

# Recommendations: The Real ‘Bond Pandemic’

Academics and journalists have recognized the media’s complicity in the racism and harm of the criminal legal system, highlighting their role in promoting a narrative of crime that legitimizes the police and promotes maintenance of the status quo. In light of the findings detailed in this report, **local media outlets should acknowledge that their approach to reporting on bond and bond reform functions to undermine police accountability, bolster the power of law enforcement, reinforce racial stereotypes, and undercut further reform efforts.**

Media outlets can rectify the issues outlined in this report by transforming their approach to reporting on crime, including developing a station-wide policy on crime reporting that includes the following measures:

- **Given the implications of conflating arrest with guilt, reporters should uphold the presumption of innocence by protecting the identities of people who have been merely arrested or accused of crime.** Media outlets frequently broadcast the names and likenesses of suspects, which amounts to public shaming of people who are legally innocent.<sup>1</sup> This public identification has lasting consequences for the accused. Despite the frequency of wrongful arrests and high dismissal rates, news providers rarely follow up on breaking crime stories to report the outcome of a case.<sup>2</sup> Though a large portion of defendants ultimately have their charges dropped, the stories identifying them as responsible for a crime remain on the internet indefinitely, which can impact their ability to gain employment and housing, among other necessities. Citing these concerns, media outlets across the nation have announced new policies that aim to protect the identities of people accused of crimes. Several media outlets have chosen to cease publication of mugshots, acknowledging that in addition to criminalizing people who have not been found guilty, the photos bolster racial stereotypes associating blackness with criminality. The Associated Press recently announced that it will no longer publish the names of people accused of minor crimes if it does not plan to offer continuing coverage of the story. Several news outlets have rolled out a process through which people can request their names and mugshots to be removed from old stories about minor crimes. These practices ensure that the media do not participate in criminalizing defendants when they have not been found guilty.
- **Reporters can avoid conflating arrest with guilt by providing context when a person is arrested or indicted and by refraining from using language that implies guilt.** Most articles in our analysis refer to defendants

as being out on bond without any additional context or acknowledgement of the likelihood of a dismissal—ultimately distorting the frequency of crimes that are committed by “repeat offenders.” To avoid over-coverage and the spread of such misinformation, reporting that a defendant is out on bond at the time of an alleged crime should be an exception that reflects the unique circumstances of specific cases, rather than a norm.

- **To give the public a more balanced perception of crime, public safety, and the impact of reform efforts, the media should stop uncritically amplifying the voices of law enforcement and instead center community voices.** Breaking stories about criminal incidents often rely on police as the sole source of information. Police accounts are typically relayed as fact, despite evidence that police frequently provide inaccurate or incomplete narratives. Initial media coverage of several high profile cases—including the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor—highlight the problems with reliance on police sources, as police accounts of these incidents diverged dramatically from the truth.<sup>3</sup> Especially in the case of George Floyd’s murder, the vague police report significantly contrasted with the eyewitness cell phone video of Derek Chauvin kneeling on Floyd’s neck.<sup>4</sup> In allowing police to control the narrative around crime, the media undermine police accountability. News outlets should refuse to run stories that reference police as the sole source of information. Reporters should uphold their obligation to verify and corroborate police accounts of crime, rather than reporting their testimony as fact.<sup>5</sup> Where police are quoted, reporters should contextualize their claims or provide space for comment from members of the community. A letter from activists to *The Philadelphia Inquirer* called for journalists to “diversify their sources and deepen their relationships with community members impacted by these unjust systems.” If the media continues to reify the unchecked power of police by parroting their narratives of crime and criminality, then Black and Brown communities will continue to suffer harm, and the unjust nature of the criminal legal system will continue to be misrepresented.
- **Media outlets should shift coverage from breaking crime towards systemic criminal justice issues.**<sup>6</sup> The issues posed by conflating arrest with guilt and relying on police as sources call into question the enterprise of “breaking crime” reporting. Because police accounts of crime are frequently inaccurate and arrested suspects are infrequently convicted, elevating these stories does little to inform the public; instead, it dangerously bolsters police legitimacy, creating the illusion that police are necessary and perform a central role in promoting public safety. In covering developing criminal cases, reporters should emphasize the processual nature of the legal system and focus on investigations, prosecutions, and court proceedings. Coverage of criminal justice should be geared towards holding public officials accountable for their ostensible function of promoting public safety.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Keri Blakinger, “[Newsrooms are rethinking their use of mugshots in crime reporting](#),” *Poynter*, February 11 2020,
- <sup>2</sup> John Daniszewski, “[Why we’re no longer naming suspects in minor crime stories](#),” *Associated Press*, June 15, 2021.
- <sup>3</sup> Paul Farhi and Elahe Izadi, “[Journalists are reexamining their reliance on a longtime source: The police](#),” *The Washington Post*, June 30, 2020.
- <sup>4</sup> Drew Shenkman and Kelli Slade, “[Police Reports Shouldn’t Set the News Agenda: A Guide to Avoiding Systemic Racism in Reporting](#),” *American Bar Association*, January 22, 2021.
- <sup>5</sup> Paul Farhi and Elahe Izadi, “[Journalists are reexamining their reliance on a longtime source: The police](#).”
- <sup>6</sup> *Id.*