

# Recent Police Killings in the United States: A Three-City Comparison

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Police Quarterly  
2018, Vol. 21(2) 196–222  
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DOI: 10.1177/1098611117744508  
journals.sagepub.com/home/pqx



## Abstract

Recent police killings of citizens in the United States have attracted massive coverage in the media, large-scale public protests, and demands for reform of police departments throughout the country. This study is based on a content analysis of newspaper coverage of recent high-profile incidents that resulted in a citizen's death in Ferguson, North Charleston, and Baltimore. We identify both incident-specific content as well as more general patterns that transcend the three cases. News media coverage of similar incidents in past decades tended to be episodic and favored the police perspective. Our findings point to some important departures from this paradigm. Reporting in our three cases was more likely to draw connections between discrete incidents, to attach blame to the police, and to raise questions about the systemic causes of police misconduct. These findings may be corroborated in future studies of news media representations of high-profile policing incidents elsewhere.

## Keywords

police misconduct, news media, race relations, police reform, content analysis

Recent highly publicized cases of police misconduct in the United States have catalyzed street demonstrations throughout the country, the Black Lives Matter movement, the Blue Lives Matter countermovement, a presidential commission on policing, and reform initiatives in several cities (Condon, 2015; “President’s

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Task Force,” 2015; Wilson, 2015). News coverage of police killings has increased as well, partly because of the advent of video recordings of such events, public protests after such incidents, and heated discussions on social media. The result is that police misconduct has experienced an unprecedented “new visibility” (Goldsmith, 2010; Victor & McPhate, 2016).

Researchers have analyzed news media representations of policing incidents that occurred decades ago, but little is known about the nature of such representations today. News consumption has evolved over the years, with cable television and social media helping to disseminate information much more widely and immediately than in the past. Video coverage of police actions has increased as well.<sup>1</sup> Because of these developments, news media coverage of incidents involving the police may be having a larger impact on public perceptions and official responses than reporting of similar events in the past. Moreover, publicized incidents of police misconduct can damage the reputation of police not only in the city where an incident occurs but also nationwide, and this is especially true when multiple events cluster in a compressed timespan—“when one dramatic incident occurs shortly after another [and] bears strong resemblance to another case” (Lawrence, 2000, p. 103). It has been argued that “this contamination-by-association is occurring today in a cumulative manner—with each incident pollinating subsequent ones—in part because activists and the media are drawing connections between them” (Weitzer, 2015, p. 475). A 2014 poll reported that a sizeable minority of Americans (43%) believed that the police killings of Michael Brown (in Ferguson) and Eric Garner (in New York) were not “isolated incidents” but instead “a sign of broader problems in the treatment of African Americans by police” (Washington Post/ABC News, 2014). Two years later, the proportion taking the “broader problems” view had grown to 60% (54% of Whites, 79% of Blacks), arguably because of an accumulation of publicized incidents since the Brown and Garner killings in 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2017).

The impact of news media representations on public perceptions is important. Since most people have limited direct contact with police officers, information about the police comes largely from the media, including traditional news sources whose reporting is now often redistributed through social media (Pew Research Center, 2016). The public does not necessarily adopt the news media’s version of reality, but by setting the agenda for what is defined as news and selectively presenting content, the news media strongly influences public perceptions of events and issues (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The pivotal role of the media has been demonstrated in studies documenting enhanced support for the police among people who watch reality-TV programs, such as *Cops*, that present officers in a sympathetic light (Eschholz, Blackwell, Gertz, & Chiricos, 2002) as well as erosion of public confidence in the police after well-publicized incidents of police misconduct (Kaminski & Jefferis, 1998; Sigelman, Welch, Bledsoe, & Combs, 1997). And these outcomes are especially

likely for people who are frequently exposed to media representations of the police. One survey found that the more a citizen read newspaper accounts of an incident involving drunk Indianapolis police officers who beat two citizens, the greater the likelihood that these readers would deem the officers guilty (Chermak, McGarrell, & Gruenewald, 2006). Similarly, a national study found an association between an individual's perceptions of the police and his or her exposure to news of police misconduct: Individuals heavily exposed to such reporting were more likely to view several types of police misconduct as widespread and to endorse a host of reforms in policing (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006).

News coverage, especially when it includes video recordings or public protests after an incident, can also affect police officers themselves. Officers typically rationalize and justify their use of force, whether excessive or not (Waegel, 1984; Weisburd, Greenspan, Hamilton, Bryant, & Williams, 2001), but they may also alter their behavior in response to public criticism of the police or if they feel they are being monitored. Officers may avoid certain types of encounters altogether or may consciously temper their treatment of the citizens they interact with (Simonson, 2016). A few studies document the latter. Half of the officers interviewed in a recent Canadian study said that, because of the potential for video recording by citizens, they now use force less often and use a lesser amount of force in specific encounters; and three quarters reported other behavioral changes for fear of being caught on camera (Brown, 2016). In Britain, two thirds of the officers interviewed in six towns said that the presence of CCTV cameras in public places made them "more careful" in conforming to procedural requirements while on patrol and anxious about their conduct being scrutinized after the fact; some officers stated that the cameras made them more reluctant to use force against citizens (Goold, 2003). Regarding the effect of controversial incidents, a survey of 7,917 police officers across the United States reported that the vast majority of officers believe that the recent fatal encounters with citizens and the public outcry generated by them has made their job harder (86%), that officers are now more concerned about their safety (93%), and that officers are less willing to stop and question suspicious people or to use force when it is called for (72%; Pew Research Center, 2017). At the same time, half of these officers say that wearing body cameras will make officers act more appropriately when dealing with the public. This view received empirical support in randomized field experiments in Rialto, CA, and Orlando, FL, which found that equipping officers with body cameras correlated with reductions in the use of force as well as decreased complaints from the public (Ariel, Farrar, & Sutherland, 2014; Jennings, Lynch, & Fridell, 2015).

News media representations of the police are therefore important in multiple ways: They can influence public perceptions, catalyze popular demands for reform, affect the conduct of at least some officers, and help generate initiatives to curb police misconduct. But these outcomes depend in part on the *nature* of news media coverage. This article examines reporting on high-profile events in

three cities, identifying (a) the main thematic similarities across the cities and (b) the issues on which reporting varies by city, suggesting local contextual explanations for the incident.

