

**MASS MEDIATED
REPRESENTATIONS OF CRIME
AND CRIMINALITY**

STUDIES IN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS

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STUDIES IN MEDIA AND
COMMUNICATIONS VOLUME 21

MASS MEDIATED REPRESENTATIONS OF CRIME AND CRIMINALITY

EDITED BY

JULIE B. WIEST

West Chester University of Pennsylvania, USA

Sponsored by the ASA Section on Communication,
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This volume follows *Theorizing Criminality and Policing in the Digital Media Age*, Volume 20 in the *Emerald Studies in Media and Communications* series. Both focus on the broad theme of media and crime, as both arose from the successful 2019 Media Sociology Preconference plenary panel that I organized and moderated, titled “Media Representations of Crime: Constructing Culture and Shaping Social Life.” Thank you to those panelists – two of whom authored or co-authored chapters in this volume – for sharing their insights and expertise: Valerie J. Callanan (Kent State University), Venessa Garcia (New Jersey City University), Lisa A. Kort-Butler (University of Nebraska – Lincoln), Nickie Phillips (St Francis College), and Alicia Simmons (Colgate University). Thanks also to the Media Sociology Preconference organizing committee, including chair Casey Brienza, Kenneth Kambara, Laura Robinson, and Ian Sheinheit. I also am grateful to the scholars who reviewed these chapters and whose comments and suggestions certainly enhanced the overall quality of the volume; to series editors Laura Robinson, Shelia Cotten, and Jeremy Schulz for their support and guidance; and to Emerald’s fantastic publishing team, especially Jen McCall, Dheebika Veerasamy, Carys Morley, and Harriet Notman.

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Julie B. Wiest, West Chester University of
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Stories about crime and criminality have long been the mainstay of news and entertainment media content, and the intersection of crime and media is a common topic in scholarly research. Moreover, substantial amounts of evidence indicate that these media depictions are highly influential, especially for consumers in economically advanced societies – who tend to have little personal experience with crime – as they form perceptions about criminality, crime rates, characteristics of criminals, and even their own likelihood of victimization. One reason relates to the sheer amount of time that media consumers spend engaged in various platforms. According to the [Nielsen Company \(2020\)](#), the average US adult spent nearly 11 hours per day consuming mass media during the first quarter of 2020, while the comparable global average is estimated to be about eight hours per day ([Zenith Media, 2019](#)). And there is longstanding and widespread agreement among social scientists and media scholars that media representations shape consumers' perceptions of social reality (e.g., [Fox & Philliber, 1978](#); [Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992](#); [Gerbner, 1998](#); [Hall, 1975](#); [Massoni, 2004](#); [McQuail, 1979](#); [Medrano Samaniego & Cortés Pascual, 2007](#); [Morgan & Shanahan, 2010](#); [O'Guinn & Shrum, 1997](#); [Smythe, 1954](#)).

Late media scholar George [Gerbner \(1998\)](#) and his research team launched what is known as the Cultural Indicators Project in the 1960s to study the long-term effects of media consumption on viewers' perceptions. Among the many findings of the decades-long project was an unexpected insight related to public perceptions of crime that the team dubbed the “mean world syndrome” ([Gerbner, 1998](#)). The finding called into question taken-for-granted ideas of the time that consuming large amounts of violent media content promotes antisocial behavior, especially among children (e.g., [Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, 1972](#)), suggesting that consuming large amounts of violent media content instead tends to increase public fear and anxiety related to crime. This concept is clearly illustrated by the fact that, despite steadily declining crime rates in the United States over recent decades, US adults tend to believe that the opposite is true and also indicate a disproportionate amount of worry related to crime and violence occurring in their own community (see Figs. I1 and I2).

