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News Media, Victims and Crime

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Chapters 1 and 2 offered an overview of the emergence and development of victimology, and outlined some of the conceptual, practical and political problems associated with notions of 'victim' and 'victimhood'. Not least, the determination of who may legitimately claim victim status is influenced profoundly by social divisions including, class, race, ethnicity, gender, age and sexuality, and as such remains a matter of debate. Such debates are framed and inflected, to a significant extent, in the news media. This chapter, then, explores how the status of victim, and different acts and processes of criminal victimisation, are defined and constructed in the news media.

Research evidence has repeatedly confirmed that, across news and entertainment formats, media focus overwhelmingly on the most serious examples of violent, interpersonal offending (Marsh, 1991; Reiner et al., 2000). By contrast, lower-level property offences that make up the significant majority of recorded crime, and white-collar and corporate offences that place a major social and financial burden on society, have tended to receive less attention (Hillyard et al., 2004; Machin and Ayre, 2013; Whyte, 2015). Levi (2009) argues that the low visibility of

corporate crime has been maintained by 'the "'softly, softly'" approach of the enforcement agencies, media averse to the genuine risk of libel suits, and governments and public almost superstitiously afraid of meddling with the market.' He also notes, however, that when corporate crimes become 'embodied in visible and known persons', media outcry can follow, not least because 'society is seen to be changing and becoming less moral' (ibid.). Yet these visible and known persons tend to be offenders. The victims of corporate crime remain mostly invisible. It is still the victims of violent, frequently fatal interpersonal crime that receive the greatest media attention. And even here, research evidence makes abundantly clear that news constructions are highly selective and unrepresentative, tending to focus on particular types of victims suffering particular types of victimisation by particular types of offender (Greer and Reiner, 2012; Gekoski et al., 2012).

Critically exploring news media constructions of crime victims is important because, over the past few decades, victims have taken on an unprecedented significance in media and criminal justice discourses, in the development of crime policy and in the popular imagination (Maguire and Pointing, 1988; Rock, 2004). Indeed, as Reiner and colleagues noted, the foregrounding of crime victims is one of the most significant qualitative changes in media constructions of crime and control since the Second World War (Reiner et al., 2000). The chapter is structured as follows. First, it takes a critical look at how social divisions shape the news media construction of crime victims and criminal victimisation, with a particular focus on 'ideal victims'. Second, it examines the newsworthiness of crime victims and explores how changes in the news environment have affected the reporting of criminal victimisation 'as news'. Third, it considers the growing significance and impact of institutional failure in victim-driven crime stories. Fourth, it identifies gaps in the existing research literature, raises some questions for further reflection, and suggests potentially fruitful areas for future research and investigation.

News Media Constructions of 'Ideal', Primary and Indirect Victims

Media interest in crime victims is at its greatest when they can be portrayed as 'ideal'. Christie (1986: 18) describes the '**ideal victim**' as 'a person or category of individuals who – when hit by crime – most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim.' This group includes those who are perceived as vulnerable, defenceless, innocent and worthy of sympathy and compassion. Elderly women and young children, it is suggested, are typical 'ideal victims', whereas young men, the homeless, those with drug problems, and others existing on the margins of society may find it much more difficult to achieve legitimate victim status, still less secure a conviction in court. In this sense, there exists a '**hierarchy of victimisation**', reflected and reinforced in media and official discourses. At one extreme, those who acquire the status of 'ideal victim' may attract massive levels of media attention, generate collective mourning across the globe, drive significant change to social and criminal justice policy and practice, and even transform how society views itself. At the other extreme, those crime victims who never acquire legitimate victim status or, still worse, are perceived as 'undeserving victims' may receive little if any media attention, and pass virtually unnoticed in the wider social world (Greer, 2004; Peelo, 2006; Smolej, 2010). Examples spanning the past three decades can illustrate these dynamics in action.

In the summer of 2002, two 10-year-old girls, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, went missing from their home in Soham. Their disappearance attracted international media attention and precipitated the biggest ever manhunt in Britain. In 1996, two boys of similar age, Patrick Warren and David Spencer, went missing from their homes. Their disappearance failed to

register much outside the local press. Shortly after 13-year-old Milly Dowler went missing in 2002, the body of a teenage girl was recovered from a disused cement works near Tilbury docks. Amidst press speculation that it was another missing teenager, Danielle Jones, who had disappeared almost a year earlier, the body was identified as that of 14-year-old Hannah Williams. Yet it was Milly's story that continued to dominate the headlines. Hannah received only a few sentences on the inside pages.

