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“Media Pressure is What Makes Law Enforcement Move”: Insights from Co-victims About the Positive Impacts of True Crime Media Attention

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ABSTRACT

The true crime genre, which focuses on real cases of harm told in an entertaining, narrative format, is enormously popular in the United States and abroad. While existing research has extensively explored true crime’s content, producers, and audience reception, one significant perspective remains overlooked: that of co-victims (i.e. the loved ones of individuals who are missing or have been victimized). To fill this gap, the researchers conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 20 co-victims. Each co-victim had experienced their loved one’s case being covered by true crime media. For this study, the researchers were interested in co-victims’ views on the positive (i.e. beneficial) impacts of true crime media attention. Co-victims noted three primary positive effects: They felt the genre could (a) bring needed attention to their loved ones’ (and other people’s) cases, (b) educate about criminal justice system issues, and (c) place pressure on criminal justice officials. Importantly, some respondents added important caveats to their responses, emphasizing that positive effects were dependent on the content being created ethically, factually, and with consent of co-victims.

Kristin Smart was 19, a first-year student at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, CA, when she went missing around 2 a.m. in May 1996 (Hauser, 2023). While police had interviewed the last person she had been seen with, he was never arrested or charged with a crime (Hauser, 2023). Her family declared her legally dead in 2002 but continued their fight for justice (Hauser, 2023). A missing person’s billboard featuring Kristin, offering a \$75,000 reward, had been visible for years, fading in the sun, and the media had stopped covering the case (Lambert, 2019).

Then, on September 29, 2019, a true crime podcast, *Your Own Backyard*, launched its first episode, changing the case’s trajectory (Lambert, 2019). By July 2023, the person last seen with Kristin had been prosecuted, convicted, and sentenced, bringing needed closure to the Smart family over 23 years after their daughter had gone missing (Storey, 2023). Chris Lambert, the host and producer of the podcast, described himself as someone with “almost no interest in true crime” and “a musician and recording engineer” (Storey, 2023, para. 5 & 8). Yet, the first episode of the podcast had over 75,000 downloads on the first day, and more than “24 million people had downloaded the podcast before the verdict was read” (Storey, 2023, para. 41).

After the sixth episode aired, the San Luis Obispo County Sheriff’s Department reached out to Lambert, wanting to talk (Storey, 2023). This relationship brought Sheriff Ian Parkinson new leads and evidence, helping to secure a court order that cracked the case (Bjorlo, 2021; Storey, 2023). Nate Paul,

the lead investigator in the Smart case from 2014 through 2017, was interviewed in episode 7 and described how much the podcast has meant to the case:

Officially, I think the greatest benefit to the podcast is the renewed interest it has cultivated in the case. You can't ask for anything else for a case that is older to have a vehicle that drives new interest because you never know when that interest will lead to additional information, maybe blow something wide open. So I think your podcast is extremely beneficial to the case. (Storey, 2023, para. 27)

After the verdict was read, Stan Smart, Kristin's father, spoke to the media and thanked the Sheriff's Department of San Luis Obispo as well as "... the selfless contributions of Chris Lambert, his *Your Own Backyard* podcast, which brought not only new information, and also the needed light for the attention during our darkest moments, sharing Kristin's voice and story" (2022, 0:22).

Your Own Backyard is just one example of true crime media that has brought attention to a cold case, educated audiences about the inner workings of the criminal justice system, pressured and/or worked with officials to right a wrong, and made a difference in co-victims' lives. True crime also attracts audiences, holding 24% of the top-ranked podcast positions (Naseer, 2023), and wins industry awards, including the Golden Globes (*Dahmer-Monster*, 2023), Emmys (Coates, 2022), and Peabody awards ("*Believed* wins 2018 Peabody Award," 2019; Serial, 2014). True crime productions have also been mentioned in court documents (Rankin & Halicks, 2016; Syed v. Maryland, 2016) and have been used by innocence projects to overturn wrongful convictions ("About | Undisclosed Podcast," n.d.).

While prior research has explored many aspects of true crime media, the purpose of this study is to explore how true crime media is helping co-victims find answers, build community, and progress toward closure. Specifically, the researchers hoped to answer the following research question: What do co-victims view to be the positive impacts of true crime? In other words, what are the benefits of true crime media coverage, according to co-victims? Through in-depth interviews with friends and family members of those covered in true crime, we demonstrate how co-victims, and to an extent, society, comes to depend on true crime media to address issues restricting "justice for all" (Augustyn, 2024). In particular, this work explores the impact of true crime media on co-victims, using the media dependency theory framework (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) to examine the tripartite relationship between media, audiences, and society. This study demonstrates that the complex and interconnected relationship between the true crime genre, society, and co-victims can be a force for change in the media industry and society as a whole.

Literature review

In this study, we define *co-victims* as family members and loved ones of those who have experienced violent victimization and/or are missing. In their work, Miranda et al. (2003) referred to co-victims as people related to victims, while Yardley et al. (2017) used the term *secondary victims* to describe those related to victims and/or perpetrators of crime. To date, there is little academic work on how co-victims are impacted by true crime coverage of their loved ones' stories and their views of the genre as a whole (Slakoff et al., 2024). While some co-victims may seek media attention to share their loved ones' stories or to pursue justice (Cherry, 2021), others have described feeling traumatized by sensational reporting surrounding their loved one's death (Riches & Dawson, 1998; Rinear, 1988). It is important to center co-victims' experiences because co-victims struggle with immense grief in the aftermath of violent crime (Connolly & Gordon, 2014; Slakoff et al., 2024). Indeed, co-victims are vulnerable and often in a hypervigilant state when their loved one is harmed or disappears (Hertz et al., 2005; Rock, 1998a), and it is important to understand the impact of true crime media on their experiences.

