

Representation of Race and Gender in *News-Gazette* Crime Reporting

A Research Project of the Junior Honors Program in the Department
of Political Science, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

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Academic Research on Racial Representations in News Coverage

Research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s tended to find that African-Americans were overrepresented as crime suspects and underrepresented as crime victims relative to “real world” benchmark indicators like arrest records

More recent research suggests that African-American suspects may be covered roughly on par with “real world” benchmark indicators

Typical focus is on television reporting in large news markets or national news outlets

Why News Depictions of Race Matter

Misrepresenting racial characteristics of local crime suspects is an important cause of racial stereotyping in society

- Can serve as raw material for initially developing stereotypical associations between race and crime

- Can sustain and support existing stereotypes about racial characteristics of criminal perpetrators

- Can perpetuate systemic forms of racial injustice that take root in societal institutions

Best Practices for Detecting Racial Stereotyping in News Coverage

Individual perceptions about racial stereotyping in news coverage are strongly influenced by a person's prior beliefs about racial justice issues (e.g., the "hostile media effect")

The strongest research designs for detecting misrepresentation of suspect characteristics therefore rely on systematic analysis of news content over long periods of time

The strongest research designs also compare news depictions of crime to "real world" benchmark indicators such as arrest records

Motivation

- Importance of news media
 - Recent national and local race events
 - How media portrays different racial groups
-
- Research Question: Are certain crimes or suspects more likely to be reported on than others?

Arrest Data

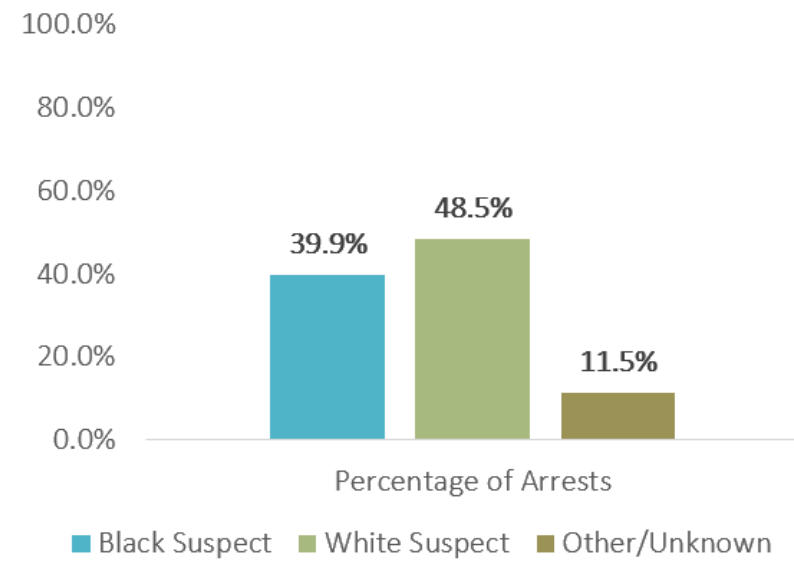
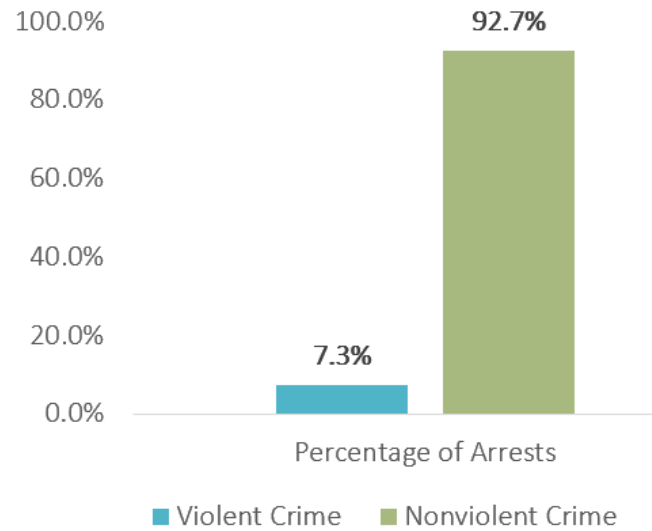
-Arrest data from: Champaign County Sheriff's Office, Champaign Police Department, Rantoul Police Department, University of Illinois Police Department, Urbana Police Department

