

Cooking Meth and Killing Girlfriends:

Audience perception of justifiable crime in the television series *Breaking Bad*

Kelsey Collins

Saint Mary's College

December 15, 2014

Susan Alexander

## Abstract

Previous research on audience perception of crime in the mass media has found demographic differences by race, class, sex, and nationality (Kathlene, 1995; Hurwitz & Smithey, 1998; Menjívar and Bejarano, 2004; Cao & Cullen, 2001; Doucet, D'Antonio-Del Rio, & Chauvin 2014; Piff et. al. 2010; Gina and Pierce, 2009; Mastro, & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Welch, 2007; Dixon & Azocar, 2007 ). Drawing upon such earlier work this study examines audience perception of crime as a justifiable act to determine any social factor differences. A survey of users on two on-line forums of the television show *Breaking Bad* was conducted. The results show that there are no significant differences related to social factors regarding the audience members' views of justifiable crimes, thus suggesting that the traits of the person committing the crime influences audience members' perspectives on justifiable crime.

An individual's perception of the world, including what constitutes crime, is viewed as a two-step process. Navon (1977) explains, "The hypotheses about what a stimulus may be interact with what the stimulus actually is [to determine] what the stimulus is finally perceived to be" (p. 356). In other words, an individual's past experiences help to shape his/her perceptions of the current situation. Previous research has shown that individual perceptions of events are influenced by a number of demographic variables including sex (Kathlene, 1995; Hurwitz & Smithey, 1998), ethnicity (Menjívar and Bejarano, 2004; Cao & Cullen, 2001; Doucet, D'Antonio-Del Rio, & Chauvin 2014), socioeconomic status (Piff et. al. 2010; Gina and Pierce, 2009), and race (Mastro, & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Welch, 2007; Dixon & Azocar, 2007).

One cultural artifact that may shape an individual's perception is the mass media. A television program is written with a specific message in mind, but there are countless audience interpretations of what is shown in the television program because of the different viewpoints from which it is perceived. The mass media offers a symbolic message that may shape individual perceptions, but little is known how audience perceptions of specific media content, namely fictionalized crime, may be impacted by demographic variations among the audience.

A crime is a historically and culturally specific activity that a society has deemed as illegal or immoral. However, when individuals are watching fictionalized crime, such as a television program, they may perceive the criminal action as justified and, thus, root for the protagonist committing the crime. In order to understand why individuals may support fictionalized criminal action, this study surveys viewers of the television program

*Breaking Bad* to recognize when individuals perceived a television character as committing justified or unjustified criminal acts.

The central research questions guiding this research are: When do audience members first see the criminal acts of the main protagonist as unjustified? Are there any demographic variables that can account for any differences in responses? Contrary to previous literature, this paper argues that audience perception of crime, as shown in the television show *Breaking Bad*, does not vary by social factors such as gender and ethnicity; instead crime is perceived by the audience as justified if a crime is committed by someone who does not fit into the hegemonic box of criminal.

### **Theory: Social Construction of Reality**

The Thomas Theorem states, “if men define situations as real, then they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas 1928, p. 572). Thomas and Thomas note that an interpretation of a situation may call an individual to action, and that actions are subjected to an individual’s perceptions. Berger and Luckmann (1966) expanded upon the Thomas Theorem by arguing that society has an “objective” reality, which is based upon the subjective reality, or interpretations, which people hold as true. They claim that individual realities are not exhausted on the “here and now,” instead people “experience life in terms of differing degrees of closeness and remoteness” (p. 3). For Berger and Luckmann closeness is the area of everyday life that is physically accessible, where only in face-to-face interactions do things fully become real, and all other forms of interactions vary in degrees of remoteness.

Television producers are faced with a level of remoteness when producing a program because interactions with the audience are not immediately reciprocal. As

Berger and Luckmann point out, the degree of interest either increases or decreases the anonymity of an experience (1966). For example, if an audience member is interested in the content of a television program, this decreases the anonymity of the experience of watching; e.g. a person who was a crime victim will have a more intense personal interest in a crime-related program. Therefore, producers are faced with the task of making the program as relevant as possible to multiple viewers' understandings of social reality, but the content of the program may be based upon the producer's unique constructions of reality. Berger and Luckmann discuss how social realities are constructed, but they do not explain how different groups/audiences comprehend these social constructs.

