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# Racialized Media Frames in Depiction of Gun Violence in Maryland

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# Executive Summary

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Gun Violence is a severe problem in Maryland with roughly 14 deaths per 100,000 residents (Everytown Research & Policy, 2024). Overall, the counties in Central Maryland that tend to experience the highest violent crime rates are those with larger populations. According to the Report on Crime Firearms Study published by the Governor's Office on Crime Prevention, Youth and Victim Services (2021), there were a total of 2,772 gun crime cases in Maryland between 2019 and 2020. Of this total, the majority occurred in urban and metropolitan areas of the state. 61.8% of the cases occurred in Baltimore City and Prince George's County with an additional 20.4% of the gun crime cases occurring in Baltimore, Anne Arundel, Worcester, Wicomico, and Washington Counties. When journalists cover a news story, they can cover it from various perspectives, referred to as framing. Framing in one way versus another may influence public perception and opinion of the issue being described (Bhatia et al., 2021). When describing incidents of gun violence, some journalists may focus on mental health or gun regulation while others may emphasize the discussion of gun rights (Tourni et al., 2021). The "if it bleeds, it leads" mentality has created tensions in journalism, where profit motives often push against more nuanced and contextualized

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depictions of why violence happens and how we should address it. This has led to movement in the past two decades towards fear-based news programming which grabs the audience's attention while concurrently promoting anxiety (Serani, 2008). As a result of this type of programming, many people of color, especially Black Americans, find the coverage of Black people and other people of color to be problematic (Pew Research Center, 2010). Anxieties about gun violence have historically been tied to anxieties around race and public corruption, with notions of inherent criminality tied to certain populations and locations of the state (Alexander, 2012). Local media has played a role in furthering these conceptions, using specific tropes to tell stories around how gun violence happens and how local communities should feel about crime (McKeever, Choi, Walker & McKeever, 2022). In fact, analysis throughout the nation has noted the unique nature of Maryland's media environment has contributed to stoking community fears about crime, with media consolidation and particularly aggressive media strategy around stoking fears of crime and violence making these concerns especially prevalent for Maryland and the capital region (Ellison, 2024). While these factors are agreed upon by many parties, there have not been many in-depth analyses of the representations of gun violence in local media throughout the state. Indeed, a recent meta-analysis of depictions of

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gun violence and the media focused on national media and its focus on mass shootings. Therefore, an analysis of local media can add to a growing body of research around media and its relationship to public perceptions of gun violence (Topaz & Higdon, 2024). Our goal was to examine the role of media in accurately and fairly reporting on issues related to gun violence. This is the resulting report which provides a foundational understanding of racism, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness as it evaluates the impact of media depictions of gun violence and gun policy in Maryland from 2020-2024.

Media depictions of crime, gun violence, and gun policy are not neutral. Despite historic veneration of the concept of "journalistic objectivity," what is reported or omitted from news depictions plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions about how much crime there is, who is committing crimes and with what motives, and what should be done to address it.

These news depictions operate within the context of the history of the United States, where issues of crime, gun violence, and gun policy have been shaped by the nation's history of racism. This country has a long history of justifying racialized oppression by depicting oppression as a necessary tool for keeping the innate violent criminality of racialized others in check. The resulting anxieties have at times led to a contradictory relationship with guns. Lauding their usefulness for protecting families and as a symbol of power and security, while concurrently describing guns as a source of anxiety and fear when in the hands of racialized others.

News depictions in the state of Maryland reflect this. Stories around armed slave revolts in the 1800s, news stories in the 1960s around the Black Panthers carrying arms, and those linking Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 to increased gun violence all reflect anxieties linking Black political movements to threats of gun violence.

After 2020, the politics of racialized anxiety around guns have been challenged by calls to diversify newsrooms, calls for the media to challenge local media consolidation, and calls to shift reporting on gun violence to reflect a more public health perspective on gun violence. These demands have been met with resistance. Backlash to concepts like "defund the police" have been used to claim the community has real concerns about gun violence—which spiked after the pandemic—justifying a journalistic focus on violent crime.

This report provides a foundational understanding of racism, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness as it evaluates the impact of media depictions of gun violence and gun policy in Maryland from 2020–2024.

### **Discourses of *Racial Panic*: Historic Depictions of Race and Gun Violence in Maryland**

An analysis of historic anti-Black tropes in news coverage is essential to understanding the contemporary representations of gun violence in the United States. Notions of anti-Blackness are deeply rooted in culture and have been translated in various ways, including historical depictions of gun violence in the news media. In *The Press and Slavery in America*, Brian Gabriel noted that three particular events can be seen as reflecting

anti-Black racialized sentiment in news media: the Haitian Revolution, Nat Turner's revolt, and John Brown's revolt. This reflects what he calls an environment of *racial panic* in the Southern United States. Gabriel states:

*George Fredrickson observes in The Black Image in the White Mind, "The image of Black violence and retribution, drawn not only from Nat Turner, but from memories of what had occurred in Santo Domingo . . . continued to haunt the Southern imagination." Such fright put a psychological stranglehold on slave society, with masters knowing full well that no amount of coercion—physical, psychological, or legal—could control all slaves all the time . . . Newspaper content from Prosser's 1800 conspiracy through the John Brown rebellion illustrated that any slave revolt meant social catastrophe to members of a white society that feared the attendant "horrors of Santo Domingo." While specific details of events between 1800 and 1859 vary, the desperate and frightened tone in newspaper content remained strikingly consistent with intertextual links drawn to past troubles as well as (and especially) the terrifying connections to Haiti. Because these events always concerned Black people, the resulting media discourse has been labeled "the discourse of racial panic." . . . The discourse of racial panic was focused on the initial and panicked white response to the Black threat and later the abolitionist threat to slavery. In newspaper coverage that spanned fifty-seven years of slave troubles, this discourse gained expression that reflected the heightened state of fear of racial violence against whites . . . Newspaper reports reinforced the negative attributes while informing whites what Black slave violence meant for them. These discursive residues imbued all later newspaper accounts of slave troubles. So insistent were these fears of racial violence that they consumed white, especially southern, society throughout the antebellum years and, arguably, up to the present day (Gabriel, 2016).*

An analysis of historical depictions of these events from sources in Baltimore and the Maryland Capital Region supports Gabriel's reading, specifically linking the areas of this study to this anti-Black "racial panic" news frame. In an 1831 report from the *Daily National Intelligencer*, the author juxtaposes the use of guns by those in Nat Turner's revolt with the use of guns by their enslavers. White use of guns is framed as heroic and protecting family, with the author writing:

*Crippled with the gout, and indisposed to flee, he resolved to defend his house. His force was his son, overseer, and three other white men. Luckily there were six gun[s] . . . The Doctor's orders were, that each man should be particular in his aim, and should fire one at a time. He himself reserved one gun, resolved, if the house was forced, to sell his life as dearly as he could. The remaining five fired in the succession upon the assailants, at the distance of fifteen or twenty steps. The Blacks upon the fifth fire, retreated, leaving one killed . . . and were pursued by the Doctor's negros with shouts (Daily National Intelligencer, 1831).*

Conversely, the use of guns as a means of liberation from bondage is depicted as the height of savagery, with the same author writing later in the article:

*. . . the negros dismounted and ran around the house, pointing their guns at the doors and windows. Mrs. Vaughan appeared at a window, and begged for her life, inviting them to take everything she had. The prayer was answered by one of them firing at her, which was instantly followed by another, and a fatal shot. Mrs. Vaughan . . . rushed down and begging for her life, was shot as she ran . . . It is difficult for the imagination to conceive a situation so truly and horribly awful, as that in which these unfortunate ladies were placed. Alone, unprotected . . . in the power of a band of ruffians . . . pointing their guns at the door (Daily National Intelligencer, 1831)."*

This juxtaposition shows white gun use as justified and protective, while Black gun use is depicted as irrational, emotional, and sadistic. They also show specifically the intersection of race and gender gun usage. Black male gun use is shown as a threat to civilization in general, and white femininity especially.

Hezekiah Niles writes in his Baltimore-based *Niles' Weekly Register* a similar version of this 1831 event, stating:

*. . . A pleasing instance of this is said to have occurred while the Black demons of slaughter were executing their horrid work. Before they had received any considerable increase, and in the early stage of their butcheries, they approached the dwelling of Dr. Blount . . .*

*A party of 4 militiamen, who had been sent to reconnoiter the Blacks, came up with a party of about 20 of them, and after a sharp engagement, succeeded in killing three or four, and taking several prisoners, when the remainder fled. Such was the vigilance of the former that nearly everyone was either shot down or captured. Many of the Blacks were well mounted, and armed with bird and other guns, and axes. The roads were strewed with the carcasses of the negroes killed, and up to the 25th ult. neither these nor the corpses of the unfortunate whites hail been buried (Niles, 1831)."*

Terms like "butchers" and "demons" reflected a fear and dehumanization that belies the reality that the condition of chattel slavery created conditions of consistent violence to make armed resistance a legitimate response. This is in stark comparison with the "unfortunate" whites who the author laments have not been buried.

