



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Newsworthiness in Minnesota Homicide

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ABSTRACT

News media surrounds today's society in a variety of different ways. The content of news media and the amount of reporting on a specific topic might say something about the worth society places on different situations and individuals. Homicide is one of the most reported crimes in news media, so investigating what makes a certain homicide more newsworthy may help create future assessments of 'worth.'

The current literature around newsworthiness in homicide is controversial. This study adds to that discussion by measuring Minnesota 2013 homicides in *The Minneapolis Star Tribune* and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* in conjunction with the Center for Homicide Research's Minnesota 2013 Database. This analysis found that that sex is the most significant predictor of news coverage. Additionally, this study did not find support for age, race or number of victims as predictive factors and offers exploratory information on other factors like innocence and circumstances.

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INTRODUCTION

Newsworthiness in Reporting Outcomes

Despite the sensationalism of the homicidal act, not all homicides get equal media coverage. Chermak (1998) found that some homicides were not deemed 'interesting enough' to be covered by the media. Newsworthiness is the idea that a homicide is worth reporting and that it presents a salacious enough story to prompt revenue (for the newspaper) so it will be reported more heavily. There are a variety of variables, including number of victims, age and race and gender that might contribute to newsworthiness.

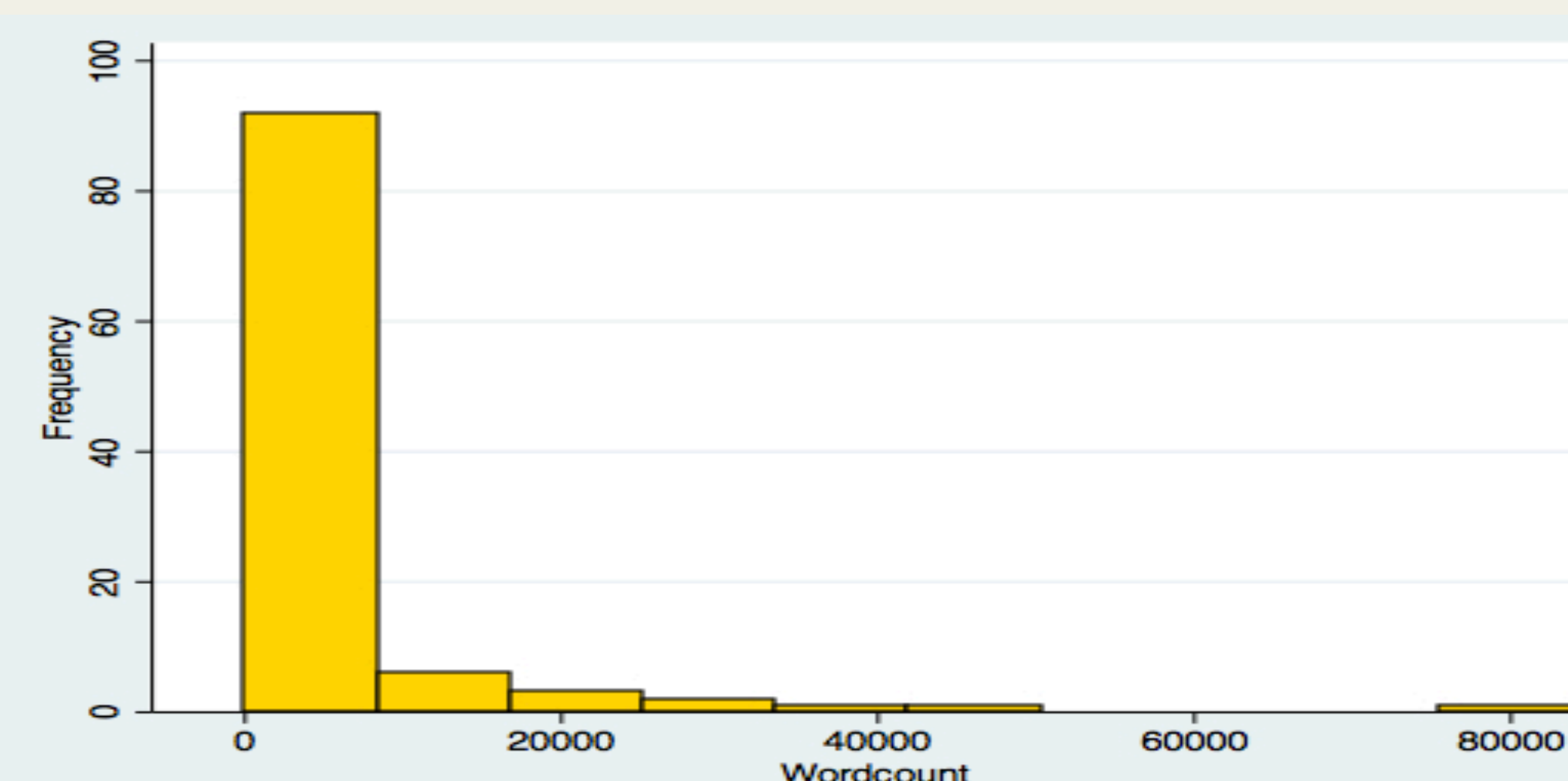
It is worth noting that there has been controversy regarding the impact of many of these variables. For example, Schildkraut and Donley (2012) found no consistency in gendered and racial factors in reporting, while emphasizing the importance of circumstances surrounding the killing. Age is another variable of interest with studies like Peelo et al. (2004) finding that the peak ages for coverage are 4 to 14, with children under 4 not receiving as much coverage when slain. While there was no newsworthiness in mid-life homicide, more coverage occurred after age 60, with older victims also receiving more media coverage in death (Schildkraut and Donley 2012). While there are many common variables in the media-homicide literature, there is not a complete consensus of the mechanisms of newsworthiness.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study uses content analysis to find all mentions of named homicide victims in 2013 in *The Minneapolis Star Tribune* and *The St. Paul Pioneer Press*. A population of 102 victims was established using the Center for Homicide Research's 2013 Minnesota Homicide Database.

