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Race and the Misrepresentation of Victimization on Local Television News

A content analysis of a random sample of television news aired in Los Angeles and Orange Counties was undertaken to assess representations of Whites, Blacks, and Latinos as crime victims. Intergroup comparisons (Black vs. White and Latino vs. White) revealed that Whites are more likely than African Americans and Latinos to be portrayed as victims of crime on television news. Interrole comparisons (perpetrator vs. victim) revealed that Blacks and Latinos are more likely to be portrayed as lawbreakers than as crime victims, whereas the reverse is true of Whites. Interreality comparisons (television news vs. crime reports) revealed that Whites are overrepresented, Latinos are underrepresented, and Blacks are neither overrepresented nor underrepresented as homicide victims on television news compared to crime reports. Conversely, African Americans are overrepresented, Latinos are underrepresented, and Caucasians are neither overrepresented nor underrepresented as perpetrators on television news. Whites appear to be overrepresented as victims, whereas Blacks are relegated to roles as perpetrators and Latinos are largely absent on television news. The theoretical implications of these findings are discussed.

Watching crime news may distort perceptions of social reality if these stories misrepresent the extent to which members of racial groups occupy positive or negative crime roles (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark, & Roberts, 1978). To test whether television news portrayals misrepresented depictions of race and crime, Dixon and Linz (2000) compared the frequency of Black and Latino perpetrators to White perpetrators. In addition, they compared the frequency of Black, White, and Latino perpetrators to Black, White, and Latino officers. Finally, they compared the proportion of Black, Latino, and
White perpetrators and officers portrayed on television news to crime reports and employment records (Dixon & Linz, 2000).

Their study revealed that Blacks and Latinos are more likely than Whites to be portrayed as perpetrators on television news. In addition, Blacks and Latinos are more likely to be portrayed as lawbreakers rather than in positive roles as officers on television news. However, Whites are more likely to be portrayed as officers than as perpetrators (Dixon & Linz, 2000). Whites are also overrepresented as police officers, whereas Blacks are overrepresented as perpetrators on television news when their television proportions were compared to crime reports and employment records (Dixon & Linz, 2000). These results strongly suggest that Whites tend to occupy benevolent roles whereas Blacks and Latinos are relegated to more negative depictions on television news.

Given these findings, we wonder if portrayals of victims on television news may also differ by race such that White victimization is overemphasized and Black and Latino victimization is largely ignored. This issue of victimization and race is important for two reasons. First, the same process that works to relegate Blacks and Latinos to roles as perpetrators might also function to depict Whites as victims. Second, these distorted portrayals might have an influence on White viewers. If Whites are portrayed as victims, whereas Blacks and Latinos are portrayed as perpetrators, it might have the effect of increasing fear among White consumers of news programs. This work examines whether the depiction of victimization may be misrepresented by race on television news, and later, we speculate on the potential psychological effects of these portrayals.

Overemphasis on White Victimization

Two complementary perspectives would predict such an emphasis on White victimization. The first is the power relationship perspective that emphasizes the role of media ownership in producing news imagery. Essentially, it posits that Whites influence news content through the ownership of mass media outlets. This in turn leads to content that reflects White stereotyping of out-group members, and ethnocentric biases and behavior (Romer, Jamieson, & De Coteau, 1998). The power relationship perspectives would predict an overrepresentation of White victimization because of the ability of Whites to shape media content in a way that portrays their group favorably.

Romer et al. (1998) investigated victimization using a power relationship perspective. They contended that television news tends to overrepresent Whites as victims because of an ethnic-blame discourse in which people of
color are blamed for the problems of Whites (e.g., crime problems) (see also Van Dijk, 1993). This discourse affects news makers such that they produce crime stories that emphasize the harm that people of color cause Whites. As a result of such a discourse, people of color are relegated to roles of perpetration, whereas Whites are portrayed as victims.

The second perspective emphasizes the role of the news-gathering process in shaping media content (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Graber, 1980; Prithcard & Hughes, 1997). The news-structure-and-economic-interest explanation would predict that the misrepresentation of Whites as victims in the news results from reporting practices designed to generate and maintain a substantial media market. For example, the format of television news encourages an emphasis on the visual and the dramatic (Kaniss, 1991; Klite, Bardwell, & Salzman, 1997). Prithcard and Hughes (1997) observed that the competition for ratings between television news stations encouraged journalists and editors to focus on dramatic stories featuring victims to which the audience can identify. Given that the majority of those audience members are White, the victims also tend to be White.

In summary, both explanations focus on different aspects of the news business but predict an overemphasis on White victimization in television news. The power relationship perspective spotlights White ownership. The news-structure-and-economic perspective concentrates on news-gathering practices. Both suggest that Whites will be more likely to appear as victims in the news than either Blacks or Latinos.

To examine whether this hypothesized overemphasis on White victimization occurs in the news, we content analyze a randomly drawn 2-year sample of television news programming. We employ multiple indices of victimization and race originally developed to investigate perpetrators in order to examine this phenomenon.

Indices of Victimization

We use three measures in this study of victimization: intergroup measures (i.e., comparing Black to White victims and Latino to White victims), interrole measures (i.e., comparing Black, White, and Latino perpetrators to Black, White, and Latino victims), and interreality measures (e.g., comparing the proportion of victims on television news to crime reports). Dixon and Linz (2000) used each of these indices in their investigation of perpetration on television news. Each comparison index provides different information about the portrayal of these groups on television news, and each carries underlying assumptions about the effects of exposure to news on viewers. We
use each of them in this investigation of victimization and race. Below we explain the utility of these measures.

**Intergroup Comparisons of Victims**

The intergroup content measurement approach involves comparing portrayals of Blacks or Latinos to Whites portrayed in the media (Entman, 1992, 1994). The intergroup comparison of victimization involves contrasting the frequency of Latino and Black victims on television news with the frequency of White victims. The intergroup measure is a convenient and easily calculated index of which racial groups are portrayed in a particular role. It offers us a useful way of documenting the strength of the linkage between the presentation of a particular racial group and a particular role in television news.

