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Media Depictions of Crimes Committed by Aboriginal Peoples:

Sensationalizing and Reaffirming Stereotypes

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### **Abstract**

Two separate cases of crime involving the deaths of First Nation children in Aboriginal communities in Canada were examined for this paper. Online news articles of the 2005 death of Phoenix Sinclair and the 2013 death of Lee Bonneau were analyzed using framing theory. Several thematic patterns framing First Nation crime were discernable, including the dangerousness of reserve life, the inadequacy of child foster homes and the child welfare system, the under-valuing of Aboriginal bodies, and the exploiting of the (welfare) system by Aboriginal peoples. The explanation for why negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people are utilized in the media arguably stems from a history of discrimination and colonialization. Negative framing of Aboriginal people in the media may be destructive. Suggestions for how media could discuss Aboriginal communities are examined.

*Keywords:* Aboriginal peoples, Canada, media, framing theory, First Nation

## Introduction

Those studying the role of the media have been concerned about the influence of media depictions, as well as the social and broader ideological implications of these, particularly at the intersection of media, race, and justice issues. Attention to how Canadian news media frame racialized communities, and specifically the country's indigenous population, has recently attracted scholarly concern (e.g., Comack, 2012; Harding, 2009; Jiwani, 2009; Morton, 2016). Mainstream media stereotypes tend to suggest that Aboriginal peoples are incompetent and unable to successfully manage their own affairs (Harding, 2005). Negative stereotypes of Aboriginal peoples are inherently problematic, since racialized discourses reaffirm entrenched racist attitudes (McMahon & Chow-White, 2011). Harding (2009) argued that “problematic representations of indigenous issues,” such as (negatively) framing Aboriginal people as being incapable of managing childcare and their responsibilities toward children, disempowers these communities and perpetuates historical iniquities. Native people's association with crime is often highlighted in the mass media (Harding, 2005; Nairn, 2006; Simmons, 2008). As media coverage continues to shape the public's understanding of indigenous lives, racialized stereotypes persist and reinforce colonial hierarchy and prejudice (McMahon & Chow-White, 2011).

The question of media treatment of indigenous communities intersects media power. Critical media literature, including Marxist theory, has shed light on media power, contending that the media establishment traditionally serves the interests of the ruling class and legitimizes their authority. Gramsci (as noted by Collins, 2014) argued that newspapers provide an ideal outlet for dominant groups to produce and spread hegemonic beliefs that support and maintain the social order. According to Collins (2014), “these ideologies can help secure power for the dominant class by perpetuating crime as a problem of the ‘Other’ through simplistic, fragmented and contradictory explanations of social phenomena. This discourse results in decontextualization that blames crime on individual flaws rather than social forces” (p. 78). Race-based attitudes, prejudice, and problematic mainstream representations have the potential to erode empathy among the general public toward indigenous peoples (Harding, 2005). More research is still needed to understand the potential impact of mainstream media on these communities.

In this paper, we investigate these issues through an analysis of the mediated construction of murdered Aboriginal children on First Nations reserves. The following questions underpin the study: How did Canadian mainstream news cover crimes involving Aboriginal children? How has European colonialism informed contemporary mainstream media coverage? We examine two high-profile Canadian stories involving First Nations children through online newspaper articles and explore the implications of mainstream depictions. The first case to be discussed is the death of a six-year-old boy who was allegedly killed by another child. Lee Allan Bonneau's body was found on August 21, 2013, near a First Nation reserve in Saskatchewan. He was reported missing and found 20 minutes later in a wooded area. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police felt that another boy was responsible for the killing of Bonneau, but the suspect was under the age of 12 and could not be charged—the age of criminalization in Canada is 12. The second case involves Phoenix Sinclair, a five-year-old girl from Winnipeg, Manitoba, whose murder also received substantial media attention. She was killed by her mother and stepfather, and the circumstances of her death led to one of the largest public inquiries into the child welfare system that has ever been held in Manitoba. The two cases involve media coverage of murdered Aboriginals on reserves and focus on the most vulnerable individuals in First Nation communities, namely children.

## Colonial Interventions and Indigenous Trauma

Colonial interventions in Canada have shaped government policies and indigenous experiences with the criminal justice system from early encounters to the present moment. As Elizabeth Comack (2012) suggested, colonialism is a living phenomenon that impacts the present, and it is not just something that happened in the

past. Colonial policies have eroded Aboriginals' culture, economic base, social structure, and political organization and created extreme forms of cultural oppression (Sutherland, 2002). In 1920, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott said that his objective was "to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada" (Rudin, 2001, p. 26). His purpose aimed for the destruction of Aboriginal peoples through relocation, criminalization of spiritual practices, and restrictions on rights, liberties, freedom of speech, mobility, and voting rights, all of which are outlined in the *Indian Act*. As Henderson and Wakeham (2009) argued, cultural loss is a crucial injury from colonialism, as the loss of meaning and identity result in pervasive self-destructive behavior.

