

# The Real Cost of ‘Bad News’: How Misinformation is Undermining Youth Justice Policy in Baltimore

A detailed analysis of news coverage at six media outlets in the Baltimore area during the first half of 2024 finds that they have been providing their audiences with skewed and misleading information about youth crime. Problematic coverage has been more frequent at the four local TV news stations analyzed than the two newspapers reviewed and especially prevalent on one local station, WBFF Fox45.

For decades media scholars have noted that local news coverage is often sensationalized and framed in ways that heighten public fears of youthful offending.<sup>1</sup> And this tendency has continued since the outset of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> This coverage has likely contributed to a shift in public opinion toward tough-sounding policies that conflict with the evidence on what works to reduce youth crime and promote youth success.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, problematic coverage appears to have been a factor behind the bipartisan passage of a juvenile justice bill in Maryland in April 2024 that rolled back evidence-based reforms enacted only two years earlier.<sup>4</sup> The new law imposes harsher responses on youth that are not grounded in research and that are likely to worsen crime, damage young people’s futures, and exacerbate the Maryland youth justice system’s already severe racial and ethnic disparities.<sup>5</sup>

Specifically, this analysis of local news coverage in Baltimore reveals:

- **Disproportionate focus on crimes committed by youth.** All six local media outlets in Baltimore, but especially TV news stations (and particularly Fox45), highlighted crimes by young people far out of proportion with their arrest rates.

- **Misleading representation of youth crime trends.** Whereas the available data on youth offending rates in Baltimore show a mix of trends, most of them favorable, all six local media outlets repeatedly asserted a recent spike in youth crime and violence.
- **Failure to support assertions of rising youth crime rates with accurate and representative statistics.** All six of the news outlets often made or echoed claims about rising youth offending rates either without providing statistical evidence, or – when they did offer statistics – doing so in problematic ways.
- **Widespread use of fear-inducing rhetoric about youth crime.** All six outlets published stories that included rhetoric suggesting that youth crime in Baltimore was rampant or out of control.
- **Fox45, relative to other news outlets, was much more likely to air sensationalized coverage highlighting youth crime incidents and perceived leniency in the justice system.** Each of the problems described above were an order of magnitude more intense on Fox45. On that station, viewers were presented with a steady stream of often lengthy stories offering graphic footage of youth crime incidents as well as sharp and fear-inducing rhetoric from select victims, witnesses, experts, and community residents.

The tone of the Fox45 coverage, and to a lesser extent the coverage at other news outlets, fostered an atmosphere of panic around youth crime during Maryland’s 2024 legislative session.<sup>6</sup> The problematic media coverage in Baltimore (the state’s largest city and home to the State Senate President and the Speaker of the House of Delegates) likely contributed to a bipartisan rush to

toughen juvenile justice policies that is unsupported by the evidence of what actually works to reduce youth offending and maintain community safety.

In a 2022 report, The Sentencing Project noted that alarming news coverage about youth crime was increasing nationwide. This news coverage was fueling calls in many states and localities for more punitive responses to youth misconduct even though youth arrest rates for violent crimes and other types of offenses remained far below historic levels.<sup>7</sup> In September 2024, a national update on youth crime trends by the non-partisan Council on Criminal Justice found that “there has been a general decrease in most forms of juvenile offending in recent years,” with increases in some crime categories offset by decreases in many others.<sup>8</sup>

This study provides an in-depth look at how, in one jurisdiction, these troubling media portrayals of crime continue. The study’s findings are likely to be reflected elsewhere in the country. Many media outlets are mischaracterizing isolated short-term increases from artificially low offending rates during the pandemic as a major new teen crime wave.<sup>9</sup> These news reports are being touted by political leaders seeking to promote a “tough-on-crime” agenda, with disturbing results for youth justice policy.<sup>10</sup>

It is critical for public officials to recognize that media coverage of youth crime is often skewed and to remain steadfast in supporting effective rehabilitative youth justice policies. Media outlets have a responsibility to accurately portray youth crime trends and to cover youth crime policy debates in even-handed ways.<sup>11</sup> Finally, advocates and scholars must shed light on problematic media coverage of youth crime. By documenting poor journalistic practices and misleading media portrayals of youth and crime, advocates can push back against false narratives in the political arena and encourage responsible journalism on youth justice issues.

## Misleading Coverage of Crime Shapes Public Opinion and Influences Policy

A sizable body of research finds that media coverage of crime, and local television news coverage in particular, is often problematic.

Local television news broadcasts remain the preferred source of news for a wide swath of the U.S. public. Three-quarters of U.S. adults follow local news very or somewhat closely, and 70% follow crime news very or somewhat closely.<sup>12</sup> Studies find that “crime coverage dominates local news programming, and local stations manipulate crime and violence as a marketing strategy.”<sup>13</sup> Local TV news programs devote one-third to one-fourth of their air-time to crime stories, and local TV news stories about crime often concentrate on uncommon but sensational incidents of violence, and often overemphasize crimes committed by people of color.<sup>14</sup>

Consumption of local television news has been shown to influence viewers’ perceptions of crime. Those who watch local TV news are more likely than other adults to support punitive policies in the justice system, and experimental studies find that showing people TV news stories about crime raises their support for punitive policies.<sup>15</sup> Problematic media coverage of crime is often cited as a cause why, in public opinion surveys, a majority of Americans consistently believe that crime rates are increasing, even when they are not.<sup>16</sup>

