

# **Does “Special” Mean Young, White and Female? Deconstructing the Meaning of “Special” in Law & Order: Special Victims Unit**

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Audience members often use what they see on television, both in news and entertainment programming, to socially construct their reality (Surrette, 1998; Fishman & Cavendar, 1998). While, undoubtedly, direct experience is more powerful in shaping our perceptions of the crime problem in the United States, crime dramas provide powerful images for many lacking extensive knowledge of the criminal justice system. Although many crime dramas focus on crime in general, some like the popular “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit” (SVU) portend to focus specifically on “sexually motivated offenses” and emphasize child victims. In this paper we utilize a content analysis to deconstruct the meaning of “special” in “Law & Order: SVU” and examine the many ways this program may shape public opinion about sexual assaults and official responses to them. Specifically, we focus on the age, sex and race of victims and offenders compared to comparison data from Manhattan, New York—where the program is set. A qualitative analysis provides information about the context of portrayals of sexual assault, specifically assessing whether or not these presentations focus disproportionately on stereotypical child abductions and murder, and reify common rape myths. The analysis also includes a discussion of how civil rights violations by criminal justice personnel are represented.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Television and other forms of media have long been criticized for their portrayals of gender, race and violent crime and numerous studies have shown moral panics in society are often linked to stereotypical coverage of youth victims of sex crimes (Jenkins, 1992). Research shows that crime-related television shows often exaggerate white female victimizations, emphasize African American offenders and inflate the proportion of all crime that is violent (Entman, 1990; Chermak, 1995; Gerbner et al., 1980; Romer, Jamieson & Decoteau, 1998). Additionally, numerous studies have found that print, broadcast, and film mediums all frequently depict sexual assault in stereotypical terms that tend to negate the reality of sexual assault (Meyers, 2004; Ardovini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002; Bufkin & Eschholz, 2002).

Despite statistics that show that most victims of sex crimes are victimized by family members or acquaintances and are not murdered, child victims like Polly Klaas, Adam Walsh and Jon Benet Ramsey have become cultural archetypes for the typical victims of sex crimes (Kappeler, Blumberg & Potter, 2000; Best, 1987; Finkelhor, Hotaling & Sedlak, 1992).

The prescribed formula taken in primetime crime dramas, which includes an evil offender, a violent crime, at least one go-getter police officer who is willing to bend the rules to serve justice and a just resolution of the case at the end of the program can create powerful ideological images of crime, the efficiency of the criminal justice system, and characteristics of offenders and victims (Surette, 1998). Because violent crime is not a part of most peoples everyday lives, “for the vast majority of us, our exposure to crime, violence and the criminal justice system may be obtained largely through the media rather than through personal experience or formal education” (Dominick, 1978). If crime dramas act as a source of the publics’ feelings and attitudes, as a study by Breslin (1990) suggests, then it is important to study these programs and the impressions about crime, victims, offenders and the criminal justice system they may help to foster.

“Law & Order: SVU” is presently the highest rated spin-off of the Law & Order series, and is one of NBC's top-rated shows (Nielsen Media Research, 2006). Although scant research exists on the age characteristics of victims and offenders on drama programs, a non-scientific review of many popular primetime crime dramas lends us to believe that “Law & Order: SVU” focuses more time on youth victims than any of the other “Law & Order” program, “CSI”, “NYPD Blue”, or “The Shield.” In fact, age of the victim may be one of the characteristics that aids in the inclusion into the category of “special victim.” Detective Olivia Benson on “SVU” demonstrates this when she empathizes with a new prosecutor who struggles with handling cases of child molestation – “Lesson Number One: nobody can handle the children.” The sensitive subject matter addressed in this show consists primarily of brutal rapes and homicides. The show purports to follow an “elite squad” called the Special Victims Unit (SVU) as they investigate and prosecute “sexually motivated offenses.”

Feminist scholars have long argued that the media frequently misrepresent sexual assault by replicating common rape myths, which either blame the victim for the crime or show images of “innocent” victims who are savagely brutalized by monstrous (less than human) offenders (Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000; Hirsch, 1994; Meyers, 1997). Victims of sexual crimes are therefore dichotomized into either the “Madonna” or the “whore” role (Griffin, 1971) and as a result viewers’ understanding of the etiology of rape suffers. Furthermore, this dichotomy is often linked to traditional stereotypes of race and class (Meyers, 2004, Moorti, 2002; Ardovini-Brooker & Caringella-Macdonald, 2002; Grover & Soothill, 1996). Age is also frequently used as a signifier of the innocence of the victim, with victim-blaming occurring more frequently for victims over eighteen.

