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School Shootings and Moral Panics: Differences in Media Framing Based on Race, Class, and  
Socioeconomic Status

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Bridgewater State University

December 9, 2015

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***School Shootings and Moral Panics: Differences in Media Framing Based on Race, Class,  
and Socioeconomic Status***

Kelly Ann Lavoie  
Sociology Honors Thesis  
December 11, 2015  
Adviser: Dr. Jodi Cohen

***School Shootings and Moral Panics: Differences in Media Framing Based on Race, Class, and Socioeconomic Status***

**Abstract:**

Media coverage of school shooting incidents are constructed using various frames that differ depending on the race, class, and socioeconomic status of the victims, perpetrators, and their communities. Moral panics have arisen as a result of these frames, having been constructed to instigate fear and affect policy in ways that can have negative effects on both students in general and, in particular, minority students in urban schools. In this study, I analyzed the framing language used in news content, the demographic information of the schools in which shootings occurred, and the amount of coverage afforded to the incidents. This content analysis will observe television news broadcasts regarding school shootings from Fox News, CBS, NBC, ABC, and CNN, ranging from 1995 to 2014.

## Introduction

“All media exist to invest our lives with artificial perceptions and arbitrary values.”

-Marshall McLuhan

What comes to mind when the typical suburban American reflects on school shootings? This question would likely have many answers, but more than a few would seem familiar. Perhaps disaffected youth would be a topic of conversation; “the quiet loner who sits home each weekend playing *Grand Theft Auto* for hours. Being weaker than the other boys, he has been a target for bullying. Then, he simply snaps one day and exacts his revenge against those who find it so much easier than he to fit in.” One might ponder whether or not the young person had received psychiatric care; “how could it be that no one would notice something wrong until it was too late? In fact, how was he able to get ahold of a gun in the first place? How could his law-abiding parents raise a child who would do such a thing? How could something like this happen *here*?”

School shootings were happening before these narratives came to the forefront of news coverage in the 1990s. At that time, there were a series of school shootings that resulted in higher casualties than usual, in addition to occurring in predominately white communities; examples took place in Lynnville, Tennessee in 1995, Moses Lake, Washington in 1996, Bethel, Alaska in 1997, Pearl, Mississippi in 1997, West Paducah, Kentucky in 1997, Stamps, Arkansas in 1997, Littleton, Colorado in 1999, and Conyers, Georgia in 1999 (National School Safety Center, 2010). These were unlike many of the prior school shootings that occurred largely in urban schools that were racially diverse or predominately African American. “Rampage” shootings such as these were also less common than targeted shootings in schools (Henry, 2009). The

result of these relatively unusual occurrences was consistent and long lasting media coverage of school shootings, mainly those occurring in middle-to-upper class, predominately white communities (Schept et al., 2015).

There are many studies on school shootings, media framing, and moral panic. In this study, I explored the idea that race, class, and socioeconomic status have effects on the way that school shootings are framed and the level of coverage afforded to a given incident. I have undertaken a content analysis of internet articles and television news broadcasts from widely viewed news networks. In addition, I explored the idea of moral panic and the effects that media framing has in creating it. These questions matter because the moral panic and fear created by media framing of school shootings could be detrimental to the quality of the learning environment; particularly for urban schools, but additionally for *all* schools in general. Although these incidents are frightening and tragic, they are relatively rare (Cornell, 2015). Studying the most prominent media frames surrounding school shootings helps to understand why these incidents are a source of fear in society at large even though they are, at this point, statistically unlikely to occur.

## **Literature Review**

### *Media Frames, Moral Panics, and School Shootings in the United States*

Moral panics, as defined by Stanley Cohen (2011), occur when “a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (1). Dowland (2009) notes that since the Presidential election of Jimmy Carter in 1976, there has been public emphasis on the idea that conservative values are under threat. In this view, non-traditional families, Hollywood movies, music, video games, public education, and a host of

other facets of society are held responsible for a wide array of social problems such as drug abuse and juvenile delinquency (Dowland, 2009; Warnick, et al., 2015). These ideas were at the forefront in news media throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Dowland, 2009). The social and political climate at these times created fertile ground for the growth of moral panics in the United States, particularly in the wake of negative and frightening events that prompted the desire for something or someone to blame.

