How News Media Shapes Our Understanding of Youth Violence and Sexual Assault

Addressing the Social Norms that Underlie the Acceptance of Violence Workshop
Institute of Medicine Forum on Global Violence Prevention

Washington, D.C.
October 29, 2015

Lori Dorfman, DrPH
• Research on news coverage of public health issues
• Media advocacy training and strategic consultation for community groups and public health advocates
• Professional education for journalists
Acknowledgements

• Prevention Institute, the UNITY City Network, and The California Wellness Foundation

• National Sexual Violence Resource Center and the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention

• Pamela Mejia, Laura Nixon, Fernando Quintero & Lawrence Wallack
Today’s mash-up of our studies

- Framing: how does it work, why does it matter?
- Moving from *Them* to *Us*: Challenges in Reframing Violence Among Youth

*All available from bmsg.org/publications.*
Key Functions of the News

Setting the Agenda
- What we think about

Shaping the Debate
- How we think about it

Reaching Decisionmakers
- What we do about it
VIOLENCE IS PREVENTABLE
A century of news distortions

- Crime, especially violent crime, reported out of proportion to actual occurrence.
- As a series of individual events without adequate attention to its overall context.
- Especially TV, unduly connects race and crime, especially violent crime.
- Youth rarely appear in news, and when they do, it is often connected to violence.
Articles about community violence or safety rarely appeared in the news.
Misinformation Synergy

- Distorted picture of crime
- Distorted picture of race
- Distorted picture of youth
The Need to Reframe

Institutional Accountability

Personal Responsibility
News frames are more often portraits than landscapes.
The Need to Reframe
Topics of sexual violence news

- Criminal justice process: 60%
- Sexual violence in an institution: 30%
- Solutions (?): 10%
- Statistics/Trends: 10%
- Causes of sexual violence: 5%
Sexual violence news focuses on criminal justice solutions.

- More than half of articles reference employment or criminal justice consequences for the person accused.
- Fewer articles include calls for solutions and when they do, most are about criminal justice responses.
- Prevention rarely appears.
Policing is the most commonly proposed solution.

Preventing violence

Addressing violence

- Preventive policing
- Gun control policies
- Changes in cultural norms
- Services for potential perpetrators

- Policing
- Sentencing policies
- Services for perpetrators
- Services for victims of violence
When it appears, what does prevention look like?

• “More needs to happen in homes and schools to keep teenagers on the right track.”

• “The bill would extend state-mandated sexual abuse and assault education to elementary and middle schools.”
How does news characterize people who commit sexual violence?

18% of stories use **distancing** language
- “The **beast** Marvin Powell is out of prison.”

11% use **exonerating** language
- “I’ve known [him] for 45 years and there’s absolutely no way I believe any of this could possibly have happened.”
How does news characterize people who experience sexual violence?

Overt victim blaming is rare…but 15% of articles use language that minimizes the act of sexual violence and implies consent: “his admitted sex romp with a 16-year old girl.”
How does news characterize men who experience sexual violence?

- Articles about acts of child sexual abuse focus on abuse of boys.
- Stories about child sexual abuse against boys include more minimizing language.
- Male victims rarely appear in stories about other types of violence.
Tasks for reframing

- Make the landscape as vivid as the portrait.
- Illustrate the values.
- Connect values to solutions.
- Use communications to support action.
Conclusions

• Despite many strengths, criminal justice perspectives dominate the news and prevention is largely absent.

• There are many opportunities for advocates to make prevention part of the news.

• More complete news coverage will inform decision makers and the public about prevention, what it means, and why it matters.