

Framing Children in the News

The Face and Color of Youth Crime in America

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The case began with a numbing discovery: an 11-year-old girl's body found bludgeoned and mauled amid the rubble in one of Chicago's most crime-adled neighborhoods. Local newspapers gave the story the standard crime-scene treatment in July 1998—reporting what happened, where, when, and to whom. Police said the little girl was riding her bike near her grandmother's home during the day when she was struck in the head, dragged to a weed patch, sexually brutalized, and suffocated.

As horrifying as it was, the story did not fit the conventional page-1 formula for a Chicago blockbuster. If Ryan Harris were an affluent child, killed in one of the city's relatively safe sections, news attention would undoubtedly have been far more intense. But as it was, this bright girl's death in the all-minority streets of Englewood nearly disappeared in the clip morgue of violent tales of poor children in poor neighborhoods.

Then the story took a jolting turn from neglected paragraphs to national headlines. Three weeks after the little girl was found with her underwear stuffed in her mouth, and dead leaves jammed in her nose, Chicago police produced their suspects—two children, ages 7 and 8. Officials said the Englewood boys likely killed Ryan Harris for her Road Warrior bike. The scared, skinny kids were escorted before the press and the judge, their hands engulfed to the wrist in the court officer's palm. The spectacle brought home how far America's justice system has gone in treating children as adults, and how closely entangled the news media has become in

the process. These second and third graders were the youngest ever in American history to be charged with first-degree murder.

The public gasped in dismay, but not disbelief. In the first weeks, it seemed plausible to most that such young children could kill, so violently, for so little. After all, the nation had been pummeled with the truly appalling stories of young kids in Arkansas, Mississippi, and Oregon gunning down their classmates in the hallowed halls and school playgrounds. A few months after the Englewood murder, two teens in Littleton, Colorado, went on a murder spree in their high school, killing 13 fellow students before turning their Tec-9 semiautomatic weapons on themselves (Bai, 1999).

These aberrant events tested the limits of common understandings about children's behavior. And yet they are, in fact, aberrations. And the question still haunts: How did the public reach the point where it could so readily believe that 7- and 8-year-olds can be so brutal? What has happened to our collective understanding of children and violence that we can describe such young children as "predators," as we do animals in the wild? Is it true that children are more savage today? Is it a myth born of media saturation and newsroom racial biases? Or is it the tragic truth found somewhere between?

In this chapter I examine the news media's role in shaping the public's fear of children—or more specifically, the fear of *other people's* children. How do reporters use statistics, context, sources, and the power of story choice? What role does race play in stories about kid criminals? How does the media's portrayal of youthful offenders influence legislators and the public debate about solutions? And finally, what happens when responsible journalists cover crime beyond police reports, bringing context to the crime and humanizing texture to the victims, the suspects, their families, their communities?

The overall picture poses a serious challenge to newsrooms in America. Most news organizations—television news most egregiously—still practice drive-by coverage of local juvenile courts, child protection services, foster care agencies, and correction facilities. Full-time reporters are rarely assigned to specialize in children's institutions the same way they would City Hall. Journalists almost never have sufficient training in child development, public health, or the art and ethics of interviewing kids. The day-to-day realities of childhood and teenage life are little covered and less understood. Therefore, when the anomalous violent act erupts—a foster care child commits suicide, a troubled teen is arrested for torturing a younger child, a pair of friends spray the school grounds with gunfire—general-assignment reporters swoop in with inadequate tools to probe for answers. The public is left with a glut of stories repeating myths about violent kids (the majority

of whom are minority and male) and an anemic understanding of these children's lives and communities' responses to their needs.

The horrific spate of schoolyard slaughterers from 1997 to 1999 jolted some news editors into the realization that timeworn news conventions and assumptions do not work when it comes to covering children and crime. Some papers are attempting to expand the crime beat into a more comprehensive violence beat, where reporters would routinely place juvenile arrests in a larger context, exploring not only the facts of the crime, but also the roots of violence and the impact on the community (Stevens, Dorfman, & Wallack, 1997). Others offer in-house workshops using experts in juvenile law and child development to help reporters understand that the world of children can be very different from the world of adults. If this kind of thoughtful press coverage becomes more prevalent, we may eventually see coverage that calms fears, points to salient solutions, and avoids the sad series of misunderstandings that seemed almost inevitable for the families in Chicago.

AMERICA'S LITTLEST MURDER SUSPECTS

The news that the two little Chicago boys were arrested for murder hit the newsstands on August 11, 1998. Police, reporters, editorial writers, readers—everyone except the residents of Englewood—expressed little more than resignation that the newest killers were so small they couldn't see over the judge's bench, let alone understand their Miranda rights to remain silent and request an attorney upon arrest. "We were all primed to believe this could happen," said Alex Kotlowitz, author of *There Are No Children Here* (1992), a groundbreaking account of children and violence in a Chicago housing project. After the arrests, Kotlowitz found himself on "CBS This Morning" earnestly calling on citizens to find ways to prevent any more Ryan Harrises in the future (A. Kotlowitz, personal communication, February 15, 1999).

