

# Media Guide

## 10 Crime Coverage Dos and Don'ts

Misleading news coverage of crime and justice policies has played an integral role in the [50-year history](#) of mass incarceration. Newsrooms should strive to more accurately and critically cover these issues. Following is The Sentencing Project's guidance to newsrooms and journalists on how to cover crime and justice in ways that would inform the public and policymakers on how to pursue the most effective and humane public safety policies.

### 1. **Situate crime stories, and proposed solutions, within their broader historical and geographic context.**

In most of the country, crime rates reached their peak levels in the 1990s then fell roughly 50% by year end 2019, before certain crimes began [climbing in 2020](#). The economic, social, and psychological turbulence of the pandemic [lowered](#) overall property crime rates while contributing to an increase in violent crimes—particularly [homicides](#), which have [begun](#) to [decline](#) again. The country's experience with mass incarceration has [shown clearly](#) that ratcheting up harmful police and prison policies is a counterproductive response. 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 jurisdictions, this should inspire skepticism that a particular local 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 vi-

olence 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.

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. Critically assess whether the [“tough on crime”](#) label should be echoed for ineffective policies.

## 2. Recognize the limited and declining role of youth crimes.

Recently we have begun to see a new wave of alarmist youth crime coverage which is unsupported by evidence. The reality is that youth ages 17 and under were just [6% of arrests](#) nationwide in 2020 (the latest data available)—down from [15% in 2000](#). The spike in certain violent crimes during the pandemic has been driven by [adults, not minors](#). National data indicate that youth's share of total arrests continued to fall during the first year of the pandemic in [every major crime category](#).

In the mid-1990s, media reports 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 narrative. Similarly, be wary of claims exaggerating crime levels among other demographic groups, such as [immigrants](#), who commit crimes at lower rates than native-born citizens.

## 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 include [sources](#) beyond criminal legal practitioners to ensure that you are reporting the truth. 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 [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 *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, 444,000 people were released from prison in 2021 (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 0. 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 [The Marshall Project](#) explains, furloughs and work release programs in prisons were generally 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 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. In addition, ensuring diversity among sources and news staff, in terms of racial and other identities and exposure to the criminal legal system, would improve the fairness of your coverage.

## **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 Latinx 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 pre-

sented more [sympathetically](#), such as by recognizing an underlying mental illness, 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—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 Latinx 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. 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 2005, 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 of one mind 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 Latinx 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 your coverage is about people. Using person-first language (e.g., people in prison, people with criminal records, youth) promotes the development of [humane policies](#). Using shorter alternatives or jargon (e.g., prisoner, inmate, felon, juvenile, etc.) comes at the expense of casting [stigma](#) on a vulnerable population by focusing attention on one dimension of their lives, and contributes to public support for their harsh treatment. Mass incarceration has broad-ranging [human costs](#), harms our [democracy](#), and [diverts resources](#) from more effective investments in public safety. Destigmatizing language regarding [substance use disorders](#) also supports public health solutions, instead of the [failed War on](#)

[Drugs](#).

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, including in headlines. According to the [AP Stylebook](#): “Avoid the vague ‘officer-involved’ for shootings and other cases involving police. Be specific about what happened. If police use the term, ask: 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.

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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.