

LIBRARY
COPY

THE NEW YORK NEWS MEDIA AND THE CENTRAL PARK RAPE

Linda S. Lichter
S. Robert Lichter
Daniel Amundson

AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE
LIBRARY, INFORMATION CENTER
READING ROOM



THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE, Institute of Human Relations, 165 East 56 Street, New York, NY 10022-2746

CENTER FOR MEDIA AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

2101 L Street, N.W. • Suite 505 • Washington, D.C. 20037

1998-89 AJC Box
ETHNICITY
1998

Linda S. Lichter, Ph.D., is a sociologist specializing in public opinion and political sociology. **S. Robert Lichter, Ph.D.**, is a political scientist specializing in mass media and research methods. They are co-directors of the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, D.C. **Daniel Amundson**, a graduate student in sociology at George Washington University, is research director at the Center.

Executive Summary

The rape of a jogger in New York's Central Park this spring touched off a controversy over the media's reporting of interracial crimes. Charges of sensationalism and racism were raised and debated. We have analyzed the topics, themes, and language of local media coverage for two weeks after the attack (April 20 to May 4). Using the method of content analysis, we examined 406 news items in New York's four daily newspapers, the weekly Amsterdam News, and evening newscasts of the city's six television stations.

Although the racial element was conspicuous in this story, the content analysis found no evidence that media coverage played on racial fears or hatreds. On the contrary, the question of race was repeatedly raised in order to deny its relevance to the crime, to warn against reviving racial tension, and to call for a healing process to defuse racial animosity.

The study located several other elements, rooted in traditional news values, that help account for the heavy and emotionally intense "play" the story received. These include the randomness and brutality of the crime, the youth and reported personal and social stability of the suspects, and the "human interest" inherent in the victim's struggle to recover.

Nonetheless, a troubling aspect of the coverage was the use of highly negative and emotional language to describe the suspects, including frequent aspersions to their animality. The Post epitomized this approach, but the study concludes that the Post's coverage was typical of a populist tabloid. Further, by concentrating on the story's racial angle, the media largely ignored the attack as a crime against women.

Major findings include:

- * Race was mentioned as a possible explanation for the attack 54 times, more than twice as often as any other factor. But its relevance was denied 80 percent of those times.*
- * There were only six references to the attack as a crime against women, that is, as a demonstration of the perpetrators' virility or power over women or the treatment of women as sex objects.*
- * The crime was most often presented as a random act, a consequence of group dynamics, a product of the subculture of "wild youth," or a result of negative media messages.*
- * The suspects were described in emotional negative language 390 times, including 185 animal images such as "wolves," "pack," and "herd."*

- * *The notion that the crime reflected on the city's minority population was advanced only once and rejected 15 times.*
- * *Notwithstanding calls for the death penalty, greater prudence by runners was urged more often than stronger penalties for criminals.*

The study also uncovered sharp differences in coverage by different media outlets. Among them:

- * *The Post featured the most coverage, the most emotional language (twice as much as any other outlet, averaging over three animal images per day), and the most calls for getting tough on crime.*
- * *The Times had the least coverage among daily papers and the fewest negative descriptions of the attackers, fewest expressions of adverse public reaction, and fewest calls for increased law-enforcement efforts. But the Times carried denials that racial factors were relevant twice as often as any other outlet.*
- * *The Amsterdam News ran the most comparisons to previous racial violence, identified the suspects' race more often than any other outlet, and printed the most charges that the (white) media's coverage was based on racial factors.*

The study concludes that the coverage was split between a populist tabloid approach (emotional language, focus on public outrage, and calls for "law and order" measures) and concerns about social responsibility (the frequent denial that race was relevant to the crime). But by treading so lightly on the race issue, the media missed an opportunity to confront the racial undertones that well up in cases of interracial violence, even when no overt racial motive is present. In place of emotional coverage that denied the relevance of race, a calmer approach that probed more deeply into race relations might have better served the twin goals of good journalism and good citizenship.

A Crime and the Response

Interracial violence animates and divides New Yorkers more than any topic on the urban landscape. It becomes a kind of Rorschach inkblot onto which the city's residents project their fears and fantasies. In notorious cases from Howard Beach to Tawana Brawley, those reactions have been partly guided (or goaded) by the city's lively and diverse news media. It is almost inevitable that the media coverage of such highly sensitive and divisive incidents will itself prove controversial. And so it was with the story of "wilding" in Central Park.

The facts of this case are relatively simple. A young white female jogger was raped and severely beaten in Central Park on the night of April 19, 1989, in a series of assaults by the same group. The first news stories appeared the morning of April 20 as the victim lay in a coma. That day and the next, eight black and Hispanic teenagers were arrested and charged with the attack. Meanwhile, the term "wilding" began to grip the imagination of headline writers to describe the series of attacks. On April 23, public reaction heated up after the suspects were reported to have boasted that the attack was "fun." Vigils were held at the place of the attack and elsewhere.

On April 24 Mayor Koch and Governor Cuomo began to speak out against violent crime and call for new measures to deal with it. On April 26 and 27 the first indictments were handed down. The last few days of the month saw outpourings of sympathy for the victim and outrage against the attackers. Cardinal O'Connor visited the victim, who had begun to emerge from her comatose state.

And Donald Trump ran a newspaper advertisement calling for restoration of the death penalty. During the first days of May, the victim showed further signs of recovery, and the media reported several rapes of young women in Harlem and a sexual assault on another jogger in Central Park.

By this time the city was in an uproar over the case, which continued to receive heavy press coverage. Not surprisingly, that coverage was itself drawn into the controversy. Critics charged that its emotionalism was sensationalistic at best and racist at worst.

Concerned about the effect on interracial tensions in New York of media coverage of just such an explosive incident as the Central Park rape, the Institute for American Pluralism and the Center for Media and Public Affairs undertook a study and evaluation of the press and television coverage of that event. We did so by means of content analysis, a method of studying how information is conveyed. Coders tabulated the topics, viewpoints, and language of local media coverage from April 20 to May 4, the first two weeks after the attack. The outlets examined were the major daily newspapers -- the *Times*, *Post*, *Daily News*; the *Amsterdam News*, a weekly paper aimed at the city's black community; and the evening newscasts on television stations WABC, WCBS, WNBC, WNYW, WWOR, and WPIX.* The study included editorials, signed columns, and letters to the editor in addition to straight news stories, because these forums of opinion were an integral part of the media treatment, especially in the tabloids.

Amount of Coverage

In fifteen days, from April 20 through May 4, the 11 outlets we examined carried 406 news items (table 1).** These included 313 news stories, 42 editorials or signed columns, and 51 letters to the editor. In the newspapers, which ran 190 news stories overall, the crime was front-page news 34 times. The heaviest print coverage was the *Post's*, whose 957 column inches included 46 news stories, 13 editorials or columns, and 42 letters to the editor. The printing of so many letters was in itself a kind of editorial statement. The *Daily News* nearly matched the *Post* in space allocated to the story (948 column inches) and exceeded it in news and editorial coverage. It was the profusion of letters, which functioned mainly as a sounding board for popular outrage, that set the *Post* apart. The *Post* also led all outlets in the prominence accorded the story, with 12 front-page headlines. By contrast, the *Times* ran only 24 stories, including two on the front page, and five editorials or op-ed pieces. Even the weekly *Amsterdam News* printed 13 items, including four news stories on the front page, in the two issues included in our sample period.

