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Murder in Black: A Media Distortion Analysis of Homicides in Baltimore in 2010

Jaclyn Schildkraut[1] and Amy M. Donley[2]

Abstract

Crime stories, particularly homicide, are extremely prevalent in the media. The current study builds on previous literature by examining a nearly homogenous victim population (*N* = 223) to identify salient predictors of newsworthiness, particularly celebrated coverage, using *The Baltimore Sun*, the city's largest newspaper. Contrary to prior research, in this analysis, neither race nor gender were found to be consistent significant factors in receiving media coverage. Various factors, including females, older victims, White victims, and homicides by stabbings, asphyxiation, or other circumstances, were found to be indicators of several types of celebrated coverage.

Keywords

Baltimore, homicide, media, newsworthy, race

Introduction

Crime stories have become an intrinsic component of modern media. Studies have shown that stories pertaining to crime can account for up to 50% of news coverage (Chermak, 1995; Graber, 1980; Maguire, Sandage, & Weatherby, 1999; Surette, 1992). Previous research (Chermak, 1994, 1995; Gans, 1979; Humphries, 1981; Maguire et al., 1999; Pollak & Kubrin, 2007; Surette, 1992) has focused on the popularity of general crime news and its prevalence within various types of media. Studying crime in the news is important for several reasons. First, much of what society knows about crime is constructed directly in the media (Pollak & Kubrin,

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2007). Second, media can use stories of crime to sway public opinion (Chermak, 1994; Surette, 1992). Finally, the media "present a world of crime and justice that is not found in reality" (Surette, 1992, p. 246), thus creating an unbalanced understanding of crime.

The media devote much more attention to homicide than to property crimes even though property crimes are far more common (Chermak, 1995; Gruenewald, Pizarro, & Chermak, 2009; Meyers, 1997; Paulsen, 2003; Pritchard, 1985). A number of studies (Buckler & Travis, 2005; Chermak, 1995, 1998; Chermak & Chapman, 2007; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Johnstone, Hawkins, & Michener, 1994; Lundman, 2003; Paulsen, 2003; Peelo, Francis, Soothill, Pearson, & Ackerly, 2004; Pritchard, 1985; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Sorensen, Manz, & Berk, 1998; Weiss & Chermak, 1998; Wilbanks, 1984) have examined the extent of media coverage of homicide and have sought to explain factors that are salient in terms of what cases are covered versus those that are not. This form of research has been termed "media distortion analysis" by Gruenewald et al. (2009, p. 264). Not all homicides will receive media attention (Johnstone et al., 1994; Pritchard, 1985; Weiss & Chermak, 1998) and those that do will receive varying amounts of coverage (Gruenewald et al. 2009; Meyers 1997). Therefore, it is important for researchers to examine what factors contribute to certain homicides receiving coverage over others.

This study builds on the previous media distortion analyses conducted by examining the predictors of newsworthiness in a population that is far more homogenous than previous studies (such as Johnstone et al., 1994, or Paulsen, 2003, for example). Recently, Gruenewald et al. (2009) examined a homogenous population. Their study focused mainly on race indicators and did not examine the impact of other factors such as specific age groups, income levels, or unusual homicide weapons that were found to be salient predictors in other studies (e.g., Buckler & Travis, 2005; Chermak, 1998; Paulsen, 2003; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Sorensen et al., 1998).

In the current study, homicides in Baltimore, Maryland for the year 2010 are examined to answer the question, "What factors are salient in predicting both general and celebrated news coverage when the population of homicide victims is overwhelmingly homogenous?" Data from *The Baltimore Sun*, the city's largest newspaper, are used to identify cases and attributes of the homicides to identify which characteristics increase newsworthiness among the 223 homicide cases known to the Baltimore Police Department that occurred in 2010. Furthermore, while previous studies (e.g., Buckler & Travis, 2005; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Lundman, 2003; Paulsen, 2003; Sorensen et al., 1998; Wilbanks, 1984) have incorporated police data into their analysis, the present study focuses solely on data collected from the newspaper articles to have an unobstructed view into the presentation of crime exclusively from the newspaper and its writers.

Theoretical Orientation

Due to the overabundance of crime incidences, a number of stories are never presented in the media (Chermak, 1995; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997). Using their sense of

newsworthiness, journalists and editors make the decision of which stories are included and which are not (Chermak, 1995; Gans, 1979; Liska & Baccaglini, 1990; Lundman, 2003; Meyers, 1997). Surette has described newsworthiness as "the criteria by which news producers choose which of all known events are to be presented to the public as news events" (1992, p. 60). Meyers (1997) has posited that

> newsworthiness . . . [or the] qualities journalists believe make an event worth reporting . . . has never been easy to define. There are no hard-and-fast rules about what constitutes the news, and reporters and editors themselves are often vague about how they separate what to cover from what to ignore within the vast pool of occurrences that could, potentially, be news. (p. 18)

Media outlets will find stories to have varying amounts of newsworthiness based on a bevy of factors, not limited to their target audience and journalistic style.

Ultimately, crime news is essentially a product that the media wants to sell to their viewers (Buckler & Travis, 2005; Chermak, 1995; Johnstone et al., 1994; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997) and audiences typically favor stories that are graphic or violent in nature (Chermak, 1995; Gans, 1979). The need to produce news quickly and efficiently affects the manner in which newsworthiness is assigned (Chermak, 1995; Gans, 1979). News organizations must "rely on sources that are easily established and accessible, and abide by whatever organizational policy might be in place that govern their behavior" (Chermak, 1995, p. 24). These sources typically come from relationships with law enforcement personnel and criminal justice professionals (Chermak, 1995; Gans, 1979; Surette, 1992). These relationships not only provide the news organizations with reliable and consistent information about a crime but also do so while limiting expenditures in time and costs as the need to produce news efficiently also helps to define newsworthiness (Chermak, 1995; Maguire et al., 1999).

