



**Texas Center for
Justice & Equity**
SOLUTIONS FOR SAFE, HEALTHY,
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**Analysis Explores How the *Houston Chronicle's* Coverage of the Local
Criminal Legal System Misinforms the Public**

Following Report Exposing Racial Bias in Houston-Area TV Media, New Analysis Evaluates Balanced Coverage of Bond Reform, Misleading Reporting on Criminal Cases and Defendants

(HOUSTON, TX) – A new report evaluates the *Houston Chronicle's* coverage of bond reform and crime stories. The [report](#), “Materially Misleading: How the Houston Chronicle’s Coverage of Bond Misinforms the Public,” was produced by the Texas Center for Justice and Equity (TCJE) and authored by Elaine Hennig and Jay Jenkins. The analysis follows a November 2021 [report](#) tracking coverage by six local television stations.

Released today, TCJE’s analysis finds both balanced reporting on misdemeanor bond reform in Harris County (Houston) and heavily negative coverage of criminal cases and defendants.

“Unfortunately, the *Chronicle's* fair and informative coverage of bond reform is undermined by highly skewed reporting on legally innocent defendants who were rearrested while released on bond,” said **Elaine Hennig, Harris County Project Associate and author of the report**. “By prioritizing fearmongering in this way, outlets sacrifice their impartiality and mislead their readers. Over the past two years, many media outlets have re-assessed the nature of their crime coverage. We hope this assessment will encourage the *Chronicle* to do the same.”

TCJE’s Harris County team analyzed nearly 500 articles run by the *Houston Chronicle* between January 2015 and December 2021; in total, 110 defendants were named in the sample of articles. While bias in coverage was the primary focus of this analysis, the team also reviewed 13 other key variables, including referenced sources and the defendant’s race.

The authors’ analysis revealed a number of findings, including:

- **Racial disproportionalities among defendants in cases covered:** The *Chronicle's* coverage of criminal cases contained a disproportionate number of Black defendants compared to the makeup of Harris County’s general population.
- **Sources with a vested interest in the outcome of criminal cases:** Most of the *Chronicle's* crime coverage can be sourced to either law enforcement or the District Attorney’s Office. When not quoting those sources, *Chronicle* reporters rely on organizations like Crime Stoppers of Houston, the former employer of District Attorney Kim Ogg; that organization regularly receives hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations from the District Attorney and law enforcement agencies.

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- **Premature—and misleading—coverage of allegations against individuals:** Of the 270 unique Harris County charges identified in the *Chronicle's* crime coverage, nearly a third of charges were ultimately dismissed, an outcome that was rarely, if ever, reported. Further, almost half of the charges had not yet reached a disposition at the time of the authors' analysis of published articles.
- **Lack of follow-up and context:** Although legally innocent people are named in articles about arrests and charges, reporters often fail to follow up when a case is disposed. Additionally, the *Chronicle* has left its readers largely in the dark about the recent, dramatic increase in dismissals in Harris County's felony courts.

“Materially Misleading” provides a set of recommendations for print and online media outlets, including: refraining from detailing a defendant’s criminal history or bond status without an explanation of its relevance to the case being covered; shifting coverage from arrests and allegations towards trials and case outcomes; refraining from publishing defendants’ mugshots; and adhering to journalistic standards for source attribution.

Today’s report follows a November analysis of Houston-area television stations’ coverage of crime and bond reform, which found that local TV outlets frequently misrepresent the realities of the criminal legal system in ways that perpetuate negative stereotypes. Both reports are available on the series page [here](#). Links to each report in the series can be found below.

- Report series on media bias in Harris County: [Homepage](#)
 - » Part I: “The Real ‘Bond Pandemic’”: [Interactive webpage](#)
 - [PDF](#)
 - [Web-based report](#)
 - » Part II: “Materially Misleading”: [Webpage](#)
 - [PDF](#)
 - [Web-based report](#)

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The Texas Center for Justice and Equity (formerly the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition) advances solutions and builds coalitions to end mass incarceration and foster safer Texas communities.