

# I S S U E

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Youth and Violence in California Newspapers

BERKELEY MEDIA STUDIES GROUP

High school seniors

High school seniors



## Youth and Violence in California Newspapers

In the week following Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris' bloody rampage through Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, journalists left few clues unexamined in their effort to explain the tragedy. Were the wise-cracking, bomb-tossing teens on drugs? Drunk? Were they members of a violent subculture? Unsupervised by parents? Had violent media images numbed them to the painful consequences of such actions? Were the two young men harassed by more popular classmates? Had they suffered abuse as children? Witnessed personal violence? Or were they just evil?

Reporting was broad, deep and so ubiquitous that it frightened students, teachers and parents coast-to-coast, provoking numerous disruptions as schools closed and students were punished at the hint of violence. But your child has a greater chance of being killed by lightning than in school, less than one in a million. In fact, youth are far more vulnerable *outside* of school—hanging out with friends, in the neighborhood, even at home. Suburban schools are particularly safe.<sup>1</sup>

In short, what happened on a chilly April day at Columbine High School was highly *atypical* of youth violence in the United States. That gave the news shock value. Made it sell. But much more important for citizens almost a thousand miles away in California is coverage of near and likely dangers.

Our research measures how reporting about these proximate and probable threats to California young people compares with coverage of dangers rare and remote.

The comparison is important. Much of our picture of reality beyond the range of our own ears and eyes is crafted in newsrooms. In fact, we sometimes imagine we personally experienced events we only read about or saw on television.<sup>2</sup> Further, mediated ideas tell us what to expect, shaping even what we experience personally. These media-suffused pictures in our heads<sup>3</sup> are the resource we will use to decide such issues as funding for public education and whether to try juveniles as adults. And those decisions will shape our future.

We analyzed this mediated mosaic, over a year and immediately after a major event—Columbine—in three of California's largest and best newspapers. We wanted to know:

- Are young people getting their share of the press' attention?
- What kind of attention is it? Which topics get the most play? Are young people presented as they are, or as "problems," or perhaps even "predators?" How often do youth stories focus on violence? What is missing from the mosaic?
- How are stories about youth violence reported? We employed many measures, asking: How substantive is the coverage—a series of disjointed episodes of violence, or more thoughtful articles about trends and issues? When reporters tell a story what is included and what is pushed to the margin or left out? Who or what gets blamed? What is the nature of the problem? Who is responsible for fixing it? Who do reporters quote? Who is left out? How much context accompanies descriptions of violence?
- What can we do to ensure a more accurate and useful picture of youth, and particularly violence affecting youth?

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<sup>1</sup> Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report, Washington, DC: National Center for Juvenile Justice, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Gamson, William A. *Talking Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Lippmann, Walter. *Public Opinion*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922.

## Methods

Although fewer Americans are reading the news than a decade ago, newspapers are still the standard-bearers of journalism. With more reporters than local television, print usually sets the agenda for broadcast and digs deeper into issues. We chose three of the largest, and by reputation, best newspapers in California.<sup>4</sup> The *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *Sacramento Bee*.

We created two samples. In the first, we randomly selected one newspaper every 13 days for a year—from June, 1998 through May, 1999. To maximize representativeness, we designed the sample to include equal numbers of papers from Sunday through Saturday.<sup>5</sup> The second sample consisted of the seven days in April 1999 following the shootings at Columbine. The two samples did not overlap.<sup>6</sup> This allowed us to compare the portrayal of youth routinely with coverage immediately after a major news event.

Readers pay more attention to prominently displayed or promoted stories and journalists put their best out front. So we analyzed every story that began or was “teased” on the front page, the local/metro front page, the front of the lifestyle section and the first page of any inserted weekly local news sections. We also scrutinized “sidebars” of display page stories—adjacent articles about the same topic on an inside page. Finally, we examined editorials, including op-ed columns. Overall, we analyzed 3,174 articles.

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<sup>4</sup> This research was done as part of The California Wellness Foundation’s Violence Prevention Initiative, which is why we studied California newspapers.

<sup>5</sup> Random selection plus a “constructed week” design, which pulls in equal numbers of fat Sunday editions and thin Monday papers, provides the best overall picture of reporting available with a particular sample size (Riffe, Daniel, Aust, Charles F. and Stephen R. Lacy, “The Effectiveness of Random, Consecutive Day and Constructed Week Sampling in Newspaper Content Analysis,” *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 70, No. 1, 1993, pp. 133-139). Such a sample is a good measure of the general features of reporting. However, it may miss specific examples of excellent (or poor) journalism.

<sup>6</sup> The routine sample, however, did contain two editions published in May, after Columbine.

