

# The Role of Race and Class in Local Media Coverage of Utah's Opioid Epidemic

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*This project's aim is to increase understanding of the role that demographic factors like race and class play in news coverage of Utah's opioid epidemic. I begin by reviewing literature on the role race and class has played in national media coverage of the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s and other social crises, and then conduct original research on Utah's opioid epidemic by looking at local newspapers and broadcasts. Specifically, I look at 64 news stories from six major local media outlets. This project revealed seven general themes in local media coverage, including an emphasis on the way middle-class and white demographics are affected by the opioid epidemic.*

## Introduction

In recent years, prescription opioid abuse has quietly become one of America's most prevalent and complex drug problems. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, opioid abuse is one of the most serious drug problems in the country. In the past two decades, the rate of overdose deaths due to prescription pain relievers has tripled. The rate of deaths nationally caused by synthetic opioids has doubled, from 3.1 per 100,000 people to 6.2 per 100,000 people. The national rate for overdose deaths is 19.8 per 100,000 (Anderson, 2017).

Utah's opioid epidemic has received significant media coverage in recent months. Various parts of Utah, such as Tooele, Emery, Carbon, and Grand counties, rank disproportionately with other areas of the country regarding opioid deaths and emergencies. According to research from The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Utah had the seventh-highest rate of drug-overdose deaths in the country from 2013 to 2015 (Gifford, 2017). The opioid problems in Utah and other areas of the country have largely been treated, by the mainstream press, politicians, and medical experts, as a concern of public health, mental wellbeing, and drug addiction. Waters writes in *USA Today* that medical professionals and researchers are treating opioid addiction and use as a medical problem, not a moral one. The dean of the University of Tennessee's College of Medicine in Memphis said he sees opioid addicts as patients instead of criminals, stating, "We have to start looking at addiction for what it is, a medical disorder that can and must be treated by a group of medical specialists. We have to take care of addicts like we take care of cancer patients" (Waters, 2017).

A number of people have noted that the opioid crisis, being treated as a medical and public health problem, is a new phenomenon. Other drug crises in recent memory, such as the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, were treated almost exclusively as criminal, moral, and individual problems. Lopez argues for *Vox* that this is because opioid addiction, which usually takes the form

of prescription pills like fentanyl, hydrocodone, and oxycodone, disproportionately affects the white middle class. Therefore, law enforcement, elected officials, and the predominantly white general public are better able to empathize and relate to the issue, as opposed to the crack epidemic which largely involved marginalized Black communities. Lopez writes that "a close experience with a personal friend or family member drove them [lawmakers] to understand drug addiction and the opioid crisis in a much more compassionate way – one that emphasizes treating drug misuse as a public health issue" (Lopez, 2017).

For this project, I present original research on statewide media coverage of Utah's opioid epidemic and compare it to national media coverage of the crack epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, which I chronicle through a review of literature. In a textual analysis of state news coverage, I ask a series of research questions to determine the role of race and class as factors in media coverage. The questions are:

**RQ1: What role does race or ethnicity place in national media coverage of the crack cocaine epidemic?**

**RQ2: What role does class or economic position play in national media coverage of the crack cocaine epidemic?**

**RQ3: What role does race or ethnicity play in Utah's local media coverage of the opioid epidemic?**

**RQ4: What role does class or economic position play in Utah's local media coverage of the opioid epidemic?**

## Method

The methodology of this project is a qualitative analysis of news media related to Utah's opioid crisis. To find news articles and broadcasts relevant to the subject, I searched Lexus Nexus

and Google using the phrases: "opioid addiction"; "opioid abuse"; "opioid crisis"; and "opioid epidemic." In order to narrow the scope of the project, the search was limited to six major Utah media outlets: *The Salt Lake Tribune*, *Deseret News*, *KSL*, *Fox 13*, *KUTV*, and *Good4Utah*; I further limited the search to publications and broadcasts that were published between the two-year period January 1, 2015 and December 31, 2016. This period was chosen because it was about the time opioid addiction began receiving increased attention from journalists and politicians.

## Race and Media Framing

Media act as "gatekeepers" of public information and consequently shape the public agendas and determine the way events are interpreted (Gutierrez & Wilson, 1995). This is especially true in areas like Chicago, where television media coverage of crime heavily associates it with Black crime and youth gangs. Research found that in 1993 and 1994, eight or nine minutes of every 14 minutes of news coverage on Chicago's three dominant network affiliates had to do with a threat of violence to humans (Entman, 1997). The symbolic message being sent is that African Americans are more dangerous than whites, reinforcing negative emotional stereotypes about African Americans and communities of color. The opinions of the white societal majority often dictate the ways in which non-whites are depicted. One example of this concerns Chinese and Mexican immigrants, who have historically been accused of disrupting neighborhoods, "stealing jobs," and abusing government assistance (Miller, 1997). Although the public's attitudes are out of media outlets' control, their reports have exacerbated such perceptions by giving them frequent attention and reaffirming stereotypical notions. In effect, this leads to the creation of composite images and generalizations of other races and cultures (Downing & Husband, 2005).

