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Media Representations of Toronto's Social Housing Communities and Their Implications

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Abstract

This paper examines the different ways in which media representations depict images of deviance amongst Toronto's social housing communities. Social housing communities within Toronto, specifically Regent Park and Jane and Finch, face sensationalized crime coverage regularly and provide both internal and external implications for those communities and their residents. As these communities face extensive criminalization, the policing brought forth onto them is often punitive in nature and proves less beneficial. Such observations have been established by drawing on a series of qualitative and quantitative research conducted on residents within said communities, along with empirical evidence from criminologists that portray the realities of punitive policing. This paper provides recommendations for policing that better protect Toronto's social housing communities and its members from hard policing tactics stemming from inaccurate media representations.

Keywords

Media Representations, Criminalization, Policing, Social Housing, Criminality

1. Introduction

The media often serves as the primary source of information for those within society seeking to understand current world events and social issues in their everyday lives. Such media outlets include television, social media, newspapers, news agencies, and many more that shape the way consumers think and act. While the media has long been portrayed as an exemplary form of mass communication, media representations often play a negatively influential role as they obtain the power of labelling their depicted narratives as unbiasedly objective. This narrative-creating power is pronounced when looking at the disproportio-

nate coverage of crime-related news when it pertains to, particular and often marginalized, communities. Whether they be communities of place or people, these groups are often under great scrutiny within the media due to longstanding and societally accepted, albeit flawed, depictions of inherent deviance. Often, communities can face assumptions of probable criminality through the media based solely on locality, which can be illustrated in places like Regent Park and Jane and Finch. In this paper, I will discuss how specific social housing communities and their residents within Toronto continue to face criminalization and stigmatization due to negative media representations that deems them as inherently criminogenic, warranting extensive policing in such areas. In turn, the criminalizing of individuals for minor crimes becomes apparent, along with the straining of police-community relations. Thus, the policing of social housing communities, to be effective, needs to focus on diminishing racial profiling tactics while increasing diversity within police forces that reflect the communities being represented.

2. Literature Review

Prior to the formulation of Regent Park, the location was referred to as "Cabbagetown" and was subject to substantial economic instability, resulting in the state intervening and creating affordable public housing, which is now known as Regent Park (Purdy, 2005). Regent Park is a community within Toronto that was built to create low-income housing for those in the city, ultimately resulting in Toronto's first public housing project (Purdy, 2005). Regent Park was built between the 1940s and 1950s and was then held to be an "ordered community," yet by the 1960s, Regent Park was characterized as a "slum" (Purdy, 2005). Slums ultimately express links between social isolation and deviant behaviour, deeming Regent Park as the "Other" in that those residing within the community were inferior to the rest of society (Purdy, 2005). As time progressed, the need for revitalization became more apparent and was influenced by three factors, those being the community's desire to mitigate gang violence and police harassment; plummeting government support for affordable housing, and an emerging consensus among city officials about the link between urbanicity and quality of life in such areas (University of Toronto Libraries, 2022). Through state intervention, city officials decided they wanted to enact change by creating a mixed-income community with a combination of rental, co-op, condos, and subsidized units, with the hopes that Regent Park would encompass a range of residents with differing socio-economic statuses (University of Toronto Libraries, 2022). By integrating more middle-class residents, a social mix currently resides in Regent Park that disallows a strong sense of community that was once held dear to its original residents (University of Toronto Libraries, 2022).

In contrast, Jane and Finch, stemming from a small farming district, was built to endure a high influx of immigrant families settling into the city throughout the early 1960s (Inner City Outreach, 2018). The community of Jane and Finch

was founded on three ideas, those being "the large-scale production of public housing, experimentation in urban planning and urban design, and the de-racialization of Canadian immigration policy", where these ideas came to be generally discredited over time (Boudreau et al., 2009: p. 124). Based on such ideas, Jane and Finch is considered in between modernity and post-modernity (Boudreau et al., 2009). This inner-city community has faced extreme criticism based on high crime and poverty rates since its formation, holding the status as being one of the most dangerous areas within Canada (Narain, 2012). Although the Jane and Finch community is subject to extensive ridicule, it is also one of the most ethnically diverse and multicultural neighbourhoods in the city of Toronto (Inner City Outreach, 2018). Both territorial-based communities within Toronto have faced ample amounts of criminalization and stigmatization throughout the public discourse and the media, upholding a false narrative that is mistaken for the truth by most residing outside of these given communities.

