

News Media Coverage and the Epidemiology of Homicide

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ABSTRACT

Objectives. This study assessed how newspaper coverage of homicides corresponds to the epidemiology of homicide.

Methods. Stories in the *Los Angeles Times* about homicide ($n = 2782$) were compared with the homicides that occurred in Los Angeles County from 1990 through 1994 ($n = 9442$). The generalized linear model assessed how victim, incident, and suspect characteristics related to coverage.

Results. Even when multiple variables were taken into account, some homicides (those with female, child, or elderly victims; those in which the suspect was a stranger to the victim; those in wealthier neighborhoods) received more coverage and others (those with Black or Hispanic victims or victims with less than a high school education; those committed with nonfirearm weapons; those in which the suspect was an intimate of the victim) received less coverage than expected.

Conclusions. Some homicides are more newsworthy than others. Potential implications of not providing the public with representative data are discussed. (*Am J Public Health*. 1998; 88:1510-1514)

An informed public is key to the prevention of violence and to other policy arenas in which substantial public cooperation is required to achieve optimal results. For the public to be well informed, the main channels of information need to provide adequate and accurate information. The news media are a critical source of the public's information about crime and violence.¹ Although television plays a major news role, newspapers are the primary source of information about local crime.²

The present study is one of several (e.g., references 1, 3-10) to extend the current focus on violence and the entertainment media to the news media. We investigated the degree to which newspaper stories about homicide correspond to actual patterns of homicide victimization. Homicide was selected because law enforcement data on homicide are believed to be more complete than data on robberies, rapes, and other crimes and because, although homicide constitutes the least common form of crime, it receives the largest share of television and newspaper coverage of crime.^{1,11,12}

Methods

Los Angeles, with its diverse population, large number of homicides, and major local newspaper (the *Los Angeles Times* has the second-largest circulation in the nation), was the site for our study of whether some homicides receive preferential newspaper coverage. The data reported here are from the 7-part series on criminal justice processing of homicides that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* in December 1996.

The 9442 willful homicides that occurred in Los Angeles County from 1990 through 1994 constituted the study population. Data were gathered from the California Department of Justice, the Office of Vital Records and Statistics, the Los Angeles County Department of the Coroner, Los Angeles County Municipal and Superior Court case files, and the *Los Angeles Times* database of its news stories.

Data used in this analysis include variables having to do with the homicide victim (e.g., age, ethnicity); incident (e.g., weapon used, special circumstances [a legal term applied to homicides that are particularly

heinous in the sense that, by statute, offenders are eligible for capital punishment; see California Penal Code 190.2a]); suspect (e.g., sex, education); and newspaper coverage of the incident (e.g., number of articles, story length). Education was used as an indicator of the victim's and the suspect's socioeconomic status. Victim and incident address information was geocoded and linked to 1990 US census data (victim address information was available for 1993 and 1994 only). The median household income for the relevant census tract was used to indicate the economic status of the victim's neighborhood of residence and the neighborhood where the homicide occurred.

Newspaper coverage consisted of full stories, in which the specific homicide was the primary focus of the reporting, and mention stories, in which the victim was one of several listed in roundup fashion. Substantive findings were very similar whether the analysis was based on full stories alone or on any coverage; analyses using all stories are reported herein. Victims with more than 5 articles were recoded to 5. (The murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman received abundant coverage and were reassigned to the category of 1 story.)

Frequency distributions and cross-tabulations were computed to compare Los Angeles County homicides with those reported in the *Times* and to describe the characteristics of newspaper coverage of homicide victims. Statistical models were established to mirror, to some degree, the information flow that was likely to be available to a reporter. Specifically, victim characteristics (which typically are known first) were entered into a logistic regression to predict some vs no coverage (Model I), then incident characteristics were added (Model II), and finally suspect characteristics and

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Note. This paper is an abbreviated version of a longer manuscript, a copy of which can be obtained from the authors.