The people killed by Nat Turner are not seen in their historic context as enforcers in the regimes of violence. Maryland would pass a law in 1831 banning free Black people from owning firearms, an act seen as tied to anxieties around armed Black resistance stemming from Nat Turner's rebellion (Aptheker, 1966). That such lurid depictions of the Nat Turner slave revolt come from D.C. and Baltimore news media reflects how racial panic frames hold specific salience for interpreting contemporary coverage of gun violence in the region.

Latif Davis explains how this dynamic has an impact on news coverage of gun violence in the present day. In his book *Gun Points: The Role of Culture in Violence*, he describes the political implications of these depictions where Black people are perceived to be stronger and more threatening, stating:

*. . . this perception is used for justifying the use of deadly force against them (Crump, 2019, p.43). America rationalizes the killing of Blacks classifying them as uncivilized, dangerous savages undeserving of equal protection (Crump, 2019, p.44). Although crimes against humanity are attributed to white men, poor Black men are always seen in the news as suspect, which makes the Black male image predatory (Moore, 2001, p.59).*

*When people are dehumanized, it makes it more of a necessity to oppress them to maintain 'law and order' from the savages. . . . The American public, secure in its racist-sexual tropes of Black male criminality and danger, consents to the police as executioners-murders of Black males, because the public is now convinced that the death of Black men and boys is necessary for their protection and the security of society (Curry, 2017, p.133) . . . The gun in American society is often associated with violence as a means of power and control . . . The gun defined honor and respect in the wilderness and thereby made violence inescapable . . . Some Black communities in urban centers became associated with gun violence . . . Baltimore was the deadliest city in America . . . This emphasis on particular Black communities as representative of all Black communities is problematic, because it never implicates the larger society of white domination as the major contributing factor (Davis, 2023)."*

The failure to implicate white domination in contemporary news stories related to gun violence can be considered a contemporary reflection of the discourses of racial panic stemming from news coverage of slave revolts in the 19th century. The historical ties between slave patrols/militias and contemporary police have been well noted. The historical notions of white violence as necessary to contain the threat of Black male resistance impact the depiction of contemporary news stories around police use of gun violence against Black people. Much as the *Daily Niles' Weekly Register* article fails to account for the violence of the white militia that killed many innocent Black people after the Nat Turner revolt, the structural violence of white domination within contemporary conditions that drives gun violence gets subsumed by racial anxieties around Black men with guns.

These anxieties around gender and race impact depictions of Black women in Maryland press as well. A 1935 article from *The Star Democrat*, published in Talbot County on Maryland's Eastern Shore, relates the story of Harriet Tubman in a way that downplays her role as an armed freedom fighter (Star Democrat, 1935). Her self-emancipation is described passively as winding her way north. Her desire to emancipate her people is framed as emotional. Lastly, Ms. Tubman's Civil War record is questioned, with her being described as a nurse who may have helped with military actions (ibid). This framing reflects a common tendency to "disarm" Harriet Tubman because gender stereotypes of women as embodying care and civility are the flip side to the violence and criminality tropes tied to Black men (Gerund, 2024). This is in comparison with a 1933 story from the Black-owned, Baltimore-based *AFRO-American* Newspaper, which celebrated Tubman's role as an armed conductor on the Underground Railroad and union spy. The article also

criticizes a sculpture that depicted Tubman as old and enfeebled, rather than the vigorous armed freedom fighter, which more accurately reflected her legacy (The AFRO-American, 1933).

These gender and racial discourses are a lens through which fears and anxieties of gun use and ownership are viewed. The association of guns with power, in the light of anti-Black male sentiment, creates a unique dynamic where both support for and opposition to gun control can reflect anti-Black racism. While anxieties about armed Black men can lead some to support gun control, belief in the necessity to bear arms to defend against Black male aggression creates support for expanded gun ownership rights (Alexandra and Kaplan, 2015).

These dynamics are demonstrated in a 1969 *Baltimore Sun* article written about civil rights lawyer William Zinman, who defended both White nationalists and Black Panthers in Baltimore. By praising the lawyer for defending both groups on First Amendment grounds, the article draws a de facto equivalency between the two, which reflects Davis's analysis around the inability to indict the violence of white society (Schoettler, 1969). The White nationalists' defense is described as a test of Zinman's virtue and tolerance:

*. . . paradoxically, he likes Mr. Luthardt, the segregationist whom he has defended several times. 'He's the most mild-mannered of them all' 'If you like a guy, you try to dissociate him from his horrendous philosophy. If you don't, you can't function as a lawyer. (ibid) '*

In contrast, the Black Panthers are depicted as politically immature and needing to be lectured, described in ways that clearly reflect sexualized anxieties around Black men with guns:

*His introduction to the Black Panthers came when he was asked if he would give a dissertation on gun laws. "It was a bad time to hit me," he said. "I was upset over the victory of Nixon. I attributed it to the extremism of many groups that equate the right to shoot guns with the right to shoot their mouths off. And there is a vast difference!" Nevertheless, he agreed to see the Panthers: "I was prepared to give them hell." ... And they came with their bullets around their necks and Black berets and Black jackets. All young kids. And there were some white girls with them. Pretty girls. Also with bullets." (ibid)*

While noting that the Black Panthers were very young, Zinman frames them through a racialized lens and ascribes to them a propensity for violence. This sentiment continues in the present day. Jackson and Goff (2010) found that observers consistently view Black youth as older than they are and thus less innocent than white youth generally and for each age group after the age of nine. Black youth ages 10-13 years old are seen with the level of innocence associated with non-Black youth ages 14-17, and Black youth ages 14-17 are seen with the level of innocence of non-Black youth ages 18-21 (ibid). The inability for Zinman to ascribe innocence or put gun carrying into context for the Black Panthers can be seen with the reality of racialized anxieties around Black youth. These anxieties continue to impact media depictions of gun violence.

### **Adultification, the Denial of Innocence, and Racialized Media Depictions of Gun Carrying**

The denial of the category of *childhood* to Black youth creates the context for the *super predator* mythologies, which began to show themselves in press coverage of gun violence in the 1980s and 1990s. With the rise of the War on Drugs and related increases in gun violence, fears of urban gun violence led to calls for gun control, creating the context for the contemporary news environment. A *Washington Post* article from 1991 reflects anxieties around armed Black youth terrorizing D.C. and its Maryland suburbs. Economic impacts, like a contractor from Montgomery County refusing to do jobs in Washington, D.C. are centered as the negative impacts of the fear of gun violence (Pressley and Morin, 1991). Whereas the impacts of gun violence on the victims are presented in a manner that not only adultifies but dehumanizes them.

For example:

*In her home in Hyattsville, Charlene Smith, 54, keeps what she calls 'a little daily record' of gunshots in her apartment complex: "9 p.m. - three spaced shots. Boom. Boom. Boom." It's "these children" in her neighborhood, she said, who think guns and drugs make them big shots, who do not know how to extricate themselves from the deadly mess they're in.*

*"It's so sad. I know they're doomed." A year ago, the youngest of her four sons became involved with a rough crowd of neighborhood youths. When he moved back home, trying to get away from them, they appeared at Smith's door - eight young men with guns - making threats to kill him. Smith called the police, who escorted her son to safety elsewhere. "You think those people would run? No, indeed. Those boys had nerves of steel," she said. Within six months, the problem had solved itself. Most of the young men who came calling at her door had been shot to death. (ibid)*

While the interviewee consistently called individuals engaging in the shooting, *children* and *boys*, the authors twice adultified them with the term, *young men*. Moreover, the authors' statement that the death of these children solved the interviewee's problem reflects a fundamental idea that they are irredeemable. It can even be interpreted that since the youth had gotten into a conflict with her son, the interviewee believed these boys were better off dead.

