



# Crime news trends studies in the NRILP

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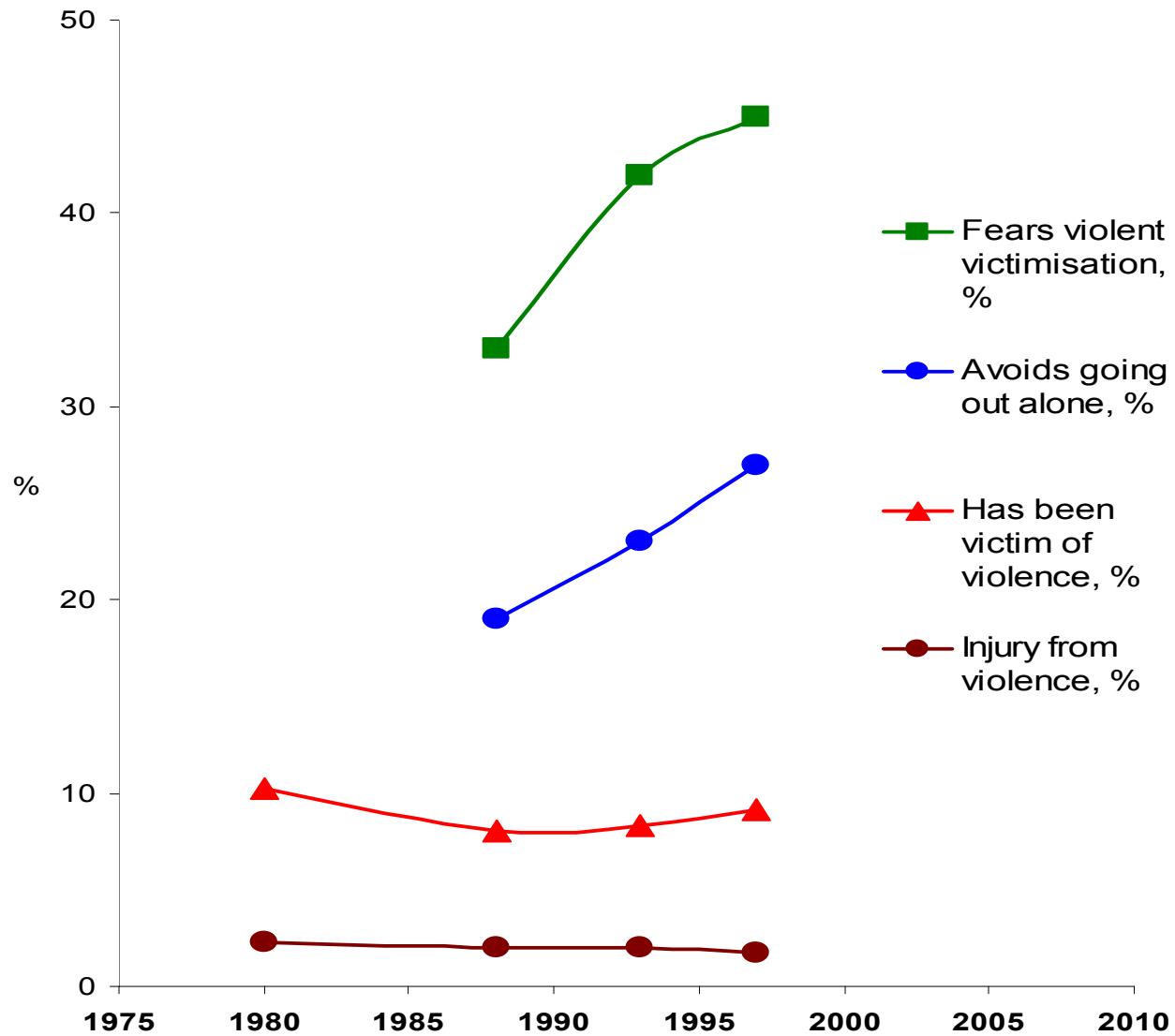
# National Research Institute of Legal Policy

- A small research institute with 10-15 researchers (half of which work with crime related topics)
- Independent status based on law, connected to the Ministry of Justice
- Main task of the criminological unit: description of crime trends and patterns
- For example, National Victimization Studies since 1980, Finnish Self-Report Delinquency Study since 1995

# Why research on crime news?

- National victimisation studies indicated a paradoxical development:
- Violent victimisation was stable, but...
- ...Fear of violence was drastically increasing during the 1990's
- What could explain this pattern?

