



CRIMINAL JUSTICE NEWS COVERAGE IN 2014

Ferguson & Aftermath Take Center Stage

HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Initial media coverage of police-community tensions was ‘one-sided.’**
- ***Rolling Stone’s* misreporting on U of Virginia case overshadowed campus sex assault issue.**
- **More original reporting needed on mental health issues in justice system.**
- ***Washington Post* praised for coverage of Secret Service scandals.**
- ***The Marshall Project* launches; but *Homicide Watch DC* closes down.**

By Ted Gest

Criminal Justice Journalists

At first, it seemed to be just an isolated, unfortunate small-town incident on a hot weekend day in August. The Associated Press reported on August 9 that, “A large crowd of angry residents confronted police Saturday afternoon, yelling such things as ‘kill the police’ after an officer fatally shot a male in a St. Louis-area neighborhood.”

It didn’t take long for the names “Ferguson,” “Michael Brown,” and “Darren Wilson” to be entwined in the biggest criminal justice news story of 2014. The killing of the unarmed, 18-year-old Brown by Wilson in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson produced national reverberations for policing, race and other aspects of the criminal justice in the United States that would last well beyond 2014.

Coverage of U.S. policing in the aftermath of Ferguson and other racially tinged incidents dominated the crime and justice news in the last half of the year. In this annual report, we'll review that coverage and report on news media treatment of other major issues, including capital punishment, rape, and asset forfeiture.

This report was based in part on a conference call conducted by **Criminal Justice Journalists** on January 23, 2015 with **James Alan Fox**, a criminologist at Northeastern University; **Mike Cavender**, executive director of the Radio Television Digital News Association; **William Freivogel** of Southern Illinois University and the *Gateway Journalism Review*; and **Debora Wenger**, journalism professor at the University of Mississippi and Second Vice President of Criminal Justice Journalists.

A full online transcript of the conversation will be available soon. Please check back at The Crime Report's "Resources Section."

**NOTE TO READERS: Hyperlinks embedded in this report can be accessed in the Web version posted on The Crime Report by clicking on "Resources" in the top bar and going to the Media Toolkit section in the dropdown menu.*
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FERGUSON RAISES POLICING, RACE ISSUES

It took only a few days for Ferguson, a medium-sized St. Louis suburb, to become a household name around the nation. One question is why the killing of Michael Brown became such a big story at all, given that police shootings around the nation are common.

A combination of factors contributed. One of them was that the Ferguson Police Department refused to discuss the case, not even naming the officer until Friday, Aug. 15, almost a week after the incident. In fact the day before, the *New York Times* published at the top of its front page a [story](#) headlined, "Police Conceal Officer's Name Amid Protests."

This meant that the story was being told only from the viewpoint of police critics, who painted the incident as a clearly unjustified shooting, probably fueled by racial motives. Initial reports from witnesses portrayed Brown as something of a "gentle giant" and asserted that the 18-year-old had his hands up and was surrendering when he was shot.

The facts that Brown's body was left in the street for several hours, and that the Ferguson police force was dominated by whites were prominently mentioned. Another key element was that, as the initial AP story emphasized, the case immediately provoked widespread anger from community members, later joined by civil rights leaders both locally and nationally.

Police withheld important details, most significantly that Wilson realized that Brown was a suspect in a robbery that had just occurred at a nearby store, at the suggestion of St. Louis

County Prosecutor Robert McCulloch, who didn't want witnesses tailoring their stories to media accounts.

This was not a good tactic for a confrontation that took place in a public street in midday that could have been reported by any witness with a cellphone and a social media account.

The news media immediately paid attention to what had happened in Ferguson, with reporters coming from out of town to cover the case. Police treatment of the media played a major role in journalists' interest in the episode, with officers manhandling reporters from the *Washington Post* and *Huffington Post*, who reported in detail on the incidents.

The *Huffington Post* [reported](#) that its correspondent Ryan J. Reilly, along with the *Washington Post*'s Wesley Lowery, were arrested August 13, saying that "SWAT officers roughed up the reporters inside a McDonald's, where both journalists were working."

Reilly told his publication: "They essentially acted as a military force. It was incredible. The worst part was he slammed my head against the glass purposefully on the way out of McDonald's and then sarcastically apologized for it."

