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Auto-Theft Coverage in New Jersey-Based Online News Articles From 2017–2022

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Walden University

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Walden University

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

Auto-Theft Coverage in New Jersey-Based Online News Articles From 2017–2022

by

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MA/MA, American Military University, 2020

BS, Colorado State University, 2017

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Criminal Justice

Walden University

August 2023

Abstract

News organizations at both the local and national level report current events through many platforms, including print media, online news media, television programming, and social media posting. All these mediums have virtually unlimited reach as the internet, social media, and smartphones have proliferated globally. A popular topic reported by the media is crime. This study was focused on how crime, specifically auto theft, has been reported on by New Jersey web-based news organizations and public officials in the past 5 years. To obtain a local perspective, three news organizations were randomly selected from the News Bank archive, and all articles related to car theft/auto theft were purposely sampled, published 2017–2022, since the implementation of bail reform in New Jersey in 2017. A single qualitative case study using thematic analysis was employed using Gerbner's cultivation theory. The latent themes detected included the bulk of web-based news articles sampled that demonstrated objectivity that coincided with police information, despite increases in the frequency of auto theft, it was not framed as a problem, and public officials expressed concerns about the increasing number of stolen vehicles in New Jersey. Although auto theft has increased, none of the messaging by local news media or public officials in those stories rose to the level of fear cultivation. The findings of this study have implications for positive social change in creating an increased understanding of how local news media and local public officials portray certain property crimes, which is not something that has been studied in this specific state and for this specific crime. This kind of research can be foundational in working toward assessment of law and policy changes and their impact on crime and public perception.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Kristin. Thank you for continually supporting me and my vision since the first day we met. You have never wavered in supporting my dreams despite building your own business and having our two wonderful children.

I dedicate this dissertation to my sons, Kyle and Chase. The body achieves what the mind believes. Never stop fighting for your goals, and take each day one day at a time.

Lastly, to my parents, Mike and Lesa, and sister Kylea, thank you for leading by example and showing me how to be successful through hard work, dedication, and perseverance despite overwhelming adversity. I love you all very much, and this would not be possible without you guys.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Human beings have a unique way of connecting, evaluating, and internalizing information presented to them whether visually on television, digitally on social media, or in published online texts. *Media* can be broadly defined as any private corporations that report on local or national events. People also have a unique sense of risk perception when dealing with the dangers of driving, walking, or riding the train to work daily (Sobkow et al., 2016). Thus, when people hear, read, or see information being broadcast by media across many platforms and formats, risk perception tends to be altered based on that information.

Most local news organizations in New Jersey carry comments from public officials, so the public receives those views on whatever topic is being reported on. The media carry the message to the public, the public, in turn, interprets the message and formulates opinions and perceptions, which then influences public officials—and vice versa. Hager and Hilbig (2020) found that “knowledge about public preferences spurs responsiveness” (p. 936), and the cycle of influence continues. In this research, the intersection of auto theft, fear, and messaging from local media organizations and public officials was explored.

In general, the media has historically zeroed in on infrequent events and can produce bombastic and sensational headlines (Sarithchandra & McCright, 2017). This could explain the popularity of reality television or hyped-up news articles conveying stories that occur irregularly. Public officials have the same ability as the media to distort

reality through their comments on relevant issues. Hendriks Vettehen and Kleemans (2017) argued, “sensationalism stimulates viewing time” (p. 113), and that viewing time applies to published online news articles as well. Local news organizations in New Jersey routinely carry the comments of public officials in their news articles. More people than ever before are obtaining news from online platforms (Shearer, 2021). Thus, while television has historically been the key deliverer of news, online viewership of published articles is drastically increasing given the various platforms and mediums where these stories can be accessed quickly. Online news consumers receive an opinion from their local journalists and what public officials have to say about a topic.

One of the most sensationalized headlines news corporations seek to cover is aggressive or pernicious offenses either involving injury or death. The media must market and tailor their news stories based on viewership demands and interest, and that can lead to non-objective stories being told (Chermak, 1994). Public officials routinely comment on sensationalized stories and inject their own opinions, which can impact public discourse and fear (Sauer et al., 2021). People’s perceptions of violent or deadly crimes might be more prevalent due to the themes and messages news companies and public officials disburse over various platforms. Works and Wong (2020) found, “News reports, by the very nature of the industry, cannot achieve complete objectivity” (p. 426). There is a gap in how lesser crimes such as property crimes are reported in published online texts, especially concerning automobile theft, by New Jersey-based media outlets. There is also a gap in how public officials interpret and deliver messages on lesser crimes like auto theft.

In this study, I did not seek to determine the ethics of producing stories for the public with images, text, and soundbites to elicit a response or more views. I also did not seek to determine the ethicality of the way public figures frame issues. There is a significant distinction in how national media companies' market versus how local news media report the news, and this is true of national public figures. However, almost 20% more Americans trust their local news organizations over than national news organizations (Gottfried & Liedke, 2021). Trust in local government remains high at almost 70% (Brenan, 2021a). This trust in local government varies per zip code but can be extended to public officials as well. Local news organizations and public officials have a colossal burden to bear as more Americans are tuning in and reading their published information concerning what is going on in their areas.

There are dozens of other news organizations that operate and exist in New Jersey. I used three randomly selected news organizations from the News Bank archive for this qualitative thematic analysis in New Jersey: the Star-Ledger, Press of Atlantic City, and TapINTO.net. Most of the publications for the 2017–2022 period included direct quotes or paraphrases of public officials and various law enforcement personnel.

There is a gap in research on how one of the most prevalent crimes in New Jersey, automobile theft, is being covered by local news organizations and commented on by public officials in New Jersey. In 2017, the New Jersey Bail Reform Act was signed into law by former Governor Chris Christie. This law, in tandem with the recent attorney general guidelines, has drastically impacted the prosecution of and management of

automobile theft. The extent of this is unknown, and I sought to evaluate the themes and patterns displayed by public officials and local news media.

Background

Automobile theft is a property crime committed with relative ease that rarely involves injury. However, stolen vehicles affect individuals, families, law enforcement, and the communities where the vehicles are used for nefarious purposes (Walsh & Taylor, 2007b). Auto theft does not demand the same attention as homicides or carjackings, but the crime is a catalyst for chaos given its frequency and subsequent use of stolen automobiles in other felonious and violent crimes. Pre-pandemic declining auto theft numbers have left this topic understudied and primarily forgotten (Fujita & Maxfield, 2012; Lee et al., 2016; Walsh & Taylor, 2007a). Studies of auto theft and its subsequent reporting via online published news media, as well as how public officials frame auto theft, are virtually non-existent in academia. Tracking, monitoring, and evaluating local media and public official responses and reporting on crime, specifically auto theft, may have an influence on crime perceptions at the local level that should be explored.

Numerous academic studies exist on the motives (Jacobs & Cherbonneau, 2018), spatial significance (Bjerregaard et al., 2021; Potchak et al., 2002), targeted auto theft reduction programs (Linden & Chaturvedi, 2005), theoretical evaluations (Rice et al., 2002), policing techniques to reduce auto thefts (Collazos et al., 2021; Piza et al., 2020; Rengert, 1997), and others on auto theft. However, there are no published studies explaining how local news media and public officials report on this recurring property

crime. There is a wealth of information and study on the infrequent events picked up by the media, i.e., homicides, carjackings, stabbings, and armed robberies/burglaries, but seldom any attention on the coverage of frequent crime events. Despite the severity of these events and the grotesque violence that can result, they do not occur with the same frequency as auto theft but receive far more coverage, attention, and commentary. In other words, marketable stories always take precedence.

There are presently no studies on themes and patterns displayed by public figures on auto theft in online news media. The closest study concerning media reporting of auto thefts was Cherbonneau and Copes's (2003) research on carjacking. The authors evaluated and conducted a content analysis on almost 700 Louisiana news articles from 1993 to 2002. Cherbonneau and Copes (2003) found "that while Louisiana newspapers do devote attention to typical carjackings as described in previous research, they devote significantly more coverage to carjackings that have more sensational aspects" (p. 17). This study adds another layer to thematic analysis by factoring in the statements by public officials and focusing on a New Jersey-based perspective. Given that auto theft is more prevalent than both carjacking and homicide combined, the way it is being reported by local news organizations and framed by public figures is of great importance.

The New Jersey Bail Reform Act of 2017 removed custodial punishments for auto theft and other lower criminal offenses. Auto theft used to be reported with the same persistence and brevity as sensationalized crimes today because auto theft levels were the highest ever in 1990, at a rate of 939.5 thefts per 100,000 residents; they reached a historic low of 115.7 recorded in 2020 (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2021). In

this qualitative research, I aimed to determine the themes and messages conveyed by New Jersey-based local news media organizations and public officials concerning the historically declining crime of automobile theft.

Problem Statement

It is not known how New Jersey-based published online news media have changed how they report automobile thefts or how public officials frame auto theft since the passage of bail reform in 2017. In their qualitative content analysis of carjacking, Cherbonneau and Copes (2003) indicated, “To date, no one has examined the media’s role in constructing an image of carjackings” (p. 2). To date, no one has examined New Jersey-based media’s role or public officials’ role in constructing an image of auto theft. There are no studies on the relationship between New Jersey-based media, public officials, and automobile theft. In this study, I explored this path as a primer for further inquiry into localized media and public officials’ coverage of frequent crimes. The relevant phenomena in this study include bail reform, changes to attorney general guidelines, and cultivation theory among others.

Automobile theft from a crime syndicate standpoint is complex. Auto theft rings are gaining prominence as the cost of new vehicles and vehicle parts drastically increases along with the illicit demand for those vehicles. However, on the surface, auto theft is a straightforward crime of opportunity. Once out of control in New Jersey almost 30 years ago, citizens are seeing a significant upward trend of auto theft today. Automobile thefts are more than just property crimes as they can result in injury whenever people encounter these thieves. Operators of stolen vehicles may drive the vehicles at reckless speeds and

seldom follow traffic laws when attempting to evade law enforcement and capture, thus jeopardizing everyone else on the road and in adjacent areas.

People are more likely to have their car stolen than they are to be killed or carjacked in New Jersey, yet it remains unclear whether news media coverage and public officials in published online texts convey that risk. For context, the homicide rate in 2020 in New Jersey was 3.7 per 100,000 versus 115.7 per 100,000 for auto theft (FBI, 2021). Despite the frequency of auto theft, it does not receive nearly the same amount of coverage as other high-profile crimes given its lack of sensation and the sometimes-victimless point of view it is sometimes understood as.

The impact of auto theft is wide ranging, stretches across state and national lines, and continues to impact New Jerseyans negatively. How automobile theft is reported on by the news media and by public officials, particularly in published online texts, has never been thoroughly explored. Auto theft is a growing problem that cannot be ignored any longer. Callanan (2012) revealed, “A large body of research argues that the high amount of violence in mass media elevates the public’s fear of criminal victimization” (p. 93). There is an urgent need for a comprehensive investigation of the themes and patterns shown to the public via published online text and how those messages may impact crime perceptions. Not only do local media have a say on auto theft, but so too do public officials routinely used in news articles.

New Jersey is currently enjoying the lowest automobile theft numbers on record as of the last recorded New Jersey State Police (NJSP) and FBI crime stats. Subsequent changes have occurred at the legislative level to offer lenience for lower-level crimes.

Lawmakers in New Jersey have continued their quest for a fairer, more equitable criminal justice system under the New Jersey Criminal Justice Reform Act (2017) at the request of the public (Piza & Welsh, 2021). This law immediately reduced prison populations across the state. In 2019, a study was conducted by the MDRC Center for Criminal Justice Research (2019) on the efficacy of New Jersey's bail reform overhaul. Researchers found police officers were making less arrests for lower-level offenses, and if suspects were arrested, they were likely to be immediately released on a summons with a court date versus a warrant or otherwise known as custodial punishment (MDRC Center for Criminal Justice Research, 2019). These significant changes took place simultaneously with sweeping impacts to police pursuits and use of force reporting. Auto theft is conceived as a lower-level or non-violent offense and has subsequently been impacted by this legislation.

Former Attorney General Gurbir Grewal scaled back police pursuits for stolen vehicles under New Jersey Attorney General Law Enforcement Directive No. 2020-13 and No. 2021-7 to enhance public safety. Criminals, especially those who operate and supervise auto theft rings, likely understand these changes to the laws. Jacobs and Cherbonneau (2018) asserted, "Although sanction threats promote fear, among committed offenders, that fear can become a resource with which to sculpt emerging crime preferences" (p. 191). Crime preferences have been altered in New Jersey due to Directive No. 2020-12, which diverted juveniles away from the criminal justice system and increased leniency for juvenile offenders (Office of the Attorney General, 2020a). While it is beyond the scope of this study to evaluate auto theft rings and crime

preferences, there is virtually no custodial punishment for juveniles who steal vehicles in New Jersey.

Both Directive 2020-12 and Directive 2020-13 and the bail reform act directly impact car thieves in New Jersey. In a recent news article by Sullivan (2022), the writer cited multiple Essex County law enforcement officials and elected officials. Sullivan (2022) found that auto theft rings are increasingly recruiting juveniles to steal high-end cars. Perhaps over legislation on too many issues at once and altering the AG guidelines has created a loophole that encourages more crime instead of reducing it.

Despite those prior New Jersey attorney general directives, Attorney General Law Enforcement Directive No. 2022-4 changed course because of surging auto theft numbers. This new directive allows officers, sheriffs, and troopers across the state to pursue confirmed National Crime Information Center stolen vehicles again to address the rise in this crime. The increase in auto thefts caught the attention of public officials who regularly speak to local news. Public officials have a duty to speak and act on crime-related issues as the public looks to them for assistance and to take action (Ashcroft, 2001).

New Jersey is now on its third attorney general in three years. Attorney General Matthew J. Platkin seemed to acknowledge the growing national and statewide auto theft problem. A review of recently published online texts from news media describes auto theft around the United States as unprecedented (National Insurance Crime Bureau, 2022b) and locally in New Jersey as disturbing (Platkin & Callahan, 2022). This rhetoric

was largely absent a few years ago when the number of auto thefts in New Jersey was much higher than in 2020.

Years before legislative and attorney general guidelines changed, news media's and public figures' narratives reflected different messages concerning auto theft. Cars today in New Jersey are not being repossessed with the same frequency they were given the rapid technological increases that auto makers have outfitted newer vehicles with (Sherman, 2015). Sherman (2015) suggested optimism that auto theft had been reduced given technological advances in police surveillance and vehicle technology, and auto theft statistics confirmed that decline. Vehicle technology is now more advanced than years ago, yet the messaging on the topic by both local news and public officials appears to be changing rapidly. This change is likely due to offender adaptation, owners leaving keys and key fobs in vehicles, an overestimation of the security that newer vehicles actually provide, legislative changes, and change in police practices that may be increasing those auto theft statistics.

The expansion of automatic license plate readers for New Jersey police has proliferated across the state on major transportation routes (Piza & Welsh, 2021). While the use of automatic license plate readers on both patrol cars and fixed posts is noteworthy and an achievement in intelligence-led policing, it is easy to evade detection of these cameras with fictitious, stolen, or otherwise altered license plates. Despite active media campaigns by police, local leaders, and politicians around the state to encourage people to lock their cars, unattended key fobs/keys in vehicles continues to fuel the auto theft epidemic.

Furthermore, when vehicles are locked, if the demand for the vehicle is high enough, some perpetrators have shown a willingness to enter homes to secure the keys to the vehicles. Lastly, vehicle immobilizer technology has existed for many years and can be added as an after-market product by subscription, such as OnStar or others; however, not every new vehicle is automatically equipped with such features. Most car thieves are acutely aware of where the GPS tracking technology is located on the vehicles they target, and they rip the units and wires out and discard them on the roadways as quickly as possible.

The culprits in these thefts are not simply committing this crime of opportunity for joyriding. Many criminals use these vehicles for nefarious purposes such as carjackings, homicides, shootings, burglaries, and thefts. There is also special spatial significance as most cars are brought back to urban metropolises, allowing them to blend in more easily with the environment (Rice & Smith, 2002). In addition to these localized crimes, many of these vehicles are conveniently shipped out to overseas destinations via the Port of Newark in an illicit transnational trade, as a small percentage of outgoing shipping containers are searched (Block, 2012; Kempinski & Murphy, 2016). The themes and patterns being conveyed by New Jersey-based online published news media and public officials on automobile theft do not match the last recorded declining automobile theft numbers.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this singular qualitative case study using thematic analysis is to explore and explain the themes and patterns being conveyed by New Jersey-based online

news media and public officials on automobile theft. This qualitative content analysis is comprised of several phenomena that may influence auto theft reporting, such as media objectivity, cultivation theory, local media culture, sensationalism, moral panic incited by media, media framing, crime reporting on auto theft, New Jersey attorney general guidelines, bail reform, and the intersection of crime and politics in New Jersey. The population for this research consisted of New Jersey-based news media organizations and online news stories produced on auto theft that included comments by public officials.

General reporting, especially crime reporting, is susceptible to influence from various factors and may intentionally or inadvertently alter messaging on crimes, especially auto theft, given its prevalence in New Jersey recently. Additionally, understanding if media reporting at the state level has been or continues to be impacted by profits, politicians, legislative changes, or others is of great social importance. The public places a tremendous amount of trust in private institutions and public officials to deliver news on crime in an objective and unbiased fashion free from rhetoric or undue influence. New Jerseyans deserve trust in the public and private institutions that provide them with crime reports on auto theft.

Research Questions

RQ1: Has New Jersey-based published news media changed how it reports auto thefts in New Jersey from 2017 to 2022, since the implementation of bail reform?

RQ2: What messages have public officials in New Jersey been conveying to the public on auto theft from 2017 to 2022, since the implementation of bail reform?

Theoretical Framework

Cultivation theory is the theory that undergirded this research on the patterns and themes being conveyed by New Jersey-based published news media on automobile theft. Cultivation theory was established as an explanation to increasing crime perceptions as a result of extended viewership of television programming (Romer et al., 2014). Since cultivation theory's development decades ago, researchers have continued to push the boundaries of how cultivation theory can be applied to different phenomena outside of television (Lee & Niederdeppe, 2011). I extrapolated cultivation theory and adapted it for this study to explain and provide credence to alleged sensationalism and fear cultivation in published news media concerning crime reporting and comments by public figures.

Cultivation theory holds that the media, in any of its many shapes and sizes, conflates crime stories or makes crimes appear more prevalent than they may be (Gerbner, 1969). Many Americans continue to report being fearful of crime. Weitzer and Kubrin (2004) explained, "One frequently cited source of this fear is the mass media. The media, and local television news in particular often report on crime incidents and do so in a selective and sometimes sensational manner" (p. 497). While cultivation theory was constructed for television, it has permeated and transcended all media outlets, both national and local, including online published news. Moreover, almost every New Jersey-based online news article published on auto theft contains comments by public officials, which may influence crime perceptions.

Crime numbers at historic lows prompted changes at both the ground and legislative levels, such as virtually eliminating police vehicle pursuits, which have

recently changed, and removing bail. The previous crime stats do not appear to reflect what is being said in published news media and by public officials, which requires further investigation and qualitative analysis. Thus, one of the study aims was to determine whether cultivation theory is at play and whether New Jersey-based published news media and public officials are sensationalizing crime stories or if there is a much bigger problem unfolding in New Jersey.

