



## **School shootings, the media, and public fear: Ingredients for a moral panic\***

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**Abstract.** Recent shootings at schools around the country have resulted in widespread fear and panic among both students and parents, prompting a myriad of responses to make schools safer. Yet, empirical data suggest that despite the recent shootings, schools remain extremely safe places for children, and school violence is lower today than it was several years ago. The present research focuses on the construction of school shootings as a moral panic, with examinations of the roles played by the media, the public, and politicians in using isolated incidents (albeit heinous offenses) to support their interests. The interactions between these groups and the resultant punitive actions directed toward juveniles are discussed.

... my chances of avoiding evil are good – as good as yours. But these events do affect me. That's OK: I don't want to become insensitive to tragedy. But neither will I let fear rule my life. When I'm afraid I don't think clearly – and a clear head may be my best defense against letting evil overwhelm me. (Ode, 1998)

### **Introduction**

Since the recent fervor over school shootings, Americans appear to be gripped with fear. This fear has extended beyond the poor, inner-city neighborhoods, reaching affluent suburbs, towns, and rural areas. An issue that was once thought of as an urban problem has recently touched historically stable suburban and rural communities. For many, the violence suggests a breakdown in the social order, as no place seems safe anymore. Elliott (1998) notes that many Americans feel as if violence has invaded their lives, and that much of the violence seems to be petty, senseless, and random, suggesting a wanton disregard for human life.

Yet, is the public's fear justified? Have the recent school shootings provided ample evidence that something must be done not only to prevent violence in schools, but all juvenile violence? In the present research we argue that the widespread societal responses to several high profile incidents should be re-evaluated, mainly because of the decreasing amount of juvenile violence both within and outside of schools, and especially because of the relatively small

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numbers of children murdered at school. We argue that the situation evolved largely due to the self-serving interests of several groups in American society. Put simply, we claim that the recent school shootings have resulted in a moral panic. In presenting our argument, we begin with a general discussion of moral panics, followed by an examination of the recent school shootings and the subsequent societal responses.

### **Defining and identifying moral panics**

Although the concept moral panic is relatively new, it has been used to define many of the well-known social problems in recent history. Examples include the moral crusades against alcohol under Prohibition (Gusfield, 1963), anti-pornography and censorship crusades (Greek and Thompson, 1992), and more recently during the drug panic of the 1980s with crack cocaine (Reinerman and Levine, 1989). In each of these examples there was widespread public fear that evildoers were trying to harm and/or tear apart the very fabric of our society. We suggest that our society has experienced a new crusade, or moral panic with regard to the apparent explosion of school shootings and juvenile violence.

The term moral panic is most often associated with Stanley Cohen's 1972 text *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. However, according Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) the term "moral panic" first appeared in an essay by Jock Young entitled "The Role of the Police as Amplifiers of Deviance, Negotiators of Drug Control as Seen in Notting Hill" in a book edited by Cohen (1971). Nonetheless, Cohen provides one of the most comprehensive definitions of a moral panic in suggesting that it occurs when:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its (the panic) nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians, and other right-thinking people . . . Sometimes the subject of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten . . . at other times it has more serious and long lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself.

(1972: 9)

A moral panic typically focuses on evildoers – or supposed evildoers who come to be defined as the enemy of society. Therefore, in the eyes of the

claimsmakers, or moral entrepreneurs (Becker, 1963), these “folk devils,” deviants, or outsiders deserve public hostility and punishment.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) suggest that a moral panic appears when a substantial portion of society feels that particular evildoers pose a threat to the moral order of society. As a result, the general consensus among the group is to “do something” about the issue. A major focus of their reaction “typically involves strengthening the social control apparatus of the society, including tougher or renewed rules, increased public hostility and condemnation, more laws, longer sentences, more police, more arrests, and more prison cells” (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994: 30). It is through these, and other efforts, that the “moral order” is to be re-established, or held in check.

How and why a moral panic emerges has been a serious research topic for social scientists for decades. Researchers often employ similar methods to trace the origins and developments of a social problem, although their terms may differ. For example Blumer (1971) refers to five stages that must be met in the construction of a social problem: (1) emergence of the problem, (2) legitimitization of the problem, (3) mobilization of action, (4) formation of an official plan, and (5) transformation of the official plan into implementation. For this research we chose to employ a model based on Goode and Ben-Yehuda’s (1994) approach to assess moral panics which requires a problematic behavior that generates heightened senses of societal concern and hostility, a general societal consensus that the behavior is harmful, and a disproportionate societal interpretation/reaction to the problem.<sup>1</sup> Each of these requirements is discussed below.

For an event or behavior to be defined as a moral panic there must initially exist a heightened level of *concern* about the issue and its impact on the rest of society. There are numerous ways to measure public concern over an issue, the most concrete and easily accessible being newspaper reports, opinion polls and social/political movements. Concerns over issues, either fabricated or concrete palpable threats, are always real to those who make these claims and demand action.

