



Covering Crime

US NEWS MEDIA CRIME and JUSTICE COVERAGE: 2010 and Roundtable Discussion

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**prepared by
Criminal Justice Journalists**

The sputtering economy affected both criminal justice and news coverage of it in 2010. Most dramatically, many criminal justice agencies, from police departments to prisons, were forced to cut back on their staffing and services. For their part, the news media continued to readjust, including the use of smaller staffs in many mainstream publications whose cutbacks had as much to do with competition on the Internet as with general economic conditions.

Introduction

Perhaps the most surprising story was what didn't happen. Despite longstanding speculation that the continuing economic crisis would produce a "crime wave," it registered no strong impact on crime rates. With nearly two years of data available since the recession set in, it seemed clear that what is normally called crime in the streets was continuing to decline, albeit slowly, on a national level; and that high unemployment was

not translating into a major increase in lawbreaking. It is possible, however, that the nation's economic woes had a so-far unmeasured effect of increasing some kinds of white-collar crime.

This report will assess news media coverage of crime and justice issues in 2010, based partly on a conference call conducted by **Criminal Justice Journalists** on January 10, 2011 with experts **Tom Rosenstiel** of the Project for Excellence in Journalism and **James Alan Fox**, a criminologist at Northeastern University; and separate conversations with **Ellen Podgor** of Stetson University School of Law, who runs White Collar Crime Prof Blog at: http://lawprofessors.typepad.com/whitecollarcrime_blog; and with several television news directors and a broadcast news consultant.

Coverage Volume Down Slightly

As measured by the Project for Excellence in Journalism's annual survey, crime news took up about four percent of the "newshole" in a sampling of publications, radio and television broadcasts, and online outlets in 2010, down slightly from about six percent in 2009. The category getting the most news coverage was the 2010 election campaigns, taking up 12 percent of the newshole. Crime was the eighth highest category in U.S. coverage (tied with business); in 2009, it was seventh. For more detail, the full report is available at http://www.journalism.org/commentary_backgrounder/2010_year_news

With economic conditions continuing in 2010 as the most dominant domestic issue of news coverage, it was natural that a prominent part of that coverage dealt with how government operations were affected. Indeed, a leading issue in the congressional mid-term elections that shifted control of the House of Representatives to the Republican Party was the need to rein in government spending.

Because criminal justice is a key component of spending at a state and local level—much less so in the federal government—it should command news coverage.

In fact, so far there has been relatively little detailed media examination of the impact except in a few places where the situation has reached a near-crisis level, such as the layoff of nearly half the police force in crime-plagued Camden, N.J. Newspapers, broadcast outlets and websites have dutifully reported on discussions in many jurisdictions about reducing budgets of police forces, court systems and corrections agencies, but there was scant analysis of what it would mean or of the public reaction.

In one example of a news outlet that has provided consistent coverage of the kind of local budget crunch that may be seen nationwide, the *Seattle Times* reported that King County Sheriff Sue Rahr, facing layoffs of 28 deputies and elimination of more than 40 vacant

positions, said she would disband teams investigating property crimes, close storefront offices, and reduce other services. For more details, see

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2013411401_kingbudget12m.html

STORY SUGGESTION

As more states, counties, and cities attempt to deal with budget deficits in 2011, the news media should examine the potential or actual impact on all stages of the criminal justice system. The warnings of public officials about the effect of budget courts should not be accepted uncritically. It should not be assumed that any cutback will result in a lower quality of justice delivered. It is very possible that efficiencies could lead to improvements in the handling of cases, if, for example, better technology replaces outmoded manual systems.

The Economy's Role

The economy also played a major role as a theme of crime news coverage, with the assumption by many public officials and other observers that poor economic conditions would prompt an increase in crime. This theory never has been sustained by scientific analysis, but long has been the subject of anecdotal reports.

As city after city experienced continued declines in reported crimes, police chiefs and others who analyze crime rates conceded that they had not in fact seen an increase in major crime categories which they could attribute to the nation's economic difficulties.

A good example of media coverage was a *Los Angeles Times* story of December 27, 2010 on the city's relatively low murder total for the year—under 300. The *Times* said the drop in crime “defied predictions that a bad economy would inexorably lead to higher crime.” The paper quoted experts as saying that the crime drop “is not easily explained and is probably the result of several factors working together, including effective crime-fighting strategies, strict sentencing laws that have greatly increased the number of people in prison, demographic shifts, and sociological influences. A significant factor, said Columbia University law Prof. Jeffrey Fagan, is “the absence of a drug epidemic.”