Officers undoubtedly treated some of the demonstrators the same way, but mistreating journalists certainly didn't encourage favorable news coverage. As *New York Times* media columnist David Carr wrote, "Police officials in Ferguson made it clear that they had no interest in accommodating news coverage."

Local media began reporting in depth on the Ferguson story. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the local daily newspaper, invested heavily—from overtime pay to more bullet-resistant vests to extra pages—to tell short- and long-term stories, both to serve a hometown appetite for news and provide a standard for national coverage.

Ferguson illustrated the determination, bravery and skill of reporters and photographers who dived into the thick of it. Some were attacked, some were robbed, some were gassed. They all were willing to come back again and again. *Post-Dispatch* editor Gilbert Bailon has been named winner of the National Press Foundation's Editor of the Year Award "for guiding his news organization through the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., and the tumultuous aftermath."

St. Louis Public Radio also did extensive coverage, such as a long [explanation](#) the day after the shooting on what the law says about when police can use deadly force. The radio station also did this [analysis](#) concluding that a grand juror had a strong case against prosecutor McCulloch's prohibition on the jurors' speaking publicly about the normally secret proceeding.

FOR WEEKS, A ONE-SIDED ACCOUNT

While the criminal investigations by both St. Louis County, in which Ferguson is located, and by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), were ongoing, the fact that the public story initially was being told only from the side of Michael Brown supporters kept it more prominently in the news than it would have been if the police version had been expressed earlier. That would have made it more of a “he said, she said” kind of story that might not have had so much public and media attention.

News reporting began linking the Brown case to an unrelated incident that had happened the previous month in which Eric Garner, an African American in New York City’s Staten Island borough, died after an apparent chokehold by an officer investigating him for illegally selling individual cigarettes.

The common fact was that in both cases, unarmed black men died at the hands of white police officers. A third such case was added to the narrative in November when a white Cleveland police officer shot and killed Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old African-American boy reported to have been threatening people at a park with a gun. It turned out to be an Airsoft BB gun.

It’s an old journalism cliché that it takes three anecdotes to make a trend, and the trend identified by the New York City, Ferguson, and Cleveland shootings was that there was a rage of white police officers killing innocent blacks.

MEDIA INVESTIGATE LACK OF DATA ON POLICE SHOOTINGS

Attempting to draw general conclusions from these cases, some reporters asserted that there were no reliable national data on police shootings.

A typical [story](#) was published on August 20 by McClatchy Newspapers, which said, “Federal officials don’t know how many police shootings take place annually. They don’t know how many citizens complaints get filed each year. And, despite a 1994 congressional order, they don’t tally annually the incidents of ‘excessive force’ by police.”

The story did say that, “The FBI publishes annual tallies of justifiable homicides by law enforcement personnel, which jumped from 378 in 2008 to 410 in 2012. This database is incomplete, though, because it relies on self-reporting by law enforcement agencies and does not cover non-fatal shootings.”

The FBI publication cited by McClatchy is called the Supplemental Homicide Reports. The *Wall Street Journal* investigated this database and [concluded](#) that “the latest data from 105 of the country’s largest police agencies found more than 550 police killings [from 2007 to 2012] were missing from the national tally or, in a few dozen cases, not attributed to the agency involved. The result: It is nearly impossible to determine how many people are killed by the police each year.”

Even if there were no solid data to assess the complaints of demonstrators nationwide that largely white police forces were routinely brutalizing minority defendants, critics did cite figures from New York City's "stop and frisk" challenges showing that a disproportionate number of minorities were being stopped by officers.

The Manhattan Institute's *City Journal* was one of the few in the media that took the trouble to analyze the available data related to race and policing. The [summary](#) pointed out that in the most recent survey, for 2011, 88.2 percent of people stopped by the police "said they thought officers acted properly. There were few significant distinctions by race. Nearly 83 percent of African-Americans judged police behavior to be proper." The study asked citizens whether they thought the police had stopped them for a "legitimate" reason. Some 80 percent of drivers viewed their stops as legitimate, compared with 68 percent of African Americans.

Many media stories examined legal precedents that made it difficult to prosecute police officers who fired at suspects when the officers believed that their lives were being threatened.

FINALLY: THE FERGUSON OFFICER'S SIDE OF THE STORY

As a St. Louis County grand jury investigation of the Brown case went into its second month, news reports frequently speculated that whatever officer Wilson's defense was, it seemed likely that he would not be indicted.

