

CHAPTER 7

Super-Predators or Victims of Societal Neglect?

Framing Effects in Juvenile Crime Coverage

Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. and Shanto Iyengar

(Abstract here)

An impressive array of scholarly research demonstrates that language has a profound influence on human thought (see Carroll 1956; Seidel 1975; Sanford, 1987; Rosch 1973; Lakoff 1987). In the realm of political communication, the use of particular forms of presentation or modes of discourse (also known as "frames") -- strongly influences perceptions of public issues, events, and leaders (Iyengar 1991; Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992; Gamson 1992; Anderson 1996). For example, the public is more likely to endorse increases in government welfare spending when the beneficiaries are said to be "poor people" rather than "people on welfare" or "black people" (Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Gilens 1996; 1999; Gilliam 1999; Smith 1987).

Of course, the most common forum for the presentation of public issues is broadcast news. The overwhelming majority of broadcast news reports are "episodic" or event-oriented,

focusing on concrete acts or live events rather than general contextual material. Television news coverage of poverty, for instance, is much more likely to deal with the predicament of particular poor people than with current economic trends or social welfare policy issues (Iyengar 1991; also see Gilens 1996; 1999). A similar pattern has been noted in news coverage of terrorism; information about specific terrorist acts is not matched by information about the underlying historical, social or economic antecedents (Altheide 1987). In short, as depicted in television news programs, political issues are invariably particularized.

Few issues match crime for the pervasiveness of the episodic news frame; in network newscasts the ratio of episodic to thematic stories is approximately 9:1 (Iyengar 1991). The pattern is even more skewed in local television newscasts, the most frequently encountered form of news (Roper Starch Worldwide 1994). Local news coverage of crime is almost universally episodic (Budzilowicz 2002; Yanich 1998). In the Los Angeles media market the typical thirty-minute local newscast includes three reports on crime, cumulating to approximately four minutes (out of 12 minutes devoted to "news") of coverage (see Gilliam et al. 1996). In this respect at least, Los Angeles is not an outlier; one study of local news in fifty-six cities indicates that crime accounted for one-third of all broadcast news (Klite, Bardwell, and Salzman 1997).

In addition to the dominance of the episodic news frame, crime coverage is also characterized by two qualitative attributes -- an emphasis on violent crime and an interest in individual perpetrators and victims. As seen in the news, most crime is violent -- "if it bleeds it leads" is the order of business. In Los Angeles, for instance, while murders represent only

two percent of all felony crimes, stories about murders account for some 30 percent of crime news coverage (see Gilliam et al. 1996). Second, crime coverage also features information about particular attributes of the perpetrators and victims, in particular their race or ethnicity and age (Entman 1993; Gilliam 1998; Gilliam and Iyengar 2000). Race and ethnicity are clear visual cues, especially since news reports often feature photographs or composite sketches of the suspect and/or victim. While visual or verbal descriptions of suspects are typically less revealing of their age, higher rates of juvenile crime, however, are reflected by an increase in news coverage of youth gangs and gang-related criminal activity in which the suspects are either explicitly or implicitly described as juveniles or young adults (Gilliam et al. 2002).

We anticipate that public reaction to crime is heavily influenced by the news media's portrayal of perpetrators as racial minorities or juveniles (especially as gang members). More specifically, we expect that viewers' attitudes toward crime are not so much based on general principles, as by racial and age-related stereotypes.¹ Thus, we expect that if subjects are presented with otherwise-identical news reports on violent crime which feature alternatively white and nonwhite perpetrators, those subjects who are exposed to the nonwhite perpetrators version will express greater fear of crime and support for punitive criminal justice policies. Independently of the perpetrator's race, we expect similar results on the gang/non-gang dimension (i.e., higher levels of fear and punitiveness in the gang versions of the news story).

¹ The effect of these stereotypes on the formation of opinions about crime is similar to the influence of a particular speaker's message or agenda on public tolerance of the right to free expression (e.g., Sullivan, Pierson and Marcus 1982; McCloskey and Brill 1983; Sniderman 1996; Gibson and Gouws 1997) or to the effect of the

JUVENILES AND NON-WHITES AS "SUPER-PREDATORS"

Throughout the early and mid-1990s pundits warned of an impending youth crime epidemic (DiIulio 1995). To many observers (e.g., Bennett et al. 1996), the increasing frequency of juvenile violent crime signified that America was now home to a new breed of so-called "super-predators" -- amoral, radically impulsive, and brutally cold-blooded pre-adults who murder, assault, rape, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, engage in gang warfare, and generally wreak communal havoc (Bennett et al. 1996, p. 27; Berkman 1995). As proof, analysts noted that teenage homicides and violent crime arrests doubled between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s; the number of gun homicides tripled; and juvenile gang murders quadrupled (Bennett, DiLulio, and Walters 1996). Indeed, talk of violent, remorseless teen "superpredators" quickly became part of the public discourse. As criminologist James Fox observed, "Unless we act today, we're going to have a bloodbath when these kids grow up." (Quoted in Garrett 1995).

