

# Which Deaths Count? Debating Homicide Coverage Amidst Newsroom Scarcity

JONATHAN BEN-MENACHEM

Department of Sociology, Columbia University

## Correspondence

Jonathan Ben-Menachem, Knox Hall, 606 W 122nd St, New York, NY 10027.

Email: [jb4487@columbia.edu](mailto:jb4487@columbia.edu)

## Abstract

Past research documents disparities in which homicides receive news coverage and how victims are portrayed, yet the organizational processes producing these patterns remain understudied. This paper asks how crime journalists navigate homicide coverage under resource scarcity—and why widely voiced concerns about the racialized consequences of coverage fail to resolve disagreements about equitable practice. Drawing on interviews with 58 crime journalists across 40 local newsrooms, I find that homicide coverage generated the most sustained professional disagreements in the data. Journalists agreed homicides were newsworthy and shared a vision for ideal coverage, but resource constraints often made it unrealizable. Participants invoked competing moral frameworks organized around two concerns: that selective coverage risks symbolic annihilation of primarily Black victims whose deaths go publicly unacknowledged, and that universal episodic coverage risks territorial stigmatization of communities where violence is concentrated. Because scarcity forecloses the coverage that would avoid both harms, it transforms professional discretion into a choice among ethically unsatisfactory alternatives. Some journalists responded by abdicating discretion entirely, endorsing universal coverage because they distrusted selective judgment. These findings illuminate why the coverage patterns that criminologists have identified as harmful persist even among practitioners who recognize and contest them.

## KEYWORDS

crime news, discretion, homicide, news judgment, resource constraint, symbolic annihilation, territorial stigmatization

## INTRODUCTION

News coverage of crime is a key mechanism by which lethal violence becomes a publicly legible social problem (Surette 2015; Duxbury 2023). Homicide dominates local crime coverage more than any other offense (Chermak 1995), rendering selection and portrayal decisions highly consequential. Yet that coverage is unequally distributed. White victims, women, and victims from more affluent neighborhoods consistently receive more prominent attention (Schildkraut and Donley 2012; Slakoff and Brennan 2019; Baranauskas 2020), and coverage of Black victims more frequently withholds the humanizing treatment that renders a death publicly legible as a loss (White, Stuart, and Morrissey 2021). Because interpersonal violence is concentrated among young Black men and boys, these dynamics mean that homicide coverage may produce two distinct racialized harms: symbolic annihilation (Tuchman 1978) through coverage gaps that render certain deaths publicly invisible, and territorial stigmatization through episodic reporting that reduces communities to their violence (Wacquant 2007; Schwarze 2022). News coverage of crime shapes the sociopolitical environment determining whose deaths are treated as deserving of public grief and collective response (Enns 2016; Kulig and Cullen 2017).

The organizational processes that produce these patterns remain understudied. Media distortion analyses work backward from published content, inferring selection criteria from statistical associations between victim characteristics and coverage outcomes. Such analyses can identify what gets covered, but not how or why coverage decisions are made. If coverage disparities emerge from structural constraints rather than preferences of individual gatekeepers, then interventions focused on newsroom demographics or bias training may be insufficient. A production-side account is necessary to determine whether the "worthy victim" pattern (Sorensen, Manz, and Berk 1998) reflects individual judgment or the organizational conditions

shaping it—and why practitioners who recognize these dynamics nonetheless struggle to change them.

This paper provides such an account. Drawing on interviews with 58 crime journalists across 40 local newsrooms, I examine how homicide coverage decisions are made under conditions of sustained resource scarcity—the defining feature of local print journalism over the past two decades (Muse Abernathy and Stonebely 2023). I find that journalists overwhelmingly agree on the newsworthiness of homicides. Yet precisely because this commitment is widely shared, newsroom austerity produces unusually frequent and pointed disagreement about how homicide should be covered when comprehensive humanizing coverage is impossible.

This paper makes two contributions. First, it explains how racialized disparities in homicide coverage persist even among journalists who recognize and contest them. Newsroom scarcity forces practitioners to choose among compromise practices that risk either symbolic annihilation or territorial stigmatization. Second, it identifies a broader organizational dilemma. When professional organizations lack the capacity to realize shared equity commitments, scarcity transforms the nature of professional discretion itself. Practitioners no longer exercise judgment among defensible options but must choose among alternatives, each of which reproduces a harm they recognize and reject. This dilemma may recur across professional domains like criminal courts, medicine, teaching, and social work, where resource constraints force practitioners to choose among compromises with divergent equity implications.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **News Coverage, Racialized Victims, and the Social Construction of Homicide**

A substantial body of quantitative research examines which homicides receive news coverage and what predicts the prominence of that coverage. This tradition of "media distortion analysis" (Gruenewald, Pizarro, and Chermak 2009) has consistently found that homicide receives disproportionate media attention relative to its incidence (Chermak 1995), and certain victim and case characteristics predict coverage outcomes. White victims, women, younger and older victims, victims of higher socioeconomic status, and cases involving multiple victims or unusual weapons tend to receive more and more prominent coverage (Chermak 1998; see Schildkraut and Donley 2012:178-180 for a more comprehensive review). The concept of the "worthy victim"—white, young or old, female, affluent, killed by a stranger (Sorensen et al. 1998)—captures the general finding that statistically atypical victims receive outsized attention. These patterns extend to the neighborhood level: Baranauskas (2020) finds that newspapers overreport robberies and assaults from neighborhoods with lower levels of disadvantage.

Coverage disparities extend to portrayal as well as frequency. Coverage of white women victims tends toward sympathetic, humanizing narratives that foreground relationships and community roles, while coverage of Black women victims more frequently reproduces stigmatizing narratives, attributes blame through emphasis on deviant behavior or associations, and frames victimization as an expected outcome of the victim's environment (Slakoff and Brennan 2019; 2023). This "expected victimization" reflects an implicit judgment that the loss of Black lives represents a comparatively lesser community harm. These disparities in tone and framing extend to whether victims are recognized as multidimensional human beings with family and community roles, i.e., the portrayal of "complex personhood" (White, Stuart, and Morrissey 2021). White and colleagues (2021) find that victims killed in predominantly Black

neighborhoods in Chicago were about half as likely to receive coverage acknowledging their complex personhood as those killed in predominantly white neighborhoods.

These patterns of selection and portrayal carry downstream consequences for public opinion and policy. Media consumption is associated with heightened perceptions that crime is rising and with support for punitive policy responses (Chiricos, Padgett, and Gertz 2000; Callanan 2005; Roche, Pickett, and Gertz 2016; Enns 2016; Simmons 2017; Duxbury 2023), effects that are conditioned by the racial composition of the viewer's neighborhood (Baranauskas and Drakulich 2018). In cities where homicide victims are disproportionately Black and male, researchers have repeatedly expressed concern that the worthy victim dynamic renders the most common forms of lethal violence less publicly visible (Gruenewald et al. 2009; Weiss and Chermak 1998). This concern echoes the concept of “symbolic annihilation,” or the systematic erasure of certain demographic groups from media portrayal, which in turn cements such groups’ marginalization in social reality (Tuchman 1978). The deaths of Black victims too often fail to register as public losses warranting collective recognition, a dynamic reflected in how named memorial laws in the United States have been disproportionately dedicated to white victims (Kulig and Cullen 2017). Yet at the same time, coverage that does attend to violence in predominantly Black neighborhoods may still reinforce racialized perceptions of place and deviance.

Racialization is salient in the social construction of place. Research on territorial stigmatization (Wacquant 2007)—the process by which neighborhoods acquire stigmatizing reputations through repeated symbolic association with violence, poverty, and social disorder—shows how news coverage renders certain urban spaces publicly legible as dangerous and undeserving of investment or empathy. Episodic crime coverage that foregrounds the

location of shootings while omitting the circumstances, structural conditions, and community voices that would contextualize them contributes to the normalization of violence as a defining feature of particular neighborhoods (Schwarze 2022). Such coverage reproduces stigma through the accumulation of brief, decontextualized reports that teach readers where violence occurs without understanding why. The racialization of place constructs expected victims, undermining the news value of their victimization: “If crime or deviance frequently occur in certain places or within certain families, then it is not surprising when certain individuals are victimized... surprise is a key factor in assessing a story’s newsworthiness” (Slakoff and Brennan 2019: 12). Coverage that devalues racialized homicide victims and their neighborhoods reproduces the racial ideologies that shape institutional responses to violence, from police resource allocation to policy attention (see White et al. 2021).

