

Special Report

The Crime Beat: Does Quantity Matter?

A content analysis of six U.S. newspapers finds a significant amount of crime reporting—but raises questions about the quality of coverage

October 2014

Criminal Justice Journalists

By Debora Wenger and Dr. Rocky Dailey

Although newspapers have been struggling in recent years to maintain their reporting muscle, crime and criminal justice content continues to be a staple of local coverage. In 2011, a survey by the Pew Research Center (formerly the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism) found that crime ranked sixth among topics covered across media types—below foreign news, government agencies, campaigns/elections, foreign affairs, and the economy. In the survey sample, 36 percent of U.S. adults reported they get most of their [news about crime in their communities](#) from newspapers, 29 percent from local TV news and 12 percent from the Internet.

Moreover, the coverage newspapers produce has a significant impact, says James Alan Fox, a criminologist at Northeastern University in Boston. “People’s perception of crime in their own neighborhoods is generally based on their own experiences,” he told us. “But when it comes to perceptions about crime in the city as a whole or the state or the nation, those perceptions are created by news coverage.”

Crime in the News(paper)

★ 78

Crime and criminal justice stories
per month in U.S. daily
newspapers

● 2.5

Local crime stories per day

Pew has since stopped its quantitative surveys of news coverage, but an analysis of how newspapers continue to cover the “crime beat” at a time when the criminal justice system is the subject of intense national debate remains a critical tool for editors, journalists and policymakers. **Criminal Justice Journalists**, with the support of the **Center on Media, Crime and Justice** at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and the **Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation**, studied a representative sample of daily newspapers to gauge the quantity and nature of coverage during a one-month period in 2014, and asked editors and journalism educators about their perceptions of the coverage. We also examined the perspective of law enforcement officers, who made up over a third of the sources used by journalists in the papers studied, and their relationship with media outlets. While it is a limited study, we hope that it will spur more intensive and detailed research.

For the study, six daily newspapers in large and small markets were selected for content analysis between March 1 and March 31, 2014. The newspapers were selected based on the [CQ Press 2013 City Crime Rankings](#). Papers covering cities listed as having the highest and the lowest crime rates for each population category (cities of 500,000 or more, 100,000-499,000 and 75,000-99,000) were included. The newspapers examined were *Detroit Free Press*, *El Paso Times*, *The Indianapolis Star* (which covers Fishers, In.), *The Camden (N.J.) Courier-Post*, *Naperville, (Ill.) Sun* and *The Flint, (Mi.) Journal*.

We found that the six papers under review 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).

NOTE: for individual content analyses of each newspaper studied, please see attached sidebars.

The crime and justice stories analyzed were overwhelmingly reported as discrete incidents, without significant context added, and they tended to focus on violent crime versus property crime. In addition, 65 percent of the crime and justice stories overall referenced just one source of information.

Yet, enterprise and investigative reporting did play a role in coverage. Several of the newspapers included in the study produced pieces that involved significant original reporting and multiple sources.

The *Courier-Post* is the fifth largest paper in New Jersey. With one full-time reporter dedicated to crime and public safety and additional help from other staff as needed, the paper and CourierPostOnline.com serve the counties of Burlington, Camden and Gloucester. The editor says the newspaper tries “to present the human aspect of crime.”

“(That involves) how it affects families, individuals and communities,” said Metro editor Phaedra Trethan. “We cover a tri-county area that is mostly suburban, but also includes Camden, routinely listed among the nation’s poorest and most violent cities.”

In fact, with 165 total stories for the survey period, the *Courier-Post* had more crime and criminal justice coverage than any other paper in the study. More than 15 percent of the stories reported in the *Courier-Post* were enterprise or investigative in nature.

