



**CRIME IN THE PUBLIC MIND:  
LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AS A MEASURE OF CRIME SALIENCE\***

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**ABSTRACT**

Departing from the traditional reliance on survey data of crime fear to assess crime salience, this paper describes findings derived from measuring crime salience through content analysis of 1655 letters to the editor, published by five newspapers in four New England communities. The study examined crime and justice concerns expressed in newspaper letters. Findings suggest that crime and justice concerns, deemed significant in survey methodologies using global questions, are not given the same priority in letters to the editor, and that other concerns are more immediate for people on the individual level.

**INTRODUCTION**

Despite two decades of decreasing crime trends, crime salience remains a feature of American society. We are reminded of crime's prominence in the public psyche from surveys by Gallup, showing crime and violence ranked as the most important problem facing the country ([Newport, 1998](#)), and Harvard University's School of Public Health, pointing out that drugs/drug abuse and crime are ranked as the first and second most serious problems facing American children ([Maguire and Pastore, 1998:101](#)).

While public concern about crime is apparent, the magnitude and focus of the concern may be another matter. Researchers, it is argued, have approached measuring the public's concern about crime with a conceptual bias, equating concern about crime with fear of criminal victimization. The historical roots for this bias can be traced back to the late 1960s. Concerned with an increase in urban violence, the federal government promoted a more intensive effort to understand and control crime. Fueled by a combination of academic interest, the need for data, and an abundance of funding, a proliferation of studies measuring various levels of crime fear and its social correlates

followed. [Ferraro and LaGrange \(1987\)](#) list 46 of the better known empirical studies completed between 1971 and 1985 that measure crime fear. Public awareness about crime was explained by pointing out the large percentage of adults who expressed fear to be out at night ([Lewis and Salem, 1986](#)). This level of crime fear, we have been reminded, has remained relatively constant over the past two decades ([Warr, 1995](#)).

Even as a measure of public salience, the crime fear concept was deficient. Conceptual cloudiness and inappropriate operationalization distorted the meaning and utility of crime fear, with early studies measuring risk assessment instead ([Ferraro and LaGrange, 1987](#)). Recent studies appear to be more sensitive to the complexities of measuring fear of crime. Crime fear and risk perception are beginning to be treated as conceptually distinct constructs, and crime fear is being placed in the context of other life concerns such as safety and quality of life ([Gibbs and Hanrahan, 1993](#); [Rountree and Land, 1996](#)).

Traditionally, measures of crime salience include fear of crime and crime risk. Furthermore, [Sacco \(1982:490\)](#) contends that public perceptions of crime are diffuse phenomena that reflect generalized anxiety about the social and political environment, complicating the meaning of crime-related perceptual measures. Likewise, as [Lewis and Salem \(1986:460\)](#) point out:

Crime rates and victimization surveys tell us about the prevalence of crime in an area, but do not indicate its salience to the inhabitants. Measures of awareness and concern, on the other hand, tell us little about the realities on which these attitudes are based.

As a central theme on how citizens construct crime concerns, [Sasson \(1995:161\)](#) reports substantial support among participants agreeing with "media discourse blames crime on individual moral failure and a poorly functioning criminal justice system." Crime concerns then include family character, community controls, schools, social class issues, and the ability of the **[End page 1]** criminal justice system to effectively regulate the behavior of citizens. A case can be made that a more valid measure of crime salience can be obtained by broadening its conceptual definition.

A broader interpretation of crime salience might contribute to a better understanding about fear of crime. [Gibbs and Hanrahan \(1993:370\)](#) define a concern as:

a central or important feature in an individual's life in a specific environment such as an organization, institution, or community. It is a theme, issue, or matter that engages the individual's attention, shapes his or her life, or affects the sense of well-being in a particular environment or setting.

To better represent the breadth of a concern as defined by Gibbs and Hanrahan, crime salience, in this article, represents a much broader concept than the traditional reliance on victimization. It includes fear of crime and perceived risks, attitudes toward crime and criminals, and attitudes toward police, courts, and corrections.

Studies of crime salience need also to be challenged for their heavy reliance on survey designs

as the primary method for data collection. Preference for survey designs, no doubt, comes from ease of administration, the public's greater acceptance of "scientific" findings, and funding sources' preference for proposals that reflect "rigid," "scientific" procedures. [Sacco \(1982:490\)](#) cautions that a survey respondent's perceptual reaction to crime may not signify a narrow subjective reaction to the objective facts of crime. Pollsters' recordings of crime-related anxieties may be expressions of generalized negative feelings about other social concerns. Survey research, like all research designs, is subject to a variety of shortcomings. The need of "between-method triangulation" as a way to increase understanding of societal crime concern, therefore, becomes apparent ([Denzin, 1989:146-153, 244](#)).