Racism in the media is rarely overt or explicit. Instead, it operates inferentially and through unquestioned assumptions about different groups and races. These assumptions "enable racist statements to be formulated without ever bringing into awareness the racist predicates on which the statements are grounded" (Hall, 1995, p. 20). Even if reporters or broadcasters have every intention of fairly portraying a group or accurately addressing a race-related issue, their stories end up filled with imagery and language predicated on unstated assumptions about non-white communities and groups. Media outlets, then, have the ideological power to portray events in a particular way (Hall, 1982). Media, including television, print, and radio, cover events differently depending on the race or ethnicity of the people involved. A study of news media coverage of the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting revealed that the shooter's ethnicity played a significant role in how the media treated the incident (Park, Holody, & Zhang, 2012). Seung-Hui Cho was assessed and analyzed based on his South Korean heritage. In mass shootings involving white perpetrators, however, such as the 1999 Columbine High School massacre, media narratives did not focus on the race of the shooters and instead focused on different

aspects, such as the shooters being bullied and social outcasts. This research reveals how the media racializes crimes committed by non-white individuals, yet does not apply the same kind of racial analysis when criminals are white.

Something that has affected media coverage of minorities is the fact that minorities are disproportionately underrepresented in the news industry. A 2014 statistical analysis of 1,400 newspapers found that out of the 36,722 full-time employees, only 4,887 of them were non-white (Jenkins, 2017). This means that even though ethnic minorities collectively make up 37.9 percent of the U.S. population, they only made up 13 percent of the news industry workforce in 2014. The implication of this is that ethnic minorities do not have an opportunity to control the narrative regarding their portrayal in the mainstream press.

## Race, Social Crisis, and Hurricane Katrina

Moral panic has been looked at in the context of media coverage of natural disasters and public perception of them. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the captioning of photographs was also thought to be racially motivated. In one photo that circulated over the internet, a Black man is shown in waist-high water carrying a package of soda and a stuffed garbage bag. The caption read, "A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store." A similar photograph of a white couple moving through water and carrying food and drinks was captioned, "Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store." Since the only real difference in the pictures was the race of those depicted, this supports the idea that race played a role in news coverage of Hurricane Katrina (Lacy and Haspel, 2011).

Researchers from Tufts University analyzed aspects of media depictions of Hurricane Katrina and discovered a disproportionate tendency of the media to exaggerate instances of Black crime, including inaccurate reports of criminal looting, mischief, and petty crime. The first factor considered was language use in media. The Tufts study found that the term "refugee" was used 1,040 times to describe Katrina victims while "evacuee" was used 2,830 times. This means "evacuee" was used more often than "refugee" by a ratio of 2.7 to 1. This is a much smaller ratio than was found for Hurricane Rita, a Gulf Coast storm that hit three weeks after Katrina. The ratio for Rita was 5.9 to 1, more than twice that for stories about Katrina. Moreover, the research found that "refugee" was used more often in conjunction with the words "poor" or "Black" by a margin of 68 percent to 32 percent, suggesting that "these data support the conclusion that race played some role in the increased use of 'refugee' in the coverage of Katrina (Apfelbaum, Dukes, Sommers, Toosi, & Wang, 2006). This is notable because, according to Merriam-Webster, a refugee is "a person who flees to a foreign country or power to escape danger or persecution," (2018). Therefore, referring to Black evacuees as "refugees" implies that Katrina's evacuees were foreign and not American. There is also evidence of racial biases in coverage of Hurricane Katrina in

email chains that depicted Katrina evacuees in terms suggesting that evacuees were lazy, dirty and unappreciative. In a massively circulated email labeled “Rest Stop,” Katrina evacuees from New Orleans were referred to as refugees and accused of “peeing all over the walls, floors, mirrors, etc,” and leaving the Texas Department of Transportation public bathrooms a mess. The email continued: “Why the hell should any of them want to get a job when they can lay around all day in free air-conditioned stadiums where they don’t have to spend a dime and they have TV, entertainment and education and great food?” Although these claims were never confirmed by the Texas Department of Transportation, this widespread email is an example of the ways Katrina victims were depicted. These accounts go beyond describing Katrina evacuees as violent and focus on bodily function and barbarism. Unreliable urban legends of this sort disseminate easiest when they involve particular racial groups.