## News Media Constructions of Policing Issues

Decades of research shows that political elites are the primary definers of events and issues covered in the mass media. Journalists typically perceive government officials as the most credible authority in their domain and rely heavily on them as sources (Bennett, 1996; Cook, 1998). This is especially the case in crime and justice reporting, where police officials typically have a monopoly on key information. Certain reporters are assigned to cover local crime stories—the “crime beat”—and develop symbiotic relationships with police officials. Some reporters come to identify with police values and may thus distort news stories in favor of the police (Chermak & Weiss 2005; Ericson, 1995; Lawrence, 2000). At the same time, journalists tend to marginalize the voices of nonofficials due to the latter’s lack of demonstrable “credibility” or lack of access to reporters (Lawrence, 2000, p. 55; Paletz & Entman, 1981).

News media coverage rarely focuses on larger patterns or causes of police misconduct (Lawrence, 2000; Pollack & Allern, 2014). Instead, reporting tends to be event oriented and fragmentary:

The news doesn’t often address questions such as the prevalence of police violence, patterns in how it occurs, or the acceptability of police tactics in fighting crime and maintaining order . . . Not only is most news about police use of force highly episodic in its focus. Most use-of-force incidents that are reported in the news disappear from the news pages quickly. (Lawrence, 2000, p. 45)

Likewise, the causes of police brutality are typically *individualized*—either blaming a “rogue cop” or the citizen (for provoking the officer)—rather than being defined as outcomes of systemic problems in a police department or larger societal conditions (Lawrence, 2000; Pollack & Allern, 2014). Finally, media reporting on the police is influenced by the core imperative of crime control: Officers are involved in dangerous work and sometimes have to make split-second decisions, which may give them the benefit of the doubt in ambiguous situations. Therefore, it is not just the fact that journalists are occupationally dependent on official sources, but also the widespread fear of crime and diffuse public support for punitive responses that helps to privilege the police version of events when covered by the news media.

Some scholars argue that skewed media coverage of police killings promotes the *normalization* of police violence. In her content analysis of *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* articles published between 1985 and 1994, Regina Lawrence (2000) found that police use of force was “typically normalized in

news that presents it as a necessary and appropriate response to a violent world” (p. 60). Similarly, fully 70% of a sample of 105 newspaper articles on police use of deadly force, published between 1997 and 2000, provided justifications for the killings and presented officers as acting reasonably under the circumstances (Hirschfield & Simon, 2010). Of course, news stories in the past occasionally departed from this narrative, particularly if a video recording or other compelling evidence existed. In these instances, “a sensational police killing can shift patterns of symbolic construction in police violence news, even if only temporarily” (Hirschfield & Simon 2010, p. 156). In these cases, police conduct is reframed as problematic and the media may give voice to nonofficial sources. Examples of this include the Rodney King beating in Los Angeles in 1991 and the killing of Amadou Diallo in New York in 1999 (Hirschfield & Simon, 2010; Lawrence, 2000). But this kind of critical coverage is rare, according to the literature.

We know of no research on how the news media have portrayed *recent* instances of police violence. The current study explores this question by examining local newspaper coverage of three recent highly publicized killings: Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; Walter Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina; and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland. Each incident received massive coverage by both local and national news organizations. Two *research questions* drive the study: First, what are the main types of content appearing in newspaper coverage of these incidents across the three cities? Do the patterns of episodic coverage, individualization, and normalization—documented in earlier studies—still predominate today? Second, on which content issues does coverage vary by city? The former question allows us to identify policing issues that transcend city context and may reflect broader constructions of policing problems throughout the nation, whereas the latter question allows us to contextualize what appear to be city-specific issues that shape each event.

### **The Three Incidents and Cities**

Michael Brown, an 18-year-old unarmed Black man, was shot and killed by a White police officer, Darren Wilson, during a confrontation in Ferguson, MO, on August 9, 2014. The incident was not video recorded, but the authorities subsequently released video footage suggesting that Brown had engaged in a robbery at a convenience store shortly before being stopped by Officer Wilson for walking in the center of a street. Days of street protests and rioting followed the initial media reporting on the incident, events that showed a heavily militarized police force that was later augmented by the National Guard. A grand jury decided not to indict Wilson, and the Justice Department conducted its own investigation in March 2015, clearing Wilson of civil-rights violations.

The second incident occurred in North Charleston, SC. On April 4, 2015, a White officer, Michael Slager, stopped a 50-year-old Black man, Walter Scott,

because of his car's faulty brake light. During the encounter, Scott ran away and shortly thereafter a physical altercation ensued between the two men, which included struggling over the officer's Taser. As Scott fled, Slager fired his handgun eight times, hitting Scott in the back five times. A bystander's recorded the shooting on his cell phone—video that contradicted Slager's account of the shooting and resulted in him being fired and tried for murder. A mistrial was declared after the jury deadlocked in the state trial in late 2016. In the subsequent federal trial in May 2017, Slager pleaded guilty to a civil rights charge and currently awaits sentencing.

On April 12, 2015, just 8 days after Scott's shooting, Freddie Gray was arrested in Baltimore, MD, for allegedly possessing an illegal knife. A bystander video recorded part of Gray's encounter with six officers, showing him being dragged to a police van and having difficulty standing on his own. The officers failed to provide medical attention to Gray, who had asthma, after he requested an inhaler and appeared to have trouble breathing (Cohn, 2015). The officers failed to secure Gray inside the van, and reports in the media speculated that the driver may have deliberately given Gray an injurious "rough ride," something Baltimore police had been accused of doing in the past. During the ride, Gray fell into a coma and died a week later. After the medical examiner ruled Gray's death a homicide, the State's Attorney for Baltimore filed charges against the six officers—charges that include illegal arrest, assault, and second-degree murder. Four of the officers were prosecuted but not convicted, and the two remaining cases were dropped by the prosecution in July 2016. One month later, the Justice Department issued a scathing report on Baltimore's police department, which detailed patterns of excessive force and racially biased policing (Department of Justice [DOJ], 2016). Video cameras have now been installed in the city's police vans.

