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Perceptions of Minorities Criminal Involvement in Grand Rapids: Community and Media Dialogue



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ABSTRACT

This study examines media over-representation and its effects on community perception. The research examines the perception of racial/ethnic involvement in violent crimes in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Grand Rapids Police Department arrest reports for violent crime were dichotomized by race/ethnicity and compared to news articles reporting violent crimes found in the Grand Rapids Press to determine if a disparity exists between those data sets. To measure public perceptions, questionnaires were administered concerning racial/ethnic groups and their likelihood to commit violent crimes. The overall intention is to provide a better understanding of root causes of minority disparity within the Criminal Justice System.

Introduction

There is ample evidence that shows social and economic inequalities exist between the dominant groups and ethnic minorities in U.S. society. Many of these discrepancies result from years of inequality and differential treatment of minorities. Historically, institutions have enforced norms that differentiate its citizens, with preferential treatment towards the dominant group and negative treatment towards minorities. The laws, customs, and traditions of the past have had an effect on our current thinking concerning race and ethnicity. Our traditional institutions and ideology have a tendency, once they have been set in motion, to continue on that same course unabated. The history of enslavement, segregation, and inequalities that have occurred in the U.S., while less prevalent today, may not be entirely extinguished from society but instead may be concealed. That is why institutional discrimination continues to be a problem in today's society.

The objective in this research is to explore causes of over-representation of minorities in the prison system by examining possible root causes of minority disparity in the Criminal Justice System. Minority over-representation in penal institutions is a complex problem with many facets. I aim to examine media influence on this social problem. This research examines how often minorities are depicted in the news and assesses if the number of news stories reported are over-representative of the amount of violent crimes minorities are actually committing in comparison to their counterparts in the city of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Additionally, this study examines such depictions and whether there is any significance in how the Grand Rapids population, to which the news is reported, views minorities and their likelihood to commit violent crime. Their views are assessed through a



Dennis Malaret, Ph.D.
Faculty Mentor

questionnaire aimed at finding the general public perception of minorities' involvement with crime.

Police reports of violent crime, defined as robbery, willful killing, murder, assault, and sexual assault, were obtained for the months of January through December 2001, and the race and ethnicity of the offenders were sorted and categorized. News articles reporting violent crime found in the *Grand Rapids Press* were also categorized by race and ethnicity and compared to the criminal arrest data set. With the purpose of investigating if a discrepancy exists between news articles reporting violent crimes of a given group and the actual amount of crime committed by that group. A survey was also constructed with the purpose of understanding how individuals in Grand Rapids felt about racial/ethnic groups and their likelihood to commit violent crime. These questionnaires aimed at finding the public's perception of minorities, with respect to criminality, were handed out in Grand Rapids. This study examines the city of Grand Rapids as a sample for the larger, broader problem of inequities in the likelihood of arrest and length of imprisonment in penal institutions amongst racial and ethnic groups.

Literature Review

Numerous studies (Wellman, 1977; Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967; Knowles & Prewitt; 1965) show that people of color are more likely to live in areas of extreme poverty, with limited life chances such as no employment opportunities, a high incidence of drug use and abuse, and crime. These circumstances have led to a prison population that greatly over-represents minorities in relation to their presence in the overall population in the United States. Previous research has confirmed that a bias exists within the U.S. Criminal Justice System due to the

disproportional representation of minorities within the prison population. This circumstance is the result of policies and police tactics applied unevenly amongst racial and ethnic groups, such as over-policing in urban neighborhoods and racial profiling (Cole, 1999).

The effect a prison record has on minorities is great. The social stigma placed on ex-convict minorities who have been labeled as criminals tends to create difficulties in obtaining steady work once they have been released from prison (Cole, 1999). Along with the stigma placed on former criminals, divergent treatment develops within the society. Stereotypes which represent minorities as criminals or as individuals with a greater propensity towards criminality are borne out of this stigma. This continues the cycle of poverty for minorities, that is, actions are based on negative perceptions (profiling), creating negative outcomes (stigma) inhibiting minority involvement with formal institutions (employment).

The society we live in, formed by our customs of the past, has been discriminatory towards minorities. The institutional discrimination mentioned earlier forces minorities into a cycle of poverty, whereby their access to the means of success are denied. Justice Marshall of the Supreme Court stated in a case involving race that:

It is unnecessary in 20th-century America to have individual Negroes demonstrate that they have been victims of racial discrimination; the racism of our society has been so pervasive that none, regardless of wealth or position, has managed to escape its impact. The experience of Negroes in America has been different in kind, not just in degree, from that of other ethnic groups. It is not merely the history

of slavery alone but also that a whole people were marked as inferior by the law. And that mark has endured. (Anderson, 1973, p. 175)

The discrimination of the past and the laws born out of this discrimination, while they may have been partially erased from our legislature, clearly are not erased from everyone's belief system or our institutions as a whole.

One of the journals examined involving institutional inequities was the *Grand Rapids Police Department Preliminary Traffic Stop Summery: Quarterly Report* printed in 2000. This document was very relevant to my research, crucial information concerning who and how often the Grand Rapids Police Department stops an individual were presented. This document displays that black and Latino males have a 2.6 and 2.0 times greater chance of being arrested during a traffic stop than white males (GRPD, 2000). Black males are subject to a total search of their vehicles during a traffic stop 35% of the time, Latino males 26% of the time, while white males are only subject to a total search of their vehicles 16% of the time (GRPD). This data shows a discrepancy in likelihood of arrest in traffic stops. Black males led in number of arrests and were also the subject of the most total searches of their vehicles than any other racial or ethnic group in the study. White males lead the category of verbal warning by police officers during a traffic stop. The differential treatment that occurs during traffic stops, the increased probability that a black male's entire vehicle is searched and the likelihood that a white males will be issued a verbal warning could be one of the reasons that black males led in arrest during traffic stops (GRPD).