TABLE 1—Characteristics of Homicide Victims and Suspects, From Official Records and Newspaper Stories: Los Angeles County, 1990–1994

	Victim					Suspect				
	% of Homicides (n = 9442)	Newspaper Stories ^a				% of Homicides (n = 9442)	Newspaper Stories ^a			
		Mention Stories Only (n = 349)	1 Full Story ^b (n = 492)	2+ Full Stories ^b (n = 400)	Any Coverage ^c		Mention Stories Only (n = 349)	1 Full Story ^b (n = 492)	2+ Full Stories ^b (n = 400)	Any Coverage ^c
Sex										
Male	85.3	85.1	72.2	66.0	11.4	43.2	42.7	49.4	53.8	14.9
Female	14.4	14.9	27.8	34.0	23.9	2.6	0.6	1.4	5.3	12.4
Missing/unknown	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	54.3	56.7	49.2	41.0	11.8
Age, y										
≤14	5.3	4.9	9.8	17.8	27.1	0.0 ^d	0.3	0.0	0.0	33.3
15–24	39.3	46.7	35.6	27.8	12.1	23.8	26.4	26.8	33.0	15.8
25–34	28.4	26.6	22.8	21.5	10.9	12.9	10.9	14.4	14.8	13.8
35–44	15.3	10.6	13.4	12.3	10.6	4.8	3.7	4.9	5.3	11.6
45–54	6.0	6.6	7.1	10.3	17.6	1.6	1.4	1.8	2.3	15.6
55–64	2.8	2.6	4.9	4.3	19.1	0.5	0.3	0.2	0.8	11.4
65+	2.5	2.0	6.5	6.3	27.1	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.5	17.6
Missing/unknown	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	56.2	57.0	51.6	43.5	11.9
Race/ethnicity										
Asian	3.8	5.7	8.7	8.3	26.4	1.1	0.9	1.2	2.5	17.8
Black	33.3	32.1	24.8	28.3	11.1	18.3	18.6	20.1	27.0	15.8
Hispanic	47.9	47.6	44.5	32.8	11.4	20.1	20.1	20.9	16.0	11.5
White	12.9	12.6	20.9	28.3	21.4	4.5	3.4	6.3	10.8	20.1
Missing/other	2.1	2.0	1.0	2.6	11.3	55.9	57.0	51.4	43.8	11.9
Education										
<HS	49.3	48.8	44.9	40.3	12.1	19.1	15.5	15.4	21.8	12.0
HS graduate	32.8	33.7	35.3	30.5	13.6	7.1	6.6	8.5	7.8	14.4
>HS	13.8	15.7	18.5	28.2	20.1	3.7	3.4	5.5	8.0	20.0
Missing/unknown	4.1	1.7	1.2	1.0	6.1	70.1	74.5	70.5	62.5	12.9

Note. HS = high school.

^aPercentage of stories in which the victim (or suspect) had the characteristic listed.

^bCoverage may include mention stories in addition to the full stories.

^cPercentage of all homicides in the category indicated (i.e., in which the victim [or suspect] had the characteristic listed) that received any coverage at all.

^dn = 3.

victim–suspect relationship were included (Model III). Poisson regression was used to assess the association of these variables with the number of articles published. For both analyses, the unit of analysis was the homicide victim.

Results

Of the 9442 homicide victims, 85.3% were male, 67.7% were between the ages of 15 and 34 years, and 85.0% were minorities (47.9% were Hispanic, 33.3% were Black, and 3.8% were Asian; Table 1). The murders of 1241 (13.1%) of the homicide victims were covered by the *Times*. Of all homicide victims, 9.4% received at least 1 full story and 3.7% had only mention stories; 8.1% received 1 story and 5.0% were covered in 2 or more stories. Full-length articles predominated in both single-story and multiple-story coverage (63.5% and 65.7%, respectively). Most of the covered homicides (72.4%) received multiple stories. Initial coverage most often occurred when the crime

occurred (78.3%) or when an arrest was made (16.9%). Homicide stories on the first page of each section were the longest, and those in section A were, on average, the longest. Section B (the Metro section), however, contained the majority (62.6%) of the articles. Victims receiving more coverage than would be expected based on the frequency of homicides in their respective groups included women, victims younger than 15 and those 65 or more years old, and Asians and Whites.