# Violent victimisation and fear of violence trend, Finland 1980-1997



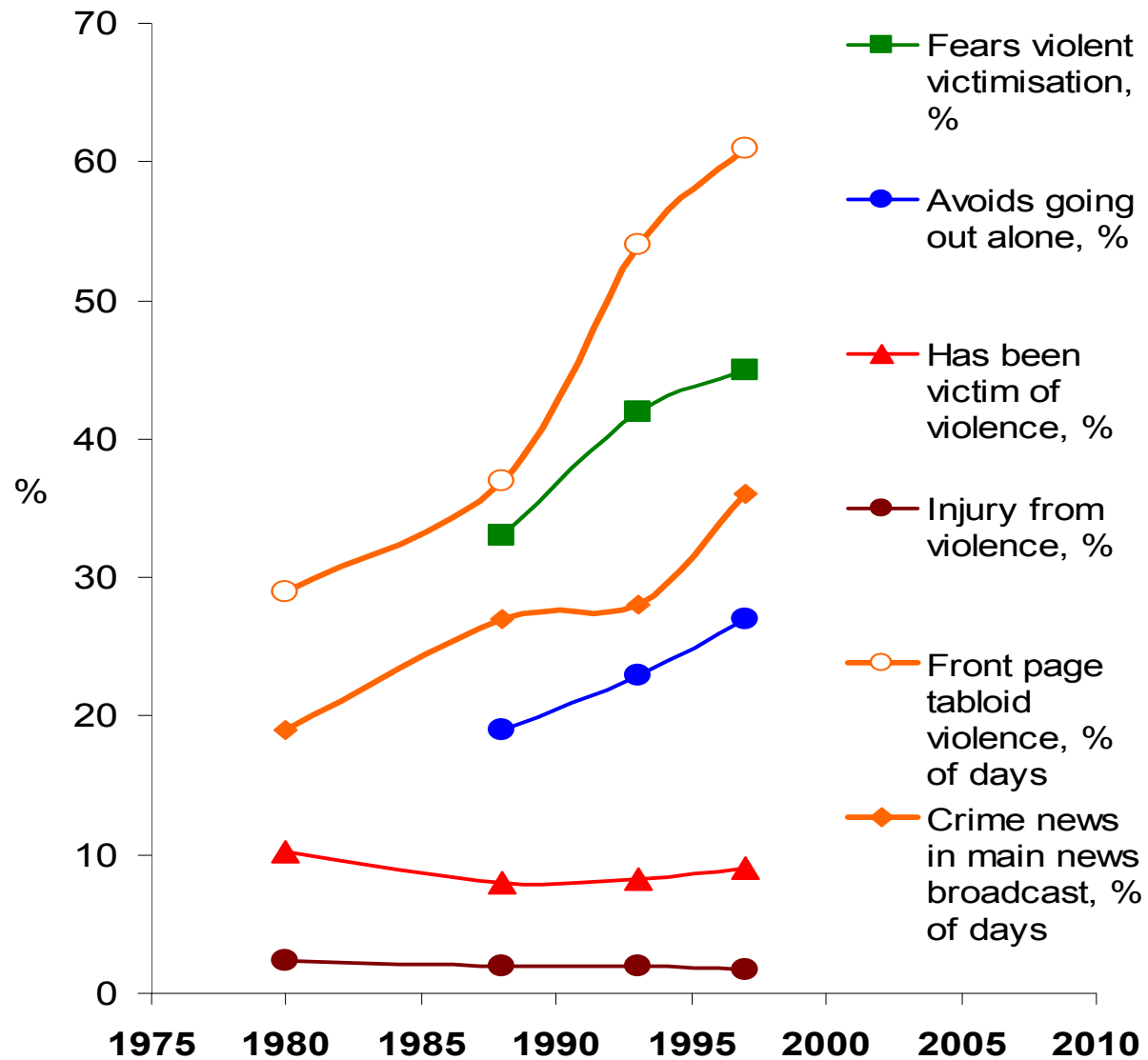
# Why fears were rising?