Scholars have argued for decades that co-victims have a unique perspective (Rock, 1998a; Yardley et al., 2017). In addition to the trauma of the event, co-victims have had very little time to prepare for conversations with the media, and many cede control of the narrative to officials almost immediately (Rock, 1998a, 1998b; Yardley et al., 2017). This study responds to Yardley et al.'s (2017) belief that

“engaging with secondary victims will be an important aspect of future inquiry” (p. 490). In their work, they specifically call for qualitative research focused on co-victims’ “reasons for engaging with newer media” (p. 490).

The true crime genre and media dependency theory

The true crime genre dates back to the 16th century when pamphlets and ballads were the primary mediums (Burger, 2016). Some scholars even argue that the first true crime story was in *The Holy Bible* when Cain killed his brother Abel in Genesis 4 (Punnett, 2018). Of course, technology has advanced significantly since the genre was created, and true crime has seen a resurgence due to new media (Burger, 2016). Even early true crime mentioned co-victims (New International Version Bible, 2011, Gen. 4; Rule, 1980). Today, the genre’s focus remains on a true story of a crime in a narrative format—one that is typically victim-centric and told in the past tense (Punnett, 2018). The 2014 podcast *Serial* notably shifted focus to the voice of the accused, potentially altering the genre toward a more perpetrator-centric perspective. In recent years, certain popular documentaries have veered toward glorifying perpetrators, sparking ethical debates within the industry (Proulx, 2024).

The convergence of media, audience, and societal change is the core of media dependency theory and influences the true crime genre. The main argument of media dependency theory is that the media, societal systems, and the audience depend on each other via shared resources to reach goals and enact change in a social context (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). This “tripartite audience-media-society relationship is assumed to most directly determine many of the effects that the media have on people and society” (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p. 3). In a complex society, people have less contact with the systems that are in place, making them dependent on the media for information (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Specifically, scholars have proposed that co-victims depend on the media in unique ways by expecting the media to provide “stature to their loss” and support their belief that their tragedy is worthy of outrage (Rock, 1998b, p. 86). Yardley et al. (2017) argues that newer media “represent a shift in providing opportunities to express alternative narratives to those in existing mediated representations of homicide” (p. 489). Moreover, they note that it is not just traditional media that audiences depend on for information, and newer media spaces can bypass the official systems, solidifying a sense of an underground media-audience-societal change relationship (Yardley et al., 2017).

Related to the true crime genre, people (the audience) are not always aware when the criminal justice system fails in its promise to “uphold the rule of law, to keep our country safe, and to protect civil rights” (Department of Justice, 2014; “Our Mission” section). True crime media is designed to entertain, educate, and encourage activism (Boling, 2019; Sherrill, 2023). Incorporating true crime media into the tripartite relationship described in media dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) means that the audience depends on the media—in this case, true crime—to educate them on societal injustice. Then, they can take action to remedy the issue (solve a crime, pass a law, vote for a new sheriff, etc.), creating societal change. It also means that co-victims can depend on the media to shine a light on their personal situation, generate audience interest, and incite change (Rock, 1998b).

Prior scholars have demonstrated dependency on media in several contexts, including local power relations (Chen et al., 2017), public support for the press and president (Hindman, 2004), changing environmental behaviors (Ho et al., 2015), weather disasters (Kim et al., 2023), and even terrorist attacks (Lowrey, 2004). In this study, we demonstrate that co-victims depend on the reach of the media to draw attention to their stories and cause societal change. Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) argue that “dependency is defined as a relationship in which the satisfaction of needs or the attainment of goals by one party is contingent upon the resources of another party” (p. 6). As we have increasingly become a mobile, technology-connected society, sharing something on social media can reach more people than posting a flyer on a tree in a town square. Since some true crime productions have millions

of followers (Anderson, 2023; Schneider, 2016), sharing a story with an established audience can lead to even greater change.

The concept of “the greater the need, the stronger the dependency” applies in various ways to true crime media (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p. 6). Co-victims often turn to true crime media to share their experiences, seeking closure (Yardley et al., 2017). Additionally, lawmakers may leverage true crime narratives to build support for legislation, and law enforcement may utilize media to aid in solving cold cases or locating missing persons. This dynamic is not one-sided; the criminal justice system seeks resolution, co-victims desire closure, and media outlets aim for audience engagement to drive advertising revenue. While conflicts may naturally arise, synergistic success is also possible. The reliance on media intensifies during times of significant societal change and conflict (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976, p. 6), and true crime shifts with larger cultural shifts (Horeck, 2019; Slakoff, 2022). True crime media exists at the nexus of change and conflict in society, generating active audiences and producers.