Building an understanding of the messaging being conveyed by trusted New Jersey-based media organizations is imperative. Shrum (2017) argued, “As cultivation is a sociocultural theory, the three components—media institutions, message production, and message effects on viewers—are inextricably intertwined” (p. 1). If one were to look at the FBI’s auto theft numbers in recent years, they probably would not see it as a problem; it is the lowest ever in the state’s history, and the trajectory from the 1990s is straight downward. However, Americans continue to believe that crime is getting worse every year (McCarthy, 2019, 2020; Saad, 2011). This crime problem extends directly to those polled on automobile theft. According to Gallup (2021), 42% of people in the suburbs fear their cars will be broken into or stolen (Brenan, 2021c). It remains unclear whether crime perceptions may be changing regarding auto theft. When the public is unified in an identified problem, they hold public officials accountable.

Despite increased fears of crime, Americans nationwide have renounced the punitive nature of the criminal justice system. New Jersey is no different—cash bail was removed and juvenile pretrial-diversionary programs are now the standard. Americans are more inclined to place resources into alternative methods of managing crime versus

decades earlier when there was more confidence in the criminal justice system (Brenan, 2020a; McCarthy, 2016). Bail reform and the increased usage of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) via New Jersey Law Enforcement Directive 2020-12 are evidence of those changes to how crime is managed in New Jersey. Thus, it is timely to understand respondents' feelings about the linkages between bail reform and auto theft.

Many questions remain about media objectivity, specifically within the frame about whether the media's messaging is inherently objective and not sensationalized. Based on polling in the past 2 years, American's have overwhelmingly confirmed they are losing their trust in the media to deliver them objective news (Brenan, 2020b). Questioning the media and their intentions continues to gain relevance.

Cultivation theory is more prevalent than ever despite its origination with television programming; this theory directly applies to published online text promulgated by news media. Inflammatory or heavy rhetoric from any source impacts the viewer in the same negative fashion. This study was conducted to determine whether cultivation theory has been at play in terms of the reporting of automobile theft and comments by public officials in New Jersey-based media publications.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this qualitative case study was to understand New Jersey-based online news media and public officials messaging since the passage of bail reform in 2017. Auto thefts cost taxpayers nationwide billions of dollars every year, not to mention the negative impacts of the crimes associated with these stolen vehicles, such as homicides, shootings, burglaries, and kidnappings (FBI, 2019). Thus, it is necessary to

understand if the media and public officials are sounding the public alarm over auto theft for no reason or if they are raising genuine concerns. There are still far too many car thefts in New Jersey, hovering around 10,000 annually over the past 5 years (NJSP, 2021). Gaining a conception of media and public official messaging on a prevalent crime in New Jersey through content analysis will be constructive in exploring media objectivity and variables that affect crime reporting.

The themes and patterns conveyed on auto theft were explored through a case study involving a thematic analysis of published New Jersey-based news media and public officials' comments over the last 5 years. A qualitative case study with thematic analysis is necessary to paint an accurate picture of media and public officials reporting on auto theft in New Jersey. This qualitative content analysis was exploratory in nature, given the lack of academic attention in this specific arena. The study delves deeper than a typical quantitative analysis by various internal and external variables to better understand crime reporting at the local level. In similar research, Cherbonneau and Copes (2003) found the media in their study sensationalized reporting on carjackings in print media. Now, two decades later, news stories are accessible on dozens of platforms, including social media where they can spread even faster. The scale at which news travels is unlike any other point in history. This qualitative case study with thematic analysis was focused on media and public figure messaging and phenomena that may or may not impact its messages.

Definitions

Auto theft: The intentional unlawful taking of someone else's vehicle for personal or financial reasons (Lu, 2003).

Attorney general guidelines: Direction that all sworn law enforcement in New Jersey must follow and abide by (Office of the Attorney General, 2022a).

Cultivation theory: Prolonged focus on how news media alters one's reality (Gerbner, 1969).

Framing: A method of portraying individual topics to convey a specific narrative (Taylor, 2019).

Local media culture: Geographically unique media with diverse perspectives and reporting methods (Steblyna, 2018).

Media objectivity: The accurate rendition of an event or story concerning timelines, values, and ethics (Adeyemo, 2020).

Moral panic: When narratives about certain events are embellished to the point that it alters public perceptions about the event (Lavorgna, 2019).

New Jersey Bail Reform Act of 2017: The law removed cash bail and reduced penalties for minor crimes in an effort to shrink the prison population (Smith, 2017).

New Jersey Law Enforcement Directive 2020-12: Impacts how police interact with juveniles in terms of speaking with them, charging them, and reducing punishments for alcohol and marijuana usage (Office of the Attorney General, 2020a).

New Jersey Law Enforcement Directive 2020-13: Established seven core principles for law enforcement officers to follow, including eradicating vehicle pursuits

unless a first- or second-degree crime was committed (Office of the Attorney General, 2020b).

New Jersey Law Enforcement Directive 2021-7: Instituted de-escalation training for all sworn law enforcement officers (Office of the Attorney General, 2021).

New Jersey Law Enforcement Directive 2022-4: Revised vehicle pursuit policy to include stolen vehicles (Office of the Attorney General, 2022c).

Public official/figure: Any elected or unelected leader at the state level and below who speaks to the public (Ashcroft, 2001).

Sensationalism: Using inflammatory or exciting language to distort reality and simultaneously draw in viewers or readers (Brown et al., 2018).

Assumptions

Assumptions are beliefs a researcher is cognizant of that may or may not be factually or historically accurate. Crime and crime trends are transitory and are ever-changing with a multitude of driving forces unique to each zip code, state, country, etc.; however, federal and state laws and law enforcement policies do impact crime levels (Hinton & Cook, 2021; Howell, 2015). Such as the case with the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, broken windows policies, sentencing guidelines, the war on drugs, three strike laws, and others. The local-state-federal criminal justice system functions imperfectly, and the reporting of changes takes place simultaneously. Bail reform and the recently implemented attorney general guidelines in New Jersey are affecting crime in some capacity, specifically auto theft, which prompted the need for this qualitative analysis.

Scope and Delimitations

This case study with a thematic analysis included data from the NJSP Uniform Crime Report as well as FBI's crime stats and various news articles from the Star-Ledger, Press of Atlantic City, and TapINTO.net. Authoritative information from the attorney general of New Jersey was also used. Included in the thematic analysis are New Jersey-based articles, including motor vehicle thefts, articles mentioning the attorney general guidelines, articles assigning blame for auto thefts, opinion-editorials, articles where stolen vehicles were used in the commission of other crimes, and articles mentioning the New Jersey Bail Reform Act of 2017. Some of the excluded material included non-New Jersey-based articles on auto theft, articles on general/non-specific crimes increasing or decreasing, televised pieces, articles on carjacking, public commentary, and articles generated from social media and police blotters.

The goal of this research was not to explore every impact of the bail reform act or of the attorney general guidelines, but rather to explore the relationship or intersection between auto theft crime trends and subsequent reporting and public figure comments from a localized standpoint. Auto thefts in New Jersey are up significantly from 2020 but are not yet being reflected in state or nationwide crime stats (Office of the Attorney General, 2022b). In this case study, I evaluated how local media and public figures have reported these changes since the implementation of bail reform in 2017.

Limitations

Data saturation in a case study with thematic analysis is imperative in maintaining objectivity and reducing bias. Over the past few years, the covid-19 pandemic played a

significant role in altering crime statistics. The relationship between a pandemic and subsequent crime and crime reporting is well beyond the scope of this study. That relationship will likely take years to analyze. There has never been a more significant variable in distorting crime stats than covid-19. However, crime stats via the FBI and NJSP maintain a crime portrait that stretches decades before the pandemic.

It is unlikely, however, that a pandemic would, at the outset, increase crime across the spectrum. Additionally, the usage of New Jersey-based news organizations and public officials' comments may hold a unique but different perspective than other news organizations outside of New Jersey. State-specific media analysis on specific crime reporting is research that has not been sufficiently explored. This junction of auto theft reporting by local media and public figures is ripe for exploration, but exploratory research cannot and should not stand alone to hold any-one finding as true or untrue without more research.

Qualitative methodology at the outset can be defined as a vulnerability or liability due to its subjective nature versus quantitative methodology with specific instructions, measurements, and variables that can be replicated step by step (Ochieng, 2009). Single case studies are no exception to criticism. On single qualitative case study designs, Baskarada (2014) posited, "Due to conflicting epistemological presuppositions and the complexity inherent in qualitative case-based studies, scientific rigor can be difficult to demonstrate, and any resulting findings can be difficult to justify" (p. 1). Despite these limitations, structured single case study research designs can alleviate many vulnerabilities.

In this single-qualitative case study, I used thematic analysis to determine the themes and patterns of New Jersey-based media and public officials. The limitations of qualitative thematic analysis are well known. Chermak (1998) found, “Studies using content analysis are often criticized because of their inability to account for the actual decision-making that occurs to produce crime stories” (p. 67). These limitations are evident with regard to biases, transferability, replicability, trustworthiness, inadequate sample sizes, and reliability (Anderson, 2010; Elo et al., 2014; Khatony et al., 2019; Noble & Smith, 2015). A unique perspective is sought using solely New Jersey-based media and public officials, as members of these sectors are focused on New Jersey. Reaching data saturation for the New Jersey-based media outlets will ultimately reduce but not eliminate the above-mentioned limitations.

The number of auto theft-related articles published by the specific media outlets used for this qualitative content analysis was not known. I estimated that over the course of 5 years, hundreds or thousands of articles within the study’s specified guidelines could have potentially been published online. Confounding variables are omnipresent as there are many different writers employed by these organizations, and multiple public figures commented on the dozens of articles; moreover, I included auto theft specific op-eds within the content analysis (see Skelly et al., 2012). Thus, the themes and patterns conveyed will only be evaluated regarding the relevance of the research questions.

Significance of the Study

Auto theft, its subsequent reporting, and how public figures frame it is understudied. Because auto theft is categorized as a property crime, it does not typically

command the same media attention as other crimes such as homicide or carjacking.

However, residents of New Jersey are far more likely to have their cars stolen than they are to be murdered or carjacked. Nationwide, auto thefts are up 6% from 2020 and 17% from 2019 (National Insurance Crime Bureau, 2022a). I sought to analyze and explore the themes and patterns being conveyed via a single qualitative case study through a thematic analysis of local online published news media and comments by public figures. As crime trends change, the messages being disbursed to the public must simultaneously be evaluated.

News media and public figures, especially at the state level, are arguably the arbiters of public discourse and have an ethical obligation to make the masses aware of important events going on around the state. Cherbonneau and Copes (2003) found that print media tended to engage in sensationalism, which coincides with the theoretical framework of this study, cultivation theory. This case study was conducted to determine the themes and patterns displayed by public figures and local media on auto theft since the implementation of bail reform in 2017.

The final aspect of this study includes bail reform and its relationship to auto theft and media reporting and comments by public officials. Bail reform has had some impact on overall crime, and in this study, I examined that relationship in regard to auto theft. This sector of literature has never been explored, especially from a localized perspective, under the lens of a qualitative case study with a thematic analysis. Bail reform can be likened to a mass social experiment as it is a relatively new phenomenon and will likely

take years to draw conclusions about its relationship to crime increases/decreases or recidivism.

Summary

Auto theft trends are fervently changing in New Jersey and elsewhere because of changing legislation and enforcement. How those changes were recorded and then reported is the essence of this qualitative case study using thematic analysis. From an accountability standpoint, the themes and patterns being displayed by New Jersey-based online published news media and comments by public figures will tell a tale that must be analyzed and studied. Available crime stats have shown auto theft as declining, but authoritative information provided by New Jersey and statements made by the acting attorney general and by the media have suggested auto theft is rapidly increasing. Thus, this study must consider the following themes considering these changing messages: media objectivity, cultivation theory, local media culture, sensationalism, moral panic incited by the media, framing, crime reporting on auto theft, attorney general guidelines, bail reform, and politics and crime in New Jersey. Crime involves more than just criminals and law enforcement; a bevy of active variables impact crime and its subsequent reporting, which relates to the second research question of this study.

The purpose of this qualitative case study using thematic analysis was to explore and understand the themes and patterns in published online news media and public officials' comments regarding automobile theft since the introduction of bail reform in 2017. Case studies using thematic analyses are important in garnering a deeper meaning about a given topic. News media tell a story and public officials tell a story, and a

qualitative case study employing thematic analysis connects the dots through common themes and patterns. There are various firsthand and second-hand benefits to conducting a qualitative content analysis on crime, published news media, and public figures' comments in terms of accountability, honesty, and objectivity.

In this study I used a qualitative methodology in the form of a single-case study with thematic analysis. This method was particularly suited to track, interpret, and understand the themes and patterns being conveyed by New Jersey-based media and public officials on automobile theft over the last 5 years. Neuendorf (2017) explained, “[interpretive analysis] is clearly spelled out, but it differs from scientific inquiry, in its wholly qualitative nature and cumulative process, whereby the analyst is in a constant state of discovery and revision” (p. 12). Crime and its reporting are much like a magnet with a North and South pole that must function harmoniously for a positive attraction. When crime and reporting are not coordinated, it creates dysfunction in the public. Thus, this relationship can be further examined by crime stats and single case study with thematic analysis.

I modeled this study after Cherbonneau and Copes' (2003) research, which concerned Louisiana-based media themes and patterns regarding carjacking. Cherbonneau and Copes (2003) expressed, “By over-reporting the sensational violent cases of carjackings, newspapers contribute to the public's false perception of the nature of carjacking” (p. 18). Sensationalism is but one preliminary theme of this analysis. The authors were able to make sense of and interpret these themes and patterns over time (Cherbonneau & Copes, 2003). It was impossible to separate local news stories from

public officials' comments as the bulk of news stories were comprised of paraphrases or direct quotes from public officials. This study possesses a few additional themes but ultimately dispels a common critique of thematic analysis which states that thematic analysis is the simplified organization of raw qualitative data (see Lindgren et al., 2020). There is a dual target under study, as local media has a say on what they believe is happening and the embedded comments by local officials and their beliefs are also evident. There is room to explore this same relationship under various quantitative lenses; however, those methodologies would not be suitable to make sense of the latent themes and patterns of published online news media and public officials' comments concerning auto theft from a New Jersey-based perspective.

The primary source of information for this study included news articles. The news articles coded for this analysis were supplied by the News Bank archive and included articles from the Star-Ledger, Press of Atlantic City, and TapINTO.net. Not every article written about auto theft was included in this single-case study with thematic analysis, and the news articles were screened and sorted for their relevance to the research questions and the inclusionary/exclusionary criteria. The secondary source of information pertained to authoritative information and crime statistics from government websites. The third source of data were supplementary scholarly articles, journals, and books via Google Scholar, EBSCO Host, Science Direct, ProQuest, Taylor and Francis, and Gallup Polls, among others.

The news articles garnered from the aforementioned news organizations were the centerpiece of this single-case study with thematic analysis. The accumulation of relevant

news articles and the subsequent coding process determined the themes and patterns of auto theft disbursed by New Jersey-based media since the implementation of bail reform in 2017. The use of crime statistics, authoritative information, and scholarly articles aided in determining the most significant variable to impact the reporting of auto theft. The combination and evaluation of this information should sufficiently allow me to draw conclusions about the research questions.

This qualitative single-case study with thematic analysis was exploratory in nature as I evaluated the media reporting and public figures' comments of a specific area of crime in a specified timeframe through the published online words of New Jersey-based media. There are inevitably going to be limitations in terms of credibility, confirmability, dependability, transferability. No previous study has been conducted with the same approach to media reporting and public officials' comments on auto theft. The closest research was conducted by Cherbonneau and Copes (2003) on print media reporting of carjacking by Louisiana-based newspapers over a longer period than the one in the current study. Delimitations included employing a qualitative single-case study with thematic analysis; such studies have historically been criticized as being subjective and subject to intentional or non-intentional bias. Authors researching moral panic and sensationalism may bring preconceived notions about a topic that reinforces the stereotype (Kort-Butler & Killingsworth, 2015). I address these potential biases in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2 includes a thorough literature review of relevant themes that may influence crime reporting in New Jersey. In Chapter 3, I present the research method,

research design, and research methodology as well as the process for accumulating, theming, and transcribing the content and addressing threats to the study's validity. Chapter 4 includes the single-case study with thematic analysis findings and conclusions drawn about other avenues of research in this arena. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the findings, their relation to the theoretical framework, and the implications of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Examinations of themes and patterns being displayed by media and public figures in television, movies, radio, and published online texts have existed for decades. In other words, single-case studies with thematic analysis under the direction of qualitative and quantitative analysis have been used to explore, measure, and interpret the meaning of spoken, written, and typed words being disbursed to the public—but never an examination focused specifically on auto theft messaging. Thus, this chapter will include studies concerning the intersection between media objectivity, cultivation theory, local media culture, attorney general guidelines, bail reform, sensationalism, moral panic incited by the media, and crime reporting on auto theft. The goal is to understand the meaning of New Jersey-based media outlets and public officials’ messaging on auto theft in New Jersey from 2017–2022 following the implementation of bail reform and attorney general guideline changes.

There have been no specific qualitative single-case studies using thematic analyses concerning the themes and patterns promulgated on New Jersey-based printed online news media and public officials’ comments since the implementation of bail reform in 2017 or on the connection between New Jersey-based media and auto-theft reporting. Nonetheless, this literature review includes themes and patterns relevant to automobile theft and messages routinely being produced by New Jersey-based news media organizations as well as variables that impact public officials. The themes were drawn from a wide variety of studies ranging across the spectrum of law enforcement

reporting. This pasture of qualitative analysis is incredibly green at a time of low levels of trust in media and declining trust in local government across the United States (Brenan, 2021a, 2021b).

In this analysis, I explore the habitat in which local published online news media and public figures in New Jersey operate, specifically within the region of automobile theft, which continues to plague New Jersey. This qualitative single case study using thematic analysis aims to explore the themes and patterns written by New Jersey-based published news media and commented on by public officials' concerning automobile theft. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: Has New Jersey-based published news media changed how it reports auto thefts within New Jersey from 2017 to 2022 since the implementation of bail reform?

RQ2: What messages have public officials in New Jersey been conveying to the public on auto theft from 2017 to 2022 since the implementation of bail reform?

These research questions were centered on the following themes: understanding how New Jersey-based published news media have changed their reporting on auto theft, if at all, since 2017, and understanding if public officials cultivated fear in terms of their comments on auto theft from 2017–2022.

This literature review consists of ten preliminary themes: (a) media objectivity, (b) cultivation theory, (c) local media culture, (d) sensationalism, (e) moral panic incited by the media, (f) framing, (g) crime reporting on auto theft, (h) attorney general guidelines, (i) bail reform, and (j) politics and crime in New Jersey. The first section covers media honesty from a historical perspective. The second section unpacks

Gerbner's (1969, 1970) cultivation theory and explains the transformation from television to published news media. In the third section, I explore how New Jersey-based media organizations have fared regarding ethics and objectivity in the past. The fourth section reveals how media has stretched the truth on specific stories, especially crime stories, to increase viewership. The fifth section intersects with the prior two sections and explains how media can create panic based on distorted reporting. The sixth section articulates how certain stories are portrayed to support specific lines of thought on a topic. The seventh section reviews how auto theft has been reported in the past. The eighth section reviews New Jersey's attorney general guidelines since 2017. The ninth section covers a new crime and punishment strategy implemented in 2017. In the final section, I discuss the connection between politics and crime in New Jersey.