Broadcast coverage was equally diverse. WABC was the clear leader, with 45 stories totaling over 83 minutes of airtime. That was more than half again as much time as any other station devoted to the story. The other major network affiliates (WCBS and WNBC) ran fewer stories combined than WABC. Among the independents, Fox's WNYW led with 28 stories lasting nearly 55 minutes. WWOR and WPIX lagged far behind with only 16 stories between them.

Print coverage totaled 3,415 column inches, broadcast news 4.25 hours.

* We analyzed the April 29 and May 5 issues of the *Amsterdam News*, because the April 22 issue went to press too early to include any mention of the attack. Among the television outlets, we analyzed the 6:00 p.m. broadcasts of WNYW and WPIX and the 10:00 p.m. broadcast of WWOR.

** We were unable to procure the May 3 issue of *Newsday*.

Topics

Media attention quickly transcended the facts of the crime and the subsequent police investigation. The most heavily covered topics were neither of these, but rather the victim's story and public reaction to the attack (table 2). The victim's uncertain recovery became a compelling human-interest story that extended the normal period of press attention. But even this was eclipsed by coverage of the public reaction to the assault.

The assault gripped the public emotionally, and it seemed for a time that every New Yorker had both an opinion about it and the opportunity to express that opinion to a reporter. This was a specialty of the *Post*, which ran 48 items dealing with public reaction, twice as many as any other outlet. (By contrast, the *Post* gave only passing coverage to the victim, about half as much as the other two daily tabloids.) The *Times* stood out among dailies for its lack of coverage in these areas -- only six stories on the victim and 16 on public reaction. The weekly *Amsterdam News* also had a distinctive profile, with no stories on the victim or the facts of the crime, only one on the police investigation, but eight on public reaction. As we shall see, this paper's idiosyncratic approach to the story set it apart from the dailies.

Among the television outlets, WABC stood out by offering over twice as much coverage as any other station on the victim's background, her recovery, and the public's reaction. The other stations concentrated their airtime on more traditional crime-story topics, such as the attack itself and the ongoing police investigations (though WABC led in covering even these aspects).

The print media differed most markedly from television in considering the attack in the context of broader social problems. Thirty stories dealt extensively with contextual issues like the racial and class disparities in New York, government cutbacks in social programs, and the difficulties that working parents have in monitoring their teenaged children. All but two of these stories (93 percent) appeared in print. The leading source of social-context stories was the *Post*, with 11.

Framing the Story

We move from the broad contours of coverage to its substance. We asked first whether the media presented the crime in terms of certain conceptual frameworks that structured the audience's perception of it -- as a racial crime, for instance, or a crime against women, or an example of a sick or lawless society. It was not enough to mention such a factor in passing; it had to be directly related to the nature or larger meaning of the crime. Most coverage did not use such a framing device; it was absent in 74 percent of print and 97 percent of broadcast stories.

Eight such conceptual frameworks were identified, although some were introduced only to be rejected (table 3). Chief among them was the randomness of the attack, which the police called a "crime of opportunity." The crime's apparent lack of purpose or meaning beyond immediate gratification was cited 19 times, far more than any other factor.

On May 2, for example, *Times* columnist Tom Wicker wrote: "Ironically, the crime itself does not seem to have been stereotypical -- committed by drug addicts or hardened street criminals, drug related or racially motivated, or the product of definable social conditions." He concluded that the crime was "a chance event that could have happened to anyone unfortunate enough to have crossed the path of the wilding youths." Two days later, the *Times* repeated the point in an unsigned editorial: "Those arrested evidently did not act out of racial hostility, involvement with drugs or economic deprivation. They apparently believed they could get away with random brutality."

Tied for second, with 11 mentions each, were the notions that this was either a sexually motivated crime or an instance of interracial violence (without racial motivation). Almost as frequent, with ten mentions, were stories that portrayed the attack as an example of wild or lawless youth. For example, one *Newsday* story (April 25) began, "Driven by rage, sexual lust and boredom, free-floating bands of restless youths have preyed on New York City neighborhoods for a decade, say social workers and urban crime experts." An additional nine stories considered the crime within the framework of racial conflict.

Finally, five news items portrayed the crime as an example of our "sick society," and another five raised the issue of violent crimes against women (beyond merely describing the crime as a sexual assault). The arguments about a sick society ranged from discussions of the case at hand to critiques of the underlying social conditions alleged to produce such behavior. For example, the *Times* published (May 1) an op-ed piece by Elizabeth Sturtz that charged: "These kids look into the future and see nothing promising. They breathe the contagion of violence in a society where guns are worshiped and material objects and self-gratification are made to seem the aim of life."

In an era of heightened feminist consciousness, it is notable that complaints about the prevalence of crimes against women were raised so rarely, indeed no more often than charges of a generalized social sickness. Very few sources echoed the opinions of a Harlem woman quoted (April 26) in the *Daily News*: "It's a male and female thing. . . . That's what this is about. This happened to a woman"; or a female jogger quoted (April 21) in *Newsday*: "I've heard that stuff about joggers being safe because they don't carry money before. . . . But a woman can't leave home the thing the perverts and the two-legged animals want most -- their sexuality. . . . a woman who runs here at night is like Bambi in hunting season."

Explanations

With the early arrests of suspects, the story quickly became less a whodunit than a "whydunit." Why the crime occurred became the central question that animated media coverage (table 4). The 279 responses that were printed or aired ranged from the suspects' motives or mindsets to systemic factors that either predispose young people to violence or fail to prevent it from occurring. The vast majority of proffered explanations were simply asserted or affirmed. But we also noted those whose relevance or validity was denied.

Race was the explanation discussed most often in the media. It was cited 54 times, more than twice as often as any other possible cause. But its relevance was denied on 43 (80 percent) of those occasions. More than a third of these denials (14) appeared in the *Times*, but the pattern was similar in every other outlet except the *Amsterdam News*, which provided equal space to those who affirmed and those who denied the relevance of race.

Thus on April 26 the *Times* quoted a teenager from the suspects' neighborhood: "This is not a black and white issue. They hurt a woman and race is a cover-up. They are just bad kids." The same day the *Daily News* quoted an East Harlem mother: "No color mattered. It ain't about black and white. It's a male and female thing. The victim, she's a human. That's what this is about. This happened to a woman." Two days later the *Times* quoted a mother of two to the same effect: "It wasn't a group of blacks and Hispanics who raped this white woman, it was a group of children who raped this woman. I think they would have been as vicious with a black woman."

No television outlet ever asserted a racial motive, while seven broadcast statements specifically denying it.

The overwhelming rejection of a racial motive is unusual in media coverage of such an event. Our previous studies indicate that sociological explanations of events tend to be countered by competing explanations rather than simply and repeatedly denied. It suggests a kind of "Lady Macbeth syndrome," with the media providing a forum for sources concerned to defuse racial tensions exacerbated by a particularly abhorrent crime. Among the sources denying any racial motive were Mayor Koch, mayoral candidate David Dinkins, the police, and church leaders. Of the four unattributed statements to this effect, three appeared in the *New York Times*. We deal with the media's treatment of the racial dimension in more detail below.

After race, the explanations mentioned most often were the group dynamics or mob psychology of the attackers, the antisocial subculture of youth gangs, and the thesis of a "random act" -- the notion that this was an aberrant or otherwise unpremeditated crime. (This category included reports that the suspects themselves cited "fun" and "boredom" as their motives.)