Increased levels of *hostility* directed toward a deviant group and/or their problematic behavior(s) is also a necessary element of a moral panic. Essentially, every moral panic must have its evildoers or “folk devils.” As deYoung (1998) points out, the demonization of these evildoers, or whom Becker (1963) would refer to as “outsiders,” is often easy because they are typically already marginalized and don’t have the resources nor the creditability to counter this stigmatization. From the poor women accused of witchcraft to the poor minority males of the drug scares of the 1980s, folk devils tend to be outside mainstream society. They are those individuals who have stepped

beyond the socially accepted boundaries (Erikson, 1966) of their respective societies.

A moral panic also requires *consensus*, or agreement on a minimal level in society, that these “evildoers,” or their threat to society is real, immediate and serious. The panic must be widespread, but does not have to be universally held, or even affect the majority of society. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994: 34) point out that “moral panics come in different sizes – some gripping the vast majority of the members of a given society at a given time, others creating concern only among certain of its groups or categories.”

Finally, for the existence of a moral panic, there must be a belief by a number of “non-deviant” members in society that a greater portion of the population is engaged in this disturbing behavior than actually is, or that the harm incurred is greater than what has occurred. To borrow Jones, Gallagher and McFall’s (1989: 4) phrase: “objective molehills have been made into subjective mountains.” Fritz and Altheide (1987) illustrate *disproportionality* in their account of the moral panic constructed around missing children. The authors note the widely publicized claims regarding the extent and nature of child abduction and abductors despite the arguments of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and related officials who suggested otherwise.

Only by understanding the empirical basis of a given social problem or threat can we determine if disproportionality exists. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994: 38) suggest the following:

We can only know disproportionality by assessing threat from existing empirical information. . . . Our knowledge of the material world is never definitive, never absolutely certain. We are permitted only *degrees* of confidence. Still, that may be enough, for some issues, to feel fairly certain that what we say is correct.

In sum, a moral panic is not defined by pointing out a concern over an issue for which there is little agreement or for which a number of people are ethically or morally opposed. Similarly, it is not defined simply by persecuting undesirables, nor is it “. . . an invidious, ideologically motivated term of debunking” (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994: 41). Moral panics often emerge in different ways and impact our society on many levels. Nonetheless, their assessment and construction are not abstract. Essentially, “they can be located and measured in a fairly unbiased fashion” (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994: 41). In addition, a key-defining concept of the moral panic is the fact that a “folk devil” or evildoer is located and the actions taken against them are scientifically defensible. The following addresses the moral panic which emerged surrounding the recent school shooting incidents.

### School shootings

The United States was shocked on October 1, 1997 when a 16-year-old Pearl, Mississippi student killed his mother and proceeded to his school where he shot nine students. Two of them died, including the boy's ex-girlfriend. Two months later the American public was saddened and became nervous about school violence when a 14-year old boy began shooting at a student prayer circle in West Paducah, Kentucky. Three students were killed and five wounded. Later, in March 1998, four students and one teacher were killed in Jonesboro, Arkansas as they exited West Side Middle School when a fire alarm, deliberately set off by the shooters, went off. Two boys, ages 11 and 13, opened fire on the group of students as they proceeded from the building. Similar incidents occurred around the United States, including situations in Oregon where on May 21, 15-year old Kip Kinkel fired a gun indiscriminately into a crowded cafeteria at Thurston High School, killing two students and wounding 22 others; and in Edinboro, Pennsylvania where on April 24, a student fatally shot a teacher and wounded two classmates. Perhaps the most prolific incident occurred on April 20, 1999, when two Columbine (CO) High School students opened fire, killing a teacher and 12 classmates before killing themselves. Several high-profile incidents occurring within a short time frame ignited widespread public concern, fear, and reaction.

### *Concern*

Researchers such as Best (1990) have distinguished between concern and fear. These two concepts are not mutually exclusive, because there are examples when concern and fear are intertwined and indistinguishable as with the satanic day care scares of the 1980s. Even though fear is not a necessary element of a moral panic, it can be very real to those who see the event(s) or behavior(s) as a serious threat to society. Public concern and fear in response to the school shootings can be observed in several areas. For example, after each of the shooting incidents, various media outlets flooded the public with horrifying accounts. *The New York Times* ran stories about the Oregon shooting for three straight days on the front page. President Clinton used his Saturday radio address to decry the "changing culture that desensitizes our children to violence," and was one of numerous politicians who publicly chastised the entertainment industry for being "irresponsible" and playing a role in the recent school shootings. Daytime television programming was being pre-empted and continuous coverage of the shootings was provided (McFadden, 1998), while funerals for the victims were advertised and broadcast live on the Internet, radio, and closed circuit television (McFadden, 1998; Cart, 1998).

Concern and fear are also evident in the general reactions to the shootings. Among the reactions to the shootings were hiring additional security officers in schools (Sanchez, 1998); installing metal detectors in schools (Page, 1998); keeping schools open evenings and nights and proposals to fund 100,000 "youth counselors" (Willing, 1998); a guidebook compiled by a presidential panel to alert teachers, parents, and students to early warning signs of potential violent behavior and to provide strategies for preventing and responding to violence; the discontinuation of selling toy action figures because the toy's name could provoke reminders of a boy charged in one of the school shootings ("Burger King . . .", 1998); bullet drills in which school children drop and take cover (Tirrell-Wysocki, 1998); requiring at least a few school teachers to carry concealed weapons at school (Page, 1998); efforts by libraries to raise the age at which teenagers may borrow general circulation books to 16 from 13 and issuing special library cards that allow access only to juvenile books (Carvajal, 1999); efforts to include cigarette-style warning labels on violent music, movies and video games (Fiore and Anderson, 1999); and school lockdown procedures (Behrendt, 1998).

