

but justifiable – for example, illegal torture and detention of terrorists is justified by denying they are victims of abuse as they themselves show no regard for human life or human rights, or by appeals to higher loyalties such as the need to stop ruthless terrorists from massacring innocent people, or as necessary steps to protect national security in the war on terror. By such techniques of neutralization, states provide the necessary excuses and justifications to explain their human rights breaches to themselves, to those who actually carry out the acts, and to other countries in the rest of the world who might seek to condemn them for it.

Problems of researching state crimes

Traditional sociological research on crime has been fairly straightforward, with the use of official crime statistics, victim surveys and a range of other sociological methods to discover acts of law-breaking, who commits them and why. Researching state crime is rather different.

Cohen shows it is difficult to find the true extent of state crime because governments adopt strategies of denial to either deny or justify their actions, or reclassify them as something else. State crimes are carried out by powerful people, who have a huge armoury of state agencies at their disposal to control information, and to cover up any of the state's criminal activity. This state secrecy means there are no official statistics or victim surveys to show the extent of such crime, and the 'dark figure' of hidden state crime is probably much greater than that of unreported and unrecorded conventional crime. Researchers are often reliant on secondary data like media reports, but even these tend to focus on state crimes in developing countries, and largely ignore state crimes committed by Western democracies, such as those of the United Kingdom or the United States.

Tombs and Whyte (2003) point out that researchers are likely to face strong official resistance, and states can use their power to prevent or hinder sociologists doing research – by threats, by refusals to provide funding, and by denying access to state officials and to official documents. In dictatorships, researchers additionally risk imprisonment, torture and death as enemies of the state. Greene and Ward (2012) point out research can therefore be difficult, harrowing (because of the nature of the offences) and dangerous, and the state can use the law and criminal justice system to control and persecute researchers whom it perceives to be its enemies, even in democracies. All these factors make it difficult to access information on state crime.

The media and the social construction of crime and deviance

Crime as consumer spectacle

Crime and deviance have long been major themes in popular culture. Fictional and non-fictional crime stories have provided significant sources of spectacle and mass entertainment, and are staple parts of the media diet. In fiction, comic books, thrillers and films often have acts of crime and violence, particularly murder and theft, and the detection of offenders, as central features. Media news is full of stories of crime and deviance, which have become an integral part of contemporary media *infotainment*, in which information about crime is packaged to entertain. For example, programmes like *Crimewatch* present crime in the form of dramatized reconstructions giving quite frightening insights into the crimes committed, and TV reality shows like *Police, Camera, Action!* use footage shot from police cars as entertainment. Hayward and Young (2012) argue advertisers have turned images of crime and deviance into tools for selling products in the consumer market, such as the way, for the youth market, things like gangsta rap, urban hip hop, and videogames like *Grand Theft Auto* combine images of criminality, street gang culture and designer chic that represent crime as a style and fashion choice that is romantic, exciting and cool. Some designer gear, like hoodies, has itself become a symbol of deviance.

Agenda-setting

Many of the issues that people think about and discuss are based on the list of subjects (agenda) that media reports tell them about. This influence of the media is known as **agenda-setting**. The media provide knowledge or impressions about crime and deviance for most people in society, including politicians, the police, social workers and the public at large. The media clearly can't report every single criminal or deviant act that occurs, and media personnel are necessarily very selective in the incidents they choose to report. People are only able to discuss and form opinions about the crime and deviance they have been informed about, and for most people this information is provided by the traditional mainstream mass media rather than by personal experience or through social media networking sites, like Facebook, YouTube or Twitter, which are more likely to provide alternative views of events. This means that people's perceptions of crime and deviance in society are influenced by what media personnel choose to include in or leave out of their newspapers, television programmes, films or websites. Media representations may therefore influence what people believe about crime and deviance, regardless of whether or not these are accurate.

Agenda-setting involves the power to manage which issues are to be presented for public discussion and debate and which issues are to be kept in the background.

