VISIBILITY AND VICTIMIZATION: EXAMINING THE NEWSWORTHINESS OF MISSING WOMEN IN MAJORITY-MINORITY CITIES IN TEXAS

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the many missing women and girls in Texas whose stories were never told.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
MWWS	Missing White Woman Syndrome
BLM	Black Lives Matter
CRT	Critical Race Theory
CRF	Critical Race Feminist Theory
NamUs	National Missing and Unidentified Persons System Database

I. INTRODUCTION

"Every act of seeing is also an act of *not* seeing" – Sarah Stillman

The disappearances of Laci Peterson, Natalee Holloway, and most recently, Gabby Petito made national headlines and received round-the-clock, repeat news coverage for months. Laci Peterson was 27 years old and eight months pregnant when she disappeared from her California home on Christmas Eve of 2002 (Houston Chronicle 2003). Natalee Holloway was a recent high school graduate who vanished while on a class trip to Aruba in 2005 (Norton 2005). Most recently, 22-year-old Gabby Petito went missing while she was on a cross-country road trip with her fiancé in 2021 (Marchante 2021). Americans were personally invested in the missing young women and captivated by the intimate anecdotes of their lives. Ordinary citizens joined search parties, attended vigils, and prayed for their safe return. While the circumstances surrounding the women's disappearances were different, their demographics were not. All three women were young, attractive, educated, and white.

Although the stories of Laci, Natalee, and Gabby garnered a great deal of public interest, most cases of missing women and girls do not. According to the National Crime Information Center, 268,884 women and girls were reported missing in the United States in 2020 alone (National Crime Information Center 2021). As of this writing (April 2022) 8,321 women and girls are missing nationwide (National Missing and Unidentified Persons System 2021). With numbers this staggering and the public's apparent interest in missing persons cases, why do some stories of missing women and girls capture the public's attention and others do not? Recent studies show that while Black and Hispanic/Latina women and girls go missing at a disproportionately higher rate than

white women and girls (NPR 2021), those who are white are more likely to receive national news coverage, appear on the front page of newspapers, and receive more repeat news coverage than those who are nonwhite (Jeanis and Powers 2017; Slakoff and Fradella 2019; Slakoff and Brennan 2019).

Several reasons have been given for this disparity. One argument is that national newspapers publish more stories on missing white women because most of the United States population, and consequently the national audience, is white (United States Census Bureau, QuickFacts: United States 2021). Publishers may blame the "empathy gap" for the disparity, the idea that we are more likely to experience empathy for those who we relate to, while suggesting that white audiences care more about white crime (Sager 2016:3). This can be seen in the media's use of the phrase "she could be your…" (enter: daughter, sister, wife, mother) when describing a victim of violent crime. Some members of the media state that they can only report on what they are told by police, and any racial bias is due to gatekeeping by law enforcement (Liebler, Ahmad, and Gayle 2020).

Others suggest that the disparity in news coverage of missing women is due to implicit bias, "prejudice that is present but not consciously held or recognized" (Merriam-Webster 2021), which could result in white reporters unconsciously giving more attention to missing people who are white. Structural racism, "the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege" has also been cited as contributing to this issue (Bonilla-Silva 2018:15). Structural racism in the media benefits missing women who are white over missing women who are not white by giving their stories more attention and airtime. This argument proposes that it isn't necessarily the case that the predominantly white-owned media decides *not* to cover cases of missing

minority women, it's that it never occurred to them in the first place. (Liebler 2010).

One of the difficulties in determining the cause of these disparities is the disagreement in how terms such as "racism" are conceived (Bonilla-Silva 2018:14). Most individuals who are white associate racism with discrimination, while People of Color (POC) usually define racism as "systemic or institutionalized" (Bonilla-Silva 2018:14). Bonilla-Silva explains that throughout history, the concept of race creates a racial structure that favors Europeans (now referred to as "white") over non-Europeans (now referred to as "nonwhite") (Bonilla-Silva 2018:14-15). This can result in a number of conditions that disadvantage POC, including the difference in how missing Black and Brown women are treated in the media compared to missing white women.

Missing white woman syndrome (MWWS), first coined by influential journalist and author Gwen Ifill, is the phenomenon that deems missing white women as more newsworthy than missing women of color (Slakoff 2020; Slakoff and Fradella 2019; Sommers 2016; Stillman 2007). MWWS is important in our society both in theory and in practice. Because newsworthiness translates to significance, any "typecasting" of missing women and girls in the news may influence who we believe to be valuable, which victims matter most in society, and who deserves the resources needed to be found. While there have been numerous studies that prove MWWS does indeed exist on a national level, there are none that analyze articles of missing women and girls in local newspapers or newspapers with a predominantly minority audience. To test whether local newspapers give more media attention to local missing women (regardless of their race or socioeconomic status), and to examine if the racial makeup of the news audience impacts which missing women receive news coverage, I will conduct a mixed-method analysis of

missing women and girls in the local newspapers of five majority minority cities in Texas to see if MWWS still exists at a local level.

Because these are majority minority cities and these women are from the local area, it could be possible these local newspapers would not have the racial bias that has been found in the national press (Slakoff 2020; Slakoff and Fradella 2019; Sommers 2016; Stillman 2007). However, if patterns in local newspaper coverage mimic those in national coverage, this could suggest that structural racism and implicit bias may play an even more important role in shaping how much attention is given to missing women. By comparing the characteristics of the missing women and girls written about in local news articles to the characteristics of the women and girls that disappeared in Texas during the same time period, this study will not only fill the gaps in literature but could provide an explanation as to the underlying cause of MWWS.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the literature first describes MWWS and examines our society's obsession with true crime. Next, the possible systemic causes of MWWS, including media bias and police bias, are analyzed. This is followed by a discussion of the potential outcomes of these biases: victim precipitation and the creation of the ideal victim, which can also impact MWWS.

The terms for the different components of racism have come to be used almost interchangeably in modern society. To avoid confusion, I will use the following definitions provided by the Fair Fight Initiative (2022):

- *Systemic Racism*- A system that unfairly elevates white people over everyone else.
- *Institutional Racism*- Racism that seeps into society, including rules, laws, and guiding principles that inherently favor white people over those who are nonwhite.
- *Interpersonal Racism*- Racism that one person can inflict on another in a personal interaction based on their prejudices.
- *Structural Racism*- The way that all these different components create an environment where outcomes will automatically favor white people because of disadvantages laid upon POC.

The discrepancy in news reports of missing women is a social problem with roots in communication studies and criminology. Since sociology is the "study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior" (American Sociological Association 2021), a sociological approach to the study of MWWS is beneficial because in addition to analyzing the individual structures that impact what we consider newsworthy, sociology recognizes the importance of exploring how these structures work together to create the MWWS phenomenon and what MWWS suggests about our society's values.

Social justice movements like Black Lives Matter and advances in technology that make it possible for civilians to record and share instances of police misconduct have created a climate that promotes antiracist discourse and increased institutional transparency. The present culture of accountability challenges structural racism, police bias, and media bias, and encourages the exploration of unjust social phenomena like MWWS.

The figure below illustrates the factors that contribute to MWWS. Structural racism is the central cause of MWWS; it can reinforce media bias and police bias, which influence each other and work together to create MWWS. Media bias and the ideal victim theory influence one another and contribute to MWWS, while police bias and the victim precipitation theory also influence each other and contribute to MWWS. Finally, the ideal victim theory and the victim precipitation theory are reinforced by each other and strengthen the MWWS phenomenon. The factors that contribute to MWWS are media bias, police bias, the ideal victim, and the victim precipitation theory, all of which are derived from structural racism.

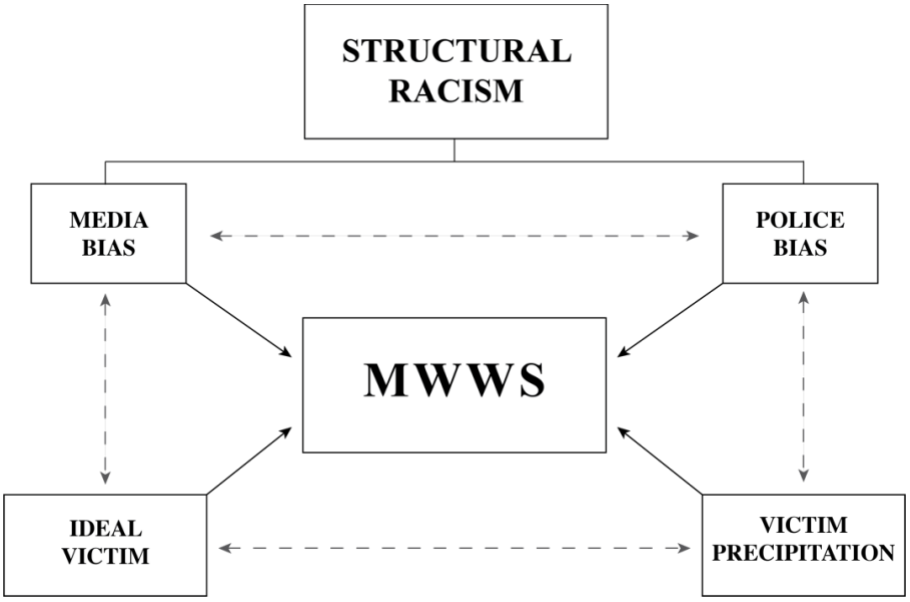

Figure 1. Factors that Contribute to MWWS

Missing White Woman Syndrome (MWWS)

As Gwen Ifill stated at the 2004 Unity: Journalists of Color conference in response to a statement regarding the lack of coverage on the Rwandan genocide in 1994, "I call it the missing white woman syndrome. If there's a missing white woman, we're going to cover that. Every day." (C-SPAN 2004). Ifill's off-the-cuff explanation was met with audience laughter, but studies show that she was right. Missing white women and girls receive more media attention than missing women and girls who are not white (Slakoff 2020; Slakoff and Fradella 2019; Sommers 2016; Stillman 2007).

