

COVERING CRIME

HOW THE MEDIA COVERS VIOLENCE

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Journalists, in Milwaukee and elsewhere, often find themselves in a no-win racial crossfire when covering crime, and especially when covering homicide. Some public pressure groups argue that reporters cover crimes involving ethnic minorities too much, fostering damaging racial stereotypes and driving tough-on-crime law enforcement measures that penalize minorities more than others. To others, reporters unfairly make judgments about the “worth” of people’s lives, over-dramatizing crimes involving white victims and suspects, while ignoring minority victims and leaving them both faceless and nameless.

And to others, the news media should simply follow the numbers and not worry about making race-based value judgments when covering crime. If a heinous crime occurs in a community, it’s news, goes that thinking, regardless of whether the suspect is black, white, or a member of another ethnic group. And if the media cover certain groups more than others, perhaps it’s a function of those groups being over-represented in real-life crime numbers rather than evidence of systemic bias.



The media’s coverage of crime is significant because it can drive public policy decisions and influence public opinion toward them. But many of these oft-heard observations are based on assumptions about how the news media decide which crimes are newsworthy and which are not. Often, these competing premises contradict.

For their part, the media traditionally counter such race-based arguments by maintaining that journalists base decisions about crime coverage exclusively on traditional *news values* taught in journalism textbooks—namely, the news value of unusualness. The more unusual a crime is statistically, the rationale goes, the more newsworthy a crime becomes. A crime in the suburbs or involving white victims? More rare and thus newsworthy. A crime involving a juvenile suspect? More newsworthy. And so on. Many reporters will adamantly deny that cultural judgments, such as those involving race or gender, play any role in their decision-

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making process. This, however, is a premise that is equally based on assumptions and not scientific rigor.

But what does statistical analysis show?

A three-month, one week multivariate quantitative analysis into Milwaukee television and newspaper homicide coverage showed that race was *not* a factor in almost all judgments about newsworthiness. In addition, suburban homicides, although far fewer in number, did not receive more coverage than city homicides. The reverse was true. And the seriousness of the crime—as measured by such things as multiple victims and the type of homicide charge issued by prosecutors—mattered far more to the news media than did race. The gender of the suspect and victim also enhanced newsworthiness. Simply put: More

serious crimes received more coverage. Homicides involving females received more coverage. Racial value judgments were not paramount in decision-making.

The content analysis was conducted by coding the homicide news coverage of two Milwaukee television stations—WTMJ Channel 4 and WISN Channel 12. The homicide coverage in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* was also coded during the same span in spring 2004.

Newsworthiness was defined as the amount of time and space the news organizations devoted to a homicide story. For the newspaper, column inches were measured. For the television stations, newsworthiness was measured in seconds.

To determine which homicides the organizations ignored completely, the pool was col-

STATISTICAL UNUSUALNESS INDICATORS:

Variable	No (case did not include)	Yes (did include)	Missing
Multiple victims	92	16	None
Female victims	87	21	None
White victims	76	32	None
Victim committing crime	86	22	None
Victim with criminal record	69	39	None
Juvenile victims	92	16	None
Multiple suspects	81	22	5
White suspects	77	24	7
Female suspects	95	7	6
Suspect not committing crime	54	49	5
Suspect has no criminal record	73	29	6
Juvenile suspects	88	14	6
Non-city location	95	13	None
No penalty enhancer	52	50	6
Stranger homicides	66	36	6
Family relationship	88	14	6
Non-gun homicide	76	32	None
Less than 1st degree Intentional homicide	67	35	6

lected of “homicide occurrences”—the potential homicide cases that news organizations could have covered during the time period of the study. Naturally, homicides that actually occurred during the study period were included but so were homicide cases in court for at least one significant court hearing—such as a jury trial or sentencing—or where prosecutors issued fresh criminal charges. Past research into homicide in the news has not always determined the potential pool. This is important to determine which homicides were ignored completely, not just the degree of coverage given to those receiving attention. Regression analysis was used to determine whether variables were associated with greater story length in a statistically significant manner. The study encompassed the Milwaukee metropolitan area of Milwaukee, Waukesha, Ozaukee, and Washington counties. Homicide stories were not coded when they involved cases outside the study area because there was no feasible way to compile such a homicide pool.

Overall, there were 108 homicide occurrences during the study period. Demographic and other information about each homicide was collected from criminal complaints, the Wisconsin automated circuit court database, and medical examiner’s reports. In order to test the traditional media assumption that a homicide’s statistical unusualness makes it more newsworthy, a researcher must determine which homicides were statistically unusual during the study period. These types of cases were statistically rare in the homicide pool that was then compared to news coverage:

Missing homicides were those in which suspects were not apprehended. One suspect’s race could not be obtained. Some information was known about the type of offense in cases where suspects were at large, resulting in the different numbers under missing.

