

How Media Can Change Its Coverage of Youth

The role of cultivation theory in public perceptions of youth crime

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IN BRIEF

Young people are seldom in the news, and when they are, the story is usually violent crime — with Black youth most often cast as the offenders.

Cultivation theory explains what four decades of that repetition have produced: heavy news consumers believe youth crime is rising and is driven by youth of color, the opposite of what arrest and victimization data show.

Those beliefs harden into fear, mistrust, and support for punitive juvenile justice policy, from the superpredator era to today's teen takeover coverage.

The paper sets out six practical changes newsrooms can make — story selection, content audits, language, sourcing, use of crime data, and solutions-focused reporting — along with structural steps such as diversifying staff and rebuilding investigative teams.

(Bogert, 2019; Burakoff, 2019; Hancock, 2003), moving to the term superpredator, created by DiIulio (1995), and used widely by media in the mid to late 1990s (Bogert & Hancock, 2020), and arriving at today's language of teen takeovers (Naugle, 2026). As crime and media expert Alec Karakatsanis (2025) notes, “individual stories about vulnerable children are not told in high volume, unless it is a story about police arresting them for something” (p. 41).

Media stories that cover youth crime greatly impact the public's perception of youth (Goidel et al., 2006). As a result, audiences frequently have an inaccurate picture of young people that does not align with official government statistics on youth arrest and victimization data. For example, public opinion polling shows that the majority of polling respondents incorrectly believe that youth crime is increasing (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022) and that youth crime is overwhelmingly committed by youth of color (Ghandnoosh, 2014).

Media coverage of youth crime has created fear of victimization (Allen & Whitt, 2020) and increased public support for punitive approaches toward youth in the justice system (Allen & Whitt, 2020). Some researchers have asserted that media coverage has led to state law changes across the country that expanded the use of incarceration, imposed harsher penalties, and made it easier to try youth in adult criminal court (Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001; Mendel, 2024). To add, this sustained pattern of media coverage of youth crime poses a serious credibility problem for journalists, especially as the volume of media coverage of youth crime has increased at the same time that youth crime has decreased (Chan et al., 2024).

I. Introduction

Youth are rarely covered by media (Busso et al., 2018; Woodruff, 1998). However, when youth are, it is frequently in connection with problems (Amundson et al., 2005) such as youth crime (Pollak & Kubrin, 2007). The youth crime that media cover is nearly always violent crime, especially homicide (Ferguson, 2013; Pizarro et al., 2007), with Black youth most often represented as offenders (Dixon & Azocar, 2006). Over the past four decades, media have also relied on dehumanizing language to describe young people, beginning with wolf packs and wilding in the 1980s

Using cultivation theory, we can understand how the portrayal of youth crime by media has impacted the public's perceptions of youth and learn what steps media organizations and journalists can take to change that portrayal so that it aligns more with reality.

II. Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory is defined as a “sociocultural theory regarding the role of television in shaping viewers’ perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and values” (Shrum, 2017, p. 1). Cultivation effects take place over a long period of time and individuals whose media consumption is the heaviest will be the most impacted (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). No specific genre of program or individual story produces the effect. Rather, the repetition of messages over time produces the cultivation effect (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2017). Media messages are similar across mediums, such that the same homogenous messages will be seen over and over on television as well as across other media outlets (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2017). The theory is relevant for understanding the public’s perceptions of youth and youth crime because it focuses on the pattern and volume of sustained media coverage over the long-term and how that coverage impacts viewers’ perceptions of reality.

While the theory started with a focus on television (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), it has expanded to other media such as television news (Trautman, 2004; Goidel et al., 2006), crime news across platforms (Yamamoto et al., 2019), radio, internet and newspaper use measured alongside television (Kort-Butler & Habecker, 2018; Shin & Watson, 2024), reality-crime programming (Rosenberger et al., 2023), single-outlet cable news (Mencken, 2025), and true crime podcasts (Tremblay, 2023).

Cultivation theory incorporates several key concepts that explain what media consumers have come to believe about youth and youth crime.

One concept is mean world syndrome, which is the perception that the world is more dangerous

than it is (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Heavy media consumers will develop a concept of social reality that exaggerates danger and violence. They will also become fearful of crime. Cultivation theory demonstrates that heavy media consumers have an increased worry and anger about crime, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender (Kort-Butler & Habecker, 2018).