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-la-crime-20101217,0,1871598.story>

Meanwhile, the accuracy of basic crime data continued to be an issue. In previous years, Philadelphia and St. Louis news media had found that rape reports had been downgraded.

More recently, Dallas and Detroit police officials were involved in allegations of undercounting crimes. In 2010, the issue flared in New York City, where the news media and other critics questioned the city's failure to disclose complete data on minor crimes.

In the light of an academic survey that found some police commanders reporting pressure to downplay crimes as part of the city's well-known CompStat program, which holds local police officials accountable for crime rates in their districts, the suspicion was that the touted decline in major crimes was due partly to a deliberate downgrading of crimes.

The *New York Times* sued the city for not releasing the data on minor crimes. For the background, see:

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/02/nyregion/02secrecy.html?_r=1&hpw.

In late 2010, the city issued a report showing that reported misdemeanors also were down:

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/29/nyregion/29misdemeanor.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=eterno%20browne%20misdemeanor&st=cse

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* has been particularly attentive to the issue. Last summer, the newspaper reported that when 52 car windows were smashed in one area overnight, police tallied just three larcenies—one per block (a counting method that since has been changed). Police Chief Dan Isom said his department also realized it had been undercounting assaults by counting them by incident, instead of by victim.

http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/article_b5ff5e58-1a15-5957-a9c4-bd51ee84ee6c.html

The *Baltimore Sun* examined rape reports, finding that Baltimore led the nation in the percentage of rape cases that police say are false or baseless. The newspaper reported that many victims of sexual abuse say police interrogators ask confrontational questions and challenge their motives and veracity; as a result, many women decide not to cooperate, leading to the cases being shelved.

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/baltimore-city/bs-ci-unfounded-rape-conviction-20100725,0,6853467.story>.

In early 2011, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and *The Tennessean* in Nashville published similar reports.

Why is Crime Down?

Even with undercounting in some places, it seems clear both from the FBI's Uniform Crime Report and the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics' victimization survey, which includes estimates of the many offenses not reported to law enforcement, that crime is down significantly in the last 15 years. Why is street crime continuing to decline? Criminologists who make it their business to study the trends don't agree on an answer, so it isn't surprising that the media don't either. When crime is down, it is convenient for law enforcement officials to take credit, and the news media usually help them do it. Because police issue the official statistics, it is typical for journalists to quote the police chief as the only source of interpretation.

Many chiefs take the opportunity to attribute the decline to tactical changes they have ordered, such as concentrating police officers in "hot spots" or doing more patrolling instead of maintaining specialized units handling specific crimes. Even though most of these moves are not subjected to rigorous analysis, police chiefs typically proclaim them successful.

When crime goes up, law enforcement officials rarely take the blame. Rather, they blame the increase on societal factors beyond their control. *The media should talk to other experts such as academic criminologists to assess the various factors.*

No firm data are available, but anecdotally it appears that the continued financial problems of the news business are having the effect of reducing the number of "beat" reporters at U.S. newspapers. The situation differs from city to city, but often in the criminal justice area, this means there are fewer reporters covering a single police department or court system as a full-time beat and more reporters trying to keep track of a wider area by phone or Internet.

Another widespread phenomenon is the need to provide separate versions of stories for the printed newspaper and the website. Michael Kimball of *The Oklahoman* in Oklahoma City says that crime stories (as well as University of Oklahoma football) are by far the most-viewed topics on the newspaper's website. This results in more coverage of "odd" crime stories, in which those with lots of sex or violence get plenty of play on the Internet, but not in the print version.

While police and court news remain staples of American news coverage, the erosion on the local level means that the media are less likely to perform their watchdog role examining the operations of the justice system.

A series like this year's John Jay-HF Guggenheim award-winning *Philadelphia Inquirer* examination of the local courts system, which initially appeared late in 2009, is a

welcome exception to the rule. The courts in most cities presumably do not operate so poorly as those in Philadelphia, but it is difficult for readers of many daily newspapers to tell because rarely are there stories examining basic court functions.