Drawing upon Berger and Luckmann's notion of constructing reality, Hall (1973) identifies how media messages are constructed. Hall notes that the media production process is framed by many factors including professional ideologies and assumptions about the audience. Hall explains how producers "encode" a meaning onto a topic, draw images of the audience and 'definitions of the situation' "from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part." Before this message can have the desired effect on the audience, however, it must be "appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded" (p. 130). For example, in order to capture and maintain an audience's attention producers aim to create main protagonists who appeals to the audience. Thus, producers draw upon dominant social constructs of characteristics of agreeable people when forming these characters in the hopes that audience members will identify and empathize with the characters.

Hall's (1973) model of communication also suggests how individuals "decode" the interpretation of reality encoded by the producer. Since media images are multiple layered, Hall suggests these media images can be *decoded* in various ways. In other words, any cultural artifact, like a television program, carries different meanings for the various people in the audience.

Producers encode messages with a dominant or preferred code that viewers are expected to operate within; however, Hall identifies three different positions an individual can take when decoding media discourse. The *dominant-hegemonic position* occurs when the viewer operates within the hegemonic code by fully accepting the message straight, as was intended by the producer. The *negotiated position*, as Hall describes, "contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements" the reader generally accepts the message, but modifies it in a way to reflect his/her own views (p. 137). Lastly, the *oppositional position* occurs when the viewer "detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference" (p. 138).

In order to understand these three positions, it is helpful to look to the example of the "Marlboro Man," an advertising image that was produced to convince men that cigarette smoking is part of being the ideal male. As Sturken, Cartwright, and Sturken (2001) explain, since his origin the "Marlboro Man" has been depicted as a cowboy, relaxing with a cigarette surrounded by the beauty of untouched, rugged terrain, embodying "a romanticized idea of freedom that stands in contrast to the more confined lives of most workers" (p. 29). Phillip Morris, the company manufacturing Marlboro cigarettes, began using this image for their advertising campaign in the 1950s anticipating

that men would embrace the dominant-hegemonic masculine social construction and start smoking in order to be a “real” man. On the other hand, women who already smoked Marlboro cigarettes and who saw this new construction of social reality (“real men” smoke Marlboro) had to negotiate its message because they were not striving to be real men. Some women may have embraced the “western” image (being “cowgirl”), or the idea of “freedom” (smoking as women’s liberation), or created some other negotiated meaning of the Marlboro man advertisement. The Department of Health Services and the American Cancer Society, however, took the oppositional position in 1999 when they created an anti-smoking campaign that mimicked the original Marlboro billboards, but presented evidence about the harmful health effects of smoking (Sturken, Cartwright, & Sturken, 2001). The message of these anti-smoking advertisements was to detotalize the image by stripping it of its original message, and then retotalized it by constructing a new and oppositional message.

Sturken, Cartwright, and Sturken (2001) state that “the use of language and images [is] to create meaning about the world around us” (p. 12). Previous theorists have sought to understand why audience members give different meanings to media representations or social constructions. This study will provide empirical evidence to show how audience members’ decoding of images of crime in the media may vary by social factors such as sex, ethnicity, social class, and race.

## **Literature Review**

### **Crime in the Media**

One of the earliest scholarly works on crime in the media is *Crime News and the Public* (1980), in which Graber analyzes print and electronic news sources over a one-

year period of time to measure the public perception of crime and compares this perception with media images of criminals and crime fighting. Graber uses the modular model of audience effects, which conjectures that “effects of the media on the audience are modulated by the sensitivity of the audience to a particular issue and by the background and demographic characteristics and experiences of individual audience members” (p. 121). Graber’s study indicated that perceptions concerning crime on both the individual and group level vary due to “selectivity in choosing media and differences in community attitudes and personal preferences” (p. 123). Mass media, thus, does not generate uniformity of public opinion; instead people’s attitudes and behaviors are based upon their perceptual realities.

Other studies have shown that the audience’s understanding of a media event involves the process of using existing memories and extracting meaning out of the event while simultaneously integrating these inputs in order to construct a coherent meaning (Harris, Cady, & Tran, 2006). In other words, an individual’s long-term memories combine with the message produced, which then leads to their comprehension of an event. Shrum (2006) identifies the schema, related to the television genre which influences the audiences’ perceptions and categorizations of situations. Shrum’s example of a schema is the differences between a serial, which has an ongoing plot line from one episode to the next, or a situational comedy, which typically presents a problem at the beginning of each episode with the resolution coming at the end. Shrum points out that an individual’s particular schemas lead to the same act being perceived in different ways by different individuals. For example, if a person is physically hit in a drama, this act is interpreted as an act of violence; whereas hitting someone in a situational comedy is



interpreted as comical. In all cases, research shows that an individual's interpretation is influenced by a variety of social factors.