Using a content analysis of the 2003-04 season of “Law & Order: SVU” the present study will examine how race, gender and age are used to construct images of rape and murder. Whenever possible, comparisons will be made with relevant victim and offender data from Manhattan, NY. A qualitative analysis will provide information about the context of these portrayals, examine the presence or rape myths, the efficiency of the criminal justice system in

terms of the outcomes of the cases, and how civil rights violations are depicted in the program.

### *Literature Review*

With the proliferation of television crime dramas and crime based reality shows, studies have begun to examine the ways the media generally and these programs specifically shape the perceptions, emotions and cognitive assessments of the viewing public. Media research is extremely diverse and spans several academic disciplines, media mediums and methodological preferences. In order to focus this discussion, we will limit our discussion to research on the inaccurate portrayal of crime, victim, offender and criminal justice characteristics, and the ideological messages found in media content that relate to sexual victimization.

Television, whether in the news or in drama formats, frequently uses crime and violence to ensnare its viewers and children are often used to carry dramatic ideological messages about “good” and “evil” (Gonzales & Eschholz, 2003). It has been found that on average television programming devotes one-third of its time to crime in either news or television crime dramas (Soulliere, 2003), and these portrayals affect societal views towards crime and violence and indirectly influence preferences for certain crime policies (Surette, 1998; Breslin, 1990). While many studies conclude that crime in the media influences viewer's feelings towards crime and the criminal justice system, how viewers are affected is still disputed. Sparks (1995) argued that crime dramas actually reduce the publics' fear of crime due to the resolution of conflict at the end of each episode. More recent studies have come to the opposite conclusion, demonstrating that crime dramas actually increase the fear of crime for viewers (Eschholz, Chiricos & Gertz, 2003; Heath & Petraitis, 1987).

The reasons for increased fear of crime vary, but in general they result from the overrepresentation of serious offenses. The media generally reports crime stories the public views as severe in nature (Chermak, 1995), in particular, the media focuses disproportionately on murder despite the fact that it is the least frequently occurring index crime in the United States (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Potter & Ware, 1987). As a result of serious crimes being over-represented, the public's view of reality may be skewed as to how much violent crime is actually taking place, and what the typical violent crime, particularly sex-crime looks like (Kappeler et al., 2000).

Similarly, some studies argue that watching programs like “COPS”, “America’s Most Wanted”, “NYPD Blue”, “The Shield” and numerous other reality crime shows and crime dramas that frequently portray the police violating individuals civil rights and resorting to vigilante style justice may negatively shape viewers perceptions of police officers (Baker et al., 1983; Levin & Thomas, 1997). Others argue that these same presentations, especially when coupled with the results of punishing offenders, serve to legitimate and normalize civil rights violations and increase viewers confidence in the police because they usually protect citizens by apprehending offenders efficiently (Sparks, 1995; Cavender & Fishman, 1998). More recent research has also suggested that the affect of watching these programs is contingent on the race of the viewer because televised images of police officers, offenders and victims are frequently racialized (Wortley, Macmillan & Hagan, 1997, Tuch & Weitzer, 1997; Eschholz, Blackwell, Gertz & Chiricos, 2002).

Images of children are frequently used for ideological purposes in the news media. Children represent both vulnerability and potential for the future and as such their images are attention grabbing and powerful, particularly when the issue is crime. Cohen (1972), Jenkins (1992) and Chiricos (1995) have all noted that children's images, either as victims or offenders, are often the basis of moral panics, suggesting when crime stories focus on children they have more salience among consumers. To this end, it is not surprising that "Law & Order: SVU" is the most popular "Law & Order" spin-off (Nielson Media Research, 2006).