To be sure, the immediate surge of youth crime through the mid-1990s was concentrated among members of particular racial and ethnic minority groups. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, *Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Programs*, for example, "black youth were responsible for the majority of the increase between 1986 and 1994" in homicides nation-wide. In California, a state which experiences about twice its expected share of teen murders, the overwhelming preponderance

"deservingness" of a particular welfare recipient on expressed support for welfare spending (e.g., Gilens 1999, Iyengar 1991; Smith 1987).

of teenage violent crimes between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s was committed by blacks and Latinos (California Commission on the Status of African-American Males 1996).

Strengthening the connection between ethnicity and youthful criminality even further is the disproportionate number of minority youths who are involved with urban street gangs (Curry and Sperge 1992; Hagedom 1991; Klein 1995; Vigil 1988). For example, gang-related homicides accounted for 18 percent of all homicides in Los Angeles County in 1978, but by 1994, the figure had risen to 43 percent. Likewise, the gang-related homicide rate for 15-19 year old African-American males was 60.5 per 100,000 populations during 1979-1981; for the 1989-91 period; the rate was 192.4 per 100,000.

Public alarm over juvenile crime through the mid-1990s was heightened by extensive media coverage. Of course, young people (especially minority youth) who engage in criminal violence are especially newsworthy (see Males 1996; Dorfman et al. 1995); senseless acts of violence by “glassy-eyed, remorseless” teenagers in gang attire (Berry and Manning-Miller 1996) satisfy the media's programming needs. As general trends in American public opinion suggest, the growing reach of local news contributed to increased support for punitive remedies aimed at youth offenders (Dorfman, Woodruff, Chavez, and Wallack 1998; Gilliam 1998). For instance, the public called for more aggressive law enforcement and in response policy makers across the country proposed and adopted more severe sanctions on adolescent crime such as incarceration in adult facilities, trying juveniles as adults, the death penalty, and "three strikes" legislation (Alderman 1994; Jacobius 1996; Tang 1994; Walinsky 1995). Thus the rate of juvenile crime and the increased visibility of juvenile crime to the public through

the news media-- frequently featuring nonwhite teenagers engaged in the most violent of acts -
- was thought to have contributed to the high levels of public concern for crime.

In summary, the realities of violent crime in mid-1990s were that an individual's age and ethnicity could realistically be considered as "threatening" attributes. Our objective in this chapter is to examine the extent to which the public's attitudes toward crime reflect these cues. More specifically, we test the proposition that people become more fearful of crime and more committed advocates of punitive measures for dealing with violent crime when the news media frame the issue in ways that highlight the juvenile and nonwhite attributes of perpetrators.

METHODOLOGY

Experimental Design

We treat the two relevant characteristics of individual perpetrators (race and youth) as orthogonal factors in a fully crossed experimental design. A recently broadcast news story dealing with increased police patrols in the city of Long Beach provided the experimental stimulus. The story described armed police patrols of high crime areas and the eventual arrest of two males. We manipulated the age of the suspects indirectly by depicting the police activity either as a general effort to reduce crime or, alternatively, as an attempt to curb gang-related crime. Thus, we altered the anchor's introductory lead-in so that the police operation was described either as a "crime sweep" (the words appeared on the television screen during the anchor's introduction) or a "gang sweep" (this label was substituted for "crime sweep"

during the lead-in and later the reporter referred to the suspects as "gang members"). With the exception of these two variations, the gang and non-gang versions of the news report were equivalent (the video of the gang version is available [here](#)).

The race/ethnicity manipulation was more direct. Because the original report included police photographs of the two suspects, we were able to insert different "mug shots" corresponding to different ethnic groups. Depending on the experimental condition, the photos of the two suspects featured African-Americans, Whites, Hispanics, or Asians. Except for the substitution of the photographs, the news report was identical in content and appearance. The mug shots representing the different ethnicities are presented below.



Experimental participants watched a fifteen-minute videotaped local newscast (including commercials) described as having been selected at random from news programs

broadcast during the past week. The objective of the study was said to be "selective perception" of news reports. Depending upon the condition to which they were assigned (at random), they watched one of the following versions of the news story on the Long Beach police patrols.

1. The "crime sweep" report that included the close-up photo of the two suspects.
2. The "crime sweep" reports, but with all references to particular suspects eliminated.
3. The "gang sweep" report including the close-up photo of the two suspects.
4. The "gang sweep" report, but devoid of any reference to individual suspects.

Control participants watched the same newscast, but without any story on crime. In place of the crime report, they watched a story on a partial solar eclipse.

The design allows us to investigate a variety of questions. First, we can compare viewers' responses to news reports featuring non-white perpetrators (operationally defined as the conditions featuring African-Americans and Hispanics) with their responses to coverage in which the suspects were white or Asian², or to coverage in which there was no information about specific perpetrators. Second, we can estimate the effects of youth-related crime on public attitudes by comparing reactions to the "gang sweep" and "crime sweep" conditions. Third, we can isolate the interactive effects, if any, between the youth and ethnicity factors. Perhaps viewers feel especially threatened when the crime involves juvenile gangs and the gang members are non-white.

²Our decision to collapse these categories is explained in the "Results" section.