Each article (N=692) was coded in RedCap for multiple factors and the results were analyzed using STATA 13.

Figure 1. Word count Frequency Breakdown of 2013 Homicide Cases



RESULTS

The two analyzed newspapers were very similar in coverage, with *The Minneapolis Star Tribune* covering slightly more cases and publishing slightly more articles. Only 8 cases out of 102 were not covered by either paper.

The strongest predictor for newsworthiness is sex. Even when controlling for offender and case-level characteristics, women are more likely to have greater news coverage. Another significant predictor of newsworthiness is the presence of a known offender. Having an identifiable offender is positively correlated with newspaper coverage.

No support was found in this study for the significance of race, number of victims or number of offenders. Nor was any support found for 'circumstances' as conceptualized in this study.

Specific iterations of variables represented in the literature were tested in this study (see the example of the 'age' variable in Table 2), but yielded no significant results.

Table 1. Case Level Regressions with Word Count

	Model 1	Model 2
Offender Race	-	-1768
	-	(6277)
Victim Race	-	-2869
	-	(6328)
Victim Sex (male as reference category)		
Female	-	15269***
	-	(5527)
	5556**	4552
Known offender	(2433)	(6454)
	1262	-
Multiple offenders	(3154)	-
	-5356	-150
Multiple victims	(5676)	(153.8)
	-	-127
Victim age	-	(214.0)
	-	-
Offender age	-	-
	-	-
R squared value	.068	.316

Note: *p<.1, **p<.05, ***p<.01, ****p<.001

DISCUSSION

This study attempts to analyze the most prevalent newsworthiness variables in the homicide coverage literature. Contrary to the literature, most discussed variables did not have a significant effect on coverage (measured in number of articles and number of words reported). Particularly salient is race, which showed no predictive power. In some models age was significant, but the only consistent potential indicator of news coverage is sex. Sex is positively correlated with coverage, so women receive more coverage on average.

One limitation of this study is lack of geographic and regional demographics to compare to previous studies. It is possible that there is something different about Minnesota homicides.

Table 2. Victim Level Age Regressions with Word Count

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Victim age (continuous)	-72.75	-	-	-
	(58.21)	-	-	-
Age 4-14 or <60	-	-1549	-	-
	-	(3071)	-	-
Age >18 or <60	-	-	-501.6	-
	-	-	(2993)	-
Age <60	-	-	-	-2004
	-	-	-	(3507)
R squared value	.0149	.0025	.0003	.0032

Note: *p<.1, **p<.05, ***p<.01, ****p<.001
SE reported in word count
Dichotomous age codes

CONCLUSIONS

Sex is the most significant correlate of high newspaper coverage. The mixed findings of this study represent a need for further research. While some literature-identified variables were supported, most were not.

Future research should look at interaction effects between variables and endeavor to investigate the regional demographic conditions that might be changing homicide trends.

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