



THE ROLE OF TELEVISION NEWS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE AS A "MORAL PANIC"*

by

Donna Killingbeck
Eastern Michigan University

ABSTRACT

This work examines the representation of school shootings in the television news media and how these representations have contributed to the construction of school violence as a "moral panic." A review of the literature as it pertains to the media and the social construction of moral panics is provided as well as an overview of the news making process. The discussion is situated within Stanley Cohen's stages of a "moral panic." The article concludes that the presentation of specific events (i.e., school shootings) and elements of popular culture have contributed to increasing levels of fear, misguided political policy, and the development of an industry focused on school violence. In addition, an integrative, broader definition of school violence is suggested.

INTRODUCTION

During the 1997-1998 school year, the American public was riveted by magnified coverage of highly unusual crime stories of school shootings that turned into what some news outlets described as an "all too familiar story." Rather than providing context, the media's labeling of these shootings as "a trend" has tended to exacerbate people's fears about the safety of their children and youth in schools. The result is that misdirected public policy is being generated to safeguard the schools, even though the real threat may lie elsewhere. To remedy the purported "crisis" of classroom violence, politicians have proposed solutions ranging from posting additional police officers in our schools, to eliminating any minimum age at which children may be tried as adults, to expanding the death penalty to juveniles.

According to Barak (1994:6): "The consideration or examination of the interrelationships between media, society and criminology is essentially a dynamic and complex enterprise. It involves the interaction of journalists, sources and audiences that co-exist within a diverse and eclectic cultural and social system." To add value, the study also requires attention to the developing political economy and the sociohistorical experience of news production that exist within the larger organization of mass media. In an attempt to provide equal attention to these interactions, this paper begins with a review of the research concerning the media's role in the construction of moral panics. Next, the discussion turns toward the historical representation of criminals and crime in the film and television genre and how these representations have changed

over time and is then followed by an outline of the news making process. Finally, the article considers the [end page 186] social impact and importance of the news media's role in policy making and the construction of societal fears, focusing particularly on political and corporate decisions in response to the increasing fears of school violence and how each of these are situated in the framework of a moral panic.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF MORAL PANICS

In 1971 Stanley Cohen investigated a series of "moral panics." Cohen (1980) used the term "moral panic" to characterize the reactions of the media, the public, and agents of social control to youth disturbances. This work, involving the Mods and Rockers, demonstrated how agents of social control amplified deviance. According to Cohen (1980), these groups were labeled as being outside the central core values of consensual society and as posing a threat to both the values of society and society itself, hence the term "folk devils." In addition to Cohen's work, Jock Young's (1971a) book, *The Drugtakers*, also demonstrated the role of the media in the amplification of deviance and thus drew attention to the ideological role of the media in actively constructing meanings, rather than simply reflecting a shared meaning. When discussing the public concern about statistics showing an apparent alarming increase in drug abuse, Young (1971b) observed that the "moral panic over drug taking results in setting up of police drug squads, which in turn produces an increase in drug related arrests." This observation highlights the effect produced by the interaction of the media, public opinion, interest groups, and the authorities, which gives rise to a moral panic.

According to Cohen (1980:9), the key elements or stages in a moral panic are:

1. Someone or something is defined as a threat to values or interests;
2. This threat is depicted in an easily recognizable form by the media;
3. There is a rapid build up of public concern;
4. There is a response from authorities or opinion makers;
5. The panic recedes or results in social changes.

It was through Stuart Hall's (1978) approach to ideology that the media's use of moral panics to both define and distort social problems was fleshed out into a general critique of the media's construction of social reality. For instance, mugging was presented in the media as a new and growing phenomenon, when in fact the crime was not new, only the label was. Official statistics did not support the view that mugging was rapidly growing; however, with a name for the crime now in existence old offenses were categorized as such, creating the impression of growth. According to Hall et al. (1978), the media whipped up a moral panic around the issue which served to legitimate an increase in punitive measures; they conclude that the media played a key role in developing and maintaining the pressure for law and order measures. [end page 187]