-Name, age, race, sex, crime type

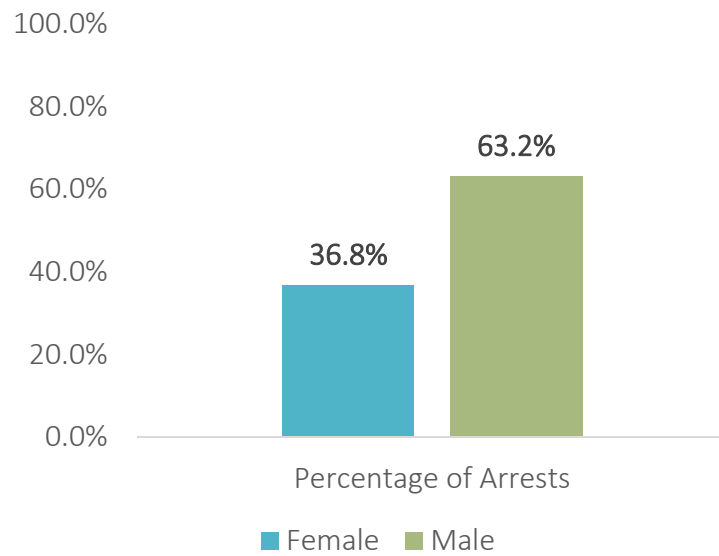
-Date range: May 31, 2015 through August 31, 2015

-5016 total arrests

Arrest Data



Arrest Data



News Data

- News data spans from June 1, 2015 to September 1, 2015
PDF copies of paper edition (no online content included in study)
- Captured every crime story published within time frame
- Student analysts paired together to reconcile any disagreements

News Data

- Generated a codebook to determine important variables
 - Location, type of crime, race of suspect, gender of suspect, whether or not suspect was arrested
- Two student analysts analyzed each crime story according to the codebook
 - Ignored “Crime Report” summary roundups

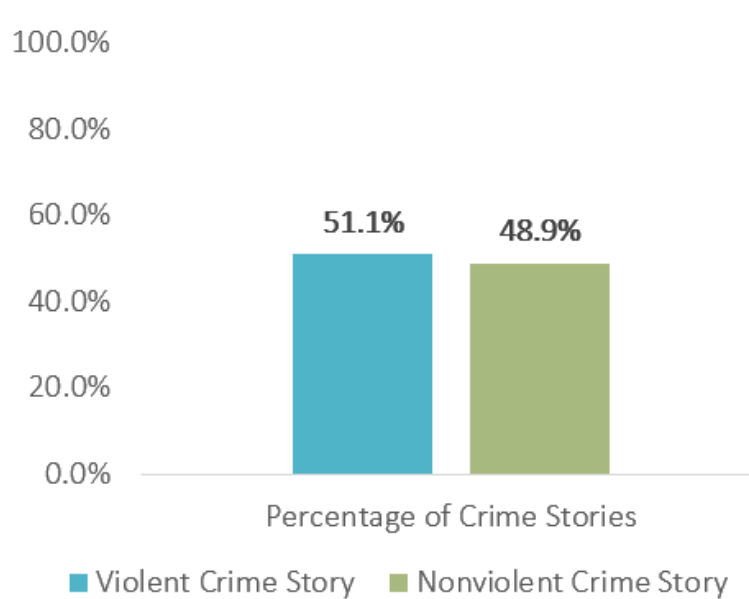
News Data

- Followed “best practice” academic standards for analyzing news content
 - Intercoder reliability
 - Two student analysts independently coded each story
 - Disagreements reconciled by two more working together

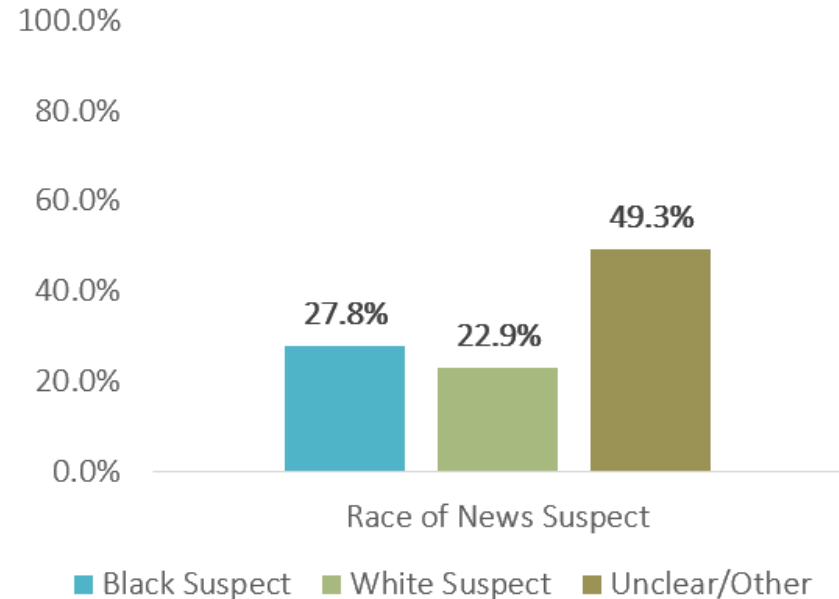
Matching Arrest and News Data

- Created a matching algorithm
- Student analysts then went through and made matches manually
- Made sure that all of the matches were correct and fixed those that were incorrect
- Allowed us to clarify any discrepancies with race among suspects and lessen “Unclear race”

