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A qualitative vignette study of how various factors affect the formulation of media reports about children who are victims or perpetrators of crime

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ABSTRACT

Crime is a significant topic that often takes prominence in media reports when committed by or against children. Moreover, when a crime is committed by or against children, news reports are curated differently to those concerning adults, hence the law and journalistic ethics require that the children's best interests always be taken into account. Despite this, stories of this nature are often sensational and dramatic, usually containing no quotations from the children involved and sometimes inadvertently identifying children whose identities should have been protected. Due to such incidents, it is necessary to interrogate the thought process of journalists when they tackle such topics. Therefore, this research project sets out to understand how various factors affect journalists' decision-making. This was done by engaging news journalists in vignette interviews triangulated with thematic content analysis of previously published news reports. Using imagined scenarios, news reporters were asked about the choices they would make when dealing with stories about children who are victims or perpetrators of crime. It emerged that factors including age, gender, guilt, sympathy, convenience, race and social class affect how children involved in crime are portrayed in the media. Moreover, as there are no industry-specific checklists for journalists to use to standardise their decision-making around such stories, personal values and perceptions of individual journalists influence how particular stories are portrayed. There are also grey areas in applying the press code, legislation and journalistic ethics, coupled with knowledge gaps, editing, deadline pressures, bureaucracy, and other forms of red tape. As a result of all these factors, published stories do not always reflect journalists' original intentions.