Comedian Jon Stewart's bestselling book *American* pokes fun at our obsession with missing white women too. In his section on "Determining Newsworthiness", Stewart gives us "simple equations" to "determine where to place news for your broadcast or newspaper" (Stewart, Karlin, and Javerbaum 2004:155). The equation for kidnaping is as follows:

Kidnapping

Y= Family Income x (Abductee Cuteness / Skin Color)2 + Length of Abduction x Media Savvy of Grieving Parents

*(where y = minutes of coverage)

Although written in jest, Stewart's equation of newsworthiness has some ring of truth. It may be that the disappearances of Laci Peterson, Natalee Holloway, and Gabby Petito received extensive news coverage because of their similar characteristics. All three women were young, straight, conventionally attractive, white females. They lived in "good" neighborhoods, came from "good" families, and had grieving parents that pleaded

for their daughter's safe return on the nightly news (ABC *20/20 One Last Chan*ce, 2021; ABC *20/20 Life Online* 2021; and ABC *Nightline* 2019).

Recent studies suggest that, in addition to receiving *more* national news coverage, missing white women are more likely to receive *any* news coverage compared to minority women (Sommers 2016). Along with race, there are disparities in reports of missing women based on their ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status. According to Stillman (2007), the goal of increasing media coverage of missing minority women and women with a lower socioeconomic status is not to ignore missing white women in the news media, but to *also* include women who do not fit the model of the ideal victim. According to columnist Eugene Robinson, it is "nonnegotiable" that newsworthy damsels in distress are white (Robinson 2005). It is helpful if "cable television reporters can credibly describe as 'petite'…with a good deal of princess in her personality" (Robinson 2005). The missing woman or girl must be classically attractive and "her economic status should be middle class or higher" (Robinson 2005).

Which cases the media chooses to report on is important because it can impact victim recovery. Reports show that media missing persons appeals are effective in locating missing children (Hunt, Ioannou, and Synnott 2019), yet missing Black children are more likely to be labeled as "runaways" and receive less media attention than children that are white (Van de Rijt, Song, Shor, and Burroway 2018; Moss 2018).

Coupled with the lack of media attention given to missing Black and Brown children are the disparities in clearing rates. In analyzing records from the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, Van de Rijt and colleagues (2018) found that Black children are more likely to remain missing for longer than white children and are

more likely to never be found. While our society is starting to recognize the prevalence of MWWS, and according to Stillman (2007), acknowledgement is the first step in activism, there is currently no legislation that provides resources to find missing Black women and children (Moss 2018).

The lack of attention given to missing minority women is not unique to Black and Hispanic/Latina women; areas of the United States that have a large Native American population have a similar issue with missing and murdered Indigenous women. In 2016, the National Crime Information Centered reported 5,712 cases of missing Native American women and girls, however, the U.S. Department of Justice only had a record of 116 cases. (Our Bodies, Our Stories, 2016). The disparity in data is due to racial misclassification, a lack of tribe recognition, or because the cases were not entered into the U.S. Department of Justice records (Our Bodies, Our Stories, 2016).

In Canada, where Aboriginal women make up only 2 percent of the population, those aged 24-44 are "five times more likely to experience a violent death than another other Canadian woman" (Gilchrist 2010:373). In Wyoming, the last place that Gabby Petito was seen alive, only 18 percent of missing indigenous women received media coverage (ABC 20/20 *Life Online* 2021). In discussing the contrast between the media's response to Petito's disappearance to the disappearances of Native women, advocate Carolyn DeFord states, "There is a phrase in Indian country that when a Native American woman goes missing, she disappears twice; once in life, and once in the news" (ABC *20/20 Life Online* 2021).

Below are two case studies that demonstrate how MWWS can harm women of color and alter their investigations.

MWWS Case Study 1:

In the Summer of 2005, the nation was fixated on the disappearance of Natalee Holloway, an 18-year-old white attractive blonde who disappeared in Aruba while on a high school graduation trip (*Birmingham News* 2015; ABC *Nightline* 2019). During this time, LaToya Figueroa, a 24-year-old Black and Latina waitress who was five months pregnant went missing from a neighborhood in west Philadelphia. Even though Figueroa's disappearance occurred in the local media's backyard, newspapers only reported on Natalee Holloway, who was missing 1,920 miles away (Stillman 2007).

That is, until a committed group of bloggers, citizen journalists, and community activists worked together to promote interest in Figueroa's case. They were "action-oriented" in their attempt to find Figueroa: they raised funds to create a $100,000 reward for information on her case, created and shared online videos about her disappearance, reached out to community organizations to profile the missing women, and distributed hundreds of missing persons flyers around in the community (Stillman 2007:497). These "guerrilla journalism" tactics worked (Stillman 2007:497). Figueroa's story was picked up by the national news and one month after her disappearance, Stephen Poaches, the father of Figueroa's unborn child, was arrested for her murder (CBS News 2005).

MWWS Case Study 2:

Jennifer Wilbanks disappeared while jogging near her home in Duluth, Georgia in 2005. Wilbanks, 32, was an athletic white woman who was engaged to the son of a former municipal judge and Duluth mayor (Ghirardini 2005). Within hours, the local and national news media picked up the story and a 250-person volunteer search team was assembled. Police officers and K-9 units from various agencies and jurisdictions

canvased the area, noting that they were "making a special effort" to look into all registered sex offenders in the community (Ghirardini 2005:JJ1).

Four days later, it was discovered that Wilbanks staged her own abduction and was alive and well in New Mexico. "The Runaway Bride," as she was nicknamed by the media, had gotten cold feet about her upcoming nuptials and decided to flee. The amount of time and money that went into Wilbanks' search was substantial, the Duluth Police Department reportedly spent more than $44,000 trying to locate the missing woman (Bruner 2005). Her disappearance was costly in other ways too; the seemingly unlimited publicity and resources provided to search for Wilbanks was either not offered, or offered at the expense of other, *actual* missing women.

One of these missing women was Tamika Huston, a 24-year-old African American nursing student who went missing from her home in Spartanburg, South Carolina in June of 2004 (Keyes 2005). A few weeks after she disappeared, the police searched Huston's home where they found traces of blood that was later confirmed to be Tamika's. This led investigators to believe that she had been met with foul play, but without any suspects, her case went cold (Keyes 2005).

The contrast between the disappearances of Wilbanks and Huston was not lost on Huston's friends and family. In an NPR interview, one of Huston's friends explains his frustration with the lack of attention given to Tamika during the continuous media coverage of "The Runaway Bride":

> *We took one little affluent white girl and here we go again, folks. They make her important, and that's what the media's telling us. But Tamika Huston, a little pretty black girl right here in town, hard-working, she's missing. She could be dead. No one knows* (Keyes 2005).

True Crime and the Current Media Landscape

To better understand MWWS, current trends in media must be discussed. One specific trend includes the rise of the "true crime" genre. Our fascination with true crime is not new. Whether being consumed for informational purposes or for entertainment, true crime is defined as narratives that "focus on real crime events, and the real people entangled, by accident or design, in these events" (Franks 2016:239). According to Horeck (2019), true crime is "a genre that invites viewer judgement on matters of justice" (p. 2). She suggests that true crime in the internet-age is no longer a form of entertainment and a passive way to relax. Instead, the audience is encouraged to participate in the investigation, often in real time, through internet sleuthing, armchair detection, and online "Neighborhood Watch style activities" (Horeck 2019:6).

The true crime genre has intrigued the public since the nineteenth century (Horeck 2019). The most notorious example of the public's early interest in true crime took place in the fall of 1888, when five prostitutes were brutally murdered in London's Whitechapel district by a man the media called "Jack the Ripper" (Mishou 2019). Without any solid leads, suspects, or arrests made in the murder cases, anxiety (and newspaper sales) skyrocketed (Mishou 2019). The terror in the community led to a rise in sensationalist reporting, an exaggerated reporting method in which a writer uses the suspense of a developing story to capture attention and inspire public involvement (Mishou 2019).

To this day, the identity of Jack the Ripper is unknown, yet the story continues to inspire authors, artists, and researchers, who are known as "Ripperologists" in the true crime community. During the "Autumn of Terror", as it was referred to in the headlines,

the media capitalized on the public's "anxiety, shock, and curiosity" and successfully turned the tragic deaths of five women into enormous profit (Mishou 2019:3). The strategy of sensationalizing the news is as an effective way to increase sales and readership and is still used in crime news today (Horeck 2019).

Another important contribution to true crime was Truman Capote's 1966 book titled *In Cold Blood*, which covered the 1959 case of the Clutter family murders in Holcomb, Kansas (Capote 1966). The book, which began as a series of newspaper articles in *The New York Times*, was an instant success and became and national best seller (*The New York Times* 2016). Capote beautifully detailed the lives of the Clutter family, their slayings, and the eventual capture and conviction of their killers in a way that elevated the true time genre and paved the way for the narrative nonfiction style of writing that became synonymous with true crime (Capote 1966; *The New York Times* 2016).

True crime in the 21st century can be accessed 24/7 and involves audience participation across various digital platforms (Horeck 2019). True crime consumers can watch, listen to, and immerse themselves in real investigations through podcasts, television series and documentaries, social media, and websites that are dedicated to individual cases or true crime itself (Horeck 2019). True crime in the digital era is a "multimodal experience" in media-driven culture that invites viewers to create theories, form opinions, and cast judgements on matters of criminal justice (Horeck 2019:1).

Many contribute the re-emergence of true crime to the 2014 podcast *Serial*, which follows the 1999 murder of Hae Min Lee and the subsequent arrest and conviction of her boyfriend Adnan Syed (Boling 2019). Hosted by *This American Life* producer Sarah

Koenig, *Serial* "follows the plot and characters wherever they lead, through many surprising twists and turns" (Apple Podcasts 2020). The series was world-renowned and has been credited as the best podcast ever made, investigative or otherwise (Boling 2019). *Serial* won numerous awards, including the 2015 Peabody award, captivated millions of listeners from around the world, and created a space for true crime in the mainstream media (Boling 2019).

While true crime has been criticized as bingeable entertainment that uses other people's tragedies to generate an emotional response from the audience (Horeck 2019), the genre continues to become more popular. According to an article in *Time* Magazine, more than 1.6 million true crime books were sold in print in 2018, and Netflix's 2020 docuseries *Tiger King*, which shines light on the big-cat industry and the criminal activities of those involved, has garnered 64 million unique views worldwide, and there are currently more than 2,800 podcasts that focus on true crime (Chan 2020).