Assimilation policies were implemented in Canada through the apprehension of children, forcing 150,000 children to attend residential schools (Comack, 2012; Sutherland, 2002). With the first opening of residential schools in Canada in 1849, the focus was on assimilation, stiff punishment, and passing on Christian religious values and practices by eradicating all unchristian behavior through strict rules (Harding, 2006). Furthermore, residential schools were a tool to remove Aboriginal identity, alienate thousands of Aboriginal people from their communities, and take away their sense of self. Christian denominations, acting on behalf of the Canadian government, intended to rescue First Nation children from what they deemed to be uncivilized living conditions, which led to an assumption that Aboriginal families and communities were culturally inferior or in ruin (Bracken et al., 2009). During the "60s sweep," or "60s scoop," many First Nation communities lost most, if not all, their children to child welfare agencies (Rudin, 2001). Harding (2006) noted that in the 60s scoop, the seizure of indigenous children from their homes was for some time described as a "well-intentioned crime"; it is now recognized as cultural genocide. Children were cut off from their families, communities, and cultural and spiritual teachings, as government policies legalized controlling and monitoring First Nation lives (Comack 2012). Generations of Aboriginal children were deprived of healthy parenting role models, which left them with a diminished ability to raise and care for their own children. Residential schools provided inadequate care and permitted physical and sexual abuse of children, and survivors were demoralized and ill equipped for life as marriage partners and parents (Miller, 2005). Intergenerational trauma has forced families and communities into a vicious cycle of abuse (Sutherland, 2002), with alcohol and drugs used as coping mechanisms (Comack, 2012), economic dependence, low-quality social services, and the destruction of social and cultural structures (Manzo & Potts, 2013).

Colonialism remains a key event that helps to explain First Nation overrepresentation in the criminal justice system and high crime rates among Aboriginals (Rudin, 2001; Woods & Griffiths, 2000). The mixture of poverty, violence, and alcohol use within this community has its roots in colonialism (Comack, 2012). An attempt to explain Aboriginal offending focuses on the colonization process by European settlers that resulted in the destruction of Aboriginal culture, community, and identity (Woods & Griffiths, 2000). Furthermore, a long-term consequence of colonization has been the marginalization of Aboriginal people in Canada, which resulted in communities being plagued with high rates of unemployment and poverty, low levels of formal education, substandard living conditions, lower life expectancy, greater infant mortality, and higher incidence of disease (Harding, 2009; Rudin, 2001). Harding (2010) explained that economically strained Aboriginal communities receive less funding for child welfare agencies than their provincial counterparts. Cindy Blackstock, a child advocate, filed a complaint with the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal claiming that Aboriginal child welfare agencies received 22% less funding than provincial agencies (Harding, 2010). Currently, 42.8% of Aboriginal people live in poverty, compared with 19% of other Canadians.

### **Crime in Aboriginal Communities**

Rates of violent crime and property crime in Aboriginal communities have been very high in comparison with the corresponding rates among non-Aboriginal people (Woods & Griffiths, 2000). According

to Canada's General Social Survey in 2004, 40% of Aboriginal people aged 15 and older reported being victimized at least once in the previous 12 months (Brzozowski et al., 2006). Homicide rates are higher among Aboriginal people, who are also more likely than non-Aboriginal people to be victims of violent crime and spousal violence (Brzozowski et al., 2006). Between 2004 and 2009, there were 330 homicides with Aboriginals as victims and 417 with Aboriginals as the accused (Perreault, 2011). Perreault reported that 71% of those homicide victims were under the influence of alcohol or drugs, while 82% of those accused had used those substances at the time of the incident. Crime rates on reserves are also higher compared to the rest of Canada. Aboriginal women are at greater risk of being victims of spousal violence (15%) compared with 6% of non-Native women (Perreault, 2011). Aboriginal Canadians spend more time in custody than non-Aboriginals (Owusu-Bempah et al., 2014). The incarceration rate for the Aboriginal population in Saskatchewan is 25.9%, while Manitoba has the highest incarceration rate, at 1377.6 individuals per 100,000 population. Owusu-Bempah et al. (2014) suggested that individuals who are incarcerated are subjected to physical violence, sexual violence, sex without condoms, and sharing of needles. Furthermore, "Aboriginals lose six times as many life years to incarceration than non-Aboriginals" (Owusu-Bempah et al., 2014, p. 4).

Aboriginal overrepresentation in the criminal justice system has been attributed to several social, economic, and political factors. According to Fitzgerald and Carrington (2008), the relationship between Aboriginal neighborhoods' social and economic conditions influences crime rates. In addition, the role of the police, courts, correctional branches, and government, through legislation and policy, all contribute to the social and economic features of Aboriginal communities where crimes are committed. In Winnipeg, First Nation people comprise about 31% of the population residing in low-income housing. The findings from Fitzgerald and Carrington's (2008) study argue that neighborhoods with a high degree of socioeconomic disadvantage contribute to high Aboriginal crime rate, and therefore criminogenic identified neighborhoods have more crime. Aboriginal people tend to live in higher-crime neighborhoods characterized by social disorganization and social disadvantage. With regard to Aboriginal offending, Dickson-Gilmore and La Prairie (2005) found that long-term poverty and a disproportionate number of Aboriginal people in conflict with the law has contributed to a growing underclass of Aboriginal Canadians.

