

DON'T BE A Copagandist!

A Resource for Media on Covering “Crime” and Violence

Compiled by Mia Henry, Lewis Raven Wallace, and Andrea J. Ritchie
with research from [No More Police: A Case for Abolition](#)

1 *Don't act as a stenographer for police*

Don't repeat police narratives unchecked. We know from decades of experience that cops don't tell the truth, especially if they are implicated in violence themselves. Wait until you can find out what actually happened and report the truth, rather than the police press release. Your story can wait.

2 *Don't use passive language to describe police violence*

“Officer-involved shooting” is police terminology that removes any implication of guilt. So is saying someone “died at the hands of police” or that someone “was caught in the crossfire.” Be attentive to who is active and named in your stories about violence.

3 *Question police statistics on “crime”*

Crime does not equal violence and harm and not all harm and violence is crime. Crime statistics both overestimate and underestimate violence and harm. Most violent crimes are not reported to police,¹ most things designated as crimes don't involve violence or harm,² many things that are violent and harmful are not crimes, and most crime statistics don't include violence by police.³ As a form of “copaganda,” police conflate multiple things to construct a narrative of “out of control” crime—homicides, property crimes, public order offenses.⁴ They also frequently focus on the categories of “crime” that are increasing, and not on those that are decreasing. In addition, crime statistics are created and influenced by police—including through what areas and offenses they focus on policing. We also know that crime statistics are deliberately manipulated by police with no independent verification of their numbers.



4 *Don't fuel fear-mongering!*

A lot of news coverage reinforces fear about interpersonal violence, making it seem, mysteriously, that violence has been on the rise every year since forever (when in fact violent crimes reported to police are currently near a 20-year low).⁵ While the pain and fear felt by individual victims is real, the narrative of constant rising crime becomes a justification for expanding police powers. Be wary of listing homicide rates in a given year in articles about police budgets; these numbers are too often presented to justify more policing (even when they are falling; even when more policing is proven not to help).⁶

5 *Watch out for criminalizing language like "safe/unsafe," "dangerous" or "illegal"*

Cops target certain areas, then report higher crime in those areas, reinforcing stereotypes about "safe" versus "unsafe" neighborhoods, usually characterizing low-income Black and Brown neighborhoods as "unsafe" or "crime ridden." Also watch out for dehumanizing police terminology such as referring to people as "criminals," "males" and "females" instead of men, women, girls or boys, young people as "juveniles," accused people as "suspects," and people who have been convicted as "dangerous" or "offenders." Same goes for words that define people by the crime they are accused of: "prostitute," "robber," "assailant." These are terms the criminal legal system uses to dehumanize and criminalize.

6 *Don't publish mug shots*

Just don't. It's dehumanizing, it criminalizes people forever (when you Google their name a mug shot comes up), and it supports police narratives by setting them up as the bad guys and cops as heroes who arrest the bad guys.



7 *Be skeptical of police “solutions” to violence*

Police will often present further investments in policing and surveillance as solutions to violence, whether or not they are proven to work. Take Shotspotter, an expensive technology that surveils communities and then informs police after shots have been fired—doing nothing to prevent shootings and contributing to increased criminalization of entire communities. Cop solutions to their own violence are also suspect: for example, body cameras increase surveillance without decreasing police harm; investments in Tasers are expensive and still potentially deadly; and de-escalation training doesn’t prevent police murders.⁷ Question these initiatives based on the evidence and report with skepticism. Often they are expensive alternatives to what actually works: investing in education, ending poverty, eliminating laws that criminalize communities, and increasing access to health care.

8 *Respect names, pronouns, and requests for anonymity*

Cops often misreport the names and genders of trans and gender non-conforming people. Whether they are victims of violence or accused of perpetrating it, no one should be [deadnamed](#), misgendered, or disrespected in news articles about them. Do the research to make sure you are referring to trans and GNC people accurately.⁸ Additionally, people shouldn’t have to risk their safety to go to reporters about police violence or violence at the hands of immigration officers. Respect requests for anonymity from undocumented and otherwise vulnerable people, so that their stories can be told without putting their lives at risk.⁹

GOOD THINGS!

Approaches for advancing abolitionist narratives

HOW DO WE ADVANCE AN ABOLITION NARRATIVE?

WHY THIS APPROACH?

WHO INSPIRES US?

| | | |
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| <p><i>Amplify the voices of criminalized journalists</i></p> | <p>Directly affected, criminalized, and incarcerated people are the experts on their own lives. By supporting criminalized people not just as sources but as journalists + storytellers, we can shift narratives about violence, harm, and the true impact of criminalization.</p> | <p>The Black and Pink National Newsletter is written by LGBTQ people in prison and their outside allies, and distributed to nearly 20,000 people in prisons. The Abolitionist, the newspaper of Critical Resistance, also reaches thousands of people in prisons.</p> <p>Empowerment Avenue worked with The Appeal on this piece about how prison writers struggle to be heard.</p> |
| <p><i>Challenge copaganda directly</i></p> | <p>Huge swaths of pop culture, youth and teen programs, and messaging campaigns by police fraternal organizations are devoted to presenting cops as honest, heroic, and helpful in spite of tons of evidence to the contrary. Challenge copaganda, large and small.</p> | <p>MLK50 published a piece critiquing a police survey of residents and calling on readers to question results.</p> <p>Outlier Media in Detroit exposed police misuse and misrepresentation of data about complaints filed by residents.</p> <p>Injustice Watch debunked Right Wing, pro-police propaganda about a law that abolished cash bail in Illinois.</p> <p>Scalawag Magazine is analyzing copaganda in pop culture through its Pop Justice newsletter and ongoing series.</p> |

