Crime in the News: How do People Feel About Crime Reporting in Portland, Oregon?

Kris R. Henning  
*Portland State University, khenning@pdx.edu*

Brian Renauer  
*Portland State University*

Greg Stewart  
*Portland Police Bureau*

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cjpri_briefs

Part of the Mass Communication Commons, Public Affairs Commons, and the Urban Studies Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

**Recommended Citation**

https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cjpri_briefs/4

This Report is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute Research Research Briefs by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.
Crime in the News: How do People Feel About Crime Reporting in Portland, Oregon?

**Research In Brief**

**Criminal Justice Policy Research Institute (CJPR)**
Kris Henning, Brian Renauer, & Greg Stewart

---

**Key Findings**

- Three quarters of adults in Portland watch the local TV news and/or read the area’s major newspaper on a regular basis.

- While two-thirds of Portlanders rate media coverage of individual crime incidents as “good”, all other forms of crime reporting are evaluated much less favorably.

- Younger residents and people with a college degree are more dissatisfied with the overall quality of crime reporting.

- Criminal justice agencies need to develop alternative mechanisms for disseminating crime information directly to the public and/or work with local news media to cover a broader range of crime topics.

---

**Introduction**

Criminal justice researchers and media experts consistently find that local news media devote extensive coverage to individual criminal events, particularly crimes that involve atypical victims and offenders or severe acts of violence. Hence the journalistic expression, “if it bleeds it leads.”

Reporting on criminal events like these might benefit the community if residents and organizations use the information to make better decisions regarding their safety. Studies suggest, however, that a more common outcome of exposure to incident-based crime reporting is inaccurate assessment of crime facts, fear that is disproportionate to actual victimization rates, and increased support for punitive sanctions with offenders.

Other areas of news coverage that may have greater value for a community include reports on crime prevention, crime trends, the underlying factors that contribute to crime, and efforts by the community and police to reduce offending. It remains unclear whether local news organizations are doing a good job covering these topics.

This research brief summarizes the results of a recent survey with residents in Portland, Oregon assessing public opinions on the local news media’s coverage of various crime topics.
Are Portlanders Watching/Reading the Local News?

More than one-half (55.5%) of the adults in Portland watch local TV news on a regular basis (i.e., several times per week to daily; see Table 1). A similar proportion of people (51.2%) are regular readers of the Oregonian newspaper and three-quarters of residents (72.6%) do one and/or the other regularly. These data, combined with prior analysis of print and television news content, suggests that most adults in Portland are frequently exposed to crime reporting.

Table 1. Exposure to Local News Media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Watch Local TV News*</th>
<th>Read the Oregonian*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a month or less</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several times per month</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several times per week</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyday</td>
<td>33.5%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes watching/reading online

How Do People Feel About Local Crime Reporting?

Residents used a scale ranging from “very good (A)” to “very poor (F)” to rate news coverage of seven distinct crime topics (see Figure 1). Two-thirds (63.9%) gave a good to very good rating for news coverage of individual criminal events (e.g., recent murder, robbery, rape, or burglary). The other six areas of crime reporting were rated less positively. For example, less than one-third (31.5%) of the public gave a good or very good rating to the news media’s coverage of crime prevention tips (i.e., strategies people could employ to reduce their own risk of victimization).

Figure 1. Public Evaluation of News Media's Coverage of Crime

CJPRI would like to thank Kate Ginsberg, MS for assistance in designing the study and managing the data collection.
Who is Dissatisfied with Local Crime Reporting?

Ratings on the seven crime topics were averaged to create an overall media score. People whose average rating was in the “poor (D)” to “very poor (F)” range were then compared to people who rated the media’s overall coverage of crime as “fair (C)” to “very good (A).” There were no differences in the distribution of men and women in these groups, nor were there any differences by race/ethnicity. Education and age, however, did make a difference. As shown in Figure 2, people with more education rated the media’s crime reporting less favorably. Similarly, younger residents in Portland were more critical of local crime reporting on average.

Summary

The present study found that people living in Portland are generally satisfied with the local media’s reporting on individual criminal incidents. By contrast, the vast majority of residents feel that news organizations are doing only a fair to very poor job of reporting on the underlying causes of crime in our community, longer term crime trends, crime prevention tips, and police/community efforts to reduce crime.

Further research will be needed to explore the reasons for this high level of dissatisfaction with local crime reporting. In the meantime, the findings have important implications for criminal justice agencies that have a responsibility not only to reduce crime, but to help people feel safe where appropriate and to engage the community in efforts to prevent crime. The latter requires agencies to expand their role in educating the public about the causes of crime and things people can do to reduce their risk for victimization.

While some of these goals may be achieved through expanded collaboration with the traditional news media, criminal justice agencies should also consider alternative strategies for communicating crime information directly to the public to ensure that these messages are being heard (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube). This is particularly important for our younger and college educated residents who appear to be especially dissatisfied with current crime reporting on TV and in newspapers.