

News Coverage of Sexual Offending in New Zealand, 2003

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The objective of this study was to assess the extent and nature of newspaper coverage of sexual offending in New Zealand in 2003. All news stories relating to sexual offending published in three daily newspapers (The New Zealand Herald, The Press, and The Dominion) were coded on a range of variables including article type, topic and frame of article, any reference to treatment, sources quoted in the report, and the type of offence mentioned. Overall there were 377 articles relating to sexual offending in the three newspapers. Most articles were either descriptions of offences/court reports (31.6%) or were related to specific offences or offenders (35.3%), with few articles focusing on either treatment (3.2%) or education and prevention (2.4%). The most frequent source for the articles were police or legal representatives (N=220) with few articles drawing on the comments and opinions of either mental health specialists (N=56) or academics (N=12). Consistent with prior research on crime reporting, there were a disproportionate number of high profile cases covered in the news, with nine cases capturing 22% of the total news coverage on sex offending in New Zealand in 2003. Some implications of these findings for clinicians and academics are discussed.

In a letter to the editor published in *The Press*, Marc Alexander (2003), MP for United Future, advanced the following opinion:

“Rehabilitation of sex offenders is mostly an attempt to remove an inherent part of their personality; and you have as much chance of doing that as removing the flour from a baked cake.”

Alexander clearly believes that the rehabilitation of sex offenders is a futile task. Not everyone might agree with this point of view, and other news coverage of sexual offending might offer a different perspective. However, the kinds of opinions expressed and the way that sexual offending is presented in the mass media are likely to provide one, potentially important, influence

on the public’s attitudes regarding this important social issue.

A standard assumption of research in mass communications is that the media can exert an influence on people’s beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Bryant & Zillmann, 1994). Different individuals, of course, will use media in different ways and media effects will be influenced by the nature of the topic that is being covered (Chapman & Lupton, 1994). However, politicians, policy-makers, and public health advocates alike, recognize the power of the media in shaping public opinion on issues such as voting, the passage of new laws, and the implementation of public health campaigns.

A considerable body of research has been devoted to exploring how the news

media, in particular, can influence social perceptions of reality (see Eveland, 2002; Heath & Gilbert, 1996; Protesse & McCombs, 1991 for reviews). One prominent line of research has explored the “agenda setting” function of the mass media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Through the selection and placement of news stories the public learn about the importance of specific issues. News stories are also “framed” in specific ways (Entman, 1993). Some aspects of the issue may be given more emphasis while others are neglected or ignored. Frames, therefore, can be identified not only by what they might include but also by what is left out from a story or article (Entman, 1993). Frames, according to Entman (1993), not only define the nature of the problem and its causes, but also delineate specific solutions.

Newsmakers do not simply hold up a mirror to the events occurring in the world, and “tell it like it is”. Rather, news stories are best conceptualized as highly crafted artifacts that shape events into a readily digestible format (McCombs, 1994). By framing issues in specific ways, the media can play an important role in influencing not only *what* issues are presented to mass audiences, but also *how* these are perceived, and what importance the public should attach to them (Entman, 1993; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). News is always a “social construction”, rather than a direct transfer of facts to the public (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). The selection of stories for inclusion in the news, and the way that they are framed are

not designed primarily by a desire to inform or educate the public. "News" is carefully selected, displayed, and placed to appeal to readers. Sensational news topics – those that perhaps tap into enduring human concerns and interests (see Davis & McCleod, 2003) – tend to be given greater prominence.

In domains such as crime, where most people have few direct experiences which they can draw on, the media may become an important source of information that can shape subsequent attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours (Barak, 1994). Research suggests that media coverage of crime is often highly distorted. There is an enduring tendency to narrowly focus on the most extreme or atypical crimes, providing a skewed picture of the nature of crime in society (Barak, 1994; Heath & Gilbert, 1996; Surette, 1994). According to Surette (1994), crime in the mass media is portrayed as being predominantly perpetrated by abnormal, predatory individuals who lie beyond the boundaries of the "normal" social world. This focus on individual pathology obscures the social context of crime. Crime news also tends to give prominence to "law and order" agendas and, by focusing predominantly on perpetrators, often eschews discussion of prevention or the social context of crime (Coleman & Thorson, 2002).

