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Attributing Responsibility When Police Officers are Killed in the Line of Duty: An Ethnographic Content Analysis of Local Print News Media Frames

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The line-of-duty death of a police officer challenges the public's shared views of social order and morality. Local news media help audiences make sense of these tragedies. This study examines how attributions of responsibility are framed in local print news stories, guided by the question, "How do news stories frame the cause of death when police officers are killed in the line of duty?" We conducted an ethnographic content analysis of stories about line-of-duty deaths published in Indianapolis, Indiana newspapers between 1872 and 2019. Six frames promoting causal explanations for police officer deaths emerged from our analysis: moral depravity, gun availability and lethality, the nature of the job, unaddressed mental illness, alcohol and drug abuse, and officer failings. While line-of-duty deaths have been consistently framed as a result of individual and societal moral depravity over time, we also find that officer deaths have more recently been framed as simply being part of the job. We discuss our findings within the broader framing of social problems literature, recognizing how frames shift over time and conflate social issues to maintain their salience.

KEYWORDS: ethnographic content analysis; line-of-duty deaths; media framing; police officer deaths; social problems; violence.

INTRODUCTION

Police officers are a highly visible symbol of law, order, and shared morality. This symbolism is important in the United States, where the public fears crime and generally believes that crime continues to increase (Gramlich 2019; McCarthy 2015). Death while working due to an accident or natural causes can occur in any workplace. However, the death of a police officer in the line of duty, whether at the hands of someone else or accidental, presents a shock to the collective conscience. Law enforcement officers are not only the most visible arm of government authority but also represent locally shared values and morality. Consequently, the death of a police officer tears at social cohesion, albeit temporarily, within communities. These events expose the vulnerability of police to working hazards in a way that can be difficult for the public to process. Communities must work together to determine who (or what) caused the incident and attribute responsibility accordingly. As part of this process, law enforcement agencies seek to symbolically heroize fallen officers who sacrificed their lives on behalf of the community. Doing so serves to reestablish the sanctity of shared righteousness and civic order.

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Because most people have little direct interaction with the police and other criminal justice entities (Braga et al. 2014; Davis et al. 2018; Kort-Butler and Habecker 2018; Surette 2015), the public relies on news media stories for information about crime and justice issues (Chermak 1994; Fields and Newman 2020), including the circumstances in which police officers are killed. It is within the contexts of such social crises that police and news media work collaboratively to help the public in making sense of police officer deaths (Manning 1997).

News media coverage of events and social issues may play a central role in shaping public perceptions (Gamson 1992). Not only do news media help to set the agenda on what social issues are considered salient (McCombs 2014), but news stories tell audiences how to think about them by relying on specific angles and interpretations (Entman 2004). Given the relevance of the news media in shaping the public's perception of the police, and criminal justice more generally, the lack of empirical research on news media coverage of police line-of-duty deaths is somewhat surprising. In particular, little is known about how the news media portray or frame the causes of death—specifically, who (or what) is responsible for what happened. The gap in research is also curious considering the news media's prominence in helping audiences understand crime and justice issues (Chermak 1995a; Jewkes and Linnemann 2017) by promoting narratives concerning the responsibility and culpability for social problems (Entman 2004; Iyengar 1991). The purpose of the current study was to investigate how the news media portray police line-of-duty deaths. To do so, we content analyze local newspaper coverage of incidents occurring in one Midwestern city, Indianapolis, Indiana from 1872 to 2019. The research question that guides our study is "*How do news stories frame the cause of death for police officers killed in the line of duty?*"

This study advances research on news media framing of social issues in a few important ways. First, while deaths of officers in the line of duty remain novel events, it is also the case that murder, deadly accidents, and police-involved violence are reoccurring themes in news stories. By studying how causes of line-of-duty deaths are given meaning for their local audiences, it is possible to learn more about how these events are linked to other prominent social problems by reporters, and how high-profile tragic deaths are publicly processed more generally. While other deaths and tragedies evoke public mourning, we explore whether deaths of police officers may increase the perceived salience of other social ills, perhaps as opportunities to address concerns of moral decay within communities. Second, high-profile deaths of police officers often receive elevated news attention and may serve as "focusing events" (Birkland 1998) that present opportunities for policymakers to advance ideas and their agendas (Benford and Snow 2000; Kingdon 2003). Therefore, the current study illuminates how news media frames set the conditions for public discourse and debate (see Gitlin 1980), and how some perceived causes and recommended responses to police line-of-duty deaths and police officer safety are favored over others. Third, there are strategic advantages to limiting the scope of our study to a single, mid-size city like Indianapolis. While prior research on the framing of social issues tends to focus on the immediate coverage of a major event (e.g., terrorist attack, political scandal), or is limited to relatively short intervals of coverage of broader issues, our study examines news media coverage for a period spanning more

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than 140 years. As such, we are able to observe how news media framing strategies change and remain stable as the city endures several major advances in technology, sociocultural transformations, and multiple eras of policing. It allows us to observe if news framing decisions for law enforcement deaths are influenced by the era in which they occur. Focusing on the mid-size city of Indianapolis also allows us to understand how the public makes sense of line-of-duty deaths outside of major American urban centers.

BACKGROUND

Policing as a profession is dangerous. While not ranked the most dangerous occupation in the United States, the fatality rate for police officers (and firefighters) in 2018 was almost double that of the average American worker (7.4 and 3.5 per 100,000 workers respectively).[3] Accidental hazards are common for police officers (Mona et al. 2019). Safety improvements and better training have mitigated the risk of both felonious and accidental deaths for police officers as witnessed by the dramatic decrease in line-of-duty deaths in the last 50 years (White et al. 2019). Regardless of the method of death, line-of-duty deaths affect not only the officer's family and agency but also the broader community and profession (Brandl 1996; Fridell et al. 2009).