News Data*

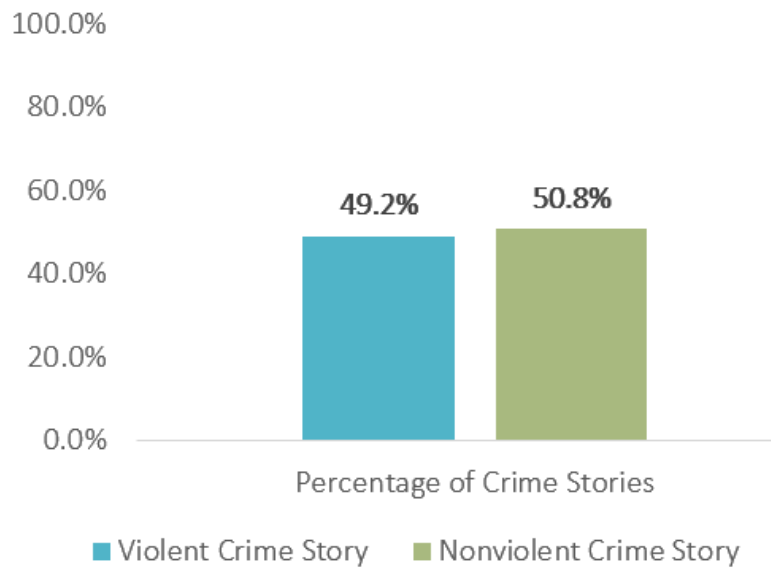


*Story level data, all locations

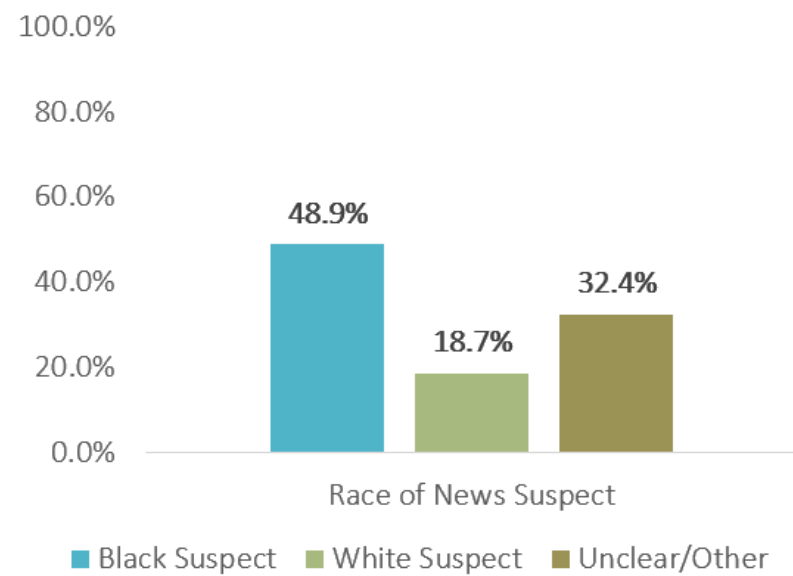


*Suspect level, race enhanced data, all locations

