

Crime Creep: Urban & Suburban Crime on Local TV News

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Local Television News Media Project

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A b s t r a c t

Crime has fallen in the United States in the past eight years, yet public opinion polls indicate that crime and public safety are over-riding concerns of citizens in communities. Polls also tell us that a significant majority of our citizens get most of their information from local television news and, in general, they believe what they are being shown and told. In short, these newscasts play a pre-eminent role in the social construction of reality and, by extension, in forming the cognitive maps that citizens use to understand their communities.

This research examines how the press, particularly local television news, portrays the urban–suburban dimensions of crime in twenty television markets across the U.S. It is an major extension of an earlier study of two markets. Findings show that local newscasts in the markets consistently focused on suburban crime in spite of the fact that the suburban crime rate was about one-half of the crime rate of urban areas. The newscasts also regularly conveyed the message that the city was a dangerous place.

Introduction

The media's attention to specific areas of public policy has produced significant consequences. For example, the news frame regarding violence against women reinforces the mythology of male supremacy that is evident in the public policy that constitutes society's response to the issue (Meyers, 1997). Election campaigns are reduced to political communication that forces candidates to espouse positions at the political margins to be heard—positions that are incompatible with governance once the election is won (Kaniss, 1995; Patterson, 1993).

Perhaps the most clear example of the media's impact on public policy is found in the area of crime and criminal justice. The media's treatment of and its relationship to crime and justice policy has received much attention (Barak, 1994 & 1995; Dahlgren, 1988; Ericson, 1990; Katz, 1987; Klite, 1998; Lesser, 1993; Pritchard, 1994; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994; Surette, 1998). Juvenile crime on television has also been examined in detail (Children Now, 2001; Dorfman and Shiraldi, 2001). Budzilowicz (2003) concluded that local television news portray ("frame") crime in such a way as to produce episodes in which the responsibility for crime is seen as individualistic and the remedy is punishment

This *mediated* public sphere has important implications when we consider the media's agenda-setting and agenda-priming capacities. The public pro-actively uses various techniques to process the information that it receives from the media, each of which is employed to help make sense of the environment (Graber, 1988). Apart from these action strategies, attributes such as education, partisanship and political involvement influence how citizens are affected by the agenda-setting mechanisms of the media (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). Regardless of the use of these mechanisms or effect of these attributes, the public's understanding of the political world is affected by the media's messages. Hart (1999) argues that television makes the public sphere more private and, in so doing, it endorses a set of feelings about politics (feeling intimate, feeling informed,

Being informed and feeling informed are different matters.

feeling clever, feeling busy, feeling important). But, he warns, “being informed and feeling informed are different matters” (Hart, 1999, p.8). Television, he concludes, miseducates the citizenry and democracy “becomes imperiled (a) when people do not know what they think they know and (b) when they do not care about what they do not know” (Hart, 1999, p. 9).

The cognitive maps produced by this understanding of politics has profound effects on citizens’ understanding of social issues and the corresponding public policies that have been instituted to address them (Morris, 1997). That is particularly acute when we consider private understandings of life (derived from lived experience) and the public discourse (constituted in large part from media representations). When the two understandings of life are in conflict, people tend to devalue their own experience and accept the public discourse as a better representation of the world at large (Aubrun and Grady, 2000). In the case of crime and justice policy, that portrayal leads to an understanding of crime and justice that translates into public policies that often seek simple solutions to complex problems (Morris, 1997). For example, in the United States over the last quarter century, the rehabilitative rationale for incarceration has been forsaken in favor of the punitive approach. But more punishment can only occur in more prisons and states have embarked on wholesale prison construction programs in which inmates are simply “warehoused”. Concomitantly, increases in state budgets for prison construction have been many times higher than any other budgetary item, including education. All this for a correctional policy that fails (as measured by recidivism) almost two-thirds of the time (U.S. Department of Justice, June 2002).

Former President Clinton’s effort to “put 100,000 more police on the streets” represented another policy choice on the opposite end of the criminal justice system from corrections. Media reports immediately and repeatedly intoned the obvious metaphor of “taking back the streets” from criminals. And make no mistake, the streets to which the President referred were **urban** streets. In addition, thirty-four states in the United States allow citizens to carry a concealed deadly weapon.

Beyond public policy responses, there have also been strategies adopted by private citizens. These “private” policies have taken an ominous turn. *Dead Serious*, an organization in Texas, makes a straightforward offer. For a \$10 membership fee, *Dead Serious* gives you a bumper sticker and a promise. It will pay you \$5,000 if you kill someone who is committing a crime. Wounding them does not count (All Things Considered, 1995).

These policies, both public and private, are a response to a perception of crime that is largely urban and pre-eminently violent. But, how does the press, particularly local television news, portray the urban–suburban dimensions of crime?

Among the large number of content studies of news, only a few have made comparisons across cities (Chermak, 1995; Cohen, 1975; Graber, 1980; Lotz, 1991; Windhauser, Seiter and Winfree, 1990). But none has examined the urban-suburban axis. In this paper, I extend my previous analysis of crime coverage by local television newscasts from two prominent television markets in the United States (Philadelphia and Baltimore) to a national sample of newscasts in twenty markets in the country. The conventional wisdom (Chermak, 1995; Graber, 1980; Klite, 1997) suggests that the coverage is skewed toward an over-representation of violent crime. Is that the case for local newscasts across the nation? Do the newscasts make any distinction between suburban and urban crime? What might this coverage mean for our visions of the city and the suburbs and for our corresponding policy responses?

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The findings indicated that crime was the major public issue that occupied the newscasts, more than all other public issues combined. In fact, the presentation of crime was wildly unrelated to its actual occurrence in the cities and suburbs in the television markets. Further, even though the suburban areas in the markets experienced lower crime rates, crime coverage on the newscasts was overwhelmingly a suburban phenomenon.

Local TV News & Crime

Everyday an estimated 71 million viewers across the nation tune in to local television newscasts (Pew Center for the People and the Press, 1998). Although that represents a decrease in audience size since the early 1990's (from an estimated 80 million viewers), local television news reaches more citizens than the combined viewership of the broadcast network nightly news programs (McManus, 1994, pp. 15-16). In 1998 a majority of Americans said that they used local TV news as an information source “daily or weekly”, a higher percentage than local newspapers (Newport and Saad, 1998). That preeminence continued in December 2002 when a Gallup poll found that almost six out ten Americans used local television news as an information source **every day**, more than any other news outlet (Gallup Poll, 2002). Further, two-thirds of the public indicated that they thought that local news was doing an “excellent or good” job (Radio-Television News Directors Association & Foundation, 2001). In addition, local television news enjoys a “net trust” rating of 54 percent, tied with public TV news and second only to the trust level (59%) for CNN (Newport and Saad, 1998). Although there has been some erosion in the dominance of local television news since the late 1990's (NewsLab, 1999), these polls tell us that a significant majority of our citizens get most of their information about their communities from local television news and, in general, they believe what they are being shown and told. These newscasts play a prominent role in the social construction of reality. By extension, they help form the cognitive maps that citizens use to understand their communities (Gans, 1979; Kaniss, 1991; Kaniss, 1995; Klite, 1998; Miller, 1998; Parenti, 1986; Surette, 1998; Tuchman, 1978). Not only was local television news the public’s primary choice for information, viewers were specific about their interests. Crime (91%) was tied for second place on that list with education and “community happenings” while weather (94%) occupied the top spot (Radio-Television News Directors Association & Foundation, 2001). That was also consistent with earlier research in which two topics were the most

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prominent:(1) “news from where you live”and (2) crime (Newseum Survey on Attitudes Toward the Media, 1997). Further, there is evidence that regular viewers of crime drama are more likely to fear crime (Dowler, 2003; Glassner, 1999).