To contextualize our findings, Table 1 provides selected demographics on the three cities and their police departments. African Americans have substantially higher poverty and unemployment rates than Whites, roughly double or triple in each city. The cities also have plurality- or majority-Black populations; yet, the police departments in Ferguson and North Charleston were overwhelmingly composed of White officers (83% and 81%, respectively), while Baltimore's was more mixed, with a slight majority of White officers. At the time of the incident, the police chiefs in Ferguson and North Charleston were White and Baltimore's was African American. All three police chiefs have now been replaced.

## **Data and Methods**

This study is based on a content analysis of newspaper articles from the cities where the events occurred. Therefore, the units of analysis are newspaper articles. The articles consist of straight news reporting, editorials, op-eds, and

**Table 1.** Selected City Characteristics.

	Ferguson, MO	North Charleston, SC	Baltimore, MD
Population	21,151	102,143	622,271
Racial composition			
Whites	31%	38%	30%
Blacks	66%	47%	63%
Hispanics	1%	11%	5%
Police department composition			
Whites	83%	81%	51%
Blacks	11%	16%	40%
Hispanics	4%	3%	7%
Poverty rate			
Whites	9.7%	15.8%	14.8%
Blacks	27.4%	32.4%	28.3%
Hispanics	13.8%	30.3%	25.5%
Unemployment rate			
Whites	6.5%	7.8%	7.1%
Blacks	15.7%	16.4%	18.5%
Hispanics	2.9%	7.7%	9.7%

Sources: U.S. Census, 2014 American Community Survey. Figures on police department composition are from Bureau of Justice Statistics, Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics, 2013 survey, reported in *Governing*, September 2015.

Associated Press articles published in these newspapers. The three incidents were selected because they involved a highly publicized police killing of a citizen, occurred within a fairly narrow time span (8 months), and garnered substantial local and national news coverage.<sup>2</sup> Our sources were the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* for Michael Brown in Ferguson, the *Post and Courier* for Walter Scott in North Charleston, and the *Baltimore Sun* for Freddie Gray in Baltimore. The timespan of the articles used for this research begins on August 9, 2014 (the day after Brown's death), and concludes on September 30, 2015. A total of 578 articles were collected: 267 from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 119 from the *Post and Courier*, and 192 from the *Baltimore Sun*. The fact that the three cases generated this much coverage at the local level is noteworthy in itself.

Lexis-Nexis was used to collect articles from the *Baltimore Sun* and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and, because Lexis-Nexis does not contain *Post and Courier* articles, they were accessed through an online subscription. Key search terms consisted of "police" and the full name of the deceased person (hereafter, "victim"). To capture all articles pertaining to the incidents, a search limited

to the full name of the victim (without “police”) was also conducted in order to include other relevant articles. Finally, because the names of the victims may not have been available for the initial articles, a search using only “police” was conducted for the first 2 weeks after each incident was first reported. All articles were sorted by date to eliminate duplicates.

Once the articles were collected, we constructed a list of major codes and subcodes, facilitated with the qualitative software program Atlas/ti.<sup>3</sup> These are grounded, inductive codes that emerged from the narratives, not superimposed *a priori*. Major codes are defined as *types or categories of content* (e.g., “Causes of Incident”) and subcodes as subsidiary items under the rubric of a major code (e.g., “Victim Precipitation”; see Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We recorded the presence or absence of codable content in each article and allowed for multiple mentions of subcodes within each major code. Codes were tagged to each article if they were mentioned (yes = 1) at any time within the article; all other codes were marked as “not mentioned” (no = 0). Additionally, close attention was given to specific aspects of each newspaper’s coverage. Coding yielded 7 major codes and 29 subcodes.

To assess the reliability of the coding process, we drew a 10% random sample of *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles ( $N=27$ ). We then enlisted a criminology graduate student, trained in the initial coding scheme, to code the randomly selected articles, using the major codes and subcodes that emerged from the authors’ coding procedure. Inter-coder agreement occurred in 99% of the coded observations ( $N=972$ ) in the subset of articles. The amount of agreement is likely due to the rigorous training the second coder underwent.

The analytic plan was twofold. We used a univariate (i.e., descriptive) approach to identify the prevalence of coded content both within and across all three incidents. We then conducted Pearson’s chi-square tests to examine the bivariate relationships between the codes and the specific incidents. The Pearson’s chi-square tests allowed us to identify statistically significant differences between the prevalence of major codes and subcodes for the three incidents.

## Findings

The newspapers routinely identified the victims in Ferguson and North Charleston as unarmed Black males and the officers involved as White males. For Baltimore, media reporting varied in whether it characterized Freddie Gray as being “armed” (a knife in his pocket) and whether it mentioned the mixed racial makeup of the six officers involved (three White and three Black). In addition to these baseline patterns, our major codes helped us identify the types of content or topics mentioned frequently in newspaper coverage across the three incidents. Given the different circumstances of the three cases, these overarching themes point to issues that transcend city context and may reflect broader constructions of the problem of police misconduct throughout the nation.



**Table 2.** Major Codes and Subcodes by Total Sample and City.

Major code/subcode	Total sample (%) (N = 578)	St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Brown) (%) (N = 267)	Post and Courier (Scott) (%) (N = 119)	Baltimore Sun (Gray) (%) (N = 192)	Chi-squared significance level
Incident-specific issues					
Causes of incident	27.7	25.5	44.5	20.3	***
Victim precipitation	15.4	9.4	31.1	14.1	***
Racism	5.7	7.5	7.6	2.1	*
Rotten apple	5.7	6.4	10.0	2.1	**
Poverty/inequality/ drug crimes	2.8	1.9	1.7	4.7	NS
Police policies	2.0	1.1	5.0	1.6	*
Lack of police training	1.7	1.9	2.5	1.0	NS
Lack of diversity	0.9	1.5	0.8	0.0	NS
Lack of officer accountability	0.9	0.8	0.8	1.0	NS
Responsibility for incident	36.5	31.1	52.1	34.4	***
Blaming police	32.5	25.1	50.4	31.8	***
Blaming victim	14.5	20.2	10.1	9.4	**
Questioning the investigation	26.0	25.8	9.2	36.5	***
Structural factors					
Police issues	54.2	50.6	53.8	59.4	NS
Police violence	40.0	33.3	41.2	48.4	**
Police-community relations strained	16.6	18.4	13.5	16.2	NS
Accountability deficiency	15.0	12.4	23.5	13.5	*
Defending police (in general)	10.0	9.4	8.4	12.0	NS
Policing is hard job	3.6	3.8	3.4	3.7	NS
Racial issues	42.6	51.3	44.5	29.2	***
Institutional racism	17.8	19.9	19.3	14.1	NS
Racial profiling	17.5	20.6	22.7	9.9	**
Racism (other)	16.8	29.2	2.5	8.3	***
Racial disparity	13.7	16.1	19.3	6.8	**