We could not locate any empirical study that used an intergroup comparison of victims. However, an illustration of the intergroup comparison approach for perpetrators is provided by Entman (1992), who performed a content analysis of 55 days of local television news in Chicago. An intergroup comparison of Whites to Blacks was undertaken to investigate differences in certain features of the portrayals of Blacks and Whites in crime stories. He found that Blacks (38%) accused of a crime were much more likely than similarly accused Whites (18%) to be shown in the grip of a restraining police officer. He also found that Black perpetrators (49%) were less likely to be named than White perpetrators (65%).

**Interrole Comparisons of Victimization**

Interrole content measures involve comparing the number of portrayals of a positive role within a racial or cultural group to the number of portrayals of a negative role within the same group (Turk, Richstad, Bryson, & Johnson, 1989). In this study, the interrole measure of victimization involves comparing the portrayal of victims to the portrayal of perpetrators for Blacks, Latinos, and Whites. Similar to the intergroup measure, the interrole comparison is a convenient and easily calculated index that reveals the extent to which each racial group’s appearance in television news is marked by a preponderance of positive or negative imagery.

An interrole comparison approach was used by Romer et al. (1998) to investigate the extent to which television news stories emphasize the harm that people of color cause Whites. The researchers conducted a content analysis of the 11:00 p.m. news broadcast for three stations in Philadelphia over 14 weeks. Romer and his associates coded the ethnicity of primary actors (i.e.,
person of color vs. White) in each of the stories and their roles (i.e., victim or perpetrator). They found that, in the news, Blacks were more likely to be shown as perpetrators (72%) than as victims (47%).

Utility of Intergroup and Interrole Measures

Intergroup and interrole comparisons in content analysis are useful for at least two reasons. First, they offer us a precise measure of the content of the television news environment with regard to race and crime. These summary measures can then be used to compare various forms of mass media content or document trends in television content over time. Second, intergroup and interrole comparisons are important because they represent specific mixtures of television content that may lead to particular psychological effects in viewers.

As with the risk ratios employed by Gerbner and his colleagues in content analyses of the larger television environment, intergroup and interrole comparisons of victims by race on local television news may be interpreted as indicators of the social reality potentially cultivated among news viewers (Gerbner, 1990; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan, & Jackson-Beeck, 1979). Gerbner and his colleagues used risk ratios to determine the extent to which various social groups (i.e., men, women, or the elderly) were more likely to be victims than perpetrators in entertainment programming (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1979). We use a modified version of these ratios to determine the extent to which racial groups are portrayed as victims and perpetrators on television news. The presumption here is that viewers may come to embrace the version of the social world cultivated by television news and incorporate it into their view of social reality. Although future media effects studies must establish whether this occurs, the first step must be in determining what content viewers might ingest from television news. The lack of Blacks and Latinos presented in the role of victims on television news relative to other roles, such as perpetrators, could possibly lead viewers to believe that there are fewer Black and Latino victims in the real world.

News presentations reflecting these ratios may also have effects on viewers. If television news portrays significantly fewer Blacks and Latinos as victims of crime than Whites, negative stereotypes of Blacks and Latinos as criminals rather than as victims of crime may be perpetuated in the minds of viewers. Conversely, if the interrole comparison reveals that Blacks and Latinos are more likely to be portrayed as victims rather than as perpetrators,
this might represent a form of counterstereotypical information that discour-
gages a cognitive association between Blacks and lawbreaking (Bogatz & Ball,
1972; Gorn, Goldberg, & Kanungo, 1976) and creates sympathy for these
groups among White viewers. In sum, intergroup and interrole comparisons
may be useful because they identify content that may increase or decrease
the cognitive linkage between people of color and negative criminal behavior.
Based on the literature described above, we test two hypotheses using the
intergroup and interrole hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Blacks and Latinos will be portrayed as victims at a lower
rate in comparison to White victims on television news.
Hypothesis 2: Blacks and Latinos will appear as perpetrators rather than
as victims at a higher rate in comparison to Whites.

Interreality Comparisons

Interrole and intergroup comparisons allow us to measure the television
environment and imagine effects on viewers’ cognitive representations of the
social world after exposure to television. However, these comparisons tell us
little about the accuracy of the media portrayals or the stereotypes and
beliefs that are subsequently cultivated in viewers. It may be the case that
Whites are, in fact, more likely than Blacks and Latinos to be victims of
crime, depending on what index of crime is used as a comparison point. In
this sense, television news may disseminate an accurate picture of the world
rather than cultivate a distorted view. Intergroup and interrole measures
must therefore be anchored to objective indicators of social reality that are
measured outside of the television environment both to evaluate claims of the
accuracy of media representations and to provide a basis for speculating on
and evaluating the potential effects of news on viewers. To make the claim
that media portrayals overrepresent, underrepresent, or accurately repre-
sent Whites, Blacks, or Latinos as either victims or perpetrators, intergroup
and interrole comparisons must be authenticated by other measures (Graber,
1980; Oliver, 1994; Romer et al., 1998).

Romer et al. (1998) created a probability model of victimization based par-
tially on crime reports to compare victimization rates with other nonmedia
indicators of social reality. This revealed that Whites were overrepresented
as victims on television news. A second study conducted by Sorenson, Manz,
and Berk (1998) compared 2,782 stories in the Los Angeles Times newspaper
about homicide with homicides that occurred in Los Angeles County from
1990 to 1994. These researchers found that Black and Latino victims received
less coverage than White victims. In addition, Latinos were underrepresented
as homicide suspects when their numbers in the newspaper were compared to crime reports.

