

NOT TO BE TRUSTED

Dangerous Levels of Inaccuracy in
TV Crime Reporting in NYC

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BREAKING THE PATTERN

“We cannot make good news out of bad practice.” – Edward R. Murrow

Trust is the bedrock of news reporting. It is the foundation of the relationship between news outlets and their audiences. Even in our rapidly changing media environment, television news remains an essential public resource. It is a trusted service that people rely on for making decisions about everything from what laws should be passed, to what neighborhoods to live in. TV news influences our thoughts and feelings not only about critical issues, but also about one another. We place enormous trust in news outlets, and the basis of that trust is accuracy.

So we were deeply troubled to learn that when it comes to crime reporting, local news stations in New York City are not to be trusted. Two Media Matters for America studies of crime coverage in 2014 uncovered a disturbing pattern—every major network affiliate station in New York is consistently over-representing Black people as perpetrators of crime. They are unfairly and disproportionately focusing their crime reporting on Black suspects, and inaccurately exaggerating the proportion of Black people involved in crime—on average, exaggerating by 24 percentage points.

The news media “Distortion Index” of 24 percentage points has grave consequences for Black people.

We know from well-established research that repeated exposure to unbalanced and distorted portrayals of Black people in media leads to the development of implicit biases against them. That also includes the practice of inaccurately under-representing white people in crime coverage, which then intensifies stereotypes about Black people even more. When media makers get the proportions so egregiously wrong, it reinforces a culture in which the benefit of the doubt is not distributed evenly—we see a hostile society for some, and a privileged society for others. Media-driven biases limit the empathy people feel for Black folks, and adversely influence the behavior of employers conducting job interviews, juries and judges evaluating guilt and sentencing, and countless other discriminatory encounters with doctors, teachers, landlords, lawmakers, prosecutors and everyday people on the street.^{1,2} The news is no exception.

When media makers get the proportions so egregiously wrong, it reinforces a culture in which the benefit of the doubt is not distributed evenly—we see a hostile society for some, and a privileged society for others.

¹ Perception Institute. (2014). Transforming Perception: Black Men and Boys. Retrieved from <http://perception.org/app/uploads/2014/11/Transforming-Perception.pdf>

² Forgiarini, M., Gallucci, M., & Maravita, A. (2011). Racism and the Empathy for Pain on Our Skin. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2, 108. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3108582/>.

Local news stations are representing 3 out of every 4 criminals as Black (75%), when the NYPD's actual Black arrest rate is only 2 out of 4 people (51%).

Over time, the exaggerated preponderance of Black faces and stories on the evening news breeds the kind of suspicion and hostility toward Black people that too often defines the Black experience in New York City. Gravelly, this pattern of behavior reinforces another—it gives false credibility to the perverse logic driving the NYPD's unjust and systematic over-targeting of Black people in the first place.³ Moreover, news reporters will freely admit that the demands of delivering breaking news, which impacts both ratings and revenue for their stations, incentivizes their over-reliance on information and perspectives from police departments, which further introduces bias into the overall pattern of reporting.

The bottom line is, local news stations in New York City are failing their most basic responsibility: to accurately report the news.

We respect the many reporters, producers, station owners, news directors and staffers at every level working throughout New York—for both their professionalism and journalism. We know their intentions are to serve the public good. We know they strive for excellence. We recognize and appreciate the great effort they make to understand and amplify the voices and needs of the many communities that make New York City so unique. If we didn't, we wouldn't hold them to these standards, and we would not have reached out to each of them to share our findings ahead of the release of this report.

We know stations can do better, and break the pattern. There is a constructive path forward. We are hopeful that WABC, WCBS, WNBC and WNYW/FOX5 will take the immediate steps necessary to right what's wrong—to represent Black people fairly and accurately.

And that goes especially for WABC, where the problem is at its worst:

82% of the people they present as perpetrators of crime are Black, an exaggeration of 31 percentage points, which warranted a failing grade in our News Accuracy Report Card. We urge all of these stations, and their parent companies, to accelerate their dialogue about the problem of over-reporting Black people in crime coverage, and change their practices. We are here to help, as willing and open partners in that dialogue.

We also urge all stations to release their employee diversity data, so we can all better understand the experiences and points of view represented at various levels of decision-making, especially at the leadership level. The decisions of news stations matter, because they affect so many other people's decisions that matter.

News stations have a choice. Every day, with so many stories to choose from, news directors and reporters choose to single out Black people. It's inaccurate and unfair. Viewers deserve news broadcasts that present accurate crime coverage. Black people deserve fairness in the eyes of the news media and the public. It's essential for guaranteeing a safer New York, for all of us.



A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Rashad Robinson'.

Rashad Robinson
Executive Director, ColorOfChange.org

³ New York Civil Liberties Union. (2013). Ending Discriminatory Policing in New York City. Retrieved from NYCLU website: http://www.nyclu.org/files/publications/NYCLU_DiscriminatoryPolicing_final.pdf

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SETTING THE CONTEXT

Imagine what it's like to be Black and applying for a job today in New York City— to be sitting down at an interview for a job that many other people also want. More times than seem anywhere near fair, you notice your interviewer looking at you differently than other candidates. They have suspicions about you, a feeling that you are less reliable and trustworthy. They think they know you, and where you're coming from.⁴ But they really don't know much. Whether they see it or not—or admit it or not—they are probably exhibiting attitudes forged less by experience or facts, and more by media representations and bias. What can you do to break out of the stereotypical box they've placed you in at that moment?

It's an unfair, uphill battle to be Black in New York City. You rarely have the benefit of the doubt, yet see it amply granted to others. It happens in your apartment search, in your child's classroom, in the doctor's office and even when your elected leaders are drafting policy. And we've seen all too often how deadly bias can be when it comes to policing. In 2015, it is shocking to realize that it's necessary to remind ourselves of such a simple idea—that no one deserves to be perceived as a criminal just because of the color of their skin, let alone to be treated as one. But when the preponderance of people presented as criminals in the media are Black, even when the facts prove the contrary, we are setting the stage for a dangerous and hostile journey through life for all Black people.

We hope that all readers of this report will consider the everyday impact that grossly inaccurate crime coverage in the news can have for Black folks. Specifically, we are asking local news stations to understand and own up to the pattern of inaccurate crime reporting that our research has revealed.

This degree of lopsided reporting by local TV news stations sends the message to viewers that New York is not safe from Black people, while overlooking how unsafe New York may be for Black people, partially as a result of their distortions.

⁴ Pager, D. (2003). The Mark of a Criminal Record. *American Journal of Sociology*, 108, 5, 937-75.
Retrieved from Harvard University website: http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/pager/files/pager_ajs.pdf

WABC, WCBS, WNBC and WNYW/FOX5 are not trustworthy sources for crime reporting. To varying degrees, the stations have all greatly and systemically over-represented and exaggerated the involvement of Black people in murders, assaults and thefts, while systemically downplaying the involvement of white people in committing those same crimes. Below, the numbers tell the story quite plainly, and shockingly.

This degree of lopsided reporting by local TV news stations sends the message to viewers that New York is not safe *from* Black people, while overlooking how unsafe New York may be *for* Black people, partially as a result of their distortions. Given the dramatic and patently unacceptable levels of inaccuracy we have identified in local TV news crime reporting, we are asking each station to take a hard look at their practices, and change them.

RESULTS & CONCLUSIONS

1. Immediate and Necessary Improvements

This is the first in a series of reports by ColorOfChange that will analyze, expose and address unfair and inaccurate reporting practices that put Black people in harm's way. When we release our next report, later this year, we are hopeful that all news stations will have made clear and tangible progress toward necessary change in the following ways:

- » **STOP disproportionately targeting Black people in crime coverage,** and bring the Black representation rate on TV in line with reality—at the very least, as reflected by average NYPD arrest data. It is essential that every local news station rectifies its Distortion Index.

- » **START being more transparent about the diversity of news station staff.** Consistent with a growing trend in other industries—such as high tech—it is essential that news stations be transparent about who is responsible for making critical and influential content decisions in the newsroom.⁵

2. Key Findings from the August – December 2014 Study

Based on the monitoring data provided by Media Matters for America for the 2014 study period—tracking news coverage of murder, assault and theft in the weekday evening (10/11pm) news broadcasts of the four major network affiliate stations—we are able to present the following findings and analysis.

» **Not To Be Trusted: Unacceptable Grades For Three Out of Four Major Affiliate Local News Stations**

WABC, WCBS and WNBC all received barely passing or failing grades, reflecting that three out of the four major network affiliate stations greatly over-represent Black people as criminals in their crime reporting of murder, assault and theft. Through their distortion, these stations are grossly and inaccurately promoting the idea that Black people are somehow more violent, threatening and dangerous to society than everybody else.

- WABC: **F**
- WNBC: **D**
- WCBS: **D**
- WNYW/FOX5: **B**

⁵ National Association of Black Journalists. (2012). 2012 NABJ Diversity Census: An Examination of Television Newsroom Management. Retrieved from: http://c.yumcdn.com/sites/www.nabj.org/resource/resmgr/onrmore.2012_nabj_diversity_.pdf

» **Dangerous Levels of Inaccuracy: Outsized Distortion Indexes at Three Out of Four Stations**

Three out of four stations over-represented Black people as perpetrators of crime by 19 percentage points or more. The “Distortion Index” represents their degree of exaggeration—the difference between the actual average NYPD arrest rate for Black people (2010-2013) for murder, assault and theft, and the news stations’ rate of representation of Black people as suspects or arrestees for those crimes.

