

The Media and Public Perceptions of Criminal Justice Policy Issues: An Analysis of *Bowling for Columbine* and Gun Control

By

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ABSTRACT

Recent research in criminology has indicated that the media may influence people's attitudes toward criminal justice policy. This paper examined attitudes toward gun control among a student population using both ideological (attribution styles) and instrumental perspectives (fear of crime), and then tested whether viewing the film *Bowling for Columbine* influenced those attitudes. The study employed a classic experimental design. Results from the pretest indicated that there was some support for ideological and instrumental perspectives in attitudes toward criminal justice policy. Results from the posttest indicated that participants in the experimental group reported significantly more support for gun control policies, and were more likely to assign dispositional attribution to criminal behavior. Results therefore suggest that students are susceptible to suggestion from the media when formulating opinions about criminal justice policy.

INTRODUCTION

Television and print media provide a great deal of information on social issues, such as crime and justice, to the American public (Sotirovic, 2003). However, this information may not always be correct. In fact, researchers in criminal justice have pointed out that information relayed through the media about crime in the United States is often inaccurate and may fuel misconceptions about crime and justice (Applegate, Cullen, & Fisher, 2002; Roberts & Doob, 1990; Romer, Jamison, & Aday, 2003; Surette, 1998). Still, people use information from the media to make judgments and decisions about crime and crime policy (Kleck & Kates, 2001).

One of the most hotly debated crime policies is gun control. Spitzer (1995, p. 1) maintains that there are essentially two questions in the gun control debate. First is whether the government has the right to impose firearms regulations on its citizens, and second is whether the government or some other appointed agency should enforce firearm regulations.

Periodically, gun control comes into the national spotlight and is usually a divisive issue. On April 20, 1999, people across the country were horrified at the events that unfolded at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. On that morning, two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who were both heavily armed, opened fire in the school cafeteria killing 12 students, one teacher, and injuring 23 others, before killing themselves.

This study examined attitudes toward gun control among a student population using both ideological (attribution styles) and instrumental perspectives (fear of crime), and then tested whether viewing *Bowling for Columbine* influenced those attitudes. Consistent with previous studies on attitudes toward gun control, also examined in this study were age, gender, political and religious affiliation, crime victimization, and community cohesion.

There are a number of rationales for this paper. First, there is not a great deal of recent research on influencing factors on public attitudes toward gun control in the United States, and we also know little about the influence of mass media on people's positions on criminal justice policy. Second, this paper can add to current literature on ideological perspectives as there is only one other study that has examined the relationship between attribution and gun control (see Hartnagel, 2002). Last, the examination of instrumental perspectives in criminal justice literature is also relatively new, and so this paper can add to that body of literature.

Introduction to instrumental and ideological perspectives

Attribution is one ideological perspective that has been receiving attention in recent studies on attitudes toward criminal justice policy. Attribution is the retrospective explanation of behavior that either focuses on internal characteristics of the actor (dispositional attribution) or external characteristics (situational attribution; Blatier, 2000; Weiner, 1986). Attribution has been examined in criminal justice research with respect to attitudes toward the death penalty (see Langworthy & Whitehead, 1986; Robbers, 2004b) and attitudes toward general criminal sanctions (see e.g., Cullen, Clark, Cullen, & Mathers, 1985; Graham, Weiner, & Zucker, 1997; Grasmick et al., 1994). Results from these studies typically indicate that those people assigning dispositional attribution to criminal behavior are more likely to favor punitive crime control policies. Further, these individuals tend to be more conservative, citing conservative political and religious affiliations (see Robbers, 2004b).

Instrumental perspectives have also been examined in criminal justice literature, but to a lesser extent. In economic theory, instrumental perspectives are means-ends oriented, with the physical environment serving as the means, and behavioral or economic goals serving as the ends (Stokols, 1990). Translated to the criminal justice setting, it is likely that people will support particular criminal justice policies because they believe they are instrumental in reducing crime, they will enhance their safety, and they will improve their environment.

