

Kids, Crime & Local TV News

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by
Danilo Yanich

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Local Television News Media Project

Center for Community Research & Service
and the Graduate School of Urban Affairs & Public Policy
University of Delaware
Newark, Delaware 19716
302/ 831-1710; dyanich@udel.edu

Danilo Yanich is an Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Urban Affairs & Public Policy and the Center for Community Research & Service at the University of Delaware and Director of the Local TV News Media Project. He has conducted research on crime, the media and public policy for over a decade. His most recent research was supported by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund.

Dr. Yanich has developed a unique database of over 10,600 searchable and viewable digitized local television news stories from 20 markets in the U.S. available at www.localtvnews.org. The database of the website is being expanded by another 7,500 stories from 17 television markets across the country. Upcoming research will further refine the examination of crime and local TV news on a national scale and the pattern of ownership of local news media.

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A b s t r a c t

The vast majority of crime reporting occurs locally, on local television news and in newspapers. In the course of human interaction, crimes are extraordinary events, but they assume an ordinariness that only daily reporting can give them. The obvious question is what does the news tell us about crime. This research is a significant expansion of my previous study from two television markets to twenty markets across the United States.

In this paper I focus on the presentation of crime on local television news. Specifically, I compare the coverage of adult crime and the coverage of what I have termed “KidsCrime”. KidsCrime is defined as a crime story in which a juvenile (under 18 years of age) was either the suspect or the victim (or both). What is the nature of that coverage? How consistent is this portrait of crime with official statistics? What aspects of the criminal justice system receive attention? Are there differences between adult crime and KidsCrime coverage regarding offenses, victimization, production techniques, and other attributes?

This examination of the coverage of crime on local television news revealed: (1) significant differences between KidsCrime and adult crime coverage; (2) a portrait of crime that was both consistent and inconsistent with official statistics; (3) a presentation approach that discouraged critical viewing.

Introduction

For a significant majority of citizens, the presumed reality of public events—their characteristics, their meanings, their implications—is constructed by media institutions. Increasingly, these institutions set the agenda for public discourse (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Bennett, 1996; Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McChesney, 1999) and they dominate the public sphere—“that realm of social life where the exchange of information and views on questions of common concern can take place so that public opinion can be formed” (Dahlgren, 1995). The media have become the chief institutions of the public sphere. In fact, Cohen (1963) concluded that “the press may not be successful in telling its readers what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (p. 13).

The molding of the public’s cognitive map by the news frame is particularly penetrating for crime and justice (Sasson, 1995; Ericson, 1991). There are two complimentary reasons for such a condition. First, there is the sheer ubiquity of crime stories, particularly on local television news. Crime news is regularly found to be the most prominently covered social issue on newscasts (Maguire, et. al., 1999; Kaiser Family Foundation, 1998; Klite, et. al., 1997; Miller, 1998; Chermak, 1995; Graber, 1980). That finding was also consistent with research on juvenile crime on television (Children Now, 2001; Dorfman and Shiraldi, 2001) Second, crime is ubiquitous because it is the perfect vehicle to satisfy the news selection criteria (Barak, 1995; Surette, 1998). Those criteria have been stated several ways. Rueven Frank, in his capacity as the Executive Producer of the NBC Evening News, offered the following prescription for a news story in a memo to his staff in 1963:

Every news story should, without sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle and an end. These are not only the essentials of drama; they are the essentials of narrative (In Epstein, 1973, 4-5).

For crime stories the most stark distillation of the news selection criteria has been expressed much more succinctly: “If it bleeds, it leads”. The logic that is explicit in both prescriptions directs television news producers to select stories that are imbued with conflict and tension. The result is a skewed portrait of crime and justice (Barak, 1994; Surette, 1984) that cultivates a fear of crime among viewers (Romer, et.al., 2003; Lowry, et. al., 2003).

In 1997 almost three-quarters (72%) of Americans watched local television news regularly even though that was during a period when network news viewership had dropped from 60% to 41% (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1998). Further, 81 percent of Americans viewed local television news favorably (Pew, 1998). In this paper I focus on the presentation of crime on local television news. Specifically, I compare the coverage of adult crime and the coverage of what I have termed “KidsCrime”. KidsCrime is defined as a crime story in which a juvenile (under 18 years of age) was either the suspect or the victim (or both). What is the nature of that coverage? How consistent is this portrait of crime with official statistics? What aspects of the criminal justice system receive attention? Are there differences between adult crime and KidsCrime coverage regarding offenses, victimization, production techniques, and other attributes?

Juvenile crime is often seen through the prism of such tragedies as the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in April 1999 or at the Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas in March 1998. The Columbine story offered the perfect vehicle for the view of the juvenile as “superpredator—violent, remorseless and impulsive pre-adults responsible for widespread mayhem” (Gilliam and Iyengar, 1998). National magazines, for example, have drawn that portrait. *Newsweek’s* cover on August 2, 1992 announced: “Teen Violence: Wild in the Streets”. In 1993, a *U.S. News & World Report* cover chose a chilling approach: “Guns in the Schools: When Killers Come to Class—Even Suburban Parents Now Fear the Rising Tide of Violence.” The publication invoked the image of the spread of crime from urban to suburban places. A *Time* cover story called these juveniles: “Children Without Pity” (Doi, 1998). The singular attention to these national stories, while important, somewhat misses the mark. The vast majority of juvenile crime reporting occurs locally, on local television news and in local newspapers (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 1997; Dorfman, et. al, 1997; Dorfman and Shiraldi, 2001). Compared to the national stories, these stories are part of the ordinary and mundane representations of life that govern the public’s understanding of social issues (Bennett, 1996; Hart, 1999). This comparison of the coverage of the mundane stories of juvenile and adult crime on local television news revealed a portrait of crime that was both consistent and inconsistent with crime as determined by official statistics. Further, stories were presented in such ways as to discourage critical viewing.

Method

The purpose of this study was to conduct an in-depth comparative examination of the coverage of adult crime and crime involving juveniles on local television news. In order to carry out the analysis, I focused on the individual stories that were broadcast. Adult crime stories and crime stories involving juveniles were distinguished by the ages of the suspects and the victims in the story. A crime story was designated as “adult” where both the suspects and the victims were ONLY adults. Crime stories involving juveniles (called KidsCrime in this paper) were defined as those stories in which the suspect or the victim or **both** was a person under 18 years of age. Therefore, a story in which only the victim was a juvenile was assigned to the KidsCrime category. This is an important point because the KidsCrime category does not necessarily mean that a juvenile *committed* the crime. Rather, a juvenile was involved in the story as either a suspect, a victim or both.

The basic methodology for this research was content analysis (Krippendorf, 1980). It is a method that produces a systematic and objective description of information content. The researchers catalogued or “coded” the material according to several analytical categories following explicit rules and procedures to minimize their subjective predispositions.

The Sample: Nielsen Media Research defines a television market as a Designated Market Area (DMA), identifying 210 such DMA’s across the country at the time of the newscasts in the sample. Each DMA “consists of all counties whose largest viewing share is given to stations of that market area” (Nielsen Media Research, 2003). Every county in the U.S. is allocated exclusively to one DMA.

The sample for this research was developed from the videotaped local television broadcasts in twenty television markets (DMA’s) throughout the United States. The videotaping was carried out by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) during the Spring of 1998 and included both “sweeps” and “non-sweeps” time periods. A “sweeps” month is a period when the Nielsen ratings of the stations’ programs are recorded to establish the size of its audience and, by extension, to determine the price of advertising on the station. Obviously, the larger the audience, the more the station can charge for advertising. “Non-sweeps” periods are those months when the Nielsen ratings are not officially used to set advertising prices. To avoid any bias, PEJ recorded newscasts from both periods. PEJ selected the markets

by first grouping all DMA's into quartiles based on rank. Five markets within each quartile were then chosen randomly after being stratified to ensure geographic diversity. PEJ chose the highest-rated competing news programs in the market using the highest rated time slot as the common denominator. These time slots were either 6 PM, 10 PM or 11 PM. Hour-long newscasts and distant stations were excluded. According to PEJ, this approach provided the most consistent yardstick among markets. PEJ provided the videotapes to me for digitizing and further study.