These dynamics inform the interpretation of various crime news coverage formats. A two-paragraph brief sourced from a police press release, a reported feature drawing on interviews with the victim's family and neighbors, a trend piece aggregating incidents into statistical patterns, and the absence of coverage altogether each produce qualitatively different kinds of public knowledge about lethal violence. Iyengar (1994) distinguishes episodic frames—which isolate specific incidents and individuals—from thematic frames, which contextualize events within broader structural and social conditions. Episodic crime coverage draws viewer attention to individual actors rather than societal conditions, encouraging punitive rather than structural responses to violence (Gilliam and Iyengar 2000). The brief is structurally episodic: sourced from police reports, focused on location and incident, absent community voice. It renders a death visible but frames it through official categories that situate the event within a law enforcement narrative. By contrast, the feature contextualizes a death within a life and a community, making

structural conditions legible alongside individual loss. The trend piece abstracts individual deaths into aggregate patterns, potentially supporting policy discourse but effacing the particularity of each case. The qualitative differences between these coverage forms, and the distinct implications each carries for how violence is publicly understood, have received less systematic attention. If news coverage is a mechanism through which certain forms of violence become publicly recognized social problems, while others remain invisible outside the communities where they occur (Beckett 1999; Garland 2001), then the organizational decisions governing coverage formats are consequential for which communities' experiences of violence enter public discourse and on what terms.

Quantitative analyses of news content cannot fully explain the mechanisms producing observed patterns. As Schildkraut and Donley (2012: 181) acknowledge, such studies “may not address changes in the reporting techniques of the papers, nor may they take into consideration how the stories themselves are selected for publication.” Baranauskas (2020) and White et al. (2021) similarly call for qualitative examination of the organizational processes underlying observed coverage patterns. Understanding how and why journalists make these choices requires a production-side account.

### **Crime News Judgment**

The patterns documented by media distortion analyses are produced through a process that journalism scholars have long described as tacit, socialized, and consensual. News judgment—the determination of what is newsworthy and how prominently it should be covered—is not typically governed by explicit rules or rubrics. Scholars have characterized it as a “gut feeling” (Schultz 2007), an embodied sense acquired through socialization rather than formal

instruction. Harcup (2019) observes that selection decisions "often seem to be so deeply ingrained [...] that they may only appear as decisions when an individual journalist or particular news outlet steps outside the consensus and makes a choice that appears aberrant or even unprofessional." Journalists learn news values through interaction in the institutional context. Editorial decisions about story placement and prominence allow experienced editors to transmit norms to newer reporters (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1987).

This consensus is sustained through the organizational structure of news work. Newsrooms manage the unpredictability of events through routinization—typifying stories into shared categories that allow efficient resource allocation (Tuchman 1973). The beat system orients reporters toward bureaucratic sources who provide reliable flows of information, allowing journalists to meet deadlines without extensive independent investigation (Fishman 1980). Journalists' sense of audience was traditionally limited to a small circle of colleagues, competitors, sources, and acquaintances that functioned as a proxy for the public (Gans 1980). Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1987) described the resulting dynamic as a "game" in which reporters learned to anticipate editorial preferences through accumulated precedents—story assignments and play decisions functioned as signals of what the newsroom valued. Reporters who disagreed with these precedents rarely contested them openly, instead managing disagreements through covert tactics such as strategically omitting details editors would find interesting or filing stories designed to be rejected (Ericson et al. 1987). Together, these organizational practices meant that judgments about newsworthiness were made quickly, in reference to shared professional norms, and rarely surfaced for sustained explicit deliberation. When reporters and editors agreed on what constituted a story, the decision-making process was



effectively invisible; when they disagreed, the disagreement was typically managed through the game rather than through open debate.

Crime journalism has historically operated within this framework of tacit consensus: reporters oriented to police and court sources, prioritized serious violent offenses, and exercised news judgment in ways that were widely shared across newsrooms (Chermak 1995; Ericson et al. 1987). By contrast, this paper focuses on the comparatively rare instances when the game breaks down and tacit consensus gives way to open contention.

### **Newsroom Austerity in the Digital Era**

The organizational conditions described above have been dramatically altered by two interrelated developments: sustained declines in newsroom capacity and the shift to digital publishing. Industry-wide employment at U.S. daily newspapers fell by over 40 percent between 2007 and 2015, with cutbacks occurring across ownership structures rather than concentrated among chain-owned papers (Peterson 2021). These declines affected reporters across beats, reducing the volume of coverage that surviving newspapers could produce (Hayes and Lawless 2017). Simultaneously, the collapse of daily print deadlines into continuous online publishing cycles restructured the temporal rhythm of news work. Usher (2018) found that metropolitan newspaper journalists adopted breaking news strategies to maintain authority relative to competitors and audiences, even as they recognized that this approach led them to pursue stories that did not accord with their own professional standards. Journalists' embodied sense of what constituted important news was overridden by production demands that rewarded speed and volume over significance. For crime journalism specifically, these pressures created a particular bind: fewer reporters working in contexts that reward high-volume, low-investment content,

even as the beat's core subject matter demands the kind of labor-intensive reporting that 20th-century ethnographers described as foundational to news production.

This paper addresses a gap at the intersection of these two literatures. Studies of coverage patterns have documented disparities in which homicides receive attention and how victims are portrayed, but these studies do not observe news production. Studies of news production have detailed the organizational mechanisms through which journalists make coverage decisions, but most ethnographies that examined crime news were conducted in an era of relative resource abundance—when newsrooms could plausibly aspire to cover most serious violent crime that came to their attention. Few studies have examined how journalists navigate coverage decisions when the consensus that a category of event is inherently newsworthy meets organizational conditions that make comprehensive coverage impossible—and when the divergent normative implications of those decisions are widely recognized but resist easy resolution.

This paper examines how crime journalists decide what to cover and how to cover it, with a focus on homicide—the category of crime most universally regarded as newsworthy. Specifically, I ask what homicide coverage practices look like across local newsrooms, how and why those practices are changing under resource scarcity, and why journalists who share commitments to equitable coverage nonetheless find themselves in sustained disagreement about what that coverage should look like.

## **METHODS**

### **Design and Recruitment**

I designed this study to examine crime journalists' motivations and practices in local newsrooms. I recruited reporters and editors from local print newsrooms in populous U.S. cities,

excluding most nonprofit newsrooms and alt-weeklies with ideologically aligned readerships. I prioritized mainstream organizations because they likely exert stronger influence on punitive attitudes, particularly given that post-George Floyd opinion shifts were bifurcated by partisan media consumption (Reny and Newman 2021). I focus on local crime journalists because they develop long-term relationships with members of local criminal justice organizations in order to produce new information about the practices of local police, courts, jails, and prisons. Accordingly, events discussed in interviews overwhelmingly emphasize local rather than national news stories.

My recruitment approach followed the logic of "sampling for range" (Weiss 1995, Small 2009), focusing on participants "well positioned to reveal the practices, mechanisms, and relationships your research seeks to explain" (Gerson and Damaske 2020: 46). I sampled across metropolitan newspapers in major metro areas and varied job descriptions within crime news, identifying participants through article searches using keywords such as "crime," "police," and "shooting," as well as staff directories. I was previously acquainted with nine participants prior to recruitment. I contacted 229 journalists in 62 newsrooms and interviewed 58 (25% response rate) across 40 newsrooms in 24 U.S. states (35 cities). The sample included ten breaking news reporters, ten court reporters, twelve public safety/criminal justice reporters, six investigative reporters, ten police reporters, and ten editors. As data collection progressed, I adjusted recruitment to focus on underrepresented groups among these professional specializations—i.e., after achieving satisfactory exposure to police and court reporters, I emphasized recruitment of editors and breaking news reporters.

[Table 1 about here]

Participant characteristics were comparable to national estimates of the crime reporting workforce (see Table 1), though my sample skews younger and does not include television or digital-only outlets (Tomasik and Gottfried 2023). Table 2 provides summary statistics regarding the cities that participants covered at the time of their interview, including homicide rate and demographic characteristics drawn from the 2019 UCR tables and 2022 ACS data. In the interest of ensuring participant confidentiality, I do not provide minimum or maximum values in the summary statistics—yet the standard deviation for homicide counts and rate demonstrates that the sample covers a wide range of local conditions with respect to interpersonal violence. The sample mean homicide rate was roughly 6 per 100,000 (median 5), slightly higher than the national mean of 5 per 100,000 in 2019. In my interpretive analysis of the interview data, I use a binary coding of the homicide rate information represented here to assess variation among respondents’ practices and preferences. This binary homicide rate variable (“high/low”) is split at the sample median of 5, producing categories that roughly track the national distribution.

Newsroom characteristics are more difficult to describe. Nationwide data regarding digital readership are not publicly available. 29 out of the 40 newsrooms in the sample appear on Pew’s list of top 49 highest print circulation newspapers in 2023 (Naseer and St. Aubin 2023).<sup>1</sup> Most news organizations in the sample employ approximately 20 to 60 newsroom staff (as best I can tell from online staff directories and remarks in interviews). Some outliers were much larger than these typical cases. My case selection logic emphasized any newspaper with specialized

---

<sup>1</sup>Print circulation statistics are nearly irrelevant at the time of writing. Per the Local News Initiative at Northwestern, print circulation declined from 120 million in 2005 to 38 million in 2025. Some papers in the sample do not even have a print edition anymore. Digital news subscriptions and ad revenue are considered more relevant, and data on these points are unavailable for analysis (some reports mention individual newsroom figures from Comscore; I do not have access to Comscore data).

crime staff in a state's largest metro areas, which occasionally meant recruiting participants working in unusually small or large organizations.<sup>2</sup>

[Table 2 about here]

Interviews averaged 1.68 hours and ranged from 45 minutes to three hours. All were conducted via video call between 2022 and 2024, with one exception conducted in person. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. All quotes are verbatim, with brackets indicating edits for confidentiality or clarity. Participants did not review drafts.

