

***Are We Getting the Whole Picture?
The Absence of Crime Data in Newspaper Reporting of School
Violence***

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore how school violence is portrayed in the newspaper media. Articles discussing Columbine in *The New York Times* were analyzed for content for 30 days following April 20, 1999. Specifically, the research looked at the use of crime data, the explanation of cause for Columbine and other information included in the articles on Columbine. The research found that fewer than 10 percent of the 130 articles contained crime data leaving the reader with a very narrow view of school violence. Fifty-two percent of the articles identified a cause for the incident; of the articles with a cause, guns (gun control laws, availability of guns) were responsible in 31 percent of the articles. Logistic regression analysis showed that an article with a picture was 20.7 times more likely to appear on the front page than an article without any pictures ($p < .01$). The results suggest that the use of episodic framing dominated the articles on Columbine in *The New York Times*.

Introduction

Based solely on media reports, violence in schools has increased over the past twenty years. In reality, school violence has been decreasing, and most violence among youths occurs outside of school. During 2002, 88,000 students aged 12-18 were victims of violent crimes at school while 309,000 students of the same age were victims of violent crime outside of school. These numbers may seem shocking but they are relatively positive since victimization rates at school and away from school have declined between 1992 to 2001 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005). The media sometimes engages in agenda setting- attracting attention to problems that they believe need to be addressed (Young, 2003). Thus, the misrepresentation of school violence in the media could be due to agenda setting. The current study examines how school violence is portrayed in the newspaper media. Specifically the coverage of the incident at Columbine is examined with articles printed in *The New York Times*. This study adds to the existing body of research focusing on school violence by examining how school violence is presented in the media.

Researchers have previously examined crime and its presentation by the news media. Erich Goode (2000, p. 549) believes that, "The mass media thrives on scares; contributing to moral panics is the media's stock in trade." The mass media has an impact on making people more fearful than they need be (Glassner, 1999). Heath (1984) proposed that crime stories are sensationalized because of their emphasis on crimes that are unusual and rare. For example, between July 1, 1999 and June 30, 2000, 16 school age children were involved in school related

homicides (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005). In that one year period, only one more student died in all the United States than those that died as a result of Columbine. Columbine was not the norm for violent incidents at schools across America, yet the media constantly displayed images from that day without mentioning the broader picture: school violence decreasing as a whole. Rather than focusing on isolated events that rarely occur, I am suggesting that writers use a more thematic approach (general context) when writing articles rather than the abundance of episodic framing (specific events) that pervades our newspapers today.

The ideas the media portrays (that violence is prevalent and more frequently occurring than in reality) direct social change and social movements. For this reason, the media should report news that is more representative of reality. One way to thematically frame articles in the newspaper is by incorporating actual crime statistics in articles that discuss school violence. The purpose of crime data is to provide contextual information surrounding school violence. However, this goal may be contrary to the desire of newspapers in attracting the largest number of readers/viewers and making the news interesting to all age groups.

In order to learn more about the way school violence is reported in the media, the current research will look at how the worst case of school violence in history is presented in one of our nation's top newspapers. School-violence-related articles from *The New York Times* will be analyzed for 30 days following the tragedy at Columbine (April 20, 1999) to determine whether school violence in the media is representative of school violence in reality. Several studies have examined the Columbine event, (Addington, 2003; Brener, Simon, Anderson, Barrios, & Small, 2002; Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Kostinsky, Bixler & Kettl, 2001) but none has looked at the use of crime data in reporting school violence in the newspaper. Crime data are reported in academic journals and government reports, but the media reaches the greatest number of people. If the media does not incorporate actual crime statistics in its reporting of school violence or violence of any sort, public perception of violence will be skewed. Biased public perception can affect the decisions politicians make whose primary concern is just to be re-elected.

Due to the importance of accurate reporting, I focused on the presence or absence of crime data in newspaper articles on the school violence which took place at Columbine High School. By means of content analysis, I examined how frequently crime data is used to report school violence in the newspaper. Also, I explored the speculation of cause by the newspaper media for the incident at Columbine, factors that influence the location of the article within the newspaper (front page or not), the focus of the articles discussing Columbine and the type of information included in the articles on Columbine. In addition to the content analysis, I observed the trends in school violence between 1992 and 2002 and compared that data with the number of school violence articles that appeared in *The New York Times* during the same time period.

Literature Review

Concerning the media's "hype" over school violence, Donohue, Schiraldi and Ziedenberg (1998) of the Justice Policy Institute investigated the reality of school violence and violence among youth outside of school. Specifically they asked: "Is there a trend towards increasing violent school deaths in America?" and "What is the overall incidence of crime, and particularly homicides, in America's schools versus outside of schools" (Donohue et al., 1998, p. 3)? Since school killings are recorded by several different sources using different criteria, Donohue et al. (1998) utilized data from multiple sources including the United States Department of Education, U.S. Department of Justice, Uniform Crime Reports from the FBI, Centers for Disease Control,

National Safe Kids Campaign, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National School Safety Center, Center to Prevent Handgun Violence and the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

The National School Safety Center collected data annually since the 1992-93 school year to determine the number of deaths occurring in American schools over time; however, this survey measures “school related violent deaths,” which does not specifically define who is killing whom. An example of this measurement error is a homicide by an angry boyfriend who did not work at the school but shot a teacher in the school parking lot. The problem is that “school related violent deaths” include random acts of violence that may have been committed by someone other than a student. In 1997-98, four of the 40 “school related violent deaths” were adult deaths. Another drawback of the National School Safety Center’s survey lies in the fact that the Center relies on newspaper clippings to count school violence incidents, limiting the count to what the media chooses to cover.

