POLICING 2020:

Local news reporting during a year of racial justice protests

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary

In 2020, racial justice took center stage in U.S. public discourse as massive numbers of people took to the streets to protest police brutality and systemic racism in policing and in American society more broadly. Triggered by the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020, the protests demanded accountability for Floyd's death and for the many other Black people killed by police. In this context, many news organizations were confronted with their own history of institutionalized racism, including scrutiny around how newsrooms cover policing, race, and communities of color.

This study explores whether and how the heightened public discourse on racial justice potentially influenced reporting on policing in 2020. Based on a content analysis of a full year's coverage of policing by the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* – each of which witnessed a local high-profile case of police killing a Black person in 2020 – we assess how sourcing practices, portrayals of the police and civilians, and the presence of contextual information help shape readers' understanding of policing. Key findings are summarized below.

Sourcing

Sourcing practices that privilege police sources: Contrary to concerns that newsrooms frequently privilege police sources, we found a relatively small proportion of stories about policing in the three newspapers we studied used single-source reporting that relied exclusively on police sources (7-23%) – and even fewer featured a police source in the headline (3-11%). *The Philadelphia Inquirer* was the mostly likely of the three newspapers to use police-only sourcing.

Relative presence of police sources compared to other sources: Even if it was relatively uncommon for the newspapers to rely *exclusively* on the police as a source or to cite them in the headline, in two of the three newspapers the police still appeared in more stories than community-based voices such as victims of local crime, civilians harmed by police, and community-focused organizations. This heavy use of police sources relative to other sources was particularly evident in local crime stories. More inclusive sourcing practices were used in stories about police conduct, accountability, reforms, and protests – particularly during the period following Floyd's death.

Portrayals of Civilians

Dehumanizing language: Dehumanizing language used to describe civilians targeted by the police – such as *suspect*, *juvenile*, and *offender* – appeared in a relatively small proportion of stories in the three newspapers (19-26%). While we observed little change over time in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, the other two newspapers became less likely to use this language during the period following Floyd's death.

Criminalizing information: Portrayals of civilians who were seriously injured or harmed by police were more likely to include "criminalizing" information (for example, by mentioning a prior arrest record or describing the person's threatening behavior) as opposed to "humanizing" information (for example, by describing the person's relationships with loved ones and details about their life).

Delegitimizing frames to portray protesters: Across the three newspapers, a substantial majority (66-82%) of stories about the protests portrayed protesters as posing a threat to property, to police officers, and to other civilians – far exceeding the proportion of stories that mentioned protesters harmed by the police department's use of tear gas, rubber bullets, and other forms of force (24-36%). This lopsided portrayal is consistent with prior research documenting the use of delegitimizing frames in coverage of protests against racism and police violence.

Portrayals of Police

Distancing language: Coverage of police violence has been criticized for using "distancing" language to euphemistically describe police use of force, such as "officer-involved shooting" or "discharged weapon." However, this practice was rare in these three newspapers' stories about policing (less than 10%), both before and after Floyd's death.

Information challenging the police: Coverage of policing frequently included sources or information that questioned or criticized police practices or police conduct, suggesting that portrayals of the police often incorporated a challenge to the police narrative. The clear exception to this pattern was in the subset of stories on local crime, which more rarely included such information. All three newspapers became more likely to include information challenging the police during the period following Floyd's death.

Information about police accountability: Coverage of policing became somewhat more likely to mention information about police accountability for their conduct over the course of 2020, reflecting the heightened public attention to police accountability for harming civilians prompted by the viral video of Floyd's death and the ensuing protests. However, when we examined stories that specifically mentioned a civilian seriously injured or harmed by the police, we found that only about half these stories in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* included any information about police accountability (compared to 80% in the *Louisville Courier-Journal*), suggesting that this connection between police violence and police accountability was often missing in these two newspapers.

Context

References to issues of racial justice or injustice: Information about issues of racial justice can help contextualize – and legitimize – calls for police accountability and reform. Looking across the full year of coverage of policing, references to racial justice increased in all three newspapers during the period following Floyd's death – both reflecting and contributing to heightened public attention to racism in policing and in society more broadly. In covering the protests specifically, the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and *Philadelphia Inquirer* usually included at least brief references to racial justice or injustice, helping to provide this context. This was less common in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune's* protest stories, which frequently omitted any reference to racial justice as context for protesters' demands.

Explanation of the policy implications of "defund the police": In all three newspapers, there was relatively little substantive information about the policy implications of "defund the police" – one of the most salient rallying cries of the protests. Only a small minority of stories that mentioned reform explained what "defunding the police" could look like in policy or budgetary terms, suggesting that readers often lacked contextual details about what calls to "defund the police" might mean.

Implications

Source diversity: Newsrooms have an opportunity to build on the more inclusive sourcing practices used in their coverage of police conduct, accountability, reforms, and protests, bringing this wider set of perspectives to their local crime reporting. Reporters need to be given space to prioritize diverse sourcing practices that construct a more complete narrative. This includes making community-based voices more of a norm rather than an exception in local crime reporting.

Attributions of responsibility: Stories that involve police use of force convey a narrative about who is responsible for triggering that use of force and for any harm that occurs as a result. For example, information that portrays civilians as threatening helps shift responsibility away from the police, whereas information that questions police conduct helps shift responsibility towards the police. Contextual information can further deepen readers'

understanding of attributions of responsibility – for example by pointing to systemic factors like racism that may inform interactions between the police and civilians. Attributions of responsibility can be usefully nuanced by considering the balance of information that shifts responsibility towards the police vs. towards civilians.

Legitimacy of the status quo versus demands for change: News coverage can serve to legitimize the status quo or legitimize demands for the status quo to change, depending on which sources and which pieces of information or context are included (or omitted) in a given story. For example, while long-established traditions in protest coverage may pressure news organizations to focus on property damage, this can help delegitimize protesters' calls for police reforms. The status quo can also be upheld through omission of information about police accountability for killing or injuring civilians (including harming protesters), helping to legitimize current police practices. Conversely, calls for change can be legitimized through sources who explain the racial justice context for why police reforms are needed. This kind of contextual reference point also shifts the focus from the actions of a few individual police officers, orienting attention to institutional and cultural problems that require large-scale policy solutions.

Protests as a causal mechanism for change: Information about the impact of protests emerged as a recurring theme in coverage of policing. We encourage further exploration of whether and how reporting contributes to a deeper understanding and amplification of the value and impact of public protests as a mechanism for social, political, and policy change.

Introduction

On May 25, 2020, an eyewitness video captured Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin murdering George Floyd, an unarmed Black man. The video came amidst rising public outrage over two previous extra-judicial killings of African Americans: in February 2020, Ahmaud Arbery had been killed by Travis McMichael in Glynn County, Georgia, and in March 2020, Breonna Taylor was killed by Louisville police officers Jonathan Mattingly, Brett Hankinson, and Myles Cosgrove. The May 2020 video of Floyd's murder went viral, prompting massive Black Lives Matter protests against police violence and systemic racism across the US and internationally. In the month that followed, millions of Americans participated in an estimated 4,700 protests, demanding police accountability for Floyd's death and the many other Black Americans harmed by police violence.[1] Protests continued into the summer and beyond, keeping a spotlight on racial justice and calls to confront systemic racism in policing and in American institutions and society more broadly.

In this context, many news media outlets faced their own "racial reckoning," as journalists of color drew attention to a lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion in American newsrooms, their experiences with institutionalized racism, and problems with how reporters cover race and communities of color. [2] Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Wesley Lowery called out the mainstream media's "neutral objectivity" model of journalism for producing coverage of policing that privileges the police department's perspective, while failing to gather the perspectives of those who are harmed by the police, especially in communities of color. [3] The violent response by some police departments to the racial justice protests fueled further scrutiny of how reporters cover policing and use the police as sources. [4]

Using content analysis of a full year of coverage from three local newspapers in three cities, this study assesses which claims about the coverage of policing and protests in 2020 are supported by data. Most importantly, the study offers insights into whether, how, and to what extent the heightened public discourse on racial justice potentially influenced reporting on policing by drawing attention to police violence and the connections between policing and systemic racism. Over the course of 2020, did newsrooms change their practices when reporting on stories involving the police? As newsrooms turned to cover the protests, debates about police reform, and issues of police accountability, whose perspectives were included? What information was included (or excluded) to help shape readers' understanding of the police and their interactions with civilians, not only in the context of high-profile examples of police violence and protests, but also in more "routine" coverage of local crime?

This report examines key characteristics of news stories that speak to these questions about how the three newspapers covered policing in their respective cities over the course of 2020. We begin with a summary of our key research questions and the research design. In our presentation of findings, we first review the overarching patterns from across the three newspapers, followed by a summary of city-specific findings. The report concludes by considering the implications of the findings for newsroom practices going forward.
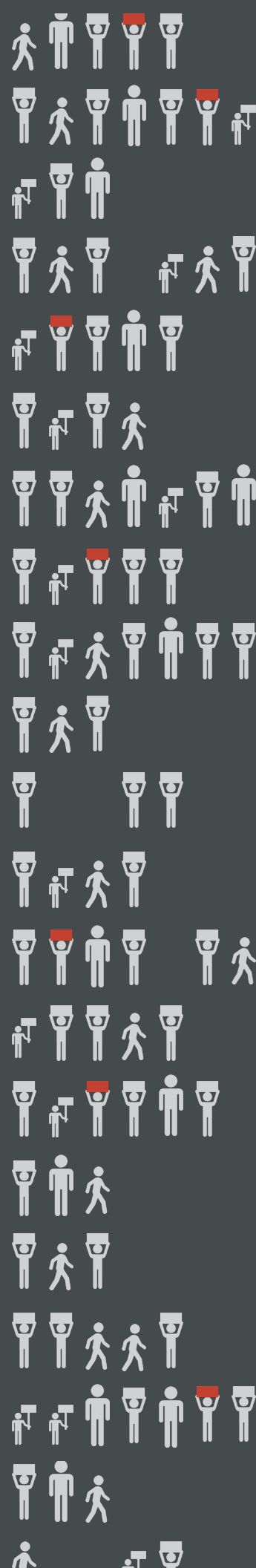
Research Questions

RQ1. Which sources were included in coverage of policing – and to what extent is there evidence of change over the course of the year?

Local crime reporting has been criticized for its heavy reliance on official sources, including breaking news crime reports that describe what happened based on police sources, police press releases, and news conferences.[5] Failure to follow up beyond the initial report based on police accounts – for example, to talk to other people involved in or affected by the incident, to correct the police account, or to report that a person was exonerated or charges were dropped – can have real consequences for civilians named as suspects in local crime stories.[6] Very brief digital stories about local crime convey a few details from the police report, and relay the police department's request for people to call if they have any information – without further sourcing or context.[7]

Beyond crime reporting, sourcing disparities appear in other types of stories about policing. For example, a study of news media outlets' social media posts about cases of police violence showed that police or official sources were more likely to be included than sources advocating for the civilian harmed by police.[8] And a recent study of Philadelphia local news coverage of the 2020 protests against police brutality and racial injustice found that law enforcement or government officials were more than twice as likely to be directly quoted than protesters.[9]

To assess the presence of police sources relative to other sources, our analysis first examines how often coverage of policing privileged police sources – either by quoting or paraphrasing the police in the headline or by drawing exclusively on police sources within the body of the story (i.e., single-sourcing). We then consider the relative presence of different sources in coverage of policing by comparing the percentage of stories that cited the police versus the percentage that cited other types of sources. To assess whether and how sourcing practices may have been influenced by the heightened attention to racial justice and police violence in 2020, we look for any evidence of change over time, particularly following the protests trigged by Floyd's death.

RQ2. How did newsrooms portray civilians in their interactions with police – and to what extent is there evidence of change in these portrayals over the course of the year?

In coverage of policing, the inclusion (or omission) of certain pieces of information determines what the public learns about civilians who have interacted with the police. This includes civilians who came into contact with police in the context of crime investigations or emergency response, as well as civilians who interact with the police in other contexts involving public safety, such as during protests.

One dimension of our analysis of civilian portrayals is the news media's use of dehumanizing language. Examples of this include referring to children and teenagers as "juveniles" and describing civilians whom the police are targeting in their investigation as "suspects" or "offenders." This is one form of "copspeak" – language that police departments routinely use and reporters often mirror in their crime stories. Such language is dehumanizing because it portrays an individual as defined entirely by criminality, regardless of whether they have been convicted of a crime.[10]

Our analysis of civilian portrayals also examines how news media portray civilians who have been seriously injured or harmed by police. One study found that a majority of stories about police violence included "expurgation of the victim" – such as mentioning the person's prior criminal history or derogating the person.[11] By contrast, only a quarter of the stories contained language that praised or humanized the person, for example by describing their positive personal characteristics. Another study examining language used by the media to describe Black men killed

by police found a pattern of "demonization and criminalization," such as including information about prior arrests or convictions, describing a threatening appearance or behavior, and other associations with criminality.[12] These kinds of portrayals can serve to "justify" police use of force, including incidents of police brutality. We explore the relative balance of information that "criminalizes" versus information that "humanizes" civilians who were seriously injured or killed by the police.

In the context of protest coverage, research indicates that protesters advocating against racism and police violence are also framed in negative ways. For example, one study found that rioting and violence were most frequently used to frame protests against anti-Black racism.[13] Another study, focusing on coverage of Michael Brown's killing by police, revealed that stories emphasized the threat posed by protesters, acts of vandalism, and property damage. This kind of "delegitimizing frame" focused on protester "deviancy" was much more common than legitimizing frames that offered more neutral or positive references to protesters' demands.[14] We examine the extent to which protest coverage portrays protesters of police violence as a threat.

RQ3. How did newsrooms portray police practices and their consequences – and to what extent is there evidence of change in these portrayals over the course of the year?

