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# Scene of the Crime: The Study and Practice of Local Television Crime Coverage from the mid-1990s to the Present

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Scene of the Crime:  
The Study and Practice of Local Television Crime Coverage  
from the mid-1990s to the Present

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Scene of the Crime: The Study and Practice of Local Television Crime Coverage from the mid-1990s to the Present**

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This study examines the quantity and quality of crime coverage on television and its perceived impact on public policy. It discusses various stations' attempts to address the concern that there is "too much crime on local TV newscasts." The paper explores three techniques that can make such coverage more relevant to viewers: adoption of crime coverage guidelines, use of interactive crime Web sites and, most notably, the coverage of crime from a public health perspective.

# Scene of the Crime: The Study and Practice of Local Television Crime Coverage from the mid-1990s to the Present

## **Background and objective**

This study summarizes the most recent research regarding crime coverage on local television news. It also examines past and present practices among a range of stations that have attempted to address the concern that there is “too much crime on local TV newscasts.” The report addresses such topics as the amount of coverage, the quality of coverage, approaches to improving coverage and the perceived impact of TV crime coverage on public policy.

The report was requested by the USC Annenberg Institute for Justice and Journalism in collaboration with Criminal Justice Journalists. The study was conducted by Debora Wenger and Jeff South, associate professors in the School of Mass Communications at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Wenger and South conducted a comprehensive review of the literature and research concerning crime news on local TV over the past decade. They also interviewed about 20 TV news executives, reporters, academic experts and industry observers.

## **Summary of literature and previous research**

Over the past 10 years, numerous studies have established that television stations devote a substantial proportion of their newscasts to crime coverage. The amounts reported ranged from less than 20 percent to more than 50 percent. The disparities reflected the fact that the studies often varied in how they defined crime stories and how they selected their sample of news stories to analyze. Most of the studies agreed that between one-quarter and one-third of local airtime is devoted to crime news.

Several reports looked at news broadcasts in a particular city.

In 1994, the Chicago Council on Urban Affairs examined 10 weeks of news programming on the city's five major local TV channels. The council found that when weather, sports and commercials are excluded, more than 50 percent of the news was devoted to "crime and violence." The group's report said that Chicago's TV news painted "an urban America seemingly out of control: night after night the news overflows with victims and perpetrators of violence."<sup>1</sup>

In 1996, Danilo Yanich, director of the Local TV News Media Project at the University of Delaware, studied 847 news stories broadcast in Philadelphia and Baltimore. Excluding sports and weather from his sample, he found that 31.3 percent of the stories focused on crime. "Crime news occupied a prominent place in newscasts far out of proportion with its actual prevalence in the community," Yanich wrote.<sup>2</sup>

Sarah Eschholz, an assistant professor at Georgia State University, led a content analysis of three stations' evening newscasts in Orlando, Fla., in 1998. "The overwhelming majority of all local news broadcasts began with a crime story, and approximately one-quarter of all stories (apart from weather, sports or anchor chit-chat) shown on the news were crime related," Eschholz reported.<sup>3</sup>

Mark Crispin Miller, a New York University professor, conducted a similar study in Baltimore in 1998. He found that 38 percent of the TV news there concerned crime. Local government or politics made up 8 percent the coverage; education, 4 percent; health, 4 percent;

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<sup>1</sup> Fitzgerald, M. (1994, June 18). Newspapers and violence coverage. *Editor & Publisher*, Vol. 127, Issue 25, 14-15.

<sup>2</sup> Yanich, D. (1998, Fall). Crime, community & local TV news: covering crime in Philadelphia & Baltimore. A report of the Center for Community Development & Family Policy and the Center on Crime, Communities & Culture. Retrieved Sept. 5, 2003, from <http://www.localtvnews.org/papers/CrimeCommLocalTVNews.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Eschholz, S., Chiricos, T., and Weitzel, P. (1998). News consumption and perceptions of crime: an assessment of media content and public opinion in Florida. A report for the Collins Center for Public Policy and the Poynter Institute.

and business, 1 percent.<sup>4</sup> Crime stories were heavy on melodrama, anguished interviews and gruesome facts but devoid of information that would help viewers understand the causes or frequency of particular kinds of crime, Miller said. “Anchors and reporters dwell obsessively on local crime and other telegenic instances of pain and suffering. Despite their obvious talent, and despite their clear concern for Baltimore’s well-being, those professionals are over-zealous in their crime coverage, which ... crowds out other, more important stories.”

Besides analyzing broadcasts in individual markets, researchers have attempted national studies of local television news.

A nonprofit group called the Rocky Mountain Media Watch monitored 100 local TV newscasts for one evening in 1995, 1996 and 1997. The report on the broadcasts of Sept. 20, 1995, said, “Crime reports, which often serve as lead stories, constitute on average 30.2 percent of news time.”<sup>5</sup> Of the stories aired on Feb. 26, 1997, the RMMW said 42.6 percent were about “crime, disasters, war or terrorism.” The group said 72 percent of the newscasts on Feb. 26, 1997, led with stories about “crime and violence.” Using such data, the RMMW computed a “mayhem index” for each station studied. However, the group was criticized for coding as “mayhem” such segments as a report on furnace-repair rip-offs and a story about how airplane pilots handle turbulence.<sup>6</sup>

In 1996, journalism professors from eight universities formed the Consortium for Local Television Surveys (COLTS) and conducted what they called “the first known attempt to sample the news content of television newscasts on a national scale.” The researchers taped and

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<sup>4</sup> Miller, M.C. (1998). It’s a crime: The economic impact of the local TV news in Baltimore. Technical report, New York University, New York.

<sup>5</sup> Klite, P., Bardwell, R.A. and Salzman, J. (1995). Pavlov’s TV dog: a snapshot of local TV news in America taken on September 20, 1995. Rocky Mountain Media Watch Content Analysis 7; Rocky Mountain Media Watch; Denver.

<sup>6</sup> Libin, S. (1997, June). Trashing television news: Some of what passes for research is a crime. Retrieved Sept. 5, 2003, from <http://www.scripps.ohiou.edu/producer/thebook/chapter8.htm>

analyzed newscasts in eight cities in late 1996 and early 1997. The universities (and the markets they studied) were: Ball State University (Indianapolis); Columbia University (New York City); Northwestern University (Chicago); Syracuse University (Syracuse, N.Y); University of Miami (Miami); University of Oregon (Eugene); University of Southern California (Los Angeles); and the University of Texas (Austin).

COLTS found that the TV stations devoted an average of 20.2 percent of their news time to crime and 9.1 percent to other criminal justice stories – for a total of 29.3 percent. The second most common news subject was government and politics, which accounted for 15.3 percent of airtime.<sup>7</sup>

The consortium later expanded to nine universities and markets (adding Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge) and studied a sampling of newscasts during the first half of 1999. The amount of crime coverage had dropped, but it still received far more news time than any other topic, the researchers said. “Crime and criminal justice took up nearly twice as much airtime as government and political coverage – 23 percent to just under 12 percent.”<sup>8</sup>

The extent of crime coverage “should be obvious to anyone who watches TV news,” Dave Kurpius, the coordinator of COLTS, said at the time. A professor at LSU’sanship School of Mass Communication and a former local television news director, he said the findings raised questions about TV stations’ story selections: “Are stations just covering what’s cheap and easy, like crime and criminal justice, or are they covering stories that help citizens and communities make decisions and play a part in the democracy?”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Fitzgerald, M. (1997, May 24). Local TV news lacks substance. *Editor & Publisher*, Vol. 130, Issue 21, 8-9.

<sup>8</sup> Geisler, J. (2000, May). Blacked out. *American Journalism Review*, 36.

<sup>9</sup> Geisler, J. (2000, May). Blacked out. *American Journalism Review*, 36.

Also in late 1996, the Center for Media and Public Affairs, with funding from the Kaiser Family Foundation, categorized more than 17,000 local weekday nightly-news stories in 13 cities. The center said 3,397 stories – 20 percent of the total – were about crime. The stations broadcast 1,838 weather stories (11 percent) and 1,557 accident/disaster stories (9 percent) but only 223 city-government stories (1.3 percent).<sup>10</sup>

An average 30-minute broadcast, the center said, included eight minutes of commercials, four minutes of crime stories, four minutes of sports coverage and three minutes of weather.

