

# HOW THE MEDIA COMPOUND URBAN PROBLEMS

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**ABSTRACT:** *Major news media coverage of cities reinforces an overwhelmingly negative and misleading view of urban America. The images from the nightly news, newsweeklies, and on the pages of our daily newspapers are an unrelenting story of social pathology—mounting crime, gangs, drug wars, racial tension, homelessness, teenage pregnancy, AIDS, inadequate schools, and slum housing. Moreover, this perspective on our cities is compounded by misleading news coverage of government efforts to address these problems. Government programs are typically covered as well-intentioned but misguided, plagued by mismanagement, inefficiency, and, in some cases, corruption. There is very little news coverage of collective efforts by unions, community organizations, and other grassroots groups to address problems. Only when such efforts include drama, conflict, and/or violence do the major media typically pay attention.*

**M**any community activists, big-city mayors, and even urban scholars have spent much of the past several decades focusing on what is wrong with America's urban areas. "Our cities are burning," they seem to be crying. Then they demand action from the federal government: "Please help us put out the fire." The United States has many serious problems that are disproportionately located in urban areas. But our perceptions of the magnitude of these problems, their underlying causes, and most important, the capacity of society to find solutions to these problems is significantly shaped by how the major news media cover our cities.

In general, the way the major news media frame coverage of our cities reinforces an overwhelmingly negative and misleading view of urban America. The images from the nightly news, newsweeklies, and daily newspapers are an unrelenting story of social pathology—mounting crime, gangs, drug wars, racial tension, homelessness, teenage pregnancy, AIDS, inadequate schools, and slum housing.

Moreover, this perspective on our cities is compounded by news coverage of government efforts to address these problems. Government programs are typically covered as well-intentioned but misguided, plagued by mismanagement, inefficiency, and, in some cases, corruption. A standard news story focuses on one policy initiative (i.e., federal

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enterprise zones, welfare, community policing, subsidized housing) and proclaims that, despite government's best efforts, poverty and crime persist.

This is not to say that the media completely ignore good news about cities. For example, Grogan and Proscio's (2000) book, *Comeback Cities*, heralding a revival of America's inner cities through the work of community development corporations, received considerable media attention. The release of the 2000 Census data triggered a small flood of news reports about how, during the 1990s, poverty and crime rates declined in most central cities while population and homeownership rates increased. When the Brookings Institution released a report in early 2003 about the "dramatic" decline of concentrated poverty in the 1990s (Jargowsky, 2003), many major newspapers published stories about this trend, focusing on both the national data and local conditions.

Despite these examples, however, the day-to-day coverage of America's cities is overwhelmingly negative. More important, the drumbeat of negativism has its political consequences. Many Americans have concluded that problems such as poverty and crime may be intractable. Media coverage of our cities contributes to public cynicism about government in general and about society's capacity to solve urban problems. This undermines the public's trust in government, and thus has an overall conservative impact, regardless of whether editors and reporters consider themselves liberals, moderates, conservatives, or apolitical. Would you invest your hard-earned dollars in a company that has been failing for 40 years? The way the media frames urban issues compounds the obstacles to building a majoritarian coalition for metropolitan reform.

### CRIME NEWS

Media coverage of urban crime is a good example. The public's beliefs about crime are based less on personal experience and more on what they see and read in the news media (Alderman, 1994). This is particularly important in terms of how suburbanites view the condition of nearby central cities. Americans are bombarded with news about crime, particularly violent crime. Crime news accounts for a significant share of daily news coverage. The phrase "if it bleeds, it leads" characterizes the disproportionate attention paid to crime and other threats to public safety, not only on local evening television news, but also on network television news and in daily newspapers. A study of news programming in 56 US cities found that violent crime accounted for two-thirds of all local news (Klite, Bardwell, & Salzman, 1997). Murder accounts for less than 1% of all crime in Los Angeles but makes up 20% of all local news reports on crime (Iyengar, 1998). The extent of news coverage of crime typically has little to do with actual crime rates. The decline in urban violent crime rates in the 1990s did not result in a proportional decline in news coverage.

In addition, news coverage over-represents minorities as violent criminals (Alderman, 1994; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Freeman, 1994). Elias' (1994) study of news magazines found that "criminals are conceptualized as black people, and crime as the violence they do to whites" (p. 6). In his study of local television news, Entman (1990, 1992) found black suspects were typically shown in handcuffs and in the custody of police officers while white suspects were typically shown with their attorneys (see also Dixon & Linz, 2000). Likewise, news reporting of the crack epidemic, starting in the 1980s, was heavily biased against urban African Americans compared with the coverage of suburban white use of cocaine (Dreier & Reiman, 1996; Reeves & Campbell, 1994a, 1994b; Reinerman, 1994; Reinerman & Levine, 1997).

