

# **The Representation of Juvenile Offenders by Race on Los Angeles Area Television News**

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*The authors conducted a content analysis of a random sample of local television news programming aired in the Los Angeles area to assess representations of Black, Latino and White juvenile law-breakers. Results revealed that Black and Latino juveniles were significantly more likely than White juveniles to be portrayed as perpetrators on television news. Black juveniles were overrepresented as lawbreakers, whereas Latino juveniles were underrepresented as lawbreakers on television news. White juveniles were neither over- nor underrepresented as perpetrators. The theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.*

*KEYWORDS* race and media, African Americans, Latinos, crime, news, juveniles

The juvenile justice system appears to be undergoing a major overhaul away from attempts to reform youth offenders and toward harsher punishment of juvenile delinquents (Bernard, 1999; Snyder, 1999). By 2000, all 50 states had adopted laws that made it easier for youths to be tried as adults (Lewin,

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This research was partially funded by a grant from the Howard R. Marsh Center for Journalistic Performance at the University of Michigan.

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2000). Some critics claim that these changes are being driven by a fear of Black juvenile delinquents who are remorseless, cold-hearted, and amoral (Dohrn, 1997; Gilliam & Iyengar, 1998; Squires & Ettema, 1997) and that the media in general and television news in particular have inculcated stereotypes about young Black criminality. In spite of the contentions made by these observers, the empirical evidence for news' overrepresentation of Black juveniles appears to be lacking. The current study is designed to address this deficiency in the literature by examining the extent to which television news associates Black and Latino youth with criminality. A content analysis of a random sample of local television news programming drawn over 2 years in Los Angeles and Orange County, California was conducted to assess representations of juvenile lawbreakers. This study is a secondary analysis of content data originally used to assess representations of adults (Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b).

### ADULT PORTRAYALS OF RACE AND CRIME

Recently, a number of studies have been conducted that investigate the extent to which adults of color are misrepresented as criminals on television news (Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b; Entman, 1992; Romer, Jamieson, & de Coteau, 1998). Many of these studies have concluded that Black adults, in particular, are often linked with criminality in news programs. For example, Dixon and Linz (2000a) compared the appearance of Black to White perpetrators on television news and found that for every White adult perpetrator portrayed on television news, there were two Black adults portrayed as perpetrators of crime. In addition, these authors compared the proportion of Black perpetrators on television news to the proportion contained in crime reports. They found that Blacks were overrepresented as perpetrators (37%) compared to arrest records (21%). Blacks are not just frequently depicted as perpetrators on television news. They are also characterized as ruthless lawbreakers. For instance, Entman's (1992) study found that for every White adult shown in the grip of a restraining police officer on news programs, there were more than two Black adults portrayed in a similar manner.

Latino adult criminals are portrayed similarly to Black adult criminals, but there are some key differences as well. For example, similar to Black adults, Latino adults are also more likely than White adults to be portrayed as criminals on news programs (Dixon & Linz, 2000a). However, Latino adults are simultaneously more invisible than Blacks on television news. Dixon and Linz found that Latino adults were underrepresented as perpetrators on television news (29%) compared to crime reports (47%). A number of scholars have suggested that Latinos may in fact be associated with other "problems" in the news such as illegal immigration (Turk, Richstad, Bryson, & Johnson, 1989; Wilson & Gutiérrez, 1985; Wilson, Gutiérrez, &

Chao, 2003). However, research thus far suggests that Latino adults may be underrepresented as lawbreakers in non-fictional programming. Similar findings of Latino underrepresentation have also been reported in studies of race and entertainment programming (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000).

White adults, on the other hand, are portrayed in a much more positive light compared to African American and Latino adults. White adults are overrepresented as police officers compared to employment records on local television news and in “reality” style programming (Dixon & Linz, 2000a; Oliver, 1994). In addition, White adults are overrepresented as victims on local television news, while being underrepresented as violent criminals (Dixon & Linz, 2000b; Romer et al., 1998). The overrepresentation of White adults in these sympathetic crime roles has also been found on network news (Dixon, Azocar, & Casas, 2003).

