
**OFF BALANCE:
YOUTH, RACE & CRIME IN THE NEWS**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Building Blocks for Youth

OFF BALANCE: YOUTH, RACE & CRIME IN THE NEWS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the fourth in an ongoing series of analyses published by *Building Blocks for Youth*, a multi-organizational initiative whose goal is to promote a fair and effective juvenile justice system. In January, 2000, *Building Blocks* issued its first report, "The Color of Justice" which found that youth of color in California were more than eight times as likely to be incarcerated by adult courts as White youth, for equally serious crimes. *Building Blocks'* comprehensive national study, "And Justice for Some", reported that youth of color are treated more severely than White youth at each stage of the justice system, even when charged with the same offenses. In October, 2000 *Building Blocks'* third report, "Youth Crime, Adult Time" an in-depth study of youth prosecuted as adults in 18 of the largest jurisdictions in the country, found racial disparities similar to the earlier reports, and raised serious concerns about the fairness and appropriateness of the process.

The initiative has five major components:

- (1) Research on the disparate impact of the justice system on minority youth, on the effects of new adult-court transfer legislation in the states, and on the privatization of juvenile justice facilities by for-profit corporations;
- (2) Analyses of decisionmaking at critical points in the justice system, including arrest, detention, adjudication, and disposition;
- (3) Direct advocacy on behalf of youth in the justice system, particularly on issues that disproportionately affect youth of color such as conditions of confinement in jails, prisons, and juvenile facilities; access to counsel and adequacy of representation in juvenile court; and "zero tolerance" and other issues relating to school suspensions and expulsions;
- (4) Constituency building among African-American, Latino, and Native-American and other minority organizations, as well as organizations in the medical, mental health, legal, law enforcement, child welfare, civil rights, human rights, religious, victim's rights, and domestic violence areas, at the national, state, and local levels;
- (5) Development of communications strategies to provide timely, accurate, and relevant information to these constituencies, public officials, policymakers, the media, and the public.

The partners in the initiative are the Youth Law Center, American Bar Association Juvenile Justice Center, Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, Juvenile Law Center, Minorities in Law Enforcement, National Council on Crime and Delinquency and Pretrial Services Resource Center.

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A. INTRODUCTION

Despite sharp declines in youth crime, the public expresses great fear of its young people. Although violent crime by youth in 1998 was at its lowest point in the 25-year history of the National Crime Victimization Survey, 62% of poll respondents felt that juvenile crime was on the increase. In the 1998/99 school year, there was less than a one in two million chance of being killed in a school in America, yet 71% of respondents to an *NBC/Wall Street Journal* poll felt that a school shooting was likely in their community. Despite a 40% decline in school associated violent deaths between 1998 and 1999 and declines in other areas of youth violence, respondents to a *USA Today* poll were 49% more likely to express fear of their schools in 1999 than in 1998.

In an environment in which *fear* of youth crime and *actual* youth crime are so out of sync, policies affecting young people are bound to be impacted. Since 1992, 47 states have made their juvenile justice systems more punitive by eroding confidentiality protections or making it easier to try juveniles as adults. In one estimate, more than 200,000 youths were prosecuted in adult court in America in 1998.

Americans are also more likely to exaggerate the threat of victimization by minorities. Twice as many White Americans believe they are more likely to be victimized by a minority than a White, despite the fact that Whites are three times more likely to be victimized by Whites than by minorities.

What Is The News Media's Role?

More than 70 years ago, in his classic work, *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippmann wrote that it was impossible to know through direct experience everything that it was necessary to know to function as a citizen in our modern democracy. Instead, Lippmann explained, we depend on "pictures in our heads," many of them delivered by the news media, to tell us about the world. Our decisions about how to behave and how to construct our society have to be based on those pictures, Lippmann believed, because the world was too vast to experience personally.

The public depends on the media for its pictures of crime. Three quarters (76%) of the public say they form their opinions about crime from what they see or read in the news, more than three times the number who state that they get their primary information on crime from personal experience (22%). In a *Los Angeles Times* poll, 80% of respondents stated that the media's coverage of violent crime had increased their personal fear of being a victim.

These survey results are consistent with communications research that confirms that the news media largely determine what issues we collectively think about, how we think about them and what kinds of policy alternatives are considered viable. News portrayals of juvenile justice issues are significant for how they influence policymakers and the public regarding what should be done to ensure public safety. The public and policy makers do not consider issues unless they are visible, and they are not visible unless the news brings them to light.