- Deep economic slump in the early 1990s
- Increasing immigration and multicultural society may have provoked fears
- Internal migration to cities placed more people in urban environments
- Political turmoil in Eastern Europe
- Older age structure
- ... possibly the increase of crime news?
- → we decided to create a parallel time series on crime news trends

# Method

- Quantitative content analysis
- Observation points: the measurement years of the National Victimization Survey
- Aim: to create parallel series to NVS victimisation and fear series
- Tabloid front pages, broadsheet editorials, Tv prime time news (and local press)
- In most cases, the data were collected by sociology students doing master's theses

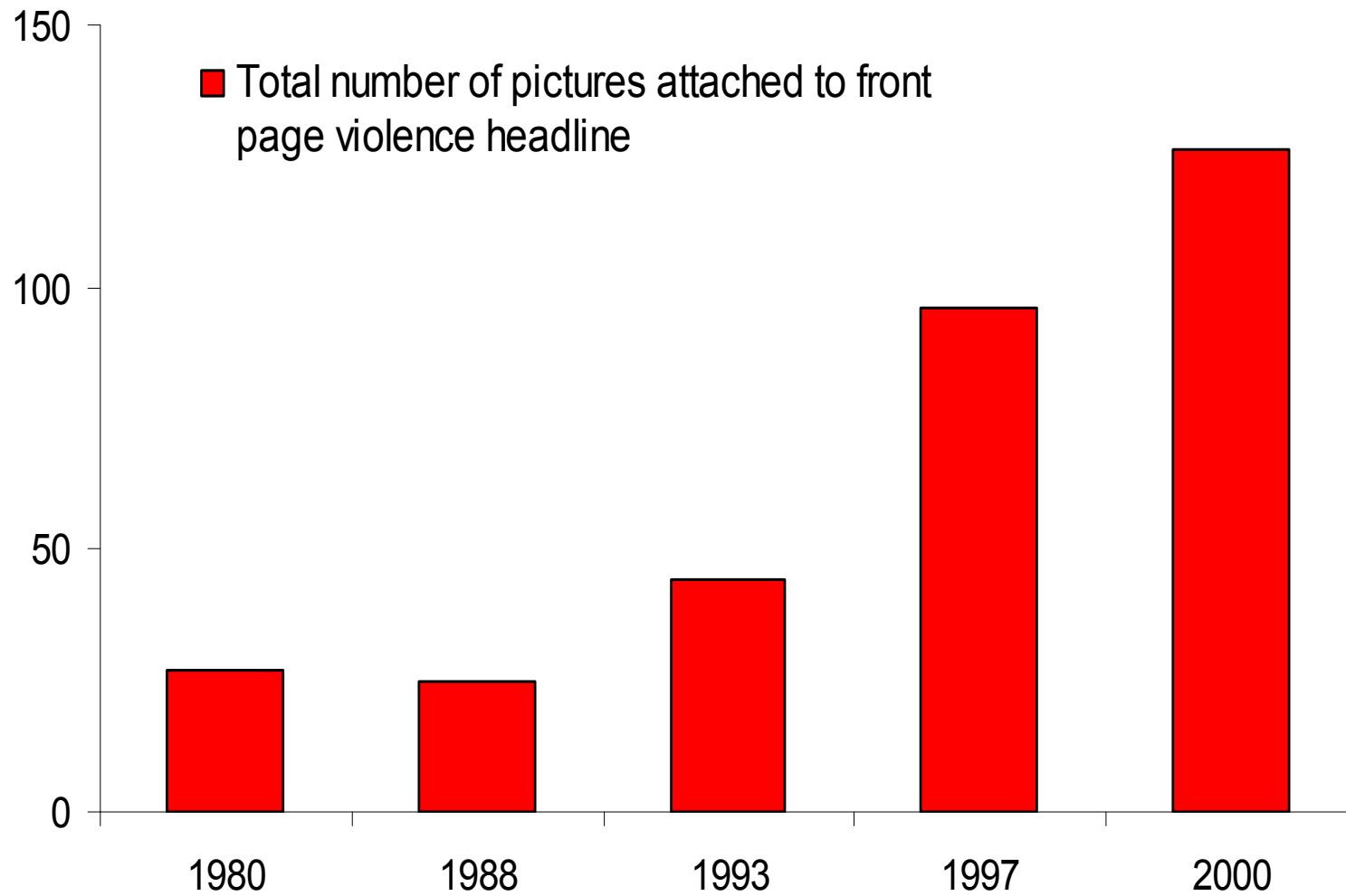
# Victimisation, fear and crime news trend, Finland 1980-1997



