

Killers, Cases, and Crimes: The Shocking Effects of Society's True Crime Obsession

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ABSTRACT

This literature review aims to explore the reasons for the popularity behind the true crime genre, as well as the individual and societal effects this genre has on the human mind. The popularity of this form of entertainment involves four main considerations, including the types of people consuming the genre, the psychology of morbid curiosity, the impact of the release of specific chemicals in the brain, and the enticement of mystery. The consumption of true crime episodes on the individual included two main findings, a variety of mental health conditions and variables in brain development. The societal impacts also had two notable discoveries: a lower levels of both empathy and sympathy for others in people who consume true crime, which could lead to significant problems in society as a whole.

INTRODUCTION

On December 17, 2017, the first episode of the podcast *Crime Junkie* was released. Gaining popularity quickly, the *Crime Junkie* series became a sensational addition to the true crime genre, and is now one of America's favorite podcasts. Amanda Vicary, a professor at Illinois Wesleyan University, remarks "that the true-crime genre has had an incredible explosion in the past five or six years", with data showing that 42% of Americans aged 18-29 listen to true crime podcasts, which seems to demonstrate that something about true crime is appealing to the human mind (Colyard, Naseer and Aubin). But, what is true crime exactly, and what does it include that makes it so fascinating? According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the definition of true crime is, "a nonfiction genre of literature, film, podcasts, etc. that depicts and examines real crime cases" (Merriam-Webster). This genre is a type of media violence, since it discusses and portrays violent acts. Because consumers know the contents of true crime were real-life events, it pulls people in, sensationalizing crimes.

Because the definition of true crime is understood, another question follows: why do people find the true crime genre intriguing, and does consuming it have psychological effects? By delving into the reasons behind true crime's prominence, as well as the possible ramifications, these questions can be examined. Looking into the reasons behind why true crime is appealing not only offers a clearer view of the mental health impacts on individuals, it also determines the plausible effects of true crime on the human brain, which reveals the greater influence to society.

While researching, it was found that most available information on the psychology of true crime mainly investigates why the audience is intrigued. This information was necessary to include in this analysis as it

February 2026

Vol 4. No 1.

explored the true crime genre's popularity, as well as included statistics on the amount and type of people who consume it, showcasing the grip this genre has on particular populations (Boling). Some of this research was limited by a dearth of full statistical data regarding variable impact with audience age, frequency of consumption, and consideration of individual susceptibility to media effects. This would be imperative to further research conclusions. However, to enhance overall analysis, research about the immediate impact of viewing true crime, including what brain chemicals are released when engrossed in the content, was incorporated (Colyard).

Interestingly, there has also been some research on the long-term implications of watching media violence, of which the genre of true crime is a subcategory. To specify, there is a study showing the effects of media violence on the brain with the help of neuroimaging (Hummer). This research was included in this review as it assists in answering some questions; however, other questions continue to go unanswered.

Although there is *some* research on the lasting effects of media violence, there is not nearly enough. This is a crucial element when deducing the potential drawbacks of true crime content in order to see what the future holds for people who are constantly listening or watching it. For example, what are the long-term mental and behavioral effects for avid true crime fans? This is an important question to truly understand the full impact of crime content. Long-term psychological ramifications must be studied to a deeper degree in order to accurately state the consequences. However, because there is data on the immediate and emotional impacts of media violence, this could help researchers comprehend the extent of the influence true crime has on the mind. By analyzing the available research and pulling from adjacent research on media violence to understand potential implications, it will be easier to grasp the significance of the genre.

REASONS FOR POPULARITY

First, the type of people that consume this content must be addressed to understand the reasons for immense appeal. The vast majority of fans, specifically true crime *podcast* fans, are “about 73%... women” (Boling). Why is the overwhelming majority of fans female? According to psychologist Chivonna Childs, Ph.D, “[Women] want to [consume] true crime in part to learn how to avoid being a victim...It can teach us to be prepared in case we’re ever in that situation” (Childs). Childs’ insight allows one to understand part of the underlying thought process behind women who consume true crime; in certain situations, they may want to know who to look out for, what to do, and most importantly, how to survive. Furthermore, even victims of similar crimes, such as domestic abuse, may find themselves fixated on true crime because “they’re putting themselves in the same situation, but this time they have complete control, and it becomes healing instead of traumatizing,” as remarked by Kelli Boling, Ph.D. (Boling). It feels as though they are in the situation, but they can control everything, so true crime becomes an outlet to relieve stress. To summarize, most listeners or viewers of this category of entertainment are women, either ones who want to avoid being victims, or ones who have experienced domestic violence, allowing the content to be empowering. This is just one of the reasons given in

February 2026

Vol 4. No 1.

literature as to why the true crime category of entertainment is popular, but there are a plethora of other factors that contribute to its prevalence.