- **WABC:**
Distorted the representation of Black people as perpetrators of crime by **31 percentage points**
- **WNBC:**
Distorted the representation of Black people as perpetrators of crime by **22 percentage points**
- **WCBS:**
Distorted the representation of Black people as perpetrators of crime by **19 percentage points**
- **WNYW/FOX5:**
Distorted the representation of Black people as perpetrators of crime by **11 percentage points**

» **Broadcasting Bias: Egregious Over-Representation Rates At Every Station**

The over-representation rate describes the proportion of suspects who are identified as Black as a percentage of all race-identified suspects in reporting on all crimes monitored for coverage (murder, assault, theft) during all 10/11pm weekday news broadcasts for the period of the study. The actual average NYPD arrest rate is 51%.

- **WABC:**
Percent of all race-identified crime suspects identified as Black: **82%**
- **WNBC:**
Percent of all race-identified crime suspects identified as Black: **73%**
- **WCBS:**
Percent of all race-identified crime suspects identified as Black: **70%**
- **WNYW/FOX5:**
Percent of all race-identified crime suspects identified as Black: **62%**

» **WABC is “Crime TV”—
And the Only Station to Receive an “F” Grade**

While all of the stations are surprisingly far from fulfilling their responsibility to report the news accurately, WABC is the worst of all.

- On WABC, an outrageous 82% of the people presented as perpetrators of the crimes of murder, assault and theft are Black, reinforcing dangerous stereotypes by exaggerating the image of Black people as criminals by 31 percentage points.
- As a result, WABC is clearly downplaying the role of non-Black people in these crimes, thus further reinforcing the perception among viewers of Black people as having a greater inclination to crime and a greater social responsibility for it.
- WABC also reports the most on crime overall—an average of 1.68 crime stories per night—thus amplifying the effect.

» **Outlier: Context for the “B” Grade for WNYW/FOX5**

A very low frequency of reporting on crime, as compared to the three other news stations, resulted in WNYW/FOX5 receiving the highest grade for accuracy (“B”) in their crime reporting: the lower sample size means that their overall Distortion Index is better, even if their per crime Distortion Indexes are varied.

- All of WNYW/FOX5’s coverage of theft in the study period focused on Black suspects—100% of race-identified suspects were Black. But because race-identified theft coverage was minimal overall, and they reported more often and less distortedly on assault, their overall Distortion Index was lower.
- Lower reporting on crime is a good thing because it works against the perpetuation of society’s generally over-hyped hysteria about crime, in which local news stations are reporting more on crime even while crime rates are actually going down. It also decreases the potential for disproportionate coverage and impact, as there is simply less repetition of inaccurate and harmful stereotypes. We support WNYW/FOX5 in making crime coverage less of a focus of news broadcasts generally.
- WNYW/FOX5 reported on crime less than the three other stations. They averaged just .25 crime stories per day during the 98 weeknight broadcasts covered in the study, as compared to averages of 1.68, 1.21 and 1.12 crime stories reported per day by WABC, WNBC and WCBS, respectively.
- WNYW/FOX5 also reported fewer race-identified crime suspects overall, as compared to the three other stations. They presented a total of 33 race-identified suspects during the study period, as compared to 115, 94 and 88 race-identified suspects reported by WABC, WNBC and WCBS, respectively.

» **An Unsafe Climate: New York City Media Market Distorting the Picture of Black-Perpetrated Crime by Nearly 25 Percentage Points**

The Total Distortion Index represents the degree of exaggeration in the overall media market—the difference between the actual average NYPD arrest rate for Black people (2010-2013) for murder, assault and theft, and the total rate of representation of Black people as suspects or arrestees for those crimes on all four major network affiliates combined. The total Distortion Index across all stations and all crime categories is **24**.

» **An Unfair Climate: New York City News Media Market Erroneously Represents Black People as 75% of All Criminals**

On average across all stations, and among all race-identified suspects of murder, assault and theft presented during the 10/11pm weekly news broadcasts for the period of the study, 75% of the people newscasters present as perpetrators of murder, assault and theft are Black.

» **Missing the Story: Lack of Context and Systemic Analysis in News Reporting on Crime**

During the course of our monitoring, we found that not one of the stations contextualizes their crime coverage with any analysis of the overall justice system. Coverage of crime consistently lacks discussion of factors such as over-targeting of Black people by police, discriminatory incarceration (e.g., Black people receiving harsher sentences for the same crime compared to white people⁶), and the impact of poverty, unemployment and discrimination on crime.

- A repetitive news formula focuses on re-broadcasting police statements unquestioned, and routinely focuses on individual perpetrators of crime, in lieu of discussing systemic factors such as root causes of crime and patterns of racial discrimination.
- In other segments of their reporting, stations cover systemic problems like discriminatory policing on occasion, and when the news cycle warrants the focus; they often present “balanced” discussions of policies like Stop and Frisk and Broken Windows. But when it comes time to crime reporting, the focus repeatedly turns toward the individual perpetrators of crime, with no context at all.

⁶ Rehavi, Marit M. & Starr, S. B. (2012). Racial Disparity in Federal Criminal Charging and Its Sentencing Consequences. Retrieved from: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1985377

» **Downplayed: News Stations Under-Representing White-Perpetrated Crime**

No one deserves to be perceived as a criminal just because of the color of their skin. But there are two sides to the representation story. Although tallying which crime stories were “missing” from coverage during the monitoring period falls outside the scope of this report, the findings we have raise critical questions about which crime stories are under-reported as stories of Black-perpetrated crime are over-reported.

- In particular, based on the arrest rates for white people reported by the NYPD, one area for further study is an investigation into the rate at which news stations in New York City disproportionately downplay white crime.
- If news stations are unfairly and inaccurately priming viewers not to expect stories about white crime, it only serves to harden the inaccurate thesis that viewers carry with them in their hearts and minds, in the form of their implicit bias—that Black people are overly responsible for crime and should be treated with special suspicion.

- Bias is so strong that people will assume a suspect is Black even when they aren't. Research has shown that even when viewers of crime reporting on the news are exposed to a majority of reports of suspect whose race has not been identified, they still fill in the blank and assume the suspect is Black. What's more, when viewers routinely see either a majority of Black suspects or a majority of race-unidentified suspects on the news, they are much more likely to support the police. That is, “the increased sense of threat manifests in support for the authorities responsible for protection⁷.”
- When media-makers get the proportions so egregiously wrong, it reinforces a culture in which the benefit of the doubt is not distributed evenly, which creates a hostile society for some and a privileged society for others. Both are harmful for all of us.

⁷ Dixon, T.L. (2009). “He was a Black guy”: How news' misrepresentation of crime creates fear of Blacks. Retrieved from University of California, Los Angeles website: [http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/comm/dixon/research_files/Dixon%20\(2009\).pdf](http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/comm/dixon/research_files/Dixon%20(2009).pdf)

THE POLICE OVER-TARGET

51% of the people the NYPD arrest for murder, assault and theft are Black ...

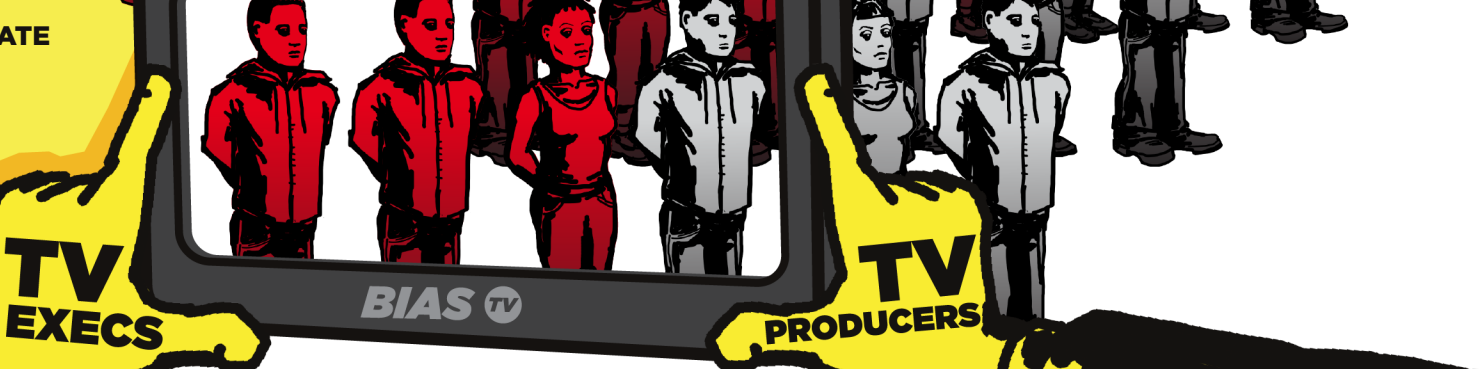
51%



THE NEWS MEDIA OVER-EXAGGERATE

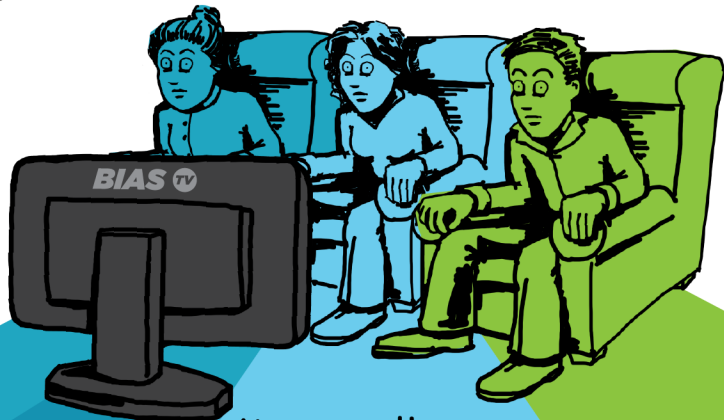
... But 75% of the people local news stations broadcast as responsible for those crimes are Black.