To understand how the news media portray police slayings and accidental line-of-duty deaths, it is important to investigate how reporters and editors, or "news workers," construct crime stories (Chermak 1994; Fishman 1981; Sacco 1995). News outlets are market driven and must sell stories to stay profitable, and thus there remains a constant need to maintain or increase their readership (Chibnall 1977). Reporters along with their editors must produce stories that entice audiences, including stories of crime and violence (Gilliam and Iyengar 2000; Sacco 1995; Sheley and Ashkins 1981). News workers have developed several strategies for efficiently producing a high volume of content that is of interest to audiences. For instance, reporters meet their daily quotas by accessing information about crime from digital blotters, in addition to established practices like monitoring police scanners and maintaining close relationships with reliable sources who are able to pass along the information required to construct crime stories (Beckett 1997; Chibnall 1977; Ericson et al. 1989; Fishman 1981; Mawby 2010). The primary sources for crime and justice stories are the designated representatives of local police agencies, sometimes referred to as public information officers (Chermak and Weiss 2006).

In communities with a high crime rate, not all crime and justice stories receive equal coverage. Instead, coverage decisions are based on reporters' evaluations of newsworthiness (Surette 2015) according to criteria that are shaped by organizational and market-based considerations. Stories judged to be of the greatest interest to audiences involve novel and shocking incidents (Sacco 1995), and acts of heroism that speak to our shared humanity (Gans 2004). News stories about police slayings and accidental deaths in the line of duty meet both criteria—as rare events involving

[3] Source: Table 3: Fatal occupational injuries counts and rates for selected occupations, 2017-18 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries.

the deaths of respected public service figures—and are therefore likely to be considered especially newsworthy.

FRAMING SOCIAL PROBLEMS

While shocking events like police line-of-duty deaths may receive the greatest attention, the complexity of these events is not always well represented by the news media. Instead, news workers use frames as tools for "selecting and highlighting some facets of events and issues and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution" (Entman 2004). Frames help reporters present multifaceted stories within a simplified timeline and set of circumstances to produce stories that are easily digestible for audiences (Gamson and Modigliani 1987; Reese 2001). In effect, crime stories are structured to reduce social issues and events into neatly packaged storylines to suggest why certain deleterious conditions persist, who is suffering and who is responsible, and how the problem must be addressed (Entman 1993). The selection of a given news media frame determines which aspects of a story are highlighted or, conversely, deemphasized (Tankard Jr. 2001). For example, news workers may choose to portray an event episodically as an isolated occurrence, or thematically as a symptom of larger social concerns (Chyi and McCombs 2004; Iyengar 1991). Iyengar (1990) found that in some instances poverty was framed in a personal or individualistic manner suggesting that responsibility ultimately falls on individuals, while society-at-large (e.g., changes in policy) was responsible in other cases. The author suggested that how poverty was framed in news stories could influence beliefs about the amount of public assistance people deserved. Kim et al. 2010 similarly examined how American news media frame the causes of poverty, finding that liberal newspapers were more likely than conservative papers to emphasize the social causes of poverty.

News media frames also shape story narratives by linking events and issues to other prominent social conditions. In one study, researchers examined how the causes of illegal immigration were covered in the news, revealing how linking illegal immigration to crime was a "preferred way of talking about the issues because it will necessarily involve drama, conflict, good, and evil" (Kim et al. 2011). A more recent study examined how the causes and consequences of immigration, specifically as it relates to crime, were framed in several high circulation newspapers. The authors found that the most prominent frame used in newspaper stories linked crime and immigration as a cause for increased crime rates, concluding that the salience of immigration as a social issue was heightened when associated with the simpler and more familiar narrative of increasing crime (Harris and Gruenewald 2020).

It also follows that, through the process of framing, news media stories tend to favor the interpretations of events and social issues advanced by some claimsmakers rather than others (Ericson et al. 1991; Fields and Newman 2020). Thacker Thomas and Vermilya (2019) suggest that that way news media frame incidents substantiates existing social hierarchies. The voices and views of claimsmakers most closely aligned with publicly favored frames are granted access to the news media and hence to elevated levels of attention. It is in this way that news media play a key role in

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shaping the definition of social events (Thacker Thomas and Vermilya 2019) and responses by policymakers, including incidents of police brutality and other forms of police-involved violence (Lawrence 2000).

Scholars have relied on framing theory over the last several decades to study how media help to shape public understanding of the causes and consequences of, for example, health concerns like obesity (Kim and Anne Willis 2007), international crises (Iyengar and Simon 1993), and urban legends and crime panics (Best 1987; Best and Horiuchi 1985). While there have been a number of framing studies focusing on particular forms of violence, such as sexual violence against children (Kitzinger 2004), less is known about how news media frame police slayings and accidental deaths of officers in the line of duty.

Prior research has found that women, children, and other individuals considered vulnerable (e.g., elderly people) make ideal victims (Chermak 1995b; Gruenewald et al. 2013). Scholars have also suggested that celebrities make perfect victims (Greer 2007), and increasingly so, as society's obsession with celebrity has only increased over time (Rojek 2001). Similar to stories about the especially sordid or celebrated members of the community who have passed, police line-of-duty deaths often garner extensive news media attention. Police deaths are unique, however, because the Durkheimian notion of social consciousness (Durkheim 1933) is challenged by these events as the harmony that exists between social forces of order and disorder within communities become temporarily disrupted.

Following a line-of-duty death, law enforcement administrators and other government officials quickly act to heroize fallen officers through the ritualistic pageantry of police funerals that can be witnessed by the public. The initial outpouring of sympathy and mourning for the family of fallen officers and for their fellow officers is accompanied by the public's search for answers. Scholars have speculated that the relationship between the news media and the police temporarily becomes stronger and more tightly coupled, or less adversarial and focused and of singular purpose, when police are killed in the line of duty (Manning 1997). Shifting into a crisis mode of communication, news media and designated police representatives turn to established frames to make sense of the violence. Along with providing details about the essential facts—the who, what, when, and where of police slayings and accidents—the news media must explain how the incidents occurred and who (or what) is responsible.