News coverage of crime can, potentially, exert an influence on public opinion. For instance, in a longitudinal study, Fan (1996) demonstrated that changes in public opinion regarding drugs as America's most important problem could be explained by the nature and prominence of press coverage on this issue. More generally, exposure to crime news is related to fear of crime in society (e.g., Williams & Dickinson, 1993). For instance, in a recent study, the nature of network news coverage of crime explained four times more variance in public perceptions of crimes as America's most important problem than did actual levels of crime (Lowry, Nio & Leitner, 2003). Research on the influence of news in an experimental context has also demonstrated how the way the news stories are framed can influence particular judgments about the causes and solutions to social problems (e.g., Coleman & Thorson, 2002;

Strange & Leung, 1999). Understanding how criminal activities, such as sexual offending, are presented in the news is, therefore, an important undertaking because this coverage may in turn influence both public opinion and public policy on such crimes.

In his historical analysis of "the child molester" in American society, Jenkins (1998) argues that our perceptions of sex offenders have undergone dramatic changes over the course of the last century. One important factor which has contributed to these changes, Jenkins argues, has been the media. One of the first systematic studies of news coverage of sexual offending was provided by Soothill and Walby (1991). This research sampled news stories published in the British press between 1951 and 1985. The initial focus was on news coverage of rape but this was later expanded to include other sexual offences in the 1980s. Several important themes emerged from this research program. First, news coverage of sex crimes increased dramatically from the 1950s to the 1980s. Second, press coverage tended to converge on a few, extreme cases of sexual offending perpetrated by "sex fiends" or "sex beasts", whereas there was relatively little media interest in less typical or less extreme sexual offences. Third, law and order agendas feature prominently in the press with scant coverage devoted to the social complexities of sexual offending. An increase in the number of newspaper articles devoted to coverage of sexual offending was also found in Northern Ireland between 1985 and 1997 (Greer, 2003). Greer also found that the vast majority of news items focused on specific cases with limited coverage related to issues like prevention or treatment.

In a more recent study, Cheit (2003) analyzed news coverage of child molesters between 1993 and 2001 in a Rhode Island newspaper. This coverage was then compared with a database of actual charges of child molestation in the Rhode Island court system. Cheit found that over 47% of defendants charged in 1992 were mentioned at least once in the press by 2001. As with most studies on crime reporting, more severe charges were more likely to be reported and prominent coverage tended to focus on

bizarre, unusual or extreme cases. News coverage also tended to exaggerate the danger posed by strangers. However, Cheit (2003) did not find any support for the idea of "media hysteria" over child sexual abuse, as suggested by Jenkins (1998).

Several additional studies have also examined newspaper coverage of child abuse in general. Nelson (1991) noted an increase in newspaper coverage of child abuse since the 1950's, as did McDevitt (1996) for the period between 1963 and 1989. It seems that both reports of child abuse and coverage of this issue in the news have increased significantly since the late 1950s, although McDevitt (1996) concluded that there is no evidence of a causal relationship between the two. News coverage of child abuse also appears to be subject to the same kinds of bias that permeate reporting of sexual offending and other crimes. In an analysis of press coverage of child abuse in two Sydney newspapers in 1995, Wilczynski and Sinclair (1999) found that most stories focused on extreme, atypical cases. The focus of coverage was also directed at individual offenders, whereas the social context of child abuse was largely ignored. Law and order agendas again tended to dominate news coverage and little attention was paid to issues of prevention or treatment (Wilczynski & Sinclair, 1999).

