

# Youth Crime, Moral Panics, and the News: The Conspiracy Against the Marginalized in Canada

Bernard Schissel

## Introduction

CANADA'S WAR ON CRIME, SIMILAR TO THAT IN MANY OTHER COUNTRIES, IS quickly becoming a war against youth. From varying proposals to reintroduce the death penalty for young killers to the implementation of mandatory boot camps for all young offenders, Canadian society is embarking on a crusade to increase punishment for children, ostensibly in the hope of curbing crime. The focal point for this neoconservative-based law-and-order campaign is the Young Offenders Act. Critics of the act argue that it is too lenient, that youth are not deterred because of the soft punishments determined by the act — in favor of excessive human rights provisions — and that the act releases adolescent dangerous offenders into the society to become adult offenders.

The generalized law-and-order mindset in Canada, which currently typifies many other countries, seems to stand in contradistinction to the overall principles of Canada's Young Offenders Act (YOA), wherein prevention and rehabilitation are constructive and punishment and criminalization are ultimately destructive to the young offender and to the society. The act, as a progressive, libertarian, and compassionate approach to youth, attempts to use community-based noncarceral alternatives to formal punishment, to provide rather short-term maximum sentences for even the most dangerous offenders, to minimize labeling through ensuring anonymity via publication bans, and to provide that the civil rights of the young offender are met through adequate legal and parental representation in court.

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**BERNARD SCHISSEL** is a Professor in the Department of Sociology, 9 Campus Drive, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada S7N 5A5; e-mail: schissel@sask.usask.ca. He works in the areas of youth crime and justice and social control and his current works include *The Social Dimensions of Canadian Youth Justice* (1993, Oxford University Press) and *Social Control in Canada: Issues in the Social Construction of Deviance* (with Linda Mahood, eds.). This article is excerpted from a larger study of youth crime in Canada to be published in spring 1997 by Fernwood Publishing entitled *Blaming Children: Youth Crime, Moral Panics, and the Politics of Hatred*. The author is indebted to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Grant number 41-095-1532) and would like to thank the anonymous reviewers, as well as Wendy for her generous reading of this work.

Fiscal realities, however, have left the goals of the YOA unmet in many respects. Programs and organization systems that were supposed to replace the formal justice system are poorly realized and police and court officials are left with little alternative but to use the formal legal code in ministering to young offenders. The state's inability to support the spirit and intent of the YOA has given right-wing political movements ample fodder for their "we told you so" agenda. With the rise of street kids (a social/political problem, not a criminal phenomenon) and with a profusion of highly publicized violent crimes committed by youth, the "war on young offenders" is a *cause célèbre* that politicians seem unable to resist.

I contend that we are on the verge of an acute "moral panic" in this country that, if allowed to continue, will result in the sweeping indictment of adolescents, especially those who are marginalized and disadvantaged. The result will be the continuing scapegoating of youth for political purposes and, as is the irony of punishment, the alienation of a more uncompromising, more disaffiliated youth population. It is hardly insightful that if you increase punishment to any living organism, you greatly increase the likelihood of violence and alienation. Despite the hollow political rhetoric to the contrary, Canadians scarcely consider children a valuable resource. In fact, we consider them to be one of our most dangerous threats.

Interestingly, many of the panics that typified the 1960s and 1970s appear today in similar form, if not content. As described by a newly developing body of current literature on moral panics (Kappeler, Blumberg, and Potter, 1993; Painter, 1993; Jenkins, 1991), public perceptions of the degree and form of violent crime are largely inaccurate, exaggerated, and based on stereotypical accounts of youth subcultures: the gang. Overall, however, little attention has been paid to the moral outrage that has greeted all youth, not just identifiable gang members — although gang membership and race are often used to underscore the presumed violent and organized nature of youth crime. This is not to suggest that the moral panic surrounding youth crime is subtle or hidden. On the contrary, the attack on youth has been vocal, concerted, and politicized, fostered by the portrayal of idiosyncratic examples of youth crime as typical.

The existing public debates on youth crime, although largely uninformed, are able to focus public opinion and to effect social-control policy that stigmatizes and controls those who are most disadvantaged and most victimized. Further, with specific reference to youth crime, I wish to suggest that the primary effect of media and official accounts of youth crime is to decontextualize the act for public consumption, allowing those with direct access to discourse to direct and control public perception. The portraits of youth criminals that public crime accountants paint are largely portraits of nihilistic, pathological criminals who act alone or as members of gangs, criminals who are devoid of ethical ballast.

The decontextualization of youth crime, however, intentionally ignores a fundamental consideration in understanding crime; most repeat young offenders

and their families are victims of socioeconomic forces and they are more than likely to be repeatedly victimized as clients of the systems of law, social welfare, and education. Ultimately, the discourse serves political movements both informally and formally.

As political movements come to terms with their “terror of adolescence,” the debates seem to coalesce around the suffering of those who are victims of violent crime. The fear of crime that seems to be forever increasing is a powerful personal and political emotion. Ironically, the fear of kids in Canada has been fuelled by two phenomena that are largely the result of business as usual. First, part of the problem has been the increased visibility of young people in public places. As industry “rationalizes” production by reducing employment costs, youth unemployment rises, as high as 30% in some areas in Canada. Simply put, more youth have increasingly more idle time and the work that is available is poorly paid, bereft of benefits, and offers little in terms of meaningful apprenticeship. The typical employee at fast food chains is the adolescent, the typical wage is at or just above minimum wage, the work is typically hard and quite dangerous, and the typical benefits package is nonexistent. Furthermore, the building of centralized shopping centers is not done with community solidarity in mind, but is merely the result of profit considerations. That adolescents gather in such places is neither anathema to profit, nor is it discouraged by private interests. Yet the presence of youth in places such as shopping malls fuels the panic that kids are loitering with intent.

