

Selling Crime Prevention: The Evaluation of A Mass Media Campaign¹

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L'article commente une évaluation qui a été faite d'une campagne de prévention du crime menée par le truchement des media dans une province de l'Ouest canadien. Les auteurs interprètent les données de réévaluation comme il suit: (1) la campagne a touché une majorité de gens; (2) une petite proportion de gens ont trouvé que les thèmes et les messages étaient percutants; (3) l'impact de la campagne sur la mentalité et le comportement des gens a été négligeable. L'inefficacité de la campagne est jugée en fonction des caractères particuliers du plan et de la mise en oeuvre de l'opération. L'article se termine par des réflexions sur certaines implications générées que l'étude pourrait peut-être avoir pour la planification future de la prévention du crime par le moyen des media.

A. *Introduction*

Mass media information campaigns have traditionally been popular vehicles for **the** achievement of public policy objectives. Over the last several decades, decision-makers responsible for the implementation of formal programs of social amelioration have directed campaign efforts toward a variety of ends, including highway safety²⁸ physical and mental health,^{25,16} safe drug and alcohol use^{4,17} and citizen awareness of political process.^{23,33}

One of the most recent applications of the information campaign approach to public policy is found in the area of crime control and criminal justice planning. Within the context of such programs, radio and television time and newspaper space are used by program designers to communicate general crime prevention awareness as well as specific risk-reducing skills to the large audiences that regularly attend to these media. As crime control strategies, these programs are consistent with the recent trend towards the development of projects which directly or indirectly involve the general public in the crime reduction effort.^{7,18,36}

As might be expected, mass media crime prevention campaigns require a major commitment of both financial and human resources. The decision to implement a full-scale program of this kind normally means that there will be less funding available for alternative crime prevention strategies. In view of the direct and indirect costs of this approach, it is essential that program

planners be provided with a systematic appraisal of the efficacy of crime prevention through mass media. To date, however, few such assessments are to be found in the literature of criminology or mass communications.^{37,26}

The present paper reports on an evaluation of a mass media crime prevention program which was conducted in a western Canadian province. It is argued that the generally unsuccessful nature of this campaign may be explained with reference to several specific features of both the program and the wider communication environment. The paper concludes with a discussion of some of the implications which this evaluation might have for the future planning and implementation of mass media crime prevention.

B. *The Campaign*

In March of 1978, the office of the Solicitor-General of Alberta initiated a publicly funded province-wide program of crime prevention through mass media. The stated long-range objective of the program was to effect decreases in the levels of several specific offenses. With respect to three of these crimes (vandalism, residential break and enter, and theft from automobiles) campaign materials were addressed to potential victims. For the remaining crimes (hitchhiking-related assaults and rapes and auto theft) the target audience was conceptualized as consisting of both potential offenders and potential victims.

The campaign was implemented in two stages. During the first six weeks of the program, the effort was made to increase public awareness of crime prevention generally as well as the new program. Thus, throughout this initial period, several non-specific "advertisements" were disseminated in order to promote the campaign theme, "Let's not give crime a chance". The second phase of the campaign focused upon the communication of crime prevention messages designed to promote preventative behaviors relevant to the crimes and target audiences mentioned above. A continuity across these stages was maintained through the consistent utilization of the major campaign slogan. Both phases of the campaign employed radio and television public service announcements, newspaper and billboard advertisements.³¹

C. *The Evaluation*

The principle part of the evaluation procedure involved the comparative analysis of data collected from two separate samples of Provincial residents.³ The first survey, which was conducted prior to program commencement took place in February and March of 1978. The purpose of this initial survey was to gather baseline information regarding residents' attitudinal and behavioral orientations to crime and crime prevention. In January and February of 1979 a second survey was undertaken in order to gather information comparable to that which had been collected in the earlier study as well as data relating to campaign exposure.

