

Media's reporting on gun violence does not reflect reality, study finds

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A new study, led by the doctors who regularly treat gunshot victims, examined the way the media covers shootings and found that news reports place a disproportionate emphasis on fatal and multiple

shootings, while also focusing on uncommon victims, such as women. The researchers fear that the gap between what is covered—and what goes uncovered—in the news could be painting an unrealistic picture of gun violence, which might affect the way the public perceives it. The study was published today in the journal *Preventive Medicine*.

"As a trauma surgeon, and someone who feels very connected to my patients, I take notice of gun [violence](#) coverage in the news—most often the lack thereof. I am particularly saddened when I find there was no media reporting on the shootings that have caused injury and death to my patients, which is most often the case," said the study's lead author, Elinore Kaufman, MD, an assistant professor of Surgery in Traumatology in the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. "While I was not surprised to see data on under-reporting in the media, I was startled to see how much it varied related to victim characteristics."

Kaufman and her fellow researchers drew on [police reports](#) and information kept by the Gun Violence Archive, a non-profit research group, to monitor media reporting during 2017 in three different cities: Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and Rochester, NY. Of the 1,801 victims of intentional shootings (outside of self-inflicted shootings), the researchers saw that almost exactly half, 900, were covered in the news.

Of these victims, roughly 83 percent were Black, but just 49 percent of them made the news. Moreover, if the victim was a man, he was about 40 percent less likely to be covered on the news than a woman.

Disparities in news coverage continued when the deadliness of the shootings was examined. Although 16 percent of the victims from the analyzed shootings died, these fatal shootings accounted for 83 percent of the cases covered by the news.

"A vast majority of the victims of gun violence survive, but I don't think the public knows much about people whose lives have been disrupted in so many ways by their injuries, and who need all our support to recover," Kaufman said. "I like to think that more public awareness of the impact of gun violence on survivors would lead to broader support for the services and programs that they need."

Statistics have shown that one in four Americans perceive mass shootings to be the greatest gun violence threat facing their communities, but the study showed that shootings with multiple victims occurred just 22 percent of the time. However, mass shootings were almost six times as likely to make the news.

"This skews our focus toward things like active shooter drills in schools, and away from the kind of community investment that we need to prevent the forms of gun violence that are so much more common," Kaufman said.

There were some differences on the city level data that the study uncovered. Philadelphia had the most [shooting](#) victims in 2017 with 1,216 (compared to 407 in Cincinnati and 178 in Rochester), but those victims were also covered the least: only 46 percent of the time (compared to 55 percent in Cincinnati and 65 percent in Rochester).

"I think the news media in any given market has limited space for reporting on violence, and so in areas where violence is common, there's going to be a lot of underreporting. The opposite could be true as well: In areas with little violence, the reporting may be disproportionate," she explained.

While the study focused on the numbers and percentages associated with media reporting on gun violence, Kaufman and her fellow researchers believe that it is just the beginning of the story. Public perception and

support are key to making public health policy changes, and media reporting clearly has an influence on them. As such, changing the content of the reports appears key.

That might especially be important as newsrooms are hit by budget cuts and downsizing. With a smaller pool of reporters to cover incidents, shifting the focus of coverage to more truly represent the realities of gun violence could solve issues the study found.

"We understand that reporting community gun violence is an interminable obligation, especially for contracting newsrooms," said senior author Jim McMillan, the director of the Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting, a project of the Initiative for Better Gun Violence Reporting. "But instead of trying to double down on incident coverage, we recommend that journalists collaborate with other stakeholders to advance best reporting practices such as focusing on evidence-based solutions to the crisis."

So while every instance may not make the news due to the realities of modern newsrooms, such shifts in focus could go a long way toward solving perception issues.

"Many of these reports that we counted were one- or two-liners that tell very little about the humans whose lives are impacted by these shootings," Kaufman said. "We hope to soon study how widely reporters are able to engage more deeply and substantively with the subject, and perhaps even measure the impact of different kinds of stories on readers and watchers of the news."

More information: Elinore J. Kaufman et al, Making the news: Victim characteristics associated with media reporting on firearm injury, *Preventive Medicine* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ypmed.2020.106275](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2020.106275)

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