One important element of police portrayals is the use of "distancing" language when describing police use of force. Examples include using phrases such as "officer-involved shooting" to describe incidents where the police shoot a civilian, or adopting "copspeak" such as "deploying" tear gas or "discharging" weapons to describe police use of violent force.[15] This kind of language creates distance between the police and the harm inflicted on civilians by police use of force. Research on news coverage of deadly police violence suggests that use of euphemisms for lethal police actions is relatively common.[16]

Another key component of police portrayals is the inclusion (or omission) of information that questions, challenges, or criticizes police practices or police conduct. This kind of information can serve as a "repudiation" of the police by questioning the rationality or legality of police actions.[17] It can also help frame police use of force as unfair, inappropriate, or excessive, and assign responsibility to the police for situations in which civilians are harmed or killed.[18]

Responsibility for the consequences of police actions is also conveyed in information about police accountability. For example, when covering an incident of police violence, news stories may include (or omit) information about investigations into police (mis)conduct, the release of body camera footage, or disciplinary or legal action taken against officers who engaged in misconduct. This kind of information does not necessarily assign *blame* to police officers, but it can help draw attention to the question of *whether* the police acted appropriately in situations where civilians were harmed – and serve as a signal that interrogating police use of force is warranted. This helps convey the idea that the police are to be held accountable for their actions and that use of force is not always justified.

Our analysis examines these three aspects of police portrayals: distancing language, information that challenges the police, and information about the police being held accountable for their conduct.

RQ4. To what extent did newsrooms contextualize issues of police accountability and reform?

This final research question assesses whether coverage included key pieces of information that could help contextualize the protests against police violence and debates about police reform. Research has shown that news coverage often relies more heavily on episodic frames focused on discrete events and individualistic attributions of responsibility, as opposed to thematic frames that focus on trends over time and attribute problems to societal conditions.[19] Within coverage of police violence in particular, prior research suggests that episodic frames focusing

solely on the specific incident appear far more frequently than thematic frames that place the incidents in the context of larger debates (e.g., about racism in policing or police brutality).[20] This same pattern was observed in local news coverage of the 2020 racial justice protests in Philadelphia as well.[21] A broader study of how the media covers race and racism found that most news coverage is not "systemically aware" – meaning that it tends to focus on individual-level racism, as opposed to system-level racism.[22] As the study's authors note, even including terms such as *institutional racism*, *systemic racism*, or *racial justice* can help "lay the groundwork for a more productive discourse on race and racism precisely because the discussions are less tied to particular individuals."

The inclusion of such contextualizing information is important for helping to explain – and legitimize – calls for police accountability and police reform. Our analysis examines how often the coverage mentioned racism, racial discrimination, or racial justice as context for why people were pushing for change.

We also assess the inclusion of contextual information about the slogan "defund the police," which became a rallying cry for some protesters and supporters of police reform. This slogan, by itself, does not convey a clear idea of what "defunding the police" might entail at a policy or budgetary level. Yet supporters did articulate specific reforms, such as shifting funding from police departments to social services, recreational centers, trauma centers, or forgivable loans for Black-owned businesses, and reallocating funding away from police and toward community-based models of safety, support, and prevention. We explore the extent to which stories helped legitimize calls to defund the police by providing context about what this would look like in terms of policies, practices, or budgets.

Methodology

To explore the four research questions, we conducted a content analysis of reporting in three cities in which there was a high-profile case of police officers killing a Black person in 2020: Minneapolis (George Floyd), Louisville (Breonna Taylor), and Philadelphia (Walter Wallace).[23] Our analysis focused on the mainstream "paper of record" in each city: the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. This selection of newspapers enabled us to examine how prominent local mainstream print outlets covered local policing during a year that included a high-profile police killing within the newspaper's own city, as well as extensive demonstrations and public debate about police accountability and reform.

Scope of coverage and sampling

The study's examination of coverage of policing encompasses multiple contexts in which the police or police practices appear in the news. This includes local crime reporting, which covers the police response to robberies, shootings, and other violent and non-violent local crimes, as well as broader stories about local crime prevention strategies and crime rates. Coverage of policing also includes stories about specific cases of police (mis)conduct – including instances when civilians and/or police officers are harmed – as well as debates over police reforms or budgets, and the widespread protests against police violence in 2020.

To identify relevant articles, we conducted Boolean searches in Nexis and ProQuest (using the keywords *police*, *law enforcement*, and *cops*) and then manually reviewed the search results and removed irrelevant articles (e.g., stories about national or international crime, stories that did not include a substantial focus on policing, and opinion pieces).[24] Based on the resulting population of relevant articles for each newspaper, we selected a random sample: 305 of the 1115 *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* articles (27%); 250 of the 700 *Louisville Courier-Journal* articles (36%); and 275 of the 932 the *Philadelphia Inquirer* articles (29%) – for a total sample of 830 articles across the three newspapers.

The sampling procedure yielded a distribution across the 12-month period that mirrored the broader population of stories. The roughly 7-month period following Floyd's death (May 25-December 31) comprises just under three-quarters of the sample (73%), reflecting the increased volume of stories covering the high-profile cases of police killing civilians, the protests, and debates about police reform **(Figure 1)**.

Figure 1

Sampling details: Total number of stories per newspaper and distribution of stories relative to George Floyd's death.

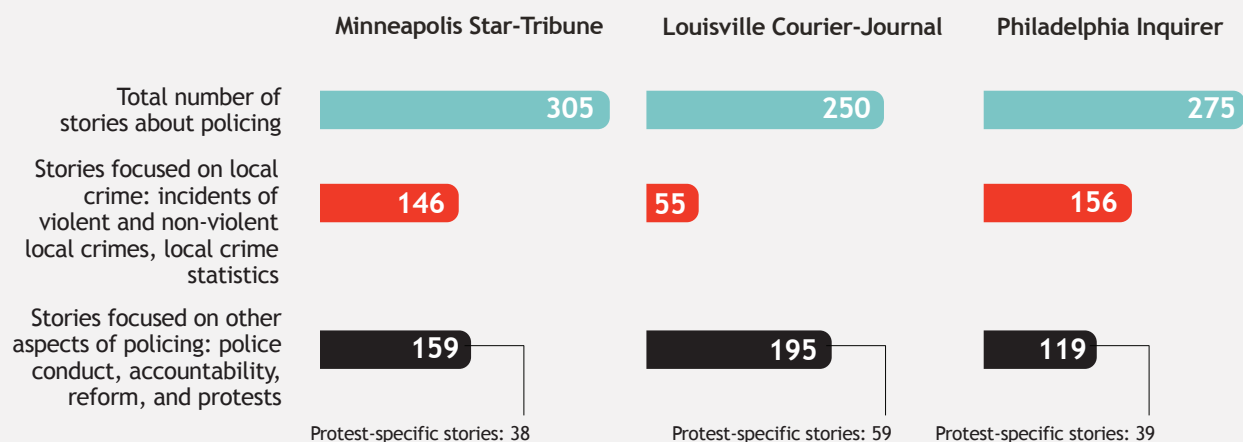| Before Floyd's death (Jan. 1 - May 24, 2020)		After Floyd's death (May 25 - Dec. 31, 2020)
82	**Minneapolis Star-Tribune** Total number of stories about policing=305	223
48	**Louisville Courier-Journal** Total number of stories about policing=250	202
90	**Philadelphia Inquirer** Total number of stories about policing=275	185
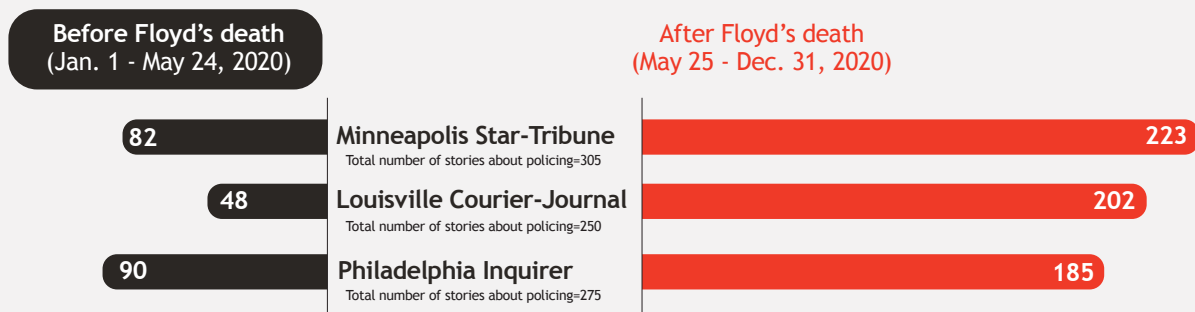
Coding process

Grounded in the research questions, we developed a coding framework encompassing 36 characteristics of news stories (see Appendix for details). As part of this framework, we identified key categories of stories relevant to answering the research questions **(Figure 2)**. Specifically, to explore patterns in crime beat reporting, we distinguished stories focused on local crime from stories focused on other aspects of policing – namely, stories about police conduct, accountability, reform, and the protests against police violence and racial injustice. Within the latter category of stories about other aspects of policing, we also identified the subset of stories in which a majority of paragraphs were focused on the protests or protesters. This enabled us to examine nuances in how the newspapers covered the protests.

Figure 2

Number of stories in key categories of coverage

	Minneapolis Star-Tribune	Louisville Courier-Journal	Philadelphia Inquirer
Total number of stories about policing	305	250	275
Stories focused on local crime: incidents of violent and non-violent local crimes, local crime statistics	146	55	156
Stories focused on other aspects of policing: police conduct, accountability, reform, and protests	159	195	119
	Protest-specific stories: 38	Protest-specific stories: 59	Protest-specific stories: 39

Coders engaged in a series of trainings to practice coding and clarify the coding instructions. Then a random sample of 44 articles was drawn to conduct a formal test of intercoder reliability. Krippendorff's alpha was used to assess reliability, using ReCal.[25] Reliability coefficients ranged from .77 to 1.0, with the exception of two codes for which inter-coder reliability was marginally acceptable (.70 and .64).[26] Findings for the latter two codes should be interpreted as tentative. See Appendix A for additional details on the coding framework and reliability coefficients.

Beyond the coding process, we also used a Python script to search the article text for use of "dehumanizing" language, such as the words *suspect, offender,* and *juvenile.* The search results were manually reviewed and incorporated into the dataset of coded articles.

As a complement to the content analysis, the study also draws on insights from interviews with reporters at each of these publications as well as activists in each city to provide local context regarding journalism and activism on policing and racial justice issues.

Limitations

Because of the study's focus on these three newspapers, the findings may not be generalizable to other mainstream media such as TV news or public radio. The "paper of record" does typically help set the agenda for other outlets, but we recognize that newsroom practices and decisions are informed by other factors as well, including differences in story structure and use of audio/visual material. Our findings also do not speak to how other media – including media produced by and for specific racial, ethnic, or cultural groups – covered policing. Our analysis was also limited to story text; the findings do not take into account information contained in images and/or videos in coverage of policing. In addition, although the overall sampling strategy was designed to have a margin of error of 5%, disaggregated analysis to examine certain sub-groups of coverage or patterns over time in some cases leads to small sample sizes. We also note that significant developments in Floyd's case (namely, the trial and conviction of Chauvin) occurred in 2021, beyond the period of study. The findings should be interpreted with these limitations in mind.

Cross-City Findings

The cross-city findings below highlight key patterns across the three city newspapers. We then examine nuances in how coverage unfolded within each city's specific context.

Sourcing

Contrary to concerns that newsrooms frequently privilege police sources, only a small minority of stories about policing relied exclusively on police sources or featured a police source in the headline.

Across the three newspapers, a relatively small proportion of coverage used police-only sourcing – and an even smaller proportion featured the police perspective by citing the police in headlines **(Figure 3)**. This suggests that coverage of policing overall does not tend to privilege police sources in this way.

However, as Figure 3 illustrates, the subset of local crime stories diverged somewhat from these overall patterns. In all three newspapers, police-only sourcing appeared more frequently in local crime stories than in other stories
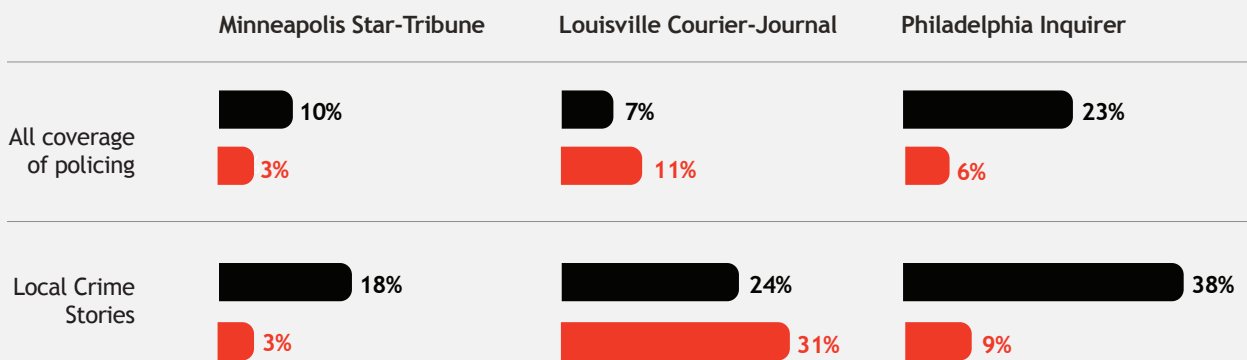
about policing. And the *Louisville Courier-Journal's* local crime reporting stood out for its relatively frequent use of police sources in headlines, compared to the newspaper's coverage overall.

As we discuss further in the city sections below, we observed evidence of some change over time in these sourcing practices in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Louisville Courier-Journal*.

Figure 3

Overall, most coverage of policing did not use police-only sourcing or feature police sources in headlines. But among the subset of local crime stories, these practices were somewhat more common.

■ Police-only sourcing ■ Police cited in headline

	Minneapolis Star-Tribune	Louisville Courier-Journal	Philadelphia Inquirer
All coverage of policing	10% / 3%	7% / 11%	23% / 6%
Local Crime Stories	18% / 3%	24% / 31%	38% / 9%

Local crime reporting cited police (and government) sources far more often than community sources. But stories about police conduct, accountability, reform, and protests had more inclusive sourcing practices.