In addition to the additive and interactive effects of perpetrator ethnicity and age, we can also assess the relative influence of visual (photographs of faces) and semantic cues (the "crime sweep" versus "gang sweep" label) in news coverage of crime. Simple comparison of the difference in viewer responses between the "gang sweep" and "crime sweep" conditions that excluded pictures of the suspects with the baseline condition in which there was no reference to crime at all provides an estimate of the effects of crime coverage that lacks visual information about individual perpetrators. A parallel comparison of the gang and non-gang related conditions in which photographs of the perpetrator appear reveal the degree to which "pictures speak louder than words."

The report on crime was inserted into the middle position of the newscast following the first commercial break. Except for the news story on crime, the newscast was identical. None of the other stories appearing in the newscast concerned crime or matters of race.³

The experimental "sample" consisted of residents of West Los Angeles who were recruited through flyers and announcements in newsletters offering \$15 for participation in "media research." The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 64. Fifty-one percent were white, 30 percent were black, 4 percent were Asian, and 7 percent were Latinos. Fifty-two percent were women.⁴ The participants were relatively well educated (40 percent had

³ These stories focused on (in order) firefighters' efforts to put out a series of wildfires, the passage of a local ordinance requiring property owners in Los Angeles to retrofit their buildings in compliance with new seismic safety guidelines, beach closures due to seepage of sewage, testing of missiles by the Chinese government, and an electrical fire in a downtown office building

⁴ Using Los Angeles as the baseline, our sample overrepresents African-Americans, underrepresents Latinos, and matches exactly the proportion of whites.

graduated from college) and, in keeping with the local area, more Democratic than Republican (47 percent versus 22 percent) in their partisan loyalty.

The experiment was administered during the fall of 1995 at a major shopping mall in West Los Angeles in a two-room suite that was furnished casually with couches, lounge chairs, potted plants, etc. Participants could browse through magazines and newspapers, snack on cookies and coffee, or (in many cases) chat with fellow participants who were friends or colleagues.

On their arrival, participants were given their instructions and then completed a short pretest questionnaire concerning their social background, party identification and political ideology, level of interest in political affairs, and media habits. They then watched the videotape of the newscast. At the end of the videotape, participants completed a lengthy questionnaire that included questions about their evaluations of various news programs and prominent journalists, their opinions concerning various issues in the news, their recall of particular news stories, their beliefs about the attributes of particular racial/ethnic groups, and, of course, a series of questions concerning crime. After completing the questionnaire, subjects were debriefed in full (including a full explanation of the experimental procedures) and were paid.

Indicators

Our primary interest lies in examining the effects of news coverage on public opinion toward crime. Two facets of opinion are especially relevant to the "super-predator" hypothesis -- fear of violent crime and support for punitive criminal justice policies. We used

two closed-ended items to construct a "fear of crime index." The first was the standard General Social Survey (GSS) question on fear of victimization: "Is there any area around where you live -- say, within a one-mile radius -- where you would be afraid to walk alone at night"? Affirmative responses were scored as one, other responses as zero. Second, we asked participants to rate the importance of random street violence: "Lately, there has been a lot of attention paid to the problem of random street violence? How serious a problem do you think random street violence is in your immediate neighborhood?" The response options included "very serious," "somewhat serious," "not very serious," and "don't know." Participants choosing the "very" or "somewhat" categories were given a score of one, all others were scored as zero. The responses to the two questions were then averaged.⁵

We assessed support for punitive criminal justice policies with a pair of open-ended questions that asked participants to attribute responsibility -- both causal and remedial -- for the occurrence of crime. These questions were worded as follows:

"People sometimes disagree about the reasons for crime. In your opinion, what are the three most important reasons why people commit crimes in the United States?"

"People also disagree about ways to solve the crime problem in the United States. In your opinion, what are the three most important remedies for crime?"

Responses to these questions revealed a rich diversity of explanations and recommended solutions. Attributions of causal responsibility fell into three general categories. Crime was either attributed to individuals' personal characteristics (e.g., greed and immorality), societal conditions (e.g., economic and social inequality), or to the indecisive and lenient nature of the

⁵ The zero-order correlation between the two questions was .26 ($p < .01$) and Cronbach's Alpha was .51. The index mean was .53.

criminal justice process (e.g., problems in obtaining convictions and adequate sentences). In the case of remedies for crime, the responses referred either to changes in societal conditions (e.g., more job opportunities) or to the imposition of more severe and punitive sanctions (e.g., stricter enforcement of the death penalty). We defined an index of punitiveness as the total number of references to punitive factors in participants' lists of causes and remedies.⁶

In order to boost the efficiency of our estimates of the effects of the experimental manipulations, we also incorporated a number of control variables into the analyses -- factors known to predict individual's views about crime and crime policy. These included participants' race and gender. Blacks and Hispanics were scored as one and compared with open-ended all other respondents. In the case of gender, men were assigned the score of one. We also included measures of partisanship and political ideology (Republicans were scored as one, all others as zero; conservatives as one, liberals, moderates and others as zero), and an index of racial stereotyping reflecting the degree to which participants agreed with negative characterizations of African-Americans.⁷ Finally, we included a question tapping participants' level of exposure to local television news (daily viewers were scored as one and

⁶ The zero-order correlation between the two counts was .25 ($p < .01$) and Cronbach's Alpha was .49. The index can range from zero to four and has a mean of 1.01. That is, on average, the open-ended responses included one reference to punitive factors