Numerous scholars have noted how – through saturation coverage around isolated crime issues – the news media often plays a central role in creating “moral panics,” defined as “sharply increased public anxiety about the threat some group or condition poses to society’s values and well being.”<sup>17</sup> Moral panics often lead to the rapid passage of harsh legislation, often without any basis in data or research, to deal with the perceived crises.<sup>18</sup> Examples include laws around crack cocaine, school violence, child abduction, and crimes of a sexual nature.<sup>19</sup>

In the mid-1990s, the widespread media attention devoted to youth crime (which was then rising) helped fuel a flurry of state law changes embracing more

punitive practices in youth justice systems across the nation. Much of the media coverage centered around the so-called “superpredator” theory, introduced by Princeton University political scientist John Dilulio in 1995.<sup>20</sup> This theory’s predictions of a sharp increase in youth offending proved thoroughly false; youth offending rates declined substantially in the proceeding years.<sup>21</sup>

Yet the “superpredator” theory received extensive press and political attention. In 2020 an analysis published by NBC News 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.”<sup>22</sup>

The current moment is reminiscent of this troubling chapter, as is the accompanying chorus of inflammatory rhetoric from public officials. Once again, a growing political movement, fueled by problematic news coverage, is emerging to scale back youth justice reforms enacted in many states and to derail proposed reforms in others.<sup>23</sup>

## Studying How the Media Covers Youth Crime in Baltimore

This study documents how the media has been covering youth crime issues in one jurisdiction – Baltimore, Maryland. The study examines crime coverage from January through June 2024 on six prominent outlets, including the area’s four broadcast television news stations – WBAL (affiliated with the NBC network); WBFF (affiliated with FOX and owned by Sinclair Broadcasting); WJZ (affiliated with CBS); and WMAR (affiliated with ABC) – plus the *Baltimore Sun* and a recent entry to the local media market, the *Baltimore Banner*, an online newspaper. Together, these outlets published nearly 2,700 crime stories during this period.

To determine the extent to which the outlets were focusing on youth offending in proportion to their actual share of total crime, The Sentencing Project created and reviewed a random sample of 100 crime stories from each outlet and determined – among stories that identified the age of people accused of an offense (youth versus adult) – what share of stories at each outlet focused primarily on youth (or a mix of youth and adults) versus stories that focused primarily on adults.

Second, we reviewed the complete collection of coverage to identify all stories that focused on crimes committed by youth *and* also included content that would be likely to influence audience perceptions about the prevalence or dangerousness of youth crime and/or the policies and practices that should be employed to address youth crime. These included stories that:

- (a) made claims about trends in youth offending rates;
- (b) included fear-inducing rhetoric that is likely to heighten audience concern about youth crime (such as claims that youth crime is spiking, worse than ever, rampant, or out of control); or
- (c) examined policy questions related to addressing youth crime.

Using a Google form, the study team then analyzed each of the 137 stories that met these criteria to determine which of the stories made assertions about youth crime rates (increasing versus stable, mixed, or decreasing). The analysis also identified each trend assertion and each use of fear-inducing rhetoric and looked at whether stories making assertions about youth crime trends provided statistics to justify them, and if so, whether they did so in fair-minded ways. (A more complete description of the methodology used for this study can be found in the Appendix.)

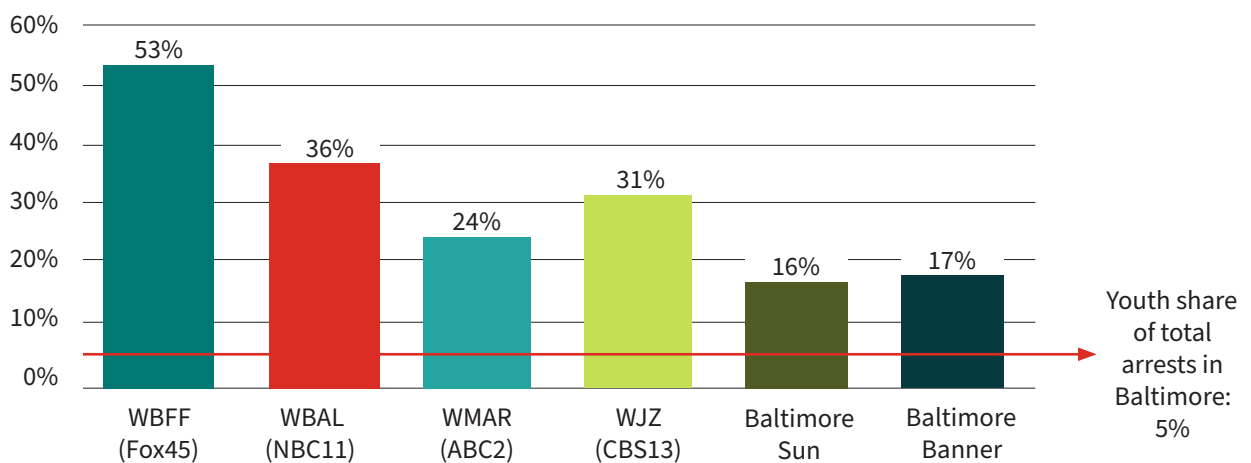
## Media Overrepresentation of Youth in Crime Coverage

The analysis found that:

→ **All media outlets highlight crimes by young people far more frequently than their actual contribution to overall crime rates.** Of the 600 randomly selected stories, 381 identified the ages of persons who committed offenses, and 105 of those stories (28%) focused either

primarily on youth or on a mix of youth and adults. More than half of the Fox45 crime stories indicating the age of persons committing offenses (53%) focused primarily or partly on youth under age 18. The other TV news outlets focused on youth in 24-36% of stories, while Baltimore's two print news outlets focused on youth in 16% to 17% of stories. Yet, youth under 18 represented just 5% of arrests in Baltimore City through the first seven months of 2024.<sup>24</sup> Nationwide, youth under 18 commit about 10 percent of all crimes.<sup>25</sup>

### Share of Baltimore Crime Stories That Focused on People Under 18\* (January-June 2024)



\*Among stories that mentioned age.