In an analysis of 323 news stories, Lacy and Haspel found that Africans Americans impacted by Hurricane Katrina were viewed as apocalyptic looters with the following implications: that the African American looters were subhuman, irrational and immature, dangerous criminals, rapists, and murderers. Furthermore, Katrina evacuees were seen as racial Others and non-Americans who posed an alien threat to the wellbeing of Louisiana’s surrounding states. Media outlets like *USA Today* and *The New York Times* painted visions of “thousands upon thousands” of people fleeing the storm and in need of support from surrounding areas. At the same time as popular media outlets and publications were treating Katrina evacuees as non-American criminals, they sympathized and made excuses for government leaders and civil servants who failed to adequately do their jobs. When dozens of floodwalls and levees failed, a Washington Post editorial portrayed the Bush administration as ignorant of the matter. However, as it was later noted in *The Los Angeles Times*, governmental officials anticipated that the levees would fail. Moreover, it was noted that officials in Louisiana and New Orleans knew they wouldn’t be able to receive adequate assistance from the federal government. When reports surfaced that at least 12 rescue workers abandoned their missions after hearing gunfire, media outlets absolved hospital rescue helicopters, rescue boats, local police forces, contractors sent to repair the broken levees, and evacuation ambulances and buses of any blame or responsibility. There were also a number of high-profile cases involving New Orleans police officers who shot and killed Black Katrina victims, who were unarmed. On April 20, 2016, five officers were indicted and all plead guilty to shooting unarmed victims. Four received sentences ranging from seven to 12 years and the fifth officer who was involved in the cover-up received three years (Robertson, 2016).

### Race and Moral Panic

The scholarly concept of moral panic occurs when there is a heightened level of fear over an issue, leading to an increased hostility towards the group the issue is associated with, and an eventual consensus that the threat is real (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2006). Culture has been described as an ideological phenomenon in that it

relates to struggles over meaning and social power. As an ideology, culture “narrows down choices and prescribes behavior through formal and informal social rules” (Lull, 2000, p. 136). Media’s tendency to sensationalize crime and associate it with non-Whites is an example of moral panic being used to promote an ideology (Chiricos, 2006). Moral panic acts as an ideology by promoting partisan discourse and distorting reality. A study from the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Missouri, St. Louis used moral panic theory to provide a content analysis of 124 newspaper articles to examine whether the race or class of crack cocaine and methamphetamine users affected print media’s depiction of such drugs (Cobbina, 2008). Moral panic theory occurs when a majority population associates a minority population negatively and as an active threat to the stability and decency of society. There has been a great deal of research done on the role of the media in generating moral panic. Pressed by time, journalists rely on public experts and officials who often have their own agendas, especially with controversial topics like crime. This means news reports are often written with only one perspective in mind, making it easier for moral panics to be constructed and disseminated. It is apparent that mass media institutions play a role in the production of societal moral panics about groups that are seen as outsiders.

Cobbina notes that class and race have historically impacted the way drug issues are treated and the attention they receive. Cocaine, for example, was popular among the middle and upper classes in the late 1970s, but didn’t gain attention until the mid 1980s when it was associated with poor inner-city African American and Hispanic youth populations. Another example is of Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century who were associated with smoking opium. Public panic arose and so did popular media depictions of Chinese men luring white women into lives of prostitution. During the Great Depression, marijuana became associated with Mexicans and was blamed for increases in violent crime. Once marijuana was associated with Mexican men, it became outlawed in the United States. These examples highlight the ways drugs have traditionally been associated with minority groups, leading to disharmony and hostility on behalf of the public and those in power (Cobbina, 2008).

### Media Portrayal of the Crack Cocaine Epidemic

In order to better understand the relationship between race and media coverage, Cobbina looked at articles from four major newspapers: *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. The archives of each of these publications were searched for uses of the phrase “crack cocaine” in the title or text between the years of 1985 and 1987, as well as the phrase “methamphetamine” between 2001 and 2003. A content analysis was performed to “examine whether the race and class of crack cocaine and methamphetamine users have shaped the print media’s representation of these drugs; and whether such depictions affect the official response” (p. 150). Her study explored two questions: whether the race and class of crack cocaine and

methamphetamine users shaped print media’s representation of these drugs and whether such depictions affected the official response. Cobbina’s analysis found that print media coverage of crack cocaine commonly associated it with impoverished African American communities. Moreover, when white or middle-class affluent individuals were identified as the purchasers of crack, they were portrayed as victims 67 percent of the time, reinforcing the stereotype that white people are non-dangerous and non-criminals. White users of crack were treated with sympathy, usually as blameless targets of drug crimes by poor African American men. This victimization catalyzed the idea that white individuals are deserving of sympathy while Black individuals are seen as dangerous and wicked criminals. Similarly, print media coverage of methamphetamine users typically treated them as societal victims. For example, one woman reported to *The Chicago Tribune* that she started doing meth so she would have the energy to balance work, personal life, and being a mother. In this instance, the report portrayed this woman’s actions as justified and worthy of public sympathy.