True crime as watchdog journalism

Watchdog journalism is “a specific form of investigative journalism that shines a light on systemic abuses of power” (Ostini, n.d. “What is watchdog journalism?” section). For example, the media is believed to have embraced the mantle of watchdog during the Vietnam War to hold politicians accountable (Hallin, 1984). In 2013, 68% of Americans believed that the press served as a watchdog, preventing leaders from abusing their power (“Amid criticism,” 2013). As of 2020, 73% of Americans believed it important for journalists to serve as watchdogs (Jurkowitz & Mitchell, 2020). The concept of watchdog journalism is not part of the First Amendment, although the term is included in the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics (Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics, 2014; U.S. Const. amend. I). Specifically, the SPJ Code of Ethics states that journalists should “recognize a special obligation to serve as watchdogs over public affairs and government” (*Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics*, 2014, para. 3).

Journalists have received prestigious awards for watchdog investigatory efforts for decades, such as *The Boston Globe* for public service in exposing sexual abuse by Catholic priests (The Pulitzer Prizes, 2003), *The Washington Post* for uncovering the Watergate case (The Pulitzer Prizes, 1973), *The New York Times* for reporting on sexual assault allegations of influential media producers (The Pulitzer Prizes, 2018), the *Indianapolis Star* for exposing the sexual abuse of U.S. gymnasts by Larry Nassar (News Leaders Association, 2018), and the *Serial* podcast for its “damning attack on disturbing flaws in the justice system” (Peabody, 2014).

Not all true crime is produced by journalists, and not all crime journalism is true crime. It is important to note that while the true crime genre has served as a watchdog, helping solve cases (Turnbull, 2022), overturn wrongful convictions (Yesko, 2020), and find missing people (McHugh, 2023), that does not make it watchdog journalism. However, the concept of watchdog journalism is important to this study because many true crime productions are investigatory and watchdog in nature, attempting to hold those in power accountable. Prior research has demonstrated that true crime producers (journalists and non-journalists) often see their role as advocates investigating abuses of power, focusing not just on specific cases “but systemic issues,” fitting the definition of watchdog (Sherrill, 2023, p. 104). Specific to this study, co-victims have used true crime to put pressure on law enforcement, and some true crime productions have been open in their criticism of how cases were handled and who is responsible (Boling, 2019; Peterson, 2019). Again, this tripartite relationship between audience-media-society can be seen as dependent on using media for societal change.

Using true crime to generate change

Importantly, the audience, producers, and criminal justice system may use true crime media for their benefit. The true crime audience has been shown to be engaged and responsive to requests for help

from producers (Boling, 2019). In addition to engaging with producers, audience members and co-victims frequently become producers themselves (Scott, 2023), and the criminal justice system has used true crime productions to leak case information to develop new leads (Storey, 2023). New media like podcasts and YouTube channels have created a low barrier to entry for audience members turned producers, and many have begun to develop their own true crime productions to keep cases prominent in the media (Mind over Murder, n.d.). Prior scholarship has demonstrated that some producers of true crime see themselves as advocates fighting for change, while others still hesitate to use the term due to their journalistic roots (Sherrill, 2023).

Uses and Gratifications Theory has been used in mass communication scholarship since the 1940s (Herzog, 1944), and has shown how audiences use daytime serial programs (Herzog, 1944), reality television shows (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007), television in general (Rubin, 1983, 1984), the internet (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000), and more. It is important to remember that when scholars examine why the audience uses the media, they are looking at both gratifications sought and gratifications gained (Rayburn, 1996). For example, a co-victim might create a true crime production specifically to keep their loved one's case in the media. But in addition to gaining media attention, they may solve the case, lead activist groups in legislative action, and connect with other families experiencing grief.

Audience members moving from listener, to participator, to producer are a strong example of another key component of uses and gratifications theory—that of an active audience (Rubin, 1984). However, the true crime audience goes beyond active participation in the media they consume. Audience members who are co-victims can use the media to create change in their own lives and potentially in the lives of others. This combination of an active audience, using the media in unique ways to drive societal change, the potential for watchdog journalism (or citizen journalism with watchdog intent), and a dependent, tripartite relationship makes the true crime genre unique.

The current study

Prior academic work on true crime has focused on the content (Slakoff, 2022, 2023), the producers (Boling, 2019; Sherrill, 2023), and why audiences interact with the genre (Boling, 2023; Boling & Hull, 2018). Relatively little work has centered on co-victims' thoughts or experiences with the true crime genre (Slakoff et al., 2024). As part of a larger data collection effort, the researchers examined co-victims' perceptions of true crime media coverage surrounding their loved ones' victimization or missingness. Specifically, co-victims were asked questions about multiple aspects of the true crime ecosystem, including the ethics of the genre, the positive and negative impacts of true crime attention, and their experiences with true crime content creators. For this study, which is the first to be published from this data, the researchers focused specifically on co-victims' beliefs surrounding the positive impact of true crime. In other words, the researchers were interested in co-victims' views on the beneficial aspects of true crime media coverage. While co-victims experience negative effects, this paper instead focuses on the synergistic success of the audience-media-producer relationships and how true crime media is being used to impact positive societal change and help co-victims.

Method

Study design

In this study, the researchers utilized a qualitative research methodology with in-depth semi-structured interviews of 20 co-victims. In order to qualify for the study, an individual's loved one's story had to be covered by some sort of true crime media outlet (e.g., documentaries, podcasts, television shows, books, etc.). The authors aimed to interview co-victims with diverse and varying experiences related to true crime. The researchers asked all participants the same primary questions using an interview guide (Taylor, 2005). Importantly, semi-structured interviews are flexible, and the

Table 1. Sixteen named participants (in alphabetical order).

