

Media Guide

10 Crime Coverage Dos and Don'ts

Misleading news coverage of crime and criminal legal policies has played an integral role in the over [50-year history](#) of mass incarceration. Following is The Sentencing Project's guidance to newsrooms and journalists on how to accurately cover crime and justice. News coverage that adds context, mitigates biases, and ensures veracity can inform the public and policymakers on how to pursue the most effective and humane public safety policies.

1. Situate crime trends and policies within their broader historical and geographic context.

Nationwide, [crime rates](#) reached their peak levels in the 1990s then fell roughly 50% by year end 2019—a trend to which mass incarceration contributed only modestly. Then, the economic, social, and psychological turbulence of the COVID-19 pandemic created a seismic shift for the most serious crime: homicide. Homicides spiked up 27% in 2020 and remained at elevated rates until beginning a [substantial decline](#) in 2023. Reported rates of violent and property crime exhibited typical fluctuations amidst the pandemic, although [household surveys](#) of violent victimization showed a more dramatic increase across the country. Motor vehicle thefts, which were at near-historic lows by 2019, also increased in the subsequent years, as did carjackings.

The country's experience with mass incarceration has [shown clearly](#) that ratcheting up harmful police and prison policies is a counterproductive response to upticks in crime. Well-framed stories about crime increases should consider the following questions: Is the shift unique to one form of crime and is it attributable to a change in crime reporting or recording? How does the uptick compare to historical crime peaks and lows, and how does it compare with crime trends in other jurisdictions? If crime rates increased in several otherwise unrelated jurisdictions, this should inspire skepticism that a particular lo-

cal reform is to blame. Be sure to also request and assess evidence of the effectiveness of proposed solutions. What broader policy shortcomings does the crime uptick point to and what [broader solutions](#) are being implemented? (E.g., access to mental health care and effective drug treatment programs, community-based violence prevention programs, gun control, summer youth programs, affordable housing, underemployment and low wages, unaddressed residential segregation, etc.).

U.S. crime rates increased dramatically beginning in the 1960s, but between 1991 and 2019 crime rates fell by about half, just as they did in many other countries [around the world](#). The decline has been especially steep for [youth](#), whose arrest rate fell by 80% from 1996 to 2020. [Polls](#) show that throughout most of this crime drop, the majority of Americans continued to believe that crime was increasing nationwide. Sensationalist coverage does not advance public safety and distorts public understanding. Given longstanding public misperceptions about crime trends, consider: [Why cover a crime incident at all?](#) Routinized crime coverage and click chasing promote punitive and ineffective crime policies. As the [Center for Just Journalism](#) recommends, also consider whether you're giving adequate attention to broader forms of harm caused by violations of civil or criminal law by powerful people.

Media coverage should also test causal claims about the

effectiveness of past crime policies by comparing local crime trends with regional and national patterns. The nationwide crime drop between the 1990s and 2019 challenges any claim that a particular local policy brought down crime rates. Do not award credit for crime declines to particular leaders, laws, or tactics without a rigorous assessment.

2. Recognize the limited role of youth crimes and evidence on appropriate responses to adolescent crime.

For much of the past quarter century, both youth crime and incarceration levels have fallen dramatically. Between 1999 and 2020, [the youth arrest rate fell by 80%](#). Meanwhile, the number of youth held in juvenile justice facilities fell from 107,000 to 25,000 – a [77% decline](#) – during roughly the same time period. The recent uptick in certain youth crimes has occurred alongside other promising trends. The most recent data show [32% fewer youth arrests](#) in 2022 than in 2019, the year before the pandemic began. This general trend masks increases in youth arrests for homicide (up 45% from 2019 to 2022) and weapons offenses (up 19%). However, youth arrests for other serious offense categories fell over this period, such as for aggravated assault (down 14%) and robbery (down 36%). Overall, youth’s share of total arrests nationwide reached [9% in 2022](#). These trends have been misrepresented in a recent wave of alarmist youth crime coverage.

In the mid-1990s, media reports, relying on unqualified sources, trumpeted “[a ticking time bomb](#)” of adolescent crime perpetrated by a new wave of allegedly remorseless and morally impoverished young “[superpredators](#).” These predictions were based on faulty science and proved wildly inaccurate: youth crime rates began a sizable and prolonged downturn in the mid-1990s. Yet the coverage helped spark a wave of counterproductive, punitive laws that contradicted all available evidence on what works to address delinquency. In 2020, [NBC News reviewed this history](#) and concluded: “Though it failed as a theory, as fodder for editorials, columns and magazine features, the term ‘superpredator’ was a tragic success—with an enormous, and lasting, human toll.” Avoid repeating this history: double-check the data to verify an alleged trend, interview multiple experts, and ask hard questions before feeding a crime wave/surge narrative. Be aware that voluminous research finds that over-responding to adolescent misbehavior typically damages young people’s futures and harms public safety. Youth do better and reoffend less when they’re [diverted from the](#)

[court system](#) rather than prosecuted, and [incarceration](#) likewise leads to worse public safety and youth development outcomes.