In the *Community Forum on Race Relation in Grand Rapids* (Michigan Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights (MACSCCR), it is stated that in Grand Rapids, minority populations are

concentrated into 44 of the county's 344 census blocks and are in the central and near southside area of Grand Rapids. In approximately 54% of the entire Grand Rapids census blocks, minorities are less than 4% of the population. In the central city census block (downtown), where most arrests were made and over 40% of the household incomes are under \$10,000, minorities accounted for more than 50% of the residents. In 17 of those central city census blocks, minorities accounted for 80% of the residents (Michigan Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1998). The segregation of minorities into impoverished areas of the city can help create the inequality in traffic stops for black males, given that minorities are concentrated into low-income areas, which garners more traffic by police officers.

The residential segregation of citizens in Grand Rapids makes it possible to distance or limit social intercourse. Michael Woods of the Catholic Diocese of Grand Rapids said

I am convinced at this moment that if we were to ask 1,000 white folks if they were racist, they could be attached to a lie detector, say no and pass. I think that is the real problem...the denial and the ignorance that helps to perpetuate racism. [Furthermore,] part of the reason racism is able to perpetuate itself is the distances, the absence of relationships, the absence of dialogues of people not knowing

each other. What the dialogues do is put people in front of each other in the same proximity...and that changes reality. (MACUSCCR, 1998, p. 26)

This racial isolation can create social isolation and alienation between different races or ethnicities in Grand Rapids.

Tension can often stem from both employment and unemployment. Data shows that Caucasians in Grand Rapids account for 88.6% of the population, yet they constitute 92% of the employed labor force (MACUSCCR, 1998). Caucasians were the only racial or ethnic population to have the percentage of employed citizens (88.6%) greater than their percentage of the population (92%). Employment is further segregated in the white-collar and blue-collar sectors of employment. Table 1 shows the highest paid category in the white-collar sector, Officials and Managers; 95.5 percent of these positions were held by Caucasians who again make up 88.6% of the total population. African Americans who are 6.7% of the population made up 2.6% of the category. Latinos who are 3% of the population held only 1% of these positions (MACUSCCR). Caucasians constitute 94.4% and 93.3% of the category, Sales Workers and Clerical Office Workers, while African Americans represented 3% and 4.4%; Latinos represented 1.4% and 1.6% (MACUSCCR). Minorities, who are 11.4% of the population in Grand

Rapids, were underrepresented in every white-collar category (Officials, Professionals, Technicians, Sales Workers, and Clerical Workers) at 8%, while Caucasians, who are 88.6% of the population, exceeded in every white-collar category making up roughly 92% of the highest paid job sector.

Additionally, in the blue-collar sector the highest skilled and highest paying category, Craft Worker, is occupied by Caucasians in 93.5% of the cases; 2.9% and 2.4% are occupied by African Americans and Latinos respectively; both rates lower than their presence in the population. In the Laborer and Service Worker category of blue-collar work, African Americans make up 7.2% and 9.3%; Latinos make up 5.4% and 3%, both rates are either consistent with their presence in the population or exceed it (MACUSCCR, 1998). Minorities are continually clustered into the lowest paying jobs while Caucasians occupy the highest paying jobs in Grand Rapids. Minorities make up 6.9% of the skilled trades, yet represent 23.6% of the service workers, occupations with the lowest wages and most menial tasks. Four out of every ten minorities in the labor force in Grand Rapids work in the lowest paying occupations available in Grand Rapids (MACUSCCR). These discrepancies are hard to ignore. The segregation and/or concentration of minorities into impoverished areas and low paying jobs can create negative perceptions or stereotypes about minorities.

Table #1: *Civilian Labor Force by Minority Group in Grand Rapids, 1998*

	African Am.	Am. Indian	Asian	Caucasian	Latino
1. Officials and Managers	1,301 2.6%	170 0.3%	277 0.5%	48,506 95.5%	511 1.0%
2. Professionals	1,896 3.5%	103 0.2%	365 0.7%	51,711 94.8%	483 0.9%
3. Technicians	492 3.5%	47 0.3%	139 1.0%	13,139 93.2%	279 2.0%
4. Sales Workers	1,649 3.0%	207 0.4%	407 0.7%	52,137 94.4%	794 1.4%
5. Clerical and Office Workers	3,100 4.4%	242 0.3%	303 0.4%	65,374 93.2%	1,114 1.6%
6. Craft Workers	1,714 2.9%	325 0.5%	348 0.6%	55,325 93.5%	1,427 2.4%
7. Operatives	6,283 8.1%	596 0.8%	1,061 1.4%	65,819 85.0%	3,638 4.7%
8. Laborers	1,662 7.2%	154 0.7%	231 1.0%	19,827 85.7%	1,257 5.4%
9. Service Workers	5,838 9.3%	430 0.7%	562 0.9%	54,080 86.0%	1,902 3.0%
10. No category	773 7.3%	66 0.6%	79 0.7%	8,492 80.4%	1,137 8%

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Furnished by: Michigan Employment Security Commission, Information and Reports Section. Note: The first line represents the total number of individuals in an occupation. The second line represents the percentage of the total occupation's total.