As an alternative method of assessing the level of crime salience among the general public, the authors undertook a content analysis of letters to the editor published in five New England newspapers. This approach departed from earlier research endeavors in two ways. First, crime salience was conceptually defined as a broad concept to reflect fear of crime, victimization, risk assessment, attitudes toward police, the courts, and the criminal justice system in general. Secondly, instead of using data derived from survey research, data were obtained from content analysis of letters to the editor.

Two research questions guided the present study: 1) *To what extent were crime and justice concerns the focus of published letters to the editors?* 2) *When published letters to the editor focused on crime and justice concerns, what specific topics were addressed?*

The first research question was directed at assessing the general level of crime salience in published letters. Research question two was directed at determining the specific concerns addressed by the authors of crime and justice letters. **[End page 2]**

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Americans' sensitivity to crime and justice did not develop in a vacuum. Perceptions and attitudes about crime and justice have been shaped largely by exposure to the popular press rather than by direct experience ([Bortner, 1984](#); [Chibnall, 1975](#); [Garofalo, 1981](#)). For most people, the media are often relied upon as a major force for socialization, and the case may be made that the saliency of crime among citizens has been media influenced. [Graber \(1980: 50-51\)](#) notes that 95% of the participants in her study responded that media sources were their primary source of information about crime and justice. [Einsiedel, Salomone, and Schneider \(1984\)](#) found that crime news was a better predictor of crime salience than even personal experience with crime.

Information about crime and justice is provided to the public by many media outlets: television news, television reality programming, media covered trials, radio, online news services, periodicals, cable television, and film. As [Surette \(1998\)](#) notes, citizens' interest in crime news results in criminal justice topics being one of the leading types of news issues, representing upwards of one-quarter of the total news programming across mediums. Yet, in spite of the growth of news mediums, popular interest in criminal justice news, and its potential impact on knowledge and attitudes, Surette notes in an extensive review that the relationship between the three is far from settled.

Although findings have been mixed, research on the role played by newspapers in shaping public awareness of crime has a rich history. [Davis's \(1952\)](#) study of crime news in four Colorado newspapers in the late 1940s was one of the first. Although Davis found no consistent relationship between the amount of crime news in newspapers and the local crime rate, he found moderate support that public opinion reflects trends in the amount of crime news rather than in actual rates ([1952:329](#)). [Sheley and Ashkins \(1984\)](#) found public attitudes about crime were more similar to newspaper presentation than to television.

With few exceptions, most studies looking at newspapers' influence on public awareness of crime have relied on levels of crime fear as the unit of measurement. [Jaehnig, Weaver, and Fico \(1981\)](#) determined that the level of crime fear was associated more strongly with newspaper emphasis on violent crime than with the actual frequency of violent crime in a community. [Heath \(1984\)](#) concluded that not all newspaper crime reports were equally fear provoking. Story details of sensationalism, apparent randomness of the crime, and crime location made a difference in the effect of the article on the perception of crime. She found that readers of newspapers that printed high proportions of local crime news reported high levels of fear if crimes were predominately sensational or appeared random. Conversely, Heath found readers of newspapers that printed a low proportion of local crime news reported lower levels of fear if the crime were sensational or random. Heath concluded that the more a newspaper prints crime news about other places, people feel more secure in their own environment ([1984:271, 274-275](#)). [O'Keefe and Reid-Nash \(1987\)](#) discovered that newspapers increased concern about crime, but not necessarily fear about crime. Fear of crime, and perceptions of neighborhood crime rates, were not significantly associated with readership of newspaper crime news. On the contrary, perceived likelihood of being burglarized and self protection concern were positively related to **[End page 3]** newspaper crime news attention. Heavier consumers of crime news felt more concerned about the crime issue, but also felt they had the ability to take preventive measures ([O'Keefe and Reid-Nash, 1987:156](#)).

[Liska and Baccaglini \(1990\)](#) found newspaper homicide crime stories showed the strongest relationship to crime fear. Local homicide stories increased fear, and non-local homicide stories decreased fear. They found that fear is affected positively by only initial, local homicide stories in the first part of the newspaper, further supporting [Heath's \(1984\)](#) findings that newspaper coverage of crime in other cities makes people feel better ([Liska and Baccaglini, 1990:372](#)). A survey of 2,092 adults in Tallahassee, Florida by [Chiricos, Eschholz, and Gertz \(1997\)](#) revealed that the frequency of reading newspapers had no apparent relationship to respondents' fear of being a likely victim of selected crimes. In a recent article describing the effects of television, newspapers, and new technologies on the fear of crime, [Heath and Gilbert \(1996\)](#) point out that media effects are not simple main effects, but involve many moderators.

