

Muslims and Latinos much more prominent in TV crime news than in real-life crime

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If it seems as if most terrorists are Muslims and almost all immigrant lawbreakers are Latinos, it may be because you're watching national TV news - not because those things are true.

That's one implication of a study of five years of network and cable crime news led by University of Illinois communication professor Travis Dixon.

The study, recently published online by the *Journal of Communication*, sampled 146 [episodes](#) of prominent news programs focused on breaking news (rather than commentary) that aired on ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS, CNN, Fox News, MSNBC and Univision over the calendar years 2008-12.

Dixon found that among those described as domestic terrorists on those programs, 81 percent were identifiable as Muslims. Yet in FBI reports for the same period, only 6 percent of domestic terrorist suspects were Muslim, or about one in 17. (In fact, terrorism on American soil is far more likely to be committed by white supremacists, Dixon said.)

Likewise, among those described as immigrants accused of a crime on those news programs, almost all (97 percent) were identifiable as Latinos, according to the study - yet only about half (47 percent) of immigrants are Latinos, according to a cited 2013 report from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Among immigrants described on those programs as undocumented, 99 percent were identifiable as Latinos, according to the study - yet only 75 percent of undocumented immigrants were Latinos, according to a well-regarded 2005 report by the Pew Hispanic Center.

The results show that "the entire way we conceive of these policies is through a particular kind of ethnic lens," Dixon said. "Our conceptualization of various issues is so tied to race and ethnicity considerations that we've actually been somewhat misinformed."

Dixon found no significant difference on these results between the crime stories aired on network news programs versus those on cable. The sample size of 146 episodes, 90 of which contained crime stories, was not large enough to make valid comparisons between specific programs, he said.

Dixon conducted the research for the study while a professor at the University of California at Los Angeles, and the episodes studied were among those available in UCLA's Communication Studies Digital News Archive. Trained student coders watched the programs and collected the data.

The episodes included in the sample were from "ABC World News Tonight"; "CBS Evening News"; "NBC Nightly News"; "PBS NewsHour"; "Anderson Cooper/Anderson Cooper 360," "CNN Newsroom Live," and "The Situation Room" on CNN; "Fox News Live" and "On the Record with Greta Van Susteren" on Fox News; "MSNBC Live"; and "Univision Ultimate Hora" and "Noticero Univision" on Univision.

Additional research was done while Dixon was a visiting scholar at the Center on Community Philanthropy at the University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service. Dixon's co-author on the study is

Charlotte Williams, director of the center, as well as an Arkansas professor of public health.

In contrast with the overrepresentation of Muslims and Latinos in network and cable crime stories, Dixon found that African-Americans were significantly underrepresented in those stories, as both perpetrators and victims of violent crime.

According to the study, blacks were 19 percent of the violent perpetrators in the news accounts, yet were 39 percent of those arrested during that period, based on U.S. Department of Justice Uniform Crime Reports. They were 22 percent of homicide victims in the news accounts versus 48 percent in the national crime reports.

These results are contrary to previous research, by Dixon and others, that has shown blacks as overrepresented, especially as perpetrators, in television crime coverage. "This is something I don't think anyone has ever found in any study before," he said.

These results are in line, however, with studies showing that African-Americans are almost invisible in other ways on national television news - rarely seen as spokesmen, experts or in other roles, Dixon said. "This says that those findings in other areas apply to crime news as well, and that was kind of surprising to us."

One possible explanation, Dixon said, is that the perceived internal threat from crime has declined as a national issue since the 1990s, partly as a result of both declining [crime](#) rates and a greater perceived external threat, post-9/11, from terrorism and immigration.

That explanation and the results also fit with a "guard dog" perspective of news coverage, Dixon said. According to this perspective, the media often behave like a sentry for society's power structure. Those with the

least power receive the most bias in coverage, and [news](#) stories get greater attention if they identify something as an intruder or threat, he said.

More information: The paper, "The Changing Misrepresentation of Race and Crime on Network and Cable News," is available online from the *Journal of Communication* - [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10...1111/jcom.12133/full](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcom.12133/full)

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