The world created by heavy media consumption does not align with the actual world, creating what is known as a “law of opposites” (Pollak & Kubrin, 2007, p. 62) where heavy media consumers will perceive a picture about crime that directly contrasts with what the data show.

Another concept is mainstreaming, which is defined as “a sharing or convergence of views of the world among heavy viewers in otherwise disparate groups” (Shrum, 2017, p. 5). When viewers watch a lot of television, their perspectives move closer to one another despite the fact that they may be very different, such as individuals of different income levels or political affiliation. Mainstreaming explains why punitive responses towards youth in the justice system persist across the political landscape. Heavy media consumers may differ in view on other political issues but converge on the same picture, created by media, of youth involved in violent crime.

The cultivation research also shows that the effects are not uniform, showing the strongest effects among white people (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2017). The effects can vary across race, gender, and ethnicity (Rosenberger et al., 2023). Also, more recent studies have shown that some mediums show differing effects (Rosenberger et al., 2023; Shin & Watson, 2024), such as stronger cultivation effects from news coverage than from television crime drama programming, such as *Law & Order* (Ferguson, 2013). These cultivation effects can be mediated by connections, however weak, with neighbors and walkability of neighborhoods (Yamamoto et al., 2019). Media brings disparate consumers together in a shared perspective, but individual consumers’

characteristics demonstrate how much that settles in.

Resonance is an additional concept that predicts that “viewers whose life experiences are congruent with TV portrayals will be most affected by TV viewing” (Shrum, 2017, p. 5). For example, heavy media consumers who live in a neighborhood where there is a lot of crime will be more affected. Their day-to-day lives match what they are consuming from media. Yet, the research also demonstrates that for consumers who have connections with their neighbors, however weak, and have walkable neighborhoods, the cultivation effects are mediated (Yamamoto et al., 2019).

Further, the substitution thesis suggests that media provide information to consumers and help to fill in knowledge gaps where viewers have no direct knowledge or personal experience (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2017). That explains why white consumers, who have limited or no experience with law enforcement, strongly support police and believe that they operate in a fair way. Police are overrepresented as white males in media, which is also the audience that media are largely directed towards. That contrasts with Black consumers, who may have more extensive involvement with police as a result of overpolicing in Black communities that result in higher arrest rates, as well as racially targeted policing policies, such as stop-and-frisk (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2017).

The substitution thesis also explains why heavy consumers perceive higher criminality among Black people while not affecting perceived criminality of white people (Mencken, 2025). Media consistently show Black youth as offenders, and for consumers with no other experience or knowledge, that portrayal becomes the only source of their knowledge.

Finally, the affinity thesis under cultivation theory explains that consumers who share the same demographics with portrayed victims will relate more closely and also fear more (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2017). Since media programming is designed with a middle-class, white male audience

in mind, victims tend to be portrayed from that audience’s demographic. Together, substitution and affinity produce a coverage pattern that encourages the target audience to identify with crime victims and perceive youth of color as a threat.

III. Applying Cultivation Theory

In applying cultivation theory to how youth are portrayed by media, we would expect to find four major effects. First, heavy media consumers should perceive youth as engaged in crime, especially violent crime. Second, the perceptions that result should contrast with official crime and victimization data. Third, those perceptions create fear, anger and mistrust of young people. Fourth, that fear, anger and mistrust results in heavy media consumers’ support for punitive juvenile justice policies.

The most heinous and least common offenses youth engage in are the ones that heavy media consumers see as typical. Heavy media consumers perceive youth in connection with violent crime and that youth crime is increasing (Goidel et al., 2006). That often creates the perception by heavy media consumers of a youth crime wave (Pollak & Kubrin, 2007). Also, heavy media consumers view youth of color as disproportionately committing youth crime (Dixon & Azocar, 2006; Pollak & Kubrin, 2007).

Those perceptions by heavy media consumers run counter to the official crime statistical data that shows that a very small percentage of violent crimes are committed by youth (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2025). In addition, youth crime has been generally decreasing over the past two decades, with some variation related to the Covid-19 pandemic (Rovner, 2025). Official arrest data and self reported surveys among youth show that youth of color and white youth commit crimes at roughly the same rates (Rovner, 2025).

Additionally, heavy media consumers report a greater fear of crime as well as more favorable attitudes toward police (Shin & Watson, 2024).