⁷ The stereotype index was based on five trait ratings. "Now, here are some different questions about these same groups (Asian-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, African Americans, White Americans). We want you to rate these groups in terms of particular attributes that may or may not characterize them. Please consider the group named at the top of each list of attributes or behaviors and rate how well each attribute applies to that group in general. A score of one would mean that you think the attribute applies very well to that group, while a score of four would mean that the attribute does not apply to the group at all. If you have no opinion at all about how well an attribute applies to a particular group, you may choose nine." The African-American stereotype index was constructed using the traits of "law-abiding," "sexually responsible," "violent," "lazy," and "use drugs." The items were scored so that negative characterizations were scored as one and others as zero. The stereotype score was defined as the average of the five ratings (Cronbach's Alpha was .62).

compared with all others).⁸

RESULTS

Manipulation Checks

We began by validating the two experimental manipulations. The gang manipulation was designed to influence participants' perceptions of perpetrators as juveniles. Accordingly, at the very end of the post-test questionnaire, we directed participants' attention to the news story on crime (identified by the label "Crime in Long Beach") and asked them to recall the age of the suspect. ("Thinking back to the suspects in the news story, please identify their age.") We compared the percentage of participants who recalled the suspect to be over the age of twenty in the gang-sweep and crime-sweep conditions. As expected, there was a significant difference in recall of the suspect's age -- while 60 percent of the participants in the crime-sweep conditions recalled the suspect to be over the age of twenty, 60 percent of the participants in the gang-sweep conditions recalled the suspect to be twenty or younger. This difference was highly significant ($p < .01$); use of the gang-sweep label did influence perceptions of the perpetrator's age.

We also asked participants to recall the ethnicity of the suspect. ("Thinking back to the suspects in the news story, what was their race/ethnicity?"). Across all four levels of the ethnicity manipulation (Asian, White, African-American, Hispanic), 48 percent of the participants accurately recalled the suspects' race. Excluding participants who were unable to recall anything about the suspects, the level of accuracy in recall of ethnicity increased to 57

⁸ We also included several other antecedents of crime attitudes including victimization in the last twelve months, family income, home ownership, political knowledge, and age. Since their coefficients proved non-significant,

percent. That is, participants with accurate recall of the suspects' race outnumbered those with inaccurate recall by a margin of 2.3 to 1.0. Despite the open-ended format of the recall question, and the fact that it was asked at the end of the survey instrument (a full 30 minutes after exposure to the news story on crime), the pictures of the perpetrators did convey information about their ethnicity. Participants' ability to recall the ethnicity of the suspect varied noticeably depending on the particular category of the ethnicity manipulation. As shown in Table 6.1, the ratio of accurate to inaccurate identifications was highest in the African-American and Hispanic conditions (67:5 percent) and significantly lower when participants were exposed to the conditions featuring white and Asian suspects (40:34 percent). This difference was statistically significant ($p < .01$).

[Table 7.1 here]

The significant effect of the race of the suspect on accuracy of recall suggests that participants' prior beliefs about the attributes of particular ethnic groups powerfully color their interpretation of new information. We asked our participants to rate each of the four ethnic groups in terms of their tendency to be "not law abiding" and "violent." While 46 percent of the sample reported that these attributes applied "very well" or "fairly well" to African-Americans and Hispanics, only 25 percent considered the attributes similarly apt descriptions of Whites and Asians (for corroborating evidence concerning the similarity of Whites' stereotypes about Hispanics and African-Americans and the distinctiveness of Whites' stereotypes of Asians, see Bobo et al. 1994). The importance of racial stereotyping is

they were dropped from the final analysis.

especially apparent in the responses of participants who watched the crime report devoid of any reference to individual suspects. Forty-four percent of these participants falsely recalled a suspect, and only four percent of these false recognitions referred to a White or Asian. In short, news coverage of crime featuring African-American and Hispanic suspects tends to confirm viewers' existing stereotypes of non-Whites, while news reports in which the perpetrator is White or Asian disconfirm beliefs about Whites and Asians (for further evidence of "motivated recall," see Gilliam and Iyengar 1997). Given the significantly higher levels of accurate recall in the African-American and Hispanic conditions and the convergence of the African-American and Hispanic stereotype ratings, on the one hand, and the stereotype ratings of Whites and Asians, on the other hand, we decided to fold the ethnicity manipulation into two categories--non-white (the African-American and Hispanic conditions) and White/Asian.

TESTING THE SUPER-PREDATOR HYPOTHESIS

The underlying premise of the hypothesis is that youthful, minority offenders are especially threatening to the public. Therefore, we expect that people will become more fearful and punitive when they are exposed to news stories that feature "super-predators." Table 2 presents the results of parallel analysis-of-variance tests for the impact of the age (gang-sweep versus crime-sweep) and ethnicity (nonwhite versus white/Asian) manipulations on the indices of fear and punitiveness. The top panel of the table reveals a robust main effect of the youth crime manipulation on fear of crime ($p < .05$). As expected, exposure to news

coverage of gang-related crime boosted fear by a factor of 10 percent (in relation to news coverage of ordinary crime). Despite their heightened fear, viewers were not more likely to mention punitive accounts of crime when they encountered the "gang sweep" frame. To the contrary, the gang frame made participants significantly ($p < .02$) less punitive in their approach to crime. Thus, these results provide only partial confirmation of the super-predator hypothesis; people are especially threatened by youthful offenders, but youth crime does not prompt them to prescribe harsh treatment of offenders.