## Findings

### 1. Are young people getting their share of attention?

We defined “young” to include all legal minors—children and adolescents below the age of 18—and young adults through age 24. This represents 37 percent of California’s population.<sup>7</sup> In the yearlong sample, the three newspapers devote about 16 percent of their section fronts, sidebars and editorial page stories to articles with a significant—but not necessarily primary—focus on youth.<sup>8</sup> This amounted to between 4 and 5 stories per edition.

We would not expect that 37 percent of display stories to be about youth. Many stories are not specific to a particular age group. Weather, housing costs, natural disasters, wars, etc. affect all ages. But given its importance, coverage of youth and youth-related issues represent only a moderate priority in these large, quality newspapers.

During the week following the Columbine shootings, youth stories jump to 25 percent. Most of these articles, however, concern the grim events of the tragedy.

### 2. What kind of attention is it?

Only two topics dominate routine youth coverage: education and violence. No other topic receives even a third as much attention. In the yearlong sample, stories about education from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade comprise 26 percent of all youth stories; another 8 percent fall in higher education. This seems appropriate; the vast majority of children between the ages of 5 and 17 attend school and about half continue after high school.

Violence stories<sup>9</sup> comprise 25 percent of all youth coverage. But only 3 young people in 100 perpetrate or become victims of serious violence in a given year.<sup>10</sup> Treating violence and education nearly equally exaggerates the frequency of violence.

Despite its rising importance in a post-welfare world with more and more working mothers, less than 2 percent of the papers’ youth stories concern child care. Similarly neglected are stories about youth and drugs or alcohol or sex, or unintentional injuries. Two other topics we expected to merit a lot of space—parenting and health—receive only 6 percent and 5 percent respectively. Organized sports and recreation get as much ink, even though we did not include the sports section in the sample.

Violence is the dominating topic during the week following the Littleton murders, climbing to 67 percent of youth stories. Education, higher and lower combined, fades to 20 percent.

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 1999 estimates:  
<http://www.census.gov/population/www/estimates/statepop.html>

<sup>8</sup> If 1/3 of the first half of the story described young people acting, or being acted upon, or topics directly related to youth, such as schools, parenting, child care (and gun safety/control), we counted it as a youth story.

<sup>9</sup> We counted only stories taking place in the U.S. in which youth willfully injured someone or were injured. Violence in other countries, or caused by natural disaster or unintentional injury, was not included.

<sup>10</sup> Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. *America’s Children: Key National Indicators of Well-being*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. 1999.

## Percentage of Youth Stories By Topic

Topic	% In routine sample <sup>11</sup>	% During Columbine week
K-12 Education	26	15
Violence	25	67
Higher Education	8	5
Other	8	2
Parenting	6	2
Recreation	6	2
Health	5	2
Organized Sports	5	0
Performance (arts)	3	1
Unintentional Injuries	2	1
Good deeds	1	1
Other behaviors	1	0
Fashion/style	<1	2
Child Care	<1	1
Alcohol	<1	0
Drugs	<1	0
Sex	<1	0

### *How often are youth stories about problems?*

In the yearlong sample, about half the youth stories focus on a problem; many fewer describe a solution. The problem might be a school's poor test scores, or a gang-related shootout at a school bus stop. Solution stories might be about first-graders learning how to use words rather than fists, or a story about smaller class sizes. Very few stories contain both problems and solutions.

Although youth stories often call attention to problems in the yearlong sample, youth are much more often written about as suffering from than causing difficulties. We see no pattern of labeling youthful offenders as "predators," a generation to be feared.<sup>12</sup> Editors' emphasis on violent topics, however, links youth and violence disproportionately.

During the week of the Columbine shootings, 75 percent of all stories about youth concern problems. And youth are both perpetrators and victims.

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<sup>11</sup> Percentages don't add to 100 due to rounding.

<sup>12</sup> For a different view, see Males, Mike A. *Framing Youth: 10 Myths about the Next Generation*, Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1999.

### 3. How are stories about youth violence reported?

If you interviewed reporters and asked them what causes youth violence, it is unlikely even one would be so naive as to say violence has a single simple cause: someone chooses to harm another. We would expect multiple causes, implicating the perpetrator's upbringing, environment, role models, quality of education, expectations of punishment, psychological state, sobriety, etc. We know reporters would answer with appropriate complexity, because they do so covering the Columbine shootings.

But almost all of that complexity is stripped away in the yearlong sample of reporting about youth violence. Journalists apply entirely different rules to an unlikely event 1,000 miles away than they apply to daily violence in their backyards.