It comes as no surprise that even people who live in communities with little crime or drug problems think that they are the middle of a crime wave perpetrated primarily by black males (Liska & Baccaglia, 1990). As a result, "exposure to local news will

strengthen public support for punitive approaches to crime and encourage the expression of racist attitudes” (Iyengar, 1998, p. 2; Valentino, 1999). Overall, local TV news programs “feed racial stereotypes, encouraging white hostility and fear of African Americans” (Entman, 1994, p. 29). They portrays blacks as “violent and threatening toward whites, self-interested and demanding toward the body politic—continually causing problems for the law-abiding tax-paying majority” (Entman, 1994, p. 29).

## RACE AND POVERTY

Media portrayals of the urban poor overemphasize the so-called non-deserving poor and contribute to misleading racial stereotypes about the poor. Gilens (1999) found that news stories about poverty (in weekly news magazines and network nightly news shows) disproportionately focus on people who are on welfare or unemployed rather than those who are working. The stories about welfare recipients and the jobless are generally more negative in tone than stories about the working poor. The news media also exaggerates the extent to which African Americans comprise the poor, a trend that began in the early 1960s and has since intensified. Between 1992 and 1998, the majority of people described as poor in weekly newsmagazines and television network news were black, even though the majority of poor Americans are white. Blacks comprised 29% of the nation’s poor but accounted for 62% of the photographs accompanying news magazine stories about poverty.

Moreover, negative stories about poverty are disproportionately associated with photographs of African Americans, while sympathetic portrayals of the poor (for example, connecting poverty to national economic conditions rather than personal characteristics, or stories about the working poor) are illustrated with photographs of whites. These trends contribute to a distorted view of the urban poor (Edy & Lawrence, 1999; Gilens, 1999).

Media coverage of urban blacks is typically framed as bad news. For example, news coverage of urban neighborhoods, particularly low-income black neighborhoods, focuses on problems rather than strengths, institutions, and assets (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993). Ettema and Peer (1996) analyzed news stories about two Chicago neighborhoods, Austin (a predominantly black neighborhood with a median household income of \$24,877) and Lincoln Park (an overwhelmingly white neighborhood with a median income of \$41,016) in the *Chicago Sun-Times* and *Chicago Tribune*. They found that “newspaper coverage of the lower income Austin neighborhood is largely a discourse of urban pathology” (p. 839). More than two-thirds of the stories about Austin were framed in terms of social problems compared with one-quarter of the stories about Lincoln Park. Stories about Austin viewed the community as crime-ridden and drug-infested. Both papers did, in fact, report good news, primarily efforts by individuals and community groups to respond to the symptoms of urban pathology, but stories about citizens and community groups organizing effectively to improve their communities were still rare.

The news media also distorts and racializes politics in its coverage of local elections. A study of local daily newspapers reporting on recent mayoral elections in Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York (each featured a white mayor succeeding an African American mayor) found that news coverage focused primarily on the *horse race* aspects of elections—poll standings, endorsements, campaign strategies, contributions, and personalities—rather than on such issues as urban development, education, crime, and city administration. In the Chicago papers’ coverage of the 1989 and 1991 mayoral contests, for example, three out of every five paragraphs focused on horse race reporting. The newspapers also injected race into these election campaigns even when the candidates did not do so. News

stories emphasized the racial horse race, assuming that the election was primarily about candidates seeking to consolidate their respective racial voting blocs. The media treated candidates' claims that they were seeking votes among all racial groups as mere rhetoric (Peer & Ettema, 1998; Sylvie, 1995). Such reporting undermines efforts to build cross-racial coalitions and address urban problems in class rather than racial terms.

### **POLITICS, GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC POLICY**

Even after the elections are over, media coverage of local, state, and federal government pays more attention to politics (the ongoing horse race among public officials vying for attention) than to government (the distribution of public services and the effectiveness of government programs in our metropolitan areas). Indeed, newspapers allocate more space to sports than to local government and urban issues. They pay more attention to sports "box scores" than to "keeping score" of how well public officials and government agencies carry out public policies, or of the economic and social conditions in urban and suburban neighborhoods (Burd, 1986; Ernst, 1972).

Overall, the local newspaper (even those owned by national chains or conglomerates) is part of the urban growth coalition (Dreier, 1982; Mollenkopf, 1983; Molotch, 1976). Local news media, particularly newspapers, tend to be boosters, advocating economic growth in general and development projects intended to revitalize central business districts in particular. In the 1950s and 1960s, local newspapers eagerly promoted the federal urban renewal program as a tool to rebuild city downtowns. In recent decades, daily papers have generally supported construction of private sports stadiums, convention complexes, and large-scale transportation projects (such as Boston's Central Artery project and Los Angeles' Alameda Corridor project) as ways to promote civic pride, boost downtown land values, and make their cities more competitive. Occasionally the local press will oppose specific projects on environmental grounds or in response to significant community protest, but these are rare exceptions.