Research suggests that Aboriginals who come into contact with the law have a past with distinguishable features such as unemployment, being taken away from their natural family, poverty, family dissolution, poor school performance, dysfunctional background, and diminished social and community controls (Dickson-Gilmore & La Prairie, 2005). In addition to low income levels among First Nation people, educational attainment is lower among Aboriginal communities, where 48% of children aged 15 and older do not complete high school, compared with 31% of non-Aboriginal children (Brzozowski et al., 2006). Income levels are lower among First Nation people (Brzozowski et al., 2006). Aboriginal children are more likely to be members of a lone-parent family (35%), compared with 17% of non-Aboriginal children (Brzozowski et al., 2006), and low-income households are associated with economic poverty. As Rudin (2001, p. 26) concluded, "poverty is one of the best predictors of the chances of an individual coming into conflict with the law." Other findings suggest that Aboriginal youth's high incarceration rates may be due to the fact that the Aboriginal population is younger than the non-native population, and 15- to 19-year-olds are at the most risk for criminal involvement (Dickson-Gilmore & La Prairie, 2005). This could also explain why "Aboriginal youth are overrepresented in Ontario correctional facilities at a much higher rate than Aboriginal adults" (Rudin, 2001, p. 2).

Policing of Aboriginal lives has led to increasing overrepresentation in criminal justice, regardless of the nature of offences. For Smandych et al. (1993), overrepresentation is due to racial bias (discriminatory attitudes), cultural factors (linguistic differences, Anglo-Celtic criminal justice system), legal and extralegal considerations, and over-policing. Other researchers have attributed Aboriginal overrepresentation in the criminal justice system to differential treatment in each of the criminal justice system, commission of crime, and offense patterns. Other contributing factors in overrepresentation include economic disparity and social

structure, which give a better understanding of criminal offense patterns (see Smandych et al., 1993). Similarly, Rudin (2001) blamed three major causes of overrepresentation among Aboriginals in the criminal justice system, namely the culture clash between the Aboriginal and Western concepts of justice, which are very different; socioeconomic causes, with those at the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder finding themselves in conflict with the law and in jail; and colonialism. Some have also warned that “under-policing” of Aboriginal communities could exacerbate crime rates, since Aboriginal victims are seen as less worthy, they are often ignored, or their victimization is downplayed (Rudin, 2001).

The pattern of offending extends to reserves, urban areas, and remote settlements (Woods & Griffiths, 2000). Historically, police have been used to resolve Aboriginal rights disputes and arrest those who were exercising their right to land claims (Rudin, 2001). Police have also been used in the apprehension of children through government policies of assimilation, and their presence has been used to support the provisions of the Indian Act. Comack (2012) described the criminalization of an individual as creating dualistic imagery between the criminal and law-abiding citizens. This process outlines the view that those who are deemed to be criminal are not like the “rest of us” (Comack, 2012, p. 87). The focus of criminal justice intervention is to take control of the “problem population” that poses a threat, which turns into racialized policing of Aboriginal peoples (Comack, 2012). Relevant research, in sum, indicates that Aboriginal crime and offending is systemic and caused by poverty, unemployment, and lack of opportunities; it has roots in generational traumas, issues that adversely influence depictions of Aboriginal communities in mainstream media, and culture at large.

### **Media Framing of Aboriginal Communities**

Framing theory provides a useful theoretical approach for the analysis of news coverage, as it delves deeply into the social construction of news (Golan & Lukito, 2017). In its broadest sense, framing refers to the way that the media represent a particular topic or issue (Van Gorp & Vercruysse, 2012). Framing theory analyzes the way media messages can shape public response and sentiment (Boyle & Mower, 2018). Frame-building can be thought of as message construction (Boyle & Mower, 2018). News frames act as organizing mechanisms, produce meaning by including and excluding information, and promote a certain interpretation (Golan & Lukito, 2017). Frames define a problem, identify the cause of it, and often provide some moral judgement (Golan & Lukito, 2017). They encourage members of the public to interpret a story in a particular way (Golan & Lukito, 2017). The news media therefore construct reality by using certain frames at the expense of others and present phenomena through a specific cultural perspective (Dimitrova et al., 2018). Examining news frames is important because they represent an important aspect of news storytelling (Boyle & Moyer, 2018).

