Copycat Crime and Copycat Criminals

Ray Surette

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The Nature of
Copycat Crime

Let me give you a 101 on how to ghost ride
Pull up, hop out, all in one motion
Dancing on the hood while the car's still rollin'
Stuntin', shinin', flamboastin'
Get out the way, let Casper drive
Ghost ride, go crazy
Who that drivin'?
Patrick Swayze![1]

FOLLOWING THE INSTRUCTIONS FOUND IN THE ABOVE RAP song, "Ghost Riding It" by Mistah F.A.B., a young man puts his parents' car in neutral on a slight hill so that the car can roll forward. He opens the door and, with a friend, climbs out of the car onto the roof, taking a seat and waving to a second friend who is manning a camera. The rap song "Ghost Riding It" plays and, using his arms, the man gyrates as the car begins to speed up. The screen goes blank as the sounds of yelling and a crash are heard. Another media-driven copycat crime gone bad is in the books.[2]

The goal when ghost riding is to create the impression that a ghost is driving your car, or "whip" ("Ghost Riding the Whip" n.d.; Piersa 2009). Copycats of ghost riding the whip resulted in thousands of moving-vehicle offenses, several accidents and injuries, and a few fatalities. Via YouTube clips and Google searches (see Figure 1.1),

Figure 1.1   "Ghost Riding the Whip" Google Search Popularity, January 2004 to January 2019
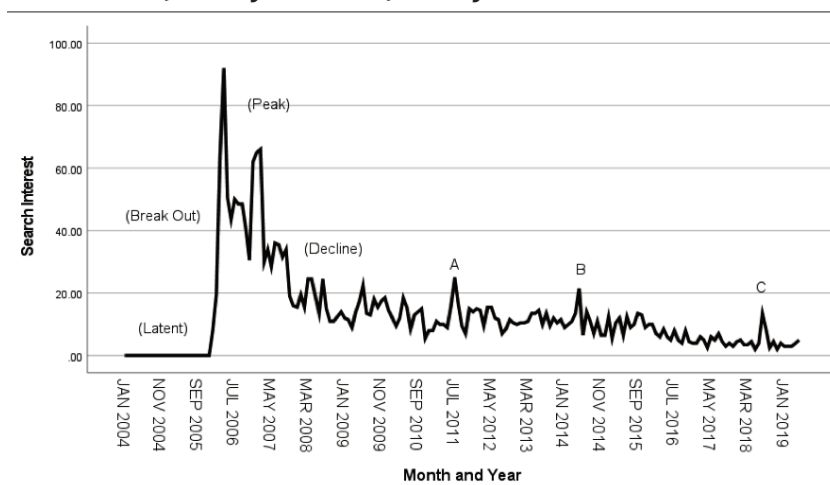
Source: Surette 2020a, 248.
  Notes: Results shown for "ghost ride the whip" and "ghostride the whip" summed and divided by two (verisons correlated at .664). (A) Family Force 5 concert. (B) Marvel *Ghost Rider* comic. (C) Drake dance challenge.

detailed instructions on ghost riding spread nationwide from a minority community to the middle class (Surette 2020a). Ghost riding the whip provides a digital example of a style of copycat crime where a crime is purposely recorded and distributed to audiences by the offenders (Surette 2016c). Bolstered by media that closely follow celebrities, generate a strong need in audience members to share content, and support the idea that some crimes are acceptable, performance-style copycat crimes have seen a significant increase (Chan et al. 2012; Penfold-Mounce 2010; Surette 2012, 2016c).

Not surprisingly in this modern-day cultural environment, copycat crime has become a recurring pop culture subject found in online streaming programs like *Copycat Killers* (www.reelz.com /copycat-killers) and commercial films such as Warner Brothers' 1995 movie *Copycat*. As online and social media have supplanted the traditional media of newspapers and broadcast television, the public and academic debate about media criminogenic effects and the nature and extent of copycat crime has amplified. But the discussion remains based on rare and unusual copycat crimes, poorly documented copycat crime anecdotes, and portrayals of copycat crimes found in infotain-

ment programming (Surette 2017). The ongoing debate reflects a backward portrait where bizarre, usually violent copycat crimes dominate, while the mundane reality of copycat crime is ignored. The central aim of this book is to clarify what copycat crime is and what it is not. To rigorously study copycat crime, it is important to be able to determine if a specific crime is a copycat. This task is not as easy as it might appear, and a first requirement for the study of copycat crime is to define it as a mutually exclusive set of criminal events separate from other crimes.

Defining Copycat Crime

In this book the term *copycat crime* refers to a crime whose cause lies in an offender's exposure to media about a prior crime.[3] Whereas a homicide requires only one crime and one victim for study, copycat crime is unique and problematic in the necessity that two crimes be validly tied together via the media. In a copycat crime pairing, the media chronologically yoke two crimes together. The crimes share a unique criminogenic connection, with the first serving as a generator for the later crime. Although the crimes can be separated by time and geography, the media are linking mechanisms, and the removal of the media would eliminate the occurrence or form of the subsequent copycat crime. In sum, calling a crime a copycat indicates that a unique criminological and psychological media-linked dynamic is operating.

