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How True Are True Crime Podcasts?
An Assessment of Crime, Victim and Offender Representation
in Popular True Crime Podcasts

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Abstract

Over the last decade, the creation and popularity of true crime genre podcasts has risen exponentially. Like print media, TV shows, and films before them, podcasts and their focus may shape individual perceptions on a vast number of criminal justice related issues. Using content analysis, this study examined the accuracy of crimes portrayed in true crime podcasts, as compared to national level estimates of crime. Coders assessed more than 250 of the most downloaded episodic true crime podcasts in the United States between February 2020 and May 2021. Analyses revealed true crime podcasts highlighted an inordinate number of homicides as a crime type, White female homicide victims, and homicides where the victim and offender did not know each other. The prevalence of these crimes in the podcasts diverges significantly from what would be expected based on official crime statistics compiled by the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). At the same time, nonwhite victims of homicides were virtually ignored in the podcasts. Overall, results suggest as true crime podcasts grow in popularity, they are continuing entertainment media's tradition of misrepresenting crime. Lastly, potential implications for perceptions of crime and punishment are discussed.

Keywords: cultivation theory, true crime podcasts, media, crime

Introduction

There has long been a fascination with the intersection of media and crime (for reviews see, Jewkes & Linnemann, 2017; Surette, 1992). Print newspapers and radio were first to garner large audiences, followed later by television and films, as they presented fictionalized and non-fictionalized narratives about crime and violence. More recently, true crime podcasts, a narrative medium that often focuses on non-fiction criminal incidents and a review of crime-related evidence (Punnett, 2018), have gained immense popularity (Sherrill, 2020).

Since the original release of the podcast *Serial* in the Fall of 2014 and its investigation of the 1999 murder of Hae Min Lee and trial of Adnan Masud Syed, the creation and popularity of true crime podcasts has risen exponentially (Boling & Hull, 2018; Sherrill, 2020). Podcasts are a growing medium with estimates of over 100 million people listening to at least one podcast each month (Edison Research, 2020). Few, if any, genre of podcast is more popular than true crime, as they are consistently some of the most downloaded podcasts and often appear in the weekly, monthly, and end of year top ten most downloaded lists (Boling, 2019). The popularity of true crime podcasts, where a host or hosts review and examine details of rare crimes, could influence listeners' perceptions of the types of crimes commonly committed in the United States, as well as the typical characteristics of offenders and victims.

The chance that true crime podcasts' portrayals shape public perception could be important if the crime events streamed are not consistent with the nature of actual crime. Inaccurate depictions of the race and sex of those involved in the criminal justice system could help foster or reinforce harmful stereotypes (Entman, 1992). Further, repeated exposure to violent and dangerous narratives may lead some listeners to perceive they are at an increased risk of victimization as they see the world filled with dangerous people and places (Cavender & Bond-Maupin, 1993). True crime podcasts might help shape how individuals think about crime and punishment. Listeners' perceptions and opinions about crime can prompt changes in criminal justice policy (Enns, 2016); therefore, it may be constructive to examine the people and types of crimes described in this rapidly growing medium and genre. Using content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of the most popular true crime podcasts, the current study identified and documented the type of crimes, victims, and offenders most often represented. Each of these areas were contrasted with current crime statistics to determine if, or to what extent, depictions of crime and justice in true crime podcasts align or contradict with official crime statistics.

Literature Review

The representation of people and the everyday world in the media often differs in important ways from demographic realities (Eschholz, 2003; Eschholz et al., 2004; Gerbner, 1986; Oliver, 1994; Prosis & Johnson, 2004). This notion was expressed by Gerbner and Gross (1976) as part of a larger cultural indicators project where they developed a theoretical approach that, at the most basic level, described the processes of how one's world views can be influenced by the prevailing narratives portrayed on television. Termed "cultivation theory" or "cultivation process," there is a relationship between exposure to mass media and the views individuals hold based on the images and storylines depicted (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Shrum, 2017).¹

Television audiences are bombarded with recurring patterns, behaviors and themes. Very few, if any, can escape exposure to these powerful messages, that ultimately may contribute to an individual's social reality

¹ Cultivation theory has been criticized for not clearly developing the causal link between media messages and fear (Doob & MacDonald, 1979). Furthermore, cultivation theory did not initially fully recognize potential complex relationships between the messages displayed and individual audience characteristics (Potter, 1993).