The study then measured which variables predicted newsworthiness by analyzing the demographic and other breakdown of the cases that received varying degrees of news

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES MEASURED TO TEST FOR WHETHER THEY INCREASED NEWSWORTHINESS:

Victim race
Suspect race
Victim gender
Suspect gender
Victim age
Suspect age
Suspect-victim relationship (stranger or family)
Risky behavior (whether homicide occurred in commission of another crime by victim or suspect)
Suspect and victim prominence
Cultural violation (pregnant victim, homicide occurring at business, etc.)
Multiple victims
Multiple suspects
White victim-white suspect combination
White victim-minority suspect combination
Minority victim-minority suspect combination
Minority victim-white suspect combination

coverage. In addition to race and gender, measured variables included age, whether the suspect and/or victim had a criminal record, whether the suspect and/or victim was engaged in a criminal act at the time of the homicide, whether there was a family relationship between suspect and victim, and other factors.

To account for television's heavy emphasis on the need for imagery, logistical concerns such as the time of day and day of week the homicide occurrence took place were also measured. Control variables measuring the seriousness of the offense, such as the type of charge and whether a penalty enhancer was issued by prosecutors, also were tested.

But logistical issues did not matter much to the news organizations, other than one: Weekend homicides received more coverage for the newspaper and one television station. This may be explained by the news media's greater need to fill the weekend news hole because government buildings and other businesses are often closed, and news is thus often sparse. Crime scene coverage may offer a relatively easy solution.

But the most interesting findings in the study involved race, because they contradicted not only some public perception, but also a large body of past research.

Researchers have consistently found that the news media are more likely to cover homicide cases involving black suspects and/or white victims, particularly when they occur in combination with one another (Alix, 1978; Butterfield, 1995; Chancer, 1998; Chermak, 1995; Dixon and Linz, 2002; Entman, 1994; Fass, 1999; Hasian & Flores, 2000; Keever, 1997; Pritchard and Hughes, 1997; Shipman, 2000; Lundman, 2003).

For example, Entman (1992) attributed racial discrepancies he documented in crime stories to an emerging "modern racism" distinguished by a societal denial of racial discrimination and presence of hostility. He described it as subtler than the past's overt racism (350). Entman found blacks were less likely to be named in stories (350), and that there were

consistent differences in representation of blacks and whites in crime coverage that could be traced to modern racism (346). In a 1997 study of the pre-merger *Milwaukee Journal* and *Milwaukee Sentinel*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee researchers David Pritchard and Karen Hughes found that white, senior citizen, female, and child victims received more coverage. In a separate 1985 study of the same Milwaukee newspapers, Pritchard found that a white suspect increased newsworthiness. This study broadened the research into television.

And, although the study backed up the earlier Milwaukee research in several key ways, it also found another trend at work in spring 2004 in the Milwaukee metropolitan area when dealing with race. Statistical analysis showed:

- Whether a victim or suspect was black, Latino, Asian, or American Indian did not make a homicide more newsworthy for any of the news organizations.
- Whether a victim or suspect was white did not make a homicide more newsworthy for any of the news organizations.
- All combinations (minority suspect-white victim, white suspect-minority victim, minority suspect-minority victim, white suspect-white victim) did not predict newsworthiness, with one exception. The combination of white suspect-white victim enhanced newsworthiness for one television station in the study—Channel 12.

However, the news organizations studied did make some cultural value judgments about which homicides deserved coverage and which did not. This echoes the earlier Milwaukee research, in addition to national findings. Specifically, as noted, gender mattered a lot to the organizations. Cases involving female suspects and victims received greater coverage than those without them. And cases where a greater deviation of cultural norms was present—defined as such things as gang involvement or a crime occurring at a business or the slaying of a pregnant victim—increased newsworthiness for Channel 12.

And, a factor often absent in public rhetoric—the seriousness of the crime—mattered in several ways. The inclusion of penalty enhancers by prosecutors increased newsworthiness for some organizations, as did the levying of a first-degree intentional homicide charge, the most serious possible under the law. Homicides with multiple victims received more coverage as well. Homicide cases with multiple victims that were heavily covered included the case of an African-American man sentenced for slaying three African-American victims outside a Milwaukee tavern, and a triple gang-related slaying involving Latino suspects and victims. In other words, the news interest in multiple-victim homicides may have overshadowed race concerns.

The analysis also showed a dramatic trend in the newspaper in particular in downplaying homicide cases. Almost all of the newspaper-covered homicides were relegated to briefs in the inside of the B section, regardless of the race of the suspect or victim. In the study period in question, only four homicide cases in the local pool made it onto the *Journal Sentinel's* front page. The gang-related triple murder was one of them.

But the newspaper also covered more homicides than did the television stations; it just didn't give them much space unless—statistics showed—they involved women, multiple victims, a city location, or penalty enhancers. This difference in coverage may be explained in part by the newspaper's larger news hole and greater staff resources. The newspaper, for example, has a full-time court reporter and multiple police reporters, whereas the television stations do not have full-time court and police reporters assigned to nothing else.