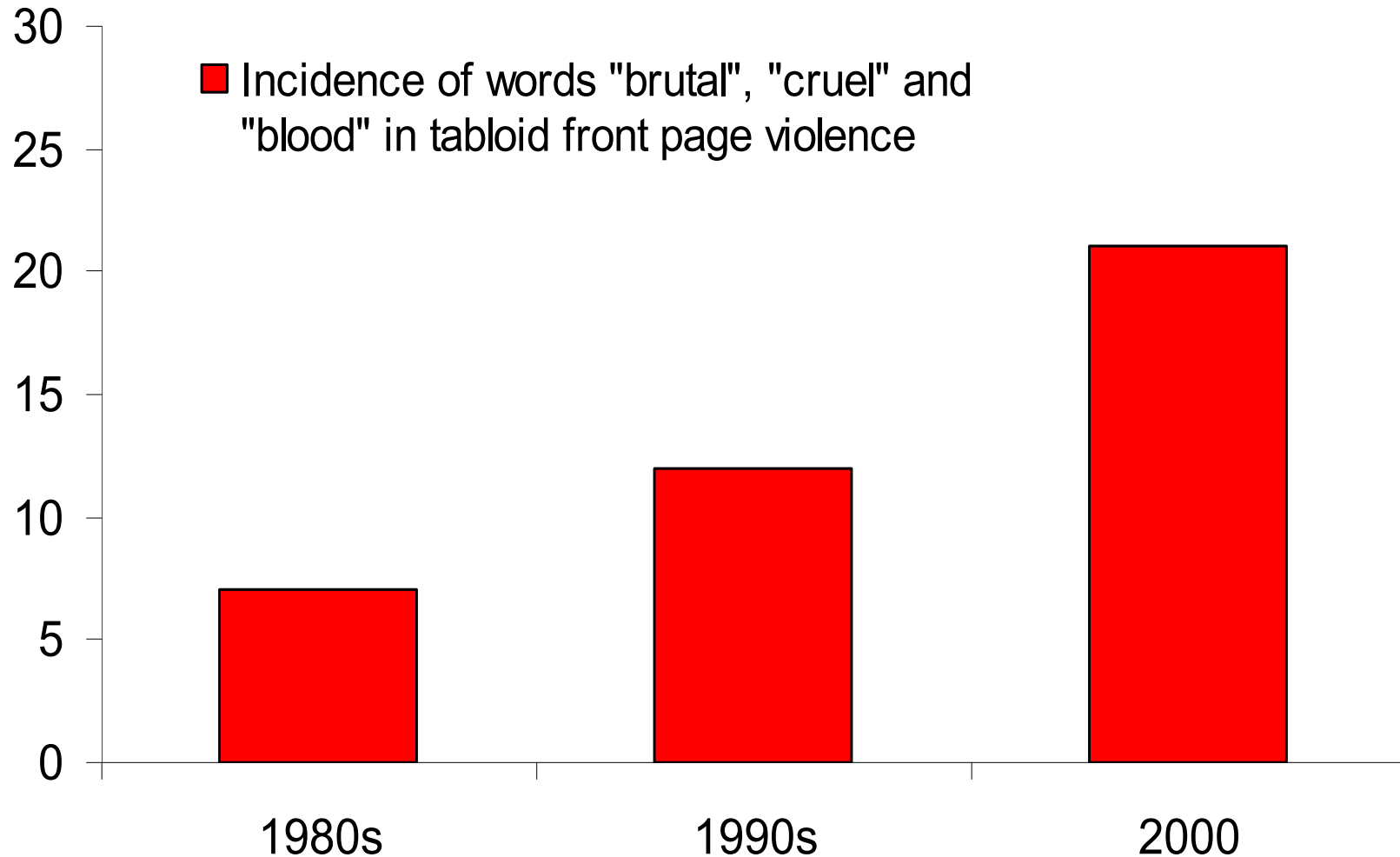
# The main result

- There was a radical increase of violence in the tabloid front pages (we counted only criminal violence taking place in Finland)
- There was a big increase of crime news in the main prime time news broadcast
- Fear and crime reporting increased together, while general violence risk remained stable
- Note however some changes in the patterns of crime (so-called 2nd drug wave etc.)