They also perceive an increased fear of victimization (Allen & Whitt, 2020) and an increased mistrust (Yamamoto et al., 2019).

It must be noted that several of these studies examine fear of crime though not specifically fear of crime by youth. Still, the research infers that the cultivation effects do involve youth while not always directly stated because it has analyzed some effects directly, such as heavy media consumers' perceptions of youth crime (Goidel et al., 2006), and has examined specific racial groups, such as Black people, that has been shown to impact heavy media consumers' perceptions of criminality of that group as a whole, which presumably includes youth (Mencken, 2025).

Further, the fear, anger and mistrust among heavy media consumers creates an increased support for punitive juvenile justice policies (Allen & Whitt, 2020; Trautman, 2004). That combination explains why support for punitive juvenile justice policies toward youth have persisted from the superpredator era of the 1990s to the current teen takeover era.

Cultivation theory and its supporting research offer some insights that point to steps that media organizations and individual journalists can take to rectify the misleading portrayal of youth by media.

First, media organizations can update their story selection criteria before running stories to reflect on how they are covering youth crime, who the victims are that they are portraying, whether race is driving the story selection, and if they actually need to run what could be considered a sensational story (Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001). Any alarming forecasts, such as predicting rises in youth crime, that media organizations come across could be heavily examined before amplifying them (Bogert & Hancock, 2020).

Second, media organizations can regularly conduct audits of their news content (Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001) by comparing the volume of media coverage of youth crime against official crime statistics (Chan et al., 2024). Media organizations can also compare their portrayals of offenders and

victims against official statistics (Dixon & Azocar, 2006; Glascock, 2024). Media organizations could also consider examining what they run on their editorial pages with the same kinds of analysis (Bogert & Hancock, 2020).

Third, media organizations can update their headlines and story language to ensure that it does not dehumanize or degrade youth (Bogert & Hancock, 2020; Koo & Coleman, 2025; Naugle, 2026). For example, media organizations could replace the term teen takeover with more neutral terms such as gathering or social media meetup in headlines and also revise any other negative terminology to describe youth in stories (Franklin, 2026).

Fourth, because media often rely on police as core sources in media production, media organizations can change their sourcing practices. Media organizations can expand their sources beyond police and other official government contacts, such as courts, to include community leaders, youth-serving organizations, violence interrupters, and credible messengers who work directly with youth, as well as young people themselves (Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001).

Fifth, media organizations can cite more responsibly by requiring journalists to include official crime statistics in their news stories (Mendel, 2024). Those crime statistics could be provided in the context of youth crime trends (Koo & Coleman, 2025) as well as the broader social context of neighborhood conditions or the availability of guns in the same way that sports and business media often cover developments in their respective arenas (Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001).

Sixth, media organizations can connect stories about youth crime with evidence-based solutions to prevent youth crime (Koo & Coleman, 2025). Stories paired with information on how the problem can be ameliorated give media consumers a more hopeful outlook and move them away from punitive approaches by the justice system toward youth.

On a more structural level, media organizations can examine the demographics of their leadership and staffing and make concerted efforts to diversify their teams (Bogert & Hancock, 2020). Additionally, media organizations can expand their investigative journalism teams so that they are positioned to cover trends in much more depth and, at the same time, reduce the coverage of sensational, episodic events (Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001). Hiring younger journalists who are more attuned to the current generation of youth can ensure that media coverage of young people is geared toward their interests and concerns (Robertson et al., 2026).

Ultimately, no single media story can reverse the decades-long pattern of media coverage of youth crime and the cultivation effects that pattern has produced in heavy media consumers. However, as a starting point, a steady stream of media coverage showing youth achieving success, contributing to their communities, and navigating

the broader issues that affect them could begin to rectify that imbalance and ensure that young people are not overwhelmingly covered in connection with violent crime (Mendel, 2024; Rhineberger-Dunn et al., 2008). Youth themselves have called for this, asserting that they want to see more coverage of young people in a positive light and more coverage on issues that impact their lives (Forman-Katz et al., 2025; Robertson et al., 2026).

In sum, youth crime does not need to be the only story about youth given the extensive cultivation research showing the misleading picture it has created among heavy media consumers. There are many ways for media organizations to reverse course, starting with content criteria, better language choices, using crime data, and drawing from more sources, but most especially by producing many more media stories about the positive contributions of youth to society and the more pressing issues impacting their daily lives.

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