



No. 158 Print Media Reporting on Drugs and Crime, 1995–1998

Michael Teece and Toni Makkai

In any modern society, the media provide important sources of information about matters beyond people's personal experience. This applies especially to social deviance, including drugs and crime. How the media report drugs and crime, therefore, has a great impact on public debate about, and ultimately on policy decisions related to, drugs and crime. There has been much criticism of the way in which the media report on drugs and crime. However, there have been relatively few systematic empirical studies of the media's portrayal of drugs and crime in Australia. This paper attempts to redress this lack of a knowledge base by examining a sample of print media reporting on drugs and crime from January 1995 to December 1998. The paper focuses on sources used by the media, the types of drugs covered, and the connection posited in media reporting between drugs and non-drug criminality. It concludes with some suggestions about how media professionals and stakeholders (especially criminal justice researchers and government) can work together to improve reporting on drugs and crime. These include the setting up of guidelines so that drugs and crime are reported in a manner that takes account of public interest.

Adam Graycar
Director

In recent times, State and Federal governments have sought to rationalise the provision of services and to base policy upon evidence of effectiveness. However, policy development is necessarily constrained by public opinion. Research has found that although the media may not change opinion, they set the agenda and the parameters of the discussion and debate. For this reason, the way in which the media depict drugs and crime has serious policy ramifications. Furthermore, the media is one of the principal sources of information on subjects outside the bounds of people's direct experience. Drug-related crime, of a kind serious and exceptional enough to make the news, is one of these subjects.

Media reporting on drugs and crime, as on other aspects of social deviance, has been widely criticised, in both academic and popular discourse, as a limited and distorting representation of its subjects (see Chan 1995). It is alleged that the media depend largely on limited, easily accessible sources—often “authorities” that “own” an issue—and, therefore, present a one-sided picture (Ericson et al. 1989). However, there have been few systematic empirical studies of the media's portrayal of drugs and crime in Australia. Two detailed studies by Bell (1983, 1985) examine the construction of a normative discourse on drugs in the media. Bell argues that media coverage of drugs “educate[s] ... audiences to a resigned, alienated passivity”, systematically ignoring the broader social context of drug use and “focusing on the individual victim as a publicly confessing example of the *consequences* of drug consumption” (Bell 1985).

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Australian Institute
of Criminology
GPO Box 2944
Canberra ACT 2601
Australia

Tel: 02 6260 9221

Fax: 02 6260 9201

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Bell's qualitative studies do not focus specifically on how the media depict drug-related *crime*. More recently, Elliott and Chapman (2000) examined the portrayal of heroin addiction within the context of the Australian Capital Territory heroin trial. They concluded that:

The cultural value of abstinence from drug use and the ideology of individualism with its connotations of heroin use as a choice that required punishment rather than help were rarely challenged, reinforcing the view of drug use as a problem of individual morality. (Elliott and Chapman 2000 p. 191)

This paper examines sources of information and connections posited between drugs and crime, as well as type of newspaper and type of drugs and crime referred to in newspaper articles. The database consists of 865¹ press reports focused specifically on drugs and crime held by the Alcohol and Other Drugs Council of Australia (ADCA) clipping service. The period covered is between January 1995 and December 1998. A number of newspapers, both metropolitan and regional, are represented in the sample.

Limitations

It is difficult to determine how representative the sample of clippings is of all drugs and crime reporting. In particular, regional newspapers may well be under-represented. Conversely, national, Sydney, and Melbourne dailies may be over-represented. It is important to acknowledge that this is not an exhaustive account of all articles on drugs and crime appearing in the print media. The sample is constrained by the clippings held by ADCA. However, the ADCA clipping service clearly covers print media reporting on this topic thoroughly, especially reporting in national and metropolitan newspapers.

More generally, the present study is confined to the print media and excludes consideration

of other forms of media. Finally, the present paper gives only a one-sided account of news discourse. There is no analysis of how the public receives the news or what the public makes of the media's constructions of drugs and crime.

Results

The newspapers have been grouped into 5 categories. The first group consists of the 3 biggest "quality" dailies, namely *The Australian*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and *The Age*. The second group represents the popular or tabloid press of Sydney and Melbourne. The third group comprises the dailies from each of the capital cities other than Sydney and Melbourne. The fourth group represents regional

papers, and a small fifth group comprises Sunday papers. Sunday or weekend editions of daily newspapers are included with the daily newspapers.