Name of Co-Victim	Relation to Victim or Missing Person
Jan Canty	Wife of homicide victim Alan Canty
Jenny Carrieri	Twin sister of homicide victim Jody LeCornu
Eric Carter-Landin	Brother of homicide victim Jacob Landin
Amy Chesler	Daughter of homicide victim Hadas Winnick
Jessika Gaehring	Fiancée of homicide victim Austin Utley
Kim Goldman	Sister of homicide victim Ron Goldman
Diane Kloepper	Half-sister of <i>Jane Doe</i> killed by her father
Lawrence (<i>Requested Researchers Use His First Name Only</i>)	Lawrence's loved one was killed by their partner in an assault
Carmen Lodato	Daughter of homicide victim Ruthanne Lodato
Madison McGhee	Daughter of homicide victim John Cornelius McGhee
Julie Murray	Sister of missing woman Maura Murray
Terra Newell	Daughter of domestic violence victim Debra Newell; Direct survivor of the same perpetrator
Paulette Norman	Mother of homicide victim Samuel McKay Everett (who went by McKay)
John Palmer	Husband of Katie Palmer, who was fatally struck by a driver while out walking
David Robinson II	Father of missing man Daniel Robinson
Bill Thomas	Brother of homicide victim Cathleen "Cathy" Thomas

researchers sometimes asked follow-up questions based on the participants' responses (Kallio et al., 2016).

The protocols for this study were approved by the Institutional Review Board of both authors' universities (California State University, Sacramento on July 14, 2023 [IRB Number: Cayuse-22–23–17]; University of Nebraska-Lincoln on August 1, 2023 [IRB Number: 20230522807EX]). All interviews took place on Zoom between September and December 2023, and participants orally consented to participate and to have their interviews recorded for transcription purposes. Over half of the participants were interviewed by both researchers, while some were interviewed one-on-one. All participants were offered a \$100.00 USD Amazon gift card as compensation for their participation in the study. The funding for these gift cards was provided by a faculty research award from the Mass Communication and Society Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Interviews ranged from 31 minutes to one hour and 42 minutes, with an average of 65.8 minutes.

At the time of the interview, all participants were provided the option to use a pseudonym for the write-up of results; however, 19 of 20 participants elected to use their full real names, and one chose to use their first name only. The Findings section below includes the names of 16 participants. All 16 named participants were provided the first version of the manuscript submitted for peer review, and all signed a written Consent to Publish form. The quoted material in the Findings section did not change after revision. Please see Table 1 for a chart of the named participants and their relation to a victim or missing person.

Recruitment of participants & participant profile

Participants—in this case, co-victims—were primarily recruited through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a common recruitment method for hard-to-reach populations (Valerio et al., 2016), and is influenced by the researchers' already existing networks (Parker et al., 2019). Both authors had previously connected with co-victims through prior academic work examining true crime media and media interviews surrounding the genre. These primary contacts (often called *seeds* in snowball sampling; see Parker et al., 2019) served as a starting point for the study. The seed participants were interviewed, and they provided the researchers with the names of other co-victims they believed might be willing to participate. After interviewing their connections, the researchers then asked those contacts if they would be willing to connect us with other co-victims following a chain-referral method (Valerio et al., 2016). In addition to snowball sampling from these contacts, the authors occasionally

reached out directly to co-victims who had been vocal online in their search for media coverage or about the damage done by media coverage of their loved one's case. All initial contacts were made via online communication, either via e-mail or a direct message on social media.

Participants ranged in age from 28 to 73 ($M = 48$), and 15 of 20 participants identified as White. Thirteen participants were women, and seven were men. Almost all participants are immediate family members of the victim or missing person, including parents/stepparents, full/half siblings, children, and partners/spouses of those harmed or missing. One participant is the best friend of the missing person. Importantly, some co-victims experienced the loss/harm of their loved ones at the hands of another family member (i.e., via domestic/family violence). Further, some participants are both direct survivors of harm and co-victims.

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded via Zoom and transcribed using Rev.com. With the transcribed interview data, the two researchers conducted a thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Riger et al., 2015). Thematic analysis (TA) tasks the researchers with “systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insights into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). In other words, the goal of TA is to uncover, categorize, and explain the patterns and themes that emerge from participant responses. Moreover, the purpose of TA is to examine themes relevant to particular research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In this case, the researchers were interested in co-victims' beliefs surrounding the benefits of true crime media attention.

In order to analyze the data, the two researchers first separately read and re-read the transcripts. This reading and re-reading ensured that both researchers were familiar with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The researchers then separately generated initial codes related to the benefits of true crime. The researchers then met via Zoom and compared their initial codes, and they verified that they coded the data similarly. Together, the researchers considered which initial codes fell into broader themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), a theme represents a patterned response related to the research question, and themes are generated by considering which codes cluster together and “share some unifying feature” (p. 63). Ultimately, the two researchers agreed upon the three key themes found in the data related to the benefits of true crime.¹ In order to quality check the TA (Braun & Clarke, 2012), the first author then re-read all the transcripts and verified that all data was appropriately sorted into the key themes. Below, the researchers report on the key themes across the interview data related to the benefits of true crime.