Media coverage of crack frequently associated it with violence, using phrases like “crack wars” and “rampant” drug use to describe gang violence and murder. While nearly half of the articles about crack made mentions of violence, only one fifth of articles about meth did. This means meth users were less likely to be portrayed as threats to the public, supporting the notion that white people are less dangerous or less violent than people of color. Cobbina concludes: “Evidence suggests that race and class influenced both the perception of crack and meth abusers and the response to crack users. It appears that it is not just the depiction of drugs that create moral panics but media representations of crack and meth to particular groups of people are what lead the drug to be viewed as dangerous” (p.161). Other scholars and journalists have also looked at the relationship between race and crack cocaine (Gfroerer, Flewelling, & Rachal, 1993; Palamar, Davies, Ompad, Cleland, & Weitzman, 2015; Cohen, 2015).

Politicians and members of the media did not focus on drugs until about 1988, when stories about the crack epidemic began appearing on front page and primetime news. This “orgy” of media attention did not occur in the 1970s when cocaine was popularly used by upper and middle-class whites. However, the crack epidemic “attracted their [media and politicians] attention because of its downward mobility to and increased visibility in ghettos and barrios” (Reinarman & Levine, 1989, p. 540). Crack users had a different social class and race status and were therefore seen as a bigger threat than the wealthier white groups associated with cocaine. The drug scare wasn’t a scare until it “became visible among this ‘threatening’ group.” This research provides an example of drug problems being treated differently based on the race and social positioning of the people involved.

In this literature review, I have examined pertinent areas of scholarship pertaining to my study. These include media gatekeeping, agenda setting, minority representation in news rooms, drug and crime coverage, moral panic, and race. This study aims to

contribute to that literature by examining one state, Utah, and news coverage of the opioid epidemic.

### Media Coverage of Utah’s Opioid Epidemic

Since racial media bias has long been studied at the national level, this paper set out to narrow the scope and look at Utah as an example. The search criteria returned 103 news stories from the six Utah outlets. Of those, 30 stories were re-published from national media outlets or wire services and did not mention Utah specifically, so they were not included in the analysis. An additional nine articles were excluded because they were written by guest contributors and thus did not meet the definition of media coverage. The 64 news stories that were analyzed break down as follows: 23 from Fox 13; 19 from the Deseret News; nine from the *Salt Lake Tribune*; five from *Good4Utah*; five from *KSL*; and three from *KUTV*.

|                       | NUMBER OF STORIES | PERCENTAGE OF STORIES |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| FOX-13                | 23                | 35.9                  |
| DESERET NEWS          | 19                | 29.7                  |
| THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE | 9                 | 14.1                  |
| GOOD4UTAH             | 5                 | 7.8                   |
| KSL                   | 5                 | 7.8                   |
| KUTV                  | 3                 | 4.7                   |
| TOTAL                 | 64                | 100                   |

From these 64 local news stories, there were seven major themes that emerged. These themes were: all socioeconomic groups affected; compassion, empathy, and concern; physician and industry blame; user blame; high-profile crime and sensational stories; policy, lawmaking, and medical marijuana; and overdose reversal.

|  | NUMBER OF STORIES | PERCENTAGE OF STORIES |
|--|-------------------|-----------------------|
| ALL SOCIOECONOMIC GROUPS AFFECTED          | 16                | 25.0                  |
| COMPASSION, EMPATHY, AND CONCERN           | 26                | 40.6                  |
| PHYSICIAN AND INDUSTRY BLAME               | 18                | 28.1                  |
| USER-BLAME                                 | 3                 | 4.7                   |
| HIGH-PROFILE CRIME AND SENSATIONAL STORIES | 11                | 17.2                  |
| POLICY, LAWMAKING, AND MEDICAL MARIJUANA   | 29                | 45.3                  |
| OVERDOSE REVERSAL                          | 9                 | 14.1                  |
| TOTAL                                      | 64                |                       |

### All Socioeconomic Groups Affected

A dominant theme of news coverage of Utah’s opioid epidemic was an emphasis that this issue moves across socioeconomic boundaries and affects people of all walks of life, profession, race,

religion, or social status. A number of stories made reference to no one being safe and the opioid abuse impacting everyone in the state. While only a few stories made explicit mention of race, the news coverage implicitly focused around the idea that the opioid epidemic affects middle-class white people. A *Deseret News* story (Chen, 2016) cited a 2008 study that found 98 percent of people who died from opioid overdoses in Utah were white. There is even journalistic reflection on this point. In a *Salt Lake Tribune* column, George Pyle noted that the people affected by the opioid crisis are predominantly “well-dressed white people” (2016). Other news coverage hinted at this by pointing out that it spans all cities, counties, and demographics. As the *Salt Lake Tribune* editorial board put it, talking specifically about heroin addiction, “It is no longer a disease of the poor and dispossessed. It reaches into all races and socioeconomic groups, big cities and small towns” (2016). Another *Salt Lake Tribune* article noted that suburbs are “hot spots” for opioid addiction; there was a quote from a Salt Lake County health department employee that “people from all walks of life are experiencing this epidemic” (Gorrell, 2016). An article by the *Deseret News* quoted Salt Lake Police Chief Mike Brown as saying the opioid crisis “crosses every socioeconomic boundary you know” (Chen, 2016). Or, as an editorial from the *Deseret News* observed, “It has affected families in every community and demographic” (2016). Opioid addiction is a problem, Utah U.S. Attorney John W. Huber told *Fox 13*, “whether you live in Magna or Millcreek. It transcends socioeconomic lines” (McKay, 2016). To put Huber’s comments in perspective, the median property value in Magna, a semi-rural suburb of Salt Lake City, in 2015 was \$148,500, compared to \$279,300 in Millcreek, a residential suburb.