Research on attitudes toward gun control

Smith (2001) estimates that about 36% of all American households own firearms and 22% of households contain handguns. Historically, gun control has been a contentious issue and many Americans have viewed gun ownership as a right granted by the Constitution that should have few restrictions. However, public attitudes appear to be changing and recent statistics compiled by Maguire and Pastore (2001) indicated that 62% of Americans supported stricter gun control laws, while only 22% were in favor of less regulation. In the 2001 National Gun Policy Survey, Smith (2001, p. 2) found that 88% of Americans would like to see gun safety training a mandatory exercise for those purchasing firearms, and 79% support a police permit prior to gun

purchase. However, these studies do not examine the relationship between changes in attitudes toward regulation and changes in gun ownership.

There are also few studies that have examined factors influencing attitudes toward gun control in the United States. One example is Wolpert and Gimpel's (1998) study on self-interest factors (firearms ownership) and attitudes toward gun control. Results from this study are inconsistent with prior research, and indicate that self-interest in the form of gun ownership had a consistently strong influence on gun regulation, regardless of the year in which respondents were polled. However, as Wolpert and Gimpel (1998, p. 255) point out, "the NRA's ability to mobilize its members into participating in a variety of political activities, including voting, is legendary," suggesting that gun owners are extremely vocal in the gun control debate. Wolpert and Gimpel also found that the effect of political orientation on the three types of regulation changed dramatically over time; a finding that the authors suggest reflected the election cycle and historical events outside the study. Thus, when democratic parties were elected, there was more support for firearms regulation, and when republican parties were in power there was less support for regulation.

Hartnagel (2002) examined the effects of socio-political ideology, causal attributions and instrumental perspectives on attitudes toward gun control among citizens of Alberta, Canada. The central relationships examined in the study were support for conservative socio-economic policy (using a one-item measure of gun control attitudes), instrumental perspectives (using fear of crime as a proxy), ideological perspectives (using dispositional attribution of criminal behavior as a proxy), and conservative moral beliefs would result in greater support for firearms control.

Results from the study indicated that dispositional attribution was related to more support for gun control, providing some support for ideological explanations of gun control. Fear of crime was found to moderate the relationship between belief in gun control effectiveness and support for gun control, thus providing support for the instrumental perspective. Using this perspective, Hartnagel (2002) proposes that people who believe in firearms regulation view regulation as a good way to reduce crime.

In the United States, the relationship between conservative socio-political beliefs and gun control is not quite as clear-cut. Typically, in other studies that examine punitive criminal justice policies such as the death penalty, conservatives have tended to support punitive policies more often than liberals (see Robbers, 2004b for discussion). This finding may be because conservatives attach dispositional attribution to criminal behavior. It makes sense also that liberals would be less supportive of social regulatory policy, and in turn, liberals are more likely to assign situational attribution to criminal behavior. However, with gun control, both Spitzer (1995) and Tonso (1982) write that there is a group of conservative individuals in the United States who are part of the American gun culture, and who view unregulated gun ownership as an American way of life. There is also some evidence in recent research to support this view. Results in Dowler's (2002) study of American adults indicated that Republicans were less likely to support gun control (see discussion of this study below).

Research on media influence

There are numerous studies that indicate the media influences fear of crime, attitudes toward the police, and attitudes toward punitive crime policies, even when the media provides inaccurate information about crime (see e.g., Altheide, 2002; Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000; Roberts & Doob, 1990; Surette, 1998; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004). From a cultivation theory perspective, inaccurate depictions of the state of crime in the United States means that the media are responsible for promoting what Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1980) call the “mean worldview.” In this world, people are constantly fearful of being victimized and thus, will tend to support punitive sanctions (also see Dowler, 2002; Hoffner et al., 2001 for discussion).

Dowler (2002) examines media influence on attitudes toward criminal justice policy, particularly gun control. Results from the study indicate that regular viewers of crime shows were more likely to be anti-gun control. Dowler suggests that this is because those people who view guns and gun violence regularly may be desensitized, and may view law enforcement heroics as possible only with the help of firearms. Thus, these people feel that firearms possession is a good way to protect oneself against crime. Results from this study also suggest that regular viewers of crime shows may be less likely to support gun control because they do not think that gun control will effectively reduce crime.

In a study that examines the role of media in explanations of social problems, Sotirovic (2003) tests whether there are differences in attribution assignment between those who rely on newspapers versus television for information on crime (death penalty policy) and welfare issues. She then examines how attribution style affects support of the death penalty. Sotirovic proposes that to make sense of media depictions of criminal events, people assign different types of attribution to instigators. Attributional judgments therefore are likely to influence a person’s policy preferences (see also Shaw & Costanzo, 1982).