Most people have little or no personal experience with juvenile crime since adults commit most of the crime in the nation: adults commit about 89% of all crimes cleared by arrest.

The public depends on the media even more for its pictures of crime done by or to minority youth, since most of the public doesn't have personal experience with it. Eighty-six percent of White homicide victims are killed by other Whites and, overall, Whites are three times as likely to be victimized by other Whites as by minorities. There is a very small likelihood that a White adult will have the unfortunate opportunity to form an opinion about Black youth violence based on personal experience. Consequently, America's dominant voting and opinion setting block — its White adult population — simply must rely on the news to explain minority youth crime to them.

The news media should help as many citizens as possible make sense of the world around them. But does the current approach to covering youth and crime maximize public understanding of reality? What information on youth and crime does the American public get from the news? In view of the powerful impact news coverage of crime has on public opinion and the dependence of most Americans on the media for depictions of crime, there are several important questions we have about the accuracy of the picture Americans are receiving from the news media:

- Does news coverage reflect actual crime trends?
- How does news coverage depict minorities and crime?
- Does news coverage disproportionately depict youth of color as perpetrators of crime?

B. METHODS

Our objective was to compile and examine the best social science that has analyzed the content of crime news to answer the questions above, particularly analyses that included examinations of race and youth. Toward that end, we conducted a comprehensive, computerized search of criminal justice and communications data bases on content analyses of crime news, which we augmented with additional studies gleaned from references in the computer-generated articles. Altogether, the search yielded 146 articles that we reviewed, abstracted, and categorized. We eliminated any articles that were about single events (e.g. O.J. Simpson), "reality" shows, or non-US news. We also eliminated articles that did not offer primary data analyses and books that were not peer-reviewed. Ultimately we focused on the 77 studies that directly assessed the content of crime, race and/or youth in the news.

Once we had summarized and condensed the findings about news content, we compared those findings to crime trends reported by law enforcement agencies. For example, if studies of the news showed an ever-larger proportion of the "news hole" (the amount of newspaper or television time devoted to news) occupied by violent crime, was that simply a reflection of

actual increases in violent crime during the same time period? According to the best scientific analyses of media content, is the news providing an accurate reflection of crime trends? We ascertained whether the studies themselves made the relevant comparisons to crime trends, and, if they did not, we collected the appropriate crime data to compare to the content of the news.

The studies we surveyed covered a range of media — local and network television, newspapers, and broadcast and print news magazines — from 1910 through 2001. Most studies analyzed newspapers (N=55), followed by local television (N=25). Nineteen studies analyzed network television news. Only three studies analyzed print news magazines and two analyzed the content of TV news magazine programs. (The numbers add to more than 77 because several studies analyzed more than one medium).

C. FINDINGS

Overall, the studies taken together indicate that depictions of crime in the news are not reflective of the rate of crime generally, the proportion of crime which is violent, the proportion of crime committed by people of color, or the proportion of crime committed by youth. The problem is not the inaccuracy of individual stories, but that the cumulative choices of what is included in the news — or not included — presents the public with a false picture of higher frequency and severity of crime than is actually the case.

Furthermore, the studies show that crime is depicted as a series of distinct events unrelated to any broader context. Most

studies that examine race and crime find that the proportion of crime committed by people of color (usually African Americans) is over-reported and that Black victims are under-represented. Other studies find that crimes committed by people of color are covered in proportion with arrest rates, but that crimes committed by Whites are under-covered.

Finding #1: The news media report crime, especially violent crime, out of proportion to its actual occurrence.

Studies of newspapers and television identified three clear patterns. First, and most consistent over time, is that newspapers and television emphasize violent crime. Second, the more unusual the crime, the greater the chance it will be covered. Third, the rate of crime coverage increased while real crime rates dropped. While all media emphasize violence in their news, newspapers do it to a lesser degree than network television, which does it less than local TV news. There are fewer studies of Spanish language newspapers and television news broadcast in the US, but those that exist also demonstrate an emphasis on crime consistent with studies of English-language US news.

