“I Don’t Want to Die in Here”: Absence and Vulnerability in COVID-19 News Coverage of Prisons

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Abstract
This research examines how news constructed vulnerability in the coverage of COVID-19 and populations in prisons and jails. Focused on key moments during the moral panic around the pandemic, the analysis of publications from across the U.S. found substantial reporting earlier in 2020, and a striking absence and ignorance of key developments later into 2021. Six news discourses—journalistic objectivity, blaming and abandonment, vulnerability, compassion, vilification, and absence—were complicated by the climate of demonstrations for racial justice.

Keywords
COVID-19, news, prisons, vulnerability, absence

There’s one side that says we’re all going to die… The other isn’t going to let it bother them.

- Jim Quinn, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, March 28, 2020

By spring 2020, the coronavirus COVID-19 had become a global health crisis spreading throughout the United States especially in congregate settings. At that

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time, approximately 2.3 million people were involuntarily confined in jails, prisons, and detention facilities and institutions (Sawyer & Wagner, 2020). March 26 marked the first COVID-19 death among inmates – Anthony Cheek in New York’s Lee State Prison (Park & Meagher, 2020). Over the next two years, at least 593,611 prisoners tested positive and more than 2,898 died of the disease (“National COVID-19 Statistics”, 2022). The health status of incarcerated people has been of varying concern throughout the pandemic. Close-living quarters, changing inmate populations, inconsistent hygiene measures, and unreliable access to personal protective equipment (PPE) amplify disease in jail and prison environments, increasing the crisis inside and the spread to outside communities. And yet, prisoners denote a group that is typically stigmatized, marginalized, or ignored, a belief system bolstered by a focus in the news media on deviance or absence (Dunn, 2004). Particularly during trying times like a moral panic – that is, during an overwhelming state of hyper-awareness, stress, stigma, blame, anxiety, paranoia, conspiracy theories, and generalized fear, typical during outbreaks, epidemics, and pandemics (Awaludin, 2020; Gilman, 2010) – fear of others is enhanced and generalized to encompass all perceived as a threat or outside the norm (Awaludin, 2020). This research examines coverage of COVID-19 related to prison issues, from early in the pandemic through vaccine expansion to the general population. It contributes to the literature on the role of news in establishing meaning, and contributing to a public forum, about the incarcerated. It provides insight into the discourses that characterize the historic pandemic, and also into the larger collective, cultural, and institutional Discourse of the country’s relationship with one of its marginalized communities.

Background

Even in non-pandemic times, prisoners face health issues at much higher rates than the general population, especially obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, tuberculosis, hepatitis, HIV, other chronic and infectious diseases, and shorter life expectancy (Maruschak et al., 2015; Wildeman, 2016). Contagious diseases can spread quickly through confined spaces, infecting and sometimes killing large numbers. Prisons have been of concern during outbreaks such as the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia or nineteenth century cholera waves, as well as influenza and other respiratory diseases in the last century (Bick, 2007; Foss, 2020; Marland et al., 2020). Jail and prison populations are composed of already-vulnerable individuals, clustered together in environments that increase disease transmission. Despite this heightened risk, inmates have historically received the least attention in times of crisis; newspapers and other media outlets tend to focus on outbreaks’ threat to privileged classes, ignoring those who are most vulnerable to disease (Foss, 2020).

Marginalized populations around the world are typically the most affected by the intersection of inequity and health. As people of color are disproportionately represented in prison populations – according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, 38.1% of inmates are Black, compared to 14% of the public (“Inmate Race,” 2021;
Tamir, 2021) – health inequalities for the incarcerated contribute to overall health disparities across race and ethnicity (Wildeman & Wang, 2017). COVID-19 has only exacerbated and shed light on vulnerability and disadvantaged communities (Hebert et al., 2008; Rendon et al., 2021). Since marginalization is defined as an imbalance of power and unequal relationships between groups, as well as exclusion from mainstream life in a society (Sevelius et al., 2020), it is important to investigate populations in jails and prisons and the severe effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the vulnerable community.