Hence, for a crime to be a valid copycat crime, it must have been inspired by an earlier, media-publicized or -portrayed crime. The perpetrator of a copycat crime must have been exposed to the media content of the original crime and must have incorporated major elements of that crime into their offense (Helfgott 2015). At a minimum, a copycat crime requires a crime dyad, with at least one generator and one copycat crime. A generator crime can be a real crime covered in the news or portrayed in infotainment media or a fictional crime created in entertainment media. Generator crime content can be delivered by print, visual, audio, or new-media channels. Additionally, copycat crimes can range from detailed rote copies of a crime to composite crimes created from multiple media models, to amorphous adoptions of criminal personae (for example, when the 2012 Aurora, Colorado, movie theater shooter assumed the movie role of "The Joker"), to broadly motivated targetings of specific types of victims (Helfgott 2022, forthcoming). Anecdotal reports of examples include copycat

bank robberies (Livingstone 1982; Schmid and de Graaf 1982); race, school, and political disturbances (Hamblin, Jacobsen, and Miller 1973; Ritterband and Silberstein 1973; Spilerman 1970); and military coups (Li and Thompson 1975; Midlarksy 1970). A copycat crime can be committed by an individual, a small group, or a large collection of people and can encompass a range of criminal behaviors, including collective acts like rioting (Bohstedt and Williams 1988; Myers 2000), small-group crimes such as sniper and school shootings and hate crimes (Coleman 2004), individual acts such as suicide (Phillips 1979, 1982; Phillips, Lesyna, and Paight 1992), and lone-wolf terrorism (Nacos 2007; Phillips 2013; Tuman 2010; Weimann and Winn 1994). Copycat crime thus encompasses the full range of criminal activity from the trivial to the homicidal, and it is not the criminal behavior but the associated media dynamics that generate copycat crime and separate it from noncopycat crime.

In this conceptualization, most crimes are not copycat crimes, and as defined, a copycat crime can involve broad types of criminal behavior. However, for rigorous study, copycat crimes must be mutually exclusive from noncopycat crimes, and defining the basic elements required for a particular crime to be part of a copycat crime dyad is a necessary first step. A copycat crime pair will contain, at a minimum, the following:

1. A generator crime—an account or portrayal of a crime in a media product that is the precursor to a subsequent crime.
2. Criminogenic content—media content that encourages the committing of an emulated crime.
3. A copycat criminal—an individual who commits a crime after being influenced by criminogenic media content.
4. A copycat crime—a crime whose occurrence or form is shaped by criminogenic media content in a generator crime.

In the basic copycat crime process, fictional or real-world generator crimes are distributed via the media to create a threshold level of accessible criminogenic media content in society. The criminogenic content interacts with other social and individual factors to create a pool of potential copycat criminals who, when given the opportunity in the proper environment, commit copycat crimes. While a crime dyad is a minimum requirement—at least one generator and one copycat crime are needed—some copycat crime family trees involve multiple generator crimes where a set of crimes contribute unique indi-

vidual elements to a single copycat crime. Along the same lines, a heavily publicized generator crime can spawn multiple copycat derivatives and recurring waves of copycats so that one generator copycat crime, like a heavily publicized school shooting, can generate second- and third-generation copycats.[4]

Difficulties Studying Copycat Crime

The complicated and unique nature of copycat crime has rendered rigorous study of the phenomenon difficult (Langman 2017, 2018), and although there exists today a sizable amount of research on violent media's relationship to aggression, research on copycat crime has lagged. A leading reason for this deficiency is the difficulty in examining copycat crime levels (Landsbaum 2016). Whereas other crimes are comparatively easy to quantify and are routinely tallied, copycat crimes are not counted systematically, and debate about the extent of a copycat effect persists (Clarke and McGrath 1992; Stack 1987, 2000).

The invisibility of copycat crime is further exacerbated by its multicrime nature. Studying copycat crime first requires that a media link between two crimes be correctly recognized. A media-portrayed crime and its subsequent copycat crime can be so separated in space and time that an unknown number of copycat crimes invariably go unrecorded. As parodied by the online satire site *The Onion*,[5] the reality of false positives is a research concern when crimes that appear similar are incorrectly labeled as copycat crimes (see Coleman 2004 for a list of presumed copycat events).

> Copycat Criminals Continue to Mimic Liquor Store Robbery from 1822
> Noting the similar circumstances surrounding all of the cases, sources confirmed that countless copycat criminals continue to imitate the infamous Blackjack Collins' robbery of a liquor store in 1822. "We still see thousands of individuals each year who have clearly patterned their heists after Blackjack, an early American criminal who masked his face in cloth, walked into Johnsons' Spirit and Tobacco Shoppe brandishing a firearm, and screamed at the clerk, 'Give me the money!'", said criminal profiler Paul Gorman, adding that the meticulously recreated homages are typically executed by those—just like Collins—who seek to quickly increase their personal wealth. "And just as Blackjack fled the scene on horseback, we find that nearly every modern-day culprit uses some form of transportation to make their getaway, a hallmark of the initial crime that has repeated itself for nearly 200 years."