Second, people gain their images and opinions about the nature and extent of crime through the media. In Canada, much of our vicarious experience with youth crime is filtered through television. Television news, much of which teeters on the edge between fact and fiction, is highly sensational, selective to time and place, and focuses primarily on the bad. I argue below that such depictions are not based on reality, but rather on the wants of a presumed audience. All forms of news accounts, though they are mandated to be based on an objective reality, are largely based on consumer demand.

What we are left with, then, is a gulf between reality and perception. The reality is that youth are mostly disenfranchised from the democratic process at all levels of governance. They are disadvantaged in the labor market and have few services available to them unlike the adult world. When they do break the law, they victimize other youth who are like them. Furthermore, youth crime has not increased significantly, although the prosecution of youth crime has.

This reality stands in stark contrast to the singular collective perception that kids are out of control, are more dangerous now than ever, and that youth crime is expanding at an alarming rate. How, then, do we explain the existence of a belief system that moralizes and condemns children in the face of contradictory evidence? Are we, as a society, so uncertain about our ability to raise children that we constantly question the culture of youth? Or, are we, in a world created by and based around adults, so unfamiliar with adolescent norms and social conventions

that we are frightened by the unfamiliar? Are there larger structural forces at work that construct, communicate, and perpetuate a belief system that benefits those who have access to avenues of power and indicts and disadvantages those who live on the margins of political, social, and economic society?

In this article, I analyze society's collective disintegrating faith in children by studying the role of the media and its affiliations with information/political systems, with its readers/viewers, and with corporate Canada. I contend that public panics are predictable in that they have little to do with a criminogenic reality and much to do with an economic and political context in which they arise. Furthermore, crime panics are targeted at vulnerable, marginal, and identifiable people who occupy social categories that are based on race, gender, class, and geography.

In fact, a critical analysis of media coverage brings us to a particular political moral position; the public's perception of seriousness of crime is largely a matter of race, real estate (incorporating class and area), and family constitution. To extend this critical criminological position, I argue that the youth panic is a coordinated, calculated attempt to nourish an ideology that legitimates a society stratified on the bases of race, class, and gender and that the war on kids is part of the state-capital mechanism that continually reproduces the social and economic order (Hall et al., 1978; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). In the following section, I offer critical theoretical positions that are most useful in analyzing and understanding the phenomenon of child-hating.

### **Theoretical Issues**

Two general theoretical issues inform this work. The first falls under the broad rubric of social constructionism and assumes that public images of acceptable behavior, as well as the appropriate penalties for violations of social norms, are highly variable, as is the definition of "normal" behavior. As a result, what constitutes deviant behavior changes over time and across social groups and societies. The social construction approach is informed largely by historical studies that track changing modes of social control. Moreover, it is almost axiomatic that moral panics occur in troubled times. As we observe the public and political venom that is directed toward children and youth, and as we contextualize youth misconduct in the structure, the culture, and the family of contemporary society, we are left with the gnawing question of "what is going on" at this particular time. Our focus, then, is how power operates in defining and sanctioning virtuous and evil behavior among youth. The second theoretical concern attempts to understand the origins and intent of such power. The presumption is that fear, in its collective manifestation, becomes highly politicized as it is manipulated either inadvertently or deliberately for political and economic ends.

The specific theoretical positions, I suggest, that help make sense of the paradox between child victimization and child blaming include postmodern deconstructionism, feminist criminology, and traditional political economy.

*Postmodern Deconstruction Theory*

The discourse analysis domain of postmodernism is based on the methodological position that “deconstruction tears a text (all phenomena, all events, are texts) apart, reveals its contradictions and assumptions” (Rosenau, 1992: *xi*). The questions that arise include: What are the hidden messages that “objective journalism” conveys? Who are the originators of such ideological communiques and how do they make claims to legitimacy? Further, who are the expressed and insinuated targets of the social/political attack?

From my research, the manifest messages are clearly that the society is too lenient with children and that the only way to restore order and appropriate conduct is to become “tough” on law and order. The associated belief is that kids are inherently evil and that discipline and punishment are essential in the creation of normal, law-abiding children. The latent messages are much more damning. Youth who break laws belong to certain racial and ethnic categories, are born and raised in the lower socioeconomic strata of the society, their families are feminized, and their lack of morality stems from their socioeconomic positions in society. Simply put, the messages indict poverty and endorse wealth, and blame the poor for being poor. They condemn mothers almost exclusively for poor parenting and censure cultural difference as criminogenic.

The work of Foucault (1980) is particularly instructive in understanding the nature of the discourse surrounding young offenders. Foucault argues that historically, specific discourses constrain the ways that people produce knowledge. Modern political discourse controls the way in which the new media speak about young offenders by restricting the debates to individual or family-based accounts of the origins of crime. Rarely are the explanations based on structural inequalities or the injustice of people living on the margins of society. As Foucault has suggested, the discourses of historical periods are constrictive; they are rules under which “talk” can be carried out. It also appears that the modern discourse of youth crime and punishment is restricted to accounts based on individual blame. This contemporary medical/psychological discourse of goodness and badness sets youth crime in a context of orthodox criminology: individuals gone wrong, either inherently or culturally. Further, the underlying ideological position is that society is structured correctly and that individuals who offend are individually or socially pathological and identifiable.

