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Justice Chronicles

Coverage of Crime, Criminal Justice, and Reentry in the Providence Journal

A Content Audit Report

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I. Introduction: Community, News Analysis and Strategic Frame Analysis

Communications and Community

Efforts to introduce “system-reform” initiatives in low-income communities must take into account the powerful influence of mass communications. In particular, research shows that news coverage – both print and broadcast – has a profound effect on what issues people believe to be important (agenda-setting); the lens through which they interpret issues (framing); and whether they use this information in making judgments about racial groups, immigrants, early childhood development or policy preferences as it relates to legal rights and opportunities of former offenders reentering society. In short, the news powerfully shapes the ways in which people relate to their communities and to important local issues.

The challenge for community improvement advocates, we believe, is to develop media relationships that empower community-based organizations. To effectively engage the news media, community development advocates should have an understanding of the nature of local news coverage. Content news audits and content analysis help us understand the nature of the coverage.

Understanding Content News Analysis and its Value

A content news audit is a method for reliably measuring what news and information is appearing on television and in newspapers. Audits can include a variety of searchable criteria – identification of coverage topics, tallies of the frequency of coverage topics, coverage treatment such features vs. hard news, and geographic focus among them. A content analysis is an assessment or evaluation of an audit. News executives sometimes use such analysis to measure the impact of editorial content changes on readership building. Community stakeholders use it to define how news organizations frame specific issues.

Understanding News Frames

News frames tell an audience how to interpret and evaluate a given story by drawing attention to some things and ignoring others. Newscasters use symbols, inference and language to construct a story line. The particular mix of ingredients has a profound meaning for how the public comes to understand social issues. For example, recent experimental work shows that exposure to violent youth “superpredators” in the news increased adult support for punitive crime policy. Thus, it may be more than coincidence that politicians and policy makers have moved to enact restrictive youth policies. For example, several states have passed laws lowering the age at which a juvenile can be tried as an adult. Likewise, numerous cities have passed youth curfew, wide-ranging gang injunctions and measures to place metal detectors in schools and search children’s lockers. In sum, the way that the news media frames public issues has important consequences for public opinion and public policy.

The Value of Tracking Coverage of Criminal Justice and Reentry Issues

Crime and criminal justice policy has been one of the most significant and contentious topics in American discourse the past three decades. Triggered largely by a legislative and prosecutorial war on drugs that has escalated since the 1970s, arrests and incarcerations have mushroomed, creating a huge prison population.

In Rhode Island, for example, 3,601 people were incarcerated at the RI Department of Corrections as of October, 2 2003. The rate of incarceration per 100,000 Rhode Islanders increased more than 500% between 1975 and 2000. According to a recent Rhode Island Family Life Center study of convictions, 41.6% are incarcerated for nonviolent or drug offences, compared to 38% jailed for violent offenses.

Recently, high recidivism rates have prompted citizens, corrections officials, and policymakers to focus more on issues relating to the reentry of former offenders into society. Why are such a large percentage of former offenders re-arrested and incarcerated? Should laws relating to the rights of former offenders be changed? Would more former offenders successfully reenter society if more was done to help them obtain counseling, training, jobs, and housing?

To make informed decisions about such policy, the public needs to be well informed. The news media is the public's primary source of information. Newspapers have traditionally been the best source of information on criminal justice policies and reentry because local press has more reporting resources than the electronic media and because newspapers have more content capacity than time-limited broadcasters. In addition, broadcasters frequently take their coverage cues from the print media.

If the public is to determine how well it is informed on crime, criminal justice and reentry issues, it must be able to evaluate such coverage in newspapers. If communities want to help prompt the news media to improve coverage of these issues, an accounting of newspaper reporting is required.