## Other trends in violence reporting: **more pictures**

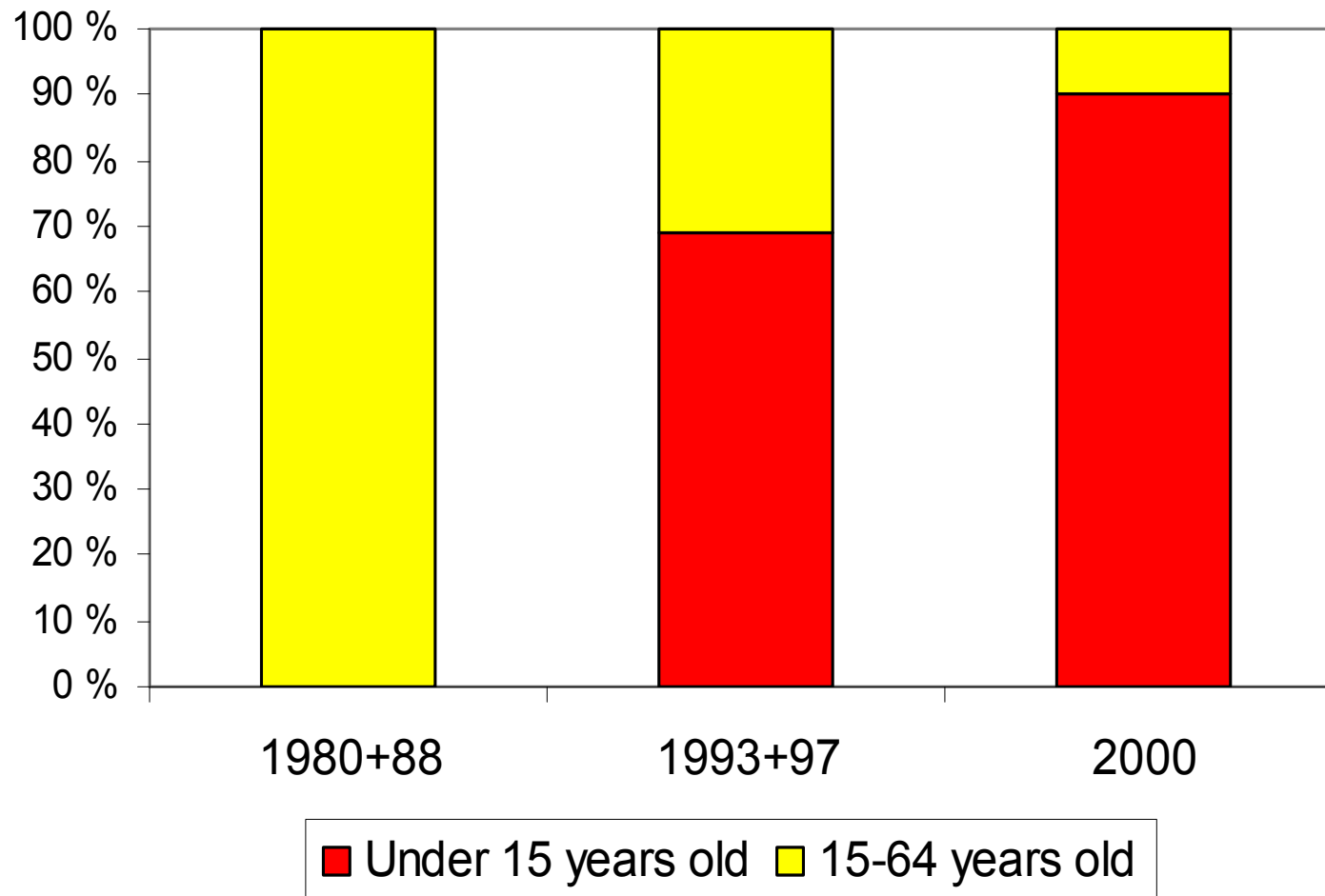


## Other trends in crime reporting: **more emphasis on blood and cruelty**



# Other trends in crime reporting: **more emphasis on young offenders and victims**

(homicide victim age distribution in front page violence, % of headlines giving the victim age)



