News Coverage of
Intimate Partner Homicides in
New York City (2013-16)

A Systematic Review

NYC

**Mayor's Office to Combat
Domestic Violence**

News Coverage of Intimate Partner Homicides in New York City (2013-16)

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Key Takeaway:

News coverage of intimate partner homicide in NYC has become more comprehensive in the past year, but there are important aspects of coverage quality that necessitate improvement given the critical role the media play in shaping public conversation around intimate partner violence.

Highlights:

Overall quality of coverage:

- Only ten of the 442 articles (2.3%) covering NYC intimate partner homicides from 2013-16 included an intimate partner violence advocate or expert as a source.
- Only 15% of articles used terms such as "domestic violence," "intimate partner violence," or "domestic abuse," and less than 8% of articles described the homicide as being intimate partner violence-related.
- Less than 6% of articles framed the homicide within the broader social problem of intimate partner violence.
- Only seven articles (1.6%) listed intimate partner violence resources for readers.

Differences in quality of coverage by homicide:

- Homicides that involved victims who were men and perpetrators who were women were covered differently than those that involved victims who were women and perpetrators who were men, respectively.
- Articles about dating partners vs. spouses and articles about younger victims and perpetrators were less likely to place the homicide in the context of intimate partner violence.
- Victim race was associated with multiple differences in the quality of news coverage.
- Finally, articles about gun homicides were over six times less likely to identify areas for improvement in the system's response to domestic violence and over three times more likely to use victim blaming language compared to articles about other homicide methods.

A Research Report from the New York City Mayor's Office to Combat Domestic Violence
Commissioner: Cecile Noel

The Mayor's Office to Combat Domestic Violence (OCDV) formulates policies and programs, coordinates the citywide delivery of domestic violence services and works with diverse communities and community leaders to increase awareness of domestic violence. OCDV collaborates closely with government and nonprofit agencies that assist domestic violence survivors and operates the New York City Family Justice Centers.

For more information on intimate partner violence programs and services in New York City, please visit the OCDV website at nyc.gov/domesticviolence.

I. INTRODUCTION:

Through their reporting on intimate partner violence (IPV) incidents, the media play a critical role in shaping how society perceives the dynamics of IPV and in sparking conversation around public responsibility and solutions to IPV. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that media coverage of IPV incidents is often inadequate or problematic in its framing. There is a limited research literature that systematically analyzes the coverage of IPV and broader domestic violence to elucidate trends in reporting patterns. These studies generally report that while coverage of IPV in news outlets has increased substantially since the 1970s, IPV incidents are rarely identified within the larger context of IPV as a social problem [1-5]. This episodic framing of IPV isolates the crime from its social context and diminishes the likelihood for public health solutions to the problem [5,6].

In addition to thematic framing that places each IPV incident in its social context, researchers have identified other elements of effective coverage that would improve public awareness and response to the issue. Gillespie et al. [1] highlight the opportunity to use IPV experts and advocates as sources as they are able to provide an informed perspective and contextualize incidents, as opposed to a more commonly used source: neighbors of the victim and perpetrator. Additionally, and perhaps unsurprisingly, researchers find that effective articles use terminology that distinguishes an intimate partner or domestic violence incident from other crimes [1,2]. Finally, it is important to note that there are multiple frames that are often found in articles about IPV that can perpetuate myths about the problem, hinder the development of solutions, and revictimize readers who have experienced IPV [1]. These frames include blaming the victim, sexualizing the event, normalizing the event as commonplace, and suggesting the victim or perpetrator as deviant or "other" [1]. In fact, researchers have noted differences in framing based on demographics of the victim and perpetrator. For example, in one study, Carlyle et al. [7] found that reporters were more likely to characterize an IPV perpetrator as socially deviant and mention a history of infidelity when the perpetrator was a woman.

Using prior research as a guide for effective coverage, we conducted a systematic review of reporting on New York City intimate partner homicides from 2013-16 to improve understanding of the quality of media coverage of IPV. This research study provides an evidence-based foundation upon which to develop best practices and educational strategies for IPV news coverage.