In summary, prior work on adult racial representations of crime on television news has revealed three fairly consistent findings. First, Black adults are typically depicted as ruthless perpetrators. Second, Latino adults are underrepresented as criminals compared to crime reports. Third, White adults occupy positive or benign roles on television news. Below, the possible similarities and differences between news portrayals of juveniles and adults are explored.

#### SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN JUVENILE AND ADULT PERPETRATORS ON TELEVISION NEWS

The prior research on adult lawbreaking strongly indicates that television news overrepresents Blacks as criminals and underrepresents Latinos as criminals. It is unclear whether juvenile crime and race portrayals on television news would mirror those of adults. Dixon and Linz (2000a, 2000b) suggested that news gathering practices tend to place an emphasis on crimes that Blacks rather than Whites are more likely to commit. They also argue that language barriers hinder greater coverage of Latino lawbreaking because expensive translation costs might be associated with news coverage of Spanish-speakers. These same forces may be at work in shaping the portrayal of juvenile criminals on television news, and therefore juvenile and adult racial representation in the news might mirror one another.

However, several scholars have also noted that portrayals of juveniles are often tied to “moral panics” in society (Dohrn, 1997; Doi, 1998; Onstad, 1997; Squires & Ettema, 1997). These moral panics are public outcries that have surrounded a large assortment of media concerns. These concerns include the relationship between (a) television violence and juvenile aggression, (b) movies and illicit activities, and (c) video games and attention deficits (Harris, 1999; Salomon, 1990; Wilson et al., 1998; Yang & Linz, 1990).

A few observers have speculated that some of these moral panics are partly driven by racial stereotypes (Heider, 2000; Squires & Ettema, 1997; Wilson & Gutiérrez, 1985). These researchers contend that public perceptions of disruption in the social order are due to the public's conception of the "other" (e.g., people of color) in society (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978). Members of the public may believe that people of color engage in immoral behaviors such as excessive violence that find their way into mainstream society. These stereotypical notions of people of color may be reinforced and maintained by an ethnic blame discourse or incognizant racism. This discourse frames problem behavior committed by ethnic others (e.g., Blacks and Latinos) as inter-group conflict. Ethnic blame and incognizant racism are ever-present phenomena that accentuate the harmful effects of people of color on Whites. Ethnic blame and incognizant racism also shape the thinking and reporting of journalists and editors (Heider, 2000; Romer et al., 1998).

If moral panics, stereotypes, and ethnic blame/incognizant racism shape coverage of people of color, this may result in the overrepresentation of both Black and Latino juveniles as criminals on television news. The moral panic paradigm suggests that Blacks and Latinos would be portrayed as responsible for the social instability that has been caused by juvenile crime. Therefore news would tend to emphasize Black and Latino juvenile lawbreakers over White juvenile lawbreakers.

A third possibility also exists. It is possible that an analysis of the news might find that there are few racial differences in the portrayal of juvenile criminals, or that Whites are actually overrepresented as criminal suspects. Whites might be overrepresented as juvenile criminals because of news' interest in "deviant" or unusual stories (Klite, Bardwell, & Salzman, 1997; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997). If journalists, editors, and viewers endorse the stereotype that Black and Latino youth represent typical lawbreakers, then White juvenile criminals would constitute the unusual or deviant. As a result, when White juvenile suspects break the law, they may receive more attention than Black and Latino juvenile lawbreakers. This thinking would explain the heavy coverage of White juvenile lawbreakers at Columbine high school (Gold & Ellingwood, 2001; Miller, 1999).

Ethnic blame/incognizant racism, structural limitations of the news, and "deviance" reporting suggest three potential outcomes in how juvenile crime and race may be portrayed. Ethnic blame suggests that both Black and Latino juveniles will be overrepresented as criminals in news programming. The structural limitations of news posit that Black juveniles will be overrepresented while Latino juveniles will be underrepresented as lawbreakers on television news. Finally, the "deviance" model suggests that White juveniles may receive more coverage than either Black or Latino juveniles in news programming. The current study is designed to determine which of these patterns or if another pattern of portrayal occurs in news programming.