Hence, what is currently thought about copycat crime has been surmised from anecdotal, often haphazard, post hoc reports of crimes labeled as copycats. Although *The Onion's* 1822 copycat-generator criminal, Blackjack Collins, is fictional, the satire highlights the issue of research difficulty and leads to the question of why bother to study copycat crime.

Why Study Copycat Crime?

A small but steady stream of crimes described as copycat crimes can be easily found by search engines (Surette 2015b; Surette et al. 2021). Public concern connected to copycat terrorism, school shootings, mass and serial murderers, and suicides is now common. An irony of copycat crime is that the imitation of crime is perceived in criminology as both common and rare. Beginning with Italian criminologist Gabriel Tarde, since the late 1800s some criminologists have argued that the basic nature of crime is imitative, and this perception has led to the conclusion that much crime is copied from other perpetrators. Copycat crime is both common and uninteresting. Others see media-linked copycat crime as rare and applicable to such a small proportion of crime as to be unimportant.

There is some truth to both views. On the imitative-crime-is-common side, social learning theory has established that much crime is based on real-world crime models (Akers and Jensen 2003; Bandura 1973; Sutherland 1947). It is generally conceded in criminology that exposure to real-world crime models is important in the genesis of criminality and that a substantial proportion of crime is influenced through physically direct person-to-person modeling. Juveniles, in particular, are thought to model criminogenic parents, older siblings, and neighborhood offenders, especially when launching their criminal careers (Akers 2011; Sutherland, Cressey, and Luckerbill 1992). When queried, about one-fourth of adult offenders report that they have attempted a copycat crime, and many copycat offenders state that they attempted their copycat crime as teenagers (Surette 2013a; Surette and Chadee 2020; Surette and Maze 2015). Youthful copycat crime appears to be a jumping-off point for a substantial number of delinquents.

On the copycat-crime-is-rare side, it is true that media-generated criminality likely makes up only a small portion of all criminality and that the majority of crimes are not linked to media content. When asked, three of four offenders report that none of their crimes were copycat crimes

(Surette 2014; Surette and Maze 2015). If most crime is not generated by the media, and the imitation avenue that has received the most support in criminology is not the media but other people (Sutherland, Cressey, and Luckerbill 1992), why worry about media-generated copycat crime?

The answer is three pronged: recent changes in the nature of the media/audience relationship (Grodal 2003b; Surette 2020a), research suggesting the genesis role of media in the launching of juvenile criminal careers (Surette and Chadee 2020; Surette and Maze 2015), and evidence indicating that copycat crimes are increasing (Helfgott 2022, forthcoming) all raise the importance of studying copycat crime. Copycat crimes may be rare, but they influence crime trends, criminal justice policies, criminal careers, and public perceptions of criminality.

From the public's point of view, an ability for media content to generate real-world criminality has been a leading public concern about media effects on society for over 150 years (Surette 2015b, 2017). The question of the extent of the media's ability to generate crime lies at the crux of public concern regarding pernicious media effects. If, as many believe, the media are producing copiers of serial killers, terrorists, and other serious criminals, the public has reason to worry, while, ironically, being simultaneously fascinated by the copycat crimes they worry about.

Lastly, for social scientists in the fields of criminology and mass media, understanding the extent and dynamics of media-linked crime would help to explain the broader media effects on crime and justice and the media's relationship to noncriminal social behaviors. The study of copycat crime also has relevance for several criminology theories, including social learning, subcultural, cross-cultural, and life-course theories of crime. Copycat crime research would be additionally helpful in the study of the media's role in cognitive processing, the influence of the media on the adoption of behaviors, and the impact of media immersion on individuals. As crime's association with media has a unique history, copycat crime can provide an untapped reservoir for understanding broader media, crime, and social behavior questions.

Copycat Crime's Cultural History

Historically, the verb *to copy*, denoting the hand duplication of printed material, is thought to have appeared in 1580 (Surette 2015a).[6] The profession of copyist was recognized in the 1700s. Over the eighteenth century, the term *copyist* evolved, and by 1814 the derivative *copyism* began to refer to the negative behavior of imitators. Thereafter, the

word *copyism* was frequently used to disparage actors and artists (Siegelberg 2011). In parallel with the etymology of the word *copying*, references in popular culture to the media as a source of crime imitations can be traced to the 1600s. Sharpe (1999, 228–229)[7] noted that from the end of the 1600s, it was widely accepted that entertainment media accounts of crime encouraged real crime, a belief repeatedly expressed throughout the 1700s. For example, a 1728 pamphlet claimed that an honest young man was led to become a highway robber after seeing the play *The Beggar's Opera*. By the 1760s, newspaper reporting in the United States was being criticized for amplifying crime waves (Sharpe 1999). Widespread public acceptance of media-generated crime continued into the nineteenth century, as shown in an 1828 newspaper editorial:

> We deem it of little benefit to the cause of morals thus to familiarize the community, and especially the younger parts of it, to the details of misdemeanor and crime. . . . [I]t suggests to the novice in vice all the means of becoming expert in its devise. The dexterity of one knave, arrested and sent to State Prison, is adopted from newspaper instruction by others yet at large. (Bleyer 1927, 157, citing the *Evening Post,* June 6, 1828).