(continued)

**Table 2.** (continued)

Major code/subcode	Total sample (%) (N = 578)	St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Brown) (%) (N = 267)	Post and Courier (Scott) (%) (N = 119)	Baltimore Sun (Gray) (%) (N = 192)	Chi-squared significance level
Denial that racism exists	1.6	2.3	1.7	0.5	NS
Poverty/economic inequality	15.4	21.4	8.4	11.5	***
Reforms	46.2	52.4	61.3	28.1	***
Body cameras	21.1	15.4	51.3	10.4	***
Reform revenue intake	11.8	22.5	4.2	1.6	***
Strengthen police-community relations	10.0	12.0	5.0	10.4	NS
Training on use-of-force	9.7	13.5	4.2	7.8	**
Civilian review board	9.2	13.9	8.4	3.1	***
Police policies (other)	5.5	8.6	2.5	3.1	*
Diversify police force	4.0	6.0	0.8	3.1	*
Decarceration	2.2	1.9	0.8	3.7	NS
Reintegrate ex-offenders	1.4	0.8	0.0	3.1	*

Note. NS = Not statistically significant.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 2 displays proportions for coded content for the total sample as well as for each incident covered by the three newspapers.<sup>4</sup> Univariate and bivariate results are presented later, along with illustrative quotations from the articles. We organized our seven major codes under two rubrics: *Incident-Specific Issues* and *Structural Factors*.

***Incident-Specific Issues***

Studies have shown that newspaper coverage of police violence in the past has overwhelmingly centered on the specific incident per se. The current study found that much of the recent coverage fits this pattern. The rubric Incident-Specific

Issues consists of two major types of content: Causes of Incident and Responsibility for Incident.

*Causes of incident.* As briefly mentioned earlier, more than one quarter (27.7%) of articles mentioned Causes of the Incident, with notable variation in the appearance of this major code across the three incidents: 25.5% *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 44.5% *Post and Courier*, and 20.3% *Baltimore Sun* ( $p < .001$ ). Eight subcodes were identified as reasons for the killings, and three appeared with notable frequency in the total sample: Victim Precipitation (15.4%), Racism (5.7%), and Rotten Apple (5.7%).

Victim Precipitation is when a citizen allegedly behaved in a way that precipitated or escalated the incident and resulted in the police officers using force against them—thus taking the onus off the officer. Mentions of the victim resisting the officer, attacking the officer, fleeing the scene, or brandishing a weapon were coded as Victim Precipitation. Victim precipitation accounted for 15.4% of the 578 articles. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* published articles that explained the killing resulting from a physical altercation between Officer Wilson and Brown. Articles also stated that after being shot, Brown's body lurched forward as if he were going to charge at Wilson. As for *Post and Courier* articles, nearly all mentions of victim precipitation involved resistance by Scott: He initially fled the scene, was caught and struggled with the officer, and fled a second time. The *Baltimore Sun* reported that Gray ran when he saw one of the officers. Victim precipitation as a contributor to the killing was mentioned most frequently in *Post and Courier* articles on Scott (31.1%).

Racism was depicted as a cause of the incident in roughly 6% of all articles. This theme emerged when the newspapers cited racism, either on the part of the individual officer or entire police department, as an explanation for the incident. Some racism content appeared bluntly, such as a woman who declared, "Racism killed Brown" (quoted in Deere, 2014, p. A1). Another article quoted the president of North Carolina's National Association for the Advancement of Colored People chapter, William Barber: "All of these things should force us to recognize that we still have systemic racism"; the op-ed author agreed and added that the Scott incident "proved indisputably that racial profiling is very real, that in America a Black man can be killed for having a faulty brake light on his car" (Hicks, 2015b).

The Rotten Apple subcode refers to the police officers involved in an incident as aberrant within the police department. The cause of the incident was due to the officer's alleged character or bias. This subcode was present in nearly 6% of all articles. In the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Officer Wilson was portrayed as callous and unprofessional. One article reported that Wilson "pulled up and ordered [Brown and his friend] to 'get the F on the sidewalk' and grabbed Brown, 18, in the throat" (Kohler, 2014, p. A9). Referring to Wilson, Police Chief Frank McCall declared: "You've come across a bad apple... There are

methods and ways of going about getting that bad apple plucked out” (Bock, 2014, p. A11). The Rotten Apple theme appeared in a higher proportion of *Post and Courier* articles (10%) than in the other two newspapers, probably because of the bystander’s video of Scott’s shooting and the subsequent murder charges leveled against Officer Slager, whose actions were labeled those of a rogue cop.

**Responsibility for incident.** Approximately 37% of the total sample contained content describing Responsibility for the Incident. This is an important theme, as it reveals whose side, if any, the newspapers’ accounts supported—the police officer’s or victim’s. Studies cited earlier have found that the news media relies heavily on the authorities as sources and skews reporting in their favor. Does coverage of recent police shootings, in our three cities, bear this out?

We found that the police were blamed more than twice as often as the citizen (32.5% vs. 14.5%). North Charleston Mayor Keith Summey stated that Officer Slager had made a “bad decision”: “When you’re wrong, you’re wrong. If you make a bad decision, don’t care if you’re behind the shield or just a citizen on the street, you have to live by that decision” (quoted in Knapp, 2015c). This statement was quoted in several articles in the *Post and Courier*. A Ferguson example is an editorial critical of Officer Wilson: “We’ve got some John Wayne cops who don’t know that ‘tactical withdrawal’ is an honored military strategy” (“Partisan melee over law,” p. A14). When the *Baltimore Sun* attached blame to the officers, it typically described their behavior as abusive or insensitive. Consider this poignant example:

The video shows . . . Gray screaming on the ground with police kneeling beside him before he’s dragged to the police van, where he appears to stand briefly. Witnesses have said Gray’s legs looked broken and suggested the injury may have occurred during his arrest. Police acknowledged Gray was having trouble breathing and asking for an inhaler for asthma. Police now say he should have received medical treatment before being loaded into the van, where they also say they failed to buckle him in. (Cohn, 2015, p. A14)

And an editorial unequivocally contested the rationale for arresting Gray: “Officers had no probable cause to chase Gray when he ran after making eye contact with one of them, and no probable cause to restrain, search, and arrest him” (“What Took So Long?,” 2015, p. A20).