Theoretical Framework: COVID-19 Pandemic as a Moral Panic

During health-related moral panics, medical information often becomes hyperbolic, personalized, or vilified in the social imaginary. People’s reactions to the disease and understanding of the real threat to one’s health increasingly have less to do with scientific data and nearly everything to do with the emotions experienced around the moral panic (Gilman, 2010). At their most basic level, moral panics are overblown reactions. They occur when a condition “emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests,” generally generating “stylized and stereotypical” representations by “moral barricades” and moral figures – be they the media, politicians, opinion leaders, experts, or the clergy (Cohen, 1972, p. 9). Syphilis in the nineteenth century, the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, the SARS outbreak in 2003 – COVID-19 since 2020 – such instances led to moral panics, with real political and socio-cultural implications and stigma. At the same time as all were significant health events, response to the diseases were determined equally by the development of medical knowledge as by societal meanings (Gilman, 2010). Exploratory research on the current pandemic has found specific behaviors and themes in people’s reactions to the spread of COVID-19 as a moral panic – severe hypochondria, indifference, annihilation, nihilism, paranoia, sadness, fear, transmission of virus, shock, government blaming, anxiety, relating to past pandemics, worry for self, family, or others, information dissemination, composure, compliance, protection, cautiousness, optimism, and health consciousness (Nicomedes & Avila, 2020).

Prison Coverage in the News Media

Moral panics have been shown to also enhance a fear of immigrants, criminals, and in general of others, preliminarily confirmed in the contemporary context in trends towards overcriminalization (Awaludin, 2020). No other site illustrates this more clearly than media constructions of prison populations, as the platform where beliefs are enacted into representation and public discourse. Research on news constructions of crime and prison has long documented distorted representations and messages. Contemporary news articles perpetuate “traditional definitions of newsworthiness,” by centering around the “dangers of prison,” reinforcing stereotypes about prison,
which paints incarceration as the primary solution to reducing crime (Cecil, 2019, p. 230). Reporting tends to oversimplify other salient topics (such as privatization of prisons), suggesting a disconnect between real life debates and their mediated coverage (Cecil, 2017; Montes et al., 2020). Overall, media typically constructs prison populations as other—marginalized either through deviance or through absence. Arguably, the latter is the more dangerous or harmful of the two strategies, as it practically eliminates the plight, needs, and voice of a group of people, dehumanizing them. As such, the approach has been used to justify policy and systemic discrimination (Dunn, 2004).

News outlets also perpetuate racialized stereotypes in crime coverage. In their analysis of television crime news, Dixon and Williams (2015) found that network news underrepresented Black people for both crime victims and offenders, rendering them nearly invisible. News unequally racialize and stigmatize particular communities, without adequately covering the complex issues that contribute to the overcriminalization of Black and brown people (Dixon, 2007). Film and television portrayals also contribute to distorted perceptions of prison and criminal justice, exaggerating the prevalence of violent offenders and depicting prisons as places of violence (Britton, 2003; Cecil, 2017). Crime narratives heighten public interest in understanding the realism of depictions of the criminal justice system (Huey, 2010). Much of the research in this area has centered around cultivation, demonstrating the extent to which higher consumption contributes to a mediated view of reality, overestimated crime rates and risk of one’s own victimization, and justified views of imprisonment over rehabilitation (Custers & Van den Bulck, 2011; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Goidel et al., 2006; Romer et al., 2003).

As for news constructions of the prison population in the context of the pandemic, studies have thus far focused on the reduction of community transmission, mitigation protocol, case studies of early outbreaks, and vaccine uptake in specific prison populations (Cingolani et al., 2021; Leibowitz et al., 2021; Lessard et al., 2022; Montoya-Barthelemy et al., 2020; Vest et al., 2021). The literature has also explored perspectives of the incarcerated during the pandemic. Pyrooz et al. (2020) interviewed inmates in April and May 2020, finding that most assumed that they would contract COVID-19, yet were not overly concerned about the risk, while Pettus-Davis et al. (2021) found that prisoners relied on television, and not correctional facility announcements, as the primary source of pandemic-related information for most inmates.

