

## **Source Variety, Event Frequency, and Context in Newspaper Crime Reporting**

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Crime and criminal justice content remains an important part of local news reporting because underreporting can lead to underenforcement and overreporting can lead to misuse of resources or misguided public policies. To explore this issue, we conducted a content analysis of six daily newspapers from markets with the highest and the lowest crime per capita. The stories analyzed were overwhelmingly reported as episodic incidents and focused on violent crime. Nonviolent crimes were greatly underreported. Source variety was a key issue, with law enforcement the most commonly cited source and often the only source. This demonstrates a lack of depth in reporting, whether prompted by a desire for convenience or by necessity created from lack of resources.

*Keywords: crime reporting, newspapers, criminal justice*

### **Introduction**

Crime and criminal justice content remains an important part of local news reporting and an important duty of the local press. Crime and justice coverage matters because underreporting can lead to underenforcement and overreporting can lead to a misguided use of resources or public policies that emphasize the wrong types of criminal justice-related activities ranging from sentencing guidelines to laws.

Although information consumers may be moving to digital forms of media, newspapers remain an important source for news about crime and public safety. The last qualitative news coverage survey by the Pew Research Center (formerly the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism) in 2011 indicated that crime ranked sixth in importance among topics covered across all media types. Thirty-six percent of U.S. adults stated that they get most of their local crime news from newspapers, 29% from local TV news, and 12% from online sources (Rosenstiel, Mitchell, Purcell, & Rainie, 2011). In a study by the American Press Institute (2014), 40% of U.S. adults said that they get their crime and public safety news from TV, and 17% said newspapers were their go-to source on this topic.

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At a time when newspapers are losing audience and newsgathering resources are shrinking, we explored how the amount and the approach to crime coverage are being affected by these changes. We sought to set a baseline for the current state of crime and criminal justice reporting in local, daily newspapers. A content analysis of six daily newspapers was conducted over a period of one month. The newspapers represented markets with the highest and the lowest crime per capita for their populations, as based on analysis found in Congressional Quarterly (CQ) Press 2013 City Crime Rankings. Stories identified as covering local and regional criminal activity, law violations, and the justice system were analyzed based on the type of crime, type of story, number of sources, and source type, as well as story prominence.

Of particular importance is the finding related to a preponderance of official sources used in the reporting. Normalization theory suggests that a reliance on information from those in authority causes people to ignore or to avoid seeking information from other sources. Official sources were the dominant voice heard in crime stories coded in this study, and in cases in which only one source was used, an official was most often the only source featured.

### **Literature Review**

Looking at how newspapers report crime remains important for editors, journalists, and policymakers, and part of that importance stems from the perceived influence of crime reporting on the public's sense of security. This dates back to the development of the practice of sensationalizing the news to increase news readership (Wiltenburg, 2004). Studies have shown that the amount of local crime reported can have an influence on the level of public fear of crime in general (Jaehing, Weaver, & Fico, 1981; Liska & Baccaglioni, 1990; O'Keefe & Reid-Nash, 1987; Perse, Ferguson, & McLeod, 1994). In fact, the ways in which the news media collect and contextualize crime are thought to help shape public consciousness about which crime or justice issues require urgent attention, the causes of those problems, and how they should be addressed (Sacco, 1995). In recent years, critics of crime reporting have chastised news organizations for failing to put crime in its proper context. The perception of how crime affects the average citizen can be distorted when many incidents of crime are treated as discrete events with no relation to other crimes or societal factors. A summary study by the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma indicated that coverage of many traumatic events, including those that are crime-related, tends to focus on provocative or sensational aspects rather than overarching patterns or risk factors that the audience needs to better understand the situation (Tiegreen & Newman, 2009).

In addition, reporting on crime requires a very exacting approach both in gathering information and sharing it because journalists also must consider victims' rights. Journalists and the media outlets they work for are liable for the information they report; however, they are afforded some legal protection if the reporting is considered fair and accurate. For these reasons, quality crime reporting should be a very detailed and precise process.

Traditionally, newspapers have had the means to do more in-depth and contextualized reporting of crime than other forms of news media (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Iyengar, 1991). With the changing landscape of newspaper reporting due to mobile news delivery and news staff reductions, for example, it may well be that such in-depth reporting is in danger of being replaced with less comprehensive forms of crime coverage (Guskin, 2013). Some go so far as to suggest that crime reporting is less about

newsgathering now than it is about simply processing news releases and press conferences (Surette, 2014). The time and dedication needed to cover criminal court cases may be lacking in newsrooms because of the difficulty of covering such events and the limited number of reporters available (Center on Media, Crime and Justice, 2014). For example, it is not unusual for an arrest to be reported, but the subsequent criminal proceedings are often ignored, and it is relatively rare to see any sort of systemic evaluation of the criminal justice process. This often is the case despite the fact that crime and criminal justice stories are routinely considered of high interest to news consumers (Erickson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991; Reiner, 1997).