The issues and the coverage of these topics is especially important to poorer communities and communities of color because these neighborhoods are disproportionately affected. This pattern is particularly pronounced in Rhode Island. Consider these statistics in 2004 and 2005 reports by the Rhode Island Family Life Center:

- Black Rhode Islanders are incarcerated at more than ten times the rate of white Rhode Islanders.
- Based on 2002 year-end numbers, 1 out of every 30 black Rhode Island is serving a sentence or awaiting trial.
- Rhode Island has the nation's 13th highest rate of African-American disfranchisement

The coverage of these issues is very important to certain cities and certain communities because nearly all offenders will return to the same neighborhoods from which they came. This is very much the case in Providence. Consider these statistics from the Family Life Center:

- 38% of the state's offenders call Providence home, while only 15% of all Rhode Island residents live in Providence
- For more than half of Providence neighborhoods, a least 1 in 10 adult males in currently on probation or parole

- Adult males living in Upper South Providence are 45 times more likely to be incarcerated than adult males from College Hill or Blackstone
- More than 1 in 4 adult males living in Upper South Providence, and nearly 1 in 4 in Lower South Providence, are currently on probation or parole.

Responding to these problems, a coalition of community-based organizations is seeking public support for changes in the conditions of reentry. Led by the Family Life Center, with the support of coalitions such as Making Connections Providence, activists have challenged regulations that prevent former offenders from getting welfare benefits such as food stamps and opposed housing discrimination practices against people with criminal records, and launched a campaign against felony disfranchisement laws in Rhode Island that deny the right to vote to more than 12% of the state's African Americans. Some national media outlets and many news organizations outside of Rhode Island have covered this "voting rights" campaign.

Considering this activism, the *Providence Journal* is well positioned to be a leader in coverage of reentry issues. This audit examines the *Journal's* coverage of reentry within the wider context of coverage of crime and criminal justice.

II. Methodology

The analysis is based on an audit and analysis of stories on crime, criminal justice, reentry in the Providence Journal between March 1 and May 31. For purposes of this report, we have provided definitions for these topics.

- **Crime:** Investigations of assault, robbery, criminal flight (fugitives), burglary, theft, arson, vandalism, and drug use or drug trafficking
- **Criminal Justice:** Arrests, indictments/charges, trials, convictions, sentencing, corrections, and legislative action related to these criminal justice topics
- **Reentry:** The transition from prisons and jails to society. Advocates for improving reentry have sought to improve the legal and/or socio-economic status of former offenders. They favor preparing offenders for release while they are still incarcerated, removing barriers to reintegration that former offenders face when they are released, and expanding access to resources designed to reduce crime victimization and incarceration.

Other Relevant Definitions

- **Corrections:** Stories relating to conditions, staffing and management at correctional institutions. Corrections stories are part of the criminal justice category.
- **Legislative:** Stories on (state) legislative action relating to criminal justice. Legislative stories are also part of the criminal justice category.

Definitions of Major Audit Categories

Story Topic: The primary subject of the story.

Sources: Persons who have provided quotes, general comments, data, background, opinions and/or perspectives. They can be categorized by gender, race, occupation, and/or by professional or community affiliation.

Story Type (Narrative Type): This category involves story-telling context. The “*Episodic*” category applies to the straight standard news “breaking news” story that typically focuses on individuals and events. The “*thematic*” category applies to features, news analysis or reports on developments that typically focus on issues and trends.

Story Length: The length of a story based on word count.

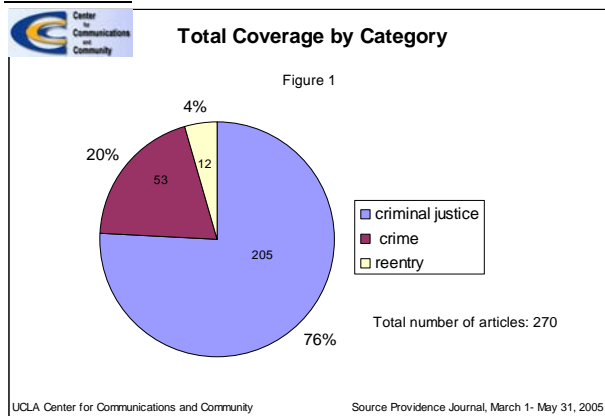
Story Placement or “Play”: The location of stories based on the page number and the news section. For example, the “A” section is the leading story section typically set aside for international or national stories or local stories of great significance. The “B” or “C” sections are typically reserved for state and local news. The features department is often placed behind the A section and the local news section.

