Sixteen miles: New users, stock dealers, and racialization in small cities

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ABSTRACT
This study examines how proximate small cities in the United States that have similar socioeconomic backgrounds, disproportionately high rates of opioid overdose, but different racial demographics, narrate local experiences of the opioid epidemic. Using critical discourse analysis, we analyzed 251 local news articles from Lawrence and Lowell, Massachusetts. This comparative study highlights the racialization of space and the racializing power of space in two small city newspapers: the Eagle Tribune and the Lowell Sun. We demonstrate how (White) criminality is made sympathetic through White death, and how space is employed as a multi-valiant mechanism of colorblind racialization. We theorize the construction of a distorted and racialized “supply chain,” featuring narratives of “stock dealers” from “source cities” moving drugs into predominately White “receiver cities” populated by vulnerable “new users,” employing and producing space as a racialized frame. Ultimately, we map how familiar racialization and novel decriminalization is produced in/by local news media.

Introduction

While often described as a “national crisis” in the United States, the opioid epidemic—including opioid use, addiction, overdose, and death—is concentrated in particular states, and within these states, specific towns, cities, and regions are impacted to varying degrees. In Massachusetts, our state of focus, the opioid-related death rate is double the national average, and adjacent small cities Lowell and Lawrence have been especially impacted (Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 2017). We compare how the opioid epidemic is framed as a social problem in these two small cities, using critical discourse analysis to analyze a total of 251 articles from the cities’ local news media.

More specifically, we ask in two geographically proximate areas with similar overdose rates, similar socioeconomic structure (albeit with Lawrence experiencing slightly higher rates of poverty, lower rates of educational attainment, and lower median household income, and both cities experiencing high poverty rates relative to Massachusetts), and differing racial demography, how do local newspapers report on the opioid epidemic? What are the differing narratives and rhetorical strategies used, and why? Our expectation was
that the racial demographics of the two cities would influence the reporting on opioid use and addiction. However, we did not expect to find that the (relational) representations of cities and towns—in part characterized by the symbols, bodies, and emotions represented within them—would serve as conduits for the construction of opioids and criminality, or that disparate framing of opioid use and possession would be correlated to the person’s place of residence.

Ultimately, two place-bound suggestions for opioid use and management emerged: the decriminalization of illicit substances in predominately White Lowell, and the continued criminalization of predominantly Latino Lawrence. We argue that the classed and racial imaginaries of the cities and towns leads to a place-bound split in reporting focus, and through racialization of multiple spaces (the city, the town, the home, the supply chain), reporting coalesces to convey a racialized source city and (White) receiver cities.

The elegiac writing surrounding grief, death (specifically, death as humanized or death as spectacle), and loss in the receiver cities demarcates them from the source city and racializes them as White spaces. This is most often narrated through young, White, and vulnerable new users, or the novel demographic grappling with opioid-use and overdose, as well as their loved ones and support people from a cross-section of state and local institutions. Though symbolic boundary work, this felt demarcation of “purity” simultaneously iconizes the source city into a space of “pollution,” “danger,” and “dirt”—or “matter out of place”—which must be contained and (re)emplaced by social practices (i.e., rituals) (see Douglas, 1966). The “polluting” power of the source city is signified by dilated space, aggressive policing, criminalization, and racialized stock dealers—a familiar specter of news media—who use drugs to exploit the youth, naive, mental health struggles, and precarity of the new users.

This imagined supply chain generates an exaggerated and emotive narrative, in which the receiver city and surrounding suburbs (and their residents) are always-already victimized by the source city. While we find that characteristics of population—including race, gender, and socioeconomic status—and related stereotypes are included in these newspapers, these become further moderated by place. As such, this is an empirical inquiry into how place is racialized and a vector for racialization.

The structure of this analysis is as follows: first, we outline relevant literature on framing, news media and discourse studies, as well as space, crime, and race. Second, we detail the history of this iteration of the opioid epidemic in the United States and provide a brief overview of Lawrence and Lowell, Massachusetts, as well as their local news media, to provide context for our analysis. Third, we detail our methodology and research process. Fourth, we introduce our results, focusing on the discursive construction of the supply chain, representations of drugs users and sellers, space (focusing on criminalization and racialization), descriptions of overdose, grief, and death, and regional “White decline.” We conclude the paper with an overview of our findings and potential implications.

**Literature: Framing space, race, and crime in small cities**

As yet, there has been little inquiry into how small urban areas marked by high opioid-related mortality rates narrate local effects of this national crisis in the United States, nor has there been comparative analysis of how place affects local news reporting on the epidemic. In examining these small city newspapers, we follow “contextual constructivism,” which
comparatively examines the thematic components of the claims-making process (Best, 2018, p. 56) related to opioid use and overdose, while placing the claims of each local newspaper within socio-political geography of its city.

In following “contextual constructivism,” an explicit and latent “vocabulary of motivations” (C.W. Mills, 1940) is clear in the articles, where the rationale of action is attributed to actors and actions based on dominant narratives within a cultural context (Presser & Sandberg, 2015). The attribution of motivation is based on existing “frames” of race, class, and gender, among others. This can include emotion, such as grief, which are embedded in and constitutive of such frames (Butler, 2004; Feagin, 2009). We add to this concept, arguing that the newspapers employ place as a frame of racialized meaning-making, and that place becomes a frame in its own right. Applying discourse analysis, we identify the narrative production of this frame by examining drug use (both medicalized and criminalized), race, place, and space. In doing so, we turn to scholarship on small cities, theoretical approaches to space, and analyses of race, policing, drugs, and criminality.

The majority of recent urban scholarship on opioids in the United States has been singularly focused on rural areas or large urban areas, and has found that poor, White Americans are criminalized (Quinones, 2015; Tiger, 2017). This literature on the criminalization of poor White’s opioid use runs contrary the popular narrative of the “gentler war on drugs,” which suggests White drug use has dramatically shifted public discourse on addiction (Netherland & Hansen, 2016). Given that popular reporting and scholarly analysis of the opioid epidemic contains both sympathetic and more punitive frames, local news media is an apt site to explore how reporting on similar content varies by place (see Brown-Saracino & Rumpf, 2011).

Analyses of Canadian newsprint media, for example, found that reporting on opioids was dichotomous, featuring patients innocently following physician prescriptions or living lives characterized by addiction and street crime (Webster et al., 2020). While the authors identified date of publication as an indicator for this bifurcation in reporting, other studies of Canadian newspapers demonstrate that race is predictive of how opioid use is characterized (Johnston, 2020). Given these findings, we hypothesized the LS and the ET would describe opioid use, addiction, and overdose through dual lenses of sympathy and criminality, differing in relation to race. Ultimately, while we found similar messages of humanization and criminalization with regard to race, we also found that the split in local reporting was tied to place, associated racialization, and place as a site of (relational) racialization.

Both newspapers offer similar approaches to the opioid epidemic when discussing White spaces (see Anderson, 2015). For example, Andover’s (an affluent and predominantly White suburb) fire chief was quoted in the ET “‘We are losing too many of our young citizens. We’ve got to lead the way and prevent any more tragedies’” (Date, 2015). The LS features similar reporting in Billerica (another relatively affluent and majority White suburb). As Billerica police chief explains, “We’ve all come to the realization that we’re not going to arrest our way out of this problem” (“An out-of-the-cell tack on heroin abuse,” An out-of-the-cell tack on heroin abuse, 2015).