Results from her study indicate that those who relied on television for information were more likely to assign dispositional attribution and be more in favor of the death penalty. Consistent with other studies that examine attribution and the death penalty, Sotirovic also found that conservatives were more likely to assign dispositional attribution and be supportive of the death penalty (see also Robbers, 2004b for discussion). Sotirovic adds that assigning attribution is affected by other factors. For example, she proposes that if the media depicts perpetrators as unusual, or if very specific occurrences of crime are described, people are more likely to assign dispositional attribution.

Kleck (1996, 1997) writes that the public’s knowledge of the gun control debate is filtered through the media using what he terms exclusion bias. This bias entails the omission of critical facts in a news story. Kleck provides numerous examples of stories from both sides of the gun control debate to support this theory. One example cited is the story about new armor piercing “cop-killer” bullets aired in newspapers and television news across the country during 1985 and 1986. Kleck points out that those bullets capable of piercing police armor had been around for years, and that the “new” bullets had never actually killed an officer (Kleck, 1997). Such misleading information not only influences those who watch the stories, but also ends up influencing the social discourse and ultimately criminal justice policy (Kleck & Kates, 2001).

A large number of studies have also examined the influence of media on crime, fear of crime, and criminal justice policies other than gun control. One recent example is Chiricos, Padgett, and Getz's (2000) study that found viewing local and national television news was related to fear of crime regardless of the reality of crime in the local area. Weitzer and Kubrin (2004), who examined the effects of local and national news and real-world conditions on fear of crime, conducted an extension of this study. Results of their analysis suggested that individuals who rated local news as their most important news source had higher rates of fear, compared to those who watched national news.

Prior research reviewed here suggests that people's attitudes toward various criminal justice policies are influenced by the media, their fear of crime, and by the type of attribution that they assign to criminal actions. This study sought to build on prior research by addressing two research questions. First, the effect of attribution, fear of crime, and other socio demographic variables on students' attitudes toward gun control was examined. Also investigated within the scope of this question were possible moderating effects. Second, the effect that media has on attitudes toward gun control was examined by assessing whether viewing the film *Bowling for Columbine* influenced students to re-think their positions on gun control.

METHOD

Sample and procedure

Respondents for this study were recruited over a period of two and a half years from Introduction to Social Science and Introduction to Sociology courses at a private, metropolitan university. These classes are required by all students at the university. Students were told that they could participate in the study for extra credit; therefore, the sample was self-selected and was a non-probability sample. Typically, two classes each semester were used as the sample pool in the study.

This study employed a classic experimental design. Once students from both classes signed up for the study each semester, they were given the pretest. The pretest established base line levels of attitudes toward gun control as well as assessed demographics, fear of crime, community cohesion, and attitudes toward attribution among all respondents. One class was then designated as the control group and the other the experimental group. One week after the pretest, the experimental group viewed the movie *Bowling for Columbine*, and then took the posttest immediately following it. The posttest was given to the control group at the same time. The posttest was identical to the pretest. Once respondents had completed the posttest, respondents in the experimental group participated in small focus group sessions where they shared their views of the movie.¹ Following classic experimental design, posttest results from the experimental group were compared to a) results from the pretest, and b) posttest results from the control group.

The number of participants in the experimental group was 110. This number was reduced to 104 at the posttest stage due to missing data on posttest surveys and inability to locate several students. Participants in the experimental group ranged in age from 18 to 47 ($M = 21.53$, $SD = 6.65$). Fifty-seven percent of the participants were female. The distribution of respondents in the

experimental groups' race, political and religious affiliations can be found in Table 1. In the experimental group, 21% owned a firearm, and 39% reported having been a victim of a crime.

The control group consisted initially of 78 students, but three were discarded, as they could not be located at the time of the posttest. The age of the participants in the control group ranged from 18 to 49 ($M = 22.12$, $SD = 8.47$), and 60% were female. The distribution of control group respondents' racial, political and religious affiliations can be viewed in Table 1. Of the respondents in the control group, 20% owned firearms and 40% reported having been a victim of a crime.

Also presented in Table 1 are non-parametric and parametric tests used to ascertain whether the control group and the treatment group were comparable. Results indicated that the two groups did not differ significantly on any variables.

