

# Framing Crime: How Partisan Media Reports on and Shapes Public Perception of Crime and Policing

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In today's polarized media landscape, news outlets do far more than merely report on crime and policing; they construct competing political narratives through framing and agenda-setting. These partisan portrayals do more than reflect ideological divides—they actively shape public perception.

American media as a whole, but especially local news, disproportionately focuses on crime: "Americans are more likely to get news and information about crime than about any other local topic except the weather" (Gramlich and Eddy 2024). However, perspectives on crime vary sharply depending on which outlets audiences consume. Media is inherently subjective; "objective news" is a myth. Journalistic practices, institutional biases, and societal influences all shape the narratives audiences receive (Wolfsfeld 2011). Conservative and liberal media use both framing and agenda-setting to very different effects and outcomes, with one of the most striking differences being how each frames the broader narrative of crime rates, public safety, and policing.

Conservative outlets such as Fox, The Daily Wire, and The New York Post often run stories amplifying the perception of rising crime to construct a narrative of societal breakdown that calls for stricter policing and legal policy. Liberal outlets, such as MSNBC, CNN, and Democracy Now, by contrast, tend to contextualize crime data within broader social or economic trends and urge reforms

rather than crackdowns. While this is a broad generalization, it is genuinely challenging to find fully neutral reporting in mainstream media, with a clear divide between liberal and conservative reporting. When searching the phrase "migrant crime," liberal-leaning outlets repeatedly use words such as "backlash," "mistake," and "unprecedented," whereas conservative-leaning outlets frequently use terms like "illegal," "crime," and "convicted." This reinforces the media's ability to craft narratives that play on emotion and guide audiences toward particular conclusions. This phenomenon resembles what scholars describe as partisan coverage filtering, where outlets emphasize different language, facts, and emotional frames based on political leanings (Broockman and Kalla 2023). As a result, audiences consuming news from opposite ends of the ideological spectrum can inhabit entirely different political realities.

The representation of police is another area where framing diverges sharply depending on the outlet's political leaning. Conservative news often portrays law enforcement as heroic defenders of order who are under attack from overreaching bureaucracies and social movements. This "thin blue line" narrative aligns with broader law-and-order political messaging and calls to defend law enforcement and expand police discretion (National Police Association 2025). Liberal media, by contrast, tend to be more skeptical of law enforcement and frequently highlight misconduct, systemic abuses, and accountability failures.

In the wake of the police killing of George Floyd and the subsequent nationwide protests, Fox News ran stories emphasizing destruction, clashes, and injuries to officers, including “Police Under Siege: Attacks on Law Enforcement in Wake of George Floyd’s Death” (Casiano 2020). CNN coverage, by contrast, documented what it described as a “violent and excessive” police response to protesters (Shoichet 2020). These articles, published just days apart in June 2020, demonstrate the media’s ability to frame the same events in dramatically different ways.

Politically framed media coverage correlates with electoral behavior and public opinion. In August 2020, the Council on Criminal Justice documented a stark partisan divide on support for major changes in policing, with only 14 percent of Republicans in favor compared to nearly 90 percent of Democrats (Council on Criminal Justice 2020). In their study of media persuasion, economists Stefano DellaVigna and Ethan Kaplan (2007) famously documented “The Fox News Effect,” finding that the introduction of Fox News into local cable markets increased Republican vote share and persuaded between 3 and 28 percent of non-Republican viewers to vote Republican in the 2000 election. This demonstrates the persuasive power of media framing in shaping political attitudes and electoral outcomes.

Political narratives about the causes of crime further expose partisan divides. Conservative media frequently attribute rising crime to progressive policies and efforts to defund the police, framing crime through a law-and-order lens (Wolfsfeld 2011). This message has been echoed by conservative political leaders, including former President Donald Trump, during his 2025 address to Congress, where

he blamed Democratic leaders for rising crime and referenced the death of Laken Riley.

Liberal outlets, conversely, often frame crime as a systemic issue rooted in structural inequality, poverty, and institutional failures. For example, following the death of Laken Riley, some left-leaning outlets emphasized immigration policy failures and court system shortcomings rather than focusing primarily on immigration status (Cevallos 2024).

National crime data complicate partisan narratives. FBI data show that violent crime has declined significantly, reaching a 20-year low (Gilder 2024). When media outlets frame crime through a partisan lens, they risk distorting complex social realities and discouraging bipartisan solutions (Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2025).

The 2024 election further illustrates how media framing shapes political priorities. Immigration and violent crime ranked among the top concerns for Republican voters (Pew Research Center 2024). During the campaign, Donald Trump repeatedly framed immigration as a driver of violent crime, a narrative amplified by right-leaning media. Fox News alone ran nearly 1,000 weekday segments in 2024 covering “migrant crime” (Gertz 2024). Yet empirical evidence suggests immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than U.S.-born citizens, and violent crime declined by 10.3 percent between 2023 and 2024.

Framing distortions are not exclusive to conservative media. During debates over drug decriminalization in San Francisco, some progressive outlets downplayed policy consequences and emphasized structural explanations (Bowles 2022). After the passage of Proposition 47, larceny rates rose

by 25 percent between 2014 and 2019 (California Department of Justice 2020). Similarly, overdose deaths in Portland rose sharply following Measure 110 (Oregon Health Authority 2023), though some progressive outlets framed the increase as primarily a failure of social safety nets (Herzlich 2024).

The disparities between empirical data and political messaging underscore the media's powerful agenda-setting role. Through framing, word choice, and emotional appeals, media outlets construct political agendas that shape policy debates on crime and policing. Americans are often not merely disagreeing on policy, but operating from different perceived realities. This polarization undermines public trust in journalism and deepens partisan divides. Recognizing the framing power of media is essential to navigating an increasingly polarized information environment.

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