Given the potential influence of the news media on public opinion and public policy, and the often highly distorted image of crime offered by newsmakers, analysis of news coverage is an important endeavor. The aim of the present study is to extend previous research by examining newspaper coverage of all types of sexual offending in New Zealand over the course of a calendar year. Specifically, this study aimed to investigate (1) what sort of themes are most prominent in newspaper coverage of sex offending in New Zealand; (2) how sexual offending and sexual offenders are framed in the New Zealand news media; (3) the relative proportion of news articles devoted to specific, high profile cases; and (4) the prevalence of different sources for news articles on sexual offending.

Method

Sample

Most studies of news coverage of sexual offending in particular, and crime in general, have focused on the print media. Although theoretical tradition in media research has emphasized the importance of other media (e.g., McLuhan, 1964), it has been argued that newspapers, rather than television or radio, tend to set the agenda for news stories (Wanda, 1997). Moreover, it is typically the major newspapers in a country that take on the primary agenda setting role (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002). It was decided in this study, therefore, to focus on the print media of the widest circulating New Zealand daily newspapers.

News articles were obtained from Newztext, an online database that includes full text articles from a variety of New Zealand newspapers and magazines. Three daily newspapers – The Christchurch Press, The New Zealand Herald, and the Dominion Post – were selected for inclusion in this study. These newspapers were

selected because they have the highest circulation figures for daily newspapers in New Zealand and therefore provide a good representation of the way the news, in general, is presented in the New Zealand press. The database was searched for all articles published in these newspapers in 2003 using the following key word search string: “Sex offender*” OR “rape*” OR “paedophile” OR “child molester”. In order to obtain articles that were focused primarily on sex offending, for an article to be included in must have contained at least 100 words of text, have at least one full paragraph focused on sexual offending (or sex offenders), and include one other mention of sexual offending. This search strategy yielded a total of 377 articles over the course of 2003.

Procedure and Measures

Coding procedures were developed and refined by the authors. An initial coding framework was designed based on a priori knowledge of the content area and to address the specific research objectives outlined in the introduction.

Both authors then read a sample of 20 articles and this coding framework was further refined as additional coding categories were included until no new categories emerged (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine & Newbold, 1998). The authors and an additional coder then coded the rest of the sample. Members of the coding team coded a random sample of 20 articles and inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen’s K index. The median value of K across coded variables was 0.86 (range 0.69 to 1.0). Thus, an acceptable level of agreement between coders was established.

Articles were coded for a range of attributes (Table 1). These included descriptive variables such as article date, newspaper name, and article type. The one main theme or topic of the article was also coded, based on eight separate categories including description of an offence or court report, legislation, and treatment/rehabilitation. This coding framework was developed to include both specific categories of interest in this study, such as treatment/rehabilitation and

Table 1. List of Coded Variables

Variables	Definition
Date of publication	Day, month, and year of the publication of the article
Newspaper name	Name of the newspaper from which the article was obtained
Article type	(1) News article (factual accounts of issues and events); (2) Editorial (a column stating the opinion of the newspaper); (3) Letter to the editor; (4) Column or opinion piece (comment with a strong opinion on the issue); (5) Other
Article topic	Article coded for one of eight dominant themes: (1) Description of an offence or a court report; (2) Legislation (all articles that primarily focus on existing, new, or proposed laws relating to sex offending); (3) Treatment/rehabilitation; (4) Education/prevention; (5) Victim issues (all articles that primarily focus on issues relating to the victim(s) of sex offending); (6) Offence/Offender related (articles that describe offences or offenders but not focused on the offence per se – e.g., articles relating to parole, sentencing issues, blame allocated for reoffending); (7) Pornography (all articles primarily focused on pornography, including child and internet pornography); (8) Sexual offending and the church; (9) Other
Article frame	Articles coded for up to two main frames (see Table 2 for further detail): (1) A call for law and order; (2) Moral opprobrium; (3) Saving society; (4) Redemption is possible; (5) Civil liberties; (6) The unredeemable; (7) A balanced point of view; (8) Someone’s to blame; (9) Straight reporting; (10) Other
Treatment	Coded “yes” if there is any mention of treatment or rehabilitation
Treatment slant	Coded for the perspective offered on treatment: (1) Treatment can and does work; (2) Treatment doesn’t work; (3) Neutral or mixed with regards to treatment
Source of report	Each article was coded (“yes” or “no”) for each of the following sources: Police/legal representatives; government or government agency; the victim or family of the victim; the offender; other members of the public; academics; psychologists or other mental health professionals; other.
Type of offence	The type of offence or offences mentioned in each article were coded: (1) sexual offending against adults (age 16 and over); Sexual offending against children (under 16); Sexual offending against children under the age of 12; Other

