

San Francisco Chronicle

JUVENILE Injustice

Youth Media Watch

On Day 2 of General Strike

Associated Press

Juan, Puerto Rico



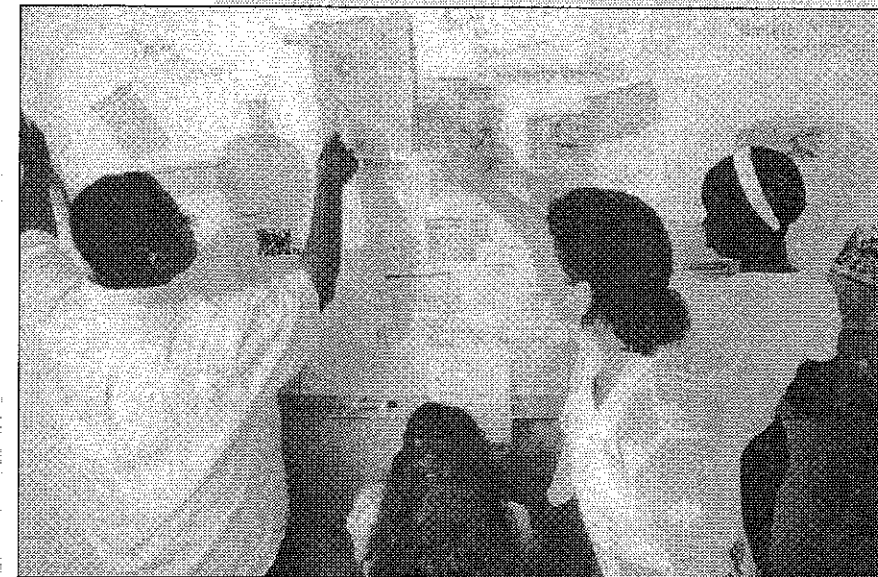
A Joint Project of the UNYTE Youth Team and We Interrupt This Message

JUVENILE Injustice

A YOUTH-CONDUCTED STUDY OF SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE COVERAGE OF YOUTH CRIME

WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DID

This is a study of the *San Francisco Chronicle's* coverage of youth crime designed by We Interrupt This Message and conducted by 15 homeless and at-risk youth as part of a community organizing project called



community organizing project called UNYTE (Unity Now! Youth Training for Empowerment). Over two consecutive summers we examined the way youth crime and violence is reported. UNYTE exists to engage homeless, formerly homeless, and at risk youth in the struggle to end youth oppression in Alameda County. We are a diverse team of 15 youth, ages 14-17, whose differences cross the spectrum of race, culture, gender, religion, class, age, sexuality and experience. Some of us have lived on the streets, in

motels, with relatives or strangers, in squats, in cars, or even in jails. We have suffered every kind of abuse whether it be physical, sexual, mental, or verbal. There are those of us who have had drug addicted parents or were addicted to drugs ourselves. All of these experiences have inspired us to make a powerful change, and we have chosen to make that change through community organizing.

We operate during the summer as well as the school year, and are currently working with We Interrupt this Message to improve news coverage of youth crime in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. This study is part of that project.

STUDY AUTHORS

ROCIO NIEVES, 15

LUIS CEJA, 14

SHANTE BALL, 15

JOAQUIN HERNANDEZ, 16

MEGHAN MOORE, 16

DEAUNTE GIBSON, 17

CALVIN WATSON, 16

THERESA CANAVAN, 15

ROMEO YARBOROUGH, 14

JEANNETTE KENNEDY, 17

HERIBERTO ZAVALA, 14

EMILLIANO YARBOROUGH, 16

ORTEGA YARBOROUGH, 18

MYESHA MILLER, 20

CRUZ VALDEZ, 16

JOHN SIPP, 17

DENISE VENEGAS, 15

KYOKO FREEMAN, 16

ADRIAN THOMPSON, 17

BILLY NVINS, 15

SARAH XOCHITL BERVERA, 24, UNYTE director

MYLA MARKS, 17, and ALLYSON BOGLE, 18, UNYTE's San Francisco Foundation interns

MALKIA CYRIL, URSULA CHANSE, KIM DETERLINE and HUNTER CUTTING of We Interrupt This Message

This study and report was made possible in part by the support of the Greenville Foundation.