Further evidence of the public concern and fear is found in a senior White House advisor's plan to extend the Brady gun control law to juveniles (Burnett, 1998). The advisor apparently was unaware that the application of the Brady Bill to juveniles is virtually impossible as current law already states that no one under age 21 can purchase guns. Comments made by President Clinton and public opinion surveys (both discussed below) also suggest that many Americans were troubled by school violence. Similar to Fritz and Altheide's (1987: 478) account of the media's portrayal of the missing children issue, these reactions tended "to focus on the tragedy and suffering of individual children and parents."

### *Hostility*

The hostility displayed by the American public is evident in the punitive, restrictive responses both suggested and implemented in response to the school shootings. Actions included the suspension of bail for students charged with bringing guns to school (Willing, 1998); imposing stiffer penalties against gun owners who fail to keep firearms out of the reach of children (Bendavid, 1998), and a variety of other gun restrictions including criminal background checks for guns purchased at gun shows, and requiring dealers to provide safety devices with all handguns (Fairbank, 1999); requiring that students caught with guns be detained by officials for 72 hours and evaluated ("Keep guns . . .", 1998); making it a felony to expose children to books, movies and video games that contain explicit sex or violence (Carvajal, 1999); and the Senate's Juvenile Crime Bill which calls for \$1 billion in Federal grants to

toughen prosecution of juvenile crime and efforts to prevent it (Bruni, 1999) and proposes structuring current law to incarcerate youthful offenders, including those charged with acts such as running away from home, with adult offenders (Weisman, 1998). Other proposed efforts include the governmental allocation of \$1.5 billion over three years to local and state governments that impose corrective sanctions beginning with young, first-time offenders (“Heading off . . .,” 1999); incarcerating the parents of children who are truant from school and/or fining the truant student (MacGregor, 1999); and increasing security measures at the expense of students’ rights (McDowell, 1999). Several of these actions had been taken in schools prior to the rash of shootings, however, they mostly focused upon inner-city youths attending urban schools. The recent school shootings generated and directed hostility toward youths, particularly juvenile delinquents, in schools throughout all of the country.

As such, juveniles were feeling the brunt of the “get tough” policies directed towards them, due in part to the recent school shootings. The public hostility was spurred by statements such as those from:

1. Juvenile Magistrate Deborah Robertson who noted that “troublemakers are younger than their counterparts 20 years ago; carrying guns, issuing deadly threats and vandalizing buildings” (McNeil, 1998);
2. Reverend Mark Clark who noted that “Right when it (a school shooting) happened, I wanted to kill that kid, to rip him apart with my bare hands” (Siemaszko, 1998); and
3. President Clinton and various experts who referred to today’s youth as a generation desensitized to brutality by its own culture of violent media and seemingly unable or unwilling to take responsibility for their actions (Males, 1998).

Such reactions provide evidence of, and fueled the public’s hostility and concern about the incidents, which eventually assisted in legitimizing school shootings as a “social problem.”

It has been noted that in times of great fear, there is a temptation to reach for simple, often punitive solutions to complex problems (Schiraldi, 1998). These responses definitively support such a statement. Males (1998) notes that “conventional wisdom holds that grown-ups vote and kids don’t, that no politician wins today without flattering the baby boomers, and that ’90s wedge-issue politicking demands moralistic ‘us versus them’ positioning.” We elaborate upon these issues later in our discussion.

*Disproportionality*

Were these massive societal responses to what were indeed heinous, threatening offenses against schoolteachers and students justified? A closer look at statistics regarding juvenile crime and more specifically school violence suggests that what occurred was arguably an overreaction to the situation. For example, consider the following sample of recent findings regarding juvenile crime in the context of the aforementioned societal responses:

- There has been no increase in the number of children under age 13 arrested for homicides in the U.S. In 1965, 25 children under age 13 were arrested for homicides and in 1996 it was 16, a 36 percent decline (Donahue, Vincent and Schiraldi, 1998).
- Overall, fewer than 3 percent of the killings in America in 1996 involved someone under age 18 killing someone else under age 18 (FBI, 1997).
- FBI data suggest that national youth violence arrests went down both in number and in share of total youth arrests between 1992 and 1996 (“Violent youth . . .,” 1998).
- Three of four young murder victims – 90% of them under age 12 and 70% of them aged 12–17 – are killed by adults, not by juveniles (Males, 1998).