## Problematic Characteristics of Stories Focusing on Youth Crime

The analysis of 137 stories across the six media outlets that both (a) focused on offending by youth; and (b) included information indicating a trend in youth crime rates, included fear-inducing rhetoric, or discussed youth justice policy found that:

→ **Misleading (and often fear-inducing) representation of youth crime trends are commonplace.** More than 80% of stories on Fox45 and on WJZ that made assertions about the direction of youth crime trends said that youth crime rates were rising, as did 50% of the stories on WMAR, WBAL, and the *Baltimore Sun*. In the *Baltimore Banner*, 36% of stories that made an assertion about youth crime trends suggested that youth crime rates were rising. The available data on youth arrests in Baltimore show a mix of trends – with troubling recent increases in a handful of crime categories but highly favorable trends in the long-term across most crime categories.<sup>26</sup> Yet many stories on

all local media outlets casually repeated assertions of a serious recent spike in youth crime and violence.

→ **Many stories on all outlets fail to support assertions of rising youth crime rates with accurate and representative statistics or any statistics at all.**

- **Lack of statistical evidence to support claims of rising youth crime.** Across all six news outlets, 31 of the 137 stories claimed that youth crime rates were rising.<sup>27</sup> Of these 31 stories reporting that youth crime rates were rising, only 16 (52%) included statistical evidence to support their assertions. This failure was more common for print outlets, which included statistics in only 3 of 14 print stories asserting that crime rates were rising, versus 13 of 17 local TV news stories making comparable assertions. Often the print stories mentioned a purported increase in youth crime rates as an aside, rather than the stories' main focus.<sup>28</sup>
- **Problematic use of data.** When news outlets did show statistics to support claims about youth crime trends, they often did so in problematic ways that were likely to mislead readers. For instance, in all 16 stories where any outlet used statistics to assert that crime rates were rising, they highlighted just one or two isolated crime categories such as auto thefts or carjacking without noting favorable trends in other offenses, such as gun possession, and overall arrests.<sup>30</sup> Eight stories measured current offending rates against the artificially low rates seen for most offenses during the pandemic – ignoring the fact that even after these recent increases, youth offending rates often remain well below those seen before the pandemic. Seven stories gave statistics on the current number of offenses by youth, but failed to provide any historical comparison to show whether the situation was growing worse or better.

## Misleading With Statistics

On January 26, 2024, Fox45 reporter Rebecca Pryor led off a three-minute news report by asserting that after setting a record in 2023, car thieves in Baltimore were “showing no signs of slowing down.” Pryor justified this assertion by comparing car thefts for the first 20 days of 2024 to the same period one year before. Yet data show that the recent car theft spike in Baltimore – which Pryor’s report attributed primarily to teens – did not start until April 2023, then rose astronomically through July 2023, and then began a precipitous decline. By January 2024 car thefts had fallen by half from their high the previous summer, making Pryor’s assertion wildly misleading.

On March 2, 2024, Fox45 reporter Keith Daniels aired a story about a recent carjacking. In the story, Daniels stated that residents are “raising their voices over the juvenile crime crisis, notably car thefts with child offenders and the punishment they believe the young lawbreakers should face.” Daniels cited unnamed police officials who said that “most of the offenders are youth, juveniles” – an untrue statement<sup>29</sup> – and he cited statistics showing that there had been 66 carjackings in the first 60 days of 2024 and 580 in all of 2023. Despite the alarming tone of his reporting, Daniels’s figures actually indicate that carjackings were becoming less common in Baltimore, not more common: 66 offenses in the first 60 days of 2024 represents a significantly lower rate (1.1 carjackings per day) than 580 carjackings in the 365 days of 2023 (1.6 per day). Fox45 viewers were not provided this information.

→ **Use of fear-inducing rhetoric was widespread.** On Fox45, 37 of 42 youth crime stories analyzed (88%) employed fear-inducing rhetoric, as did 10 of 14 stories (71%) on WJZ. By contrast, just 4 of 12 stories (33%) on WBAL, 3 of 9 stories (33%) on WMAR, 3 of 35 stories (9%) in the *Baltimore Sun* and 3 of 25 stories (12%) at the *Baltimore Banner* included fear-inducing rhetoric. These stories suggested that youth crime in Baltimore was rampant, out of control, or worse than ever. In the stories, news anchors or reporters used – or they showed or quoted sources using – words such as “spike/spiking,” “surge/surging” or “soar/soaring.” Other stories referred to a “rash,” “spree” or “wave” of crimes by youth, or described “chaos” or “mayhem” caused by youth misconduct, or they used comparable words and phrases likely to heighten a perception in their audiences of dangerous and uncontrolled offending by youth.

