

# DEMOGRAPHIC CORRELATES OF HUMANIZING MEDIA COVERAGE OF HOMICIDE: EVIDENCE FROM THE *BOSTON GLOBE*, 1976-84

## Introduction

Media coverage of homicides **reflects and shapes** how society perceives members of different demographic groups.

**Ideal victim theory** proposes that victims perceived as weak, vulnerable, etc. will be treated better.

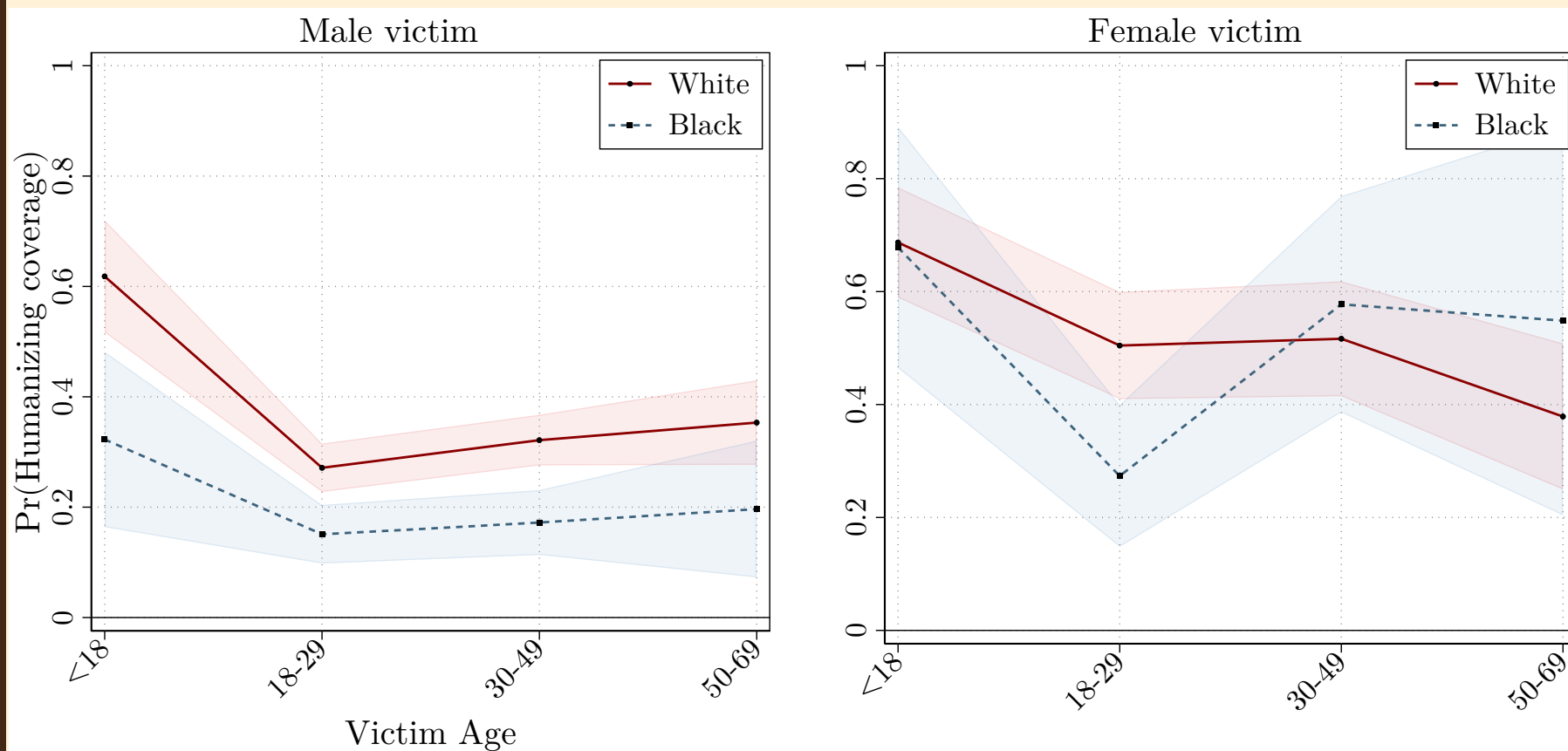
It is important to analyze **differential coverage** of homicides in media, not only based on race, gender, and sex identities, but also through the lens of **intersectionality**.

A news article is **humanizing** when it mentions additional information about the victim, presenting them as a **person not just a statistic**.

Content analysis can be automated using **Natural Language Processing**, specifically assisted by the **GPT-3** Large Language Model.

