al.*, 1987, 1989, 1991), and to a lesser extent, fictional television portrayals of the police (see Sparks, 1992). American "reality-based" television police shows, on the other hand, are a relatively recent phenomenon, first appearing in the late 1980s. To the best of my knowledge, only one scholarly investigation has been undertaken with this new category, or genre, of television cop shows (see Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994); but, even this analysis is limited since it only includes a particular type of "reality-based" television police program, i.e. *Crime Stoppers*. Perhaps the present study can begin to fill the gap in the literature.

In the spirit and tradition of such classic academic studies on crime and the media as Cohen and Young's *The Manufacture of News: Social Problems, Deviance, and the Mass Media* (1973), Dominick's *Crime and Law Enforcement on Prime-Time Television* (1973), and Garofalo's *Crime and the Mass Media* (1981), or more recent works such as Surette's *Media, Crime and Criminal Justice: Images and Realities* (1992), Sparks' *Television and the Drama of Crime: Moral Tales and the Place of Crime in Public Life* (1992), and Barak's *Media, Process, and the Social Construction of Crime* (1995), this thesis explores the presentations of crime and policing by a politically and culturally constituted television industry. Like those scholarly works that precede this one, similar conclusions are reached about the prevalent biases, stereotypes, and distortions to be found in sensational portrayals of crime, police work, and issues related to law-and-order (Barak, 1995: xi).

Another goal of this study is to instill in the reader a general awareness of the importance of being critical when observing and evaluating television police shows — or any television program for that matter. Television images of crime and policing should not go unchallenged; more importantly, they should not be taken at face-value.

**Chapter Two** begins by giving the reader a brief background to the world of television. Just what kind of influence (if any) do television police shows actually have on public opinion and criminal justice policy? Is fear of crime or confidence in local police influenced by television presentations of crime and policing?

Questions such as whether or not the levels of violent interpersonal crime shown on "reality-based" television police programs "might 'cultivate' widespread fear, bring about imitative behaviour or a deadening of public sensibilities" (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994: 187) are legitimate and important, but beyond the scope of this analysis. I would, however, have to agree with Sparks' (1992: xii) commentary that, "Criminology has gone on far too long without analysing in detail the impact of these prevalent, entertaining and popular moral tales upon recurrent public images of criminality and policing, *and* upon young police officers racing around in their fast cars." What people actually *do* with television images (whether based in fact or fiction) is certainly a topic worthy of further study.

This lack of attention devoted to the 'effects' of television violence and program content on behaviour seems to correspond with the current trend in the fields of criminology and mass media research, as identified by the literature review. Sparks (1992: 6) notes that, in recent years, there appears to have been a fundamental shift in the focus of attention within the area of crime, justice, and the media. He has observed that

the focus appears to have moved from a preoccupation with the 'effects' of viewing on behaviour towards a more general concern in the viewer's mediated experience of crime, criminal justice, and law enforcement through the medium of television.

This chapter also describes several previous media content analysis studies conducted in the area of crime and justice and lists some of their findings with respect to how media coverage of crime distorts the nature and frequency of crime, especially violent crime.

**Chapter Three** describes the methodology used in this study. The two primary sources of data, i.e. the television shows and official statistics, will be explained in greater detail. Some advantages and inherent limitations of each data source will also be discussed.

This chapter provides the reader with an introduction into the process of media content analysis. The instrument used to code the contents of the television programs is also examined.

It should be noted that this study is not entirely quantitative in its approach and presentation. That is, an interpretive approach is also utilized whereby an attempt is made to understand the phenomenon being studied through both interpretation and imagination. As well, an interpretive approach assists in the sorting out the *meaning* of what has been seen and heard on the various television episodes analyzed. For example, one of the ancillary research questions put forth in this thesis concerns *how* police officers who are women and/or racial minorities are portrayed. I am not convinced that a purely quantitative study could address such a complex issue.

**Chapter Four** displays the findings of the content analysis of the thirty-six *COPS* episodes. Using official sources of data and key criminological findings, I attempt to illustrate crime and policing trends as they occur in American society. I then go on to compare the images portrayed on *COPS* with what occurs in "real-life." Possible explanations as to why distortions may exist are explored in the next chapter.

**Chapter Five** provides a discussion of the content and format of "reality-based" television police programs.

If we as television viewers restrict ourselves to what appears in the television shows, this clearly does not tell us much about the intricate *process* whereby it comes to be there (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994: 26). As an approach used on its own, content analysis faces the unavoidable limitation of only being able to make inferences based on external factors or variables about the editing and production processes (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994: 28). Therefore, to begin to better understand these processes, I have included a discussion of an article written by Debra Seagal (1993), an ex-producer of the "reality-based" television police program *American Detective*. She provides us with a revealing account of the inner workings and trade secrets behind so-called "reality-based" television programming. Behind-the-scenes production and editing techniques are just that — they are not transparent. From Seagal's vantage-point, however, she is able to shed some much needed light on the subject. One can only assume that Seagal probably had her own personal reasons for "exposing" the show's format and content; nevertheless, her testimonial was verified by some raw footage and an investigative report which aired on one of the major American television networks in 1994.

**Chapter Six** concludes the thesis and discusses some implications of the findings.

# *II*

# *THE MEDIUM OF TELEVISION*

## The Medium of Television

Television is undeniably one of the most powerful, influential and pervasive mediums for the communication of ideas and information in society. It is a firmly established element of North American life as demonstrated by the high percentage of residences in the United States that own them and the amount of time spent watching them. In fact, "the average American now watches over 40 hours of TV a week and the average household keeps a set turned on for over 7 hours a day" (Lichter *et al.*, 1994: back flap; see also Morgan and Signorielli, 1990: 13).

Understanding the potential impact of television is crucial to appreciating the significance of this study's findings. The old adage that 'one picture is worth a thousand words' does not even begin to describe what kind of audiovisual impact television can have on individuals.

For many viewers, television's seemingly simple format is both appealing and entertaining. For some, television's format is quite convenient in that it requires little effort to process the information in addition to presenting information in both visual and audio terms (Nelson, 1989: 2). The collage of visuals and sounds are assembled and packaged in such a way so that the end product is a coherent form for viewers to easily digest — little or no thinking required.

"Information in the U.S. mass media often takes the form of entertainment, which draws the largest audiences and is therefore the most profitable. In trying to make all of their message entertaining, however, the media may trivialize serious subjects" (Strate, 1992: 9). For instance, complex issues such as crime, poverty, mental illness and racism are often reduced to simple, prepackaged television episodes. As a consequence of these

simplistic and/or incomplete analyses, misleading perceptions may be created which can potentially affect people's fear of crime and violence.

## Television, Public Opinion and Public Policy

The notion that television can directly (or indirectly) influence public opinion, affect criminal justice decision-making, and influence criminal justice policy, is an area worth exploring further.

For decades, researchers have been asking the seemingly simple question, What does television do to the viewer? "Yet, as numerous communication scholars have found, the questions are complex and the answers are neither simple nor straightforward" (Morgan and Signorielli, 1990: 14).

As a starting point, I would direct the reader to the work of George Gerbner and his associates (see Gerbner and Gross, 1976; Gerber et al., 1986; Signorielli, 1990). Their work offers an important theoretical foundation for understanding the function of television in the social construction of reality.

Cultivation analysis is one approach which seeks to study the impacts and functions of television. This research paradigm is particularly interested in assessing the contributions of television viewing to the audience's conceptions of social reality (see Morgan and Signorielli, 1990).

Cultivation analyses conducted to date suggest that, "Television viewing usually relates in different but consistent ways to different groups' life situations and world views" (Morgan and Signorielli, 1990: 21). Further, there appears to be a "general (though not universal) acceptance of the conclusion that there are statistical relationships between how much people watch television and what they think and do; there is far less

consensus on a host of related questions and problems" (Morgan and Signorielli, 1990: 25). Over the past two decades or so, media researchers have uncovered a consistent societal-link between television exposure and a person's beliefs and attitudes with respect to crime and justice (Perse,1990: 51).

Indeed, a complicated relationship exists between the kinds of images, ideas, and messages that are disseminated through the mass media and what people actually come to believe. One would not wish to suggest that all members of the television audience passively, unknowingly, and/or uncritically absorb *all* that they see and hear (Soothill and Walby, 1991: 14). If people react to things as they perceive them, then, one can assume that different groups of viewers may perceive the same television program in radically different ways. Keep in mind, however, that, "film and video lend themselves to distortion and ambiguity because they appear so patently to extend the audience's own senses directly" (Bogart, 1995: 203).

Indeed, television possesses a universal dimension or quality which has an almost intrinsic or mesmerizing power over people. In fact, some experts believe that some television programming "can captivate an audience to such an extent that it can influence public opinion" and go on to influence public policy (Nelson, 1989: 2).

To be sure, this is a highly contentious issue. Exactly what kinds of 'effects' television images of crime have on audiences (e.g. television violence on behaviour) has been, and continues to be, vigorously debated by academics and criminal justice practitioners alike. Some research suggests that the audience can indeed be highly discriminating when it comes to taking television images of crime and justice and being able to separate what is real from what is make-believe (Gunter, 1987: 49).

Nonetheless, these assumptions are primarily based on studies conducted in the area of fictional, and not "reality-based," television programming. Both the content and format of "reality-based" television shows contribute to the lines being blurred with respect to what is factual and what is fictional. As a result, some television viewers may become confused or perhaps misled about what they are watching.

It is true that people receive information about issues related to crime and the criminal justice system (particularly the police) from a variety of sources. These include the mass media, family, peers, school, work, and personal experience.

For many people, however, television and other media of popular culture are probably the primary sources of knowledge on crime and justice issues. In her seminal study, Graber (1980) found that 95 percent of her respondents felt that the media was their primary source of information with respect to crime and justice.

"Because relatively few people have extensive direct experience with crime [or direct contact with the police], it seems reasonable to assume that the public's mental images of crime — as well as criminals, victims, and criminal justice — are shaped, to a great extent, by the mass media" (Garofalo, 1981: 334). Similarly, Surette (1990: 7) asserts that, "Since the majority of people have little direct experience with crime, it is argued that the media will be a significant source in forming public attitudes and perceptions concerning crime and justice." To compensate for a lack of direct personal experience, many people will go on to use information obtained from the mass media, "to construct a picture of the world, an image of reality on which they then base their actions" (Surette, 1992: 2).

Because television — including both news and entertainment programming — is the primary source of information on crime and justice issues for many Americans, the presence of social and/or political biases in television program content may have profound effects. What kinds of effects could television presentations of crime and police work possibly have on viewers? Murdock (1982: 104) argues that inaccurate television depictions of crime and policing could quite possibly serve to feed "people's fears about the collapse of law and order and enlist their support for reactive control policies, more repressive laws and further restrictions on civil liberties."

At first glance, the foregoing statement might seem far-fetched or perhaps even absurd. But is it? The influence of television on members of society should not be underestimated nor be easily dismissed. One must keep in mind that television is so intrinsically woven into the daily lives of North Americans that its compelling presence is inevitably felt in public opinion, criminal justice policy, and criminal justice decision-making.

"In terms of the criminal justice system, the media has been credited with a number of public policy effects such as . . . affecting police recruitment, influencing investigation procedures to match media-induced public expectations, and decreasing the support for civil liberties" (Surette, 1990: 7; see also Stern, 1990). Some of these issues will be discussed in later sections.

## The Changing Structure of the Television Industry

For decades, the three largest national television networks in the United States have been the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), and the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC).

These three major networks continue to exercise extensive power in the television world. Yet, increasingly, their influence over the viewer market seems to be challenged by a growing system of smaller networks and specialty channels. For example, by 1990, "[Rupert] Murdoch's Fox group — 7 stations plus 126 independent affiliates — presented a serious challenge to the old network hegemony. Fox could now reach over 90 percent of American television viewers, with offbeat programming designed to attract the younger audiences that had begun to desert the more staid Big Three network presentations" (Bergreen, 1992: 29).

One of the new offbeat programs to come from Fox in the late 1980s was a show called *COPS*. This now syndicated "reality-based" television police show has been the precursor of what is rapidly becoming an expanding form of popular television programming.

## The Evolution of Television Police Dramas

Over the past fifty years of so, hundreds of television police-crime dramas have come and gone. Some of the more popular programs from the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. *Columbo*, *Police Story*, *Hill Street Blues*) have endured the test of time and are now in syndication all over the world.

Certainly, television viewers have witnessed a transformation in the types of police programs televised on American networks. Indeed, both the content and format of today's shows are quite diverse in nature and appeal to a wide range of audiences. For the most part, the majority of television cop shows, past and present, have been fictional in nature. For example, some shows are specifically devoted to federal law enforcement agencies (e.g. *The Marshal*; *Feds*) while others deal with smaller municipal police

departments (e.g. *In the Heat of the Night*; *High Incident*). Some programs emphasize policing at the street or "grassroots" level (e.g. *Hill Street Blues*; *Adam-12*) while others focus on highly specialized areas such as homicide (e.g. *Homicide: Life on the Streets*; *NYPD Blue*), forensic sciences (e.g. *Quincy, M.E.*; *Cosby Mysteries*) or behavioural sciences (e.g. *The Profiler*; *Millennium*).

Not all of the television shows involve traditional portrayals of crime and law enforcement. Non-traditional presentations range from images of lawmen of yesteryear (e.g. *Bordertown*) to images of futuristic policing (e.g. *Robocop: The Series*; *Alien Nation*; *Space Precinct*).

One of the more interesting programs found on television today, in my opinion, is a science-fiction show called *The X-Files*. The two main protagonists are Special Agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully. The show revolves around the unusual case files of the two FBI agents, who are the sole members of a special unit that investigates, among other things, unexplained phenomena and government conspiracies.

The popularity of television cop shows does not appear to be diminishing. In 1993, the *New York Times* conducted a study comparing the most common jobs on American television programs versus real-life (*T.V. Guide*, 1993: 5). Not surprisingly, the police officer was the number one career portrayed on television (see Table 2.1).

**TABLE 2.1 - *T.V. Guide* Comparison Study**

| Jobs on Television | Jobs in Real-Life |
|---|---|
| 1. Police Officer | 1. Salesperson |
| 2. Lawyer | 2. Teacher |
| 3. Doctor | 3. Secretary |
| 4. Restaurateur | 4. Accountant |
| 5. TV Reporter / Host | 5. Truck Driver |
| 6. Nurse | 6. Cashier |
| 7. Journalist | 7. Janitor |
| 8. TV Writer / Producer | 8. Nurse |
| 9. Coach / Radio Host / Decorator (tie) | 9. Cook |
| | 10. Engineer |

## "Reality-Based" Television Programming

In contrast to fictional television police programs, a new breed of cop show has emerged over the past decade, i.e. those that are factual or "reality-based." Essentially, I would argue that there are three distinct types of "reality-based" television police shows found on American television today.

Shows such as *American Detective*, *COPS*, *Real Stories of the Highway Patrol*, and *L.A.P.D.* are all good examples of quasi-documentary-styled television programs. Generally, these types of shows are filmed "live" by two-man camera crews made up of a cameraman and a soundman: these crews go out with police officers on actual calls and general patrol. To members of the television audience, it may seem that they are actually riding along in the backseat of the police vehicle or responding to a call alongside the police. These types of television programs are also referred to by some media critics as "fly-on-the-wall" documentaries (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 1994).

This format provides the television audience with the sensation that what they are watching is appearing "live." Reams of raw footage are shot, and then later, selected

scenes are edited or pieced together to make up an individual segment that flows relatively smoothly while still maintaining that rough-edge or "live" (i.e. as it is happening) feeling. The edited episodes do not usually contain a linking commentary or narration.

In essence, television programs such as *COPS* provide members of the audience with voyeuristic glimpses of rare, sensational, and often bizarre incidents that they would otherwise probably not be exposed to. Perhaps this is why "reality-based" television shows have become so popular with television audiences in the last couple of years.

In contrast, shows such as *FBI: The Untold Stories*, *Secret Service*, and *Top Cops* are all good illustrations of docudramas or dramatized reenactments based on real or factual crimes and criminal cases. This type of television show usually has either a regular host providing linking commentary or has police officers narrating their own amazing true stories.

Lastly, I would consider the third kind of "reality-based" television police program to be shows that encourage viewers to actively participate in the capture of a criminal or fugitive by providing key information to law enforcement officials. *America's Most Wanted*, *Unsolved Mysteries*, and various *Crime Stoppers* programs are good examples of this third type. One has to ask, however, whether these television shows are more about entertaining rather than aiding the police? This also raises the issue of propriety of using crime or exploiting a person's victimization for entertainment purposes (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994).

The term "info-tainment" has been used by some media analysts (Surette, 1992) to describe those television programs where there is a combination of both news and

entertainment formats. This term can be readily applied to all "reality-based" television police shows. I would argue, though, that the entertainment component of these shows plays a much greater role than the information or educational component.

