There are an average of 90,000 people actively missing in the United States at any given time, according to the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System. Of this number, 56 percent of missing people in the United States are white women and 33 percent are African American. However, African Americans make up just 13 percent of the United States’ population. Yet, there is an abundance of coverage of missing, white women. Thousands of women go missing every year, but the news media doesn’t cover many of those stories.

“Missing White Women Syndrome” is a term accepted with researchers to describe the excessive coverage of missing person’s cases involving young, upper class and attractive, white women. There are five attributes taken into account when talking about missing white women syndrome: sex, age, race, socioeconomic status and the attractiveness of the missing person. The theory describes why certain white woman are covered disproportionately to others and become well known and even famous, such as the Elizabeth Smart and Natalie Holloway cases. Even though missing white women need to be covered in the news media, ignoring missing women of color has negative effects, such as an incorrect view of the actual missing population and potential stereotyping.
Missing people affect all communities and regions across the country. Major cities have a missing population. Houston, Texas, is one of the largest and most diverse cities in the United States. While gathering information about the city’s missing population from the Houston Police Department and *Houston Chronicle*, it was made evident that there is a lack of reporting and overall understanding of missing people in the United States. I called the Houston Police Department to request their cities’ missing women population data and its racial breakdown and I was told I was the first person to ever request such data.

Houston is the fourth largest city in the United States with over 2 million people, with a historic diverse population. The *Houston Chronicle* wrote about 33 missing women during 2016. However, according to the Houston Police Department there were 3,435 women missing that same year. There is an obvious disconnect of overall coverage of missing women in Houston, one of the largest cities in the US, seeing how over three thousand women were not reported by the city’s main newspaper.

Of the missing 3,435 women, 57 percent were white, 40 percent black, 2 percent Pacific Islander, 1 percent Asian and 0.1 percent American Indian. Houston’s population in 2016 was 2.3 million people with 50.5 percent white, 23.7 percent black or African American, 0.7 percent American Indian, 6 percent Asian, 0.1 percent Pacific Islander, 43.8 percent Hispanic of any race, 3.3 percent two or more races, and 15.2 percent other, according to the United States Census.

Black or African American women were missing at a higher rate compared to their proportion of the population than white women. Black women are only 23.7
percent of Houston’s population. In 2016, black and African American women made about 40 percent of Houston's missing female population. There were 57 articles about 33 missing women cases *the Houston Chronicle* published in 2016. Three of those cases did not mention the missing women's race. Of the cases, nine black women, seven Latina women and 14 white women were covered. There were no stories about missing Asian or Native American women. Those nine articles out of 1,370 missing black women often averaged about five paragraphs per story. None of the missing black women had more than one article per case. Six of the nine stories were either written after the missing women was found or a week after their disappearance, signifying an afterthought.

Journalists have an ethical responsibility to be inclusive and accurate in their coverage. According to the Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics, it states that journalists should “boldly tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience. Seek sources whose voices we seldom hear.” Information should be covered fairly, accurately and thoroughly on all media content, especially when covering missing persons. People go missing from every age group, race and gender and the coverage should reflect that diversity. The Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics was created to “encourage all who engage in journalism to take responsibility for the information they provide, regardless of medium.” According to the code, journalists have responsibility for the information they provide, or in this case the lack of information, about missing people.

Language matters in overall coverage of women and minorities in the news media. In 1967, President Lyndon Johnson established the National Advisory
Commission on Civil Disorders as a result of racially charged riots that occurred in the United States. The commission, informally known as the Kerner Commission, examined how to prevent future riots from happening and found that one of the causes was the mostly white news media's coverage of black Americans. The 11-member group determined that the media should “recognize the existence and activities of Negroes as a group within the community and as part of a larger community.” The commission found that racial representation is important throughout news media and their characterization of people of color. How a person is characterized can influence the audience’s overall perception of that gender, race and age demographic. The articles written about missing black or African American women used word choices, such as “child,” “in danger,” and “woman” and didn’t go into detail about their case. All the reports included a photograph of the missing woman. Although the articles did include photographs of the women, they didn’t go into detail other than simply stating that they are missing and who to contact if the reader has any information. Very few of the articles had quotes from family or friends. These articles were written by the Chronicle would be considered “briefs” within the journalism profession because of their length and brevity.

The overall lack of representation of this missing group of women is detrimental. Audiences, without knowing the full data set provided by the Houston Police Department, only know if people are missing if they are informed by journalists, police officers or people who experience that trauma personally. This is also data that has to be formally requested with the Houston Police Department and is not readily available online. A Chronicle reader, who reads the publication every
single day, would only be aware of those 30 cases and would have no idea about the other 3,000.

There were only seven missing Latina women written about by the *Chronicle*. The shortest article was three sentences and the longest was six paragraphs. Two of the articles about a missing, Latina woman were also combined with a story about a missing white woman. They were not connected in any way except for the fact that they went missing in the same week and were from the same area in Houston. They were not connected by the same suspect or by the same possible leads. Missing Latina women faced similar treatment to missing black and African American women coverage in the *Chronicle*.