An important consideration of the role of newsworthiness is the perception of crime as a social threat. More specifically, the manner in which crime news is reported can have varying effects on the readers and their perceptions or fear of crime (Heath, 1984). The presentation of an abundance of local crime news, versus stories from other locales (which can give readers a feeling of safety by comparison), can lead to an increased level of fear by the readers (Heath, 1984; Liska & Baccaglini, 1990). Liska and Baccaglini (1990) also note that among crime stories, homicide stories are the strongest predictor of fear of crime for readers, especially in respect to celebrated coverage (stories that according to Paulsen (2003) appear in the first 15 pages of a newspaper). Other factors, such as the level of sensationalism of the crime and the proportion of crimes that are random, are also indicators of an increased fear of crime and social threat (Heath, 1984).

Selection decisions, therefore, are based in part on a range of considerations on what constitutes newsworthiness (Chermak, 1995; Gans, 1979; Liska & Baccaglini, 1990) and what crimes are worth presenting (Chermak, 1994; Weiss & Chermak, 1998). Chermak (1995), for instance, suggests that newsworthiness is assessed based

on five criteria: the violent nature of the crime, demographic characteristics of the victim and offender (such as age and occupation), characteristics of the news agency, the uniqueness of the event, and finally the event's salience. Other researchers (e.g., Johnstone et al., 1994; Paulsen, 2003; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997) have also suggested that higher levels of newsworthiness are given to crimes that are statistically rare or "high impact," meaning that they will generate more interest than a less serious but more common crime. Though homicides, for example, are the least common crimes to occur, they are also the most frequently presented in the media (Graber, 1980).

A Review of the Literature

Crime Portrayal in the Media

Crime news plays an important role in today's society. As many people will never be victims of crime, the media is typically used to shape individuals' beliefs about crime (Chermak, 1994; Graber, 1980; Humphries, 1981; Maguire et al., 1999; Surette, 1992). In fact, Surette (1992) notes that the mass media is the primary source of information about crime for nearly 95% of the general population. Crime news also has the ability to influence and manipulate public opinion and affect policy decision (Chermak, 1994; Surette, 1992). This public interest also helps to shape what is inevitably considered newsworthy and what gets left on the newsroom floor (Gans, 1979; Maguire et al., 1999; Surette, 1992). It is for these reasons why crime coverage is more prominent by comparison than other topics in the news (Chermak, 1995; Surette, 1992).

Specifically, murder typically receives the most attention of any type of crime news story (Chermak, 1994, 1995; Humphries, 1981; Maguire et al., 1999). In some instances, homicide and other violent crimes can represent a disproportionate amount of news coverage, sometimes more than 40% of crime stories (Chermak, 1995; Graber, 1980; Humphries, 1981; Paulsen, 2003; Pollak & Kubrin, 2007). In addition, as availability for coverage may be limited either due to time or space constraints, the media typically focuses on cases that are the most extreme to capture the audience's attention (Chermak, 1994; Pollak & Kubrin, 2007; Weiss & Chermak, 1998). In particular, those cases that receive coverage are considered to be "high amplitude" (Johnstone et al., 1994), or more specifically "those which deviate most from what is statistically normal" (Chermak, 1994, p. 580). These cases also typically receive more prominent coverage than any other type of crime (Chermak, 1994).

Predictors of General News Coverage

A number of studies (Buckler & Travis, 2005; Chermak, 1995, 1998; Chermak & Chapman, 2007; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Johnstone et al., 1994; Lundman, 2003; Paulsen, 2003; Peelo et al., 2004; Pritchard, 1985; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Sorensen et al., 1998; Weiss & Chermak, 1998; Wilbanks, 1984) have focused on

identifying salient predictors of whether or not a homicide case will receive any coverage in the media. In many instances, selection of cases for coverage is centered on the notion of the "worthy victim" (Gruenewald et al., 2009; Sorensen et al., 1998). Sorensen et al., in particular, define the "worthy victim" as "victims who were White, in the youngest and oldest age groups, women, of high socioeconomic status, killed by strangers" (1998; p. 1514). This notion has been echoed in the findings of other researchers.

Both female and White victims were found to be salient predictors of whether or not a victim receives newspaper coverage by Johnstone et al. (1994), Lundman (2003), Paulsen (2003), Peelo et al. (2004), and Pritchard and Hughes (1997). When examining age, both child and older victims were posited to lead to a greater likelihood of coverage (Chermak, 1995; Paulsen, 2003; Peelo et al., 2004; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997). Both Johnstone et al. (1994) and Wilbanks (1984) found child victims to be predictors of coverage, though older victims did not have a greater propensity for coverage. Gruenewald et al. (2009) also found an inverse relationship between age and general news coverage.

Moving beyond the notion of the "worthy victim," research has also looked at other situational attributes of homicide cases to examine what may predict whether or not the case receives coverage. One such attribute is the presence of multiple victims. A number of studies have found a significant impact of multiple victims on an increased chance for coverage of a homicide case (Chermak, 1998; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Johnstone et al., 1994; Paulsen, 2003; Peelo et al., 2004; Sorensen et al., 1998; Wilbanks, 1984). In fact, Paulsen (2003) found the presence of multiple victims to be the strongest predictor of coverage in his study of Houston homicides, and Sorensen et al. (1998) found that cases with multiple victims were 4.5 times as likely to receive any coverage than those with single victims.

The type of homicide, or more specifically the type of weapon used in the homicide, has yielded less uniform findings. In previous research (e.g., Buckler & Travis, 2005; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Johnstone et al., 1994; Paulsen, 2003; Sorensen et al., 1998), homicide by firearm has been the most prevalent weapon. Both Gruenewald et al. (2009) and Sorensen et al. (1998) found that cases involving firearms were more likely to be covered than incidents involving other types of weapons. Conversely, incidents involving unusual weapons beyond firearms and cutting instruments were found to be more salient predictors of news coverage in studies by Buckler and Travis (2005) and Johnstone et al. (1994).

Predictors of Prominent News Coverage

In addition to predicting whether a homicide receives *any* coverage in the newspaper, research (Buckler & Travis, 2005; Chermak, 1998; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Johnstone et al., 1994; Lundman, 2003; Paulsen, 2003; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Weiss & Chermak, 1998; Wilbanks, 1984) has also focused on factors that may lead to an increase in the prominence of the coverage. Celebrated coverage, as it is also sometimes

called, can be measured in terms of premium or front-page placement in the paper (Chermak, 1998; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Johnstone et al., 1994; Lundman, 2003; Paulsen, 2003). It can also be measured across higher word counts for the stories (Buckler & Travis, 2005; Chermak, 1998; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Johnstone et al., 1994; Paulsen, 2003; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Weiss & Chermak, 1998; Wilbanks, 1984) or an increased number of articles for the incident (Buckler & Travis, 2005; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Paulsen, 2003; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Weiss & Chermak, 1998). A number of the predictors of general coverage have also been found to be predictors of celebrated coverage.