Through data triangulation, Donohue et al. (1998) examined school violence in all its complexity. Data from the National School Safety Center suggests a 27% decline in school associated violent deaths from the 1992-93 school year to the 1997-98 school year.

From the Center for Disease Control’s study of “School-Associated Violent Deaths in the United States, 1992-1994” Donohue et al. (1998) reported less than one in a million chance of suffering a school associated violent death (homicides and suicides). Also, during the 1992-94 time period, more than 99% of violent deaths involving children occurred away from school.

The National Center for Education Statistics’ *Violence and Discipline Problems in U.S. Public Schools, 1996-1997* surveyed principals across America regarding the incidence of school violence. Only 10% of the principals within the sample reported the occurrence of serious violent crime, operationalized as murder, suicide, rape or sexual battery, robbery or physical attack with a weapon; none of the principals reported murder or suicide. Because school violence rarely occurs, we can not conclude from this small sample that no murder or suicide took place in all American schools during 1996-97. Broken down by school location, urban schools were more likely to report serious violent crime; 17% of urban schools, 11% of urban fringe schools, 8% of rural schools and 5% of suburban/town schools reported at least one incident of serious violent crime (Donohue et al., 1998).

Another finding that contradicts the media’s representation of crime is that 90% of all childhood deaths occur at places other than school. Data from the National Safe Kids Campaign show that unintentional shootings among kids occur more frequently when children are without adult supervision such as between 4 and 5 p.m. All of this media attention may affect the perceptions of politicians or they may receive pressure from their constituents to make changes to reduce school violence. Governor James Gilmore of Virginia actually proposed ending after school programs after a non-fatal shooting in Richmond despite research support for the effectiveness of after-school programs in reducing crime among youth (Donohue et al., 1998).

Focusing on the media’s representation of school violence, Chyi and McCombs (2004) examined coverage of the tragedy at Columbine in *The New York Times*. Their research analyzed the content of articles and editorials for 30 days following the event. Their content analysis involved a space and time frame measurement for each article. The space frame measured the focus of the article on five levels: *individual* if the story focused on individuals such as offenders and victims; *community* if the article focused on Columbine High School, Littleton or any other single community; *regional* if the story focused on Denver, Colorado, or any state or region; *societal* if nation-wide concerns were discussed; *international* if the story was related to events in other countries.

Of the 170 articles and editorials found in *The New York Times* for the 30 days following Columbine, Chyi and McCombs (2004) found that 52% of the stories had a societal frame, 29% had a community frame and 17% had an individual frame. Two percent used a regional frame and only one percent used an international frame. Furthermore, the researchers took note of the change of focus as the 30 days progressed. During the first 25 days, the percentage of societal frames gradually increased from 38% to 78%, while percentage of individual frame articles decreased from 30% to 0%. This finding demonstrates the shift in focus from specific information about the event and the people surrounding it to a broader examination of school violence as a social problem.

In addition to analyzing articles in *The New York Times*, Menifield, Rose, Homa and Cunningham (2001) compared media coverage of urban and rural school violence in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Louisville Courier Journal*, *New York Times*, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post*. The purpose of their research was to determine if the newspaper media publish misleading views of school violence.

The content analysis of the six newspapers included the title of the article, the tone of the article, location within the newspaper, word count, lines, paragraphs and pictures used in the article. The *Courier Journal*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *New York Times* came from the library microfilm collection at Murray State University, Murray, Kentucky. The data from the *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *St. Louis Post Dispatch* were found in the microfilm collections at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale and Illinois State University at Bloomington-Normal. Three rural and three urban schools where shootings occurred were examined through the content analysis.

Menifield et al. (2001) found that the three rural school shootings received a disproportionate amount of attention compared to the three urban school shootings. The urban shootings received little attention from the six newspapers along with the number of pictures devoted to those shootings. For example, in the *Courier Journal*, photos pertaining to the rural school shootings totaled 101, while the total number of photos for the urban school shootings was two. The high amount of reporting on rural school violence may be due to the assumption that rural schools are safer than urban schools. The National Center for Education Statistics' *Violence and Discipline Problems in U.S. Public Schools, 1996-1997* surveyed principals across America regarding the incidence of school violence and found that 17% of urban schools, 11% of urban fringe schools, 8% of rural schools and 5% of suburban/town schools reported at least one incident of serious violent crime (Donohue et al., 1998).

Although the previous research has focused on the print media it is important that other forms of news media are examined. Dorfman, Woodruff, Chavez and Wallack (1997) examined how television news structures the perceptions of the public and the policies created regarding youth violence. Their research involved content analysis of 214 hours of local television news in California which resulted in 1791 stories concerning youth, violence or a combination of youth and violence. These stories were coded and analyzed to determine whether they had a public health perspective (more thematic rather than episodic and not blaming the individual for the problem).

Dorfman et al. (1997) found that violence dominated the news stories and the specifics of particular crimes dominated the violence coverage in the news. One-half of the youth stories included violence while two-thirds of the violence stories involved youth. Their major finding was that episodic coverage was five times more prevalent than thematic coverage which refers to the broader picture of youth violence.