Violent crime dominates crime coverage. Crime is often the dominant topic on local television news, network news, and TV news magazines. In general, TV crime reporting is the inverse of crime frequency. That is, murder is reported most often on the news though it happens the least. Several analyses of the evening news found that, although homicides made up from one to two-tenths of one percent of all arrests, homicides made up more than a quarter (27% - 29%) of the

crimes reported on the evening news. While it is to be expected that a homicide will receive more media attention than a petty theft, over-coverage of violent crime can give viewers the sense that the world is a more dangerous place than it actually is.

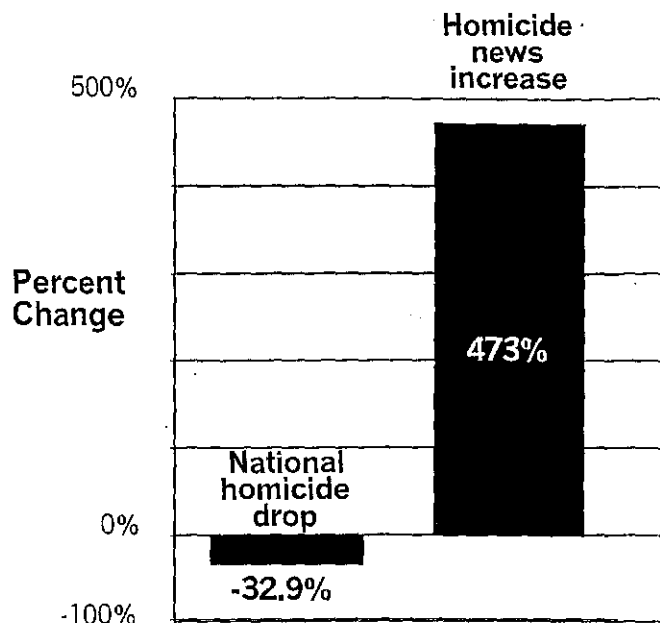
The more unusual the crime or violence, the more likely it is to be covered. Factors that increase the likelihood of a homicide being reported in the news are multiple victims, multiple offenders, an unusual method, a White victim, a child, elderly, or female victim, or occurrence in an affluent neighborhood. One study found that the least frequent murders—homicides between strangers and interracial homicides—received more coverage when, in reality, most people were murdered by someone they knew and someone of the same race.

Crime coverage has increased while real crime rates have fallen. Overall the rate of crime coverage in the news did not reflect crime trends. Nationally, crime dropped by 20% from 1990 to 1998 while network TV showed an 83% increase in crime news. While homicide coverage was increasing on network news -- a 473% jump from 1990 to 1998 -- homicides were down 32.9% during the same time period. (See Figure 1).

Finding #2: The news media report crime as a series of individual events without adequate attention to its overall context.

Presumably, if the emphasis on crime is satisfying viewers' desire to know about it, print and broadcast journalists should also be explaining it. Yet most crime news is episodic, describing crime events as if they are isolated from larger social, historical or environmental contexts.

Figure 1: From 1990-1998, homicide coverage was increasing on network news by 473% while homicides were down 32.9%



Source: Center for Media & Public Affairs, US DOJ 1999.

Studies spanning almost 100 years—1910 to 2001—were consistent in their findings that news reports describe what happened with little reporting about why the crime and violence happened or what could be done about it. In one example, researchers found that the nation's dominant news magazines portrayed the race riots of the late 1960's as "random, unpredictable and most of all, unjustified" events outside a larger social context, despite Kerner Commission findings that there were many identifiable—and justifiable—reasons for the riots. The lack of explanations for crime and violence complicates the problem of exaggerated frequency in news stories by leaving the impression that the violence is inevitable.

Finding #3: The news media, particularly television news, unduly connect race and crime, especially violent crime.

A disproportionate number of perpetrators on the news are people of color, especially African Americans, and the strongest evidence shows that people of color, again primarily African Americans, are underrepresented as victims in crime news. African American perpetrators are depicted as dangerous and indistinguishable as a group, and they appear more frequently in crime news stories than Whites. Interracial crime is also covered disproportionately.

Invisible Black victims. Six out of seven studies that clearly identify the race of victims found more attention was paid to White victims than to Black victims. Homicides of White victims not only resulted in more articles, but also longer articles than homicides of Black victims. This prompted one researcher to coin the term "worthy victims" to describe the greater coverage received by White crime victims compared to people of color.