Recent research has examined the ways in which mass media construct fallen officers as heroes, suggesting that coverage simultaneously serves as a virtual stage and platform for audiences to receive symbols of social solidarity and confirm existing social norms and values (Terpstra and Salet 2020). These authors suggest that it is through the media that the public-at-large participates in the construction of fallen police heroes and reaffirms the moral values for which they sacrificed their lives. To our knowledge, however, no prior research has empirically examined how the local news media frame causal attributions for the deaths of police killed in the line of duty, therefore we know little about how news stories actually seek to explain these events for the public. We also do not know if news media framing decisions are influenced by the social eras in which events occur, eras that encompass major shifts in societal and political changes, and major changes to policing philosophies over time. Providing empirical answers to these key questions will elucidate whether, and if so,

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how news media frames of police killed in the line of duty operate to reestablish communal sense of social order and shared morality.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The purpose of the current study was to examine how the local news media frame the causes and attribute responsibility for the deaths of police killed in the line of duty in an urban setting, Indianapolis, Indiana. A single site study is particularly appropriate in this instance because the media coverage of policing may be very context specific and this method allows for an in-depth examination that can guide similar research in other locations (Flyvbjerg 2004). Information about police line-of-duty deaths come from a comprehensive archival data set maintained by the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department (IMPD). The data contain information about every known incident in which a police officer died in the line of duty while serving for the IMPD.[4] We relied on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) definition of a police officer according to the Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA) Program as well as their incident criteria to determine whether an incident should be included in the current study (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2016). Incidents included all felonious (n = 47) and accidental (n = 21) line-of-duty deaths occurring in the Indianapolis Metropolitan Area during the period 1872–2019 (N = 68).[5] Three wartime-related deaths of police officers were excluded. Our population has proportionally more felonious than accidental deaths (69% and 31% respectively). Nationally, the proportion of felonious to accidental line-of-duty deaths is evenly split over the last 10 years (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2017).

Using incident-specific search terms, including the deceased officer's name, offender's name, and the year of the incident, researchers collected and digitized 1668 articles from 11 local print news media sources.[6] The majority of articles (82.8%) consisted of original reporting; another 11% were brief articles—containing a headline and fewer than five sentences. The remaining six percent consisted of editorials, obituaries, newswires, and other, unknown story types. *The Indianapolis Star*, historically the city's largest newspaper, produced almost 95% of all the articles.[7] The study exclusively includes local print news stories in part to maintain historical consistency in the type of media content analyzed. The temporal scope of our study predates the advent of both television and internet-based news sources. On average, each line-of-duty death produced 24 unique newspaper articles (Hipple et al. 2019), although the number of articles associated with a given incident varied

[4] The Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department was formed in 2007 after the consolidation of the Indianapolis Police Department with the patrol division of the Marion County Sheriff's Department. Deaths from all three entities are included in the data set.

[5] The incident that led to the first line-of-duty death occurred in 1872, although this officer did not die from his injuries until 1922. The first story related to this incident was published in 1879.

[6] *Indianapolis Business Journal*, *Indianapolis Monthly*, *Indianapolis Recorder*, *Indianapolis Republic*, *The Indianapolis Journal*, *The Indianapolis Morning Star*, *The Indianapolis News*, *The Indianapolis Star*, *The Indianapolis Sunday Star*, *The Indianapolis Times*, and *The Journal Gazette*.

[7] This total includes a newspaper that merged with *The Indianapolis Star*.

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considerably—from two to 175 articles (sd = 19.3). The unit of analysis for this study was the individual print newspaper *article*.

METHODOLOGY: ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTENT ANALYSIS

We relied on an ethnographic content analysis (ECA) approach to identify how the local print news media frame attributions of responsibility for incidents in which police officers were killed in the line of duty. As outlined by Altheide and Schneider (2013), ECA is both a reflexive and interactive process for analyzing mediated content that utilizes the method of theoretical sampling for a specified number of sources and a specified period of time. Coding for the ECA began with three research assistants who individually reviewed a sample of 358 news media articles about six line-of-duty death incidents. The incidents occurred at the following points across the data set: 1882, 1897, 1976, 1977, 1993, and 2001. The incidents were selected purposely based on when they occurred and the number of corresponding articles in an attempt to maximize variation across the articles for the discovery and description portion of the protocol development. The research assistants were asked to identify the cause of death for each police officer as it was provided in the news accounts, with the understanding that it is possible for an article to include more than one causal frame. Causal frames were not determined a priori; instead, we used a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 2009) of continual comparison to identify emerging themes, or more specific explanations for why line-of-duty deaths occurred, and who (or what) was responsible. The authors met with the research assistants to review their initial coding and to discuss and resolve any inconsistencies across coders (Harry et al. 2005; Saldana 2009). Six causal frames emerged from the initial coding, and a final coding protocol was developed that could then be applied to the entire sample of 1668 news media articles.

FINDINGS

The news media frames attributed responsibility for the deaths of police in the line of duty to: (1) moral depravity, (2) gun availability and lethality, (3) unaddressed mental illness, (4) the "nature of the job," (5) alcohol and drug abuse, and (6) officer failings. Table 1 includes an overview of the six identified frames including definitions and example quotations. Forty-three of the 68 (63.2%) line-of-duty death incidents generated the 252 news media articles that had at least one of the six identified frames. There were 298 total causal frames identified in the 252 articles. That is, at least one causal frame was identified in 15 percent {252/1676} of all news articles in the data set. The majority of articles containing causal frames (236 articles or 93.7%) were about 38 unique felonious death incidents. The remaining 16 articles with causal frames were about five accidental death incidents (6.3%). Of the 25 incidents that had no frames attributed to them, nine were felonious incidents and 16 were accidental incidents. Frames were not observed in the majority of the articles included in our study time frame because the articles were largely comprised of nonanalytical, episodic coverage, for example, articles providing updates on the development of criminal

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Table 1. *Causal Frames, Definitions, and Examples*

Frame	Definition	Example
Moral Depravity (n = 106)	Officer deaths are attributed to the moral depravity of the suspect. Stories may reference gang affiliations and provide detailed descriptions of individual criminality, sometimes relying on racialized language.	"He (the suspect) had no reason to kill other than to satisfy his own lust to kill."
Gun Availability and Lethality (n = 64)	Officer deaths are attributed to guns, including their availability and lethality.	"These incidents show that too many individuals are carrying guns illegally and using them for aggression." "The whole (suspect's family) is possessed with possession of guns."
Unaddressed Mental Illness (n = 41)	Officer deaths are attributed to the mental illness or mental state of the suspect.	"The defense charged that this confession had been obtained by means of 'third degree tactics' and that the defendant was insane at the time he signed the statement."
"Nature of the job" (n = 38)	Officers' deaths are attributed to risks of violence associated with the *job* of police officer.	"You can have the brightest young officer doing everything the way he's trained, and you just can't prevent everything."
Alcohol and Drug Abuse (n = 37)	Officer deaths are attributed to suspects being under the influence of alcohol or drugs.	"Accused Killer of 3 Admitted Having 'Heavy Drinking Problem.'"
Officer Failings (n = 12)	Officer deaths are attributed to officer inexperience, incompetence, or misconduct.	"The cause of (the officer's) tragic death was his inability to accept constitutional limitations on police power and the gross abuse of that power."

cases and victim statuses. For articles with at least one identified frame (n = 252), the mean number was 1.2 frames per article. The greatest number of causal frames attributed to any single article was four.