(Gerbner et al., 1986). Often these media messages do not accurately portray people and events in the real world. For instance, media images have been found to underrepresent elderly characters (Signorielli, 2004), reinforce traditional gender roles (Lauzen et al., 2008), and overrepresent the prevalence of affluence (Hwang & Jeong, 2020). Further, a considerable amount of work has documented the pervasiveness of violence represented in the media (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1986). Overall, in the United States the levels of threat, violence, and victimization are inaccurately portrayed in the media, especially in TV, suggesting violence is far more rampant than in reality (Gerbner et al., 1994).

Since the pioneering work by Gerbner and others, there have been numerous studies documenting the mismatch in the amount and types of crime, as well as the characteristics of offenders and victims portrayed on TV. For example, a content analysis of three popular fictional prime-time programs determined that “type of crime, gender, age, and socio-economic status on fictional crime television programs does not correspond to actual crime” (Brown, 2001: 197). A comparison of crime portrayed on fictional television to the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting revealed that on television homicides are overrepresented while more common crimes like thefts are rarely shown. Further, women were shown to commit violent crime at a higher rate in the fictional programming whereas males were underrepresented as victims than would be expected based on official crime data (Brown, 2001).

Analyses of additional prime-time crime dramas revealed similar incongruities. Eschholz et al. (2004) found crime dramas overemphasized murder and disproportionately cast racial and ethnic minorities as offenders. Additionally, the two police procedurals examined showed atypical clearance rates, suggesting the police are more effective at solving crimes than would be expected based on the actual number of cases that result in arrest and are referred for prosecution. In addition to fictional crime dramas, reality TV crime shows, ones that are unscripted and feature non-professional actors, also provide a distorted view of the United States criminal justice system. These reality TV crime shows often depict an overabundance of Black offenders committing serious crimes (Monk-Turner et al., 2007; Oliver, 1994).

More recently, researchers have started to scrutinize podcasts to determine if they exaggerate the amount of crime and accurately depict the types, perpetrators and victims of crime. Indeed, like other forms of media, podcasts focus less on the more common crimes like theft and instead highlight murder cases (Yardley et al., 2019). Further, Compton (2019) in her analysis of the true crime genre, found they regularly focus on “white women and ignoring issues of violence against other marginalized communities” (p. 39). Likewise, in a non-United States context, Vitis (2022) found that true crime podcasts often focus on disappearances, murder and rape of young women. Lastly, Slakoff (2022), focusing specifically on portrayals of intimate partner violence in true crime podcasts, found the overall representation of this violence was more accurate and extensive in podcasts than many traditional news sources. However, physical intimate partner violence was depicted in a more sensationalistic manner than psychological intimate partner aggression and the author concluded podcasts often neglected to present the wider context that allows or encourages abuse to occur.

The disproportionate media focus on young and often White women victims aligns with Christie’s (1986) notion of the “ideal victim.” Ideal victims are seen as blameless, physically vulnerable, and worthy of compassion. Whereas, a person experiencing a mental health crisis, an individual without regular housing and more broadly men and even women of color are not seen as legitimate victims and thus will not garner the same levels of sympathy (Christie, 1986; Greer, 2007; Slakoff & Fradella, 2019). At the same time, White males are often portrayed as the central figures to protect the ideal victim. These highly selective representations may

distort who is classified as a victim, emphasizing females as weak and vulnerable and males as strong and knowledgeable (Cavender et al., 1999).²