Findings

When discussing the positive (i.e., beneficial) impacts of true crime, three clear themes emerged from the interview data. Specifically, co-victims commonly shared that true crime media can bring much-needed attention to criminal and missing persons cases, help educate the masses about issues with the criminal legal system, and place pressure on criminal justice officials. Below, we discuss each theme.

True crime can bring much-needed attention to criminal/missing persons cases

Participants frequently noted that true crime can bring needed attention to criminal and missing persons cases. This attention could provide fresh eyes on these cases and could possibly even lead to these cases/disappearances being solved. When asked about the positive effects of true crime attention, Bill Thomas, brother of homicide victim Cathleen (Cathy) Thomas, said:

¹The coders' choice to convene following the initial coding phase and collaboratively categorize preliminary codes into overarching themes aligns with the method advocated by O'Connor and Joffe (2020) for ensuring intercoder reliability in qualitative research.

Well, I think this is true for our case and thousands of others across the country. True crime media is incredibly helpful if you're trying to attract attention and community involvement to your loved one's case. . . . If you stop talking about your loved one's case, I can tell you from personal experience, it will die. It will go away. [The positive is] that true crime media has created an opportunity for families like ours to get out there and speak about and build community awareness of their loved one's case.

Cathy was one of eight people murdered 37 years ago in Virginia (Hope, 2019). Bill has actively sought true crime coverage and now hosts his own podcast (Fox, 2024; Sison, 2024). He has been vocal in his criticism of law enforcement (Federico, 2024; Fox, 2024; Sison, 2024) and has been open about seeking closure to the case (Fox, 2024; Sison, 2024). Bill's actions demonstrate an active audience (Rubin, 1984), one that depends on true crime media to bring attention to their loved one's case and encourage cooperation from law enforcement (Fox, 2024; Sison, 2024).

Eric Carter-Landin, brother of homicide victim Jacob Landin, noted that "true crime, because there is such a large audience out there, it could really do wonders for awareness on cases, especially cases like Jacob's, where there's not a lot of media coverage on it." Eric is another example of a co-victim who has now become a producer of his own true crime podcast ("About True Consequences," n.d.). By mentioning that the "large audience" can "really do wonders for awareness" when there is little traditional media coverage, he is demonstrating belief in the media's ability to advocate, specifically in relation to how the audience can bring needed attention to cases and possibly influence law enforcement response.

Several other participants also mentioned true crime media bringing vital attention to cases. Jenny Carrieri, twin sister of homicide victim Jody LeCornu, referred to the 2017 film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, a film about a mother trying to solve her daughter's unsolved killing: "I always go back to that line from the *Three Billboards*: The more you keep the case in the public eye, the better chances you are of getting it solved." Kim Goldman, sister of homicide victim Ron Goldman, similarly noted, "I think probably the positive would be around cold cases and the attention that cold cases get."

Julie Murray, sister of missing woman Maura Murray, also noted the positive impact of true crime media attention:

Well, it's unrivaled in bringing awareness to cold cases. And what solves cold cases are two things, leads and awareness, and they go hand in hand. If there is no awareness, there's no new leads coming in. So to warm up a cold case, you need those two elements. And so the family is desperate to get any sort of attention to their loved one's cases.

Similarly, David Robinson II, father of missing man Daniel Robinson, stated that for a missing person's case, "it's a lifeline where you can get the story out there." Describing the media as an unparalleled "lifeline" illustrates a profound reliance on (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) and clear use of (Rubin, 1984) true crime media by co-victims aiming to impact the outcomes of their loved ones' cases. True crime media attention can be a "lifeline" for victims and their families.

John Palmer, husband of Katie Palmer, who died after a driver struck Katie and John while they were out on a walk together, noted that "Katie's story and our fight gets amplified with every single person that listens to the podcasts, that joins our group, that interacts with us, that shares her story." Describing their search for justice and closure as a "fight" that "gets amplified" by the media shows how active the co-victims in the audience see themselves and how much they depend on the media to garner support for, and interest in, their cases.

Lawrence, whose loved one was killed by their partner in an assault, requested the researchers only use his first name. His use of the word "obviously" demonstrates that bringing awareness to cases is a widely understood benefit of true crime media. He commented:

Well, if the case is unsolved, then obviously it brings awareness to that case and can bring witnesses forward or new information, and that's really what most people are looking for or seeking when they participate, I believe, if their case is unsolved.

Across participants, it was clear that co-victims felt true crime could provide needed attention to their loved ones' (and other) cases and that they depend on this attention for potential closure and/or societal change (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Importantly, however, while co-victims regularly cited this attention as a benefit of true crime coverage, several participants also included important stipulations about the production. In other words, while co-victims described raising awareness of cases as a strength of the genre, they acknowledged that not all true crime is of the same quality or impact. For example, Julie Murray said, "I think, *when done responsibly*, true crime is a very, very powerful resource and can be used for good" (emphasis added by researchers). Diane Kloepfer, whose half-sister (currently a Jane Doe) was killed by her father, said, "I think it can bring positive attention. It can help solve cases *if it's done correctly*, but whenever it brings out any sort of attention to it it's going to bring the crazy people" (emphasis added by researchers). Jessika Gaehring, fiancée of homicide victim Austin Utley, said:

It's good when it's a platform for the family when the family wants to participate. They're not forced to participate or their stories told without their consent, then that's not good. But when the family wants to participate or they need their story out there or somebody's missing and they need that information shared, there is nothing better than all the desk detectives, a group of them trying to find clues and missing people.