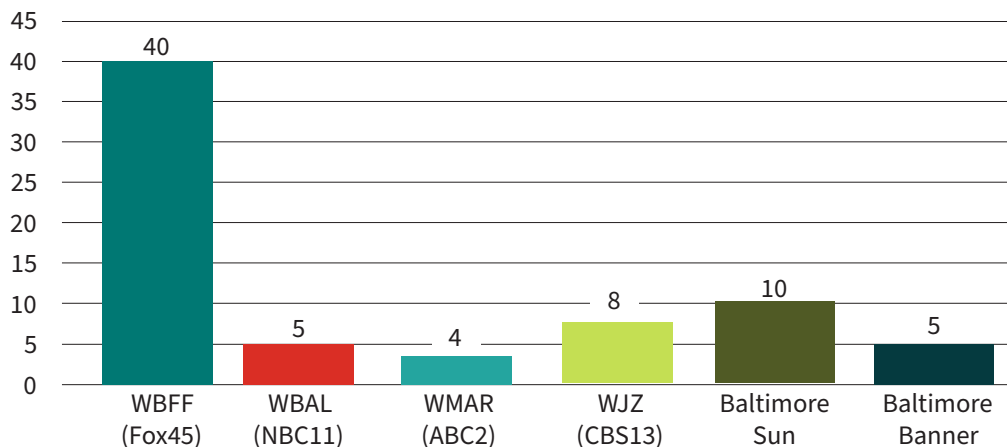
→ **Of the six media outlets analyzed, the Fox45 coverage on youth crime was far and away the most frequent and fear-inducing.**

- **Fox45 aired far more coverage of youth crime, and total crime, than the other five outlets.** Overall, Fox45 ran 1,119 crime stories during the first six months of 2024. The other three news

stations and the *Baltimore Banner* each produced around 300 crime stories, and the *Baltimore Sun* about 400 articles. Also, as noted above, a far higher share of crime stories on Fox45 focused on youth than on any of the other media outlets. In addition, Fox45 aired many more stories than the other three local news stations that focused on the prevalence and dangerousness of the youth crime problem in Baltimore.<sup>31</sup>

- **Ninety-five percent of coded stories on Fox45 indicated that youth crime rates were rising, used or quoted sources using fear-inducing rhetoric to describe the youth crime situation, or both.** By contrast, less than 30% of coded stories in the *Baltimore Sun* and *Baltimore Banner* indicated that youth crime rates were rising or used or quoted sources using fear-inducing rhetoric to describe youth offending behaviors. For other TV news stations, 42% to 64% of coded stories asserted that youth crime rates were rising or included fear-inducing rhetoric.

**Number of Stories Alleging Increase in Youth Crime and/or Using Fear-Inducing Rhetoric (January-June 2024)**



- During the 6-month study period, **Fox45 aired more stories about youth offending that included fear-inducing rhetoric or alleged an increase in youth crime rates (40) than the other five media outlets combined (35).**
- **Fox45 coverage of youth crime was often presented in ways likely to stoke public fears of youth crime and discontent with current youth justice policies.** As noted above, 37 of the 42 stories (88%) on Fox45 analyzed for this study included fear-inducing rhetoric about youth crime. Indeed, many of the Fox45 youth crime stories opened with a visual graphic reading “City in Crisis,” referring to youthful offending. Also, in many Fox45 stories, new incidents were framed as “just the latest” in an ongoing series of alarming youth offenses. Often, after detailing the disturbing details of a new youth offense incident, the Fox45 stories replayed graphic video from previous youth crime incidents. As a result, many of the youth crime stories ran for several minutes – average story length was three minutes and 15 seconds – far longer than the youth crimes stories of the other local TV stations.

## Implications: Problematic News Coverage of Youth Crime Politics and Public Policy in Baltimore

What impact does problematic media coverage, such as that seen in Baltimore, have on public opinion and policy debates over youth crime? The question is difficult to answer definitively. No before-and-after polling data are available to measure the impact of Baltimore youth crime news coverage on public opinion, and it is impossible to know what action the Maryland legislature would have taken had the youth crime coverage offered by these six media outlets been different.

Nonetheless, it seems apparent that the problematic news coverage documented in this study had a substantial and counterproductive impact on the public

policy debate over youth crime during the Maryland legislature’s 2024 session.

At a news conference in January 2024, State Senate President Bill Ferguson (D-Baltimore City), joined by several colleagues, unveiled a bill to revise the state’s juvenile justice laws, saying the legislation must be passed during the 2024 legislative session. Ferguson took this position even though Maryland had enacted a major youth justice reform law two years earlier based on years of intensive study by a high-level policy task force.<sup>32</sup> Ferguson acknowledged that “youth offenders account for less than 10% of the crimes committed;” however, he said, “unfortunately it is clear that [youth have] become the biggest part of the crime perception problem in Maryland.”<sup>33</sup>

By the time Ferguson made this statement, the local Baltimore media’s intensive spotlight on youth crime, including frequent use of fear-inducing rhetoric, had been ongoing for months. Between August and December of 2023, Fox45 ran eight stories of eight minutes or longer focused on youth crime, as well as more than a dozen shorter stories. In this coverage, Fox45 anchors stated explicitly that the station was seeking to influence state and local officials to toughen youth justice laws and policies.