What emerges thus far is that the existing literature has identified the role of news media during the pandemic, the exceptional health crisis and moral panic of COVID-19 in the prison populations, and the importance of inmates’ experiences. This study contributes to this literature by adding attention to how news media establish and convey messaging about the incarcerated to the general public. In our analysis, we therefore asked how news outlets covered the COVID-19 pandemic related to prisons and incarcerated populations. Does the coverage suggest a moral panic? If so, what aspects of a moral panic are evident in the news coverage? Do discourses shift over time? What is missing or absent in the news discourses?
Methodology

This study used critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2004) to analyze the news coverage of COVID-19 in jails and prisons. News stories were treated as texts rich with meaning. News subjects (the people and voices included) as well as object positions or cognitive aspects (practices talked about, the type of knowledge conveyed) were examined and categorized thematically. Emerging themes and patterns were then interpreted contextually, positioned in conversation with one another and within a wider cultural framework (Fairclough, 2004; Hall, 1997; Saukko, 2003; Schneeweis, 2015; Stewart, 2005). In frequent discussions, the authors refined the common stories emerging from the news coverage. Guiding questions in the analysis included, how is the prison and jail population spoken about in the news at key moments during the COVID-19 pandemic? How do news talk about the spread of the virus, the management and mitigation of the crisis, and vaccine distribution? What is included and what is omitted? What aspects of a moral panic are evident – and how are they constructed – in the news coverage? Starting from attention to the minute – wording, tone, emphasis, repetitions, metaphors, descriptions, and voices/sources in a story – the analysis contextualized the emerging little (d) discourses to make sense of the broader big (D) Discourse of the incarcerated in contemporary U.S. It is this larger Discourse that shapes beliefs and behavior (Fairclough, 1993; Gee, 1996; Rogers, 2002).

As others have suggested, critical discourse analysis of news practices must also engage with the question of “why” and not just of “what” in news. The latter tends to overemphasize a journalistic preoccupation with, and overplay of, objectivity, a detached style of reporting that ignores ideological content in the name of fairness and routines of the craft (Xie, 2018) and is often reductive of the issues covered. To that effect, our analysis engages with the question of “why” such coverage of the pandemic in the context of prison populations? What is constructed as an explanation or justification for pandemic mitigation or vaccine-related decisions?

Sample

Three time-frames with key developments in the pandemic were selected for analysis: (1) March 11–May 8, 2020 to capture the pandemic beginning, including the rise in COVID-19 cases and deaths in prisons and jails; (2) December 1, 2020–January 31, 2021, which constituted the peak of the pandemic for prison populations (Park et al., 2021); and (3) May 1–July 1, 2021 when COVID-19 vaccines were approved for the broadest population in the U.S. News stories were collected through digital searches on ProQuest’s U.S. Southeast Newsstream database, using the terms (1) “prison”/“incarcerated”/“jail” in conjunction with “COVID”/“coronavirus,” (2) “prison”/“incarcerated” and “COVID”/“vaccine,” and (3) “prison”/“incarcerated” and “COVID” for each time period respectively. The change in keyword selection mirrored a dramatic fall in the number of news stories as the pandemic evolved. Narrowing the dataset to
stories featuring the keywords in the headlines and to U.S. newspapers in English only, and removing unrelated stories (for example, on people who served time in prison at some point in their past, etc.), news, features, human interest articles, and op-eds were included in the sample to gauge a comprehensive picture of the coverage. After removing duplicates, the search yielded 136 unique articles, published in 33 publications. Among the papers were The Baltimore Sun, The Christian Science Monitor, The Journal Record, The Washington Informer, and The Missoulian, yet nearly half of the reporting appeared in USA Today (17 articles or 12.5% of the sample), The Wall Street Journal (20 stories or 14.7% of the sample), and The Washington Examiner (23 news or 16.9% of the total articles). Worth mentioning is that, even though the reporting featured in regional and local publications across the country, about ten different publications (nearly a third of the sample) are based in Florida, a state that ranks third for prison population in the country, and tenth highest for imprisonment rate (World Population Review, 2022).