Even with these issues, newspapers are still a highly trusted source of news when compared with other forms of communication (Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, 2014). Therefore, it is also worth considering how the amount of crime news reported compares with the actual number of criminal events that take place within a community. One might expect a community with a high frequency of crime to have more criminal incidents reported than an area of similar size but with less overall crime. All of the factors mentioned suggest that how newspapers report crime affects how the citizens perceive their own personal security or chances that they may be directly affected by a criminal act.

As part of a study commissioned by the Center on Media, Crime and Justice (2014) at John Jay College, we conducted a content analysis of crime reporting from a representative sample of daily newspapers to gauge the quantity and nature of coverage during a one-month period in March 2014. Those data were explored further to analyze the information sources used in crime reporting and to compare crimes reported with actual crimes committed.

### **Research Problem**

Newspapers provide an important source of crime and criminal justice reporting, but how much reporting do they do, and what is its quality as determined by topic, sourcing, and the amount of context provided?

### **Research Questions**

This study addressed the following questions:

- RQ1:* How does the quantity of crime reporting compare with the actual amount of crime in a community?
- RQ2:* How varied are the sources used in crime reporting, and what effect do those sources have on the content?
- RQ3:* How often is context added or an investigative approach employed in local crime reporting?

### Definitions

In terms of story sources, *variety* refers to sources having distinct differences from one another as to their perspective on the crime reported. The sources may or may not be diverse in terms of demographic background, but rather in the role they play within the criminal justice system or the story itself. For example, a report that contains a statement from the police chief and the fire chief would not be considered as having a variety of sources for the purposes of this study, as both sources are considered official.

For the purposes of this study, *episodic crime* was defined as a crime event or issue that was limited to one event or occurrence. *Contextualized crime* was defined as a crime event or issue that was reported in relation to other similar crimes and the overall effect on society. *Investigative crime* was defined as a crime event that was part of a longer form investigative report by the news organization.

### Theoretical Framework

There are many critical cultural theories that explore the possible effects of the media, and the set of theories that best applies to this research is that of news production. Bennett (1988) identified four common conventions that explore how economic and other influences affect how news is produced: personalized, dramatized, fragmented, and normalized. In terms of crime reporting evaluated in this study, the area of normalization fit best with the aspects of this study.

Normalization theory suggests that a reliance on information from those in authority causes people to ignore or fail to seek information from other sources. This is more common in reporting on breaking news issues such as crime. Journalists often seek the official word first and perhaps go no further. The theory suggests that this creates a level of trust in the official word that may or may not be warranted, as it is cited often without contrasting information. Journalists operate on a set of shared assumptions that the news audience is interested in stories that contain conflict, consequence, prominence, timeliness, proximity, and human interest (Evensen, 2008; Noelle-Neuman, 1993). Crime reporting can often be considered a high-threshold issue: The news audience has limited to no firsthand experience with crime, so their basis of knowledge comes from the media (Lang & Lang, 1981; McCormick, 1995). If information on crime in news reporting comes solely from law enforcement, then law enforcement effectively controls information on the public safety issues reported. There is also a difference between the actual amount of crime and how much is reported by victims (Baumer & Lauritsen, 2010). If crime victims are hesitant to talk to law enforcement, then it stands to reason that they also may be hesitant to talk to journalists. The fact is that the official word offers journalists a quicker and easier approach to crime coverage, but not necessarily the most accurate and comprehensive.

In this study, data on the number of sources and source type (victim, law officer, court representative, witness, family/friend, lawyer) and story prominence (page number/location, word count, image count) lend themselves to consideration of quality and impact of crime reporting within the parameters of normalization theory.

### Method

We selected six daily newspapers for content analysis between March 1 and March 31, 2014. The newspapers were selected on the basis of their standings in the CQ Press 2013 City Crime Rankings. Newspapers covering cities listed as having the highest and the lowest crime rates for each population category (cities of 500,000 or more, 100,000–499,000, and 75,000–99,000) were included. The newspapers examined were the *Detroit Free Press*, the *El Paso Times*, *The Indianapolis Star* (which covers Fishers, Indiana), the *Courier-Post* (Camden, NJ), the *Naperville (Illinois) Sun*, and *The Flint (Michigan) Journal*.

