Print News Media and Prisoner Reentry: An Exploratory Study of Local Newspapers in 2018

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Print News Media and Prisoner Reentry: An Exploratory Study of Local Newspapers in 2018

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By

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Introduction

Criminologists have long studied criminals prior to, during, and after their incarceration. Much of the latter research focuses on the rehabilitation and reintegration of former criminals back into society as law-abiding citizens. More generally, prisoner reentry has gained more widespread attention as policymakers and the public debate changes to our criminal justice system to relieve prison overcrowding (Angelos & Jacobs,1985; Pitts, Griffin, & Johnson, 2014), reduce inequalities in incarceration across communities (Phelps & Pager, 2016), and reduce state and local costs (Orrick & Vieraitis, 2015; Pitts, Griffin, & Johnson, 2014). Much of this debate has taken place in local, regional, and national news venues.

Although the debates on rehabilitation and integration seem to still be holding much attention, there continues to be a difference in how the public perceives the risk of prisoner reentry and what research finds regarding recidivism and rehabilitation. On one hand, data generally support the concept of rehabilitation and programs designed to educate and reintegrate offenders with minimal risk (Belden, Russonello, & Stewart 2001; Wozniak 2014). On the other hand, the general public remains generally uniformed about the rehabilitation and reentry process and, in turn, wary of ex-offenders. Furthermore, data shows that even though there is support for rehabilitation, the public often are unwilling to devote resources to reentry at the cost of other community programs, particularly when they have little optimism of reentry programs working (Belden, Russonello, & Stewart 2001; Wozniak 2014).

Unfortunately, little is known about how public opinion towards reentry is shaped (Garland, Wodahl, & Smith 2015). One area that calls for greater attention is the role

played by local news media in shaping public opinion of many important current issues, including those of criminal justice (Klite, Bardwell, & Salzman 1997; Tuttle & Harris, 2019). Sociologists and criminologists have shown that media play an important role in understanding how the public perceives crime and justice issues (Harris, Gruenewald, & Tuttle 2021), but there are several unanswered questions about how the media impact public perceptions of prisoner recidivism and the reentry of prisoners into communities. In hopes to fill gaps on this subject, the current study uses ethnographic content analysis on newspaper articles while investigating the following research questions: (*1*) *How does local news media portray recidivism by reentering prisoners? and in turn, (2) What are some characteristics of those news articles associated with the likelihood of local media using specific portrayals or "frames"?*

There are several reasons to examine these research questions. First, this research aims to convey how local news media might use their positions to create narratives for public consumption that foster worry and panic. This study can shed light on the overall narrative of risk that is provided for public consumption, including the differences in prevalence of different kinds of narratives. Second, in describing how media might create fear of those released from the criminal justice system, the current project also aids in understanding why more or less restrictive prison release policies may be adopted in certain communities. In some cases, this may mean that communities pursue policies that lack empirical evidence and, in turn, can lead to more harm to the community than good. Broadly, this project addresses disparities in support of reentry initiatives by focusing on both how it is portrayed across different local media sources and some of the factors associated with that portrayal. In doing so, the current project can help to shed light on

public receptiveness that, subsequently, shapes the prospects and reception of returning prisoners.

A Review of Public Opinion

There has been significant growth in the studies of criminal's re-entry into communities, as well as how the communities feel about this process over the past few decades. These bodies of research have not only provided knowledge of what the public thinks, but also drawn attention to inconsistencies within public opinion relative to empirical research. For example, several studies have shown that, while the public recognizes that prisoners are reentering society, it is not a pressing concern for most (Belden, Russonello, & Stewart 2001; Wozniak 2014). When directed to think about the issue, national polls reveal that over 70 of the public have concerns about or are fearful of ex-criminals being released from custody (Krisbery & Marchionna 2006). These same polls also show that the majority of respondents recognize that the incarceration system has in some ways failed those being released from prison by perpetuating stigma or undermining legitimate work and education after they are released (Krisbery & Marchionna 2006; Belden, Russonello & Stewart 2001). Ironically, this leads to a contradiction: the public largely see the purpose of incarceration in jails and prisons as rehabilitating offenders (Wozniak 2014; Harding 2014), but simultaneously believes they are not harsh enough (Belden, Russonello & Stewart 2001; Wozniak 2014).