Crime has fallen in the United States over the past decade (Pastore and Maguire, 2001). Yet, public opinion polls indicate that crime and public safety are the over-riding concerns of citizens in cities. Crime is a persistent feature of urban life in America and urban populations express more fear of crime than residents in any other type of community (Flanagan & Longmire, 1996). In May 1996, a plurality of twenty-five percent of Americans (more than for any other issue) thought that crime violence was the most important problem facing the country (United States Department of Justice, 1996, p. 128). Further, when asked about the problems toward which tax dollars should be spent, eighty-four percent of Americans (more than for any other problem) stated that it was “extremely important” to reduce violent crime (Executive Office of the President, 1996, pp. 22-25). There has been some change in the public’s attitude toward society’s preferred approach to the remediation of crime. In 1994, the public was about evenly split regarding policies that were tough on crime versus policies that were tough on the causes of crime. By 2001, fully two-thirds of the public favored policies that would address the causes of crime (Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., 2001). But regardless of the policy choice, crime continues to be a primary concern for the public in both urban and suburban areas.

Most often, the press represents the negative aspects of the city around the issues of urban conflict and crime. Focusing on television news, Cottle (1993) suggests that the press offers “contested realities” regarding the inner city in which the nature of urban distress is explained by competing discourses. In its treatment of urban conflict, he concludes television news “failed to convey the lived conditions and the curtailed life chances daily confronted by those living in run-down areas and marginalized communities”. This failure represents “a major social struggle over meaning: the struggle to define and publicly engage opposing points of view in relation to the problems and issues of urban distress” (Cottle, 1993, p. 1).

Burgess's (1985) study of the riots in two English cities in 1981 saw the inner city as playing a central role in the disorders. The media role's was to construct the inner city, symbolically, as a distant and deviant place. She observes that, "the newspapers fulfill an ideological role in which the myth is being perpetuated of *The Inner City* as an alien place, separated and isolated, located outside white, middle-class values and environments" (Burgess, 1985, p. 193). What is implied by her analysis and those of others is that the inner city stands apart from the other parts of metropolitan areas, namely suburbs.

Crime is fundamentally a local phenomenon and local media organizations place great emphasis on urban conflict, crime and justice (Burgess, 1985; Cottle, 1993; Graber, 1980; Snyder, 1992). For local television news, there is no more salient issue than crime (Atwater, 1984; Atwater, 1986; Chermak, 1994; Dominick, et. al., 1975; Klite, et. al., 1997; Klite, et.al, 1998; Miller, 1998; Surette, 1984). It provides the viewer with instantly recognizable symbols, good guys and bad guys, and situations, conflict, drama, tension. And, it perfectly satisfies the media's news selection criteria. Rueven Frank, in his capacity as the Executive Producer of the NBC Evening News, offered the following prescription for a news story in a memo to his staff in 1963:

Every news story should, without sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle and an end. These are not only the essentials of drama; they are the essentials of narrative (In Epstein, 1973, 4-5).

For crime stories the most stark distillation of the news selection criteria has been expressed much more succinctly: "If it bleeds, it leads". The logic that is explicit in both prescriptions directs television news producers to select stories that are imbued with conflict and tension. The focus on crime, then, is almost a foregone conclusion. As a result, citizens and policy makers alike point to the emphasis of crime news on television as evidence of increasing crime and an overburdened criminal justice system.

Methodology

To examine the structure and elements of television news, it is necessary to look explicitly at its content. Thus, the basic methodology for this research was content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980). It is a method that produces a systematic and objective description of information content. Content analysis has a long history of use in studies of both print and electronic media. It has been used extensively in the examination of local television news (Atwater, 1984; Atwater, 1986; Chermak, 1994; Dominick, et. al., 1975; Graber, 1980; Klite, et. al., 1997; Klite, et.al, 1998; Miller, 1998;). In the instance of TV news studies, actual news broadcasts are used as the basis for the analysis. For this study, the unit of analysis was the individual news story.

Study Sites, The Sample: Nielsen Media Research defines a television market as a Designated Market Area (DMA), identifying 210 such DMA's across the country at the time of the newscasts in the sample. Each DMA consists of all of the counties in which the home market stations receive a preponderance of viewing. Every county in the U.S. is allocated exclusively to one DMA. Each market is given a rank depending on its size as measured by the number of television households in the DMA.

The sample for this research was developed from the videotaped local television broadcasts in twenty television markets (DMA's) throughout the United States. The videotaping was carried out by the Local TV News Project of the Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) during the Spring of 1998. Based in Washington, D.C., PEJ is a non-profit initiative by journalists to clarify and raise the standards of American journalism. PEJ's videotaping included both "sweeps" and "non-sweeps" time periods. A "sweeps" month is a period when the Nielsen ratings of the stations' programs are recorded to establish the size of its audience and, by extension, to determine the price of advertising on the station. Obviously, the larger the audience, the more the station can charge for advertising. "Non-sweeps" periods are those months when the Nielsen ratings are not officially used to set advertising prices. To avoid any bias, PEJ recorded newscasts from both

periods. PEJ selected the markets by first grouping all DMA's into quartiles based on rank. Five markets within each quartile were then chosen randomly after being stratified to ensure geographic diversity. PEJ chose the highest-rated competing news programs in the market using the highest rated time slot (6 pm, 10 pm or 11 pm) as the common denominator. Hour-long newscasts and distant stations were excluded. According to PEJ, this approach provided the most consistent yardstick among markets. PEJ provided the videotapes to me for digitizing and further study.

The television markets in the study represented stations from every geographic region in the U.S. as well as a wide range of sizes (from market #1 to market #109), as measured by the number of households in 1998. The television markets in the study reached a combined total of over 30 million television households in the United States. That represented approximately 30% of all of the television households in the country.

For this analysis, the television markets were placed into four DMA groups based on their size. The sizes of the markets offered obvious groupings. DMA Group 1 comprised of markets 1 through 10 and included New York (1); Los Angeles (2); Chicago (3); Boston (6); Washington, D.C. (8) and Atlanta (10). Stations in this DMA Group reached over 21 million households and accounted for over two-thirds of the households comprising the sample. DMA Group 2 accounted for markets 12 through 21 and included Seattle (12); Minneapolis/St. Paul (14); Pittsburgh (20) and St. Louis (21). DMA Group 3 was comprised markets 44 through 72 and included Buffalo(44); Louisville (48); Albuquerque (49); Jacksonville, FL (52); Wichita (65) and Tucson (72). DMA Group 4 (markets 91 through 109) included Burlington, VT (91); Evansville, IN (98); Lansing, MI (107) and Tallahassee (109). The television markets, their market number (as determined by Nielsen Media Research) and the number of television households in each that comprised the DMA groups appear in Table 1.

The sample included 559 newscasts from the network affiliated stations in each of the markets. The broadcasts of NBC, CBS and ABC affiliates were included in all of the markets except Burlington, VT where the newscasts of the

CBS affiliate were not part of the sample. The broadcasts of four stations were included in two markets. In Minneapolis/St. Paul the UPN affiliate's newscasts were included. The same is true for the Fox affiliate's newscasts in St. Louis.