To begin, we first looked at the dispersion of frames (n = 298) across incident types. Table 2 displays the incident type and the number of causal frames attributed to each type. The majority of frames (93.6%) was found in articles about felonious incidents. While felonious incidents included all six frames, the moral depravity and the nature of the job frames were only attributed to felonious incidents. The alcohol and drug abuse frame was the most common frame for the small portion of frames attributed to accidental incidents (6.4%).

Accidental deaths occurred as the result of various unfortunate circumstances, including motorcycle accidents and being electrocuted while using "call boxes" connected to wires that would become electrified during lightning storms. One accidental incident [(#66] accounted for 14 of the 19 frames attributed to accidents. This 1993 incident involved the first and only female officer killed in the line of duty during the study period. Officer Teresa Hawkins was traveling with her lights and siren on to assist an ambulance crew with a patient when her vehicle was struck by a drunk driver who had a blood alcohol level of more than twice the legal limit. The relatively elevated level of coverage for this officer death might be explained by the novelty of the Officer Hawkins being a female officer, and also because females tend to be

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Table 2. *Incident Type and Number of Causal Frames*

	Felonious		Accidental		Row Totals	
Causal Frame	*n*	%	*n*	%	*N*	%
Moral Depravity	106	100.0	0	0.0	106	35.5
Gun Availability and Lethality	63	98.4	1	1.6	64	21.4
Unaddressed Mental Illness	41	100.0	0	0.0	41	13.7
The "Nature of the Job"	33	86.8	5	13.2	38	13.0
Alcohol and Drug Abuse	25	67.6	12	32.4	37	12.4
Officer Failings	11	91.7	1	6.4	12	4.0
Column Totals	279	93.6	19	6.4	298	100.0

considered more vulnerable and "worthy" victims compared to males in general. This incident also demonstrates the influence of media causal framing on the public's perception of the event (Gruenewald et al. 2009; Lundman 2003; Pritchard and Hughes 1997). As mentioned in the methods, incidents were coded as felonious or accidental based on the *news media coverage*. News media portrayed this incident as an accident despite the fact the suspect was charged and convicted of three felonies.

We also looked closely at the incidents that had no causal frames attributed to them. As a group ($n = 25$), they generated significantly fewer articles when compared to the articles with frames ($n = 43$). The mean number of articles for incidents without causal frames was 11.8 (SD = 20.5). The mean number of articles for incidents with causal frames was 32.1 (SD = 28.5) ($t(63) = -3.31$, $p < .001$). The majority of incidents without causal frames was accidental incidents (64%). All of the incidents occurred before 1980 with 19 occurring before 1960. Seven of the 16 accidental incidents occurred before 1930. Generally, these articles were simply reported as accidents, something happened to the officer while he was working and he died. The news worker did not attribute the death to anything but an accident. Examples include an officer who was electrocuted (Incidents 3 and 8); one who suffered a heat stroke (Incident 6); one who fell down a stairwell; (Incident 13) and at least eight vehicle accidents (Incidents 29, 31, 32, 38, 42, 45, 55, 56). Modern safety precautions and advancements in medicine now significantly mitigate many of these once lethal situations. The felonious incidents with no frames often had little known detail as to what actually happened or had unknown suspects. This finding suggests that incidents are less newsworthy when responsibility cannot be attributed.

Next, we expand upon six prominent frames used by local newspapers to help readers make sense of the deaths of police killed in line-of-duty incidents as a social problem. For each frame, we also (1) identify specific themes used by news workers to attribute responsibility for the deaths of police officers, (2) describe specific line-of-duty death incidents that include the frames, and (3) explain how themes might be connected to policy responses and broader social issues. We also (4) discuss the exemplary terms, phrases, and rhetorical devices used by news workers to explain offender motives and other possible conditions resulting in the deaths of police officers in the line of duty.

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Moral Depravity

The most prominent media frame attributes responsibility for police line-of-duty deaths to the immorality of criminals and, more generally, the moral decline of society accounting for greater than one-third of the identified frames (see Table 2). Moral depravity frames are detectable in stories that include phrases such as "in today's violent society," suggesting that society is more violent than in the past. The moral depravity frame was only found in articles about felonious incidents. While the rarity of felonious police killings precludes establishing statistical patterns, we might expect that the time period in which line of duty deaths occur shape their specific social function. As shown in Figure 1, the moral depravity frame was most prominent at the turn of the twentieth century and then becomes relatively more prominent again in the 1930s and 1950s. While the symbolism of police slayings may serve to increase social solidarity during times of rapid social change (i.e., turn of the twentieth century) and moral outrage (i.e., 1930s Prohibition era), line-of-duty deaths could also be used to maintain the status quo during times of social solidarity (i.e., 1950s).