Likewise, aside from inconsistency in the overarching opinion of the public on offenders, we find that there are also differences in opinion across different areas of the United States (Ouellette, Applegate, and Vuk 2017; Garland, Wodahl, & Schuhmann 2013). For example, public opinion polls reveal that a higher proportion of respondents in

Missouri support reentry programs and services for offenders than those in South Carolina, where residents report more uncertainty about living near ex-offenders. Yet, these same polls also show that the willingness to put taxes and time into the local community to support reentry programs has somewhat less support in Missouri (Ouellette, Applegate, & Vuk 2017; Garland, Wodahl, & Schuhmann 2013). Another study conducted by Leverentz (2011) examining three communities in Massachusetts with similar populations, crime rates, and victimization rates found considerable variation in levels of punitiveness for former inmates (Leverentz, 2011). In sum, these studies demonstrate that public opinion on reentry and the rehabilitation of offenders is not uniform.

The Importance of News Media

Since the creation of large-scale television media in the early 1950s, access to local current events has become easier as technology has continued to become more widespread. Increased access to news media has certainly allowed for the greater and more rapid consumption of information, with much discussion also centered on the accuracy of the information presented by news sources. This remains particularly true with regards to crime. Crime stories have historically been one of the most prevalent types of stories in news media outlets (Harris, Gruenewald, & Tuttle 2021; Jewkes 2011; Surette 2014). Yet, in writing crime stories, the news media has to choose a "frame" for an event or topic. They narratively simplify and emphasize different aspects of the stories for affect (Chyi & McCombs 2004).

Because news media must find ways to frame a topic for the public, empirical research has increasingly examined how the media describe crime stories. Unfortunately,

this research shows that media portrayals of crime continuously fail to report information on crime in a way that reflects what crime data show (Harris, Gruenewald, & Tuttle, 2021; Jewkes 2011; Pizarro, Chermak, & Gruenewald 2007). For example, most crime stories overrepresent violence and homicide, particularly for certain categories of victims and offenders (Pizzaro, Chermak, & Gruenewald 2007). In turn, how crime is presented to the public by news media has been shown to shape how those individuals think and feel about it (Gilliam & Iyengar 2000).

The current study focuses in particular on the concept of framing, which is the strategic selection of some aspects of a social issue to make them more salient in communication (e.g., print, television). Framing can be characterized as a centralized organizing idea for news content that provides contexts and suggestions about how to think of an issue by using selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration (Chyi & McCombs, 2004). In essence, news media framing is about giving information to the public by taking lengthy, complicated events – like crime and justice topics – and turning them into shorter, easy-to-follow narratives that are suitable for a number of different audiences (Harris, Gruenewald, & Tuttle, 2021; Kim, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2002).

While constructing a frame is important, decisions about how prominently to display a news story with a specific frame are also critical. That is, newsroom decision makers not only decide how to discuss a topic, but also how centrally to feature that discussion. Articles about crime and justice have often been a prominently featured topic, as summarized by Pooley's (1989) famous observation: "if it bleeds, it leads." Indeed, some research shows that framing and prominence are tied together (Tuttle & Harris,

2019) such that whether an article appears on the front-page of a paper remains a key characteristic of news stories too (Peake, 2007).

Framing and other news making decisions are part of the larger process of agenda-setting. Not all types of social issues are equally important to the news media, who must find stories that draw readers or viewers. Therefore, the news media find issues that have saliency in the public agenda to report on (Golan 2006; Chyi & McCombs, 2004). The idea of agenda-setting in simple terms is to create items for public consumption, including current public issues, that are important for public figures, policy makers, and other stakeholders. As part of setting the agenda, frames are selected to keep stories and issues fresh. A story can be given emphasis in different ways to hold on to the public's attention so that they come back to find out more about the story (Chyi & McCombs, 2004). This helps to explain the misreporting of crime relative to its actual occurrence: news media set an agenda by framing stories in ways that overemphasize or rework certain things about a crime story to keep readers and public stakeholders coming back.

