

*UNIVERSITY INTRAMURAL CORRESPONDENCE*

MEMO TO: CULTURAL INDICATORS GROUP - M. Eeey,  
L. Gross, M. Morgan, N. Signorielli

FROM: G. Gerbner

DATE: January 3, 1984

Dear CI's:

The enclosed letter from Ron Milavsky (see bcc list) needs no explanation, (or if it does, it can only be provided in person). Note interesting reference (starred) on page 2, with Lometti on the circulation list.

George

THE ANNENBERG SCHOOL OF  
COMMUNICATIONS  
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

NBC

National Broadcasting Company, Inc.

Thirty Rocketteller Plaza  
New York, N.Y. 10020 212-664-4286

J. Ronald Milavsky  
Vice President, News and Social Research  
Research

December 12, 1983

Dr. Everett Koop  
Surgeon General  
Public Health Service  
Office of the Assistant  
Secretary of Health  
200 Independence Avenue S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Dr. Koop:

I just learned that Mr. Grant Tinker wrote to you about his reaction to your talk at the NCTV conference in October. I had been on a panel with Dr. David Pearl of NIMH and Professor Thomas Cook, Northwestern University, which took place just before lunch, so I heard you in person. Your talk impressed me greatly. In fact, I have followed up on a few points you made and would like to share with you what I have learned.

First, let me say that your call to social scientists to begin asking questions about why audiences are attracted to things like violence is an extremely constructive suggestion. Research into what involves, excites and moves us may indeed help provide answers about what we are, and we certainly need to know that.

I also applaud your plea for greater understanding of how we can become alienated from the palpable and immediate suffering of other human beings in serious trouble, as in the Kitty Genovese tragedy. This speaks directly to the need to stretch the limits of our own humanity, and provides more of the kind of constructive leadership we need.

On a perhaps less important matter, I assure you that I, too, wish an end to the harsh tone which has sometimes characterized the debate about television's role in instigating the kind of violence you spoke to us about. I believe that the three networks differ in the extent to which each has contributed to the tone you correctly noticed and decried, as well as to the substance of the debate. Frankly, even though I can understand your grouping us, I didn't feel wonderful being thought of as

one of the 6th Avenue researchers. I think NBC has contributed something very special to understanding the issue. I would like to try to help you differentiate NBC's research from the pamphlet published by ABC which I know has been called to your attention. To this end, I am sending you a copy of our book which reports on a study NBC conducted on the issue of television's influence. A summary of this book actually was included in the NIMH report, Volume II, as a separate chapter. I hope that you did not mean to include this work when you criticized the research done by the networks. \*

Finally, I believe you did a service to the nation in discussing the high crime rates which characterize the contemporary scene. I, too, have had occasion to examine them and your speech motivated me to look at them once again. I think you will find it useful to know that there are some differences between the facts you reported based on FBI Uniform Crime Reports and those which emerge if one looks at another important source of data, the Victimization Surveys conducted by the Census Bureau for the Bureau of Justice Statistics. These show the same picture of epidemic growth you found for the period from 1965 to 1973. But since then, they indicate that criminal violence mercifully appears to have leveled off (albeit at an unacceptably high level), and there is some reason to believe that in the past year there has been a slight decrease.

Here are some specific examples:

Rape. In 1973 and '74 there were 181 rapes per 100,000 females, 12 years or older. During the following 10 years, the rate fluctuated slightly up and down. In 1981 the rate was 166 per 100,000, and in 1982 it dropped slightly to 140 per 100,000. (See exhibit A.)

Assault: Here the trend is more or less the same as for rape. In 1973 there were 24.9 assaults per 1000 persons, 12 years or older. This figure grew slowly until it reached 27.2 in 1979 -- an increase of 8% over the seven year period. In 1980 it dropped to 25.8 and in 1981 it went up again to 27.0. In 1982 it fell slightly to 26.4. In other words, we actually are back to 1977 levels (See exhibit B.)

Robbery: In 1974 the rate per 1000 persons, 12 years or older, was 7.4. There was then a very gradual and uneven decline to a rate of 6.3 in 1979. In 1981 it went up to 7.4 and remained about that (7.1) in 1982. (See exhibit C.)

Murder: In considering the incidents of murder we must rely on the Uniform Crime Reports, since the Victimization surveys are not able to collect data on this crime. The UCR data do show some growth during the past ten years -- about 15% in the number of murders from 1972 to 1981. The all-time high figure for this period was in 1980 with 23,040 murders; it is, I hope, an encouraging sign that in 1981 it dropped slightly to 22,520, and in 1982, it dropped again to 21,010. (See exhibit D.)