In his treatises on power and knowledge, Foucault was generally unconcerned with the origins of discourses and what interests they served. Typical of postmodern orientations, his approach to the study of the social construction of truth focuses on how power and knowledge operate, and not on what discourses mean, but rather on what makes them possible. This approach, as a consequence, leaves us with the crucial problem of who controls the images of youth, who benefits from biased and incriminating portraits of offenders, and why certain categories of people are the

targets of journalistic and political abuse. To answer these questions, we need to turn to the critical feminist and political economy-based theories of knowledge as it relates to criminality.

*Feminist Theory and the Indictment of Women*

While feminism, as a generic theoretical position, is highly complex and multidimensional, feminist studies in general address the structure of society as disadvantageous to women. In hierarchical societies, men generally inhabit positions of privilege and domination over women. Furthermore, in such patriarchal societies, women and men live in different experiential worlds and the knowledge that underpins our understanding of gender issues is largely produced by men and is based on stereotypical and distorted ideas about women and men. Importantly for this article, these stereotypical “sexist” images are reproduced in the media and in academic institutions. I will show below how news media depictions of youth crime as it relates to race and poverty include conventional notions of gender that indict women and are often supported by the “legitimated” claims of academic or political experts.

These male-produced, stereotypical gendered constructions about youth crime generally focus on what constitutes appropriate female behavior. It is at this juncture that feminist scholarship is especially important to the study of Canada’s moral panic about youth. When female youth are targeted, the depictions are couched in “paradox talk.” It is so unusual for girls to act aggressively or antisocially that bad genes must be at work. The “sugar and spice” understanding of femaleness is often the standard upon which young female offenders are judged and, in effect, the produced images are presented as biological anomalies that are especially sinister.

The second way that women are included and loathed in media accounts of youth crime is through speculations about the causal origins of delinquent behavior. Specifically, the references are to “feminist women” trying to be more like men, or to the inability of single mothers to raise “normal children” in the confines of the “abnormal family” living in conditions of privation. Importantly, the “family values” reference that has become so much a part of the conservative political creed is infused with references to the functional two-parent heterosexual family and to the importance of male discipline and male role models. Interestingly, on the bases of empirical evidence on street youths and youth who have been in contact with the courts, single-parent families show little correlation with law-breaking behavior, although living a life of poverty, which is often typical for single mothers, is a predisposing condition to contact with the law. Problems resulting from structural inequality and the potential unfairness of a market-based economy are transposed to problems of mothering.

*Class, Power, and the Immorality of Poverty*

The final theoretical orientation that directly addresses the issues of domination by powerful people over less-powerful people as a primary focus can be subsumed under the broad category of political economy or Conflict Criminology. This theoretical position is concerned not only with the nature of the production of images of youth, but also with understanding the creators of those images and those who are advantaged and disadvantaged by the social construction of knowledge. Quite obviously, the media are partly responsible for the creation and reproduction of the stratified socioeconomic order by creating images of good and evil that are attached accordingly to preferred and nonpreferred categories of people. Yet,

The media, then, do not simply “create” the news; nor do they simply transmit the ideology of the “ruling class” in a conspiratorial fashion.... [I]n a critical sense, the media are frequently not the “primary definers” of new events at all; but their structured relationship to power has the effect of making them play a crucial but secondary role in reproducing the definitions of those who have privileged access, as of right, to the media as “accredited sources” (Hall et al., 1978: 59).

Hall and his colleagues took this political-economy position and applied it to the moral panics surrounding “mugging” in England in the 1960s and 1970s. They illustrated how the raw materials of crime facts get filtered to the media and are produced as “factual” stories that ultimately serve to reproduce the ideologies of powerful people.

The obvious question that emanates from critical, structural studies of the media, then, is why news definers and makers conform to the dominant ideology of a modern day “ruling class,” especially when the professed mandate of the media is objectivity and journalistic integrity. As we observe the ownership patterns of the Canadian news media, it is increasingly obvious that newspapers and newsmagazines are monopolized by a few major corporate interests. For example, at the time of this writing, Hollinger Corporation, owned by the Conrad Black empire, purchased all the major daily newspapers in the Province of Saskatchewan and all the daily papers in the Maritime provinces. Similar to what has occurred in other areas in Canada, this monopolization of the news media resulted not only in the dismissal of employees, but also in the abolition of certain areas of news coverage, “Women’s Issues” for example.

This converging corporate domination of the news creates narrowed comprehension and tolerance for issues that involve disaffiliated and marginalized people. Furthermore, the imminent threat of dismissal is a powerful compulsion for reporters to toe the corporate line. It is easily understandable how; if such monopolization can restrict the subject matter of the news, then it can also

determine the editorial slant and the constructed images of good and bad. The result is that the media ultimately present the ideas and fictions of a corporate class. These mental currencies, which are based on the ideas of superordinate people and are legitimated by the media as an objective communicator, eventually filter down to become the ideas of subordinate classes. The constructed images of goodness and badness that we see in media portraits of young offenders become the bases of the moral framework for the entire society.