Drew Altman, president of the Kaiser Family Foundation, said: “This study shows that stories on crime outnumber other local news stories two to one. Does anyone seriously believe that crime is twice as important as any other issue that the public needs to learn about from local television news?”<sup>11</sup>

Since 1998, the Project for Excellence in Journalism has conducted an annual study of local TV news. The project is part of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and is funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. Each year, it has examined newscasts from about 60 stations nationwide – a total of more than 30,000 stories and 1,200 hours of programming. “In the 2002 local TV news study, a quarter (26 percent) of all stories were devoted to crime, law and the courts, the most of any single year since 1998, when we began monitoring local television news.”<sup>12</sup> The project’s researchers found that the percentage of crime-related stories was 28 percent in 1998, 22 percent in 1999, 21 percent in 2000 and 25 percent in 2001.

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<sup>10</sup> Fletcher, J. (1998, August). Crime stories dominate local TV news: If it bleeds, it leads. *PM. Public Management*; 22-23.

<sup>11</sup> Fletcher, J. (1998, August). Crime stories dominate local TV news: If it bleeds, it leads. *PM. Public Management*; 22-23.

<sup>12</sup> On the road to irrelevance. (2002, November/December). Produced by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, an affiliate of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Retrieved Sept. 5, 2003, from <http://www.journalism.org/resources/research/reports/localTV/2002/public.asp>



The researchers said that according to their survey of news directors, three-quarters of local newsrooms have assigned beats, the most common being medicine/health (42 percent), crime or courts (38 percent), education (37 percent), investigative (25 percent), consumer news (24 percent) and government/politics (24 percent).

“With all those beats, why are newscasts still so full of crime news? Apparently the reflex to cover the ‘live, local and late-breaking’ – usually crime – is so strong that it commands most newsroom resources not specifically earmarked for other subjects. Indeed, the actions of cops, criminals, suspects, crime victims, family members, and lawyers made up 27 percent of all stories,” according to the PEJ report for 2002.<sup>13</sup>

In 2002, Jeremy Lipschultz and Michael Hilt, professors of communication at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, published a book, *Crime and Local Television News: Dramatic, Breaking and Live From the Scene*<sup>14</sup>. It was based in part on a content analysis in 1999 of local newscasts from two dozen TV markets, of varying sizes, across the nation. “The numbers vary, but one can expect 14 to 25 percent of local TV news stories to have a crime angle. These numbers have remained fairly stable over time,” Lipschultz said. “Also, crime is often the lead story – particularly when the story is new for the 10 p.m. broadcast.”<sup>15</sup>

Grade the News, a watchdog group affiliated with Stanford University’s Graduate Program in Journalism, recently published a study about crime reporting by television stations and other media in the San Francisco Bay area. It found that on average, the TV stations in 2003

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<sup>13</sup> Dean, W., and Brady, L.A. (2002, November/December). After 9/11, has anything changed? In the report “On the road to irrelevance.”

<sup>14</sup> Lipschultz, J.H., and Hilt, M.L. (2002). *Crime and local television news: dramatic, breaking, and live from the scene*. Mahwah, N.J.: Earlbaum Associates.

<sup>15</sup> “Book offers analysis of appeal of local TV crime stories.” Retrieved Sept. 5, 2003, from [www.unomaha.edu/~wwwcomm/booknote.html](http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwcomm/booknote.html)

devoted more than 22 percent of their airtime to crime stories.<sup>16</sup> That was up from 2000, when the stations devoted an average of 17 percent of their airtime to crime. Crime news was more prevalent on TV than in the Bay area's newspapers, the survey found.

Grade the News focused especially on stories about “episodic” crime – isolated incidents – rather than “thematic” stories about crime trends, causes, effects or solutions. In 2000, the TV stations devoted almost 12 percent of their airtime to episodic crime; by 2003, that jumped to more than 17 percent – an increase of 44 percent.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, the amount of airtime devoted to thematic crime stories stayed about the same, at approximately 5 percent.

Several news directors in the San Francisco Bay market expressed concern that the Grade the News study sampled only the first half-hour of their broadcasts. The second half of some broadcasts has more in-depth reporting, they said. (Grade the News has said it will adjust its sampling technique for the second half of 2003 to record full-hour shows.<sup>18</sup>)

The journalism trade press has echoed the concerns of academics about the proportion of crime news on television. In 1993, the *American Journalism Review* published an article titled, “Why Is Local TV News So Bad?” It quoted Howard Rosenberg, TV critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, as saying, “Local news – in Los Angeles, at least – is mostly an extension of the entertainment programs that surround it. If I want nightly triple features of violence – endless coverage of grisly, blood-spattered offenses that feeds our paranoia about crime – I know where to find it: local news.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Stoll, M. (2003, November). Ratcheting up the mayhem. Retrieved Nov. 30, 2003 from <http://www.stanford.edu/group/gradethenews/pages/crimewave.htm>

<sup>17</sup> Stoll, M. (2003, November). Ratcheting up the mayhem. Retrieved Nov. 30, 2003 from <http://www.stanford.edu/group/gradethenews/pages/crimewave.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Stoll, M. (2003, November). Ratcheting up the mayhem. Retrieved Nov. 30, 2003 from <http://www.stanford.edu/group/gradethenews/pages/crimewave.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Rieder, R. (1993, September). Why is local TV news so bad? *American Journalism Review*, 18-27.

In 1997, the *Columbia Journalism Review* published an article with a similar title: “Why Local TV News Is So Awful.” It quoted Marty Haag, senior news vice president for the A.H. Belo stations, as saying, “Covering crime is the easiest, fastest, cheapest, most efficient kind of news coverage for TV stations. News directors and station owners love crime because it has a one-to-one ratio between making the assignment and getting a story on-air.”<sup>20</sup> The article explained that a crime scene, marked off in yellow police tape, provides a reliable backdrop, and crime stories require little digging or research. “Just get to the crime scene, get the wind blowing through your hair, and the rest will take care of itself.”<sup>21</sup>

### **The industry’s reaction to the research**

Television news professionals have dismissed some of the studies as flawed. For example, Scott Libin, a former TV news director now with the Poynter Institute, called the Rocky Mountain Media Watch’s study “sloppy research”<sup>22</sup> for its overly broad definition of “mayhem.” And Barbara Cochran of the Radio-Television News Directors Association criticized the RMMW’s methodology: “You can certainly quarrel with the methodology” of sampling just one evening of any newscast.<sup>23</sup>

Likewise, an industry publication, *DigitalTV*, said news directors largely criticized or ignored the report by the Project for Excellence in Journalism: “Most of them took the study with

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<sup>20</sup> Grossman, L.K. (1997, November/December). Why local TV news is so awful. *Columbia Journalism Review*. Retrieved Sept. 5, 2003, from <http://www.cjr.org/archives.asp?url=/97/6/grossman.asp>

<sup>21</sup> Grossman, L.K. (1997, November/December). Why local TV news is so awful. *Columbia Journalism Review*. Retrieved Sept. 5, 2003, from <http://www.cjr.org/archives.asp?url=/97/6/grossman.asp>

<sup>22</sup> Libin, S. (1997, June). Trashing television news: Some of what passes for research is a crime. Retrieved Sept. 5, 2003, from <http://www.scripps.ohiou.edu/producer/thebook/chapter8.htm>

<sup>23</sup> McClennan, S. (1997, May 19). Violence, fluff lead local news, says survey; RTNDA challenges media group study’s methods, conclusions. *Broadcasting & Cable*, 34.

a grain of salt.”<sup>24</sup> The article said PEJ had blown out of proportion its main finding: that the percentage of crime stories in local TV news increased 1 percentage point, from 25 percent in 2001 to 26 percent in 2002. Some of PEJ’s other findings were contradictory, the article said. “That’s not to slam PEJ, which at least tried to quantify trends in local news, but it does suggest that the exercise is a little like measuring steam with a yardstick.” The article joked that it could have carried the headline, “News Directors Shrug at Ambiguous Study.”<sup>25</sup>

Some news directors said PEJ’s sample of newscasts was too small (each station was evaluated on two weeks’ worth of newscasts – a total of 10 hours each year). Others said PEJ ignored the commercial pressures in the TV newsroom. Mike Devlin, news director at KHOU in Houston, said:

They don’t factor in that a publicly owned station has to be commercially successful. When *America’s Funniest Home Videos* gets twice the rating of a senate debate ... that speaks to the public appetite. I wish they would at least question the appetite of the public. There’s a reason stations put on mother-daughter breast implants during sweeps ... I’m not saying we shouldn’t be held accountable, but the public should be held accountable, too.<sup>26</sup>

TV news industry officials don’t dispute that there is “a lot” of crime news on local television. “I don’t find that surprising at all,” Cochran said. She said stations would be criticized if they didn’t report crime stories.<sup>27</sup>

But Cochran disputed the assertion by some studies and experts that local stations follow the philosophy of “if it bleeds, it leads.” “That’s pretty outdated now.”<sup>28</sup> She said stations are

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<sup>24</sup> McAdams, D. (2003, January). News you can lose; why great newscasts fail. *DigitalTV*, 14-17.