[Table 7.2 here]

The effects of the race/ethnicity manipulation are presented in the bottom panel of Table 7.2. Both measures show the expected pattern -- higher levels of fear and punitiveness when the suspects were nonwhite -- but both patterns are weak. If we subject the data to a more pointed test of the hypothesis by comparing the conditions with nonwhite suspects with those featuring whites or Asians, the results are more telling. The lower level of punitiveness when the suspect is either Asian or White is significant at the .05 level. In the case of fear, the difference was less dramatic ($p < .15$). As compared with their counterparts who encountered Asian or White suspects in news coverage of crime, participants who saw Hispanic or African-American suspects were significantly more punitive and somewhat more fearful. These results thus validate the racial component of the super-predator hypothesis.

How is it that people are more fearful of crime, but at the same time are less willing to favor punitive measures when presented with youthful offenders? Perhaps the study participants, following the model of the criminal law, reasoned that pre-adults should not be

held individually accountable for their actions. Moreover, gangs are collectivities, making it difficult to pinpoint responsibility. The distinctiveness of the gang label is also suggested by the finding that the significant differences in punitiveness elicited by the race/ethnicity manipulation were conditioned by the distinction between gang crime and ordinary crime. That is, we detected evidence of an interaction between reference to gang crime and the suspects' race. When the news is not framed in gang-related terms, nonwhite offenders elicit more punitive responses than White or Asian offenders. When the report refers to gangs, on the other hand, the ethnicity cue becomes less informative and participants make no distinction between the White/Asian and black/Hispanic suspects. In effect, the gang frame makes participants noticeably less punitive in their attitudes irrespective of the suspects' race.

Verbal Versus Visual Cues

The analysis to this point has ignored qualitative differences in the depiction of crime. Specifically, the differences reported in Table 7.3 were calculated across the conditions that featured both verbal and visual cues (the "gang sweep" or "crime sweep" label followed by photos of the two suspects) and conditions that provided only the verbal cue. The effects of the "verbal only" and "verbal plus visual" conditions are presented in Table 7.3.

[Table 7.3 here]

These results do little to support the maxim that pictures are more persuasive than words. In general, the addition of the photographs of the suspects did not strengthen the manipulation. In the case of gang-related crime, the presence of the visual cues, if anything, tended to reduce viewers' fear and punitiveness. On the other side of the manipulation,

(ordinary crime), the pattern was reversed; participants tended to be more fearful and punitive when the news story included photographs of the suspects. While none of these differences is statistically significant, the pattern suggests that the conceptual distinction between gang-related crime and garden-variety crime takes precedence over the presence or absence of visual cues concerning individual suspects. When viewers are forewarned that the crime in question is gang-related, exposure to the pictures of two "gang members" serves to make them slightly less punitive. On the other hand, when viewers are not led to anticipate gang involvement in crime, exposure to the identical pictures elicits slightly higher levels of punitiveness. In our final set of tests, we isolated the participants who were exposed to both elements of the super-predator concept -- juvenile and nonwhite offenders--and compared their levels of fear and punitiveness with all other participants. Unlike the earlier analyses of variance, this specification treats both experimental factors as simple dichotomies (gang crime versus all other conditions, nonwhite suspects versus all other conditions). Using this reconfigured design, we re-estimated the effects of the manipulations, this time controlling for a set of individual differences generally thought to influence crime-related attitudes. These included participants' race, gender, party identification, ideology, frequency of exposure to local newscasts, and their stereotypes of African-Americans. Table 7.4 presents the reduced-form or "best-fit" multiple regression analyses of the fear and punitiveness indices.

[Table 7.4 here]

Fear of crime was equally affected by exposure to juvenile crime and nonwhite offenders. Among participants who watched the news report on gang-related crime, fear of

crime increased by nine percent; for participants who encountered Hispanic or African-American suspects the increase was eight percent. The interaction of the youth and race factors proved insignificant. That is, the effects of the suspects' race proved uniform in the gang crime and ordinary crime versions of the news report.

Turning to the control variables, women and blacks were especially fearful of crime. These individual differences are in keeping with the literature on victimization and fear of crime. In addition to race and gender, people who watch local news on a regular basis are more likely to fear crime, suggesting that the distinctive agenda of local newscasts has been passed on to the audience.

The right-hand panel of Table 7.4 displays the regression coefficients for the open-ended measure of punitiveness. The multiple controls weaken the effects of the gang ordinary crime distinction considerably; the decreased frequency of punitive responses among participants who saw the report on gang crime now only borders on significance ($p < .15$). The most noteworthy result for the index of punitiveness, however, is the interaction between the two defining attributes of super-predators. This interaction occurs because of the substantial weakening of the race manipulation when the news report focuses on gang-related crime. As we noted earlier, the effects of the suspects' race virtually disappear when the news focuses on gang crime. The regression coefficient for the race manipulation in the right-hand panel of Table 4 tells us that punitive responses increased in frequency by a factor of .32 ($p < .07$) when participants saw nonwhite suspects in the context of ordinary crime. The interaction coefficient of $-.39$ ($p < .15$) indicates that when the news report focuses on gang

crime, the race effect is reversed. That is, when the suspect is an alleged gang member, White, and Asian suspects elicit more punitive responses (by a margin of .39) than Hispanics or Blacks.