Stories identified as covering local and regional criminal activity and law violations were analyzed on the basis of the type of crime (violent, property, adjudication, corrections), type of story (episodic, contextualized, investigative), number of sources and source type (victim, law officer, court representative, witness, family/friend, lawyer), and story prominence (page number/location, word count, image count). The FBI's Uniform Crime Report was used to code crimes, and stories that involved more than one crime were coded for each crime (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014). As a result, the number of topics reported could exceed the total number of stories. Intercoder reliability was implemented flagging every 10th story coded for comparison between coders.

### Newspapers

#### *Detroit Free Press*

The *Detroit Free Press* is the largest daily newspaper in Detroit, Michigan. The Sunday edition is entitled the *Sunday Free Press*. It is sometimes informally referred to as the "FreeP" (reflected in the paper's Web address <http://www.freep.com>). Owned by Gannett Company, Inc., it primarily serves Metro Detroit, which comprises the counties of Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb. The paper and the *Detroit News* are part of the Detroit Media Partnership. In 1987, the newspapers combined business operations but maintained separate editorial staffs (*Detroit Free Press*, 2014).

Detroit has an estimated population of 701,475. The majority of the population is Black/African American (82.7%), with the remaining White (10.6%), Hispanic/Latino (5.5%), or those identifying as two or more races (2.2%). Asians make up 1.1% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014m).<sup>1</sup>

Wayne County has an estimated population of 1,775,273. The majority of the population is White (54.5%), with the next largest segment reported as Black/African American (40.1%), followed by Hispanic/Latino (5.5%), Asian (2.8%), and those identifying as two or more races (2.2%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014u).

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<sup>1</sup> The data presented on the cities and counties is based on estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau at the time of this study.

Oakland County has an estimated population of 1,231,640. The population is mostly White (77.3%), followed by Black/African American (14.3%), Asian (6.1%), and Hispanic/Latino (3.7%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014t).

Macomb County has an estimated population of 854,769. The majority of the population is White (84.5%), with the next largest segment Black/African American (9.9%), followed by Asian (3.3%), Hispanic/Latino (2.4%), and those identifying as two or more races (2.0%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014r).

Detroit has the highest crime rate among cities with a population of 500,000 or more (CQ Press, 2013).

### ***El Paso Times***

The *El Paso Times* is the English-language daily newspaper in El Paso, Texas. It is owned by MediaNews Group, which is now part of Digital First Media (as of May 2014). The Gannett Company also owns a minority share in the paper, which primarily serves far West Texas (*El Paso Times*, 2014).

The city of El Paso has an estimated population of 672,538. The majority of the population is White (80.8%) and Hispanic/Latino (80.7%). Blacks/African Americans make up 3.4%, followed by those identifying as two or more races (2.2%). Asians make up 1.2% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014d).

El Paso County has an estimated population of 827,718. The majority of the population is White (92.4%) and Hispanic/Latino (81.2%), followed by Black/African American (3.9%) and Asian (1.2%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014e).

Hudspeth County has an estimated population of 3,318. The majority of the population is White (94.9%) and Hispanic/Latino (79.4%), followed by Black/African American (1.6%) and American Indian (1.5%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014i).

El Paso has the lowest crime rate among cities with a population of 500,000 or more (CQ Press, 2013).

### ***The Indianapolis Star***

*The Indianapolis Star* is the largest daily newspaper in Indianapolis, Indiana, with a coverage area that includes Fishers, Indiana. Owned by Gannett Company, Inc., it primarily serves Metro Indianapolis and the counties of Marion, Hamilton, Hendricks, and Johnson (IndyStar.com, 2014).

Indianapolis has an estimated population of 843,383. The majority of the population is White (61.8%), with the remaining Black/African American (27.5%), Hispanic/Latino (9.4%), or those identifying as two or more races (2.8%). Asians make up 2.1% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014p).

Marion County has an estimated population of 928,281. The majority of the population is White (66.7%), with the next largest segment reported as Black/African American (27.6%), followed by Hispanic/Latino (9.7%), Asian (2.4%), and those identifying as two or more races (2.6%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014s).

Hamilton County has an estimated population of 296,693. The population is mostly White (88.5%), followed by Asian (5.4%), Black/African American (4.0%), and Hispanic/Latino (3.7%), and those identifying as two or more races (1.8%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014n).

Hendricks County has an estimated population of 153,879. The majority of the population is White (89.8%), with the next largest segment being Black/African American (5.8%), followed by Hispanic/Latino (3.4%), Asian (2.4%), and those identifying as two or more races (1.6%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014o).