There were a number of advantages in utilizing letters to the editor as a data source. Over the past decade newspapers have experienced a significant increase in the number of letters they receive ([Editor and Publisher, 1995](#); [Hynds, 1994](#)), providing a good source of information about citizen concerns. Unlike most survey questionnaires, which provide data from specific responses via fixed-alternative or closed-ended items, content analysis of letters to the editor provide data from subjects who have utilized an open-ended format to volunteer their concerns. Letters to the editor can provide first hand insights into one's attitudes and perceptions regarding the saliency of crime as a central concern of their immediate environment. Since the task of writing a letter

involves an expenditure of time and effort, a letter to the editor should reflect a reader's strong concern about a particular matter. Most citizens have an opinion about crime and justice, and letters to the editor provide insights regarding the prioritizing of community issues, as well as the identification and articulation of specific crime concerns among letter writers.

The authors of the present study have not overlooked the concerns raised when letters to the editor have been used as data sources. Early studies focused on several areas of concern: the demographic representativeness of letter writers; the representativeness of letters as a barometer of public opinion; and the motivational components of letter writing. [Forsythe \(1950\)](#) found letter writers were overwhelmingly older, primarily male, above average in formal education, native white American, and white-collar. [Tarrant \(1957\)](#) and [Vacin \(1965\)](#) found similar results in their studies, adding that letter writers had more children, were more likely home owners, did not listen to television or radio, were well-read and more likely belonged to the Republican party.

As a barometer of public opinion, [Foster and Frederich \(1937\)](#) found letters to the editor were tied to propaganda effects, with newspaper stories, editorials, and other letters most frequently conveying the stimulus to write letters to the editor. [Grey and Brown \(1970\)](#) concluded that political attitudes and interests of published letters to the editor were more a reflection of editors' gatekeeping than sentiments found in the community, or with the majority of letters writers. A comparison study of published and unpublished letters by [Renfro \(1979\)](#) **[End page 4]** found certain topics were more likely to get published than others. She found that letters dealing with local, controversial issues had a better chance of being published.

The safety valve function has been cited as the primary motivation for writing letters to the editor. Most letters are negative, "agin" something or somebody ([Foster and Frederich 1937: 74](#)). "The letter column gives the irate, the antagonist, the displeased a chance to speak out and be heard" ([Davis and Rarick 1964: 109](#)). [Forsythe \(1950: 144\)](#) concluded that letters to the editor are of a contentious nature, which did not represent reasoned, logical approaches to problems.

An explanation for these concerns may lie with the narrowness of the studies, which focused on politically orientated letters. Moreover, assessments of information validity have been based upon the degree of writers' conformity to mainstream political ideologies.

Mindfulness of a self-selection process in writing letters to the editor and the demographic bias of letter writers has not discouraged use of letters as a data source. [Lambkin and Morneau \(1988\)](#) compared the image of police in editorials to the image of police in letters to the editor in three papers. They found editorials and letters in the *New York Times* split evenly on positive and negative images of police. The *Los Angeles Times*, although publishing more negative editorials, published more positive letters about police. The *Daily News* (circulated in the San Fernando Valley) was found to be highly positive in both editorials and letters. [Pritchard and Berkowitz \(1991\)](#) studied 10 newspapers covering 31 years. Their results suggested that letters to the editor were more important in understanding the content of front pages and of editorials than had been previously realized.

More recent studies have challenged earlier contentions that letter writers are emotionally and politically extreme, and that letters to the editor are an unreliable measure of public opinion. [Buell](#)

(1975) and [Volgy et al. \(1977\)](#) concluded that letter writers were not a politically distinct group compared to the larger population. [Hill \(1981\)](#) found letter opinion in major American dailies regarding the Equal Rights Amendment was very similar to that found in public opinion polls. In a study of letters to the editor in 15 Arizona newspapers regarding opinions on establishing a Martin Luther King Holiday, [Sigelman and Walkosz \(1992:945\)](#) concluded, like [Davis and Rarick \(1964\)](#), that letters to the editor were not just the province of crackpots, providing them with a safety valve for blowing off steam, but under certain conditions were also a vehicle that provided an accurate gauge of public thinking on controversial issues. They noted that much of the evidence critical of letters as a reliable and valid thermometer of public opinion was dated, and most of these studies focused on the characteristics of letter writers rather than on the content of the letters they write ([Sigelman and Walkosz, 1992:939](#)).

## RESEARCH DESIGN

To ascertain community salience of crime and justice issues, a content analysis of letters to the editor was undertaken in five newspapers, representing four different news markets. The *Boston Globe* and *Boston Herald* represented a large news market. The *Manchester Union Leader* (NH) and *Lowell Sun* (MA) each represented a medium-sized news market, and the *North Adams Transcript* (MA) represented a small news market.<sup>1</sup> [End page 5]

The *Boston Globe* and *Boston Herald* provided an opportunity to assess the impact on crime salience in the same news market from newspapers with differences in reporting style and emphasis of presentation in news reporting. The *Boston Globe* was viewed as presenting news in a more conventional manner. The *Boston Herald*, on the other hand, was viewed as relying on a more sensational format in its news reporting. Selection of both the *Manchester Union Leader* and *Lowell Sun* provided an opportunity to study community crime salience in two news markets of similar size and with similar crime rates,<sup>2</sup> but with newspapers exhibiting different political perspectives. The *Lowell Sun's* image as a politically low-keyed community newspaper was in sharp contrast to the nationally known, outspoken, and very conservative *Union Leader*.