The *Chicago Tribune* reporter Maurice Possley told me that his first instinct was to believe the police. "We all tend to give the benefit of the doubt to authorities," Possley said. "We need to believe them. They are in charge of public safety" (M. Possley, personal communication, February 11, 1999). Most Chicagoans remembered that some of the most alarming childhood crimes of this decade happened in their city. In 1994, two grade school children dropped five-year-old Eric Morse out of a 14th-floor window because the kindergartner refused to steal candy for them. Months later, 11-year-old Yummy Sandifer shot a 14-year-old girl, and then was himself gunned down days later by his own teenage gang members. "I'm continu-

ally amazed at the extent and scope of human cruelty I see all the time," said Possley, a 28-year Chicago crime reporter. "Anything's possible."

The first wave of coverage underscored this tendency to believe the worst. *The Los Angeles Times* announced "the end of innocence" in the headline of its first-day editorial. In the piece, the editor asked, "Why are children who used to only quarrel or push and shove now capable of murder?" ("End of Innocence," 1998, p. B6). The *Chicago Sun-Times* opined that "more and more we are seeing child play replaced with predatory behavior in children too young to comprehend fully the implications of what they have done" ("Lives Endangered," 1998, p. 37; emphasis added). *Time* magazine dropped a reckless line in its first story about the case, saying that "neighbors told *Time* that R. [the 7-year-old] is a gang-banger with the notorious Black Disciplines," an outrageous accusation that was never corroborated (Stodghill, Cole, & Grace, 1998, p. 62).

The poignant punchline to this story is that these boys didn't kill Ryan Harris. Prosecutors dropped the murder charges a few weeks later. (Semen was found on the girl's clothing, a biological impossibility for boys so young.) Police faced public ridicule for their roughshod interrogating and sloppy investigating. An official rule has since been issued insuring that children have parents present and videotapes rolling when under police interrogation (Kotlowitz, 1999). The subsequent news reporting demonstrated the best and the worst of media coverage of kids and violence, depending on which newspaper you happened to read.

THE TALE OF TWO PAPERS

A closer look at the Englewood story demonstrates several aspects of the news media's influence when it comes to shaping public opinion on children and crime. One, as detailed above, is the press's potent prelude to this story, which helped solidify the public's firm belief that children these days are more savage than ever. Another is the power of seemingly innocuous, standard-fare crime reporting to subvert children's rights. This is done most effectively through handing over full control of the story to the sources—in this case, the police. A third is the potential power of the press, when used responsibly, with a special sensitivity to children, to subvert all of the above, and to protect children's rights in the courts.

By-the-book, cop-beat regulations dictate that reporters find out who is arrested for what crime, when, where, and why. Police are often the only source of information that a reporter can draw on and still meet tight deadlines for filing a story. Child suspects tend to be unprepared emotionally and cognitively to deal with police interrogations and legal proceedings.

They certainly have few resources with which to reach reporters and make sure their voices are heard. A daily police-blotter crime story does not allow for probing beyond the cop version to bring context and human focus to the suspects, the victim, the families, or the community. These questions are important when it comes to stories involving adults. They are imperative when the subjects are children. But most reporters do not consider the special circumstances of child suspects. When crime writers treat children's cases exactly as they would adults' (just as the legal system tends to do for violent crimes), children's rights are severely compromised.

On the other hand, other news organizations (notably *The Chicago Tribune*) demonstrated how hard work and child-sensitive journalism can actually protect children's rights. Some reporters at the paper challenged inconsistencies in the official story from the outset, questioning police interrogation methods and conclusions about children's mental and physical capabilities. They talked to the boys' families. They placed a template of the police version of events over a knowledge of child development. They asked questions such as, What are children really capable of at what ages? How would a child respond in certain circumstances to authorities? Is it really sensible to treat children as young as these as adults in the legal system, or in the press? One could argue that this kind of sensitive press attention coupled with strong legal representation helped to restore the boys' legal rights.

The day that police announced they were arresting two little boys, *The Chicago Tribune* decided this was a big story—big enough to send one of its most senior crime reporters. Possley had covered the Oklahoma City bombing case and the Unabomber trial. He had a clip morgue full of experience. Possley admitted that he went into this story with a set of assumptions culled from nearly 30 years as a newsmen in Chicago (M. Possley, personal communication, February 11, 1999). He told me he expected to find, for instance, that the adults in these boys' lives were dysfunctional—"mother all strung out, father missing"—like so many poor. Black families whose kids end up in trouble with the law. He assumed that these children were cut out of the notorious Yummy Sandifer mold, having grown up in a world of gangs and fear. Neither stereotype turned out to be true.