There has been, and will continue to be, an enormous fascination and preoccupation with crime- and police-related topics in television programming. According to Surette (1992: 32), approximately 25 percent of all prime-time television programs in the U.S. from the 1960s to the 1990s have directly focused on crime or law enforcement; the proportion of television time devoted to crime themes, without a doubt, makes crime the largest single subject-matter in television history.

## Crime and the Media: Previous Research

Communications and mass media scholars have developed considerable empirical support for the notion that television and newspapers distort news (Bennett, 1996: 47; see also Ericson, 1991). Fortunately, a blow-by-blow review of the literature with respect to news, news reporting, and news organizations is not necessary due to the remarkable degree of consensus among the various critics over the years (Altheide, 1974; Tuchman, 1978; Fishman, 1980; Bennett, 1996).

Ericson *et al.* (1987: 346) observe that several academic studies, including those from the authors noted above, have "given emphasis to the fact that news is not a veridical account of reality but a social construction of journalists and their sources." In addition, some research has focused on the *process* of newspaper story selection or, as Tuchman (1978) prefers to describe it, the process of "creating news."

With respect to the relationship between crime, justice, and television, the body of literature is not quite as extensive. It is true that both the criminal justice system and the

mass media's news/entertainment system are two massive sets of social institutions that have been around for some time. Notwithstanding, "serious interest in their interaction and mutual effects is relatively recent" (Surette, 1992: 2).

I share in Surette's (1992: 6) belief, "That the advantages of simultaneously studying justice and the media have not been exploited more fully is disheartening. A lack of research in crucial areas has left far more unanswered questions than definitive answers" (see also Newman, 1990).

In a comprehensive literature review, Garofalo (1981: 320) found that most content analyses of crime-related topics in the media, conducted prior to 1981, were primarily devoted to the study of news media, particularly newspapers.

Fifteen years later, little has changed. Few content analyses have been done in the area of fictional television police shows from a criminological or social scientific point of view. And, as stated previously, there is even less research available with respect to the new domain of "reality-based" television police programming.

In his book, British criminologist Richard Sparks (1992) brought a new perspective to looking at television crime dramas. In the preface, it is acknowledged that "[Sparks'] . . . thoughts on the subject of television crime drama move criminology into a new and largely unexplored terrain. He not only demonstrates the centrality of the dramatization of crime on television to key issues in criminology, but also, by drawing upon contemporary social theory, he enters a telling series of caveats about the kinds of conclusions we might reach on the subject of television's influence. He considers, in a careful, measured way, whether the 'cop shows' stimulate our fear of crime, whether they mystify the truth of policing in suggesting that the good guys always win and that

detection rates are high, whether the imagery built into the narratives of these very moral tales excites a more punitive attitude to 'criminals,' thus reinforcing the drift toward a more authoritarian society begun in Western societies in the 1980s" (Sparks, 1992: xi).

In an often cited study conducted over 40 years ago, Davis (1952) found that official crime rates and newspaper coverage of crime had little in common. And, it would appear that the public's perception of crime reflects more closely the picture of crime presented in the newspapers rather than changes in the actual crime rate.

In another newspaper-crime study, Fishman (1978) noted that the news media appear to be fixated on certain crimes to such an extent that they go out of their way to organize these crimes around themes and create artificial "crime waves." He found that, in 1976, a "crime wave" against the elderly in New York City was created by one television station and two newspaper outlets. "In Fishman's view, the "crime wave" occurred when news reporters became aware of a few crimes against the elderly and began to search for and to highlight such crimes" (Sheley and Ashkins, 1987: 47).

In a content analysis conducted on television police-crime dramas from the early 1970s, Dominick (1973) found that: (1) the television shows focused mostly on crimes of violence while little attention was devoted to corporate crime or property offences; (2) criminal suspects were always apprehended during the last five minutes of the show, supporting the notion that "crime doesn't pay"; (3) television justice usually ended with the suspect's apprehension; rarely were viewers taken through the remaining stages of the machinery of justice (e.g. initial appearance, preliminary hearing, arraignments, sentencing, and so forth).

That certain crimes receive disproportionate coverage in the news media is well-documented. In a content analysis of crime news from four Chicago newspapers, Sherizen (1978: 215) found that, "Almost half of all crimes reported were murder . . . with another 35% involving serious crimes. The notice given to murder and the lack of notice given to such other crimes as larceny and burglary is striking."

Similar conclusions were reached in a study conducted by Sheley and Ashkins (1981) a few years later. They found that both television and newspapers exaggerated the amount of violent crime, especially murder, even though murder accounted for less than one percent of all Index crimes reported to the police.

In many respects, the present television study is similar to a content analysis conducted by Gabor and Weimann (1987: 79) in the area of news print media and how it covers stories related to crime and justice. They were primarily interested in assessing the validity of several propositions or criticisms often leveled at the print media such as the over-representation of sensational stories related to violent crime. Some of the results included the following:

- newspapers are preoccupied with violence and "street-crime";
- the print media are superficial in their reporting of crime, failing to provide any type of analysis of the roots of crime or the workings of the criminal justice system;
- newspapers misinform the public about the characteristics and typical profile of offenders and victims.

Graber (1980) conducted a scholarly study about crime coverage by the media and its potential impact on public opinion. She found that media coverage of crime greatly distorts the nature and frequency of crime. Another finding to come out of Graber's study was that the media tends to ignore the social and/or economic context in which crime

often occurs. "Covered without context, [news and entertainment] . . . claims often cloud full public understanding of crime and criminal activity" (LaMay and Dennis, 1995: xiii).

Lichter and Lichter (1983) conducted a content analysis of several fictional television police-crime dramas airing in 1981. They found that violent crimes such as murder, robbery, aggravated assault, and kidnapping accounted for 87 percent of all television crimes whereas property crimes were seldom shown; the FBI Crime Index for 1980, on the other hand, indicated that violent crimes made up less than 10 percent of all index crimes reported to the police. Rarely did television crimes go unsolved; in real life, however, crime often succeeds and goes undetected, unreported, unrecorded, and/or unsolved.

A common theme running through many of the studies cited above appears to be the fact that a large discrepancy exists between what people are likely to experience in reality with respect to crime and justice issues, and what they are likely to be exposed to in the news and entertainment media (Lewis, 1984).

# *III*

# *METHODOLOGY*

## Positivistic Framework

In many respects, this study could be considered positivistic in nature since it exercises a scientific approach to the study of "reality-based" television police shows. Kerlinger (1973: 11) states that scientific research involves a "systematic, controlled, empirical, and critical investigation" of the phenomenon being studied.

Quantitative methods were chosen as data were coded according to pre-determined categories. I echo Shipman's (1981: 13) assertion that, "If a social scientist follows an interest by observing what strikes his eye, recording the memorable and writing what seems interesting, there is no claim to be scientific [and objective], however valuable the observations may be when guided by the insights of . . . [criminology] or some other social science. There has to be some measure of control over the selection, definition, observation of the phenomenon concerned and some concern over reliability and validity. . . . [T]he methods used in accumulating evidence are spelled out in detail. That detail enables professional colleagues to assess the merit of the work and hence to reach some agreement on whether it is credible as evidence. The detail also enables the work to be replicated."

## Sampling Procedure

The present study involves an analysis of an American "reality-based" television police program: *COPS*. Episodes of the show were video-recorded weekly by the author from the period commencing January 1st, 1993, and ending June 31st, 1993.

The recording of the television shows enabled the author to review the episodes as often as necessary. Re-runs, or episodes airing for the second time during the six-month

period of analysis, were excluded from the study. In total, thirty-six episodes involving 123 cases/incidents were retained for the content analysis.

The various episodes of *COPS* primarily aired during "prime-time." "Prime-Time" refers to the time period on television between 8:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. — the time of the day when viewing is at its peak. Episodes of *COPS* can also be seen at other times (e.g. midnight). The television program runs for 30 minutes.

*COPS* can be seen as providing a national focus since law enforcement agencies from all across the United States were represented. In addition, the program aired throughout the United States, as well as Canada.

## Comparison of Television Images and Official Statistics

After systematically classifying and studying the content of the television shows, the findings regarding the images presented were then compared in many different areas to official sources of data. The present study attempts to assess the relative accuracy of "reality-based" television's portrayal of the "real" world (by comparison with official statistics).

For the purposes of this research study, the following sources of official data were utilized for comparison to the television findings: (i) Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); and (ii) Bureau of Justice Statistics. Both organizations are branches of the United States Department of Justice, but work independently of each other.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics annually publishes the *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics* while the FBI puts out *Crime in the United States*, more commonly known as the Uniform Crime Report (UCR) Index. The UCR is perhaps the most authoritative source on crime statistics in the United States.

The UCR's main unit of analysis is referred to as index crimes, also known as Part I offences. Albanese (1990: 13) notes that the FBI, ". . . tallies crimes reported to police and arrests made nationwide each year for eight offences, and counts arrests only for 19 other offences. Although there are many more than 27 types of crime in the United States, most of the serious forms of crime are included."

The eight Crime Index offences for which detailed information is collected include the violent crimes of murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault and the property crimes of burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft, and arson.

"The 19 other offences for which only those arrested are counted include: simple assault; forgery and counterfeiting; fraud; embezzlement; buying, receiving or possessing stolen property; vandalism; weapons offences; prostitution and commercialized vice; other sex offences; drug abuse violations; gambling; offences against the family and children; driving under the influence; liquor laws; drunkenness; disorderly conduct; vagrancy; curfew and loitering laws; and runaways" (Albanese, 1990: 13).

Siegel (1986: 55-6) further states that:

> The FBI receives and compiles reports from over . . . [16,000] police departments serving a majority of the United States population. . . . The FBI tallies and annually publishes the number of reported offences by city, county, standard metropolitan statistical area (SMSA), and geographical divisions of the United States. . . .
>
> The methods used to compile the UCR are quite complex. Each month, law enforcement agencies report the number of index crimes known to them. A count of these crimes . . . is taken from records of all complaints of crime received by law enforcement agencies from victims, officers who discovered infractions, or other sources.
>
> Whenever complaints of crime are determined through investigation to be unfounded or false, they are eliminated from the actual count. The number of "actual offences

known" is reported to the FBI whether or not anyone is arrested for the crime, the stolen property is recovered, or prosecution is undertaken. In addition, each month law enforcement agencies report the total crimes that were cleared. Crimes are cleared two ways: (1) when at least one person is arrested, charged, and turned over to the court for prosecution, or (2) by exceptional means, when some element beyond police control precludes the physical arrest of an offender (e.g. they flee the country). Data on the number of clearances involving only the arrest of offenders under the age of eighteen, data in the value of the property stolen and recovered in connection with Part I offences, and detailed information pertaining to criminal homicides are also reported.

Since the episodes of *COPS* analyzed in this study aired in 1993, and the majority of them were produced in 1993 as indicated by the copyright date in the closing credits, they were subsequently compared and contrasted to official statistics from 1993 whenever possible. National statistics, rather than data at the city, county or state levels, served as the basis for comparison as the *COPS* episodes were from all across the United States and were broadcast nationwide.

## Limitations of Official Statistics

In this study, official sources of data were used as a benchmark or barometer of "reality" to compare with the television images of crime and policing. Some critics may argue that official statistics are not an accurate reflection of what is actually happening "out there." Conrad and Schneider (1980: 21), for instance, claim that " 'reality' is defined not as something that exists 'out there' for the [social] scientist or anyone else to discover but as a social construction that emerges from and is sustained by social interaction."

I acknowledge, but do not necessarily subscribe to, the tenets of this particular paradigm. I strongly believe that official statistics are the best available sources of data for comparison in order to approximate the types of crime reported, the frequency of such

crimes, etc. At the same time, one must consider the "dark figure" of crime that remains largely *undetected*, *unreported*, and *unrecorded*. With this said, it is felt that official data does indeed provide a reasonable benchmark to act as a comparison to the television findings. Mannle and Hirschel (1988: xvii) are correct to point out that, "Statistics are used to illustrate relatively stable and broad trends, not as narrow or immutable facts in and of themselves."

Another potential criticism relates to the value of national statistics. Different cities, regions and states have very different racial or ethnic compositions in their populations. For example, the southern U.S. states have a disproportionate number of Hispanics. Notwithstanding this point, *COPS* is a nationally televised show and the aim is to determine the similarity of the images conveyed to a national audience with the national crime picture as we know it.

Another limitation of official crime statistics encountered in this study is the fact that certain types of incidents are not included. For instance, in the television police shows, incidents that were deviant (but not necessarily criminal) in nature were portrayed, e.g. disorder and incivility. UCRs do not include these types of occurrences. The same holds true for incidents such as motor vehicle accidents and other calls for service of a non-criminal nature.

## Content Analysis and Its Limitations

The method of observation and measurement of the television police shows was content analysis. What exactly is content analysis? There are many definitions found in the literature. According to Kerlinger (1973: 525), content analysis "is a method of studying and analyzing communications in a systematic, objective, and quantitative

manner to measure variables." It is the systematic classification and study of the content of mass media (Holsti, 1969). Holsti (1969: 601) asserts that content analysis is "any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics of messages."

By utilizing content analysis as a method to record and analyze raw data, a research study can be approached from a more rigorous standpoint thus allowing the researcher to venture beyond mere opinions or anecdotes based solely on non-scientific observation and/or personal experience.

Compared with techniques such as interviews, content analysis commonly yields unobtrusive or nonreactive measures. In this study, it can be stated unequivocally that the subjects, for lack of a better term, were not aware that they were being studied or observed analytically even though their work was being televised. Thus, in this study, it can be argued that the act of measurement itself did not influence the subjects. As Budd (1967: 2) asserts, the content analyst himself "is not part of the process, but [by] employing his analytic tool, he taps into the process through the message to gain . . . information."

The central problems of content analysis originate primarily in the data-reduction process whereby the many symbols, images, sounds, dialogues, etc., are classified into much fewer, more refined, content categories. Reliability problems can potentially grow out of the ambiguity of category definitions or even deficient and vague coding instructions. The latter problem does not concern us here in this study since the author was the sole coder. It should be noted, however, that a pilot study was undertaken with 10 independent coders; this will be described in more detail in the next section.

## The Coding Instrument

Classification by multiple human coders permits the quantitative assessment of achieved reliability, often referred to as inter-coder or inter-rater reliability. Inter-coder reliability refers to the extent to which the content classification produces the same results when the same text or visuals are coded by more than one coder.

A content analysis is valid to the extent that it measures the construct(s) that the researcher intended it to measure. The researcher should always ask himself or herself the following fundamental question: Are the categories measuring what they were originally set out to measure?

Before setting out to construct the categories for study and devising a coding instrument, a preliminary review of several episodes was conducted. This key step enabled the author to get a sense of the types of visuals, dialogue and themes that might be encountered later on in the coding process.

With these issues in mind, the author pretested the coding instrument before actually putting it into practice. Nine classmates and a professor from the M.A. programme in Criminology at the University of Ottawa were provided with instructions on how to code the television shows and then went on to code several randomly-selected episodes of *COPS*. On the whole, the pilot study was quite successful, resulting in only a few minor changes being made to the coding instrument.

As indicated, the coding instrument went through several revisions before taking on the appearance of the final version found in Appendix 1.

At the beginning of every incident shown on *COPS*, crucial information is displayed across the viewer's television screen including: the name of the police

department; the geographic location; the time of day; the name of the police officers responding to the call; the type of call or incident they are responding to. At the end of the incident, the police officer will often state what crime or charge the suspect will be arrested with.

The majority of the categories that make up the coding sheet (see Appendix 1) are self-explanatory. However, for the benefit of the reader and those not familiar with this particular "reality-based" television police show, there may be a few sections that might need further explanation. It should be noted that not all of the items captured by the coding instrument were retained for analysis.

The top portion of the coding instrument contains information with respect to keeping track of the various television episodes recorded. This facilitated the retrieval of programs for secondary analysis, for example.

The second section collects information pertaining to the *type* of criminal or non-criminal incident being shown on a particular episode, the geographic location (i.e. city and state) where the incident took place, and the time of day in which the incident occurred. All of this information was conveniently displayed for television viewers at the beginning of each episode.

Among other things, I wanted to see if violent crimes were being disproportionately shown and if property crimes were being under-represented. Were routine calls such as traffic accidents and animal complaints frequently shown? I wanted to determine if the incidents were distributed relatively evenly throughout the United States since *COPS* is a television program with a national scope. I was also curious as to the time of day in which the majority of incidents were taking place.

The next section of the coding instrument collects basic information on the law enforcement agencies represented on the show (e.g. whether the agency is local, state or federal).

The fourth portion gathers information (e.g. race and gender) pertaining to the police officers involved in a particular incident. For example, I wanted to see how many police officers from minority groups were shown.