The television markets in the study represented stations from every geographic region in the U.S. as well as a wide range of sizes (from market #1 to market #109), as measured by the number of households in 1998. The television markets in the study reached a combined total of over 30 million television households in the United States. That represented approximately 30% of all of the television households in the country.

The television markets, their market number based on population (as determined by Nielsen Media Research) and the number of television households in each that comprised the DMA groups appear in Table 1 on the following page.

Table 1: Dominant Market Areas, Rank & Size

Dominant Market Area	DMA Rank*	# Television Households
New York	1	6,874,990
Los Angeles	2	5,234,690
Chicago	3	3,204,710
Boston	6	2,210,580
Washington, D.C.	8	1,999,870
Atlanta	10	1,774,720
Seattle	12	1,591,100
Minneapolis/St. Paul	14	1,481,050
Pittsburgh	20	1,135,290
St. Louis	21	1,114,370
Buffalo	44	621,460
Louisville	48	576,850
Albuquerque	49	568,650
Jacksonville, FL	52	540,450
Wichita	65	443,690
Tucson	72	380,900
Burlington	91	295,480
Evansville	98	274,460
Lansing, MI	107	237,860
Tallahassee	109	230,300
Total		30,791,470

Source: Nielsen Media Research

*DMA Rank is determined by the number of television households in the DMA

There are 210 DMA's in the U.S.

Stories, The Unit of Analysis: The unit of analysis was the individual story that was shown on the newscast. The sample included 559 broadcasts from the twenty markets and yielded 7,667 separate stories, excluding sports and weather. These stories fell into the following categories: (1) Crime; (2) Human interest; (3) Public issues, all public issues such as education, health, etc., other than crime; (4) Fires/Accidents; (5) Government; (6); Clinton investigations; (7) Politics; (8)

Consumer news; (9) International stories; (10) Entertainment news; (11) Promos for the station..

Of the 7,667 stories that comprised the total sample for this research, there were 1,739 crime stories (out of a total of 2,002 crime stories) that specified the age of the suspect or the victim or both. These crime stories comprised the basis for this examination and they were further separated into five categories for more detailed analysis: (1) Crime event; (2) Police; (3) Courts; (4) Corrections; (5) Criminal justice policy.

Comparing Adult & Juvenile Crime

Before examining the treatment of adult and juvenile crime on local newscasts, it was important to consider the portrait of crime from official statistics. To accomplish that, I analyzed FBI data for each county in the DMA (for which there were data) for the latest year in which adult *and* juvenile arrest data were available (Online at: <http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/ojstattbb/ezaucr> [28 April 2003]). The broadcasts were recorded in 1998. However, in some cases the most recent year for which data were available was either 1996 or 1997 rather than 1998. Therefore, data from either 1996 or 1997 were included in the analysis for some DMA's in which data from 1998 were not available.

In order to compare arrest data for the nation and the DMA's in a manageable form, data from the DMA's for which juvenile and adult arrest data were available were combined. Complete adult and juvenile arrest data were available in ten out of the twenty markets that comprised the sample for this research. They included Atlanta, Boston, Buffalo, Lansing, Los Angeles, Minneapolis/St. Paul, New York, Pittsburgh, Tallahassee and Tucson. These DMA's combined represent over 20 million households and two-thirds of the households in the sample.

Within the combined DMA's that were part of the sample, murder accounted for one-tenth of one percent of arrests for adults and juveniles. That proportion exactly matched the national arrest rates for murder. There were more juvenile arrests than adult arrests for violent crime (8.9% and 6.1%, respectively) and for property crime (12.5% and 8.4%, respectively). Within the DMA's, adults had more arrests for Non Index crime (85.4%) than did juveniles (78.5%).

Table 2: Adult and Juvenile Arrests* in the Combined DMA's and the US in 1996, 1997 & 1998**

	<i>Juvenile Crime</i>	<i>Adult Crime</i>
Combined DMA's**		
% Murder	.1	.1
% Violent	8.9	6.1
% Property	12.5	8.4
% Non Index	78.5	85.4
Total	100	100
US		
% Murder	.1	.1
% Violent	4.2	4.6
% Property	22.9	10.1
% Non Index	72.8	85.2
Total	100	100

*Source: Author's analysis of data available ONLINE at: <http://oijdp.ncjrs.org/ojistattbb/ezaucr> [28 April 2003].

**Combined DMA's=Complete adult and juvenile arrest data were available for ten of the twenty markets that comprised the sample for this research. These data reflect the totals for these markets. They included: Atlanta, Boston, Buffalo, Lansing, Los Angeles, Minneapolis/St. Paul, New York, Pittsburgh, Tallahassee, Tucson. These markets accounted

There were substantial differences in the distributions of property and violent crime arrests for juveniles between the combined DMA's and the nation. In short, the differences revealed that the combined markets had more arrests for violent juvenile crime than the nation (8.9% to 4.2%, respectively). However, the combined DMA's had substantially fewer juvenile arrests for property crime than the nation (12.5% to 22.9%, respectively).

There were also differences in the adult arrests between the combined DMA's and the nation. However, those differences were not as significant as those for the juvenile arrests. Violent crime accounted for 6.1 percent of the arrests in the combined DMA's, compared to 4.6 percent in the nation. Property crime arrests were also relatively close for the DMA's and the nation (8.4% and 10.1%, respectively). The arrests for Non Index crime were relatively consistent between the combined DMA's and the nation for both adult and juvenile arrests.

In summary, the combined DMA's for which data were available had a crime profile for adults that was reasonably consistent with the nation. However, the juvenile crime profile for the combined DMA's showed the proportion of arrests for violent crime more than doubled that of the nation. Conversely, the proportion of juvenile arrests for property crime in the DMA's was substantially lower than that proportion for the nation (Table 2).

Arrest data, while important, only offer one half of the crime picture. Victimization is the other crucial side of crime. Victimization data that was separated by adult and juvenile categories was difficult to obtain for each DMA. Therefore, I examined victimization in the United States as a whole. In 1998, persons between 12 and 19 years of age were more likely to be the victims of non-fatal violent crime (includes rape, robbery, aggravated and simple assault) than persons in any other age categories. For juveniles aged 12 to 15 years the rate (per 1,000 population) of victimization was 82.4. That rate was 91.1 for persons 16 to 19 years of age. The rates of victimization decreased steadily as the age categories reflected older persons. For example, the victimization rate for persons 20-24 years was 67.3. The rate dropped to 2.8 for persons 65 years and older (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003).

While these victimization rates offer an overall picture, an analysis of existing research (Wordes and Nunez, 2002) provides a more detailed picture of juvenile victimization. The authors found, among other things, that, although adolescents comprise approximately 14% of the population, they represent about 25% of those who were the victims of violent crime, and juveniles experienced a higher rate of property crime than adults (166 and 118 per 1,000 population, respectively). In short, juveniles are victimized more often than adults.

Views of Kids & Kids Crime

The official numbers tell us that juveniles are about three times as likely as adults to be the victims of violent crime. Further, as perpetrators, they commit more violent crime and more property crime than adults (see Table 2). That is the "official" version. But how does the public see juveniles and juvenile justice? The public has definite ideas regarding policy-relevant juvenile crime and juvenile justice questions. A national study of the public's view of these issues by Ira Schwartz, Shenyang Guo and John J. Kerbs (1993) found that the public made an important distinction between the legal

handling of juveniles accused of serious crimes and the types of disposition and correctional interventions they felt juveniles should receive. Their findings pointed to a relatively sympathetic view of juvenile crime and juvenile justice. While the adult respondents did favor adjudicating juveniles who committed serious crimes in adult courts, they also supported more lenient sentences for those juveniles than the sentences meted out to adults.