Although Figure 3 shows it was relatively uncommon for the three newspapers to rely exclusively on police sources, Figure 4 indicates that coverage of policing in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* and especially in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* cited police sources more frequently than community sources. These two newspapers were also far more likely to include government sources, relative to community sources. In other words, when reading stories about policing, these newspapers' readers were much more likely to see police and government sources than community sources, such as civilians harmed by police, local crime victims, activists, or community-focused organizations. The *Louisville Courier-Journal* was distinct in that its coverage overall was similarly likely to include police, government, and community sources.

But as Figure 4 further illustrates, sourcing practices varied between local crime reporting versus other stories about policing. In all three newspapers, sourcing practices in local crime stories were very lopsided, with police sources appearing in a far higher percentage of these stories than community sources. These sourcing patterns changed little over time, suggesting that the heightened focus on racial justice and policing in public discourse was not reflected in the diversity of sources used in local crime reporting.

In contrast, we observed more inclusive sourcing practices in the remainder of coverage of policing – that is, stories focused on police conduct, accountability, reform, and protests. Among these stories, community sources appeared in as many or even more stories than police sources. Many of these stories were published in the wake of Floyd's death, covering the protests, investigations into police misconduct, and debates over police reform.

Figure 4

In local crime reporting, police sources were far more frequently cited than community sources. But among stories focused on police conduct, reform, accountability, and protests, community sources were a much more frequent presence — appearing in as many or more stories than police sources.

■ Police   ■ Government   ■ Community

	All coverage of policing	Stories focused on local crime	Stories focused on police conduct, accountability, reform, and protests
Minneapolis Star-Tribune	Police 56% / Government 74% / Community 43%	Police 65% / Government 73% / Community 29%	Police 48% / Government 75% / Community 57%
Louisville Courier-Journal	Police 67% / Government 70% / Community 72%	Police 85% / Government 55% / Community 42%	Police 62% / Government 74% / Community 81%
Philadelphia Inquirer	Police 81% / Government 61% / Community 44%	Police 92% / Government 47% / Community 29%	Police 66% / Government 79% / Community 64%

Note: The figure show the percentage of stories that cited each source category: police, government, and community. Community sources encompassed the following: civilians harmed by police or witnesses of police harming a civilian; victims or witnesses of local crime; community-focused organizations; activists, advocates, and protesters; local businesses; and civilian eyewitness videos of local crime, police, or protests. The percentage for the community category refers to stories that included at least one of these types of community sources.
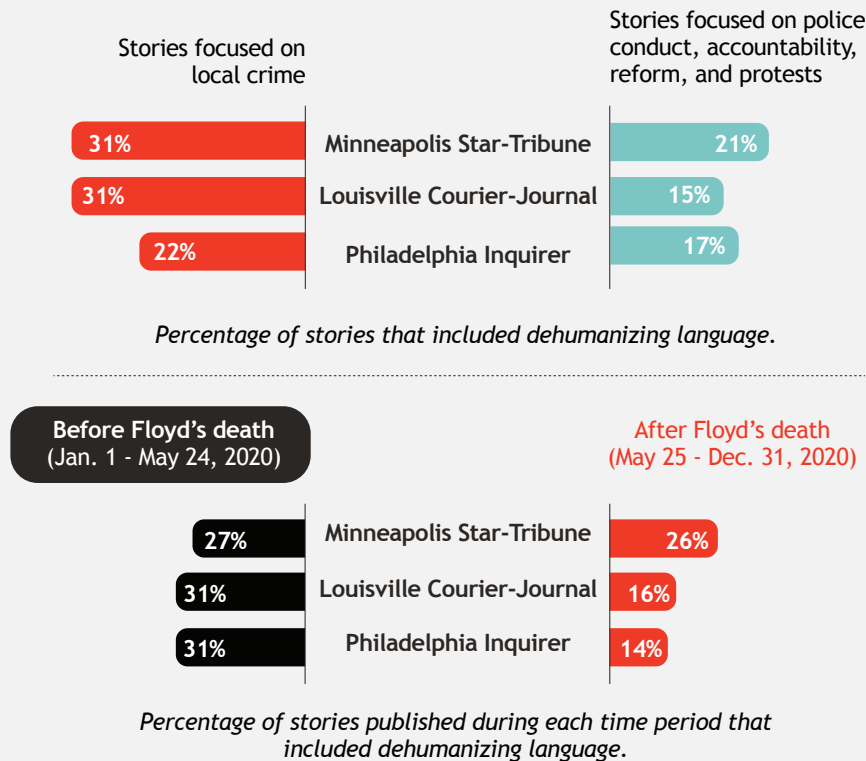
Portrayals of Civilians

In coverage of policing overall, a minority of stories used dehumanizing language to describe civilians targeted by the police. Local crime stories tended to use this language more often than other stories about policing.

Dehumanizing language – such as suspect, juvenile, and offender – appeared more often in local crime stories than in other stories about policing, particularly in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* and the *Louisville Courier-Journal.* While this is consistent with concerns that local crime reporting echoes this form of "copspeak," we note the use of such language is still relatively infrequent.

Looking over time, we observed a decline in the use of dehumanizing language in the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* during the period after Floyd's death **(Figure 5)**. The *Minneapolis Star-Tribune's* coverage, however, did not exhibit this change.

Figure 5

Use of dehumanizing language was relatively uncommon, appearing somewhat more frequently in local crime stories than in other stories about policing. Use of this language in the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* fell after Floyd's death.
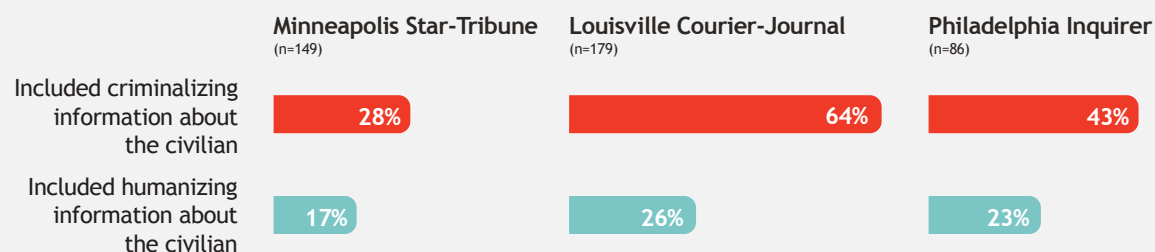
Stories focused on local crime

Stories focused on police conduct, accountability, reform, and protests

	Minneapolis Star-Tribune	
31%		21%
31%	Louisville Courier-Journal	15%
22%	Philadelphia Inquirer	17%

Percentage of stories that included dehumanizing language.

Before Floyd's death
(Jan. 1 - May 24, 2020)

After Floyd's death
(May 25 - Dec. 31, 2020)

	Minneapolis Star-Tribune	
27%		26%
31%	Louisville Courier-Journal	16%
31%	Philadelphia Inquirer	14%

Percentage of stories published during each time period that included dehumanizing language.

Portrayals of civilians who were seriously injured or killed by police were much more likely to include "criminalizing" information than "humanizing" information.

Among stories that mentioned a civilian killed or seriously injured by police, criminalizing information appeared much more frequently than humanizing information **(Figure 6)**. The association with criminality was most frequently conveyed in information about the immediate threat that the civilian posed to police (as opposed to information about the civilian's prior association with crime). This helped provide "justification" for the police officers' violent use of force.

As we explore in each city section below, there were nuanced shifts in the three newspapers' use of criminalizing and humanizing information over time, informed by events unfolding in each city context.

Figure 6

The three newspapers were more likely to include criminalizing information, as opposed to humanizing information, when portraying civilians seriously injured or killed by police.

	Minneapolis Star-Tribune (n=149)	Louisville Courier-Journal (n=179)	Philadelphia Inquirer (n=86)
Included criminalizing information about the civilian	28%	64%	43%
Included humanizing information about the civilian	17%	26%	23%

Among stories mentioning civilians seriously injured or killed by police.

A majority of protest coverage portrayed protesters as posing a threat, far exceeding the proportion of stories that mentioned protesters harmed by police use of force.
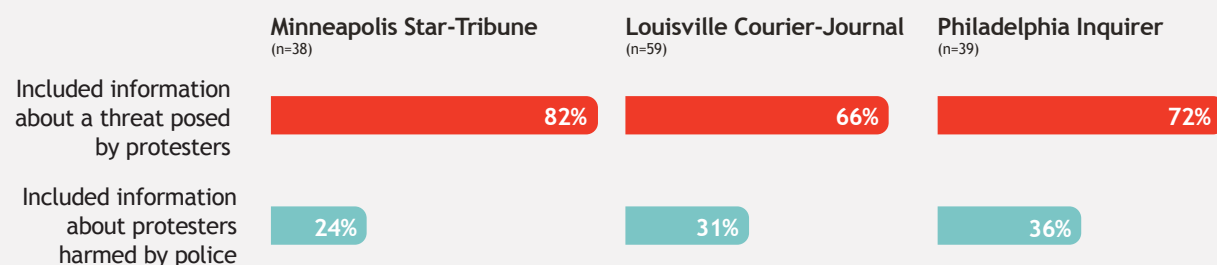
Within the subset of stories that focused primarily on the protests, we examined how often reporting included information about the threats posed by protesters. Such threats included damage that protesters inflicted on police property or non-police property (e.g., government buildings or statues, businesses); information about protesters engaged in illegal activity or threatening behavior towards the police; references to civilians physically harming police officers during the protests; and references to civilians physically harming other civilians during protests.

Among protest stories, we found a clear majority mentioned at least one of these types of protester threats **(Figure 7).** This aligns with the focus on protester "deviancy" shown in prior research on protest coverage. As a comparison point, we conducted additional analysis of the protest coverage, examining how often these stories included information about the police harming protesters.[27] Such information might serve to legitimize protesters' calls for police reform, particularly if stories provided details about how protesters experienced police officers' use of force. Figure 7 shows that information about police harming protesters appeared in far fewer stories than information about protester threats. Roughly half of these stories contained only brief references to police harming protesters – for example, noting in passing that the police used tear gas or rubber bullets on protesters. The remainder offered details of the physical harm inflicted by the police or vivid descriptions of what protesters experienced when they were hit with tear gas, rubber bullets, or other weapons. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* was the most likely of the three newspapers to offer more detailed descriptions of police harming protesters.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that protest coverage leaned heavily towards describing the threat of protesters, as opposed to describing the harm they experienced from police use of force. On balance, this may have served to delegitimize protesters' demands for change.

Figure 7

In coverage of protests against police brutality and racial injustice, most stories included information about the threat posed by protesters, while far fewer mentioned the harm inflicted on protesters by police.

	Minneapolis Star-Tribune (n=38)	Louisville Courier-Journal (n=59)	Philadelphia Inquirer (n=39)
Included information about a threat posed by protesters	82%	66%	72%
Included information about protesters harmed by police	24%	31%	36%

Among stories focused on the protests.

Portrayals of the Police

Although coverage of police violence has been criticized for using "distancing" language to euphemistically describe the harm inflicted on civilians by police use of force, the three newspapers' stories about policing rarely used this language.

Distancing language was quite rare in all three newspapers, appearing in only 2% of stories in the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and 6% of stories in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* and *Philadelphia Inquirer*. We only occasionally observed phrases such as "police-involved shooting" or "officer-involved death" to describe instances when police shot and killed someone, or terms like "less-than-lethal munitions" or "less lethal projectiles" to describe police firing tear gas and rubber bullets at protesters.

Coverage of policing frequently included sources or information that questioned or criticized police practices or conduct, suggesting that portrayals of the police often incorporated a challenge to the police narrative.

Stories about police conduct, accountability, reform, and protests often incorporated questions or criticisms of the police **(Figure 8)**. Many of these articles cited sources who were critical of the police or who questioned the appropriateness of police practices. This included activists who demanded justice for those killed by police, community members who criticized police treatment of Black people, local government officials who questioned specific police practices or policies, and individuals who filed lawsuits against the police. In more rare instances, stories about specific officers' misconduct included information about the officers' relevant history of misconduct or "red flags" such as prior civilian complaints about use of force.

As Figure 8 shows, stories about local crime were far less likely to include information or sources that challenged the police. This suggests that local crime reporting is unlikely to offer a counter-narrative to the framing or perspectives provided by the police. This may be partly a result of sourcing practices: as noted earlier, the police are overwhelmingly the most frequently cited source in local crime reporting in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, and the second most-frequently cited source (after the government) in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune's* local crime reporting.

Figure 8

Most stories about police conduct, accountability, reform, and the protests included information that challenged police conduct or practices. This contrasts with local crime stories, which rarely challenged the police.


	Stories focused on local crime	Stories focused on police conduct, accountability, reform, and protests
Minneapolis Star-Tribune	5%	78%
Louisville Courier-Journal	24%	92%
Philadelphia Inquirer	8%	78%

Percentage of stories including information challenging police conduct or practices

In stories that mentioned a civilian seriously injured or killed by the police, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* did not consistently include information about police accountability for their conduct.

Across the three newspapers' coverage of policing, information about police accountability came up in multiple ways, including internal police investigations into police actions, the release of body camera footage and 911 recordings, investigations into police actions by the District Attorney or U.S. Justice Department, and disciplinary or legal action against police officers or the department as a whole. However, when we examined how often this kind of information was included in stories mentioning a civilian seriously injured or killed by police, we found that it was frequently missing in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* and *Philadelphia Inquirer* **(Figure 9)**.[28] This suggests that, when referring to this level of serious civilian harm, these two newspapers did not consistently help draw the connection between police use of violent force and police accountability for their actions.

Figure 9

In stories mentioning civilians seriously injured or killed by police, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* were much less likely than the *Louisville Courier-Journal* to include information about police accountability for their actions.