The coding instrument contains four categories of race: (i) White; (ii) Black; (iii) Hispanic; and (iv) Other. The 'Hispanic' category includes such groups as Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other Latin Americans. The 'Other' category includes such groups as American Indians, Alaskan Natives, Asians, and Pacific Islanders.

The author appreciates the fact that categorizing suspects, victims, and police officers according to their skin colour can be problematic. It is an arduous task, to say the least, since skin colour is not always an accurate indicator of race. Moreover, the notion of racial purity is a myth (Roberts and Gabor, 1990). Nevertheless, it is important to establish if the various episodes of *COPS* consistently portray certain images or stereotypes. For instance, is the police officer typically Caucasian while the criminal suspect is African American or Hispanic?

Coding race in the television police shows was actually not as difficult as had been anticipated by the author. In most cases, police *conveniently* provided the race of the suspect. In other instances, a combination of names (e.g. Officer Juan Martinez), skin colour, and dialect/accent helped to categorize an individual into one of the designated groups.

Data with respect to victims was also collected to determine whether criminal incidents were disproportionately directed at persons of colour or perhaps women.

*Primary Police Officer*: To satisfy the criteria for this category, the television police officer(s) must have appeared at the outset of the segment and also at the conclusion. Basically, these officers had to be the prime focus of the entire episode. In addition, they must have had at least two consecutive lines of dialogue.

During the initial stages of the data analysis, the intention was to look at how other police officers were portrayed — i.e. those appearing briefly or performing secondary roles during a particular incident. However, this initiative was found to be difficult. Sometimes there were as many as 15 or 20 police officers at the scene of a crime, zipping in and out of the camera lens' range. In homicide cases, for example, some officers would be collecting evidence at the crime scene, some would be dealing with crowd control, while others would be interviewing witnesses.

The bottom portion of page one of the coding instrument collects additional information with respect to the police officer responding to a particular incident. For example, did the officer need to use force to take a criminal suspect into custody? Did the suspect physically assault the police officer? By asking these and other related questions, the author was trying to establish whether or not police work was being portrayed by the television program as a dangerous occupation.

The second page of the coding instrument pertains to various characteristics related to those individuals identified as suspects and victims (e.g. race of suspect/victim; relationship, if any, between suspect/victim; any weapons involved).

The bottom section of page two was reserved for general comments or observations made during the coding process of the television shows as well as any comments made by police officers (e.g. *"police work is exciting"*, *"crime is out of control"*, *"more uniformed police officers should be hired to combat crime"*, etc.).

Before going on to discuss the results and findings of the study, there is at least one methodological issue that should be pointed out to the reader. Because the study only looks at one particular "reality-based" television police show and because the sample contains only thirty-six episodes or 123 individual incidents, this may limit the generalizability of the findings.

# *IV*

# *RESULTS*

## Types of Crime: Violent Crimes

By looking at Table 4.1, it is quite apparent that levels of certain types of crime, i.e. violent interpersonal crimes involving force or threat of violence, are exaggerated and over-represented in the various episodes of *COPS*. Of the totality of criminal and non-criminal incidents shown on *COPS*, violent crime against the person is clearly given disproportionate attention.

If we look at the FBI Crime Index for 1993, we find that violent crimes (i.e. murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault), represent only 13.6 percent of all index crimes reported to the police (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994: 8). In contrast, violent offences such as aggravated assault, robbery and murder constituted over 55 percent of all index crimes portrayed on *COPS* (see Table 4.2).

As with news media coverage, the coverage of violent crime by "reality-based" television police shows appears to be dependent upon this type of crime's sensationalistic and entertainment value (Mannle and Hirschel, 1988: 18).

The fact that not one incident of rape or sexual assault was presented on *COPS* is interesting. Perhaps these types of incidents were too graphic to show on television? Perhaps these types of incidents were not shown out of respect for the victim? A more plausible explanation, however, may be that with many of these incidents a significant period of time had elapsed between when the rape or sexual assault had occurred, and when the incident was reported to the police by the victim; therefore, the television program could not possibly show police rushing to get to an incident and apprehending the perpetrator shortly thereafter.

## Types of Crime: Property Crimes

Larceny (theft), the least serious of felonies, represents 55.3% of the total number of index crimes reported to officials in the United States in 1993 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994: 8). Interestingly, non-violent crimes such as larceny constituted only 13% of the total number of index crimes shown on *COPS* (see Table 4.2).

Contrary to the predictions of the author, the crime of burglary was not associated with lower levels on the various television episodes of *COPS* as compared to the FBI Crime Index. In fact, the television frequency reflected quite closely statistical reality as demonstrated by official crime statistics (see Table 4.2). This finding was a bit surprising since studies have demonstrated that many residential burglaries are "cold crimes" where the burglar has fled the scene long before the homeowner returns home and notifies the police (Bayley, 1994). For the police officers on *COPS* to catch burglars "in the act" was truly amazing!

**Table 4.1 - Type and Frequency of Criminal and Non-Criminal Incidents Presented on *COPS***

| TYPE OF INCIDENT | NUMBER | PERCENT |
|---|---|---|
| TOTAL | 123 | 100.0% |
| **Violent Offences** | | |
| Aggravated Assault | 19 | 15.4% |
| Domestic Violent Assault | 9 | 7.3% |
| Robbery | 6 | 4.9% |
| Murder / Criminal Homicide | 4 | 3.3% |
| Simple Assault | 4 | 3.3% |
| Assault of a Police Officer (no weapon) | 3 | 2.4% |
| Domestic Violent Threats | 2 | 1.6% |
| Assault of a Police Officer (with weapon) | 1 | 0.8% |
| Kidnapping | 1 | 0.8% |
| Terrorist (Bomb) Threats | 1 | 0.8% |
| Uttering Threats | 1 | 0.8% |
| SUBTOTAL | 51 Incidents | 41.5% |
| **Other Offences Against the Person** | | |
| Child Endangerment or Abandonment | 1 | 0.8% |
| Harassment | 1 | 0.8% |
| SUBTOTAL | 2 Incidents | 1.6% |
| **Property Offences** | | |
| Burglary | 10 | 8.1% |
| Theft / Larceny | 7 | 5.7% |
| Motor Vehicle Theft | 7 | 5.7% |
| SUBTOTAL | 24 Incidents | 19.5% |
| **Drug Offences** | | |
| Drug Sales / Trafficking | 6 | 4.9% |
| Drug Possession | 5 | 4.1% |
| SUBTOTAL | 11 Incidents | 9.0% |
| **Public Order Offences** | | |
| Weapons Charges (e.g. careless use; concealed weapon) | 7 | 5.7% |
| Drunkenness / Public Intoxication | 4 | 3.3% |
| Driving Under the Influence | 3 | 2.4% |
| Disorderly Conduct | 2 | 1.6% |
| Flight / Escape | 1 | 0.8% |
| Leaving the Scene of an Accident | 1 | 0.8% |
| Liquor Laws (e.g. Illegal Brewery / Distillery) | 1 | 0.8% |
| Suspicion | 1 | 0.8% |
| Trespassing | 1 | 0.8% |
| SUBTOTAL | 21 Incidents | 17.1% |

(continued on next page)

**Table 4.1 (continued)**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Non-Criminal Calls for Service** | | |
| Medical Emergency (e.g. suicide threat) | 5 | 4.1% |
| Traffic Accident | 2 | 1.6% |
| Person Locked Inside Apartment (lost keys) | 1 | 0.8% |
| Rounding up a Cow | 1 | 0.8% |
| Search & Rescue | 1 | 0.8% |
| Water Leaking from Apartment Upstairs | 1 | 0.8% |
| SUBTOTAL | 11 Incidents | 9.0% |
| **Other** | | |
| "Typical Night" at a County Jail (General Info. Piece) | 3 | 2.4% |
| SUBTOTAL | 3 Incidents | 2.4% |

Note: 1. Percentages may not add up to total due to rounding.
2. Thirty-six episodes (123 individual incidents or cases) were analyzed.
3. None of the episodes were re-runs.

**Table 4.2 - Comparison of Television Crimes and Real-Life Crimes**

| FREQUENCY RANKING OF FBI INDEX CRIMES FROM 1993 | FREQUENCY RANKING OF TV INDEX CRIMES PRESENTED ON *COPS* EPISODES FROM 1993 |
|---|---|
| 1. Larceny-Theft (55.3%) | 1. Aggravated Assault (37.0%) |
| 2. Burglary (20.0%) | 2. Burglary (18.5%) |
| 3. Motor Vehicle Theft (11.0%) | 3. Larceny-Theft (tie) (13.0%) |
| 4. Aggravated Assault (8.0%) | 3. Motor Vehicle Theft (tie) (13.0%) |
| 5. Robbery (4.7%) | 4. Robbery (11.1%) |
| 6. Forcible Rape (.7%) | 5. Murder (7.4%) |
| 7. Murder (>.2%) | 6. Forcible Rape (0) |

Note: Television index crimes are grouped into categories comparable to the FBI data. For a detailed description of the offences in each category see Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Crime in the United States - 1993*. U.S. Government Printing Office. 1994: 8.

## Types of Crime: "White-Collar" Crimes

Not one incident of "white-collar" crime was dealt with on *COPS* (see Table 4.1). It is quite evident, then, that television shows like *COPS* disseminate misleading images. This is demonstrated by the *types* of crime that are focused upon. What about corporate crimes, for example? Are these types of crime not occurring in society? Is insider-trading or industrial espionage not considered a serious crime?

In the case of *COPS*, seriousness appears to be defined in terms of what are typically called 'street' crimes. Perhaps the perpetrator is easier to identify and more accessible than a company with many workers, supervisors and corporate executives; exactly who would take the blame and responsibility for wrongdoing in these cases? Perhaps the television industry is attempting to deflect attention from the social and economic damage (and sometimes violence) incurred as a direct or indirect result of "white-collar" crime?

*COPS* seems to understate or downplay crimes of the rich and powerful while drastically exaggerating crimes of the poor and powerless — particularly those involving racial minorities. The television show tends to focus on the socially deprived and inept, rather than the socially affluent and mentally stable.

More likely, the reason that examples of corporate crime are not represented on *COPS* is because they probably would not make for high drama or interesting television viewing. With violent street crime, the victimization is sudden and direct whereas white-collar crime seldom brings the criminal or criminals face-to-face, with the ultimate victim (Livingston, 1992: 12).

The television findings appear to be in line with public opinion. "Ask people what crimes they think of as the crime problem, and they will probably mention murder, rape, robbery, burglary, and theft. The cost of these crimes, though, pales in comparison with the cost of the crime they are not thinking of: white-collar crimes" (Livingston, 1992: 11); these types of crimes cost American companies and businesses billions of dollars annually.

## Police Work & Non-Criminal Calls for Service

Koenig (1991: 38) argues that, "it would be a gross oversimplification to imply that all, or even most, of the working time of police is crime-related. Much of the time is committed to traffic patrol, accident investigation, emergency response to incidents of a non-criminal nature, peacekeeping and general order-maintenance."

The police are entrusted with the responsibility of responding to criminals and their victims. For many police officers, however, this is only a small part of police work.

Traditionally, the roles of the police have been two-fold: (a) enforcement of laws and investigation of infractions of these same laws; and (b) maintenance of public order. Over the years, however, the police have taken on (or have been delegated) additional responsibilities, functions, and service roles that are of a non-criminal nature. On a daily basis, police departments across the United States respond to such calls for service as medical emergencies, motor vehicle accidents, animal complaints, family counselling, and missing persons. According to Tenzel et al. (1976: 22), police officers in the United States spend as much as 80% of their time responding to the types of calls noted above.

For obvious reasons, not every type of incident that police are confronted with in real-life can be shown on *COPS*. Nevertheless, the incidents (mainly calls of a criminal nature) that were predominantly shown tend to represent only one small part of police work. Involvement in non-enforcement activities appears to play a lesser role in the various television episodes; less than 10% of the total incidents shown on the program dealt with non-criminal calls for service (see Table 4.1).

## Geographical Locations

The geographical distribution of *COPS* cases is far from uniform. Certain regions of the country were highlighted (see Table 4.3). Only 8 out of 50 states were represented (See Table 4.4). The three states featured most frequently were Texas, California, and Washington, which collectively accounted for over half of all *COPS* episodes.

The restriction to certain American states, cities, and law enforcement agencies immediately raises the question about the general applicability in other geographical locations and police jurisdictions of the patterns and conclusions described in the various episodes. After all, these shows are seen nationwide.

Geographically speaking, actual crime statistics indicate that "the largest volume of Crime Index offences was reported in the most populous Southern States, which accounted for 38 percent of the total" (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994: 6). In 1993, California had the highest murder, robbery, and aggravated assault rates out of all U.S. states; Texas ranked number three with respect to murder, number four with respect to robbery, and number three with respect to aggravated assault (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994: 202-204). Interestingly, Texas and California were the two most frequently represented states with respect to incidents appearing on *COPS*. This may suggest that the television show's producers felt that their chances of capturing sensational footage of a violent crime being committed was higher in these states than in others? One can only speculate, however.

**Table 4.3 - Geographic location of incidents depicted on *COPS***

| CITY OR COUNTY, STATE<br>TOTAL | NUMBER<br>123 | PERCENT<br>100.0% |
|---|---|---|
| Fort Worth, TEXAS | 23 | 18.7% |
| Philadelphia, PENNSYLVANIA | 16 | 13.0% |
| Pierce County, WASHINGTON | 15 | 12.2% |
| Cleveland, OHIO | 13 | 10.6% |
| Denver, COLORADO | 12 | 9.8% |
| San Bernardino Co., CALIFORNIA | 12 | 9.8% |
| Sacramento, CALIFORNIA | 6 | 4.9% |
| Tarrant County, TEXAS | 5 | 4.1% |
| Pomona, CALIFORNIA | 4 | 3.3% |
| Broward County, FLORIDA | 3 | 3.3% |
| King County, WASHINGTON | 3 | 2.4% |
| Miami, FLORIDA | 3 | 2.4% |
| Nashville, TENNESSEE | 3 | 2.4% |
| Aurora, COLORADO | 2 | 1.6% |
| Olympia, COLORADO | 2 | 1.6% |
| Los Angeles, CALIFORNIA | 1 | 0.8% |

Note: 1. Percentages may not add up to total due to rounding.
2. Thirty-six episodes (123 individual incidents or cases) were analyzed.
3. None of the episodes were re-runs.

**Table 4.4 - States where incidents occurred on *COPS***

| STATE<br>TOTAL | NUMBER<br>123 | PERCENT<br>100.0% |
|---|---|---|
| TEXAS | 28 | 22.8% |
| CALIFORNIA | 23 | 18.7% |
| WASHINGTON | 18 | 14.6% |
| PENNSYLVANIA | 16 | 13.0% |
| COLORADO | 16 | 13.0% |
| OHIO | 13 | 10.6% |
| FLORIDA | 6 | 4.9% |
| TENNESSEE | 3 | 2.4% |

Note: 1. Percentages may not add up to total due to rounding.
2. Thirty-six episodes (123 individual incidents or cases) were analyzed.
3. None of the episodes were re-runs.

## Participating Law Enforcement Agencies Appearing on *COPS*

Law enforcement in the United States is handled by over 20,000 separate agencies which are divided among three levels of government: (a) local/municipal/county; (b) state; and (c) federal.

As we see from Table 4.5, there was no representation from "specialty" law enforcement agencies such as university campus police, military police, department of public safety, or transit authority. In addition, no federal law enforcement agencies were shown such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Secret Service, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, U.S. Postal Service Police, U.S. Customs Service, Drug Enforcement Agency, or any of the various state police agencies.

It should be noted that some state and federal law enforcement agencies already have several "reality-based" television programs solely dedicated to their work and cases:

e.g. *Real Stories of the Highway Patrol, F.B.I.: The Untold Stories, Secret Service,* and *U.S. Customs.*

**Table 4.5 - Law enforcement agencies depicted on *COPS***

| NAME OF AGENCY<br>TOTAL | NUMBER<br>123 | PERCENT<br>100.0% |
|---|---|---|
| **Local/City** | | |
| Fort Worth Police Dept. | 23 | 18.6% |
| Philadelphia Police Dept. | 16 | 13.0% |
| Cleveland Police Dept. | 13 | 10.5% |
| Denver Police Dept. | 12 | 9.7% |
| Pomona Police Dept. | 4 | 3.2% |
| King County Police Dept. | 3 | 2.4% |
| Miami Police Dept. | 3 | 2.4% |
| Nashville Metropolitan Police | 3 | 2.4% |
| Aurora Police Dept. | 2 | 1.6% |
| Olympia Police Dept. | 2 | 1.6% |
| **Sheriff** | | |
| Pierce County Sheriff's Dept. | 15 | 12.1% |
| San Bernardino County Sheriff's Dept. | 12 | 9.7% |
| Sacramento County Sheriff's Dept. | 6 | 4.8% |
| Broward County Sheriff's Dept. | 3 | 2.4% |
| Tarrant County Sheriff's Dept. | 3 | 2.4% |
| Tarrant County Constable's Office | 2 | 1.6% |
| Los Angeles County Sheriff's Dept. | 1 | 0.8% |
| **State** | 0 | 0 |
| **Federal** | 0 | 0 |

Note: 1. Percentages may not add up to total due to rounding.
2. Thirty-six episodes (123 individual incidents or cases) were analyzed.
3. None of the episodes were re-runs.