Entman (1992, 1990) argues how race is portrayed in the media is critical because viewers construct their reality through television and this may result in "modern racism," part of which involves associating minorities, particularly African Americans with crime. Studies in this area have focused on both the racial and ethnic typification of crime and the criminal typification of race and ethnicity (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002). The racial typification of crime happens when the media over-represents minorities as offenders on television as compared to their white counterparts. The criminal typification of race happens when the portrayal of a particular race is dominated by criminal figures, for example if a crime drama program has many African American characters who play the role of violent criminals or drug dealers, but few who represent more positive or sympathetic roles such as police officers, or victims.

Although a few studies have offered evidence of the racial and ethnic typification of crime in the news, reality programs, and crime dramas (Romer et al., 1994; Sheley & Ashkins, 1981) the overwhelming majority of studies in the area have found that whites are much more likely to be shown as offenders (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Klite, Bardwell & Salzman, 1997; Gilliam et al., 1996; Chermak, 1995). Evidence of the criminal typification of race is more apparent, demonstrating a pronounced lack of positive and sympathetic portrayals of minorities in both fictional and non-fictional (news and reality) programs (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; Klein & Naccarato, 2003; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Romer et al., 1998; Klite, Bardwell & Salzman, 1997; Chermak, 1995).

While the majority of studies on crime and the media have focused on the portrayal of offenders it is also important to examine how victims are portrayed. Just as portrayals of offenders can distort images of who to fear, portrayals of victims may elevate fear unnecessarily among certain populations and create or reinforce myths about victimization, particularly when it comes to sexual assault. Several qualitative studies have assessed the ways in which adult female victims of rape are presented in the media. A study of crime dramas in the 1980s revealed that although rape was only shown infrequently, storylines involving rape frequently contained verbal references to rape myths (Brinson, 1992), the most common being "the victim asked for it." Adelman's (1989) study of four popular films demonstrated that rape victims in the movies are frequently sexually promiscuous and invite the attention of their attackers. A study of film in 1996 reinforced a different myth: "rape is committed by sadistic, disturbed, lower class individuals who prey on children and the vulnerable" (Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000:1337). Taken together these images suggest the "Madonna/Whore" dichotomy of victims is often replicated in the media.

Several studies also link race, sex and class characteristics in the application of stereotypical labels to rape victims. Recent research by Meyers (2004), found that race and class

both contribute to whether newspapers frame sexual assault coverage in victim-blaming or offender-blaming terms. Victims of color, particularly if they were associated with the lower or working class were more likely to be depicted as contributing to their offense. This coverage “minimized the seriousness of the violence, portrayed most of its victims as stereotypic Jezebels whose lewd behavior provoked assault, and absolved the perpetrators of responsibility” (Meyers, 2004:95). In contrast, coverage that focuses on white upper-class victims expressed greater sympathy for the victim and condemnation of the offender (Ardovini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002).

Other studies of newspaper coverage of rape cases demonstrate the focus on atypical victims – white, middle-class, older women and young girls who are attacked by a stranger (Benedict, 1992; Hirsch, 1994; Meyers, 1997). Age, in both extremes, is used as a way to depict innocence. Conversely adults who are not seniors are frequently blamed for their attack. In the pre-trial coverage of the case, details about the rape such as the location of the attack and the use of a weapon are the focus (Soothill & Walby, 1991; Grover & Soothill, 1996; Schwengels & Lemert, 1986), as well as underclass or minority offenders (Abbott & Calonico, 1974; Grover & Soothill, 1996). Once criminal proceedings begin, coverage of the rape often shifts toward the behaviors of the victim that may have contributed to the offense (Benedict, 1992; Griffin, 1971; Madriz, 1997; Meyers, 1997). A recent example of this phenomenon is the coverage of the Kobe Bryant rape case.

“Law & Order: SVU” has become a fixture in primetime television, and like the original “Law & Order” uses the trademark “ripped from the headlines” approach where crimes are modeled after actual crimes that are presented in the news. With many members of the public using crime dramas to shape their perceptions of both sexual assault and the criminal justice system (Breslin, 1990) it is important to analyze crime dramas to see how accurately sexual assault and other violent crimes are portrayed and how these programs use age, sex and race to characterize victims and offenders.

