

TV Stations Miss Real Story Behind HIV-Positive Inmate

A media critic asks reporters to dig deeper on AIDS-related stories.

July 29, 2013 By James Miller

In the early days of the AIDS epidemic, most people had no idea how AIDS was transmitted. Even as late as 1999, many [people believed](#) that they could get AIDS from public toilets or sharing drinking glasses with an HIV-positive person. These erroneous beliefs were at least partially attributable to homophobia, but misinformation from irresponsible news reporting was likely also to blame.

One would think that in 2013 this type of reporting would be long gone, but three Louisville, Kentucky, TV stations are uncritically repeating assertions from authorities about the dangers of HIV and urine.

[WHAS](#), [WLKY](#), and [WDRB](#) all reported essentially the same story which appears to be based on a single arrest report: an HIV-positive inmate at [Louisville Metro Corrections](#) allegedly threw a cup of his own urine onto a corrections officer.

The corrections department decided to destroy the officer's clothing and send the officer to a local hospital for "treatment and decontamination" despite the fact that HIV [cannot be transmitted through urine](#). So the inmate's HIV status is entirely irrelevant, unless some enterprising reporter decides to write a story about the fact that the Department of Corrections is still treating urine from an HIV-positive prisoner as if it was a deadly infectious substance.

According to [earlier reports](#), the DOC even charged this same inmate with attempted murder for exactly the same act back in February, even though there is no risk of catching HIV from urine. It's like charging someone with attempted murder for throwing a glass of water on somebody else.

Chris Hartman, director of the Fairness Campaign, called these stories "gravely irresponsible reporting" and agreed that "the real story is the inappropriate way in which Metro Corrections handled this incident." He also speculated that [Metro Louisville's HIV Prevention Services](#) "would be happy to have a conversation with Metro Corrections and give them some education on this issue."

As of Thursday, July 25, the story was one of the most popular on WHAS.com. I'm sure overblown

stories like this are great for clicks and shares, but the Project for Excellence in Journalism's [Principles of Journalism](#) specifically caution against "inflating events for sensation." Perhaps next time, reporters will dig a little deeper past the press releases and arrest reports and look for the larger story.

[James Miller](#) is WFPL's media critic and a journalism teacher at duPont Manual High School in Louisville, Kentucky. This article was originally published on [WFPL.org](#).

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