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# Crime, coverage and stereotypes: Toronto's Jane and Finch neighbourhood

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Is the media's coverage of Jane and Finch disproportionately negative? **Eric Mark Do**, J-Source's new Students' Lounge editor and Ryerson Journalism student, looks at the media's coverage of crime in the Toronto neighbourhood from the eyes of police, community members and groups working in the area.



In April 2012, a 12-year-old boy was arrested after a principal and a teacher found a loaded gun in his knapsack at school. He was a grade-seven student at Oakdale Park Middle School. Some major news outlets reported that the school was located in the Jane-Finch area – an intersection in the north-west sector of Toronto, Canada's most populated city – despite the fact the school is actually closer to the intersection of Jane Street and *Sheppard Avenue*.

This generalization of crime in the Jane-Finch corridor has earned the neighbourhood an unsavoury reputation. Many area residents say that the stigma of Jane and Finch being a crime-riddled community is unwarranted, and that the media only perpetuates this image. In 2005, The United Way Toronto and Toronto city council identified 13 "priority areas," which are locations with high poverty and social needs. However, a research report appears to confirm that Jane and Finch, along with other priority neighbourhoods, are unfairly represented in the news.

Mario Sergio has served as the community's member of provincial Parliament since 1995.

"The media has not really grasped Jane and Finch as it actually is," says Sergio, the York-West Liberal representative. For starters, he explains, Jane and Finch is a high-density residential community that has a rich mix of multiculturalism. Yet the reputation of it being high-crime area persists. "Perhaps it is because of the negativity that has been created over the years, and therefore nothing has been done to erase this particular image," he says.

The accuracy of the amount and type of news coverage for priority neighbourhoods, such as Jane and Finch, was the subject of April Lindgren's research. Lindgren is a professor at Ryerson University. Her findings show that "the highest volume of violence-related calls for service occurred in...the downtown core," while priority areas were in the low-to-medium range for the same calls.

Despite this, the report [News, Geography and Disadvantage: Mapping Newspaper Coverage of High-needs Neighbourhoods in Toronto, Canada](#), reveals that priority areas receive coverage about crime-related news most often – almost a third of the time. And though the downtown-area dominated violence-related calls to police, only 11 per cent of downtown news coverage was police-related.

This appears to confirm Sergio's point-of-view. "Over the years we have done a lot to clean up the area," he says. "And crime is way, way down."

Lindgren's research backs this up. "This suggests these [priority] areas, despite the high proportion of police-related news coverage, actually experience lower crime rates than downtown city neighbourhoods," she says in the report.

The majority of news releases issued by the Toronto Police relate to "the issue of threats to public safety," says spokesperson Mark Pugash. "But what the media does with our news releases - whether they pay attention to them, whether they ignore them, whether they feature them prominently, whether they bury them - those are all issues over which we have no control," he says.

Constable Tony Vella adds in an example with two neighbourhoods. "It's not like, 'Oh we released too much about A, we'd better release some about B.' It doesn't work that way."

Still, Sergio questions the amount of negative publicity the area receives. "If you look at other areas, we have other areas with more crime than Jane and Finch, so why would they always tend to be more negative about Jane and Finch?" he asks.

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Paul Nguyen, longtime resident of Jane and Finch, says he believes he knows why the media focuses its attention on his neighbourhood. "If it bleeds it leads," says Nguyen. "And Jane and Finch is the marquee name for violence in the city." He says this is why news organizations use Jane and Finch as a "catch-all name" for their reports, even if the crime takes place closer to another intersection.

As a child, Nguyen says he didn't think Jane and Finch was any different from other neighbourhoods. "But then obviously you grow up and then you're exposed to the media perception, and also just general public perception of Jane-Finch."

Nguyen took it upon himself to start the website [Jane-Finch.com](#) in 2004, after searching and realizing that there was not much information on the community online. Since then, both Nguyen and the site have won awards, including most recently, the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee for fighting stereotypes in the community.

"In the past you're getting an outsider's view," he says, "with the site you're getting the residents' view, not some biased view of the area."

However, not everyone sees a news bias towards the area. Antonius Clarke says the media's depiction of the area, one of widespread poverty and crime, is accurate. Clarke is a community activist who has lived in the Jane-Finch area since 1990. He says when he thinks of Jane and Finch, he sees "suffering with no end."

"When it comes to poor black people, they never come out of the situation they're in," says Clarke. "It's perpetuating - people you grow up with are on welfare, living with their moms, and they're still there. It's never-ending suffering."

But Clarke did not sit still. He started the non-profit organization Friends in Trouble, to try to bridge the gap between those who have, and those who have not, by addressing the root causes of poverty, he says. The organization advocates for, and provides services and training to those in need. And in the last municipal election, Clarke ran for city councillor. He came in third, behind two incumbents, with 13 percent of the total votes.

"I realized the organizations could only do so much. A lot of it is systemic, and systemic change comes from the top."

The top elected official of the region is Liberal member of Parliament Judy Sgro. The York-West MP says that activists like Antonius Clarke are what make the community, and Canada, strong.

"The community is made up of over 120 different languages, wonderful people," says Sgro. "People who actually care about each other, and are hardworking committed, law-abiding citizens who get a bad rap because they happen to live in the Jane-Finch community."

The notorious reputation creates an unexpected consequence for community members: pride.

"Jane and Finch is like an identity, I think people see it as a badge of honour," says Nguyen. "It's like surviving a struggle, it's like overcoming poverty and barriers. For the most part, they're proud."

CBC News anchor Dwight Drummond is a former resident of the Jane-Finch area. He goes back to the neighbourhood from time-to-time, MC'ing events and performing speaking engagements. Nguyen says Drummond is one of the success stories of Jane and Finch. "It's in the nature of people [from the area], to come back and give something back," he says.

In 2007, Councillor Anthony Perruzza (who did not respond to requests for an interview) began a bid to change the name for the area to "University Heights."

"The community fought back hard because they didn't want to delete their identity like that," says Nguyen. "Even though it's bad, they wanted to hold onto it because it represents who we are: surviving and working. That's why they fought against changing the name."

The Jane and Finch community definitely has a stronger bond due to its reputation, says Sgro. "People come together to defend it. And it does bring people together because they have a reason; that is to say, we have a wonderful community here, and stop giving us a bad name by focusing only on the negative."

Nguyen agrees. He says it has become "second nature" to stand up for the community. "Often the case is... it would come up, about the Jane-Finch area, and people would be like, 'It's bad' or 'It's dangerous.' And we'd be like, 'Oh no, it's not exactly what you think it is.'"

*This article was originally published July 2012 in [Dispatches International](#), a feature news website produced by student journalists from around the world.*

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