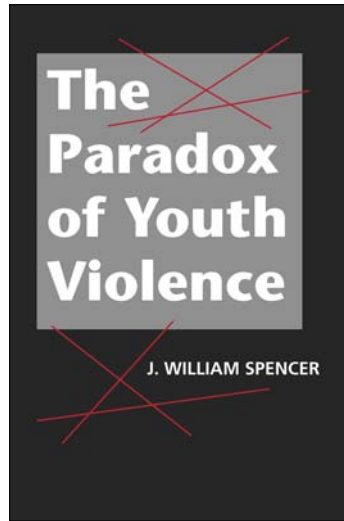


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The Paradox of Youth Violence

J. William Spencer



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1

The Problem of Youth Violence

The 1990s were the decade of the Clinton presidency and growing economic prosperity, the O. J. Simpson trial and the Rodney King incident and subsequent Los Angeles riots, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the FBI siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco and the Oklahoma City Federal Building bombing. I might argue that the 1990s were also the decade of youth violence. Almost all of us remember the shootings at Columbine High School in 1999. It was almost impossible to read a newspaper or magazine or turn on the television without encountering a story about the event. We learned about the offenders—Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold—and their backgrounds: The speculation about how these two young men could have come to this act seemed endless. We encountered stories about their victims and followed the local community’s efforts to deal with the tragedy. We were also treated to, and most likely became part of, a wide-ranging debate on how such events could be prevented in the future.

Of course, Columbine was not the first event of its kind during that decade. Many of us may remember similar events in schools in Pearl, Mississippi; West Paducah, Kentucky; Springfield, Oregon; and elsewhere. And there was a seemingly endless string of events outside schools: A young boy in Chicago was dropped to his death from a fourteenth-story window by two other boys—ostensibly for refusing to steal candy for them. Also in Chicago, a young boy was shot to death days after he had killed a neighborhood girl. An older woman in New Jersey was killed by a teenager who lived in her neighborhood. There were stories about the “superpredator”—a new sort of violent youthful of-

fender who grew up in conditions of moral poverty and killed without conscience—and about the “gang problem” involving drive-by shootings and drugs. During the 1990s, all these exemplified the growing threat of youth violence. By the time the Columbine shooting occurred, the term “youth violence” had become firmly established in our cultural lexicon.

Over the course of that decade, talk about the problem of youth violence underwent considerable change—both in how the problem was framed and in our collective searches for causal accounts and solutions to the problem. Consider the following two *New York Times* articles. The first article appeared on January 31, 1990, and began:

In a voice choked with emotion, a Brooklyn mother told a City Hall hearing yesterday that when she sends her children to school by public transportation each morning, she worries she will not see them alive again because of marauding groups of violent youths.

“I might have to bury my child. No, I don’t want that. I want my children to bury me,” she said before a hushed audience at a hearing on the perils children encounter on the way to school—youth violence and “wilding.”

The hearing was held by City Council President Andrew J. Stein, and Family Court judges, probation officials and police officers also spoke. Mr. Stein said he wanted to focus attention on youth violence and wilding and to send the message that “if you hurt other people, you are going to be punished.”

The second article appeared on June 6, 1999, and began:

A bitterly divided House plunged into the nation’s culture wars today, passionately debating long into the night whether school prayer, a clampdown on violence in entertainment, stiff prison sentences or gun control was the answer to the spate of school shootings that have left teen-agers dead. The debate was the beginning of a two- to three-day free-for-all as the House considered 44 amendments on cultural issues and crime and 11 gun control proposals. The House approved tough mandatory minimum sentences to combat juvenile crime. But in a blow to social conservatives, the House voted 282 to 146 tonight to reject a measure sponsored by Representative Henry J. Hyde, Republican of Illinois that would have made it a crime to expose children to movies, books or video games containing explicit sex or violence.

Both articles focus on the problem of violence committed by youth and a search for a solution to that problem. In both articles, the victims of this violence were, themselves, other youth. The talk in both articles is full of emotion. In the first article, a mother’s talk is “choked with emo-

tion” as she describes how she “worries” about her children. In the second article, debate among lawmakers is “passionate” and a “free-for-all.”

However, these two articles also illustrate some of the ways in which public discourse about youth violence underwent significant transformation over the course of the decade. Notice how the first article casts the problem as a local one—the incidents occur in New York City, and solutions are being discussed by local officials and parents. In the second article, members of the US House of Representatives debate solutions to a national problem. In the first article, the problem appears to constitute “marauding groups of violent youth”—perhaps a reference to gangs or the “wilding” problem (Best 1999; Welch, Price, and Yankey 2002)—whereas in the second, the problem clearly constitutes the school shootings that dominated public discourse on youth violence in the last few years of the decade. The solutions proffered in the first article seem relatively simple, if not vague. There is talk of deterrence—“if you hurt other people, you are going to be punished,” and in the absence of talk to the contrary, there seems to be a consensus regarding that. In the second article, the solutions are more clearly articulated, but they are also more complex—running the gamut from “mandatory sentences” to school prayer and a “clampdown on violence in entertainment”—and there is much debate and acrimony.

In the pages that follow, I examine the continuities and changes in talk about the youth violence problem over the course of the 1990s. My main argument throughout is that we confronted youth violence as a paradox, as a mystery, or simply senseless. At the most general level, the presumed innocence of youth was contradicted by their deadly—and malevolent—acts; that other youth were among the victims only added to the senselessness. Violence in suburban and small towns was a mystery—they were the last kids we’d expect to be killers. Not surprisingly, the emotions revealed in this talk were full of ambivalence: pity and sympathy versus fear and anxiety. Talk about the causes of, and solutions to, the problem was rife with complexity. Sometimes causes appeared to be taken for granted, but at other times agreement could not be reached. The search for solutions spawned hotly contested political battles.

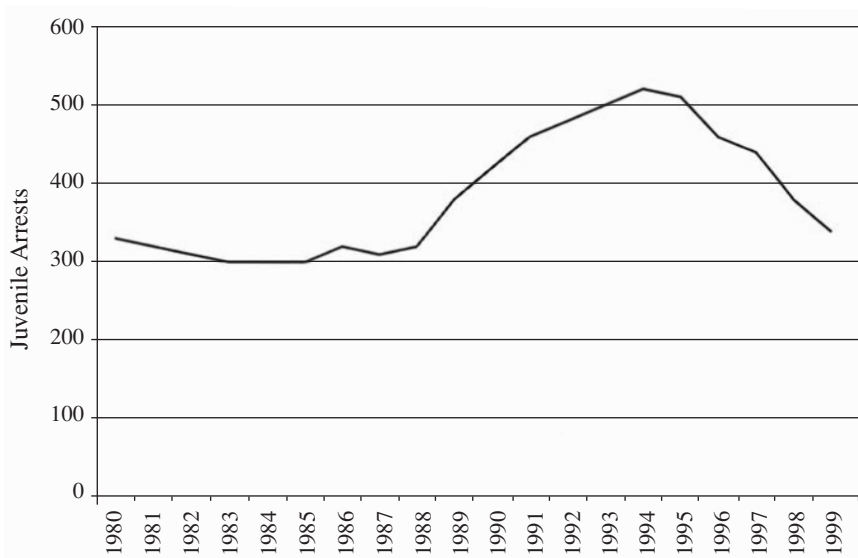
The Context: Youth Violence and Social Reactions in the 1990s

Although official data suggest that rates of violent *adult* crime declined throughout the 1990s, it appears that *youth* crime, especially *violent*

youth crime, reached its highest level in several decades. One official measure of violent crime is found in the FBI's *Uniform Crime Report*. As Figure 1.1 shows, based on these data, the juvenile arrest rate for the violent crime index (which comprises data on murder, aggravated assault, rape, and robbery) began to increase in the late 1980s and continued to climb until peaking around 1994. At that point, the juvenile violent crime rate was over 60 percent higher than it had been in the mid-1980s.