Negative media stereotyping produces negative societal views of Aboriginal people, and these views affect public policy and debate. Criminal acts committed within Aboriginal communities are reported by the media in damaging ways that highlight First Nation people as singlehandedly responsible for their own situation. The systemic structural issues, including discrimination in the justice system (Wood & Griffiths, 2000), that make First Nation people prone to criminality (and overrepresentation in Canadian prisons) remain overlooked and underreported. The most vulnerable, marginalized, and impoverished members in the Aboriginal community are women and children who are often the targets of abuse. Mainstream media coverage’s tendency to exploit tragic incidents reinforces misconceptions of First Nation people being incompetent or incapable of managing their own affairs (Harding, 2005).

In a study of news content regarding Aboriginal issues, Harding (2005) identified some recurring and damaging stereotypes of Aboriginal people in the three newspapers examined. Five specific frames dominated the coverage of Aboriginal people’s affairs: 1) Aboriginal people as incompetent or corrupt financial managers, 2) Aboriginal people as taking advantage of the system, 3) Aboriginal people as “dependent” and/or incapable

of self-governance, 4) Aboriginal people as working within the “system,” and 5) Aboriginal people as living outside non-Aboriginal law and social norms. Overtly racist and stereotypical tropes about indigenous people as primitive, savage, drunken natives (McMahon & Chow-White, 2001; Ojo, 2006), drug and alcohol abusers, criminals, and deviants with savage behavior (McMahon & Chow-White, 2001), find their way into contemporary mainstream media depictions (Roberts, 2007).

Media coverage and framing of Aboriginal children who die on a reserve would usually provide familiar “context” for readers. In another study of news coverage of critical incidents involving Aboriginal children, Harding (2010) found that news coverage focused on blaming Aboriginal social workers and questioning their competence, since the victim was associated with a population that had been stereotyped as at risk. News reports on Aboriginal child welfare agency cases framed the agency as irresponsible and dangerously incompetent and claimed that the agency should bear responsibility for the child’s death. As Harding (2010) explained, news reporting would identify the crime scene as happening in an “Aboriginal community” or on a reserve, which also links viewers/readers to a variety of social conditions, such as crime, poverty and violence. Readers attach a racial label to such stories, and this limits their interpretative choices.

Media coverage of Aboriginal affairs plays an important role in shaping public opinion about First Nation people, especially for those Canadians who have very little contact with them. Harding argued that news reporting that focuses on tragic consequences or extreme social conditions is exploitive in nature. In exercising hegemony, mainstream media framing of Aboriginal matters occurs in a way that both maintains the status quo and promotes the media’s interests (Harding, 2010). Through media construction and framing, for example, the idea of “no possibility of change” with respect to social problems is typically reported with regard to the state of Aboriginal communities and offending (Simmons & Lecouteur, 2008). Additionally, this mindset dominates popular imagination and political discourse. Within the news industry, the recognition is that “bad news sells, and is often the only news about Aboriginal people that the Canadian public ever receive” (Harding, 2010, p.102).

## Method

The first author of this article is an indigenous mother who is distressed by the ongoing negative portrayal of Aboriginal parents and their children. She therefore chose to analyze the Canadian media’s coverage of the deaths of Aboriginal children. She selected two cases for the study, which considers the death of Aboriginal children on reserves in Canada. These two cases were widely reported by the Canadian media and are likely most well-known among members of the public. The first is the 2005 death of Phoenix Sinclair, an Indigenous girl beaten by her mother and mother’s boyfriend. This incident drew attention to the failures of the child welfare system and led to a public inquiry (*The Canadian Press*). The second case focuses on the media coverage of Lee Allan Bonneau, who was found dead outside a recreation hall on August 21, 2013. These two cases received national attention, although their coverage in the media varied. The authors selected *The Globe and Mail*, a national, mainstream newspaper in Canada, to investigate mainstream media framing of deaths involving Aboriginal children on reserves. The researchers performed multiple searches of the LexisNexis academic database using the official names of the victims, “Phoenix Sinclair” and “Lee Allan Bonneau.” *The Globe and Mail* had covered the case of Phoenix Sinclair, and the search yielded 23 articles published between 2005 and 2020. The search did not turn up any news articles related to the death of Lee Allan Bonneau in *The Globe and Mail*. This case received more attention from regional/local media outlets, with numerous articles published primarily in Saskatchewan-based media. Careful scrutiny of the available media coverage led the research team to focus on *The Star-Phoenix*, due to the extent of its coverage (19 articles), published between 2015 and 2020. This is comparable to that of *The Globe and Mail*’s coverage of the Phoenix Sinclair case.

Interestingly, the LexisNexis search of *The Star-Phoenix* did not turn up any articles related to the Phoenix Sinclair case.