Johnson County has an estimated population of 145,535. The majority of the population is White (94.2%), with the next largest segment Hispanic/Latino (3.4%), Asian (2.3%), and Black/African American (1.7%), followed by those identifying as two or more races (1.5%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2014q).

Fishers, Indiana has the lowest crime rate among cities with a population of 75,000 to 99,000 (CQ Press, 2013).

### ***Courier-Post***

The *Courier-Post* is a newspaper based in Camden, New Jersey. It is published seven days a week and is owned by the Gannett Company, which purchased the paper in 1959. It serves the counties of Burlington, Camden, and Gloucester in New Jersey. The *Courier-Post* is the fifth largest paper in the state, with a circulation of approximately 75,400 weekly and 89,922 on Sunday (*Courier-Post*, n.d.; Nationwide Newspapers Advertising, 2013).

Burlington County has an estimated population of 450,838. The majority of the population is White (75.0%), with the largest minority Black/African American (17.3%). Hispanics/Latinos make up 7.1%, with Asians at 4.7% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014a).

Gloucester County has an estimated population of 290,265. The majority of the population is White (84.5%), with the largest minority Black/African American (10.5%). Hispanics/Latinos make up 5.2%, with Asians at 2.8% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014h).

Camden County has an estimated population of 512,854. The majority of the population is White (70.7%), with the largest minority Black/African American (21.0%). Hispanics/Latinos make up 15.1% of the population, with Asians at 5.5% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014c).

The city of Camden has an estimated population of 77,250. There is no clear majority of racial make-up for the city, as Black/African Americans make up 48.1% of the population, with Hispanics/Latinos following at 47.0%. Whites make up 17.6% of the population, and Asians come in at 2.1%, with a higher percentage (3.8%) indicating more than one race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014b).

### ***Naperville Sun***

The *Naperville Sun* is a newspaper based in Naperville, Illinois. It is published six days a week, Sunday to Friday, and is owned by the Sun-Times Media Group, formerly Hollinger, a group that includes the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *The (Aurora) Beacon News*, *The (Joliet) Herald News*, *The (Elgin) Courier News*, and the *Lake County News Sun*, formerly the *Waukegan News Sun*. The *Naperville Sun* has a circulation of about 20,000 (*Naperville Sun*, n.d.).

Naperville is the fourth largest city in Illinois, with a population estimate of 143,684. The majority of the population is White (76.0%), with the largest minority Asian (14.9%). African Americans make up 4.7% of the population, and Hispanics/Latinos make up 5.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014k).

Naperville has the fifth lowest crime rate among cities with a population between 100,000 and 499,000 (CQ Press, 2014).

The *Naperville Sun* does not offer mail-based subscriptions, so all data on crime reporting were based on monitoring its website (<http://napervillesun.suntimes.com>) for March 2014. Crime stories appeared under the link "Crime" in the website navigation, and stories appeared to be posted based on timeliness rather than perceived importance as the stories are time and date stamped.

### ***The Flint Journal***

*The Flint Journal* is a newspaper based in Flint, Michigan. It is published four days a week (Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, and Sunday) and is owned by Booth Newspapers, which was recently renamed MLive Media Group. It serves the counties of Genesee, Lapeer, and Shiawassee in Michigan. *The Flint Journal* has a daily circulation of 41,606 and a Sunday circulation of 60,100 (MLive Media Group, 2014).

Genesee County has an estimated population of 415,376. The majority of the population is White (75.1%), with the remaining Black/African American (20.9%), Hispanic/Latino (3.1%), or those of two or more races (2.5%). Asians make up 1.0% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014g).

Lapeer County has an estimated population of 88,389. The great majority of the population is White (96.6%), with the next largest segment Hispanic/Latino (4.3%) followed by Black/African American (1.2%) and Asian at 0.4% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014j).

Shiawassee County has an estimated population of 68,900. The population is mostly White (97.1%), with Hispanic/Latino at 2.6%, Black/African American at 0.6%, and Asian at 0.5% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014l).

Flint has an estimated population of 100,515. The majority of the population is Black/African American (56.6%), followed by White at 37.4%, Hispanic/Latino at 3.9%, and Asian and American Indian both at 0.5% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014f).

Flint has the highest crime rate among cities with a population between 100,000 and 499,000 (CQ Press, 2013).