## Results

To determine the factors which significantly affect humanization for each victim, a **Probit regression model** is used, with the dependent variable being a binary humanization score  $h_v = 1$  when at least one article uses humanizing language to describe the victim and  $h_v = 0$  when no articles are present, or all are impersonal.



Probability of **humanizing coverage for male victims is significantly higher for whites among all age groups**, with the highest difference (30 percentage points) in the <18 age group.

**Black female victims, only in the age range of 18-29, are significantly less likely** to have humanizing coverage than whites (20 percentage point difference).

Demographics perceived as **innocent are more likely to receive humanizing coverage** (children and the elderly more than all other ages & females more than males).

## Methods

### 1) Create Database

- 1 • Began with all the articles published in the Boston Globe (1976-1984): **1,215,056 articles**
- 2 • Computer algorithm filtered majority of unrelated articles: **22,640 potential Massachusetts homicide articles**
- 3 • Manually reduced to final database with only articles that mention a Massachusetts homicide: **5,042 articles**

### 2) Match Articles

Each article in the final Massachusetts Homicide database was manually assigned the FBI record of the homicide(s) it describes.

The FBI database provided the demographic details for the people involved in every article.

**Sample Article** Dec 1, 1984

Man, 79, charged in death of wife

**BARNSTABLE**, 79-year-old Cape Cod man was charged with murder yesterday after he allegedly suffocated his ailing wife in what his daughter called an act of love. John Anderson 79, a retired chef, was ordered to undergo 20 days of psychiatric tests following his arraignment on charges he killed his wife of 52 years, 74-year-old Olive Anderson. (...)

**Sample FBI database records from Nov 1984**

V: Age	V: Sex	O: Age	O: Sex	Agency	Relationship	Weapon
74	F	79	M	Barnstable	Wife	Asphyxiation
68	M	?	?	Cambridge	?	Knife

### 3) Determine Humanization

GPT-3 was used to analyze each article to determine whether the victim(s) was presented in a **humanizing** or **impersonal** way.

Three consecutive prompts were used:

**Prompt 1:** The following is a newspaper article that may include unrelated stories mixed together:

<Text of Article>

Create a text that only includes every piece of information in the article that refers to the victim <Victim name>, especially any facts about <Victim name>'s life, occupation, family, and relationship before the incident:

**Response 1:** James Santos, 28, of 17 Horan Way, Jamaica Plain, was killed early Sunday morning after an argument with 20-year-old James Abernathy of Roxbury. Santos was stabbed in the abdomen and taken to Carney Hospital, where he was pronounced dead at 1:58 a.m. His sister Nina Santos was treated for bruises at the same hospital and later swore out a complaint against Abernathy for assault and battery. Abernathy was taken to Charles Street Jail, where he was ordered held without bail. A hearing was set for Nov. 28 at Roxbury District Court.

**Prompt 2:** The following text includes information about homicide victim <Victim Name>:

<Text of Response 1>

Rewrite text after removing age, gender, address, and information about the suspect:

**Response 2:** James Santos was killed early Sunday morning after an argument with another person. Santos was stabbed in the abdomen and taken to Carney Hospital, where he was pronounced dead at 1:58 a.m. His sister Nina Santos was treated for bruises at the same hospital and later swore out a complaint against the other person for assault and battery. The other person was taken to Charles Street Jail, where they were ordered held without bail. A hearing was set for Nov. 28 at Roxbury District Court.

**Prompt 3:** Articles about homicide victims are humanizing when they focus on their lives, such as their occupations, relationships and families. Articles are impersonal when they focus only on what happened and the criminal's background. An expert editor is asked to evaluate this article based on these definitions and provide an opinion on whether the article is humanizing or impersonal. Summary: "Raymond Johnson was a man who lived with his companion, Carol Ross. On the day of his death, he was shot once in the chest and was found by police on the floor of his apartment."

Response: Impersonal, because it only mentions what happened

<... additional example included here...>

Summary: <Text of Response 2>

Response:

**Final Response:** Impersonal, because it only mentions what happened

## Conclusions

Newspaper depictions of homicides **disproportionately humanize victims** of certain demographic groups.

**Ideal victimhood** provides the most consistent explanation of the humanization patterns documented.

Differences across demographic groups are brought into sharp contrast when measured **intersectionally**.

Young adult Black females and Black males of all ages, but especially **young Black males, are less likely to be humanized** because they are perceived as stronger, less vulnerable, and less innocent.

**Content analysis can be done through automated natural language processing** using a large language model such as GPT-3.