For both surveys, samples of households were selected from the seven communities in the Province with populations greater than 10,000. Because of

the methodological interests of the funding agency, respondents in two of the communities were chosen according to traditional stratified random sampling procedures, while in the remaining communities prospective interviewees were selected through random digit dialing.³⁵ These sampling methods revealed similar estimates of population distributions of key variables.³¹

In all cases, samples were drawn on the basis of approximate proportion of the population represented by each town or city. Interviewing was restricted to persons over the age of eighteen years; and in order to ensure an acceptable sex distribution, male and female respondents were selected according to preestablished quotas (i.e., at least one-third male).

All interviews were conducted by telephone.^{152°} In each city, interviewers were recruited locally and trained by one of the principle investigators. The primarily closed-ended interview schedules were pre-tested in order to minimize differences with respect to interviewer style. As a result of this procedure, across-interviewer variation took the form of differential completion rates rather than differentials with respect to the quality of data.

The comparison of pre- and post-intervention surveys may seem to be a cumbersome technique for detecting campaign impact. In this regard, it might be argued that if the campaign had significant effects, they would be evident in the patterns of officially recorded crime data. However, the complex nature of official crime statistics makes difficult their interpretation as measures of actual crime levels.⁵⁻³² Yet, for the sake of comprehensiveness, trends in the rates of selected offenses were analyzed for one of the campaign cities. A previous analysis of that city's official police statistics suggested that they would be suitable for evaluation purposes.³⁰

D. *Campaign Exposure*

Any attempt to answer questions relating to campaign effectiveness must, of course, be preceded by a consideration of audience exposure to campaign materials. If audience members do not attend to campaign messages then important effects cannot be expected. As mentioned, the campaign designers were interested in ensuring province-wide exposure to the program. The evaluation data suggest that this objective was only partially realized.

Early in the post-intervention survey respondents were asked to indicate their familiarity with a number of "crime prevention slogans" which were read to them by the interviewer. The list was comprised of the "let's not give crime a chance" slogan, three non-existent slogans ("pull together to prevent crime", "crime prevention is a community affair", "help cure the common crime") and one which was being used by an alternative ongoing crime prevention program ("shoplifting is no way to make your mark in life").

As indicated by Table 1, the slogans differ with respect to their apparent recognizability. The data reveal that the slogan with the greatest exposure is, in fact, the one associated with the Provincial campaign (87%). It will also be

noted that, in general, the three bogus slogans have much lower reported recognizability than do either of the genuine slogans. However, the fact that one of these bogus slogans ("crime prevention is a community affair") elicited a higher rate of recognition than expected, may indicate the extent to which the recognition measures are inflated. Such inflation is no doubt in large part due to extraneous factors such as a social desirability element in responses and the tendency on the part of some respondents to confuse unfamiliar slogans with those used by other ongoing campaigns.

Table 1
Recognition of Crime Prevention Slogans:
Adjusted Percentages*

	<i>Heard Of It</i>	<i>Never Heard Of It</i>	<i>Not Sure</i>	N
Pull Together To Prevent Crime	24	73	3	1258
Crime Prevention Is A Community Affair	66	30	4	1282
Help Cure The Common Crime	14	82	4	1278
Shoplifting Is No Way to Make Your Mark In Life	79	19	2	1285
Let's Not Give Crime A Chance	87	10	3	1288

* Adjusted percentage refers to percentages computed after "unknown" categories are deleted.

While slogan recognition may serve as a crude and somewhat generous indicator of campaign exposure, it does not suggest the degree to which audience members actually attend to campaign messages or the degree to which they perceived them to be salient. For this reason, respondents were asked elsewhere in the post-intervention survey if they could recall anything that they had seen or heard in the media that informed them of something that they could do to prevent crime. Only 36% of the 1266 respondents replied in the affirmative. These respondents were then asked to describe the message to which they had been exposed. A content analysis of these open-ended descriptions allowed coders to sort respondents' replies into a limited number of pre-established categories. This analysis revealed that only about one-third of those responding to this item provided descriptions which suggested media messages associated with the campaign of interest. These data may be interpreted as indicating that a rather small proportion of the total sample (about

12%) found the messages of the province campaign salient enough to recall in **an unstructured situation.**

Thus, while a majority of Provincial residents may have been exposed to the campaign, it is likely that a much smaller proportion may be said to have attended to these messages in any meaningful fashion. Both slogan recognition and recall of campaign content evidenced only minor variation across social and demographic categories (Table 2).