Most important for our concerns here were two findings regarding the formation of the public's punitive attitudes regarding juvenile crime. The first was that punitive attitudes regarding juveniles were formed earlier in the life-cycle (around middle-age rather than old-age) than the age-conservatism continuum suggests. That is, members of the public have embraced more stringent measures to respond to juvenile crime earlier in their lives (Schwartz, et. al., 1993). As the population of the United States ages, that may have important policy implications for juvenile courts and the sanctions that are applied to juvenile offenders.

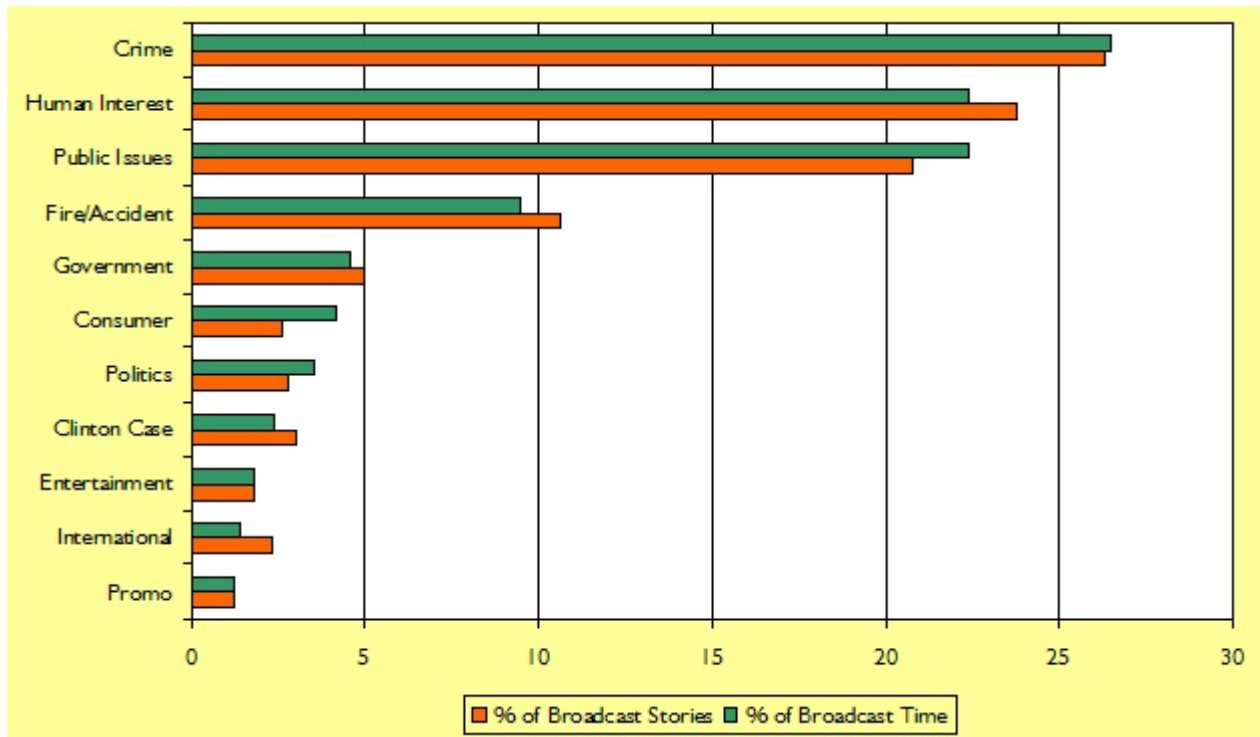
The second important point was the finding that the fear of being victimized by violent crime was the key factor that produced punitive attitudes toward juveniles (Schwartz, et. al., 1993). That is particularly critical when we consider that citizens consistently report that they derive most of their information about public issues from media sources, particularly local television news. In short, the public's cognitive map about the salience of issues is most often being drawn by media institutions.

But, one point comes through. The fear of victimization has much to do with how the public understands its young citizens. Given that result and the fact that the public derives most of its information about crime from media sources, a logical question is how juveniles are portrayed by those institutions. I look here at local television news.

Covering Adult and Kids Crime

The first task was to determine what kinds of stories, as defined by story topic, comprised the newscasts. What information was selected as news by the producers of the broadcasts? The most important feature of the combined DMA's newscasts was that crime was the dominant story topic, accounting for over one-quarter (27%) of the reported stories and broadcast time (26%) on the newscasts (Figure 1). Human interest stories were

Figure 1: Distribution of story type and broadcast time across broadcasts in the combined Dominant Market Areas



the second most prevalent story type (22% of broadcast content and 23% of broadcast time). When compared to the category of public issues, which included all other social issues, the dominance of crime was even more striking. The combined DMA's newscasts covered all of the remaining public issues in about one-fifth of their stories and broadcast time. After that, there was a significant decrease in the proportions of the newscasts that were devoted to other story types. As a result, there was a clear demarcation between the story topics that received the most coverage (crime, human interest and public issues) and those story topics that received less coverage (fires/accidents, government, consumer news, politics, Clinton investigations, entertainment news, international news and promos). Judging by the selection process, crime was presented as the most newsworthy public issue facing the citizens of these television markets, as in many others (see Klite 1997; Miller, 1998).

My concern here was a comparison of the coverage of adult crime and those crimes involving juveniles (KidsCrime). What was the distribution of adult crime

and KidsCrime stories among the stories that specified the age of the suspect or the victim?

The significant majority of crime stories (69%) focused on adults. These were stories about crimes committed *by* adults *against* adults (in only a minute percentage was the “victim” of an adult crime an institution, as in an embezzlement offense). Conversely, almost one-third (31%) of the stories focused on KidsCrime in which a juvenile was either a suspect, a victim or both.

Production Factors

The primary attribute on which I focused was, quite logically, story content. However, news stories have another crucial set of characteristics, production factors— placement, montage, presentation mode and sources.

Viewers have often expressed the perception that the local television news is “nothing but crime news” (Miller, 1998; York, 2004). This analysis of crime coverage supported that conclusion to a point. The story topics and time allotted to crime stories were substantial (see Figure 1). However, certain production techniques were used in the presentation of those stories that increased our sense of crime-dominated news.

Placement: The first production attribute was story placement, i.e., where the story appeared in the chronological order of the newscast. The newscast was divided into blocks or segments, separated by commercial breaks. The first block (from the opening of the program to the first commercial break) is the most important portion of the newscast and, as such, is reserved for the most newsworthy stories of the day. Typically, the first block lasted between nine and eleven minutes. As we might expect, the zero-sum game of deciding which stories were included in and excluded from the newscast was played most seriously in this instance. These first block stories must capture and hold the audience for the broadcast. They represent, essentially, the newscast’s “best shot” to play the ratings game. News directors are keenly aware of the fickle fingers that wait nervously on the remote control ready to zap to another channel and the dreaded “zap” must be avoided at all costs. As such, the stories that comprise the first block tell us much about what the stations considered not only newsworthy, but, more importantly, audience-generating.

The news directors had very clear ideas regarding which stories should lead the newscast (defined here as appearing in the first block). The overwhelming majority of crime stories, in general, appeared in the first block of the newscasts. In this respect, adult and KidsCrime stories were treated consistently as over eight of ten such stories appeared in the first block (82% and 80% for adult and KidsCrime stories, respectively). When stations prepared crime stories, they placed them at the front of the broadcasts. Conversely, non-crime stories received quite different placement consideration; just over half (53%) of them were broadcast in the first block. Crime, more often than not, was not only the most prominent type of story in the first segment, it was regularly the very first story in the newscast.

Montage: Another attribute of crime coverage may have been significant in giving the impression that local news was dominated by crime, i.e., the sequence and coupling in which crime stories were presented. A crime story that was broadcast as part of a block of at least three crime stories was defined as a *montage* story.