On October 18, the *New York Times* published one of the first accounts of Wilson's side of the story, noting that the officer said "he was pinned in his vehicle and in fear for his life as he struggled over his gun" with Brown. The article, datelined Washington, was sourced to officials who had been briefed on the federal civil-rights investigation, operating in parallel with the St. Louis County prosecutor's probe.

Then on October 22, the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* published the most extensive account to that point of Wilson's side. The story, quoting unidentified sources, said that Wilson had told the grand jury that during the struggle in the police SUV, Brown had "pressed the barrel of Wilson's gun against the officer's hip." Wilson, according to this account, eventually got control of the weapon, firing twice, and hitting Brown in the hand. Brown ran from the vehicle but then started running back toward Wilson, the officer said, prompting him to fire the subsequent shots.

It was something of an anticlimax on the Monday night before Thanksgiving when prosecutor McCulloch announced that indeed, the grand jury had decided not to charge Wilson.

Still, the *New York Times* made it the lead story on November 25 with a four-column headline of the kind usually reserved for cataclysmic events. A front-page sidebar story proclaimed, "From

Plains to Both Coasts, Fury Boils Over,” reporting “smoke bombs and tear gas, random gunshots and sporadic looting” in Ferguson itself.

A similar decision by a grand jury in the case of New York City’s Eric Garner continued the narrative that police officers were unlikely to be penalized for excessive use of force.

While the individual cases proceeded, President Barack Obama named a national “task force” on 21st Century Policing that began meeting in January 2015; but that got relatively little attention during widespread protests nationwide about police brutality.

LITTLE REPORTING ON POLICE TACTICS NATIONALLY

While national and local media did commendable reporting that dissected details of the Brown, Garner, and Rice deaths, there was relatively little reporting on policing tactics generally.

The *New York Times* should be credited with exploring some of the key subjects even before the Ferguson episode by publishing a [front-page story](#) on July 25 headlined, “Safer Era Tests Wisdom of ‘Broken Windows’ Focus on Minor Crime.” Focusing on the Garner chokehold death a week earlier, the *Times* said continued low crime rates in New York City raised the question of whether the practice of making large numbers of arrests for minor crimes was justified.

Arrests for non-serious offenses had many critics, but Randy Mastro, a deputy mayor under former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in the 1990s, was quoted as contending that the large number of misdemeanor arrests was one of the many reasons that the city’s murder rate had dropped.

The *Gateway Journalism Review* in St. Louis, one of the few local journalism reviews still operating in the United States, provided extensive commentary on how the news media covered Ferguson. In one [review](#), Publisher William Freivogel said:

“Citizen journalists ... sometimes had the most accurate on-the-scene reports. But citizen journalists with Anonymous reported, falsely, the name of the officer who shot Brown and even the got the name of the police department wrong. National media got things wrong too. Fox and Ann Coulter reported, falsely, that Brown had broken Officer Wilson’s eye socket. Meanwhile, Chris Hayes of MSNBC preened on the streets of Ferguson, national reporters made the story more about them than Ferguson and a *New Republic* reporter helicoptered in to peg St. Louis as racist based on a chat with a table of white folks at a barbecue joint.”

The journalism review also [explored](#) the complaint by U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder in October regarding leaks to the media about the ongoing federal and local criminal investigations of the incident. Two of the three stories based on leaks were written by *New York*

Times and *Washington Post* reporters covering the Justice Department, so they could have come from Holder's own employees.

A major aspect of the Ferguson story that got relatively little attention from the media was whether the protests that occurred in many cities around the U.S. would have any lasting impact. The *Washington Post* addressed this topic early on by publishing a long article by political scientist Fredrick Harris of Columbia University on August 24, concluding that, "If Brown's death is to lead to a true movement, it must transcend the street unrest and hashtag angst that too often stand in for political organizing."

In a similar vein, while much coverage was focused on whether Wilson would face criminal charges, less was written and broadcast about the part of the federal investigation that could have the greatest effect: the work by the U.S. Justice Department on potential reform of police practices in Ferguson and St. Louis County. As part of that inquiry, a coalition of news media organizations asked the DOJ to include police treatment of the media in that investigation, but the coalition has had no response as of January 2015.