The comparative analysis of these two outlets provides insights into national, regional, and local mainstream print media. The two newspapers were selected because they make a compelling comparison on several grounds. They represent corporate mainstream print media in Canada belonging to two established media companies. *The Globe and Mail*, an influential national newspaper, is sometimes considered to be the “Canadian equivalent of *The New York Times*” (Ojo, 2006). It has a long history and special status in the Canadian media landscape for upholding some of the established media traditions and journalism values since its founding in 1844 (MacDonald, 2018). Owned by the Toronto-based Thomson family, *The Globe and Mail* views itself as “Canada’s foremost news media company and a part of Canada’s fabric.” It covers “events that have changed our nation as well as the day-to-day happenings that continue to shape us as a country.” The newspaper’s editorial line can be described as pro-corporate and right of center. Compared to the national focus of *The Globe and Mail*, *The Star-Phoenix* is primarily a local/regional newspaper owned by Postmedia Network, a Canadian news media company that also owns *The National Post* and numerous conservative-leaning news outlets. The only daily newspaper in Saskatoon, *The Star-Phoenix* often republishes regional and national news articles originally published in other Postmedia-owned outlets, including *The National Post* and Regina-based *Leader Post* (see summary data in Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Newspaper Data*

Data	<i>The Globe and Mail</i>	<i>The Star-Phoenix</i>
Coverage area	National (Canada)	Regional/local (Saskatoon)
Editorial line	(Right of) Centre	Right/Conservative
Date established	1840	1902
Company	The Woodbridge Company (Thomson Family)	Postmedia Network
Print circulation numbers (average weekday in 2015)*	346,543	43,593
Website	<a href="https://www.theglobeandmail.com">https://www.theglobeandmail.com</a>	<a href="https://thestarphoenix.com">https://thestarphoenix.com</a>

*Note.* \* “Circulation Report: Daily Newspapers 2015,” from [https://nmc-mic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/2015-Daily-Newspaper-Circulation-Report-REPORT\\_FINAL.pdf](https://nmc-mic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/2015-Daily-Newspaper-Circulation-Report-REPORT_FINAL.pdf)

An in-depth qualitative analysis of the data investigated reporting patterns and the construction of First Nation crime, particularly involving Aboriginal children as victims and/or perpetrators, in the selected outlets. Drawing upon framing analysis literature, the researchers regard media frames as lenses through which mainstream media shape readers’ understanding of First Nation crime as a social problem in explicating the causes of the problem and suggesting possible solutions and remedies. As discussed previously, framing occurs through information selection, exclusion, and salience because, as Entman (1993, p. 52) explained, “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.” The sources used and the frequency and prominence of these frames provide significant insight into how the construction of crime happens, including the deployed framing mechanisms.

There are two approaches to content analyzing frames in the news. The inductive approach, used by the authors, involves analyzing a news story with a view to revealing an array of possible frames (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). After multiple readings of related coverage, the researchers were able to discern the



following recurring thematic patterns framing First Nation crime (after ensuring interrater reliability amongst frames): 1) dangerousness of reserve life, 2) inadequate child foster homes and child welfare system, 3) undervaluing Aboriginal bodies, 4) exploiting the (welfare) system, 5) violence and punishment, and 6) social context (poverty, addiction, and residential schools’ legacy). Below, these framing mechanisms and major themes are discussed.

### Findings and Analysis

In the media construction of First Nation crime, media coverage relies upon a diverse set of sources as a means of externally supporting and legitimizing their reporting and narratives. For this reason, we examined the type of sources used in the sample of news articles and identified three major categories used in the two newspapers: official government sources (provincial and federal), indigenous organizations, and family/friends of victims and perpetrators (see Table 2). Compared to *The Globe and Mail*, *The Star-Phoenix* appears to have drawn on a broader range of sources, featuring information from family, friends, “experts,” and indigenous community members, in addition to the preponderance of official government sources. Coverage from *The Globe and Mail* relied more heavily on government and indigenous organizations.

**Table 2**  
*News Sources*

Source	National media <i>(The Globe and Mail)</i>	Local media <i>(The Star-Phoenix)</i>
Official (gov’t)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Office of the Children’s Advocate</li> <li>- Cabinet press secretary</li> <li>- Indian and Northern Affairs</li> <li>- Auditor general</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Advocate for Children and Youth</li> <li>- Social services minister</li> <li>- RCMP</li> <li>- Social services</li> <li>- Assistant deputy minister for child and family programs (provincial government)</li> <li>- Advocate for child and youth</li> <li>- NDP social services critic (opposition)</li> <li>- Indigenous services minister</li> </ul>
Indigenous organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- AMR Planning and Consulting</li> <li>- First Nations Child and Family Caring Society</li> <li>- Sagkeeng First Nation band councilor</li> <li>- Native Woman’s Association of Canada (NWAC) executive director</li> <li>- Yorkton Tribal Council Child and Family Services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Yorkton Tribal Council Child and Family Services</li> <li>- Saskatoon-based FASD Support Network</li> </ul>
Family and friends	None	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Victim’s parents</li> <li>-Perpetrators’ parents</li> <li>- Foster mother</li> </ul>
Media	None	None

Non-gov't	None	None
Other	None	- Dr. Susan Petruk (expert)