Agenda-setting can be helpful for media outlets wanting to draw in readers but is also important because news media plays a pivotal role in the shaping and reflecting public perceptions of crime. The general public relies on their local media for information about crime and justice because they often lack direct experience with the criminal justice system, and other aspects of crime (Tuttle & Harris, 2019; Surette, 2014). Because of this, news media overemphasis on violence, inaccurate portrayals of common offenders and victims (Tuttle & Harris, 2019; Chermak & Chapman, 2007; Dowler, Fleming, &

Muzzatti 2006; Pizarro, Chermak, & Gruenewald 2007) can affect how the public perceives and acts toward crime and justice issues.

It is important to note that this study does not argue that media is the sole resource used by the public to form their opinions. Clearly, things like interactions with peers, cultural values, and even political preferences affect how each individual forms opinions on issues related to crime and justice. However, with the prevalence of crime news reports and the public dependency on those media narratives, I argue that it is important to specifically examine how local news media frame topic related to crime and justice, including for issues surrounding release from prison.

Parameters of the Current Study

To reiterate, my research questions are: (1) How does local news media portray recidivism by reentering prisoners? and in turn, (2) What are some characteristics of those news articles associated with the likelihood of local media using specific portrayals or "frames"? In short, I aim to explore the prevalence of specific news media frames about prison release, as well as examine whether specific characteristics of those news media articles are related to whether certain frames are used in those articles.

Data

The primary data for this study are drawn from articles gathered from the Lexis Uni database. Lexis Uni is an academic database that archives news articles, journals, and law cases on a variety of searchable topics dating back to the 19th century. The database was created to provide researchers and librarians with easier access to digitized materials collected from a host of different sources.

I selected articles printed in English language, within the category of newspaper article, and published in the United States between January 1, 2018, and December 31, 2018. I restricted my collection using a search algorithm returning articles including the words "prison" or "prisoner" within five words of the word's "reentry" or "release." These restrictions resulted in 2,177 articles that met criteria after eliminating duplicates. However, due to copyright and download restriction for the database, I selected a random 999 articles that were then read and inspected for relevance, and subsequently coded when applicable (this is the maximum number allowable per search). The final sample includes a total of 241 articles. These articles were selected as applicable because they included actual discussion of issues related to prisoner release, reentry, and/or recidivism. Talking about crime and prison in general terms did not suffice for the purpose of this study.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables for the current study are local news media frames, or the narratives employed in each article to describe the prisoner release/reentry. Frames were constructed using ethnographic content analysis (ECA) of the 241 relevant articles, which involves developing a systematic analysis of the content of articles using pre-defined frames, as well as the expansion of those frames within the articles as they emerge while coding.

Using prior research, I identified several frames common to public opinion and criminological research on prisoner release/reentry (e.g., release from prison is a risk for public safety) that formed the initial protocol for coding (Tuttle & Harris, 2019; Harris, Gruenewald & Tuttle, 2021). Additional frames were created as the coding process