'MILITARIZATION' OF POLICE

One widely reported side story in the Ferguson-related coverage was the alleged "militarization" of U.S. police departments resulting from a longstanding practice by the Defense Department of providing local agencies with surplus equipment. The topic received prominent play when, in response to protests after the Brown shooting in Ferguson, local authorities used "armored vehicles, noise-based crowd-control devices, shotguns, M4 rifles like those used by forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, rubber-coated metal pellets and tear gas," the *Washington Post* [reported](#).

Ferguson Police Chief Thomas Ferguson challenged the description, saying, "It's not military, it's tactical operations. It's SWAT teams."

The subject of police using military equipment is not new to the media, having been explored in years past. For example, in 2012, the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* published a [long feature](#) on the military surplus program, including the sentence, "Skeptics ask why police need military-grade weapons and worry about the image that these weapons convey." That is what many critics were saying after Ferguson.

On June 9 last year, exactly two months before the Ferguson shooting, the *New York Times* did a [front-page story](#), headlined, "War Gear Flows to Police Departments." The story said that, "...the former tools of combat – M-16 rifles, grenade launchers, silencers and more – are ending up in local police departments, often with little public notice." The long feature included no serious criticism of the surplus program.

On August 24, the *New York Times* led its Sunday paper with a [story](#) headlined “In Washington, Second Thoughts on Arming Police,” leading with the fact that President Obama had “ordered a comprehensive review of the government’s decade-old strategy of outfitting local police departments with military-grade body armor, mine-resistant trucks, silencers and automatic rifles.”

Contrary to the *Times*’ article back in June, the problem with the August story and similar coverage was that it was one-sided, quoting only critics, including Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-MO), and Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY). There was no apparent effort to talk to law enforcement organizations and individual police chiefs, who regard the military surplus program positively. In fact, it was about five months later that Obama got around to establishing a review of the program, and by then it was seemingly aimed at making sure the former military equipment actually was being used for law enforcement purposes, not the “second thoughts” expressed by the *Times* in August.

Other Major Topics of Coverage

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Public support nationally for executing those who commit the most heinous crimes remains strong. But it has declined as more cases have been reported in which defendants have been wrongly convicted or put to death despite mental defects or poor legal representation.

Several states, mostly in the South, Midwest, and West, continue executions. The biggest current issue is that some states are finding it difficult to obtain the combination of drugs needed to perform lethal injections, as drug manufacturers have become more reluctant to provide them.

On April 29, Oklahoma scheduled two executions on the same evening. The lethal injection of the first man scheduled to die, Clayton Lockett, was widely described as having been botched or bungled as the procedure took 43 minutes, with Lockett writhing in pain for most of it, and the second execution was postponed. Coverage in the *Tulsa World* was notable for its thoroughness.

In a [story](#) nearly two weeks after the execution, the *World* reported that Lockett’s “death took nearly four times as long as most Oklahoma executions because a failed IV line started by a medical professional whose credentials remain secret under state law slowly leaked a drug combination that experts had warned could potentially be inhumane.” The newspaper added:

“When state officials realized what was happening, they technically halted Lockett's execution, but they had no backup drugs to restart the process.” (The state has since resumed executions.)

On another capital punishment topic, *The Marshall Project*, a new criminal justice news website, published a two-part [series](#), “Death by Deadline,” in November documenting the cases of 16 inmates who have been executed after their attorneys missed deadlines for filing *habeas corpus* appeals under a 1996 federal law limiting the time for appeals in capital cases.

SEX CRIMES

The extent of the sexual assault problem on U.S. university and college campuses has been little covered in the news media in past years, in large part because many are never reported in the first place, and because institutions treat secretly the cases that are filed.

That changed in 2014, as the federal government disclosed a list of educational institutions being investigated for not handling student complaints fairly and adequately.

That helped encourage more media attention. The *New York Times* produced a long [takeout](#) on Sunday, July 13, “Reporting Rape, and Wishing She Hadn’t.” It was the story of a student at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in central New York State. The institution’s handling of her rape accusation, the newspaper concluded, showed a “school ill-prepared to evaluate an allegation so serious” that in a court it would be treated as a felony warranting a prison sentence. An internal college panel ended up clearing three football players she accused.

It turned out that the *Times* story was just a prelude to a more sensational attempt to tell how a major university mishandled a sex-assault case. It was dismaying that a November article in *Rolling Stone* ended up causing a furor over a poor reporting job on an alleged gang rape at the University of Virginia.