## Results

### *Detroit Free Press*

During the period of this study, 82 crime stories were printed, with just one issue of the paper lacking one or more crime or criminal justice stories. Thirty-six stories dealt with a form of violent crime and 14 dealt with property crimes. An additional 24 crimes were reported, such as drunk driving and drug-related crimes, and another 36 stories dealt with issues related to courts and corrections (see Table 1). The number of topics reported exceeds the total number of stories because some stories involved more than one crime or subject matter.

We also evaluated the content to determine whether the story was episodic (i.e., it was reported as a crime occurring occasionally, without placing it in the context of a larger, overall issue or trend). Seventy-nine of the stories were coded as episodic. Contextualized stories were those that put the covered crime in context by referencing similar crimes or other information that added perspective for the reader. Eighteen of the stories were coded as contextualized (see Table 1). In addition, three stories were considered investigative in nature (i.e., the paper had uncovered and reported information through its own initiative or analysis).

Law officers made up an overwhelming number of the sources used in the reporting, cited 48 times. Family/friends and court representatives were quoted 20 times each, followed by victims, lawyers, witnesses, and others (e.g., politician, store clerk, etc.; see Table 1).

The average word count was 317 and the average image count was just under one per story, although many briefs had no photos and some stories had five or more. Only eight of the stories made the front page (A1; see Table 1).

**Table 1. Detroit Free Press Crime and Criminal Justice Reporting.**

Story topic	Story approach		Source		Prominence		
Aggravated assault	5	Contextualized	18	Court representative	20	Zero coverage days	1
Rape	4	Episodic	79	Family/friend	20	A1 story	8
Murder	23	Investigative	3	Law officer	48	B1 story	N/A
Robbery	4	One source only	33	Lawyer	7	Word count average	317
Arson	6			Victim	9	Image total	81
Burglary	2			Witness	3		
Larceny-theft	3			Other	95		
Motor vehicle theft	3						
Other crime	24						
Court system	27						
Corrections	9						

*Note.* Word count average is based on 82 total articles.

### ***El Paso Times***

Ninety-seven crime stories were printed during this study, with all issues including at least one crime or justice system story. Thirty-three stories dealt with a form of violent crime and five dealt with the types of property crimes. An additional 40 crimes were reported on, such as drunk driving and drug-related crimes, and another 34 stories dealt with issues related to courts and corrections (see Table 2). The number of topics reported exceeds the total number of stories because some stories involved more than one crime or subject matter.

Fourteen stories featured contextualized content, with 94 categorized as episodic and three categorized as investigative. The most used sources were law officers, with court representatives second. The average word count was 259 and the average image count was 0.52 per story. The majority of stories were listed in the "Local" portion of the paper, with 31 making B1, the local front. In total, of nine crime and justice stories were featured on A1 (front page) of the paper (see Table 2).

### ***The Indianapolis Star***

During the period of this study, 87 crime and justice-related stories were printed, with just three issues lacking one or more crime or criminal justice stories. Twenty-seven stories dealt with a form of violent crime and six dealt with property crimes. An additional 40 crimes were reported on, such as drunk driving and drug-related crimes, and another 34 stories dealt with issues related to courts and corrections (see Table 3).

**Table 2. El Paso Times Crime and Criminal Justice Reporting.**

Story topic	Story approach		Source		Prominence		
Aggravated assault	14	Contextualized	14	Court representative	24	Zero coverage days	0
Rape	0	Episodic	94	Family/friend	3	A1 story	9
Murder	14	Investigative	3	Law officer	60	B1 story	31
Robbery	5	One source only	60	Lawyer	4	Word count average	259
Arson	0			Victim	1	Image total	51
Burglary	2			Witness	2		
Larceny-theft	3			Other	91		
Motor vehicle theft	0						
Other crime	40						
Court system	31						
Corrections	3						

*Note.* Word count average is based on 97 total articles.

We also evaluated the content to determine whether the story was episodic. Eighty-one of the stories were coded as episodic. Eighteen of the stories were coded as contextualized. In addition, six stories were considered investigative in nature (see Table 3).

Law officers made up an overwhelming number of the sources used in the reporting: They were cited 41 times. Court representatives were quoted second most often at 11 times. The average word count was 423 and the average image count was approximately 0.8 per story; 12 of the stories made the front page (A1; see Table 3).

**Table 3. The Indianapolis Star Crime and Criminal Justice Reporting.**

Story topic		Story approach		Source		Prominence	
Aggravated assault	0	Contextualized	18	Court representative	11	Zero coverage days	3
Rape	7	Episodic	81	Family/friend	2	A1 story	12
Murder	12	Investigative	6	Law officer	41	B1 story	N/A
Robbery	8	One source only	48	Lawyer	6	Word count average	423
Arson	1			Victim	8	Image total	69
Burglary	0			Witness	2		
Larceny-theft	5			Other	85		
Motor vehicle theft	0						
Other crime	40						
Court system	28						
Corrections	6						

Note. Word count average is based on 87 total articles.