The police held a hearing first, describing the brutal crime, including lots of "adult sex stuff," said Possley. Then the reporters fled over to juvenile court for the hearing. An audible gasp greeted the children as they were marched out to meet the judge. As Possley said,

I think we were all expecting to see demon children—Danicens—based on the police description. Then these two little skinny kids come

out. They stand next to the bench that was built for kids to see over. And they can't see over it. I'm sitting there thinking of my deadline, trying to write the story in my head, and I thought—these little squirts? It just doesn't make sense.

The Dangers of Objectivity

Here is a sample of the first-day stories of Chicago's two main papers.

The Chicago Sun-Times published "just the facts, ma'am" standard fare on the first day, rarely straying from the police version of events:

Two boys, age 7 and 8, accused of killing an 11-year-old girl, are the youngest suspects in memory to be linked with a murder here, Chicago police said Monday.

Police believe Ryan Harris may have been killed last month for her bicycle.

She died from a blow to the head, allegedly from a rock used by the 7 year old and from suffocation caused by clothing, grass and leaves stuffed into her mouth, police said. She was sexually molested with an object. (Carpen-ter & Lawrence, 1998, p. 1)

The dry recitation of the case illustrates the shortcoming of textbook Associated Press-style journalism. There is nothing overtly wrong with it. The police were treating the boys as adults. *The Chicago Sun-Times* was simply following suit. The facts are in order. There is no discernible opinion betrayed. But this dispassionate account reads more like a police-blotter report than a story. By objectifying the children, never challenging their special status as children, the story ends up dehumanizing them and giving unbalanced credence to the police's version of events. Readers are left with the impression that there is no more to it than the facts before them.

We read that the police describe the boys as of "average height and weight." The story does not describe them beyond this, even though the reporters have firsthand knowledge that they are skinny little boys. It does nothing to correct the assumption that these children must be remorseless thugs. Therefore, it's much easier for readers to believe the worst of cardboard criminals than of flesh-and-blood little boys.

At the end of the story, reporters balance this version by quoting Ryan's grandfather and the 8-year-old's attorney—both registering their disbelief that such small boys could have killed Ryan. It's significant that the reporter chose to bury this skepticism deep into the story.

Finally, the piece concludes with a mention of two other Chicago child-on-child murders: one last March, one 5 years ago. This is a common, and often misleading, way in which journalists try to contextualize a crime.

But simply listing similar crimes does not make for accurate context. It's a way of inventing a trend, leaving readers with the impression that an epidemic is afoot. The specific context for each individual crime is ignored. The most damaging result is that this list adds credence to the current crime, instead of a deepened understanding of its circumstances or consequences. In this case, the list was also completely misleading.

Reporting at the Child's Level

The Chicago Tribune's story began this way:

The two slaying suspects, ages 7 and 8, sat patiently at the defense table, legs dangling above the floor Monday, as prosecutors accused them of fatally bludgeoning an 11-year-old girl to death last month in Chicago's Englewood neighborhood.

Despite often-gruesome testimony, the boys, who are now among Chicago's youngest-ever slaying suspects, seemed mostly oblivious.

The 7-year-old, with a pout on his face and his black hair braided neatly in cornrows ending in blue beads, sat hunched over a yellow legal pad, using a red pen to sketch a house with a smoking chimney below a sky filled with heart-shaped clouds.

"Am I going to jail?" he whispered to Cathy Ferguson, one of his attorneys. In response, she handed him another sheet of drawing paper. (Possley, 1998b, p. 1)

The story goes on to describe the 8-year-old eating Skittles, smiling at his parents, before detailing the police case against them, and Englewood residents' disbelief.

Possley's story reflects his studied skepticism about the police version of events from the beginning. Readers see children, not demon seeds. The kids are calm (sitting patiently). They are small (dangly feet); they are not psychotic (sketching normal childlike pictures with houses and hearts, instead of the disconnected drawings of troubled children). And above all, they are not adults. They are grade school children, "oblivious" to the adult proceedings around them.

A few days later, reporters received the police records. Possley read them not through the standard view of the police, but through the eyes of the small boys involved. Detectives described holding the 7-year-old's hand, telling him that good boys tell the truth, insuring him that they were his friends. "The first thing a 7-year-old will want to do is to do as please the man, tell the man what he thinks he wants to hear," Possley told me. "It's hard to believe the child understood the implications of talking to these detectives."

Then there was the matter of the rocks the boys said they threw at Ryan. Police reports indicated that a medical examiner found that Ryan was struck by something much bigger and heavier than a rock. In fact, a bloody brick was found next to her body. The detectives decided that the boys were lying about the rocks, but not about other things. "There were too many inconsistencies to conclude so definitively that these boys killed her," said Possley. He dissected the reports, putting them in the context of Illinois law and juvenile justice practices, in a subsequent article (Possley, 1998a, p. 1).