Schools are a fundamental part of American society. Both parents and children have high expectations of the educational experience. As Fritz (2013) suggested,

Protecting and educating our children, sacrificing in the present to make sure their futures are bright, and finding joy in the innocence of childhood are fundamental American values (8).

For parents, facilitating the social and educational experiences found in school is indeed a fundamental American value. For students, school is an important social world. Warnick et al. (2015) posit that children are socialized to believe that they will get all they could possibly want from school: popularity, acceptance, affirmation, romantic relationships, and more. They also posit that because children are socialized to believe this, the potential for severe emotional damage, perhaps resulting in self-harm or harm of their peers, arises if their experience does not live up to what they were taught that it should be.

In the United States, some of the most potent instances of moral panic have emerged regarding shooting incidents in schools (Altheide, 2009; Neuman, et al., 2015; Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2013). School shootings are harbingers of moral panics because educating children in safety is strongly associated with our values as a society. In the wake of several highly visible school shootings, these values have been perceived to be under threat. Calls for enforcing a

narrow definition of “family values,” the censorship of various types of entertainment, stricter gun laws, looser gun laws, increased security measures in schools, or changes to prosecution of juvenile crimes can and have been raised resulting from moral panic brought on by the framing of school shootings in news media (Altheide, 2009; Dowland, 2009; Neuman, et al., 2015; Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2013).

The desire to understand the cause of incidents that the public perceives as a threat to their children creates demand for continuous news coverage. Naturally, when the safe space that suburban schools are envisioned to be (Larkin, 2009) is invaded by students shooting at their peers and authority figures, the search for the elusive answer to “Why?” will not be long to follow (Altheide, 2009; McGinty et al., 2014). Cornell (2015) posits that, although school shootings are very rare occurrences,

the national media attention given to school shootings has the effect of biasing our understanding of how likely it is that a school will have a shooting, creating a false perception of imminent danger (217).

Mass news media, particularly with the advent of both the 24-hour cable news cycle and the internet, tend to exacerbate moral panics by selectively focusing on specific incidents, and on specific aspects of the incident (Denham, 2008; Fox & Delateur, 2014).

Media framing, as Birkland & Lawrence (2009) explain, is “the communicative process of highlighting and focusing on certain aspects of reality,” (1406) which steers moral panic in a particular direction. Facts are not simply conveyed to readers/viewers at random, but constructed in such a way to hone in on specific aspects of a story. News media in the United States are no strangers to media sensationalism, since the days of “Yellow Journalism, pulp magazines, and ‘muckraking’ investigative reports of the early twentieth century” (Fox et al., 2007, 2). As the



“second most covered emergent news event in the decade of the 1990s, outdone only by the O.J. Simpson car chase” (Larkin, 2009, 1309), coverage of the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colorado serves as a fitting example of the many frames that can be used to convey an incident and infuse it with various meanings (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009; Chen et al., 2015; Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Ordoñez-Jasis & Jasis, 2003; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2014). One of the many frames attached to this shooting, for example, involved an inordinate level of media discussion of “goth” teen subculture, portraying it as a groups of death-obsessed, dangerous social deviants, or even “devil worshippers.” Unlike African American youth, this subculture was not prominently defined by the fact that they were usually white males, but by much more individual traits. Commonly marked by rejection of traditional values, goth teenagers were a media-perpetuated symbol of morally bankrupt and disaffected youth, provoking fear and suspicion of them (Frymer, 2009; Griffiths, 2010; Kiilakoski & Oksanen, 2011; Ordoñez-Jasis & Jasis, 2003). This teen subculture was used to construct the frame that there were negative forces in the entertainment industry (i.e. violent video games, music, movies, etc.) influencing the youth (Kaplan, 2012).

Many researchers asserted that violent content must be censored before the minds and actions of more young people become violent (Altheide, 2009; Frymer, 2009; Kaplan, 2012, Ordoñez-Jasis & Jasis, 2003). This was a continuation of moral panics that had been prevalent since the 1980s, such as “satanic panic.” During that decade, childcare workers across the country were arrested (and even convicted in some cases) for spurious accusations of “satanic ritual abuse” including “blood-drinking, cannibalism, and human sacrifice” (DeYoung, 19, 1997). In the same vein, another popular yet baseless moral panic occurred in the 1990s, when news media warned of the coming prevalence of “super-predators,” or “teenage boys who have

no respect for human life and kill and maim on impulse, without any tangible motive” (Killingbeck, 187, 2001). In 2001, shortly following the first explosion of media attention to school shootings, Killingbeck refers to the school shootings in 1997-1998 as the beginning of moral panics related to school shootings, asserting that,

To remedy the purported ‘crisis’ of classroom violence, politicians have proposed solutions ranging from posting additional police officers in our schools, to eliminating any minimum age at which children may be tried as adults, to expanding the death penalty to juveniles (185).