The focus of this study is not on co-victims' views on the ethics of true crime nor the negative effects of the genre; however, these important caveats about the production are integral to understanding co-victims' often complex relationships with true crime. While they use and depend on true crime media to generate progress and attention (either with their case or the criminal justice system in general), they do not see all true crime as created equal. They depend on the media, but they want to retain control of their own story and want true crime to be created with their consent.

True crime can educate about issues within the criminal justice system

Another common theme in co-victims' interviews was the power of true crime to educate and inform people about issues within the criminal justice system. For example, Bill Thomas stated:

I think the justice system in the United States is pretty badly broken at this point and needs a tremendous amount of overhaul. . . . I think that true crime media can definitely be part of that conversation in helping to tee up those issues.

Carmen Lodato, daughter of homicide victim Ruthanne Lodato, similarly stated, "The industry could shed light on the corruption and the racial profiling and all of the messed-up stuff that goes down with policing and the justice system, to try and make it even for everybody." These participants are demonstrating true crime's ability to showcase the reality of the justice system. Specifically, the media can educate the audience and create awareness that might drive social or criminal justice change.

Paulette Norman, mother of homicide victim Samuel McKay Everett (who went by McKay), noted that true crime should call attention to criminal justice issues: "If something didn't go right with the case, I think that we owe that to the viewer to go, 'This case was probably not handled as well as it should have been.'" Jan Canty, wife of homicide victim Alan Canty, felt that true crime could help expose issues surrounding prosecutorial immunity: "The shenanigans that go on are blatant, and they're shielded from the repercussions unlike any other person in this country." When discussing a particular podcast, Kim Goldman noted:

So it highlighted inequities, it highlighted injustice, it highlighted where we have flaws, and that's just one [podcast] of a ton that do that. And so I do think that there is a positive outcome, again, if done in a way that is appropriate, responsible, legit, fact-based. And if it brings attention and gets people talking and highlights where the breakdown is, and if that results in change and movement, then yeah, I'm all for that.

In other words, co-victims felt that true crime's ability to highlight flaws in the criminal justice system is an important benefit of the genre.

We asked participants about whether true crime could advocate for those incarcerated. Many participants responded specifically about people who were wrongfully accused or convicted. Madison McGhee, daughter of homicide victim John Cornelius McGhee, said, “I think that there’s a level of exposing the system. If someone goes to prison and they are wrongfully convicted, journalism can be used to call out the system that wrongfully convicted this person, identify why, and prevent it from happening again.” This idea of “exposing the system” demonstrates that co-victims understand the power of the media beyond their own case and that those who are wrongfully incarcerated can also be victims of the justice system. Without that exposure and producers serving as watchdogs by “call[ing] out the system,” audience members may not understand the issues within the justice system.

Eric Carter-Landin explained that some true crime content is already dedicated to focusing on wrongful convictions:

And there are people out there that are doing that, that are looking at those who are wrongfully accused, which I think also is still advocating for justice because the wrong person incarcerated is not justice for the family. It is injustice for the family and that person who was wrongly accused. So it’s almost like a double injustice in that situation.

Terra Newell, daughter of domestic violence victim Debra Newell and direct survivor of the same perpetrator, also described the injustice of wrongful conviction: “I think that it’s important to advocate for the wrongfully convicted because they are survivors in another way.” In sum, participants commonly referred to true crime’s ability to draw attention to criminal justice-related issues, including that of wrongful convictions.

True crime can place pressure on criminal justice officials

Another common theme in co-victims’ interviews was the idea that true crime can place pressure on criminal justice officials, including law enforcement, attorneys, etc. Some participants experienced true crime placing pressure on law enforcement firsthand. David Robinson II, whose son Daniel is still missing, noted how powerful true crime is:

We say, “Hey law enforcement, you need to pay attention to this, you need to do this. Can you do the search or whatever?” And when you get these people from the true crime community raining down on them, it makes them move the needle up a little bit. Every time we reach out to the community, they’ll do something, help write these letters or whatever, and they’ll get law enforcement to start doing a little bit more, a little bit more, a little bit more. And next thing you know, you have gotten law enforcement to do a whole lot.

David is describing the true crime audience as a “community.” True crime audience members were willing to write letters to law enforcement, which demonstrates a strong relationship between co-victims and the audience. Further, David wanted more engagement from law enforcement, and the true crime audience helped him achieve this goal. In this way, some true crime consumers may also be active engagers—working to help co-victims reach their goals. Similarly, Julie Murray, whose sister Maura is still missing, noted that law enforcement acts once the media gets involved:

I’ve gone and done independent evidence searching, independent cadaver dogs, independent, all kinds of stuff, digs, and presented to law enforcement a packet of the results, and they sit on it. And it is only when we go to the media and say, here’s what we’ve done, and we’ve paid for independently as a family, and the law enforcement will not act. And the minute it gets put out, all of a sudden, law enforcement comes out with a statement. So media pressure is what makes law enforcement move.

