

Introduction to Special Issue on Youth Violence

By

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The juvenile justice system was created with good intentions: decisions were to be made in the best interests of the child. The hope was that the system would be a good parent; its parenting style would promote change through rehabilitation. The juvenile justice system has been criticized for being flawed and abandoning its original premise, but such criticisms can not necessarily explain the dramatic changes that have occurred during the last twenty years. The public has very little knowledge about the operations of juvenile justice—such proceedings are generally closed to public view and the media rarely report on its day-to-day operations. Academics have focused primarily on delinquency, ignoring the administrative and organizational issues that explain the juvenile justice process.

It is unfortunately common for policymakers to recommend significant policy change after a single event reacting with only limited data. Similarly, the juvenile justice system has been attacked and revamped with only a limited understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. The response—reflective of the dominant ideology that has infected criminal justice generally—has been to “get tough” with juveniles. In fact, the juvenile justice system has become an abusive parent—punishing youth to draconian sentences, limiting judicial discretion with mandatory minimums, removing confidentiality requirements, transferring kids to adult courts and incarcerating them in adult prisons, and divesting in rehabilitation.

The public adheres to numerous misconceptions about juveniles and crime. The tendency is for the public to overestimate juvenile involvement in crime, believe that juvenile crime is on the rise, and think that juveniles have become increasingly violent (see Roberts 2004). Policymakers assume now that the public does not want to save juveniles, but punish them. The public’s fear and confusion about juvenile crime can be directly explained by the distorted coverage of juveniles in news and popular media. The public has limited direct experience with juvenile justice, and thus the media becomes the primary mechanism shaping its understanding about this important social problem. Media coverage, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, significantly transformed public debate about juvenile justice (Roberts 2004; Yanich 2005). What is offered by the media is a steady diet of violent crime incidents. Juvenile crime is less frequently presented in the news compared to adult crime, but the incidents that are covered are extremely sensationalized. The media’s general emphasis on violence is exacerbated with juveniles, and involvement in gang and drug activities is emphasized (Yanich 2005). Single celebrated events, such as the Columbine school shooting, not only set the policy agenda related to juvenile crime but powerfully influence public understanding about children.

This special issue of the *Journal of Crime and Popular Culture* examines youth violence in the media. It was fortuitous that the invitation to edit this special issue arrived at about the

same time Finn Esbensen, the E. Desmond Lee Chair of Youth Crime and Violence at the University of Missouri at Saint Louis, invited me to participate in the 5th annual Youth Violence Prevention Conference held annually at UMSL. In fact, three of the papers presented in this volume were originally presented or developed at that conference.

The articles included that were solicited and reviewed for this special issue represent many of the strengths of the journal: they cover a wide range of issues, examine different types of media, and use a range of methodologies. The first article, “Beyond the Requisites: Alternative Starting Points in the Study of Media Effects and Youth Violence” by Michelle Brown, provides a thorough account of the questions, theories, and methods that have dominated the media effects literature. Brown’s work is important not only because it provides an alternate reading of this massive body of literature, but it also suggests a pathway to theorizing to a more complete understanding of the complex ways that the media influences public opinion, policymaking, and criminal justice decision-making. The significance of the core issue explored in Brown’s article is again accentuated in Esbensen and Tusinski’s piece on “Youth Gangs in Print Media.” There is little doubt that gang violence is a contested issue in media publications, shaping public preferences regarding this important social problem. This study examines the representation of gangs in major newsweeklies, emphasizing the disconnect between scholarly understandings about gang violence and media portrayals of this issue. In fact, the authors skillfully show how scholars have increasingly offered a refined understanding of gang life, but the media continue to promote harmful inaccuracies and myths. Britto, Hughes, Saltzman, and Stroh’s article, “Does ‘Special’ mean young, white, and female? Deconstructing the meaning of ‘Special’ in ‘Law & Order: Special Victims Unit,’” further explores how media coverage of an issue diverges from a more objective reality. Despite the widespread imagery of crime in music, popular television, and film, few scholars explore these mediums systemically. Britto et al. examine the dominant crime, offender, and victim frames presented in one of popular television’s most well known franchises. They find that minorities are marginalized, rape myths are promoted, and the criminal justice system is incredibly efficient and effective solving crimes by violating basic civil right principles.

Media research consistently indicates that homicides are generally more newsworthy than other crimes. Most of this research uses classic content analysis—a sample of newspaper articles, television scripts, or magazine articles is collected, and then the crime, victim, and defendant characteristics that are presented in these articles are coded. Fair conclusions about the media coverage of crime can be made using this approach, but still significant gaps in understanding the presentation of crime in the news remain. The final two articles in this special edition address several of these gaps. Pollack and Kubrin in the article, “Crime in the News: How Crimes, Offenders, and Victims are Portrayed in the Media,” use an innovative approach to compare the representations of crime in print and television media. Specifically, they “match pairs” to specifically compare how the unique format differences of newspaper and television media influence crime, victim, and offender coverage. They find that the media, especially in its coverage of juveniles, tend to emphasize an opposite reality: crimes that are most likely to occur are simply ignored, and crimes that occur rarely, especially when juveniles are the focus of the story, are emphasized. The final article by Pizarro, Gruenewald and Chermak titled, “Juvenile ‘Super-Predators’ in the News: A Comparison of Adult and Juvenile Homicides,” examines the presentation of homicide in Newark, New Jersey. The study is unique in that the researchers

examine media coverage of all homicides that occur in Newark for a significant period of time. The primary question examined is whether the juvenile superpredator myth that was propagated in the early to mid-1990s influenced how reporters cover youth homicide. They find that juvenile homicides are disproportionately covered compared to adult homicides, but find only modest support for the “super-predator myth” hypotheses.

Although the media play an important role shaping public opinion about juveniles and juvenile involvement in crime, there is little research examining this topic. The articles included in this special edition start to fill this gap.

REFERENCES

Roberts, J. (2004). Public opinion and youth justice. *Crime and Justice*, 31, 495.

Yanich, D. (2005). Kids, crime, and local television news. *Crime & Delinquency*, 51(1), 103-132.