The IRB approved this study as exempt. Given the small and potentially identifiable target population, I use pseudonyms and remove organizational identifiers throughout. I omit pseudonyms for particularly identifiable vignettes. My ethical obligations to participants also prevent me from systematically assessing variation in local homicide rate or organizational capacity for each informant (i.e., I cannot provide a table itemizing interview participants' individual demographic characteristics, newsroom characteristics, and so on). I cannot share interview transcripts, but I can share my recruitment outreach template, interview guides, and code list (Appendices).

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

This study employs sequential interviewing, in which each case refined my understanding of the research questions and different interview guides were used across cases (Small 2009). Interview guides ensured comprehensive coverage of key topics while allowing follow-up questions tailored to individual participants' experiences. To improve data quality and mitigate

---

<sup>2</sup> Another form of organizational variation that merits future study is the differential capacity allocated to the crime desk within organizations of similar size, and how this variation changes over time. For example, some informants suggested that layoffs tended to target the education desk rather than the crime desk. A survey design may be better suited to collect such data.

recall bias, I asked participants to discuss specific recent events (Tavory 2020, Lareau 2021) and requested links to published stories for triangulation.

I coded interviews iteratively, indexing transcripts after every fifth completion using qualitative software and refining categories to locate confirming and disconfirming evidence (Deterding and Waters 2021). I developed substantive codes drawn from existing literature (e.g., "routinization," Tuchman 1973; "newsworthiness," Chermak 1995) and codes generated inductively from the data.

I did not initially set out to analyze homicide coverage in particular. The first draft of my interview guide (Appendix A2) aimed to collect granular information about crime reporters' routine work practices. In an early interview that later became an index case (Timmermans and Tavory 2022), Mary explicitly contrasted the news value of homicides against deaths from traffic collisions. Homicide coverage emerged as a focal area when I recognized that informants across newsrooms were independently describing similar debates about briefs, selectivity, and resource allocation—debates that cut across geographic and organizational contexts and resisted the kind of resolution I observed in other coverage domains. By contrast, a general question prompting informants to recall disagreements over news judgment occasionally produced nothing at all. Some informants could not recall a single disagreement over newsworthiness. After observing several recollections of homicide coverage debates or practice changes, I added a question specifically prompting details regarding homicide coverage practices. Afterward, I followed up to ask about the participant's attitude regarding those practices. I sought disconfirming evidence by probing informants who reported minimal conflict over homicide coverage and by presenting emerging impressions to later participants to assess generalizability (Lareau 2021).

Because the interviews were semi-structured and the interview guides changed over time, I generally do not report specific numbers of respondents or percentage shares of the sample when discussing findings. See Small and Calarco (2022: 63-67) for a discussion of quantifying semi-structured interview data. In the results section, I report certain findings from a systematic coding of those transcripts with sufficient homicide-coverage data to counts of theme frequency—but given the study design, I advise readers to interpret such evidence as strictly suggestive.

This study compares individual journalists, organizations, and organizational positions. Although initially focused on empirical description, theoretical development became more central as analysis progressed (Weiss 1995; Collins, Neely, and Khan 2024). I drew on scholarship in criminology and organizational sociology to interpret patterns in the data rather than testing existing theory (Timmermans and Tavory 2022).

## **RESULTS**

### **Cutting Traffic Coverage Without Debate**

Coverage of traffic deaths presents a stark contrast to homicide coverage: cuts to traffic coverage generated almost no professional conflict. Such decisions were met with little resistance because news workers did not see traffic coverage as personally fulfilling or of great civic importance. Some informants explicitly compared traffic deaths and homicides without prompting. “Anytime you have a homicide, somebody’s died. And so, immediately, I think that has a community interest because someone died violently,” said Mary, a late-career police reporter. “I mean, it’s one thing if your loved one dies in a car crash, or dies of some horrible disease, but to have somebody violently taken from you is a very different kind of wound.”

Mary's viewpoint was widely shared. "There is usually a perpetrator who has malice in a homicide," explained Lisa, a mid-career court reporter. "Whereas traffic accidents, there's not necessarily a bad guy." Intentionality was a commonly cited justification for the distinction. "It's a tragic accident. As a story, it does not have the intentionality of 'this person killed this other person,'" said Charles, an editor. Jennifer, a mid-career police reporter, was the only informant who saw homicides and traffic fatalities as equally newsworthy. "I personally think when somebody loses their life, that is a story, when it is in a car crash, when it is in a homicide, because those are very public things," she explained. "It's not a suicide in your house."

Reader interest (or lack thereof) was also frequently cited as a justification for differential coverage norms. "If it's literally just this car crashed on this road, and this guy died. It's tragic. But it's also not news in the same way that a murder is," Charles explained. Another editor, Elizabeth, shared his view: "We don't cover individual traffic fatalities. But [...] if we notice that one particular intersection has 10 pedestrian fatalities, then we're gonna be like, 'Okay, well, why is the traffic so bad here?' Like a broader trend piece."

The ease of this consensus is notable. Unlike the debates that follow, cuts to traffic coverage provoked practically no discussion about equity, community impact, or whose experiences were being erased from public record.<sup>3</sup> When I asked informants if any categories of coverage had been cut following declines in newsroom capacity, traffic stories were among the most common answers—and informants usually seemed to approve of the shift, or at least accept it without much friction. The contrast with homicide coverage is stark. There, cost-cutting forces

---

<sup>3</sup> It bears noting that in the US, traffic fatalities rank third among causes of preventable injury-related mortality, whereas homicides account for roughly half as many deaths each year. Although Black Americans are disproportionately harmed by both traffic death and homicide, racial disparities in traffic deaths seem less commonly invoked in journalistic or scholarly discourse.



choices that no available rationale can settle, and the professional consensus that characterizes most of newsroom life often breaks down into sustained debate.

### **The Shared Ideal: Humanizing Lifecycle Homicide Coverage**

Informants almost unanimously agreed that homicides were inherently newsworthy. "I think everybody considers a homicide to be too serious to ignore," said Fred, a mid-career breaking news reporter. "We prioritize every homicide," explained Mia, an early-career breaking news reporter. "Even if it's a small item, we write about it. And we try to write when people are charged, and we try to write when the case is done." In cities where crime beats had been narrowed by austerity, homicides were often the last category standing. "We really only care about the biggest of things," Jennifer said. "So most of the time, that's homicide cases." Accordingly, even in the minority of newsrooms that made no systematic effort to cover every homicide, interpersonal violence remained a prominent focus of local coverage.

Beyond this consensus on newsworthiness, several informants articulated a broadly shared ideal for how homicide coverage should be performed (assuming unlimited newsroom resources). This ideal encompasses several elements: best efforts to gather information about every homicide, comprehensive tracking of criminal justice organizational responses to each killing, relationship-building and interviews with people who were personally affected by the loss of life, and information about recent homicide trends in the city with accompanying structural or even sociological explanation. Although homicide coverage was the focus of news judgment disagreements in the data, this disagreement largely centered on the compromises that news organizations made in response to scarcity rather than the abstract ideal. Sam, an early-career breaking news reporter, described newsroom practices that lived up to the ideal.

Let's say John Doe gets shot to death on the sidewalk at 5:30am [...] we're gonna get a brief up [...] then we're going to send a reporter to the scene, ideally before the tape goes down [...] They're going to canvass the scene for witnesses [...] pull an insane amount of information from the community. [...] Next is gonna be a feature on the murder. [...] Part three is a couple of days after the killing, when [the police department] basically identifies the victim. So we're gonna start reaching out to anybody who knew the victim and interview them [...] Part four is, if the legit killer is caught, we're going to cover that. And then part five is courtroom coverage. [...] And then we do trends, too.

The end result of this “coverage lifecycle” is that the newsroom “tracks homicides more granularly and in more detail than [local police]”. Sam’s account is fairly unique in my data in the sense that their newsroom is well-resourced enough to support such a robust coverage lifecycle, and there are not so many homicides in the city that it would overwhelm newsroom capacity. Where Sam described a newsroom that actually achieved comprehensive coverage, other informants viewed similar practices as aspirational. Steven, a late-career breaking news reporter who lost a family member to gang violence, described what homicide coverage would look like if he were in charge:

When I was assigned to [cover homicides], I had that experience in mind, I needed to explain to people what a homicide does to a family, that it's not just a violent end to someone's life, it's more than that. It's the beginning of a ripple effect that will continue for generations [...] If I was running things, we need to investigate, we need to unwrap what is happening in this particular neighborhood. Look at the families [...] How did this neighborhood become the neighborhood it is today? And how is it changing? [...] I think

that would allow our readers to understand, sort of tear apart this prejudice, where you're seeing 'Oh, because it's like [this neighborhood], it's a gang. So who cares?' But if we start to unwrap that and explain it, I think people will have more empathy.