An example of the impacts of this denial of innocence and adultification is the coverage of the Baltimore Uprising. Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old Black man, died after being arrested, held down, and tossed into the back of a police van in April 2015, precipitating civic unrest and property destruction largely associated with Black youth. In the book chapter entitled "The Case of 'Misguided' 'Thugs': Baltimore Youth, Activism, and News," Khadijah Costley White (2019) interviewed Baltimore youth and found their analysis of news coverage of the Baltimore Uprising reflected many of the themes of the Jackson and Goff's (2010) *Essence of Innocence* report, writing:

*In regards to the news framing of what happened to Gray and subsequent community response, all of the young people criticized the news coverage of Gray and the Baltimore protests as inaccurate. They were especially critical of what they took to be journalists' extreme bias against youth, particularly Black youth. ...interviewees here expressed concern that the news reporting related to the Freddie Gray video dehumanized him and demonized the demonstrators protesting his treatment and fatal injuries suffered in police custody.*

*As one 18-year-old girl explained when asked about what stood out about the news coverage of Gray: "I think the truth was very fabricated when it comes to him because yeah, he was poor, yeah he was Black. But I mean, he was a person and a lot of times the media don't look at Black men or Black people as people; they look at them as animals or just something that can easily be replaced. Moreover, White described several ways that Gray's innocence and the violation of his rights by police were obscured by the press reporting on video of the arrest: What fact do I think they left out? The fact that he literally was just chilling, nobody understands that he was not doing anything, he didn't resist arrest, he didn't even have a warrant for his arrest...." (Costley White, 2019.)*

The youth expressed that Freddie Gray's innocence is rarely mentioned in mainstream media's reports of his arrest and death, reflecting their inability to see Black people as innocent. Finally, the fact that Black youth from Maryland are sharing this analysis is validation of the utility of using these concepts to analyze media depictions of gun violence in the state.

This disregard for Black life shows how deep these discourses of racialized panic have permeated historic news coverage of gun violence in Maryland. While not explicitly using the term, these stories reflect a larger societal view of Black youth as "super predators." These concepts have been mobilized as coverage of Black youth, even when victims of violence, are denied access to categories of innocence and seen through the lens of being a threat to not only individual safety but also society. In the edited volume *The News of Baltimore*, Gutsche and Estrada (2019) show how the racial tropes applied to Black youth and the narrative of Black youth deviance linking gun violence to Black youth leads to less engagement with structural gun violence from police. In it, they write:

*...One Tribune wire service story... outright racialized news stories of figures ("teenagers") involved in Gray's case by using terms such "thugs" in reference to protesters. It thereby placed the protestors in a context of racial tension (e.g. Mozingo and Phelps, 2015), as the term "thugs" frequently appears in news to associate urban Blacks with crime (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Gutsche, 2015; Macek, 2006). ...In May 2015 the Wisconsin State Journal published a local news article about police opposition to artwork placed in a library depicting "a Black boy pointing a toy gun at three riot police officers who have their weapons aimed at the child"*

*(Ehlke, 2015); the artwork was presented as becoming controversial "as demonstrations endure nationwide to protest the killings of Black suspects by white police officers." The State Journal mentioned that the debate emerged because of Gray's death. As such, a police shooting in Madison, WI in May 2015 was presented as an afterthought: "In March, a white police officer shot and killed an unarmed Black man in Madison, sparking demonstrations." Articles . . . cast Baltimore as a dangerous urban environment - even without the protests—and full of morally corrupt youth and Black agitators (i.e. Milloy, 2015; Robinson, 2015)." Through a combination of hometown and national voices in reporting and opinion pieces, local newspapers presented Baltimore as home to racialized disorder . . . A Washington Post column republished in the Tulsa World, for instance, mentioned a 'blighted, joyless place of boarded up buildings in one of Baltimore's poorest areas' (Dvorak, 2015a) and told stories of reckless and untamed youth through the journalist's first-person tale from Baltimore: "I wanted to ask the protesting kids what they were feeling. I got my answer when one of them knocked into me and took my phone . . . (Gutsche and Estrada, 2019).*

An analysis of racialized depictions of Black youth and crime can help explain why an image of a Black youth holding a toy gun while confronting riot police would instigate a controversy. Media distorts the reality of power inequities between the youth and the state, presenting armed Black bodies as a symbol of chaos to be feared and controlled. Maryland's local media depictions of Black youth spread through the nation and impacted the public conception of Black youth, so much so that, even in Wisconsin, Black youth were framed through the lens of Baltimore. Fear of armed Black youth crowds out more substantive coverage of gun violence, as demonstrated by the mural getting more coverage than an actual police shooting.

### **Contemporary News Coverage of Crime through the Lens of "Racial Panic"**

Over the past 30 years, there has been extensive scholarly conversation around the impacts of the news ecosystem on public perception and public policy as it pertains to coverage of gun violence. Anxieties about gun violence have historically been tied to anxieties around race and public corruption, with notions of inherent criminality tied to certain populations and locations of the state (Alexander, 2012). Local media has played a role in furthering these conceptions, using specific tropes to tell stories around how gun violence happens and how local communities should feel about crime (McKeever, Choi, Walker & McKeever, 2022). In fact, analysis throughout the nation has noted the unique nature of Maryland's media environment has contributed to stoking community fears

about crime, with media consolidation and particularly aggressive media strategy around stoking fears of crime and violence making these concerns especially prevalent (Ellison, 2024). While these factors are agreed upon by many parties, there have not been many in-depth analyses of the representations of gun violence in local media throughout the state. Indeed, a recent meta-analysis of depictions of gun violence and the media focused on national media and its focus on mass shootings, meaning an analysis of local media can add to a growing body of research around media and its relationship to public perceptions of gun violence (Topaz & Higdon, 2024).

Local news serves a critical role in shaping opinions. There is a higher degree of trust in local news over national news, especially for Republicans and Independents (Peterson et al, 2024), although this number has declined in recent years (Shearer, 2024). Local news is also particularly relied upon for news on local crime and is most popular with individuals 50 and over (ibid). Moreover, there are concerns with the role algorithms play in amplifying local news crime stories, with studies showing social media sites and news aggregators prefer local crime stories, including those from more conservative outlets like Fox News (Fischer et al, 2024).

This begs the question—what is the form and content of these local news crime stories? While crime has been declining, local news consistently focuses on crime, with an overfocus on violent crime stories, thus increasing communities' fear of crime (Yanich, 2004). In an attempt to attract advertisers and a more affluent suburban audience, these news outlets tend to report more on suburban crime despite lower crime rates, while consistently depicting urban communities as a zone of danger (ibid). This mirrors analysis done by Jonathan Moreno-Medina, who argues that specifically interracial crime and suburban crime is overcovered relative to the more common intraracial crime (Moreno-Medina, 2024).

While these crime stories have racial impacts, they do not have to explicitly mention race. A review of stories written by the Washington Post in the late 1990s through the mid-2000s found that while explicit references to race have declined, the use of racial proxies through imagery increased (Ravid, 2018). By including not only explicit mentions of race, but also implicit mentions of race through terms like "inner city" and "ghetto" the author concluded that the *Post* articles continued to underrepresent Black victims and overrepresent Black perpetrators, with visual representations of race increasing as explicit textual mention of race decreased (ibid).

Janyl Smith identified how these implicit representations in local news crime reports feed off historic notions of Black criminality and discourses of racialized panic. The use of still photos was found to be associated with Blacks being named less frequently (Smith, 2018).

Omitting the accused's name suggests that there are no significant differences among them as individuals and that their visual representation as a part of a larger, undifferentiated group—in this case the dangerous Black male stereotype. Basically, their names are not important; the fact that they are Black is. In addition, Blacks were more likely to be shown in street or jail clothing and/or being restrained by the police which perpetuates the fear of the dangerous Black male. Furthermore, Smith (2018) states:

*Whites were more than twice as likely to have pro-defense sound bites as compared to Blacks. Not only does this suggest that Whites are less likely to be subjected to the general pro-prosecution slant which is so prevalent in crime news stories, but it suggests that the White accused is a human being with an individual story and unique perspective, rather than a part of a homogenized mass of criminals . . . To the extent that these negative images have been seared into our collective unconscious, Black people as a 'problem population' and the police practice of containment in the Black communities mutually reinforce and support one another. The problem population's perceived affinity for deviant behavior is often attributed to a non-culpable developmental cause of criminal violence: racial character. "Centuries of criminalizing Black males through over policing, coupled with the demonization of this group through the creation and perpetuation of evil, violent, barbarous caricatures has resulted in the majority has steadily communicating a racialized assignment of deviant pathology to Blacks . . . " (Smith, 2018)*

This mutually reinforcing system where negative perceptions of Black people drive news coverage reinforces negative stereotypes, leads to material impacts for Black communities.

## **The Danger of Episodic Framing for Gun Violence News Stories**

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When journalists cover a news story, they can cover it from various perspectives referred to as frames. Usage of one frame versus another may influence public perception and opinion of the issue being described (Bhatia et al., 2021). When describing incidents of gun violence, some journalists may focus on mental health or gun regulation while others may emphasize the discussion of gun rights (Tourni et al., 2021). The "if it bleeds, it leads" mentality has created tensions in journalism, where profit motives often push against more nuanced and contextualized depictions of why violence happens and how we should

address it. This has led to movement in the past two decades towards fear-based news programming which grabs the audience's attention while concurrently promoting anxiety (Serani, 2011). As a result of this type of programming, many people of color, especially Black Americans, find the coverage of Black people and other people of color to be problematic (Pew Research Center, n.d.).