Interreality comparisons of victims and perpetrators on television with social indicators measured outside of the media, such as government reports, also focus our attention on crime news' potential psychological effects on viewers. For example, the underrepresentation of Blacks as victims and overrepresentation of Blacks as perpetrators on television may have the effect of distorting viewers' perceptions of Blacks as being dangerous in our society. Overrepresentation of Whites as victims and overrepresentation of Blacks and Latinos as perpetrators of crime when compared to official reports may facilitate fears of victimization of Whites by Black and Latino perpetrators among news viewers. These viewer fears would be unrealistic to the degree that they strayed significantly from the social reality of crime reports (Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, & Wright, 1996; Graber, 1980; Romer et al., 1998).

In this study, two interreality comparisons designed to contrast media portrayals of perpetration and homicide victimization with crime reports are undertaken. The interreality comparison of perpetrators involves comparing television portrayals to the perpetration rate contained in the Criminal Justice Profile published by the California Department of Justice (1996a, 1997a, 1998a). The interreality comparison of homicide victims involves comparing television portrayals to the homicide victimization rate contained in the Supplementary Report of the Criminal Justice Profile published by the California Department of Justice (1996b, 1997b, 1998b). There is a focus on homicide victimization in this study for two reasons. First, as Romer et al. (1998) observe, a substantial number of crime stories are about homicide. Second, homicide is the only crime for which data is collected on victimization. A two-part hypothesis is tested with these interreality comparisons:

Hypothesis 3a: Whites will be overrepresented as crime victims on television news, whereas Blacks and Latinos will be underrepresented as victims of crime.

Hypothesis 3b: Whites will be underrepresented as perpetrators of crime on television news, whereas Blacks and Latinos will be overrepresented as crime perpetrators.

Additional Strengths of the Current Work

This study attempts to overcome several of the limitations of prior work that examined race and victimization in news programming. In this section, we lay out three limitations of this prior research and how this study addresses
them. First, as indicated above, this study uses multiple indicators of the television news environment (intergroup, interrole, and interreality measures) to examine victimization and race. Prior studies have focused on one indicator or another (Romer et al., 1998; Sorenson et al., 1998). We believe that using all three measures (i.e., intergroup, interrole, and interreality) offers a more comprehensive assessment of television content. The intergroup and interrole measures are solid examples of the strength of the association between a particular racial group and a particular role. The interreality measures provide an indication of the extent to which the portrayals deviate from other indicators of social reality.

Second, very few studies have analyzed the portrayals of Latinos on television news. Prior authors appear to suggest that Latinos and Blacks should be portrayed similarly by the news media (Entman, 1994; Romer et al., 1998). However, it is altogether possible that they are portrayed differently, either in terms of perpetration or victimization. This study uses data provided by the California Department of Justice that include information on Latino perpetration and victimization to overcome this limitation. Prior work (Dixon & Linz, 2000) suggests that Latinos are largely absent and that Blacks are demonized by television news in terms of perpetration. This pattern may also extend into the area of victimization.

Third, we are not aware of any study that examines victimization portrayals on Los Angeles television news stations. Although the Sorenson et al. (1998) study gives us information about Latino representation in newspapers, it reveals nothing about the coverage of homicides on television news. This is important because television news has been criticized for excessive and overdramatic coverage of crime stories ( Gilliam et al., 1996; Klite et al., 1997). Romer et al.’s (1998) study only looked at victimization on Philadelphia television news. It is possible that the race and victimization portrayals may be different depending on the area under investigation.

A content analysis is used to overcome these limitations and extend our knowledge in this area. The method and subsequent analyses are described below.

Method

Sample of Programs

The news programs were drawn from broadcasts aired by Los Angeles–based stations. Theoretically, the population of interest here is all local news programs aired in Los Angeles and Orange Counties. These two counties represent the primary metropolitan areas for Los Angeles–based stations (Nielsen

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Media Research, 1994). The sample in this study was drawn by using procedures and materials developed by the National Television Violence Study (NTVS) (Kunkel et al., 1996; Potter et al., 1998; Wilson et al., 1998).

Obtaining a Representative Sample of the Program Population

The programs chosen in this study were selected with a modified version of the equal probability of selection method. With this method of selection, every program has an equal chance or opportunity to appear in the sample. This method ensures that a subset of the population of television programs that is close to being representative of the entire population of programs is obtained for the analysis.

Two ½-hour time slots (defined by hour of day and day of week) were randomly selected for each channel during each week that the sampling occurred. Once a time slot was selected, TV Guide was consulted, and the program corresponding to that time was entered into a scheduling grid several days before the target week of programming began. Programs were retained in their entirety regardless of the number of time slots they occupied. For example, if the time slot of 4:30 p.m. was randomly selected and an hour-long news program that began at 4:00 p.m. was identified in TV Guide, then that program was selected for inclusion in the sample and permitted to occupy two ½-hour time slots (from 4 p.m. to 5 p.m.).

Basic Parameters of the Sample

The sampling frame for this investigation was defined by four parameters: channels, program types, sampling times (i.e., times of day), and sampling periods (i.e., times of year). The following channels were included in the sample: KABC (ABC affiliate), KCBS (CBS affiliate), KNBC (NBC affiliate), KCAL, KCOP, FOX, and KTLA. Only breaking news programs (e.g., programs that self-identify as news) were coded, and all breaking news programs listed in TV Guide from 3:00 p.m. until 10:59 p.m. were eligible for inclusion in the sample (a total of 7 hours per day). The sampling period was two sets of 20 weeks. The first set began in October of 1995 and ended in June of 1996. The second set began in October of 1996 and ended in June of 1997. However, the time periods during certain holidays (e.g., Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter) were excluded from the sampling frame.

Using the sampling procedure described above, two 7-day composite weeks of news programming were produced. Virtually all news shows in the regular program schedule for each channel appeared in the final composite
weeks. The taped news sample included 205 programs. A total of 5 (2%) were removed from the sample due to taping errors or other technical problems, yielding 200 programs.