That rate declined until the end of the 1990s. Although higher than it had been in the 1970s, the 1999 juvenile arrest rate for violent crimes had returned to a level comparable to that of the early 1980s. The trends for each of the individual offenses that comprise the violent crime index were the same over the decade. For example, the juvenile arrest rate for murder peaked in 1993 at a level (14 per 100,000) more than twice the rate in 1980 (6 per 100,000) before dropping to around 4 per 100,000 in 1999. The increase and decline in the arrest rate for forcible rape was not nearly so dramatic, peaking at a rate of 23 per 100,000 in 1991 before dropping to 16 per 100,000 in 1999—the same rate as in 1980. Robbery

Figure 1.1 Violent Juvenile Arrest Rates, 1980–1999



Source: Adapted from H. N. Snyder. 2000. *Juvenile Arrests, 1999*. Washington, DC: US Department of Justice.

peaked in 1994–1995 at a rate of 200 per 100,000, but by decade’s end was below 100 per 100,000. Finally, the rate for aggravated assault peaked at around 300 per 100,000 in 1994—double its rate in 1980—and then dropped to around 225 per 100,000 in 1999.

The previous paragraph is, of course, only one of many different ways of “reading” or understanding these data. That is one of the grounding assumptions of this book: The “reality” of youth violence was—and is—in many important ways a matter of social definition. The numbers are important, but what we make of them (and the reality of youth violence more generally) is at least as important. We could see the rising rates of the first half of the decade—as many did at the time—as grounds for anxiety and fear. Alternatively, the falling rates might indicate that during the last half of the decade, significant progress was made in mitigating the problem. With a more historical perspective in mind, we could argue that the rates by decade’s end were higher than in the 1970s, suggesting that we might be concerned about longer-term trends. We could suggest that the focus on violence by youth is misplaced, that this focus draws our attention away from much more common nonviolent crimes such as drug use or property crime. We might critique the use of official statistics to measure the problem, arguing that such statistics always underestimate the problem, thus suggesting the “problem” was even greater than what these facts suggested. Finally, it is possible that these statistics exaggerated the gravity of the problem and that all the anxiety and fear they generated were misplaced or unwarranted. After all, most kids behave themselves most of the time; violent crime like this is relatively rare.

Given all the possible ways listed above of orienting to the “facts” about youth violence, it is clear that most of the *public discourse* both reflected and fed a growing concern and fear of the problem. As we see in this book, the general view was that violence among youth was a serious threat and was growing worse. Reactions on the part of the federal and state governments, as well as the general public, were predictable. In 1993, the US Conference of Mayors and the Rainbow Coalition formed task forces to address the problem. The following year, violence prevention was designated as the theme of National Child Month by the American Academy of Pediatrics. In 1995, National Random Acts of Kindness Day was declared by the Kindness Movement. Mark Warr (1995, p. 300) has noted that public opinion about crime underwent “an unprecedented reassessment” in 1994—the year that the juvenile violent crime index rate peaked. Crime and violence came to head the list of perceived problems in a number of public opinion polls for the first time in more than a decade (Warr 1995).

With rising youth crime rates and growing public concern, it is not surprising that the juvenile justice system shifted to a more punitive stance (Colomy and Greiner 2004; see also Haydon and Scraton 2000 for a discussion of this phenomenon in Great Britain). A 1999 US Department of Justice report suggested “the 1990’s have been a time of unprecedented change as State legislatures crack down on juvenile crime” (Snyder and Sickmund 1999, p. 87). According to this report, states responded to public concerns about youth crime with a flurry of legislative activity. For example, between 1992 and 1997, forty-seven states and the District of Columbia enacted legislation in one or more of the following areas: (1) making it easier to waive or transfer juvenile offenders from the juvenile court to the adult criminal court, (2) giving both sets of courts expanded sentencing options, and (3) modifying or removing traditional requirements that shielded juvenile court proceedings from public scrutiny. Thus, by 1997, twenty-eight states had passed laws that excluded certain offenders from juvenile court jurisdiction, meaning that their cases now *originated* in the adult criminal court. In twenty-four of these states, laws singled out for such statutory exclusion capital crimes, murder, and/or other violent offenses. For example, ten-year-olds living in Wisconsin could have their cases automatically waived to the criminal court. In five other states, the minimum age was thirteen.

These changes in violent crime rates and state-level juvenile justice policies provide part of the immediate context of this book. However, there is much more to the story of youth violence in the 1990s. These changes in policy were not simply a direct reaction to the increase in official rates of violent juvenile crime. As Ira Schwartz (1992) has suggested, juvenile justice policy is “usually made in an emotionally charged atmosphere” (p. 224). Similarly, Paul Colomy and Laura Greiner (2004) argue that a full understanding of juvenile justice policy must consider “analyses of the symbolic dimensions of crime, law, and punishment” (p. 5). Put differently, to understand how juvenile justice policy changed—indeed, to understand our broader collective search for solutions to the problem of youth violence—we need to understand the cultural meanings attributed to youth violence during this period. From this perspective, official rates of youth violence take on a different importance—they not only partially shape this search for meaning and solutions but also become part of the process. These numbers were part of the discursive “raw material” out of which the “crisis” of youth violence was constructed.

Youthful Misbehavior as a Recurring Social Problem

With a broader context in mind, the 1990s were certainly not the first time the misbehavior of youth had become an object of widespread concern and intense public debate. Indeed, recurring concern about delinquency can be traced back to the Progressive Era of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Social reformers of that time raised alarm at the untoward behavior of lower-class, immigrant children (Bernard and Kurlychek 2010; Hagan and Leon 1977; Platt 1977; Schlossman 1977). The child-savers, as child advocates of this time were known, saw these youth as largely responsible for dramatic increases in crime in our major cities. According to the dominant discourse of that time, the behavior of these youth was the result of three factors—inept parenting, the weak moral nature of the lower class, and the more general corrupting influences of the urban landscape (Bernard and Kurlychek 2010; Platt 1977). This discourse, and the shared understandings of which they were part, resulted in a host of different methods of training, treating, and rehabilitating these lower-class youth and their parents, ranging from houses of refuge in the early 1800s to the juvenile court systems of the first decades of the twentieth century.

The 1950s appear to have been another period of intense concern regarding juvenile delinquency. James Gilbert (1986) suggests that much of the discourse during this period expressed a deep concern for what was seen as an emerging middle-class teen subculture characterized by rock-and-roll music, new styles of dress (e.g., blue jeans and boots) and hairstyles, and even a new language. To many adults, the new appearance and lifestyle of teenagers signaled a troubling change—a transformation of traditional teen rebellion and high jinks to dangerous criminal behavior. According to Gilbert (1986), the discourse of the time identified several culprits responsible for this new and growing problem, in particular (1) the inability of middle-class parents (and for that matter, most of adult society) to properly understand and socialize children and (2) the influence of popular culture—specifically mass media in the form of movies, television, and comic books. This concern with popular culture was not new, but rather the most recent manifestation of anxiety about social change and its effects on youth that periodically surfaces. From the mid-to late 1960s through the early 1970s, young members of the baby boom generation (myself included) were objects of growing concern because of reputed drug use (marijuana and LSD in particular), participation in

antiwar protests, and teenage rejection of marriage, school, and the world of work. More recently, in the 1980s Americans witnessed widespread concern regarding youth gangs generally and with violence and drug dealing in particular.