The discrepancies found in Grand Rapids have created tension between the races and ethnicities in the city. Lawrence H. Borom, President of the Grand Rapids Urban League, attributes the racial tensions found in the African American community to the sense of frustration and powerlessness due to the high levels of poverty (MACUSCCR, 1998). In a recent exposé published in *Take Pride*, an African American newspaper, it was discovered that infant mortality for African American children in Kent County was double that of any

other group. According to Walther Mathis, President of *Take Pride*, the racial tensions are heightened due to the Grand Rapids media, which is dominated by white people, leaving the minority view point muted (MACUSCCR). Several testifiers before the Michigan Advisory Committee on Civil Rights expressed concerns about the local news coverage in the Grand Rapids area. The negative depictions of minorities creates a reinforcement of negative stereotypes that impedes equal opportunity for minorities; an

impression that minorities make negative contributions to a community rather than positive contributions can create alienation towards the minority community by the larger community (MACUSCCR). The literature I reviewed has been very important to the research being conducted and provides great insight into the inequities that exist within Grand Rapids and the tensions created by these discrepancies in the community.

A study conducted by Michael J. Leiber and Kristin Y. Mack (2002)

focused on the differential treatment that occurs amongst juveniles in the judicial system in the state of Iowa. The study found that probation officers use different causal attributions (internal vs. external attributions) to assess the criminal behavior of minorities and white youth. Leiber and Mack reported that minority youth involvement in crime was seen as related to internal or dispositional attributions such as attitudinal problems, e.g. lack of individual responsibility, while delinquency among white youth was attributed to external causes, e.g. impoverished conditions. Because internal attributions resulted in perceptions that youths were at a higher risk for re-offending, decision-makers recommended longer sentences for minorities than whites. By delving into the subjective qualities that influenced the construction of a case, Leiber and Mack found that the values and beliefs of decisions-makers created a legally recognizable, yet racially stereotypic, image of an offender that influenced the decision-making process.

A similar study conducted by Albonetti and Hepburn (1996) examines the joint effects of age, minority status, gender, and prior offenses on the decision to defer prosecution and recommend referral of felony drug defendants to a drug treatment program. They found that race coupled with prior offenses and being older in age increased the likelihood of prosecution; minorities with no prior offenses also had increased likelihood of prosecution; younger minorities with prior offenses increased the likelihood of participation in a drug diversion program.

The studies conducted by Albonetti and Hepburn (1996) and Leiber and Mack (2002) display the differential treatment that occurs within the prosecutorial stage in the criminal justice system. The negative stereotype that is placed on minorities in regards to

crime affects how or to what degree the justice system prosecutes minorities compared to white youths. The discrepancies are in part due to stereotypes held by those who are in decision-making positions and may involve personal biases developed towards a given race or culture which can negatively affect minorities during prosecution and can lead to longer sentences and rejection from diversion programs, assisting in the over-representation of minorities in the criminal justice system.

Theoretical Assessment

The major theories used as the framework of this research are the self-fulfilling prophecy perspective and the labeling and conflict theories. Each provides an understanding of underlying effects that may result from misrepresentations in arrests and news reports related to perceptions.

Labeling theory explains how labels, particularly negative labels, can inhibit the opportunities of an individual and create negative feelings about general groups of people. Conflict theory discusses the possible reasons for power conflicts between classes and how inequalities and discrimination can have benefits for one class at the expense of another. This study evaluates the perception of the Grand Rapids community with respect to violent crime and those perceived to be the main perpetrators. Reasoning for this component of the research is largely rooted in the perspective within labeling theory called the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Self-fulfilling prophecy was first employed by Robert Merton in *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1957) and was described as a false definition of a situation evoking a new behavior which makes the original false conception come true. This perspective will help to understand how generalized negative perceptions a community holds

regarding a particular racial or ethnic group can result in negative outcomes for those racial or ethnic groups negatively stereotyped. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1971) conducted a well-known experiment exhibiting self-fulfilling prophecy. In this study, twenty percent of the students from each of eighteen elementary classrooms were randomly chosen and the teachers were informed that those students were "intellectual bloomers." Those students who were randomly given the label "intellectual bloomers" scored four points higher on IQ test than the rest of the children. This experiment displays that the result of expecting a high performance can lead to a higher performance; conversely, expecting a low performance can lead to a lower performance. Perceptions that certain segments of society are more prone towards criminality can have the effect of creating more criminality within that segment of the population based on the expectations the larger community holds for that given group. If the larger community and institutions in that community feel that a certain group or groups of people are more likely to commit crime, more crime may be committed than normal by those groups given the expectations of the community. If a negative behavior, i.e. committing violent crime, is perceived by the larger community to be more prevalent in minority conduct, then it is important to understand why and how these labels could be constructed and imposed on minorities by the larger community.

The labeling theory takes a symbolic interactionist outlook towards crime or deviance. Symbolic interactionism interprets symbols and the meanings assigned these symbols such as language, gestures, and objects. The differences in how cultures interpret these symbols found in society can affect how cultures interact with one another.

Labeling theory examines how the dominant culture's interpretation of an action affects those individuals labeled by society and the affect it has on the individuals.

Lemert (1951), focuses on the social construction of deviance and describes deviance as a product of society's "reaction" act, assigning a "deviant" label to the person. Labeling theory is critical to understanding the creation of boundaries between deviance and compliance and whom these boundaries inhibit and enable. Lemert's concept is outlined by primary (initial "deviant" act) and secondary (any subsequent "deviant" act) deviance. According to Lemert, primary deviance is the "actor's" initial (a person's first negative interaction with authority) act that causes an authority figure (criminal justice system) to label them a deviant. This reaction by the authority figure will remain primary to the "actor", as long as the labeled "actor" can rationalize the process (dispute charges through the judiciary branch) as a function of a socially acceptable role (prove innocence and retain non-deviant label).