E. Attitudes and Behavior

Since for a large portion of respondents, the Provincial campaign seems to have been lacking in salience, it would be unrealistic to expect substantial campaign impact. The analysis of responses to a number of post-intervention survey items, as well as the comparative examination of pre- and post-campaign survey results, suggests that, overall, the influence exerted by the campaign upon attitudes and behavior was negligible.

For instance, during the second survey respondents were asked a number of questions about the crime prevention behaviors in which they had engaged during the six month period preceding the survey. Of the 36% of the respondents who reported that they had engaged in one or more specified behaviors during this period, only 9% indicated that they had done so as a reaction to some sort of crime prevention publicity. Similarly, of those respondents who had identified Provincial campaign ads in their open-ended descriptions of crime prevention publicity to which they had been exposed, 63% stated that they had "followed the advice" contained in the advertisement. However, this figure, refers to only about 7% of the total sample.

The comparison of pre- and post-intervention survey data further supports these findings regarding the general lack of campaign efficacy. For instance, during both the first and second surveys, respondents were asked to choose from a list of social problems the one to which they had been "paying most attention recently". The respondents who replied to this question were then asked if there was another problem to which they had been paying attention. With respect to the pre-campaign survey, 12% of the respondents chose crime as a "first" problem while 20% mentioned it as a second problem. The comparable figures from the second survey were 16% and 24% respectively. These data suggest that the position of crime on the public agenda was left unaffected by the campaign.

In addition, a comparison of pre- and post-campaign items, relating to the crimes that formed the focus of campaign attention, revealed a consistent pattern of responses. As Table 3 illustrates, for instance, respondents to the second survey were no more likely than respondents to the first survey to perceive increases in their chances of being victimized.

In terms of crime prevention behaviors in the six months prior to the survey, there seems to be little difference between respondents to the first and

Table 2
Exposure Items By Social and Demographic Variables

	<i>Exposure Items</i>	
	<i>Slogan Recognition</i> (% "heard of it")	<i>Recall of Message Content</i> (% describing Alberta ad)
Sex		
Male	84 (N=506)	29 (N=157)
Female	89 (N = 773)	33 (N = 300)
Age		
18-20 years	93 (N = 477)	34 (N=187)
30-49 years	86 (N = 507)	29 (N=188)
50 and older	79 (N = 298)	31 (N= 84)
Socioeconomic Status		
Low	88 (N=167)	32 (N= 62)
Medium	89 (N = 512)	28 (N=185)
High	86 (N = 454)	36 (N= 171)
Household Status		
Own	88 (N = 483)	28 (N=181)
Rent	86 (N = 787)	34 (N = 273)
Concern With Crime		
Low	86 (N = 743)	31 (N = 271)
Medium	89 (N = 294)	29 (N=106)
High	89 (N=197)	36 (N= 70)
Newspaper Reading* (number per week)		
None	88 (N=145)	28 (N= 57)
1-2	89 (N=183)	28 (N= 78)
3-5	87 (N = 252)	38 (N= 87)
6 or more	86 (N = 697)	32 (N = 235)
Television Viewing* (hours per day)		
1 or less	85 (N = 417)	31 (N= 147)
2-3	87 (N = 558)	34 (N = 201)
4 or more	90 (N = 307)	29 (N = 111)
Radio Listening* (hours per day)		
1 or less	85 (N = 580)	33 (N = 207)
2-3	87 (N = 308)	29 (N= 116)
4 or more	90 (N = 394)	31 (N=136)
Victim Status**		
Victim	90 (N = 262)	25 CN= 101)
Non-victim	86 (N = 1011)	33 (N = 356)

* Respondents were asked about their media behavior during the week which preceded the survey.