How might this media selectivity be understood? The answer lies, at least partly, in dominant conceptions of legitimate and ideal victims. Holly and Jessica were archetypal 'ideal victims'. They were young, bright, photogenic girls from stable and loving middle-class family backgrounds, and each had an exemplary school record. David and Patrick were working-class, they were boys, and they had been brought up on a rough West-Midlands council estate. They had been in trouble at school and one of them, David, had been caught shoplifting. While Holly and Jessica captured the hearts and minds of a nation, Patrick and David did not attract the same media or public interest, and few ever knew about their disappearance. Like Holly and Jessica, Milly Dowler epitomised the notion of an 'ideal victim'. By contrast, Hannah Williams was working-class, raised by a single mother on a low income, and had run away before. Her background denied her 'deserving' victim status and, eclipsed by Milly's ongoing story, Hannah was forgotten almost immediately. Hannah Williams' murder generated just over 60 articles in the British national press, mostly after her body was found. In its first two weeks alone the hunt for Holly and Jessica produced nearly 900 (Fracassini, 2002).
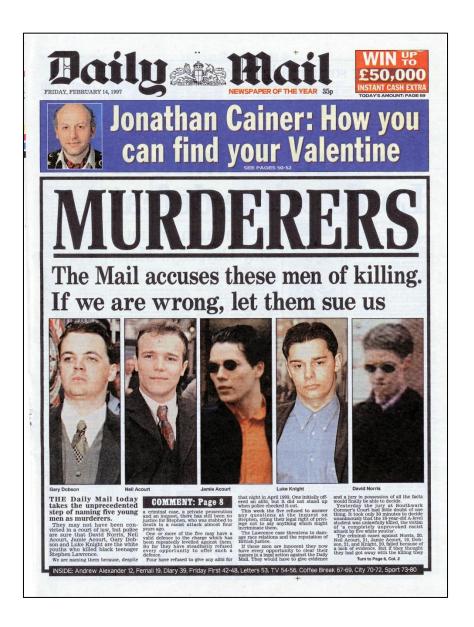
The attribution or otherwise of ideal or legitimate victim status and related levels of media interest are clearly influenced by demographic characteristics. The cases of missing and murdered children discussed above indicate that both 'class' – or perhaps better, a middle-class notion of 'respectability' – and gender can be defining factors. Race, too, can be central. In

1993 black teenager Stephen Lawrence was fatally stabbed in a racist attack. At first the police assumed that because the victim was a young, black male the murder must have been gang-related (Cottle, 2004; McLaughlin and Murji, 2001). It was not until later that Stephen was recognised and reported as a legitimate victim worthy of national media attention. Partly because of his race and partly because of his gender, legitimate victim status was not automatic as it was for Holly, Jessica and Milly, but needed to be won. The murder of white London solicitor Tom ap Rhys Price in 2006 received 6,061 words in the national press, while the murder of Asian London cement merchant Balbir Matharu, killed on the same day, received only 1,385 (Gibson and Dodd, 2006). For some, including the then Commissioner of the London Metropolitan Police, Sir Ian Blair (now Lord Blair of Boughton), the explanation was sad but simple: the British news media are institutionally racist in how they report murder. He further questioned news media selectivity by asking why the disappearance of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman received so much attention (Steele, 2006: 6):

'If you look at the murders in Soham, almost nobody can understand why that dreadful story became the biggest story in Britain. Let's be absolutely straight. It was a dreadful crime, nobody is suggesting anything else. But there are dreadful crimes which do not become the greatest story in Britain. Soham did for that August [2002] period become the greatest story'.

There was some limited media debate regarding the merits of the Commissioner's allegation of news media racism. Overwhelmingly, though, the media response was hostile. Outraged newspaper editors reproduced high-profile coverage of black and Asian murder victims – including Stephen Lawrence – as 'proof' that they were not racist. The conservative *Daily Mail*, known for its 'traditionally reactionary stance on race issues in Britain' (McLaughlin ad Murji, 2001: 377), reprinted its infamous front page which risked legal action by sensationally naming

and picturing the alleged killers of Stephen Lawrence beneath the headline 'Murderers: The Mail accuses these men of killing. if we are wrong, let them sue us!' (see 3.1).