Minneapolis Star-Tribune (n=149) 52%
Louisville Courier-Journal (n=179) 80%
Philadelphia Inquirer (n=86) 48%
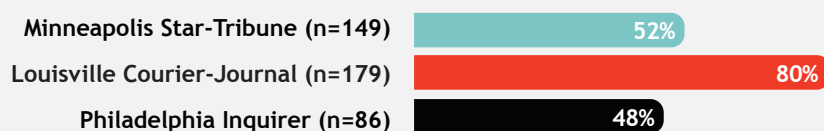
Among stories that mentioned civilians seriously injured or killed by police, percentage that included information about police accountability for their actions
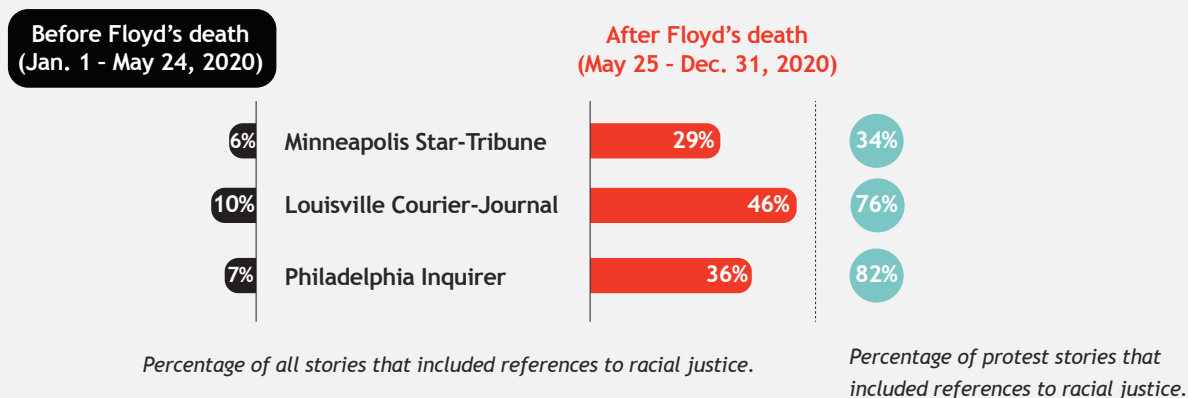
Context

In coverage of policing overall, references to racial justice increased during the period following Floyd's death – both reflecting and contributing to heightened public attention to racism in policing and in society more broadly.

All three newspapers became more likely to include references to racial justice or injustice in stories about policing during the period following Floyd's death **(Figure 10)**. This confirms that racial justice issues in policing became more visible in coverage as the newspapers reported on stories about police conduct, accountability, and reform. While some of these stories included more nuanced information about racism in policing and the historical roots and systemic nature of racism, others had only brief references to racial justice – such as a passing reference to Black Lives Matter, the goal of ending police brutality and racism, or the phrase "racial justice." Stories that included a more substantive reference to racial justice – for example by quoting sources who explained how racism in policing has affected Black people or how police brutality is part of a long history of racism in the U.S. – provided a stronger basis for helping readers situate police accountability and reform in the broader context of systemic racism.

Figure 10

In all three newspapers, references to racial justice in coverage of policing increased during the period following Floyd's death. But when covering the protests in particular, the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* was less likely than the two other newspapers to refer to the racial justice context for protesters' demands.

Before Floyd's death (Jan. 1 – May 24, 2020)		After Floyd's death (May 25 – Dec. 31, 2020)	
6%	Minneapolis Star-Tribune	29%	34%
10%	Louisville Courier-Journal	46%	76%
7%	Philadelphia Inquirer	36%	82%

Percentage of all stories that included references to racial justice.

Percentage of protest stories that included references to racial justice.

In covering the protests, the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and *Philadelphia Inquirer* usually helped contextualize calls for police accountability and reform by referring to issues of racial justice or injustice. This was less common in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune's* protest stories, which frequently omitted any reference to racial justice as context for protesters' demands.

To further probe the observed increase in racial justice references, we examined the subset of stories focused on protests. To what extent did stories mention the racial justice context for protesters' demands? The answer to this question differed across the three newspapers **(Figure 10)**. In the *Louisville Courier-Journal* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, more than three-quarters of protest stories included at least a passing reference to the racial justice context. However, the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune's* protest stories included this contextual information far less frequently – only a little over a third of the time. This suggests that *Star-Tribune's* protest coverage often lacked this contextual reference point for why people were protesting.
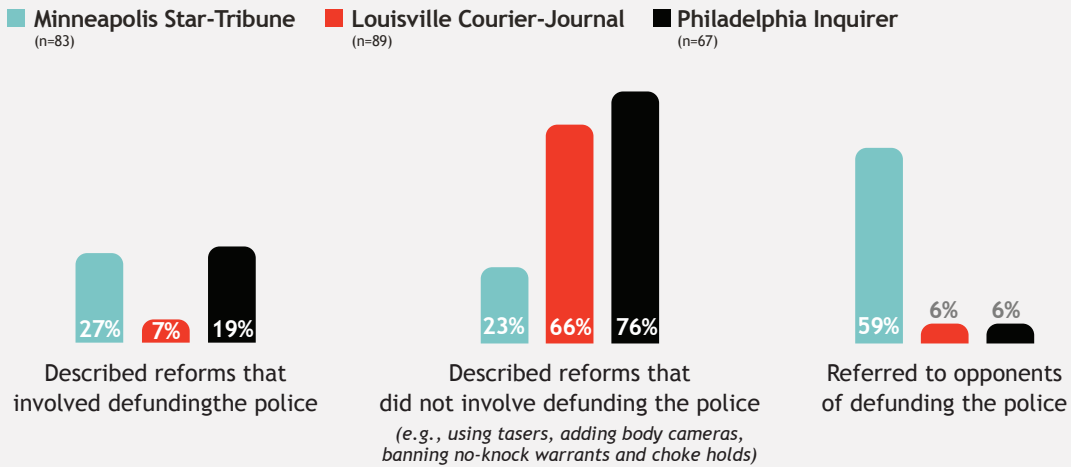
Relatively little coverage helped readers understand the slogan "defund the police" in a policy context.

References to police reform increased during the period following Floyd's death. Reflecting heightened public attention to potential changes in policing, the newspapers covered debates about modifying police practices, exploring alternative approaches to police emergency response (e.g., mental health specialists), directing funding or authority away from the police, and bolstering police accountability and oversight mechanisms.

However, we observed relatively little substantive information about the policy implications of "defund the police" – one of the most salient rallying cries of the protests. In all three newspapers, only a small minority of stories that mentioned reform explained what "defunding the police" could look like in policy terms **(Figure 11)**. In Minneapolis, where the most substantial policy debate on defunding the police occurred, readers of the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* were far more likely to see references to opponents of defunding the police. In the other two cities, where there was a relatively less robust defunding debate among policymakers, *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Louisville Courier-Journal* readers most frequently saw descriptions of reforms that did *not* involve decreases or reallocations in police funding. These patterns suggest that readers often lacked contextual details about what calls to "defund the police" might mean in concrete policy or budgetary terms.

Figure 11

14

Among stories that mentioned police reforms, only a small proportion included information that could help explain the policy implications of one of the most salient slogans in police reform efforts: "defund the police."

■ **Minneapolis Star-Tribune**
(n=83)

■ **Louisville Courier-Journal**
(n=89)

■ **Philadelphia Inquirer**
(n=67)

27% 7% 19%

Described reforms that
involved defundingthe police

23% 66% 76%

Described reforms that
did not involve defunding the police
*(e.g., using tasers, adding body cameras,
banning no-knock warrants and choke holds)*

59% 6% 6%

Referred to opponents
of defunding the police

Minneapolis

THE CONTEXT

On the evening of May 25, 2020, then-seventeen-year-old Darnella Frazier hit record on her phone, capturing the final minutes of George Floyd's life as he was murdered under the knee of police officer Derek Chauvin outside a corner store in South Minneapolis. When Frazier shared the video on social media later that evening, it quickly went viral and sparked near-immediate protests. Floyd's murder was the latest in a series of high-profile killings of civilians at the hands of police in the Twin Cities area — beginning with Terrance Franklin in 2013, Jamar Clark in 2014, Philando Castile in 2016, and Justine Damond in 2017.

While Minneapolis has long been a hub for progressive politics and grassroots activism — including as the site of the founding of the American Indian Movement in 1968 — there is not a longstanding history of abolitionist organizing in the city. A number of organizations like MPD150, Communities United Against Police Brutality, Twin Cities Justice for Jamar, and Black Visions Collective have coalesced in recent years to call attention to the Minneapolis Police Department's mistreatment of Black and Brown communities.

The day after Floyd's killing, on May 26, demonstrators gathered at the South Minneapolis intersection where he was murdered and marched to the Minneapolis Police Department's Third Precinct, where the officers responsible for Floyd's death — Derek Chauvin, Tou Thao, Thomas Lane, and J. Alexander Kueng — worked. Over the course of the week, mostly peaceful protests continued in the Twin Cities and spread across the country and around the world as outrage swelled over the killing of Black Americans at the hands of police. The unrest in Minneapolis culminated on the night of May 28, when protesters overtook the Third Precinct building and set it alight, along with looting and fires at other area businesses. The outcry over Floyd's killing led to the firing of the four officers involved, criminal and federal charges against all four, and a commitment from a majority of Minneapolis City Council members to defund and dismantle the police department — a commitment that has not yet come to fruition, as of this report's writing. In April 2021, Chauvin was convicted of second-degree unintentional murder, second-degree manslaughter, and third-degree murder. He was sentenced to 22 and a half years in prison.
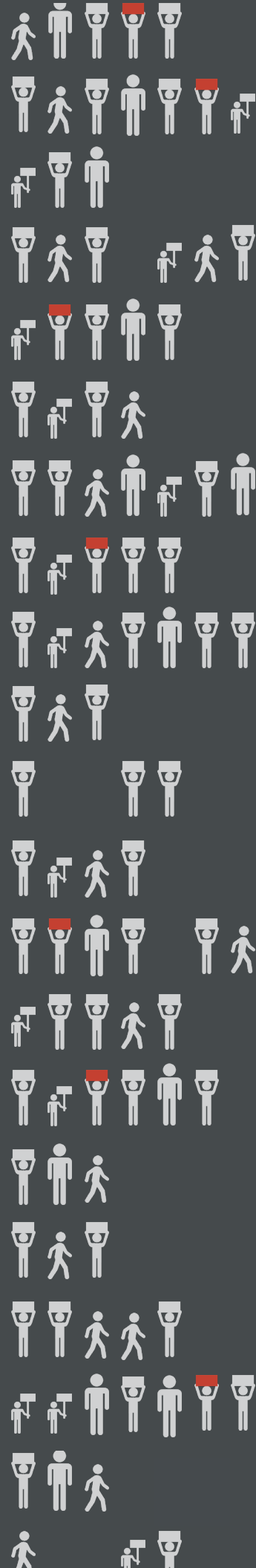
Sourcing

The presence of police sources in the *Star-Tribune's* coverage decreased during the period following Floyd's death.
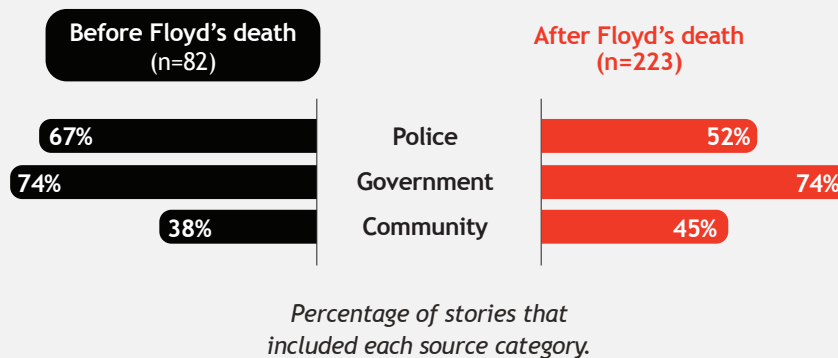
This decline in the frequency of police sourcing was complemented by an increase in the percentage of stories that cited community sources -- particularly activists and protesters and (to a more modest extent) civilians harmed by police **(Figure 12)**. These changes were driven by the influx of stories about police conduct, accountability, reform, and protests following Floyd's death. Local crime reporting, in contrast, did not demonstrate this decline in police sourcing.

Of the three newspapers, the *Star-Tribune* demonstrated the least frequent use of police sources.

As we noted in Figure 4 earlier, the *Star-Tribune* stood out from the other two newspapers for its less frequent inclusion of police sources in both its local crime reporting and its other stories about policing. This comparison held even during the period following Floyd's death, when all three newspapers became less likely to cite police sources. That said, we note that the strong presence of government sources in the *Star-Tribune's* coverage is partly due to reporters' regular use of court records. While we categorized court records as a government source, we note that court records often included information from police reports – and as a result, may be understood as an indirect police source in many cases. As Figure 12 shows, the prevalence of government sources was a consistent pattern both before and after Floyd's death.

Figure 12

The police became a less frequent source in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune's* coverage during the period following George Floyd's death.

Before Floyd's death (n=82)

After Floyd's death (n=223)

	Police	Government	Community
Before	67%	74%	38%
After	52%	74%	45%

Percentage of stories that included each source category.

Note: The percentage for the community category refers to stories that included at least one type of community source: a local crime victim or witness, a civilian harmed by police or witness thereof, a community-focused organization, a local business, eyewitness video, or an activist or protester.

Civilian Portrayals

Prior to Floyd's death, the *Star-Tribune* most frequently used criminalizing information to portray civilians who were seriously injured or killed by police. But during the period following Floyd's death, a majority of stories mentioning Floyd or others seriously injured or killed by police offered neither criminalizing nor humanizing information.[29]

This shift seems to have been partly the result of stories that referred to Floyd in passing, such as when his name was mentioned in stories about protests or police reforms without including any information about him as a person or about the circumstances around his killing by the police. In these cases, the civilian portrayal was essentially left "blank," lacking both criminalizing and humanizing information. In stories where the *Star-Tribune* did include more specific details about Floyd, we observed examples of both criminalizing and humanizing information.

The *Star-Tribune's* protest coverage exhibited a particularly strong emphasis on the threat posed by protesters.

Most (82%) of the *Star-Tribune's* stories about the protests mentioned one or more threats posed by protesters. The most common threat, appearing in 76% of protest stories, was damage to government and private property.[30] By contrast, information about police harming protesters appeared in only a quarter of protest stories – and even then, it was mostly mentioned in passing. This strong emphasis on protester threat, relative to harm to protesters, is the most pronounced of the three newspapers.