75%



NEWS REPORTERS ARE BROADCASTING BIAS

Over time, inaccurate reporting limits empathy, and causes viewers to develop hostility against Black people.



INACCURACY IS DANGEROUS FOR BLACK PEOPLE

Often unconsciously, people act out their biases, and treat Black people as if the media's stereotypes are real.



THE PATH FORWARD

We know that local news media can do better. And we know that change is feasible for the stations in question. In such a short period of time, we can see how dramatically news station decision-makers have changed their representation of LGBTQ people and issues in news coverage, while owners and media makers across all forms of media have simultaneously changed their practices. It is encouraging to think that this same principle can and should apply to race, and that greater accuracy in representations of race is possible in the very near future. The story of the change in LGBTQ representation has had an impact that all of us would agree is an important part of our story of progress as a country.

The stakes, the need and the responsibility to do far better could not be higher when it comes to race. It is no less possible, and no less valuable. There is a clear path forward, and ColorOfChange hopes to walk alongside news stations in a concerted effort to change practices and ultimately represent Black people fairly and accurately. In the near-term, we hope to work with local news stations in New York to:

- » Raise the standards of accuracy in crime reporting, and implement the practices that facilitate meeting those standards consistently;
- » Expand our criteria for accuracy and fairness in representation to include other facets of reporting;
- » Continue to articulate the importance of tangible improvements in accuracy as a mission-critical priority for responsible news coverage.

In the following two sections, we outline some of the key steps along that path: immediate and necessary improvements in the practice of news reporting, and recommendations for raising standards to the highest level.

When we release our next report, later this year, we are hopeful that all news stations will have made clear and tangible progress toward necessary change.

IMMEDIATE AND NECESSARY IMPROVEMENTS

This Report Card is the first in a series of reports by ColorOfChange that will analyze, expose and address unfair and inaccurate reporting practices that put Black people in harm's way. When we release our next report, later this year, we are hopeful that all news stations will have made clear and tangible progress toward necessary change in the following ways:

- » **STOP disproportionately targeting Black people in crime coverage,** and bring the Black representation rate on TV in line with reality—at the very least, as reflected by average NYPD arrest data. It is essential that every local news station rectifies its Distortion Index.
- » **START being more transparent about the diversity of news station staff.** Consistent with a growing trend in other industries—such as high tech—it is essential that news stations be transparent about who is responsible for making critical and influential content decisions in the newsroom.⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RAISING STANDARDS

In addition to the necessary improvements listed above, our analysis of the monitoring data has led us to a few other recommendations, which we hope these news stations will consider as they strive for excellence in journalism. We hope that many of the news professionals at WABC, WCBS, WNBC and WNYW/FOX5 are already taking the recommendations below into consideration as they make key decisions about content and shape their overall offering as a news service. We are eager to see news stations devoting even greater effort toward implementing and standardizing these practices across their daily reporting.

» Applying a Systematic Analysis to Crime Reporting

Report on local crime activity in the context of the overall justice system and public policy environment, including the context of citywide policing policies. Integrate discussions of factors such as over-targeting of Black people by police, discriminatory incarceration (e.g., Black people receiving harsher sentences for the same crime compared to white people⁹) and the impact on crime of social trends and public policies related to poverty, unemployment and discrimination.

» Ensuring the Representation of a Diversity of Perspectives in Crime Reporting

Ensure that a range of racially, professionally and ideologically diverse perspectives is represented in news reporting on policing practices and other issues related to crime and the criminal justice system.

Solicit and more prominently integrate the perspectives and expertise of local community representatives working to reduce crime in a fair and just manner, such as community leaders, violence interrupters, foundations, faith groups, advocacy groups and artists.

⁸ National Association of Black Journalists. (2012). 2012 NABJ Diversity Census: An Examination of Television Newsroom Management. Retrieved from: http://cymcdn.com/sites/www.nabj.org/resource/resmgr/onrmore.2012_nabj_diversity_.pdf

⁹ Rehavi, Marit M. & Starr, S. B. (2012). Racial Disparity in Federal Criminal Charging and Its Sentencing Consequences. Retrieved from: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1985377

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on research conducted by our partners at Media Matters for America. Over the course of two study periods—the first from May to August 2014, and the second from August to December 2014—Media Matters monitored weekday nightly crime coverage at the four major network news affiliates in New York City. (In this report, ColorOfChange draws upon the findings from the second Media Matters data set.)

MEDIA MATTERS NEWS MONITORING RESEARCH

As reported by Media Matters in their own report,¹⁰ the methodology for the second study is as follows:

“Media Matters watched the late-night news on WCBS, WNBC and WABC (airing at 11 p.m.) and WNYW (airing at 10 p.m.) during weeknights from August 18 (the first weekday after our previous study concluded) through December 31. Media Matters recorded the race, if it could be determined, of suspects who were reported to be connected to crimes committed in New York City’s five boroughs. Any story about a crime committed outside of the city limits was excluded. The race of the suspect was recorded only if it could be determined from a picture shown on the air or if the suspect’s race was explicitly mentioned in the report. Any suspect whose race could not be determined was not included. To maintain consistency with NYPD data, a single suspect may be counted in multiple crime categories if they appear to be connected to multiple crimes during the same report.

This data was then compared to data from the 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013 editions of the New York City Police Department’s *Crime and Enforcement Activity in New York City* report.¹¹ Media Matters used numbers from the reports to calculate the amount of African-Americans arrested as a percentage of people with a known race who were arrested on the following charges:

- Murder and non-negligent manslaughter, for the category ‘murder’
- Robbery, petit larceny and grand larceny, for the category ‘theft’
- Felony assault and misdemeanor assault, for the category ‘assault’

These categories represent the three most-covered crime stories on the four stations.”¹²

The news media are an important starting point for scrutiny, since accuracy in news reporting is a widely accepted standard, and the focus of news media is largely oriented to the public interest.

¹⁰ Media Matters for America. (2015). New York City Television Stations Continue Disproportionate Coverage Of Black Crime. Retrieved from: <http://mediamatters.org/research/2015/03/23/report-new-york-city-television-stations-contin/202553>

¹¹ New York Police Department. Crime and Enforcement Activity in New York City. Retrieved February 2015 from New York City government website: http://www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/html/analysis_and_planning/crime_and_enforcement_activity.shtml

¹² It should also be noted that during this period, there was continuing coverage of a white police officer who was involved in the death of Eric Garner, an African-American man. The data from that story was not included because Garner was not considered a suspect in any of the categories of crimes included in the report and because it was unclear from reporting whether the police officer was considered a suspect in a crime, according to NYPD classifications of suspects. Subsequently, during the period of this report, it was announced that the police officer would not be charged with a crime. In addition, an Asian police officer was involved in the death of Akai Gurley, an African-American man. Data from that story was also not included as it was unclear from reporting if the police officer was considered a suspect in a crime, according to NYPD classifications of suspects.

COLOROFCHANGE NEWS ACCURACY RATINGS

Why New York City?

The over-representation of Black people as criminals is endemic in our media landscape—from entertainment to news, from old media to new media, from national network broadcasts to local affiliate broadcasts. As we study both the extent of this inexcusable and dangerous pattern of practice—and its impact—the news media are an important starting point for scrutiny, since accuracy in news reporting is a widely accepted standard, and the focus of news media is largely oriented to the public interest.

Primarily, we have focused on New York City local news reporting for our first Report Card because it is the largest media market in the country. Network affiliate news reporting reaches an incredibly wide and populous audience—a metro area of nearly 20 million people.

But in addition to the sheer size and impact of this market, New York City communities have a lot at stake in this report. Along with other key communities across the country, New York has been a centerpoint for the national debate on discriminatory policing, racialized police targeting and police violence. Moreover, policies such as Stop & Frisk and Broken Windows have given rise to contentious public policy and electoral debates locally. In fact, the stakes could not be higher, and we hope this report will provide important context and critical findings to inform those debates.

The Report Card

The ColorOfChange News Accuracy Report Card evaluates each of the four major network affiliates in the New York City media market, and grades them on their accuracy. While we recognize that there are TV news sources beyond these four major network affiliates that shape public consciousness in New York City (e.g., the 24-hour stations NY1 and News 12, the Spanish language stations), we narrowed our scope to the major network affiliates as a critical starting point.

The Distortion Index

To understand the scale of over-reporting practices and exaggeration with respect to Black-perpetrated crime in each category (murder, assault, theft), ColorOfChange first looked at the “Distortion Index”—the difference between the actual average NYPD arrest rate for Black people (2010–2013) for murder, assault and theft, and news stations’ rate of representation of Black people as suspects or arrestees for those crimes. Although we used average NYPD data as our point of comparison, we did not account for (and we do not endorse) the racially biased system of policing that consistently drives such high arrest rates. We focused on the degree of exaggeration over and above those arrest rates by local news. The Distortion Index for each station determined the grades assigned by the News Accuracy Report Card.

NEWS ACCURACY REPORT CARD

OVERVIEW

The ColorOfChange News Accuracy Report Card is a study of how accurately news stations are covering the role of Black people in crime. From August to December 2014, ColorOfChange partnered with Media Matters for America to study the representation of Black people in nightly local TV news reporting on crime in New York City. The result is an outrageous level of distortion: news stations report that Black people are involved in murder, assault and theft an average of 75% of the time, which exceeds the actual arrest rates for those crimes by 24 percentage points. (And that's not even factoring in the equally outrageous over-targeting of Black people by police in the first place.) All four stations—with WABC performing the worst of all, followed by WNBC, WCBS and WNYW/FOX5—are failing the most basic responsibility of journalism: to report the news accurately.

The result is an outrageous level of distortion: news stations report that Black people are involved in murder, assault and theft an average of 75% of the time, which exceeds the actual arrest rates for those crimes by 24 percentage points.

