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Police-Citizen Shootings that Result in Death or Injury to an Officer or Citizen:

Local, Urban News Media and Evaluations of Newsworthiness

Kevin Buckler

University of Houston-Downtown

&

Cristal Casas

University of Houston-Downtown

&

Elizabeth L. Gilmore

University of Houston-Downtown

Abstract

Use of force on and shootings of citizens by police officers received substantial national media attention in recent years, particularly since the Michael Brown/Darren Wilson incident that captured the nation's attention in 2014. The issue was reignited in the spring and summer of 2020 with the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, and Jacob Blake. Concurrently, several high-profile ambush-style shootings of police officers by citizens in New York City, Dallas, and Baton Rouge, for instance, have garnered national media coverage. Little attention in the academic literature has addressed how incidents of firearm related deaths and injuries from police-citizen interactions are covered by news media. The available studies are limited because, owing to difficulties in securing data from police departments, they utilize media databases to identify coverage rather than beginning the analysis with a list of events that occurred in a specific geographical jurisdiction. Additionally, the prior studies show a tendency to focus on media coverage of high-profile cases. Lastly, there is little to no attention in the extant literature on localized media coverage of these cases that occur in a specific urban jurisdiction. This study addresses these gaps in the literature by examining all police-citizen shooting events that occurred in Harris County, Texas (Houston), from September of 2015 through June of 2019 where a citizen or a police officer was killed or injured by firearm. News articles on each event that were published in the *Houston Chronicle* were collected and analyzed. The study examines the factors that make some of these events more or less newsworthy than others. Newsworthiness is conceptualized as case specific factors that make the case appear marketable to readership and as themes in national and grassroots coverage that enable a specific case to be linked to past items that appeared in the news.

Keywords: newsworthiness, police shootings

Introduction

Police-citizen interactions that lead to the use of force by police officers or violence by citizens toward the police are an area of increased public concern. When these events occur and become fatal or produce injuries to either a police officer or a citizen, there is a tendency for the parties involved and their supporters to head to their respective corners and double-down on their versions of what happened. The shooting of Michael Brown (who was Black) by Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson (who is White) in August of 2014 is a seminal event in contemporary police-community relations.¹ Community activists, believing that Michael Brown was unduly gunned down, developed a “hands up, don’t shoot” narrative² and further advanced the “Black Lives Matter” movement that originated following the death of Trevon Martin in Florida,³ each of which remains powerfully embedded in social culture. The development and advancement of Black Lives Matter elicited a subsequent response and movement by police supporters who asserted that “Blue Lives Matter”⁴ and that “All Lives Matter.”⁵

The Brown/Wilson (Ferguson) case led to a groundswell of perspectives on how police should and should not enforce law and engage interpersonally with minority citizens, particularly in an urban jurisdiction. The case also enhanced the focus of the national media on police-citizen interactions that result in injury or death of a Black citizen. Subsequent cases, including those of Philando Castile (St. Anthony, Minnesota), Terence Crutcher (Tulsa), Sam DuBose (Cincinnati), Eric Garner (New York City), Freddie Gray (Baltimore), Laquan McDonald (Chicago), Tamir Rice (Cleveland), and Alton Sterling (Baton Rouge), to name a few, are among those that garnered substantial national and grassroots media attention.⁶ The police shootings database of the *Washington Post* indicates that from 2015 through 2019, of the persons killed by police where the race or ethnicity of the citizen was known, 50.1% were White, 26.4% were Black, and 18.6% were Hispanic, with the remainder comprised of other races or ethnicities. During this period, the number of citizen shooting deaths by police remained relatively stable with an initial decrease followed by slight year-to-year increases. In 2015 there were 994, 962 in 2016, 986 in 2017, 990 in 2018, and 999 in 2019.⁷ Police officer deaths from firearm at the hand of a citizen, with a substantially lower base number, increased from the previous year in both 2016 and 2018.^{8, 9} The number of police officers killed by firearm in 2015 was 38, 62 in 2016, 42 in 2017, 51 in 2018, and

¹ Smith, M. (2019, August 7). Policing: What changed (and didn’t) since Michael Brown died? *New York Times*. Retrieved from the Nexis-Uni database on September 29, 2019.

² Grinberg, E. (2015, January 11). Why ‘hands up, don’t shoot’ resonates regardless of evidence. Retrieved from the CNN.com on September 29, 2019.

³ Hafner, J. (2016, August 9). 2 years later, Michael Brown’s death remains a movement that sparked a movement; Ferguson now shorthand for wellspring of anger, springboard of calls for justice. *USA Today*. Retrieved from the Nexis-Uni database on September 29, 2019.

⁴ Miller, M.E. (2018, December 22). When the badge feels like a burden. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from the Nexis-Uni database on September 29, 2019.

⁵ Flegenheimer, M. (2015, July 15). Mayor seeks to strike a balance at memorial. *New York Times*. Retrieved from the Nexis-Uni database on September 29, 2019.

⁶ The Associated Press (2017, September 15). A look at high-profile police-related deaths of U.S. Blacks. *Associated Press*. Retrieved from the Nexis-Uni database on September 29, 2019.

⁷ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>.

⁸ Staglin, D. (2019, January 1). 144 police officers died in line of duty in 2018, reversing a one-year decline. *USA Today*.

⁹ Pane, L. M. (2016, December 30). Number of police officers shot, killed on the job rose sharply in 2016. *PBS News Hour*.

44 in 2019.¹⁰ Much, although not all, of the 2016 increase resulted from ambush-style shooting deaths of police officers, the most high-profile of which occurred in Dallas (5 officer deaths) and Baton Rouge (3 officer deaths).

During the spring and summer months of 2020, at a time when the nation was dealing with the global pandemic of COVID-19, the issue of shootings between officers and citizens again exploded into public consciousness. The deaths of George Floyd in Minneapolis¹¹, Breonna Taylor in Louisville, and Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta, as well as the shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin (a city situated just south of Milwaukee and north of Chicago), spurred media attention and public debate. In 2020, as of the end of July, the number of White citizens killed by police by firearm was 242 (54.4%), 123 Blacks (27.6%), and 80 Hispanics (18%), which is consistent with the 2015-2019 data.¹² There was a slight upward shift in the number of police shootings of citizens from January to July of 2019 (564) in contrast to January to July of 2020 (591), a percent increase of 4.8%. With respect to officers killed in the line of duty by firearm from January to the end of August, there were 30 in 2019 and 32 in 2020.¹³ The 2014 shooting death of Michael Brown and the 2020 shooting deaths/injuries of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, and Jacob Blake galvanized mass media attention and social justice movements on the issue of police shootings. Year-to-year national media coverage of police shootings has ebbed and flowed with major incidents of the killing of Black citizens by White police officers. Most recently, from January to the end of August of each year, there was a 27% increase from 2019 to 2020 in coverage of police shootings in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*. National media coverage of police shootings appears to have peaked in 2016 in the aftermath of the Ferguson shooting (which occurred in August of 2014). A year-to-year comparison of the period that followed the Michael Brown death shows a substantial increase in national media attention. From August to the end of December, coverage of police shootings increased by 108% from 2013 to 2014.¹⁴

Academic attention on the intensity of media coverage of police-citizen shooting events is limited. This is unfortunate because a typical citizen has a very narrow realm of direct experiences to pull from to form an opinion on these occurrences. In the absence of direct knowledge, citizens take their cues from and form opinions based on vicarious experiences that are knowable primarily through mass media coverage (McCombs & Shaw 1972; Goffman, 1974) or word of mouth exchanges with others who have more direct experiences. In this regard, news media may influence both what people think about and talk about related to criminal justice and the judgments that people make about the specific events or the issues that are covered (Beckett, 1994).

In the extant literature four published works have examined media attention to police-citizen shootings (Klahm, Papp, & Rubino, 2016; McCulloch, 1996; Obasogie & Newman, 2016; Potterf & Pohl, 2018). A fifth media coverage study more broadly addressed police use of deadly force (Hirshfield & Simon, 2010). There are

¹⁰ Data are taken from the FBI releases on “Statistics on Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted,” for each of the respective years 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019.

¹¹ George Floyd was not killed by firearm by police. The death, combined with that of Breonna Taylor, reengaged the public on the issue of police shootings during the spring and summer of 2020.

¹² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>.

