

Expert offers insight into crime coverage

BY CHARLIE BIER

Dr. Michelle Jeanis teaches and researches topics that are often covered by media: missing persons, including kidnapping and murder victims, and young runaways.

A native of Church Point, Louisiana, she earned bachelor's and master's degrees in psychology at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. After adding a doctorate in criminology from the University of South Florida, she returned to UL Lafayette this fall as an assistant professor in the Department of Criminal Justice.

Jeanis also partners with public safety officials and nonprofit organizations, offering analyses and suggestions to help prevent crime and solve cases.

In one recent study, she researched missing persons cases in Louisiana from 2009 to 2013 to ascertain which types were deemed most newsworthy.

She pored over almost 800 newspaper articles and newscast transcripts, mining the material for demographic factors, such as a missing person's gender, age, and race, and circumstances surrounding each case.

Jeanis studied and documented word counts, headlines, and the use of repeated words or phrases, including what she describes as emotional phrasing, such as "loving mother of three vanishes." Her objective was to discover which cases generated the most coverage.

She found that missing persons who were female, young and white were given the most coverage. Kidnappings by strangers received more coverage than those in which victims knew their abductors. Cases involving victims out alone at night – or with lifestyles or occupations commonly thought to put them at high risk – were often framed as "cautionary tales."

The media, Jeanis explained, is only partly responsible for what it reports. "It's a reflection of what viewers want. Crime would be covered differently if we didn't watch it or read it."

What sparked your interest in criminology?

I have always been interested in offenders and the criminal mind. I originally thought I wanted to counsel them. And then I did an internship at a correctional facility, and I thought, 'This is not for me.' I wanted another way that I could still study crime and criminal behavior.

What about crime and psychology are so compelling to you?

They seem related.

They *are* related. I think about how one missing person affects an entire community. I think about families that are so desperate to bring loved ones home. But a missing person case is larger than that. It leaves a hole that can bring a community together.

Youth runaways add another aspect. When you start to dig into it, you see that runaway youth are often kind of neglected, put to the side, thought of as different. They receive less attention. There's this notion that they're bad kids, or disobedient, and so they're perceived differently.

Other than murder, missing persons cases seem to capture public interest more than many other crimes. Why?

I think they're synonymous in some ways. We think of bad guys out there hunting. I think that's what people are thinking of when they hear "missing person" or "serial killer." It's intriguing. It keeps us fearful.



DOUG DUGAS

Dr. Michelle Jeanis

In some of your research, you allude to media stories that have an undercurrent that conveys that the victim is partly to blame and ends with crime prevention advice. Explain that dynamic.

It's a tried-and-true method to scare people. And, to place blame on the victim, so that society doesn't have to make any changes or think about the way we're handling things. If we put blame on this one person, then we don't have to look at ourselves.

"Ideal victims" – our elderly, our children, our women – are most vulnerable and support our perceptions about crime.

Given the 24-hour news cycle, and seemingly endless coverage from a variety of outlets, haven't we – as a society – become somewhat desensitized? It just doesn't seem we're very easily shocked anymore by murder or missing persons.

I think, in general, it takes a very compelling case now for a missing person to receive national attention for any long period of time. We think: Natalee Holloway. But, there haven't been many Natalee Holloways since Natalee Holloway. I think the media is moving on to different topics. In the nineties, we had a moral panic about predators and child molesters. That was getting people's attention. Now, I think we've moved on to mass shootings, terrorist attacks, those types of things.

You share your research with law enforcement. Are most agencies receptive?

Law enforcement is generally very receptive.

The Lafayette Parish Sheriff's Office has been very receptive. I recently partnered with it in its endeavor to bring awareness to missing persons cases. We're conducting a social media analysis of missing persons coverage. A graduate assistant and I are helping it identify best practices in using social media as a law enforcement tool.

Do you have any other current or upcoming projects?

I'll be working on a large national missing persons project involving advanced statistical analyses on 3,000 cases. So, I'm really excited about that. And, my plan is to start a research group with undergraduate and graduate students in the spring or next fall.