While one cannot discount the substantial increases in juvenile crime during the late 1980s, recent reports suggest that the problem is diminishing. Bernard (1999) suggests that although there exists conflicting trends, the most consistent interpretation is that juvenile crime, with the exception of homicide, has declined by about one-third over the last twenty years. In their chapter titled: “Juvenile Superpredators: The Myths of Killer Kids, Dangerous schools and a Youth Crime Wave,” Kappeler, Blumberg and Potter (2000) elaborate upon these and similar findings. There has been a similar, and probably more pronounced decrease in the amount of school violence. Consider the following:

- There were 55 school shooting deaths in the 1992–1993 school year; 51 in 93–94; 20 in 1994–95; 35 in 1995–96, 25 in 1996–97; and 40 in 1997–98 (Lester, 1998). There are more than 50 million students and more than 80,000 schools across the country (Sanchez, 1998).
- A child’s chances of being struck by lightning are greater than the million-to-one odds of being killed in school. The number of children killed by gun violence in schools is about half the number of Americans killed annually by lightning (Byrne, 1998).
- According to PRIDE, the number of students bringing guns to school dropped from 6 percent in 1993–94 to 3.8 percent in 1997–98 (“1 million . . .,” 1998).

- In Los Angeles, 15,000 people have been murdered during the 1990s. Five occurred at school. Of 1,500 murders in Orange County during the 1990s, none took place at school. Institutions in these areas serve 2 million students, including 700,000 teenagers (Males, 1998).
- The United States has approximately 338 million children between the ages of ten and seventeen who attend roughly 20,000 secondary schools. In 1994, there were no school shootings in which more than a single person was killed; in 1997, there were four; and in 1998 there were two (Glassman, 1998).<sup>2</sup>

Available data from sources such as the Centers for Disease Control, National School Safety Center, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, and The Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics support the suggestion that the recent school shootings were idiosyncratic events and not part of any recognizable trend. Ironically, the shootings may have received such intense coverage because of the infrequency of these occurrences rather than their frequency (Donohue, Schiraldi and Ziedenberg, 1998).

### *Consensus*

The recent shootings left many Americans disturbed and fearful for their children's safety. Comments made by President Bill Clinton to members attending the October 15, 1998 *White House Conference on School Safety* summarize the public's perception of fear and concern regarding the situation ("Federal emergency. . .," 1998: 9A):

I saw a survey, a public opinion survey a few months ago that asked the American people what they thought the most important story of the first six months of 1998 was, and dwarfing everything else was the concern our people had for the children who were killed in their schools.

Clinton's words reflect the July, 1998 findings of a nationwide study of adults which suggested that 75% of Americans were very seriously concerned about school violence and school shootings with another 15% noting that they were somewhat seriously concerned (Shell Oil Company, 1998). Similarly, Rose and Gallup (1998) noted that there was an 11% increase between 1977 and 1998 in the number of parents who feared for their child's safety while they were at school. In addition to providing supportive evidence regarding the societal *consensus* surrounding the school shooting incidents, such findings could also be used as supporting evidence of the societal *concern* surrounding school violence.

To better understand the situation surrounding the school shooting incidents, we must consider why there was such an overzealous societal reaction to

the spate of school shootings. Looking at the interests held by several claim-makers with regard to the school shooting incidents assists in understanding the societal response. Similar to Cohen's (1972) account of the societal reaction to the *Mobs and Rockers*, the groups having the greatest interests in the school shooting incidents (whose efforts were largely responsible for the aforementioned responses) include, but are not limited to: (1) proponents of increased punitiveness with regard to juvenile justice (including politicians and legislators), and (2) the media.<sup>3</sup> It has largely been through the actions of these groups that the moral panic surrounding school shootings developed and persevered.

### *Interests*

It should be noted that successful moral panics are not only interest-driven. They are also cultural constructions assembled by cultural entrepreneurs who, among other things, draw on cultural resources to convey compelling narratives, tell riveting stories, and present engaging melodramas. While narratives, stories, and melodramas were indeed present throughout the moral panic surrounding school shootings (largely in the form of accounts concerning the star athlete who wrestled the gun away from one of the shooters, the "heroic" teacher who gave her life to protect her students, and the various discussions surrounding how each of the shooters obtained their respective weapons), we chose to focus upon select groups whose involvement/roles/participation in addressing the situation was largely encouraged by their personal interests. Such an approach assists in presenting the issue as a moral panic and provides a better understanding of how these particular interest-driven agents can largely impact societal happenings.

### *Politicians*

What, specifically, were the interests of the claimsmakers and how did this social problem fulfill their interests? Through statements such as "there was a time when no one could conceive of students shooting classmates in school, and the public now has a right to be outraged, if not demand from their schools and the children who attend them higher standards of conduct" (Byrd, 1998), and deeming student-criminals "fledgling psychopaths" (Monmaney and Krikorian, 1998), those in favor of increasing the punishments directed toward juvenile criminals were able to use the school shooting incidents to strengthen their arguments. With regard to the interests of politicians, it becomes quite clear why they appear to have a vested interest in promoting tougher legislation surrounding juveniles. Their interests largely lie in the hands of the voters, who, through their "media-filtered and culturally-influenced" understanding of the situation largely support the idea of in-

creased punishment for juvenile delinquents. Schiraldi's (1998) suggestion that fear generates a temptation to reach for simple, often punitive, solutions to complex problems becomes quite apparent in the present situation. In juveniles and more specifically juvenile delinquents, politicians have an ideal target for action.