Part of the media's bias is due to the way it defines what is newsworthy, how it allocates its resources to identify news, and what kinds of people and organizations routinely become sources of information and, thus, news. For example, daily newspapers assign reporters to beats based on editors' views of where news is most likely to happen, such as city hall, the police department, and the courthouse. This leads, of course, to a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Because few newspapers (much less news magazines or TV stations) have regular beat reporters assigned to poor neighborhoods, stories about these areas are typically about breaking news (crime, fires, conflict) written by reporters with little familiarity with the community. Business-backed organizations (such as the chamber of commerce, foundations, or policy groups) have the resources (staff, reports, blue-ribbon task forces, social connections) to get their concerns into the media's line of vision, while low-income groups often have to resort to protest. As a result, local newspapers devote greater resources to official news (news initiated by government officials and agencies) and central business district concerns than to the concerns of low-income neighborhoods or to broad regional issues that require reporters to cover concerns that cross municipal boundaries. (Indeed, few newspapers have a regional beat designed to look at metropolitan-wide issues.) The media do not always take the public officials' perspective (indeed, they often seek to uncover mismanagement and misconduct) but they typically allow politicians and government officials to set the agenda regarding the issues that are covered (Gans, 1980; Sigal, 1973, 1986).

The national and local media often portray public policies addressing urban poverty and other problems as inefficient or mismanaged. The Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, for example, was often described as the *welfare mess* or *welfare abuse*. Stories focused on people who received benefits for which they were not eligible or who traded food stamps for drugs or alcohol, even though such abuses were exceptionally rare. Much less attention was paid to the fact that benefit levels were below the poverty line and that for many poor women it was a preferable alternative to low-wage work without health insurance (Edy & Lawrence, 1999).

Similarly, while the public housing program was generally reported sympathetically from the 1950s through the mid-1960s, since 1965 media coverage has been consistently negative, focusing on the anti-social behaviors (crime, drug use, gang membership) of its residents and presenting a misleading portrayal of public housing developments as high rise slums (Reed, 1999). The public still has misleading and stereotyped views about government-subsidized housing (the *projects*) despite the fact that, since the 1980s, most subsidized housing developments have been sponsored by community-based organizations, are designed as mid-rise or low-rise style buildings, and are well-managed.

Hardly ever do the media explain our urban condition as a consequence of federal policies that promote suburbanization and urban disinvestment. They generally do not acknowledge that efforts to revitalize cities (such as enterprise zones, community development block grants, subsidized housing, and others) have been counter to most federal policy. In effect, they are “swimming against the tide,” trying to clean up the problems created by more powerful public policies that have promoted urban disinvestment (Dreier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2005; O’Connor, 1999).

Even the recent upsurge of media interest in smart growth and suburban sprawl fails to examine these issues as the flip side of urban disinvestment. They are viewed primarily as reflecting consumer preferences for cars and single-family homes, not trends driven by federal transportation and housing policies. Suburban sprawl is framed by the media primarily as an environmental problem (pollution, traffic congestion, and loss of green space) and not as a problem of economic segregation.

The media frequently report on cities engaging in bidding wars to entice a particular company or shopping mall, but they rarely explain that this competition is fueled by federal and state zoning and tax policies that undermine the economic health of all the bidders (Cart, 1999; Chawkins, 1999; Egan, 1996; Firestone, 1999; Pedersen, Smith, & Adler, 1999; Purdum, 1999; Sanchez, 1999).

### EVERYDAY PROBLEMS AND COLLECTIVE ORGANIZING

News coverage of the lives of ordinary people living in metropolitan areas focuses on the exceptional and unusual. The day-to-day concerns about making a living, health care, housing, neighboring, public services, and schools are typically out of the media’s line of vision unless they feature drama and conflict. Everyday relations between different racial groups (including cooperation toward common goals or people simply getting along without rancor) are rarely newsworthy, while racial tensions and violence are staples of the news.

The daily realities of urban life become newsworthy when they are defined as problems, often a result of the findings of a study sponsored by a think tank, a government agency, a foundation, or a community group, or if a group resorts to protest to dramatize an issue. In the 1960s, for example, the New York City media paid little attention to slum housing, slum landlords, or the city’s failure to enforce housing codes until tenant groups organized

rent strikes and engaged in civil disobedience (Lipsky, 1970). Similarly, in the 1990s, Los Angeles media ignored slum housing problems until a blue-ribbon citizens' task force released a report documenting that one out of eight apartments in the city was substandard. Once the *Los Angeles Times* published a front-page article summarizing the report, public officials and tenant groups maneuvering to address the problem kept the issue alive (Tobar, 1997). Yet in the seven years after the public controversy occurred, the *Los Angeles Times* did not publish one follow-up news story to assess whether, or how well, the municipal government was implementing the code enforcement reforms it adopted in 1997 in response to the blue-ribbon report.