III. Results

Coverage of Crime, Criminal Justice and Reentry

Figure 1 displays the results of an audit of coverage of crime, criminal justice, and reentry. It shows that the Journal produced 270 stories in these coverage topic categories. Of the total, the great majority of the stories (75%) were articles in the Criminal Justice System category – arrests, indictments, trials, verdicts, sentences, and corrections issues. Coverage of incidents of crime and investigations of those crimes – the Crime Commission category– was significantly less frequent (19%) but much greater than coverage the coverage in the Reentry category, which was very slight (4%) considering the level of activism and legislative action on the rights and opportunities of former offenders.

FIGURE 1

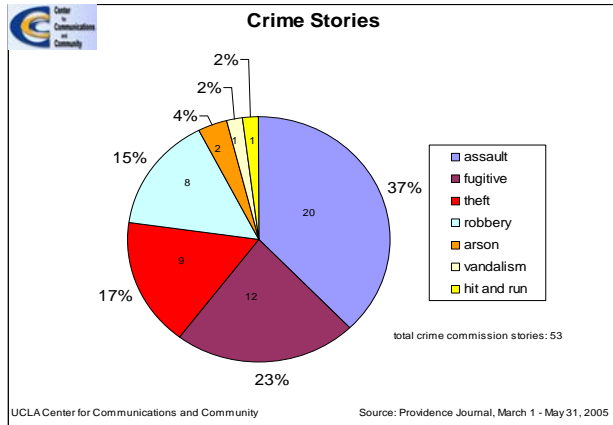


Coverage of Crime and Criminal Justice: The Violent Crime Focus

The coverage of criminal acts and the investigation of those acts – Crime Commission – have a bearing on the coverage of criminal justice because newspapers typically devote much of the criminal justice reporting to the coverage of arrests and indictments for crimes previously reported. Figure 2 shows that “assaults” – shootings, stabbings and rape – was the most frequently reported in the crime commission category, comprising nearly half of the coverage

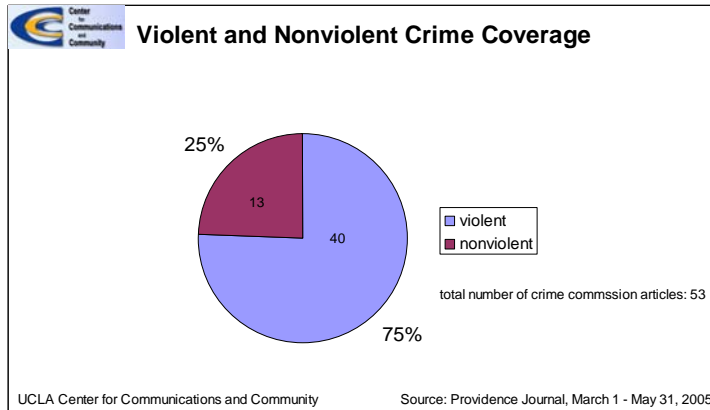
(37%). (The assault category includes attacks that resulted in murder or other homicides.) Stories involving fugitives ranked second, followed by nonviolent theft. Robberies, another violent crime category, ranked fourth, vandalism fifth and hit-and-run accidents sixth.

FIGURE 2



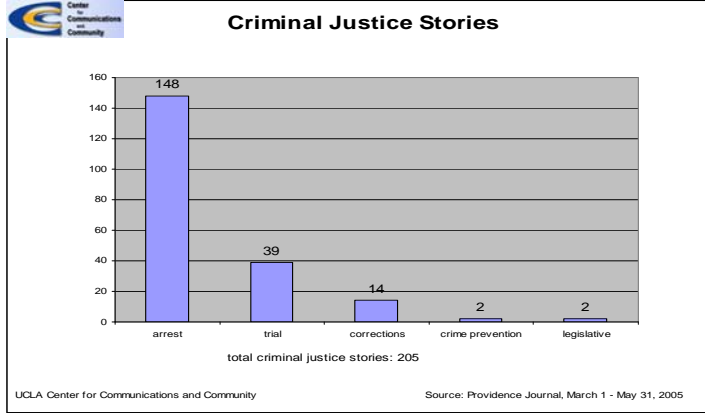
Most of the stories on fugitives involved reports on suspects in violent crimes. Those reports are combined with stories on the violent crimes – assaults and robberies – in Figure 3. It shows that coverage of violent crime is dominant in the Crime Commission category.