The article told in graphic detail the story of “Jackie.” As *Rolling Stone* [described it](#), it was the tale “of a brutal gang rape of a woman identified only as “Jackie” during a party at a University of Virginia fraternity house, the University's failure to respond to this alleged assault – and the school's troubling history of indifference to many other instances of alleged sexual assaults.”

The problem, as the *Washington Post* and other media soon reported, was that Jackie’s story may have been greatly exaggerated or even fabricated.

There was no party at the fraternity in question on the night she alleged the incident occurred, and friends of hers reported that she gave less-incriminating accounts to them at the time. *Rolling Stone* first attempted to defend publishing the story without having heard from the

accused perpetrators on the ground that it was only purporting to tell the story from Jackie's point of view.

In early December, after receiving widespread criticism, *Rolling Stone* abandoned its defense and said, "We apologize to anyone who was affected by the story and we will continue to investigate the events of that evening." It asked the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism to review its handling of the story, a review that had not been published when this report was compiled.

In a critical [story](#) on the *Rolling Stone* coverage December 6, headlined "A failure to follow tenets of reporting," the *Washington Post* concluded: "Every story has two sides. In fact, every story has many sides. *Rolling Stone* decided to run with just one of them. To its everlasting regret."

While advocates for assault victims and many university officials agree that the problem of sex crimes on campus is greater than has been acknowledged, the *Rolling Stone* episode is sure to make the media more careful about reporting. One question is whether victims generally will be less likely to speak to journalists — possibly resulting in fewer stories on the problem.

Issues surrounding rape cases in the general population also got media attention. On June 17, for example, the *Washington Post* gave front page treatment to the possibility that there are 100,000 or more "rape kits" in police storage around the U.S. containing evidence in cases from years ago. The [story](#) explained well why the process of analyzing the evidence takes so long and why it may not be conclusive.

The *Post* also broke ground on December 16 when it reported that universities rarely expel students for sexual assault. Focusing again on the University of Virginia, the newspaper said that dozens of students had been thrown out of that institution for academic cheating in the last decade, but none for sexual misconduct. A survey by federal officials found that of 478 sanctions for sex assaults in 2012 and 2013, only 12 percent were expulsions.

Another significant aspect of the news media's sexual assault coverage during the year was the attention given to a series of charges against comedian Bill Cosby by women who accused him of assaulting them in incidents that spanned many years. The flurry of coverage was prompted in large part by the media's greater willingness to publicize the story of a woman named Barbara Bowman, who had spoken out in 2006 about an alleged rape by Cosby several decades earlier but got little attention at the time. The *Washington Post* decided to publish a first-person account by Bowman on November 13 even though nothing had changed other than public discussion by another comedian, Hannibal Buress, of the accusations against Cosby.

A *Washington Post* [story](#) on the Cosby flurry concluded that "rape allegations are more likely to be covered by the media and to be treated with greater nuance and deference when they are."

ASSET FORFEITURE

Since a major federal anticrime bill in 1984 established a federal program encouraging state and local law enforcement to seize the assets of criminals, asset forfeiture has become a major source of income for police agencies across the nation. Over the years, accusations piled up that to maximize revenue, some law enforcers wrongly seized assets of innocent people based on flimsy evidence.

There was only sporadic attention to the issue in the news media until the *Washington Post* published a series of stories starting September 7, with the tagline “Stop and Seize.” The first [story](#) documented “the spread of an aggressive brand of policing that has spurred the seizure of hundreds of millions of dollars in cash from motorists and others not charged with crimes.”

The newspaper published several follow-up articles, which attracted comment in the criminal justice community and beyond. A long [story](#) starting on the front-page on Sunday, October 12, charted how 5,400 police agencies had spent \$2.5 billion in cash and property seized since 2008 alone. The story included anecdotes such \$225 in forfeiture funds spent by Police Chief Jeff Buck in Reminderville, Ohio, to hire Sparkles the Clown to promote police-community relations. Buck told the *Post* that the money spent on the clown was “a very, very minute portion of the forfeited money that I spend in fighting the war on drugs.”

In January 2015, Attorney General Eric Holder took notice, putting major limitations on the federal “Equitable Sharing” program that allowed abuses. States still are able to use the asset forfeiture procedure, and it still will be allowed in some federal cases, but the days of largesse to law enforcement from sometimes dubious seizures may be over.

