

# US Media and Diversity

Representation, Dissemination,  
and Effects

Edited by  
Travis L. Dixon and Dana Mastro

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2024  
by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge  
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2024 selection and editorial matter, Travis L. Dixon and Dana Mastro; individual chapters, the contributors

The right of Travis L. Dixon and Dana Mastro to be identified as the authors of the editorial material, and of the authors for their individual chapters, has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*Trademark notice:* Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

ISBN: 978-1-032-59079-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-59077-6 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-45282-9 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003452829

Typeset in Sabon  
by codeMantra

Con

SECT  
Iden

1

2

3

4

## 5 The Portrayal of Black Family Social Instability

### A Content Analysis of Family and Race across Traditional and New Media Sources

*Kristopher R. Weeks, Travis L. Dixon, Chelsea P. Butkowski, Marisa A. Smith, Sarah V. Benevento, Deja D. Rollins, and Amanda N. Tolbert*

Over the last few decades, scholars have documented racial stereotypes in news media and demonstrated that these distortions shape our perceptions of social groups (Dixon, 2017; Dixon & Williams, 2015; Saleem et al., 2017; Weeks et al., 2020). Many previous content analyses made ethnic/racial comparisons between Black, White, and Latino individuals (Weeks et al., 2020). However, we are unaware of prior studies examining the role of social institutions such as families in shaping media portrayals within and across ethnic/racial groups. The current study fills this gap by assessing whether the media distort the portrayals of Black families. We rely on media framing to examine whether news media incorrectly blame the Black family structure for social challenges in America, such as poverty (Entman & Rojecki, 2000). Given that the press has identified Black families as a source of Black people's sociopolitical challenges as far back as the Moynihan report on poverty during the Johnson administration (Gans, 2011); these racialized news frames may reinforce negative Black family stereotypes, instigating the misguided notion that Black people remain irreparably undeserving (Mastro et al., 2011). The following literature review addresses previous studies that demonstrate how media places internal blame on Black people instead of external blame on other social and political forces.

#### Media Framing of Black Families as Problematic

Several scholars have used framing theory to advance our understanding of mediated stereotypes (Entman, 1993; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gilens, 1996a, 1996b, 1999; Iyengar, 1990). The theory asserts that media sources emphasize some elements of sociopolitical issues more than others

to influence how audience members perceive reality. Hence, media create different frames (or interpretations) of sociopolitical issues, such as crime and welfare, that influence how audience members understand these issues (Entman, 1993; Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Thematic frames address issues that stem from problems at the government and social levels. However, prior scholars have argued that news outlets deploy episodic frames to gain audience members' attention and to increase revenues. An episodic frame communicates narratives about individuals or specific events. These frames lead audience members to blame Black individuals for their impoverished conditions and society's general economic problems (Iyengar, 1990, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). For example, a news reporter may choose to present a focused narrative about a Black teenager robbing a grocery store rather than how the lack of economic opportunities leads people to steal for survival. Research also demonstrated that the media blame US poverty on Black people, ascribing it to laziness and misrepresenting them as over-reliant on welfare (Gilens, 1996a, 1996b, 1999).

The tendency for media to blame Black people for societal ills has not been limited to the context of poverty; it is also prevalent in crime news coverage (Entman, 1992; Entman & Rojecki, 2000). Previous content analytic studies reveal that media falsely attribute a rise in crime to the stereotypical notion that Black people tend to break the law (Dixon & Linz, 2000). News media's framing of Black people as poor, lazy, and criminal suspects could reinforce cognitive linkages between race and societal ills (Dixon, 2006; Ewoldsen & Rhodes, 2020). This, in turn, increases the cognitive accessibility of these stereotypical constructs for making political judgments. Most prior content analytic research investigated this process by focusing on individual characters, suspects, and/or specific roles. However, the current study seeks to expand news framing analyses by focusing on broader family depictions and their connections to racialized social issues in various news forms.

By expanding the focus in this way, this study offers an additional snapshot beyond crime news and provides a broader array of news sources that better capture the current news ecosystem. Recent research has demonstrated that Americans receive their news from various sources via social media, including local news, network news, digital newspapers, and ideological sources (Pew Research Center, 2013). The present study analyzed several of these sources to better understand the current news landscape that shapes public opinion and political attitudes. Below, we provide information on our comparison standards and study goals.

### **The Racialization of Poverty**

Prior work demonstrates that the news repeatedly racializes poverty (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gilens, 1996a, 1999; Iyengar, 1990; van Doorn, 2015). Initially, anti-poverty programs in the 1920s and 1930s targeted

unemployed White males who needed financial support to weather the Great Depression (Gilens, 1996a; van Doorn, 2015). Following the passage of Civil Rights and Voting Rights legislation, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and President Lyndon B. Johnson focused on urban and rural poverty within the Black community (Gilens, 1999). But this new focus was met with opposition. Political opponents created a narrative that depicted social welfare as a means to support undeserving Black people. News media followed suit. Reporters changed their coverage of poverty, decreasing reporting on out-of-work White people and increasing reporting on impoverished Black people.

In 1967, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a scholar serving as Lyndon B. Johnson's assistant secretary of labor, published a report on Black male unemployment and the Black family. That report suggested that Black pathology combined with Black urbanization led to the development of an underclass value system that warped the Black family. The report influenced media coverage, politics, and scholarship over the next several decades (Gans, 2011). Over time, media coverage suggesting the breakdown of the Black family and an abuse of government assistance facilitated a pejorative relationship between poverty, government assistance, and Black families in viewers' minds. For example, Gilens (1996b, 1999) found that news over-represented the proportion of poor Black families who received monetary support from the government while under-representing the proportion of Black family members who participated in job training. Scholars also found that this framing influenced public policy support for anti-poverty programs. Welfare soon symbolized the relationship between government assistance and Black family dysfunction. At the same time, the Head Start program, which provided impoverished families free access to preschool, remained relatively popular because it was not related to the stigma of Black family dysfunction (Gilens, 1999).

