CRIMINAL JUSTICE NEWS COVERAGE IN 2018

By Ted Gest

Criminal Justice Journalists

Mass shootings, the special counsel’s Russia investigation, immigration, and sexual assault charges against powerful men in the worlds of entertainment, media and business dominated the news media coverage of criminal justice last year.

The most significant development in 2018, as it was in 2017, was the continued drop in coverage of local justice issues, which arguably has a greater impact. The U.S. justice system overwhelmingly comprises players who operate in state, county and municipal jurisdictions, where policies and practices directly affect millions of people.

Layoffs or closures in many mid-market or small outlets across the U.S. affect many subjects of news reporting in addition to criminal justice. Budget and staffing pressures have forced many outlets to combine traditional justice beats with others and to reduce deep-dive reporting on local justice issues. The daily survey of several dozen media websites for the news digest produced by The Crime Report shows fewer in-depth stories on criminal justice than there were in earlier years.

Some fairly new online news sites had filled some of the gaps in criminal justice reporting among mainstream media organizations but there were layoffs at such places as BuzzFeed News and Huffpost. The workforce problem shows every signs of continuing this year.

There are some bright spots worth noting. Some of the smallest outlets, mostly in rural areas, have demonstrated enthusiasm for reporting on the rural jail crisis and opioid overdose deaths. A media training program on justice in the "heartland" organized by the Center on Media, Crime and Justice at John Jay College in July produced an impressive collection of stories. Some can be read on The Crime Report's website.

Last year's midterm elections drew media attention to the emergence of a new wave of "progressive" prosecutors from both parties, whose actions will come under increased attention over the next several years. (See "Progressive Prosecutors' below.)
Turning to the national landscape, an Associated Press survey of editors found that criminal justice issues were involved in five of the six top news stories of 2018, topped by the Parkland, Fla., school shooting on Valentine's Day 2018 that led to a national student movement for gun control. (The one other story in the leading half-dozen was the 2018 midterm elections.)

Editor’s Note: An annual survey of nightly television news coverage of all subjects by ABC, CBS and NBC by analyst Andrew Tyndall will be available shortly, and a revised copy of this report will be posted on our website.

This assessment of criminal justice news coverage was based in part on a conference call conducted by Criminal Justice Journalists on Feb. 1, 2019 with criminologist James Alan Fox of Northeastern University, William Freivogel of Southern Illinois University and the Gateway Journalism Review, Roger Goldman of Saint Louis University School of Law, and Dan Shelley of the Radio Television Digital News Association, with contributions by Marea Mannion of Pennsylvania State University and Brandt Williams of Minnesota Public Radio.

Local Criminal Justice Coverage Continues to Drop

While several newspapers and online outlets in the national media produced exemplary criminal justice coverage during the year, it is clear that the volume of detailed and analytical coverage has decreased at the local level.

The number of employees in newspaper newsrooms fell 45 percent between 2008 and 2017, from about 71,000 to 39,000, a Pew Research Center study reported last summer.

Commenting on the Pew findings, media critic Margaret Sullivan of the Washington Post wrote, “One problem with losing local coverage is that we never know what we don’t know. Corruption can flourish, taxes can rise, public officials can indulge their worst impulses.”

It should be noted that several local news outlets produced fine coverage of important subjects in their areas, such as the prize-winning Cincinnati Enquirer’s reporting on the opioid overdose crisis in that hard-hit area, the Miami Herald’s investigations of abuse of inmates in Florida prisons, and the Houston Chronicle’s stories on similar problems in the sprawling Texas prison system.

The Center on Media, Crime and Justice at John Jay College continues to receive dozens of high-quality entries in its annual competition for prizes for the best coverage during the previous year, so it should be clear that there is plenty of good reporting going on in this important area.