ED NOTE: *For the winners of the 2010-2011 awards, see:*

<http://www.jjay.cuny.edu/cmci/>

For a case study on the Philadelphia Inquirer series, see:

<http://www.thecrimereport.org/resources/media-toolkit/2011-02-crime-reporting-case-study-the-philadelphia-inquirer>

The winning entries, including the Inquirer series, will be available shortly on The Crime Report site www.thecrimereport.org

The media do report on extraordinary cases such as wrongful convictions. If anything, these stories may give the public the idea that a large proportion of criminal cases involve such flaws as mistaken eyewitness testimony or crime laboratory errors. *The media are right to focus on systemic flaws but they should periodically report on how the justice system overall functions in their communities.*

While most stories on wrongful convictions concentrate on particular cases, occasionally a news organization will take a broader view. *The Columbus Dispatch*, which has paid attention to problems of DNA evidence analysis in Ohio, reported the opinion of experts that the state “now has some of the best laws in the country to protect the innocent from wrongful convictions and put the right people behind bars” as a result of the governor’s signing a bill that sets statewide standards for retaining biological evidence.

http://www.dispatchpolitics.com/live/content/local_news/stories/2010/04/06/copy/ohiosnwdnalawcalledmodel.html?adsec=politics&sid=101

Corrections Coverage Comes Up Short

If fewer journalists are concentrating on the police and courts than formerly was the case, the number who specialize in the corrections system—prisons, probation, parole and sentencing practices—is minuscule.

The result is that the public usually is not well informed about what is happening in the system unless there is a crisis, typically a disturbance among inmates, an escape, or a financial issue that may result in releasing prisoners before the end of their normal terms.

With the crime rate down and fundamental economic issues looming large in political races, the news media did not focus on prisons and sentencing in most state and local political campaigns last fall, primarily because the candidates themselves did not debate it vigorously. Two exceptions were New Hampshire and Illinois, where there were disputes among gubernatorial candidates over the length of prison terms. In neither case did the issue become a definitive electoral issue, and incumbent governors won re-election in both states.

In Illinois, Gov. Pat Quinn was criticized for what the Associated Press called a secret program that freed 1,700 inmates before their expected release dates. Nearly 130 parolees were returned to custody and the state corrections director left office. Quinn did win re-election. Malcolm Young of the Northwestern University School of Law, a sentencing expert, issued a report concluding that, contrary to news media reports, the release program “has not been responsible for a single illegal or premature release of dangerous criminals or for the commission of additional violent crime.”

Most media coverage of states’ consideration of corrections budget cutbacks was straightforward and uncritical but the *New York Times* published a front-page lead story on March 5, 2010 headlined “Safety Is Issue as Budget Cuts Free Prisoners.” The article reported a “backlash,” focusing on complaints by Michigan prosecutors that inmates were being released too quickly in that state and that public safety could be endangered. Few in the media, including the *Times* itself, did much follow up on the issue.

To help fill the gap experienced by journalists who are not familiar with the nuances of covering prisons, jails, sentencing, and probation, parole, and community corrections programs, Criminal Justice Journalists, which long has maintained an online guide for justice-system reporters, added three chapters providing detailed information, sources, and story ideas on those subjects. (see <http://justicejournalism.org/crimeguide>). Working with the Center on Media, Crime and Justice at John Jay College, the group distributed the guide at a conference for journalists covering corrections subjects in Kentucky.

The media are yet to recognize widely one development that could prove promising in sentencing and prison reform. A group including prominent national conservatives such as Newt Gingrich and Grover Norquist started a “Right on Crime” campaign that endorsed basing criminal sentencing practices on cost-benefit analyses rather than a “lock-‘em-up-throw away-the-key” approach that had been pursued by conservatives for many years.

This development 10 days before Christmas was not covered much by the mainstream media. The *Washington Post* reported on it in a Christmas Eve article that noted how the

campaign had prompted television evangelist Pat Robertson unexpectedly to criticize long prison terms for marijuana users.

More on Sex Offenders

The news media over the last few years had played a major role in reporting restrictions that states and localities put on sex offenders. Now, some of them are taking a look at subsequent re-examinations of the effectiveness of these rules.

The Rochester *Democrat & Chronicle*, for example, published a series of articles on questions about New York State's laws:

(<http://www.democratandchronicle.com/article/20101226/NEWS01/12260311/Civil-confinement-of-sex-offenders-costs-state-175-000-apiece>.)