Steven had previously managed a project that partially modeled this ideal—a database tracking every homicide in the county, paired with reported vignettes about each victim. "The goal was, every day I would be out reporting in the field, talking to people, talking to families, talking to detectives, and writing these small little vignettes about the victims, who they were." The project eventually became automated, losing the human reporting element. Steven's vision—vignettes that recognize each victim's complex personhood, paired with structural reporting that contextualizes violence within neighborhood history—was broadly shared among informants. That vision addresses both of the racialized potential harms of homicide coverage: the symbolic annihilation of racialized victims through coverage gaps that render their deaths publicly invisible, and the territorial stigmatization of their communities through episodic reporting that reduces neighborhoods to their violence and renders individual death unsurprising. Informants rarely argued against this kind of coverage in the abstract. The disagreements that follow center on what journalists should do when that ideal is unrealizable.

### **Organizational Constraint and Local Homicide Dynamics**

For most newsrooms, the ideal remained out of reach. Jessica, a mid-career criminal justice reporter who works in a city with far more yearly homicides compared to Sam, explained that she was simply unable to adopt a comprehensive and holistic approach to gun violence coverage despite working at a relatively well-resourced newspaper.

Last year, there were just so many shootings that I couldn't, I just was like, I can't mentally process this. And I felt guilty about what I was picking and choosing to cover. And so I said, 'Okay, this year, kids were being shot at higher rates, I'm just going to look at kids. And that means that I can't look at all the other crimes, but at least I'm doing a really good job on covering these kids who are shot.'

Jessica applied to her job with the specific intent of humanizing the victims of gun violence and cultivating an approach to reporting embedded in community perspectives (rather than law enforcement perspectives). For Jessica, homicide briefs were often most ethical if they were effectively a byproduct of more robust homicide coverage:

If I'm going out to the scene of a shooting, I might as well do a story, even if it's kind of bare bones that day, and then I know I'm still going to be following up on it. And for me, like that feels fine, because I try not to go to scenes, I try not to write a brief unless I know I'm going to follow up. And I know that not everybody has the luxury of doing that. But that has been something that's been really important to me, ethically, because I don't always agree with crime briefs, I think that they contain a lot of errors. I think they can be dehumanizing. But I also don't think that episodic crime coverage is harmful. Because I think that people want to know what's happening in their communities.

Jessica's dilemma was not unique. Across my sample, informants described a fundamental mismatch between the coverage they believed homicides deserved and the resources available to provide it. In a city that sees hundreds of homicides each year, one reporter noted that "if we had every single person at the paper writing about them, we still couldn't write

about every single one.” Similarly, mid-career criminal justice reporter Ashley reflected on her experiences as a breaking news reporter at a prior paper, when she would write up “15 or more homicides per shift overnight” before going to bed at 9 AM with no knowledge of whether any would receive follow-up. Emily described a spreadsheet with “hundreds of homicide cases” and a team that was “not covering any of them gavel to gavel.”

In a review of transcripts that compared local homicide rate against explicit mentions of resource scarcity, reporters in high-homicide cities were more likely than their peers in low-homicide cities to invoke concerns about resource constraints when discussing routine and idealized homicide coverage practices. Similarly, every participant who explicitly disagreed with their current newsroom’s coverage practices also invoked resource constraint concerns. Yet even in newsrooms with more manageable homicide volumes, informants reported that resource constraints limited the ceiling of coverage (depth of victim profiles, follow-up stories, and so on). The gap between the ideal and the possible was a source of ongoing tension—and in many newsrooms, it prompted explicit debates about what homicide coverage should look like when comprehensive coverage was off the table.

The coverage and portrayal disparities documented in scholarly literature largely predate the resource constraints that define contemporary local journalism. What austerity changes is not the existence of disparities but journalists' capacity to address them. Informants broadly agreed that humanizing, lifecycle coverage would mitigate both symbolic annihilation and territorial stigmatization. But most newsrooms lacked the capacity to implement it. Instead, journalists navigated a constrained menu of compromise practices: briefing every homicide regardless of follow-up capacity, applying news judgment to select individual homicides for in-depth coverage

while leaving others uncovered, abandoning briefs in favor of fully-reported stories for a smaller subset of deaths, or maintaining internal tracking databases without publishing individual briefs.

Each practice mitigates one harm by reproducing the other, positioning journalists differently with respect to the harms of symbolic annihilation and territorial stigmatization. Accordingly, no compromise practice dominates the alternatives on equity grounds. Under the shared ideal of humanizing lifecycle coverage, journalists could recognize victims and contextualize violence at once. Scarcity forecloses that option, leaving only substitutes that are each vulnerable to critique from the direction it fails to address.

### **Debating Coverage Practices: Annihilation and Stigma**

Perhaps the most contentious practice is committing to "brief" every homicide, or as many as possible. A "brief" is a short news report which focuses on the who, what, when, and where of an incident. Homicide briefs may only be one or two paragraphs long, and the work that goes into them varies—in many cases, the homicide brief will be composed by a reporter working from home or in the newsroom, stitching together information from official sources. (Note that in Sam's example of lifecycle coverage, a reporter ideally goes to the scene immediately after the brief is filed.) Newsroom norms with respect to homicide briefs vary: they may brief every single homicide, brief only those which seem especially important or interesting, or eschew briefs altogether. Most participants in my sample reported that their newsroom makes best efforts to brief every single homicide. Some reporters support the practice, some oppose it, and still more are ambivalent.

For those who opposed universal briefs, justifications often focused on organizational arguments. Betty, the sole court reporter at her paper, framed the problem as an both organizational and ethical:

I'm in the minority in my newsroom currently. I came up in local journalism, and so I was taught to cover every homicide. [...] I don't like covering every homicide and arrest, unless we're going to come back and tie the bow on that. And currently, I'm the only court reporter, and I cannot cover the outcome of every single arrest. [...] We have something like six people on breaking who cover every single homicide.

If a homicide brief names an arrestee who is ultimately not convicted, their identification in the newspaper becomes a permanent stain. "So many times, a murder charge does not stick," she noted. Betty also suggested that briefs monopolize resources that could go toward accountability coverage. William, an editor in a high-homicide city, echoed the organizational perspective: "You can spend every day chasing a shooting, or chasing a homicide [...] the danger in that is, if you do that, then you end up with 365 stories of somebody who gets killed, when I believe there is more work to be done in covering criminal justice."

Opponents of universal briefing also frequently invoked concerns that universal homicide coverage could contribute to the stigmatization of neighborhoods and communities where homicides most frequently occur. "I've also become more concerned about stereotyping communities and opening my eyes to even my own community being stereotyped," Betty added. Chris, a mid-career criminal justice reporter, invoked the concerns of community members in high-violence neighborhoods who felt alienated by crime coverage:

I think that the traditional journalistic reasoning for covering shootings is: you humanize people, so they'll care. But if you talk to gun violence survivors, they do not feel humanized at all, they feel traumatized. Often, when there's a shooting, and you lost your brother, and you get a knock at your door from some reporter. [...] A lot of folks would say, 'why do you guys only show up when some bad shit goes down? Like, why don't you care about our lives when we're not being shot?' And I don't have an answer for that.

Chris's account captures the territorial stigmatization dynamic that scholars have documented in content analyses: episodic coverage that arrives only at moments of violence, sourced from police rather than civilian residents, reproduces the image of neighborhoods as sites of disorder rather than communities made up of complex people. Yet informants who supported briefing all or most homicides also mobilized arguments regarding the racialized sociopolitical implications of coverage decisions. Michael, a mid-career police reporter, provided what reads like a direct rebuttal to Chris (though I interviewed Michael first):

I disagree with the idea of not writing about individual homicides. I understand that the argument is that it might be seen as fear-mongering, you might paint a community with this broad brush, it does more harm than good. And I agree with that when we're just talking about the bare bones story that really is just regurgitating the police news release. But if you take a step further, and you write about the victim, and you try to humanize them [...] sadly, violent crime is so heavily concentrated, like sometimes it's a few blocks in that neighborhood. And they tend to be places that have been historically disenfranchised [...] And the way I see it is that if I ignored their pain, or I don't write



about some of those victims, that's just another way of stifling their voices or not recognizing their humanity.

Here, Michael argues that the harm of symbolic annihilation (“stifling their voices”) outweighs the harm of territorial stigmatization (“broad brush”). Other participants pushed back on the fear-promotion argument more directly, arguing that interpersonal violence reverberates through communities regardless of coverage, and that withholding information from residents who want it sets an unacceptably high bar for ethical override. Notably, Michael's case for episodic coverage focuses on humanizing victim profiles rather than briefs themselves—the work of briefing can contribute to these more time-intensive projects, but the brief alone is not what he's defending. Informants who were ambivalent about universal briefs often referenced newsroom capacity declines. “I think it's important for the community to know that this act of violence took place,” explained Kenneth, an investigative reporter. “I can see if you're just doing a couple blurbs and then forgetting about it, maybe it's not worth it. And it sucks. But when you've gutted your newsroom to 12 reporters, yeah, I can see like, maybe that's a discussion.”