Visible Black suspects. Overall, while the coverage of perpetrators of color is out of balance with actual crime trends, it is less so than the coverage of minority victims. In nine of twelve (75%) studies, minorities were overrepresented as perpetrators of crime. Some studies found distinct disparities, while others found perpetrators of color represented in numbers that matched their local arrest rates, but found Whites underrepresented.

For example, a study of murder coverage in Indianapolis newspapers found that the percentage of articles about Black suspects reflected the percentage of

Blacks arrested for murder (60% and 61%, respectively), but if the suspect was Black, the average article length was longer than for a White suspect. Close looks at local TV news in a large urban center found disparities as well. Blacks were 22% more likely to be shown on local TV news in Los Angeles committing violent crime than nonviolent crime, while according to police statistics, Blacks were equally likely to be arrested for violent crime and nonviolent crime. Likewise, Hispanics were 14% more likely to be depicted as committing violent crime than nonviolent crime, whereas Hispanics were 7% more likely to be arrested for a violent crime than a nonviolent crime. Some might argue that this is simply because violent crime is more newsworthy than non-violent crime. But Whites were 31% more likely to be depicted committing a nonviolent crime than a violent crime, whereas Whites were only 7% more likely to be arrested for a nonviolent crime than a violent crime. While Blacks and Hispanics were overrepresented as violent offenders, Whites were underrepresented as violent offenders on the same evening news. In addition, researchers found that when stories featured a Black perpetrator, reporters included sources hostile to the perpetrator half the time, whereas with White perpetrators, reporters included hostile sources 25 percent of the time.

How are African Americans depicted in crime stories? In his extensive work on portrayals of African Americans on local television news, Robert Entman documents that Blacks are most likely to be seen in television news stories in the role of criminal, victim, or demanding politician. Black suspects were less likely to be identified by name than White suspects; were not as well dressed as

White suspects; and were more likely to be shown physically restrained than Whites. In sum, Entman concluded that Black suspects were routinely depicted as being poor, dangerous, and indistinct from other non-criminal Blacks.

Interracial crime. Our nation has an ugly history of treatment of interracial crime, dating from slavery through the "Jim Crow" era to the well-documented fact that today Blacks have a higher risk of receiving the death penalty for killing Whites than any other victim-offender racial mix. That history is reflected in public opinion polling on race and crime that shows that Whites overestimate their likelihood of being victimized by minorities by three to one. Studies of TV news coverage of crime in Philadelphia, Los Angeles and Chicago found that interracial crime was substantially more likely to be reported than its actual percentage of crime statistics would predict. These findings are disturbing since people of all races are far more likely to be killed by someone of the same race.

Summary. While every content analysis of media coverage of crime by and against people of color does not show disparate coverage, a clear majority of the research reveals a disturbing pattern of disproportionate coverage. Consequently, it is likely that most Americans form an erroneous picture of which groups are violent and who suffers most often from crime and violence. In particular, the absence of Black victims, coupled with the repeated presence of Black suspects across different sources of news, reinforces stereotypes about African Americans as a group audiences should fear.

Finding #4: Few studies examine portrayals of youth on the news. Those that do find that youth rarely appear in the news but when they do, it is connected to violence.

There is substantially less research that focuses on portrayals of youth in the news. Though the findings are consistent there are fewer of them. Of the 146 articles we originally identified, only 16 examined whether and how youth were portrayed on television news or in newspapers. The findings on the coverage of youth crime are consistent with overall crime coverage – when youth appear in the news, it is in connection with violence. A few of the studies also uphold the findings on race and the news. Young people of color seem to fare as poorly as their elders on the news – perhaps worse. Finally, some studies find that violence perpetrated by adults upon youth is underreported.

News involving youth is violent. Stories about youth in newspapers and on television news are scarce. When they do appear in the news, youth usually are in stories about education or violence. Relatively few youth are arrested each year for violent crimes, yet the message from the news is that this is a common occurrence.