GRADING METHODOLOGY

To understand the scale of over-reporting practices and exaggeration with respect to Black-perpetrated crime in each category (murder, assault, theft), ColorOfChange first looked at the “Distortion Index”—the difference between the actual average NYPD arrest rate for Black people (2010-2013) for murder, assault and theft, and the news stations’ rate of representation of Black people as suspects or arrestees for those crimes. Although we used average NYPD data as our point of comparison, we did not account for (and we do not endorse) the racially biased system of policing that consistently drives such high arrest rates. We focused on the degree of exaggeration over and above those arrest rates by local news. The Distortion Index for each station determined the grades assigned by the News Accuracy Report Card, based on the following grade scale:

GRADE SCALE

- » **A:** Fair and Accurate Coverage: Over-reporting on Black-perpetrated crime exceeds the average NYPD arrest rate (2010-2013) by 0-5 percentage points
- » **B:** Unbalanced Coverage: Over-reporting on Black-perpetrated crime exceeds the average NYPD arrest rate (2010-2013) by 6-11 percentage points
- » **C:** Biased Coverage: Over-reporting on Black-perpetrated crime exceeds the average NYPD arrest rate (2010-2013) by 12-17 percentage points
- » **D:** Dangerous Coverage: Over-reporting on Black-perpetrated crime exceeds the average NYPD arrest rate (2010-2013) by 18-23 percentage points
- » **F:** Outright Hostile Coverage: Over-reporting on Black-perpetrated crime exceeds the average NYPD arrest rate (2010-2013) by 24 or more percentage points

NOT TO BE TRUSTED:

DANGEROUS LEVELS OF INACCURACY

NEW YORK CITY LOCAL NEWS STATIONS MAKE BARELY PASSING OR FAILING GRADES

*The ColorOfChange News Accuracy Report Card reflects the level of distortion in crime reporting at each station. The Distortion Index is the difference between the average NYPD arrest rate for Black people (2010-2013) for murder, assault and theft, and the stations' rate of representation of Black people as suspects or arrestees for those crimes. (See the rating scale in our full report.)

MARCH 2015 — NEW YORK CITY

colorofchange.org

NEWS ACCURACY REPORT CARD

Station	Grade	Distortion Index*
WABC "CRIME TV"	F	31
WNBC	D	22
WCBS	D	19
WNYW/FOX5	B	11

NOTES ON CONDUCT

Local news stations are inaccurately reporting crime— over-exaggerating the proportion of Black people involved in crime in New York City.

With WABC being the worst, local stations are unfairly and disproportionately focusing their crime reporting on Black suspects, while also under-reporting on white-perpetrated crime. By doing so systematically, day in, day out, they are reinforcing stereotypes and biases that have serious consequences for Black people in everyday life. They are also failing to satisfy the most basic responsibility of journalism: to report the news accurately.

These stations can and must do better. We are hopeful that each station will make clear and tangible progress toward change by the time of our next Report Card release, later this year.

WHAT DO THE GRADES TELL US?

Not To Be Trusted

» **Unacceptable Grades For Three Out of Four Major Affiliate Local News Stations**

The need for immediate improvement could not be greater—this level of inaccuracy is dangerous. WABC, WCBS and WNBC are either barely passing or outright failing when it comes to accurately reporting on crime. Although ColorOfChange used a fairly generous grading scale in assessing each station's accuracy in crime coverage, two stations received a barely passing grade, and one station failed.

(WNYW/FOX5 received a “B” grade for reasons explained below, which is encouraging in terms of their significantly lesser focus on crime in general, compared to the other stations, but still discouraging in terms of their equally troubling over-representation of Black people in reporting on certain crimes.)

Taken as a whole, the grades demonstrate that all four major network affiliate stations are over-representing Black people as criminals in their crime reporting of murder, assault and theft. Through their distortion, they are grossly and inaccurately promoting the idea that, proportionally, Black people are somehow more violent, threatening and dangerous to society than everybody else.

We are confident that no one who takes part in making the news would want Black people to suffer discrimination so routinely in any of these forms. Yet, this pattern of news reporting does, in fact, encourage it.

Saying vs. Doing

» A Reality Check on Stated Values

Local news media in New York City—owners, directors, producers—are unfairly targeting Black people in their coverage of crime. Though there is likely a rationale behind the business-as-usual practices that lead to this extreme degree of over-representation and disproportionate targeting, the end result is unacceptable. Therefore, we must call those practices into question—and hold decision-makers accountable—for the dangerously inaccurate outcomes they lead to.

We assume that these outcomes run contrary to the stated values, concerns and interests that the staff at these stations vocally support, and even deeply care about. Yet no matter their good intentions, deeply held beliefs, or stated commitments to the community, an entire literature of supporting research is undeniable—the pattern of behavior of singling out Black people and inaccurately over-associating them with criminal activity puts all Black people and communities in harm's way. News directors and reporters have plenty of stories to choose from, yet they are systematically singling out Black people, and downplaying white-perpetrated crime. It has to stop.

The attitudes born of inaccurate crime reporting—unconscious biases forming in the background of one's mind, while watching this type of coverage over and over—can fuel support for an already biased system of policing in New York City. These attitudes serve to justify the outsized presence of law enforcement in communities of color, as well as the policies of surveillance, aggression and abuse that can traumatize these neighborhoods. We already know that in New York City, racially biased policies like Stop and Frisk and Broken Windows

allow police officers (and other authorities in the criminal justice system) to target Black people routinely, unfairly and with grave results. The news media's inaccurate reporting on crime contributes to this larger problem. At best, well-intentioned producers and reporters in New York City are unwittingly playing into the biased system that criminalizes Black people, largely, just for being Black. At worst, news stations are serving as a kind of “public relations arm” for the police, working to justify the targeting and extreme violence that Black people face daily in our communities.

As mentioned above, and as the social science literature supports, the effects range far beyond policing. These biases show up elsewhere in the criminal justice system—adversely influencing prosecutors, judges, jurors and corrections managers and officers. They show up in other institutional contexts—adversely influencing employers in assessment and hiring, teachers managing the classroom, doctors prescribing treatment, landlords and roommates accepting or rejecting candidates, and lawmakers and regulators setting public policy and determining which communities and programs get funding. No less discouraging and painful, they show up in everyday life—when people move away from a Black person in an elevator, cross the street to avoid a group of Black people, or clutch a purse in suspicion and fear. We are confident that no one who takes part in making the news would want Black people to suffer discrimination so routinely in any of these forms. Yet, this pattern of news reporting does, in fact, encourage it.

THE NUMBERS

Based on the monitoring data provided by Media Matters for America for the 2014 study period—tracking news coverage of murder, assault and theft in the weekday evening (10/11pm) news broadcasts of four local stations—we are able to present the following findings and analysis.

Dangerous Levels of Inaccuracy: Outsized Distortion Indexes at Three Out of Four Stations

Three out of four stations over-represented Black people as perpetrators of crime by 19 percentage points or more. The “Distortion Index” represents their degree of exaggeration—the difference between the actual average NYPD arrest rate for Black people (2010-2013) for murder, assault and theft, and the news stations’ rate of representation of Black people as suspects or arrestees for those crimes.

- » **WABC:**
Distorted the representation of Black people as perpetrators of crime by **31 percentage points**
- » **WNBC:**
Distorted the representation of Black people as perpetrators of crime by **22 percentage points**
- » **WCBS:**
Distorted the representation of Black people as perpetrators of crime by **19 percentage points**
- » **WNYW/FOX5:**
Distorted the representation of Black people as perpetrators of crime by **11 percentage points**

Broadcasting Bias: Egregious Over-Representation Rates At Every Station

The over-representation rate describes the proportion of suspects who are identified as Black as a percentage of all race-identified suspects in reporting on all crimes monitored for coverage (murder, assault, theft) during all 10/11pm weekday news broadcasts for the period of the study. The actual average NYPD arrest rate is 51%.

- » **WABC:**
Percent of all race-identified crime suspects identified as Black: **82%**
- » **WNBC:**
Percent of all race-identified crime suspects identified as Black: **73%**
- » **WCBS:**
Percent of all race-identified crime suspects identified as Black: **70%**
- » **WNYW/FOX5:**
Percent of all race-identified crime suspects identified as Black: **62%**

WABC is “Crime TV”— And the Only Station to Receive an “F” Grade

While all of the stations are surprisingly far from fulfilling their responsibility to report the news accurately, WABC is the worst of all.

- » On WABC, an outrageous **82%** of the people presented as perpetrators of the crimes of murder, assault and theft are Black, reinforcing dangerous stereotypes by exaggerating the image of Black people as criminals by 31 percentage points.
- » As a result, WABC is clearly downplaying the role of non-Black people in these crimes, thus further reinforcing the perception among viewers of Black people as having a greater inclination to crime and a greater social responsibility for it.
- » WABC also reports the most on crime overall—an average of **1.68** crime stories per night—thus amplifying the effect.

Outlier: Context for the “B” Grade for WNYW/FOX5

A very low frequency of reporting on crime, as compared to the three other news stations, resulted in WNYW/FOX5 receiving the highest grade for accuracy (“B”) in their crime reporting: the lower sample size means that their overall Distortion Index is better, even if their per crime Distortion Indexes are varied.