¹³ <https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/leoka>.

¹⁴ Nexis-Uni was used to search for news items in these outlets that contained the words “police” and “shooting” within the same sentence. Here are the number of news items by year: 2016 (3,456), 2017 (2,960), 2018 (2,877), and 2019 (2,805). From January to the end of August the number of news items in each of 2019 and 2020 were 1,817 and 2,299, respectively, a 27% increase (aftermath of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, and Jacob Blake). From August to December of 2013 there were 713 news items published by these outlets, compared to 1,485 for the same time period in 2014 (the time period after the Michael Brown killing). While this is an imperfect method and may not capture all coverage, it is used here to illustrate the national attention to the issue.

several limitations with the current literature. An important methodological limitation in the extant research relates to breadth of focus. The prior research either addresses media coverage of only one high-profile case (McCulloch 1996; Potterf & Pohl, 2018), or the study used a media database (such as Lexis-Nexis) as the starting point (a keyword search) for examining news coverage of several distinct events (see Hirshfield & Simon, 2010; Klahm, Papp, & Rubino 2016). This limitation of the prior research is understandable given that police departments traditionally have had considerable discretion in the amount of information on police-citizen shootings that is publicly available, and many departments have not released much data on these events.

One published study is an exception to this trend. Obasogie and Newman (2016) started with a database and a list of police-citizen shootings. While their approach is sound, that study may lack comprehensive analysis of media coverage of these events because the authors analyzed only one media article that the relevant database (killedbypolice.net) linked as a source of information on the death. Initial coverage may be followed up by additional articles when more information becomes available. In aggregation, the prior studies do not adequately address police-citizen shootings from a comprehensive framework that would allow for a complete understanding of media behavior relating to these events (inclusive of high-profile and less-than-high profile cases, and immediate and ongoing coverage). Scholarly analysis of that which has become high-profile (in large part because it received substantial news attention) or of only those instances that received press coverage omits from critical observation those incidents that occur but receive no news coverage at all. To understand what editors and journalists filter in and filter out in the presentation of these issues to the public necessitates attention to cases that the media cover and those that receive no attention at all (Pritchard & Hughes, 1997).

A second limitation of the extant research is that all of the available studies that we discovered focus on police use of deadly force against citizens narrowly and exclude shows of force by the citizen directed at officers. A more expansive approach is to consider how the press covers both shootings of officers by citizens and of citizens by officers in police-citizen interactions. This approach is particularly salient due to the divisive rhetoric that ensues in the aftermath of police shootings of citizens, with police claims that their lives matter as well. A third notable limitation of the extant work on media coverage of deadly encounters between police and citizens is that local or regional coverage of these events frequently give way to analysis of nationally prolific incidents. In four of the five prior studies, the analysis focused either exclusively on a case of national significance or examined how a nationally covered event impacted subsequent coverage of the topic of deadly police-citizen encounters. The one published work that studied local media coverage (Obasogie & Newman, 2016) was not a comprehensive examination of all local media coverage of the events. Rather, it analyzed only one article per case that was linked to the database as a source of information.

A fourth and final limitation of the available literature is that there is little attention devoted to understanding differential focus of the media on factors that make a particular shooting more or less newsworthy than other cases. Left out of the empirical work in this area is a focus on how media *comprehensively* cover these events at a *local level*. The current study seeks to address each of these limitations. It examines, for a particularized period of time, newspaper coverage of all police-citizen incidents in a local jurisdiction (Harris County, Texas) where a police officer or a citizen was killed or injured by firearm during a police-citizen interaction. It utilizes three media measures to assess newsworthiness of the event, whether any news item was published, number of articles published, and the number of words published.

Prior Studies of Media Coverage of Police Shootings

Both Hirshfield and Simon (2010) and Potterf and Pohl (2018) conducted a qualitative inquiry on articles published and utilized a pre-determined coding structure. They coded content pertaining to both the officer and the citizen on seven distinct dimensions: rationalization (or repudiation), expurgation, inclusion, passivization, objectification, anonymity, and invisibility. Potterf and Pohl (2018) clarify the coding structure by noting that the seven dimensions are “paired frame concepts” in that they have implications for whether a “law and order” frame or, in the alternative, a “social justice” frame is implicit in the content. Hirshfield and Simon (2010) found that most articles resorted to a stereotypical portrayal of police and the citizens involved in the incidents. The citizens involved were cast as social and physical threats, whereas police were portrayed as performing legitimate institutionalized roles.

Obasogie and Newman (2016) and McCulloch (1996) also used a qualitative-based inquiry to study media coverage of police-citizen shootings. The approach of Obasogie and Newman (2016) involved collection of information on the media’s extent of reliance on the police account of the event (relative to non-police narratives), the justification used by the officer to describe the events that led to the shooting and whether these were subjective or objective, descriptions of the citizen killed and the area (geographic location) where the killing occurred, the race of the officer and citizen, and photograph(s) used in the story. They found that often the media take a “colorblind” stance by not mentioning or discussing the race of the officer and citizen. Moreover, they concluded that news media advance the dominant narratives of the police, while criminalizing the citizen involved. McCulloch (1996) explored how two Melbourne daily newspapers portrayed a fatal police shooting of a citizen, and found that police controlled the press narrative by selectively filtering information to the media. Newspapers aided this by uncritically reporting the police-supplied information.

In contrast to these four studies, Klahm, Papp, and Rubino (2016) collected newspaper articles on police shootings from the Lexis-Nexis database by using keyword searches for a time period of nearly a year-and-a-half. They quantitatively analyzed the content and compared coverage across circumstances where White and Black citizens were involved. Articles on Black suspects were significantly less likely, compared to articles on White suspects, to mention the suspect’s criminal history, that the suspect possessed a weapon, and that there was a formal ongoing investigation. Articles on Black suspects, in contrast to White suspects, were more likely to state the race of the officer involved, allude to officer wrongdoing, mention the community response, reference another previous police shooting, discuss race in relation to a prior shooting, and be written in a tone that was favorable to the suspect.

Newsworthiness of Police-Citizen Shooting Events in Harris County

Newsworthiness is defined here to mean case-specific characteristics that may lead a journalist to believe that an event would be of interest to the organization’s readership or viewership, and factors that make an event appear to fit well with existing recent news themes in national, regional, local, or grassroots media coverage. Newsworthiness can be evaluated and measured based on whether events that have certain qualities are more likely to receive any coverage at all, or on whether events that have these qualities receive more extensive coverage. This section discusses the nature of journalistic work and identifies qualities of a shooting event between the police and a citizen that may make it more newsworthy than other police-citizen shooting events.

Local media organizations are influenced by market-driven concerns and organizational constraints (Buckler, & Salinas, 2009). News organizations exist to generate profits for shareholders (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006; Lipschultz & Hilt, 2002), and therefore, news and editorial decisions are influenced by market imperatives. Journalists and editors assess potential news stories on the basis of market-driven newsworthiness, and these assessments are informed by notions of “deviance” (Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Shoemaker, Chang, & Brendlinger, 1987; Shoemaker, Danielian, & Brendlinger, 1991). Deviance, according to Pritchard and Hughes (1997), who synthesized various perspectives on the concept, can be statistical (compared relative to what is typical), cultural (compared against social conceptions of what is healthy, clean, and un-perverted), normative (compared to standards of law), or can be based on status (the social standing of those persons involved). In essence, potential news events that are relatively rare, are more in violation of cultural expectations of conduct, offend existing codified standards of law that specify what conduct is most serious, and those that involve harm to persons of higher social standing receive more press coverage. In evaluations of what is newsworthy, Pritchard and Hughes found that journalists ground their judgments in their beliefs about what sells to the readership or viewership of the media outlet. They further found that this assessment is based on what is known about the event at the time (ahead of the daily deadline for the news outlet). Basic information about a police-citizen shooting event is generally made available by the police to the press, such as who (citizen and/or officer) was killed or injured, whether the officer was on or off duty, the demographic qualities of the officers and citizens involved, and the circumstances that led to the police-citizen encounter.

