

Ford Report

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# **What is News and Who Makes News in Prime Time**

A Report of the Cultural Indicators Research Project

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## **Highlights**

- \* Themes of crime and violence dominate the national news.
- \* News professionals (reporters, anchors) and news sources (witnesses, experts) are predominantly white males. Persons of color appear mostly as the subjects of the stories.
- \* Almost half of the people in the news are government officials.
- \* Violent, criminal and other dangerous persons are disproportionately Hispanics and dark-skinned foreigners.
- \* Prime time entertainment drama presents a cast of characters who are mostly business persons, entertainers, service persons, and law enforcers.

## **Results**

This is a report of work supported by the Ford Foundation for the content analysis of news and entertainment programming. Some of the results are included in a report to the Screen Actors Guild ("Casting and Fate in '98"). The results of this research will also be released to the press and edited for publication in both academic and general journals.

A representative sample of dramatic programs from the four broadcast networks has been recorded and analyzed for the first phase of this project, from the Fall 1997 season of prime time drama (8:00 – 11:00pm EST). Evening news broadcasts on ABC, CBS, and NBC were recorded from consecutive weekdays from 5 different weeks in the Fall of 1997. The research team performed a content analysis of 15 programs, 206 news stories and 338 dramatic entertainment programs in the first phase of this research, including a one week sample of daytime serial drama on network television.

One-week samples of daytime serial dramas and prime time television have been recorded for analysis from the Fall 1998 season. Not yet analyzed are one week samples of the programming broadcast on MTV and BET from 8am to 2pm EST from 1997 and 1998.

Units of analysis are themes in news stories and people in the news. The analysis has been performed by trained coders who observe and code various aspects of content using an instrument of analysis. This instrument consists of definitions and category schemes relating to the units and the purposes of the analysis. It is the main recording instrument that has been used by the Cultural Indicators Project in the analysis of over 4,000 programs and 40,000 characters on annual samples of dramatic programs since 1968, and on news since 1992.

## Themes in the News

As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1 below, themes of crime and violence dominate the national news. About 40% of the news stories analyzed dealt with crime, violence or law enforcement.

Table 1. Themes of National Evening News Stories

Theme	Number of stories	Percent of stories
Crime Violence Police	80	38.8
International Politics, War	66	32.0
Business	51	24.8
National Politics	47	22.8
Courts	43	20.9
Health	41	19.9
Disasters	29	14.1
Childcare, Education	22	10.7
Minority Issues	17	8.3
Entertainment	13	6.3
Religion	9	4.4
Aging	4	1.9
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>206</b>	

Table 1. Themes of stories in national evening news. Each news story could have more than one theme, so the number of stories shown are not equal to the total stories.