First responders, including police officers and other state actors, are largely sympathetic and encourage the use of supportive services across papers when discussing the opioid epidemic’s impact on White spaces. Occasionally, sympathetic frames are extended to dealers operating out of the White towns and cities, despite the criminalization of drug sellers (and users) in Lawrence. Surprisingly, residents of color who live in White spaces
(although they appear infrequently in the data set) are also offered sympathetic frames, illuminating the ways racialized spaces can (de)racialize and (de)criminalize residents. Our main finding that place is a key determinant in how opioid use and overdose is described and constructed as a social problem, is especially troubling given that circulating media discourse spurs uneven development (Mathew Greenberg, 2008; Rofe, 2004) that serves the interests of urban elites (Jonas & Wilson, 1999; Logan & Molotch, 1987).

Small cities scholarship demonstrates three relevant ways these urban areas are different from larger cities. First, they maintain more close-knit communities (Wirth, 1938/1969, 1968) suggesting that stigma and other effects associated with drug use would be more significant. Second, while arrests are down nationally, they have increased in small cities (Pfaff, 2017; Simes, 2017), indicating that policing and related carceral effects are rising in small urban areas. Third, the “characteristics of the people [in small cities]—their education levels, racial identities, and nativity—matter more” than other metrics of change for the city’s progress (or decline) (Norman, 2013, p. 143). Although collective identity and difference in small cities has always been important, new trends such as the concentrated rise of drug use and overdose, as well as increasing rates of arrests and incarceration, suggest that demographic structure may have more amplified effects in small urban areas.

While empirical work shows the uniqueness of small cities, theoretical interventions also provide insight in local experiences of space and place. Place is more than location or built environment; it is further constituted by how it is “interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined” (Gieryn, 2000). Scholarship on space illuminates how the places in which we live and work are dynamic. Doreen Massey has explained, “I want to see space as a cut through the myriad stories in which we are all living at any moment” (Edmonds, 2013). Spaces are created and reinforced through the creation of boundaries, the telling and re-imagining of history among residents, residents owned lived histories, local politics, and unfortunately, through violence and exclusion (Massey, 1994).

Of course, this “felt” experience of place and the material processes of its making are highly racialized in the United States, and White spaces have been separated (and separate themselves from) from “dangerous,” “urban,” “ghetto,” “inner cities,” i.e., “Black” spaces (see Anderson, 2012, 2015). These spaces are both historical creations and presently enforced through everyday actions (Marable, 2002). White spaces are built, extended, and preserved through various mechanisms, some of which are more subtle (such as social isolation and public representation of White history through statues and monuments), and some of which are dangerously overt (including threats of violence or outright violence; Loewen, 2018).

This boundary-work, reinforced through NIMBY-ist (Not-In-My-Backyard!) ideologies, has sought to push “social problems” (which, in some ways, is a euphemism for people of color) out of White spaces through exclusion, discrimination, anti-immigrant sentiments, and unequal housing practices (Harris Combs, 2019; Wexler, 1996). The preservation of White spaces is supported by multiple actors; it is enacted through exclusion, boundary-work, institutionalized discrimination, and outright violence by individuals, groups, as well as state actors and agencies. The police have a history of supporting this violence against “bodies out of place” (Boyles, 2015; Harris Combs, 2019; Loewen, 2018; Puwar, 2004). Despite this history of violent White backlash, it is Black spaces that have been historically described as dangerous, which has been named “the most powerful racist idea” (Kendi,
While the majority of people of color in the United States are “ghettoized” by this violence and exclusion, Whiteness enables hypermobility while enforcing the unidirectional nature of White boundary work from communities of color (Anderson, 2015). Whiteness has been theorized as an unmarked, neutral master status (Apple, 1998; Guess, 2006) that is inscribed on the body and protected by dominant institutions (Haney-Lopez, 1996; Muhammad, 2010; Roedigger, 2006). This protected privilege extends through constructions of temporality, feeling, and space (Coontz, 1992). The majority of White people have the power to live in White places, preserve White places, migrate to avoid desegregation, and have freedom of mobility generally (Parisi et al., 2015). Loewen (2018), for instance, theorizes that “Suburban Hitchhikers” are White Americans that travel to cities for the infrastructure they resist implementing within their own communities, such as mental health and substance use disorders clinics. Simultaneously, they effectively block the use of the amenities they do allow in their communities from people of color (such as tennis courts and well-funded schools). Accordingly, the seemingly macroeconomic structural factors that led to post-Fordist decline (often characterized as “White decline”) and that have caused distress during the opioid epidemic, such as the lack of treatment options, were also mobilized in defense of White spaces.

Theories of colorblind racial formations show how racism has become less “explicit.” Rather, it emerges through coded language, socio-political rhetoric, and institutional practices, instead of direct expression of racist beliefs (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Importantly, constructions of race and colorblind racism are always evolving and enacted alongside continued violence and boundary work. Place is one means through which colorblind racialization manifests. Indeed, White spaces are often maintained through (colorblind) racism and boundary work from minority communities, theoretically illuminating the connection between race and space (Anderson, 2012, 2015; Kobayashi & Peake, 2000; Omi & Winant, 2015).

In recent history, drug panics have also employed colorblind logics to extend mechanisms of racialized social control (Reinarman & Adler & Adler, 1994; Rios, 2011; Wacquant, 2001). In the 1980s and 1990s, for instance, reporting on the crack epidemic skyrocketed as police waged a drug war on “the inner city,” which was symbolically and spatially separate from the predominantly White suburbs (Cohen, 2015; Golub et al., 2010; Moriearty & Carson, 2012). Attention to colorblind constructions of race, place, criminality, and drugs, in concert with our data, reveals the supply chain (or the relational construction of drug use and movement between proximate cities) as an interconnected space of continued racialization.

**Background and case justification**

**The opioid epidemic: 1990s–2020**

The American prescription opioid epidemic began in Appalachia in the 1990s, especially impacting economically disadvantaged Whites. Those living with opioid use disorder have been shown to experience neglect, stigma, policing, and imprisonment across racial groups (Lopez, 2018a; Quinones, 2015; Tiger, 2017). The early 1990s saw a surge in use, which rose
again in the 2000s. This growth in supply and demand is attributed to deindustrialization, unemployment, faulty medical training, lax- and overprescribing, aggressive pharmaceutical lobbying, and the centralization of the patient’s “right” to be “pain free” (Quinones, 2015).

Since 1990 to time of writing, over 760,000 people have died from opioid-related overdoses (CDC, 2020). In 2017 alone, over 70,000 people in the United States died from opioid-related overdoses, surpassing annual deaths from guns, cars, and HIV/AIDS, as well as causalities from the Vietnam War (Lopez, 2018b). While these numbers are already tragic, the true scope of the epidemic is still emerging. A 2020 study from the University of Rochester indicates that reported deaths are conservative at best, and “opioid-related overdoses could be 28% higher than reported because of incomplete death records” (Kornfield, 2020). Due to limited resources—which can delay toxicology reports, limit drug testing, and prevent the completion of autopsies—underreporting is spatially determined, with the most underreporting in poor communities misidentifying opioid-related overdose in White females aged 30–60. While overdose deaths decreased somewhat in 2018, opioid-related overdoses still account for almost 70% of all “injury related deaths” (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). It is the leading cause of death for people under 55 and has effectively lowered the national life expectancy.