Some articles were more emphatic in describing American society as "violence-addicted" ("Mean Street Heros" 1993), and the country as a "nation of bandits" ("Last Respect Paid Slain Detective By Mayor, Officers and Friends" 1935). The spike in the use of the moral depravity frame during the 1920s and 1930s occurred

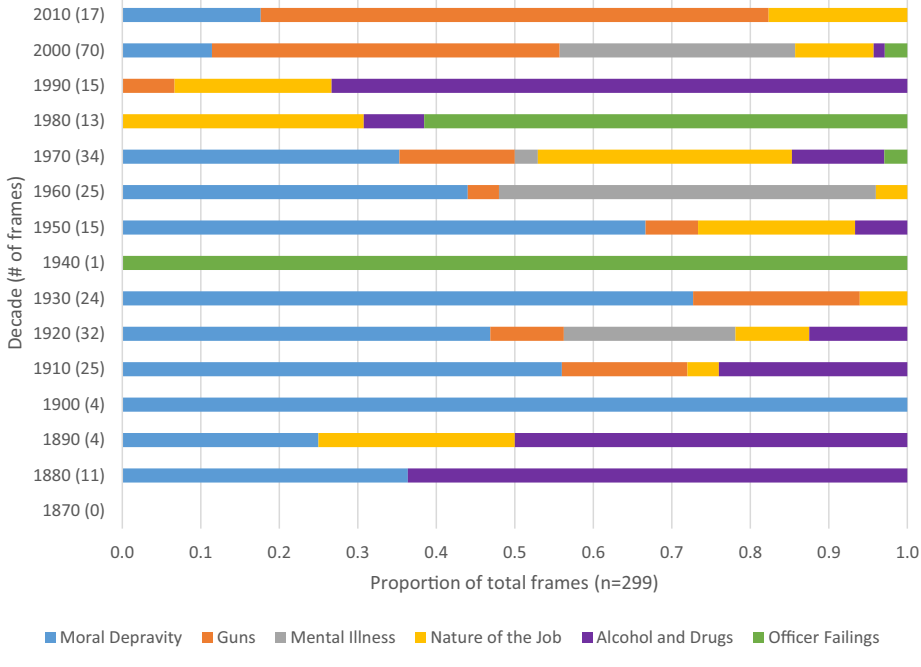

Fig. 1. Incident Decade by Proportion of Total Frames (n = 299). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

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when the United States was in the throes of the Prohibition on the production and sale of alcohol, and the gangster violence associated with the Prohibition. Some newspaper articles rebuked the state of Indiana for being notorious for violent crime during this time. The frame has become much less common over the last 40 years.

By attributing responsibility for violence broadly to the state or country, the culpability of individual perpetrators is deemphasized. It was more common, however, for news stories to attribute responsibility directly to the "savages" and "monsters" responsible for carrying out unthinkable acts of violence against local police officers (Carpenter 1979). This strategy was especially true in the earlier decades of the study's time span, when perpetrators of violence were vividly described as "cool, calm killers" (Friedersdorf 1953) with eyes that were "cold, brown, and lifeless" (Johnson 1971).

Offenders were also characterized as abnormal—as somehow other than human. News stories represented the perpetrators of police slayings as persons with warped values who had lost faith somewhere along the way. This rhetorical technique allowed readers to distance themselves from those deemed responsible for violence against police and from the circumstances that led to the violence. This type of rhetoric also symbolically reifies the social boundaries between "us" and "them," exemplifying the antithesis of shared moral values.

In 1961, Deputy Edward Byrne was shot and killed during a traffic stop resulting from a report of suspicious activity. The three suspects had burglarized a tavern and one shot the Deputy as he was sitting in his patrol car conducting a license check. In this situation there was no overt confrontation and the Deputy had not witnessed any crime, creating an ambush situation. The suspects had lengthy criminal histories which also contributed to the moral depravity theme. The lawbreakers reportedly had a "lust to kill" ("Court Hears Callahan Conviction Appeal" 1964).

As noted in the Deputy Byrne incident, some newspaper articles described the moral depravity of killers in terms of their lengthy criminal histories and determination not to return to prison. Juxtaposed with the superhuman predators described above, other morally depraved cop killers were portrayed as "cowardly assassins" who sought only to escape the law ("The Burns Tragedy" 1882). Their salient characteristic was not their abnormal strength or wickedness, but instead their weakness of character and fear of being held accountable for past deeds.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, offenders were often called "desperados" (e.g., "Identify Brad in Ohio Killing" 1936), described in the news stories as men exclaiming that they "would never be taken alive" ("Widow to be Mother Soon: Fund Started to Aid Slaid Deputy's Family" 1961) or apprehended "without a fight" ("Police Rejoice at News. Story of the Killing of Coe as Told Them by Bryant" 1908). In this last example, partners Officer Charles Russell and Officer Edward Petticord were both killed while searching for men who had reportedly been involved in a drunken fight when they came across two suspects who were unrelated to the fight but planning to rob a nearby store. Both suspects had lengthy criminal histories. One had killed before and a reputation of being an intelligent desperado also known as the "Kentucky Bad Man" (Sharp 2002).

Reflecting a different era in Indiana's history, some stories explicitly highlighted the race of "Negro" desperados, labeling them as lost souls who had endured a long

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life of crime ("Policeman's Number Same That of Murdered Father" 1918). Race was a prominent feature of line-of-duty death news stories up until 1922, cited in only two articles after that year, in 1965 and 1974. The inclusion of offender race in crime stories only when it is pertinent to the story over the course of the twentieth century likely reflects a growing sensitivity to race relations following the Civil Rights Movement and an increasing Black population in Indianapolis. In this way, framing likely shifted over time along with the changing demographics of the city. Alienating a growing Black audience would be antithetical to a news media organization's need to sell newspapers.

Gun Availability and Lethality

The second most prominent frame attributes responsibility for line-of-duty deaths to criminals' access to firearms. This frame was most commonly found in articles about felonious deaths although one accidental death did have this frame attributed to it. One theme used in these news articles suggests that, in some instances, police are killed because they are outgunned on the street. Fellow officers of those killed reported to the news media that the police were no match for the firepower of gangsters, or even of the common criminal. This theme appeared spottily over the time span of our study but has increased in the last 20 years of the study's time frame (see Figure 1). This upward trend in news framing aligns with increasing gun availability and lethality in the United States over the last century (Beeghley 2003; Cook 1981; Weaver 2002). Furthermore, gun availability and lethality may also emerge as a prominent frame because of claimsmakers, especially law enforcement agencies, who take advantage of policy windows and stand to benefit from news stories that effectively link line of duty deaths to organizational agendas and needs, such as requests for additional resources to buy more sophisticated weaponry and protective equipment.

In 2001, Deputy Jason Baker was killed by a suspect with an assault rifle after attempting to stop a suspicious vehicle. The president of the local Fraternal Order of Police was quoted in the newspaper as saying "...ordinary patrol officers, who are issued handguns and shotguns, are outgunned and out-weaponed by criminals on the street" (Webber 2004). The next line-of-duty death occurred in 2004. In the case of Deputy Baker and the subsequent death of Officer Timothy "Jake" Laird in 2004 (discussed later), young officers were killed by criminals wielding semi-automatic rifles.