A suspect was identified in 52.1% of the homicides. (An arrest was made in about one third of the cases. It is important to point out that clearance rates for homicide and other violent crimes have dropped nationally during the past 3 decades; see, for example, Riedel.¹³) Homicides in which no suspect was identified were slightly more likely to be covered than those with a suspect (15.1% vs 12.0%). Suspect characteristics generally were not related to newspaper coverage, with 2 exceptions: Latino suspects were less likely than others to receive coverage, and suspects with more than a high school edu-

cation were more likely than those with less education to be covered.

As shown in Table 2, most homicides had a single victim (88.1%), were committed in the street (54.1%), and involved a firearm (75.0%). Of the cases in which the victim–suspect relationship was known, 36.3% of the victims and suspects were strangers, 35.3% were friends or acquaintances, 17.2% were gang members, and 11.3% were intimates or family members. In 76.6% of the cases, the victim and suspect were of the same ethnicity. The *Times* was more likely to report homicides with multiple victims, those involving special circumstances, and those that were solved.

Even when other variables were taken into consideration, the odds that homicides of women would be covered were twice the odds for homicides of men (Table 3). Homicides of the very young and the very old were more likely to be covered and homicides of 25- to 44-year-olds were less likely to be covered than homicides of 15- to 24-year-olds. Homicides of Hispanics and Blacks were substantially underreported in

TABLE 2—Characteristics of Homicide Incidents, From Official Records and Newspaper Stories: Los Angeles County, 1990–1994

	% of Homicides (n = 9442)	Newspaper Stories ^a			Any Coverage ^c
		Mention Stories Only (n = 349)	1 Full Story ^b (n = 492)	2+ Full Stories ^b (n = 400)	
No. of victims					
1	88.1	90.8	72.6	66.8	11.3
2+	8.0	8.9	26.4	32.3	38.4
Missing/unknown	3.9	0.3	1.0	1.0	2.8
Location					
Residence ^d	24.7	20.6	34.6	39.0	17.1
Street ^e	54.1	61.3	40.9	40.0	11.3
Place of business	6.9	8.0	10.0	10.0	18.0
Open areas ^f	8.9	8.9	10.2	7.8	13.4
Other	1.6	0.9	3.5	2.3	19.7
Missing	3.8	0.3	1.0	1.0	2.8
Weapon					
Firearm	75.0	84.5	75.8	73.5	11.6
Other	20.6	14.9	22.6	25.0	13.5
Missing/unknown	4.3	0.6	1.6	1.5	3.9
Special circumstances					
Yes	14.6	15.5	21.7	35.3	21.8
No	81.5	84.2	77.2	63.8	12.0
Missing/unknown	3.8	0.3	1.0	1.0	2.8
Victim–suspect relationship					
Intimate	4.0	1.1	4.9	5.0	12.8
Family	3.8	2.0	7.5	7.8	21.2
Other known	24.3	20.9	27.2	22.3	12.9
Gang	11.8	14.9	10.4	9.0	12.5
Stranger	24.9	29.8	30.1	36.0	18.8
Missing/unknown	31.2	31.2	19.9	20.0	9.7
Interethnic					
Yes	10.2	11.7	12.6	20.3	19.2
No	33.4	29.5	36.0	34.8	13.3
Missing/unknown	56.5	58.7	51.4	45.0	11.9
Suspect arrested					
Yes	52.1	48.7	62.6	30.0	15.4
No	47.9	51.3	37.4	70.0	10.7

^aPercentage of stories in which the homicide incident had the characteristic listed.

^bCoverage may include mention stories in addition to the full stories.

^cPercentage of homicide incidents with the characteristic listed that received any coverage at all.

^dIncludes the victim's, the suspect's, their shared, or another residence.

^eIncludes homicides that occurred on streets or highways, in cars, or on sidewalks.

^fIncludes homicides that occurred in public-use spaces such as parks and parking lots as well as fields in rural areas.

the newspaper. Victims with more education were more likely to receive coverage.