“From shootings to car thefts we have seen an alarming number of young suspects and victims over the past few months,” Fox45 anchors said, leading off a 15-minute story on September 13, 2023. “Fox News has documented it all, holding elected officials accountable at the state and city levels.”<sup>34</sup>

On November 29, 2023, a 14-minute story on Fox45 stated that “state lawmakers are facing mounting pressure to address the youth crime crisis. And tonight Fox News is demanding answers from lawmakers and the governor on how they plan to get the problem under control.”<sup>35</sup> Other stations also aired problematic coverage in late 2023. An anchor at WMAR began one November story saying: “There’s no denying it. An increase in juvenile crime in the Baltimore area. It’s out of control.”<sup>36</sup>

An objective review of crime data in Baltimore makes clear that the “perception problem” Ferguson referenced was due more to skewed media coverage than to actual trends in youth crime, which were mixed. Baltimore did see significant increases in a few serious crime categories in 2023 and early 2024, such as robberies,<sup>37</sup> plus a worrisome increase in the number of Baltimore children and youth killed by violence.<sup>38</sup> Also, amid a nationwide increase in auto thefts linked to the “Kia Challenge” – sparked by social media content describing a simple procedure to hotwire some Kia and Hyundai models – Baltimore saw a phenomenal but brief spike in car thefts, with young people playing a significant role.<sup>39</sup> Citywide, auto thefts reported to police mushroomed from roughly 300 per month in 2020 through 2022 to more than 1600 in July 2023. Auto thefts then fell to roughly 500 per month in May through July 2024 – less than one-third their July 2023 peak, but still well above the norm before 2023.<sup>40</sup>

However, the larger trends in youth crime in Baltimore have been favorable. According to the Baltimore Police Department, the average monthly number of arrests for Baltimore City youth in 2023 and the first seven months of 2024 remained roughly half what they were in 2018 and 2019, and one-third the levels in 2016 and 2017. Youth under 18 comprised just 7% of all arrests in Baltimore in 2023 and just 5% of arrests during the first seven months of 2024 – a smaller share than any year between 2016 and 2019.<sup>41</sup> Yet, particularly on local TV news stations, few media stories about youth crime mentioned these favorable trends. This lack of balanced coverage allowed the youth crime “perception problem” Ferguson described to take root.

In March 2024, Sen. Ferguson and his legislative colleagues responded to the perception problem by passing legislation, HB 814,<sup>42</sup> that scaled back some provisions from the 2022 reform law and toughened treatment for some youth, particularly young children.

“News media played a pivotal role in how the HB814 legislation came into being,” said the Rev. Dr. Marlon Tilghman of Ames United Methodist Church in Bel Air, a member of the Maryland Youth Justice Coalition.

Echoing off-the-record comments made by many legislators, executive branch officials, and observers of the 2024 legislative debate over youth crime, Tilghman noted that “The legislative process was not aligned with reliable statistical data on youth crime or research on what works to control delinquent behavior. Rather, it was driven by the raw and real emotions of citizens triggered by frightening coverage on certain media outlets. When it comes to Maryland’s children, the laws should carry the burden of grace, truth, and justice. We can only hope for the best after this disappointing legislation.”

Melissa Goemann, Senior Policy Counsel for the National Youth Justice Network, observed that “Fox and Sinclair News media bullied legislators for half a year leading up to the General Assembly session. Legislators reported getting chased to their cars by media persons confronting them about a fictitious youth crime wave narrative that often relied on the repetition of sensationalized stories lacking the basics of sound reporting.”

“This does nothing to help create true safety or well-being for young people,” said Goemann, who is a Maryland resident and has been deeply involved in youth justice issues in the state.

Days after the legislation passed, the *Baltimore Sun* printed a scathing opinion column by two respected criminologists, who criticized the new law as both counterproductive and unnecessary. The legislation, they wrote, would “make no one safer” and would exacerbate the system’s “shameful” racial disparities.<sup>43</sup>

“The authoritative statistical evidence could not be clearer,” declared the column, one of whose co-authors, Alex Piquero, recently served as director of the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics. “Despite an already-receding spike in some violent offenses that coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic,” wrote Piquero and Heather Warnken, “most crimes committed by young people in Maryland, as in the rest of the nation, remain below pre-pandemic levels and very far from the peaks of the early 1990s.”<sup>44</sup>



## Recommendations and Conclusion

Baltimore's problematic media coverage offers a case study on the media's influence in policy debates and the potential for poor media coverage to undermine reasoned and constructive approaches to youth justice. While the study's findings are limited to a single jurisdiction, they are likely to reflect circumstances in other media markets.

No matter the city, local news media remain the public's primary source of information about youth crime. Problematic coverage in the media – local TV news outlets especially – can increase concern and fear among community members, exacerbate racial stereotypes, and drive support for punitive laws and policies that conflict with the evidence on what works to minimize youth offending.<sup>45</sup>

In light of these realities, elected officials and other policymakers must recognize that local news coverage of crime issues is often problematic and skewed, and they must fulfill their responsibility to address youth crime policy issues in ways that maximize community safety and youth wellbeing. Members of the media have an obligation to re-examine their approaches to youth crime issues and avoid covering these issues in sensationalized and misleading ways that are likely to stoke public fears and promote tough-sounding policy responses that research shows are counterproductive.

Finally, the findings of this report make clear that youth justice reform advocates and other supporters of effective youth justice policies must hold the media to account. Advocates should bring attention to false narratives, provide context to sensationalized coverage of isolated youth crime incidents, and set the stage for constructive debate grounded in objective evidence.

In particular, youth justice reform advocates should:

*Identify and document problematic coverage by creating and publicizing materials that offer more balanced and constructive information about youth crime trends and effective policy alternatives.* As part of these efforts, advocates should:

- **Document false, misleading coverage in local media outlets.** Suggested strategies include:
  - (a) conducting or commissioning rigorous content analysis studies like this study on Baltimore; and
  - (b) preparing and circulating critiques documenting instances where media outlets present false and misleading content that violates journalistic norms and best practices.
- **Respond to the problematic coverage quickly using multiple approaches.** Advocates can prepare opinion columns, fact sheets, press releases, social media posts and other materials to contradict false and misleading media narratives with objective facts. These findings must be shared with elected officials.