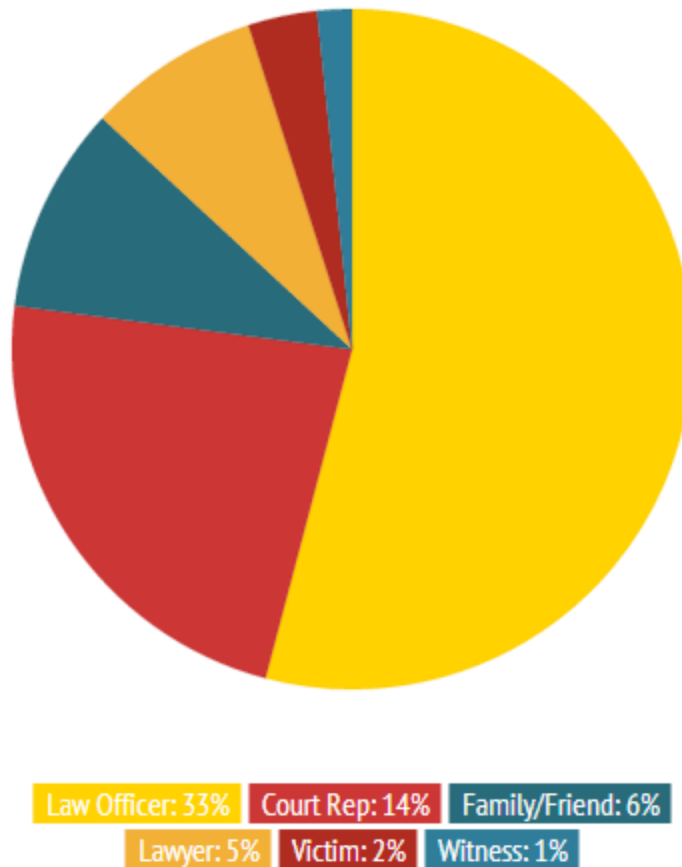
“We try to get beyond the ‘brief’—a just-the-facts recitation of the crime—and into some depth, talking to victims, their families; reporting on the ripple effects of violence throughout communities and the long-term, traumatic impact on people,” Trethan said.

The Camden newspaper’s high story total may have been influenced by the city’s traditionally high homicide rate and the decision to make the surrounding county responsible for policing the city.

Michigan journalist and educator Bonnie Bucqueroux says in-depth reporting has been rare in crime and justice coverage, even when more newsrooms had more resources.

“We have never done a good job of putting crime in broader context,” said Bucqueroux, who teaches journalism at Michigan State University and runs a local news website. “What we typically get is the police version of an event. I think it’s a box that the traditional media have always been in; it’s difficult and time-consuming to dig out alternative sources.”

Crime & Justice Story Sources



(The other 40 percent included a wide range of other sources, such as government officials, neighbors, school principals and business people.)

Sourcing Stories

At every publication in the study, law enforcement officers were the most commonly cited sources by a wide margin [see below], with court representatives, including judges and prosecutors, coming in a distant second. Fox agrees this heavy reliance on the official point of view is one of long standing.

“News media tends to take the official side, the prosecution side – this doesn’t surprise me – when a case emerges in the news, that’s often the only side available to the reporter,” said Fox.

What may be more surprising is how often stories rely on a single source. At the Camden paper, for example, 84 percent of stories had one reported source, as did 55 percent of those published in *The*

Indianapolis Star. Eric Dick, breaking news editor at the *Star*, says the newspaper likes to add more points of view to stories whenever possible; but for every enterprise story, there are undoubtedly many more briefs.

“I think there are three factors involved. One is the amount of crime: information is readily available that rises to the threshold you need to do a story, but you wouldn’t be able to develop all of them,” Dick said.

He also points out that the nature of crime news comes into play.

“Some stories can be told clearly in a few paragraphs as opposed to city hall coverage, for example. And the third factor is just the way crime news presents itself, meaning it’s breaking-news-oriented, so covering it doesn’t always necessarily require the commitment of a lot of background research or deep sourcing.”

Bucqueroux says she thinks only sports coverage is comparable:

“Many newspapers cover sports in the same way. You may interview a spokesperson for the team or an authorized player and then the perception is you don’t need more than that unless you’re dealing with an issue in sports, like concussions.”

The results, according to Bucqueroux, are certain cliché, formulaic stories.

“It’s the good guys versus the bad guys, and police are the good guys,” she said.