Table 1: Characteristics of Designated Market Area (DMA) Groups (part 1)

DMA Group	DMA Rank	# Television Households
DMA's 1-10		
New York	1	6,874,990
Los Angeles	2	5,234,690
Chicago	3	3,204,710
Boston	6	2,210,580
Washington, D.C.	8	1,999,870
Atlanta	10	1,774,720
Sub-total		21,299,560
DMA's 12-21		
Seattle	12	1,591,100
Minneapolis/St. Paul	14	1,481,050
Pittsburgh	20	1,135,290
St. Louis	21	1,114,370
Sub-Total		5,321,810

Table 1: Characteristics of Designated Market Area (DMA) Groups (part 2)

DMA Group	DMA Rank	# Television Households
DMA's 44-72		
Buffalo	44	621,460
Louisville	48	576,850
Albuquerque	49	568,650
Jacksonville, FL	52	540,450
Wichita	65	443,690
Tucson	72	380,900
Sub-total		3,132,000
DMA's 91-109		
Burlington	91	295,480
Evansville	98	274,460
Lansing, MI	107	237,860
Tallahassee	109	230,300
Sub-total		1,038,100
Grand Total		30,791,470

Source: Nielsen Media Research

Stories, The Unit of Analysis: The unit of analysis was the individual story that was shown on the newscast. The sample yielded 7,667 separate stories, excluding sports and weather. These stories fell into the following categories: (1) Crime; (2) Human interest; (3) Public issues, all public issues such as education, health, etc., other than crime; (4) Fires/Accidents; (5) Government; (6); Clinton investigations; (7) Politics; (8) Consumer news; (9) International stories; (10) Entertainment news; (11) Promos for the station..

Of the 7,667 stories that comprised the total sample for this research, there were 2,002 crime stories. These crime stories comprised the basis for this examination and they were further separated into five categories for more detailed analysis: (1) Crime event; (2) Police; (3) Courts; (4) Corrections; (5) Criminal justice policy.

Crime in the Designated Market Areas

Before we look at the news coverage of crime in the Designated Market Areas, it is important to understand the prevalence of crime in the markets. In many ways, crime in the DMA groups was remarkably similar. The table below offers a comparison.

Table 2: Proportion of reported crimes in DMA Groups, 1998

SMSA	% Murder	% Violent	% Other Crime
DMA's 1-10			
City	.2	22.7	77.1
Suburbs	.1	9.3	90.6
DMA's 12-21			
City	.2	15.2	84.7
Suburbs	.1	6.1	93.8
DMA's 44-72			
City	.1	12.9	87.0
Suburbs	.1	13.4	86.5
DMA's 91-109			
City	.1	9.5	90.4
Suburbs	.1	6.3	93.6
Median for all markets			
City	.2	15.1	84.8
Suburbs	.1	9.4	90.5

Source: Crime in America's Top-Rated Cities, 2000

The vast majority of crimes in the DMA's were non-violent offenses (Table 2). That was true for the cities (with a median of 84.8% for all markets) as well as the suburbs (a median of 90.5% for all markets). In general, the core cities had

more violent crime than their suburbs (a median of 15.1% and 9.4%, respectively), but, again, non-violent crime comprised the overwhelming majority of crime in the cities. There was a pattern to crimes in the DMA's indicating that the proportion of violent crime, other than murder, in the core cities of the DMA Groups fell as the size of the DMA Group decreased. For example, violent crime accounted for almost one-fourth (22.7%) of crime in DMA's 1-10. For DMA's 91-109, that proportion decreased to under one out of ten crimes (9.5%).

The proportion of murder was virtually the same across the DMA groups accounting for a median of .2 percent and .1 percent in the cities and suburbs, respectively. In the two largest DMA groups the proportion of murders in the cities doubled that of the suburbs (.2% and .1%, respectively). In the two smallest DMA groups that proportion was virtually the same (.1%). What is important to the analysis here is that murder accounted for almost an infinitesimal proportion of crimes in either the cities or the suburbs of the DMA's.

When comparing these crime patterns to those for the nation, I found a very high degree of similarity. For the U.S., the distribution was as follows: murder, .1%; other violent crime, 12.1%, other crime, 87.8% (Crime in America's Top-Rated Cities, 2000). It is clear that murder was the most rare of crimes.

To give these proportions of crime some context, I examined the rates for specific types of crime. In general, the crime rates confirmed the significant difference in crime between the core cities and the suburbs in the DMA's. For example, the median total crime rate for all core cities in the DMA's doubled that rate for the suburbs (8,305 and 4,181 per 100,000 population, respectively). Further, the median violent crime rate for the core cities (1,230 per 100,000 population) tripled that rate for the suburbs (357 per 100,000 population). The median murder rates for the cities and the suburbs were similarly different (9.8 and 3.9 per 100,000 population, respectively). However, the differences in the murder rates between the core cities and the suburbs within the DMA groups varied significantly. In the largest DMA group (1-10), the murder rate in the core cities was four times the rate in the suburbs (19 and 4.6 per 100,000 population,

respectively). Further, in the third largest DMA group (44-72), the murder rate between the cities and the suburbs was much closer (9.5 and 6.8 per 100,000 population, respectively).

Table 3: Crime Rates* for DMA Groups, 1998

SMSA	Total Crime Rate	Property Crime Rate	Violent Crime Rate	Murder Rate
DMA's 1-10				
City	7540	5904	1343	19
Suburbs	3912	3325	401	4.6
DMA's 12-21				
City	9693	8515	1201	13
Suburbs	3983	3748	235	2.5
DMA's 44-72				
City	7431	6521	989	9.5
Suburbs	4369	3730	566	6.8
DMA's 91-109				
City	8811	7581	1230	9.5
Suburbs	4252	3665	330	1.9
Median for all markets				
City	8305	6756	1230	9.8
Suburbs	4181	3716	357	3.9
U.S.	4616	4049	566	6.3

*Crime rate=crime per 100,000 population.

Source: Crime in America's Top-Rated Cities, 2000

This profile of crime is highly instructive. From the portrait painted by the official statistics, crime in all of the DMA's was mostly non-violent and, more revealing for our study of local TV news, very rarely was a homicide. Let's see how that compares with the coverage of crime by local television news.

Covering Crime in the Designated Market Areas

Before examining the specific locations of crime stories in the newscasts, it was important to understand the context in which crime stories were broadcast. The obvious question was what information was selected as news by the producers of the broadcasts. What were the topics of the 7,667 stories that were reported in the newscasts in the DMA's that comprised our sample? An examination of the newscasts yielded eleven categories of story topics: (1) crime; (2) human interest; (3) public issues, all public issues other than crime such as environment, health, the economy, etc.; (4) fires/accidents; (5) Clinton case; (6) politics; (7) consumer news; (8) government; (9) entertainment; (10) international stories; and (11) promos for the news or the station.

Which Stories Made the News?

The most important feature of the newscasts across the DMA's was that they were strikingly similar in the types and frequencies of the stories they broadcasted. Crime stories were either the predominant or second-most frequent story on the newscasts in all of the markets (Table 4). In the largest DMA group (1-10), crime stories accounted for the largest plurality of stories (28.5%) and an equal amount of broadcast time (29%). And, the stations in this DMA group reached over 21 million households. Crime stories also predominated in DMA's 44-72 with 28.2 percent of the stories and 27.8 percent of the broadcast time. In the other two DMA groups, crime was the second-most frequent story type. In short, crime was a prevailing topic in all of the markets.

The dominance of crime was even more striking when compared to the category of public issues, which included all other social issues. In the three largest DMA groups, the stations covered all of the remaining public issues that they thought were newsworthy in about one-fifth of their stories. They ranged from 16.5 percent in DMA's 1-10 to 22.5 percent in DMA's 12-21. In only the smallest DMA group (91-109) were public issues the predominant story type (28.6%). Human interest stories accounted for the third most often presented story type. After that, however, there was a significant decrease in the proportions of the newscasts that

were devoted to other story types. As a result, there was a clear demarcation between the story topics that received the most coverage (crime, public issues and human interest) and those story topics that received significantly less coverage (fires/accidents, Clinton case, politics, consumer news, government, entertainment and international news). Judging by the selection process, crime was presented as the most newsworthy public issue facing the citizens across the television markets. That finding was consistent with previous research (Klite, 1998; Miller, 1998).