Those cases where a police officer is killed or injured will likely be viewed as more newsworthy than events where a citizen is the only person killed or injured. An officer’s death is statistically deviant (recall that the data above established a lower baseline for officer deaths at the hands of citizens, compared to citizen deaths at the hands of officers). When an officer is killed in a shooting by a citizen the event also meets the cultural, normative, and status elements of newsworthiness. Firing on an officer is harmful to society, it is listed as a factor to make the case death penalty eligible in the state of Texas¹⁵, and on criminal justice matters, law enforcement officers are traditionally held in higher social standing than citizens. Similarly, the deviance framework implies that events where an officer is injured in a shooting will likely lead to more press coverage. Police-citizen shootings that involve an off duty officer similarly meet the criteria for higher assessments of newsworthiness. They are relatively rare (statistical deviance), with some estimates suggesting that 12-17 percent of killings of citizens by police officers occur while the officer is off duty (Fyfe, 1980). This finding from the Fyfe study is consistent with the data from the current study of Harris County, Texas (16%). Some of these off duty events can involve attacks on an officer either at home or in public, and others can concern an off duty officer working an additional security job for a business. Status, cultural, and normative deviance can also be present in these situations and make an off duty officer event more newsworthy.

The deviance framework advanced by Pritchard and Hughes (1997), as it pertains to race and ethnicity, is more difficult to apply. Statistical deviance implies that cases that involve White male citizens will receive the most media attention, followed by Hispanic male citizens, and then by Black male citizens. In the dataset for the current study, Black male citizens are involved most often followed by Hispanic male citizens, and then by White male citizens. Statistical deviance also leads to an expectation that Black male officer cases will receive the most media attention, followed by Hispanic officer cases, and then by instances that involve a White officer. The Harris County dataset used here contains mostly White male officers, followed by Hispanic male officers, and then by Black male officers. Status deviance would make the same sort of prediction as statistical deviance

¹⁵ Texas Penal Code, Section 19.03.

with regard to the race/ethnicity and sex of the citizen. Status deviance is more difficult to apply to the race/ethnicity of the officer, since the status as an officer in and of itself elevates the standing of the person involved as an officer. Normative deviance is also less useful in predictions about race and ethnicity, as the law does not recognize differences in seriousness of the shooting death or injury on the basis of race or ethnicity. In contemporary times, a potential application of cultural deviance relates to shootings that involve Black officers. Cases that involve a Black officer may receive more attention in the press owing to a real or perceived potential community backlash that may come to be for a Black officer involved in something that so impacts and harms the Black community.

A police-citizen shooting that has an element of police misconduct will be viewed as more newsworthy. The presence of misconduct makes the event culturally deviant. Tremendous trust and confidence is placed in police. When this trust is violated it is unhealthy for society and damages the police-community relationship. Chermak and Weiss (2005) described the relationship between the media and police as interdependent and cooperative, yet tenuous. News organizations rely on the police for a steady stream of crime-related content, while police organizations generally see the need to effectively utilize the media in an effort to control messaging to citizens concerning police activity and legitimacy. Despite this interdependent relationship, news media organizations “must protect the image that they are the great watchdogs – the fourth estate – of American democracy” (p. 503). Reporters, therefore, must be careful to not “burn” the police, out of fear that they may “lose access to this critical source of information.” (p. 503). In turn, police departments must be willing and prepared to contend with scrutiny from the press. This interdependent between the police and the press becomes strained amid allegations of police misconduct or abuse of authority. While the press covers police in a generally positive manner in run-of-the-mill crime and criminal justice stories, in feature items on celebrated cases of alleged police misconduct, a different tone and tact is often taken by reporters (Chermak, McGarrell, & Gruenewald, 2006).

A final market-driven aspect of newsworthiness relates to the circumstances that led to the police-citizen shooting. In the data on Harris County events the most common circumstances were an emergency request (or a call for assistance) and a situation where an officer was present to observe a crime. Statistical deviance suggests that the coverage for the other situations, a traffic stop, the targeting of an officer for a crime, execution of a warrant, and hostage or barricade situations will receive more media attention. Cultural deviance is also relevant. When a citizen calls on the police to respond and assist with a situation and when a citizen involved in a shooting was engaged in a crime that was observed by an officer, the parties involved may be viewed as contributing to a serious event that led up to the interaction with the officer. In contrast, when police-citizen shootings occur during an execution of a warrant or at a traffic stop, the interaction is initiated by the police and may involve persons who have not done anything wrong (other than a traffic violation) and are not yet suspects of a crime. These police-initiated interactions may be more culturally deviant. In addition, a hostage or a barricade situation where a citizen is controlling the movements of other persons varies from cultural expectations of behavior.

Aside from journalistic evaluations of market-driven considerations, organizational constraints influence journalistic output (Buckler, Griffin, & Travis, 2005; Fishman, 1978; Welch, Fenwick, & Roberts, 1998). An organizational constraint is defined here as a structural circumstance of the *news production process* that influences journalists’ perceptions of newsworthiness of a particular event. Local coverage of events may be influenced by organizational constraints such as the agenda that is set by the national media, and more recently, by agenda setting at a grassroots level (Hirshfield, & Simon, 2010). News companies structure what they focus on based on existing patterns of coverage in previous days, months, or years (Fishman, 1978). An event that can

be thematically linked to an ongoing series of similar media events has a greater likelihood to be viewed as newsworthy.

Indeed, national mainstream media, post-Ferguson, retained the issue of police use of force as an ongoing theme in news coverage, and responses to this theme in the national media agenda further solidified it. Starting in 2015, the *Washington Post* and the *Guardian* began to collect data on police fatal force shootings. Some departments responded to increased public scrutiny with a renewed focus on body worn cameras for officers, giving media an additional angle of the police misconduct theme to cover. Police and their supporters advanced the notion that there is a “war on cops” that was and is being waged in the aftermath of Ferguson (McGuire, Nix & Campbell 2017; Nix, Wolfe, & Campbell 2018). There was also speculation that there is a “Ferguson Effect” on crime rates in large cities in the United States, because, hampered by increased public scrutiny, police are standing down or de-policing (Nix & Pickett 2017; Pyrooz, Decker, Wolfe, & Shjarback 2016). These reactions created additional lines of potential news coverage from the original theme. In addition, the widespread availability of social media has spurred grassroots and citizen-initiated journalism (Carney, 2016), sometimes in an effort to bypass traditional mainstream media (Everbach, Clark, & Nesbett, 2018). Social media narratives on police and use of force are themed around solidarity of the movement, instances of police violence, movement tactics, continuous reference to Ferguson, and expressions against counter movement efforts (Ince, Rojas, & Davis, 2017).

The police shootings news theme at the national level was constructed mainly based on data suggesting that Black citizens, and more specifically Black males, are disproportionately impacted in police shootings. The rise to prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement contributed to the national media’s framing of the issue as one that is predominately about Black males. It is documented that Hispanics, and particularly Hispanic males, are also disproportionately impacted by police shootings, yet Hispanic deaths have not generated the level of national media attention compared to Black citizen cases.¹⁶ A contributing factor may be gaps in perceptions of injustice between Black and Hispanic citizens and distinctions between these two groups in their historical experiences in the United States (Buckler & Unnever, 2008). Considering the dominance of the Black Lives Matter and Black disproportionality themes in the national and grassroots media coverage, local media attention to the issue of police-citizen shootings in the current study will likely skew toward more coverage of Black male citizen cases and less coverage of cases that involve a Hispanic male citizen. The dominant national and grassroots media themes also support a prediction that cases of a White male officer involved will garner more local media attention.

Cases that receive substantial coverage in the national and grassroots media often concern an unarmed citizen. It is expected that local instances of police-citizen shootings that involve an unarmed citizen will generate more media coverage.

¹⁶ See Santa Cruz, N., Vives, R., & Gerber, M. (2015, July 18). Why the deaths of Latinos at the hands of police haven’t drawn a much attention. *Los Angeles Times*; Arce, J. (2020, July 21), It’s long past time we recognized all the Latinos killed at the hands of police. *Time.*; and Florido, A. (2016, November 5). Latino activists ask, when should Brown Lives Matter? *NPR*.

Methods

Data

This study examines media decisions on the newsworthiness of police-citizen shooting events that occurred in Harris, County, Texas. These include events where a police officer and/or the citizen discharged a firearm, and there was an injury or a death of an officer and/or a citizen. These data do not include those incidents where a citizen or a police officer fired a weapon and no one was injured or killed. The incident is the unit of analysis. Incident reports were obtained from the publicly accessible website of the Texas Office of the Attorney General (OAG).¹⁷ The authors used data from the downloaded reports of each Harris County, Texas (inclusive of Houston) police-citizen shooting that resulted in an injury or a death to a citizen or an officer. The study's timespan is September of 2015 through the end of June of 2019. News articles about the incidents are taken from the *Houston Chronicle* (collected from the *NewsBank* database).

