

2014

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Recommended Citation

Christenson, Danielle (2014). Victim Worthiness: The Effect of Media Coverage on the Portrayal of Homicide Victims. *Undergraduate Review*, 10, 49-54.

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol10/iss1/14

Victim Worthiness: The Effect of Media Coverage on the Portrayal of Homicide Victims

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Danielle is a senior majoring in criminal justice. This research was conducted during the summer of 2013

with funding from an Adrian Tinsley Summer Research Grant. Danielle is grateful to her mentor, Dr. Richard Wright (Criminal Justice), for his dedication to this project and his continued support. Danielle presented her research at the 2013 American Society of Criminology Conference in Atlanta, GA. She also was the first Bridgewater student to present research at the National Collegiate Research Conference at Harvard University in January 2014. Danielle will graduate in May and will attend graduate school at Bridgewater in the fall.

In the last thirty years with the growth of 24-hour news channels, Internet only news sites and the decline of the newspaper, there have been tremendous changes in how the media covers crimes. Whether it is a catastrophic terrorist attack, school shooting or a low-profile homicide, violent crime is a staple of news coverage. The field of victimology has documented that the media does not portray all crime victims the same. The race and class of the victim as well as seemingly non-relevant factors such as their age, profession and the location of the crime as well as the demographics of the offender all influence public portrayals of crime victims. Scholars refer to these factors as influencing “victim worthiness.” Victim worthiness can have an influence on jury selection, prosecutorial discretion and sentencing (Stabile, 2006). Utilizing computer content analysis, this study examined three case studies of violent crime, analyzing the news coverage and its impact on “victim worthiness.” The hypothesis of this study was there would be media bias in the portrayal of homicide victims due to “extralegal” factors (e.g. race, age, status, etc) of either the victim (s) and/or the offender. The findings of this study suggest mixed findings in support of the hypothesis.

Research Question & Hypothesis

Is there a media bias in the portrayal of homicide victims?

This study examined whether there was a media bias in the portrayal of homicide victims. Our hypothesis was that there would be discernible media bias in the portrayal of homicide victims due to “extralegal” factors (e.g. race, age, status, etc.) of either the victim (s) and/or the offender.

Policy Relevance

This study is particularly important as most of the information the public receives about crime comes from the media and it is critical that the information be scrutinized and critiqued. According to the law all victims should be treated equally. In the media, however, victims are treated very differently. Media portrayal of crime victims and offenders can be objective or subjective. Scholars have documented that media coverage of crime victims and offenders tend to be biased (Callanan, 2012) (Greer, 2007). Media coverage of crime victims often focus on personal, situational and demographic characteristics, which had nothing to do with their victimization. As such media coverage affects jury selection and decision-making as well as public sentiment (Bing III, 2010).

Methods

This research used three different case studies as well as a computerized content analysis to answer the research question and test the hypothesis. A content analysis method is a way of evaluating text, newspapers, essays, etc. Computerized content analysis allows an electronic software package (Concordance® was used in this research) to assist in the identification of themes, keywords and patterns articulated by the researcher. As such computer content analysis allows for the quick and methodological examination of large sums of text. The data for the content analysis came from local and national newspapers and national news broadcast transcripts that were obtained from LexisNexis, ProQuest, and news websites. Local television news coverage due to was excluded due to the lack of available transcripts.. Also excluded were radio, and online only news sources due to time constraint.

Each case study qualifies as a mass shooting according to the FBI's definition. All three case studies initially received significant media attention. They also had varying racial dyads between victim and offender. The three case studies chosen were the Mattapan Massacre (Boston) in 2010, the Tucson, Arizona shooting in 2011, and the Oak Creek, Wisconsin shooting in 2012.

Literature Review

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) presents national homicide data through the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) and Supplemental Homicide Report (SHR). According to the 2009 and 2010 SHR's, the majority of murder victims were male (77.6 percent). African Americans accounted for 50 percent of victims. Whites accounted for 45.2 percent of victims while 2.4 percent of the victims were of other races (Cooper & Smith, 2011). African Americans only constitute 13.1 percent of the U.S. population despite making up a majority of crime victims (State & County Quick Facts, 2011).

Fear of crime in America remains constant despite the declines and stagnant crime rates since the 1990's (Drakulich, 2012). Drakulich conducted a study in 2012 on racial anxieties to determine whether those who possessed racial stereotypes would have a higher perception of criminal danger than those who did not possess racial stereotypes.

Drakulich found that respondents who did not report interacting with neighbors of other races or ethnicities were more likely to possess racialized crime stereotypes. Those who did interact with other races and ethnicities were less likely to possess racial crime stereotypes. For example, Drakulich found that interactions with members of a different race led to a decreased likelihood of stereotyping African Americans and Latinos as gang and drug involved (Drakulich, 2012).