Photos: Fred Verhoeven; Cover illustration: Theresa Canavan; Design: i•arte

WHY WE DID THE STUDY

At UNYTE, we decided we were tired of reading news reports of juvenile crime which inaccurately depicted teenagers as offenders of violent crime, without any deeper analysis of the social conditions impacting our lives and communities. The UNYTE team recognized the need for accurate coverage of juvenile crime; we understood the impact that juvenile crime coverage has on the crime, welfare, education, and immigration policies which affect youth, and we wanted to hold the media accountable for the biased coverage which has shaped the overwhelmingly negative public opinion of us.

INTRODUCTION

In the summers of 1997 and 1998, 15 homeless and at-risk youth conducted a study of news coverage in the *San Francisco Chronicle* as part of a summer community organizing and leadership program called UNYTE (Unity Now, Youth Training for Empowerment). We Interrupt This Message assisted UNYTE in examining *Chronicle* coverage of youth and crime. The youth examined the way youth crime and violence is reported, the myths and stereotypes that reporting perpetuates, and the policies and politics it impacts. At the same time the young people discussed the role of the media in their lives, and how it shapes the way their parents, teachers, police, and policy-makers see them.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

San Francisco Chronicle coverage of youth crime promoted a negative view of youth. Foremost, youth were disproportionately reported as perpetrators of crime. Even though youth are more often the victims of crime than the perpetrators, the *Chronicle* reported on youth as perpetrators more often than reporting on youth who were victims. Adding to this distortion the *Chronicle* more often reported on youth who were victims of other youth rather than youth who were victims of adults. This stands in direct contrast to real world crime where youth are more often the victims of adults. Youth murders comprised a disproportionate share of youth crime covered by the *Chronicle*. And root causes of crime were almost ignored.

METHODOLOGY

15 teenagers took on the job of reading the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Using highlighting markers and butcher-block paper, the young people separated every article written about youth and crime where youth were either victims or perpetrators of crime, or the article discussed juvenile crime. They used coding categories to examine whether overall coverage portrayed youth crime accurately.

The youth surveyed six weeks of coverage—four weeks the first year and two the second. The youth looked at one week in each of the two months before their summer project started (April and May) and two weeks during the program (June) in 1997 as well as surveying two weeks during their 1998 program (July).

Dates of coverage examined

April 1, 1997 - April 8, 1997
May 8, 1997 - May 15, 1997
June 16, 1997 - June 30, 1997
July 1, 1998 - July 14, 1998

We looked at the following:

- Youth perpetrators vs. youth victims.
- How many youth victims covered were victims of youth.
- How many youth victims were victims of adults.
- References: Gang-related references, indicating source (reporter, community member, youth or police).
- Possible solutions to youth crime and violence mentioned, if any.

SHANTE

From the inside out
we know pain
we know the smell of rape
the feel of broken bones
the sight of our mothers crumpled
under the weight of poverty,
unemployment, addiction
we know the imprint of a boyfriend's fist
or foot or belt
we all have scars
and we live with them.

- We also looked to see if the following questions were addressed:
 - Does incarceration lower crime?
 - Was poverty part of the background the article covered or was the link between poverty and crime mentioned?
- Youth Sources—the number of youth quoted in the article.

FINDINGS

74 articles in the *San Francisco Chronicle* were identified over the six week period as depicting youth as perpetrators or victims of crime, or discussing juvenile crime.

1. Youth Perpetrators Overrepresented; Youth Victims Underrepresented

In the *Chronicle*, youth were more often portrayed as perpetrators than victims of crime. Fifty-three of the 74 articles portrayed youth as perpetrators of crime, in contrast to the 38 articles which portrayed youth as victims.¹ A total of 113 individual youth were identified as perpetrators of crime, as compared to the 101 youth who were portrayed as victims.