According to Hall et al. (1978), the media obtain their information from the primary definers of social reality, those in powerful and authoritative positions. The media (secondary definers) amplify the perceived threat to the existing social order, and the police and courts then act to eliminate the threat. The media ensure that the dominant ideas or ideologies are constantly reproduced by relying on the information of the definers of the dominant ideology. Thus, Hall and his colleagues demonstrate the media's ability to enlarge the state's influence into everyday life, the moral panic becoming the vehicle for transmission of the dominant ideology. In other words, "the media tend to reproduce the definitions of the powerful" (Hall et al. 1978: 57). They faithfully reproduce, symbolically, the existing structure of power in today's institutional order. However, Hall et al. (1978) argue that this is not conspiratorial; the media do not set out to divert attention

from root problems, such as economic problems. But these economic problems create strain and the media responds by amplifying the symptoms of the strain.

The term "moral" implies that the perceived threat is not something mundane, but is a threat to the social order itself or an idealized conception of it. The threat and its perpetrators are regarded as evil "folk devils" and excite feelings of righteousness. The response is likely to be a demand for greater social regulation or control and a demand for a return to traditional values. Although there is some disagreement on what constitutes a "panic," there is some agreement on the characteristics of concern and hostility. Concern is over the behavior of a certain group or category of people and hostility, or an increase in fear, is directed toward the group or category regarded as a threat. In addition to hostility and concern, other characteristics such as volatility and disproportionality may be emphasized. Volatility means that the moral panics are likely to appear suddenly and that the level of feverish concern is not likely to last, even if the problem is long-standing. Finally, disproportionality refers to an assumption that the threat or danger is more substantial than is warranted by a realistic appraisal (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). During a moral panic, public anxiety is amplified by publicity in the press which portrays these events as signifying a widespread and deeper moral malaise and as a sign of social disintegration. However, public concern about an issue, in complex societies, seldom results from the indignation of the citizenry alone, but as a result of the roles of many contributors, including the role of the moral entrepreneurs.

Howard Becker (1963) emphasizes the role of "moral entrepreneurs" in defining behavior and individuals as deviant and criminal. Becker (1963) asserts that the public is often stirred up through the mass media by efforts of moral entrepreneurs or moral crusaders, who attempt to rouse public opinion through the media by leading social movements and organizations to bring pressure on the authorities to exercise social control and moral regulation. Becker (1963) describes the moral crusader as fervent and righteous and holding to an absolute ethic; what he or she sees is truly evil with no qualification. [end page 188]

Joseph Gusfield (1963), in his study of prohibition, explains the success of moral crusades in terms of Max Weber's status defense. Gusfield (1963) argues that these crusades stand in for the social discontents of particular social classes or groups. By controlling status issues, the group feeling threatened reasserts its power and values through legislation. Although this single factor explanation is far too simplistic to explain the persistence and rise of moral panics, it does, however, add to the understanding of contextual factors that contribute to moral panics.

Philip Jenkins (1992) contributes the role of "symbolic politics" and "politics of substitution" to the understanding of moral panics. Jenkins (1992) argues that claims makers draw attention to a specific problem, in part because it symbolizes another issue. For example, school shootings raise issues concerning gender relations, without ever actually stating it. Whether an accused shooter is from a dual working parent family or a single parent family, simply reporting the shooter's family arrangement says something about the breakdown of the traditional family structure; thus, the idea is conveyed that someone (usually the mother) has done (or hasn't done) something that either led to this situation or allowed it.

HISTORICAL TRENDS IN MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF CRIME AND CRIMINALS

Film was introduced in 1895 and by 1923 was the most influential entertainment medium in America. The images were universally available, widely consumed, and came to shape and reflect American culture. Film affected the public's values, political views, social behavior, consumption patterns, and worldviews. Film was the first mass medium with the ability to create a mass public –

a homogenous group made up of people with different social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. From 1920 to 1950 criminals, whether heroic or villainous, were portrayed as decisive, intelligent, and attractive individuals ([Surette 1992](#)).

