

The Social History of Crime and Punishment in America: An Encyclopedia

News Media, Crime in

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The news media spends much time reporting on crime and criminal justice in America and is a primary source of information about these topics for the general public.

People now have easy access to the news at their fingertips, with online news sources and the sharing of information through social media. They also have the ability to discuss the articles through forums on many news Websites. Citizens must discern which information is accurate and which information is inaccurate, and may come to conclusions about a suspect's guilt or innocence or make judgments about a crime victim's actions based on what they read. Citizens will also draw conclusions about how the criminal justice system operates and whether or not it does so fairly. In other words, our collective knowledge about the causes, amount, and types of crime in our society—as well as the workings of criminal law, the police, courts, corrections, and other aspects of the criminal justice system—is heavily influenced by the news media.

Early Crime News

Crime stories often lead the evening news and are given prime spots in newspapers and online news sources, though this was not always the case. While crime has been with us for millennia, crime news is a much more recent development, though by no means solely a modern phenomenon. Indeed, the Roman Senator Cicero is said to have lamented the too frequent reports of criminal violence that filled the “newspaper” of ancient Rome—the *acta diurnal populi Romani*. However, for most of human history, technological limitations and low levels of literacy meant that these presentations of crime were restricted primarily to oral accounts, with some augmentation through written text and artistic renderings such as sketches, wood etchings, and paintings. While actual accounts of crime in early news were relatively rare, some attention was devoted to issues of “justice”—that is, the state's retributive response to wrongdoing. Newspaper-like accounts of executions can be found in the historical records of many African, Asian, and European nations. These stories were frequently devoted to the “spiritual” consequences of crime, though they were occasionally paired with notions of the state's retributive responsibility. Tales of executions were recounted in gruesome detail for the news audience, serving both the functions of vicarious titillation as well as general deterrence.

An early incarnation of broadsheet newspapers, the English “newsbooks” of the 17th century began to include sensational and bizarre accounts of crime and misadventure. In the United States, the publication of criminal narratives goes back to the colonial era. Strict morality and religiosity in colonial America curbed crime, but also created ample opportunity for news accounts of transgression and punishment. News accounts of colonists convicted of using profanity, displaying public drunkenness, or inappropriate behavior occurring between men and women and sentenced to lashings, the stock, or pillory were a common fixture. For example, in 1656 a newspaper in Boston reported that a naval officer, Captain Kemble, was placed in the stocks for having engaged in lewd behavior on the Sabbath, while a Salem paper recounted the fines imposed on John Smith and Mrs. John Kitchin for their frequent absences from church. In addition to other strategies for shaming [p. 1243 ↓] offenders (such as clipping ears, branding, or forcing them to wear signs—such as “A” for adultery) crime news coverage heavily emphasized specific and general deterrence.

As crime news became more prominent in the 19th century, papers like the New York Herald and the Sun captivated their readers with detailed accounts of crime. The coverage of the murders of high-class New York prostitute Helen Jewett in 1836 (left) and Mary Rogers, a New York tobacco shop worker in 1841 were the beginnings of sensationalized news coverage.



In keeping with the punitive orientation of American justice, the harsh punishment of offenders was a common theme in colonial accounts of crime. Stories recounting public lashings, scalding, and executions were among newspapers’ staple offering, even for what we would today consider relatively minor offenses. For example, in 1752, the

Pennsylvania Gazette reported that John Broughton had the letter “R” branded on his hand and was sentenced to a lifetime of servitude for the crime of pickpocketing.

As early American cities grew, the general populace's fear of crime increased. In 1744, a newspaper in New York reported that the city's streets were becoming very dangerous at night and that only the “sufficiently strong or well armed” were safe. Indeed, according to the press, it was not simply growing urban areas that were dangerous, but small communities as well. Many colonial newspapers featured editorial content condemning the English for transporting some of Britain's criminals, particularly counterfeiters, pickpockets, and highwaymen to America.

Nineteenth-Century Crime News

Growing populations, increased literacy, and technological advancements in the early decades of the 19th century made news accounts of crime a more prominent component of the general public's knowledge of crime and criminal justice. By the 1830s bizarre and fear-laden crime news coverage under the auspices of the “astonishingly real” became standard fare. James Bennett's fledgling paper, the *New York Herald*, vastly increased its circulation with long, drawn-out crime stories, such as that of the murder of Helen Jewett, an upscale New York City prostitute in 1836. The paper titillated readers with details from the trial [p. 1244 ↓] and of Jewett's death and championed the innocence of her accused murderer Richard Robinson. Other New York City newspapers, such as Benjamin Day's *The Sun*, condemned Robinson and editorialized that he used his family's prominent wealth to buy an acquittal from a corrupt criminal justice system.