A few stories focused on the opioid epidemic impacting high-profile and affluent individuals. In a *Good4Utah* TV broadcast, a recovering heroin addict noted that he came from a middle-class family and that his “mom was a doctor.” This story was used as an example of how opioid addiction is “a crisis that spans socioeconomic boundaries and [that] no one is immune [from]” (Nelson, 2016). A *Fox 13* story discussed how Utah gubernatorial democratic candidate Mike Weinholtz’s spouse struggled with prescription pill addiction for years, highlighting the fact that opioid addiction hits close to home for many Utahns, even well-known families (Steinbrecher, 2016). Aside from politicians, Utah celebrities are impacted by opioids, too. Alema Harrington, who spent years as a commentator for the Utah Jazz professional basketball team, became addicted to prescription painkillers and eventually heroin, which cost him his job and family, according to a *Good4Utah* story (Carlisle, 2016).

These stories all focus on how opioid addiction affects many people, even those who are wealthy or well known in the community. By doing so, news coverage portrays the opioid crisis as a unique drug problem that transcends socioeconomic and racial boundaries. Unlike the crack-cocaine epidemic that was associated with poverty-stricken inner cities, Utah’s opioid epidemic is portrayed as significantly affecting middle class suburban and rural communities. An explanation for why the opioid epidemic

has received such widespread coverage could be that the epidemic is associated with a wealthier and more represented demographic, namely, Utah’s white middle class, while other drug-related issues, like the crack-cocaine epidemic, are primarily associated with poorer Black and Latino communities.

#### *Empathy, Compassion, & Concern*

A significant theme of news coverage was revealed in stories targeting the emotions of viewers by telling relatable stories, as well as drawing upon anecdotes about families, young women, and children. In many stories, the siblings, spouses, parents, and children of deceased opioid addicts were at the center of the discussion. A *Salt Lake Tribune* article talked about ‘Chasing the Dragon,’ a documentary that “features first-person accounts of people. ... who have children who have abused opioids with tragic consequences” (2016). Although it is not in the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that the documentary title alludes to 19th century opioid use and addiction by Chinese immigrants, ultimately associating opioid addiction with Chinese immigrants and culture. Another paper might further discuss and analyze the implications of this association. A *Fox 13* broadcast focused around Dr. Jennifer Plumb, Medical Director for Utah Naloxone, who actively spoke out against opioid addiction after her brother overdosed and died (Nuñez, 2016). Another *Fox 13* story was about Mark Lewis, who lost his son to a heroin overdose, “dread[s] the thought of another family going through it” and consequently became an advocate for heroin addiction awareness (McKay, 2016). In a *KSL* story, Craig PoVey with the Utah Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health cites 75 percent of people who have misused drugs as getting them from family and friends (Madsen, 2016). A number of stories focused on women or reference statistics that indicate young women are disproportionately impacted by opioid addiction. The focus on women as victims is in line with historical moral panics and crises that have similarly victimized women. A *Fox13* story quoted Utah congressman Chris Stewart, who said he has personally seen opioid abuse affect three people, one of whom “was a young mother who got addicted after the birth of her child” (Roth, 2016). This idea is further seen in the *KSL* headline “Born addicted: Moms struggle with opioid addiction during pregnancy” (Simonsen, 2015). In a *Deseret News* feature, Tim Whalen, director of Behavioral Health for Salt Lake County, said people being treated right now are overwhelmingly young homeless women (Cortez, 2016). Another *Deseret News* story chronicled Erin Finkbiner, “a 32-year-old mom from Cottonwood Heights [who] was a thriving customer service representative with a supportive family when she started using [prescription painkillers]” (Chen, 2016).

A number of stories talked about lost loved ones or focused on how close to home the issue hits. A *Salt Lake Tribune* editorial refers to “us” as being the victims of opioid addiction and overdose, telling the reader that the *Salt Lake Tribune* staff relates to the problem (2016). Some stories indicated that opioid abuse awareness and policy reform will save lives, such as Utah Rep. Steve

Eliason’s Opiate Overdose Response Act. A *Fox 13* story quoted Eliason, “This important policy will save lives and give people’s sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, a second chance at life and hopefully help them step out of substance abuse once and for all” (Green, 2016). When discussing subdermal implants meant to counteract opioid dependence, the *Deseret News* reported, “Doctors say it will save lives” (Simonsen, 2016).