The study covered the time period April 1 to May 31, 1997. This time period was selected to avoid the conflicting factors of the lower crime rates typical in winter and the higher crime rates expected during the summer months. With the exception of the *Transcript*, without a Sunday edition, weekday and Sunday editions of the papers were examined during the period of 61 days.

Content analysis was conducted on letters to the editor using a coding scheme modified from subject categories developed by [Deutschmann \(1959\)](#) and [Graber \(1980\)](#). Graber's coding scheme was especially useful for it was based upon a broad definition of themes that addressed topics pertaining to both crime and justice. Crime and justice included individual crimes, criminals, statistics and trends, police activities (in letters devoted at least in part to the activities of police), courts, corrections, and law and criminal justice policy debate or announcement ([Graber, 1980:21-25, 164-183](#)).

The content analysis procedures progressed through several layers of coding. First, letters were coded as fitting one of four general categories. These categories included: 1) Politics/Government; 2) General Society/Other; 3) Crime and Justice; and 4) Ethical/Moral (See [Appendix A](#) for

descriptions of the coding categories and examples). Next, crime and justice letters were further categorized according to the primary focal point of their discussions: 1) Crime; 2) Police Activities; 3) Court Processes; 4) Corrections; 5) Policy/Law; and 6) Other (See [Appendix B](#) for examples). Letters concerning a criminal event, such as the occurrence of a murder, were coded as (1), whereas a letter concerning the police investigation of that murder would be coded as (2). Crime and Justice oriented letters to the editor were additionally divided according to the type of crime mentioned. Categories for crime types were: 1) Murder/ manslaughter; 2) Rape/sex-related; 3) Other crimes against the person; 4) Property crime; 5) Public order crime; and 6) Other/unspecified. To determine consistency of coding, the authors compared each other's coding from a sample of 100 letters selected from four of the five newspapers (the *Transcript* was omitted). A coefficient of reliability of .88 was obtained.

## FINDINGS

A total of 1655 letters to the editor was coded from the five newspapers studied. The *Lowell Sun* accounted for the largest percentage of letters published among the newspapers. The [End page 6] *Boston Globe*, *Boston Herald*, and *Manchester Union Leader* were comparable in the number of published letters. The *North Adams Transcript* produced the fewest number of letters.

The *Sun's* large number of published letters was no doubt a result of the variety in the newspaper's submission formats. In addition to publishing postal mail, the *Sun* also encouraged e-mail and phone-mail submissions, an increasing trend among community newspapers ([Hunter, 1995](#); [Noack, 1994](#)). It published concerns and opinions of readers submitted by e-mail and voice mail in a regular column titled "BackTalk"; ninety-three percent of their mail was received via an electronic method. On the one hand, the expeditious nature of phone-mail no doubt encouraged a higher rate of reader input in the *Sun's* "BackTalk" column. Phone-mail communication was quick, direct, and required minimal grammatical and articulation skills. On the other hand, the immediacy with which "BackTalk" callers could express opinions on topics discouraged a "cooling down" period available when composing and then mailing a letter. Consequently, "BackTalk" calls frequently appeared more emotionally directed or inspired, possessing an "edge" not found in traditional letters to the editor (See [Appendix C](#) for examples). While the other papers allowed for electronic transmission of letters from readers, unlike the *Sun*, they did not distinguish electronic mail from other methods of submission, nor did they regularly devote columns to electronically received correspondence.

### ***Research Question #1: To what extent were crime and justice concerns the focus of published letters to the editors?***

As noted in [Table One](#), issues of crime and justice were not the focal point of most letters written to the five newspapers studied; only 6.4% of the 1655 letters addressed those topics. Except in the *Sun*, letters pertaining to crime and justice ranked last as a focal point for writers. Most writers focused on general society concerns, or politics and government.

Telephone interviews with editors responsible for letter selection in the five newspapers dispelled concerns that the low percentage of crime and justice letters was the product of purposive selection on their part. While all editors confirmed that letters may be edited for length, with

libelous and hate letters eliminated, none of the editors deliberately attempted to change a letter's intent. The *Union Leader* and *Transcript* published all letters received. The *Sun* published all letters (e-mail and postal mail) intended for its "Letters To The Editor" column. Phone-mail and e-mail directed to the *Sun*'s "BackTalk" column required more editorial vigilance, resulting in the publication of roughly two-thirds of "BackTalk" received communiqués. Typical of large newspapers, the *Boston Globe* and *Boston Herald* published 15 to 20 percent of letters received. However, editors of both papers offered assurances that every effort was made to publish letters reflecting the proportion of topics addressed from the total number of letters received. Consistent with our own findings, the *Boston Globe*'s letters editor volunteered that less than 5% of all letters received focused on crime and justice concerns.