In the 1980s, President Reagan campaigned against "welfare queens," creating a false narrative that single Black women were unwilling to work and instead had children to receive welfare and benefits from the government (Gray, 1995; Reeves & Campbell, 1994). Gilens concluded that news stories of this kind led viewers to believe that Black families were likelier than White families to exploit the system (Gilens, 1996a, 1996b). Similarly, Iyengar (1990) found that readers' exposure to news stories portraying Black welfare recipients discouraged approval of government anti-poverty programs. These findings underscore how the news media links Black poverty with "undeserving" dysfunctional families (Gilens, 1999).

Moreover, Van Doorn's work helps illustrate the difference between the deserving and undeserving (van Doorn, 2015). Van Doorn concluded that when economics takes a downturn, the media's face of poverty becomes White families down on their luck. Given the moderate economic growth that preceded the COVID-19 pandemic, news media may revert

to over-representing news stories that feature Black poverty. However, no recent study directly addresses this possibility. We remain unsure whether an “undeserving” frame of poverty in the form of the over-representation of poverty might be associated with Black families in the news today. The current content analysis addresses this issue. Below we offer a description of our hypotheses.

**Poverty representation.** Like Gilens (1999), we measured the extent to which Black families may be over-represented within the overall population of poor people and whether White families may be under-represented within that same population. We predicted the following:

H1a: Black families will be more likely than White families to appear as poor in the news.

H1b: Black family poverty portrayals in the news will be an over-representation of real-world indicators of poverty rates in US society.

**Black family members as criminals.** Previous content analyses compared the percentage of Black crime reported in local news programs to official local crime reports. These studies found that Black lawbreaking is over-reported in the news, leading to an over-representation of Black criminals (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Entman, 1992; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gilliam & Iyengar, 1998, 2000; Gilliam et al., 1996). Researchers documented an over-portrayal of Black criminality in Philadelphia, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles (Entman, 1992; Romer et al., 2003; Sorenson et al., 1998). However, investigators have yet to explore the family context in this line of research. The current study seeks to address this. We explored that possibility in this study using the rigorous standards of intergroup and inter-reality comparisons advanced by Dixon and Linz (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Wimmer & Dominick, 2005):

H2a: Black family members will be more likely to be depicted as criminals than White family members in the news.

H2b: Black family member criminal depictions will be over-represented compared to real-world statistics on crime.

## Methods

The current study assessed news stories published or aired from 2015 to 2016 and 2019 to 2020. We sampled progressive and conservative news sources to capture the news landscape leading to the 2016 and 2020 elections. Recent work indicates that progressives rely on a wide range of mainstream sources, while conservatives utilize primarily ideological right-leaning sources for their news consumption (Pew Research Center, 2014).



For the 2015–2016 sample, we located relevant mainstream news sources, including national network news broadcasts (e.g., CBS News), cable news programs (e.g., FOX News), and national mainstream newspapers (e.g., *New York Times*). We then added mainstream, liberal, and conservative web sources (Pew Research Center, 2014). To gather the samples, we used four sources: (1) the University of California, Los Angeles NewsScape database of televised news content (Rosenthal & Steen, 2012), (2) Lexis-Nexis newspaper archives, (3) the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Cline Center news database, and (4) news outlets' web sites.

For the 2019–2020 sample, similar to the 2015–2016 sample, we collected mainstream, liberal, and conservative web sources (Pew Research Center, 2014).

**Search term extraction.** We used a two-step process to identify our sample. The first step involved designing relevant search terms to increase the frequency of applicable stories. These search terms used words dealing with family roles (e.g., mother) and words that describe family formation and behavior (e.g., deadbeat). The search term process identified 633 news stories for analysis for the 2015–2016 sample.

**Composite week extraction.** In the second step, we constructed a random sample of sources using the equal probability of selection method. This method facilitates the construction of a representative sample by increasing the chances that every program has an equal opportunity of being selected. We randomly chose seven days to capture data for each source within the two-year time frame we sampled. Each day of the standard week (e.g., Monday, Tuesday, etc.) was contained within the seven days. This approach allowed us to account for systematic variation in the population due to the time of year or day of the week. We sampled the initial family-related news story we encountered from each source, and the composite week methodology yielded 200 news stories for analysis.

**Television sources.** We sought to capture stories from television news and national news sources (including newspapers and web sources). Regarding television news selection, we captured the highest-rated news programs for each major broadcast and cable network. The sampled television news networks included: (1) ABC, (2) CBS, (3) NBC, (4) CNN, (5) FOX News, and (6) MSNBC.

**National digital news sources.** We extracted three kinds of content from digital websites for our national news sources: (1) conservative websites, (2) mainstream websites, and (3) liberal websites. Sources were selected for their ideology based on prior studies of news trust, ability to sample content, and popularity based on internet tracking data (Pew Research Center, 2014). The Conservative Websites included: (a) Breitbart and (b) The Blaze. The Mainstream sites included: (a) Chicago Tribune, (b) Los

Angeles Times, (c) New York Times, (d) USA Today, (e) Wall Street Journal, (f) NPR, and (g) Washington Post. The liberal sites included: (a) Buzzfeed and (b) Politico.

#### *Identifying and Extracting Sources for the 2019–2020 Sample*

Although the 2019–2020 sample is smaller than the 2015–2016 sample, it is a more recent snapshot of Black family portrayals. The 2019–2020 sample was collected via the search term extraction method used for the 2015–2016 sample. The extraction process yielded 240 stories for analysis. The composite week sampling method was not conducted. Except for NPR, the 2019–2020 sample selected stories from the same national digital sources as the 2015–2016 sample. Television and newspaper sources were not sampled.