Enter Television

The growth and public acceptance of television since the 1950s has been enormous and with that acceptance the impact on society's norms, values, consumption, social behavior, public policy, and expectations has been shaped and reflected. In 1987 approximately one quarter of all prime time shows were crime related, whether factual or fictional. According to Ray Surette ([1992:32](#)): "The popular mass entertainment media, first in the form of film and today led by television, have thus become a significant social factor, conveying thematic messages and lessons about whom to emulate and fear in society, what the basic causes of crime are and how crime should be fought." Concerns about the images and messages portrayed have steadily risen. The entertainment media do not claim to be an accurate portrayal of reality, nor do they accurately portray crime and its causation. However, society's ability to discern between fact and fiction is often blurred, resulting in inaccurate perceptions of whom to fear, the basic causes of crime, and the appropriate responses. Media repeatedly convey misleading messages and **[end page 189]** lessons, consistently pointing to individual predatory traits as the cause of crime. Media criminals have consistently become more violent, animalistic, irrational, and predatory and their crimes are increasingly senseless, more violent, and random. Criminality is viewed as an individual choice and other social and economic explanations are irrelevant and ignored ([Surette 1992](#)).

UNDERSTANDING THE NEWSMAKING PROCESS

In order to investigate cases of apparent moral panic, it is necessary to understand how news is developed. The distortions of reality conveyed by the entertainment media are not surprising; they are fiction. However, the similarities between entertainment media and news media, which are expected to depict an accurate and objective view of reality, are unsettling considering the enormous impact of the latter on the social construction of reality.

The images and messages put forth by the news media are remarkably similar to those of the entertainment media. There are two models used to describe the process and criteria by which news media content is created. Realistically, news agencies do not fit neatly into either model but operate somewhere in the middle. At one end is the market model, where the newsworthiness of an event is determined by what is of interest to the public; the facts are objectively reported and realistic information about the world is reproduced. The other extreme is the manipulative model, where newsworthiness is determined not by what is of interest to the public, but by what is of interest to the news agency owners. The ability of the news media, operating under a strict manipulative model, to shape and distort the image of reality is frighteningly apparent ([Cohen and Young 1981](#)).

However, it is far too simplistic to assume that these models are the norm in the arena of news reporting. An organizational model of news processing contains components of both the manipulative and market models ([Surette 1992](#)). Similar to the manipulative model, under the organizational model news is selected based on the needs of the agency. The periodicity, or timing, of the events and how they match the scheduling needs of the agency is a consideration when determining what is reported. Consonance, or how the story ties into prior news themes and explanations, is also a consideration. It is at this point that routinization allows for a threat to be depicted in an easily recognizable form by the media, one of Cohen's ([1980](#)) elements of a moral panic. The organizational model differs from the manipulative and market models in that it is not totally reactive (market) or totally proactive (manipulative). The agency reacts to non-routine

events yet takes part in the creation process for the rest of the news.

In the process of routinization, news agencies rely on respected social institutions or officials that are credible and provide reliable information. This easy influx of news allows the news agencies to utilize their financial resources elsewhere. However it also, as Hall et al. (1978) suggest, leads to the reproduction of the definitions of the powerful. **[end page 190]** This results in news that is dominated by information and interpretations that tend to support the status quo. It also reinforces the respectability of the institutions and organizations providing the information (Chibnall 1981). Hall et al. (1978) also suggest that it is this process that symbolically reproduces the existing power structure.

Crime news makes up a large part of the entire news. Being prepackaged (manipulative) and popular (market), it helps the news organization in its routinization process. Thus, a cycle of newsworthiness is created in which one type of crime is defined as news and will continue to be news. "If this focus on a particular type of event becomes industry wide, a media crime wave results. The crimes chosen as news during this span in effect become the typical 'atypical' event for that period" (Surette 1992:63). Since the traditional definition of news is "that which is uncommon or new," violent crime is seen as more newsworthy because it occurs less frequently. This focus on a particular type of event leads to disproportionality, or the belief that the threat is more substantial than it is truly, a characteristic of a moral panic.