### ***Methods***

This study consists of a content analysis of the entire 2003 - 2004 (fifth season) of “Law & Order: SVU”, which included twenty-five, one-hour episodes. The setting of each episode was Manhattan, New York. Four coders were trained during two separate two-hour training sessions. They were trained in coding for both the program as a whole and individual victims and offenders. Training sessions included a detailed discussion of the operationalization of all variables. The coders then watched a sample episode and participated in a follow up discussion, and a comparison of results between coders. Coders were encouraged to watch each episode at least two times, the first time to get an overall understanding of the show and its plot while recording data for the program unit of analysis, and the second time (more if necessary) to gather more data on specific offenders and victims. The coders consisted of two white males, one white female, and one African American female.

Two separate units of analysis were used for coding. Coding of the entire program included a basic count by race and sex of all characters and their respective roles. Only characters with a speaking part or were unable to speak due to victimization were coded. Characters were counted only once in an episode and were only counted in one category: violent

offender, non-violent offenders, violent victim, non-violent victim, violent suspect, non-violent suspects, police, attorneys, criminal justice other (included the police rank of lieutenant and above, medical or forensic police officials, judges, prison staff, and all other individuals involved in criminal justice not considered a general police officer), witnesses (included anyone who witnessed the crime or was questioned for the purpose of solving the crime), expert witnesses (individuals considered to be experts in areas who testified in court, and or individuals paid to testify in court), rat/junkie/informant (include individuals with questionable or criminal pasts who offer police information in exchange for lenience), family of offender, family of victim, or general public. A hierarchy rule was established for individuals who occupied more than one role in the program based on the order the roles are listed in above. For example if an individual is an attorney, but is also an offender in the program the individual was coded as an offender. Race and gender were based on the physical appearance, accents, first and/or last name of characters.

For each program the most serious offense (using the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) hierarchy rule) was recorded<sup>i</sup>, as was the specific crime the program focused on. Other data collected included if the program revealed who the offender was for the crime the program focused on, the outcome of the case, any civil rights violations (no Miranda warnings, physical abuse, forced confession, entry without a warrant, no probable cause for arrest, or promises of leniency), and if derogatory comments about offenders or suspects were made by police officers.

The second unit of analysis was individual victims and offenders. For every victim and offender on the program, regardless of the crime, the characteristics of age, race, sex, relationship with victim/offender, outcome of the case, involvement in other criminal activity, crime and whether or not the victim was still alive were coded. Average inter-rater reliability on both the program and the individual coding sheets for nominal level variables was 94 percent agreement, and for interval and ratio level variables  $\alpha = .84$ .

Actual statistics from the UCR (New York City, 2004) for Manhattan and National Crime Victimization Rates (NCVS) (Catalano, 2005) were used to compare the portrayals on “SVU” with reality. Although both UCR and NCVS under-represent the actual occurrence of crime in the United States they are the best measures available and UCR is considered especially valid for homicide because most homicides are reported to the police (Gove, Hughes & Geerken, 1985). Specific NCVS data is not available for Manhattan because NCVS estimates are based on a national sample. In order to get a comparable measure of victimization numbers in Manhattan we multiplied the individual crime risk calculated by NCVS for race, age and sex characteristics by the relevant demographic data found in the 2000 census for Manhattan, New York.<sup>ii</sup>

## **Results**

### *Manhattan, New York*

Manhattan, New York is a much more diverse city than the producers and directors of “SVU” show on television. According to the U.S. Census 2000 just over one-half (54%) of the individuals who lived in Manhattan, New York are white, on “SVU” almost three-quarters (72%) of all the characters are white. None of the main characters on “SVU” are Hispanic and only three percent of the individuals appearing on the program are Hispanic, while over one-quarter (27%) of the Manhattan population is Hispanic. An examination of a promotional picture of the four main “SVU” cast members also highlights the white cast members compared to a minority

cast member who appears behind the white cast members--where he is more difficult to see (Law & Order: SVU, 2006).

The gender distribution of "SVU"—a show focusing on victims of sex crimes—is biased in favor of men who represent 60% of the characters on the program. In terms of gender the U.S. Census reports that women make up about 51% of the population of Manhattan, New York. Rather than reflecting the characteristics of Manhattan, New York, the cast of "SVU" seems to mirror the hiring statistics for all television programs in 2003 as reported by the Screen Actors Guild (2003) where 58% of the roles were filled by male actors, and white actors received 73% of the available roles. This perhaps reflects the desire to attract the types of audience members companies who buy commercial time are frequently targeting.