The legitimacy of the moral framework thus created is maintained not only by the ownership of the news, but also by the credibility of the news. Specifically, only a certain type of individual is accredited with the ability to comment on issues of badness and goodness. Moreover, it is little coincidence that the primary commentators in news reports are generally professional, highly educated people who are obviously highly placed in the socioeconomic system. Most often, etiological accounts of youth crime are created and endorsed by judges, lawyers, police officers, university professors, doctors, and businessmen. As Foucault (1980), Cohen (1985), and others have argued, the credibility of these people results largely from their assumed superior knowledge and their links to science, in this case forensic and legal science. Part of their appeal, then, is their unique access to the exclusive languages of law and science that, to an uninitiated public, seem mystical, inaccessible, and, by definition, correct. It is also no coincidence that the legitimate speakers are drawn from the higher echelons of society. Their understandings of crime and punishment, as a result, are largely based on the values and morals of a typical ruling class. Marx' aphorism that "the ruling ideas of any age are the ideas of its ruling class" is especially powerful when we consider the socioeconomic origins of "legitimate experts." Rarely are media accounts based on the insights and knowledges of marginalized or underclass people.

The final method through which the ideas of dominant people are translated into dominating ideas is through the selective processing of news. Hall et al. (1978: 60) argue that:

Not every statement by a relevant primary definer in respect of a particular topic is likely to be reproduced in the media; nor is every part of each statement. By exercising selectivity, the media begin to impose their own criteria on the structured "raw materials" — and thus actively appropriate and transform them.... [The] criteria of selection — a mixture of professional, technical, and commercial constraints — served to orientate the media in general to the "definitions of the powerful."

On this point, I would agree with the authors and the work in this article lends support to their thesis. The authors, however, go on to state that:

each paper's professional sense of the newsworthy, its organization and technical framework (in terms of numbers of journalists working in



particular new areas, amount of column space routinely given over to certain kinds of news items, and so on), and sense of audience or regular readers, is different. Such differences, taken together, are what produce the very different “social personalities of papers” (p. 60).

My research departs from the work of Hall and his associates on this point. For as I have argued, the stories, the visual and verbal images, and the scientific accounts of youth crime are remarkably similar and constructed around a rigid set of journalistic/ideological rules. The newspapers and newsmagazines, with some differences in the extent of inflammatory rhetoric, could be interchanged quite easily, with little change in content or intent. Hall et al. (1978) do concede, however, that despite the different languages of newspapers, the accounts occur within certain ideological constraints. I would add that the constraints are so strong that the languages are one and the same.

### The Media

As Marshall McLuhan (1962: 193) has cautioned, “the owners of media always endeavor to give the public what it wants, because they sense that their power is in the *medium* and not in the *message* or the program.” This suggests that the television, radio, and print media are so ambient that they are “staples or natural resources, exactly as are coal and cotton and oil.... That our human senses, of which all media are extensions...configure the awareness and experience of each one of us” (*Ibid.*: 35). In turn, news producers give us what they think we want to hear and not necessarily the facts. The media have the power to construct slanted or fictional accounts of real-life incidents by decontextualizing and simplifying the news. The resulting depictions are presented as unambiguous, binary accounts of good and evil, at best that which we supposedly want to hear and at worst all that we are capable of understanding.

Ultimately, the media provide the discourse for understanding things that happen in the real world. According to Postman (1985), television is the modern medium that establishes the tools for viewing, reading, and understanding:

We are now a culture whose information, ideas, and epistemology are given form by television, not by the printed word.... Print is now merely a residual epistemology, and it will remain so, aided to some extent by the computer, and newspapers and magazines that are made to look like television screens (*Ibid.*: 28).

The importance of seeing television as an epistemological device is that the advent of television is a watershed period in human history marking the point at which we no longer needed to pay attention, at least for lengthy periods of time. Television made it possible to ingest brief images of news without having to spend time doing so. The impact of the shortened attention span is that we are unreceptive

to contextualized accounts. For example, when we read oversized alarmist headlines or see pictures in magazines of kids wielding guns, these images often satiate our interest. Postman and others have argued that television has done this to us, that it has created a discourse of abbreviated images and messages from which we cannot escape.

Although I agree that television circumscribes public discourse in the modern world, I part company somewhat with authors like Postman and McLuhan since other types of media adjust to the visual discourse of electronic media and simulate a typographic television. Magazines, newspapers, and now even the Internet use television techniques to sell their message. The fundamental consideration in the age of television is that what we see and read must entertain. This has profound implications for the print news media. Its primary function, in competition for the attention of the viewing/seeing public, is to use journalistic “facts” in an entertaining context, now an enduring feature of modern print news media accounts.

Because of the highly competitive nature of “the news,” a vast and expanding body of discursive techniques has arisen, the most recent being the Internet, which permits access to international images and accounts in seconds. Much like the truncated portraits typical of television, the Internet news sources are necessarily brief, often accompanied by photographs, and often unabashedly biased. Yet we need look no farther than the grocery store checkout stand or magazine rack to see that the print medium has proliferated despite the ubiquity of television and that the “new typography” is more photography than print in its attempts to emulate television. Within television itself, intense competition for the public’s news attention creates various forms of accounts, ranging from docudramas, daytime talk shows (that purport to deal with real-life issues), “true crime” shows (in which the camera follows law enforcement officials), and actual courtroom eavesdropping, to the ultimate technique exemplified by the O.J. Simpson phenomena, the real-life soap opera.

