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## Cultural Commentary: The Danger of Danger

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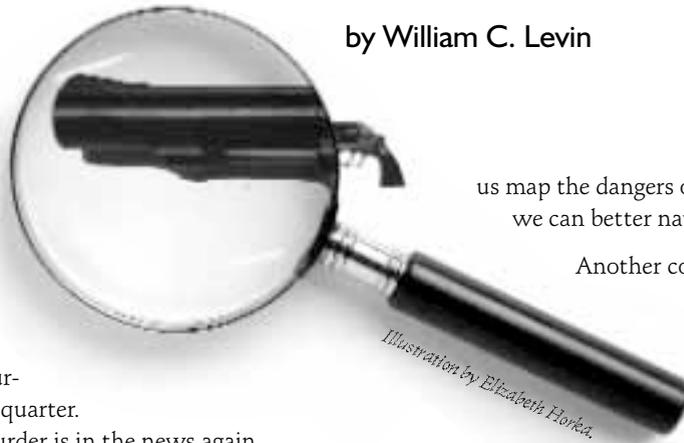
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# Cultural Commentary

## The Danger of Danger

by William C. Levin



Judging by newspaper and television stories, it seems like we live in a pretty dangerous place these days. Just within the last day I counted more than fifty stories that reported murder and mayhem from every quarter.

The Christa Worthington murder is in the news again with the arrest of a suspect after two years of investigation. Worthington was the young woman writer who was found stabbed to death in her Truro home in January of 2002. Yesterday a mother of two was stabbed to death by her son in the dining room of their suburban home. There is serious possible danger to drivers posed by massive leaks (not just damp walls) in the new Big Dig tunnels. Cracks have appeared in the brakes of the high speed Acela trains that could result in disaster for riders. And today the *Boston Herald* headlined, in a screaming one inch type front page headline "Rape Fear Grips City." Some local television news programs seem to have become so dominated by stories of threats to our lives, especially by murder (the more lurid and the more local the better), that they have no time left in the broadcast for information about anything else. Why is there such a focus on the dangers of the world, and what are the possible consequences of being exposed to so much horrible news?

It is easy to understand why newspapers and television stations produce these fear-inducing stories. They sell newspapers and build audience. But why do they? What happens when we watch a story about a murder in a town just like the one we live in, or read about a seemingly normal teenager who has been collecting guns for a planned attack on classmates? One explanation is that such information is useful to us. In the case of murder on the television news, we may watch because we need to keep track of how whacked the world is right now. It can be comforting to learn what the extremes of danger in everyday life have become. For example, I can use the information to plan to act so as to limit that danger myself and my family. Parents now typically drive their children to school rather than let them walk. And I think I'll ask that psychotic boarder to move out of our guest room. Stories like these help

us map the dangers of the real world so we can better navigate it.

Another common explanation for our fascination with news of the dangerous is a variant of the explanation for why so many people like going to terrifying movies. It contends that people like getting "scared to death" because the experience reaffirms their sense of safety and security in real life. After all, if you can watch the awful stuff that Hollywood special effects departments can do to the characters on the screen, but still walk out afterwards to go for chocolate ice cream, how dangerous can the real world be? Every time you go to a film like this you psychologically defy death. And it's not just film that works this way. Great scary stories depicting human disaster have sold for as long as stories have been told. And video games like *Mortal Kombat* and *Doom*, which advertise themselves as "the scariest games ever made" have taken routine and extreme violence into the mainstream of play.

But what happens if we confuse the reporting of disaster in the news with the depiction of it in fiction? While mayhem may sell in both entertainment and in the news, this practice can lead to two kinds of problems. One is that we may come to see real disaster as similar to entertainment disaster. Those generations of Americans who are raised in the film, television and computer game era may have lowered ability to make distinctions between the murder produced for entertainment value, and the murder that really happened. Think of the cases of children who imitate acts they have seen in film, but have no idea that they would have deadly consequence for their victims. If by blurring the line between news and entertainment we become less sensitive to the consequences of real suffering and danger, we are less prepared to make good decisions about how to live in the real world. I can't help think of the similarity in the depictions of massive floods and wholesale destruction of life and property in the 2004 film *The Day After Tomorrow*, and the television coverage of the South-East Asian tsunami that killed more than 280,000 people in December of that same year. I remem-

ber being disappointed that the film of the actual tsunami was so inferior to the Hollywood depiction of a similar, though fictional, event. Did others have this reaction, and did we Americans respond less aggressively to the event than we would have if the coverage had matched the impact of the film?