The issue is that the stories often revolve around scandals in a particular city or region. As Sullivan notes, it is not clear in many areas whether there is news or not about basic operations of the criminal justice system.
On a broader scale, it is fairly rare to see the news media produce serious stories about what causes the high level of violence that continues around the nation even while rates of reported crime clearly are lower than they were in the 1990s.


He says, “In [today’s] sensationalized, polarized environment, evenhanded stories about everyday violence often find it hard to compete for attention. And it is these stories that can celebrate the successes of treatments like cognitive behavioral therapy and explore the science supporting them. The media—mainstream, new, and social—must do a better job of getting the word out on such stories.”

Of course, some local newspapers and television stations do run occasional feature stories on projects aimed at the violence problem, but the fact that overall crime rates around the U.S. are not so high as they have been in past decades means that the media typically do not focus on the issue unless there is clear increase in lawbreaking in their circulation areas.

**Mass Shootings and Gun Control**

Once again, 2018 was a year punctuated by mass shootings, which always get disproportionately more news coverage than other crimes because they are so shocking. Most of the 50,000 or more annual shootings involving just a few individuals get hardly any attention by comparison.

The killings of 17 students and staff members at Parkland’s Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on February 14, 2018 were especially newsworthy for a variety of reasons: They took place in an upscale area; the local law enforcement reaction to the attack was erratic at best, with the school’s own police officer accused of not responding quickly, and there had been several danger signs involving the shooter that were not taken very seriously.

Many Douglas students immediately announced that they would campaign for stronger gun control measures, a drive that resulted in quick adoption of a state law in Florida that imposed a three-day waiting period for most purchases of long guns, raised the minimum age for buying such weapons to 21 and banned bump stocks, devices that can make semiautomatic weapons fire like fully automatic firearms.

A large volume of media coverage speculated that the student enthusiasm would make Parkland different from the pattern that followed other major school shooting incidents, starting with the one at Colorado’s Columbine High School in 1999 and continuing through Newtown, Ct.’s Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012. In each instance, widespread pleas for new gun control laws had relatively little impact, particularly in a Congress heavily lobbied by the National Rifle Association.
At year’s end, the *South Florida Sun Sentinel* published a sobering review of events leading up to and following the Parkland episode. “Once he decided to shoot up a school, there wasn’t much to stop Nikolas Cruz,” said the newspaper. “His threats were ignored, the campus was wide open, the school doors were unlocked and students had nowhere to hide.” Ten months later, students at the school “are still exposed to potential danger,” the *Sun Sentinel* said. The Parkland shooting was followed by an episode on May 18 in which a 17-year-old student at Santa Fe High School in Texas killed 10 students, using his father’s gun.

Unlike in Florida, that incident did not lead to a particularly strong call for gun control in Texas, where policymakers have been much more conservative on gun issues. There also was no significant action in a Republican-dominated Congress, but there clearly will be much more attention to the issue now that Democrats have taken control of the House of Representatives. Whether that leads to any significant changes in the law is yet to be seen.

Throughout the year, several important aspects of school security were covered by the *Washington Post*. The newspaper compiled a graphic updated in December concluding that more than 220,000 students have experienced gun violence at schools in the two decades since Columbine. In June, the newspaper reported that many school districts were rushing to buy facial-recognition technology, although it “remains unproven as a deterrent to school shootings.”

This was followed up by a lengthy examination published on November 15 questioning how much equipment sold to schools by a $2.7 billion industry (a figure that doesn’t even count the large sums spent on security guards) actually works. The story said, “little research has been done on which safety measures do and do not protect students from gun violence.”

Then in December, the *Post* told how many of the four million children who had endured school lockdowns around the U.S. during the last school year were traumatized by the experience.

The *Post* took a close look at the issue of how school shooters obtain their weapons. On August 5, the newspaper reported that among 105 school shootings since 1999 in which the weapon’s source was identified, 80 percent were taken from the homes of the child, relatives or friends. The newspaper could find only four cases in which someone had been prosecuted for allowing a young person access to a firearm.