## HYPOTHESES

This study tests two hypotheses:

- H1: Black and Latino juveniles will appear more frequently than White juveniles as perpetrators and felons on television news.
- H2: Black and Latino juveniles will be overrepresented on television news as lawbreakers in comparison to official crime data.

## METHOD

### Sample of Programs and Secondary Analysis Methodology

The current study was a secondary analysis of local news programs that had been originally sampled to study adult representations of race and crime in news programming. The original studies were conducted by Dixon and Linz (2000a, 2000b). In the current study, this data set was used to focus our analyses exclusively on juveniles. Filter variables were created based on the age of defendants to identify all of the juveniles in the data set. These juveniles' race and crime committed were then tracked and recorded in the analysis.

The data set reflects the following sampling properties. Local news programs were drawn from Los Angeles-based stations to represent crime coverage in Los Angeles and Orange Counties. These counties are the primary metropolitan areas for Los Angeles-based stations (Nielsen Media Research, 2000). The sample was derived from procedures outlined by the National Television Violence Study (NTVS, Kunkel et al., 1996; Potter et al., 1998; Wilson et al., 1998) and prior investigations of crime and adult lawbreakers in news programming (Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b).

The programs in the present study were selected with a modified version of the equal probability of selection method (EPSEM) that allows every program to have an equal chance, or opportunity, to appear in the sample. This method increases the chances that the sample represents the characteristics of the population of television news programs under study. Two half-hour time slots (defined by hour of day and day of week) were randomly selected for each channel during each week that the sampling occurred. Once a time slot was selected, the *TV Guide* magazine was consulted and the program corresponding to that time was entered into a scheduling grid. Programs were retained in their entirety regardless of the number of time slots they occupied. For example, if the time slot 4:30 was randomly selected and an hour-long news program that began at 4:00 p.m. was identified in the TV Guide, the 4:00 p.m. program was selected for inclusion in the sample and permitted to occupy two half-hour time slots (4 p.m. to 5 p.m.).

The sampling frame for the present investigation was defined by four parameters: channels, program types, sampling times (i.e., times of day),

and sampling periods (i.e., times of year). The following channels were included in the sample: KABC (ABC affiliate), KCBS (CBS affiliate), KNBC (NBC affiliate), KTTV (FOX affiliate), KTLA (WB affiliate), KCOP (UPN affiliate), and KCAL (independent). Only programs that self-identify as news were coded and all news programs listed in *TV Guide* from 3:00 p.m. until 10:59 p.m. were eligible for inclusion in the sample (a total of 7 hours per day). The sampling period was two sets of 20 weeks. The first set began in October 1995 and ended in June 1996. The second set began in October 1996 and ended in June 1997. The time periods during certain holidays (e.g., Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter) were excluded from the sampling frame.

Crime reports were gathered from the California Department of Justice for Los Angeles and Orange Counties for the years 1995, 1996, and 1997 and used as the social reality indicator outside of the media. Although arrest rates are used as a standard with which to compare television portrayals, arrest rates themselves may be a function of racial discrimination. Jones (1986) reported that Blacks are arrested twice as often as Whites, and Blacks are jailed at a rate more than four times their proportion in the population. Despite this potential bias, these reports are used for three reasons. First, the only government information that was available regarding the race of perpetrators was arrest rate. Second, there is no evidence to suggest that viewers make meaningful distinctions between perpetrators who are accused and sought for a crime versus those who have been arrested for law breaking. Third, public officials and other agencies use these reports to develop policy responses to criminal activity.

Using the sampling procedure described above, two seven-day composite weeks of news programming were produced. Virtually all news shows in the regular program schedule for each channel appeared in the final composite weeks. The taped news sample included 205 programs. A total of five (2%) were removed from the sample due to taping errors or other technical problems, yielding 200 programs.