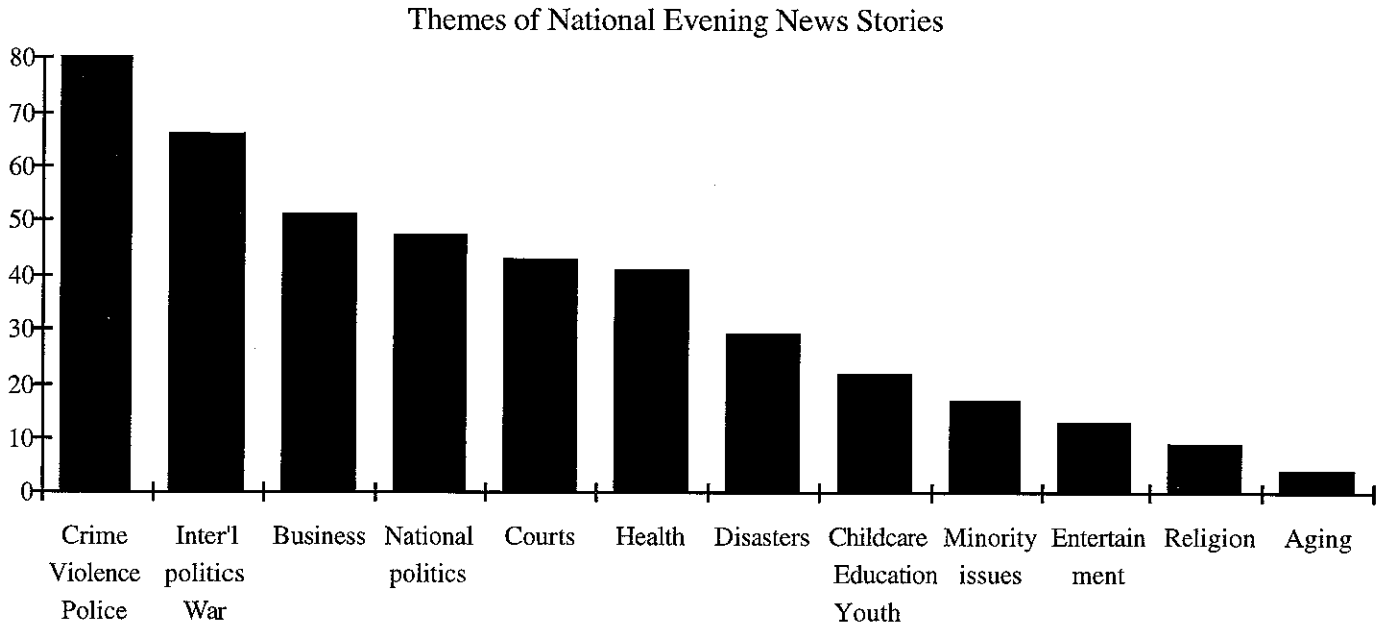


Figure 1. Themes of stories in national evening news.

## People in the News

The Cultural Indicators research system divides people in news stories into three categories. "News Professionals" are the reporters and anchors who narrate the news stories. "News Sources" are people who are not the subject of stories, but either bystanders or witnesses to news events, or experts asked to comment on or interpret events. "News Makers" are people who are presented as subjects of stories.

As shown in Table 2 and summarized in Figure 2 below, news professionals are predominantly white males. News sources also tend to be white. The majority of non-whites, 72.4% of them, appear in the news as subjects of stories rather than as information sources. By contrast, only 45.6% of white males in the news are presented as subjects of stories.

Table 2. Role of Women and Minorities in the News

	News Professional		News Source		News Maker		TOTALS
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	
Male Total	83.5	76	81.6	169	76.2	364	609
White	79.1	72	73.9	153	56.1	268	493
Non-white	0.1	1	4.8	10	7.7	37	48
Female Total	16.5	15	18.4	38	18.2	87	140
White	15.4	14	16.9	35	15.3	73	122
Non-white	0.1	1	0.9	2	1.5	7	10
TOTAL*		91		207		478	

Table 2. Role of women and minorities in the news. Some people were mentioned without indicating race. Three male News Professionals, sixteen male and one female News Sources, and 59 male and two female News Makers were mentioned without race. Percentages shown are of category totals.