From Factual Reporting to Vulnerability to Absence

The news coverage across the U.S. at three key moments between March 2020 and June 2021 is characterized by distinct yet interconnected discourses – (1) journalistic objectivity that provides expected yet detached information about the challenges presented by the pandemic in jails and prisons; (2) a discourse of scapegoating and abandonment that constructs a villain to assign fault for the moral panic; (3) vulnerability that emphasizes the victim status of populations in prisons; (4) a related discourse of human rights; (5) a discourse that vilifies the prison population; and (6) a discourse of absence that is striking later in the pandemic in its ignorance of key developments around vaccination.

Journalistic Objectivity

This predominant discourse is characterized by reporting that “separates facts from values” with little to no interpretation (in linguistic choices or types of quotes), “balanced” voices that typically represent the proverbial two sides of a coin, short and to-the-point news stories, and no emotion or human-interest appeal (Schudson, 2001, p. 150). As such, the discourse used news briefs and announcements to cite official voices as subject positions (the Federal Bureau of Prisons [BOP], departments of corrections, governors, and mayors) who spoke to an efficient implementation of necessary measures – at the same time as the reporting acknowledged the unprecedented challenges of the time. The tone in hard news represented a fairly positive representation of the government’s handling of the pandemic, and was especially prevalent in the reporting of the second and third data sets. At the peak of the winter surge when prison COVID-19 cases were at an all-time high, news focused on the number of positive cases and on mitigation measures with leads like, “The Tennessee Department of Correction reported Tuesday that it was suspending visits at four state prisons until
further notice because of the coronavirus” (Hineman, 2020). Such news stories omitted description of the prison conditions, images of COVID-19 wards in prisons, and other humanizing elements. Coverage of vaccine prioritization debates used a similar framework, emphasizing the number of inmates and staff at risk for disease transmission, as opposed to how individuals felt or were experiencing the pandemic.

The corresponding “other side” to officials’ handling of the pandemic appeared in news through the voice of advocacy groups like the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the Southern Poverty Law Center, or prisoner watchdog groups such as the Justice Roundtable or Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM). Their role has typically been to deplore hygiene conditions in prisons, capacity for social distancing, access to PPE, soap, and hand sanitizer for inmates, as well as quarantine, transfer, and release procedures, and campaigns and priorities for vaccination. The news offered the differing viewpoints at face value; for example, in The Tennessean, “Knoxville attorney Jonathan Cooper, president of the Tennessee Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, said officials should act now to release some inmates and blunt the potential for an outbreak” (Tamburin, 2020). Similarly, Florida State Policy Director for FAMM was quoted to explain the role of advocacy in the pandemic: “From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, advocacy organizations across the ideological spectrum have encouraged state leaders to take actions to slow the spread of the coronavirus in Florida’s prisons and mitigate the damages from inevitable prison outbreaks” (Newburn, 2020, p. A13).

The news approached reporting rather simplistically – yet assessing the quality of sources, the degree of realism of a claim, or the usefulness of a news development were avoided; so was adding emotion. As such, the voice of those hurting of COVID-19 – incarcerated people, their families, and affected staff – were generally absent in the discourse. As much as either journalists or other industry practitioners may assert the allegiance of hard news to objectivity, it is well-documented that so-called objective news is still rife with ideology, meaning, and, frequently, adherence to opinion (Gee, 1996; Hall, 1997; Xie, 2018). Even seemingly straightforward reporting constructs a viewpoint – accomplished through framing, wording, information order, source selection, viewpoint repetition, photos and captions, or linking. Many of the articles that included an inmate perspective (or that of their families) also made note of the person’s crime or reason to be in jail. Such addition is not common practice in journalism (H. Gilbert, personal communication, 2021), yet the practice contributes to a familiar approach to constructing the deviance of the prison populations, questioning the credibility and legitimacy of sources and removing empathy.