#### *Key Variables and Reliability*

We coded 117 news reports (or 14% of the total sample) for the 2015–2016 sample and 52 news reports (or 22% of the total sample) for the 2019–2020 sample to test the codebook throughout its development. We assessed reliability using Krippendorff's alpha and calculated alpha using the SPSS macro developed by Hayes and Krippendorff (2007). Krippendorff's alphas ranged from .70 to 1.0. The average alpha for the 2015–2016 sample was .84, and the average alpha for the 2019–2020 sample was .81. Below, we outline the variables used in our analysis and report their alpha reliability coefficient.

**Family.** Coders identified families through three different indicators. The first indicator was the mention of the word "family" as a reference to the genetic ties among group members (i.e., the genetic connection between parents and children). The second indicator was the mention of the word "family" as a reference to close relational bonds that function similarly (or the same) to genetic bonds (e.g., adoptive parents). The third indicator was the mention of family member roles (e.g., "daughter," "grandparent," "cousin").

**Race identification.** To draw racial comparisons, coders identified the race associated with each depiction of family. Both individual families (e.g., "the Smith family") and generalized mentions of families (e.g., "White families") were assessed for race. We consistently used three categories of race: Black, White, or other people of color (including those with mixed-race families). However, we should note that socially valid comparisons remain most meaningful for Black and White people, given that "other" includes various racial types, including multi-racial individuals. Coders relied consistently on apparent indicators of race, including



Today, (e) Wall Street Journal sites included: (a) Buzz-

## 20 Sample

an the 2015–2016 sample, portrayals. The 2019–2020 action method used for the lded 240 stories for analy- not conducted. Except for om the same national digi- on and newspaper sources

otal sample) for the 2015– f the total sample) for the ghout its development. We and calculated alpha using pendorff (2007). Krippen- erage alpha for the 2015– for the 2019–2020 sample in our analysis and report

ree different indicators. The mily” as a reference to the enetic connection between as the mention of the word nds that function similarly arents). The third indicator daughter,” “grandparent,”

arisons, coders identified nily. Both individual fami- ments of families (e.g., consistently used three cat- of color (including those ld note that socially valid k and White people, given iding multi-racial individu- dicators of race, including

whether race was directly mentioned or by examining pictures or videos of individuals shown (Dixon & Linz, 2000). In both newspapers and television, visual indicators (e.g., photos and videos) and explicitly written or stated indicators of race remain common across platforms. Regarding commentators, coders made decisions about the *race being discussed by the individual* using direct commentator statements or any video evidence relying on the three above-delineated racial categories of the family: Black, other people of color, or White (2015–2016 sample:  $\alpha = .85$ ; 2019–2200 sample:  $\alpha = .92$ ).

**Socioeconomic class.** We assessed *the socioeconomic status* of families portrayed in the news story to ascertain how poverty was described (2015–2016 sample:  $\alpha = .82$ ; 2019–2020 sample:  $\alpha = .78$ ). We considered occupation, residence, and narratives regarding life experiences to determine the SES of a given family as being either poor, middle, or upper class. For example, if a news story described a head of household working in a position requiring little education that paid poorly, the family was coded as poor. Families were also identified as poor if they were associated with the need, dependence, receipt, or potential for irresponsible use of welfare benefits. If the news story portrayed parents described as well-educated professionals making good money, the family was coded as middle-class. References to luxury, high-income occupations (e.g., doctor), high net worth, and upper-class neighborhoods were indicators of upper-class families.

**Perpetration.** Fourth, we assessed the race of *family members accused of being criminal perpetrators* (2015–2016 sample:  $\alpha = 1.0$ ; 2019–2020 sample:  $\alpha = .72$ ). These included family members arrested, charged, incarcerated, or convicted of illegal activity. Individuals exonerated of all charges and speculative statements about future perpetration (e.g., “she could commit a crime in the future”) were omitted.

## Indicators of Social Reality

The primary purpose of this study is to determine if the news media’s portrayal of Black families is inaccurate. Hence, we identified several sources representing the actual social and economic state of Black families, White families, and other families of Color. These sources were used to conduct inter-reality comparisons. Specifically, we utilized US Census Bureau (2016, 2021) data reports on family poverty and the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) to assess criminal involvement through arrest statistics (US Department of Justice, 2015, 2020). Although the UCR does not report on crime within families, it compares arrest rates among racial groups. We inferred that the UCR provides the expected rates of criminal involvement we should expect from Black and White family members.

### Results

Two techniques were used to analyze the data. First, we deployed inter-group comparisons to compare Black to White family representations on central traits (e.g., welfare), and when appropriate, we calculated ratios. This approach illuminates the disparity between the depictions of these two kinds of families (Dixon & Linz, 2000).

Second, we utilized inter-reality comparisons to compare media portrayals of family dynamics to non-media indicators of social reality documented in official reports (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Dixon & Williams, 2015). This technique initially requires us to calculate the proportion of Black and White families depicted in particular roles. We then calculate the confidence interval because these proportions are sampling estimates with associated errors. Finally, we determined whether the difference between the media portrayal and the official report is larger than the calculated confidence interval. If it was larger, we concluded that the media distortion was statistically significant (Wimmer & Dominick, 2005).

#### *Poor Families Misrepresented as Overwhelmingly Black*

Hypothesis 1a stated that Black families would be more likely than White families to appear as poor in the news. Hypothesis 1b predicted that this portrayal would be an over-representation of Black poverty and inconsistent with real-world indicators of poverty rates. We found robust support for Hypotheses 1a and 1b.