A recent meta-analysis of depictions of gun violence in the news reveals important patterns in coverage. Increased coverage correlates to the higher number of victims in a shooting, a female shooting victim, and perceived political motivations behind shootings (Topaz et al, 2025). Both white shooters and victims are more sympathetically portrayed in national media coverage around gun violence (ibid). Studies also show mental health frames deployed around mass shootings have risked stigmatizing those with mental illness, portraying them as innately violent (McGinty et al, 2014).

The extant literature has demonstrated that event-focused news stories influence public attitudes and policy support differently than thematic news stories describing issues in broad terms. Event-focused news stories are defined as those stories primarily describing a specific shooting event, meaning a news story describing a single shooter's history, actions, and victims. Thematic news stories are defined as stories describing the general problem such as gun violence. For example, a news story discussing the history of mass shootings. Concerns over implicit racial bias have been presented within the context of episodic vs. thematic framings of news articles.

A report from the FrameWorks Institute, working with The Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting, gives a hypothetical example of an episodic gun violence news story:

*ANOTHER VICTIM SHOT AMID GUN VIOLENCE CRISIS Nov. 30, 2023 At 2:19 AM on Monday, the North County Police Department responded to reports of gunshots on the 3400 block of Wornall Avenue. Police have arrested a suspect and taken him into custody.*

*The victim, a 23-year-old male, was rushed to North County Hospital, where he remains in critical condition. The suspect, 26-year-old John Smith, is believed to have acted alone. Monday's shooting was the fourth that our county saw this week. "We're experiencing a huge rise in violent crime," says Maya Barnes, police spokesperson. "We understand that many people do not feel safe in our community." Barnes added that the department is increasing law enforcement presence in the neighborhoods adjacent to Wornall Avenue in anticipation of escalating violence in the coming months (FrameWorks Institute, 2024).*

This hypothetical example reflects a shift in style for gun violence news stories. Rather than relying on sensationalized depictions of gun violence like the *Post's* articles from the early 90s, this article reflects an on face neutral/colorblind depiction of gun violence, focusing on addresses, names, ages, and a generic quote from law enforcement. Neither the victim nor the perpetrator has their race disclosed. Moreover, the demographic characteristics of the neighborhood where the shooting occurred are not presented.

By excluding context and focusing on individual incidents, journalists make decisions that shape the context of what information the reader is trained to think matters or does not matter when it comes to gun violence. Beard et al (2024) give more context for how the episodic frame for gun violence news stories is creating space for colorblind racism, arguing that the "just the facts" approach to episodic frames creates the illusion of objectivity, which frames out seeing gun violence within the larger context of structural racism, which produces disproportionate gun violence in Black communities.

*In the US, news outlets rarely contextualize the complexity of CFV [community firearm violence] as an issue rooted in historic and contemporary structural racism [24–28]. Instead, news reports on violence typically emphasize individual blame over structural causes and have been critiqued for producing stereotypical narratives about Black people and communities [26,29–33]. The transmission of messaging about CFV—and its potential harms—depends in large part on how a news story is told, a concept called framing.*

*Framing in news media occurs when journalists make choices about which content to include or exclude in a story, whose perspectives to highlight, and what attributes of an event to emphasize over others [27]. Those decisions make certain facets of a story more salient to audiences, and when the same messages are repeated in the news over time, people are likely to internalize those ideas [27,34,35]. ... the crime frame is the dominant frame in news stories about violence [18,24–26,28,36]. Episodic crime framing is therefore news framing that is episodic, defines violence as a crime issue, and privileges police narrators above other viewpoints. Studies indicate that episodic crime framing in news reports about violence has detrimental societal level impacts; it can lead news audiences to blame individual victims, reinforce racist stereotypes about the people and places impacted, suggest an unfounded efficacy to policing as a means to prevent violence, and undermine effective public health responses [18,21,24–26,36,38,39] (Beard et al, 2024)."*

By defining the stories through the lens of the individual, the episodic frame risks framing *out* the structural and social determinants of violence and frames *in* the individual perpetrator, activating the historic notions of Black criminality, even as it seeks to move away from explicit use of race in news coverage. Ravid argues that even as explicit mention of race in crime stories in *Washington Post* articles declined, implicit racial cues through pictures and depictions of perpetrators and victims increased, creating a mental connection in the audience's mind where "criminal" becomes a racial signifier standing in for "Black." (Ravid, 2018). This, he argues, increases support for stronger racialized social control through policing as the solution to gun violence (ibid). The social and political context that may drive gun carrying among youth and minorities is largely erased in mainstream depictions of gun violence under the episodic frame, leaving racial notions of dangerous "bad guys with guns" as the logical conclusion to the information presented in these articles (Parham-Payne, 2014).

Centuries of internalized racial stereotypes don't go away because race is not explicitly mentioned in a news article. To the contrary, the internalized racial narrative becomes the context through which these news stories are processed. Without context on larger community dynamics or details on individual life stories, abstract notions of "super predators," or, within the context of racial panic, Black people operating from a demand for violent redress for past grievances, become the frame through which these gun violence stories are processed. Even the hypothetical news story from the FrameWorks Institute focuses on police preventing the "likely" retaliatory violence from spilling over into surrounding neighborhoods. While this is a hypothetical neighborhood, historical

patterns of gun violence clustering in Black communities and racialized narratives of gun violence mean these mentions of retaliatory violence function not only within racialized suburban fears of inner-city violence impacting surrounding communities, but a generalized societal desire for police to control Black retaliatory violence, which can be linked to historic fears of Black retaliatory violence against whites going back centuries.

The authors go on to list various elements news stories can be analyzed for to evaluate the implicit/explicit racialized frames used to communicate news on community firearm violence, ranging from inclusion of mugshots, sole reliance on police narratives/sources, graphic depictions or descriptions of violence, and lack of content/solutions focus (ibid). This demonstrates that not all "episodic" stories are made equal, with some having a higher reliance on graphic content and "dog whistle" terms and others using more explicitly racialized frames.

The Berkeley Media Studies Group uses a visual metaphor to explain the impact of episodic versus thematic framing for gun violence news stories. They present a distinction between the "portrait framing" (i.e. "episodic framing"), which centers on an individual person or a particular incident of violence, and the "landscape framing" (i.e. "thematic framing"), which "illustrates the broader context in which individual incidents occur" in order to "expand the conversation about who is responsible for causing—and solving—problems" (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2024). This metaphor is useful to explain the political impact of news frames. The episodic/portrait frame centers individuals in the action, creating heroes and victims and memorializing one dramatic moment. The landscape/thematic shows the larger ecosystem and systems at play, giving context for the larger structural forces that may determine an individual's action. A portrait of Nat Turner attacking someone is hard to accurately interpret outside the context of the landscape of slavery. Similarly, a portrait of 90s gang violence should not be viewed outside the landscape of the undermining of Black social movements through the counterintelligence program, the racialized mass incarceration of the War on Drugs, and government austerity. The historical context provided in this report serves to explain the implications of these omissions through framing, showing not only what is excluded from the frame but what is subtly and implicitly represented. Episodic gun violence stories in Maryland come from a long line of region-specific history rooted in anti-Black racial constructs.

Guo et al (2021) further delineates the real world impacts of episodic framing for gun violence news stories while also adding a bit of nuance to this episodic/thematic binary. They found that exposure to episodic news stories on gun violence from mainstream media increased concerns about gun violence, but episodic gun violence stories from

conservative media created a "deflation effect," where individuals were less likely to view gun violence as an issue. Adding an analysis of race helps potentially explain these findings. While mainstream stories may not have a deep thematic analysis of structural factors driving violence, they may lack the sensationalism of implicit racial cues that trigger discourses of racial panic in the audience, thus allowing them to increase desire for gun control in those who read them. More conservative media's episodic new stories may have colorblind cues to dismiss gun violence not only as an individual issue but as an issue of racial others expressing innate criminality. This would make the audience less likely to support gun control, and they may need to arm themselves to protect themselves from criminals, and more likely to support policing. This also demonstrates the value of analyzing, in addition to the episodic thematic binary, the content of the story to see if elements of sensational headlines or pictures may be shaping new consumers' responses to these stories.

## **Public Health Framing of Gun Violence News**

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The focus on event-based versus thematic context for gun violence stories has been raised by scholars advocating for an alternative frame for gun violence reporting—the public health frame.