In May, the Associated Press published a national survey that found a “confusing array of rules for juvenile sex offenders...despite a vast overhaul that was adopted four years ago to bring clarity and consistency to the nation’s sex offender registration laws.”

<http://www.miamiherald.com/2010/05/06/1615765/states-vary-on-dealing-with-youth.html>

Not all the reporting questioned the severity of sex offender rules. After two teenage girls were killed in separate incidents by a registered sex offender, the *San Diego Union-Tribune* published many articles about an ultimately successful effort in the California legislature to tighten the laws on offenders.

See, for example:

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2010/sep/09/governor-signs-chelseas-law/>

A Focus On Gun Violence

In many communities, gun crime is virtually an accepted fact of life. As the total number of reported violent crimes seems to have stabilized or is trending downward, virtually any new restrictions on firearms are opposed by the powerful pro-gun lobby. The Supreme Court’s recognition of the individual right to bear arms has meant that guns are easier to obtain in big cities.

Relatively few outlets in the mainstream news media have devoted much effort to this problem, but the *Washington Post* deserves commendation for spending a year on an

investigation of how guns made their way into the hands of people who used them to kill police officers. Among 341 deaths for which the newspaper was able to trace guns, 107 firearms were obtained legally.

The *Post* series, which can be seen at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/nation/guns>, also explored the politics of the issue. With the National Rifle Association poised to oppose virtually any gun-control proposal, many Democrats who would be expected to support what advocates call “common-sense measures” such as background checks for purchasers at gun shows, backed off from seeking new laws. The *Post* reported, for example, that the Obama administration heeded NRA opposition and delayed a plan to require reporting multiple sales of rifles and shotguns to slow gun trafficking from the U.S. to Mexico. The *Post* was almost alone in detailed reporting on the issue, however.

The *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* paralleled the *Post*'s reporting by focusing in repeated stories on a Wisconsin gun store that was able to stay in business despite numerous federal citations for illegal sales, by prolonging appeals in the courts. For an example of the paper's stories, see:

www.jsonline.com/watchdog/watchdogreports/97747109.html

Legalizing Pot

Drug policy was a major subject of news coverage in 2010, much of it focused on a campaign to make California the first state to legalize marijuana use for any purpose. Previously, 15 states had authorized its use for medical reasons. The California campaign was covered extensively nationwide, including many stories on the business and tax aspects of marijuana as well as its health implications.

In the end, opposition by law enforcement and other interests led to Proposition 19's defeat by a 54-46 percent margin. Debates in “medical marijuana” states like Michigan, Colorado, and New Jersey on how best to regulate the drug attracted much media coverage, and the topic was sure to get more attention as advocates of full legalization vowed to try again in California and other states.

Homeland Security and Law Enforcement

Homeland security policies relating to law enforcement got relatively little attention from the news media, presumably because they were not a particularly contentious issue and because policymaking was shrouded in secrecy. (Much more coverage went to airline security measures such as the prospect of full body scans.)

Federal money spent on antiterrorism equipment and manpower was plentiful, and police were required to apportion their time among traditional crime fighting and terrorism prevention.

Again the *Washington Post* led the way in reporting on the subject, publishing “Monitoring America,” the results of an investigation that spread over four complete inside pages. The report described how nearly 4,000 federal, state, and local law enforcement and intelligence agencies were collecting information on thousands of U.S. citizens and residents, even if they were not accused of wrongdoing. The story can be seen at <http://projects.washingtonpost.com/top-secret-america/articles/monitoring-america>

The story described reports such as one of a “suspicious subject ... taking photographs” of a fire boat and a ferry with a cellular phone camera in California. A report on the photographer (traced through his car license plate) found no record of wrongdoing but could sit in a federal database for as long as five years, the *Post* said.

Critics said the *Post* gave insufficient attention to the privacy protections built into the program, and contested the newspaper’s basic point that federal, state, and local authorities are compiling permanent databases on innocent people. Paul Wormeli of the

IJIS Institute, which represents much of the information-sharing industry, told Criminal Justice Journalists that officers in the chain of handling such reports do not have the “time or reason to continue to collect information on individuals unless and until a positive determination is made that there is a reason to do so.”

Clearly this issue deserves more media reporting as government at all levels spends large sums on collecting and analyzing anti-terrorism intelligence.