By the mid-1840s the penny presses in the United States began to publish lurid accounts and photos of the dead and dying, frequently related to street crime, but also included those resulting from what the media frequently termed *industrial accidents*. While this decade began with a clear distinction on the treatment of crime between the “exploitative” newspapers and their more “serious” counterparts, it was not long before all the papers were including sensationalized accounts and photographs of heinous crimes among their staple offerings. Coverage of the death of Mary Rogers, a tobacco store employee from a New York City in the summer of 1841, exemplified the

news media's approach to crime news coverage during this time period. Dubbed the "Beautiful Cigar Girl," she was missing for three days before her body was found floating in the Hudson River. The New York press transformed her death into a national story with sensationalized coverage—alternately speculating suicide and several different murder scenarios and reporting a confession that Rogers died as a result of a failed abortion. Drawn out for months, these stories also served as a venue for criticism of the police, debates over abortion, and gang activity.

By the mid-19th century newspapers were regularly covering a host of crime and criminal justice issues in connection with city politics, industry, labor movements, and immigration. Anti-Irish immigrant sentiment in the 1860s resulted in newspapers from all political stripes running stories about crimes and disturbances linked to Irish immigrants. This period also saw newspapers addressing the role of government authority in crime news stories ranging from the New York City Draft Riots through police discretion and the use of firearms.

Twentieth-Century Crime News

By the turn of the 20th century, crime took on the character of the saleable news commodity we know it to be today. This epoch saw the rise of yellow journalism, exemplified by Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*. These periodicals ran features on atrocious, though statistically rare criminal violence, including cannibalism, human sacrifice, kidnapping, white slavery, and gangland murder. William Randolph Hearst's *San Francisco Examiner* similarly entertained readers, devoting a quarter of the paper to coverage of crime. Stories about transgressive (typically, lascivious) behavior and humorous coverage of arrestees brought into lower courts were standard fare.

By the 1920s crime news coverage took on an increasingly lurid, sensational flavor. A growing number of mediated depictions of crime, particularly visual representations of dead and dying crime victims, became the standard fare in newspapers. News audiences were inundated with photographs of spectacular death moments, brought on by criminal violence on the streets of urban cities. During this decade, news coverage of crime also harkened back to a zeitgeist of an earlier age—the punishment of criminals. News accounts of trials abounded, as did exposes on hard labor in prison

and executions of convicted felons. In 1928, newspaper photographer Tom Howard smuggled a small camera into the press viewing gallery of New York's Sing Sing Prison during the execution of convicted murderer Ruth Snyder. Howard snapped a photo as the electricity surged through Snyder's body. The blurry, full-page photo of Snyder's jolting body captioned "**DEAD!**" appeared on the front of New York's *Daily News* the following morning. By the end of the day, the paper sold more than 1.5 million copies—the highest sale of any newspaper in history at that time.

The general public's social desire to consume crime through the news coalesced with newspaper visuals and media loops by the 1930s. From fatal bar brawls and car chases through brothel raids to mobster warfare, the visual record of crime swelled in the 1930s and 1940s. One of the most famous contributors was New York photojournalist Arthur Fellig. Fellig built his early career on capturing images of crime, which he sold to newspapers and magazines. As one of only a few journalists who had a license, Fellig used a police-band shortwave radio to listen in on police radio calls. As a result, he frequently arrived at crime scenes before the police or ambulance personnel. Nicknamed "Weegee the Famous," Fellig shocked [p. 1245 ↓] and delighted news audiences with his detailed accounts and explicit photos of crime scenes. The work of Fellig and journalists like him not only generated substantial profits for newspapers and magazines but perhaps more importantly cemented the relationships among crime, spectacle, and the news media.

In the early 20th century, large police departments hosted crime reporters whose focus it was to report on the major activities of the department. The fascination with crime was in part fueled by a media campaign organized by J. Edgar Hoover, who wished to make the Federal Bureau of Investigation the premier law enforcement agency in the nation. To generate public support, he strategically portrayed his agents as crime fighters, and the suspects as hardened criminals who were dangerous and difficult to apprehend.