In 2016, the American Public Health Association was one of the first major institutions to declare gun violence a public health crisis, citing guns as a key driver of mortality and in need of public health research, surveillance, and interventions akin to other fatal diseases (APHA, 2016). The Surgeon General's proclamation of gun violence as a public health crisis in 2024 was the culmination of many years of academic and political advocacy. This declaration sought to shift gun violence from a crime frame focused primarily on moralizing and individualizing themes such as "bad guys with guns". This framing reflects a multidisciplinary, cross-sector approach that combines the work of clinical health care providers, those who treat victims and survivors, with the work of law enforcement who holds perpetrators accountable. Utilizing a public health lens, gun violence is approached like a communicable disease, with trauma and poverty conceptualized as conditions where one incidence of gun violence is spread to others through mechanisms like retaliation. Targeted prevention interventions, such as focusing policing on groups engaging in activity that puts them at increased risk of committing or being victimized by gun violence and conflict mediation, can be seen as "vaccines" to inhibit the spread of violence (Slutkin, 2013).

Various organizations have published style guides and resources to help journalists shift their crime/gun violence reporting to a public health frame. The FrameWorks Institute

report advocates for thematic and public health reporting, instructing reporters to steer away from individualizing and victim blaming episodic frames, using sensationalizing language, reducing victims to data points, and using racist codewords like "gritty" or "urban" (FrameWorks Institute, 2024). They instead offer a move towards humanizing journalistic practices, including the use of language like *son* or *father*, directing audiences to community resources, and offering solutions that address core drivers of gun violence, such as access to social supports, concentrated poverty, structural racism, ineffective firearm policies, and disinvestment in public health systems (ibid). This solutions journalism perspective is part of a global shift focused on advanced reporting on how people are trying to solve problems and what can be learned from both their successes and failures (Solutions Journalism Network, 2026).

Missing from this discourse on the use of the public health frame is input from community members and victims. As such, this frame, while presented as an alternative to existing episodic and racial panic frames, has its limitations. The gun violence-focused journalistic outlet *The Trace* has incorporated a public health, solutions-focused frame for its reporting, which they have positioned as an alternative to a gun violence journalism ecosystem endorsed by the National Rifle Association (Weiss, 2022). The outlet has come under criticism as its largest donor is former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg. As mayor, Bloomberg not only supported stop-and-frisk policies which had a disproportionate impact on Black New Yorkers, but he also funded the gun control advocacy group Everytown, which has ignored legitimate concerns around the disproportionate impact of gun control laws on minoritized and marginalized populations (Lindsay, 2022). In addition, the president of Everytown was also the head of *The Trace* demonstrating that adopting a public health frame does not prevent hierarchy and ensure community control over journalism production.

Somewhat paradoxically, many of the institutions advocating a public health frame for gun violence caution against the general use of epidemiological language when talking about gun violence, where terms like *gun violence epidemic* create the same sort of sensationalist normalization of gun violence the public health frame seeks to challenge (FrameWorks Institute, 2024). Indeed, some have noted the capacity for the public health frame to reflect discourses of racial panic, as it is not a large leap from saying "gun violence is a disease" to "Black and Brown communities suffering from gun violence **are** the disease," creating the same victim blaming that the public health frame seeks to correct (Grandpre, 2022). This goes to show that in addition to noting the distinctions between episodic, thematic frames for gun violence, it is important to have context for what fills the thematic frame when interpreting the impact of the coverage.

## **The Baltimore News Built Environment**

Influenced by the public health model, some have recommended a shift in language when talking about the landscape of news media production. While reports typically talk about media "landscapes", or "ecosystems," some scholars have argued that this language makes the media environment appear natural and inevitable, rather than the result of intentional decisions around media coverage and corporate consolidation (Wenzel, 2023). Following this trend, this report will briefly explain the media's built environment in Baltimore and the Capital Region to place depictions of gun violence in their proper context (ibid).

The Baltimore news environment has been described as diverse, but fragile. A 2010 Pew Media report on the Baltimore news ecosystem notes that despite there being 55 outlets in Baltimore, there was a tendency of smaller media outlets to reprint information from larger ones, reducing overall media diversity (Pew, 2010). The report describes a specific example of a police-involved shooting, where 38% of the stories contained no new information, repeating the already reported facts from legacy outlets like *The Baltimore Sun* (ibid). Moreover, the report notes how budget cutbacks have impacted the local news environment, with reports tying the high percentage of stories initiated by government (60% of all stories, with the number one entity initiating stories being police) to a lack of journalist resources (ibid). In a more recent study of the Baltimore media's built environment by the Local News Network, 33 news outlets were listed in Baltimore City and County in 2024, with only two of them being described as robust, including *The Baltimore Sun* (Local News Network, 2024).

***The Baltimore Sun***, the region's paper of record for more than 150 years, deserves some specific mention given not only its longevity but also the nature of its recent ownership change. The newsroom staff shrank from 400 to less than 100 because of years of corporate takeovers and downsizing (Fu, 2025). Purchased by private capital firm Alden Capital in 2020, the paper was acquired by Baltimore native David Smith in 2024 in partnership with conservative commentator Armstrong Williams (ibid). Smith is the executive chairman of Sinclair Broadcast Group, a media entity that owns various local news television outlets throughout the country, including Fox45 in Baltimore (Woods, 2025). He is known for using his media platform to support Republican political talking points, ranging from support of Bush-era attacks on John Kerry's military service to mandating *must-run* right-wing political commentary segments (ibid).

In Baltimore, there are signs that Smith's ownership has implications for *The Baltimore Sun's* coverage of crime. He has publicly stated that his coverage of crime has political objectives. In a conversation recorded by a member of *The Baltimore Sun* staff, Smith

stated that his coverage of juvenile justice and crime involving the use of guns, is designed to influence state politics in a manner that reflects the agenda of states' attorneys. *Baltimore Banner* quotes reveal Smith as saying:

*In the political context, let me tell you what the reality is. If I do a poll that asks a very simple question: Should Bill Ferguson be thrown under the bus? You know what the answer is? Unequivocally, yes. . . . you know what Bill Ferguson's view of that poll is? It scares him to death. And you know what it says to him? Maybe I better rethink what my political posture is. I'll give you an example, we've done polls on Ferguson and [Maryland House of Delegates Speaker] Adrienne Jones. Very simple polls. Now Bill Ferguson and Adrienne Jones last year said the juvenile justice, whatever that legal system is, works the way it should. Well when 24 district attorneys got on television and said that's bullshit, there was a problem. When we started focusing on Bill Ferguson and Adrienne Jones, you know what they did? They started moving away from their position. Adrienne Jones, literally, I know this because we're so plugged in to what goes on in Annapolis and the governor's office, we normally find out. When, I think, it was [Fox45 reporter] Mikenzie Frost was walking toward Adrienne Jones, she was almost running to her car to get away from her. That story was so scary to her, you know what she did within an hour? She said we have to do something now. We have to do something now, because I don't want to be bothered by these people. That's very telling. But it took Mikenzie Frost with a microphone chasing her, asking her a very simple question that she wouldn't answer. Now she's changed her view. Is that right or wrong? I'm not here, I just say we simply ask the question. That's all as a journalist, you ask the question (Sanderlin et al, 2024).*

This focus on sensationalizing juvenile crime narratives is reflected not just in targeting lawmakers, but in their coverage of youth crime. A 2024 report by Richard Mendel for the Sentencing Project noted the youth represent 5% of arrests, yet in Fox45 news stories where the age of an offender is mentioned, 54% of the alleged perpetrators were juvenile (Mendel, 2024). This is 30% more often than the second-highest television news channel in Baltimore (ibid). Moreover, Fox45 stories that covered youth crime asserted an increase in youth crime 80% of the time, using various misleading statistics to obscure the reality that youth crime during this period was declining (ibid). The unique role of the *Sun*, given the tendency of other outlets in the region to reprint their information and the associated volume of Fox45 stories on youth crime, creates an environment where racialized anxieties around crime, specifically youth crime, have been at the center of conversation and coverage of gun violence in the region over the past five years.

As Anne Arundel County sits directly to the south of Baltimore City, ***The Capital Gazette***, an Annapolis based paper covering news in the county and throughout the state, falls within the Baltimore news media's built environment. While undergoing many mergers and changes, the paper traces its roots back to 1727 as the *Maryland Gazette*, making it one of the oldest newspapers in the country (Kaltenbach, 2020). While technically in the Baltimore metropolitan region, the paper has historically focused more on Annapolis and Anne Arundel County, with the paper's self-narrated history boasting of historically focusing on youth leagues, teams or neighborhood associations. The paper was sold to The Baltimore Sun, which was then owned by the Tribune company and Alden Capital in 2019 (Allsop, 2021). Only a year earlier, the paper was tragically the site of a mass shooting that killed five people. The history of Alden Capital cutting staff at newspapers thus came as the newspaper struggled to both replace the staffers who were killed, while still grieving and recovering (Allsop, 2021). In 2024, with the sale of *The Baltimore Sun* to David Smith, the *Capital Gazette* also shifted ownership from Alden Capital to Smith. While the sale is recent, there are signs the sale may be impacting *Capital Gazette* coverage. A 2024 story in the *Gazette*, written by a journalist who works for *The Baltimore Sun*, sought to draw distinctions between Sinclair Broadcast Group and the political actions of David Smith, who at the time was funding an ultimately unsuccessful ballot initiative to shrink the Baltimore City Council (Belson, 2024). The story failed to mention that, as the owner of *The Baltimore Sun*, Smith was also the owner of the *Capital Gazette* (ibid).