Although video footage captured part of the Gray incident—Gray being dragged to a police van—it did not reveal what happened inside the van. That a video documented Scott’s shooting may explain why the blaming-police theme is reflected in a much higher proportion of *Post and Courier* articles (50.4%) than in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (25.1%) or *Baltimore Sun* (31.8%). That video evidence can speak volumes was also clear in the October 2014 killing of Laquan

McDonald in Chicago: The officer involved was charged with murder only after a video of the shooting was released a year after the killing.

Fewer articles contained content coded Blaming Victim. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported not only that Brown struggled with the officer prior to being shot but also frequently mentioned security-camera footage of Brown stealing cigars from a convenience store and shoving the store attendant prior to his encounter with Officer Wilson. The implication was that Brown was dangerous and that Wilson's actions may have been justified. This security footage itself became a contested issue in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* because it was released to the public at the same time as Wilson's name, with some analysts surmising that the timing was intended to defuse public outrage over the killing. And this may account for the Blaming Victim code materializing twice as often in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* than the other two newspapers. Victim blaming was evident in one tenth of *Post and Courier* articles, for example, by reporting that Scott posed a threat to or endangered the life of Slager. This angle was more evident in early *Post and Courier* coverage, before the video of the shooting was released: "Police allege that during the struggle the man gained control of the Taser and attempted to use it against the officer. The officer then resorted to his service weapon and shot him" (Elmore & MacDougall, 2015). Articles in the *Baltimore Sun* mentioned Gray's possession of a knife, which police alleged to be illegal, Gray's testing positive for opiates and cannabis at the time of his arrest, and Gray's previous schemes to injure himself while in police custody in order to collect settlement money.

The final theme is Questioning the Investigation. Unlike previous research that found the media rarely interrogating the authorities' investigation of a police-involved incident, our three newspapers were not averse to doing so. The mean (26%) is skewed by the low percentage of mentions of this theme in North Charleston (9.2%), arguably because the officer involved was immediately charged with murder once the videotape surfaced. Investigation of the incident was questioned much more often in Ferguson (25.8%) and Baltimore (36.5%) because of intense controversy in Ferguson over the much-delayed naming of the officer and the decision not to indict the officer, and in Baltimore, the delay in the decision to indict the six officers. Delays of any kind or failure to prosecute can be interpreted as signs of flawed investigations.

**Structural factors.** It is not surprising that Incident-Specific Issues would figure prominently in our data, especially in light of previous research findings that media coverage of instances of police misconduct has been heavily skewed in focusing on particular events rather than larger systemic factors. Our analysis, however, reveals a clear departure from past media coverage in that several important Structural Factors were highlighted in the three newspapers. Here, *structural* refers to larger institutional or societal factors that were presented as underlying or related to the incidents. And, considering the different

circumstances of the three incidents, these overarching themes point to issues that transcend city context and may reflect broader constructions of the problem of police misconduct throughout the nation. We identified four major codes that constitute Structural Factors: Police Issues, Racial Issues, Poverty/Inequality, and Reforms. With the exception of Police Issues, there was notable variation in mentions of these main themes across the three incidents, which we discuss in the following section.

### **Police Issues**

A large number of articles discussed general policing issues beyond the particular incident. In fact, 54.2% of the articles in the total sample were coded Police Issues. The most frequently mentioned subcodes were Police Violence, Police-Community Relations Strained, and Accountability Deficiency.

Police Violence (40%) refers to any mention of police violence *outside of our three incidents*. It appeared in articles mentioning specific, prior incidents of police violence *in any city* as well as in *general critiques* regarding use-of-force actions. Mentions of Police Violence usually portrayed the police in a negative light. Some *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles drew a connection between race and police violence or compared Brown's death with police killings of other individuals. *Post and Courier* articles ranged from mentioning police treatment of civil rights protesters on "Bloody Sunday" in Selma, Alabama, in 1965 to Officer Slager's unlawful Tasing of a man in a prior encounter. Mentions of police violence also included general statements, such as when the *Post and Courier* reported that the Scott incident "renewed scrutiny of police officers' use-of-force against Black men and ignited challenges to patrolling methods that had long been criticized in North Charleston" (Knapp, 2015a). In addition to citing other use-of-force incidents and making generalizations regarding police violence toward African Americans, *Baltimore Sun* articles revealed the Baltimore police department's history of giving "rough rides" when transporting a suspect. Such individuals cannot protect themselves if they are handcuffed but unsecured and thrown around inside a police vehicle that is driven aggressively. An article in the *Baltimore Sun* defined a "rough ride" as when "officers intentionally drive erratically, causing shackled passengers to bounce helplessly against the walls of the van" (Marbella, 2015, p. A1). As the *Baltimore Sun* speculated about how Gray sustained injuries in the van, the newspaper also drew connections to a larger pattern involving rough rides that had come to light in Baltimore in the past.

Police-Community Relations Strained appeared in references to citizens' pre-existing distrust in the police or a worsening of police-community relations because of the incident in question. This code accounted for 16.6% of articles in the total sample (18% *St. Louis Dispatch-Post*; 13% *Post and Courier*; 16% *Baltimore Sun*). Examples include a "Improved dialogue on police" (2015)

editorial on Scott's killing: "It has shaken the community's confidence in law enforcement," and an article highlighting "strained relations between the local police force and Black community members" stemming from this killing (Knapp, 2015b).