Michael went on to emphasize that the use of news judgment to choose between individual victims would lead to an unrepresentative spatial and racial distribution of coverage, exacerbating inequities:

Let's say a white kid from an affluent part of town is tragically gunned down, like killed by an errant bullet. And that story ends up on the front page of the newspaper [...] and a story about a young Black kid who gets killed and a part of town that maybe had a history of gang violence. And it turns out to be a 12 to 15 inch brief that gets put inside the paper. You're implicitly telling your readers that this one life mattered more, you should pay

more attention to the white kid from that one part of town, and this other kid [...] you're almost saying, who had it coming. Because he just happened to live in an area that's had some of these problems before.

Here, Michael also emphasizes the concept of expected victimization: the Black victim's death is unsurprising to news workers because that victim lived in a high-crime neighborhood (Slakoff and Brennan 2019). Michael's concern about the undesirable impacts of news judgment was frequently articulated by other participants. In general, news judgment leads reporters to emphasize surprising stories, or as another reporter put it, stories that "buck the trend." Accordingly, informants were sensitive to the geographic concentration of violence and its implications for news judgment. "If you stop covering every homicide, you are forced to make decisions about which one is more newsworthy," Emily observed. "And ultimately, you will say the woman killed in the suburb is more newsworthy than the young Black man killed in the poor neighborhood, and that's not great."<sup>4</sup>

James, a late-career criminal justice reporter, recounted an extensive disagreement with an editor who prioritized a rare instance of downtown violence over chronic neighborhood shootings (partially in response to local TV news coverage). His editor's position, according to James, was that they could cover wealthy residents "having to look at crime" first, and address "people that are actually dying" afterward. He described being assigned to cover a police surge in an affluent shopping district following viral footage of an assault on a white victim. One night, he observed several police squad cars deployed to enforce a parking removal operation.

---

<sup>4</sup> Emily also made more ambivalent or conflicted comments on this point, explicitly addressing her discomfort with a majority-white newspaper covering conflicts between young Black people: "Our staff is mostly white. And it's like, how do we cover that? And nobody wants to touch it. But like, being the person who's in court, I see Black family members of the victims talk about that all the time."

Searching for something newsworthy, he met a man from a predominantly Black, high-homicide neighborhood who had come downtown with friends for the first time in years. Watching the police response, the man asked James what had happened. When James explained it was parking enforcement, the man replied: “I would never see this many squad cars [...] unless somebody in [my neighborhood] got shot.” Despite this encounter, James's editor pushed a lede framing the story around tourist safety. James eventually got to file the neighborhood violence story he believed was more important, but doubted anyone saw it. Criminologist sources he spoke with in following days were blunt: “‘Why are you writing this story? The story is the mounting body count everywhere else.’”

James's account is notable for how explicitly it names the racial and class dynamics at stake—a contrast he drew between affluent white tourists and residents of predominantly Black high-violence neighborhoods. Yet even here, the register is primarily geographic. Across transcripts, race and place each appeared as explicit analytical categories in the large majority of interviews, but the two codes rarely appeared together—suggesting that (primarily white) participants invoke place as an implicit register for race.

The tensions documented above were vivid enough that some informants reached for examples outside of homicide coverage to illustrate them. Daniel, an investigative reporter, described a newsroom dispute over a story about a woman and her baby found dead in a row home—a suspected overdose and death by neglect. Daniel saw it as a story about systems failure: “I wonder who failed these people, what systems need to be held accountable.” When a colleague was assigned the story and called it “trauma porn,” Daniel was deeply offended by what he saw as a misreading of meaningful crime coverage: “Those stories will simply not get told unless you make a specific effort to tell them. No one is calling us up saying, ‘please write

about that 17-year-old kid who got gunned down yesterday.’’ This dispute illustrates a conviction shared by many informants—that explanatory coverage of spatially and racially concentrated death is not necessarily “trauma porn,” and that labeling it as such risks leaving important stories untold.

Supporters of universal homicide briefs rarely appealed to organizational justifications. These were most often invoked by opponents or ambivalent informants. Supporters leaned on moral arguments grounded in concerns about symbolic annihilation or failing to recognize the pain of affected communities, paired with a stated preference that universal coverage would be paired with systematic follow-up reporting humanizing victims and contextualizing violence. In practice, however, that follow-up was achievable primarily in low-homicide newsrooms with sufficient capacity—in higher-homicide cities, universal briefing more often meant a high-volume record of deaths with limited in-depth coverage attached.

Opponents of universal briefing, by contrast, preferred fully-reported stories that were selected for human interest and community impact. These approaches freed capacity for accountability and criminal justice reporting (outside of homicides) that universal briefing crowded out—though they carried their own risk of reproducing the geographic and racial selection patterns that universal coverage was designed to avoid.

News workers who broadly share racial justice commitments find themselves invoking contradictory positions: that Black readers want coverage of community events other than trauma, or that it is racist to focus on ‘interesting’ (i.e., surprising or unusual) homicides when Black people die most often. In newsrooms with limited capacity, the available moral frameworks intensify the dilemma rather than resolving it. Arguing journalistic ethics could not completely solve the core tension produced by resource scarcity.

## **Abdicating Professional Authority**

One justification for universal briefs was particularly striking in that it undermined news workers' professional authority over news judgment itself. "I don't think a newspaper or a newspaper reporter has the power or right to decide whose death merits a follow-up story," said Ashley. "What makes one person's life more valuable than another person's?" Elizabeth raised the same point in her heated response to a colleague's proposal to cover only certain homicides: "How are you going to be selective? Which lives are going to be worth writing about?"

This argument against professional discretion—news judgment itself—was also echoed by informants who felt more ambivalent or conflicted about coverage practice. Recall that Jessica said she felt “guilty” choosing which victims merited coverage. "If I cover this person's homicide, but not this person's homicide, and this person is white and this person's Black, am I now letting my racial bias determine coverage?" asked Linda. She continued: "I just argued both sides. I don't know, I think it's a tough one, because it feels like if you say we shouldn't acknowledge every homicide, then you're kind of writing people off who die." These arguments represent a striking inversion of the professional authority that journalism scholars have consistently described reporters as defending. Rather than exercising news judgment—the core professional competency through which journalists distinguish themselves—these informants voluntarily surrendered it.

At first glance, the logic is internally consistent: if any selection criterion will reproduce racial and geographic coverage disparities, and if those disparities are morally unacceptable, then the only available remedy is to remove the discretion that would otherwise generate them. Yet the anti-discretion argument, taken to its logical conclusion, would require not just universal

brief coverage but universal depth—equal follow-up reporting, equal victim profiles, equal front-page placement for every homicide. Resource scarcity typically makes this impossible. In high-homicide cities like Baltimore or Chicago, equal front-page placement would mean a front-page killing practically every day of the year. In practice, the newsroom that commits to briefing every homicide still faces discretionary decisions at every subsequent stage of the coverage lifecycle: which deaths receive follow-up stories, which families are interviewed for victim profiles, which cases receive prominent placement or sympathetic frames.

Universal briefing resolves the equity problem at the point of initial documentation while leaving it intact at every subsequent stage where depth, prominence, and humanization are determined. In organizational contexts defined by resource scarcity, abdicating discretion often displaces the dilemma rather than resolving it entirely.

### **Alternative Coverage Practices**

Informants who opposed or felt ambivalent about universal briefs often pointed to alternative practices that they believed better served both their audiences and the communities most affected by violence. The most drastic alternative was to abandon briefs altogether in favor of complete, multi-source stories. Miles, an early-career criminal justice reporter in a high-homicide city, explained why his newsroom made this shift:

We kind of reshaped our crime coverage a little bit. And we decided it's not helpful to write a four-paragraph story about a homicide. So what we've decided to do is not write about every single homicide. And when we do choose to write about them, we'll make it a full, complete story with multiple sources. [...] The four-paragraph story would just have one source, and it would be the cops. A complete story, we'll have input from the

police, but we'll also make phone calls to city officials, the [legislators] representing the area, try to talk to neighbors and community members, always try to reach out to the family. [...] We have a pretty good relationship with the [violence prevention office], that's where [the city] has its team of violence interrupters. And then we'll just try to add more context about the kinds of crime trends that this is part of.

The shift was not seamless. "The idea of not acknowledging a homicide was weird for everybody," Miles recalled. "Homicides are a big deal. It sort of felt at first like we weren't doing our job." But the logic was clear: if a brief's sole source was the police department, it wasn't journalism worth publishing. This approach prioritized quality and harm reduction—fewer stories, but stories that drew on community voices rather than reproducing police narratives.

A related alternative was to shift resources toward contextual and accountability reporting on the systems surrounding violence. Chris, who opposed episodic coverage, described the kind of reporting he preferred (and enacted, following a newsroom debate that he 'won'):

I was focusing on gun violence prevention, not just writing up episodically where shootings are happening and who's being shot, but focusing on what strategy is the city using to deal with this. Is it working? [...] If you were to shadow a violence interrupter, which a lot of newsrooms have been doing lately, that to me is so much more valuable than covering a shooting, because you can get at the same issues in a way that also outlines a potential solution that isn't just locking people in cages.