Definitions of Crime and Race

Definition of crime. Crime is defined as behavior or information either pertaining to the commission of a particular lawbreaking act or a social and/or legal reaction to lawbreaking more generally. Only those crimes (e.g., murder, arson, robbery) that are tracked by the U.S. Department of Justice and the State of California Justice Department were coded to accurately compare the depiction of crime on the news with crime data.2

Definition of race. To compare the race of individuals portrayed on television news with the race of individuals noted in crime reports, the categories and definitions that are used by the California Department of Justice were employed in this study. Race included four categories: Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and Others (e.g., Asians).

Identification of race. The following apparent race variables were used to assess the race of victims and perpetrators: (a) shown on videotape, (b) mug shot shown, (c) artist's sketch shown, (d) photo shown, and (e) race is stated. Although rare, when these more apparent indicators of race were not available, the race of victims and perpetrators was inferred based on characteristics of the story. Three variables were used: (a) surname (e.g., Martinez is associated with Latino), (b) family member (when a family member of the victim or perpetrator is shown, e.g., White mother infers White victim), and (c) prior news (when prior news reports indicate race, e.g., Selena is identified in prior news reports as a Latina homicide victim).

Coding multiple perpetrator and victims. In a few cases, the race of multiple victims or perpetrators had to be coded. First, coders used a majority rule when coding the race of multiple perpetrators or law defenders on television news. In other words, the category for race was coded based on the attributes of the majority of characters in any one story. Second, when no clear majority arose, coders recorded the primary racial groups present and estimated the number of each group present. In cases in which no clear number was given but coders could detect that multiple characters were involved, a conservative number of characters was counted. Third, these frequencies were summed into a final tally for each racial group, and each race was tracked in the analysis.
Levels of Analysis

The judgments and observations that are recorded for each instance of lawbreaking are organized into two levels or units of analysis: (a) crime-story level and (b) victim-of-crime level.

Crime-story level. News programs are generally composed of several segments or news stories. Only news stories that contained criminal behavior were analyzed. These crime stories represented the first level of analysis in the design. At the crime-story level, the location of crimes (crime committed in Los Angeles and Orange County or not) was coded.

Perpetrator and victim-of-crime level. Contained within many but not all of the crime stories were perpetrators and victims of crime. The racial distributions of television news victims and perpetrators were analyzed at this level and compared to crime reports. Coders coded variables pertaining to race of victims (e.g., Black, White, Latino, or Other), race of perpetrators, and crime committed (e.g., murder, arson).

Coding and Reliability

Fourteen undergraduate students with strong academic records were selected to perform the coding of data for this project. Coders underwent approximately 30 hours of instruction in a small seminar class setting. Each coder received five randomly selected identical programs that they were all required to code along with their regular coding assignment. The coding of these five programs provided the reliability data for this study. Although this may seem like a small number of programs, judgments were made at the story and defendant level. This means that each of the 14 coders made judgments on 77 defendants and 59 crime stories. Therefore, reliability coefficients presented here are based on 1,078 defendant and victim judgments and 826 crime-story judgments.

Measuring Reliability

Coders were assigned a random sample of programs. They then had to decide which segments of the programs consisted of news stories. Coders then had to identify crime stories and victims and perpetrators of crime within these news stories. Coder consistency in identifying each crime story, victim, and perpetrator was quite good given the complexity of the task and the number of coders involved. Across all of the programs examined for reliability, most
coders were able to agree on the number of crime stories and of victims and perpetrators contained within the news programs.

As displayed in the table in the appendix, the reliability on each of the variables was quite high, as indicated by the overall median level of agreement that ranged from .85 to 1.0. Our reliability estimates are similar to that of Imrich, Mullin, and Linz (1995), whose coefficients ranged from .77 to 1.0, and Dixon and Linz (2000), whose coefficients ranged from .88 to 1.0. We also computed a confidence interval for each of the 100 reliability coefficients (20 variables on each of the 5 programs in the reliability test). Out of those 100 coefficients, only 1 of them, race inferred from surname of victim, was too small to attain statistical significance ($p < .05$). Given that all the other coefficients for this variable did reach statistical significance over several trials, it was not eliminated from the analysis. Overall, the reliability assessments appear to establish strong confidence in the accuracy of the data reported in the study.

Results

To allow for comparisons with government crime reports, only those television news crimes committed in Los Angeles and Orange Counties were included in the following analyses. In addition, only those stories that featured crimes that are monitored by the California Department of Justice were analyzed. Finally, O. J. Simpson stories were systematically removed from all of the analyses in order to generalize about typical portrayals of Blacks on these programs. There were no other dominating and idiosyncratic programs aired during this time period that may have influenced the results. An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.

**Intergroup Comparisons of Black to White Victims of Crime and Latino to White Victims of Crime on Television News**

Hypothesis 1 predicted that Blacks and Latinos will appear as victims at a lower rate when compared to Whites. To test this hypothesis, we obtained descriptive data from our analysis and calculated ratios of Black and Latino victims as compared to White victims. As shown in Table 1, Blacks were less likely than Whites to be portrayed as victims on television news. This pattern was maintained when only homicides were included in the analysis. The intergroup comparisons for Latino to White victims of crime reveal that Latinos were also less likely than Whites to be portrayed as victims on local television news. When only homicide victims were included in the analysis,
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Black/White Victim</th>
<th>Latino/White Victim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All offenses</td>
<td>0.48 (53/111)</td>
<td>0.45 (50/111)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homicides only</td>
<td>0.54 (43/79)</td>
<td>0.43 (34/79)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Numbers outside the parentheses are ratios. Inside the parentheses are the raw figures used to calculate the ratios. A ratio greater than 1.00 indicates that Blacks and Latinos are more likely to be victims than are Whites. For instance, a 2.00 under the Black/White Victim column would indicate that for every White victim there are 2.00 Black victims portrayed on television news.*

Latinos were again less likely than Whites to be portrayed as homicide victims. Chi-square tests suggest that these differences are statistically significant, $\chi^2(3, n = 139) = 20.40, p < .001$.