Another critique of true crime is that it primarily focuses on stories that are outrageous and salacious crimes. Our fascination with true crime is relevant to this study because it shows how society consumes nonfiction crime and our love of cliffhangers, montages, and the lure of violence (Horeck 2019). True crime consumers have become accustomed to stories of shock and suspense, which has created a heightened audience expectation for crime stories in the news media.

Media Bias

To meet audience needs, those in the news media have attempted to emulate the true crime formula by sensationalizing crime stories and engaging in round the clock news coverage. Viewer demands plus the added economic pressure of high ratings and increased advertisement sales result in the news media picking and choosing which crimes are reported on (Gilchrist 2010).

Most people in the United States cite the media as their main source of gathering information (Slakoff and Brennan 2019). The news media is designed to "make sense of social events for the viewing public," (Shrikant and Sambaraju 2021:1199) and has a serious influence on our society's values and beliefs (Slakoff and Brennan 2019; Vaes et al. 2019). Visuals play an important role in influencing public opinion, as the combination of text and imagery that is often used in in news coverage is shown to influence audience behavior and opinion (Powell et al. 2015).

When it comes to crime news, deciding who is and is not considered newsworthy is often decided by which crime stories newsmakers think will capture the largest audience (Gilchrist 2010). Additionally, how people associated with crimes (victims, perpetrators, and accused perpetrators) are framed in the media in ways meant to appeal to viewers. In crime news, the media publicly assigns culpability by applying a set of "abstract morals" to a case to determine which people are good or bad (Shrikant and Sambaraju 2021). Although the news media functions to provide factual, unbiased information, Black victims of crime seldom make the news and crime news that features minorities are more likely to include prejudicial language (Davies, et al 2007; Vaes, et. al 2019).

Instead, the U.S. media has a history of demonizing Black and Brown youth as the criminal other through their depictions of minority criminals and delinquents (Davies, et al. 2007). The perception that young Black men are the perpetrators of crime, and that criminal behavior is "an inherent characteristic of Blacks," is a form of social control that can be traced to slavery and laws of the Jim Crow-era (Welch 2007:276). While neither slavery nor segregation required a sophisticated racial ideology or a standardized set of rules to separate the "us" from the "them," as Black individuals become free, "they posed a threat" to white privilege. (Bonilla-Silva 2018:21). This perceived threat has led to Blackness being associated with crime and the prevalence of the menacing Black predator stereotype (Welch 2007). This results in Black Americans being overrepresented in the news media as the perpetrators of crime, while being underrepresented as the victims of crime.

One such example of how media framing varies by race was found in the reporting of Hurricane Katrina. Criminalization and stigmatization were prevalent in the media's reporting of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. False reports of exaggerated criminal activity among victims living in the hardest-hit 9th Ward were fueled by city officials to distract from their poor planning and inadequate relief efforts (Brezina and Phipps 2010). Since the 9th Ward consists of primarily Black, low-income residents, media reports of rampant crime perpetrated racial and class stereotypes that sparked "moral panic," impacted public sentiment, and slowed down rescue operations (Brezina and Phipps 2010:112).

Despite a "growing awareness of forms of racialized violence" (Horeck 2019:16), including the fact that Black women and girls are reported missing at a disproportionately

higher rate than white women, and are more likely to be murdered, sexually assaulted, and experience intimate partner violence (Slakoff and Brennan 2020), the media tends to particularly focus on white victims. Choosing which stories are considered newsworthy is a manual process in which newsmakers determine which stories become news based on "personal motives" or "organizational profits" (Chiazor et al. 2021:1).

The above discussion indicates that racial patterns in news coverage, including MWWS, is a real phenomenon. Still, *why* are missing women of color given so little media attention? As previously stated, one explanation as to why missing minority women are so often overlooked by the media could be structural racism. According to Liebler (2010), "individual-, organizational-, and societal-level factors" are to blame for the disparity in news coverage among missing women (p. 559). Chiazor, et. al (2021) defines systemic bias in the media as "news that attempts to portray in a negative light any minority group more than it portrays in a negative light any majority group and vice versa" (p. 2).

Others in the media take a more defensive approach to the lack of minority representation in the news. They argue that they can only report what they are told by police, and any racial bias is due to police bias and gatekeeping since it is law enforcement who decides which crimes warrant a press conference. (Liebler, Ahmad, and Gayle 2020). They also cite slow news days, pressure by network executives to capture repeat "runaway" stories, and the desire to cover unusual stories for the disparity in news coverage (Liebler 2010:560). Because, according to Dori Maynard from the Maynard Institute, "majority audiences do not consider it unusual for something bad to happen to a minority" (Liebler 2010:559).

Another reason for racial bias in the media could be our society's love of drama. Eugene Robinson describes the media's reaction to missing white women in *The Washington Post*:

> *"it's the meta narrative of something seen as precious and delicate being snatched away, defiled, destroyed by evil forces that lurk in the shadows just outside the bedroom window. It's whiteness under siege. It's innocence and optimism crushed by cruel reality. It's a flower smashed by a rock"* (Robinson 2005).

Liebler (2010) suggests that media bias can be traced to economics and market forces that benefit some victims over others. Research suggests that news about missing young, attractive, white women draws more viewers and generates more ad dollars (Liebler 2010). The media has been criticized for using "the dead female body as a lure, only to then turn away from the issue of gendered violence" (Horeck 2019:170). By portraying missing white women as sensationalized anecdotes, the media treats gendered violence as a singular issue and ignores the major issue of gender inequality and gendered violence that faces all women in our country (Horeck 2019).

To review, some explanations as to the cause of media bias include: the economic pressure of increasing viewership, pleasing executives, and selling advertisements, the need to sensationalize crime news to keep up with the true crime audience's demands for dramatic stories, slow news days that result in repeat coverage during the 24-hour-news cycle, systemic bias that paints Black individuals as the criminal other and the reliance on racial stereotypes that harm POC, and police gatekeeping. Those who work in the media argue that increasing diversity in journalism would create a "greater awareness and

broader definition of newsworthiness," because more women and minorities in decision-making rules leads to more stories about female and nonwhite experiences (Liebler 2010:559-60).

Police Bias

Since the news media blame law enforcement for MWWS, it is necessary to examine how police bias impacts crime news. Welch (2007) argues that the stereotypical threatening Black man in the media coincides with the rise of racial profiling, a controversial practice in which law enforcement officials "target racial minorities in criminal investigations in an attempt to increase the likelihood of uncovering illegal activity" (p. 277). Racial profiling is "most likely rooted in inaccurate and often discriminatory information," since most crime in the United States is committed by white individuals (Welch 2007:277).

The United States has the highest rate of incarceration in the world and an imprisonment rate that is five to twenty times that of other industrialized nations (Wakefield and Uggen 2010; Currie 2007). A demonstration of structural racism can be seen in the racial disparities of incarcerated individuals within the United States; the incarceration rate is twice as high in the Southern United States, where the majority of Black and Brown Americans live (Wakefield and Uggen 2010).

Implicit police bias operates on both a conscious and an unconscious level and can be observed in "split-second decisions based on (an officer's) subconscious perceptions" (Russell-Brown 2018:186). According to Russell-Brown (2018) and Page and King (2021), these biases can be deadly. Police killings, brutality, and the use of

excessive force disproportionately affects low-income Black Americans, who are most likely to experience "police-involved harm" compared to any other group (Cobbina-Dungy and Jones-Brown 2021:2; Page and King 2021).

Police bias that associates Blackness with danger subjects Black individuals to increased victimization. Various studies show that unarmed Black men are two to seven times more likely to die by police gunfire than unarmed white men (Lowery 2016; Nix, Campbell, Byers, and Alpert 2017). According to Cobbina-Dungy and Jones-Brown (2021), 1 out of every 1,000 Black men are expected to be killed by the police over their life course, making law enforcement the leading cause of death for young Black men. Black women also experience increased police brutality and excessive force. A study from Washington University found that 60 percent of Black women who were killed by police in St. Louis, Missouri were unarmed (Cobbina-Dungy and Jones-Brown 2021).

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a global organization and activist movement with a mission "to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes" (Black Lives Matter 2021; Library of Congress 2019). BLM is a decentralized movement without any formal leadership or hierarchy (Library of Congress 2019). While the movement started in 2013 in response to the killing of Trayvon Martin, it became nationally recognized the following year, when Eric Garner and Michael Brown, two unarmed Black men, were each killed by white police officers (Library of Congress 2019). Eric Garner's death was videotaped by a civilian and went viral. His last words, "I can't breathe", became the "rallying cry" for social activists protesting police brutality against Black citizens (Baldwin 2018:431). One month later, Michael Brown, another unarmed Black teenager,

was killed by Officer Darren Wilson. No criminal charges were filed in either death (Baldwin 2018).

BLM opposes "racial profiling, police brutality, and racial inequality in the United States criminal justice system" and regularly condemns and protests police brutality against POC (Library of Congress 2019:). According to the Library of Congress (2019), U.S. citizens' perceptions of the BLM movement "varies considerably by race". Similar to the BLM movement, MWWS calls to attention the racial disparities that deem missing women and girls who are Black and Brown as less important than those who are white. Also similar to BLM, MWWS leaves Black and Brown women and girls more vulnerable to victimization since their disappearances will likely not be compelling enough to make the nightly news.

According to Baldwin (2018), racial inequality is a societal fact and failing to acknowledge this inequality "further exacerbates the pain experienced by its victims" and ensures that it will continue to exist (p. 61). Russell-Brown (2018) suggests that identifying and naming implicit bias is important:

> *There are several reasons that the label given to a social harm has significance: 1) the name may determine whether the social problem is treated as a serious social threat or as a low-level concern; 2) the label may affect whether researchers focus on the issue; and 3) the label may impact how the criminal justice system responds, e.g., which remedies are devised to address the problem* (p. 188).