Rationale for Current Study

Podcast audiences have been growing rapidly (Jones et al., 2021; Sherrill, 2020; Vogt, 2016). Listeners to podcasts are now the fastest growing media audience. Furthermore, those engaging with podcasts are listening to more shows and listening for longer periods of time. True crime podcasts have been among the most downloaded genres, as evidenced by two of the top five most listened to podcasts of 2020 being part of the true crime genre (Edison Research, 2021). True crime podcasts and their messages are important parts of the media landscape. The nature of the nonfiction crime-based events depicted provide the opportunity to influence individuals' attitudes, beliefs and even impact public policy. Those with greater exposure to news media and images of crime tend to view crime as a more immediate concern and could lead individuals to overestimate their probability of being a victim (Cavender & Bond-Maupin, 1993; Gebotys et al., 1988). In addition to media consumption altering individuals' perceptions of crime and justice, it can also influence public policy. As fear of crime increases individuals may be more supportive of punitive criminal justice policies (Eschholz, 2003). Legislators in turn may seek to align their views and policy with public preference as a means to get reelected (Enns, 2016).

To date, prior research has established that portrayals of crime on television often inflate the extent of crime and distort notions of "typical" offenders and victims. Research has overwhelmingly focused on television news, reality shows and nightly dramas. Far fewer studies have examined the depictions in the widely popular and growing genre of true crime podcasts. With the popularity and growth of podcasts, research has started to more closely examine themes represented in the true crime podcast genre, such as exploration of law enforcement portrayals (Seppälä, 2020), audience members' motivations for listening (Boling & Hull, 2018), the language used by hosts (Sacks, 2017) and if levels of fear are impacted by listening to true crime podcasts (Bailey, 2017).

Limited work has documented the tendency of true crime podcasts to highlight violence against White women or children while ignoring other possible victims (Compton, 2019; Vitis, 2022; Yardley et al., 2019). However, prior research has focused on multiple episodes from a single show or a limited number of serialized true crime podcasts. Further, some work has identified victim characteristics and, to a lesser extent, offender characteristics, but research has yet to systematically examine victim-offender relationships and other key aspects and elements of the criminal events. Additionally, research has not compared representations of crime depicted in true crime podcasts to national level estimates of crime in the United States. This study attempts to fill these gaps in the literature by analyzing the most downloaded episodic true crime podcasts in the United States and evaluating to what degree true crime podcasts align with national level estimates of crime.

Analysis

To select podcasts for inclusion in the study we used Trigon Digital monthly reports of the top 100 most popular podcasts based on average weekly downloads by users who are located in the United States. Triton Digital, a global technology company, user metrics are calculated using what they term a 'census based' digital audio streaming and audience measurement. Either log files of streaming activity or client-side measurement

² Despite the problematical ideal victim construct often highlighted in true crime podcasts, recent work has highlighted how women and their families have used this medium as an alternative to seek justice in cases where they feel let down by the formal justice system (Pâquet, 2021).

where data are culled from web-based players are used to measure user's digital audio activity (Triton Digital, 2020).

Punnett (2018) notes across all media, true crime can be distinguished via common themes such as non-fiction narratives that involve conceptions of justice, and forensic investigations. With these themes in mind, we identified and selected episodic true crime podcasts from the period of February 2020 to May 2021 that ranked in Triton Digital's top 15 for most users or downloads in the United States. Further, we included podcasts in our analysis that were ranked in the top 15 most users or downloads for at least three months over the 16-month timeframe.³ A podcast might gain initial support and a high ranking but soon experience a significant decline in listenership; therefore, we selected podcasts that appeared in rankings for multiple months. Further, the decision to limit our examination to episodic true crime podcasts to those ranking in the top 15 should include the podcasts with the widest reach but at the same time allows for the inclusion of different podcast series.

Based on the process described above, three true crime podcasts were identified: *My Favorite Murder*, *Morbid: A True Crime Podcast*, and *Crime Junkie*. Hosted by Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, *My Favorite Murder* launched in January of 2016 and incorporates both humor and a feminist perspective as the hosts typically discuss a single criminal case (Sacks, 2017). Second, *Morbid: A True Crime Podcast*, premiered in May 2018 and is hosted by Alaina Urquhart and Ashleigh Kelley. In addition to covering well known crimes, *Morbid* also features paranormal activities and, at times, an examination of conspiracy theories (Sammuli, 2021). Lastly, first airing in December 2017, *Crime Junkie*, hosted by Ashley Flowers and Brit Prawat, typically follows a single, often unsolved, suspected criminal incident (Seppälä, 2020).