Finally, the effects of the control variables were true to form--whites, Republicans and conservatives were in the vanguard of the punitive approach to crime. People who tune in to local news regularly were not only more likely to fear crime; they were also significantly more punitive in their outlook.

In all, our results provide mixed support for the super-predator hypothesis. We found that exposure to news reports featuring juvenile and non-white offenders triggered more responses reflecting concern about crime (as compared with groups who were exposed to crime stories featuring other categories of perpetrators), but there was no outpouring of support for punitive criminal justice policies. Our subjects actually expressed less punitive attitudes when they were exposed to juvenile offenders, no matter what the perpetrators' ethnicity. Apparently, people believed, or at least hoped, that youthful offenders could be reformed with appropriate intervention.

We offer three related accounts for the incomplete substantiation of the super-predator thesis having to do with design, measurement, and context. A first design concern is that our age manipulation conflates group-based and individualistic accounts of crime. The previous discussions of "super-predators" have assumed that individuals, rather than groups, are the major criminal forces. Gang crime necessarily shifts the focus to collective behavior. Even ordinary citizens seem to explain gang activity based on the harsh realities of contemporary

urban environments. Most scholars of gang life suggest that a sense of group identity and the need for protection and self-esteem far outweigh criminal motives as the primary incentives for youth involvement in gangs (see, for instance, Klein 1995). Once the behavior of individuals is placed in the context of gang activity, the public's outlook seems to shift from the failings of individuals to the shortcomings of the broader society. The net result is that people do not endorse harsher penalties as the most effective way to treat youth crime. In other words, because the gang conditions contain notable thematic content, they are not completely accurate representations of the typical episodic news stories. And, as noted above, the vast preponderance of local television news is episodic in nature. A cleaner test of the super-predator thesis should feature a sole perpetrator in the experimental design.

A second design flaw has to do with the fact that we created experimental treatments featuring Asian, Caucasian, African American, and Latino youth perpetrators. There is little doubt that stereotypes about blacks (especially black youth) are still more accessible to most white Americans (Bobo et al. 1994; Entman 1992; Entman 1996; Entman et al. 1998; Peffley and Shields 1996; Peffley and Hurwitz 1999). While the rapidly changing demographics of America's urban landscape call into question the general utility of the black v. white distinction, it is still a staple of local television reporting of juvenile crime news.

Two matters of measurement may have further contributed to the tepid support for the superpredator hypothesis. First, our operationalization of crime attitudes did not specifically focus on the public's view of *youth* violent crime; and a core element of the superpredator hypothesis, of course, is the alleged perpetrators age. Thus there is a conflation of people's

general crime attitudes and their specific views on what to do about youth crime. A second, a more minor concern is that our previous measure of punitive crime attitudes was crafted from a set of open-ended responses. While this surely has the advantage of obtaining more spontaneous responses, this type of measurement also introduces a fair amount of measurement error. In any event, closed-ended items directed at youth crime would be an improvement.

Our final explanation for the results is contextual. In the first instance, the rate of juvenile crime significantly declined between the mid-1990s and the beginning of the new century. For example, the national violent crime index of juvenile arrests decreased 23% between 1996-2000 (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention 2001). Nonetheless, the local television news media continued to focus on crime as a prime topic of youth-related news. In 2000, for example, the child advocacy organization Children Now commissioned Gilliam to perform a content analysis of youth and local television news (Gilliam et al. 2001), their data show that crime stories accounted for 53% of all adolescent news coverage (Bales and Gilliam 2003; see also, Amundson et al. 2000). How could crime continue to dominate local television youth news coverage in the face of quickly falling youth crime rates?

One answer is that the rash of tragic and violent school shootings in 1998 and 1999 trumped the fact the juvenile crime rates were in serious decline. The media frenzy and ensuing national hand-wringing after the school shootings in Paducah, Jonesboro, and Columbine continued to hold juvenile crime in the spotlight. Interestingly, the media added a new element to the youth crime narrative; namely, a featured role for the victim of violent

crime. The Children Now data, for instance, show that youth were more likely to be depicted as victims of crime rather than perpetrators (this holds regardless of the level of violence depicted). Over three-quarters of crime stories featured juveniles in the role of victim (Gilliam, and Bales 2003). This finding is in line with the results reported by Amundson et al. who note a “heavy emphasis on crime victimization” in their study of six local news markets (2000: 11). Youth as crime victims has apparently become a new element of the youth crime frame.

In all, weakness in design and measurement, combined with a significantly changed context account for the incomplete rendering of the superpredator hypothesis. With this in mind, we conducted a second study designed to overcome the liabilities mentioned above. We paid special attention to securing a more typically episodic news treatment, limiting the analysis to white and black youth, revising dependent measures to reflect views specific to youth crime, and incorporating the role of the violent crime victim into the youth crime news narrative.