The paper also has a legacy of publishing conversations from the county's Black community. Longtime civil rights leader in Anne Arundel County, Carl Snowden, has written a regular commentary that touches on a variety of issues, including gun violence (Snowden et al, 2022).

***The Baltimore AFRO-American*** newspaper is one of the oldest Black owned newspapers in the country. Started in 1892 by a formerly enslaved man, John Henry Murphy, *The AFRO* gradually grew from a local one-page church paper to a full-fledged newspaper with regional circulation (PBS n.d.). Vivienne Sano notes that while the Black Press consistently played political and racial uplift functions in the Black community, *The AFRO* historically balanced this approach by including stories from multiple perspectives and on a variety of topics, including business, church news, and foreign policy (Sano, 2019). The paper historically included political commentary from multiple perspectives, including coverage of Booker T. Washington, The Garvey Movement, and the Civil Rights and Black Power movements (ibid). The paper was also a home for local political commentary, including the work of Madeline Murphy. She drew links between media depictions of crime, including gun violence, as reflecting anti-Black bias and implicating policy as far back as the 1970s, writing:

*How often have we witnessed white fat cat wrong-doers (Nixon not excluded) never being punished in relation to the magnitude of their crimes against people, and Blacks caught in the same net punished severely? . . . The press, Black and white, the radio, TV, also give too much coverage to violent acts of Blacks, which appeal to the vicarious bestiality of readers, listeners, and viewers... The more Black frustration is felt as a result of rotten housing, rats, filth, hopelessness, unemployment, hunger, and overcrowding, the more impetus is given to kill every thing that is Black, because Black is evil, Black is bad . . . No amount of conferences, no amount of deprecation will erase Hangman's Hill on the Eastern Shore, lynchings, fire hoses tearing the flesh off of Black Southern protesters, bombings of churches, and wholesale slaughter on ships laden with human cargo: proud Black Africans sold into slavery . . . We must not reduce our real problems to political gimmickry and simplistic solutions, ignoring the main culprits in this tragedy, for this only leads us into the jaws of the culprits white racist Americans who will say: 'I told you so, even they recognize they are less than human. Kill them all, in the prisons, in the courts, in the schools, in the ghettos, in the jails. Make them believe they are worthless, and worthless they will become. (Murphy, 1973)*

That *The AFRO* could include such sophisticated analysis of the relationship between racial discourses on violent crime and political implications for policy reflects a possibility that their coverage on gun violence may reflect more thematic elements. At its peak, the newspaper had a circulation of 250,000 in 1972, including weekly papers in Newark and Washington, D.C. Since then, the paper has struggled with adjusting to the economic disruptions brought by changing media environments for social media and less advertising revenue, impacting its ability to provide comprehensive news coverage (Wilson, 2014).

## **Study Aims**

It is into this context that the current study was conceptualized. **Our goal was to examine the role of the media in accurately and fairly reporting on issues related to gun violence in Maryland.** Specifically, we aimed to analyze the media, including but not necessarily limited to, radio, print and local television news, and their depictions of topics related to gun violence throughout the state over a period of roughly five years (2020-2024). This analysis hoped to produce a depiction of the accused, victims, and what the media isolates as the causes of gun violence and what is presented as solutions. The goal was to compare these depictions with an analysis of a historical understanding of inequality, structural violence, the War on Drugs, and lived experiences

of those who have lived in communities impacted by gun violence to check for accuracy and conceptual limitations and blind spots in these media representations. The particular focus was on isolating consistent themes in this coverage and comparing these depictions to historical tropes tied to Black youth, Black families, and anxieties about community control of public safety and public resources. The analysis concludes with an analysis of the political implications of these depictions, relating them to changes in criminal justice policy and government decisions around funding police and community based anti-violence programs.

## Methods

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### Search Strategy and Keywords

In consultation with the University of Maryland Baltimore's data librarian, the authors developed a search strategy using available resources at the Health and Human Services Library. A search of the media literature was conducted on March 7, 2025, using *The Baltimore Sun* ProQuest database and the *Capital Gazette* online database with the following terms and Boolean operators: **gun OR weapon OR firearm OR rifle AND violence OR crime OR shooting**. These databases were chosen as both *The Baltimore Sun* and *Capital Gazette* newspapers are the most comprehensive sources for local news in the state. Initially, the aim was to run this search in *The AFRO-American Newspaper* as well. However, the archives are not able to be searched similarly at the current time. As such, the authors utilized articles from *The AFRO-American Newspaper* and relevant television news outlets to triangulate information from stories reported in either *The Baltimore Sun*, the *Capital Gazette*, or both.

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Articles were eligible for inclusion if they met the following criteria: (1) published between 2020 and 2024 in *The Baltimore Sun* or *Capital Gazette*, (2) written in English, and (3) depicted violence, crime, or a shooting in Maryland. Articles were excluded if they (1) were published in another language, (2) did not depict violence, crime, or a shooting, (3) were in other formats such as journal articles, conference papers, or reviews, and/or (4) were published prior to 2020 or after 2024. The search term "shooting" also picked up articles in sports, film, books, advice columns, and/or fatal accidents due to dual meanings in words. These types of articles were excluded as well upon further review. News stories shorter than 100 words or classified as corrections, book reviews, letters to the editor, business or stock, obituaries, duplicate wire stories, story previews, or calendar reports were also excluded.

## **Qualitative Content Analysis**

To qualitatively analyze the content of news coverage on gun violence, we developed a coding instrument similar to those used by other researchers for examining framing of gun violence stories (e.g. McGinty, Webster, Jarlenski & Barry, 2014). Additionally, we aimed to examine depictions of victims/perpetrators of gun violence and communities where gun violence occurs to evaluate how these depictions differ across the state and examine how they may reflect concerns around sensationalism and racial bias in media coverage of gun violence.

We measured whether the news stories identified focused exclusively on a specific act of gun violence, or on the general problem of gun violence and by whom. Specific attention was paid to the framing of event-based/episodic and thematic news stories as it pertains to race and ethnicity. It was important to ascertain how Black people were framed when discussing issues of gun violence in media outlets throughout the state as a whole and in comparison to other races and ethnicities. We also intended to investigate the extent to which news outlet biases manifest in the reporting.

## **Quantitative Data Analysis**

We measured the frequency of each type of story, as well as collected basic demographic factors related to specific acts. We planned to use  $\chi^2$  tests to compare the proportion of news stories and additional factors related to gun violence in event-focused versus thematic news coverage. However, the cell sizes were too small to test relationships. Additionally, there were only two papers to report from which limits some of the testing. As such, frequencies were reported.

## **Findings**

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The following section outlines qualitative and quantitative findings relevant to our aims. The qualitative findings are organized by themes based on content analysis of articles and relevant quotes, while the quantitative findings outline frequencies of demographic information captured in articles and potential associations with other relevant factors.

### **Quantitative Findings**

A total of 2400 articles were found upon limiting the search databases with the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Of those 2400, a total of 253 articles addressed the issue of gun violence as a single event or ongoing issue. Nearly 80% of the articles focused on a single incident or event related to gun violence, whereas 20.2% of the articles focused on gun violence as an ongoing issue. Finally, 99.2% of the articles focused on the central and

capital regions of Maryland with little attention to the other surrounding regions of Maryland.

Of the articles that addressed gun violence, articles inconsistently shared demographics related to age, race, and gender. Some stories included the victims' age (45% ages 25+ and 27% unknown) and gender (52% male and 27% omitted gender) but omitted race (95% omitted race). Relatedly, the stories included the perpetrators' age (49% unknown and 40% ages 25+) and gender (52% male and 45% not reported) but omitted race (97% omitted race).

## **Qualitative Findings**

Of the articles included in the review, an overwhelming majority referenced single incidents or events related to gun violence in the central and capital regions of Maryland, which include Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Carroll, Harford, and Howard counties in the central region, and Montgomery, Prince George's, and Frederick counties in the capital region. Compared to the *Capital Gazette*, *The Baltimore Sun* published a greater volume of articles addressing gun violence. In contrast, the *Capital Gazette* relied more heavily on *Associated Press* content rather than locally produced journalism. There were three predominant themes of the news stories: public safety, public opinion, and politics.