3. External Media Representations

Research on social housing communities and their residents show that the majority of individuals within society hold a false narrative of specific spatial locations that deem them to be less than deserving. As the mainstream media puts forth any content that is likely to produce shock value that appeals to viewers, the public often receives sensationalized depictions of Regent Park from the media, distorting their opinions on the neighbourhood and its tenants (Purdy, 2005). The film *A Farewell to Oak Street* put forth by the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) serves as an example of the negative media representations Regent Park has endured. The film was created and shot during the demolition of "Cabbagetown," where the focus of the film revolves around portraying the shameful contrast between the current disorder and the efficiency of the new housing development that would come to be (Purdy, 2005). To illustrate the need to do away with slums, the documentary depicts scenes of "the slum life" and contrasts them to scenes of "the good life" (Purdy, 2005). The film accentuated women's roles as a mother and housewife, and how these roles cannot be accomplished unless done in a "proper" environment, along with the focus on children being at risk for sexual abuse in these poor neighborhoods (Purdy, 2005). As seen through the previous examples stated, the film aimed to depict that "social cohesion could only be obtained within a profoundly middle-class paradigm of private family life and responsible conduct in line with the social order" (Purdy, 2005: p. 544). Here, the NFB's depiction of the "slum life" in contrast to civilization not only attracted wider support for public housing but made clear how the media influences the public's views and opinions on social housing communities.

Regent Park, being a focus of public scrutiny, has endured a great deal of negative media representations since its inception. *Return to Regent Park* is another film that revolves around public housing within Toronto, with more of a focus

on the negative results of this public housing (Purdy, 2005). With a focus on the efforts of activists to come up with a redevelopment plan for Regent Park, the film narrows in on the community's drug and crime problem, along with the physical deterioration within the neighborhood (Purdy, 2005). In this film, constant scenes of drug dealing, and prostitution are shown, making clear that "the themes of hope and despair are continually emphasized as the camera juxtaposes the 'bad' with the 'good.'" (Purdy, 2005: p. 538). These negative representations of drug use, prostitution, and deterioration throughout the film blames tenants for the conditions in which they live in, disregarding external factors entirely. It is evident that both *A Farewell to Oak Street* and *Return to Regent Park* are films that elicit negative media representations of Regent Park as an "outcast space" that carries with it probable criminality.

Like Regent Park, Jane and Finch is an area within Toronto that is also subject to extensive negative media representations that impact not only the public's opinions of the area but the public's perception of the residents there as well. Earlier depictions of Jane and Finch in the media makes mention of minor crimes, such as vandalism, whereby the community does not pose as a serious threat (Richardson, 2008). Yet, twenty-first century depictions of the neighbourhood became more negative as gun and gang violence in the community became the focus of attention. Present day discourse on this inner-city neighbourhood is consistently referred to as the "crime ridden and impoverished Jane and Finch corridor" (Boudreau et al., 2009: p. 122). For instance, the Canadian film *How She Move*, which is set in Jane and Finch, shows depictions of the "slum life". *How She Move* is a coming-of-age story where a student returns to her old, crime-filled neighborhood after her sister dies from drug addiction where she then finds her passion in street dancing. Such portrayals of the community deem it crime ridden and encourage myths regarding broken families, violence, poverty, and struggle. With this, the sensationalization of violent crimes committed in Jane and Finch becomes apparent as numerous media outlets, even those that reside outside of the Greater Toronto Area, put forth negative stereotypes regarding the community. In turn, Jane and Finch is assigned a position within Toronto through a compilation of stories in the press which enables journalists to then justify this position by using their stories as evidence (Richardson, 2008).

When it comes to Jane and Finch, news articles on this neighborhood often revolve around violent acts that take place within the community, accompanied by a headline that serves to be aggressive and powerful. *The Toronto Star* published an article with the headline "Jane and Finch: Toronto's most dangerous place to be a kid?" including statements such as "...recent upswing in violence police say is gang-related, may once again signal that Jane and Finch is by raw numbers the most dangerous place to be a kid" (Pagliaro, 2013). Despite the sensational headline explicitly implying that the neighbourhood is unsuitable for children, analysis of the article shows little to no indication of support by empirical evidence. Furthermore, by posing what would otherwise be considered a se-

riously negative portrayal of the neighbourhood, *The Toronto Star* appears to remove itself from the responsibility of providing fact-based evidence towards such a claim, while still managing to leave a lasting impression on readers.