STUDY 2: Race, Youth and Crime Role in Television News

In this study we were interested in assessing the effects of the race and crime role played by youth in crime news stories. In this instance, the stimulus was incorporated into a sixty- second crime story about an adolescent male who was murdered at an ATM. Thus we constructed a 3X3 design in which we manipulated the crime role and the presence of racial cues in crime news. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of nine conditions (i.e., *White perpetrator, No perpetrator, black perpetrator X White Victim, No victim, Black victim*).

Depending upon the condition to which they were assigned, subjects watched a news story on crime that included a close-up photo of the suspect and/or victim. Using the method described above, the photo either depicted a youthful African-American or white male. The report on crime was inserted into the middle position of the newscast following the first commercial break. Except for the news story on crime, the newscast was identical in all other respects. None of the remaining stories on the tape concerned crime or matters of race. As previously noted, two facets of opinion are especially relevant to the "super-predator" hypothesis -- fear of violent crime (and particularly youth crime) and support for punitive juvenile justice policies. We operationalized fear of *youth* crime with two items. The first was worded as follows: "Who commits most of the violent crimes these days? Would you say they are committed mostly by adults or mostly by young people?" The second question asked: "Which of the following do you personally perceive as a greater threat: violent crime committed by adults or violent crime committed by young people?" Study participants who believed young people committed the most violent crimes or that youth crime posed a greater threat than adult crime were coded as three. People who were unsure were assigned a score of two and those who felt that adults were more threatening received a value of one. A scale was constructed by summing the responses to the two items and dividing by two ($X=2.13$, $S.D. =.55$, Cronbach's $\alpha=.73$). To separate out general crime fears from fears of youth crime, we measured general fear of crime with the standard General Social Survey (GSS) question: "Lately there has been a lot of attention paid to the problem of random street violence. How serious a problem do you think random street violence is in your neighborhood?" Subjects

who believed random street violence was a “very serious” problem were coded as three, those who thought it was “somewhat serious” received a score of two and those who believed it to be “not very serious” were given a score of one ($X=2.27$, $S.D.=.72$). We measured support for punitive juvenile justice policy using a two-item index. The first item was worded as follows.

“When a teenager commits a murder and is found guilty by a jury, do you think he should get the death penalty or should he be spared his life because of his youth?” The second question asked: “In your view, should the law require fines or prison sentences for the parents of juveniles convicted of major crimes, or not?” Subjects who supported the death penalty and fines and prisons were coded as three, people who were unsure were given a score of two and those who believed a teenager should be spared because of his youth and did not support fines and prison were coded as one. We created the index by summing the responses and dividing by two ($X= 1.88$, $S.D. =.64$, Cronbach’s alpha = .63).

For this section we performed analysis of variance tests to measure the impact of the youth crime news script. Initial analysis indicated that the critical influence on crime attitudes concerned the pairing of white victim with black perpetrator. There was no statistically significant difference as a function of other configurations of race of perpetrator, race of victim, and crime role. Thus, we conducted parallel analyses for the main effects of exposure to the white victim or black perpetrator (controlling for several common individual differences including education, income, age, gender, marital status, ideology, and party identification – full results available upon request) on subjects’ crime attitudes.

Table 7.5 presents the results of Study 2. The top panel of the table provides moderate support for our expectations. For example, exposure to the white victim condition was associated with a significant increase in fear of random street violence and teen crime and violence. Similarly, exposure to the black perpetrator increased fear of random street violence but did not have an appreciable impact of fear of adolescent crime or punitive crime solutions. These results are produced, in large part, by the significant difference between white and

(Table 7.5 here)

African American study participants. Thus the second panel of the table examines the impact of the dominant frame on whites' crime attitudes. The results of this analysis provide more solid support for the super-predator perspective in four of the six relevant comparisons. In other words, exposure to either a white victim or a black perpetrator was related to heighten fear of youth crime and support for punitive juvenile justice policies. To the contrary, there were no measurable effects on more general fear of crime attitudes. Finally, the last panel of the table repeats the analysis for black subjects. The main finding is that the manipulations do not influence African Americans' crime attitudes (see also, Gilliam and Iyengar, 2000). Presumably this is the result of the fact that African Americans are more likely to have a deeper pool of experiences upon which to make judgment. In other words, they do not rely as heavily on the news media for information about their community.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our results describe a cascade of effects that reveal subtle variations in the applicability of the superpredator hypothesis. Contrary to expectations, our study

participants were reluctant to punish juvenile criminals in the context of gang involvement, regardless of the race of the perpetrator. The gang manipulation in our study effectively reduced the proportion of viewers who offered consistently punitive attributions of responsibility – those who cited inadequate deterrents and the personal attributes of perpetrators as causal factors and who recommended harsher and more stringent sanctions as the key to reducing crime. Once the behavior of individuals is placed in the context of gang activity, the public's outlook seems to shift from the failings of individuals to the shortcomings of the broader society. Thematic frames thus lead to societal attributions of responsibility (Iyengar, 1991).