Local Crime News Data*

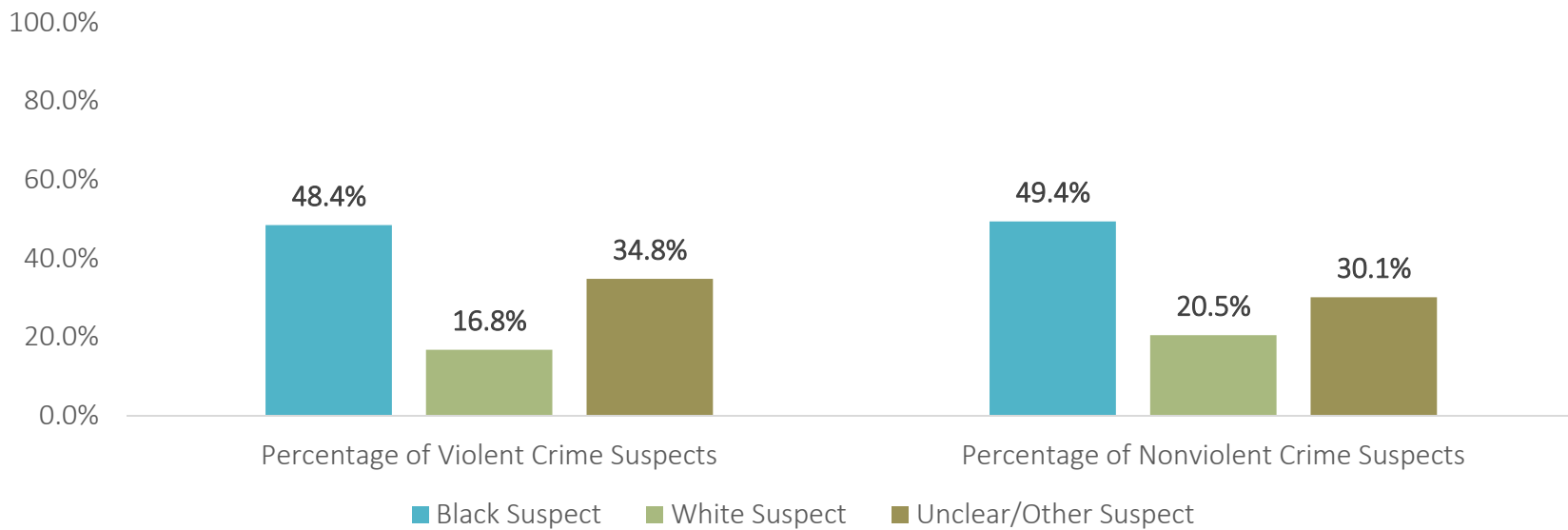


*Story level data, Champaign County



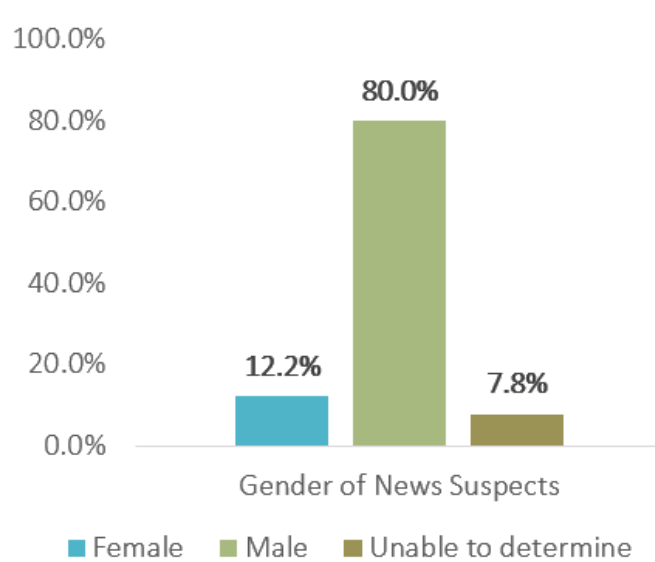
*Suspect level, race enhanced data, Champaign County