### Levels of Analysis and Definitions

Only news stories that contained criminal behavior were analyzed. These crime stories represented the first level of analysis in the design. At the crime story level, the location of crimes (committed in Los Angeles County or Orange County or not) was assessed. Contained within many, but not all, of the crime stories were juvenile perpetrators of crime. Variables pertaining to these juvenile perpetrators represented the second level of the design. Coders coded variables pertaining to (a) the crime (e.g., murder, arson) committed, (b) the race (e.g., Black, White, Latino or Other) of perpetrators, and (c) age (juvenile or not) of suspects.

#### DEFINITION OF CRIME

Crime was defined as behavior or information either pertaining to the commission of a particular law-breaking act, or social or legal reaction to law-breaking more generally. Only those crimes (e.g., murder, arson, robbery) that are tracked by the U.S. Department of Justice and the State of California Justice Department were coded to compare the depiction of crime on the news with crime data. Coders used all cues contained in a crime story including reporter statements and officer statements regarding the nature of the crime in question in order to categorize offenses.

#### DEFINITION AND IDENTIFICATION OF PERPETRATOR RACE

To compare the race of juveniles portrayed on television news with the race of individuals noted in crime reports, the categories and definitions used by the California Department of Justice were used in this study. Race included four categories: Black, White, Latino, and Other (e.g., Asian). All information contained in a news story was used to determine the race of perpetrators portrayed. These race indicators included (a) shown on videotape, (b) mug shot shown, (c) artist's sketch shown, (d) photo shown, and (e) race is stated.

#### DEFINITION AND INDICATORS OF JUVENILE STATUS

Juveniles were defined as those persons who were under the age of 18. In California, legal adult status is granted to those who are 18 years or older. Coders were asked to determine the perpetrator's age by noting (a) whether the news story mentioned the suspect's precise age or (b) whether the news story mentioned the suspect's age range. In some cases visual inspection was used to determine the age of suspects. Coders relied strictly on visual inspection or age information stated by reporters in order to determine the age of suspects.

#### CODING AND RELIABILITY

Ten (six male, four female) undergraduate students were selected to perform the coding of data for this project. An undergraduate research program headquartered at the institution of the lead author selected the coders. Student coders had to submit resume materials and be interviewed by program coordinators and the principal investigator to work on the project. Students were selected based on their interest in the study, prior research experience, and academic excellence. The coders consisted of four Whites, four Blacks, one Latino, and one other (e.g., Asian). The coders ranged in age from 19 to 24-years-old. After selection, coders underwent approximately 30 hours of instruction in a small seminar class setting. This instruction included lectures

and group discussion regarding the coding task, group coding of program tapes, and individual coding of program tapes.

#### THE CODING PROCESS

The actual data coding process was conducted by randomly assigning individual coders to programs. Coders viewed each show alone and could watch the entire program or any segment of it as many times as necessary to ascertain the required coding judgments. Data for each observation were obtained from a single coder. Coding was completed over a 25-week time span.

#### THE RELIABILITY PROCESS

At the end of coder training and over the course of the coding process, all coders periodically received a randomly selected identical program that they were all required to code along with their regular coding assignment. They received one of these randomly assigned programs every five weeks and coded five identical programs in total. The coding of these five programs provided the reliability data for this study.

#### CODER FATIGUE

Coder fatigue or drift was assessed throughout the coding task through an examination of the reliability tapes assigned to the coders every five weeks. Fatigue was addressed by examining the consistency of each individual coder on each specific judgment. An emergent agreement criterion was used to assess coder fatigue by examining the coder mode for each judgment (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). To assess coder drift, the extent to which each individual coder made judgments consistent with the modal agreement was calculated. There was not a significant indication of fatigue based on this assessment.

#### CODER CONSISTENCY

The proportional reduction of error technique used in this study to assess coder consistency relied on Cohen's Kappa (Cohen, 1960). This technique was chosen because of the large number of coders used in the study. Cohen's Kappa is commonly viewed as a version of Scott's Pi that corrects for chance error in the consistency ratings of multiple coders, and it is considered a standard proportional reduction of error technique in content analysis studies (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000). The reliability on each of the variables was quite high as indicated by the overall median range of agreement that ranged from .82 to .94.