The social importance of these media constructed crime waves is, according to Fishman (1978:533): "1) They enable the media to influence policy by raising public outrage affecting everything from sentencing and preventative measures to society's level of fear. 2) By operating around these themes, other, more often serious significant events or issues do not become news." Therefore, they are less likely to receive public attention, raise concern or fear, or receive resources. Hall et al. (1978) argue that the media do not consciously set out to divert the attention, yet the end result is the same. The root problems are often neglected and do not receive attention.

Local Television News

Homicide rates have continued to decrease since 1993, yet one out of every seven news stories covered the topic. Coverage of murder has increased 700 percent while overall crime coverage has tripled since 1993. According to a recent survey by Louis Harris for the Center for Media and Public Affairs, local television newscasts are the public's number one source of news. Not only do they get the biggest ratings, but people also rank them as higher in quality and credibility than network news, local newspapers, and any other news source (Grossman 1997). A study conducted by the Rocky Mountain Media Watch found that crime occupied 30 percent of what little time was actually devoted to news (40 percent) in 100 local television newscasts in 56 cities. Incidentally, 36 percent of the airtime was spent on commercials and promos; sports and weather filled 22 percent and another two percent was anchor chatter (Grossman 1997). However, what is most significant and follows from Fishman's (1978) assertion that "more serious and significant events do not become news" is the absence of social and economic investigations, such that the national and local political scene was entirely absent from these newscasts. **[end page 191]**

Crime has become the focus of local television news for several reasons, and each is consistent with the characteristics of the manipulative, market, and organizational models outlined by Surette (1992). Local television newscasts are relatively cheap to produce and a major profit maker for stations. The "eyewitness news" formula has become the standard thematic scheme and there is a lack of pressure on broadcasters to serve their community's needs and interests (Grossman 1997). Marty Haag, Senior News Vice President for the A. H. Belo stations, reports that: "Covering crime

is the easiest, fastest, cheapest and most efficient kind of news coverage for T.V. stations. News directors and station owners love crime because it has a one to one ratio between making the assignment and getting a story on the air" ([Grossman 1997](#)). The crime scene doesn't move; no matter when the reporter arrives, there is always a picture to shoot. There is no need to spend time and money researching; when the cameras arrive, so do supposed witnesses.

National News

On the national network news, the story is much the same. In the school year 1997-1998 there were 6,146 deaths by firearms for the age group 15-24 ([Hoyert, Kochanek, and Murphy 1999:68](#)). Thirty-five of these deaths were a result of school shootings. School shootings represent .5 percent of the gun related deaths for this age group ([National School Safety Center 2001](#)). Network evening news crime coverage for 1998 reported 1392 stories about crime on NBC, CBS, and ABC. Stories on two school shootings – Jonesboro, Arkansas, on March 24, 1998, and Springfield, Oregon, on May 21, 1998 – represented nine percent of ALL network evening news crime coverage in 1998 ([Center for Media and Public Affairs 1999](#)). This is a significant amount of news coverage for a topic that represents only .4 percent of homicides. There were a total of 126 network evening news stories on these two events. In comparison, there were 113 stories on all environmental issues ([Center for Media and Public Affairs 1999](#)). The leading cause of death for the age group 15-19 was accidents with a total of 13,367, more than double the amount of homicides; however, accidents only made up five percent of news reports ([Hoyert, Kochanek, and Murphy 1999](#)). Thirty-five deaths in a single school year is horrifying and tragic, yet small when compared to the approximately 6,000 youth homicides that didn't become national news (These numbers do not include the number of talk show, infotainment shows and news magazine shows who ran specials on the school shootings).

Increasing Fear

The effects of the "media crime wave," which the Center for Media and Public Affairs ([1997](#)) has deemed number 10 on the "Top Ten List of Media Distortions of the 20th Century," are apparent throughout the nation. One element of a moral panic, a rapid build up of public concern, is evidenced in public opinion polls. Eighty-five percent of Oklahomans in both rural and urban areas report being "very concerned about school violence," while actual incidents of school violence are rare. The number one reason that **[end page 192]** police come to school isn't violence in the school building, but to take reports of violence in the home. School officials in Tulsa, Oklahoma, confirmed that major incidents of school violence elsewhere are exaggerating perceptions of armed and violent students ([Associated Press 1998](#)).

