



JOHN JAY COLLEGE  
THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK  
OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE

THE CENTER ON MEDIA, CRIME AND JUSTICE

## **Covering Crime**

### **US NEWS MEDIA CRIME and JUSTICE COVERAGE: 2009**

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prepared by  
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Fifteen years after reported crime in the United States reached a modern day peak, many news reporters, along with their sources, are groping to understand the decline. With a few notable exceptions, media coverage of the trends in 2009 primarily was a story of crime dropping in many big cities. Almost daily, a journalist or police chief somewhere wondered publicly whether a city's crime count could go any lower, particularly during an economic recession. Below is a summary and analysis of how American media outlets covered these and other crime issues over the past year

### **Introduction**

It's fair to question how strongly the news coverage of crime levels should be linked to the economy. It's also an open question how much the level of crime in a locality varies with the quality and tactics of law enforcement or other aspects of criminal justice system operations, as opposed to factors unrelated to government, such as unemployment rolls or the number of young people in the population.

The fact that crime levels have decreased after reaching an historic high in the early 1990s poses some fundamental questions for journalists and policymakers alike:

*(1) Should a decline in crime mean less news coverage of the problem?*

*(2) Even if crime is down, don't problems in the criminal justice system deserve ongoing attention? (These include the costs of operating police, courts, and prisons, the system's responsiveness to citizen concerns, the fairness and speed in handling cases, and the quality of justice personnel and the services they offer.)*

*(3) Finally, most of the two million-plus people now behind bars eventually will be released. If that happens without adequate preparation, especially when states are coping with budget crunches, would that help set off a crime spike?*

A question encompassing many of these issues is whether the justice system is operating under policies that are based on scientific evidence or, as police officer-turned criminologist Cynthia Lum of George Mason University said recently at a meeting of criminal-justice organization leaders in Washington, DC, on "whims, hunches, feelings, guesses, and hopes?"

This report will assess news media coverage of such concerns, based partly on a conference call conducted by **Criminal Justice Journalists** on January 21, 2010 with several experts: **Tom Rosenstiel** of the Project for Excellence in Journalism; **James Alan Fox** of Northeastern University; **Forrest Carr**, news director of KGUN9-TV in Tucson, AZ; and **Ellen Podgor** of Stetson University School of Law, who runs White Collar Crime Prof Blog at: [http://lawprofessors.typepad.com/whitecollarcrime\\_blog/](http://lawprofessors.typepad.com/whitecollarcrime_blog/)

## **Covering Crime Rates**

Let's first consider basic crime levels. The rise or fall of any important societal measurement, whether it's crime, the Dow Jones Industrial average, or health insurance costs, is worthy of coverage by the media.

How should journalists treat federal surveys that have shown crime reports declining more or less consistently between 1994 and 2009? The overall trend is found both in the FBI compilation of reports from law enforcement agencies and the National Crime Victimization Survey, which includes estimates of the many crimes not reported to law enforcement.

The most reliable figure is homicides, with more than 16,000 in 2008, compared with more than 24,000 in 1993. While the decline is notable and welcome, the 2008 toll still is worth reporting and represents a rate far above that of many nations to which the U.S.

likes to compare itself. While much attention deservedly has been paid to the more than 3,000 deaths in this country at the hands of terrorists on Sept. 11, 2001, there have been well over 100,000 homicides in the eight-plus years since the terror attack.

Consider robberies, something of a bellwether crime because they can happen to just about anyone. More than 441,000 were reported in 2008, and more than 550,000 are estimated in the victimization survey. While the number is considerably lower than in previous years, the total still is worrisome.

Many stories about crime rates are not very useful to the average person because they may not make clear that crimes are unevenly distributed. Some parts of a city may be under siege from criminals while others routinely experience lower crime rates.

One of many news outlets that does try to pay attention to this level of detail is the *Orlando Sentinel*. In an analysis last year, the newspaper said that the 40,000 residents of its local area called Pine Hills “live with a murder rate that rivals Newark, N.J., and trumps Washington, D.C. An area west of Orlando’s central business district has more than double Detroit’s murder rate. In a clutch of apartment complexes, the concentration of violence is worse.”

In a series described by Criminal Justice Journalists, in a case study for presentation at the 2010 H.F. Guggenheim Conference on Crime in America, the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* gathered detailed crime data for the city and told readers about 10-year trends in the most violent neighborhoods. This was an extraordinary and welcome effort by a newspaper in a region that has long been identified as one of the nation’s higher-crime areas. **[Ed note: the series and case study will be available online at [The Crime Report.org](http://TheCrimeReport.org)]**

Beyond the basic levels of crime, should Americans feel safe because crime totals are down? Given that criminologists themselves haven’t documented the trend thoroughly, it’s understandable that the news media haven’t figured it out, either.

Much space in news columns and Web sites, and in broadcast news reports, has been devoted to listing potential causes of crime rate changes. At first there was much speculation that the nation’s worsening economic problems in 2008 would contribute to crime increases last year, and there may be some places where that happened. By now, most experts have agreed that the economy has not fueled a big increase in street crime, or that the bad effects of the economy have been overcome by better law enforcement.