**Analysis of 2015–2016 sample.** As reported in Table 5.1, 59% of impoverished families in the news were Black, 17% were White, and 24% were families of Color:  $\chi^2 = 48.36$  (2,  $N = 157$ ),  $p < .001$ . In comparing strictly Black and White family occurrences of poverty, we found:  $\chi^2 = 36.3$  (1,  $N = 120$ ),  $p < .001$ , meaning that the frequency of portrayals between Black poverty and White poverty differ. The adjusted standardized residuals showed that both Black family portrayals of poverty (Adj. Residual = .7.59) were above 1.96 and therefore higher than expected and White family portrayals of poverty (Adj. Residual = -8.86) were below -1.96 and therefore lower than expected (Other families of Color Adj. Residual = -1.04). Our intergroup comparison reveals that Black families were three times likelier to appear poor than White families.

To conduct our inter-reality comparison, we consulted the US Census Bureau (2016), which found that only 24% of families in the United States living below the poverty line are Black. This difference between the official report (24% of low-income families are Black) and news media depictions (59% of low-income families are Black) exceeds the 8-percentage

Table 5.1 Frequency and Percentage of Poor Family Representations by Race (2015–2016) (e.g., Portrayal Suggests That a Family Lives in an Economically Depressed Neighborhood)

| Race of Families Depicted as Poor | Frequency of Families Depicted as Poor <sup>a</sup> | Percent of Families Depicted as Poor <sup>b</sup> | Percent of Poor Families according to Census Data <sup>c</sup> | Percentage Point Differential <sup>d</sup> | 95% Confidence Interval % <sup>e</sup> |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Black                             | 93                                                  | 59%                                               | 24%                                                            | +35*                                       | ±8                                     |
| White                             | 27                                                  | 17%                                               | 66%                                                            | -49*                                       | ±6                                     |
| Other people of color             | 37                                                  | 24%                                               | 10%                                                            | +14*                                       | ±7                                     |
| Total                             | 157                                                 | 100%                                              | 100%                                                           |                                            |                                        |

<sup>a</sup> Raw frequencies of families depicted as poor by race in news and opinion media.

<sup>b</sup> Percentage of Black, White, and other people of color families depicted as poor who appeared on news and opinion media between 2015 and 2016.

<sup>c</sup> Percentage of White, Black, and other people of color families who are poor according to official census reports (US Census Bureau, 2016).

<sup>d</sup> Difference between the television percentage and the poverty report percentage for each racial group (TV % - poverty report percentage%).

<sup>e</sup> Percentage point differential outside the confidence interval.

1. First, we deployed inter-family representations on appropriate, we calculated ratios between the depictions of these

ns to compare media portrayals of social reality documents; Dixon & Williams, 2015). te the proportion of Black . We then calculate the con-sampling estimates with as-r the difference between the r than the calculated confi-at the media distortion was 2005).

### Black

d be more likely than White thesis 1b predicted that this Black poverty and inconsis-s. We found robust support

d in Table 5.1, 59% of im-17% were White, and 24% i7),  $p < .001$ . In comparing poverty, we found:  $\chi^2 = 36.3$  iency of portrayals between djusted standardized residu-s of poverty (Adj. Residual r than expected and White 8.86) were below -1.96 and s of Color Adj. Residual = at Black families were three ies.

ve consulted the US Census families in the United States fference between the official ck) and news media depic-c) exceeds the 8-percentage

point confidence interval, so we interpret the difference as statistically significant.

**Analysis of 2019–2020 sample.** As reported in Table 5.2, 69% of impoverished families in the news were Black, 7% were White, and 24% were of families of Color:  $\chi^2 = 55.114$  (2,  $N = 157$ ),  $p < .001$ . In comparing strictly Black and White family occurrences of poverty, the portrayal of Black poverty was significantly more frequent than White poverty,  $\chi^2 = 45.15$  (1,  $N = 67$ ),  $p < .001$ . The adjusted standardized residuals showed that Black family portrayals of poverty (Adj. Residual = .5.92) were above 1.96 and therefore, higher than expected, and White family portrayals of poverty (Adj. Residual = -7.29) were below -1.96 and therefore lower than expected (Other families of Color Adj. Residual = 1.45). Our intergroup comparison reveals that Black families had a nine times higher likelihood of appearing poor than White families.

To conduct our inter-reality comparison, we again consulted the US Census Bureau (2021), which found that only 24% of families in the United States living below the poverty line are Black. This difference between the official report (24% of low-income families are Black) and news media depictions (69% of low-income families are Black) exceeds the 11-percentage point confidence interval, so we interpret the difference as statistically significant.

Table 5.2 Frequency and Percentage of Poor Family Representations by Race (2019–2020)

| <i>Race of Families Depicted as Poor</i> | <i>Frequency of Families Depicted as Poor<sup>a</sup></i> | <i>Percent of Families Depicted as Poor<sup>b</sup></i> | <i>Percent of Poor Families according to Census Data<sup>c</sup></i> | <i>Percentage Point Differential<sup>d</sup></i> | <i>95% Confidence Interval %<sup>e</sup></i> |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Black                                    | 61                                                        | 69%                                                     | 24%                                                                  | +45*                                             | ±11                                          |
| White                                    | 6                                                         | 7%                                                      | 66%                                                                  | -59*                                             | ±6                                           |
| Other people of color                    | 21                                                        | 24%                                                     | 10%                                                                  | +14*                                             | ±10                                          |
| Total                                    | 88                                                        | 100%                                                    | 100%                                                                 |                                                  |                                              |

<sup>a</sup> Raw frequencies of families depicted as poor by race in news and opinion media.