By asserting, without evidence, that school shootings were an imminent and spreading problem, news media encouraged moral panic, resulting in real-life effects on policy and people.

As Altheide (2009) explains, Columbine was one of the most intensely covered school shootings in the United States, and even in the world. Throughout the course of the months-long, intensive coverage of the incident, numerous additional frames were used, demonstrating the concept of “frame changing,” where

the news media...reframe the event by emphasizing different attributes of the event -- consciously or unconsciously -- in order to keep the story alive and fresh (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009, 1407).

For example, Cullen (2009), author of *Columbine*, wrote an article for *Slate Magazine* five years after the incident, decrying the media’s propensity for jumping to conclusions about causes for these sorts of tragedies. In spite of that, Cullen (2004) went on to create his own frame of the cause: that the shooters, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, were “The Depressive and The Psychopath” (1) respectively. Although Cullen’s research appears to offer more depth than mainstream media reports, the assertion that the mental health of the shooters was the most salient point about the event creates a frame change (Altheide, 2009).

Public perceptions of school shootings are also very much affected by various media reports using a range of differing parameters to gather statistics of their frequency. Researchers and interest groups present vastly different numbers depending on criteria included or excluded from each study, such as the exact location (i.e. in or near a school, at a school related event but not in the school itself, etc.) of the shooting, or the involvement of outside actors (i.e. a non-student shooter versus a student shooting his/her classmates and teachers) (Fox & DeLateur, 2014).

One example of this can be seen in research compiled by Follman et al. (2015) which shows data on mass shootings (including but not limited to school shootings) from 1982 to 2012 (updated in 2015) using certain parameters (shown in *Mother Jones Magazine*). With this set of parameters, there appears to be a recent drastic increase in mass shooting incidents. However, there are important drawbacks to the rationale behind the Follman's chosen parameters that have drawn criticism, as discussed by both Fox & DeLateur (2014) and Follman himself (2012). One criticism is that shootings involving gang-related activity were not included in the study (Follman, 2012). The exclusion of such incidents ignores and undervalues certain groups of people based largely on location (urban), class, and race (Park et al., 2012). Fox & DeLateur (2014) question this exclusion, pointing out that shootings "designed to further some criminal enterprise" are equally noteworthy (129). To suggest that gang-related shootings could not possibly be connected to the same root factors commonly attributed to mass shootings involving white individuals is to suggest that society accepts and expects the former brand of violence but not the latter (Larkin, 2009; Park et al., 2012).

Demonstrating the differing data results that different research parameters can produce, data collected by the *Associated Press* in 2012, the same year that the *Mother Jones* study was undertaken, resulted in different findings. Their data suggested that mass shootings under the

FBI parameters of “a shooting incident in which four or more people were killed” had shown a fairly steady decrease, albeit with peaks and valleys, since 1993 (Follman, 2012). The significance of this cannot be overstated because research and statistics can be selected specifically to support certain frames that promote agendas, fuel moral panic, and affect substantive change, for better or worse (Martin, 2013; Shuffleton, 2015).

### *Moral Panics and Policy Effects*

Moral panics can produce “serious and long-lasting repercussions, and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself” (Cohen, 2011, 1). For decades, in response to what tends to be perceived as a growing problem, calls for change have brought about intense debate on numerous issues such as gun control, mental health, violent media, bullying, the breakdown of religious influence, and the breakdown of “family values” in society (Brent, 2013; Chrusciel, et al., 2015; Cummings, et al., 2013; Engelhardt et al., 2015; Fan, 2015; Fritz, 2013; Jacobson, 2015; Kub & Feldman, 2015; Larkin, 2009; McGinty et al., 2014; Mongan & Walker, 2012; Whitson, 2015).