Cohen ([1980](#)) asserts that a key stage in the development of a moral panic is that there is a response from authorities and/or opinion makers. President Clinton added to the fear of school shootings in this 1997 speech: "We've got about six years to turn this juvenile crime thing around or our country is going to be living with chaos." This said, he then acknowledged that the youth violent crime rate had fallen 9.2 percent the previous year ([Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice 1999](#)). While youth violence continued to decline, CNN reported: "Teenage time bomb's becoming increasingly more commonplace in America." NBC's *Today Show* news anchor Ann Curry introduced a child psychologist to the audience by asking him to address parents on this "new trend in our schools, shooting each other." When he stated that children are safer in school than anywhere else, she reminded him that this was the fourth incident. Vincent Schiraldi, the director of the Justice Policy Institute, reminded viewers that three times as many people were struck by lightning as were killed in school shootings, while another *Today Show* host, Katie Couric,

declared that "today's youth are more likely to pull a gun than make a fist" ([Glassner 1999: xiv](#)). Lead-ins and sound bites such as these are a complete contradiction of the truth. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the National Center for Education Statistics ([1999](#)), an average of 50 percent all of schools report fights without a weapon; only 12.5 percent of all schools report fights with a weapon and those weapons are not necessarily guns. These newscasters are opinion makers, and the interviews are with authority figures, filling two of Cohen's ([1980](#)) elements of a moral panic. However, what seems most important is that combined these statements define guns and kids as a threat to the values and interests of society, which is also a stage in the development of a moral panic.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Schools are safer than all other locations where kids congregate, including cars and homes. However, municipalities continue to raise taxes to buy state of the art surveillance cameras, metal detectors, and police mini-stations for schools in response to concerns raised by media reports that proclaim: "The coming of Super-Predators – teenage boys who have no respect for human life and kill and maim on impulse, without any tangible motive" ([Associated Press 1995:3A](#)). Responses by authorities and claims makers, a stage in the development of a moral panic, are evidenced by the reactions of several school districts and officials. School districts across the country are taking steps to improve the security of students, faculty, and staff. A boom has erupted in the school security business such that security technology has become a major budget topic for school administrators as well as politicians. Proposed changes in policy are occurring across the country. For instance, California Governor Gary Davis has proposed spending \$100 million of a budget surplus to strengthen school safety programs in his state. The **[end page 193]** money would allow districts to purchase more metal detectors, video surveillance, and other security devices. Washington Governor Gary Locke wants legislators to allocate \$9 million for a grant program to improve school safety. In Wisconsin, it has been proposed that spending on safety measures be exempt from fiscal limits placed on schools. In San Francisco, Mayor Willie Brown is asking for an additional \$1.5 million in his budget to put 26 more police officers in public schools; 56 officers are already deployed in San Francisco schools ([Kennedy 1999](#)).

President Clinton, at the White House Conference on School Safety, proposed \$12 million for project SERV, the School Emergency Response to Violence, which responds to school violence in a similar way that FEMA responds to emergencies. The president has also issued a \$65 million initiative to hire 2,000 community police and school resource officers to work in schools and a minimum of \$25 million in grants to develop and implement community wide school safety plans ([Clinton 2000](#)). Just as Jock Young's ([1971b](#)) work demonstrated how the media's amplification of an issue can result in a moral panic leading to the legitimization of punitive policy measures, the amplification of school shootings has led to both legal and economic changes. These changes are what Cohen ([1980](#)) listed as the final stage in a moral panic.

School Safety is Big Business

With the large amounts of dollars available, a business that once served private investigators, retail companies, and corporate security details has found an entirely new customer base: schools and government funds. Capitalizing on the fears of citizens, and the policy changes that attempt to alleviate these fears, is big business. Companies not only compound the fears through advertising, but also shape the types of solutions that are offered.