The montage technique was used extensively for both KidsCrime and adult crime stories. Just under one-half of the stories for both types of crime story (48% and 46% for adult and KidsCrime stories, respectively) were broadcast as part of a montage. In addition, the montage effect of these stories was often heightened by employing a production technique called a “wipe” in which the image of one crime story was replaced by the image of the following crime story. The montage technique, coupled with the placement of crime stories in the first block, yielded a “pace” and continuity to the newscasts that were the goals of the news directors. The result was a set of broadcasts that gave the impression that we were being bombarded by “one crime story after another”. That perception was generally borne out by the facts.

Presentation Mode: Another feature of the stories that affected the “feel” of the broadcasts was the mode in which each story was presented. Mode was defined as the primary method used to communicate the narrative and/or the pictures of the story. These presentation modes were crucial considerations because they were cues to the audience that conveyed the importance of the story. The examination yielded five types of presentation modes: (1) Voice-over by anchor; (2) Live location to video; (3) Package; (4) Anchor read without voice-over; (5) Live location report to no action (Table 3).

Voice-over By Anchor: In this presentation mode, the story was delivered by the news anchor as he/she provided the narrative while the videotape that was shot for the story was shown on the screen. Typically, the anchor offered some introductory narrative before the video began, but that did not last very long. This mode was significantly the most common for both KidsCrime and adult crime stories (Table 3). It was employed in about two-thirds each type of story (68% and 65% for KidsCrime and adult crime stories, respectively). The use of the voice-over by anchor was remarkably consistent between both story types not only in the proportion of crime stories in which the technique was used, but also the time devoted to these stories. For the KidsCrime category, the median time for these stories was 27 seconds; for adult crime stories, it was 29 seconds. In comparison, the median time for *all* KidsCrime stories, regardless of presentation mode, was 41 seconds; for adult crime stories the median time was 33 seconds. Further, non-crime stories lasted a median of 33 seconds. Therefore, news producers most often presented KidsCrime stories through a relatively less expensive presentation mode with a median duration of under half a minute.

Table 3: Distribution of Presentation Mode and Story Duration across KidsCrime and Adult Crime stories

Presentation Mode	KidsCrime*		AdultCrime	
	% of stories	Median Story Time (sec)	% of stories	Median Story Time (sec)
Voice-over by anchor	68	27	65	29
Live location to Video	11	138	13	130
Package	10	120	10	118
Anchor read, no video	9	24	10	25
Live location to no action	2	113	2	143
Total (All crime stories)	100	41	100	33

*KidsCrime=story in which suspect and/or victim was under 18 years of age.

Live location to video: In this presentation mode, the story began with a live report from the scene of the story. Typically, there was an introduction by the anchor of the reporter with a “live at the scene” setup. The reporter would then make preliminary comments and then show video of the scene that was videotaped earlier. This mode was used for just over one out of ten for both KidsCrime and adult crime stories (11% and 13%, respectively). These stories were also about four to five times as long (median of 138 seconds and 130 seconds for KidsCrime and adult crime stories, respectively) as those using the Voice-over by anchor presentation mode.

A closer look at these stories begs the question regarding the use of this presentation mode. That is, once the video for the story was shot and the reporter’s narrative was added to the tape, what need was there for the reporter to introduce the story “live” from the scene of the event? Could the reporter have just been in the studio to introduce the video? In some instances the answer may be that there was not enough time to return to the station. However, in the stories I examined the video was often shot much earlier than the “live” portion of the story. A more plausible explanation for the “live” approach is found in television news’ constant search for action and immediacy. The “live at the scene” setup conveyed that immediacy even when, more often than not, it was not there.

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Package: In the *package* presentation mode, a news crew (a reporter and camera operator) went to the scene of the story, shot video, produced the video for broadcast and the reporter wrote the narrative for the video voice-over. The package mode was used in ten percent of the KidsCrime and adult crime stories (Table 3). As we might expect, the package mode required substantial time and resources to prepare. That was reflected in the length of time such stories occupied in the broadcasts. That is, the investment of resources to produce the story was reflected in its duration on the newscast. The package crime stories lasted a median of about two minutes for both types of stories (120 seconds and 118 seconds for KidsCrime and adult crime stories, respectively).

Anchor Read w/o Video: A fourth approach to presenting the crime stories was the reading of narrative by the anchor without any video being shown on the screen anchor read w/o/video; the proverbial “talking head”. News producers used this technique in about ten percent of Kidscrime and adult crime stories (Table 3). Further, these stories occupied the same amount of time in the broadcasts (median time of 24 and 25 seconds for KidsCrime and adult crime, respectively).

Live location report to no action: In these stories the reporter and the camera operator broadcast their story from a remote location at which the “action” of the story had long been over. Typically, these stories involved a reporter at a crime scene (or the closed offices of a defense attorney or the court, etc.) describing the case. The only video that could be shot was the yellow crime scene tape (in the case of a crime event story). This approach was used rarely (Table 3) for crime stories (2% for both types of crime story). However, when they were used, the stories ran for a substantial period of broadcast time (median times of 113 and 143 seconds, for KidsCrime and adult crime stories, respectively). That was about four to almost five times as long as the stories that were presented using the *voice-over by anchor* mode.

The presentation modes among the stories involved very different production costs and that seemed to influence the frequency with which news directors utilized them. In general, more expensive presentation modes were used less often than those that were more cost efficient. The relatively more expensive techniques were the live location report and the package. Each required the efforts of a complete news crew (reporter and camera operator) in addition to others at the station to produce the story. That investment was generally reflected in longer, but fewer, stories for the broadcast.

The most common crime story presentation mode, voice-over by the anchor, was also a relatively less expensive approach to news production. Its main ingredient was pictures and those pictures were most often acquired by sending a camera operator to a variety of locations during the day and editing the video back at the station. Either the anchor or a producer would write the narrative (from information gathered by someone else) to accompany the video as it was shown on the screen. The pictures to which the anchor was lending a voice were often not seen by the anchor previously. Essentially, the anchor was a “viewer” in almost the same way as the audience. The impression that this mode left was that the station was “at the scene” of the story. That was true in only the most generous of

interpretations. Yes, the station was “at the scene”, but it was only there in the form of a camera operator whose mandate was to get some pictures. The station was certainly not “there” to acquire some context for the story. Indeed, there was no “there” there.

Sources: A critical aspect of the news process is the sources that provide the life-blood of the enterprise. There is a symbiotic relationship between journalists and their sources. The result of the interaction between them is “news that represents *who* are the authorized knowers and *what* are their authoritative versions of reality” (Ericson, et. al., 1989). Further, the relationship between journalists and

Table 4: Distribution of sources across KidsCrime and Adult Crime Stories

	KidsCrime*	AdultCrime
Source	% of stories using this source	% of stories using this source
CJ Officials	63	65
Victim	11	12
Expert	11	10
Neighbor	10	6
Family of victim	9	7
Defense Attorney	7	9
Suspect	5	7
Gov’t officials, not CJ	5	5
Family of suspect	3	1
Eyewitness	2	3

*KidsCrime=story in which suspect and/or victim was under 18 years of age.

sources is such that, “sources are used to cite the facts of the matter without further investigation and to give credibility to what the reporter visualizes” (Ericson, et. al., 1989). Given the role of sources in the news process, I examined which ones were used by the newscasts in the reporting of crime stories. Who were the authorized “knowers” in the stories we saw?

I identified ten sources that appeared in the crime stories: **1.** Criminal justice officials, i.e., police, courts, corrections; **2.** The victim (s); **3.** Experts; **4.** Neighbors; **5.** Victim’s family; **6.** Defense attorney; **7.** The suspect (s); **8.** Officials from government agencies other than criminal justice institutions; **9.** Suspect’s family members; **10.** Eyewitnesses.

