

# 10 Crime Coverage Dos and Don'ts



The Sentencing Project is a research and advocacy organization that promotes effective and humane responses to crime that minimize imprisonment and criminalization by promoting racial/ethnic, economic, and gender justice. News coverage of crime and criminal justice policies has played an integral role in the buildup of mass incarceration and its racial disparities. Many newsrooms are now striving to more accurately and critically cover these issues. Following is our guidance to newsrooms and journalists on how to cover crime and criminal justice in ways that would better inform the public and policymakers on how to pursue the most effective and humane public safety policies.

## 1. Use non-stigmatizing, person-first language (e.g., people in prison, people with criminal records).

Cutting word count with shorter alternatives (e.g., prisoner, inmate, felon, etc.) comes at the expense of casting stigma on a vulnerable population by focusing attention on one dimension of their lives, and contributes to public support for their harsh treatment. Mass incarceration has broad-ranging [human costs](#) and [diverts resources](#) from more effective investments in public safety. Destigmatizing language regarding [substance use disorders](#) also supports public health solutions, instead of the [failed War on Drugs](#). Resources: [Rewire](#), [Urban Institute](#), [Center for NuLeadership on Urban Solutions](#), [Marshall Project](#), [New York Times Editorial Board](#).

## 2. Avoid creating backlash bait with partial coverage of reforms.

Situate the impact of sentencing reforms within the massive scale of mass incarceration. For example, over 600,000 people were released from prison in 2019 (see Table 8 [here](#) for a state breakdown). If a particular reform expedites the release of some hundreds or thousands of people, contextualize that within the much larger number of people that are typically released from prison each year. Unless the pace of decarceration dramatically increases, it will take near-

ly [six decades](#) to cut the prison population in half. If you have identified unfairness in the reform process, be sure to also hold government officials accountable for the persistent [unfairness](#) and ineffectiveness of current prison sentences, which [scholars](#) have shown to be too long, imposed too frequently, and racially imbalanced.

## 3. Avoid creating backlash bait with partial coverage of recidivism.

Even the best policies that dramatically reduce recidivism rates cannot get these rates to zero. If policies are evaluated by the recidivism of the few, then elected officials and practitioners will be pressured to abandon effective policies in the face of public opinion misinformed by skewed media coverage. As the [Marshall Project](#) explains, furloughs and work release programs in prisons were generally successful but news coverage of “Willie” Horton brought that to an end. Avoid turning one tragic incident into the harbinger of tragic criminal justice policies by informing your audience about the relative infrequency of such incidents, and by asking what preventative policies—beyond further incarceration—might avert another similar tragedy. If an arrest you’ve covered results in a dismissal or finding of innocence, ensure that your coverage follows through to the conclusion of the case.

#### 4. Toss the “exonerative tense.”

This is the [tense](#) that replaces “police shoot and kill man” with “man struck by officer’s bullet.” The [noun](#) “officer-involved shooting” is no clearer than “officer shooting” in conveying who did the shooting and who was shot. Strive for clarity and precision, including in headlines. According to the [AP Stylebook](#): “Avoid the vague ‘officer-involved’ for shootings and other cases involving police. Be specific about what happened. If police use the term, ask: How was the officer or officers involved? Who did the shooting? If the information is not available or not provided, spell that out.”

#### 5. Situate crime stories within their broader historical and geographic context.

In most of the country, crime rates reached their peak levels in the 1990s and have since reached near-record lows, before certain crimes began [climbing in 2020](#). U.S. crime rates increased dramatically beginning in the 1960s, but between 1991 and 2019 crime rates fell by about half, just as they did in many other countries [around the world](#). During this crime drop, [polls](#) showed that most Americans (although a declining share) continued to believe that there was more crime in the country than there was a year ago. Contextualizing specific crime stories within historical crime trends can dispel this false sense of crisis.

Test causal claims by comparing local crime trends with regional and national patterns. The nationwide crime drop challenges any local claim that a particular policy brought down crime rates. Similarly, if crime rates increase in several jurisdictions, this should inspire skepticism that a particular local reform is to blame. Well-framed stories about crime upticks should consider the following questions: Is the uptick unique to one form of crime? Is the uptick attributable to a change in crime reporting or recording? How does the uptick compare to historical crime peaks and lows, and how does it compare with crime trends in other jurisdictions? What broader policy shortcomings does the uptick point to? (E.g., access to mental health care, access to effective drug treatment programs, underinvestment in community violence intervention programs, prevalence of guns, under-resourced summer youth programs, unaddressed residential segregation, underemployment and low wages, lack of affordable housing, etc.)

