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Crime in the News: How do People Feel About Crime Reporting in Portland, Oregon?

Research In Brief

Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute (CJPRI)

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Key Findings

- *Three quarters of adults in Portland watch the local TV news and/or read the area's major newspaper on a regular basis.*
- *While two-thirds of Portlanders rate media coverage of individual crime incidents as "good", all other forms of crime reporting are evaluated much less favorably.*
- *Younger residents and people with a college degree are more dissatisfied with the overall quality of crime reporting.*
- *Criminal justice agencies need to develop alternative mechanisms for disseminating crime information directly to the public and/or work with local news media to cover a broader range of crime topics.*

Introduction

Criminal justice researchers and media experts consistently find that local news media devote extensive coverage to individual criminal events, particularly crimes that involve atypical victims and offenders or severe acts of violence. Hence the journalistic expression, "if it bleeds it leads."

Reporting on criminal events like these might benefit the community if residents and organizations use the information to make better decisions regarding their safety. Studies suggest, however, that a more common outcome of exposure to incident-based crime reporting is inaccurate assessment of crime facts, fear that is disproportionate to actual victimization rates, and increased support for punitive sanctions with offenders.

Other areas of news coverage that may have greater value for a community include reports on crime prevention, crime trends, the underlying factors that contribute to crime, and efforts by the community and police to reduce offending. It remains unclear whether local news organizations are doing a good job covering these topics.

This *research brief* summarizes the results of a recent survey with residents in Portland, Oregon assessing public opinions on the local news media's coverage of various crime topics.



ABOUT THE SURVEY

Data for the current report were drawn from the larger 2012 *Portland Criminal Justice Survey* conducted by the Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute at Portland State University.

A multi-stage sampling procedure was used for the survey. We started with a list of 75 neighborhood/areas previously categorized by the City of Portland's Auditors Office. Forty neighborhoods were then randomly chosen from this list for inclusion in the present study. Statistical analyses verified that the sample of 40 neighborhoods accurately represents the overall demographics of the city and the geographic distribution of residents across neighborhood coalitions.

A random sample of 150 addresses was then pulled from each of the 40 neighborhoods, resulting in a final sample of 6,000 residential locations in Portland. Households were mailed a postcard alerting them to the forthcoming survey, then the survey instrument, a reminder postcard, and then a final reminder. Residents were asked to have the adult with the most recent birthday complete the survey.

There were 162 invalid addresses making the valid sample size 5,838. As of July 11th, 2012 we had received 2,461 completed surveys for an overall response rate of 42.2%. Females, Whites, and people with a college degree were overrepresented among those returning the survey.

The error attributed to sampling for the survey as a whole is ± 2.47 percentage points (95% confidence level).

For more information about the methodology contact Dr. Brian Renauer, Dir of CJPRI (renauer@pdx.edu).

CJPRI would like to thank Kate Ginsberg, MS for assistance in designing the study and managing the data collection.

Are Portlanders Watching/Reading the Local News?

More than one-half (55.5%) of the adults in Portland watch local TV news on a regular basis (i.e., several times per week to daily; see Table 1). A similar proportion of people (51.2%) are regular readers of the *Oregonian* newspaper and three-quarters of residents (72.6%) do one and/or the other regularly. These data, combined with prior analysis of print and television news content, suggests that most adults in Portland are frequently exposed to crime reporting.

Table 1. Exposure to Local News Media

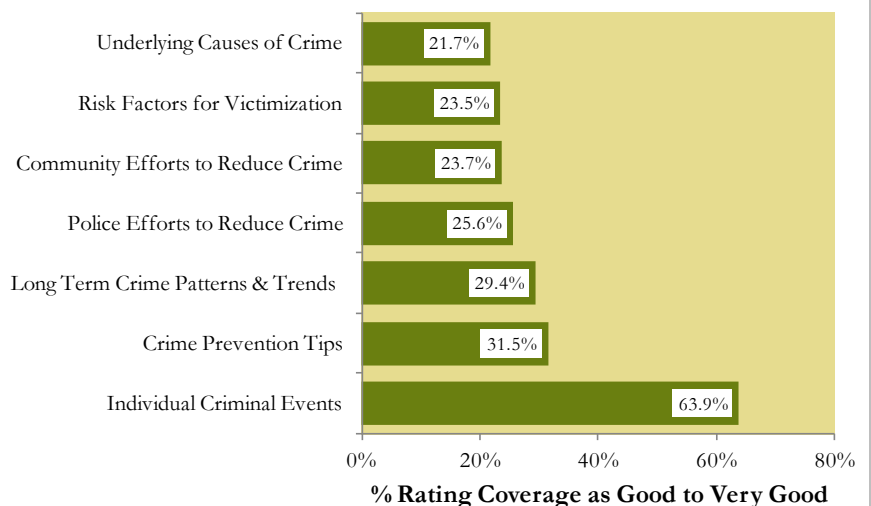
	Watch Local TV News*	Read the Oregonian*
Never	13.5%	15.0%
Once a month or less	16.6%	17.8%
Several times per month	14.4%	16.0%
Several times per week	22.0%	14.8%
Everyday	33.5%	36.4%

*Includes watching/reading online

How Do People Feel About Local Crime Reporting?