Underrepresentation of missing women can negatively affect how they are perceived in society. Women of color have a history of being misrepresented in news media that often leads to negative stereotyping and racism. The Kerner Commission also found that “by and large, news organizations have failed to communicate to both their black and white audiences a sense of the problems America faces and the sources of potential solutions. The media report and write from the standpoint of the white man’s world.” In cases of missing women of color, there is a lack of reporting which can insinuate a lack of caring or a lack of newsworthiness about people of color being missing.

Missing white women in Houston were written about extensively, compared to missing women of color. Donna Kay Cloud went missing in the Houston area on Oct. 25, 2016, and the *Chronicle* published its first story about her on Nov. 1, 2016. Compared to articles about missing women of color, Cloud’s first story was nine
paragraphs long and included a large photo of her within the story’s body. None of
the missing black or African American women’s stories were longer than six
paragraphs. Cloud’s first article then discusses that she went on a date with a man
that she presumably met online, either signifying blame or hint of foul play. The
article then describes her tattoos and who to contact if they have any further
information. The majority of articles written about women of color are very brief,
often only writing about specifically where and when they went missing and
possibly their physical description.

Anne-Christine Johnson’s case was written about 11 times. She is a missing
white woman from the League City area and was often named a “mother” in the
Chronicle’s headlines as well as a “victim of domestic abuse” and a “waitress” in the
story paragraphs. The use of the word “mother” characterizes her as nurturing and
loving, allowing audiences to identify with her. She also was not discussed in the
story as just a missing woman, but a victim and waitress. She was also 30 years old.

The first article written about her included quotes from her family members
and friends stating that they suspected foul play, “this isn’t like her,” etc. This
characterizes her as innocent and provides the reader with Anne-Christine’s
personality. This article was written two days after she disappeared. A lot of the
missing women’s articles were written up to a week from their missing date,
whereas Anne-Christine was written about shortly after she went missing. This was
not seen with the missing women of color’s articles. Anne-Christine’s coverage
provides an indication of a mystery, comparable to the popular true-crime shows
like 48 Hours Mystery and Dateline. There was no indication of her being a runaway
but that there was foul play. Some of the women of color’s articles indicated being a
runaway. Not to say that that isn’t why these women went missing, but the blame is
placed on the victim as opposed to the circulating circumstances. Some of the
women of color were characterized as running away from home, but that was not
seen with the white women coverage.

The *Houston Chronicle* continued to write 10 more stories about Anne-
Christine. The stories were mainly about authorities asking the public for help to
locate her as well as a public reminder that she was still missing. There were also
stories about her vigil once her remains were found, then there were a series of
stories about her boyfriend being charged with the murder, sentenced, and
imprisonment. It is important that Anne-Christine received coverage throughout her
case, however, none of the articles of missing black or African American woman
detailed their cases and their aftermaths.

Only one woman of color was written in length. Adriana Coronado had four
stories written about her. It was not nearly as much as Donna Kay Cloud or Anne-
Christine Johnson, but the most of any women of color. The first article was only
four paragraphs long and didn’t include an image. However, Adriana was written as
a missing girl with a “sweet smile” and had a quote from one of her classmates. The
second article had six sentences and included a school photograph of the 13-year-
old. The second article talked about a person of interest named in the case. The third
article talks about how Adriana’s father was also found dead. This is similar to the
true-crime narrative from Anne-Christine’s case. This article also featured four
photographs. The fact that she was 13 years old was a factor to her overall coverage.
For both missing white women and women of color, age was important in overall coverage. There were only five articles written about women over the age of 40. The average age of the written missing woman articles is 24.8 years old. The Chronicle predominately wrote about missing teenagers, across all races, leaving out coverage of women over the age of 40. It plays into the idea of society only caring about young missing women as opposed to older women and elderly citizens. It is important for journalists to also include these women in their coverage because it creates a more accurate representation of Houston’s missing population.

The Society of Professional Journalist’s Code of Ethics preamble states “public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy.” In-depth coverage of missing women will create a more informed society. If the statistics indicate there are thousands of missing people in the Houston area, then the public needs be more informed because it is an issue that affects the community. It is a public issue that needs to be regarded with the same seriousness as other public concerns like assault, battery and arson. Journalists’ loaded word choices can lead to misrepresentation of the missing. Loaded words, such as “runaway,” “mother,” “child,” etc., all have meaning. None of the articles mentioned professions or socioeconomic status.

Journalists also need to be consistent about having quotes from the missing’s friends and family in their stories. Not all families and friends will want to comment. However, the articles need to state that there was an attempt to contact the missing’s family. Marianne-Asher Chapman is the founder and director of Missouri Missing, a nonprofit that aids families with missing loved ones in Missouri. She
discussed that she would feel that there would be more empathy for their cases if people knew the number of missing people in the United States. Based on the Houston Chronicle’s coverage, only 30 missing women were covered. Therefore, the audience would only believe that 30 women were missing in 2016 as opposed to 3,435. There is a responsibility for police officers to give the information to the public as well as for journalists to cover all missing cases. The public needs to care about this issue and a way for them to care if for them to have the information at hand. According to the Journalist’s Creed from the Missouri School of Journalism, “accuracy and fairness are fundamental to good journalism.” It is journalists’ responsibility to accurately cover missing people because accuracy is on the foundation of good journalism.

Overall, it’s an issue in the United States that needs to be addressed by law enforcement, journalists and citizens. People go missing by the thousands every year and are rarely talked about in news media, unless the missing is a young, attractive, educated, wealthy white woman.