If the "actor" who is labeled deviant reacts to the negative label by accepting the deviant label (convicted of crime) and continues to involve themselves in other deviant acts (further crime), this is termed as secondary deviance. This creates the critical factor towards becoming a career delinquent, movement by "actor" into deviant subculture (Dahrendorf, 1979). The "actor" (convicted deviant) surrounds himself with persons who can provide moral support and self-justifying rationale and may develop new forms of deviance in this environment. If minorities in Grand Rapids are labeled by judicial and/or media institutions (arrested or reported) as committing more crime, this can create a general negative perception among the general population towards an entire group or

groups of people with similar characteristics. Those characteristics that may be similar are housing and/or neighborhoods, occupations or annual income and/or racial and ethnic indicators that can be used to identify and easily categorize groups of people as criminal. These characteristics can result from the lower wages found in minority groups in Grand Rapids and the clustering of minority neighborhoods discussed earlier. Labeling theory is very concerned with the one-on-one interaction created between those who are labeled deviant and those who are not, and subsequently segregated populations. Labeling helps to understand how the dominant culture imposes itself on sub-cultures in society; another theory must be used to explain the "why" in this question.

Conflict theory is utilized in this study to bring a macro-based understanding of the actions that occur in society and discussed in this study. In the view of conflict theory, certain forms of deviance represent behaviors that are in conflict with those powerful segments of society that shape public policy. Deviance in and of itself is a socially constructed category, thus a situation becomes criminal because a law defines it as such. Conflict theory views society not has shared values, but the outcome of struggles between two classes. Deviance is rooted in society's economic system, which has laws that are created to protect the interest of the ruling class. Laws are used to legitimize intervention by society's institutions of correction and control (i.e. police, family, religion, etc). These apparatuses often work against the poor and/or powerless, reflecting a certain institution's specific norms and values, which in capitalism emphasizes buying goods and accumulating wealth. The means to attain goods are out of reach for segments of society due to differential treatment by policy makers and law enforcers, creating wants but

inadequate means for attaining the goals that society has created. This phenomenon tends to send a good proportion of members of society into a spiral or state of ambivalence, often referred within the realm of sociology as *anomie*. This kind of institutional discrimination is very evident in current drug laws which have placed longer prison sentences, as well as heavier fines, on people arrested with possession or distribution of crack, predominately sold in lower-class neighborhoods. While individuals arrested for cocaine, a purer form of crack used predominately by affluent drug users, receive smaller fines and shorter sentences (Feagin, 1991).

These theories provide the foundation for my research. The study uses the self-fulfilling prophecy perspective to understand the effect negative perceptions the larger community holds for sub-cultural communities can have for the sub-cultural community. Labeling theory is a framework to investigate any differential treatment that may appear in the criminal justice system and in the news reporting media regarding the involvement of racial/ethnic minorities involved in and/or associated with violent crime. Conflict theory uses a macro-level of analysis to understand the conditions that can create a disproportional representation of minorities within the criminal justice system from an institutional perspective. These conditions include laws created to prohibit any actions that threaten those in positions of power and protect the interest of the wealthy and the dominant ruling class. Existing inequality helps create a negative perception leading into labeling theory. This in turn helps us to understand the labels that are attached to different segments of society, especially those labels that involve crimes committed by those in the urban lower class. The negative perceptions of racial/ethnic minorities can create

negative outcomes; the expectations the community and institutions hold for a generalized group can create more negative activity than normal based on the expectations the community holds for that general group following the self-fulfilling prophecy perspective. The negative image the media creates towards minorities can help create negative acts from the segment of society negatively labeled by the larger society.

Methodology and Design

To conduct this research, I obtained the arrest reports from the Grand Rapids Police Department for the year 2001. The arrest reports were for violent crimes defined as assault, robbery, willful killing, sexual assault, and murder. These categories were selected with the assistance of Captain Rex Marks of the GRPD, who suggested them as meaningful and appropriate categories. These statistics were separated and categorized by race/ethnicity and compared to news articles in the local newspaper, the *Grand Rapids Press*. The study evaluates if minorities are over-represented in violent crime news articles relative to the number of crimes committed by minorities for the year of 2001 in Grand Rapids. The third data set used in this study was a questionnaire which provided an understanding of how individuals in Grand Rapids perceive different groups and their likelihood to commit violent crimes.

In gathering the data for this study, I encountered a few problems that I did not anticipate. In gathering the GRPD statistics used in the study, I have no knowledge as to whether those individuals who were arrested were actually found guilty of the crime charged. This occurred because cases may still be pending at the time the data were collected from the GRPD. The files used in the study were only of individuals arrested for crimes, but may not have been incarcerated for the crime.

Forty-five violent crime news articles in the *Grand Rapids Press* were found and retrieved from the internet site www.Mlive.com, which retains archives of old Michigan newspapers. The website's search engine was used to find the violent crime news articles for the time frame of the study, 2001. Due to time and financial constraints of the study, it was not possible to take into account other mediums of news such as television or other printed press. These other news sources would have given the study a deeper perspective on how minorities are presented in news to the larger public.

A questionnaire instrument was the third data set used in this study. This instrument was designed to explore the perception of both racial/ethnic minorities as well as Caucasians on issues such as violent crime perpetrators, media coverage and distortions, and their attitudes towards minority stereotypes towards committing such crimes. Due to the extent of this research and the limited length of time, the sample population surveyed turned out somewhat narrow in scope. The questionnaire's sample population primarily included, but was not limited to, Grand Valley State University (GVSU) students. This occurred because I am a GVSU student and had greater access to students as a sample population. Another drawback of having mostly college students is that students tend to be aware of the tactics used in the questionnaire to assess discrimination amongst the general population towards minorities; the students know how to disguise any negative feelings or stereotypes they have about minorities.