– [INSERT TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE](#) –

Because there were relatively few crime and justice letters to the editor (n=106), comparisons across newspapers by category were difficult. Even with the greater number of **[End page 7]** letters received by the *Sun* due to the popularity of its "BackTalk" column, there was little variation among the five newspapers.

***Research Question #2: When published letters to the editor focused on crime and justice concerns, what specific topics were addressed?***

Attention was directed toward ascertaining the nature of concern among writers of crime and justice letters. Of the small number of letters concerning crime and justice, the majority (39.6%) was coded as crime concern, the category wherein the emphasis is on a specific criminal event mentioning a victim, an offender, and some type of harm or loss. The majority of letters received by the *Boston Globe* (7 of 9), *Boston Herald* (8 of 12), and *Transcript* (3 of 5) fell under the category of crime concern. On the other hand, only the *Sun* (25 of 63) and the *Union Leader* (2 of 17) received crime and justice letters focusing on police activities.

Of the 106 crime and justice letters only 84 letters referred to a specific type of crime. The majority of these letters concerned public order offenses, with the more serious crimes of murder and sex-related offenses less often mentioned. There was little evidence of concern for other personal crimes (i.e., robbery, assault) or property crimes (See [Table Two](#)).

- [INSERT TABLE TWO ABOUT HERE](#) -

Some of the letters, concerned with the more serious personal crimes, need qualification. For example, although seven of the nine crime relevant letters in the *Boston Globe* were coded as rape/sex-related, four of these seven letters were critical of Lt. Kelly Flynn's court-martial trial on adultery and disobeying orders. Three of the seven letters were in response to a *Boston Globe* story on date rape. Except for one letter criticizing the court's decision in convicting a Manchester attorney of sexual assault, *Union Leader* crime and justice letter writers paid little attention to those types of crimes ordinarily receiving more attention in the press. Both *North Adams Transcript* letters that discussed murder/manslaughter were reactions to a news story about a local native who was murdered in a Florida holdup. Two other letters dealt with problems resulting from drinking by students at a local college.



## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Departing from traditional reliance on survey data to measure crime salience, the present study used newspaper letters to the editor as the unit of analysis. Our findings show that crime salience among newspaper letter writers appears to be low, with only a small proportion of published letters to the editor addressing crime and justice topics. It appears that crime and justice concerns, deemed significant when survey methodologies utilize global questions, are not given the same priority in letters to the editor. Our findings suggest that, at least among letter writers, other concerns are more immediate for the individual. Letters that dealt with crime usually focused on the less sensational incidents reported in crime news stories, a characteristic consistent with findings in public opinion research. Americans' belief about crime on the national level is not the same as what they believe about crime in their neighborhoods ([Warr, 1995:302](#)). Differences exist between global versus specific attitudes. [Applegate \(1996\)](#), for **[End page 8]** example, found that support for a "three-strikes-and-you're-out" law was high when citizens were asked broad single-item questions, but diminished greatly when citizens were presented with specific situations under the law.

Cautions accompany any claims made that letters to the editor represent opinions held by the general population. In our case, the demographics of letter writers may be more representative of people who are better informed of the risks of crime, less affected by crime, or less affected by the media's portrayal of crime. Nonetheless, [Sigelman and Walkosz \(1992:944\)](#) report "a close match between explanations offered by survey respondents and those given by letter writers" in a study comparing citizen attitudes in letters to the editor and an independent poll on the passage of a Martin Luther King Holiday. The similarity of findings among the five newspapers from four different communities in the present study, moreover, provides reasonable support to suggest the relatively low measure of public concern about crime may be an opinion shared by the public at large, at least in four New England communities. As [Sotillo and Starace-Nastasi \(1999:251\)](#) point out, "Even though a certain degree of editorial pruning is done to ensure that published letters are not defamatory or grossly offensive, the LEs [letters to the editors] do provide an insight into the socio-cultural dimensions of a community as experienced by reader-writers."

On the basis of the research reported in this article, a case can be made for the importance of surveys measuring crime salience that identify more immediate crime and justice concerns among individuals in a geographically defined area. The use of surveys with extensive open-ended formats, which allow for better probing of respondents' attitudes, will provide a better sense of the public's concerns about crime in their community.