## Time of Day of Call

At the beginning of each incident shown on *COPS*, the time of day in which the police officer responded to the call is displayed for the benefit of the television audience.

Looking at Table 4.6, one is left with the impression that crime primarily occurs during the dark hours and that one's chance of becoming a victim of a crime during daylight hours is virtually nil. Over 90 percent of the incidents shown on *COPS* occurred

during the dusk or dark hours; incidents occurring during the evening hours (5:00 p.m. to 9:59 p.m.) made up 43.9% of the total incidents while 47.1% of the incidents happened during the night hours (10:00 p.m. to 6:59 a.m.).

The television findings appear to conflict with the findings of a burglary study conducted by Waller and Okihiro (1978: 24). They found that the time of day in which burglaries occur tends to be distributed relatively evenly with 24.3 percent occurring in the morning, 24.1 percent occurring in the afternoon, 28.0 percent occurring in the evening, and 23.6 percent occurring at night.

Rengert and Wasilchick (1985) found that burglars prefer to commit burglaries when homeowners are at work and residences are left unattended, i.e. during day-light hours. Similarly, Cromwell (1995: 191) and his colleagues found that the majority of burglars "preferred to work between 9:00 and 11:00 a.m. and in mid-afternoon."

In their study on theft from shopping bags in city center markets, Poyner and Webb (1992: 101) note that this type of crime "tended to be restricted to quite narrow periods, i.e., between midday to 2:00 p.m. on Tuesdays and 1:00 – 4:00 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays."

Finally, in their study on armed robbery, Gabor *et al.* (1987: vii) note that robberies "can occur at different hours of the day or night..."

**Table 4.6 - Time of day that the incident/crime took place on *COPS***

| TIME OF DAY<br>TOTAL | NUMBER<br>123 | PERCENT<br>100.0% |
|---|---|---|
| Morning (7:00 a.m. to 11:59 a.m.) | 1 | 0.8% |
| Afternoon (12:00 noon to 4:59 p.m.) | 10 | 8.1% |
| Evening (5:00 p.m. to 9:59 p.m.) | 54 | 43.9% |
| Night (10:00 p.m. to 6:59 a.m.) | 58 | 47.1% |

Note: 1. Percentages may not add up to total due to rounding.
2. Thirty-six episodes (123 individual incidents or cases) were analyzed.
3. None of the episodes were re-runs.

## Police Officers: Race and Gender

Today, minorities and women are at the vanguard of police officers who are slowly changing the face of policing in America. That face, once predominantly male and white, is now likely to be black, Hispanic, Asian, or female.

Although women and minorities have made significant inroads during the past decade, they are still under-represented. Approximately 10% of police officers today in the United States are female (Bayley, 1994: 72). In comparison, female officers made up less than 3% of primary police officers responding to calls on *COPS* (Table 4.7).

At the beginning of every episode, the following message is displayed across the television screen while the background announcer reads it: "*COPS* is filmed on location with the men and women of law enforcement . . . " Despite this introduction, female police officers were rarely portrayed. When female officers did appear, they were often portrayed in a negative light.

For instance, there was one particular episode where two female officers were trying to talk a young male out of jumping off a two-story balcony and committing

suicide. Unfortunately, the two female officers were unsuccessful in their attempts and the individual jumped. Some viewers may come away from this particular episode with a sense that female police officers are incompetent. Interestingly, in three other cases involving suicide attempts where only male officers responded, the situations were resolved without incident.

Another negative incident involved a female police officer in a fist-fight with a female suspect. Throughout the entire incident, it was quite obvious that this particular officer was not in control of the situation. At the conclusion, the cameraman zoomed in to get a close-up shot of the female officer checking her well-manicured nails to see if she had broken any of them.

In yet another example, a female officer instructed a male suspect to drop a weapon and put his hands behind his back. The suspect did not comply right away. In fact, the female officer had to ask the suspect seven times to drop his gun. In this particular incident, there may have been a language barrier problem where the Hispanic suspect did not understand English. But to the television audience, it was quite clear that the female officer did not have the situation under control.

**Table 4.7 - Race and gender of primary police officers depicted on *COPS***

| RACE / GENDER<br>TOTAL | NUMBER<br>156 | PERCENT<br>100.0% |
|---|---|---|
| White Male | 122 | 78.2% |
| White Female | 3 | 1.9% |
| Hispanic Male | 22 | 14.1% |
| Hispanic Female | 0 | 0 |
| Black Male | 8 | 5.1% |
| Black Female | 1 | 0.6% |
| Other Male | 0 | 0 |
| Other Female | 0 | 0 |

Note: 1. Percentages may not add up to total due to rounding.
2. Thirty-six episodes (123 individual incidents or cases) were analyzed.
3. None of the episodes were re-runs.
4. Of all of the police officers appearing on *COPS*, 156 fulfilled the criteria for the categorization of 'Primary Police Officer'. Please refer to Methodology section for definition.

## Criminal Suspects: Race and Sex

Many episodes of *COPS* tended to reinforce crude stereotypes of crime and justice, particularly when it came to *who* the criminal was. For instance, there was a disproportionate representation of minorities (e.g. African Americans and Hispanics) as criminal suspects; suspects were typically members of ethnic groups and the disadvantaged classes as well as from the socially and economically deprived.

Official crime statistics from 1993 indicate that 31 percent of the arrestees were black while 67 percent were white (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994: 217). In the television results, however, it was found that 44 percent of the arrestees were black while only 37 percent were white.

Others have also noted stereotypical portrayals of black people on television with respect to crime. Wozencraft (1995: 68) found that 47 percent of the time, evening news visuals will "show black people with drugs, even though African Americans actually

consume less than 20 percent of America's illegal substances, whether home-grown or imported. What's shown on television are inner-city ghetto scenes, cops kicking down doors and dragging "them" off to jail. As though *"it's a black thing, man."*"

One could argue that by giving crime a colour or a race, this may serve to fuel prejudices in American society. For example, "When white people do [criminal] things they are seen as individuals who have gone bad. When a black person does something it's the whole group of people [i.e. race] that is seen as bad and the crime becomes a 'black' crime" (*Ottawa Citizen*, 1994a).

Several of the *COPS* episodes focused on the problem of inner-city gangs — specifically black gangs. Camera crews rode around with police officers (predominantly white) who were members of specialized gang units. This tends to support Matthews and Young (1986: 159) who argue that, "Types of policing policies employed in deprived inner-city areas serve to magnify and exaggerate the degree of involvement of black youngsters in street crime and this is then periodically seized on by the media and elaborated into a concept of innate black criminality."

In 1992, a media study conducted by the National Council of La Raza, a civil rights group based in Washington, D.C., found that, "Latino characters on American prime-time television are four times more likely to be portrayed as gangsters, drug dealers and other sorts of criminals than are other ethnic groups. . . . Latino characters are frequently based on stereotypes. Among the findings: about 16 per cent of the Latino characters committed crimes, compared with four per cent each by white and black characters" (*Ottawa Citizen*, 1994b). The study surveyed over 300 television programs for one month during the fall of 1992.

With respect to gender. the television results indicate that 88 percent of persons arrested on *COPS* were male (Table 4.8). This figure was not far off from official crime statistics from 1993 which indicated that 81 percent of persons arrested nationwide were males (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994: 217). Both the television shows and official crime statistics appear to portray offending as predominantly a male activity.

**Table 4.8 - Race and gender of criminal suspects shown on *COPS***

| RACE / GENDER<br>TOTAL | NUMBER<br>139 | PERCENT<br>100.0% |
|---|---|---|
| White Male | 45 | 32.4% |
| White Female | 7 | 5.0% |
| Hispanic Male | 26 | 18.7% |
| Hispanic Female | 0 | 0 |
| Black Male | 52 | 37.4% |
| Black Female | 9 | 6.5% |
| Other Male | 0 | 0 |
| Other Female | 0 | 0 |

Note: 1. Percentages may not add up to total due to rounding.
2. Thirty-six episodes (123 individual incidents or cases) were analyzed.
3. None of the episodes were re-runs.
4. Of all of the suspects/subjects appearing on *COPS*. 139 fulfilled the criteria for the categorization of 'Suspect'. Only criminal suspects that were identified and arrested were included for analysis.
5. Cases where a suspect was identified. but the race and/or gender could not be ascertained due to a digital "blurring-out" of the suspect's face to protect his or her identity for whatever reason. were not included in the sample.

## Victims: Race and Sex

In the television results, it was found that almost 56 percent of the victims shown on *COPS* were male while 44 percent were female (see Table 4.9). Actual victimization statistics for 1993 also indicate that, "For every violent crime category but rape and sexual assault, victimization rates were significantly higher for males than females.

Males were twice as likely as females to experience robbery and aggravated assault" (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995: 4).

Similarly, several criminological studies have established that, "Men, especially those who are young, single and unemployed, are at far greater risk of becoming victims of all forms of violence than are women, except for the categories of sexual assault and domestic violence" (National Committee on Violence, 1990: xxiii; see also Weiner and Wolfgang, 1985).

With respect to race, the 1993 National Crime Victimization Survey found that blacks were more likely than others to experience both violent and property crimes (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995: 1). These rates, however, do not correspond with the television results which found that white victims were over-represented, making up almost 51 percent of the total victim count on *COPS* compared to 26 percent for blacks, 20 percent for Hispanics, and 3 percent for persons of other races such as Asians or Native Americans (see Table 4.9).

**Table 4.9 - Race and gender of victims appearing on *COPS***

| RACE / GENDER | NUMBER | PERCENT |
|---|---|---|
| TOTAL | 61 | 100.0% |
| White Male | 15 | 24.6% |
| White Female | 16 | 26.2% |
| Hispanic Male | 6 | 9.8% |
| Hispanic Female | 6 | 9.8% |
| Black Male | 13 | 21.3% |
| Black Female | 3 | 4.9% |
| Other Male | 0 | 0 |
| Other Female | 2 | 3.3% |

Note: 1. Percentages may not add up to total due to rounding.
2. Thirty-six episodes (123 individual incidents or cases) were analyzed.
3. None of the episodes were re-runs.
4. In total, 61 victims were identified as the recipients of a criminal act.

## Clearance (Solution) Rates

In the U.S., an offence is *cleared by arrest* when at least one person is arrested, charged, and turned over to the courts for prosecution. The overall clearance rate for incidents presented on *COPS* was unrealistically high. Consistently, the investigative prowess of the police was demonstrated time and time again to the television audience by showing a suspect being apprehended in virtually every criminal incident (Table 4.10); incidents to which police responded were cleared or resolved over 95 percent of the time! Comparable data from the FBI report indicate that in 1993 police agencies nationwide only recorded a 21 percent Crime Index clearance rate (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994: 6).

Solution rates and the types of crime typically portrayed on *COPS* appear to be interrelated. Magar (1995: 112) asserts that, "Reporting on violent crime makes police

look good . . . because police solve a far higher percentage of homicides . . . than property crimes."

**Table 4.10- Clearance / solution rates of incidents (criminal and non-criminal) shown on *COPS***

| Was the incident cleared? | Number | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Total | 120 | 100.0% |
| Yes | 115 | 95.8% |
| No | 5 | 4.2% |

Note: Three (3) segments were not included in this section. The 3 segments in question dealt with an inside look or general information piece on a county jail and did not involve a specific incident or case per se.

As the television results indicate, rarely did an episode end with the criminal perpetrator eluding police or not being apprehended. And yet the television program still manages to build up a great deal of suspense and tension. According to Allen (1992: 74), this high level of suspense could be due to a number of reasons. First, each incident is a self-contained episode. The suspects, victims, and police officers appearing on *COPS* are not "regulars" on the show and the television audience has no expectation of seeing them again in next week's episode. Secondly, *COPS* capitalizes on the fact that everything is filmed as it happens. Naturally, knowing that a particular incident really happened and that the people are real makes the peril and the stakes all that much higher than they would be in an overtly fictional dramatization.

Perhaps television shows like *COPS* endeavour to leave viewers with a feeling that justice has been served. At the climax of any particular episode, the suspect is caught and handcuffed thus leaving the viewer with a sense of relief — justice has prevailed once again. Capture (and one can only assume conviction and punishment will follow?) of the suspect is the television audience's reward. Even though television viewers can be

reasonably confident as to the outcome of a particular incident — i.e. the bad guy will be apprehended by police — viewers still look with anticipation to the "closure" of an incident.

As stated elsewhere, the television images of crime and justice depicted on *COPS* hardly represent an overall picture of a justice system lenient or "soft" on crime. Perhaps the law enforcement agencies appearing on the television program hope that some kind of deterrent effect will come out of these images. Since the television shows have close to 100% solution rates, they may be sending a message to would-be criminals that there is a very good chance that they will be caught should they decide to commit a crime — crime doesn't pay. Perhaps another message being directed at the general public and funding agencies is that tax dollars are being well-spent and that the police are doing an excellent job fighting crime. This is merely speculation, however; further research will be required in this area.

Having a near one-hundred percent solution rate on television can potentially have negative implications in real-life. For instance, television viewers may come to expect too much of their own local police department. That is, the public may have unusually high and unrealistic expectations, e.g. 100% clearance rates, solving crimes in record time, etc.

Similarly, portraying police officers as "super-cops" is not very realistic. Police officers are only human. And, as we all know, human beings are not infallible and do, from time to time, make mistakes or errors in judgment (something rarely seen on *COPS*, except when it came to portraying female officers). For example, police officers in real-life do sometimes arrest the wrong person; police officers do sometimes get the facts

mixed up; police officers do sometimes receive faulty information from confidential informants and snitches; police officers do sometimes base decisions on faulty assumptions; police officers do sometimes botch investigations; police officers do sometimes bungle drug raids due to poor intelligence reports or lack of tactical planning.

# *V*

# *DISCUSSION*

## Car Chases vs. Paper Chases: Capturing the Television Viewer's Attention

Routine and mundane tasks such as completing incident reports, filing paperwork, general patrol duty, foot patrols, surveillance, public education programs, and the like, were either given little consideration or left out entirely in the various episodes of *COPS*.

Many police officers would agree that completing paperwork and reports can be tedious and boring, to say the least. Some studies indicate that officers spend as much as one-third of their time filling-out paperwork (Bennett and Lupton, 1992; Tarling, 1988). This kind of task is an essential component of daily police work for officers across the U.S. — a fact of life that is not presented in the "reality-based" television police shows analyzed in this study.

Similarly, issuing tickets for speeding and parking infractions is an everyday occurrence for the majority of police officers in the United States. In not one episode did it show a police officer pulling someone over for speeding. Again, this should not come as a great surprise since this type of incident is not dramatic and does not make for exciting television viewing.

As stated in the previous chapter, corporate or "white-collar" crimes were virtually ignored. I suppose this should not come as a big surprise since a police investigator or forensic accountant going through boxes of financial records, for example, is not exactly exciting nor entertaining for the majority of the television audience. It is excitement, drama, and sensationalism offered by car chases and shoot-outs that get the viewing audience's attention and maintain its interest.

## Extraordinary Incidents vs. "Routine" Calls

The television findings indicate that extraordinary or unusual cases appeared to be emphasized much more than routine calls for police assistance, traffic accidents, etc. (see Table 4.1). As a result, this misrepresents or distorts the essence of what police work is fundamentally all about.

A significant proportion of the total incidents shown were of a bizarre nature. Even though some of these incidents may have portrayed the lighter or humorous side of police work, they are far from being typical incidents that police officers across the U.S. encounter on a daily basis. One episode, for example, featured an assault suspect who liked to wear women's clothing; another incident showed police officers being called in the middle of the night to round-up a cow sitting in the middle of a road.

## Police Work Portrayed as Dangerous

From the statements made by many of the police officers appearing on *COPS*, television viewers learn that police work can be a dangerous job:

*"In order to survive out here, you gotta be alert. It's scary. To be perfectly honest with you, you never know."* Officer Ken Storch, Aurora Police Department.

*"Today, we have 19- and 17-year-old kids running around out here with an Uzi with a 20- or 30-round clip."* Officer Hank Glenn, Philadelphia Police Department.

"[Many of our police officers have been] . . . *marked for death by these gangs."* Deputy Hank Valencia, San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department.

*"Every warrant is dangerous because of the unknown. You have no idea what's behind the door which makes the unknown the hardest part of the job."* Sergeant Ed Logan, Philadelphia Police Department.