News values

Greer and Reiner (2012) point out that in news, documentaries and fiction, stories of sexual and violent crimes are the stuff that titillates, excites and captures the popular imagination. The media are always seeking out newsworthy stories of crime and deviance, and they exploit the possibilities for a 'good story' by dramatizing, exaggerating, over-reporting and sensationalizing some crimes out of all proportion to their actual extent in society, in order to generate audience interest and encourage audiences to consume or buy their media products.

Reiner (2007) suggests that media coverage of crime and deviance is filtered through the values and assumptions of crime-thriller and film-script writers, and of journalists, about what makes a story worth telling or 'newsworthy' – exciting, interesting, and that media audiences want to know about. These values and assumptions are known as **news values**. Jewkes (2011) suggests that the news values that influence the reporting of crime and deviance include those shown in table 6.6. These guide the choices writers, editors and journalists make when they decide what stories are sufficiently newsworthy to report, and what to leave out; which elements of a story to include and play up; and how what they choose to report should be presented. The stories that are most likely to be reported are those which include many newsworthy aspects. Greer (2005) suggests it is these news values that explain why all mainstream media, both fact and fiction, tend to exaggerate the extent of violent crime, and why practically any form of deviance by celebrities, no matter how trivial, receives massive coverage.

News values are the values and assumptions held by editors and journalists which guide them in choosing what is 'newsworthy' – what to report and what to leave out, and how what they choose to report should be presented.

The backwards law: public perceptions and the distortion and exaggeration of crime

Surveys such as the CSEW (see, for example, the Office for National Statistics report, *Public Perceptions of Crime*, 26 March 2015), show that the majority of people base their knowledge of crime and the criminal justice system (CJS) on the media, including crime fiction, rather than on their own direct experience. However, Surette (2010) suggests that there is what he calls a 'backwards law', with the media constructing images of crime and justice which are an opposite or backwards version of reality. Greer (2003) and Greer and Reiner (2012) suggest this backwards law is shown by media news and fiction misrepresenting the reality of crime in the following ways:

- By hugely over-representing and exaggerating sex, drug and (particularly) serious violence-related crimes, such as sexual assault, murder or armed robbery, and by under-representing the risks of the most common offence of property crime
- By portraying property crime as far more serious and violent than most recorded offences, which are fairly routine, trivial and non-dramatic, and typically involve little or no loss or damage, and no violence or threat to victims

- By over-exaggerating police effectiveness in clearing-up (solving) crimes
- By exaggerating the risks of becoming victims faced by higher-status white people, older people, women and children
- By emphasizing individual incidents of crime, rather than providing any understanding or analysis of crime patterns or the causes of crime.

Left Realists suggest media reporting of crime disguises the reality that both offenders and victims are mainly from the working class and the poor, and Marxists point to the concealment of the significance of white-collar and corporate crimes, such as widespread tax and other frauds, environmental pollution, and the manufacture of harmful drugs, which rarely get reported.

Table 6.6 News values and crime and deviance

News value	Meaning
Threshold	Events have to be considered significant or dramatic enough to be in the news – a single rape might make it into a local paper, but a serial rapist might become a national story.
Proximity	Items which will have some cultural meaning or geographical closeness (proximity) to media audiences. For example, in the British media, British criminals or victims are more newsworthy than foreigners (except for foreign criminals who prey on the British in Britain), significant national crimes are generally considered more important than local ones, and the murder of a 'respectable' woman is more likely to be reported than that of a prostitute.
Predictability	Stories that are predictable (known in advance) are more likely to be covered, like the publication of the latest crime statistics, as media can plan ahead.
Individualism	Focus on the actions of, or conflict between, individuals, avoiding complex explanations.
Simplification	Events that are easily understood and not too complicated, without the need for lots of background explanation and detail.
Risk	Crime becomes newsworthy when it can be presented (or misrepresented) as sufficiently serious, random and unpredictable for us all to be at risk of becoming victims, and to have something to fear.
Spectacle and graphic images	Events, particularly violent ones, accompanied by film, video, CCTV, or mobile phone footage are more newsworthy as they enable the media to provide a visual and dramatic portrayal for audiences.
Celebrity or high-status people	Crime and deviance, even if quite trivial, involving celebrities or important or powerful people, whether they are victims or offenders, is seen as more newsworthy than that involving ordinary people.
Children	Children as offenders or victims of crime have the potential to be newsworthy (see, for example, the Madeleine McCann story on page 209 of chapter 3).
Sex	Sex crimes, crimes with a sexual dimension, women as victims, and non-criminal sexual deviance like BDSM (bondage domination sado-masochism) – especially involving celebrities or other famous people – are more newsworthy.
Violence	Violent events enable media to report using the drama, excitement and action which appeal to audiences.
Conservatism	Events are made newsworthy by calls for more punishment and deterrence, e.g. more police, higher fines, jailing young people, more prisons, and longer sentences.