As mentioned, this “national crisis” can flatten how geography impacts opioid use and overdose as certain states are seeing rises in opioid overdoses, and urban areas are generally seeing higher drug overdose rates than rural areas (Hedegaard et al., 2019). Middlesex county (including Lowell) experienced 2,190 opioid related deaths from 2010 to 2018, the highest in Massachusetts. Essex County (including Lawrence) reported 1,623 opioid overdose deaths from 2010 to 2018, the second highest in Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 2019). Both cities have high rates of overdose compared to the rest of Massachusetts, but low compared to the city of Boston proper. (In 2017, Lowell reported 59 opioid-related overdose deaths, Lawrence 50, and Boston 201 [Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 2020].) We are not the only scholars who think Lowell and Lawrence are worthy sites for comparison. Boston Medical Center, which was awarded $89 million from the National Institute on Drug Abuse in 2019 to begin a clinical trial to reduce opioid-related mortality in Massachusetts towns and suburbs, selected both Lowell and Lawrence as trial sites (Grayken Center for Addiction, 2019).

Currently, more White people die from opioid overdose than Black or Latino individuals, and relatively affluent White users have driven the medicalization of drug use (Murphy, 2015). Young Whites from relatively affluent suburbs have “made heroin a public health problem” (Cohen, 2015), resulting in calls for “treatment not punishment,” especially when compared to the discourse around the crack epidemic (Netherland & Hansen, 2016). Be that as it may, the criminality associated with drugs—including opioids—are still used as justification for state violence against Black and Brown Americans today (see Allen, 2020). Despite these relative shifts in discussing addiction, overdose, and best practices for interventions, the “White face” of heroin has obscured rising rates of opioid overdose among Black and Latino users (Bebinger, 2018; Katz & Goodnough, 2017). For example, from 2015 to 2017, Hispanic and Black Americans have experienced massive surges in opioid-related mortality in urban areas, increasing by 262% and 103%, respectively (Lippold et al., 2019).
**Lawrence and Lowell, Massachusetts**

Connected by interstate 495 and approximately 16 miles apart, Lawrence and Lowell are about 30 miles north from Boston. The cities share a similar socio-economic trajectory. Both are historic cities (each with over 20 locations on the National Register of Historic Places, 2017). In the 1840s, immigrant labor and domestic migrant laborers supported the industrial boom. Both suffered post-Fordist decline (Norkunas, 2002).

Both are “gateway cities,” or urban centers known as an initial destination for immigrants. Lowell has a higher proportion of White residents, but retains a notable Cambodian population. In the 1980s, 25,000 Cambodian immigrants came to Lowell seeking refuge from the Khmer Rouge regime (Shank, 2014). While the International Institute of New England, which facilitates refugee and immigrant placement accounts for this population of residents of color, the city has historically opposed each wave of immigration that brought with it a new ethnic group to Lowell, with native residents placing the blame on immigrant populations for a slew of social problems caused by the decline of the mills (M. Lavallee, 2010). Today, Lawrence is predominantly Hispanic and Latino. Following industrial and manufacturing decline in the 1960s, mill owners sought cheap labor in Puerto Rico, and in the 1970s, labor migrants from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic started arriving in Lawrence (Khmerization, 2009; Lawrence Community Works, n.d.). Lawrence is known as “New England’s first minority-majority city” (WCVB, 2019) and is a registered sanctuary city, but is not considered an “uncooperative jurisdiction” by ICE (Demers, 2017).

Both Lowell and Lawrence share similar politics, with 82.4% of Lawrence and 65% of Lowell voting democratic in 2016 (Fujiwara, 2016). While Lowell has a higher median income, household incomes for both cities are low compared to Massachusetts. Both contain areas with low and high unemployment. See Figure 1. In sum, the cities’ similarities but differing racial demographics make them useful for comparison. See Table 1.

**Data and methods**

After identifying the cities’ aforementioned similarities, these two local newspapers were selected given their established reputations and circulation areas; they are the primary local newspapers covering community-focused concerns. The *LS* was founded in 1848 and *ET* in 1868. The *ET* is a daily newspaper circulating in and beyond Lawrence. Though Lawrence is the largest city in its circulation area, it has been headquartered in North Andover, Massachusetts since the 1960s (Crane, 2005). Both are owned by larger media companies that own between 50 and 100+ local newspapers (CHNI LLC, n.d.; Nicholson, 2018).

We selected all articles from *ET* referencing “opioid,” “opiate,” and/or “heroin” for analysis through a keyword search on the paper’s website and we collected data from *LS* by inputting the same key words into LexisNexis. “Fentanyl” and its role in opioid deaths has now become a household name, but it was not always widely recognized. Despite its increased involvement in opioid-related deaths annually from 2013 to 2018, it jumped significantly from 2017 to 2018—increasing by 10% from the prior year (Wilson et al., 2020). Google Trends, a service that tracks trends in keywords searched through the site, showed that peak popularity for Google searches such as “what is fentanyl” occurred in 2016 and 2019, likely coinciding with the public’s growing familiarity with the term (Google Trends, 2020). As a result, “fentanyl” was not included in our original keyword search.
Two hundred and fifty-one articles were analyzed: 144 from *LS* and 107 from *ET*. The average *LS* article had approximately 400 words, while *ET* contained about 900 words. As

![Unemployment rate (deciles)](image)

**Figure 1.** Unemployment rates in Lawrence and Lowell, MA, 2017.

| Table 1. Lawrence and Lowell, Massachusetts. |
|---------------------------------------------|
|                                             |
| **Race/Ethnicity**                          |
| White                                       | 17.0% | 49.5% | 83.2% |
| Black                                       | 2.9%  | 6.8%  | 8.1%  |
| Hispanic/Latino                             | 76.4% | 18.1% | 10.5% |
| Asian                                       | 2.9%  | 21.3% | 6.0%  |
| Other                                       | 0.8%  | 0.8%  | 2.8%  |
| Child Poverty Rate                          | 37.0% | 23.6% | 12.0% |
| BA or Higher                                | 11.20%| 22.30%| 41.2% |
| Violent Crime                               | 0.34% | 0.74% | 3.77% |
| SES                                         |
| Median Household Income                     | $34,852| $48,002| $75,297|
| Crude Overdose Rate (2017)                  | 46    | 69    | 1,913 |
| Total Population (2017)                     | 80,162| 111,346| 6.683 million|
such, we sourced more LS articles to have sufficient comparative data. The articles spanned from 2009 to 2017, and most were published from 2015 to 2017. The full sample included articles by staff writers, police logs, op-eds, letters to the editor, editorials, and, occasionally, an article featured from other local newspapers or national newspapers, like the *Washington Post*. Repeated articles were not included, and data collection ended when saturation was achieved. Table 2 details the top 20 most common words (excluding irrelevant words), which helped inform our shared selective codes (see Table 3) and thematic analysis (see Table 4).