Non-school mass shootings also made major news during the year. On June 28, a man who had held a grudge for many years against the *Capital Gazette* newspaper in Annapolis, Md., burst into the newsroom and killed five journalists. The man had made threats against the newspaper and filed a lawsuit that was dismissed over a 2011 story in the publication about his guilty plea to harassment of a high school classmate. The newspaper was able to continue publishing with the help of journalists from other cities. The story ranked eighth in the list of crime stories covered by the three major television networks.

Then on October 27, a man killed 11 people at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, a case that has been classified as a hate crime. The massacre got a large volume of news coverage, focusing on the suspect’s long history of anti-Semitic statements. The *Pittsburgh Post*
Gazette published a front-page headline in Hebrew, the first words of a Jewish mourners’ prayer, as a tribute to the victims.

The Post-Gazette reported October 30 on Trump’s "somber visit to Pittsburgh just three days after the massacre, a visit marked by protests and pushback from local officials who expressed discontent with his appearance and chose not to attend."

One aspect of gun crimes getting considerable attention was “red-flag” laws in 14 states that allow law enforcement to seize weapons from people who are judged to be serious threats to themselves or others. The Washington Post on March 18 took a close look at the use of such a law in Connecticut, where there have been 200 cases since the measure was enacted in 1999.

As the newspaper summarized the debate, “Gun-control advocates say it is a common-sense way to prevent suicides, murders and mass shootings. Some gun owners say it is the manifestation of their greatest fear, in which the government confiscates legal guns from the homes of law-abiding citizens.”

Among major mainstream media, the New York Times most consistently covered gun issues not directly related to school shootings. Three examples:

On June 4, the Times reported on lax enforcement by the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. The agency regularly finds violations of the law by licensed firearms dealers but rarely penalizes them. Of 11,000 inspections in the year starting in October 2016, more than half of dealers were cited for violations but fewer than one percent of inspections resulted in the loss of a license.

On September 10, the Times took on the issue of how California is dealing with ammunition control. The state is limiting internet sales, banning large-capacity magazines, requiring sellers to have licenses, raising taxes on bullets, and requiring serial numbers or other traceable markings on ammunition so police can more easily track them.

The newspaper on Christmas eve detailed how in at least eight mass shootings since 2007 that killed 217 people, gunmen financed their attacks using credit cards, some using credit to acquire weapons they could not otherwise have afforded.

The news media’s habit of featuring mass killers continued to get attention last year. Criminologist Adam Lankford of the University of Alabama, who has studied the practice, was invited to speak at the annual meeting of Investigative Reporters and Editors, an event covered in The Crime Report.

He contended that the media may inadvertently encourage school shooters, commenting that, "When someone is desperate for fame or attention, committing a high-profile mass killing is one of the only guaranteed ways to get it. In many cases, winning a Super Bowl or Academy Award garners less media attention than committing one of these crimes."
There was no exact count available on how often the media named mass shooters, but many follow-up stories did not use the name of suspects but rather referred only to “the shooter” or similar anonymous characterizations.

**Immigration**

After seemingly endless debates in Congress for decades over the nation’s immigration policies, the Trump administration has made immigration a top-priority issue for more than two years, prompting constant news media coverage over a series of controversial policy moves.

News coverage has been extensive and often critical. In a year end review, *The Guardian* quoted Gregory Chen of the American Immigration Lawyers Association as saying, “It is breathtaking, how sweeping and deep the policy and legal changes are that this administration has ushered in within a period of just two years.”

The newspaper said the changes “hit every angle of the immigration system, from assailing humanitarian protections with the family separation policy to restricting workers travelling on the so-called ‘high-skilled’ H-1B visa with a plan to revoke their spouses’ work permits.”

In the criminal-justice arena, one major policy shift was the “zero-tolerance” policy of stepping up enforcement at the southwest border, which resulted in the separation of thousands of immigrant children from their parents.