Women and Minorities in the News

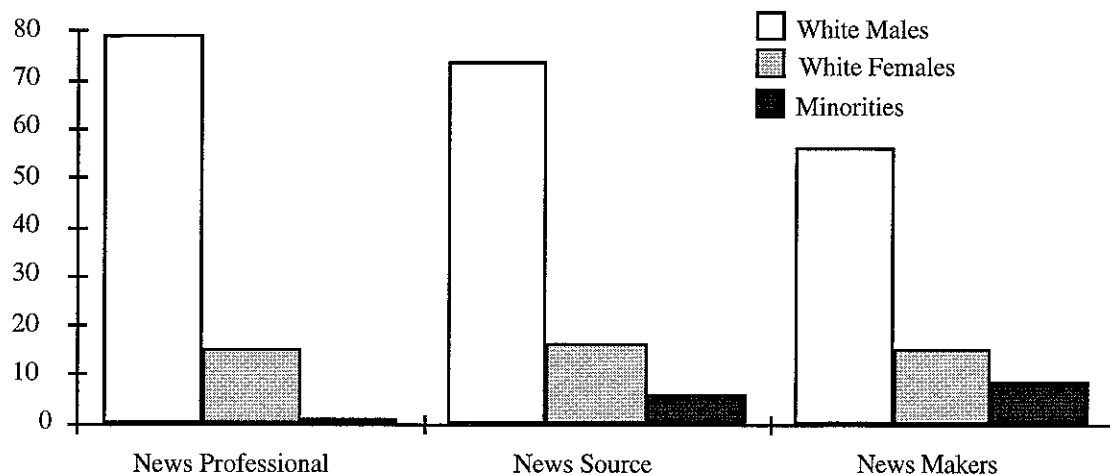
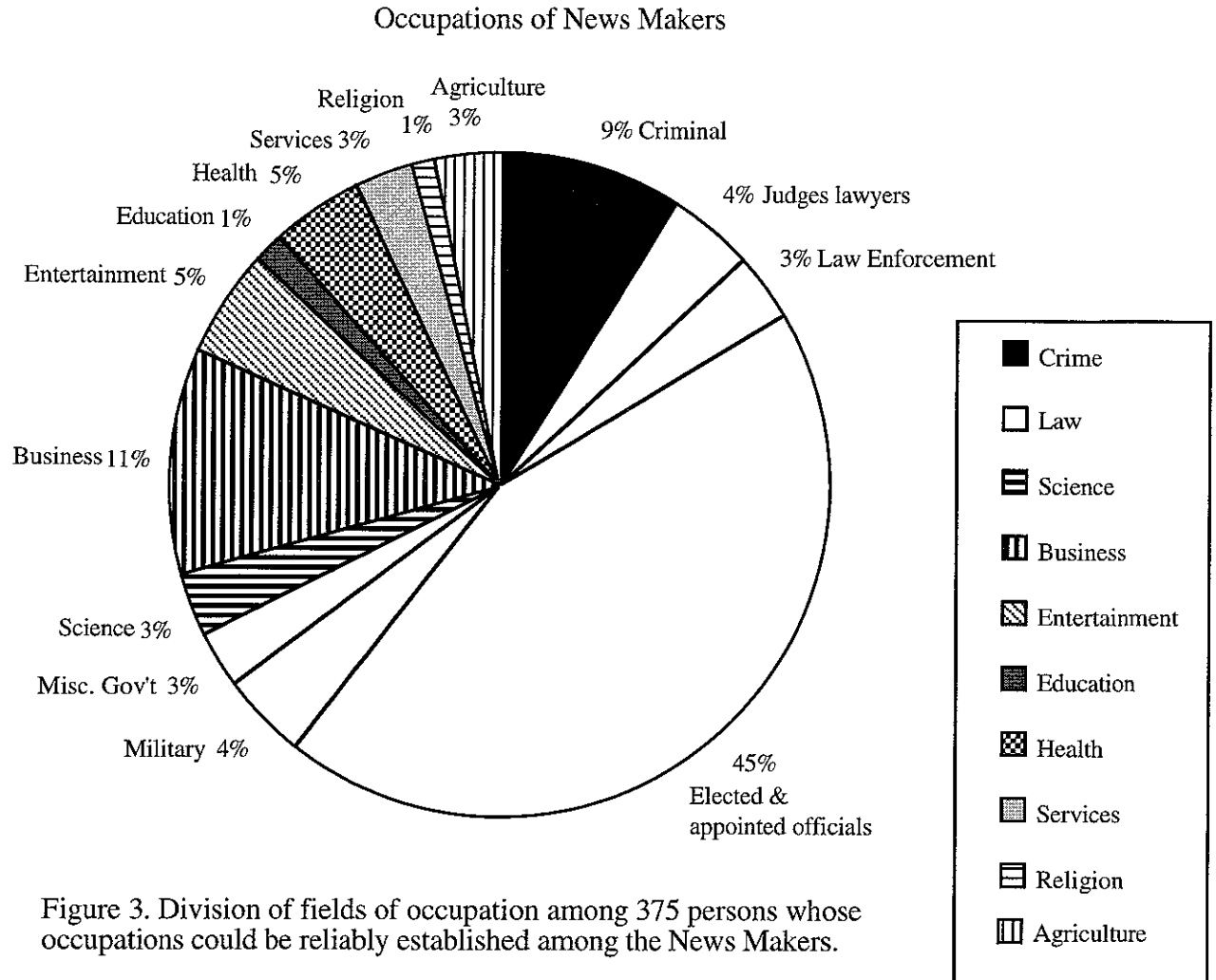


Figure 2. Percentages of white males, females, and minorities among categories of people appearing in evening news as in the columns of Table 2.

## Occupations

The content of news is largely government business, and, as shown in figure 3 below, by and large about government officials. Their lives, their elections and their voices make up over half of the people who make the news. People identified as accused or convicted of crimes are 9% of news makers.