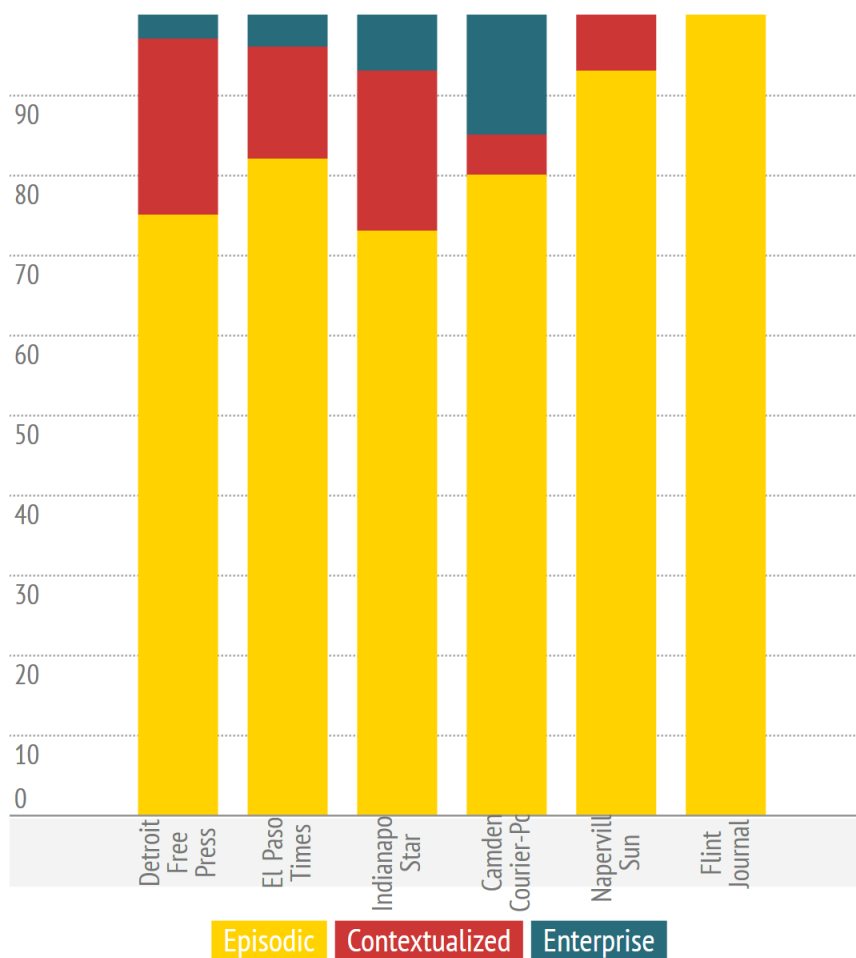
At the *Star*, about 7 percent of the reporting that Dick and his team of six produced during the analysis period was enterprise and investigative in nature—something he says is important in order to avoid perpetuating a “culture of fear.”

“We like to bring more context to our stories, we’re cognizant of the need to not always be doing four paragraphs and ‘here’s another shooting’ stories,” said Dick.

He points to the *Star*’s recent coverage of why rape is most commonly prosecuted as a Class B felony in Indiana, as opposed to a Class A felony, which comes with stiffer penalties, and the *Star*’s stories that raised questions about whether juveniles should face more repercussions for gun law violations or its exploration of whether Indianapolis has enough officers to make community policing work well.

“I’m particularly proud of those instances when we really can pursue enterprise reporting to the degree it examines whether the system is working as it should,” Dick said.

Episodic Reporting



Episodic Crime

In recent years, critics of crime reporting have blasted news organizations for failing to put crime in context by treating too many incidents of crime as discrete events with no relation to other crimes or societal factors. For example, the [Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma](#), summarizing a series of studies, concluded that coverage of many traumatic events, including those that are crime-related, feature the events' provocative or sensational aspects, ignoring overarching patterns or risk factors, which could be valuable for the audience to understand.

Our study suggests that “episodic” crime reporting is a common practice.

For the month-long review period, all of the crime and justice stories covered by the *Flint Journal*, for example, could be described as episodic rather than contextualized or enterprise. The *Detroit Free Press* (75%) and the *Indianapolis Star* (73%) had the fewest “one-off” stories, but those percentages are still high.

Fox says he's not sure that episodic reporting of crime has much impact on the public.