*"There was a time not too long ago where there was so much trouble at that particular store, they wouldn't let one two-man car go there alone. Whenever one* [car] *went they had to send another one anytime there was an assignment in that general area. Just because a lot of things had leaked out about threats on policemen and a lot of weapons*

*floating around with the people who were hanging around the store."* Officer James Luby, Cleveland Police Department.

*"A lot of gunshots, a lot of assaults, a lot of shootings, a lot of stabbings. The night is still early, too."* Sergeant James Boone, Philadelphia Police Department.

*"It's what we call high-risk street patrol."* Officer Matt Smith, Forth Worth Police Department.

*"You never know what you're getting into."* Master Patrol Officer Kenneth Elkins, Nashville Metropolitan Police Department.

*"He* [suspect] *wanted to kill me. He would've killed me if he could have."* Officer Nick Rogers, Denver Police Department.

*"You've got your safety to worry about . . ."* Officer Rick Benson, Fort Worth Police Department.

*"Any time that I see those suspicious movements and get control of the weapon and get control of the situation without getting hurt, I feel good because I feel like I passed another test. And every time I pass a test, that means I get to go home the next morning."* Officer Matt Smith, Fort Worth Police Department.

*"This guy* [suspect] *didn't even think twice — tries to take a cop's gun — what a great guy."* Officer Dan O'Shea, Denver Police Department.

*"We've lost a fourth officer about a month ago. Now we've lost two Arlington officers. And I don't want to lose any of y'all. Everybody's still here tonight, that's what I want to see the next time we get together. I want to see everyone here. . . . I want you to be damn careful out there because I want all of you back."* Constable Mike Honeycutt, Tarrant County Constable's Office.

*"These chases are getting hairier and hairier."* Officer Gary Mullins, Cleveland Police Department.

*"In England, we don't carry any kind of weapon. So, now I've done the job in law enforcement with a weapon and without a weapon. And I think now that I've seen both sides, I've seen that people pretty much have the same kind of problems throughout the world and with crime growing the way it is. I don't think I would like to go back now* [to England] *and do this same job in law enforcement without carrying a sidearm."* Officer Gina Haynes, Sacramento Police Department.

*"You never know houses like these. You have so many people, you can't watch everybody. A lot of times they'll come out with a gun and it only takes a second."* Officer James Luby, Cleveland Police Department.

*"It's just kind of eerie sometimes in the dark, not knowing what's behind you or around you and just having to go slow around each corner. We got the guy in custody and none of us* [police officers] *got hurt and that's the important thing. We're all going home tonight."* Deputy Rob Wickum, San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department.

*"We know that people out here can hurt us and we know that people out here sometimes would like to hurt us."* Officer Rick Benson, Fort Worth Police Department.

Police officers appearing on COPS would have viewers believe that because of the nature of police work, it is often fraught with danger. They argue that domestic violence incidents, for example, can be very unpredictable and risky. However, "research indicates that this is not true. . . . [P]olice rarely have to intervene physically" (Bayley, 1994: 19).

Through their statements and comments, some of the police officers appearing on *COPS* maintain that the chances are very high that a police officer would be shot in the line-of-duty.

"[I have been] . . . *involved in some shootings where fellow officers were killed . . ."* Master Patrol Officer Jim Stephens, Nashville Metropolitan Police Department.

*"Hopefully . . .* [my death] *will be of natural causes and not from somebody shooting me in the head or something."* Sergeant Tim Ellis, Fort Worth Police Department.

*"I believe it was October 1969 and I ultimately got hired in Denver in 1978 and my wife Debora got hired on Aurora P.D. . . . in 1980. Debora was killed in a line of duty shooting. A couple of months after that, I got shot on the job here in Denver . . ."* Officer Bill Snyder, Denver Police Department.

However, statistical evidence indicates that an officer's risk of becoming the victim of homicide is less than that of losing his or her life in a non-duty related traffic accident. For example, one internal departmental study found that the greatest threat to New York City's 31,000 rank-and-file police officers doesn't come from dangerous situations involving criminals with guns. Ironically, the biggest threat comes from the

officers themselves by way of their poor driving skills! In 1993, 1,230 New York officers were injured in car accidents, compared to only 20 hurt in shootings (*Ottawa Citizen*, 1994c). The NYPD may not be representative of all law enforcement agencies in the United States, but the problems confronted by them are certainly typical of the police problems facing many departments across the nation.

## Police Work Portrayed as Exciting and Rewarding

Generally, the various *COPS* episodes portrayed police work as very interesting, exciting, and rewarding. This point is consistently demonstrated by the large number of high-speed pursuits and foot-chases that occurred.

Some statements made by police officers on the show include the following:

"*Five minutes after roll-call,* [we] *get into a pursuit,* [we] *get into a* [foot]*chase,* [and we] *capture the bad guy.*" Officer Bob Rose, Cleveland Police Department.

"*It's* [police work] *satisfying. It's rewarding. It gets in your blood. There's just nothing like catching the bad guy.*" Officer Matt Smith, Fort Worth Police Department.

"*It was interesting. Every call you went on was a surprise . . . . There's never a dull moment.*" Officer Rick Benson, Fort Worth Police Department.

"*I had to find a new source of adrenaline, a new source of excitement* [referring to policing as an exciting new career choice for him]." Officer Fred Doughty, Olympia Police Department.

"*It's never the same every day.*" Sergeant Ed Logan, Philadelphia Police Department.

"*I was just into the chase* [of a suspect], *man. I was having a good time.*" Officer Dan O'Shea, Denver Police Department.

"*I just love the work. It's great work.*" Deputy Scott Jacobs, Sacramento County Sheriff's Department.

"*That's the fun part of police work — when you catch them* [the suspect]." Officer Ralph Suarez, Miami Police Department

*"It gives you a good sense of accomplishment when you take a gun off the street."* Officer King Harris, Philadelphia Police Department.

*"The good thing about this job is that when you make an arrest like that — whether it's a gun or robbery or theft — it makes your day and it makes you feel good inside."* Officer Walter Rice, Philadelphia Police Department.

*"Basically, I got into the job because of the excitement of it. It's not routine.* [It's] *something different every day and not working in an office."* Deputy Rick Roelle, San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department.

*"I've always wanted a job with a uniform. I went into other areas in the civilian side of society and worked in my degree areas and didn't seem to like it because you didn't have any adrenaline pump at all. But out here you can get into a chase right quick and you can get another call and that can change and take you into a lull where you run into a kid who's super sick, or in critical condition, or has been shot with a gun — that's your lull. You get back out here, and get another call and you got a burglar running out of the house."* Officer Bill Daniels, Fort Worth Police Department.

*"This badge is like an E-ticket to Disneyland. And I intend to ride every ride in the park. It's* [police work] *a ball."* Officer Dan O'Shea, Denver Police Department.

Bayley (1994: 43) argues that, "It is human nature to stress the exciting parts of one's work. Most jobs are boring in part, but few people define their work in terms of those periods. Police officers . . . naturally dwell on the purposeful, adventuresome side of their job. They tend to magnify the time spent actually "fighting crime." It is hard for them to admit that they often simply drive around [and wait for something to happen]."

## Perceptions of Job-Related Stress

Many officers spoke about responding to calls where their hearts would be pounding and adrenaline pumping through their veins:

*"Some people thrive on stress. I think I am one of those people. It keeps me awake."* Officer Matt Smith, Fort Worth Police Department.

*"That's adrenaline rush. It smacks you in the forehead like a rock."* Deputy Shawn McDonald, Pierce County Sheriff's Department.

*"The adrenaline that we experience, the adrenaline rush, is almost like a drug. When you get into something* [a call] *you get a two or three-minute adrenaline rush and when it's over and you catch your breath and have a cold drink, you go out and you start looking again, you want to find somebody else, you want to get into another deal. And even though you know it's dangerous, and even though you're scared, you know there's fear going through your system, you want to get into it again, because you want to have that feeling* [adrenaline high] *again."* Officer Rick Benson, Fort Worth Police Department.

Rarely, however was there any discussion about occupational stress. Research studies indicate that the many consequences of stress include lack of job satisfaction, burnout, physical symptoms, and suicide (see Hillas and Cox, 1986; Jones 1989; Snow 1990). The nature of police work, the prevalence of stress-related disorders, and the relationship between personality and the dynamics of the way in which stress is manifested were not considered at any great length.

Police officers who use deadly force in the line of duty, for example, can suffer in many ways including physically, psychologically and/or emotionally. Reactions to a traumatic incident such as a shooting can be immediate and long-term. The television audience does not get to see and hear this human component or vulnerable side of policing.

Pressures due to such things as family commitments, time constraints handed down by superiors to solve cases, and the challenge of juggling several investigations were issues that were never brought up on *COPS*.

## Social Censures

Perhaps *COPS* and television shows like it serve to stimulate the television audience's consciousness of the need to censure and 'crack down' on crime. In turn, this

may lead to support of 'get tough' policies to combat crime. Indeed, the mass media have been notorious for stoking the fires of punitiveness (Sumner, 1990: 48).

Sumner (1990: 27) argues that, "Censures are used for a variety of purposes and in a variety of contexts. . . . Their general function is to signify, denounce and regulate, not to explain. Their typical consequence is not an adequate account of a social conflict but rather the distinguishing of 'offenders' from 'non-offenders', the creation of resentment in their targets, or the cessation of the offensive matter. They mark the deviant, the pathological, the dangerous and the criminal from the normal and the good. They say 'stop', and are tied to a desire to control, prevent or punish."

If one were to step back for a moment and really take a hard look at the content of the various *COPS* episodes and the way in which the subject matter is presented, one could probably come to the conclusion that these censures are clearly moral and political in character. Because these censures "simplify worth and correctness against wrong and danger, they simultaneously form a justification for repressive action against the offender and for attempts to educate the recipient [i.e. the television viewer] into the desired habits or way of life. . . . Nuts, sluts, perverts, prostitutes, . . . murderers, psychopaths, villains, freaks, . . . troublemakers, militants, muggers, rioters, squatters, and scroungers are all social censures with the potential to mobilize the forces of law, order and moral purity against target sections of the population" (Sumner, 1990: 27).

## Social Polarizations: Good Guys vs. Bad Guys

Dualistic notions of right and wrong, non-criminal and criminal behaviour, and order and chaos, were subtly presented throughout the television program. From watching the various television episodes, one is left with the distinct impression that the

police regard themselves as the thin blue line — the last line of defense standing between law-abiding citizens and the criminal element.

*"In terms of being a police officer, my goal is to protect the public and maintain law and order."* Corporal Lonny Arnold, King County Police Department.

*"This is my hometown. My goal is to keep it safe ."* Officer Fred Doughty, Olympia Police Department.

Not surprisingly, it was the police (in conjunction with the executive producers of *COPS*) who set the boundaries and defined what was deemed to be acceptable behaviour in the community and what was not.

Members of the television audience can easily figure out who the protagonists are on the show. From the beginning of each segment, it was quite apparent who the good guys were and who the bad guys were. In reality, however, determining who the so-called 'bad guys' are is obviously a much more complicated affair (Stern, 1990: 70). In the "real" world, everything is not so black-and-white — there are many gray areas.

For instance, sometimes the fine line that demarcates the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys' becomes blurred (e.g. crooked cops). Interestingly, the various episodes gave no mention of Professional Standards or Internal Affairs units within police organizations. In fact, there was no mention of police impropriety whatsoever. The topic of police corruption and misconduct will be discussed in greater detail in a later section.

Both the media and the criminal justice system often deal with moral principles through techniques of individualization and personalization (e.g. moral-character portraits). "The emphasis on individual morality is not only a dramatic technique for presenting . . . stories as serial narratives . . . but also a political means of allocating responsibility for actions and attributing accountability. Moreover, in law enforcement,

as in news, personalization combined with an event-orientation 'produces the appearance . . . that troublesome persons rather than troublesome social structures are at fault. . . . By individualizing problems on a case-by-case basis, the news and law rule out systemic and structural accounts that might question the authority of cultural values, the state, and the news and legal institutions themselves" (Surette, 1990: 8).

The simplistic dichotomy of good and evil was presented to encourage viewers to distinguish between two basic groups of people: those who break the law and those who obey it. An 'us' versus 'them' mentality was a common theme throughout many of the episodes. This presentation works to the advantage of the police since most viewers would likely come down on the side of law-abiding and would thus go on to identify with the police. In fact, many of the episodes attempted to foster a sympathetic, affective response in the television audience towards what is typically seen as dangerous work requiring heroic effort.

## A Disregard of the Root "Causes" of Crime

The various episodes of *COPS* typically ignored the wider social issues at work behind crime such as poverty and unemployment. Of particular concern here is the point that the television show tends to frame crime and justice issues in narrow terms.

Some people believe that criminal behaviour is freely chosen while others argue that it is caused or influenced by external factors. As eluded to earlier, the television show treated the issue of crime as predatory in nature and "rooted more in individual failure than in social ills" (Surette, 1992: 24). The following were some of the comments made on program:

*"He's a criminal. He's not somebody with principles. He's just a criminal."* Deputy Andy Estes, Pierce Country Sheriff's Department.

"[The suspect] . . . *has no conscience about what he's doing . . .*" Deputy Hank Valencia, San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department.

Rarely was there any discussion of external social forces at work with respect to crime. There was a lack of recognition that if there is to be true crime prevention, then, one must attack the root causes such as poverty, lack of education, unemployment, and other social ills.

In fact, a focus on the broader range of social problems that underlie incidents of crime in America was not explored to any extent in the television police shows. There was virtually no discussion of such important issues as drugs, access to guns, joblessness, inadequate housing, or television violence. Crime and other social issues are more complex than the television show is letting on. Hence, a proper understanding of crime (and ultimately, of the means for its control) requires an awareness of the variety and complexity of contributing factors of crime.

## Police Officers Profiled on *COPS*

It would be interesting to find out how these officers came to appear on *COPS* to represent their respective police departments. Were they randomly selected? Were they selected by their department's top brass? Were they recommended by a supervisor or their peers? Were they selected on the basis of their reputation for being professional and well-spoken? What kind of briefing, if any, did the officers get before the camera started rolling? Were they instructed by their supervisors on what they could or could not say? Were the police officers allowed to speak what was on their minds (unrehearsed and

impromptu) or were they prepped in some way by supervisors on what to say and how to act?

Another interesting finding was the fact that the majority of *COPS* episodes only showed rank-and-file police officers at the street level, i.e. patrol officers and sergeants. In rare instances, a lieutenant may have made a brief appearance to offer guidance at the scene of a crime. The television audience does not get to hear from senior police managers such as Captains, Commanders, or Chiefs of Police. In addition, it was a rare occurrence for a rookie police officer to appear on *COPS*; veterans with several years of street-experience under their belts were typically shown.

## Front-Stage vs. Back-Stage Behaviour

The way that police officers acted and carried themselves in front of the camera may not necessarily be typical of the way they usually act. Their positive actions and professional demeanor may have been displayed for the benefit of the television audience. Indeed, some of the officers may have tailored their behaviours, actions, and statements to conform to media expectations.

This should not come as a surprise to the reader. As Rosenberg (1995: 108) asserts, " . . . who among us would not become an actor when in the presence of a TV camera close enough to record every facial tic? Some early scenes from *COPS* serve as examples, including one where the camera closed tight on a Florida sheriff's deputy kissing his wife after a day at the office, another where a male officer proposed to a female officer on a boat in a lake. Not putting on a bit for the lens? And wouldn't a camera practically sitting on their noses alter the behavior of participants on both sides in a police interrogation . . . "

We know that, "specific types of behavior are expected of people in specific social roles and places. Front-stage behavior is formal, planned behavior performed in professional and public settings. Such behavior is designed for public observation by a specific audience. . . ." (Surette, 1992: 10).

One is not likely to observe the television show exposing the back-stage behavior of police officers. Essentially, the executive producers do not want to bite the hand that feeds them. Without the cooperation of the police, there would be no show.

With respect to criminal suspects, one may wonder why suspects allow themselves to be shown on national television in what is typically an unflattering depiction? The television show's executive producer John Langley states that it probably has something to do with " . . . fame or immortality [which could also apply to some of the police officers appearing on *COPS*], or to have a videotape to claim innocence . . ." (Brooks and Marsh, 1995: 214). More than 50 percent of suspects caught on film signed the required release while others who were shown appeared with their faces electronically obscured to protect their identity (Brooks and Marsh, 1995: 214).

## Absence of Criminal Justice Partners and Other Professional Colleagues

After watching 36 episodes, one is left with the impression that the police regard themselves as the sole agency for preventing and combating crime. Social workers, teachers, judges, lawyers, probation officers, youth counsellors, etc., were given very little, if any, consideration.