We measured the contrast four ways:

- How often is reporting thematic (issue-oriented) vs. episodic (single-event-oriented)?
- How much interpretation of violent events or issues do reporters pursue, especially explanations of causes and solutions?
- Who do reporters choose to speak in their stories?
- When reports are episodic, how much context about the event is included, such as baseline frequency of the violence in the community, relationship between actors, type of weapons used, presence of drugs or alcohol, etc.?

#### *Thematic vs. Episodic*

Thematic reporting looks at the big picture, examining connections between similar events, looking for trends, emphasizing the questions “why” and “how.” Thematic coverage also includes efforts to curb violence, such as the politics of gun control or sentencing reform. In this analysis, any story in which one-third or more of the content is focused on issues or a pattern of events is labeled thematic. Episodic reporting, in contrast, focuses on a single event. It is a snapshot of “what” happened. It is reporting at the micro level.

To see why this is important, consider the difference between simply recounting the death of a single 16-year-old, Nicholas Contreras, in an Arizona ranch for troubled boys and a three-part investigative series the *Sacramento Bee* reported several months later. The *Bee* documents brutality and a lack of supervision across a system serving 1,000 California young people at ranches throughout the west, costing tax-payers \$45 million annually.

While thematic reporting need not be investigative, nor nearly as in-depth as the *Bee*'s report, it generally provides more basis for citizen's judgment than episodic coverage. If one teen dies at a correctional boys' ranch it could be an aberration. No need for citizens to be alarmed call for policy change. But if 14 have died over several years, as the *Bee* discovered, there may be sufficient evidence to seek reform. Thematic reporting empowers citizenship.

But in our yearlong sample, we found almost two-thirds of the reports are episodic, only one-third thematic. During the week following the Littleton shootings, however, the percentage reverses. Thematic stories grow to 60 percent and episodic fall to 40. These numbers, however, understate the contrast. The Columbine coverage was so extensive that each day's reporting was broken up into three or four stories—perhaps one on the on-going investigation, another on tensions between high school cliques, and a third on the upbringing of the young men. Were these combined into one larger story, almost every article would have met thematic standards.

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### *Interpreting Youth Violence: Analyzing Frames*

Most newsrooms permit reporters to draw reasonable conclusions from the evidence they have gathered. But broader interpretations are left to sources. (Of course the journalist chooses those sources and decides which of their comments to quote, thus playing an instrumental role in the interpretation offered.)

In our analysis we call these interpretations “frames.” They are ways of understanding or explaining something. We are particularly interested in how sources and reporters portray the causes of violence, the solutions to it, and the nature of the problem. These are the three things citizens most need to know if they are to prevent personal or community violence.

Some of the most powerful frames are only implied, almost never stated. These frames are taken for granted, assumed to be true without any need for evidence. An example: “Guns don’t kill; people do.” The assumption is that a gun is a neutral instrument, a tool little different from a hammer. A second, broader assumption is that humans are rational and can freely choose how to use that tool, uninfluenced by the power a gun might provide.

Hidden frames are among the most powerful. They channel our thinking before we are even aware of them. For example, if you believe people have free will and exercise it rationally, it follows that punishment will deter them, and the more severe the punishment the greater the prevention.

Frames are important because views presented often and favorably gain legitimacy in public discussion. They may become issues policy makers address and eventually incorporate into law. Frames that are denigrated or ignored lose public standing. Last, but perhaps most important, frames that are assumed by journalists—rather than stated and challenged—and inferred unnoticed by readers tend to straightjacket our thinking and prompt erroneous conclusions.

### *The Default Frame*

Framing is a two-way street. It is not just a technique reporters use to simplify and order their observations. Readers bring their own frames.<sup>13</sup> So when no apparent frame is offered, readers supply their own. If we read a crime story reported in standard “objective” format in which the reporter does not inquire about why something happened, what else can we conclude but personal choice as the cause? Placing full responsibility on the individual and exempting any environmental factors is so common, psychologists call it the FAE, or “fundamental attribution error.”<sup>14</sup>

The idea of free will permeates our culture. America’s dominant religions all consider it fundamental. Even under duress—wandering the desert starving, or facing lions in the Coliseum—we are considered autonomous moral agents able to choose good or evil. As a causal frame, it is taken for granted, by both journalist and reader.

The most striking finding of this research is the absence of specific causal or solution frames in the yearlong sample compared with the explosion of such frames in the Littleton coverage. Almost half the youth violence stories in the routine sample state no frame of cause or solution. When we remove editorials and opinion columns, focusing just on news reports, less than one story in four contains an identifiable cause or solution frame. The dominant frame then is supplied by the reader—very likely that both cause and solution are matters of personal responsibility.