**Interrole Comparisons of Black, Latino, and White Victims to Black, Latino, and White Perpetrators on Television News**

Hypothesis 2 predicted that Blacks and Latinos will appear as perpetrators at a higher rate than as victims and that Whites will appear as victims at a higher rate than as perpetrators. To test this hypothesis, we obtained descriptive data from our analysis and calculated ratios of Black, Latino, and White victims as compared to Black, Latino, and White perpetrators. As shown in Table 2, Blacks were more than twice as likely to be portrayed as perpetrators than as victims. In the case of homicides, Blacks were also more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators than as victims. The ratios of Latino perpetrators of crime to Latino victims reveal that Latinos were more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators than as victims. However, when only homicides were included in the analysis, Latinos were almost as likely to be portrayed as perpetrators as they were to be portrayed as victims. Whites, on the other hand, were less likely to be portrayed as perpetrators than as victims when all crimes were included in the analysis and when only homicides were included. Chi-square tests suggest that these patterns are statistically significant, $\chi^2(3, n = 116) = 26.69, p < .001$.

**Undertaking Interreality Comparisons of Homicide Victims and Perpetrators**

The interreality comparisons (e.g., contrasting the television portrayals of perpetration and victimization with crime reports) were undertaken in three
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Black Perpetrator/Victim</th>
<th>White Perpetrator/Victim</th>
<th>Latino Perpetrator/Victim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>2.26 (120/53)</td>
<td>0.76 (84/111)</td>
<td>1.48 (74/50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homicides only</td>
<td>1.35 (58/43)</td>
<td>0.49 (39/79)</td>
<td>.94 (32/34)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Numbers outside the parentheses are ratios. Inside the parentheses are the raw figures used to calculate the ratios. A ratio greater than 1.00 indicates that Blacks, Whites, or Latinos are more likely to be perpetrators than victims. For instance, a 2.00 under the Black Perpetrator/Victim column would indicate that for every Black victim there are 2.00 Black perpetrators portrayed on television news.*

steps. In the first step, the percentages of Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and Others were calculated for Los Angeles and Orange County homicide victims and perpetrators portrayed on television news. As Table 3 shows, 43% of homicide victims portrayed on television news were White, 23% were Black, 19% were Latino, and 15% were Other (e.g., Asian). Table 4 reveals that 36% of all perpetrators were Black, 25% were White, 23% were Latino, and 16% were Other.

*The percentage point differential.* In step two, these television news proportions of homicide victims were subtracted from the proportion of victims according to the 1995, 1996, and 1997 *Supplementary Report of the Criminal Justice Profile for Los Angeles and Orange County* (California Department of Justice, 1996b, 1997b, 1998b). The news proportions of perpetrators were subtracted from the proportion of perpetrators according to the 1995, 1996, and 1997 *Criminal Justice Profile for Los Angeles and Orange County* (California Department of Justice, 1996a, 1997a, 1998a). The California Department of Justice is responsible for gathering population data that correspond to the number of victims and perpetrators within each county in California. Therefore, the corresponding proportions are not statistical estimates but actual population parameters of the race of perpetrators and victims within Los Angeles and Orange counties. The resulting difference between these population proportions and our television news estimates is represented in Table 3 and Table 4 as the percentage point differential. This gives us some indication of the size and direction of differences between television news and crime reports.

*Accounting for sampling error.* In the final step, sampling error was calculated because the television proportions are estimates of population...
Table 3
Race of Homicide Victims in Los Angeles and Orange County Compared With the Racial Makeup of Homicide Victims Portrayed on Television News From 1995 to 1997

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Victimization Rate %&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>TV Victimization %&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Percentage Point Differential&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>95% CI %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>±6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>+30&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>±7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>-35&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>±6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>+10&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>±5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. χ²(3, n = 139) = 20.40, p < .001.

b. Percentage of Blacks, Whites, Latinos and Others who appeared as homicide victims on local television news.
c. Difference between the television percentage and the victimization rate percentage for each racial group (TV victimization % – victimization rate %).
d. Percentage point differential outside the confidence interval.

Table 4
Race of Arrested Perpetrators in Los Angeles and Orange County Compared With the Racial Makeup of Perpetrators Portrayed on Television News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Arrest Rate %&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>TV Perpetrator %&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Percentage Point Differential&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>95% CI %</th>
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</thead>
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<td>+15&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>±5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>±5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>-24&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>±5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>+11&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>±4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. χ²(3, n = 116) = 26.69, p < .001.

a. Percentage of Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and others who were arrested according to the California Department of Justice’s (1996a, 1997a, 1998a) Criminal Justice Profile for 1995, 1996, and 1997.
b. Percentage of Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and others who appeared as perpetrators on local television news.
c. Difference between the television percentage and the arrest rate percentage for each racial group (TV perpetrator % – arrest rate %).
d. Percentage point differential outside the confidence interval.

parameters from a sample of news programs. Therefore, a 95% confidence interval was calculated around each sample estimate of the proportion of perpetrators and homicide victims on television news (Moore, 1989). This confidence interval is represented in the last columns of Tables 3 and 4. If the percentage point differential exceeded the 95% confidence interval, the
corresponding television proportion was considered a statistically significant underrepresentation or overrepresentation.