The incident reports include information on the demographics of the officer and the citizen and data related to a description of the incident. In an instance of injury or death of a citizen, the report includes basic information such as the date and location of the incident and the demographics of each officer and each citizen involved (age, sex, race, and ethnicity). The incident report also lists whether each citizen was injured or died, whether each citizen used, carried, or exhibited a deadly weapon, and whether the peace officer was on or off duty. The report further details the circumstance that initiated the incident (emergency call or request for assistance; traffic stop; execution of a warrant; hostage, barricade, or other emergency; or other). In cases of an injury or death to a peace officer, the incident report includes the date and location of the event, a demographic profile of all officers injured or deceased (age, sex, race, and ethnicity), and the demographic data of each citizen involved who injured or killed an officer (age, sex, race, and ethnicity). This report also notes whether the officer was injured or died from the incident.

The information on each report was used to identify newspaper articles about the case that were published in the *Houston Chronicle*. The database *NewsBank* for the *Houston Chronicle* was searched using the following "Advanced Search" parameters: date range (date of the incident and up to one week after the incident) AND all text (the address of the event from the incident report). As an additional check to ensure thoroughness of the news article database, a search was run for each incident with these parameters: date range (date of the incident and up to one week following the incident) AND all text ("police" or "deputy" or "constable"). For each search we considered the headline of each article and opened and read the article for each headline that could be related to a police-citizen shooting event. This included broad headlines that concerned "state" or "local" news items where several items were covered in one story and were separated by different subheadings. To make a "match" between the news article and the incident report, we compared the content of each. Lastly, as an added check to obtain all relevant articles, where an officer or citizen name was provided in a news article we ran separate searches of each name from the date of the incident up through the date that the search was conducted.

¹⁷ In the 2015 session, the Texas state legislature passed House Bill (HB) 1036. The bill modified state law to require Texas law enforcement agencies to report information on police-citizen encounters that result in an injury or a death from a firearm. Reports are submitted to the Texas Office of the Attorney General (OAG) and are downloadable from the OAG website.

Measures and Plan of the Analysis

Outcome Measures. The outcome measures for the study are the media coverage variables. *Article Published* is a dichotomous measure of whether the newspaper published any article on the incident (1=at least one article published; 0=no article published). The variable *Number of Words Published* is a count of the total number of words published about the incident, and the *Number of Articles* variable is a count of the number of articles published. These three measures – *Article Published*, *Number of Words Published*, and *Number of Articles Published* – cover a broad scope of print media decision-making. The news media do not necessarily cover all incidents, so the *Article Published* variable enables examination of the distinctions between those cases that receive coverage and those that get no coverage. The *Number of Words* and the *Number of Articles* variables are measures of the comprehensiveness and intensity of the local print media coverage.

Citizen and Officer Demographic Factors. The study examines whether there are differences in the amount of attention that an incident receives in newspaper coverage based on certain characteristics of the persons involved and the circumstances of the event. To examine whether sex of the victim and race of the victim influences the amount of coverage, a series of ten dichotomous measures were created. These include *Black Male Citizen*, *Hispanic Male Citizen*, *White Male Citizen*, *Asian Male Citizen*, *Other Male Citizen*, *Unknown Male Citizen*, *Black Female Citizen*, *Hispanic Female Citizen*, *White Female Citizen*, and *Unknown Citizen*. The study uses a similar approach to examine the extent to which incidents that involve officers with certain characteristics receive more or less attention in media coverage. A series of seven dichotomous variables are used: *Black Male Officer*, *Hispanic Male Officer*, *White Male Officer*, *Other Male Officer*, *Black Female Officer*, *White Female Officer*, and *Unknown Officer*.

Circumstance Factors. The study explores how certain circumstance factors impact whether the news media cover the incident and the extensiveness of the coverage. The variable *Citizen Weapon* is a dichotomous measure of whether any citizen involved in the interaction carried, exhibited, or used a deadly weapon in the interaction with the officer (1=deadly weapon carried, exhibited, or used; 0=all others). *At Least One Citizen Killed* is a dichotomous measure (1=at least one citizen killed; 0=all others). The variables *At Least One Officer Killed* (1=at least one officer killed; 0=all others), and *Officer Off Duty* (1=officer off duty; 0=officer on duty) are also dichotomous measures. Lastly, we measure the circumstance that led to the interaction with a series of dichotomous variables: *Emergency Request/Assistance Call*, *Traffic Stop*, *Officer Targeted in Ambush/On Duty or in a Robbery/Burglary*, *Hostage or Barricade or Emergency Situation*, and *Robbery Sting or Officer Observed Crime*.

Plan for the Analysis. The plan for the analysis is twofold. First, for each variable value, the percentage of the cases that received any coverage at all (at least one article published) is reported. Second, for each variable value the intensity of the coverage is examined with respect to the number of articles published and the number of words published. Here, the strategy is to compare frequency and percentage data for the actual events relative to the media intensity data (number of articles and words published). For any specific citizen or offender characteristic and for any specific circumstance, event data are defined here as information (frequency and percentage) about how often the characteristic or circumstance actually occurred in the total number of Harris County officer and citizen interactions that resulted in a firearm-related injury or death for the time period of the study. With respect to *Article Published*, for each citizen and officer demographic quality and for each circumstance factor, the media data are defined as the frequency and percentage of all the cases under study where the *Houston Chronicle* published at least one article. For the variables *Number of Articles Published* and the *Number of Words Published* the media data are the frequency and percentage of the number

of articles and words published, respectively, that were dedicated to cases with the specific circumstance or citizen or officer demographic. This approach enables a comparison of what is real in the local jurisdiction versus what the local news media portray.

Results

Table 1 contains summary parameter information on the 120 cases with respect to agency, year, weapon used, police officer on/off duty, and situation. Most of the cases involved a Houston Police Department (55.8%) or a Harris County Sheriff’s Deputy or Constable (31.7%). Only 12.5% of the cases involved an officer of some

Table 1. Summary statistics: Agency, year, and case characteristics (N=120, Unit of Analysis=Shooting Event with Death or Injury).

	Frequency	Percent
<i>Agency</i>	120	
Houston PD	67	55.8
Harris County Sheriff/Constable	38	31.7
Other	15	12.5
<i>Year</i>	120	
2015	12	10.0
2016	35	29.2
2017	24	20.0
2018	31	25.8
2019	18	15.0
<i>Citizen Carried, Exhibited, or Used Deadly Weapon</i>	98	81.7
<i>Police On/Off Duty</i>	120	
On Duty	100	83.3
Off Duty	19	15.8
Missing	1	.9
<i>Situation</i>	120	
Emergency Call/Request	51	42.5
Robbery Sting/Crime Obs.	19	15.8
Traffic Stop	12	10.0
Hostage/Barricade	8	6.7
Officer Targeted	10	8.3
Warrant Execution	8	6.7
Other	11	9.2
Missing	1	.8

other municipal police department located in Harris County. In 81.7% of the cases at least one of the involved citizens carried, used, or exhibited a deadly weapon. For 83.3% of the cases the officer was on duty. Most of the cases involved a police-citizen interaction that originated from an emergency call or a request for assistance (42.5%). Sixteen percent of the interactions occurred during a robbery sting or an officer on-viewing of criminal activity, and 10% originated with a traffic stop.

Table 2. Summary statistics: Citizens and officers: Number injured and killed (N=120, unit of analysis=shooting event with death or injury).

	Citizen		Officer	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
<i>Number Injured</i>	120		120	
None	61	50.8	99	82.5
One	55	45.8	18	15.0
Two	2	1.7	2	1.7
Three	2	1.7	---	---
Four	---	---	1	.8
<i>Number Killed</i>	120		120	
None	69	57.5	119	99.2
One	47	39.2	1	.8
Two	4	3.3	---	---

Table 2 contains data on the number of citizens and officers injured or killed in police-citizen interactions. The data from Table 2 show that one citizen was injured in 45.8% of the cases (n=55), and in 1.7% of the cases, two citizens and three citizens were injured, respectively. The fact that in 50.8% of the cases (n=61) no citizen was injured must be considered in context. In many of these cases, a citizen was killed. In 47 of the 120 cases (39.2%) one citizen was killed, and in four cases (3.3%) two citizens were killed.