This sounds an optimistic note for policy advocates who seek to resist the popular trend toward more punitive approaches to juvenile crime. For one thing, our results indicate that the public is not monolithic in its support for "get tough" measures. Even among policy makers who favor punitive approaches to juvenile crime, there is considerable recognition that intervention at an early age (e.g., information, education, mentoring, family support) is crucial in the fight against juvenile crime (see, for example, Wilson 1993; Bennett et al. 1996).

Nonetheless, there is still strong support for the superpredator hypothesis as the dominant youth crime frame available to the American public. Our second study strengthened the mild findings in the first experiment. For example, among white study participants, exposure to the black perpetrator significantly increased the number of people fearful of teen crime and supportive of more punitive juvenile justice policies like placing youth in adult detention facilities. This is all the more interesting given that the black/white juvenile murder

arrest rate is at the lowest it has been in two decades (Snyder 2002).

The addition of the crime role -- perpetrator or victim -- as an element of the news frame yielded interesting insights. For example, exposure to white teen victims in and of itself raised fear levels and support for punitive crime policies among white participants. In other words, people gain no added leverage by knowing the identity or race of the alleged perpetrator. Simply knowing that the victim was white increased the proportion of harsh crime attitudes.

All told, our evidence suggests the following generalizations. First, both semantic and visual cues condition public attitudes on crime. The word “gang” appears to associate crime with violence and youthful perpetrators. Accordingly, people exposed to the cue become both more fearful of crime, and less enthusiastic about punitive remedies. It is worth noting that the effects of the gang cue on support for punitive remedies were “color blind” -- study participants were more lenient with youthful offenders, no matter what their ethnicity. At the same time, our evidence also demonstrated considerable traces of race-based reasoning about crime. Exposure to non-white perpetrators or white victims was sufficient to move the audience in a more punitive direction. In this respect ordinary citizens seem more consistently race-oriented than the judicial process. Criminal sentencing, as is well-documented, is most extreme when the case involves both a white victim and a non-white perpetrator (Sidanius and Pratto 1999; Bridges and Steen 1998). The court of public opinion, however, is insensitive to perpetrator-victim permutations; the mere presence of a non-white perpetrator or white victim is sufficient to elicit an extreme “sentence.”

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Table 7.1

Recall of Suspects Race by Experimental Condition

	Asian/White	Crime Story B	African
	Face	No Face	American/Hispanic
			Face
% Accurate	.40	--	.67
% False	.34	.44	.05
Recognitions			
	(99)	(93)	(95)

Table 7.2

Fear of Crime and Punitiveness by Types of Crime and Race of Suspect

Type of Crime Coverage

	Gang Crime	No Crime Coverage	Ordinary Crime
Fear of Crime	.58 (132)	.45 (65)	.48 (155)
	F 3.91, p < .05		
Punitiveness	.80 (132)	1.06 (65)	1.18 (155)
	F 3.96, p < .02		

Race of Suspects

	Asian/White	No Crime Coverage	Nonwhite
Fear of Crime	.50 (99)	.45 (65)	.57 (95)
	F 2.21, n.s.		
Punitiveness	.88 (99)	1.06 (65)	1.16 (95)
	F 1.36, n.s		

Table 7.3
Verbal Versus Visual Framing of Crime

	Type of Crime Coverage				
	Gang Crime		No Crime	Ordinary Crime	
	Pictures	No Pictures	Coverage	No Pictures	Pictures
Fear of Crime	.58 (88)	.59 (44)	.45 (65)	.48 (155)	.50 (106)
	F 2.25, p < .06				
Punitiveness	.77 (88)	.84 (44)	1.06 (65)	1.10 (49)	1.22 (106)
	F 2.08, p < .08				

Table 7.4

Best-Fitting Regressions for Fear and Punitiveness

Predictor	FEAR	PUNITIVENESS
Race of Suspects	.08 (.04)	.32 (.17)
Gang Crime	.09 (.04)	-.21 (.15)
Race x Gang Interaction	--	-.39 (.27)
Race of Participant	.11 (.05)	.31 (.14)
Gender	-.19 (.04)	.17 (.06)
Party Identification	--	.35 (.17)
Index of Stereotyping	--	.20 (.19)
Constant	.58 (.06)	.47 (.18)
Adjusted R ²	.10	.11
N	352	

Table 7.5

Impact of TV News by Crime Role and Race of Subject

	Threat of Teen Crime	Punitive Solutions	Fear of Random Street Violence
All Subjects (N=300)			
White Victim	2.36*	2.22**	1.90
Non-white Victim	2.23	2.09	1.87
<hr/>			
Black Perpetrator	2.32*	2.15	1.89
Non-black Perpetrator	2.25	2.12	1.88
<hr/>			
White Subjects (N=132)			
White Victim	2.43**	2.27*	1.96
Non-white Victim	2.13	2.11	1.82
<hr/>			
Black Perpetrator	2.39*	2.29**	1.81
Non-black Perpetrator	2.17	2.11	1.90
<hr/>			
Black Subjects (N=85)			
White Victim	2.41	2.26	1.79
Non-white Victim	2.41	2.14	1.84
<hr/>			
Black Perpetrator	2.45	2.20	1.90
Non-black Perpetrator	2.40	2.17	1.80

p < .10; ** p < .05