<sup>25</sup> McAdams, D. (2003, January). News you can lose; why great newscasts fail. *DigitalTV*, 14-17.

<sup>26</sup> McAdams, D. (2003, January). News you can lose; why great newscasts fail. *DigitalTV*, 14-17.

<sup>27</sup> McClennan, S. (1997, May 19). Violence, fluff lead local news, says survey; RTNDA challenges media group study’s methods, conclusions. *Broadcasting & Cable*, 34.

<sup>28</sup> McAdams, D. (2003, January). News you can lose; why great newscasts fail. *DigitalTV*, 15.

making a better effort to report the causes and possible solutions to crime. “It’s hard to talk about it in any generalized way.”<sup>29</sup>

TV news directors, producers and reporters say there is a logical reason that crime stories are common and prominent: Viewers are deeply interested in crime and want comprehensive crime coverage.

Katherine Greene, news director at WBAL-TV when Mark Crispin Miller was conducting his study there in 1998, said, “We’re like the viewers. We get sick of crime coverage, too.” But she said crime is a story that can’t be ignored: “The safety issue makes crime one of the most important stories.”<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, a 1998 study by the Radio-Television News Directors Association found that viewers and news directors are in sync when it comes to crime. The group surveyed viewers to find their level of interest in different story topics. It then asked local TV news directors to predict the public’s level of interest. The news directors estimated that 67 percent of the public would be very interested in “crimes that happen in your area.” In the general survey, 65 percent of viewers said they would be very interested in such stories.<sup>31</sup> A 2003 survey by the RTNDA reinforced that finding: Asked what topic was most important on the local news, 72 percent of viewers said they tune in for weather, 62 percent for crime and 31 percent for sports.<sup>32</sup> At a time when journalists are trying harder to listen to their audience, some believe it is arrogant for the profession to override viewers’ demand for crime news.

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<sup>29</sup> McClennan, S. (1997, May 19). Violence, fluff lead local news, says survey; RTNDA challenges media group study’s methods, conclusions. *Broadcasting & Cable*, 34.

<sup>30</sup> Trigoboff, D. (1998, July 6). Study blasts Baltimore news. *Broadcasting & Cable*, 33.

<sup>31</sup> Geisler, J. (2000, May). Blacked out. *American Journalism Review*, Vol. 22, Issue 4, 34-41.

<sup>32</sup> Lee, D. (2003, Sept. 19). All eyes on those in eye of storm: Weather stories test TV journalists. *Raleigh News & Observer*. Retrieved on Sept. 20, 2003, from <http://newsobserver.com/news/story/2880976p-2655888c.html>

In a 1999 editorial, *Broadcasting & Cable* magazine said TV news directors should neither play up nor play down crime. “It is not TV’s job to underreport crime to keep from shocking or offending viewers. That would be a true disservice, because it would provide a false sense of security. But trolling the satellite feeds for violence, or giving it more airtime because of its power to shock and attract, provides viewers with a false sense of insecurity by putting so many violent acts, no matter how remote from the individual viewer, in every living room, everywhere.”<sup>33</sup>

### **The focus on violent crime**

Some researchers criticized TV stations not just for the amount of crime they covered but the kinds of crime they covered and the ways they covered crime.

In his study of newscasts in Baltimore and Philadelphia, Danilo Yanich, an associate professor in the Graduate School of Urban Affairs and Public Policy at the University of Delaware, found that half of the crime stories were about murders and a quarter were about other types of violent crime. In contrast, Yanich noted, most crimes are property crimes – and murders are rare. “What was remarkable about the offenses that were chosen for inclusion in the newscasts in both television markets is how far they were from the reality of crime in both Baltimore and Philadelphia. Remember, murder accounted for less than one-half of one percent of the crimes in both metropolitan areas. In other words, the coverage of murder on newscasts was about one hundred times more likely than its occurrence in reality in both metropolitan areas.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Top of the news. (1999, Sept. 27). *Broadcasting & Cable*, 102.

<sup>34</sup> Yanich, D. (1998, Fall). Crime, community & local TV news: covering crime in Philadelphia & Baltimore. A report of the Center for Community Development & Family Policy and the Center on Crime, Communities & Culture. Retrieved Sept. 5, 2003, from <http://www.localtvnews.org/papers/CrimeCommLocalTVNews.pdf>

Yanich said most crime stories appeared in the first segment of the newscasts as part of a montage – packaged with other crime news. “The result was a set of broadcasts that gave the impression that we were being bombarded by ‘one crime story after another.’”

News directors argue that their broadcasts reflect the fact that crime is part of the reality of the city, Yanich said. He rejected that argument as disingenuous. “Crime is only a part of city life. The local newscasts in Baltimore and Philadelphia that we examined made conscious decisions to cover more crime news than any other social issue. They also decided what crimes they would cover (mostly murder) and how they would cover them (in a montage of stories placed in the first segment). Crime is part of the reality of urban life, and it is a legitimate subject for local news coverage. But crime is only a part of city life.”

Sarah Eschholz leveled similar criticism at TV stations in Orlando. She said that more than two-thirds of the crime stories she studied in 1998 focused on violent crime.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, she cited FBI statistics showing that violent crime made up 18 percent of all crime in Orlando that year.

In its 1996 study, the Center for Media and Public Affairs also bemoaned the attention devoted to coverage of violent crimes: 60 percent of the crime stories in the group’s national sample involved violent offenses.<sup>36</sup> Robert Lichter, the center’s president, noted that in the years preceding the study, crime in the United States had decreased. But he said, “If it bleeds, it leads on the local news, regardless of the reality of falling crime rates.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Eschholz, S., Chiricos, T., and Weitzel, P. (1998). News consumption and perceptions of crime: an assessment of media content and public opinion in Florida. A report for the Collins Center for Public Policy and the Poynter Institute.

<sup>36</sup> Fletcher, J. (1998, August). Crime stories dominate local TV news: If it bleeds, it leads. *PM. Public Management*; 22-23.

<sup>37</sup> Fletcher, J. (1998, August). Crime stories dominate local TV news: If it bleeds, it leads. *PM. Public Management*; 22-23.

From the standpoint of news professionals, many academic experts ignore the very definition of news in criticizing the amount of local TV coverage of crime in general and violent crime in particular. News is the extraordinary, not the ordinary. Murders and certain violent crimes are clearly more serious than most property crimes and deserve greater coverage by traditional news standards. Arguing that crime or certain categories of crimes should be covered in proportion to their occurrence in society is like arguing that news organizations should downplay or ignore plane crashes because most planes land safely.

To many TV journalists and observers, the debate should center not on the quantity of crime news on local TV but on the quality. They believe the misplaced emphasis on quantity has stalled the movement toward finding ways to improve crime reporting.

“I think the quality of coverage counts more than the quantity,” said Scott Libin, director of development and outreach for the Poynter Institute. “My chief concern is that we so often take the easy way out, and avoid what we consider to be ‘newspaper stories’ because they are complex and challenging. If we weighed stories truly on their merits, instead of principally on ease of execution, I think crime coverage would assume its appropriate place in our newscasts.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Public policy implications in crime coverage**

In criticizing the amount and tone of crime coverage on local television news, researchers often make two related assertions:

- That people are more likely to get their news from local TV than from any other source. According to a nationwide survey of 3,000 Americans, 34 percent said local television

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<sup>38</sup> E-mail. (2003, Sept. 14).



news was their most important source of information; 17 percent picked national TV news and 15 percent local newspapers.<sup>39</sup>

- That watching disproportionate crime coverage on TV instills fear in viewers and distorts their views toward public policies.

Several studies in recent years found that people who watch a lot of local television news tend to have a greater fear of crime in their community.<sup>40</sup> Local TV news was strongly related to perceptions of crime in one's city and neighborhood and to the belief that crime was increasing in the city.<sup>41</sup> Exposure to crime news on TV was directly related to perceptions of the probability of violent crime.<sup>42</sup>

In his 1997 book, *Media, Crime and Criminal Justice*, Ray Surette, professor in the College of Health and Public Affairs at the University of Central Florida, discussed how the American media's coverage of crime and violence affects news consumers. Because of such coverage, he said, people overestimate the frequency of different classes of crime and violence. Surette also maintains that TV news has contributed to an unwarranted increase in fear – and that people do not realize crime has decreased in recent years.<sup>43</sup>

Barry Glassner, a sociology professor at the University of Southern California, made a similar point in his book, *The Culture Of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid Of The Wrong*

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<sup>39</sup> 1996 survey by Louis Harris and Associates, commissioned by the Center for Media and Public Affairs.