While the "nature of the job" frame (as described more below) was also widely employed by reporters to make sense of these high-profile deaths, recent news stories relying on the gun availability and lethality frame are distinguished by their thematic coverage of gun policies and advocacy for specific responses to violence against the police. Newspaper articles citing criminals' access to high-powered weapons almost always suggested that the police department should equip patrol officers with shotguns (in earlier decades) or assault rifles (in more recent decades) to match the firepower of criminals, and to provide officers with additional training.

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Unaddressed Mental Illness

The third most common news media frame attributes responsibility for police deaths to perpetrators who are suffering from mental illness. This frame is often observed in combination with the "gun availability and lethality" frame and concerns the access to firearms by violent criminals suffering from mental illness. All incidents with this frame attributed to it were felonious incidents. The news stories describe legal loopholes that have historically led to the illegal purchase of weapons for convicted felons by their acquaintances (i.e., a straw purchase). Other news stories discussed policies requiring the police to return guns to persons who had been released from custody. Here, too, the theme accompanies a response theme of promoting legislation that, if passed, would allow police to hold onto criminals' weapons for an additional length of time to reduce risks to the police and to others, and to the criminals themselves.

While present in news stories published during the 1920s, mental illness is a relatively less prominent causal frame overall (13.1% of all frames) typically relied on when signs of cognitive impairment are obvious. One theme that emerged from newspaper articles published in the 1920s addressed the odd behaviors of offenders, portraying them as utterly delusional. Other themes, emerging in the mid-twentieth century and at the turn of the twenty-first century, conceptually linked police line-of-duty deaths to other policy issues, including involuntary commitment laws and access to firearms for persons with a mental illness.

Officer Jake Laird was killed in 2004 while responding to numerous reports of a man walking down the street firing an assault rifle. While unaddressed mental illness was the most prominent frame for this incident, the "availability and lethality of guns" was almost as prominent—for this incident the two frames almost always occurred together. The suspect was armed with and SKS rifle, a .357 caliber and .22 caliber handguns. The suspect had also killed his mother and seriously injured another responding officer. Earlier in the year, the suspect had been "Immediately Detained"[8] and the police confiscated a large quantity of weapons and ammunition from his house. The suspect later requested the return of his weapons and the police department had to comply due to lack of legal authority to keep them. One of those weapons was used to kill Officer Laird. The suspect's family reported he was schizophrenic and not taking his medications. One article said, "The tragedy involving IPD officers and [suspect] shows the incompatibility of firearm possession and schizophrenia" (Shaw 2004).

While, overall, few concrete policy responses were recommended in the coverage of this theme—aside from a general call for increased access to mental health services—the death of Officer Laird led to the passing of a "red flag law"[9] known as the

[8] Indiana Code 12-26-4-1. Allows a law enforcement officer to apprehend and transport an individual to an appropriate facility (e.g., hospital) if the officer has reasonable grounds to believe that an individual has a mental illness, is either dangerous or gravely disabled, and is in immediate need of hospitalization and treatment.

[9] "Red Flag Laws" allow law enforcement to temporarily confiscate guns from individuals who they believe are a risk to themselves or others.

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Jake Laird Law" (Indiana Code 35-47-14). Indiana was one of the first states in the nation to have such a law.

The "Nature of the Job"

The fourth most common news frame is the "nature of the job" frame. This frame, which first emerged in the 1890s, problematizes the profession and the inherent dangers of policing, rather than blaming specific individuals who would wish to do harm to police officers, or more generally, a society in moral decline. Officer Ware "gave his life for the benefit of the public" ("For Wares Family Supt Colbert Has Received $35 in Subscriptions So Far" 1897) and Officer Hagerty "gave his life for his country ("J.D. Hagerty Buried in Holy Cross Cemetary" 1916)." An associated theme that emerged from the content analysis of the articles emphasizes that police officers who were killed in the line of duty were playing by the rules and conducting themselves in a professional manner when they were killed. The officers were thereby absolved of any possible responsibility for actions or circumstances contributing to their own deaths. For example, Officer Gerald Griffin was shot and killed and several other officers were wounded while responding to a domestic disturbance in 1979. There was nothing noteworthy or controversial about the incident or the lead up to the incident, it was simply officers responding to a call for service.

A more common theme associated with the nature of police work frame highlights the heroic sacrifice involved in the choice of becoming a police officer despite the inherent risks of the job. One article highlighting the heroism of law enforcement included the quote, "They put their lives on the line for the rest of us. They fight crime and act to protect the public when safety and lives are endangered. They are the front-line defenders of the domestic peace" ("Police Memorial" 1993). While fallen officers were honored for their selflessness, the articles simultaneously acknowledged that those who were killed knew what they were getting into by joining the police force. That is, it was clear to them that, by wearing a badge, officers instantly become a target and that "sudden death by violence always lay as a threat in the city's by-ways" ("Celebrated Knabe Death Case Still Is A Mystery" 1953). One interpretation of the assertion that individuals were aware of the risks involved in joining the police force is that the officers' own career decisions played a key role in their deaths. Arguably, this interpretation serves to assuage the public's sense of grief and guilt when officers lose their lives in protecting and serving them. At the same time, rhetorical emphasis on the willingness of individuals to join police agencies despite the risks to their safety and well-being reaffirms a temporally impugned social consciousness following line-of-duty deaths.

Alcohol and Drug Abuse

The fifth most prominent news media frame emphasizes the abuse of alcohol and drugs and offender drunkenness as a condition leading to accidental deaths and deadly violence against police. Varying themes were identified in the ECA analysis that distinguish this frame from the frame of moral depravity, though the two frames

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were often used by reporters in combination. While alcohol abuse was responsible for accidental line-of-duty deaths in the 1990s, the majority of incidents framed in this way were felonious, occurring disproportionately in the earliest decades of our study. In particular, early news stories about police officers killed in the line of duty attributed responsibility to the excessive consumption of alcohol, which could transform offenders into "madmen" (e.g., Lyst 1962) and "deranged" lunatics ("The Burns Tragedy" 1882). This frame implied that those responsible were not always violent, criminal, or immoral. Instead, offenders were portrayed simply as drinking in excess and routinely becoming "abusive and quarrelsome" when drunk ("Patrolman Ware Killed" 1897). For example, in 1897, Officer Charles Ware responded to disturbance at a tavern in an attempt to disperse a "drunken gang" ("Patrolman Ware Killed" 1897). After engaging in a fight with one of the suspects, the suspect gave up and Officer Ware detained him. As they waited for a transport wagon, the suspect pulled out a gun and shot Officer Ware at point blank range.