Along with research done on school violence, researchers have also focused only on the Columbine school event. Similar to Menifield et al. (2001) interest in the media's portrayal of school violence, Addington (2003) focused solely on the effect Columbine had on the fear of victimization among 12-18 year-old U.S. primary and secondary school students. Using the school crime supplement (SCS) to the national crime victimization survey (NCVS) a random sample of 12-18 year old U.S. students was surveyed pre and post Columbine. The NCVS and SCS from 1995 and 1999 were used in the analysis. Students were interviewed from January to June of each year. The pre-Columbine group contained two-thirds (5620) of the 1999 sample of the NCVS-SCS while the post Columbine group contained one-third (2777) of the students interviewed. The respondents were randomly allocated to the two groups resulting in no systematic differences between the groups.

The SCS asks questions about student's fear of victimization, perceptions of school security measures and avoidance behaviors such as staying home from school. The two questions from the SCS regarding fear of victimization included, "How often are you afraid that someone will attack or harm you at school?" and a similar question, "How often are you afraid that someone will attack or harm you on the way to and from school?" Other questions from the SCS dealt with security at school and areas that students avoid at school because of fear that someone might harm or attack them.

Addington (2003) found that the students interviewed post-Columbine reported more fear at school than the students who were interviewed before Columbine. Of the 3.8% who reported more fear, only one-fourth of the students were afraid "sometimes" or "most of the time" while three-fourths were "almost never" afraid at school.

This study also examined school security before and after Columbine; however, only six security measures were assessed. Schools may have implemented other security programs after Columbine that were not included in the SCS. Also, the interviewing only lasted until June, a short period of time after Columbine when most schools may not have had the time to create and implement security measures.

Focusing again on the effects of Columbine, Kostinsky et al. (2001) sought to determine whether the abundance of threats following the incident at Columbine was catalyzed by imitation. Using a database of school violence threats reported to the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency (PEMA), Kostinsky et al. (2001) analyzed the amount of threats from different counties and school districts in Pennsylvania along with demographic data from the U.S. Bureau of Census county estimates.

Before 1999, school administrators estimated only one to two threats per year; however, during the 50 days following the Columbine incident, Pennsylvania schools reported 354 threats of school violence. The threats were made in a crescendo-decrescendo pattern. Fifty-six percent of the threats occurred on or before the tenth day after Columbine, and more than one-third of the threats were on days eight, nine and ten. Kostinsky et al. (2001) found the major predictors of the likelihood of violence to be a larger proportion of white than non-white students and a larger school enrollment.

The research done by Kostinsky et al. (2001) is instrumental in the prevention of future school violence and school threats. Their research stressed the importance of realizing that imitation threats can occur. The media should be aware of this and construct their stories with this fact in mind. The well-being of students and those who work with them should be valued more than attracting the most attention to a story. More importantly the students who commit these crimes should not be portrayed as heroes. "It would be more prudent following similar

events in the future to shift the focus from the countercultural aspects of the crime to the fact that the perpetrators are troubled individuals, who often suffer from psychiatric disorders, need help, and do not know where to get it” (Kostinsky et al., 2001, p. 1001). Thus it would be important to include the names and telephone numbers of organizations that provide help for troubled individuals at the end of or within the articles.

Brener et al. (2002) studied the effect of Columbine on reports of violent behavior and suicide among U.S. high school students. Specifically they examined whether students missed more school following Columbine due to feeling less safe as a result of the Columbine incident. Brener et al. (2002) also looked at weapon carrying after Columbine along with increased fighting and other violent behavior among students.

Using the 1999 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), Brener et al. (2002) examined nationally representative data measuring behaviors related to violence and suicide. Students in grades nine through twelve were obtained through a three-stage cluster sampling. All public and private high schools in the U.S. were part of the target population. A total of 15,349 students completed questionnaires between March 1 and June 4 of 1999; however, 78.4% of the respondents completed the survey on or before April 20, 1999, the date that Columbine occurred.

The survey contained questions about weapon carrying, gun carrying, weapons carrying on school property and missing school because of feeling unsafe 30 days or less before the survey. There were five questions related to suicide and eight questions regarding interpersonal violence. Also included in the survey were questions about physical fighting on and off school property.

Brener et al. (2002) found that after Columbine, 10.2% of students reported feeling too unsafe to go to school compared to 3.9% of students before Columbine. Surprisingly, students completing the questionnaire after Columbine were less likely to report considering suicide or making a suicide plan than the students who completed the survey before April 20, 1999. The effects of geographic region on feeling too unsafe to go to school were most pronounced for rural areas more so than urban and suburban areas; however, their change was significant, also. For rural areas the percentage of students who felt unsafe increased from 3.8% to 32.6%.

Questions

Question 1: How often did The New York Times use actual crime statistics when reporting on Columbine during the 30 days following the event?

In the current research, it is expected that episodic coverage will dominate the Columbine stories. This will be shown by the lack of crime data used to report school violence. By excluding crime data, the reader will only have a limited view of school violence believing that it is more frequently occurring than it really is. This is consistent with the Dorfman et al. (1997) research which found that episodic coverage was five times more prevalent than thematic coverage in stories concerning youth and/or violence. Therefore, I believe that this research will find little crime data in newspaper articles on Columbine resulting in more episodic than thematic coverage in the articles.