In every crime story I recorded whether or not each of the groups was used as a source. Obviously, the stories could have multiple sources. A source was coded as having been consulted or not consulted in a story only when that was logically possible. For example, if the topic of the crime story was a crime event and no suspect was identified, the suspect’s defense attorney logically could not be cited as a source. In that case, the defense attorney source designation was recorded as “not applicable”. I used the “not applicable” code in this instance because there were no stories in which a suspect was **not** identified where a defense attorney was consulted as a source to offer general information about the case. Local news producers do not have the resources to have an attorney on “retainer” to comment on cases. Therefore, I used the “not applicable” designation to avoid any skewing of the data.

Criminal justice agencies were the main sources in the vast majority of the crime stories (Table 4). In fact, the stations relied on these sources in the overwhelming majority of stories for KidsCrime (63%) and adult crime (65%). That was an expected finding. However, the use of these sources has some implications.

Criminal justice agencies (particularly the police) are the primary definers of crime and its control to the public.

Criminal justice agencies (particularly the police) are the primary definers of crime and its control to the public. They develop the system of classification concerning what constitutes crime, crime rates and case

clearance (Ericson, et. al., 1989). These agencies “now accept that, in relation to a particular incident or activity, a proactive approach to the media is useful in controlling the version of reality that is transmitted, sustained, and accepted publicly” (Ericson, et. al., 1989). This proactive approach served as a legitimizing mechanism for the work of these institutions. Further, this more accommodating relationship with the media made it much easier for journalists to acquire the

necessary basic information (*who, what, where, when, why*) about a particular crime in time for the newscast. It also made the *voice-over-by-anchor* presentation mode significantly more enticing (see Table 4) because the process of “getting the facts” was already accomplished by the justice officials and “fed” to the journalists. This is not to suggest that criminal justice officials should not be primary sources in crime stories. That is both necessary and appropriate. However, we must recognize the role they play in the process.

The second, but very distant second, most cited source for both types of crime stories was the victim (11% and 12% for KidsCrime and adult crime, respectively). The use of the remaining eight categories of sources varied somewhat between the two types of crime, but not by a wide margin. However, there was one source whose use varied somewhat between KidsCrime and adult crime—neighbors. The stations used neighbors as a source for KidsCrime over one and one-half times as often as they used that source for adult crime (10% and 6%, respectively).

The family of the victim was an important source for both KidsCrime (9%) and adult crime (7%). It is important to note what information was derived from those sources. In virtually all of the instances in which the victim’s family members were employed as sources, the reporter asked for a reaction to the crime. There was nothing substantive that these sources added to the story, but they certainly personalized and dramatized the presentation. This is not say that family members also were not victimized. Rather, their use as a source was presented to serve the dramatic aspects of the story rather than to provide information.

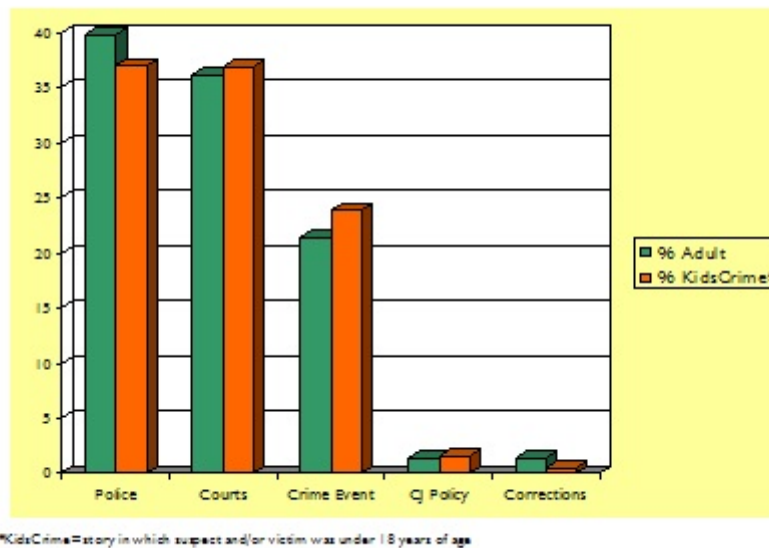
Crime News Content

The crime news that occupied so much of the content was divided into five separate categories. One category included **Criminal Justice Policy and Administration**. The remaining four categories were conceptually congruent with the criminal justice process, i.e., **Crime Event, Police, Courts** and **Corrections**. In this way, I could examine the stages of the criminal justice process as they were covered by the newscasts. In the Crime Event category, the story reported the occurrence of a crime. A story was placed in the Police category, when the action of the story was taken by the police, either an arrest was made, an investigation was being launched or continued, etc. In the Courts category, the action was being taken by the courts, typically a trial was being held, a plea was being taken, etc. In the Corrections category, action was being taken by

correctional authorities, prisons, parole boards, etc. In the broadcasts that comprised our sample, the execution of a convicted murderer in Delaware occupied some of the stories in this category.

There were clear similarities in the coverage of KidsCrime and adult crime regarding the aspects of the criminal justice process. For both categories, police stories comprised the significant plurality of crime news (Figure 2). For KidsCrime, the proportion of police stories was four out of ten stories (40%); the adult crime category was over one-third (37%). Over one-third of the KidsCrime and adult crime stories focused on the courts (36% and 37%, respectively). Just over one-fifth of the KidsCrime (21%) and almost one-quarter adult crime (24%) news items focused on the crime event. Corrections and criminal justice policy issues received scant attention for both categories (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Distribution of story type for adult and KidsCrime stories across the combined Dominant Market Areas



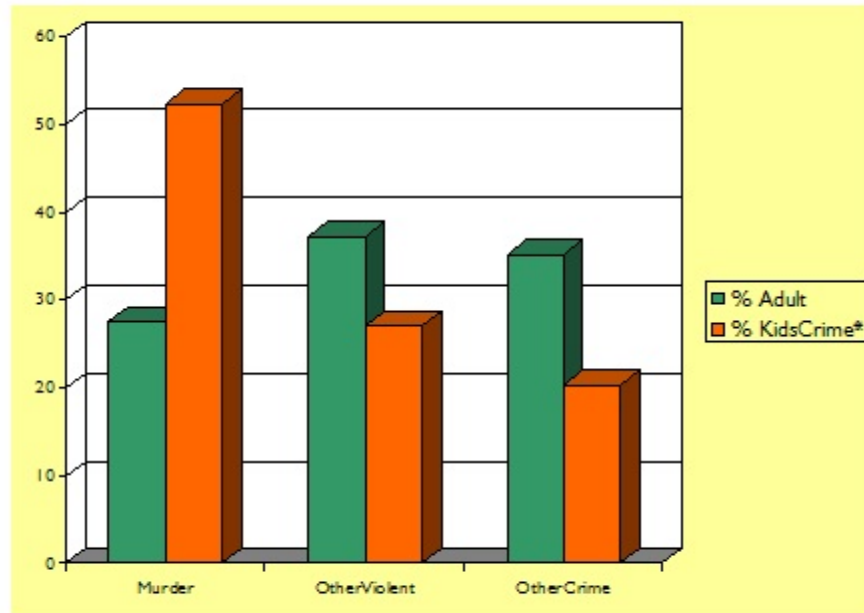
Most crime stories focused on the police or the courts. There are several possible explanations for the relatively extensive coverage. First, from a production standpoint, these stories were easier to cover. For the court stories, the action of the story (testimony, verdict, etc.) occurred at the courthouse, a familiar location to the station’s news staff, where the news director knew that a story was available. That was important because the news director had scarce resources with which to produce

the newscast and their efficient use was a primary consideration. The most expensive of those resources was the news crew consisting of a reporter and a camera operator. Therefore, dispatching a news crew had to be done with the calculation that it would deliver a story that could be used on the newscast, otherwise scarce resources would be wasted. Sending the news crew to the courthouse virtually guaranteed that a useable story would result. This same logic applied to police stories.