People in the news cited as sources, experts and witnesses regarding news events come from a more varied occupational background. In figure 4 the occupations of 166 experts and witnesses in the news are shown.

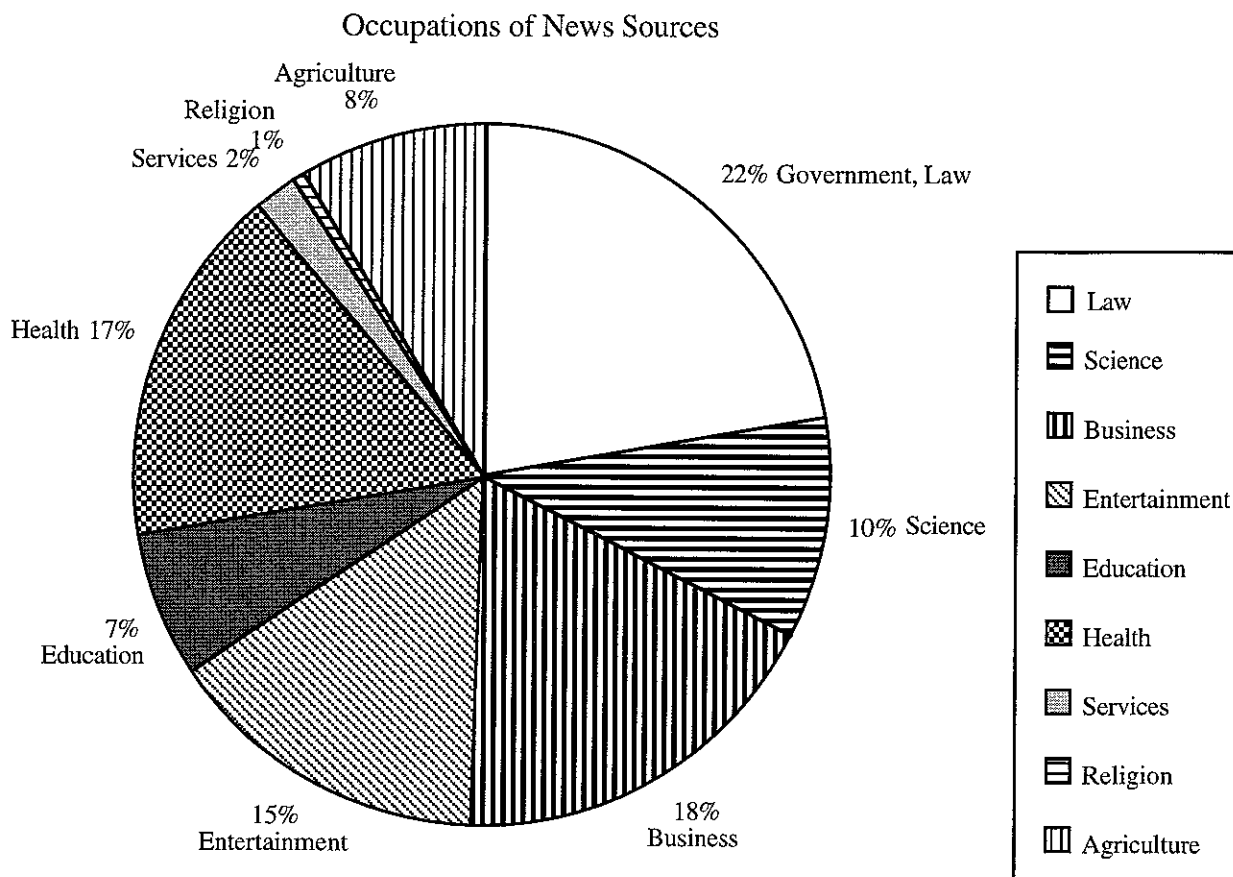


Figure 4. Occupations of 166 News Sources from the Fall 1997 sample.

As a point of comparison, the same same figures are provided from the Prime Time entertainment sample in the chart below.

