

**A Review of *Feeding the Fear of Crime:  
Crime-Related Media and Support for Three Strikes***

**By**

**Maria Markantonatou  
Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Criminal Law**

Book: *Feeding the Fear of Crime: Crime-Related Media and Support for Three Strikes*  
Author: Valerie J. Callanan  
Publisher: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC  
Year: 2005

In her book titled *Feeding the Fear of Crime*, Valerie J. Callanan examines a number of questions relating to the “Three Strikes” model of crime prevention, the public fear of crime, crime-related media consumption and representation of crime and criminals, punitiveness, and the politicization of the increasing fear of crime. Over the last 25 years, writes Callanan, both concern about crime and the fear of crime between Americans has dramatically increased. Whereas in 1982 a Gallup poll showed that “only 3% of Americans cited crime and violence as the number one problem in the country” (p. 3), in 1989 this number “shot up to 27%, declined somewhat in the early 1990’s (...) and now stands at 7% in the early 2000’s” (p. 3). According to Callanan, a growing dissatisfaction with the American criminal justice system and the belief that criminals were treated too leniently, have all been promoted in a climate, where “politicians cited this increase in fear to justify an escalation of punitive crime control legislation that swept the nation in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s – mandatory sentencing, truth-in-sentencing, sentence enhancements, and three strikes laws” (p. 4). These get-tough laws had the effect, as Callanan notes, that “in 1994, over one hundred crime control bills, such as sentencing enhancements, and more mandatory sentencing laws, were passed by the California legislature” (p. 4). Impressively, “the American prison populations ballooned from approximately 200,000 in 1980 to almost 2.2 million in 2003” (p. 6) and “the number of crime stories on national television news broadcasts nearly quadrupled from 1990 to 1995 – from 757 to 2,574” (p. 8).

Callanan explores these trends and focuses especially on California’s “Three Strikes Law” that mandates 25 years to life in prison for an offender convicted of any felony following two prior convictions for serious crimes. In order to examine the support of the public opinion for three strikes laws as well as the determinants of punitiveness, she utilizes two important dimensions: “the severity of the crime and the type of crime committed” (p. 13). By reviewing the prior research on public opinion of criminal sentencing, which mostly studies the attitudes of public opinion towards the imposition of death penalty, Callanan systematizes and elaborates thoroughly four distinctive groups of argumentation. The first one “links punitive attitudes toward criminal offenders to fear of crime. Increased fear is hypothesized to increase punitive attitudes toward criminal offenders” (p. 19). The second body of inquiry “focuses on the attribution of criminal behavior or what people believe about crime causation” (p. 19). A third area of explanation “focuses on beliefs about crime control, specifically, the efficacy of the criminal justice system” (p. 19), and the fourth “focuses on the sociodemographic correlates and socio-psychological attributes related to punitive attitudes” (p. 20). With regard to these argumentation groups, Callanan discusses the impact of a number of socio-psychological determinants such as crime seriousness, the beliefs about

the purpose of punishment, the perceptions about crime causation, and the role of political ideology.

Thereafter, Callanan builds a set of hypotheses that she examines empirically. Arranged in a wide scale of “strongly”, “partially”, “moderately” and “weakly” supported as well as “not supported” hypotheses, she elaborates on various aspects of fear of crime and crime-related media consumption. Amongst her “strongly supported” hypotheses are, for example, that “Republicans will be less likely to support rehabilitation compared to Independents and Democrats” (p. 158) and that “Republicans will be more supportive of three strikes than Independents or Democrats” (p. 158). A “partially supported” hypothesis is, according to Callanan’s research, that “Increases in television news and newspaper consumption will increase perceptions of local crime risk” (p. 164), whereas one of her “weakly supported” hypotheses is that “The greater the exposure to crime-related media, the lower support for rehabilitation” (p. 173). By testing the set of assumptions that relate fear of crime with crime-related media consumption and the increase of punitiveness, the author is interested in the influence of specific crime-related media stories on punitiveness and also compares this influence between Whites, Latinos and African Americans. In this frame, she concludes that in relation to variables like the crime seriousness or the support for rehabilitation, “there are no differences across race/ethnic groups in the impact of the media (...) with the exception of their impact on perceptions of neighborhood crime risk and fear of crime” (p. 175).

Callanan argues accurately that the relationship between the fear of crime, the increase of punitiveness, the support for three strikes sentencing and the (heavy) crime-related media consumption is *not* direct (p. 174). On the contrary, she considers that media “operate indirectly through their effects on other attitudes and beliefs related to punitiveness” (p. 175). But, this indirect impact of the media on fear of crime and punitiveness is not less important. The media, argues Callanan, have made “the issue more salient, so that the protection from crime is an organizing principle of modern daily life” (p. 176). Callanan indicates that the crime-related media, the television news, and the info-tainment identify between crime and violence (p. 176) promote a “simplistic view of the world” (p. 177) and contribute to the “constriction of discourse about crime” (p. 177). In her critique on media she also refers to other important parameters: “By excluding information about the actual distribution of crime, by not reassuring viewers that the likelihood of violent crime is very rare, by not portraying alternative solutions to incarceration, by not informing viewers of what *is* effective in preventing crime, and by not framing crime as a function of other social problems, the media have wielded enormous influence on the public’s understanding of crime” (p. 179).

One of the most interesting arguments of Callanan’s critique on media is that they (re)present crime as a result of individual pathology and they do not relate it with broader socioeconomic problems and structural changes. For example, notes Callanan, the economic crisis during the 1970s and 1980s and the crisis in the labor market caused by deindustrialization and globalization, which hit the Black communities hard, drove to the creation of informal economies: “As people turned to informal economies, such as the much maligned crack cocaine market, the state responded by increasing police surveillance of inner-city neighborhoods, ratcheting up drug penalties, and by embracing an all out ‘war’ on drugs” (p. 178). All the while, continues Callanan, media were reporting on the “war” on drugs and warning about the effects of drugs, and at the same time they were neglecting the

economic crisis, its causes and consequences as well as the economic plight of the individuals in the unprivileged Black communities.

With reference to this selectivity of crime-related media stories Callanan questions: “Would we have two million people incarcerated today if the links to deindustrialization and globalization had been made in the media?” (p. 178). Her question is much more than simply rhetoric; it reflects not only the symbolical power of crime-related media, but also shows – like in the example about the economic crisis of the 1970’s and 1980’s and the following incarceration rates – what kind of quite real effects this symbolical power is capable of producing.

#### **ENDNOTE**

Correspondence concerning this review should be sent electronically to Maria Markantonatou at [markantonatou@hotmail.com](mailto:markantonatou@hotmail.com).