Typical of the group-dynamics explanation was a *Daily News* quote (April 25) from a psychiatric social worker: "It's basically like a feeding frenzy by sharks. You get a group disinhibition where any conscience or moral controls that would prevent them from going out and doing anything they want -- even murder -- completely break down. There are no more rules." Sources who blamed the attack on contemporary youth culture tended to echo a writer on children's issues who argued (April 28) in the *Times*: "There is in this city among teen-agers, white and black, something that is anarchic. They feel that anything goes, that all the rules have broken down."

The notion of randomness was sometimes brought to fend off the topic of sociological explanations cited below. For example, *Newsday* quoted (April 25) Mayor Koch's statement: "That's what it is -- a gang-bang rape. You name one society [sic] reason that you can give to explain that. Most kids don't commit crimes. You're talking about an aberrant group." At other times the crime's very randomness was treated as a sign of a troubling, even chilling sociological phenomenon. Thus another article in the same issue of *Newsday* quoted journalist Bruce Porter: "These are just kids erupting. There really is not a precedent for this kind of unfocused rage. We are seeing the fiery tip of something we haven't explained."

These explanations were followed in frequency by a number of more traditional sociological background factors -- poverty, drugs (the pattern of violence associated within the drug subculture), media messages that encourage violent behavior, family breakdowns or inadequate parental supervision, cuts in government social programs, and social class (have-nots striking out against the haves). Some of these broadened out into lengthy perorations about the misdirected social policies that plant the seeds of violent crime. For example, Pete Hamill charged in the *Post*: "Under Reagan, violence became entwined with policy. You don't like the Sandinistas? Fine: Kill them. Having trouble in Beirut? Shell them. Don't care for the government in Grenada? Get rid of them at gunpoint. If violence was permissible for the government, who in government could lecture the American young to be pacific?" Dr. Roscoe Brown, Jr., was quoted (May 6) in a similar vein in the *Amsterdam News*:

[New York] has not learned that the violence and disrespect for the basic human needs and values we see and hear daily on sensationalized television programs and in the multi-colored headlines of our town's newspapers sends a message about the low value we place on human dignity. . . . So should our city be surprised that a group of Black and Hispanic youths acted out the violent rage that has been nurtured by our media and the way the city treats its citizens?

Explanations related to the attackers' poverty and the drug subculture were debated and rejected about as often as they were affirmed. For example, the *Daily News* reported (April 25) Mayor

Koch's rejection of the crime and poverty linkage: "The mayor said he refused to accept poverty or discrimination as the root causes of the attack. 'Poor people overwhelmingly don't commit crimes,' he said."

References to the media's role mostly referred to concerns about violence in television, movies, and rap music. For example, a *Post* column cited (April 24) Cardinal O'Connor's complaint about "the inordinate power of television and movies that glorify sex and violence." And the *Times* quoted a Johns Hopkins professor who warned: "Dim and troubled people will take very powerful suggestions from the media. . . . How can the criminal values of many of the action shows help but have an effect?"

Thus the assault was most often explained as a random act or a product of group dynamics (25 citations apiece), followed closely by youth subculture (24) and the negative impact of media messages (20). This debate was carried on mainly in the newspapers, where six out of every seven explanations (86 percent) appeared. The only explanations offered with any frequency on television were race, youth culture, and "random act."

The assault was least often explained in terms of male-female relations and minority subcultures. We found only six references to the abuse of women as evidence of virility. One reference made in passing is worth noting. It came in an April 24 *Newsday* interview with a Brooklyn Bad Boys Club member: "If you are any kind of bad boy, you don't need to do that to a broad. There's too many broads wild to do it already. All you got to do is be holding. That's what money is for -- clothes, women, fun, get high." Minority subcultural models, which are often used to explain patterns of violence, the second-class status of women, etc., within urban populations, were offered only twice and rejected both times.

Exploring the Racial Angle

A persistent theme in media coverage of the assault was concern that the crime and its aftermath would worsen relations between blacks and whites in New York. We coded every viewpoint published or broadcast about the impact the crime might have on any aspect of life in the city (table 5). By far the most common view was the fear that it would increase racial tension or encourage negative stereotypes of nonwhites. As 15-year-old Kai Lewis put it (April 26) in the *Post*, "We aren't all like that and I hope people don't stereotype us as being like those kids." This opinion appeared 29 times; nearly half the citations (13) appeared in the *Times*; *Daily News* reporter Mike McAlary developed this theme at length on April 26:

The phone lines to this newspaper are busy with people screaming, "Call the case for what it is. Black savages rape white girl." No one is even making an attempt to mask their racism. . . . Manhattan prosecutor Robert Morgenthau . . . announce[d] that the case had nothing to do with race. But no one wanted to hear. The newspapers came out in the morning and we have a bias incident complete with the quote: "Let's go get whitey." It's doubtful, I am told, that the words were even said. . . . But the words are right there in the newspaper, stamped into our brains. Now mothers in East Harlem . . . find themselves on trial.

Discussions of the crime's impact on criminal justice finished a distant second, with 12 opinions expressed. These included calls for toughening the juvenile-justice system, restoring the death penalty, and preventing vigilantism.

As if in response to such concerns, several other race-related themes appeared repeatedly in the

coverage. The most frequent of these concerned the need to heal racial wounds opened by the attack. Such statements appeared 22 times, split almost evenly between print (12) and television (10). For example, the *Times* quoted (April 26) the president of the Schomburg Plaza Residents' Council (where several suspects lived), who led a prayer vigil for the victim: "Through prayer we can heal the wounds on her body and the racial wounds this has caused to society. . . ." The need for racial healing was featured most prominently in *Newsday* (six citations) and on WABC (five times).

Nearly as common was a rejection of the notion that this crime somehow indicted the black community as a whole or reflected negative cultural patterns characteristic of minority populations. This argument was advanced only once. It was rejected 15 times, most often in the pages of the *Post* (seven instances). Thus, on April 26 the *Post* quoted a black teenager: "I feel bad I have to be associated with people like that. All blacks shouldn't be painted with the same brush." Similarly, the *Times* quoted (April 28) one Manhattanite: "People scream it's a racial episode, but I disagree. There are very good black people and very bad white people. . . ."

There was greater willingness to interpret the attack as an indictment of behavior within teen subcultures. For example, the *Times* quoted (April 26) a Harlem teenager: "This is not racial. It has to do with peer pressure. Kids follow each other. They wouldn't say this is wrong when among friends." Variations on this argument were raised nearly as often as the responsibility of the black community (13 times), but it was affirmed more often than it was rejected (54 to 46 percent).

Concern over the impact of this incident on minorities even spread into the debate over the justice system. This aspect of the coverage was mainly a forum for calls to "get tough" on crime and violent offenders. Nonetheless, the question of racial bias in the juvenile-justice system was raised 11 times. We coded eight assertions that the system was biased against minorities, while only one source defended it against the charge (the others reached no conclusion). These charges were raised most often by activists like Reverend Al Sharpton and attorney Alton Maddox and by one suspect's attorney. For example, the *Post* reported (April 24) Sharpton's charge that "the white teens involved in the Howard Beach attack on a black man were granted bail, unlike these teens."

Another indication of the media's sensitivity to racial issues was the frequent comparisons of the Central Park assault to other interracial crimes (table 6). There were 55 print mentions of prior incidents, led by Howard Beach (20), Tawana Brawley (8), and Bernhard Goetz (5). However, only 33 of these sought to compare either the facts of the cases or the public's responses. And only 30 percent of the comparisons found some similarity between the current case and a previous one, while 70 percent pointed out differences or warned against faulty comparisons.