#### ***Courier-Post***

In total, 165 crime stories were printed during this study; 39 dealt with violent crimes and 17 dealt with property crimes. Only seven stories featured contextualized content, with 132 episodic, 25 investigative, and one containing both episodic and investigative elements. The most used sources were law officers, with court representatives second, followed by lawyers; 139 stories had only one source for information, with that source being some form of law enforcement representative. The average word count was 192 and the average image count was 0.25 per story. Of the 42 total images used, 23 were mug shots. The majority of stories were listed in the "Crime Update" portion of the paper, with the "Our Towns" section the second most used (see Table 4).

#### ***Naperville Sun***

During this study, there were 22 days when no new crime stories were published. In total, 26 crime stories were published during this study, with the majority falling outside the category of violent crime. Only two stories featured contextualized content, and none involved any investigative reporting. The most used sources were law officers, with court representatives second, followed by family and friends. Eighteen stories cited only one source. The average word count was 398 and the average image count was 1.3 per story. Of the 34 total images used, three were stock photos, 10 were file photos, and 12 were mug shots (see Table 5). All stories were located under the "Crime" heading in the main page navigation.

**Table 4. Courier-Post Crime and Criminal Justice Reporting.**

Story topic	Story approach		Source		Prominence		
Aggravated assault	7	Contextualized	7	Court representative	46	Zero coverage days	0
Rape	0	Episodic	132.5	Family/friend	11	A1 story	17
Murder	14	Investigative	25.5	Law officer	71	B1 story	1
Robbery	8	One source only	139	Lawyer	19	Word count average	192
Arson	2			Victim	1	Image total	42
Burglary	0			Witness	3		
Larceny-theft	14			Other	16		
Motor vehicle theft	1						
Other crime	47						
Court system	36						
Corrections	2						

Note. Word count average is based on 165 total articles.

**Table 5. Naperville Sun Crime and Criminal Justice Reporting.**

Story topic	Story approach		Source		Prominence		
Aggravated assault	4	Contextualized	2	Court representative	11	Zero coverage days	22
Rape	1	Episodic	24	Family/friend	7	A1 story	0
Murder	1	Enterprise	0	Law officer	26	B1 story	0
Robbery	1	One source only	18	Lawyer	4	Word count average	398
Arson	0			Victim	0	Image total	34
Burglary	5			Witness	0		
Larceny-theft	3			Other	1		
Motor vehicle theft	4						
Other crimes	12						
Court system	9						
Corrections	0						

Note. Word count average is based on 26 total articles.

### ***The Flint Journal***

Thirty-five crime stories were printed during this study, with three issues lacking crime stories. While four stories dealt with violent crime occurring during the time of the study, eight of the 11 court system stories dealt with coverage of a murder trial where the event happened prior to the period of the study. Nine stories dealt with property crimes. No stories featured contextualized or investigative reporting. The most used sources were law officers, with family and friends second, and 22 stories had only one source cited. The average word count was 332 and the average image count was 0.5 per story. Of the 18 total images used, four were mug shots. The majority of stories were listed in the "Local"

portion of the paper, with the "Local & More" section the second most used. Only one story was featured on the front page (A1) of the paper (see Table 6).

**Table 6. The Flint Journal Crime and Criminal Justice Reporting.**

Story topic	Story approach	Source	Prominence
Aggravated assault	3 Contextualized	0 Court representative	5 Zero coverage days
Rape	0 Episodic	35 Family/friend	13 A1 story
Murder	0 Investigative	0 Law officer	31 B1 story
Robbery	1 One source only	22 Lawyer	5 Word count average
Arson	0	0 Victim	18 Image total
Burglary	3	0 Witness	
Larceny-theft	4	8 Other	
Motor vehicle theft	2		
Other crime	11		
Court system	11		
Corrections	0		

Note. Word count average is based on 35 total articles.

### Discussion

This study found that the six papers under review averaged 78 crime-related stories for the period studied, with the most stories appearing in the *Courier-Post* ( $n = 165$ ) and the fewest in the *Naperville Sun* ( $n = 26$ ). The crime and justice stories were overwhelmingly reported as episodic incidents, without significant context added, and they tended to focus on violent crime versus property crime. When compared with the FBI (2014) Uniform Crime Report, the only crimes for which the number of occurrences came close to the number of incidents reported was murder, and nonviolent crimes such as theft and robbery were greatly underreported (see Table 7).