Based on several heavily covered anecdotal examples, by the latter half of the Victorian era, weekly print periodicals known as penny dreadfuls were widely characterized as drivers of juvenile crime (Dunae 1979; Springhall 1994).

> It is almost a daily occurrence with magistrates to have before them boys who, having read a number of "dreadfuls", followed the examples set forth in such publications, robbed their employers, bought revolvers with the proceeds, and finished by running away from home, and installing themselves in the back streets as "highwaymen." This and many other evils the "penny dreadful" is responsible for. It makes thieves of the coming generation, and so helps fill our gaols (Springhall 1994, quoting Alfred Harmsworth 1893).

This early public acceptance of a media-crime link was succinctly summed up in the 1886 British magazine *Punch* (quoted by Dunae 1979, 138): "The Boy Pirate and The Boy Brigand of fiction soon becomes the boy burglar and the boy thief of fact." The notion of crime generated as the result of media content has thus been popular for 300 years, but the labeling of the media-crime connection as "copycat crime" did not happen quickly.

Box 1.1   First Media Reference to Copycat Crime
Murdered Man's Diary Found: "Copycat" Inquiry
Daily Telegraph Reporter

A diary belonging to George Gerald Stobbs, 48, of Mansfeldt Road, Chesterfield, who was found murdered in a hedge at Clodhall Lane, Baslow, Derbyshire, on Wednesday, was found yesterday by Mrs. Frances Adlington, wife of a Chesterfield businessman. She was out with her two dogs at the time.

She found it in a wood 300 yards from the main drive of Stubbing Court, Wingerworth, where the murder is believed to have been committed. Following this, police investigating the "copycat" murder found a track over a quarter of a mile long, made by Stobbs' dragged body.

A police spokesman said last night: "We think it unlikely that one man could have dragged the body the whole distance. It would have taken at least two powerful men. One or both might well have been concerned in the killing of William Elliott, 60, in the bubble car murder nine months ago."

Elliott, of Haddon Road, Bakewell, was found murdered not far from where Stobbs was found. Their cars were abandoned in the same road in Chesterfield, nine miles away.

Source: "Murdered Man's Diary Found" 1961.

It was not until the late 1800s that the words *copy* and *cat* were united and the disparaging of social acts as "copycat behavior" appeared.[8] It took another seventy years before the words *copycat* and *crime* were combined. Reproduced in Box 1.1, the first documented reference to a copycat crime occurred in the United Kingdom in April 1961 in a *Daily Telegraph* newspaper story ("Murdered Man's Diary Found" 1961). Eight months later the phrase *copycat criminal* appeared in a December 1961 *New York Times* article by David Dressler, "The Case of the Copycat Criminal." Once born, the expression *copycat crime*, together with general acceptance of its social impact, steadily increased.

From its popular culture roots and under different names, media-generated copycat crime became a phenomenon widely acknowledged by the public and slowly began to attract serious academic attention. In the twentieth century, research in two areas began to empirically explore

copycat effects. The first area of research involves copycat suicides. Sociologist David Phillips called the media-generated copycat effect on suicides the "Werther Effect," so named for the main character of Johann Goethe's 1774 novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, who commits suicide when faced with unrequited love. The second copycat research area deeply examined is copycat terrorism, characterized as having a "contagion effect" in the terrorism research literature (Poland 1988; Tuman 2010). Within the terrorism research literature, there are few doubts about the media's ability to motivate copycat terrorism. Numerous anecdotal descriptions of media-linked terrorist events, including kidnappings, hostage-taking bank robberies, airline hijackings employing parachutes or altitude bombs, suicide bombings, and online beheadings of hostages, are available (see Poland 1988; Tuman 2010). The early anecdotal copycat crime cases, in combination with research on media-copied suicides and terrorism, established public support for the proposition that media-linked copycat crimes occur at a significant rate.[9] Despite impetus from these two research streams and the availability of a large set of anecdotal historical examples, criminology remained reluctant to study copycat crime.

Criminology Discovers Copycat Crime

With the popular notion of media-generated crime already in circulation among the press and the public, in the late 1800s criminologist Gabriel Tarde applied the idea of imitation to the study of crime and legitimized, at least for a short time, the concept of copycat crime in academia. Tarde coined the phrase *suggesto-imitative assaults* to describe copycat crimes and provided anecdotal examples, the best known being murders he linked to Jack the Ripper (Tarde [1912] 1968, 340):

> What more striking example of suggesto-imitative assault could there be than the series of mutilations of women, begun in the month of September 1888 in London in the Whitechapel district! Never perhaps has the pernicious influence of general news been more apparent. The newspapers were filled with the exploits of Jack the Ripper, and, in less than a year, as many as eight absolutely identical crimes were committed in various crowded streets of the great city. This is not all; there followed a repetition of these same deeds outside of the capital and very soon there was even a spreading of them abroad. At Southampton attempt to mutilate a child; at Bradford horrible mutilation of another child; at Hamburg murder accompanied by disemboweling of a little girl; in the United States disemboweling of four negroes.