II. METHODS:

A. Data Collection

We conducted a systematic and comprehensive search of the LexisNexis database for all newspaper articles covering New York City intimate partner homicides published in all news outlets in the tristate area. Our search terms were victim's or perpetrator's name as well as the terms 'murder' and/or 'homicide'. The search excluded articles published prior to the homicide. Using a standardized data abstraction form, reviewers abstracted information on the following variables:

1. Level of coverage:
   Level of coverage was measured by the number of articles published per homicide.

2. Sources:
   Direct sources used in articles were identified and categorized as follows:
   - Public official
   - Victim or perpetrator neighbor
   - Victim or perpetrator friend of family
   - IPV expert/advocate
   - Other

3. Context:
   Context was comprised of multiple measures that assessed whether or not the incident was placed in the context of IPV or domestic violence broadly. These measures were as follows:
   - Did the article identify the intimate partner relationship between the victim and perpetrator?
   - Did the article use terminology/language such as "domestic violence," "domestic abuse," or "intimate partner violence" at any point?
   - Did the article identify the homicide itself as being domestic violence- or IPV-related?
   - Did the article discuss any history of abuse between the victim and perpetrator?
   - Did the article identify high risk factors for intimate partner homicide that were present in the case?
   - Did the article frame the incident within the broader social problem of IPV?
   - Did the article identify areas for improvement in the system's response to IPV?
   - Did the article provide any IPV resources for readers?

4. Language:
   The language section of data collection captured the presence of any frames that perpetuate myths about IPV, hinder the development of solutions, or revictimize readers who have experienced IPV. These language frames were as follows:
   - Victim blaming language
   - Sexualized language
   - Normalizing language
   - Making the victim or perpetrator seem deviant or "other"
   - Sensationalized language
   - Minimizing language
   - Suggesting IPV and/or Domestic Violence is isolated or uncommon

To reduce risk of bias, two reviewers reviewed each article independently and compared results to reach consensus with a third party serving as an arbitrator.

B. Data Analysis

After data were systematically abstracted from all relevant news articles, we conducted descriptive and comparative analyses of the four variables above. Descriptive analyses, in the form of frequency distributions, were conducted to evaluate overall trends in level of coverage, sources used, context, and language. Comparative analyses were conducted to evaluate any differential reporting by gender, race, and other factors related to the victim, perpetrator, and homicide incident. Risk ratios were calculated to present differences in the quality of reporting when the independent variable was dichotomous (e.g., gender). Chi-square estimates were calculated to present differences in the quality of reporting when the independent variable contained more than two categories (e.g., race). Statistical significance was set at the $\alpha=0.05$ level.

III. RESULTS:

A. Level of Coverage

Over the study period (2013-16), there were 126 intimate partner homicides in NYC. A comprehensive search of the LexisNexis database resulted in a total of 442 articles written about 99 of these homicides, with 27 homicides receiving no media coverage. Over the four years, an average of 3.5 articles was written per homicide. The year 2016 had a higher than average level of coverage, with an annual average of 4.7 articles written per homicide.

An analysis of differences in level of coverage by homicide characteristics demonstrated a statistically significant difference by borough. Specifically, homicides that took place in Staten Island were five times more likely (risk ratio (RR)=5.08, $p<0.0001$) to have at least six articles of coverage compared to homicides that occurred elsewhere in the City. Additionally, homicides that took place in the Bronx were significantly less likely to have six or more articles of coverage compared to homicides in other boroughs (RR=0.31, $p=0.027$). Differences by victim and perpetrator demographics were not statistically significant.

B. Overall Quality of Coverage

A summary of the data concerning overall quality of coverage, comprised of sources, context, and language, is presented in Table 1.

Sources:

An analysis of the sources used in the 442 articles indicated that 54% of articles included a direct source. The most commonly cited source was a public official, with 22% of articles citing a public official. Public officials included police officials, members of district attorneys' offices, and other government agency spokespeople. Other common sources were friends or family members of the victim and/or perpetrator (21%), neighbors (14%), and statements from the perpetrator (9.7%). Only ten articles over the four-year period (2.3%) included a domestic violence advocate or expert as a source. Nine of these ten articles were published in 2016.

Context:

We also assessed the context in which the homicide was framed in each article. We found that nearly 90% of the articles identified the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. However, only 15% of articles used language such as "domestic violence," "intimate partner violence," or "domestic abuse," and less than 8% of articles described the homicide as being domestic violence- or IPV-related. Over half (53%) of the articles identified specific intimate partner homicide risk factors, such as gun ownership, prior domestic violence, recent separation, financial problems, etc. Yet, it was rare for these risk factors to be explicitly identified as such. Twenty-three percent (23%) of articles included a discussion of a history of abuse between the victim and perpetrator. Very few articles (5.7% and 7.0%, respectively) framed the homicide within the broader social problem of domestic violence/IPV or identified areas for improvement in the system's response. Finally, only seven articles (1.6%) listed domestic violence or IPV resources for readers and these seven articles were all published in 2016. In four of these seven instances, the inclusion of resources was embedded in a statement or quote from a source.