**Engage reporters and editors to discuss problematic coverage and promote the use of better practices for covering youth justice issues.** To help promote more fair and balanced coverage, advocates should consider the following strategies:

- **Meet with editorial boards and local network news management teams** to discuss any problematic practices in their recent coverage of youth crime issues and brief them on best journalistic practices for covering crime and delinquency as described in the text box below.<sup>46</sup>
- **Contact beat reporters covering youth crime issues to respectfully discuss problematic coverage,** familiarize them with best practices for covering youth crime issues, and urge fairer and more balanced coverage.

- **Make presentations on best practices for covering crime and youth justice issues** at journalism conferences and workshops.

Echoing the findings of past research, this study demonstrates how media outlets – especially local television news programs – can present problematic coverage that misleads the public and creates fertile ground for opportunistic political leaders to advance a get-tough agenda for youth crime that contradicts the evidence of what works. So long as this problematic coverage remains unchallenged, the prospects for sustaining recent reform successes in youth justice will be bleak. In this environment, contradicting problematic reporting about youth crime – and engaging with journalists to promote better coverage – must be a core activity and high priority for youth justice advocates everywhere.

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## **Studying Media Trends in Your Jurisdiction**

While this study is specific to Baltimore, its methodology can be replicated in any jurisdiction to review local media coverage of youth crime. Replicating the study methodology in other locales can help to inform policymakers and the public about inaccurate media narratives, better inform public policy debates, and encourage journalists to embrace more balanced and professional approaches to covering this issue.

## Best Practices for Journalists Covering Youth Crime Issues

1. Review your crime coverage to avoid focusing a disproportionate share of coverage on youth under age 18, who are responsible for roughly 10% of crime nationally, as measured by arrests and victim reports.<sup>a</sup>
2. Be careful in making assertions – or repeating assertions from police, prosecutors or political leaders – claiming that youth crime is increasing. Always support claims about increases in youth crime with reliable statistics that take into account historical trends, not just recent fluctuations.
3. When citing statistics, use data in responsible ways by presenting broad trends in total arrests, or arrests for all violent crimes, rather than concentrating isolated offense categories.
4. Avoid citing people who use false and inflammatory rhetoric about the youth justice system that will predictably raise fear levels among the public.
5. When covering youth justice policy issues, present alternative policies in a balanced way that takes into account the evidence of what works and doesn't work to reduce youth offending. Overwhelmingly, research shows that confinement in residential facilities typically increases the likelihood of future justice system involvement and damages young people's futures.<sup>b</sup> Compelling evidence also shows that youth diverted from the justice system have better outcomes than comparable youth who are charged in juvenile court. Therefore, journalists must challenge assertions made by proponents of more detention, incarceration, and other punitive practices.<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Tapp, S.N., Thompson, A., Smith, E.L., & Remrey, L. (2024, April). *Statistical brief: Crimes involving juveniles, 1993–2022*. U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>b</sup> Mendel, R.A. (2023). Why youth incarceration fails: An updated review of the evidence. The Sentencing Project.

<sup>c</sup> Mendel, R.A. (2022). Diversion: A hidden key to combating racial and ethnic disparities in juvenile justice. The Sentencing Project.

## APPENDIX: Study Methodology

To determine the extent to which Baltimore's media have been providing their audiences with accurate and objective information about youth crime, The Sentencing Project (TSP) undertook a rigorous analysis of six local media news outlets. These included four broadcast television news stations – WBAL (affiliated with the NBC network); WBFF (affiliated with FOX and owned by Sinclair Broadcasting); WJZ (affiliated with CBS); and WMAR (affiliated with ABC); as well as the city's largest newspaper, the *Baltimore Sun*, and a recent entry to the local media market, the *Baltimore Banner*, an online newspaper.

For each outlet, our first step was to **identify and capture all of the stories about crime that were aired or published during the first six months of 2024**. For the print outlets – *Sun* and *Banner*, which both had complete archives, TSP relied upon the outlets' own websites. For the four local TV news stations, which had weaker archives, TSP used Google News searches. Search terms included police, carjack, crime, arrest, assault, felony, and juvenile justice. This search process yielded 2,689 stories.

We then analyzed these media stories to answer two overarching questions.

### ***First, how prevalent was coverage of offending by youth, as opposed to adults, in relation to youths' actual share of total arrests in Baltimore?***

To address this question, from the full collection of 2,689 new stories, TSP drew a random sample of 100 stories from each of the six outlets. Then TSP analyzed these 600 stories to calculate, among stories that identified the age of persons who committed offenses, what share of stories for each outlet focused primarily on youth (or a mix of youth and adults) versus focusing primarily on adults.