In addition to making imitation the main crime engine, Gabriel Tarde was the first criminologist to consider the media as an important source of crime ideas. His best-known quote explicitly pointed to a strong media influence: "Infectious epidemics spread with the air or the wind; epidemics of crime follow the line of the telegraph" (Tarde [1912] 1968, 340). Although Tarde's ideas about crime quickly fell into disfavor in criminology following criticism of his research, other academic references to copycat crimes began to appear in the 1920s (see, for example, Bleyer 1927).

The idea of media-linked imitation as a crime-causing process flourished for only a short time with Gabriel Tarde but survived more permanently within psychological theories and within a focus on face-to-face imitation in criminology. Popular use of the word *copycat*, academic thought about imitative crime, and media influences on deviant behaviors were to remain separated for another sixty years. Outside academia, media-linked crimes continued to be identified by the public as a concern from the nineteenth into the twentieth centuries, despite academic abandonment of Tarde's advocacy of media-generated criminogenic imitation.

In twentieth-century criminology, imitative crime was subsumed within Edwin Sutherland's criminological theory of "differential association," where face-to-face interactions were felt to trump media influences. For the public, however, the plausibility of media-driven imitative crime never lost popularity and continued to influence public policy. From the Victorian-era penny dreadfuls, to the dime novels and yellow journalism of the 1890s, to the radio programs and movies of the 1920s and 1930s, the media remained commonly perceived by the public and policymakers as sources of criminogenic imitation. The first serious effort to study media effects on society, the Payne Fund studies in the United States, led to the adoption of the Motion Picture Production or Hays Code in the 1930s, a set of voluntary rules and guidelines meant to make movies safe for the public (Hays 1932; Surette 2015a). The code clearly reflected the belief that media crime models generate criminal imitators, stating,

> Crimes Against the Law. These shall never be presented in such a way as to throw sympathy with the crime as against law and justice or to inspire others with a desire for imitation.
>   1. Murder:
>   a. The technique of murder must be presented in a way that will not inspire imitation.

    b. Brutal killings are not to be presented in detail.
    c. Revenge in modern times shall not be justified.
2. Methods of Crime should not be explicitly presented:
    a. Theft, robbery, safe-cracking, and dynamiting of trains,
       mines, buildings, etc., should not be detailed in method.
    b. Arson must be subject to the same safeguards.
    c. The use of firearms should be restricted to the essentials.
    d. Methods of smuggling should not be presented.

Following the Payne Fund studies and the Hays Code, media-generated imitative crime continued to remain accepted by the public through the 1940s and generated a brief crusade against comic books as a cause of juvenile delinquency in the early 1950s (Nyberg 1998; Sparks and Sparks 2002).[10] However, the media as a crime generator was not reintroduced as a source of serious study in criminology until the age of television.

In the 1950s, criminologist Daniel Glaser (1956) reformulated Sutherland's theory of differential association to include media influence and reintroduced to criminology the media as a significant crime source. A second major push in the reintroduction of media as a crime generator was the development of social learning theory pioneered by Albert Bandura (1973), who expanded the ideas of behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner (1988) from the behavior-modification lab to everyday society. The social learning perspective sees behavior as acquired from watching others and learning what to expect from imitating their behavior. In addition, heated public debate about media effects and a large body of research on media and aggression were triggered by government hearings in the 1960s on possible negative social effects from media; a cluster of airline hijackings widely credited to copycat effects in news media coverage; a 1966 fictional commercial film, *The Doomsday Flight*, about an airline hijacking; and the first television-raised generation entering their teenage prime delinquency years.

These divergent forces all contributed to the academic acceptance of media-linked copycat crime in the 1960s. Based on the theoretical efforts of Glaser and Bandura, newsworthy copycat crimes, and popular culture portrayals, by the end of the 1960s a criminogenic role for the media was present in criminological theory, and the phrase *copycat crime* began to appear in the popular media. By the end of the 1970s, the idea of copycat crime had been widely popularized, as reflected in dialogue from an October 27, 1977, episode of the ABC television comedy *Barney Miller* (Episode 6, Season 4, "Copycat"):

DETECTIVE YEMANA: Mr. Boston here was robbed by a guy who used the same M.O. as he saw on TV last night.

CAPTAIN MILLER: Another copycat crime! That's the fifth in the last two weeks.

DETECTIVE YEMANA: Yeah. There's a lot of good things on. It's the new season.

Copycat crime's time had come; thereafter it was a widely accepted, easily recognized criminological concept. Pop culture references to copycat crime and periodic real-world media-linked crimes kept copycat crime in the public mind through the 1980s. Two impactful sets of crimes in 1983—the poisoning of over-the-counter medicines mimicking the poisoning of Tylenol headache medicine (see Box 8.1) and a wave of antigovernment protest bombings—dramatically brought copycat crime home to the public and marked the beginning of a significant increase in the use of the term and interest in its study.