Local Crime News Data*

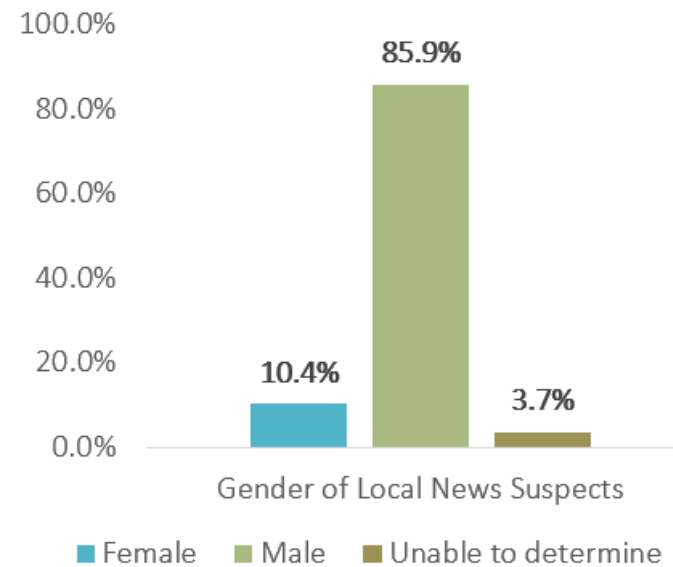


*Suspect level, race enhanced data, Champaign County

News Data Gender

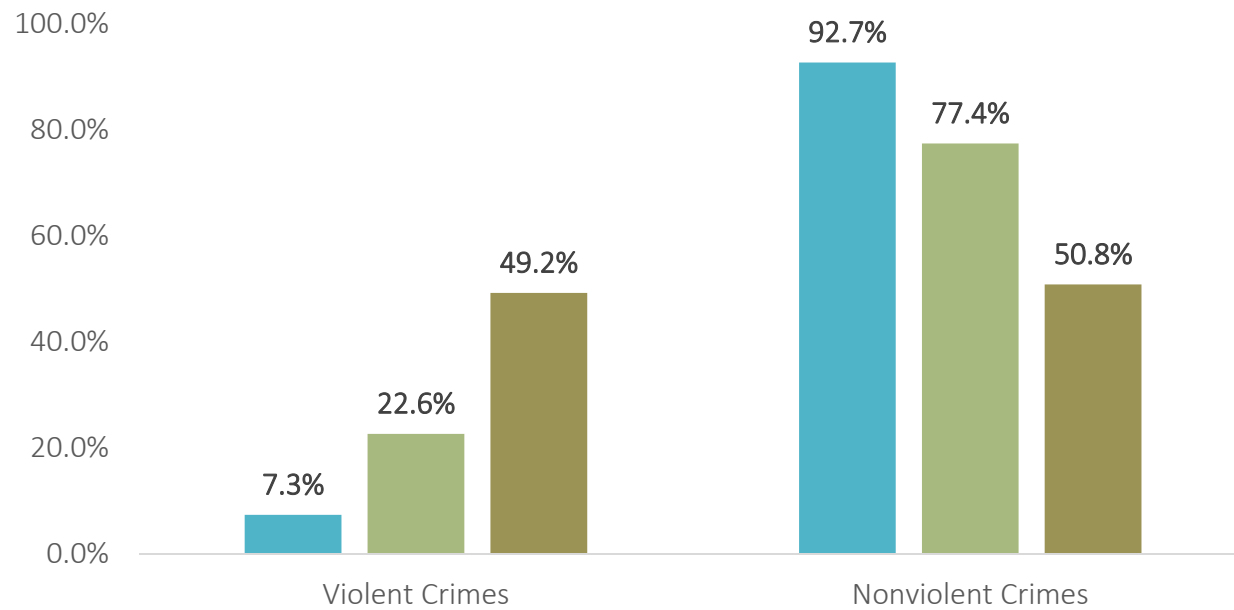


*Suspect level data, all locations



Suspect level data, Champaign County

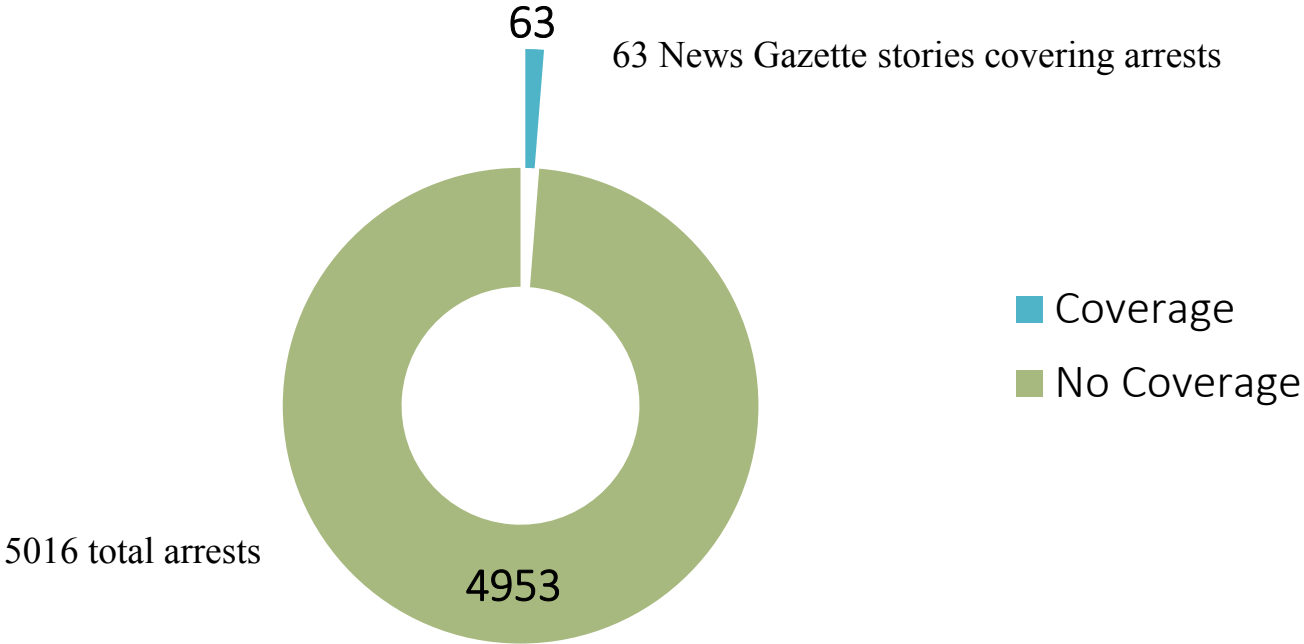
News is 7 times more violent than arrest data and over twice as violent as booking data*