### **Views of Crime by Social Factors**

An audience member's view of crime is impacted by various social factors such as sex, ethnicity, nationality, race, and socioeconomic status. One social factor that influences an individual's perspective of crime is gender. Hurwitz and Smithey (1998) examine the audience's view of real-life crime, and found that female respondents are more likely to feel unsafe in their neighborhoods in comparison to men, and women were also more likely "judge crime as a more important issue" (Hurwitz & Smithey, 1998, p. 99). Hurwitz and Smithey reported that although women are more likely to support crime-prevention policies, such as poverty prevention, the differences between men's and women's opinions on increasing prison terms and building more prisons was not significant.

Investigating how the social factors of gender influence views of crime, Kathlene (1995) draws upon Gilligan's (1982) theory of "different voices" which argues that men's responses to moral dilemmas tend to emphasize individual rights and rely on absolute rules of truth and fairness whereas women's responses tend to actively attempt to nurture and protect others and relationships among them. Kathlene's findings support Gilligan's theory and show that women take a nurturing perspective regarding the causes of crime by blaming crime on social factors, such as the criminal being a victim of economic circumstances. Men, on the other hand, were found to emphasize individual responsibility when talking about criminals.

Previous research also shows ethnicity and nationality are social factors that

influence individual's perceptions of crime. Menjívar and Bejarano (2004) examine immigrants' fear of crime and their perceptions of U.S. authorities. Menjívar and Bejarano (2004) identify key immigrant-specific factors that affect their perceptions of crime and police including immigrants' former experiences with crime, the social networks in which they learn about U.S. police authorities, where to expect criminal activity, and who may be a potential criminal. The researchers note that immigrants' social networks, which largely consist of family and friends, is the most important factor in determining immigrants' perceptions of crime, even if their own personal experiences contradicted this information.

A study by Cao & Cullen (2001) comparing Chinese and American ideologies regarding crime note differences in cultural principles account for variations in views of crime. They find that the exercise of state power within the varying countries is the cultural principles accounting for this difference in views of crime.

Even within a nation differences regarding the audience's view of crime varies according to geographic location. In a study focusing on the United States, Doucet, D'Antonio-Del Rio, and Chauvin (2014) found that a southern subculture of violence exists, which may account for higher crime rates in the south than any other area in the United States.

An individual's race is another social factor that influences views of crime. Previous research finds that an individual's interactions with a person from a different racial group, the media's portrayals of different racial groups, and racial stereotypes all influence individual's perceptions of crimes and criminals (Mastro, & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Welch, 2007).

Previous research has found that Black and Hispanic individuals are more likely to have had a negative encounter with the police and to live in high-crime neighborhoods, thus Black and Hispanic individuals are more likely than whites to respond negatively to police presence and are thus more likely to perceive criminal injustice (Hagan, Shedd, & Payne, 2005; Weitzer & Tuch, 2004).

Noting that previous research has found that U.S. news programs over-represent Blacks as criminals, Dixon and Azocar (2007) study the long-term effects of news on the likelihood of an individual using racial stereotypes of Blacks to base a political view. The participants were exposed to different news programs depicting a majority of suspects from one particular racial group, and the researchers found that “those who endorse Black stereotypes were more likely to support the death penalty” (p. 239). Furthermore, those participants who were exposed to more Black perpetrators tended to “find a subsequent race-identified criminal culpable for his offenses” (p. 244).

In a similar study Peffley, Hurwitz, and Sniderman (1997) assessed the power of racial stereotypes in influencing an individual’s general impressions and thus biasing political judgments of Black targets. The researchers found “whites holding negative stereotypes are substantially more likely to judge blacks more harshly...in the areas of welfare and crime policy” (Peffley, Hurwitz, & Sniderman, 1997, p. 30).

A final social factor that has been shown to affect individual’s perceptions of crime is socioeconomic status. Piff et. al. (2010) theorized that since a lower social class is associated with fewer resources and a reduced sense of personal control, lower class individuals might be expected to engage in less prosocial behavior. However, Piff et. al. (2010) found lower class individuals to be more generous, charitable, trusting, and

helpful when compared to upper class individuals. In a follow-up study, Piff et. al. (2012) analyzed which social class was more likely to participate in unethical behavior, and found that upper-class individuals were more likely to engage in immoral actions, such as cutting off a person while driving, endorsing unethical behavior at work, and exhibiting unethical decision making. Gina and Pierce (2009) suggest that abundant wealth provokes feelings of envy toward other upper class individuals and that leads to unethical behavior.

