Blackness and Criminality in N.C.'s Media System

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Primary Question

News Media   Police Social Media

How does North Carolina's media system abet associations of Blackness and crime?

Background

The overrepresentation of Black people in the U.S. criminal justice system has been widely documented.[1]

In North Carolina, Black people represent…

50%
prison populations[2]

22%
demographic population[3]

That overrepresentation comes as Black people are more likely to be stopped by police or to be the subjects of police-initiated contact.[4]

The Media's Role

Media imagery has contributred to a synonym of Blackness and criminality.[5] Historically, Black people only made the news if they were the victim or perpetrator of a crime.[6]

Crime stories posted with mugshots have higher click rates[7] — which is interesting given the lasting impact having a mugshot published in a news outlet can have on people.

Past research has found that minorities were overrepresented in crime stories nationally,[8] and that news viewers found darker skinned perpetrators to be more memorable in mugshots posted.[9]
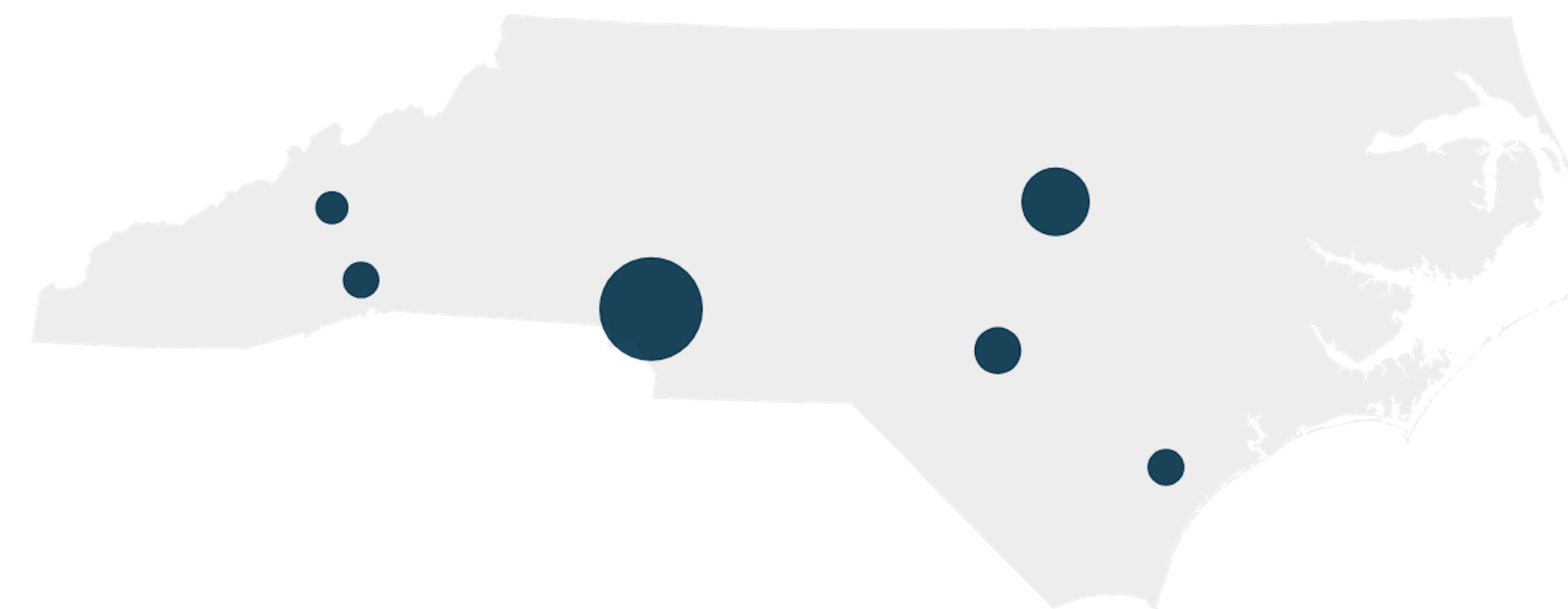
xxxxx

These studies are interesting, but outdated given the race movements that have happened since.

Methods

This two-part study examines race representations in both police Twitter feeds and crime news outlets in corresponding regions across North Carolina.

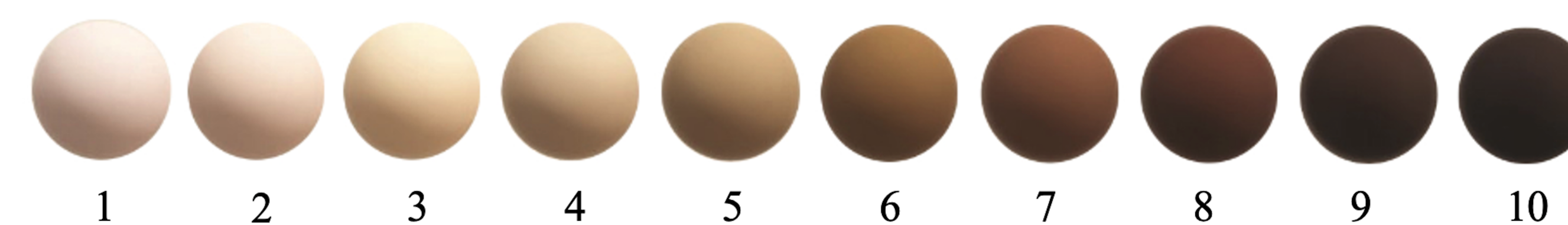### Regions of North Carolina Included in Study

The size of the dot corresponds to the population size in each region.
Created with Datawrapper

For each region I selected the top broadcast and top online news organization for each region. I scraped all of the crime news articles published by each outlet from May to August of 2019 and of 2021 — bookending the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement — with Google news as my archivist. Using Python I scraped the main image and headline from each crime article.