4. Internal Representations

In addition to discussing the way in which external media representations of Jane and Finch and Regent Park have led to criminalization and stigmatization, it is essential to note the internal representations within these areas. As these external representations from the media distort the public's perception of these communities and their residents, many of these people generating these views have little to no experience in the community. When analyzing the views of those who are actual members within these communities, many focus less on the supposed poverty and violence that the media accentuates, and more on how these false narratives have negatively affected them throughout their life. Rather than agreeing with the external media representations, a resident within Regent Park goes forth to state "when you go out to look for a job, I hear many kids say they don't want to put down that they live in Regent Park, not because of what it is, but because of what other people say about it" (Purdy, 2003: p. 90). Here, this resident is making it evident that due to the stigmatization of their community, they feel the need to hide the fact that they live in Regent Park solely based on the negative effects this information may cause in their everyday life. In addition, Zaami (2015), in her study on the experiences of exclusion faced by racialized youth in Jane and Finch, indicates that many participants expressed profound concern about the negative public perceptions of their neighbourhood. As a participant stated, "as soon as you tell potential employers of your postal code that's enough... you start to feel that your chance of landing that job is next to nothing. In fact, you can see from their faces that they're thinking—oh God, he is one of them" (Zaami, 2015: p. 81). The stigma that is attached to these neighbourhoods has extensive implications for the social and economic wellbeing of youth in the area, particularly the ethnic minorities (Zaami, 2015). Another resident within Regent Park stated, "despite all the bad publicity we get, I love this park" (Purdy, 2005: p. 538). Through these internal representations, we see how they do not coincide with the negative external representations employed by the media, as many residents hold their neighborhood to be a place, they are proud to call home. External representations of social housing communities within Toronto often do not align with the internal representations held by residents within these neighborhoods, however, the impacts of sensationalized negative media coverage are strongly felt by people in the community.

5. Media Narratives and Their Implications on Communities

While the media works to create a public discourse around social housing communities by accentuating negative representations of these neighbourhoods, these representations often racialize the communities, deeming them to be inhe-

rently criminogenic. Studies have reported that regarding race within the media in the U.S context, there is "...strong evidence that African Americans are not only associated with crime, but are also depicted as particularly dangerous, criminal, and guilty" (Oliver, 2003: p. 8). Here, it becomes clear that perceptions of race play a vital role in how one will be depicted in the media, as a person of colour can be labelled as a deviant while their white counterparts will not be subject to such accusations. This false narrative that exists in the media attempts to correlate criminogenic behavior and race to specific communities, whereby socially constructed identities like race can be replicated, or mapped, onto the physical landscape, creating a racialized space (Nelson, 2000). Through examples such as Jane and Finch and Regent Park, geographic space is imbued with negative meanings as they come to be associated with groups of people, often racialized, which can be replicated to attach meaning to such locations (Nelson, 2000). These meanings attached to both space and people revolve around deeming Jane and Finch and Regent Park as inherently criminogenic. The racialization of space has allowed for the "othering" of residents within those given communities and the production of fear within the media, which produces an environment of high police surveillance (Narain, 2012). Ultimately, the negative media narratives regarding social housing communities that deem its residents prone to criminality implicate the way such residents are treated, specifically by criminal justice personnel.

6. Over-Policing and the Criminalization of Community Residents

Meanings that are perpetuated through false narratives and are attached to people can also be seen to be attached to geographical space, often affecting police deployment in these areas. These depictions of inherent deviance throughout the media often promotes tough on crime approaches for social housing communities, such as excessive policing, that criminalize those that are racialized as they make up majority of the community's population. By focusing on race as a determinant in criminal behaviour throughout the media, over-policing in racialized communities becomes standard due to the belief that the usual suspects of certain kinds of crimes are to be found in those communities. For example, after the widespread perception that gun crimes were escalating after a series of incidents in 2005, state action was taken in Jane and Finch whereby police services deployed additional officers with the belief that more penal force would reduce crime (Boudreau et al., 2009). This is problematic as the over-policing of these social housing communities results in the police criminalizing these individuals for minor crimes and activities, while their white counterparts are not. For example, through over-policing, black respondents are more likely to report being stopped and searched by the police than respondents from other racial backgrounds (Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2011). Recently, there has been speculation regarding the "war on drugs," which many deem to be a "war on blacks," as they have been disproportionately arrested, convicted, and imprisoned for

drug offences (Cobbina et al., 2019). "Black people with no history of criminal convictions have been three times more likely to be arrested by Toronto police for possession of small amounts of marijuana than white people with similar backgrounds," portraying the tendency of police to criminalize people of colour for minor drug crimes (Contenta, 2017). Statistics also reveal that "15.2 percent of Black people were detained for a bail hearing, compared to only 6.4 percent of whites from 2002 to 2013" (Contenta, 2017). Additionally, Tanner and Wortley (2002) studies indicate that over 50 percent of Black youth in Toronto reported being stopped and questioned by police on two or more occasions compared to 23 percent of whites, 11 percent of Asians, and 8 percent of South Asians. Such statistics show how inaccurate media representations affect community members and with concepts such as the "war on drugs" that are so easily perpetuated throughout the media, the intensive surveillance of supposed "problem" communities becomes commonplace as those within the community are more susceptible to facing criminal charges for minor crimes based on racialization.