Age of the victim has been shown to have a significant impact on story prominence in several studies, though there have been mixed findings (Chermak, 1998; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Paulsen, 2003; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997). Gruenewald et al. (2009), for example, found that an increase in age led to a decrease in the number of articles published by incident. Chermak (1998) and Pritchard and Hughes (1997), however, found that older victims would lead to an increase in prominent coverage, particularly with higher word counts. Pritchard and Hughes (1997) also found that older victims would also yield an increase in the number of articles published by incident as well as front-page placement of the stories. Both Paulsen (2003) and Pritchard and Hughes (1997) found that the presence of youth victims also led to an increase in word count and front-page or celebrated coverage.

Race and gender have similarly been found to have an effect on the amount of celebrated coverage a homicide will receive. White victims have been shown to be the most significant predictor of prominent coverage in respect to race (Buckler & Travis, 2005; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Lundman, 2003; Paulsen, 2003; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Weiss & Chermak, 1998). The presence of White victims has consistently resulted in an elevated word count (Buckler & Travis, 2005; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Paulsen, 2003; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Weiss & Chermak, 1998), more articles (Paulsen, 2003; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Weiss & Chermak, 1998), and more front-page articles (Lundman, 2003) than for Black or Hispanic victims. Females, rather than males, have also been shown to be more significant predictors of all three types of celebrated coverage (Buckler & Travis, 2005; Lundman, 2003; Paulsen, 2003).

In addition to individual victim characteristics, case-level attributes have also shown a significant effect on prominent coverage. The presence of multiple victims, for instance, has been shown to be one of the most significant predictors of celebrated coverage (Buckler & Travis, 2005; Chermak, 1998; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Johnstone et al., 1994; Paulsen, 2003; Weiss & Chermak, 1998; Wilbanks, 1984). Paulsen (2003) also found that median income for the location of the homicide has a positive, significant relationship with all three types of prominent news coverage. Unusual weapons, those excluding guns and knives, were also found to lead to an increase in word count and number of articles written (Buckler & Travis, 2005).

In sum, homicides seem to be considered newsworthy when they are unusual or contain elements that are out of the ordinary (Gruenewald et al., 2009; Meyers, 1997). In many urban areas, victims of homicide are disproportionately African American (Meyers, 1997). As such, many journalists may not consider these victims to be

especially newsworthy, though some will receive coverage (Pritchard, 1985). It is important to remember that these findings may be somewhat limited. First, there may be a limited period of coverage (Paulsen, 2003). In addition, these studies may not address changes in the reporting techniques of the papers (Paulsen, 2003) nor may they take into consideration how the stories themselves are selected for publication.

The Current Study

The present study examines news reporting in *The Baltimore Sun* of homicides that occurred in Baltimore, Maryland, between January 1 and December 31, 2010, to determine the factors that contribute to newsworthiness for certain victims. Baltimore has one of the highest homicide rates in comparison to most cities nationwide. In 2010, Baltimore had the third highest murder per capita rate in the nation behind New Orleans and St. Louis, with Detroit a close fourth (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010). In a city where homicides are somewhat commonplace, occurring at an average of one homicide every 1.6 days, research is needed to determine how the local media determines newsworthiness out of such a large pool of victims and what attributes of these victims make their stories publishable.

A number of media distortion analyses of homicides (Buckler & Travis, 2005; Chermak, 1995, 1998; Chermak & Chapman, 2007; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Johnstone et al., 1994; Lundman, 2003; Paulsen, 2003; Peelo et al., 2004; Pritchard, 1985; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Sorensen et al., 1998; Weiss & Chermak, 1998; Wilbanks, 1984) have been performed in various cities across the nation over the last several decades, and each study has evolved the way in which newsworthiness is measured. Some studies (e.g., Johnstone et al., 1994; Sorensen et al., 1998; Wilbanks, 1984) focused on factors contributing to general newspaper coverage, while others (e.g., Buckler & Travis, 2005; Chermak, 1998; Paulsen, 2003; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Weiss & Chermak, 1998) also included measures for celebrated or prominent news coverage. However, it was not until the study by Gruenewald et al. (2009) that a relatively homogenous population was examined to determine what factors influence publication, though race was the primary focus of the study.

The present study expands on Gruenewald et al.'s (2009) research by examining the impact of factors such as age, homicide weapon, and income levels found salient in previous studies (see Buckler & Travis, 2005, Chermak, 1998, Paulsen, 2003, or Pritchard & Hughes, 1997, for example) within a homogeneous population. We examine not only where these variables affect a case's probability for any coverage but also which factors are predictors of celebrated coverage including more articles, longer story length, and more prominent placement within the newspaper. In addition, unlike previous literature, this study examines all homicides in the year, not just those in which an offender was identified, allowing for analysis of this potentially relevant factor to be assessed. Finally, unlike other studies (e.g., Buckler & Travis, 2005; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Lundman, 2003; Paulsen, 2003; Sorensen et al., 1998; Wilbanks, 1984) that used police data on the offenders, the present study focuses only on the representation of the homicide victims within *The Baltimore Sun*.

Research Question and Hypotheses

This study seeks to answer the question, "What factors are salient in predicting both general and celebrated news coverage when race is no longer the prominent consideration?" Previous literature (Chermak, 1998; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Johnstone et al., 1994; Lundman, 2003; Paulsen, 2003; Peelo et al., 2004; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Sorensen et al., 1998; Wilbanks, 1984) has suggested other factors are also significant predictors of whether or not a homicide receives coverage and the prominence of such coverage. These include victim characteristics (e.g., age and gender) as well as case-specific attributes (e.g., the type of homicide weapon used and the income level where the homicide occurred). Based on the previous research, this study would expect to find that several of these characteristics would affect general news coverage and the amount and type of celebrated coverage an incident receives.