Finally, in a powerful interview with the 7-year-old's mother, Possley dispels the commonly held myth that most poor children who encounter legal trouble live in homes headed by single parents who lack both education and a desire to work. Both boys lived with two parents who had college educations and full-time jobs (Possley & Puente, 1998, p. 1). Without the interview, the public stereotype would have prevailed. "It heightened the sensitivity about this case around here," Possley said.

The Chicago Tribune avoided the newsroom temptation to treat these suspects as adults, simply because the courts had charged them with an "adultlike" crime. This kind of perceptive treatment of children in the news goes a long way toward deflecting the public drumbeat of the coming wave of superpredators—male, Black, and young.

IF IT BLEEDS, IT LEADS, AND LEADS AND LEADS...

The Englewood debacle provides a good place to pause in the flurry of debate over kids and crime to examine news coverage of youth at millennium's end. Any honest reader will admit that human brutality makes for good reading. Any savvy editor will tell you that violence sells, whether we like it or not. "If it bleeds, it leads" is a timeless maxim in the newsroom. And since the advent of the penny press, a gory crime—particularly if the suspected perpetrator is baby-faced—is guaranteed front-page material. The trick for a responsible journalist is to cover these stories without falling into easy clichés and conclusions; to use these stories to inform, instead of entertain.

That trick has become a monumental hurdle in the 1990s, with the runaway proliferation of media outlets. Beyond the traditional newspapers and network television and radio news, the global audience now has access to hundreds of cable and satellite television stations, on-line media sites, and scores of entertainment talk shows, often confused by the public for news. Some are staffed by trained journalists, many only by trained techni-

cians, and all have the rapid-fire capability of flooding airwaves and cyberspace with their own versions of the breaking stories of the hour.

When a huge story breaks, such as the schoolyard shootings in Jonesboro, Arkansas (where an 11- and 13-year-old trapped and fired at their classmates combat style), it hits the national and international airwaves in nanoseconds, and keeps coming and coming until the story runs its course. There is little time for reflection, no time to assess the impact of the avalanche of coverage on the lives of the children involved and the community they live in, or on the public's soured attitude toward all children. The damage is done instantly.

For weeks in the spring of 1997 audiences and readers were barraged by photos of the Arkansas suspects as toddlers dressed in combat fatigues, cradling rifles. *The New York Daily News* headline described them as demon-seed children who were "born to kill" (Williams, George, & Siemaszko, 1998, cover). *Time* turned up the volume with "Armed & Dangerous" (Labi, 1998, cover). A *Newsweek* sidebar asked, "Why Do Kids Kill?" (Gegax, Adler, & Peterson, 1998, p. 45), instead of, "Why did these particular children kill? Even if some individual stories within these packages were balanced, the sheer volume of the coverage and the fear-mongering tone created by the editors who package the stories left a deadly impression. It takes a highly discriminating reader to avoid coming away from this flood of images and headlines without a gnawing fear that youth in general are more dangerous than ever.

The damage to children's rights by such unrelenting coverage was most obvious in the aftermath of the Littleton, Colorado, massacre. In the first few hours after the two teenagers gunned their way through Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, television and radio news shows were linking the pair to Nazi sympathizers and a "trench coat mafia" (O'Driscoll, 1999, p. 1A). School officials from Rhode Island to Japan began suspending children based on their dress, combing through their poems and homework for signs of violence. A siege mentality took hold on many campuses. Virtually all schoolchildren became potential terrorist suspects. In the weeks that followed, the American Civil Liberties Union reported receiving dozens of complaints from students saying they were disciplined by school officials for a variety of issues, ranging from sporting blue hair to having nail clippers in their book bags (Mathis, 1999).

AMERICAS CHILDREN: DEAD OR DIABOLICAL

Newsrooms run on the adrenaline of story-by-story deadlines, resisting the need to pay attention to the overall effect of their coverage. When it comes

to the coverage of kids, violence overwhelmingly defines their image in the news, until recently. Children—predominantly minority kids—appeared as either dead or diabolical in the news far more often than just plain kids. A 1994 Children Now survey found that 40% of all print news involving kids was devoted to crime and violence. One quarter of the coverage involved education—the next largest category. The rest divided between public policy issues such as poverty, child care, protection services, and so on. Broadcast news was far more slanted toward the miscreants: 48% of its youth news coverage was about violence, and only 15% was devoted to education (Kunkel, 1994).

The picture four years later was more hopeful. The percentage of child violence stories dropped to 23% for newspapers, and 10% for television, according to the most recent Children Now study. One reason for the improvement was an overall media commitment to covering a broader range of kids' issues, such as culture, health, and education. Still, poverty, welfare, and other policy stories routinely ignore children (Children Now, 1999). None of this is to say that childhood crime is not a concern and should not be covered. There is no question that arrests for teen homicides more than doubled overall between 1985 and 1995—a phenomenon that deserved rigorous public scrutiny (Sickmund, Snyder, & Poe-Yamagata, 1997). The danger comes when these crime stories are covered at the exclusion of others: when they ignore context, dehumanize the victims and suspects, and fail to search for answers that are neither easy nor stereotypical.