By the mid-1950s, higher standards of living and economies of abundance resulted in lower crime rates but, ironically, greater news coverage of crime. In fact, the mid-20th century was a watershed moment for crime in the news media, with increasingly aggressive marketing of crime news through specialized "crime beat reporting." The result was more sensationalistic coverage of crime that relied ever more heavily upon

the police, prosecuting attorneys, and other criminal justice officials for commentary and analysis.

In the final decades of the 20th century, the news media was quickly ascending to a position of unchallenged dominance for producing and filtering popular portrayals of crime. Now there are several types of news media that provide the public with information about crime and justice in America. Television, newspapers, the radio, and the Internet are all popular sources of news coverage. Local media outlets tend to focus on events occurring within a certain geographic area and national outlets choose to cover events that either have implications for the entire nation, or those that will capture national attention.

Crime Suspects

The news media provides considerable information about the suspects who are accused of having committed crimes. After they are arrested, suspects can expect to have their mug shots, criminal histories, and even mental health history reported in news coverage. This information can be gathered from a variety of places, including the police, public court records, attorneys, friends, and family members. This information can also include whether the suspect and victim knew each other.

In cases where the suspect is unknown, the news circulates information provided by the police in the hope that someone will know the suspect and report him or her to the police. Sometimes this includes a sketch of the suspect provided to a police sketch artist by the victim. In the cases of crimes committed in public places, such as banks or retail stores, there is often video of suspects, which is aired to the public. Some news coverage is specifically directed at the apprehension of people who are suspected of committing crimes. For example, *America's Most Wanted* focuses on encouraging citizens to provide information about suspected criminals so they can stand trial. This TV show was the first of its kind, developed by John Walsh, whose son Adam was murdered in 1981. Walsh has been a figurehead in the news not only because of this show but because of his efforts to create stricter laws for sex offenders and his leadership in searching for missing children.

Crime Victims

The news also reports information about crime victims, but is usually more selective in what it shares. Some information about victims is not provided to the public. For example, the names of child victims or rape victims are usually not published to assist the victims in keeping their experiences private and possibly protecting them from further violence. Sometimes information about victims is shared that casts them in a negative light. For example, a good deal of private information about the woman who accused Kobe Bryant of raping her was made public, including mental health problems she experienced when she was younger. Her name quickly spread across the Internet, and after she filed a civil lawsuit against Bryant, some news media made the decision to publish her name. The charges were dropped and Bryant was never tried for, nor convicted of, committing any crime.

Sometimes victims of crimes are portrayed by the media as deserving of what happened to them, or at least, as being partly at fault for what happened to them. Researchers have found that gender is a significant ingredient in the news media's [p. 1246 ↓] coverage of crime victims. For example, while men are the most common victims of violence, it is women who are overrepresented as victims of violent crime in the news media. While female victims may be more newsworthy than their male counterparts, they must be deemed innocent (i.e., virtuous and honorable) as opposed to blameworthy (i.e., shameful and unscrupulous) if they are to warrant sympathetic media coverage.

A policewoman renders first aid to a citizen. Since the late 20th century, television shows have been developed that blur the line between news and fiction by filming police officers while they perform their duties. These shows include COPS, Alaska State Troopers, Border Wars, and the Police Women series in locales such as Broward County, Florida and Maricopa County, Arizona.



The Police

Crime reporting has largely focused on the police since their development in the mid-1800s. Reporters were stationed at police departments, where they received firsthand accounts of any activity or crime. The police are portrayed in the news media largely as crime fighters and law enforcers. This image is only partly based on reality. While the police are responsible for enforcing laws, their shifts are often filled with other duties. The police are responsible for assisting citizens with non-criminal matters, maintaining order, investigating traffic accidents, and providing service to the community. Officers often engage in activities designed to bridge the gap between them and citizens, such as the DARE program or citizen police academies.

Police misconduct and abuse are frequently covered by the news media. The public normally has little knowledge of police activities; however, personal recording devices and video recording capabilities on cell phones have made it easier for police activity to become more publicized. The publicity surrounding the altercation between Rodney King and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) marks one of the earliest and most controversial instances of private citizens secretly videotaping police officers on duty. In 1991, four LAPD police officers were accused of using excessive force against King. These officers were tried in a court of law, and were subsequently acquitted of any criminal wrongdoing at the state level, resulting in violent rioting in Los Angeles. This case was widely covered by the news media and analyzed by reporters.