FIGURE 3



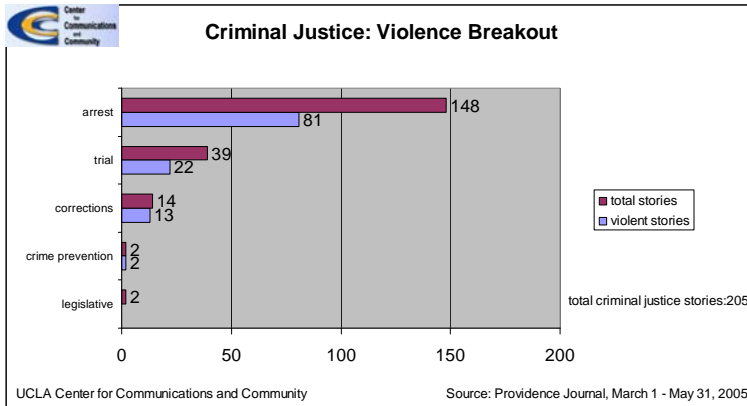
As for the Criminal Justice category – which includes actions by police, courts, and correctional institutions – Figure 4 shows that accounts of arrests received the most coverage (72%). (The “arrest” category includes those who are also charged.) Stories about trials ranked second with 19%, followed by reports on correctional institutions (6%). Stories on legislative action on criminal justice matters ranked last, accounting for less than 1% of the total.

FIGURE 4



In each of the relevant Criminal Justice System categories, coverage of violent crime is dominant. In Figure 5, the top bar represents the total number of stories in each category and the second bar shows the total number of stories relating to violence in that category. Stories relating to violence comprised about 55% of the reports on arrests/charges, 56% of the trial stories, about 93% of the corrections stories and 100% of the crime prevention stories.

FIGURE 5



Much of the coverage of violence involved reports on Esteban Carpio, the Providence man who – while being questioned for a stabbing on April 17 – killed a police detective after grabbing his gun. Police say he briefly escaped and that he suffered severe facial injuries when they subdued him; but some community activists say he was a victim of excessive force.

The Journal produced 27 stories on the shooting and related developments. Among the stories was a report on Carpio’s history with the criminal justice system in Massachusetts – before the jailhouse incident – and in Rhode Island. Carpio had been arrested numerous times for assault and for drug and gun possession charges. In all, 13% of the stories in the Criminal Justice System categories were devoted to the Carpio controversy.

The coverage included an enterprising front page April 29 report on Carpio’s alleged mental problems, a story that quoted mental health advocates saying that the mentally ill are often jailed instead of hospitalized.

While coverage of violent crime is high, violent criminal activity in Providence has been dropping dramatically, according to the Providence Plan, a nonprofit organization that conducts research on issues relating to improving the quality of life in the city of Providence.

The research shows that “violent and property crime” in Providence declined 18% from 2002 to 2004. Say the Providence Plan report: “While this overall gauge of decline is initially helpful, it is much more illuminating to compare how instances of individual crime types changed over that period. Murder, for instance, dropped from 23 in 2002 to 17 in 2004 – a 26% decline. Robberies went from 560 to 414 - another 26% drop. Aggravated assaults also declined from '02 to '04 but by only 6%.” These changes are reflected in Figure 6.

FIGURE 6 Violent Crime and Other Crime in Providence

| | Yearly Totals | | |
|----------------------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| | 2002 | 2004 | %cng |
| Murder | 23 | 17 | -26% |
| Rape by Force | 95 | 84 | -12% |
| Robbery | 560 | 414 | -26% |
| Aggravated Assault | 603 | 569 | -6% |
| Burglary | 2,206 | 1,688 | -23% |
| Motor Vehicle Theft | 2,950 | 2,300 | -22% |
| Larceny | 7,602 | 6,412 | -16% |
| Total Crimes | 14,039 | 11,484 | -18% |

Source: The Providence Plan

In addition, there have been sizeable drops in crimes involving guns in the 2003-2004 period. The Providence Plan report says assault with firearms went from 171 to 127 – a 26% decline. Robbery with firearm experienced a major decline of 37%, from 199 to 125 incidents, according to the report.