unfolded. The final coding includes the following frames: (1) *Safety*, a frame that emphasizes that the safety of the community is/was at risk as individuals are release from prison. To aid with understanding an example of the *Safety* frame is found in a Richmond Time Dispatch article describing the danger of releasing inmates, some of whom had written letters to the prison system stating they were a threat to society. (2) *Advocacy*, which stressed that those who are released from prison have specific needs and require help from the community in order to not re-offend or to fit into society upon release. As an example of the *Advocacy* frame, a St. Louis Post Dispatch article describes the need for company fairs to help get ex-inmates get jobs. That article quotes company employees in stating, "Everyone deserves a second chance" and that "Somebody's past does not predict their future or dictate their future." (3) *Anti-Release*, which differs from Safety by emphasizing or arguing for keeping prisoners in jail/prison regardless of any specific threat; (4) *Recidivism*, a frame that describes the overall rate of re-offending among those released from prison or jail percent or, in broader terms, the failure of release from incarceration more generally; (5) *Hardship/Technicalities*, which stresses the barriers to incorporation faced by those released from jails and prisons (but which does not advocate for a specific set of reforms or assistance). An example of the *Hardship/Technicalities* frame in The Day states, "after incarceration, many people face significant barriers for securing housing.". (6) *Policy*, a frame describing new or old policies affecting former criminals as they are released or reenter society; and (7) *Specific Crime after Release (SCAR)*, a frame which presents of particular crime committed by a specific individual who has recently been released. An example of the *Specific Crime After Release (SCAR)* frame, a May 2018 publication in the Tampa Bay Times note that a

released inmate (Beckford) killed a young girl. All frames are coded for each article with no limit on the number per article.

Independent Variables

In order to examine whether some types of articles are more/less likely to include specific frames, I also dummy coded whether each article appears on the *front page* or in a *large paper*. Regarding the latter, a large paper was defined as any paper with a national or regional circulation, including The New York Times, Philadelphia Inquirer, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Star Tribune, and Tampa Bay Times. Finally, the length of article was captured by the *logged word count*. The independent variables are used to predict the frames used in each article.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the news media frames, as well as our independent variables measuring characteristics of the articles and papers. I note two key findings. First, not all prison release and recidivism frames are equally common. The two most common frames within all articles were those antagonistic toward release from prison: the Anti-Release frame had a sample proportion of .26 and Specific Crime After Release (SCAR) had a sample proportion of .46, indicating that there is a one-in-four chance for a news article about prison release to be anti-release and an almost fifty percent chance an article will talk about crimes committed by someone released from prison. On the flip side, there is only a small number of articles that talk about the struggles of those released from prison. Of the 241 articles, only fifteen percent

mention any technicalities or challenges faced by those who are entering back into the community.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Sample of Release and Recidivism Newspaper Articles, 2018 (n = 241)		
	Mean	Standard Deviation
News Media Frames:		
Safety	.17	(.38)
Advocacy	.15	(.36)
Anti-Release	.26	(.44)
Recidivism	.12	(.33)
Hardships/Technicalities (HT)	.15	(.36)
Policy	.22	(.42)
Specific Crime After Release (SCAR)	.46	(.50)
Article Characteristics:		
Front Page	.15	(.35)
Word Count	917.56	(822.83)
Word Count (ln)	6.61	(.64)
Large Paper	.35	(.48)
Note: Standard deviations in parentheses. Each article can have more than one frame, so frames are not mutually exclusive and proportions will not sum to 1. Word count (not logged) is displayed for ease of interpretation with all subsequent analysis using logged word count. Large paper is defined as any paper with a national or regional circulation, including The New York Times, Philadelphia Inquirer, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Star Tribune, and Tampa Bay Times.		

Second, Table 1 also reveals differences in the length and prominence of articles, as well as the prevalence of publication in large newspapers. About 15 percent of our articles appeared on the front page of their publication papers, with about 35 percent of the articles published in large papers. The average word count for articles was about 918 words (about 6.61 logged words).

To further describe these patterns, Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations (in parentheses) of each article characteristic separately for the groups of articles that include each frame. This table shows, for example, that very few articles that include the *Policy* (.09), *Anti-Release* (.08), or *Safety* (.10) frames are published on the

front page. In contrast, among the articles that include the *Recidivism* or

Hardship/Technicalities frames, about 20 or 30 percent, respectively, appear on the front

page of their newspapers. Likewise, articles that include the Hardship/Technicalities

frame or Advocacy frames tend to have longer articles, on average. Similarly, articles that

include the *Hardship/Technicalities*, *Advocacy*, or *Policy* frames are more likely to be

published in large papers (all over 40 percent).

