The surprising racial and gender bias in 'Law and Order'

By **John Sides** January 3 at 1:31 PM

For many years, variants of the show "Law and Order" have been among the most popular television programs about crime. At times, they have been among the most popular programs, period. "Law and Order: SVU" still airs on NBC.

Social science research tells us that the public often learns about crime — and especially its racial implications — from how it is portrayed on television.

A new paper by Gaurav Sood and Daniel Trielli analyzes "Law and Order" and comes to a surprising conclusion: In its portrayal of both perpetrators and victims, "Law and Order" is biased in terms of both race and gender, but not in the way you'd expect. The show over-represents whites and females as both victims and perpetrators.

In total, Sood and Trielli analyzed 731 episodes from three different "Law and Order" series: the original, "SVU," and "Criminal Intent." They identified the gender and race of over 1,100 criminals and over 1,500 victims portrayed on these episodes.

They compared the racial and gender breakdown among criminals and victims to government statistics for similar types of crime and periods of time. Here is what they found.

Criminals

Black criminals are less common on "Law and Order" than in reality. The graph below shows that in the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), about 30 percent of criminals are black (with higher percentages among those arrested for murder or rape). But in each of the "Law and Order" series, about 10 percent are black.

By contrast, female criminals are much more common on "Law and Order" than in reality. The graph below shows that although women are only 10 percent of those arrested for murder, they are 40-60 percent of the murderous criminals on "Law and Order."

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Victims

"Law and Order" also distorts the true proportion of blacks and women who are crime victims. It dramatically underrepresents blacks as victims, especially with regard to murder. About 50 percent of murder victims are black, according to the FBI, but on "Law and Order" just over 10 percent of victims are black.

The show overrepresents females as victims. Just over 20 percent of murder victims are women, but on "Law and Order" it is upward of 40 percent and, on "Law and Order: SVU," 60 percent.

Ironically, however, "Law and Order: SVU," which often focuses on sexual assault, underrepresents women as rape victims. According to data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Crime Victimization Survey, 89 percent of rape victims are women. On "SVU" it is 70 percent.

Sood and Trielli are simply analyzing what "Law and Order" depicts, not whether it has an actual influence on people's attitudes. But there is reason to suspect that it could. As they write, "Popular television is our bay window to the world."

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