Another theme related to alcohol consumption suggests that offenders had little or no memory of killing police officers. One offender reportedly had "no recollection of what occurred" ("The Burns Murder" 1882), while another was quoted as saying, "I was drinking. I did not know what I was doing" ("Patrolman Ware Killed" 1897). Relatively more prominent in the early coverage of felonious line-of-duty deaths (see Figure 1), this theme might suggest that it was the offenders' intoxication that led them to kill police officers, alleviating moral culpability and ultimate responsibility for their crimes. It is important to remember that alcohol consumption, especially in public, has not always been as socially accepted as it is today. In fact, Indiana supported some of the strictest anti-liquor laws in the early part of the twentieth century; and alcohol was prohibited nationally in 1920–1933. Likewise, the bootlegged and home-brewed liquor of the Prohibition era was, naturally, unregulated and could have unpredictable effects. It is possible that describing offenders as crazed drunks in this sociohistorical context imparts a different meaning than it would today, as excessive consumption of alcohol and addiction were viewed as root causes of crime and less as a medical issue.

Officer Failings

Finally, the sixth news media frame attributes responsibility to certain failings of the fallen officer. This frame is substantively unique from the more prominent nature of the job causal frame that suggests mortal risks are possible for officers despite them following their training and competently fulfilling their duties. News workers relied on the officer failings frame only rarely, in just 12 stories spanning four decades, or less than 1% of all newspaper articles included in the study. A related theme of the officer failings frame effectively attributed responsibility to the inexperience of a fallen officer (i.e., a rookie) on the job. One article, for example, suggested that a confrontation between an officer and a community member "should have resulted only in a citation. But, in this case, a young and inexperienced officer wants to do more than that" (Horne 1992). Other articles stated that the misjudgment of the fallen officer made him responsible for the incident. One newspaper article, for

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instance, portrayed the homicide of a police officer as the direct result of the officer's choice to conduct a "warrantless search" (Petroskey 1989). This incident had two different officer failing frames attributed to it. Officer Matthew Faber was killed in 1988 while responding to a disturbance. He and other officers entered the suspect's residence in an effort to arrest him. As noted, critics said the officers entered illegally, without a warrant. The suspect shot Officer Faber in the back, and due to extreme heat that day, he was not wearing his ballistic vest. He might have survived if he had been wearing his vest. Stories framed in this way shift responsibility from the more abstract threats of policing to the victims of line-of-duty violence themselves.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the current study was to examine how local news stories attribute responsibility for felonious and accidental deaths of police officers in the line of duty in a single urban setting. Our data set spanned more than a century and encompassed all line-of-duty deaths known to the study police department through 2019. We found that 63% of line-of-duty deaths generated articles that included at least one of six frames attributing responsibility for the officer's death. The media play an important role in shaping readers assessments about the police especially because most people do not have any interactions from which to draw (Braga et al. 2014). The majority of incidents without any frames were accidents which, by themselves, have a resolution in that there is no further explanation needed and perhaps they are less newsworthy. "Solutions journalism" would suggest that the incidents with frames lacked this resolution and therefore the media felt the need to offer the reader that resolution (McIntyre 2019). The reader's acceptance of the frame may be influenced by their trust in the media or their belief about the media as a reliable source of information (Kort-Butler and Habecker 2018).

We found that news media relied on six news media frames to attribute responsibility for police officer deaths, which differed depending on whether deaths were accidents or homicides (see Table 1). We found that accidental deaths of officers were often framed as cases of offender intoxication. Whether blaming alcohol consumption or drug abuse for officer deaths removes some level of culpability from those who kill officers is open for interpretation. Regardless, tragic deaths resulting from alcohol consumption (e.g., drunk driving accidents) is an all too common script for accident-related stories in American news media more generally, and thus can be easily applied to accidental line-of-duty deaths by reporters. One recommendation is that local reporters allot more space in news stories for addressing ways to reduce deaths attributed to drugs and alcohol following this type of line-of-duty death.

One of the most prominent findings of this study is that reporters consistently relied on the moral depravity frame to explain why accidental and felonious officer deaths occur, especially up until the 1980s. The persistent prevalence of the moral depravity frame may be explained in part by the fact that it resonates so highly with audiences. The nostalgic narrative that morality is under attack by changing ideals of secularism and corrupt-minded younger generations also remains a mainstay of intergenerational critique (Males 1999). Moreover, as episodic challenges to the collective

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conscience, blaming line-of-duty deaths on those who may operate outside of the shared morality serves to symbolically reify social boundaries of good and evil. This may be especially functional in times of social turmoil.

Individualistic moral depravity themes may also be salient in local news coverage because of their simplicity and convenience in helping reporters efficiently attribute responsibility for tragic deaths. Individual responsibility remains a cultural bedrock in America, such that placing blame on individuals labeled as immoral is easily accepted by audiences. Blaming the wickedness of individuals is also much less controversial than pointing to other broad social phenomena as causal explanations for officers being killed in the line of duty, while also effectively distancing "us" from "them." In addition, shifting responsibility to individuals aligns with the ingrained need of audiences to clearly identify solutions to problems (Iyengar 1990). Assigning personal responsibility to morally depraved offenders is a more immediately satisfying solution to line-of-duty deaths, as punishing these individuals can be accomplished by the criminal justice system, while the tasks of addressing broader issues of gun control and the mental health crisis in America are much more daunting.