We selected critical discourse analysis and semiotic analysis as the appropriate methods for analyzing this discourse (Fairclough, 1989; Ruiz Ruiz, 2009). Frederick analyzed LS and Mooney analyzed ET. After open coding in NVivo, we used abductive analysis to construct

| **Table 2. Most frequent words in the LS and ET**. |
|-----------------|----------|-----------------|----------|
| **LS**          | **Frequency** | **ET**          | **Frequency** |
| Drug            | 474       | Police          | 580       |
| State           | 405       | Heroin          | 485       |
| Opioid          | 351       | Lawrence        | 378       |
| Police          | 347       | Drug            | 356       |
| Massachusetts   | 342       | People          | 228       |
| Health          | 323       | State           | 221       |
| Treatment       | 312       | Opioid          | 175       |
| Addiction       | 311       | Fentanyl        | 162       |
| People          | 286       | Overdose        | 160       |
| Overdose        | 251       | City            | 157       |
| Abuse           | 216       | Addiction       | 146       |
| Drugs           | 207       | Treatment       | 144       |
| Overdoses       | 199       | Drugs           | 137       |
| Narcan          | 191       | Andover         | 126       |
| Deaths          | 189       | Officers        | 126       |
| Prescription    | 186       | Street          | 120       |
| Department      | 180       | Family          | 113       |
| Public          | 172       | Overdose        | 107       |
| House           | 169       | Massachusetts   | 102       |
| Program         | 158       | Narcan          | 101       |

| **Table 3. Shared codes.** |
|-----------------|----------|----------|----------|
| **LS**          | **LS %** | **ET**   | **ET %** |
| Race            | 118      | 81.9     | 73       | 68.2     |
| PoC             | 34       | 29.8     | 49       | 45.7     |
| Whiteness       | 104      | 72.2     | 34       | 31.7     |
| Place           | 126      | 87.5     | 102      | 95.3     |
| Region          | 116      | 80.5     | 50       | 46.7     |
| Social Decline  | 72       | 50.0     | 19       | 17.7     |
| Nation          | 8        | 5.5      | 12       | 11.2     |
| Family          | 77       | 53.4     | 47       | 43.9     |
| Mothers         | 30       | 20.8     | 25       | 23.3     |
| Children/Youth  | 63       | 43.7     | 42       | 39.2     |
| Death           | 110      | 76.3     | 56       | 52.4     |
| Spectacle       | 11       | 7.6      | 10       | 9.3      |
| Humanized       | 39       | 27.0     | 18       | 16.8     |
| Volume          | 87       | 60.4     | 27       | 25.2     |
| Affect          | 91       | 63.1     | 63       | 58.8     |
| Positive        | 73       | 50.6     | 24       | 22.4     |
| Negative        | 19       | 13.1     | 50       | 46.7     |
| Intervention    | 92       | 63.8     | 92       | 85.9     |
| Punitive        | 38       | 26.3     | 64       | 59.8     |
| Supportive Services | 60       | 41.6     | 41       | 38.3     |
Table 4. Thematic composite.

| Race                      | Space               | Criminality                                      | Death                                             |
|---------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| LS Emphasis on White users in Lowell | “Receiver City”   | Drug use/possession is medicalized               | White death, White decline                        |
| Higher SES                | Locations of drug use/illicit activity are not referenced | More “supportive services”                        | All affective responses to death, dying, and grief |
| Predominantly white community | Representations of family and the private/domestic space emphasized | Fear of death in relation to overdoses          |                                                   |
| ET Emphasis on Latino/Hispanic sellers in Lawrence, white users in other cities | “Source City” | Drug use/possession is criminalized              | White death                                      |
| Lower SES Predominantly Latino community | Locations of using/selling and policing are emphasized | Criminal enforcement, surveillance within city and at borders | Some affective responses to death, dying, and grief |
| “Cooperating” Sanctuary City | “Broken windows”  |                                                 | Death as spectacle                                |
a list of shared codes and independent codes per newspaper to standardize our analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). We first generated independent codes from our unique samples, but identified 18 shared codes to analyze the interrelationship between place, race, and drugs, and compared them using inter-coder agreement. Our intercoder reliability rate averaged 87%. The codes are represented as percentages of mentions. See Table 3.

**Results**

Our results revealed how discourse around race and (drug-related) criminality is unevenly reflected in the papers through place, crime, and depictions of overdose and death; the newspapers presented narratives on opioid use and possession that were place-contingent and selectively emphasized place as a racialized frame. *LS* uses colorblind language to deemphasize the importance of place and criminality, while highlighting the impact opioid use has on middle-class, White families. *ET* follows this, framing Lawrence as a space of pollution because of drug pushing across community borders, necessitating social control and surveillance.

In both papers, Lawrence is constructed as a “source city” of racialized stock dealers, reproducing narratives of criminality, violence, and deviance through opiates. Both papers’ discourse on White death largely employs humanizing narratives, emphasizing relationships and family, activism and prevention, and memorials and funerals; or death in relation. This documentation of untimely death and deeply felt loss captures the realities of bereavement. However, it simultaneously reveals how death and loss are made collectively legible, which serves to construct a more “grievable”—or more “human”—life (Butler, 2004). In contrast, *ET* also portrayed death as spectacle, demonstrating the criminalization of White opioid-related activity, especially in racialized spaces. See Table 4.

Importantly, the *LS* prominently features quotes directly from families and communities affected by the opioid epidemic. While we are critical of the White hegemonic perspective of the papers, the grief included in the papers is palpable. Although the supply chain and death represented in the papers is racialized and skewed, the devastation to the region, communities, and families is very real. The theorization of grief does not discount the realities of loss; rather, it is intended to offer insight into how death and emotion is deployed/employed in mechanisms of racialization.

**Racializing the supply chain**

The newspapers suggest Lowell, Lawrence, and their surrounding towns are linked in a supply chain, wherein stock dealers—largely residing in Lawrence—move opioids across borders into neighboring communities. One of the key findings that emerged is how Lawrence and racial imaginaries “follow” and co-constitute the other in reporting, relationally producing racialized criminality tied to city-area, and the additions of surnames, mugshots, nationality, and place.

This happens through direct mentions that consistently collapse place and crime, such as “Lawrence man gets 22 months for heroin distribution,” “‘Blue Crush’ drug sweep nets 36 more arrests in Lawrence,” “Lawrence man faces false ID charges in two states,” “43 arrested
in latest Lawrence drug sweep,” or “Lawrence man facing murder charge in Puerto Rico.” Relatedly, the 2017 ET article “Lawrence drug dealer arrested making deliveries to Pelham homes” features a mugshot, Spanish surname, and mention of an investigation of his citizenship status (Edelstein, 2017a). Some LS articles quote the ET directly while highlighting the connection of race, criminality, and Lawrence. According “to the Eagle Tribune newspaper . . . a Lawrence man . . . was charged with trafficking fentanyl and conspiracy to violate drug laws” ("Punched-up fentanyl law serves notice,” 2016). In describing the danger receiver cities and towns face, this discursive supply chain is employed to report on Lawrence and its residents. For instance, an LS article notes that a “19-year-old Lawrence man is facing charges he planned to distribute heroin and cocaine after a police canine sniffed out a stash of each drug hidden inside Mentos candy containers” (R. Mills, 2012). Importantly, he pleaded “not guilty,” and the article offers no evidence that he planned to distribute the drugs in his possession.

When describing the same behavior, place is de-emphasized for White sellers in White places. For example, a 2017 ET article “Heroin and fentanyl sales made at Pelham home, two men charged” showcases mugshots of White sellers, but deemphasizes their place of origin. The article describes their arrest and eventual release on personal recognizance (Edelstein, 27 November 2017). This shows how (racialized) place is used as a vector to communicate how criminality penetrates receiver cities. The article “Andover Police bust Lawrence men on heroin, gun charges after executing search warrant” mentions an arrest in which Andover residents were “suspects,” but highlights the (criminal) Lawrence connection in the article and headline (Francis, 2017). Even former ties with Lawrence are central in reporting on opioids: “A former Lawrence resident was sentenced to 12 years in federal prison on Monday for selling heroin and fentanyl in Plaistow and other southern New Hampshire towns” (DeAngelis, 2017). Even if the Lawrence connection is secondary, it is a central piece of reporting, producing the “inherent” criminality of Lawrence. Other ET headlines describe, “Woman to be sentenced Thursday in death of girl, 17, who got drugs from Lawrence” (Associated Press, 2017). Here, the drugs from Lawrence—rather than the place of death or hometown of involved parties—is amplified.

