

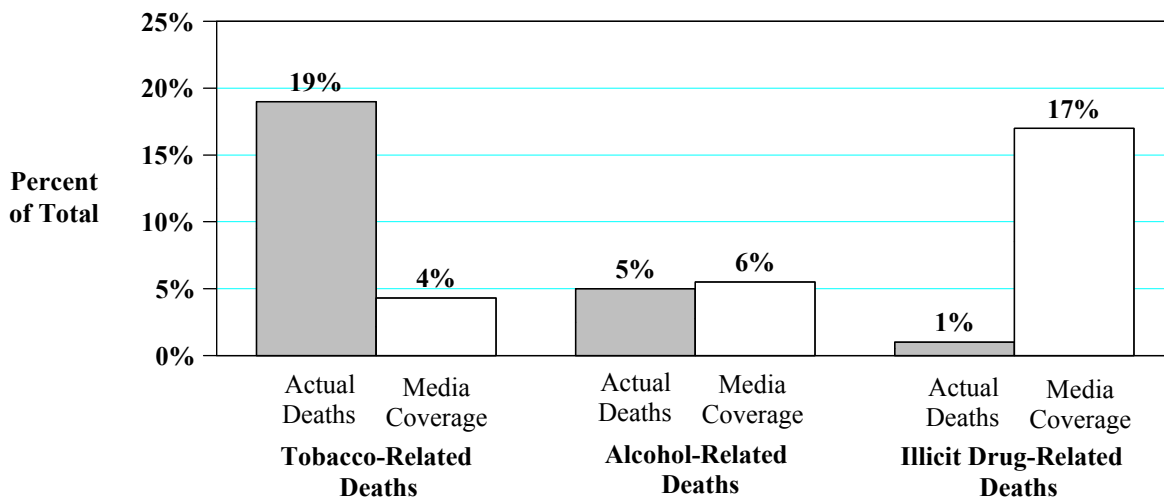
A Weekly FAX from the Center for Substance Abuse Research

University of Maryland, College Park

Study Finds That the Media Overemphasizes Illicit Drug-Related Deaths; Underemphasizes Tobacco-Related Deaths

A recent article in the American Journal of Public Health concludes that the print media's representation of illicit drug- and tobacco-related deaths is not consistent with actual mortality rates. The study examined national print media from 1990 for the amount of mortality-related text. The authors found that "there were substantial disparities between actual causes of death and the amount of coverage given those causes in the print media" (p. 843). One of the causes of death most underrepresented by the news media was tobacco use; 4% of the mortality-related text in 1990 was devoted to tobacco use, compared to 19% of actual deaths attributed to tobacco in that year. Conversely, the illicit use of drugs was overrepresented by the news media (17% of the mortality-related text versus 1% of the actual deaths). The authors conclude that health professionals should "aggressively and proactively work with the news media to produce a more balanced agenda and to counteract the effects of journalistic practices that distort accurate presentations of relative risk" of mortality (p. 844).

**Percentage of Actual Substance Use-Related Deaths
vs. Print Media Coverage of Substance Use-Related Deaths, by Substance, 1990**



*The most widely circulated publication in each of four categories (weekly news magazine, general interest women's magazine, general interest monthly magazine, and daily newspaper) was randomly sampled and coded for mortality-related text (measured in square centimeters).

SOURCE: Adapted by CESAR from data from Karen Frost, Erica Frank, and Edward Maibach, "Relative Risk in the News Media: A Quantification of Misrepresentation," American Journal of Public Health, 1997, 87(5):842-845. For more information, contact Dr. Edward Maibach at 202-973-5800.