- » All of WNYW/FOX5’s coverage of theft in the study period focused on Black suspects—100% of race-identified suspects were Black. But because race-identified theft coverage was minimal overall, and they reported more often and less distortedly on assault, their overall Distortion Index was lower.
- » Lower reporting on crime is a good thing because it works against the perpetuation of society’s generally over-hyped hysteria about crime, in which local news stations are reporting more on crime even while crime rates are actually going down. It also decreases the potential for disproportionate coverage and impact, as there is simply less repetition of inaccurate and harmful stereotypes. We support WNYW/FOX5 in making crime coverage less of a focus of news broadcasts generally.
 - WNYW/FOX5 reported on crime less than the three other stations. They averaged just .25 crime stories per day during the 98 weeknight broadcasts covered in the study, as compared to averages of 1.68, 1.21 and 1.12 crime stories reported per day by WABC, WNBC and WCBS, respectively.
 - WNYW/FOX5 also reported fewer race-identified crime suspects overall, as compared to the three other stations. They presented a total of 33 race-identified suspects during the study period, as compared to 115, 94 and 88 race-identified suspects reported by WABC, WNBC and WCBS, respectively.

An Unsafe Climate: New York City Media Market Distorting the Picture of Black-Perpetrated Crime by Nearly 25 Percentage Points

The Total Distortion Index represents the degree of exaggeration in the overall media market—the difference between the actual average NYPD arrest rate for Black people (2010–2013) for murder, assault and theft, and the total rate of representation of Black people as suspects or arrestees for those crimes on all four major network affiliates combined. The total Distortion Index across all stations and all crime categories is **24**.

An Unfair Climate: New York City News Media Market Erroneously Represents Black People as 75% of All Criminals

On average across all stations, and among all race-identified suspects of murder, assault and theft presented during the 10/11pm weekly news broadcasts for the period of the study, **75%** of the people newscasters present as perpetrators of murder, assault and theft are Black.

Crime Stories: The Frequency of Reporting on Crime

In assessing the stations’ crime coverage, we found that not all stations report on crime with the same frequency. Looking at crime stories that were reported to have occurred in one of the five boroughs of New York City, we found that WABC reports on crime the most, and WNYW/FOX5 the least. We tallied the total number of murder, assault and theft stories for the period to determine a reporting rate for each station per day (out of 98 weeknight broadcasts covered in the study).

- » **WABC:** Reported an average of **1.68 crimes per day**
- » **WNBC:** Reported an average of **1.21 crimes per day**
- » **WCBS:** Reported an average of **1.12 crimes per day**
- » **WNYW/FOX5:** Reported an average of **.25 crimes per day**

KEY OBSERVATIONS

The ColorOfChange News Accuracy Report Card does not itself account for all of the findings uncovered during the monitoring period. Below are some of the most critical observations to emerge from the study that are not covered by the numbers above.

Missing the Story: Lack of Context and Systemic Analysis in News Reporting on Crime

During the course of our monitoring, we found that not one of the stations contextualizes their crime coverage with any analysis of the overall justice system. Coverage of crime consistently lacks discussion of factors such as over-targeting of Black people by police, discriminatory incarceration (e.g., Black people receiving harsher sentences for the same crime compared to white people¹³), and the impact of poverty, unemployment and discrimination on crime.

A repetitive news formula focuses on re-broadcasting police statements unquestioned, and routinely focuses on individual perpetrators of crime, in lieu of discussing systemic factors such as root causes of crime and patterns of racial discrimination.

In other segments of their reporting, stations cover systemic problems like discriminatory policing on occasion, and when the news cycle warrants the focus. They often present “balanced” discussions of policies like Stop and Frisk and Broken Windows. But when it comes time to report on crime, the focus repeatedly turns toward the individual perpetrators of crime, with no context at all.

Downplayed: News Stations Under-Representing White-Perpetrated Crime

No one deserves to be perceived as a criminal just because of the color of their skin. But there are two sides to the representation story. Although tallying which crime stories were “missing” from coverage during the monitoring period falls outside the scope of this report, the findings we have raise critical questions about which crime stories are under-reported, as stories of Black-perpetrated crime are over-reported.

In particular, based on the arrest rates for white people reported by the NYPD, one area for further study is an investigation into the rate at which news stations in New York City disproportionately downplay white-perpetrated crime.

A repetitive news formula focuses on re-broadcasting police statements unquestioned, and routinely focuses on individual perpetrators of crime, in lieu of discussing systemic factors such as root causes of crime and patterns of racial discrimination.

¹³ Rehavi, Marit M. & Starr, S. B. (2012). Racial Disparity in Federal Criminal Charging and Its Sentencing Consequences. Retrieved from: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1985377

If news stations unfairly and inaccurately prime viewers *not* to expect stories about white-perpetrated crime, it only serves to harden the inaccurate thesis that viewers carry with them in their hearts and minds, in the form of their implicit bias—that Black people are overly responsible for crime and should be treated with special suspicion, derision and discipline.

Bias is so strong that people will assume a suspect is Black even when they aren't. Research has shown that even when viewers of crime reporting on the news are exposed to a majority of reports of suspects whose race has not been identified, they still fill in the blank and assume the suspect is Black. What's more, when viewers routinely see either a majority of Black suspects or a majority of race-unidentified suspects on the news, they are much more likely to support the police. That is, "the increased sense of threat manifests in support for the authorities responsible for protection."¹⁴

When media-makers get the proportions so egregiously wrong, it reinforces a culture in which the benefit of the doubt is not distributed evenly, which creates a hostile society for some and a privileged society for others. Both are harmful for all of us.

Stations Show Commitment to Representing Diverse Perspectives in the Community

In general reporting, we saw local stations make an effort to represent a broad spectrum of community voices on the issues and incidents they cover, including those related to policing. For example, in step with news stations across the country, local news stations in New York chose to provide a platform for some of the hundreds of thousands of peaceful protesters to discuss the climate of fear and hostility the police have created, which they feel led to the death of Eric Garner.

Stations Show Commitment to Representing Diversity Behind the Desk

On screen, stations are demonstrating their commitment to delivering the news through a variety of diverse personalities (i.e., on-air talent). Years ago, news stations largely did not reflect the diversity of their viewers—the people living in the city they covered. While some stations' on-air talent pools are more diverse than others—and all stations are lagging behind in representing the vast diversity that exists in New York City—the four stations covered in our study are demonstrating a clear commitment toward attracting and retaining diverse on-air talent.

If stations inaccurately prime viewers not to expect stories about white-perpetrated crime, it only serves to harden their implicit bias—justifying the treatment of Black people with special suspicion, derision and discipline.

¹⁴ Dixon, T.L. (2009). "He was a Black guy": How news' misrepresentation of crime creates fear of Blacks. Retrieved from University of California, Los Angeles website: [http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/comm/dixon/research_files/Dixon%20\(2009\).pdf](http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/comm/dixon/research_files/Dixon%20(2009).pdf)

VOICES OF COLOROFCHANGE MEMBERS

In the comments below, ColorOfChange members in New York City describe how local news reporting practices impact them, as well as the people they care about.

ABC Channel 7 Eyewitness News frequently distorts reporting about Black New Yorkers.

... I no longer watch their newscast.

—T., New York, NY

Most stories detail community news related to crime and other anti-societal acts, especially, if there is a black face/latino face as the frame of reference, with little reference to how people of color suffer at the hands of substandard infrastructures and the basic institutions of the city.

—Steve, Brooklyn, NY

I have a 5 year old and a 12 year old and I've watched them both stare nervously at young black men as they passed down our block in Bed-Stuy despite no one ever harming any of our family. At times my 5 year old has run to me or her big sister upon seeing black males. It's very upsetting and I know negative imagery on tv has had an effect. They are in a home with an amazing, honest, hard working black father but it seems they still need more positive visual examples.

—Lisa, Brooklyn, NY

This is a huge problem in New York and throughout the country! It is as lopsided as our justice system where blacks are highly over represented on drug charges over the actual ratio of users. We need to stop criminalizing skin color! The media plays an important role in the gross misconceptions that dominate society.

—Emilie, New York, NY

Media representations of Black folk won't change until there are Black folk getting hired behind the scenes and working in positions of power. There are so many talented and experienced Blacks in the media industry, but they do not get the creative decision-maker jobs at an appropriate rate.

—Stephanie, Brooklyn, NY

The idea that crime somehow is the entire responsibility of blacks is outrageous, offensive and inaccurate. ...The deaths of Eric Garner, Michael Brown and all the other murdered black men, women and children are the responsibility of irresponsible media reporting. ...It's time the media became responsible in understanding that they influence the public's views, and when that view is inaccurate it can cause deaths of innocent people.

—J., New York, NY

RESEARCH REFERENCES

Beyond the scope of this report, there is a larger story emerging about inaccurate media portrayals of Black people, and the very real-world harm that irresponsible decision-makers in the media can cause. We have identified a few key areas of related inquiry, and cited related research, as important context for this report.

In reference to the set of studies outlined below, it is worth noting that the harmful effects of dehumanizing media for Black women and girls, in particular, is an area of neglect within the available literature. It is our hope that this particular gap in understanding will be rectified in the near future.

OVERVIEW OF CITATIONS BY CATEGORY:

- » Prevalence of Racism in Attitudes and Beliefs
- » Implicit Racial Bias
- » Racial Bias in the Media
- » Racial Bias in the Justice System
- » Local News Viewership Trends

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APPENDIX

SUPPORTING DATA FROM MEDIA MATTERS

I.

**Black Representation in Murder, Assault
and Theft Coverage in New York City
at Local News Stations**

II.