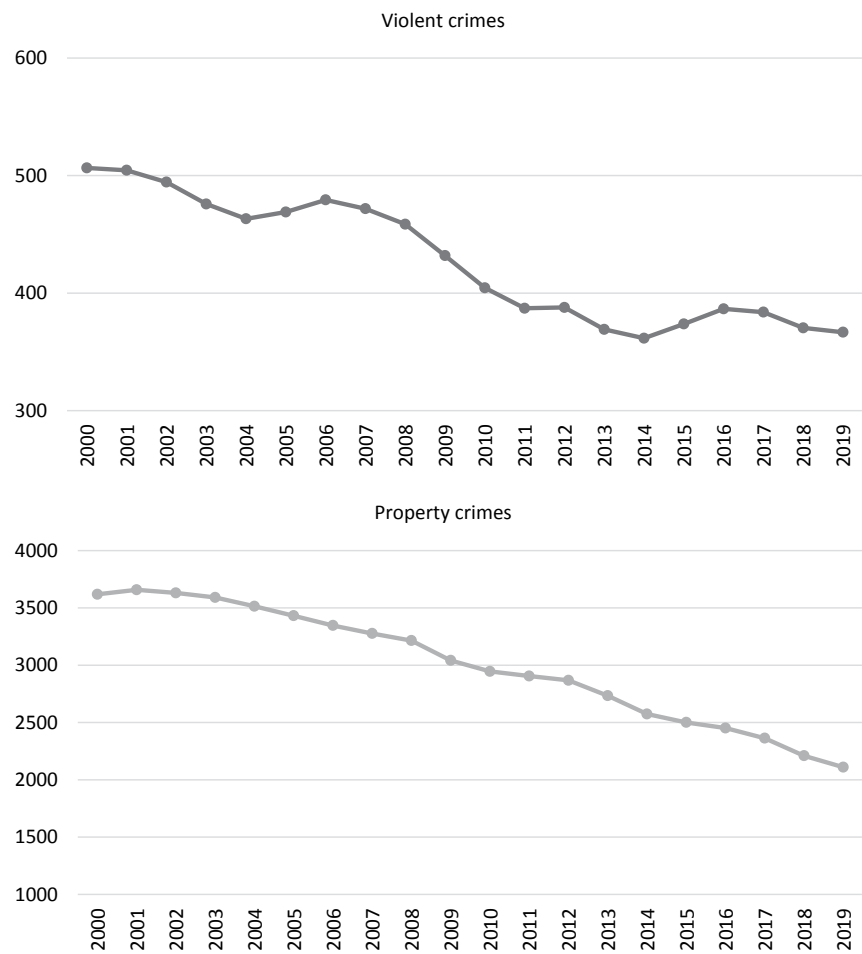


Fig. 1.1. US Crime Rates per 100,000 Population, 2000–2019. *Source:* Based on data from [US Department of Justice \(2020\)](#).
Notes: Population figures are from US Census Bureau estimates as of July 1 for each year, except for 2000 and 2010, which are decennial census counts; violent crimes include four offenses: murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault; murders that occurred as a result of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 are excluded; property crimes include three offenses: burglary, larceny-theft, and motor vehicle theft.

Ongoing examination of crime images within various types of mass media aids in understanding of the associated messages and meanings that are disseminated to consumers. Although assessing any subsequent influence on public perceptions remains difficult, comparing media representations of crime and criminality with known information about their reality can offer valuable insights. The studies in this volume will enhance the knowledge of junior and senior scholars, as well as graduate and advanced undergraduate students, in the fields of criminology, sociology, journalism, and communication/media studies, particularly because of the

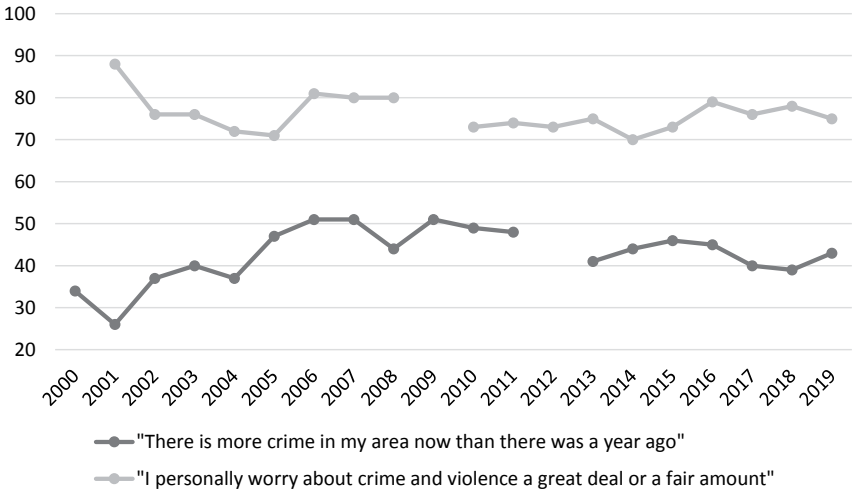


Fig. I.2. US Adults' Estimates and Worries Related to Crime, 2000–2019. *Source:* Based on data from Gallup (2020)

Notes: Data related to the question on amount of crime are missing for 2012; in other years, data are based on representative samples of US adults surveyed in early to mid-October of each year; other response options were “less” and “same amount.” Data related to the question on worrying about crime are missing for 2000 and 2009; in other years, data are based on representative samples of US adults surveyed in early to mid-March of each year; other response options were “only a little” and “not at all.”

inclusion of crime stories in a variety of formats and that represent media content from six nations spanning four continents.