Police bias that contributes to the overincarceration of minorities impacts how society thinks about crime and who we consider to be criminals and who we think of as victims (Welch 2007). This could impact which crimes law enforcement discusses with the media, which, in turn, influences which victims are reported on in the news. While the media is not bound to only cover stories that they hear from the police, this gatekeeping

of information has been used to blame law enforcement for the media's inequality in news reporting (Liebler et al. 2020).

Victim Precipitation

Recognizing implicit bias and analyzing the labels assigned to victims and offenders give us a clearer understanding of the motivations and consequences in the disparity of newsworthiness of missing women and girls of color. Victim Precipitation was first contrived in the 1940's and suggests that "victims often contribute to their own victimization" by passively displaying certain characteristics and social positions that make them an easier target for perpetrators (Fisher and Lab 2010:338). Examples include children and those who are weak, elderly, or disabled.

In the late 1960's, Menachem Amir expanded on the victim precipitation theory by adding victim behavior to the list of victim characteristics. According to Amir (1967), victims who consume alcohol, have a criminal record, and use "indecent language or gestures" can provoke potential perpetrators and cause their own attack (p. 339). This interpretation of victimization is wildly unpopular among many criminologists, as it gives too much focus to the victim and not enough to the perpetrator, negatively impacts evaluations of risk assessment, diverts attention away from social institutions and cultural values that that can influence criminal activity, and leads to victim blaming (Fisher and Lab 2010; Jensen and Raver 2018; North and Smith 2018; Petherick, Kannan, and Brooks 2021).

Victim precipitation is most often seen in reports of rape, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence when police, the courts, and the public question whether a

victim is somehow responsible for their own victimization (Horeck 2019). According to Horeck, women who are victims of crime are often blamed for "not being resilient enough" (Horeck 2019:85). She states that being resilient in preventing a possible attack is a form of "affective labor" that is expected of women to prove their worth (Horeck 2019:85).

Indeed, the victim precipitation theory has been criticized for reflecting "a very male view" of which areas are problematic for women, because it includes public places in general (Davies, Francis, and Greer 2007:148). The theory suggests if women stay indoors and do not engage, they will not provoke an attack (Davies et al. 2007). Another criticism of victim precipitation is that it can lead to a hierarchy of victims. Logically, if a victim can be "bad", they can also be "good", as seen in the characteristics that are often associated with ideal and non-ideal victims. This can result in a lack of public interest and outrage when Black and Brown women go missing.

Ideal Victims, Ideal Offenders, and Stereotypes

Extensive news coverage is not guaranteed for every missing woman or girl who is white. A captivating true crime story must have a *legitimate* victim that displays characteristics that the audience connects with. The ideal victim is sympathetic, innocent, and vulnerable (Bouchard et al. 2020; Lewis et al. 2012). The hierarchy of victims created by the victim precipitation theory and reinforced by images of the ideal victim places women into categories of resilient and non-resilient and relies on "traditional virgin/whore dichotomies" that separate "pure" white women from minority women (Horeck 2019:86). According to Long (2021) public opinion generally suggests that ideal

victims are typically white women, and "ideal offenders" are typically Black and Black-mixed race men (344).

In the news media, nonwhite victims are often described as bad people who reside in dangerous areas (Slakoff and Brennan 2019). As victims, Black women are perceived as terrible mothers and wives with poor, unstable families. They are generally described as deviant and are more likely to be depicted engaging in risky behavior such as alcohol and drug abuse, gang involvement, and sex work (Slakoff 2020). Latinas are rarely portrayed as victims in crime news, but when they are, they are oversexualized and their "lives and bodies… are often devalued" (Slakoff 2020:4). White women are overrepresented as victims of crime in the news media and are regularly labeled as innocent, religious, wealthy, and pure (Slakoff 2020). They are often reported as living in safe neighborhoods and the crimes against them are more likely to be described as "random" (Slakoff and Brennan 2019).

As offenders, Black women are frequently depicted as less likely to reform and Latinas are portrayed as illegal system-abusers. (Slakoff 2020). White women who commit crimes are often depicted as sympathetic and very likely to reform (Slakoff 2020). They are described as having "legitimate mental health concerns" and their actions are frequently justified by the media (Slakoff 2020:2).

Accapadi (2007) notes that white women have a "one up/one down" identity (p. 210). Although as women they are part of a marginalized group, they also have the privilege that comes with being white. This privilege deems the experiences of white women as the "universal norm of womanhood," which creates a double layer of oppression for minority women (Accapadi 2007:209).

The one up/one down identity of white women separates their reality from that of other women because in order to access their white privilege, they must also accept the victim status of being a woman (Accapadi 2007; Phipps 2021). This dual identity also makes it possible for white women to choose their identity- to be either helpless or powerful, depending on the situation (Accapadi 2007). White women's tears are the "ultimate symbol of femininity" and have the power to generate extraordinary sympathy (Phipps 2021:85). Historically, white tears have been used to "weaponize women's safety"; after the Emancipation Proclamation, the fear of a white women being raped was used as an excuse to attack the "growing Black social and economic power" (Phipps 2021:81,86). Today, white women's tears have the power to invalidate the harms experienced by women of color. Besides silencing women of color, white women's tears can be used to shore up their role as the ideal victim.

The hierarchy of victims created by oppression and racial stereotypes has life-altering consequences. Individuals convicted of killing white women are more likely to receive the death penalty than those who kill men and nonwhite women (Holcomb, Williams, and Demuth 2004), and in a study involving staged emergencies, Black victims were helped less often and at a slower speed than white victims (Kunstman and Plant 2008).

The discrepancy in the newsworthiness of missing women and girls "both reflects and reinforces social divisions and inequalities" in our society (Davies et al. 2007:43). MWWS has a serious impact on those who are nonwhite, low-income, have a criminal record, a history of mental illness, homelessness, or substance abuse, or otherwise do not fit the model of the ideal victim (Zizumbo-Colunga, Daniel 2021). In addition, MWWS

harms *every* woman because it puts too much focus on individual cases of violence and ignores the broader issue of gender-based violence.

III. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Black feminist theory is relevant to MWWS because there are racial discrepancies between the missing women who are reported on in the news and those who are not. MWWS is not the first example of society turning away from Black women's pain, crimes committed against women of color have been ignored throughout history. Patricia Hill Collins points out that America has a history of exploiting Black women; slaveowners used perceptions of "Black sexual deviance" to control and abuse enslaved women and perpetuate racism (Collins 2005:87). Unlike the ideal victim (who is wholesome, helpless, and white), enslaved women were depicted as assailants whose victimization and persecution were seen as deserving and justified (Collins 2005).

While critical race theory (CRT) examines "racial politics and the injustices faced by racially minoritized communities" (Patton and Ward 2016:331), critical race feminist theory (CRF) expands on CRT to include the intersectionality of "racism, sexism, classism, and other systems of oppression and their disproportionate impact on racially minoritized women" (Patton and Ward 2016:331). Black women have different lived experiences than white women and Black men, experiences which "cannot be understood without acknowledgment of the interconnected roles of racism and sexism on her historical and current existence" (Patton and Ward 2016:332).

The central premise of CRF is to recognize that sexism, racism, and classism is endemic. The goal of this research is to evaluate the newsworthiness of missing women through a CRF lens that acknowledges the gender, class, and racial discrimination that women of color endure as a result of structural racism. This study aligns with CRF methodology by addressing the "bodies, lives, and experiences that are unseen and

situating them at the center of research inquiry" (Patton and Ward 2016:332). By engaging in what Patton and Ward (2016) call "counter-storytelling" (p 331), this research aims to examine the difficult lived experiences of Black and Brown women that is often ignored or discounted in our society.

IV. METHODS

This analysis examines the newsworthiness of missing women and girls in local newspapers within the state of Texas. It extends the work of three studies on MWWS in major national newspapers by Slakoff and Brennan (2019), Slakoff and Brennan (2020), and Slakoff and Fradella (2019). The databases used for this analysis include the U.S. National Missing and Unidentified Persons System Database (NamUs), Newsbank, and BeenVerified.

As a fan of true crime, I was familiar with the concept of MWWS and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women movement prior to starting this research, yet was unaware if any disparities in news coverage of missing women exist in my home state of Texas. Since Texas' population is mostly nonwhite, an examination of how missing women and girls are portrayed in local newspapers will fill the gaps in literature concerning the impact the audience has on newsworthiness, and the news media's objectives and values at the local level. This study has two potential outcomes: (1) MWWS does indeed exist at the local level and/or which crimes are reported on is not determined by the audience's racial makeup; or (2) MWWS does not extend to the local level and/or the audience's racial makeup influences which crimes are reported on.

Texas is one of five majority-minority states in the United States, along with California, Hawaii, Nevada, and New Mexico (United States Census Bureau, QuickFacts: New Mexico; Nevada; Hawaii; California; Texas 2021). In Texas, 59 percent of the population is nonwhite, 17 percent of the residents were born outside of the United States, and more than 29 percent of the population speak Spanish at home, which is more than any other state. (United States Census Bureau, QuickFacts: Texas 2021).

In addition to being diverse, Texas is growing. The total state population is over 29 million and there has been a 15 percent population increase in the last ten years (United States Census Bureau, QuickFacts: Texas 2021).

In accordance with the argument that white women and girls get more national coverage than minorities because the majority of the national audience is white, it would be expected that missing women and girls of color are reported on more often than white women and girls in newspapers that have a majority nonwhite audience. Unlike statistics from the National Crime Information Center that does not distinguish missing white individuals from missing Hispanic/Latinos, NamUs (2021) allows individuals to filter current missing persons by state, gender, race, and ethnicity. Once a missing person is located or declared deceased, their record is deleted from the database. Therefore, the data collected from NamUs only consists of women and girls who are *currently* missing. Many of the missing women and girls who have been reported on in local newspapers and used in this analysis have been found and subsequently deleted from NamUs. As a result, the data collected from NamUs is not necessarily representative of the missing women and girls in the articles but will serve as a useful comparison group. The actual analysis is conducted in three stages.