Increasing the penalties directed towards juvenile delinquents is a no-lose situation for politicians, mainly because such an approach has become popular with the general public. Juveniles are not permitted to vote in popular elections, and they are not likely to develop lobby-, or special interest groups. Thus, politicians do not fear losing juveniles' votes upon election day nor any threat of opposition. Politicians also enjoy the benefit of our country's historical approach of taking our societal frustrations out upon the marginal, fringe, or deviant classes, rendering juvenile delinquents prime candidates for increased punishments.

Arguably, politicians used the school shootings to detract from other issues that were occurring. For example, President Clinton was very outspoken in responding to the school shootings, even going so far as to appear at a press conference with the parent of a student who was shot in one incident and visiting the scene of another shooting. The school visit was in the face of dissent from several young residents who noted that Clinton's appearance would aggravate their emotional wounds (Harris, 1998). Throughout all of the shootings, Clinton was faced with several potentially damaging issues, including the Whitewater investigation, allegations that his administration gave China sensitive missile information in return for illegal Chinese contributions, accusations of sexual misconduct and perjury (among other charges), and other related issues. One must question if Clinton was truly concerned about the incidents, or if he was simply trying to "*Wag the Dog.*"

### *Media*

With the abolition of the Cold War, a prospering economy, and relative peace in the Middle East, Americans have recently had to focus their attention elsewhere. For example, a panelist at a Harvard symposium recently pointed out that local television news shows had to import violent footage because local criminals weren't turning out enough products (Glassman, 1998). Glassman (1998) suggests that in an era of peace and prosperity, the press finds little to excite the imagination, and prey on the fears, of its audience. The school shootings provided a perfect opportunity to reach the public. With the pre-existing general discomfort with juvenile crime, the media recognized and seized an ideal opportunity to continuously cover an issue that personally affects a large audience and involves harms against children, a group which has been referred to as "sentimentally priceless" (Zelizer, 1985). Overwhelming

media coverage enabled society to press even harder upon the “juvenile crime panic button.”

There is so little we can all agree upon in a pluralistic society. However, when evil is oversimplified (e.g., through sensationalistic media accounts of select horrific incidents) societal agreement becomes feasible, if not likely. Pitting “evil” against “innocents” likely results in societal support, or encouragement for the innocents. Due in part to the media’s and popular culture’s continued utilization of crime stories to attract customers (e.g., Surette, 1992), the general public has developed a “discomfort” with criminals, and in particular, juvenile criminals. The recent reports of school shootings reinforced and legitimized the arguments of those who were previously rallying to increase the punishments for juvenile criminals, while encouraging additional citizens to support their views.

People use the knowledge they obtain from the media to construct an image of the world (Surette, 1992). However, the news media are frequently chastised for presenting a misleading portrayal of crime (e.g., Graber, 1980; Lotz, 1991; Marsh, 1989), often functioning as a “carnival mirror” (Reiman, 1990) by distorting reality through focusing disproportionately on street crime, particularly violent offenses. Unfortunately, most people learn about crime from the mass media (Graber, 1980; McNeely, 1995), and because the public rarely has enough information to form opinions independently on many issues, people are often at the mercy of the media, not only for information, but also for interpretation (Graber, 1980). Researchers from the Justice Policy Institute recently accused the media of creating a dangerous misperception that schools are dangerous (Donahue et al., 1998). They noted that the danger is magnified when the media describe these unusual crime stories as “an all-too-familiar story” or “another in a recent trend,” and suggest that the media’s fixation on the shootings ignited a “moral panic” among the public and a “fever pitch” among school administrators.

The researchers suggested that the perception of increased school dangers could lead to “counterproductive” new laws and an excessive focus on dangers at school when everyday gun violence outside school is a bigger threat to children (Byrne, 1998). Glassman (1998) added that the media’s overreaction to a single school shooting makes the common viewer think that child murders are rampant and an immediate threat to society. The media continually fail to put these events into proper context, even when statistics strongly suggest the “so called” problem is blown out of proportion.

## **Discussion**

In discussing the social construction of the missing children problem, Fritz and Altheide (1987: 487) note that “Politicians, moral entrepreneurs and jour-

alists used the issue for their own purposes.” Their argument also applies to the situation surrounding the recent school shootings. For instance, the interaction between the media, politicians, and the general public regarding the school shootings could be depicted in the shape of a triangle, with a constant circular motion encouraging punitive directives to be imposed upon juveniles. Juveniles represent a group which is not directly involved in the motions occurring in the triangle, yet absorb the impact of whatever developments, decisions, and/or laws emerge from the interaction.