<sup>40</sup> Chiricos, T., Padgett, K., and Gertz, M. (2000). Fear, TV news, and the reality of crime. *Criminology*, 38, 755-786. Also, Chiricos, T., Eschholz, S., and Gertz, M. (1997). Crime news and fear: toward an identification of audience effects. *Social Problems*, 44, 342-57. Also, Eschholz, S., Chiricos, T., and Weitzel, P. (1998). News consumption and perceptions of crime: an assessment of media content and public opinion in Florida.

<sup>41</sup> McLeod, J.M., Eveland, W.P., Moy, P., Scheufele, D., Yang, S., Horowitz, E.M., Guo, Z., and Zhong, M. (1996, August). Is what we see what they get? Probing the processes of media effects on support for crime policy proposals. Paper presented to the Communication Theory and Methodology Division at the 79<sup>th</sup> Annual AEJMC Conference, Anaheim, CA.

<sup>42</sup> O'Keefe, G. (1984) Public views on crime: Television exposure and media credibility. In R.N. Bostrom (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook* 8.

<sup>43</sup> Surette, R. (1997). *Media, Crime and Criminal Justice*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

*Things*.<sup>44</sup> “Television news programs survive on scares. On local newscasts, where producers live by the dictum ‘if it bleeds, it leads,’ drug, crime, and disaster stories make up most of the news portion of the broadcasts.”<sup>45</sup>

Glassner blamed media-induced fear for the disconnect between reality and public opinions about crime. He said that in 1997, after six consecutive years of falling crime rates, more than half of the respondents in a national survey disagreed with the statement: “This country is finally beginning to make some progress in solving the crime problem.” Instead, Glassner said, “62 percent of us described ourselves as ‘truly desperate’ about crime – almost twice as many as in the late 1980s, when crime rates were higher.”

Glassner reiterated his views in a recent interview with the Web site Buzzflash:

TV news gains by continuing its style of coverage in several ways. First, it is relatively inexpensive to run a news operation based on the maxim “if it bleeds, it leads.” You need a police radio and an adequate camera, or, in some cities, a helicopter, to follow the police around. You will get very dramatic pictures. The audience is understandably anxious and engaged when presented with the prospect of violence by strangers in their own community. In point of fact, of course, most interpersonal violence is between people who know each other, often people who live together.

But we don’t get that impression from the TV news. And were they to present that to us, it would create lots of uncomfortable viewers, uncomfortable advertisers, and an uncomfortable political climate for them. It would raise difficult and important questions. No one can disagree with the premise that an attack by a stranger is a bad thing and a frightening thing that should be stopped. And that’s basically what they cover, and what those newscasts cover, and a lot of what police in many cities focus upon.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Glassner, B. (2000). *The Culture Of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid Of The Wrong Things*. New York: Perseus Books.

<sup>45</sup> Glassner, B. Excerpt from *Culture of Fear*. Retrieved Sept. 20, 2003, from <http://www.bowlingforcolumbine.com/library/fear/03.php>

<sup>46</sup> Professor Barry Glassner, The Man Who Knows About Fear in American Culture. (2003, April 10). Retrieved Sept. 20, 2003, from [http://www.buzzflash.com/interviews/03/04/10\\_glassner.html](http://www.buzzflash.com/interviews/03/04/10_glassner.html)

Glassner's theories are not new, and such criticisms aren't directed only at television. In his 1978 essay, "Crime Waves as Ideology,"<sup>47</sup> Mark Fishman, an associate professor of sociology at the City University of New York, argued that crime waves are frequently media constructions. He said that in 1976, the New York media – three newspapers and five TV stations – carried a spate of stories that incited public concerns about "crimes against the elderly." But during this "crime wave," police statistics showed no increase in crimes against elderly New Yorkers. The media created the elderly-crime wave because they often seek a theme – a means of connecting anecdotes to present a seemingly bigger story, Fishman said. This has big implications for the public: "Although you can't be mugged by a crime wave (but, only by a real criminal), a crime wave can certainly increase citizens' fears. It can also directly lead to increased efforts at law enforcement, the enactment of new laws and penalties, and impact the correctional system as well."<sup>48</sup>

A study published recently in the *Journal of Communication* also found a link between television news and fear of crime. "Cultivation theory suggests that widespread fear of crime is fueled in part by heavy exposure to violent dramatic programming on prime-time television," said the researchers, headed by Dan Romer of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. The researchers concluded "that fear of crime is in part a by-product of exposure to crime-saturated local television news."<sup>49</sup> The study was based on a recent national survey of perceived risk as well as a survey of more than 2,300 Philadelphia residents. "The

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<sup>47</sup> Fishman, M. (1978, June). Crime Waves as Ideology. *Social Problems*, 25: 531-543.

<sup>48</sup> Greek, C. Lecture notes for "CCJ 4938 Section 1: Seminar in Crime and Media," Florida State University. Retrieved Sept. 20, 2003, from <http://www.criminology.fsu.edu/crimemedia/lecture3.html>

<sup>49</sup> Romer, D., Jamieson, K., and Aday, S. (2003). Television news and the cultivation of fear of crime. *Journal of Communication*, 53: 88-104.

results indicate that across a wide spectrum of the population and independent of local crime rates, viewing local television news is related to increased fear of and concern about crime.”<sup>50</sup>

Studies and critics have said that local TV news contributes not only to fear but also to dubious public policies regarding crime. Especially in the 1980s and 1990s, when crime rates were higher than they are today, politicians often used television to express “get tough” policy changes; their proposals typically were driven by election strategy, not criminological research. Afraid of the crime they see on the local TV news, viewers have been quick to embrace such policies, Danilo Yanich said in a 1998 study funded by the Soros Foundation’s Center for Crime, Communities & Culture:

The reality and the perception of danger have significant policy implications. For example: (1) President Clinton promises to put 100,000 more police officers on the streets of America’s cities as a response to crime; (2) Thirty-four states in the United States allow citizens to carry concealed weapons, justifying that action as a deterrent to crime; (3) State legislatures enact laws that increase lengths of sentences, requiring consecutive rather than concurrent sentences; (4) State executive branches embark on prison-building programs that represent the fastest increasing portion of state budgets; (5) State attorneys general call for changes in state laws that will make it easier to prosecute more juveniles as adults.<sup>51</sup>

Crime coverage also impacts public policy because it displaces other stories that local TV news could pursue, Yanich said. “News is a zero-sum game. If a crime story goes in, something else must be left out.”<sup>52</sup>

In a 2002 report also for the Local TV News Media Project at the University of Delaware, Lisa Budzilowicz analyzed TV news stories that the Project for Excellence in

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<sup>50</sup> Romer, D., Jamieson, K., and Aday, S. (2003). Television news and the cultivation of fear of crime. *Journal of Communication*, 53: 88-104.

<sup>51</sup> Yanich, D. (1998, Fall). Crime, community & local TV news: covering crime in Philadelphia & Baltimore. A report of the Center for Community Development & Family Policy and the Center on Crime, Communities & Culture. Retrieved Sept. 5, 2003, from <http://www.localtvnews.org/papers/CrimeCommLocalTVNews.pdf>

<sup>52</sup> Telephone interview. (2003, Sept. 19).

Journalism had collected in 1998 from New York and Los Angeles (the largest markets), St. Louis and Buffalo (medium-size markets), and Lansing and Tallahassee (the smallest markets).

PEJ had taped 7,700 stories from those markets in 1998. About 2,100 of the stories – 27 percent – focused on crime. Budzilowicz selected 313 crime stories for her study. She found that the stories usually aired in the beginning of the newscast, were short, relied heavily on video, often were about court proceedings and employed “minimal use of sources.” Budzilowicz wrote:

The heavy reliance on video footage as a production necessity likens crime coverage more to a television drama than to a public service. In addition, the prominence of court-related stories shows little initiative in covering crime as an issue. These stories, which appear so very often in the beginning of each evening newscast, serve the purpose of entertainment more so than information. Episodic coverage dominated every station in every market in my sample. ...

Crime stories are framed in a way that leaves little or no interpretation of the causes or treatments for crime. It is overwhelmingly obvious from my observations that individuals are largely held responsible for the causes of crime, despite the myriad existing social dysfunctions that may have precipitated that crime. In addition, more certain or severe punishment is seen as the most acceptable prescription for the problem of crime, despite such issues as overcrowded prisons and the existence of many other methods of treatment. ...

