The proliferation of police, crime, and forensic science dramas on television have taken on increasing sophistication as insatiable public curiosity. Much has been made of the CSI effect, in which jurors are sophisticated for having been steeped in such shows before evaluating the nature and quantity of evidence presented to them. Lurking beyond this, however, is the question of whether these gripping programs are instructive to criminals. Ray Surette of the University of Central Florida Department of Criminal Justice took this question on in a recently published study in the *American Journal of Criminal Justice*.

Putting theories of the relationship of media to crime aside, “copycat” crimes are not so obvious as the name would suggest. Copying is not so much reproducing as it is a crime responding to an earlier inspiration. For this reason, “copycat” crimes are rarely studied because they are difficult to distinguish, due to variances from the inspirational crime in geography, timing and/or circumstance. Further, crimes may be misidentified as copycat due to coincidentally shared elements.

Professor Surette designed and distributed an anonymous, written survey of male and female inmates at a large jail in the southern U.S. over a period of four days. The survey collected self-reported lifetime criminal history data from respondents using forced-answer questions, answerable by “Yes”, “No”, or “Unsure”. These questions were posed using lifetime-encompassing “Have you ever…” phrasing, because such phrasing has been shown in other studies to increase reliability in self-reporting of delinquency.

The 574 inmates who responded included 39% black, 37% white, and 15% Hispanic (remaining percentage unspecified). One third of respondents fell below the age of 27 and one fourth of the respondents were female. Most had extensive arrest histories with the majority reporting more than five arrests, with only 8% in jail on their first charge. Seventy percent had a relative who had been incarcerated.

The survey collected information about a respondent’s exposure to real-world crime via questions regarding the criminality of an inmate’s neighborhood, friends and family members. Lastly, information about the respondent’s exposure and reaction to crime-related media was gathered.

Among the 574 respondents, twenty-two percent indicated that they had committed a copycat crime; twenty percent of these crimes were violent. About 19% of respondents perceived the media as a “highly helpful source of information on how to commit a crime”, and 14% indicated that they had a high interest in crime-related media content.
Bivariate analysis of the data revealed a statistically significant relationship between exposure to real-world crime models and copycat behavior, with the strongest predictive factor being exposure to friends and family who had engaged in criminal activity. Being younger and being male, were predictive factors, as was the percentage of neighbors jailed and the history of a relative incarcerated; race was not.

In terms of media exposure, the survey found that respondents who were highly interested in crime related media content, and who saw the media as helpful sources of crime knowledge, were significantly more likely to report past copycat behavior. These were the strongest predictors. Amount of video game hours was also a predictor of engaging on copycat crime, if less robust; a predictor of lesser likelihood of copycat crime was the number of books read in a year.

Those indicators found to be significant in bivariate analysis were then analyzed and compared at a multivariate level. Six indicators were shown to be statistically significant at multivariate level: age, gender, exposure to real-world crime model(s), having a close relative incarcerated (in the past or at present), having an interest in crime-related media, and perceiving the media as helpful in providing crime-related instructional information.

Perceiving the media as a helpful source of crime information was the strongest predictive factor of copycat behaviors. Emerging as more important than gross media exposure, attitudes reflecting an attraction to media crime models were the most predictive of copycat histories. In other words, the inclination to learn from these crime models in the media was even more important than the level of exposure.

This importance of attitude is illustrated well by the interaction between the number of daily hours respondents spent playing video games, interest in crime-related media, and history of copycat crime. When there was no interest in crime content, more game hours was associated with less copycat crime. With interest in crime content, more game hours meant more copycat crime. Interest in media crime content magnified the effect of video game hours and seeing the media as criminogenically helpful. The importance of both was significantly increased with higher levels of respondent interest in crime content.

This data supports the idea that exposure to crime-related media serves as a catalyst or rudder, inspiring pre-inclined individuals to commit crimes by learning from publicized crimes and their modus operandi.

Analysis: The study provides very important guidance to practicing forensic examiners and corrections professionals, and observers of news and entertainment media as an industry. Forensic examination and law enforcement interrogation, in my experience of even heavily scrutinized cases, does not come right out and ask:

- Did you get any ideas for your crime or how to go about doing it from any television program, music video, movie, or video game?
- Which program was that?
• What was that idea?
• Were there any other programs or video games that gave you an idea?
• What was that idea?
• Were there any other programs or violent media that gave you motivation, confidence, or even inspired you to do what you did?
• What was that? (etc).

From a forensic psychiatric perspective, this information reflects upon premeditation, fantasy, and informs motive. This information further informs the way in which choices are made and how rational, mature, and intelligent the thinking behind them. Future examinations of criminal responsibility and presentencing assessment need to include these and other inquiries to more fully capture the inner world of the examinee.

One of the frequent retorts of those dismissing the toxic potential of media violence and violent gaming is their own experience as consumers who have not been inspired to kill in response to their partaking in these media. This study, however, distinguishes the influence of violence in the media as a rudder rather than as a trigger. Specifically, if one is oriented in such a direction, violent media direct the motivated person to where, what, and how to succeed. This is particularly important for corrections officials to note. For many thousands of inmates languishing in prisons, eventually to be released, harboring continued identification with deviance and a desire to avoid discovery and capture in the future. Prison recreation includes a saturating diet of violent entertainment in the form of television programs and movies. If violent media are demonstrated to have inspired and instructed offenders, and many of these offenders have criminal histories, should there not be a more responsible policy about what can and should be watched by inmates? Do prisons defeat the aims of “corrections” by allowing inmates to access media from which they can learn and refine skills to reoffend successfully? In the age of Netflix and controlled choices of programming, it would be easy to develop “prison channels” of continuous television programming that prevented saturation of the aspiring deviant, be they in prisons, jails, halfway houses, or juvenile detention facilities.

The approach that Professor Surette takes here introduces an informative research avenue for further understanding of particularly dangerous media. In this study, many respondents separately reported having been inspired or instructed by media they viewed or sought out. What are those movies? What are those television programs? What did the offenders draw from those media? As studies like this clarify the dangers of violent entertainment media and video games in general, more specific input from inmates will teach us what programs in particular have poisonous ingredients and what those ingredients are. The data can readily feed back to the federal government and the motion picture and gaming industry to responsibly apply to future video and gaming production. The next generation of the media-violence link needs to be in focused remedies to diminish entertainments role in inspiring and instructing the criminally motivated.
Conclusions about age may be offset by the lesser experience of older inmates with media-violence saturation than the younger generation, and less experience with violent gaming. Once the gaming generation ages, findings of such a study might be different.

A few years ago, I interviewed the recently executed Joseph Paul Franklin over many hours in meetings recorded for a cable television special. We established enough rapport that he was unusually forthright and disturbing. There was no mistaking how gripping his recollections were. Franklin was the rare deviant with acute perceptual awareness of his environment and a highly refined sense of successful destructiveness – how to kill, how to get away. I found myself alternatively appreciating how much I learned from him and could learn from him and how frightening his expertise would be if lavished on aspiring deviants watching our meeting. As we were editing the program from the interview, there were huge sections of what would have been “great TV” that I asked to exclude because I found them to be the kindling that this study speaks to.

This study speaks to a necessary level of responsibility for entertainment and news television, and news organizations with web presence that can post large documents, video and audio files. You cannot choose your audience. Your job may be to inform. But if you believe you have the potential to instruct as well as inform, please contemplate whether you are instructing tomorrow’s deviant, just as Anders Breivik did Adam Lanza. We all have a stake in social responsibility.