#### 6. Conduct a racial equity audit on the *quantity* of your crime coverage.

Media accounts often over represent crime committed by Black males and victimization experienced by white females. Researchers have shown that journalists gravitate to *unusual* cases when selecting homicide victims (white women) and to *more common* cases when selecting people who have committed homicide (Black men), suggesting that newsworthiness is not a product of how representative or novel a crime is, but rather how well it can be [“scripted using stereotypes grounded in White racism and White fear of Black crime.”](#) Homicide victims were more likely to make the news if they were white or killed in majority-white neighborhoods, according to a recent [study](#). Media outlets should conduct an [audit](#) comparing how their crime coverage compares to the community’s crime and victimization rates, with awareness that arrest rates oversample crimes committed by people of color. In addition, ensuring diversity among [sources](#) and news staff, in terms of racial and other identities and exposure to the criminal justice system, would improve the fairness of your coverage.

#### 7. Conduct a racial equity audit on the *quality* of your crime coverage.

Ensure that your crime coverage is treating people of color—both those accused of crime and those who are victims—as humanely and fairly as it is treating white people in similar circumstances. Chicagoans killed in predominantly Black and Latinx neighborhoods were less likely to be treated through the [“lens of complex personhood,”](#) such as by noting the victim’s family and community roles. White mass shooters have been presented more [sympathetically](#), such as by recognizing an underlying mental illness, than Black counterparts. [News images](#) of people—often white—impacted by the opioid crisis have depicted well-lit spaces, stressed domesticity, and emphasized close-knit communities while past drug crises tended to depict nighttime scenes on seedy streets or portrayed individuals—often Black—interacting with the police, courts, or jails—often using starker black and white photography. Past research on television news found that Black individuals accused of crime were presented in more [threatening contexts](#) than whites: Black individuals were disproportionately shown in [mug shots](#) and in cases where the victim was a stranger. Black and Latinx individuals were also more often present-

ed in a [non-individualized](#) way than whites—by being left unnamed—and were more likely to be shown as threatening—by being depicted in physical custody of police. Regular audits can help to catch and correct biased coverage. To correct these disparities, level up rather than down: present the nuance and humanity of everyone.

**8. Be cognizant that growing prison terms for violent crimes are a key driver of mass incarceration, and that an abundance of evidence has proven these sentences to be ineffective.**

Half of the prison population was convicted of a [violent offense](#), which ranges from assault and robbery to sexual assault and murder. Growing sentence lengths for this population has been a [major driver](#) of mass incarceration. Over 200,000 people in U.S. prisons were serving [life sentences](#) in 2020—more people than were in prison with any sentence in 1970. But “criminal careers are of a short duration (typically under 10 years),” write University of Texas Criminologist [Alex Piquero and colleagues](#), “which calls into question many of the long-term sentences that have characterized American penal policy.” People released after decades of imprisonment for the most serious crimes have extremely [low recidivism rates](#). This fact indicates that they have been imprisoned long past the point at which they pose an above-average public safety risk. More generally, when the [Bureau of Justice Statistics](#) examined individuals released from state prisons in 2005, it found that those with violent convictions were less likely to be arrested than those with drug or property convictions. Consider these facts when reporting on reforms impacting, or [omitting](#), people convicted of violent crimes. Since most coverage focuses on people at the time of their crime and not years later, [profiling people](#) released after spending many years in prison is an important contribution.

**9. Report claims as claims and facts as facts.**

“Man Dies After Medical Incident During Police Interaction,” the Minneapolis police department [reported](#) after its officers killed Gorge Floyd. Video of the incident contradicted their account, reinforcing that police reports cannot be trusted as facts. Relatedly, there’s a growing understanding that [prosecutors](#) don’t just enforce laws, but play an active role in creating them, making them active players in many legislative debates. This is why it’s important to include [sources](#) beyond criminal justice practitioners to ensure that you are reporting the truth. Remember that not all numbers are equally reliable: apply a critical lens to internally-conducted polls whose questions and sampling methods are obscure, such as those conducted by some police unions of their members. Finally, report verifiable facts as facts, rather than as claims. For example, did an expert say that people with violent convictions leaving state prisons have lower recidivism rates than others, or does data show it to be a fact? (See #8.)

**10. Accurately present crime victims and survivors as having a complexity of views.**

Crime survivors are not of one mind and many have unmet needs that go beyond extreme punishment. Increasingly, victim services and advocacy organizations are supporting criminal justice reforms, noting that incarcerated people are [often victims](#) of crime and trauma, and are calling for effective investments to prevent future victimization. Black and Latinx people have been far more likely than white people to be serious crime victims, and to be more fearful of becoming crime victims, and yet they have been [less supportive](#) of punitive criminal justice practices while being more supportive of [investments in rehabilitation and crime prevention](#). Assess whether your coverage includes this spectrum of views. Ultimately, a survivor’s desire for punishment must be balanced with societal goals of [advancing safety, achieving justice, and protecting human dignity](#).