The separations were necessary because those accused of crossing the border illegally typically were jailed, and children are not supposed to be jailed with their parents. The *Texas Tribune* and *Reveal* combined to tell the story of a Guatemalan women who was separated from her four children even though she attempted to enter the U.S. legally by seeking asylum. A lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union cited 40 such cases.

Much of the controversy concerned basic facts, including repeated contentions by President Trump that immigrants are responsible for a disproportionate amount of crime. In “The Myth of the Criminal Immigrant,” *The Marshall Project* cited a study concluding that in 136 metropolitan areas, the immigrant population increased between 1980 and 2016 while crime was stable or fell. The study, which reflects the results of other research on the subject, “suggests either that immigration has the effect of reducing average crime, or that there is simply no relationship between the two,” the story said.

The *Washington Post*’s fact-checking team said immigration accounted for the "biggest source" of the 8,158 false or misleading claims by President Trump in his first two years of office. The fact checkers added that the tally has grown with the addition of 300 misleading immigration claims in [early 2019] for a total of 1,433 of the president’s total.

To take one example, the president claimed that if his proposed wall were built on the southern border, “The crime rate and drug problem in our country would be quickly and greatly reduced. Some say it could be cut in half.”
The Post called that statement “simply laughable,” saying, “There is no evidence to suggest that is the case. Most undocumented immigrants do not illegally cross the southern border, undocumented immigrants do not commit crimes at a rate higher than U.S. citizens, and drugs flow through the border mostly through legal crossing points.” Many other media have made similar points.

Conservatives complained that much media coverage of the president’s policies was negative. It is true that stories about policy changes almost always included quotations from critics, but that didn’t prove that the overall coverage was biased. Coverage would have been more favorable if the media hadn’t had to devote so much space in print, on the internet, and in broadcast reports to correct factual errors made by the White House.

The New Yorker observed that the media gave plenty of coverage to the president’s anti-immigration rhetoric. Much of the coverage was explanatory to a public that largely does not know much in detail about the U.S. immigration system. The magazine said that in mainstream media coverage overall, with some exceptions words like "migrants" and "asylum" before 2017 "appeared primarily in coverage of foreign countries."

Another big issue covered by the media has been the level of cooperation between local law enforcement and the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency. The Washington Post discussed the debate in “County by county, ICE faces a growing backlash” on October 2. The story focused on counties that cut off contracts to house alleged immigration-law violators for ICE. Only near the end of the piece was it reported that during the Trump administration, the number of counties joining the federal 287(g) program that allows local jails to screen inmates for immigration violations had tripled.

The Post also reported extensively on the role of California as a “sanctuary state.” A May 14 story examined the state’s California Values Act, which prohibits most communication between local law enforcement and federal immigration agents.

Federal Sentencing and Prisons bill

Almost since long mandatory minimum federal sentences for drug crimes were enacted, starting in the 1980s, critics have tried to roll them back, arguing that they far exceed the damage actually done by narcotics and their application often hits minorities the hardest.

Tough-on-crime members of Congress managed to block major changes until late 2018, in large part because President Trump was persuaded to back a reform measure called the First Step Act that had gained support among many Republicans.

Much of the persuading was done by his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, whose father had served a federal prison term, but he was joined by such conservatives as then-Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Charles Grassley (R-IA.)
Trump’s endorsement of the measure was surprising to many, partly because his initial choice as attorney general, Jeff Sessions, had opposed it, as had hard-line conservatives on Capitol Hill. On November 15, the New York Times recognized the significance of Trump’s move, leading the newspaper with a story headlined, “Trump Embraces a Path to Ease U.S. Sentencing.”

Much of the national news media gave extensive coverage to the measure’s often-uncertain march to passage before Congress adjourned late last year. In fact, some of the reports were too exuberant, wrongly labeling the measure “sweeping criminal justice reform” when it actually involved only parts of the federal justice system.