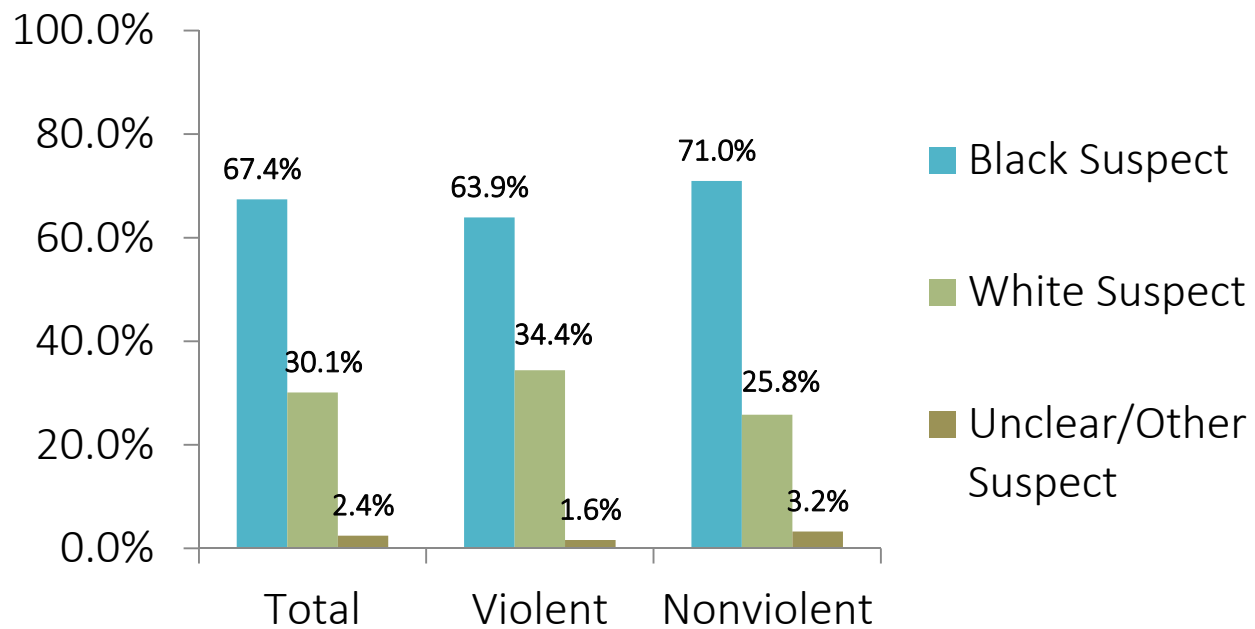
*Story level data, Champaign County

■ Arrest Data ■ Booking Data ■ News Gazette

Only 1% of arrests are reported in the news

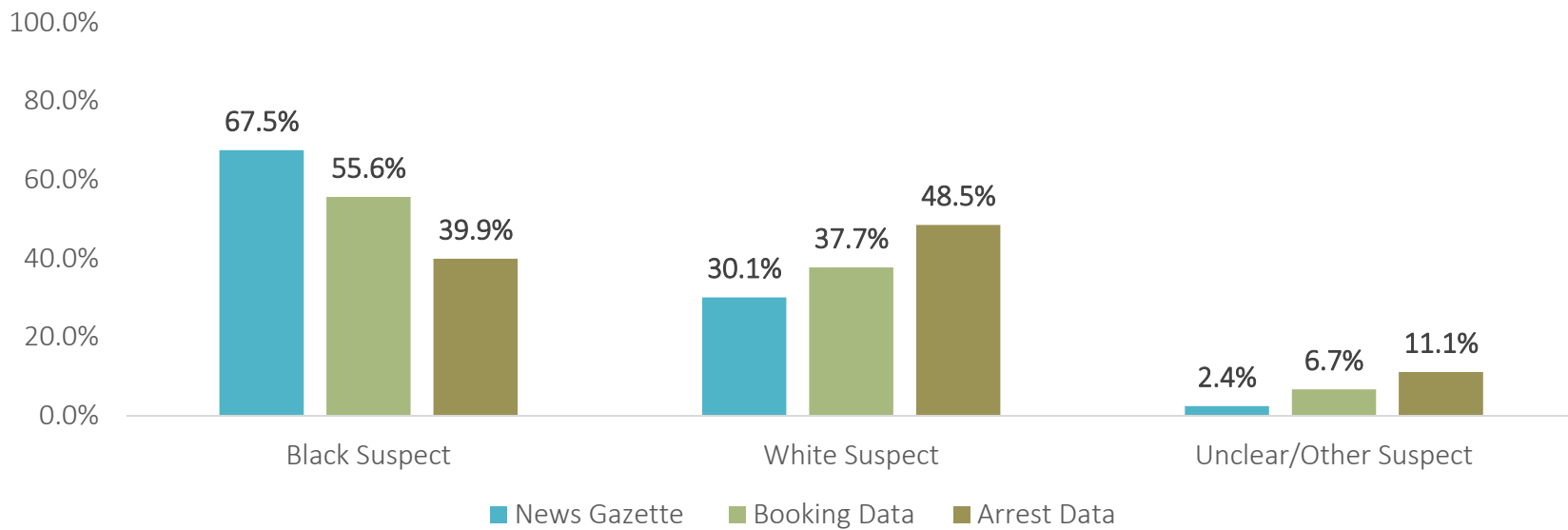


Suspect Images*