From February 2020 to May 2021, *My Favorite Murder*, *Morbid: A True Crime Podcast*, and *Crime Junkie* released a total of 257 episodes.⁴ Premiering before the other two true podcasts examined here, *My Favorite Murder* examined a larger number of unique cases relative to the other true crime podcasts. Although, there was a total of 68 *My Favorite Murder* podcast episodes released, a single episode was often comprised of a description of two separate incidents, resulting in 120 individual or unique cases. Next, there was a total of 120 podcast episodes of *Morbid* released during this time period that examined 98 individual or unique cases, as on occasions the hosts would cover a single case across two or three episodes. *Crime Junkie* would intermittently cover a single case across two episodes or present two cases in a single episode, but the majority of the time devoted a single podcast episode to a single case. For the period of time under observation *Crime Junkie* released 69 episodes exploring 76 individual or unique incidents. Overall, the unit of analysis was each unique cases or incident; therefore, a single podcast might encompass two incidents whereas a single incident might span over two podcast episodes. Using this method, we reviewed a total of 257 podcast episodes resulting in 294 individual or unique cases.

For each podcast episode, we identified both individual characteristics of the people involved and characteristics about the incident. Crimes were categorized via the National Incident Based Reporting System's (NIBRS) crime types and included the following categories: murder, aggravated assault, forcible sex offense, non-forceable sex offense, kidnapping/abduction, arson, burglary, extortion, fraud, robbery and other sex offenses. Recorded demographic information included, sex, race, ethnicity, and age of victims and offenders, as

³ There is no single agreed upon metric to measure podcast listening. Although Apple Podcast Charts, formerly iTunes, has the largest industry presence, their metrics are not public and it is suspected that they rely largely on new recent subscribers in their ranking process (Winn, 2021). Triton Digital was selected because of its wide reach and transparent methodology. Triton Digital rankings can be found here: <https://www.tritondigital.com/resources/podcast-reports>. Additionally, top ranked podcasts on Triton Digital, including the true crime podcasts analyzed here closely mirrored those on the Apple Podcast Charts.

⁴ Episodes that required a fee or charged for access were excluded from the analysis.

well as the social relationship between offender and victim. Further, the location, date, and outcome of the case (e.g. guilty verdict, acquittal, or no arrests) were coded.⁵

In addition to documenting the types and key elements of the criminal incidents highlighted in the true crime podcasts, we also made comparisons when appropriate. Analyses were conducted using z-tests to determine the likelihood true crime podcasts and official crime data differ significantly on key aspects (Riffe et al., 2019). Official crime data for this study come from the 2020 NIBRS and the Summary Reporting System (SRS) published via the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR). Additionally, crime data were extracted through the FBI's Crime Data Explorer (CDE), a publicly available online tool where one can access crime data collected and published each year (Crime Data Explorer, 2021). The use of SRS data is not without limitations, such as failing to capture crime not reported to law enforcement nor are law enforcement agencies required to participate in the UCR program. However, in the United States it is commonly used and one of the most reliable measures of crime over time (Strom & Smith, 2017).⁶

Results

Homicides were overwhelmingly the main focus of cases presented during the podcasts. In total, 199 incidents out of the 294 unique incidents (68%) covered by the podcast hosts involved the killing of another person. The majority of these episodes focused on incidents where a single individual was killed ($n = 114$), followed by 46 cases that involved a serial homicide—that is, an individual over time kills multiple people in different locations and in distinct separate events (Haggerty, 2009). The remaining 39 instances highlighted cases in which multiple people were murdered in a single incident. At times ($n = 68$) a true crime podcast episode focused on non-criminal events, such as illnesses, accidents, supernatural phenomena or answered listener questions. Also, some cases involved instances where it could not be determined if a crime occurred (e.g. missing person). When eliminating cases that did not involve criminal incidences and where it was unclear if a crime occurred, almost 88% (199/226) of these true crime podcasts focused on some type of homicide. The 27 non-homicide crimes covered included kidnappings, hijackings, assaults, robberies and riots; however, individually none of these crime types accounted for ~5% of the of the overall incidents that dealt with a violation of the law. Considering there were only a small number of non-homicide cases, the seriousness and importance of homicides coupled with homicides are often considered the most reliable official crime data (Parkin & Gruenewald, 2017), the analysis that follows focuses exclusively on the 199 cases of homicides⁷. See table one.