Source: devised from Jewkes (2011)

Activity

With reference to table 6.6, choose any two current big media news stories, fiction or non-fiction TV dramas or films about crime and deviance, and try to identify those news values that have made them newsworthy or have given them 'audience appeal'.

The hyperreality of crime

The backwards law, combined with the agenda-setting and news values discussed above, means the media socially construct a distorted view of crime and the CJS, exaggerate the risks of becoming a victim of crime, and unnecessarily increase the public's fear of crime. This illustrates Baudrillard's (2001) postmodernist idea of *hyperreality* (see pages 198–9 and 399–400), which suggests that the media do not reflect reality but actively create it, as most people's only knowledge of crime is through media-created images which have little connection with the real world. The effects of this backwards hyperreality are illustrated by Flatley et al. (2010), who show that although all crime in England and Wales had been falling or steady between 1995 and 2010, between three-quarters and two-thirds of the population wrongly thought it was rising.

Activity

- 1 Study some media reports (such as national newspapers, TV news, websites and social media) for a few days, and think about TV dramas and films you've seen. What impressions do they give about the levels and seriousness of crime in society?
- 2 On the basis of what you found above, draw up a profile of the media stereotype of a 'typical criminal', explaining where you got your ideas from.
- 3 To what extent do you think media reporting tends to exaggerate the risks of individuals becoming victims of crime? Give reasons for your answer.
- 4 Outline three contemporary examples of media accounts of the criminal justice system (criminals, victims, police, courts, prisons etc.) which you think might illustrate the backwards law, i.e. show the opposite of reality.

The media as moral entrepreneurs

Moral entrepreneurs are people, groups or organizations with the power to create or enforce rules which define deviance. The media act as moral entrepreneurs and establish themselves as the self-appointed guardians of national morality by labelling and stereotyping certain groups and activities as deviant and as social problems, by presenting them as acting outside the boundaries of normal, rational behaviour, and by suggesting they are a threat to society which should be condemned. Even if much of what is reported is exaggerated or even untrue, media stories can demonize as **folk devils** those involved in some activities, and sensitize the public to such an extent that it is encouraged to support action taken against them. Some examples of issues and groups that have been defined in such ways are shown in figure 6.16 on page 521. One of the ways the media carry out their roles as moral entrepreneurs is through the creation of a moral panic, which is discussed below.

Folk devils are individuals or groups posing an imagined or exaggerated threat to society.

Deviancy amplification, folk devils and moral panics

Hall et al. (1978), in their study about the crime of mugging in 1973 (see pages 222, 457 and 482), and Cohen (2002 [1972]) (see below) show how the media, through their exaggerated and sensationalized reporting of crime and deviance, can whip up a moral panic – a wave of public concern about some exaggerated or imaginary threat to society – generating growing public anxiety and concern about the alleged deviance. The deviants themselves are labelled as folk devils and troublemakers who present a threat to society, and provide visible reminders of what we should *not* be. Hall et al. and Cohen suggest these media-generated moral panics tend to appear during periods of uncertainty, such as during periods of rapid social change or political and economic crisis. In this context, those defined as deviants play much the same role as witches in the past, as easy scapegoats to blame for a range of social problems, and this is seen by some sociologists as part of the process of strengthening the status quo and marginalizing those who challenge or threaten it.