Her face was beet red. She was wheezing, struggling to breathe. The 38-year-old woman -- an inmate at Metro Transitional Center -- had been experiencing stomach discomfort since early last week, one of her cellmates said. … The sick woman is serving out a sentence for drug and assault charges. (Boone, 2020a)
“Our sentences have turned into death sentences,” Sterling Rivers, a 32-year-old from Tennessee serving time at Oakdale for a drug conspiracy conviction said in an interview. (Gurman, 2020b)

Another Minnesota prison inmate has died from COVID-19. The man is the third inmate from the Faribault state prison to die from the disease and the sixth system wide. Larry Joseph Roberts, 64, died on Dec. 4 at St. Mary’s Hospital in Rochester, according to the Department of Corrections. … Roberts, of Bemidji, was serving a 39-month sentence following his 2019 felony conviction for possessing pornography involving minors. (Featherly, 2020)

Other stories made more subtle inferences. In this example from the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, a former mayor and newspaper editor seemingly represented the two sides of an argument at the same time: “Two wildly divergent extremes have prevailed, said Jim Quinn, former mayor of Leesburg… and editor of the local newspaper. ‘There’s one side that says we’re all going to die,’ Quinn said. ‘The other isn’t going to let it bother them’” (Boone, 2020b). The other side is not that inmates are well protected and safe, but that their deaths are negligible, expendable. While at first glance the news reporting appeared balanced, the inference is problematic. This language was rarer in the later samples, likely in part due to the heightened awareness of issues of racial justice across the country in the context of the 2020 demonstrations. Yet still only two articles in each of the second and third samples documented racial disparity in prisons – the Journal Record noted the increased risk of contracting and dying from the virus given that “Black Oklahomans were disproportionately booked into prison at even higher levels than usual” (“Rising Racial Disparity,” 2020), while an USA Today editorial noted that those incarcerated “are among those most at risk for contracting COVID-19, becoming gravely ill, or worse,” especially for “Black, indigenous and communities of color that are disproportionately harmed by over-criminalization” (Chan & Hooks, 2020).

**Blaming and Abandonment**

Establishing the “fact” of a crisis in the jail and prison system in the context of the pandemic must include an actor to blame. This is a common aspect of moral panics – the need for constructing a scapegoat and someone to blame. State officials generally blamed the pandemic for unusual circumstances and unprecedented times; advocacy groups blamed state officials for mitigation strategies, and for lapses and delays in providing proper hygiene, social distancing, and quarantining. The news contributed to this discourse through clickbait headlines and inflammatory language, at the same time that an article may include factual reporting. For example, Tampa Bay Times published a well-sourced article rich with statistics and sources that included inmates and family members, but headlined it with “Virus races in prison” (Sullivan, 2020). From the Washington Examiner,
Florida inmates test positive for COVID-19, *enflaming* fears of a prison pandemic *wildfire*

The spread of COVID-19 inside Florida’s prison system, with 95,000 inmates and 23,000 employees in 143 sites, has been a *dry tinder incendiary* in many pandemic *wildfire scenarios*. (Haughey, 2020; emphases added)

Such news presentation is grounded in a conflictual reporting approach. Promoters of solutions journalism have pointed out that identifying issues without following through with how these are managed and solved does not provide a complete picture of the challenges at hand, nor does it accomplish the mission and purpose of journalism as an institution (McIntyre, 2019; Wenzel et al., 2016). Occasional news stories in the sample speak to this issue, yet opinion pieces were the most vocal to articulate the need for nuanced solutions, policies, and reactions to the pandemic, as illustrated in these op-eds:

We could debate all day whether the majority of these people should be locked up in the first place. But no matter where you land in that discussion, we can all agree that these individuals do not deserve death sentences or to be exposed to serious illness. The reality remains that if serious steps are not taken, this is exactly the fate many prisoners face. The jails and prisons in our country are filthy and prisoners lack access to supplies that could help them prevent the spread of the virus. Basic items such as soap, tissues, and cleaning supplies are often only available for purchase. And other items, such as alcohol-based hand sanitizer, are flat-out banned. (Cox, 2020)

Reducing the jail population, which is typically those awaiting trial, is key so when the virus strikes the jail it will be manageable. Additionally, not arresting nonviolent offenders such as those accused of shoplifting and simple drug possession, while giving them a court notice, isn’t a threat to the public. (Zimmerman, 2020)

It is also in these sorts of stories – not news but opinion pieces – that the subject of the reporting were not always addressed as inmates, but rather as prison population, citizens, “those stuck in jail,” or just people.