Stage 1

Stage 1 addresses women and girls who are currently missing in Texas and listed in the NamUs database. A filtered search of persons who went missing in Texas from January 1, 2010- December 31, 2020 returns 256 results. A codebook was created (Figure 1) and the following quantitative data was recorded for each missing woman/girl: date of last

contact, age, race, whether a photo was included in the report, and if so, the type of photo used (personal, driver's license/state ID, surveillance footage, or mugshot). Next, their description and the circumstance of their disappearance was recorded for future qualitative analysis.

To determine whether a criminal record impacts a missing woman's newsworthiness, a criminal background check was conducted on each of the missing women using BeenVerified, an online public records website (BeenVerified 2021). Duplicate charges and those that are incomplete, listed as "not specified," and minor traffic violations such as speeding were discarded. The number of arrests were recorded, and charges are categorized as: trespassing, theft, controlled substance charges, prostitution, assault, DWI arrests, marijuana offenses, and other.

A search was conducted to obtain newspaper articles about the missing women and girls using NewsBank, an online database with access to over 10,000 publications (NewsBank 2021). This resulted in 66 articles written about 23 of the 256 missing women and girls. Since the sample size of newspaper articles written about current missing women and girls was not large enough to conduct a thorough analysis, a second stage was added to supplement the materials.

Table 1: Stage 1 Codebook for Women and Girls Currently Missing in Texas

Variable #	Code	Variable Description and Values
1	AGE	The subject's age at the time of her disappearance
2	RACE	The missing person's race 1=White 2=Hispanic/Latina 3=Black 4=Other/Multiple
3	PHOTO	Whether the database contains a photo of the missing person 0=No 1=Yes
4	PHOTOTYP	Type of photo used 1=Personal 2=ID/DL 3=Mugshot 4=Surveillance 5=Other
5	HAIR	The missing person's hair color 1=Blonde 2=Red 3=Brown 4=Black 5=Gray/White 6=Other
6	EYES	The missing person's eye color 1=Blue 2=Green 3=Hazel 4=Brown 5=Other
7	NEWS	Was there a newspaper article written about the missing person 0=No 1=Yes
8	CRIMREC	Does the missing person have a criminal record 0=No/Unknown 1=Yes
If the missing person has a criminal record, type of arrest		
9	TRESP	Number of trespassing arrests
10	THEFT	Number of theft arrests
11	DRUGS	Number of possession/distribution of controlled substances arrests
12	PROST	Number of prostitution arrests
13	ASLT	Number of assault arrests
14	DWI	Number of DWI arrests
15	MARIJ	Number of Marijuana arrests
16	CRMOTH	Number of other criminal arrests

Stage 2

Stage 2 was implemented to collect additional local newspaper articles on missing women and girls in Texas. The top five cities with the largest concentration of missing women and girls from Stage 1 were chosen for analysis: Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, McAllen, and San Antonio. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, each of these cities are

predominantly nonwhite (United States Census Bureau, QuickFacts: Dallas; Fort Worth; Houston; McAllen; San Antonio 2021).

Table 2: Racial Makeup of Five Majority-Minority Cities in Texas

City	White Alone (Not Hispanic or Latino)	Nonwhite
Dallas	29%	71%
Fort Worth	39%	61%
Houston	24%	76%
McAllen	11%	89%
San Antonio	25%	75%

Since Dallas and Fort Worth are widely considered to be part of the same metroplex (DFW), only one newspaper was chosen to represent the area. I chose the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* over the *Dallas Morning News* because the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* caters to a more local audience and is accessible through NewsBank, the database used in this study. The other newspapers chosen for analysis were the *Houston Chronicle*, *The Monitor* (McAllen), and *San Antonio Express-News.*

Table 3: Number of Articles About Missing Women in Local Newspapers

City	Publication	Number of Articles
Fort Worth	*Fort Worth Star Telegram*	184
Houston	*The Houston Chronicle*	84
McAllen	*The Monitor*	34
San Antonio	*The San Antonio Express*	31
TOTAL		333

An advanced search is conducted for newspaper articles published between January 2010- December 2020 that contain the keywords “missing woman” or “missing girl” in the lead/first paragraph search field, and the results were manually filtered out for articles that do not pertain to a missing woman or girl. For example, in one case an article about a *woman*’s *missing* cat is removed, and in many cases, obituaries about a *woman* who will be “dearly *missed*” are removed from the dataset. The search returned a total of 333 legitimate articles about missing women. Stories about missing women and girls from other states or from other cities in Texas were not discarded, however a vast majority of the articles were about individuals who were reported missing from the local area.

Each article was read twice and coded. While not an exact replica, the codebook created for this study was based off of the codebook used by Slakoff and Fradella’s study on MWWS at the national level (2019). When a possible theme appeared, the article was flagged for deeper investigation. Both manifest content, “the clearly distinguishable meaning of the story text,” and latent content, which detail’s a story’s “hidden, deeper meaning” are flagged for further investigation (Slakoff and Fradella 2019:84).

Table 4: Stage 2 Codebook for Local Articles about Missing Women and Girls

Variable #	Code	Variable Description and Values
1	CITY	The city newspaper the article is from 1=Austin 2=Fort Worth 3= Houston 4=McAllen 5=San Antonio
2	AGE	The subject's age at the time of her disappearance
3	STATUS	Missing status as described in the article 1=Missing 2=Found Alive 3=Found Deceased
4	CASE	Case type as reported in the article 0=Not Mentioned 1=Voluntary/Runaway 2=Homicide 3=Presumed Dead 4=Foul Play 5=Abduction 6=Accident
5	SUSPECT	Whether the article mentions a suspect in the missing person's disappearance 0=No 1=Yes
6	ALERT	Whether the article mentions an alert being issued and type of alert 0=No 1=Amber 2=Silver
7	RACE	The missing person's race 1=White 2=Hispanic/Latina 3=Black 4=Other/Multiple
8	RACESRC	What source was used to determine the missing person's race 1=Article Text 2=Missing Person Flyer 3=Second News Source/Database 4=Open Records Request
9	HAIR	The missing person's hair color 0=Not Mentioned 1=Blonde 2=Brown 3=Black 4=Gray
10	EYES	The missing person's eye color 0=Not Mentioned 1=Blue 2=Green 3=Hazel 4=Brown
11	RELAT	The missing person's relationship status 0=Not Mentioned 1=Relationship/Married 2=Recently Single/Divorced 3=Other
12	MATERNAL	The missing person's maternal status 0=Not mentioned 1=Mother
13	REPEAT	Whether the article is repeat coverage 0=No 1=Yes
14	JOB	The missing person's job 0=Not Mentioned 1=Unemployed 2=Blue Collar 3=College Student 4=Professional
15	HEALTH	Whether the missing person has any health issues 0=Not Mentioned 1=Memory Ailment 2=IDD 3=Medically Fragile 4=Mental Health Issues
16	ABUSE	Whether the missing person has a history of abuse 0=Not Mentioned 1=IPV 2=CPS Involvement
17	RWDVIG	Whether the article mentions a reward or candlelight vigil 0=No 1=Yes

NewsBank is a text-only database and often news articles do not explicitly state a missing person's race. In a more thorough examination of the literature, it became apparent that determining race is a common problem among researchers studying MWWS. When the race of a missing woman or girl is not included in an article, other researchers have looked for other racial indicators (such as a reference to the missing person's country of origin), conducted an online search of the individual's missing person flyer (which usually states the person's race), relied on YouTube and Google image search to "eyeball" a woman's race based on their skin tone or approximated a woman's race based on the skin tone of their family members (Jeanis and Powers 2017; Slakoff and Brennan 2019; Slakoff and Brennan 2020; Slakoff and Fradella 2019; Sommers 2016).

Slakoff and Brennan (2020) warn that researchers should be careful when coding based on photographs because it is difficult to accurately gauge an individual's race by appearance alone (Slakoff and Brennan 2020). Because of this, if a news article did not explicitly state the missing subject's race, I first searched online for a missing persons flyer or Amber Alert. Next, I conducted an online search for secondary news articles and databases that explicitly stated the missing woman or girl's race. Finally, I submitted an open records request with the city/county police department that took the original missing person report and petitioned for the race/ethnicity listed on the report.

The secondary databases used to determine race were Texas EquuSearch and The Charley Project. Texas EquuSearch is a volunteer search and recovery team that specializes in mounted searches for missing persons in underdeveloped and rural areas by horseback (Texas EquuSearch 2022). It was used to determine the missing subject's race

in eight instances. In two cases, The Charley Project, an online database of more than 15,000 missing persons cases that is popular among the true crime community, was utilized (The Charley Project 2021). While not an official government-sponsored source, The Charley Project database only includes cases that are on file with law enforcement agencies and publicly submitted cases are not accepted without a missing person police report (The Charley Project Criteria 2021).

The source of determining race (either directly from the article, from a missing person flyer/Amber Alert, a secondary news source or database, or an open records request) was included in the dataset. In 18 instances, the article did not provide the missing woman or girl's name or race, making it impossible to investigate. Occasionally, the open records request either could not be located, did not include race/ethnicity, or my request was denied because the case was ongoing or involved a juvenile. In these instances, the race was labeled as "unknown", and the article was removed from the dataset. After the data collection was completed, there were a total of 198 articles.

Stage 3

Finally, data from articles written about missing women in girls in Texas between 2010-2020 (Stage 2) are compared to data about women and girls who were reported missing in Texas during the same time frame and are still missing (Stage 1). This will determine how accurately local newspapers report on women and girls who are missing in Texas and whether MWWS is prevalent in local newspapers in majority-minority cities.

V. FINDINGS

This mixed-method study uses quantitative analyses (frequencies, chi square, and regression) to compare the missing women and girls who are reported on in local news articles in Texas to women and girls who are currently missing in Texas. Next, a content analysis examines how missing women and girls are described in local news articles in Texas, and whether there are any racial disparities in how they are depicted.

Quantitative Findings

Stage 1

Among women and girls currently missing in Texas who were first reported missing between 2010-2020, the youngest is 6 years old, the oldest is 79 years old, and the average age is 33 years old. Most are white (30 percent) or Hispanic/Latina (30 percent), while 26 percent are categorized as multiple races or a race other than white, Hispanic/Latina, or Black, and 15 percent are Black. A majority of the missing persons reports include a photo (79 percent), and personal photographs are the most common type of photo used. Just over 15 percent have a criminal record and only 9 percent of these missing women and girls ever received newspaper coverage about their disappearance (Table 5).