3.1 *Daily Mail* headline naming the alleged killers of Stephen Lawrence

But the heaviest criticism was directed at Sir Ian Blair for his Soham comment. Eclipsing the comparatively marginal discussion of racism in the press, Blair was castigated across a succession of front pages for daring to question the newsworthiness of ideal victims Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman. The following morning he made an unreserved 'on air' apology on BBC Radio 4 for any offence his comments might have caused the murdered girls' families

(Blair, 2009). The Soham intervention was the tipping point in a relentless **trial by media** that coalesced with a hostile political environment to make the position of the Commissioner – considered too liberal by the UK conservative press and the newly elected Conservative Mayor of London – untenable (Greer and McLaughlin, 2011). In 2011, Sir Ian Blair became the first Metropolitan Police Commissioner to resign before the end of his term since Sir Charles Warren in 1888 – also in the midst of trial by media – who stepped down for failing to catch Jack the Ripper. Calling the press 'institutionally racist' was an irritation for journalists, who quickly rebutted the claim. Questioning the newsworthiness of 'ideal victims' Holly and Jessica was unforgivable, and the press went on the attack.

Sir Ian Blair's successor, Sir Paul Stephenson, became the second Met Commissioner since 1888 to resign before term, as a result of the phone hacking scandal of 2011. The symbolic and political power of 'ideal victims' was pivotal here too. The phone hacking story broke in 2007 with revelations that journalists at the Sunday tabloid *News of the World* had worked with private investigators to hack the phones of the royal family, politicians and celebrities. The story became a full-blown scandal when the *Guardian* (Davies, 2011) reported that journalists' hacking activities had extended to ordinary members of the public, and crime victims – including victims of the 7 July 2005 London Bombings and 'ideal victim' Milly Dowler. It was alleged that journalists had hacked Milly Dowler's phone in 2002, before her body was found, eavesdropped on voicemail messages left by her family and deleted messages from her phone. Deleting messages created space for new ones, giving the family – who never stopped calling – false hope that Milly was still alive, and hampering the police investigation by destroying potential evidence.[1] Public outcry and the legal repercussions of the phone hacking scandal were so damaging that in 2011 the *News of the World*'s owner, Rupert Murdoch, closed the

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[1] Evidence subsequently brought to court confirmed the hacking and the parents' experience of 'false-hope', but cast doubt on the source of the message deletions, suggesting they were more likely to be automatic than deliberate (https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jun/26/phone-hacking-trial-milly-dowler-voicemail).

168-year-old newspaper and the UK government established the Leveson Inquiry (2012) to investigate the 'culture, practices and ethics of the press and, in particular, the relationship of the press with the public, police and politicians'. The Metropolitan Police Service was implicated in the scandal for failing properly to investigate allegations of hacking, for the possible involvement of police officers in facilitation and cover-up, for not informing victims whose phones had been hacked, and for misleading the public and Parliament about the scale of phone hacking. When it was revealed that the Met had hired the former executive editor of the disgraced *News of the World* as an advisor, allegations of institutional corruption and cover-up forced Sir Paul Stephenson's resignation (Greer and McLaughlin, 2012a).

Ideal victims are **primary victims**: those harmed directly and immediately as participants in the criminal event. Most cases of criminal victimisation also feature **indirect victims**: the families, friends and relatives of primary victims, those who may be distressed by witnessing serious crimes, and the wider community (Howarth and Rock, 2000; but see also Chapter 2). The legitimacy of primary crime victims is attributed, or denied, on the basis of that victim's characteristics, the wider socio-economic context in which they live and their degree of separation from the offender. As we have seen, ideal victim status is the news media's most emphatic expression of victim legitimacy. Since only a tiny minority of crime victims ever achieve ideal victim status, it tends once attributed to be robust and remain stable over time. The news media construction of indirect victims is altogether more unpredictable. Their status as worthy of news media support and public sympathy is established, or denied, through the closeness of their association with the primary victim, their personal and demographic characteristics, and crucially their willingness and ability to engage with the news media. The news media construction of indirect victims can change dramatically with the twists and turns of a developing news story.

SOMEONE, SOMEWHERE, KNOWS WHERE MADELEINE IS

If you have ANY information regarding the disappearance of Madeleine McCann, please come forward in confidence.