The creation of a moral panic can sensitize the police, courts and other agencies of social control to the group or problem, and lead to demands by the media and the media-fuelled public for

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Deviancy amplification is the way the media may actually make worse or create the very deviance they condemn by their exaggerated, sensationalized and distorted reporting of events and their presence at them.

action to stamp down on the alleged deviance. Often these agencies, such as newspaper editors, the churches, politicians, schools, social services, the police and magistrates, will respond to the exaggerated threat presented in the media by pulling together to take harsher measures against the demonized folk devils of alleged troublemakers. These measures might include heavier policing levels, more arrests, stiffer fines, more imprisonment of offenders, and sometimes changes in the law to criminalize deviant activities. Such action, particularly by the police, can often amplify (or make worse) what was originally minor or isolated deviant behaviour, for example by causing more arrests. It's possible that such action, combined with media coverage and pre-publicity over the possible trouble looming, might even create deviance where there was none before, as people get swept away by the excitement of events. The presence and attention of reporters and TV cameras might encourage people to act up for the cameras and misbehave when they might not otherwise have done so. The way the media may actually create or make worse the very problems they condemn is known as **deviancy amplification**.

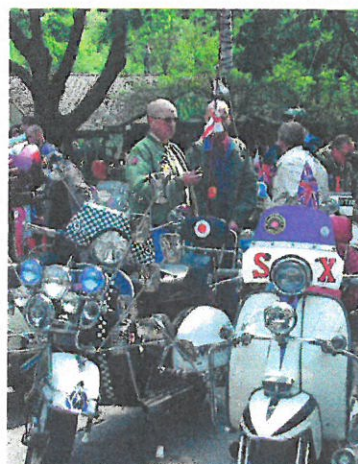
Figure 6.15 illustrates the way the media can amplify deviance and generate a moral panic, and figure 6.16 shows a range of moral panics which have arisen in Britain since the 1950s.

An example of deviancy amplification: Stanley Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*

In *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (2002 [1972]), Stanley Cohen showed how the media helped to create two opposing youth groups in the 1960s – the Mods (who drove scooters and wore parkas) and the Rockers (who drove motorbikes and wore leather gear).

On an Easter bank holiday weekend in 1964, at Clacton and other seaside resorts, there were some minor acts of vandalism and a few scuffles between some Mods and Rockers, though the level of violence was little different from that occurring anywhere else in the country. However, the media carried hugely exaggerated reports of what happened, and front-page headlines gave the misleading impression that Clacton had been terrorized and torn apart by pitched battles between rival gangs.

This generated a moral panic, with widespread public fear of, and hostility towards, the Mods and Rockers, who came to be seen in the period after this as folk devils posing major threats to public order. The police were forced to stamp down hard on these groups in response to the alleged deviant behaviour, which had been so exaggerated by the media. This resulted in a growing number of arrests.



1960s Rockers hanging out, and some 'born-again' present-day Mods out for a spin. Are there any similar rivalries among competing youth groups today which the media suggest might be folk devils?

Before these events, the Mods and Rockers had not seen themselves as rival groups, and most young people did not identify with either of them. However, the publicity created by the media's exaggerated, distorted and sensationalized reporting encouraged more young people to identify with the two groups, and to adopt their styles as fashionable and exciting lifestyle choices. This raised public fears to even greater heights. The example of the Mods and Rockers shows how the media's reporting of deviance can actually create the very problems they are allegedly concerned about, and generate public concerns about a problem that only existed because the media created it.