By far the largest number of comparisons appeared in the *Amsterdam News*, whose two issues contained 43 percent of all comparisons. The *Amsterdam News* repeatedly counterpoised the Central Park assault against instances of blacks attacked by white policemen or mobs, such as Michael Griffith (Howard Beach) Derrick Tyrus, Michael Stewart, Akeem Davis, and even the Scottsboro Boys (seven young blacks sentenced to death in Alabama in 1931 for raping two white girls). For example, the April 29 issue included an interview with the suspects' attorney Golin Moore, who alleged a pattern of rapid arrests in black-on-white crimes but a lack of arrests in white-on-black crimes. The story contrasted "fashion model Marla Hanson, Dr. Kathryn Hinnant of Bellevue Hospital and the Marshank brothers of Staten Island, all of whom were attacked by African Americans," with the absence of arrests in the cases of "Tawana Brawley . . . Derrick Antonio Tyrus of Staten Island, . . . Akeem Davis of Brooklyn's Park Slope community, and Frederick Pinckley in Williamsburg."

Other sources were restrained in raising comparisons to other racial incidents, only six sources

pointing out similarities and 12 denying them out of 393 news items. For example, the *Times* ran only three comparisons (all to Howard Beach) and *Newsday* published only two (one to Howard Beach and one to Tawana Brawley). All six television stations combined for only seven such mentions, only one of which found a point of similarity. Thus -- with the exception of the *Amsterdam News* -- the reluctance to find a racial aspect to the crime extended to a reluctance to find points of comparisons to previous racial incidents.

Finally, perhaps the ultimate test of the media's sensitivity to the racial angle was their willingness to air complaints about racial bias in their own coverage. Most of the sources that expressed concern about the heavy media coverage attributed it to racial attitudes harmful to minorities. This argument appeared 40 times, split evenly between those who asserted that the race of the victim increased the attack's visibility (22) and those who made the point indirectly by asserting that black-on-black crime received less coverage than black-on-white crime. Only four sources pointed to the victim's upper-class background as a reason for media interest, and none linked the amount of coverage to either the sexual nature of the crime or the amount of violence involved.

The *Amsterdam News* led with nine references to racial bias in the media coverage, all but one criticizing the lack of coverage of black-on-black crimes. The *Times* and *Daily News* were close behind with eight, although the *Times* took the opposite tack of pointing directly to the victim's race in seven of the eight instances we coded. For example, the *Daily News* quoted (April 22) one Harlem resident: "If it were a black woman in a black neighborhood, no one would care about this"; and four days later, another: "You wouldn't be here if she was black."

The *Amsterdam News* went further, publishing a lengthy front-page story on May 6 contrasting this case with the recent rape and murder of a black woman in Central Park that received less press attention. The story quoted Reverend Calvin Butts: "We haven't heard a thing about this incident in the press. . . . This is just another indication that class and race have a lot to do with the value people put on life." And Father Lawrence Lucas was quoted as saying: "This is another example of the fact that in this society, the press, the police, district attorney and religious leaders consider white life at a far greater value than black life."

This alleged link between race and news was the leading subject of controversy over the media's handling of the story. By comparison, only eight sources (led by the *Amsterdam News* with three items) complained about sensationalistic, irresponsible, or otherwise questionable media coverage. As in the debate over the crime itself, the racial angle dominated the debate over the media's treatment of it.

For all the hullabaloo over media attention to black-on-white crime, however, surprisingly few stories even identified the race of either suspects or victim (table 7). Only 41 news items, one in ten, identified the race of one or more suspects, and even fewer, 34 or one in 12, specified that the victim was white. Moreover, the outlet most likely to identify suspects as blacks was the *Amsterdam News*. When its nine references are deleted, the remaining media revealed the suspects' racial background only 32 times, or in one of every 12 news items -- the same proportion that mentioned the victim's race. The number rises when accompanying pictures are included as identifiers (especially for television). But even including both words and pictures, three out of four items contained no information about the suspects' racial background.

Negative Language

If the media were so careful to avoid or refute assertions that the actions of these youths

reflected more broadly on minorities, then why did the coverage prove controversial? The answer is that objections were raised not so much to what was said as to how it was said. The quality of language, particularly the use of harsh terms to describe the suspects, was itself seen as inflammatory or discriminatory. As Congressman Floyd Flake charged (April 29) in the *Amsterdam News*: "The press clearly gives the impression of Blacks as being animals in a wolfpack. And by placing these young men individually in the paper, the press did their historical stereotyping that inevitably leads to more division among the various ethnic groups in the city."

To evaluate this aspect of the coverage, we noted every instance of emotion-charged language to describe the attackers or the crime itself (table 8). Negative imagery used to describe the attackers or their behavior fell into four distinct categories: terms that evoked animality (e.g., "wolfpack," "herd," "bestial"); criminality ("thugs," "gang," "crime spree"); aggressiveness ("marauders," "war party," "hungry for action"), and a catchall category of colorful negative terminology ("wildeyed teens," "fiends," "these goddamned people"). The repeated use of such language gave the coverage a heightened emotional or sensationalistic flavor.

Altogether we counted 390 uses of strongly negative words or phrases to denigrate the attackers. Nearly half of this total, 185 uses, consisted of animal imagery. For example, one *Daily News* editorial began: "There was a full moon Wednesday night. A suitable backdrop for the howling of wolves. A vicious pack ran rampant through Central Park." The references to animality were perhaps typified by Congressman Charles Rangel's statement (*Amsterdam News*, April 29) that he had "never seen such an animalistic attack"; in fact, "calling them animals and wolfpack is an insult to animals and wolves." The *Post*'s Pete Hamill made (April 25) the same point in even stronger terms by decrying "a bizarre new form of life . . . who call themselves men . . . the mutants among us." He concluded, "And for now, we should stop labeling wolves."

The second largest category of emotion-charged language, with 122 references, disparaged the attackers by using epithets that evoked their criminality. A much smaller number of references (45) focused on the attackers' aggressiveness. Finally, there were some highly charged descriptions that defied categorization, other than to express anger at the type of people who could commit such a crime.

Of course, many pieces combined several of these images. For example, on May 1 the *Post*'s Mary McGrory, no hard-had conservative, was moved to call the attackers "life's losers," "a pack . . . out 'wilding,'" "fiends," and "punks." A *Newsday* story on April 24 condemned "wolf-pack stuff," and "random pack violence." And in another column, Hamill called (April 23) the group "demented," "a savage little pack," and "these brutalized little sociopaths."

As these examples suggest, negative characterizations were most prominent in the tabloids, especially the *Post*. Just under 90 percent of them appeared in the newspapers, and the *Post* led all other outlets in all four categories, accounting for 30 percent of all negative imagery. The *Post*'s lead in negative language was particularly pronounced in the catchall category of unusual colorful phrases; its writers contributed 60 percent of this total. For example, on April 25 columnist Jerry Nachman likened the attackers to "an invading melanoma" and an "anonymous, faceless tumor mass." The next day he came up with an even more graphic metaphor: a "rolling mass of pus." But this couldn't top Hamill's grisly image from April 23: "And then, out of the New York darkness, comes the lewd and wide-eyed mask of death. Grinning."