White-Collar Crime

White-collar crime was given sporadic coverage by the mainstream media in 2010. The *Wall Street Journal* said the Supreme Court’s ruling in the case of former Enron executive Jeffrey Skilling that limited use of the 1988 federal “honest services” law to cases involving bribery and kickbacks could have a major impact on white-collar crime and political fraud cases, but the repercussions had yet to play out by year’s end.

Stories appeared around the U.S. during the year on subjects like Ponzi schemes, mortgage fraud, and health care fraud, but there was not much national media coverage of major trends. Law Professor Ellen Podgor of Stetson University, who writes a blog on

white-collar crime, speculated that news media cutbacks in the weak economy meant that “the media are not leading coverage as much as they have done in past years.”

Scant coverage of corruption cases can mean that white-collar criminals may not be aware that strong federal prosecution efforts and relatively stiff penalties remain in effect for these offenses, Podgor says.

Television News Coverage

Local television news broadcasts have been dominated by daily crime reports for many years. That phenomenon, characterized by the cliché “if it bleeds, it leads,” continued in 2010.

In one potentially promising trend, a few stations in many U.S. markets are abandoning the hard-crime-news approach in favor of covering crime in a way that is more meaningful for viewers.

Jerry Gumbert, president of Texas-based Audience Research & Development, a consultant to local television news directors, says that hundreds of research studies by his firm in the last year have concluded that many viewers are “sick and tired of the mayhem” they see on local television news.

A decade ago, Gumbert says, viewers “wanted a blow-by-blow account of what was happening in their communities.” Now, he adds, many are “angry, concerned, and

frustrated” about a “barrage of crime reporting that gives them no sense of hope.” He notes that people who want detailed accounts of local crimes can often get them on the Internet and no longer need to wait for the nightly television news.

STORY SUGGESTION

Because many already know the headlines of today’s news, they are looking to local television for “more meaningful, investigative, in-depth” coverage, including better storytelling, he says. Instead of merely reporting, for example, the 10th murder in a city so far during the year, a television station might analyze the data in one area, telling about the kind of people who were killed and analyzing the trends.

Dan Bradley, president and general manager of WCMH-TV in Columbus, Ohio, an NBC affiliate, endorses Gumbert’s approach. Instead of routinely leading its newscasts with the latest crime reports, WCMH might do enterprise reporting on how enforcement of the

city's building codes allows many abandoned, dilapidated houses that are bases for criminals.

Bradley says the station's viewers are appreciative, often suggesting other enterprise reporting. Says Bradley: "Too often the local news broadcasts feature unnecessarily urgent, seldom important, often irrelevant stories with flashing blue lights and yellow police tape. After a time, people get tired of it."

Gumbert and Bradley concede that fewer than one-fourth of local television stations that report news have adopted this approach so far.

Kevin Benz, chair-elect of the Radio Television Digital News Association and until recently news director of a television station in Austin, Texas, says that at many stations these days, there are "better discussions of the effect of crime coverage on the social fabric of the community." Stations should be providing viewers "good, actionable information about their communities" rather than "throwing salacious material on the air to get ratings up."

Benz worries that the continual pressure to get news on the air first "trumps the need to verify the facts independently." Benz says that broadcast news reporters should do better at providing sources for information when doing live coverage.

Broadcast news media coverage of border crime played a big part in the debate that led to passage of Arizona's controversial law requiring police to determine the immigration status of people they detain, says Forrest Carr, news director of KGUN-TV, an ABC affiliate in Tucson. (The law has not gone into effect pending court challenges.)

Even if some television stations have toned down their crime coverage, "if it bleeds here on the border, it still leads," Carr says. Stations like his have taken on the task of trying to put the story into perspective by examining the actual safety levels in specific border communities, finding that many are reasonably safe, Carr says.

Still, broadcast news operations are under pressure from viewers who expect news coverage to be skewed in favor of what public opinion shows. Carr says he got hundreds of email messages from viewers who believed that stories about the Arizona law should not be balanced but should explicitly favor its enactment. "People don't seem to be so open to hearing the facts as they used to be," Carr says.

Carr lamented that as 2011 began, most news outlets in his area erroneously reported that U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords was killed by a gunman at a meeting with constituents. They seemingly relied on a local sheriff's deputy who believed that the wounded Giffords had

stopped breathing. If the media continue to make major errors in the rush to get any rumor on the air, “we’re slitting our own throats” in terms of credibility, Carr says.