In reality youth are more often victims than perpetrators of violent crime. Crime data report that for every violent and sexual offense committed by a youth under 18 there are 3 such crimes committed by adults against teens.²

2. Youth Victims of Adults Underrepresented

The majority of youth victims who were covered were victims of other youth. Out of 101 youth victims, 53 youth were victims of other youth, while 43 youth were victims of adults. Articles about youth victimized by other youth were almost equal to the number of articles which depicted youth victimized by adults (21 verses 23).

In reality, youth are victims of adults much more often than they are victims of other youth. Sixty percent of violent crimes against juveniles were committed by adults in 1996.³ And youth between the ages of 16 and 19 are the victims of violent crime more often than any other age group.⁴

In addition, not only were youth victims of adults underrepresented, the kids who were covered as victims were disproportionately young. Of the total 43 youth victims of adults who were covered, 33 were children under 13. Of the 23 articles on youth who were victims of adult, a majority of articles (15) were about children

under 13 who were victimized by adults.⁵ Only 8 of the articles, 35%, depicted teenagers and young adults (between the ages of 14 and 21) as victims of adults.

3. References to Gangs

19 out of the 74 articles (24%) made references to gangs with a total of 112 references. These 112 references were made overwhelmingly by reporters and officials (lawyers or police officers). 82 gang references were made by reporters, 21 by officials (16 police, 5 lawyers) and only 6 by people in the community where the crime or violence was occurring. Only 3 of the references were from a youth. Some of the references made by reporters were questionable such as putting a teenager in the category of "gang members and hangers-on" based on the fact that he was dressed in "gang garb." Youth and community members often have an important understanding of what is actually gang-related which can be different from police.

4. Most Covered Solution to Youth Crime—Lock 'em Up!

In reporting juvenile crime, 50 articles did not mention any possible solutions to the problem of youth crime. Many articles focused on isolated events but even stories exploring larger issues in juvenile crime rarely mentioned solutions.

Fifteen articles included calls for tougher penalties, incarceration-related solutions, or better policing practices. Eight articles included solutions focused on impacting the individual (i.e. midnight basketball). Only 7 articles suggested any solution aimed at reducing societal risk factors proven to be associated with crime (i.e. anti-poverty programs, gun control, economic development or jobs programs). Of the 8 articles which suggested individual impact solutions, a few of these included after school activities and programs formerly offered by the public school system. (The fact that these types of programs used to be part of public education was never noted.)

ROCIO

There are no children in this system
only wards of the courts and
delinquents
there are only rules, and lines, and
order
Juvenile Hall doesn't know my friend
Doesn't know his power
doesn't know his pain
Silence keeps us from seeing
the faces of homelessness
we are removed by the courts
pushed out by abuse
kicked out because we are pregnant
or gay, or just neglected
because our families are being
strangled by this system
and they don't remember what it
means to hold us tight
instead of fighting for us they make us
bleed
but struggle makes us family