The first four chapters focus on nonfiction media representations on platforms including contemporary and historical newspapers, television news, and video-on-demand (VOD) systems. In “Crime News in the Israeli Daily Press: A Comparison Between the Quality *Haaretz* and the Popular *Israel Hayom*,” Alina Korn examines media representations of crime in the Israeli press by comparing reports on offending patterns in two daily newspapers, one that is considered “elitist” (i.e., *Haaretz*) and the other “popular” (i.e., *Israel Hayom*). Next, “Crime in Television News: Do News Factors Predict the Mentioning of a Criminal’s Country of Origin?” by Janine Brill, Lars Guenther, Wibke Ehrhardt, and Georg Ruhrmann, is a novel study investigating the factors related to the inclusion of an accused criminal’s country of origin in related news reports, as well as the potential implications.

In “Demented Mother, Maniac with a Gun, Madman: Prejudicial Language Use in Historical Newspaper Coverage of Multiple-child Murders in New Zealand,” Francine Tyler analyzed 60 years of historical reporting on multiple-child murders in New Zealand to take a closer look at the longevity of “mad,” “bad,” and “sad” frames that have been more commonly found in contemporary studies of child murder. Then, Lorena R. Romero-Domínguez, in “Intersections between Journalistic Documentary and True Crime in the Context of VOD

Platforms: The *Alcàsser Murders* as a Spanish Case Study,” offers an examination of true crime productions and investigative documentaries on VOD platforms while distinguishing between the two genres and offering insights into their divergent aims, components, and outcomes.

The next four chapters examine representations in fictional media. In “Framing Gender and Race in Television Crime Dramas: An Examination of *Bones*,” Venessa Garcia uncovers unrealistic representations, as well as gendered and racialized images, within the popular television crime drama series *Bones*. Then, Jared S. Rosenberger, Valerie J. Callanan, and Darcy Sullivan, in their study, “Whose Stories? Victims and Offenders on Television’s *Law and Order*,” take on *Law and Order* to explore representations of crime victims and offenders on the long-running series that has likely shaped perceptions related to the US criminal justice system, victims of crime, and criminals for two decades. And Beatriz Elena Inzunza Acedo, in “The Narco as a Sui Generis Criminal Character and TV Genre,” compares representations of drug figures and drug trafficking within narcotelenovelas and news accounts while identifying intertextual references that are present in both fictional and journalistic reports.

Wrapping up the volume is “‘The Errors are Egregious’: Assessing the CSI Effect and Undergraduate Students’ Perceptions of Forensic Science through a Pre- and Post-test Investigation,” by Krystal Hans and Kylie Parrotta, which lends insight into the preconceptions of students who are new to forensic science, as well as their later self-assessments of acquired competencies. In doing so, the authors offer a test of the so-called “CSI effect” while also comparing the views of students in two different academic environments, namely those at an historically Black institution and others at a predominately White one.

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PART I

REPRESENTATIONS IN NONFICTION

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CHAPTER 1

CRIME NEWS IN THE ISRAELI DAILY PRESS: A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE QUALITY *HAARETZ* AND THE POPULAR *ISRAEL HAYOM*

Alina Korn

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study is concerned with media representation of crime in the Israeli press. It examines the pattern of offenses reported in two daily newspapers of seemingly different characteristics, the “elitist” Haaretz and the “popular” Israel Hayom.

Methodology/approach: Crime reports appeared in the news pages during November 2016 were content analyzed in both newspapers by using a coding scheme, which operationalized several variables relating to type of crime, characteristics of offenders and victims, and court proceedings.

Findings: Violent and sex offenses featured disproportionately in the news reports in both newspapers, while conventional property offenses were under-reported relative to their prevalence in official crime statistics. In terms of the characteristics of offenders and victims, the vast majority of offenders portrayed in crime stories were adult Jewish males. Women were more likely to appear as victims of crime rather than perpetrators, and more likely to appear as victims of sex offenses rather than other offenses.