Although the show is named "Special Victims Unit" and is themed around "sexually-motivated offenses" 48% of the programs did not focus on a sexually-motivated offense. In fact, many of the programs focused on the murder of white males. Almost all of the crimes on "SVU" are extremely brutal, and may serve to connect rape and murder in the viewer's mind. Almost 60% of the victims on "SVU" were dead by the end of the program. While sexual assault is a violent crime and creates enormous psychological harm, victims generally survive and in the majority of cases do not require hospitalization for their physical injuries (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Like reality (Catalano, 2005), the majority of criminal cases on "SVU" did not involve strangers, but involved individuals who knew one another. Unlike reality, most rapes shown were not spousal or date rapes.

**Table 1: Victims in Manhattan, NY Data compared to SVU Victims**

	<b>Manhattan, NY: NCVS*</b>	<b>“Law &amp; Order: SVU”</b>
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	11%	39%
Female	89%	61%
<b>Age</b>		
Under 18	23%	44%
18 – 30	50%	30%
Over 30	27%	26%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
White	47%	62%
Black	20%	16%
Hispanic	26%	6%
Other	7%	16%

\* Estimates for New York City victimization combine 2003 NCVS national victimization rates for violent crime, with ages rounded to fit study categories for violent crime, with New York City 2000 Census data on age composition of city.

### *Victims*

Table 1 shows the race, gender and age characteristics of “SVU” victims. Almost one-half of all the victims on “SVU” were under the age of 18, compared to NCVS reports that suggest the actual figure is closer to one-quarter or all victims. This focus on youth clearly establishes the qualitative link made by the programs producers and directors between age and “special”. “SVU” also clearly over-represents white male characters as victims on “SVU” compared to NCVS data for 2004. Only 12% of all victims of sexual assault and murder are male according to the NCVS victimization rates adjusted for the population of Manhattan, however, almost 40% of victims on “SVU” are male. While some of this discrepancy may be accounted for by the fact that many of the crimes that were committed on “SVU” were not sexually motivated and therefore the victims would most likely be male, male sexual victimization still accounted for just over one-third of the sexual assault victims on the program. The gendered nature of sex-crimes, which acknowledges that rape and sexual assault are crimes of dominance and that the victims are predominantly female (New York City, 2004; Catalano, 2005) is largely missing from the portrayals of rape on “SVU”. Additionally, although most victims were shown in a very sympathetic role, female victims were more likely than men on “SVU” to appear to contribute to their victimization by associating with the wrong crowd, talking to strangers, or using drugs and alcohol.

Almost two-thirds of the crimes on “SVU” had white victims, while in Manhattan the



majority of victims are minorities. This pattern indicates a greater value placed on young white victims by the show's producers and directors, while minimizing the number of minority victims, as well as their importance. Minority victims were minimized on "SVU" compared to their white counterparts in a number of subtle qualitative ways. Specifically, although a single white victim was frequently the sole focus of an episode on "SVU", minority victims were almost always portrayed in groups. For example, one episode focused on a whole truck-load of minority children abducted to become sex-slaves, and another episode involved the shooting of two African-American youths but the program focused on the white shooter as the victim of medical malpractice.

Furthermore, minority victims were more likely than their white counterparts to be shown only in a photograph and to remain nameless throughout the program. African American females were almost completely missing as rape victims on "SVU", despite the fact that they are the group most at risk for sexual assault (NCVS, 2005). Ignoring minority female victims of sexual assaults reinforces the racist assumption that minority women are "Jezebels" who are not innocent victims (Meyer, 2004) and therefore do not belong on a show about "special" victims. "SVU" frequently used age and race as signifiers of the innocence of victims, reinforcing the difference between "Madonna" and "Whore" victims. Crosstabulations of age by other program characteristics such as sex, type of crime, and whether or not the victim survived did not differ significantly from adult victims on "SVU".