## Investigating Juvenile Portrayals of Race and Law Breaking

In the current study two indices used by Dixon and Linz (2000a) are used to investigate portrayals of Black and Latino juvenile lawbreaking on television news. The first content measurement approach is a comparison of the portrayals of Blacks or Latinos to Whites portrayed in the media (Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b; Entman, 1992, 1994). This comparison is a frequency estimate based on a ratio calculation (e.g., for every White juvenile perpetrator, there are three Black juvenile perpetrators portrayed).

However, the index described above reveals little about the “accuracy” of media portrayals. To make the claim that media portrayals overrepresent, underrepresent, or accurately represent Black and Latino juveniles as perpetrators, a second measure must be undertaken. This second measure involves calculating the proportion of Blacks, Latinos, and Whites who appear as perpetrators in the media and comparing this proportion to the percentage contained in crime reports. In the current study the comparison is undertaken with the juvenile crimes tracked by the California Department of Justice (1996, 1997, 1998).

## RESULTS

News stories retained for analysis met two criteria. First, they reported crimes committed in Los Angeles and Orange County. Second, they reported on juvenile crimes that are monitored by the California Department of Justice. Thus, 27% of the originally sampled stories were dropped from the analysis, and only those juvenile crimes on television news that are tracked by the California Department of Justice were included in the analysis. This allowed the appropriate comparisons to be made between television news portrayals and actual juvenile crime activity.

### Comparisons of Black to White and Latino to White Juvenile Perpetrators

The first hypothesis predicted that Black and Latino juveniles would appear as perpetrators at a higher rate compared to Whites. The data appear to indicate that Black and Latino juvenile offenders were each more likely to appear as perpetrators compared to White juveniles. A chi-square analysis was used to undertake the first comparison and an alpha level of .05 was used. For every White juvenile perpetrator, there were 1.66 Black juvenile perpetrators and 1.25 Latino juvenile perpetrators depicted on local television news programs,  $\chi^2(3, N = 51) = 10.57, p < .01$ . For every felony White juvenile perpetrator there were 1.54 Black juvenile felony perpetrators, and 1.36 Latino felony juvenile perpetrators appearing on news programs,  $\chi^2(3, N = 45) = 11.80, p < .01$ .

**TABLE 1** Race of Juvenile Perpetrators Arrested According to Crime Reports Compared with the Racial Make-up of Juvenile Perpetrators on Television News.

| Race   | Arrest rate <sup>a</sup> | TV perpetrators <sup>b</sup> | Percentage point differential <sup>c</sup> | 95% confidence interval |
|--------|--------------------------|------------------------------|--|-------------------------|
| Black  | 18%                      | 39%                          | +21*                                       | +/-13%                  |
| White  | 22%                      | 24%                          | +02  | +/-12%                  |
| Latino | 53%                      | 29%                          | -18*                                       | +/-6%                   |
| Other  | 7%                       | 8%                           | +1   | +/-53%                  |

<sup>a</sup>Percent of Juvenile Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and others who were arrested according to the California Department of Justice Criminal Profile for 1995, 1996, and 1997.

<sup>b</sup>Percent of Juvenile Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and others who appeared as perpetrators on local television news from October 1995–June 1997.

<sup>c</sup>Difference between the television percent and the arrest rate percent for each racial group (TV% – Arrest%).

\*Percentage point differential outside the confidence interval ( $N = 51$ ).

### Comparisons of New Reports to Crime Statistics

Our second hypothesis predicted that Black and Latino juveniles would be overrepresented on television news as perpetrators compared to crime reports. The data appear to support this hypothesis. Undertaking this analysis involved three steps (Dixon et al., 2003; Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b). In the first step, the percentages of Black, White, Latino, and Other juvenile perpetrators who appeared on television news were calculated for Los Angeles and Orange County based on crimes tracked by the California Department of Justice (1996, 1997, 1998). As Table 1 shows, 39% of all juvenile perpetrators portrayed on television news were Black, 29% were Latino, 24% were White, and 8% were “other” (e.g., Native Americans, Asians). This trend was also evident for felonies. As shown in Table 2, 38% of all juvenile felons portrayed on television news were Black, 33% were Latino, 24% were White and 4% were other.