When administering the questionnaire in the general community, it became apparent how difficult it is to survey the Latino community. Since the questionnaire was in English some unskilled factory workers in Grand

Rapids could not complete the survey. The flaw resulted from the language barrier many Latinos face in the U.S. – a critical factor taken for granted by the researcher. The length of the survey also made it unfavorable for workers, who were on lunch break at the factory. Clerical workers avoided me or would take the questionnaire and return it incomplete or untouched. Future research would include English and Spanish surveys and appropriate time to complete the instrument as well.

Findings

A survey instrument, which consisted of a questionnaire, was developed with the aim to assess the public perception of minorities in relation to crime. The questionnaire consisted of approximately thirty-six questions, developed with the assistance and advice of Dr. Dennis Malaret. More specifically, the instrument was designed to assess the public perception in Grand Rapids towards crime in general and, in particular, crimes and its association with ethnic minorities.

The sample population in the study consisted of students at Grand Valley State University, clerical workers and administrators at a factory in the Grand Rapids area, along with educators and staff in the Grand Rapids Public School system. The survey is utilized in this study to evaluate if an over-representation of minorities in violent crime news articles and a negative perception of minorities exist in Grand Rapids and if the two phenomena are corollary.

The sample population was comprised of 62% women and 38% men. The age of the participants are as follows: 67% of the participants were 20-29; 10% were 30-39; 5% were 40-49; 7% were 50-59; and 9% were 60 and over. The racial composition of the survey group consisted of 64% Caucasian, 28% African American, and

8% Latino. The economic standing of the respondents was comprised as follows: 10% reported making an income under \$10,000; 25% reported income of \$10,000 to \$20,000; 19% reported making \$21,000 to \$35,000; 14% reported making \$36,000 to \$50,000; 3% reported \$51,000 to \$65,000; and 9% reported making over \$66,000. Interestingly, a total of 7% of the respondents reported Don't Know/Not Sure and 9% simply did not respond to this question.

In assessing some of the most salient findings as reported by the Grand Rapids Police Department data set, the researcher found that for the year 2001, African Americans accounted for 56% of violent crime arrests. Additionally, African

Americans comprised 45% of mentions in news articles reporting violent crimes. On the other hand, Caucasian's arrest for violent crimes consisted of 29% of the cases and 30% of the news article mentions involving violent crime. Latinos, however, consisted of 10% of the violent crimes arrests. Interestingly, Latinos appeared disproportionately overrepresented amongst criminal involvement mentions in the media, comprising 21% of all mentions. Latinos appeared to be over-represented in news articles by over 10%, the highest percentage of any racial/ethnic group that was over-reported. This phenomenon of over-representation could have further implications in that it can lead to bias by the criminal justice system. Despite the

fact that not all minority groups are being over-represented by the *Grand Rapids Press* news articles, the general institutional practices can often lump these groups together. This can be caused by similar economic situations that can result from occupational and/or residency similarities, or other media institutions, therefore negative misrepresentations of one minority group can engender similar patterns of bias towards other minority groups within this area of study.

Table 2

Characteristics	n=	% of Sample Population
Gender	55	
Male	21	38%
Female	34	61%
Age of Respondent	55	
20-29	36	67%
30-39	7	10%
40-49	3	5%
50-59	4	7%
60 and over	5	9%
Race/Ethnic Background	55	
African American	16	28%
Caucasian	35	64%
Latino	4	8%
Household Income	55	
Under 10,000	6	10%
10,000-20,000	14	25%
21,000-35,000	11	19%
36,000-50,000	8	14%
51,000-65,000	3	3%
66,000 and over	5	9%
Don't Know/Not Sure	3	7%
Did Not Answer	5	9%

Table #3: News Articles Reporting Violent Crime

	# of Articles	%
African American	21	45%
Caucasian	14	30%
Latino	10	21%
Asian and/or Pacific Islanders	1	2%
N =	46	

Note: Percent totals may not add up to 100 due to rounding. (*Grand Rapids Press, 2001*)

Table #4: Violent crime for 2001 in Grand Rapids, Michigan
 figures furnished by the Grand Rapids Police Department

	Assault	Robbery	Sexual Assault	Willful Killing	Murder	Total
African American	330 56%	90 58%	16 47%	7 70%	5 71%	448 56%
Caucasian	178 30%	45 29%	8 24%	0 0%	2 29%	233 29%
Latino	56 9%	14 9%	8 24%	3 30%	0 0%	81 10%
Unknown	23 3%	5 3%	2 6%	0 0%	0 0%	30 4%
Total	587	154	34	10	7	792

Note: Percent totals may not equal 100 due to rounding

The survey had some interesting findings in terms of how minorities were perceived by non-minority respondents. A direct question asked “*which of the following groups do you think is most likely to be involved in violent crime?*” and the respondents were given various choices between racial/ethnic groups. From this question, 41% of the respondents agreed that African Americans commit more violent crimes; 30% selected Latinos; 17% selected Caucasians; 5% selected Arabs; 2% selected Asian or Pacific Islanders; 25% answered Don’t Know; and 12% did not select an answer. When compared to other racial/ethnic groups, African Americans and Latinos were selected most often by the sample population as being involved in violent crime. In the questionnaire, questions 16 through 21 stated “*I believe violent crimes are committed by...*” and different