### **Cultural Reception**

A cultural object, like a television show, is subject to varying interpretations that can be influenced by an individual's interactions with others. Cultural reception is "the process of interpersonal influence in which individuals may display and debate their viewpoints on the text's quality and meaning" (Childress & Friedkin, 2012, p. 46) According to Morely (1994), audiences "actively make use of and interpret the symbolic products offered to them by the mass media" (p. 119). Trepte (2006) argues that audiences choose the media programs they watch based on their social identity and that programs are selected for self-validation and reaffirmation of the status quo. One way to receive validation for the television programs one watches is through the use of online forums.

Bielby and Harrington (1994) investigated television audience interaction through electronic bulletin boards (EBBs) and found that EBBs serve primarily as a way for audiences to comment on, speculate about, request (ask questions), and diffuse information about their favorite television shows. Each of these four uses of the EBBs plays a different role in the audiences' perceptions of the show. Commentary allows

individuals to share their opinions and interpretations of the show. Speculation, which is “essentially gossip about a given program in terms of character development, story-line potential, plot twists, and so forth,” allows viewers to tap into a specific sector of the audience who share the same interest in the show, which in turn forms subgroups of the larger audience (p. 85). Asking questions about the show, or “requesting,” is where “viewers perceive that it is necessary to have certain information in order to enjoy or interpret what is happening on a program, and they turn to other viewers to help,” thus this process “indicates the interactive nature of creating meaning” (Bielby & Harrington, 1994, p. 85). Lastly, diffusion is what the researchers considered to be the most important function of EBBS. Since these bulletin boards contain such a rich detail of information, audience members nationally and internationally use them.

The previous literature all points to the ways in which the audience’s understanding of crime and criminal behavior might be interpreted in various ways, depending upon social factors, and that new sites for audience discussion of media also shape audience views of crime. This study adds to the existing literature on audience perceptions of crime by surveying participants in on-line forums designed for fans of *Breaking Bad* to determine any patterns of difference among various groups of fans.

### **Methodology**

Data for this study was collected by surveying viewers of the AMC television series *Breaking Bad*. This television program follows a high school chemistry teacher, Walter White, who is a middle-class, white, married man with two children. Walt is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer in the first episode and is then faced with the financial realities of his mounting medical bills. Walt fears leaving his family without financial resources

once he dies. In order to support his family once he is gone Walter decides to start cooking and selling crystal meth and recruits a former student, Jesse Pinkman, to connect Walt with drug dealers.

*Breaking Bad* ran for five seasons, from 2008 through 2013. Over the course of its five seasons the show was nominated for 187 awards, winning 55 including the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series (Pomerantz, 2013). The series' season finale had a viewership of over 10 million, generating 23,599 tweets per minute (Pomerantz, 2013). Although no longer in production, *Breaking Bad* continues to receive award nominations and the show's fan base continues to discuss past episodes via forums and blogs.

The survey consisting of 28 questions, asks general background information questions (age, sex, race, geographic location, income, educational level), followed by questions regarding the actions of the main protagonist, Walter White (see Appendix A). Lastly, participants were asked their opinions on relevant social issues (such as gun ownership and drug legalization) and to disclose any past history of potential illegal activity in which they had engaged (e.g. traffic ticket, illegal drug use, or felony conviction).

The survey was posted on two *Breaking Bad* forums, which are public sites where fans discuss issues specific to this television series. The forums were identified using a Google search of the term "Breaking Bad forums." The top two most frequented *Breaking Bad* forums were found to be AMCblogs and Reddit. A link to the survey, which took potential participants directly to the survey located on the website Survey Monkey, was posted on these forums.

The total number of surveys started was 376, but only 203 respondents completed the entire survey. Thus, incomplete surveys were omitted from the data. Of the 203 complete surveys 80% of respondents were male, 18% were female, and 2% were transgender. Of the male respondents, 53% were 18-20 years old, 30%, were 21-29 years old, and the remaining 17% were 30 years or older. Of the female respondents, 28% were 18-20 years old, 44% were 21-29 years old, and the remaining 28% were 30 years or older. The majority of respondents, 82%, were white. The forums are open to anyone regardless of nationality, thus 30% of the 203 respondents were from a country other than the United States. The large variation in demographics of the population of the study helped to illustrate if there were any demographic differences in respondent answers.

### **Findings**

The data shows that overall there are no significant differences in respondent's perceptions regarding Walter's first unjustified criminal act regardless of sex, prior convictions of criminal activity, or region of residence. Table 1 compares attitudes regarding Walter's first unjustified act by sex. Note, the gender gap between respondents is significant; the majority of the respondents were male (82%) while 18% were female. Notably, male responses were more varied than females; 54% of men answered one of the top five responses compared to 74% of women. The act of "LetJaneDie" is the most frequently cited incident (27%) by both females (33%) and males (25%). This refers to a scene in season 2 episode 13 when Walter accidentally flips Jesse's unconscious girlfriend, Jane, a heroin addict, on her back then deliberately does nothing as she asphyxiates on her own vomit.