Table 5: Stage 1 Findings- Descriptive Statistics of Women/Girls Reported Missing in Texas

n=256	*X/%*	*f*
Mean Age (range 6-79)	32.9	256
Percentage Race		
White	29.8	76
Hispanic/Latina	29.8	76
Black	14.5	37
Multiple/Other	25.9	66
Percentage Newsworthy		
Yes	9.0	23
No	91.0	233
Percentage Criminal Record		
Yes	15.6	40
No/Unknown	84.4	216
Percentage Photo		
Yes	78.9	202
No	21.1	54
Percentage Photo Type		
Personal	68.3	138
Driver's License/ID Card	20.8	42
Mugshot	5.0	10
Surveillance	4.0	8
Other	2.0	4

Stage 2

Stage 2 examines newspaper articles about missing women and girls in four local newspapers in majority-minority cities in Texas between 2010-2020. As seen in Table 6, among women and girls who received newspaper coverage, the youngest is less than a year old, the oldest is 85 years old, and the average missing woman/girl is 29 years old. Half of the newspaper articles are about missing women and girls who are white, while 27 percent are about missing women and girls who are Hispanic/Latina, 18 percent are Black, and 5 percent are categorized as belonging to multiple races or another race. Among the articles about missing women and girls, the majority are about individuals who is still missing (48 percent), while 28 percent are about missing individuals who

were found deceased, and 24 percent are about individuals who were found alive.

As described in the articles, 20 percent of the missing women/girls are in a relationship or married, 17 percent have children, 10 percent have a history of parental or spousal abuse, 23 percent mention the missing person's mental or physical health conditions, and 3 percent are described as religious. A reward or vigil is mentioned for the missing woman/girl in 8 percent of the articles, 10 percent of the articles describe the woman/girl's disappearance as shocking, and 3 percent describe the missing person's beauty.

In 10 percent of the articles, the missing woman/girl is described as sympathetic (a people pleaser, mostly kept to herself, not very street savvy, a poor girl who never caught a break, sweetest little girl, totally defenseless, a good girl). In 5 percent of the articles, the woman/girl is described as unsympathetic (not a legal citizen, has a history of running away, may have pawned jewelry, drinks alcohol and smokes cigarettes, has multiple ex-husbands, does not have custody of her children, is off her medication, is a danger to herself or others). These themes are examined further in the study's qualitative findings.

Table 6: Stage 2 Findings- Descriptive Statistics of Articles About Missing Women and Girls

n=198	*X/%*	*f*
Mean Age (range 0-85)	28.9	181
Percentage Race		
White	49.5	98
Hispanic/Latina	27.3	54
Black	18.2	36
Multiple/Other	5.1	10
Percentage Repeat News Coverage		
Yes	32.3	64
No	67.7	134
Percentage Case Status		
Missing	48	95
Found Alive	24.2	48
Found Deceased	27.8	55
Percentage Relationship Status		
Not Mentioned	77.3	153
In a Relationship/Married	20.2	40
Single/Divorced	1.5	3
Other	1.0	2
Percentage Mother		
Yes	17.2	34
Not Mentioned	82.8	164
Percentage History of Abuse		
Yes	10.1	20
Not Mentioned	89.9	178
Percentage Mental/Physical Health Issues		
Yes	23.2	46
Not Mentioned	76.8	152
Percentage Religious		
Yes	3.5	7
Not Mentioned	96.5	191
Percentage Reward/Vigil		
Yes	7.6	15
Not Mentioned	92.4	183
Percentage Shock		
Yes	9.6	19
Not Mentioned	90.4	179
Percentage Beauty		
Yes	2.5	5
Not Mentioned	97.5	193
Percentage Sympathetic		
Yes	9.6	19
Not Mentioned	90.4	179
Percentage Unsympathetic		
Yes	4.5	9
Not Mentioned	95.5	189

Missing white women and girls are most likely to be reported on overall, however there is a significant association between the newspaper and the missing women and girls that receive news coverage. White women and girls are the subjects of the majority of the articles in Houston (60 percent), Fort Worth (49 percent), and San Antonio (46 percent). However, articles about missing women and girls in McAllen are overwhelmingly more likely to be about individuals who are Hispanic/Latina (72 percent) (Table 7). McAllen has the largest minority population than any of the other cities and Fort Worth has the largest white population (Table 2).

Table 7: Stage 2 Findings- Bivariate Associations between City Newspapers and Race

n=198	*San Antonio* *%* *(f)*	*Fort Worth* *%* *(f)*	*Houston* *%* *(f)*	*McAllen* *%* *(f)*	*Sig.*
Race					
White	46% (5)	49% (59)	60% (29)	28% (5)	.000
Hispanic/Latina	9% (1)	25% (30)	21% (10)	72% (13)	
Black	18% (2)	22% (26)	17% (8)	0% (0)	
Multiple/Other	27% (3)	5% (6)	2% (1)	0% (0)	

Of the women and girls whose disappearance received newspaper coverage, there is a significant relationship between the missing woman/girl's race and their age. Most missing children and missing seniors who received news coverage are Black, the majority of missing teenagers who received news coverage are Hispanic/Latina, and the majority of adults who received news coverage are categorized as multiple races or a race other than white, Black, or Hispanic/Latina (Table 8).

Table 8: Stage 2 Findings- Bivariate Associations between Race and Age Group

n=198	*White* *%* *(f)*	*Hispanic/Latina* *%* *(f)*	*Black* *%* *(f)*	*Multiple/Other* *%* *(f)*	*Sig.*
Age Group					
Child	15.5% (13)	20.4% (11)	35.3% (12)	22.2% (2)	.003
Teenager	23.8% (20)	38.9% (21)	14.7% (5)	22.2% (2)	
Adult	53.6% (45)	25.9% (14)	26.5% (9)	55.6% (5)	
Senior	7.1% (6)	14.8% (8)	23.5% (8)	0% (0)	

The variable for health includes any mention in the article of the missing person's mental or physical health condition(s). As depicted in Table 9, articles about Black missing women and girls are more likely to include descriptions of poor mental or physical health compared to any other race.

Table 9: Stage 2 Findings- Bivariate Associations between Race and Health

n=198	*White* *%* *(f)*	*Hispanic/Latina* *%* *(f)*	*Black* *%* *(f)*	*Multiple/Other* *%* *(f)*	*Sig.*
Mental/Physical Health Issues					
Yes	20.4% (20)	18.5% (10)	41.7% (15)	10% (1)	.030
Not Mentioned	79.6% (78)	81.5% (44)	58.3% (21)	90% (9)	

A missing woman/girl's age, history of abuse, and whether the article mentions a reward or vigil are significant factors in determining whether the story will generate

repeat news coverage. Each additional year of age is associated with a 2 percent increase in the likelihood of receiving repeat news coverage. Articles detailing the missing person's history of abuse are 176 percent more likely to receive repeat news coverage than articles that do not mention abuse, and articles that discuss a reward or vigil increase the likelihood of repeat coverage by 434 percent (Table 10).

It is also important to note the variables that do not predict repeat news coverage. Race, missing case status (runaway, homicide, accident, foul play suspected, abduction) whether the missing woman is a mother, her relationship status, whether the initial article describes the woman/girl as a sympathetic victim, or mentions their beauty or religion are not associated with repeat news coverage.

Table 10: Stage 2 Findings- Logistic Regressions Predicting Repeat News Coverage

	Exp (B) (S.E.)	R^2	*n*	*Sig.*
Age	1.019 (.008)	.116	181	.013
History of Abuse	3.052 (.501)	.116	181	.026
Reward/Vigil	5.339 (.652)	.116	181	.010

Stage 3

In the table below, the women and girls who were reported on in majority-minority local newspapers in Texas are compared to the women and girls who are currently missing in Texas. Missing women and girls who are white are overrepresented in local news articles in majority-minority cities in Texas. Half of missing women and girls who are reported on in the news are white compared to 30 percent of missing women and girls who are

reported missing to law enforcement are white. Missing women and girls with multiple races or a race other than white, Hispanic/Latina, or Black are underrepresented in news articles. Only 5 percent of the articles about missing women and girls are about individuals who are racially categorized as multiple/other, while 26 percent of women and girls who are currently missing belong to this group. Interestingly, missing women and girls who are Black are slightly overrepresented in the news articles and missing women and girls who are Hispanic/Latina are slightly underrepresented. The average age of missing women/girls in news articles is 29, while the average of women and girls who are currently missing is 33 (Table 11).

Table 11: Stage 3 Findings- Frequency Comparison of Race

	Texas Population %	*Newspaper Article %*	*Currently Missing %*
Race			
White	41.2	49.5	29.8
Hispanic/Latina	39.7	27.3	29.8
Black	12.9	18.2	14.5
Multiple/Other	6.2	5.1	25.9
Mean age (range)		28.9 (0-85)	32.9 (6-79)

Qualitative Findings

Again, modeled after Slakoff and Fradella (2019), I incorporated a content analysis into this study to examine how missing women and girls are portrayed in newspaper articles about their disappearances. This type of qualitative analysis helps "provide illustrative examples of story themes," which is an important element to the MWWS phenomenon (Slakoff and Fradella 2019:85). The major themes in Stage 1 and Stage 2 are discussed below.

Stage 1

Although not originally intended to be part of the study, an analysis of the NamUs database reveals that at least 30 women and girls were reported missing between 2010-2020 while crossing the U.S. border from Mexico and remain missing to this day. This number is certainly far less than the women and girls who actually vanish while entering the United States because in these instances: 1) law enforcement was explicitly told that a person went missing while committing an illegal act, 2) the missing person was reported to law enforcement by individuals who were often committing the same illegal act, and 3) the missing person was reported missing to foreign law enforcement at all. The details about some of their disappearances are below.