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q
Total 74 articles	113	101	49	38	53	21	43	23	112	see below	see below	0	0	24	33M 13R	16M
4/2/97 Extra Street Patrols	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	PP	1, 3	no	no	0	M	
4/3/97 Boston's Big	23	3	1	0	3	0	0	0	4	RRRR	1, 2, 3	no	no	0	M	
4/5/97 Youth Hall Supervisor	0	1	0	1	0	0	<13 1	<13 1	0		none	no	no	0		
4/8/97 Backpack Bomb	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		none	no	no	0		
5/8/97 Former Students Accuse	0	3	0	1	0	0	<13 1	<13 1	0		none	no	no	2	MMM	
5/9/97 Cal. Teens Urged	"teens"	N/A	1	1	N/A	1	0	0	0		2, 3	no	no	1		
5/12/97 United Playaz	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	9	RRRRRCYYP	2	no	no	1		
5/12/97 South Bay Boy	3	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	P	none	no	no	0	M	
5/14/97 Teen Torturer's Mom	5	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	R	none	no	no	0		
5/15/97 Mom Held	5	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	R	none	no	no	0		
6/16/97 Stolen Lives	3	3	1	0	3	1	0	0	0		none	no	no	0	MMMR	
6/16/97 Gangs Get a Foothold	"teens"	"teens"	1	0	N/A	1	0	0	33	6P26R,C	1, 2, 3	no	no	2	M	
6/16/97 Ohio Brother Wanted	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		none	no	no	1		
6/17/97 4 held in Killing	4	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	4	RR,FP	N/A	no	no	0	M	
6/18/97 Possible SF Abduction	0	1	0	1	0	0	<13 1	<13 1	0		none	no	no	0		
6/18/97 SF Child Molester	0	<13 1	0	<13 1	0	0	<13 1	<13 1	0		none	no	no	0		
6/18/97 Teenager Arrested	3	2	1	0	2	1	0	0	5	RRRRR	none	no	no	0	M	
6/18/97 Mafia Like	4	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	3	RRR	none	no	no	0	MR	
6/18/97 Impromptu	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	R	none	no	no	1	MR	
6/18/97 Young People, Dalai Lama	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	Y	2	no	no	8		
6/19/97 Robbery Called Motive	6	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	P	none	no	no	0	MR	
6/19/97 Rancher Helps	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		none	no	no	0		
6/20/97 New Trial Possible	3	3	1	0	3	1	0	0	0		none	no	no	0	MMM	
6/20/97 Man Faces Charges	0	1	0	1	0	0	<13 1	<13 1	0		none	no	no	0		
6/21/97 15-year Prison Term	3	3	1	1	3	1	0	0	0		none	no	no	1	MMM	
6/22/97 Police Arrest Pair	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		none	no	no	0	MR	
6/22/97 Border Drug War	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0		N/A	no	no	0		M
6/23/97 2 Juveniles Arrested	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		none	no	no	0		
6/24/97 Teenagers Hop Train	4	3	1	1	3	1	3	1	0		2	no	no	1	MR	M
6/24/97 Girls Intentionally	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		none	no	no	0		
6/24/97 6 Hurt in Pittsburg	2	5	1	0	5	1	0	0	3	PEC	none	no	no	0		
6/25/97 Teens Sent Home	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		1, 3	no	no	0		
6/25/97 San Mateo	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		2, 3	no	no	0		
6/25/97 19 Year Old	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0		none	no	no	0		
6/25/97 Prom Mom	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0		none	no	no	1	M	
6/27/97 USC Student	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0		none	no	no	0	M	
6/27/97 San Mateo Expands	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		2	no	no	0		