The Accountability Deficiency code refers to content noting that the police are rarely held accountable for their misconduct *generally*—apart from the three incidents examined here. Accountability is mentioned in 15% of all articles, and almost one quarter in North Charleston. Two examples illustrate this theme:

Too many times communities across the country have watched officers exonerated in controversial shootings . . . Every time they wound communities, and those scars never really heal. (Hicks, 2015b)

Baltimore has paid more than \$6 million in judgments and settlements in civil suits against police during the past five years . . . Police are rarely charged after encounters that result in deaths and are even more rarely convicted as a result. ("Mosby's 'Conflicts'," 2015, p. A1)

### Racial Issues

Fully 43% of articles in the total sample mentioned broad or generic racial issues in their coverage of the incidents: 51.3% *St. Louis Dispatch-Post*, 44.5% *Post and Courier*, and 29.2% *Baltimore Sun* ( $p < .001$ ). Notable subcodes in the Racial Issues category include Institutional Racism (17.8%), Racial Profiling (17.5%), and Racial Disparity (13.7%). The relatively high frequency of mentions suggests that newspapers are beginning to draw connections to racial issues *beyond* the specific incident—a departure from media coverage of police misconduct in the past.

Institutional Racism implies that racism is structurally embedded in a police department. In the *Post and Courier*, for example, this code appeared in phrases such as "stop racist police terror" (Knapp & Smith, 2015) and calls "to change a culture of fear-induced bigotry in and beyond law enforcement" (Darby, 2015). Institutional Racism was mentioned in nearly 18% of articles in the total sample, and there were no notable differences in the proportions of mentions between the three incidents, suggesting that this issue transcends the three incidents.

Racial Profiling (17.5%) refers to the practice of police officers stopping people based on their race. There were notable variations in the appearance of this code across the three newspapers: 20.6% *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 22.7% *Post and Courier*, and 9.9% *Baltimore Sun* ( $p < .01$ ). The lower proportion of articles in the *Baltimore Sun* may be due to the fact that three of the six officers involved in the Gray incident were African American or perhaps to the higher representation of Blacks on Baltimore's police force (40%) compared with the other two largely White police departments (see Table 1). In the other two cities,

articles portrayed Brown and Scott as having been stopped solely for being Black, which they connected to racial profiling more generally. An editorial on Ferguson revealed that “Blacks were 37% more likely to be pulled over in 2013 than Whites, as a percentage of their respective populations” and that Blacks were “twice as likely to be searched for contraband...even though police found contraband, percentage-wise, more often in the cars of White drivers” (“Justice Department investigation,” 2014b, p. A12). A *Post and Courier* writer stated, “Some Black friends...have long and frequently told me about being harassed by police officers without credible cause. Those pals have been convinced of, and convincing in their assertions of, racial bias in those encounters” (Wooten, 2015). One editorial linked racial profiling by police to profiling in other spheres and highlighted the dire consequences of such bias:

For many African Americans, there is fundamentally no difference in the cases. They see them as part of a fabric of a justice system that doesn't value Black lives, in which Driving While Black or Walking While Black or Shopping While Black leads to harassment which leads to legal problems which leads to unfair arrests which leads to death. The evidence is on their side. (“In a Nation Holding Its Breath,” 2014, p. A14)

Support for at least part of this statement is found in the Justice Department's report on Ferguson's police department: “We have found substantial evidence of racial bias among police and court staff in Ferguson” (DOJ, 2015, p. 5). Another article indirectly touched on racial profiling by discussing the practice whereby Black parents feel compelled to instruct their children on proper etiquette if they are stopped by the police:

Many African-Americans consider it a rite of passage to have a talk with their father or parents about showing respect when stopped by a police officer. Johnson said he had the conversation with his kids, even though they are not old enough to drive, knowing that they could be questioned while out walking the dog around the block. (Bock, 2014, p. A11; cf. Brunson & Weitzer, 2011)

As expected from media reporting on other controversial issues, some of the assertions might be viewed as hyperbole. For example, Malik Shabazz (President of Black Lawyers for Justice) was quoted in the *Post and Courier* as declaring that “American police were hunting Black men ‘like a deer or a dog’” (Knapp, 2015d). Such statements illustrate the graphic characterizations that appeared in some reporting on these incidents.

An additional set of articles (13.7%) discussed race not in terms of racism or profiling per se, but instead in the context of Racial Disparities in offending rates, arrest rates, police killings, citizen complaints against officers, or a disjunction between the city and police department's racial composition. Regarding



the latter, some articles compared the African American proportion of Ferguson or North Charleston with the largely White complexion of their police departments. With respect to complaints lodged against officers, the *Post and Courier* reported that the majority of the 120 complaints filed over a recent 4-year period came from African Americans (Knapp & Smith, 2015). And, regarding racial disparities in police killings that were not expressly labeled racially biased, one article recounted a litany of such incidents:

Sadly, we are witnessing incidents of police violence against Black people with increasing frequency these days. Akai Gurley was killed by police in the stairwell of his girlfriend's public housing residence in Brooklyn. We saw Eric Garner choked to death by a New York City police officer. We witnessed Marlene Pinnock being pummeled by a California Highway Patrol officer. We saw Levar Jones shot by a South Carolina police officer during a traffic stop. And just two days after Michael Brown's death, Ezell Ford, an unarmed Black man, was killed by a Los Angeles police officer. (Southerland, 2014, p. A21)

### *Poverty and Socioeconomic Inequality*

Although socioeconomic factors were not as frequently mentioned as the other items under the Structural Factors rubric, we note that Poverty/Inequality registered 15.4% of mentions across the three cases, and more than one fifth (21.4%) in Ferguson. Socioeconomic disadvantage was identified as possibly contributing to racial or class disparities in offending rates, to obtrusive or aggressive police practices in low-income neighborhoods, or to public distrust of the police. Consider this "Why Freddie Gray Ran" (2015, p. A22) editorial:

Why did Gray run? He had been arrested a number of times in the past on relatively minor charges... What it makes him is all too typical in a neighborhood where generations of crushing poverty and the war on drugs combine to rob countless young people like him of opportunities."

And *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* editor Gilbert Bailon remarked,

What has not grown with [Ferguson's Black population] is the political representation, the economic opportunity... They feel very isolated and additionally, a deep mistrust for the police there. Many cities around the country... have similar issues. (Raasch, 2014, p. A4)

The role of socioeconomic inequality is largely absent from the findings of previous content analyses of media coverage of controversial policing incidents, suggesting a noteworthy shift in recent coverage of similar events.