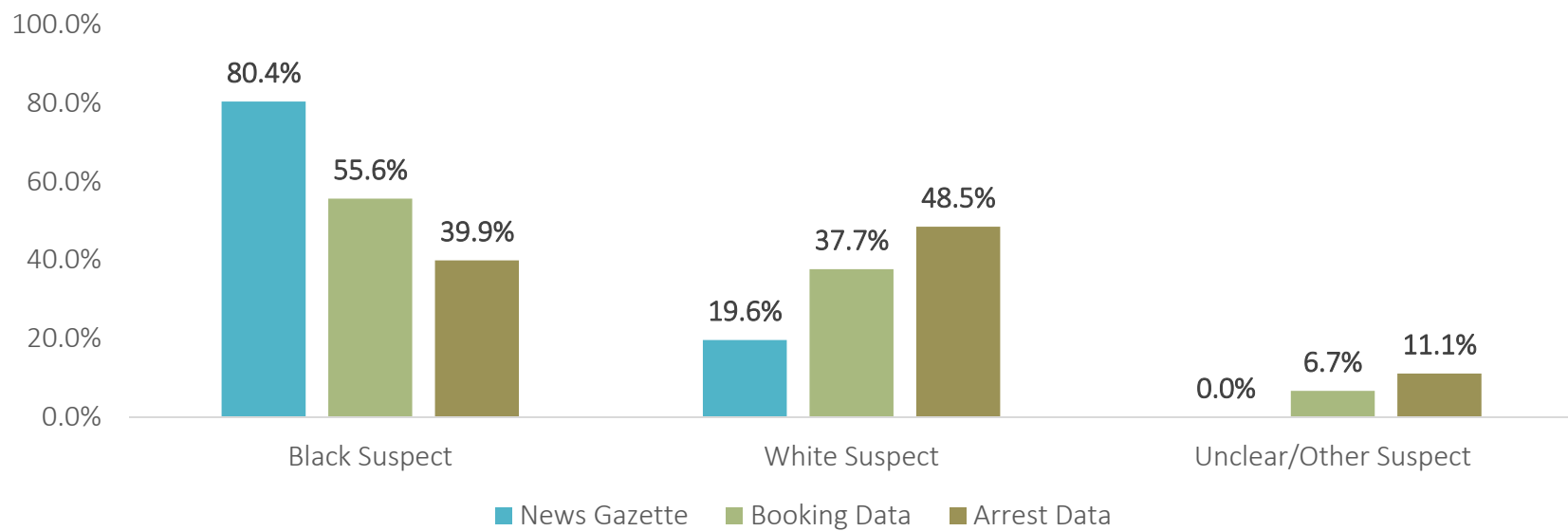
*Suspect level, race enhanced data, Champaign County

Suspect Images vs. Bookings and Arrests*



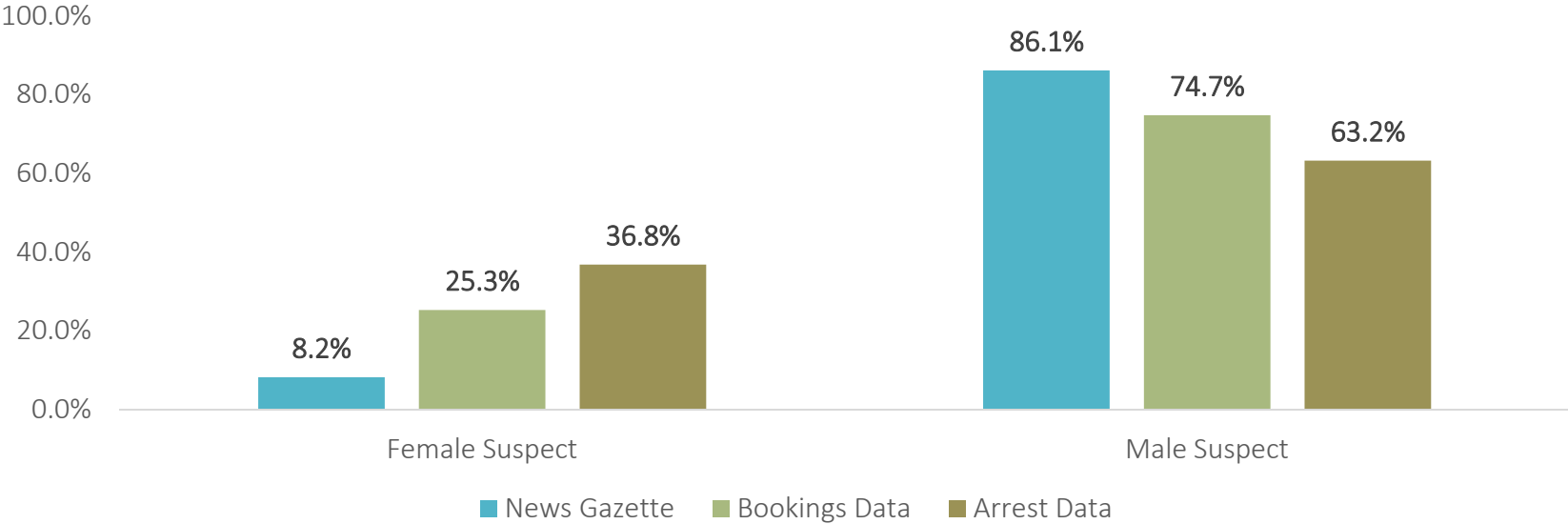
*Suspect level, race enhanced data, Champaign County