There were several rationales for the sample. First, students in both of these courses came from a variety of majors, thus their views on gun control were not likely to be skewed by any sociological or criminological instruction. Second, it was anticipated that students would be more than happy to sit through a 120-minute movie, which would have been a difficult intervention to implement with the general public. The last rationale for choosing this population was the demographics of the student body. Although the institution is a liberal arts university, it is a conservative school located in a conservative area. Therefore, a good mix of attitudes toward gun control was expected.

The film *Bowling for Columbine* was chosen as the media representative in this study for several reasons. First, the film was released when this study first began, and so many of the students had not seen it prior to this study. Second, and more importantly, many of the students in the experimental group were in high school during the Columbine incident and so this film was likely to have a dramatic impact upon them. Third, the film had been hailed as an instrument for critical analysis of positions in the gun control debate (see Robbers, 2004a).

Dependent variable

The dependent variable in this study was attitudes toward gun control. Given that single measures used in previous studies may not provide ideal measurement of attitudes toward gun control, for this study, the Attitudes toward Gun Control (ATGC) scale was developed. This scale consisted of ten questions that were scored on a five point Likert scale with responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (see Appendix A). Composite scores were coded so that a high score on the scale indicated pro gun control attitudes. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.85. Scores on the composite variable for all respondents at the pretest stage ranged from 10 to 39 ($M = 24.20$, $SD = 8.68$).

Table 1
Comparison of Participants in Experimental and Control Groups

Demographics	Control Group (<i>n</i> = 74)			Experimental Group (<i>n</i> = 107)		
	% or Mean	<i>SD</i>	Valid <i>N</i>	% or Mean	<i>SD</i>	Valid <i>N</i>
Age (in years)	22.12	8.47	74	21.53	6.65	107
Gender						
Male	40		30	43		46
Female	60		44	57		61
Race						
White	60		44	55.1		59
African American	15		11	18.7		20
Hispanic	15		11	13.1		14
Asian	10		8	10.3		11
Other	0		0	2.8		3
Religious Affiliation						
Catholic	43		31	42.1		45
None	20		15	25.2		27
Protestant	11.1		8	11.2		12
Muslim	2.5		2	3.7		4
Baptist	10		8	7.5		8
Greek Orthodox	5		4	3.7		4
Jewish	2.8		2	2.8		3
Church of Christ	2.8		2	-		-
Unitarian	2.8		2	-		-
Other	-		-	2.8		3
Political Affiliation						
None	15		11	18.7		20
Liberal	30		22	25.2		27
Moderate	15		11	22.4		24
Conservative	40		30	33.6		36
Victim of Crime						
Yes	40		30	39.3		42
No	60		44	60.7		65
Own Firearms						
Yes	20		15	21.5		23
No	80		59	78.5		84

Independent variables

Bowling for Columbine. During the aftermath of the Columbine incident, controversial filmmaker Michael Moore released *Bowling for Columbine*. The film's title comes from Harris and Klebold's high school schedule, which had them in bowling class the morning of the shootings. The title is a precursor to criticism that Moore applies to a number of social institutions, beginning with high schools, throughout the film.²

The central question of *Bowling for Columbine* is: Are we a nation of gun nuts, or are we just nuts? In examining this question, Moore takes viewers on a less than impartial journey of American history, firearms culture, and modern day crime. In this film, Moore focuses attention on how the media portrays crime. In essence, Moore suggests that the media creates an atmosphere of terror by constantly putting the American people on notice of various threats. He

cites examples of the Killer African bees that never came to America; the Y2K campaign that resulted in nothing happening; razor blades in apples; poisonous Halloween candy and various other perils that citizens could stumble into at any moment (see Robbers, 2004a for further discussion on the film's plot).

Attribution. In this study, attribution was used as a proxy for ideology as has been the practice in previous studies (see Dowler, 2002; Hartnagel, 2002). Given that those respondents who view criminals as culpable may be more likely to favor firearm use, particularly in self-defense situations, measuring dispositional and situational attribution was of most interest. To this end, Cullen et al.'s (1985) single composite measure of attribution was adopted. This measure is a seven-item scale that was scored on a five point Likert scale. The items were re-coded so that a high score on the composite scale indicated dispositional attribution. Scores on the composite scale ranged from 8 to 26 ($M = 17.02$, $SD = 5.05$). Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.81. This scale's validity was previously established (see Robbers, 2004b).