First Unjustified Act	Sex		
	Female	Male	TOTAL
LetJaneDie	12 (33%)	42 (25%)	54 (27%)
KillKrazy8	6 (17%)	14 (8%)	20 (10%)
FirstCook	3(8%)	18 (11%)	21 (10%)
PoisonBrock	3 (8%)	9 (5%)	12 (6%)
DecideCook	3(8%)	8 (5%)	11 (5%)
Other	9 (26%)	74 (46%)	83 (41%)
TOTAL	36/201 (18%)	165/201 (82%)	*201 (100%)
*Two respondents answered "transgender"			

The second most common answer, “KillKrazy8,” (10%) demonstrated the largest difference between men (8%) and women (17%). “KillKrazy8” is an incident in season 1 episode 3 in which Walter kills the drug dealer Krazy-8 after holding him hostage for days. Walter decided that Krazy-8 would have been a future threat, so he strangles Krazy-8. The second most frequently given response among men was “FirstCook” (11%) which was the third most frequent response for women (8%): In this scene occurring in the first episode of the series Walter cooks his first batch of crystal meth.

Table 2 compares the respondents’ prior crime history by first unjustified act. A majority (62%) of respondents report not having been convicted of any criminal offense. The order of responses by prior convictions, as sorted by frequency, is similar to the findings in Table 1. “LetJaneDie” was the most frequently given answer (28%) followed by “KillKrazy8” (10%) and “FirstCook” (9%). One notable difference between respondents with a prior civil infraction versus those with either a misdemeanor or a felony is that respondents who had a prior civil infraction were more likely to respond with one of the top four responses.



Table 2 Attitudes on what was Walter's first unjustified act by prior crimes conviction							
First Unjustified Act	Prior Crime Convicted Of						TOTAL
	Civil Infraction		Misdemeanor		Felony		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	
LetJaneDie	14	39	3	50	2	51	159 (28%)
KillKrazy8	7	11	3	15	0	19	55 (10%)
FirstCook	9	8	3	14	2	15	51 (9%)
PoisonBrock	5	7	1	11	2	10**	26 (4%)
Other	38	56	9	85	1*	93	281 (49%)
N***	73/194 (38%)	121/194 (62%)	19/194 (10%)	175/194 (90%)	7/195 (4%)	188/195 (96%)	572 (100%)
*Remaining Responded "Never" **11 Responded "DecideCook" *** Respondents were given the option to not respond							

Table 3 compares differences among respondents' attitudes on Walter's first unjustified criminal act by region of residence. Regardless of nationality, the most frequently given response regarding Walter's first unjustified criminal act was "LetJaneDie;" 28% among U.S. residents versus 24% among respondents in other countries. Notably, regardless of location, the top four most frequently given answers – "LetJaneDie," "FirstCook," "PoisonedBrock," and "DecideCook" – are the same for those who reside in the United States and in other nations, thus suggesting that perceptions of crime do not vary by nationality.

When examining differences by region within the United States, the same pattern of the first four highest frequency responses holds with one exception. The response "PoisonedBrock" -- an incident in season 4 episode 12 when Walter poisons Jesse's girlfriend's son Brock -- was the third most frequent response in the United States overall (6%); however no respondent from the Northeast gave this answer.

First Unjustified Act	Region of Residence							
	Midwest	Northeast	Southeast	Southwest	West	U.S. TOTAL	Other Country	TOTAL
LetJaneDie	6 (22%)	9 (32%)	12 (33%)	5 (31%)	8 (24%)	40 (28%)	15 (24%)	55 (28%)
FirstCook	2 (7%)	2 (7%)	5 (14%)	1 (6%)	2 (6%)	12 (9%)	10 (16%)	22 (11%)
PoisonedBrock	3 (11%)	0	5 (14%)	1 (6%)	2 (6%)	11 (8%)	1 (2%)	12 (6%)
DecideCook	1 (4%)	3 (10%)	2 (6%)	1 (6%)	2 (6%)	9 (6%)	2 (3%)	11 (5%)
Schwartz	0	1 (4%)	3 (8%)	1 (6%)	2 (6%)	7 (5%)	1 (2%)	8 (4%)
JesseKillGale	3 (11%)	1 (4%)	0	0	0	4 (3%)	3 (5%)	7 (3%)
BlowUpCar	0	2 (7%)	0	0	3 (9%)	5 (4%)	2 (3%)	7 (3%)
Never	0	1 (4%)	1 (3%)	2 (13%)	0	4 (3%)	2 (3%)	6 (3%)
TucoHQ	1 (4%)	0	1 (3%)	1 (6%)	0	3 (2%)	1 (2%)	4 (2%)
BecomeHeis	1 (4%)	0	0	1 (6%)	0	2 (1%)	1 (2%)	3 (1%)
Other	10 (37%)	9 (32%)	7 (19%)	3 (20%)	15 (43%)	44 (31%)	24 (38%)	68 (34%)
N	27 (100%)	28 (100%)	36 (100%)	16 (100%)	34 (100%)	141 (100%)	62 (100%)	203 (100%)

