

## Journalists do a poor job of correctly identifying copycat crime and social science hasn't helped.

*In the past mass shootings have often been referred to as 'copycat' crimes in media reports. But are these crimes truly triggered by earlier events? **Ray Surette** writes that identifying copycat crimes has long been problematic because many independent crimes that are similar are often identified as 'copycat'. Using a new measure, he finds that in a sample of purported copycat crimes, less than 40 percent could actually be described as true copycat crimes. He argues that better knowledge of trends in copycat crimes through such new measures could help decision making in criminal justice policy.*



### Copycat crime and the media

Recent mass shootings in the US have once again raised concerns over the possibility of 'copycat' crimes by others. When media outlets claim that a crime is a copycat, these claims are nearly always presented without an objective assessment of their validity. Whether a crime is labeled as a copycat or not is a haphazard process directed by how closely related a purported copycat crime looks like a prior crime and how often the 'copycat' label is applied by the media.

In reality, the nature of copycat crimes is unique in comparison with other types of crimes. Copycat crime implies the coupling of two crimes where a primary cause of one crime is found to be the offender's exposure to media content about a prior crime. In order for a crime to be a 'copycat' it must have been inspired by an earlier, publicized original crime. The 'generator' crime and subsequent copycat crime are seen as sharing a unique media-linked dynamic, with the first crime serving as a crime model for the later crime and with substantial elements of the first crime present in the second. While copycat crime is thought to be an element of a substantial number of offender histories, the identification of copycat crime has proven problematic because crimes that are actually independent but similar, follow each other in time, and receive media attention, are likely to be mistakenly identified as a copycat crime set. In contrast, true copycat crimes can go unrecognized, particularly when they are significantly separated by time or place.


### The difficulties in measuring copycat crime.

Despite the fact that recent estimates of the prevalence of copycat crime are that 1 in 4 adult male offenders have attempted to commit a copycat crime in their criminal careers, too few copycat crimes and copycat criminals have been identified to allow for adequate research. Researchers have instead relied on anecdotal evidence to gauge the extent and nature of copycat crime and much of what circulates as knowledge about copycat crime is speculation derived from the examination of a small number of cases that have never been objectively validated. It has usually been journalists who have determined whether a particular crime is identified as a copycat crime or not. The result is that a questionable set of crimes have been grouped together in the public mind as 'copycat' crimes and the rigorous study of copycat crime has stalled. A more objective means of differentiating copycat from non-copycat crimes is needed so that the study of copycat crime can move beyond a subjective methodology dependent upon anecdotal case studies and subjective classifications.

As an initial step in measuring copycat crime, we developed a methodology to empirically score crimes on a scale from "unsubstantiated" to "substantiated". The copycat crime measurement utilizes seven factors to assess candidate copycat crimes and follows the basic logic that the more copycat indicators present, the more

substantiated a crime is as a copycat event. No single indicator is an absolute requisite for a crime to be a copycat crime, but failure to meet the first factor is an automatic disqualifier. Possible copycat crimes can have their initial scores increased or decreased as new information comes to light. The score of a crime as a copycat crime is therefore interpreted as its likelihood of being a copycat crime based on the currently available information. Listed in Table 1, the seven elements of copycat crime collectively provide measurable indicators that differentiate substantiated copycat crimes from unsubstantiated copycat crimes.

**Table 1 – Indicators of unsubstantiated versus substantiated copycat crimes**

		
	<b>Unsubstantiated Copycat Crime</b>	<b>Substantiated Copycat Crime</b>
<b>Time order and time proximity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exposure to Media coincides with or follows crime or is greater than 5 years in past.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exposure precedes crime but is less than 5 years.</li> </ul>
<b>Theme consistency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>General nature of media crime not observed and no characteristics of media theme present.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>General nature of crime as portrayed by the media observed, e.g. adoption of personae, dress and mannerisms of original crime.</li> </ul>
<b>Crime scene specificity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Crime does not match a particular scene or actions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Elements from a specific media scene are observed.</li> </ul>
<b>Repetitive viewing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Media are not viewed or viewed only once by the offender.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Media production is viewed multiple times by offender</li> </ul>
<b>Self-editing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Media exposure is in normal fashion.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Close attention to specific crime content.</li> </ul>
<b>Offender statements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discredits media as an influence source and credits other sources.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offender makes statements crediting media as a significant crime source.</li> </ul>
<b>Second party statements</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Non-journalist sources discredit media as an influence source and credit other sources.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Second parties make statements crediting media as a significant crime source.</li> </ul>

For crimes where an offender was available for possible comments – for example, following an arrest – the total possible copycat crime scores ranged from 0 to 9. For those crimes where no offender was available – crimes with no arrest or offender death – total possible copycat crime scores ranged from 0 to 7. An event's score was divided by its potential maximum score to provide a final copycat score that ranged between 0 and 1. A crime's final score should not be interpreted as a hard probability measure of the likelihood of an incident being a copycat; for instance, a crime with a score of 0.0 could be a true copycat crime due to a lack of information.

Fifty-three candidate copycat crimes linked to commercial movies candidate crimes were scored on the 7 factors. Scores from 0.66 to 1.0 were categorized as a 'substantiated copycat crime'; crimes with a score of 0.34 to 0.65 were labeled as a 'possible copycat crime'; and crimes that scored between 0.0 and 0.33 were described as an 'unsubstantiated copycat crime'. Not surprisingly, in the demonstration test, the label 'copycat crime' was found to be often questionably attached to crimes. About one quarter of the crimes presented in the media as copycat crimes were described as such, based upon inadequate information with slightly fewer than 40 percent (or 2 out of 5) of the examined crimes were described as copycat crimes based on what was deemed as adequate information.

### **The importance of having better measures of copycat crime**

With the means to more objectively identify copycat crimes, long-term trends in this type of crime can be studied and

understood, and we can determine whether or not copycat crimes are increasing or decreasing. Within a longitudinal analysis, questions regarding the distribution of copycat crime events, including how the level of copycat crime differs by era, culture and region can be explored. Are copycat crimes more often individual or group acts, spontaneous or planned, instrumental or emotive? Is a copycat crime motivated by risk reduction substantially different from crime motivated by media attention? The role of the Internet and other new social media in the generation of copycat crime is a current concern and there is a need for quantitative study of legacy media compared with new media Internet based outlets and digital social media. These research questions and policy issues necessitate that a better means of identifying the copycat crime phenomena first be available.

To date, conclusions regarding the media's role in copycat crime have been hampered by the dearth of empirical research, a direct result of the lack of measurement of the phenomenon. Better knowledge of copycat trends and its nature would help in the making of decisions about criminal justice policy, clinical treatment of delinquency, and coverage of crime by journalists. Copycat crime is an important element of the overall crime picture and its importance is expected to increase as society becomes a more mediated, celebrity-focused, social media dominated culture.

*This article is based on the paper "[Measuring Copycat Crime](#)" by Ray Surette in *Crime Media Culture*.*

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author

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Ray Surette is a Professor in the Department of Criminal Justice at the University of Central Florida. His recent works include *Media, Crime, and Criminal Justice: Images, Realities, and Policies* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) and *The Media and Criminal Justice Policy*. His current research focuses on copycat crime, media crime and criminal justice, and computer vision and public space surveillance camera systems.



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