Each photo was hand coded to determine the race and gender of the depicted perpetrator. Race was coded two ways: using a mutually exclusive category assignment and also the Monk Skin Tone Scale.

The codebook was tested for intercoder reliability and met a Scott's Pi of .80.

Monk Skin Tone Scale

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

The police Twitter feed data, collected for a previous study using similar methods, was reanalyzed to match the timeframe of the crime news data.

Asheville Police @AshevillePolice
This is the official twitter feed for the Asheville Police Department | Feed not monitored 24/7 | Call 911 for emergencies
Asheville, NC   ashevillenc.gov/police   Joined May 2011
241 Following   10.4K Followers

Fayetteville Police @FayettevillePD
The official Twitter account of the #FayPD in Fayetteville, NC. Report emergencies or crimes by calling 911.
Fayetteville, NC   FayPD.com   Joined September 2010
1,022 Following   11.9K Followers

CMPD News @CMPD
This is the official twitter feed for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department | Feed not monitored 24/7 | Emergencies call 911 | Non-emergencies call 311
Charlotte NC   linktr.ee/charlottemeckl...   Joined August 2011
566 Following   86.9K Followers

Raleigh Police @raleighpolice
Official City of Raleigh Police Department Twitter • 911 : Emergencies/Ongoing Crimes 919-829-1911 : Non-Emergency •• Social Media is NOT monitored 24/7
Raleigh, NC   joinraleighpd.org   Joined October 2010
163 Following   33.3K Followers

Wilmington, N.C. Police @WilmingtonPD
@CityofWilm, North Carolina Police Department Official Twitter | Call us at (910) 343-3600 for non-emergencies, or 911 for emergencies. Use Tip411 for tips.
WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA   wilmingtonnc.gov/departments/po...   Joined June 2009
693 Following   19.6K Followers

Results

49%
decrease in the number of crime news mugshots posted from 2019 to 2021.

The drop doesn't mean these outlets are posting fewer crime stories, just fewer mugshots.

Similarly, there was a **54%** drop in suspects posted on police Twitter feeds.

There was a general right-siding of representation among crime news outlets in 2021. This was not prevalent in the police Twitter feeds.
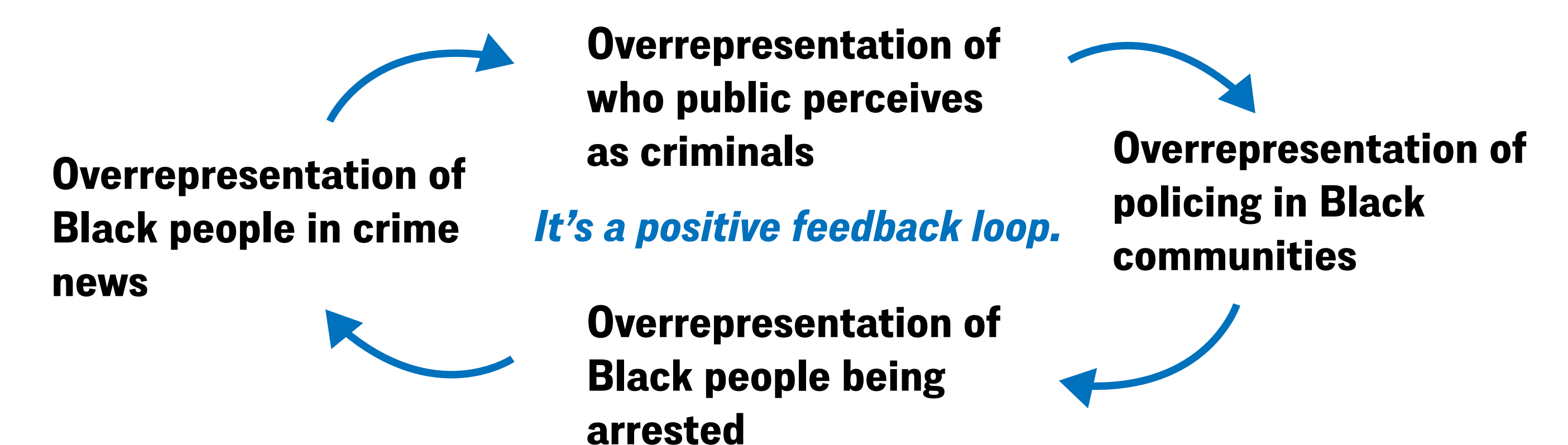
Race of Crime News Images, 2019 v. 2021

Race	2019 (N = 1417)	2021 (N = 719)	z
White, not Hispanic or Latino	654 (46.2%)	352 (49.0%)	-1.23
Black	680 (48.0%)	308 (42.8%)	2.26*
Hispanic or Latino	62 (4.4%)	40 (5.6%)	-1.22
Asian or Pacific Islander	7 (0.5%)	12 (1.7%)	-2.73*
Native American	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.1%)	-1.40
Unidentifiable	14 (1.0%)	6 (0.8%)	0.35

Note. Comparisons made between proportions within row using *z*-tests. A *z*-score with an asterisk indicates a statistically significant difference at $p < .05$.

Discussion

While there appears to be somewhat of a righting of representation among crime news outlets, it is important to note that news organizations still reflect the disproportionate number of Black people arrested in North Carolina.

Overrepresentation of who public perceives as criminals

Overrepresentation of policing in Black communities

Overrepresentation of Black people being arrested

Overrepresentation of Black people in crime news

It's a positive feedback loop.

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Citations