Literature Search Strategy

In searching the literature for this review, I explored EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, Science Direct, ProQuest, and Taylor & Francis and used Gallup polls on media trust and objectivity. Some of the search terms included were *auto theft*, *auto theft in New Jersey*, *media objectivity*, *sensationalism*, *media culture*, *cultivation theory*, *moral panic incited by the media*, and *crime reporting* via peer-reviewed journals, news articles, e-books, and authoritative sources in the aforementioned databases. The timeframe for articles was not fixed as it is important to provide historical context for not only theories but for how auto theft used to be viewed versus how it is viewed now. How auto theft is studied and perceived has undoubtedly changed and articles with varying publication dates reflected and documented those changes over time.

Literature Review

Historical Background

There is a trail of auto theft/crime reporting and public officials commenting at their peaks throughout history; however, there is no relative history of bail reform and its intersection between auto theft and media/public official messaging given its new implementation. All the themes discussed further in this chapter have been emphasized and used in academic research, books, and discussed in newspaper articles. A few metaphorical atoms have come together to compound during the last five years which has never before occurred in New Jersey or the United States. History is being made as rates of auto theft in New Jersey and around the United States are climbing at an unprecedented rate (National Insurance Crime Bureau, 2022a). The 2017–2022 timeline is of special importance as a handful of other states have implemented bail reform, amended attorney general guidelines or similar police practices, and retooled the prosecution of juvenile and adult offenders. Every element of these changes has the potential to be explored individually from multiple angles as there is no research on the culmination of these variables together. A unique stage has been set in which multiple criminal justice reforms took hold simultaneously that warrant study. The essence of this study is determining how public officials and local news media have been tracking, studying, and subsequently reporting on the slew of criminal justice reforms as they relate to automobile theft.

This single-case study is of great importance as bail reform is gaining popularity—passed by New York in 2019 and taking effect in Illinois in 2023—and

many states are expressing interest in overhauling their justice systems. Entman (1989) revealed, “the media make a significant contribution to what people think—to their political preferences and evaluations—precisely by affecting what they think about” (p. 347). Public news consumers have shown favoritism for local news, and local news in New Jersey is unique in that not only are the authors expressing their opinions, almost every news article has comments by various public officials. There are two simultaneous perspectives for some of these articles that carry great weight when evaluating messaging and the cultivation of fear or usage of sensationalism.

Decades before 2017, auto theft numbers were on a steady decline as recorded by both the NJSP and the FBI. Auto theft reached its peak in New Jersey in 1990 at a rate of 939.5 per 100,000 to a now historic low of 115.7 per 100,000 in 2020 (FBI, 2021). The policies, practices, laws, and methods of policing to stem auto theft were working and the statistics were a reflection of that. New Jersey made tremendous strides reducing auto theft because the state’s auto theft average was much higher than the national average at its peak in the same year (FBI, 2021). The historical theoretical foundations of auto theft reflect these declining statistics as they were used to explore nature versus nurture elements. Researchers turned their attention to why auto theft was still being committed and the causality of the rapid decline in the frequency of auto theft. However, auto theft research and reporting arguably went dormant for decades as a result of its declining prevalence. The bulk of academic research conducted on auto theft occurred in the 1990s.

Crime is a major talking point for politicians and media alike, and the two entities have weighed in at different points in history and in different geographic areas about

crime increasing or decreasing. Auto theft, as a property crime, has never received the same amount of coverage as violent crimes; the language describing violent crimes has historically been far more sensationalized than that of auto theft. The input or reporting by both news organizations and public officials on overall crime has at times been skewed, biased, directional, objective, or outright sensationalized. Sensationalism, given its massive influence, slices its way to the front of media outlets reporting programs and can be modified into whatever narrative that organization is trying to convey (Potter & Kappeler, 1998). There are dozens of theories concerning both auto theft and media reporting, however, the cultivation of fear is central to this single case study. Rival or supplementary theories worth noting, but not used for this study, included agenda setting theory and multiple streams theory as the two strike at the heart of how legislation is produced and how the media prioritizes various stories.

In the past, offenders who stole motor vehicles, burglarized them, or other auto crimes were sent to jail if they could not post bail; there was some form of custodial punishment for even the lowest level of motor vehicle crime. Today, several criminal justice reforms have cut adult and juvenile prison populations. Given the onset of covid-19 and subsequent safety restrictions and the amount of federal inmates the state holds, there is no way to pinpoint a specific number of inmates who have been released because of the removal of cash bail. However, the New Jersey Department of Corrections (2017, 2019, 2022) reported 13,972 adult inmates and 2,745 juvenile inmates in 2017 and 10,260 adult inmates and 1,139 juvenile inmates in 2022.

Moreover, Attorney General Law Enforcement Directive No. 2020-12 lays out directions for police and prosecutors to exercise restraint when handling juveniles and divert them away from custodial punishments (Office of the Attorney General, 2020a). The purpose of removing cash bail was to reduce the adult inmate population, which it succeeded in doing. The purpose of Attorney General Law Enforcement Directive No. 2020-12 was to reduce the juvenile inmate population with the aid of the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI), which it succeeded in doing.

The only metric used to measure the success of the removal of bail reform and Attorney General Law Enforcement Directive No. 2020-12 has been how many people are released from correctional facilities not on the number of recidivist offenders. In 2017, 8% of all adult offenders and 7% of all youth offenders were incarcerated for property offenses—auto theft included (New Jersey Department of Corrections, 2017). This stands in contrast to 2022, as only 4% of adult offenders and 5% of youth offenders were incarcerated for property offenses (New Jersey Department of Corrections, 2022). These criminal justice reforms led to the release of property offenders and to alternative sentences for offenders. Additionally, according to a 2015 New Jersey Department of Corrections report, over 50% of all inmates released were rearrested within 3 years.

Lastly, New Jersey Law Enforcement Directive 2020-13 eliminated vehicle pursuits for stolen vehicles (Office of the Attorney General, 2020b). This directive was not superseded until New Jersey Law Enforcement Directive 2022-4. Since 2017, the criminal justice system has significantly decreased the prosecution and detention of property crime offenders. The combination of these factors led to this single case study

within this timeframe. These criminal justice reforms are having an effect, and the purpose of this study was to evaluate the messaging that local media and politicians impart regarding auto theft crime.

The final component of this single case is the property sought by car thieves: the vehicles. The cost of new vehicles sold and purchased in the United States is at the highest point in history (Tucker, 2022). Financial incentives for stealing high-end vehicles far outweigh the minimal consequences an individual is likely to endure if caught. Despite vehicle immobilizers existing, they are not often equipped in new vehicles. GPS tracking systems are often stripped immediately upon a vehicle being stolen. Often, vehicle keys are left inside, enabling car thieves to continue to pursue them.

Media Reporting

While ancient civilizations had many forms of conveying what was happening on a day-to-day basis well before the creation of the United States, for purposes of this review, a good starting point is in 1721, with the promulgation of one of the earliest newspapers in the United States, the *New England Courant* by James Franklin (America's Library, n.d.). This early publication, along with others created around the same time, would create a revolution in the way in which people received updates about what was going on in the area and around the world. The *New England Courant* routinely challenged both church and Government and was rife with strong and sometimes unpopular opinions spanning a range of topics (Fireoved, 1985). At its core, the news, even then, was committed to informing as a healthy republic demands an aware populous. The purpose of the media is to provide an accurate rendition of the event that

occurs in a given community free from opinion, bias, or other. The paramount objective of the news media is to keep the community apprised of specific events that are relevant to them and which may impact them in some way (America Press Institute, 2022).

The overarching goal of the media since it began reporting on real-world events is to ultimately convey to the public what is going on with a specific event in a particular region. Bias, directional reporting, and propaganda have a deep connection to media that started during the American Revolution and began to flourish in the early 1900s as it became intertwined with politics on an unimaginable scale to influence national opinion even further (Thornton, 2013). It can be argued that around this specific time period in the United States that objectivity became tainted with opinions to score not only political points but also sway public perspectives on particular topics. The media is a powerful influencer of public narrative and drastically drives change on whatever topic or event is covered.

It is certainly up for debate whether the relationship between media and politics has gotten worse or the fact that the planet gained billions more people in tandem with the creation of the internet, smartphones, and 24-hour news. The two entities are now inseparable and divided mainly along political lines. Early publications argued for a united front against tyranny or one voice to produce camaraderie for American independence, and now, in modern times, there are countless outlets that continue with warring narratives against one another or altered narratives that produce fear in the public.

Media Objectivity

The untainted reporting of real-world events, or media objectivity, plays a pivotal role in keeping Americans up-to-date and aware of new events. Events happen in chronological order and should be reported as such. Hanson (1997) articulated, “Stories attempt to evoke feelings in the reader by drawing on a shared stock of knowledge held by members of society through the use of narrative storytelling techniques rather than attempting to transmit neutral information through the form of objectivity” (p. 385). The media as a whole has never collectively declared itself to be the arbiter of truth, but it remains a de facto title. However, it was generally understood to be objective on the stories that mattered and affected Americans in their everyday lives while conceding that editorials and the like may not represent a truly accurate portrayal of events and how they occur. The reality is that the media have burned Americans’ for being outright duplicitous and deceitful when it mattered most. A general example of building a national narrative by national media companies with the invasion of Iraq on the premise of weapons of mass destruction.

The invasion and subsequent fallout showed the true infallibility of the American press. Before and during the invasion of Iraq, it appeared that national media ran cover for the sitting President of the United States and never questioned the motives or evaluated the statements being put forth by the federal government (Moeller, 2004). While the bond between government and media has grown exponentially over the years, the trust in both institutions has inevitably frayed, and polling of that trust has confirmed this. The objectivity of news media has been called into question by the public, thus

leading to a reduction in trust in the news media (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). It is difficult to harmonize a relationship between the public, media, and government without trust.

Despite this potentially eroding relationship, current projections of media profits are increasing drastically yearly. Media objectivity is under attack for increased profits. Journalism and the ethics of objective news have changed in step with the amount of money media companies have been generating yearly (Praveen Kumar, 2016). Integrity and ethics in news media of all kinds are in jeopardy since news profitability has risen. Modern media companies make over 50 billion dollars annually due to advertising (Holcomb and Mitchell, 2014). A tradeoff appeared between objective reporting, income, and bias at some point. Uzuegbunam and Udeze (2013) revealed, “The in-thing is now is market-driven journalism– giving priority to trivial news items, certain kinds of layout, headline sizes, photo enhancements, flashy colours, irrelevant and lurid photos that attract mass audiences like entertainment while downplaying information” (p. 69). Thus, the public has been shortchanged on pertinent and vital factual information in lieu of media profits.

One of the primary objectives of this dissertation is to determine the level of objectivity concerning New Jersey-based media in reporting one of the most pervasive crimes in New Jersey, auto theft. Bradshaw et al. (2019) found, “Objectivity is central to the study of media performance” (p. 242). This is especially true when the information coming from local news agencies should be to the point and above bias or fearmongering. Reporting of law enforcement and crime are some of the most watchable and marketable topics in media across all platforms. O’Hear (2020) articulated, “it is said that the news

media devote greatly disproportionate coverage to the most outrageous instances of violent crime and that the media fail to provide information that would helpfully contextualize the offense or humanize the perpetrators” (p. 1007). It is understood why national media companies such as FOX, CNN, ABC, or NBC, to name a few, would embellish or headline every show, newspaper article, or published online news article with infrequent crimes to draw in their national audiences.

News organizations in tandem with public figures weighing in ultimately hold the balance of public thought and opinion in its hands, given their wide-spread reach by default. Over-viewership of crime reporting leads consumers to possess warped senses of reality (Wiltenberg, 2004). In essence, scaring people or a heightened fear of crime draws viewers back to the broadcasting more than run-of-the-mill reporting with no injected opinion, bias, or persuasion. Andreasen (2016) succinctly stated, “Humans’ greatest motivator within history has been fear” (p. 13). Thus, constantly creating a culture of fear is marketable, especially when it relates to crime reporting.

On average, national media companies see millions of viewers consistently tune into their programming throughout the day (Pew Research Center, 2021). The dynamic at these companies has changed so much that only popular, polarizing, political, or sensationalized topics make the national news. Journalists at every level of news reporting acknowledge it is an imperfect craft but have never manufactured, embellished, or provided alternative facts about events (Schudson, 1989). The news, as it was known then, was not nearly as widespread and impactful as it currently is today, given the growth of the internet, social media, smartphones, apps, iPhones, and the like.

The media reporting the facts and only the facts and public figures confirming such is important in shaping the public narrative. Anastasio et al. (1999) found, “Not only does the media bias people’s perceptions by offering an unrepresentative view of the world at times, but it may also facilitate biased processing of accurate information by presenting that information with an emphasis on intergroup differences” (p. 155). There is undoubtedly damage being done by reporting and commenting impulsively without gathering all the facts first, as many people’s perceptions of given topics are immediately influenced based on experiencing that first impression.

That is not to say or assume that the public is mindless non-player characters. However, there is a point to be made when the hyperinflated stories being distributed by media and commented on by public figures on multiple platforms at all hours a day around the world have at least some impacts on how people receive and conceive what they are hearing, reading, and see. Elevated news ratings also showcase that people are drawn to specific content that is sometimes more embellished than objective. Objectivity in media does not guarantee heightened fears of crime but ensures truthfulness and trustworthiness amongst the public.

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory drives much of the sensationalized news at the national level. Cultivation theory was created by George Gerbner more than 50 years ago, which, in layman’s terms, posited that extensive viewership of media might impact, distort, alter, or change perceptions about reality (Gerbner, 1969, 1970; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Gerbner sought to understand messaging and its effects over an extended time period. Cultivation

theory plays a role in how people carry out their routines with the information provided to them (Potter, 2014). Fear is cancerous and spreads quickly among groups of people. It is the ultimate motivator and demotivator of action among humankind.

A prime example of cultivation theory at play is the news coverage and public figure commentary at every level of the covid-19 pandemic. The former governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo, spoke almost every day on covid-19 and even wrote a book on how he handled the pandemic. Public officials and news media were heavily invested in maintaining frequent coverage of the pandemic. Never in history, with the exception of the Spanish Flu, has the United States and arguably the world shut down rapidly over the fear of dying. The pandemic effectively placed the world on hold as cars were off the road, planes stopped flying, and people sheltered in place, awaiting some reprieve. The media and public figures continued their feverish coverage and relentlessly drove home fear-based narratives. There has not been a better example of cultivation theory at play.

While cultivation theory was crafted predominantly for television, the theory easily applies and can be seamlessly adapted to published news media and the dialogue of public officials. Shin and Watson (2022) on the relationship between cultivation theory and TV conveyed, “While local TV has been widely examined, and has also been reported as the strongest predictor of fear of crime, few studies have focused on various media types other than TV” (p. 3). Published online news media and public officials’ comments are ripe for exploration as it travels with alacrity as more people are connected through technology; the rise of smartphones and social media keeps people updated and aware of their surroundings with constant notifications and alerts, oftentimes to news

articles that are easily accessible. More importantly, people are more attached to their phones throughout a given day than to television, radio, or other. Technology that allows for reader or viewership is now available and more accessible than it ever has been in history (York, 2013). Non-prevalent crimes that are violent or made to be pervasive easily fill that news cycle vacuum to alter public perception and draw more viewership.

The constant media and public figure narratives on crime in the United States appear to be working. Americans continue to believe that crime is getting worse every year (McCarthy, 2019; McCarthy, 2020; Saad, 2011). This crime problem extends directly to those polled on automobile theft. According to a recent Gallup Poll, 42% of people in the suburbs fear their cars will be broken into or stolen (Brenan, 2021c). The jury is out that crime perceptions are increasing. Media is the source at which fear is generated and then fed to the public on a mass scale (Shah et al., 2020).

While the frequency of auto theft has increased across New Jersey, it is one of the primary tasks of my study to determine if local news media and public figures have been conveying that point fairly and in a measured fashion or if media companies and public officials are trying to scare people using deceptive or sensationalist tactics. Maintaining media objectivity is paramount in public discourse, and a better-informed public can make better decisions in their lives as a result.

Local Media Culture

While national news has received its fair share of criticism for a lack of objectivity (Belova & Georgieva, 2018; Soroka et al., 2019; Yglesias, 2018), it begs the question as to whether local or state news maintains a different set of operating

procedures or if it is just as tainted as national news is alleged to be in a time where overall public trust of all media is waning. The trust that Americans have in media is dwindling (Brenan, 2020b).

As Americans have turned away from national news, viewers have found sanctity in local news. Guess et al. (2018) found “...overall trust is higher for local TV news and newspapers, which Americans on average say they trust a fair amount, compared to their national counterparts” (p. 5). Thus, local reporting carries weight in the states, municipalities, and counties being reported on.

Do local news organizations possess any type of culture that is different than that of national news organizations? Hess and Waller (2017) asserted “there has been relatively little work on conceptualizing local journalism’s place in a networked society, or how understanding the ‘community ties’ thesis that has historically underpinned most scholarship on local news could help ‘big’ news media to maintain its relevance” (p. 2). Local news organizations that are unaffiliated with larger networks continue to struggle to maintain relevance in light of many national news networks. For example, Google News is an accumulation of the day’s latest and greatest stories all neatly organized by section, however, local news companies are significantly underrepresented in the Google News lineup (Fischer et al., 2020). Despite this adversity, local news culture is something local communities value. Local news organizations continue to maintain relevance because there is a certain level of trust that they embody over other national options (Ferrucci & Perreault, 2022; Pavlick, 2013). The recurring theme of why New Jerseyans

continue to turn to local news is because of the reputation local New Jersey journalistic culture has built.

While the true impact of local news and all its pathways for delivering stories is outside the scope of this study, the relationship between local news and its impact on public fear levels must be noted. Weitzer and Kubrin (2004) revealed, "... local television news is the medium with the greatest effect on fear" (p. 518). Eighteen years removed from that study, news at all levels has innovated and evolved to keep up with the times by building foundations online. It is not a stretch to say that TV viewership is down, and readership is up, given the medium by which consumers can access news. Local news and local culture play a role in crime perceptions.

Sensationalism

While national media has repeatedly gotten criticism for their lack of objectivity given certain high-profile events, local media is no exception. Cherbonneau and Copes (2003) found that Louisiana newspapers indulged in sensationalism when reporting on carjacking cases (Cherbonneau & Copes, 2003). People are naturally drawn to violent headlines as it is captivating, scary, and heightens fear levels (Shin & Watson, 2022). The problem with sensationalist reporting is that some people in the community take these stories at face value at the outset which manipulates reality. Media and politicians routinely work in tandem engaging in sensationalism on popular or relevant topics of the day (Van Scoy et al., 2021).