Quoted in the ET, acting North Andover Police Lieutenant describes, “People are buying there [Lawrence] and getting out [to neighboring communities] to use . . . and] In Methuen, police keep an eye on Jackson Street, Swan Street and Merrimack Street because the area is close to both Lawrence and Interstate 495” (Moser, 2015), suggesting how borders and spaces of “pollution” must be continuously monitored and reified (see Gootenberg, 2009). Another ET article describes, “Police Chief Thompson said border cities like Haverhill and Methuen are attractive for these types of transactions because of their location near both the state borders and Boston, and because of rural spaces outside their city centers. . . . There’s no question in Lawrence, we have people here selling for the purpose of taking it somewhere else.” Here, Lawrence is constructed as criminal and polluting, and the drugs within Lawrence and outside the city (often attributed to Lawrence) require punitive surveillance within the city and at its borders.

Areas of trans-spatial connection, like highways, also must be monitored. From the 2016 article “Some Jeers, Some Cheers for local lawmakers,” the ET describes “Cheers to Haverhill police, who made one of the first arrests under a new state law . . . on the very day the law went into effect . . . police arrested . . . of . . . Lawrence, on charges of trafficking fentanyl . . . The arrest was made just off Interstate 495 in Haverhill, a popular
rendezvous for dealers and buyers because of the easy on-off highway access.” Similarly, noting how natural landscapes such as rivers connect areas of “purity” and “danger,” the LS reports on literal pollution. One article explained, “Further evidence of the crisis is the jar full of 659 needles found last year in an eight-mile river stretch from Lowell to the city of Lawrence by … the Clean River Project” (Castillo, 2017). This descriptive reporting emphasizes the symbolic and uncontained flow of social problems, as well as the limitations to demarcating borders (one cannot truly police a river). Following the logics of color-blindness, references to Lawrence and crime are stitched to race, showing how place is a vector of racialization in these papers.

**Distorting the supply chain**

Despite their relatively different areas of emphases (both geographically and in terms of punitive or supportive reporting), both newspapers showcase a distorted, raced, and spatial narrative of the supply chain. This conclusion is reinforced by the literature, as minority communities are disproportionately policed (Alexander, 2010; Capers, 2009; Rios, 2011). This inevitably leads to more news reporting of crime found in Latino neighborhoods, including Lawrence. Second, the papers erase other area sellers and drug movers. While many articles feature these racialized stock dealers, there is minimal reporting on White participation in the drug trade; it is an afterthought, or portrayed as exceptional.

The papers occasionally acknowledge this; the 2013 ET article “Heroin Users Among Us” describes, “I’m not throwing stones at Lawrence, but that’s quite often what we see, the dealers coming out of Lawrence. Not that we don’t have dealers in Haverhill” (Moser, 2013). Infrequently, depictions of White drug sellers appear as unbelievable and lurid scandals. A 2012 LS article quotes, “William ‘Bill’ Emerson, a popular Tewksbury church deacon, has admitted to allegations that he smuggled drugs into the Cambridge and Billerica jails after being blackmailed by an inmate who threatened to expose that he had gay pornography on his home computer” (Redmond, 2012). These serve to minimize White drug movers, or tie them to more outrageous events, making them seem like outliers.

Finally, as the cities have similar rates of overdose per state data, it is clear that opioid users and overdose survivors/victims of color are erased in the reporting (Katz & Goodnough, 2017). State level data shows Latinos are hit particularly hard by the opioid epidemic in Massachusetts (Bebinger, 2018). This reality is occasionally reflected in the newspapers. Lawrence Police Chief admits that, in Lawrence, “Unfortunately we see this [overdose and deaths] way too often” (Sabga, 2017), though coverage of these incidents in the ET are minimal. Another vague mention is in a 2017 ET article, stating how, in Lawrence, “overdose deaths have risen significantly in recent years” (Blessing, 2017a), and how a recovery center opened in Lawrence after “analyzing overdose statistics for the state” (Blessing, 2017b). Unfortunately, these scant mentions of overdose in Lawrence are overwhelmed with repeated references of crime, surveillance, and violence, including how “Lawrence police have made 572 drug-related arrests and seized 47 weapons [to date this year],” in an ET article about citywide curfews (Harcacinski, 2017d).

In another example, the LS article “Lawrence heroin bust stems flow to Lowell,” Lowell Police Chief Lavallee states, “The distribution network is so intricate . . . In many ways we are trying to keep pace with those people hellbent on delivering death” (Moran, 2011). Lavallee describes the effort put into protecting Lowell from “those people,” yet the negation
of drug-related harm to Lawrence residents is clear. This demonstrates that the characteristics of a city’s residents as well as the city itself (as animated by racial imaginaries) have a significant impact on how the cities (de)criminalize opioid use.

As discussed, place is a significant determinant of how similar reporting is framed. Surprisingly, place-based racial imaginaries even follow the Black and Latino residents of vulnerable receiver cities, granting them access to some of the humanizing discourse that describes the new users more generally. While these articles appear infrequently, they do demonstrate the ways place determines emphasis for the papers. The LS article “Lowell opioid event raises hope, awareness” features a Latino Lowell resident described much like the new users that are the focus of the majority of the reporting. “Sometimes I just wanted to give up,” Vasquez said. “That’s why I kept feeding my demons. ‘But it was the right friends who extended themselves for Vasquez and believed in him . . . who saved his life” (Tuitt, 2017). Here, the same descriptions of the importance of familial support and the individualized biographies are present, even though this is not the case for descriptions of Lawrence residents, reductively flattened into a criminalized “Lawrence Man” in the newspapers. Therefore, while there is truth to the recorded movement of drugs in the region, both newspapers present a distorted, emotive, and racialized geography that maps a supply chain between source and receiver cities, necessitating punitive control in Lawrence and its borders, and supportive services in Lowell.

**The stock dealers and new users**

This section details the reconstitution of the supply chain through discursive mechanisms that reinforce the innocence of residents in the receiver cities and the inherent criminality of those living in the source city. As our literature review details, the seller and the spaces they inhabit are simultaneously racialized and criminalized (Anderson, 2012, 2015; Muhammad, 2010; Wacquant, 2001). In this way, there is a *stock dealer* in these news articles, or a familiar boogeyman of news media that often ties together race and class imaginaries with criminality, violence, and predatory behavior. However—following colorblind logics—race is not made explicit, instead appearing through diffuse sites, discourses, and coded language (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). ET articles racialize the sellers by displaying criminal mugshots nearly exclusively of Latino individuals,⁴ highlighting the citizenship status, criminal history, or national-origin of the sellers, and displaying Spanish surnames for the readers. From ET’s, “Bail for suspect in fentanyl trafficking set at $2 million,”

A Dominican national . . . who allegedly told police he was seeking asylum in the United States, told officers he was not carrying narcotics in a black duffel bag. Rather, he said he had packages of “rat poison” that someone . . . gave him to deliver to someone here on Glen [in Lawrence] . . . The report also noted Glen Avenue “is a high crime area” where officers . . . have made numerous arrests (Harmacinski, 2017c)

The connection of the “Dominican National” to local space and “high crime areas” shows how racialization, place, and criminality coalesce through associations of raced bodies and the spaces they inhabit with criminality (Muhammad, 2010; Simes & Waters, 2014; Waters & Kasinitz, 2015; Welch, 2007). The criminality is constructed not merely by illicit actions, but by reference to location. While less common in the LS, the LS also emphasizes the race and nationality⁵ of stock dealers, such as the Dominican-American Nieves that trafficked
“an astonishing amount of heroin” by “swallowing latex plugs filled with the drug” (“Stomach full of heroin gets Nashua man 6 years,” 2010).