- Maria Tasej Gonon, 23, was reported missing by someone in her group after she was left behind with two bottles of water after becoming ill while crossing the border.
- Adriana Dominguez Tirado, 35, was left behind from a group crossing the border after she was bitten by a snake and could no longer walk.
- Dilcia Hernandez Martinez, 21, was traveling alone from El Salvador when she was left behind next to a dirt road when she was too tired to continue the journey.
- Jaslyn Chavez Ramirez, 17, was last seen with a group crossing the border when she stayed behind to rest with another migrant.
- Johanna Morales Cetina, 37, was reported missing by her family after they were told that a human smuggler left her on the side of a street and called an ambulance after she became too ill to keep walking.

- Margarita Canil Suar, 36, was left behind by a human smuggler 20 minutes after crossing the Rio Grande.
- Erika Chajon Jolon, 35, was last seen passed out underneath a tree after crossing the Texas border.
- Claudia Duran, 24, was left behind from a group crossing the border after she was injured and could no longer continue the journey. She was left with food and water and was told someone would come back for her; no one ever did.

Stage 2

The content analysis of the newspaper articles about missing women and girls in majority-minority cities in Texas revealed the following themes: 1) The missing person is "the girl next door," 2) The missing person is a "troubled teen," 3) The missing person has poor mental health, 4) The story of the missing woman/girl should serve as a "cautionary tale," and 5) The story is shocking or outrageous.

The Girl Next Door

Articles about "the girl next door" focused on young white women who seemed to have vanished without a trace. These stories garnered repeat news coverage, included expansive searches, and indicated a sense of urgency. There were often candlelight vigils and large rewards that increased with each headline. Of the articles that fell into this category, most were about the disappearances of Christina Morris and Zuzu Verk.

Christina Morris was 23 years old when she was last seen entering the parking garage of a Fort Worth retail area with a male friend. She was described as a 5'4" white female weighing 95 pounds with brown eyes and brown hair with blonde highlights

(Mitchell 2018). The initial search involved 12-20 officers, and although a spokesperson for the Fort Worth Police Department stated that the "resources are not typical for a missing person's case," police were having to play catch up since Morris had not been seen for four days before anyone reported her missing (Mitchell 2018).

The first article in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* included a $5,000 reward for any information about her disappearance. The reward increased to $10,000 in the second article, $25,000 in the third article, and $30,000 in the fourth article. The final article revealed that human remains found near a construction site three-and-a-half years after her disappearance were confirmed as those belonging to Christina Morris (Mitchell 2018). The person she was seen entering the garage with had previously been found guilty of kidnapping and had been sentenced to life in prison (Mitchell 2018). There were seven articles about Morris' disappearance, her assailant's trial, and the discovery of her remains.

Zuzu Verk was a junior at Sul Ross State University in Alpine, Texas when she was reported missing to law enforcement after failing to show up to school or work. She was last seen the previous evening with her boyfriend. Like Morris, Verk was described as petite; the article stated that she was 5 feet tall, 110 pounds, with blonde hair and hazel eyes (McFarland 2016). The police seemed to take her disappearance seriously. The *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* reports that "police have been reviewing hundreds of hours of surveillance video received from businesses and private citizens" and urged anyone in the area with private security cameras to assist in the investigation (McFarland 2016).

In addition to increased police involvement, the article provided more information than is typical for missing women/girls. Verk's boyfriend, the last known person to see

her alive, was reported to be uncooperative and hiding behind his attorney (McFarland 2016). The article also detailed four vehicles as "cars of interest" for the public to keep an eye out for and included information about an upcoming candlelight vigil (McFarland 2016). The reward for information about her disappearance gradually increased from $7,000 to $100,000. There were five articles about Verk's case.

The Troubled Teen

In articles about missing teenagers, they were usually labeled as runaways. Typically, there was not a lot of information about the missing teen or the circumstances that led to her disappearance. The articles were relatively short, came across as less concerning than other articles about missing women/girls, and there was generally no follow-up. Most of the "troubled teens" were white and none of them were Hispanic/Latina. Their average age was 14 and a vast majority of these cases did not garner repeat news coverage.

Nyla Rider was described as a 16-year-old Black female with black hair and brown eyes. She was 5'4" and 110 pounds and was last seen one week earlier at an apartment complex in Fort Worth (Hurley 2020). The article reported that police believed she was a runaway and asked anyone with any information to come forward (Hurley 2020). There was no information about where she might be headed, what she was last seen wearing, or any other identifying marks/scars or characteristics (Hurley 2020). There is no explanation as to why police concluded she ran away, and the article didn't invoke the sense of urgency one might expect from a 16-year-old who has not been seen or heard from in one week. This was the only article about her disappearance.

Tia Russell, 15, was last seen while walking late in the evening near a freeway in Dallas (Stokes 2018). She was spotted wearing a black New Orleans Saints tank top and

was described as a Black female who was 5'5" and 150 pounds with Black hair and brown eyes (Stokes 2018). The police are "asking for the public's assistance" and suggested that Russell "may pose a danger to herself or others" (Stokes 2018). There were no additional details, and this is the only article written about her disappearance.

Poor Mental Health

Articles that mentioned a missing woman's mental health condition, intellectual and/or developmental disability, memory ailments (such as dementia), and/or their need for daily psychiatric medication were often cases in which police stated that the subject was missing voluntarily. As with the articles about "troubled teens", those that involved a missing person with poor mental health were usually short with no follow-up. The descriptions of the missing women usually contained some aspect of deviant behavior, and the articles were usually published long after the subject had been reported missing. The average age of missing women and girls with poor mental health was in her 40's and the majority were white. Most of the stories did not result in repeat news coverage.

Rachel Marie Seeton was 29 when she was last seen at the Drummer Inn Motel in Fort Worth "about a month ago," according to the article (Smith 2017). Seeton was described as 5 feet tall, 150 pounds with blonde hair and hazel eyes (Smith 2017). Although not included in the article, a missing persons flyer stated that she was white. According to the newspaper, she had "mental disabilities and needs medication" (Smith 2017). There was no additional detail nor any follow-up article.

Iryna Rybalchenko was first reported missing in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* three weeks after she was last seen. The article indicated that she was a 5'4" tall female with blonde hair and blue eyes (Ramirez 2017b). Her age and race were not mentioned,

however a missing persons flyer stated that she was white. Rybalchenko was described as "mentally challenged" and had been "off her medication for several days" (Ramirez 2017b).

In a second article about Rybalchenko, she had been located in Denton after being arrested for causing minor damage at a fast-food restaurant (Ramirez 2017a). Although it was rare that articles about missing women and girls with poor mental health received repeat news coverage, it was revealed that after her arrest, Rybalchenko was detained in John Peter Smith Hospital where she underwent a mental evaluation, a detail that made that story more provocative (Ramirez 2017a). In addition, the article outlined Rybalchenko's history of mental illness, citing that her arrests for minor infractions (once for stealing chips from a Walgreens and once for public intoxication) and brief stays at homeless shelters (Ramirez 2017a). The article also claimed that she had obsessive compulsive disorder, had trouble caring for herself, and didn't have any close friends (Ramirez 2017a).

The Cautionary Tale

Articles in the "cautionary tale" category served to warn the reader of danger, however this was usually accomplished by blaming the missing woman or girl for making poor choices that led to her disappearance. The common storylines were that of the missing teen who vanished after meeting an older man on the Internet, and the abused wife or girlfriend who went missing after last being seen with their romantic partner. These articles had much more detail and were more likely to result in repeat coverage than articles of "troubled teens" or women with poor mental health. However, the stories didn't seem to generate the same sort of public outcry seen in the articles about a missing

"girl next door". Most of the articles were about teenagers or young women and although every racial category was represented in this category, the majority were Hispanic/Latina.

Fourteen-year-old Ruby Contreras was first reported missing after leaving her middle school in April of 2013. Police suspected her to be with 26-year-old Stephan Cox, a man whom she met online who was wanted on two unrelated counts of "unlawful sexual conduct with a minor" (Ramirez 2013). Contreras was described as 4'11" and 95 pounds (Ramirez 2013). Although not included in the initial article, a public record's request listed her ethnicity as Hispanic/Latina.

One week later, the same newspaper reported that Contreras had been located in Mexico and that police were working on having her returned home. The article stated that Contreras did indeed leave with Cox, who it appeared had been fleeing to Mexico to avoid the previously discussed rape charges of another 14-year-old girl from Pennsylvania (McFarland 2013). In the article police were ecstatic, stating that they "couldn't ask for a better ending" to this very serious situation (McFarland 2013).

There are two articles written about Maria Teresa Leon in the *San Antonio Express-News*. In July of 2011 it was reported that Leon's body had been discovered in the trunk of her abandoned vehicle, and a follow-up article in October of 2011 reported that there had been no new developments in the case (Ulloa 2011a; Ulloa 2011b). Leon was described as a quiet single mother who worked at a cabinet making factory and "rarely smiled" (Ulloa 2011b:15A). The article suggested that she was beautiful but sad, with long black hair and "solemn eyes" (Ulloa 2011b:15A). She was trapped in an abusive relationship with Rafael Hernandez, her on again-off again boyfriend of four years and the last person to see her alive.

In the second article, her friend and coworker detailed the abuse and stated that she "never understood what tied her to him" and that she had "warned her not to trust him" (Ulloa 2011b:15A). Leon was last seen leaving a bar with Hernandez after he showed up unannounced while she was out with friends (Ulloa 2011b). It was reported that Leon was scared to leave but did so to "avoid trouble" (Ulloa 2011b:15A). According to the article, Hernandez was wanted on a separate charge of domestic violence that involved Leon a year prior to her disappearance, but that "they are treating it as a separate case and have not named him as a person of interest in Leon's killing" (Ulloa 2011b:15A). There was no physical description of Leon in the article, but the San Antonio Police Department listed her race as white. It is uncertain if Hernandez was ever captured or charged with Leon's death.

Shocking & Outrageous

Some news articles center around mysterious disappearances or shocking homicides that may serve as paradoxical entertainment for the readers or to incite moral or political panic. Rare cases in which an article was about a missing woman or girl in another state belonged to this category. These articles almost always resulted in repeat news coverage and race did not seem to have a significant factor in their stories.