The New York Times took a more measured approach, saying on December 19 after the Senate voted for the bill that, “the legislation falls short of benchmarks set by a more expansive overhaul proposed in Congress during Barack Obama’s presidency and of the kinds of changes sought by some liberal and conservative activists targeting mass incarceration.”

On the next day, the Washington Post analyzed “How the law-and-order GOP pivoted on criminal justice.” Its story noted that, “Republicans said revising the criminal justice system will save money by moving people convicted of low-level offenses out of prison and into programs that will help reduce the recidivism rate.” The newspaper said the bill was “also a response to moves on the local level, where similar changes passed in some of the nation’s reddest states, including Oklahoma and Texas.” It was one of the relatively few stories that explained how the federal reform actually lagged changes in many states.

The New York Times contributed good reporting on federal prisons. On June 18, the paper reported in a lead story that a workforce shortage in institutions meant that some prisons “regularly compel teachers, nurses, secretaries and other support staff” to step in as guards. On November 18, the Times described the “harassment, humiliation and terror” experienced by many female employees of federal prisons.

“Murder With Impunity”

The Washington Post deserves a special mention for a lengthy series over the course of the year that mapped homicides in major cities over a decade and found “areas where murder is common but arrests are rare.”

It was unusual and successful attempt by a newspaper with a national readership to analyze a key criminal justice issue that is touched on only occasionally by most local media.

Here is a rundown of some highlights of the series:

* Police blamed the failure to solve homicides on insufficient resources and poor relationships with residents, especially where witnesses fear retaliation, the paper reported on June 6. Families of victims say the fault rests with “apathetic police departments.”

* Police in 52 large cities have failed to make an arrest over a decade in nearly 26,000 killings; in 18,600 of those cases, the victim was black. Black victims were the least likely of any racial
group to have their killings result in an arrest. Police arrest someone in 63 percent of the killings of whites but only 47 percent of the killings of blacks, the Post reported on July 29.

* A September 14 story discussed high caseloads for detectives in Detroit and other cities. The article reported that departments with lower caseloads tended to have higher arrest rates, while departments with higher caseloads tended to have lower arrest rates; 39 of 48 departments reflected that pattern.

* On October 18, the series focused on Richmond, Va., where police have the highest homicide arrest rate of 50 cities surveyed, having made an arrest in 351 of 495 homicides — more than 70 percent of cases — since 2007. Police officials credit persistent community outreach that has helped encourage witnesses to cooperate.

**Kavanaugh Confirmation and Sex Crimes**

President Trump’s nomination of federal appellate judge Brett Kavanaugh to replace the retired Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy would have had extensive news coverage in any case, but the story gripped the nation in the summer and early fall when Kavanaugh was accused of having sexually assaulted a high school classmate decades earlier.

The mainstream media generally covered the issue responsibly, giving detailed accounts of accuser Christine Blasey Ford's account before and during a Senate hearing in September, as well as Kavanaugh's strong denials.

In the rush to cover all angles of the contentious nomination fight, some cable news programs and newspaper stories gave too much play to unsubstantiated allegations dating from Kavanaugh’s high school and college years. For at least a few days while the Senate was deciding how to proceed, it seemed like any accusation against the nominee about his activities in the 1980s could get publicity.

As just one example, USA Today reported that Deborah Ramirez, a Yale University classmate of Kavanaugh, “said that he exposed himself to her and shoved his penis in her face at a dorm room party in their freshman year at the Ivy League school. She said they were playing a drinking game at the time and admits there are gaps in her memory of that night.” That, like several other stories about Kavanaugh, never got much traction as he was narrowly confirmed.

Other sex-assault charges got major attention, most prominently the conviction of comedian Bill Cosby in a court near Philadelphia for having abused a Temple University employee 14 years earlier. Charges against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein for allegedly raping a woman in 2013 and forcibly performing oral sex on another woman in 2006, and the sentencing of former Michigan State University sports doctor Larry Nassar for molesting many young female athletes also had a huge volume of print and broadcast coverage.