To make news stories more interesting, journalists focus on sensational descriptions of the offenders and victims specific to the event being covered rather than including crime statistics that may not reflect the violence they are covering. By providing information on the broader picture (i.e. a decreasing crime rate) the story may not seem as interesting or capture the attention of such a large audience. At the time of Columbine, school violence was decreasing;

however, this fact probably will not be presented in many articles. More attention is drawn to articles by focusing on the peculiarities of an isolated event.

Question 2: How representative is the amount of newspaper coverage of school violence between 1992 and 2002 compared to the actual occurrence of school violence during the same time period?

I predict that the number of articles appearing in *The New York Times* each year will not be representative of school violence in reality. The results from the Menifield et al. (2001) study of media coverage of urban and rural school violence support this reasoning. Menifield et al. (2001) found that the three rural school shootings received a disproportionate amount of attention compared to the three urban school shootings despite the fact that urban school violence is more frequently occurring than rural school violence (Donohue et al., 1998).

Exploratory Question 1: What will the media most frequently speculate as the cause for the Columbine incident?

Due to the absence of literature regarding this topic I do not know what to expect the media to speculate as the cause for the Columbine incident. Based on the fact that past research has not found the reporting of violence to be representative of violence in reality (Dorfman et al. 1997; Menifield et al. 2001), I would not expect their speculations to be in-depth, discussing school violence as a social problem or the offenders as troubled individuals who need help.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: A majority of the Columbine articles will have a societal frame rather than individual, community, regional or international.

I expect to have similar findings to Chyi and McCombs (2004) regarding the framing of the articles on Columbine. In their study of media salience and media coverage of Columbine, they found that 52% of the 170 stories they found in *The New York Times* had a societal frame, meaning that the articles focused on nation-wide interests. Because I am replicating this part of their project I expect to have similar findings; however, I am not going to include editorials although Chyi and McCombs (2004) did include editorials for their analysis.

Hypothesis 2: The front page articles will contain more graphic pictures and use episodic reporting and sensationalized words to describe Columbine more than non-front page articles in order to attract the most number of readers.

In their analysis of urban and rural school violence reporting in several newspapers including *The New York Times*, Menifield et al. (2001) found, “the newspapers sought to capture the attention of the audience with glaring headlines and then to elicit sympathy for those involved by running front-page pictures with intense captions” (p. 458). I believe that this research will have the same outcome as that of Menifield et al. (2001), especially because Columbine was the worst case of school violence in history.

Methods

Content Analysis

Content analysis was done using the New York Times Historical database. The articles were found by conducting an advanced search for “Columbine” OR “Littleton” in the citation or document text of articles for each of the 30 days following April 20, 1999. From April 21 to May 20, 1999, 130 articles appeared in *The New York Times* that discussed Columbine. Editorials and letters to the editor were excluded from the analysis due to their highly opinionated nature. Also, the basis on which these editorials and letters are selected is unknown; there are many more written than are published. Articles that did not directly discuss Columbine but mentioned the event (and otherwise would not have been written if it were not for Columbine) were analyzed in addition to the articles that directly focused on Columbine. Examples of these articles include discussion of the gun control debate, bomb threats at schools across the United States, bomb threats at schools across the United States or articles about the effects of violence in the media.

In order to gain rich descriptive information on school violence reporting in *The New York Times*, the articles were analyzed using the following criteria: date, location in paper (front page or not), headline, whether or not crime data were included and the type of data, focus of article (individual, community, regional, societal or international), words used to describe the Columbine incident, whether or not the offenders and/or victims of Columbine were discussed, number of words in article, number of pictures used and whether or not the article attempted to explain the cause of the event. The focus measure was taken from research done by Chyi and McCombs (2004). Chyi and McCombs (2004) established that an article with an individual focus concentrated on individuals such as the offenders, victims or their families. A community-oriented article focused on Littleton, Columbine High School or any other community across the nation. The article was coded as regional if it focused on Colorado, the Denver area or any other state or region. An article coded as societal discussed national interests, and lastly, international articles focused on events in other countries. This research deviated slightly from Chyi and McCombs’ (2004) criteria for community and regional focused articles. In this research, an article from a different area of the country was coded as regional even if the article focused on a community in another part of the United States; whereas, Chyi and McCombs (2004) chose to code it as community. Only articles that discussed Columbine or Littleton were coded as community in this research.

After the data were collected, the “explanation of cause” category was coded. If an article speculated the cause of the event, the response was then coded into one of five categories. The categories include: guns (weak gun laws, gun availability), cliques, violent media (video games, movies, music, internet), a combination of factors (could be the aforementioned causes or other factors) and lastly a category for “other” which included examples such as psychiatric disorders, suburban design or children not being screened for emotional instabilities. If an article focused on the gun debate (weak gun laws, etc.) while citing the incident at Columbine, it was implied that the speculation of cause was guns. Thus the article did not have to directly claim that weak gun laws were the cause of Columbine.

The number of pictures category ranged from 0 to 12 and was recoded into “having” or “not having” pictures because the specific number of pictures was not important. The descriptive words that were recorded for each article were coded based on the degree of seriousness. On a scale from one to ten, each article’s descriptive words were rated with ten being the most descriptive and inciting, and one being the least descriptive and inciting.