Derion Vence, the boyfriend of the mother of four-year-old Maleah Davis, reported her missing to police after she was allegedly abducted from his vehicle by three unknown Hispanic men (Hensley and Lewis 2019). According to the articles, his story of a stranger abduction had many inconsistencies. Later, blood matching Maleah's was found in his apartment and video surveillance surfaced of Vence leaving his apartment carrying a laundry basket that held a "heavy looking" large black bag (Ketterer 2019).

There were a total of seven articles written about the Houston girl's disappearance, Vence's arrest, and the eventual discovery of Maleah's body on the Arkansas-Texas border.

It is important to note that while most of the articles included salacious details about Maleah's case, only one provided a basic description of the missing child before she was found deceased. While it wouldn't have made much of a difference in this case (Maleah was killed prior to being reported missing), detailed descriptions exist to inform the public to be on the lookout for the missing person and potentially aid in the search.

The fact that most of the articles focused on speculations of physical and sexual abuse and that the toddler's body was discovered after a roadside crew "accidentally hit the bag containing Maleah's body with a mower," might provide some insights into the true motivations of the publications and the need to sensationalize news stories (Ketterer 2919). Although not reported in newspapers, a missing persons flyer indicated that Maleah was a Black female.

Another shocking case is that of Genesis Cornejo Alvarado, a 15-year-old who was reported missing in Jersey Village, a small-town northwest of Houston. The articles about Alvarado were written after she was found deceased and told a story that included "murder and kidnapping, cocaine dealing, and sex trafficking by two members of street gang that prides itself on violence" (Harden 2017:A004).

Like Maleah, Genesis seemed to have gotten lost in her story. According to articles written about her death, Genesis was killed and dumped on the side of the road in an apparent Satanic ritual "after she disrespected their shrine to Satanism" (Harden 2017:A004). Her killers had been apprehended and were believed to be members of the

MS-13 gang (Harden 2017). The article also stated that they were from El Salvador and had been residing in the country illegally (Harden 2017).

Although there was no physical description of Genesis in either of the two articles, one article stated that in order to identify the body, police had to release "images of her face with her eyes digitally added," a detail that seemed unnecessarily gruesome (Harden 2017:A004). An open records request stated that Genesis was a Hispanic female.

VI. DISCUSSION

The results indicate that MWWS is present in local newspapers in majority-minority cities in Texas. White women and girls are overrepresented in local news articles and women and girls who are multiple/other race(s) are underrepresented. Women of color are usually only featured if their cases involve young children, teenagers, elderly women, or those who face specific challenges such as poor health. These findings are relevant to MWWS because it suggests that if a missing woman is not white, their stories must have an additional layer of vulnerability to be noticed.

Women who were classified as "the girl next door" fit the criteria of the "ideal victim," as they had higher economic status, were conventionally attractive, petite, and white (Robinson 2005). The women in this category received the most repeat news coverage, had the largest rewards, and there were candlelight vigils held in their honor. Members of the community cared about these women, which most likely impacted the abundant police resources that were used to locate them. Individuals who fell into "the girl next door" category were among the lucky few whose stories had an ending. The remains of both Christina Morris and Zuzu Verk were discovered and returned to their families for a proper burial. Their killers were arrested, convicted, and are both serving life in prison. In the cases of "the girl next door" justice was served.

When women and girls go missing, it is common that they are blamed for their own misfortune. This is especially true in cases of missing women and girls of color. The "cautionary tale" warns us that men are not to be trusted. Through the stories of the missing, women are told to never ride with strangers and that victims of abuse are weak. Women are reminded that it's bad to be too quiet, too reserved, and too nice. However,

the victim precipitation theory suggests that women also must not provoke. To avoid being victimized, a woman must pay constant attention to what she wears, what she drinks, and how she acts. It's important to be friendly, but not be too friendly. Stand your ground but don't upset anyone. Be assertive but know your place. Be everything at once, but don't ever be "too" anything.

Contrary to the society pressures that pull women in every direction, many of the articles in this study depicted the missing women and girls as one-dimensional (good, troubled, mentally ill) In some of the articles, the victims get lost, and their tragedies are used to over-dramatize the coverage. This could be because the media is often faced with enormous pressure to attract larger audiences, which may especially be true in the case of the struggling newspaper industry. Interestingly, although many in the media cited slow news days or the pressure to sensationalize as the reason behind MWWS, none of the newspapers reported on the series of disappearances of women and girls who vanished while crossing into the United States from other countries. This mystery seems remarkably newsworthy and deserving of a "girl next door" style public outcry, especially since the local audience could potentially aid in the investigation.

Articles written about cases that received repeat news coverage seemed to have increased police involvement. While it was common for a story about a "troubled teen" or an individual with poor mental health to include the contact information for the police, should the reader have any information, shocking and outrageous articles, cautionary tales, and those about a "girl next door" usually included lengthy quotes from police officers. This implies that either a press conference was called by law enforcement or that individuals in the media deemed the stories important enough to seek out a quote from

law enforcement. Again, begging the question of which entity determines newsworthiness. It is clear that articles about cases involving a missing "girl next door," cautionary tales, and shocking/outrageous events had a much larger police presence. It is also evident that these types of cases were much more likely be reported as ending in an arrest compared to the "troubled teens" and those with poor mental health. These findings suggest that the hierarchy of victims described in the literature does indeed exist and helps us understand the magnitude and consequences of MWWS.

Black feminist theory suggests that it's more difficult for women of color to be considered victims in our society. This argument can be seen in the present study, in which missing women and girls who are Black and Brown are more likely to have an additional crisis in addition to having gone missing (not only is she missing, but she is also a child/has health issues/is a senior). Women and girls of color whose disappearances garner media attention are more likely to be children or seniors (under 18 and over 65). Since there is no statistical significance between age and race among women and girls who are currently missing in Texas, CRF may suggest that this in attempt to make stories of missing women and girls who are not white seem more newsworthy. Missing Black women and girls are depicted as especially vulnerable, as they are the group most likely to be described as having poor physical and mental health. This could be another attempt to sensationalize their disappearances and/or "justify" their newsworthiness.

The disparity in the news coverage of missing women and girls has negative social impacts because it perpetuates the idea that there is a racial hierarchy of victims. This not only increases the likelihood that minority women and girls will experience

victimhood but dismisses the broader issue of gender-based violence. It is important that local news cover stories of missing women and girls so that we can help bring them home, but too much coverage of one particular story (Laci Peterson, Natalee Holloway, and Gabbi Petito) suggests that it is *rare* for women and girls to go missing, when in fact it happens every day, just not for the kinds of women so frequently cited in the news.

It should be noted MWWS is not inevitable. In 2020, U.S. Army Specialist Vanessa Guillen, a 20-year-old Latina from Houston, went missing from her base in Fort Hood, Texas after filing two formal complaints of sexual harassment. Frustrated with the lack of media attention on Guillen's disappearance, her sister turned to social media to increase public awareness and pressure the military to investigate the case. Through platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, Guillen's story went viral and sparked the same sort of community outrage that is usually reserved for stories about the missing "girl next door."

Although it was later discovered that Guillen had been murdered by a fellow officer, her story has forever changed how sexual assault cases are handled by the U.S. Military. The "I Am Vanessa Guillen Act," which went into effect in 2022, requires that allegations of sexual harassment and sexual assault that occur within the military be investigated and prosecuted by an outside party. Through grassroots activism, the family was able to bypass the potential biases and barriers of MWWS to challenge the U.S. Military, one of the largest American institutions, and demand answers in Guillen's case.

VII. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This study determined that MWWS is not limited to the national news, but the findings were much more complex. The overrepresentation of white women and the underrepresentation of women and girls who belong to multiple/other races could be due to misclassification, as it can be difficult to determine a person's race when they are not present. However, since news articles are likely to report the missing woman/girl's race as stated in her missing person report, which are the same reports used in the NamUs database, there is an indication of racial bias when it comes to which missing women and girls are reported on in the local news.

There are no official records (birth certificates, driver's licenses/identification cards) that explicitly state an individual's race, therefore there is a chance of error in all studies about race when the person is not present to self-identify. Assigning a person's race perpetuates the idea that race is biological and ignores the political and social constructs that have widely been used to justify oppression. Even missing persons reports involve an officer assigning a person's race, who may do so based on the missing person's appearance and/or skin tone. In this study, for example, multiple sources were used to determine the missing woman/girl's race, therefore race was not universally defined. Although it was necessary to use various sources in this research, this distinction creates the possibility of error in race classification.

It should also be noted that it can be difficult to uncouple the relationship between race and class. As seen in this study, articles about the missing "girl next door" had large rewards and candlelight vigils, both of which can only be achieved with monetary resources and community status. However, racial identity is important in racially diverse

societies because it helps explain an individual's history and experiences of systemic, institutional, interpersonal, and structural racism. According to the National Museum of African American History and Culture, racial identity also helps determine how individuals are understood by others and how individuals perceive themselves (National Museum of African American History and Culture 2022). Discussions and examinations of racial inequality work to identify inherent biases, which will hopefully assist in creating a more equitable society.

Future research is needed to explore the newsworthiness of missing women and girls who belong to more than one racial group or are categorized as a race other than white, Hispanic/Latina, or Black. While there has been research conducted on the experiences of missing Indigenous women and girls, additional research on missing women and girls from other marginalized groups (like those crossing into the United States) could result in the public awareness needed to help locate these individuals. In addition, an evaluation of the newsworthiness of missing multiracial women and girls could provide insight into the complex experience of both belonging to more than one racial group and being perceived as the "other" in these groups.

Likewise, future studies should focus on how audiences respond to news reports of missing women and girls. This could be done by analyzing the content of the comments section of online news articles and/or by recording which articles of missing women and girls are shared on social media and how they are discussed online. It would also be interesting to examine the role of colorism in media reports of missing women and girls to determine whether there are any disparities in the newsworthiness of missing nonwhite individuals based on skin tone.

Local newspapers are often the main source for community-specific information, including reports of individuals who are missing. By providing accurate, unbiased reporting of missing persons, articles could encourage residents to be on the lookout for missing individuals or to come forward with information. Disseminating information about missing persons is key in helping locate them, and local newspapers have the responsibility to give everyone an equal chance of coming home.

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