Across the 4 years, Table 1 shows the *Canberra Times* had the highest total number of press clippings dealing with drugs and crime (120). This was in part due to interest in the proposed "heroin trial" in the Australian Capital Territory. Following the *Canberra Times*, the *Courier-Mail* had the next highest number of clippings—this was partly due to the very extensive coverage of drug-related corruption in the Queensland Police Service under investigation by the Criminal Justice Commission. The *Daily Telegraph* had the third highest number of articles, followed by the *Herald-Sun* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The peak year

Table 1: Number of Press Clippings Related to Drugs and Crime by Year and Newspaper

	1995	1996	1997	1998	All years
Major dailies					
<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	24	17	35	14	90
<i>The Age</i>	9	18	20	17	64
<i>The Australian</i>	23	11	15	9	58
(Sub-total)	(56)	(46)	(70)	(40)	(212)
Popular metropolitan dailies					
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	11	28	42	19	100
<i>Herald-Sun</i>	12	31	27	26	96
(Sub-total)	(23)	(59)	(69)	(45)	(196)
Smaller capitals					
<i>Canberra Times</i>	38	38	30	14	120
<i>Courier-Mail</i>	9	19	52	22	102
<i>West Australian</i>	18	15	40	12	85
<i>Adelaide Advertiser</i>	6	10	17	9	42
Other ^a	6	7	3	9	25
(Sub-total)	(77)	(89)	(142)	(66)	(374)
Regional papers^b	8	4	9	27	48
Sunday papers^c	4	13	9	9	35
Total	168	211	299	187	865

^a Other consists of *NT News*, *Hobart Mercury*.

^b Regional papers consists of *Newcastle Herald* (n=9), *Border Mail* (Albury) (n=8), *Illawarra Mercury* (n=7), *Launceston Examiner* (n=4), *Queanbeyan Age* (n=3), *Warrnambool Standard* (n=2), *Burnie Advocate* (Tas), *Central Western Daily* (Orange, NSW), *Cobar Weekly* (NSW), *Gladstone Observer* (Qld), *Kalgoorlie Miner* (WA), *Northern Daily Leader* (Tamworth, NSW), *Northern Star* (Lismore, NSW), *Queensland Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton, Qld), *Southern Star* (Moruya, NSW), *Temora Independent* (NSW), *Wagga Daily Advertiser* (NSW), *Warren Advocate* (NSW), *Wellington Times* (NSW), *Western Advocate* (Bathurst, NSW), and *Western Star* (Qld).

^c Sunday papers consist of *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), *Sunday Mail* (Qld), *Sunday Times* (WA), *Sunday Mail* (SA), and *Sunday Tasmanian* (Tas).

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, Print Media Reports on Drugs and Crime, 1995–98 [Computer File].

of reports on drugs and crime occurred in 1997 with 299 clippings, followed by 1996 with 211 clippings.

Local issues are important factors in determining coverage. There was relatively little coverage of drugs and crime in smaller capital cities and regional papers. Given that the “drug problem” has until recently been perceived as primarily a “big city” problem, this distribution of coverage is consistent with local concerns. The coverage of drugs and crime in regional papers increased from very low figures for the first 3 years, 6 per cent in 1995 (and well below that in the 2 intermediate years) to 18 per cent in the last year of the sample period. This mirrors an increasing concern about illicit drugs in rural and regional Australia. On the other hand, reporting in the *Canberra Times* decreased in 1998 as the heroin trial faded from the public agenda.

Articles were classified into routine articles, feature or in-depth pieces, or editorials. The breakdown by the 5 categories of newspapers is shown in Table 2. Just over three-quarters of the articles were routine reports on drugs and crime. Of the remaining articles, 13 per cent were feature or in-depth pieces and 10 per cent were editorial or

Table 2: Type of Article by Newspaper Group (Percentages)

	Major dailies	Popular metrop dailies	Smaller capital dailies	Regional papers	Sunday papers	All newspapers
Routine article	74	73	82	81	69	77
In-depth feature	18	12	10	8	20	13
Editorial	8	15	8	10	11	10
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Sample excludes 2 clippings that could not be assigned to any of the 3 categories. Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, Print Media Reports on Drugs and Crime, 1995–98 [Computer File].

comment pieces.² The Sunday papers and the quality dailies were the groups most likely to have covered drugs and crime in in-depth feature pieces. In the case of the Sunday papers, this simply reflects a style and format different from that of dailies. However, the quality dailies were clearly more likely to devote extended attention, and coverage to drugs and crime, than were the tabloids. Editorial comment was most likely to be found in the metropolitan tabloids, reflecting these papers’ greater tendency to editorialise on law and order issues considered to be of popular concern. Differences in types of reporting were statistically significant (chi-sq = 19.10, df=8, p<.02).