racial/ethnic groups were inserted at the end of this statement. The respondents were given the choice to strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree. The responses given by the surveyed population were as follow: 1% believed that Asians are more likely to be involved in violent crimes; 35% indicated Latinos; 54% indicated African Americans; 25% indicated Arabs; 43% indicated Caucasians; and 20% indicated Native Americans. These findings clearly show that African Americans and Caucasians were identified as the groups most likely to commit violent crime. The finding from the sample population agrees with the data from the GRPD arrest records: Caucasians and African Americans are the two groups who are perceived as and who commit the most violent crime in Grand Rapids. Arab and Native Americans had relatively high

perception of likelihood to commit violent crime, according to the respondents, yet this group was not reported in any category indicating criminal activity in neither arrest reports from GRPD nor *Grand Rapids Press* news articles. Any negative perception towards Arab Americans may have been triggered by the aftermath of the September 11th attack on the N.Y. World Trade Center and by other Arab vs. non-Arabs global conflicts. Additionally, the instrument was administered less than two months before the second anniversary of September 11th, which could have had some influence in how the respondents expressed their feelings and beliefs. Similarly, perceptions towards Native Americans could have come from external sources (i.e. media, Hollywood, distorted history, etc.) other than the *Grand Rapids Press*.

Table #5: Perceptions of Minority Groups Involvement with Violent Crimes

Race/Ethnicity	% of Sample Population
African Americans	41%
Arabic	5%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2%
Caucasian	17%
Latino	30%
Native American	0%
Don't Know/Not Sure	25%
Did Not Answer	12%

Multiple selections were possible, may not add up to 100.

Table #6

Statement	Percentage of the Sample Population that Agree or Strongly Agree
I believe violent crimes are mostly committed by:	
African Americans	54%
Arabs	25%
Asian/Pacific Islander	1%
Caucasians	43%
Latinos	35%
Native American	20%

Multiple selections were possible, does not add up to 100

As part of the questionnaire instrument, direct statements such as, “*For the most part, I believe violent crimes are committed by Asians*” were included. The individuals then had the opportunity to indicate how strongly they agree or disagree with such statement at varying intervals. Other questions (See Appendix, questions 17-22) included attempts to evaluate how the individual being surveyed viewed other minority groups and whether the individual felt

these “*different groups*” are more likely to be involved in criminality. This questionnaire involved bold statements with varying intervals of agreement or disagreement to gauge how an individual felt about other cultures and/or races. Attitudinal perceptions, either positive or negative, may not always reflect an individual’s truthful feelings due to the fact that the individuals may not consider themselves as biased.

Biased or prejudice feelings may not be forthcoming. For this reason, questions that clearly identified the race/ethnicity of hypothetical criminal offenders were used along with questions that did not specify race/ethnicity. These questions involved differences from the dominant group in Grand Rapids regarding social class, culture, and socialization and were formulated to indirectly associate minorities. The realities of minority

clustering in occupation (low-wage earning jobs), residency (low-income housing areas), and socialization (differences in gestures, speech and dress than the dominant class) were used to identify perception of minorities by the sample population. Indirect questions implicating these characteristics were developed to assess the sample population's perceptions of a minority's likelihood to commit violent crime.

Questions indirectly involving race/ethnicity findings were much more significant. Interestingly, 69% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that violent crimes are committed by the poor. Of the population sampled, 46% agreed or strongly agreed that violent criminals come from a culture that encourages crime. Interestingly, 39% of the sample population agreed or strongly agreed that violent criminals lack the values of a traditional American citizen. We could make the generalization from these statements that the vast majority of the non-minority respondents believe violent criminals are not raised within the American culture and society, thus are likely to come from other cultures and societies. Although minorities are not directly indicated, one can infer that these statements are referring to minorities.

In reference to media portrayal of violent criminals with regards to race/ethnicity, 38% of the sampled population agreed or strongly agreed that minorities were fairly portrayed by the media, yet 56% of the same sample population agreed or strongly agreed that there is a bias in the way the media portrays crime.

Approximately 58% of the sample population reported receiving their information from television news, 38% from newspaper, 30% from personal experience and friends, 23% from family, and 12% reported as "Other" as

Table #7

Statement	Percentage of the Sample Population that Agree or Strongly Agree
I believe violent crimes are more often committed by the poor	69%
Those who commit violent crime, do so because they come from a culture that encourages crime	46%
Those who commit violent crime, lack the cultural values of the traditional American citizen	39%

Table #8

Statement	Percentage of the Sample Population that Agree or Strongly Agree
The news reporting media accurately portrays violent criminals in regards to race/ethnicity	38%
There is a bias in the way the media portrays crime	56%

Table #9

Where Does Your Information Come From?	Percentage of Sample Population
Television News	58%
Newspaper	38%
Personal Experience	30%
Friends	30%

their news source with no specifics provided. A contradiction appears where the sample population feels that particular racial and ethnic groups are responsible for violent crime (African Americans and Latinos), yet also that a bias exists in how the media portrays crime. Latinos, an ethnic group over-represented in the *Grand Rapids Press*, is considered to be a racial/ethnic group largely responsible for violent crime according to respondents. In concluding this section of the research, it is important to remark that this sample population consisted of mostly traditional undergraduate college students at Grand Valley State University. A further elaboration of this research would include incorporating a larger sample population where a more diverse sample population can be used. Such research will certainly help to understand the nature, extent, and complexity of the problem under scrutiny.

Concluding Remarks

The inequities concerning the disparity between arrest rates compared with population rates for minorities is a prevailing problem in our current society. Minority over-representation in negative media depictions, traffic stop pretexts, arrests, and prison populations have led to negative perceptions of minority groups by the general population. Contributing to the already serious problems facing minorities in terms of negative depictions by the media and negative perceptions by the general public (the labeling perspective process) is the continual clustering of minorities into low-wage jobs and segregated housing areas in Grand Rapids. This in turn tends to reinforce (self-fulfilling prophecy) the negative perceptions of the general public and media in the individual and may lead to eventual class conflicts (as delineated by conflict theory) associated with income inequalities.

