

Anatomy of Three Crime Dramas

Police procedurals and legal dramas are the bread and butter of primetime lineups, drawing the largest audiences in the US: an average of 112 million viewers tune-in each week for crime shows on network television, with presumably millions more watching on streaming services.²⁸ To explore how different ideological groups respond to the same shows, we chose three perennial police procedurals that were liked by all three groups, and we compared current reactions to those of ten years ago.²⁹



Criminal Minds

Criminal Minds is the rare show that is equally favored among **Blues**, **Purples** and **Reds**, even when we control for age, race and gender. All groups gave it an average score over 80 on the 100 point “liking” scale, with at least one-third from each group reporting they watched it. The show was a preferred show for 18% of respondents in 2008, ranking highest with **Purples** followed by **Blues** and then **Reds**, and we found the same pattern in 2018. Thus, *Criminal Minds* can be considered a color neutral show, appealing across

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Further analysis of what each group specifically liked about the show revealed some common themes, but also some interesting contrasts. For example, all groups most frequently selected the *characters* as what they liked best. After characters, **Reds** were next most likely to say they liked the *style and tone*, whereas **Purples** noted both *suspense* and the *educational value* of the show. Almost half of the **Blues** liked its *emotional impact* and the way *it makes them feel*. More than half of **Blues** indicated that the emotional responses they most often

feel while watching are *surprise*, *fear* and *sadness*. Half of the **Purples** also felt *surprise* and *fear*, although **Purples** were as likely to say they felt *hope*. Some 40% of **Reds** also felt *surprise* while watching the show, but the *fear*, *sadness* and *hope* felt by the other groups were not reported as often by **Reds**. In fact, **Reds**’ second most frequently reported feeling was *neutral* while they watched this show. **Reds** and **Purples** also selected *disgust* and *anger* far more often than **Blues**.

²⁸ See the Media Impact Project’s forthcoming 2019 report: Racial Disparities in the Criminal Justice System: An Examination of Depictions in Mainstream Television.

²⁹ Due to differences in how questions were posed and discrepancies between number and types of other shows investigated by both studies, these comparisons are provided as indicators of general feelings and trends in viewership behavior.

The Purple group's responses stood apart in several ways. Purples watched this show most often to *learn about other people's lives*; they were more likely to say it makes them feel *inspired* and *helps them think about their own lives* more than other groups. Purples also enjoyed social viewing more than the other groups. Blues most frequently watched *Criminal Minds* because it allowed them to *experience things they can't in real life*, while both Reds and Blues watched to *forget about their own problems* at double the rate of Purples.

Law & Order: SVU vs. NCIS

Although both of these long-running police procedurals enjoy broad appeal, analysis revealed an interesting fact: both today and ten years ago, NBC's *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* appealed more to



Blues, whereas the Reds -- the group that generally eschewed most entertainment programming -- watched CBS's *NCIS* at a higher rate than most other shows and more than other groups.³⁰ We found that just under half of those who selected *SVU* as the show they liked best (n=152) were Blues (47%) while 35% were Reds. Those who most liked the show were generally consistent in their reasons, praising the *characters* and its *story and plot* most frequently. The emotion they reported feeling while viewing the show was *surprise*. For *NCIS*, those numbers flipped: of those who selected *NCIS* as the show they liked best (n=233), half were Reds and one-third were Blues. Although Reds are generally infrequent TV watchers, *NCIS* appears to have a special attraction for this group, perhaps related to the *adrenaline boost* that Reds say it provides. Still, all



fans agreed that the *characters* were what they enjoyed most, followed by its *story/plot*. Thus, we see that despite differing values, priorities and interests in many of their outlooks, viewers were drawn to shows with compelling characters and intriguing stories. Since this is the stock in trade of police procedurals, these findings provide some evidence for why the subgenre remains a TV staple.

30 Only the two most watched shows for all groups (The Simpsons and The Big Bang Theory) were more likely to be watched by Reds.