Towards the end of spring 2020, investigating real blame began to surface, documented by the Wall Street Journal, for instance, when the ACLU requested access to public records to assess why BOP has moved “far too slowly” to manage the crisis and to “stave off some of the worst impacts of Covid” (Kusisto & Gurman, 2020). In the later dataset in the winter 2020–2021 time-frame, evidence emerged that prison staff underreported or started withholding virus data from the public – evidence of “moral barricades” in the management of the crisis (Cohen, 1972).
Vulnerability as Victimization

In sharp contrast to objective reporting, a discourse of vulnerability depicted populations in jails and prisons as victims of a harsh and unprepared system. Explicit vulnerability was phrased, for instance, in USA Today: “‘As some prison officials have already warned, prisons are like petri dishes, leaving inmates vulnerable to COVID-19,’ a bipartisan coalition of senators said…”; later in the same article, “Waiting is not an option. Let’s send these vulnerable nonviolent inmates home for the sake of our nation’s health” (Johnson, 2020). News articulated risk occasionally through the voice of inmates or family members, and predominantly through advocacy groups that built on arguments of human rights violations in the prison system that such organizations have long deplored. The argument was unequivocal: Inmates are at risk of dying in prison; vulnerability can equate death sentences. For instance, a letter to the editor in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution noted, “Those incarcerated cannot choose where they want to be, but their living circumstances have reached the point where they clearly constitute cruel and unusual punishment” (2021). Another op-ed by a law professor and a public defender stated,

[O]ur jails and prisons are filled with poor people, mostly of color. Many of us also know that our prisons are being used to house people experiencing mental illness. We have not yet come up with a humane response to this reality. COVID-19 is now becoming a threat that takes our system’s inhumanity to a new and even more horrific level: We know that the virus spreads in confined groups with frightening speed and efficiency. In a prison environment, in a prison environment, huge numbers will die. Essentially, we are transforming their sentence of incarceration into a sentence to death. (Mills & Galvin-Almanza, 2020)

The two stories connected vulnerability to marginalization and racial markers, whereas others articulated the risk for vulnerable groups in the context of politicized mitigation efforts – “When partisan politics take over the policymaking process, it is ultimately the most vulnerable in our society who lose” (Desmond & Volz, 2020).

What is significant is not that the issue of vulnerability is included in the news – journalistic objectivity relies on including opposing sources in the same news story; and it was a fairly common theme to refer to people with vulnerable health or risk factors from the beginning of the pandemic. Rather, representing vulnerability emphasizes that those in prisons need protection as a collective group that is marginalized or at a disadvantage. The call for attention to vulnerability remained throughout the three samples; for instance, news reported that prisoners were not prioritized for vaccination in Georgia, “despite the vulnerability of any population living in a congregate setting. About 8% of Georgia’s incarcerated population is over age 60 and 60% are Black, two additional risk factors for poor outcomes with COVID-19” (Landers, 2021).
**Human Rights in Compassion and Litigation**

A discourse emphasizing human rights emerged early in the pandemic, flourishing into calls for clemency and justice. This reporting approach presented interest on its own, as the news emphasized the humanity of prisoners unlike any other discourse. Two developments shaped this discourse—compassionate release early in the pandemic, and legal action and investigations into prison conditions later into 2021. As for the former, news introduced this position almost exclusively through advocacy voices and op-eds, often written by former correction officers and judges, and by political commentators. In 2020, more than 44,000 prisoners had been recommended for early release—nonviolent offenders with little time left to serve and/or at a higher risk of COVID-19 complications (Chan & Hooks, 2020). At least 24,000 inmates were released to home confinement (Phillips, 2021). As prisons and jails began implementing this process of release to home confinement, several news stories broke of mainly famous individuals asking to be considered for release—well-known politicians, actors, musicians, and business figures, most of them men. Most requests from celebrity figures were denied, though overall the number of releases increased into the summer of 2020 and continued into 2021. A typical example was, for instance, a pharmaceutical executive’s (denied) request, claiming “mental health issues weakened his immune system and made him more susceptible to contracting the coronavirus” (“Pharmaceutical exec loses second bid,” 2021).