Portraying George Floyd

The *Star-Tribune's* portrayal of Floyd was shaped by the fact that bystander video of his death went viral immediately. The newspaper's first reporting appears to have been in an early morning tweet on May 26, which cited the bystander's video that showed Floyd saying he could not breathe while police held him down. Excerpts from that video appeared in one of the *Star-Tribune's* first stories on Floyd's death, helping to humanize him through his own words:

"Please, please, please I can't breathe. Please, man," Floyd is heard pleading with the officers. At one point, he cries out for his mother.

Other stories published during an intense flurry of coverage following Floyd's death provided additional humanizing details about Floyd's history and life, drawing on information from family and friends. At the same time, some of that early coverage of Floyd's death also included information about the "immediate threat" that Floyd posed. This includes references to his alleged use of a counterfeit $20 bill, a county autopsy report suggesting that he was under the influence of fentanyl at the time of his arrest, and a claim by one of the police officer's lawyers that Floyd "asserted himself" and resisted arrest.

Police Portrayals

During the period following Floyd's death, the *Star-Tribune's* coverage of policing became much more likely to include information that challenged or questioned the police.

The percentage of stories including this kind of information more than doubled, rising from 21% during the period before his death to 52% during the period after. This increase was driven by stories about police conduct, accountability, reform, and protests sparked by Floyd's death. Local crime stories did not register this same change, remaining highly unlikely to include information challenging police.

The *Star-Tribune* focused almost immediately on police accountability in covering Floyd's death. But overall, information about police accountability was not consistently included in stories mentioning civilians seriously harmed or killed by police.

The viral video capturing Floyd's killing provided an impetus for focusing on questions of police accountability, which we saw reflected in the *Star-Tribune's* coverage. But more broadly, the *Star-Tribune* was inconsistent in drawing connections between references to civilians seriously injured or killed by police and police accountability for inflicting that harm. As noted earlier, only about half of the stories that mentioned this level of civilian harm included information about police accountability for their actions.

Reporting on police accountability for George Floyd's death

The *Star-Tribune's* reporting on Floyd's death was informed by the viral video of his death, which prompted immediate attention to police accountability. The day after Floyd's death, the *Star-Tribune* published an article titled *"What we know about Derek Chauvin and Tou Thao, two of the officers caught on tape in the death of George Floyd."* On the same day, another article featuring an interview with Darnella Frazier, the young woman who took the bystander video, was headlined: *"'World needed to see,' says woman who took video of man dying under officer's knee."* These stories point to the newspaper's immediate focus on police accountability for Floyd's death. Over the next week of coverage, a majority of the stories included information about police accountability for Floyd's death. By June 4, the *Star-Tribune* was reporting on Attorney General Keith Ellison's decision to upgrade the charges against Derek Chauvin and to charge the other three officers with aiding and abetting murder. This solidified the framing of police accountability for Floyd's death.

Context

Although the *Star-Tribune's* coverage of policing overall became more likely to mention issues of racial justice or injustice after Floyd's death, only a third of its protest coverage mentioned racial justice or injustice to contextualize calls for police accountability and reform.

During the period following Floyd's death, the *Star-Tribune's* coverage of policing integrated references to racial justice in its reporting on legislative debates about police reform, the charges against the officers involved in Floyd's death, and the Minnesota Department of Human Rights' investigation into the police department. Some of these stories cited government officials naming racism or racial bias in policing or specifically pointed to the institutionalized culture of racism or white supremacy in policing. The *Star-Tribune* also published multiple public opinion polls of Minnesotans' views about Floyd's killing, Black Lives Matter, and police treatment of Black people. But references to racial justice were surprisingly infrequent in the newspaper's coverage of the protests, with only a third mentioning this as context for protesters' demands for change. This pattern may partly reflect sourcing practices. Compared to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, the *Star-Tribune* appears to have put less of an emphasis on protester voices who could have helped draw the connection to the racial justice context. Only 42% of the *Star-Tribune's* protest stories included sources in the activist/protester category, compared to over three-quarters of protest stories in the other two newspapers.

Star-Tribune stories that mentioned police reform were more than twice as likely to refer to opponents of defunding the police (59%) as they were to provide information about the actual policy implications of defunding the police (27%).

This suggests that readers heard more about opposition to defunding than they heard about what defunding reforms might look like in policy or budgetary terms. This is notable, given that there was a robust policy debate in Minneapolis, culminating in a ballot measure to replace the city's police department with a department of public safety, a measure which ultimately failed in the November 2021 elections.
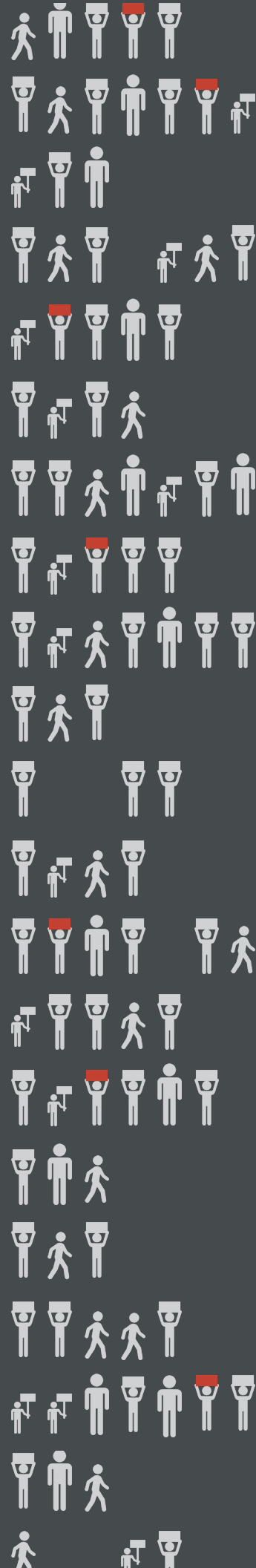
Louisville

THE CONTEXT

In the early hours of March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor — a 26-year-old Black woman and emergency medical technician — was shot and killed in her apartment by officers from the Louisville Metro Police Department (LMPD). Taylor's family filed a lawsuit against the three LMPD officers who fired shots in Taylor's apartment, but the case did not attract much media coverage. Two months later, in mid-May, Taylor's case began attracting media attention, as Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear called for an investigation into Taylor's death, prominent civil rights attorney Benjamin Crump joined the Taylor family's legal team, and the FBI launched its own investigation. Her case gained further attention following the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis in late May, which kicked off months-long protests in Louisville to demand justice for Taylor. During the first week of protests, David McAtee, owner of a popular barbeque stand, was fatally shot by the Kentucky National Guard when they were enforcing a city-wide curfew with the LMPD. Louisville Mayor Fischer fired the LMPD police chief upon learning the LMPD officers at McAtee's killing did not have their body cameras turned on.

Taylor and McAtee were the latest victims in a series of law enforcement murders of Black residents of Louisville — including Adrian Reynolds in 1998, Desmond Rudolph in 1999, James Earl Taylor in 2002, and Michael Newby in 2004 — which fostered a prominent anti-police movement over the years, led by groups like The Kentucky Alliance Against Racism and Political Repression. The history of community organizing in the city, however, goes back generations. Unlike many other Southern cities, Louisville has consistently had an active and prominent racial justice movement. While the movement has ebbed and flowed over time, the murder of Breonna Taylor led to a surge in momentum with protesters maintaining a visible presence in downtown since May 28, 2020.

During the following months, Louisville banned no-knock warrants and established police accountability measures such as mandated use of body cameras and a civilian oversight board. The Taylor family reached a $12 million wrongful death settlement with the City of Louisville. The LMPD fired three officers involved in Taylor's death, sanctioned three others, and exonerated three additional officers. A grand jury indicted only one of the three officers who shot at Taylor – not for shooting her, but for wanton endangerment of Taylor's neighbors.
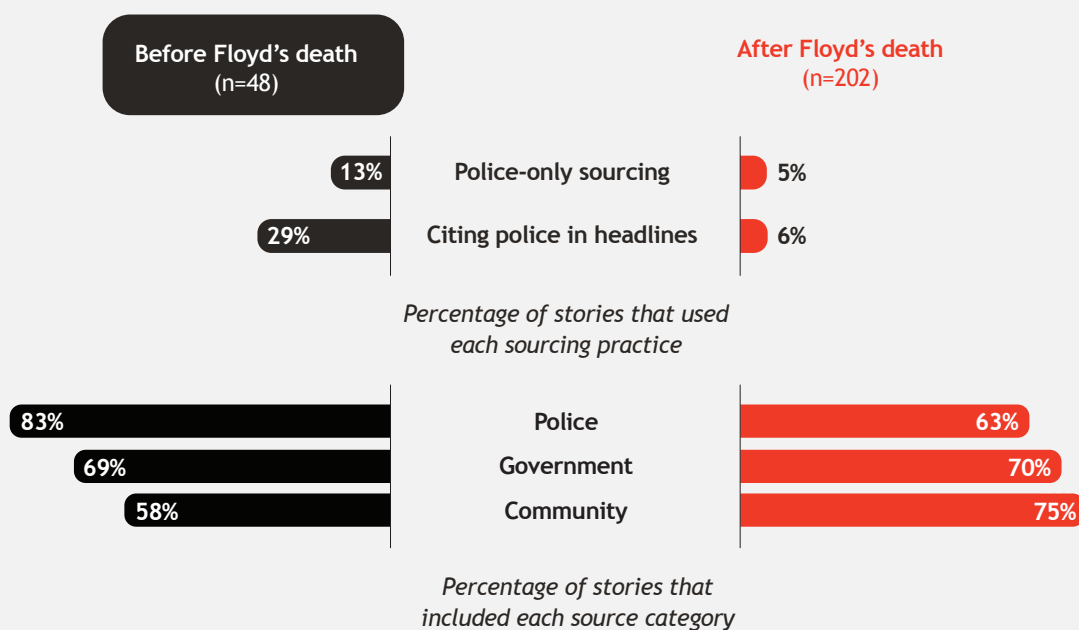
Sourcing

The *Louisville Courier-Journal's* sourcing practices shifted during the period after Floyd's death triggered protests, showing less reliance on police sources and greater inclusion of community-based sources. Its reliance on government sources remained constant.

One of the most visible changes was a decrease in the percentage of stories citing the police in the headline – a shift that appears to have been driven primarily by local crime reporting.[31] We also observed a substantial decrease in the percentage of stories citing police sources, complemented by an increase in the percentage of stories citing community sources -- particularly activists and protesters as well as civilians harmed by police. This pattern of change was not observed among local crime stories; rather, the decline in police sources and rise in community sources was driven by stories about police conduct, accountability, reform, and protests. Similar to the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, government sources were a consistently strong presence in the *Courier-Journal's* reporting, both during the period before Floyd's death and during the period after.

Figure 13

The *Louisville Courier-Journal's* sourcing practices shifted over time, becoming less likely to cite police sources and more likely to cite community sources during the period following George Floyd's death.

Before Floyd's death (n=48)

After Floyd's death (n=202)

	Before Floyd's death	After Floyd's death
Police-only sourcing	13%	5%
Citing police in headlines	29%	6%

Percentage of stories that used each sourcing practice

	Before Floyd's death	After Floyd's death
Police	83%	63%
Government	69%	70%
Community	58%	75%

Percentage of stories that included each source category

Note: The percentage for the community category refers to stories that included at least one type of community source: a local crime victim or witness, a civilian harmed by police or witness thereof, a community-focused organization, a local business, eyewitness video, or an activist or protester.

Civilian Portrayals

The *Louisville Courier-Journal* tended towards a criminalizing portrayal of civilians seriously injured or killed by police. But there were important nuances in the paper's portrayal of Breonna Taylor, composed of a mix of details that both reiterated and refuted her connection to criminality.

Overall, in stories mentioning civilians seriously injured or killed by police, the *Courier-Journal* was more likely to include criminalizing information than humanizing information. This lopsided emphasis on criminalizing information was particularly pronounced in stories published prior to Floyd's death. But even after Floyd's death in late May triggered local protests in Louisville, civilian portrayals still remained heavily oriented towards criminality.[32] That said, there are important nuances in how the *Courier-Journal's* portrayal of Breonna Taylor unfolded over time. An initial story published on March 14, 2020, the day after she was killed, emphasized a criminalizing portrayal of her based on the police department's account. In mid-May, however, the *Courier-Journal's* stories began including more humanizing information as the police account came under scrutiny. Later stories also tempered references to criminalizing information with counterpoints that refuted her (and her boyfriend Kenneth Walker's) association with criminality.

Portraying Breonna Taylor

The *Courier-Journal's* portrayal of Breonna Taylor exhibited a sharp change over time. The very first story appears to have been published on March 14, with a story that heavily privileged the police department's perspective. Headlined *"LMPD: Officer shot, suspect dies in drug probe,"* the article referred to Taylor (still unidentified at the time) as a "suspect" in a narcotics investigation and repeated the assistant police chief's statement that "suspects" (plural) shot at the officers – even though the article later acknowledged that the police did not know if Taylor was armed. The article also noted that the "second suspect," Kenneth Walker, was arrested and charged with attempted murder of a police officer.

We observed no further articles about Taylor until mid-May, when the *Courier-Journal's* coverage of the case took off as the police department's account of Taylor's death came under increasing scrutiny. The portrayal of Taylor was distinctly different from the first article. On May 13, the *Courier-Journal* published an article headlined *"Taylor didn't deserve this,"* which included a humanizing portrayal of Taylor's life, family, and aspirations and explicitly noted that she had no criminal record and that police did not find any drugs in her home. This article also began to offer a counter-portrayal to the police department's account of Walker's actions – for example, by including his assertion that he acted in self-defense. Subsequent stories provided further humanizing descriptions of Taylor from her family and others and refuted her association with criminality. The coverage also reiterated Walker's statement that he did not know it was police entering Taylor's home when he fired a shot, and compared his single shot to the many rounds that police fired in response. The tenor of Taylor's portrayal is captured well by a July 5 article that describes the unfolding of events through the eyes of her mother, Tamika Palmer. Its headline quotes Palmer: *"To us, she was everything."*

The *Courier-Journal's* protest coverage was twice as likely to include information about one or more threats posed by protesters (66%), as opposed to information about protesters harmed by the police (31%).