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<sup>13</sup> Graber, Doris, *Processing the News: How People Tame the Information Tide*, White Plains, NY: Longman, 1984.

<sup>14</sup> Iyengar, Shanto, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. For an excellent discussion of FAE, see Gladwell, Malcolm, *The Tipping Point: How little things can make a big difference*, New York: Little and Brown, 2000.

In routine coverage of youth violence the most common frame of causality mentioned is access to guns. Yet this frame occurs in only 7 percent of youth violence stories. Only three other frames are offered as frequently as one story in 20: peer pressure from within a group; isolation from, and harassment by, peers; and individual psychological disturbance.

Solution frames are even scarcer. The most often cited is greater law enforcement, mentioned in 8 percent of stories. No other remedy frame is described. Nature-of-the-problem frames are scarcer still, but almost all are of the same type: The violence is shocking or personally distressing. This “sympathy” frame is present in 29 percent of youth violence stories.

In contrast, Littleton stories teem with frames—25 different frames rate mention in 5 percent or more of the stories. Were coverage on a single day combined into one larger story, many frames would occur in every story.

Causal frames are most common in the Columbine reporting. The most frequent causal frame presented is peer isolation and harassment; 29 percent of stories blame this behavior. Violent TV, movies and video games are mentioned as a cause in 20 percent of the stories. Close behind at 18 percent come poor parenting and psychological disturbance. Next most frequent are access to guns, peer pressure from a group and erosion of social mores with the rise of a culture of violence and guns.

Solution frames are only about half as common. The most frequently mentioned solution is controlling youth’s access to guns; 19 percent of stories contain this frame. Increasing adult-youth connections/better parenting is the next most common solution offered, 16 percent. Then come treating at-risk kids, 8 percent, and prosecuting parents, 7 percent. Reducing media violence and violence prevention programs were remedies offered in 6 percent of youth violence stories.

Nature-of-the-problem frames are least common in the Columbine coverage, although 41 percent of the stories mention how personally distressing or shocking the violence is.

#### *Frame Analysis Summary*

Overall, these three quality California dailies routinely frame violence as having no cause—thus implying personal choice or leaving readers to infer it. Solutions, more complex or contributing causes, and ways of describing the nature of the problem other than shocking or distressing are very rarely offered. The relative absence of solution frames reinforces the notion that violence is inevitable.

A highly unusual event, however, utterly transforms these same news organizations and reporters. Suddenly the cause of a crime becomes complex. The young men are socially isolated by their own behavior and others’ actions. They are harassed by peers and seek revenge. Years of mediated images of violence—often rewarded and shown with no negative consequences—distort the perpetrators’ sense of reality. They get no psychological help. Their parents fail to supervise and help them fit in. Their rebellious clique urges them in anti-social directions. Guns make them feel powerful. Access to firearms enables them to turn their twisted fantasies into reality. Living in a culture where violence is often the first, rather than last, resort, Harris and Klebold make a personal choice. Rather than being an intractable problem we just have to live with, solutions are possible: Enact laws restricting access to guns; find ways for adults to get in touch with the young people in a community. Simply hiring more cops is not an adequate deterrent.

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### Who Gets to Speak to the Public?

Those sources reporters quote are given the opportunity to influence what the public learns of events and issues. Because television stations often use press reports as blueprints for their own stories, sources identified by print reporters often find themselves on camera as well.

Routine reporting of youth crimes is dominated by sources from the criminal justice system, most often police, but also prosecutors and defense attorneys. They are quoted in 77 percent of such stories. No other type of source is quoted in as many as half the stories. Such official sourcing is the easiest way to report on violence, but gives police and lawyers a disproportionate voice.

The next most quoted types of sources are the victim or his/her family or friends, and non-elected government officials, such as schoolteachers and administrators. Each of these groups is quoted in about one in three stories. In 34 percent of these stories youthful sources speak. Rarely heard are independent experts, health professionals, issue advocates, corporations, or community-based religious or social organizations. Routine sourcing is extremely narrow, ignoring valuable viewpoints available in the community.

During the Littleton week, there is far less reliance on criminal justice sources. The reporting becomes more active, getting closer to the participants and witnesses of the violence. Youth gain greater voice and are quoted in 55 percent of the stories. Witnesses become the most common sources. Politicians become more prominent. The number of stories quoting independent experts and issue advocates also rises. The number of sources per story also jumps. Again, because the Columbine reports are so extensive that they were broken into separate stories on the same day, the percentage of stories in which a particular type of source appears is understated when compared to routine coverage.