6/28/97 Accused Killer	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	L,R	none	no	no	0	M	
6/28/97 Sex Offenders	0	<13 1	0	<13 1	0	0	<13 1	<13 1	0		1	no	no	0		M
6/29/97 San Jose Police	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		none	no	no	0		
6/29/97 Dad Accused	0	<13 2	0	<13 1	0	0	<13 2	2<13 1	0		none	no	no	0		MMM
6/29/97 States Taking Action	0	2<13 3	0	2<13 1	0	0	2<13 3	2<13 1	0		1	no	no	0		MMM
6/29/97 Blood Brothers	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	32	29,R,3-C	none	no	no	0		
6/30/97 Prom Mom Thought	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0		none	no	no	1	M	
7/1/98 Youth, 15, Gets 7 Years	2	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0		none	no	no	0		
7/2/98 Woman Fatally Torches	0	<13 1	0	1	0	0	<13 1	<13 1	0		none	no	no	0		M
7/2/98 House Fire Kills	0	4<13 5	0	1	0	0	N/A	1	0		none	no	no	0		
7/2/98 Bike-Riding Bandit	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		none	no	no	0	R	
7/3/98 Ex-Deputy Pleads Not Guilty	0	4	0	1	0	0	<13 4	4<13 1	0		none	no	no	0		
7/3/98 Bay Bridge Drivers	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		none	no	no	0		
7/4/98 FBI Uses New	0	3	0	1	0	0	2<13 3	2<13 1	0		1	no	no	0		MMM
7/4/98 Police Arrest 2 Teens	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		none	no	no	0	R	
7/5/98 Gunshots Turn Fair	1	13	1	1	13	1	0	0	0		none	no	no	0		
7/6/98 Phony Hanson Brother	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0		none	no	no	0		
7/6/98 FBI Arrests Suspect	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		none	no	no	0	MR	
7/6/98 Crash Ends High Speed Chase	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		none	no	no	0	R	
7/6/98 Father Cuts Own Throat	0	<13 1	0	1	0	0	<13 1	<13 1	0		none	no	no	0		
7/7/98 Reporter to Test	0	several	0	1	0	0	several	1	0		1	no	no	0		
7/8/98 Last Days of	0	3	0	1	0	0	<13 3	3<13 1	0		1	no	no	0		
7/8/98 Murder Guilty Verdict	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	R	none	no	no	0	MR	
7/8/98 16 Year Old Surrenders	2	6	1	1	6	1	0	0	4	R,LL	none	no	no	0		
7/9/98 Puerto Rican Teen Riot	several	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		none	no	no	0		
7/9/98 Camille Cosby Blames	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		3	no	no	0	MR	
7/10/98 British Nanny	1	<13 1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0		none	no	no	0	M	
7/10/98 Teenagers Get Terms	2	<13 1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0		none	no	no	2	M	
7/11/98 Unlikely Pair	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		1	no	no	0		
7/11/98 Parents Shot	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		none	no	no	0		
7/11/98 Cornered Murder Suspect	0	<13 2	0	1	0	0	<13 2	2<13 1	4	RR,LL *D.A.	1	no	no	0		
7/11/98 Police Say Baby	0	<13 2	0	1	0	0	<13 2	2<13 1	0		none	no	no	0		M
7/12/98 Grim Wait in	0	<13 2	0	1	0	0	<13 2	2<13 1	0		1	no	no	1		
7/12/98 Cosby Hearing Closes	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0		none	no	no	0	MR	
7/12/98 Molester's Privacy	0	5	1	1	0	0	1<13 5	<13 1	0		1	no	no	0		
7/12/98 Couple Allegedly	0	<13 3	0	1	0	0	<13 3	3<13 1	0		none	no	no	0		
7/13/98 Killings Stun Antioch	0	<13 2	0	1	0	0	<13 2	2<13 1	0		1	no	no	1		MM
Totals 74	113	101	49	38	53	21	43	23	112	P = 16 R = 82 L = 5 C = 6	No solution = 50 1) = 15 2) = 8 3) = 7	0	0	24	33M 13R	16M