The study set out to examine minority over-representation in violent crime news articles relative to the number of actual crimes committed in Grand Rapids for the year 2001. A questionnaire instrument was also developed and administered within Grand Rapids to evaluate public perception of minority's likelihood to commit violent crime in Grand Rapids. These three instruments of research posed some limitations in the formulation of this research.

Gathering statistics from the GRPD arrest reports for the year 2001, the researcher had no knowledge as to whether those individuals who were arrested were actually found guilty and imprisoned for the crimes. Additionally, a number of cases were still pending at the time the data was recorded at the GRPD. At the time the data was submitted by GRPD in the spring of 2003, the number of cases ending in incarceration was omitted, making it difficult for the researcher to know which of those cases did result in actual incarceration. Thus, the files used in this study consisted only of those individuals who were arrested for crimes, but who may not have been incarcerated for the crime.

The violent crime news articles used in the *Grand Rapids Press* were gathered from the Mlive internet site (www.mlive.com). Due to the scope of the research and time constraints, it was not possible to take into account other mediums of news such as television and other printed press. These other news sources may have shed light on how minorities are represented in news to the larger audience.

The questionnaire's sample population was limited to mostly Grand Valley State University students. When administering the questionnaire in the general community, difficulty was faced with Latinos who only spoke Spanish since the questionnaire was written only

in English language. It became apparent that many Latinos could not complete the survey within the time frame allowed or simply could not respond to any of the questions because they could not read in English. Additionally, the length of the questionnaire created problems with potential participants who could not or did not find it pertinent to dedicate their lunch time to answer the instrument.

Throughout this study, the researchers found that Latinos are over-represented in violent crime articles relative to the number of violent crimes committed for 2001 by a margin of about 10% compared to other ethnic/minority groups. African Americans were under reported by about 11% compared to Latinos. Given the opportunity, the African American under-representation found in violent crime may not have been such for other types of crime such as drug violations, traffic stops, etc. Although my data did not display an over-representation for all minority groups, this does not necessarily mean other minority groups may not be over-represented in other criminal statistics or misrepresented in other forms of media in Grand Rapids. Here we leave an opened window to further research on this area. The media looked at in this study was limited to one form of media and further study into different types and forms of media, including where in the news it is being placed, could be used in order to have a clearer perception of how minorities are being portrayed. Roughly 30% of all of the total violent crimes committed in Grand Rapids for 2001 had a race/ethnicity designation as unknown and as a matter of speculation, it is possible that some of those individuals could have belonged to a Latino or any other race/ethnicity group.

Future research in this area would include a larger sample population and a questionnaire developed in both English

and Spanish. Further research would attempt to expand on the number of media sources used such as television and other printed press. Grand Rapids can be used as a microcosm to be compared to a more macro-level of analyses (i.e. to a national level) to assess the nature, extent, and magnitude of the problem in Grand Rapids as well as in West Michigan at large as compared to the larger U.S. society.

Appendix

Privacy Statement: Your anonymity will be guaranteed. All information furnished in this questionnaire will be kept strictly confidential and will be used solely for this research purposes.

Please fill out this questionnaire as honestly and truthfully as possible. Since your name will not be asked, it is important that you record the answer that best suits your opinion. Please complete the entire form which will not take more than 12 minutes. This is not a test, therefore NO answer is right or wrong. Thank you for your time and for participating in this research.

1. State your gender: Female Male

2. Among what age group do you fit in: 20-29 30-39 40-49
 50-59 60 or older.

3. Would you consider yourself primarily:
 African American Caucasian
 Arabic Latino
 Asian/Pacific Islander Native American
 Don't Know/Not Sure
 Other (Please Specify: _____)

4. In which geographical area do you live within Grand Rapids?
 North East (Specify _____)
 North West (Specify _____)
 South East (Specify _____)
 South West (Specify _____)

5. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
 8th grade or less Some High School
 High School Graduate or GED certificate Some College
 Associate Degree (2 years) Refuse to answer
 Bachelor Degree(4 years) Some Technical school
 Technical school graduate Higher Education (MA/PhD)

6. Which of the following categories best describes your household income from all sources?
 Under \$10,000 \$10,000 to 20,000 \$21,000 to 35,000
 \$36,000 to 50,000 \$51,000 to 65,000 \$66,000 and over
 Don't know/not sure

7. What kind of work do you normally do? That is what is or was your job called?
 Operators Precision production craft
 Educators Professional occupations
 Technical Support occupations
 Farm laborer Sales
 Administrative Social Worker
 Service occupations Non-profit organization
 None of the above Managerial occupations
 Other(Specify _____)

8. Are you currently working?
- Full-time(35 hours or more)
 - Part-time (1-34 hours)
 - Out of work for more than one year
 - Out of work for less than one year
 - Homemaker
 - Student
 - Retired

Question 9, 10, 11 asks you about what is your perception of violent crime in the Grand Rapids area. As you read the following questions and/or statements, please indicate whether you STRONGLY AGREE, AGREE, DISAGREE, OR STRONGLY DISAGREE.