education/prevention, and to provide an accurate description of the topics relating to sexual offending presented in the print news media in New Zealand in 2003. In addition, each article was coded for up to two unique frames. A frame is a specific way of approaching or examining a given issue that often reflects specific moral or political concerns. As outlined by Entman (1993), frames are typically organized around a series of questions: How is the problem defined? What are the causes of the problem? How is the problem evaluated in moral terms? What solutions to the problem are suggested? A list of 11 frames was developed and employed in this study (Table 2).

The main aim of this analysis was to explore the different viewpoints on sexual offending expressed in the news media. It could be argued that the content of all news articles reflect decisions about what information to include or exclude and that such decisions form part of the subjective construction of news. However, we limited our analysis to more overt viewpoints including a category "straight reporting" to capture news articles in which no obvious view point was expressed. Each article was also coded as to whether there was any mention of treatment and, if there was, what perspective on treatment was offered. The content of a news

article and the position that it might seem to advance can also depend on the source that the journalist draws on. Each article was therefore coded for the source of the report. Finally, the type of offence mentioned in the article was coded, allowing for the coding of more than one type of offending (Table 1).

Results

Over the course of 2003, a total of 377 articles focused on sexual offending were published in The New Zealand Herald (N = 82), The Christchurch Press (N = 146) and The Dominion Post (N = 149). This represents an average of 31 articles per month, or just over an article every day. As can be seen from Figure 1, however, there was considerable variation in the volume of coverage each month, from a peak of 64 in June to a low of 16 in February. News articles were the most frequent type of article, comprising 89% of total coverage (N = 334), followed by letters (N = 21), columns and opinion pieces (N = 13), and editorials (N = 9). As depicted in Table 3, the majority of articles were either descriptions of offences or court reports (N = 119), or relating to offences or offenders (N = 133). Articles relating to legislation (N = 34) and victim issues (N = 28) were the next most frequent, with few articles focused on treatment (N = 12) or education/prevention (N = 9).

Most newspaper reports were either straightforward descriptions of the facts and/or the information was presented in a balanced fashion. Thus, the vast majority of articles were coded for the frame of "straight reporting" (N = 276). Of the remaining articles, 'law and order' was the most prominent frame (N = 36), followed by 'other' (N = 24), 'saving society' (N = 23) and 'someone's to blame' (N = 19) (see Table 2). Of the 377 articles, 18% (N = 67) made some mention of treatment or rehabilitation. Of these articles, 31% (N = 20) expressed the perspective that treatment often works, 17% (N = 11), indicated that treatment rarely works, and 52% (N = 33) were either neutral or mixed in their perspective on treatment. As illustrated in Table 4, the most frequent source for the articles was police or legal representatives (N = 220), followed by the government (N = 164), with relatively few articles drawing on the comments and opinions of either mental health specialists (N = 56) or academics (N = 12).

Of the 377 articles, 39% were related to sex offences against adults, 36% were related to sex offences against individuals under the age of 16, 30% were related to offences against children under the age of 12, 3% were related to other offences, and 19% did not specify the type of offence (note: these figures do not add up to 100% because an article might make