Some reporting narrowed in on the unusual circumstances of a particular inmate—a certain Mr. Rochell, who was released to home confinement, was described as a “decent, kindly, honest and immensely likable man, beloved in the residential unit” (Gurman, 2020a). Others articulated a nuanced approach to compassionate release, seeking to improve the criminal justice system and uniquely engaging with the “why” of the current circumstances:

[S]omehow, top officials across the country haven’t recognized the urgency of this issue. Why the hesitation? Do our leaders believe that anyone accused or convicted of a crime, no matter the nature, must still be dangerous? Do they consider the lives of people behind bars so devoid of value that they’d prefer to see them dead than risk any possibility of future crime? Do they not understand that an outbreak in one of these facilities will ripple outward? If our governors, sheriffs, prosecutors, and president want to save as many lives as possible, they must be willing to reassess the view that sees confinement as the default. (Mills & Galvin-Almanza, 2020)

Many inmates requested release during this time and faced denial, yet only the cases of well-known, formerly powerful, mostly white, mostly male inmates received news coverage. By the second data set, late in 2020 and into January 2021, news coverage on compassionate release focused more on reducing transmission than on individual cases or impact, whereas by June 2021, given the challenges of the prolonged pandemic, reporting focused on success stories, the low rates of recidivism, and implications...
around return to prison. Those released were presented as model citizens that should not be incarcerated, suggesting that the end of COVID-19 spread could be detrimental to inmates released.

The other aspect to the discourse of human rights was to cover concern over the hidden numbers, the underreporting of cases, and the alleged general withholding of information that threaten prisoners’ human and citizen rights. A range of issues came to light and made the news, including low testing rates that skewed data for some states and that led to underreporting of cases (Griesbach & Turcotte, 2021), mishandling of mitigation protocols – such as prohibiting correctional staff from wearing masks, not allowing for social distancing or being able to decrease overcrowding, lacking adequate soap, isolating high-risk individuals, prioritizing vaccination, etc. (Cordeiro, 2021; McCoy, 2021).

**Vilification and Threat to Community**

As advocacy groups called for release to home confinement, for better mitigation efforts, and for transparency during the pandemic, news coverage also emphasized the prison population as deviant, especially reporting on the notion that prisoner rates of infection constitute a threat to the wider community. For instance:

> “You’re talking about the inside of an institution, that’s like a little petri dish,” [Joe Rojas, Southeast regional vice president of the Council of Prison Locals] said. “That’s a life and death situation because we take that home to our families.” (Gurman, 2020c)

Absent a shift in the state’s approach, this will mean more infections and deaths among incarcerated people and corrections professionals. These outbreaks will affect the wider community, as well; the person who serves lunch at a prison eats dinner near your family at a restaurant. (Newburn, 2020)

Similarly, an editorial pointed out the threat to communities surrounding prisons in an argument for vaccine prioritization among the incarcerated: “In areas that are rural or have small cities that don’t belong to a larger metropolitan area a substantial inmate population could be contributing to the severity of a county’s outbreak” (Velazquez, 2021).

The threat of prison outbreaks spreading to external communities is a possibility. At the same time, such messages can further stigmatize incarcerated populations, painting them as “diseased,” and in general build on the fear and vilification of people that have passed through the criminal justice system. It also further enhances the victim status of inmates already vulnerable to actors in power positions - prison staff, correctional officers, the wider public even. Although advocacy is a genre of strategic communication and it should not surprise that news stories attribute this argument of public threat to activists and lawyers – who likely need to emphasize the urgency of the requests – the discourse also solidifies a moral barricade between the public and the challenging circumstances of those in prison.
Absence

Overwhelmingly newspapers left out or downplayed the risks and impact for incarcerated populations. Early in 2020 concerns about congregate settings dominated coverage, as cruise ships were quarantined and nursing homes began to restrict visitors. Stories and videos of isolated senior citizens, notices of deaths in nursing homes, and narratives of the families impacted by visitor restrictions circulated online and became feature news – while prisons were primarily overlooked or included few humanizing moments or inmate experiences. Put in a broader socio-cultural context, the discourse of absence is vastly different than the narrative chronicled in The Marshall Project series on coronavirus, which offered stories on health in prison, compassionate release, vaccine hesitancy, along with articles by current inmates documenting the impact of mitigation restrictions (“The Marshall Project,” 2021).