Second, the court story most probably was in reference to a crime that had already been the topic (the crime event) of a story on a previous broadcast by the station. Therefore, no new information about the crime needed to be developed for the story; it was already on “file” with the station and it was easily accessed for the court story, thereby saving additional resources.

Offenses: A story in each of the crime event, police, courts and corrections categories referred to a specific crime, i.e., burglary, robbery, murder, etc. By definition, the criminal justice policy stories did not focus on a particular crime. Stations exhibited an exceptional degree of agreement about which crimes should be included in the newscasts regardless of the category (Figure 3). However, the treatment of offenses across KidsCrime and adult crime stories was statistically different (Chi-square=101.453, $p < .01$). Murder was the offense of choice. For KidsCrime, **murder** occupied over half of the crime stories (52%). However, fewer than three out of ten (28%) adult crime stories were about homicide. The **other violent crime** category referred to all violent crime except murder and included rape, robbery, attempted murder and assault. Adult crime stories focused on these crimes over one-third of the time (37%); for KidsCrime stories just over one-quarter (27%) reported other violent crime. The **other crime** grouping contained every other crime that was reported within the crime stories. This category included property, drugs, non-violent, official misconduct, traffic and civil offenses. Again, the adult crime stories reported offenses in this category for about one-third (35%) of the items. One-fifth (20%) of the KidsCrime stories focused on these offenses. The offenses that were chosen for inclusion in the newscasts were far from the reality of crime in the combined DMA’s. Remember, murder accounted for one-tenth of one percent of the arrests for crimes in the markets (See Table 2). In other words, in the case of KidsCrime, the coverage of murder on newscasts was over five hundred times (250 times for adults) more likely than its occurrence in reality in the combined DMA’s.

Figure 3: Distribution of the offenses reported in adult and KidsCrime stories across the combined Dominant Market Areas



*Kids Crime=story in which suspect and/or victim was under 18 years of age.
The differences between KidsCrime and adult crime stories are significant at $p < .01$.

As murder was vastly over-represented on the newscasts, the *other crime* category was significantly under-represented. It comprised only about one-quarter of the newscast offenses, but it accounted for almost nine out of ten (88%) of the offenses reported to the police (U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, October 28, 2002).

The newscast reporting of the *other violent crime* category was also very different from the official portrait of crime. *Other violent crime* accounted for just over one out of ten (12%) of crimes reported to police in the combined DMA's (U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, October 28, 2002). In the markets, *other violent crime* constituted over one-quarter (27%) of the offenses reported in KidsCrime stories and over one-third (37%) of the offenses in adult crime stories; two to three times their occurrence in reality.

The discrepancy between the official view of crime and crime coverage in the newscasts was also borne out when we looked at adult and juvenile arrests. Murder arrests for juveniles and adults accounted for one-tenth of one percent of all arrests both groups. Conversely, in the combined DMA's, arrests for non-index offenses accounted for the overwhelming majority of juvenile (73%) and adult (85%) arrests (U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, October 28, 2002). However, murder was the topic of interest for the majority of crime stories that were broadcast.

These findings were consistent with other analyses of crime and the news (Cottle, 1994; Graber, 1980; Miller, 1998). Crime, particularly selected offenses, occupied a prominent place in newscasts far out of proportion with its actual prevalence in the community.

Victims and Suspects

The crime stories that were broadcast regarding KidsCrime and adult crime were populated by suspects and victims. What did we learn about them? What did that knowledge tell us about the presentation of crime?

Types: The stories had several types of suspects and victims. They were: **(1) an individual**, in which only one person was identified in the story; **(2) a group**, in which a group of individuals was the victim and/or suspect; **(3) an organization**, i.e., a public or private institution, etc.; **(4) the public** (only as a victim, for example, a consumer fraud case). These categories were based on an identification of the suspect and/or the victim in the story. However, there was another possibility—that the identity of either the suspect or the victim or both was not reported or not known. That is, the story simply did not report it.

The crime stories, whether KidsCrime or adult crime, that were broadcast were heavily dependent on the actions or the circumstances of individuals, significantly outnumbering all other categories (Table 5). There were statistically significant differences between KidsCrime and adult crime stories when it came to the victims (Chi-square=104.871, $p < .01$). Almost eight out of ten (78%) of KidsCrime stories portrayed an individual victim; that was the case in just over half (53%) of the adult crime stories. News items with individuals as suspects were appeared in about two-thirds of KidsCrime and adult crime stories (65% and 68%, respectively).

The reliance on individuals as suspects and victims in the stories provided very strong evidence of the “bias” toward personalized news (see Bennett, 1996). There was the presumption that the public would identify with the story when the circumstances that animated it were those they could understand as part of their own experience. Using individuals as victims and as suspects accomplished that task.

Groups of individuals comprised the second most prominent categories of victims (19% and 28% for KidsCrime and adult crime, respectively) and suspects (26% and 20%, respectively). One in ten, or fewer, adult crime stories did not identify the suspect (10%) or the victim (7%) at all. For KidsCrime, the victim was not reported in only two percent of the stories, however, just under one in ten stories (9%) did not identify the suspect. Either the information was unavailable or not reported. The individual focus of the stories was even more significant when we considered that organizations, by comparison, were virtually neglected, either as suspects or victims. An organization was identified as a victim in only one percent of KidsCrime news items. Organizations were more prominent in adult crime stories, but they still represented a very small proportion of identified victims (9%) and suspects (2%).

Gender: We know that the suspects and victims in the crime stories were individuals in the significant majority of cases. A logical question was what demographic characteristics did they have. The most obvious demarcation was gender. There were statistically significant differences (Chi-square=79.869, $p < .01$) between the KidsCrime and adult crime stories regarding the reporting of the gender of victims and suspects (Table 5).

Males were overwhelmingly the suspects in both of the categories of crime stories (57% and 72% for KidsCrime and adult crime, respectively). However, victimization was somewhat different by gender between the two categories. For adult crime, males and females comprised about one-third each of the victims in the stories (35% and 36%, respectively). In almost one-quarter (24%) of the adult crime stories, the gender of the victim was not reported or not known. In five percent of the stories, the victims were both male and female. (Table 5). That pattern was slightly different for KidsCrime stories. For these pieces, males accounted for a plurality (42%) of victims compared to females (39%). Fourteen percent of the stories did not identify the gender of the victim and five percent of the stories contained both male and female victims (Table 5).

Table 5: Characteristics of victims and suspects in KidsCrime and Adult Crime stories.

	KidsCrime*		AdultCrime	
	Victim % of stories	Suspect % of stories	Victim % of stories	Suspect % of stories
<i>Type of Victim or Suspect</i>				
Individual	78	65	53	68
Group of individuals	19	26	28	20
Not known/reported	2	9	7	10
Organization	1	<1	9	2
Public	1	N/A	3	N/A
Total	100	100	100	100
<i>Gender of Victim or Suspect</i>				
Males	42	57	35	72
Females	39	15	36	7
Not known/reported	14	17	24	18
Male & Female	5	11	5	3
Total	100	100	100	100
<i>Race/Ethnicity of Victim or Suspect</i>				
Not reported/known	54	41	67	48
Only Caucasian	31	39	18	27
Only African-American	12	17	12	19
Hispanic/Native-Amer/Asian	3	3	3	6
Total	100	100	100	100

*KidsCrime=story in which suspect or victim was under 18 years of age.

The differences between KidsCrime and adult crime stories are significant at $p < .01$.

In contrast, female suspects were reported in substantially different proportions for the crime stories. Female suspects comprised only fifteen percent of the KidsCrime stories (Table 5). But that proportion was still over twice as large as adult crime stories with a female suspect (7%).