Fear of crime. Fear of crime was used as a proxy for the instrumental perspective in this study, as has been done in previous studies (e.g., see Hartnagel, 2002). Fear of crime was measured using an adapted version of Dowler's (2002) seven-item fear of crime measure.³ Again, items were scored on a five point Likert scale ranging from never to very frequently, and a high score indicated high fear of crime.

Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.85 and scores ranged from 8 to 32 ($M = 20.10$, $SD = 6.60$). Because it could be suggested that items in this scale measure both worry about crime and safety, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted on the items and revealed a single factor.⁴ Scree discontinuity analysis confirmed the single factor (Mertler & Vannatta, 2002).

Community cohesion. Community cohesion reflects the extent to which participants interact with members of the community. A scale of community cohesion using eight items was created for this study. Items were scored on a five point Likert scale, with a high score indicating a high level of community cohesion. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.75, and scores ranged from 8 to 28 ($M = 18.05$, $SD = 6.03$). Confirmatory factor analysis was also conducted with the items in this measure and analysis revealed one factor.

Control variables. In addition to the demographic variables discussed in the sample section above, also included were questions that asked for participants' religious and political affiliations.⁵ Political affiliation was coded so that a high score indicated conservatism. In addition, a measure of lifetime victimization was included. Crime victimization has been measured in literature using multiple items (e.g., Cullen et al., 1985; Taylor, Scheppele, & Stinchcombe, 1979) and single items (e.g., Langworthy & Whitehead, 1986), but typically neither type of measure has had a significant impact on outcome variables. Still, given victimization may influence attitudes toward gun control, a single-item measure asking respondents if they had ever been the victim of a crime was included.

Race was also included in this study as a control variable, given results using this variable in studies on gun control have been mixed (see Kleck, 1996; McClain, 1983). The last two control variables included in the study were gender and family gun ownership, which have been

among the most important predictors of attitudes toward gun control in previous studies (Dowler, 2002).

Analysis

Analyses were conducted in two parts. First, analysis was conducted to ascertain how the main independent variables in the study influenced attitudes toward gun control by examining the entire sample at the pretest stage. Second, after the experimental group had viewed the film, comparisons of the main study variables between and across groups were made.

RESULTS

Examining attitudes toward gun control

The first part of this study examined influencing factors on students' attitudes toward gun control. To this end, analysis was conducted with all pretest responses – both those in the experimental and control groups. Pearson's product moment correlation statistics were estimated with all variables in the model. Among the main study variables, significant correlations were found between fear of crime and gun control ($r = 0.25$; $p < .05$), indicating that people who are afraid of crime support gun control. A negative relationship between attribution and gun control was also found ($r = -0.34$; $p < .05$), indicating that those assigning dispositional attribution are less likely to favor gun control.⁶

Among the control variables, there was a significant, but weak, negative correlation between gender and gun control ($r = -.14$; $p < .05$), indicating females are supportive of gun control. Political affiliation and gun control were also significantly, negatively associated, indicating that conservatives are anti-gun control in this sample ($r = -.59$; $p < .01$). Last, there was a significant positive relationship between previous victimization and gun control, indicating that those who had been victimized were supportive of gun control ($r = .15$; $p < .05$).

To examine these relationships further, OLS regression models were estimated and results from this analysis are presented in Table 2.

Examining the coefficients in the full model, there are three significant relationships. Political affiliation, gun ownership, and fear of crime are significant, and the direction of their relationships with attitudes toward gun control has not changed from the correlational analysis discussed above. Attribution is no longer significant, which may indicate that it is moderated by another variable, given that multicollinearity was tested.⁷ The model is significant and explains 57% of the variance in attitudes toward gun control.

Literature on attitudes toward gun control has repeatedly indicated that gun ownership may moderate relationships between predictor variables and attitudes (see Dowler, 2002 for discussion). Given this finding and the change in the coefficient for attribution, a cross product interaction term using gun ownership and attribution was created and another OLS regression model was estimated. Results also appear in Table 2.