Throughout these stories, there was a strong and constant underlying tone of empathy, compassion, and concern. Whereas the crack-cocaine epidemic was treated as a criminal problem, Utah’s opioid epidemic was treated as a public health problem. The result is that opioid abusers are seen as worthy of sympathy and being relatable, while crack-cocaine users are not. While crack-cocaine is thought of as being a problem in “other” communities, Utah’s opioid epidemic is portrayed as affecting our own communities. Consequently, Utah’s opioid abusers are treated with compassion and concern in a way that other drug users are not. This finding is in line with the idea that white drug users were seen as less of a threat than Black and Latino drug users, and that race and class contributed to the way local media covered Utah’s opioid epidemic.

#### *Physician & Industry Blame*

Another theme in coverage was a shifting of blame and responsibility from prescription pill abusers towards the people, agencies, and industries that have made the abuse possible. A number of news stories referenced doctors, pharmacists, pharmaceutical companies, and advertisers as bearing some degree of responsibility for the prevalence of opioid addiction in Utah. A *Good4Utah* story described the addiction of Nicholas Call, who was prescribed opioids after he pulled a muscle in his back during a softball game. In the story Call brought attention to his doctor in playing a role in his addiction. “I mean the doctor’s giving you permission, right? The doctor knows best. ... My doctor told me we need to treat pain aggressively. So I went back in [and] got some more medications and from that point on the next few years of my life were a wreck. I lost my family, I lost my job. I lost my life, really” (Nelson, 2016). The story then turned to Dr. Thomas J. Wood of Intermountain Healthcare, who said 25 out of every 100 people who are prescribed opioids will become addicted. Therefore, Wood said, doctors are addicting one out of every four patients. A *Deseret News* story reported that some people turn to the streets when they are cut off from their prescriptions, and paraphrased Intermountain Salt Lake Clinic rehabilitation doctor Michael Jaffe, “Nobody in the medical community – not doctors, not insurers, not pharmaceutical companies – should be let off the hook” (Chen, 2016). Later, it is pointed out that despite there being no research or evidence to support prescribing opioids to treat back pain and headaches, doctors continued to do so. In a *Deseret News* article about a “pill pusher” doctor, Simmon Lee Wilcox, who wrote false or fraudulent prescriptions for at least 81,000 oxycodone pills, Assistant U.S. Attorney Vernon Stejskal was quoted, “Dr. Wilcox specifically used his position as a licensed and trained person to get those 81,000

pills into the community” (Romero, 2016). These articles show how doctors were portrayed as being in part responsible for opioid addiction in the state.

As much attention was brought to pharmaceutical companies and the industry as a whole as it was to individual doctors and physicians. The *Salt Lake Tribune* editorial board brought attention to lobbying on behalf of pharmaceutical corporations that prevented any effective legislature aimed at halting opioid abuse. There would be hope for change, the editorial board wrote, “if the big drug companies that profit from the growing use of opioid painkillers weren’t spending more than \$100 million a year to stop any legislative efforts to limit the use and abuse of those pills.” The editorial asserted that manufacturers of OxyContin, Vicodin, and fentanyl have made billions by convincing doctors to prescribe them, and that it was time to “stand up to the legal drug pushers at least as forcefully as we fight the illegal ones,” (2016). *Salt Lake Tribune* columnist George Pyle wrote that “well-dressed pharmaceutical salespeople who are sitting next to you in the doctor’s waiting room” share responsibility for opioid abuse (2016). In some cases, drug makers have been held responsible in court. A *Good4Utah* story brought up the massive amount of television time and advertising space purchased by pharmaceutical companies (Carlisle, 2016).

Throughout this coverage, blame was shifted from opioid users to the manufacturers, sales people, and lobbyists of opioid-containing drugs. Instead of framing the opioid epidemic as a problem of individual choice, the epidemic was portrayed as being at least partially caused by drug providers and manufacturers. In other words, opioid addiction is not seen as a problem caused by poor choices on the part of individual drug users, but rather caused by systemic and institutional factors. Additionally, opioid addiction is seen as being more than a drug problem, but also raising concerns about advertising and lobbying. Once again, this coverage indicates that opioid abusers are seen as less to blame, and therefore less of a threat, than crack-cocaine users.

#### *User Blame*

The news stories examined in this study contained noticeably little discussion about the role opioid abusers and users play in the statewide crisis. Only three articles mentioned user behavior and personal choice being a contributing factor to opioid addiction. In a *Fox 13* story, Jen Chambers of the National Fibromyalgia and Chronic Pain Association said prescription opioids are not being used legally or for the proper uses, and “what is happening is that when the illegitimate patients, or people who have addictions, are pursuing the doctors, they’re finding the doctors who believe them, and they receive these medications” (2015). Some stories pointed to a cultural shift of people expecting pain medication for every ailment as being to blame. In a *KUTV* story about a “Use Only As Directed” campaign, Angela Stander from the Utah Department of Health presented a list of “Five Questions to Ask Your Doctor” to prevent patients from becoming addicted, abusing, and overdosing, indicating that there is a burden on patients to understand the

dangers of the drugs they are using (Barton, 2016). Eric Barnhart, a special agent with the Federal Bureau Investigation Salt Lake City Field Office, told *Fox 13* that part of the problem is people neglecting to properly dispose of leftover prescriptions. Barnhart said people should throw away unused prescriptions when they no longer need them so they “don’t risk becoming [their] household’s drug dealer” (Vaifanua, 2016).