**Table 2: Offenders in Manhattan, NY Data compared to SVU Victims**

	<b>Manhattan, NY: UCR*</b>	<b>"Law &amp; Order: SVU"</b>
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	5%	63%
Female	95%	37%
<b>Age</b>		
Under 18	6%	11%
18 – 30	51%	22%
Over 30	43%	67%
<b>Race/Ethnicity**</b>		
White	48%	82%
Black	50%	10%
Hispanic	22%	2%
Other	4%	6%

\*Estimates for Manhattan, NY offenders are from 2001 UCR estimates of forcible rape, murder, and manslaughter. Source: [http://criminaljustice.state.ny.us/crimnet/ojsa/cja\\_00\\_01/contents.htm](http://criminaljustice.state.ny.us/crimnet/ojsa/cja_00_01/contents.htm)

\*\* Race estimates for UCR will total more than 100%, because Hispanic ethnicity may also be included in other race categories.

### *Offenders*

Table 2 shows the gender, race and age characteristics of “SVU” offenders compared to UCR violent offences cleared by arrest in Manhattan. Whites and women, particularly white women, are over-represented as offenders on “SVU” compared to Manhattan, New York statistics. Additionally, individuals over 30 are over-represented as offenders on “SVU”, this trend was particularly pronounced for male offenders. This focus on older offenders coupled with a focus on juvenile victims highlights the innocence of the victims and the evil nature of sex offenders and murderers.

Although females commit just 5% of the sexual assaults and murders in Manhattan, on “SVU” females commit more than one-third of these offenses. Men on the other hand commit 95% of the rapes, murders and manslaughters in Manhattan, NY, but only 63% of similar crimes on “SVU”. On a qualitative basis, female offenders were also portrayed as being particularly manipulative and cruel in their planning and execution of violent crimes. For example, one mother hired a man to kill her future son-in-laws ex-girlfriend and her unborn baby, so that her daughter would not have to compete with a baby and an ex-girlfriend for attention in her new marriage.

When shown, female juvenile offenders were brutal, vindictive, petty and manipulative, where as the two juvenile male offenders were shown as victims of their circumstances. One killed two youths because a greedy doctor had illegally prescribed him inappropriate medication in order to make a profit. The second youth was himself the victim of severe abuse and was coerced into believing that killing his brother would help his brother avoid a life of suffering.

The prevalence of female offenders tends to de-gender sex crimes. On “SVU” both males and females are common violent offenders and the motivations for their crimes appear more rooted in greed and lust than socialization patterns and inequality. This minimizes the impact that patriarchy, male socialization and masculinity may play in sex crimes. Additionally, men on “SVU” were more likely to receive a reduced sentence because of plea-bargains while women were more likely to be convicted in a jury trial and receive a severe sentence, sending the message: women who violate gender norms and commit violent offenses are worse than violent men.

While the lack of minority offenders—they constitute only 18% of all offenders shown-- may be a positive attribute of the program, “Law & Order: SVU” did have several episodes where a black male was a suspect for the majority of the program and in the last minutes of the program it was revealed that the offender was a white male. For example, in one episode an African-American criminologist was a suspect in a rape and murder case for an entire episode until the last 5 minutes when the program revealed a white male graduate student had committed the crime and framed him.

**Table 3: Crimes Cleared by Arrest or Conviction in Manhattan, NY and on SVU**  
New York City\* SVU

Violent Crime Cleared By Arrests (Rape & Murder)	49%	100%
Violent Crime Cleared By Conviction (Rape & Murder)	51%	92%

\* Conviction rates for New York City based on data from “Dispositions of Violent Felony Arrests New York City.” [http://criminaljustice.state.ny.us/crimnet/ojsa/dispos/nyc\\_vfo.htm](http://criminaljustice.state.ny.us/crimnet/ojsa/dispos/nyc_vfo.htm)

#### *Criminal Justice System*

“SVU” offenders are always identified, and almost always punished by the criminal justice system for their offenses. Table 3 shows that the criminal justice system on “SVU” is clearly more efficient than in real life. In Manhattan, NY just less than one half of all murder and rape reports are cleared by arrest, and of those cleared by arrest only 51% result in a conviction. On “SVU” all of the crimes were cleared by an arrest or the death of the suspect and 92% of those arrests ultimately resulted in a conviction in court. Combine this with the fact that the program exaggerates crimes against young white victims and the viewer is left with a vision of an efficient criminal justice system that fights for justice for stereotypical “special” victims.