Table 2
Attitudes toward Gun Control Regression Models

Variable	Full Model b (SE)	Std Beta	t-value	Interaction b (SE)	Std Beta	t-value
Gender	1.31 (1.29)	0.08	1.01	0.70 (1.29)	0.04	0.53
Age	-0.17 (0.07)	-0.02	0.26	-0.01 (0.07)	-0.10	-0.17
Race	-0.52 (0.65)	-0.07	-0.85	-0.70 (0.64)	-0.89	-1.09
Political Affiliation	-3.51 (0.52)	-0.46	- 6.73**	-3.44 (0.51)	-0.47	- 6.70**
Crime Victimization	-2.17 (1.27)	-0.12	-1.73	-.155 (1.27)	-0.89	-1.22
Gun Ownership	-11.02 (1.67)	-0.52	- 6.60**	-31.77 (8.32)	-1.50	- 3.82**
Attribution	-.005 (0.13)	-0.00	-0.04	-0.13 (0.14)	-0.78	-0.96
Fear of Crime	0.22 (0.11)	0.16	2.03*	0.24 (0.10)	0.18	2.27*
Community Cohesion	-0.15 (0.11)	-0.11	-1.37	-0.17 (0.11)	-0.11	-1.37
Gun Ownership x Attribution	-	-	-	0.99 (0.38)	1.03	2.54**
Model Prediction Rate (Adjusted)	0.57 (0.55)			0.59 (0.56)		

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Coefficients indicate that the interaction term is negative, and significant. The coding of these variables is such that those people who own guns and assign dispositional attribution to criminal activity are unlikely to support gun control.⁸

The findings in the OLS model provide some support for the premises tested in this study. For example, the relationship between fear of crime and gun control provides empirical support for the instrumental perspective, as it is likely that respondents who fear crime view gun control as contributing to safety and decreased crime rates. This result also supports the prior research of Heath, Weeks, and Murphy (1997) as well as Smith (2001).

Examining the effect of media

The second part of this study was to investigate the impact that viewing *Bowling for Columbine* may have on students' attitudes toward gun control.

Integrity of experimental and control conditions. Maintaining the integrity of a social science experiment is typically more challenging than maintaining integrity in a laboratory setting as social settings are difficult to control (see Babbie, 2004 for discussion). Although it has been ascertained in this study that the treatment and control groups are equivalent across all variables, there is a possible spurious variable of students in the control group watching the film outside of the study, which would threaten internal validity.

In this case, the risk of the spurious variable has been minimized by asking students to sign a pledge stating they would not discuss the study with other students, and part of the pledge for students in the control group was the promise that they would not see *Bowling for Columbine* until the study had concluded. In order to get some sense of whether students were abiding by the pledge, a question was included on the control group posttest that asked participants whether they had seen *Bowling for Columbine*. All students said no except one, and his responses were left out of the study.

Comparison of main study variables pre and post Bowling for Columbine. Once *Bowling for Columbine* had been viewed by the experimental group, analysis using matched pairs t-tests was conducted to ascertain whether there were significant differences between the groups and across time. Results appear in Table 3. Examining the averages for the main study variables across the two groups at the pretest stage, no significant differences were found.

At the posttest stage, there was a significant difference between average gun control scores for the experimental and control groups. The average for the experimental group was 26.67, while the average for the control group also increased from the pretest, but only slightly to 23.35. These results indicate that viewing the film is likely to have an impact on respondents' attitudes toward gun control ($t(103) = -5.67, p < .01$).

Across the two groups from pre to posttest, there are two significant changes in variables. First, there is a significant increase in scores for attribution among the experimental group ($t(103) = -5.53, p < .01$), indicating that dispositional attribution scores increased after viewing *Bowling for Columbine*. The second significant difference was found for the mean of attitudes toward gun control at the pre and posttest stages for the experimental group. In this case, scores also significantly increased meaning that respondents in the experimental group were more in favor of gun control after viewing *Bowling for Columbine*.

Table 3
Main Study Variables by Group and Over Time

Variable	Group	Pretest		Posttest		Difference <i>t</i> -scores
		Mean <i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>	Mean <i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Attitudes toward Gun Control	Experimental	23.73 107	8.13	26.67** 107	8.21	-5.61**
	Control	22.40 74	7.61	23.35 74	7.87	-2.01
Fear Of Crime	Experimental	19.86 104	6.55	19.83 104	6.60	1.84
	Control	20.60 74	6.78	20.10 74	6.27	1.96
Attribution	Experimental	16.94 104	5.08	18.84 104	4.30	-5.53**
	Control	17.40 74	5.20	17.02 74	5.24	1.18
Community Cohesion	Experimental	18.00 104	6.34	17.86 104	6.15	-0.64
	Control	18.30 74	6.21	18.21 74	6.03	1.01

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

DISCUSSION

Analyses in this study addressed two research questions. First, attitudes toward gun control among a student population were examined, focusing particularly on the role that ideological perspectives and instrumental perspectives play in attitudes toward gun control. Second, analysis investigated whether media can influence people's attitudes toward criminal justice policy by testing the effects that viewing the movie *Bowling for Columbine* had on participants' attitudes toward gun control.