⁵ All podcasts were downloaded and when available summaries of podcast episodes supplied by the podcast provider were copied. The lead author developed the coding scheme and trained the second author who conducted the coding independently. To help ensure reliability of the coding, 20% of the cases were randomly selected and rated by the first author. A comparison of the independent ratings demonstrated negligible variation between raters as Krippendorff's alpha-reliability (2011) measures resulted in all variables with an $\alpha > .85$.

⁶ The podcasts examined were released in portions of both 2020 and 2021, but only 2020 crime data were available and used. Although crime counts and crime rates may fluctuate, such as an almost 30% increase in homicides from 2019 to 2020 (Johnson, 2021); the focus of the current work on victim and offender characteristics tends to be more consistent over time. Therefore, changes in the number or levels of crimes should not significantly impact the results. Related, about 75% of the homicide cases covered by the hosts occurred in the last 50 years and over half since 1990, but comparisons with official crime were based on 2020 data. This incongruity should be acknowledged as it is possible that crimes in a historical context are less impactful to listeners as they form their perceptions of crime and justice compared to more recent events.

⁷ Serial or mass homicides covered in a single episode were treated as a single incident. For example, if a podcast episode covered a case where an individual killed two people at one time, this was categorized as single incident.

Table 1: Popular true crime podcast episodes and featured content - February 2020 to May 2021

	<i>My Favorite Murder</i>	<i>Morbid</i>	<i>Crime Junkie</i>	Total
Number of podcast episodes	68	120	69	257
Number of unique incidents covered	120	98	76	294
Number of unique criminal incidents	97	72	57	226
Number of homicide cases*	77	66	56	199

*Note: A single podcast might cover two separate individual homicide cases whereas a single homicide case might span over multiple podcast episodes.

The majority of homicides in the United States are committed with a firearm, often a handgun. In 2020, 13,620 of 17,754 (76.7%) homicides were committed with a firearm, followed by knives or other cutting instruments (9.8%), and none of the other categories where the weapon type was known accounted for >4% of the total (FBI, 2021). Of the 133 homicides where the type of weapon was known and only a single weapon was used, only 36 were committed with a firearm—less than 30% of the total. Whereas in the true crime podcasts, cutting instruments, blunt force and strangulation were identified in approximately 50% of the cases as the weapon used in a murder. Z-test analysis showed that homicide victims in true crime podcasts had a much lower likelihood of being killed with a firearm compared with official crime data compiled by the FBI ($z = 13.4$, $p < .001$). Overall, true crime podcasts fail to represent the high proportion of homicides in the United States committed with a firearm.

According to data compiled by the FBI, males engage in and are victims of lethal violence at a far higher rates than females. When the sex of the offender was known, the most recent available data demonstrate that in the United States males comprise approximately 88% of murder offenders. Although the gap for victimization is not as pronounced, 80% of homicide victims are males whereas females account for the remaining 20% (FBI, 2021). Almost 84% of the homicide offenders in the podcasts were male. However, unlike the sex of offenders represented in podcasts that align with expectations based on official crime data, victimization skews heavily toward females. With the exception of the 44 cases where a single incident had at least one male and one female victim, the remaining 155 cases included 118 female⁸ homicide victims and only 37 males (see table two). Z-test of proportions supported significant differences between the representations of female homicide victims in podcasts and official crime data ($z = 17.1$, $p < .001$); however, when it came to a comparison of female offenders, these differences were not significant at the .05 level ($z = 1.7$, $p = .09$).