Language:

The most common negative language frame used in the articles was sensationalism. Sensationalism was evidenced in 20% of articles by phrases such as "bludgeoning," "bloodbath," "jilted gangbanger," "slaughter," and "butcher." Additionally, 16% of articles used language that portrayed the victim or perpetrator as socially deviant or as an "other." Finally, minimizing was present in 10% of articles, including both minimization of the homicide and minimization of the intimate partner relationship. For example, the term "gal pal" was often used in place of girlfriend/intimate partner.

Table 1. Overall quality of coverage across all articles (N=442)

	2013 (N=119)		2014 (N=91)		2015 (N=69)		2016 (N=163)		Total (N=442)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Mean word count	355		410		391		377		380	
SOURCES										
No direct sources	54	45.4%	42	46.2%	33	47.8%	78	44.8%	202	45.7%
Public official	22	18.5%	15	16.5%	13	18.8%	49	30.1%	99	22.4%
Neighbor	18	15.1%	19	20.9%	11	15.9%	15	9.2%	63	14.3%
Friend/family	25	21.0%	13	14.3%	20	29.0%	33	20.2%	91	20.6%
IPV expert/advocate	0	0.0%	1	1.1%	0	0.0%	9	5.5%	10	2.3%
Other	38	31.9%	23	25.3%	15	21.7%	41	25.2%	117	26.5%
CONTEXT										
Identifies relationship	107	89.9%	82	90.1%	61	88.4%	138	84.7%	388	87.8%
Uses IPV/DV terminology	17	14.3%	18	19.8%	8	11.6%	23	14.1%	66	14.9%
Describes homicide as IPV/DV	8	6.7%	10	11.0%	2	2.9%	13	8.0%	33	7.5%
Discusses abuse history	40	33.6%	26	28.6%	12	17.4%	24	14.7%	102	23.1%
Identifies high risk factors	75	63.0%	44	48.4%	42	60.9%	71	43.6%	232	52.5%
Frames within broader social problem of IPV/DV	6	5.0%	5	5.5%	0	0.0%	14	8.6%	25	5.7%
Identifies area for improvement in system response	5	4.2%	3	3.3%	1	1.4%	22	13.5%	31	7.0%
Lists IPV/DV resource(s)	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	7	4.3%	7	1.6%
LANGUAGE										
Victim blaming	3	2.5%	3	3.3%	10	14.5%	5	3.1%	21	4.8%
Sexualized	3	2.5%	2	2.2%	3	4.3%	6	3.7%	14	3.2%
Normalizing	1	0.8%	2	2.2%	3	4.3%	0	0.0%	6	1.4%
Making the victim/perp seem 'other'	25	21.0%	14	15.4%	20	29.0%	12	7.4%	71	16.1%
Sensationalized	21	17.6%	28	30.8%	25	36.2%	13	8.0%	87	19.7%
Minimizing	11	9.2%	12	13.2%	11	15.9%	12	7.4%	46	10.4%
Suggests IPV/DV is isolated/uncommon	2	1.7%	2	2.2%	2	2.9%	0	0.0%	6	1.4%

C. Differences in Quality of Coverage

Victim and perpetrator gender:

Homicides that involved victims who were men and those that involved perpetrators who were women were covered differently than those that involved victims who were women or perpetrators who were men, respectively. Regarding sources, articles about homicides of victims who were men were nearly twice as likely to include a neighbor as a source compared to those about homicides of victims who were women (RR=1.75, p=0.025). Similarly, articles about homicides with perpetrators who were women were over twice as likely to include a neighbor as a source compared to those about homicides with perpetrators who were men (RR=2.43, p=0.0002). Regarding context, the victim-perpetrator relationship was more likely to be identified in articles about women-perpetrated homicides compared to men-perpetrated homicides (RR=1.11, p=0.024). Additionally, identifying the homicide as being IPV-related was over three times more common in articles about victims who were men vs. those about victims who were women (RR=3.90, p<0.0001). The same was true for articles about perpetrators who were women vs. those about perpetrators who were men (RR=3.23, p=0.0003). Abuse history was also more likely to be discussed in articles about victims who were men and perpetrators who were women (RR=1.89, p=0.0005; RR=2.27, p<0.0001; respectively). Finally, articles about perpetrators who were women were more likely to use a frame that portrays the victim or perpetrator as socially deviant or as an "other" (RR=1.72, p=0.024).

Victim and perpetrator age:

Articles about younger victims and perpetrators were less likely to place the incident in the context of IPV. For example, articles about victims who were 30 years old or younger were less likely to identify the victim-perpetrator relationship compared to those about victims over 30 (RR=0.90, p=0.005). Similarly, articles about perpetrators who were 30 or younger were also less likely to identify the relationship (RR=0.90, p=0.006). Additionally, domestic violence or IPV terminology was less likely to be used in articles about perpetrators under the age of 30 (RR=0.48, p=0.010).