The odds that homicides involving multiple victims would receive newspaper coverage were 4.5 times the odds for homicides in which there was 1 victim. Homicides involving special circumstances were more likely to be covered, as were those occurring in wealthier neighborhoods (those with a median household income of at least \$25 000), although the kind of location (e.g., street, residence) was not related to coverage. Homicides involving a weapon other than a firearm were less likely to be covered than those involving a gun.

The data patterns observed in the first 2 models remained the same when suspect characteristics and victim–suspect relationship were taken into consideration. Homicides in which the victim and suspect were

intimates were less likely to be covered and homicides by strangers were more likely to be covered than homicides in which the victim and suspect were acquaintances. Demographic characteristics of the suspect generally were not related to coverage of the homicide. (This finding is consistent with research on race and the death penalty: It is the race of the victim, not the race of the suspect, that matters.^{14–16}) A Poisson regression used to examine the number of articles published produced results very similar to the logistic regression findings. (Tabled data are available from the authors.)

We explored whether interethnic homicides were more likely than others to be covered by running the regression analyses again with a variable indicating whether the victim and suspect were of the same ethnicity. (Victim ethnicity and suspect ethnicity

were not included as independent predictors because of the high collinearity with the inter/intraethnic variable.) The odds that interethnic homicides were reported in the newspaper were 1.25 times the odds for intraethnic homicides (95% confidence interval [CI] = 1.01, 1.54).

The logistic regression was rerun with 1993 and 1994 data to include the median household income of the census tract where the victim lived. (Tabled data are available from the authors.) Even taking into consideration the education level of the victim and the other variables listed in Table 3, the odds that victims from neighborhoods with a median household income of at least \$35 000 received coverage were 2.1 times the odds for victims from poorer neighborhoods (95% CI = 1.39, 3.25). Interethnic homicides were not disproportionately covered once the

TABLE 3—Homicide Victim, Incident, and Suspect Characteristics Related to Newspaper Coverage (Some vs None)