Stereotypes are not created based on fact. Stereotyping can lead to false ideas about specific groups. For example, African Americans are often stereotyped as criminals; this leads people to fear them due to the false stereotype (Mears et al., 2011). This issue is important to consider due to the widespread growth of media. Stereotypes now have the ability to be spread very quickly and reach many people.

A majority of Americans rely on the mass media for information about crime as opposed to obtaining information through personal experience. It is important, that the media reports accurate information regarding crime to the public (Jewkes, 2011). News organizations serve the important purpose of informing the public; however, they also serve a conflicting role, which is to make a profit. In order for news organizations to make a profit they have to maintain high ratings and newspaper sales. This then leads to an emphasis on certain news stories that appeal to a mass audience known as newsworthy stories (Callahan, 2012).

Crimes that are considered newsworthy are those that include drama, a vulnerable victim, and are out of the ordinary (Callahan, 2012). Bing (2010) argues that the media constructs a connection between race and crime through social constructionism. According to Bing (2010), African Americans were twice as likely as whites to be shown under physical restraint by the police. This is true despite whites being accused of similar violent crimes.

According to Potter & Kappeler (1998), between 1991 and 1994 crime and victimization rates in the U.S. decreased. Despite the decrease in crime, all the major television networks consistently raised the number of violent crime stories they reported each year from 1991-1994. Despite the consistent drop in 1994 the public, when asked about their perception of crime, 88% answered that they thought it was at an all-time high. Politicians fueled this false perception of crime by proposing new laws that would combat the "crime problem" (Callanan, 2012).

Few crimes are considered as newsworthy as mass murder. This is because it is shocking, infrequently occurring, and involves multiple victims. Mass murder attracts local, national and sometimes even international media attention. There are however, some mass murders that are considered more newsworthy than others. Past studies have suggested this is because of certain characteristics. One characteristic is that of a lone gunman who shoots strangers in a public setting. Less coverage is devoted to mass murders involving fire, family members of victims, and mass murders that were committed in connection with property offenses (Duwe, 2000).

Case Studies

The FBI defines “mass murder” as four or more murders occurring during the same incident, with no distinctive time period between the murders (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011). These events typically involved a single location, where the killer murdered a number of victims in an ongoing incident (Morton, 2008). Mass murders are rare but tragic crimes. Even in a nation which is becoming increasingly violent, mass killings demand attention.

This study examined three cases involving mass shootings to determine if there exists any media bias in homicide cases. The cases were all chosen because they were mass shootings (according to the definition of the FBI). The cases included mass killings in the Mattapan district of Boston, Tucson, Arizona and Oak Creek, Wisconsin. These specific case studies were also chosen because they initially appeared to elicit differing levels of media attention. The Mattapan case received only local media coverage. The Sikh Temple shooting received local media attention and brief attention in the national media. The Tucson, Arizona shooting received significant and prolonged local and national media coverage.

Case Study #1. Mattapan Massacre (2010)

On September 8, 2010 four people were killed and one severely injured on Woolson Street in the Mattapan district of Boston (Stout, 2012). According to Boston Police, three men, Kimani Washington, Edward Washington and Dwayne Moore went to 21 year old Simba Martin’s apartment to buy drugs (Swasey, 2010). Also in the apartment were Martin’s 21 year-old girlfriend Eyanna Flonory, her 2 year old son Amanihotep and 22 year old Levaughn Washum- Garrison a friend of Martin’s (Stout, 2012). Edward Washington, Kimani Washington and Dwayne Moore robbed Martin of the drugs. Those inside the apartment were ordered to strip naked and marched down the street. They were then each shot (Stout, 2012).

Shortly after the police arrived at the murder scene, Kimani Washington was found near the alleged getaway car and admitted to being in it (Martin, 2012). Washington would later be arrested on a weapons charge in Manchester, New Hampshire on October 2, 2010 and charged in the Mattapan shootings (Swasey, 2010). Within a few weeks police arrested Dwayne Moore and the third suspect, Edward Washington (Swasey, 2010).

Kimani Washington admitted being involved in the robbery, but not the murders. He was given a plea deal in exchange for his testimony against Edward Washington and Dwayne Moore. The prosecutor chose to try Dwayne Moore and Edward Washington together as it was unclear who fired the fatal

shots. The jury acquitted Edward Washington of all charges and a mistrial was declared for Dwayne Moore (Jones, 2012).