There were very few stories in which there were multiple suspects of both genders (Table 5). However, that occurred almost four times as often in KidsCrime (11%) as in adult crime (3%). Conversely, the proportion of stories in which there were multiple victims of both genders was consistent for both types of stories (5%). The gender of the suspects was not reported or not known for an almost consistent proportion of stories in both categories (17% and 18% for KidsCrime and adult crime, respectively).

Race/Ethnicity: In addition to gender, I also examined the race/ethnicity of the suspects and the victims in the crime stories. First, some definitions are in order. The “only” that precedes the various racial and ethnic categories here refers to the fact that when there were multiple suspects or victims in the story, they were comprised exclusively by a particular racial/ethnic group. By extension, then, the mixed race/ethnicity category indicates that there were a group of persons who were the suspects or victims and they consisted of several racial/ethnic categories. The most striking finding here was that in most stories the race or ethnicity of the suspect and /or the victim was *not* reported (Table 5). Either the reporter did not know that information or it was simply not reported.

For the KidsCrime stories over one-half of the news items (54%) did not report the race or ethnicity of the victim. That proportion jumped to two-thirds (67%) of stories for adult crime. The victim(s) was identified as only Caucasian in about one-third (31%) of KidsCrime stories. That was the case in fewer than one-fifth (18%) of the adult crime stories. The identification of African-American and Hispanic/Native-American/Asian victims was consistent for both types of stories (12% and 3%, respectively). The differences between KidsCrime and adult crime stories were statistically significant (Chi-square=31.417, $p < .01$).

Looking at the suspects in the stories, there were some parallel findings. Again, for both crime categories, the plurality of stories did not specify the race or ethnicity of the suspect (41% and 48% for KidsCrime and adult crime, respectively). Caucasian suspects was the next most prominent group identified in the stories for

KidsCrime (39%) and that was significantly higher than the proportion for adult crime (27%). The identification of African-American suspects occurred in a slightly higher proportion of adult crime (19%) as KidsCrime (17%) stories. Hispanic, Native American or Asian suspects were identified in very few stories for each category (3% and 6% for KidsCrime and adult crime, respectively).

Who Victimized Whom?

In the crime stories the most sympathetic actor in terms of public sentiment was the victim. It was easy and effective to make that person (it was most often an individual as stated earlier) the focal point of the empathy of the audience. So, an obvious question was who victimized whom in the vignettes that were broadcast as crime stories. Were there any differences between KidsCrime and adult crime stories? I looked at several factors: **(1)** the age of the suspect and the victim, the most important feature for this analysis; **(2)** the relationship between the suspect and the victim; **(3)** the gender of the suspect and victim.

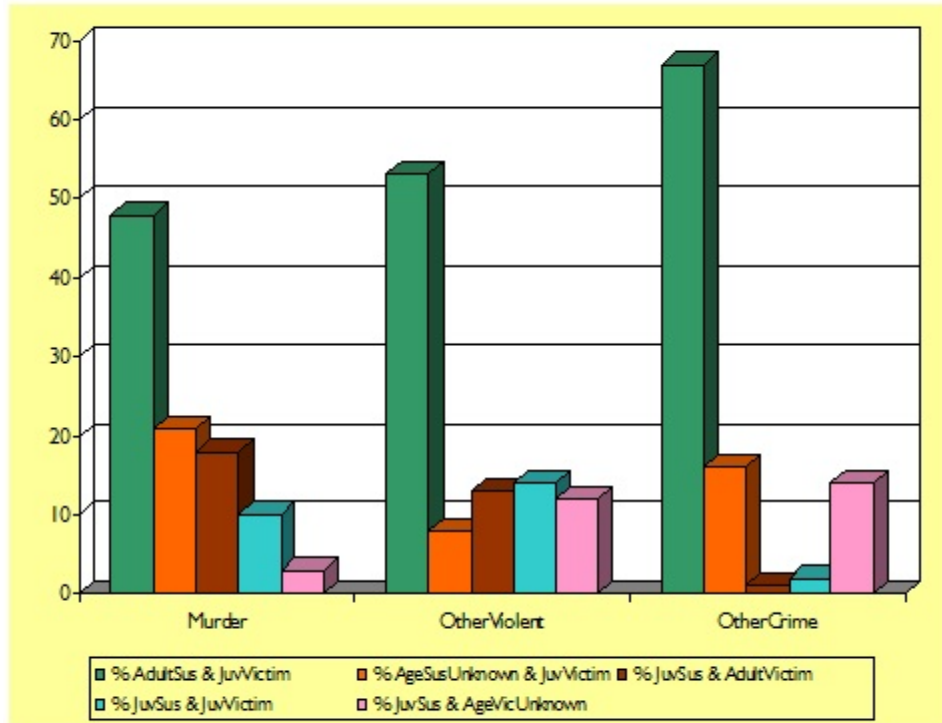
Age & Victimization: The fundamental relationship between the suspects and victims that I examined focused on was age. I defined two age categories, adult (persons 18 years of age and older), and juvenile (persons 17 years of age and younger). Age was determined from the narrative in the story (the reporter stated the age of the suspect and/or victim) or from the video that was shown on the screen. Because age can be difficult to determine from the video alone, we used the widest possible categories, adult and juvenile. This distinction seemed to be very accurate because the stations were cognizant of the need to protect the identity of juveniles. Therefore, they were quick to make the adult/juvenile differentiation because they treated juveniles differently regarding the information they could offer in the story. When neither the narrative or the video contained sufficient information to determine the age of the suspect or victim, it was coded as not reported or not known.

In order to examine the reporting of who victimized whom with respect to age, I looked at victimization patterns across the three categories of offenses that dominated the newscasts; murder, other violent crime and other crime. However, by definition, the adult crime stories were those that represented adults as both suspects *and* victims. Therefore, there were no age differences along the adult/juvenile dimension in those stories. As a result, we examined this factor for the KidsCrime stories only.

Adult/juvenile victimization scenarios: Given this age demarcation, there were five possible combinations of adult and juvenile victimization scenarios (understanding that these could include individual or multiple suspects and/or victims): **1.** Adult suspect *and* juvenile victim; **2.** Juvenile suspect *and* adult victim; **3.** Juvenile suspect *and* juvenile victim; **4.** Juvenile suspect *and* age of victim not known or reported; **5.** Age suspect not known or reported *and* juvenile victim

Based on that analysis, I found that juveniles were the VICTIMS of adults in the vast majority of KidsCrime stories, regardless of offense (Figure 4). The differences in the victimization patterns across the offense categories were statistically significant (Chi-square=62.070, $p < .01$). Almost one-half (48%) of the *murder* stories, over one-half (52%) of the *other violent crime* stories and two-thirds (67%) of the *other offenses* stories involved juvenile victims rather than juvenile suspects. Consequently, for the stations, KidsCrime stories made the broadcast because kids *were* the victims and *not* the perpetrators of crime. That is consistent with the official portrait of crime in which teenagers (12-19 years) were twice as likely to be victimized by violent crime than any other age group (see Wordes and Nunez, 2002) .

Figure 4: Distribution of the age relationship between the victim and suspect in KidsCrime stories by offense category across the combined Dominant Market Areas



*KidsCrime=story in which suspect and/or victim was under 18 years of age.

The differences in the age relationship of suspects and victims across the offense categories are significant at $p < .01$.

That finding seems counter to our perception of the presentation of juvenile crime. National stories of juvenile perpetrators like the shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado in April 1999 make it seem that television news most often covers juveniles as crime suspects. In fact, the opposite is true for local crime news stories.

The coverage of KidsCrime regarding suspects and victims was also interesting when we looked at juvenile suspects. Stories in which a juvenile suspect victimized an adult were most often murder stories (18%). There were very few stories (1%) broadcast with this suspect/victim profile that involved non-violent (other) offenses.

This presentation of crime news in which juveniles were victims more often than adults was consistent with the victimization information that I offered earlier in this paper. Given that fact, the focus by newscasts on juveniles as victims of crime reflected the portrait of crime drawn from official information.