The Cosby verdict may have been more an anomaly than a breakthrough for sex-crime cases, the New York Times said on April 28, quoting a former prosecutor in the jurisdiction where Cosby was tried as saying, “The reality for sex crimes prosecutions against victims of
acquaintance sexual assault, even post-Cosby conviction, is the cards are stacked against them.”

**Mueller Probe: ‘Watergate Times a Thousand’?**

Special counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation of Russian interference with the 2016 U.S. presidential election attracted saturation coverage, as the media competed to pierce the veil of secrecy covering the probe’s activities. Leaks and unsourced comments complemented (and occasionally confused) reportage on the prosecutions of former Donald Trump advisers Michael Flynn, Paul Manafort and Michael Cohen, among others. Ambiguity over the sources of the leaks (Congress, the White House, Trump’s legal team) added further confusion, and made it hard to assess the information—and also led to criticism that the media was pouncing on any details that would undermine the President.

In one story after Republicans in Congress issued a memo criticizing the Mueller probe, the Associated Press noted that the "media’s partisan divide seems wider than ever."

AP said that, "Fox, CNN and MSNBC, which are now more political talk than news channels, have been consumed by the story." Fox host Sean Hannity declared, "This is Watergate times a thousand,” charging the FBI with deliberately misleading a federal judge. On MSNBC at the same time, talk-show host Rachel Maddow was laughing. “That’s it?” she asked. “That’s all they got? That’s what all the hype was about?”

Some of the media can be faulted for constantly speculating that the Mueller investigation was about to end. It was still going on in the late winter of 2019.

Most reporting of the Mueller investigation seemed accurate, but the special counsel rarely said anything and stories mostly consisted of reporting on court cases or statements from key figures about what testimony grand juries were hearing.

It wasn't until 2019 that a major media report was questioned by Mueller directly. The special counsel's office denied a BuzzFeed News report that prosecutors possessed evidence that the President had directed then-lawyer Michael Cohen to lie to Congress about a potential Trump real estate project in Moscow. BuzzFeed stood by its story.

**Attorney General Sessions Fired**

Reporage on the short tenure of Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who was fired shortly after the midterm elections, centered on Trump's continued criticism of Sessions for recusing himself from overseeing the Mueller probe, a decision that most ethics experts said was legally correct.

The focus on the probe largely overshadowed detailed analysis of the actions Sessions was taking on crime and immigration issues, most of which agreed with White House policies. USA Today reviewed his record, noting that he had "urged federal prosecutors to intensify their focus on immigration crimes" and that he had added 311 prosecutors to help fight opioids, crime and immigration offenses.
Opioid Epidemic

Scores of media stories continued the previous year's focus on the death toll from drug overdoses, and the roots of the crisis. The Washington Post concentrated on drug manufacturers' role in causing the problem. The newspaper reported in February on a congressional report that two of the biggest drug distributors sent 12.3 million doses of powerful opioids to a single pharmacy in a tiny West Virginia town over eight years.

A congressional panel is investigating the sale of pills in the state by wholesale drug distributors, which are required to tell Drug Enforcement Administration about suspicious purchase orders for opioids.

Many media outlets contributed good reporting on how the opioid epidemic has affected their communities.

Meriting special attention is the Cincinnati Enquirer, which won a Pulitzer Prize last year for its 2017 story "Seven Days of Heroin," in which 60 journalists contributed to what the Pulitzer price board called "a riveting and insightful narrative and video documenting seven days of greater Cincinnati's heroin epidemic, revealing how the deadly addiction has ravaged families and communities."

More coverage is needed on how federal, state and local agencies are spending large sums of money that are being allocated to deal with the crisis.

The New York Times made such an effort on February 20, questioning how much the $38 million being spent by the city had to do with a decline in the number of drug fatalities between 2016 and 2017. The largest single chunk of the money was spent on police heroin overdose teams. Critics said more should be devoted to increasing treatment opportunities.