Building on the idea of the "worthy victim" (Gruenewald et al., 2009; Sorensen et al., 1998), this study focuses on the impact of factors influencing news coverage beyond just race. This study hypothesizes that statistically rare victims including females, children, and older people, will receive more coverage than victims who are considered to be statistically normal (such as males and adults aged 18 to 50). It is also hypothesized that the presence of atypical victims will receive more prominent coverage than typical victims. Finally, this study hypothesizes that atypical homicide weapons such as blunt force, asphyxiation, or other unusual circumstances, will generate a greater propensity for coverage and more celebrated coverage than typical firearm homicides.

Method and Data

Research Setting

Baltimore is the largest city by population in Maryland and is spread over approximately 80 square miles with a population density of approximately 8,000 people per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). The city population is 52.9% female and 47.1% male (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). The racial composition is 63.7% Black, 29.6% White, 2.3% Asian, and 0.4% American Indians or Alaska Natives (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). People reporting to be two or more races comprise the final 2.1% of the city's population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). In addition, 4.2% of Baltimore's population identified themselves as being of Hispanic or Latino descent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). The median household income for the city of Baltimore in 2010 was US$38,738 as compared to US$69,475 for the state of Maryland (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

According to data compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau and reported by the FBI (2011) in their Uniform Crime Report for 2010, the population of Baltimore was listed as 639,929 citizens. In 2010, there were 223 homicides within the city limits (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). This means that for every 100,000 citizens in Baltimore, there were 34.85 homicides in 2010.[1] Homicide makes up a very small percentage of the total number of violent crimes within the city (or any city). In 2010, it was

estimated that there were 9,316 violent crimes committed; so only 2.39% of the violent crimes were homicides. In comparison, homicide accounted for 1.18% of all violent crimes nationally.
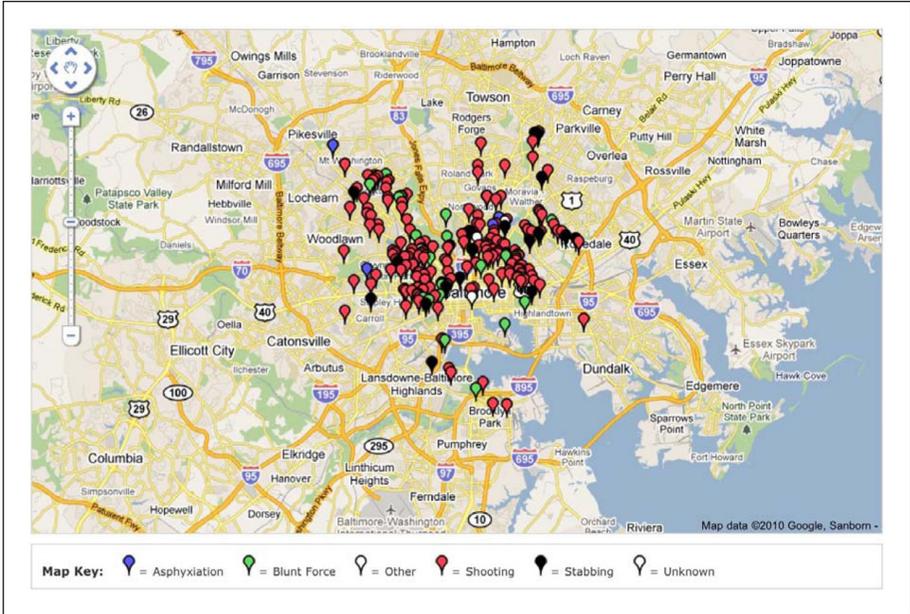
Data

The data for this study come from *The Baltimore Sun*. *The Baltimore Sun* was selected, as it is the main newspaper for the region with a circulation rate of more than 1.1 million readers on a weekly basis that covers approximately 51% of the designated market area (Scarborough Research, 2008). Reporters at *The Baltimore Sun* possess the freedom to determine what cases are newsworthy and subsequently get published, as opposed to having editors making the decisions, as is the case at other newspapers (J. Fenton, personal communication, January 6, 2011). However, the actual crime data that is placed on the map comes directly and entirely from the Baltimore Police Department. Thus the crime map operated by *The Baltimore Sun* on their web site reflects all of the homicides that occurred in 2010 that were known to the Baltimore P.D. Fenton (personal communication, January 6, 2011) notes that officials from the department contact the paper daily with updated homicide totals and case information. When information on a case is added, dropped, or updated, the paper updates the homicide map accordingly.

To access the data for this study, a search was conducted through the crime map for all homicides that occurred in the year 2010. There were 223 murders and the results were indicated with pins on the interactive map of Baltimore (Figure 1). Each of the markers was then visited and all of the relevant information on the homicide was compiled, including the victim's name, age, gender, and race, as well as the date the body was discovered and the cause of death (shooting, stabbing, asphyxiation, blunt force, or other). The address and zip code where the victim's body was discovered was also recorded to determine whether or not there were any instances of multiple victim murders (which there were not in 2010).

After data on the demographic characteristics of victims were recorded, *The Baltimore Sun*'s online newspaper archive was searched for each victim's name. The victim's name was selected as the searchable variable as it is independent and individual to each case, barring any overlap in names.[2] Article attributes such as the date of publication, section of publication, page number of print, and article word count were also recorded. The online archive is consistent with the print version of the newspaper in regard to these attributes. Victims who had multiple articles published about them were also noted. Opinion publications such as editorials and obituaries were omitted from the set of articles as were any articles published more than 60 days after the date the body was discovered. Limiting articles to those within a 60-day time period ensures that homicides that occur earlier in the year are not given more time to receive coverage as compared to those that occur later in the year. Therefore, a body discovered on January 1, 2010 was followed for the same length of time as a body discovered on December 31, 2010.