Table 2: Sex of homicide victims and offenders in popular true crime podcasts & official crime data

	Victims in True Crime Podcasts	Victim Data UCR 2020	Offenders in True Crime Podcasts	Offender Data UCR 2020
Female	118 (76.1%)	3,573 (20.2%)	23 (16.5%)	1,735 (11.8%)
Male	37 (23.9%)	14,146 (79.8%)	116 (83.5%)	13,023 (88.2%)
Total	155	17,719	139	14,758

Note: Totals and percentages are based on cases where the sex of the victim or offender were known. The sex of the offender was not known in 42 of the 199 cases (21%), whereas in UCR data the sex was not known in 6,224 of the 20,982 homicides, about 30% of the incidents, these have been excluded from the total. Z-tests showed significant differences ($p < .001$) in the proportion of female homicide victims, but not offenders in true crime podcast data compared to UCR data.

⁸ Two of the 118 female homicide victims were trans-female.

Turning attention to race, UCR data showed Whites comprised near 41% and Blacks approximately 57% of known homicide offenders. Likewise, the racial composition of homicide victims in 2020 followed a similar pattern, with Whites making up close to 40% and Blacks 57% of homicide victims (FBI, 2021). However, the race of homicide offenders and victims in true crime podcasts paint a very different picture. When the race of the offender and victim were known, Whites accounted for 93% of offenders and just over 88% of homicide victims (see table three). A z-test of proportions supported that Whites were both more likely to be victims ($z = 12.3, p < .001$) and offenders ($z = 12.5, p < .001$) in true crime podcasts compared to what would be expected based on reported crime.

Table 3: Race of homicide victims and offenders in popular true crime podcasts & official crime data

	Victims in True Crime Podcasts	Victim Data UCR 2020	Offenders in True Crime Podcasts	Offender Data UCR 2020
White*	145 (88.4%)	7,029 (40.3%)	133 (93.0%)	5,844 (40.6%)
Black or African American	17 (10.4%)	9,913 (56.8%)	9 (6.3%)	8,142 (56.6%)
Other**	2 (1.2%)	497 (2.9%)	1 (0.7%)	404 (2.8%)
Total	164 (100%)	17,439 (100%)	143 (100%)	14,390 (100%)

* Of the White victims in the true crime podcasts, eight were Hispanic or Latinx. This accounts for 4.0% of the victims. Whereas UCR 2020 data displays that Hispanic or Latinx individuals account for 17.6% of the victims. Of the White offenders in true crime podcasts, six were Hispanic or Latinx, which accounts for 3.0% of offenders. Whereas UCR 2020 data displays that Hispanic or Latinx individuals account for 9.5% of offenders.

** Other includes American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

Note: Totals and percentages are based on cases where the race of the victim or offender were known. The race of the offender was not known in 45 of the 199 podcast cases (22.6%), whereas in UCR data the race of the offender was not known in 6,592 of the 20,982 homicides, about 31% of the incidents, these have been excluded from the totals. Also excluded from the podcast totals are 33 and 11 victim and offender incidents as they included cases where there were multiple victims or offenders of varying race. Z-tests showed significant differences ($p < .001$) in the proportion of White victims and offenders in true crime podcast data compared to UCR data.

In 2020, slightly more than half of the homicides in the United States the victim/offender relationship was not known. When the relationship between a homicide victim and offender could be determined, 79% of homicides were committed by a person who knew the victim in some capacity (e.g., family, friend, or acquaintance) and 21% killed by a stranger (FBI, 2021). Whereas, in the cases examined in the true crime podcasts the victim/offender relationship was known in more than 80% of the cases. The remaining cases where the victim/offender relationship could be established, 49% or 80 out of 162 homicide cases the victim was killed by a stranger and 51% were killed by a non-stranger (see table four). The difference in proportions was significant ($z = 8.5, p < .001$) with true crime podcasts covering cases at a much greater rate where someone was killed by a stranger compared to national estimates from official crime data.