### Type of Sources Quoted<sup>15</sup>

Source type	% of stories in yearlong sample	% of stories in the Littleton sample
Criminal justice	77	45
Non-elected government	34	34
Victim/family, friends	34	26
Witness/neighbor	31	52
Perpetrator/family, friends	25	25
Politicians	21	29
Community-based organizations	12	12
Health professionals	12	10
Issue advocates	12	14
Independent experts	11	14
Other	8	14
Corporate	6	8

<sup>15</sup> Columns total more than 100 because a single story may contain multiple sources.

### *How much context accompanies youth violence stories?*

Incidents taken out of context are difficult to make sense of. Because they do not get the whole picture, readers are left to infer critical details from what is provided. At best such guesses are uninformed. At worst, readers inject stereotypes and biases into the gaps.

We checked each episodic story to see how many contextual items it contained, e.g., type of violence, frequency of that type in the community, relationship between the perpetrator and victim, weapon type, how the weapon was obtained, whether alcohol or drugs were present, medical and police costs, etc. We drew the list from the violence research literature.<sup>16</sup>

Obviously, not all of these details are relevant or available for every violent act reported in the paper. If the perpetrator is unknown, for example, little can be said about him or her. So we did not include context items inappropriate to the particular circumstances of the event in our analysis. We also credited stories for any context item we could tell reporters inquired about, even if they were unable to get answers. Thus, the statement “police were unable to determine whether the suspect had been drinking” counts as much as noting that the suspect was or was not.

The newspapers score very well on several context items in routine coverage. The relationship between actor and perpetrator is mentioned in 91 percent of the stories, and 93 percent note the type of violence and weapon used. More than half of the stories mention whether or not there are gang influences. No other contextual items are mentioned in half or more of the stories where they could have been reported.

Given that 21 percent of violent offenders may be under the influence of alcohol and 12 percent high on drugs at the time of the incident,<sup>17</sup> we were surprised at how infrequently journalists report on these prominent risk factors: Only 14 percent of stories for alcohol, 9 percent for drugs. The frequency of a particular type of violence in the community is also seldom depicted—reported in only 19 percent of stories.

Reporters infrequently inquire whether a known perpetrator was previously a victim of violence, even though we know that young victims often become perpetrators when they get older. Although we know that the poor are victimized at about twice the rate of affluent Americans<sup>18</sup>, the socio-economic status of perpetrators or victims is mentioned in less than 30 percent of stories.

The cost of violence rarely appears in press accounts. Although many states spend as much or more of their budgets on prisons as higher education, the cost of incarceration is mentioned in only 1 percent of stories. Police costs are not mentioned at all; court costs, in only 1 percent of stories. Ditto for medical costs, and loss of family income. Violence is portrayed as saddening its victims, but not affecting our pocketbooks.

In contrast, every day of the Littleton coverage is full of context. Entire stories address how the two teens could have acquired semi-automatic weapons and learned to make bombs. Other stories detail the biographies of the two young men—their employment, previous scrapes with authority, their grades in school, their well-off parents, their fascination with Hitler. Some details have now been questioned for accuracy, such as Klebold and Harris’ affiliation with gothic culture and the “Trench Coat Mafia.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Winett, Liana. Constructing violence as a public health problem. *Public Health Reports* 113:498-507, 1998.

<sup>17</sup> *Survey of State Prison Inmates 1991*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>18</sup> *Criminal Victimization in the United States, 1994*, Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, May 1997.

<sup>19</sup> Cullen, Dave. “Inside the Columbine High Investigation,” Salon.com, September 23, 1999.

Columns of print are spent on whether the two were under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or had a history of use. Race plays a prominent part in coverage, as do gender and the popularity or athletic prowess of some victims. However, costs, other than emotional trauma, are rarely discussed.

**Frequently Mentioned Context Items in Yearlong Sample<sup>20</sup>**

<b>Context element</b>	<b>% of stories in which mentioned</b>
Type of violence	93
Weapon type	93
Perpetrator's relationship to victim	91
Was violence gang-related <sup>21</sup>	67
Victim's race	39
Perpetrator's race	39
Perpetrator's socio-economic status	28
Violence frequency in community	19
Presence/use of alcohol	14
Lost opportunities for victim	11
Presence/use of drugs	9
Costs to others in community	7
Family income lost	1
Medical costs	1
Incarceration costs	1
Court costs	1
Police costs	0

We did not tabulate context scores for Columbine coverage because of the small number of episodic stories and tendency to break those stories into smaller articles focusing on single aspects of the violence.