In contrast to the stock dealer, there is a new user of heroin. While there is still criminalization of opioid-use, punishment, and stigma, the high rates of mortality among young White people in suburban and relatively affluent communities has prompted “gentler” discourse on drug use (Bowser et al., 2016; Netherland & Hansen, 2016; Seelye, 2015). While prior discourse emphasized drug use by an urban, racialized, underclass, our data indicate that more sympathetic, treatment-oriented frames are used, in part because of the demography of new users and the institutions that protect and serve them. It is both the demography of the new users, as well as the mechanisms continuously used to humanize them—such as consistent reporting on vigils, overdose education, and opinion pieces penned by mothers whose children had overdosed—that reinforce the narrative that these vulnerable areas have fallen victim to Lawrence’s stock dealers.

Integral to the construction of the new user is the humanizing response by their communities, often narrated through family and loved ones. A White mother whose son passed away after an overdose explained why treatment matters: “They look like us. They talk like us. They are human beings and they deserve access to treatment” (Tuitt, 2017). This mother’s explanation is racialized in her relational explanation of a drug users’ “human” appearance; simply, the new users are White people like her. These frames contribute to the emerging rhetoric of treatment in Lowell and other receiver cities.

Many LS articles feature the police (see Table 2). However, police in White spaces are represented as an important extension of supportive services as opposed to a punitive apparatus (Anderson, 2015; Boyles, 2015). The “battle” of opioid addiction is portrayed as a problem requiring cross-institutional support from families, educators, police officers, and politicians who band together to save lives. For example, the LS chronicles the work of Lowell’s outreach team:

The members of the opioid outreach team stroll up to the apartment—out to prevent a man’s fourth overdose… The members of the “Co-Op” [Community Opioid Outreach Program] start each day by reviewing police reports, looking for overdose cases from the previous day. They then start… attempting to track down the individuals. (Sobey, 2017)

In “A Call to Arms,” Lowell Police Superintendent Taylor explains, “The police can’t do it alone, the medical professionals can’t do it alone. But if we all work together we stand a chance of reducing that number,” referencing the number of lives lost in Lowell the year prior as a motivating factor for more support (Pak-Harvey, 2016). Notably, the aforementioned “Co-Op” team, and several other services mentioned in LS, remain confined to Lowell and its (imagined) White borders. This gentler and cross-institutional response, in which public officials track down residents in need of assistance and an entire city restructures around a single (albeit large) problem, is representative of the majority of efforts described to help users in Lowell.

This is in stark relief to the absence of such services in ET’s depiction of Lawrence, eclipsed by punitive measures and increased policing. For example, in an article featured multiple times in ET, the deaths of two men who overdosed on opioids resulted in a Hazmat probe, where a professional sanitation team and “some extra [police] patrols on the street” monitored the situation. “The bodies of the two deceased men remained in the second-floor
apartment for hours Monday morning … Both bodies were removed by the medical examiner’s office before noon” (Sabga, 2017). These men are not met with the same sympathy as the vulnerable new users: their bodies are left on the floor “for hours,” and the space of the overdose is met with sanitization and increased street policing rather than the emotional aftermath of death. In small cities, the characteristics of people matter (Norman, 2013), and while supportive services are rendered to the new users in Lowell, punitive control remains the norm in Lawrence to “manage” the source city filled with racialized and criminalized stock dealers.

**Space: Social decline, surveillance, criminalization**

In reporting on opioids, Lawrence is constructed as a crime-ridden city. Lowell, in contrast, is less spatially bound and place is deemphasized in reporting, aligning with constructions of Whiteness and White space. Instead, the city is narrated through people, personal stories, supportive services, community events, and education campaigns. Lawrence is depicted in the *ET* (and in the *LS*) as dangerous and dilapidated, requiring punitive monitoring by police. This colorblind rhetoric connects racialized residents with social decline and criminality. *ET* article “Saturating the City,” (Harmacinski, 2017a) describes:

> Armed with maps showing gun-violence hot spots, an intensified combination of Lawrence police officers and Massachusetts state troopers conducted “saturation patrols” this weekend … The heightened police presence—10 troopers and 7 extra city police officers on evening and overnight shifts—is a tactic Lawrence police have used previously to drive down crimes in certain areas … Emblazoned in red and orange, the worst areas for gun violence both are located in the north side of the city.

Police, punitive surveillance technologies, and crime mapping strategies target dilapidated areas and criminalize certain spaces and residents (Brunson & Gau, 2014; Lynch et al., 2013). Even when threats of gun-violence or drug trafficking are absent, space itself, and objects within it, are criminalized through “violations” that justify the extension of surveillance.

> Many violations were found which included broken and missing floor and ceiling tiles, broken door knobs and missing window screens … property managers were told the [fire] system “needed to be inspected and brought up to date,” he said. Old mattresses were found stacked up next to 7 Thornton Ave., which is a major fire hazard. Ruiz said if the mattresses ever ignited the flames could easily leap to and destroy nearby buildings … Thornton Avenue will also continue to be heavily monitored by police, noting area residents should expect extra checks. (Harmacinski, 2016a)

“Violations” within neighborhood areas (incurred due to material deprivation) and accompanying rhetoric are used to criminalize space and the bodies within it, justifying extended surveillance due to the threat to “order” and neighboring communities. Following the logics of colorblindness, the racialized and criminalized space is targeted by measures of punitive social control, as opposed to the explicit targeting of people. As described, *ET* largely neglects to centralize the need for supportive services in Lawrence; unlike *LS*, there is no documented pressure for funds to be diverted from traditional, punitive policing toward addiction services. For (White) receiver cities, space and the bodies within it are not bound
by criminality or decline. Instead, they are narrated through community hardships and resilience.

**Space: White places**

On White mobility, Anderson (2015) explains that Black Americans have always experienced a fixity in space due to segregation and ghettoization, while White people have had relative freedom in movement. Following, place is deemphasized for the new users across both papers, which serves to humanize them despite their illicit activities, while highlighting imagined victimization by the source city (and as discussed, stock dealers are more spatially bound). *LS* simultaneously contains narratives of White mobility and fear that the inner city’s social ills (drugs) would permeate White spaces, most notably the home (with schools and children also mentioned). In turn, the threat of addiction (i.e., drugs, criminality, death) lurking in the middle-class White domestic space emerges (Coontz, 1993). The 2015 *LS* article “Opiates out of control despite state program” notes that you can find opioids “on the street, in the bathroom, in a cabinet, beside a bed” (Feathers, 2015). The *LS* collapses public and private space, spurring panic over a danger that must be tackled on multiple fronts. According to the *LS*, threat most common to the “home” was the threat of unwanted prescription pills. Families, and mothers in particular, were encouraged to police drugs within their households and eliminate the threat within. Many articles in the *LS* referencing “prescriptions” (see Table 2) encouraged families to drop-off unwanted prescription pills as part of “National Prescription Drug Take-Back Day” (“Removing one source of dependency,” 2014).