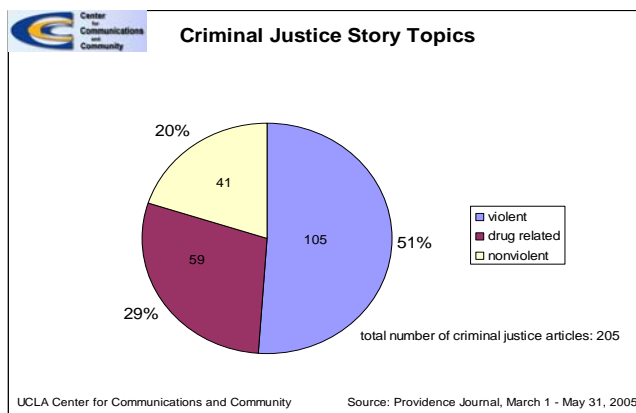
On the other hand, the number of statewide drug-related arrests in Rhode Island rose slightly from 1997 through 2001, according to the National Drug Intelligence Center.

Another study – one produced by the Rhode Island Family Life Center in October 2003 – shows that 41.6% of those incarcerated in Rhode Island are imprisoned for nonviolent or drug offenses, compared to 38% incarcerated for violent offenses. On a gender basis, 39.4% of the males and 80.3% of the females in jail have been incarcerated for nonviolent or drug offenses.

Considering these statistics, more coverage of drug crime might be expected. However, Figure 2 shows that there were no reports on drug crimes in the Crime Commission category during the audit period, compared to 40 stories – 75% of the total – on violent crimes.

As for the Criminal Justice category, Figure 7 shows 29% of stories were reports on drug crimes, compared to 51% devoted to reports related to violent crime.

FIGURE 7



Considering the upward trend of drug crimes, more coverage on efforts to combat illegal drug use, drug-trafficking and drug crime recidivism might also be warranted. However, only one story examined drug crimes from these perspectives – a May 31 story on drug courts. Drug courts are special court calendars or dockets designed to cut recidivism by nonviolent offenders. People charged with drug crimes before such courts receive an intensive regimen of substance-abuse and mental-health treatment, counseling, drug testing and probation supervision while reporting regularly to a judge with expertise on the drug court model. The report noted that the U.S. General Accounting Office studied drug court records and found that they produced lower re-arrest and conviction rates and positive cost-benefit ratios.

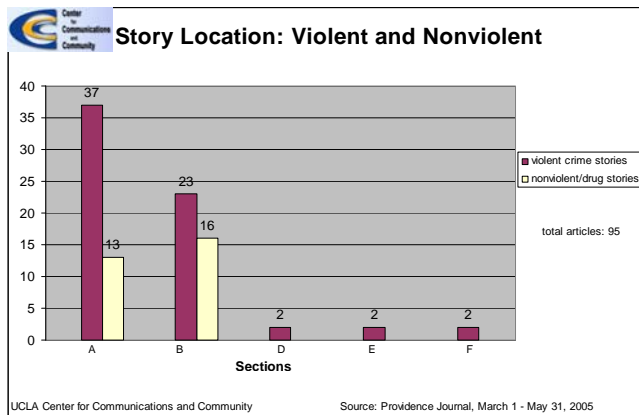
However, this one story was prompted by a visit to Providence by the director of the National Drug Court Institute and his release of a study that noted the benefits of such courts and cited the recent increase in the number of drug courts nationwide. A family court judge in Rhode Island quoted in the story says the state needs more drug courts. Newspapers do not have to depend on the visit of officials to produce enterprising reports examining possible solutions to criminal justice problems.

As for the coverage of other nonviolent crime, there was one major enterprise report – a lengthy, front page April 24 story on federal probes into Mafia involvement in Rhode Island’s construction industry. In all, reports related to nonviolent crime accounted for just 25% of the Crime Commission coverage and 20% of the Criminal Justice coverage.