The most frequently cited threats were: threatening or illegal behavior by protesters who interacted with the police – such as throwing rocks or water bottles at police or looting stories (39%); damage to government or private property (32%); and references to civilians harmed by other civilians in the context of the protests (31%).[33] In the Louisville context, the latter category included stories about Tyler Gerth, a protester who was shot and killed by another protest participant, Steven Lopez. Among the relatively smaller number of stories that mentioned protesters

harmed by police, just under half dedicated multiple paragraphs to describing the harm inflicted by the police on protesters – for example through their use of tear gas or rubber bullets. Those stories provided sometimes graphic information about the experiences of protesters, offering a counterpoint to the negative portrayal of protesters as a threat.

Police Portrayals

The *Courier-Journal's* coverage of policing shifted towards including more information that questioned or challenged the police.

During the period prior to Floyd's death, 48% of stories included information challenging the police. That percentage jumped to 84% of stories published during the period after his death. This shift was largely driven by the high volume of stories about police conduct, accountability, reform, and protests triggered by Floyd's death and subsequent demonstrations and developments related to Taylor's death. Local crime reporting did not reflect this same change, remaining relatively unlikely to include information that challenged the police.

The *Courier-Journal* reported heavily on police accountability for Breonna Taylor's death.

During the period prior to Taylor's death, information about police accountability was uncommon in the *Courier-Journal's* coverage of policing. This shifted in the wake of Taylor's death, when coverage began to include substantial investigative reporting on what had gone wrong in the police investigation and events leading up to Taylor's death and who was responsible for the entire operation leading up to it. The *Courier-Journal* filed multiple records requests to gain access to documents and records related to Taylor's case (suing the police department twice for failure to respond to these requests) and called attention to official evidence that had not been released publicly.

Figure 14

Following Taylor's death, the *Courier-Journal's* coverage of policing shifted, becoming more likely to include information about police accountability for their actions.

Before Taylor's death
(Jan. 1-March 12, 2020):

7 of 30 Stories
Included information about police accountability

Two months between Taylor's death and Floyd's death
(March 13-May 24, 2020):

11 of 18 Stories
Included information about police accountability

After Floyd's death
(May 25-Dec 31, 2020):

141 of 202 Stories
Included information about police accountability

Reporting on police accountability for Breonna Taylor's death

As noted earlier, the initial story about Taylor's death relied heavily on the police department's account. However, even as this article privileged the police perspective, it did note that one of the officers had previously been sued for excessive force – offering an initial hint of what would later become a heavy emphasis on police accountability. The *Courier-Journal* obtained K-9 search reports, the search warrants for Taylor's house and other properties related to the same operation, and detailed breakdowns and timelines, using these records to recreate the night of Taylor's shooting. On May 28, the *Courier-Journal* reported that it was suing the Louisville police department to release its investigative file regarding Taylor's death, and subsequently published stories in June reporting on continued delays in the release of the file and the lack of information contained in

the official police incident report. The newspaper published articles focusing attention on policy and operational failures leading to Taylor's death, and closely examined the officers involved in Taylor's shooting, including prior involvement in use of force incidents, policy violations, complaints, or lawsuits. In October, the *Courier-Journal* published an in-depth analysis of testimony provided to the grand jury that undercut the police account of events and portrayed a "chilling scene of false assumptions, chaos and massive gunfire." That month, the newspaper also sued the police department a second time for failing to respond to records requests, and took the unusual step of intervening in Brett Hankinson's criminal case to argue in court papers that the evidence presented during discovery should be public.

Context

In the *Courier-Journal's* coverage of protests, activist and protester sources helped place the protests in the context of racial justice.

A majority of the *Courier-Journal's* protest stories (76%) included references to issues of racial justice or injustice, with activist and protester sources helping to place the protests in the context of systemic racism, the history of police violence against Black people, and the need for institutional change. As reported in one story, the protests were about more than justice for Taylor: "It's about police officers and the way they treat people of color, protesters say. It's about losing relatives to police brutality, or having personal experiences of mistreatment. It's about getting the right people in power and changing systems and institutions. It's about lifelong Louisville residents battling racism."[34] Some of the stories also contextualized the protests as speaking to Louisville's history of racism across institutions, pointing to the "legacy of racism" that shows up not only in law enforcement, but also in redlining, urban renewal and gentrification, and racial disparities in education, wealth, food insecurity, incarceration rates, and health care.[35]

Taylor's name, appearing in nearly all (92%) of the *Courier-Journal's* protest stories, became a symbol in protests against police brutality and racial injustice.

Taylor's name took on symbolic significance in the context of the protests, channeling the #SayHerName movement. This movement aims to address the marginalization of Black women's experiences of police brutality in the current racial justice movement and in media coverage of police violence.[36] Indeed, in a few of the *Courier-Journal's* stories, sources explicitly drew attention to the intersection between systemic racism and sexism, highlighting the need to focus on police brutality against Black women, and not just Black men.[37] In this way, the prevalence of Taylor's name in protest stories may be understood as a reminder of the racial justice context for the protests.

More broadly, the *Courier-Journal's* coverage of policing became more likely to mention issues of racial justice or injustice over time – but often only in passing.

As noted earlier, across the full sample of the *Courier-Journal's* coverage of policing, the percentage of stories mentioning racial justice rose during the period after Floyd's death. This was due in part to coverage of disciplinary and legal action against the officers who shot Taylor and actions taken by political leaders in response to calls for racial justice. However, we note that these tended to be passing references to racism and police brutality, offering less context than we observed in the protest coverage.

Philadelphia

THE CONTEXT

Like many cities across the country, Philadelphia saw thousands of peaceful protesters flood into the streets in late May and early June in response to the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Breonna Taylor in Louisville, and systemic racism in U.S. institutions and society more broadly. Philadelphia has a long history of Black-led organizing against police brutality and a robust activist community that has challenged systems of inequality and oppression going back to the presence of the Black Panther Party and the 1985 MOVE bombing in West Philadelphia. In recent years, this work was formalized through the Black Lives Matter movement and spearheaded by a number of activist groups including BLM Philly, Reclaim Philadelphia, and The Philly Coalition for REAL Justice.

The 2020 demonstrations began on May 30, with a rally and march at Philadelphia City Hall, and spread throughout the city over the next several days. Tensions escalated on June 1, when Philadelphia police pepper-sprayed, tear-gassed and trapped protesters on Interstate 676, sparking further outrage against police brutality. Sustained calls for systemic police reform resulted in passage of a number of state and local measures aimed at increasing police accountability, including establishing a Citizen Police Oversight Commission to handle complaints of police misconduct in Philadelphia. Additionally, a statue of controversial former police commissioner and mayor Frank Rizzo — known for his legacy of racist policies and brutal treatment of Philadelphia's Black community — was removed from its pedestal outside of the Municipal Services Building in early June. This move, which came after years of calls from activists and community members petitioning for the statue to be taken down, was widely seen as an expression of popular distrust and disgust with the city's police culture.

Demonstrations in the city were reignited in late October, when 27-year-old Walter Wallace Jr. was shot and killed by the police in West Philadelphia. Wallace, who had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, was experiencing a mental health crisis at the time police shot him. Protesters took to the streets in West Philadelphia, demanding justice for Wallace's death. At the time of this report's writing, Wallace's family settled a $2.5 million wrongful death lawsuit with the City of Philadelphia. Part of the settlement included the requirement that the City's police officers all be equipped with body cameras, which the City has budgeted $13.9 million to purchase. Both officers who shot Wallace were removed from active duty, but no criminal charges have been filed.
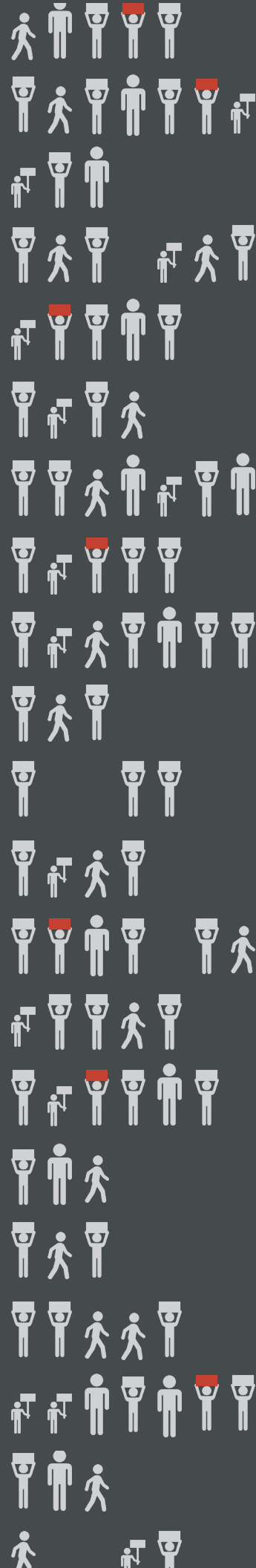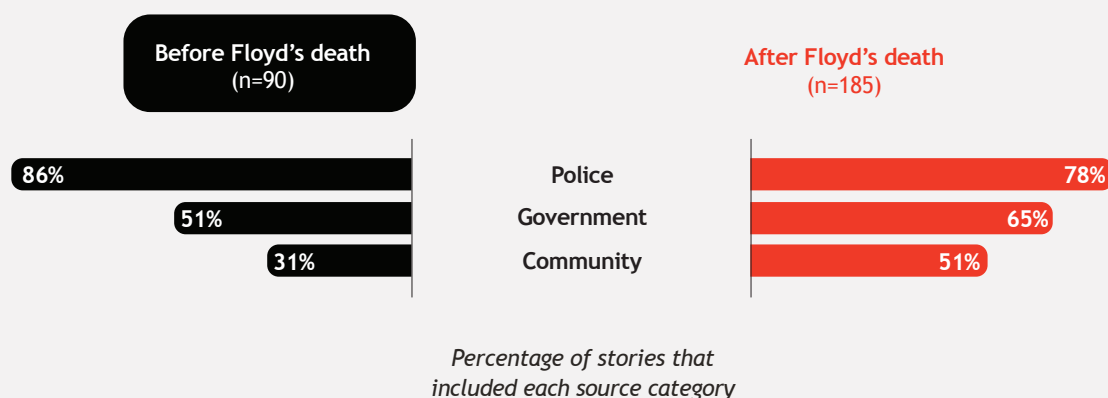
Sourcing

The *Inquirer* was the most likely of the three city newspapers to use police-only sourcing – though this practice declined somewhat after Floyd's death.

As shown earlier in this report **(Figure 3)**, the Inquirer stood out from the other two newspapers for its relatively higher use of police-only sourcing. This sourcing practice appeared in just under a quarter (23%) of the *Inquirer's* coverage overall, with a somewhat higher frequency (38%) among the subset of local crime stories. We observed a modest decline in police-only sourcing in local crime stories over time: from 45% during the period before Floyd's death to 34% during the period after his death.

Figure 15

The presence of community sources in the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* coverage increased during the period following George Floyd's death, but the police still remained the most frequently cited source.

Before Floyd's death (n=90)		After Floyd's death (n=185)
86%	Police	78%
51%	Government	65%
31%	Community	51%

Percentage of stories that included each source category

Note: The percentage for the community category refers to stories that included at least one type of community source: a local crime victim or witness, a civilian harmed by police or witness thereof, a community-focused organization, a local business, eyewitness video, or an activist or protester.

Police and government sources were by far the most frequently cited sources in the *Inquirer's* coverage, both during the period before Floyd's death and during the period after. But there were also signs of a shift towards more inclusive sourcing practices.

Police sources appeared in the vast majority of the *Inquirer's* coverage of policing overall, with only a very modest decline during the period after Floyd's death **(Figure 15)**. This pattern was even more pronounced in the subset of local crime stories, where the police were cited in over 90% of stories published both before and after Floyd's death. Government sources were also frequently present in coverage of policing – and became even more so during the period after Floyd's death.[38] Nonetheless, we did observe an increase in the percentage of stories citing community sources over time. This was largely due to the subset of stories about police conduct, accountability, reform, and protests published during the period after Floyd's death, with more inclusive sourcing practices that increased the presence of community sources such as civilians harmed by police, community-focused organizations, and activists and protesters.

Community voices in local crime reporting

The *Philadelphia Inquirer's* coverage of local crime in 2020 relied heavily on police sources — to an even greater extent than we observed in the other two newspapers — while community voices were typically less visible. However, there were exceptions to this general rule. Two stories, both published in December 2020, stood out for their strong focus on community voices in the context of local crime reporting.

One story, titled *"Under Fire,"* used police data, court records, and interviews with many victims of gun violence, their families, and community advocates to deeply explore how law enforcement has failed to

secure justice for shootings in communities of color. The second story, titled *"A year later, life without her,"* went beyond the crime beat's typical focus on breaking news, returning to a case from the prior year where a mother was stabbed to death by her boyfriend. The story drew on interviews with the woman's children, sister, and other family members to bring a human lens to the experiences of those affected by violent crime in Philadelphia. These two stories illustrate different ways in which local crime reporting can reflect more inclusive sourcing practices, allowing community perspectives to more strongly shape readers' understanding of crime in Philadelphia.

Civilian Portrayals

The *Inquirer's* portrayal of civilians seriously injured or killed by police shifted over time as the city responded first to George Floyd's killing by Minneapolis police and then to Walter Wallace's killing by Philadelphia police.

In the Philadelphia context, protests erupted first after Minneapolis police killed Floyd in late May, and then again after Philadelphia police officers killed Wallace in late October. As Figure 16 suggests, during the period before Floyd's death, the *Inquirer* tended to provide criminalizing portrayals of civilians who were seriously injured or killed by police. This seemed to shift over time after Floyd's death and then again after Wallace's death, with coverage including more of a mix of criminalizing and humanizing information.[39]

Figure 16

Inquirer portrayals of civilians seriously injured or killed by police shifted over time, becoming less likely to exclusively focus on criminalizing information.

