

Newspaper Analysis as a Research Method for Mapping Urban Vulnerabilities and Media Framing: Evidence from Surat, India

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Abstract

Cities are shaped not only by their built form and institutions, but also by the stories they tell about themselves. Newspapers constitute a routine, publicly accessible archive of urban events and the narratives that frame them. This paper presents newspaper analysis as a structured research method to generate early evidence base where official datasets are incomplete, fragmented, or slow to emerge. We describe a replicable six-step protocol: (i) define scope and questions, (ii) select newspapers and time frame, (iii) develop keyword strategy, (iv) set inclusion/exclusion rules and remove duplicates, (v) code and classify articles, and (vi) analyze patterns across time, space, and social groups. The method is demonstrated using applied datasets from Surat, Gujarat, India- (a) child-safety coverage in 2023 (875 collected items, cleaned to 620 unique articles), (b) suicide-related reporting from January 2020 to April 2024 (100 coded publications), and (c) comparative coverage of children's issues (2017 vs. 2023). Across cases, analysis highlights dominant themes (abuse and accidents in child-related reporting), seasonal clustering (winter concentration in dog-bite reports), and differences in visibility by gender and age in suicide reporting. We argue that, when used with transparent coding rules and ethical safeguards, newspaper analysis can serve as a rapid first-step method to identify media-visible vulnerability narratives, inform hypotheses, guide fieldwork, and support policy prioritization.

Keywords: newspaper analysis; methodology; urban vulnerability; child safety; Surat

1. Introduction

Urban planning and governance depend on timely, disaggregated evidence about where risks concentrate, who is most affected, and how vulnerabilities are being discussed in public forums. In many rapidly growing Indian cities, however, administrative datasets on health, safety, and social protection are fragmented, delayed, under-reported, insufficiently disaggregated or unavailable at the spatial and demographic detail to support timely problem diagnosis. Newspapers provide a complementary stream of event-based information that is produced daily, archived, and accessible to the public. When analyzed systematically, news reports can be converted into structured evidence about what incidents are being surfaced, where they occur, how risks cluster over time and how affected groups are presented. This paper advances newspaper analysis as a practical research method for early-stage assessment. Beyond counting incidents, the approach also enables analysis of framing—how language, emphasis, and tone shape the public construction of vulnerability and responsibility. Using Surat, India as a case context, we demonstrate how a transparent protocol and coding frame can be applied to multiple topics (children's issues and suicide reporting) to generate comparable findings and actionable leads.

2. Literature Review

Content analysis provides a foundation for transforming communication artifacts into analyzable data through systematic, replicable coding procedures (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, n.d.). In media studies, framing theory explains how news outlets select and emphasize aspects of reality to promote particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations (Entman, 1993). Applied to urban safety and public health, these approaches enable researchers to examine both the distribution of reported events (e.g., injuries, violence, suicides) and the narratives that shape public understanding of risk. Suicide reporting is a particularly sensitive domain in which media framing can influence public behavior; international guidance recommends avoiding sensationalism, explicit method description, and prominent placement, while encouraging help-seeking information and educational framing (Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals, Update 2017, n.d.). For children's issues, media reporting can elevate public concern and policy attention but may also skew perceptions toward episodic incidents rather than structural determinants. Against this background, a method-forward newspaper analysis can support rapid situational assessment while explicitly acknowledging selection bias and ethical constraints.

3. Objectives

1. To present a replicable protocol for newspaper analysis as a research method.
2. To demonstrate the method using applied datasets on children's issues and suicide reporting in Surat.
3. To identify dominant themes, temporal clustering, and group-wise visibility patterns in the sampled coverage.
4. To reflect on limitations and ethical safeguards for using newspapers as a data source.

4. Research Problem/Hypothesis

Research problem: In the absence of timely, disaggregated administrative datasets, how can researchers generate an early, transparent evidence base about urban vulnerabilities and the public narratives attached to them?

Working hypothesis: Systematic newspaper analysis can reliably surface media-visible patterns of vulnerability (dominant themes, time clustering, and group-wise visibility) and reveal framing features (tone and causal emphasis) that can guide subsequent data triangulation, fieldwork, and policy prioritization.

