Representation of Race and Gender in News-Gazette Crime Reporting

A Research Project of the Junior Honors Program in the Department of Political Science, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

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Academic Research on Racial Representations in News Coverage

Research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s tended to find that African-Americans were overrepresented as crime suspects and underrepresented as crime victims relative to “real world” benchmark indicators like arrest records. More recent research suggests that African-American suspects may be covered roughly on par with “real world” benchmark indicators. Typical focus is on television reporting in large news markets or national news outlets.
Why News Depictions of Race Matter

Misrepresenting racial characteristics of local crime suspects is an important cause of racial stereotyping in society

- Can serve as raw material for initially developing stereotypical associations between race and crime
- Can sustain and support existing stereotypes about racial characteristics of criminal perpetrators
- Can perpetuate systemic forms of racial injustice that take root in societal institutions
Best Practices for Detecting Racial Stereotyping in News Coverage

Individual perceptions about racial stereotyping in news coverage are strongly influenced by a person’s prior beliefs about racial justice issues (e.g., the “hostile media effect”).

The strongest research designs for detecting misrepresentation of suspect characteristics therefore rely on systematic analysis of news content over long periods of time.

The strongest research designs also compare news depictions of crime to “real world” benchmark indicators such as arrest records.
Motivation

- Importance of news media
- Recent national and local race events
- How media portrays different racial groups

- Research Question: Are certain crimes or suspects more likely to be reported on than others?
Arrest Data

-Arrest data from: Champaign County Sheriff’s Office, Champaign Police Department, Rantoul Police Department, University of Illinois Police Department, Urbana Police Department

-Name, age, race, sex, crime type

-Date range: May 31, 2015 through August 31, 2015
  -5016 total arrests
Arrest Data

- Percentage of Arrests:
  - Violent Crime: 7.3%
  - Nonviolent Crime: 92.7%

- Percentage of Arrests by Suspect Race:
  - Black Suspect: 39.9%
  - White Suspect: 48.5%
  - Other/Unknown: 11.5%
Arrest Data

Percentage of Arrests

Female: 36.8%
Male: 63.2%
News Data

- News data spans from June 1, 2015 to September 1, 2015
  - PDF copies of paper edition (no online content included in study)
- Captured every crime story published within time frame
- Student analysts paired together to reconcile any disagreements
News Data

- Generated a codebook to determine important variables
  - Location, type of crime, race of suspect, gender of suspect, whether or not suspect was arrested
- Two student analysts analyzed each crime story according to the codebook
  - Ignored “Crime Report” summary roundups
News Data

- Followed “best practice” academic standards for analyzing news content
  - Intercoder reliability
  - Two student analysts independently coded each story
  - Disagreements reconciled by two more working together
Matching Arrest and News Data

- Created a matching algorithm
- Student analysts then went through and made matches manually
- Made sure that all of the matches were correct and fixed those that were incorrect
- Allowed us to clarify any discrepancies with race among suspects and lessen “Unclear race”
News Data*

*Story level data, all locations

*Suspect level, race enhanced data, all locations
Local Crime News Data*

*Story level data, Champaign County

*Suspect level, race enhanced data, Champaign County
Local Crime News Data*

*Suspect level, race enhanced data, Champaign County
News Data Gender

*Suspect level data, all locations

Suspect level data, Champaign County
News is 7 times more violent than arrest data and over twice as violent as booking data*
Only 1% of arrests are reported in the news

63 News Gazette stories covering arrests

5016 total arrests

4953

No Coverage

Coverage
Suspect Images*

*Suspect level, race enhanced data, Champaign County
Suspect Images vs. Bookings and Arrests*

*Suspect level, race enhanced data, Champaign County
Early Stage Images*

*Suspect level, race enhanced data, Champaign County
Gender Comparison*

*Suspect level data, Champaign County
Effect of Violence, Race

Crime Occurs
- Violent: 6.9%
- Nonviolent: 1.8%
- Black: 3.6%
- White: 1.3%

Crime Stories
- Violent=Nonviolent
- Black: 51.9%
- White: 60.7%

Image
Effect of Gender

Crime Occurs
- Male: 3.2%
- Female: 0.4%

Crime Stories
- Male: 38.4%
- Female: 44.1%

Image
Summarizing Findings

-Violent crimes comprise a far greater proportion of crime stories than actual arrests

-Black suspects appear in the news at a greater proportion than in the arrest records

-Images of Black suspects appear at a greater rate than White suspects

-Black arrestees are much more likely to be selected for a news story

-White suspects are more likely to carry an image than Black suspects
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Important Limitations of This Study

Patterns from the study’s three-month window may not generalize to longer-term trends in News-Gazette coverage.

Many suspects in News-Gazette coverage are never identified in a way that can be matched to arrest data (e.g., unnamed suspects in initial incident reports, juvenile suspects).

The arrest data and jail bookings data are partial and potentially misleading benchmarks for “real world” crime.

The study is unable to address the underlying causes of demographic misrepresentation in crime reporting.
Typical Origins of Demographic Misrepresentation in News Coverage

Academic research strongly suggests that such patterns in news coverage are **almost certainly**

- Unknown to and unanticipated by the news organizations that produce this coverage
- Unintended outcomes of common work processes and resource constraints that influence how news stories are selected and constructed
- Fixable by the news organizations that produce this coverage
Evidence Against Intentional Discrimination as a Possible Cause

Unless a suspect image is shown, race is rarely mentioned or even implied in textual descriptions of suspects.

White suspects are more likely to be shown in images.

Males are consistently overrepresented as news suspects.

The choice to highlight violent crimes in the news will tend to increase the representation of Black suspects. In arrest data:

- 61% of violent crime suspects are Black, 32% are White
- 38% of nonviolent crime suspects are Black, 50% are White
Why Fixing Sources of Misrepresentation is Important

Misrepresenting racial characteristics of local crime suspects is an important cause of racial stereotyping in society

- Serves as raw material for initially developing stereotypical associations between race and crime
- Sustains and supports existing stereotypes about racial characteristics of criminal perpetrators
- Perpetuates systemic forms of racial injustice that take root in societal institutions
Where to Look for Remedies

Information subsidies from outsiders that make certain types of criminals or criminal acts easier to discover or report

Institutional tracking routines for becoming aware of criminal activity in Champaign County

Definitions of newsworthiness that influence story selection and story construction decisions

Degree to which news decisions at all levels are made by a mix of reporting and editorial staff that matches the racial diversity of the local community
Find the report on this research @
http://www.clinecenter.illinois.edu/research/undergrad/