Even this outpouring of obloquy against the attackers was dwarfed by denunciations of the attack itself. The brutality and randomness of the crime were repeatedly evoked in verbiage that expressed outrage and horror. The number of times emotionally charged phrases were used to depict the crime was nearly twice that of epithets aimed at the attackers (768 vs. 390). The phrases

fell into three categories: descriptions of the violence ("savage," "bloody," "gang bang"), emotional evocations of randomness ("senseless," "frenzy," "wilding"), and negative reactions to the event ("chilling," "abhorrent," "outrage").

We coded 322 references to the violence of the crime. The random or unprovoked quality of the attack sparked 274 emotional references. Finally, 172 references expressed the negative reactions of the populace or the writer. For example, a *Times* editorial condemned (April 21) the attack's "savagery" and "atrocities"; *Newsday* quoted Mayor Koch on the "savagery" of "this terrible crime . . . this outrageous act"; the *Post*'s Ray Kerrison decried "the appalling savagery" as "obscene" and "horrifying"; and the *Amsterdam News* quoted an assistant district attorney who claimed, "This was the most vicious and brutal assault that has occurred in New York City to date."

Once again, colorful language was mainly the property of the press (80 percent of all instances vs. 20 percent on television). And the *Post* again led all other outlets, far outdistancing its competitors in strong depictions of violence and negative reactions. It was the *Times*, however, that led in descriptions of randomness, reflecting its extensive coverage of the phenomenon of "wilding."

Combining terms applied to both the crime and the attackers produced an overall total of 1,158 instances of negative phrasing. The *Post* was the clear leader in emotionally charged verbiage with 309, about half again as many as any other outlet. Roughly similar levels were found at the *Times* (200), *Newsday* (211), and the *Daily News* (193). Television lagged far behind, with emotion-laden language evident roughly in proportion to each outlet's amount of coverage -- highest at WABC, followed by the other network affiliates and then the independents.

The Suspects' Backgrounds

These vivid and frequent denunciations of the attackers and the crime were set against a backdrop of puzzlement over the apparent emotional and social stability of the suspects. Indeed, reports of their "positive" personality traits or demeanors became a kind of ironic counterpoint to the brutality of the crime with which they were charged (table 9).

We coded 110 descriptions of the suspects' personal traits prior to the alleged attack. Ninety-two of these (84 percent) were positive (including terms such as "non-violent," "decent," and "well-adjusted"), and only seven (6 percent) were negative, and the rest were neutral. This refrain was sounded most often in *Newsday* (28 times), although such characterizations appeared regularly in all the daily papers. Television mostly failed to develop this aspect of the story, with the exception of WABC (which aired half of the 20 video references coded).

Thus a *Newsday* story on April 22 quoted one suspect's friend, "They're good boys." The reporter observed, "They could be good students and polite sons, but they could be transformed when surrounded by a wilding pack . . ." Nearly a week later another *Newsday* piece quoted (April 28) one suspect's father, "He's a good kid"; another's girlfriend, "He was nice and everything . . . it shocked me . . . I knew him so well"; and the teacher of a third, who called him "well-behaved" and "likable."

It is typical of crime coverage to eulogize the victim. In this case, however, the suspects' personalities were extolled even more often than the victim's (table 10). She was termed "pretty," "personable," "smart," "diligent," etc. only 70 times, although positive reports of her accomplishments or social potential ("rising star," "fast track," etc.) would bring the total up to 114 encouraging words.

Obviously the intent of this coverage was not to compare the suspects favorably with the victim. It was intended to contrast the brutal behavior during the attack they were alleged to have committed with their apparently exemplary behavior prior to it. But the comparison points out how important this contrast was to the story. It drove home the theme of "good kids turned bad," which contributed to the sense that their alleged crime was shocking, unexpected, or incomprehensible. Thus the *Times* quoted (April 28) one East Sider: "That was the first shock: They're average city kids. If they were street kids you could blame it on poverty. In a sense they were anybody's kids. Here you don't know where to put the blame."

Similarly, frequent references to the victim's attractiveness, intelligence, and once-bright prospects heightened the dramatic contrast and strengthened the implication that no one is safe. *Newsday* columnist Jimmy Breslin played on this contrast in an April 21 column that raised the specter of two New Yorks on a collision course: "The young woman . . . could not, with all her schooling and all her success . . . envision a kid like this. . . . If she had realized that the other New York throws out kids like this by . . . tens of thousands, she wouldn't have been running alone at night in the park."

Public Reaction

If there was an inflammatory quality to some of the language used to describe this story, the pot was also kept boiling by reports of public outrage and associated calls for crackdowns on crime. We noted earlier that reports on public reaction provided the single most frequent topic of coverage. We also measured the substance of those reports (table 11). They served most frequently as a means to convey public anger (41 instances), followed by expressions of shock (20), fear (20), and sorrow (19).

These accounts of public reaction provided one of the best indicators of differences in the flavor of coverage at the various media outlets. As we found with colorful language, this was a specialty of print coverage. The press ran two reports of public reaction for every one that appeared on television (66 to 34). And once again, the *Post* led all print outlets, by an even larger margin than its use of strong language. In fact, the *Post* ran twice as many public-response items (30) as any other news organization. The *Post* was particularly prone to print expressions of anger at the crime -- almost twice as many as the other four newspapers combined. At the other end of the print spectrum was the *Times*, which ran only three examples of citizen reaction.

Thus on April 25 the *Post* editorialized, "The anger sweeping through the city . . . is a healthy sign, an indication that New Yorkers are not yet willing to surrender their city to savagery." The next day a *Times* editorial began, "The news inspires horror and outrage." The *Post* columnist Pete Hamill provided (April 23) one expression of sorrow by quoting a black resident of the city, "Thing like that happens, it breaks everybody's heart -- the family, friends, hell, anyone with some kinda feelings." And in the *Amsterdam News*, Dr. Roscoe Brown, Jr., acknowledged that "all New Yorkers are repulsed and outraged by the Central Park attack," before asking, "What is the value of reiterating such phrases as 'wolf-pack' and 'savages' in the press and on television?"

Differences among broadcast outlets were equally striking. WABC (12) and WCBS (13) vied for the lead in airing expressions of public outrage, concern, etc., while WNBC refrained from broadcasting any emotional reactions. The remaining stations confined themselves to recording a few expressions of public anger. The emotional impact of man-on-the-street statements was, of course, heightened by the visual medium. For example, WABC aired (April 22) a denunciation by a neighbor of a suspect who concluded angrily, "I got no patience with any of them. I hope you get 'em!"

Preventing Violent Crime

The sharp differences among outlets in their use of language and reporting of public reaction extended to one other controversial topic -- media-borne calls for a crackdown on crime. We analyzed all discussion of measures intended to prevent future attacks of this sort (table 12). Most of these concerned calls for tougher penalties, more police, or altering the behavior of runners. The debate over tougher penalties received the most coverage. The 43 citations ran nearly four to one in favor of such measures as restoring the death penalty and trying juveniles as adults. (This did not include Donald Trump's paid advertisement, except when cited in news stories.) Much of this debate took place in the *Post*, which accounted for 60 percent of all references to increased penalties for criminals.

Thus on April 23 the *Post* quoted extensively from Mayor Koch's address to the Columbian Lawyers Association, in which he called for treating juvenile offenders as adults: "Anyone who committed this rape is not a child. They should be subject to the full range of imprisonment." In a similar vein, the *Daily News* quoted (April 28) Representative Chuck Douglas (R-NH), "If you're gonna do big boy crime, you're gonna do big boy time." And a *Newsday* story quoted (April 30) the headline of Donald Trump's newspaper ad, "Bring back the death penalty! Bring back our police!" On the other side of the law-and-order issue, a *Times* editorial titled "Lunging for Death" lamented (May 4) that "some people abandon talk of deterrence and speak of primitive vengeance. . . . The death penalty would only pander to an ugly mob mood."