Table 4: Homicide victim/offender relationship in popular true crime podcasts and official crime data

Victim/offender relationship	True Crime Podcasts	UCR 2020
Non-stranger	82 (50.6%)	7,066 (78.9%)
Stranger	80 (49.4%)	1,889 (21.1%)
Total	162 (100%)	8,955 (100%)

Note: The victim/offender relationship was unknown for 37 of the 199 (18.6%) homicide cases presented in true crime podcasts. Whereas, 9,564 of the 18,519 (51.6%) homicide cases the victim/offender relationship was not known. Z-tests showed significant differences ($p < .001$) in the proportion of homicides committed by strangers in true crime podcast data compared to UCR data.

Discussion

The current study systematically examined the types of crimes, victims, and offenders most often represented in the most popular episodic true crime podcasts in the United States. As anticipated, the findings suggest the type of crimes, weapons used in a murder, key characteristics about homicide victims and offenders did not align with official crime data. Despite being a relatively rare crime, the popular true crime podcasts we examined focused almost exclusively on homicides, with a particular emphasis on White females as victims.

The hyper-focus on homicides may not be surprising, as podcasts highlighting a simple assault might not lend itself to compelling storytelling. However, murders are extremely rare relative to all crime, and the least frequently occurring violent crime. Research has demonstrated the powerful impact media coverage of homicides has on fear of crime (Liska & Baccaglini, 1990). The consistent exposure and reinforcement on homicides by podcast hosts could lead to an irrational sense of danger, panic, insecurity, and mistrust as individuals come to believe they are at an elevated risk of serious victimization (Gerbner & Morgan, 2010). Further, distorted views of crime can make it more challenging for individuals to make informed decisions about policies related to crime and ultimately can lead some to support more unnecessary punitive policies (Eschholz, 2003; Eschholz et al., 2004).

Additionally, the lack of attention by podcasts on homicides committed with firearms arguably aligns with broader trends in the United States. Firearms and specifically handguns are the most common murder weapon and result in thousands of people being killed each year. However, unless a child is murdered, or there is a mass shooting, these “everyday shootings” are often concentrated in urban areas among marginalized members of society and rarely garner much attention (Goss, 2010, p. 4). As daily gun deaths are neglected, they may not receive the necessary political and policy action needed to address this violence (Cook & Ludwig, 2006; Cotter, 2019).

Although in true crime podcasts males were somewhat accurately portrayed as the most likely homicide perpetrators, as victims, they were significantly underrepresented. Instead, females are portrayed as the victims of homicide on popular true crime podcasts far more than would be indicated in official crime data. The focus on female homicide victimization can be viewed via a number of lenses. First, arguably females, especially as victims of intimate partner violence, were traditionally ignored or disbelieved (Brownmiller, 1993; McHugh & Frieze, 2006). Therefore, as the podcast hosts highlight cases where females are homicide victims, including fatal violent victimizations by an intimate partner, this could help bring attention to the prevalence of this type of serious physical and psychological violence (Pâquet (2021; Slakoff, 2022). Second, while recognizing violence against women is important, Stillman (2007) has noted that some female homicide victims, often White and wealthy, received media attention and societal empathy whereas low-income women of color do not. Neglecting some victims and deeming others as tragic can reinforce that some victims are worthy of sympathy and policy interest while others are not. Third, the emphasis on female victimization could give an impression

to the listening audience, who tend to be female (Boling & Hull, 2018), they or a loved one are at a heightened risk of danger.

The almost complete absence of non-White individuals as both offenders and victims is noteworthy for a number of reasons. Research by Eschholz and colleagues examining prime time television dramas found that “minorities are disproportionately more likely to be cast as offenders than their White counterparts” (2004, p. 173) and this can contribute to negative criminal racial typifications (Eschholz, 2003). It does not appear the popular true crime podcasts examined here contribute to the media’s perpetuation of stereotypes of racial and ethnic minorities as typical offenders. However, since podcasts are not a visual medium, it is possible that the focus on White offenders and victims and lack of attention on Black offenders and victims has the same impact compared to viewing the content. Listeners of podcasts might not be certain or less likely to know the offender’s race in an audio medium.