Furthermore the data was recoded into “0” if it had no descriptive words, “1” for words ranging from two to five on the original scale, and “2” for words ranging from six to ten on the scale. For example, words such as “bloody rampage” and “carnage” were coded as a ten, while words such as “jocks, preps and trench coat mafia” were coded as a two. In one of the articles, a quote from a classmate of one of the killers stated that Dylan Klebold was a “nut case.” Although the statement is quite derogatory, it was only coded as a three due to the varying degree of words used to describe the incident at Columbine.

The date was also recoded into three categories: “0” for the first ten days following Columbine (April 21-30, 1999), “1” for the next ten days (May 1-10, 1999) and “2” for the last ten days following Columbine (May 11-20, 1999).

Analysis of School Violence Trends

The other portion of this research compared the number of school violence related articles in *The New York Times* with the actual school violence rates for each year from 1992 to 2002. Data from the 2004 *Indicators of Crime and Safety* were used to compare school associated violent deaths with the actual number of school violence articles in *The New York Times*. The rate of nonfatal crimes (violent crimes and theft) among youth at school was also graphed and compared to the number of articles appearing in *The New York Times*. The following definitions were taken from the 2004 report.

School-associated violent deaths include a homicide, suicide, legal intervention, or unintentional firearm-related death in which the fatal injury occurred on the campus of a functioning elementary or secondary school in the United States, while the victim was on the way to or from regular sessions at such a school, or while the victim was attending or traveling to or from an official school-sponsored event. Victims included students, staff members, and other nonstudents (Table 1.1, “Indicator 1,” n.d.).

Serious violent crimes include rape, sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault. Violent crimes include serious violent crimes and simple assault. Total crimes include violent crimes and theft. “At school” includes inside the school building, on school property, or on the way to or from school (Table 2.2, “Indicator 2,” n.d.).

The purpose of this part of the investigation was to determine how representative newspaper reporting is of actual school violence rates. The search for articles may not have produced all the articles on school violence each year, but the search was consistent from year to year. Using the New York Times Historical database, articles were generated by searching for “school violence” in the document text of articles from January 1 to December 31 of each year. Due to the limited nature of the search engine, front page articles were not included in the search for articles. This among other search restrictions did not allow for a full list of articles on school violence related events. For example, I found 130 articles on Columbine in one month of 1999, but the latter search only produced 56 articles using “school violence” as the keyword. Consequently, articles that discussed school violence events but did not contain the words “school violence” in the document text were not included in the count.

Results

Content Analysis

Only 11 (8.5%) of the 130 articles contained crime data. The following crime data were founding the 11 articles.

Data used in reporting Columbine in The New York Times

1. 1997 Study by Journal of American Medical Association: states that enacted laws making parents liable if they don't store guns properly saw 23% decrease in number of accidental shootings of children
2. Bureau of ATF: 0.1% of dealers supplied 13,000 guns in crime in 1998
3. Center for Disease Control and Prevention: less than 1% of child homicides occur in or around schools
4. FBI: crime fell 7%; Dr. James Alan Fox: "school is safest place to be"
5. Michael Moore, attorney general of Mississippi: 12 children die a day
6. National School Safety Center in CA: school violence is rare and declining, less than 1% of schools in US had death on campus in last 7 yrs
7. National School Safety Center of Westlake Village, CA: school violence down from 5 years ago.
8. Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency: 19 bomb threats in 17 counties following Columbine
9. Research on 120 adolescent suicides; 90% had diagnosable psychiatric disorders
10. Research studies cited for finding some effects of media violence on children's behavior
11. Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher: 13 young people die due to violence each day

Although 11 out of the 130 articles used crime data to report school violence in the 30 days following Columbine, lines #5 and #11 above are very ambiguously stated. Do 12 children die a day in school? Due to the fact that this statement was reported in an article on school violence, it is not unreasonable to assume that some readers would believe that many of these violent deaths occur at school. The statement, "12 (or 13) young people die due to violence each day" does not fully describe adolescent violence. In fact, this line of thinking would be erroneous because statistical data provides evidence that, "Students are more apt to be victims of serious violent crime away from school than at or on the way to school" (School Crime Victimization, "Juveniles as Victims," n.d.).

Of the 130 articles found in *The New York Times* that covered Columbine, 18.5% of the articles were on the front page. On average, almost one article was printed per day on the front page of *The New York Times* following Columbine. For the 30 days following the incident, 24 (18.5%) of the articles were front page stories.

Using the criteria from Chyi and McCombs (2004) study of media salience and news coverage of Columbine, I found 16.2% of the articles contained an individual focus, 13.1% a community focus, 21.5% a regional focus, 46.9% a societal focus and 2.3% an international focus.

The next research question concerns what the article speculated as the cause for Columbine. Overall, 52% of the articles speculated a cause for the incident. Guns were the cause in 30.9% of the articles that speculated a cause. A combination of factors was discussed as the cause 27.9% of the time, while cliques and violent media were responsible 11.8% and 10.3% of the time, respectively. The "other" category yielded 19.2% of the explanations for Columbine.

The other category included such explanations as psychiatric disorders, suburban design or children not being screened for emotional instabilities.

Information regarding the offenders at Columbine along with the victims from the incident appeared at about the same rate in the articles. Twenty percent of the articles contained offender information and 21.5% contained information about the victims. Examples of offender or victim information include demographics, opinions of the offenders from anyone who knew them or reactions from victims and families to the Columbine incident.