And the coverage of Channel 4 and the *Journal Sentinel*—both owned by Journal Communications, Inc.—was more likely to agree than did the coverage of the newspaper and Channel 12 or the coverage between the two television stations.

Contrary to beliefs commonly held in many newsrooms, statistical unusualness was not a reliable predictor of whether any of the news organizations considered a homicide newsworthy. In essence, it didn't consistently matter whether a homicide was more rare than another. Many homicides that were statistically rare did not receive much coverage at all. For example, white victims and suspects were

rare in the homicide pool, but they did not predict greater coverage. The same was true of cases with multiple suspects and juvenile victims. And some suburban homicide cases were completely ignored by some of the news organizations. This finding backs up past research studies conducted both nationally and in Wisconsin into media coverage of homicide. Specifically, the 1997 study by Pritchard and Hughes found that statis-

tistical unusualness did not make a Milwaukee homicide story more newsworthy, and Richard Lundman made a similar finding in a 2003 study into Columbus, Ohio, newspaper coverage of homicide.

Several factors may explain why the Milwaukee media operated in a largely color-blind fashion when covering homicide in this study.

For one, the media showed a heavy bias toward covering crime scenes—with their chaotic, dramatic imagery and easy access—and ignored many court cases. Many of the crime scenes involved minority victims and

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suspects. Of the 108 cases in the study overall, 56 homicides received no coverage from television or the newspaper whatsoever. Almost all of those were in court. It's hard to argue the court-only cases not covered would not be interesting to some. They included jury trials, sentencings, and motion hearings, raising concerns about coverage of due process. By the time a homicide hits court, mitigating circumstances may result in plea agreements or even a dismissal of charges, but the media tended to ignore court cases at the expense of the more dramatic and fear-inducing crime scenes.

There may be a logistical concern impeding coverage of court cases, of course. Although cameras are routinely allowed in state courts, the Milwaukee media must get judicial approval and some of the courtrooms have glass, which can affect the ability to get good footage. It may take more time to get a crew over to the courthouse and positioned than it does to dispatch someone to a neighborhood.

The media's extensive coverage of homicides that involved females included both minorities and non-minorities. In essence, gender may have overshadowed race in decision-making. For example the top two television homicide stories in total seconds involved women from different ethnic groups:

- 660 seconds. The Ashley Steffan case in Waukesha County. She was a white teenage girl killed by another female motorist. Both suspect and victim were white.
- 603 seconds. The Sasha Carter carjacking case. She was a black woman killed by a black man in a random carjacking.

Why do such studies matter?

Crime news is important to study because of the amount of it that citizens are exposed to in both the newspaper and on television. Graber (1980) documented that one-fourth of three Chicago daily newspapers' stories, cartoons, and editorials dealt with criminal justice. In *Crime and the American Press*, Roy Edward Lotz reported a similar trend in the

New Orleans Times-Picayune newspaper (2). And television relies on crime stories proportionately even more so than newspapers (Chermak, 1995, 13). Researchers have documented local television stations' heavy emphasis on crime (Chermak, 1995; Entman, 1994; Klite and Bardwell, 1997). One study found violent crime constituted one-third of all local television news programming (Klite and Bardwell, 1997, 102).

News organizations are selective about what crimes they cover, ignoring and downplaying some crimes but not others (Chermak, 1995; Dixon and Linz, 2000 and 2002; Entman, 1992 and 1994; Ericson et al., 1987, 1989 and 1991; Gilliam and Iyengar, 1998 and 2000; Johnstone et al., 1994; Lundman, 2003; Peterson, 1998; Pritchard, 1985; Pritchard and Hughes, 1997; Rodgers and Thorsen, 2001; Yanich, 2000). The media report crime as "an epidemic" through frames of "sensationalism, blame, and solutions" (Rodgers and Thorsen, 2001, 174). Gilliam and Iyengar (2000) showed the media overplay violent crime, although in the real world, property crime is the highest category (363). The news media showcase the innocent victim "extreme," helping make "the general problem of victimization an issue of national concern (Chermak, 1995, 9).

News coverage of crime has demonstrable effects on audience members. Crime news increases fear among viewers, often disproportionate to reality (Behr and Iyengar, 1995; Chermak, 1995; Gilliam and Iyengar, 2000; Heath, 1984; Lord et al., 2001; Yanich, 2000). It also prompts prosecutors to negotiate less (Pritchard, 1986), promotes racial stereotypes (Peffley et al., 1996, 315), and increases support for conservative law enforcement measures (Gilliam and Iyengar, 2000, 560).

But the spring 2004 study dispelled some myths about Milwaukee media homicide coverage. Statistical analysis is important because the public debate should be based on evidence instead of hyperbole. And the findings show that some factors discounted in much of the public debate—such as gender and the seriousness of offense—are overlooked whereas

other factors—such as race—are sometimes overplayed. Other value judgments that do matter—such as the heavy media interest in violence by and against women—do not receive much attention in the public forum.

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