**TABLE 2** Race of Juvenile Felons Arrested According to Crime Reports Compared with the Race of Juvenile Felony Perpetrators on Television News.

| Race   | Felony arrest rate <sup>a</sup> | Felony TV perpetrators <sup>b</sup> | Percentage point differential <sup>c</sup> | 95% confidence interval |
|--------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|-------------------------|
| Black  | 23%                             | 38%                                 | +15*                                       | +/-14%                  |
| White  | 15%                             | 24%                                 | +9   | +/-12%                  |
| Latino | 54%                             | 33%                                 | -21*                                       | +/-14%                  |
| Other  | 8%                              | 4%                                  | -4   | +/-6%                   |

<sup>a</sup>Percent of Juvenile Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and others who were arrested for felonies according to the California Department of Justice Criminal Profile for 1995, 1996, and 1997.

<sup>b</sup>Percent of Juvenile Blacks, Whites, Latinos, and others who appeared as felony perpetrators on local television news from October 1995–June 1997.

<sup>c</sup>Difference between the television percent and the arrest rate percent for each racial group (TV% – Arrest%).

\*Percentage point differential outside the confidence interval ( $N = 45$ ).

In Step 2, these television news proportions of juvenile perpetrators were subtracted from the proportion of juvenile perpetrators arrested according to the California Criminal Justice Profile 1995, 1996, and 1997 for Los Angeles and Orange County (1996, 1997, 1998). The resulting difference is represented in Tables 1 and 2 as the percentage point differential. In the final step, a 95% confidence interval was calculated around each sample estimate of the proportion of juvenile perpetrators on television news (Moore & McCabe, 1989). If the percentage point differential exceeded the 95% confidence interval, the corresponding television proportion was considered a statistically significant underrepresentation or overrepresentation.

Tables 1 and 2 provide information on each racial group, their arrest rate percentage, television perpetration percentage, the percentage point differential and the 95% confidence interval. They reveal that Black juveniles were more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators of crime on television news (39%) than to be arrested according to crime reports (18%). The percentage point differential, exceeds the 95% confidence interval, so this difference is statistically significant. Black juveniles were also significantly more likely to be portrayed as felons on television news (38%) than to be arrested for felonies (23%).

Latino juveniles were significantly *less* likely to be portrayed as perpetrators of crime on television news (29%) than to be arrested (53%) according to crime reports. Latinos were also significantly less likely to be portrayed as juvenile felons on television news (33%) than to be arrested for juvenile felonies according to crime reports (54%).

White juveniles were no more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators of crime on television news (24%) than to be arrested according to crime reports (22%). Whites were no more likely to be portrayed as juvenile felons on television news (24%), than to be arrested for felony offenses (15%). In this case, the nine-point percentage point differential does not exceed the 12-point 95% confidence interval required for statistical significance.

Juvenile "others" (e.g., Asians) were also no more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators on television news (8%) than to be arrested according to crime reports (7%). There were also no statistically significant differences between juvenile "others" portrayed as felons on television news (4%) and "others" arrested for felonies (8%).

## DISCUSSION

The current study was a secondary analysis designed to investigate the representation of race and juvenile lawbreaking on local television news to determine the extent to which juveniles of color were associated with criminality. Two indices were used in this study to produce an assessment of the extent to which Blacks, Latinos, and Whites were accurately represented or

misrepresented as juvenile lawbreakers on news programs. The first comparison revealed that Black and Latino juveniles were more likely than White juveniles to be portrayed as perpetrators of crime on television news. The second comparison revealed that Black juvenile perpetrators were overrepresented, Latino juvenile perpetrators were underrepresented, and White juvenile perpetrators were neither under- nor overrepresented on television news.

Below, an explanation of these patterns of findings is offered. Afterwards, the potential psychological impact of these depictions is discussed. Finally, an overview of possible limitations of this research is outlined.