The number of pictures for each article was also recorded during analysis. Almost 42% (54) of the articles had zero pictures, while the remaining articles had at least one picture. Forty percent (52) of the articles had one picture, 13.1% (17) had two, 2.3% (3) had three, 0.8% (1) had four, 1.5% (2) had five and 0.8% had 12 pictures. In addition to the number of pictures, a word count was taken from the New York Times Historical Database. The minimum number of words was 102, while the maximum was 3967. The mean was approximately 993 with a standard deviation of 530.

Table 1 presents the correlations of variables used in the logistic regression analysis. At the 0.05 level of statistical significance, speculation of cause and description of the incident were significantly correlated with an article being on the front page. Word count, offender information, victim information and whether or not there was a picture were correlated with front page articles at the 0.01 level of significance. Offender information and description of the incident were significantly correlated with the date ($p < .05$), while victim information was significantly correlated with the date at the 0.01 level. Word count was significantly correlated with speculation of cause ($p < .01$). Offender information, victim information and the picture variable were significantly correlated with word count at the 0.01 level. The picture variable ($p < .05$), victim information ($p < .01$) and description of the incident ($p < .01$) were significantly correlated with offender information. The picture variable was significantly correlated to victim information at the 0.05 level; the description of the incident, at the 0.01 level. Lastly, whether or not crime data were presented was significantly correlated with the picture variable at the 0.05 level.

Table 2 presents the logistic regression with front page (0=no, 1=yes) as the dependent variable. At the 0.01 level of significance an article with a picture was approximately 20.7 times more likely to appear on the front page than an article with no pictures. An article that did speculate a cause was 3.6 times more likely to appear on the front page than an article that did not ($p < .05$). Articles containing victim information were 5.7 times more likely to appear on the front page than articles that did not contain information on the victims of Columbine and was also significant at the 0.05 level. Because of the relatively small number of cases ($N=130$) I chose to include relationships significant at the 0.1 level: articles containing offender information were 3.7 times more likely to be located on the front page than articles that did not contain offender information. At the same level of significance, articles on the second ten days following Columbine (May 1-10) were 1.2 times less likely to be on the front page than articles written in the first ten days following the event.

Table 1
Correlation matrix with variables in the logistic regression model, N=130

	Mean	Std. Dev.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
(1) On front page	0.18	0.39	1								
(2) Date	0.65	0.77	0.12	1.00							
(3) Speculation of Cause; 0=none, 1=yes	0.52	0.50	0.18 *	0.02	1.00						
(4) Word Count	992.56	529.92	0.42 **	0.09	0.32 **	1.00					
(5) Offender information; 0=none, 1=yes	0.20	0.40	0.36 **	0.22 *	0.02	0.26 **	1.00				
(6) Victim Information; 0=none, 1=yes	0.22	0.41	0.38 **	0.32 **	0.10	0.34 **	0.49 **	1.00			
(7) Picture; 0=none, 1=yes	0.58	0.49	0.36 **	0.08	0.10	0.51 **	0.19 *	0.18 *	1.00		
(8) Description of incident; 0=no desc, 1=less desc, 2=more	0.30	0.64	0.18 *	0.18 *	0.06	0.13	0.31 **	0.28 **	0.13	1.00	
(9) Crime data present; 0=no; 1=yes	0.08	0.28	0.07	0.00	0.07	0.05	0.15	0.16	0.19 *	0.03	1

* significant at the .05 level
 **significant at the .01 level

Table 2

Logistic Regression with Front Page (0=no, 1=yes) as the dependent variable, N=130

Variable Name	B		Exp(B)
Date			
First 10 days (April 21-April 30) (reference group)		*	
Next 10 days (May 1-10)	-1.23769	*	0.290054
Last 10 days (May11-20)	0.534172		1.706035
Speculation of Cause; 0=none, 1=yes	1.288139	**	3.626033
Word count	0.000927		1.000927
Offender information; 0=none, 1=yes	1.306661	*	3.69382
Victim Information; 0=none, 1=yes	1.746094	**	5.732168
Picture; 0=none, 1=yes	3.029402	***	20.68485
Description of incident			
No description (reference group)			
Less descriptive	-0.3774		0.685639
More descriptive	-0.04025		0.960552
Crime data present; 0=no; 1=yes	1.391732		4.021809
Constant	-6.54179		0.001442
* significant at the 0.1 level			
**significant at the 0.05 level			
***significant at the 0.01 level			

Analysis of School Violence Trends

The second portion of the research involved comparing the number of articles on school violence in *The New York Times* with the actual amount of school associated violent deaths per year from 1992 to 2002. Nonfatal crimes against students from 1992-2002 were also compared with the number of school violence articles in *The New York Times*. Figure 1 shows the amount of school associated violent deaths per year with data from the *2004 Indicators of School Crime and Safety* conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (Table 1.1, "Indicator 1," n.d.). Figure 2 is a graph of nonfatal crimes against students age 12-18 per 1000 students (Table 2.2, "Indicator 2," n.d.). Figure 3 shows the number of articles appearing in *The New York Times* when searching for the words "school violence" in the document text of articles each year using the New York Times Historical Database.