It is no wonder that politicians enter the picture at this point and harvest votes with simplistic proposals to build more prisons and hire more police. There is no incentive in this system to engage in more critical or thoughtful discussion of society's problems.<sup>53</sup>

A 1997 study at the University of California-Berkeley reached a similar conclusion. Researchers with the Berkeley Media Studies Group conducted a content analysis of local television news in California and explored how such coverage shapes the public and policy debate on youth violence. The study concluded: “Local television news provides extremely limited coverage of contributing etiological factors in stories on violence. If our nation's most popular source of news continues to report on violence primarily through crime stories isolated

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<sup>53</sup> Budzilowicz, L.M. (2002, Summer). Framing responsibility on local television news. A report of the Local TV News Media Project, University of Delaware, p. 44. Retrieved Sept. 5, 2003, from <http://www.udel.edu/ccrs/pdf/FramingCrimeNews.pdf>

from their social context, the chance for widespread support for public health solutions to violence will be diminished.”<sup>54</sup>

The 2003 study by Grade the News also said that crime-saturated news reports “can create a climate of public mistrust that can warp public policies.”<sup>55</sup> Mark Leno, who chairs the California State Assembly’s Public Safety Committee, said the state could save \$1 billion a year under his plan to allow early release of “non-violent, non-serious, non-lifer offenders.” But the frenzy over crime in the news prevents a rational discussion of such reform proposals, Assemblyman Leno said. “The concepts are that much more difficult to explain to my colleagues if they and their constituents are convinced by the media that crime is on the rise. The obvious response to rising crime is lock ’em up and don’t let ’em out.”<sup>56</sup>

### **TV coverage and crime rates**

Glassner, Yanich and other critics of local television news coverage contend that as the rate of serious crime has fallen, the amount of crime coverage on TV has risen. This assertion merits scrutiny.

By any measure, crime rates in the United States have decreased. Each year, the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics surveys Americans, asking if they have been victimized by crime. The rates of victimization for violent crimes and for property crimes in 2002 were the lowest since the survey was started 30 years ago.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Dorfman, L., Woodruff, K., Chavez, V., and Wallack, L. (1997, August.) Youth and violence on local television news in California. *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 87, Issue 8, 1311-1316.

<sup>55</sup> Stoll, M. (2003, November). Focusing on random incidents of violence can harm us all. Retrieved Nov. 30, 2003 from <http://www.stanford.edu/group/gradethenews/pages/antisocial.htm>

<sup>56</sup> Stoll, M. (2003, November). Focusing on random incidents of violence can harm us all. Retrieved Nov. 30, 2003 from <http://www.stanford.edu/group/gradethenews/pages/antisocial.htm>

<sup>57</sup> Criminal Victimization, 2002. Bureau of Justice Statistics Web site. Retrieved Sept. 2, 2003, from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/cv02.htm>

Another measure of crime is the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting system, which tracks offenses reported to law enforcement agencies. According to the UCR, the crime rate dropped sharply between 1991 and 2000: from nearly 6,000 crimes per 100,000 residents, to about 4,000 crimes per 100,000 residents. The 2000 crime rate was the lowest since 1973. The UCR rate held steady in 2001 and increased slightly in 2002.<sup>58</sup> The rate of violent crimes (murders, rapes, assaults and robberies) also has fallen: After decades of rising steadily, the number of violent crimes per 100,000 residents peaked at 758 in 1991 and has dropped every year since then, to 504 violent crimes per 100,000 residents in 2001.

Glassner said that TV journalists should have realized by 1997 that crime rates were falling, and that they should have reduced or modified their news coverage accordingly. Many journalists say such criticism is unfair: In 1997, they say, the downward trend of crime rates was unclear. First, the FBI doesn't release UCR data until almost about 10 months after the calendar year has ended. So for most of 1997, the latest data available were for 1996. And in 1996, the decline in the rate of serious crimes was in its infancy: The number of UCR crimes per 100,000 residents went from 5,898 in 1991 to 5,087 in 1996; and the number of violent crimes per 100,000 went from 758 in 1991 to 637 in 1996. While those dips were significant, journalists had no way of knowing that this the start of a dramatic plunge in crime.

Regarding crime rates and television coverage, some journalists raise novel questions that hint at a contrarian view: Is it possible that local television's coverage of crime contributed to the decline in crime rates? That rather than (or in addition to) raising fears about crime, local TV kept a spotlight on the issue – and kept the heat on local officials, prompting communities and police to mobilize?

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<sup>58</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation – Uniform Crime Reports. Retrieved Sept. 20, 2003, from <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm>

Scott Libin of the Poynter Institute believes that may be the case. “I’m familiar with the argument that we continue to cover crime disproportionately at a time when crime rates are actually down significantly, but I’m not sure what the relationship between those two phenomena might be. I think we have to acknowledge the possibility that government ‘got tough’ on crime, built more prisons, put more cops on the street, etc., at least in part because people demanded it, and that people demanded it because TV news had raised their consciousness of the problem.”<sup>59</sup>

That’s possible – but doubtful, other experts say.

“It sounds like a spurious relationship,” said Dr. Laura Moriarty, a criminal justice professor at Virginia Commonwealth University.<sup>60</sup> “There are many reasons why the crime rate has decreased – and maybe one facet is the awareness of crime. However, most often the public has an unrealistic understanding of crime, and they get this ‘picture or perception’ from the media.”

### **Early station response**

Discussion concerning the need for media restraint in covering crime often occurs after high-profile crimes that receive national attention. The arrest of Lee Harvey Oswald for the John F. Kennedy assassination in 1963 led to one early set of proposed crime coverage guidelines.<sup>61</sup> In 1975, after Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme tried to assassinate President Ford, Congress and the White House denounced a “violence-prone media that was out of control.”<sup>62</sup> More current events have rekindled discussions about the need for the media to have crime coverage guidelines.

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<sup>59</sup> E-mail. (2003, Sept. 13).

<sup>60</sup> E-mail. (2003, Sept. 13).

<sup>61</sup> Rosenstiel, T. and Balzar, J. (1994, February 9). News Analysis; Frenzy to Ice the Harding Saga Freezes Out Standards. *Los Angeles Times*. Part A, Page 1, Column 1.

<sup>62</sup> Getlin, J. (1999, Sept. 13). Journalists under Fire for Coverage of Violent Crimes. *Los Angeles Times*. Part A, Page 1.



These events include school shootings, hostage situations, and arrests of priests on sexual abuse charges.

In the mid-1990's dozens of stations made attempts to control crime coverage with varying degrees of success. Some of the most innovative approaches gained national attention, including the KVUE crime guidelines and WCCO's family-sensitive approach to news.

### **KVUE, Austin, Texas**

One of the most publicized attempts to improve crime coverage came in January 1996 at KVUE in Austin, Texas. Executive producer Cathy McFeaters and news director Carole Kneeland spearheaded a movement at the station to introduce published guidelines for covering crime. The impetus came from a series of monthly meetings the station held for members of the community to give the station feedback about its role in the community. At the meetings, audience members complained that the station sensationalized some crime stories and presented others in poor taste.

At the time, the Gannett-owned station established the following five guidelines to determine whether and how to cover crime stories:

1. Is there specific action the audience could take (such as calling police if they have seen someone the police are searching for)?
2. Is there an immediate threat to public safety?
3. Is there a threat to children?
4. Is there a significant impact to the community?
5. Does the story lend itself to a crime-fighting or prevention effort?

The station called the project "KVUE Listens to You on Crime" and promoted it extensively. Station management asserted viewers responded favorably to the changes in

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coverage.<sup>63</sup> The station's ratings remained at No. 1, and the policy remained in place for several years. In a 1999 interview with *USA Today Magazine*, McFeaters (by that time the station's news director after Kneeland's death) said that the guidelines had resulted in fewer crime stories on the air and that complaints about crime coverage were virtually non-existent. She was quoted as saying, "We were liked before; I'm convinced we're respected now."<sup>64</sup>

On June 1, 1999, Belo purchased KVUE from Gannett. In August 2000, Belo named Frank Volpicella as news director. Volpicella decided the guidelines were hurting the news department. Now, he says, the station still has crime guidelines but not in the form originally created. "The crime project, however noble it was in my opinion, it over the years became a twisted line that ended in poor news judgment. It became an excuse for the news department not to cover spot news."<sup>65</sup>

Volpicella believes you can't decide on the significance of a story until you actually cover it. He says the station was automatically dismissing coverage of stories because they fell under a certain category – crime. Volpicella said the station's current policy is to evaluate every story on its own merit and to look for the deeper impact a story might have whether it's about crime or any other subject.