**Table 3**  
*Thematic Framing*

Frame	National media		Local media	
	<i>(The Globe and Mail)</i>		<i>(The Star-Phoenix)</i>	
	<i># Articles</i>	<i>%</i>	<i># Articles</i>	<i>%</i>
Inadequate child welfare system	10	53%	11	50%
Violence and punishment	4	21%	6	27%
Social context (poverty, addiction, residential schools)	3	16%	2	9%
Undervaluing Aboriginal bodies/lives	1	5%	1	5%
Dangerousness of reserve life	0	0%	2	9%
Exploiting the (welfare) system	1	5%	0	0%
	19	100%	22	100%

The most striking similarities in the thematic framing of indigenous-related crime in the two newspapers relate to their focus on the inadequacies of the child welfare system. Half of the related news reports in both *The Globe and Mail* and *The Star-Phoenix*, with 53% and 50% respectively, indicated that child welfare agencies and foster care were inadequate for protecting children (Table 3). In Phoenix Sinclair’s case, Children and Family Services (CFS) were partly to blame for her murder. Harding (2010) claimed that news reporting on Aboriginal agencies focuses on the agency being irresponsible and dangerously incompetent. The stereotypes that are projected frame Aboriginal individuals in a way that suggests that they are not ready or able to assume full responsibility for their lives (Harding, 2005). The analyzed articles also suggested that Aboriginal parents were unable to care for their children, and that CFS was unable to do so either. It is important to note that research on colonial assimilative policies has suggested that residential schools were detrimental to the family structure. Comack (2012) argued that children were cut off from their families and communities and deprived of healthy parenting role models. Generations of Aboriginal people have had no positive parenting role models, leaving them with diminished capacity to raise and care for their own children (Comack, 2012). With a history of fractured families caused by governmental assimilative policies, the state of parenting in Aboriginal communities is unstable. Research by Harding suggests that Aboriginal child welfare agencies are *demonized* by the media as players in the death of children that are in their care. Harding (2010) stated that economically strained aboriginal communities receive less funding for child welfare agencies than their provincial counterparts. When child welfare agencies receive less funding, their service delivery may suffer, and cases may get overlooked.

The thematic framing of indigenous crime in the two newspapers within the “violence” and “punishment” frame of reference is commonly used in mainstream media’s construction of crime, including references to violence, discipline, and punishment. Quantitatively, *The Globe and Mail* and *The Star-Phoenix* offered comparable space to these frames of reference, albeit at a slightly larger proportion in the latter newspaper (21% and 27%, respectively; see Table 3). Qualitatively, in the case of Lee Allan Bonneau, both media outlets depicted his alleged killer as violent, unpredictable, and known to police. “Known to police” is often used by the media as a code for having a criminal past. Such details promote public fear and anxiety about criminal acts (Dowler, 2003). Following these fears, there is often public demand for a punitive response to crime (Dowler, 2003). The article regarding Lee Allan Bonneau’s killer mentioned that he could be held by social services until he is 16 years old, or possibly 21. The mention of detaining the alleged killer plays into the public’s demand for more punitive measures. Dowler (2003) stated that media play an essential role in constructing criminality, and when individuals are seen as violent or dangerous, the media have an active part in creating mistrust of these individuals. When criminality is paired with ethnicity, the public may perceive an entire racial group as a threat and resort to alienation and disassociation. Depicting children as violent and a security threat, as seen the analyzed articles, may make some parents fearful and less willing to allow their children play with Aboriginal children. The media can play a part in attitudes that support segregation.

Another striking similarity in the thematic framing of indigenous crime is the persistent undervaluing of Aboriginal bodies, with 5% of the coverage in both newspapers featuring such reporting (see Table 3). In the case of Phoenix Sinclair, graphic details were mentioned in the articles describing the abuse that she suffered during her life. Researchers have claimed that the media is willing to report on sensitive issues and use sensationalized words (Collins, 2014; Gilchrist, 2010; Strega, 2014) to get readers’ attention and sell newspapers. Also, not only were gruesome details reported but another element of race and ethnicity was also added in these articles. News reporting of First Nation persons involved in violence, crime, and murder, and disclosing sensitive details, shapes the public’s opinion about Aboriginal Canadians (Harding, 2010). It also lends credence to the idea that Aboriginal bodies have less value and are awarded less respect and dignity. Historically, First Nation people have been characterized by the dominant class as “inferior” and seen as having no worth (Comack, 2012). Colonizers sought to take over First Nation people’s lives and civilize them (Comack, 2012). Aboriginal people are still living among this legacy of “inferiority” and are undervalued by the media. The media reports on sensitive issues with no care or respect for Aboriginal people and their dignity.

