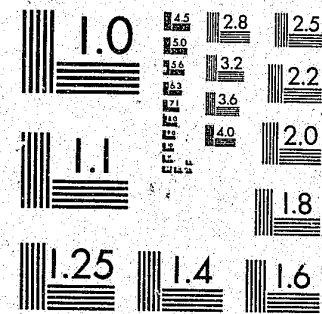


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A Synopsis

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James K. Stewart
Director

"Taking a Bite Out of Crime": The Impact of a Mass Media Crime Prevention Campaign

A Synopsis

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ABSTRACT

Public involvement in crime prevention activities has emerged as a critical issue in recent years as it has become clear that citizens can play a key role in reducing crime. Numerous efforts have been aimed at encouraging citizens to take actions to reduce their own risk of victimization, and that of others as well. One prominent effort has been a three-year-old "Take a Bite Out of Crime" national media campaign, sponsored by the Crime Prevention Coalition in cooperation with the Advertising Council.

This report summarizes research evaluating the impact of that campaign on public awareness, attitudes, and actions concerning crime prevention, and offers recommendations for future public information strategies aimed at encouraging increased citizen participation in crime prevention.

The evaluation findings indicate that mass media campaigns can be effective in changing people's crime prevention attitudes and behaviors, and that mass media can be effective tools in promoting cooperative prevention efforts among citizens.

"TAKING A BITE OUT OF CRIME":

THE IMPACT OF A MASS MEDIA

CRIME PREVENTION CAMPAIGN

Public involvement in crime prevention activities has emerged as a critical issue in recent years as it has become clear that citizens can play a key role in reducing crime. Numerous efforts have been aimed at encouraging citizens to take actions to reduce their own risk of victimization, and that of others as well. One prominent effort has been a three-year-old "Take a Bite Out of Crime" national media campaign, sponsored by the Crime Prevention Coalition in cooperation with the Advertising Council. This report summarizes research evaluating the impact of that campaign on public awareness, attitudes, and actions concerning crime prevention, and offers recommendations for future public information strategies aimed at encouraging increased citizen participation in crime prevention.

The objectives of the campaign include promoting a sense of individual responsibility for crime prevention among citizens, as well as attempting to dispel unwarranted feelings of frustration and hopelessness regarding crime and criminal justice. The campaign encouraged citizens to work with their community law enforcement agencies and to engage in such specific crime prevention actions as improving the security of their households and cooperating with neighbors in surveillance programs.

The campaign symbol was a trenchcoated hound dog cartoon character named McGruff, who urged citizens to help "take a bite

out of crime" and gave specific examples of how they could protect themselves and their communities.

The media campaign consisted of Advertising Council-produced public service advertisements (PSAs), which were disseminated by broadcast and print media at their own expense. The McGruff PSAs proved to be one of the most popular Advertising Council campaigns, with over \$50 million in broadcast time and print space being donated annually to them by media outlets during the first two years. In addition, the media campaign was tied to local community-based prevention efforts in hundreds of locales throughout the country.

EVALUATING THE CAMPAIGN

The Take a Bite Out of Crime campaign was seen as having the potential for affecting citizens in a number of ways. Most generally, the campaign objective was to make citizens more competent at crime prevention. Prevention competence was measured by the extent to which citizens:

- (1) Were made more aware of appropriate crime prevention techniques;
- (2) Held more positive attitudes concerning the effectiveness of citizen-based prevention activities;
- (3) Felt more capable of protecting themselves and others;
- (4) Became more concerned about protecting themselves and others; and
- (5) Engaged in more actions aimed at reducing crime.

The campaign was evaluated in terms of the extent to which it influenced citizens on each of these dimensions.

Evaluation Methods

Citizen responses to the campaign were examined by using two types of sample surveys. In one, a nationwide scientific probability sample of 1200 adults was interviewed to find out who the campaign was reaching and what those people thought about it. In the other, a panel of 426 adults in three cities was interviewed both before the campaign was underway and again two years later. This panel survey enabled the evaluators to examine whether people had changed in their views about crime or in their prevention competence over the two years, how they had changed, and whether those changes were associated with their having seen or heard the campaign messages.

The initial round of panel interviews occurred in September of 1979, just before the campaign was initiated. Both the national survey and the second round of panel interviews were conducted in November of 1981, two years after the campaign's onset.

THE PUBLIC IMPACT OF THE CAMPAIGN

The Take a Bite Out of Crime campaign had widespread public exposure. The national survey indicated that just over half of the adult population had seen or heard the McGruff PSAs during the first two years of the campaign. Given the voluntary nature of PSA dissemination, this indicated a heavy commitment on the part of media organizations to present the McGruff ads. It also

suggests that the ads were appealing enough to have been remembered by substantial numbers of people. Television was clearly the medium through which most people became exposed to the campaign.

The campaign reached a demographically diverse population, with no social or economic group appearing beyond its reach. While McGruff was decidedly likelier to reach younger adults, a third of the people over age 64 could also recall the ads.

