
LETTERS

CRIME: DIG DEEPER

I read with great interest Joe Holley's article on KVUE's brave and worthwhile experiment with crime coverage in Austin ("Should the Coverage Fit the Crime?," *CJR*, May/June). I'd like to challenge them to go even further.

For the past three years, we have been studying local television news coverage of youth and violence in California. We systematically collected more than 200 hours of local evening news from around the state, watched it closely and carefully, and found what you would expect: few reports contextualized crime or violence in a way that would point toward solutions. What particularly concerned us was the absence of information that we knew would be relevant to the stories.

Imagine, for example, how the public understanding of violence might deepen, if along with the usual five W's, the following questions were reported in every crime story:

1. Did the victim and perpetrator know each other?
2. Was alcohol involved?
3. Where was the weapon obtained?
4. Was the victim insured?

We know from public health data that alcohol is a factor in 50-66 percent of all homicides and 20-36 percent of suicides. We know from criminal justice data that in those murders where the perpetrators have been

identified, most were known to the victim. We know that the explosion of gun availability is coincident with the steep rise in youthful death and injury; and we know that 80 percent of the \$1.4 billion in medical costs for firearm injuries is paid for by taxpayers. This type of information is admittedly difficult to connect to specific crime events, yet it would have an impact on how the public thinks about violence and its solutions.

The criteria that KVUE developed — does action need to be taken; is there an immediate threat to safety; a threat to children; significant community impact; and does the story lend itself to crime-prevention — enabled their reporters to think deeply and systematically about crime, which Holley reports led to crime stories with context and perspective. However, some critics worried that their new reporting might lead to cheerleading for local law enforcement. We submit that reporters' questions linked to an understanding of the public health data on violence would prevent cheerleading for one point of view and provide everyone in the community, from law enforcement to citizens, with a more complete picture of the problem.

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