<sup>20</sup> Several context items failed reliability standards and so are not reported here. They are: Victims' employment status, victim's socio-economic status, perpetrator's employment status, perpetrator's previous victimization or witness to violence, how the weapon was obtained, whether a crime was motivated by racial/ethnic hatred, and psychic costs of crime.

<sup>21</sup> The reliability of this measure was marginal: Scott's Pi equaled .680, somewhat below the .75 standard.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Public interest in the Columbine shootings made it one of the most closely followed stories of the decade, according to the Pew Center for the People and the Press.<sup>22</sup> Large numbers of upscale Americans—the demographic to which newspapers cater<sup>23</sup>—could identify with an affluent suburb of fashionable Denver. The characters were almost exclusively white and well-to-do. Earlier school shootings were in smaller, more rural and less affluent settings.

Violence arouses fear.<sup>24</sup> It commands our attention, particularly when it is unexpected. The scale of carnage at Columbine surpassed earlier school shootings and in an environment previously thought safe. The event was not just surprising, but bizarre—the laughing shooters quizzing their victims before dealing death at point-blank range, then killing themselves. It was a story that sells papers. The story also seems to say something important about American culture at the close of the millennium. We *do* need to pay attention to the alienation of youth, to the profusion of violence in media, to the availability of guns more suited to the battlefield than the duck pond, to relationships between cliques of students, to parental supervision.

Multiple killings in affluent suburban high schools, however, are extremely rare. Much more common and close by are youths being hurt by angry parents, killed by peers or adults driving while intoxicated or high, or, in urban centers, shot by gangsters staking out turf. The conditions that create and encourage these violent acts are what citizens most need to understand if they are to improve community well-being.

In the yearlong sample, we discovered ample, perhaps even excessive, space given to youth violence stories. But the quality of reporting—episodic, decontextualized, barren of interpretation of cause and especially of solution, depending mostly on police sources—was poor, perhaps neglectful.

Passive, police-blotter reporting on violence, or reports that capture the emotions of fear and loss, but neglect causes, effects and solutions have an ideological component. Such journalism reinforces an American cultural assumption that violence is a matter of individual choice rather than a complex interaction of individuals with their environment. The individual-blame interpretation hides the well-documented contributions to violent behavior of poverty, inadequate schools, discrimination, lack of police enforcement, scarcity of medical care, over-commercialization of liquor, easy access to drugs and weapons, and other environmental factors. Unreported, these rarely make an impression on public consciousness.

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Reports that capture the emotions of fear and loss, but neglect causes, effects and solutions reinforce a cultural assumption that violence is a matter of individual choice.

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<sup>22</sup> A national poll showed 68 percent of Americans were “very closely” following the events in Littleton. News release 5/18/99: “Americans Disengaging from Kosovo.” Washington, DC: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

<sup>23</sup> Picard, Robert G. and Brody, Jeffrey H. *The Newspaper Publishing Industry*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997.

<sup>24</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of how public fear increased following last year’s news coverage of school shootings despite overall decreases in school violence, see Ziedenberg J, Brooks K, and Schiraldi V, *School House Hype II*, Washington, DC: Justice Policy Institute, [www.cjcj.org/schoohousehype](http://www.cjcj.org/schoohousehype), 2000.

Such coverage of youthful perpetrators may harden society's attitudes toward its young offenders. When youth crime rose sharply, peaking in the early 90s, the political response was largely founded on a theory of individual responsibility. Forty-four states have adopted tougher sentencing laws, permitting juveniles—in some states even pre-teens—to be tried as adults. Despite sharply falling crime among youth, this March Californians overwhelmingly approved one of the nation's severest juvenile crime programs.

Several studies already demonstrate serious drawbacks to this strategy. Youth locked in prisons with older offenders are far more likely to be sexually and otherwise assaulted, and more likely to commit suicide than those in juvenile facilities. And when those youth get out of adult prisons, they are more likely to commit new crimes.<sup>25</sup>

The sharp distinction between the rules of journalism in the week following the Columbine tragedy and the rest of the year can best be explained by seeing journalism more as a business seeking maximum returns to shareholders than a profession committed to public service. A media firm maximizes profit by providing *consumers* what they *want* to see at the least cost. Professional journalists, on the other hand, are expected to provide what *citizens need to know* with as much depth, breadth and pizzazz as their resources permit.

The business impulse passively lets the size of the expected audience determine prominence and depth. Ethical journalism decides priority by the magnitude of a subject's importance to the community. It does not wait for an event to arouse public curiosity. Rather, with talented writers and photographers, it directs our attention to problems—ideally, before they explode in violence.