Research limitations: This study was based on an analysis of crime stories which appeared in two newspapers during one-month period of time. Future research should extend the sample size and collect data from a longer period of time and from additional media outlets.

Originality/value: Media coverage of crime stories has not yet been researched in Israel. Beyond the interest in the Israeli case or the potential contribution to comparative global knowledge, the value of the study may lie in expanding the lens of scholarship of media's construction of crime.

Keywords: Crime construction; crime news; *Haaretz*; *Israel Hayom*; Israeli press; media coverage

Numerous studies have shown that crime reports are an important part of the content of all mass media (Chermak & Chapman, 2007; Garofalo, 1981; Greer & Reiner, 2012; McGregor, 2017; O'Hear, 2020; Sacco, 1995; Surette, 1998). Some researchers have used systematic sampling and measurement of the news space devoted to crime in order to describe the general patterns and changes in the amount and types of crimes reported. In some cases, this has included a comparison of different types of media, markets, or periods. Other studies have used official criminal statistics to compare crime representations with crime in "reality." The current study examines crime reporting in November 2016 in two major daily newspapers in Israel: the popular *Israel Hayom* and the elitist *Haaretz*. Despite the proliferation of studies on the presentation of crime stories in the media, the nexus of media and crime has not yet been researched in Israel. This pilot study is intended to compare the "tabloid" with the "quality" newspaper, and to examine the differences between the two newspapers in the scope of reports and in the types of offenses reported. Beyond the interest in the Israeli case, the current study aims to contribute to the body of research that explores the ways in which crime is featured within the news media, adding more generally to the theoretical and empirical discussions on the role of crime in the construction of the social world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media Construction of Crime

The news media play a powerful role in the social construction of crime. They provide an important forum, in which private troubles are selectively gathered up, invested with a broader meaning, and made available for public consumption (Sacco, 1995). According to Surette and Otto (2001), media attention provides the "heat energy" needed to raise behaviors to criminalization levels. The media are so crucial that behaviors cannot be criminalized at all without media attention (Surette & Otto, 2001).

Analyses of media content demonstrate that crime news follows different patterns to both the “reality” of crime and its representation in official crime statistics (Jewkes, 2011). Media professionals report on a selected portion of criminal incidents and turn them into stories. However, events are not simply reported on, since they are fundamentally transformed by the news-gathering process and framed in larger systems of meaning (Sacco, 1995). By framing events and by making certain aspects of stories more salient than others, media outlets construct reality (M. J. Carter, 2013). According to Entman (1993), frames are understood as those media images that focus on some aspects of reality, elevating the importance of that reality. Frames work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world (M. J. Carter, 2013).

In a process that is far from random or personal, editors and journalists select, produce, and present news according to a variety of professional criteria that are used as benchmarks to determine a story’s newsworthiness (Jewkes, 2011). Journalists rely on news perceptions to help them decide which stories to choose (Johnstone, Hawkins, & Michener, 1994). Moreover, because newspapers strive to increase their profits and their readership, selection decisions are influenced by a combination of market forces and social and cultural dynamics (Beckett & Sasson, 2004; Petersen, 2016).

Most people rely on the mass media as a primary source of information about crime and its control (Colburn & Melander, 2018), and much of what the general public believes to be true about the prevalence of crime and the operation of the criminal justice system is potentially collected from information presented through the mass media (Chermak & Chapman, 2007). Constructionist scholars have clearly demonstrated that some criminal events are more newsworthy than others (Lin & Phillips, 2014). Violent crime is over-represented in the news; the characteristics of criminals and victims in the news do not represent their demographic distribution in criminal statistics; and in respect to many “crime waves” reported in the media, the perception that crime is on the rise is not consistent with a real rise in crime (Chermak & Chapman, 2007; Fishman, 1978; Sacco, 1995).

These constructions have far-reaching implications regarding the public perception of the crime problem and how to deal with it. Distorted public perceptions of crime and criminal-justice realities and pervasive coverage of unusual violent or outrageous crimes can give rise to excessive fear and lead to the adoption or maintenance of harshly punitive policies (Chermak & Chapman, 2007; O’Hear, 2020).