By the end of the twentieth century, copycat crime was a concept available to quickly describe, categorize, and explain selected crimes. The year 1995 was a watershed for the concept. For the first time, the term *copycat crime* was employed in the public debate about media criminogenic effects as stories were published about a crime labeled as a copycat of a crime portrayed in the movie *Money Train* (see Borg 1995; Holloway 1995). The film depicted a scene in which a New York City subway toll booth was doused with gasoline and set afire by a psychotic criminal. Following the film's release, a similar crime was committed in the New York City subway system. While the film character was saved, the real-world toll collector died from his burns. The timing and similarity of the movie crime and the real-world crime launched a debate about the criminogenic effects of media in general and movies in particular. In the same year, the film *Copycat*, about a psychologist who lectures on serial killers and finds herself pursued by a serial killer who copies prior serial killers, further cemented the idea of media-generated copycat crimes in the public's mind. By the end of 1995, the idea of copycat crime had become so engrained in the public psyche that it began to appear in stories about sports and fashion (Surette 2015b).[11]

Mediated Crime

The technological evolution of media enabled the cultural acceptance of copycat crime as a social phenomenon. Examination of the historical development of the media reveals a persistent trend. Each advance in

media technology brought the mediated experience, the experience that an individual has when experiencing an event through the media, closer to what it would be like to experience the event in the real world. As the first mass media, print media provided narratives and factual information but left to readers the generation of visual imagery and emotional reactions. In the late 1800s, artists' drawings and then photographs initially moved print media a small step toward imaging the real world, but the phonograph and radio, which provided sound, and home radio, which added live coverage and emotional dialogue, nudged the mediated experience substantially nearer to a real-world experience in the early 1900s. In the next media evolution in the 1920s, full-length commercial films provided continuous visual action and eventually sound, which again moved the media-based experience closer to a real-world one. Movies became more graphic and realistic through the 1930s and 1940s, until the 1950s television networks provided the first mediated experience combining easy access, live coverage, sound, moving images, and home delivery (Surette 2015a). Over the second half of the twentieth century, media technology evolved further to create delivery vehicles that increased access to media content and broader content choices for consumers. The late-twentieth-century introduction of electronic interactive games and computer-generated images poised the mediated experience via virtual and augmented reality to be truly competitive with and sometimes preferable to real-world experiences. Importantly, by the twenty-first century, technology changes moved the media audience from passive consumers to active content-creating participants (Surette 2017).

   In terms of crime, individuals today can experience crime through the media and have the sensation of undergoing an actual crime experience. A media consumer can be a crime fighter, crime victim, or criminal in a way that realistically mimics each role. The cumulative result for copycat crime is that currently a multimedia environment ubiquitously presents realistic, graphic, and instructive crime models that can be interactively test-driven by potential copycat offenders. While the experience of real-world crime is concentrated among the poor and socially vulnerable, the experience of realistic mediated crime is a potentially universal experience. We live in a time where criminogenic media are parsed, recast, and filtered through a digital, visually dominated, multimedia web. In addition to the glut of crimes found in entertainment media, some real-world crimes have their images shared in real time in social media and become crime news. Their reenactments

appear in entertainment films and television programming and audience-produced YouTube videos. Through such avenues, mediated crime is realistic and influential, is repeatedly recycled, and cumulates in the popularity of social-media-driven copycat performance crimes (Surette 2016c). More than ever, crimes in the media are both culled for instructions on how to commit them and emulated for the attention they garner.

Contemporary media influence how the public perceives crime and justice, and criminology concedes that peer-to-peer imitation plays a role in many crimes. However, the goal of this book is not to explore either dimension. Other works discuss the general portrait of crime and justice found in the media and the role of the media in people's beliefs about crime and support for criminal justice policies, as well as the media's impact on criminal justice (see Surette 2015a for an overview). Similarly, the process of direct person-to-person imitation of crime, particularly among delinquent peers, has been a significant element of criminological theorizing since the 1930s, with Sutherland's theory of differential association. In contrast, this work focuses on the set of crime influences generated through media-provided criminal models. As such, it explores copycat crime as it is commonly perceived—as a result of criminogenic media—and not the result of real-world crime models, such as a neighborhood delinquent gang leader or the influence of a criminal parent or sibling. If the media have important social effects on crime, it is through the media-generated emulation of crimes that the strongest effects will appear. Media-generated copycat crime marks the nexus where the media's criminogenic influences are determined, where public fears reside, and where calls for public policies arise.

Despite the social drivers and copycat crime's long evolution from a marginal concept largely ignored in criminology to its current embrace, copycat crime remains sparsely researched. It is erroneously, albeit commonly, portrayed in the media in an inverse manner that creates a perception that is the opposite of reality. For copycat crime that means that bizarre, violent, rare crimes, such as school shootings and terror attacks, are put forth as representative, while more mundane copycat crimes such as moving vehicle offenses and vandalism are ignored. In addition, a major issue in the study of copycat crime remains the continued lack of coherent, interdisciplinary theoretical discussion. The discussion that is readily available tends to be more descriptive than explanatory (Surette et al. 2021). Capping off the importance for studying contemporary copycat crime is the development of new interactive social media and the accompanying heightened audience participation in the creation and

distribution of content. The balance of this book strives to correct the misconceptions circulating about copycat crime within the contemporary new-media environment, to develop theoretical perspectives for understanding the generation of copycat crime, and to provide directions for needed policies and research.