7. Over-Policing and the Scarcity of Secure Community-Police Relations

While inaccurate media representations enable over-policing in supposed problem areas that unnecessarily criminalize its residents, it can also cause tension between community-police relations. Often, the tendency to over police is done so in racialized communities, where reduced levels of confidence in the police are present. Walker and Kratcoski (1985) found that 36 percent of respondents rated police-citizen relations as good, while 60 percent of participants provided ratings in the fair and poor categories. Here, it is made evident that relations between community residents and the police are not as strong due to a large portion of the public rating it as such. Police stop and search encounters can undermine the legitimacy of the criminal justice system as people who are frequently stopped and searched by the police have less trust in the justice system and are more likely to view criminal justice institutions as biased (Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2011). Also, "additional research suggests that people with a poor perception of the justice system are less likely to cooperate with police investigations" (Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2011: p. 403). Thus, those most targeted by criminal justice personnel are most likely to have the least confidence in formal justice mechanisms, which in turn, weakens community-police relations. With immigration patterns transforming, change is evident based on the substantial number of minority groups within Toronto, and with this may come increased tension between the police and minority communities (Walker & Kratcoski, 1985). As discussed before, the community of Jane and Finch is known for its diversity, especially concerning its intake of immigrants. With this, the connection can be made that tension between police and minority community relations runs high throughout Jane and Finch, which also attests to the community being under considerable police surveillance. The tendency of police to increase surveillance within specific communities throughout Toronto is detrimental not

only to the community but the members residing within it as it leads to racial disparities in criminalizing minor crimes and tension in community-police relations. Change must be considered when discussing policing in social housing communities in order to mend these injustices.

8. Recommendations

Concerns of over-policing in social housing communities and its tendency to disproportionately criminalize racialized people when convicting them of minor crimes, can be solved with the efforts put forth by the Toronto police to diminish racial profiling tactics. This can be very beneficial for specific social housing communities. Tactics such as carding, which is a form of street checks that involves stopping and questioning individuals who have not been suspected of a crime, have been used by police throughout Toronto. Racial profiling can be seen as a form of over-policing as it disproportionately targets people of colour, deeming them as deviants without giving a sound reason. Thus, these targeted groups are more likely to get caught breaking the law than their white counterparts who engage in similar criminal activities based on racial profiling tactics (Wortley & Tanner, 2003). Through this, we see a spike in the rates of racialized individuals being convicted of minor crimes as the police use their discretion to target them the most. While racial profiling tactics, such as carding, are supported under the guise of being a beneficial community safety tool that prevents criminal activity, such practices, in effect, do little to increase safety. By diminishing racial profiling by police, these efforts can decrease the number of unnecessary stops and searches that committed onto racialized individuals with the attempts to indict them. Community-police relations must be improved to reduce over-policing in these neighbourhoods. The Toronto police should strive to increase diversity within their police force to reflect the specific communities they serve. Canada's influx of immigrants today, face a great amount of social exclusion, where they are treated differently than other groups within society. For example, many Somali-Canadians have reported experiencing various forms of discrimination at the hands of the police, in school settings, and more (Mythen et al., 2013). Hong (2017) findings indicate that high ethnic representativeness within police jurisdictions can reduce their use of racial profiling as a policing tactic, in turn, reducing the over-policing of targeted groups. Specifically, Hong (2017) found that "ethnic representation remains significantly associated with a reduced proportion of ethnic minorities among those stopped and searched throughout the last 6 years of the program" (p. 555). In creating a diverse police force, it becomes easier for these groups to have closer bonds with the police and work towards trusting relationships that will be beneficial in the future. Yet, it is important to note that highly diverse police forces are also capable of enacting unnecessary crime control polices as no amount of diversity can alter the inherent, ingrained, and flawed mechanisms deployed by the police (Vitale, 2017). Thus, efforts to provide diversity within police forces are needed while simulta-

neously reducing racial profiling tactics as this not only allows for officers to relate and sympathize with minority groups throughout Toronto, creating greater social bonds, but reduces the weak accountability mechanisms and the culture of machismo widely upheld within law enforcement agencies (Vitale, 2017). Ultimately, over-policing becomes less of a problem for minorities when formal defective justice methods are eradicated and replaced with community based policing that focuses less on racial profiling and more on diversifying police forces.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, the media plays a significant role in how people perceive communities, and with these external representations come real and harsh implications for areas such as Regent Park and Jane and Finch. In order to prevent these external representations from creating internal implications for those within social housing communities, an emphasis on progressive policing in these areas is needed that benefits these groups of minorities, in a city where the majority is against them.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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