An associated theme was the need for more police or increased patrols in Central Park, mentioned by 30 sources (including two who questioned the efficacy of such measures). Once again the *Post* led with nine mentions. For example, on April 23 it quoted mayoral candidate Ronald Lauder's assertion that "an incident like this might not have happened" if there were more police patrols in central Park. If these two categories are combined to form a single "law-and-order" dimension, the *Post* accounted for nearly half the discussion of stronger law-enforcement measures (35 of 73 mentions, or 48 percent). At the other end of the print spectrum was the *Times*, with only two mentions, even fewer than the weekly *Amsterdam News*.

Not all the calls for preventive measures were calls for law and order. Greater prudence by runners was urged even more often than stronger penalties for criminals (by 36 vs. 34 sources favoring such measures). These measures were urged mainly by *Newsday*, which ran 44 percent of all suggestions that runners avoid the park at night, stay below 90th Street, run in pairs, etc. Typical of this theme was advice from the often-quoted Fred Lebow, president of the New York Roadrunners Club (*Newsday*, April 21): "If you run late in the evening, do not run above 90th Street. Don't wear jewelry, don't wear a Walkman. If you've got to run at night run on the Fifth Avenue sidewalk."

There is an historical irony to this aspect of the coverage, because Central Park was conceived by its creators as a place where all classes of people could peacefully mingle. This assumption lasted well into the twentieth century. Thus the transformation of the park into a dangerous place ("the ultimate nightmare") holds deep resonance as a symbol of the breakdown of urban life. Hence the *Daily News's* editorial cry on April 22: "The city must struggle constantly to insure that Central Park is open to everyone, all the time. . . . Retreating behind doors is like telling the wolf packs: Go on, the city is yours."

On the subject of crime prevention, television was less in evidence than the newspapers, and its priorities differed significantly from those of the print media. Television aired only six sources who called for harsher penalties, compared to 12 who advocated a greater police presence and 15 who debated the need for runners to change their behavior (12 favored such changes; 3 were

opposed). Television's contribution to this debate was headed by WABC, which aired eight of the 12 calls for more police and 11 of the 15 sources who debated the behavior of runners.

Conclusion

How did the New York media cover the story of "wilding" in Central Park? Our study uncovered a schizoid quality to the coverage, a split between the flamboyant populist approach of tabloid journalism and the concerns of social responsibility. The populist element surfaced in the use of colorful and emotional language; the frequent reports of public outrage, which may feed back into and intensify the public mood; and the calls for "law and order" measures. At the same time, there was a continuing effort to defuse racial tensions by denying that racial motives or interracial differences were relevant to the crime.

Although the racial angle played a major role in this story, our content analysis found no evidence that the coverage played on racial fears or hatreds. On the contrary, the question of race was repeatedly raised in order to deny its relevance to the crime, to warn against reviving racial tension, and to call for a healing process to defuse any racial animosity that might exist. The denial of racial relevance was found not only in the *Times* but in the tabloids (including the *Post*), which pushed the story much harder and in a more emotional vein. Only the *Amsterdam News* insisted on a racial angle, by presenting the crime and its coverage within the framework of white America's injustices to blacks.

Indeed, one might argue that the media treatment of race cut two ways: they helped diffuse tensions, yet they may have missed an opportunity to confront the racial undertones that well up in cases of interracial violence, even when no overt racial motive is present. WABC's Jeff Greenfield recently argued (July 8) in the *Times* that race

is an issue that the political and journalistic establishment cannot or will not talk about . . . race seems to take otherwise intelligent and thoughtful people and strike them dumb, in both senses of that word . . . I have heard . . . last spring's Central Park terror [linked] to the "poor role models" provided by Richard Nixon, Oliver North, Ivan Boesky . . . -- as if the behavior of these public figures counted for a tenth as much as the culture of remorseless violence that has become an epidemic in many black and Hispanic neighborhoods. [Race] will either be talked about openly, honestly . . . or it will remain underground, poisoning the wellsprings of discourse, hidden in the whispers within the city's tribes, emerging only in the form of angry denunciations across sealed borders.

Our study located several other elements, rooted in traditional news values, that help account for the heavy and emotionally intense "play" the story received. First, the randomness of such a brutal crime fueled public fears. "Stranger crimes" are the most threatening, because they remind people that they themselves (i.e., anyone) could have been the victim. A neighbor of one suspect put it bluntly (April 21) on WABC: "It could have been me. It could have been her. It could have been anybody. If they'll do that person like that they'll do me, same way."

Second, the youth of the suspects, combined with their reported positive personal traits and stable social backgrounds, flew in the face of traditional explanations for such behavior. The "good kids go bad" story is a variant of the "man bites dog" turnabout that lies at the core of what makes news. This aspect of the story was strengthened by widespread puzzlement and conflicting opinion over *why* these kids "went bad." The apparent failure of traditional sociological categories to account for this behavior added an element that was at once tantalizing and disturbing.

Overlaid onto an already heightened concern with violent crime, this element also stoked fears of a city under siege by criminal elements, especially violent young males. The apparent unlikelihood of these particular youths committing such a crime made the problem and associated fear (hence the news value) seem much greater. Third, the victim's struggle to recover kept the story alive by providing a daily news peg for continuing speculation, condemnations, and political pronouncements, all duly reported.

The central news value at work was unpredictability -- the unusual brutality, the apparent randomness of the crime, the unexpected inability to provide a standard sociological explanation, and, finally, the uncertain outcome of the victim's struggle to recover.

The operation of traditional news values must be considered by those who would ascribe the heavy and emotional coverage to more malign forces ranging from sensationalism to racism. But this does not absolve the media from responsibility for the news judgments that shaped their coverage. The news is not a mirror on reality but a prism whose refracted images are formed not only by events but by the choices and perspectives of journalists and news organizations. This can be illustrated most clearly by comparing coverage of the same events by different outlets. For example, our content analysis revealed three quite different but internally coherent perspectives in the *Times*, the *Post*, and the *Amsterdam News*.

The tone of the *Times's* coverage was cerebral, conceptual, informed by sociological analysis. A majority of all "experts" quoted (58 percent) appeared in the *Times*. It also seemed aimed at defusing the passions aroused by the crime. The *Times* featured by far the least coverage among the daily papers. It also ran the fewest stories on the public's reaction to the crime and the victim's struggle to recover, thereby downplaying the story's empathetic elements. Significantly, the *Times* led all other outlets in one major area -- the rejection of race as an explanatory factor. In fact, the relevance of race was denied in the pages of the *Times* at least twice as often as anywhere else. The paper also featured only three comparisons to any other case of interracial violence.

Among the dailies, the *Times* printed by far the fewest calls for increased law-enforcement efforts, the fewest negative descriptions of the attackers, the fewest positive descriptions of the victim, and fewest expressions of adverse public reaction. Alone among the local press, the *Times* treated the crime as a "normal" story, a regrettable and troublesome event, but one that carried the danger of rousing popular passions that might unleash racial hostilities.