** Refers to respondents' reporting of events that occurred in the six-month period preceding the survey.

Table 3

Pre- and Post-Campaign Comparisons Of
Subjective Probabilities of Victimization

<i>Crime</i>	<i>(Percent reporting a recent increase in the "chances of becoming a victim")</i>	
	<i>Pre-Campaign Survey</i>	<i>Post-Campaign Survey</i>
Break and Enter	70 (N=1025)	71 (N=1283)
Vandalism	71 (N=1023)	70 (N=1280)
Theft of Car	59 (N=984)	55 (N=1243)
Theft from Car	55 (N=982)	57 (N=1244)
Assault	64 (N=1023)	63 (N=1288)
Rape (females only)	71 (N=604)	70 (N=785)

second surveys. If anything there is less such behavior in the second survey. If the campaign had been a success one would expect increased crime prevention behavior among the population from which the sample was drawn.

Table 4

Pre- And Post-Campaign Comparisons Of
Crime Prevention Activities

<i>Activities</i>	<i>(Percentage of respondents who report ini- Hating the behavior during the six-month period preceding the survey)</i>	
	<i>Pre-Campaign Survey</i>	<i>Post-Campaign Survey</i>
Locked Doors and/or Windows	18	11
Installed New Lights	4	4
Installed New Lock	18	12
Bought a Dog	4	2
Bought Insurance	5	4
Secured Valuables	2	1
Secured Cars	3	3
	N = 1015	1287

F. *Crime Rates*

As discussed above, the employment of official crime statistics as measures of campaign success presents the evaluation researcher with several problems. Since these measures reflect reportability, as well as actual crime levels, their fluctuation over a program period is difficult to interpret. For instance, either increases or decreases in rates of selected offenses could be construed — in the absence of additional data — as evidence of program success. A statistical decrease, of course, could be viewed as suggesting that increased crime prevention behavior on the part of citizens has resulted in the lowering of actual crime levels. Alternatively, an increase in a particular rate

of crime might be reflecting a greater reportability of offenses rather than a program failure.

Official police statistics are measures of such complexity that any attempt to determine the manner in which their variability is affected by media campaigns must be characterized by a high degree of uncertainty. Further, aggregate crime statistics are not even likely to reflect campaign impact unless *large number of people* have altered their behavior in response to campaign materials.

Since the data discussed above indicated that few significant effects could be attributed to the Provincial campaign, major variations in crime rates over the program period were not expected. An analysis of monthly crime statistics for one of the program cities found that the variation which did occur over the campaign period could be more suitably explained in terms of seasonal patterns rather than campaign influence.

G. *Discussion and Summary*

The evidence reviewed in this paper suggests that the Provincial mass media campaign was characterized by an effectiveness structure of the following order: large numbers of Albertans were exposed to the campaign; a considerably smaller number of residents perceived campaign themes and messages as salient; only a negligible number of residents altered their behavior in response to the campaign. Thus, while the program may have overcome the physical barriers to communication, it did not effectively overcome the more important psychological barriers.²²

While it may be argued that the evaluation might have taken place at a point prior to the emergence of important effects, the unanimity of evidence suggests that explanations regarding the lack of campaign impact are likely to involve a consideration of operational rather than evaluative procedures. The accumulated body of research relating to the functioning of public information campaigns indicates that program success is a variable whose strength and direction is contingent upon a wide array of factors both internal and external to the communication situation.^{13>27} It is hypothesized that, with respect to the Provincial campaign, several of these factors mitigated against campaign effectiveness.

Perhaps the most basic consideration in this respect concerns the fact that Provincial residents did not regard crime or crime prevention as particularly salient issues. The pre-campaign survey data revealed that, in general, respondents were unlikely to express high levels of crime-related anxiety or to report any great degree of involvement in preventive action. It may be argued that, because of these predispositions, audience members were only marginally interested in the themes and appeals of crime prevention messages.

While increasing the salience of information is often conceptualized as an explicit objective of media programs, the Provincial campaign was somewhat

deficient in this regard. As discussed, the message structure of this campaign consisted largely of newspaper advertisements and broadcast public service type announcements. Given the manner in which Alberta residents were predisposed to crime and crime prevention, such messages could not be expected to generate high levels of interest or motivation.