Rarely do the media report about solutions to problems, compounding popular cynicism that such problems are intractable. Rather, the media cover cities primarily as sites of social and economic problems. There are, of course, exceptions to this pattern. The news media run stories that show individual success stories, e.g., mothers who get off welfare and find a job. Their success is typically attributed to their individual character, not public policy. Occasionally the news media report community-level success stories, e.g., a well-run, low-income housing development sponsored by a church or community group. These examples are typically framed as "islands of success in a sea of failure."

Even rarer are stories that highlight systemic policy solutions or that reveal that government policies in other countries have made their cities more livable. Americans who rely primarily on mainstream media for information would hardly know that no other major industrial nation (including Canada) has allowed its cities to face the type of fiscal and social troubles confronting America's cities. Other democratic industrial nations do not permit the level of sheer destitution and decay found in America's cities (Dreier & Bernard, 1992). In terms of such indicators as violent crime, infant mortality, homelessness, poverty, and others, the US is the outlier among OECD nations (Rainwater & Smeeding, 2003). Such stories would demonstrate that our urban problems are neither inevitable nor intractable, but rather a matter of political priorities.

The efforts of poor and working class families to collectively solve problems through grassroots organizing are virtually invisible in the mainstream media unless it involves drama and conflict. Stories about unions, for example, appear primarily during strikes or other episodes of conflict, particularly if they include violence (Martin, 2004; Puette, 1992; Tasini, 1990; Witt, 1999). The work of community organizations like ACORN and the Industrial Areas Foundation network, and their many counterparts in cities around the country, are likewise virtually off the media radar screen unless they engage in dramatic public protests to draw attention to the problems they are organizing around (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003; Reynolds, 2002, 2004).

Reading or viewing the nation's mainstream press over the past decade, for example, you would hardly know that there has been growing momentum at the local level for progressive urban policies. One dramatic example is the growing number of cities (now more than 100) that have adopted living wage laws, a tribute to the alliances between unions, community organizations, and faith-based groups that have emerged in the past decade (Pollin & Luce, 1998; Reynolds, 2002). Local newspapers and TV stations will report on specific living wage battles in their cities but rarely put them in the context of a growing national movement for urban reform and for lifting the working poor out of poverty. Similarly, with a few exceptions, all urban daily newspapers have business pages that report on the ups and downs of financial corporations (interest rates, mergers, new branch openings), but they do not routinely report on the persistent problem of bank redlining (mortgage discrimination) in major cities and metropolitan areas unless local community groups are engaged in public protest. Even then the media frame these protests

as specific battles between a community organization and a particular lender rather than as part of a broader national movement for community reinvestment movement that has made significant progress since the 1980s in changing national laws and corporate banking practices (Dreier, 2003).

Grassroots organizing is seldom dramatic. The news media rarely pay attention to the small miracles that happen when ordinary people join together to channel their frustration and anger into solid organizations that win improvements in workplaces, neighborhoods, and schools. The media are generally more interested in political theater and confrontation—when workers strike, when community activists protest, or when hopeless people resort to rioting. As a result, much of the best organizing work during the last decade has been unheralded in the mainstream press. This silence contributes to public cynicism by failing to show how urban conditions can improve when people organize effectively to pressure business and government to reform institutional practices and policies.

### CONCLUSION

Entman (1994) argues that the ways the news media frame urban and regional matters may be “making urban America less governable, by deepening the chasm of misunderstanding and distrust between blacks and whites” (p. 29). Indeed, in our increasingly diverse metropolitan areas the tendency of the media to frame social issues in primarily racial terms undermines efforts at building bridges across racial and geographic boundaries.

More broadly, the media give their audience of readers and viewers little reason for optimism that ordinary people working together effectively can make a difference, that solutions are within reach, and that public policies can make a significant difference. As a result, what the media report as the public’s apathy or indifference may simply reflect their resignation about the potential for changing the status quo. As Fallows (1997) observes, news coverage of urban affairs conveys the message that “the world being described is inexplicably and uncontrollably perilous” and that “the individual citizen can do nothing at all about the dangers except to avoid any entanglement in them” (p. 199). This kind of reporting is a recipe for public distrust of government and suspicion of policies to improve economic, social, and environmental conditions in our metropolitan areas.

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