Building on Gruenewald et al.'s (2009) media distortion analysis of a homogenous population, the present study examines not only predictors of general news

Figure 1. *The Baltimore Sun* interactive crime map; 2010 homicide data displayed
Source: © *The Baltimore Sun*, used with permission; http://essentials.baltimoresun.com/micro_sun/homicides.

coverage but also predictors of prominent news coverage found salient in previous studies (e.g., Buckler & Travis, 2005; Chermak, 1998; Johnstone et al., 1994; Paulsen, 2003; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Weiss & Chermak, 1998). As such, Paulsen's (2003) study of Houston homicides serves as the basis for the study's construction, with a replication of many of the variables in his study. Several adjustments are made in how these concepts are measured based on the availability of data and differences in the layouts of the two newspapers, *The Houston Chronicle* and *The Baltimore Sun*. Multiple independent and dependent variables are used for analysis over a variety of determinants that have been correlated to a high level of newsworthiness (see appendix).

Dependent Measures

The first dependent variable addresses "basic selection outcomes," encompassing which cases received coverage and which did not (Paulsen, 2003). Consistent with prior studies (e.g., Gruenewald et al., 2009; Johnstone et al., 1994; Sorensen et al., 1998), those that received any mention in the newspaper (excluding opinion/editorial pieces or obituaries) were coded as receiving coverage (1), and those that received no mention were coded as no coverage (0).

The next two dependent variables are employed to examine news coverage prominence. Prior research (e.g., Paulsen, 2003 or Sorensen et al., 1998) suggests that an elevated word count or article count will translate into the case being considered more prominent. To keep the operationalization of these variables consistent with prior research, word count—a total of the word lengths for all articles about a particular case—is measured continuously, and a count of the number of articles is also recorded for each case. OLS regressions are then run on both dependent variables to determine which independent variables will contribute to an elevated word count or higher number of articles for the cases.

The final dependent variables are designed to measure coverage prominence based on placement of the story within the newspaper. As all stories regarding the homicide cases were found in the local section of the paper, attention is paid to where the articles are published within the section. Though Paulsen (2003) suggests that celebrated coverage occurs when articles are placed within the first 15 pages of the section, all of the articles pertaining to homicides in Baltimore fell within the first 15 pages of *The Sun*, suggesting by his definition that all cases received celebrated coverage. To be able to measure celebrated coverage within *The Baltimore Sun*, this variable was coded so that stories that were placed on the first three pages were considered celebrated, whereas coverage that came in later columns and pages was not considered to be celebrated coverage. This includes stories that were published in the "Around the Region" and "Crime Briefs" columns, typically found on the fourth through sixth pages of the newspaper additional variable was created based on whether the victim received any story on the front page (coded as 1) or not (coded as 0).

Explanatory Measures

Characteristics drawn from the stories themselves, more specifically characteristics of the victim and the homicide, are used as the independent variables. Important factors including the victim's age, race, and gender, as well as the type of homicide (weapon) committed, are included in the analysis. The median household income for the census tract where the homicide occurred is also included as a proxy for the socioeconomic status of the victim as well as the neighborhood as a whole. This measure is used to test for previous findings that homicides that occur in wealthier locations receive more coverage (see Johnstone et al., 1994 or Sorensen et al., 1998). Unlike the majority of previous studies including Paulsen's (2003) study, all homicides were used in the analyses, not just those in which a suspect or offender had been identified. Therefore homicide cases were coded for whether or not a suspect had been identified in the media coverage. In total, six independent variables were coded, and dummy variables were constructed for the victim's race, age, and homicide type.

Analysis

Just above 73% of homicides occurring in Baltimore in 2010 received some form of coverage in *The Sun*. Though Paulsen's study had a coverage rate of 69%, his study

also spanned 8 years of homicides. In comparison to previous studies that covered 1 year of homicides, those that analyzed larger cities, including Chicago and Miami, found a lower percentage of cases covered (26% and 60% respectively). Studies that examined smaller cities, such as Indianapolis and Milwaukee, had higher percentages of cases covered (92% and 100% respectively). Given Baltimore's size, a 73% coverage rate is not unexpected.

Table 1 presents the results of univariate analysis of all homicides in Baltimore and those that received coverage in *The Sun*. Females, a group that represents less than one tenth of homicide victims in Baltimore, received similar amounts of coverage in *The Sun* in comparison to males. In looking at the breakdown of coverage by race of the victim, the results show that coverage is again similar, despite the observation that Black victims are more than six times more common than White victims. Similar to Paulsen's study, victims aged 51 and older are a group with one of the lowest totals of victims (8.1%), yet predictably they are the group with the highest percentage of coverage (88.9%). However, contrary to prior research, victims aged 17 and under (5.4% of all victims) actually receive the lowest percentage of coverage in the paper of all age categories (66.7%).

The median household income of the census tract where the victim was found also yields interesting results. Though the smallest concentration of homicide cases occurred in areas with a median income of less than US$15,000 (less than 4%), these homicides were the most likely to receive coverage (87.5%) in *The Baltimore Sun*. Those areas considered to be wealthier, with median incomes of US$40,000 or greater, accounted for just above 5% of all homicide cases and had 83% coverage in the paper. The majority of homicides took place in areas with median household incomes between US$20,000 and US$24,999 (29.6%); 77.3% of these homicides received coverage.

In terms of the type of homicide, shootings are the most prevalent in Baltimore (77.1%) yet receive the lowest percentage of coverage among the various homicide types (70.9%). Interestingly, cases where the cause of death is unknown or other (such as the case of one victim who was pushed into the harbor and drowned) represent less than 2% of the total number of homicides yet received coverage 100% of the time.

In the present study, only 33 of the 223 cases were found to have an identified suspect in print. This is 14.8% coverage in all articles, and 20.3% of cases when excluding those cases where the victim(s) received no coverage. According to Fenton (personal communication, January 5, 2012), the clearance rate for Baltimore homicides in 2010 was 52.5% as of December 28, 2011. With this figure in mind, having a low percentage of identified suspects in the articles data set is not unanticipated.