Before Floyd's death (Jan. 1-May 24, 2020): ⟶ **Five months following Floyd's death** (May 25-Oct. 25, 2020): ⟶ **After Wallace's death** (Oct. 26-Dec. 31, 2020)

9 of 9 Stories
*Included **criminializing** information*

14 of 55 Stories
*Included **criminializing** information*

14 of 22 Stories
*Included **criminializing** information*

1 of 9 Stories
*Included **humanizing** information*

8 of 55 Stories
*Included **humanizing** information*

11 of 22 Stories
*Included **humanizing** information*

Portraying Walter Wallace

The *Philadelphia Inquirer's* portrayal of Wallace was mixed: coverage included humanizing information while also consistently mentioning the threat he posed to police officers when he was shot. The headline of the *Inquirer's* first story – *"Police kill man armed with knife"* – emphasized a criminalizing portrayal of Wallace as a threat to the police officers. However, headlines in the following days – such as *"A family man and an aspiring rapper with a history of mental health crises"* and *"Crisis center says it could have helped that day"* – brought a stronger focus to Wallace's mental health illness, helping to humanize him.

Subsequent stories typically included both references to his mental health (including his family's statement that they had called for an ambulance, not police) and references to the knife he was holding or his prior criminal record. A few stories went a step further by placing Wallace's death in the context of failures of the criminal justice system to address mental illness. Most notably, in a story titled *"Odds were stacked against Wallace, experts say, from his sex and race to mental illness,"* the *Inquirer* helped to convey a more complex picture of Wallace that recognized the linkages between policing, the mental health care system, and systemic racism.

In its protest coverage, the *Inquirer* frequently portrayed the threat posed by protesters, but it also offered detailed descriptions of the harm inflicted on protesters by Philadelphia police.

A clear majority (72%) of the *Inquirer's* protest stories included information about one or more threats posed by protesters – most commonly citing damage to government and private property – while only 36% of protest stories included information about police harming protesters.[40] Yet we noted that, when the *Inquirer* did cover harm to protesters, it was in substantial detail – more so than in the other two newspapers. Indeed, most of these stories dedicated multiple paragraphs to describing how police inflicted harm through their use of tear gas, pepper spray, rubber bullets, and other forms of violent force. [41]

POLICE PORTRAYALS

Over time, the presence of information challenging police actions or practices increased in the *Inquirer's* coverage.

Similar to the other two newspapers, local crime reporting rarely included information challenging police. Rather, the shift towards including this information was driven by stories about police conduct, accountability, reform, and protests. In the wake of Floyd's death in May, these stories became more likely to include information challenging the police – a pattern that was reinforced further after Wallace's death in October **(Figure 17)**.

Figure 17

In covering stories about police conduct, accountability, reform, and protests, the *Inquirer* increasingly included information that challenged or questioned police actions or practices.

Before Floyd's death (Jan. 1-May 24, 2020): ⟶ Five months following Floyd's death (May 25-Oct. 25, 2020): ⟶ After Wallace's death (Oct. 26-Dec. 31, 2020)

14 of 23 Stories
Included information that challenged the police

57 of 72 Stories
Included information that challenged the police

22 of 24 Stories
Included information that challenged the police
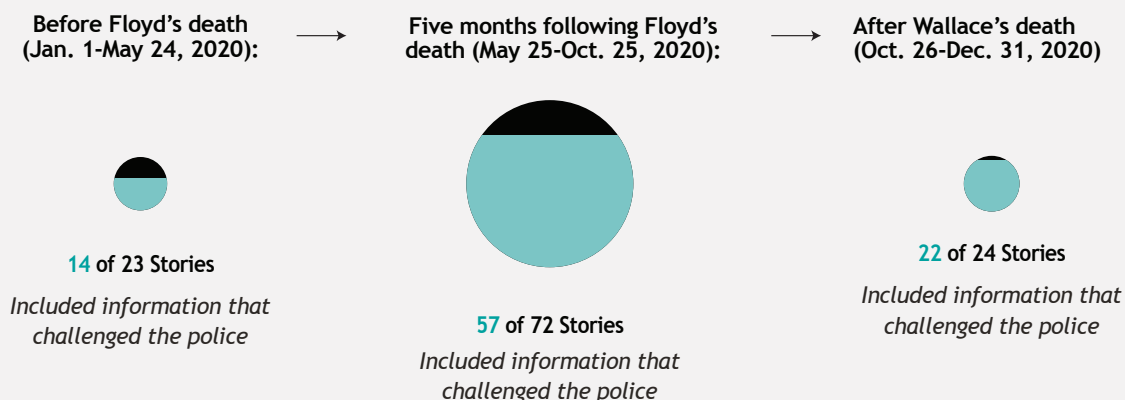
The *Inquirer* frequently omitted information about police accountability in stories mentioning civilians seriously injured or killed by police.

In the aftermath of Wallace's death, the *Inquirer's* reporting included some information about police accountability – for example, the release of officers' bodycam footage and tapes of the 911 calls from the day Wallace was killed. But overall, information about police accountability was not consistently present in stories mentioning a civilian seriously injured or killed by police. Similar to the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, only about half of the *Inquirer's* stories mentioning this level of civilian harm included information about police accountability for their actions.

Context

Following Floyd's death, the *Inquirer* began drawing more attention to systemic problems in policing – both in its coverage of the protests and in other stories about policing.

As noted earlier, most of the *Inquirer's* stories about the protests (82%) included references to racial justice, helping to contextualize demands for police accountability and reform. In many of these cases, the stories briefly referred to protesters' rallying cries, signs, and broad objectives around ending racism in policing. More occasionally, we observed stories that provided greater context – such as a story pointing out the discrepancy between the police response to white vigilantes in a majority-white neighborhood who claimed to be protecting the police, versus the aggressive police response to individuals in majority-minority neighborhoods and those protesting police brutality.[42] Beyond protest coverage, the *Inquirer* reported on the role of racism in other stories about policing. A particularly striking example was an interactive timeline published in July 2020, providing in-depth context about the long history of police brutality against Black people in Philadelphia.[43]

Implications

Overall, this study has yielded a nuanced set of answers to our research questions. Key characteristics of the three newspapers' coverage of policing did seem to reflect and respond to the heightened public attention to issues of police violence and racial justice, fueled by Floyd's death in late May. For example, we observed some signs of more inclusive sourcing practices, less dehumanizing language, and greater inclusion of information that challenged the police or helped situate policing in the context of racial justice. But the findings also suggest that coverage of policing continues to reflect certain systematic tendencies towards narratives that reinforce a police perspective. This is visible in the prevalence of police sources in local crime reporting, the persistently strong focus on "criminalizing" or "threatening" information about civilians who interact with the police, and the regular omission of information about police accountability in stories that mention civilians seriously injured or killed by police.

Our findings align with observations from interviews with journalists, who confirm that there have been some efforts to shift certain problematic practices – for example, around use of police jargon, inclusion of information that perpetuates victim-blaming narratives, and use of mugshots. But more broadly, interest in reexamining and shifting reporting practices to deepen and strengthen coverage seems to be driven more by individual journalists and (some) editors, rather than an institutional-level commitment to changing newsroom norms and culture. At an institutional level, journalists observe resistance to changes that would reduce reliance on police sources and increase the presence of community voices in coverage of crime, protests, and activism. Norms of "objectivity" as the professional standard of journalism continue to present barriers to changes in the ways that news stories are

structured and produced. That said, both journalists and activists observe that personnel shifts in newsrooms and the rise of digital media have helped create at least some room to question the idea of "unbiased" reporting and practices that normalize a white perspective.

Below we offer four broader observations about the implications of our findings for newsroom practices.

1. Source diversity:

Newsrooms have an opportunity to build on the more inclusive sourcing practices used in their coverage of police accountability, reforms, and protests, bringing this wider set of perspectives to local crime reporting. We recognize that this may run afoul of newsroom pressures to quickly report out on a breaking local crime story. But relying solely on the police version of events at best offers an imbalanced narrative – and at worst validates a narrative that is misleading or even false. Publishing follow-up stories to correct and/or expand upon the record is one option, as seen on a large scale in the *Louisville Courier-Journal's* coverage of Taylor's death. More broadly, reporters need to be given space to prioritize diverse sourcing practices that construct a more complete narrative from the get-go. This includes making community-based voices more of a norm rather than an exception in local crime reporting.

2. Attributions of responsibility:

Stories that involve police use of force convey a narrative about who is responsible for triggering that use of force and for any harm that occurs as a result. Information that portrays civilians as threatening helps shift responsibility away from the police, justifying use of force through the reactive lens of upholding the law and restoring order. References to a prior association with crime and use of dehumanizing language such as "suspect" or "offender" reinforce this same lens by portraying police as reacting to someone defined already as criminal. Conversely, information that challenges police conduct helps shift responsibility towards the police, raising questions about how and why force was used. Attributions of responsibility can be usefully nuanced by humanizing information that expands readers' view of the person beyond a specific interaction with police. Contextual information can further deepen readers' understanding of attributions of responsibility – for example by pointing to the systemic factors that inform how police respond to a Black man experiencing a mental health crisis, as we saw in one of the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* stories about Walter Wallace.

3. Legitimacy of the status quo versus demands for change:

The heightened focus on police reform in 2020, including intense coverage of widespread protests, put a spotlight on how news coverage can serve to legitimize the status quo and/or legitimize demands for the status quo to change. For example, an emphasis on describing threats posed by protesters to property or to one another can help delegitimize their calls for police reforms. Omission of information about police accountability for actions that seriously injure or kill civilians can help legitimize current police practices. By the same token, calls for change can be legitimized through sources who explain the racial justice context and systemic problems underlying the need for police reforms. These kinds of contextual reference points shift the focus from the actions of a few individual police officers, orienting attention to institutional and cultural problems that require large-scale solutions. These examples illustrate how the narrative arc of

news coverage can bend towards or away from the status quo, depending on various newsroom decisions about which sources and which pieces of information to include or exclude in a given story.
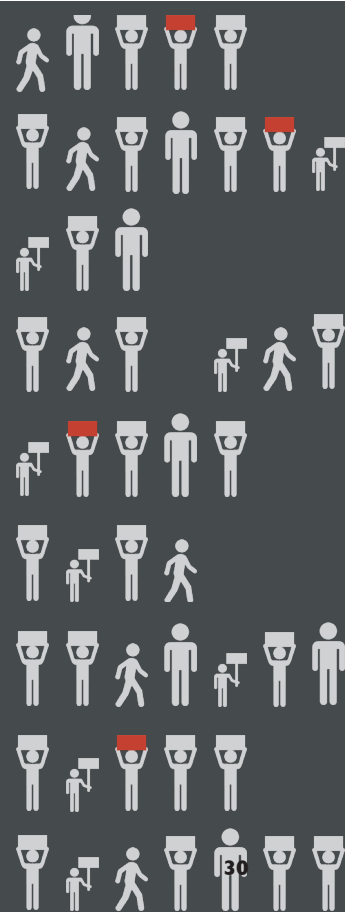
4. Protests as a causal mechanism for change:

A future area for additional research is exploring whether reporting explicitly links protests to social, political, and policy change. To what extent do news stories discuss the role of mass demonstrations in advancing shifts in policy debates or introducing changes in the national conversation? Although not formally part of the coding framework presented in this report, information about the impact of protests emerged as a recurring theme in coverage of policing. For example, stories credited the protests with contributing to tangible changes such as: official pledges to increase police accountability and transparency of police departments; public hearings about police reforms as well as police responses to protests; arrests, firings, and resignations of police officers held accountable for misconduct; passage of a range of police reforms; and a wider and deeper dialogue at the local, state, national, and even international level about policing, racism, and public safety. These examples illustrate how reporting can potentially validate and amplify the value and impact of public protests as a meaningful mechanism for change. We encourage further exploration of whether and how newsrooms describe the impact of protests and mass actions in broader processes of policy, social, and political change.

These observations highlight how the myriad decisions that go into reporting on a single story ripple out into systematic patterns of coverage that shape how readers think about and understand policing in their community. This underscores the important role that newsroom practices can play during key moments when the public discourse dramatically shifts, as it did in 2020. We recognize that reporting practices may have continued to shift in 2021 after the period of our study concluded, perhaps moving in the directions we have suggested above.[44] As discourse around policing and racial justice continues to ebb and flow over time, we hope this study contributes to ongoing conversations, both within newsrooms and beyond, about how local news outlets relate to and cover the communities they serve.