“Unless they’re really big stories that are covered repeatedly, most people will read about what happened and then forget about it, especially when there are so many. They’ll shake their heads and not remember the case,” Fox said.

Still, Fox says there are times when the episodic approach is problematic:

“For the most important stories, journalists should try to look at not just one crime but at a pattern of crime; I wish there were more of that.”

During the period studied, there appeared to be relatively few high-profile stories driving "extra" coverage. However, there are notable exceptions. Two examples: the *El Paso Times* analysis of the impact of a drug cartel leader’s capture on the local trafficking world; and the *Camden Courier-Post’s* look at efforts the local campus of Rutgers University is making to battle sexual assault. These illustrate an ongoing commitment by the newspapers to cover stories that have a broad and significant impact on the communities in their circulation area.

Courts & Corrections

Another criticism leveled at the news media is a lack of reporting on issues related to the court system and corrections. For example, it’s not unusual for an arrest to be reported, but the subsequent criminal proceedings are often ignored, and it’s relatively rare to see any sort of systemic evaluation of the criminal justice process.

In this study, court coverage fared much better than corrections. In five of the six papers analyzed, more than 30 percent of the stories dealt with some aspect of the court system. The *Camden Courier-Post* featured court coverage in 21 percent of its stories.

However, corrections topics such as prisons, parole and probation were much less likely to get coverage, with the exception of the *Detroit Free Press*, which devoted just under 11 percent of its crime and justice coverage during the month to corrections-related issues. For example, the paper explored Michigan’s early release program after an 84-year-old grandmother was murdered by a previously convicted killer who was out on parole. Another story detailed how failure to reset motion sensors within a state correctional facility aided a quadruple murderer’s escape. Reporters also explored the issue of resentencing for hundreds of inmates serving mandatory life terms for murders committed while they were juveniles.

Bucqueroux says a focus on corrections is in keeping with what she sees as the paper’s approach to coverage.

“The Detroit Free Press always took more seriously the full breadth of criminal justice issues, and there are so many challenges to covering crime in Detroit. Detroit has a higher homicide rate than Chicago; it is a violent city with a lot of crime, but the paper recognizes it is a complicated tableau of which crime is a part.”



Crime coverage is of keen interest to our readership.

-Eric Dick, Indianapolis Star

Making the Front Page

Crime and criminal justice stories are routinely cited as high interest content in readership surveys, and Dick says the quantitative data the *Star* gets from its website confirms that finding. For example, he points to a recent home invasion story involving the rape of two women, which he says caused a spike in Web traffic.

That audience interest leads newspapers to give crime and justice stories pride of place. At the *El Paso Times*, crime is a regular feature of the front page and the metro front, with more than a third of the stories appearing in one of those two prominent positions within the paper. At the *Courier-Post*, 10 percent of the crime and justice stories hit the front page. Threthan says that placement within the newspaper conveys the seriousness of the crime; if it's on the front page, that tells readers that the crime is of particular consequence.

Dan Cassidy, the editor for the *Naperville Sun*, agrees. He says that less serious crimes are generally reported deeper in the paper.

Alternatively, the *Detroit Free Press*, which along with Camden often gets a "most dangerous city for its size" label, featured less than 1 percent of its crime stories on A1.

Bucqueroux says this can be attributed to a sort of "hierarchy of crime."

"In some cities, getting murdered isn't enough to get your name in the paper. In cities like Detroit, the sheer amount of crime to be covered is difficult to manage. It often boils down to a matter of frequency and severity."

Sources Say...Law Enforcement Comments on Crime Coverage

Law enforcement officers made up 33 percent of the sources in the crime and justice reporting analyzed for this project, and many in law enforcement recognize the symbiotic relationship they have with the media. We interviewed police agency spokespersons as part of the study.

“We value all of our news partners,” said Lt. Christopher Bailey, spokesperson for the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department. “They play an important role in crime prevention as well as keeping the citizens informed on public safety issues.”