3. Avoid amplifying false or unsupported claims: fact check police, prosecutors, and legislators.

“Man Dies After Medical Incident During Police Interaction,” the Minneapolis police department [reported](#) after its officers killed George Floyd. Video of the incident contradicted their account, reinforcing that police reports cannot be trusted as facts. Relatedly, there’s a growing understanding that [prosecutors](#) don’t just enforce laws, but play an active role in creating them, making them active players in many legislative debates. This is why it’s important to verify claims about crime incidents and [trends](#), and to include [sources](#) beyond criminal legal practitioners to ensure that you are reporting the truth. Seek out the perspective of currently and formerly [incarcerated](#) people as both sources and journalists. Also, remember that not all numbers are equally reliable: apply a critical lens to internally-conducted polls whose questions and sampling methods are obscure, such as those conducted by some police unions of their members. Finally, report verifiable facts as facts, rather than as claims. For example, did an expert claim that people with violent convictions leaving state prisons have lower recidivism rates than others, or does data show it to be a fact? (See #8.)

4. Reassess the newsworthiness of crimes and identities.

Given the racial biases in criminal legal enforcement and the lasting harm of being named in media stories that are easily accessible on the internet, some outlets including [The Boston Globe](#) are scaling back their coverage of petty crimes and trimming the long tail of these stories by amending or erasing their archives. The [Associated Press](#) will [stop naming individuals involved in stories about low-level arrests](#). “A consensus appears to be emerging among newspaper publishers,” writes [The Washington Post’s](#) Erik Wemple, “that crime coverage and its stickiness in a search-engine world need a systemic update.” News outlets should emulate these “right-to-be-forgotten” initiatives and ensure that they are accessible and fair. As a rule, news media should not reveal the names or include photos of young people who are involved in the juvenile court system, which seeks to protect their identities to minimize the long-term consequences of youthful misbehavior.

5. Avoid creating backlash bait with partial coverage of reforms and recidivism.

Situate the impact of sentencing reforms within the massive scale of mass incarceration. For example, 448,000 people were released from prison in 2022 (see Table 9 [here](#) for a state breakdown). If a particular reform expedites the release of some hundreds or thousands of people, contextualize that within the much larger number of people that are typically released from prison each year. Unless the pace of decarceration dramatically increases, it will take over [seven decades](#) to return to 1972's prison population, before the era of mass incarceration. If you have identified [unfairness](#) in the reform process, be sure to also hold government officials accountable for the persistent unfairness and ineffectiveness of current prison sentences, which [scholars](#) have shown to be too long, imposed too frequently, and racially imbalanced.

Even the best policies that dramatically reduce recidivism rates cannot get these rates to zero. If policies are evaluated by the recidivism of the few, then elected officials and practitioners will be pressured to abandon effective policies in the face of public opinion misinformed by skewed media coverage. As *The Marshall Project* explains, furloughs and work release programs in prisons were otherwise hugely successful but news coverage of “Willie” Horton brought that to an end. Avoid turning one tragic incident into the harbinger of tragic criminal legal policies by informing your audience about the relative infrequency of such incidents, and by asking what preventative policies—beyond further incarceration—might avert another similar tragedy. If an arrest you've covered results in a dismissal or finding of innocence, ensure that your coverage follows through to the conclusion of the case.

6. Conduct a racial equity audit on the quantity of your crime coverage.

Media coverage often overrepresents crime committed by Black males and victimization experienced by white females. Researchers have shown that journalists gravitate to unusual cases when selecting homicide victims (white women) and to more common cases when selecting people who have committed homicide (Black men), suggesting that newsworthiness is not a product of how representative or novel a crime is, but rather how well it can be “[scripted using stereotypes grounded in White racism and White fear of Black crime.](#)” Homicide victims were more likely to make the news if they were white or

killed in majority-white neighborhoods, according to a Chicago [study](#). Media outlets should therefore conduct an [audit](#) comparing how their crime coverage compares to the community's crime and victimization rates, with awareness that arrest rates oversample crimes committed by people of color. Such audits should also be conducted of headlines and push notifications. Examine also whether your coverage reflects the fact that [immigrants](#) commit crimes at lower rates than native-born citizens. Also ensure diversity among sources and news staff, in terms of racial and other identities including exposure to the criminal legal system.