One example of substantive change brought about by the perception of school shootings as a growing problem can be observed in the adoption of “zero tolerance” policies in schools (Cornell, 2015; Mongan & Walker, 2012; Nance, 2013; Schept et al., 2015). The early 1990s saw a peak in many types of crime, including violence that occurred in schools. In 1994, the Gun Free Schools Act (GFSA) was introduced, giving schools the authority to expel or suspend students for bringing any weapon, or anything that could be perceived as a weapon, to school (Schept et al., 2015). The expulsions were for at least one year, and students were often referred to the juvenile justice system. “Resource Officers” (police officers in schools) have made arrests

for relatively minor incidents such as “disorderly conduct” (Cornell, 2015, 218) or fighting, prompting observers to decry the “criminalization of student misbehavior” (Cornell, 2015, 218), pointing out that these situations should be handled through discipline doled out by the school as opposed to the criminal justice system (Schept et al., 2015). Although it slightly varied from state to state, there were many more overarching problems with this policy (Gereluk et al., 2015; McLeigh, 2015; Mongan & Walker, 2012; Porter, 2015; Schept et al., 2015).

For example, Mongan & Walker (2012) explain that school-aged children who are very young are subject to these policies whether or not they are capable of understanding the full meaning of bringing a “make-believe” weapon, or even a real weapon, to school. Ethically speaking, one has to question the virtue of expelling young children whose comprehension of their wrongdoing may very well be extremely limited. Furthermore, this policy can apply to anything from guns and knives to plastic squirt-guns, or even chicken fingers in one case (Los Angeles Times, 2001). This truly produced unfair results in terms of appropriate punishment (Cornell 2015, Mongan & Walker, 2012; Porter, 2015).

Also of great importance is the fact that many children who do find themselves expelled or suspended under these policies are the most in need of the structure and guidance that their school can supply (Mongan & Walker, 2012). Cornell (2015) found that “school suspension is a counterproductive practice that fails to improve student behavior and instead has negative effects on students” (218), which supports the research of others on the subject (Mongan & Walker, 2012). Some children have chaotic, unstable lives outside of school; in many cases they are being expelled from their greatest source of stability at a time when they should be provided with supportive intervention (Cornell, 2015; Mongan & Walker, 2012; Porter, 2015). While there is nothing wrong with legislators attempting to address the potential for violence in schools, the

rush to satiate frightened families in the wake of school shootings can produce flawed policies such as the GSFA (Martin, 2013; McLeigh, 2015).

Aitken (2001) discussed moral panics based on the shootings that had occurred prior to that time. He observed that, while the direction of blame that moral panics in relation to school shootings flows depends on the tone of the time, there are some issues that tend to be focused upon and revisited often: gun culture, mental illness, bullying in schools, and violent media. Research suggests that these frames are applied differently depending upon the race of the shooter and the class of the community in which the school shooting occurred (Brent, 2013; Chrusciel, et al., 2015; Cummings, et al., 2013; Engelhardt et al., 2015; Fan, 2015; Fritz, 2013; Jacobson, 2015; Kub & Feldman, 2015; Larkin, 2009; McGinty et al., 2014; Mongan & Walker, 2012; Whitson, 2015). Due to their prevalence in media reports on school shootings, these frames are often analyzed in an attempt to understand the differences in framing when it comes to race and class.

*Race, Class, and Socioeconomic Status: Aren't ALL school shootings "Senseless"?*

It is important to expand on the varied framing and level of coverage when it comes to suburban and rural school shootings involving white children compared to urban school shootings most often involving children of color (Larkin, 2009). Holody et al. (2013) and Metzler and McLeish (2015) explain that there is a trend in U.S. society and media: violence against those who are white and/or middle class is "senseless" and "insane" (Keehn & Boyles, 2015), yet violence mainly within the confines of urban areas, by or against people of color, or violence that is characterized as "gang related," is expected and accepted as a matter of course. Shapiro (2015) also noted this differentiated framing:

The white school shooter is often depicted as ‘calculating, intelligent and conniving.’ Urban crime, in contrast, is excepted from the norm, ‘constructed as random, wild and tied to ‘ghetto’ issues like gangs, reputation and revenge.’ As exceptions, ‘perpetrators of urban crime are constructed as criminals, deviant or dangerous in relation to supposedly White innocence.’ (433).