What sort of context is excluded? Juvenile crime is too often treated as if it happens in a bubble, disconnected from adult crime and social or family conditions. For instance, adults kill children at a far more astonishing rate than kids do, but the adult crimes are not always given equal column inches. Ninety percent of the murders of children under 12 and three fourths of the murders of 12- to 17-year-olds are committed by adults (Doi, 1998; Snyder, Sickmund, & Poe-Yamagata, 1996).

The press rarely supplies these kinds of comparisons. Author Mike Males points out in *Framing Youth: Ten Myths about the Next Generation* (1999) that the same day the Englewood boys were arrested, a suburban Los Angeles father gunned down his wife and three kids. The latter story was considered local, and received no national attention. The irony is that the phenomenon of adults killing children is not considered "unusual" enough to warrant news. We read it about it less and less, until it actually seems rare.

Other key questions, rarely asked, could help illuminate the root causes of violence: How many kids were abused or neglected during the same period in which the homicide rate shot up? The U.S. Justice Department reports that the abuse rate for children doubled between 1986 and 1993

(Sickmund et al., 1997). Experts have long known that kids who are abused are more at risk of behaving in dangerously aggressive ways (see chapter 3, this volume).

How many children were victims of violence? Federal statistics show that in 1994 alone, 12- to 17-year-olds were three times as likely as adults to be raped, mugged, or assaulted (Sickmund et al., 1997). If children learn from adults, then they learn violent behavior by experiencing it.

How many of the teen arrests for violent crimes involved guns? Franklin Zimring reports in his book *American Youth Violence* (1998) that the vast majority of the crimes committed by teens in the early 1990s involved firearms. Assaults involving fists and knives remained the same, suggesting that kids were not more innately savage in the 1990s, just better armed.

If reporters automatically asked these kinds of questions, their stories would be more informative, and the public could be inspired to call for longer term solutions: better child care, quality school counselors, decent housing and health facilities for kids, improved youth programs, effective gun control, more alternatives to jail. Instead, the steady drumbeat of slaughter and shock in the media distracts positive public discussion, leaving citizens numb. The cry becomes a focused crackdown on criminal kids. We fear them, so let's punish them. Rehabilitation is useless. The public believes that juvenile courts are too soft for this new, brutal breed apart. Adult criminal courts are the only answer (Zimring, 1998). A 1996 CBS *News/New York Times* poll found that 88% of those surveyed believed teen violence was a bigger problem now than in the past. Seventy percent believed that juvenile courts were too lenient with the youngsters (*False Images?*, 1997).

Fear Overwhelms the Facts

How did this happen? A quick look at the cover headlines of the nation's most respected news magazines over the decade hint at the media's contribution to this skewed fear of our children. Consider 1993, the cusp year for adolescent violence, when teenagers represented 18% of the arrests for violent crimes. *Newsweek* ran with "Teen Violence: Wild in the Streets," in August (Kantrowitz, 1993, p. 40). *U.S. News* published "Guns in the Schools: When Killers Come to Class—Even Suburban Parents Now Fear the Rising Tide of Violence" the next fall (Toch, 1993, p. 30). Adults committed 82% of the violent crimes that same year, but did not experience similar press treatment.

The following year, arrests among teens for violent crimes began to level off, along with crime in general (Fuentes, 1998). Still, the cover stories included "Killer Teens" in *U.S. News* (1994, p. 26), and in *Time*, "When

Kids Go Bad: America's Juvenile Justice System is Antiquated, Inadequate and No Longer Able to Cope with the Violence Wrought by Children Whom No One Would Call Innocents" (Lacey, 1994, p. 60).

Not surprisingly, public perception did not catch up with the facts. In the following 3 years, juvenile arrests declined by 3%. Between 1995 and 1996 the rate dropped by 6%. A 1997 report by the National Center for Juvenile Justice concluded that delinquents today are not, in fact, much different from criminal kids of decades past. "Today's violent youth commits the same number of violent acts as his/her predecessor of 15 years ago," the authors wrote (Sickmund et al., 1997, p. 24). Still, news-magazine covers during those years continued to tinker with the fear barometer. *U.S. News* ran with "Teenage Time Bombs," in 1996 (Zoglin, 1996, p. 52). *People* magazine examined "Kids Without a Conscience" (Efthimiades, 1997, p. 46). (It's worth noting that seven out of the nine criminals focused on in *People* were over age 18 at the time of their arrests.)

The Coalition for Juvenile Justice argued that "this media firestorm has either created or reinforced a public impression that juvenile crime is rampant and a major threat to the safety of the community" (*False Images?*, 1997, p. 29).

The Teenagers Are Coming, the Teenagers Are Coming . . . or Are They?