In these three articles, the responsibility of addiction is placed directly on those being affected, either due to poor life choices or failure to properly study up on the drugs they are being prescribed. While there was significantly more blame-shifting coverage, these articles question the character and decision-making of opioid abusers themselves. This is more in line with coverage of the crack-cocaine epidemic, and indicates that opioid abusers are still seen as bearing some degree of responsibility for their addiction.

#### *High-Profile Crime & Sensational Stories*

A number of stories centered around instances of high-profile crime or otherwise sensational anecdotes, which can be seen as an example of moral panic. There were several stories that relied on dramatic, shocking, and provocative information during coverage of Utah’s opioid epidemic. There were three local news stories that made up the majority of high-profile crime coverage. The first of these concerns the “St. George ‘pill pusher’ previously mentioned, who was sentenced to 8 years in prison,” as noted by a *Deseret News* headline about Simmon Lee Wilcox. The story described Wilcox as the “kingpin” of a massive oxycodone distribution conspiracy. The magnitude of the drug scheme was further elaborated by assistant U.S. attorney Vernon Stejskal, who was quoted, “Dr. Wilcox specifically used his position as a licensed and trained person to get those pills into the community. ... The word on the street was Dr. Wilcox was the place to go for pain medications in St. George or Las Vegas. ... He chose to become a pill pusher, essentially,” (Romero, 2016). The next high-profile story that received focus was a drug bust in Cottonwood Heights, described by *Fox 13* as “the case of the biggest criminal pill press operation in Utah history” (Roth, 2016). The bust was further detailed in a later *Fox 13* that described a criminal forfeiture of Aaron Shamo’s property and assets, including \$1.2 million in cash. Additionally, Drug Enforcement Agency agent Brian Besser was quoted as saying that millions of tablets were allegedly distributing by Shamo throughout the continental United States and that hundreds of thousands of opioids were seized from Shamo’s property (Wells, 2016). A story by *Good4Utah* referenced Shamo’s arrest when warning that “illegal pill making operations are popping up in Utah and around the country” (Beeby, 2016). The story noted that law enforcement agencies seized around 95,000 counterfeit pills meant to resemble opioid painkillers like OxyContin and Xanax. The third story that received significant attention was that of two 13-year-old boys from Park City, who died from overdosing on “pink,” a synthetic opioid. Davis County Sheriff’s Sgt. DeeAnn Servey told the *Deseret News* that pink’s potency makes it so dangerous;

it is something that could take a life in an instant (Boal, 2016). A *Fox 13* story emphasized the way young adults and teenagers are particularly at risk of using pink, the “potent synthetic opioid much more dangerous than other drugs,” and said Park City School District Officials urged parents to check their children’s belongings for unmarked containers in wake of the two deaths (Scheidell, 2016).

These three news events show a focus on high-profile and sensational events in local media coverage of the opioid epidemic. Although there had been hundreds of opioid-related overdoses and dozens of drug busts in the same time span, these three sensational stories made up a large portion of high-profile and sensational coverage. It is possible that these three stories received so much coverage because they affect affluent communities, and serve as an example of urban crime creeping into suburban life. In other words, these stories were so heavily covered because of the communities they involve, communities that are different from those affected by low-profile drug-related crime. This narrative of urban crime creeping into urban communities can be understood as an example of the concept of moral panic discussed earlier. Once again, there is evidence that race and class had an impact on the way local media covered the opioid epidemic.

#### *Policy, Lawmaking, & Medical Marijuana*

Of any theme looked at, the policy, lawmaking, and medical marijuana theme was the most prevalent in news coverage. Opioid addiction was a major talking point in the 2016 gubernatorial election between Mike Weinholtz and Gov. Gary Herbert, as recounted in a Salt Lake Tribune story (Gehrke, 2016). A *Fox 13* story documented a bill passed in the 2016 Utah Legislature, House Bill 240, the Opiate Overdose Act, which was sponsored by state Rep. Steve Eliason (Green, 2016). Of all the possible policy responses to opioid abuse, the legalization of medical marijuana was the most prevalent. Mike Weinholtz, 2016 gubernatorial candidate, ran on a medical marijuana plan after his wife pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of possession of marijuana, according to a story by *Fox 13*. Weinholtz’s plan noted that opioid addiction had increased dramatically in the state, and legalizing medical marijuana would reduce the use of opioids as pain relievers (Steinbrecher, 2016). A KUTV story covered Dose of Nature, a company based in Provo which sells CBD oil, an extract of hemp, a type of cannabis, which does not contain psychoactive elements and can be used as a pain reliever (Miller, 2016).

