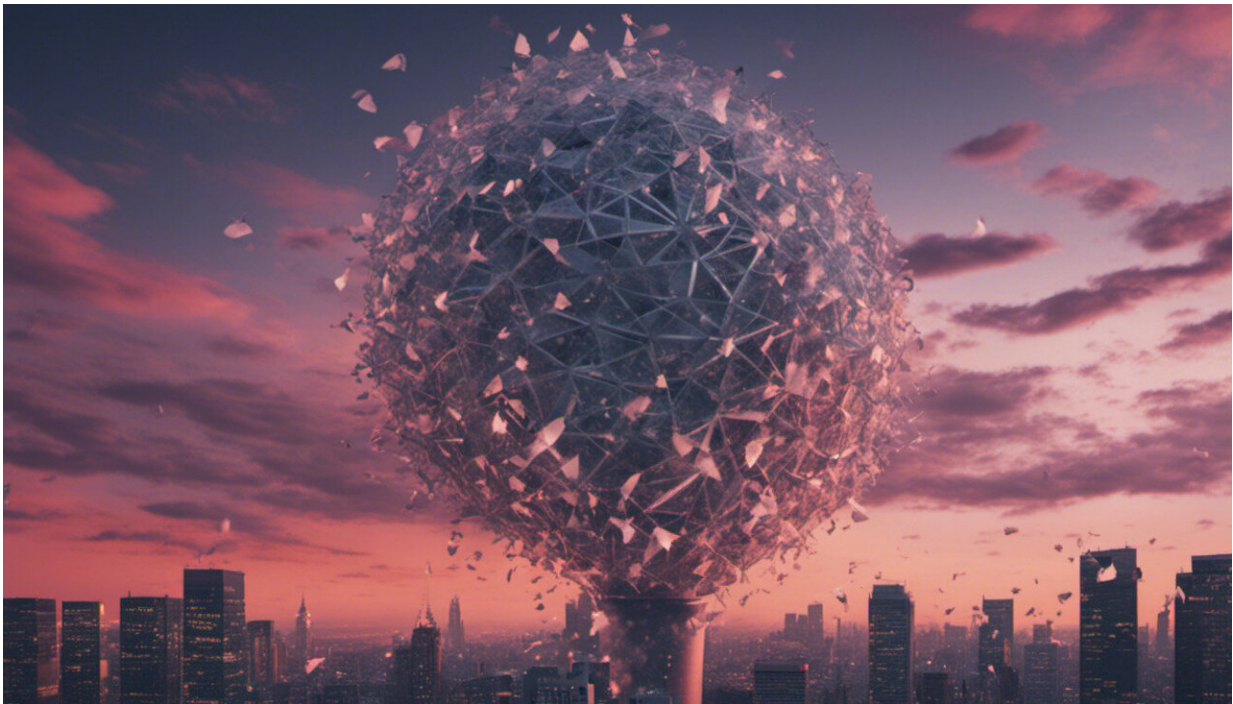


# Consumption of US crime television distorts social perceptions and promotes myths

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

People with a great amount of U.S.-based crime-related television viewing are more likely to be susceptible to misconceptions regarding the death penalty—irrespective of their age, education, or gender. This is the basic finding of a new edition of a media study conducted at MedUni Vienna's Center for Public Health under the supervision of Benedikt

Till. In the initial study carried out in 2016, approximately 11% of respondents gave answers to questions about the death penalty, which were consistent with the erroneous perception that the death penalty is still used and executed in Austria; this time, with a larger and representative population-based sample, the percentage was even higher at 18%.

Together with their colleague Florian Arendt from the University of Vienna, Benedikt Till and Thomas Niederkrotenthaler from MedUni Vienna's Center for Public Health have replicated a study from 2016 with a large sample representative of the Austrian population (n=1,002) and have found that around 18% of the respondents gave incorrect answers to at least one of the questions about the existence of the [death penalty](#) in Austria (e.g. "How many prisoners do you think are currently sitting on [death](#) row in Austria?" or "How many prisoners do you think have been executed by lethal injection in Austria in the last five years?").

This misconception about the death [penalty](#) in Austria was primarily attributable to the amount of US crime shows people watched on television. The greater the respondents' consumption of such shows was, the more likely they were to mistakenly believe that the death penalty is still executed in Austria. This correlation remained even after controlling for gender, age, and education, and is therefore not attributable to these factors. In contrast, television viewing per se—unlike in the original study—was not associated with questions about the death penalty.

## **American TV content influences perceptions**

"The effect that such a high number of respondents gave incorrect answers about the existence of the death penalty in Austria is evidently due to the consumption of US-American films and TV series," says Benedikt Till. American crime-related shows portray the US justice system, where the death penalty is a central aspect of this system. In

Austria, on the other hand, the death penalty has not been executed since the 1950s.

The specific questions about the death penalty were asked as part of a large-scale online survey. "Human beings are constantly saving information in their memory, even when watching television. Unfortunately, we forget relatively quickly where this information came from. People who watch a lot of US crime shows save a lot of information about the justice system and the use of the death penalty in the U.S., "and then they can easily be temporarily confused when answering ad hoc questions about the death penalty in Austria," says Benedikt Till, describing the possible underlying cognitive processes. It is therefore possible that the respondents would answer the same questions correctly if asked later on or in a different context.

Based on this study, it would also be reasonable to conclude that other prejudices, myths, and misinformation about other subjects—such as health-related topics—could be linked to higher levels of exposure to media.

**More information:** Benedikt Till et al, The Relationship Between Crime-Related Television Viewing and Perceptions of the Death Penalty: Results of a Large Cross-Sectional Survey Study, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.715657](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.715657)

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