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Part II

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ON MEDIA COVERAGE, 2010

Summary of conference call on January 10, 2011 on media coverage of crime and justice in 2010 for Center on Media, Crime and Justice, John Jay College.

Participants

Ted Gest, Criminal Justice Journalists

Deb Halpern Wenger, Criminal Justice Journalists and University of Mississippi

James Alan Fox, Department of Criminology, Northeastern University

Tom Rosenstiel, Project for Excellence in Journalism

TED GEST. Did you detect any major change in the volume or quality of media coverage of crime and justice in 2010?

JAMES FOX: It’s difficult to calibrate because of the proliferation of blogs and web sites of all sorts. It seems like there’s a proliferation of coverage of crime, but that may be a manifestation of the changes in the delivery vehicle.

I wouldn’t say the quality has changed. With speed come mistakes. There is pressure on journalists and others to be online as quickly as possible. Haste makes waste. Haste makes errors.

GEST: There was an example of this the first weekend in January 2011 when several media organizations declared Rep. Gabrielle Giffords of Arizona dead of gunshot wounds when she had not died.

FOX: The question is whether the errors get repeated to the point that they seem like fact. Most of them may be isolated.

TOM ROSENSTIEL: The total amount of coverage was about the same last year. Local television news tends to rely heavily on crime and public safety but the mindset and mentality is that stories that involve flashing lights tend to be put at the top of the broadcast, where they get more time. Close to 70 percent of the lead stories may be on those topics. We haven't seen a lot of change in that.

In print, because some of this can be handled with online, interactive searchable databases, there may be somewhat less crime coverage now. When newspapers are cutting staffs by 30 to 40 percent, they may do anything they can to avoid having people (reporting) on the street.

FOX: Another trend is the tendency to interrupt regular television programs with "breaking news" that may not be very critical, such as a house fire or a shooting somewhere far away.

ROSENSTIEL: People want news when they want it. They can turn on the TV set or go to a website. TV stations are saying, "We're going to tell you about it wherever you are, when it is happening." **Tweeting was a much more important element in TV coverage last year. TV stations now are promoting their Twitter feeds in commercials.** A year ago they were promoting their web pages.

FOX: It intensifies the idea of "sound morsels."

WENGER: One of the big topics of conversation among media experts is the role mobile communications will play in the delivery of news and information in the future. It's possible that crime will be a particularly relevant subject because people will want to know, not only about crime in their own communities, but also about crime in the communities they visit. **If I'm going to a movie on the other side of town, the armed robbery that took place in the theater parking lot is now relevant to me. With my cell phone, I can check on crime there, if someone has made the data available.**

The *Las Vegas Sun*, for example, is rolling out an extensive mobile initiative called "Home News" to do this kind of thing – provide crime coverage and other information to people while they're on the move.

GEST: Is there a risk that with all the pressure for breaking news, the news media will concentrate more on individual crimes at the expense of investigative reporting?

ROSENSTIEL: At a metropolitan newspaper, the more people put efforts into following a breaking story and updating it during the day, the less ability there is for enterprise reporting. It's a structural thing.

WENGER: The only plus is that data can be automated; news organizations can be sucking crime information from a database, which can allow them to focus on the big picture rather than having to track down the details of episodic crime.

ROSENSTIEL: Yes, we have way more tools now to analyze data, if journalists have the mindset to do that kind of work.

FOX: Keep in mind that crime statistics are notoriously mishandled, so there's a danger that people might get the wrong impression.

GEST: Are you saying that the standards of collection and analysis by the media are not very high?

FOX: With crime data coming in quickly, the danger of figures being misunderstood increases. Given the fear factor in crime, that worry is a significant one. There was a recent report that Massachusetts leads the northeastern and mid-Atlantic states in crime.

We were number one in aggravated assaults, but sixth in homicide and rape, and fifth in robbery.

All three major newspapers in the Boston area -- the *Boston Globe*, *Boston Herald*, and *Quincy Patriot Ledger* -- all had the same headline: Massachusetts is #1 in violent crime.

ROSENSTIEL: In the past, newspapers would filter this through an expert. Now journalists are seeing it for themselves,

FOX: Even the FBI figures are easily accessible by everyone. Individuals can obtain them easily on their own.

GEST: For several years, we've seen reports that crime is going down. Should that mean less media coverage of crime?