Additional factors must be addressed in order to see why the genre has gained more attention throughout the years. One major contributor is simply morbid curiosity, defined as “a mixture of excitement, fear, and compulsion that fuels the desire to know about horrid subjects that include, but are not limited to, death and terror” (Fludzinski). Although there has been a recent surge of true crime content consumers, due to advertising through media, “people have been fascinated by murder and violence for centuries” out of curiosity (Perchtold-Stefan et al). Supporting this, researchers conducted a study on morbid curiosity in college students, aiming to find a positive correlation between morbid curiosity and violent topics, such as serial killers or other crimes (Fludzinski). Drawing from the results, it was concluded that “society places a great value on horror and violence as entertainment”, meaning that people are captivated by violent and gruesome topics (Fludzinski). Driven by a ravenous curiosity, people “seek out and consume tales of murder, horror, and serial killers” (Perchtold-Stefan et al).

While on the topic of curiosity, it is also important to note another reason of interest. People are curious about criminals and what drives them to commit such heinous crimes (Scherman). People want to know the motives of that criminal, who is seemingly a regular person. Marc Lamber, an attorney at Fennemore Craig, points out that “most people are regular, law-abiding citizens,” (Scherman) and “because crime is foreign to most, the fascination with it and similar genres stems from the public’s curiosity regarding what would possess others to engage in criminal conduct, what it looks like and what happens as a consequence” (Scherman). In other words, since violent crimes are perpetrated by a small percentage of people, compared to the population at large, inquisitive people consume this type of content to get an understanding on the motives and thought processes of criminals (Falk et al).

It appears that interest in the macabre may not be the only reason why true crime is popular; it may also be due to the immediate effects it has on a human’s brain. According to Scott Bonn, Ph.D. in sociology and criminology received at the University of Miami, “the public is drawn to these stories because they trigger the most basic and powerful emotion in all of us: fear” (Scherman, Bonn). Humans, in general, are “drawn to the adrenaline of fear” (Scherman). Adrenaline causes people to get excited or energized, which makes people feel unable to look away. The true crime genre is used as “a source of popular-culture entertainment”, and criminals, such as serial killers, “allow us to experience fear and horror in a controlled environment, where the threat is exciting, but not real” (Scherman). Audiences *enjoy* the fear. While immersed in the world of true crime, people are compelled to keep watching because they want to know *why* this crime happened. Questions, such as “What drove the person? Was the person a psychopath? Was it triggered by domestic violence?” arise and make people intrigued, almost forcing them to keep viewing (Jared). This curiosity, mixed with adrenaline, is another reason to keep listening or watching, and when combined with other brain chemicals, it becomes even more powerful (Colyard).

In addition, another probable cause of why this content is so prominent ties in with the immediate repercussions of watching true crime. This category seems to have a similar effect on the brain as watching horror movies. Doctor Aimee Daramus, PysD and LCP, describes it as a “particular cocktail of

chemicals” (Colyard, Daramus). Due to the high-stakes content, an instantaneous result of consuming true crime is a release of certain brain chemicals, including adrenaline, dopamine, and serotonin, which is a very powerful combination of “feel-good chemicals” (Colyard). Not only that, but the brain also produces endorphins, acting like a “mild opiate”, which can be a “bit addictive” (Colyard). The reaction produced by human brains makes true crime addictive, due to the endorphins, the rush of this combination makes being scared fun, which is the responsible factor for why people want to keep watching and why it is difficult to stop watching, ultimately adding to the genre’s popularity (Colyard).

Finally, the last reason for the appeal is surprisingly simple: people are hooked by the “mystery element” (Gray). Although other forms of mystery are an option, such as books or movies, Jillian Gray, who works in the fields of digital humanities and public relations, writes that “true crime allows audience members the chance to feel invested in a real mystery unfolding before them” (Gray). People love to feel like they are a detective, like they are trying to solve a real-world mystery, but with no real consequences, which makes it exciting, thrilling, and still safe. Therefore, the type of people who love this content, the morbid curiosity about criminals, the cocktail of chemicals, and the captivation of mystery all contribute to the popularity of true crime content.