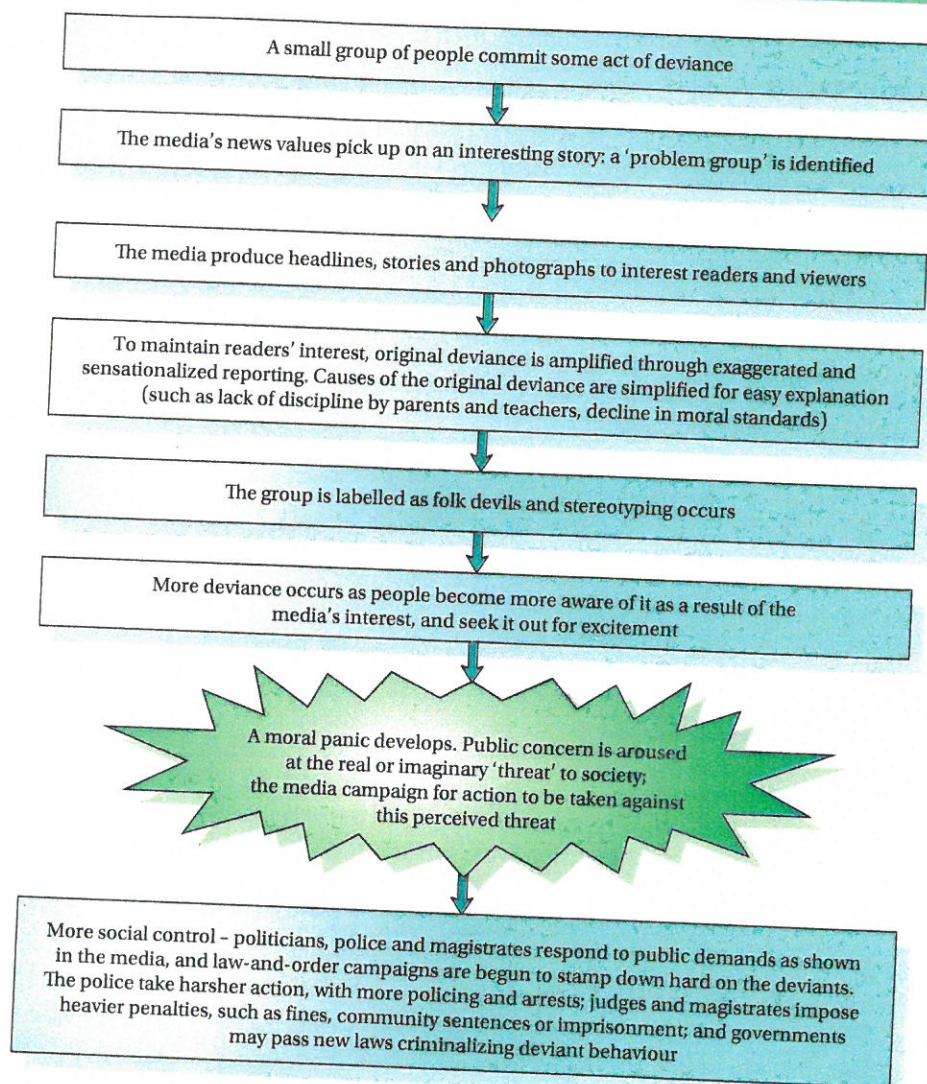


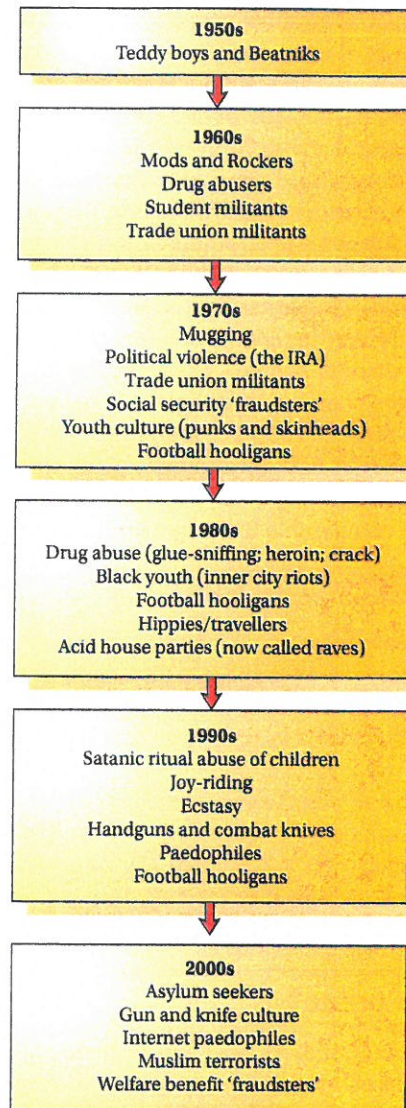
Figure 6.15
Deviancy
amplification, moral
panics and the
media

How relevant is the concept of moral panic today?