Victim race:

Victim race was associated with multiple differences in the quality of media coverage. Specifically, the victim-perpetrator relationship was most likely to be defined in articles about White victims and was least likely to be defined in articles about Asian victims (χ^2=11.08, df=3, p=0.011). Additionally, articles about White victims were much less likely to cite a public official compared to articles about victims of color (RR=0.34, p=0.005). We also found that the homicide was more likely to be labelled as being IPV-related in articles about White victims vs. articles about victims of color (RR=4.23, p<0.0001). Finally, the abuse history of the victim and perpetrator was most likely to be discussed in articles about White victims and least likely to be discussed in articles about Asian victims (χ^2=13.95, df=3, p=0.003).

Dating relationships:

There were also statistically significant differences in the way that homicides between two dating partners are covered compared to homicides between spouses, which in many ways mirror the differences in coverage by age. For example, articles about homicides of

dating partners were less likely to identify the victim-perpetrator relationship compared to those about homicides between spouses (RR=0.87, p=0.0013). Additionally, domestic violence or IPV terminology was three times less likely to be used in articles about homicides of dating partners compared to homicides of spouses (RR=0.35, p<0.0001). Specifically identifying the homicide as being IPV-related was less common in articles about dating vs. spousal relationships (RR=0.35, p=0.001).

We also found that the abuse history of the victim and perpetrator was less likely to be discussed in articles about dating homicides vs. spousal homicides (RR=0.49, p<0.0001). Additionally, articles about dating homicides were less likely to frame the homicide within the broader social problem of domestic violence compared to spousal homicides (RR=0.29, p=0.002). Language frame was also significantly associated with the type of victim-perpetrator relationship. Specifically, articles about homicides of former dating partners were most likely to use victim blaming language and minimizing language compared to all other relationship types (χ^2=13.9, df=4, p=0.008; χ^2=15.08, df=4, p=0.005; respectively).

Homicide weapon:

Finally, we observed a statistically significant difference in quality of coverage related to the way in which gun homicides were covered compared to homicides using other methods. Articles about gun homicides are substantially less likely to identify areas for improvement in the system's response to IPV (RR=0.15, p=0.022). Additionally, articles about gun homicides were over three times more likely to use victim blaming language than articles about other types of homicide (RR=3.39, p=0.003).

IV. IMPLICATIONS:

The results of this research study demonstrate that while coverage of intimate partner homicide has become more comprehensive in the past year, there are important aspects of coverage quality that necessitate improvement. Opportunities for improvement include the following:

1. Inclusion of effective sources and resources

As with media coverage of any topic, content-specific experts should be sought out as sources. In the current analysis, domestic violence experts were rarely included as sources, pointing to a lack of communication between local journalists and content experts. Efforts should be made to facilitate connections between these individuals to allow for more effective reporting. Additionally, journalists are provided the unique opportunity to contribute to the prevention of IPV through their reporting by including resources for readers. IPV resources were rarely provided in the articles reviewed and most of the articles that did provide resources did so in the form of a quote from a source. Thus, individuals who serve as sources should seize the opportunity to include IPV resources in quotes provided to journalists to increase the likelihood of resource publication.

2. Framing the incident within a larger context

As noted above, intimate partner homicides were typically reported as isolated incidents with no mention of "domestic violence" or "intimate partner violence." Given the role of the media in driving conversation about present issues, more effective coverage

includes framing each domestic violence or IPV incident within the larger social problem. Journalists should not only name the problem, but they should identify trends and patterns as well as gaps in the system's response that should be addressed. Domestic violence agencies and advocate groups should support journalists by providing up-to-date information and statistics on domestic violence at an aggregate level.

3. Victim-affirming language

Given the significant burden of IPV across the country, it is likely that the reader base of these articles includes at least one victim of IPV. The use of sensationalistic, victim blaming, and minimizing language revictimizes readers who have experienced this form of violence and may perpetuate cycles of abuse. There is demonstrated need for an educational guide on the use of victim-affirming language in journalism.

4. Covering all forms of IPV comprehensively

The results of this study illuminated several significant differences in quality of coverage based on victim and perpetrator demographics. Intimate partner homicide victims of all genders and races are deserving of the same level of reporting quality. Additionally, it is important to improve the general understanding of IPV, specifically in that it includes violence between young dating partners.

The findings presented above highlight multiple educational opportunities that should be pursued in collaboration with New York area journalists and leading domestic violence experts in order to improve the effectiveness of media coverage of IPV.

V. REFERENCES:

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