The thematic framing of indigenous crime exhibits some differences between national and local media coverage, particularly in their depictions of reserve life being “dangerous” and residents taking advantage of the (welfare) system. The local media outlet under examination, *The Star-Phoenix*, clearly constructed “life on the reserve” as “dangerous,” a recurring frame in 9% of related coverage, whereas the national media outlet, *The Globe and Mail*, featured no such depictions (Table 3). By emphasizing the location of the crimes and where the murders took place, the coverage thus constructed First Nation reserves as dangerous places, particularly for children. This suggests that criminal acts are happening in Aboriginal communities. In this particular framing of the murders and death of children on reserves in local media, the public are provided with a familiar notion of dire social conditions, crime, poverty, and violence (Harding, 2010). Wood and Griffiths (2000) claimed that Aboriginal communities have high rates of violence in comparison with non-Aboriginal communities. Brzozowski et al. (2006) added to this claim by stating that homicide rates are higher for Aboriginal persons than for non-Aboriginal persons. McCausland and Vivian (2010) noted that government policy and priorities are lacking in service delivery to Aboriginal communities, and long-term planning does not exist while short term programs seem to fade. Many aboriginal communities are underfunded and undervalued by the government, which puts stress on individuals in these areas. The previous authors continued by stating that a lack of services and government priorities creates a cycle of powerlessness, hopelessness, alcohol abuse, poverty, and poor mental health service programs, and many youth have contact with the criminal justice

system. Due to the way that the media reports murders that happen on First Nation reserves, the public may assume that these communities are unsafe. Stereotypes are therefore constructed and maintained through reporting of violent acts or murders that take place there.

Our analysis exposes another difference between local and national media thematic framing, as coverage in the national media (*The Globe and Mail*, 2013) has linked crime involving indigenous children to indigenous communities' exploitation of the "welfare system." In reporting on Phoenix Sinclair's case, for example, Ms. Kematch, Phoenix's mother was depicted as a dishonest person who took advantage of the system, and the media continued to frame her in a negative light throughout their coverage. Research has shown that the media contributes to marginalizing particular ethnic and cultural groups while depicting them as a problem and threat to the dominant (Nairn et al., 2006). Ms. Kematch was framed by the media as being a problem to society because she continued to collect child benefits after Phoenix Sinclair was murdered. Research claims that Aboriginal women are the most marginalized and oppressed members of Canadian society (Nairn et al., 2006). Aboriginal women make less money than non-Aboriginal women (Harper, 2006), suicide rates among Aboriginal women are three times the national average (Kubik et al., 2009), 43% of Aboriginal women live below the poverty line, 73% of Aboriginal women are single mothers (Carter, 2005), and Aboriginal women aged 25–44 are five times more likely to experience a violent death than other women in Canada (Gilchrist, 2010). It is clear that life for an Aboriginal woman has many challenges and is ultimately unfair. When Aboriginal women are depicted in the media as dishonest and trying to take advantage of the system, it can be assumed that they are just trying to survive and make ends meet.

Despite the negative construction of indigenous-related crime discussed above, our qualitative analysis discerned some "counter-framing" attempts in mainstream media coverage. Unlike local media coverage by *The Star-Phoenix*, national media coverage in the *The Globe and Mail* provided more information about the social context surrounding the crimes, at 9% and 16% of the sample, respectively (Table 3). In both cases, social context regarding the troubled past of the accused was mentioned in the articles. In Phoenix Sinclair's case, the articles provided a social context that included Ms. Kematch's involvement with CFS, family dysfunction, mental health issues, poverty, addiction, and the legacy of residential schools that she endured. In Lee Allan Bonneau's case, details such as a diagnosis of fetal alcohol syndrome and family dysfunction were provided about the child who was allegedly responsible for Bonneau's death. Providing a social context in a news story may give readers a background perspective of why or how things have happened. Harding (2006) suggested that resisting a racist stereotypical interpretation of events can be accomplished by ensuring media stories are told with a historical context.

Overall, the articles suggest how Aboriginal persons are linked with crime and framed in the media. The three tables have provided a coded framework that categorized common patterns and themes found in the content analysis of online newspapers. The six themes mentioned above illustrate how the media reinforce stereotypes, report on sensitive issues, frame aboriginal criminality, and position First Nation people as violent and dishonest. After a careful review of the data, it would appear that the research questions were affirmed, as attitudes and stereotypes appear to be reinforced through reporting on First Nation crime. Negative and damaging stereotypes are being maintained by the media. Negative framing by the media of Aboriginal crimes that happen among Aboriginal communities further marginalizes and negates public concern for Aboriginal social issues (Harding, 2005).

## Discussion

This analysis suggests that online media sources contribute to the framing of negative images of Aboriginal people in Canada. Disclosing where the crimes happened and specifying Aboriginal communities and reserves featured in all the examined articles. Reporting on where crime happens is part of journalism;

however, mentioning reserves gives the reader an ethnic and racial context to the story. Not including this information would stop readers from identifying crime among this racialized population. Another approach that the media uses when describing Aboriginal crime is referring to child welfare agencies as corrupt or incompetent. Mentioning child welfare agencies and Aboriginal people in the same article creates an unpleasant and a stereotypical picture that Aboriginal people are ill-equipped parents, and the state is needed to help care for their children. Furthermore, the news articles positioned Aboriginal child welfare agencies as contributors to the deaths of the children because the agencies were over-burdened with cases.