Most of the research on the Israeli media published in scholarly journals focuses on the coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict especially during periods of crisis such as the Gaza war and the Palestinian uprisings in the Occupied Territories. Studies have explored various aspects of the coverage of the political violence of Israeli and Palestinians, analyzing biases in the framing of the conflict, the reporting on casualties or the portrayal of male and female terrorists (Dor, 2003; Korn, 2005; Lavie-Dinur, Yarchi, & Karniel, 2019; Liebes & Kampf, 2009; Rinnawi, 2007; Viser, 2003; Wolfsfeld, Frosh, & Awabdy, 2008). Some researchers compared different news outlets within Israeli media (Arqoub & Ozad, 2019;

Dor, 2003; Korn, 2004; Lavie-Dinur et al., 2019; Liebes & Kampf, 2009; Rinnawi, 2007; Sela-Shayovitz, 2007; Tenenboim-Weinblatt, Hanitzsch, & Nagar, 2016), while others compared the coverage in the Israeli media with newspapers and news networks in the United States, Canada and Europe or with the Palestinian media (Karniel, Lavie-Dinur, & Samuel-Azran, 2017; Lowenstein-Barkai, 2018; Samuel-Azran, Lavie-Dinur, & Karniel, 2015; Shinar, 2009; Viser, 2003; Wolfsfeld et al., 2008).

The representation of violence and “conventional” crime in the Israeli media has not been investigated at all. The present study seeks to fill the gap in this area and examine how a quality newspaper and a popular newspaper cover “common” crime and what are the journalistic considerations that guide decision-making regarding crime news.

Beyond the interest in the Israeli case or the potential contribution to comparative global knowledge, the study seeks to contribute to the scholarship on the construction of crime news. The social construction of the “reality” of crime is important, because the media play an important role in shaping the public’s perceptions about prevalence of crime and the nature of offenders and victims. Crime stories selected for publication may also provide support for stereotypical images of innocence and guilt regarding to minorities (Colburn & Melander, 2018) and may fuel negative attitudes and encourage harmful images and practices regarding disadvantaged and minority groups (O’Hear, 2020).

An examination of the Israeli case in this context might be interesting in light of the problematic status of the Arab minority in Israel, which suffers from exclusion and marginalization in many respects (Lustick, 1980; Rouhana, 1997; Yiftachel, 2006). The present study could contribute to the debate in the research literature regarding ethnic and racial representation in crime stories, reflecting on whether members of minority groups are over-represented as perpetrators and under-represented as victims of violent crime. These issues will be discussed in more detail below. The next section will present an overview of the studies analyzing the factors that explain the prominence of crime stories in the news.

Amount of Crime News

News reports on crime figure prominently in all types of media, but there are significant differences between print and broadcast media, and between elite and popular media. Estimates of the scope of crime news vary widely, depending on methodology and definitions of “crime” used, narrow or broad. Some researchers have adopted a broad definition of deviance, referring to a variety of behaviors that deviate from the norm, while others have focused on the narrower sense of violations of criminal law. Some of the studies consider political violence and acts of terrorism in various parts of the world as crime news, while others perceive such reports as “foreign” or “international” news; some examine only reports on specific criminal incidents, while others include editorials, features, opinion columns, and reports and articles on the state of crime and the criminal justice system in general (Allan, Kelly, & Stephenson, 2018; Baranauskas, 2020;

Bjornstrom, Kaufman, Peterson, & Slater, 2010; Chermak & Chapman, 2007; Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; Deckert, 2019; Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987; Garofalo, 1981; Greer & Reiner, 2012; Lin & Phillips, 2014; McGregor, 2017; O'Hear, 2020; Petersen, 2016; Sacco, 1995; Slakoff & Brennan, 2019).

Because of the use of different definitions, estimates of the proportion devoted to crime coverage out of the total news range from 5 to 25 percent (Sacco, 1995, p. 142). A review of 36 US content-analysis studies published between 1960 and 1988 and 20 studies from 14 different countries between 1965 and 1987 indicated a significant variation in the percentages of the total news space devoted to crime, ranging from a low rate of 1.6 percent to a high rate of 33.5 percent (Marsh, 1991). A more recent study designed to examine the percentage of crime news in New Zealand's largest daily newspaper, the *New Zealand Herald* used a broad definition of crime news (McGregor, 2017). Crime news included news about crime incidents, specific police operations and police activities, legislative activities about crime and policing, and court reporting. The research covering 30 days in March 2016 recorded that 31 percent of the total hard news space measured in square centimeters was related to crime (McGregor, 2017, p. 82).