Although this book is not the place for a full history of delinquency as a social problem, I want to make several observations. Delinquency—and youthful misbehavior more generally—is an enduring feature of American society. There have always been children and adolescents who misbehave. However, only periodically has this misbehavior emerged as a *significant* public concern. That is, it is always around, but we discover or, rather, rediscover it from time to time. Second, each time we do rediscover it, we see it as worse than it has ever been. Thomas Bernard and Megan Kurlychek (2010, p. 13) refer to this as the myth of the “good old days.” Third, delinquency is often—perhaps most of the time—rediscovered as a rather different sort of problem. In the Progressive Era, it was lower-class urban youth, in the 1950s, it was middle-class suburban youth, and in the 1980s, it was urban youth gangs. There are noticeable continuities in what gets defined as its origins—the usual suspects seem to be faulty parenting and other family problems; problems or dangers of the urban landscape; and mass media, as well as other aspects of popular culture. We come to these conclusions, in part, because our understandings of delinquency inevitably draw on deeply held cultural images of children, youth, and their environments; crime and criminals; and social change. However, within these commonalities, new or different origins or causes are invented. For example, although we commonly blame youthful misbehavior on popular culture, it tends to take on different guises with each rediscovery of the problem: In the 1950s, it was comic books and music, whereas in the 1990s (as we will see later in this book), it was video games and movies. More recently, the Internet and cell phones have taken their place in our concerns about youth. In sum, when the problem of youthful misbehavior (be it drug use or violent crime) is periodically rediscovered—that is, becomes the object of public concern—this problem is understood as a different sort of problem with different causes than previously.

The Theoretical Framework of the Book

I use a constructionist social problems framework for the basic foundation of this book. For constructionists, social problems are those phenomena

that are *socially defined* as problematic (Spector and Kitsuse 1987; Blumer 1971). To say that pollution, violent crime, homelessness, and terrorism are social problems means that they have become socially defined as problems and, thus, objects of widespread concern. Whether a phenomenon is defined as a social problem is not necessarily related to its objective characteristics, such as its size or the potential harm it may cause. There are many phenomena that arguably pose serious threats that are not defined as problems, and, likewise, many others that are arguably rather innocuous that come to be socially defined as problems. Social definitions are found in, and arise out of, social discourse about problems. In constructionist terminology, social problems discourse both constitutes and produces the social meanings of problems. Such discourse, or talk, can be found in all sorts of places: in the news, on talk shows and popular television series, in congressional hearings and presidential speeches, or in our everyday discussion over the dinner table; when we talk about a phenomenon as a problem, we are defining it as one. Put another way, there are a host of discursive arenas in which social problems get constructed.

Discourse about a social problem is complex and multidimensional. Part of what gets defined—indeed, “created”—when we talk about a problem is the condition itself (Loseke 1993; Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993). For example, talk about “violent crime,” “cigarette smoking,” and “homelessness” as conditions typically establishes their “size,” their negative consequences, and their causes. Thus, when we talk about “the homelessness problem,” we often talk about how many homeless people there are on the streets and why or how they end up there. When we talk about the “smoking problem,” we may talk about the unhealthy effects of secondhand smoke and the cancer rate among smokers. When we talk about violent crime, we may talk about the murder rate or the social and economic costs of violence.

In addition, the types of people who populate a problem get defined in this sort of discourse (Loseke 1993; Loseke and Best 2003). Thus, homelessness is populated with the “homeless person,” and smoking is populated by “the smoker.” Such conclusions may appear quite intuitive at first glance, but *how* these person-categories are constructed is important. Many, perhaps most, social problems involve both victims and victimizers (Best 1999; Loseke 1993; Holstein and Miller 1990). For example, the social problem of terrorism may include the “terrorist” and his or her “innocent civilian victims.” The problem of “domestic violence” might be populated with the “battered woman” and her “abuser”

(Loseke 1992). Sometimes, the status of a person-category is subject to some debate. For example, is the homeless person someone who ends up on the street because of forces beyond his or her control? Or do people become homeless because they are lazy? Are terrorists freedom fighters (that is, victims of oppressive governments), or are they victimizers (killers of innocents)? Answers to these questions help us understand a final element of social problems discourse—the emotional orientations that surround a problem (Loseke 1993). Discourse that constructs victims and victimizers does not merely *name* these persons or groups. Rather, victims and victimizers are cultural categories—or labels—that carry both semantic and emotional baggage. The term “victim” typically means someone who is harmed and, more importantly, someone who does not deserve this harm. In other words, victims are—unless otherwise defined—innocent or blameless. Alternatively, victimizers are—in lieu of other information—assumed to have intentionally brought this harm to their victims; that is, they are to be blamed. Further, these images or meanings of victims and victimizers invoke predictable emotions: Outrage or anger may be common elements of the discourse about the victimizers in the problem of violent crime, whereas sympathy or compassion might be engendered for their victims.

Defining a problem has consequences. First, since a problem is by definition an object of public concern, there will be calls to do something about it. Indeed, such efforts are an important element of social problems discourse. The emergence of drunk driving as a social problem (Gusfield 1981) generated a host of efforts to ameliorate it. The same can be said about the problem of homelessness: In the mid-1980s amid widespread talk about the problem, Congress passed the McKinney Act—the first comprehensive federal legislation addressing homelessness (Sisco 2008). Despite decades of warnings by experts, global warming was slow to emerge as a social problem, and thus, little in the way of serious work was done about it. However, recently it seems everyone is pitching in to “save the planet”—from recycling to using less electricity to buying hybrid cars. Second, the specific nature of these ameliorative efforts is shaped by our particular definition of the problem. For example, defining aviary flu as a health threat would (and did) result in the production and stockpiling of large volumes of flu vaccine, examination of hospital emergency rooms and procedures, and all sorts of talk about rationing scarce medical resources related to the treatment of this condition. Defining this condition as a threat to US national security, however, would result in myriad efforts involving the Department of Homeland Security.

Social problems discourse is rhetorical, in the sense that it represents a preferred definition of a condition (Holstein and Miller 1990). In many instances, people debate whether a condition is “really” a problem. Even when people appear to agree that a condition is a problem, they may hold multiple views regarding the particular type of problem it constitutes or how to properly go about trying to solve it. Using the example of drunk driving from above, it seems that Americans are of at least two minds. At times we define it as a medical problem, the solution to which is treatment (Conrad and Schneider 1992). However, at other times, our penchant for demanding tougher jail sentences for drunk drivers seems to suggest we also see it as a crime problem. This same observation might apply to teenage pregnancy, which sparks perennial debates among advocates of abstinence, condom use, and sex education.