Occupations of Characters in Prime Time Dramatic Entertainment

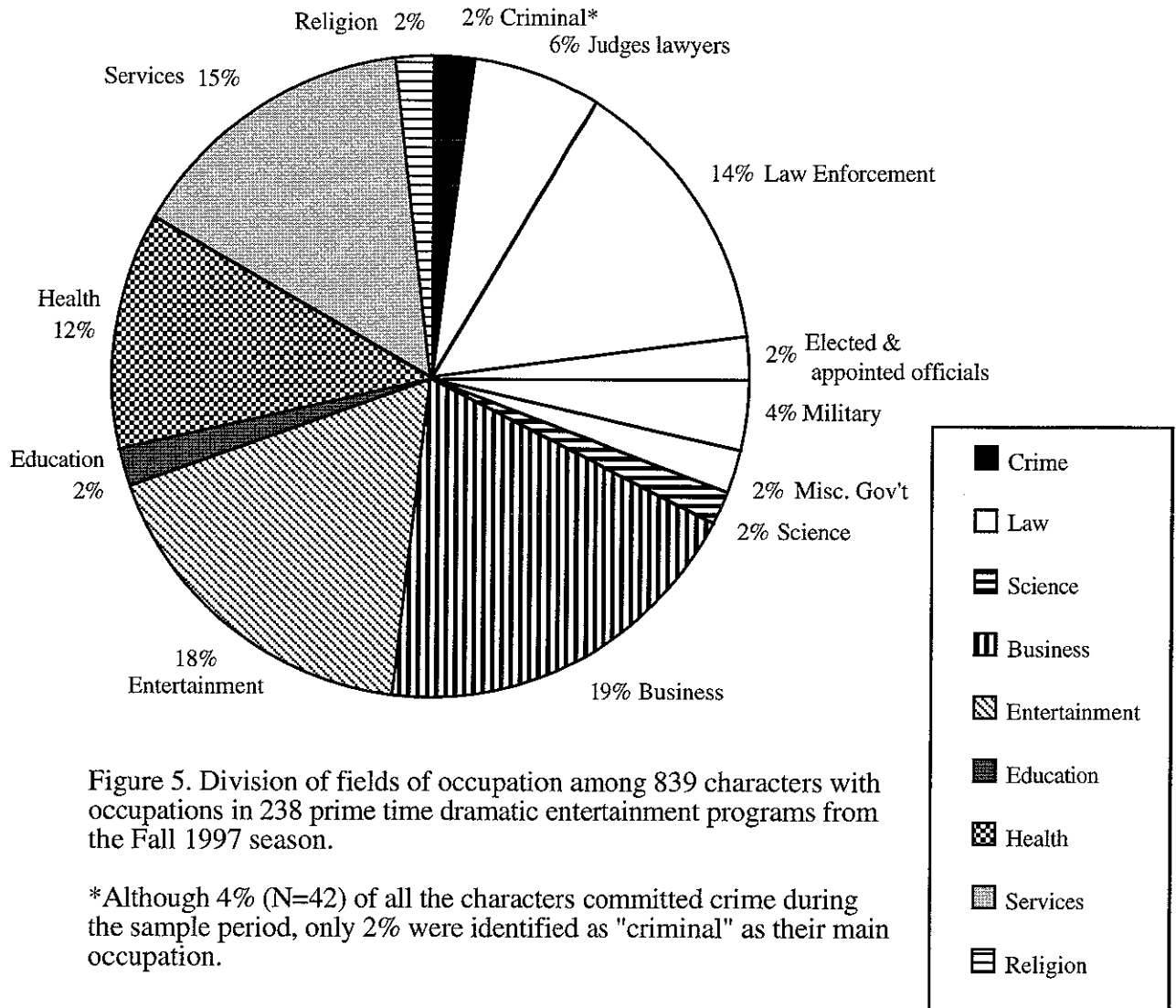


Figure 5. Division of fields of occupation among 839 characters with occupations in 238 prime time dramatic entertainment programs from the Fall 1997 season.

\*Although 4% (N=42) of all the characters committed crime during the sample period, only 2% were identified as "criminal" as their main occupation.

## Crime and violence

In the table below, aspects of gender, national origin, and racial category are cross-tabulated with involvement in a variety of criminal behaviors among News Makers.