Yet, there can be tension between law officers and the media. Bill Davis, the public information officer for the Naperville (Illinois) Police Department, says relationships can be strained when a major case is involved and limited information is being released to protect the investigation. He said:

“Much information is channeled through our state’s attorney’s office to ensure that one message is being released and prevent conflicting information that may hinder the prosecution in future court proceedings. This will often frustrate reporters competing for more information. We always strive to have a consistent message with all media outlets to ensure that no one is getting more information than the other.”

Relationships can become more strained when local law enforcement agencies are unhappy with coverage decisions made by a news organization or an individual reporter. It’s not unusual for agencies to systematically monitor news media coverage involving their departments. Davis says he tracks stories in the local media and briefs the police chief if he feels it’s warranted.

Bucqueroux says the adversarial role journalists sometimes have to play with police and other authorities can be challenging.

“Reporters are always at the mercy of access to official sources,” said Bucqueroux. “For a police reporter it’s tough. If you challenge the orthodoxy, you could have access denied. It’s a real Catch-22.”

However, Bailey says he appreciates it when the news media does crime reporting well.

“The *Star* does an excellent job of fact-checking each of their stories. It seems like they have less of a desire to be first and are more focused on being right. They do tell both sides of every story and they also include experts from multiple disciplines in most of their stories.”

THE TAKEAWAY: Quantity vs Content

While this study has its limitations, given that it involved newspapers across a wide range of market sizes and at both ends of the crime rate spectrum, it appears that, despite the cutbacks on staff and resources, crime coverage is alive and well in U.S. newspapers.

At all the papers in the survey, there were few days without a crime story, and a significant percentage of the stories covered ended up on the front pages.

At the same time, Bucqueroux is not sure that the abundance of crime reporting is directly related to its value.

As she put it:

“It’s easy and cheap to cover and readers like it. All you have to do is listen to the scanner or pick up the police blotter. I sound so cynical, but I was coordinator of the Victims in Media Program and associate director for the National Center for Community Policing. The kind of crime that comes to the media’s attention and what makes headlines is just a small fraction, and an unrealistic representation, of what actually occurs. Domestic violence springs up every day, for example, but it’s seldom reported on.”

Dick says coverage approaches are already changing. For example, he says the *Star* is more digital than print-focused at this point, and in the future, he anticipates communication technology is going to have significant impact on what it means to report on crime and criminal justice.

He said:

“I think with breaking crime news, we’ll be able to be more immediate and live in words and pictures and video, so I think that crime problems will resonate with folks more as they see things unfold in real time. It isn’t just words on paper, it’s live video of something going on two blocks from where you live.”

In addition, he anticipates interactive multimedia offering a real boon to coverage.

“We will be developing ways to inform people that take advantage of multimedia and interactive graphics to help them understand stories and to engage them to a degree that perhaps we traditionally have not.”

Already some news organizations, like the *Los Angeles Times*, are experimenting with technological solutions to crime coverage. The paper’s [The Homicide Report](#) site promises “a story for every victim” and uses an algorithm to plug in data from official sources to generate a brief report on every homicide in the coverage area. This approach ostensibly frees up the organization’s reporters to do a better job of covering stories that need more development, more often.

What this study indicates is that crime and justice reporting remains integral to the work of daily newspapers. While it is impossible to say with certainty whether the job and resource losses in the industry are thinning out that coverage, it’s evident that on many, many occasions, the stories reported include only the “official” view of the crime or court case, for example, with little to no broader perspective or context indicating why the stories matter to the public.

Future research may be able to quantify whether there is more or less crime coverage occurring in today’s daily metropolitan newspapers than in the past; and an expanded content analysis could provide insight into whether crime is getting more or less emphasis than other topics reported. Given the fact that Pew has determined that 66 percent of U.S. adults say they follow crime news, with only weather, breaking news and politics garnering more interest, it is imperative that the audience gets the most contextualized and well-sourced coverage possible.

Debra Wenger is Director of Undergraduate Journalism at the University of Mississippi. She worked in local television and newspapers for two decades and has served on the board of Criminal Justice Journalists. Dr. Rocky Dailey is Assistant Professor at South Dakota State University. He worked in local television and newspapers as a visual journalist and online reporter over the course of 17 years and currently teaches in the graduate and honors programs in journalism and mass communication.

The Center on Media, Crime and Justice gratefully acknowledges the support of the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation for this study.