The *Post* was the paradigm of everything that made the coverage controversial. It gave the story the full tabloid treatment, replete with blaring headlines, editorial outrage, angry letters, and impassioned prose. The *Post's* coverage was the heaviest of any outlet -- 101 news items (over seven per day on average). It gave the most play to public reaction and printed the most calls for getting tough on crime. It used the most emotional language to describe the crime and the attackers (averaging over three animal references per day) and to express public anger or aversion (ten times as often as the *Times*). At the same time, the *Post* was second only to the *Times* in rejecting the relevance of racial explanations, and it was second to none in printing denials that the crime indicted the black community.

Thus the *Post's* coverage was not racist but populist in tone. A singular feature of the paper's approach was its willingness to print scores of letters, many (but not all) agreeing with its editorial expressions of outrage at violent crime and demands for swift and severe punishment. The *Post* seemed to view itself as the agent for expressing public anger over the social breakdown associated with urban crime, even as the *Times* sought to temper popular passions. Hence the *Post's* editorial endorsement on April 25 of "the anger sweeping through the city" as "one of the few encouraging developments to emerge from that obscene episode."

The *Amsterdam News* provided an alternative populist perspective on the crime, one that drew on black suspicion of calls for "law and order" as implicitly racist. Ironically, that very perspective made this the outlet most likely to focus on the crime through the prism of racial consciousness. Despite running only one issue for every seven by the dailies, this weekly paper ran the most comparisons to previous instances of racial violence, identified the suspects' race more often than any other outlet, and printed the most charges that the (white) media's attention to the case was due to racial factors.

The differences in these three newspapers were perhaps best expressed in the divergent editorial responses to calls for a return to the death penalty. A *Post* editorial titled "Channel Your Outrage: Demand the Death Penalty" asserted:

The people of New York are no longer willing to be seduced by the claim that society is somehow responsible for the behavior of the marauding thugs who terrorize the city. New Yorkers are interested in swift and sure punishment, not in a groping, pointless search for "root causes."

The *Times* editorial on May 4 was titled "Lunging for Death." It condemned talk of "primitive vengeance," endorsed Governor Cuomo's veto of earlier capital-punishment legislation, and argued that "the death penalty would only pander to an ugly mob mood." The *Amsterdam News* ran (May 6) a front-page editorial signed by editor in chief Wilbur Tatum that called for Mayor Koch's resignation:

With the rape in Central Park of a young white woman, Koch's vitriol rose to another height and set another standard for indecency that trumped Trump, in spades. . . . Quite apart from his lunatic advocacy of the death penalty screeching so loudly in our ears that we hear "Death Penalty . . . for Blacks," we see this now as Koch's reelection anthem, and "KILL THEM" as his flag.

Beyond such obvious differences in the coverage, the importance of news judgment is illustrated by the story that no one reports, the angle that is not pursued. A good example is the absence of reporting on the Central Park rape as a crime against women. Concern over the crime's interracial aspect, along with random violence or "wilding," established a conceptual framework for the media's coverage that virtually excluded concerns about gender-based brutality.

It was not until May 5, over two weeks after the crime and long after its context was established in the public consciousness, that this argument appeared in fully developed form. In a *Times* op-ed piece entitled "Rape -- The Silence Is Criminal," Brooklyn District Attorney Elizabeth Holtzman argued: "Explanations that rely on race or clan alone miss the key role that gender played: The jogger was victimized because she was a woman, and the boys apparently acted out of a misguided notion of how to prove their manhood."

Thus the choices that journalists made were responsible for the tone and focus of the story, in all its consistency in some areas and diversity in others. The media appeared caught between an apparent desire to act as good citizens and avoid raising volatile social and racial issues, and a desire to express in strong terms their own and the public's anger over a brutal crime allegedly committed by young men who were poor and black against a young woman who was well off and white.

For the most part the coverage echoed Mayor Koch, as quoted (April 25) in *Newsday*: "The issue in this case is not semantics, but the savagery of those who committed this terrible crime. I believe this outrageous act should be condemned in the strongest possible language. . . ." In some

quarters, however, using the "strongest possible language" was interpreted as an expression of racial hostility.

We have demonstrated that the media did not overly pander to racial feelings in any of the several ways available to them. We cannot entirely preclude the possibility that a kind of shared code existed whereby journalists and their audiences understood that highly negative references were appropriate to black criminal suspects, or that a heightened attention level was warranted by the charge of a black-on-white sex crime. But that requires an exercise in semiotics rather than content analysis. Only by comparison to other notorious cases of both black-on-white and white-on-black violence can the inner meaning of the Central Park rape case be assessed fully and finally. That study remains to be undertaken.

Table 1
Amount of Coverage, April 20 - May 4

	Times	Newsday	Post	Daily News	Amsterdam News	All print	WABC	WCBS	WNBC	WWOR	WNYW	WPIX	All TV	Total
News stories	24	64	46	49	7	190	45	20	14	9	28	7	123	313
Front page	(2)	(8)	(12)	(8)	(4)	(34)								
Edits/cols	5	16	13	3	5	42								
Letters	1	1	42	6	1	51								
All items	30	81	101	58	13	293	45	20	14	9	28	7	123	406
Space/time	530"	948"	957'	704"	276"	3415"	83 min. 33 sec.	49 min. 55 sec.	40 min. 8 sec.	11 min. 38 sec.	54 min. 51 sec.	14 min. 5 sec.	254 min. 20 sec.	

Table 2
Most Frequent Topics of Stories

	Times	Newsday	Post	Daily News	Amsterdam News	All print	WABC	WCBS	WNBC	WWOR	WNYW	WPIX	All TV	Total
Public reaction	16	24	49	18	8	114	18	7	6	7	9	1	48	162
The victim	6	24	12	20	0	62	28	13	10	7	11	10	79	141
Police investl- gation	9	11	17	11	1	49	13	7	4	1	8	7	40	89
Facts of the crime	3	5	7	5	0	20	7	5	2	1	4	1	20	40
Social problems	6	5	11	8	1	31	1	0	0	0	0	1	2	33

Table 3
Stories Offering a Framework, whether Accepted or Rejected,
for Understanding the Crime

	<u>Print</u>	<u>TV</u>	<u>Total</u>
No framework	170	119	289
Crime of opportunity	11	8	19
Sexual motive	6	5	11
Interracial crime (no racial motive)	11	0	11
Wild youth	8	2	10
Racial motive	9	0	9
Sick society	5	0	5
Crime against women	3	2	5
Class motive (poor vs. rich)	3	0	3

Table 4
Most Frequent Explanations of the Attack

Order of fre- quency	Explanation	No. of stories
-------------------------------------	--------------------	---------------------------

Total mentions

1	Race	54
2	Random act	26
2	Group dynamics	26
4	Youth culture	25
5	Poverty	22
6	Drug culture	21
7	Media	20
8	Family factors	16
9	Gov't cutbacks	16
10	Social class	

Explanations affirmed

1	Random act	25
1	Group dynamics	25
3	Youth culture	24
4	Media	20
5	Family factors	14
6	Drug culture	12
7	Race	11
8	Poverty	10
8	Gov't cutbacks	10
8	School failures	10

Explanations rejected

1	Race	43
2	Poverty	12
3	Drugs	9
4	Gov't cutbacks	5
5	Social class	2

Table 5
Impact of the Crime: Outcomes Mentioned

	<u>Mentions</u>
Hurt minorities, race relations	29
Harsher response to crime	12
No long-term effect	3
Suspicion of teenagers	2
Hurt tourism	2