Constructionists often argue that public discourse—especially in the media—simplifies problems. For example, they suggest that the media (and by extension other arenas of public discourse) prefer monocausal framings of conditions (Fishman 1980; Gusfield 1981; Stallings 1995). That is, constructionists argue that the media construct problems in singular ways—violence as a crime problem or terrorism as a matter of national security. Similarly, the person-categories that populate problems fit into either of two types—victim or victimizer (Loseke 1993; Holstein and Miller 1990). Our analyses of emotional orientations likewise tend toward the simple—for example, we examine discourse for fear (of victimizers) or sympathy (for victims) (Loseke 1993; Altheide 2002). This simplicity in constructing problems contrasts with the complexity of the “real” world itself. For example, Donileen Loseke (1992) suggests that the relative simplicity of the organizational discourse at a domestic violence shelter allowed workers to make decisions about whom to admit to the shelter even in the face of the complexity and “messiness” of the lived experience of domestic violence. At a different level, in discussing the media, David Altheide (2002, p. 98) has suggested, “Entertainment abhors ambiguity, while truth and effective intervention efforts to improve social life reside in ambiguity. It is this tension between entertaining and familiar news reports, on the one hand, and civic understanding, on the other hand, that remains to be resolved.” That may well be the case with many social problems, but the central tenet of this book is that youth violence has been constructed as a rather ambiguous and uncertain problem on multiple levels and along several dimensions. As a condition, it constituted a variety of specific kinds of problems—from individual acts of violence to gang violence and school shootings to the

“superpredator”—sometimes in sequence and at other times in combination. Further, youth violence was understood as a paradox that juxtaposed two images—the evil of their predatory acts versus the naïveté and innocence of these youth. In turn, the evil nature of the violence was consistently drawn against the innocence and, at times, the bravery of the victims. As constructed, this violence withstood explanation, or at least an easy one.

It has become a major principle of contemporary constructionist theory that social problems discourse be studied in relationship to its broader—especially cultural—context (see, e.g., Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993). Consider what Joel Best (1999, p. 186) has to say: “Just as no social problem exists in isolation, unconnected from the surrounding patterns of social life, so the way we talk about a given problem has many links to other, familiar social problems—and to the larger culture—and those links influence what we understand and how we respond.” Jaber Gubrium and James A. Holstein (1998) make this point when they distinguish between “discursive practice” and “discourses-in-practice”: The former refers to the “hows” of social problems discourse—almost literally, the language of social problems discourse and its various features; the latter refers to the “whats” of this discourse, including “recognizable categories, familiar vocabularies, organizational missions, professional orientations, group cultures, and other existing frameworks for assigning meaning” (Gubrium and Holstein 1998). Constructionists often call these “whats” interpretive resources—referring to the notion that these elements of the social context provide ways of making sense of this discourse. In a human service organization, they might include formal and informal protocols for processing its clientele (Loseke 1992; Spencer 1997). In the news industry, they might include shared ideas of what constitutes newsworthiness, as well as broader collective representations of situations and persons. For example, assumptions about gender often make it easier to construct men as violent criminals and thus to craft explanations for this violence. In news discourse about youth violence, broader cultural understandings of youth, violent crime, race, and class were at play.

Constructionist studies often approach social problems discourse at a meso-level of analysis—that is, as claims made by specific groups or institutions. One of the major analytic goals of this work is to explain the form and content of these claims by way of group or organizational values, interests, or power. For example, in her analysis of the eugenics campaign of the late 1800s and early 1900s, Nicole Rafter makes re-

course to the motives of one of the central claimants of the campaign—Josephine Shaw Lowell. In turn, Best (1990) argues that claims about threats to children in the 1980s were often shaped by the goals or values of various interest groups, such as child advocates or law enforcement. Philip Jenkins (1994) argues that federal law enforcement and the media each had stakes in how serial homicide was constructed in the 1980s. Constructionists are most fond of using the news to study social problems construction, and it is common to understand this sort of discourse as reflecting that institution's values or interests regarding newsworthiness, sensationalism, entertainment, objectivity, and even the profit motive. Extending this argument, Altheide (2002) suggests that the contemporary culture of fear is in part shaped by the logic and technology of mass media. From this perspective, although media discourse may be shaped by broader cultural ideas, typically it is viewed as separate from those ideas.

I don't contest this way of conceptualizing news discourse, but I find it more useful to treat the news as a more truly *cultural* text—a discourse that simultaneously is produced by, reflects, and acts upon culture. In this way, analyzing news discourse tells us as least as much about culture as it does about the news industry itself. This view is very similar to that used in many contemporary studies of popular culture. For example, Chris Barker (2003, p. 319) argues that the media “draw off as well as constitute consensual assumptions about the world.” Norman Denzin (1995, p. 7) saw popular film as one way “a society cinematically represents itself to its members.” Similarly, Robert Bulman (2005, p. 2) treats films as cultural artifacts that “tell us truths about the culture that produces them.” Put a bit differently, the news (along with other mass media forms like film, popular music, and television) is a sort of window on how our culture tries to make sense of youth violence. In this light, the news is, in a way, authorless—less the work of individuals, groups, or even an entire industry and more a part, and a product, of culture. To be sure, the news is still an *institutional* discourse—partially shaped by a variety of beliefs, logics, values, and conventions relatively specific to the news industry, such as concerns with balance or objectivity, newsworthiness, profit, and entertainment (Altheide 2002; Lester 1980). Admitting that, though, still allows for a more cultural reading of the news, where in addition to conditions specific to the news industry, the concern is with how broad cultural values, assumptions, expectations, and the like are employed and, in turn, given specific shape and meaning in this discourse. In this way, my perspective is like that of Denzin (1991),

who argues that Hollywood treatments of alcoholism and the alcoholic have been shaped by broader historical and cultural understandings. Thus, in this study of youth violence, broad cultural understandings of youth, gender, violence, and the city as a social place all serve as discourses-in-practice, or interpretive resources, that shaped how youth violence was constructed in the news. Likewise, news discourse about programs and policies regarding this problem presents a window on our collective search for solutions.

In using this constructionist perspective, I am not suggesting that the objective condition of youth violence—the “reality” of the problem—isn’t worthy of study. Indeed, a considerable body of research and theory exists that focuses on the rates and correlates of youth violence, its origins or causes, as well as promising prevention and intervention programs. What I *am* suggesting is that discourse about the problem is equally worthy of serious study for at least two reasons. First, if we take seriously the notion that social definitions shape our collective reactions to problems, then to understand the ways we respond to youth violence requires that we recognize how we have come to understand it, which, in turn, means a serious study of public discourse about it. In Chapter 3, I examine discourse about our collective search for a solution to youth violence and show how this search—and the discourse about it—was shaped in important ways by our understandings of the problem itself. Second, a serious consideration of public discourse about youth violence requires an understanding of its wider social and cultural contexts. Talk about the youth violence problem was shaped by broader assumptions or understandings about youth, violence, race, class, and a number of other cultural beliefs and concerns. If we take this wider focus seriously, we can learn some important lessons about American culture. Consider what Bulman (2005, p. 8) has said about movies: “One way in which we collectively manage to cope with the complexity and confusion of social life is to package reality and represent it as fiction—to tell stories about our social world that make it more comprehensible.” I am not arguing, of course, that the news and film are equivalent sorts of discourses. However, I do argue that the news may function in ways similar to popular film in that it represents one of the ways we collectively make sense of social life—in this case, youth violence. As seen through the lens of media discourse in the 1990s, we viewed youth violence as a complex, ambiguous problem—indeed, as a paradox. What does this understanding tell us about our views of youth and of violence? Why did we describe the violence of inner-city youth in ways fundamentally different from—and

more understandable than—that of suburban or rural youth? Why, in our collective search for solutions, did we continually get caught up in debates over treatment versus punishment or prevention versus incarceration and, in the process, fail to seriously pursue alternative solutions?