	Model I		Model II		Model III	
	Exp (β)	(95% CI)	Exp (β)	(95% CI)	Exp (β)	(95% CI)
Victim						
Sex						
Female (vs male)	2.02	(1.73, 2.35)	2.03	(1.71, 2.39)	2.26	(1.89, 2.69)
Age, y (vs 15–24)						
≤14	2.73	(2.14, 3.48)	3.17	(2.44, 4.13)	3.12	(2.37, 4.12)
25–34	0.80	(0.68, 0.94)	0.80	(0.67, 0.95)	0.83	(0.70, 0.98)
35–44	0.71	(0.57, 0.87)	0.73	(0.59, 0.90)	0.77	(0.62, 0.96)
45–54	1.13	(0.88, 1.46)	1.12	(0.86, 1.47)	1.16	(0.88, 1.53)
55–64	1.25	(0.89, 1.77)	1.23	(0.85, 1.78)	1.30	(0.90, 1.89)
65+	1.72	(1.23, 2.40)	1.83	(1.27, 2.64)	1.92	(1.33, 2.79)
Ethnicity (vs White)						
Asian	1.30	(0.98, 1.72)	1.21	(0.90, 1.62)	1.30	(0.94, 1.79)
Black	0.53	(0.44, 0.64)	0.66	(0.54, 0.81)	0.62	(0.49, 0.77)
Hispanic	0.66	(0.54, 0.80)	0.74	(0.60, 0.91)	0.76	(0.61, 0.95)
Education (vs HS graduate)						
<HS	0.75	(0.64, 0.88)	0.78	(0.66, 0.91)	0.78	(0.66, 0.92)
>HS	1.34	(1.12, 1.62)	1.25	(1.03, 1.51)	1.24	(1.02, 1.51)
Missing	0.33	(0.23, 0.46)	0.39	(0.28, 0.56)	0.39	(0.27, 0.56)
Incident						
Multiple victims						
Yes (vs no)			4.49	(3.77, 5.35)	4.52	(3.78, 5.40)
Weapon (vs firearm)						
Other			0.77	(0.65, 0.92)	0.82	(0.68, 0.98)
Missing/unknown			0.22	(0.12, 0.43)	0.26	(0.14, 0.51)
Special circumstances						
Yes (vs no)			1.83	(1.55, 2.17)	1.49	(1.24, 1.80)
Location (vs residence)						
Place of business						
Street			1.25	(0.96, 1.61)	1.10	(0.85, 1.44)
Open areas			1.05	(0.89, 1.24)	0.95	(0.80, 1.14)
Missing			1.22	(0.95, 1.56)	1.15	(0.89, 1.49)
Median household income, \$						
(vs <\$20 000)						
20 000–24 999			1.14	(0.92, 1.43)	1.18	(0.95, 1.48)
25 000–34 999			1.82	(1.49, 2.23)	1.94	(1.58, 2.39)
35 000+			1.86	(1.48, 2.34)	2.01	(1.60, 2.54)
Missing			1.55	(1.28, 1.88)	1.69	(1.39, 2.06)
Suspect						
Sex (vs male)						
Female					0.74	(0.48, 1.16)
Missing					1.29	(0.74, 2.22)
Age, y (vs ≤24)						
25–34					0.77	(0.61, 0.97)
35–44					0.85	(0.61, 1.19)
45–54					1.06	(0.63, 1.80)
55–64					0.61	(0.22, 1.68)
65+					1.17	(0.31, 4.48)
Missing					0.67	(0.41, 1.10)
Ethnicity (vs White)						
Asian					0.60	(0.30, 1.17)
Black					1.17	(0.84, 1.64)
Hispanic					0.87	(0.62, 1.23)
Missing					0.71	(0.41, 1.22)
Education (vs HS graduate)						
<HS					0.89	(0.67, 1.18)
>HS					1.17	(0.80, 1.72)
Missing					1.30	(0.98, 1.72)
Victim–suspect relationship (vs acquaintance)						
Intimate					0.56	(0.39, 0.82)
Family					0.93	(0.65, 1.31)
Stranger					1.37	(1.13, 1.67)
Gang					1.17	(0.92, 1.50)
Not determined					0.85	(0.69, 1.04)
Model statistics						
(–2) Log likelihood		6803.4		6378.67		6297.19

Note. CI = confidence interval; HS = high school.

median household income of the victim's neighborhood was taken into consideration.

Discussion

If different kinds of homicides were covered in the news media in the proportion in which they occur, the general public might have an accurate sense of the scope and nature of the homicide that occurs in their communities. Some research suggests, however, that cases covered by the media are chosen for their deviance from the statistical norm.¹⁷ In other words, public health and the news media may be at odds—public health focuses on commonalities such as high-risk groups and environments, whereas the news media focus on the uniqueness of an event.

Our findings suggest a somewhat different story, however. Although homicides involving special circumstances and multiple victims were consistently associated with more coverage, a primary feature of the *Los Angeles Times* coverage was that it focused on the "worthy victim"—victims who were White, in the youngest and oldest age groups, women, of high socioeconomic status, killed by strangers. We were able to describe patterns of coverage, but we could not examine empirically why the patterns exist; such an analysis is beyond the data available in this study.

News media accounts of crime can affect the public's ratings of the importance or salience of issues,¹⁸ define a social problem,¹⁹ shape public estimates of violence within society,²⁰ and affect the public's views on criminal justice sentencing.²¹ They can also influence the public's fears about personal safety, satisfaction with law enforcement, and trust of others.¹ These concerns, in turn, can affect a range of personal and political actions with implications for violence prevention and control. If the information used by the public is suspect, so are the behavioral and policy responses that follow.

For the past several years, crime and violence have been rated as the most impor-

tant problem facing the United States.²² But does the public have accurate information about violence in general and about homicide in particular? These findings suggest that newspaper presentations of homicide do not necessarily reflect actual patterns of homicide and homicide risk. This may also be why, despite well-publicized announcements of declining homicide trends in the past several years, an overwhelming majority of people, regardless of sex, race, age, income, geographic region, and political affiliation, believe that the country is losing ground when it comes to crime.²³ □

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