Emotional or sensationalized reporting impacts the underlying objectivity of a news story. Chama (2019) conducted a comparative analysis of news reporting by the

New York Post and New York Daily News and found the NYP had not been objective in their portrayal of the Black Lives Matter Movement (Chama, 2019). Two local newspapers in New York had two markedly different perspectives on the same phenomenon, which is healthy for debate; however, it is sensationalism, bias, and a lack of media objectivity that alter the true depiction of events in real-time. Media and public figures may work together to set and then subsequently reinforce an agenda (Otto et al., 2017). Public figures and media companies of their choosing work harmoniously together to deliver mutual messaging on a wide array of topics.

Another article by Wong and Harraway (2020) on Vancouver media reporting of homicides found “...fear and sensationalism may play a role in this prominence, heightening awareness of certain types of homicides and contributing to perceptions of violent crime in an area” (p. 349). The option to indulge in sensationalism is omnipresent, as using a few choice words or stretching the truth may draw in viewers and readers in droves. Sensationalism has been explored within the realm of violent crime at great length over the course of dozens of years but has not been evaluated for non-violent property crimes. Literature in this search field concerning property crimes such as auto theft is scant unless it relates to the property crime of looting following a mass casualty event such as a hurricane (Settles and Lindsay, 2011). This research evaluates not only the messaging by local media, but it also evaluates the comments by public figures on auto theft over a 5-year space.

Despite the prior nonexistent relationship between auto theft, sensationalism, and the media/public figures—the frequency at which auto theft is occurring demands attention

especially given the legislative and police practices that have recently changed and have a direct impact on property crimes. Property crimes have never been given the same respect as violent crimes but that does not mean they cannot or have not been sensationalized by local news media in recent times.

Moral Panic Incited by the Media

Moral panic can be defined as a body of people's collective response to an event conveyed by the media with sometimes sensationalized underpinnings (Cohen, 2002). Moral panic was the primary variable in the content analysis of Louisiana newspaper coverage of carjackings by Cherbonneau and Copes (2003). The authors went on to explain, "Moral panics refer to periods in which previously peripheral issues are pushed onto the social agenda and are perceived to be major social problems" (p. 2). Given that auto theft was on the decline for decades and is now making its way back to the front of newspapers and demanding attention, it is timely to understand the nexus between auto theft, local news media, and moral panic.

While auto theft is seeing a resurgence, it is nowhere near the peak of overall crime across the spectrum that was seen in the 1990s. Thus, the media has the ability to bring topics into the fold that they see as relevant and simultaneously these topics are made relevant to the consumers. Settles and Lindsay (2011) stated "The media, as a major source of news and information for the average citizen, creates and instills perceptions through the images and language they select" (p. 201). The idea of moral panic and moral panic theory have grown since their inception much like cultivation theory given the rise of social media, smartphones, and the like. Falkof (2020) claimed,

“moral panics can spread faster and more widely than ever before. Digital media have also changed what moral panics do” (p. 228). Instead of word of mouth passing fear or panic, text and speech travel at the speed of light all around the world 24/7/365.

The intersection of auto theft and moral panic is determining whether the local media is inciting this panic through their reporting. These moral panics are created by the media and subsequently adopted by a given community which eventually leads to political or legislative action as a result of this event (Chiricos, 2002; Jenkins, 1992). There are second and third-order effects of creating a moral panic that may not be evident right away. While moral panics are not the focal point of this qualitative analysis, moral panics are undoubtedly a relevant theme worth being cognizant of.

Moral panics can be set off by the media as well as public figures as the pair work in tandem to deliver messages to the public (Hier, 2011). Moral panic can also be used to sway public opinion by the media and politicians on topics to either push support for or pull support away from a given topic at will (Garland, 2008). While moral panic has existed in media for a long while, politicians and media in tandem pushing moral panics has only recently gathered attention post-pandemic when national media outlets would favor public figures that supported their messaging. Studies on moral panics at the local media and public figure level is non-existent.

Framing

Media in all its many forms and platforms always has a direction and a narrative the organization believes in and pushes out to the public. The substitution or addition of details or words has a very powerful impact on the way consumers perceive the story. As

with moral panics, the media and political figures have the ability to portray a story in a certain light to be perceived in a certain way. In other words, there are 100 different ways to tell the same story with or without all the relevant facts. Often, framing works hand in hand with or against moral panic, cultivation theory, and media objectivity.

Where framing is a dependent variable, many other independent variables are also simultaneously present. When an issue is framed, there tends to sometimes be a political string attached to it. Crime is always on the public's mind and safety matters when election season comes around (Conrey & Haney, 2021; Saad, 2022). Media has also sometimes struggled to separate itself from political party affiliation. The premise of media framing is that someone is pulling the network strings to alter perceptions of an issue (Entman, 2010). News stories can be manipulated by way of framing for some tangible gain or to set an agenda.

The tentacles of media framing are long and impact people on a deep sociological level. Framing crime stories determines how people judge and feel about the offenders who commit the crimes, as well as impacts their attitudes about crime perceptions as a whole (Foreman et al., 2016; Kort-Butler & Habecker, 2018). Framing can undoubtedly be weaponized as it can bring an abundance of attention to non-issues to support a certain argument or conceal and restrict attention to major issues.

Auto theft is seldomly framed by the media as a singular issue, and it is often lumped in with other property crimes or crime overall. The media has a penchant for framing crime in certain lights, but these crimes demonstrate their relationship to the legislative policies which affected them (Conrey & Haney, 2021). They may also use

selective interviews to push a given narrative with the support of certain political leaders. Almost every article utilized for this content analysis contained input from public figures.

Those criminal justice reforms the authors speak of are especially relevant in New Jersey where both the Attorney General Guidelines and bail reform policies have changed in the past few years. These two significant reforms have a direct impact on automobile theft which has a direct correlation to the media reporting of car theft. Crime is in a constant state of change and the media reflects that in its reporting.

The bottom line is that framing is one tool in a large arsenal that the media carries at any given time. Framing is just another theme that is omni-present during a content analysis of media coverage of crime, specifically auto theft. How auto theft is being framed will be evaluated while exploring the themes and patterns being conveyed by New Jersey-based published news media since the implementation of bail reform in 2017.

Crime Reporting on Auto Theft

Auto theft has always been reported on but not necessarily given the same respect as other attention demanding crimes despite the regularity of this crime occurring in New Jersey and the tri-state area. A comparative analysis of news coverage covering various countries over the span of almost 40 years conducted by Marsh (1991) revealed that non-violent crimes do not carry the same weight in terms of media reporting while rare virulent crimes dominate headlines (Marsh, 1991).

When people conceive auto theft, it is generally seen as more of a nuisance crime than one that demands immediate attention such as those that are violent. While many

topics the media reports on come and go, crime is one consistent topic that remains at the front of every news cycle, and rightfully so. People care about what goes on in their communities and enjoy being informed of crime patterns and stories.

As has been noted, crime reporting has links to politics and criminal justice reform/policy that cannot be severed. However, over the last three years during the covid-19 pandemic, crime across the board, especially property crimes and auto theft included, dropped significantly (Scott & Gross, 2021). So too, did crime's relevance in media reporting drop off. Despite national drops in crime, auto theft in New Jersey did not taper off at all. Crime all but disappeared or was reduced to arguably the most minimal levels ever during covid-19 (Abrams, 2021; Nivette et al., 2021). The true impact of covid-19 and its subsequent impact on crime will take decades.

The problem with covid-19 and its subsequent reporting, is that it never allowed for the newly implemented criminal justice reforms in New Jersey to be objectively evaluated to test their efficacy. There are minimal crime stats over the last 2 years because when crime slowed, the recording of crime was inevitably skewed. During the pandemic reporting on crime also decreased. Governor Murphy issued a state of emergency for covid-19 on March 9, 2020, and most of those restrictions that were implemented were only lifted in early 2022. Thus, that time-period for crime stats and reporting is essentially a black hole.

Two years removed from covid-19, crime reporting has taken off again. Those policies that affected auto-theft are now starting to bear fruit and the local media has taken notice. Crime across the spectrum has continued to steadily decline since 2017 and

long before the start of when this content analysis began, many critical changes have occurred in this five-year time period under study. Bail reform kicked off in 2017, multiple Attorney General Guidelines changed during this period, as well as covid taking its hold over the last 2-3 years, media reporting of auto theft has also changed, and it is the goal of this study to determine those themes and patterns reflecting these auto-theft reporting changes.

New Jersey Attorney General Guidelines

The attorney general is the top cop in the state of New Jersey, they can dictate, determine, and compel all those under them to abide by their direction through the usage of guidelines and directives. There are limited restrictions on the attorney general's ultimate power as they are appointed by the governor and not elected by the public, as is done by most other states (Wright, 2004-2005). Attorney general's advocate for causes with the support of the governor. Given that there is no election for this position, these selectees do not have to advertise or campaign about their positions on crime or how to subsequently manage it how they see fit. They are also ardent allies and supporters of the governors who select them for their positions and would not take action that went against the governor's wishes or undermined their political agenda.

With declining crime statistics, covid-19, and a public push for police accountability considering contentious use of force incidents around the United States, it was inevitable some police authority and discretion would be rolled back in a major way. These AG Guidelines were put into service starting with New Jersey Law Enforcement Directive 2020-13 which virtually removed vehicle pursuits entirely barring first-degree

or second-degree crimes, 2021-7 revised auto theft training for all sworn law enforcement officers, and 2022-4 which reimplemented vehicular pursuits for confirmed stolen vehicles. The momentum for criminal justice changes and Covid-19 drops in crime left a void on the impact of these Attorney General Directives.

The playing field for auto theft and its reporting was altered during a transitional period as a result of exigent and outside circumstances. These alterations are now starting to be recognized and reported on as auto thefts are increasing not just in New Jersey but nationwide. Attorney General Guidelines in New Jersey are another theme that has had an impact on auto theft and its reporting over the last 5 years.

Bail Reform

In years and policies past, if you had the cash, you were not going to jail. There was a certain monetary factor that could not be ignored in the way punishment was meted out. That all changed with the historic legislation passed in 2017 which removed bail. There are far too many arguments to list both for, and against bail, however, a receiving stolen property charge is likely to result an offender receiving a summons with a court date in New Jersey. Chasin (2021) has claimed that bail reform has benefitted the criminal justice system and reduced prison populations (Chasin, 2021); others such as Cassell and Fowles (2020) have offered counter assertions that bail reform does not work the way in which it was intended and may actually be increasing crime (Cassell & Fowles, 2020). Despite many states in the United States implementing their own versions of bail reform, every state has a unique setup that is unlike the others, New Jersey is no different.

New Jersey employs a risk-based system created by the nonprofit criminal justice reform group the Arnold Foundation to assess offenders who enter the criminal justice system at the first stage, incarceration. The risk assessment tool boils down to the willingness of the offender to appear before the court and their likelihood of recidivism (Judge Rabner, 2018). The risk assessment tool plays a vital role in dictating the outcome for the offender in terms of punishments are concerned.

There are both many advocates for and against bail reform as well as the grading-risk based system that it currently employs in New Jersey. The literature and study of this arena is growing by the day. Reimel III (2019) has made the ambitious assertion that jail populations and crime rates have declined as well as the risk-based system effectively working to keep the most dangerous of society off the streets (Reimel III, 2019). One of those claims is true, since the 2015 and the passage of bail reform in 2017, the adult prison population has been almost cut in half and the juvenile inmate population has been significantly reduced (Harvell et al., 2022; Shalom, 2022). While bail reform had multiple objectives before its inception, one of the foremost goals was to reduce the prison population. There is no question that this goal has been accomplished. This task was happening expeditiously as less people were arrested and more people were released on summonses. Then covid-19 happened, and even more people were released from prison and less were taken in as a product of covid-19 restrictions.

The subsequent risk-based system of New Jersey's bail reform laws and its pros and cons are far too much address, and it is not a major focus of this study. However, the elephant in the room when discussing bail reform, reduced prison populations, and

reduced sentences, is recidivism. Reimel III (2019) on the public safety assessment grading scale, explained, “The PSA embodies the policy goals of the CJRA. The PSA assesses three factors: (1) a Failure to Appear score (FTA score); (2) a New Criminal Activity (NCA) score; and (3) a New Violent Criminal Activity (NCVA) flag” (p. 202). The system is solely geared toward keeping violent offenders off the streets and car thieves are not designated as such, they are likely to be immediately released even after repeat offenses.

Bail reform, its grading system, and New Jersey Attorney General Directive 2020-12 have created a reality where recidivism grows. Durose et al. (2014) found, “Overall, 67.8% of the 404,638 state prisoners released in 2005 in 30 states were arrested within 3 years of release, and 76.6% were arrested within 5 years of release” (p. 1). This study was conducted well before the introduction of bail reform and restrictions of police pursuits and hands-off approaches for juveniles in New Jersey. Studies claiming bail reform was working such as (Adler et al., 2019; Coppola, 2020) did not do their due diligence and allow for enough time to pass to assess the true ramifications of bail reform especially given a data deficit caused by covid-19. New Jersey-based media provide a timeline based on their reporting efforts of the true impact of bail reform since its implementation in 2017.

Politics and Crime in New Jersey

As with many of the prior themes of this qualitative analysis, many if not all the themes of this literature interact and intersect in more ways than one. The final theme of this literature review pertains to how politics and crime are related. Politics and crime are

inextricably bound by the hip. The imperfect criminal justice system that the United States maintains at all levels of government are subject to welcome criticism, but it is routinely blamed for society's woes. Additionally, crime levels are a common talking point among leaders around the United States. Gottschalk (2011) conveyed, "Throughout American history, politicians and public officials have exploited public anxieties about crime and disorder for political gain" (p. 58). Fear is a powerful motivator and often used by politicians and leaders to curry favor and what better way to accrue that favor than through local media outlets via op-eds or interviews.

It appears there is a dichotomy when it comes to how republicans and democrats represent themselves in terms of criminal justice reform as tough on crime or placing resources into alternative-community based methods to reduce crime. Some politicians fear the reactive crime label will hurt them in elections while tough-on-crime politicians feel as though the public will support them to reduce crime and punish offenders (Welsh and Farrington, 2012). Crime control is an important factor in political races. Bradshaw et al. (2019) revealed "the press often fails to maintain autonomy from political elites" (p. 242). Certain media outlets may work in tandem with politicians to either aid their agendas or work against it. When the public makes an issue of a crime or fears they may be the victim of certain crimes, media takes notice and the public force their elected officials to act on that issue (Cherbonneau & Copes, 2003; Chiricos, 2002).

Auto theft is a certifiable problem in New Jersey as more and more people continue to be victimized, a consensus is forming among both Democrats and Republicans in the state to take action. Politicians from both sides of the aisle routinely

weigh in on crime in local media newspapers. Cherbonneau and Copes (2003) argued, “If the social problem maintains social legitimacy, then formal action will typically occur. Media reports foster and maintain a problem’s legitimacy” (p. 18). That formal action has undoubtedly occurred, as auto theft is so prevalent that it has unified both political spectrums to put a dent in out-of-control car thefts.

When politics, problems, and policy all meet and intersect, a window to create legislation inevitably occurs (Kingdon, 1984, 2011). John Kingdon’s multiple streams framework applies here as auto theft in New Jersey has created a policy stream which has led to the introduction of the bipartisan Auto Theft Prevention Act which has not been passed yet. Auto theft simply could not be ignored any longer as the current spike is the highest it has been in many years. It is politics which led to the implementation of bail reform in 2017, however, cutting the prison population in half for both adults and juveniles, reducing penalties for stealing vehicles, temporarily removing police pursuits of stolen vehicles has legislation working against each other which harms the public while the media attempts to keep an objective track. Despite the history of crimes and politics, lately, the media and politicians have been sounding the alarm that auto theft is a problem that must be fixed.

Summary

This review of literature has stretched across ten different themes which interact with automobile theft, media reporting, and bail reform directly or indirectly. The goal of addressing so many themes is to demonstrate how complicated the playing field truly is. News reporting at the outset is a simple task, given these active variables, it alters how

that reporting is done. Much has changed during the time period under study, as bail reform was implemented in 2017, covid-19 took place in 2019, and multiple New Jersey Attorney General Guidelines were implemented, amended, and reformed throughout this space. How prevalent property crimes are reported in the news such as auto theft have never been studied through the lens of local news media.

News partners at the local and national level had been building a foundation to grow viewership and expand access to both foreign and domestic markets for over a century. News reporting at all levels has changed in the platform that it is provided in, the methods utilized to edit and produce the stories, as well as the credentials of the journalists as well among other changing variables. Transitioning and metamorphosing to stay relevant in a sea of information outlets has remained a challenge for many news organizations (Weber, 2017). There is a constant ethical and moral tightrope between staying relevant & interesting and staying objective.

The challenge with competitive journalism is the ability to maintain objectivity when also staying relevant in the news cycle. The creation of the 24-hour news cycle lit a flame of competitiveness in media. It is especially difficult to do so given the rise of technology, i.e., smart phones, tablets, iPhones and watches, and social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter where news stories can be linked, shared, and unpacked by the masses. The objectivity standard for U.S. media claimed by Schudson (2001) has been under fire year after year. Warring political factions continue to keep the public divided (Morris, 2007). This content analysis will challenge New Jersey based media & public officials and test their objectivity on reporting surging auto theft crime.

Gerbner's Cultivation Theory has expanded far and wide since its inception over a half century ago and has now been adapted to all forms of media, this study included. Crime is a cornerstone of American life as it has infested every aspect of our entertainment and reality and in news reporting it is no different (Reber & Chang, 2000). The media has historically cultivated fear as they produced relentless accounts of sensationalized and rare crimes that may increase crime perceptions. Covid-19 fears replaced crime fears over the last two years as fear was peddled heavily during the covid-19 pandemic by media and public figures (Manzoor & Safdar, 2020). Now, media is back to regularly scheduled broadcasting of crime stories with input from public officials.

Given the growing political divide in the United States many news consumers have turned to local news versus other national options. Despite claims that local news outlets are failing (Martin & McCrain, 2019), new polling suggests that more people are turning to local digital news than ever before (Eva Matsa & Worden, 2022). The power politics have on media reporting is palpable. However, consumers are turning to local news in droves given the political rhetoric and divisiveness are less likely versus national options (Darr et al., 2021). Thus, local media culture and public figures play an important role and offers a calmer alternative to consumers vice national options.

Sensationalism has existed and will continue to persist in news cycles, stories, and comments by public officials around the United States. Sensationalism is a prevalent phenomenon but unique in every circumstance it is employed. Fear and sensationalism work in tandem. Sensationalism drives fear and fear drives sensationalism. Altheide and Michalowski (1999) found, "the word fear pervades news reports across all sections of

newspapers, and is shown to move or “travel” from one topic to another” (p. 475). Given the fear of covid-19 has largely dissipated, has auto theft filled the void of news reporting in New Jersey?

Moral panic is a byproduct of sensationalism, cultivation theory, and a lack of objectivity in the media. While sensationalism, cultivation theory, and a lack of media objectivity survive and thrive on television, the usage of digital news on social media has allowed moral panics to thrive (Walsh, 2020). Crime and news reporting have always had an intimate relationship and the advent of technological and digitized media have contributed to moral panics.