Early studies in the United States and the United Kingdom tended to obtain low estimates of the amount of crime in the news. It was found that crime news accounted for about four to five percent of the total news space (Garofalo, 1981; Roshier, 1973; Swanson, 1955). Higher proportions of crime news were reported by Graber (1980). In Graber's (1980) study, data for 1976 were gathered from three national television networks, two local news shows on two television stations, and three daily newspapers in Chicago. Graber (1980) used a broad definition of crime news. She found that topics related to crime and justice accounted for 22–28 percent of the topics mentioned in the three newspapers, 20 percent of the topics mentioned on each of the local television news shows, and 12–13 percent of the topics on network television news.

A long-term historical study aiming to map the changes in media representations of crime in Britain in the half-century after the Second World War examined a random sample of two daily newspapers for each year between 1945 and 1991 (Reiner, Livingstone, & Allen, 2003). Reiner et al. (2003) found a generally upward trend in the proportion of crime news in both newspapers, from less than 10 percent in the 1940s to more than 20 percent in the 1990s. For most of the period, the percentage of crime stories was higher in the *Mirror* than in *The Times*, but since the 1990s this gap has been closed.

An increase in the amount of crime news over the decades was also found in New Zealand. McGregor's (2017) study mentioned above used the same methodology as in her two previous studies to measure the percentage of crime news in the *New Zealand Herald* over a monthly print cycle. In 1992, crime news amounted to 21 percent of total hard news reported in the month of May (McGregor, 1993). The same study repeated in 2001 showed an increase of crime news as a percentage of hard news to 24 percent, and the figures for March 2016 showed a further increase to 31 percent of total hard news reported in the *New Zealand Herald* (McGregor, 2017).

The Pattern of Crime News

Many studies point to similar patterns of news reporting on crime. The most striking finding in all studies is that interpersonal crimes – especially those involving violence – are consistently over-represented, while routine property crimes are under-reported relative to their incidence in official criminal statistics (Davis, 1952; Ditton & Duffy, 1983; Graber, 1980; Marsh, 1991; Reiner et al., 2003; Rhineberger-Dunn, 2011; Roshier, 1973; Smith, 1984; Williams & Dickinson, 1993). Ditton and Duffy (1983) found that crimes involving violence and crimes involving sex together constituted 2.4 percent of the crimes documented by the police, yet they constituted 45.8 percent of crime news in the six Scottish newspapers examined.

Reiner et al. (2003) found that about two-thirds of crime reports focused on violent or sex offenses, although these account for less than 10 percent of crimes recorded by the police. The emphasis on violent crime was high in the “quality” newspaper *The Times* as well as in the “popular” *Mirror*, while the proportion of sex offenses reported was generally lower in *The Times*. Homicide was the most frequent crime in news reports in both papers throughout the period, accounting for about one-third of all crime reports. In contrast to homicide and other violent crimes that featured prominently throughout the period, there has been a decline in the proportion of reports about property offenses, which, as noted, constitute the bulk of offenses according to criminal surveys and statistics (Reiner et al., 2003).

Similar observations emerge from more recent studies. O’Hear (2020) analyzed crime stories drawn from two news sources in Milwaukee (Wisconsin) over a period of one year between 2017 and 2018: the daily *Journal Sentinel* and the website of WTMJ, a leading Milwaukee news/talk radio station. O’Hear (2020) found that both outlets disproportionately covered violent crime, and, within the violent-crime category, disproportionately covered homicides. Violent offenses accounted for 80 percent of the coverage in the *Journal Sentinel*, with homicides accounting for 61 percent. Similarly, violent offenses accounted for 62 percent of the WTMJ coverage, with homicides accounting for 27 percent. This depiction did not correspond to the realities of crime in the Milwaukee area as reflected in police data. Homicides clearly predominated the crime coverage of both outlets, though constituting a very small proportion of the actual crime. In contrast, theft and burglary accounted for 62 percent of the crime in Milwaukee County, whereas the two crimes accounted for only three percent of the *Journal Sentinel* stories and 22 percent of the WTMJ.com stories (O’Hear, 2020).

Homicide, in general, is the most prominent crime in news reports, but not all cases are equally newsworthy. A study of homicide coverage in *Los Angeles Times* between 1990 and 1994 found greater coverage of homicides with female, child, or elderly victims; those in which the suspect was a stranger to the victim; and those in wealthier neighborhoods. On the other hand, homicides whose victims were Black or Hispanic, or victims with less than a high-school education, those committed with non-firearm weapons, and those in which the suspect was an intimate of the victim, received less attention and coverage (Sorenson, Peterson Manz, & Berk, 1998).