Copycat crime exists today as a phenomenon with high public interest but little public understanding. Reports of horrific crimes labeled as copycat crimes regularly peak interest in the relationship between media and crime, but despite periodic attention and expressions of concern, specific research-based information about criminogenic media effects is not readily available. Instead, rare violent copycat crimes have dominated the literature, few copycat criminals have been studied or interviewed, little scientifically adequate research has been conducted, and, not surprisingly, well-grounded generalizations about copycat crime have been sparse. Although the phrase *copycat crime* appeared more than half a century ago, researchers still largely rely on anecdotal reports from journalists to gauge the extent and nature of copycat crime, with the result that many crimes are labeled as copycats without thoughtful assessment. While debate over pernicious media effects continues, with the most recent revolving around video games and social media, a discussion is lacking about copycat crime set in a broad array of scientific disciplines. A coherent summary of current knowledge, theories, and speculation about copycat crime in the contemporary digital, social media world is needed. As a response, this book explores the relevant current copycat crime research, theories, and knowledge.

Organization

The following chapters discuss copycat crime in terms of the following: evidence of its existence and prevalence; what we currently know about copycat crime; types of offenders, crimes, and media; models of the dynamics of copycat crime; and research that needs to be pursued and policies that are indicated. The text draws from research conducted in multiple disciplines, including criminal justice, criminology, sociology, political science, law, public administration, journalism, biology, psychology, and communications. Examples are drawn from the popular culture media sources of magazines, newspapers, music, video games, films, and the internet. Both the allure and the reality of

copycat crime are explored, with a focus on social media. The work is offered as an entrée into the extant research and unaddressed research questions regarding copycat crime for interested individuals, researchers, and policymakers.

Chapter 2: Copycat Crime in Theory

Chapter 2 introduces five theoretical perspectives that are applicable to copycat crime. Starting with imitation and the disciplines of biology and psychology, a foundation for understanding copycat crime is laid out. Ideas regarding imitation are followed by descriptions of research on social contagion and the diffusion of innovations. The fourth area of discussion covers social learning theory; the fifth and last area describes the relevant media studies concepts. The basic causal processes, theoretical concepts, and working hypotheses underpinning each theoretical pillar are introduced, setting up their application to copycat crime in Chapters 5 and 6.

Chapter 3: Copycat Effects in Practice

The existence of media-induced copycat effects has been questioned and their importance disparaged by, among others, Clarke and McGrath (1992), Stack (1987, 2000), Torrecilla and colleagues (2019), and Sutherland, Cressey, and Luckerbill (1992). Chapter 3 reviews the research concerning pernicious media-generated copycat effects not associated with crime. It addresses the question of what evidence there is for media effects on noncriminal behavior. There does exist good evidence of copycat effects in noncriminal behaviors, and a substantial set of research has been conducted on media-induced copycat suicides and on the effect of violent media on socially aggressive behavior. Research on advertising also contributes to belief in media-induced effects on social behavior. As a whole, this research provides evidence and support for a substantial media behavioral effect on consumers and the potential importance of copycat crime as a social phenomenon.

Chapter 4: Measuring Copycat Crime

In the same manner that the association between two weakly related variables may be statistically significant but substantially irrelevant, copycat effects may occur in the world but be so infrequent as to be

unimportant. As the substantive importance of copycat crime is some-times questioned, a review of the estimates of its prevalence is included. Chapter 4 therefore looks at the empirical methods employed concerning the determination of copycat crime waves and the measurement and identification issues that have retarded the study of copycat crime, along with historical approaches for studying crime waves and crime clusters. The first issue—the prevalence of copycat crime—has been estimated with a set of surveys that asked respondents if they had committed a copycat crime in their lifetime. The next issue—how to objectively assess evidence for copycat crime clusters and distinguish a valid copycat crime cluster from a random distribution of criminal events—has been examined by researchers using time-series crime data and varied quantitative approaches.

Chapter 5: Imitation, Contagion, and Diffusion

Having established reasonable grounds for the existence of a persistent copycat effect, Chapter 5 begins the two-chapter task of applying each theoretical perspective to copycat crime, with Chapter 5 covering imitation, contagion, and diffusion. First, a biological impetus for the imitation of crime is proposed, followed by a discussion of the psychological drives to imitate crime. Next, moving from an emphasis on individual copycat offenders, processes that encourage the contagion of crime in large social groups and the diffusion of new behaviors in social networks are detailed. The contagion and diffusion perspectives share an interest in how the adoption of new behaviors works in social settings. They differ in that social contagion research is more focused on negative group behaviors like riots, while the diffusion research is focused on the spread of positive social innovations such as healthy habits.

Chapter 6: An Interdisciplinary Perspective

Chapter 6 first applies the most directly relevant criminological theory, social learning, to copycat crime, then applies research in media studies that is pertinent for copycat crime. The chapter then culls all five theoretical areas to offer an interdisciplinary perspective for researching and understanding copycat crime. The proposed interdisciplinary copycat crime approach considers both individual-level and aggregate-level processes. The aggregate level includes the cultural, social, and media

factors and the dynamics that generate copycat crime waves. At the individual level, a family of suggested factors determine an individual's risk of copying a media-modeled crime.

Taken together, Chapters 4 through 6 cover current theoretical ideas and concepts regarding copycat crime and lay the groundwork for discussions in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 about the current state of copycat crime knowledge, the research that needs to be pursued, and the social policies that warrant consideration.