### **Bay News 9, Tampa, Fla.**

When Time-Warner's 24-hour local cable news channel first went on the air in 1997, the management stated that the station would follow and publish specific guidelines for covering crime. The station still adheres to the policy (though it was revised once in July 2000) and features the guidelines prominently on its Web site. The guidelines not only say what the station

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<sup>63</sup> Holley, J. (1996, May/June). Should the Coverage Fit the Crime? A Texas TV station tries to resist the allure of mayhem. *Columbia Journalism Review*. Retrieved Aug. 9, 2003 from <http://www.cjr.org/year/96/3/coverage.asp>

<sup>64</sup> Papper, B. (1999, January). Fixing Television News. *USA Today* (Magazine), Vol. 127, 56.

<sup>65</sup> Telephone interview. (2003, Sept. 4).

will and won't air; they tell viewers who will make the decisions and provide precise details concerning what information or video will appear on screen.

The following summarizes the guidelines (a full copy can be found at <http://www.baynews9.com/site/crime.cfm>):

1. Avoid showing corpses unless the news director decides it significantly adds to the story. Avoid showing corpses when children are watching, and always provide an on-air warning 10 seconds before the video showing corpses airs.
  2. Interview grieving relatives only with permission, and indicate their permission in the script and in supers.
  3. No non-fatal stabbings, shootings or suicides unless unusual.
  4. Offer the audience the chance to help solve crime, but give suspect descriptions only when specific characteristics are provided. NEVER use race as a sole identifying characteristic.
  5. Show moderation when deciding how often to report the same murder and where in the show the story will air. Don't repeat a murder story past 12 hours unless there's new information.
  6. Track key court dates, but don't air arraignments, preliminary hearings or pre-trial motions unless it's a high-profile crime.
  7. Name suspects only after they are formally charged in court, or possibly after arrested, depending on circumstances.
  8. Name juveniles only if charged as adults and only with news director's decision.
  9. NEVER name the victim of a sex crime unless he/she comes forward and wants to speak out. Otherwise, don't reveal the victim's identity.
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10. Don't show live coverage of police teams during hostage situations. Never contact a hostage-taken during an incident.

Mike Gautreau is the news director at Bay News 9. He says the guidelines are the brainchild of the station's general manager, Elliott Wiser. Wiser was the news director at WTVR in Richmond back in 1994. At the time, the market was ranked second in the nation in terms of murder per capita. Wiser and his wife had just had a daughter, and he became concerned about families who wanted to see the news but not be inundated with the "gore" often associated with crime blotter reporting. He developed his first set of crime guidelines for the Richmond market and brought the idea with him to Bay News 9 seven years ago.

Gautreau says the station has been able to stick to the guidelines because they make provisions for atypical cases. "In most instances, the guidelines are not a set of rigid direction but a roadmap of the overall direction we would like to go in pursuing the majority of our stories."

Gautreau also takes issue with those who believe that there's too much crime on television news in general. "Stories on crime are not a bad thing in my opinion. It's the manner in which the stories are told that can be questionable," he says. He believes what is seen on television news is reflective of viewer consumption. "For example, since September 11<sup>th</sup>, there has been a seemingly renewed interest by the viewing public in public safety issues in general, which can translate into more crime coverage. Of course, I think it's easy for a newsroom to inadvertently use crime coverage as a crutch if it's not careful."<sup>66</sup>

### **The 'family-sensitive' response**

Another often discussed approach to improving crime coverage came out of WCCO-TV in Minneapolis. That station is credited with starting the "family sensitive" approach to news. At the start of 1994, the station promised viewers that its 5 p.m. newscast would never contain

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<sup>66</sup> E-mail. (2003, Aug. 28)

material that a family with children watching would find offensive. Family-sensitive news was the result of WCCO's research involving focus groups in which consumers were asked what was wrong with TV news. The overwhelming response was that news was too violent.<sup>67</sup>

A handful of other stations around the country picked up the approach for their own newscasts. More than a year after WCCO implemented its family-sensitive approach, the station remained in first place, but other stations weren't so lucky. Several that tried family-sensitive news suffered lower ratings and dropped the experiment. In 1995, noted journalist Ellen Hume wrote that one reason may be that some of the family-sensitive stations were missing the point. "Violence should not be swept under the rug any more than it should be gratuitous. It should be covered in a way that provides meaning and context for viewers."<sup>68</sup>

There appear to be few, if any, mentions of WCCO's family-sensitive initiative after 1997, when WCCO's news director John Lansing left the station. Noel Holston, radio/TV critic for the *Star-Tribune* in Minneapolis-St. Paul, says that after Lansing left, all of the innovations he tried were quietly phased out.<sup>69</sup>

### **Journalism organization guidelines**

Journalism organizations such as the Radio-Television News Directors Association and the Society of Professional Journalists have made only the most general recommendations on how broadcast journalists should cover crime.

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<sup>67</sup> Rubel, C. (1995, April 24). Viewers choose the news they want to use. *Marketing News*.

<sup>68</sup> Hume, E. (1995). *Tabloids, Talk Radio, and the Future of News: Technology's Impact on Journalism*. A report for The Annenberg Washington Program in Communications Policy Studies of Northwestern University. Retrieved Sept. 22, 2003, from <http://www.ellenhume.com/articles/tabloids6.html>

<sup>69</sup> Brown, R. (1997, Oct. 12). Aiming to Picture Community; New TV-5 Chief Still Carries Passion of News Photographer. *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Arts, 11.

In the 2000 RTNDA Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct, in a section titled “Fairness,” the code says the following about crime: “Treat all subjects of news coverage with respect and dignity, showing particular compassion to victims of crime or tragedy.” In a section titled, “Integrity,” the code says, “Refrain from contacting participants in violent situations while the situation is in progress.”<sup>70</sup>

The Web site for the RTNDA also spells out specific ethical guidelines for its members to use when covering hostage-taking crises, police raids, prison uprisings and terrorist actions. The guidelines are lengthy and detailed. In general, they tell journalists not to interfere with police work in any way and to seriously weigh the benefit of giving the public information against the harm that it could cause. The RTNDA distributed the guidelines to TV news directors after the Colorado school shootings in April 1999.<sup>71</sup>

RTNDA President Barbara Cochran has been questioned many times about the amount of crime coverage included in many television newscasts. She has said repeatedly that crime is a topic that broadcast journalists cannot ignore. The RTNDA’s own research shows that crime is important to TV news viewers and that crime coverage can provide a public service when it informs people of dangerous situations.

The Society of Professional Journalists’ current Code of Ethics contains no section dealing specifically with crime. Under the section titled, “Minimize Harm,” the SPJ urges sensitivity and good taste in all news coverage. It also says, “Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes. Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before

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<sup>70</sup> Full text for the 2000 RTNDA Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct can be viewed at <http://www.rtna.org/ethics/coe.shtml>

<sup>71</sup> Full text of the guidelines for covering hostage-taking crises, police raids, prison uprisings, and terrorist actions can be viewed at <http://www.rtna.org/ethics/crisis.shtml>

the formal filing of charges. Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed.”<sup>72</sup>

SPJ President Gordon McKerral says that to his knowledge, SPJ has never drafted or proposed guidelines for coverage of any specific content area; however, he does think many of SPJ's ethics code tenets clearly apply to covering crime. McKerral also says, “I do not think the amount of crime coverage is the most serious issue. It's how it's covered.”<sup>73</sup>

### **Suggestions from academic experts and think tanks**

Several experts recommend that TV newsrooms have a crime beat, as 38 percent of stations do.<sup>74</sup> But the experts say TV stations should define the beat broadly. “Some have called it a public safety beat or social justice beat. First you need to think about what you want to cover: just daily cops and courts? Or trends and solutions? I would argue that the latter makes for better coverage,” said Jan Schaffer, executive director of J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism, at the University of Maryland.<sup>75</sup>

Mark Crispin Miller of New York University said stations should assign knowledgeable and experienced reporters to the crime beat – reporters who understand such issues as those outlined in the KVUE guidelines. He said it would be good if the reporter has covered crime for a newspaper or magazine and perhaps has written books about crime. “Such a person would

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<sup>72</sup> Full text of the SPJ Code of Ethics can be viewed at [http://www.spj.org/ethics\\_code.asp](http://www.spj.org/ethics_code.asp)

<sup>73</sup> E-mail. (2003, Sept. 22)

<sup>74</sup> Dean, W., and Brady, L.A. (2002, November/December). After 9/11, has anything changed? In the report “On the road to irrelevance.”

