

Columbine: Framing youth violence

Failing to report about its contributing factors nurtures a sense that citizens can do little about violence

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DJNF SCHOLASTIC RESEARCH

IMPLICATIONS

This study shows a surprising contrast between routine coverage of serious local youth violence in three large California newspapers and reporting on a highly aberrational episode more than a thousand miles away, the Columbine High School shootings of April 1999. While that single incident was reported with great concern about causes and solutions, the violence most seriously affecting local readers contained few frames of cause or solution. Such reporting nurtures a sense that citizens can do little about violence and that its causes are entirely individual rather than powerfully influenced by environmental factors such as poverty, failing schools and easy access to drugs and guns.

States. That unusualness gave the news shock value. Made it sell.

But the purpose of ethical journalism is to help citizens make sense of (and act on) the most likely and vexing problems they face. With that standard, we'd expect that the most frequent kinds of serious youth violence in a newspaper's own circulation area would get careful attention. Reporting would dig into causes and solutions. Explore "why," not just "what." Look at trends and remedies that have worked or failed elsewhere.

So we compared routine coverage of youth violence in three large and generally respected California newspapers over a year with their reporting in the week following the Columbine shootings. Using a "constructed week" design that equalizes

fat Sunday papers with thin Monday editions, we randomly sampled every 13th day of the Los Angeles Times, San Francisco Chronicle and Sacramento Bee. In a second sample, we analyzed all seven days following the Columbine massacre. Overall, we examined 3,174 articles.

Of course, we knew few, if any, local crimes would get the wall-to-wall coverage of Columbine. But we wanted to see whether there was a qualitative difference in the reporting.

There was. The same news organizations that supplied such a sophisticated examination of why the Columbine tragedy happened and what might prevent a similar event, generally covered serious local youth violence as no more complex than A hurting B.

There were some bright exceptions, but few stories explored either causes or solutions of such violence.

Well-documented research tells us that poverty, inadequate schools, discrimination, lax police enforcement, easy access to guns, drugs, alcohol and other environmental factors all contribute to violence. But these factors went largely unreported in routine coverage. Thus, they remain unconsidered when we, as citizens, deliberate solutions. The dearth of reporting on cause and solutions reinforces the myth that violence is inevitable.

The simplistic representation of A hurts B implies, by default, that A is a bad person whom we should lock up (at greater annual expense than sending him or her to college). As Walter Lippmann pointed out long ago, people act not on reality, but on "the pictures in their heads." Those pictures appear to have affected public policy. Forty-four states and the District of Columbia have enacted stiffer sentencing for youthful offenders over the past decade. During the same period violent youth crime actually fell, but coverage of crime increased, particularly in broadcast news.

In reporting local youth violence, we don't need the volume of reporting Columbine attracted, but we do need its explanatory quality. ■



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