News reporters are nothing without sources. The best will vary the ideological perspectives of their chosen spokesmeisters. But the bottom line is that whoever captures the media's attention with the newest theories and the snappiest quotes often takes the lead in shaping public opinion. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the news media helped three prominent academics, one more conservative than the other, dominate the child violence story: UCLA criminologist John Q. Wilson, Princeton political scientist John J. Dilulio, and Northeastern University demographer James Alan Fox. Their theories and statistics were provocative, their credentials impressive, their accessibility to the press free flowing. Whenever a child viciously murdered another, or a youth gang wreaked havoc somewhere, the press—especially the news magazines—turned to one in this triumvirate to offer the "official" explanation. Perhaps this phenomenon, more than any other, explains how the public developed a conservative understanding of youth violence and an irrational fear of America's teens.

In November 1995, Princeton's Dilulio coined the most racially explosive word in the field to sunn up his theories on urban crime. In a *Weekly Standard* article, the professor predicted the ominous "coming of the Super-Predator." This was a new breed of feral child, described by Dilulio as almost mythical in his savagery. The superpredator suffers from "moral

poverty," and commits his "homicidal violence in 'wolf packs.'" He is raised in "chaotic, dysfunctional, fatherless, Godless and jobless settings where . . . self-respecting young men literally aspire to get away with murder." By the year 2010, the conservative moralist foresaw, 270,000 more such remorseless thugs—most of them Black, male, and urban—would be pouring into helpless communities (Dilulio, 1995, p. 23).

A respected demographer turned criminologist weighed in with some supporting and alarming arithmetic. Northeastern's Fox noted the expected rise in adolescent population over the next 15 years, linked it with recent juvenile violence arrests, and warned that more teens will mean more crime. That's because "teenagers," Fox told *Time* magazine, are "temporary sociopaths—impulsive and immature" (Zoglin, 1996, p. 52). UCLA's Wilson, a major influence on Dilulio and Fox, added that the new criminal is "remorseless . . . sullen—and very young" (Rodríguez, 1996, p. 11).

The Anatomy of the Superpredator Story

Embracing the theory's melodramatic undertones and its slave-era assumptions of Black male behavior, the press took these fear-mongering ideas and ran with them. Editors and reporters were primed to believe the new trend, since they had been relying on its theorists for years. Moreover, the theory was highly media friendly: simple, believable, and conducive to lively copy.

Newsweek pumped up the volume, asking if the current teen violence decline was actually "the lull before the storm." The writer then added, "Crime really is down, but teenagers are more violent than ever—and some cops and experts believe 1995 may turn out to be the good old days" (Morganthau, 1995, p. 40). That story was followed the next month by "Superpredators Arrive," which asked if Americans should consider *caging* "the new breed of vicious kids" (Annin, 1996, p. 57). *U.S. News* put together a "Crime Time Bomb" cover story in March of the same year (Gest & Pope, 1996, p. 28). Americans battened down.

Legislators helped provide the locks. Senator Orrin Hatch introduced legislation that would jail runaways with adult prisoners and expel kids from school for smoking cigarettes. Florida representative Bill McCollum warned Americans to "brace yourself for the coming generation of superpredators," to drum up support for his bill, The Violent Youth Predator Act of 1996 (Miller, 1998, p. 48).

Consequently, in 1999, more children are being sent to adult court for sentencing than in previous decades. Forty-seven states have tightened their juvenile justice laws, making punishment tougher. In a decade, the numbers of kids transferred to adult court nearly doubled (Sickmund et al., 1997).

In many ways, we are still seeing the aftershocks of this superpredator theory in Congressional acts. Post-Littleton, the House of Representatives passed a youth violence bill most noted for its provision allowing schools to post the Bible's Ten Commandments (a clause that will not likely withstand a constitutional challenge) (Fiore & Anderson, 1999). Less attention was paid to its provisions making it even easier for the courts to try children as young as 14 years old as adults, and to release their criminal records more readily to the public—reversing states' century-long practice of protecting the privacy of juveniles from the glare of public exposure (O'Rourke, 1999).

But there was one problem: The theory was dead wrong. Despite the media hype and the congressional endorsement, teenage wolf packs failed to materialize. The teen population continued to grow, but crime continued on its downward spiral. Experts note that this alarming prediction of waves of juvenile violence is based on fear, not science. Even the theory's conservative architects are now backing off, saying that other factors such as tougher crime prevention and the collapsing crack trade overshadowed demographic predictors. Dilulio has turned his attention to faith-based solutions in the inner city. He wrote most recently that failing children with adults "will merely produce more street gladiators" (*Covering Criminal Justice*, 1999).

But the damage was done.

Black and Latino Boys Take the Rap

The superpredator concept—and all its dehumanizing connotations—still lives on, primarily in newscasts. And its most powerful message is race. It's a label reserved almost exclusively for Black and Latino males.