The moral depravity frame may also persist because of its malleability. That is, claims of immorality can be easily morphed to characterize many different types of deviance that may manifest in various forms over time by being linked to other issues. A single frame that can be recycled for stories that cover a range of circumstances is a beneficial tool for news reporters. It simply questions logic to refute claims of offender moral depravity when morality is linked to murderous acts against law enforcement, as was done for felonious deaths included in our sample. Moreover, by linking the familiar frame of moral depravity to other, more complex, issues, reporters provide meaning and increase the salience of problems like drunk driving, firearms restrictions, and mental illness, as well as proposed policy solutions to these problems.

Despite the longevity of the moral depravity frame throughout the line-of-duty death news coverage, a shift to frames explicating the nature of the job as the cause of police deaths was observed in more recent decades. One possible interpretation is that these frames reflect two perspectives of the same underlying narrative. That is, choosing to be a police officer will remain a risk because society in general, and some individuals in particular, will always be beleaguered by moral deprivation. Emphasizing the police perspective of this dual narrative could reflect changing journalistic standards, as colorfully describing the moral failings of individuals increasingly became frowned upon or because of the reliance on police as news sources (Chermak 1995a), rather than bystanders, family members, and others involved, increased over time.

A final possible explanation is that the moral depravity frame persisted for felonious police deaths because it discursively vindicates police use of deadly violence against community members. The ritualized pageantry of police funerals evokes feelings of grief and an affinity for the families of fallen officers, serving to restore social cohesion and promote healing within communities (Crank 2015). Symbols of patriotism and community solidarity are conjured up in the days following police deaths to represent, reinforce, and legitimate the power of the state, and counter fears of more violence (see Lawrence 2000). Turner (2019) suggests that news media play an

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important role in this process of police legitimation following line-of-duty deaths by advancing a discourse where police lives are more germane than those of "others," who often include persons of color and members of other marginalized groups. In relying on the moral depravity frame, news media draw boundaries between good, which includes the police and civilized populace, and evil, including persons demonized as threats to the safety and well-being of communities. By conceptualizing the potential effects of police deaths within the context of this dichotomized narrative, it will be possible for other researchers to examine how media coverage of police line-of-duty deaths discursively justify officer-involved shootings, even when questionable circumstances are involved. While a critical discourse analysis is beyond the scope of the current article, researchers should expand on the work of Turner (2019) and others to comparatively examine the symbolic interpretation, semiotic patterns, and cultural and historical context of line-of-duty deaths and police-involved shootings. Doing so would illuminate how symbolic rhetoric in news discourse surrounding line-of-duty deaths reifies the social position (and power) of police, while denigrating those portrayed as posing challenges to the state.

Limitations

While the temporal scope of this research spans more than a century, our study's findings are limited in their generalizability to other settings. We are unsure if the media coverage of line-of-duty deaths is typical of cities like Indianapolis is size and population. However, research about police line-of-duty deaths that does not rely on official LEOKA data is scant and the methods applied here should be used in other jurisdictions. Thus, further comparative studies are needed to investigate how the news media frame responsibility for police line-of-duty deaths.

Our findings are also only generalizable to print news media. Because in this study we were interested in news media framing of line-of-duty death incidents occurring prior to (and after) the digital age, print news sources were the appropriate form of media to explore. Prior research has found that crime and accident stories from online news outlines have become less analytical and more episodic, focusing more on providing frequent updates to breaking news stories (Barnhurst 2013; Tremayne et al. 2007). Scholars have also found that online news outlets provide more content, multimedia features, interactivity, and other revenue-generating features (Greer and Mensing 2004). It will be important for future research to examine if and, if so, how reporters working in television and web-based news outlets borrow frames or perhaps frame responsibility for police line-of-duty deaths in new and more nuanced ways. Focusing on a single local newspaper was necessary to track framing practices over the span of multiple decades in Indianapolis, but doing so tells us little about the framed attributions of responsibility for police line-of-duty deaths in newspapers with a more national scope. We would expect few stories about Indianapolis police line-of-duty deaths to make national headlines, but the inclusion of additional news sources with different readership levels and targeted audiences would shed further light on how other news media help the public make sense of these incidents.

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CONCLUSION

Communities turn to the local news media to make sense of tragedy when police officers are killed in the line of duty. The purpose of the current study was to examine how the news media explain why these incidents occurred, and who or what was responsible for these events. We relied on an ethnographic content analysis approach to examine over 100 years of local newspaper articles published in a large Midwestern city to investigate how local print news media stories account for the causes of police officer line-of-duty deaths. Several attributions of responsibility frames and associated themes emerged from our analysis of the stories from local newspapers. The most prominent frame places the responsibility squarely on the morally depraved, who have historically been described as presenting an increasing threat to public safety. The second most prominent frame points to widespread gun availability and the increasing lethality of semi-automatic weapons as a major cause of line-of-duty deaths.

We also found that line-of-duty deaths are contextualized for audiences as being simply a part of an officer's job, and that the sacrifice of one's life for the greater good is perceived by all officers as a possibility. Other frames are narrower, attributing responsibility to alcohol abuse, unaddressed mental illness, and individual officer failings. Our findings help us to better understand the enduring role of the local news media in providing answers and reaffirming the public's shared sense of social order and morality following the tragic deaths of police killed in the line of duty.[10]

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[10] During the revision stage of this manuscript, Officer Breann Leath was killed in the line of duty. She was shot while responding to a domestic disturbance on April 9th, 2020. This incident is the first line-of-duty death in more 5 years for IMPD and the first for the 2020 decade. She is the second woman and only African-American woman killed in the line of duty. While the news media portrayal of this incident is in its infancy, it is so far being portrayed using predominately the nature of the job frame. This framing aligns with that of the last several decades. News media reports also alluded to mental illness and gun availability and lethality as frames. It is a unique case in that it is the only line-of-duty death in Indianapolis in the post-Ferguson era; however, it occurred in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic where the majority of states, including Indiana, were under stay-at-home orders. News coverage of crime, and coverage of most topics that are not related to the COVID-19 pandemic, was relatively less prominent. In addition, some key details about the incident have not been reported in the news media because the court proceedings have yet to occur. This incident also occurred roughly 6 weeks before the murder of George Floyd, an incident and the protests that followed that dominated the news for months after. The authors would like to thank Jean Ritsema and Patrick Pearsey for their help verifying facts as well as countless other individuals within IMPD who have made never forgetting a fallen officer their passion.

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