The Media Accountability Project

Race and Media Depictions of Gun Violence

Research Brief
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Acknowledgements

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Community Justice

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Media representations of gun violence in U.S. neighborhoods

Media depictions of gun violence deeply influence how we perceive the individuals perpetuating or victimized in incidents, whether we feel safe, and how society collectively racializes crime and violence. The language that the media uses to describe individuals involved in gun violence incidents has evolved but remains deeply and problematically tied to race and other identities, as seen by the different connotations of “domestic terrorist,” “thug,” and “individual suffering from a mental illness” used to describe gun violence-involved individuals of different ethnicities and races.1-3 The impact of these depictions on the public can be profound, as differences in portrayals of gun violence, based on the race of those involved and where incidents occur, may reinforce harmful racial stereotypes and influence public support for gun reform policies.4-8 Most research examining gun violence in the media, however, tends to overwhelmingly focus on deadly mass shootings and school shootings—fatalities that comprise only a fraction of firearm deaths—and overshadows more common forms of violence that routinely devastates cities across the United States, especially in Black and Latino communities.

To better understand the way that media representations of shootings are influenced by race and place, Community Justice partnered with researchers at Northwestern University and the Center for Neighborhood Engaged Research and Science (CORNERS) to collect large portions of the U.S. media landscape on gun violence and analyze it using advanced computational and statistical methods. The goal of the project is to determine the extent to which racial differences among the individuals and communities where gun violence occurs create real, measurable differences in the way that incidents are reported and ultimately viewed. By understanding the relationship between race and media coverage of gun violence incidents, this Media Accountability Project aims to help news outlets, journalists, educators, and community stakeholders build more just and accurate narratives on gun violence.
The Media Accountability Project

To examine how race impacts media depictions of gun violence, the research team collected and combined almost 30,000 print and digital articles and around 12,000 TV news segments related to nearly 12,000 shooting events in the U.S. over the last four years. Then, after connecting incidents to their census tract locations, the research team determined the racial neighborhood of each incident based on whether its census tract was home to more than 50% non-Hispanic white residents (a neighborhood designation of “majority white”) or greater than 50% Black or Hispanic/Latino residents (a neighborhood designation of “majority people of color”/“majority POC,” or “community of color”). Natural language processing tools and statistical methods then provided the advanced computational processing needed to (1) identify key patterns across thousands of articles and TV news segments and (2) draw comparisons across neighborhoods throughout the U.S.

The portrayal and descriptions of the individuals involved in gun violence varied tremendously depending on where the incident occurred

Overall, our multi-method analysis of nearly 12,000 media accounts of incidents of gun violence present converging evidence to the same, critical finding: the portrayal and descriptions of the individuals involved in gun violence varied tremendously depending on where the incident occurred. Not only were there proportionally fewer incidents covered in communities of color, but they also disproportionately presented what happened rather than why the incident happened as was more commonly observed in incidents occurring in majority white neighborhoods. Our research suggests that the media prioritizes and contextualizes gun violence incidents in majority white neighborhoods in ways not seen in communities of color, leading to some key insights that can inform a more equitable approach to covering gun violence in the media.
The media prioritizes and contextualizes gun violence incidents in majority white neighborhoods in ways not seen in communities of color

Media accounts of gun violence in communities of color receive disproportionately less focus than events in majority white communities. Even though 63% of gun violence incidents occur in communities of color, an incident from a majority white neighborhood is 50% more likely to receive national attention than an incident from a community of color.

Figure 1. The mean number and length of print/digital articles (left) and TV segments (right) per incident (right), as well as their probability of receiving national attention, in communities of color versus majority white neighborhoods. The threshold for receiving national attention is based on whether the incident was covered by a nationally recognized news outlet. The probability of receiving national attention is based on a full set of the incidents we have records for, while the number of articles (or segments) per incident and article (or segment) length are based on only those articles and TV segments for which we could match to an incident.

Articles devoted to these accounts are shorter and fewer in number, especially for mass shootings. For example, a mass shooting in a community of color receives nearly half the expected coverage (by number of articles) as a mass shooting in a majority white neighborhood. Conversely, officer-involved shootings receive disproportionately more coverage than similar incidents in majority white neighborhoods. This coverage disparity is often exacerbated in TV news media, which at the national-level focuses on a much smaller set of gun violence incidents, particularly those that are officer-involved.
Details about gun violence incidents in communities of color are presented more concisely and more concretely than in majority white communities.