TEL +44 (0)845 838 4699
or visit www.findmadeleine.com thank you.

Figure 3.2

Three-year-old Madeleine McCann disappeared on 3 May 2007 from a holiday apartment in Portugal, while her parents, Kate and Gerry McCann, were having supper with friends approximately 120 metres away. The case received unprecedented global media attention. Across rolling 24/7 news coverage and social media, Madeleine was constructed as the archetypal 'ideal victim' (see 3.2). In stark contrast, her parents, at first universally supported by a sympathetic press as the indirect victims of a terrible crime against their daughter, quickly

became the targets for sustained and defamatory **trial by media** (Greer and McLaughlin, 2012b). These white, mediagenic, middle-class doctors proactively engaged with journalists to try and maximise the news visibility of the case and manage the news agenda. For a period, the strategy worked. Unlike in the UK, however, there is no culture of open dialogue between the Portuguese police and the news media, so when the investigation failed to produce a breakthrough and the 'facts' of the case dried up, the news void needed to be filled. Madeline's parents went from managing the news agenda to becoming the news agenda. Their news construction shifted from indirect victims of Madeline's abduction to primary suspects in her abduction and murder. After months of media speculation based on unofficial sources, police leaks, rumour and gossip, the McCanns' trial by media reached its height in January 2008 when a flood of front-page newspaper stories insinuated that Kate and Gerry McCann were responsible for their daughter's death, had disposed of her body, and had conspired to cover up their actions by deliberately diverting police attention from evidence that would expose their guilt (Statement in Open Court, available at http://www.carter-ruck.com/news/read/kate-and-gerry-mccann). In an attempt to reclaim both the news agenda and their status as legitimate victims, the McCanns took legal action against those newspapers for publishing 'utterly false and defamatory allegations' (ibid.). Realising there was little chance of winning a High Court battle, several newspapers published unprecedented front-page apologies and contributed substantial sums to the parents' 'Find Madeline' fund. Others settled by private agreement. Once again, the McCanns were constructed in the UK press as indirect victims of their daughter's still-unresolved abduction, and now also as primary victims of news media defamation. In 2016 Madeleine was still missing. While dwindling UK news coverage remains overwhelmingly supportive, the McCanns are still subjected to an array of internet and social media attacks which they appear powerless to prevent.

These cases illustrate the complexity of what it is to be a 'victim' in the news. They demonstrate how demographic characteristics like class, ethnicity, gender and age can at times determine news media interest in a fairly straightforward manner, but can also cut across each other and interact with other variables in nuanced and unpredictable ways that do much to invalidate blanket claims that 'the press' or, still worse, 'the media' are institutionally prejudiced. The influence of victim demographics needs to be considered within the wider context of the news production process, the influence of social media, the other elements of the case in question, and the prevailing cultural and political environment at that time. In order to unravel this complexity a little further, it is helpful to explore the concept of newsworthiness.

Pause for Review

Stop now and try to think of some well-known victims of crime.

How would you describe these victims?

Other than their victimisation, do they share anything in common?

What do your recollections tell you about news media representations of crime and criminal victimisation?

Newsworthiness, Crime and Criminal Victimisation

There exists an extensive literature on the various factors that make events attractive – or 'newsworthy' – to journalists (Chibnall, 1977; Hall et al., 1978; Katz, 1987; Greer, 2012; Jewkes, 2015). Newsworthiness is shaped by **news values** – those criteria that determine which events come within the horizon of media visibility, and to what extent, and which do not. Since the first sociological statement of news values by Galtung and Ruge in 1965, numerous commentators have offered their own interpretation of the key determinants of newsworthiness. Most accounts agree on certain criteria, which can be thought of as core or fundamental news

values, including: drama, novelty, titillation, simplification and conservative ideology. With specific reference to crime news, most accounts also highlight the importance of violence. The observation made by Hall et al. (1978: 68) four decades ago still holds today:

> One special point about crime as news is the special status of *violence* as a news value. Any crime can be lifted into news visibility if violence becomes associated with it … Violence represents a basic violation of the person; the greatest personal crime is 'murder' … Violence is also the ultimate crime against property, and against the State. It thus represents a fundamental rupture in the social order.