Table 2. Descriptions and numbers of article frames

Frame label	Description	Number [†]	%
Straight reporting	No obvious perspective put forth; a plain description of the facts. This included articles with an equivalent balance of different points of view	276	66.3
A call for law and order	We need stricter, more punitive, more controlling measures for sex offenders	36	8.8
Other	Any opinionated perspective that does not fit into the above categories	24	5.9
Saving society	The most important issue is to protect innocent people (especially children) from sex offenders	23	5.5
Someone's to blame	Someone has made a mistake (e.g., in allowing sex offenders free unmonitored)	19	4.8
Redemption is possible	Sex offenders can and should be treated; rehabilitation is possible	14	2.6
A balanced view	We need to take a balanced perspective on sexual offending	9	2.1
Civil liberties	Legislation directed at sex offenders should not ignore issues of individual rights and freedom	7	1.7
Moral opprobrium	Sex offenders are morally degenerate, sexual predators who deserve whatever punishment is meted out to them	5	1.2
Total		413	100

[†] Because each article could be coded for up to a maximum of two different frames the number of frames exceeds the number of articles (N = 377)

mention of multiple offences). Many of the articles focused on a relatively small number of high profile cases. A list of cases that received 5 or more mentions is provided in Table 5. These cases represented 22% of the total news coverage on sex offending in the three newspapers in 2003.

Discussion

The results of this study provide the first systematic study of news coverage of sexual offending in New Zealand. Overall, there were 377 articles relating to sexual offending in the three New Zealand newspapers. Given circulation

and readership rates, this represents an average of about 1 million individuals potentially exposed to such articles in New Zealand every day. The vast majority of coverage related to actual sexual offences – either court reports or articles relating to specific sexual offenders or sexual offences. Other prominent topics include legislation, victim issues, and pornography, with little coverage of prevention or treatment. This finding largely mirrors the results of Greer’s (2003) analysis of press coverage of sexual offending in Northern Ireland with the vast majority of coverage devoted to specific cases or crimes, rather than the issues surrounding sexual offending.

Most of the news articles in the present study provided a straightforward description of the facts without the issues being framed in specific ways. However, in accord with previous research on crime (e.g., Surette, 1994), law and order frames and concerns over public safety tended to be most prominent, with comparatively less attention directed at rehabilitation or the context of offending. However, when treatment was mentioned, favourable views were more often expressed than unfavourable views, suggesting that there is a diversity of viewpoints of this issue, represented in the New Zealand press. Although the majority of articles did not contain explicit “points of view” regarding sexual offending in New Zealand, it can be argued that even news articles that are restricted to describing particular events or court cases represent decisions about what specific information to include or exclude. For example, whether a court report mentions the fine-grained details of the crime or the criminal history of the defendant may influence perceptions of sexual offending. [1] The results of this study, however, do not allow a specific evaluation of this suggestion and future research might fruitfully explore the way that journalists and editors act as “gatekeepers” in making decisions about the inclusion of material in news articles related to sexual offending (e.g., see Clayman & Reisner, 1998).

One method of exploring some of the more implicit ways that news stories are constructed is to examine the primary sources quoted in news