Framing news stories to convey certain preordained perspectives is not a new phenomenon and news consumers are far more aware of bias in reporting than ever before. Crime is routinely framed and is undergirded by politics and policy. Framing issues in the media elicits an emotional response from the reader or viewer (Goffman, 1974). Framing is but one tool the media and public officials can employ at any given time to attempt to shift or shape a person’s thoughts and emotions regarding a certain topic.

Crime reporting on auto theft is historically far less glamorous than crimes involving death or violence and rightfully so. The high point of academic attention on auto theft and its subsequent reporting occurred when it was at its peak in the 1990s. Despite years of stagnant academic and media coverage on auto theft, this crime is being given much more coverage and attention than ever before. The recent surge of auto theft in New Jersey has led to its increased coverage across local news stations in New Jersey.

Surging crime demands media coverage and attention (Fox & Fridel, 2021). Auto theft in New Jersey has undoubtedly caught and is maintaining the attention of local news outlets to some extent.

The New Jersey Attorney General Guidelines are an important phenomena in determining how sworn police officers in the State of New Jersey operate and carry out their day-to-day tasks. The pursuit of and punishment of those offenders who commit vehicle thefts are dictated by these guidelines (Office of the Attorney General, 2020, Office of the Attorney General, 2020b, Office of the Attorney General, 2021). The changes that were implemented to police practices were put in place during a time when auto theft was declining to its lowest level in recorded history (FBI, 2021; NJSP, 2021). The true fallout of these changes is only now starting to be recognized and realized following the passage of covid-19.

The removal of bail in New Jersey was crafted with good intentions in mind as punitive custodial punishments of the past did not deter or dissuade criminal activity (Petrich et al., 2021). Now that a new approach to criminal justice is slowly being implemented, the fallout of bail reform is becoming more evident. From a comparative perspective as New York borders New Jersey and has also enacted bail reform within the last few years and is also seeing a surge in crime, Quinn (2022) argued “it is not coincidental that the sudden, massive increase in city crime came at precisely the same time as the release of 2,000 career criminals from city jails” (p. 2). New Jersey is charting the uncharted and the interpretation of the efficacy of bail reform is still being evaluated.

The final theme of this literature review, politics and crime in New Jersey, demonstrate that crime, media, and politics create the perfect triangle, when these variables are in unison, policy has a good opportunity to be created (Kingdon, 1984). While cultivation theory is guiding this study, it must be noted that Kingdon's multiple streams theory was at work for the crafting of the newly introduced Auto Theft Prevention Act. The impression politics has on crime and vice versa is noticeable but despite partisan affiliations and allegiances, auto theft has united both primary political parties in New Jersey.

Chapter 3 continues the inquiry into auto theft reporting by New Jersey based media outlets with regard to the ten themes listed above. The next chapter will expand on the qualitative content analysis research method and its usage in investigation the problem statement and answering the research questions. Chapter 3 delves into sources which make up the single-case study thematic analysis, how they were collected, why they were collected, and how they were coded and transcribed to determine the themes and patterns. Lastly, the next chapter discusses ethics, validity, reliability, generalizability, replicability, and shortcomings and strengths of qualitative research, and a summary into Chapter 4.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative single case study with thematic analysis is to explore and explain New Jersey-based local media outlets and public figure reporting of automobile theft from 2017–2022 with respect to the implementation of bail reform in 2017. This region of inquiry cannot be thoroughly explored without noting the themes and phenomena evident and that may have an impact on how auto theft has been reported the last 5 years. These facts support the investigation and exploration of the themes and patterns being displayed by New Jersey-based media outlets from 2017–2022.

To adequately measure New Jersey-based media outlets and their auto theft reporting messages from 2017–2022, I evaluated news articles from the Star-Ledger, Press of Atlantic City, and TapINTO.net and comments embedded in those articles by public officials to determine themes for patterns and latent meaning. This qualitative analysis serves as a primer for additional explorative research into themes and patterns offered by local media and public figures on property crime.

This chapter includes the problem statement and the research questions under study. I elaborate on the content analysis methodology, the study's design, and the content that made up this analysis. In the remainder of the chapter, I explain research design and rationale, researcher's role, methodology, ethical considerations, and obligations as well as bias, trustworthiness, validity, credibility, dependability, transferability, and limitations and delimitations of qualitative content analysis research along with a final summary.

Research Design and Rationale

In this study, I employed a qualitative single case study with a thematic analysis to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Has New Jersey-based published news media changed how it reports auto thefts within New Jersey from 2017-to 2022 since the implementation of bail reform?

RQ2: What messages have public officials in New Jersey been conveying to the public on auto theft from 2017 to 2022 since the implementation of bail reform?

This exploratory qualitative analysis was conducted to determine the themes and patterns being displayed by New Jersey-based online published news media and public officials' comments on auto theft since the passage of bail reform in 2017. This study was guided by cultivation theory but resides between inductive and deductive reasoning.

News media publications can be understood and interpreted through both qualitative and quantitative lenses (Whipple & Shermak, 2018). Despite the flexibility of exploring news media publications, human emotions such as fear and crime perceptions offered by public figures cannot be effectively measured solely quantitatively. Neuendorf (2017) asserted, "A quantitative content analysis has as its goal a numerically based summary of a chosen message set" (p. 21). This exploratory study was a textual analysis of themes and patterns that included a partial numerically based summary. Kalu and Bwalya (2017) offered, "Qualitative research is very useful for exploring complex phenomena that are difficult to measure with quantitative studies" (p. 43). Crime and its true and perceived impact are largely qualitative in nature.

Case studies and the processes by which they operate are much more structured today than they have been historically. Single case studies are not only appropriate but necessary when they meet certain metrics or criteria (Yin, 2018). This singular case study tested for the existence of cultivation theory and was exploratory and evaluating messaging over time. Yin (2018) articulated, “A major step in designing and conducting a single-case study is defining the case itself” (p. 54). The case and relevant themes were explained in Chapter 2.

There is no shortage of criticisms for qualitative inquiry and for case studies and thematic analyses. Themes and patterns are messages being expressed to the public, and this study involved analyzing those messages over a 5-year period. While I used two forms of qualitative inquiry in a case study and thematic analysis, numbers were used in select ways to aid in setting the stage. For example, crime statistics, number of theme references in NVivo, and article frequencies are cited. Maxwell (2010) argued, “quantitative data help you to adequately present evidence for your interpretations and to counter claims that you have simply cherry-picked your data for instances that support these interpretations” (p. 479). In this study, I used numbers sparingly and the study does not meet the standard for a mixed-methods study.

Despite criticisms of rigor for qualitative inquiry (Sandelowski, 1986), qualitative thematic analysis has made leaps and bounds to ensure it follows a scientific process that includes guidelines, appropriate measurements, transparency, and a means to replicate the study (Neuendorf, 2017). A qualitative single-case study using thematic analysis was the

best way to determine the themes and patterns offered by New Jersey-based media on auto theft over the last 5 years.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in this summative qualitative content analysis was unique. While my connectedness to the data and inferences is a benefit, it also creates a responsibility and a liability. Given this single case study with thematic analysis was exploratory, it was my prerogative as the researcher to discover and uncover the latent meanings of themes and patterns the New Jersey-based online newspapers and public officials were conveying about auto theft during 2017–2022. Latent inferences can often be generated and ultimately extracted through qualitative inquiry (Holsti, 1969; Hsieh & Kleinheksel et al., 2020, Shannon, 2005). In the pursuit of a singular-case study with thematic analysis, a researcher is a custodian of the data and is charged with organizing, sorting, describing relevance, interpreting, assigning, and transcribing codes (Fink, 2000).

In this study, I was an instrument subject to my own limitations given the usage of thematic analysis and the quest for latent meanings. As a police officer, I am directly connected to the law enforcement side of auto theft-related issues and carry personal opinions and biases about how media and public officials portray auto theft, the criminal justice system, and police officers. While my profession provides me with personal experience that may benefit this study, it also demands I be as transparent as possible throughout the study. I did so by maintaining a physical journal and documenting biases as they arose to maintain objectivity. For this research, I am a normal New Jerseyan news

consumer who is determining themes and patterns by New Jersey-based news media and public figures on auto theft under the direction of cultivation theory.

Methodology

Auto theft has been and continues to be a growing problem in New Jersey and the United States overall. Cultivation theory has been a staple of American press since before its inception and creation by Gerbner (1969, 1970) over 50 years ago. Prolonged exposure to salacious news topics alters crime perceptions (Gerbner, 1969, 1970). In this study, I determined the themes and patterns offered to the public via New Jersey-based media and public figures over a 5-year period, 2017–2022. To best examine these themes and patterns, I conducted a qualitative single-case study with thematic analysis of online news articles published by the Star-Ledger, Press of Atlantic City, and TapINTO.net, as well as the comments by public figures, since the implementation of bail reform in 2017.

News media and public officials contribute to how public discourse is carried out. Thus, it was necessary to understand how local news media tracked, monitored, and reported major crime trends and legislative changes in the last 5 years. The best way to do so was by setting data collection parameters, collecting news articles available from the news archive News Bank, coding and sorting the news articles, and using authoritative and statistical information from the New Jersey Office of the Attorney General, NJSP, and the FBI as well as supporting articles from academic search engines. All the information used for this study is publicly accessible and available. I obtained approval and a subscription from News Bank to collect data for this research.

The inclusion list for the study allowed for New Jersey-based articles concerning auto theft, articles mentioning the attorney general guidelines, articles assigning blame for auto theft, articles mentioning solutions to reduce auto thefts, op-eds concerning auto theft, articles where stolen vehicles were used in the commission of other crimes, and articles mentioning the Bail Reform Act. Items excluded from the study consisted of televised pieces, articles relating to carjacking, social media articles, non-New Jersey-based articles, police blotters, public commentary on news articles, articles prior to 2017, and articles on general–nonspecific crimes increasing or decreasing.

Once the search parameters were set, I was granted access and a free subscription to News Bank’s news archive/search engine to purposely gather articles from each of the randomly selected New Jersey newspapers. There are many forms of sampling in case studies with thematic analyses; however, I employed a multistage sampling strategy. The news organizations themselves were selected 24 news titles available in the News Bank web-based news section by a simple random sampling strategy. Then, I used a purposive sampling strategy to segregate the relevant articles from the nonrelevant articles based on their utility in answering the research questions.

The inclusionary and exclusionary criteria ensured there was not an overabundance of nonrelevant articles in the content analysis that could have altered the conclusions. Johnson et al. (2020) put forth, “Determination of a final sample size is largely based on having sufficient opportunity to collect relevant data until new information is no longer emerging from data collection, new coding is not feasible,

and/or no new themes are emerging” (p. 141). Data saturation is just one more step toward rigor in qualitative thematic analysis.

The searches of the news archive search engine for the Star-Ledger, Press of Atlantic City, and TapINTO.net fit well within the set parameters as I searched for auto theft/car theft in the advanced search bar, which included all articles with either of those keywords for each randomly selected news organization and purposely collected news articles. Searching for articles using the advanced search with multiple key words ensured that no relevant articles were excluded. The search consisted of *auto theft OR car theft* which ensured no relevant articles were excluded.

Almost all the news articles contained some form of public official commentary, and those statements were themed in NVivo. Some of the articles in the news archive included duplicates, such as updated articles, which were excluded; only the most current version of each article was used. The keyword searches allowed me to stay on topic and gather only relevant articles that would assist in answering the research questions. It is easy to taint the accumulation of articles to be themed if a researcher is not careful in examining every article for relevance. I read every news article collected to ensure clarity and that the most up-to-date articles were being evaluated.

Text is representative of human emotion, is a form of communication, and tells a story. The data from the newspaper venues had to be broken down into bite-size pieces so themes, patterns, and other phenomena could be studied. The best and most efficient way to break that data down is to code or theme the data. Saldaña (2013) posited, “A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a

summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). Just as there are many ways to collect information, there are also a bevy of ways to decipher that information once it was collected.

This analysis was intended to determine the themes and patterns promulgated by New Jersey-based media and public officials on auto theft from 2017–2022. Thus, the best approach to uncover those themes and patterns was through establishing themes for the data. Saldaña (2021) asserted, “Like coding, thematic analysis or the search for themes in the data is a strategic choice as part of the research design that includes the primary questions, goals, conceptual framework, and literature review” (p. 260). Themes on auto theft by New Jersey-based media has never been explored. Thus, a single case study was devoted to a specific period to examine a specific phenomenon under cultivation theory. NVivo is especially well suited to explore themes and produces a variety of ways to display themes (Davis & Meyer, 2009).

The number of articles collected along with the unavoidable human errors that routinely occur in coding dictated the usage of both manual coding and coding in NVivo. Neuendorf (2017) affirmed, “Almost always, computer coding means that using software that analyzes a set of text, counting key words, phrases, or other text-only markers” (p. 39). Despite the allure of auto-coding feature, I manually coded each article and the entire data set twice at two different stages in NVivo.

Following the accumulation of the news articles, I created a project in NVivo and lumped all the documents together in a PDF binder. Ishak and Bakar (2012) revealed, “Nodes are representation of variables that a researcher is interested in his or her study”

(p. 99). *Nodes* and *codes* are now synonymous as the terminology has changed in the newest version of NVivo Windows Release (1). All the data were manually themed twice through NVivo using an open coding–inductive/deductive strategy. The results were organized and the relevant themes that emerged will be reported in Chapter 4.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation for this study consisted of the methods of gathering and making sense of the data that was accumulated. The researcher was granted a temporary subscription to News Bank as Lexus Nexus and NexusUni only contained national news articles which would have not aided me in garnering local news-public officials takes on auto theft. The News Bank database houses the news articles of 24 New Jersey web-based news organizations. The three news organizations utilized for this study were randomly selected from those 24 organizations and articles were purposely selected based on my inclusionary and exclusionary criteria. I also purchased a subscription to NVivo Windows Release (1). Additional instrumentation included Microsoft Word, academic and authoritative articles, and journals, as well as the news articles from the Star-Ledger, Press of Atlantic City, and TAPinto.net and the comments of public officials in those news articles.

The best way to trace the meaning of the written/published word within a precise time frame is through a singular-case study with thematic analysis. NVivo and its many features were utilized to support the researcher make sense of the manual codes that were extracted from the news articles. NVivo also allowed the researcher to maintain a physical reflexivity journal to stay on track answering the research questions and not

stray into territory outside of the dissertation. The audit feature ensconced in NVivo also allowed the researcher to track and document the many different changes the evaluation undertook.

Data Analysis Plan

The New Jersey based-news articles that met the researcher's stringent criterion were copied from the News Bank archive and uploaded to NVivo and dissected for relevant codes and themes which directly related to answering the research questions. The themes and patterns had to be evaluated by the local news organizations as well as from the lens of the many public officials who weighed in on almost every news story. The filtered news articles were stored as a PDF binder in a separate document. Based on those codes and themes, reports, illustrations, and queries were run to further refine the finalized themes. All of these inquires was documented, saved, and reported in the results Chapter 4.

Data Theming

The process for manually coding the news articles included an open inductive/deductive approach to determine themes and patterns concerning auto theft in New Jersey. Armat et al. (2018) on qualitative content analysis, claimed, "In effect, both modes of inductive and deductive reasoning are simultaneously used in each QCA" (p. 219). Despite the allure of auto coding, it does not always reliably capture latent meanings which were sought. Saldaña (2021) on computer aided research applications, argued, "The software efficiently stores, organizes, manages, and reconfigures your data to human analytic reflection" (p. 46).

The primary step in thematic analysis is determining the most prevalent themes then drawing conclusions from those themes to make general assertions (Saldaña, 2021). To support those assertions, statistics were selectively utilized and referenced to aid in the validity of those assertions. The newspaper articles were themed and sorted for themes by sentence versus word and the frequency of articles was also utilized to showcase the importance or lack thereof of certain phenomena.

Issues of Trustworthiness

There is a certain level of trust that each and every academic endeavor must strive to achieve. Nowell et al. (2017) explained trustworthiness as, “To be accepted as trustworthy, qualitative researchers must demonstrate that data analysis has been conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner through recording, systematizing, and disclosing the methods of analysis” (p. 1). Trustworthiness is the cornerstone of academic research, and it ensures that the results of any given study can be relied upon and replicated if need be.

The subsequent auto theft related themes, patterns as well as the method of singular-case studies along with thematic analysis was expounded upon. Kyngäs et al. (2020) broke trustworthiness down as, “the current consensus is that credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity are the five most relevant terms for determining the trustworthiness of research” (p. 41). Both single case studies and thematic analysis share some similar and differing metrics for achieving trustworthiness.

Triangulation is one of the primary ways to establish trust and validity in qualitative inquiry and through the usage of multiple data sources over a specified time period the researcher worked out data triangulation for both single case studies and thematic analysis. Despite the criticisms of both qualitative methods, this singular-case study with thematic analysis followed structured approaches. This study meets the single case study metrics set by Yin (2018) and follows the thematic steps outlined by Clarke and Braun (2006, 2013). The additional trustworthiness components were discussed below.

This qualitative content analysis was built on the foundation of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The research employed a multi-stage sampling strategy, documented, audited, and recorded changes throughout the research process and maintained a physical reflexivity log for clarity. Every resource used in this study was in the public domain when the news articles were published and the steps to replicate the study have been employed by other researchers in the past conducting single-case studies with thematic analyses.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research is paramount; when there is credibility, the readers and fellow researchers can ensure that the study was completed with due diligence. Credibility can be approached from a few angles, which include strict techniques for accumulating data, the authors themselves, and the method of analysis (Patton, 1999). Credibility ensures that other researchers can look at the study's blueprints and track what was done and evaluate and generalize those actions. Rather

than an entirely subjective process, the single case study element fit the criteria established by Yin (2018) for conducting a single case study and the thematic analysis followed an established protocol by Clarke and Braun (2006, 2013). This qualitative study was conducted with respect to those criteria and procedures.

There are also various ways by which to increase a study's credibility. Kornbluh (2015) offered, "These strategies include: (a) understanding the population, (b) conveying the data analysis process, (c) reconstructing data collection memories and being open to change, (d) comparing themes, and (e) incorporating member checks into the data analysis process" (p. 397). The data was themed twice, the news bank was checked throughout the study and articles were added or subtracted from analysis, and statistics were provided to show credence for the claims being made. Credibility in this study consisted of consistent observation, data triangulation, maintaining a journal, and explaining potential biases.

Transferability

Transferability can be defined as taking the same route as the next car and arriving at the same destination. Transferability relates to the ability of the researcher and the results of their research to be applicable to the wider audience and academia as a whole. Elo et al. (2014) revealed, "Transferability refers to the potential extrapolation. It relies on the reasoning that findings can be generalized or transferred to other settings or groups" (p. 2). The transferability of this study is evident as the exact steps taken to replicate this study are straightforward and all the news articles accessed are in the public domain or by subscription as well as the authoritative information and statistics available

from the Office of the Attorney General, NJSP, and the FBI. Transferability can be established in single case studies by employing theory (Yin, 2018). For this case, cultivation theory was tested by evaluating the messages conveyed by both local news media and public officials.