The triangular motion is initiated by a harmful event involving juveniles (e.g., a school shooting), and the interaction between the three participants consists of a self-perpetuating cycle in which major actors involved in the situation respond in a manner which encourages subsequent action from the other groups. For example, a school shooting occurs, and the three groups immediately become aware of a problematic social situation. The media seize upon the opportunity to cover a story that will pique the public’s interest (mainly due to the involvement of children, violence, and the public’s appetite for sensationalism), arguably with the underlying intention of increasing their customer base. The public is disturbed because of the thought “You never know when it’s going to be one of your kids,” and thus continuously reads, watches, and/or hears about the situation (including analyses from various “professionals” in the field regarding the “problem”), and their concern is compounded by the intense media coverage (e.g., Fritz and Altheide, 1987). As a result, they feel that “something needs to be done” (e.g., Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994), and often not possessing the ability, or desire to address the situation on their own, they look to the government to handle the situation. As a result, politicians, who recognize their concern for the situation and the public’s dependence upon the government to address the situation, use their position to, among other things, pass legislation and make public announcements and appearances about their “tough stance” in regard to the situation (e.g., Cohen, 1972). In turn, the politician’s tough stance against the problem is covered by the media, which further legitimizes the “problem” and perpetuates the public’s concern about the problem. The responses and reactions ultimately result in punitive actions against the evildoers. In the school shooting incidents, juveniles (especially juvenile delinquents) have felt the brunt of the societal response. Figure 1 depicts such a cycle.

With regard to the interaction between politicians and the media, among other things, the media provide a forum for politicians to appear “tough” or portray their actions. Media outlets also enable “issue-identification” by which politicians are able to determine which topics they need to address, as it is these issues which are going to be recognized by the public. In return, politicians provide the media with a sense of legitimization. In other words,

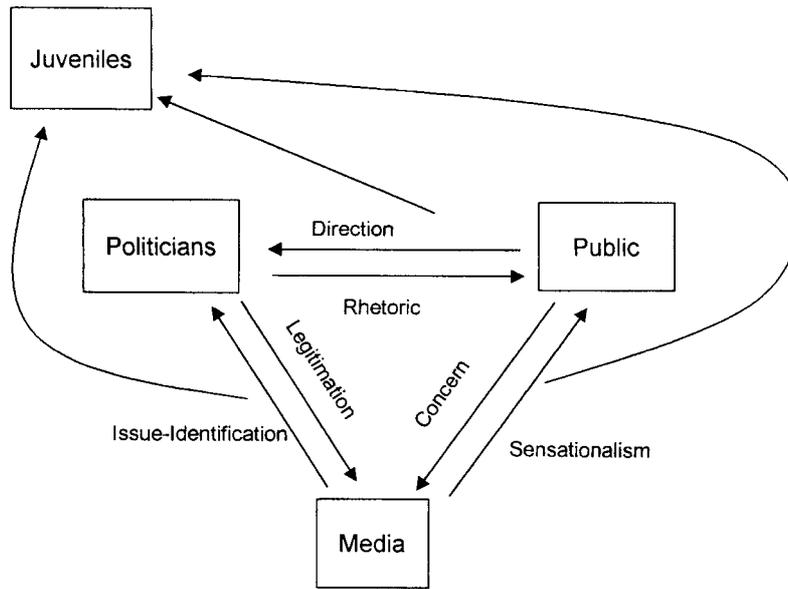


Figure 1. Interactions in the school shooting moral panic.

through speaking about or responding to an issue being covered by the media, politicians not only provide credible sources, but also enable the issue to seem more “real” or “important” to the public.

The interactions between politicians and the public largely consist of politicians providing the public with information about how they’re going to address the problematic situation, and the public providing a sense of direction for politicians. This direction is determined through public opinion polls, general election polls, and various other methods used by politicians to “tap into the public’s mind” and see what issues they should be addressing, and how they ought to address the issues. For example, soon after the shootings, policy makers reacted abruptly to what they perceived to be a huge swing in public opinion; a moral panic swept the country as parents and children suddenly feared for their safety at school (Donahue et al., 1998). The behavior of politicians in this instance resembles the behavior of their colleagues who were in office during the “missing children” situation, when politicians “wanted to be helpful and symbolically affirm their commitment to aid constituents. . .” (Fritz and Altheide, 1987: 487).

Finally, the interaction between the public and the media is based upon, among other things, sensationalism and concern. The conceptualization and depiction of a social problem largely influences public perception of the problematic issue (Sutherland, 1950; Becker, 1963). For example, a school shoot-

ing occurs and the general public demonstrates an obvious concern. In response, the media continuously cover the issue. Thus, in order to determine what makes news and where particular issues are displayed, the media are in touch with the public's concern and react accordingly. In return, the media tend to focus upon sensationalized stories, or stories they know will pique the public's interest (e.g., violent crime stories), thus meeting their needs while earning a profit and arguably inadvertently altering public perception of these issues. Erikson (1966) suggests that confrontations between deviant offenders and agents of control have always attracted a great deal of attention, adding that although we no longer stage the trial and punishment in the market place, popular media outlets such as televisions and newspapers have fulfilled the public's hunger for this information. This portion of the triangle involving the interaction between the media and the public is one that appears to have quite a large effect upon the development of moral panics.

The results of these interactions are often directed toward some group outside of the triangle, which basically has limited, if any, say in what's occurring within the triangle. In the present case, it is juveniles who are outside of the triangle, and thus, have no input regarding the decisions affecting them. Often marginal groups, or those outside of the triangle, are helpless, voiceless beneficiaries of the punitive, or restrictive, decisions being made within the triangle.