FOX: There is a total disconnect between crime rates and coverage of events. We have plenty of crime stories to lead the news at 11 even if there are 50 percent fewer homicides overall. We still have an ample supply of grisly, bizarre murder cases.

FOX: Crime is so intriguing for viewers and readers, and fear of crime is driven by coverage of crime stories, with no relation to statistics. Crime may have gone down 20 percent, but people don't feel it when there is a shooting reported in the news. There can be a high-profile case of the murder of a child that creates fear and drives both public opinion and the policy agenda.

When the crime rate goes down, it gets far less coverage than when the rate goes up.

ROSENSTIEL: Crime took up about 4.1 percent of the newshole in 2010 in the media we surveyed, compared with 5.8 percent the year before, but the decline could have been

because major events like the Haiti earthquake and the Gulf oil spill took up so much coverage.

WENGER: What is the impact of the fear of crime on public policy?

FOX: There is pressure on state legislatures to invest in increasingly stiffer penalties in response to public fear of crime, which is based on episodes, not on rates. Atypical crimes get an unusual amount of coverage, create fear, and end up making for bad law. My guess is that it happens more now than it did a few years ago.

GEST: A case could be made that because we have not had widely-publicized sex offenses in most areas in recent years like the Polly Klaas or Megan Kanka cases in past years, the media have been somewhat more responsible in following up on trends.

ROSENSTIEL: Some media are structurally more oriented to certain topics than others. Morning shows have twice as much crime coverage as network evening shows, eight percent compared to four percent.

GEST: One of the big issues in 2011 will be cutbacks in public spending. Is this the kind of thing the media should be covering in the criminal-justice area?

WENGER: It may be something that should be covered, but I wouldn't look for much of it on local TV. Television news is notoriously bad on money and budget stories. It is often hard to visualize abstract concepts, so unless something occurs that can be pegged as a direct result of budget cuts, I doubt you will see television stations covering the issue.

ROSENSTIEL: The media agenda will be influenced by what the Republicans in the House want to do. If the idea is that the Obama Administration is becoming weaker on crime and homeland security or if there is crime and public malfeasance in the Obama Administration, there will be House investigations.

I don't think that "soft on crime" is as important to the current conservative agenda as it was before the economy fell apart.

FOX: Things can change quickly if crime goes back up, which it very well may. We have short memories. There's a good possibility that by the end of 2011, homicides could go back up because we had a large decline in 2010.

When the numbers get so low, it's difficult to maintain that low level. **There can be an overreaction to a short-term, meaningless crime increase. It's important to keep things in perspective.**

GEST: Have the media now got away from the theory that when the economy goes bad, there will be an increase in crime?

FOX: There never has been a correlation – [the false idea is] that because people lose their jobs, they just go out and rob others. There sometimes is a connection between loss

of jobs and family shootings, but those are rare events. You also might see an impact on embezzlement and insurance fraud, but those aren't counted in the crime statistics.

ROSENSTIEL: White-collar crime stories often are classified as financial stories, such as mortgage fraud. When the cases move into the legal area, the defense is that it wasn't a crime.

GEST: Can you mention any other notable media issues in crime and justice for 2010?

FOX: In stories about wrongful convictions, it often isn't clear whether the defendants were innocent or just wrongfully convicted. Media tend to report numbers from the Innocence Project and then use an extreme case to illustrate.

GEST: Is there a decline in investigative reporting, such as media not keeping close tabs on police?

ROSENSTIEL: News organizations aren't getting rid of investigative units. It's part of the franchise. What has been cut back more is "beat" reporting, such as people assigned to cover a particular police department. A reporter may now have 3 police departments to cover; or perhaps there used to be 3 people on that beat, now there is just one or one and a half. **It's the day-to-day monitoring that has been cut back rather than the once-every-three years intensive look at a problem.**

If you have fewer reporters, you're going to have fewer tips, fewer long-term exposes. There is an erosion, but it's not that investigative reporting is being singled out to be cutback.

FOX: What are the effects of so many people having cell phones?

ROSENSTIEL: That's meaningful. Cops behave better if a reporter is around but now there are many more cell phones, even a kid on the corner may have one. Cops can be aware of a possible Rodney King phenomenon.

Overall, the erosion in the newsroom is undeniable. People are under more pressure to do breaking news, there are fewer beat reporters monitoring day-to-day activities of law enforcement. There's no denying that.

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