Despite enduring similarities between accounts, it is important to recognise that news values are also culturally specific in that they reflect the historical and social moment in which they are situated. As media and society change, so too can the criteria that influence the selection and production of events as news. The 'celebritization' of society has rendered just about anything related to 'celebrity culture' newsworthy (Driessens, 2013). Celebrity crime is especially so. The 'sexualisation' of society has also affected the news (Duschinsky, 2013). With the breaking down of many sexual taboos in recent decades, sex and violence are presented more frequently and graphically across all media forms, including crime news (Greer and Jewkes, 2005; Reiner et al., 2000).

At the same time, specific criminal incidents can have a lasting influence on crime reporting. The racist murder of Stephen Lawrence, and evidence of institutional racism in the police (mis)handling of the case (Macpherson, 1999), intensified interest in race and racism and their connection to 'crime and victimisation', 'law and order', 'policing and criminal justice' (Cottle, 2005; McLaughlin and Murji, 2001; see also Chapter 11). The sexually-motivated abduction and murder of 8-year-old Sarah Payne in the summer of 2000 by a convicted paedophile crystallised fears around the image of the predatory child sex offender and fuelled debate on 'risk and dangerousness', 'punishment and rehabilitation', 'surveillance and control' and the

suitability of public notification regarding sex offenders in the community (Silverman and Wilson, 2002). And the scandalous revelation in 2011 that television icon and national treasure Sir Jimmy Savile had for decades exploited his BBC celebrity status to sexually abuse children and young people in Britain's public institutions led to a flood of fresh accusations of abuse against television celebrities, public figures and institutions across the UK (Greer and McLaughlin, 2013, 2016). In the wake of these cases, further incidents of child violence, racist violence, predatory sexual violence and institutional violence are rendered more newsworthy still because they can be reported in relation to the paradigmatic incident at that time, which in turn can be revisited, reactivated and recreated across corporate and social media for a mass audience. Thus, while violence endures as a core news value, its newsworthiness can be intensified considerably when focused through the lenses of celebrity, childhood, sex and race, institutional corruption and cover-up, among others – categories that are not in themselves new, but which have gained increased and lasting media currency due to wider social change and/or specific, high profile crimes.

Newsworthiness, Crime Victims and the Visual

Until recently, accounts of crime newsworthiness have paid insufficient attention to the importance of the **visual** (Brown and Carrabine, 2017). The rapid development of communication technologies has changed the terrain on which crime news is produced. Today, crime stories are selected and 'produced' as *media events* on the basis of their visual (how they can be portrayed in images) as well as their lexical-verbal (how they can be portrayed in words) potential. Of course, television stations are primarily concerned with producing an appealing visual product, but press representations too have become intensely visual phenomena, incorporating: photographs of victims, offenders, or loved ones; diagrams and interactive

digital maps of a route taken, a geographical area, or a crime scene; graphic illustrations of crime rates, prison populations, and police numbers; satirical cartoons lampooning bungling criminal justice professionals; the list goes on. These visual elements of the news product depict immediately, dramatically, and often in full colour what it may take several paragraphs to say in words. As one British reported explained, 'A tabloid journalist often thinks about collects first (photographs) and interviews second, because the picture is paramount to the amount of space your story gets in the paper' (cited in Gekoski et al., 2012: 1218). If the visual has always played an important part in the manufacture of crime news (Hall, 1973), today it has become a universally defining characteristic.

Where victims of crime are concerned, the potential to visualise a case can have a direct impact on its perceived newsworthiness. Gekoski et al. (2012: 1220; see also Chermak, 1995) interviewed a number of British newspaper journalists about crime news production, one of whom said:

> 'What is important is the co-operation the victim's family and friends give the press. If they close the door and refuse to speak to the press, then it makes their job more difficult and they may not be able to glean the necessary information required to make it a good story. However if they decide to hold press conferences, give out photographs of the victim, and talk on their door steps about the victim, then it will make the job of the journalist easier, and therefore increase the space it is given in the newspaper article'.