Such reporting would treat readers as citizens—members of a community who act to govern themselves—rather than consumers—individuals who buy or use things. It would provide what we need to *know* to act wisely, more than what we may merely want to see or *feel*—drama, arousal, the shock of the bizarre.

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<sup>25</sup> Ziedenberg, Jason, "Justice Facts for Columnists" The Justice Policy Institute (www.cjcj.org/jpi), January 13, 2000.

## Recommendations

If policy makers and the public are to make well-informed decisions about preventing violence among youth, they will need a more accurate picture than what newspapers are currently providing. Below are recommendations for both journalists and prevention advocates who want to ensure that the picture of youth and violence is comprehensive.

### Recommendations for Journalists

On the day a six-year-old boy shot Kayla Rolland in Flint, Michigan, *The Flint Journal* assigned 12 reporters and five editors to the story. By the next day, the paper printed stories on a range of topics, from the current investigation of the shooting to an overview of school violence.<sup>26</sup> “We do well with this sort of thing,” metro editor John Foren told *Editor & Publisher*.<sup>27</sup> Newspapers can do just as well with the routine violence that affects more of the young people more often in their communities. It will not take 12 reporters and five editors every day, but chances are it will take more than are now reporting on the topic. The major finding from this study is that California newspapers do not cover *routine* violence comprehensively. If newspapers devote more resources to the most likely kinds of violence and seek out sources in public health and community-based organizations, they will be able to incorporate the context of violence in their stories so their readers can act from an informed base.

**Devote more resources to violence and crime reporting.** Reporters need to get beyond earshot of the emergency scanner radio and into the neighborhoods to find out what type of violence is dominating a community and what is being done to prevent it. They need to cultivate new sources, investigate events, and identify local patterns. Expanded reporting requires an investment from the paper.

Fortunately, most newspapers are extremely profitable, with pre-tax margins in the range of 15 to 40 percent of gross revenues. That is 70 to 400 percent more profitable than the average U.S. business.<sup>28</sup> Last year, newspaper revenues from advertising rose 5.4 percent, according to the Newspaper Association of America. This gain, the largest since 1976, came in spite of competition from Internet news sources.<sup>29</sup> A conservative estimate for annual gross revenues for a mid-size newspaper like the *Sacramento Bee*, with a circulation averaging 300,000, is about \$200 million a year. From that amount, such a paper would keep from \$40 to \$50 million after all expenses, but taxes, are paid. Even if taxes claimed half of those profits, the remaining 20 million dollars would employ 400 additional reporters at \$50,000 a year. With a much smaller investment, less than half a percent of its profit, a newspaper the size of the *Bee* could put together a team of three to five reporters and editors to cover violence comprehensively.

**Include public health sources, along with police and courts, in violence stories.** Since 1977, epidemiologists and prevention specialists have considered violence a public health issue.<sup>30</sup> Public health professionals are applying the same tools they have used to understand and help prevent diseases and injuries to violence, and they are starting to show results. So far, newspapers have missed this story. How are young people injured in your community? What do they die from most often? What do the hospital discharge data tell you about your community? What is being done to prevent the violence? Is it working? If nothing is working in your community, where is something working? Would it work where you are? The sources in public health departments and community-based agencies can help reporters interpret data and prevention efforts.

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<sup>26</sup> Liebeskind, K. Tragedy in Michigan. *Editor & Publisher* March 6, 2000, page 6.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> McManus, John. *Market-driven Journalism: Let the Citizen Beware?* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994.

<sup>29</sup> Yahoo! News  
[http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/nm/20000307/en/media-advertising\\_1.html](http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/nm/20000307/en/media-advertising_1.html)

<sup>30</sup> Winnett, L. 1998, *op cit.*

## **Recommendations for Public Health Advocates**

**Make data available.** Data can help make the case that violence is a persistent, chronic problem in many communities. Journalists need local data to make national problems relevant for their audiences. Work to resolve problems with confidentiality and other barriers to sharing information so journalists can learn about local patterns, incorporate that information into daily stories, and give citizens the information they need to make better decisions about violence prevention policy.

**Make yourself available.** In this study, health professionals and members of community-based organizations were among the least quoted sources. If they are to be heard more often in stories, they need to make themselves and their resources—background on prevention, “real people” sources, evidence-based information—known to journalists. Without new sources who actively seek them out, journalists will rely on their traditional sources based in the courthouse and the police station. Those traditional sources currently dominate the perspective in stories about youth and violence. They need to be augmented with sources that can talk about prevention, risk factors, and patterns of violence. Establish relationships with journalists; let them know what resources are available from public health sources, provide background, and be available when journalists are on tight deadlines with breaking news. Reliable sources from public health and community groups will allow journalists to expand their reporting on violence among youth.