Table 4: Story Topic and Broadcast Times (N=7667)

Story Type	DMA's 1-10		DMA's 12-21		DMA's 44-72		DMA's 91-102	
	% Stories	% Time	% Stories	% Time	% Stories	% Time	% Stories	% Time
Crime	28.5	29.0	24.0	24.8	28.2	27.8	23.3	22.0
Human Interest	22.7	20.3	24.3	23.2	26.9	25.4	19.6	20.4
Public Issues	16.5	16.2	22.5	25.8	19.5	22.5	28.6	30.0
Fire/Accidents	12.4	11.3	11.3	10.1	8.8	7.9	8.3	7.7
Clinton Case	5.2	5.1	2.8	1.7	1.6	.8	.7	.7
Politics	4.1	5.7	1.3	.8	1.8	1.9	4.7	6.2
Consumer	3.0	5.4	2.6	4.5	2.4	4.0	1.8	1.7
Government	2.8	2.2	4.5	4.2	7.4	6.8	6.7	6.4
Entertainment	2.4	2.9	.4	.3	1.3	1.6	4.1	2.1
International	2.0	1.5	4.2	2.4	1.3	.7	.7	.8
Promo/Round-up	.4	.3	2.1	2.4	.8	.6	1.5	2.1
Total	100 <i>(n=2374)</i>	100	100 <i>(n=2280)</i>	100	100 <i>(n=1891)</i>	100	100 <i>(n=1122)</i>	100

For purposes of this analysis, the treatment of government stories was particularly instructive. I defined a government story as focusing on an action by a local, county, state entity or the Federal government. Typically, these stories

reported a policy or administrative action taken by the jurisdiction. There was an unmistakable general pattern in this coverage across the DMA groups---the larger the DMA group, the less coverage of government actions (Table 4). To wit: the two largest groups (DMA Groups 1 and 2) covered government issues in substantially less of their broadcasts (2.8 and 4.5 percent, respectively) than DMA groups 3 and 4 (7.4 and 6.7 percent, respectively). Regardless of the relative attention that the stations in the DMA's gave to government actions, that coverage was still significantly less than the coverage that was directed at crime.

How Was Crime News Presented?

Crime was the single most prominent social issue on the newscasts in all of the DMA groups. To understand that coverage more completely, the 2,002 crime stories (26% of all stories that were broadcasted) that occupied so much of the newscasts were divided into five separate categories. One category included criminal justice policy and administration (legislation, management, etc). The remaining four categories were conceptually congruent with the criminal justice process, i.e., **Crime Event, Police, Courts** and **Corrections**. In this way, I could examine the stages of the criminal justice process as they were covered by the newscasts. In the *Crime Event* category, the story reported the occurrence of a crime. A story was placed in the *Police* category, when the action of the story was taken by the police, either an arrest was made, an investigation was being launched or continued, etc. In the *Courts* category, the action was being taken by the courts, typically a trial was being held, a plea was being taken, etc. In the *Corrections* category, action was being taken by correctional authorities, prisons, parole boards, etc.

There were similarities and substantial differences in the crime news categories that were presented in the newscasts of both markets. First, the similarities; in all of the DMA groups, police and court stories *combined* accounted for the majority of crime news (Table 5). That majority ranged from 72 percent in DMA's 44-72 to 67 percent in DMA's 1-10. The newscasts in the markets were also similar in giving corrections the least coverage (1 - 2%).

Table 5: Types of Crime Coverage in the DMA's (N=2002)

Story Type	DMA's 1-10	DMA's 12-21	DMA's 44-72	DMA's 91-102
	% Stories	% Stories	% Stories	% Stories
Police	37	33	34	37
Courts	30	35	38	33
Crime Event	22	22	18	11
CJ Policy	10	9	8	18
Corrections	1	1	2	1
Total	100 (n=680)	100 (n=544)	100 (n=523)	100 (n=255)

Court stories were prominent in all of the DMA groups with the largest plurality in DMA's 12-21 and 44-72 (35% and 38%, respectively). The fact that a very high proportion of crime stories focused on the courts was an interesting finding because we often think that the crime event itself would be the most prominent crime story for local TV news. There are several possible explanations for the relatively extensive coverage of court proceedings in the newscasts. First, from a production standpoint, the court stories were easier to cover. The action of the story (testimony, verdict, etc.) occurred at the courthouse, a familiar location to the station's news staff, where the news director knew that a story was available. That was important because the news director had scarce resources with which to produce the newscast and their efficient use was a primary consideration. The most expensive of those resources was the news crew consisting of a reporter and a camera operator. Therefore, dispatching a news crew had to be done with the calculation that it would deliver a story that could be used on the newscast, otherwise scarce resources would be wasted. Sending the news crew to the courthouse virtually guaranteed that a useable story would result.

Second, the court story most probably was in reference to a crime that had already been the topic (the crime event) of a story on a previous broadcast by the

station. Therefore, no new information about the crime needed to be developed for the story; it was already on “file” with the station and it was easily accessed for the court story, thereby saving additional resources. Third, and most important, court stories offer court news as miniseries—the media trial-- in which the media co-opt the criminal justice system as a source of high drama and entertainment (Surette, 1998).

There were important and statistically significant ($p < .001$) differences in crime coverage among the DMA groups. Specifically, DMA’s 91-109 covered criminal justice policy issues (18%) almost twice as often as the stations in the other DMA groups (Table 5). Concomitantly, its coverage of crime event stories (11%) was about half of that coverage in the other DMA groups. This attention to policy issues in DMA’s 91-109 was consistent with the overall approach to newscasts. This DMA group accounted for the only broadcasts in which public issues comprised the largest plurality of story types (28.6%) among all of the DMA groups (See Table 4) and it represented the smallest markets in the sample.

Location

The local stations in the DMA's constructed their newscasts to portray crime stories in ways that they thought would capture an audience. The stories had a particular character--mostly murder, mostly presented at the beginning of the show, mostly individual suspects and victims, etc. There was, however, another crucial aspect of the coverage--the location of the crime that was the topic of the story. The conventional wisdom has suggested that crime has been depicted in the media as a predominantly urban phenomenon (Burgess, 1985; Cottle, 1994; Chermak, 1995). Was the local news coverage of crime among the stations in the DMA groups consistent with that representation? What were the locations of the crimes that were reported in the stories? Core city? Suburbs? Where did the presentation fall along the urban/suburban dimension?

In order to negate any locational bias, I limited the urban/suburban analysis to the crime event and police categories of crime stories. By definition, the criminal justice policy category did not refer to a specific crime and therefore, these stories were not included in the location analysis. The stories in the court and corrections categories were also inappropriate for the location analysis. These stories were "located" where the courthouse or the prison happened to be and did not reflect the "place" where the crime took place. My interest was the "place" where the crime occurred and that was only identifiable by examining the stories that indicated the location of the crime. That was possible by looking at the crime event or police (investigation, arrest, etc.) categories of stories. Given this definition, there were 1,097 such stories in the DMA groups.