Over the 4 years of the study, there was some change in the form of reporting on drugs and crime. The number of in-depth

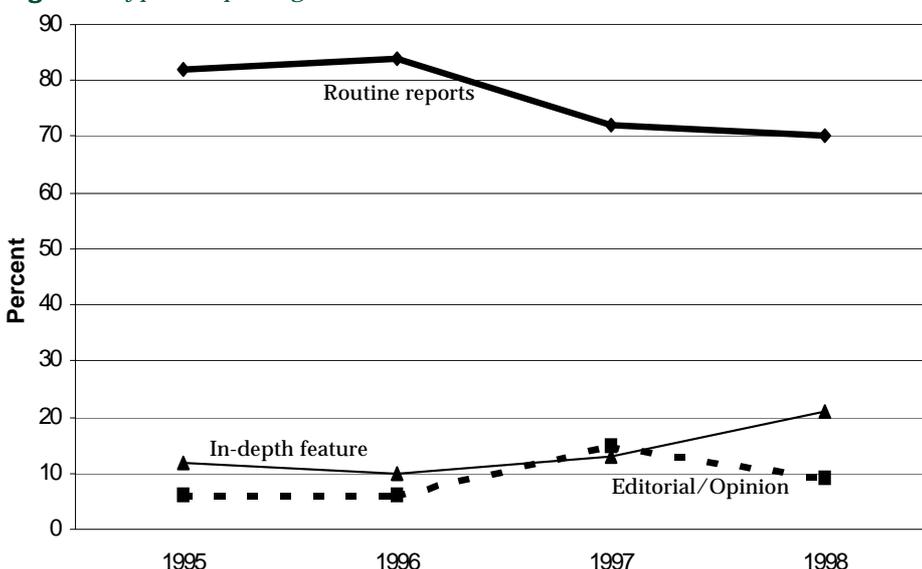
feature articles as a proportion of the total increased significantly from 11 per cent in 1995 to 21 per cent in 1998 (see Figure 1). At the same time, the number of routine reports declined from 81 to 70 per cent. Editorial and opinion articles peaked in 1997 with 15 per cent but fell in 1998 to 9 per cent, similar to the levels observed in the first 2 years of the sample.

Sources of Information

The media use a variety of sources. Sometimes, several sources were referred to in the one article. The 865 articles used 1,238 different sources. As can be seen from Table 3, the major sources of information were the police (35%) and the courts (28%). Ten per cent of sources were individuals directly involved in the matter being reported upon, 9 per cent of sources were either politicians or their advisers, and 8 per cent were research sources.

When police, courts, politicians, and bureaucratic and local government sources are added, “official sources” made up three-quarters of all sources. This is consistent with international research. In one American study, Beckett (1995) found that 85 per cent of sources cited in a sample of television news and newspaper items were “officials” and “state actors” of some kind (most of these were law enforcement officials and politicians). In Australia, research has shown there is a close relationship between crime reporters and official sources (see, for example, Grabosky and Wilson 1989). This is reflected in the current data.

Figure 1: Type of reporting, 1995–1998



Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, Print Media Reports on Drugs and Crime, 1995–98 [Computer File].

Table 3: Sources of Information (Percentages)

	1995	1996	1997	1998	All years
Police	32	39	32	35	35
Courts	37	30	30	18	28
Politicians/advisers	9	7	11	8	9
Researchers/research	7	7	8	11	8
Victim/suspect/witness	8	11	9	13	10
Other*	7	6	10	15	10
Number	222	315	426	275	1238

* Includes bureaucratic sources, local government, other individuals, and organisations.

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, Print Media Reports on Drugs and Crime, 1995–98 [Computer File].

Sources of information varied by type of article. Not surprisingly, in-depth feature articles and editorial and opinion pieces were much more likely to draw upon research information than were routine reports on drugs and crime. Eight per cent of routine reports drew upon research information as compared to 22 per cent of feature and in-depth articles and 27 per cent of editorial and comment pieces. Routine reports were more likely to draw on courts for information (45%) than the other types of articles. Editorial and opinion pieces were more likely to draw upon statements by politicians and their advisers and were the least likely to draw upon police information.

The major dailies were significantly more likely to draw on research sources than were any of the other newspaper categories: 18 per cent of articles from the major dailies used research sources, compared to 12 per cent for the smaller capitals, 10 and 9 per cent for regional papers and Sunday papers respectively, and only 5 per cent of tabloid articles ($\chi^2=17.09$, $df=4$, $p<.002$). Conversely, tabloids (58%) and Sunday papers (63%) were more likely than the other categories (46–47%) to rely on the police ($\chi^2=10.48$, $df=4$, $p<.05$).