Potential problems with the interreality comparison. The interreality comparison as described above is somewhat imprecise for two reasons. First, all victims and perpetrators (e.g., whether sought or arrested) are compared to crime reports. Second, repeat perpetrators and victims are included in the analysis. The point of the interreality comparison is to compare television portrayals to some other indicator of social reality to create a precise index of overrepresentation or underrepresentation. However, television news portrays perpetrators at all stages of the judicial process, including when they are sought, arrested, or convicted, and television news may repeat the story several times. There may be a difference between which racial groups are sought for crimes and which groups are arrested. In addition, high profile cases may spur multiple newscasts about the perpetrators and victims involved in the crime. If there is some correlation between race and high profile cases, certain racial groups may be more likely to be repeated than others. This becomes problematic when comparing these television news depictions to crime reports because victims and perpetrators are only counted once.

Both of the issues outlined above are only seriously problematic if the pattern of racial makeup for sought and repeated victims and perpetrators in the news is different from the pattern of racial makeup for nonsought and nonrepeated victims and perpetrators. To ensure this was not the case, two chi-square analyses were conducted. A chi-square analysis revealed that the inclusion of sought perpetrators was not problematic because all of the racial groups had approximately equal numbers of sought versus nonsought perpetrators portrayed on television news, \( \chi^2(3, n = 260) = 3.05, p < .383 \). The inclusion of repeated perpetrators and victims in the analysis was not problematic because all of the racial groups had approximately equal numbers of repeated versus nonrepeated perpetrators and victims on television news, \( \chi^2(3, n = 380) = 2.67, p < .446 \).

Interreality Comparison of Victims of Homicide on Television News to the California Department of Justice’s Supplementary Report of the Criminal Justice Profile

The first part of Hypothesis 3 predicted that Whites would be over-represented as victims and that Blacks and Latinos would be underrepresented as crime victims. This hypothesis was generally supported.
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As Table 3 shows, Whites were more likely to be portrayed as homicide victims on television news (43%) than to be victimized by homicide according to crime reports (13%). Given the confidence interval of plus or minus 7%, this is a statistically significant 30 percentage point difference. Based on this interval, the difference between the proportion of Black homicide victims portrayed on television news and those victimized according to crime reports may be as low as 23% or as high as 37%.

Table 3 also displays the percentage of Latino homicide victims portrayed on television news compared to the proportion of Latino victims recorded in crime reports. Latinos were less likely to be portrayed as victims of homicide on television news (19%) than to be homicide victims according to crime reports (54%). Given the 6% confidence interval on either side of the estimate, this difference is statistically significant.

Blacks, however, were no more likely to be portrayed as victims of crime on television news (23%) than to be victimized by homicide according to crime reports (28%).

Others (e.g., Asians) were more likely to be portrayed as homicide victims on television news (15%) than to be victimized according to crime reports (5%). Given the 5% confidence interval on either side of the estimate, there is a statistically significant 10 percentage point difference between Other victims of homicide on television news and Other victims recorded in official crime reports.

Interreality Comparison of Perpetrators of Crime on Television News to the California Department of Justice’s Criminal Justice Profile

The second part of Hypothesis 3 predicted that Blacks and Latinos would be overrepresented as perpetrators and that Whites would be underrepresented as crime perpetrators. This hypothesis was generally supported.

As Table 4 shows, Blacks were more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators of crime on television news (36%) than to be arrested (21%) according to crime reports. Given the confidence interval of plus or minus 5%, this is a statistically significant 15 percentage point difference. Based on this interval, the difference between the proportion of Black perpetrators portrayed on television news and those arrested according to crime reports may be as low as 10% or as high as 20%.

Table 4 also displays the percentage of Latino perpetrators portrayed on television news compared to the proportion of Latino perpetrators arrested according to crime reports. Latinos were less likely to be portrayed as perpetrators on television news (23%) than to be arrested according to crime reports.
reports (47%). Given the 10% confidence interval on either side of the estimate, this difference is statistically significant.

Others (e.g., Asians) were more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators on television news (16%) than to be arrested according to crime reports (5%). This difference is statistically significant.

There were no statistically significant differences between White perpetrators portrayed on television news and Whites arrested according to the California Department of Justice.

Discussion

Review of Findings

To produce a comprehensive assessment of the representation of Black, White, and Latino victimization on television news, we used three measures (i.e., intergroup, interrole, and interreality comparisons) of victim portrayals. First, we calculated intergroup comparisons (i.e., ratios of Black to White victims and ratios of Latino to White victims) and interrole comparisons (i.e., ratios of Black, White, and Latino perpetrators to Black, White, and Latino victims). The intergroup comparisons revealed that Blacks and Latinos were less likely than Whites to be portrayed as victims on television news. The interrole comparisons revealed that Blacks and Latinos were generally more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators than as victims on television news. However, Whites were less likely to be portrayed as perpetrators than as victims.

To determine whether the pattern of portrayals uncovered by the intergroup and interrole comparisons deviated from other indicators of social reality, we used two interreality measures (i.e., we compared television portrayals of victims and perpetrators to crime reports). These measures revealed that Whites were overrepresented, Latinos were underrepresented, and Blacks were neither overrepresented nor underrepresented as homicide victims on television news. They also revealed that Blacks were overrepresented, Latinos were underrepresented, and Whites were neither overrepresented nor underrepresented as perpetrators on television news.

Below we discuss some of the limitations of this study. Afterward, we outline the theoretical implications of these findings. Finally, we speculate on the potential psychological effects of these portrayals.
Limitations of This Study

Two limitations of this study are outlined in this section. First, only Los Angeles stations were included in the analysis. Second, Spanish-language stations were not included in the sample.

Only Los Angeles–based stations were included in the sample because these programs were drawn from a larger NTVS sample that taped all of its programs in the Los Angeles market. Because of this, these findings cannot be readily generalized to other areas around the country. However, these findings appear to be consistent with prior content studies conducted in other cities, especially with regard to portrayals of African Americans and Whites (Entman, 1992; Romer et al., 1998). This suggests that the characteristics of the Los Angeles market are probably similar to most other large urban areas in the United States.