This approach prioritized systemic understanding over individual incident coverage. Chris argued that the civic function of crime journalism was better served by examining

institutional responses than by simply documenting each death or dramatizing the interpersonal conflict that produced it.

A third alternative preserved the tracking function of universal coverage without turning the entire criminal justice section of the paper into a list of killings. Several newsrooms maintained internal homicide databases—spreadsheets tracking every killing, its location, victim demographics, case status, and outcome. Miles noted that although his newsroom no longer briefed every homicide, each one was added to their database, which helped him "spot trends" and identify potential sources for deeper reporting. Other informants described similar practices. "When we talk about what to cut, I'm like, okay, we could cut homicides if we track them," said Donna, a mid-career police reporter. "That doesn't mean not caring about them."

A fourth, related concern extended beyond homicide coverage decisions specifically to the overall news coverage ecology of high-violence neighborhoods. Several informants noted that the territorial stigmatization produced by frequent crime coverage could be counterbalanced by sustained coverage of community life, institutions, and events in the same neighborhoods—coverage that would contextualize violence within a fuller picture of community experience. (It is not obvious that a reporter who produced this kind of coverage would even work on the crime desk.) In practice, however, this kind of neighborhood-embedded reporting was rarely put into practice, and respondents often attributed this lack to resource scarcity. "In an ideal world, if you had as many reporters as you needed, you could be in a neighborhood and cover the crimes, but also the other things that happen there," Lisa explained. "I just think that that kind of position is just fading away into the abyss of capital funds." Thus, even a newsroom that gets the homicide coverage calculus 'right' faces structural limits on its ability to represent high-violence communities as anything other than sites of violence.



In practice, most newsrooms adopted some mixture of approaches to homicide coverage rather than committing wholly to one. And as Jessica's earlier comments suggest, the boundaries between approaches were often blurry. Her practice of only writing briefs when she intended to follow up represented a personal ethical framework that bridged universal coverage and selective depth—briefing as a stepping stone rather than an endpoint. "I don't always agree with crime briefs," she explained. "But I also don't think that episodic crime coverage is harmful. Because I think that people want to know what's happening in their communities." Her position was a reminder that abstract categories rarely mapped neatly onto the messier reality of daily newsroom decisions, especially under resource constraint. "I think episodic coverage can be done well, if it's intentional," she added. "It's very time consuming."

## **DISCUSSION**

This paper documents a revealing contrast in how local newsrooms cover untimely death amidst resource scarcity. Coverage of traffic fatalities—a genre that most informants considered neither personally meaningful nor civically essential—was cut with minimal friction. Informants converged on a shared rationale: traffic deaths lacked the intentionality that made homicides inherently newsworthy, generated less reader interest, and could be replaced by occasional trend pieces without meaningful loss. The ease of this consensus establishes a baseline against which the homicide debates become visible.

By contrast, informants broadly agreed that homicides were inherently newsworthy, and articulated a shared ideal of humanizing lifecycle coverage. Yet when resource constraints made the ideal unrealizable, journalists were forced to choose among compromises, and many found that no available rationale could settle the choice. Supporters of universal briefs invoked the

potential harms of symbolic annihilation, the importance of meeting community information needs, and the impossibility of equitable selection. Opponents invoked the potential harms of territorial stigmatization and the opportunity cost of resources diverted from accountability work. Ambivalent informants sometimes argued both sides in the same breath. The debate was sustained precisely because each position drew on legitimate moral commitments that contradicted one another under constraint.

The stakes of these debates extend well beyond the newsroom. Homicide coverage is a primary mechanism through which lethal violence in specific communities becomes a publicly legible social problem. When a death goes uncovered, the grief of families and neighbors remains local, the circumstances of the killing unexamined, and the structural conditions that produced it invisible to audiences beyond the immediate community. When a death is covered only as a brief sourced from a police report, it enters public discourse as a location and a body count rather than as a human life—rendering the death visible while effacing the complex person. When coverage contextualizes a death within a life, community, and neighborhood, it creates the conditions for public empathy, policy attention, and collective recognition of loss. These choices determine whose deaths register as social problems warranting public response, whose grief is publicly validated, and whose communities are represented as sites of violence rather than as places where people live full lives. The journalists in this study were acutely aware of these stakes. When journalists argue over whether to brief every homicide, they are arguing over how violence in specific communities will register in public discourse.

These dynamics illuminate why the coverage and portrayal disparities that media distortion analyses have consistently documented persist even among practitioners who recognize and contest them. Some participants explicitly rejected scholarly critiques of homicide

coverage. Daniel, who had encountered a study that included his own coverage, pushed back: “I think the researcher had a preconceived notion that we were only writing about white victims and white neighborhoods, and the study found that that wasn’t the case,” he explained. “And frankly, it couldn’t be the case, because they don’t happen to white people. They don’t happen in the affluent areas.” Daniel’s implicit answer to the territorial stigmatization concern is simply to cover deaths well—with context, accountability, and community voice. This returns the argument to resource scarcity: that kind of coverage requires capacity that most newsrooms no longer have. Similarly, when Jessica acknowledged arguments against episodic coverage of shootings, she mentioned a study that included some of her own coverage, and expressed frustration with what she saw as an incomplete depiction of the relevant tradeoffs. Content analyses of coverage disparities thus not only document patterns in news content, but also function as a form of external feedback that shapes how journalists reflect on their own practices.

The present study reveals that such patterns today emerge from organizational responses to impossible tradeoffs. When a newsroom that cannot thoroughly cover every homicide must decide which deaths receive more than a brief, any selection criterion will correlate with the demographic and neighborhood characteristics of victims—producing the worthy and expected victim patterns even among journalists who explicitly reject them.<sup>5</sup> The selection dynamics pull in opposing directions: toward symbolic annihilation when selective coverage renders deaths in predominantly Black communities publicly invisible, and toward territorial stigmatization when episodic, universal coverage reduces communities to their violence. Both harms result from

---

<sup>5</sup> Mass shootings and other highly publicized homicides represent a boundary case in which the scarcity dynamics documented here partially dissolve—national attention makes comprehensive coverage an organizational priority regardless of resource constraints. More broadly, informants’ accounts suggest that unusual killings, whether locally or nationally prominent, tend to receive substantially greater coverage depth than routine homicides regardless of available capacity. This differential allocation reflects the same news judgment logic documented throughout this paper: the worthy victim pattern operates not only in decisions about whether to cover a death, but in decisions about how much coverage depth any given death deserves.

routine coverage decisions made under resource scarcity. Practitioners who are aware of these harms can only completely avoid them under increasingly rare organizational conditions. Scarcity thereby transforms professional discretion itself: where the ideal is affordable, journalists select among defensible options, but where it is foreclosed, every remaining option reproduces a harm they recognize and reject. Discretion becomes the task of choosing among questionable alternatives.

The journalists in this study largely agreed about what mattered: recognition of victims' humanity, harm reduction for affected communities, equitable distribution of coverage attention. Yet they could not always agree on the practices required by those values under constraint. Each framework provides partial justification for a compromise practice while leaving that practice vulnerable to critique from the other direction. Universal coverage honors recognition, but usually cannot deliver the depth and contextual reporting that would actually address territorial stigmatization—particularly in high-homicide cities where the volume of death forecloses comprehensive follow-up. Selective coverage is arguably more pragmatic under those conditions, but cannot escape the charge that its application of news judgment will emphasize unusual killings or sympathetic victims while effectively ignoring the bulk of spatially and racially concentrated violence. Linda's confession that she had 'just argued both sides' is emblematic. The available frameworks provide a repertoire of justifications for critiquing or defending compromise practices without resolving the underlying dilemma.

The opportunity cost arguments that opponents of universal briefing frequently invoked—that resources devoted to homicide briefs crowd out accountability reporting—also carry an implicit racial justice logic that is worth making explicit. When William argues that there is 'more to be done in covering criminal justice' than documenting individual killings, and

when Betty describes wanting to pursue accountability stories about criminal justice organizations rather than 'stereotyping communities,' they are making a claim about what kind of coverage best serves communities most harmed by both violence and the institutions that respond to it. Episodic homicide coverage documents (primarily) Black death; accountability reporting examines the systems that produce and respond to it. Although the opportunity cost framing can be read narrowly as a concern about organizational capacity trade-offs, it also often reflects a judgment about which form of coverage is more consequential for the communities at stake. In this sense, the opportunity cost argument points toward a partial resolution that resource scarcity forecloses: newsrooms with sufficient capacity could pursue both comprehensive victim recognition and the accountability and structural reporting that contextualizes violence within the systems that produce it. Yet local news capacity declines have only accelerated over time.