<sup>b</sup> Percentage of Black, White, and other people of color families depicted as poor who appeared on news and opinion media between 2019 and 2020.

<sup>c</sup> Percentage of White, Black, and other people of color families who are poor according to official census reports (US Census Bureau, 2021).

<sup>d</sup> Difference between the television percentage and the poverty report percentage for each racial group (TV % - poverty report percentage%).

<sup>e</sup> Percentage point differential outside the confidence interval.

*Over-representing the Connection between Criminality with Black Families and Under-representing the White Family Link with Criminality*

Hypothesis 2a stated that Black family members are more likely to be depicted as criminals than White family members. Hypothesis 2b predicted that Black family members would be over-represented as criminals compared with outside indicators of criminal behavior and more likely to be depicted as criminals than White family members. We found support for Hypotheses 2b regarding the 2015–2016 sample. For the 2019–2020 sample, Hypothesis 2a was not supported and 2b was supported.

Analysis of 2015–2016 sample. In Table 5.3, we report the extent to which Black family members are inaccurately over-associated with the perpetration of a crime. Of all family members portrayed as perpetrators, 37% were Black, 28% were White, and 34% were of other families of Color; however, these differences were not significant:  $\chi^2 = 1.27$  (2,  $N = 99$ ),  $p = .529$ . Although Black family members were mentioned 1.32 times more often than White family members in a strict comparison between White and Black family member perpetrator representations, this Chi-square test also was not significant:  $\chi^2 = 1.25$  (2,  $N = 65$ ),  $p = .264$ . Also, none of the adjusted standardized residuals were greater than 1.96 or less than -1.96, meaning that within this analysis, Black family member perpetration (Adj. Residual = .91) and White family member perpetration (Adj. Residual = -1.87) were within expected value ranges (Other families of Color Adj. Residual = -2.21).

Table 5.3 What Was the Race of Family Members Associated with Perpetrating a Crime (2015–2016) (e.g., a Parent Is Arrested for Not Making Child Support Payments)?

| Identifiable Race of Family Members Associated with a Crime | Frequency of Family Members Associated with a Crime <sup>a</sup> | Percent of Family Members Associated with a Crime <sup>b</sup> | Percent of Family Members Associated with a Crime according to Crime Reports <sup>c</sup> | Percentage Point Differential <sup>d</sup> | 95% Confidence Interval % |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Black                                                       | 37                                                               | 37%                                                            | 26%                                                                                       | +11*                                       | ±10                       |
| White                                                       | 28                                                               | 28%                                                            | 70%                                                                                       | -42*                                       | ±9                        |
| Other people of color                                       | 34                                                               | 35%                                                            | 4%                                                                                        | +31*                                       | ±9                        |
| Total                                                       | 99                                                               | 100%                                                           | 100%                                                                                      |                                            |                           |

- <sup>a</sup> Raw frequencies of family members depicted as criminals by race in news and opinion media.  
<sup>b</sup> Percentage of family members who are Black, White, and other people of color who appeared on news and opinion media between 2015 and 2016.  
<sup>c</sup> Percentage of White, Black, and other people of color family members associated with crime according to the Uniform Crime Reports (US Department of Justice, 2015).  
<sup>d</sup> Difference between the television percentage and the crime reports percentage for each racial group (TV % - poverty report percentage%).  
 \* Percentage point differential outside the confidence interval.

In addition, we utilized inter-reality comparisons, which found that news media over-represent members of Black families as criminals by 11 percentage points. Black family members were 37% of those associated with crime on the news and opinion media. However, according to UCR (US Department of Justice, 2015), they only comprise about 26% of family member perpetrators. Our team calculated a 9-percentage point confidence interval for these comparisons, so we determined there was a statistically significant over-representation of Black family members' criminality.

**Analysis of 2019–2020 sample.** As reported in Table 5.4, of all mentions of family member perpetrators, 50% were Black, 31% were White, and 19% were other people of color ( $\chi^2 = 6.14$  (2,  $N = 42$ ),  $p < .046$ ). In a strict comparison between White and Black family member perpetrator representations, a significant difference was not found  $\chi^2 = 6.14$  (2,  $N = 42$ ),  $p = .170$ . Also, none of the adjusted standardized residuals were greater than 1.96 or less than -1.96, meaning that within this analysis, Black family member perpetration (Adj. Residual = .650) and White family member perpetration (Adj. Residual = .01) were within expected value ranges (Other families of Color Adj. Residual = -.75).

In addition, we again utilized inter-reality comparisons, which found that news media over-represent members of Black families as perpetrators by 23% percentage points. Black family members were 50% of those

ly Representations by Race

| Percentage Point Differential <sup>d</sup> | 95% Confidence Interval % |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| +45*                                       | ±11                       |
| -59*                                       | ±6                        |
| +14*                                       | ±10                       |

ws and opinion media.  
 ilies depicted as poor who ap-  
 .0.  
 ilies who are poor according to

erty report percentage for each

l.

with Black  
 k with Criminality

are more likely to be de-  
 Hypothesis 2b predicted  
 sented as criminals com-  
 or and more likely to be  
 s. We found support for  
 For the 2019–2020 sam-  
 s supported.

we report the extent to  
 over-associated with the  
 s portrayed as perpetra-  
 4% were of other fami-  
 ot significant:  $\chi^2 = 1.27$   
 embers were mentioned  
 rs in a strict comparison  
 ator representations, this  
 5 (2,  $N = 65$ ),  $p = .264$ .  
 s were greater than 1.96  
 sis, Black family member  
 ily member perpetration  
 ie ranges (Other families



Table 5.4 What Was the Race of Family Members Associated with Perpetrating a Crime (2019–2020) (e.g., a Parent Is Arrested for Not Making Child Support Payments)?