Table 3. Commission of Crime by News Makers

	Male	Female	U.S. origin	Non- U.S.	Black	White	Latino/ Hispanic	Middle East	Other Asian
Nonfatal violence	8 2.2%	1 1.1%	18 4.8%	9 8.7%	0 0.0%	7 2.0%	0 0.0%	2 5.3%	1 5.9%
Fatal violence	25 6.9%	2 2.3%	3 0.8%	13 12.6%	0 0.0%	18 5.1%	3 18.8%	6 15.8%	0 0.0%
Total Violent & Property Crime	64 17.6%	8 9.2%	51 13.6%	28 27.2%	0 0.0%	50 14.3%	4 25.0%	13 34.2%	0 0.0%
Illicit Drugs	6 1.6%	0 0.0%	4 1.1%	5 4.9%	0 0.0%	4 1.1%	4 25.0%	1 2.6%	0 0.0%
Crime Violence & Drugs	67 18.4%	8 9.2%	56 14.9%	28 27.2%	0 0.0%	53 15.1%	4 25.0%	13 34.2%	1 5.9%
No crime	287 78.8%	79 90.8%	319 85.1%	75 72.8%	21 100%	297 84.9%	11 68.8%	25 65.8%	16 94.1%
TOTAL	364	87	375	103	21	350	16	38	17

Table 3. Shows the proportions of News Makers with various background features who are depicted as accused or convicted of involvement in nonfatal violence (row #1), fatal violence (row #2), violent and/or property crime (row #3), use or trafficking in illicit drugs (row #4), any involvement in drugs, crime and/or violence (row #5) and the proportion of characters among each group not involved in any crime, violence or drugs (row #6).

In Figure 6 below, the data in Table 3 are summarized, with groups of people in news stories ranked by their involvement in drugs, crime and violence. Contrary to observations in earlier studies, the data show that it is no longer the case that African-Americans are disproportionately represented as engaging in criminal behavior. The villain in evening news is now the dark-skinned foreigner.

Involvement in Violence, Crime, and Drugs by People in the Evening News

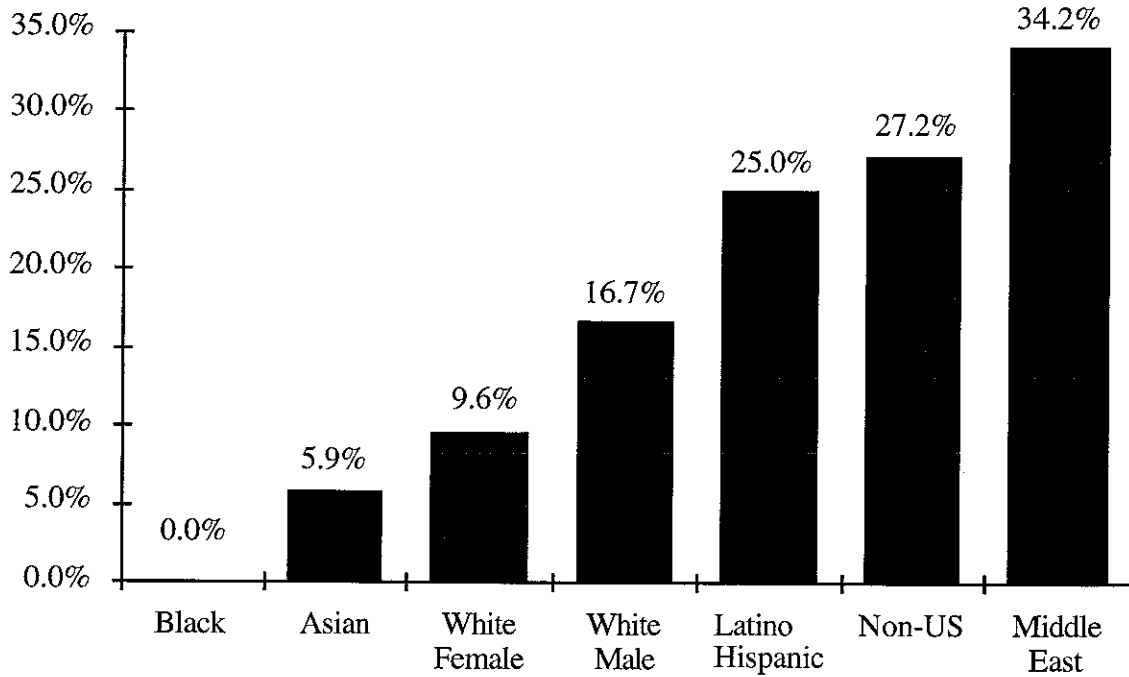


Figure 6. Proportions of people depicted as being involved with illicit drugs or committing acts of violence or crime among various social groups shown in Table 3, from a sample of 539 News Makers in 206 national evening news stories taped during 5 weeks of news during Fall 1997.