The *Courier-Post* had more crime and criminal justice coverage than any other paper in the study, with 165 total stories. More than 15% of the stories reported in the *Courier-Post* were investigative in nature. Metro editor Phaedra Trethan says the newspaper tries "to present the human aspect of crime." "[That involves]how it affects families, individuals and communities." She pointed out that Camden is routinely listed among the nation's poorest and most violent cities. "We try to get beyond the 'brief'—a just-the-facts recitation of the crime—and into some depth, talking to victims, their families; reporting on the ripple effects of violence throughout communities and the long-term, traumatic impact on people" (Wenger & Dailey, 2014, p. 3).

The *Courier-Post* is the fifth largest paper in New Jersey, with one full-time reporter dedicated to crime and public safety and additional help from other staff as needed. One thing to consider is the recent decision to make the county surrounding Camden responsible for policing the city because of a traditionally high homicide rate (Queally, 2013). This may have influenced the Camden newspaper's high story total.

The lack of context added to crime and justice reporting overall is important to note given research done previously by Sacco (1995), which asserts the important role the media play in shaping the public and political discourse around these topics.

**Table 7. Reported Crime Compared With FBI Crime Data.**

Type of crime	<i>Detroit Free</i>	<i>El</i>	<i>The</i>	<i>Nape</i>	<i>The</i>	FBI
	<i>Press</i>	<i>Paso</i>	<i>Indianapoli</i>	<i>Courier-</i>	<i>rville</i>	
		FBI	FBI	FBI	FBI	FBI
Aggravated assault	5	733	14	156	0	491
Rape	4	52	0	14	7	55
Murder	23	26	14	1	12	11
Robbery	4	398	5	38	8	317
Arson	6	51	0	6	1	26
Burglary	2	980	2	145	0	1,120
Larceny-theft	3	1,432	3	1,082	5	2,178
Motor vehicle theft	3	991	0	66	0	417
Other crime	24		40		40	47
Court system	27		31		28	36
Corrections	9		3		6	2

#### **Official Sources**

Law enforcement officers were the most commonly cited sources by a wide margin in all papers studied, with court representatives, including judges and prosecutors, coming in a distant second. Law enforcement officers made up 33% of the sources in the crime and justice reporting analyzed.

There was also a heavy reliance on single sources in crime reporting; 65% of all the reports relied on just one source for the story. At the Camden paper, for example, 84% of stories had one reported source, as did 55% of those published in *The Indianapolis Star*. At *The Star*, about 7% of the reporting produced during the analysis period was investigative in nature.

Eric Dick, breaking news editor at *The Indianapolis Star*, says the newspaper likes to add more points of view to stories whenever possible, but for every investigative story, there are undoubtedly many more briefs. Dick said,

I think there are three factors involved. One is the amount of crime: information is readily available that rises to the threshold you need to do a story, but you wouldn't be able to develop all of them. (Wenger & Dailey, 2014, p. 5)

He also points out that the nature of crime news comes into play:

Some stories can be told clearly in a few paragraphs as opposed to city hall coverage,

for example. And the third factor is just the way crime news presents itself, meaning it's breaking-news-oriented, so covering it doesn't always necessarily require the commitment of a lot of background research or deep sourcing. (Wenger & Dailey, 2014, p. 5)

The effect, however, is that law enforcement officials control the narrative surrounding crime and justice stories in a vast majority of the reporting that takes place in U.S. daily newspapers.

### **Context and Crime Reporting**

This study suggests that episodic crime reporting is a common practice among the papers in this study. For the month-long review period, all of the crime and justice stories covered by *The Flint Journal* could be described as episodic rather than contextualized or investigative. The *Detroit Free Press* (75%) and *The Indianapolis Star* (73%) had the fewest "one-off" stories, but those percentages are still high. During the period studied, there appeared to be relatively few high-profile stories driving extra coverage. However, there were two notable exceptions: the *El Paso Times* analysis of the impact of a drug cartel leader's capture on the local trafficking world, and the *Courier-Post's* look at efforts the local campus of Rutgers University is making to battle sexual assault. These illustrate an ongoing commitment by the newspapers to cover stories that have a broad and significant impact on the communities in their circulation area.

### **Courts and Corrections**

In this study, court coverage fared much better than corrections. In five of the six papers analyzed, more than 30% of the stories dealt with some aspect of the court system. The *Courier-Post* featured court coverage in 21% of its stories.