While coverage of incidents in communities of color talk about what happened and who was involved, they do so in the narrow context of the incident. Words associated with these more direct references include terms related to law enforcement (e.g., “police,” “officer,” “cop”), hyperlocal geography (e.g., “block,” “neighborhood,” “street”), and immediate impacts of an incident (e.g., “homicide,” “death,” “fatal”). Stylistically, there is also disproportionate use of more matter-of-fact nouns such as “boy”, “girl”, “man” and “year(s) old” in communities of color. In contrast, media accounts of incidents in majority white neighborhoods disproportionately use familial and relational terms such as “wife” and “husband,” and are more likely to describe individuals involved in gun violence through their social roles (e.g., “student,” “parent,” “friend,” “player,” “athlete,” and “president”) and unrelated contextualizing events (e.g., “play,” “game,” “speech,” and “convention”).
Greater use of quotations and subjective speech suggests that incidents in majority white neighborhoods are more deeply considered and discussed journalistically than incidents in communities of color.

Our findings show that articles about incidents in majority white neighborhoods use more subjective words — both positive and negative — and that both print and TV news media in majority white neighborhoods use more complex and formal language. This increase in subjectivity and complexity might imply a greater consideration, on the behalf of journalists, to debate the merits of an incident. The subjectivity that is seen for incidents in communities of color are often graphic in nature, with disproportionate use of terms such as “bloodshed,” “suffering,” and “critical.” In contrast, there appears to be a greater effort to situate incidents in majority white neighborhoods based on what was leading up to or following the incident, which can be seen in the more frequent use of words such as “complaint,” “concerns,” “suspicious,” “heroic,” and “protest.” Articles in majority white neighborhoods are also disproportionately likely to include quoted speech. These quotations come from both authoritative figures (like police officers or politicians, especially those at the national level) and civilians (like family and community members); in this way, compared to communities of color, articles pertaining to majority white neighborhoods quite literally give more voice to the involved and affected parties.
Incidents in majority white neighborhoods are more likely than incidents in communities of color to be contextualized within social and political environments in which the incident occurred.

Depictions of incidents that occur in majority white neighborhoods are disproportionately likely to use terms such as “home,” “downtown,” “state,” and “country,” terms that evoke imagery of important national geographies. Even when controlling for known characteristics about the incident, reporting in communities of color was more likely to mention gangs or police, whether the incident actually involved gangs or police. In contrast, incidents in majority white neighborhoods were more likely to draw comparisons to other notable incidents as well as connect to broader policy impacts and discussions of mental health.

Figure 2. The proportion of articles that mention gang-, mental health-, or policy-relevant terms, by communities of color versus majority white neighborhoods. The difference in means in each of the comparative bar graphs above are statistically significant at p=0.05, meaning that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the media depicts incidents differently between neighborhoods based on their racial composition.

There is subtle variation in how gun violence incidents are covered in the Midwest versus other regions in the U.S. For example, incidents in the Midwest are substantially more likely to include words related to race, policy, children, and police.
Shifting the media focus on gun violence towards just and fair representation

Media representations are a critical piece of the public’s understanding of gun violence as a pressing social issue; our present work illustrates some of the ways in which these representations might distort that understanding along the lines of race. Drawing from our findings, the research team gives the following recommendations:

1. **Strive for equitable media coverage.**
   
   Media organizations should make efforts to ensure equitable coverage for events of similar severity, especially mass and school shootings, regardless of where they occur. Our research shows that this requires greater media investment in communities of color, namely, broader and deeper reporting both immediately after and following an incident. Beat reporters that normally cover crime might be reimagined into beat reporters of gun violence who can elevate and dignify incidents as they occur. Newsroom editors and publications must support these shifts in labor and coverage.9

2. **Avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes.**

   Our findings show increased mentions of gangs and police in communities of color, even when statistically accounting for whether an incident was gang-involved or officer-involved. A similar pattern emerges in TV news, where images of a crime scene (e.g., lights, sirens, and crime scene footage) are statistically more likely to occur in incidents that occur in communities of color. These trends perpetuate implicit biases regarding our understanding of gun violence, and therefore care should be taken when describing—or visualizing—incidents.