In real life, the police rarely work alone. For example, they often require the cooperation and expertise of others to help solve crimes. Other professional colleagues such as pathologists, medical examiners, physical anthropologists, serologists, biologists,

entomologists, forensic technicians, criminologists, criminalists, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, medical doctors, and the like, were left out altogether. These experts do not appear to be part of the equation.

Even in the special homicide episode of *COPS*, civilian experts were conveniently omitted. This seems unusual since pathologists, for example, can assist the police in determining such things as cause of death, approximate time of death, nature of the assault, type of weapon used, and the physical characteristics of the perpetrator.

Some of the police officers appearing on *COPS* voiced their criticisms with respect to other components of the American criminal justice system. For instance, they viewed judges and the court system as being far too lenient on criminals. Some of their frustrations are noted in the following statements:

" . . . *they* [suspects] *have been through the juvenile system repeatedly — a revolving door — slap on the wrist, slap on the wrist.*" Officer Matt Smith, Fort Worth Police Department.

" . . . *I'm getting tired of scuffling with the same guy every time and the* [court] *system is not taking care of him.*" K-9 Officer Mark Shannon, Pomona Police Department.

"*It's kind of crazy. This is about what, the third time in two months we've had contact with him* [suspect]." Corporal Joe Waltman, Pomona Police Department.

"*Why he's* [suspect] *not put away for a long time, hopefully now this time is going to do it.*" K-9 Officer Mark Shannon, Pomona Police Department.

"*He's* [suspect] *been arrested 38 times for being drunk, public intoxication. . . . What a waste of taxpayers' money.*" Officer George Seroka, Cleveland Police Department.

"*After a criminal has been arrested or he's going through the judicial system, the jury, the judge, pretty much anybody that has to make decisions, have as much time as they need to make those decisions whereas while you're out on the street, you've got to make decisions in split-seconds that can affect your life, that can affect the citizen's life, that can affect the suspect's life.*" Corporal Joe Waltman, Pomona Police Department.

*"What frustrates me the most on this job is dealing with some of these juveniles who commit serious crimes against people and are released and back out on the street before we can even finish our paperwork. That's the ultimate in frustration on this job is when someone can commit a crime and before the police can even finish the paperwork that has to be done, that person will be back on the street. That's frustrating."* Officer Mel Gonzales, Cleveland Police Department.

With respect to topics such as crime, criminals, and criminal behaviour, it is only the view of the police which seems to matter. They are a major, if not *the* sole, authoritative source of information about crime. With respect to incidents responded to by police on the television show, they are the sole definers of *what* happened and *why* it happened. Academics were never utilized to explore the broader, underlying societal issues behind crime and violence.

In the last decade or so, some journalists covering crime stories have been dubbed "crime specialists." Suddenly everyone is a criminologist or an expert on crime. In the same way, the police appearing on "reality-based" television police shows like *COPS* are passing themselves off as so-called experts. They rely solely on their knowledge and experience and never seek out the opinion of other "experts" such as academics or other practitioners working within the criminal justice system.

The police are shown "fighting" and "solving" crime all by themselves. It is well established that the police cannot do it alone (see Bayley, 1994). They often require assistance from other agencies and professionals, and more importantly, the community. Partnerships and cooperation with the community (e.g. community-based policing programs) and other agencies appeared to be lacking in the various television episodes. In addition, police were rarely shown working side-by-side with fire and emergency personnel.

While it seems to be in the short-term interest of the police to report their "great accomplishments" with respect to fighting crime, this too perpetuates our crime problem by serving as a barrier to long-term solutions. What kind of impact are the police really having on the crime situation in the United States? Short-term goals are emphasized rather then long-term consequences.

## Alcohol and Drugs

In many of the *COPS* episodes, alcohol appeared to play a major role in many of the criminal incidents, especially the ones involving violence. The following statements made by police officers appearing on the television show are good examples:

*"Unfortunately, we have a large population of people that love to drink up here in the high desert and they also love guns. Just add alcohol and you get an instant jerk."* Deputy Rick Roelle, San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department.

*"Here's a guy that's just drunk. He doesn't know what's going on, he's prone to get mad easy, and he's flashing this gun around these little girls"* Officer J.K. Jacoby, Fort Worth Police Department.

*"He's* [break-and-enter suspect] *got about a nine-tenths empty 12 pack of beer in the front* [of his truck] *so he's intoxicated. Plus they've* [fellow officers] *determined that he's probably intoxicated which didn't help to his ability to rationalize the situation."* Officer Rick Benson, Fort Worth Police Department.

However, to state or imply that "drugs cause violence" is an oversimplification. "The effect of a drug on an individual's behaviour is the product of a range of drug and non-drug factors which include the pharmacological properties of the substance in question, the individual's neurological foundation, personality and temperament, his or her expectations of the drug's effects, and the social setting in which the individual is located" (National Committee on Violence, 1990: xxv).

Indeed, a strong association exists between alcohol, for instance, and violent behaviour. But the relationship is a complex one whereby many psychological, social and cultural factors come into play.

## How "Reality-Based" T.V. Shows Are Made

Editing and production techniques, selection of incidents, etc., are all crucial to the understanding of *why* "reality-based" television shows like *COPS* portray crime and policing the way that they do. *How* these shows present information is just as important as *what* they present. Because as we all know, although the media, ". . . collectively constitute a major force in society, they are more often driven by [business and] organizational needs than by political ideologies" (Surette, 1992: 3). As Ericson (1991: 219) correctly points out, "The mass media do not merely report on events but rather participate directly in processes by which events are constituted and exist in the world."

With this in mind, Reiner (1992: 173) contends that, "The key to understanding the content of the media is knowledge of the organisational dynamics, ideology and professional imperatives of the productive personnel and institutions" (see also Ericson *et al.*, 1987, 1989, 1991).

In a tell-all article that appeared in the November 1993 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, a former story analyst with the "reality-based" television police show *American Detective* provides the reader with an insider's view, revealing how these types of shows are edited and produced. Some people might question the ex-analyst's motives for coming forth and exposing so-called "reality-based" television programming. Whatever her motive or agenda, the article does provide the reader with "trade secrets" and invaluable information about what actually goes on behind-the-scenes. It should be

noted that the statements made in her article were corroborated by some footage from *American Detective*, which appeared on a CTV evening news broadcast during the winter of 1993.

Huge amounts of raw footage are shot each week at predetermined locations across the United States. However, only a small percentage of the selected segments actually make it past the cutting-room floor stage. It is not unheard of for camera crews to go out and shoot one hundred 20-minute videotapes to get a mere twenty-two minutes of actual broadcast material (Brooks and Marsh, 1995: 214). O'Sullivan *et al.* (1994: 108) also note that, "With a shooting ratio of up to fifty hours of recorded video to one hour broadcast, the onus is on the editor to generate as much dramatic interest and entertainment as possible." According to Seagal (1993: 50), it is the story analyst's job to "scrutinize each . . . tape second by second, and make a running log of every visual and auditory element that can be used to 'create' a story."

At the beginning of each episode of *American Detective*, the following words appear across the viewer's television screen at home: *"What you are about to see is real. There are no re-creations. Everything was filmed while it actually happened."* A similar claim is made at the beginning of each *COPS* episode. These statements appearing at the outset of every episode are not entirely accurate because what members of the television audience are not told is that each segment is scrutinized, dissected, edited, and manipulated for maximum dramatic and sensationalistic effect.

Furthermore, the audience does not get to see the scenes which are considered by the show's producers, according to Seagal (1993: 55), as "too much reality for reality-based T.V." In one particular instance, scenes which show White police officers using

unnecessary, excessive physical force during the arrest of two young Hispanic male suspects were conveniently taken out during the editing process. In the final version which went to air, the television audience got to see a "clean bust." It is important to note here that the *COPS* production team provides participating police departments with all tapes of incidents that are filmed (Stites, 1990: 38).

With respect to *COPS*, one begins to wonder whether at any time the camera was turned off so not to embarrass or expose police doing something unethical, unprofessional and/or illegal. As was found in Sherizen's (1978: 213) study, news reporters greatly "depend upon their relationship with the police to such an extent that they are unable to report about the police when mistakes are made, when corruption is found, or when the crime fighters' image is not fulfilled." The same can be said for the relationship between the police and the executive producers, story editors, and camera crews of *COPS*. The television show's access to the police is granted on the understanding that they will not reveal anything that would be detrimental to the police image.

Another well-kept trade secret consists of a compendium of miscellaneous images and sounds such as guns, interior house shots, drugs, etc., which are compiled and stored for use on future episodes. "This compendium is used to embellish stories where certain images or sounds have not been picked up by a main or secondary camera. . . . Evidently the 'reality' of a given episode is subject to enhancement" (Seagal, 1993: 51). So much for the television show's claim that everything is filmed while it actually happens!

Many unsuspecting viewers may not be aware that many aspects of "reality-based" television shows like *COPS* are often manipulated or even fabricated. Raw footage is scrutinized, scenes are cut and spliced, and sounds/visuals are often inserted to

"enhance" the shot. Producers and story editors, "reassemble what the camera records to convey what they judge to be the true meaning of events. It is only a step away from these necessary steps of selection and editing to a radical reconstruction that incorporates what the camera never caught at all" (Bogart, 1995: 189). In essence, the final product becomes what the show's producers and editors regard as an entertaining account of events, and not necessarily a true or accurate reflection of what actually happened.

Television's penchant for distorting reality through the selective focus of the camera lens is well-documented. "The limited horizon of the television camera has a selective and therefore a distorting effect in its depiction of reality. Television imposes technical requirements that put great power into the hands of those who light, shoot and edit film. An instrument in human hands, the camera can make the unimportant seem dramatic and vice versa or make the simple appear complex. . . . A similar process of control occurs in the editing process, which reconstitutes what the camera has actually recorded" (Bogart, 1995: 190).

The repertoire of many "reality-based" television shows consists of, among other things, ". . . tricks of artful juxtaposition. Documentarists distinguish good guys and bad guys through timing, placing sequences, splicing tape, [and] using close-ups. . . . More like artists than journalists, they manipulate images to arouse the emotions of the audience" (Bogart, 1995: 190).

*COPS* utilizes several production techniques that add a certain level of personalization to the show. Close-ups of officers while they talk about their backgrounds, how they got into police work, etc., occurred in every episode. By the end

of the segment, the television audience is able to relate to the police and empathize with them with respect to the dilemmas police officers face on a daily basis.

At first glance, "reality-based" television programming gives the appearance (or illusion) of neutrality. Its journalistic "news" format (minus the news anchor's commentary in the background) contributes to this perception. After all, they are filming everything as it happens, right? As we have heard so far, this appears not to be the case.

The world that unfolds on our television screens is in fact only one "version" or perspective of reality. Television producers are able to get and keep the attention of unsuspecting audiences "through careful and clever packaging" of television programs (Rushkoff, 1996: 7).

## Low Production Costs

"Reality-based" television programs like *COPS* and *American Detective* are relatively inexpensive to make, which makes them all the more attractive to the major American television networks. As Seagal (1993: 51) points out, "why create an elaborate car-chase sequence costing tens of thousands of dollars a minute when a crew with a couple of video cameras can ride along with the cops and get the 'real' thing?" There is no need to do re-creations with actors, fancy wardrobes, expensive sets and props, special effects, or stunt men. As a result, production costs remain fairly cheap.

## Video Technology: Seeing Is Believing?

"Technology and media cheerleaders argue that tools and mediums [of communication] are neutral. It is true that any technique can be used for good or ill" (Surette, 1990: xiv). However, the new uses of the media as demonstrated by shows like

*American Detective*, *COPS*, *L.A.P.D.*, and *Real Stories of the Highway Patrol*, raise important issues about 'truth'.

One must bear in mind that while the intended effect of "reality-based" television programming is to make the audience believe that they are witnesses to reality, "reality" is always inferential. The "reality" presented is actually the result of a process in which the television show's executive producers, editors, etc., have necessarily gone beyond the knowledge procured by them, reconstructing it in ways that displace the observed world (Surette, 1990: 32).

Surette (1990: xiv) argues that:

> When offered as evidence [the television images] . . . can easily lead to a misplaced confidence in the validity of what is seen or heard. Seeing should not always lead to believing, particularly when the replay occurs in an environment far removed in space, time, culture and social setting from the original. There is a danger of decontextualizing the interaction. Video technology, for example, can beguile us into confusing image with reality, because the video record is believed to more fully approximate real experience than witnesses who merely tell what they remember. Video can distort in a number of ways from high-tech editing in which things are added or deleted, to unrepresentative sampling, to naive subjects who are manipulated in performing before a camera or audio recorder they are unaware of. It is important to always ask what went on before the machine was turned on.

The format of "reality-based" television programs like *COPS* can "easily lead to a misplaced confidence in the validity of what is seen and heard" (Surette, 1990: xiv). When visuals are involved, there is a certain "trust" that viewers come to place in the accuracy and genuineness of those images. We often accept these images at face value without asking where they came from. But television viewers should not be so quick to believe everything they see and hear on television. As Bogart (1995: 217) points out, "Because the direct evidence of our eyes and ears is so compelling, the illusion or reality

can be maintained [quite easily]." One must keep in mind that video-recordings can be altered, manipulated, and embellished.

This should not come as a surprise since we have known for decades that fashion magazines, for example, have been using airbrushing techniques to embellish or enhance photographs of female models. Waists and hips are "reduced," bust sizes are "increased" and blemishes, scars, and wrinkles are "erased."

A recent example of photograph manipulation is demonstrated by the picture of O.J. Simpson's mug shot which appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine*. The picture was digitally altered to make his skin complexion appear darker than it really was. In addition, a shadow was added which didn't appear in the original mug shot. It gave Simpson a more ominous (and criminal?) appearance, to say the least. In essence, "reality" is being tampered with. One could even take this one step further and argue that "reality" is being manufactured.

During the Paul Bernardo trial here in Canada, the *Globe and Mail* newspaper wanted a still photograph of the stairs leading up to the courthouse where the case was going to be held. On the sidewalk adjacent to the bottom of the stairs were two newspaper stands: one belonging to the *Globe and Mail* and the other to one of their rivals, the *Toronto Star*. The photograph which appeared in the *Globe and Mail* the next day only had the one newspaper stand in it — their own. The competitor's stand had been digitally-removed from the picture. How convenient.

As stated previously, this kind of tampering is also occurring in "reality-based" television programming. It is methods and techniques like these that raise important questions about (the perception of) truth.

Even without actually doctoring images, distortions in "reality" can still occur. That is, in any one of the incidents analyzed in this study, the television producers in conjunction with the officers from participating police departments present their own perception or interpretation of what transpired. This interpretation, however, is only one of several. Suspects, victims, witnesses, and other police officers at the scene may have had very different versions of the events which transpired. Again, one must keep in mind that the world that unfolds on our television screens is in fact only one 'version' or perspective of "reality."

## The Police and the Television Industry: A Symbiotic Relationship

It is quite evident that a reciprocal relationship exists between the police and the television industry. This relationship is similar in nature to the relationship identified between the police and news organizations (see Ericson *et al.*, 1987, 1989). Both parties appear to benefit from the association in some way or another.

The police are a good example of an institution in society which enjoys privileged access to the media. In the case of *COPS*, essentially, the police receive free (positive?) publicity or air-time as well as being provided with an outlet to voice their views, concerns and pet-peeves. The police are able to utilize the medium of television to disseminate information *from* them and *about* them.

In the case of *COPS*, the television industry plays a pivotal role when it comes to helping participating law enforcement agencies make convincing claims. As a medium, television offers a pervasive and persuasive means by which the police can attempt to obtain wider consent for their moral perspectives (Surette, 1990: 8) and also a forum where they can justify and legitimize their role and function in society.

The television program also provides police with an opportunity (and a captive audience of a sort) to argue for this or that (e.g. hiring of more uniformed police officers or an increase in firepower for officers) and to garner public support.

"*. . . sometimes we don't have enough manpower to go around and answer our calls exactly like they should be answered . . .*" Officer Rick Benson, Fort Worth Police Department.

"*We got 27 car assignments tonight and we got 25 cars. . . . So for those of you who do not have a car, see me after roll-call, we'll see if we can get you into a cruiser or one of the C.R. roadshows* [community relations vehicle] *or something like that.*" Sergeant Bill Yeros, Denver Police Department.

The police have a vested interest in crime-related issues appearing on episodes of *COPS*: their reputation as authorities on crime is further enhanced and reinforced as their views and opinions are sought after by the television show's executive producers (Sherizen, 1978: 212).

What does the television industry (i.e. producers, network executives, sponsors) get in return? They are provided with the basic subject matter and raw footage which their show depends on. They rely heavily on the police for access to actual incidents, permission for film crews to ride-along with police, and so on. Put simply, without the cooperation and assistance of the police there would be no show. In this respect, then, the police appear to have the upper hand.