It is unfortunate, but true, that in social science one's conclusions will not always be the same when they are based on closely related, but different data sets. Although I am no expert in criminology, it is my understanding that criminologists feel more secure basing their generalizations on the Victimization series than on the UCR's, for the following reasons:

First of all, the UCR's rely on a person's willingness to report the incident to the local police, and the proportion who are willing to do so varies from year to year. Victimization data from the Census Bureau do not suffer from this defect.

Secondly, UCR's rely on local jurisdictions to report their data to the FBI. Not all jurisdictions cooperate, although the rate of response by local jurisdictions has been increasing over the years. This increase in the response rate accounts for some of the increase in crime rates, but it is not clear how much.

The data reported by local jurisdictions to the FBI is subject to manipulation for political and budgetary reasons. In contrast, Victimization surveys have been standardized and are not subject to such distortion.

Finally, the crime rates in the UCR's are based on the total population rather than relevant population. This practice can greatly distort the crime picture in this country, as it does when one compares the crime rates for the 1950's with crime rates for the 1960's. During the 1950's the baby-boom generation were not of age to commit crimes, but they were being counted naturally in the total population. In the late 1960's they moved into the crime prone years. Consequently, looking only at rates based on the total population misleads since a portion of the increase in crime rates is due to changes in the size of the different age groups. Crime rates should follow the example of

demography in which fertility rates are computed based on the number of women in their child-bearing age range, not on the total population.

You can see that I found your whole speech very stimulating, which is why I felt privileged to have heard it in person and why I have looked further into the crime reporting issue. You asked a number of important questions which deserve attention and discussion and if I can help to convince other social scientists of this, I am at your service.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "J. Ronald Melavoy". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name.

bcc: George Comstock  
Thomas Cook  
George Gerbner  
Rowell Huesmann  
Joe Klapper  
Guy Lometti  
David Pearl  
Eli Rubinstein

Exhibit A

RAPE - 1973 to 1982\*

	<u>Number of Incidents</u>	<u>Rate per 1000 Persons 23 Years or Older</u>	<u>Rate per 100,000 Women, 12 Years or Older</u>
1973	152,740	1.0	181
1974	161,160	1.0	181
1975	151,055	0.9	163
1976	145,193	0.8	144
1977	154,237	0.9	156
1978	171,145	1.0	167
1979	191,739	1.1	184
1980	160,224	0.9	149
1981	178,000	1.0	166
1982	153,000	0.8	140

\* Bureau of Justice Statistics, Special Report, 1973-82 Trends  
Criminal Victimization in the United States, September 1982,  
NCJ-90541, Table 2, p. 2.

Exhibit B

ASSAULTS - 1973 to 1982\*

	<u>Number of Incidents (in 1000's)*</u>	<u>Rate per 1000 persons, 12 Years or Older *</u>
1973	4,002	24.9
1974	4,064	24.8
1975	4,176	25.2
1976	4,343	25.3
1977	4,664	26.8
1978	4,730	26.9
1979	4,846	27.2
1980	4,371	25.8
1981	5,024	27.0
1982	4,973	26.4

\* Bureau of Justice Statistics, Special Report, 1973-82 Trends  
Criminal Victimization in the United States, September 1982,  
NCJ-90541, Table 2, p. 2.

Exhibit C

ROBBERY - 1973 to 1982\*

	<u>Number of Incidents (in 1000's)*</u>	<u>Rate per 1000 persons, 12 Years or Older *</u>
1973	1,087	6.7
1974	1,174	7.2
1975	1,121	6.8
1976	1,111	6.5
1977	1,083	6.2
1978	1,038	5.9
1979	1,116	6.3
1980	1,138	6.6
1981	1,381	7.4
1982	1,334	7.1

\* Bureau of Justice Statistics, Special Report, 1973-82 Trends Criminal Victimization in the United States, September 1982, NCJ-90541, Table 2, p. 2.

Exhibit D

HOMICIDE - 1973 to 1982\*

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of Homicides</u>	<u>Rate per 1000 persons, 12 Years or Older</u> *
1973	19,640	9.4
1974	20,710	9.8
1975	20,510	9.6
1976	18,780	8.8
1977	19,121	8.8
1978	19,560	9.0
1979	21,460	9.7
1980	23,040	10.2
1981	22,520	9.8
1982	21,010	9.1

\* Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, Uniform Crime Reports for the United States, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office). 1982, Table 2, p. 43.