Table 4 compares respondent's country of residence by respondents' attitudes

regarding which of Walter's criminal actions were seen as justified.

"CookMethForFamily" was the most commonly given answer by U.S. residents (24%)

and the third most commonly given answer by non-U.S. residents (11%). Respondents argued that because Walter was cooking meth in order to support his family, this action was justified. A respondent explains:

I believe that when Walt FIRST started cooking meth, before he started doing it for selfish reasons, it was justified. In the beginning, he had just found out that he had cancer, he was only making the salary of a teacher, his wife was pregnant & he had a son already. In the beginning, he only wanted to provide for his family before he was gone. When you care about someone, you sometimes will have to take drastic measures to make sure that they will be okay.

The remaining answers regarding justifiable criminal acts all center on Walter killing someone in self defense, although some respondents grouped all of these murders together in "Kill in Self-Defense" (7% of U.S. and 8% of non-U.S. residents).

"RunOverDealers" is an incident in season 3 episode 12 when Walter drives over two

drug dealers who were threatening his meth cooking partner, Jesse. When one of the drug dealers survives being run over, Walter then shoots him. Because the individuals murdered were a threat to him and his family, Walter's acts of murder were seen as justified. Respondents explain:

Kill or be killed!

Some of the killings (Gus, Tuco, Etc) were merely precautionary to defend his family. Anyone would do whatever it takes to protect the ones they love.

Killing the two drug dealers in order to save Jesse as he was emotionally damaged & wasn't thinking clearly, plus they killed Tomas and were nasty people in general.

There is some slight regional variation; "Kill in Self-Defense" is the most frequently given answer by non-U.S. residents (22%) and the third most frequent response given by U.S. residents (14%). Overall, however, there are no significant demographic differences between respondents' attitudes on Walter's justified criminal acts.

Justified Act	From U.S.		
	Yes	No	TOTAL
CookMethForFamily	27 (24%)	4 (11%)	31 (21%)
RunOverDealers	16 (14%)	8 (22%)	24 (16%)
KillKrazy	19 (17%)	4 (11%)	23 (16%)
PoisonDealers	14 (13%)	6 (17%)	20 (14%)
KillGus	12 (11%)	3 (8%)	15 (10%)
Kill in Self-Defense	8 (7%)	3 (8%)	11 (7%)
Other	15 (14%)	8 (23%)	23 (16%)
TOTAL	111/147 (76%)	36/147 (24%)	*147 (100%)

\*56 Respondents answered that Walter never committed a justified act

### Discussion

Hall's (1973) theory of encoding and decoding explains that since media messages are multiple layered they can be decoded in various ways, based upon an

individual's social position. The data found here, however, shows that an individual's sex, region, or prior convictions have little to do with their perceptions of justifiable crimes Walter White's behaviors – from cooking crystal meth to killing drug dealers or watching Jane die – are legally considered criminal offenses, most of which are felonies. However, the majority of respondents saw these criminal acts as justified. The question is why?

The answer might lie in the traits of the main protagonist, Walter White, who is a white, middle-class, educated family man. He does not fit into the hegemonic box of criminal. Most people will break the law at least once in their lives, through such minor offences as speeding and jaywalking. However individuals who commit such criminal acts do not construct themselves as “criminals” because these acts are not socially constructed by the media as criminal. Instead, certain types of acts, such as unjustified killing, are socially constructed by media viewers as criminal.

The data suggests that laws do not define right and wrong in an individual's eyes. No underlying demographic variable appears to significantly alter a particular group's perception of justifiable or unjustifiable crime. The one variable that all respondents have in common is the character of Walter White; all the viewers see the same image of a white, educated man committing criminal acts. One must wonder if the image were of a black man cooking meth, killing drug dealers, or engaged in other criminal acts, would the results have been the same given that racial stereotyping has been a part of American culture for decades.