Residents used a scale ranging from "very good (A)" to "very poor (F)" to rate news coverage of seven distinct crime topics (see Figure 1). Two-thirds (63.9%) gave a good to very good rating for news coverage of individual criminal events (e.g., recent murder, robbery, rape, or burglary). The other six areas of crime reporting were rated less positively. For example, less than one-third (31.5%) of the public gave a good or very good rating to the news media's coverage of crime prevention tips (i.e., strategies people could employ to reduce their own risk of victimization).

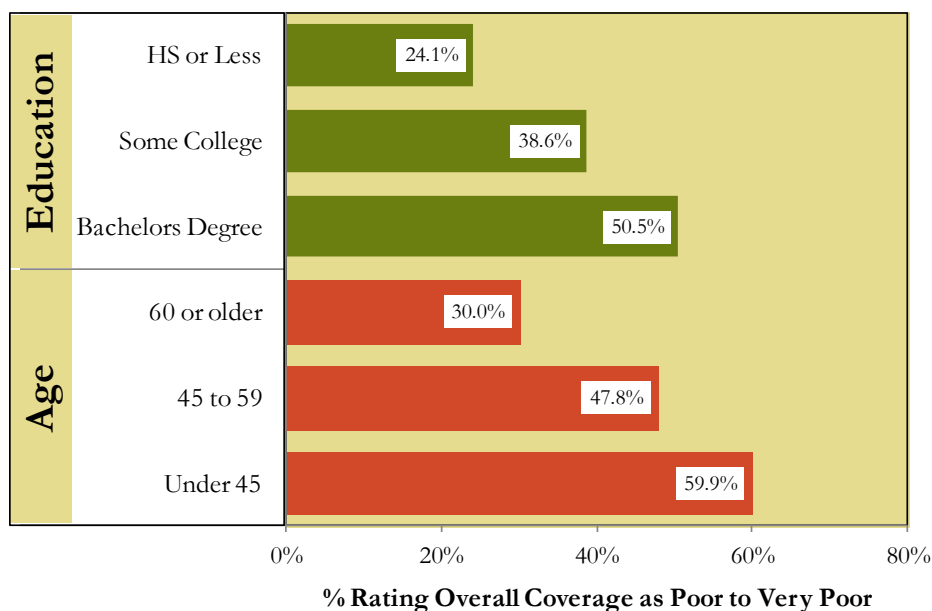
Figure 1. Public Evaluation of News Media's Coverage of Crime



Who is Dissatisfied with Local Crime Reporting?

Ratings on the seven crime topics were averaged to create an overall media score. People whose average rating was in the “poor (D)” to “very poor (F)” range were then compared to people who rated the media’s overall coverage of crime as “fair (C)” to “very good (A).” There were no differences in the distribution of men and women in these groups, nor were there any differences by race/ethnicity. Education and age, however, did make a difference. As shown in Figure 2, people with more education rated the media’s crime reporting less favorably. Similarly, younger residents in Portland were more critical of local crime reporting on average.

Figure 2. Dissatisfaction with News Media's Coverage of Crime



Summary

The present study found that people living in Portland are generally satisfied with the local media’s reporting on individual criminal incidents. By contrast, the vast majority of residents feel that news organizations are doing only a fair to very poor job of reporting on the underlying causes of crime in our community, longer term crime trends, crime prevention tips, and police/community efforts to reduce crime.

Further research will be needed to explore the reasons for this high level of dissatisfaction with local crime reporting. In the meantime, the findings have important implications for criminal justice agencies that have a responsibility not only to reduce crime, but to help people feel safe where appropriate and to engage the community in efforts to prevent crime. The latter requires agencies to expand their role in educating the public about the causes of crime and things people can do to reduce their risk for victimization.

While some of these goals may be achieved through expanded collaboration with the traditional news media, criminal justice agencies should also consider alternative strategies for communicating crime information directly to the public to ensure that these messages are being heard (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube). This is particularly important for our younger and college educated residents who appear to be especially dissatisfied with current crime reporting on TV and in newspapers.

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Criminal Justice
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CJPRI strives to meet the informational needs of policy makers and practitioners while at the same time expanding the body of scientific literature addressing criminology and criminal justice.

Faculty and staff at CJPRI have a broad set of technical skills that can be brought to bear on a subject, including advanced statistical analysis, database development, GIS mapping, survey design, literature reviews, process evaluations, and program assessment.

CJPRI welcomes inquiries for collaboration on a wide range of topics. Recent projects have focused on urban crime and policing, public perceptions of crime and justice, rehabilitation and correctional “best practices”, domestic violence, and immigration.



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