It is a rare event that an officer is killed by firearm by a citizen. In only one case (.8%) did this occur. One officer was injured in 18 of the 120 cases (15%). Two officers were injured in two cases (1.7%), and in one case four officers were injured (.8%).

Table 3 reports sex, race, and age information for the citizens and officers involved. Half of the cases involved at least one Black Male citizen, 21.7% involved an Hispanic Male citizen, and 15% a White Male citizen. Asian males were involved in 2.5% of the cases. A male of some other race was involved in 1.7%, and in an additional 1.7% there was an unknown male citizen involved. Female citizens were injured or killed in only nine cases. In 2.5% of the total cases a White Female was involved. Black females and Hispanic females were also involved in 2.5% of the cases, respectively.

Most of the cases involved a White Male officer (54.2%, n=65), followed by a Hispanic Male officer (37.5%, n=45), and then by a Black Male officer (21.7%, n=26). Asian Male officers were involved in three cases (2.5%). White Female, Black Female, and Hispanic Female officers were, respectively, involved in three cases (2.5%).

The average age of the citizens involved is 31.3 years, and the average age of officers involved is 37.1 years. Twelve percent of the citizens involved were under 18, an additional 22.5% were 18 to 24 years-old, and 23.5% were 25 to 31 years-old. The officers were mainly in the 25-31 and 32-38 age ranges. Thirty-eight percent were 25-31 and 26.7% were between the ages 32 and 38.

Table 3. Summary statistics: Citizens and officers: Race, sex, and age (N=120, unit of analysis=shooting event with death or injury).

	Citizen			Officer		
	Freq.	%	\bar{X} (SD)	Freq.	%	\bar{X} (SD)
<i>Person(s)</i>	120			120		
<i>Involved</i>						
White, Male ¹	18	15.0		65	54.2	
Black, Male ¹	60	50.0		26	21.7	
Hispanic, Male ¹	26	21.7		45	37.5	
Asian, Male ¹	3	2.5		---	---	
Other, Male ¹	2	1.7		---	---	
Unkn., Male ¹	2	1.7		---	---	
White, Female ¹	3	2.5		1	.8	
Black, Female ¹	3	2.5		3	2.5	
Hisp., Female ¹	3	2.5		1	.8	
Unkn. Person ¹	2	1.7		1	.8	
Average Age			31.3 (11.4) ²			37.1 (9.1)
<i>Youngest Individual³</i>	120			120		
Under 18	14	11.7		---	---	
18-24	27	22.5		5	4.2	
25-31	28	23.5		45	37.5	
32-38	20	16.7		32	26.7	
39-45	10	8.3		13	10.8	
46 and Over	16	13.3		25	20.8	
Unknown Age	5	4.2		---	---	

¹ The race and sex measures will not sum to 120. The unit of analysis is the shooting (or case). Citizens and officers of different sex and race are involved in events and are engaged in shootings. The frequency data for each group is the number of cases that involved at least one citizen or officer of the sex and race.

² For four cases, the citizen involved is unknown. The number of cases for the average and standard deviation for citizen age is 116 cases, not 120.

³ Eleven of the cases involved multiple citizens involved in the interaction who either were injured or killed by police gunfire, or injured or killed an officer by gunfire. Of these, 8 involved an age gap of 10 years or less. In 34 cases, the incident involved more than one officer injured or killed by gunfire from a citizen, or fired upon a citizen, which resulted in the injury or death of a citizen. In 21 of these, the age gap between the officers' ages was 10 years or less.

Agency: Impact on Coverage in at Least One Article

There is evidence that the agency of the officer involved is linked to whether or not there is any *Houston Chronicle* coverage of the shooting incident between an officer and a citizen that results in an injury or a death. Table 4 shows that of the 67 incidents that involved a Houston PD officer, 76.1% were covered with at least one news article. The data for the Harris County Sheriff/Constable are nearly identical. Of the 38 instances that occurred, 76.3% were covered by the paper. Those cases that concerned an officer of a municipal agency other

than Houston but in Harris County are less likely to have an article published. For these other municipal agencies, of the 15 incidents that occurred, 53.3% had at least one article published.

Table 4. Whether any article was published: Importance of the agency.

	Houston Police Department		Harris Co. Sheriff or Constable		Other Municipal Department		Total	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
	No Article	16	23.9	9	23.7	7	46.7	32
At Least 1 Article	51	76.1	29	76.3	8	53.3	88	73.3
Total	67		38		15		120	

Outliers in the Data

Seventy-three percent of the total cases (88 of 120) were covered in at least one article in the *Houston Chronicle*. Media data such as these are often heavily influenced by outliers. While outliers are of importance in

Table 5. Summary of the outlier cases.

Media Data	Agency	Description of Event and Media Coverage
11 Articles 8,312 Words	Harris County	During patrol an officer observed a physical altercation between 2 men and stopped to investigate. One of the men, a B, M, 35 Y.O. was shot and killed by a B, M officer. Video subsequently showed the B, M citizen advancing on the officer with his pants down around his ankles prior to the shot fired. Two H, M officers were also on scene. The department initially reported that the citizen had an object in his hand. No weapon was found at the scene.
14 Articles 13,584	Houston PD	During routine patrol officers spotted a man with a gun and engaged him. B, M, 38 Y.O. killed by 2 H,M, officers, 39 and 43 Y.O. The citizen pointed the pistol at the officers. Ongoing coverage focused on Houston’s movement toward body cameras, calls for reform by the citizen’s family and the community, and linkages to the case in other cases or events.
17 Articles 15,486 Words	Harris County	Ambush of an officer. A W, M, 64 Y.O. killed a W, M, 59 Y.O. officer in an ambush as the officer exited his vehicle at a courthouse. The officer had reported to the District Attorney that he felt the citizen posed a safety risk to him and his family.
50 Articles 45,379 Words	Houston PD	Execution of a warrant: Two citizens killed (W,M, 59 Y.O.; W,F, 58 Y.O.) and 2 officers injured (B, M, 40 Y.O.; H, M, 50 Y.O.). Five other officers were involved but were not injured. The affidavit in support of the warrant detailed testimony from an informant. During the investigation that followed, the PD could not verify the veracity of the information nor the identity of the informant. The substantial coverage focused on the investigation. This case came to be known as the “Harding Street Raid.”

understanding news media coverage, the approach of this study is to separate these cases in the analysis so that media attention to more normative cases can be independently examined. Separation of the cases into “outlier” and “normative” groups was based on the number of articles published. For the normative cases the number of articles published ranged between zero and seven. As reported in Table 5, the four outlier cases, respectively, had 11, 14, 17, and 50 articles published. These four cases accounted for a disproportionate number of both the articles published (38.3%; 92 of the 240 total articles) and the number of words published (50.6%; 82,761 words). Outliers do not impact the measure of whether any article at all was published about the case.

The outlier cases provide some support for the notion that market-based newsworthiness evaluations impact coverage decisions. These cases also support the notion that local media coverage is impacted by existing themes in national and grassroots media. One of the four cases concerned substantial evidence of police misconduct, and two of the cases implied questions about the tactics or the behavior of police. The case with the most coverage (50 articles) involved a botched drug raid of a residence where two citizens (both White, one male and one female) were killed and four officers were injured by firearm. It was discovered that an officer (a Black male) had lied about the existence of a confidential informant that served as the basis for a no-knock warrant in the case. The other two cases (14 and 11 articles published, respectively) addressed circumstances where a single citizen was killed by an officer and the events were linked to the ongoing concern about Black males killed by the police. Most interesting about these three cases of intense local coverage is that none of the primary police officers involved was a White male. The botched raid case mainly involved a Black male officer and a Hispanic male officer. The case with 11 articles published concerned a Black male officer and two Hispanic male officers. Two Hispanic male officers were involved in the case that generated 14 articles. It appears that, contrary to much of the national and grassroots coverage, the *Houston Chronicle*'s coverage broadened the scope of problems in police-citizen encounters past the notion that this is a White officer and Black citizen issue. This shift in direction away from the dominant narrative of national media and grassroots efforts is likely due to the diversity of the city of Houston and the demographics of the police agencies of Harris County. There is anecdotal evidence in the outlier data that shootings that lead to an officer's death are assessed as newsworthy. The case with 17 articles published involved an ambush of an officer where the officer had previously reported a concern for his and his family's safety due to the behavior of the citizen who eventually killed him. This was the only case in the event data that concerned the death of an officer.