The emphasis on the coverage of violent crime can also be seen in the decisions on where to “play” (place) stories. Newspapers give local stories more visibility and prominence when those stories are placed in the A section. In the metro and local (zoned) editions of the Providence Journal, the vast majority of local stories are placed in the C or D sections, portions of the paper set aside for local news. However, a sizeable number of local stories are placed in the A section of the statewide edition because there is less space for local news in that version of the newspaper.

The difference in story placement can be seen in the statewide or “all edition” versions of the Journal. Figure 8 shows that stories related to violent crime appear much more frequently in the A section than stories related to nonviolent crime.

FIGURE 8



The heavy focus on violence is consistent with the coverage tendencies of local daily newspapers and local TV news broadcasters in most medium-to-large cities in the United States. It stems from a news agenda that gives a very high priority to violent crime coverage. However, this study and audits of news coverage in other cities show that the coverage of violent crime remains consistently high regardless of recent crime trends.

On the other hand, the cost and causes of nonviolent crime – and possible solutions – are often under-reported. That was the case in the Journal during the audit period. That’s also frequently the case at other newspapers and TV news broadcast operations in other cities.

Also, under-reported – in the Journal during the audit period and elsewhere – is the crime prevention story. Of the 258 stories in the Crime and Criminal Justice categories during the audit period, only 2 focused on crime prevention. One was a March 3 story on new crime prevention strategies at a Providence middle school – a community response to a spate of crimes by juveniles. The story was prompted by the school superintendent’s vow to change the culture of

the school by conducting assemblies, teaching students about proper behavior, and by holding after-school training workshops for the school’s faculty. The other crime prevention report was a March 11 story on a Pawtucket police plan to deter crime by placing more officers in a high-crime area.

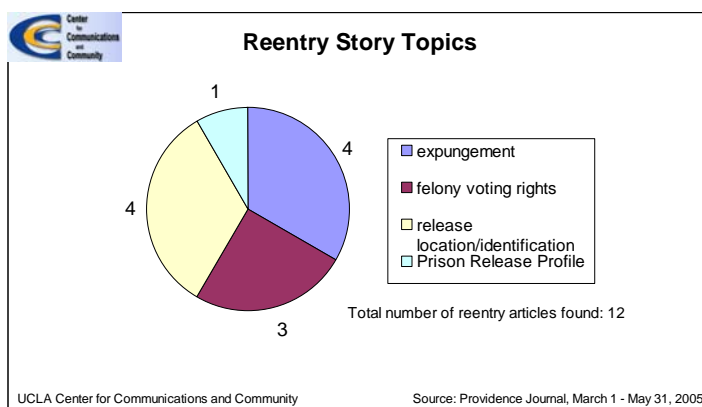
Without commenting on intent, it is enough to say that this heavy focus on violent crime – “body-bag” journalism – has a corrosive influence. It often creates or perpetuates fear that hardens public attitudes about crime, punishment, and the reentry of the convicted into society. There are more constructive ways of reporting these stories. For example, organizations such as The Berkeley Media Studies Group and television stations like KVUE in Austin, Texas have developed alternative approaches that work well in reporting the story of youth crime and reduce the racially polarizing effect that otherwise emerges.

Coverage of Reentry

There were only 12 stories focusing on topics relating to reentry during the audit period. Reentry was actually a secondary topic in two of those stories – both reports about legislative activity.