Indeed, the press conference has become integral both to the police investigation and the news reporting of murder cases. Today it is *expected* that indirect victims – most often the primary victims' loved ones – will express their emotions and share their pain and suffering with media audiences, at once horrified and fascinated by the spectacle unfolding before them. As well as increasing the likelihood of public co-operation in a murder investigation, police are also aware that 'emotional displays of this kind make a good story for journalists and thus the case may

receive more media attention than it might otherwise do' (Innes, 2003: 58). The parents of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, Sarah Payne and Milly Dowler – all indirect victims in child abduction and murder cases – made emotional television appeals for the safe return of their children, and in some cases for information regarding the identity and whereabouts of their child's killer. Madeline McCann's parents, Kate and Gerry McCann, went further still and appointed media advisors to help manage the news agenda. The risk, as they learned to their cost, is that once inside the media spotlight it can be impossible to step back out. Their punishing trial by media is clear evidence that, even with professional help, it is impossible to control the news process with any certainty, still less manage wider social media speculation and debate. Because these cases featured ideal victims, media interest was automatic. In stark contrast, Stephen Lawrence's parents, Doreen and Neville, were faced with a clear lack of media interest in their son's murder. They had to campaign to raise the case's profile and keep it in the public imagination when media attention was sparse (Cottle, 2004). Their efforts paid off. With the continuing support of the *Daily Mail*, two men were convicted of Stephen Lawrence's murder and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2012. The newspaper's editor, Paul Dacre (2012), had the following to say:

> 'I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that if it hadn't been for the *Mail*'s headline in 1997 – 'Murderers: The Mail accuses these men of killing' – and our years of campaigning, none of this would have happened. Britain's police might not have undergone the huge internal reform that was so necessary. Race relations might not have taken the significant step forward that they have. And an 18-year-old A-Level student who dreamed of being an architect would have been denied justice. The *Daily Mail* took a monumental risk with that headline. In many ways, it was an outrageous, unprecedented step.'

Ultimately, in each of these cases articulate and 'respectable' parents were not only able, but willing, and in some cases driven to engage with the media and withstand the constant and

potentially blinding glare of its spotlight. Their suitability and capability in this regard made the stories more newsworthy and, crucially, kept the cases in the public eye. Those less willing or able to engage with the media, those the police consider less suitable for media exposure, or those the media themselves are less interested in reporting, may find that attention quickly dries up.

Potentially even more powerful than press conferences, victim photographs familiarise media audiences, instantly and enduringly, with victims of crime in a way that words cannot. 'Photographs', Susan Sontag (2004: 2) argues, 'have an insuperable power to determine what people recall of events'. Gerrard (2004: 14), writing about the murders of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, suggests that 'We understand with words and stories, through the linked chain of events. But we recollect in pictures. Memory freeze-frames. Our lives are held in a series of vivid stills inside our head, and so it is with more public events.' And in the words of one journalist, 'If the public can see … a victim, it adds something. There is nothing to a name. When you see a picture, you see the life, the potential' (cited in Chermak, 1995: 104). In missing persons and murder cases, victim photographs are rendered more poignant still by the understanding that those featured may be, or already are, dead. They present an idealised personification of innocence and loss. At the same time, they serve indirectly to highlight the monstrosity of the offender and the extent to which that monstrosity should inform a retributive justice process (Pickett et al., 2013). In Western culture so attuned to the visual (Carrabine, 2012; Young, 2014), photographs simultaneously humanise and memorialise crime victims, creating affective connections between image and spectator, victim and viewer, with potential to evoke a more visceral and emotionally charged reaction than might be produced by words alone.

Thus it is not only what is known or imagined about victims, in terms of background, life history, future potential, but also how vividly – how *visually* – that history and potential can be communicated to media audiences. In high-profile crimes featuring 'ideal victims', whose innocence is uncontested and whose potential is palpably felt, photographs may take on an iconic status, becoming an instant, powerful and lasting reference point. The photograph of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman posing in their matching Manchester United shirts, the school portrait of Sarah Payne, or the picture of Madeleine McCann (3.2) are examples of victim photographs which were used relentlessly throughout each case and its aftermath, and became deeply embedded in the popular imagination. The power of these images, the newsworthiness of the crime type, the social characteristics of the primary victims, and the suitability and willingness of the indirect victims to engage with the news media coalesced with other factors to produce a compelling narrative that connected deeply and on a profoundly personal level with media consumers. A further reason why many of these cases maintained a high profile news media presence was evidence of serious failure by key institutions and agencies tasked with the role of 'public protection'.