Such univariate analysis can be informative and can provide a glimpse into which cases may be covered and potential factors affecting such coverage. However, more complex analysis will provide a better explanation as to how these factors can affect coverage. Table 2 provides the results of a logistic regression for factors that are predictors of newspaper coverage. Unlike prior studies (e.g., Johnstone et al., 1994 or Paulsen, 2003) that found a significant relationship between newspaper coverage and factors including multiple victims, female victims, and multiple offenders, the results of our logistic regression indicate that there is no statistically significant relationship

Table 1. Coverage of Homicide Incidents by Victim Characteristics, Homicide Types, and Offender Identifications

	Actual incidents		Homicides covered	
	n	%	n	%
Victim gender				
Male	204	91.5	150	73.5
Female	19	8.5	13	68.4
Total	223	100.0	163	73.1
Victim race				
Black	202	90.6	150	74.3
White	13	5.8	9	69.2
Hispanic	6	2.7	3	50.0
Other/unknown	2	0.9	1	50.0
Total	223	100.0	163	73.1
Victim age groups				
1-17	12	5.4	8	66.7
18-24	66	29.6	48	72.7
25-35	86	38.6	62	72.1
36-50	41	18.4	29	70.7
51 or older	18	8.1	16	88.9
Total	223	100.0	163	73.1
Median income				
Less than US$15,000	8	3.6	7	87.5
US$15,000-US$19,999	36	16.1	26	72.2
US$20,000-US$24,999	66	29.6	51	77.3
US$25,000-US$29,999	61	27.4	47	77.0
US$30,000-US$34,999	24	10.8	9	37.5
US$35,000-US$39,999	16	7.2	13	81.3
US$40,000 and greater	12	5.4	10	83.3
Total	223	100.0	163	73.1[a]
Homicide type				
Shooting	172	77.1	122	70.9
Stabbing	23	10.3	19	82.6
Asphyxiation	20	9.0	15	75.0
Blunt force	4	1.8	3	75.0
Other/unknown	4	1.8	4	100.0
Total	223	100.0	163	73.1
Suspect identified				
Yes	33	14.8	33	100.0
No	190	85.2	130	68.4
Total	223	100.0	163	73.1

a. χ^2 = 18.571.
$p < .01$.

Table 2. Logistic Regression Results for Basic Newspaper Coverage[a]

Variables	Victim received coverage in *The Sun*	Odds ratio
Victim gender		
Female victim	−.790 (.619)	0.454
Victim race		
White victim	−.489 (.680)	0.613
Hispanic victim	−1.295 (.883)	0.274
Victim age		
Older victim (ages 51 and older)	1.181 (.783)	3.258
Youth victim (ages 17 and under)	−.666 (.632)	0.514
Median income	.000 (.000)	1.000
Homicide type		
Stabbing	.680 (.592)	1.974
Blunt force	.443 (.594)	1.557
Other (Includes asphyxiation and unknown)	1.876 (1.225)	6.529
(Constant)	1.568	

Note: Coverage results are reported as unstandardized coefficient with standard error in parentheses.
a. Each homicide case was followed for 60 days after the date the body was discovered to allow adequate time for a case to receive coverage within the paper. In addition, this provides the same review period for a homicide that occurred on January 1 and a homicide that occurred on December 31.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

between newspaper coverage and any of the predictors tested. Prior studies (e.g., Paulsen, 2003) also indicated a significant relationship between coverage and victim age and median income, but these predictors were not significant in this model.

OLS regressions were run to determine the impact of a range of incident characteristics on two dependent variables: word length and number of articles written per homicide case (Table 3).[3] In examining word length within the regression model, only one predictor tested in the model showed a statistically significant effect on the word length of an article. Incidents involving White victims are shown to receive 939 more words on average per article than Black victims.

A similar analysis was conducted to examine the number of articles per homicide victim. Cases where the victim was in the older population (aged 51 or older) was found to be statistically significant, averaging approximately one article more per incident. However, race did not show to be a significant predictor of an increased article count nor did any of the other variables tested in the model.

A final logistic regression (Table 4) examines factors contributing to receiving front-page coverage as well as celebrated coverage (coverage within the first 3 pages of the paper). In terms of a victim receiving front-page coverage, cases where the victim was stabbed to death were found to be statistically significant. Older victims, those aged 51 and older, were also more likely to receive front-page coverage. Interestingly, youth victims (aged 17 and under) were not a significant predictor of front-page

Table 3. OLS Regression Results for Word Length and Number of Articles Per Homicide Incident

Variables	Word length	B	Number of articles	B
Victim gender				
Female victim	−184.219 (424.047)	−.034	−.491 (.504)	−.076
Victim race				
White victim	939.595 (459.399)*	.145	.881 (.545)	.114
Hispanic victim	174.231 (639.916)	.019	−.144 (.760)	−.013
Victim age				
Older victim (ages 51 and older)	720.214 (382.177)	.129	1.009 (.449)*	.152
Youth victim (ages 17 and under)	258.534 (452.367)	.040	.079 (.537)	.010
Median income	−.013 (.014)	−.067	−1.464E−5 (.000)	−.062
Homicide type				
Stabbing	381.708 (341.681)	.076	.605 (.406)	.152
Blunt force	−155.120 (382.177)	−.029	.130 (.454)	.020
Other (includes asphyxiation and unknown)	87.887 (632.037)	.011	.488 (.750)	.050
(Constant)	577.122		1.302	
	$R = .214$		$R = .230$	
	$R^2 = .046$		$R^2 = .053$	

Note: Coverage results are reported as unstandardized coefficient with standard error in parentheses.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

coverage, despite being noted as a vulnerable and more newsworthy population in other studies (e.g., Johnstone et al., 1994; Paulsen, 2003; Pritchard and Hughes, 1997; Sorensen et al., 1998).

Homicides by asphyxiation or other circumstances, as well as older victims, were statistically significant indicators of celebrated coverage. Interestingly, and contrary to previous findings, female victims received *less* celebrated coverage as compared to male victims. Homicides due to asphyxiation account for just 9% of all cases. Therefore, these instances would be considered to be statistically rare, or "high amplitude" (Johnstone et al., 1994). It would therefore be posited that females, who account for just 8.5% of all homicide victims, would receive celebrated coverage and yet this is not the case.