<sup>75</sup> E-mail. (2003, Sept. 17).

know something about criminology and law – would know more, in other words, than your average semi-educated titillator.”<sup>76</sup>

TV stations should carefully consider which crime stories to air and when to air them during the newscast, Miller said. “Crime should be covered only if the crime in question is especially newsworthy and/or if the coverage would improve public safety. Crime in poor urban neighborhoods should be contextualized, moreover – for example, by asking why particular neighborhoods have high rates of violence, drug use, etc. By and large, it shouldn’t lead the newscast, which should be covering other things in order of their true importance. Those stations that overdo the violent crime thing also tend to underplay real news – on local politics, business, labor, the environment – that actually affects how people live.”

Al Tompkins, the broadcast/online group leader at the Poynter Institute, agrees that “stations should cover crime responsibly. Don’t exaggerate the size of the problem or severity of crime. ... Exaggerated coverage has the potential to encourage viewers to disconnect with their community, turn inward for safety and shut the community out of their lives.” It’s cheap and easy for TV crews to “drive by a murder scene and take pictures,” Tompkins said. But “society pays a heavy price for the skewed coverage” in unwarranted fear.<sup>77</sup>

Danilo Yanich of the University of Delaware says TV stations should show restraint in airing stories about crimes from outside their market areas. He said his research shows that about a quarter of the crime stories on local TV aren’t even local stories. “It is so clearly gratuitous when a station airs a crime story from hundreds or thousands of miles away just because it has good video.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> E-mail. (2003, Sept. 19).

<sup>77</sup> Tompkins, A. (2002). *Aim for the Heart*. Chicago and Los Angeles: Bonus Books, 190-191.

<sup>78</sup> Telephone interview. (2003, Sept. 19).



Sometimes, a story about a non-local crime “rises to the level of ‘entertainment’ and it’s covered as a national story,” Schaffer said. “But I think the public feels bombarded by a lot of duplicate ‘noise’ on these stories. I’d advise stations to push their assignment editors on what ‘added value’ the station could provide that would advance the coverage beyond daily incremental developments (or non-developments.)”<sup>79</sup>

### **New attitudes toward covering crime**

While much of the focus of crime coverage research has been on the amount of crime covered, several stations have tried to address the quality of their crime coverage by creating franchises that force reporters to go beyond the daily story to put crime in perspective and/or offer possible solutions to the problem or advice on how viewers can protect themselves.

Bob Kaplitz is a principal and strategist for Audience Research and Development, a leading newsroom consulting firm. He says, “Many viewers complain about what they call the ‘if it bleeds, it leads’ approach to crime coverage.” Instead, Kaplitz says, they want to know what crime means to them – even if it’s a short story read by the anchor.

That’s one reason why in markets where viewers say the issue of crime is of great importance, AR&D does recommend putting a reporter knowledgeable about crime and criminal justice issues on the crime beat. Kaplitz says, “As with any beat, a specialist is in a better position to provide the perspective and context that viewers want. Otherwise, viewers complain they’re just getting a barrage of meaningless crime stories not relevant to their lives.”<sup>80</sup>

That theme of relevance is consistently raised as the key to better crime coverage. Philip O’Brien is the assistant news director at WCBS in New York. In the Project for Excellence in

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<sup>79</sup> E-mail. (2003, Sept. 17).

<sup>80</sup> E-mail. (2003, Aug. 28).

Journalism's 2002 survey of "who's best" in local television news, WCBS received a grade of "C" and the comment "Loves everyday crime." In the past year, O'Brien says senior management has changed, and so has the station's approach to crime coverage. "Now, we stop and think. That doesn't mean we reject crime stories, especially when the story has an impact on public safety and affects many people. So, yes, we'll do a story about a rape pattern or burglary spree. But we won't run to any old murder just because our reporters don't have a better story idea."<sup>81</sup>

At WSOC-TV in Charlotte, N.C., station news director Robin Whitmeyer says there's still too much crime on television news that is not put in perspective for the audience. That's why newsroom managers make it a habit to probe reporters and producers about crime stories. Whitmeyer wants to make them question and answer why a crime story matters. "The audience wants more understanding of what is going on – not just a listing of the crimes of the day."

Whitmeyer says station research supports this approach. "Our research continues to tell us that people want information that impacts their lives – if someone or something is potentially putting them or their families at risk or in danger, they want to know about it."<sup>82</sup>

### **Current approaches to crime coverage**

This drive to make crime coverage more relevant and to put it in perspective has created some new approaches and some renewed interest in formalized crime coverage guidelines.

At KWTW in Oklahoma City, the station has developed a Web component (at the suggestion of Kaplitz and AR&D) that allows viewers to gather information about crimes in particular neighborhoods by typing an address into an interactive database. Called Crime

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<sup>81</sup> E-mail. (2003, Aug. 29).

<sup>82</sup> E-mail. (2003, Aug. 25).

Tracker, the site indicates to users that “the reports you produce can be useful in determining the nature and frequency of crimes occurring in your neighborhood and the trends that indicate an increase or decrease in crime activity.”<sup>83</sup>

KWTV’s executive producer, Jenny Monroe, says that Crime Tracker was developed as a way for the station to track what was happening with crime in the market and to allow viewers to do it for themselves. “One of the reasons for developing Crime Tracker was to make our crime coverage actually have some meaning.” Though the station does have a reporter who does daily beat checks with local law enforcement, there is no one person assigned to handle Crime Tracker reports.

Monroe believes there’s too much crime coverage in the Oklahoma City market in general. But she says station research indicates that viewers see Crime Tracker as a beneficial tool and that it sets KWTV’s crime coverage apart from the competition.<sup>84</sup>

Several other stations offer or have offered similar services, including WFLA in Tampa, KPHO in Phoenix, KGUN in Tucson, Arizona, KVBC in Las Vegas and KOLR in Springfield, Mo.

The J-Lab’s Schaffer believes the Web’s interactivity has great potential to enhance local TV coverage of crime and empower and inform viewers. “I like [WFLA’s] Crime Tracker because it goes beyond the stories the station wants to tell; it lets the audience find their own stories in crime stats and trends.”<sup>85</sup>

WCCO in Minneapolis labels its crime coverage as Crime Tracker, but the franchise name means something different at that station. WCCO has one reporter specifically assigned to

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<sup>83</sup> KWTV’s Crime Tracker site can be found at <http://www.newsok.com/?crime>

<sup>84</sup> Telephone interview. (2003, Sept. 2).

<sup>85</sup> E-mail. (2003, Sept. 17).

cover crime trends and prevention. The station also provides an e-mail address to which viewers can send questions concerning crime, crime tips or comments on crime. Finally, the station airs and posts still frames from surveillance video for viewers to identify suspects.<sup>86</sup>

Caroline Lowe is the lead reporter for Crime Tracker 4. She's been covering crime for about 20 years and has just recently passed Minnesota's police officer exam. Lowe says she approached her bosses about a year ago with the Crime Tracker concept. "I was finding that we often didn't give enough context to our crime coverage. One of the things I realized is how many crimes could be prevented if people took steps to reduce their risk."

Lowe says she got the idea for the Crime Tracker 4 Web site from KVBC in Las Vegas. Popular features of the WCCO site now include an interactive database that allows viewers to look up registered sex offenders by ZIP code and stills of suspects wanted by police.

The site has even been used by local law enforcement agencies. At one point, Lowe tipped police in one agency to check out a story on the site about a similar set of robberies under investigation by another agency. The Crime Tracker approach has also helped WCCO cultivate more sources within local law enforcement. Lowe often speaks to law enforcement groups about the site, encouraging them to use it as a way to get crime prevention information to viewers.<sup>87</sup>

Though it's been years since they were developed, KVUE's crime coverage guidelines live on. Ron Coming is news director for KXTV News 10 in Sacramento, Calif. He credits the guidelines for reducing the amount of crime coverage and for tempering the amount of emphasis placed on some crime stories. Under the guidelines, he says, "Many stories once covered by a

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<sup>86</sup> WCCO's Crime Tracker 4 site can be found at <http://www.wcco.com/crime/>

<sup>87</sup> Telephone interview. (2003, Sept. 16)

reporter in the field are handled as voice-overs or short copy stories by the anchors ... or not covered at all.”<sup>88</sup>

At KTAL in Shreveport, La., the station has incorporated KVUE’s crime coverage guidelines into item No. 3 in a “Viewers Bill of Rights.” The promise states that viewers have the right to relevant crime coverage and that “NewsChannel Six recognizes that an over-emphasis on crime coverage would harm our community through portraying it in a false, negative light. We will cover crime in such a way as to provide context, meaning, perspective and relevance.” Before airing any crime story, KTAL promises to weigh the story’s newsworthiness by asking the crime guidelines questions.<sup>89</sup>

Susana Schuler is the corporate news director for Nexstar, which owns KTAL. She says the guidelines were instituted based on what corporate and station management saw as too much crime coverage out of context in the market. “Shreveport has the highest crime rate of any of our markets even though it’s not the largest, but much of that crime is centered around drugs, and when it’s not put in context, it appears to be a greater threat than it truly is.”

