



Race and Media in New Mexico

The New Mexico Race Matters Coalition works to eliminate structural racism so all New Mexico children may reach their full potential.

New Mexico is a minority/majority multicultural state where 67% of the children are racial minorities: 51% are Hispanic, 12% are Native American, 2% are African American and 2% are Asian, while only 33% are white non-Hispanic. Despite their high numbers, children of color in New Mexico tend not to fare as well as their white counterparts due to the numerous disparities they face.

Disparities are often created and maintained both intentionally and inadvertently through policies and practices that contain barriers to opportunities. We call this structural racism. Structural racism is evident in New Mexico as unequal outcomes in the health, success and wellness of children of color. Because of its negative impacts on behavioral health across generations and along the life span, structural racism should be eliminated in New Mexico.

Mass media has a strong influence on the way we perceive our communities and societal norms. Children especially form their understanding of our society while being bombarded with media messages that, unfortunately, don't always reflect reality. For our purposes here, we have chosen to focus on prime-time television, news in three formats (print, radio and TV), and movies, because they reach the largest audiences and therefore hold the most influence.

National Data:

How likely is it that a shooting will happen in your community's school, or that you will be victimized by a stranger whose race is different than your own? Public opinion surveys show that people think these things are far more likely to occur than they actually do. Part of this misconception is due to crime coverage in the news. Violent crime, in particular, is extremely over-reported in TV news, though less so in print and radio. And though our TVs are being flooded with crime stories, we're not getting an accurate picture of the crime rate or who the perpetrators and victims are.

- On television news, particularly on local outlets, Blacks and Hispanics are over-represented as perpetrators while whites are under-represented¹, and it is more likely that a mug shot of the perpetrator will be shown if the perpetrator is black.² (Note: media outlets are entirely dependent on law enforcement for the acquisition of mug shots and other access to people in their custody.)
- White victims are shown more often than Black victims, giving the impression that non-white perpetrators target whites.³
- Nationally, news anchors, reporters, and primary sources are over-represented as white.⁴
- Youth of color are shown in 52% of crime news while white youth are only shown in 35%, but white youth are shown in many more stories about education or health (13%) than youth of color (2%).⁵

Although we know that most entertainment media is fictional, we subconsciously assume they reflect reality, or a possible reality. But when we watch a sitcom with a cast comprised of only one race, or a show that often depicts people of certain races doing hard labor, we develop a skewed perception about society. Today's youth are most likely to watch television in the evening during prime time,⁶ and 40% of these younger viewers in America are of a minority race.⁷ But that diversity is not reflected on the screen because 73% of the children shown in prime-time shows are white.⁸

- Sitcoms are the most popular shows among youth and are also the most racially segregated.⁹ This is particularly true of prime-time television, as the vast majority the shows have single-race casts, and characters are most often shown associating only with members of their own race.¹⁰
- In the Prime Time Diversity Report, not one Native-American character was found in the entire media survey.¹¹
- Latino characters are under-represented in high-status occupations (about 10%) such as physicians or attorneys, whereas about 30% of other racial groups hold these positions.¹² At the same time, domestic workers on television were four times more likely to be Hispanic than any other race.¹³
- Latinos are more likely to appear as criminals in shows like *America's Most Wanted* (which is based on real criminal cases) than they are to be regular characters on sitcoms.¹⁴
- Of the criminal roles on television, 46% are represented as Arab/Middle Eastern while just 15% are represented as Asian/Pacific Islander or Latinos, 10% are Black and only 5% are white.¹⁵
- In the movies, more Black female characters are shown being physically violent (56%) than white female characters (11%).¹⁶

A Youth of Color's Concerns

A youth tells this story:

The way I view media and race is that media portrays being a person of color as negative. It has young people or color thinking that being bad and being locked up is the way to be. Why is it that it's always a Black or Hispanic male doing a crime on shows and the news? What kind of message does that send to us youth of color? My nephews are getting the wrong idea about who to be and how to act. I just don't think that's right and it really needs to stop.

Covering Victims of Violence Does Race Matter?

On Nov. 19, 1999, soon after the school shooting at Columbine High School, and when the nation was hyper-sensitive to any kind of school violence, 13-year-old Aracely Tena was shot in the head by a classmate at a Deming, New Mexico, middle school. The story aired on CNN that night, and was allotted 20 seconds of airtime. Even when the girl died the next day, the national media failed to cover the incident (although it was, along with several other school shootings, referenced in successive stories about trends in school violence). The local television media covered the story more thoroughly.

Between 1999 and 2001, there were 39 school killings that went unreported by the media, including the incident in Deming. The media chooses which stories to cover based on a variety of criteria, but as far as murder goes TV producers and reporters seem more inclined to write about youth perpetrators than adults. However, of these 39 murders, adults committed eight.

So what likely accounts for the remaining 31? These victims were Black, Hispanic, Asian, or of unknown race, and attended mostly minority schools. Why does the media appear to choose to report incidents with white victims more frequently than those with minority victims? As Mike Males wrote in *Kids and Guns: How Politicians, Experts, and the Press Fabricate Fear of Youth*, "...[I]n the crass logic of reporters and editors, things like that are 'supposed to happen' to darker skinned youth."

Part of this problem stems from the fact that the news media – television in particular – is an industry dominated by white males. That is not to say that the media in general is unaware of their coverage imbalances or unwilling to correct them. During the coverage of the Elizabeth Smart kidnapping, for example, ABC News did a story about the fact that virtually all of the kidnapping victims they covered were not only white females, but also blond. They did this story, they reported, not because they were aware of the discrepancy themselves, but because a Black woman called in to complain that, although her daughter had been missing for some time and was presumed kidnapped, ABC News did not cover her disappearance. While it's commendable that ABC News did a report detailing its own prejudices, whether it changed their coverage practices remains to be seen.

Recommendations:

- Data on racial trends in local television news is sadly lacking. A comprehensive study that monitors all local TV news stations should be conducted. Once the data has been collected and studied, the conclusions need to be presented to the TV news outlets and the public at large.
- Virtually all TV ratings data comes from just one source – Nielson Media Research. While Nielson claims to sample audiences that are statistically representative of the racial make up of the country, more research needs to be done.
- Socially responsible groups working to end structural racism or reduce disparities for children of color should work with the media to feed them stories that truly represent the communities they are portraying.
- Hold New Mexico schools and the state Public Education Department accountable for meeting state standards of Media Literacy for all high school students.
- Reverse the 1996 FCC decision that allowed more media conglomerates to form, and increase the amount of local/community media outlets available, such as low-power community radio.
- Go to www.helpchangetv.com and sign the petition asking for better representation of Latinos on TV.
- Learn how to deconstruct negative magazine and TV advertisements that reinforce racial stereotypes at www.nmmlp.org.

Endnotes

¹ Lisa Dorfman and Vincent Schiraldi, "Off Balance: Youth, Race & Crime in the News," *Building Blocks for Youth*, (April 2001): p. 15.

² Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), Companion website, www.raceandmedia.com.

³ Dorfman and Schiraldi, p. 13.

⁴ Ibid, p. 15.

⁵ Ibid, p. 21.

⁶ Children Now, "Fall Colors 2003-04: Prime Time Diversity Report," p. 14.

⁷ Ibid, p. 1.

⁸ Ibid, p. 2.

⁹ Ibid, pgs. 4-5.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 12.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 2.

¹² Ibid, p. 6.

¹³ Ibid, p. 6.

¹⁴ Ibid, pgs. 5, 12.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 6.

¹⁶ Entman and Rojecki, www.raceandmedia.com

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