Some argue that most economic hardship simply doesn’t result in lawbreaking, no matter what the anecdotal evidence may show. Several murder-suicide cases were attributed to the economic collapse of a family’s breadwinner, but there was no indication of a widespread trend.

Most news stories that attempt to analyze crime trends simply quote a police chief or some of the chief's colleagues as claiming part or full credit. A few editorial pages, such as the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* and the *Washington Post*, decided that law enforcement indeed deserved most of the credit. The Minneapolis newspaper, saying that criminology rivals economics as a so-called dismal science, cited "smarter, more proactive police tactics," such as officers' stopping suspects in minor crimes and aggressively seizing illegal guns.

What was not clear was the role other factors like demography—the relative balance in the population shifting to Baby Boomers of retirement age—and stabilizing drug use, particularly in the cocaine markets, may have played in the decline.

### Consider the Source

A major shortcoming in much media coverage of crime is considering only the viewpoint of law enforcement when analyzing it. A typical story will report that crime totals have dropped, and then quote the police chief as taking credit, citing stronger or different law enforcement tactics. While there may be an element of truth in such assertions, rarely are they questioned. When crime goes up, the chief almost always blames forces outside of law enforcement.

Journalists should consult other sources, including sociologists/criminologists, public health experts, probation/parole officials, and community leaders to develop a more complete picture of crime's ups and downs. Of course, in places where crime rates are up, police officials almost never take the blame, instead pointing to other factors.

A few journalism outlets were notable for questioning law enforcement. The *Detroit News*, for example, challenged the city, reporting last spring that the Detroit Police Department is systematically undercounting homicides, leading to a falsely low murder rate in a city that regularly ranks among the nation's deadliest. The newspaper said police incorrectly reclassified 22 of its 368 slayings in 2008 as "justifiable" and did not report them as homicides to the FBI as required by federal guidelines. There were at least 59 such omissions over the past five years, according to incomplete records obtained from the police department through the Freedom of Information Act.

There is no doubt what whatever the numbers of reported crimes, much crime remains unreported. Some of that results from police department policies. *The Dallas Morning News* produced several notable reports on how police in that city computed crime data. One of the newspaper's stories began this way:

"One man beat a stranger with a pipe. Another battered a disabled person with a walking cane. Another smashed a large glass mug on his brother's face. Though none of the victims was seriously injured, state and federal authorities say each of the attacks was an

aggravated assault. Dallas police disagree. Police classified the attacks as lesser offenses when reporting them to the authorities who collect crime statistics from cities across the nation. As a result, the offenses were not factored into Dallas' reported violent crime rate." "It's wrong," said Sam Walker, a police accountability expert at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. "It's creating an artificial image [] and it looks like they are clearly violating the FBI's own guidelines."

We suspect that kind of thing is happening in many cities but rarely are the news media taking the trouble to find out.

### **Following the Money**

Crime may be up or down depending on the city, but dealing with crime and justice remained a costly element of government. In fiscal year 2006, a Justice Department compilation showed that federal, state, and local governments spent an estimated \$214 billion for police protection, corrections, and judicial and legal activities, a 5.1 percent increase over the previous year. This amounted to more than \$700 per citizen annually, and was consuming more than 7 percent of state and local budgets.

Were Americans getting their money's worth? To the extent that police protection was helping keep crime down, hiring police officers was worthwhile, but few journalists explored the lack of efficiency in maintaining more than 17,000 law enforcement agencies around the nation.

Nearly \$70 billion of the national spending total on criminal justice was devoted not to police officers but to the sprawling corrections system, which continued to grow despite the crime decline. Why the growth? That's another subject that has escaped most serious journalistic attention.

Some of it is due to longer prison sentences that started via legislation and judicial action in the 1980s and 1990s. The incarceration of career criminals contributed to the crime decline. but what about all of the convicts who might not have committed crime if they were not in custody?

As states and localities face major fiscal challenges, news media in some places have taken a look at how the money is spent. *The Detroit News*, for example, gave extensive coverage to Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm's decision to close eight prisons in order to save \$118 million.

## Notable Stories

As in any year, several individual crime stories consumed more than their share of air time and print space. The death of pop star **Michael Jackson** resulted in many stories speculating about criminal charges against one or more physicians for causing his death by over-prescription of drugs. Despite those stories and several other celebrities whose deaths were linked to drugs, there was relatively little coverage of the overall prescription drug problem, which accounted for a high percentage of youthful drug abuse.

Another case that consumed media attention was the discovery in California of **Jaycee Dugard**, who had been kidnapped at age 11 but not found until 18 years later despite the fact that her captor had been on parole supervision during most of that period. Journalists were understandably interested in feature stories (mostly speculation) about Dugard's mental state, but there was relatively little reporting on what the case said about the quality of parole work in California.