Klein (2012) also noted this divergence, pointing out that,

periodic outbursts of violence seemed to be taking place not just at ‘disadvantaged’ inner-city high schools but at ‘good’ schools in suburban and small town America (430).

She is referring to the fact that school shootings and violence did not occupy much of the media’s attention until it began to happen in predominately white, suburban, “good” schools, as opposed to “bad” schools in inner-cities. Violence in urban schools has been normalized to the point that it has not occupied the forefront of media coverage in most cases. The “goodness” of a school, being directly linked to the wealth of the area it occupies, produces outraged reactions when violence occurs there. These shootings are intensively covered and consistently portrayed as something that “makes no sense,” implying that it *does* make sense when it happens elsewhere; in urban schools.

Chen et al. (2015) found that when presented with a rudimentary scenario resembling the Columbine High School shooting, white participants were more likely to attribute the cause to mental illness without prompting. When presented with a scenario that resembled the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting, including a Korean-American perpetrator, white participants were less likely to attribute the cause to mental illness without a prompting question and more likely to associate the cause with negative beliefs about young Korean men.

In addition, many studies have shown that African American and Latino individuals are portrayed quite negatively in crime related news coverage, often over-emphasizing their

“dangerousness” and contributing to negative racial stereotypes (Holody, et al., 2013; Hurley et al. 2015; Mastro, 2015). The reality is that African American youth have been and continue to be disproportionately *victimized* by gun violence, “even though U.S. firearm-related deaths fell nearly 40% between 1993 and 2011, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported” (Jacobson, 2015, 19). In an even more alarming statistic: “in 1993 African Americans died by gun violence at three times the rate whites did; by 2010 the rate was lower but still twice that of whites” (Jacobsen, 2015, 19). Additionally, this study found that 55 percent of gun deaths were African Americans even though they represent only 13 percent of the population (Pew Research Center, 2013).

The advent of zero-tolerance policies in schools has had a disproportionately negative effect on African American and Latino students (Schept et al., 2015). They are referred to the juvenile justice system, suspended, and expelled with greater frequency than white students. Cornell (2015) discusses this racial disparity in suspension rates due to zero tolerance policies, finding that,

[suspension rates] cannot be explained by differences in serious offending, such as fighting or bringing weapons to school, but are the result of high suspension rates for relatively minor misbehavior among the minority students (219).

These policies have resulted in a “school-to-prison pipeline,” (Cornell, 2015, 218) where students, especially minorities, are essentially discarded on an arbitrary basis, be it for a minor infraction or serious crime, to come into contact with the justice system at an early age (Cornell, 2015; Nance, 2013; Schept et al., 2015). In December of 2012, a Congressional hearing was held in which research on this and other aspects of racial inequality in schools was discussed, noting that,



minority students across the country are disciplined more often and more severely than white students, have less access to higher-level courses, and more often have teachers that are less experienced and are lower paid. (Nance, 2013, 4-5).

Research has also revealed that students of lower economic status in urban areas (most often minority students) are subject to much tighter security measures than students attending suburban or rural schools. These measures include “using metal detectors, conducting random sweeps for contraband, hiring law enforcement officers or guards, controlling access to school grounds, and installing security cameras” (Nance, 2013, 5). The advice of the Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence (2013) was that society “cannot and should not turn our schools into fortresses.” (120), yet increasingly panicked demands for school safety (incited by media framing) have degraded the environments of schools in which the application of increasingly strict security measures creates a “prison-like environment that deteriorates the learning climate” (Nance, 2013, 5).

While the media has neglected to cover incidents of school violence primarily involving minorities as widely as school violence primarily involving whites (Klein, 2012), it has, ironically, played a role in creating the moral panic that led to the adoption of policies that disproportionately affect minorities (Cornell, 2015; Nance, 2013; Schept et al., 2015). The media approach to reporting suburban or rural school shootings is to continuously dissect the incident, identify a culprit for blame, and communicate the trauma, eliciting panic from parents in the aftermath. Urban students, especially those in prominently minority communities, disproportionately pay the price of the heightened security enacted to satisfy suburban and rural parents (Cornell, 2015; Nance, 2013; Schept et al., 2015).