When comparing the data from the three graphs, the number of articles on school violence in *The New York Times* is not representative of the actual occurrence of school associated violent deaths or nonfatal crimes against students. The peak number of articles on school violence appeared in 1999, the year of Columbine; however, school associated violent deaths and nonfatal crimes were low in 1999 relative to previous years. Also, take note that the number of nonfatal crimes greatly exceeds the number of school associated violent deaths in any year. Less serious crimes are more frequently occurring, yet it appears the media chooses to report the least frequently occurring incidents such as Columbine.

The results of this comparison of articles in the newspaper with actual crime data displays the randomness of reporting by the newspaper media. During the years when crime was higher in schools, the amount of reporting was down. The amount of articles on school violence clearly does not represent school violence in reality. In future examination of this comparison it would

be beneficial to use more than one newspaper from different areas of the country to get a more representative sample of articles on school violence. These findings are only preliminary.

Figure 1
School Associated Violent Deaths per Year, 1992-2002

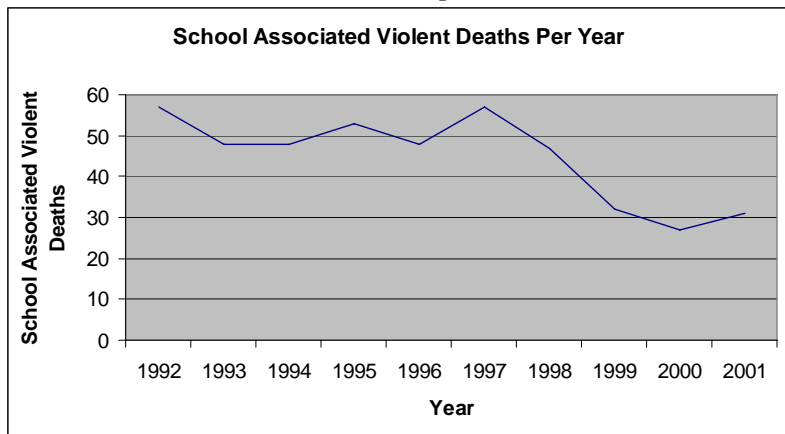


Figure 2
Nonfatal Crime for Students Age 12-18 per 1000 Students, 1992-2002

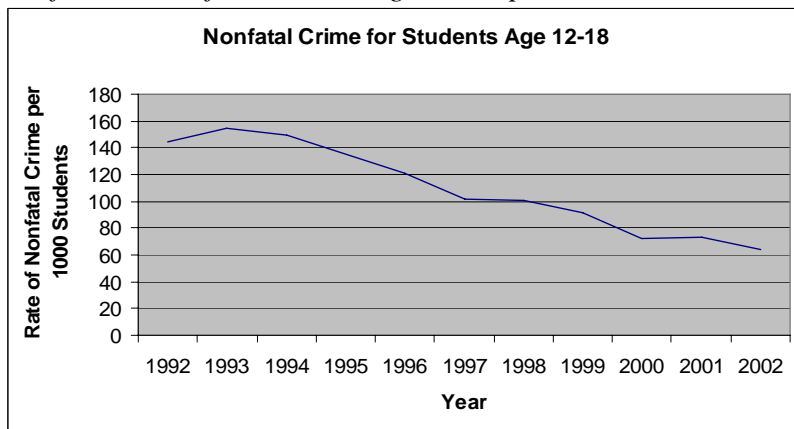
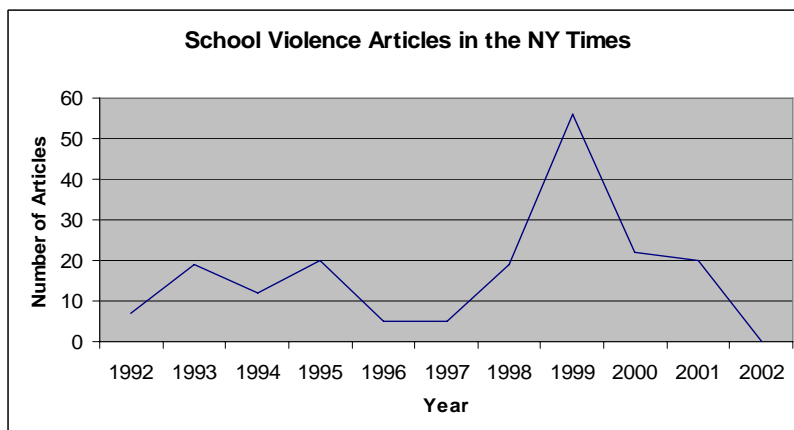


Figure 3
School Violence Articles in The New York Times, 1992-2002



Discussion and Conclusion

From this study we can conclude that *The New York Times* did not frequently report crime data in articles that covered Columbine for 30 days following the incident. Eleven of the 130 articles contained crime data and only one of the front page articles used crime data to report on Columbine. Just as Dorfman et al. (1997) found that episodic coverage was five times more prevalent than thematic coverage, the lack of crime data found in this study suggests similar findings. Incorporating crime data in articles on school violence provides a broader picture and allows the reader to better understand social issues such as school violence. In addition to the findings on crime data, more individual and community focused articles were on the front page (as opposed to not being on the front page) than regional, societal or international articles. Focusing on individuals or the community of Columbine or Littleton does not help to provide a broader view of school violence.