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| <p><i>Consider the context; cover violence beyond the interpersonal</i></p> | <p>Police statistics only represent individual, usually interpersonal violence. Structural violence, such as evictions, food insecurity, family separation, and the violence of prisons, jails, and detention are left out of the equation.</p> | <p>City Bureau in Chicago trains community-based reporters on Chicago’s South Side, who report on systemic divestment and community solutions, often in collaboration with organizations.</p> <p>The Bloomfield Info Project cited a study of racist traffic stops in their coverage of a community meeting about policing.</p> <p>Shadowproof published an investigation of COVID-19 neglect at San Quentin Prison—one way prisons perpetuate violence and death.</p> |
| <p><i>Expose the ways police use their power</i></p> | <p>Policing is fundamentally brutal and violent. The system is not “broken,” it is working the way it was designed - to control people and protect capital. Our stories can expose this system without presenting it as exceptional.</p> | <p>Mainline Zine exposed police use of funds to gentrify and expand their power through “Cop City” Atlanta</p> <p>KnockLA published a deeply reported history of LA County Sheriff’s gangs.</p> <p>Baltimore Beat and Baltimore Courtwatch put time and resources into courtwatching to reveal what’s happening to people after their arrests.</p> <p>Race Capitol podcast covered surveillance in public housing as a problem (rather than a solution)</p> |
| <p><i>Explore solutions that work</i></p> | <p>Policing doesn’t prevent or intervene on violence. Cover what does—or what could if it was fully funded (as police have been for hundreds of years).</p> | <p>AirGo and Interrupting Criminalization’s One Million Experiments podcast tells stories about community-based safety projects.</p> <p>The Trace covers violence interrupters—a proven approach to prevention that is chronically underfunded.</p> |

**HOW DO WE
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Report on approaches that get at root causes of violence

WHY THIS APPROACH?

In addition to looking at policing and militarization as a cause (rather than solution) of violence, we should be striving to understand what’s driving interpersonal violence in order to invest in real solutions.

WHO INSPIRES US?

[The Trace looked at trauma and healing through public libraries in Baltimore](#)—including healing from the trauma of racism.

[The Stand in Syracuse did this piece on addiction and street violence](#) (and followed up four years later).

[The New Yorker’s coverage of the Dylann Roof trial](#) in Charleston laid responsibility at the feet of United States history.

ADDITIONAL READING AND GUIDES

(in English):

[A Guide for Reading and Writing About Crime](#) by Alec Karakatsanis of Copaganda Newsletter

Dart Center on Trauma and Journalism [Style Guide for Trauma-Informed Journalism](#)

Dart Center [Resources for Editors and Reporters Covering Gun Violence](#)

Defund MPD [How to Stop Copaganda](#)

[Ethical Reporting on Police Violence and Black-led Resistance: Tips for Journalists](#) by Mia Henry and Lewis Raven Wallace for Press On; also see [M4BL’s Journalism for Black Lives](#)

[Scalawag Magazine’s Press In Prison](#) guide (free to download, now available in print)

[Say What? How to Talk about Trans and Gender Non Conforming People, Youth and People in the Sex Trade Respectfully](#) by Fierce, Streetwise and Safe, and TransJustice of the Audre Lorde Project

[Press On and Migrant Roots Media Narrative Screening Tool](#) for journalists

[Media 2070 report](#) on media reparations from Free Press

THINGS TO LISTEN TO FOR MORE INFO AND ANALYSIS

(in English):

[Mariame Kaba on the Finding Our Way podcast](#) with Prentis Hemphill

[Andrea Ritchie on Beyond Prisons podcast](#), discussing gender justice and abolition

[Clarissa Brooks on Getting to the Root of It](#) with Venus Roots, discussing the myth of “objective” journalism and the work of movement journalists

[Lewis Raven Wallace on The View from Somewhere](#), “How Black Lives Matter Changed the News”



Endnotes

- 1 Mariame Kaba and Andrea J. Ritchie, [No More Police: The Case for Abolition](#), p. 44
- 2 In 2020, [The New York Times found](#) that only 4 percent of calls to police are related to violent crime.
- 3 *No More Police*, p. 54, citing numbers from the Centers for Disease Control.
- 4 *No More Police*, p. 12, p. 49-53
- 5 According to FBI statistics analyzed by [The Brennan Center For Justice](#)
- 6 *No More Police*, p. 54
- 7 *See No More Police*, p. 118-124
- 8 See the [Trans Journalists Association Styleguide](#) for more guidance.
- 9 This [guide on anonymity](#) from Define American has tips for how to navigate this with sources.

IC INTERRUPTING CRIMINALIZATION

www.InterruptingCriminalization.com