In this study, fear of crime was used as a proxy for the instrumental perspective, which assumes that people may be in favor of gun control as it reflects policy that adds to societal safety. Results indicated that those with a greater fear of crime were more likely to support gun control policies. These results are consistent with findings in Hartnagel's (2002) study. Additionally, Dowler (2002) found that participants who feared crime believed that being armed was the best way to keep safe, but unlike the current study participants, Dowler's study participants were regular viewers of crime shows. Investigations of instrumental perspectives in criminal justice literature are new, but results from this study suggest that they have some value in explaining how people assess their physical environment and the impact this has on their attitudes toward policy.

The other main study variable examined was the impact of attribution on attitudes toward gun control. Attribution was used as a proxy for an ideological perspective in this study, as had been done in previous studies (see Hartnagel, 2002; Sotirovic, 2003). Results indicated that those students who assigned dispositional attribution to criminal behavior are less likely to favor gun control, thus supporting the notion that these individuals believe that being armed is a good way to protect oneself against criminals. The examination of attribution in gun regulation studies is new. However, despite the non-random nature of this study's sample, results suggest that the relationship is worthy of further examination.

Results from the analysis with the control variables revealed a number of significant relationships. Results indicated that conservatives were less likely to support gun control policies. It is noted that the gun control issue is unlike other criminal justice policies in that conservatives favor less restrictions, whereas with other policies, such as the death penalty, conservatives are more likely to support punitive policies, and therefore more regulation.

Correlational analysis indicated that gender was significantly associated with attitudes, and consistent with previous literature, females in this sample were more in favor of gun control (see Maguire & Pastore, 2001). However, the finding did not hold in the regression analysis, suggesting that the relationship between gender and attitudes toward gun control may be moderated by another variable. Such relationships should be addressed in future research. Consistent with previous studies was the finding that gun ownership is significantly related to attitudes toward gun control (see Dowler, 2002 for discussion).

The second part of this paper investigated the impact that viewing *Bowling for Columbine* had on attitudes toward gun control in an effort to ascertain the extent to which media could influence people's attitudes toward criminal justice policy. Results from the analysis of matched pairs indicated that scores for both attribution and attitudes toward gun control significantly increased from pre to posttest for the experimental group. This finding meant that participants were more likely to assign dispositional attribution post viewing. Further, participants who viewed the film were also more likely to be pro gun control. This result may be related to the specific crime hypothesis, which proposes that participants assign dispositional attribution to particular crimes, such as the Columbine incident, after they become familiar with the perpetrators and the crime. However, the same people may still assign situational attribution to crimes in general, or crimes with which they are not familiar.

The significant change in attitudes toward gun control post film viewing also lends support to the argument that students, and perhaps people in general, are susceptible to suggestion from media sources, even when those sources are biased. Such suggestion can then play a role in influencing criminal justice policy. This finding is worth further exploration. It is also quite possible that media sources, such as the plentiful crime and policing fiction television shows, and films like the one used in this study, may actually be having a large impact on students' decisions to enter professional criminal justice fields. This link is also one that has yet to be examined in the literature.

One limitation of this analysis was a failure to control completely for social distance in the relationship between fear of crime and attitudes toward gun control. Previous studies, such as

Hoffner et al., (2001), have indicated that social distance influences how respondents perceive an event. In this case, I had hoped that the Columbine incident would have been fairly close to the respondents, given many of them were in high school at the time. Although age was included in the analysis, this cannot be viewed as a good proxy for social distance as geographical location of high school was not included, and those student's who attended high school in Colorado, or other locations where incidents of school violence occurred, may have reacted more strongly to the film.