Despite this profusion of discursive vehicles, my focus here is on newspapers and newsmagazines, principally because these two media have not diminished, but instead have changed in form and content to compete in the electronic era. The use of the tabloid style of newspaper is an attempt to make the newspaper physically easier to handle on the bus, in the car, or standing on the street corner — situations that allow only brief periods of time to see and ingest the news. Furthermore, magazines of all stripes, including newsmagazines, proliferate in the waiting rooms of public places, including the offices of doctors, dentists, mechanics, hairdressers, and lawyers, to name a few. Although these may appear to be banal examples of access to news discourse, I contend that the accounts found in the magazines reach a wide audience and are viewed in a very cursory way. Given the short time span for viewing/reading, the visual images become the most influential components of the magazines.

This position thus suggests that the print media are still profoundly influential. Importantly, with respect to the images of youth studied in this research, the photographs and headlines are the elements the cursory reader sees and likely remembers. The short attention span of the modern reader is vulnerable to images that are necessarily simplistic and decontextualized. A television-based discourse provides “news” accounts of crime that can only be taken and understood out of context; crime becomes fiction.

To understand the phenomena of constructed crime, it is important to suggest that the media respond to the pressure of supply and demand in producing news for mass consumption. Though not terribly insightful, this fact gains significance with the added twist that by creating sensationalist accounts of real-life incidents, supposedly to appeal to the prurient desires in most readers/viewers, the media have exceptional political/ideological power. In the creation and promotion of sensationalist news accounts, the media create a world of us and them, of insiders and outsiders. As a consequence, stereotypical images of deviants and menaces are embedded in our collective psyches and these help form opinions about crime and punishment.

This position on the formative power of the media is more complex still. That the media have epistemological influence has been well voiced over decades (McLuhan, 1962; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Kellner, 1995), but this argument contradicts those made by media economists who contend that the media respond to the wishes of consumers following supply and demand. This supply-and-demand position tends toward the ordinary in its implication that people somewhat democratically control what they see and how they understand what they see. Although I grant that this position has some credibility, I feel quite strongly that the panics and hatred that modern society manifests regarding young people are at least partly the result of constructed, controlled, and knowingly decontextualized images of kids. In essence, *the print media’s depictions of youth criminals, as the new folk devils, are fraught with biased images of gender, class, and race/ethnicity.*

The following analysis of the print media is based on the argument that common-sense understandings of young criminals originate with fictionalized, distorted, and stereotypical accounts of young offenders and their socioeconomic affiliations. Furthermore, those who present these partial images have a two-dimensional vested interest, at once economic and ideological. In the following sections, I draw examples from my larger research project to illustrate how media discourse frames youth crime. The examples are intended to be characteristic of the messages that are common in Canadian news accounts of youth crime.

### **The Messages**

Typical depictions of youth criminals in the media readily reveal that categories for condemnation are poor families (living in poor communities), racially

based gangs (either recent immigrants or aboriginal Canadians), and single mothers and mothers who work outside the home. In sociological analyses, race, class, and gender often arise as categories and are those upon which discrimination and maltreatment are thrust. The phenomenon of the discursive creation of youth folk devils is no exception. The following two sections illustrate how race, class, and gender are intertwined in media accounts that indict certain people as responsible for youth crime.

### *Racialized Images of Youth Criminals*

It is noteworthy that in the Canadian justice system, law-breaking youth from nonwhite minority groups receive harsher treatment in the legal system than do their white counterparts. This disparate treatment occurs at levels of arrest, detention, access to counsel, conviction, and sentencing and is especially true for youths of aboriginal ancestry (*cf* Schissel, 1993). Furthermore, in Canadian society, minority-group youth, especially those of aboriginal ancestry, are relatively disadvantaged. They experience high rates of unemployment, low levels of educational achievement, low family incomes, and substandard housing (*cf* Wotherspoon and Satzewich, 1995). That negative images of minority-group youth appear in the print medium when they are already legally and socioeconomically disadvantaged is a paradox that illustrates the nature of oppression whereby those already victimized by the courts or the socioeconomic system are doubly victimized in the media.

Second, images of visible minority youth are often discussed in the context of the “gang.” In effect, the concept “gang” has become a linguistic referent that fosters powerful visceral reactions against visible minority youth and street kids. Further, when news accounts of gang activity discuss gang membership, rituals, and criminal activity, they either deliberately or inadvertently fail to discuss the social and economic reasons why kids congregate in rebellious groups and why affiliation is so important to young people. That few gangs exist in reality is neglected, as are the ethical implications of branding all youth who are in groups, especially in public settings like “the mall,” as potentially dangerous. Once one clears away the ideological smoke and mirrors, it is perfectly reasonable that almost all youth congregate in groups, either rigidly or loosely bound. When youth, especially those who do belong to rebellious gangs, are marginalized and disaffiliated by the larger society, they attempt to invest their lives with meaning through membership in a collective. Notwithstanding the probability that most adults prefer to congregate as well, the unspecific and unbound use of the term “gang” in media accounts contributes considerably to the public panic about kids out of control. One of the most insidious outcomes of such linguistic referencing is the targeting and scapegoating of visible minorities.