McRobbie and Thornton (1995) suggest that the concept of moral panic is no longer useful for understanding crime, and is outdated in the age of the new media. This is because new media technology, the growing sophistication of media audiences in a media-saturated society, constant 24/7 rolling news reporting, and intense competition both between media organizations and between different types of media – such as web-based news, blogs, social networking through Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, and cable, print, broadcast and satellite news – have changed the reporting of, and reaction to, events that might once have caused a moral panic. Pluralists and postmodernists argue there is now such a huge diversity of media reports and interpretations of events, and of opinions on and reactions to these events by the public through citizen journalism and social media, that people today are much more sceptical of mainstream media reports and less likely to believe them. This means it has become more difficult for the media to define issues or events in such a way that they can develop into a moral panic. This is also made more difficult by the way news is reported and updated by both social media and mainstream news organizations on an ongoing, almost minute-by-minute basis, 24 hours a day. As a result, most deviant or criminal events now have such short shelf-lives in sustaining audience interest that they are unlikely to be newsworthy for long enough to become a moral panic.

Hunt (2003, cited in Hall (2012)) suggests that the boundaries separating moral and immoral behaviour have become blurred, and late modernists like Beck (1992) argue that in contemporary

Figure 6.16 Folk devils and moral panics: Great Britain, 1950s–2010s



'risk society' there are now so many risks and uncertainties that many of the things that used to generate moral panics have become a normal part of daily life, and no longer seem to have the exceptional and anxiety-inducing qualities required to whip up moral panics. He suggests that the concept of moral panic is now too vague to explain a situation in which daily life is routinely marked by new crises of some kind, and where 'crime consciousness' is a part of normal, everyday life. It is therefore now less easy to define what a moral panic might be.

Steve Hall (2012), a critical theorist, dismisses the whole concept of moral panics. He suggests that newspaper headlines about 'the grinding selfishness and anti-social behaviour of numerous groups ranging from troublesome youths on sink estates to spoilt and unruly sportspeople, over-paid celebrities, faceless bureaucrats and corporate executives, corrupt politicians, irresponsible bankers and financial traders and organized criminal traffickers' reflect a real sense of exasperation felt by many, but these headlines have not produced moral panics. He suggests the concept of moral panics is wholly unfounded. He argues that the media do sensationalize specific crimes, and this sensationalism does cause concern amongst the public, but the media also overstate the criminal justice system's ability to solve these crimes and bring criminals to justice. Therefore, public concern is generated only to be soothed by the media in a way that increases the public's

faith in the existing political and administrative system and creates complacency – the opposite of panic.

Hall also argues that there are rational concerns (not artificial fears manufactured by media headlines) about real crimes, particularly in disadvantaged communities where crime and disorder are high and policing lax, and where family structures and communities are unable to provide informal controls as they are breaking down under economic pressures, such as those of unemployment, temporary and part-time work, and low pay. Hall argues that criminality is not a figment of the imagination that a fearful and stupid population are duped into believing by the media, but that crime produces real and distressing harms to all sorts of victims. Sociologists who dismiss such events as myths – moral panics – generated by a conservative media are denying the justified anxieties that people have. Hall argues the concept of moral panics is simply an ideological construction by liberal sociologists who dismiss people's anxieties as a product of overblown and sensationalized media reporting to avoid stampeding people into supporting greater repression by the state. At the same time, liberal sociologists don't concern themselves enough with the rational fears that people have as they face the risks and uncertainties of an unstable contemporary capitalism. Hall sees 'moral panic' as a zombie concept, and regards the importance attached to moral panics in contemporary sociology as comparable to living with the undead.