INDIVIDUAL EFFECTS

The explosion in the prevalence of true crime can sometimes affect people in shocking ways. People become invested in cases and criminals because “the more taboo or forbidden the activity is, the more hooked we become” (Kelley). In fact, there is a famous and eerie example demonstrating the amount of attention (and sometimes even admiration) criminals, specifically serial killers, get. During his trial, serial killer Ted Bundy had scores of “female admirers” that dressed like Bundy’s preferred victims: large hoop earrings and long, dark hair parted at the middle (Janos). This begs the question: psychologically, what was passing through the admirers’ heads? In an interview, Amber McDonald, Ph.D., LCSW, an assistant professor at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus’ School of Medicine, answered this question (Kelley). McDonald noted that this sense of admiration “relates back to the dopamine and adrenaline” and in extreme cases, such as Bundy’s trials, “it draws out emotions we don’t often feel, which can be exciting” (Kelley). These women were feeling that “cocktail of chemicals” from the rush of dopamine and adrenaline, which exposed certain emotions, like admiration, that were exciting (Colyard, Kelley). This leads people to wonder what other extreme psychological effects criminals and true crime may have on individuals.

While most people do not become obsessed with criminals and crime to the point of admiration, there could still be adverse psychological results. If one frequently immerses themselves in true crime entertainment (for an extended period of time or every day), anxiety and paranoia are likely to increase, as noted by Chivonna Childs, Ph.D. (Childs). Most true crime shows and podcasts discuss murderers, who, on the outside, seemed like normal people. It is horrifying to think that someone who looks normal, who fits in, might be a monster. This could become a root for developing anxiety. In fact, in some cases, people could become so anxious that they may “start to believe that everyone is a predator and everything

February 2026

Vol 4. No 1.

is dangerous” (Colyard). This can make everyday life more challenging if a substantial amount of fear is induced by consuming true crime. Some people can begin to “wonder about their own relationships” because “statistics show that most murderers know their victims”, remarked Patricia Bryan, a professor of law at the University of North Carolina School of Law (Jared). These types of thoughts begin to grow into stress, paranoia, and hypervigilance. Although a “constant state of high alert, paranoia, and hypervigilance is helpful when we’re trying to protect ourselves from threat in a genuine crisis”, a persistent state of these feelings stemming “from a diet of true crime” can lead to severe stress, and sometimes even stress-related illnesses, as remarked by forensic psychology professor Jessica Micono at Regis University (Volpe). People should not “become overly reactive to the point where you’re not leaving your house, you’re not socializing, you’re not functioning” (Childs). If one becomes aware of states of increased anxiety, paranoia, and high alert, which can lead to thinking everyone is dangerous, they should reevaluate the level of violent content they view.

Furthermore, other psychological drawbacks may include the distrust of everyone and the feeling of being unsafe anywhere, which could start to become tiresome (Childs). True crime can lead someone to feel like they could be the next victim, and they want to make sure they are prepared to survive, which is partially the cause of increased hypervigilance after consuming the content (Volpe, Childs). Not only that, but Amber McDonald, Ph.D., also spoke on the issue of emotional distress caused by violent content, specifically true crime, where she remarked that “other more profound mental health problems such as vicarious or secondary traumatic stress [can develop] if [viewers are] not careful” (Kelley). McDonald emphasized the importance of listening or watching violent content in moderation to avoid mental health conditions.