Most media accounts of youth gang activity in Canada have a deliberate racial referent. The most obvious example is the constant use of gang names, many of

which have a racial identifier. Although journalists and editors may argue that it is sound, objective, informative journalism to identify racial groups (and it may help to sell papers), the use of broad categorical linguistic devices like Black, Asian, or Native paints the entire racial category with the same brush and creates an unnecessary, unfounded, and generalized criminogenic referent to people of color. Examples include: “police raided the locker of a student at Jarvis Collegiate believed to be a member of the Asian Posse gang” (*Globe and Mail*, Toronto, Metro Edition, May 23, 1990: A1, A2); “Two native youths sniggered about their guilty pleas outside the courtroom here before sentencing” (*Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, May 31, 1989: A18); “she was surrounded by 10 native girls who pushed her to the ground, kicked her and punched her in the face and stole her leather bomber jacket” (*Alberta Report*, July 31, 1995: 25). These samples of the types of racial referents that occur in media articles may at first seem rather benign. However, the racial categories are very general, in some instances subjective, and the identification of race only serves to create associations between criminality and race. Consider the following “objective,” rather subtle racialized news reports:

- “New immigrants, especially Vietnamese, do make up a slightly higher proportion of youth gang members.” A few years ago, we had the Los Diablos and those Latin gangs in Vancouver. They effectively no longer exist, although some Latin people are still involved in criminal activity. However, they generally involved gangs of mixed-race composition (*Vancouver Sun*, February 3, 1994: B1).
- “Like all of Canada’s major cities, both Edmonton and Calgary have a growing Asian crime problem.” In Edmonton, where Vietnamese make up 35% of the Asian population, Vietnamese crime is the biggest threat (*Alberta Report*, October 26, 1992: 22).
- Another so-called gang calls itself the Los Votos Chicanos and is reportedly modeling itself after the Hispanic gangs of East Los Angeles. “Police say most youths in the Indian Posse and the Overlords are aboriginal, while the other two gangs are racially mixed” (*Winnipeg Free Press*, September 29, 1994: B1).

Probably the most blatant use of “word-based images” that I encountered was part of a series of articles in the *Winnipeg Free Press* dealing with Winnipeg’s burgeoning youth-gang problem. One of the articles, a full-page spread entitled “Angry, Bitter Kids Flex Their Muscles: An Outsider’s Guide to Youth Gangs” (*Winnipeg Free Press*, September 29, 1994: B1), contained a pictorial guide to the gangs in Winnipeg with a sketched portrait of typical gang members and a list of identifiable characteristics, including racial composition, which was either aboriginal or racially mixed. As an aside, it is noteworthy that when racial referents are unclear, the term used is “mixed-racial” or “racially diverse,” never white. This

particular article stands out and is especially malevolent in its use of a poem, written by an Indian Posse member, to describe the activities and the criminological orientation of aboriginal youth. The last line of the poem is reproduced as an emboldened headline: **“Your Racist Blood We Will Spill.”**

The use of this essentially pictorial device is noteworthy for several reasons. First, of all the sentiments expressed in the poem, the newspaper chose to use the one inflammatory statement as the headline, despite the fact that the poem contained many other important and socially significant sentiments. Second, the poem was centered in the middle of the page under the large heading “Bad Boys” and, after the primary headline, is the first thing the reader sees. If the cursory consumer sees only what is stark and highly visible, there is little reason to doubt that s/he will come away with a sense of fear and disdain for aboriginal youth.

Some of the most overt and most subtle forms of hatred are directed at woman and motherhood. Most of the depictions, however, are couched in circumspect language that often laments the states of privation in which many people live. When one looks deeper, the subtle images and messages imply that although poverty may not be a matter of choice, single mothers are responsible for their socioeconomic and marital conditions and are ultimately the most likely to produce criminal children through their own negligence. Rarely does the account mention the responsibility of the father, of the society in which women’s work is devalued and underpaid, or the underfunded system of social justice that herds kids in and out of the system in attempts to cope with diminishing resources. The offenders and victims are quite distinct and mothers who live below the poverty line clearly are constructed as inadvertent or deliberate offenders.

The last example in this section illustrates how race, class, and gender come together in media attempts to understand the social and personal origins of youth crime in a seemingly even-handed manner. Hidden prejudicial messages, however, come to light as the articles venture further into the realm of personal responsibility for crime. The following example, entitled “Neglected Kids Kill More Than Time,” illustrates how an article attempts to present a factual accounting of and for crime and ultimately places the blame for criminal behavior on the most vulnerable people in society. Importantly, the article omits any discussion of the structural origins of problem kids by focusing on abuse within the home, while failing to address why abuse occurs and why troubled families exist below the poverty line.

Any child can kill, but there is a disturbing trend among those who do. They are often abused, neglected, or unwanted. Their homes are run more like hotels, with parents not bothering if they check in or out. They wander the streets and wind up stealing car stereos or burglarizing homes — often because there’s nothing better to do. They don’t express their feelings, they grow up seeing people as objects and they can’t

differentiate right and wrong. And then they kill (*Calgary Herald*, August 9, 1990: C3).

Though this statement seems rather innocuous at first blush, it presents an alarmingly stereotypic view of youth crime. The chronological listing of the development of criminal behavior reads like a psychiatrist's report preceded by the alarmist and absurd statement that any child can kill. One thing necessarily leads to another: one patterned response produces emotional flatness, followed by murder. In this development of the killer personality, the blameworthy are without question the families, who don't want their children, who don't care where they are, and who abuse them. These stereotypes are numerous in news reports and I contend, in most cases, they are wrong.