### Misrepresentations of the Race of Juvenile Perpetrators

We proposed that a systematic examination of the news with regard to the race of juvenile suspects might yield three possible findings. The first possibility was that juvenile racial depictions might mirror those of adults whereby African American juveniles would be overrepresented while Latino juveniles would be underrepresented as criminal perpetrators. The second possibility was that Black and Latino juveniles would both be overrepresented as perpetrators. The third possibility was that White juveniles would be overrepresented as lawbreakers. Our analysis supports the first proposed outcome. African American juveniles are overly associated with crime. However, Latinos are underrepresented as criminal suspects. An ethnic blame discourse/incognizant racism phenomenon might explain the African American and White juvenile depictions, while structural limitations and the economic interests of news organizations might explain the Latino juvenile findings. Each of these is discussed below.

#### ETHNIC BLAME DISCOURSE

It could be argued that the overrepresentation of Black juvenile lawbreaking and accurate representation of White juveniles on television news is part of an "ethnic blame discourse" being carried out in the media (Romer et al., 1998). This discourse is ethnocentric talk that becomes routinized in everyday speaking and shapes the thoughts and actions of persons exposed to the discourse. The ethnic blame discourse frames problem behavior committed by ethnic others (e.g., Blacks) as inter-group conflict and accentuates the harmful effects of the behavior on the in-group (e.g., Whites). Researchers who espouse this perspective claim that such a discourse is pervasive, that it occurs in interpersonal and mass media contexts (Romer et al., 1998; Van Dijk, 1993). Advocates of this perspective argue that news reporters and editors are susceptible to this discourse and their news decisions are affected accordingly (Heider, 2000). The face-to-face interpersonal force featured in the transgressions of Black juvenile suspects may be perceived as a large draw because of this ethnic blame discourse and the visual nature of the stories (Dorfman, Woodruff, Chavez, & Wallack, 1997; Kaniss, 1991).

Researchers who advance this perspective might argue that ethnic blame made Black juvenile perpetrator stories appear more salient and newsworthy to news producers than stories featuring White juveniles. In addition, these advocates might contend that ethnic blame also explains White's lack of appearance as perpetrators on television news due to the fact that Whites occupy an ingroup position among news decision makers (Heider, 2000).

#### STRUCTURAL LIMITATIONS AND ECONOMIC INTERESTS

The explanation of Latino underrepresentation might rest with the structural limitations/economic interest perspective (Chermak, 1995; Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, & Wright, 1996; Harris, 1999; Heider, 2000; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997). This perspective argues that most depictions are driven by a cost-benefit paradigm in which the public sees what the public wants as long as the costs are not prohibitive. Latino juvenile perpetrators are less likely to appear in crime news according to this perspective because of the resources it may take to cover stories featuring Latino juvenile perpetrators. The additional resources are tied to the language and cultural barriers that must be overcome in order to report on Latino juvenile perpetrators (Dixon & Linz, 2000a). Latino reporters fluent in Spanish may be able to traverse the barriers that limit the access of English-speaking news agencies to Latinos. However, Fitzgerald (1994) reported that Latinos were underrepresented as news reporters. In addition, Heider (2000) found that geography, history, and financial resources were all related to the lack of Latino coverage on news programs. All of these issues might contribute to the lack of Latino juvenile perpetrators in crime news.

#### Psychological Effects of Portrayals

Gerbner and other communication theorists have observed that each instance of exposure to the imagery uncovered by this study might shape the views of perceivers (Dixon & Linz, 2000a; Gerbner, 1990; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980). The mechanisms associated with this phenomena have been explicated by a large body of scholarship in social psychology (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Dasgupta, McGhee, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2000; Hewstone, 1990; Rudman, Greenwald, Mellott, & Schwartz, 1999; von Hippel, Sekaquaptewa, & Vargas, 1995). These psychological mechanisms would predict that as a result of repeated exposure to the Black juvenile criminal in the mass media and other contexts, White viewers might come to associate juvenile crime itself with Blackness.

