GSG
Global Strategy Group

Innocent Until Proven Guilty?

A look at media coverage of criminal defendants in the U.S.

For the last half-century, mass incarceration has become a tool and accelerator of injustice in America. Unequal treatment of Americans – particularly those who are Black or brown, or who face economic hardship – in our justice system threatens the basic human rights of millions of people.

Inspired by our friends at the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), who have always understood the power words and images can have on outcomes within the criminal justice system, Global Strategy Group (GSG) has conducted a comprehensive media analysis of national and local coverage around 10 criminal cases – 5 with a Black defendant and 5 with a white defendant. We collected and collated information on more than 20 different topics, including the use of imagery, language choices, framing of defendant and victim, and reporter background.

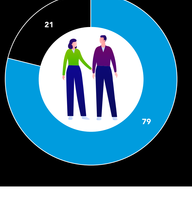
A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

Stark disparities exist between the types of images used for Black and white defendants.

Left: Photo from Mesa police by fox five officer accused of murder (3/15/16); Right: Photo from Recording between suspected Seminole Heights killer and his family won't be released (5/4/2019).

WHITE VICTIMS WERE NEARLY 4x MORE LIKELY

than Black victims to have a photo with friends or family included alongside coverage, reinforcing existing tendencies to dehumanize Black pain and suffering and, by the same token, put a face to white victims.



LABELS MATTER

Language used to characterize defendants also paints a biased story.

One-off nicknames and colorful quotes belie a larger trend to negatively characterize a defendant in media coverage, much of which is written prior to conviction. More personally descriptive words of the defendant are used when describing white defendants, while more crime-related descriptions are more heavily used for Black defendants.

Words characterizing white defendants

father
son
white
men
armed
guilty
charges
involved
Special
chased
ground
convicted
black
reported
charge
filed
recused
violent offender
violent offender
unsatisfactory
performance
34-year-old
22-year-old
self-defense
26-year-old
low-income enforcement
23-year-old
aggravated
confrontation
player
retired
Navy
Marine
Marine corps
Marine corps
Marine corps