In a short list of murders by youth that culminates in the following statement by unspecified "experts," the article raises the issues of race and poverty:

Criminologists and psychologists agree that raising a child who kills can happen to families from all walks of life, but families that are barely surviving — the welfare mom in East Vancouver, the newly arriving immigrant to Surrey — are more likely to see it in their homes (*Ibid.*).

At this point the article draws on public fears and stereotypes to make its point. The criminogenic families are single mothers and immigrants. The not-so-subtle implication is that these families produce killers, for that is what the article is about. Bold statements such as this are not only untrue and unsupported, but are also racist and sexist in their indictment of women and immigrants. The article finishes with a powerful statement by a criminologist who asserts that "you have someone in a high state of arousal, confusion, with the hormones percolating. They are very, very susceptible especially if they're from an unstable background" (*Ibid.*). The article has come full circle with a statement about the human condition — any child can kill — to a similar biodeterminist avowal that puberty and hormonal changes create lethal kids, especially minority-group kids who live in poverty.

In general, racial references serve both journalistic and ideological purposes. They promote the image of the young offender and his/her family as unlike the viewer/reader, and in doing so, they create identifiability in the stereotype of the young offender. Furthermore, such images play on already existing racialized biases in the community and use these biases to create anxiety in the reader. It is the alarm that sells and race-based images of gangs and visible minority mothers predominate in the news because they help sell particular accounts. More distressingly, they help formulate societal opinions and attitudes toward "young folk devils." I reiterate that the use of race as a category of identification — especially when it is done in a consistently selective manner — serves no social purpose other than to create negative associations between primordial characteristics and potential dangerousness.

*Poverty and the Crime of Welfare*

The general industry of criminal representation is based on subtle and embracing messages that the poor are not only responsible for crime, but that poverty is also crime. The isomorphic connection between poverty and badness is embedded in the codes of media discourse and the code words infiltrate what is essentially acceptable vernacular. For example, magazines and newspapers that carry accusatory articles about youth often target those who are dependent on social support. Welfare mothers, indigent and absentee fathers, youth on social support, and the able bodied who collect unemployment insurance all receive public censure through the voices of politicians and right-wing activists who gain access to the public's attention through the news media.

From an analytical perspective, it is the combination of being young and poor that surfaces in news-media discourse. The following newsmagazine excerpt is a consummate example:

Welfare dependency has also contributed to youth crime and family breakdown. Former Alberta crown attorney Scott Newark, now head of the Ottawa-based Canadian Resource Center for Victims of Crime, argues, "Welfare is not a responsible way of dealing with young people who can just as easily work." It invites trouble by creating a "lifestyle that is fundamentally anti-social. Idleness is not a good thing." Mr. Newark believes that if young males are forced to support themselves, most will find work and the time they have to contemplate criminal behaviour will evaporate.

Sociologist June O'Neill and Anne Hill of Baruch College of the City University of New York seem to have proven this empirically. In their study of inner-city poor, Professor O'Neill and Hill found that the higher the welfare payments, the greater the "negative effects on the behavior of young men by increasing the likelihood of fathering a child out of wedlock, criminal activity, and by reducing their attachment to the labor force." The duo ultimately concluded that "a 50% increase in the monthly dollar value of welfare benefits led to a 117% increase in the crime rate among young black men."

Such reasoning is, in part, behind Social Services Minister Mike Cardinal's announcement in early April that he wants the 29,000 singles still on welfare in Alberta to be off the rolls by the year 2000 (*Alberta Report*, May 2, 1994: 39).

The decontextualized logic presented as empirically true by two American professors provides the reader with a neat package that relates welfare, laziness, and criminality.



An article in the *Montreal Gazette* (July 18, 1993: C1) entitled “About 30 Kids a Year Charged with Murder” illustrates the visceral images that are created by word connections, in this case, murder and poverty. The article discusses how youth murder is a rare event and the writer acknowledges how the panic over youth murderers is exaggerated. It then discusses several murders and the ensuing “lenient” sentences that were received under the Young Offenders Act. A subtle attack on poor kids comes at the end, where a testimonial by a psychologist suggests that youth murders are so rare that it is difficult to make social or psychological generalizations about young murderers. Most importantly, however, this discussion is preceded by the suggestion that “if we really care about the poor kids, we should make sure they get the help they need when we send them to correctional facilities” (*Ibid.*), an ostensibly enlightened position. Although the article attempts to be even-handed and progressive, by implication it fuses youth murderers with poor children, a proposal that is entirely unsubstantiated. The result, however, is that while the reader is told to feel some understanding for young murderers, the text clearly generates revulsion and bewilderment and connects this “evil world” with poverty. The final testimonial in the article despairs that “most kids are subject to impulse, and that often results in something deadly” (*Ibid.*). Again, this alarming statement about the innate dangerous potential of youth (especially poor youth in the context of this article) is patently unsubstantiated, but gains credibility since it is voiced by a consulting youth psychologist with the title of Doctor accompanying his name. Much of the theoretical and historical work on knowledge, language, and power (see, for example, Foucault, 1980; Cohen, 1985) argues that the credibility of discourse often hinges on the professional and social status of the speaker. This case is typical, then, of accounts that strive for credibility by drawing on the “expert” knowledge of highly placed, highly educated, and, by social definition, highly credible individuals.