| Identifiable Race of Family Members Associated with a Crime | Frequency of Family Members Associated with a Crime <sup>a</sup> | Percent of Family Members Associated with a Crime <sup>b</sup> | Percent of Family Members Associated with a Crime according to Crime Reports <sup>c</sup> | Percentage Point Differential <sup>d</sup> | 95% Confidence Interval % |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Black                                                       | 21                                                               | 50%                                                            | 27%                                                                                       | +23*                                       | ±16                       |
| White                                                       | 13                                                               | 31%                                                            | 69%                                                                                       | -38*                                       | ±15                       |
| Other people of color                                       | 8                                                                | 19%                                                            | 4%                                                                                        | ±                                          | ±13                       |
| Total                                                       | 42                                                               | 100%                                                           | 100%                                                                                      |                                            |                           |

<sup>a</sup> Raw frequencies of family members depicted as criminals by race in news and opinion media.

<sup>b</sup> Percentage of family members who are Black, White, and other people of color who appeared on news and opinion media between 2015 and 2016.

<sup>c</sup> Percentage of White, Black, and other people of color family members associated with crime according to the Uniform Crime Reports (US Department of Justice, 2015).

<sup>d</sup> Difference between the television percentage and the crime reports percentage for each racial group (TV % – poverty report percentage%).

\* Percentage point differential outside the confidence interval.

associated with crime on the news and opinion media. However, according to the UCR (US Department of Justice, 2020), they only comprise about 27% of family member perpetrators. Our team calculated a 16-percentage point confidence interval for these comparisons, so we determined there was a statistically significant over-representation of Black family member criminality.

### Discussion

The current study advances understanding of the relationship between race and families within news media. Two main findings emerge. First, news reports over-represent Black families as poor. Second, the news over-represents Black family members as criminals. Below, we provide an overview of our study's theoretical and practical implications. We follow this with a discussion of the limitations of this work, potential future studies, and some concluding thoughts.

#### *Framing and Accessibility*

The current study has implications for framing theory and accessibility. Framing outlines how media discuss issues that shape what kind of considerations people use to form their opinions (Price & Tewksbury, 1997).



For example, Gilens (1996a) found that the association of Black people with the notion of the undeserving poor in the media reduced support for welfare policies. The framing effects emanated from an availability heuristic suggesting that due to their laziness, Black people overly relied on these poverty programs (Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Our current research uncovered the perpetuation of these types of frames. Specifically, the strong link between Black families with crime and poverty in this coverage suggests that the sociopolitical challenges Black families face are a result of Black people's dysfunctional choices (e.g., choosing not to work; choosing violence over peace) rather than the external factors that negatively affect Black families (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Audience members might come to assume that Black irresponsibility is the driving (and perhaps sole) force behind discussions about poverty, welfare, and crime policy. (Iyengar, 1990). As a result, the cognitive accessibility of the false link between Black families and irresponsibility may increase. This incorrect link may inform numerous political judgments (Ewoldsen & Rhodes, 2020). For example, consumption of these distorted news frames may lead to more significant public support for punitive decisions regarding social welfare and criminal sentencing cases. Future research should examine the potential impact of exposure to such frames.

Our findings regarding cognitive accessibility suggest that our current digital environment might exacerbate Black stereotypes for two reasons. First, viewers will regularly see such stereotypes across easily attainable popular news media. Second, news consumers predisposed to believe in the accuracy of Black stereotypes may regularly select news media that bolster these stereotypes. As a result of these selections, these consumers will reinforce their biased views (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2008). Media algorithms resemble consumer preferences, exposing readers to stories that appeal to their biases. But in addition, Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic (2015) found that Facebook friends share stories that align with their ideologies more than stories that do not, contributing further to a confirmation bias echo chamber. In the current study, the patterns we observed were not driven exclusively by partisan media but were seen across the ideological landscape.

#### Policy Implications and Emergent Artificial Intelligence

Overall, news outlets propagate racist explanations for social issues. News media situates Black culture, families, and people as inherently destabilizing forces in their neighborhoods and beyond. As a result, evidence demonstrating Black family success and the contributions Black families make to society may be overshadowed. Moreover, in every problematic area where Black families remain over-represented, White families are under-represented, significantly increasing their perceived gap.

Associated with Perpetrating a  
ted for Not Making Child Sup-

|                  | Percentage<br>Point<br>Differential <sup>d</sup> | 95%<br>Confidence<br>Interval % |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| ibers            | +23*                                             | ±16                             |
| e                | -38*                                             | ±15                             |
| rts <sup>c</sup> | ±                                                | ±13                             |

by race in news and opinion media.  
l other people of color who appeared

family members associated with crime  
of Justice, 2015).

ne reports percentage for each racial

al.

i media. However, according  
, they only comprise about  
am calculated a 16-percent-  
sons, so we determined there  
ion of Black family member

of the relationship between  
main findings emerge. First,  
poor. Second, the news over-  
. Below, we provide an over-  
implications. We follow this  
ork, potential future studies,

ing theory and accessibility.  
hat shape what kind of con-  
(Price & Tewksbury, 1997).

There may be significant policy implications for the United States if the above-discussed theories and findings are supported by future family-based research. Scholars have already shown that news depictions of Black poverty and welfare dependence increased public support for the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 (Gilens, 1999). Politicians and policymakers motivated to demonize Black families will find supportive content to bolster their biased positions in the news. For instance, the misrepresentation of Black lawlessness may suggest that Black families cannot curb Black crime. Hence, news consumers may more easily endorse President Trump's outspoken support for aggressive policing. In addition, the disproportionate representation of Black poverty may be interpreted as Black irresponsibility that stems from Black family dysfunction. In response to this erroneous interpretation, audience members may be more likely to endorse work requirements, drug testing, and other restrictions on welfare programs intended to help all families in need. The frequent occurrence of the Black family dysfunction narrative may also diminish news consumers' ability to recognize Black family successes. Thus, these consumers would be less likely to respond to policy calls that create or maintain opportunities that capitalize on Black family strengths. In all presented cases, practical solutions to real family challenges will lead to political disfavor, hindering the potential for these solutions to become a reality.