Activity

- 1 Outline and explain three reasons why the mass media might distort, exaggerate and sensationalize the extent of deviance and crime in society. Try to illustrate your answer with examples drawn from current media reports.
- 2 Refer to figures 6.15 and 6.16 and try to fill in each of the stages of any current moral panic in society.
- 3 To what extent do you agree with the view that the nature of the media in the contemporary world has made the concept of moral panic largely redundant? Give reasons for your answer.
- 4 Outline reasons why the lifestyles and activities of young people are often the focus of media amplification of deviance, and why they are most often portrayed as folk devils.

Do the media cause crime?

Greer and Reiner (2012) point out there has been a very long history of what Pearson (1983) called 'respectable fears' (concerns of 'respectable' people) about the media causing crime and deviance. They identify several ways that the media might do this, and a number of these are discussed in more depth elsewhere in this book, and you may wish to refer to the pages shown.

- 1 *Labelling, moral entrepreneurship and deviancy amplification* suggest that media reporting can create and/or make crime and deviance worse (see above, and pages 222, 457 and 482 on mugging, and pages 459 and 479–82 on labelling theory).
- 2 *Motives for crime.* The media's promotion of consumerist culture through images of affluent lifestyles creates crime by intensifying relative deprivation in what Young called a bulimic society (see Left Realism, pages 465–6), or generating the strain Merton identified (see pages 451–2), or through images of crime and violence encouraging people to commit crime by imitating (copycatting) what they pick up from the media, or by desensitizing them to violence (see pages 249–51).
- 3 *Knowledge and learning of criminal techniques,* such as the way the video *Child's Play 3* is alleged to have influenced the murderers of toddler James Bulger (see pages 249–51), and videogames like *Grand Theft Auto* in which players act out the roles of criminals.
- 4 *New means of committing crimes.* The new media and media technology, like the internet, provide new opportunities for cybercrimes and the organization of transnational crime and terrorism (see pages 502–3, 505).
- 5 *The reduction of social controls over crime.* Drawing on control theory (see pages 454–6) and rational choice theory (see page 468), Greer and Reiner suggest that, even if people are motivated to commit crime, they may not do so if there are effective *internal* controls, through

self-control and conscience, and *external* controls, through the risk of police action and arrest, that prevent them. The media may undermine these controls in two ways.

- By stories mocking the police and criminal justice system, and/or suggesting they are corrupt, ineffective and inefficient. This undermines external controls by reducing both public cooperation in controlling crime and the perception by potential offenders of the risks they face of getting caught.
 - By stories and images which undermine internal controls by presenting crime sympathetically, or as glamorous, exciting and seductive, or which desensitize people to the use and effects of violence.
- 6 *Providing targets for crime.* Media hardware and software provide new targets for property crime, such as smartphones, laptop and tablet computers, TVs, DVD recorders, and DVDs and CDs.

There are many difficulties and controversies surrounding research into the effects of the media (see, for example, pages 240 and 249–52) and many of the suggestions about how the media may encourage people who might otherwise not have done so to commit acts of crime or violence have little conclusive evidence to support them.

Practice questions

- 1 Outline **two** ways in which green or environmental crimes may reinforce existing social inequalities. **(4 marks)**
- 2 Outline **three** reasons why the media may exaggerate the extent of crime in society. **(6 marks)**
- 3 Read **Item A** below and answer the question that follows.

Item A

State crimes are those carried out by the state in pursuit of its policies, and involve violations of human rights as defined by international law. It can be difficult to investigate the extent of state crimes, because governments have the power to adopt strategies to either deny or justify human rights abuses, or reclassify them as something else that is not criminal.

Applying material from **Item A**, analyse **two** reasons why it may be difficult for sociologists to investigate the extent of state crimes. **(10 marks)**

- 4 Read **Item B** below and answer the question that follows.

Item B

Globalization has created a global criminal economy and transnational networks of organized crime. New opportunities for crime and new types of crime have emerged. Less financial regulation and fewer state controls over business and finance have contributed to the globalization of crime, along with other factors such as growing inequality, cultural globalization and the ideology of consumerism.

Applying material from **Item B** and your knowledge, evaluate sociological views of the effects of globalization on crime. **(30 marks)**