Incarceration

With 2.3 million people in U.S. prisons and jails, the topic should get more attention than it does from the media. There is plenty of commentary, but relatively little original reporting, partly because federal, state and local corrections agencies make it difficult for journalists to gain entry to lockups.

The Jackson (Ms.) *Clarion-Ledger* published a [series of stories](#) about poor conditions and brutality in Mississippi prisons. The newspaper said that inmates “reached out to Investigative Reporter Jerry Mitchell – asking him to look into conditions at their prisons. What Jerry found set off a 13-month investigation of our state's correctional system.” The series, “Hard Look at Hard Time,” was a co-runner-up for the best series on criminal justice in the annual John Jay/H.F. Guggenheim Awards for Excellence in Criminal Justice Reporting given in 2015 by the Center on Media, Crime and Justice at John Jay College.

The *New York Times* did extensive reporting on abuses of juveniles in the city's Rikers Island jail complex, one of the nation's largest, which was the subject of a highly critical report by the U.S. Attorney in Manhattan.

Mental Health

Another subject that deserves more coverage is the role of mental health issues in chronic criminal justice system failures and in major violent episodes. The *New York Times* led its news coverage on December 2 with, "New York Plans Treatment Focus in Justice System," a [report](#) on New York City's plan to spend \$130 million to expand treatment "at almost every step of the criminal justice process."

The killing of six people in Isla Vista, California on May 23 by Elliot O. Rodger, 22, who then killed himself, prompted at least a brief look by some in the media of mental health issues and violence. The *New York Times* told Rodger's life story on June 2 and quoted his parents as saying they wanted to try preventing similar incidents by dealing with "the mental issues that drive our son to do what he did." The *Los Angeles Times* found that nearly a year before Rodger's rampage, he tried to push several people off a 10-foot ledge at a party. The Santa Barbara Sheriff's Department concluded that Rodger was the aggressor, "but for reasons that are unclear, they dropped the case," the *Times* said.

Juvenile Crime

The *Washington Post* left it to David Finkelhor of the University of New Hampshire in a commentary article to tell the [story](#) on November 30 of how juvenile misbehavior has declined dramatically in the U.S. in recent years, including some prominently reported categories like bullying and binge drinking. Finkelhor lamented the fact that media reporting of school shootings, which also are down, have "left a sense that schools are dangerous."

Guns

It had appeared that guns would be a major public issue after the massacre of 26 students and staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Ct., in December 2012. Several states strengthened gun-control laws in 2013, but an attempt at Congressional action failed and the subject largely faded from the news headlines in 2014.

One exception was an effort by journalism students to report on state gun control efforts and gun rights issues as part of the 2014 Carnegie-Knight News21 national multimedia reporting initiative. Headquartered at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication

at Arizona State University, News21 was created by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

In the [project](#), 29 journalism students from 16 universities traveled to more than 28 states “to examine the political and cultural divide between those who say the right to own and carry guns is guaranteed by the Second Amendment and those who believe firearms should be more regulated.”

The result was a well-balanced and well-reported series of stories that appeared in various media around the nation. One example was a [story](#) describing how Arizona and Connecticut reacted differently to the Newtown massacre because of their very different gun cultures. The students concluded that “while Connecticut took extreme measures to muscle through one of the most comprehensive packages of gun laws in the country, Arizona failed to pass any significant legislation concerning gun purchases, use or ownership.”

Another notable effort was a [story](#) reporting that more than a decade of data from the FBI on the background checks aimed at keeping firearms from the dangerously mentally ill “reveals broad failings of the system.”

Drugs

Heroin

On February 2, actor Philip Seymour Hoffman was found dead in New York City of a heroin overdose. This celebrity case led to scores of media stories about the nation’s heroin problem. A typical account was [one](#) on February 4 by *Agence France Presse* declaring that Hoffman’s death “has spotlighted a growing epidemic of heroin use across the United States,” quoting a Drug Enforcement Administration spokesman using the phrase “growing epidemic” The key evidence cited was a figure that heroin-overdose deaths had increased 45 percent from 2006 to 2010, four years earlier.