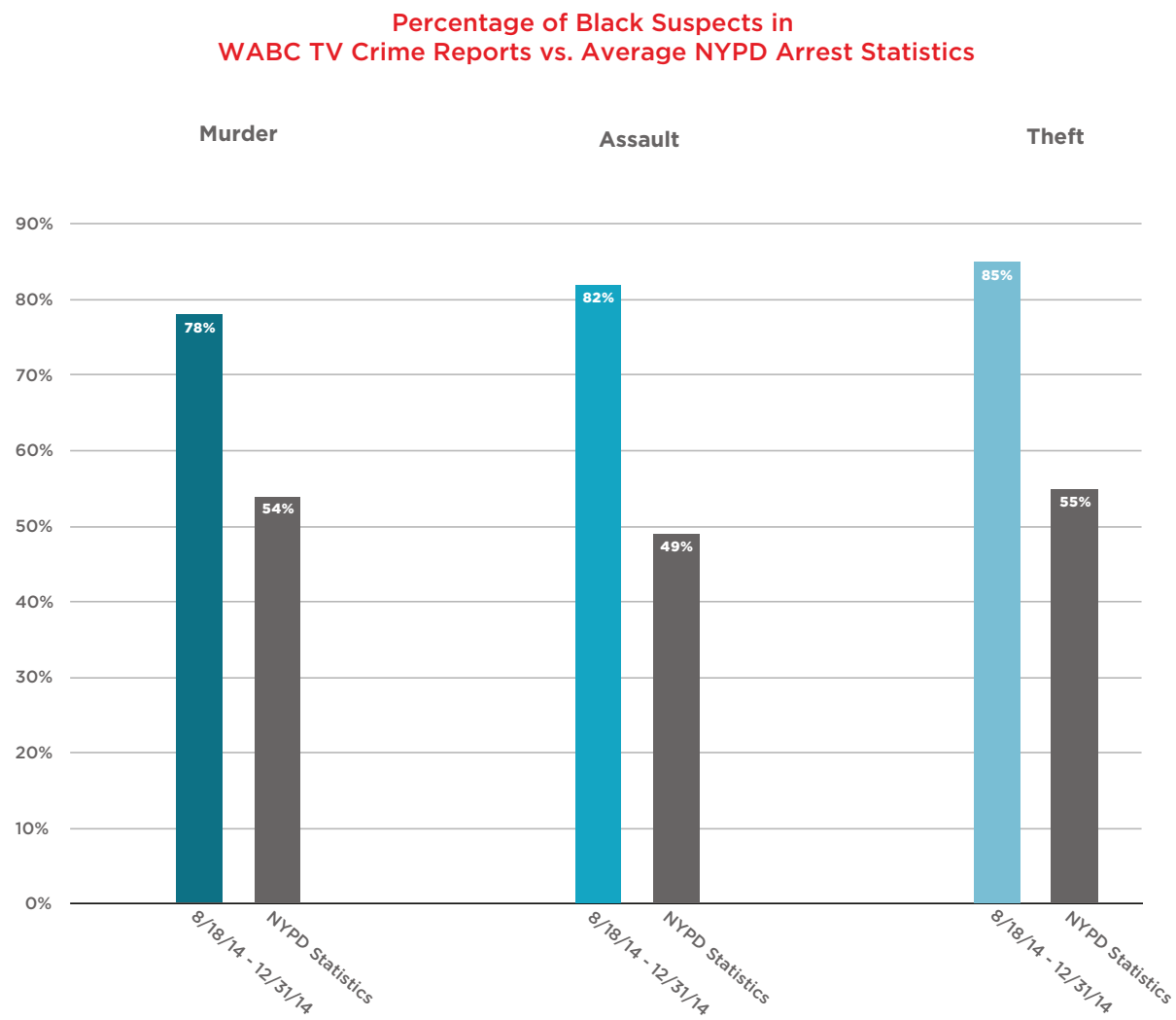
**Comparing Black Representation in New York City
Murder, Assault and Theft Coverage
on Local News Stations**

III.

**Black Representation in New York City
Crime Coverage in Local Media Market**

APPENDIX

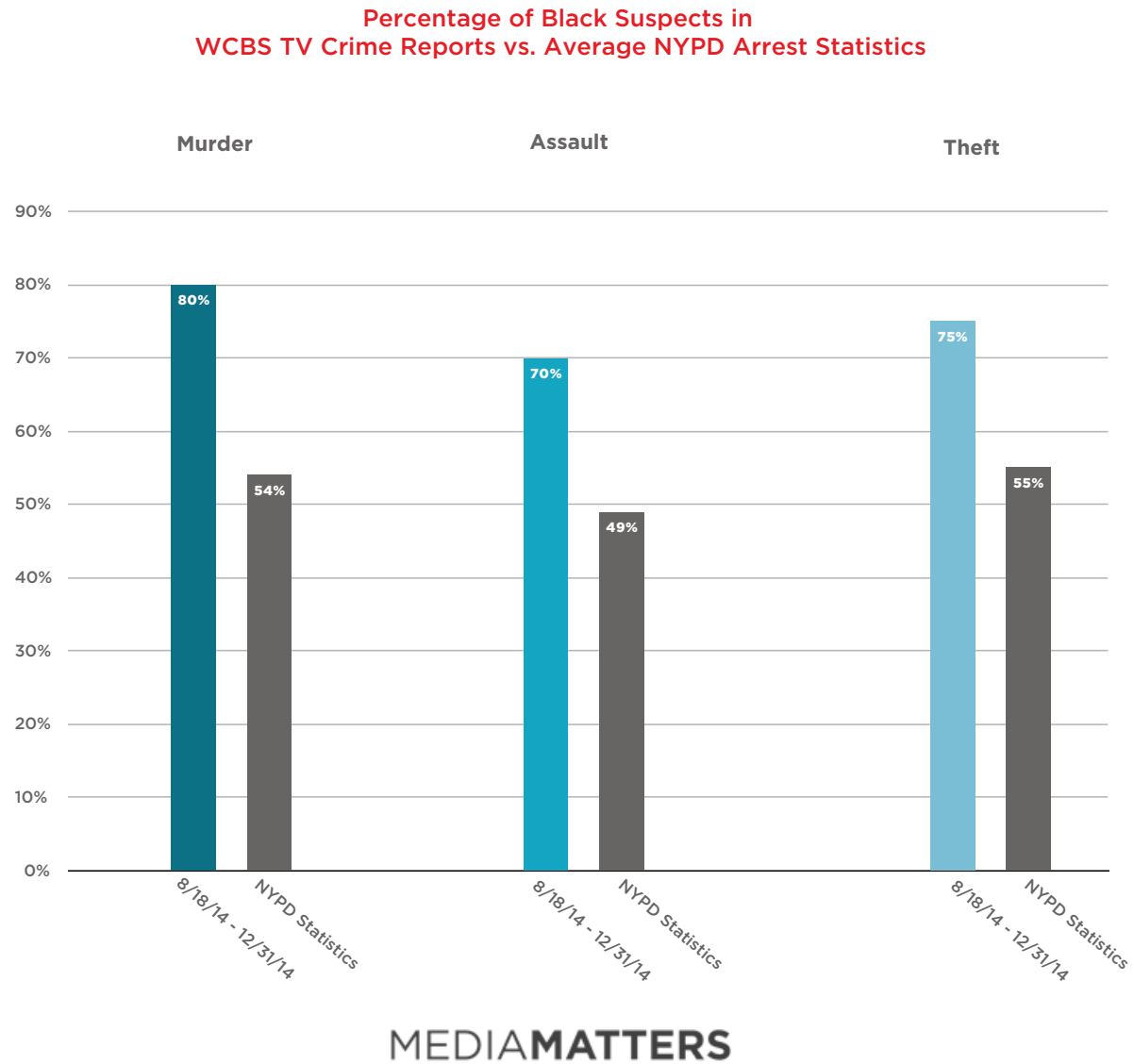
I. Black Representation in Murder, Assault and Theft Coverage in New York City at Local News Stations, Graph 1