"Place"

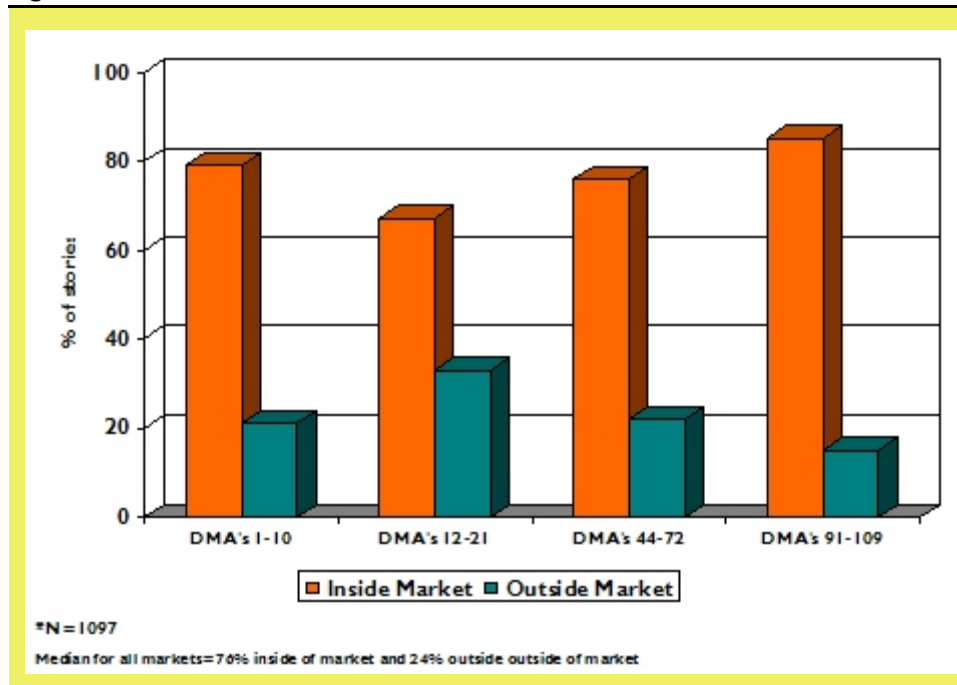
In order to understand where the crimes reported in the newscasts had occurred, I coded the smallest geographic unit or "place" that was identified in the news story for which I could make comparisons among the markets. The "place" had different geographic specificity across the markets. In some cases the stations reported a particular address. In other cases, the smallest geographic unit that was reported in the story was a town. As a result, the smallest geographic unit that I

used in this analysis was the town in order to make comparisons among the markets.

Inside or Outside of the Market?

An important demarcation regarding crime coverage among the stations was whether the crime in the story was “located” inside or outside of the market. The market is defined by Nielsen Media Research as consisting of all of the counties in which the stations receive a preponderance of viewers and they represent large geographic areas. Although the majority of the location stories were inside the markets, there was some statistically significant variation ($p = <.001$) among the

Figure 1: Distribution of crime stories* inside and outside of the DMA markets



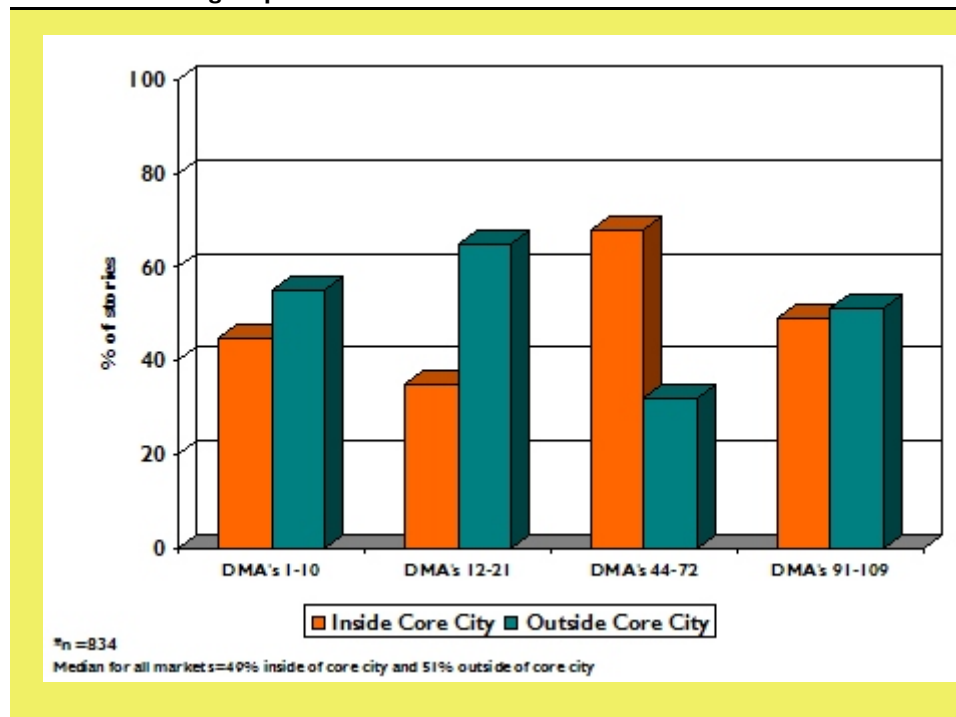
DMA groups regarding this dimension. Only two-thirds of the stories in DMA’s 12-21 were inside the markets; DMA’s 91-109 had the highest proportion (85%) of stories inside the markets (Figure 1). This finding should be understood in context. The location stories that we examined here represented only a portion of all of the

crime stories that were broadcast on the stations. Yet, it was remarkable that between 15 and 33 percent of those stories across the DMA groups were “imported” from outside of the markets.

Urban or Suburban?

In this analysis I wanted to examine the locations of these stories in the most basic geographic terms—coverage *inside* of the core city and *outside* of the core city. I defined urban as inside the core city of the market; conversely suburban was defined outside of the core city. Given that approach, there was statistically significant variation ($p = <.001$) among the DMA groups along the urban/suburban dimension. The most striking feature of this analysis found that, in three out of the four DMA groups, suburban crime was the focus of the coverage.

Figure 2: Distribution of Location of stories* inside and outside of the core cities across the DMA groups



That was so despite the fact that crime (as measured by crime rate) in the suburban areas in the markets was about half as prevalent as it was in urban places (See Table 3). In the two largest DMA groups (1-10 and 12-21), the stations focused most significantly on suburban crime (Figure 2). In fact, suburban crime stories in DMA's 1-10 almost doubled urban crime stories (65% to 35%, respectively). The suburban/urban difference was even more striking in DMA's 12-21 in which suburban crime stories outnumbered urban crime stories by three to one (77% to 23%, respectively). That emphasis on suburban crime was also evident in the coverage of the stations in the smallest DMA group (91-109) with over half of the stories (58%) coming from outside of the core cities. The stations in only one of the DMA groups (44-72) had an urban focus for the majority of their crime stories, and that was barely so (53%). Therefore, it was clear that crime coverage on these newscasts was decidedly a suburban affair.

Crime Creep

The significant emphasis on suburban crime across the DMA groups required a closer look at the broadcasts. Was there something in the stories that might make the coverage more understandable? The analysis revealed a motif best described as creeping crime in the newscasts that might help to explain the more extensive coverage of crimes outside of the core city. Many of the suburban crime stories articulated a consistent theme—the spread of crime and danger from the core city into the suburbs. Stories with this theme had several very important characteristics in common that gave them special prominence in the newscast. First, they most frequently lead the newscasts with 80 percent appearing in the first block immediately at the top of the broadcast. That placement indicated that these were the most important stories of the day and the public needed to pay attention. The implicit message in this placement said that the danger was imminent. Second, these stories were broadcast using the two most expensive presentation modes, the package and live location report, much more extensively than other crime stories. In addition to these modes, our examination yielded three others: Voice-over by anchor (VO/Anchor); Anchor read without voice-over; Live reporter in the newsroom. The *VO/Anchor mode* was defined as a reading of narrative by the anchor as videotape was shown on the screen. In the *package* presentation mode, a news crew (a reporter and camera operator) went to the scene of the story, shot video, produced the video for broadcast and the reporter wrote the narrative for the video voice-over. The *live location* report required the news crew to go to the location of the story and broadcast from there.

Many of the suburban crime stories articulated a consistent theme – the spread of crime and danger from the core city into the suburbs.

The VO/Anchor was, by far, the most common presentation mode for all crime stories across the DMA groups (64%). The package and live location reports accounted for another one-quarter of the presentation modes used in those stories.