The types of equipment available range in cost and effectiveness, and numerous companies offer consulting and safety plan designs. Emergency communication devices, according to Mike Fickes

(1999) of Roland Borg Corporation, are in need because "conventional telephones are inadequate in an emergency. Intercom systems with emergency calling capabilities are vandal proof and one does not need to dial emergency numbers." The company recommends a station in every room, in hallways, and in offices. The cost is \$300 per station. Experts also recommend photo badging systems using bar codes. Not only do these systems act as an alarm system (students, faculty, and staff will notice any unbadged person and report them to security), they are also used to control access. Cards cost approximately \$2.50 each, midrange card printers cost \$3800, and the camera badging station and its software cost \$1800. However, these access control systems require an initial investment of \$10,000 and approximately \$4000 per year in maintenance (Fickes 1999:22). In the 1997-1998 school year, there were approximately 54 million students; if each student were issued a photo badge (this does not include teachers and staff or the initial investment, maintenance fees, and the expense of printers), the cost would be \$135 million. Sensormatic Electronics Corporation [end page 194] recommends closed-circuit television (CCTV) monitors at the cost of \$10,000 per four cameras, monitor, and videocassette recorder. While CCTVs are mainly used for reactive purposes such as illegal entry and vandalism, schools across the country are purchasing them in hopes of preventing violence. As for metal detection and x-ray screening, experts disagree on which is the best method; however, they agree that one or both are necessary. Handheld units for random searches begin at \$150.00 and walk-through units at \$2500. Prices for x-ray screening equipment range from \$15,000 to \$30,000 (Fickes 1999:31). In the 1997-1998 school year there were 136,012 public and private elementary and secondary schools across the nation. If each school bought only one handheld metal detector, the cost would be approximately \$20 million. If each school in the country bought four cameras (CCTV), the cost would be a whopping \$1.36 billion. With these large sums of potential revenues available, it is no wonder that companies such as Siemens Building Technologies have begun to address society's unwarranted fears with advertisements such as "maintaining a safe and secure environment for our schools and our children requires solutions that work." Best Access Systems advertises expertise in "securing a world where kids are free to learn." Finally, Mosler offers the assertion that "schools today need all the answers technology can give them, and then some" (Fickes 1999:30).

All of this comes despite a special report issued by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (Bilchik 1999) in which the reader is told that in the school year 1997-98: "Juvenile violence peaked in the after school hours on school days and in the evening hours on non school days." The violent victimization of juveniles is greatest between 3 and 9 p.m. The highest percent of violent incidents involving a firearm for those under 18 years old, nine percent, occur between 8 and 9 pm followed by seven percent occurring between 3 and 4 pm (Bilchik 1999).

School Shootings in Context

In the academic school year 1997-1998, there were 44,351 public and private secondary schools and 91,661 public and private elementary schools for a total of 136,012 schools (Moody 1998). There are on average 180 days of school per year when schools are in session for a total of 24.5 million school sessions. The nine school shootings in this year represent .00003 percent of the approximately 24.5 million times school was in session for the day somewhere in America. As horrific and tragic as each of these events was, given the number of days individual schools in America are in session, on most days and in most places it is safe for a child to go to school.

Despite the small numbers and percentages of school shootings, stories of youth violence are used by the news media to present a distorted image of the true state of affairs in our schools. In fact, in 1998 the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that 29 percent of all teenagers believed drug use/abuse was the biggest problem facing kids their age, followed by social pressures, good grades, and sexual issues; only five percent listed crime and violence in school as the biggest problem

([Maguire and Pastore 1999](#)). In **[end page 195]** 1997, parents listed lack of funding and discipline (15 percent each) as the biggest problems facing schools; violence came in fourth behind drug use/abuse. However, in 1998, at a time when teens believed drugs were the biggest problem, parents' fear of school violence rose to 20 percent ([Maguire and Pastore 1999](#)). According to Ray Surette ([1992:88](#)): "the media emphasis on crime has frequently been credited with raising the public's fear of being victimized to disproportionate levels, hence giving crime an inappropriately high ranking on the public agenda." Surette ([1992](#)) concludes that the importance of the relationship between mass media news and the criminal justice system may be greater today than ever before.