Certainly, a disproportionate number of young minority males are arrested for robbery and homicide, compared with Whites; the teen jail population is 63% minority, 37% White (Sickmund, 1997; Zimring, 1998). But even when White children are caught committing heinous crimes, they are rarely referred to as predators—super or otherwise—in the press. For example, coverage of the Jonesboro shooters from the beginning was sensitive to the community and to all the families. The public could sympathize with the anguish of the parents of the killers as well as of the killed. The California-based Freedom Forum (1998) organization praised the tone-setter for national coverage, *The Jonesboro Sun*, for neither demonizing nor glorifying the suspects or their victims.

"The Jonesboro suspects were given a certain sense of humanity in the coverage that Black, inner-city kids often do not get," said Alex Kotlowitz

(personal communication, February 15, 1999). "There's little probing into the circumstances in their homes, their families, the financial and spiritual poverty in their communities."

Television news is the more blatant offender. A recent survey by the Berkeley Media Studies Group of more than 200 hours of local television news in California found that more than two thirds of the stories on violence involved youth. When Black children were interviewed for these stories, they were more often witnesses, victims, or perpetrators of violent crimes than White children were. White children were more often interviewed as victims of less threatening crimes, such as accidents (Woodruff, 1998).

"Right now, in the minds of the viewing public, youth crime is as much about race as it is about crime," concluded UCLA's political science professor Franklin Gilliam and Stanford professor of communication Shanto Iyengar (1998, p. 46). Gilliam and Iyengar tested their theory recently in a unique study that measured viewers' fear levels and racial attitudes in direct response to news stories. Viewers were chosen at random to watch a 15-minute newscast. A crime report was inserted midstream. Some viewers watched a "superpredator script" in which the alleged murderer was a young Black or Latino male. Other viewers watched the same segment with an Asian or White suspect. A third group saw the crime story, but was never shown the racial identity of the accused. Finally, the control group watched the newscast without the crime story.

The results were striking. Those who watched the minority youth arrested reported feeling more afraid of crime than those who did not. They also tended to support more get-tough crime policies. It's interesting to note that White and Asian viewers supported get-tough measures at a far higher rate than Black viewers. Most, though, believe society needs to be held somewhat responsible for these kids. Iyengar and Gilliam conclude that "body-bag journalism" is a concept that has lasted beyond its years. Newsrooms need to retool their coverage, or else continue to allow the small percentage of troubled youth in America to define the entire group (Gilliam & Iyengar, 1998, in press).

DEATH TO THE DEAD-BABY BEAT

Some call it body-bag journalism. Others call it the dead-baby beat. These are the facetious newsroom names for the spectacle of reporters swooping into courts, welfare offices, and foster care agencies when a huge story breaks—most often when a child's body is found. Some fine stories may be written in the meantime, sidebars about child abuse, the failures of the courts, or the negligence in the child welfare ranks. But after the story runs

its course, reporters move on; the chance to provide sustained scrutiny of these institutions is lost.

Lost, too, are troves of stories culled from seasoned relationships between sources and journalists. The bureaucrats don't get a chance to develop a comfortable working relationship with the press. Journalists lose the opportunity to fully understand the agencies and the children they serve. And the public loses its power to scrutinize its government at work. When the next corpse is found, the process starts all over from scratch.

No one is pleased with this kind of drive-by reporting. Reporters loathe wolf-pack assignments as much as the public disdains the spectacle. One solution is to launch a full-time juvenile court beat. The case of the Englewood children might not have shocked the public quite so much if the Chicago press had had a history of covering youth courts. Possley said he recently asked the *Chicago Tribune* editors for that assignment, figuring files of untold stories would keep him busy for years. "They liked the idea," he told me. "But they don't feel they can spare the manpower" (M. Possley, personal communication, February 11, 1999).

This is a common response in resource-starved newspapers. In fact, only one U.S. paper dedicates a full-time reporter to the juvenile courts. "My phone rings off the hook with stories," said Jack Kresnak of the *Detroit Free Press*. "So many people are hungry for these stories to be told" (J. Kresnak, personal communication, February 21, 1999).

The juvenile court beat was born in 1988 after *The Free Press* ran a series on youth outlaws. Prodded by the coverage, the state legislature opened the doors and the documents of juvenile courts to more public scrutiny. The paper decided to cover it full time. "I showed up to court the first day it was open, and they kicked me out," Kresnak said. "They kept kicking me out, and I kept coming back. They really didn't know how to deal with the press at first."

Finally, a truce was called, and a rapport was built. Court officials realized that this persistent reporter was not going away. Kresnak learned about the workings of the court as well as the roots and risk factors involved in child violence and juvenile arrests. "As soon as they realized I was responsible, that I wasn't there to exploit children, access was never a problem again," he said.

But the experience at *The New York Daily News* is more typical. Several years ago, *Daily News* attorney Eve Burton, aided by the paper's editorial editor, pushed the state to open New York Family Court to more public scrutiny. The suit was successful. Judges were encouraged to open their doors. *The News* wrote one large exposé on the courts, and then virtually disappeared from its halls and hearing rooms. "It's hard to justify dedicating one reporter to family court, when the stories don't get in the paper that

often," the managing editor told me (A. Brown, personal communication, April 11, 1998).