## Television: An Indispensable Tool for Law Enforcement in the 1990s

"Since the police have a vested interest in communicating with the broad spectrum of the public and . . . [television provides] a conduit reaching into the homes ... of people everywhere, it behooves the police to consider ways and means of harnessing the opinion-forming [attributes] . . . of the media . . ." (Alderson, 1982: 7).

*COPS* and similar "reality-based" television programs provide participating law enforcement agencies with a forum in which to project a particular "image" (e.g. tough on crime: partners with the community; outmanned and outgunned by criminals, etc.). And, to the police, image is everything. In their study of news sources, "Ericson *et al.* (1989) found that police were most concerned with whether the media positively reflected the force's image rather than with providing an accurate understanding of crime, police organization, and their occupation (cited in Kasinsky, 1995: 216).

As stated in the introduction, television can be a very effective and influential tool. Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, law enforcement agencies across the United States have increasingly tapped into this powerful medium and used it to their advantage.

A case in point is the *Crime Stoppers* program. *Crime Stoppers* has turned out to be an innovative way to illicit the public's assistance to solve crimes. Essentially, unsolved crimes (with few leads) are reenacted on television and cash rewards are offered to individuals who may be able to provide key information: the caller's identity remains anonymous. Conclusive empirical evidence to gauge the success and effectiveness of the *Crime Stoppers* programs remains to be seen, however.

There are other examples where television, law enforcement, and the public come together to form a three-pronged approach to combat crime. Weekly television shows such as *America's Most Wanted* and *Unsolved Mysteries* have led to the "apprehension of fugitives, the solution of difficult cases, and positive publicity for the law enforcement agencies involved" (Nelson, 1989: 2). In fact, many local, state and federal law enforcement agencies across the United States have "cooperated with certain crime-time

television shows . . . recognizing the programs as unique opportunities to catch fugitives and solve cases through public/private involvement" (Nelson, 1989: 4).

Unlike the rigid format of television news reports, police officers appearing on *COPS* do not have to settle for ten or fifteen-second sound-bites. In a news interview, the police officer had better be articulate the first time because there are rarely second takes; the interviewee cannot go to the news editor and say, "I didn't like what I said earlier today or how I said it, so don't broadcast the segment tonight on the six o'clock news edition."

In contrast, "reality-based" television police shows provide a forum where officers have more time to voice their opinions. Police have input at the editing stages before the final product is seen on televisions across North America. It would be naive to think that the police did not review and approve the final cut before it went on to air all across North America and elsewhere around the world. After all, it is in the best interests of the police agencies involved to carefully inspect and scrutinize the film footage — frame by frame — for anything at all that might be damaging to their reputation, integrity, and/or public image.

## 30-Minute Info-Mercials: A Step Towards Image Management

Today, as never within our lifetime, police in America are in urgent need of a revival to their bruised and tarnished image. In recent years, the police have received a lot of negative publicity where their integrity and/or their investigative skills have often come into question: e.g. O.J. Simpson case; L.A. riots; Rodney King beating; Olympic Park bombing; the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas; the Jon-Benet Ramsey murder. Dramatic media spectacles such as these have ultimately served to hurt the public image

of the police and erode public confidence. With this said, there have been incessant attempts to repair and to reform the American police image.

The police often find themselves trying to make friends with a public that mostly, thanks to media scrutiny and a glut of fictional movies and television shows, sees them as either armed bullies or larger-than-life heroes. Perhaps through "reality-based" television programs, the police feel that they can have more input and control over their own image. Perhaps an attempt is being made to counter negative public perceptions and also previous damaging incidents involving the police — damage control of a sort.

What better way to achieve this than by creating your own image — an image that you think best represents your organization. Law enforcement agencies recognize the potential damage to their public image that the news and entertainment (i.e. fictional cop shows) media can inflict. With this in mind, many police departments are starting to disseminate their own images with the help of "reality-based" television programming.

Ericson *et al.* (1989: 32) maintain that the very fact that the police appear on television could serve to:

> . . . sustain the view publicly that they are operating with procedural regularity, and are therefore accountable. . . . Traditionally, the police have adopted a reactive approach to news communication. This approach has entailed either defending their actions when questioned, or simply enclosing on knowledge. More recently they have made an effort to control their environment through a proactive strategy of selectively disclosing knowledge about organizational activities. . . . [T]he police have become proactive in making their public image. . . . [A] proactive approach . . . is useful in controlling the version of reality that is transmitted, sustained, and accepted publicly.

Over the past decade or so, there has been a fundamental shift on the part of the police as an organization from a defensive and/or secretive posture to one that is generally proactive when it comes to *developing* and *disseminating* their own public image (Ericson

*et al.*, 1989: 93). A case in point is the Police Federation in the United Kingdom. They have utilized various "designers, corporate video, and other communications professionals to help change its image" (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994: 52).

Media relations and training are now standard courses in police academies and colleges around the world and are fast becoming a more general practice among American police departments. "At one level, then, media training is largely concerned with teaching interview techniques for the camera and the microphone to individual officers, and awareness of how to present oneself. The other side of media training deals with how the police . . . can interact with the media to its best advantage" (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994: 128).

Each law enforcement agency probably had its own reasons for allowing some of their officers to appear on *COPS*. One can only assume that a common reason was the national exposure that would result as well as the opportunity to create and project a positive image of their respective agency. In this respect, then, television shows like *COPS* function as self-promotion mechanisms for the police profession in general and for the participating individual police department specifically.

Self-promotion and image-building are by no means new techniques. For example, politicians, military leaders, and entertainment personalities have been using rhetoric and propaganda for years to achieve and maintain power and garner public support.

Similarly, the police are not immune from the general tendency to 'promotion' as outlined above. As Schlesinger and Tumber (1994: 107) argue, "Their very exposure to the public gaze, and to political conflict about their role in society, has led them

increasingly to develop means of image management." It goes without saying that the police want to "present themselves as likable, accessible, and competent" (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994: 12).

Schlesinger and Tumber (1994: 113) assert that:

> The police recognize that without public confidence in their ability to deal with crime, or in their professionalism and integrity, they will not receive public cooperation, and will encounter political difficulties. In recent years, there has been a feeling within the police that the public and the media have overlooked the good work that they do. The emphasis in the media, it is believed, has been on bad news and rising crime, with the implication that the police are unable to contain it. This has been injurious to morale and has also fostered the siege mentality. . . . Many policemen and women feel beleaguered and misunderstood.

Public opinion research indicates that it is "thought that the media had contributed to unwarranted fear of crime, which has harmed the police because they were perceived by the public as not doing enough to maintain law and order" (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994: 53). Perhaps "reality-based" cop shows are an attempt by law enforcement to counter or minimize the negative view that police are not doing anything; this may also explain the high crime solution rate for the various episodes of *COPS*.

Interestingly, it is the larger metropolitan police departments in the U.S. that appear to be "particularly concerned with how they handle their media and public relations. . . . By contrast, it is much more common for smaller forces to be primarily concerned with their local press and consequently these do not need such developed media and public relations operations" (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994: 120). This could explain, in part, why the various episodes of *COPS* included more larger metropolitan police departments rather than smaller rural law enforcement agencies. Another reason could be that the show's executive producers consider police work in the big city setting

to be more 'exciting' and 'interesting.' Or, for filming purposes, perhaps the show's producers consider incidents of crime to be more easily accessible in the urban environment.

## Incidents of Police Corruption and Misconduct

After reading the above section on public image, it should not be surprising to the reader that not one incident of police brutality, misconduct, wrongdoing, corruption, or abuse of authority was shown on *COPS*; instances of procedural error and inefficiency were also lacking. Similarly, incidents involving illegal searches, coerced confessions, the use of excessive physical force to subdue a suspect were not considered.

Unlike some fictional television cop shows that show officers solving crime by committing crimes themselves (e.g. breaking and entering; illegal searches without a warrant) or ignoring fundamental constitutional rights (e.g. failing to give Miranda warnings to suspects when necessary), the police officers appearing on *COPS appear* to do everything by the book — i's are dotted and t's are crossed for the benefit of the television audience. For obvious reasons, it would not have been in the best interests of participating police departments to have shown scenes where their officers are using excessive force. This would serve only to tarnish the police image, outrage viewers, and serve as ammunition for plaintiffs in civil liability suits against the police.

This is not to say, however, that these types of occurrences did not occur. All it means is that highly discrediting or damaging incidents were not "caught" on film. Or were they? As stated previously, some incidents involving police impropriety do get caught on film, but are conveniently excluded during the editing process. This fact is not surprising since, as one ex-producer of a "reality-based" television cop show has stated,

participating police departments have much control over which film segments remain on the cutting-room floor and which segments go on to be seen by the television audience.

There was one particular incident appearing on *COPS* that warrants further discussion. The incident showed police being called to a domestic disturbance involving an ex-cop who was described as a drug-user and wife-beater. This particular story seemed to be located within the 'one bad apple' framework, implying that the discovery and subsequent dismissal of this individual from the department is proof that the police *institution* itself remains wonderful (Reiner, 1992: 175).

Ericson (1991: 226) asserts that, "The rituals of expunging rotten apples offset the possibility of a structural critique of the [police] organization as a rotting barrel, thereby contributing to its continuing legitimacy".

## ***COPS* as an Example of Conservative Crime Control Thinking**

The right-wing law-and-order lobby often argue for more police officers and harsher penalties for those convicted of criminal offences.

In recent decades, there appears to be an increase in American society's clamour for retribution and punishment: i.e. put more offenders in jail for longer periods of time. Longer prison terms for many offences are loudly sought despite the volume of statistical evidence and social scientific studies that conclude that longer sentences are counterproductive and simply do not achieve the desired result. More specifically, they neither rehabilitate the offender nor deter others.

"Get tough" policies of crime control were emphasized throughout the various episodes of *COPS*. Rarely was there any mention of rehabilitation for offenders, for instance. The emphasis is placed on punishment.

*"The answer to this guy is just to keep him off the streets. I don't think there is hope for something like that."* Officer Fred Doughty, Olympia Police Department.

There is a call for keeping potentially high-risk offenders in prison for longer periods of time; there is a call for measures that would see sexual offenders and violent criminals kept in jail indefinitely, even after the expiration of their sentences. One theme that seemed to come up time and time again in many of the episodes was that the public is fed up with seeing unrepentant and unrehabilitated criminals commit subsequent rapes and murder after being released from prison. How often does this actually happen, though? Statistical evidence is not cited by police to corroborate this particular point of view.

In their statements, many of the police officers appearing on *COPS* continually sent a "get tough" message to the television audience, advocating to keep dangerous and violent offenders behind bars longer, and in some cases, indefinitely. But we know that putting more people in jail for longer periods of time is not a panacea.

Generally speaking, *COPS* seems to be advocating a conservative crime control philosophy. Conservative crime control strategies aim to strengthen the machinery of justice. Proponents of these types of strategies feel that crime can be reduced by catching more criminals, for example. They feel, however, that their efforts are being hampered or impeded because the machinery of justice is weakened by various "technicalities" of criminal procedure. And, therefore, the conservative agenda calls for removing them (Walker, 1985: 6).

"The belief that the courts have "handcuffed" the police is a central tenet in conservative crime control thinking. The courts have spun a web of procedural rules —

"technicalities" — that make it difficult, if not impossible, for the police to fight crime" (Walker, 1985: 91). This notion was reflected in several of the television episodes.

## Civil and Constitutional Rights of a Criminal Suspect

"The legislatures and the courts in . . . the United States have . . . attempted to limit police power and to protect the rights of citizens against improper police exercise of power. As fabled in television [fictional] drama, for example, American Supreme Court rulings have long since obliged police officers to advise persons of their rights, including the right to an attorney at time of arrest . . ." (Forcese, 1992: 49).

Interestingly, the majority of *COPS* episodes did not show a suspect being read his or her Miranda rights at the end of a segment. The last few seconds of a segment typically showed the suspect being handcuffed or being placed in the back seat of a police cruiser. This is in contrast to fictional cop shows where reading a suspect his or her rights has a certain dramatic effect. Perhaps Miranda rights are regarded as one of the so-called "technicalities" as referred to by conservative crime control proponents above. Perhaps due process, civil rights, etc., are considered to be secondary to the paramount role of the police in apprehending a suspect and solving a crime. Some people (particularly those espousing conservative crime control ideology) would argue that in order to "get tough" on crime and criminals, it is inevitable that some rights of the individual must be restricted so that more paramount rights of the law-abiding citizenry may be protected.

Generally speaking, *COPS* seems to be advocating the crime control model by educating the public about the functions of the criminal justice system, primarily the police component, and by enhancing deterrence by publicizing the detection and arrest of criminal suspects, rather than promoting due process goals.

## Police Response Time

Many of the *COPS* episodes were very fast-paced. Police officers were regularly shown rushing to get to a call. To the viewer, it would appear that only a few seconds transpired from the time the officer received the call over the radio to the time the officer reached the incident.

Common sense would seem to dictate that the police would catch more criminals if their response time to an incident was quicker. However, as Walker (1985: 108) points out, "The idea that shorter response time leads to more arrests is one of the great myths of American police management. For fifty years, reducing the amount of time it took for the police to get to the scene of a call was one of the paramount police objectives."

For most crimes, the fact that police can get to the scene in 2-minutes or 4-minutes is irrelevant. There are few crime situations in which response time might matter (Bayley, 1994: 6). After all, approximately two-thirds of all crimes committed are considered to be "cold" crimes where a criminal suspect has fled the scene long before the crime is even discovered. "Most burglaries are cold crimes: you come home and find that your house or apartment has been burgled. Most street robberies are similar — by the time you are able to summon the police, the robber has fled. The speed of police response in such instances is, to some degree, irrelevant. Even when the perpetrator is present or nearby, police response time is inconsequential. In these cases the victim usually knows or can readily identify the offender" (Walker, 1985: 108).

The fact that several of the *COPS* episodes showed the perpetrator/suspect being apprehended within a block of the incident only mere minutes after police received the call was truly amazing. Oftentimes, burglars were caught in the act!

"Some of the earliest and best known research on policing, such as the Kansas City preventive Patrol Study, examined patrol intensity and response time. It was concluded that speeding to the scene was generally not crucial in crime response, except as possibly to influence public perception" (Forcese, 1992: 168).

Bayley (1994: 6) also points out that "there is no evidence that reducing the time the police take to get to crime scenes increases the chances that criminals will be caught."

## The Aftermath: What Happens to the Suspect?

A distinguishing feature of the *COPS* episodes was the fact that the criminal justice process typically ended with the suspect's apprehension. In reality, however, the justice process is only beginning. The television audience is not taken through the remaining machinery of justice, i.e. initial appearance by suspect, plea, preliminary hearing, trial, sentencing, and so on.

So what happens after the arrest? The television viewer does not get to see what happens to the suspect after this point in time when the handcuffs are slapped on his or her wrists. A suspect is apprehended by police — end of story. One can only assume that the right suspect was correctly identified and apprehended in the first place, that the suspect will go to court and plead guilty or be found guilty, and that the suspect will serve his or her sentence in a correctional facility.

As Dominick (1973: 246) found in his study, "In the TV world, there seems to be little connection between arrest and trial. The legal process almost always ends with capture."

In his news media study, Sherizen (1978: 215) also observed that, "The majority of . . . [stories] were limited to one particular stage of the criminal justice system, with

two-thirds of the articles related to the beginning stages of the system. Crime incidents, arrests, captures . . . and/or charges placed against the suspect were the most prevalent responses to crime reported. The post-arrest stages of the criminal justice system were seldom mentioned."

With respect to the various episodes of *COPS*, how many suspects were subsequently not charged once they got down to the police precinct due to mistaken identity? How many cases were thrown out of court due to lack of evidence? How many suspects had their charges reduced due to plea bargaining? How many suspects went on to be acquitted by a court of law? The television audience cannot possibly know the answers to these and other related questions due to the limited scope of the television program. It goes without saying that the complexity of many of the cases presented on *COPS* cannot be fully appreciated by television viewers in a ten-minute segment. The television show's producers are only concerned with the final result of the police investigation — i.e. an arrest of *a* suspect.

The reader should bear in mind that in the real world, "most arrests result in dismissal rather than prosecution" (Walker, 1985: 31).

## The Mystique Surrounding Policing

Although *COPS* does provide the television audience with a glimpse into policing in America, albeit a distorted one, much of the mystique surrounding the police and what they do still remains. The television audience learns very little about the inner-workings of the police structure. The notion of a police subculture is not explored to any extent. Also, the police were careful not to give away any "trade secrets" to would-be criminals who might be watching.

These facts should not be surprising since it is in the best interest of police organizations to control both the level and nature of public awareness pertaining to their duties and activities (see Ericson *et al.*, 1989).

Sparks (1992: xi) argues that "reality-based" television cop shows serve to, "mystify the truth of policing in suggesting that the good guys always win and that detection rates are high."