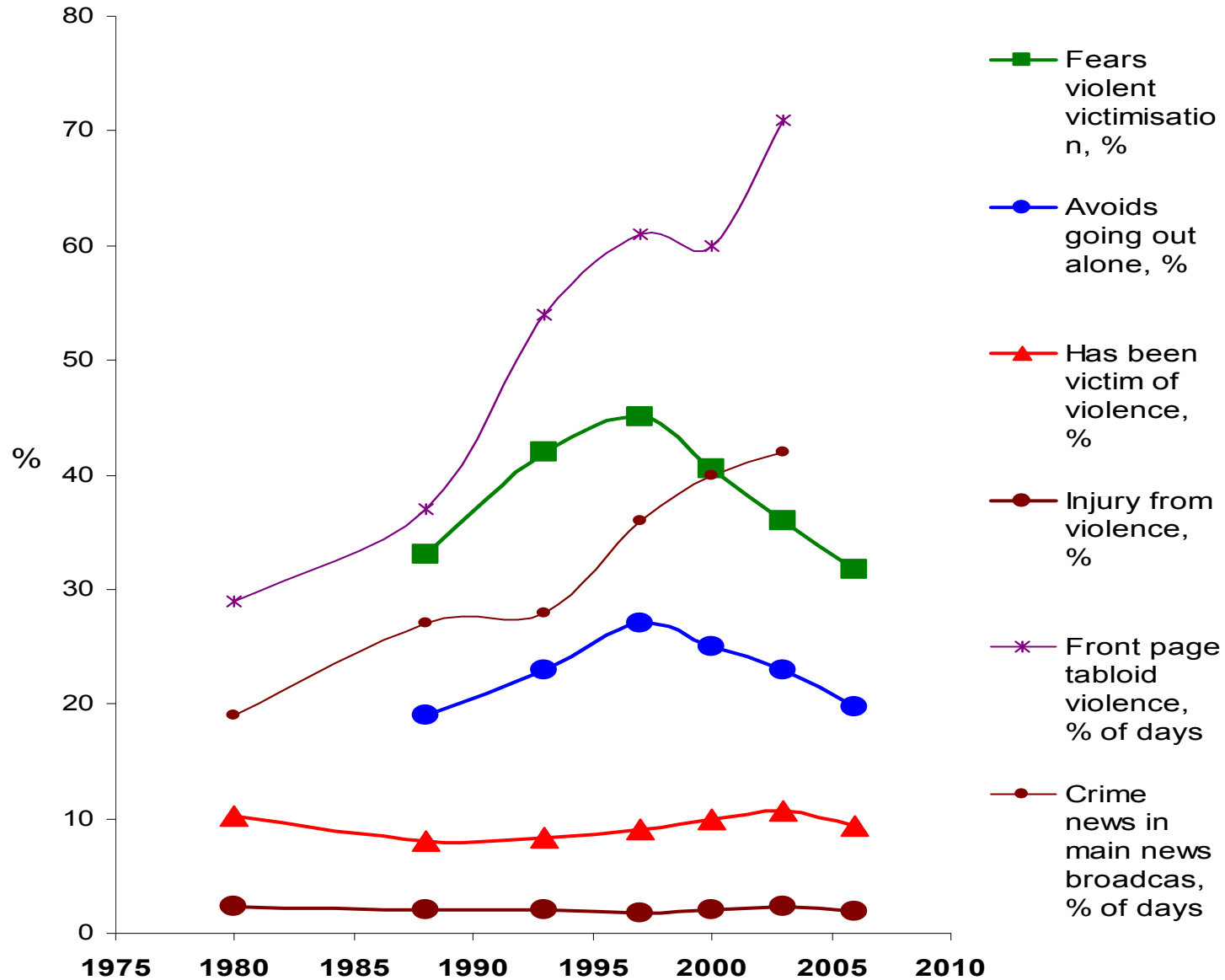
# Consistent increase of crime content in most types of news media

- Broadsheet editorials: stability or modest increase
- Tabloid front page headlines: increase
- Local press: moderate increase
- TV prime time news broadcast: increase

# Developments in this decade

- The figures on fear and media trends shown earlier were about period 1980-1997
- There was a consistent increase in both crime media attention and fear
- What happened subsequently?

# Victimisation, fear and crime news trend, Finland 1980-2006



# Decrease of fear in this decade?

- Fear no longer increases in population, clear explanation lacking
- Increase of crime news not sufficient cause of fear increase?
- Interaction with deeper social and economic factors needed to trigger fear effects
- Saturation of media influence?
- Note: above data are based on total population, differential trends possible in sub-populations and local areas
- The link between crime media exposure and fear still exists at the individual level (Smolej & Kivivuori 2006)