Crime Victims and Institutional Failure

A key element in the construction of a compelling crime narrative is the attribution of blame (Chibnall, 1977). Blame for serious and violent crimes may be individual and directed at offenders, or less often social and directed at society. Importantly, however, it can also be institutional. When there is evidence that official agencies and state bodies assigned to protect the 'innocent' have somehow failed in this task, the potential to develop and sustain a compelling narrative is increased considerably. Media interest the deaths of Stephen Lawrence, Sarah Payne, Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman was maintained in part by evidence of serious

institutional failings – variously implicating the police, the courts, the education system – which were portrayed either as serving to maintain the conditions that allowed the offence to occur in the first place, or impeding the case's investigation and prosecution afterwards. Now sensationally located at the heart of a scandal, the victims' symbolic power extended beyond their individual cases and they became representative of wider issues and debates on public safety, social and criminal justice, or the nature of society itself.

When crime victims come to symbolise a problem that resonates with and potentially affects many in society – school safety, racist violence, knife crime, institutional child sexual abuse – mediatised campaigns, particularly when launched in the victim's name, are likely to garner high levels of public support (Chancer, 2005). Faced with collective moral outrage and a barrage of critical media coverage, agencies publicly implicated as part of the problem, or the authorities to which those agencies are answerable, are required to respond. In each of the cases discussed above, the response was some form of official inquiry which, in turn, led to recommendations for change across structures of training and accountability, professional practice and criminal justice and social policy. The Macpherson Report (1999) investigating the mismanagement of the Stephen Lawrence murder case branded the London Metropolitan Police 'professionally incompetent and institutionally racist' and called for fundamental change to police training and accountability, and engagement with black communities across the UK (Hall et al., 2013). Sarah Payne's abduction and murder by a convicted paedophile generated mediatised debate and public outrage, which informed the legislative changes embodied in the Sex Offences Act 2003 and resulted in the nationwide launch of the Child Sex Offenders Disclosure scheme – also known as Sarah's Law – across the UK in 2012 (Lipscombe, 2012; Jones and Newburn, 2013). The murders of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman resulted in the Bichard Inquiry (2004), which scrutinised the police's 'intelligence-based record keeping, vetting practices and information sharing with other agencies' and made

recommendations relevant for police, social services, education establishments, vetting services and government aimed at improving national child protection. The Savile scandal resulted in most far-reaching public inquiry in British history. With victims potentially numbering in the thousands, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) has been launched not in the name of an individual 'ideal victim', but in the name of *all* victims of institutional child sexual abuse in England and Wales in the post-War period (Greer and McLaughlin, 2016). The IICSA is committed to 'identify institutional failings where they are found to exist' and to 'demand accountability for past institutional failings' (www.iicsa.org.uk/). It is arguably leading to a re-writing of British post-War history as a growing body of evidence forces British society to acknowledge that: a) the sexual victimisation of children has been widespread across Britain's core public institutions throughout the post-War period; and b) in many cases senior figures knew abuse was taking place and either failed to act or, still worse, actively covered it up.

The extent to which the changes or recommendations for change following these cases have been appropriate, effective or adequately implemented remains a matter for debate (Hall et al., 2013; Foster et al., 2005; Roycroft et al., 2007; Price et al., 2013; Greer and McLaughlin, 2016). For current purposes, what is important is the role news media played in generating, sustaining and shaping the preceding debate. In each case news media were instrumental in publicly defining the cases, rooting the victims' images in the popular imagination, generating and focusing collective moral outrage and support for change, and, crucially, keeping the stories alive in both political and popular consciousness, in some cases long after the initial investigation had closed.

Pause for Review

Revisit your list of crime victims. Now, consider how you are thinking about those crimes.

What is it that you recall about each case? Is it the details of the offence; the news coverage – television, radio, internet, press; the images that were released during the investigation; evidence of institutional failure?

Do you recall different things about different cases?

Are you imagining the cases in words, images, or both?

Why is it that some types of crime victim and criminal victimisation feature so prominently in the news, whilst others are scarcely mentioned or discussed?

What additional forms of criminal victimisation, not discussed in this chapter, are reported in the news? What characterises those news constructions?