Schuler also confirms that it’s not the amount of crime coverage that’s at issue for viewers, but the approach to crime coverage. “In our markets where we’ve done research, we haven’t heard that there is too much crime coverage overall, but too often how the crime is covered doesn’t provide viewers with enough detail.”<sup>90</sup>

Many stations around the country make helping law enforcement the focus of their crime coverage. The most recognized name in the United States for calling in anonymous tips concerning crime is CrimeStoppers. CrimeStoppers began in 1976 in Albuquerque, New Mexico

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<sup>88</sup> E-mail. (2003, Aug. 7).

<sup>89</sup>KTAL’s “Viewers’ Bill of Rights” can be viewed in its entirety at [http://216.87.159.53/viewers\\_rights.asp](http://216.87.159.53/viewers_rights.asp)

<sup>90</sup> E-mail. (2003, Aug. 26).

when the local community banded together with law enforcement to catch a criminal. There are now hundreds of local CrimeStoppers organizations throughout the United States. Many of the organizations use local television stations to broadcast photographs or surveillance video of suspects or just telephone numbers for reporting criminal activity. Stations use the CrimeStoppers name on the air, post the telephone numbers on station Web sites, or perhaps offer links to the CrimeStoppers sites.<sup>91</sup>

Beyond CrimeStoppers, a number of stations air or post photographs and/or surveillance video of criminal suspects in cooperation with local law enforcement. For example, KPHO in Phoenix uses the label, “The Valley’s Most Wanted List” on photographs and information concerning a list of people wanted by detectives from various local police agencies. Several stations use labels other than CrimeStoppers to provide telephone numbers that allow viewers to call police investigators with anonymous information concerning crimes. WPVI in Philadelphia airs “CrimeFighter” segments and refers people with information about the crimes covered to the Citizens Crime Commission tip line.

This helping law enforcement approach meshes well with another trend in television news – that of trying to involve viewers in the coverage whenever possible. By providing tip lines and encouraging the audience to share information with police, TV stations are trying to dispel a sense of helplessness that many people feel when confronted with crime stories.

### **A public health approach to coverage**

Some researchers have advocated that journalists adopt a new approach – a public health perspective, also known as a prevention or data-driven approach – to covering crime. The Reporting on Violence Project of the Berkeley Media Studies Group has strongly advocated such

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<sup>91</sup> The history of CrimeStoppers is described at <http://www.crimestopusa.com/>

an approach. The project was conceived by Lori Dorfman, director of the BMSG, and Jane Stevens, a multimedia journalist who teaches at the University of California-Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. The project later involved Esther Thorson, associate dean of the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri-Columbia, and Brant Houston, director of Investigative Reporters and Editors Inc. and the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting.<sup>92</sup>

In 2002, Thorson, Dorfman and Stevens wrote: “It is well-supported that the way crime news is structured has crucial impact on audiences. It seems reasonable, then, to ask what crime news would include if it were to provide information for people to use in understanding crime and violence from a richer point of view, one that emphasizes prevention rather than inevitable and often sensationalistically represented occurrences.”<sup>93</sup>

Stevens, the director of the Reporting on Violence Project, has elaborated on what this approach to crime coverage might mean for reporters. She suggests that crime and violence news should regularly provide:

- 1) Information about how often this type of violence occurs in the community.
- 2) Information that puts violent incidents into context about what is usual and can be prevented and what is unusual and cannot be prevented.
- 3) Information about methods being developed to prevent violence and how successful they are.
- 4) Information about whether people’s communities are implementing these approaches.

Stevens sees a tremendous opportunity for using the Web to provide this kind of perspective. “Mainly because what you need to do with this public health approach is to provide

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<sup>92</sup> BMSG: Reporting on violence. Retrieved Sept. 5, 2001, from <http://www.bmsg.org/content/28.php>

<sup>93</sup> Thorson, E., Dorfman, L., and Stevens, J. (2002, November). Reporting crime and violence from a public health perspective. Paper presented to the November 2002 Crime, Media & Public Policy Symposium. Published by the Journal of the Institute of Justice and International Studies; 56.

context and continuity. Television as a medium doesn't lend itself to that, but the Web is such an amazing and demanding medium in the sense that the people who use it are looking for answers and information."

What Stevens is suggesting is that stations target those crimes that are creating the biggest problems in their communities. The station would then build a Web page for each crime category. The page could include crime statistics, resources for preventing the crime and other relevant information. (A prototype of what Stevens is talking about can be found at <http://www.bmsg.org/hs/main.html>.) Any time a story about a crime in one of the station's key categories is reported, viewers would be referred to the Web for more perspective and opportunities to be proactive. Stevens says it's a way for TV news organizations to remain viable in an increasingly competitive media landscape. "If you have a news organization that's giving you stories that just point out the problem but don't help you as an interested and involved citizen in figuring out the answer, I don't think the news organization is going to survive."<sup>94</sup>

### **A new crime beat reporter**

Some educators who study crime coverage say the quality of television news could be improved by providing more training for those who make crime their beat. Sarah Eschholz, an assistant professor at Georgia State University, says crime reporters should be trained in how to interpret basic crime statistics such as the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports and the Bureau of Justice's National Crime Victimization Survey. "Crime coverage should provide more context and offer more stories about the criminal justice system and crime policy."<sup>95</sup> According to Eschholz, making sure crime reporters have a working knowledge of the criminal justice system

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<sup>94</sup> Telephone interview. (2003, Sept. 16).

<sup>95</sup> E-mail. (2003, Sept. 26).



is essential to providing context so that “viewers are better able to understand how an individual event is related to the overall crime problem.”

Dr. John McManus is the project director for Grade the News at Stanford University. He says that instead of a crime beat reporter, stations might try having a reporter look at the broader issue of violence rather than crime. “I think it makes much more sense to address violence as a social pathology, rather than merely as a crime, which implies individual responsibility alone.”<sup>96</sup>

McManus suggests a shift in thinking about crime. Instead of looking at it as a problem of “bad people who need to be locked down (at vast public expense),” McManus suggests that the focus should be on what causes violence – such as poverty, disintegration of social infrastructure, lack of positive role models, drugs and alcohol. McManus says, “It would be more useful if reporters tracked patterns and asked ‘why,’ and looked for solutions.”

### **Conclusions**

For many television stations, the focus is now on improving the quality of crime coverage. At the heart of it all is a desire to put crime news in perspective. Around the country, across a broad spectrum of market sizes, broadcast journalists are addressing this issue of putting crime in context in a variety of ways. Whether it’s crime guidelines, interactive crime databases or simply looking for ways to link daily crime to larger trends, stations are trying to make crime more relevant to viewers. What’s unknown is what impact these various approaches are having on coverage quality, and that may be fertile ground for a follow-up study on the effectiveness of these efforts.

What is clear is that the audience is telling researchers and television stations alike that crime is an important topic that should be covered. AR& D consultant Bob Kaplitz says,

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<sup>96</sup>E-mail. (2003, Sept. 24).

“Viewers are most interested in protecting themselves by knowing about crime trends that will impact them.”<sup>97</sup> In fact, Kaplitz says when AR&D has tested the concept of Crimetracker, viewers say they’d leave their favorite station to watch one that was tracking crime trends.

One other relatively new approach that has not captured the attention of many broadcasters is the idea that crime can be put in context through a public health reporting perspective. This approach can have the added benefit of capitalizing on the capabilities of the Web – something that many television stations underutilize as a resource. The Web’s continuity allows TV stations to collect and post data that can be used over and over again in relation to the crime stories they cover.

Many broadcast journalists seem hungry for reporting techniques that will allow them to improve the quality of their crime coverage. But the solutions offered must be based on a realistic understanding of time and resource constraints. With crime coverage making up approximately a quarter of the content on local television news, future research might do well to focus on effective approaches to reporting on crime.

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<sup>97</sup>E-mail. (2003, Sept. 22).

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