**Artificial intelligence implications as related to policy.** Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly influencing our lives, from entertainment to criminal sentencing. We call attention to the potential for biased media content to control the AI-driven processes integral to our society's operation. Given that AI designers and end users may harbor racial biases, we cannot say AI leads to bias-free decision-making. Livingston (2020) notes that AI is gaining popularity in the federal public administration. While AI designers are mainly responsible for developing algorithms and taking measures to ensure that these algorithms are tested, AI users are accountable for contesting biased AI outputs. But suppose stereotypes about Black families, reinforced through media exposure, are cognitively accessible to designers and users. These stereotypes may influence how corporations and governments develop and use AI.

As an example, Lum and Issac (2016) note that biased policing algorithms (which may be developed by private contractors) can lead to the over-policing of Black neighborhoods. Over-policing may increase police violence (Lerman & Weaver, 2014). Lum and Issac (2014) state:

Every statistic or data analysis course student has heard the adage "garbage in, garbage out." In an era when an ever-expanding array of statistical and machine learning algorithms are presented as panaceas to large and complex real-world problems, we must not forget this fundamental lesson ...

(para. 25)

While the adage may ring true, we must remember that the human process of identifying garbage can be biased. Indeed, our current media landscape may teach biased lessons. But we should consider the role of media literacy in training AI designers and users to seek and act upon objective social and political truths. If humans cannot work to check AI, we cannot adequately manage AI. Thus, we cannot sufficiently address societal problems and ensure equitable public service.

### Closing Items

**Limitations of the current study.** Our study updates previous research by focusing on the family context. However, we must undertake additional studies to understand this context in greater depth. Despite our team's best efforts, a few of our initial key variables did not attain acceptable levels of reliability. Although our first sample was sizeable and the second sample's findings corroborated the first sample's results, an even more extensive selection could allow us to unearth more significant observations.

**Future studies.** The Communication discipline has yet to undertake a thorough inquiry into race and families since the 1980s. We call upon the field to revisit this topic once again. Media effects research could help us determine whether these stereotypical family portrayals have the same influence as racialized depictions uncovered in prior work. Furthermore, we urge researchers to investigate the degree to which Black family stereotypes endorsed by media pervade AI development and usage, including associated effects.

**Conclusion.** Our study suggests that news media play an important role in stereotyping Black families. The study found that Black families are misrepresented as poor and criminal. This coverage reinforces support for punitive policies and downplays the historical, structural, and systemic issues these families face. Continued representation of Black families in this way can engender serious consequences and warrants close attention and action.

### References

- Bakshy, E., Messing, S., & Adamic L. A. (2015). Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook. *Science*, 348(6239), 1130–1132. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaa1160>
- Dixon, T. L. (2006). Psychological reactions to crime news portrayals of Black criminals: Understanding the moderating roles of prior news viewing and stereotype endorsement. *Communication Monographs*, 73, 162–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637750600690643>
- Dixon, T. L. (2017). Good guys are still always in White?: Positive change and continued misrepresentation of race and crime on local television news. *Communication Research*, 44, 775–792. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650215579223>

(para. 25)