Next, although prior work has found novel interracial homicides receive enhanced media coverage (Gruenewald et al., 2013), the incidents covered in the true crime podcasts tended to spotlight intraracial incidents. The focus on White victims and White offenders comports with FBI statistics that shows the vast majority of murders in the United States are intraracial (Rosenfeld & Fox, 2019). At the same time, the lack of focus on Black victims is not surprising as work has documented the media’s disregard for Black female homicide victims (Compton, 2019; Neely, 2015). This selective attention can contribute to a dehumanization of Black women as they may be seen as less legitimate victims and their homicides are not treated with the same urgency by the criminal justice system relative to other victims (Nelly, 2015).

Lastly, popular true crime podcasts overemphasized homicides committed by individuals not known to the victim. Additionally, research has found that females have a greater likelihood of being murdered by an intimate partner, and males are at a higher risk of being killed by a stranger (Vieraitis et al., 2008). Therefore, considering female homicide victimization was the primary focus of the podcasts, one would expect an even greater proportion of homicides where the offender is known to the victim. While the true crime podcasts examined here already misrepresented the typical homicide victim-offender relationship, the attention on stranger homicides is less justifiable as females have a lower likelihood of being killed by a stranger. It could be expected that repeated exposure to these true crime podcasts that portray violence from strangers against women instead of people they know, communicates that public places are unpredictable, dangerous (Cavender & Bond-Maupin, 1993; Pain, 1997) and strangers cannot be trusted (Gerbner & Gross, 1976).

Limitations

Important limitations deserve mentioning. We were not able to measure if, or to what extent, listening to true crime podcasts changed perceptions of crime and justice. However, prior work has been consistent that the media can be a powerful tool in influencing public perceptions of crime and the criminal justice system (Eschholz et al., 2002; Gerbner, & Gross, 1976; Goidel et al., 2006; Lowry et al., 2003). Additionally, audience characteristics such as age, sex or socio-economic status have been found to affect how individual viewers interpret crime content (Heath & Gilbert, 1996). Likewise, listener characteristics of true crime podcasts might induce fear in some listeners but not others (Bailey, 2017). While work has found that listeners of true crime podcasts are overwhelmingly female (Boling & Hull, 2018), we do not know specific audience characteristics of those who listened to the podcasts analyzed here and cannot assume the perceptions of crime and justice will be monolithic for listeners (Vitis & Ryan, 2021).

Additionally, our understanding of podcast themes was based on content analyses of the end product, without knowledge of the decision-making process the podcast creators/producers used to choose the cases covered and therefore no specific knowledge as to why certain cases were selected. Lastly, this work examined popular episodic podcasts while excluding non-episodic or serial podcasts that often examine a single case over a limited number of episodes. Considering non-episodic true crime podcasts are also very popular, results might have been different with their inclusion. Despite these limitations, this work was still able to document crime

types and other key characteristics of victims and offenders represented in episodic popular true crime podcasts. Further, we were able to identify incongruencies between crime depicted in true crime podcasts and national level estimates of crime in the United States.

Conclusion

This study assessed the types of crimes, victims, and offenders most often depicted in the most popular true crime podcasts. These episodic podcasts almost exclusively focused on murders, often with White female victims, while nearly ignoring nonwhite victims of crime. According to cultivation theory, inaccurate media messages that exaggerate “stranger danger” may contribute to higher levels of fear among women, who, in turn, might unnecessarily avoid certain places (Scott, 2003). Further, portrayals of crime, including especially sympathetic or ‘worthy’ victims contrasted against simplistic marauding ‘bad guys’ can influence how individuals think about punishment and can result in the justification for longer sentences and generally more punitive forms of punishment (Cavender & Fishman, 2018). More than 45 years ago, Gerbner and Gross (1976) documented how television dramas distort reality and can cultivate assumptions about crime and justice. Over four decades later, though television viewership has declined and podcasts audiences have grown (Willens, 2015), what has not changed is the inaccurate representation of crime by entertainment media.

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