

## **Ted Gest, Criminal Justice Journalists** (<http://thecrimereport.org>)

This is the best of times and worst of times for American journalism, providing opportunities and perils for those in the criminal justice system. It is a bad time economically, largely because of the Internet, which has taken away much of the advertising and readership base from daily newspapers, and to some extent the viewership base from local television. This means that there are relatively fewer people covering crime news, especially on a “beat basis.” A reporter who formerly concentrated on one or two police departments or courthouses may now be required to juggle many more agencies at any given time. Because rates of reported crime have decreased in the last 15 years, many editors and broadcast news directors give the subject somewhat less prominence.

On the flip side, the Internet provides many more opportunities for coverage of crime issues. Newspaper and broadcast Web sites can provide seemingly unlimited space for stories that formerly may have had severe limits. Many media sites now include maps of homicide locations and other serious crimes. Some major media organizations still devote considerable effort to reporting on how crime affects their communities. One example running as the JRSA conference occurred was in Memphis, where the Commercial Appeal newspaper is publishing a five-part series focusing on high-crime neighborhoods. (see <http://commercialappeal.com/news/news/local/crimes>.)

Opportunities for criminal-justice practitioners in this changed media environment include:

- answering media questions.
- attempting to correct inaccuracies and misconceptions in media stories.
- suggesting ideas to the media.
- doing crime mapping or other sophisticated presentation of data on their own Web sites, and telling the media and other organizations about it.

On the issue of suggesting stories, especially in a time of turmoil in the media, many journalists are appreciative of ideas coming from professionals in various areas, and journalists usually are easy to reach by e-mail. The longstanding high turnover among reporters covering police, courts, and general justice issues has been exacerbated because of the economic problems in the media. Do not assume that reporters are aware of your agency and what data it can provide. Providing more information to the media could benefit your agency, because the media collectively still influence public policy.

Criminal Justice Journalists, a national organization affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania and John Jay College of Criminal Justice, can help. We have a guide to journalists online at <http://justicejournalism.org/crimeguide> and a new edition (as of 2009) of “Understanding Crime Statistics” for journalists. The latter, published with the national Investigative Reporters & Editors organization, is available to nonmembers @\$25 via <http://ire.org>. It also is available online. You should take the opportunity to mention it to journalists who appear to need help in this area of coverage.

News media, especially cable television, continue to cover many crime stories based on sensational incidents, whether the Michael Jackson death, the Bernard Madoff Ponzi scheme, or the Jaycee Dugard 18-year kidnapping. That phenomenon is not likely to change, but criminal justice professionals can use the opportunity of saturation coverage to raise general issues, such as prescription drug abuse, fraudulent investment schemes, or probation/parole failures. These and many other issues often get more public attention than usual in the context of a widely publicized crime.