Analysis of Normative Local Coverage of Citizen and Police Deaths Due to Firearm

Data contained in Tables 6 and 7 report on the 116 cases that were more normative in the news cycle of the *Houston Chronicle*. These are the police-citizen shootings that did not generate substantial media attention. The analysis of data reported in Table 6 first considers proportionate representation of three types of cases, those where only a citizen was injured or killed, those where only an officer was injured, and those where a citizen was injured or killed and an officer was injured. In all 10 cases where both a citizen was killed or injured and an officer was injured there was at least one article published (100%). Among the 95 cases where a citizen was injured or killed, 70.5% (n=67) had an article published, and for the 11 cases where only an officer was injured, 63.7% (n=7) had an article published.

With respect to intensity of the media coverage, cases where a citizen was killed or injured *and* an officer was injured are the least likely scenario in the event data (8.6%; 10 of 116), yet these cases comprise 14.9% (22 of 148) of the articles and 25.4% (20,477 of 80,428) of the words published. In the cases where only an officer was injured, the comparison between event and media data is fairly even. Cases where only a citizen

Table 6. Event and media data: Case circumstances, race and ethnicity of the citizen, and race and ethnicity of the officer.

	Event Data		Media Data					
	n	%	At Least					
			One Article		# Articles		# Words	
	N	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Citizen Killed/Injured	95	81.9	95	70.5	113	76.4	51,779	64.4
Officer Injured	11	9.5	11	63.6	13	8.8	8,172	10.2
Citizen Killed/Injured AND Officer Injured	10	8.6	10	100.0	22	14.9	20,477	25.4
	116		116	72.4	148		80,428	
Carried, Exhibited, Used Weapon	77	81.1	77	71.4	87	77.0	37,697	72.8
Did Not Carry, Exhibit, or Use Weapon	18	18.9	18	66.7	26	23.0	14,082	27.2
	95		95	70.5	113		51,779	
Officer On Duty	88	83.0	88	65.9	108	85.7	53,613	89.4
Officer Off Duty	17	16.0	17	94.1	18	14.3	6,338	10.6
Missing On/Off Duty	1	1.0	1	---	---	---	---	---
	106		106		126		59,951	
Black Male Citizen	52	49.0	52	75.0	62	49.2	31,305	52.2
Hispanic Male Citizen	25	23.6	25	64.0	20	15.9	5,003	8.3
White Male Citizen	13	12.3	13	69.2	27	21.4	15,616	26.0
Black Female Citizen	3	2.8	3	66.7	8	6.3	5,200	8.7
Hispanic Female Citizen	3	2.8	3	33.3	1	.8	522	.9
Asian Male Citizen	3	2.8	3	33.3	1	.8	263	.4
Other Male Citizen	2	1.6	2	100.0	2	1.6	416	.7
Unknown Male Citizen	2	1.6	2	100.0	2	1.6	575	1.0
White Female Citizen	2	1.6	2	50.0	3	2.4	1,005	1.7
Unknown Citizen	2	1.6	2	50.0	1	.8	428	.7
White Male officer	60	56.6	60	75.0	69	54.8	28,853	48.1
Hispanic Male Officer	35	33.0	35	62.9	41	32.5	18,935	31.6
Black Male Officer	22	20.8	22	72.7	33	26.2	22,296	37.2
Black Female Officer	3	2.8	3	66.7	2	1.6	464	.8
Other Male Officer	1	.9	1	100.0	3	2.4	914	1.5
White Female Officer	1	.9	1	100.0	1	.8	329	.5
Unknown Officer	1	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

is injured or killed by firearm are underrepresented in these data. While comprising 81.9% of the cases in the event data (95 of 116), these cases account for 76.4% of the articles published (113 of 148) and 64.4% of the words published (51,779 of 80,477). These findings, in conjunction with the coverage of the one case that had an officer death (an outlier), suggest that officer death cases will receive coverage and a substantial amount of media attention due to statistical and cultural deviance. Cases where an officer is injured and a citizen is killed or injured in a shooting was also always covered, and when covered, accounted for proportionately higher amounts of media attention, due to a combination of both statistical and cultural deviance. The impact of the news theme of the national and grassroots media appears to have influenced cases where just a citizen was

injured or killed, in contrast to officer injury (only) cases, as citizen death or injury cases were more likely to be covered. But when covered, the citizen death/injury cases did not generate proportionately more coverage (in terms of numbers of articles and words) than officer injury (only) cases.

To examine the importance of whether a citizen is armed with a deadly weapon or not on news coverage this study only considers those 95 cases where only a citizen was killed or injured. The 11 cases where only an officer was injured and the 10 cases where both a citizen was injured/killed and an officer was injured all involved a deadly weapon, and, therefore, lack variation. In the 95 cases, 77 involved a citizen with a deadly weapon and in 18 cases the citizen was not armed with nor used a deadly weapon. More of the cases where the citizen had a deadly weapon (71.4%; 55 of 77) had at least one article published, relative to those instances where a citizen was not armed with a deadly weapon (66.7%; 12 of 18). Conversely, an upward media attention influence of the absence of a deadly weapon by the citizen is captured in the data with respect to the intensity of the coverage. The cases where the citizen was not found with a deadly weapon were 18.9% (18 of 95) of the cases, however, these cases accounted for 23% of the articles published (26 of 113) and 27.2% of the number of words published (14,082 of 51,779). There is support in these data for the notion that local media attention assumed the posture of national media and grassroots efforts on the narrative of unarmed citizens shot by the police, but only in that these cases were more intensively covered (in terms of articles and words published).

Ninety-four percent of the cases where the officer was off duty at the time of the incident were covered in at least one news article (16 of 17). This is in comparison to 65.9% (55 of 88) of the cases that involved on duty officers that were covered in at least one article. While a high percentage of the off duty officer cases received coverage, the off duty cases were more rare in the event data (16%, 17 of 106 cases where either a citizen was injured or killed or an officer was injured), and are underrepresented in the media intensity data (14.3%, 18 of 126 articles published; 10.6%, 6,338 of 59,951 words published). Thus, even though the off duty officer cases attracted the attention of the news media, they were not extensively covered with multiple articles or a large number of words published. There is fairly strong support for the idea that news media see off duty cases as newsworthy, but this does not translate into these articles receiving many more articles or words published.

Black Male Citizen cases were proportionately most likely to have at least one article on the case published (75%, 39 of 52), in contrast to the White Male Citizen (69.2%, 9 of 13) and the Hispanic Male Citizen (64%, 16 of 25) cases. Yet, again, the intensity of the media coverage measures stand in fairly stark contrast. Cases that involved a White Male Citizen received proportionately more media coverage (21.4%, 27 of 126 articles published; 26%, 15,616 of 59,951 words published) than the proportion of cases in the event data (12.3%, 13 of 106 of the cases were either a citizen was killed or injured or an officer was injured, but not both). Hispanic Male citizen cases are underrepresented in the media intensity data (15.9%, 20 of 126 articles published; 8.3%, 5,003 of 59,951 words published) relative to their representation in the event data (23.6%, 25 of 106 cases where either a citizen was killed or injured or an officer was injured, but not both). Black Male citizen cases are only slightly over-represented in the media data (49.2%, 62 of 126 articles published; 52.2%, 31,305 of 59,951) compared to the event data (49%, 52 of 106). Thus, whereas Black Male Citizen cases receive the most focus with respect to receiving any coverage at all, the White Male Citizen cases that are covered received substantially more intense coverage, seemingly at the expense of the Hispanic Male Citizen cases. These data on citizen race appear to tell two distinct stories. It appears from the data that the national and grassroots spotlight on the plight of Black Males in interactions with the police means that locally these cases are proportionately covered most often, and Black citizen cases receive amounts of coverage that are proportionate to the events that occur. In addition, Black male citizen cases (based on the outlier cases) that

have fact patterns that may suggest police abuse receive substantial coverage. However, the concept of deviance (statistical and status) in assessments of newsworthiness appears to contribute to differences in how much coverage cases get when comparing White male citizens against Hispanic male citizens.