Over the 4-year period, the major dailies moved towards a more in-depth coverage of drugs and crime as an important social problem. As a result, the number of feature articles as well as editorials and opinion columns

increased as a proportion of the total. Most notably, the proportion of feature articles in the 3 major dailies showed a continuous increase from 9 per cent in 1995 to 13 per cent the following year, further increasing to 18 per cent in 1997, and then to 38 per cent in 1998.

Given that the number of feature articles and editorial and opinion pieces that cover drugs and crime increased over time, we would expect to find that sources of information also changed. This has indeed been the case. From 1995 to 1998, the proportion of clippings that used police sources increased from 42 to 52 per cent, the use of court sources declined from 49 to 26 per cent, while the use of research sources increased from 9 to 16 per cent. Political sources remained relatively constant at about 10 per cent, although 1997 recorded a markedly higher level of 15 per cent.

Seventeen per cent of all articles quoted statistics about crime and/or drugs in their reports. Of these, 42 per cent used police statistics, 38 per cent used statistics from research, 3 per cent (5 articles) used court statistics,

and 17 per cent (25 articles) used figures from other sources. Use of statistics varied between years. In 1995, 17 per cent of articles quoted statistics whereas the figure for 1996 was only 9 per cent. In 1997, it rose to 18 per cent and increased further to 26 per cent in 1998.

Table 4 examines the differences between type of newspaper and use of statistics (for “any statistics”, $\chi^2=10.24$, $df=4$, $p<.05$). The major quality dailies cited statistics more than the other groups of papers and they were almost twice as likely to cite statistics as the metropolitan tabloids. The smaller capitals’ dailies (which also tend to be the quality as opposed to the popular end of the market) were next most likely to cite statistics. This pattern was even more pronounced in the case of research statistics.

Drug Focus

One quarter of the clippings referred to cannabis, 15 per cent to amphetamines, 11 per cent to cocaine, and 48 per cent to heroin (Table 5). In total, 29 per cent of clippings referred to more than one drug. Ecstasy and hallucinogens were reported at low levels in all types of paper: 3 per cent and 2.5 per cent respectively of all clippings mentioned these drugs. Coverage of these drugs and cocaine did not vary significantly across newspaper types. There were statistically significant differences in levels of reporting on the other 3 major illicit drugs. However, these seem to reflect differences in region rather than type of newspaper. Smaller capital city dailies were relatively

Table 4: Use and Source of Statistics by Type of Newspaper (Percentages)

	Major dailies	Popular metrop dailies	Smaller capital dailies	Regional papers	Sunday papers	All newspapers
Any statistics	22	12	18	15	9	17
Police	8	8	8	2	3	7
Courts	1	0.5	0.3	0	0	1
Research	11	3	7	6	3	7
Other	5	1	2	6	3	3

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, Print Media Reports on Drugs and Crime, 1995–98 [Computer File].

Table 5: Reporting on Specific Drugs by Newspaper Group (Percentages)

Drug	Major dailies	Popular metrop dailies	Smaller capital dailies	Regional papers	Sunday papers	All newspapers
Cannabis	22	18	29	23	31	25
Amphetamines	12	12	17	6	34	15
Heroin	54	55	40	52	37	48
Cocaine	15	10	9	4	14	11

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, Print Media Reports on Drugs and Crime, 1995–98 [Computer File].

more likely to report on cannabis and amphetamines, but somewhat less likely to report on heroin and cocaine. Interestingly, regional papers are about as likely as the major and popular metropolitan dailies to report on heroin and significantly more likely to do so than papers from the smaller capitals. Sunday papers clearly follow a very different pattern, they were significantly more likely to report on amphetamines than the other papers.

Reported Connections Between Drugs and Other Criminality

The articles in the sample were coded into 4 categories according to the connection they posited between drug use and crime.

These were:

- the pharmacological effects of drugs cause drug users to commit crimes;
- drug users commit crimes to pay for drugs;
- trafficking in drugs is associated with violence; and
- drug trafficking is an important criminal enterprise.

Over half of the articles did not expressly posit specific connections between illegal drugs and other forms of crime. As can be seen from Table 6, 20 per cent of articles made no comment on links between drugs and crime. However, only 5.5 per cent linked drugs with general criminality, without specifying the nature of the link or making any claims about causation. A further 29 per cent discussed drug trafficking as a criminal enterprise without explicitly positing links between drugs and other forms of crime (although all of these articles

mentioned non-drug criminality as well as drug trafficking).