Chapter 7: Crime, Criminals, and Environments

Drawing from the literature on the five foundational theories, Chapter 7 extracts the characteristics that are hypothesized as linked to copycat crime. The media characteristics regarding crime models and criminogenic content associated with copycat crime are examined first, followed by review of the personality traits and exposure settings that have been associated with copycat crime. From these characteristics a set of untested propositions related to media, at-risk individuals, and copycat crime acquisition are pulled. Last, a copycat crime typology that dichotomizes the various copycat crime types and motivations suggested in the foundational theoretical literature is offered along the copycat crime dimensions of spontaneous or planned crimes, genesis or metamorphic crimes, and risk-reduction or media-attention crimes.

Chapter 8: Copycat Crime Across the Media

Much as Chapter 7 separates copycat crime and copycat offenders into subgroups, Chapter 8 breaks down the common perception of the media as a monolithic entity and examines copycat crime across constituent parts of the mass media. The first section of the chapter focuses on the historical relationship between copycat crime and print, sound, and visual legacy media found within books and newspapers, popular songs and radio programming, and television and movie content. The subsequent section examines the media by types of content and covers entertainment, news, advertising, and infotainment content's relationship to copycat crime. How these media differ in their delivery of content and portraits of crime and the implications of those differences for copycat crime are discussed. The dynamics of copycat crime are next contrasted with legacy media in a discussion of the various types of new digital media and copycat crime.

Chapter 9: What We Know—and
Don't Know—About Copycat Crime

Chapter 9 begins with discussions of two models of copycat crime. The first model presents aggregate paths that describe how copycat crime rates are generated depending upon the pool of potential copycat offenders available and the nature of the media and the cultural conditions in a society. The second is a multiple-path model that individuals traverse on their way to committing copycat crimes. This model's paths determine whether or not an individual will choose to commit a copycat crime and determines what type of copycat crime they commit. Following the introduction of the aggregate and individual copycat crime paths, the causal role of media in a society either as a direct causal trigger for crime or as a crime-molding rudder is discussed, with evidence presented for the media more often being a rudder for crime than a trigger.

In closing out the book, Chapter 9 discusses social policies related to copycat crime and criminogenic media that are supported by research and current knowledge. Acknowledging the persistence of a reversed portrait of copycat crime influencing public perceptions of the phenomena, three policy-related questions are considered: What do we know about copycat crime? What do we need to know to act? What policies and practices make sense now? A set of policy recommendations and the implications of copycat crime case law are considered. Yet-to-be-addressed research questions are discussed, and speculations about the future of copycat crime, its media portrayal, trends in copycat performance crime, and the live-streaming of copycat crimes are offered as calls for future research.

Notes

1. Excerpt from "Ghost Ride It" (2006) by Mistah F.A.B. from the album *Slappin' in the Trunk Vol. 2*. The discussion of "ghost riding the whip" draws on Surette 2020a.

2. To view the ghost riding the whip video, visit "Ghost Riding the Whip Gone Wrong," video posted to YouTube by daboo760, November 1, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r36PUoWDyog.

3. The discussion in this section draws on material from Surette 2016a.

4. An overview of the copycat crimes linked to the Columbine shootings provides an example of a multiwave copycat crime sequence. See zyopp, "Columbine Iceberg," scifiaddicts.com, http://scifiaddicts.com/p/IcebergCharts/comments/owo44n/columbine_iceberg.

5. The full satire can be seen at "Copycat Criminals Continue to Mimic Liquor Store Robbery from 1822," *The Onion*, January 5, 2015, https://local.theonion.com /copycat-criminals-continue-to-mimic-liquor-store-robber-1819577324.

6. The section on the cultural history of copycat crime draws from Surette 2015b.

7. Citing *Thievery a la Mode: The Fatal Encouragement* (London, 1728).

8. The first recorded print use of the word *copycat* was apparently in the 1887 novel *Bar Harbor Days* by Constance Harrison; the next was in Sarah Orne Jewett's 1890 novel *Betty Leicester: A Story for Girls*.

9. For initial discussions of the copycat crime rate, see Helfgott 2008; Pease and Love 1984a; Schmid and de Graaf 1982; Surette 2002; Wilson and Herrnstein 1985.

10. See also Wertham 1954 for advocacy of censorship of comic books as causes of juvenile crime and delinquency. Sparks and Sparks 2002 criticizes Wertham's link between comic books and violent delinquency as based on unscientific studies with biased samples and anecdotal testimony obtained from boys who were being treated for a wide range of psychological problems.

11. For example, the term appears in the sports pages in 1995: "Certainly, a late hit on Young Saturday, courtesy of Chicago safety Shawn Gayle, has the Cowboys thinking about a copycat crime" (*New York Times*, January 10, 1995, B9); again in 2001: "Before it gets to be a copycat crime, the teams should exercise their powers the way the New Orleans Saints sent guards into the stands Monday night to break up bottle-throwing" (*New York Times*, December 19, 2001, S1); and in a 2008 entertainment story: "In its homeland there have been efforts to duplicate it, the most recent example being the IT Crowd, a half-hour tribute to workplace shenanigans that can only be considered a copycat crime" (*New York Times*, September 30, 2008, E7).