Figure 1. Number of newspaper articles on sex offending by month, 2003

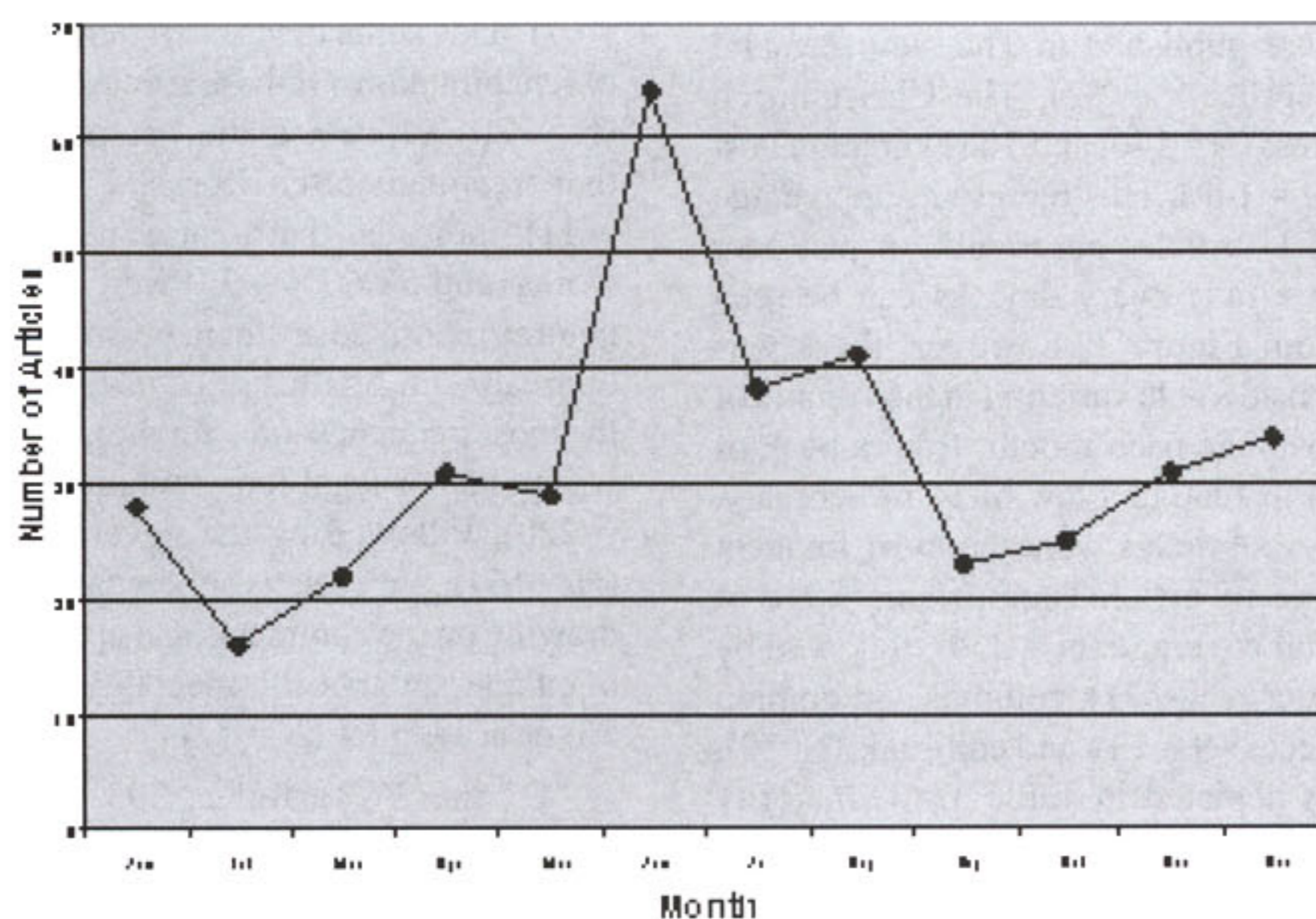


Table 3. The number and percentage of articles for each topic

Topic	Number	%
Offence/Offender related	133	35.3
Description of an offence/court report	119	31.6
Legislation	34	9.0
Victim issues	28	7.4
Pornography	19	5.0
Other	13	3.4
Treatment/rehabilitation	12	3.2
Sexual offending and the church	9	2.4
Education and prevention	9	2.4
Total	377	100

Table 4. The number and percentage of articles that use each source of information

Source	Number	%
Police/legal representatives	220	58.4
Government	164	43.5
Victim/Family of victim	57	15.1
Offender	69	18.3
Other	87	23.1
Mental health specialist	56	14.9
Academic	12	3.2

articles as the source used can influence the ideas and opinions expressed in important ways (e.g., Marsh, 1991; Wilczynski & Sinclair, 1999). For example, Marsh (1991) states that although court proceedings in the United States are always two-sided, newspapers tend to report only the victim's side of a story. As suggested by Marsh, there is often a "mutually rewarding relationship" between reporters and those involved in law enforcement. The results of the present study suggest that individuals within the legal system – police, lawyers, judges – are the most common source for news articles on sexual offending, with little input from mental health professionals or academics. Although this is perhaps not surprising given the preponderance of court reports in the sample, it does mean that criminal justice issues are likely to be much more salient than those concerned with mental health issues and the rehabilitation of sexual offenders.