Among those articles that did explicitly discuss the drugs and crime nexus, various imputed connections can be found. Crime was very unlikely to be attributed in the press to the direct pharmacological effects of drugs on users' behaviour. Not surprisingly, economic-compulsion—the need to commit crimes to finance an expensive drug habit—was the single most common connection claimed in the press. Twenty-nine per cent of all articles posited such a link (some of these also mentioned other connections). “Systemic” crime, principally violent disputes and intimidation arising from an underground trade in drugs, was not far behind.

Analyses show that the proportion of articles reporting an economic-compulsive link between drugs and crime increased steadily from 20 per cent in 1995 to 46 per cent in 1998. The trend in coverage of

trafficking was in the opposite direction, but of a greater magnitude (64 to 27%). The percentage of articles reporting violence related to drug trafficking also declined, though not as sharply (17 to 10%).

Discussion

From the current sample of newspaper clippings, media concern about drugs and crime appear to have increased from the beginning of the study period, although this trend seems to have levelled off at the end of the period. How drugs and crime are perceived and represented in the media also appears to have changed. This is evident from the following trends observed in the current data:

- number of feature articles as well as editorial and opinion columns devoted to drugs and crime have increased;
- coverage of drugs and crime has increased markedly in regional newspapers;
- the proportion of articles that draw on research has increased, as has the proportion that cited statistics, though the overall level of use is extremely low;
- the papers have become less likely to report drug trafficking and associated criminality and more likely to report “economic-compulsive” property crime by individual drug users; this appears to be

Table 6: Reported Connections Between Drugs and Crime

Nature of link	N	Percentage
Link proposed		
Pharmacological	13	1.5
Economic-compulsive	204	23.6
Trafficking/violence	133	15.4
Trafficking/economic-compulsive	31	3.6
Trafficking/violence/economic-compulsive	7	0.8
(Sub-total)	(388)	(44.9)
No link proposed		
Drug trafficking	247	28.6
Other	8	0.9
Link posited—not specified	48	5.5
No link posited	174	20.1
(Sub-total)	(477)	(55.1)
Total	865	100

Source: Australian Institute of Criminology, Print Media Reports on Drugs and Crime, 1995–98 [Computer File].

related to increased attention to heroin as the main problem drug;

- increased attention to heroin in the major quality dailies appears to have reduced differences between them and the other daily newspapers in coverage of drugs and crime, in terms of levels of coverage, and depiction of the drug-crime link.

Policy Implications

A degree of distortion and bias is inherent in crime journalism, if only because official sources predominate and the most prominent subjects of reporting are statistically exceptional crimes. This can sometimes distort, or at least decontextualise, crime stories. However, some scholars have claimed that journalists are potentially open to other sources and views and that this tendency is increasing (Welch et al. 1997; Barak 1994). The proportion of articles that report research findings is small. Clearly, this offers an opportunity for researchers who study and publish on various aspects of crime to claim their place as credible and authoritative sources of information about drugs and crime (Barak 1994, p. 260).

Daly (1995) argues that researchers need to work with the media to bring their expertise to a wider audience. Such efforts foster a better-informed and considered discourse about crime, and thereby facilitate evidence-based policy making. An important initiative in this regard is the Australian Drug Foundation (ADF) regular one-page newsletter (*DrugLeads*). The newsletter is primarily aimed at providing quality, research-based information and statistics on drugs to media professionals.

For their own part, the media could adopt formal guidelines on reporting drugs and crime. Guidelines on the reporting of other controversial subjects, such as suicide and mental illness, have been collaboratively drawn up by the media and government agencies (Commonwealth

Department of Health and Aged Care 1999). Guidelines on reporting drugs and crime could encourage journalists to refrain from either glamorising or trivialising drugs and crime, to check the reliability of their sources, and to consult experts as appropriate. Most importantly, guidelines would emphasise the media's duty to report drugs and crime in a manner that takes account of the public interest. Such guidelines would encourage news professionals to show greater concern for their work's impact on popular, and ultimately political, discourse about drugs and crime in deciding which events become news.

Notes

¹ Twenty-seven clippings in the sample were syndicated articles supplied by press agencies for simultaneous publication in a number of newspapers.

² There were 3 clippings that did not fit into this classification and have been excluded.

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Michael Teece was a Research Assistant at the Australian Institute of Criminology until July 2000. Toni Makkai is Head of the Illicit Drugs Monitoring Program, Australian Institute of Criminology.



General Editor, Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice series:
Dr Adam Graycar, Director
Australian Institute of Criminology
GPO Box 2944
Canberra ACT 2601 Australia

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