Near year's end, the dramatic murders of four police officers in a Seattle suburb prompted coverage of why assailant **Maurice Clemmons** had been released from prison in 2000 after serving 11 years of a 95-year term in Arkansas. Because Gov. Mike Huckabee, a 2008 presidential candidate, had commuted a prison sentence that made the release possible, much media coverage focused on the political angle of how the case might affect Huckabee's political future.

*In both the Dugard and Clemmons cases and similar ones in various localities, it would be fruitful for the news media to examine sentencing and parole practices generally.*

This was the conclusion of former U.S. Pardon Attorney Margaret Colgate Love, who wrote on *The Crime Report* on Dec. 24, 2009:

“Any system involving the exercise of discretion will occasionally produce a decision that can later be criticized as unwise or even irresponsible. Why not report on the overall operation of the system, rather than leap to conclusions based on the one case that went horribly wrong?”

*For her full essay, please see:*

<http://thecrimereport.org/2009/12/24/crime-politics-and-the-24-hour-news-cycle>

Both of those cases clearly were extreme, but the public might well draw the conclusion that parole supervision is typically sloppy and career criminals are too often released to commit new offenses. Without better journalism on such issues, politicians may be inclined to overreact when one parolee goes terribly wrong.

The Clemmons case also raised the perennial question of why criminal justice records were not shared more widely among states. Some experts speculated that Clemmons likely would not have been freed on bail shortly before the police shootings if courts in Washington State had been fully aware of his criminal history. CNN went to the trouble of interviewing a judge who had been involved in one of Clemmons' releases to provide an explanation of how judges make such decisions.

## **White-Collar Wrongdoing, Terrorism**

Several other criminal justice issues were deserving of more extensive coverage. One of them was white collar crime, which unlike street crime may be increasing. The data are not clear. The Justice Department asserted that it was stepping up enforcement in areas like mortgage fraud and health care fraud, the transition in the main Justice Department and FBI to an emphasis on terrorism after Sept. 11, 2001 put the federal government at a disadvantage in this area. Sadly, one of the few news organizations to follow this issue closely, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, moved to online-only coverage and did less original reporting during the year.

Terrorism in the U.S. generally was not a subject of major media coverage until the Christmas Day incident in which a Nigerian was nearly able to set off an explosion aboard an airliner bound for Detroit. News reports questioned why the man was able to board the plane despite various warning signals, but there had been little chance by the time of this report for reporters to do extensive digging into failures in the database system designed to thwart such attacks.

## **Conclusions**

Looking at criminal justice journalism overall in 2009, it was heartening that several dozen high-quality entries published last year were submitted to the annual John Jay College Excellence in Criminal Justice Reporting competition, indicating that enterprise reporting in our field across the United States was alive and well. To offer a few examples, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* did a series on lax punishments in driving-while-intoxicated cases and the Riverside, California, *Press-Enterprise* took a close look at misleading police data on "clearances" of homicides.

Courts as institutions generally receive less sustained reporting than do law enforcement agencies. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* produced an excellent series on failures of local courts to handle criminal cases quickly fairly, prompting a state Supreme Court investigation that promised reform.

Corrections practices also got inconsistent news coverage. The *Washington Post* published a long front-page feature headlined, "States Seek Less Costly Substitutes For Prison," and some other newspapers and the Associated Press did their own versions.

Overall, the subject generally got coverage only in the context of a budget crisis. An exception occurred in Illinois, where the Associated Press covered flaws in Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn's plan to release many inmates before their terms normally would have expired.

At the same time, it appeared that collectively, there was less reporting occurring on a local level. Major newspapers like the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Miami Herald*—all of whom have been noteworthy in the past for their in-depth reporting on the justice system—produced fewer such stories in 2009. This in part may be attributable to the fact that these papers have gone through considerable downsizing as a result of news staff layoffs and buyouts.

To the extent that enterprise reporting was declining on a local level, was there any prospect that it would be replaced by other entities?

That was an open question at year's end. In several cities, notably Minneapolis, St. Louis, and San Diego, local Web sites have been created that are staffed at least in part by experienced journalists. None of them so far has excelled in criminal justice reporting, however, and media expert **Tom Rosenstiel** observed in our roundtable discussion that the new sites lacked capacity compared with many established newspapers. Rosenstiel warned that special interest groups would replace traditional news reporting in some instances, a prospect that could produce reporting by ideologically-driven advocates.

Some national sites that specialize in investigative reporting have been launched, but again, criminal justice has not been a particular focus. One site, ProPublica, has produced for example stories on such subjects as the DNA testing backlog and abuse by New Orleans police officers after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, but the stories have so far not had much national impact.

Crime and justice is destined to be a staple of news reporting in the U.S., but it was not clear at year-end 2009 who, if anyone, would continue to provide the sustained level of original reporting on the subject comparable to what occurred during the rise in crime rates in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**ED NOTE: please check The Crime Report web site: [www.thecrimereport.org](http://www.thecrimereport.org) for a summary of the criminal justice reporting round-table.**

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