While the results of this research are exploratory in a field of inquiry that is virtually non-existent, there are various avenues by which to extrapolate and apply this to many other studies as auto theft around the United States has increased and the take on this omnipresent property crime may be of great interest to qualitative researchers in the area of content analysis. Transferability is achieved in thematic analysis when instructions or a roadmap are provided to follow the same pathway (Nowell et al., 2017). The theories and themes by which to evaluate the content are also interchangeable and pliable to fit any newspaper content analysis.

Dependability

Dependability in content analyses can be achieved through taking careful steps collecting data, coding and recoding, and providing transparency. Taking this pathway will ensure that other researchers broaching the same issues and topics can use the mold that was created. One of the primary ways to establish dependability in thematic analysis is through having the researcher revisit and retest the data over a documented period (Kondracki et al., 2002). The data set created for this qualitative study was recorded and coded and two different stages throughout the study. A physical reflexivity journal was also maintained to establish dependability (Nowell et al., 2017).

This method showcases that there are no major changes to the outcomes over time. By forcing the researcher to, in essence, revisit and reexplore the same data twice, it ensures that the outcome is dependable as coding is a laborious process where it is easy to stray off topic (O'Connor and Joffe, 2020). To ensure dependability, the researcher conducted a preliminary coding of all data and then a secondary thematic coding to ensure clarity in NVivo.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the process by ensuring that there is no undue influence on the research or the researcher that would taint the results in any way (Kynge et al., 2020; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Confirmability was maintained throughout the study through an internal audit trail in NVivo. This includes the decisions for why certain tests, graphs, charts, or scans of the data were conducted. Referring back to this log frequently throughout the study ensure that biases were reduced and objectivity was maintained.

Graneheim et al. (2017) on establishing trustworthiness throughout the study, posited, “The researcher can facilitate this judgement by establishing accuracy during the research process and by giving trails allowing readers to understand how and why decisions were taken” (p. 33). Leaving this breadcrumb trail allows outside observers to evaluate the researchers cognitive process to detect bias and determine objectivity.

Ethical Procedures

Was the research carried out by the researcher done in a reasonable and impartial fashion? Neuendorf (2017) postulated, “it is unusual to encounter ethical critiques of content analyses—perhaps because so many of them conduct unobtrusive analyses of

message content that is publicly available” (p. 130). All the information utilized for this qualitative content analysis is publicly available and through a subscription to News Bank they are also available. The authoritative, statistical, and other academic resources and books that were used are also available.

This study only evaluated direct quotes by public officials and those statements were not quoted nor were the public officials listed. The focus of quotes of public officials was more on the messaging and less on the individual public officials. In other words, the number of references aided in generating a theme, but were not specifically listed in any tables or figures. The goal was to establish and recognize themes and patterns and not to single out any one public official for statements that they made on auto theft from the 2017–2022-time frame.

Thematic analysis specializes in textual analysis that may include public material including interviews and there is no ethical obligation when the information resides in the public domain (Kondracki et al., 2002). Institutional Review Board approval was granted via #1044654 for this research. Despite the public nature of newspapers content analysis, newspapers are copyrighted, and ethical standards were maintained in accordance with Walden University’s Research Ethics and Compliance Policies.

Summary

This qualitative single-case study using thematic analysis determined the themes and patterns being displayed by New Jersey based media on auto theft since the induction of bail reform in 2017. This study accrued, stored, documented, maintained, evaluated, coded, and transcribed the data under the lens of cultivation theory. To maintain

trustworthiness, the researcher coded/themed and recoded the data at different stages to maintain objectivity and bias in addition to keeping a physical reflexivity journal. Most of the information used for this thematic analysis is publicly available or through a News Bank subscription.

The researcher in this study wore a few different hats being a consumer and interpreter of the themes and patterns being offered by New Jersey based media on auto theft over the last five years. The purposely sampled newspapers and the secondary commentary provided by public officials offer valuable insight as to the themes and patterns concerning auto theft that were provided to the public. The continuation and outcome of these methods take shape in Chapter 4 as the findings of this thematic analysis have been discussed at length.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Prior to this qualitative thematic content analysis, the messaging conveyed by local news media in tandem with local public officials on auto theft since the implementation of bail reform in 2017 was unknown. I was unable to find any dual analysis of local media and public officials' coverage on auto theft in New Jersey. Most analyses are either on one or the other and never both together on a specific issue under cultivation theory. News media messaging on various topics under various theoretical lenses has been evaluated in the past and the same goes with public officials with equally as many forms of analyses.

Auto theft in New Jersey and around the United States is increasing. The public goes to local news to be informed and updated, and these news organizations serve as a one-stop shop for information since the majority of published news articles contain either direct quotes or paraphrases from people who can make a difference in deterring, dissuading, or reducing auto theft who are public officials. Recently, trust in both public officials and media is waning; thus, there was an urgent need to determine the themes and patterns from both media and public officials on auto theft since the implementation of bail reform in 2017.

In this qualitative inquiry, I sought to determine if local news media and, by extension, public officials cultivate fear about auto theft through sensationalism or framing. Cultivation theory was adapted for this study and applied to published news media versus its origins in extended television viewing. Cultivation theory is pliable

given the revolution of alternative platforms to deliver news and the preference of Americans to receive their news through these alternative platforms (Shearer, 2021). To do this, I determined themes and patterns offered by local media and public officials since the induction of bail reform in 2017. The media tends to engage in sensationalism in crime reporting (Cherbonneau & Copes, 2003). Sensationalism is a pillar of cultivation theory, and this study offers new insight into adaptations of cultivation theory as well as sensationalistic reporting and issue framing.

This research was conducted using a thematic content analysis of New Jersey-based newspapers from 2017–2022. A latent thematic analysis was necessary to determine themes and patterns being conveyed to the public from public officials and local news organizations. This study was exploratory as this specific vein of cultivation theory has never been explored prior and latent meanings based on the local news media and public officials reporting on auto theft. Two research questions aided in the formulation of this study:

RQ1: Has New Jersey-based published news media changed how it reports auto thefts within New Jersey from 2017-to 2022 since the implementation of bail reform?

RQ2: What messages have public officials in New Jersey been conveying to the public on auto theft from 2017 to 2022 since the implementation of bail reform?

To effectively answer these research questions in their entirety, I randomly selected three out of 24 news organizations and then purposely selected news articles published from 2017–2022 that contained keywords *auto theft* or *car theft*. Based on the

return of that search, all relevant articles based on a set inclusionary/exclusionary criteria in relation to the research questions were selected for content analysis.

There are various ways to demonstrate the trustworthiness of a study throughout every step (Elo et al., 2014). In this study, I did so by using multistage sampling. The news organizations were randomly sampled, while every published news article from 2017–2022 was purposely sampled. This was the best way to ensure there was no bias in picking a specific news organization for any reason and the articles used were selected for their relevance to the research questions. I also maintained transparency, kept a physical reflexivity journal, and established data triangulation.

Setting of the Study

The years under study in this research are of great importance, which is why 2017–2022 was selected. In 2017, former Governor Chris Christie signed into law the New Jersey Criminal Justice Reform Act, which removed cash bail. For a decade prior to 2017, crime across the spectrum had been trending downward in New Jersey and across the United States. In general, the true impact of most laws cannot be felt immediately regardless of the laws' focus. Bail reform has yet to be fully evaluated; however, public sentiment greatly affects how criminal justice systems operate. With low crime levels, it seemed necessary if not obligatory to reduce the number of people incarcerated, especially with the injustices of the war on drugs, specifically marijuana which is now legal in many states.

The motivations of why former Governor Christie pushed and signed into law bail reform measures are beyond the scope of this study; however, this monumental action is

still influencing surrounding states today as they consider removing bail as well. The risk-based system adopted by New Jersey has also been subject to extreme criticisms, which is another arena still being judged. This law was passed despite a backdrop of high recidivism rates among newly released inmates in New Jersey. A flexible trial period would have been better suited instead of passing legislation and discovering the fallout afterward.

In the early months of 2019, the covid-19 pandemic swept across the world and hit New Jersey hard, which led to school lockdowns, curfews, statewide testing, businesses closing, and state economy effects. There was also a significant reduction in crimes in all categories—apart from auto theft which maintained consistent levels of frequency. Between the passage of bail reform and the pandemic, most prisons in New Jersey cut their inmate populations by almost half.

In 2020, Minneapolis Police controversially apprehended and arrested George Floyd during a call for service. The methods employed by officers on-scene to restrain Mr. Floyd drew wide-spread criticism and unfortunately led to his death. That particular incident led to national movement to reform policing across the United States. These movements came in the form of national protests. These protests led to a national shift in trust of both police and the criminal justice system (see White et al., 2021). When trust in law enforcement and the criminal justice systems decreases, the efficacy of the system ultimately declines in some regards. Many events during this period had substantial effects. The pandemic lasted almost 3 years, and during 2020–2022, various New Jersey attorney general directives were implemented and subsequently amended. Crucial

directives included New Jersey Law Enforcement Directive 2020-13, which outlawed police vehicle pursuits for stolen vehicles, and New Jersey Law Enforcement Directive 2022-4, which brought police pursuits among stolen vehicles back. In the culmination of these unique events, the messaging on auto theft began to change. This study was conducted to evaluate the messages on auto theft by public figures and local media for themes and patterns under the scope of cultivation theory.

Data Collection

Data for this study was collected online in the public domain; no confidential or private information were obtained or used. Dozens of academic search engines and archives maintain news articles, but most do not archive local news. One of the primary themes in this study was local media culture, which could not be explored without local news articles. Thus, I discovered News Bank which possessed 24 New Jersey-based news organizations and subsequent local news articles. I obtained a free-trial subscription to access the news articles. The three news organizations selected for this study were randomly selected from that archive: Press of Atlantic City, TapINTO, and Star-Ledger.

The News Bank archive allows a user to search specific time frames and key terms. The terms *auto theft/car theft* were searched in 2017–2022 for each of the three news organizations. The searches of all three news organizations yielded over 2,000 results; however, many articles were disregarded as duplicates or as not relevant to the research questions. The relevant articles were saved to a PDF binder. Additional sources included peer-reviewed articles and journals, books, and authoritative information published online, such as the New Jersey attorney general guidelines and the New Jersey

Criminal Justice Reform Act (2017). Crime statistics provided by the NJSP and the FBI were also used as references.

Once the relevant news articles were sorted for accuracy and relevancy, they were uploaded to NVivo (Windows Release 1) and thematically coded. NVivo is a computer program tailored to qualitative researchers. The NVivo program allows users to code, organize, manage, and illustrate their findings in a variety of forms. The news articles were manually coded in NVivo; however, additional auto functions allow a researcher to showcase data and results in images, graphs, charts, and pictures, which are shown in the results section.

Data Analysis

There is much flexibility in the approaches that qualitative analysis employs, especially when using a thematic analysis. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) found, “The goal of a thematic analysis is to identify themes, i.e. patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue” (p. 3353). The important topic under study here is auto theft messaging by both local news media and public officials since 2017. Clarke and Braun (2006, 2013) provided a roadmap for navigating thematic analysis that includes inundation in the topic, dissecting the data, fishing for recurring items, a material reflection, conducting a breakdown of inventoried information, and providing a succinct explanation. The map does not have to be followed continuously as there is much room for detours and route changes to fit a study and a researcher’s needs. This framework was instrumental in analyzing and interpreting the results.

The process of a single case study is straightforward, but the process of utilizing a thematic analysis is not; however, both processes involve repetition (Kohlbacher, 2006; Yin, 2018). The case was set with context provided, the pertinent phenomena were defined and explained, and the thematic analysis was employed to explore the themes and patterns of New Jersey-based media and public officials in New Jersey.

The first step of this thematic analysis included reading every online news article available in the News Bank archive that contained the search terms *auto theft/car theft* from 2017–2022. I read each article to obtain a thorough understanding of what the articles were about and to eliminate duplicate articles and articles not within the inclusionary scope of the study. Authoritative information provided by the New Jersey attorney general, FBI, and NJSP were also read and reviewed.

The second step included the thematic coding of all the relevant news articles. Two simultaneous searches for themes specific to each research question occurred as both the themes and patterns of local news organizations (Press of Atlantic City, TapINTO, and Star-Ledger) and dozens of public official's sentiments. The sentiments of those public officials as well as the local news organizations were lumped together for analysis. The study was guided by cultivation theory—thus, both thematic searches entailed evaluating the themes for fear generation.

The third step was the quest for themes. The study was guided by cultivation theory—thus, both thematic searches entailed evaluating the themes for fear generation in tandem with any overarching changes in reporting or commenting by public officials. The emergent themes were manually processed in NVivo and separated according to

relevancy. Statements by news article authors were separated into different themes and only direct quotes inside the news articles were used for public officials.

The fourth step required me to revisit the initial themes and refine them into more functional themes. While thematic analysis does not mandate or even require a codebook, some of the broad preliminary themes evident in past studies concerning crime and auto theft are shown in Table 1. Given there is no prior research on auto theft and the messaging on the topic by local news media, a foundation was necessary to launch from.

Table 1

Preliminary Themes and Emergent Themes

Preliminary themes	Emergent themes
Media objectivity	Media assigning blame for auto theft
Local media culture	Media cultivating fear
Sensationalism	Media expressing concern about auto theft
Moral panic incited by the media	Media indicating auto theft worsening
Framing	Media imparting informative information
Slanted crime reporting	Public official assigning blame for auto theft
Politics and crime	Public official cultivating fear
Impact of bail reform	Public official speaking to the public
Fear cultivation	Public official indicating auto theft is worsening
Historical media reporting	Public official taking action on auto theft

The preliminary themes shown in Table 1 were known to intersect with crime reporting in general by which auto theft is included based on historical research. The emergent themes arose during the first round of thematic analysis in NVivo. During this phase, the researcher should lay out all the themes and determine what pieces need to be added to complete the larger mosaic (Clarke & Braun, 2006, 2013; Terry et al., 2017). Themes at this stage were retooled, altered, and amended based on the pathway of the thematic analysis.

The fifth step ensures that the product is well tailored, void of any excess or unrelated words, and is succinct. The finalized themes were then generated based on their relevance to the research questions because of multiple thematic analyses. Boyatzis (1998) confirmed, “Consistency over time and events is attained when a person makes the same observation at two different times or in two different settings” (p. 147). The finalized themes were confirmed at two different times.

The last phase is the culmination of all the research and a detailed summary of the themes and patterns displayed by local news media and public officials on auto theft since the implementation of bail reform in 2017. The case study set the stage for the events that occurred during that time frame and the thematic analysis was utilized to determine the messaging on auto theft that both local news media and public officials conveyed. This last step must weave all the loose fibers together into a coherent and cogent product (Terry et al., 2017). In other words, the researcher is detailing the results of the study based on the methods, instruments, data, and theory that was used to get there.

Results of the Study

Independent case studies are a reliable qualitative method when paired with a theoretical foundation. Boyatzis (1998) claimed, “Thematic analysis is a process that can be used with any form of qualitative research” (p. 160). While cases, in terms of qualitative inquiry are broad, they can also be applied to specific spaces in time with specific events, such as themes and patterns disbursed by local news media and public officials on auto theft from 2017-2022 since the passage of bail reform. Sandberg (2005)

conveyed, “the primary research object within the interpretive research tradition is individuals’ and groups’ lived experience of their reality” (p. 47). The experiences of local media and public officials in New Jersey regarding auto theft are unknown. Single interpretivist epistemological case studies guided by theory are but one additional way to extract meaning from a phenomenon (Dobson, 1999). Thus, interpretivist epistemological case studies and latent meanings derived from thematic analysis worked hand in hand for this singular case study as the meaning of written text was filtered to answer the study’s two research questions.

The first research question asked, Has New Jersey-based published news media changed how it reports auto thefts within New Jersey from 2017 to 2022 since the implementation of bail reform in 2017? Of the (N = 2,676) news articles covering auto theft/car theft that were published from the Press of Atlantic City, TapINTO.net, and Star-Ledger, only (N = 466) were deemed suitable for the study’s aims. Those articles were coded/themed, and three themes were generated for the first research question which included, Local Media Echoed Police Information, Local News Did Not Frame Auto Theft As a Problem, and Auto Theft is Underrepresented in Local Web-based News. There additional themes were produced for research question two, which included, Public Officials Assigned Blame for Auto Theft, Public Officials Sounded the Alarm Over Auto Theft.

Theme 1: News Articles Echoed Police Information

This study firstly sought to determine the way in which New Jersey-based media changed how it reports auto thefts over a five-year time period. Of the (N = 466) news

articles purposively sampled, (N = 427) or 91.6% echoed police information. In other words, there was very little information provided outside of what was reported by the government organization(s), media organization(s), or public official(s). The authors of the news articles would routinely publish the statistics provided to them by the NJSP, paraphrase or take direct quotes from public officials, and regurgitate the safety sentiments of government organizations. Despite the inclusion of editorials or op-eds, the outcome was not altered significantly as these articles made up a very small portion of the overall article sample.

It was understood that national news articles, the positions they take, and the sensationalism utilized are the opposite of how local news conducts business (Strömbäck et al., 2020). National news organizations are big business and to keep audiences entertained marketable stories have to be marketed to keep viewers and readers coming back. Guess et al., (2018) conveyed, “the public is more trusting of local news sources (both newspapers and TV) than national ones” (p. 7). The reason for that trust is evident here as the bulk of themed articles offered no additional insight to the public on auto theft. The neutral territory achieved by these local news organizations was evident given the lack of any detectable position, sensationalism and bias included. The findings indicated that the news organizations offered nothing more than an almost exact rendition of what happened step by step for auto theft-crimes and on general reporting of auto theft.

The three news organizations were evaluated and analyzed as a single unit together versus each one individually. Nor were the sentiments or the style of reporting cross referenced or examined. However, the stories of each news organization were

similar in the objective way that events or stories were portrayed. Echoing police information or public official's commentary on auto theft is an objective way to present the story to the public and does not attempt to shape public crime perceptions through messaging. That is not to say that all local news organizations follow this model or that these news organizations or others won't alter their reporting of auto theft in the future.

Theme 2: Local News Media Did Not Frame Auto Theft as a Problem

Crime statistics, specifically for auto theft have been historically on the decline in New Jersey. In 2017, auto-theft and homicide were at historic lows and the window to improve the criminal justice system was open. The New Jersey Criminal Justice Reform Act (2017) was passed, and covid-19 struck in early 2019. Media at all levels were saturated with the pandemic, hospitalizations, virus spread, and so on. The spotlight on crime, criminal justice reform, and auto theft largely disappeared.