## Police Discretion

Police officers wield a huge amount of discretion in the performance of their everyday duties. It is often up to them if a charge will or will not be laid. In the majority of the *COPS* episodes, an arrest of a criminal suspect was made. Rarely was a police officer shown using his or her discretion, resulting in a stern warning or lecture or perhaps giving someone "a break." In fact, the prevailing attitude throughout many of the television episodes was that an arrest was to be made no matter what:

"*Get out on the streets and get me some scalps.*" Sergeant Bill Yeros, Denver Police Department during roll-call.

"*When you get into police work, catching the bad guy is the number one thing.*" Master Patrol Officer Jim Stephens, Nashville Metropolitan Police Department.

"*All I know is somebody is going to jail tonight.*" Sergeant Dennis Gavalier, Broward County Sheriff's Department.

"*When you're chasing somebody and they get away from you like that, it becomes personal to you. You need to save face with yourself and at least apprehend him* [the suspect] *one way or another.*" Master Patrol Officer Jim Stephens, Nashville Metropolitan Police Department.

In the real world, however, police officers often do not make an arrest, even when they have probable cause or reasonable grounds to do so. This is particularly the case with domestic disturbances. "Most of the time the police do not use the criminal law

to restore calm and order. They rarely make arrests, although the threat of doing so always exists" (Bayley, 1994: 20).

# *VI*

# *SUMMARY & CONCLUSION*

To reiterate, the overall goal of this thesis was to assess the degree to which so-called "reality-based" television police programs reflect "real life" representations of crime and police work. Utilizing content analysis as the research methodology, thirty-six episodes of *COPS* (which can be further broken down into 123 individual incidents) were reviewed, analyzed, and scrutinized. My intention was to deconstruct the various television images of crime and policing and then go on to point out any inconsistencies, distortions, biases, and stereotypes. I then proceeded to challenge some of these disparities based upon an informed social scientific or criminological view of crime and justice. The "representativeness" of the television images was judged by utilizing official crime statistics and criminological studies as a point of comparison. Perhaps this thesis could be considered an exercise in 'investigative criminology.'

As demonstrated throughout this study, the television images of crime and policing have little to do with the realities or complexities of crime and police work. Unquestionably, there exists an incongruity between the real incidence of crime in America (as officially measured) and the patterns of reported crime (as represented by the "reality-based" television police shows).

The findings of this study clearly indicate that "reality-based" television police programs convey a distorted picture of crime and policing to the television audience. Consistent with other scholarly studies on crime, justice, and the media, the content analysis revealed that *COPS* pays a disproportionate amount of attention to violent interpersonal crimes (41.5%) such as murder and assault, while under-reporting property crimes (19.5%) such as burglary and theft, and neglecting to mention white-collar crimes (0%).

Indeed, the entertainment media's obsession with violent crime creates a public image at odds with official statistical data on crime (LaMay and Dennis, 1995: v). The television cop show's coverage of crime misleads viewers by giving the overall impression that crime, especially violent crime, is on the rise when in fact it is on the decline nationwide (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994). It appears, then, that the types of crimes typically shown on *COPS* receive "coverage according to public perception of their gravity and thus in obverse proportion to their frequency" (LaMay and Dennis, 1995: 2).

It was also found that the television police shows analyzed in this study neglected to examine the underlying "causes" of crime. Rather, they tended to focus on its consequences. Attention was deflected away from life's real problems such as racism, unemployment, poverty, mental illness, and so on.

Police work itself was portrayed in a stereotypical light. Certainly, these television shows add "to the exaggerated conception of police officers almost exclusively engaged in law enforcement" (Forcese, 1992: 66). The various images presented on *COPS* would have us believe that law enforcement is the *raison d'être* of any police department. But as we know, "the police not only protect, they serve in a multitude of ways. [Whether they like it or not, the police] . . . are a catch-all service agency. Police are called upon to handle unintended urban social difficulties from care for the indigent to family discipline, from traffic control to crime-fighting." (Forcese, 1992: 63). Law enforcement is only one of many components of police work. It would be a gross exaggeration to imply that all, or even most, of police work is crime-related.

Also, *COPS* painted the picture, time and again, that police work is quite exciting and often very dangerous. But police work is not as exciting and dangerous as the television program would have viewers believe, as demonstrated by the author.

*COPS* is a constructed *vision* of law and order in America which strives to show hard-working police officers diligently working to solve crime and protect society. However, many of the images of crime, predatory street criminals, victims, and police work that television viewers are exposed to are very misleading and stereotypical in many respects. One must keep in mind that only incidents that meet pre-established screening criteria by the television show's executive producers are considered for selection (Seagal, 1993). Certainly, the manner or process in which incidents are selected, edited, and produced influences the information level of the television audience in its understanding of crime and policing issues (Sherizen, 1978). Consequently, a skewed image of crime and police work is presented to the television audience.

Crime is typically portrayed as a serious threat to society in general and to individual citizens specifically. But the police give viewers the impression that they can easily contain it as demonstrated by the high clearance rates (i.e. over 95%) on the television show. As a result, the police are "portrayed as essential and valuable, even pivotal, institutions in our society" (Reiner, 1992: 185). Reiner (1992: 173) further adds that, "Overall the treatment of the police . . . has been such as to legitimate their role and activities."

American society has a preoccupation and fascination with crime and justice topics. This type of subject-matter has long been, and continues to be, a staple of the entertainment industry. One only has to look to books, magazines, newspapers, radio,

film, computer games, the Internet, and television to see that there is a saturation of information and entertainment, both fictional and factual, pertaining to crime, criminals, and law enforcement. We are all confronted with the challenge of trying to distinguish fact from fiction on a daily basis. This, however, is no easy task, especially when a blurring of news and entertainment formats often occurs (as is the case with *COPS*).

Of particular interest to us here in this study has been television's portrayal and presentation of crime and policing. Information on policing and crime in the U.S. represents some of the most potent imagery that television has to offer viewers. Perhaps this is what makes these kinds of shows so popular and appealing.

I would argue that several of the fictional police dramas found on television today (e.g. *Law and Order*, *Blue Heelers*) are probably more "realistic" in terms of their explanation and presentation of crime and policing issues than are their "reality-based" counterparts. Let me qualify this statement.

"Reality-based" television cop shows tend to focus primarily on the criminal act itself and do not focus to any degree on the *impact* of the criminal act on victims nor on the social context of the act. Many of the incidents shown are atypical of police work and do not accurately reflect how the criminal justice system routinely operates. In fact, the television audience only gets to see one component or stage of the criminal justice process. Conversely, the fictional television programs noted above look at the criminal act in addition to looking at the aftermath of the act and its impact on the lives of victims, suspects, and sometimes the investigating police officers involved.

Furthermore, in the fictional police dramas listed above, we frequently observe police officers doing what could be considered boring and tedious tasks such as

paperwork, surveillance, traffic duty, etc. We also observe the internal conflicts, politics, and bureaucracy that can exist within a given police department. Most of all, on many of today's fictional police dramas, we observe police officers making mistakes — i.e. being human.

As discussed elsewhere, television shows like *COPS* have the potential to raise inflated expectations about what society expects of the police in general. Solution and clearance rates that approach one-hundred percent are highly unrealistic and unattainable. As a result, some members of the television audience may become disenchanted and frustrated with their own local police departments who do not hold a candle to their television counterparts. According to Carlson (1985: 195), there is a distinct possibility that since the police on television are portrayed as being quite efficient and effective, the viewing audience may come to develop unrealistic expectations with respect to the performance of their local boys in blue. In addition, some members of the television audience may come to feel that they themselves have no role in crime prevention and detection.

Before concluding, I would like to make several recommendations. First, television viewers should educate themselves about the medium of television, what they see and hear on television, and what they come to believe.

Second, the topic of television portrayals of policing and crime should become an integral component of recruit training at police academies and colleges. It is surprising how many young police officers try to emulate what they see on television. "Rookies, brainwashed by television, expect to do surveillance work, undercover work, and often become disenchanted by the quotidian challenges of investigating property crimes,

negotiating marital disputes, and handling the less dramatic or exotic jobs that constitute daily police work" (Stern, 1990: 69). Television myths of crime and policing must be dispelled before they become entrenched in the young recruit.

Lastly, the television industry as a whole should be urged to more accurately depict police work and crime without the sensationalism, titillation and senseless violence. Certainly they can do more to explain, contextualize, and put incidents into perspective. Executive producers should seriously think about how a sensational television presentation of crime might be a manifestation of some larger social problem (Gorelick, 1995: 30). This will not be an easy task, however.

One could argue that there are at least three realms of reality. First, there is the *real* objective world or, put simply, whatever is actually happening "out there." Secondly, there is what could be described as the *symbolic* world that is portrayed and presented through the mass media. Lastly, there is the *subjective* world where what people come to believe is based on a combination of direct personal experiences with real "things" and "events" as well as with their portrayal by mediums of communication such as television (Surette, 1992: 4).

With this in mind, I believe that the term "reality-based" should be replaced with the term "symbolically-based" when referring to television police shows like *COPS*. This would be a more accurate description since "reality-based" television shows are not true reflections of whatever is happening "out there." "Reality-based" is truly an infelicitous term.

Nowhere in this thesis have I suggested that television police show depictions and images of crime should "mirror" the picture of crime as indicated by official data and

academic studies. I realize that the subject-matter presented on TV programs will not be a perfect reflection of statistical reality. Nevertheless, one would reasonably assume that since these programs promote themselves as "reality-based," then, the television depictions of crime and policing would at least approximate what's actually happening "out there."

Unfortunately, the basic image of police work and crime that the television viewer comes away with, "is a refraction of the reality, constructed from it in accordance with the organisational imperatives of the . . . [television industry], the ideological frames of creative personnel [e.g. producers, editors, cameramen] and audiences, and the changing balance of political and economic forces affecting both reality and image of policing" (Reiner, 1992: 172). As a result, our perceptions of the world become skewed because illusion and reality become difficult to distinguish, especially in the case of so-called "reality-based" television police programs.

# *VII*

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# *APPENDIX 1*

Show's Name: _____ _____

Tape #: _____ Show #: _____, Segment #: _____ Counter Reading: _____

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Crime/ Incident _____ Geographic Location: _____ Time: _____

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Name of Agency: _____ Local ❑ State ❑ Federal ❑

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Name of Primary Officer(s): _____ Wh❑ Blk❑ His❑ Other❑ M❑ F❑

_____ Wh❑ Blk❑ His❑ Other❑ M❑ F❑

Secondary Officer(s): _____ Wh❑ Blk❑ His❑ Other❑ M❑ F❑

_____ Wh❑ Blk❑ His❑ Other❑ M❑ F❑

The Police Officer was: On-Duty ❑ Off-Duty ❑

Did the Police Officer encounter a crime in progress ❑; was s/he dispatched ❑; or did s/he encounter a crime as a result of a sting operation❑.

Did the Police Officer need to use force to take the Suspect into custody?: Yes❑ No❑

If 'yes', how did the Officer do it?: hand-to-hand❑ baton❑ mace❑ by drawing gun❑

If the Officer drew his/her gun, did s/he have to discharge it?: Yes❑ No❑

Was the Officer assaulted by the Suspect?: Yes❑ No❑

If 'yes', how?: Verbally Threatened❑
Punched/Kicked/Shoved/Bitten/Spit At❑
Threatened with a Bar/Club❑
Threatened with a Knife/Screwdriver/Awl❑
Threatened with a Gun❑
Hit with a Bar/Club❑
Stabbed with a Knife/Screwdriver/Awl❑
Shot at with a Gun❑
Wounded by a Gunshot❑
Killed by a Stab Wound❑
Killed by a Gunshot Wound❑

No. of Suspects: ____ (a) White❑ Black❑ Hispanic❑ Other❑ Male❑ Female❑
(b) White❑ Black❑ Hispanic❑ Other❑ Male❑ Female❑

Did the Suspect have one of the following on his person: (a) Firearm❑ Knife❑ Other _____
(b) Firearm❑ Knife❑ Other _____

Did the Suspect use the weapon: (a) No, kept it concealed❑ No, but threatened to use it❑
Yes, against the Victim❑ Yes, against the Officer❑

(b) No, kept it concealed❑ No, but threatened to use it❑
Yes, against the Victim❑ Yes, against the Officer❑

The Suspect was: (a) Shot at by Police❑ Shot by Police❑ Killed by Police❑
(b) Shot at by Police❑ Shot by Police❑ Killed by Police❑

At the conclusion of the incident, was the Suspect apprehended & arrested?: Yes❑ No❑

---

No. of Victims: ____ (a) White❑ Black❑ Hispanic❑ Other❑ Male❑ Female❑
(b) White❑ Black❑ Hispanic❑ Other❑ Male❑ Female❑

The Victim was: (a) Verbally Threatened❑ Physically Assaulted❑ Killed❑
(b) Verbally Threatened❑ Physically Assaulted❑ Killed❑

Did the Victim know the Suspect (i.e. family, friend, acquaintance, co-worker) ❑ or was the Perpetrator a Stranger ❑.

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Comments made by Police Officers: _____

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General Comments: _____

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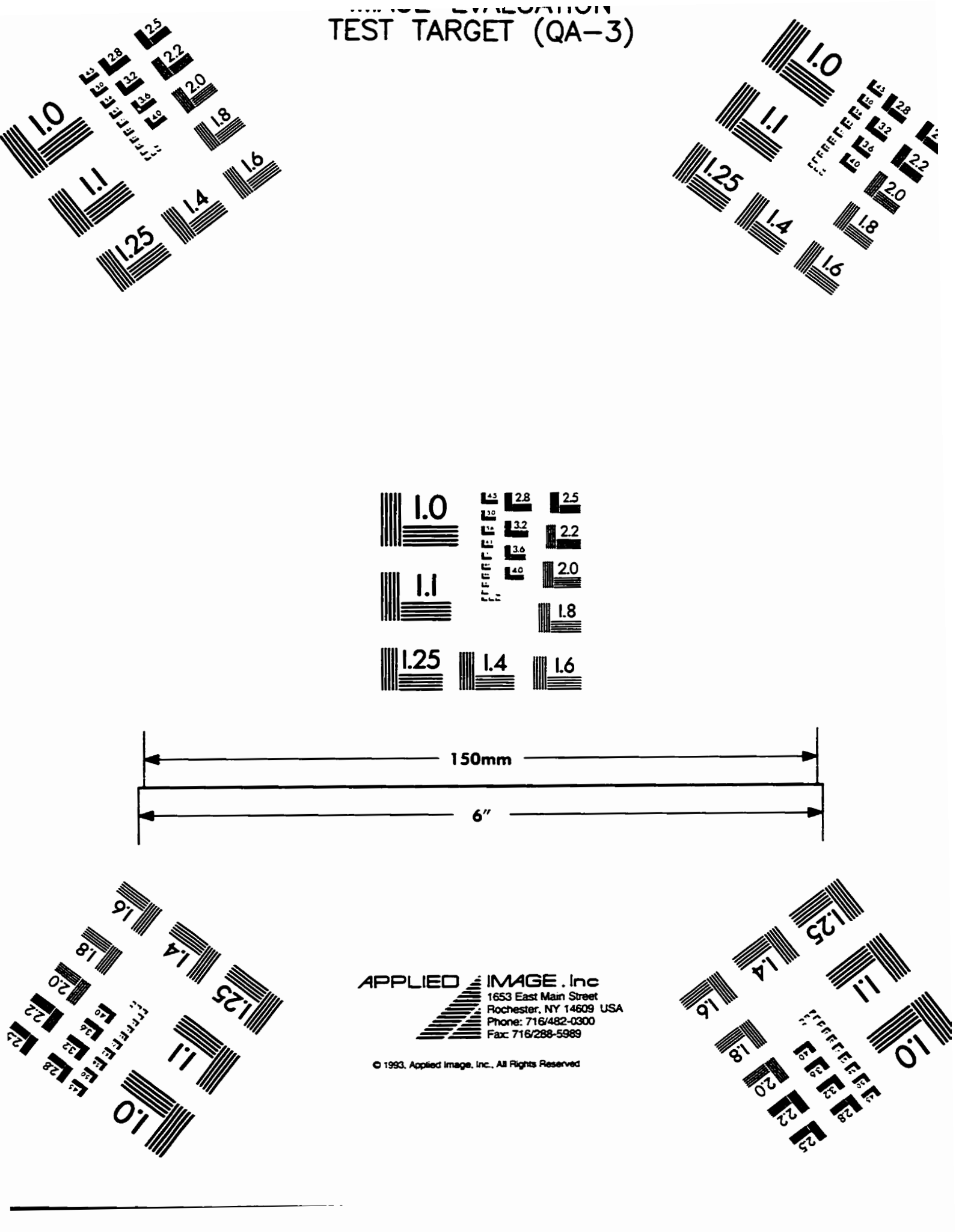
IMAGE EVALUATION
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