### ***Second, how often did the six media outlets present youth crime stories with problematic content such as fear-inducing rhetoric or misleading presentation of youth crime trends?***

To address this question, we scanned the entire collection of stories to identify those that highlighted offenses by youth and also: (a) gave an indication about whether youth crime rates were increasing or decreasing; (b) included fear-inducing rhetoric about youthful offending in the Baltimore area. This process identified a subsample of 137 stories for further analysis; and/or (c) examined policy questions related to youth justice.<sup>47</sup>

We then analyzed these 137 stories using a coding sheet on the Google forms app.<sup>48</sup> In the coding process we asked:

- Did the story provide any indication regarding crime trends overall or for any given offense category (or categories), and if so did it suggest that: (a) crime rates are rising; or (b) the crime trend is flat, improving, or mixed?
- Did the article use, or did it quote sources using, fear-inducing rhetoric about youth that was likely to intensify audience members' fear of youth crime? Did it feature rhetoric characterizing the youth crime situation as a crisis, out of control, worse than ever, or spiking, surging, rampant, etc.?
- If the article made assertions about the crime rates increasing or decreasing (or flat or mixed), did it present data to document that trend quantitatively?
- And if the story did present data to document a trend in youth crime, did the story use statistics in problematic ways such as:
  - Focusing on only one or two crime categories without presenting a broader portrait of overall youth crime trends?
  - Examining the change in offending rates only in comparison with the idiosyncratic crime trends (with far lower arrest rates for most offenses) seen

during the height of the pandemic in 2020, 2021, and 2022, while neglecting to mention the long-term trends?

- Highlighting only very short-term trends (month to month, for instance), which are subject to large fluctuations.
- Citing a change in youth rates over time without specifying the time period?
- Mentioning the number of youth crime incidents in a recent time frame without providing any comparison to the past.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Dorfman, L & Schiraldi, V (2001). *Off balance: Youth, race & crime in the news*. Justice Policy Institute.
- <sup>2</sup> Mendel, R. (2022). *Data reveals violence among youth under 18 has not spiked in the pandemic*. The Sentencing Project.
- <sup>3</sup> Beale, S. S. (2006). The news media's influence on criminal justice policy: How market-driven news promotes punitiveness. *Wm. & Mary L. Rev.*, 48, 397; O'Hear, M. (2019). Violent crime and media coverage in one city: A statistical snapshot. *Marq. L. Rev.*, 103, 1007; Callanan, V. J. (2012). Media consumption, perceptions of crime risk and fear of crime: Examining race/ethnic differences. *Sociological Perspectives*, 55(1), 93-115. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2012.55.1.93>.
- <sup>4</sup> H.B. 814, 2024 Gen. Assemb., Sess. (Md. 2024) (enacted); H.B. 459, 2022 Gen. Assemb., Sess. (Md. 2022) (enacted).
- <sup>5</sup> For instance, in a column for the *Baltimore Sun* soon after the law passed, criminologists Alex Piquero and Heather Warnken predicted that the new law "will make no one safer, and it will exacerbate the system's shameful, longstanding racial disparities." Piquero, A. & Warnken, H. (2024, April 9). Gov. Moore, veto Maryland's juvenile justice reform bill. *Baltimore Sun*.
- <sup>6</sup> At the outset of the 2024 legislative session, Maryland's Senate President lamented that, despite accounting for less than 10% of crimes in the state, youth had become "the biggest part of the crime perception problem in Maryland." Bush, M. (2024, Jan. 31). *Details of Maryland juvenile justice reform bill emerge*. WYPR Radio.
- <sup>7</sup> Mendel, R. (2022). *Data reveals violence among youth under 18 has not spiked in the pandemic*. The Sentencing Project.
- <sup>8</sup> Lantz, B. & Knapp, K.G. (2024, September). *Trends in Juvenile Offending: What You Need to Know*. Council on Criminal Justice.
- <sup>9</sup> Chan, K., Kelley, C., Kelley, S., Murphy, K., & Crockett, E. (2024). *News coverage of youth crime increased while youth arrest rate fell*. Child Trends.
- <sup>10</sup> As one recent news story explained, "The wave of juvenile justice legislation and policy changes comes amid a heightened public perception that crime, including youth crime, is rising. Political rhetoric and sensational media coverage, rather than statistics, are driving that perception." Hernandez, A. (2024, May 31). Greater focus on crime sparks another wave of juvenile justice bills: Nearly every state considered changes in juvenile age limits, detention or education programs. *Stateline*.
- <sup>11</sup> Ghandnoosh, N. (2024): *Media guide: 10 crime coverage dos and don'ts*. The Sentencing Project.
- <sup>12</sup> Mitchell, A., Gottfried, J., Barthel, M. & Shearer, E. (2016). *The modern news consumer: News attitudes and practices in the digital era*. Pew Research Center.
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- <sup>15</sup> Beale, S. S. (2006). The news media's influence on criminal justice policy: How market-driven news promotes punitiveness. *Wm. & Mary L. Rev.*, 48, 397.
- <sup>16</sup> Dilanian, K. (2023, Dec. 16). *Most people think the U.S. crime rate is rising. They're wrong*. NBC News; Jones, J.M. (2023). *More Americans see U.S. crime problem as serious*. Gallup, Inc.
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- <sup>20</sup> Dilulio, J. (1995, Dec.) The coming of the super-predators. *Weekly Standard*.
- <sup>21</sup> Bogert, C. & Hancock, L. (2020, Nov. 20). Analysis: How the media created a 'superpredator' myth that harmed a generation of Black youth. NBC News.
- <sup>22</sup> Bogert, C. & Hancock, L. (2020, Nov. 20). Analysis: How the media created a 'superpredator' myth that harmed a generation of Black youth. NBC News.
- <sup>23</sup> Mendel, R. (2022). *Data Reveals Violence Among Youth Under 18 Has Not Spiked in the Pandemic*. The Sentencing Project.
- <sup>24</sup> Rovner, J. (2024). *Baltimore's youth justice by the numbers*. The Sentencing Project.