The next example illustrates how poverty, race, and geographical location are mixed into the codes for badness. The article was part of a series in the *Winnipeg Free Press* dealing with youth gangs (September 29, 1994: B1). Although the article presents detailed, graphic, and seemingly factual police and court accounts of the nature and composition of gangs and their activities, embedded within the text is a statement that frames the detailed accounts of gang-based crime. The statement asserts that the dangerous gangs are composed of aboriginal and racially mixed kids from poor and broken homes in the inner city, and it contains the admonition that “with Manitoba leading the nation in child poverty, it’s small wonder that the statistics also bear out in higher rates of crime” (*Ibid.*). Like previous examples, the connection between poverty (and in this case, race and geographical area) and crime is made early and it contextualizes the following descriptions in “culture of poverty” explanations that again indict the poor, the inner city, and racial minorities for creating their own problems. Although

statements such as the one in this article contain some truths, they are most damaging by omission since they neglect to contextualize crime problems in a social structure where people are given privilege on the bases of wealth, prestige, race, and gender. Like most media accounts, social ills are reduced in the final analysis to the individual or the group. Furthermore, such essentially biological or psychological determinist accounts are broad generalizations and, as a result, at no time reveal that the subcultures that they discuss are mostly law-abiding, that most violent and destructive youth crime is committed by only a few youths, and that despite all the disadvantages that a highly stratified society can impose on marginalized groups, these groups create vital communities that, in many instances, are obvious only because they come under society's closest scrutiny.

The examples used so far to highlight the condemnation of poverty illustrate how the discourse, especially against the poor, may be subtle and sporadic. The last example, however, shows how the subtlety and political correctness disappear in favor of a protracted, scathing allegation of cultural inferiority when the crime in question is such an affront to our collective morality. The case involving the murder of two-year-old James Bulger in Liverpool by two boys, both 10 years old, has gained worldwide publicity. The British press subsequently went on a rampage of blaming the underclass for the current social ills in Britain. Even when cooler heads prevailed, the overwhelming consensus in the British media was that unless the poor are dealt with, they will continue to be a social and physical threat to traditional British society. An article in the *Winnipeg Free Press* (March 18, 1993: D11) illustrates how this panic emigrated to Canada and was informed by the same type of ideological polemic. Though the article is about England, and the ravages that poor economic times can have on a society, it does engage in typical media discourse that conceptualizes the underclass as teetering on the verge of violent social insurrection. The article, entitled "Liverpool a Tinder-Box," quotes a local port worker to the effect that "we're horrified by a murder that can only have been done by the city's underclass, those rotten kids who can and won't work." A probation officer added that the "real problem is an underclass developing in this country who have not had experience of work or adequate access to training." The article typically relates the views of teachers and police representatives who believe the problem is simply one of poverty and declining morality — "we've always had a lot of property crime, especially in poor areas in Britain — now we're seeing 13-year-olds who don't see any problem with assaulting people." These rather scathing attacks are endorsed by the British Social Security Secretary, who is quoted as saying: "No social conditions can excuse a youth from robbing or murdering." By presenting a litany of uncontested statements, the article presents these subjective statements as conclusive facts. The issue of criminogenesis is left to the reader; the facts on which to base judgments are based on a series of public statements by professionals directed against poverty as a vice. Furthermore, by presenting second-hand statements, the editor and writer absolve themselves from

responsibility for the unsubstantiated attacks on the underclass while insinuating a sense of plausibility into the claims.

These examples of media discourse against the poor differ in several ways from the invectives against single mothers and racial minorities. Whereas articles against the latter categories are blatant and generic, the media discourse surrounding poverty is much more circumspect, laden with images of the poor as victims of economic circumstance, but all the while maintaining the posture that the poor, as a generic culture, are volatile and potentially criminal. Moreover, the poor are treated in a much more paternalistic manner than are women and racial minorities; generally, the sentiment is that the poor, while weak in both economy and spirit, need our help. For women and especially racial gangs, the sentiment is much more pointed and castigating, as if women and racial minorities are boldly and deliberately defying society's rules. Lastly, I would add as anecdotal evidence that articles dealing with youth crime and poverty rarely, if ever, use photographs depicting privation. For articles focusing on racialized and feminized crime, photographs of defiant minority gangs members or snapshots of poorly dressed or overweight mothers are commonplace. The reason for the absence of pictorial descriptions of poverty may be that they are too representative of the stratified world that the average citizen knows — and may lament — but chooses to ignore.

### **Conclusion**

It is easy to see that the moral panic against youth in Canada is an issue of power and social control. From a political-economy position, constructing images of crime and criminalization is a social control strategy that creates the illusion that the “dangerous class” is primarily located at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This illusion melds poverty and criminality and proposes them as the effects of moral inferiority. As a consequence, the “dangerous class” deserves both poverty and punishment. This overarching political-economy position is important for understanding the origins of hatred toward children. However, feminist theory and Foucauldian postmodernism/deconstructionism help round out a theory of the social construction of child-hating by focusing on the languages and fictions of criminality and morality. These two theoretical perspectives shed light on the power of discourse and discursive agents and also remind us of the importance of semiotics in understanding ideology.

The ideology of child-hating is subtle and is produced and reproduced in media accounts of race, class, and gender. It ultimately indicts identifiable groups that are already the least advantaged in a highly stratified society. Examples from the print media cited in this work are not unusual or selected. They are commonplace and are indicative of the ambient nature of fear of children and of the extent to which society will go to scapegoat the powerless and marginalized.

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