Crime prevention behavior is, after all, an extremely abstract and intangible "commodity". In campaigns of this type audience members are asked by the mass communicator to modify old habits and to engage in new behaviors in order to achieve objectives which they may not see as contingent upon their actions. It seems unlikely that the complex motivational process which promote crime prevention behavior, can be set in motion by utilizing standard advertising techniques. The uniqueness of the message being communicated must be matched, to some extent, by a uniqueness in the way in which it is communicated. The problematic nature of effective message design is underscored by the fact that there is little empirical evidence to suggest a direct relationship between media presentations of crime and public perceptions of or reactions to crime.^{11,12,21,29,34}

The general ineffectiveness of the Provincial campaign may also be partly explained in terms of the failure of the program planners to specify in sufficient detail the segments of the audience toward whom campaign themes and appeals were to be addressed. The vague conceptualization of audience members as potential victims and offenders was clearly inadequate for the purposes of message design and dissemination. Target audiences should have been more precisely identified with respect to their relevant sociological, psychological and demographic characteristics; and, the formulation and transmission of campaign themes and messages should have taken such characteristics into account.

Recent criminological investigations into public perceptions of crime rather clearly demonstrate that concern with crime varies significantly across categories of individuals^{4,6-19} and across communities.¹⁰⁻⁹⁻⁸ If campaign planning is not informed by an awareness of such diversity, it is likely that resources will be ineffectively utilized and that few important effects will be produced.

In attempting to achieve the widest possible exposure, the Alberta campaign was directed towards a geographically dispersed audience that was conceptualized as relatively undifferentiated. However, such a strategy fails to consider the extent to which effective communication is the product of an interaction between characteristics of the message and characteristics of the audience. It should be clear that the utilization of mass media for the purpose of transmitting crime prevention information to diverse audiences may require several distinct communication strategies.

Finally, it may be argued that the Provincial campaign may have been more effective if the planners had detailed both the objectives of the program and the mechanisms through which these objectives were to be achieved. As

discussed, the expressed purpose of the campaign was to increase crime prevention awareness and behavior so as to lessen the rates of some specific offenses. However, the intervening means to these ends were never clearly specified. As a result, campaign materials employed a number of appeals (deterrence, personal protection, community well-being) which may have been unrelated to each other, in any motivational sense. A related point concerns the fact that the crimes that formed the focus of campaign attention shared little in common with respect to suggested ameliorative strategies. As a result, campaign messages advocated several distinct crime prevention behaviors.

It is clear that the complex pattern of intervening variables which link message exposure to desired behaviors was not given sufficient attention. A more adequate campaign design would have included a pre-test of campaign materials in order to determine the characteristics of appeals likely to elicit the preferred responses.³⁸ Further, a more efficient plan might have centered around the promotion of behaviors that share some common motivational bases.²⁴

In summary, the ineffectiveness of the Alberta crime prevention campaign must be seen as a logical outgrowth of the failure to plan and implement the program according to empirically-supported communication principles.²⁷ However, the data presented here are tentative. Mass media crime prevention may prove to be a valuable policy option provided that such programs are carefully planned and executed. Their design must take into account the unique nature of crime prevention information, the likely predisposition of potential audiences, and the more general factors that modify the influences of information campaigns.

This research may be interpreted as suggesting that it is too early to make large scale resource commitments to programs of mass media crime prevention. Nevertheless, pilot projects of this type are to be encouraged if their implementation does not drastically divert resources away from more efficient crime reduction strategies.

It must be emphasized that any attempt to undertake mass media crime prevention should be closely monitored through ongoing programs of evaluation. Ideally, these evaluations should be conceptualized as intrinsic components of campaigns. Large-scale mass media crime prevention efforts should be mobilized only after the analyses of relevant evaluative data indicate potentially efficacious program designs.

References

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2. Order of authorship does not reflect seniority. The authors contributed equally to the preparation of the manuscript.
3. Separate samples were drawn for the first and second surveys in order to avoid the possibility of contaminating effects. It was feared that some of the items employed in the pre-campaign

survey could have precipitated attitudinal and behavioral change or sensitized respondents to crime prevention information.

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