**Table 4: Civil Rights Violations on SVU**

Type of Violation	Times Violations Occurred
Miranda Warnings	10
Excessive Force	12
Forced confession	3
Entry without Warrant	2
Promises of Leniency	1
<b>Total:</b>	<b>28 Violations or 1.12 per episode</b>

“Law & Order: SVU” frequently portrays detectives using renegade tactics in order to get confessions and convictions. Table 4 shows the frequency of specific civil rights violations. The

use of such tactics (excessive force, control talk, violations of police procedure) are rarely questioned or frowned upon, instead they are treated as a normal part of policing. On “SVU” there is an average of 1.12 civil rights violations per episode; the most common violations are use of excessive force and failure to read a suspect their Miranda warnings. These violations were never punished in the 2003-2004 season of “SVU”.

On the rare occasion that a violation of civil rights was mentioned by a character on the program it was in the form of a verbal warning to “calm down” so that the case would not be jeopardized. More typically, civil rights violations were shown as part of doing business with heinous criminals. The importance of civil rights to the United States justice system are almost never mentioned on “SVU”, instead violations of these rights are normalized and the implicit message is that suspects and offenders have too many rights. Combine this with frequent control talk, which implies an “us” versus “them” mentality, from police officers and the impression you are left with is that police officers need to resort to any means necessary to protect “us” from “them.” (Cavendar & Fishman, 1998; Eschholz et al., 2004).

### ***Discussion and Conclusion***

“Law & Order: SVU” tends to mix just enough fact with fiction to make the story believable and entertaining to the layperson. “SVU” uses the same “ripped from the headlines” format as the original Law and Order program and these familiar storylines, although fictionalized, may prime viewers toward distorted perceptions about the crime problem generally, and sex crimes specifically. The images shown on “Law & Order: SVU” differ from the reality of life in Manhattan, New York in many important ways. The Manhattan shown on “SVU” is much whiter and more male than Manhattan, New York. While these trends are similar to those found in past research, the 60% / 40% gender split between males and females shows marked improvement over programs like “Dragnet” or more recently shows like “NYPD Blue” (Eschholz, et al., 2004) and “The Shield.”

Minorities on “Law & Order: SVU” are minimized in several disturbing ways. All minorities, but particularly Hispanics, are severely under-represented as characters on this program. “SVU” does a good job not demonizing minorities in their portrayal as offenders and this is different than many previous media studies in recent years (Eschholz, et al, 2004; Moorti, 2002; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002), however, consistent with past research they also leave them out of positive roles (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; Chermak, 1995; Entman & Rojecki, 2000) particularly as victims. “Law & Order: SVU” focuses on white victims even though the majority of victims in Manhattan are minorities. Also, similar to past media research when minority victims are shown, they are often depersonalized by only showing a photo rather than a person and grouping victims together and not developing their individual stories (Meyers, 2004). This is similar to the presentations of many news programs that highlight child-abduction cases of young whites (Kappeler et al., 2000) and is reflected in the legal changes that result from campaigns that feature unfortunate young white female victims (e.g. Megan’s Law, Amber Alert, & Jessica’s Law). Minimizing sympathetic minority roles, such as victims and police officers supports the stereotypical view that crime is a black on white problem in the United States, rather than educating the public that crime is most typically intraracial and that many minority members are actively involved in efforts to reduce the crime problem.

“SVU” images of sexually motivated crime are also distorted. Male sexual victimization and female offending were both greatly exaggerated on “SVU”, redefining the gendered nature of sex crimes for the viewing public. By de-gendering both the offenders and victims of rape the focus is placed on individual offenders rather than an understanding of social problems that lead to sexual assault. As Moorti (2002: 68) argues “the media in the United States tend to privilege the narratives of the individual over stories that might offer insights to structural and social issues.” By focusing on individual stories, that do in fact illicit sympathy for victims of sex crimes, systemic and cultural issues such as gender inequality, patriarchy, and male socialization are ignored.

The overwhelming majority of the rapes shown on “SVU” were extremely violent, resulting in severe physical injuries or death. This pattern exemplifies the myth of the sadistic, psychologically disturbed rapist who preys on innocent victims for “sick” enjoyment (Bufkin & Eschholz, 2002). These projections of rape prime the viewing public to confuse all but the most brutal rapes with consensual sex (Linz, Wilson & Donnerstein, 1992; Rhode, 1995; Yang & Linz). “People are more likely to remember information that is consistent with their preexisting schema. Participants’ expectations for what evidentiary patterns are plausible indications that a crime occurred have important implications for juror decisions” (Kovera, 2002:68).