9. There is a serious violent crime problem in Grand Rapids, acts of violence against individuals injuring or harming the victim such as rape, assault, murder, armed robbery, and so on.
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - Don't Know/Not sure

10. What area of Grand Rapids do you consider suffers from the highest number of violent crime?
- North East (Specify _____)
 - North West (Specify _____)
 - South East (Specify _____)
 - South West (Specify _____)

11. What types of crimes occur in the specified area? Please check all that apply.
- Assault
 - Burglary
 - Robbery
 - Murder
 - Theft
 - Rape
 - Larceny
 - Hate Crimes
 - Other (Specify _____)
 - No crime at all

12. To the best of your knowledge, which of the following groups do you think is most likely to involved violent crime?
- African American Caucasian
 - Arabic Latino
 - Asian/Pacific Islander Native American
 - Don't Know/Not Sure
 - Other (Please Specify: _____)

13. How serious would you say is violent crime in your neighborhood?
- Very serious problem
 - Serious problem
 - Somewhat a problem
 - No problem at all
 - No comment

14. Where does your information come from?

- News,
- Newspapers,
- Movies,
- Statistical reports,
- Personal experience
- Friends
- Family
- Other(Specify_____)

15. What kind of violent crimes do exist in your community?

- Assault
- Burglary
- Robbery
- Murder
- Theft
- Rape
- Larceny
- Hate Crimes
- Other (Specify_____)
- No crime at all

For the following statements please indicate to what extent do you Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree with each statement

16. For the most part, I believe that violent crimes are committed by Asians.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

17. For the most part, I believe that violent crimes are committed by Latinos/Hispanics.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

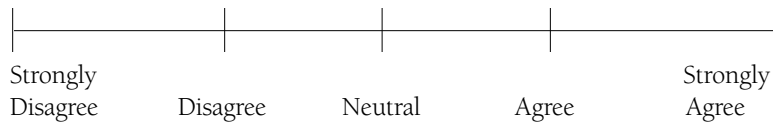
18. For the most part, I believe that violent crimes are committed by African Americans.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

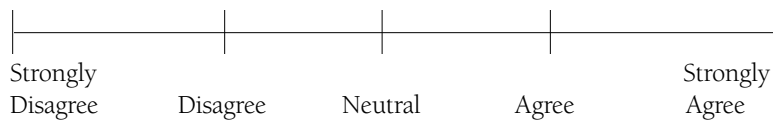
19. For the most part, I believe that violent crimes are committed by Arabs.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

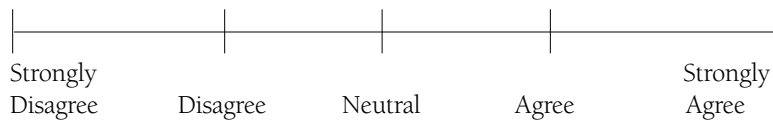
20. For the most part, I believe that violent crimes are committed by Caucasians.



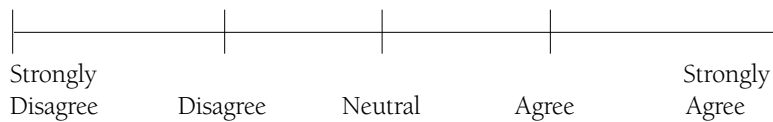
21. For the most part, I believe violent crimes are committed by Native Americans.



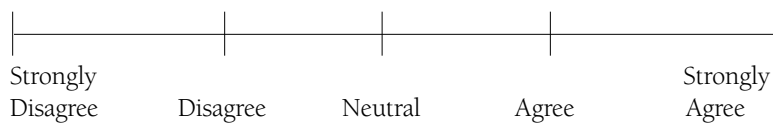
22. On the average violent crimes are more often committed by the poor.



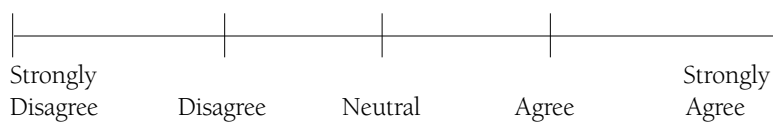
23. Those involved in violent crime do so because of cultural deficiencies on the part of the perpetrators.



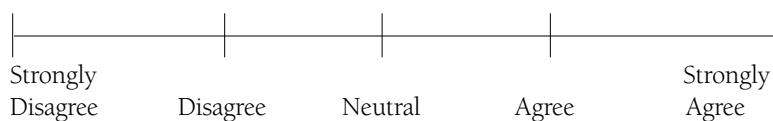
24. Those who commit violent crime, lack the cultural values of the traditional American citizen.



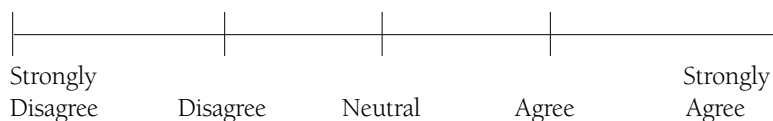
25. Those who commit violent crime, do so because they come from a culture that encourages crime.



26. Those individuals, who commit violent crime, do so because they are too lazy or lack motivation to find jobs.



27. On the average violent crime is due to poor socialization and/or lack of social skills by the perpetrators.



28. Do you know any one who has ever been the victim of violent crimes?
____YES ____NO

29a. Have you ever been the victim of violent crime?
____YES ____NO

29b. If yes, what crime were you the victim of?

The following questions pertain to the media and its depiction of crime

30. I believe the news reporting media presents fair and accurate portrayals of minorities in news reports and stories.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

31. The news reporting media accurately portrays violent criminals in regards to race/ethnicity.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

32. There is a bias in the way the media portrays crime.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

33. Minorities are often unfairly represented by the media.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

34. Minorities are often overlooked by the media in regards to crime.

|-----|-----|-----|-----|
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

35. There is no bias in how the media portrays minorities

|-----|-----|-----|-----|
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

36. Any other comments or statements you would like to add?

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