White Male Officer cases were most likely to have at least one article published (75%, 45 of 60), followed by Black Male Officer cases (72.7%, 16 of 22), and Hispanic Male Officer cases (62.9%, 22 of 35). A majority of the cases involved White Male officers (56.6%, 60 of 106 cases where either an officer or citizen was killed or injured, but not both) but these cases were underrepresented in the media intensity data. Fifty-five percent of the total articles (69 of 126) and 48.1% (28,853 of 59,951) of the total words published were dedicated to cases that involved a White Male Officer. Those cases that involved a Black Male Officer are overrepresented in the media intensity data. Cases that involved a Black Male Officer are 20.8% of the cases (22 of 106 where either a citizen was killed or injured or an officer was injured), but accounted for 26.2% (33 of 126) of the total articles and 37.2% (22,296 of 59,951) of the total words published. In contrast to the Black Male officer data, Hispanic Male officer cases (33%, 35 of 106 cases where either a citizen was killed or injured or an officer was injured) are only slightly underrepresented in the media intensity data (32.5%, 41 of 126 articles published; 31.6%, 18,935 of 59,951 words published). Local media did not advance the national media and grassroots journalism narrative that these instances are mainly driven by the behavior of White male officers. The likelihood that a case would be reported was roughly equal for White and Black officers, although less for Hispanic officers. Statistical deviance, in this regard, was not supported because the event data was quite high for White officers and low for Black officer but a roughly equal percentage of these cases for the two groups received some coverage by the press. There is some support for cultural deviance given the disproportionate number of the Black officer events that were reported on by the newspaper. Also of interest concerning culture deviance is the amount of the coverage. Black officer cases were overrepresented and White officer cases were underrepresented.

To further examine the role of race and ethnicity on the media measures, the study combines citizen and officer race and ethnicity in Table 7 for supplementary analysis. Just considering those cases that involved combinations of Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics, the dyads with respect to proportion of the cases that received any coverage is ordered beginning with White Male Officer/White Citizen (83.3%, 5 of 6), Black Male Officer, Black Citizen (81.8%, 9 of 11), White Male Officer/Hispanic Citizen (80%, 12 of 15), Hispanic Male Officer/Black Citizen (75%, 9 of 12), White Male Officer/Black Citizen (69.6% 16 of 23), Hispanic Male Officer/White Citizen (66.7%, 2 of 3), and Hispanic Male Officer/Hispanic Citizen (20%, 1 of 5). White Male Officer/Black Citizen was the most frequent in the event data (21.7%, 23 of 106 cases of either officer or citizen death or injury), but accounted for 17.5% (22 of 126) of the articles published and 16.4% (9,853 of 59,951) of the words published. Overrepresented in the media intensity data are the Hispanic Male Officer/Black Citizen cases (event: 11.3%, 12 of 106; 17.5%, 22 of 126 articles and 17.1%, 10,272 of 59,951 words), Black Male Officer/Black Citizen cases (event: 10.4%, 11 of 106; 15.1%, 19 of 126 articles and 23.1%, 13,846 of 59,951 words), and White Male Officer/White Citizen cases (event: 5.7%, 6 of 106; 9.5%, 12 of 126 articles and 6.8%, 4,086 of 59,951 words).

Table 7 also reports on the circumstances that initiated the interaction between the officer and the citizen. All instances where a traffic stop (n=10) or a robbery, burglary, or targeting of a police officer (n=7) initiated the interaction were covered with at least one news article. Just over 70% of the instances that started with an officer participation in a robbery sting or on-viewing of a crime committed by a citizen (13 of 18) or involved a hostage or a barricade situation (5 of 7) were covered in at least one news article. Sixty-six percent

Table 7. Event and media data: Combined citizen and officer race and circumstance that initiated the police-citizen interaction.

	Event Data		Media Data					
	n	%	At Least					
			One Article		# Articles		# Words	
n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
White Male Officer/White Citizen	6	5.7	6	83.3	12	9.5	4,086	6.8
White Male Officer/Black Citizen	23	21.7	23	69.6	22	17.5	9,853	16.4
White Male Officer/Hispanic Citizen	15	14.2	15	80.0	14	11.1	3,428	5.7
Black Male Officer/Black Citizen	11	10.4	11	81.8	19	15.1	13,846	23.1
Black Male Officer/White Citizen	3	2.8	2	66.7	2	1.6	211	.4
Black Male Officer/Hispanic Citizen	3	2.8	3	33.3	1	.8	522	.9
Hispanic Male Officer/Hispanic Citizen	5	4.7	5	20.0	1	.8	86	.1
Hispanic Male Officer/White Citizen	3	2.8	3	66.7	7	5.6	5,046	8.4
Hispanic Male Officer/Black Citizen	12	11.3	12	75.0	22	17.5	10,272	17.1
Hispanic Male Officer/Asian Citizen	3	2.8	3	33.3	1	.8	263	.4
Multiple Race/Ethnicity Officers and Citizens	14	13.2	14	71.4	19	15.1	10,888	18.2
Unknown Citizen Race and/or Sex	5	4.7	5	80.0	4	3.2	1,037	1.7
Female Officer	3	2.8	3	66.7	2	1.6	413	.7
	106		106		126		59,951	
Emergency Request/Assistance Call	47	44.3	47	66.0	45	35.7	20,075	33.5
Robbery/Sting/Officer Observed Crime	18	17.0	18	72.2	23	18.3	11,881	19.8
Traffic Stop	10	9.4	10	100.0	16	15.1	6,620	11.0
Officer Robbery or Burglary Attempt/Officer Targeted	7	6.6	7	100.0	12	9.5	7,398	12.3
Execution of a Warrant	7	6.6	7	42.9	9	7.1	4,973	8.3
Hostage, Barricade, Emergency Situation	7	6.6	7	71.4	15	11.9	7,385	12.3
Other	9	8.5	9	55.6	6	4.8	1,619	2.7
Missing	1	.9	1	---	---	---	---	---
	106		106		126		59,951	

(31 of 47) of shootings that initiated with a non-hostage or non-barricade call for assistance received news coverage. Of the seven shootings that initiated with the execution of a warrant, 42.9% had at least one news article published.

The most common circumstance in the event data is an emergency request or call for assistance (44.3%, 47 of 106 instances that resulted in a death or injury to a citizen or an injury to an officer), but was underrepresented in the number of articles published (35.7%, 45 of 126) and in the number of words published (33.5%, 20,075 of 59,951). Robbery stings and officer observation of criminal behavior are 17% (18 of 106) of the event data, and these cases are slightly overrepresented in number of articles (18.3%, 23 of 126) and in number of words published (19.8%, 11,881 of 59,951). Traffic stops (event: 9.4%, 10 of 106; 15.1%, 16 of 126 articles and 11%, 6,620 of 59,951 words), attempts by a citizen to rob, burglarize, or target an officer for a crime (event: 6.6%, 7 of 106; 9.5%, 12 of 126 articles and 12.3%, 7,398 of 59,951 words), executions of a warrant (event: 6.6%, 7 of 106; 7.1%, 9 of 126 articles and 8.3%, 4,973 of 59,951 words), and hostage,

barricade, and emergency situations (event: 6.6%, 7 of 106; 11.9%, 15 of 126 articles and 12.3%, 7,385 of 59,951 words) are all overrepresented with respect to the media intensity data.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study generally support the notion that all police-citizen shootings that result in a death or injury to an officer or a citizen that occurred in Harris County, Texas, were not covered in the same manner by the *Houston Chronicle*. Some received no coverage at all, others received initial coverage (often one article), and others received more attention in the form of multiple articles. A very few of these events (four) received substantial coverage by the newspaper, and these generally either involved allegations of police misconduct, could be situated as an instance of the ongoing national narrative of police use of force against Black males, or involved the death of a police officer. The media attention to these cases supported both aspects of newsworthiness. A focus on police misconduct or the a death of a police officer may be attributable to both statistical and cultural forms of deviance. The two other outlier cases, which addressed police shootings of citizens and were framed as potentially questionable, appeared to be extensions of the national and grassroots media theme of police shootings of citizens broadly. Both instances did concern a Black male citizen, but they did not involve a White male officer. In the outlier coverage it seems that the *Houston Chronicle* expanded on the national and grassroots theme through extensive coverage of cases that involved Black male officers and officers of another race/ethnicity (Hispanic male officers).