## Reforms

The three incidents generated much discussion of reforms to curb officer misconduct or improve police-community relations. Fully 46.2% of all articles referred to reforms. Five types were mentioned with some frequency: Body Cameras, Reform Revenue Intake, Strengthen Police-Community Relations, Training in Use of Force, and Citizen Review Boards (Table 2).

More than one fifth (21.1%) of articles in the full sample mentioned police Body Cameras as a type of reform, with significant variation in coverage across the three incidents: 15.4% *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 51.3% *Post and Courier*, and 10.4% *Baltimore Sun* ( $p < .001$ ). Body cameras were cited as a sensible reform measure in over half of the articles on Scott's killing in North Charleston. That the incident was captured on a citizen's phone camera, rather than the officer's body camera, may explain the *Post and Courier's* highlighting the importance of equipping police officers with body cameras to document future encounters:

Some people fear that, if not for a random video, no one would have been held accountable for the death of Walter Scott. (Hicks, 2015b)

The video records no instance of Slager telling Scott to stop or halt—the officer just opened fire and emptied his magazine into a running, unarmed man . . . This is why police officers should be equipped with body cameras . . . [Rep. Wendell] Gilliard said last year that, without body cameras, controversies over police shootings will continue. And this one would have, too – if not for that video. What more proof do lawmakers need? (Hicks, 2015a)

Despite the *Baltimore Sun's* lower proportion of mentions of this reform, the video footage of Gray being dragged to the police van likely contributed to both popular criticism of Gray's treatment and plans to provide officers with body cameras. Baltimore's mayor announced that

city officials have assured Gray's family that police officers in the Western District—the site of Gray's arrest—will be the first in the city equipped with body cameras . . . making sure that something like this doesn't happen again. (Wenger & Rector, 2015, p. A1)

All three cities have now begun to implement body-camera policies.

Reform Revenue Intake is a code for content critical of the fines imposed on offenders and police quotas for arrests or ticketing. Although the former is an issue with the courts per se, it can also influence police practices, for example, if an arrest warrant is issued for failure to pay tickets or fines. Some jurisdictions impose escalating fines or jail time on those who are unable to pay the initial fine. Revenue reform emerged in a much higher percentage of the articles on Ferguson (22.5%) than in the other two newspapers because the need for such

reform seemed particularly acute in Ferguson. The local media reported that in 2013 Ferguson's municipal court "disposed of 24,532 warrants and 12,018 cases, or about 3 warrants and 1.5 cases per household"; fines and court fees comprised the second largest source of the city's revenue in 2013, totaling \$2,635,400 ("Justice Department investigation," 2014b, p. A12). Another article reported that "twenty-five percent of the city's revenue comes from traffic citations, prompting a local public defender to argue that most people see the city as targeting its citizens to raise revenue, not to 'serve and protect' them" (Thomas, 2014, p. A17).

Ferguson's practice was branded "bigotry and profit-driven law enforcement—essentially using the Black community as a piggy bank to support the city's budget through fines" (Johnson, 2015, p. A4). In an op-ed in the *Post and Courier*, the author noted that this practice occurs in "many jurisdictions," not just Ferguson and North Charleston, and concluded, "We need to stop seeing the criminal justice system as a source of revenue" (Moskos, 2015). The practice was condemned by the Justice Department in its investigation of Ferguson's criminal justice system (DOJ, 2015). Ferguson subsequently lowered the maximum amount of revenue its municipal courts could contribute to city coffers from 30% to 10% and cancelled 220,000 of its outstanding arrest warrants for municipal offenses and traffic violations.

One tenth of the articles commented on the need for more or better Use-of-Force Training, with significant variation among the three sources ( $p < .01$ ). It is not surprising that improved training in use of force and in de-escalating tense encounters would be a reform discussed in coverage of the incidents, given that each resulted in a fatality.

The code Strengthen Police-Community Relations refers to the need to improve mutual understanding and rapport between the police and the population in general, minority groups, or specific neighborhoods or cities. Some of the content offered little more than platitudes, such as a statement in the *Post and Courier* about the need for more "outreach efforts" by police (Parker, 2015) and a quotation by North Charleston's mayor: "We will be looking for ways to develop a closer relationship with the individual communities" (quoted in Knapp & Smith, 2015). Other proposals were more specific:

What Ferguson needs are institutions that support cooperation, including a police force made up of more people who live in the community in order to overcome the current us vs. them mentality. Officers have to first understand what it means to live in Ferguson before they can police Ferguson. This kind of cooperation gives people a stake in their communities. (Thomas, 2014, p. A17)

Ferguson's mayor promised to increase recruitment of minority officers in order to "bridge the gap" between the police and the population (Giegerich, 2014, p. A4), and a newspaper article called for "mentoring programs at public

schools . . . to steer more minority children into law enforcement careers,” which will create “positive relationships between the police and the community” (McDermott, 2014, p. A3).

The code Citizen Review Board refers to mentions of an agency that has the authority to review officer behavior after a complaint is filed by a member of the public, alleging conduct such as excessive force, corruption, harassment, or verbal abuse. Baltimore and many other big cities have such boards today, but not Ferguson or North Charleston, whose newspapers presented citizen review as an imperative reform that would increase police accountability. One article implied that Ferguson was being too slow to adopt such a board: “More than a month after Brown’s death, Ferguson Mayor James Knowles said the city is still hammering out what its citizen review board will look like” (Stuckey, 2014, p. A1). *Post and Courier* articles discussed the need for a review board for North Charleston that would have subpoena power to compel officer’s testimony. Just how vital such boards are perceived to be is reflected in a statement by James Johnson, President of the North Charleston chapter of the National Action Network: “Until we can get a citizens review board, there will never be any true reform” (quoted in Knapp & Elmore, 2015).

## Conclusion

This study identified patterns both across the three cities and for each city separately. Across the cities, as expected, articles discussed the causes of the incident and who was responsible for the citizen’s death—mirroring reporting on controversial policing incidents in past decades. But we also found that coverage of our three incidents included discussions of extra-incident factors: systemic problems, racial issues, poverty/inequality, and reforms.