Nearly absent in the coverage is the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on prisoners of color. In the general population, COVID-19 has impacted people of color more significantly, with hospitalizations and deaths for American Indian, Hispanic, and Black persons more than double the rate of those for white individuals (“Risk for COVID Infections,” 2021). Since Black and Hispanic men are overrepresented in prisons (“Inmate Race,” 2021; Tamir, 2021), one can assume that, like the general population, Black individuals were significantly more affected by COVID-19 than other racial groups, even if demographic data was not consistently reported for inmate deaths (Saloner et al., 2020). Race and ethnicity should have been an integral part of the news coverage on protecting vulnerable incarcerated populations. The downplay and outright absence of news that distinctly highlighted the increased risk for prisoners of color is a notable invisibility that further marginalizes these communities, continuing to contribute to racial stereotypes and distorted public perception (Dixon, 2007).

Conclusion

The news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to populations in jails and prisons relied and contributed to six discourses that collectively represent a comprehensive picture of vulnerability. Journalistic objective reporting depicted an exceptional health crisis, blamed by officials for their challenges. News articulated a critical position towards governmental agencies and their mitigation efforts, yet overall supported a complex and challenging moral panic. Vulnerability and human rights were also emphasized clearly in the reporting. Yet seen in a broader socio-political context, these four discursive approaches – objectivity, blame, vulnerability, and human rights – have dehumanized prisoners and stripped the storytelling of emotion and the capacity for readers and the wider public to empathize and understand the real challenges facing those within jail and prison walls. A disconnect occurs between real-life experiences and salient issues from news coverage.

Based on the literature, emphasis on deviance was also anticipated, yet the news shied away from overt representation. It was less common in hard news reporting to lean discriminatory in the language – with the notable exception of articles that did
include the crime of an inmate who also served as witness or inside voice in a news story, a reporting practice that merits further investigation given its seeming uniqueness. Instead, most of the othering came through the discourse of vilification and chiefly through that of absence, arguably a more harmful approach. News emphasized the protection of vulnerable populations in relation to nursing homes and those with medical complexities, yet the incarcerated groups have been absent from this focus; the prison has been and will continue to pose high risks of disease, with periodic outbreaks that target the most vulnerable. Related, an area that presents an opportunity to further research relates to the ongoing victimization of the marginalized through advocacy voices that must emphasize vulnerability, yet they do so by constructing the prison populations as deviant – and therefore replicating problematic stereotypes.

There was also an observable deracialization of the news coverage in the context of the pandemic – which does not echo existing literature on prior concerns related to criminalization and stereotyping of prison populations. In the context of 2020 and the protests for racial justice, this absence may speak to a cultural sensitivity or to the spread of the moral panic as a general, global challenge; yet it discursively covers up, and thus perpetuates and amplifies, substantive. Such complications, while embedded in the context of the news coverage, may have offered confounding complications to understanding societal stance on disease and incarcerated populations. Related, also absent in the news coverage – and in the present study – are gender and cross-cultural comparisons. Examining how media outlets across the world covered incarceration during the COVID-19 pandemic could prove useful, as would more engagement with inmates directly and their experiences during this global health crisis. Examining how the moral panic was internalized, either as fear of the pandemic or in further victimization, could shed light on the disconnect between lived experience and its mediated/news construction. Such questions could constitute the starting point for further research, as would the noted heightened coverage of the pandemic in prisons in Floridian publications.

Finally, this study started from attention to the minute storytelling in news to identify the little (d) discourses that helped the country make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of jails and prisons. Taken collectively, the broader big (D) Discourse of the incarcerated in contemporary U.S. that emerges was one of ongoing vulnerability and absence. To the point of the former, the news media (and other power players institutionally relevant for this group) has become complacent to real, substantive challenges inside prisons as the pandemic has unfolded; as regards the latter, absence and emotional distance from the populations increasingly shaped the news. Since Discourse shapes beliefs and behavior (Fairclough, 1993; Gee, 1996; Rogers, 2002), such news approach continues to be problematic - and this study calls attention to the need for ongoing surveillance of this mediated genre of communication.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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