

A Literature Review of Studies on the Newsworthiness of Homicide Cases – Focusing on Previous Studies in the United States of America –

殺人事件のニュース価値に関する研究の検討 アメリカの先行研究を中心に

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Abstract

The purpose of this research note is to review the literature on the newsworthiness of homicide cases in the U.S. and to summarize the findings. Newsworthiness is a criterion by which the media selects cases to report. To understand the bias in our perception of a homicide case, it is necessary to understand its newsworthiness. However, in Japan, no study has examined the newsworthiness of newspaper articles on homicide cases. Therefore, it is necessary to study the newsworthiness of homicide cases from the beginning. The conclusions of the literature review are as follows: First, homicides involving multiple victims are considered newsworthy. Second, homicides involving female, children, and elderly victims are considered newsworthy. Third, homicides involving racial minority (Black or Hispanic) victims are not considered newsworthy. Fourth, the components of newsworthiness are not only statistical deviants but also cultural and status deviants, including race and gender. A future task is to conduct a survey in Japan based on these newsworthiness trends.

Keywords : newsworthiness/homicide/the United States of America

I. Introduction

The purpose of this research note is to review the literature on the newsworthiness of homicide cases in the U.S. and to summarize the findings.

Homicide cases are the most prominent type of crime reporting, owing to their heinous nature. However, certain homicide cases are more likely to be reported than others. Therefore, the homicide cases that we learn about through mass media are biased toward those that are likely to be reported, meaning that these news stories created the perception of homicide cases we hold.

Newsworthiness is a criterion by which the media selects cases to report. To understand the bias in our perception of a homicide case, it is necessary to

understand its newsworthiness. However, in Japan, no study has examined the newsworthiness of newspaper articles on homicide cases. Therefore, it is necessary to study the newsworthiness of homicide cases from the beginning.

In the U.S., on the other hand, many studies have explored the newsworthiness of homicide cases through regression analysis, utilizing homicide case data provided by the criminal justice authorities. Therefore, as a starting point, it would be helpful to review the dataset of previous studies in the U.S.

II. Overview of the Literature

Table 1 provides an overview of the literature discussed in this research note. This table refers to the cities, newspapers, periods, and factors identified as newsworthy and non-newsworthy in each study from our sample.

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Table1 Overview of the Literature

Study	City Studied	Newspaper Studied	Period of Study	Newsworthy	Non-newsworthy
Wilbanks (1980)	Miami-Dade, Miami	<i>Miami Herald</i>	1980	Multiple victims Innocent victims	Hispanic victims
Johnstone et al. (1994)	Chicago, Illinois	<i>Chicago Tribune</i> , <i>Chicago Sun-Times</i>	1987	Multiple victims A male offender killed a female victim	Black victims Hispanic victims
Pritchard and Hughes (1997)	Milwaukee, Wisconsin	<i>Sentinel, Journal</i>	1994	White participants Male suspects Female victims Child victims Senior victims	
Sorenson et al. (1998)	Los Angeles, California	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	1990-1994	Female victims Child victims Elderly victims The suspect was a stranger to the victim Wealthier neighborhoods	Black victims Hispanic victims Victims less than a high school education Non-firearm weapons The suspect was an intimate of the victim
Weiss and Chermak (1998)	Indianapolis, Indiana	<i>Indianapolis Star</i>	1995	Female victims Multiple victims	African-American victims
Paulsen (2003)	Houston, Texas	<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	1986-1994	Multiple victims Female victims Multiple offenders Motive commission of crime	Black victims Hispanic victims
Lundman (2003)	Columbus, Ohio	<i>Columbus Dispatch</i>	1984-1992	Gun Other direct contact (other than gun and knife) Multiple violators Multiple victims White victims Female victims	Involuntary manslaughter White violator
Buckler and Travis (2005)	Houston, Texas	<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	2001	Robbery homicide Minority suspects (African-American suspects, Asian suspects) Unusual weapon (other than a knife or a firearm)	
Gruenewald et al. (2009)	Newark, New Jersey	<i>The Star-Ledger</i>	1997-2005	Hispanic offenders White victims Gun	High-age victims Victims of deviant lifestyle Motive drug/gangs Motive interpersonal dispute Motive other (other than above motives and motive domestic disputes)

III. Summaries of the Literature

This chapter provides a summary of the studies' results.