## **Public Safety**

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The first major theme among the articles was public safety. Articles focusing on gun violence involving youth and young adult (15-24 years old) victims appeared to emphasize these types of shootings and gun violence as a public safety issue that garners specific attention and monitoring. While most of these articles started off describing single and isolated incidents of gun violence, they would often conclude by reporting statistics and facts that summarized gun violence as an ongoing problem in need of control. For example, a *Baltimore Sun* article reported a story concerning a single incident of violence involving a mother and her 8-month pregnant daughter found shot to death inside a car. While this was an article reporting a single incident of gun violence crime in a southwest Baltimore city neighborhood, the article concluded with a summary of young children killed in recent years by gun violence and assaults.

*Baltimore has been roiled by shootings of young children in recent years. Seven-year-old Taylor Hayes was fatally shot in 2018 when a man opened fire on the car in which she was traveling. In 2015, 7-year-old Kester Browne and his mother Jennifer Jeffrey-Browne were executed at their Southwest Baltimore home, a case that remains unsolved. Three-year-old MacKenzie Elliott was struck by an errant bullet and killed in 2014. And one-year-old Carter Scott was fatally shot in 2013 during an attack on his father, who survived. (Jackson & Fenton, 2020, A1)*

Another article published in *The Baltimore Sun* reported that, “a total of 91 people the ages of 18 to 25 have been killed in Baltimore City this year, the highest among any age demographic in the city” (Jackson, 2020). While both articles were published in the same year, 2020, the latter was printed in late November and also primarily focused on gun violence as an ongoing issue. Taken together, these articles are examples that highlight *The Baltimore Sun's* framing of gun violence as a public safety issue concerning youth and young adult victims, which ultimately creates a narrative about a public safety issue needing monitoring and attention from governing officials and neighborhood community members.

## **Public Opinion**

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Public opinion emerged as the second major theme across the articles. Coverage of single incident gun violence frequently centered public mourning, often quoting community members, activists, and families affected by shootings and crime. Grief, advocacy, pleas for attention, and calls for action comprised most of the published quotes. For example, in a story in an article about the ongoing investigation into the killing of a young adult male, the victim's mother stated:

*“I just wish it would end, I wish they [the city] would come up with some type of solution,” said Kelly, who believes the police could be stretched thin in investigating homicide cases because Baltimore has tallied more than 50 murders so far this year. (Jackson, 2020, p. A4)*

In another story, reported three months later about persistent ongoing violence among young adults, a community activist and organizer is quoted in response to the killing of a 16-year-old.

*Erricka Bridgeford, an anti-gun violence activist and co-organizer of Baltimore Ceasefire, said she is “heartbroken when people are killed.” And while Baltimore’s violence persists, so does the effort to stop it, she said. “You have to just purposely not be paying attention [to community work] when you say no one is showing up [in response] when people are being killed in a community on a daily basis. They are not actually paying attention to what is going on in Baltimore.” (Jackson, 2020, p. A3)*

While this speaks to a community response from a trusted community member, it is not relevant to the actual case or story. This speaks to how the media frames public opinion, public safety, and politics, particularly through the voices of community leaders who have established trust in local Baltimore neighborhoods through their advocacy work.

Articles that spotlighted public opinion often overlapped with those emphasizing public safety. This overlap underscores how media narratives connect public awareness of safety concerns, calls for greater support and monitoring, and community perspectives on institutional response. For example, the following quote was published in an article noting the number of killings captured within a 16-hour span:

*“[W]e cannot and will not allow this to become normalized,” Mayor Scott said in the statement. “Under my leadership, every single city agency will work in tandem to make Baltimore safer. Our police department will refocus on targeting those committing violent acts in our communities, while developing a strategy to focus on those illegally trafficking guns onto our streets.” Scott said. (Jackson, 2020, A4)*

This example outlines the overlapping themes of public safety and public opinion, in addition to connecting political themes like campaigns, and conflict among politicians.

## **Politics**

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The final theme that emerged was politics. Articles with content focused on politics often discussed gun violence as an ongoing concern in relation to political party differences, as well as varying political agendas and enforcement of policies. Additionally, these articles referenced specific gun violence campaigns that often differed among elected officials and other political leaders. The following quotes provide examples outlining article content:

*“Crime prevention isn’t just a Baltimore issue. It’s an issue for everyone,” [Adrienne A.] Jones said. “We don’t just need new laws,” Jones said. “Our existing laws need to work more effectively.” (Broadwater, 2020, A2) “If they don’t pass the bill, people are going to continue to die,” [Larry] Hogan warned Wednesday. “People are going to get shot every day in Baltimore City.” (Broadwater, 2020, A1)*

Additionally, several articles highlighted Baltimore City surpassing 300 homicides; a notable concern often reported as a major crisis in the state and linked these homicides to politics.

*“The 300-homicide mark - and violence in general - has been a pervasive problem for Baltimore’s political, civic and law enforcement leaders.” (Jackson, 2020, A2)*

Articles mentioning specific crime statistics and data related to homicide numbers often signaled gun violence as the primary problem that policy must target. Policymakers, government leaders, and community organizers were often quoted in framing the narrative of policy intervention, surveillance, and control as the most effective strategy in reducing gun violence and crime in Maryland.

## **Discussion**

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Developing a rigorous analysis of the media landscape regarding gun violence in Maryland provides important context for understanding the regional policy landscape, especially as it relates to public safety and criminal justice reform. Elected officials often make policy decisions based on a desire to appear to address a problem highlighted in the media, even when that problem is not something that is best addressed with legislative action. For instance, a few months prior to the 2018 Maryland General Assembly, then-chair of the Judicial Proceedings Committee Bobby Zirkin convened public hearings to discuss ways to address the spike in homicide rates in Baltimore City. Even though there was evidence presented during that joint hearing that enhanced penalties are not an effective solution to preventing gun violence, and that the biggest impact is that it brings more Black folks into the criminal justice system, Senator Zirkin proceeded with an agenda to enhance penalties for gun-related offenses. This policy proved to have no impact on the spike in

homicides but was touted as a decisive action to stop violence in Baltimore.

The episodic framing of stories of gun violence has created a discursive environment where elected officials are trying to protect their constituents from the "bad guys," which is ultimately of political benefit to someone like Senator Zirkin given the impact that episodic framing of stories of gun violence has on how the general public relates to the issue. The dominance of the episodic framing reduces the focus of policymakers to an effort to effectively punish the bad guys who are disrupting the lives of law-abiding citizens. This line of thinking centers legislative solutions that are geared toward creating more opportunities for what is perceived to be more effective punishment to deter the bad guys from harming good people. As mentioned earlier, if the episodic frame is used to explain the Nat Turner rebellion, Nat Turner and his comrades are bad people hurting the good guys. But a frame that uses a thematic frame and takes the social landscape into consideration, Nat Turner is responding to oppression, thus not a bad guy. Similarly, the episodic frame for gun violence characterizes many of the people who are fearful of gun violence as "good people" wanting to be protected from "bad people" with guns.

Alternatively, a thematic frame would look at the psychosocial pain produced by the systems of racial oppression and dehumanization and would see gun violence, particularly in majority working class Black communities, as self-destructive behavior born out of feelings of worthlessness and nihilism that has been injected by societal propaganda of anti-Blackness by mainstream society. Na'im Akbar explains this in his book *Akbar Papers in African Psychology*:

*Victims of the self-destructive disorders are the most direct victims of oppression. These disorders represent the self-defeating attempts to survive in a society that systematically frustrates normal efforts for human growth. The pimps, pushers, prostitutes, addicts, alcoholics and psychotics and an entire array of conditions that are personally destructive to the individual and equally detrimental to the African American community, typify this group. These are individuals who have usually found the doors to legitimate self-determination blocked and out of urgency for survival have chosen personally and socially destructive means to alleviate immediate wants such as pimping, pushing drugs or prostitution. Black on Black homicide and crime is an acting-out of the self-destructive disorder . . . The deadliness of human degradation in the American system of human oppression is reflected in the kind of self-destructive minds that are produced (Akbar, 2001)."*

Furthermore, Amos Wilson in his book *Black on Black Violence* expounds on the pain that underlies the violence that, with a thematic frame of analysis, provides context that goes beyond the good guys and bad guys framing. He says:

*. . . suicide is the pre-eminent expression of Black-on-Black violence. It is the other side of Black on Black homicide. Both homicide and suicide are different forms of the collective self-destruction of a race by death. Both actualize a death-wish instigated externally and executed internally. Both are assassinations by proxy: victim murdering victim. Both involve the killing of someone considered expendable, someone lodged between the assailant and some form of settlement or satisfaction . . . Both are attempts to palliate some unbearable hurt or pain, some sickness of the soul." (Wilson, 2020)*

It is clear that this culturally responsive lens is not present in Maryland's media ecosystem. The lone example of this kind of analysis was from *The AFRO-American Newspaper* whose circulation has declined since the 1970s resulting in a lack of diversity within the media ecosystem. There has been an increased amount of conversation about the use of a public health approach to public safety in the general public. But the presence of this analysis is severely overshadowed by the standard episodic framing that characterizes communities of color as generally pathological and prone to violence.