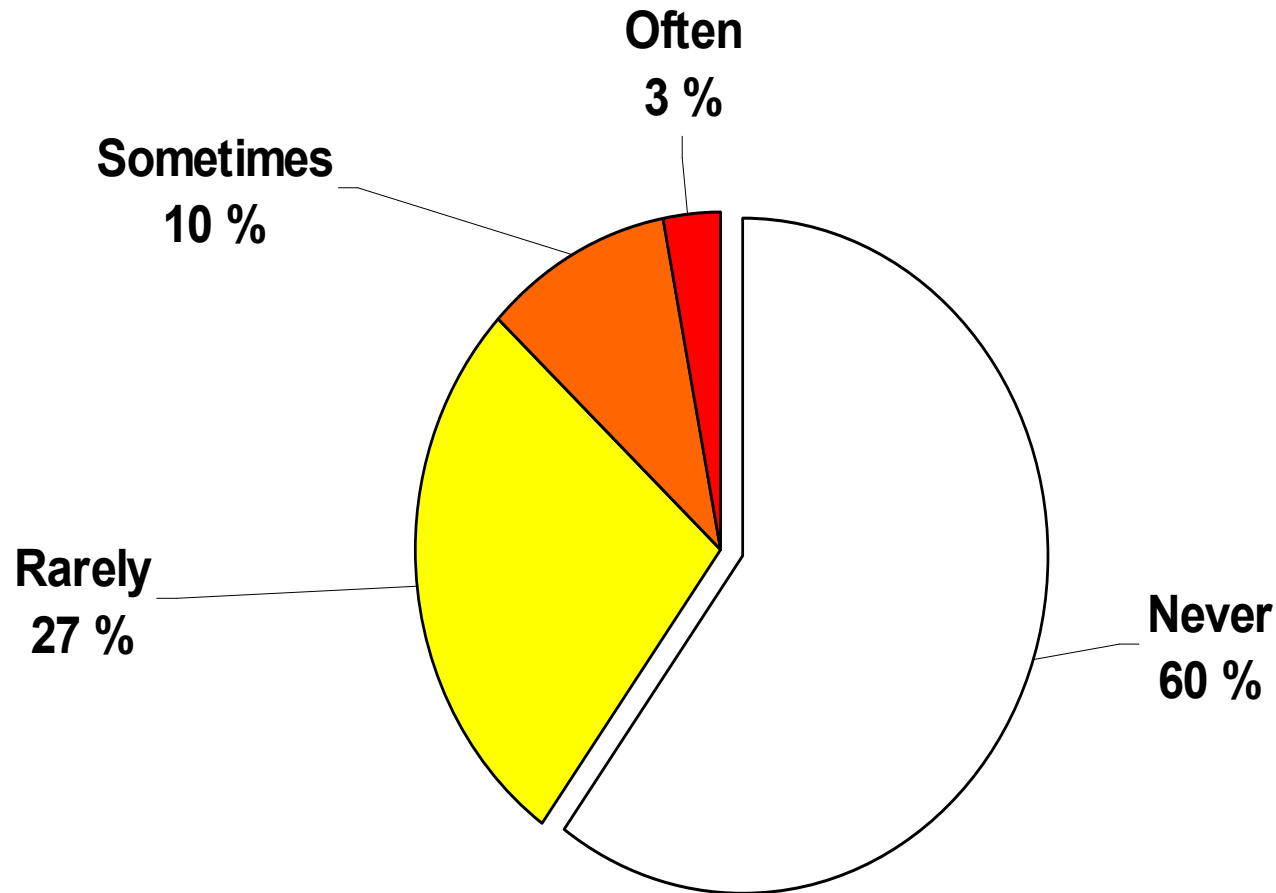
# A comparative qualitative study of crime reporting

- Berrington, Eileen & Honkatukia, Päivi (2002): An Evil Monster and a Poor Thing: Female Violence in the Media
- Comparison: Finland and England
- A qualitative case study of how the media react to female homicide offenders (one incident from both countries)
- In England, the female homicide offender was described as "bad", in Finland, she was described as "mad".