Later in the interview, Julie Murray reinforced her views about media pressure, stating, “If there’s no media pressure, public officials can just sit back and they won’t act. And when you’ve got podcasts, and YouTubers, and articles, and blogs out there, it’s going to force public officials to be held accountable.” Julie Murray is describing media pressure as a necessity because public officials may not act without it. Indeed, several participants described frustration with the lack of response/engagement from law enforcement.

Paulette Norman spoke about a development in the investigation of her son McKay's death. A local attorney told Norman, "The reason you are getting the attention you are getting and they have opened a cold case review is because of your involvement with the media and with television, with your podcast, with the documentary, and with the books you've written." Amy Chesler, daughter of homicide victim Hadas Winnick, said that she received a response from the district attorney (DA) when she emailed from her media company's e-mail address: "As soon as I sent that e-mail with the [redacted company name] on my title he wrote back to me immediately." She continued, "I saw the DA in my own experience become pressured to respond when he realized the media was involved." The district attorney's immediate response to a media e-mail address shows that criminal justice actors understand the significance of media coverage.

John Palmer noted that the true crime community helped create pressure on people involved in his wife's death investigation: "I don't think if we had the collective community that we had, I don't know if the DA would pay attention to us, and I don't know if DPS would either. I don't know if we get the meeting with the chief of the Texas Highway Patrol that came up here." Palmer also described the true crime audience as a "community" that helped place pressure on criminal justice actors and showed gratitude for their involvement in his wife's case. Eric Carter-Landin noted:

I do think that true crime can be a lever that is used to build momentum towards applying pressure to law enforcement and to elected officials in order to get them to do their job, especially when they are being negligent in that job.

Eric's use of the word "lever" shows that true crime media coverage is just one mechanism for getting attention on criminal or missing person's cases. However, the utilization of "lever" also implies that the media plays a crucial role in initiating momentum substantial enough to influence law enforcement and/or elected officials.

Madison McGhee explained that she wanted her podcast *Ice Cold Case* about her father's death to place pressure on law enforcement: "I mean, I made my podcast so that people would share it enough that Belmont County would be like, 'This is so annoying. I guess we have to look into this again.'" Importantly, some co-victims spoke about the tension between them and criminal justice officials' post-media attention. One participant stated that a federal law enforcement officer told them to "dial it down" on the negative media interviews, and another person said the District Attorney told the victim's mom to "call off her jihad." These comments by law enforcement show that co-victims' media use can put pressure on law enforcement and elicit a response.

Discussion

Across co-victim interviews, some key themes emerged surrounding the positive effects of true crime media attention. Co-victims noted that true crime can: (a) bring needed attention to their loved ones' (and other people's) cases, (b) educate about criminal justice system issues, and (c) place pressure on criminal justice officials. Importantly, some respondents included caveats with their responses—noting that positive effects were only applicable if the content was created in an ethical, fact-based manner and with co-victims' consent.

One of the primary benefits of true crime attention is bringing awareness to criminal or missing persons cases. Indeed, there have been examples of true crime helping to solve—or bring investigative movement to—criminal or missing persons cases (The Associated Press, 2021; Storey, 2023; Zuvela, 2023). At its best, true crime can be used as a tool to generate leads and possibly even aid in case closure. Many participants noted that the true crime community (audience members) were helpful in sustaining interest in their loved ones' stories or placing increased pressure on criminal justice actors. Indeed, co-victims have found true crime media to be an effective method to draw attention to their loved ones and to keep their cases in the public eye, demonstrating co-victims' dependency on the media in their pursuit of justice (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). As such, it is imperative that true crime content producers think critically about

which stories could benefit from widespread (or further) attention. For example, cold cases and missing persons cases may be more important to cover than solved cases involving long-convicted killers. Furthermore, stories of marginalized victims and missing people could benefit from increased true crime coverage (Slakoff & Duran, 2023).

Participants also noted that true crime can draw attention to issues within the criminal justice system, including that of wrongful convictions/accusations. Moreover, more than 70% of Americans feel that journalists should act as watchdogs (Jurkowitz & Mitchell, 2020). Arguably, journalism and true crime can and should serve as a check on systems, and these participant responses provide hope that true crime, when created ethically, can serve as a check on the criminal justice system, even if it is not produced by journalists. Importantly, extant research on co-victims of crime found that many feel unsupported by the criminal justice system (Reed & Caraballo, 2022; Thompson et al., 1996), so true crime's ability to reveal criminal justice issues is an important positive of the genre. Indeed, true crime can create some accountability for people harmed by the criminal justice system and can educate the masses.

From the perspective of co-victims, true crime media's ability to place pressure on criminal justice officials is a key positive outcome of the genre. Simply put, some co-victims felt that the media was a tool to place pressure on law enforcement and other criminal justice actors. The co-victims we spoke to describe using the media and the audience to influence criminal cases and, more broadly, societal change, benefiting themselves as well as others. This use of the media is unique and demonstrates the tripartite relationship of media dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Moreover, some members of the true crime community may not only passively consume the content but also help co-victims in their goal(s) of increased media attention, law enforcement pressure, letter-writing campaigns, etc. Put another way, some members of the true crime community are active engagers, willing to assist co-victims with their goals, reflecting the active audience that uses and gratifications theory calls for (Rubin, 1984). Importantly, many co-victims depend on the use of true crime media to drive systemic change and to place pressure on criminal justice actors; this is a crucial and unique benefit of the genre and reveals the ways co-victims utilize true crime.