Commensurate with most research on crime reporting (e.g. Heath & Gilbert, 1996; Surette, 1994), there were a disproportionate number of high profile cases covered in the news media found in this study. Nine specific cases captured over a fifth of all news coverage in New Zealand in 2003. Media coverage of these cases tends to provide a distorted image of the nature of crime in society. The media "face" of sexual offending in New Zealand is thus represented by individuals like Barry

Ryder. Ryder received significant press coverage in 1993 when a psychiatric nurse, at Lake Alice Hospital (where Ryder was confined at the time) warned that Ryder was too dangerous to be released into the community. Ryder was at that time confined for attempting to rape and strangle two boys. Soon after Ryder's release into the community he kidnapped a boy and attempted to sexually violate him at knifepoint. Ryder was then convicted and jailed for nine years but was paroled in 2001. During his parole period he offended again and when he was caught he admitted to various charges including two charges of indecent assault on boys under 12, one charge of unlawful sexual connection with a boy and one charge of unlawful possession of an offensive weapon. Ryder is now serving a sentence of preventive detention and will probably be permanently detained. ("Ryder's parole history," *The Press*, p. 11, 14 March 2003).

Past research has found that one of the most important factors that predicts the prominence of crime stories in newspapers is the number of individuals affected by the crime (e.g., Chermak, 1998). The results of the present study are consistent with this research: the cases given the most prominence, such as those of Barry Ryder, Peter Ellis, and Pitcairn Islanders all involved multiple victims. One of the implications of this tendency to provide more extended coverage of crimes involving multiple

victims is that the sort of offender most commonly presented to the public is one whose offending is widespread and recidivist, thereby contributing to the public conception that those who commit sexual crimes are typically repeat offenders.

In terms of this article it is difficult to avoid exhibiting a similar bias, wherein only the cases at the more severe end of the spectrum are discussed. This is in part because it is these cases that have the most newspaper coverage (or, indeed, any newspaper coverage at all) and therefore can be described more thoroughly. For example, it is not possible to describe other cases with the same degree of detail because they are less likely to be reported, and if they are reported they are less likely to be described in a detailed manner. Although it is important to recognize that all sexual offending may cause significant harm and distress to victims, there is a spectrum of such offences with those involving extreme harm and multiple victims overrepresented in the news media.

Implications and direction for future research

It is important to recognize that public policy may be influenced by the nature and extent of news coverage – both directly, and via public opinion. Media attention may signal to policy makers the importance or urgency of specific social issues. Policy-makers are also

Table 5. High profile cases or issues

Case	N of articles	Description
Peter Ellis	19	Imprisoned for 10 years for 16 offences against young children in the 1990s.
Barry Ryder	17	Repeat child sexual offender. Now serving a sentence of preventative detention, after re-offending when paroled in 2001.
Pitcairn Island	8	Charges of multiple sexual offences against Pitcairn Islanders.
Nicholas Reekie	8	Repeat sex offender, sentenced to preventative detention in July 2003 for the rape of an 11-year-old girl and three other women.
Coddington directory	7	Proposed national register to keep track of convicted sex offenders.
Michael Carroll	7	Repeat sex offender, sentenced to preventive detention on three counts of rape and abduction in 1988, paroled in February, 2003.
Peter Hollingworth	6	Australian Governor General who resigned in 2003 over claims that he failed to deal properly with child sex offending in the Church.
Mogan Fahey	5	Christchurch doctor imprisoned on 13 charges of sexual assault against women in 2000, paroled in 2003.
Lloyd McIntosh	5	Convicted of multiple sexual offences in 1993. Released in 2003 and then convicted of another sexual assault and sentenced to 18 months.
Total	82	

clearly sensitive to how social issues such as sex offending are viewed by the public, whose attitudes in turn may be shaped by the media. The relations between mass media, public opinion and public policy, however, should be viewed as reciprocal: the media both reflects and shapes public opinion; public policy is both reported on and informed by the media; public attitudes both influence and are influenced by public policy. There is little research that has explicitly explored the relationship between news coverage and public policy. However, one of the primary objectives of concerted media advocacy efforts is to influence public policy in specific ways. Advocacy efforts in public health are directed at shaping the presentation of issues in the news media in ways that best advance specific objectives (Chapman & Lupton, 1994). For instance, the role of tobacco control advocacy in influencing public policy and, ultimately, in reducing the burden of tobacco mortality are well recognized (e.g., Chapman & Wakefield, 2001).