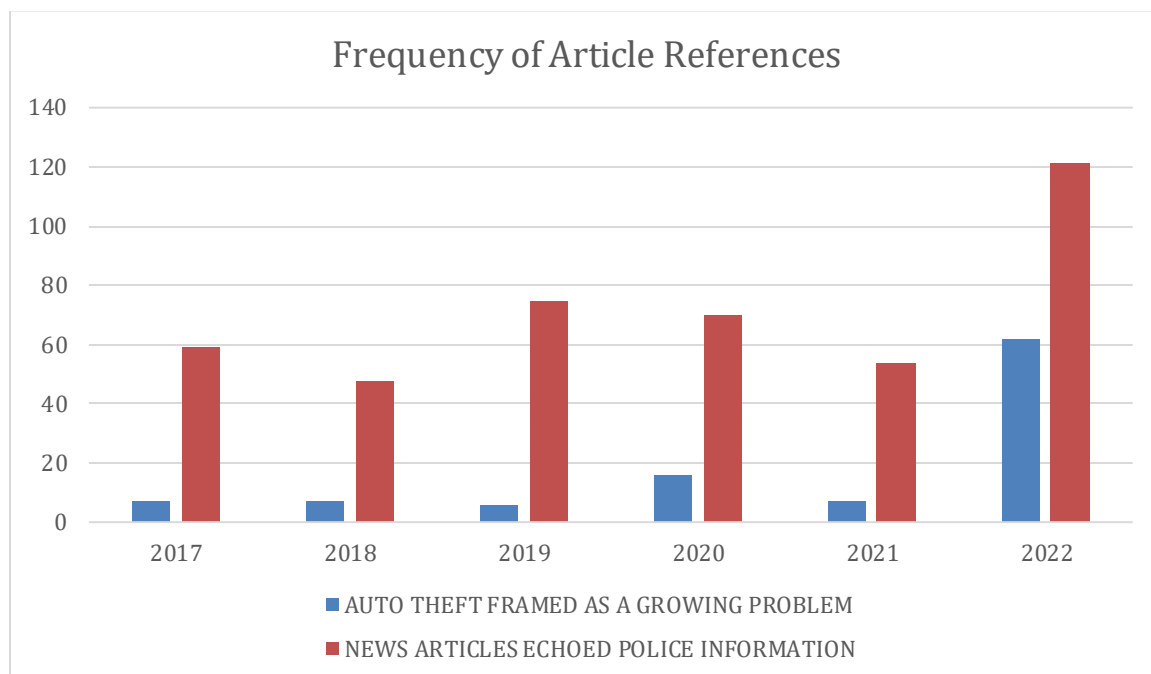
Despite local news echoing police information, every article has a frame which is contingent upon the content and direction of the article. The way in which auto theft related articles were framed by local news began to change in 2020 on a very small scale. The number of auto thefts in New Jersey has stayed relatively consistent over the last ten years staying above 10,000 per year (FBI, 2021); despite the lockdowns, restrictions, and the like, the pandemic have virtually no effect on reducing the number of vehicles that were stolen. Of the (N = 466) usable news articles published on auto theft less than 1/4th 22.5% framed auto theft as a growing problem despite sharp increases the last two years.

Figure 1 showcased the number of themed references Theme 1 and 2 received throughout the data analysis process. The number of references tells a story all on its own

when considered with the overall timeline of this study. Crime statistics have shown auto theft has surged the last two years almost without any acknowledgement from the local news media. Auto theft simply does not demand the same news coverage as historically rare violent crimes. The local media did not track auto theft and increase its coverage despite public officials' best efforts to advocate for auto theft as a plague upon New Jersey.

Figure 1

Theme 1 and 2 References



Note. News articles were coded in NVivo for each theme which determined the number of references.

Despite the frequency of auto theft growing significantly in New Jersey, local news media hardly covered it, or framed it as a problem. Altheide (1997) asserted, “The problem frame promotes a discourse of fear that may be defined as the pervasive

communication, symbolic awareness and expectation that danger and risk are a central feature of the effective environment” (p. 648). Not only was auto theft not framed as a problem, but it is also not treated as such by the local news. As far as the messages for local news go on auto theft, they are almost non-existent.

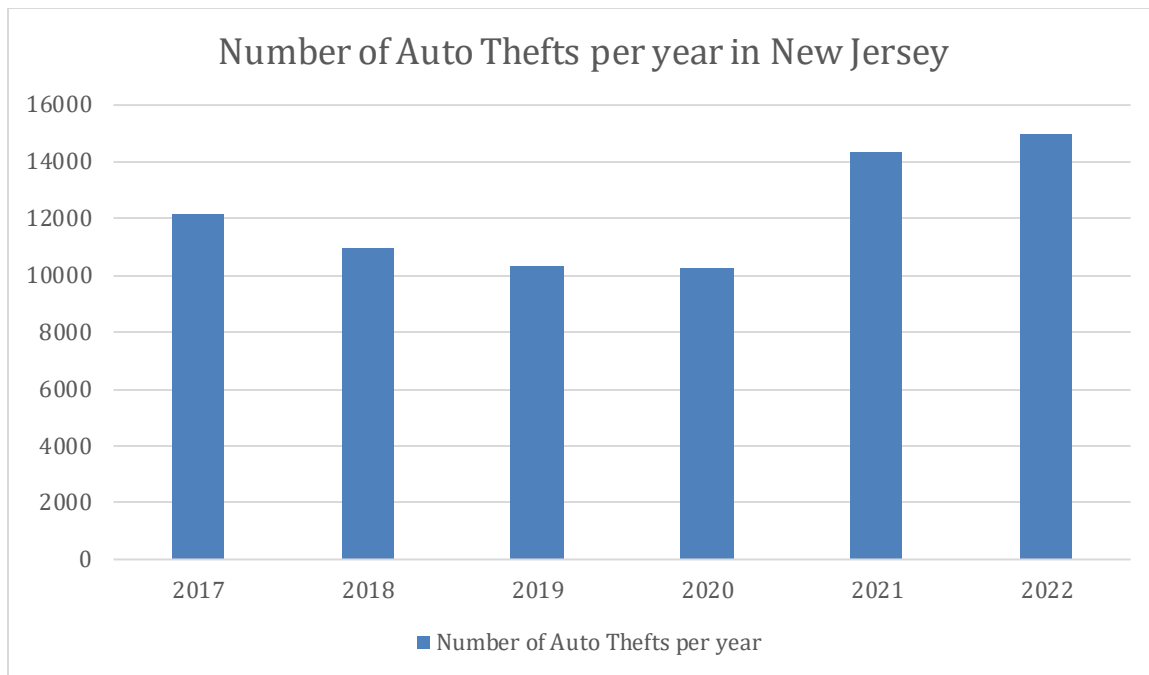
The reasons for the lack of representation of auto theft as a problem in local media are beyond the scope of the study, however, on a surface level, violent crime is far more marketable than a vehicle with the keys inside being stolen. Not providing auto theft with any significant attention, despite the frequency of which it happens, or the other violent crimes stolen vehicles are used in is a disservice to the public.

Theme 3: Auto Theft Is Underrepresented in Web-Based Local News

There is a significant disparity in how local news covered auto theft compared to homicides and murders. There were almost fifteen thousand articles web-based articles published on homicide/murder from the same publications in the same time frame versus the near three thousand on auto theft. Auto theft is a neglected topic in terms of its local news representation or lack thereof. It has been said that violent crime dominates the media at all levels (Callanan, 2012; Surette, 1990). Auto theft is one of the most prevalent crimes in New Jersey but only receives a fraction of the same attention as other crimes. The most current auto theft statistics in New Jersey are provided below in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Current Number of Auto Thefts Per Year in New Jersey



Note. From NJ.gov. (2022). Crime Data.

<https://www.nj.gov/nj/safety/features/crimedata.html>

Gottheimer, J. (2023). RELEASE: Gottheimer, DHS, NJ law enforcement convene auto theft & port security roundtable — Update on DHS efforts to combat interstate, international auto theft rings.

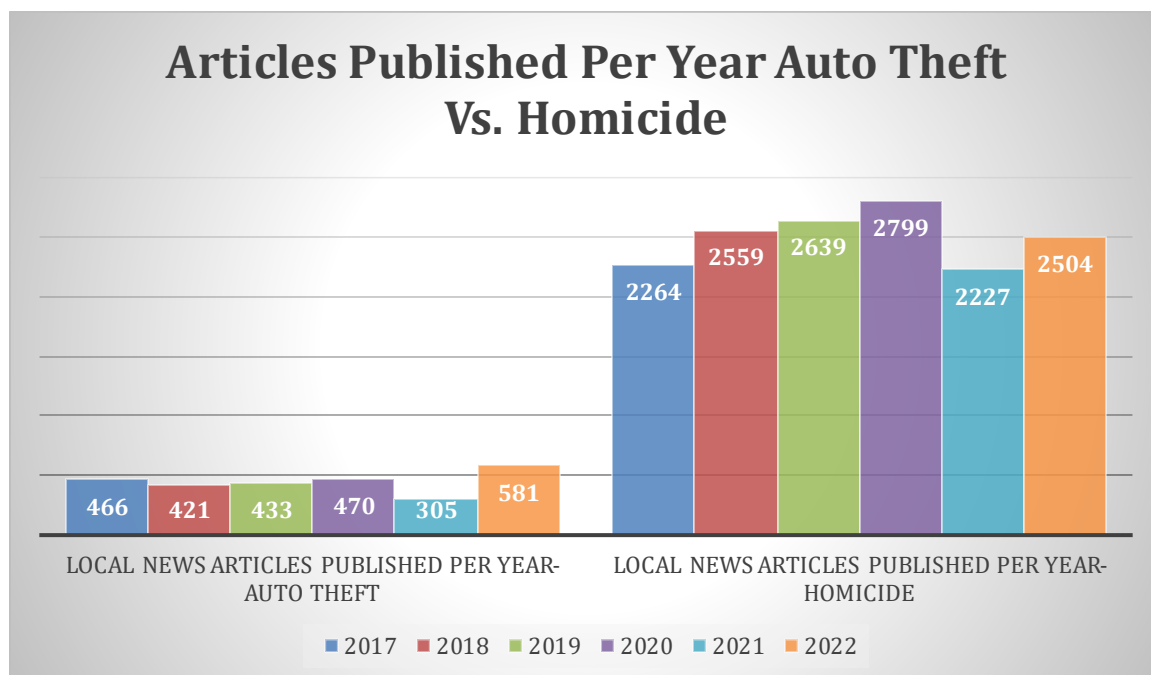
<https://gottheimer.house.gov/posts/release-gottheimer-dhs-nj-law-enforcement-convene-auto-theft-port-security-roundtable-update-on-dhs-efforts-to-combat-interstate-international-auto-theft-rings> .

The implementation of bail reform, attorney general guideline changes, covid-19, pre-trial diversionary measures for adults and juveniles, the number of auto thefts continues to increase. The year 2023 is on par to overtake years past, auto theft continues

to receive minimal attention in local news media. The lack of coverage is even more evident when paired against the number of publications homicide/murder receive per year as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Auto Theft Versus Homicide Articles Published Per Year by Local Media



Note. From NewsBank.com (2017-2022). Auto Theft/Car Theft.

https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/results?sort=YMD_date%3AD&p=AWNB&t=stp%3AWeb-Only%2BSource%21Web-Only%2BSource/state%3ANJ%21USA%2B-%2BNew%2BJersey/pubname%3AANJ6%7CSLWEN%7CPACWE%21Multiple%2520Sources%2520%283%29&maxresults=20&f=advanced&val-base-0=auto%20theft&fld-base-0=alltext&bln-base-1=or&val-base-1=car%20theft&fld-base-1=alltext&fld-nav-0=YMD_date&val-nav-0=01/01/2017%20-%2012/31/2022

NewsBank.com (2017-2022) Homicide/Murder.

https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/results/?p=AWNB&t=stp%3AWeb-Only%2BSource%21Web-Only%2BSource/state%3ANJ%21USA%2B-%2BNew%2BJersey/pubname%3AANJ6%7CSLWEN%7CPACWE%21Multiple%2520Sources%2520%283%29&sort=YMD_date%3AD&fld-nav-0=YMD_date&val-nav-0=01/01/2017%20-%2012/31/2022&maxresults=20&f=advanced&val-base-0=homicide&fld-base-0=alltext&bln-base-1=or&val-base-1=murder&fld-base-1=alltext

The statistics illustrated in Figure 3 are just another of many examples that lend credence to prior research on media objectivity, cultivation theory, framing, sensationalism, and bias in reporting. Auto theft is more likely to impact someone directly or indirectly through the commission of another crime committed with the vehicle at a later time or date. Yet, there is simply a lack of attention given to auto theft despite increasing statistics and minimal attention in local news media. Property crime is rampant yet never quite meets the same metric of importance for news coverage as violent crimes does (Frost & Phillips, 2011; O’Hear, 2020). It seems as though not only does the message itself matter when conceiving message patterns, the frequency of the message also appears to have an impact. In other words, auto theft might be more well received by both the public and policy makers if it received the same number of news articles versus homicide/murder.

The sheer difference in the total number of articles published online per year is staggering; however, it must be noted that web-based news is only one form of coverage that local news outlets offer and the other methods by which news is disbursed, i.e., television, radio, print, or emailed news was not measured. In terms of web-based

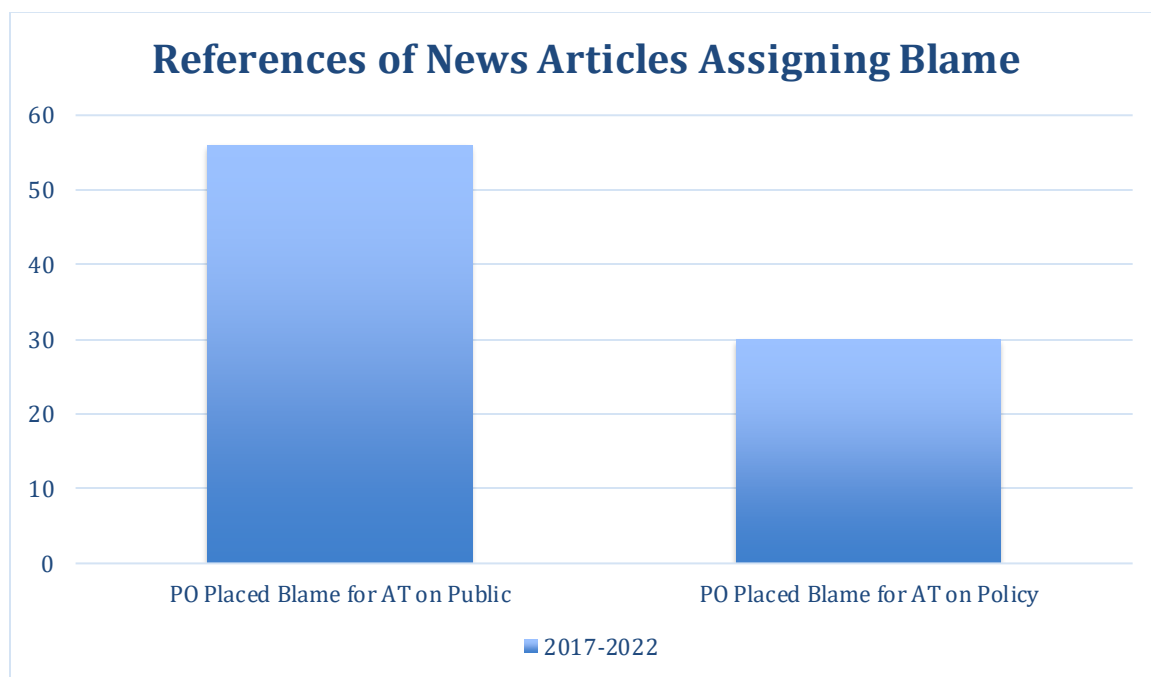
representation, auto theft remains to be represented to the level of which it occurs every day.

Theme 4: Public Officials' Assigned Blame for Auto Theft

The second research question sought to determine the messages public officials have displayed on auto theft since the passage of bail reform. Almost every news article was heavily embedded with information echoing police sentiments and information, which included a large portion of direct quotes and paraphrases of public officials. Only the direct quotes used in the news articles were themed. Since the passage of bail reform, public officials have split the blame for auto theft increasing in New Jersey as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Number of References Assigning Blame



Note. Each direct quote that alluded to blame was placed in each category in NVivo.

The results of the theming revealed that public officials did not just blame the public, they also placed blame on the policies that led to this current reality. The crime statistics have shown a definitive increase in auto theft since 2017 and public officials have sought answers, and subsequently assigned blame for that increase. It is a natural reaction to justify a reason for the increase when it is uncharacteristic given the consistency of auto theft over the past decade, as if some recent occurrences had an impact which drove the surge.

Vehicles are seldom stolen by the way of hotwiring or other anymore given technological advancements except for a few design flaws on some vehicles, however, the bulk of vehicles stolen are those with the keys and key fobs left inside. On the other hand, changes to vehicle pursuit policies, bail reform, Attorney General Guideline changes, and other pre-trial diversionary methods for adults and juveniles are equally being blamed for the serious spike in auto theft. Assigning blame for crimes veers off in several directions in terms of academia in terms of victim blaming (Spalek, 2017; Weimann & Gabor, 1987), in overall crime increasing via blaming the public (Dobrin et al., 2021), and on the offenders themselves (Sherman, 1995). In terms of specific blaming for auto theft in the past, this blame has been placed on insurance companies and vehicle technology (Brill, 1982; Karmen, 1981) and motor vehicle theft victims blaming themselves (Bohucharova et al., 2019).

Policy is no stranger to blame, either. As policy has been blamed for crime in various studies (Crawford, 1994; Hinterleitner, 2018). This is by no means an exhaustive list of the ways in which blame was assigned for crime or other. However, the 2017-2022

case in New Jersey presented a unique microcosm for study where multiple events occurred and auto theft maintained itself and even increased. Which prompted public officials to assign blame to explain the increase in auto theft. An increase in a crime occurs, the public reacts, and media and public officials look to assign that blame somewhere. In this instance, as auto theft began to proliferate in 2022, the subsequent blame began to increase.

In a sample where almost 92% of news articles echoed police information assigning blame was a rare theme that did not become evident until the 2020-2022 time frame. The onus for auto theft is certainly up to debate as car owners could better secure their vehicles, on the other hand, certain policies have reduced the efficacy of law enforcement and the prosecution of car thieves.

Theme 5: Public Officials Sounded the Alarm Over Auto Theft

The last theme for research question two was determined by theming public officials' comments on whether they saw auto theft as a growing problem by year. Of all the years themed, 2022 saw (N = 67) references for public officials framing auto theft as a growing problem. A mind map was created based on the theme of public officials messaging in NVivo shown in Figure 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

In this single qualitative case study using thematic analysis, I sought to understand the themes and patterns offered by local news and public officials' comments within news articles from 2017–2022 since the implementation of bail reform. The setting or case of this study was of particular importance and interest as never has the culmination of multiple policy, law, and policing practice come together in the middle of a pandemic. While the pandemic was not the sole focus of this study, and covid-19's effects on all aspects of the criminal justice system remain to be explored, the pandemic undoubtedly delayed some of the immediate impacts of bail reform and AG guideline changes.

In this study, I used predominantly secondary data that included newspaper articles from the Star-Ledger, Press of Atlantic City and TAPinto.com via the News Bank archive, crime statistics from the NJSP and FBI and others, as well as authoritative information from New Jersey-based websites. Themes were generated initially, and emergent themes were described and then condensed into five themes for two research questions. Data were triangulated over time; the role of the researcher and subsequent biases and limitations were explained.