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Article Characteristics by Frame, 2018							
	Safety	*Advocacy*	*Anti-Release*	*Recidivism*	*HT*	*Policy*	*SCAR*
Front Page	.10	.19	.08	.20	.30	.09	.18
	(.30)	(.40)	(.27)	(.41)	(.46)	(.30)	(.39)
Word Count (ln)	6.56	6.81	6.64	6.71	7.05	6.72	6.48
	(.60)	(.75)	(.57)	(.62)	(.67)	(.48)	(.63)
Large Paper	.22	.41	.17	.37	.62	.40	.28
	(.42)	(.50)	(.38)	(.49)	(.49)	(.49)	(.45)
n	41	37	63	30	37	53	110
Note: Standard deviations in parentheses. Each article can have more than one frame, so sample sizes are not mutually exclusive will not sum to total sample size (n = 241).							

Models Predicting Frames

I turn next to the models addressing the research question as to the factors that

impact how a news articles frames prison release/reentry. Table 3 shows the odds ratios

and standard errors (in parentheses) predicting each of the coded frames using all the

independent variables. I note one main finding, which is that some frames appear to be

affected by the characteristics of the article being published. For example, the *SCAR*

frame, which is found in 46 percent of all articles, has a significant relationship with all

the independent variables: articles published on the front page are more likely to use this

narrative (odds ratio = 3.097, p < .01), as are shorter articles (odds ratio = .518, p<.01)

and articles published in smaller papers (odds ratio = .505, p<.05). Broadly, these

findings are consistent with the idea that how an article describes prison release/reentry is affected by the characteristics of that article.

Table 3. Logistic Regression Models Predicting New Media Frames, 2018 (n = 241)							
	Safety	*Advocacy*	*Anti-Release*	*Recidivism*	*HT*	*Policy*	*SCAR*
Front Page	.764	1.171	.536	1.463	1.729	.423	3.097**
	(.650)	(.748)	(.249)	(.473)	(.225)	(.105)	(.006)
Word Count (ln)	1.012	1.762	1.518	1.298	3.563***	1.465	.518**
	(.967)	(.061)	(.094)	(.421)	(.001)	(.140)	(.005)
Large Paper	.489	1.055	.286***	.909	2.491*	1.323	.505*
	(.093)	(.893)	(.001)	(.827)	(.023)	(.415)	(.028)
Note: Odds ratios displayed with standard errors in parentheses. * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001							

As another illustration, the *Hardships/Technicalities* frame is more likely to appear in articles that are longer (greater logged word count) and in articles published in large papers. Likewise, the *Anti-Release* frame is found more often in smaller papers (odds ratio = .286, p<.001). No other frames appear to be related to article characteristics.

In total from this analysis, we can see that the framing that is found in specific news articles about prisoner release is predicted by multiple characteristics related to publication, but not in universal or consistent ways. Some frames are more likely to be published in articles appearing on the front page or in larger papers. Others are affected by the length of the article itself.

Discussion and Conclusion

Despite the amount of news and media outlets that discuss crime and justice issues, there has been remarkably little research into how news media describe – or frame – prisoner reentry. This remains a topic of concern among the public, who often hold complex and contradictory views of risk, cost, and moral concern over barriers to reentry.

The potential risks media framing has on the public's perception of the topic also matters since media play an important role in both shaping and reinforcing perspectives that individuals form with information from other sources.

The current study investigated two research questions related to the media's framing of prisoner reentry. I first asked: how does local news media portray recidivism by reentering prisoners? The answer is that media largely describe the antagonistic aspects of prison reentry more often than they provide narratives discussing the complex barriers returning inmates face, the complex web of policies governing release and reentry, or advocate for ex-offenders. Instead, the most common frames are those that highlight specific criminal acts committed by released prisoners or suggested that prison release posed a universal risk to community safety.

