A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

White defendants

Black defendants

A LOOK AT MEDIA COVERAGE OF CRIMINAL DEFENDANTS IN THE U.S.

• Philip Brailsford v. State of Arizona
• State of Georgia v. Gregory McMichael / White Defendants

A CASE STUDY: FLORIDA VS. HOWELL EMANUEL DONALDS III

57% of press releases involving Black defendants included images of crimes.

50% of press releases involving white defendants included images of crimes.

WHO SPEAKS?

Defendant, family, and friends

Prosecutor, victim, and community

AGGRESSIVE

LABELS MATTER

35% of press releases involving Black defendants used aggressive language.

25% of press releases involving white defendants used aggressive language.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MEDIA

1. Press releases should be limited to text.
2. Avoid using images of crimes.
3. Avoid using aggressive language.

WHAT WEERVED IN 2020

Types of Imagery Used of Defendants by Race

Stark disparities exist between the types of images used of defendants by race.

Mug shot

Exclusion of a defendant's name, particularly in favor of a label like "serial killer," is yet another way we see defendants in the context that their behavior was a precursor to aggression.

Jumpsuit

Howell Emanuel Donaldson's name was rarely mentioned in coverage, at the expense of the presumption of innocence.

Suit

Forgo images that drive perceptions of guilt and create a presumption of guilt.

A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

Language used to characterize defendants also paints a biased story.

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, journalists must take responsibility for their choice of words and images.

A LOOK AT MEDIA COVERAGE OF CRIMINAL DEFENDANTS IN THE U.S.

A leader in the field of criminal justice reform, GAO has collaborated with partners to develop recommendations for media to improve the way it covers criminal defendants.

Case Study: Florida vs. Howell Emanuel Donaldson III

This is a case study of how a single piece of reporting can impact public perception of a defendant.

Press releases: 61.5% of press releases involving Black defendants included images of crimes.

50.3% of press releases involving white defendants included images of crimes.

Innocent Until Proven Guilty?

For the last half-century, mass incarceration has become a tool and tactic of the criminal justice system. The result is that the basic human rights of millions of people in our country have been threatened.

In this GAO report, we analyze more than 20 different topics, including the use of imagery, language choices, and framing of defendant and victim, and reporter background.

This report aims to provide journalists with the tools they need to cover criminal defendants in a way that upholds the presumption of innocence and highlights the humanity of all individuals.

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