Dwayne Moore’s retrial began on November 1, 2012 (Ballou, 2012). With the prosecution pursuing a different legal strategy, Moore was convicted of four counts of first-degree murder for which he will serve a life sentence (Cramer, Mattapan Slay Trial Back Before Jury, 2012). Kimani Washington was sentenced on January 25, 2013 after pleading guilty to robbery, carjacking, home invasion, and possession with intent to distribute drugs (Deehan, 2010). He received 16 years in prison (Cramer, Kimani Washington Pleads Guilty in Mattapan Attack, 2013).

Case Study #2. Tucson, Arizona Shooting (2011)

On January 8, 2011, Arizona Congresswoman Gabby Giffords held a “Congress on Your Corner” event outside of a Safeway Supermarket just north of Tucson, Arizona. Giffords was the Representative for Arizona’s Eighth District. During the event, a gunman, Jared Lee Loughner, opened fire on the crowd outside the supermarket. Six were killed and 14 were wounded (Lacey & Herszenhorn, 2011). Among the dead was John M. Roll, 63, a chief judge for the United States District Court for Arizona. Also killed were Gabriel Zimmerman, 30, a staff member of Giffords, a nine year old girl, Christina Taylor Green, and three senior citizens who came out to support Gifford’s event, Dorothy Morris, 76, Dorwan Stoddard, 76, and Phyllis Schneck, 79 (Lacey & Herszenhorn, 2011).

Jared Lee Loughner was arrested at the scene by police and taken into custody. Originally Loughner pled not guilty to the 49 charges against him on March 9, 2011. On March 25, 2011 he was diagnosed with schizophrenia and the judge ruled him incompetent to stand trial (Bendery, 2012). After months of treatment, Loughner was ruled competent on August 7, 2012 to stand trial based on testimony from various medical personnel (Santos, 2012).

Assistant U.S. District Attorney Christina Cabanillas, offered Loughner a plea deal of life in prison without the possibility of parole. By accepting this plea, Loughner avoided the death penalty. He pled guilty on November 8, 2012 and was sentenced to seven life terms and an additional 140 years on federal charges (Martinez & Lah, 2012).

Case Study #3. Sikh Temple Shooting (2012)

On August 5, 2012 a gunman killed six people and injured three in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. The shooting happened during Sunday services at a local Sikh Temple (Romell, 2012). The victims included, Suveg Singh, Sita Singh, Ranjit Singh, Satwant Sing Kaleka, Paramjit Kaur, and Prakash Sing (Green, 2012).

The shooter was identified as Wade Michael Page, a 40-year-old white male. The first officer to arrive on scene was Brian Murphy. Upon his arrival the two exchanged gunfire. Page hit Murphy nine non-fatal times. One shot from Murphy hit Page, which immobilized him. Page then committed suicide by shooting himself in the head (Romell, 2012).

The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Joint Terrorism Task Force, led by Special Agent Teresa Carlson and Oak Creek Police Chief John Edwards, investigated the shooting as an act of domestic terrorism because of the tattoos found on Page’s body (Pearce & Bennet, 2012). The Southern Poverty Law Center (SLPC) a hate crimes research organization had been watching Wade Michael Page for over ten years. In contrast with the FBI, in the SPLC’s final report labeled the shooting an act of domestic terrorism. They also suggested that the attack was motivated by hate (Elias, 2012).

FINDINGS

Part I- Type & Quantity of News Stories

The following tables analyze both the quantity and type of local and national media coverage. Each case study is presented in the first column. The second column in the table is the number of total stories dedicated to each incident. The final column represents the predominant area of the media’s focus labeled “Top Category.” Each article was divided into categories based on the predominate subject of the article. These categories were victim, offender, incident, investigation, trial and other.

Table 1. Local Newspaper Coverage

Case	Total Coverage	Top Category
Mattapan	77	Trial 37 (48.05%)
Tucson	165	Victims 43 (26%)
Sikh Temple	31	Victims 9 (29.03%)

Table 2. Local Television Coverage:

Case	Total Coverage	Top Category
Mattapan	178	Trial 94 (52.81%)
Tucson	490	Victims 120 (32.34%)
Sikh Temple	316	Victims 112 (35.44%)

As evidenced in Tables 1 and 2 the local media in the Wisconsin Sikh Temple and Tucson shootings focused more of their coverage on the victims. Boston focused a majority of its coverage on the trials of the Mattapan murder defendants. It is

difficult to interpret these results most notably because there was no trial in the Sikh Temple Shooting due to Page’s suicide.

What is clear is that the victims in Tucson and Oak Creek warranted more coverage than those in Mattapan. As discussed in the full report, media will emphasize homicides involving strangers, minimize the murder of African Americans and will rationalize inner-city violence. Both Oak Creek and Tucson were stranger-based shootings. Mattapan involved the murder of four poor African Americans in the inner city.

