



# The myth of increased crime in Japan: A false perception of crime frequency in post-disaster situations



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## ABSTRACT

People tend to perceive that crime is widespread in post-disaster situations. This common misconception, also known as the myth of increased crime, was examined based on an online convenience sample of 600 people. A 11-item questionnaire survey was designed to examine what types of criminal acts people assumed would increase in post-disaster situations, as well as whether the amount of media consumption and preferences for media coverage of crime would affect the perceived frequency of post-disaster crime. Results found that people assumed that only theft, fraud, and looting, would increase after disasters, while they did not seem to think that sex offense, assault, and murder, would increase. Also, results of regression analysis found that only age, weekly hours of Internet access, and the person's preference for media coverage of daily crime were found to be significant predictors of the myth, although the present prediction models failed to provide a satisfactory explanation. Unexpectedly, hours of television viewing and one's preference for media coverage of post-disaster crime were found to have no significant effects on the perceived frequency of post-disaster crime. Types of criminal acts misperceived to increase in post-disaster situations and alternative sources of the myth are discussed to some extent.

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## 1. Introduction

People have been found susceptible to a number of misconceptions, when it comes to human behavior in disasters [1–10]. One classic example of such disaster 'myths' is the assumption that crime is on the rise in disaster-affected areas. Past research has been repeatedly indicating that people generally show altruism and prosociality in post-disaster situations rather than selfishness and antisociality [10–14]. Furthermore, in many cases the crime rate of disaster-affected areas decreases or at least does not increase in post-disaster years [9,15–18]. Nevertheless, people tend to expect crime to flourish in post-disaster situations [19–22].

Although it is now evident that people hold less accurate perceptions of post-disaster crime [23,24], still little is known about this tendency. For instance, it is still unknown exactly what types of criminal acts (e.g., looting, sex offense, murder) people assume will actually increase in post-disaster situations. Likewise, many disaster researchers have been claiming that the mass media are a primary source of disaster myths [12,24–31], as disaster behavior portrayed by the media is in many cases exaggerated, possibly causing people's misunderstandings about such behavior. Nonetheless, little research, if any, has empirically examined effects of the mass media exclusively on people's perceptions of post-

disaster crime. Therefore, the present study is designed to fulfill these purposes.

### 1.1. Post-disaster crime in Japan

It is taken as a given among disaster researchers that crime does not increase in post-disaster situations [9,15,16]. Japan seems to be no exception to this statement. After the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, in which more than 6400 people lost their lives, the number of crimes in the affected areas was found to have decreased, when compared to the previous year [17]. Furthermore, the National Police Agency issued an official statement approximately three weeks after the 2011 Great East Japan Disaster, which resulted in the loss of 15,884 lives with 2636 still missing [32], that serious crimes such as murder, robbery, and rape had not increased in the three most affected areas, Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima [33]. A year later they further announced that the number of crimes in the affected areas had generally decreased on a year-to-year comparison after the disaster [18].

Of course, post-disaster situations are not crime-free. For instance, a variety of antisocial behavior was reported to have occurred in New Orleans right after the 2005 Hurricane Katrina, although some of these reports were later found seriously distorted by the mass media [12,34–36]. The occurrence of post-disaster crime (e.g., looting) is thought to be subject to strong preconditions that favor such antisocial behavior (e.g., poverty [5,37]). Also,

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it is important to note that the city of New Orleans had quite high crime rates even before the disaster [38].

Japan has had lower crime rates [39] and economic disparities [40] compared to the U.S. Yet, increases in certain types of post-disaster crime were actually observed in the past (motorcycle theft in the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake [17] and a variety of theft crimes in the 2011 Great East Japan Disaster [18,41–44]). As some disaster researchers have been insisting [12], some opportunistic misdeeds may occur in post-disaster situations that are not attributable to organized gangs or disaster victims in need. Thus, some exceptions can occasionally be observed after disasters. However, it still seems reasonable, on the whole, to assume that the crime rate of the disaster-affected areas did not generally increase in post-disaster years in Japan, consistent with what disaster researchers in Western countries have been claiming over the past decades [3,9,16,45].

With this background, the present study first examines what types of criminal acts Japanese people assume will increase after a disaster. Past research only mentioned that people tend to misperceive the frequency of *post-disaster crime*; no specific criminal acts have been suggested as myth-susceptible based on empirical research up to now. Also, the present study explores whether the amount of media consumption, such as television viewing and Internet access, and preferences for crime news affect the degree to which people misperceive the frequency of post-disaster crime. This notion apparently sounds neither new nor novel, as many disaster researchers have been pointing out influence of the mass media on disaster myths over the past decades [12,24–30]. However, as already mentioned, no research has empirically examined effects of media consumption and preferences for crime news on *the myth of increased crime*. The present study is first to empirically explore this assumption.