However, corrections topics such as prisons, parole, and probation were much less likely to get coverage, with the exception of the *Detroit Free Press*, which devoted just under 11% of its crime and justice coverage during the month to corrections-related issues, the highest percentage of all the papers in the study. For example, the paper explored Michigan's early release program after a previously convicted killer who was out on parole murdered an 84-year-old grandmother. Another story detailed how failure to reset motion sensors within a state correctional facility aided a quadruple murderer's escape. Reporters also explored the issue of resentencing for hundreds of inmates serving mandatory life terms for murders committed while they were juveniles.

This indicates that some individual crime may be covered multiple times as it works its way through the court system. Where all incidents of a particular type of crime were not reported, some of those high-profile incidents could account for several stories over the course of time.

### **Front Page Coverage**

At the *El Paso Times*, crime is a regular feature of the front page and the Metro section front, with more than a third of the stories appearing in one of those two prominent positions. At the *Courier-*

*Post*, 10% of the crime and justice stories hit the front page. Alternatively, the *Detroit Free Press*, which along with Camden often gets a "most dangerous city for its size" label, featured less than 1% of its crime stories on the front page. This may suggest that editors are more cognizant now of concerns about sensationalizing crime coverage and are making decisions to downplay the impact of crime on their communities.

### ***Limitations***

In all the papers in the survey, there were few days without a crime story. The comparison of covered crime to officially reported crime assumes a constant rate of crime over a 12-month period, but crime and justice-related incidents may fluctuate month-to-month for a variety of reasons. FBI crime data were not available for the counties of Marion and Hamilton in Indiana and the county of Hudspeth in Texas. Data on the city of Camden, New Jersey, were available for 2011 only; as there were changes in terms of how the police force operated since 2011 (Queally, 2013), updated data for this area were not available.

This study looked only at local crime and all the papers at least occasionally reported crime and justice-related stories from outside their coverage area. Crime stories of interest nationally, either due to their nature or due to the prominence of the individuals involved, are often included in local news coverage; however, these news organizations have a primary focus on local stories. Therefore, the amount of available news space consumed by crime and justice stories is higher than what this study would suggest.

### ***Further Research***

On many occasions, the stories reported included only the "official" view of the crime or court case, with little to no broader perspective or context indicating why the stories mattered to the public. It would be of interest to explore the reasoning behind this lack of depth in crime reporting, with one possible explanation being recent and significant reporting staff reductions in the journalism field.

Future research may be able to quantify whether there is more or less crime coverage occurring in today's daily metropolitan newspapers than in the past; an expanded content analysis could provide insight into whether crime is getting more or less emphasis than other topics.

It would be worth exploring whether market factors, such as smaller staff sizes and reduced circulation, have an effect on the number of sources used and types of crime reported. Using only information from an official source simplifies and expedites the reporting process, and newsrooms may now be in a situation in which having fewer reporters available has made the depth of coverage shallower. Also, the ease with which newspapers can get information on incidental crime may contribute to the frequency of reporting such events.

This study compared crime reporting with actual crime events; however, there is potential to explore how the amount and type of crime reported have changed. Previous research has indicated that reporting on crime is directly related to the public's general fear of crime (Jaehing et al., 1981; Liska &

Baccaglioni, 1990; O'Keefe & Reid-Nash, 1987; Perse et al., 1994); therefore, this may be an area that has been sufficiently explored.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that crime reported in newspapers, and perhaps the media in general, is considerably less than the actual amount of crime in an area, and how crime stories are covered, the types and number of sources, and a story's placement may influence public perception of safety. Just as a rare criminal incident in a statistically safe part of the country would get coverage because of its uniqueness, a more common type of crime in a statistically unsafe area would not receive coverage because it is not unique. The difference is in how newsworthy the event is considered, and rare events are often considered newsworthy because of their unique nature.

This study suggests no positive correlation between market size or amount of crime in a community and the amount of coverage that crime and justice issues get. The *Detroit Free Press* reported fewer crimes than the *El Paso Times* or *The Indianapolis Star*. This may suggest a negative correlation between the amount of actual crime and reported crime, as crime may be so commonplace in large metropolitan areas that it has simply become an accepted phenomenon and not worthy of news coverage except in extreme cases.

Relying on a single source for a story is a concern as it demonstrates a lack of depth in reporting, whether it is due to a desire for convenience or it becomes a necessity created by lack of resources. In cases in which that one source is someone working in an official capacity within local government, the concern may be greater. Normalization theory suggests that this creates a level of public trust in the official word that may or may not be warranted as it is cited often without contrasting information. Ultimately, journalists have a responsibility not only to inform the public, but also to thoroughly report the issues that affect the community.

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