The profile of villains in the news reflects that of dramatic entertainment programming on prime time. The emerging pattern in both drama and the news is one of depicting Latinos, Hispanics, and all people of foreign national origin, but not African-Americans, as a more dangerous people.

Involvement in Violence, Crime, and Drugs by Characters in Prime Time Drama

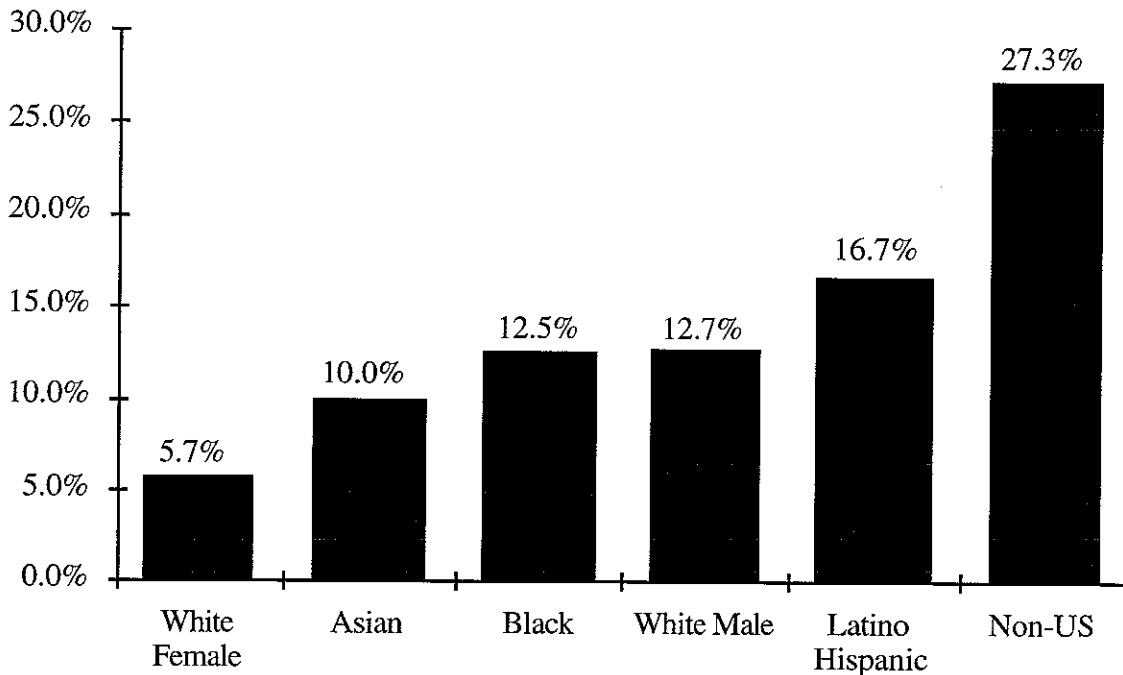


Figure 7. Proportions of people depicted as being involved with illicit drugs or committing acts of violence or crime among various social groups from a sample of 1,446 characters appearing in a sample week of prime time dramatic entertainment programming from Fall 1997.

### Summary

Themes of crime and violence dominate the national news. About 40% of the news stories analyzed dealt with crime, violence or law enforcement. International politics and wars are next in frequency, followed by business news, national politics, and the courts.

Among the people in the news, news professionals (reporters, anchors) and news sources (witnesses, experts) are predominantly white males. Persons of color appear mostly as news makers, the subjects of the stories.

Almost half (45 percent) of the people in the news are government officials, followed by persons in business (11 percent). News sources are more diverse in occupation.

Violent, criminal and other dangerous persons in the news are disproportionately Hispanics and dark-skinned foreigners.

Prime time entertainment drama presents a cast of characters playing mostly business persons (19 percent), entertainers (18 percent), service persons (15 percent) and law enforcers (14 percent).