The irresolvability of these competing equity commitments occasionally produces a counterintuitive relationship between professional authority and moral commitment. The news judgment literature consistently describes journalists as defending their discretionary authority against external threats—from metrics that empower audiences over editors (Petre 2021), from breaking news logics that override editorial standards (Usher 2018), from source organizations that seek to dictate coverage (Ericson et al. 1987). In other domains of my data, informants followed this pattern, expressing satisfaction with processes that emphasized their own judgment and resisting pressures that constrained it (Ben-Menachem 2026a). Yet in the homicide coverage debates, some informants actively sought to abdicate professional authority. These informants recognized that exercising judgment in this domain would inevitably reproduce the demographic patterns they found morally unacceptable. Universal coverage policies remove discretion from a decision that journalists do not trust themselves to make equitably. By surrendering discretion,

journalists prioritize institutional legitimacy over the technical rationality of expert judgment. In such cases, universal coverage thus functions as a "rational myth" of equity—offering a procedural account of fairness that protects the organization's legitimacy while navigating the moral risks of selection under extreme scarcity (Rubin, Vaughn, and Rudes 2024). Yet this abdication rarely fully succeeds in its aim. Universal briefing resolves the equity problem at the point of initial documentation while leaving discretion intact at every subsequent stage where depth, prominence, and humanization are determined.

This distinguishes homicide coverage from other recent debates in crime journalism. As I have argued elsewhere (Ben-Menachem 2026b), the critique of uncritical reliance on police sources provides a clear directional prescription: diversify sources, center affected communities, treat police accounts as claims rather than facts. Journalists may resist this prescription, but its logic is internally consistent and points in a single direction. The homicide coverage debate has no such resolution. The moral vocabulary that journalists have adopted—recognition, harm reduction, community voice—gives them new language for articulating their concerns but does not settle the underlying tension. This is because the two concerns (symbolic annihilation and territorial stigmatization) are structurally opposed under scarcity.

The news judgment literature has long described professional practice as governed by tacit, embodied consensus (Harcup 2019; Ericson et al. 1987). Homicide coverage under austerity disrupts this baseline. The gut feeling still works—everyone agrees homicides are newsworthy. But the organizational conditions that allowed tacit consensus to translate smoothly into practice have shifted. With fewer reporters, continuous publishing demands, and in many cases more homicides than the newsroom can comprehensively cover, the tacit consensus must become explicit. When every homicide could be covered, there was no need to debate the terms

of coverage. When they cannot, the terms are deeply contested, even among practitioners who share broadly similar normative commitments.

This pattern is unlikely to be unique to journalism. It is likely to emerge wherever practitioners share strong normative commitments to comprehensive service, face resource constraints that make ideal practice impossible, and operate in domains where selection decisions produce patterns visible along demographic lines. Criminal courts and supervision offer the clearest parallels: judges, prosecutors, public defenders, and parole officials who recognize racial disparities in their own institutions nonetheless invoke competing justifications that lead to divergent decisions and may reproduce the very disparities practitioners seek to address (Clair and Winter 2016; Kutateladze et al. 2014; Lynch 1998; Richardson and Goff 2013; Winter and Clair 2023). The pattern may also be found in medicine, teaching, and social work, where practitioners may share strong commitments to equitable service while finding that the available moral frameworks cannot settle which patients, students, or cases to prioritize. In each case, shared values and awareness of disparity may be insufficient to resolve the dilemma when resource scarcity forecloses the options that would honor shared values.

This study has several limitations that should inform interpretation of the findings. First, the data are cross-sectional interviews rather than longitudinal observation. I can report what journalists say about their practices and reasoning but cannot directly observe the decision-making processes producing coverage outcomes. Second, informants may present idealized or socially desirable accounts of their reasoning, particularly given the politically charged nature of race and crime coverage. Third, while the sample is geographically diverse and spans a range of newsroom sizes and market types, it does not include television newsrooms, digital-only outlets, or non-English-language media, all of which face distinct organizational

pressures. Finally, the study cannot establish whether the debates documented here have changed over time. Informants referenced pre-2020 precursors to current debates, but I cannot systematically compare the content or intensity of these discussions across periods.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I gratefully acknowledge feedback from my colleagues in Columbia Sociology's Qual Lab, my graduate school cohort, several anonymous reviewers, and this journal's editors. In particular, I thank Ari Galper, Emily Mazo, Tey Meadow, Michael Schudson, Mario Small, and Bruce Western for their generous engagement with this project at various stages. Finally, I thank the journalists who shared their time and experiences with me.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## **DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

The data that support the findings of this study (anonymized interview transcripts) are not publicly available due to their sensitive nature and to protect participant confidentiality.



## REFERENCES

- Baranauskas, Andrew J. 2020. "Exploring the Social Construction of Crime by Neighborhood: News Coverage of Crime in Boston." *Sociological Focus* 53(2):156–76. doi:[10.1080/00380237.2020.1730280](https://doi.org/10.1080/00380237.2020.1730280).
- Baranauskas, Andrew J., and Kevin M. Drakulich. 2018. "Media Construction of Crime Revisited: Media Types, Consumer Contexts, and Frames of Crime and Justice." *Criminology* 56(4):679–714. doi:[10.1111/1745-9125.12189](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12189).
- Beckett, Katherine. 1999. *Making Crime Pay: Law and Order in Contemporary American Politics*. Studies in Crime and Public Policy. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ben-Menachem, Jonathan. 2026a. "Clickbait Crime News? Metrics and Professional Authority in Local Newsrooms." *Sociological Science* 13: 685-711. doi:[10.15195/v13.a27](https://doi.org/10.15195/v13.a27)
- Ben-Menachem, Jonathan. 2026b. "Beyond Police Stenography: Disembedding and Critical Crime News Work." *Working Paper*.
- Callanan, Valerie J. 2005. *Feeding the Fear of Crime: Crime-Related Media and Support for Three Strikes*. LFB Scholarly Pub.
- Chiricos, Ted, Kathy Padgett, and Marc Gertz. 2000. "Fear, TV News, and the Reality of Crime." *Criminology* 38(3):755–86. doi:[10.1111/j.1745-9125.2000.tb00905.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2000.tb00905.x).
- Clair, Matthew, and Alix S. Winter. 2016. "How Judges Think About Racial Disparities: Situational Decision-Making in the Criminal Justice System." *Criminology* 54(2):332–59. doi:[10.1111/1745-9125.12106](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12106).
- Collins, Caitlyn, Megan Tobias Neely, and Shamus Khan. 2024. "'Which Cases Do I Need?' Constructing Cases and Observations in Qualitative Research." *Annual Review of Sociology* 50(Volume 50, 2024):21–40. doi:[10.1146/annurev-soc-031021-035000](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-031021-035000).
- Chermak, Steven. 1995. *Victims In The News: Crime And The American News Media*. Avalon Publishing.
- Chermak, Steven. 1998. "Predicting Crime Story Salience: The Effects of Crime, Victim, and Defendant Characteristics." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 26(1):61–70. doi:[10.1016/S0047-2352\(97\)00055-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0047-2352(97)00055-X).
- Deterding, Nicole M., and Mary C. Waters. 2021. "Flexible Coding of In-Depth Interviews: A Twenty-First-Century Approach." *Sociological Methods & Research* 50(2):708–39. doi:[10.1177/0049124118799377](https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124118799377).

- Duxbury, Scott W. 2023. "A Threatening Tone: Homicide, Racial Threat Narratives, and the Historical Growth of Incarceration in the United States, 1926–2016." *Social Forces* 102(2):561–85. doi: 10.1093/sf/soad022.
- Enns, Peter K. 2016. *Incarceration Nation: How the United States Became the Most Punitive Democracy in the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ericson, Richard Victor, Patricia M. Baranek, and Janet B. L. Chan. 1987. *Visualizing Deviance: A Study of News Organization*. University of Toronto Press.
- Fishman, Mark. 1980. *Manufacturing the News*. University of Texas Press.
- Gans, Herbert J. 1980. *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time*. Vintage Books.
- Garland, David. 2001. *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gerson, Kathleen, and Sarah Damaske. 2020. *The Science and Art of Interviewing*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gilliam, Franklin D., and Shanto Iyengar. 2000. "Prime Suspects: The Influence of Local Television News on the Viewing Public." *American Journal of Political Science* 44(3):560–73. doi:[10.2307/2669264](https://doi.org/10.2307/2669264).
- Gruenewald, Jeff, Jesenia Pizarro, and Steven M. Chermak. 2009. "Race, Gender, and the Newsworthiness of Homicide Incidents." *Journal of Criminal Justice* 37(3):262–72. doi:[10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2009.04.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2009.04.006).
- Harcup, Tony. 2019. "News Judgment, News Values, and Newsworthiness." Pp. 1–8 in *The International Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Hayes, Danny, and Jennifer Lawless. 2017. "The Decline of Local News and Its Effects: New Evidence from Longitudinal Data." *The Journal of Politics* 80:000–000. doi:[10.1086/694105](https://doi.org/10.1086/694105).
- Iyengar, Shanto. 1994. *Is Anyone Responsible?: How Television Frames Political Issues*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Kulig, Teresa C., and Francis T. Cullen. 2017. "Where Is Latisha's Law? Black Invisibility in the Social Construction of Victimhood." *Justice Quarterly* 34(6):978–1013. doi:[10.1080/07418825.2016.1244284](https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2016.1244284).
- Kutateladze, Besiki L., Nancy R. Andiloro, Brian D. Johnson, and Cassia C. Spohn. 2014. "Cumulative Disadvantage: Examining Racial and Ethnic Disparity in Prosecution and Sentencing." *Criminology* 52(3):514–51. doi:[10.1111/1745-9125.12047](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12047).