### 1.2. Hypotheses of the present study

There are two hypotheses in the present study. First, the study examines what types of criminal acts people assume will actually increase in a post-disaster situation. On the basis of National Police Agency's six crime categories (theft crime, white-collar crime, moral offense, violent crime, serious crime, and other crimes) [18], theft, fraud, sex offense, violent assault, and murder are taken from the first five categories in order to measure people's perceived frequency of post-disaster crime. Looting is also added to these five criminal acts as a disaster-related criminal behavior, although looting is not included in the official crime statistics in Japan. Whether true or not, all these six criminal acts were reported to have occurred in past disasters by the domestic and foreign mass media [19,20,41,42,44,46,47]. The first hypothesis of the study predicts that people assume that all these criminal acts will increase in post-disaster situations.

H<sub>1</sub>: People assume that theft, fraud, sex offense, violent assault, and murder will all increase in post-disaster situations.

As for the second hypothesis, the present study looks into how the amount of media consumption (television viewing and Internet access) affects the myth of increased crime. In addition to that, effects of the person's preferences for media coverage of daily crime and post-disaster crime on the myth of increased crime are also explored. Presumably, along with the amount of media consumption, these preferences should contribute to strengthening belief in the myth. Thus, the second hypothesis predicts that the amount of media consumption and preferences for media coverage of crime will increase the person's perceived frequency of post-disaster crime.

H<sub>2</sub>: The more time people spend watching television and getting on the Internet and the more attention one pays to media coverage of daily crime and post-disaster crime, the higher the

perceived frequencies of all the six post-disaster criminal acts will be.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The present study employed a convenience sample provided by a Japanese online survey company. Participants were randomly recruited from a panel of registered online respondents held by the online survey company. This survey company holds more than 2.2 million potential online respondents all over the country. These online respondents are recruited by the survey company through its website. Whenever respondents complete an online survey, they can earn participation points that can be used as a cash voucher on a variety of online shopping sites.

A total of 600 Japanese participants (379 men [63.17%] and 221 women [36.83%]) took part in the study. Their ages ranged from 20 to 69 years old ( $M=47.11$ ,  $SD=11.11$ ; 8.00% of the participants were in their 20s, 15.67% in the 30s, 32.50% in the 40s, 29.17% in the 50s, and 14.67% in the 60s). Comparing demographic details of the present sample to those of the current Japanese population (48.68% for men, 51.37% for women; 10.27% in the 20s, 13.11% in the 30s, 14.20% in the 40s, 12.15% in the 50s, and 14.43% in the 60 [48]), men were overrepresented in the present sample. Also, participants in the 40s and 50s did not appropriately reflect the proportions of the general population. Hence, great care needed to be taken, when interpreting present findings.

### 2.2. Materials

The web-based questionnaire contained 11 question items. The first two items measured the participant's average weekly hours of television viewing and Internet access. The next two items were prepared for measuring the degrees to which the participant would pay attention to media coverage of crime under non-disaster and post-disaster circumstances ('I usually pay a lot of attention to media reports on crime', 'I pay particular attention to media reports on crime after a disaster occurs') on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 5 (*totally agree*).

Six items were prepared for measuring the participant's perceived frequency of crimes in post-disaster situations, which were designed to capture the myth of increased crime. The frequency of six criminal acts (theft, fraud, looting, sex offense, assault, and murder) was rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*significantly decrease*) to 5 (*significantly increase*). Finally, in order to confirm that the mass media were the primary source of the myth of increased crime, participants were also asked to choose which information source they had relied on when they decided the perceived frequency of each criminal act. Nine information sources were prepared for this purpose; one's actual disaster experience, personal accounts of disaster victims, verbal rumors, the mass media (e.g., articles and accounts on TV, newspaper, the radio, and the Internet), Social Networking Services (SNSs; e.g., information on Twitter, Facebook, and online bulletin boards), non-fiction (e.g., interview programs, documentary programs, and their related books), fiction (movies, cartoons, and novels), other sources, and no particular source. This was a multiple-choice question, so that participants could choose as many information sources as they wanted.

### 2.3. Procedure

The present study was conducted at the end of February in 2015. The online survey company first randomly distributed an

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