Table 6
References to Previous Racial Incidents

Incident was:	Times	Newsday	Post	Daily News	Amsterdam News	All print	WABC	WCBS	WNBC	WWOR	WNYW	WPIX	All TV	Total
Similar	1	1	1	3	4	10							1	11
Different	1	0	6	5	11	23							3	26
No comparison	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>22</u>							<u>3</u>	<u>25</u>
TOTAL	3	2	15	11	24	55							<u>7</u>	<u>62</u>

Table 7
Stories Identifying Race of Victim or Suspects

	Times	Newsday	Post	Daily News	Amsterdam News	All print	WABC	WCBS	WNBC	WWOR	WNYW	WPIX	All TV	Total
Victim	6	5	8	7	6	32	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	34 (8%)
Suspects	7	7	8	7	9	38	2	1	0	0	0	0	3	41 (10%)
Words (some- times with pictures)														
Pictures only	1	5	5	3	0	14	14	10	9	2	10	2	47	61 (15%)

Table 8
Instances of Highly Negative Language Applied to the Suspects
and the Crime

	Times	Newsday	Post	Daily News	Amsterdam News	All print	WABC	WCBS	WNBC	WWOR	WNYW	WPIX	All TV	Total
The suspects														
Animals	30	37	45	50	6	168	8	6	1	1	1	0	17	185
Aggressors	9	9	14	6	1	39	0	2	2	2	0	0	6	45
Criminals	20	25	36	25	2	108	1	3	5	2	3	0	14	122
Other negatives	1	3	23	6	0	33	3	0	1	1	0	0	5	38
Total	60	74	118	87	9	348	12	11	9	6	4	0	42	390
The crime														
Violence	35	54	85	40	20	234	29	19	18	4	18	0	88	322
Randomness	68	57	52	46	4	227	20	10	7	2	8	0	47	274
Negative re-action	32	26	54	20	14	151	8	7	1	1	4	0	21	172
Total	140	137	191	106	38	622	57	36	26	7	30	0	156	768
Total negative	200	211	309	193	47	960	69	47	35	12	34	0	198	1158

Table 9
Reports on Suspects' Prior Personal Traits

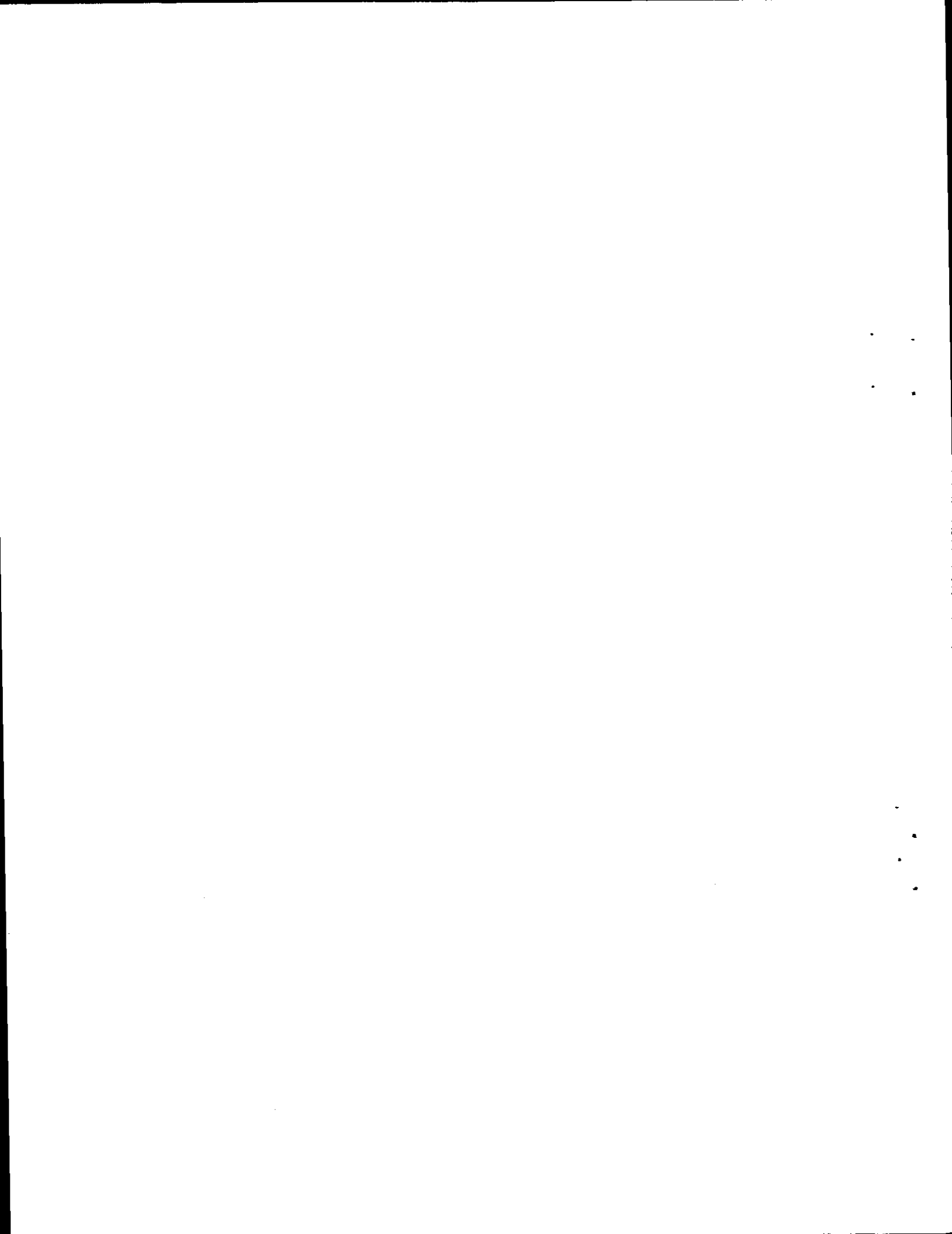
	Times	Newsday	Post	Daily News	Amsterdam News	All print	WABC	WCBS	WNBC	WWOR	WNYW	WPIX	All TV	Total
Positive	15	28	16	12	1	72	10	3	6	0	1	0	20	92
Negative	5	1	0	1	0	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
Neutral	<u>5</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>11</u>
TOTAL	25	31	18	15	1	90	10	3	6	0	1	0	20	110

Table 10
Positive Descriptions of the Victim

	Times	Newsday	Post	Daily News	Amsterdam News	All print	WABC	WCBS	WNBC	WWOR	WNYW	WPIX	All TV	Total
Personality	14	21	13	14	1	63	4	0	1	0	2	0	7	70
Social poten- tial	5	14	9	10	0	38	0	1	0	0	5	0	6	44
TOTAL	19	35	22	24	1	101	4	1	1	0	7	0	13	114

Table 11
Reports of Adverse Public Reaction

	Times	Newsday	Post	Daily News	Amsterdam News	All print	WABC	WCBS	WNBC	WWOR	WNYW	WPIX	All TV	Total
Anger	0	2	16	4	3	25	3	5	0	3	2	3	16	41
Shock	1	3	3	4	3	14	4	2	0	0	0	0	6	20
Fear	1	6	4	0	1	12	5	2	0	0	0	1	8	20
Sorrow	<u>1</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>19</u>
TOTAL	3	15	30	9	9	66	12	13	0	3	2	4	34	100



THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE
Institute of Human Relations
165 East 56th Street, New York, NY 10022-2746

September 1989

Single copy \$2.00
Quantity on request