Similarly, in the data on the more normative cases in the news cycle of the newspaper, it is clear that some cases receive more attention than others. Much of this can be attributed to statistical and cultural deviance. With respect to statistical deviance, particularly for the measures of intensity of coverage (number of articles and number of words), rare situations received more intensive attention. These included those instances where both an officer was injured and a citizen was injured or killed, where the citizen was unarmed, a White male citizen (particularly compared to Hispanic male citizen cases), a Black male officer (particularly in contrast to cases that involved a White male officer), officer-initiated interactions (traffic stop, warrant execution, and officer observed crime), officer targeted for a crime, and those that involved a barricade or hostage situation. For several of these situational aspects, cultural deviance may also be used as a framework to explain the disproportionate coverage. In particular, the finding of disproportionate attention to cases that involve Black officers may have a cultural deviation aspect to it. While anecdotal, this is captured well in a quotation by a police officer from a recent documentary-style production, where the officer stated, “Police officers are seen as outsiders in urban America. White officers are seen as racist. While Black officers, like myself, can be seen as traitors to our race.”¹⁸ This sentiment that was expressed by the officer suggests an interpersonal dilemma by Black officers in response to what at least some in Black communities may feel or communicate.

Calls for service (which are citizen-initiated encounters) occurred in a majority of events, but received proportionately less coverage in newspaper articles. Situations where a police officer kills or injures a citizen received proportionately less intensive coverage, in contrast to those cases with only an officer injured (which are slightly overrepresented in intensity of coverage measures). These findings, in conjunction with the data suggesting that several *officer-initiated circumstances* (traffic stop and execution of a warrant) receive proportionately more coverage, points to the ongoing issue of dominance of a police-centric narrative by news media in its coverage of police-citizen shootings.

¹⁸ The production is a Netflix documentary called *Flint Town*. (Season 1, Episode 2 “Two Guns,” 21:52 mark).

As further support for police-centric narratives as mainstays of news coverage, consider the coverage in the one case in the dataset where police misconduct is clear (the outlier no-knock warrant case where the investigating officer lied about a confidential informant). The *Chronicle* led with a narrative that was very pro-police and painted the officers of the narcotics squad that conducted the raid in a very positive light. Thus, even in instances of questionable police conduct, a pro-police and police-centric orientation was the default stance expressed by newspaper. The police-centric direction of the narrative is captured by two of the early headlines:

“Officers did jobs; They will have scars to remind them of the day they could never forget” (*Houston Chronicle*, January 30, 2019); and

“New details, more questions in aftermath of shootout; Squad 15: Peers praise the ‘courage’ and ‘passion’ of the injured officers” (*Houston Chronicle*, January 30, 2019).

In addition, in its early coverage, the *Chronicle*, following a police announcement, reported that heroin (which was the impetus behind the search warrant) had been recovered from the raided residence,¹⁹ but had to issue a subsequent correction that only marijuana had been found.²⁰ The *Chronicle*'s coverage of the drug raid relied heavily on police sources early and did not shift to other sources of information until after the police department announced that it had suspended an officer in connection with the drug raid. A lead journalist in the *Chronicle*'s coverage of the Harding Street case expressed that the pro-police stance in the early reporting of the case was the reporter's main regret. The journalist explained in an interview that as a kid he looked up to the police and expected that they would tell the truth, and that it is difficult for the reporter to reread the initial coverage that had praised the police.²¹

There are some important theoretical implications of this study. Newsworthiness was the central organizing concept for the study in terms of both market-driven journalism and broad news themes that develop and influence cases that are selected for coverage. This study provides support for both aspects of newsworthiness. Specifically, statistical and culture deviance appears to have influenced mainly the intensity of coverage of those items selected to receive attention. Support for the notion that ongoing news themes from national and grassroots coverage potentially influences local media coverage is more limited and fragmented. It does not appear that the dominant fixture of the national and grassroots news on police shootings (that this is White police officer and Black citizen issue) translated directly to the *Chronicle*'s local coverage of these events. Rather, it seems that national news themes and grassroots attention to cases by social organizations like Black Lives Matter influence local coverage in the content published for a limited number of cases that fit the narrative. In addition, there is some evidence that the Black Lives Matter movement may have impacted local coverage by influencing which cases are selected to receive any coverage at all. For the normative coverage cases, a higher percent of Black male citizen cases, for instance, were covered compared to White male citizen and Hispanic male citizen cases. The *Chronicle*'s coverage advanced the message of the Black Lives Matter

¹⁹ Blakinger, K., & Paulsen, S. T. (2019, February 1). Police: Drug in raid was heroin. *Houston Chronicle*.

²⁰ Blakinger, K., & Barsed-Smith, S. (2019, February 9). Report: Raid turned up little; Bust yielded only small amount of pot, white powder. *Houston Chronicle*.

²¹ Interview with *Houston Chronicle* journalist, July 3, 2020 (43:50 in length). This interview did not require IRB approval because it specifically detailed the journalist's experience covering this one case. The journalist was informed of how the interview may be used as a class resource and as anecdotal illustration in academic manuscripts for publication. The journalist's verbal agreement to the interview was recorded, even though not required for protection of human subjects.

social organization by covering a higher proportion of cases that involved a Black male citizen and by connecting its coverage of the relevant outlier cases to the growing national issue of police use of force against Black males.

There is relatively strong evidence from this study that, like national media, the local media do not proportionately or adequately cover police-citizen shooting events that involve Hispanic male citizens. The *Chronicle's* coverage appears to systemically underreport and undervalue incidents that involve Hispanic males. Cases that involve Hispanic male citizens are undervalued in both the decision to cover an event and in the amount of reporting on these incidents. Undervaluation of Hispanic male citizen cases did not happen in the *Chronicle's* coverage because the newspaper focused more content (articles and words) on Black male citizen cases. Instead, the coverage underreported Hispanic male citizen cases while overreporting on White male citizen cases. A prior study of comparative conflict theory asserted that Hispanics have historically occupied a “disadvantaged middle ground” (Buckler & Unnever, 2008, p. 272) in their social status in America. With respect to media content on the plight of Hispanics in the area of shootings that stem from police-citizen interactions, it may not be true that Hispanics occupy a disadvantaged middle position. These data suggest that in an urban area where Hispanics (relative to other urban centers) are a high proportion of the population, the mainstream newspaper in the area disadvantaged Hispanics.

An important limitation of this study is that its focus is on one media organization and the selected outlet is a local newspaper. It may be that a local network news organization will cover more of these police shootings than a newspaper would. This may particularly be the case in instances where there is video or dash camera footage of the shooting and it is made available to the news media. Network news local affiliates also use at-the-scene live coverage as a staple of their news production. Future research should look to address local network news coverage of police-citizen shootings, which is beyond the scope of this particular study. The current study's deep dive into the *Houston Chronicle's* coverage of police-citizen shooting events has value. The *Chronicle* is ranked in the top 10 in circulation in the United States, and following its buyout of the *Houston Post* in 1995, the *Chronicle* became the newspaper of record for Houston. The newspaper has bureaus in the U.S. Capitol (Washington D.C.) and in the Texas Capitol city (Austin). In ideological rankings, the *Chronicle* generally ranks as slightly right of center. It is a mainstream newspaper that is well-respected in journalism. The use of the *Chronicle* is not anecdotal; rather, the editorial decision-making is most likely generally consistent with those of other national and regional newspapers.

An final limitation is that the study's unit of analysis is death or injury by firearm cases. It does not address incidents where an officer or a citizen takes a life by means other than a firearm. Nor does the study address incidents where a police or a citizen fires a weapon and misses the target without injury or death. Future studies should look to address this limitation. Future work should also seek to explain racial and ethnic differences in media coverage. Lastly, this work and prior studies are limited in addressing police-citizen interactions that lead to the shooting of a police officer. In this time of heightened attention to police behavior and intense criticism in use of force cases, it is a salient concern that shootings of police officers have recently shown isolated year-to-year increases. More scholarly attention should be focus on media coverage of these cases.

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