Language is often used by the media to undervalue Aboriginal bodies and identities. Overstated and detailed language that describes criminal events constructs the identity of the perpetrator as “savage,” “ruthless,” and “animalistic.” Previous research on the stereotyping of Aboriginal people suggests that situating them as deviant, drunken savages and bloodthirsty individuals (Comack, 2012; McMahon & Chow-White, 2011; Mahtani 2001; Ojo, 2006) is damaging to the Aboriginal identity. Also, when Aboriginal people are constructed as dishonest and as people who take advantage of the system, readers may discount their disadvantaged and marginalized position in society. Depicting a person as someone who takes advantage of the system is to blame them for their circumstance. When a racial context is added, stereotypes may be formed.

An unexpected finding from this analysis is that background information and historical context about the offenders/accused was sometimes included in news stories. Background information is important because it may provide context for the crime. For example, if a person has suffered trauma in their life, there may be more understanding for why they committed a crime. In the case of Lee Allan Bonneau, information was revealed that indicated that his killer come from a violent home. Research suggests that those who are victims of violence may become or are more prone to replicating that violence on others. Context, therefore, may permit readers to be more sympathetic towards an offender’s actions.

In the case of Phoenix Sinclair, references to mental health issues, addiction, and residential schools provide important facts that construct the trauma that the offender had endured. Providing a social context for the lives of Aboriginal persons that commit crimes is often critical. The breakdown of the Aboriginal family has its roots in colonialism, the Indian Act, assimilative policies, and residential schools. These laws and actions by the government can be blamed for the breakdown of Aboriginal lives, families, and communities. Breakdown in the Aboriginal community has resulted in poverty, crime, trauma, and inequality. In the media, however, Aboriginal people are often constructed as being completely and solely to blame for their own affliction. The media tend to report details that line up with the mainstream dominant view of Aboriginal people. These dominant views recycle stereotypes, create discrimination, and reaffirm racist views of Aboriginal people. The impact of the media’s framing of Aboriginal peoples is that it sensationalizes and stereotypes them as criminals, and their communities are deemed to be unsafe. There may be a tendency among the wider community to avoid Aboriginal people if they are stereotyped as dangerous, dishonest, and a threat.

The purpose of this study was to use framing theory to examine how the media may depict Aboriginal people in a negative way. The results reaffirm the work of Harding, who argued that news framing depicts Aboriginal people as corrupt managers of their own lives and Aboriginal child agencies as irresponsible and dangerously incompetent. The findings in this paper support Harding’s argument while establishing some other negative stereotypes. The explanation for why negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people are utilized in the media arguably stems from a history of discrimination and colonialization. Nairn (2006) suggested that racism was formed and created by colonialism and argued that that power conflict still exists in contemporary society. Nairn (2006) argued that the ruling class and dominant institutions use the power of the media to reinforce racism. Negative framing of Aboriginal people in the media may be destructive and play a role in creating inequality within Canadian society.

This study provides an important contribution to the literature on stereotyping and negative portrayals of Aboriginal people in the media. Through the course of this study, elements of subtle racism and several

damaging themes were discovered that were used by the media to frame Aboriginal people. It was acknowledged that racialized context is often used when reporting on Aboriginal crime. When media outlets include racialized context in their reporting, they are doing a disservice to members of the Aboriginal community. Furthermore, this study makes an important contribution to the Aboriginal community through the exploration of racialized reporting in the media.

There are limitations to the present study. It only focuses on two cases of Aboriginal crime regarding children, and only two online sources were used in the content analysis. The limited sample size makes it more difficult to gain a complete and encompassing view of the media's depictions of Aboriginals in relation to crime. Another limitation of this study is that there was no comparison to online news articles regarding non-Aboriginal murders and deaths of children. The comparison of Aboriginal crime in the media to non-Aboriginal crime may have given more or less support to the findings regarding stereotypes and racism.

Future research could explore both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal crime stories in the media, particularly those involving children. Also, future research might focus on whether negative stereotypes and damaging language affect how Aboriginal people are viewed by Canadian immigrants. Presumably, many of these individuals would not come from countries where there are indigenous populations, and therefore much of their information on Aboriginals may come from or be influenced by media portrayals.

Nairn (2006) stated that there is evidence that media sources contribute to marginalization, and they monitor certain social groups and construct them as socially deviant. Thus, they can help mitigate negative stereotyping of Aboriginal people. First, the media can refrain from divulging the names of Aboriginal communities in relation to criminal acts. Secondly, they can stop using descriptive, sensationalized language when describing Aboriginal crime. Thirdly, the media should be educated on Aboriginal issues and the impact that negative framing may have on this racialized group. It is important for media outlets to take responsibility for their role in reaffirming negative stereotypes. The media should acknowledge the impact their reporting may have on the public's views on crime among Aboriginal communities. It is equally important that researchers continue to highlight and reveal the negative framing of Aboriginal communities and crime that occurs among them, such as those that have been revealed in the current study.

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