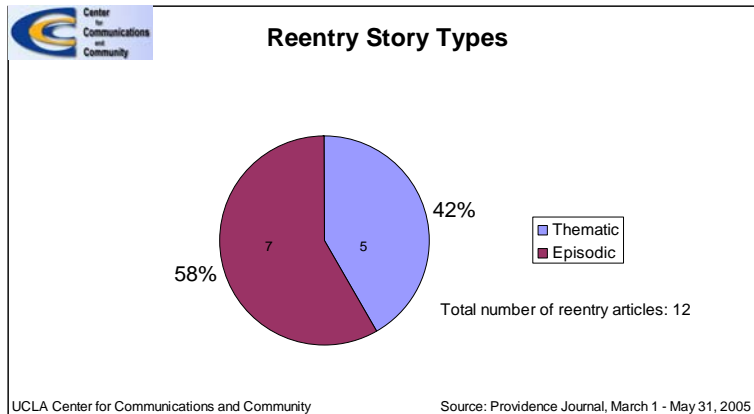
Figure 9 shows that stories on efforts to shorten the waiting period for those seeking to expunge criminal records was the leading reentry coverage topic – with four stories. Stories on the campaign to allow felons to vote was the second most frequently reported story topic. The next most frequent category involved “release location and notification” – one story about new technology for tracking former offenders, one about the launch of state Internet site with public information on the residence (location) of released sex offenders and one about a bill that would allow police to more widely inform the public about the relocation of sex offenders. There was also one story in the “prisoner release profile,” a report and brief bio on the release of a high profile white-collar criminal.

FIGURE 9



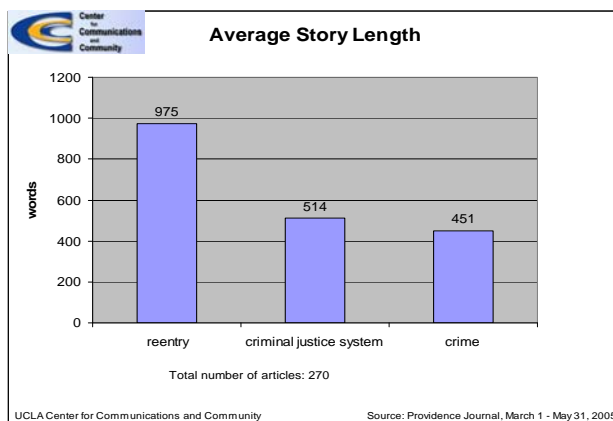
As for the narrative, 58% of the Reentry stories were episodic, reflecting a focus on individuals and events. The balance (41%) was thematic, containing a focus on issues and trends with more context and background. This is shown in Figure 10.

FIGURE 10



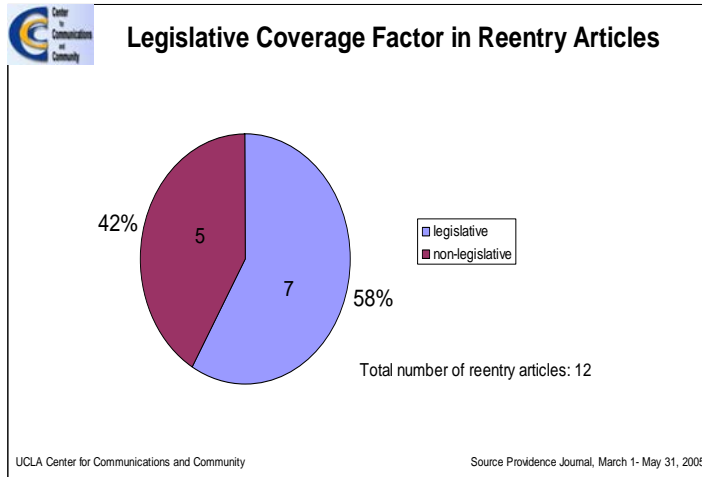
Thematic stories tend to be longer. This accounts for the fact that the average story length of the Reentry stories were considerably longer than stories related to the Criminal Justice System and more than twice as long as the story average in the Crime Commission category, as shown in Figure 11.

FIGURE 11



Of the 12 Reentry stories, Figure 12 shows that seven were based on legislative activity. All three of the “voting rights” stories and three of the four “expungement” stories were reports prompted by action in the state legislature. In addition, one of the three “release and notification” stories was a report about legislative action.