Discussion

News stories that cover serious crime are typically the most frequently covered as they are most likely to capture the audience's attention (Chermak, 1995; Humphries, 1981; Maguire et al., 1999; Surette, 1992). The disproportionate nature of crime coverage, particularly of homicide, has led to an increase in public fear due to a misunderstanding of the actual frequency of these crimes (Sorensen et al., 1998; Surette, 1992). In

Table 4. Logistic Regression Results for Homicide Articles According to Placement in Newspaper

Variables	Front page coverage	Odds ratio	Celebrated coverage[a]	Odds ratio
Victim gender				
Female victim	−.409 (1.156)	.664	−2.271 (1.120)*	.103
Victim race				
White victim	.607 (.940)	1.835	.247 (.687)	1.281
Hispanic victim	−18.811 (15473.944)	.000	−.760 (1.161)	.468
Victim age				
Older victim (ages 51 and older)	1.633 (.680)*	5.118	1.090 (.530)*	2.974
Youth victim (ages 17 and under)	1.545 (.884)	4.690	−.042 (.720)	.959
Median income	.000 (.000)	1.000	.000 (.000)	1.000
Homicide type				
Stabbing	1.446 (.634)*	4.244	.263 (.507)	1.301
Blunt force	.277 (.928)	1.319	.116 (.608)	1.123
Other (includes asphyxiation and unknown)	−18.748 (13824.870)	.000	2.839 (1.215)*	17.104
(Constant)	−3.192		−.500	

Note: Coverage results are reported as unstandardized coefficient with standard error in parentheses.
a. Celebrated coverage includes victims with articles published in the first three pages of the local section.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

reality, however, violent crimes occur relatively infrequently (Surette, 1992), though the media will present these cases as indicators of social disorder (Gans, 1979). In general, there is an overrepresentation of crime in the news (Chermak, 1998; Chermak & Chapman, 2007; Graber, 1980; Humphries, 1981), and the abundance of crime stories have led to the need for news organizations to assign values of newsworthiness to determine which stories receive coverage. Researchers (Buckler & Travis, 2005; Chermak, 1995, 1998; Chermak & Chapman, 2007; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Johnstone et al., 1994; Lundman, 2003; Paulsen, 2003; Peelo et al., 2004; Pritchard, 1985; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Sorensen et al., 1998; Weiss & Chermak, 1998; Wilbanks, 1984) have undertaken the role of examining factors contributing to news-worthiness of homicide cases through media distortion analyses.

This study contributes to the growing body of media distortion analyses in several ways. First, while Gruenewald et al. (2009) were the first to examine a demographically homogenous population, their research focused primarily on the interaction of race and gender with incident characteristics to predict story selection. This study expands on their findings in a similarly homogenous population to incorporate additional indicators found to be salient in previous research (see Paulsen, 2003 or Sorensen et al., 1998, for example). Second, in addition to adding measures for youth and older victims, median income, and type of homicide weapon into the analysis, the present study also includes

models where the importance of celebrated coverage is tested. Finally, unlike previous research (e.g., Buckler & Travis, 2005; Gruenewald et al., 2009; Lundman, 2003; Paulsen, 2003; Sorensen et al., 1998; Wilbanks, 1984) that incorporated police and offender data into their analyses, the present study focuses only on victim characteristics and the newspaper as the source of coverage to understand the true role of the newsmaking process.

One interesting finding that is in opposition to nearly all of the previous research is that none of the predictors tested were statistically significant in determining whether or not a homicide receives *any* coverage. This finding suggests that in a more homogenous population where the distribution of gender and race are also skewed, factors beyond simple demographics must be considered in determining a homicide's coverage. Another important consideration is that there were no homicides in 2010 in Baltimore with multiple victims, a factor that Paulsen (2003) found to be the most significant predictor of coverage in his study.

Beyond whether a homicide receives any coverage at all, attention should also be paid to those cases that do receive coverage and the prominence of said coverage. Paulsen, for example, found that placement of a story is also a factor influenced by newsworthiness—premium placement is given to victims who are "statistically rare" (2003, p. 309). Statistically rare victims, also considered to be "worthy victims" (Gruenewald et al., 2009; Sorensen et al., 1998), are "White, in the youngest and oldest age groups, women, of high socioeconomic status, killed by strangers" (Sorensen et al., 1998; p. 1514). However, in Baltimore, being statistically rare was not always a predictor of newsworthiness.

Female victims, a group that comprises only 9% of the victim population, received *less* celebrated coverage on average than male victims. The same finding was true for juveniles—of the four children under the age of 5 who were murdered, one child received 1,739 words in coverage, two received less than 250 words each, and one child received no coverage at all. Victims who were White did receive an elevated word count but did not receive celebrated coverage or more articles. Despite the fact that the most newsworthy victim in terms of word count (17,492 words) was Black, overall Blacks received a lower word count as compared to Whites (mean number of words for Blacks = 319.6 and for Whites = 1,206.5). This poses the question that in a city such as Baltimore, where the majority of homicide victims is Black, male, and killed with a firearm, what makes one worthy of coverage over the next?

Perhaps then, the most significant finding comes not from the individual-level characteristics of the victims but rather the context and content of the homicide case. Previous research has suggested that newsworthiness is greater for cases that have more unique elements (Chermak, 1995; Johnstone et al., 1994). "If it bleeds, it leads" seems is no longer the case as the circumstances surrounding a homicide must be out of the ordinary to garner media attention, especially in a city such as Baltimore where the occurrence of homicide is far more commonplace.

A cursory examination of the most newsworthy homicides in Baltimore during 2010 further supports this idea. The most newsworthy victim in 2010 is a Black male in his

early 30s (Schildkraut, 2011). While a cursory examination of his case would lead one to suspect that he would receive little to know coverage based on pure demographics, when the context of the case is examined, it becomes plainly obvious why he would be so newsworthy. The victim was a Marine who was home on leave who went to a nightclub with his sister and some friends. On leaving the club, he tapped a lady on her behind, angering her companion, an off duty police officer with a checkered past. The officer responded by shooting the Marine 12 times, then fled, and was not apprehended for several days.

Other highly covered cases in Baltimore in 2010 also have atypical circumstances that could be posited to have led to their increased newsworthiness (Schildkraut, 2011). For example, the most newsworthy female in the data set (also the oldest person in the data set) was gunned down by her son while she was a patient at John's Hopkins Hospital. He also shot her physician (who survived) before turning the gun on himself. Two offenders with extensive rap sheets stabbed a prominent White researcher also linked to the institution while he was walking home in a safe area of town. Other newsworthy cases included a well-respected police detective who was killed by a mentally ill offender, and a Hispanic man (a statistically rare victim in Baltimore) killed as part of a hate crime (Schildkraut, 2011).

