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Report: Covering disadvantaged neighbourhoods

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*Residents of Toronto's poorest neighbourhoods sometimes accuse the media of only reporting bad news. Is this true? And if it is true, does this matter? A new study in the Canadian Journal of Urban Research analyzes the impact local news coverage has on 13 troubled communities where social services are inadequate and poverty is rising. Study author **April Lindgren** reports.*

A new study analyzes news coverage of 13 Toronto priority areas – disadvantaged neighbourhoods where poverty is rising and social services

After spending 25 years covering the news, I now have time to think about what we do as journalists, why we do it and the consequences of those decisions.

So when residents from Jane-Finch, Malvern or another of Toronto's disadvantaged neighbourhoods accuse the media of reporting only bad news about their communities it makes me wonder: Is this true? And if it is true, does this matter?

Three years ago when I was still working as a daily news reporter, I would have argued that bad news is newsworthy and that it was my job to tell bad-news stories regardless of neighbourhood complaints. I still believe all that. But a study I've just completed suggests that journalists who write about Toronto's most troubled communities have an impact that goes beyond the personal satisfaction of making the front page, beating the competition and telling a compelling story.

The study, "News, geography and disadvantage: Mapping newspaper coverage of high-needs neighbourhoods in Toronto, Canada," was just published in the Canadian Journal of Urban Research. Using the *Toronto Star* as a test case, it analyzed news coverage of Toronto's 13 priority areas – hot spots of need characterized by rising poverty levels, high social needs and less-than-adequate social services and infrastructure.

The study, which examined local stories and photos on 28 days between January and August 2008, found crime-related items accounted for 31 per cent or 38 of 122 stories and photos associated with the priority areas.

Further research suggested that this isn't because lawlessness in these communities is higher than in other parts of the city. An examination of calls to police for violence-related incidents, for instance, found that the most calls came from within the downtown-core – where stories about sports, arts and entertainment (38 per cent of 1,249 news downtown-related news items) dominated all the local news fit to print.

Newsroom economics and the way we gather news both go a long way

toward explaining this pattern. Crime news, for instance, is relatively easy and cheap to gather. The police issue press releases and appoint media information officers to answer reporters' questions. Beat reporters often work right out of police headquarters. And most newsrooms are home to a police scanner that is constantly monitored.

Crime and mayhem also dominate news coverage of the priority areas by default, that is, because there is so little reporting on other issues. Of the 122 news items linked to the areas during the period studied, for instance, only 10 dealt with transit issues and 10 dealt with social supports, affordable housing and poverty issues. By comparison, there were eight news items about fire and accidents in addition to those 38 crime-related stories and photos. The dearth of other coverage is at least partially explained by the fact that news organizations say they can't afford to have reporters stationed full-time in satellite offices in or near the priority areas.

The data assembled for the study do not reveal whether police have a propensity to highlight trouble in the priority areas in their news releases. And we don't know if reporters are more inclined to write stories about crime committed in neighbourhoods they themselves might consider dangerous.

What we do know is that the easy access to police information and the limited coverage of other topics means that crime news dominates the reporting out of the priority areas even though crime indicators suggest other parts of the city face more serious problems with violent criminal incidents.

These are uncertain times for newspapers and local television and radio stations suffering from the hangover of a recession, new media challenges and the collapse of the business models that sustained them for years. *The Star*, to its credit, reports extensively on local news but even its coverage of the priority areas tilted toward crime news during the period studied. The pattern was likely repeated or even more pronounced in the local reporting by other news organizations struggling with shrinking news budgets and smaller news reporting teams.

Does this matter? Yes. Social agencies and all three levels of government have made major investments in the priority areas with a view to helping residents acquire the skills and confidence they need to take charge of their future. But if residents are going to engage in their communities, they need news and information about what's going on – news and information that this research suggests is in short supply unless it is crime-related.

Efforts to help priority-area communities escape poverty are also hindered because the emphasis on crime news has a tendency to stigmatize whole neighbourhoods and undermine residents' ability to get the jobs they need to move ahead. Remember the 2007 incident when a young, black university student from the Malvern priority area was described as a "ghetto dude" in an email mistakenly sent to him by the person dealing with his application for a job with the provincial government?

Finally, negative stereotyping of neighbourhoods can sap residents' willingness to become engaged in their "loser" communities and reinforce the desire of those whose prospects do improve to move away as soon as possible.

I'm going to talk to my students about this research this fall. I'll urge them to think about the study's conclusions now because they won't have much time for it once they are in a newsroom reporting on the latest murder in Malvern or police drug raid in the Jane and Finch area.

This isn't about making the case for cheerful "good news" stories. It's about doing more tough reporting on a wider range of issues: the quality of transit service, why drug trafficking is more attractive than flipping burgers for minimum wage, the accessibility of decently priced food, and, dare I say it,

whether the \$100 million poured into the priority areas in the name of neighbourhood change is working.

April Lindgren is an assistant professor in Ryerson University's School of Journalism. Before joining the Ryerson faculty, she worked for 25 years as a news reporter for the Ottawa Citizen and CanWest News Service. April.lindgren@arts.ryerson.ca.

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