Acknowledgments

Appendix:
Coding Framework

Code Name	Description	Inter-coder Reliability (Krippendorff's Alpha)
Key Topics		
Focus on local crime	To count as the "focus" of an article, local crime is mentioned in a majority of the article's paragraphs. Local crime is defined as murder, assault, rape, drugs, theft, fraud, child abuse, sexual harassment, white collar, arson, threats, hit-and-run, or kidnapping within the paper's city.	0.94
Focus on protests	To count as the "focus" of an article, protests (peaceful or violent) are mentioned in a majority of the article's paragraphs. (Inclusive of the looting/rioting code below.)	0.96
Focus on looting/rioting	To count as the "focus" of an article, looting/rioting associated with protests is mentioned in a majority of the article's paragraphs.	1.00
Sources In cases where a source fell into multiple categories, we coded the source in all categories that applied (e.g., a protester who was identified as a university professor).		
Police	The article cites sources that represent the police and associated organizations — including the police commissioner, police chief, dispatchers, sheriffs, police unions and police associations. This code also includes phrases like "authorities," "police say," and "according to police," as well as police records like arrest citations, police data, or police reports. This code does not include former police personnel.	0.78
Government	The article cites sources in elected or administrative positions — such as the mayor, district attorney, governor, council members, judges — and staff thereof. Also includes government institutions, data, or records.	0.95
Victim or witness of police causing civilian harm	The article cites sources identified as civilians who are victims of police harm, as well as family and friends of the victim, lawyers representing the victim and/or the victim's family, and witnesses to the incident. Harm to civilians is defined as police causing physical harm to a civilian (including killing them), causing psychological/mental harm, or causing economic harm like loss of a job or job prospects.	0.95
Victim or witness of local crime	The article cites sources described as victims of local crime, family and friends of victims of local crime, and witnesses to the incident. The definition of what constitutes local crime is provided above. This code does not include crimes committed in the context of protests or crimes committed by police officers.	0.90

Community organization	The article cites sources from organizations that help meet community needs or provide services to the community. This includes organizations that provide health services or social services, houses of worship and members of the clergy, neighborhood associations, local school teachers and administrators, among others.	0.80
Protesters, activists, and advocacy organizations	The article cites sources identified as protesters, activists, advocates, or representatives from advocacy organizations. This code also includes civil rights lawyers and lawyers representing protesters or activists.	0.70*
Business owner	The article cites sources identified as a business owner or representative of a business. This code also captures articles that reference video surveillance from businesses' security camera footage.	1.00
Media	The article cites sources identified as journalists associated with another media outlet, or when an article quotes or paraphrases coverage from another media outlet.	0.82
Political candidate	The article cites sources who are running for elected office.	1.00
University or research institution	The article cites sources identified as academic scholars or professors, university presidents or administrators, experts at research organizations, or peer-reviewed journals.	0.95
Civilian eyewitness video	The article cites video recording — including cell phone video and Facebook Live footage — taken by a civilian at the scene of a local crime, a protest, and/or an incident involving the police.	1.00
Police video recording	The article cites transcripts of 911 calls, police surveillance video, squad car dash video, police body camera footage, or emergency dispatch audio.	0.81
Other sources	The article cites any sources that are not covered in the above categories.	0.77
Police source in headline	The article's headline cites the police as a source.	1.00
Police Portrayals		
Distancing language	The article uses distancing language to describe an interaction between police and civilians. Expressions include "officer-involved shooting," "altercation," "discharged weapon," "crowd control weapons," and "nonlethal projectile," among others.	0.85
Challenges to police actions or practices	The article includes information or sources that explicitly question the appropriateness of the police response or police practices, describe the police as having made a mistake, and/or are critical of police. This includes articles that mention charges or lawsuits filed against the police.	0.85
Police officer history of misconduct	The article includes information or sources that indicate a police officer involved in an incident of misconduct had a prior relevant history that may be linked to use of force, violence, or other forms of police misconduct.	0.85
Police accountability in specific conduct cases	The article includes information or sources that describe accountability mechanisms and processes applied to specific cases of police misconduct. This includes internal and external investigations, the release of body camera footage and 911 recordings, and lawsuits brought against police.	0.86

Civilian Harm

Civilians harmed by police	The article includes information or sources that describe harm inflicted on civilians by police officers, or the number of civilians harmed by police officers. This code follows the definition of harm to civilians as provided above.	0.94
Civilians killed or seriously wounded by the police	The article names George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Walter Wallace, and/or other civilians who were killed by police. "Seriously wounded" is defined as people who were wounded by police gunfire and/or sustained a serious physical injury.	0.94

Civilian Portrayals

Police officers harmed	The article includes information or sources that describe harm sustained by police officers (including physical and mental trauma), or the number of police officers harmed.	0.87
Civilians harmed by other civilians in the context of protests	The article includes information or sources that describe civilians physically harmed by other civilians during protests. This excludes harm reported as part of local crime stories.	0.93
Damage to police property in the context of protests	The article includes information or sources that describe damage to police property — including police vehicles and buildings — that occurred during protests.	0.92
Damage to non-police property in the context of protests	The article includes information or sources that describe damage to non-police property — either public or private — that occurred during protests. This includes specific examples of property damage such as citizens' cars, local businesses, or statues.	0.84
Civilian threat in the context of protests	The article includes information or sources that describe civilians being aggressive, threatening, or hostile toward the police during protests, or information that otherwise suggests that police were justified in using force against civilians in the context of protests.	0.64*
Prior association with crime (in portrayals of civilians killed or seriously wounded by the police)	The article includes information or sources that describe the civilian as having a criminal history or previous interactions with police. This includes references warrants.	0.89
Threatening or criminal activity (in portrayals of civilians killed or seriously wounded by the police)	The article includes information or sources that describe the civilian as engaging in threatening or criminal activity at the time when police killed or seriously wounded the person. This applies to civilians who were directly involved in the incident (e.g., Taylor's boyfriend).	0.82
Humanizing information (in portrayals of civilians killed or seriously wounded by the police)	The article includes information or sources that describe details about the civilian that humanize them and allow readers to relate to the person's life. This includes details about their loved ones, their role in the community, or their passions, as well as details about their well-being, including their mental health.	0.84

Provision of Context

Information about racial justice or injustice	The article includes information or sources that mention racial justice or injustice, Black Lives Matter, racial equity, racism, and/or racial discrimination in police practices. This includes passing references to these phrases as well as more detailed explanations.	0.92

Information about potential reforms or changes to police practices	The article includes information or sources that describe any kinds of police reforms or potential changes in police practices, policies, accountability, or budgeting. This code applies to fleeting references to police reforms (e.g., "defund the police") that do not provide any further details, as well as to references to reform that are captured in the next three codes.	0.78
Information that explains what "defunding the police" looks like in terms of policies, practices, or budgets	The article includes information or sources that describe specific potential changes in policing that involve reallocating or redirecting funding away from the police department to other government agencies or organizations, or city budget discussions or decisions around police funding levels. This code does not apply to passing references to "defund the police"; at least some explanation of what the change would mean or look like must be present.	0.77
Information that explains any changes in policing that do NOT involve shifting funds away from police or are not described as part of "defund the police"	The article includes information or sources that describe any specific changes in policing that do NOT include any reference to decreases or reallocations in police funding levels or the phrase "defund the police" (some of these examples may even involve increases in police funding). This code does not apply to passing references; at least some explanation of what the change would mean or look like must be present.	0.83
Any reference to opponents of defunding the police	The article includes any reference to individuals or organizations who OPPOSE efforts to "defund the police." This includes even brief mentions in passing to opponents of defunding, dismantling, or abolishing the police.	1.00

* Due to marginal inter-coder reliability, we treat findings for these two codes as tentative only.

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[10] A. Johnson. 2016. "Copspeak: 7 Ways Journalists Use Police Jargon to Obscure the Truth." FAIR, July 11.

See also The Language Project, an initiative of the Marshall Project that aims to address the use of dehumanizing language in criminal justice reporting.

[11] P.J. Hirschfield, D. Simon. 2010. Legitimating Police Violence: Newspaper Narratives of Deadly Force. *Theoretical Criminology*, 14(2), 155-82.

[12] C.J. Smiley, D. Fakunle. From "brute" to "thug": the demonization and criminalization of unarmed Black male victims in America. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 26:3-4, 350-366.

[13] Kilgo and Harlow 2019.

[14] R. Mourao, D. Kilgo, G. Sylvie. 2018. Framing Ferguson: The interplay of advocacy and journalistic frames in local and national newspaper coverage of Michael Brown. *Journalism*, 22(2), 320-40.

[15] A. Johnson. 2018. Cop-speak: another form is distancing language. 6 Elements of Police Spin: An Object Lesson in Copspeak. FAIR, January 30.

[16] P.J. Hirschfield, D. Simon. 2010. Legitimating Police Violence: Newspaper Narratives of Deadly Force. *Theoretical Criminology*, 14(2), 155-82.

[17] Hirschfield and Simon 2010.

[18] K. Fridkin, A. Wintersieck, J. Courey. 2017. Race and Police Brutality: The Importance of Media Framing. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 3394-3414.

[19] S. Iyengar. 1996. Framing Responsibility for Political Issues. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 546, 59-70.

[20] Ash et al. 2019; Fridkin et al. 2017. Though Mourao, Kilgo, and Sylvie (2018) did find an increase in thematic framing over time in their analysis of coverage of Michael Brown's killing by police.

[21] Nagle 2021.

[22] Race Forward. 2014. *Moving the Race Conversation Forward: How the Media Covers Racism, and Other Barriers to Productive Racial Discourse.* The Center for Racial Justice Innovation.

[23] We have highlighted Floyd, Taylor, and Wallace as particularly high-profile cases of police killing civilians in 2020, but this is not to diminish the fact that many other civilians were harmed or killed by police that year. We also note that David McAtee, who was shot by National Guard and police officers during the protests, was another salient case within the Louisville context.

[24] We observed a gap in Nexis' database for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* at the critical juncture of May 26-June 1 – that is, the six days that followed George Floyd's death. Nexis does not appear to have recorded any articles about

Floyd's death or the aftermath during this period. We conducted a search of the *Star Tribune's* website to identify relevant articles published during this time period, and randomly selected a subset to include in our study. This rebalanced the sample to reflect the corrected distribution in the full population of relevant articles across the 12-month period, taking into account the very high volume of coverage at the end of May.

[25] D. Freelon. 2013. ReCal OIR: Ordinal, interval, and ratio intercoder reliability as a web service. *International Journal of Internet Science*, 8(1), 10-16. D. Freelon. 2010. ReCal: Intercoder reliability calculation as a web service. *International Journal of Internet Science*, 5(1), 20-33.

[26] The two codes with marginal inter-coder reliability were: a code designed to capture the presence of activists, protesters, and advocacy organizations as sources in news articles (Krippendorf's alpha = .70) and a code designed to capture information about police interactions with protesters engaged in illegal or threatening activity (Krippendorf's alpha =.64)

[27] Note: protester harm was examined as an additional layer of analysis beyond what we captured in our coding framework. A member of the research team analyzed the subset of stories focused on the protests to identify which ones included information about the police harming protesters. We defined "harm" as references to the police using tear gas, pepper spray, batons, rubber bullets, or other weapons or forms of force against protesters.

[28] These findings refer to accountability mechanisms or processes applied to specific cases of police conduct (e.g., accountability for an officer's actions, or accountability for a specific department's actions). They do not include references to police accountability in more general contexts, such as policy debates about establishing citizen oversight committees.

[29] It is important to note that, of the 149 stories in our *Star-Tribune* sample that mentioned a civilian seriously injured or killed by police, only 15 stories were published prior to Floyd's death. Of these, 11 included criminalizing information, while only 2 stories contained humanizing information. The remaining bulk of stories mentioning a civilian seriously injured or killed by police (n=134) were published after Floyd's death. Of those, 66% (n=89) included neither criminalizing nor humanizing information.

[30] The *Star-Tribune's* protest coverage was less likely to mention other types of threats: damage to police property (18%), civilians engaged in illegal activity or threatening behaviors towards the police (16%), civilians physically harmed by other civilians in the protests (13%), police officers physically harmed by protesters (8%).

[31] Among the subset of the *Courier-Journal's* local crime stories, 43% cited the police in headlines during the period prior to Floyd's death compared to 19% during the period after his death.

[32] During the period prior to Floyd's death, 15 *Courier-Journal* stories mentioned civilians seriously injured or killed by police. Of these, 14 included criminalization information, while only 3 included humanizing information. During the period following Floyd's death, 164 stories mentioned civilians seriously injured or killed by police – 61% of which included criminalizing information, compared to 27% that included humanizing information.

[33] Recall that, due to marginal inter-coder reliability, our findings are tentative for the percentage of stories mentioning civilians engaged in illegal activity or threatening behavior towards the police (Krippendorf's alpha = .64). We observed that the *Courier-Journal* was less likely to mention two other types of threats posed by protesters: police officers physically harmed by protesters (10%) and damage to police property (5%).

[34] H. Gardner, "24 days of Louisville protests about more than Breonna Taylor," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 21, 2020.

[35] For example: C. Kenning, S. Ladd, "30 days of protest," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 28, 2020; B. Loosemore, H. Gardner, "This city has failed us: Juneteenth brings chance to celebrate amid city protests," Louisville Courier-Journal, September 24, 2020; B. Kobin, "We've had enough," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 6, 2020; S. Ladd, "University presidents support protesters," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, June 5, 2020.

[36] African American Policy Forum. 2015. Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women. Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies.

[37] For example: M. Mencarini, "How Until Freedom made Taylor its focus," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, September 5, 2020; T. Duvall, D. Costello, "People across America are saying her name," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, August 9, 2020.

[38] The increase in the percentage of *Inquirer* stories citing government sources appears to have been driven by local crime reporting: the percentage rose from 42% before Floyd's death to 52% after. Among other stories about policing, the percentage citing government sources was consistently high (79%).

[39] It is important to note that Wallace was not the only civilian seriously injured or killed by police during the final months of 2020. Indeed, our analysis of criminalizing and humanizing portrayals included stories about other civilians who were shot by Philadelphia police late in the year. For example, in early December the *Inquirer* published a story about an incident in which officers shot a civilian named Jose Cerda. This story primarily relied on the police department's account, though the *Inquirer* reporters noted their attempt to talk to neighbors who declined to discuss what had happened. A few days later, a follow-up story was published, which described Cerda as a "knife-wielding man" and again recounted the police department's play-by-play account of what happened. In a separate incident on December 25, the *Inquirer* published a story titled "*Police kill man said to fire weapon.*" This initial story emphasized the police's portrayal of Jesus Perez as firing a gun into a crowd, killing his teenage son and seriously injuring his teenage nephew, with only a brief reference to the family's pushback against this account. Two days later, however, a follow-up story offered a far more humanizing portrayal of Perez, drawing on community sources who strongly refuted the police department's account of the shooting and described Perez as a family man who worked hard, played games with his son, and served as a father figure to members of the extended family. These two examples offer an interesting contrast in civilian portrayals – and use of community sources – during the period following Wallace's death.

[40] 46% of the *Inquirer's* protest stories mentioned damage to government and private property, while other threats were cited somewhat less frequently: civilians physically harmed by other civilians in the protests (26%), civilians engaged in illegal activity or threatening behaviors towards the police (21%), police officers physically harmed by protesters (18%), and damage to police property (15%).

[41] Of the 39 protest stories in our *Philadelphia Inquirer* sample, 14 included information about police harming protesters. Of those 14 stories, 11 dedicated multiple paragraphs to describing police harm to protesters.

[42] A. Orso, A. Steele, W. Bender, V. Vella, "City says vigilantism not allowed," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 3, 2020.

[43] D. Saint, C.R. McCoy, T. Rowan, V. Russ, "Black and Blue: A Look at 190 Years of Police Brutality Against Black People in Philadelphia," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 7, 2020. This is an interactive timeline, accessible at https://www.inquirer.com/news/inq/philadelphia-police-brutality-history-frank-rizzo-20200710.html.

[44] It is important to note that our study period spanned January through December 2020, so it does not include the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune's* coverage of the trials of Derek Chauvin, Thomas Lane, J. Kueng, and Tou Thao in 2021.