5. Research Methodology

This study uses a structured newspaper-analysis workflow that converts news reports into a coded dataset suitable for descriptive and comparative analysis. The protocol has six steps: (1) defining scope and research questions; (2) selecting newspapers and time frame; (3) developing and iterating a keyword strategy; (4) setting inclusion/exclusion criteria and removing duplicates; (5) coding articles using a predefined frame; and (6) analysing patterns across time, location, and socio-demographic descriptors.

Step	Operational action
1	Define scope (topic, geography, period) and research questions.
2	Select newspaper sources and sampling window.
3	Develop keyword list; pilot-search and refine to balance recall and precision.
4	Apply inclusion/exclusion rules; remove duplicates; document cleaning counts.
5	Code articles using a coding frame (category, demographics, location, tone).
6	Analyze patterns (frequency, seasonality, clusters, framing) and interpret with limitations.

Table 1. Six-step protocol for newspaper analysis.

Data was compiled into spreadsheets for cleaning and coding. Variables included publication date, issue category and subcategory, location cues (when available), demographic descriptors (age group and gender where reported), and tone/frame indicators (e.g., positive/negative). Duplicate items were removed to avoid over-counting syndicated or repeated coverage.

Date	News-paper	Key-word	Headline	Age	Gender	Theme	Geography	Positive/Negative	Link
10-02-22	TOI	Suicide Surat	Class 9 boy hangs self to death at home	15	M	Suicide due to academic pressure	Surat	N	https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/surat/class-9-boy-hangs-self-to-death-at-home/articleshow/89464443.cms

Table 2. Sample format for data collection.

6. Analysis and Interpretation/Findings

Findings are presented from three applied datasets compiled in Surat: (A) child-safety reporting (2023), (B) suicide reporting (Jan 2020–Apr 2024), and (C) comparative children’s issues coverage (2017 vs. 2023). Counts reflect articles captured and cleaned based on the inclusion/exclusion rules described above.

Dataset	Time frame	Items collected	Final coded items
Child-safety coverage	2023	875	620 (255 duplicates removed)
Suicide reporting	Jan 2020–Apr 2024	100	100
Comparative children’s issues	2017 vs. 2023	100 (2017) / 120 (2023)	220

Table 3. Dataset summary after cleaning.

A. Child-safety coverage (2023): The coded distribution was dominated by abuse-related reporting (44%) and accident-related reporting (32%), followed by suicide (15%), dog bite (5%), and murder (4%). A focused look at dog-bite stories recorded 31 reported cases, including 11 deaths (35.5%). Reports suggested a seasonal concentration, with 60% of dog-bite cases appearing in winter months, indicating a potential seasonal pattern for further verification through veterinary/public health records.

B. Suicide reporting (Jan 2020–Apr 2024): Month-wise coverage varied, with the highest volume in March and the lowest in August. Reports most frequently highlighted young adults (19–30) and adolescents (13–18). Gender-focused reporting showed greater visibility for female cases than male cases. Across articles, frequently mentioned contextual drivers included family conflict, relationship stress, financial distress, academic pressure, addiction, and technology dependence.

C. Comparative children’s issues (2017 vs. 2023): Across the two periods, tone assessment indicated a predominance of negative framing (69.4%) relative to positive framing (30.6%), consistent with the incident-driven character of news reporting. Comparing periods enables tracking of shifts in topical salience and framing emphasis, especially when interpreted alongside contemporaneous policy debates and events.

7. Conclusion

Newspaper analysis offers a scalable and transparent method for early-stage assessment of urban vulnerabilities and their public framing. By applying explicit sampling rules, de-duplication, and a structured coding frame, researchers can convert routine news output into actionable descriptive evidence. The Surat case demonstrations show how the method can identify dominant themes, highlight temporal clustering, and surface differences in visibility across gender and age. Importantly, the method should be used as a complement to—not a substitute for—administrative and field data, with careful attention to selection bias and ethical safeguards, particularly for sensitive topics such as suicide.

8. Suggestions/Recommendations

1. Triangulate newspaper-derived patterns with administrative records (police, health, municipal services) to validate incidence and reduce media-selection bias.
2. Adopt an explicit ethics checklist for sensitive reporting domains (e.g., suicide), align coding and reporting practices with WHO guidance.
3. Standardize a shared coding codebook and conduct periodic intercoder checks when multiple coders are involved.
4. Use newspaper analysis as a rapid diagnostic step to guide targeted fieldwork, stakeholder interviews, and hotspot audits.

9. References

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