This example highlights the importance of the relationship between researchers and the news media. It is important because in many fields of research the news media provide the primary means by which information about findings is made available to the general public. In the area of criminal psychology there is a significant body of research which has explored issues such as recidivism risk and treatment efficacy for various types of offending. However, this information is seldom the focus of newspaper articles. In the present study only about three percent of articles focused on treatment and only three percent used academics as a source of information. This highlights the need for a re-examination of the relationship between science and the media. This relationship is, however, fraught with difficulty, although many of these difficulties arise from inexperience and could easily be resolved (e.g. Corfield, 2003; Gascoigne & Metcalfe, 1997). For example, evidence suggests that inexperienced scientists tend to mistrust the media and avoid any contact with journalists, whereas those who have had media training, or gained experience first hand from ongoing interaction with the media, tend to be more positive about the

role of media in disseminating scientific information (Gascoigne & Metcalfe, 1997). Accordingly Gascoigne and colleague point out the value of media training for scientists.

Corfield (2003) suggests that "The media views tertiary education centres as ivory towers, the scientists inside practicing their trade as a lofty ideal, the pursuit and the implications of the science of no immediate concern to the citizens below." Of course the ivory tower concept has a long history and one can imagine how this sort of perception might impact on the likelihood that a journalist would be at ease communicating with an academic. It would appear, then, that the misconceptions run in both directions, thereby setting the scene for problematic interactions (Dorfman, 2003). The responsibility lies, therefore, with both the media and with scientists, to create opportunities for the flow of information. Perhaps as a starting point academics need to be more constructive in their responses to the media and the media need to be open to communicating with academics. In the context of this discussion it seems that there is a specific need for academics to become more engaged in media advocacy efforts to provide more balanced views on sexual offending in the New Zealand media.

As a final point, the media may also influence those individuals who are specifically involved in the highlighted domain. News coverage of sex offending, for instance, may impact either directly or indirectly on both sex offenders and clinicians' perceptions of sexual offending. This may, in turn, influence treatment outcomes. Winick (1998), for example, has argued that new legislation directed at sex offenders may have anti-therapeutic consequences. The implementation of new laws in the United States, in which sex offenders may be detained indefinitely after completion of their sentences and have to register with law enforcement agencies for the rest of their lives, sends a clear message to sex offenders and the general public: sex offenders are unlikely to change. Such views are likely to undermine primary treatment objectives (e.g., see Trivits & Repucci, 2002). If sex offenders believe that

they are unable to change, then change will be more difficult to achieve. In this way, re-offending may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The introduction of new legislation relating to sex offenders – for example, preventive detention and extended supervision, both of which have been recently introduced in New Zealand – may, if experiences elsewhere are a guide, potentially undermine therapeutic interventions (see Simon, 1998; Trivits & Repucci, 2002). Hence, arguably it is also very important for clinicians to engage with the media with the goal of informing the general public about the impact of legislation on treatment initiatives.

Clearly reducing the prevalence of sexual offending is a challenging task, but arguably efforts are best directed at education, prevention, and treatment rather than the introduction of more punitive measures. Future research needs to elucidate the complex causal relations that obtain between media coverage of sexual offending, public opinion, public policy, and treatment outcomes in order to keep the public adequately informed. Analyses of different forms of media, such as television and radio, and of the way that sexual offending may be differently represented in local and national news coverage would also enrich our understanding of how the media covers this issue. Accurate information is the starting point for balanced, reasoned views, and these in turn, are the platform for the development of appropriate judicial responses to sexual offending.

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