

The News Media's Picture of Children



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A Children Now Executive Summary
Leadership and Local Action for Children

Overview

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FOCUSING PUBLIC ATTENTION and concern on issues regarding children is vital to social and political progress on these issues. The news media holds significant power and responsibility in making this happen. *Yet, how well does the news media cover children's issues, and how do their words and pictures alert the public to the conditions of children and to positive solutions that can improve all of our lives?*

In 1922, Walter Lippmann described the press as being "like the beam of a searchlight, bringing one episode and then another out of the darkness into vision." It is not enough, therefore, that only policymakers and advocates know that more than one-quarter of the nation's children live in poverty and that less than half of our two-year-olds are properly immunized for preventable childhood diseases. This study underscores that there is a tremendous need for coverage of all the broad issues that concern children. Members of the "fourth estate" must bring to light the nature of child care, youth unemployment, and prenatal health in America with the same vigor as they report on the whereabouts of pop music stars and the daily Dow Jones Industrial average. They must also help shine the spotlight on meaningful solutions.

THE NEWS MEDIA'S PICTURE OF CHILDREN is the first major analysis of national news content devoted to child-related topics to be reported from the academic community. Children Now commissioned this study from Professor Dale Kunkel as part of a body of work to be presented at Children Now's "Children and the News Media" conference at Stanford University, March 3-5, 1994.

Key Findings

CRIME AND VIOLENCE

DOMINATE COVERAGE OF CHILDREN

THE MOST COMPELLING finding produced by this study is that the news media's coverage of children most frequently involves reports of crime and violence. For television, such coverage accounted for nearly half (48%) of all stories, with only slightly less representation (40%) in the newspapers. Stories in this category were skewed heavily toward reports of crimes just occurred or their subsequent investigation and prosecution.

- There was also substantial treatment of stories about education, with newspapers (25% of all stories) far exceeding television (15% of all stories) in such coverage.
- Coverage of crime/violence and education accounted for nearly two-thirds of all child-related stories covered by the press.
- The most neglected area, economic concerns, includes such topics as child poverty, child care and welfare, accounted for just 4% of all newspaper and television news stories about children.

Distribution of Stories by General Topic Areas

	television	newspaper news
CRIME/VIOLENCE	48%	40%
EDUCATION	15%	25%
FAMILY	11%	9%
CULTURAL ISSUES	12%	11%
HEALTH	11%	11%
ECONOMICS	4%	4%

ONLY ONE IN THREE STORIES ADDRESS ANY PUBLIC POLICY CONCERNS

In contrast, the news media provided less overall coverage for *all* public policy issues combined than they gave to their reports of crime and violence alone; both newspapers and television devoted only 35% of their stories to any policy-related content. An even smaller proportion of stories (23%) reflected a *primary* focus on policy.

Average Amount of Child-Related Stories Per Edition of News

	# of news stories	# of editions	average per edition	# of editorials commentaries	# of editions	average per edition
NEWSPAPERS	690	150	4.6	150	150	1.0
TELEVISION	109	84	1.3	—	—	—

- Of the policy topics addressed by the news media, education received the most attention, followed by crime and violence policy concerns.
- Almost entirely overlooked were many important public policy issues *and meaningful solutions* that fall in the areas of family, health, and economic concerns; each of these three areas accounted for no more than 2% of the overall news coverage examined in the study. Other important topics that received relatively little attention from the press included ethnic minority group issues, gender-based concerns, and age-related, developmental differences among the child population.

CHILDREN RECEIVE FREQUENT COVERAGE

The news media surveyed seem to provide a substantial number of stories addressing child-related topics. Newspapers naturally are more thorough in this regard, offering an average of 4.6 stories per issue, although even television devoted more than one story per edition of the network news. Many would assume that newspapers tend to convey a greater amount of information per story than television, yet the findings of this study suggest that issue may warrant closer examination. With the average television story running a full two minutes, and the comparable mean for newspaper story length observed to be only 850 words, there may not be as great a disparity between the two media as one might expect.

- The newspaper which ranked highest in the combined number of news stories and editorials/commentaries, the *Chicago Tribune*, has declared an emphasis on coverage of children.
- Children accounted for only 11% of front page stories across all newspapers.

- Children's news is conveyed with some brevity. For newspapers, nearly three-quarters of all stories contained less than 1000 words (roughly the equivalent of four double-spaced typewritten pages).

NO SINGLE AGE GROUP OF CHILDREN IS EMPHASIZED

Stories were evaluated for any focus on particular age ranges of children. The most striking finding was that the majority of all news stories involving children offers no primary focus on any particular age group, but rather tends to encompass a broader perspective that references children as a wider range of unspecified ages.

- Overall, adolescents receive considerably more coverage than other children.

TELEVISION AND NEWSPAPERS LOOK SIMILAR IN CHARACTERISTICS OF COVERAGE

There is a high degree of consistency in the approaches employed for reporting the news about children.

- Both newspapers and television rely extensively on expert sources (87% for newspapers; 76% for television).
- Both newspapers and television report statistical information and present some historical context in nearly half of their stories.
- Children or parents are cited as sources in just one-quarter of news stories involving children.

Conclusion:

News coverage of children is not balanced and little emphasis is placed on solutions.

While there may be substantial coverage of children in the news, it would be difficult to characterize that coverage as balanced. The emphasis placed on reports of crime, with children portrayed as both victims and perpetrators of violence, seems to skew the information the press provides to the public, which may in turn diminish the public's perception of the relative importance of other child-related concerns. This report underscores the need for greater breadth and balance in the news media's coverage of child-related issues.

Methodology

This study was conducted by Dale Kunkel, Associate Professor of Communication at the University of California, Santa Barbara. It is based on a significant sample of news coverage collected from eight of the nation's most important sources of news. Data were gathered throughout the entire month of November, 1993. Each edition of five major newspapers (*Atlanta Constitution*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*) was analyzed, as well as the nightly newscasts delivered by each of the three major television networks (ABC, CBS and NBC).

This sample was subjected to a systematic analysis used to identify stories with a primary focus on children and/or child-related issues and then to categorize these stories along a number of descriptive dimensions. (Stories were included in the analysis if their headline included a child-related term, if any of their first three paragraphs made mention of child-related issues, or if their overall content was judged to be primarily devoted to children or child-related issues.)

Children Now

Children Now is a nonpartisan policy and advocacy organization for children.

Children Now acts as a strong and independent voice for the millions of children who cannot speak for themselves—in the public policy arena, in the mass media and in the community. We focus particular attention on children who are poor or at-risk.

Children Now:

- Educates the public and decision makers about the needs of children;
- Develops and promotes effective strategies to improve their lives;
- Generates new resources for cost-effective programs that benefit children and families;
- Reaches out to parents and children to inform them of opportunities to help themselves.

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