Media have dutifully reported on laws passed by Congress authorizing federal funding for dealing with the issue, but little follow-up so far on successes and failures.

Other Criminal Justice Issues

- "Progressive" Prosecutors

The election of more local prosecutors who favor alternatives to prison terms for many low-level offenders got more attention from the media. The Washington Post, for example, published a front-page feature November 20 on Mark Gonzalez, a former defense attorney who became district attorney of Nueces County, Texas, on a platform that included decriminalizing marijuana possession and aggressively prosecuting police in unwarranted shootings of civilians. The New York Times did a version of the overall story on October 26, focusing on what proved to be the successful campaign of former judge John Creuzot against incumbent prosecutor Faith Johnson in Dallas County, Tx.
Because the phenomenon is relatively new, there have been few reviews of how new prosecution policies have fared. The *New Yorker* published a notable feature in October on Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner's "campaign to end mass incarceration."

**Bail Reform**

Changes in pretrial release practices to reduce discrimination against suspects who can’t afford to pay for bail got significant media attention, especially in connection with a new California law that would eliminate cash bail (the statute is being delayed by court challenges from the bail industry). The *New York Times* reported on the issue April 1 in an article headline “Extortion or the Price of Freedom?” It said that, “As commercial bail has grown into a $2 billion industry, bond agents have become the payday lenders of the criminal justice world, offering quick relief to desperate customers at high prices.”

**Shootings by Police Officers**

The number of killings of civilians by U.S. police officers again neared 1,000 last year, according to an ongoing *Washington Post* database, but the number involving unarmed people declined to 68 in 2017 from 94 in 2015, the *Post* reported. Criminologist Geoff Alpert of the University of South Carolina said, “What we don’t understand yet is what’s causing these numbers to move downward.” Print and broadcast media continue to give good coverage to incidents when they occur, but the *Post* is virtually the only news organization to be tracking the issue on a constant basis.

**Genealogy Websites**

Websites offering the public information about family histories have emerged as a source of key information to solve some cold cases. The break authorities said led them to the man accused of being California’s “Golden State Killer” came when investigators linked DNA evidence from the slayings to genetic information contained on a consumer genealogical website, reported the *Los Angeles Times*. Investigators had known the killer only through a string of DNA recorded at several of a dozen murder scenes. Eventually, they tapped genealogical databases that the public uses to search for relatives and ancestors. That narrowed the investigation to several families listed in the database, with a pool of some 100 men who fit the age profile of the killer. That case and others prompted a debate about the privacy issues in such DNA searches.

**Selective Focus on Crime Victims**

The press has long been criticized for paying more attention to crimes involving photogenic, media-friendly victims in what one scholarly analysis called a "hierarchy of victimization." The murder of Shanann Watts, a pregnant Colorado woman, and her two young daughters in August and the arrest of her husband, Christopher, for the crimes, was one of last year’s most
prominent examples. The Watts case received a large amount of airtime on major television networks, ranking sixth in the number of minutes devoted to the top ten crime stories reported by three major television networks in the annual survey by Andrew Tyndall cited earlier in this report. The Washington Post said “the story may reflect race, gender and class dynamics as much as any other detail.” The newspaper quoted sociologist Zach Sommers of Northwestern University as saying that stories about young, white, female victims are “a natural trope” in U.S. society, a variation of the classic “damsel in distress” tale that has been reinforced by movies, books and culture for centuries. The recent list of victims or alleged perpetrators include Laci Peterson, Chandra Levy, Natalee Holloway, Elizabeth Smart, Amanda Knox, Jodi Arias and Casey Anthony.

The Crime Report thanks the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation for its continued support of these annual reviews. A second part of the 2018 Year in Review with a transcript of the conference call mentioned above will be posted later, along with the revised summary.