Columbine

In 1999 crime news jumped into second place on the list of broadcasts for ABC, NBC, and CBS. Crime news followed the "War in Kosovo" by only two broadcasts. The Columbine High School shooting topped the list of crime stories covered on those evening broadcasts with 319 stories, more than five times the total of any other incident ([Center for Media and Public Affairs 2000](#)). After the smoke cleared, 16 students and one teacher were dead, including the shooters. Students and faculty at Columbine High School, as well as reporters, referred to the shooters as members of the "Trench Coat Mafia." For weeks following the shootings, reports about these modern day "folk devils" saturated the news. These students were labeled "outsiders," "different," and even "strange." Just as Cohen's ([1980](#)) Mod and Rockers were easily identifiable, so were the members of the "Trench Coat Mafia." They wore black clothes and makeup, listened to rocker Marilyn Manson, played violent video games, and designed elaborate web pages. Claims makers, including first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, used this event to draw attention to the breakdown of traditional values, to attack the entertainment industry, and to rail against those who opposed gun control legislation. "We can no longer shut our eyes to the impact that the media is [sic] having on all of our children," said Mrs. Clinton ([Fleeman 1999](#)). Criminologist Jeff Ferrell ([1998:148](#)) asserts that "as the production and consumption of popular culture lay the foundations for contemporary social life, they also become the basis for a variety of contemporary controversies." It is interesting that not only has popular culture become the basis of controversies, but these controversies are also used by claims makers to argue their beliefs on other issues. These controversies include attempts by politicians, legal authorities, religious leaders, and others to criminalize popular culture.

The late 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of a booming economy, low interest rates, a dot.com generation, latchkey children, a war fought in a faraway land but portrayed via the media using video game like recreations of bombings, and the potential to become extremely rich through technology and start up internet companies. In addition to computerized everything, there was an aging generation of authority figures, claims makers, and moral entrepreneurs who found themselves out of the loop due to the widespread use of a communications system (the computer and the internet) that was not what they were used to. In the 1950s rock and roll was blamed for the breakdown of **[end page 196]** teenage morality and their outrageous behaviors; today Marilyn Manson and rockers like him, video games, and the computer are the elements of popular culture that moral entrepreneurs attempt to criminalize or at least censor.

School shootings, and more generally school violence, have become what Jenkins ([1992](#)) calls "symbolic politics" or the "politics of substitution." Politicians and claims makers draw attention to these specific events because they represent other issues such as gun control, censorship, and morality. One week after the Columbine shootings, President Clinton introduced legislation requiring background checks on sales of explosives and holding parents liable when their children commit crimes with guns. Whitehouse Press Secretary Joe Lockhart said: "Clinton is counting on outrage over the shootings to help push the legislation through, unfortunately oftentimes it takes

tragic events to catalyze work here in Washington" ([Sobieraj 1999](#)). Cohen ([1980](#)) suggests that one response to a moral panic is a call to return to traditional values. This is echoed in both Joe Lockhart's comment as well as Senator George Vionovich's (R-Ohio) statement: "There is something wrong with our society. I think a lot of it has to do with a return to traditional morals and values. Youngsters are not getting the kinds of moral and religious training they once got at home" ([Lowy 1999](#)).

CONCLUSION

The public has not received the kind of analysis or examination from the media that is needed to give worried parents or concerned policy makers the context with which to judge safety in schools. In reality, kids are more likely to be shot by adults. Adults kill 90 percent of homicide victims under the age of 12 and 75 percent of homicide victims age 12-17 are killed by adults ([Donohue, Shiraldi and Zeidenberg 1998](#)). This is not to say that children face no threats to their safety in school; however, America cannot set rational public policy in the important area of child killings without better information from the media. No one expects the press to ignore tragic killings of kids, whether they occur on school grounds or in other places. But the data contained in this report show that the public and policy makers are done a great disservice if they are led to believe that schoolhouses are a primary locus for juvenile homicides in America ([Donohue, Shiraldi and Zeidenberg 1998](#)).