In this study, the portrayals of Blacks and Latinos were examined separately, which allows for a more sophisticated analysis than that of prior studies. The findings revealed that Blacks receive negative media attention and that Latinos do not receive much attention. One limitation of this study is that Spanish-speaking stations were not included in the sample of programs analyzed. It is possible that the portrayal of Latino victims and lawbreakers on these stations may differ from the portrayals featured on mainstream broadcasts. However, many of these Spanish-speaking stations often use the same news feeds as mainstream stations. Therefore, the impact of Spanish-speaking stations on the underrepresentation of Latinos as perpetrators of crime and victims needs to be investigated more thoroughly in the future.

Below we discuss the theoretical explanations of what might produce the portrayals uncovered in this study.

Power Relationships and Economic Interests as Explanations of Race and Crime Portrayals

We suggested earlier that two types of explanations, a power relationship and an economic interest perspective, would predict an overrepresentation of White victimization and an overrepresentation of Black and Latino perpetration in crime news. The power relationship perspective posits that White ownership of the media, ethnocentrism, and stereotyping by Whites produce positive images of Caucasians and negative images of people of color. An economic interest perspective suggests that the news-gathering process produces an emphasis on the deviant (e.g., White victims of homicide) to produce
higher ratings. Both processes probably interact to produce the findings in this study.

Power relationship perspectives would suggest that Black perpetration of crime, particularly if Whites are victims, may be deemed highly newsworthy by news gatherers who feel obliged to conform to ethnocentric discursive practices to maintain viewer interest (Armour, 1997). This tendency for White victims of Black crimes to receive special attention has even extended into the judicial system. In McCleskey v. Kemp (1987), a defendant appealed his death sentence to the Supreme Court, charging that there is a racial disparity in sentencing based on the race of the victim (Monahan & Walker, 1998). According to the Baldus study, Blacks accused of killing Whites were sentenced to death in 22% of the cases occurring in Georgia during the 1970s, but Whites accused of killing Blacks were only sentenced to death in 3% of the cases (Monahan & Walker, 1998). Clearly, this is an indication of how power relations may extend into the judicial arena. Power relations may also shape the media coverage of interracial crimes.

In addition, it is possible that the economic interest perspective also contributes to the portrayals observed in this study. Local television news may focus on violent crimes and property crimes because they are more visual and dramatic than white-collar crimes, and this may increase the appearance of African Americans as criminals and decrease the portrayal of White lawbreakers (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Kaniss, 1991). Furthermore, because Black homicide victims may be seen as more typical than White victims, news reporters and editors may see the depiction of Black victims as being less able to capture high ratings than the portrayal of White victims and therefore inflate the depiction of White victimization at the expense of Black victims (Kaniss, 1991).

The findings in this study suggest that Latinos are simply underrepresented in general—both as victims and as perpetrators. The economic interest perspective suggests that certain structural limitations may contribute to the absence of Latinos on television news by discouraging journalists from overcoming the boundaries (e.g., language and culture) that deter access to the Latino community. It is also possible that although Latinos are currently invisible in crime coverage as perpetrators and victims on television news, they are framed as a problem people in other issues. For instance, several observers have contended that Latinos appear to be framed as the source of the nation’s immigration problem (Domke, McCoy, & Torres, 1999; Turk et al., 1989).

In summary, we believe that economic interest and power relationship perspectives work together to produce the pattern of portrayals observed in
this study. We would make three suggestions for future work designed to tease out the relative contributions of each of these explanations. First, surveys should be conducted of those who are engaged in the news business to investigate which perspectives discussed above influence their decision making. Second, experimental work should also be conducted using news gatherers as participants. Third, future replications of the present work should be conducted in several different media markets to see whether the racial makeup of audience members influences content in such a way that either power relationships or economic interests produce different outcomes than what we observe in this study.

Psychological Effects of the Misrepresentation of Victimization

The intergroup, interrole, and interreality comparisons employed in this study may be useful for understanding the effects of exposure to television news. First, exposure to the news may lead to a cultivation effect, whereby viewers come to believe that the real world is similar to the television world (Gerbner, 1969, 1990; Gerbner et al., 1980). Given our interreality comparison finding that Whites are overrepresented in the news as victims and Blacks are overrepresented as perpetrators, White viewers who regularly watch television news may come to overestimate their chances of victimization and be unrealistically fearful of victimization by Black perpetrators. Although our data cannot speak to the extent to which interracial victimization as depicted in crime news is inconsistent with social reality, the overrepresentation of White victimization appears to be partially influenced by an emphasis on Black perpetration.

Second, social cognition research would suggest that viewing television news could also influence stereotypes or belief systems characterizing Blacks and Whites (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Hamilton, Stroessner, & Driscoll, 1994; Hamilton & Trolier, 1986). Watching the news may create stereotypes or reinforce already held stereotypical views of Blacks as crime perpetrators and of Whites as victims. Specifically, social cognition researchers have suggested that stereotypes may be best defined as beliefs about unequal distributions of certain group members into certain roles (Hamilton & Gifford, 1976; Hamilton & Rose, 1980; Hamilton et al., 1994). For example, the stereotype that Blacks are more likely to be criminals than are Whites is such a belief about an unequal distribution of people within certain negative roles. Habitual viewing of local television news might therefore result in the creation and reinforcement of stereotypical thinking about Blacks and Whites.
Future research needs to be dedicated to investigating whether this is the case.

Summary and Conclusions

This study investigated whether Blacks, Latinos, and Whites would be overrepresented or underrepresented as victims and perpetrators on television news. The findings indicated that Blacks and Latinos were less likely than Whites to be portrayed as victims of crime on television news. Blacks and Latinos were also generally more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators than as victims on television news. Blacks were accurately represented as homicide victims, but Blacks were overrepresented as perpetrators on television news in comparison to crime reports. Whites were overrepresented as victims and accurately represented as perpetrators, whereas Latinos were underrepresented as perpetrators and victims. We suggest that future studies be dedicated to investigating the potential causes and effects of the content revealed by these intergroup, interrole, and interreality measures.