Ironically, a second problem that is created by a fascination with disaster is that at the same time as we dilute its real impacts, we may come to exaggerate its likely impact in our lives. That is, surrounded by death and disaster in our news and entertainment, we get the impression that it is much more common than the data demonstrates. What is your impression of the danger posed to you by crime? Consider some data on the rates of crime in America.

According to data produced by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, in 2002 there were some 15,500 murders in the United States. So how likely is it that you will be the victim of a murder? To figure it out you need to look at the total number of murders and compare it to the number of people who are potential murder victims. In reporting these figures in the Statistical Abstract of the United States, the statisticians calculate a rate of murder for the United States per hundred thousand population. Using a population figure of approximately 275,000,000 for the United States and a figure of 15,500 murders we find that in 2002 there were 5.6 murders for every hundred thousand Americans. Is that a high number? Let's bring it down to one person, like maybe you. In 2002 the odds of one person (in this case, you) being murdered completely at random was 1 in 560,000, or a tiny fraction of a 1 percent chance.

Of course, murder is not randomly distributed in any population. Some people run a far greater risk of being murdered than others do, and rates change over time. For example, the murder rate in the United States has changed in the last two decades. In fact, it has declined dramatically. Since 1980 the murder rate in America has dropped nearly in half from 10.2 per hundred thousand American residents, to 5.6 per hundred thousand in 2002. The really sharp drop in this rate began in the mid 1990's. In 1994 the rate was still 9 murders per hundred thousand inhabitants.

This is data for the whole country. If you are thinking about your safety here in Massachusetts, we'll have to look for more information. As it happens, the data for 2001 reveals that compared with the national rate, the Massachusetts rate is quite low at 2 murders per hundred thousand population. Only Maine, New Hampshire, North Dakota and Vermont had lower murder rates at 1 per hundred thousand residents. If you are thinking about relocating and are concerned about this particular threat to your safety, you might not want to move to Mississippi or to Louisiana with murder rates of 10 and 11 per hundred thousand respectively. And Washington D.C. should be completely out of the question since its murder rate of 41 per hundred thousand population in 2001 was nearly the highest in the coun-

try. The highest rates were in Detroit (41 and a bit), Saint Louis (42) and New Orleans (44). In fact, cities in general have higher murder rates than do less densely settled areas. For example, while the 2001 murder rate for Massachusetts was only 2 persons per hundred thousand population, the rate for Boston was 11. If you still want to live in a fairly large city and are looking for low murder rates, try Austin, Texas (3.9 per hundred thousand residents), or Honolulu (2.3).

I have been trying to demonstrate that the dangers of the world are greatly exaggerated by the American entertainment and news industries. For their own benefits they show us too much murder and mayhem. And I admit that I have stacked the statistical deck somewhat by focusing on just murder rates. After all, murder is not all we can worry about. But even if you include all the violent crimes recorded by the FBI statistics for 2002, there were still less than 5 chances in 1,000 of being the victim of a violent crime in America in that year. Try living in really dangerous places like Iraq, Rwanda or the Democratic Republic of Congo where war or the lack of a rule of law makes daily life deadly for nearly anyone who ventures outdoors.

I am not saying that we should ignore the rates of murder and violent crime in America. We most certainly should work hard to fight such crimes, especially in those areas and among those populations who are at greatest risk of being victims. We are, in fact, spending more than ever in this effort. Since 1980, federal expenditures for items like agriculture, transportation and education have roughly tripled, while spending on the administration of justice has increased nine-fold. Prisoners under jurisdiction of state and federal corrections systems have quadrupled over the same time period, and the number of Americans who are in the criminal justice system, either because they are in jail, prison, on parole or on probation has gone from 1.8 million in 1980 to more than 6.5 million in 2001. That is 3.1 percent of the entire American population. We sure are taking the problem of crime seriously. But we may also be overreacting. We seem to be feeding our citizens a large diet of what George Gerbner, Professor of Communications and Dean Emeritus of the Annenberg School of Communication in Philadelphia calls a "Mean World View." According to Gerbner, the mean world syndrome results in a reduced sensitivity to the consequences of violence along with an increased sense of vulnerability and dependence. Ultimately, the result can be a demand for extreme reaction from our government, at all levels. In this distorted concept of reality the dangers that exist in our lives are magnified beyond reason and may lead us to overreact to them. Perhaps such a view allows us to accept the restrictions of legislation like the Patriot Act or some form of national identification cards that the US Congress is currently considering. We should probably examine why violence sells, and talk seriously to the people who sell it.

—William C. Levin is Professor of Sociology and Associate Editor of the Bridgewater Review.