The news media played the videotape of Rodney King's experience with these officers multiple times. The officers were subsequently indicted on federal criminal charges and two were convicted of violating King's constitutional rights.

There are several shows on television that blur the line between news and fiction. Born in the late 1980s and truly taking form in the decade [p. 1247 ↓] of the 1990s, this “television” medium is sometimes referred to as “crime vérité.” First aired in 1989, *COPS* and similar shows follow police officers while they are on duty, often showing either the most exciting events or the strangest events. This depiction of police work does not always accurately reflect reality. It takes many hours of filming officers to fill a half-hour segment of the show. Officers also have other duties aside from enforcing the law, but because these duties might be perceived as uninteresting, they are not covered by such shows. More recently, developed shows such as *Police Women* (e.g., with several different series set in Broward County, Florida, Cincinnati, Ohio, and Memphis, Tennessee) focus solely on women police officers on patrol.

Trial Coverage

The majority of the general public has not been inside a courtroom or taken part in a criminal trial and instead relies upon news coverage of trial events reported after the fact. Now, more than ever, people have access to information about what occurs in the courtroom. Most national news stations devote coverage to high-profile trials. There are also entire television networks dedicated to trial coverage. The first of these was Court TV (now truTV). Though the network began broadcasting in 1991, it was the coverage of the murder trials of Lyle and Erik Menendez in 1993 and O. J. Simpson in 1994 that truly propelled it into a national sensation. Originally featuring continuous live trial coverage, with commentary by a team of anchors and legal analysts, it later began airing more stylized and fictional programming such as *Forensic Files* and *Homicide: Life on the Street*.

With the Internet, reporters can now blog live coverage of trials. In Warren County, Ohio, reporters from the major news stations blogged trial coverage during the Ryan Widmer murder trial, allowing the public to follow the trial and make comments as the trial progressed.

Corrections

The corrections field (jail, prison, probation, and parole) is not covered in the news media as much as other components of the criminal justice system. The field of corrections is covered largely in the form of serial television documentaries with an investigative or exploratory focus. The shows tend to document life in prisons and provide information about how inmates adjust to life without freedom. Some of the coverage features interviews with inmates who reflect upon their lives in jail or prison, and who sometimes speak about the crime of which they were convicted. The shows also emphasize the manner in which corrections officers must conduct business.

Moral Panics

A moral panic occurs when the public believes an event or a series of events is a threat to the public order and well-being. The media contributes to moral panics by continuous coverage of crime events and other issues that could be construed as related to crime. One example of a moral panic, created in part by the media, is school shootings. Since the 1990s, there have been several dozen shootings in American schools. The news media reported extensively on these events, with a focus on the perpetrators of these crimes. The media described these school shooters as loners and outcasts who were angry and depressed. In reality, although there may be warning signs that a student may resort to violence, school shooters do not fit a single profile that allows them to be identified. Sometimes moral panics are localized and occur in only one geographic area.

Special interest groups sometimes use moral panics to put pressure on the criminal justice system to respond to the relevant issue, usually by creating or changing laws and their enforcement. Often the result is legislation designed to punish or monitor offenders that sometimes has unintended consequences.

One such example is the proliferation of news coverage of gang and drug activity in the inner cities in the 1980s. Public fear of drug crimes and an outcry over the ensuing violence prompted legislators to draft sentencing laws that mandated prison time for certain offenses, such as possession of crack cocaine. Other legislation

mandated prison time after a certain number of offenses had been committed (i.e., the Three Strikes Laws). The unintended consequence of these laws is prison overcrowding, which has created fiscal and public relations problems for prisons in such circumstances.

[p. 1248 ↓]

Conclusion

Crime is central to the production of news. It grips the collective imagination of a diverse audience of viewers, readers, and listeners. Indeed, the ubiquity of the news media has resulted in these narratives becoming the overwhelmingly dominant forum for the social depiction of crime. The portrayal of crime in the news media is largely piecemeal and is sometimes not reflective of the actuality of crime and criminal justice.

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See Also:

- 1921 to 1940 Primary Documents
- [Famous Trials](#)
- [Fear of Crime](#)
- [Film, Crime in](#)
- [Literature and Theater, Crime in](#)
- [News Media, Police in](#)
- [News Media, Punishment in](#)
- [Television, Crime in.](#)

Further Readings

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