Media Discourse About Violence Problems

Violence occupies a significant and highly visible place in American society. Our rates of violent crime are among the highest of all industrialized countries, and—perhaps not coincidentally—violence pervades our popular culture. It is the fundamental basis of many of our most popular sports, from hockey and football to wrestling and, increasingly, basketball. It serves as the basic plotline for television shows and movies and has become a staple in video and computer games. References to violence can be found in the lyrics of many songs. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that violence is the subject of considerable social problems talk. We discuss the “violence problem” at work and at home, and, of course, there is much of it in the news. Stories about specific violence problems, such as serial murder, rape, spousal and child abuse, freeway violence, and, more recently, terrorism, have been and continue to be commonplace.

A large body of research focuses on news discourse about violence-related problems. From reading these stories, we can glean a number of general themes or patterns in the way that the news portrays or presents violence. First, violent crime *dominates* media reports (Beckett and Sasson 2000; Gorelick 1989; Graber 1980; Kappeler, Blumberg, and Potter 2000; Sheley and Ashkins 1981), even though it comprises a relatively small proportion of the total rate of officially recognized street crime. For example, Robert Lichter and Linda Lichter (1994) find that 80 percent of news stories in 1993 featured violent crime. According to Sanford Sherizen (1978), 23 percent of crime news during 1975 in Chicago was about robbery and 45 percent was about murder. Stephen Gorelick (1989) found that robbery was featured in 50 percent of stories in the *New York Daily News* crime-fighting campaign during 1982.

Second, in some instances and in some venues (such as newsweeklies and opinion columns), news discourse *thematizes* violence by crafting problems out of individual violent events. For example, Mark Fishman (1978) found that individual cases of violent crime in New York were organized into a wave of “crimes against the elderly.” More

recently, Best (1999) has illustrated how individual incidents, such as two seemingly unrelated shootings on Los Angeles freeways, or an assault on and rape of a jogger in New York's Central Park, were framed as instances of larger problems of "freeway violence" and "wilding," respectively. Similarly, Gorelick (1989) illustrates how journalists at the *New York Daily News* took a variety of news fragments and organized them around the theme of "crime fighting," which became part of a more general campaign against violent crime.

Third, violence problems are almost always characterized as *expanding, spreading, or generally growing worse*. We see this in Best's (1990) analysis of the rhetoric about threatened children in the 1980s. Violence is often depicted as random and unpredictable (Best 1999; Beckett and Sasson 2000). Relatedly, news discourse often characterizes violence as widespread—with no one being safe, irrespective of race, class, age, gender, and place of residence. All this is accomplished, in part, through the use of words such as "epidemic" or "plague" (Best 1999; Gorelick 1989), and, in a sometimes unfortunate mixing of metaphors, crime control may be likened to a "war" waged against a "plague"—defining violence as the enemy whose defeat will require extraordinary efforts and sacrifice (Gorelick 1989). Claims about violence problems often draw connections to other, more familiar problems and concerns. For example, Best (1990, 1999) has noted how new problems are "piggybacked" onto established ones, such as happened in constructions of stalking that linked it to the more established problem of domestic violence (Lowney and Best 1995). In more general terms, Gorelick (1989) and Best (1999) have both noted that constructions of violence problems draw on broad cultural concerns about social disorder and moral decay.

Fourth, perpetrators and victims of violence (Holstein and Miller 1990; Loseke 1993) are fashioned by media discourse into a type of morality play (Altheide 2002), with offenders as the evil, predatory villains and their targets as innocent victims. Typecasting of offenders and victims facilitates the fashioning of these morality plays. For example, news discourse focuses disproportionately on women, children, and the elderly as victims of violence (Kappeler, Blumberg, and Potter 2000), likely because they are more easily presented as vulnerable and weak (Best 1999; Gorelick 1989; Websdale 1999). Further, victims are typically portrayed as morally pure—not responsible for their plight and deserving of our sympathy and assistance (Loseke 1992; Holstein and Miller 1990).

Violent offenders, however, are often demonized. For example, media discourse focuses on violence committed by men and youth

(Reiman 1997). Violence by strangers garners more attention than violence between friends, acquaintances, or family members (Kappeler, Blumberg, and Potter 2000; Beckett and Sasson 2000). Quite often in this discourse, victimizers lack conscience and act without remorse. Neil Websdale (1999, p. 99) shows how the sexual predator is constructed as a “fiendishly dangerous individual,” and Jenkins (1994) argues that during the 1970s serial killers came increasingly to be portrayed as monsters and savage animals.

The focus on individual offenders results partly from the media’s tendency to decontextualize violence by backgrounding both the immediate situation as well as larger social contexts. For example, John Johnson (1995) notes that in talking about child abuse, the media fail to address everyday stressors that might account for the abuse (which in turn ends up attributing responsibility to the abuser) and do not attend to the immediate context of abuse, such as preceding events or interpersonal roles and relationships. From a different perspective, Websdale (1999) argues that constructions of the sexual predator do not connect the problem with battering of women, marital rape, and child sexual abuse. Similarly, Neil Websdale and Alexander Alvarez (1998) illustrate how constructions of lethal domestic violence fail to place it in the context of a history of battering on the part of the offender. In both instances, these constructions are seen as failing to confront, and thus reinforcing, patriarchal violence and other aspects of gender politics in the United States. This tendency to focus on the individual violent offender has to do with an American cultural orientation toward a “volitional” view of crime and criminals (Sasson 1995; Scheingold 1991), which accords considerable free will and choice to offenders—in effect, rendering them evil and immoral. Victims, however, typically have few choices and are most generally portrayed as weak and vulnerable. For example, Loseke (1992) shows how the “battered woman” was portrayed as someone who was *trapped* in her situation—economically, emotionally, socially, and psychologically. More generally, James Holstein and Gale Miller (1990) suggest a “victim” is someone who had no role in their plight.

Compared to the volumes of research literature on media discourse about violence problems, relatively little work has been done on how the media portray juvenile delinquency and youth crime. This is surprising because the news has always been a major vehicle or platform for our public concerns when we periodically rediscover youthful behavior as a problem. For example, Robert Shepherd (1997, p. 10) cites an 1857 *New York Times* editorial noting “the number of boy burglars, boy robbers, and boy murderers is so astoundingly large as to alarm all good men.”

Likewise, James Gilbert (1986) suggests that popular magazines like *Life* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, in addition to popular films, were common vehicles for such discourse in the 1950s. Specifically, James Garbarino (2001, p. 83) notes a *Saturday Evening Post* article in which a child psychologist writes of “youngsters under 16 who rob at the point of a gun, push dope, rape and kill.”