The results of this research revealed that fear was not cultivated by either local news media or public officials; however, auto theft has been impacted by policy, is increasing, and is not receiving an adequate amount of news coverage despite its pervasiveness and prevalence. Guest et al. (2011) put forward, “a thematic analysis is still

the most useful in capturing the complexities of meaning within a textual data set” (p. 11). I ultimately sought latent meanings based on the data set of news articles I created. The themes tell a story that illustrates and captures how auto theft has evolved over the last 5 years.

Interpretation of Findings

I explored the themes and patterns of messages provided by local news and public officials under the lens of cultivation theory. The results of this study show that while the messaging by local news mostly echoed police information, auto theft was not presented to the public as a major issue or problem. A lack of representation regarding auto theft may alter the perceptions of auto theft in the public. The frequency of auto theft has since alerted public officials who are now trying to stem the tide and place blame to explain that increase. An inference that I made from my findings is that blame is a natural but impulsive reaction to a foundation that was put into place in 2017 with the passage of bail reform. Regardless of the blame that was placed, analysis in this study suggests that it never reached the extent of cultivating fear by either public officials or local news. That is not to say that national news commits to the same objectivity, but that was outside the scope of the study.

Sometimes decades must pass to fully appreciate and evaluate the extent to which laws impact crimes. Nonetheless, covid-19 restrictions and bail reform and the subsequent release of both adult and juvenile offenders did nothing to improve rates of vehicle theft. Ginter (2004) delineated, “even a modest reduction in crime involves paying a heavy price in terms of increases in the prison population; a ten percent decrease

in crime typically requires a doubling of the prison population” (p. 125). Retributive justice has been widely rebuked in academia for decades and is now being rebuked by the public on a national scale (Karakatsanis, 2018; Lippke, 2019). Perhaps certain lenient policies and perspectives together may have the opposite effect and increase certain crimes.

Criminals adapt to the laws. As a result of this adaptation, auto theft rings have emerged and are a driving force behind this record increase in stolen vehicles and transnational illicit trade (Brown & Clarke, 2019). Bail reform in New Jersey virtually eliminated custodial punishment for stealing a car, New Jersey Law Enforcement Directive 2020-12 diverted juveniles away from the criminal justice system, New Jersey Law Enforcement Directive 2020-13 eradicated pursuits for stolen vehicles, and New Jersey Law Enforcement Directive 2022-4 brought back pursuits for stolen vehicles. These directives may have given the impression that stealing and burglarizing vehicles would result in no punishment for juveniles. Juveniles are a pawn in the stolen vehicle game who are easily replaceable and disposable putting lives in jeopardy over property (Braun, 1967).

Despite these major changes, the local news media only increased their coverage of auto theft within the last 2 years, and the same applied to public officials. These issues run deep and still do not receive the necessary attention to convey risk to the public. A massive spike in auto theft did not lead to the cultivation of fear by either local news or public officials. Property crimes are likely never going to receive the same attention as violent offenses, but violent offenders routinely use stolen vehicles to carry out crimes.

Theoretical Foundation

Cultivation theory holds that frequent interaction with certain topics may alter consumers' perceptions of reality (Gerbner, 1969). There are now different ways to measure the effect of cultivation theory, which applies to messaging and the cultivation of fear through messaging. Grabe and Drew (2007) claimed, "Theory in this area has evolved around two general dimensions: audience characteristics and message-specific influences on the cultivation process" (p. 147). In auto theft messaging in local published online news, it pertains to the types of messages being displayed. Local news articles were so heavily embedded with police information and comments by public officials that the news articles had to be themed as entire individual units rather than sentence per sentence or word for word. Direct quotes by public officials were also themed. Neither the articles nor the public officials' comments met the requirements for the cultivation of fear.

On a frequency scale, the number of news articles published on auto theft was far lower than that of homicide/murder. A local news consumer would likely never know that auto theft is a growing problem based on the frequency of articles published. With no exposure, cultivation theory ceases to exist. Cultivation theory messaging requires sensationalism, framing, and frequency, and framing auto theft as a problem in a fraction of the articles does not meet that standard. There are double and triple the number of articles covering homicide/murder than auto theft, which goes back to marketability of infrequent and violent events.

Fear was not cultivated in local news or by public officials over the last 5 years since the induction of bail reform in 2017. Fear cultivation was explored on the level of property crimes over a specific time period where various laws and policies had an effect on it and it simply did not come to fruition. Auto theft is a single crime in a sea of property crimes and seldom is a priority.

Limitations

In this study, I explored New Jersey-based published online news articles over a 5-year period. I located a database that offered various local news publications. News Bank provided me with the necessary access to articles over the set time with a free trial subscription. With any news archive/bank, there are going to be limitations that must be addressed. Searching for *auto theft/car theft* displayed more results than just searching for *auto theft* or *homicide* versus *homicide/murder*. I employed dual word searches to extract the largest number of results possible.

Some news organizations have publicly available databases, and some do not. The only way to gather a local news perspective was to use local news. News Bank provides those articles. An additional limitation was the fee associated with accessing these articles. For a researcher wishing to use the News Bank archive with no other library access, a fee may be required. Smits (2014) argued, “Researchers outside Academia, or those from institutions with limited budgets, cannot make the same use of digital newspapers archives as their richer, mostly Anglo American, colleagues” (p. 141). Those who wish to follow the same research method will likely have to subscribe and pay the fee to conduct similar research unless their university provides them access.

Data saturation is imperative in establishing validity, reliability, and trustworthiness. I reached saturation based on the results generated from the News Bank news archive. There is the potential that other news archives may have more search results than were provided for this study. Articles that were updated or did not meet the inclusionary criteria were also discarded. The usage of those discarded articles or others on the exclusionary list might alter a different researcher's results and conclusions.

Additionally, I used three news organizations that were randomly sampled; a sampling of a different three or of all web-based news organizations in New Jersey might lead to different conclusions of the same phenomenon. A sampling of all news organization's potential outlets might yield the opposite results of what were produced for this research. The same applies to how national news organizations may discuss, frame, or portray auto theft in New Jersey. Extending the time period from 5 years to 20 years may also alter the results of the same study. Moving any single part of the samples may alter the results. There is also leeway with how other researchers may code or theme the same data set.

The articles News Bank offers also do not come with pictures, videos, or anything additional outside of text, word count, and date of publication. The public tends to have a richer reaction to salacious images or videos (Friskin, 2020), Images in the News Bank archive were not available and were not measured in this study. When the articles were published, they may have had sensationalized images present, but that is unknown given how the articles are displayed on News Bank.

The final limitation was my use of direct quotes only by public officials and the subsequent interpretation and thematic analysis of those statements. Only direct quotes marked with quotation marks were used to avoid any far-off interpretations. Many articles had paraphrasing embedded in them, but those words could have been misconstrued if taken out of context. Other researchers may come to different conclusions should their thematic analysis include the paraphrased passages in the news articles.

Recommendations for Future Research

A thematic analysis of auto theft messaging over a five-year time period is the tip of the iceberg for how deep auto theft truly goes. The layers of auto theft are thick. Lee et al. (2016) argued, “Despite the prevalence of auto theft and associated economic loss, the offense is relatively underexplored in the literature” (p. 400). Auto theft is far beyond just a property crime when the act is observed beyond just stealing a car. The theories of old on auto theft demand a fresh update. This situation now is far bleaker than it used to be when auto theft numbers were far higher than they are now.

Offender motivations for stealing vehicles may very well change state per state. Jacobs and Cherbonneau (2018) explored offender motivations but much of that research preceded the criminal justice reforms that have since taken hold in New Jersey and beyond. Do car thieves understand the law(s) and police practices which impacts how they treat, manage, and prosecute them? Are these offenders acting in any particular way as a result of the criminal justice reforms that have been implemented and do they embolden them?

The price of a new vehicle has surged to record highs, as a result, catalytic converter thefts, car burglaries, auto thefts, and car jackings are increasing. How these crimes are framed in the media and by public officials have yet to be explored. It is commonplace for new vehicles to net over \$80,000 and with an increased markup, there is an increased incentive for stealing these vehicles. But the increase in auto theft is not by accident, criminal organizations, or auto theft rings have formed to reap the reward. Auto theft rings are hardly explored in academia, especially their usage of juveniles to flout laws and police practices. Auto theft rings have adapted to the laws and police policies to expand their enterprises at no physical cost to them. Where do these high-end vehicles go and who are they funding? The national security implications are ripe for exploration, especially considering limited number of outgoing cargo that is inspected.

While prior research has confirmed media prioritizes and sensationalizes violent crimes, a byproduct of this study showcased the disproportionate frequency at which homicide/murder articles were published versus auto theft/car theft. There is further room to explore the differences in local news media vs national news media and their portrayals of property versus violent crimes. Why are property crimes excluded from the same type of exploration and attention as violent crimes?

In this case, the researcher explored a specific time frame given the changes to policy/police practices that occurred during this period. Bail reform is a new phenomenon that must be evaluated especially considering its emphasis on incarcerating violent offenders only. What kind of reality is created when policy and police practice virtually ignore property crimes and recidivist property offenders? This study is a drop in the

bucket when evaluating the impact of policy and police practice on auto theft. Can criminal justice reform and holding offenders accountable be synonymous? At some point when an offender gets caught stealing or burglarizing a vehicle more than twice, is there going to be any punishment, and more importantly, can they be reformed?

The covid-19 pandemic was a groundbreaking situation that upended the entire United States. The implications of this event stretch far across the spectrum in terms of its true impact. How a pandemic impacted really any type of crime and its frequency is of unique importance. In this case, despite maneuvering a pandemic, not only did auto theft not decrease, but it also actually began to increase towards the end. This study only offered a partial explanation for that increase in a specific scenario in a particular state and further inquiry is required to determine a consensus.

What is also important literature around auto theft are the strides in intelligence-led policing that have been made and achieved. Automatic license plate readers have changed the game in terms of detecting the presence of a stolen vehicle. There are various forms of these cameras, varying costs, varying associated programs, and various locations by which their mounted i.e., on a utility pole, vehicle, or other. Merola et al. (2019) explained, "...although technologies like LPR represent technological innovations, they may also yield unintended consequences, including the potential to undermine police-community relations if adoption decisions are not accompanied by sufficient transparency or community support" (p. 66). While the lack of trust is understood, these cameras are one of the best resources and defenses against car thieves.

These cameras local police employ scan license plates for unregistered license plates, stolen license plates, suspended license plates, felony vehicles, stolen vehicles, or National Crime Information Center information on wanted persons via a statewide and national database. In small departments with only a dozen or so police officers it is virtually impossible to be on every street at all times manually running every license plate for the prospect of a stolen vehicle. These cameras act as a force multiplier and provide crucial information about what a vehicle is wanted for and its direction of travel. These cameras in tandem all over the state provide timelines, locations, and paint a portrait of where these vehicles go especially with EZ pass hits. Given the reluctance and restriction on police pursuits these cameras offer the best opportunity to locate car thieves and get them outside their vehicles where they are able to be apprehended more easily.

From an organizational and leadership perspective where does or where should the blame lie or the buck stop? This explosion of car thefts was years in the making and New Jersey has undergone a few different attorney generals in this 5-year period and all of which maintained different views and implemented different policies. When one, or all, crimes increase, who should be taking responsibility? How do public officials and leaders manage something that may or may not be self-induced? There are many examples of crime increasing in various locations around the United States, should blame be placed especially given the staffing shortages of police officers nationwide? Leadership or lack thereof during a crime epidemic is an interesting avenue of exploration.

One of the most fascinating and best pieces of news despite the backdrop of surging auto theft is the interagency cooperation/intrastate cooperation that has taken place. Groups such as the Auto Theft Task Force in New Jersey is a dedicated team of police officers from various jurisdictions that work with partners from around the state and beyond to share information and solve auto crimes in the tri-state area. There are also various platforms by which law enforcement share information which only benefits the citizens of New Jersey. Further exploration and evaluation of how this group operates may serve as a blueprint for other areas in the nation that are struggling with beating back auto theft.

Auto theft in New Jersey has never really been handled that well as just over 10K cars have been stolen per year for the last several years. However, the perspectives of LE on criminal justice reforms and their impact on crime is an interesting approach to get insight from those on the ground. Far too often, criminal justice reforms focus on the “system”, what is this system? Every state has different laws, policies, procedures, that may or may not impact crime. It would be quite telling to understand police perspectives on crimes that are increasing or what they have done differently to stem the tide of crimes that are decreasing. Auto theft is up nationwide, how do police feel about that increase and what can be done?

It has been noted several times the prevalence of auto theft victimization versus that of carjacking or homicide, however, what is the public perspective/perception on increasing auto theft in New Jersey and beyond? Are New Jerseyans fearful they may be victimized as a product of an uptick in stolen vehicles? Is auto theft a problem that should

be better managed? Fear of victimization with violent crimes has been thoroughly studied and rightfully so, but citizen's take on property crimes is an avenue that requires further inquiry.

The blame game was evident in this study as both local news and public officials framed and placed blame for the increasing number of auto thefts in the state. Are insurance/car company/vehicle technologies to blame? Studies in the past by (Brill, 1982; Karmen, 1981) have placed that blame on those entities, but when people who leave the keys in their vehicles are being reimbursed, is there any incentive to not leave the keys in the vehicles? This total coverage is understood as policy holders pay hefty sums every month/year for insurance premiums, but it reinforces the notion of a victimless crime when victims are made whole no matter how many cars are stolen from them. Additionally, vehicles are stolen with and without the fobs inside. Vehicles without key fobs can still be driven and have been frequently stolen. Is this a design flaw and can it be improved?

One of the primary goals of this research was to showcase the connection to other violent crimes that stolen vehicles are involved in. Called the "catalyst of chaos" in this study, stolen vehicles have a hand in some of the most pernicious and violent crimes around the state. Crime is essentially displaced as it may be stolen from an affluent town and used in a shooting or homicide in another location. The need for reform to reduce stolen autos might be better received and perceived if that connection was better explained to the public. A study evaluating this link would be welcome insight into unclocking the severity of auto theft in the United States.

When the dust has settled, where does the true onus of increasing auto theft/impact of policy fall? This study offered but one explanation in an unexplored area of academia. Further insight is required to evaluate not only the same timeline but circumstances which led to this massive increase in stolen vehicles in New Jersey. Another single, multi, or comparative case study may be required where bail reform has also been implemented and the impact that has had on the commission or increase/decrease of other crimes, especially property crimes.

Kingdon's (1984, 2011) multiple streams framework was mentioned a few times throughout this study but was hardly a centerpiece in it. A policy window was observed to have taken place as policing policy was changed, auto theft increased, and public figures took notice as their constituents demanded action. In other words, a window was opened for new auto theft legislation to be crafted and finally given the attention it deserves. While lawmakers in New Jersey are still working on a joint-party solution, from a public policy perspective this represents how the following events will eventually lead to news legislation governing auto theft.

Implications for Social Change

Social change can be small scale or large scale and varies with every paper, project, or other. While most dissertations do not and should not attempt to reinvent the wheel, they are building blocks in construction. Thus, the more blocks, the more progress is made in completing the project. This research on the themes and patterns displayed by New Jersey-based media and public figures is one of the first blocks in the project's foundation. This specific frame of research has never been explored. What is being said

to the public and how crimes, specifically auto theft, are being represented and portrayed by local media and public figures impacts crime perceptions. The extent of that impact has yet to be fully investigated. The messages matter, the public deserves to be well informed with objective information that very well aid them in being victimized by a rising crime.

Trust in public and private institutions is vital to the republic. The media in this instance objectively reported auto theft as they relied heavily upon police information and public figures raised the alarm over auto theft as a worsening crime. Regardless of this objective reporting, the frequency at which auto theft was reported demonstrated a lack of interest in auto theft as a whole in comparison to rarer crimes such as homicide. Local news in this instance falls into the same trap that has been proven by other researchers where more attention is paid to crimes that the public is less likely to be a victim of.

The social change in this instance is that with proper representation of crime trends/property crimes, the public may alter their way of life to avoid being victimized. Auto theft in New Jersey is a business, and as such, operates 24/7/365. Meaning, car thieves are out everyday looking for vehicles to steal. More representation in local media, that the public historically trusts, may encourage people to lock their cars, or pull that fob from the center console before exiting the vehicle. Doing so may avoid a complete upending of someone's life as we are all heavily reliant upon our cars for everyday tasks. Lastly, accountability is paramount, if a historically stagnant crime is increasing, the public must know what is being done to curb it. More attention to less sensational but more frequent crimes may be of great benefit to everyone.

Conclusion

This exploratory single qualitative case study using thematic analysis was undertaken to understand the themes and patterns displayed by public officials and local news media on auto theft since the passage of bail reform and under the lens of cultivation theory. Significant changes to police practices, policy, and an increase in auto theft prompted the need for this study. Automobile theft and its subsequent reporting were on a decline prior to 2017 and up until 2020. The timeline tells a story of how auto theft began to increase in prominence and prevalence over time. Figure 6 displayed a timeline for the study.

Figure 6

Timeline for the Case Study



Note. Gottheimer, J. (2023). RELEASE: Gottheimer, DHS, NJ law enforcement convene auto theft & port security roundtable — Update on DHS efforts to combat interstate, international auto theft rings.

<https://gottheimer.house.gov/posts/release-gottheimer-dhs-nj-law-enforcement-convene-auto-theft-port-security-roundtable-update-on-dhs-efforts-to-combat-interstate-international-auto-theft-rings>

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Despite covid-19 auto theft numbers remained consistent and began to increase substantially in 2020. The attention paid to auto theft from a news articles frequency perspective was minimal to begin with and only began to increase as devastating predictions were made about auto thefts historic trajectory. This case study set the stage, explained the context, and provided statistics to reinforce how the policies that were implemented that may have led to this year's record number of auto thefts all while interpreting how local media and public figures treated and expressed their take on the issue.

Managing crime and rebalancing or recalibrating an imperfect criminal justice system is a daunting task. Bail reform was an ambitious and progressive measure to fix disparity in sentencing and prosecution but failed to address recidivism. These reforms taken together with reforms to police practices have an impact on the number of crimes committed. It is outside the scope of this study to evaluate bail reform's impacts on all crimes but in terms of auto theft, it appears that it may have encouraged the increase in auto theft. That connection must be evaluated even further to strengthen or dispel any assertion made in this study.

The messages offered by both local media and public officials were taken into account and measured for fear cultivation. No fear mongering or spreading was evident in any of the articles or direct quotes that were themed. There are certainly implications in terms of what crimes induce fear cultivation by the media or public officials. In this case, auto theft did not make the cut despite a major increase in frequency. Thematic analysis in this particular aim is well prepared to help set a stage a determine whether a topic is important to the public, news media, or public officials.

Auto theft is on the rise around the United States, auto theft rings are growing in prevalence, gangs routinely utilize stolen vehicles in the commission of violent crimes, and the transnational trade of stolen autos is running strong. Restricting the abilities of police to intervene, and of prosecutors to seek justice for recidivist auto thieves is not constructive in reducing auto theft in any capacity. Lastly, media has the unique ability and responsibility to bring a topic into the fold and shed light on its prevalence. In this instance, it was largely cast aside, and the frequency of auto theft articles compared to homicide articles demonstrate that. Auto theft is not going away and requires public and private partnerships to reign in this catalyst of chaos.

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