Previous victimization was included as a control variable in this study and, consistent with other studies on attitudes toward crime policy (e.g., see Langworthy & Whitehead, 1986), results indicated that it did not significantly influence attitudes toward gun control. However, I did not ask specifically whether participants had ever been the victim of school violence or delinquency, which would not necessarily be covered by the victimization of crime measure included here. Future studies may want to include a more comprehensive measure of victimization.

Evidence from the analysis in this paper reveals that film media, and specifically popular culture in film, can have an impact on student's attitudes toward policy. Although there has been no causal relationship established here, there is enough empirical evidence supporting the role of media in construction of attitudes that further studies are justified. I also recognize that the sample is not a probability sample, and generalizations from this study are thus limited.

Another limitation of this study was that the effect of media on attitudes toward gun control over time was not examined. Most likely, factors such as the amount of media exposure, the type of format, and how closely viewers can relate to events will impact the longitudinal effect. Further, only one crime policy was examined in the current study. However, results confirm that the media has the potential to be extremely influential in people's decisions about crime policies. In a social climate where television media is dominated by crime and justice presentations of both fact and fiction, it is worth examining how exposure may affect attitudes toward other crime policies.

NOTES

1. In the interests of brevity, these results will not be discussed in this paper.
2. I do not suggest that this film is a balanced examination of the gun control issue. It was used in this study because it provides a good platform for debate on the gun control issue, and it uses age appropriate illustrations and events for the sample.
3. The similarity of this measure to that of LeGrange, Ferraro, and Supancic's (1992) measure is simply coincidence as Dowler (2002) does not cite Ferraro in development of his measure of fear of crime.
4. Some researchers (e.g., Williams, McShane, & Akers, 2000) have noted the usefulness of this type of measure.
5. Respondents were given a range of choices of religious and political affiliation and were asked to indicate the one they identified with.

6. In the interests of brevity, the correlation table has been omitted.
7. Variance inflation factors were included in the model, and none exceeded 2.10.
8. A further interaction term of gender and gun ownership was created and additional models were estimated to test the interaction as suggested by Dowler (2002). The new interaction term was not significant and therefore, the results have been omitted.

ENDNOTE

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The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent electronically to monica.robbers@marymount.edu.

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Appendix A

Variable Measures

Attitudes toward gun control

1. Armed citizens are the best defense against criminals.
2. It should be easier for law-abiding citizens to carry concealed weapons.
3. In general, I feel that laws covering the sale of firearms should be made stricter.
4. All firearms should be registered with the Federal Government.
5. Stricter gun control would lessen the amount of serious crime in the United States.
6. Firearms related violent crime is a real problem in the United States.
7. The right to own firearms is a fundamental right of all citizens in the United States.
8. Any citizen in the United States should be able to purchase a firearm without being hassled.
9. Regulating firearms is the best way to prevent firearms related crime.
10. Being able to purchase a gun easily should remain a fundamental part of American culture.

Attribution

1. Most criminals know fully well what they are doing when they break the law.
2. Most criminals commit crimes because they know that they can get away with it.
3. Most people who violate the law do so because they know that crime pays in America these days.
4. Most criminals come from broken or disorganized homes.
5. Most criminals are emotionally disturbed.
6. Poverty is a major cause of crime in America.
7. Most criminals were abused as children.

Fear of crime

1. How often do you feel unsafe walking around alone after dark?
2. How often do you feel unsafe when you are outside and alone during your neighborhood during the day?
3. How often do you feel unsafe when you are outside and alone during your neighborhood during the night?
4. How often are you worried about being sexually assaulted?
5. How often are you worried about being mugged?
6. How often are you worried about getting beaten up?
7. How often are you worried about being knifed or shot?
8. How often are you worried about being murdered?
9. How often are you worried about being burglarized while you are at home?
10. How often are you worried about being burglarized when you are NOT home?

Community cohesion

1. My neighborhood is a place where people mostly help each other.
2. My neighborhood is a place where people mostly do their own thing.
3. My neighborhood is a real community.
4. My neighborhood is just a place to live.
5. When I do a neighbor a favor, I can generally trust the neighbor to return the favor.

6. If I am in need of assistance, such as my car is stuck in snow or mud, my neighbors are likely to come to my rescue.
7. I talk with my neighbors often.
8. How many neighbors do you know by name?*

* This last item was measured on a three-point scale, with zero indicating none, one indicating one to four, and two indicating five or more.