FIGURE 12

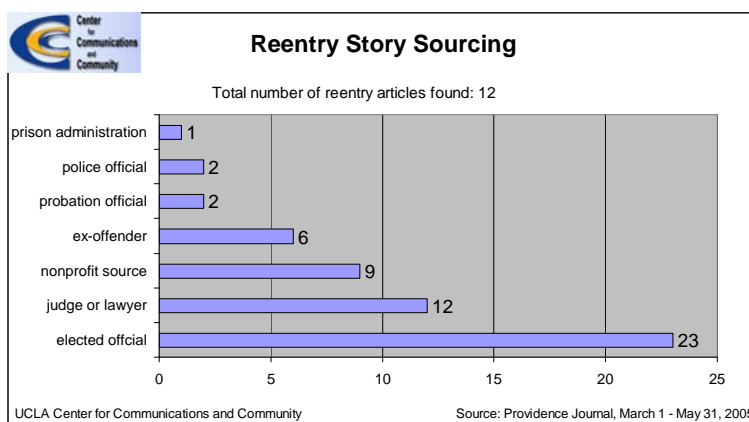


Of the stories with no legislative context, one was a court decision on expungement rulings. The two “release location and notification” stories with no legislative context included a report about the launch of the state’s new technology for tracking former sex offenders and the launch of a state Internet site on the residence location of former sex offenders. The one prisoner profile without a connection to legislature was a news report based on the corrections department release of a high profile criminal – not a feature.

In short, all 12 of the Reentry category stories were pegged to events. In other words, a review of the coverage of reentry issues during the period shows there were no enterprise (investigative) reports; there were no features; there were no stand-alone news analysis articles. All 12 stories were reports about the actions of government institutions – the courts, corrections institutions and the legislature.

Figure 13 shows that there was also a lack of breadth in the sourcing. Of the 12 stories, elected officials were sources 23 times, judges or lawyers were sources 12 times. Leaders or spokespersons for nonprofits were sources 9 times.

FIGURE 13



There were six former offenders in the sourcing. However, all six were quoted in one story – a lengthy report on State House hearings involving testimony on a law that prevents felons from voting.

There were no “community voice” sources in any of the 12 stories. Certainly, government sources should be included in a collection stories that are all based on government action. However, journalists can – and should – provide some community reaction to some of the stories on initiatives that affect the public.

Major Findings

The study shows the following for the audit period.

Coverage of Crime and Criminal Justice

- There is close coverage of violent crime but relatively little coverage of drug crime, which accounts for a very large percentage of incarcerations in Rhode Island. Violent crime has been declining in Providence but drug crimes and other nonviolent offences have been on the rise.
- There was very little enterprise coverage of crime and criminal justice system proceedings during the audit period. Coverage in these two categories was a chronicling of the actions, statements and proceedings of legislators and other government officials, police officials, courts, and corrections officials. There were no news analyses and no series reports. There was one major “closer look” report, a lengthy examination of federal probes into Mafia involvement and corruption in the state’s construction industry.
- There was very little reporting on crime prevention. Newspapers sometimes launch enterprise journalism projects designed to present possible solutions to major community problems. There are no such projects in the coverage of crime and criminal justice during the audit period. There were two stories on crime prevention – one of them a community response story involving a response to crime at a Providence middle school and the other on a Pawtucket police plan to deter crime by raising their profile in one neighborhood.
- Nonviolent crime has been on the rise and more than 40% of those incarcerated in Rhode Island are in jail for such crimes. However, there were no reports on the causes and costs of nonviolent crime during the audit period

Reporting on Reentry

Led by the Family Life Center, Rhode Island has one of the nation’s most active movements for improving the integration of former offenders into society. However, only 12 of the 270 stories in the audit’s relevant categories – 4%– related to reentry.

- There was coverage on efforts to extend voting rights to felons. However, there were no stories on efforts to end housing and job discrimination against former offenders and no stories on the campaign to provide job training and counseling to former offenders – issues important to Rhode Island’s reentry coalition.
- All 12 of the reentry stories were pegged to events – activities of the legislature, courts and corrections institutions. There were no enterprise (investigative) reports; there were no features; there were no stand-alone news analysis articles.
- There was also a lack of breadth in the sourcing. There were no “community voices” sources in any of the stories. ” Elected officials were the leading sources (23 times),

followed by court sources (12), spokespersons for nonprofits (9), former offenders (6), probation officials (2), police officials (2) and corrections officials (1).

- There was little reporting on the perspectives of former offenders. Only one story included former offenders as sources, a report on testimony at a legislative hearing on a law that denies felons voting rights. All of the former offender sources in the Reentry category appeared in this one story.