“SVU,” through its lack of portrayals of spousal or acquaintance rape, reinforce the “denial of injury” rape myth. According to this myth, if the victim is not physically injured than there is no rape (Marshall & Hambley, 1996; Scully, & Marolla, 1984). The lack of inclusion of rapes without severe injuries serves to negate their importance and may lead victims, offenders, jurors, and individuals working within the criminal justice system to similarly minimize rapes that do not involve injury (Burt, 1980; Caringella-MacDondald & Humpries, 1991; Fitzpatrick, 2001). “If they have little or no personal or sociological knowledge of sexual assault and abuse, this may entail referencing media images where rape myths portraying typical victims and offenders flourish” (Bufkin & Eschholz, 2000:1338).

The majority of the victims portrayed on “SVU” were shown as innocent or blameless and it appeared that the show actively tried to counter the common myth that victims cause sexual assault. Furthermore, most victims on the program were treated with compassion, and in the one case where a police officer minimized the victim’s rape the victim became a violent offender and the officer was racked with guilt over not initially treating the victim with the respect she deserved. As Moorti (2002) argues these sympathetic stories do draw attention to the tragedy and consequences of rape victimization, but unfortunately the way the stories are framed actively deflects attention away from systemic causes of rape and policy solutions that would address gender and racial inequality, and masculine socialization.

As the viewer’s attention is shifted away from the gendered nature of sex crimes, it is focused on the criminal justice system as a response to all crime problems, particularly violent and sex crimes. The images typically presented on “SVU” and other crime dramas are of an extremely efficient police department that can be relied on to get the job done, even if it requires bending the rules and violating a defendants civil rights (Sparks, 1995; Eschholz et al, 2004). The normalization of civil rights violations is combined with the use of control talk that

emphasizes the positive function of the police and the criminal justice system as agents of control in protecting society from a variety of evils, while demonizing offending populations (Cavender & Fishman, 1998). The end result is a reduction of the understanding of crime causes to evil offenders and a reduction of crime solutions to policing and tough sentences.

Using both quantitative and qualitative measures of what “special victims” means on “Law & Order: SVU” we draw the conclusion that “special victims” are: 1) Young – almost half of all the victims were under 18. Young victims are also frequently coupled with offenders over 30, and age is used to dramatize the distinction between “good” victims and “evil” offenders. 2) White – almost two-thirds of “SVU” victims are white. This over-representation connects whiteness with innocence and exploitation. Minority victimization is minimized and downplayed, especially given that New York City is the setting for this drama. Focusing on white victims portrays the criminal justice system as primarily fighting to protect white citizens. 3) Male – although “SVU” focuses on sex crimes 39% of all victims shown were male. Shifting the focus to male victims served to exaggerate the prevalence of female sex offenders, de-gender the coverage of rape, and frequently move the topic of the program from “sexual victims” to male homicide and kidnapping victims. Cumulatively the “special” victim on “SVU” becomes an archetype that reinforces current stereotypes about sex crimes in society (Kappeler et al., 2000; Best, 1987; Finkelhor et al, 1992) and the value given to young white victims by our criminal justice system (Meyers, 2004).

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<sup>i</sup> The crimes coded came from a list of crimes used in Uniform Crime Reports, Type 1 and Type 2 offenses and include: criminal homicide, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary-breaking and entering, larceny theft, motor vehicle theft, arson, other assaults (simple), forgery and counterfeiting, fraud, embezzlement, stolen property-buying, receiving, possessing, vandalism, weapons-carrying, possessing, prostitution and commercialized vice, sex offenses (except forcible rape, prostitution, and commercialized vice), drug abuse violations, gambling, offenses against the family and children, driving under the influence, liquor laws, drunkenness, disorderly conduct, vagrancy, all other offenses, suspicion, curfew and loitering laws, runaways.

<sup>ii</sup> We suspect this calculation under-represents actual criminal victimization in Manhattan, because Manhattan crime rates are higher than the national average, but that the proportion for different races and sex would be consistent with Manhattan.