

# Recommendations: Materially Misleading

Many media outlets have re-assessed the nature of their crime coverage since the murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis Police Department in the summer of 2020. Our analysis shows that, despite balanced coverage of Harris County's misdemeanor bond litigation, sloppy crime reporting persists at the *Houston Chronicle*. In light of the findings detailed in our "Materially Misleading" report, **newspapers 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.**

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

- **To avoid perpetuating racial stereotypes about criminality, reporters should stop publishing mugshots of the accused.** The practice of posting mugshots draws a link between crime and the race of alleged perpetrators. Because criminal cases involving Black defendants are subject to disproportionate coverage in the media, mugshots reinforce racial bias by attaching Black faces to criminal activity.
- **Reporters should refrain from detailing a defendant's criminal history or bond status absent an explanation of its relevance to the covered case.** Highlighting a defendant's past charges implies that previous arrests indicate guilt or dangerousness. These details risk conflating arrest with guilt and link bond release with negative outcomes.
- **To provide a more informative and accurate portrayal of crime and the criminal legal system, reporters should shift coverage from arrests and allegations towards trials and case outcomes.** High dismissal rates in Harris County call into question the utility of covering criminal allegations; many defendants covered by the media are not ultimately found guilty. At the very least, reporters should provide follow-up coverage on the outcomes of cases covered prematurely. But to best inform the public, crime coverage should focus on systemic issues rather than breaking crime.
- **In covering crime, reporters should adhere to journalistic standards for source attribution, ensuring that sources are credible and disclosing any motivations or conflicts of interest they may have.** Coverage should not rely on police and prosecutors as sole sources of information, given that these actors are motivated to portray the accused as guilty. If interested sources are attributed, reporters should disclose their potential conflicts of interest. Furthermore, information about alleged crimes should not be

attributed to anonymous sources unless absolutely necessary, nor should they be attributed to vague sources such as “offices” rather than individuals.