Letters to a newspaper are not intended to be representative measures of public opinion; rather, they are measures representing public opinion. Accordingly, more investigations of letters to the editor are encouraged. Increased utilization of new technology such as e-mail and voice-mail, which allows opinions to be more easily submitted to editors, broadens the popularity of citizen communication with their dailies. The traditional safety valve function of letters to the editor ([Buell, 1975](#); [Davis and Rarick, 1964](#)) should be revisited to determine if the role and function have changed over time. We found that the letters in four of the five newspapers appear to function as a safety valve, but the publication of these letters is not as immediate, nor are these letters as emotionally directed or inspired, as the phone-mail and electronic-mail utilized by the *Lowell Sun*. **[End page 9]**

## ENDNOTES

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1. Circulation for the *Boston Globe* was 498,853 daily and 793,672 on Sunday, and for the *Boston Herald* it was 294,000 daily and 203,000 on Sunday. The *Manchester Union Leader* reported a daily circulation of 89,000, and a Sunday circulation of 102,000. Daily circulation for the *Lowell Sun* was 55,890, with a Sunday circulation reported at 58,360. The *North Adams Transcript*, with no Sunday edition, reported a daily circulation of 9,638 ([Burrelle=s Media Directory, 1997](#)).

2. The population of Manchester was 99,567, and the population of Lowell was 103,439. See [U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990](#). *U S Census Data, Database 1990: C90STF1A* [On-line]; available from <http://www.venus.census.gov/cdrom/lookup>; accessed 6 March 1998. At 3407.7 per 100,000 (MSA) Manchester=s crime index was close to (MSA) Lowell=s crime index of 3975.5 per 100,000. See U.S. Department of Justice, *Crime in the United States 1995* ([Washington, D.C.: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1996: 82, 92](#)). [End page 10]

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## APPENDIX A

### Coding Categories, Descriptions, and Examples

| Categories            | Category Descriptions   |
|-----------------------|---|
| Politics/Government   | Letters concerned with government activities (local to national, domestic and foreign), national defense, elections, elected and appointed officials, political figures, political issues           |
| General Society/Other | Letters concerned with social issues, education, business and the economy, people, lifestyles, cultural activities, sports, entertainment, leisure, human interest                                  |
| Crime/Justice         | Letters concerned with general crime discussion, specific crimes, adult and juvenile crime, the criminal justice system, crime statistics, crime trends, laws, policies                             |
| Ethics/Morals         | Letters concerned with public moral problems, social equality, sexual behavior, pornography, gambling, drug addiction, alcoholism, family values, public honesty and integrity, religion in society |

### Examples

#### 1. *Politics/Government*

**Clearing the Way.** Why was Gov. Weld offered the position of an ambassador to Mexico by Bill Clinton? Could it be possible that our president is trying to make available the position of governor of Massachusetts to Joseph Kennedy? It looks like the president stepped in and eliminated the opposition.

*Lowell Sun ("BackTalk") 4/29/97*

## **2. General Society/Other**

**Ayer High Drama Production Soared as Community Effort.** On Feb. 28 and March 1, the Ayer High School Drama Club presented its production of Bye Bye Birdie. As always, I must praise the students who participated on stage and behind the scenes, they put in a lot of work to guarantee that the community of Ayer would be exposed to a great production. **[End page 15]**

This, however, was only a microcosm of the involvement in this production. In fact, this production was a celebration of the community of Ayer High School.

Karen Bagshaw, the Consumer Science teacher, organized a dinner for senior citizens of the area. Students in her charge prepared and served a meal fit for royalty, and after the meal the senior citizens watched the dress rehearsal.

I have to cheer many faculty and staff members who performed or assisted the student cast and crew. Principal, Don Parker, and teachers, Bill Beaushene, Pat Beaushene, Jane Steinberg, Sally Paul, Randy Long, Karen Bagshaw, and Maggie Hartnett joined the production to perform as Shriners and to sing "Kids." In addition, Ted Januskiewicz helped with the building of the set and Walter Naparstek assisted with sound and videotaped the production.

We also had assistance from the Dram Backers led by Merry Balchunas, Anne Marie Jeannotte, and Vanessa Riffelmacher.

The production was a success because of the community input and support.

*Lowell Sun 4/6/97*

## **3. Crime/Justice**

See [Appendix B](#).

#### **4. Ethics/Morals**

**Slot Machine Gambling Too Easy.** To the Editors: Reference "Your Turn New Hampshire" article concerning gambling by Rep. Katherine Rogers.

I believe she is right in what she wrote concerning our lottery system. The same can be said of the race tracks and beano, that have been so popular for such a long time. In fact, it is said that "life is a gamble," and I'm not being funny.

I play beano rarely and for fun. I play Megabucks almost constantly and itch for the scratch tickets. My expenditures are about \$4 a week, i.e. I win a dollar or two at scratch per week. I do look at the lottery as a "volunteer tax," with supposedly much of it going to our communities for schools. Certainly a good cause.