- Lareau, Annette. 2021. *Listening to People: A Practical Guide to Interviewing, Participant Observation, Data Analysis, and Writing It All Up*. Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lynch, Mona. 1998. "Waste Managers? The New Penology, Crime Fighting, and Parole Agent Identity." *Law & Society Review* 32(4):839–70. doi:[10.2307/827741](https://doi.org/10.2307/827741).
- Muse Abernathy, Penelope, and Sarah Stonebely. 2023. *The State of Local News: The 2023 Report*. Northwestern Local News Initiative.  
<https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/2023/report/>.
- Naseer, Sarah, and Christopher St. Aubin. 2023. *Newspapers Fact Sheet*. State of the News Media. Pew Research Center.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/newspapers/>.
- Peterson, Erik. 2021. "Paper Cuts: How Reporting Resources Affect Political News Coverage." *American Journal of Political Science* 65(2):443–59.
- Petre, Caitlin. 2021. *All the News That's Fit to Click: How Metrics Are Transforming the Work of Journalists*. Princeton University Press.
- Reny, Tyler T., and Benjamin J. Newman. 2021. "The Opinion-Mobilizing Effect of Social Protest against Police Violence: Evidence from the 2020 George Floyd Protests." *American Political Science Review* 115(4):1499–1507.  
doi:[10.1017/S0003055421000460](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000460).
- Richardson, L. Song, and Phillip Atiba Goff. 2013. "Implicit Racial Bias in Public Defender Triage." *Yale Law Journal*. 122(8).
- Roche, Sean Patrick, Justin T. Pickett, and Marc Gertz. 2016. "The Scary World of Online News? Internet News Exposure and Public Attitudes Toward Crime and Justice." *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 32(2):215–36. doi:[10.1007/s10940-015-9261-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10940-015-9261-x).
- Rubin, Ashley T., Paige E. Vaughn, and Danielle S. Rudes. 2024. "Neo-Institutional Analyses of Criminal Legal Organizations and Policies." *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 20(Volume 20, 2024):331–52.  
doi:[10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-041822-045654](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-lawsocsci-041822-045654).
- Schildkraut, Jaclyn, and Amy M. Donley. 2012. "Murder in Black: A Media Distortion Analysis of Homicides in Baltimore in 2010." *Homicide Studies* 16(2):175–96.  
doi:[10.1177/1088767912438712](https://doi.org/10.1177/1088767912438712).
- Schultz, Ida. 2007. "The Journalistic Gut Feeling." *Journalism Practice* 1(2):190–207.  
doi:[10.1080/17512780701275507](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512780701275507).

- Schwarze, Tilman. 2022. "Discursive Practices of Territorial Stigmatization: How Newspapers Frame Violence and Crime in a Chicago Community." *Urban Geography* 43(9):1415–36. doi:[10.1080/02723638.2021.1913015](https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2021.1913015).
- Simmons, Alicia D. 2017. "Cultivating Support for Punitive Criminal Justice Policies: News Sectors and the Moderating Effects of Audience Characteristics." *Social Forces* 96(1):299–328. doi: 10.1093/sf/sox031.
- Slakoff, Danielle C., and Pauline K. Brennan. 2019. "The Differential Representation of Latina and Black Female Victims in Front-Page News Stories: A Qualitative Document Analysis." *Feminist Criminology* 14(4):488–516. doi:[10.1177/1557085117747031](https://doi.org/10.1177/1557085117747031).
- Slakoff, Danielle C., and Pauline K. Brennan. 2023. "White, Black, and Latina Female Victims in U.S. News: A Multivariate and Intersectional Analysis of Story Differences." *Race and Justice* 13(2):155–84. doi:[10.1177/2153368720961837](https://doi.org/10.1177/2153368720961837).
- Small, Mario Luis. 2009. "How Many Cases Do I Need?: On Science and the Logic of Case Selection in Field-Based Research." *Ethnography* 10(1):5–38. doi:[10.1177/1466138108099586](https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138108099586).
- Small, Mario Luis, and Jessica McCrory Calarco. 2022. *Qualitative Literacy: A Guide to Evaluating Ethnographic and Interview Research*. 1st ed. University of California Press.
- Sorenson, S. B., J. G. Manz, and R. A. Berk. 1998. "News Media Coverage and the Epidemiology of Homicide." *American Journal of Public Health* 88(10):1510–14. doi:[10.2105/ajph.88.10.1510](https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.88.10.1510).
- Surette, Ray. 2015. *Media, Crime, and Criminal Justice: Images, Realities, and Policies*. Fifth edition. Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning.
- Tavory, Iddo. 2020. "Interviews and Inference: Making Sense of Interview Data in Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Sociology* 43(4):449–65. doi: 10.1007/s11133-020-09464-x.
- Timmermans, Stefan, and Iddo Tavory. 2022. *Data Analysis in Qualitative Research: Theorizing with Abductive Analysis*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tomasik, Emily, and Jeffrey Gottfried. 2023. "U.S. Journalists' Beats Vary Widely by Gender and Other Factors." <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/04/04/us-journalists-beats-vary-widely-by-gender-and-other-factors/>.
- Tuchman, Gaye. 1973. "Making News by Doing Work: Routinizing the Unexpected." *American Journal of Sociology* 79(1):110–31.

- Tuchman, Gaye. 2000. "The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media." Pp. 150–74 in *Culture and Politics: A Reader*, edited by L. Crothers and C. Lockhart. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.
- Usher, Nikki. 2018. "Breaking News Production Processes in US Metropolitan Newspapers: Immediacy and Journalistic Authority." *Journalism* 19(1):21–36. doi:[10.1177/1464884916689151](https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884916689151).
- Wacquant, Loïc. 2007. "Territorial Stigmatization in the Age of Advanced Marginality." *Thesis Eleven* 91(1):66–77. doi:[10.1177/0725513607082003](https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513607082003).
- Weiss, Robert S. 1995. *Learning From Strangers*. Free Press.
- Weiss A., Chermak S. M. 1998. "The news value of African-American victims: An examination of the media's presentation of homicide." *Journal of Crime and Justice*, 21, 71-88.
- White, Kailey, Forrest Stuart, and Shannon L. Morrissey. 2021. "Whose Lives Matter? Race, Space, and the Devaluation of Homicide Victims in Minority Communities." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 7(3):333–49. doi:[10.1177/2332649220948184](https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649220948184).
- Winter, Alix S., and Matthew Clair. 2023. "'The Roughest Form of Social Work:' How Court Officials Justify Bail Decisions." *Criminology* 61(4):904–28. doi:[10.1111/1745-9125.12350](https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12350).

**TABLE 1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n=48)**

| <b>Variable</b>                   | <b>Mean Value</b> |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| Age in years                      | 35.00             |
| Years in journalism               | 13.27             |
| Years in crime journalism         | 9.56              |
| <b>Race (Proportion)</b>          |                   |
| Asian (East)                      | 0.02              |
| Asian (South)                     | 0.02              |
| Black / African-American          | 0.02              |
| Hispanic / Latino, Latina, Latinx | 0.12              |
| Native American / Alaska Native   | 0.02              |
| White                             | 0.88              |
| <b>Gender (Proportion)</b>        |                   |
| Man                               | 0.44              |
| Non-Binary                        | 0.04              |
| Woman                             | 0.52              |
| <b>Education (Proportion)</b>     |                   |
| High School                       | 0.02              |
| Associate's Degree                | 0.02              |
| Bachelor's Degree                 | 0.73              |
| Master's Degree                   | 0.23              |
| <b>Sexuality (Proportion)</b>     |                   |
| Bisexual / Pansexual              | 0.12              |
| Gay                               | 0.02              |
| Lesbian                           | 0.04              |
| Straight                          | 0.81              |

**TABLE 2 Characteristics of Cities Covered By Newsrooms in Sample (n=35)**

| <b>Variable</b>                               | <b>Mean</b> | <b>Standard<br/>Deviation</b> | <b>Median</b> |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------------------------|---------------|
| Annual homicide count                         | 197.79      | 179.14                        | 121           |
| Homicides per 100,000                         | 6.01        | 3.79                          | 5             |
| % Black, non-Hispanic                         | 13.57       | 8.61                          | 11.72         |
| % Hispanic                                    | 16.90       | 12.99                         | 11.27         |
| % Poverty                                     | 11.30       | 2.13                          | 11.29         |
| Core-Based Statistical Area<br>population     | 3,875,609   | 3,969,866                     | 2,538,087     |
| <b><i>Cities by Census region (count)</i></b> |             |                               |               |
| Midwest                                       | 10          |                               |               |
| South                                         | 9           |                               |               |
| West                                          | 9           |                               |               |
| Northeast                                     | 7           |                               |               |