7. Conduct a racial equity audit on the quality of your crime coverage.

Ensure that your crime coverage is treating people of color—both those accused of crime and those who are victims—as humanely and fairly as it is treating white people in similar circumstances. Chicagoans killed in predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods were less likely to be treated through the “[lens of complex personhood](#),” such as by noting the victim's family and community roles. White mass shooters have been presented more [sympathetically](#), such as by recognizing underlying mental illnesses, than Black counterparts. [News images](#) of people—often white—impacted by the opioid crisis have depicted well-lit spaces, stressed domesticity, and emphasized close-knit communities while past drug crises tended to depict nighttime scenes on seedy streets or portrayed individuals—often Black—interacting with the police, courts, or jails, and often using starker black and white photography. Past research on television news found that Black individuals accused of crime were presented in more [threatening contexts](#) than whites: Black individuals were disproportionately shown in [mug shots](#) and in cases where the victim was a stranger. Black and Latino individuals were also more often presented in a [non-individualized](#) way than whites—by being left unnamed—and were more likely to be shown as threatening—by being depicted in physical custody of police. Regular audits can help to catch and correct biased coverage. To correct these disparities, level up rather than down: reassess whether crimes are newsworthy (see #4) and present the nuance and humanity of everyone.

8. Be cognizant that growing prison terms for violent crimes are a key driver of mass incarceration, and that an abundance of evidence has proven these sentences to be largely ineffective.

Over half of the prison population was convicted of a [violent offense](#), which ranges from assault and robbery to sexual assault and murder. Growing sentence lengths for this population has been a [major driver](#) of mass incarceration. Over 200,000 people in U.S. prisons were serving [life sentences](#) as of 2020—more people than were in prison with any sentence in 1970. Nearly one in five imprisoned people have already served at least [10 years](#), the maximum duration of most “criminal careers” and a point at which recidivism rates fall measurably. Racial disparities in sentencing also [grow](#) with sentence length. People released after decades of imprisonment for the most serious crimes have extremely [low recidivism rates](#). This fact indicates that they have been imprisoned long past the point at which they pose an above-average public safety risk. More generally, when the [Bureau of Justice Statistics](#) examined individuals released from state prisons in 2008, it found that those with violent convictions were less likely to be arrested than those with drug or property convictions. Consider these facts when reporting on reforms impacting, or [omitting](#), people convicted of violent crimes. Since most coverage focuses on people at the time of their crime and not years later, [profiling people](#) released after spending many years in prison is an important contribution.

9. Accurately present crime victims and survivors as having a complexity of views.

Crime survivors are not monolithic and many have unmet needs that go beyond extreme punishment. Increasingly, victim services and advocacy organizations are supporting criminal legal reforms, noting that incarcerated people are [often victims](#) of crime and trauma, and are calling for effective investments to prevent future victimization. Black and Latino people have been far more likely than white people to be serious crime victims, and to be more fearful of becoming crime victims, and yet they have been [less supportive](#) of punitive criminal legal practices while being more supportive of [investments in rehabilitation and crime prevention](#). Be mindful of the impact of your reporting on [crime survivors](#) and assess whether your coverage includes a spectrum of views. Ultimately, a

survivor’s desire for punishment must be balanced with societal goals of [advancing safety, achieving justice, and protecting human dignity](#).

10. Use non-stigmatizing, person-first language and toss the exonerative tense.

Remember that crime coverage is fundamentally about people. Using [person-first language](#) (e.g., people in prison, people with criminal records, youth) impacts [public perception](#) of these individuals and supports [humane policies](#). Using shorter labels or bureaucratic jargon (e.g., prisoner, inmate, felon, juvenile) in headlines or stories comes at the expense of casting [stigma](#) on a vulnerable population by defining them based on a negative dimension of their lives. Destigmatizing language regarding [substance use disorders](#) supports public health solutions, instead of the [failed War on Drugs](#). More precise and accurate language for people convicted of a crime of a sexual nature can also [support their rehabilitation](#).

Many punitive criminal legal concepts have Orwellian names that downplay their harm and exaggerate their efficacy, such as “[truth in sentencing](#)” and “[sentencing enhancements](#).” The catchall “[tough on crime](#)” label is also a form of doublespeak. While such policies are certainly tough on people accused or convicted of crime, why echo this term for policies that often [contribute little to community safety](#)?

Finally, the “[exonerative tense](#)” replaces “police shoot and kill man” with “man struck by officer’s bullet.” The [noun](#) “officer-involved shooting” is no clearer than “officer shooting” in conveying who did the shooting and who was shot. Strive for clarity and precision, especially with headlines. According to the [AP Stylebook](#): “Avoid this vague jargon for shootings and other cases involving police. Be specific about what happened. If police use the term, ask for detail. How was the officer or officers involved? Who did the shooting? If the information is not available or not provided, spell that out.”

This briefing paper was written by Nazgol Ghandnoosh, Ph.D., Co-Director of Research at The Sentencing Project, with support from Richard Mendel, Senior Research Fellow, and Josh Rovner, Director of Youth Justice.

Updated July 2024.

The Sentencing Project advocates for effective and humane responses to crime that minimize imprisonment and criminalization of youth and adults by promoting racial, ethnic, economic, and gender justice.