MEDIAMATTERS

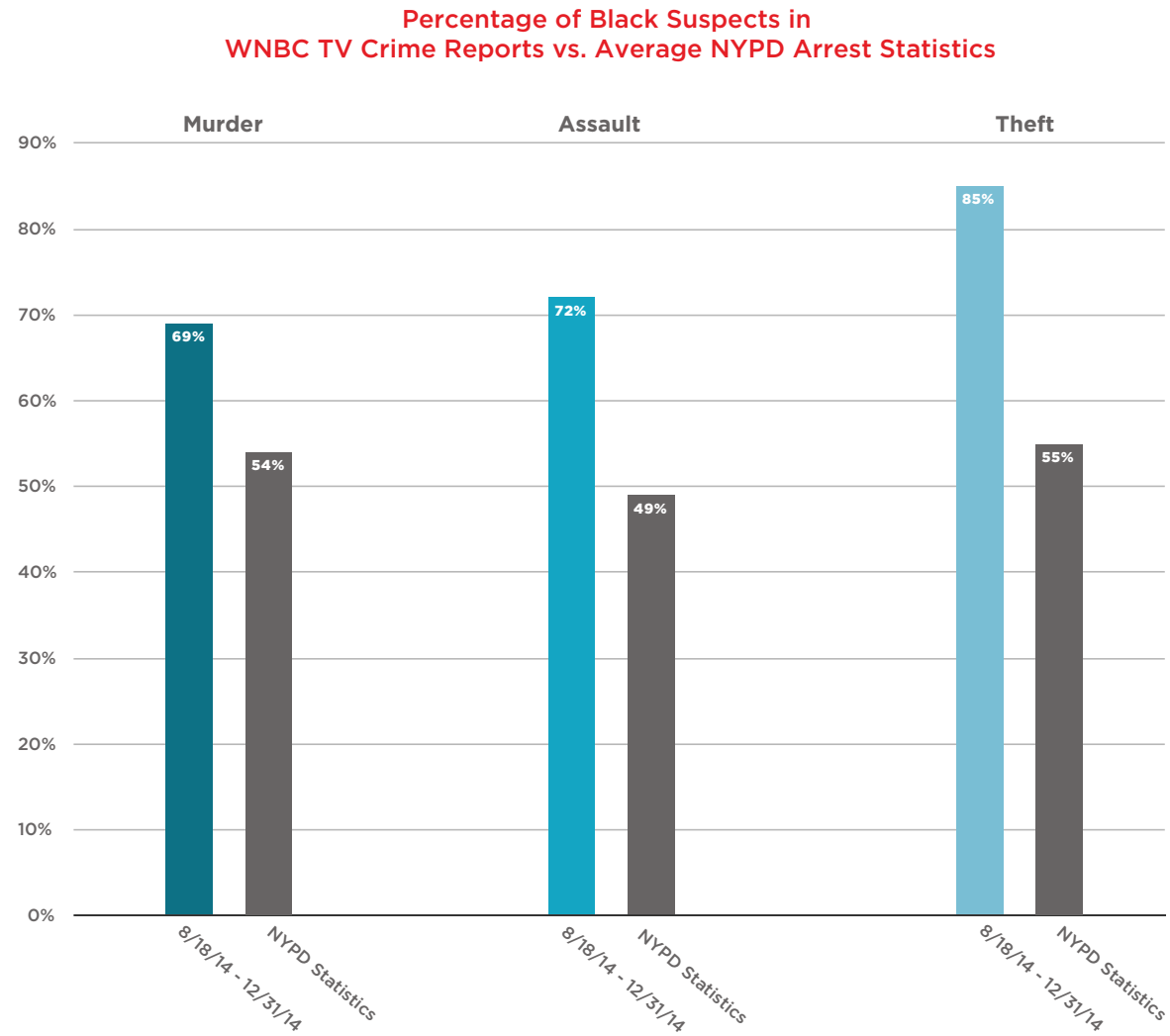
APPENDIX

I. Black Representation in Murder, Assault and Theft Coverage in New York City at Local News Stations, Graph 2



APPENDIX

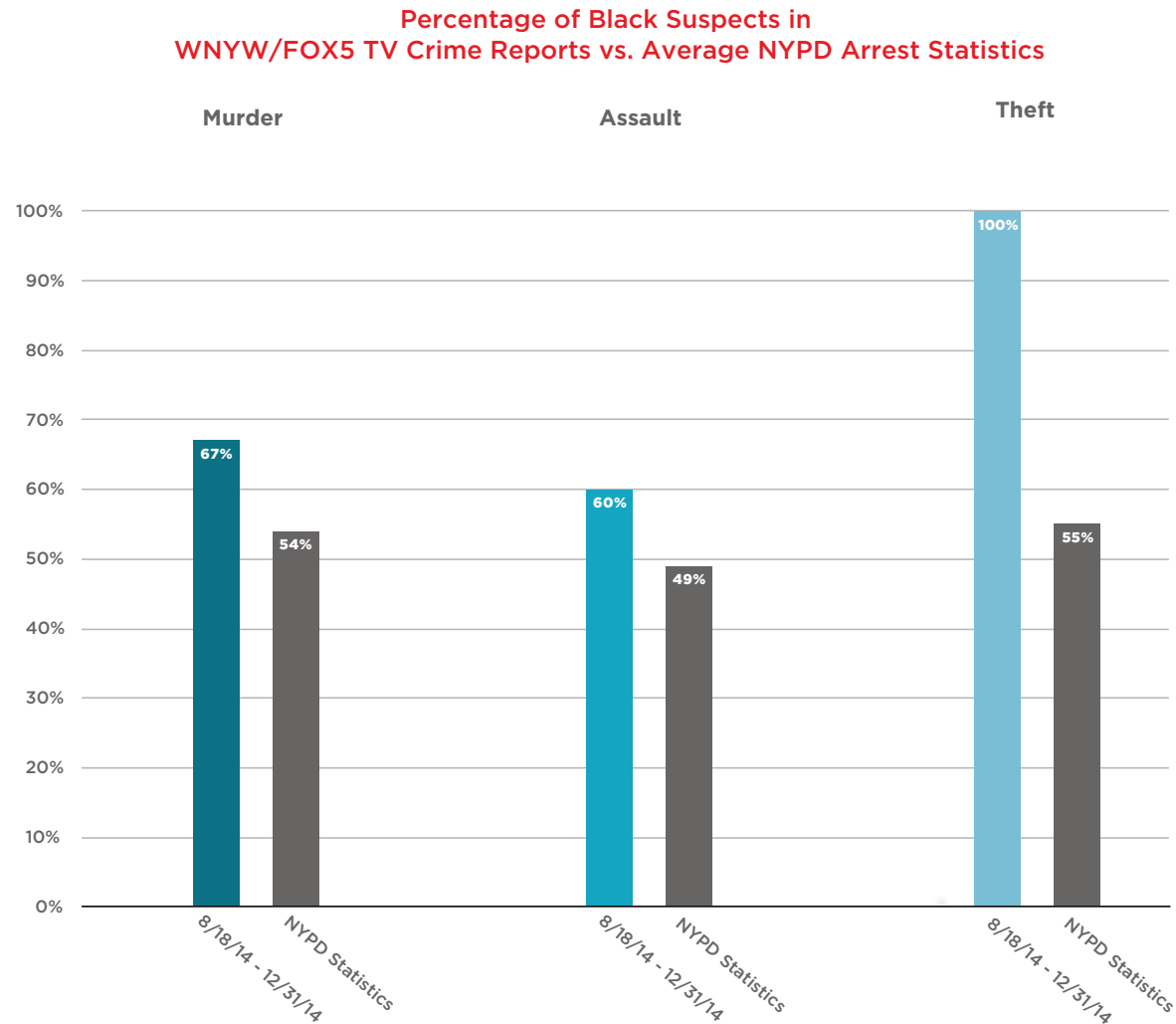
I. Black Representation in Murder, Assault and Theft Coverage in New York City at Local News Stations, Graph 3



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APPENDIX

I. Black Representation in Murder, Assault and Theft Coverage in New York City at Local News Stations, Graph 4

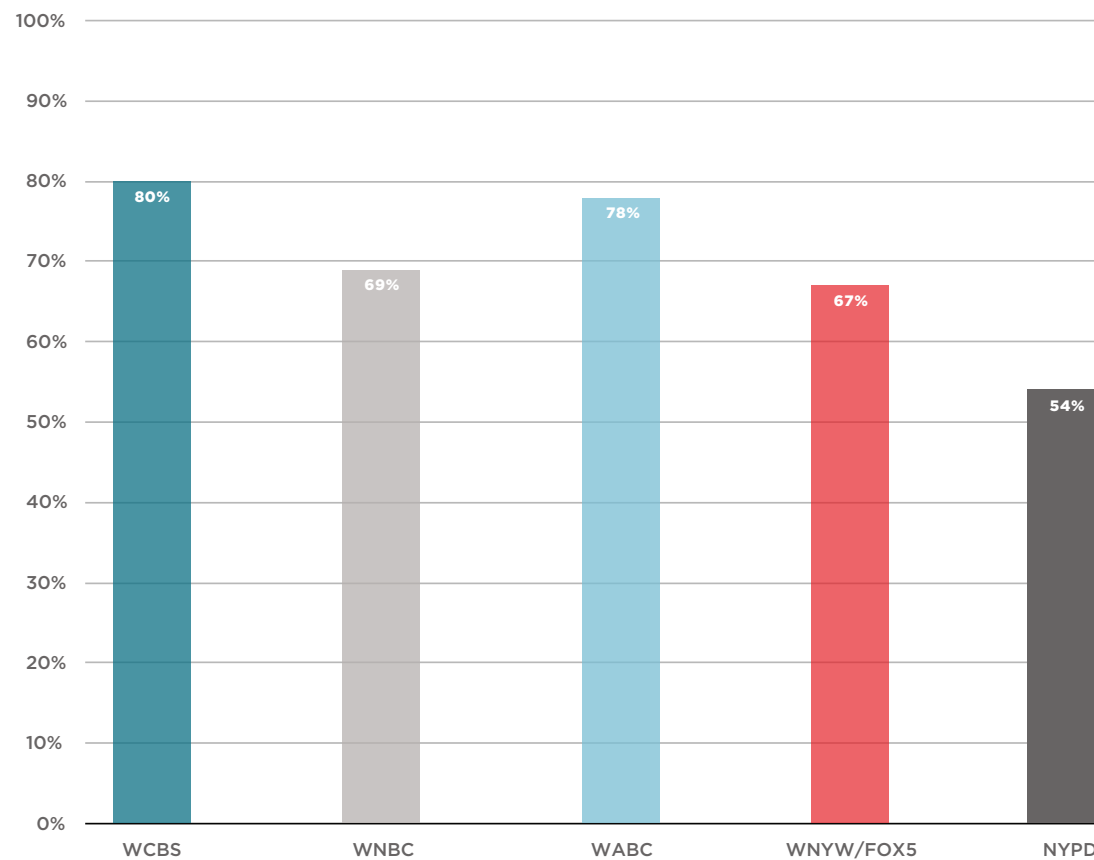


MEDIAMATTERS

APPENDIX

II. Comparing Black Representation in New York City Murder, Assault and Theft Coverage on Local News Stations, Graph 1

Percentage of Black Suspects in
TV Murder Reports vs. Average NYPD Arrest Statistics