Social psychologists, communication scholars, and political scientists have contended that memory is a network of connected cognitive structures, schemas, or stereotypes (Devine, 1989; Domke, McCoy, & Torres, 1999; Domke, Shah, & Wackman, 1998; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Gilliam et al.,

1996). This associative network is mentally available and present in long-term memory. As a result, these stereotypes can be retrieved and used to make judgments. Frequent activation of schemas or stereotypes over time makes them more likely to be used in the future to make decisions.

Given the current findings, this may lead to the frequent association of Black juveniles with lawbreaking. Frequently activated thoughts regarding Black juvenile criminals may be more accessible or available for use when a judgment needs to be made regarding juvenile crime policy or punitive decisions. Political scientists and communication scholars have demonstrated similar effects with other policies. For example, Gilens (1999) found that support for welfare policies is associated with stereotypical beliefs about black laziness depicted in news programming, and Valentino (1999) found that support for conservative policies and candidates is tied to exposure to Black criminality in the news.

### Limitations of the Present Study and a Call for Future Research

In this section, six limitations of the present study are identified and a call for future research is issued.

#### EFFECTS OF PORTRAYALS

The current study does not document the effects of content. In fact, one should be cautious about suggesting that certain kinds of media content may lead to specific effects. The current investigation can only suggest future directions for research based upon an understanding of the content and prior established theories. One of these directions should be to test whether or not the theoretical notions discussed above regarding priming, mental networks, and spreading activation occur with juvenile crime policy judgments and race. One of the issues that social scientists need to address is the extent to which a steady stream of news media images of Black juveniles affects how viewers think about juvenile crime policies.

#### IMAGE INTENSITY

Sustained coverage of a particular incident or story may have an impact on viewer perceptions, and these were not examined in the current study. It is possible that these dramatic, unusual events, such as the Columbine shootings, might have profound effects on viewers. Some theorists have suggested that critical, memorable, vivid, and unusual images may contribute more to perceptions of outgroups than incremental viewing of stereotypes (Greenberg, 1988). Future studies should also examine whether incremental exposure to the Black super-predator or “drench” exposure to school shootings featuring White perpetrators produce more substantial changes in people’s conceptions of juvenile crime and criminality.

#### TIME OF DATA COLLECTION

The sample of this study was drawn from 1995–1997 as part of a larger assessment of violence on television (Wilson et al., 1998) and the race of adult lawbreakers (Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b). Although there has been a nine-year time lapse from data collection to publication, it is likely that the pattern of portrayals uncovered by this research do not differ very much from the current content of local television news in the Los Angeles area. There are two reasons why this is most likely the case. First, crime patterns have remained steady over the last several years since the sample was drawn (California Department of Justice, 2003). Second, we are aware of no interventions to change the context and content of reporting regarding race and juvenile behavior in the Los Angeles area based partially upon informal interviews with news directors. As several researchers suggest, these portrayals may be connected with the economic interests and socio-cultural dynamics which require intense intervention in order to be modified (Heider, 2000; Romer et al., 1998). However, a replication of this work would be in order to verify that there have not been any significant changes in coverage since the sample was drawn.

#### LOS ANGELES SAMPLE

Only Los Angeles-based stations were included in the sample because they were drawn from the larger NTVS sample, which taped all of its programs in the Los Angeles market. It is possible that other markets may feature a different pattern of race and juvenile crime portrayals compared to Los Angeles. Future studies should investigate whether this is the case.

#### SPANISH-SPEAKING STATIONS

Finally, Spanish-language stations were not included in the sample of programs analyzed. It is possible that the portrayal of Latino juvenile lawbreakers on these stations differs from the portrayals featured on mainstream broadcasts. However, many of these Spanish-language stations, including *Telemundo*, often use the same news feeds as mainstream stations. Nevertheless, the impact of Spanish-language stations on the underrepresentation of Latinos as juvenile perpetrators needs to be investigated more thoroughly in the future.

#### EXPLANATIONS FOR MISREPRESENTATION

Both the ethnic blame discourse and the structural limitations/economic interest perspectives discussed above are intriguing notions that the current study does not investigate directly. However, the findings of this study

appear to support aspects of both positions. In order to tease out which of these perspectives is truly operating, a number of future studies should be conducted.

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