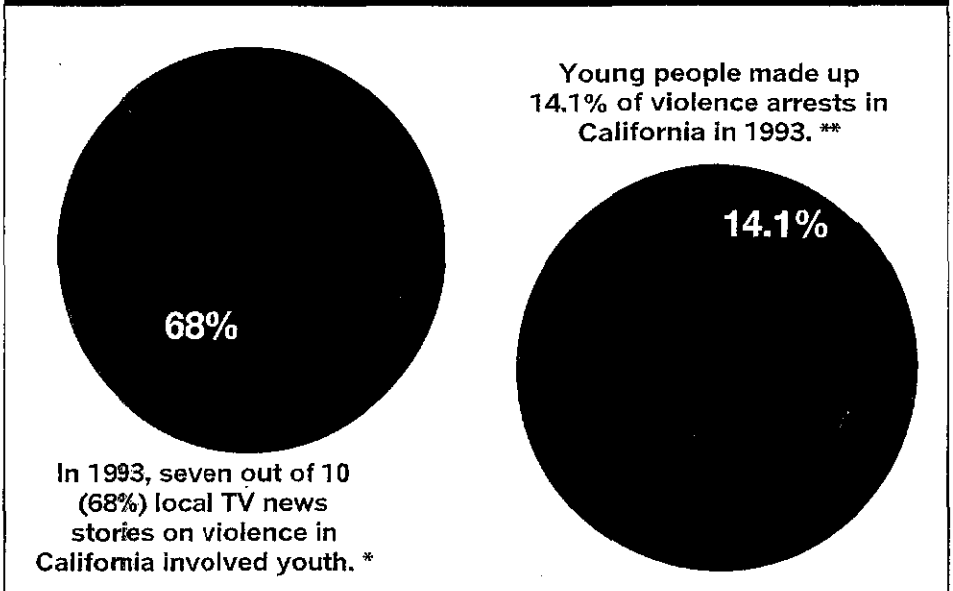
One study of newspaper coverage of youth in Minnesota concluded that youth "are presented as inevitably bad, and, if left untreated, they will inevitably go wrong." An analysis of Hawaii's major dailies over 10 years showed a 30-fold increase in coverage of youth crime, despite declining rates of youth crime. An analysis examining 840 newspaper stories and 109

network news segments in 1993 showed that 40% of all newspaper stories on children were about violence, as were 48% of network television news, whereas nominal attention was given to topics of family, health, or economic concerns. There was more overall coverage of crime and violence than of all other policy issues combined. In a later study that examined 3,172 randomly selected stories on youth in one year of the *Los Angeles Times*, *Sacramento Bee*, and *San Francisco Chronicle*, the newspapers focused largely on two topics: education and violence. No other topic rated even a third as much attention. Education stories comprised 26% of all stories involving youth. The authors concluded that this is appropriate since the vast majority of youth between the ages of 5 and 17 attend school and about half continue after high school. But violence stories made up 25% of all youth coverage, when only three young people in 100 perpetrated or became victims of violence.

The circumstances in which youth are seen on television news are similar. A study of youth on local television news in 1993 examined 214 hours of local television news broadcast over 11 days on 26 stations throughout California. More than two-thirds of violence stories involved youth while more than half of all stories that included youth involved violence. One out of every two (53%) TV news stories concerning children or youth involved violence, while California crime data show that

one out of every 50 (2%) young people in California were either victims or perpetrators of violence in 1993. Nearly seven in 10 news stories (68%) on violence in California involved youth, whereas youth made up 14.1% of violence arrests in California that year. (See Figure 2) By contrast, young people had to perform extraordinary feats to appear on local television news in non-violence-related circumstances. When youth crime receives a far larger share of all crime coverage than youths actually commit, and when youth crime coverage dramatically increases while actual youth crime is decreasing, the public that relies on media coverage as its primary source of information about youth crime is misinformed.

Figure 2: Seven out of 10 local TV news stories on violence in California involved youth, but young people only made up 14.1% of violent arrests



* Dorfman & Woodruff 1998. The study examined 214 hours of local TV news during October-November 1993.
 ** Youthful arrest data come from the California Department of Criminal Justice's California Criminal Justice Profile, 1995. Population data come from the California Department of Finance, *Race/Ethnic Population with Age and Sex Detail, 1970-2040*, December 1998.

Youth of color fare worse than their white counterparts. The one study that examined youth portrayals in magazines had the most to say about race. A qualitative analysis of all cover stories in *Time* and *Newsweek* between 1946-1995 determined that the term “young Black males” became synonymous with the word “criminal” during the late 1960’s when Blacks were struggling for equality. A March 1965 *Newsweek* article was the first to connect crime with Black crime. In later stories in the 1970’s, both *Time* and *Newsweek* portrayed crime as “largely perpetrated by ‘young Black males’”. Later, Hispanic males were added to the picture.