If one juvenile beat reporter is not a viable option for some papers, then the blended beat may be another solution. One way to integrate formerly distinct beats would be to form a children's beat. In this case, a youth reporter would be responsible for several children's agencies: juvenile court, child protection services, foster care, welfare. This journalist would make it her business to keep up with research in neuroscience, development, health, and the effects of poverty, in order to bring deeper understanding to her stories. The reporter would keep in touch with youth groups, community programs, places kids hang out. A smaller town, with a smaller budgeted paper, might consider folding child care and education into the children's beat.

Finally, consider another way to blend the beats: Mix crime with public health and science. Instead of a cop beat, why not a violence beat—one that places the arrest du jour in a larger context? Under this rubric, reporters would routinely ask questions such as, How common is this kind of crime in the community? Did unemployment play a role? How about alcohol, drugs, guns? What kind of guns? Where were they bought? What is the fallout of this crime to the families involved, to the community?

These are suggested questions posed by an innovative group of health experts and journalists at the Berkeley Media Studies Center Violence Project. The idea is to provide more information in every crime story, so the resulting coverage spawns a call for violence prevention instead of public fear. "Violence is preventable," said public health expert Lori Dorfman, co-director of the group. "And not just through the criminal justice system. Our goal is to help journalists find better tools to tell the violence story in a more meaningful way" (L. Dorfman, personal communication, March 13, 1999).

CONCLUSION

In the days following the Jonesboro shootings, I called up Howard Snyder at the Office of Juvenile Justice to discuss how quickly the media named the accused boys of five murders and attached photos to their stories. These were the youngest suspects—11 and 13—to be exposed so completely in the press. In a resigned aside, Mr. Snyder said, "Well, I was happy to see at least they were not Black and urban." They were in fact White boys, from a Southern town (Hancock, 1998, p. 18).

At first, I was startled by the comment. Certainly the shooting was an enormous tragedy that had nothing overtly to do with race. But I under-

stood his point. The face of youth crime in America is by and large Black and Brown. It's an unexamined newsroom phenomenon that has fed the nation's overwrought fear of children—other people's poor and minority children. The proliferation of "wilding Black teen" stories helped fuel the punitive legislation now in place in most states. At least these two White, baby-faced Arkansas boys shook up the stereotype. These were not the children so often portrayed as expendable and hopeless offspring of the inner-city poor. It was harder for White middle class viewers to objectify them as demons, raised in "moral poverty."

We can only speculate what the coverage would have looked like had the boys been Black and from East L.A., spraying bullets in one of their own schoolyards. Would the press have leaped as far and deep into the story, double-teaming its coverage for weeks, even months? Would it have gone to such lengths to examine the pain not only of all those involved, but also of the neighborhood, and the nation as a whole? Would it have explored the myriad social and neurological roots of violence: culture, guns, abuse, brain damage? Or would the stories have just underscored perceived expectations—dismissing the impoverished boys as remorseless criminals with few connections to American society?

If the press has learned anything from the seemingly relentless spate of White children taking armed revenge on their classmates, it's that the issue of violence and children is enormously complicated. Most newsrooms are woefully unprepared to do it justice. The roots of the problem are as varied as the individuals involved, as the communities they come from. Children themselves, and the institutions that serve them, must be considered more worthy subjects of sophisticated and sustained coverage. Kids can no longer be treated as simply cute photo opportunities, or mindless, predictable thugs who should be treated as adults. Those who covered the Columbine shootings learned to shed such stereotypes instantly.

The problems emerged from these stories in bas-relief: The standard five-Ws approach (who, what, when, where, and why) to stories about crime is insufficient. By nature it objectifies the suspects, creating cryptic stories with cardboard suspects, dehumanizing them in the process. When it comes to children who are not emotionally equipped to wield their own power within the legal system and the press, the practice serves to strip them of their rights.

The pool of news sources for stories on kids and crime is too narrowly rooted in one ideology—in this case, conservative theories focusing on character flaws of minority urban youth. Mixing up a variety of viewpoints would allow readers a chance to consider a wider range of solutions, from improving schools to searching for alternatives to jail, instead of merely taking easy potshots at the perpetrators.

Finally, violence is treated as an isolated incident perpetrated by an aberrant child, without regard to his background, environment, social conditions, and weapon availability. When it's considered in a more inclusive context as a public health issue, one that's larger than the individuals involved, the public is left with a sense of potential for change, instead of fear and despair.

News editors tend to recognize these shortcomings and areas for improvement more often when nonminority children are involved. That's the final challenge: to develop a newsroom awareness of the press's role in fostering the public's fear of Black and Brown children. Perhaps then more cases of young children falsely accused—such as those of the young Black children in Chicago—could be averted.

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