Although simplistic and somewhat deterministic, this account of the interactions between the media, the public, and politicians could be applied to other social problems and has been included to provide a better understanding of how social problems may develop and proliferate. While the arguments and goals may vary from situation to situation, the relationships between these three groups and the results of their interactions are quite powerful. However, our depiction is by no means an attempt to re-define or reconstruct the literature regarding social interactions and we recognize and concur that our abbreviated depiction lends itself to many questions regarding such interactions. It is quite possible that due to particular characteristics of the current situation (for example, the emergence of several "heroes," the involvement of guns, the randomness and locations of the attacks, the backgrounds of the shooters, etc.), such an interaction applies solely to the school shootings situation. Regardless, the illustration was provided to assist the reader in understanding how we conceptualize the roles played by the major participants in the construction of the school shooting moral panic.

While such a cycle involving the media, government, and public is not necessarily harmful to addressing problematic social issues, concern arises when the foundation of their involvement and concern is predicated upon high-profile, select events which are then incorrectly generalized to suggest a

much larger problem. Problems also occur when empirical research is ignored or discarded (Fritz and Altheide, 1987) in favor of emotion. The media's linking of these shootings as "a trend" has tended to exacerbate people's fears about the safety of their children and youth in schools (Donahue et al., 1998). The likely result is misdirected public policy and misguided solutions to safeguard schools, even though the real threat may lie elsewhere. Social scientists have long held that social problems develop through a process which usually includes "mass media cooperation in symbolically defining and announcing specific instances as examples of a larger problem" (Fritz and Altheide, 1987: 473). If the groups addressed the incidents in the context of empirically based research, the knee-jerk reaction that we've seen in response to the shootings might have been replaced by more sound, rational, and/or proportionate responses. Males (1998) noted that it is justified to deplore any killing at a school, yet it is another matter for self-righteous adults to lose all perspective and scold all young people.

### **Conclusion**

Although we have referenced various media outlets in presenting our argument, it should be noted that the majority of our media-related information originates from newspapers. It is possible that analyses of televised accounts of the shootings differ from what we encountered in the printed news. Such a limitation calls for additional research, which could perhaps focus more closely upon magazines and radio accounts as well. Another limitation of our research concerns the absence of original empirical research. However, attempts have been made to provide accounts of empirical assessments conducted by "reputable others" (e.g., a PRIDE study, FBI data, a Shell Oil Company survey, a Gallup poll, etc.) to support our argument. Non-empirical information related specifically to the shootings (e.g., reactions to the shootings, comments surrounding the incidents, etc.) was selectively and largely collected from various editions of the nation's top 50 newspapers (according to the Dow Jones News Retrieval Bank). As the empirical support generally required to demonstrate a moral panic often addresses various areas and originates from different sources, we do not feel that the lack of original, empirical data hampers our argument.

By no means do we intend to diminish the seriousness of school shootings, or violence of any kind, in any place. Put simply, we argue that social problems should be addressed through broad assessments of each individual situation, not emotionally-charged reactions to isolated incidents. Thus, we question why, instead of recognizing that these incidents occur quite infrequently and that schools are actually one of the safest places a child can

be, our society focuses constant attention toward understanding why some juveniles would want to shoot their teachers and fellow students?

Arguably, societal focus is largely dictated by media accounts and political dictates, which could explain the recent fervor surrounding the school shootings. While it is not the purpose of the present research to address the construction of the school shooting incidents as a social problem, ample support is provided to suggest that the media and politicians were two of the most influential actors in constructing the panic. For instance, Lester (1998) suggests that the intense media attention given several recent sensational school shootings has left the impression that such fatal attacks are on the rise when the total is actually lower than five years ago. Such coverage prompted a caller to the *Chicago Sun-Times* to suggest that "The shooting madness may be 'an airborne amoebae' transmitted by the media" (Wade, 1998). Similarly, Glassman (1998) argues that most people practice a kind of "social synecdoche" in believing that the part equals the whole, that a single shooting (or even several in a year) suggests that child murderers are rampant and something must be done. There is no evidence suggesting that gunfire at school is occurring more frequently today than in the past, yet enormous attention was directed toward the issue. Perhaps societal attention could be better focused elsewhere.

In an insightful analysis of the school shooting situations, Males (1998) compares the harms caused by the shootings to harms inflicted upon children in the home. He cites a study by the United States Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect which noted that approximately 2,000 to 3,000 children are killed each year by parents or guardians, arguing that perhaps the media should focus upon adults killing children instead of children killing children. He adds that approximately three out of four child homicide victims, 90% under the age of twelve and 70% aged twelve to seventeen, are murdered by adults, not other children. When one considers that more children are killed in two days of domestic violence than were killed in all of the recent, high-profile shootings, all of the recent panic seems unimportant (Males, 1998). In further demonstrating his point, Males (1998) notes that on the day of the Arkansas school killings, a California mother was arrested for suffocating her three children with duct tape. A few days after the Kentucky shootings, three West Virginia parents were arrested for burning down their house, deliberately immolating five children. The day after the Oregon school cafeteria incident, an Arleta mother was arrested for murdering her two young children and burying them in a national forest (Males, 1998).

Males (1998: M1) notes that despite the alarming statistics surrounding child abuse by parents:

... the president has never given a major address (not even a radio talk) focusing on children victimized by violence in the home. Even though

family violence is the chief killer of children under age 13 and women of all ages, the Centers for Disease Control and other violence-prevention agencies barely acknowledge it exists. In this climate of heightened family chaos and high-level denial, the wonder is that school carnage isn't more common . . . Unfortunately, talking about family violence, about how uncannily teenage behaviors reflect those of adults (good and bad), does not meet the needs of politicians and politically attuned authorities.