One small but notable finding in relation to the symbolic constitution of racialized spaces was the mention of dogs in the newspapers, specifically the *ET*, where K9 police dogs or privately owned drug-sniffing dogs for hire were occasionally mentioned in Lawrence-focused reporting (Harmacinski, 2016a, 2017b). This aligns with scholarly work that shows how security dogs, as part of spatial organization and imaginaries, are embedded into broader “geographies of fear [that] connect to spatial and ethno-racial othering” (Jaffe, 2016, p. 79). This is in marked contrast to how, in Andover, the *ET* describes how a “yellow puppy lab was rushed” to a local veterinary clinic after ingesting opioids and collapsing on a morning walk “near the bus stop where [the owner’s] children get on and off their school bus every day” (Bode, 2017). The mention of yellow Labrador puppies, children, and school busses shows how all components of (White) space are “at risk” due to polluting border transgression and drugs “out of place” in a vulnerable receiver city. Dogs serve a dual purpose in this reporting, and depending on the geographic place are mobilized as a signifier for social control or family and domesticity. Here, the article devoted to the risks of the opioid epidemic to household pets aligns with the overall representations of White space as innocent and in need of protection as opposed to criminal and polluting.

**Death in relation: Overdose, grief, and dying**

In both newspapers, death and dying are represented either through sheer volume, families or loved ones’ grief and support, or embodied spectacle. Following the logics of the supply chain where endangered new users are victimized by stock dealers, individualized biographies on death and grief were more frequent in reporting on White places, and—understandably—contained sympathetic and emotive narratives of grief, especially given the high
rates of overdose across the region. While the elegiac writing on lives lost and of families struggling with addiction emphasizes the pressing need for supportive services, these emotive narratives of grief simultaneously neutralize associations with criminality in receiver cities and redirect attributions of criminality to the source city. As Butler writes, “Some lives are grievable, and others are not . . . [this] operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human” (Butler, 2004, pp. xiv-xv).

This humanizing rhetoric of a “grievable life” is often reserved for reporting on predominantly White communities and manifests through stories of resilience and family. In a 2015 ET article, the first line states: “the cost of heroin addiction is revealed in stories of grief for the dead;” and notes that understanding can only be “revealed” through “stories of grief.” This is further constructed through resilience: “The courage and strength of the ordinary people who have lost loved ones . . . is the foundation on which victory over the heroin crisis will be built” (“Families Courage,” 2015). The humanized death of new users emphasizes the need for broader structural change.

In the LS, the most grievable lives are Lowell’s late adult children. Police superintendent K. Lavallee (2009) reflects on this in the LS:

As my wife, Sue, and I stood outside the funeral home, waiting to enter and meet the grieving family, I wondered what I would say. Wakes are often difficult and uncomfortable. Expressions of condolence and sorrow are not easy to form. Those words are even more difficult to gather when the departed loved one is only 20 years old, a wonderful son and brother with great promise for the future. He was a true son of Lowell, a good student, champion athlete, charismatic and popular.

Depictions of lost White opioid users stress their future promise, childhoods, hobbies, and positions within nuclear families, thereby humanizing their life stories and minimizing the stigma traditionally given to illicit drug use (Silva, 2013). Notably, the wake described is for a “true son” of Lowell, further emphasizing the historical Whiteness of the city and the familial relationship that humanizes the deceased (Norkunas, 2002). Importantly, the “youth” of those lost is emphasized, which is used as a mechanism to “soften” and decriminalize their actions by evoking vulnerability and naivete. One Tewksbury mom, in reference to her adult son, explained, “This little boy that I had all these hopes and dreams for, instead of graduating college, he graduated to heroin” (Lannan, 2013). Here, the mother laments the disruption of the expected life trajectory of a White, relatively affluent young person while emphasizing his youth.

The symbolic deployment of White motherhood serves to further medicalize opioid use in White places and is most often demonstrated through public grief rituals and narratives of family’s advocacy work for their children (Ladd-Taylor & Umansky, 1998; Wilson & Yochim, 2015) (and in contrast, fathers appear infrequently as advocates). One LS article showcases a mother’s annual 5K for opioid awareness raised $7,500 (Zouzas, 2017), while another features the work of “Zack’s Team,” to create a new Lowell-based sober house (Curtis, 2017). This additional labor on behalf of mothers is enabled, in part, by the family’s relative economic stability. In this opioid epidemic, White communities are frequently represented as accumulating shared grief alongside descriptions of punitive measures in minority communities that are blamed for the epidemic.

Unfortunately, representations of motherhood are fraught and racialized, and not all mothers are described so kindly. An opinion editorial from Philadelphia that was selected by ET for circulation in Massachusetts describes “No tears for junkie mothers . . . here” (Flowers, 2017).
This opens describing two White parents who “fought like Spartans . . . unstoppable, heroic, and united” to help their son with a rare genetic condition, which is immediately contrasted with a vivid description of a Latina mother struggling with the chaos of heavy addiction and drug use. At the end of the article, the author claims “I really don’t give a damn” and feels nothing “but anger toward an addict who abandoned her baby” (Flowers, 2017). However, most articles across both newspapers emphasize death-in-relation for the new users, where (White, relatively affluent) mothers’ emotional and protective work surrounding grieving and death humanizes the families, communities, and individuals struggling with addiction.

**Death as spectacle: Overdose, deviance, and dying**

When representations of (White) death and overdose in *ET* departed from the *LS*, they were deployed as embodied spectacle or in (semi) public places, signifying a vivid cautionary tale or a means to depict the chaos and devastation of addiction. These contradictory representations—death as humanized versus death as spectacle—arguably signify the shift in existing narratives of drug use and the re-assembling of drug use as a social problem requiring support rather than punishment. This paradox arguably represents the continued negotiation of drug use as a stigmatized/criminal behavior versus drug use as a medicalized/social problem: a defining element of the new user. Notably, this tension is navigated through White bodies and White users, and is often classed, with lower-income Whites (especially women) presented less kindly than their more affluent neighbors. These competing representations of deviance/sickness show how Whiteness can neutralize and evade criminal associations typically imposed on drug users, though gender and socioeconomic status can complicate this process.

This pattern could be found scattered throughout the articles, mentioning “blue lips,” “blue fingertips,” or dead bodies left on floors “for hours.” There were stories of (often White) people overdosing in cars, park n’ rides, or dollar stores, which facilitated the construction of death as an atomized, lurid, and dehumanized display in (semi) public places. A sustained engagement with this framing of death-as-spectacle comes from the *ET*, describing a “tot’s anguish” when her mother “overdosed on fentanyl and collapsed on the floor of a Family Dollar on Winthrop Avenue” (Harmacinski, 2016b) in Lawrence. This one incident featured images of the overdose and subsequent trials, precipitating several follow up stories in the *ET*. This thematic trend is in stark contrast to the relational, emotive, and family focused narratives of schools, domestic spaces, and funeral homes in the *LS* and receiver cities, showing how the death, the body, and space are deployed in the narrative (re)configuration of deviant behavior.

The near uniform association between death and Whiteness in these articles indicate how social problems can be reimagined, renegotiated, and systematically decriminalized, despite historical trends that criminalize and racialize drugs and drug use. However, that process of “untangling” drugs, race, and criminality is ongoing. Thus, there are competing representations of death in the newspapers, either through dehumanized spectacle or humanized loss and grieving. Importantly, within the composite of these newspaper reports, White death and threats to White life/space are often “delivered” by source cities *vis-à-vis* opioids.