However, the “creeping crime” stories turned those proportions on their heads. The VO/Anchor mode was used in only 30 percent of the stories; and the package and live location reports accounted for 70 percent of the stories .

Third, these stories were much longer than other crime stories. This characteristic also added to the message that these were very important events to which the public should pay attention. The package and live location modes required more preparation time and resources than other presentation techniques. That investment of resources to produce the stories was reflected in their duration on the newscasts. These stories lasted a median of 133 seconds, four times longer than the median duration for all crime stories (33 seconds).

Fourth, in the creeping crime stories, neighborhood residents were extensively used as sources (nine other types of sources appeared in the crime stories: officials from criminal justice agencies, i.e., police, courts, corrections; officials from government agencies other than criminal justice institutions; the victim(s); the suspect(s); victim’s family members; suspect’s family members; eyewitnesses; defense attorney; other sources). The neighbors were interviewed for their reactions to the crime. This was a significant finding because neighbors were cited as sources in less than ten percent of the general crime stories across the DMA groups. Yet, they were an important source in stories regarding crime in the suburbs. In every instance, the neighbors did not add any factual information to the story. Their purpose was to “react” to the events and to register their “shock” at the advance of crime from urban to suburban areas.

The stories suggested to the viewers that they were captives of a dangerous reality that was delivered randomly to their neighborhood.

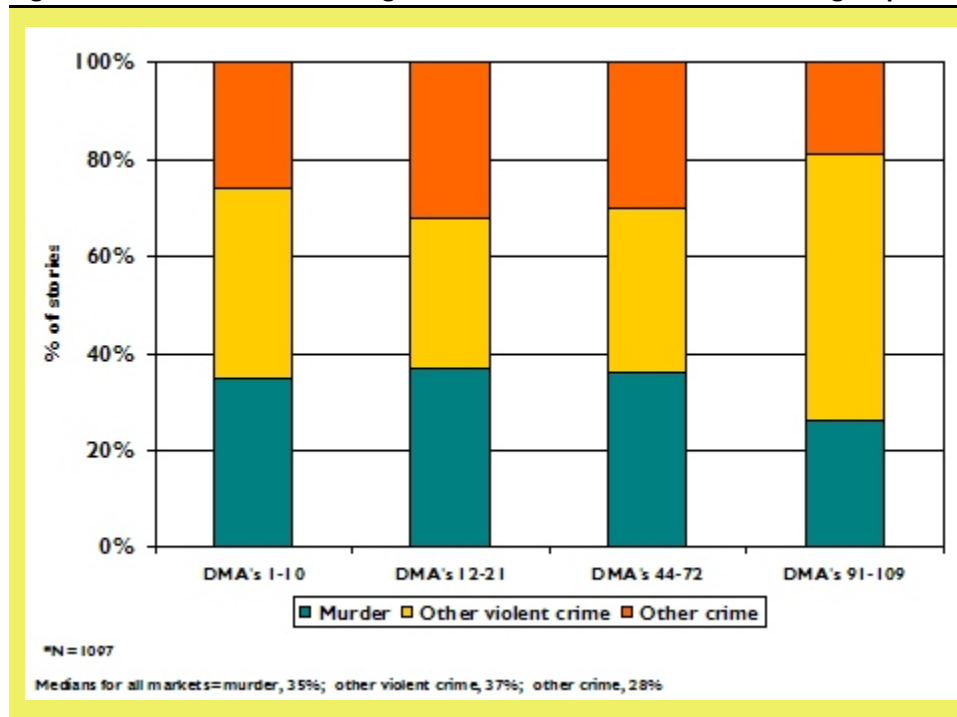
The theme of creeping crime and danger was attended by two sub-themes. First, there was a rhetorical “why?” that was part of the stories. Why did this happen? Why did it happen in our neighborhood? Why did it happen to good people? How could someone do something like this? Second, there was also an implicit answer to the “why” and it was very disturbing--random violent crime is a

feature of late twentieth-century America and there is nothing we can do about it. In short, the stories suggested to the viewers that they were captives of a dangerous reality that was delivered randomly to their neighborhood. By implication, then, the only prudent response was to adopt security measures to reduce their chances of being victimized. In this scenario, responsible citizenship was reduced to reacting to events rather than trying to influence them.

Offenses

A fundamental question regarding crime reporting focuses on the specific crimes that were the subjects of the stories. Although there were a number of crimes that were reported in the stories, they fell into three general categories: murder, other violent crime (assault, rape, robbery, etc.) and other crime (non-violent crime and property crime). This representation was consistent with the official crime data that I reported for each DMA group (See Table 2) and it made comparisons between newscast crime and official crime possible. First, let's look at the offenses in the crime stories across the DMA groups.

Figure 3: Distribution of coverage of offenses in stories* across DMA groups



Murder was the offense in a plurality of stories in two DMA groups (12-21 and 44-72), occupying over a third of the stories (Figure 3). Further, it was the

second most reported offense (35%) in DMA's 1-10. It accounted for one-quarter of the stories (26%) in DMA's 91-109. The differences among the DMA groups were significant ($p = <.001$).

When the newscasts were not focusing on murder, they chose other violent crime as the offenses of interest. While DMA's 91-109 reported fewer murder stories than the stations in the other markets, over half of the stories (55%) addressed other violent crime. The proportion of other violent crime stories ranged between 31 and 39 percent for the other DMA groups. Other crime was covered the least often in all of the DMA groups except one (12-21). And, the DMA's 91-102 only covered other crime in less than one out of five stories (19%). In summary, the stations in the DMA groups put murder at or near the top followed or preceded by other violent crime. In fact, taken together, violent crime (murder and other violent crime) accounted for between two-thirds (68% in DMA's 12-21) and three-fourths (74% in DMA's 1-10 and 91-109) of the crime reported on the newscasts. That distribution is grossly at odds with the occurrence of those crimes in reality (see Table 2). The distortion of the official picture is best illustrated by the following point. Murder accounted for one-tenth of one percent of the crimes in the suburbs of DMA's 1-10, yet it accounted for 36 percent (See Table 6) of the crimes reported in the newscasts. That was an increase of 360 percent.

Offenses & Location

The pattern of crime coverage was particularly clear when I looked at the urban and suburban locations of the stories. In all of the DMA groups, murder accounted for a higher percentage of the newscasts' reported crimes in the suburbs than in urban places. In two of the DMA groups (12-21 and 91-109) the differences were substantial (42% suburban to 24 % urban and 32%suburban to 18% urban, respectively). Further, in two of the three largest DMA groups murder accounted for about four out of ten crime stories in the suburbs (42% in DMA's 12-21 and 39% in DMA's 44-72). Those proportions were at least ten percent higher than the coverage of the next highest category, other violent crime (Table 6). However, in only the two largest DMA groups (1-10 and 12-21) were the differences between offenses reported inside and outside of the core city statistically significant ($p < .001$).

Table 6: Offenses & Location of stories Inside/Outside core cities across DMA groups (n= 1097)

Story Type	DMA's 1-10*		DMA's 12-21*		DMA's 44-72		DMA's 91-102	
	Inside Core % stories	Outside Core % stories	Inside Core % stories	Outside Core % stories	Inside Core % stories	Outside Core % stories	Inside Core % stories	Outside Core % stories
Murder	34	36	24	42	33	39	18	32
Other violent crime	44	36	32	30	39	29	74	41
Other crime	23	28	44	28	28	32	8	27

It is interesting to note that crime coverage for the smallest DMA group (91-109), was different than its larger cousins. In both the suburbs and urban places, murder (32% and 18%, respectively) accounted for a substantially smaller proportion of crime reporting than other violent crime (74% and 41%, respectively). It is also true that DMA's 91-109 reported the highest proportion of crime stories

from inside the market (85%) among the DMA groups (See Figure 1). To speculate, even though there were fewer crimes in these markets than in the other DMA groups, it seems that the stations in this DMA group did not “import” much crime for their newscasts.