As a second research question, I asked: what are some factors that affect the likelihood of local media using specific portrayals or frames? The analysis revealed, for example, that some types of narratives are more likely to be used in articles on the front page. In this case, stories about released inmates committing crime after release were especially likely to appear prominently in newspapers. Similarly, articles published in larger newspapers were more likely to describe the hardships and technicalities but less likely to the more antagonistic aspects of prison release (crime after release, general anti-release sentiment). This closely matched the findings for long vs. short articles: longer articles were more likely to include discussion of hardships and technicalities whereas they were less likely to talk about specific crimes committed by released prisoners. In short, characteristics of news media articles affects which narratives are included in stories about prison release/reentry.

These findings reinforce observations from other research on media representation of crime and justice. That literature has often found that news media distorts the prevalence of crime-related issues (Harris, Gruenewald, & Tuttle 2021; Chermak 1995). The current study's findings similarly call into question the prevalence of prisoner risks to the community and the overall pervasiveness of specific crimes committed by those released from incarceration facilities, which are likely not nearly as common as the stories about them. Local news media outlets get to choose what and how they describe prisoner reentry and release, which typically includes the stories that will grab readers attention regardless of whether those narratives align with empirical reality. As Pooley (1989) notes, "if it bleeds, it leads", and media may choose to focus on articles that show the negatives and harm that come with reentry of prisoners into communities because it feeds concerns about public safety in ways that garner attention and sell newspapers and advertising space.

Additionally, these findings help add to similar empirical research on showing that the details of article publication affect the frames used within articles. Prior research on news media and other areas of crime show that negative/antagonistic frames are more likely to be associated with front page publication (Tuttle & Harris 2019; Peake 2007). In the same manner as other crime media frames have association with specific publication details, the results of this study find the same. Similarly, the finding that longer articles include more nuanced, complex, and sympathetic frames follows a pattern overserved in prior literature (Tuttle & Harris 2019) and likely reflects how news media use shorter spaces to quickly capture the attention of readers with more sensational frames (e.g.,

crimes committed by released inmates) and are only able include more other narratives when given the proper space to unpack their complicated aspects.

Gaps and Directions for Future Research

Although our findings are similar to some prior research in the field of crime media, I note several shortcomings with this study that suggest important areas for future research. First, I was only able to examine one year's worth of news stories, and only a small sample which may hide important differences in how prison release/reentry is described over time in different ways. This may matter because media include different voices during times of political tension (e.g., elections) or may shift with a single incident that draws widespread attention (what media scholars call a "focusing event"). Future research could explore a larger number of years' worth of data to untangle how news media frame prison release over time to better understand how public opinion is shaped.

Second, my study was unable to explore news media framing across different kinds of communities in the United States. This is important because framing of crime within media could shift depending on where the publication takes place. For example, framing of an article about criminal reentry may have a different tone when published in a smaller, southern, rural area than in larger metropolitan communities. As reviewed above, there are differences across specific places/regions in public opinion about prison reentry, but more research is needed to actually explore this relative to media behavior.

Third, more research is needed to comparatively look out how different forms of media may shape attitudes on prisoner reentry and recidivism, as well as more explicit research on how media framing of this topic shapes the public's opinion. With a shift in the use of television media news and other online sources, the use of newspaper articles

in this sample was unable to capture all of the frames that might appear on this topic. Other research examining social, television, or alternative forms of print media would be helpful to understand the ways actors in different information environments frame prison release/reentry. Likewise, the current study pointed to the news media as one mechanism that could impact public perceptions of prison release, but was unable to explore how much it mattered empirically. Additional scholarship focusing on the link between media framing and individuals' actual feelings toward prison reentry would be useful.

Broadly, the current study illustrates how the new media's framing of different aspects of prison release may cause worry and panic. As a result, one important implication of this study is to reinforce calls for changing the way media report on issues of crime and justice. Clearly, there are a range of complex and interrelated issues within the debate about how to best protect communities and help those reentering society after serving times in prison or jail. One critical part of this debate is to find ways for news media to better inform the public, most of whom lack direct experience with crime and justice issues, in ways that reflect actual risks.

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