As other school shootings occur and/or the juveniles involved in the previous shootings are brought to trial, the public discourse could tremendously benefit from the presentation of a broader perspective on juvenile killings. To provide greater context to such cases, the media should at least explain: (1) that school killings are not on the increase; (2) that such killings make up a small minority of all killings of and by juveniles; (3) that children are three times more likely to be killed by adults than by other juveniles; and (4) that there is no trend toward younger and younger juvenile killings. These data are readily available and would tremendously benefit the public's understanding of youth crime. **[end page 197]**

Nine incidents of school shootings in the 1997-1998 school year provided the opportunity for news agencies to develop a thematic routinization of incidents of school violence. What was an atypical event, hence newsworthy, became the typical event; therefore, under the organizational process model, it became routinized and increased in newsworthiness. The results of this media constructed crime wave shaped public opinion, increasing fear of school shootings, contributing to fears of violent teens, fueling public policy such as government funded school safety, and prompting public consumption patterns and an increase in security technology purchases that fulfilled Fishman's ([1978](#)) assertion: "Media constructed crime waves can influence public policy by raising public outrage, effecting preventative measures and levels of fear."

According to Cohen's ([1980](#)) stages of a moral panic, school shootings can be included in the long list of moral panics that arise in all modern societies. The results and effects of this panic can be seen in misdirected policies and changes in the behaviors and actions of school officials, parents, and students. According to Barak ([1994:35](#)): "Nothing can be more important than the mass content of crime and justice news. The omission of certain types of criminality is equally, if not more important than the types of criminality included." One omission that stands out is a broad definition of school violence. The images associated with school violence, via news broadcasts, are bloody and emotional and involve physical attacks. The perpetrators are associated with death, darkness, and some form of "differentness," whether it is appearance or moral. News production is caught up in the need for dramatic structuring and according to Barak ([1994:33](#)): "Crime news is over simplified and reduced to subtle and not so subtle forms of stereotyping that socially construct

criminals and victims alike." In the process it erases considerations of structure and political economy that may deconstruct reality and thereby destabilize our sense of order (Barak 1994). These omissions and lack of considerations contribute to a moral panic.

A Broader Integrative Definition of School Violence

In light of the dramatic and often detrimental effects a moral panic has on policy decisions and levels of societal fear, it is imperative that the images and definitions of school violence be expanded and integrated. For example, the current definition is one-dimensional and involves physical force or intimidation. Missing in the news media's coverage of school violence are several elements of harm. According to Stuart Henry (2000): "the omission of these broader dimensions causes us to miss much of the content and many of the causes of violence in schools." Henry (2000) asserts that these missing elements of harm include: (1) the emotional and psychological pain that results from the domination of some over others, (2) the focus on interpersonal relationships that ignore the violence of social processes which produce systemic social injury, such as that perpetuated through institutionalized racism, sexism, and classism, and (3) the symbolic violence of domination, or the subtle form of violence that brings coercion through power exercised in hierarchical relationships. It is not until the media apply this multilevel definition to the problem of school violence that a multilevel causal analysis and a [end page 198] comprehensive policy response that takes account of the full range of constitutive elements will follow. In addition to the inclusion of these dimensions, it is important to realize that, as Barak (1994:ix) argues: "Crime and justice news are subject to and inseparable from political, economic and social struggle." These dimensions must be included in representations of school violence if a broader understanding and effective policy decisions are to develop and the news media are to become forums that promote understanding and social movement rather than moral panic.

ENDNOTE

* Direct correspondence to Ms. Donna Killingbeck, Eastern Michigan University, Department of Sociology, Anthropology & Criminology, 712 Pray-Harrold, Ypsilanti, MI 48197. Ms. Killingbeck is a lecturer at Eastern Michigan University. She holds a Master of Science degree in Criminology from Eastern Michigan University and is a former graduate assistant. In 1999, she served as a Co-Editor of *The Critical Criminologist* and conducted an evaluation of the Howell Public Schools Resource Officer Program. In addition to serving as a member of the graduate grade grievance committee, she served as a research assistant to Dr. Gregg Barak and Dr. Paul Leighton. Her research interests include prison privatization, school violence, and corporate social responsibility.

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