- Dixon, T. L., & Linz, D. G. (2000, spring, June). Overrepresentation and underrepresentation of African Americans and Latinos as lawbreakers on television news. *Journal of Communication*, 50(2), 131-154. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2000.tb02845.x>
- Dixon, T. L., & Williams, C. L. (2015). The changing misrepresentation of race and crime on network and cable news. *Journal of Communication*, 65, 24-39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12133>
- Entman, R. (1992, summer). Blacks in the news: Television, modern racism, and cultural change. *Journalism Quarterly*, 69, 341-361. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769909206900209>
- Entman, R. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51-58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
- Entman, R., & Rojecki, A. (2000). *The Black image in the white mind: Media and race in America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Ewoldsen, D., & Rhodes, N. (2020). Media priming and accessibility. In M. B. Oliver, A. Raney, & J. Bryant (Eds.) *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (4th ed., pp. 83-99). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gans, H. J. (2011). The Moynihan report and its aftermaths: A critical analysis. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 8(2), 315-327. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X11000385>
- Gilens, M. (1996a). Race and poverty in America: Public misperceptions and the American news media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 60, 515-541. <https://doi.org/10.1086/297771>
- Gilens, M. (1996b, September). "Race coding" and white opposition to welfare. *The American Political Science Review*, 90, 593-604. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2082611>
- Gilens, M. (1999). *Why Americans hate welfare: Race, media and the politics of antipoverty policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gilliam, F. D., & Iyengar, S. (1998, winter). The superpredator script. *Nieman Reports*, 52(4), 45-46. <https://doi.org/http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/102293/The-Superpredator-Script.aspx>
- Gilliam, F. D., & Iyengar, S. (2000, July). Prime suspects: The influence of local television news on the viewing public. *American Journal of Political Science*, 44, 560-573. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2669264>
- Gilliam, F. D., Iyengar, S., Simon, A., & Wright, O. (1996, winter). Crime in Black and White: The violent, scary world of local news. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 1(3), 6-23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1081180X96001003003>
- Gray, H. (1995). *Watching race: Television and the struggle for "Blackness"*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hayes, A. F., & Krippendorff, K. (2007). Answering the call for a standard reliability measure for coding data. *Communication Methods and Measures*, 1, 77-89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19312450709336664>
- Iyengar, S. (1990, March). Framing responsibility for political issues: The case of poverty. *Political Behavior*, 12, 19-40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00992330>
- Iyengar, S. (1991). *Is anyone responsible?: How television frames political issues*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Overrepresentation and un-  
 inos as lawbreakers on tel-  
 0(2), 131-154. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01651.x>
- ng misrepresentation of race  
*Communication*, 65, 24-39.
- rs: Television, modern rac-  
 e, 69, 341-361. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.01111f.1460-2466.1993>
- a fractured paradigm. *Journal*  
 y/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.01111f.1460-2466.1993
- in the white mind: Media and  
 o Press.
- ind accessibility. In M. B. Oli-  
 vances in theory and research
- ftermaths: A critical analysis.  
 e, 8(2), 315-327. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.01111f.1460-2466.1993>
- ublic misperceptions and the  
 ly, 60, 515-541. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.01111f.1460-2466.1993>
- id white opposition to wel-  
 90, 593-604. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.01111f.1460-2466.1993>
- ice, media and the politics of  
 ago Press.
- uperpredator script. *Nieman*  
 .nieman.harvard.edu/reports/
- spects: The influence of local  
*Journal of Political Science*, 44,  
 1996, winter). Crime in Black  
*Harvard International Journal*  
 7/1081180X96001003003  
 truggle for "Blackness". Min-
- he call for a standard reliabil-  
*Methods and Measures*, 1, 77-89.
- or political issues: The case of  
[org/10.1007/BF00992330](https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00992330)  
 vision frames political issues.
- Iyengar, S., & Kinder, D. (1987). *News that matters*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Knobloch-Westerwick, S. (2012). Selective exposure and reinforcement of attitudes and partisanship before a presidential election [Article]. *Journal of Communication*, 62(4), 628-642. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01651.x>
- Knobloch-Westerwick, S., Appiah, O., & Alter, S. (2008, September 17). News selection patterns as a function of race: The discerning minority and the indiscriminating majority. *Media Psychology*, 11(3), 400-417. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213260802178542>
- Lerman, A. E., & Weaver, V. (2014). Staying out of sight? Concentrated policing and local political action. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 651(1), 202-219. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716213503085>
- Livingston, M. (2000). Policy memo: Preventing racial bias in federal AI. *Journal of Science Policy and Governance*, 16(2). <https://doi.org/10.38126/JSPG160205>
- Lum, K., & Issac, W. (2016). To Predict and Serve? *Significance*, 13(5), 15-19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1740-9713.2016.00960.x>
- Mastro, D., Blecha, E., & Atwell Seate, A. (2011). Characterizations of criminal athletes: A systematic examination of sports news depictions of race and crime. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 55, 526-542. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2011.620664>
- Pew Research Center. (2013). *In changing news landscape, even television is vulnerable: Trends in news consumption-1991-2012*. Retrieved November 21, 2013, from <http://www.people-press.org/2012/09/27/in-changing-news-landscape-even-television-is-vulnerable/>
- Pew Research Center. (2014). *Political polarization & media habits*. Retrieved May 3, 2023, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/>
- Price, V., & Tewksbury, D. (1997). News values and public opinion: A theoretical account of media priming and framing. In G. A. Barnett & F. J. Boster (Eds.) *Progress in the communication sciences* (pp. 173-212). Greenwich, CT: Ablex.
- Reeves, J. L., & Campbell, R. (1994). *Cracked coverage: Television news, the anti-cocaine crusade, and the Reagan legacy*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Romer, D., Jamieson, K. H., & Aday, S. (2003). Television news and the cultivation of fear of crime. *Journal of Communication*, 53, 88-104.
- Rosenthal, P. I., & Steen, F. (2012). *UCLA communication studies news archive*. Retrieved November 15, 2013, from <http://newsscape.library.ucla.edu>
- Saleem, M., Prot, S., Anderson, C. A., & Lemieux, A. F. (2017). Exposure to Muslims in media and support for public policies harming Muslims. *Communication Research*, 44(6), 841-869. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650215619214>
- Scheufele, D. A., & Tewksbury, D. (2007). Framing, agenda setting, and priming: The evolution of three media effects models. *Journal of Communication*, 57, 9-20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00326.x>
- Sorenson, S. B., Manz, J. G., & Berk, R. A. (1998). News media coverage and the epidemiology of homicide. *American Journal of Public Health*, 88, 1510-1514. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.88.10.1510>



- US Census Bureau. (2016). *Income and poverty in the United States: 2015*. <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2016/demo/p60-256.html>
- US Census Bureau. (2021). *Income and poverty in the United States: 2020*. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2021/demo/p60-273.pdf>
- US Department of Justice. (2015). *Uniform crime reports for the United States*. U.S. Government Printing Office. <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2015/crime-in-the-u.s.-2015/persons-arrested/persons-arrested>
- US Department of Justice. (2020). 2019 Crime in the United States. <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2019/crime-in-the-u.s.-2019/tables/table-43>
- van Doorn, B. W. (2015). Pre-and post-welfare reform media portrayals of poverty in the United States: The continuing importance of race and ethnicity. *Politics & Policy*, 43(1), 142–162. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12107>
- Weeks, K., Dixon, T. L., Tolbert, A. N., & Sevilla, M. (2020). Black stereotypes in the media: A continuing problem. In A. C. Billings & S. Parrott (Eds.) *Media stereotypes: From ageism to xenophobia* (pp. 93–112). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Wimmer, R. D., & Dominick, J. R. (2005). *Mass media research: An introduction* (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Wadsworth.