1. Wilbanks (1980)

Wilbanks (1980) conducted a study in Miami-Dade County, Miami. This study focused on 569 homicides in 1980 reported by the *Miami Herald* from 1980 to 1982.

The results of the regression analysis follow:

First, concerning the number of articles, homicides involving multiple and innocent victims were more likely to be covered, and those involving Hispanic victims were less likely to be covered.

Second, concerning the number of column inches, homicides involving multiple and innocent victims were more likely to be covered.

2. Johnstone et al. (1994)

Johnstone et al. (1994) conducted their study in Chicago, Illinois. The study focused on 684 homicides in 1987 reported by the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Sun-Times* from 1987 to the first week of 1988.

The results of the analysis follow:

First, the regression analysis indicated that homicides involving multiple victims were more likely to be covered, while those involving Black or Hispanic victims were less likely to be covered.

Second, the cross-tabulation analysis indicated that homicides in which male offenders killed female victims were more likely to be covered.

3. Pritchard and Hughes (1997)

Pritchard and Hughes (1997) conducted their study in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The study focused on 100 homicides in 1994, for which a suspect was identified, reported by the *Sentinel* and *Journal* from 1994 to March 1, 1995.

An important aspect of this study is that it categorized types of newsworthiness.

Statistical deviance is "the extent to which something is unusual" (Pritchard and Hughes 1997:

51). Homicides with a large degree of statistical deviance are considered newsworthy; for example, unusual homicides, such as those involving White participants (suspects or victims).

Status deviance is "the extent to which a person or group is different, using the well-established benchmarks of high status in U.S. society" (Pritchard and Hughes 1997: 51). Homicides with a small degree of status deviance are considered newsworthy; for example, homicides involving high-status individuals, such as wealthy Whites.

Cultural deviance is "the extent to which an act is considered to be unhealthy, unclean, or perverted" (Pritchard and Hughes 1997: 51). Homicides with a large degree of cultural are considered to be newsworthy; for example, homicides involving elderly, child, or female victims.

Normative deviance exists "when an act violates formal norms" (Pritchard and Hughes 1997: 52). The analysis omitted normative deviance, because it only applies to homicides.

The results and discussion of the regression analysis follow:

First, homicides involving White participants, male suspects, and victims including females, children, and the elderly were more likely to be covered.

Second, homicides involving White participants and male suspects were covered based on status deviance, whereas those involving females, children, and senior victims were covered based on cultural deviance.

Third, "status deviance and cultural deviance are important components of newsworthiness, and that statistical deviance (unusualness) may be much less important than commonly assumed" (Pritchard and Hughes 1997: 49).

4. Sorenson et al. (1998)

Sorenson et al. (1998) conducted their study in Los Angeles, California. The study focused on 9442 homicides from 1990 to 1994 reported by the *Los Angeles Times*.

The results of the regression analysis follow:

First, homicides involving victims who were

female, children, or elderly, those in which the suspect was stranger to the victim, and those taking place in wealthier neighborhoods were more likely to be covered.

Second, homicides involving Black or Hispanic victims or victims with less than a high school education, those committed using non-firearm weapons, and those in which the suspect was intimate with the victim were less likely to be covered.

5. Weiss and Chermak (1998)

Weiss and Chermak (1998) conducted their study in Indianapolis, Indiana. This study focused on 106 homicides in 1995 reported by the *Indianapolis Star* from 1995 to January 1996.