CHART CODING CATEGORIES:

- A. Article dates and titles
- B. Youth perpetrators by number
- C. Youth victims by number
- D. Youth perpetrators by article
- E. Youth victims by article
- F. Youth victims of youth by number
- G. Youth victims of youth by article
- H. Youth victims of adults by number
- I. Youth victims of adults by article
- J. Gang references
- K. Sources for gang references
 - P=Police
 - L=Lawyer
 - C=Community member
 - Y=Youth
 - R=Reporter
- L. Solutions offered
 - 1=tougher penalties/incarceration
 - 2=individual impact solutions
 - 3=societal/environmental impact solutions
- M. Incarceration examined
- N. Link between poverty and crime examined
- O. Youth as sources
- P. Youth murder and robbery by number
 - M=Murder
 - R=Robbery
- Q. Adult murder (of youth) by number

Notes on Coding:

- We defined youth as being any perpetrator/victim who was clearly identified as being 21 years old or younger.
- We noted when the age of the youth perpetrator/victim was 13 or younger.
- Articles which described the same news item, but appeared on different days were used.
- We decided that articles which focused on youth as perpetrators or as victims, would be coded by article, as well as by individual perpetrators or victims.
- When an article portrayed youth as both victims and perpetrators, we coded the article as both.
- When articles portrayed teens in general as perpetrators/victims, without indicating individuals or their ages, we did not code for number of youth, but for the article focus.
- Stories were coded for gang references by indicating the number of times the word gang was mentioned in the article. The source for each reference was also noted.
- Where we coded for the solutions offered, we categorized the solutions into 3 types:
 - 1) tougher penalties/incarceration-related;
 - 2) individual impact—solutions which focus on changing an individual's behavior, i.e. after school programs;
 - 3) environmental impact—solutions which focus on changing the environment in which crime happens or eliminating risk factors (i.e. gun control legislation, jobs programs, anti-poverty programs)

Violent Crime Arrests Adjusted for Poverty, by Race and Age, 1993

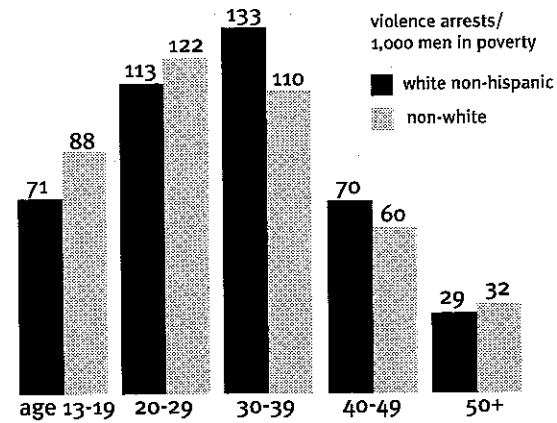


Chart reprinted from *Extra!*, 3/4, 1996

5. Effectiveness of Incarceration Never Examined

Although incarceration-related solutions were the most often covered, not one of the 74 articles even explored the question of whether incarceration lowers crime. This was true even when legislation calling for more incarceration was identified as a solution.

EMILLIANO

I know someone
whose spirit is scarred
whose childhood, sliced and invisible
lives in between the lines.

6. Link Between Economics and Crime Invisible

None of the articles looked at poverty as a primary or potential factor in crime. Only two articles linked unemployment to crime, one a story of an anti-crime program which included a jobs

program and one when a police officer mentioned the need for jobs.

This type of reporting makes youth poverty, the factor most closely correlated to youth crime, almost invisible. This leaves readers with few choices but the impression that kids are more violent than previous generations, because of something innate rather than external factors. Yet if poverty is factored in, higher rates for youth crime than adult crime disappear. For instance, in 1993, teenagers living below federal poverty guidelines had the same crime rate as similarly impoverished adults in their 40's, and well below crime rates of those in their 20s and 30s.⁶

7. Youth Underrepresented as Sources

Youth were dramatically underrepresented as sources in articles about youth and crime. Only 14 out of 74 articles included quotes by youth. Youth tended to be left out even in stories about possible solutions.

RESULTS VS. REALITY

The September 1994 Gallup Poll of 1,000 adults found widely exaggerated views of juvenile violence. Although F.B.I. crime statistics show that juveniles commit only about 13 percent of all violent crimes, the average estimate of that statistic by Americans in the poll is more than three times as high, at about 43 percent. Almost two thirds believe that juvenile violence accounts for more than 30 percent of all violent crimes. One fourth believed that youths accounted for over half the nation's violent crime.⁷

The *San Francisco Chronicle* coverage examined in this study promoted the inaccurate impression that youth are responsible for a disproportionately large share of crime. Coverage did not reflect the reality of how often youth are murdered by their parents or guardians and focused the majority of its coverage on youth as perpetrators of violent crime. In reality youth are much more likely to be victims of adult crime.