Appendix

The proportional-reduction-of-error technique used in this study to assess coder consistency relied on the index $I_*$ (Imrich, Mullin, & Linz, 1995; Perreault & Leigh, 1989). This index compares the observed frequency of agreement between judges to an expected frequency of agreement given some true level of reliability for the coding process. Conceptually, this true level of reliability is “the percentage of total responses (observations) that a typical judge could code consistently given the nature of the observations, the coding scheme, the category definitions, the directions, and the judge’s ability” (Perreault & Leigh, 1989, p. 140). Thus, $I_*$ is an estimate that is within the sampling variance of the true proportion of reliably coded observations.

Perreault and Leigh’s (1989) $I_*$ was used as the index of reliability to allow for the likelihood that some coding categories may be infrequently used but may nevertheless be reliably coded (e.g., if the race of most victims was truly infrequently reported on television news as being Black, coders would much more often be coding this variable as 0 [White] than as 1 [Black] and be accurate in doing so). Because other indices of reliability, such as Cohen’s kappa (Cohen, 1960) or Krippendorff’s alpha (Krippendorff, 1980), do not allow for this situation in their estimates of chance agreement (they assume that all categories are equally likely to be used by each judge), such indices are inappropriate for this data set. Perreault and Leigh’s (1989) $I_*$ was computed for each variable using the formula $I_* = (1 - (F0/(N) - (1/k)) [k/(k-1)])^{1/2}$ for $F0/N > 1/k$ (where $F0 = \text{observed frequency of agreement between judges, } N = \text{total number of judgments, and } k = \text{number of categories}$).

An inferential procedure was also used to determine the probability that each of the reliability coefficients could have occurred by chance alone. For each decision, a z score was computed using the following formulas developed by Potter et al. (1998) [see also Potter, 1999, No. 99]:

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\[ Z = \frac{(X - \mu)}{\sigma}, \mu = pn, \text{ and } \sigma = (pqn), \]

where \( p \) = the probability of a single coder selecting the modal value, \( q \) = the probability of a single coder not selecting \( p \), \( n \) = the number of coders in test, and \( X \) = upper real limit of coders at mode.

Next, the \( z \) score was looked up in a unit normal table. This indicates the probability of obtaining the observed level of agreement by chance alone. For example, if we ran a test with 12 coders who had to choose between four options, and 7 of those coders all chose the same option, the chance of getting 58.3% agreement (7 out of 12 agreeing on the same option out of four) would be less than 1 in a 1,000 or \( p < .001 \). With only two options available, an agreement of 10 out of 12 (83.3%) would be needed to have this same high level of confidence (\( p < .001 \)) that this pattern could not have occurred by chance alone.

### Reliabilities for Content Measures

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<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>KCBS (11/8)</th>
<th>KNBC (10/24)</th>
<th>KCOP (5/6)</th>
<th>KCAL (2/2)</th>
<th>KABC (4/25)</th>
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<td>.85</td>
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<td>.85</td>
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<td>.93</td>
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<td>.96</td>
<td>.91 to .96</td>
<td>.93</td>
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<td>.96</td>
<td>.85 to .96</td>
<td>.89</td>
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<td>.89</td>
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<td>.96</td>
<td>.82 to .96</td>
<td>.94</td>
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<td>.97</td>
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<td>1.0</td>
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<td>.97</td>
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<td>.94</td>
<td>1.0</td>
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<td>1.0 to 1.0</td>
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<td>.97</td>
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*Note. For coefficients without a †, \( p < .05 \).
†\( p > .05 \).*

### Notes

1. An earlier version of this article received the Mass Communication Division’s Top Three Paper Award at the 1999 annual meeting of the National Communication Association in Chicago, Illinois. This research was partially funded by a grant from the...
Howard R. Marsh Center for Journalistic Performance. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Travis L. Dixon, University of Michigan, Department of Communication Studies, 3020C Frieze Building, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1285; e-mail: tldixon@umich.edu.

2. There are inherent biases in using crime reports. First, certain crimes may be underreported to government crime agencies. Second, arrest rates themselves may be a function of racial discrimination. Perhaps the police are more aggressive in pursuing cases in the Black community because they believe that this is where most crimes are likely to occur. Jones (1986) reports that Blacks are arrested twice as often as Whites and that Blacks are jailed at a rate over four times their proportion in the population. The differences in news presentation may simply reflect a greater tendency for Blacks to be arrested rather than the tendency for Blacks to commit more crime. Despite these inherent biases, these reports are used for two reasons. First, the arrest rates contained within these reports are probably the best data that exist on the occurrences of Black crime. Second, public officials and other agencies use these reports to develop policy responses to criminal activity.

3. This study does not directly investigate the extent to which the misrepresentation of victimization is an outgrowth of an emphasis on interracial perpetration, particularly when Whites are victimized by Blacks. This is largely because the California Department of Justice, from which we obtained our comparison data, does not collect information on interracial victimization on a county-by-county basis. This prevents us from undertaking precise comparisons to determine whether the depiction of perpetration and victimization is consistent or inconsistent with other indicators of social reality. A cursory glance at the information contained within our data set on interracial victimization reveals that the vast majority of Blacks and Latinos portrayed on television news (over 70%) are victimized by perpetrators from the same racial group. Whites, however, are victimized by other Whites only about 41% of the time. They are victimized by Blacks 43% of the time. Although this pattern is fascinating, we are cautious about overstating this finding for two reasons. First, the percentages are calculated from a very small data set (n < 100) because few of the cases we observed contained instances in which both victim race and perpetrator race were easily identified. Second, we have no way of determining whether these percentages differ from other indicators of social reality.

References


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