Partially reflecting more popular concerns of the decade, some academics turned to the study of news discourse and youth crime in the 1990s. Deena Haydon and Phil Scraton (2000) described a case in England in which two ten-year-olds, Jon Venables and Robert Thompson, were convicted in adult court and sentenced to prison for the murder of two-year-old James Bulger. Colomy and Greiner (2004) examined how the Denver media presented violent youth during the local 1993 “summer of violence.” Jennifer Ogle, Molly Eckman, and Catherine Leslie (2003) considered how press coverage of the Columbine shootings sought to frame the incident and propose its solution. Finally, Ann Herda-Rapp (2003) explored how local media interpreted their own school violence threat in the context of national news constructions of the problem. These recent studies of youth violence suggest that media discourse portrays violent *youth* in ways sometimes quite similar to its portrayal of violent *adults*. For example, both Colomy and Greiner (2004) and Haydon and Scraton (2000) illustrate how youth violence is cast as a threat to the moral and social order. The media often demonize violent youth, framing them as acting randomly and without conscience (Colomy and Greiner 2000), and media campaigns often lead to important changes in juvenile and criminal justice policies (Colomy and Greiner 2000; Haydon and Scraton 2000; Herda-Rapp 2003). However, in other significant ways, how the media talked about youth violence in the 1990s differed quite a bit from how it constructed other violence problems.

The Social Construction of Youth Violence

In the chapters that follow, I demonstrate how the media constructed youth violence as a complex phenomenon attributable to multiple causes and solutions. Far from decontextualizing this violence, it probed almost every conceivable aspect of the social and cultural lives of these kids. The condition of youth violence was construed as a paradox in which the malevolence of the violence was juxtaposed against the youthful status of those committing it. The problem was framed and reframed over the course of the 1990s, as if we were facing not a single problem, but

multiple ones that changed constantly. Even as the victims of this violence were consistently portrayed as innocents and their deaths as tragedies, violent youth themselves were cast in complex and equivocal ways, as *both* victims and as victimizers. They were to be held culpable for their acts. Their violence was almost always premeditated and intentional. However, at the same time, a plethora of causal accounts located the origins of this violence in their families, neighborhoods or communities, and even in our general culture. Extensive as these causal accounts were, talk often suggested we may not *ever* know why these kids were killing. In this way, youth violence was perhaps more of a mystery than it was a paradox. A host of complex and ambivalent emotions attended these images of youth violence and violent youth. These were, after all, just kids, so they were to be afforded some degree of sympathy and pity. However, this pity was always equivocal. The violence they committed spawned both fear and anger. What they did was horrible. In addition, how could anyone sympathize with violent youth while feeling compassion for their victims? These reactions resemble what Michael Adorjan (2009 and forthcoming) has found in his analysis of discourse on the youth violence problem in Canada. Specifically, he found that violent youth were subjected to emotional contests in which multiple, often conflicting emotions were presented, contested, and resisted (Adorjan, forthcoming). In addition, he also identified complexity and ambiguity in the ways that government officials presented and debated solutions to the problem as part of juvenile crime legislation (Adorjan 2009).

Complexity, uncertainty, and ambivalence in media discussions of youth violence were shaped by a number of broader discourses or cultural understandings that converged on this talk. However, two such discourses deserve special mention at this point. The first comprises a complex set of understandings and beliefs regarding children and youth. The second comprises a long-standing set of beliefs and stereotypes regarding the big city as a social, physical, and cultural place.

Youth as a Social Construction

The concepts of childhood, youth, adolescence, and adulthood refer to various points or stages along a continuum of human physical and psychological development. At the same time, however, they are also social or cultural constructions. These terms do not exist universally, but rather emerge and carry different meanings in certain cultures and at various historical moments. As such, youth and adolescence become social objects

to which various meanings are attributed (Barker 2003; Levander and Singly 2003). The concepts of youth and adolescence are relatively new to the Western cultural stage. In the United States, their emergence can be tied to the vast political, economic, cultural, and demographic transformations of the nineteenth century (see, e.g., Aries 1962; Bakan 1971; Bernard and Kurlychek 2010; Emyp and Stafford 1991). Prior to this period, adulthood began around the time of puberty. However, with the advent of mass, compulsory education, adulthood was postponed, creating a gap between childhood and adulthood (Barker 2003; Jensen and Rojek 2000). This development was reinforced by the passage of child protection laws that prohibited, or at least curtailed, children's participation in the workforce (Corsaro 1997) and their free time on the streets (Zelizer 1985). As a result of these social forces, children were gradually removed from the world of adults. People we now call teenagers were no longer adults, but historically they had never been considered children. Adolescence emerged as a "cultural space of transition" (Barker 2003, p. 375) that "filled" this gap, and teens began to spend an increasing amount of their time in the home, school, and on playgrounds (Corsaro 1997).

These cultural categories of adolescence in general and youth in particular came to be understood in ways that we now take for granted. Generally, we began to view youth as innocent and vulnerable and, therefore, needing special protection (Aries 1962; Emyp and Stafford 1991; Jensen and Rojek 2000). These views form the foundation for almost all our legal and institutional arrangements related to children, such as child welfare laws, educational policies, and the juvenile justice system. These views also make youth ideal victims in social problems discourse (Best 1990; Corsaro 1997; Spencer 2000). Because we take these meanings for granted, they are rarely challenged. Constructionists would say that including youth-as-victims in the discourse about almost any condition carries considerable affective force. For example, it was easy to be emotionally moved in the face of the 1980s discourse about children being abducted, and often killed or raped, by strangers (Best 1990). The emergence of youth in the discourse of homelessness in the 1980s added a significant element to the discovery of the "new" homeless and subsequent policy changes aimed at ameliorating this problem (Spencer 1996; Sisco 2008).

Youth make powerful subjects of social problems discourse for another reason. Discourse about troublesome youth tends to be associated with anxiety about social change. Because youth signify the future of our society, cultural anxieties—especially about the future, social change, and the like—are often expressed as threats to children (Best 1990;

Corsaro 1997; Jenkins 1992). Thus, for example, concerns about technological change may be expressed in discourse about the risk posed to youth by the Internet. Likewise, anxiety about social change (such as an increasingly multicultural society) may be articulated in discourse about the spread of so-called urban problems like crime or gangs to the suburbs and small towns. In their classic treatise on social disorganization, Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay (1942) suggested that traditional systems of social control were weakened by new inventions for transportation and communication, such as the automobile and radio.

Although constructionist studies of social problems may suggest that youth are employed in relatively uniform ways in social problems discourse, the cultural meanings of “youth” are not so simple and unequivocal. At times constructionists seem to view youth as innocent and vulnerable, but there is more to this story. Since its inception, adolescence has been a site of cultural ambiguity, ambivalence, and confusion (Barker 2003; Sibley 1995). As commonly understood in American culture, youth are caught between the worlds of childhood freedom and adult responsibility. Legally, adolescents are accorded some, but certainly not all, adult rights and responsibilities, such as driving, voting, and working. At the same time, however, we require them to attend school and restrict their access to alcohol, tobacco, and R-rated films. But youth and adolescence represent even more than that—they are sites of cultural ambivalence. According to Barker (2003, p. 377), “Youth has become an ideological signifier charged with utopian images of the future. On the other hand it is also commonly feared as a potential threat to existing norms and regulations.” In similar fashion, Thomas Hine (1999, p. 11) suggests:

Our beliefs about teenagers are deeply contradictory: They should be free to become themselves. They need many years of training and study. They know more about the future than adults do. They know hardly anything at all. They ought to know the value of a dollar. They should be protected from the world of work. They are frail, vulnerable creatures. They are children, they are sex fiends. They are the death of culture. They are the hope of us all.