Besides the lack of crime data included in articles on school violence, it is also important to determine whether or not the reporting of school violence is representative of the actual rates of school violence. Donohue et al. (1998) sought to find the truth regarding school violence due to all the media hype over the issue; still, their research did not compare actual school violence with school violence in the media. In order to understand whether or not there is media hype over school violence, one must compare what is occurring in reality with what is reported. Menifield et al. (2001) compared the newspaper coverage of three rural school shootings and three urban school shootings using more than one newspaper for analysis which provided a more representative sample of the articles on the six school shootings they examined. They found more attention brought to the rural school violence incidents than to the urban school violence incidents. Although Menifield et al. (2001) research looks at specific characteristics of school violence (urban vs. rural) and this research takes a broader look at school violence, their results concur in part with the findings of this study that school violence in the media is not representative of school violence in reality. By comparing Figures 1, 2 and 3 from the data on school violence trends, school violence articles in *The New York Times* are not representative of school associated violent deaths or nonfatal crimes between 1992 and 2002.

The focus of the articles on school violence is important due to the effect the focus of an article may have on public perception. The criteria for this analysis of the framing of the article were based on research done by Chyi and McCombs (2004). In their examination of school violence articles in *The New York Times*, Chyi and McCombs (2004) based their findings on 170 articles including editorials. They found 17% had an individual frame, 29% had a community frame, 2% had a regional frame, 52% a societal frame and only 1% an international frame. The main discrepancy between this research and previous research done by Chyi and McCombs (2004) was with regard to the community and regional frames. Chyi and McCombs (2004) found 29% of the articles having a community frame while this research found only 13.1% with a community focus. Chyi and McCombs (2004) found only 2% of the articles to have a regional frame while this research, 21.5%. The coding for community and regional focused articles was different in this research than in Chyi's and McCombs' (2004) research which would explain part of the difference in results for these two categories. Another explanation is due to the fact that Chyi and McCombs (2004) chose to include editorials in their analysis which could have accounted for some of the community articles they found.

According to the results of this study and previous research, Americans may be misled to believe that school violence is more frequently occurring than it really is. The lack of crime data

and the strong focus on isolated events do not provide an accurate view of school violence. Regarding school violence,

Americans are not just misinformed, but are in many cases exponentially misinformed, by the hyperbole that too often follows school shootings. Americans don't know what they know about youth violence from personal experience, they know what they know about youth violence from the media. Most Americans report they get most of their information about violence from television (DeJong, 1999). As it turns out, the media has been a very poor teacher (Brooks, Schiraldi, & Ziedenberg, 2000).

Through this research, I wanted to examine actual school violence as compared to the media presentation of school violence. This provides a clearer picture of the real problems that adolescents face. By focusing all of our attention on isolated incidents such as Columbine, we divert energy from more important problems that teenagers face such as binge drinking, traffic crashes and other accidents which in total account for 42% of teenage deaths, explains Dr. John D. Graham, director of the Center for Risk Analysis at the Harvard University School of Public Health (Stolberg, Washington, 1999).

Limitations to this Research

In order to gain a broader understanding of school violence in the media, further research should examine more than one incident of school violence in more than one source of news media. More importantly, the television news media should be examined because it reaches more people than print news and there is probably more of an effect on public perception when one can see and hear the news. In addition to examining school violence in multiple sources of news media, it would be important to know what types of policies have been made regarding school violence and how effective they have been. It would also be reassuring to know that policies have been implemented based on real crime data and not simply on the basis of the coverage of isolated school incidents.

Implications: All the news that's fit to print?

Is anyone responsible for the way newspapers report school violence? It is easy to point the finger at the media; but they are only part of the problem. Newspapers should realize the effects of their reporting whether it results in more school violence, ineffective policies or copycat threats as described in the research by Kostinsky et al. (2001). Students may also be affected as Brener et al. (2002) and Addington (2003) found that students may be more afraid of victimization or attending school following the reporting of school violence incidents such as Columbine.

The media is not solely responsible for the effects of school violence in the media. The general public should cautiously review the information they receive from the media. If we become intolerable to the type of reporting that pervades the articles on school violence, the news media will have to change their reporting style to attract readers/viewers who have become more demanding for news that is more representative. Aside from the average American, policy makers should be aware of the misrepresentation of school violence in the media. However, even if they are mindful of the misrepresentation of violence in the media, the pressure from citizens to be tough on crime may induce politicians to strive only to satisfy their constituents even if that means inefficiently dealing with crime. For example, Governor James Gilmore (R) from Virginia proposed reducing the amount of nighttime athletic events to prevent an increase

in violence despite the fact that numerous criminologists have advocated the importance of after school programs for creating a safe environment for children (Donohue et al. 1998).

So, are we getting the whole picture regarding school violence? According to this study and previous research, we are not being fully informed. The incorporation of crime data in more articles along with more thematic coverage on school violence would help provide a better understanding of the problem we face regarding adolescent violence. We can't control the type of reporting the media uses to discuss school violence because that would infringe on their right to free speech; however, as a responsible organization, they can choose to report news in a morally acceptable way knowing that the effects of their reporting can be costly.

...Our society must address the problem of crime and violence in an informed and rational manner, making decisions based on documented empirical evidence rather than on distorted media images. Strategies and policies that are clearly ineffective and self-defeating must be discarded. Obviously the first step...is to educate ourselves about the reality, not the rhetoric, of the problems of crime and violence (Alvarez & Bachman, 2003, p. 10).

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