**Pitch interesting stories.** If you want to see more stories on prevention activities in the community, tell journalists about what you are doing. Learn to recognize the newsworthy aspects of your activities and make contact. Police departments frequently issue news releases and hold news conferences to take credit for recent declines in violence. Yet we know that just as violence has many causes, there is no one solution. Credit for declines is also due to the efforts in communities to reduce access to firearms<sup>31</sup>, control alcohol<sup>32</sup>, and provide programs for young people that engage them in communities and involve them with adults.<sup>33</sup>

**Prepare young people to speak for themselves, then give them the opportunity to do so.** The population affected most by youth violence is young people themselves. In this study, we found their voices represented among the victims and witnesses of violence, but rarely in any other capacity. Yet, youth in California are involved in violence prevention from San Diego to Mendocino. Give young people the training they need to speak confidently about the work they are doing to improve their communities for themselves and others. Increasing the visibility of young people in the news will help balance the current picture. Create situations where you can introduce young people to journalists so they can begin establishing themselves as sources on their own.

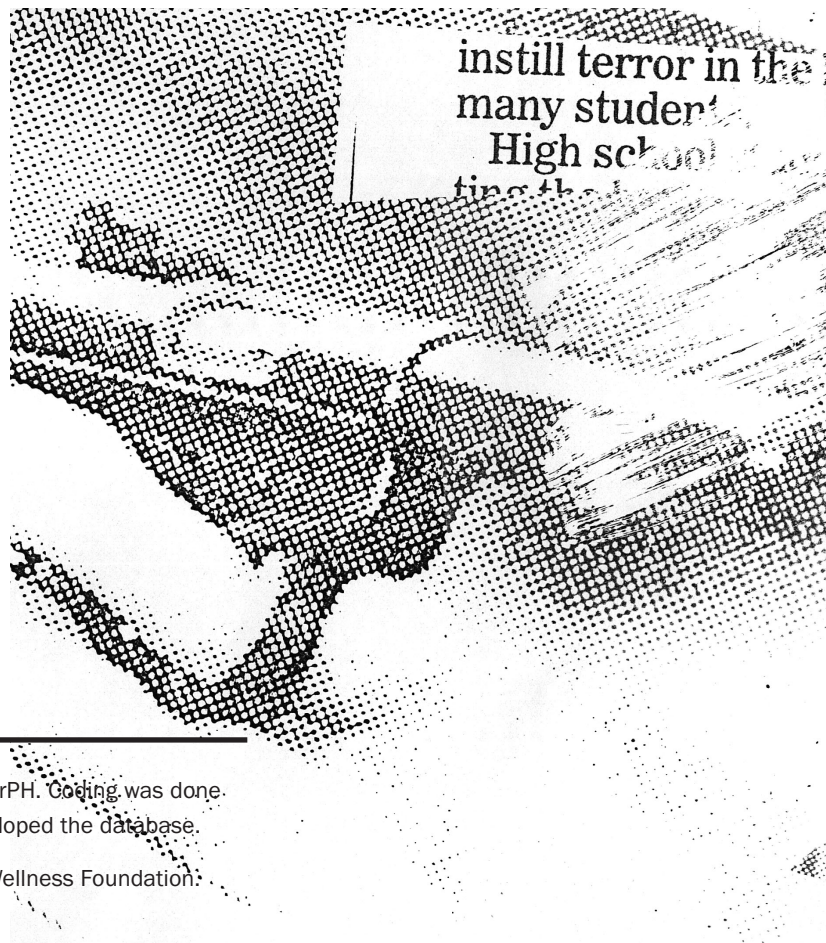
Violent incidents usually are not isolated, independent events but are linked to larger social, economic, and political forces. Both journalists and advocates need to do a better job making the links visible and telling complete stories. These links were identified and reported on in-depth in the coverage that followed the Columbine shooting. The same questions must be asked, answered, and reported on whenever and wherever violence happens.

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<sup>31</sup> Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Kids and Guns. Bulletin. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, March 2000.

<sup>32</sup> Alaniz ML, Parker RN. Alcohol outlet density and Mexican American youth violence. Berkeley: Prevention Research Center, 1998. See also, Mosher JF, Works RM. Confronting Sacramento: state preemption, community control, and alcohol-outlet blight in two inner-city communities. San Rafael, CA: Marin Institute for the Prevention of Alcohol and Other Drug Problems. December 1994.

<sup>33</sup> Greenwood P, Model K, Rydell P, and Chiesa, J. Diverting Children from a Life of Crime: Measuring Costs and Benefits. RAND Research Brief, May 1996.



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