

“OFF BALANCE: YOUTH, RACE, & CRIME IN THE NEWS”

**A Report for the *Building Blocks for Youth* initiative
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Background

- ❖ The public depends on the news media for its understanding of crime. Three quarters (76%) of the public say they form their opinions about crime from what they see or read in the news, more than three times the number who state they get their primary information on crime from personal experience (22%). But are the news media presenting an accurate picture of youth and crime? Although youth homicides declined by 68% between 1993 and 1999 and are at their lowest rate since 1966, 62% of the public believes that youth crime is on the rise.
- ❖ “Off Balance: Youth, Race, and Crime in the News” finds that news media unduly connects youth to crime and violence and that youth of color are overrepresented as perpetrators and underrepresented as victims of crime. Prepared by the Justice Policy Institute and the Berkeley Media Studies Group for the *Building Blocks for Youth* initiative, the study is an examination of over 70 content analyses of newspaper and television crime coverage.

Major Findings

1. The news media report crime, especially violent crime, out of proportion to its actual occurrence.

- ❖ Violent crime dominates crime coverage. Although homicides made up one to two-tenths of one percent of all arrests, homicides made up more than a quarter (27%-29%) of all the crimes on the evening news.
- ❖ The more unusual the crime or violence, the more likely it is to be covered. Eighty-six percent of White homicide victims are killed by other Whites, and most homicide victims know their killer. But the least frequent killings—homicides between strangers, and interracial homicides—received the most coverage.
- ❖ Crime coverage has increased while real crime rates have fallen. While homicide coverage was increasing on the network news by 473% from 1990 to 1998 homicide arrests dropped 32.9% from 1990 to 1998.

2. The news media, particularly television news, unduly connect race and crime, especially violent crime.

- ❖ African Americans are underrepresented in reporting as victims, and overrepresented in the news as perpetrators. Articles about White homicide victims tend to be longer, and more frequent than the articles that cover African American victims.
- ❖ African Americans were 22% more likely to be shown on local TV news in Los Angeles committing violent crime than nonviolent crime. Actual crime statistics reveal African American's were equally likely to be arrested for violent and nonviolent crimes. Another series of studies showed that Whites committed more violent crimes than were represented in television crime stories of violent crime.
- ❖ Studies of the news showed that interracial crime was substantially more likely to be reported than actual crime statistics would predict.

3. When youth appear in the news, they usually appear in stories about violence.

- ❖ Seven out of 10 local TV news stories on violence in California involved youth, but young people only made up 14.1% of violent arrests. Another California study showed one out of every two TV news stories concerning children or youth involved violence, but only 2% of young people in California were either victims or perpetrators of violence.
- ❖ An analysis of Hawaii's newspapers over a decade showed a 30-fold increase in coverage of youth crime, despite declining youth crime rates there.
- ❖ Youth of color fare far worse than their white counterparts in the media's association of youth and violence. A study of Time and Newsweek stories found that the term "young black males" became synonymous with the word "criminal" in coverage. A study on TV news showed that white youth were more likely to be featured in stories on health or education than black youth.
- ❖ Violence against youth is underreported. Studies found that crimes by adults against youth are underreported, and the public thinks youth commit a far larger share of all crime than they actually do.

Conclusion: Media Coverage of Crime Presents an Inaccurate Overall Picture.

- ❖ The consistent presentation of three significant distortions in the news creates a “misinformation synergy.” It is not just that African Americans and other people of color are overrepresented as criminals and underrepresented as victims, or that young people are overrepresented as criminals, or that violent crime itself is given exaggerated coverage. It is that all three occur together, combining forces to produce a terribly unfair and inaccurate overall image of crime in America. Add to that a majority of readers and viewers who rely on the media to tell the story about crime, and the result is a perfect recipe for a misinformed public.

Recommendations: For the news media— Balance coverage of youth, race and crime:

- ❖ The news media should expand sources in stories on crime beyond police and the courts. Reporters need to talk to social service agency employees, community residents, and not just the police in their search for context.
- ❖ The news media should provide context for crime in their regular coverage. Crime stories need more depth, length and breadth to help the viewer make sense of why crime happens in a particular way, and to particular people.
- ❖ News outlets should balance stories about crime and youth with more stories about youth in general.
- ❖ Media outlets should do periodic, voluntary audits of news content, and share those results readers and viewers.

A note on Methodology: “Off Balance: Youth, Race and Crime in the News” began with a comprehensive, computerized search of criminal justice and communications data bases on content analyses of crime news. The search yielded 146 articles that were reviewed, abstracted, and categorized. The report focuses on the 77 studies that directly assessed the content of crime, race and/or youth in the news. The studies surveyed covered a range of media — local and network television, newspapers, and broadcast and print newsmagazines — from 1910 through 2000.

To obtain an embargoed copy of the report “Off Balance: Youth, Race and Crime in the News,” executive summary, press release, and fact sheets, visit the *Building Blocks for Youth* initiative website www.buildingblocksforyouth/media, with the username: **media** and password: **bby123**. The full report will be made public at 12:01 AM on April 10, 2001.