Indeed, recognizing some of the co-victims we spoke to as both producers and audience members adds more depth to this study. As several of the co-victims we interviewed have launched their own podcasts, their reliance on media has deepened—as a means of generating leads for their cases (and others) and a way to foster camaraderie with fellow true crime podcasters. This has intensified the tripartite relationship between co-victims, media, and the audience (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). This dynamic illustrates not only the active audience that uses and gratifications theory describes, but also demonstrates co-victims' dependency on an active audience (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; Rubin, 1984).

While co-victims can be both producers and audience members, it is the audience as a whole that drives the dependency on the media. As Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur argued, “the greater the need, the stronger the dependency” (1976, p. 3). The desperation some of our participants described when fighting to keep their loved one's case in the media spotlight showed a great need and strong dependency on the media. Without the larger audience sharing their loved ones' (and others') stories, calling politicians, writing letters, and fighting for justice, the co-victims may feel as if they are shouting into the void. This active, large audience is what drives the media dependency of the producer and co-victims (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; Rubin, 1984). Some co-victims rely on the audience to advocate for their loved ones and their cases—to attract traditional media coverage and put pressure on law enforcement.

Although the negative impacts of the genre are not discussed in this study, it is important to note that several participants included important stipulations about the production of true crime in their responses about the genre's positive impacts. While participants noted the benefits of true crime, co-victims also acknowledged the importance of true crime being created ethically and in a victim-centered format. As mentioned, many of the co-victims we spoke to for this study have produced their own true crime media, either to help their own case and/or to assist others. Co-victims' creating their

own true crime content demonstrates that they are dependent on the media as a watchdog (even if it is not created by journalists) and recognize the genre's ability to create change or build momentum.

Limitations and directions for future research

While this data collection effort sought to center co-victims' views on true crime, an important gap in the literature, the study is not without limitations. First, one of the limitations of snowball sampling is that participants are connected to the researchers and/or seed participants, which can limit the generalizability of the study (Parker et al., 2019). However, snowball sampling is especially powerful when centering vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups (Parker et al., 2019), and the researchers endeavored to interview a sizable sample ($N=20$) in order to encompass diverse perspectives. However, future research in the field should consider alternative sampling methodologies.

Second, our sample of co-victims is predominantly White, despite Black people having higher homicide victimization rates (Lo et al., 2013; U. S. Const. amend I. Violence Policy Center, 2023). Indeed, true crime has been critiqued for primarily covering cases of missing or harmed White women and downplaying the plight of people of color (Slakoff & Duran, 2023). Given that all participants had to experience their loved one's case being covered by true crime to qualify for the study, it is unsurprising that most of our participants are White. Future researchers should examine people of color's experiences with true crime to see if their experiences differ.

Third, we interviewed people whose loved ones' stories had received true crime attention. The study did not delineate between types of true crime content (e.g., podcasts, documentaries, television shows, etc.), nor did we examine differences across coverage intensity (i.e., the amount and scope of media coverage). Furthermore, we did not delineate between co-victims connected to older cases versus newer ones. The decision to speak with co-victims with varying experiences was a purposeful one, as our goal was to understand the impact of true crime on co-victims broadly. However, future research should consider the impact of coverage intensity and scope on co-victims' experiences. Fourth, several participants were first co-victims and then became producers of true crime content. The mechanisms by which co-victims became producers were not the focus of this study, but it warrants further research and investigation.

Fifth, the focus of this study was on co-victims' perspectives on the benefits of true crime media attention. As described in the Findings section, co-victims often view the positive impacts of the genre as dependent on true crime being created ethically and with consent. In other words, co-victims describe that not all true crime is created equally. Future research should further explore co-victims' views on the ethics of the genre. Sixth, and finally, most participants did not distinguish journalist-produced media from non-journalist-produced media. They saw media as media, with very little distinction between the impact of true crime media and the impact of traditional media coverage. While we kept our conversations focused on true crime, it was clear that this line was blurry for our participants. Future research should examine this dynamic further.

Conclusion

This study examined co-victims' perspectives on the positive influences of true crime media coverage. Through their narratives, co-victims shed light on the complex dynamics between themselves, media producers, criminal justice actors, and the audience. Undoubtedly, co-victims emphasized the potential of true crime to draw attention to cases and raise awareness about criminal justice issues. It is noteworthy that true crime has helped bring a resolution to some cases (The Associated Press, 2021; Storey, 2023; Zuvela, 2023). Additionally, co-victims underscored the role of true crime in exerting pressure on law enforcement and other justice authorities. Given that co-victims are often unhappy with their treatment by the criminal justice system (Reed & Caraballo, 2022; Thompson et al., 1996), true crime media can help empower them to reclaim their agency and demand action or updates regarding their loved ones' cases. While many co-

victims may seek media attention to help solve cases and place pressure on criminal justice officials, they do so at the risk of bringing negative attention to themselves and their loved ones via the true crime audience. While there has been much discussion about the negative impacts of true crime media attention (deservedly so), the positive impacts of the genre also warrant acknowledgment. In order to understand how true crime as a whole can improve, we should examine the benefits and the drawbacks.

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