According to the FBI Uniform Crime Report of 2011, Blacks made up 28.4 % of arrests, however the U.S. Census tells us that Blacks make up only 13.2% of the

population. This overrepresentation of Blacks in the legal system is an issue sometimes traced back to racial profiling. This has serious implications within the U.S. judicial system. Alexander (2012) has argued that the 1980 “crack epidemic” was constructed by U.S. government officials in order to criminalize minority populations. Crack was introduced to the market in 1984 as a cheaper form of cocaine. Although it had the same effects of cocaine, crack could be packaged in smaller quantities, thus making it affordable for drug users in low-income communities. Schneider (1998) argues that with the help of overblown news stories of black crack addicts, crack cocaine sparked a new war on drugs. Harsher sentences came into effect for crack offenses when compared to cocaine related offenses. These racially discriminatory drug laws lead to Blacks and other minorities being profiled as felony criminals.

In the end, the data may point to the racial stereotyping of criminals in the United States. If Walter White had been an uneducated Black man, audiences might have been quicker to label his acts as unjustified. Instead, Walter embodied a caring man, just trying to do right by his family, and for that he is seen as justified in the manufacturing of crystal meth and murdering an innocent girl.

### References

- Alexander, M. (2012). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press.
- Bielby, D., & Harrington, C. L. (1994). Reach out and touch someone: Viewers, agency, and audiences in the televisual experience. *Viewing, Reading, Listening: Audiences and Cultural Studies*, 81-100.
- Burger, P., & Luckman, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Allen Lane.
- Cao, L., & Cullen, F. T. (2001). Thinking about crime and control: A comparative study of Chinese and American ideology. *International Criminal Justice Review*, 11(1), 58-81.
- Childress, C. C., & Friedkin, N. E. (2012). Cultural Reception and Production The Social Construction of Meaning in Book Clubs. *American sociological review*, 77(1), 45-68.
- Dixon, T. L., & Azocar, C. L. (2007). Priming crime and activating blackness: Understanding the psychological impact of the overrepresentation of blacks as lawbreakers on television news. *Journal of communication*, 57(2), 229-253.
- Doucet, J. M., D'Antonio-Del Rio, J. M., & Chauvin, C. D. (2014). GRITS The southern subculture of violence and homicide offenses by girls raised in the south. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 29(5), 806-823.
- Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2011). *Uniform crime report: Arrests*. [ Table 43A]. Retrieved from <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2011/crime-in-the-u.s.-2011/tables/table-43>
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice*. Harvard University Press.
- Gino, F., & Pierce, L. (2009). The abundance effect: Unethical behavior in the presence of wealth. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 109(2), 142-155.
- Graber, D. A. (1980). *Crime news and the public*. New York: Praeger.

- Hagan, J., Shedd, C., & Payne, M. R. (2005). Race, ethnicity, and youth perceptions of criminal injustice. *American sociological review*, 70(3), 381-407.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In Hall, S., Hobson, D., Love, A., & Willis, P (Eds.), *Culture, Media, Language* (pp. 128-38). London: Hutchinson.
- Harris, R. J., Cady, E. T., & Tran, T. Q. (2006). Comprehension and memory. *Psychology of entertainment*, 71-84.
- Hurwitz, J., & Smithey, S. (1998). Gender differences on crime and punishment. *Political Research Quarterly*, 51(1), 89-115.
- Mastro, D. E., & Behm-Morawitz, E. (2005). Latino representation on primetime television. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 82(1), 110-130.
- Menjívar, C., & Bejarano, C. (2004). Latino immigrants' perceptions of crime and police authorities in the United States: A case study from the Phoenix metropolitan area. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 27(1), 120-148.
- Morley, D. (1994). Between the public and the private: The domestic uses of information and communications technologies. *Viewing, reading, listening: Audiences and cultural reception*, 101-123.
- Navon, D. (1977). Forest before trees: The precedence of global features in visual perception. *Cognitive psychology*, 9(3), 353-383.
- Peffley, M., Hurwitz, J., & Sniderman, P. M. (1997). Racial stereotypes and whites' political views of blacks in the context of welfare and crime. *American Journal of Political Science*, 30-60.
- Piff, P. K., Kraus, M. W., Côté, S., Cheng, B. H., & Keltner, D. (2010). Having less, giving more: the influence of social class on prosocial behavior. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 99(5), 771.
- Piff, P. K., Stancato, D. M., Côté, S., Mendoza-Denton, R., & Keltner, D. (2012). Higher social class predicts increased unethical behavior. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 109(11), 4086-4091.
- Pomerantz, D. (2013). 'Breaking Bad' finale is big but not AMC's biggest.