<sup>25</sup> Nationwide, youth under 18 accounted for 9.2% of total arrests in 2022, and victims identified youth under 18 as the perpetrators in 10.5% of non-fatal violent offenses. Tapp, S.N., Thompson, A., Smith, E.L., & Remrey, L. (2024, April). *Statistical brief: Crimes involving juveniles, 1993–2022*. U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics.

<sup>26</sup> Rovner, J. (2024). *Baltimore's youth justice by the numbers*. The Sentencing Project.

<sup>27</sup> Most stories made no claims about youth crime trends, but rather focused on youth justice policy or included fear-inducing rhetoric about youth offending without specifically mentioning youth crime trends. Others showed youth crime rates as mixed, flat or declining.

<sup>28</sup> For instance, a February 27, 2024 *Baltimore Sun* article by Hannah Gaskill, "Maryland Senate committee advances juvenile justice bill in similar posture to House," stated: "The Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee voted Tuesday to move forward a bill to address the rise in certain crimes among juveniles." The story provided no data to justify this assertion.

<sup>29</sup> There were 34 carjacking arrests in Baltimore in the first half of 2024. Eleven of these arrests (32%) were people under the age of 18. (Open Baltimore database. Analysis on file.)

<sup>30</sup> Juvenile arrests for gun possession averaged 10 per month in the first six months of 2024, down from 12 per month in 2023. Total arrests for youth under 18 averaged 68 per month in the first half of 2024, down from 75 per month in 2023. Source: Baltimore City Police Department, Juvenile Booking Data Analysis Unit (2024). Juvenile arrest monthly reports for Dec. 2023 and June 2024.

<sup>31</sup> In all, 42 stories on Fox45 met the criteria and were therefore coded, compared to 12, 9, and 14 stories for the other three local TV stations. The *Baltimore Sun* had 35 and the *Baltimore Banner* had 25.

<sup>32</sup> The Maryland Juvenile Justice Reform Council, created by statute in 2019, met for more than two years and issued three reports – an initial report (December 2019), a final report (January 2021), and a supplemental report (October 2021). The Council's work provided much of the basis for the Juvenile Justice Reform Act (HB 459) enacted by the Maryland Legislature in 2022. Information about the Juvenile Justice Reform Council can be found on the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services website at <https://djs.maryland.gov/Pages/Juvenile-Justice-Reform-Council.aspx>.

<sup>33</sup> Bush, M. (2024, Jan. 31). *Details of Maryland juvenile justice reform bill emerge*. WYPR Radio.

<sup>34</sup> Frost, M. (2023, Sept. 13). *Maryland lawmakers hold hearing on increase in juvenile-driven crimes*. WBFF (Fox45).

<sup>35</sup> Frost, M. (2023, Nov. 29). *Juvenile crime concerns: Governor commits to unveil plan before upcoming legislative session*. WBFF (Fox 45).

<sup>36</sup> *Baltimore residents voice their concerns about juvenile crime* (2023, Nov. 29). WMAR TV.

<sup>37</sup> City of Baltimore. *Untitled Baltimore crime dashboard*. Last accessed Oct. 30, 2024.

<sup>38</sup> Little, R. (2024, Jan. 31). *We're tracking youth gun violence in Baltimore. Here's the latest data*. *Baltimore Banner*.

<sup>39</sup> For instance, in a May 1, 2024 news story presenting data about car thefts neighborhood by neighborhood, Fox45 reported that "Police say that juveniles were often responsible for car thefts across the city." Streicher, M. (2024, May 1). *Data shows car thefts soared in Baltimore City in 2023*. *WBFF (Fox45)*.

<sup>40</sup> Rovner, J. (2024). *Baltimore's youth justice by the numbers*. The Sentencing Project.

<sup>41</sup> Rovner, J. (2024). *Baltimore's youth justice by the numbers*. The Sentencing Project.

<sup>42</sup> H.B. 814, 2024 Gen. Assemb., Sess. (Md. 2024) (enacted).

<sup>43</sup> Piquero, A. & Warnken, H. (2024, April 9). *Gov. Moore, veto Maryland's juvenile justice reform bill*. *Baltimore Sun*.

<sup>44</sup> Piquero, A. & Warnken, H. (2024, April 9). *Gov. Moore, veto Maryland's juvenile justice reform bill*. *Baltimore Sun*.

<sup>45</sup> Mitchell, A., Gottfried, J., Barthel, M. & Shearer, E. (2016). *The modern news consumer: News attitudes and practices in the digital era*. Pew Research Center; Beale, S. S. (2006). *The news media's influence on criminal justice policy: How market-driven news promotes punitiveness*. *Wm. & Mary L. Rev.*, 48, 397.

<sup>46</sup> For more ideas about best practices for covering crime generally, advocates can refer editors and reporters to the Sentencing Project's report: *Media guide: 10 crime coverage dos and don'ts*.

<sup>47</sup> TSP did not analyze the nature of policy issues covered in these stories for this study. However, most stories that explored policy issues also included trends information and/or fear-inducing rhetoric.

<sup>48</sup> These included 42 stories on Fox45, 9 to 14 stories on each of the other three TV news outlets, 35 stories in the *Baltimore Sun* and 25 stories in the *Baltimore Banner*.



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## **THE REAL COST OF ‘BAD NEWS’: HOW MISINFORMATION IS UNDERMINING YOUTH JUSTICE POLICY IN BALTIMORE**

**This brief was written by Richard A. Mendel, Senior Research Fellow. Eliza Thor, Ph.D., provided critical research assistance.**

**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.**

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