Last year juveniles accounted for only 3% of homicide arrests in San Francisco. (There were a total of 33 homicide arrests, only one was a juvenile.⁸) Representative *Chronicle* coverage of would mean that only 3% of murder stories covered would be murders by youth.

Since we did not examine all crime coverage but just youth crime coverage, we don't know whether more than 3% of murder coverage was of youth murders. We suspect that it was. However, 32% of youth crime coverage examined (24 out of 74 articles) was coverage of youth-perpetrated murders.

Of the total San Francisco felony arrests last year of 23,766, juveniles accounted for only 2,155 or 9%. Yet we suspect coverage of youth crime was much more than 9% of all crime coverage. Over 90% of felonies are done by adults in San Francisco County. Given that there were 53 articles on youth perpetrated crime in six weeks, representative coverage would have yielded close to 450 articles on adult crime in those same six weeks.

The only type of crime which juveniles were a large proportion was robbery (537 out of 1,196 or 45%). Yet in six weeks, 33 youth-perpetrated murders were covered and only 13 youth-perpetrated robberies. 32% of the coverage (24 out of 74 articles) examined was coverage of youth-perpetrated murders—giving people a very skewed picture of youth crime.

Understanding that reporters and editors feel that murder is much more newsworthy than robberies, coverage still paints a skewed picture of the amount of murders youth commit. This could be remedied by including the actual percentage of murders committed by youth in articles on youth-perpetrated murder.

And it should be noted that arrest rates actually inflate juvenile crime rates. According to the FBI's Uniform crime reports juveniles account for 14% of violent crime but for 18% of violent crime arrests.

IMPLICATIONS

Distorted news coverage promotes distorted public opinion. Reporting contained no economic analysis, no critical analysis of the effectiveness of incarceration strategies, and little or no historical context or focus on the conditions which lead to crime. Coupled with incomplete report-

ACCOUNTABILITY OF THE MEDIA

It is the responsibility of the media, specifically the *San Francisco Chronicle*, to tell the whole truth about youth, to have unbiased news coverage, and to take responsibility for the impact that distorted coverage has on public opinion. News coverage should have no bias on any issue, or groups of people. It should only show what is happening in our communities, and the world.

Media coverage at this moment is very biased, and has a huge impact on our lives and communities. Our teachers, parents, policy makers and the cops all read and listen to the news. And people believe what they read and hear. Policy makers create laws based on their perception of youth. If their perception is based on overly negative news coverage, their policies will be punitive and oppressive. The stories in the media should be unbiased, and should tell the whole truth not just about the bad things we do, but about the good things too. News should tell the truth even about the bad things that get done to us.

TERESA

I know poverty
 I know addiction
 We are the result of a system that
 seems to hate us
 and we are not ashamed
 We know rape
 we know terror
 we know domestic violence
 and we are not ashamed
 We know how to pack 10 people in
 one room
 how to sleep while people have sex
 in the bed beside us
 we know how to beg
 and we are not ashamed
 Because we don't beg anymore
 we know we have the right to a
 community
 that fights for us
 we have the right to fight for
 ourselves
 We have the scars to show
 but we are not ashamed
 we are alive.

ing of this type, distorted news coverage promotes bad public policy.

These misguided public perceptions of "violent and crazy" youth affect the policies that control young people's lives. The critical factors of poverty and family violence are ignored by policy makers. Responsibility is not placed on institutions or society, but instead youth are the ones who are scapegoated. Policy makers introduce legislation calling for tougher penalties and more incarceration, taking money from education and support for families.

Generally, *San Francisco Chronicle* reporting did not cover the causes of violent crime or the risk factors associated with it. Significant facts were absent from coverage which lead policy makers to ignore factors that would lead to real solutions and crime reduction. In not one of the 74 articles was the rise in youth poverty mentioned, let alone connected to violence. Yet youth and young family poverty rose by 50% from 1973-1991.⁹

The history of decreasing funding for public schools and lack of jobs was almost always left out as a root cause of crime and violence. For instance, the fact that California is first in youth joblessness¹⁰ was not mentioned in any of the articles, nor were lack of educational opportunities or the extent of youth poverty ever discussed in depth.