These stories indicate that opioid addiction was a talking point for Utah politicians at all levels of government, and that political initiatives like the legalization of marijuana were seen as direct responses to the Utah opioid epidemic. It can be said, then, that opioid addiction was largely seen as a political issue that could be solved through lawmaking and be used as a political platform for those running for office. This coverage also demonstrated that opioid addiction is a problem worthy of concern for Utah politicians, and that a number of officials are focused on addressing the

epidemic.

#### *Overdose Reversal*

Other than solutions to prevent opioid addiction from occurring at all, a number of stories focused on what can be done to prevent deaths once someone has already overdosed. *Fox 13* reported on billboards throughout Utah aimed at promoting awareness of naloxone, a drug designed to rapidly reverse opioid overdoses in emergency situations (Nuñez, 2016). The usefulness of naloxone was further noted by the *Deseret News* in an article that discussed a number of bills aimed at easing the distribution of the overdose reversal drug (Chen, 2016). A *Fox 13* story reported on House Bill 240, the Opiate Overdose Response Act, a recently passed bill that allows pharmacists in Utah to dispense naloxone without a prescription. The effectiveness of naloxone was noted by executive director for the Utah Department of Health Joseph Miner, who said “opioid overdose can be reversed and death prevented by timely administration of naloxone” (Green, 2016).

These stories indicate that short-term solutions like overdose prevention, in contrast to long-term solutions like medical marijuana legalization, were seen as playing an important role in combating the opioid crisis and preventing deaths. It is important to note that none of these solutions included cracking down on crime or further criminalizing opioid use. Again, opioid addiction was treated as a public health problem as opposed to a criminal one. Unlike crack-cocaine addiction, opioid addiction was not seen as something that can be solved through arrests, raids, and lockdowns. Utah’s opioid epidemic, on the contrary, was seen as being solved through opioid reversal as a preventative measure.

### **Conclusion**

This project set out to examine the role of race and class in media coverage of Utah’s opioid epidemic, and how this compares to media coverage of the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s. My research questions were:

**RQ1: What role does race or ethnicity play in national media coverage of the crack cocaine epidemic?**

**RQ2: What role does class or economic position play in national media coverage of the crack cocaine epidemic?**

**RQ3: What role does race or ethnicity play in Utah’s local media coverage of the opioid epidemic?**

**RQ4: What role does class or economic position play in Utah’s local media coverage of the opioid epidemic?**

A review of literature revealed that news coverage of the crack cocaine epidemic focused on crime, violence, gang activity, inner cities, and people of color. The content analysis of local

news coverage of Utah’s opioid epidemic revealed a number of insights about the role of race and class in media coverage. A significant amount of coverage focused on opioid addiction moving across socioeconomic boundaries, impacting middle-class white people (particularly women), and even affecting Utah celebrities. Aside from a few high-profile crime stories, very little coverage focused on crime. On the contrary, Utah opioid abusers were often victimized and blame was placed on doctors, lobbyists, and the pharmaceutical industry. These findings support the idea that the race and class of the Utah demographic primarily affected by opioid addiction, middle-class white people, had an impact on the way the epidemic was covered in the media. More specifically, coverage did not focus on crime or violence, was generally compassionate, and often shifted blame away from opioid users. However, there were some stories that blamed opioid users for not throwing away unused prescriptions or being educated on the dangers of opioids. In other words, blame through ignorance and negligence as opposed to criminal blame. This study is limited in that it looked at a relatively small sample of Utah’s six biggest media publications and broadcasts. A larger study might look at local and county newspapers, especially from northern Utah counties that have high rates of opioid addiction.

The goal of this paper is not necessarily to say there is anything wrong with treating opioid addiction as a public health problem. Rather, it is to offer perspective as to how public attitudes have shifted over time, and how racial and socioeconomic factors affect public opinions and media narratives of different drug epidemics. There are a number of implications to treating the opioid crisis as a public health problem as opposed to a criminal one. The crack cocaine epidemic, which was treated as a criminal problem, led to the incarceration of hundreds of thousands of people who were disproportionately Black (Alexander, 2010). With the opioid epidemic being treated as a public health problem, there will likely be greater emphasis on rehabilitation as opposed to incarceration. This paper sheds light on how Utah’s opioid victim’s are receiving a sympathy that crack cocaine victim’s never received. Media coverage of Utah’s opioid epidemic revealed compassionate and empathetic coverage that empathized the human side of opioid users, therefore enabling viewers or readers to relate to the victims and attempt to understand their struggle. There were stories about local celebrities and working mothers that showed opioid addiction could affect any one of us, as well as stories about everyday people who were prescribed prescription opioids and eventually became addicted to heroin. It is interesting to imagine what the world would look like if the crack cocaine epidemic was treated in a similar vein, as a public health problem, and how much lower incarceration rates would be today, and how many thousands of Black men and women would have been helped rather than punished as a result.

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