It is clear from this analysis that the stations focused their attention on suburban crime, particularly murder. Again, that is in direct contrast to the official portrait of crime.

Location & Demographics

The difference in crime coverage between the areas inside and outside of the core cities was clear in all of the DMA groups. The question was were there differences in demographic factors between the suburbs and urban areas within the DMA markets? I looked at the social and economic characteristics of the “places” in the crime stories, separating them by inside and outside of the core city (Table 7).

Table 7: Demographic Characteristics of DMA groups

Median indicators	DMA's 1-10		DMA's 12-21		DMA's 44-72		DMA's 91-102	
	Inside Core City	Outside Core City	Inside Core City	Outside Core City	Inside Core City	Outside Core City	Inside Core City	Outside Core City
Total pop	1,487,536	54,457	384,736	17,626	369,879	17,180	124,773	12,509
Density (pop/sq mi)	9883	3362	6649	1680	2910	1026	1972	371
% Afri-Amer	39	9	26	2	24	4	29	7
% Caucasian	46	83	72	96	71	88	68	92
% Other race	16	8	2	2	5	8	3	1
Median HH income (\$)	26,301	39,250	20,747	30,651	27,555	25,401	23,453	25,798
% Poverty (median)	19.1	6.6	21	7.7	13.3	10.4	21.9	13
Median housing value(\$)	121,700	125,000	49,700	74,600	62,300	62,200	71,800	51,700

The “places” inside and outside of the core cities in both television markets exhibited significant and consistent differences. As compared to places *inside* the core city, places *outside* of the core cities:

(1) Had much smaller populations: We would expect that suburban places would have smaller populations. However, the “places” that I examined were those where the reported crime story was “located” and the “places” that accounted for the suburban stories had significantly smaller populations than their urban neighbors. For example, in DMA’s 1-10, the median population of the suburban places (54,457) was only 3.6 percent of the median population of the urban places (1,487,536) in those markets (Table 7). Across the DMA groups, that proportion was highest in DMA’s 91-109 where the median suburban population (12,509) was about 10 percent of the median urban population (124,773). It seems, from these data, that the crime stories were “located” in the some of the smallest places outside of the urban core.

(2) Were less dense: The places outside of the core cities were between one-fifth and one-third as dense as the core cities. For example, the median population per square mile in the places outside of the core cities in DMA’s 1-10 was 3,362 as compared to 9,883 in urban areas, about 34 percent. In DMA’s 91-109 that proportion was about 19 percent (371/1972).

(3) Had different racial compositions: Places outside of the core cities had populations that were not as racially diverse as the core cities. They were overwhelmingly Caucasian, ranging from a median Caucasian population of 83 percent in DMA’s 1-10 to 96 percent in DMA’s 12-21 (Table 7). The median African-American population in the suburbs across all of the DMA groups did not exceed 9 percent. The most racially diverse areas among the markets occurred in the urban places of DMA’s 1-10. Fewer than one-half of the population was Caucasian (46%), over one-third was African-American (39%) and a substantial proportion was Other Race (16%).

(4) Had household incomes that generally were higher: In the two largest DMA groups, the median household income of the suburbs was about fifty percent higher than that of the urban areas (Table 7). The median household income in the suburbs in DMA’s 91-109 was also higher than the core city, but only by about ten percent (\$25,798 and \$23,453, respectively). In only one DMA group

(44-72) was the median household income of the core cities higher (by less than ten percent) than the suburban areas (\$27,555 and \$25,401, respectively). The significant differences in household incomes between urban and suburban places occurred in the DMA groups that accounted for over 86 percent of the households in the study sample (See Table 1).

(5) Had poverty levels that were lower: There was a clear pattern among the DMA groups regarding poverty levels that mirrored household income. The greatest difference in poverty levels between urban and suburban places occurred in the two largest DMA groups (Table 7). Poverty levels in suburban areas were only about one-third as high as those levels in urban places (35% and 36% in DMA's 1-10 and 12-21, respectively). These are the same DMA groups in which the urban median household income was about 50 percent lower than household income in suburban areas. In the DMA groups where the median household incomes in the suburbs and urban places were relatively close, the poverty levels also exhibited that same condition. In DMA's 44-72 the poverty level in the suburbs was about 78% of the rate in the core cities; for DMA's 91-109 that suburban to urban rate was 59%.

(6) Had housing values that were both higher and lower across the DMA groups: In DMA groups 12-21 and 91-102, there were significant differences in the median housing values between the core city and the suburbs, but they were in opposite directions. In DMA's 12-21, the suburban median housing values were about 50 percent *higher* than the values of urban houses (\$49,700 and \$74,600, respectively). However, in DMA's 91-109, the median suburban housing values (\$51,700) were over one-third *lower* than housing values in the core cities (\$71,800). The median housing values in urban and suburban places for DMA's 1-10 (\$121,700 and \$125,000, respectively) and 44-72 (\$62,300 and \$62,200, respectively) were virtually the same.

The most important picture that these factors revealed, however, had less to do with what was *different* between the places inside and outside of the core cities than what was *alike* among the television markets. That is, the places outside

of the core cities were remarkably similar across the DMA groups. That was particularly so for their racial composition and poverty levels.

The television stations across all of the DMA groups were faced with landscapes outside of the core cities whose socio-demographic and crime profiles were less burdened than the same profile for the core cities. Yet, the newscasts in three of the four DMA groups chose to focus their coverage of crime outside of the core cities. Further, in the two largest DMA groups, accounting for 86 percent of the audience in the study, crime stories outside of the core cities outnumbered urban crime stories by margins of almost two to one and three to one (See Fig. 2). And, they concentrated on murder and other violent crime (See Fig. 3).

The Ghost of News Present

Crime stories were *the* most conspicuous part of the local news broadcasts across the DMA groups. It was the social issue that trumped all of the others on the newscasts. The conflict, drama, and tension that were explicit in any crime story were used by the stations to communicate their versions of the particular crime, the nature of crime and justice and, by extension, the “lived” reality of the cities and suburbs of the markets. The audiences were told essentially the same story—that random, violent crime was a persistent and structural feature of American society. Further, given the newscasts’ emphasis on crime outside of the core cities, suburban audiences were warned that urban crime was making its way toward them. This formula for news is dramatic, but it offers very little useful information for citizens.

The news may represent itself as fact, but it is communicated to the public with all of the trappings of fiction: short intense scenes; literary rather than analytical treatment; the nearly uniform of the story format; and the emphasis on drama, emotional conflict, and larger than life characters. The news may portray real events, but this portrayal discourages analytical or instrumental uses for the information it presents (Bennett, 1996, p. 184).

What factors influenced this coverage? Part of the answer lies at the juncture among several points. The first point is the role that local television newscasts claim for themselves in the community—socially responsible neighbor (Rapping, 1987). Television stations pursue activities that are specifically designed to reinforce their role as responsible citizens and as the best source of community news. Local television news’ fixation on a crime script (Gilliam, Jr. and Iyengar, 1998) perpetuates a sense of vulnerability that makes its prominence as neighbor even more real.

The second point of the juncture is the understanding that news consumers use crime news as a symbolic reference point to make sense of the world around them. They “process the news” using their own frames of reference (Graber, 1988). The crime script presents crime as an individual, not as a collective, dysfunction. Therefore, as consumers construct their own meanings from crime news, they are able to understand what actions are at the edge of accepted behavior.