There are in fact several commonalities between each of these cases. First, each of the homicides involves some atypical and highly sensational circumstances beyond the drug shootings Baltimore typically experiences. Second, in each of these cases, a suspect was identified in print, which occurred less than 15% of the time in this study. Though not necessarily surprising, the identification of a suspect was found to be the most salient predictor of prominent coverage. In many cases, however, homicide in Baltimore is a case of "criminals killing criminals," and many times witnesses are too afraid to come forward or are killed before they can testify (J. Fenton, personal communication, January 6, 2011). Therefore, the identification of a suspect, especially in print, is in itself rare and can lead to an elevated level of newsworthiness.

The overarching theme of atypical characteristics of a case as predictors of newsworthiness has several implications. First, the selection of news stories based on sensationalized themes provides the audience with a distorted representation of the problem at large (Surette, 1992). In addition, the audience may be especially concerned with stories of local homicides that can lead to an increase of fear as opposed to stories of homicide in other localities (Chermak, 1995). Finally, as news organizations rely on advertising sales as a key source of revenue, and space is sold based on their ability to attract an audience, the need to present sensationalized stories to keep reader interest may also increase (Chermak, 1995). The most covered cases in *The Sun* are also some of the most sensationalized.

Though the findings of this study build on Gruenewald et al.'s (2009) study of homicide in homogenous population and contribute new findings to a continually growing body of literature, this study is not without limitations. An important consideration for all media analyses involving newspaper coverage is the potential difference in online newspaper coverage as compared to coverage in print versions. While there are no differences between print and online coverage in the current study, this could be

an important area to study when looking at other cities. In many cities, reporters are given more freedom with what is printed online as opposed to what makes it in print, potentially affecting what is deemed newsworthy.

As other researchers (see Buckler & Travis, 2005; Chermak, 1998; Gruenewald et al., 2009; or Pollak & Kubrin, 2007, for example) have noted, there is a need to continue to examine the effects of newsworthiness on homicide and crime in general. The results of each of all of the media distortion analyses performed to date are not overwhelmingly generalizable to one another or the nation at large based on demographic disparities. The present study would benefit not only from being replicated in different years or over extended period of times to determine if the salient factors remain as predicted but also from examining other large, urban homogenously populated cities such as Detroit to determine the generalizability of this study's findings to similarly composed cities. Furthermore, future research may also consider a comparison between small, medium, and larger homogenously populated urban cities to determine if newsworthy factors found salient will hold across different population sizes as well as if the size of the city affects the amount of newsworthiness a case will receive. The need to continue to study this ever-growing relationship between newsworthiness and homicide will continue so long as the audience continues to consume the news.

Appendix
Coding of Variables Used in Analyses

Dependent variable list
  1. *Sun*: Dummy variable, with all homicides covered in *The Baltimore Sun* being coded as 1 and all those not covered in *The Baltimore Sun* being coded as 0.
  2. Word length: Continuous variable measuring the total word length of all articles written about a particular homicide incident.
  3. Number of articles: Continuous variable measuring the total number of articles written about each incident.
  4. Front Page: Dummy variable with all incidents that were covered on the front page of the local section of the paper being coded as 1 and all other incidents being coded as 0.
  5. Celebrated: Dummy variable with all incidents that were covered in the first three pages of the local section of the paper being coded as 1 and all other incidents being coded as 0.

Independent variable list
  1. Female victim: Dummy variable used in the various regression analyses, with all female victims coded as 1 and male victims coded as 0.
  2. White victims: Dummy variable with all White victims being coded as 1 and all other races being coded as 0. Importantly, Black victims were used as the comparison category for analysis.

(continued)

Appendix. (continued)

3. Hispanic victim: Dummy variable with all Hispanic victims being coded as 1 and all other races being coded as 0. Importantly, Black victims were used as the comparison category for analysis.

4. Victim age: Continuous variable indicating the age of the victim.

5. Youth: Dummy variable with all victims aged zero to 17 being coded as 1 and all other ages being coded as 0. Importantly, victims aged 18 to 50 were used as the comparison category for analysis.

6. Older people: Dummy variable with all victims aged 51 or older being coded as 1 and all other ages being coded as 0. Importantly, victims aged 18 to 50 were used as the comparison category for analysis.

7. Median household income: Continuous variable providing information on the median household income for the census tract in which the homicide incident occurred. This variable is used as a proxy for the socioeconomic status of the victim as well as the neighborhood as a whole.

8. Homicide type stabbing: Dummy variable with all homicides by stabbing being coded as 1 and all other homicides being coded as 0. Importantly, homicides committed by firearm were used as the comparison category for analysis.

9. Homicide type asphyxiation: Dummy variable with all homicides by asphyxiation being coded as 1 and all other homicides being coded as 0. Importantly, homicides committed by firearm were used as the comparison category for analysis.

10. Homicide type other (includes blunt force and unknown): Recoded dummy variable with all homicides by other means (including blunt force, other causes, and unknown causes) being coded as 1 and all other homicides being coded as 0. Importantly, homicides committed by firearm were used as the comparison category for analysis. Suspect identified: Dummy variable used in the various regression analyses, with all cases where a suspect was identified coded as 1 and cases where a suspect was not identified coded as 0.

Notes

1. For comparison, the homicide rate for Gruenewald et al.'s (2009) study of Newark, NJ was 28 homicides per 100,000 people. The population of Newark at the time of the study was 274,000 residents. For Lundman's (2003) study of Columbus, OH, the homicide rate was

21.6 homicides per 100,000 people. The population of Columbus at the time of the study was 632,910 residents.

2. For example, there were two victims named Charles Bowman—one was 16 years old and the other was 72 years old. In the event of an overlap of identical names, the date the article was published and the victim's age was used to link an article with a particular victim.

3. Negative binomial regression models were also run for both dependent variables and the results were not substantively different from those of the OLS models. Due to an insufficient number of observations in the negative binomial regressions, which can also be problematic in maximum likelihood estimations (Long, 1997), OLS regression models were included in the paper for consistent analysis and interpretation. The results of the negative binomial regressions are available on request.

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Bios

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