Summary

This chapter has identified and explored some of the key influences that shape the construction of crime victims and criminal victimisation in the news media. It has explored the relationship between social divisions, inequality and 'ideal' or 'legitimate' victim status, and examined how changes in the media environment and the news production process have impacted on the construction of primary and indirect crime victims. More specifically, it has sought to demonstrate the complexity of the interconnections between these factors and the impact they can have on the attribution of legitimate or ideal victim status, media interest, the public construction of particular murder cases and the policy outcomes that may result from victim-driven news media campaigns. These closing paragraphs offer a few points by way of summary, raise some questions which seem pertinent at the present time, and suggest a number of potentially fruitful areas for further research and investigation.

Over the past forty years or so, shifts in 'official' and 'academic' thinking, accompanied by wider political and cultural change, have contributed to generating a climate in which 'system discourses' are often pitched in vain against 'victim discourses' (Garland, 2000). At a time of widespread intolerance, anxiety and fear of the unknown 'other', those who are seen to represent the interests of offenders occupy an uncomfortable and, at times, deeply unpopular place within public hearts and minds (Greer, 2012). In stark contrast, those who speak for victims are seen to speak for us all. Yet the victim voices that find resonance in the media represent only a fraction of those suffering criminal victimisation. What this chapter demonstrates, along with the other contributions in this collection, is that those who feel the pains of victimisation most acutely are often those whose voices are stifled rather than amplified in news media discourses.

It is not simply the case that race, gender or any other social division retains an immutable defining influence over media interest in crime victims and their subsequent construction in the news. Reporting criminal victimisation is fluid and dynamic, and can change from case to case and over time. Implicitly promoting the view that news media, like any other institution, are capable of reflexive learning, many journalists would contend that since Stephen Lawrence the news media have learned how to 'do race', if perhaps not yet 'class'. That there is evidence both for and against this claim – some of which has been discussed in this chapter – serves further to highlight the variability of news reporting and the dangers of settling for blanket generalisations about the prejudices of the 'the press' or 'the media'. Nevertheless, it remains the case that much news coverage of criminal victimisation both reflects and reinforces social divisions and inequalities, and in so doing feeds into the wider structures of power, dominance and marginalisation from which they derive. Despite the growing scholarly interest in the construction of crime victims and criminal victimisation in the media, a number of key questions remain under-researched:

- How do different individuals and groups go about soliciting and sustaining media interest in particular crime victims, or types of victim?

- What are the necessary conditions for victimised members of marginalised and powerless groups to be deemed worthy of media attention and public sympathy?

- How might you evaluate the everyday impact on crime-consciousness of the selective representation of crime victims?

- How might you go about researching the influence of social media on the representation of crime victims in the news?

The answers to these questions are complex and difficult to research, but this does nothing to diminish their importance. In the digital age, news and social media debates are a key influence in shaping popular notions of who can rightly claim legitimate victim status, informing victim policy formation and, ultimately, helping to shape the structures of training, accountability and professional practice directed at protecting the public and responding to victims of crime. Deconstructing the power dynamics, information flows, social relations and political struggles between all those involved in the news production process is an important criminological project. Just like so many crime victims who remain marginalised or ignored in official discourses, understanding the role of media in constructing and representing crime victims and criminal victimisation cannot remain on the periphery of academic enquiry. Rather, it should be a central concern for all those wishing seriously to engage with the contemporary construction and meaning of crime, control and social order.

Further Reading

Chermak, S. (1995) *Victims in the News: Crime and the American News Media*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

One of the few book-length studies on the topic, Chermak presents an in-depth qualitative analysis of the often contested processes through which crime victims are socially constructed in American news media.

Cottle, S. (2004) *The Racist Murder of Stephen Lawrence: Media Performance and Public Transformation*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

A sophisticated book-length analysis of the Stephen Lawrence case and its construction and 'performance' in the media, exploring the rhetoric of journalism, the dynamics and contingencies within both politics and storytelling, and the strategic interventions of various groups, interests and identities.

Crime, Media Culture: An International Journal, London, Sage.

This journal offers a forum for exchange between scholars who are working at the intersections of criminological and cultural inquiry. It promotes a broad cross-disciplinary understanding of the relationship between crime, criminal justice, media and culture, and regularly features article on media methodology, news production, and crime victims and criminal victimisation.

Greer, C. (2012/2003) *Sex Crime and the Media: Sex Offending and the Press in a Divided Society*. London: Routledge.

This book presents an in depth quantitative and qualitative analysis of the press reporting of sex crime, including detailed discussion of victims and offenders, and interviews with all the key players in the news production process.

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