   *Guidance on how journalists, educators, and community members might provide more equitable coverage of gun violence incidents is still emerging. Our research presents opportunities for how changes in language can help media contributors avoid reproducing content that harms individuals and communities experiencing gun violence. We suggest the following shifts in language as a starting point for more humanizing and accurate coverage of gun violence incidents.*
Shifting the media focus on gun violence towards just and fair representation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Don’t use this:</th>
<th>Use this:</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Victim”; “shooter”</td>
<td>“The individual who was shot/victimized”; “the individual shooting”</td>
<td>People-centered language dignifies the individuals involved and removes ambiguity around who is the “real” victim or shooter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nouns that only superficially describe someone (e.g. “boy” or “man”), or at worst incorrectly age individuals (e.g. “man” for someone under 18)</td>
<td>Nouns that accurately describe and humanize individuals (e.g. “husband,” “parent,” etc.)</td>
<td>Considers individuals beyond simple, visible identities that may enact implicit biases in readers/viewers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphic descriptors that do not add to the incident (e.g. “bloodshed”)</td>
<td>Descriptions that reliably portray an incident based on facts (e.g. “multiple gunshot injuries”)</td>
<td>Does not sensationalize the facts of an incident, and protects readers (especially community members who may be close to an incident) from being (re)traumatized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quotations only from law enforcement</td>
<td>Quotations from family, leaders in the community</td>
<td>Demonstrates a commitment to the community and those who know it best, and avoids the stigma of an incident being associated with a crime</td>
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</table>
Shifting the media focus on gun violence towards just and fair representation

3. Contextualize the individuals involved in gun violence.

Our findings show less frequent inclusion of subjective or complex words and quotations in communities of color. The absence of these reporting features signals an opportunity for greater contextualization of individual incidents, and further, an acknowledgment that incidents of gun violence are often not one-off events but rather a consequence of ongoing systemic oppression that results in community violence. The public can deeply benefit from understanding gun violence as a public health problem, but reporting must reflect that by contextualizing events and the individuals involved.10

4. Evidence-based solutions to gun violence exist; mention them.

Too often high-coverage incidents connect to ongoing policy discussions on gun violence or gun control, but it is less common for reports to mention existing, evidence-based solutions that mitigate gun violence, particularly in communities of color. Media contributors should uplift these solutions when they can, which can help to replace fear-based arguments and discussions around gun violence with those that are founded by empirical evidence.

The public remains vulnerable to the ways in which the media disproportionately portrays incidents of gun violence based on the race of individuals and communities involved; these findings and recommendations can help media organizations work towards more just and fair media representation for all.
Summary of Key Findings

The findings of this brief draw from a more detailed technical report that expands considerably on the work presented here. Interested individuals are invited to read the technical report for more detailed descriptions of our data collection, methodology, and research findings. The table below summarizes the key findings of the technical report.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media attention</th>
<th>In communities of color</th>
<th>In majority white neighborhoods</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Officer-involved and drug-related shootings receive more attention</td>
<td>• Mass shootings and school shootings receive more attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broad word associations</td>
<td>• More emphasis on facts (like age) and hyperlocal geography (like the street block)</td>
<td>• More emphasis on personal roles (like “student” or “parent”) and larger scale geography (like “state” or “country”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content of coverage</td>
<td>• More likely to mention race, police, and gangs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style and framing</td>
<td>• More likely to mention large-scale implications of gun violence, as related to policy, mental health, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Imagery*</td>
<td>• More focus on victims</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• More quotes from local authorities (e.g. politicians, police)</td>
<td>• More focus on shooter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• More quotes from public figures with broader or national influence</td>
<td>• More complex words and sentences used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• More concrete facts about the incident</td>
<td>• More formal and subjective language used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• More passive voice</td>
<td>• Slightly more focus on context</td>
</tr>
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*Further data collection and analysis needed to support these findings more robustly.*
References


The Center for Neighborhood Engaged Research & Science (CORNERS), housed at Northwestern University’s Institute for Policy Research, develops transformative research projects with community and civic partners aimed at improving health and safety for more equitable neighborhoods.

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