As both Barker and Hine suggest, cultural images of youth connect inextricably to concerns about the present and the future. That being the case, the ways that the cultural meanings of youth function in social problems discourse may be considerably more complex than the extant constructionist literature would have us believe.

Hine (1999), Gillian Brown (2003), Caroline Levander and Carol Singley (2003) and others have argued that many of these cultural discourses find expression particularly in the ways we think and talk about youth and their problems. That youthful misbehavior (variously labeled youth crime, delinquency, and the like) has been a recurring topic of American social problems discourse since at least the early 1800s is instructive. Its *endurance* as a social problem suggests that the misbehavior of youth articulates closely in some ways with salient cultural concerns and beliefs. According to Levander and Singley (2003, p. 3), the child is “a rich and varied site of cultural inscription . . . [that] comes to represent, and often codify, the prevailing ideologies of a given culture or historical period.” Gilbert (1986) has made a similar observation regarding discourse about juvenile delinquency in the 1950s. He points out that this discourse reflected a deep-seated anxiety about social change, particularly the growing influence of the mass media. Likewise, Best (1990) notes how the rise of horror fiction featuring child monsters (such as *Rosemary’s Baby* or *The Exorcist*) coincided with the youth-centered social crises of the late 1960s and early 1970s. He argues that these horror novels spoke to, or reflected, widespread anxiety regarding youthful rebellion, drug use, and sexual activity. I return to these and other related ideas in later chapters.

Place, Race, and Social Class

Talk about youth violence also appropriated long-standing assumptions and understandings about place, class, and race in American culture. Jeffrey Hadden and Josef Barton (1973) refer to these assumptions as an “anti-urban ideology.” According to this ideology, the city is a dangerous place, filled with poverty, slums, and unemployment; rampant crime, vice, and corruption; and incivility and social disorder. Likewise, Lynn Lofland (1998, p. 108) suggests an “anti-urbanism” in which the city is compared to the small town and village: “This juxtapositioning of the moral and physical virtue and purity of small towns and villages and their rural or wilderness surroundings against the moral and physical vileness and pollution of the city is so common a device that each can be evoked by the other *even in the absence of the other*.”

In these understandings, place, race, and class are linked. According to these assumptions, youth violence was *supposed* to be limited to the big city, a place populated by the lower or working classes. Indeed, the first “discovery” of juvenile delinquency in the United States associated

it with the urban environment and the immigrant populations that lived there (Bernard and Kurlychek 2010). During the Progressive Era, the middle classes, who were more familiar with the country and small towns, saw the big city and its working-class and lower-class immigrants as strange and dirty. From this era came not only the social problem of delinquency and youth crime (Platt 1977; Schlossman 1977) but a host of other problems, such as drinking, gambling, and prostitution (Abrams 2000; Flanagan 1986). (Indeed, the 1919 constitutional amendment that ushered in Prohibition can be seen as the culmination of a movement that began in the Progressive Era.) Delinquency was seen as so embedded in the physical and social environment of the city that many early solutions to the problem involved removing working-class and lower-class youth from their urban, and family, environments (Bernard and Kurlychek 2010).

Race, place, and class have played a role in the recurring problem of delinquency throughout the twentieth century. The association of youth crime with the big city and its immigrant populations shaped popular discourse until well into the 1940s (Gilbert 1986). The delinquency scare of the 1950s was also largely about class and, by extension, place and race. However, in the mass media, as well as in considerable sociological theorizing, the delinquency-of-concern in the 1950s was being committed by middle-class teens (Gilbert 1986). As manifested in iconic films of that decade (such as *Rebel Without a Cause*), it wasn't just social class—these were largely *white* kids living in the *suburbs*. Similarly, it could be argued that much of the great anxiety about the youthful rebellion of the 1960s was, likewise, about middle-class white kids. Alternatively, the gang problem of the 1980s—whether defined as a *youth* gang problem or not—was largely defined as a lower-class, urban, minority problem.

These cultural assumptions and beliefs were appropriated in 1990s talk about youth violence, in which place, race, and class were conflated. At times, the problem was located in the big city and involved working-class and lower-class minorities (largely African Americans and Hispanics). At other times, youth violence was located somewhere else, specifically in small towns and the suburbs. As juxtaposed against the big-city problem, this other—and at times more mysterious—problem was largely about middle-class white kids. Although at times popular discourse focused on one problem or the other, at other times it combined *both* into one problem. The conflation of place, race, and class allowed talk about one to reference talk about the others. That is, talk about youth violence in the suburbs suggested middle-class violence. Alternatively,

talk about the big-city problem implicated lower-class and working-class minorities.

Assembling the Data

With the recent development of online search engines (e.g., Google and Bing) and databases (e.g., LexisNexis, EBSCOhost, Academic Elite), constructionists have found it increasingly easy to identify and assemble large bodies of news discourse for research purposes. However, even before these new technologies became available, constructionist researchers favored news discourse. Compared to other sites or arenas of social discourse (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988), such as testimony before government bodies and entertainment media, news discourse was among the most easily accessed, formatted, and analyzed. In addition, news discourse is a fundamentally *social* discourse. To varying degrees, the public not only attends to it but also participates in it (e.g., in the form of letters to the editor or on talk shows). The news is intimately related to how the public thinks and talks about a problem in other arenas (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Sasson 1995). Further, the news is tied to popular media such as television and movies. In short, the news both shapes and is shaped by its broader social and cultural context.

As I have suggested above, youthful misbehavior has proven to be a recurring topic of public discourse—searches of the news using LexisNexis turned up a seemingly endless stream of “hits.” That was both a curse and a blessing. Certainly, there was no lack of potential data for this project, but the sheer volume of available data forced me to make some hard decisions about how to systematically limit the study. First, I had to make choices regarding the *type* of news sources to focus on. I chose to focus on *national* news sources in both print and broadcast form. Thus, I collected items published in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* because these two newspapers carry a large body of stories of both local and national interest. For this reason, I also collected transcripts of stories appearing on the three major television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC), television “newsmagazine” shows such as *20/20* and *Dateline*, and transcripts from National Public Radio (NPR). I wanted discourse about the origins of this social problem as well as talk about solutions. Although regular news stories contain this sort of talk, Katherine Beckett and Theodore Sasson (2000) and Theodore Sasson (1995) argue that media claims about causes and possible remedies for a crime problem

are more likely to be found in newsweeklies and commentary sections of newspapers. Thus, in addition to news articles, I collected letters to the editors and editorials in the two papers. I also collected feature stories published in national newsmagazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News and World Report*.

I also had to make choices regarding the temporal boundaries of the study. My decision to focus on the 1990s depended on several factors. First, a graduate student I worked with had conducted her master's project on news constructions of youth violence using data from 1994 (Crook 1996). A surge of media interest in youth violence occurred from 1993 to 1994, spurred in part by several high-profile events, beginning with the so-called summer of violence in Denver in 1993, the trial of eleven-year-old Eric Smith for the murder of a four-year-old boy the year before, and the murder of an eleven-year-old girl in Chicago by nine-year-old Robert "Yummy" Sandifer and Sandifer's subsequent murder. In 1994, the *New York Times* published a fifteen-part series on youth violence titled "When Trouble Starts Young" (5/17/94). My student's project uncovered a wealth of interesting findings that promised useful avenues for future research, most notably the concepts of ambiguity and ambivalence. Searching further using LexisNexis, I found additional news discourse on youth violence that appeared to be rich and plentiful and extended in both directions in time. It seemed sensible to include the school shootings of the late 1990s since they garnered so much media attention, which extended the study to the end of the decade. Establishing the temporal boundary on the other end was more difficult. There appears to have been much media discourse in the 1980s about youth gangs and drugs (Best 1999; Reinerman and Levine 1995). News stories about youth gangs did not disappear, but they became less frequent as the 1990s wore on. For example, in 1990 the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times* published at least seventeen stories focusing on youth gangs. By 1993, that number had fallen to ten. Still, the media used the idea of "gangs" to frame the problem of youth violence during the remainder of the decade.