The third point that may help to explain the face of local television news is a realization that it is market-driven (Cummings, 1987; Greenfield, 1987; Westin, 1982; McManus, 1994; Kaniss, 1991) . News producers construct the newscasts not so much to inform an audience as to deliver that audience to a set of advertisers. Consequently, the notion that the newscast is the *product* and that the audience is the *customer* is exactly backwards from how the system really operates. A former local television news director points out the contradiction.

A TV station makes its money from advertisers (other large businesses), not viewers. Think about it, you don't pay the TV station every time you watch a show. In fact, you can watch the local stations for free if you don't have cable. That means the advertiser is the real customer and the product they're buying is...access to the audience to sell products (Shumway, 2003).

Further, advertisers want audiences with the a particular characteristic—the greatest buying power. As a result, TV stations engage in “narrowcasting” (as opposed to broadcasting) in which they aim their programming at a specific target audience (Shumway, 2003).

McManus characterizes this type of journalism as “info-tainment” where the line between information and entertainment becomes blurred and the consumer replaces the journalist as the gatekeeper regarding what becomes news (McManus, 1994).

Local TV stations have learned that crime news can provide them with some of the most cost-effective and attention-gathering stories that a newscast can assemble. They are cost-effective because most of the information comes through the public affairs mechanisms of criminal justice agencies and little investigative work must be done. They are attention-gathering because crime stories are episodes of conflict that are perfectly suited to being presented as pictures. And, television news is, above all else, pictures.

The formula for news that is produced by the juncture of these concepts does lead local television to fashion newscasts that satisfy the criterion for drama. Crime news, as I have presented in this analysis, is the primary building block in

that construction. But that portrayal casts the city as a place of peril already manifested or as the source of dangerous acts that exceed the urban boundary.

The news producers often defend this approach by saying that they are simply acting as a “mirror” of society. But that argument is, at best, disingenuous and, at worst, a convenient fiction. Crime is part of the reality of urban life, and it is a legitimate subject for local news coverage. But crime is only a *part* of city life. The local newscasts in the DMA groups that I examined made conscious decisions to cover more crime news than any other social issue. They also decided what crimes they would cover (mostly murder) and how they would cover them (mostly in the first segment).

This script for local television news is so compelling that not even the earth-shattering events of September 11, 2001 could affect it. Dean and Brady

Local TV news continues to be a surrogate rubber-necker, taking us to crime scenes, murder trials and traffic accidents, where we can do little but gawk.

coverage of all other issues except crime and disaster. They concluded: “Local TV news continues to be a surrogate rubber-necker, taking us to crime scenes, murder trials and traffic accidents, where we can do little but gawk” (Dean and Brady, 2002, p. 95).

(2002) found that, after 9/11, local television news did increase its coverage of defense and foreign affairs. But, to make room for that coverage it reduced the

Affecting Public Policy

The images that result from this communication system limit political debate and turn democracy into a spectator sport in which complex realities are simplified (Bennett, 1996). In the case of crime and criminal justice, that has profound implications for how the public understands the issue and what remedies the public will support to address the question. Budzilowicz (2002) found that crime stories on local television were framed as episodes (rather than themes) in which causal responsibility was virtually always attached to the individual (rather than societal) and treatment was framed as punitive (rather than rehabilitative). With that understanding of crime, it is no wonder why incarceration became the correctional policy of first resort in many states in the country.

The crime script on local television news has implications for urban places. Mark Crispin Miller, in his study of local television newscasts in Baltimore, called this approach “TV news as anti-urban propaganda” (Miller, 1998). He suggested that this bias had profound effects on that city’s social and economic well-being. He pointed out that Baltimore City’s population decreased by almost 11 percent between 1990 and 1998, while the surrounding Baltimore County increased in population by 4 percent. Further, the other counties in the Baltimore television market experienced remarkable population growth during that period. That loss of population cost the city over \$112 million in lost local taxes. More disturbingly, his analysis found that over one-third of those who had fled and over half of those who had considered leaving “were moved to do so by their fear of crime—which fear, as we have shown, may have had as much to do with TV’s anti-urban propaganda as it did with actual danger” (Miller, 1998, p. 17).

In addition to individual choices about living in Baltimore, Miller cites the decisions of businesses to leave the city. Between 1972 and 1992, Baltimore lost 44 percent of its retail establishments, twice the national average. In a 1997 survey, CEO’s in Baltimore said the two “strongest challenges” city businesses faced were “the perception of crime and the unavailability of parking spaces” (Miller, 1998, p. 17).

Miller's analysis of Baltimore showed what we might call the news crime script as having an evolving effect on public policy. The city's loss of population, taxes and businesses in the 1990's certainly influenced how it approached the urban condition over time. However, the "news coverage—public perception—policy response" scenario can be much more immediate. In Delaware in 1991 four men were convicted of first degree murder for killing two Brooks Armored Car Company guards. They were given life sentences by default when the jury could not unanimously agree to capital punishment. At the time, Delaware law gave juries the exclusive right to impose the death penalty. The news coverage of that decision was overwhelming in expressing outrage. It effectively ignored any other frame for presenting the story. In turn, that coverage also negated any opportunity for deliberation of possible policy responses. The hyper-reality that the news coverage produced greatly affected the hyper-speed with which policy-makers responded to the perceived outrage. Within 52 hours of the announcement of the jury's decision, the Delaware General Assembly passed S.B. 79 which made the jury's sentencing decision only a recommendation to the judge who had the final authority to impose life and death sentences in capital cases. To be sure, this case was extraordinary in the speed in which the "news coverage—public perception—policy response" scenario occurred. However, the effect of the news crime script was unmistakable.

The market-oriented communication system that produces these news has implications for public debate in all areas of public policy, not only criminal justice. The budget is a zero-sum game for political jurisdictions and resources applied for one purpose are, by definition, taken away from other uses. So, when many states

...addresses people as consumer and marginalizes other identities, in particular the identity of citizen

through the 1980's and 1990's embarked on prison-building programs as a prominent policy response to crime, other public policy issues, such as education, housing, environment, etc., were greatly affected. That approach to the budget was acceptable, in large measure, because the public's understanding of the pre-eminence of crime as a social issue (and the appropriate responses to it) was consistently constructed by local news media whose primary function was to maximize profit. The focus on

profit-maximization produces a communication system that “addresses people predominantly through their identities as consumers...and marginalizes or displaces other identities, in particular the identity of citizen” (Murdock and Golding, 1996).

The market-driven nature of news production was virtually endorsed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in a decision on June 2, 2003 when it relaxed long-standing ownership rules. Under the changes, broadcast networks were permitted to own television stations that reach 45% of the national audience (up from 35%). However, in the face of extraordinary criticism from the Congress, public interest groups and the public due, the FCC reached a compromise of 39 percent. Also, under the new rules, a single company can own up to three local television stations in a market with 18 stations or more, or two local stations in a market with at least five stations (although in neither case can one company own more than one of the top-rated stations). Finally, the FCC lifted the ban on cross-ownership of television stations, newspapers, and radio stations in markets with nine or more television stations and greatly relaxed those rules for markets with four to eight television stations. These changes will have their most direct impact in local markets (Media Access Project, 2003). This movement toward an uncluttered commodification of the news and making it a profit/loss node in a larger corporation is precisely the intent of the FCC.

The most disturbing aspect of this news system is that this ceding of citizenship to consumership by the public is almost imperceptible. Viewers think that they are getting information about public issues when, more often than not, they are simply gathering “factoids” that have no useful purpose in public debate (Bennett, 1996; Page, 1996). But, the news system communicates them to make us think that they do. Who among us can take the time to deconstruct a news story about a violent crime when we are bombarded by images of victims, suspects and yellow crime scene tape? To understand that the “reality” that we are being shown is designed to hold us as consumers until the next commercial break and not to inform us as citizens? The danger is that we think that we are being informed when, in fact, we are only being sold.

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