For the second research question—differences between the three cases—we found, first, that some important subcoded content, such as institutional racism, did not differ statistically between the cases. This may be regarded as a noteworthy finding, suggesting that institutional racism was recognized as a factor contributing to police misconduct despite the fact that the circumstances of the three killings differed. Second, for six of our seven major codes, we found statistically significant differences between the newspapers. Without speculating about the reasons for each of these differences, it is clear that some of them can be explained by features specific to the particular case. The fact that the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* gave attention to the amount of revenue cities raise from processing minor infractions was clearly rooted in Ferguson’s inordinate use of its criminal justice system to generate income. *Post and Courier* articles paid more attention to reforms, which was largely due to its heavy coverage of police body cameras—salient because of the visceral power of the video of Scott’s shooting. The video evidence in Scott’s case also arguably explains why the *Post and Courier* was much more likely to attach blame to the officer

than the other two newspapers, where responsibility for the death was less clear-cut. That the *Baltimore Sun* gave less attention to racial issues may be due to its police department being much more racially integrated than the other two departments and to the fact that three of the six officers involved in the Freddie Gray incident were Black, whereas a single White officer was involved in the other two incidents.

Prior research suggests that the news media may be more likely to draw explicit connections between events when they are temporally clustered. We found some of this cross-fertilization in our data. Nearly 22% of *Post and Courier* articles on Walter Scott also mentioned Michael Brown or Freddie Gray, while 14.6% of *Baltimore Sun* articles on Gray discussed the Brown or Scott case. Overall, Brown was the most frequently cross-referenced incident, garnering 23 total mentions in the *Post and Courier* (21 mentions alone and 2 in conjunction with Gray) and 27 mentions in the *Baltimore Sun* (22 mentions alone and 5 in conjunction with Scott). All three newspapers also mentioned incidents in other cities, such as the videotaped killings of Eric Garner in New York and Tamir Rice in Cleveland. And some articles more generally linked the current incident to others in the past. The *Post and Courier*, for example, quoted a protestor at a demonstration as saying, “We want the world to understand that this is not an isolated incident. This has been a reality . . . in the North Charleston Police Department for many, many years” (quoted in Knapp & Smith, 2015). In contrast to the much more episodic and fragmented coverage of policing incidents in the past, our three newspapers drew connections between events. Doing so conveys the message that such incidents are part of a larger problem, beyond the specific case. The same message may be implicit in the fact that two prominent mainstream newspapers (*Washington Post* and *The Guardian*) began in 2015 to compile publicly available databases with counts and descriptions of shootings and fatalities at the hands of the police. Whether readers draw connections between the cases, the fact that these newspapers decided to create these databases may mean that they, like our three newspapers, no longer normalize such cases as exceptional.

The news media typically relies on authority figures as primary definers of events and, in the past structured news regarding police deviance around official claims. Our findings suggest that this paradigm *may* be breaking down. Compared with coverage in past decades, in our three cases newspaper representations of police killings were more likely to be (a) critical of police practices and (b) attentive to systemic causes of police misconduct. It is noteworthy that articles not only attached blame for the incident to the officers involved and questioned the authorities’ investigation of the incident but also discussed larger policing practices, race relations, poverty/inequality, and the need for reform. In other words, it was not unusual for these newspapers to interrogate or draw damaging conclusions about officer behavior or to highlight structural conditions that might be responsible for police killings. This critical approach

contrasts sharply with the findings of earlier studies where coverage of similar types of incidents was skewed in favor of the police and indirectly normalized police violence. The current study found little pro-police bias or normalization across our three cases—apart from victim precipitation and victim blaming in about one seventh of the articles, the exceptional “rotten apple” attribution in about one twentieth of the articles, and a few other low-prevalence items.

If this shift applies more generally than in our three cases, how can it be explained? First, it appears that mainstream news reporting has been influenced by (a) the occurrence of a series of high-profile incidents in a compressed timespan and (b) the growth of new technologies that the mainstream media can exploit in their own reporting. The former makes it more difficult to dismiss an incident as an isolated event or attribute it to a single rogue officer, and the latter (video recording and social media discourse) can contribute both evidence and a counter narrative to the police account. Second, newspapers have a symbiotic relationship with television news reporting. In addition to national network newscasts, cable news and talk shows provided massive coverage and commentary on the three incidents as well as the ensuing street protests in Ferguson and Baltimore. This parallel media coverage may have had at least some spillover effect on our three mainstream newspapers insofar as the former highlighted similarities between the incidents and larger policing problems beyond each specific incident—content that also appeared in our three newspapers.

Our findings suggest that mainstream news reporting may be contributing to a “new visibility” and critique of police wrongdoing (Goldsmith, 2010). Such coverage overlaps with other trends, such as growing public criticism of the police and demands for major reforms. Additional research will help to determine whether other newspapers, as well as other types of news media, are also covering the police more critically and systemically than in the past.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Notes**

1. The proportion of fatal police shootings that were filmed increased from 14% in 2015 to 21% in January to June 2016 (Kindy & Lowery, 2016).
2. An alternative data source would be a national newspaper such as the *New York Times* or *USA Today*. Our selection of local sources for this study was based on our interest

in contextualized coverage of the events in each city (e.g., city-specific explanations for the incident) as well as the advantage of comparing local content across the three cases. Another consideration was the likelihood that the local papers would give more coverage to each case than any national newspaper.

3. The researchers generated the codes based on a systematic and close reading of articles, and subsequently used Atlas/ti qualitative software to organize the main codes and distill subcodes. Therefore, the initial coding was manual and grounded and later coding was computer assisted.
4. Table 2 shows, for example, that 27.7% of articles in the total sample mentioned at least one of the "Causes of Incident" (see first column). In a similar vein, 15.4% of articles in the total sample specifically mentioned "Victim Precipitation," while 5.7% of articles mentioned "Racism." If an article mentioned both "Victim Precipitation" and "Racism," each of these mentions would both be reflected (i.e., coded "1") in the percentages for each of these respective subcodes. However, because we coded for the presence or absence of mentions, it would only count once toward the "Causes of Incident" major code, which is the convention in research allowing for multiple mentions during the coding process. Table 2 also indicates whether there are statistically significant differences between the prevalence of mentions of major codes or subcodes for the three incidents. For example, 44.5% of *Post and Courier* articles mentioned at least one of the "Causes of Incident," compared with 25.5% and 20.3% of articles in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *Baltimore Sun*, respectively ( $p < .001$ ).

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