Primarily using LexisNexis, I searched the news sources discussed above, from 1990 through 1999, initially using terms such as "youth violence," "violent youth," "teen violence," and "children and violence." When I found it useful, I also searched on names of specific places, persons, or special terms. For example, to ensure that I was finding all the stories about gangs, I used the term "youth AND gangs" or "youth gangs AND violence." To make sure I had collected all the stories on school

shootings, I searched specifically for “school violence” or “school shootings.” Likewise, to make sure I had all the stories about a particular school shooting, I might search on “Columbine” or “West Paducah.” In one story, I came across a reference to a four-year-old—Eric Morse—who was thrown out of a fourteenth-story window by two other boys. To see if there were other stories about that event, I searched for “Eric Morse.” On occasion, these searches would turn up items that appeared in places other than those forming the core database for this study. For example, discourse about the “superpredator” (a term referring to a type of violent young criminal) appeared frequently in news stories around mid-decade. The term was also mentioned in a book by John DiIulio and William Bennett; congressional testimony by DiIulio; and articles published in the *Weekly Standard*, *Texas Monthly*, and a handful of other print news outlets. I included them in my analysis. As one would expect, stories about the school shootings of 1997–1999 appeared in just about every newspaper in the country. Occasionally, to confirm my readings of the stories in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, I would explore local stories about a shooting in, for example, Springfield, Oregon, or West Paducah, Kentucky. Eventually, this combination of strategies brought me more than 1,500 sources.

The Structure and Argument of the Book

The central themes of this book are that the media constructed youth violence as a rather complex, uncertain, and ambiguous problem and that these images of youth violence reflected the ways our culture came to apprehend the problem more generally. In the following chapters, I explore the various dimensions of these images. In Chapter 2, I examine the construction of the *condition* of youth violence and the person-categories that populate it, focusing first on the juxtaposition of evil and innocence. The evil of the violence was opposed to the innocence of its victims, a familiar opposition in discourse about violence. However, another opposition can be considered—the paradox of the evil and savagery of violent acts committed by otherwise innocent youth. Second, I focus on the ways the problem was cobbled together from otherwise rather disparate phenomena into four frames: youth violence, gang violence, school shootings, and the superpredator. I also explore the rhetoric of crisis, both by using statistics to show how the rate of youth violence was increasing and spreading across social space and by compiling “horror

stories” (Johnson 1995) or “atrocities tales” (Best 1990). I show how broader cultural understandings of race, class, and place were used to assert that the problem was spreading beyond familiar boundaries. I argue here that the images of violence associated with minority, lower-class, inner-city youth were problematized by images of white, middle-class, suburban and rural youth. These images call into question our assumptions regarding not only who these violent youth were but also the causes or origins of this violence. Finally, I begin an exploration of the complex array of emotional orientations inspired by this condition. Certainly, there was horror at the savage acts of violence and sympathy for its victims, but also there was ambivalence regarding the offenders themselves—fear and anger over what they did, but also compassion for who they were and how they came to be that way.

In Chapter 3, I turn to the collective search for causes of and solutions to the problem. Causal accounts comprised talk of the multiple and complex origins of the problem, but the specific causes being talked about sometimes depended on what frame was being invoked. More importantly, the causes being discussed depended on whether we were talking about big-city or small-town violence. Accounts of big-city violence fit closely into frames found by Sasson (1995) in public talk about crime and typically comprised a contemporary version of environmentalism (Gilbert 1986) that focused on the social, economic, and cultural surroundings of the city. Alternatively, accounts of suburban and small-town violence focused on psychological factors as well as others often far removed from these environments—specifically, media violence and easy access to guns. Causal accounts of suburban and small-town violence were often hotly contested, whereas environmental accounts of big-city violence were rarely debated. Indeed, they appeared to be taken for granted to such an extent that they were sometimes left unexplicated. Bernard and Kurlychek (2010) have argued that our juvenile justice system cycles through periods of leniency, periods of harshness, and back again. In the 1990s, these two ideologies found simultaneous expression, which affected how the condition and its person-categories were constructed. There were broader cultural forces at work here as well. I use James Hunter’s (1991) concept of “culture wars” to understand how the myriad solutions in this discourse were typically parsed into two competing camps—liberal versus conservative. In the context of legal and policy talk, that meant Democrats versus Republicans debating treatment versus punishment. These bifurcations provided a dramatic context to the search for solutions. They were not just alternative solutions; they

were *competing* visions and were often treated as so many political tokens to be used in the battle for votes and power. In the news about law and policy debates, discussion of those differing visions allowed stories to do double work—to serve as talk about politics *and* talk about the youth violence problem. Not only did that reflect a tendency to talk about and understand this problem in dichotomous or bifurcated ways, but also it diverted attention from the search for solutions other than those two.

In Chapter 4, I examine the drama of what I call “iconic narratives of youth violence.” Iconic narratives are more than relatively short and simple atrocity tales (Best 1990) and horror stories (Johnson 1995). They do not just illustrate the problem; they *symbolize* it. Combining the human interest narrative (e.g., Fine and White 1992) and “hard news,” these iconic narratives run for weeks, months, or even years. Their first component—the first stories in the narrative—begins with the event itself and introduces other thematic plots: the violent youth and their victims, the local residents, and the court case. These first stories set the stage—or foundation—for how other plotlines would develop. As the narratives unfold, they explore the biographies of the victims and describe how the local residents are “coping” with the “tragedy.” They follow the legal proceedings, in some instances from arrest to arraignment to testimony to final verdict and sentencing. As symbols or icons, these narratives both inform and draw on the more general images of the condition and its various framings, its person-categories, and the emotions discussed in Chapter 3. I also examine how understandings of race, class, and place are overlaid on these aggregate images to produce narratives of “communities” and narratives of “neighborhoods.”

In Chapter 5, I explore what lessons we might learn from this study. I examine three main sets of lessons. First, I examine lessons for constructionist studies of social problems and ask three questions: Do uncertainty and ambiguity matter for constructionists? What might we learn about the forms and conditions of uncertainty? How might a focus on place, race, and class inform our analysis of other social problems talk? Second, I examine lessons regarding the ongoing search for long-term, viable policies regarding youth violence and again ask three questions: What policies did we pursue in the 1990s? Did these policies work? What policies could we have pursued and might they have been more viable in the long run? Third, I explore what this book might tell us about civic discourse about youth violence as well as race.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I briefly explore how—in and through public discourse—we are confronting today’s challenges regarding youth

violence. In what ways does our talk about youth and violence look or sound familiar? In what important ways does it differ from that of the 1990s? Do we still talk about the “gang problem”? In the relative absence of high-profile suburban school shootings, how do we talk about middle-class kids and violence?