*Forbes*. Retrieved from

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/dorothypomerantz/2013/09/30/breaking-bad-finale-is-big-but-not-amcs-biggest>

Schneider, C.L. (1998). Racism, drug policy, and AIDS. *Political Science Quarterly*, 113

(3). Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2658075>

Shrum, L. J. (2006). Perception. *Psychology of entertainment*, 55-70.

Sturken, M., Cartwright, L., & Sturken, M. (2001). *Practices of looking: An introduction to visual culture* (p. 385). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thomas, W. I., & Thomas, D. S. (1928). The child in America; Behavioral problems and programs.

United States Census Bureau. (2013). *State and Country Quick Facts*. Retrieved from:

<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>

Weitzer, R., & Tuch, S. A. (2004). Race and perceptions of police misconduct. *Social Problems*, 51(3), 305-325.

Welch, K. (2007). Black criminal stereotypes and racial profiling. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 23(3), 276-288.



*Appendix A***BREAKING BAD SURVEY QUESTIONS**

Do you currently live in the United States?

- Yes
- No

If yes, in which state within the United States do you currently reside?

---

If no, in which country do you currently live?

---

Which of the following best describes your current residence? **Please check one**

- Rural (outside a city or suburb)
- Suburban (suburb of a large city)
- Urban (city)

What is your sex? **Please check one**

- Female
- Transgender
- Male
- Other

What is your age? **Please check one**

- 18-20
- 21-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60-69
- 70 or older

Do you have any children?

- No
- Yes
- Unsure

If yes, how many children do you have? **Please check one**

- None
- 1-2
- 3-4
- 5 or more

What is your race/ethnicity? **Please check all that apply**

- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Black
- Hispanic
- Native American or American Indian
- White
- Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? *If currently enrolled, highest degree received.* **Please check one**

- Less than a high school degree
- High school diploma or equivalent (e.g., GED)
- Trade/technical/vocational training
- Some college, but no degree
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctorate degree
- Other professional degree

What is your marital status? **Please check all that apply**

- Single, never married
- Married or domestic partnership
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated
- Other

What is your current employment status? **Please check one**

- Student
- Full time employed working 35 or more hours/week

- Part time employed working 1-34 hours/week
- Unemployed and looking for work
- Unemployed but not currently looking for work
- Retired
- Disabled, unable to work
- Other: Please explain\_\_\_\_\_

What is your family’s total household income? **Please check one**

- Less than \$20,000
- \$20,000 to \$34,999
- \$35,000 to \$49,999
- \$50,000 to \$74,999
- \$75,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 to \$149,999
- \$150,000 or more

Which of the following best describes your religious participation? **Please check one**

- Attends a religious service more than once a week
- Attends a religious service weekly
- Attends a religious service once a month
- Attends a religious service a few times a year
- Never attends a religious service

Have you watched the entire series *Breaking Bad* (from the first episode to the finale)? **Please check one**

- Yes
- No

If yes, how many times have you watched the entire series of *Breaking Bad*? **Please check one**

- Just once
- 2-3 times
- 4-5 times
- 6 or more times

During what specific incident in the television series did Walter White “break bad?” – first commit an act you thought was unjustified?

---



---



---



---

During what specific incident in the television series did Walter White commit his first criminal act?

---



---



---

Where any of Walter White's criminal (illegal) acts justified?

No                      Yes                      do not know

If, yes, describe one of the illegal acts committed by Walter White that was justified

---



---

Have you ever been fined for a civil infraction? (such as a parking ticket, speeding ticket, jay-walking) **Please check one**

- Yes
- No
- Do not remember

Have you ever been arrested for a misdemeanor? (such as shoplifting, underage drinking, assault) **Please check one**

- Yes
- No
- Do not remember

Have you ever been arrested for a felony? (such as illegal drug possession, DUI, property damage over \$100, assault with a weapon) **Please check one**

- Yes
- No
- Do not remember

Do you think marijuana should be legalized? **Please check one**

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Do you think other drugs like crystal meth should be legalized? **Please check one**

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Do you/ have you ever owned a gun? **Please check one**

- Yes
- No

Have you ever been in a gang? **Please check one**

- Yes
- No

Do you think the television series *Breaking Bad* accurately portrays what happens to most people who engage in the act of “cooking” crystal meth in the final scene of the television series when Walter White dies?

- No
- Yes
- Unsure

Do you believe Walter White should have been punished for cooking crystal meth?

- No
- Yes
- Unsure

If yes, which of the following best described the punishment you believe Walter White deserved?

- A monetary fine
- Jail time of 1 year or less
- Prison time of more than 1 year but less than 5 years
- Prison time of more than 5 years.
- Death penalty