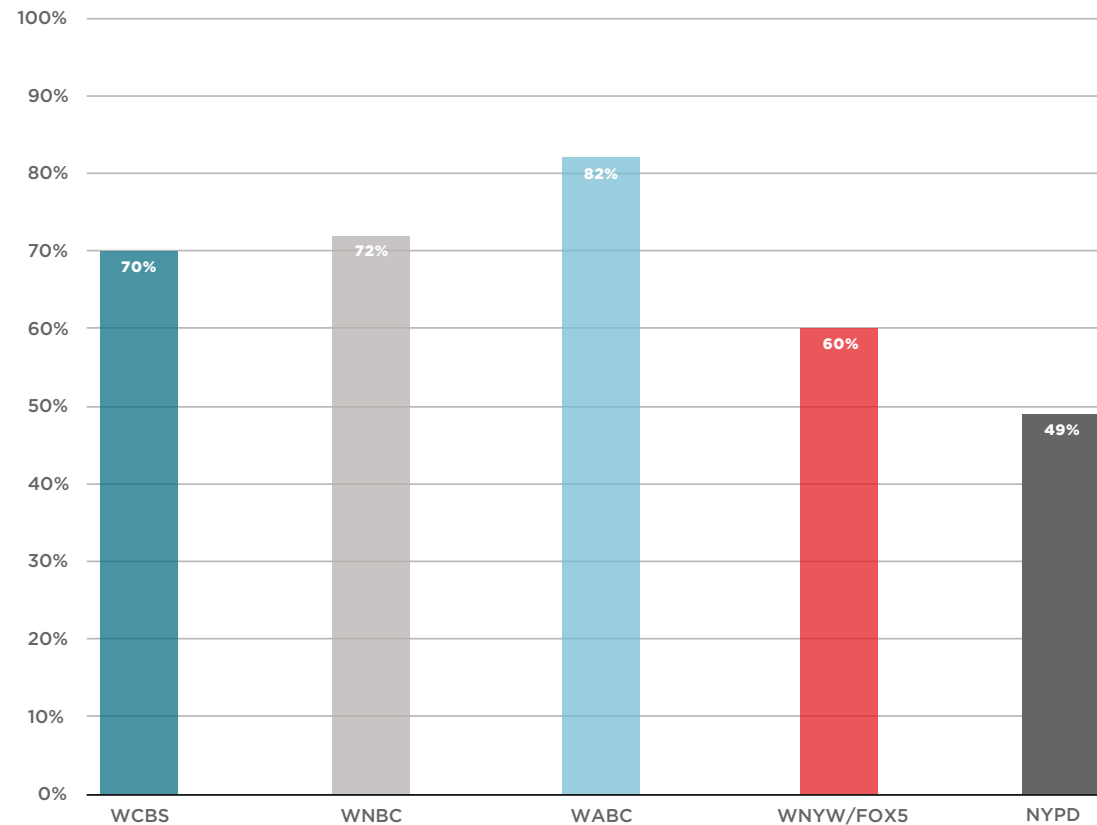


MEDIAMATTERS

APPENDIX

II. Comparing Black Representation in New York City Murder, Assault and Theft Coverage on Local News Stations, Graph 2

Percentage of Black Suspects in
TV Assault Reports vs. Average NYPD Arrest Statistics

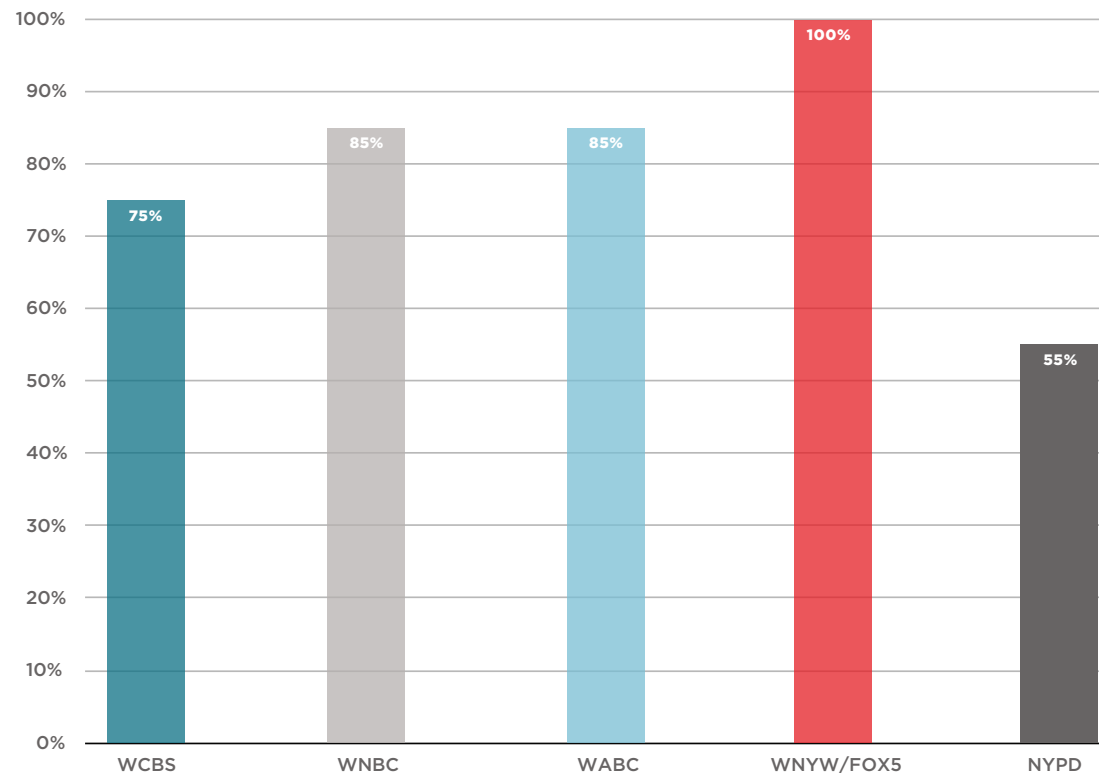


MEDIAMATTERS

APPENDIX

II. Comparing Black Representation in New York City Murder, Assault and Theft Coverage on Local News Stations, Graph 3

Percentage of Black Suspects in
TV Theft Reports vs. Average NYPD Arrest Statistics



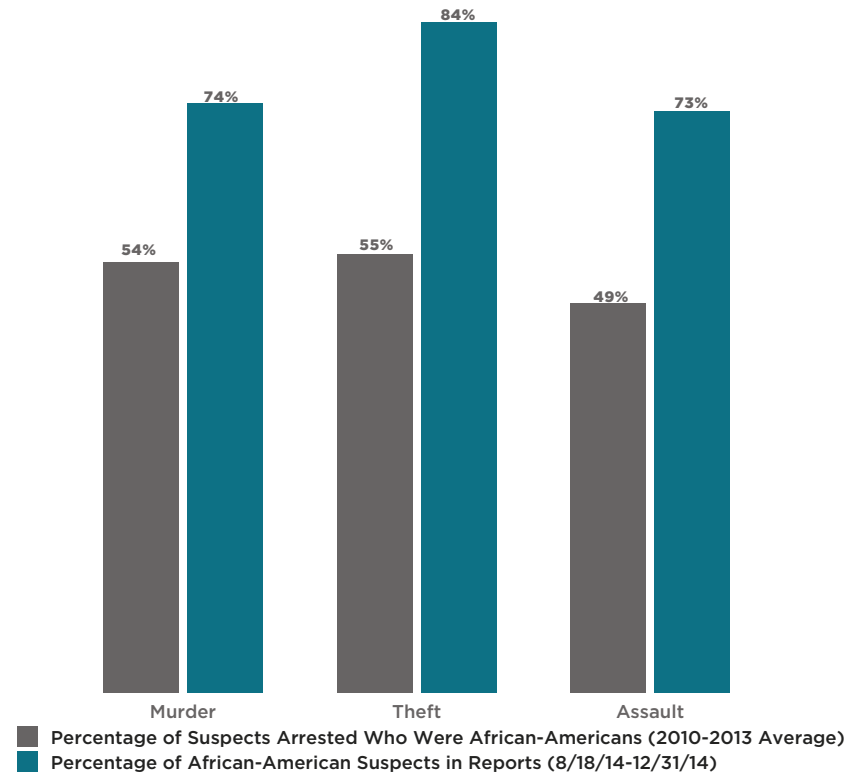
MEDIAMATTERS

APPENDIX

III. Black Representation in New York City Crime Coverage in Local Media Market, Graph 1

Percentage of Black Suspects in TV Crime Reports vs. Average NYPD Arrest Rates

Stations: WCBS, WNBC, WABC, WNYW/FOX5

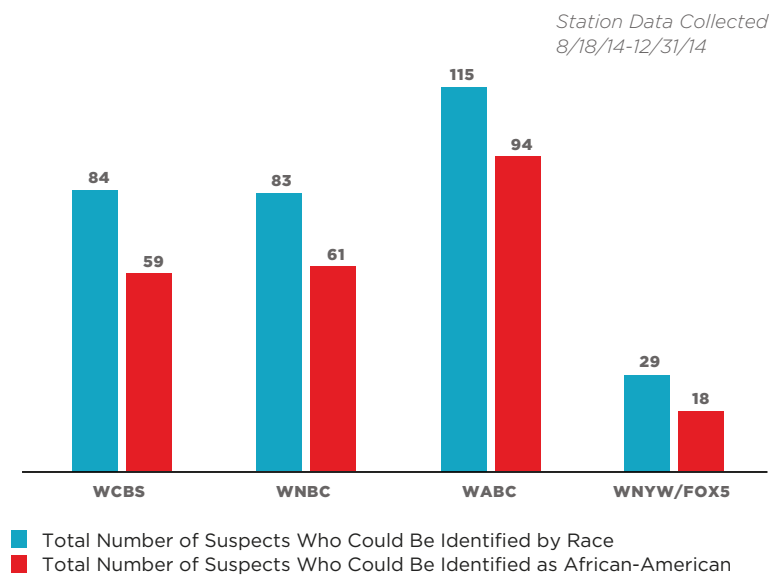


MEDIAMATTERS

APPENDIX

III. Black Representation in New York City Crime Coverage in Local Media Market, Graph 2

Suspects in TV Reports on Murders, Thefts, and Assaults, by Station In New York City



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