In April, *The Crime Report* published a [story](#), “Smack Madness” questioning the reports of a heroin epidemic, and quoting experts as saying overall heroin use in the U.S. hadn’t changed appreciably in several decades. The story noted that, “A disproportionate number of heroin users featured in recent news stories are white and live in the suburbs, even though the problem has festered for generations in inner cities.

Marijuana

The *Denver Post* continued thorough coverage of Colorado’s legalization of marijuana. On December 26, the newspaper published a [review](#) of the state’s first year of legalized pot.

Some conclusions:

“Marijuana legalization has changed Colorado. It's just tough to say exactly how. Marijuana is more available in Colorado than ever before, but it's unclear whether marijuana consumption has risen as a result. Teens are less likely to think that marijuana is harmful, and marijuana arrests at Denver schools are up, but that hasn't yet translated into increased use. More people may be driving stoned, but traffic fatalities are down.”

The *New York Times* took the unusual step of publishing a series of editorials on marijuana policy. On July 27, the newspaper declared that the states should be able to decide their own policies on the drug and criticized the U.S. Justice Department's “loose guidance” to states.

Secret Service

The *Washington Post* deserves commendation for its investigative coverage of the decline of the U.S. Secret Service, the agency charged with the protection of the President and other dignitaries. The *Post* established in a series of stories that a series of breaches in White House security and misbehavior of agents on foreign trips were not just glitches but rather symptomatic of staffing shortages and a flawed agency culture. On December 28, in “The Secret Service's Slow, Steady Slide,” the *Post* [detailed](#) the agency's struggles to adjust to the increasing demands on it since the September 11, 2011 terror attacks.

Crime Coverage Overall

There were also developments on crime and justice news coverage generally. In October, John Jay's Center for Media Crime and Justice published a [report](#) by Criminal Justice Journalists on the crime coverage in six local newspapers, the *Detroit Free Press*, the *El Paso Times*, *The Indianapolis Star*, *The Camden (N.J.) Courier-Post*, *Naperville (Ill.) Sun* and *The Flint (Mi.) Journal*. The study found that the papers averaged about 78 crime-related stories for the period studied, with the most stories appearing in *The Camden Courier-Post* (165) and the fewest in the *Naperville Sun* (26). The report said that the large quantity of crime news coverage for the most part did not include many analytical or enterprise stories that put crime and justice trends in context.

Editors Note: Gest and Wenger discussed the results of their study on Washington DC Public Safety Radio in January. Listen to their podcast [HERE](#).

In November, a web site called *The Marshall Project* that described its mission as covering criminal justice reform was launched with private and foundation support. The site, under leadership of former *New York Times* executive editor Bill Keller, has done major stories on a

range of subjects, such as capital punishment and wrongful convictions. It followed by nearly six years the launch of [The Crime Report](#) by the Center on Media, Crime and Justice at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Criminal Justice Journalists.

(*The Marshall Project* had published its first story on August 4, a long account by Maurice Possley that also appeared in the *Washington Post* on new questions about the evidence that led to the 2004 Texas execution of Cameron Todd Willingham for murdering his three daughters.)

On the negative side, a pioneering site called *Homicide Watch D.C.* that tracked every homicide in the nation's capital ended active journalism at the end of the year after the founders, Laura and Chris Amico, moved to Boston and were unable to find a local sponsor to take it over. There remain three *Homicide Watch* sites, in Chicago, Boston and Trenton, N.J., run in association with newspapers or universities.

The Washington Post noted that Homicide Watch D.C. had done some enterprise reporting, saying that the D.C. police department asserted that it closed 94 percent of homicide cases in 2011, yet only 56 percent of the cases tracked by Homicide Watch D.C. had been closed with an arrest. The explanation for the seemingly large discrepancy, Laura Amico said, was that the way the police calculated closures conformed to federal guidelines but was “not math [she] thought the public understood.”

Jan Schaffer of J-Lab, a media innovation incubator based at The American University in Washington, D.C., told the *Post* that the homicide blog “could have benefited from more such insights, which elevated it beyond its sometimes ‘stenographic quality.’ ”

The *Los Angeles Times* continued its [website](#) tracking homicides in Los Angeles County, which began in 2007. In 2010, the newspaper said, the site was “converted into a searchable database with interactive maps allowing readers to sort killings by neighborhood, cause of death, race/ethnicity, age, gender, day of the week and more.”

Many other newspapers maintain features on their websites that track homicides and other crimes so that readers can find crimes in their neighborhoods.

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