However, there was another reason why juvenile victims made very good television—their presumed vulnerability. That attribute made stories in which adults victimized juveniles a perfect vehicle for the delivery of dramatic and personalized news episodes that are the staple of local television newscasts (see Klite, et al., 1997).

Strangers: There was a statistically significant difference (Chi-square=162.503, $p < .01$) in the relationship between the victim and the suspect for KidsCrime and adult crime stories. In the adult crime stories in which the identity of the suspect and the victim was reported, the plurality (26%) were strangers. That was in marked contrast to KidsCrime stories in which fewer than one-tenth (9%) of the stories reported that the relationship between the suspect and the victim was a stranger. Further, in the KidsCrime stories the significant plurality (42%) indicated that the relationship between the suspect and the victim was that of family member

Table 6: Distribution of the relationship between victim and suspect across KidsCrime and Adult Crime stories

	KidsCrime*	AdultCrime
<i>Relationship</i>	<i>% of stories</i>	<i>% of stories</i>
Family other than spouse	42	9
Friend/Acquaintance	32	20
Suspect in position of authority	14	21
Stranger	9	26
Co-worker	2	3
Boyfriend/Girlfriend	1	21
Total	100	100

*KidsCrime=story in which suspect and/or victim was under 18 years of age.
The differences between KidsCrime and adult crime stories are significant at $p < .01$.

(other than spouse). That compared to just nine percent of adult crime stories with victims and suspect being members of the same family. In addition, about one-third (32%) of KidsCrime stories indicated that the suspect and victim were friends or acquaintances (as stated by the reporter). That compared to one-fifth (20%) of such stories for adult crime. And, fourteen percent of the KidsCrime stories reported that the suspect was in a position of power (economic, organizational, status, etc.) over the victim. That was substantially higher for adult crime stories (21%). As we might expect, stories in which the suspect and the victim were spouses or girlfriend or boyfriends were mostly reported as adult crime stories (21%). Stories in which the relationship between the suspect and the victim was that of an equal co-worker only accounted for three percent of the adult crime stories and two percent in the KidsCrime category.

Gender & Victimization: The most basic pattern of victimization that I examined involved gender. What did the stories tell us about this crucial factor? We already learned that the significant majority of the stories in both categories focused on male suspects(see Table 5). Reports with female suspects comprised only a small proportion of the stories that were broadcast (see Table 5). However, within the categories of stories, there were differences regarding who victimized whom (Table 7). Stories with male suspects accounted for the overwhelming majority of adult crime items (74.5%) and a majority of KidsCrime (55.8%). For adult crime stories with male suspects, females were victimized more often than males (29.8% and 22%, respectively). In contrast, male suspects in KidsCrime stories most often victimized males (24.4%) and females (21.4%) in relatively even proportions. It is interesting to note that almost one-fifth (19%) of the adult crime stories did not specify the gender of the victims of crime committed by male suspects.

Stories with female suspects were over twice as prominent for KidsCrime (16.2%) than for adult crime (7.1%). Within the category, female suspects most often victimized male suspects for both types of stories (7.1% and 3.0% for KidsCrime and adult crime, respectively).

Table 7: Distribution of Gender and Victimization across KidsCrime and Adult Crime stories

	KidsCrime*	AdultCrime
	% of stories	% of stories
Male suspect and...		
Male victim	24.4	22.0
Female victim	21.4	29.8
Mixed male/female victims	2.9	3.6
Victim gender not reported/known	7.1	19.1
Total, Male suspects	55.8	74.5
Female suspect and...		
Male victim	7.1	3.0
Female victim	4.6	2.5
Mixed male/female victims	0.8	0.1
Victim gender not reported/known	3.7	1.5
Total, Female suspects	16.2	7.1
Mixed Male/Female suspects and...		
Male victim	6.2	0.5
Female victim	2.5	0.9
Mixed male/female victims	0.6	0.1
Victim gender not reported/known	1.7	0.5
Total Mixed Male/Female suspects	11.0	2.0
Suspect Gender Not Reported/Known and...		
Male victim	4.6	8.2
Female victim	8.9	3.6
Mixed male/female victims	0.8	0.4
Victim gender not reported/known	2.7	4.2
Total, Suspect Gender not reported/known	17.0	16.4
Total Crime Stories** (n)	100 (482)	100 (803)

*KidsCrime=story in which suspect and/or victim was under 18 years of age.

**Total Crime Stories: This table represents the crime stories in which a suspect and/or victim was identified. By definition, it does not include the stories that fell into the criminal justice policy category.

In short, the gender victimization pattern that was selected by the newscasts was clear. Although male suspects accounted for the significant majority in both types of stories (see Table 7), female victimization was a prominent feature for both KidsCrime and adult crime stories.

Conclusion

There were significant differences in how local television news reported adult and KidsCrime. First, juveniles were part of the crime news broadcast most often because they were the victim of a crime rather than the perpetrator. Further, they were most often the victim of an adult. Second, over half of the stories that reported KidsCrime were homicides.

Juveniles were part of the crime news broadcast most often because they were the victim of a crime rather than the perpetrator. Further, they were most often the victim of an adult.

That was almost twice the proportion of stories that reported adult crime. And, that proportion of KidsCrime homicide stories in the newscasts was 500 times higher than the proportion of homicide arrests for juveniles or adults in

official statistics. Third, although males were the suspects in the majority of both categories, they were significantly more prominent in the adult crime items. Fourth, females were the victims in the plurality of adult crime stories. Males were the most prominent victims in the KidsCrime stories. Fifth, the relationship between the suspects and the victims was vastly different for the two types of stories. In the KidsCrime category, the victim and the suspect knew each other either as a family member or friend in three-quarters of the stories. Strangers comprised only about ten percent of those relationships. However, stranger was the plurality of suspect/victim relationships for the adult crime stories.

The differences between KidsCrime and adult crime stories were not the only dissimilarities that I found. Crime reporting on local television newscasts was both consistent and inconsistent with the portrait of crime drawn from official statistics (as other researchers have pointed out). Of course, there has always been the position that official crime statistics are less than completely accurate due to the number of crimes that go unreported to police. However true that might be, murder

is one crime for which the official statistics are quite reliable. And, as I stated above, murder is the offense that dominates KidsCrime coverage wildly out of proportion to its occurrence in reality.

The coverage of both KidsCrime and adult crime also assumed characteristics that offered no information for citizens to consider in public policy terms. First, these stories consistently lead the newscasts and the vast majority appeared in the first segment of the broadcasts. By definition, newscasters placed what they considered their most important stories at the top of the broadcast. The placement of crime stories there sent the explicit message that crime (or victimization) should also be a prime consideration for the audience. But the stories were presented in a way that precluded any opportunity to see the stories in any way other than in individual terms. Invariably, the stories were personalized, dramatized and fragmented. Individual suspects and victims populated the stories. And their circumstances were communicated using the most dramatic pictures and words that were possible. Further, they were presented as episodes of human peril that were not connected to any other context. Given that approach to crime reporting, viewers were left with the notion that they were all equally vulnerable to that peril, regardless of their circumstances. Crime and victimization research shows that understanding to be demonstrably false.

Invariably, the stories were personalized, dramatized and fragmented.

News is a construction; a mediated reality. That reality is also a very selective one. It shows only a very small portion of the human condition. Often, the “news” reality is comprised of extraordinary events that, by virtue of their constant repetition on the newscasts, seem to become ordinary. The sensational becomes the mundane. That was so for the broadcasts that I examined. The KidsCrime stories perpetuated the notion that juveniles live in a violent and dangerous world. But that is only true for a very small percentage of juveniles and, for that matter, adults. However, our understandings of the juvenile circumstances regarding crime are overtaken by those sensational images. And we support public policies that are based on that understanding, even if we do not recognize the connection (Morris, 1997). In the end, using local television news as a primary source to understand crime and justice distorts the perspective and serves neither juveniles nor the public well.

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