Eight of the solutions that were identified in the *San Francisco Chronicle* articles were programs, some of which were at one time part of public education (after-school sports, etc). Reporting with no historical memory like this blinds the public to causes of crime by obscuring the implication that if simple afterschool sports, education and job programs prevent crime then perhaps the constant chipping away of such services through public education cuts has the result of causing crime. Such reporting prevents the public from understanding the long term results of public policy decisions.

SUGGESTIONS FOR BETTER COVERAGE & MORE BALANCED REPORTING

- Make sure that overall coverage is representative of reality. For instance, the percentage of stories on murders committed by youth should be similar to the percentage of murders youth commit.
- Report crimes committed against youth and crimes committed by youth in the same proportion that they happen.
- When covering high profile cases which are unrepresentative of overall trends in youth crime, note that they are unrepresentative in the article.
- Provide more in-depth articles, looking at the conditions and underlying causes which lead to youth crime.
- Hire youth reporters to cover youth issues.
- Support a youth media watch council which reviews articles on juvenile crime and examines whether overall coverage is representative.
- Make linkages between policy decisions which increase risk factors for crime and the rise in juvenile crime.
- Focus on risk factors for crime (i.e. availability of guns, poverty, lack of jobs, education and economic opportunity) not just dysfunctional family stories.
- Include reporting on the link between poverty and crime in crime articles.
- Critically examine the effectiveness of incarceration and other responses to youth crime.

WHAT WE WANT

- 1** Regular commentaries by youth. Run a "real kids" column about youth doing positive things.
- 2** Jobs for youth reporters.
- 3** Profile youth groups doing good work, recognize a group each month or a "youth of the week."
- 4** More youth as sources.
- 5** Balanced pictures and articles in terms of victims and perpetrators.
- 6** Coverage of crimes committed against kids like violations of kids' rights, child abuse, conditions in public housing and youth facilities.
- 7** More positive stories.
- 8** Articles about media stereotypes of youth.
- 9** Pay a youth group to continue the youth media watch.
- 10** Publish our report or let us write an op-ed about the study.

Footnotes

- ¹ If stories had both youth perpetrators and youth victims we counted them in both categories.
- ² Comparison of crime reports with the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect report (5/93) cited in "Bashing Youth: Media Myths About Teenagers" Mike Males, EXTRA! 3/4-94.
- ³ Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Report 1996.
- ⁴ National Council on Crime and Delinquency (1997). Reducing Crime in America.
- ⁵ 1996 F.B.I. Uniform Crime Reports, table 28.
- ⁶ Bureau of Justice Statistics, Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 1994; U.S. Census Bureau, Poverty in the United States 1993, cited by Mike Males in "Wild in Deceit: How youth violence is really poverty violence in disguise" EXTRA! 3/4-96.
- ⁷ Moore DW (1994, September). Majority advocate death penalty for teenage killers. Gallup Poll Monthly, pp 2-4.
- ⁸ According to 1997 arrest data for San Francisco County from the Criminal Justice Statistics Center (which are garnered from police and sherrifs reports). These statistics are for juveniles under 18. Although we looked at coverage of youth 21 and under, coverage that focused on juveniles under 18 also dramatically overrepresented youth perpetrated murder.
- ⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, Poverty in the United States, cited in Males, op cit.
- ¹⁰ Children Now (1995), op cit, p. 18.



Juvenile Injustice is a study of the San Francisco Chronicle's coverage of youth and crime.

UNYTE is a training program in community organizing and advocacy for homeless and formerly homeless youth aged 14-17. The UNYTE Youth

Team is specifically committed to ending youth homelessness in Alameda County.

We Interrupt This Message is a non-profit training and resource center which assists community groups seeking balanced and accurate news reporting.

JUVENILE Injustice

A Joint Media Watch Project of the UNYTE Youth Team and We Interrupt This Message