Finally, the long-term potential psychological effects are concerning as well, perhaps even more so. By analyzing the data, the full scope of true crime’s probable impacts on society can be perceived. According to an American Behavioral Scientist article, “media violence induces both short-term and long-term increases in aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors”, especially in the pediatric brain (Hummer). Neuroimaging research illustrates that “media violence in childhood affects brain development, which can have lifelong behavioral consequences”, which could be detrimental to an adolescent, as they could potentially have lasting impacts (Hummer). Not only that, but “evidence suggests that prefrontal mechanisms for controlling emotion and behavior are altered by exposure to violent media”, and because of that, the “long-term increases in aggression and decreases in inhibitory control due to excessive media violence exposure may result from impaired development of prefrontal regions” (Hummer). In other words, this means that an abundant consumption of this type of content could not only lead to negatively altered behavior, but a damaged development of the prefrontal cortex of the brain, which could also affect behavior unfavorably (Hummer). This evidence is extremely vital to demonstrate how detrimental the subcategory of media violence as true crime entertainment can be when consumed without moderation. Because of this, parents should be advised to prevent their children from excessively listening or watching media violence of any kind, as it could lead to potentially debilitating consequences. Although this information is significant, the topic of long-term consequences of the true crime genre specifically need to be studied more to reveal a more direct cause and effect relationship rather than an inferred one, as the article from the American Behavior Scientist was one of the only journals exploring this topic. Therefore,

February 2026

Vol 4. No 1.

the true crime category of entertainment has a multitude of possible alarming effects, including increased anxiety, paranoia, hypervigilance, the distrust of everyone, the feeling of being unsafe, and serious behavioral issues, which demonstrate the likely unforeseen repercussions of the content.

THE BROADER IMPACT

After understanding the implications this type of violent entertainment can have on individuals, it is important to comprehend how it could impact society as a whole. According to a group of researchers affiliated with Fudan University, a renowned research facility in Shanghai, China, recent studies have shown that exposure to media violence, like true crime, can lead to desensitization, which is a “reduced distressing emotional response to violence” (Guo et al). In other words, it is a decreased “physiological, emotional, and cognitive response to real-word violence” (Vossen et al). This desensitization can lead to the lack of “empathetic responses to others’ pain”, which could be devastating to society. Empathy, defined as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another”, is vital to the role of “moral development”, meaning the process people learn to distinguish right from wrong (Merriam-Webster, Vossen et al). The lack of being able to understand the difference between right from wrong would be harmful, since it could cause people to ignore ethics and a moral compass. Similarly, another connection between media violence and a lack of *sympathy* has been found. In a study involving 516 families with at least two children, a correlation was found between teenagers who consume media violence and a decrease in sympathy (Vossen et al). This means that people who “consume media violence subsequently feel less concern for other people in distress”, which could also be damaging to society (Vossen et al). True crime, among other types of media violence, could cause a lack of empathy and sympathy, which could clearly have a detrimental impact on society by possibly allowing it to become uncaring. Because of the serious likely outcomes of excessive engagement with media violence, it is necessary for society to readdress the amount of this type of content people view.

ANSWERING THE ORIGINAL RESEARCH QUESTION

By delving into the impacts of true crime entertainment, the roots of its popularity, the immediate effects of violence on the brain, the psychological consequences, and the broader impact the content has, the nature of the true crime genre has been analyzed. Throughout the research, many things have been clarified and discovered, such as the correlation between anxiety and true crime, the addicting nature of the genre, and the negative connection between media violence and empathy, as well as sympathy. After explaining this, it is appropriate to answer the original question: why do people find the true crime genre intriguing, and how does consuming it psychologically impact the viewer? In response, the intrigue of this type of media consumption seems to be influenced by the type of people who consume it, the psychology behind morbid curiosity and curiosity about criminals, the releasing of brain chemicals, and the enticement of an element of mystery. Consuming true crime could likely have severe ramifications, such as increased mental health conditions and long-term behavioral issues, but it can also potentially have

February 2026

Vol 4. No 1.

Oxford Journal of Student Scholarship

www.oxfordjss.org

limited advantages, such as increased awareness of surroundings and a feeling of empowerment over fear. However, the greater consequences on society as a whole may include a decrease of empathy and sympathy, which could lead to an uncaring world. Therefore, the overall findings on this topic were important and relevant to today's society by providing insight on the probable unintended consequences for the thousands of fans gripped by this category of entertainment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the true crime genre can have adverse repercussions on brain chemistry, mental health, and behavior. When the brain produces adrenaline, dopamine, and serotonin, it makes the crimes discussed exciting and fun to listen to. But, when constantly listening to these podcasts or watching these shows, mental health and behavior can be impacted in an undesirable way, especially if this media was introduced as a child. However, this does *not* mean that true crime is inherently bad, it means that it *can* be bad in some cases. True crime can be pleasurable, but it is crucial to be mindful of the effects it can have, while still enjoying the thrilling world of mystery, intrigue, and the unknown.

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