Here is where the other shoe drops. I feel that Rep. Rogers may have never spent much or any time in a real gambling casino, especially around the "low cost," easy to use slot machines that promise large payoffs. **[End page 16]**

Slot machine gambling is now so easy and so popular, all you have to do is stuff paper money into a slot, just like a change machine, and you get credits on the screen for the money you put in. For example, a \$100 bill will credit you with 40 quarters [sic].

And this is where we the people begin to go wild. And as soon as our discretionary fun money is spent, then comes the car payment, and then the rent, and then . . .

This, Rep. Rogers, is the vast difference I find in playing the lotteries and "working" the casinos. I have a chilling fear they will get to [sic] close to us. Yes indeed, to [sic] close to me . . . and many other people. And yes, I know it's a crazy statement in the '90s, but I do care about other people. Yes, that gives away my age.

*Manchester Union Leader 4/1/97 [End page 17]*

### **APPENDIX B**

#### **Examples of Crime and Justice Letters**

##### **1. Crime**

**What About Guys Falsely Accused of Date Rape?** I'd like to thank

you for writing about college date rape on Page A1 last Sunday, and looking out for the *Globe's* younger readers ("Efforts by universities to curb date rape falling short").

I know it's a potentially life-ruining incident to be raped, especially by someone you knew (and trusted). You also have to take into consideration what happens to a guy or group that is falsely accused of date rape. There is so much anti-date rape propaganda (and rightfully so) on college campuses that a girl may go to a party, get drunk, have sex, and then regret it the next morning.

The next thing you know, she's accusing the guy of something that he, too, may have regretted but is too embarrassed to admit.

As a fraternity member at the University of Michigan, I saw this occur. A young woman got drunk at a fraternity house and had intercourse with a guy, and the next day accused him of rape.

The fraternity got tons of negative publicity in the school newspaper. She finally admitted it was her fault, and there was no mention of this in the paper. The media seem to be anti-male in date rape cases.

Sure, we supply alcohol for females at our fraternity parties, but we do not force it down their throats.

The next time a girl decides to get drunk and accomplish her goal of hooking up with a guy, she should make sure beforehand what she is willing to do.

*Boston Globe 5/25/97*

## ***2. Police Activities***

**Special Thanks to Police.** Regarding the way the media downplayed a recent drug bust in our community and the tireless efforts of the Boston Police Department, BPD Drug Unit and law enforcement officials who made it happen ("Southie drug sweep unites cops, residents," April 7).

Anyone with half a brain knows that the big dealers will not sell to 13-year-old kids. The 18 individuals who got busted were not only dealing, but many of them were **[End page 18]** users and they sell to everyone just to support their own habit. They don't care about anyone or anything.

Heroin is becoming rampant in virtually every neighborhood across



Boston. Its [sic] killing our kids.

Special appreciation and thanks to the entire Boston Police Department and to the excellent men of the BPD Drug Unit for a job well done. Please continue the fight against the war on drugs knowing that a good number of us truly appreciate your efforts.

*Boston Herald 4/17/97*

### **3. Court Processes**

**Fighting Crack Dealers**. I applaud your editorial, "Crack cocaine debate" (May 5).

As a former narcotics prosecutor, I agree that some adjustment should be made from a fairness standpoint to correct sentencing inequities derived from the wide disparity between penalties imposed in cases involving the street-level sale of small quantities of cocaine hydrochloride (powder) and crack cocaine. However, it's essential that stricter sentences continue to be meted out in cocaine distribution cases involving volume sales of crack cocaine.

The finished "rock" product is purer, more lethal, more highly addictive and faster-acting. Any cocaine dealer should be treated harshly and penalties should be enhanced according to weight and criminal histories. It's therefore logical to deem a dealer who takes the extra step to "cook" his product so that it's even more dangerous than in its original form as having "aggravated" the crime enough that additional prison time is mandated and increased according to the amount involved.

*Boston Herald 5/12/97*

### **4. Corrections**

**Time for Judiciary to Side with Victims**. Surviving victims of horrendous crimes and deceased victims' families are further punished by a weak, ineffective justice system which showers compassion on perpetrators rather than on their prey.

Allowing violent monsters to live out their lives in prison watching TV and visiting with family is an insult to their innocent victims.

Feeding, clothing, entertaining and "treating" killers is an affront to taxpayers and all good people. **[End page 19]**

Ignore the whining and pandering of politicians who sympathize with violent criminals because they had a tough life or were on drugs when they wreaked havoc and death upon innocent victims. Stop ridiculous years of death penalty appeals. We must insist on politicians and judges who will dispose of those who kill our friends, family and law enforcement officers dedicated to a safe and sane society.

*Boston Herald 5/26/97*

## **5. Policy/Law**

**Death Penalty Is Fair Punishment.** To The Editors: In Pennsylvania, Gary Heidnik was sentenced to die for sexually assaulting and murdering two women and then feeding their body parts to two other women he was using as sex slaves. Should Heidnik be executed?