What is notably absent from the news media depictions of gun violence identified are discussions of gun violence occurring in predominantly white communities, issues related to the use of guns in intimate partner violence situations, and the increase in guns being used for suicides. Limiting news stories to stories which incite racial panic is a disservice to the citizens of Maryland. As an example, although firearm homicides outnumber firearm suicides, suicides are a significant portion of the overall violent death rates in our state. In 2024, there were just under 700 firearm deaths, 55% were homicides and 44% were suicides. The homicides primarily impacted non-Hispanic Black males whereas most of the suicide victims were non-Hispanic white males (Maryland Department of Health Firearm Violence Data Dashboard, n.d.). There is significant evidence for public policies to prevent these deaths by firearm suicide including those that affect social and structural determinants of suicide risk, and those that restrict access to firearms (Purtle, Mauri, Lindsey & Keyes, 2025). Reporting these stories and potential policies would be in line with the themes of public opinion, public safety, and politics. Media depictions of firearm deaths focusing primarily on homicides in the Baltimore metropolitan and Capital region do not reflect journalistic objectivity but a choice to focus public opinion in ways that perpetuate anti-Blackness.

The episodic framing that produces the "good guys/bad guys" approach to gun violence contributes to a policy landscape that incentivizes criminalization of Black people in possession of guns. The societal notions of anti-Blackness have created an often-unspoken set of beliefs that any Black person illegally possessing a firearm is prone to becoming a perpetrator of violence. With guns being more accessible now than in prior history, the decision to carry a gun for the purpose of self-defense is a rational one. Communities characterized by low socioeconomic status and high crime create an ecological niche where normative behavior potentially includes gun possession. People who have to walk through neighborhoods where they know that other people have guns, or who operate in cash industries may decide to carry firearms, with no intention to cause harm to anyone unless in self-defense. This understanding of the why of gun possession and Black community views of public safety is almost completely absent in the local policy discourse regarding gun violence. This is the result of a societal anxiety towards Black people using legitimate forms of violence because of the stigma that Black people are inherently criminal and prone to violence.

This has led to a Maryland legislative landscape that champions policies that actually have the impact of exacerbating mass incarceration in Maryland in the name of supporting public safety. For instance, Maryland is one of the few states that continues to engage in the practice of automatically charging youth as adults for certain crimes, among them gun possession. The practice of having youth in adult prison facilities is dehumanizing, and approximately 80% of the youth in the adult prison system are Black. (Frasier, 2025). One of the largest categories of youth that are placed in the adult system are those charged with gun possession (*ibid*). Research has demonstrated that the majority of these youth have significant adverse childhood experiences and are subjects of forced criminality (Lesley & LaPierre, 2025). Forced criminality is a form of labor trafficking where traffickers force children to commit crimes such as weapons carrying (U.S. Department of State, 2014).

This is a policy that advocates have been trying to change for many years, but political leadership and conservative media forces characterize such a shift as a liability for public safety. Black youth that carry guns are the bad guys in these cases, and there is a need to protect the community from them. Again, this framing is dehumanizing because it does not consider the fact that many of these youths may be victims of forced criminality or carrying guns to protect themselves, not to cause harm to the community. Advocates that have been trying to change the policy of automatically charging youth as adults argue that each case should be addressed on a case-by-case basis so that an assessment can be made of each young person carrying a gun. This would allow for youth who are carrying guns, but are not a danger to the community, to avoid being pulled into the adult prison

system. This is one example of how the episodic framing of gun violence has a real concrete impact on the policy landscape in Maryland, in a way that perpetuates mass incarceration.

## **Conclusions**

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Even though there have been some reforms to the criminal justice system in Maryland (which have required tremendous effort on the part of advocates), Maryland still incarcerates the highest percentage of its Black population in comparison to any other state in the United States (PPI, 2024). Although Black people make up 31% of Maryland's population, they are around 70% of the state's prison population (ibid). The narratives of gun violence in the political landscape have helped to maintain mass incarceration. More specifically, Baltimore City has experienced some of the largest declines in homicides and non-fatal shootings in the city's recent history (Hofstaedter, 2025). There are many different factors that contribute to this success, but one of the largest factors is the investment in community-based violence prevention organizations that are able to address the issues that working-class Black people face in communities that law enforcement and other traditional forms of public safety cannot address. These community-based organizations do the work of mediating conflicts, providing relevant counseling, relocating people from neighborhoods that present danger to individuals, and many other interventions that acknowledge the humanity of individuals traditionally dehumanized by the societal forces of structural racism. Using a community-informed, culturally responsive lens when reporting about gun violence would be more impactful in shifting public opinion about the issue; and more viable in developing effective interventions supported by policy and the overall political landscape.

Overall, whether a single event (episodic) or thematic focused article, the conclusions were primarily the same and shaped the arguments as either an ongoing problem that ties to public safety and/or public opinion and ultimately presented gun violence as solely a political issue. Most of the articles described an isolated incident with references to patterns of gun violence as an ongoing crime issue, then shapes the narrative to be a political matter that needs to be controlled, monitored, and solved by policy. Whether they used a public health frame or race neutral lens, the articles examined point to the media as a significant contributor in the framing of gun violence as an ongoing problem and serious political issue warranting surveillance and control, predominantly of those in urban environments or those characterized by low socioeconomic status. Being that those environments tend to disproportionately be Black and Brown communities, these accounts echo anti-Black statements from the 19th and 20th centuries which reflect racialized

anxieties. With the pejorative framing of these narratives, particularly of young adults, these news depictions continue to perpetuate the concept of racial panic thereby justifying racial oppression.

## **Limitations**

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While the findings of this study provide interesting insights related to media framing, there are a few limitations worth noting. The authors aimed to review several newspaper databases to understand media framing; however, we were limited to *The Baltimore Sun* and *Capital Gazette* databases as they provide searchable archives available in digital format. The archives of *The AFRO American Newspaper* are currently not digitized and able to be searched. As *The Baltimore Sun* and *Capital Gazette* are currently owned by the same person, there are inherent biases in both outlets. Many of the articles from the *Capital Gazette* were either reprinted from *The Baltimore Sun* or the *Associated Press* with very few original articles. This meant that there was limited reporting on news that is local to the individual counties, and greater emphasis on the Baltimore metropolitan region almost to the exclusion of the capital region of Maryland.

The framing tool captured the title of the article and utilized key information, such as placement and artwork, to ascertain prominence of gun violence articles. However, we learned during the reviews that the title of the article changed depending on how it was being disseminated – print, email, or website. Only one version of the title is archived, and which one is inconsistent. There were also inconsistencies in whether photographs and artwork were available in the archives.

## **Future Steps**

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Our initial goal was to access and analyze not only print media but also radio and local news throughout the state. However, we quickly realized that this was an ambitious undertaking not possible to complete with our current staff and funding. With additionally sought funding, we would like to triangulate our current findings with those from other forms of media, including video and transcripts from evening news programs for the major television networks watched in several regions of the state; and transcripts from national news stories on gun violence in Maryland from major outlets (e.g., CNN, MS NOW, and Fox News). We will also include relevant news stories from public and private news radio programs throughout the state.

Secondly, as most of the articles found were single incidents or events related to gun violence, we are considering a project that compares these news stories with the publicly available homicide database. Based on the context of the articles and the overarching three themes, it is believed that the media has primarily focused not only on the central and capital regions to the exclusion of the rest of the state but also on victims and perpetrators from marginalized populations, primarily Black male youth. Also, gun violence in most of these articles focuses on homicides and/or community violence. Yet, Maryland's Violent Death Reporting System<sup>[1]</sup> shows roughly equal numbers of homicides and suicides annually. Death by suicide as a form of gun violence is barely touched upon in the stories the media chooses to present and how the issue is framed. Our future steps will also consider an examination of homicide versus suicide reporting on gun violence in the media.

Lastly, not being able to systematically analyze archival articles published in *The AFRO -American Newspaper* was unexpected. The AFRO's crime coverage is minimal as they mostly run feature articles as opposed to spot news. Regardless, we believe that being able to integrate these articles would provide a more diverse understanding of the issue of gun violence from the perspective of those most likely to be impacted in the central and capital regions of Maryland. To extend the research, it will be imperative for us to find a way to access them as this is crucial in combating echo chambers, fostering critical thinking, and challenging the inherent biases present in *The Baltimore Sun* and *Capital Gazette*.

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