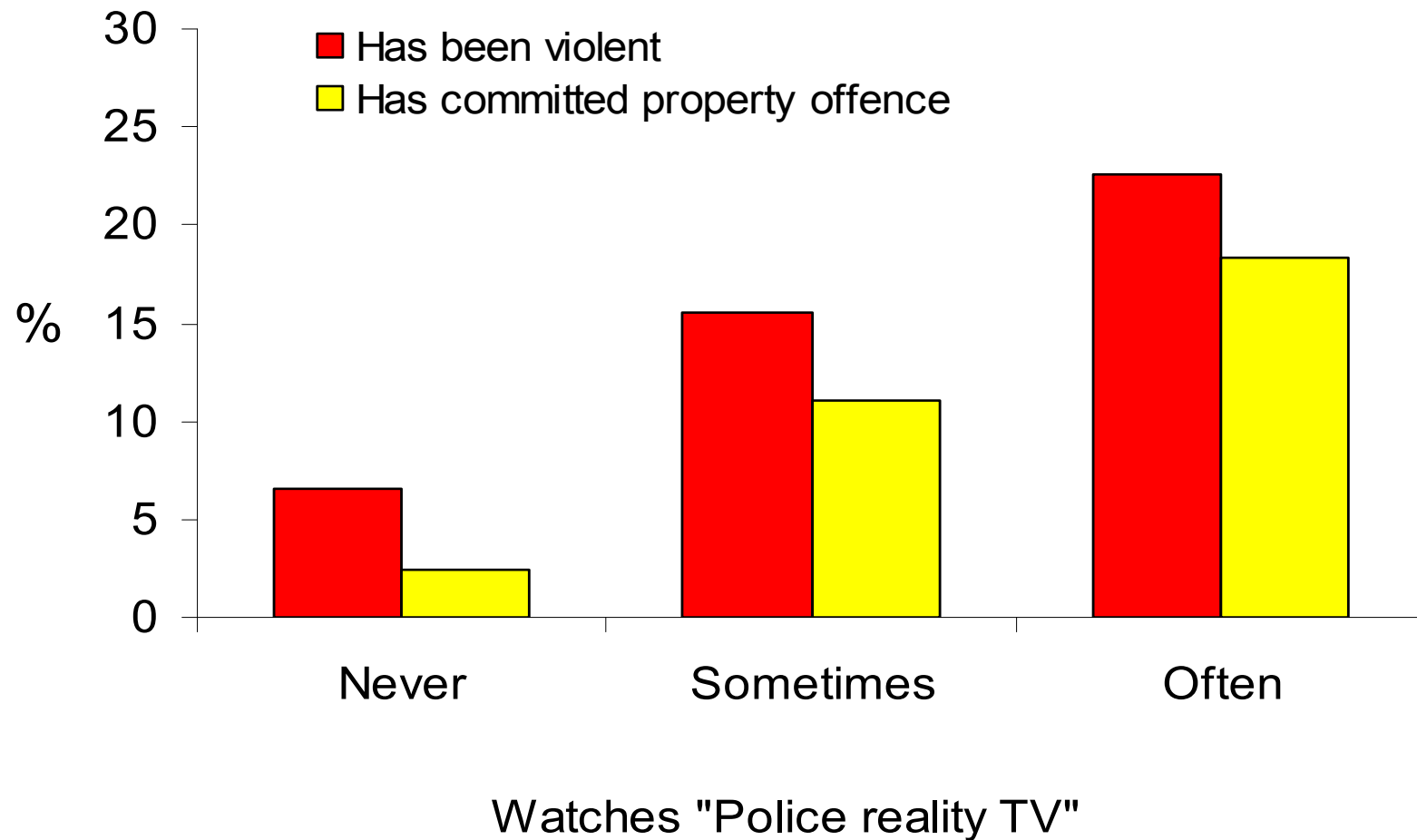
# Young people

- Increasing emphasis on youth crime in the media
- Fear effects: excessive and brutal crime news evoke fears in children and young people
- Behavioural effects: young people are susceptible to influences from crime news
- The Jokela school shooting (8 homicide victims in a single incident) had multiple causal background, but it was also part of a global and media related copycat crime chain
- Policy effects?

**Fear.** "Having seen a crime related tabloid headline (in the street), I have felt fearful", % of 15-16 year olds in a Finnish city (FSRD-08 pilot 2007, N=477)



**Behaviour.** Last year participation in violent and property offending by intensity of "Police reality TV" watching, % of 15-16 year olds in Helsinki (Mare Balticum 2002, N=1135)



# Increasing critique in Finland

- In this decade, excessive crime reporting has been defined as a social problem in Finland (not crime reporting as such)
- Critical research, for example NRILP report on "Front-Page Violence" (2002), and the study "Bad Boys" (2004) by Alvesalo & Santtila
- In 2005, an independent authority Ombudsman for Children established
- The Ombudsman has expressed concern about childrens' fears provoked by crime media
- Quantitatively oriented criminology and psychology active in this field

# Media responses

- Emphasis on finding that crime fear is decreasing
- More research funding to media and journalism studies
- At one point a tabloid announced a "change of course" toward avoiding excessively brutal headlines
- Less constructive reactions include:
- Claim that analysis and critique aim at suppressing fundamental rights (freedom of speech)
- Claim that critics divert attention from "real problems" (such as crime) by scapegoating media
- Claim that criminologists are motivated by lust for media attention

## What I learned from the "crime media debates" of this decade

- In studying crime news reporting, both qualitative and quantitative methods are important
- However, at least in Finland, it seems that quantitative work has more impact on public discussion

*Thank you for your attention!*