Citizens with widely differing views about crime and crime prevention were reached by the campaign as well. However, the PSAs seemed especially effective at reaching two special target groups: Those who saw themselves as less knowledgeable about crime prevention techniques and those who believed citizen-based prevention techniques to be more effective.

Among the citizens who had seen or heard the PSAs, about three-fourths could recite a specific theme from the ads. The vast majority also said that they were favorably impressed by what they had seen or heard. Most said they thought that the PSAs effectively conveyed information, and that they liked the use of McGruff as the campaign symbol. Younger adults were the most impressed of all age groups, which could bode well for a more lasting impact of the campaign.

Impacts on Citizen Crime Prevention Knowledge and Attitudes

The campaign had an important impact on the public's knowledge about crime prevention. Of the national sample respondents who had been reached by the campaign, nearly a quarter said they had learned new information about prevention

techniques, and almost half said the ads had reminded them of information they had forgotten. Panel sample respondents also showed significant gains in crime prevention knowledge following exposure to the campaign.

The campaign had other positive impacts as well. Both national and panel sample respondents who had been exposed to the campaign showed sizable increases in how confident they felt about protecting themselves from crime and in how effective they believed citizen prevention efforts to be.

Impacts on Citizen Crime Prevention Behavior

Perhaps most importantly, the campaign appeared to have noteworthy effects on actual crime prevention actions taken by citizens. About a fourth of the campaign-exposed national sample said they had taken preventive actions as a result of having seen or heard the PSAs. The most frequent actions taken by these respondents were "improving household security" and "cooperating more with neighbors"--two of the principal campaign recommendations.

Increased prevention activity was even more impressive in the panel sample. Prior to the campaign, the panel interviewees were asked about the extent to which they carried out 25 specific prevention actions. Seven of these activities were subsequently given particular emphasis in the McGruff PSAs, including "locking doors," "leaving on lights," and various neighborhood cooperative efforts. Panel members were then asked again about the same 25 activities when re-interviewed two years after the initiation of the campaign. Panelists who had seen or heard the ads registered

statistically significant gains over those who had not in six of the seven activities recommended in the PSAs. There were no such increases in the 18 non-recommended actions.

Differential Campaign Impacts

While the campaign had notable effects on the population as a whole, some types of people were more influenced than others. For example, campaign influences appeared to be associated with the opportunities people had for carrying out the actions recommended in the PSAs. Women and more affluent persons tended to show greater gains in "neighborhood cooperative" prevention activities. Lower-income persons increased in such activities as "reporting suspicious incidents to the police." Men showed increases in somewhat more individualistic behaviors, such as "acquiring a dog for security purposes." Finally, the campaign had greater impact on the behaviors than on the attitudes of citizens who saw themselves as more at risk from crime, while the opposite was true for those seeing themselves as less at risk.

In conclusion, the campaign appears to have had a wide range of effects across an even wider range of people, depending upon their personal characteristics, their individual circumstances, and their perceived vulnerability to crime.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE CAMPAIGNS

The campaign impact findings have important implications for criminal justice officials as well as for citizen groups planning future crime prevention media campaigns. Some of these are highlighted below:

****Television.** The televised PSAs were clearly the most visible feature of the McGruff campaign, and future campaigns would do well to capitalize on them as much as possible. They should particularly be used to simply and emphatically capsulize the most important campaign themes. In the case of McGruff, for example, much of the attractiveness and impact of the televised PSAs appears to have resulted from their directness and simplicity. Each ad included only a few bits of information, carefully orchestrated within the basic campaign theme of citizen cooperation. Also, it is critical that such PSAs include only carefully documented information about the effectiveness of various prevention techniques, and that audiences be made aware of such documentation.

****Fear.** The McGruff campaign deliberately avoided fear-provoking messages. Although other campaigns have used such messages expecting that heightened fear would lead to more prevention action, research on the effectiveness of this technique indicates that it doesn't often work and, in fact, can backfire if the audience becomes overly anxious and rejects the message completely. The McGruff findings indicate that most citizens are already threatened enough by crime and that subsequent campaigns would do well to avoid arousing still greater public fear.

****The Elderly and Crime.** The McGruff campaign reached elderly citizens somewhat less successfully than it did other age groups. It may be that the elderly are less attuned to media campaigns in general, and if so, special provisions should be made to supplement such campaigns with local community and neighborhood efforts aimed particularly at the concerns of older citizens.

****Targetting.** Campaign planners would do well to use pre-campaign surveys to find out as much as possible about their intended audiences so that specific messages may be tailored to individual groups with particular problems. Examples of factors which the current evaluation showed to be important determinants of citizen responses to prevention campaigns included: (1) Their existing awareness of crime prevention techniques; (2) Their attitudes toward citizen involvement in prevention, such as how effective they think it can be; (3) How capable they themselves feel about protecting themselves and others; (4) How motivated they are to take prevention actions; and (5) The extent to which they are already taking prevention actions and, if so, what those actions are.

In conclusion, the findings clearly indicate that mass media campaigns can be effective in changing people's attitudes and behaviors regarding crime prevention, and that media can serve as useful tools in promoting cooperative prevention efforts among citizens.

National Institute of Justice

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Director

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