Early Stage Images*



*Suspect level, race enhanced data, Champaign County

Gender Comparison*



*Suspect level data, Champaign County

Effect of Violence, Race



Crime Occurs

- Violent: 6.9%
- Nonviolent: 1.8%
- Black: 3.6%
- White: 1.3%

Crime Stories

- Violent=Nonviolent
- Black: 51.9%
- White: 60.7%

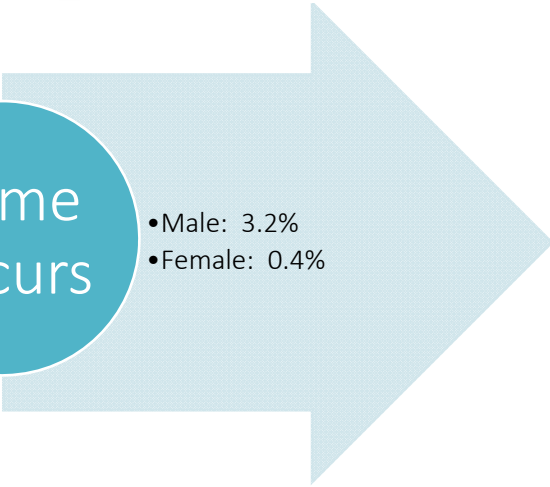
Image

Effect of Gender



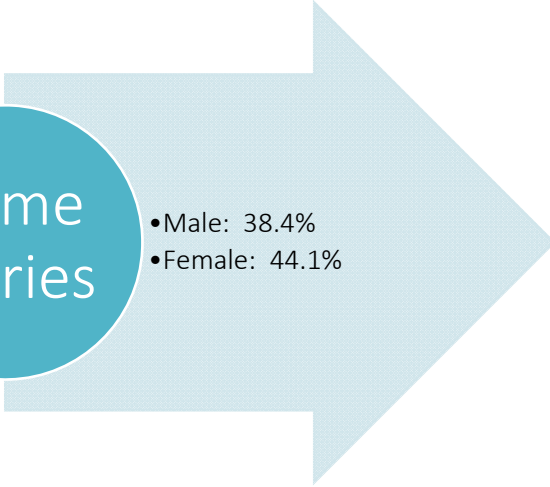
Crime Occurs

- Male: 3.2%
- Female: 0.4%



Crime Stories

- Male: 38.4%
- Female: 44.1%



Image

Summarizing Findings

- Violent crimes comprise a far greater proportion of crime stories than actual arrests
- Black suspects appear in the news at a greater proportion than in the arrest records
- Images of Black suspects appear at a greater rate than White suspects
- Black arrestees are much more likely to be selected for a news story
- White suspects are more likely to carry an image than Black suspects

Acknowledgements



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(Top row from left)
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Important Limitations of This Study

Patterns from the study's three-month window may not generalize to longer-term trends in News-Gazette coverage

Many suspects in News-Gazette coverage are never identified in a way that can be matched to arrest data (e.g., unnamed suspects in initial incident reports, juvenile suspects)

The arrest data and jail bookings data are partial and potentially misleading benchmarks for "real world" crime

The study is unable to address the underlying causes of demographic misrepresentation in crime reporting

Typical Origins of Demographic Misrepresentation in News Coverage

Academic research strongly suggests that such patterns in news coverage are **almost certainly**

- ✓ Unknown to and unanticipated by the news organizations that produce this coverage
- ✓ Unintended outcomes of common work processes and resource constraints that influence how news stories are selected and constructed
- ✓ Fixable by the news organizations that produce this coverage

Evidence Against Intentional Discrimination as a Possible Cause

Unless a suspect image is shown, race is rarely mentioned or even implied in textual descriptions of suspects

White suspects are more likely to be shown in images

Males are consistently overrepresented as news suspects

The choice to highlight violent crimes in the news will tend to increase the representation of Black suspects. In arrest data:

- 61% of violent crime suspects are Black, 32% are White
- 38% of nonviolent crime suspects are Black, 50% are White

Why Fixing Sources of Misrepresentation is Important

Misrepresenting racial characteristics of local crime suspects is an important cause of racial stereotyping in society

- ✓ Serves as raw material for initially developing stereotypical associations between race and crime
- ✓ Sustains and supports existing stereotypes about racial characteristics of criminal perpetrators
- ✓ Perpetuates systemic forms of racial injustice that take root in societal institutions

Where to Look for Remedies

Information subsidies from outsiders that make certain types of criminals or criminal acts easier to discover or report

Institutional tracking routines for becoming aware of criminal activity in Champaign County

Definitions of newsworthiness that influence story selection and story construction decisions

Degree to which news decisions at all levels are made by a mix of reporting and editorial staff that matches the racial diversity of the local community

Find the report on this research @
<http://www.clinecenter.illinois.edu/research/undergrad/>