This study primarily examined the race and gender of the victims. The results of the regression analysis follow:

First, considering the number of words, homicides involving female victims and multiple victims were more likely to be covered than those involving African American victims.

Second, considering the number of articles, homicides involving multiple victims were more likely to be covered, than those involving African American victims.

6. Lundman (2003)

Lundman (2003) conducted his study in Columbus, Ohio. This study focused on 640 homicides from 1984 to 1992 reported by the *Columbus Dispatch*.

The study focused on the race and gender of the participants but also examined other factors (weapons and circumstances). The results and discussion of the regression analysis follow:

First, concerning weapons, homicides committed with guns or other direct contact (other than guns and knives) were more likely to be covered.

Second, concerning circumstances, homicides involving involuntary manslaughter were less likely to be covered, while those involving multiple violators and victims were more likely to be covered.

Third, concerning race and gender, homicides

involving White violators were less likely to be covered, whereas those involving White or female victims were more likely to be covered.

Fourth, focusing on race, gender, and the intersections of race and gender, relative frequency was a weak and inconsistent explanation for the newsworthiness of homicides.

7. Paulsen (2003)

Paulsen (2003) conducted his study in Houston, Texas. This study focused on 4980 homicides from 1986 to 1994 reported by the *Houston Chronicle* from 1986 to 1995

The results and discussion of the regression analysis follow:

First, homicides involving multiple victims, female victims, and multiple offenders were more likely to be covered.

Second, homicides involving Black or Hispanic victims were less likely to be covered than those involving White victims. Moreover, homicides including offenders with motives for involvement in a crime were more likely to be covered.

Third, the results indicate that the *Houston Chronicle* focused on statistically rare incidents.

8. Buckler and Travis (2005)

Buckler and Travis (2005) conducted their study in Houston, Texas. This study focused on 249 homicides in 2001 and articles reported by the *Houston Chronicle* from 2001 to January 2004.

The results and discussion of the regression analysis follow:

First, a robbery-homicide was more likely to be covered.

Second, homicides involving minority suspects (African Americans or Asians) and those committed using an unusual weapon (other than a knife or firearm) were more likely to be covered.

Third, the results indicate that the *Houston Chronicle* focused on “homicides that are statistically deviant, involve a violation of strong cultural norms of behavior, and command strong emotional reactions

from the general public” (Buckler and Travis 2005: 18).

9. Gruenewald et al. (2009)

Gruenewald et al. (2009) conducted their study in Newark, New Jersey. This study focused on 664 homicides from 1997 to 2005 reported by *The Star-Ledger* from 1997 to 2005.

This study focused on the race and gender of the participants but also examined other factors (age and deviant lifestyle of the participant, weapon, and motive). The results and discussion of the regression analysis follow:

First, homicides involving Hispanic offenders were more likely to be covered than those involving Black offenders.

Second, homicides involving White victims were more likely to be reported as “specific” articles (stories specifically addressing the homicide occurrence).

Third, homicides involving high-age victims, and those with deviant lifestyles were less likely to be reported as “specific” articles.

Fourth, homicides committed with guns were more likely to be reported than those committed with other weapons.

Fifth, homicides with motives such as drug gangs, interpersonal disputes, and others were less likely to be reported as “specific” articles than those with domestic disputes as a motive.

Sixth, the result “provided partial support for the assertion that ‘cultural typification’ of homicide participants is an important dimension of newsworthiness, and that relative frequency is only a partial explanation for news selection bias” (Gruenewald et al. 2009: 270).

IV. Conclusions

The conclusions of the literature review are as follows:

First, homicides involving multiple victims are considered newsworthy.

Second, homicides involving female, children, and elderly victims are considered newsworthy.

Third, homicides involving racial minority (Black or Hispanic) victims are not considered newsworthy.

Fourth, the components of newsworthiness are not only statistical deviants but also cultural and status deviants, including race and gender.

A future task is to conduct a survey in Japan based on these newsworthiness trends.

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