A study of youth crime portrayals in the *New York Times* found that Black or Latino youth were never quoted directly, while White youth were quoted in all five stories in which they appeared. Furthermore, defense attorneys for White youth were quoted 13 times, but attorneys for youth of color only twice.

Crime news is where all youth are most likely to be seen on TV news, but youth of color appear in crime news more often than White youth—52% and 35%, respectively. White youth were present more often in health or education stories (13%) than were youth of color (2%).

Youth victims & perpetrators. Only a few studies distinguished between youth victims and perpetrators. One found that homicide victims under age 15 received more coverage in the *Los Angeles Times* than would be expected based on the frequency of homicides in that group. Researchers examining the *San Francisco Chronicle* found more depictions of youth perpetrators than youth victims, despite crime data that show three crimes

committed by adults against teens for every violent offense committed by youth under 18. In another examination of the *Los Angeles Times* in 1997, researchers found that nearly one in four murder suspects (23.9%) whose ages were identified in the *Times* were youth, while only one in six homicide arrestees (15.8%) in Los Angeles were youth that year.

Violence against youth is underreported. Two studies assessed whether crimes against young people were being covered; both studies found that crimes perpetrated by adults against youth are underreported. Several other studies that examined depictions of youth in the news generally did not detect substantial coverage of youth as victims of violence.

The relative lack of reporting on violence against youth can be juxtaposed with the overreporting of homicide by youth as compared to adults. In a comparison of youth portrayals in 327 stories from the 1997 *Los Angeles Times* (Orange County edition) to crime reports from the Los Angeles Police Department, researchers found youth homicides were nearly three times more likely to be reported in the *Los Angeles Times*, despite the fact that adults commit and are victims of far more murders. The authors conclude that the *Times*’ coverage scapegoats youth, since they commit far fewer crimes than adults.

Journalists ponder why. There are reasons the coverage looks as it does. One is that crime news is easy — everyone knows what it looks like, how to gather it, and how to report it. Some journalists argue that audiences want news about violence, though most polls dispute that argument. Another reason is that news is

a business. and reporters, producers, and editors have learned to choose the news they believe will draw the most attractive audience for advertisers.

The study of Denver's "Summer of Violence" offers some insight into newsroom decision-making about which homicides warrant coverage. After interviewing editors, producers, and reporters, the researcher concludes that, in covering Denver's "Summer of Violence" in 1993, journalists viewed these mostly White, middle class victims killed by minority youth through a predominantly White middle class lens. *Denver Post* reporter Steven Lipscher said, for example:

Take a look at our editors over there. Take a look at the news editors at the TV stations. Most of them are White middle class. Most of them are men but that doesn't make a whole lot of difference here. They live in these nice middle class neighborhoods and when those neighborhoods start having random crime...and it gets close to the suburbs or even in the suburbs where these news editors live, you know that deeply troubles them. When the crime was centered solely on the inner city if we had minority editors, people who lived in the inner city, we might have covered it. But we didn't and we still don't. Inner city crime is not nearly as shocking as suburban crime and the only reason why is look at who is writing the stories and look at who is assigning the stories.

The White, middle class lens means that some murders are more important than others, as explained by this *Rocky Mountain News* reporter:

There are homicides and then there are *homicides* on the police beat. There are homicides I can work hard on and only get this much into the paper. And then there are the kind that all you have to do is mention to the editor, "Gotta former district attorney who just killed his wife," and we're all over it...And as a colleague of mine once said, he had this theory that there were misdemeanor murders. That's not a theory I subscribe to, but he had a point. Obviously, there are some murders that don't count as much as others. A misdemeanor homicide according to Tony was typically a drug dealer [who] wipes out another drug dealer in an alley somewhere over a business deal gone bad. That is considered a low interest homicide (Emphasis in original).

Ultimately, individual news workers make decisions about what to include in the news of the day based on whether they personally care about the story. Reporters, editors, and producers have finely honed internalized mechanisms that are triggered by their personal values and emotional responses, tempered by news judgement, experience, and expectations of audience response. Standard selection criteria for news stories — controversy, conflict, novelty, proximity, significance, timeliness, visual appeal, practicality — are processed through the personal filters of journalists.