Many states have recently experienced a sharp retreat from a notion that held sway for much of this century; that children were less culpable than adults and had a greater capacity to be cured of anti-social behavior ("U.S. society . . .," 1998). Guggenheim suggests that "We've lost our faith in the rehabilitative ideal, and that loss of faith has come from the left and the right" ("U.S. society . . .," 1998). For example, under toughened laws that have become increasingly popular since the 1980s, all 50 states and the federal government allow juveniles to be tried as adults depending on the nature of the crime and the age of the offender (Suro, 1998), while recently, politicians have proposed The Violent and Repeat Juvenile Offender Accountability and Rehabilitation Act of 1999 which includes numerous restrictions upon juveniles. Since 1994, 43 states have changed their laws to make it easier to prosecute juveniles as adults and half of the states no longer have any minimum age for adult criminal offenses ("U.S. society . . .," 1998). Zeidenberg notes that "Every few years, there's a 'juvenile justice crisis,' but we have never seen a gnawing at the edges of the notion that kids should be treated separately as dramatically as we are seeing it now" ("U.S. society . . .," 1998). It has been suggested that moves to treat young offenders more like adults often follow incidents like the school shootings because such incidents focus public attention on juvenile crime ("U.S. society . . .," 1998).

In most states, the move toward harsher treatment of juvenile offenders is popular politically ('U.S. society . . .," 1998). In accordance with Gusfield's (1963) analysis of the Temperance movement, the punitive reaction to the school shootings "displays the American faith in the power of the Law to correct all evils." Contemporary approaches to juvenile reform reflect what Gusfield (1963) referred to as *coercive reform*, which involves turning to laws and force to affirm cultural dominance and social status. Through the practice of "boundary maintenance" (Erikson, 1966), our society is attempting to promote a higher degree of conformity amongst juveniles, while publicizing those behaviors which will no longer be tolerated. Gusfield might argue that such a practice could be considered an act of "status reaffirmation" on behalf of various groups in society (e.g., those in favor of increased punitive treatment of juveniles), while others might suggest that such a "crackdown" on juvenile behavior is the result of skewed media coverage having a substantial

impact upon the general public. Arguably, it has been a combination of both. However, some might suggest that the punitive approach is a logical solution to address juvenile delinquency/crime in our society.

Becker (1963) notes that at various times, enforcement practices may include an all-out attack (i.e., a crackdown) on a particular kind of deviance. One result of the school shootings moral panic has been the firm stances taken by schools and law enforcement against threats of violence. For example, two elementary school students in Tyrone, Georgia were suspended for composing a list of people they wanted to harm, including the Spice Girls and Barney, the purple dinosaur (Brett, 1998). While some may consider these enforcement-oriented responses appropriate, others may see them as overreactions which are likely to result in more harm than good. In summarizing the situation, Donahue et al. (1998: 3) suggest that “As the risk of school-associated violent death is overblown, we are witnessing a tragic misdirection of attention and resources” as we continue to make already safe schools safer; maybe even going so far as to being overly restrictive on individual freedom and further alienating our youth. They add:

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 . . . demonstrate 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.  
(1998: 11)

We concur with their suggestions, and recommend that precautions be taken before society creates additional unsupported, or unsubstantiated “social problems.” It is often too easy for individuals to get caught up in the most pressing, more highlighted issues, and construct, demand, and impose “knee-jerk” reactions without careful consideration of the current situation, as well as the short- and long-term effects. It is hoped that through highlighting the general overreaction to the school shooting incidents we can assist in preventing future moral panics and deter misguided policy.

## Notes

1. Although the current research borrows the indicators described by Goode and Ben-Yehuda, we chose not to include the concept of volatility. We feel the essence of the concept is captured by a detailed discussion of concern and disproportionality – in that they demonstrate the sudden onset and urgency of a social problem.
2. To some, it may seem hypocritical to demonstrate the concept of disproportionality through the use of various media sources, especially when one is trying to demonstrate the influ-

ence of media accounts. However, we argue that the use of media accounts to demonstrate disproportionality in this instance is justified when one considers the location, or placement, and the focus of the few newspaper articles which provided counter-claims. In general, these articles were either buried deep in the newspapers, given limited attention, or intended to demonstrate the seriousness of school violence. For example, of the eight newspaper articles used to demonstrate disproportionality, half (4) were op-ed pieces; one (1) was found on page A16; one (1) was found on page A8; and finally, two (2) were on the front pages of newspapers, although one article was only 54 words long, and the other was titled, "1 Million Toting Guns at School, Survey Finds." For a detailed discussion of the effects of moral panic counter-claims, see Fritz and Altheide (1987).

3. It should be noted that others such as violence prevention personnel, private security agencies, crisis intervention training groups, anti-gun advocates, peer-mediation training groups and other entities arguably also maintained an interest in the school shootings. Future research may want to explore the roles played by these groups/agencies in relation to the school shootings.

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