**Regional White decline in Merrimack Valley**

Parallel to the media coverage over rising opioid mortality is discourse surrounding “White decline.” White decline represents interlocking anxieties around change. First is change in the
demography of the United States (the nation will be “majority minority” by 2050) (Norris, 2018; Roberts, 2009). Second is the post-Fordist collapse of the middle class, exacerbated by the Bush tax cuts (Keeley & Love, 2010). Third is the decrease in life expectancy of White Americans, from suicide, drugs, and/or alcohol (Boddy, 2017; Case & Deaton, 2017, 2020; Katz, 2017). “White decline” or “deaths of despair” offers structural explanations for change and experiences of precarity (rather than individual, familial, or community/“cultural” failings).

While ET characterized Lawrence as being in physical decline in ways urban areas are typically described, LS used discursive mechanisms to suggest the region is in White decline, existentially and through its failing economy. White decline in the Merrimack Valley furthers the discourse of victimization within the papers by implying that the source city and its stock sellers are not only importing opioids, but are collapsing the economy and thus the security of White suburban spaces. The lack of available public support for the opioid epidemic was a recurring theme in the LS. The CEO of an addiction service center, Lowell House, stated in the LS: “I think the bottleneck is going to be that, once they try to get a person into services, the number of beds, the availability of treatment, all of those things are very scarce” (“An out-of-the-cell tack on heroin abuse,” 2015).

Articles expressed that if young people had more opportunities, they would maintain sobriety through work. The director of the Lowell House Inc. stated, “These are young men in recovery and young men who want, ultimately, to change their lives, to get jobs … this is how we’ll solve our problem locally” (Curtis, 2017). The poor state of the economy is viewed as a structural cause of the opioid epidemic—a marked contrast to the more familiar, individualistic approach to addiction as moral failing. In contrast, high rates of poverty and unemployment in Lawrence are not viewed as a reason to create supportive services, which are superseded by punitive approaches. Cyclically, the opioid epidemic is also seen as a cause of the poor economy. As Representative Tom Golden of Lowell described in the LS, “We will not have the full … brain power, or the people to power … businesses without ending opioid addiction (Myers, 2010). Altogether, the new users are portrayed as vulnerable young men, living in areas in which the economy had never recovered from post-industrialization. In contrast, little supportive attention is given to the people that are constructed as “criminal” and places that are supposedly already in “decline.”

**Conclusion**

First, while discourse analysis provides useful in-roads to mapping local framings of race and place, news coverage is fundamentally limited in its ability to fully reflect social reality. Rather, we analyze what discourse is produced and how it relates to trends. Second, considering space limitations, we did not explore how Narcan (an opioid reversal drug and an important tool in this opioid crisis) or immigration and nationality are represented in both newspapers. Third, given our findings and resulting focus of our analysis, class and gender—both instrumental to understanding representations and realities of opioid use and overdose—were underexamined, save for brief explorations of gender, race, and class in relation to representations of motherhood and death as spectacle.

This study explores local constructions of the opioid epidemic in Lowell and Lawrence, Massachusetts, United States. These small cities with many similarities differ in the racial demographics of their residents. Using critical discourse analysis, we examined articles from Lawrence’s *Eagle Tribune* (ET) and Lowell’s *Lowell Sun* (LS). Both newspapers reported on the
criminalization of opioids and drug trafficking from stock dealers, with an emphasis on punitive social control over the source city (Lawrence). Additionally, both papers reporting on predominately White receiver communities and new users prioritized medicalization of addiction and grief. As described, this split resulted in paradoxical descriptions of grief and spectacle, treatment and punishment, and structural versus moral or individual failings when describing similar events and behaviors. While important to minimize the pain and suffering of addiction for individuals and families, the call for treatment and prevention obscures new users first and ongoing contact with opioids, and instead assigns blame to racialized stock dealers from source cities.

This paper underscores how the supply chain (as represented by local news media) may impact how readers think about those that traffic drugs, use opioids, and die from drug use as a result of the opioid epidemic, in turn informing interactions, community structures, policing practices, and legal policies. In comparative aggregate, these news stories offer a distorted socio-political geography of the region, in part shown through the erasure of Latino drug users across the region, especially in Lawrence. As the cities have similar rates of overdose, Latino users are erased in reporting on the source city. In the minimal reporting on Latino users in Lowell and other receiver cities, they are afforded the humanizing frames granted in White spaces. While there have been several drug busts in Lawrence, there are far fewer reports on sellers and dealers in White towns and cities. When sellers and dealers in White towns are described, the emphasis is on the connection to the “source city.” In line with studies on disproportionate policing, the extent to which Lawrence is viewed as a problem is exacerbated by increased surveillance and policing. A related issue, tied to the well-documented disproportionate policing in Black and Brown communities, is that the media exaggerates representations of crime in these areas, while scarcely reporting White sellers’ drug movement or presenting it as an anomaly.

The bifurcated reporting on the opioid epidemic in small cities demonstrates dual aims of criminalizing racialized bodies in proximity to drugs, while reifying White dominance by portraying new users in receiver cities (i.e., White spaces) as sympathetic victims of stock dealers and racialized source cities, and deserving of treatment. We believe this demonstrated split in the discourse on opioids has detrimental effects on policing and treatment, reveals the central role of place-based racial imaginaries in importance subscribed to social problems, and demonstrates how place deploys and signifies racial frames to support racist policing in the era of colorblindness. The narratives presented by the papers were factual and well researched, yet their points of emphasis revealed how media is a tool through which communities learn, live, and retell their racial histories. As racialization evolves to fit contemporary social discourses and institutional practices, it is imperative to analyze how place, drugs, and death, are employed in the construction of and intervention into social problems.

Notes

1. We use the term imaginaries to describe how spaces and places are constructed in relation to socioeconomic structure, racial makeup, immigration patterns, and the deployment of particular histories. Essentially, these imaginaries capture the socio-political history of the region.

2. In this piece, we use place and space interchangeably. Demarcating geographic boundaries is a part of the process of spatializing areas/creating racialized spaces by drawing boundaries for storytelling, camaraderie, and belonging. Accordingly, geographically bound places are always informed by spatial imaginaries and contested histories.
3. The most common LS words evoke medical frames, including “health,” “treatment,” “addiction,” “Narcan” “prescription,” and “program,” referring to treatment). “Police” appears frequently, although in LS reporting police are part of supportive services. In the ET, multiple references to criminality appear, including “police,” “officer,” “street” (linked to a crime scene or specific area where an arrest occurred), and “fentanyl.” In the LS, “treatment” appears 312 times, compared to the ET’s 144. The LS also features 169 references to “houses,” demonstrating the symbolic importance of the home to the White family unit. In the ET, when treatment and medicalizing frames are used, they reference surrounding White towns (i.e., Andover, appearing 126 times). In sum, the table frequency shows that while we used the same search terms and thus were searching for reporting on the same content, the way those events were described varied based upon the place of reporting.

4. While there is the occasional mugshot of a White person in the ET, White subjects are often visually represented as politicians, activists, family, or in recovery.

5. Nationality and national borders were mentioned often the newspapers, often as a colorblind mechanism of racialization. Due to saturation of examples of racialization in our data and space limitations, we have not detailed these examples here, instead focusing our results in the northeast coast of the domestic United States.

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