An explanation for the differences in coverage between the Sikh Temple victims, Tucson victims and the Mattapan victims could also be based on the victim’s backgrounds. The victims of the Mattapan shootings were described by local media as being involved with drugs or having previous criminal histories. The only victim described as “innocent” was Amanihotep, the two-year-old boy who was shot, (Cramer, Mattapan Slay Trial Back Before Jury, 2012). In contrast, the Tucson victims were all white victims. Gabby Giffords received the most coverage out of all of the victims and this could be directly related to her status as a congresswoman (Nowicki, 2011).

Unlike the Mattapan Massacre victims, the victims in the Sikh Temple Shooting and Tucson case did not know their attacker (Green, 2012). It has been reported that the media are more likely to cover cases if the victim and offender are strangers (Potter & Kappeler, 1998). This could explain why the Sikh Temple Shooting and Tucson were national stories whereas the Mattapan shooting was not.

Table 3. National Newspaper

Case	Total Coverage	Top Category
Mattapan	0	0
Tucson	348	Victims 107 (31%)
Sikh Temple	33	Incident 12 (33.36%)

Table 4. National Television News

Case	Total Coverage	Top Category
Mattapan	0	0
Tucson	400	Victims 120 (30%)
Sikh Temple	93	Incident 34 (36.56%)

As evidenced in Tables 3 and 4 the Mattapan case did not receive any national coverage. This is true despite Mattapan

qualifying as a mass killing consistent with Tucson and Oak Creek. The results from the second column in Tables 3 and 4 are consistent with our hypothesis of media bias and victim worthiness.

The Sikh Temple and the Tucson shootings both received national coverage however they differed significantly in terms of quantity of coverage. Tucson received more coverage than the Sikh Temple. As discussed in the full report, race does affect the coverage of crime. White victims are favored over minority victims. The victims in the Sikh Temple shooting were originally from India and all were immigrants to the United States. This may have also affected their status as victims.

In Tucson, the media coverage was primarily about the victims. Although focusing on the victims, the media prioritized some victims over others. Although Gabby Giffords was not the only person injured in the shooting the media often referred to the killing as the “*Gabby Giffords Shooting*” in many of their headlines. The Sikh Temple shootings’ top category was the incident itself. This is inconsistent with my hypothesis because national media covered this case in a mostly objective manner.

Part II- Intercase Study Analysis: Computerized

Content Analysis:

The results of the computerized content analysis are presented in the following section. Data for the content analysis came from local newspapers, national newspapers and national television. Table 5 shows the coded keywords searched in the articles and the number of times those words appeared in each case study.

Coverage of the Tucson shooting used more subjective language than any of the other case studies. The Tucson shooting also received more national coverage than Oak Creek and Mattapan (which received none). Although it is not clear why, previous research can aide in our interpretation. Typically, high profile cases involve white victims. High profile cases also tend to be covered if they are considered stranger-based. Also, cases are more likely to be covered when the victims are of a higher status. The Tucson case, more than any of the other case studies, contained these themes.

One interesting data point can be found in the analysis of table 5. The media used the term “*tragedy*” nearly 200 times in describing the Tucson killings. This occurred in nearly 1 out of every 5 stories (18.6%). More than any other phrase this term demonstrates media bias and victim worthiness. Despite the death and destruction occurring in each shooting, the media clearly portrayed the Tucson killings as “worse.” This demonstrates positive support for the hypothesis.

Table 5.

Word	Mattapan Shooting	Tucson Shooting	Sikh Temple Shooting
Brave	0	3	1
Bravery	0	18	0
Child	4	31	0
Disturbing	0	24	0
Drugs	5	30	0
Evil	0	14	1
Father	1	17	7
Heartbreaking	0	0	0
Hero	0	28	4
Husband	0	81	0
Horrendous	0	0	0
Horrific	0	13	0
Innocent	4	15	1
Monster	0	8	1
Mother	2	48	1
Peaceful	0	12	5
Pure	1	1	0
Strong	0	40	0
Terrorism	0	4	20
Tragedy	1	174	26
Veteran	0	0	3
Wicked	0	2	0
Wife	1	44	3
Worst	1	16	4
Number of Phrases	20/66	623/966	78/151
Stories	(30.30%)	(64.5%)	(51.7%)

In conclusion, the findings yielded positive results in support of the hypothesis that there would be a media bias in the portrayal of homicide victims due to extralegal factors of the victim and or the offender. The limitations of the study included the time limit allowed for the research (10 weeks). Also, the content analysis was completed by only one coder thus allowing for possible misinterpretation. There was also insufficient time to ground the research in the media and crime literature. The lack of local television news transcripts also may have eliminated a sufficient set of data that may or may not have changed the results.

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