Some argue that capital punishment is barbaric, uncivilized and state-sanctioned murder; however, if the execution of a sadistic murderer like Heidnik is "state-sanctioned" murder, then state imprisonment of rapists, child molesters, drug dealers, burglars and murderers is "state-sanctioned kidnaping" [sic] and state taxation on consumer goods is "state-sanctioned theft."

Many religious opponents of the death penalty cite the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" to buttress their position; but the commandment is more accurately understood as "Thou shalt not murder;" indeed, a few passages after that commandment is given by God to man, there is a verse affirming that a murdered [sic] forfeits his own right to live.

Some killing is morally justified such as killing in self-defense or in a just war. If the state has the moral right to authorize its citizens to wage a just war against Adolf Hitler, then the state also has the moral right to authorize the execution of vicious murderers like Gary Heidnik.

In a conversation with this writer, the former Vatican scholar Father Malachi Martin, S.J. noted that "strict justice" demands the executions of murderers. For punishment to be just, said Father Martin, it must fit the crime, that is, be proportionate to the crime committed. For premeditated murder, the only fair and appropriate punishment is the death penalty.

*Manchester Union Leader 5/30/97 [End page 20]*

## APPENDIX C

### Examples from the *Sun's* "Backtalk" Column

**DEADLINE UNFAIR.** I couldn't believe Saturday's paper "Back to Treatment for Alleged Wife Slayer." He was not a slayer. I don't think you should have written that. This is an 80-year-old man that was with his wife for 50 years.

*Lowell Sun* ("BackTalk") 4/2/97

**SET THEM FREE.** The Amiraults should be vindicated of their charges, and Scott Harshbarger should get a life.

*Lowell Sun* ("BackTalk") 4/2/97

**YOUR OPTIONS.** To the Dracut resident who has no town water, sewage or gas, but a Lawrence phone exchange and a Methuen fire hydrant. You can: 1) take your own trash to the dump and make believe you live in New Hampshire; 2) sue who sold you the house; 3) support the power plant - it is the only way you are going to see improvement to your situation.

*Lowell Sun* ("BackTalk") 4/15/97

**PLEASE PAVE.** My car would like to know when North Road is going to be paved. She's getting very tired of this.

*Lowell Sun* ("BackTalk") 4/15/97

**SLOBS BEWARE.** To the losing slobs who throw their scratch tickets on the ground in the convenience store parking lots: As an abutter [sic], I will empty a trash barrel into your car if I see you.

*Lowell Sun* ("BackTalk") 4/18/97

**OFF DUTY.** To the caller who suggested retired police, firefighters and teachers should volunteer to patrol school hallways. The key word is "retired." We've done our time. Why don't parents assume the responsibility? Better yet, do a better job at home and we won't need to patrol schools.

*Lowell Sun* ("BackTalk") 4/22/97 [End page 21]

**NEW HAMPSHIRE MYTH.** I lived in New Hampshire for eight years. People say it is cheaper to live in New Hampshire. Well, that's

baloney. They have to drive farther and make less money. That's why they're so miserable.

*Lowell Sun* ("BackTalk") 5/28/97 [End page 22]

**TABLE ONE**

**Topics Addressed in Letters to the Editor of Five New England Newspapers**

**Newspapers**

| <b>Topics</b>           | <i>Boston</i> | <i>Boston</i> | <i>Sun</i> | <i>Union</i> | <i>Transcript</i> | All  |
|-------------------------|---------------|---------------|------------|--------------|-------------------|------|
|                         | (%)           | (%)           | (%)        | (%)          | (%)               | (%)  |
| <i>Politics/</i>        | 15.9          | 9.6           | 14.3       | 31.3         | 43.8              | 18.4 |
| <i>General Society/</i> | 68.6          | 74.7          | 71.8       | 51.1         | 38.1              | 66.3 |
| <i>Crime/</i>           | 3.5           | 4.6           | 8.3        | 6.3          | 4.8               | 6.4  |
| <i>Ethics/</i>          | 12.0          | 11.1          | 5.6        | 11.2         | 13.3              | 8.9  |
| N =                     | 258           | 261           | 763        | 268          | 105               | 1655 |

[End page 23]

**TABLE TWO**

**Focus of Discussion and Type of Crime Discussed in Crime and Justice Letters to the Editor in Five New England Newspapers**

|                   |      |                        |      |
|-------------------|------|------------------------|------|
| Crime             | 39.6 | Murder/Manslaughter    | 19.0 |
| Police Activities | 25.5 | Rape/Sex-Related       | 20.2 |
| Court Processes   | 15.1 | Other Crimes of Person | 7.1  |
| Corrections       | 5.7  | Property Crimes        | 4.8  |
| Policy/Law        | 8.5  | Public Order Crimes    | 35.7 |
| Other             | 5.7  | Other/Unspecified      | 13.1 |
| N =               | 106  | N =                    | 84   |

[End page 24]