Discussion – Creation of a "Misinformation Synergy"

The public relies on news for its knowledge of crime. We suggest that a "misinformation synergy" occurs in crime

news that profoundly misinforms the public. The synergy results from the simultaneous and consistent presentation of three significant distortions in print and broadcast news. It is not just that African Americans are overrepresented as criminals and underrepresented as victims, or that young people are overrepresented as criminals, or that violent crime itself is given undue coverage. It is that all three occur together, combining forces to produce a terribly unfair and inaccurate overall image of crime in America. Add to that a majority of readers and viewers who rarely have any personal experience with crime by Black youth, and a White adult population who must rely on the media to tell them about minority youth crime, and the result is a perfect recipe for a misinformed public and misguided power structure.

Each study's findings, taken alone, may not be cause for alarm. After all, crime is a serious problem that demands news attention and political action.

But if news audiences are taking the crime coverage at face value, they are accepting a serious distortion. They are likely to believe that most crime is extremely violent and that perpetrators are Black and victims, White. If news audiences have little contact with young people, they are likely to believe that youth are dangerous threats, in part because there are so few other representations of youth in the news to the contrary.

Since every news outlet can't cover every crime, the question then becomes, how should editors, producers, and reporters choose which crimes to cover? How can the picture be made more accurate? How can print and broadcast journalists make

choices that minimize the distortions documented by researchers since 1910? How can their cumulative choices better reflect the crime and violence they cover? When they make those choices, how can the media add more context to crime coverage so as to improve the viewers' understanding of the causes and solutions to violent crime? And what, if anything, can the public do to get more accurate information in the news?

D. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NEWS MEDIA

The overwhelming evidence is that in the aggregate, crime coverage is not reflecting an accurate picture of who the victims and perpetrators are. The most consistent finding across media and across time is the gross distortion of the types of crime reported in the news. Rather than informing citizens about their world, the news is reinforcing stereotypes that inhibit society's ability to respond to the problem of crime, including juvenile crime. This is an admittedly difficult problem to fix, given the many constraints of daily journalism. Nonetheless, it is way past time to try to create a more accurate overall picture of crime, who suffers from it, and what can be done to prevent it. To begin to address this dilemma, we suggest that reporters, editors, and producers expand their sources; provide context for crime news; increase enterprise and investigative journalism; balance stories about crime and youth with stories about youth generally; conduct and discuss content audits of their own news; and examine the story selection process, adjusting if necessary.

1. Expand sources beyond police and courts. Health departments and coroner's offices are good sources of homicide data. Hospital admission data, though not always available for a breaking story, can help reporters put crime and its consequences in perspective. Other social agency employees and community residents have information about neighborhood life pertinent to crime stories. Reporters need to cultivate these sources the same way they cultivate the local beat cops.

2. Provide context for crime in regular reporting. In almost every area of news — sports, business, politics, entertainment — general information is integrated with spot reports and the news makes sense of events for audiences by placing them in a larger context, if not in the same article, then with additional graphics or sidebars or standing reports. Stories on crime and youth could be treated with equal depth and breadth.

3. Bolster enterprise and increase investigative journalism. This recommendation requires adequate investment in the practice of journalism. Reporters need the time and resources to cultivate sources, investigate leads, and identify the connections between seemingly isolated events. They need support for understanding the patterns in a community so that they recognize when an event is important *and* interesting, not just interesting.

4. Balance stories about crime and youth with stories about youth in general. News organizations must pull back their lens to get a broader picture of what else young people are doing. When it comes to youth, violence is as prominent

in the news as education. This exaggerates the rate of violence, particularly since 52 million young people go to school but only 125,000 are arrested for violent crimes each year. What issues affect them? What other newsworthy activities are they engaged in?

5. Conduct periodic audits of news content and share the results with readers and viewers. Newspapers and television newsrooms should periodically pause to examine their content. An audit would look beyond the evening ratings and sales numbers to ask the question: If the only information our readers and viewers got was from our news, what would they know about youth and violence? What wouldn't they know? Assess whether the news gives readers and viewers enough information to deliberate their community's problems.

6. Examine the story selection process, and use restraint when necessary. Who qualifies as newsworthy in the newsroom? Who doesn't? Of course, news outlets cannot stop telling unusual stories, but they need not tell every one, thereby overwhelming readers and viewers with a cumulative misrepresentation, especially when it means there is not room for less sensational but more important news. Is perceived victim "worthiness" the unspoken criteria for whether a murder is selected for the news? Reporters should ask themselves: Who qualifies as a worthy victim in my newsroom? Who doesn't? If reporters limit themselves to reporting what just happened without considering how that crime fits into larger patterns, the news is doomed to be distorted.

E. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILD ADVOCATES, YOUTH GROUPS AND CIVIL RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

While most of this report and these recommendations have focused on what the news media can and should do to improve crime coverage, there is much that the community can do to help generate a fairer depiction of youth crime.

1. Work with the media to give a more accurate picture of youth crime.

Because of the juvenile justice system's historic confidentiality protections, many child advocates refuse to talk to reporters about the context of individual cases. This places a serious and sometimes insurmountable burden on reporters when they try to tell a more complete story. It can also result in depictions of youths as monolithic criminals whose delinquency is presented without important contributing antecedents. Child advocates and lawyers must develop creative ways to tell a more contextual story about youth crime without jeopardizing their clients' confidentiality. Advocacy groups can conduct their own audits of crime coverage, as some youth groups have done, and directly engage media outlets in dialogue about youth crime coverage. Civil rights groups which have successfully demanded diversification in entertainment media should now turn their attention and creativity to the disparate coverage of youth crime.

2. Engage the media in a dialogue about their coverage. Further, child advocates, youth groups and civil rights groups need to begin to engage news outlets as consumers to educate the media about

their needs and to jointly seek solutions to the complex issues raised in this and other reports about coverage of youth crime. We Interrupt This Message, an advocacy group that conducted two of the studies discussed in this report, took its findings on disproportionate youth crime portrayals directly to the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *New York Times*. In 2000, Suffolk University's law school held a forum which brought together reporters from the *Boston Globe*, the *Boston Herald*, and several electronic media with lawyers and community groups that work with young people for a productive exchange of ideas about coverage of youth crime. In recent years, civil rights groups like the NAACP and the National Council of La Raza have highlighted the scarcity of minority representation on network programming. For example, in 1999 the NAACP highlighted the lack of prominent characters on the new fall television lineup, prompting an immediate response by the networks to diversify their programming. Although the NAACP's efforts concerned entertainment media, there is no reason to believe that similar efforts to educate news media about depictions of minority offenders and victims would fall on deaf ears.

3. Make data available. Journalists need local data to make national problems relevant for their audiences. Share information with the media so journalists can learn about local patterns, incorporate that information into daily stories, and give citizens the information they need to make better decisions about violence prevention policy.

4. Prepare young people to speak for themselves, then give them the opportunity to do so. Youth are becoming involved in advocacy efforts about juvenile justice and violence prevention from coast to coast. Give young people the training and support they need to speak confidently about the work they are doing to improve their communities for themselves and others. Increasing the visibility of young people in the news will help balance the current picture. Create situations where you can introduce young people to journalists so they can begin establishing themselves as sources on their own.

5. Make yourself available to the media. Youth advocates and researchers cannot have an impact on the coverage of youth crime if journalists don't know they exist, if they cannot find spokespeople when they need them, or if advocates do not respond to their requests for information in a timely manner. Sometimes, this will be difficult, because breaking stories about youth crime do not always arise at convenient times. But advocates' availability as experts or alternative voices prior to deadline can help shape coverage and put youth violence into its proper context.



THE AUTHORS

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Berkeley Media Studies Group

The Berkeley Media Studies Group operates out of the belief that the mass media, especially the news, have a significant influence on people's beliefs and actions regarding public health and social issues and that the news media can be a powerful force for change. BMSG works with community groups, journalists and public health professionals to harness the power of the media to advance healthy public policy. BMSG studies the news and news gathering to support professional education for journalists and media advocacy training for grass roots and public health leadership groups. BMSG is a project of the Public Health Institute.

Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice/Justice Policy Institute

The Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice is a private, non-profit organization devoted to reducing society's reliance on incarceration as a solution to social problems. The Center provides advocacy services and direct services on behalf of youth and adults facing incarceration throughout the country, with offices in San Francisco, Washington DC, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. The Justice Policy Institute (JPI) is the research and public policy arm of the Center. Among other research topics, JPI has produced analyses of the disproportionate confinement of minorities in adult and juvenile institutions, the growing impact of America's drug war, the tradeoff between funding prisons and universities, and the impact of imprisoning youth with adults.

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