The sudden explosion of media coverage of school shootings in the mid-to-late 1990s was based largely upon the race and class of the victims, perpetrators, and their communities, than upon the occurrences themselves. In particular, incidents involving African American communities and youth were often under-reported by the media. They failed to acknowledge the fact that violence, including gun violence in schools, had afflicted African American communities before, as if it only became a “growing problem” when it began to occur in “good” (i.e. predominately white, middle class) schools and communities (Hurley et al. 2015; Klein, 2012; Mastro, 2015; Schept et al., 2015).

### *Gun Culture and Gun Control*

Guns are culturally important in portions of the United States. Often, school shootings are immediately followed by discussion of what to do about the fact that it is so easy to obtain guns in certain states, especially noting that the United States has significantly more gun related crime than any other developed country. Concerns about school security lead to polarized positions: one side believes we need to restrict guns as much as possible in order to prevent children from ever obtaining one; the other side believes that more ordinary, well-meaning people should carry guns in order to protect themselves and others from unbalanced would-be shooters. Those on either side call for continuously increasing security in schools such as metal detectors, cameras, pat-downs, and clear backpacks (Brooks et al., 2000; Esposito & Finley, 2014; McLeigh, 2015; Metz & MacLeish, 2015; Shuffleton, 2015; Towers et al., 2015). Shortly following the 1999 Columbine shooting, Brooks et al. (2000) postulated that intense media focus on only school shootings that occur in suburban/rural, predominately white areas, created an environment of panic and polarization in which thoughtful, effective, and rational policy regarding gun control and school security is difficult to achieve.

While there have been legislative changes at the state level following school shootings, public support for private gun ownership has actually increased since 1993, according to a Pew poll (Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2013). Even following the school massacre of very young children in Newtown, Connecticut, when gun control was being discussed exhaustively by media and the President of the United States, Gallup polls found that 74 percent of Americans were against banning handguns (Esposito & Finley, 2014). In that same year (2012), public opinions tended to show more support for potential bans of high capacity magazines (62%) and gun show loophole purchases (92%) (Saad, 2012).

A popular suggestion for those who favor gun rights is that arming more citizens would discourage those considering opening fire in public, as well as enabling citizens to respond and defend themselves should they find themselves as a target (Martin, 2013; Nedzel, 2014). Since school shootings are such a hot-button topic, some feel that teachers should be trained in the use of firearms and armed so that they might be able to better protect the students in the event of an active shooter situation. This idea is, for the most part, firmly rooted in the belief that the Second Amendment to the Constitution is “sacred” (Elliott, 2015; Nedzel, 2014). Arnold (2015) explains that proponents of gun rights feel it should not be changed or interpreted as archaic for fear that the government might gain too much power over the populace should ordinary citizens be disarmed. This in combination with “neoliberal” ideology, which promotes complete self-reliance, individual responsibility, and minimal government “interference,” (Esposito & Finley, 2014, 74) provides a basis to defend gun rights no matter what gun violence has happened and where (Esposito & Finley, 2014; Nedzel, 2014).

The opposing side of the debate suggests that there is a correlation between lax gun control and incidents of gun related violence (Nickitas, 2013). Metz and MacLeish (2015)

concluded that gun related homicides and suicides are more common in states where guns are easier to obtain and keep. For example, they noted the research of others which reflected that,

homicide was more common in areas where household firearms ownership was higher. Siegel et al. found that states with high rates of gun ownership had disproportionately high numbers of deaths from firearm-related homicides. Webster's analysis uncovered that the repeal of Missouri's background check law led to an additional 49 to 68 murders per year, and the rate of interpersonal conflicts resolved by fatal shootings jumped by 200% after Florida passed "stand your ground" in 2005 (241).

In the discussion of arming teachers, many are opposed to the idea since young people have already reported that, with the increase in other types of security, they feel they are entering a correctional facility when they go to school. As long as fifteen years ago, Brooks et al. (2000) observed that, even at the level of enhanced security reached back then, it could compromise the emotional well-being of students and their ability to be in a positive learning environment. A drastic security increase such as armed teachers may not be conducive to that. Additionally, the level of training received when obtaining a license does not guarantee that civilians would react safely and/or appropriately in an active shooter situation. Police officers have training and invaluable experience on their side, providing them with the tools to respond in the ways to achieve the best outcome possible. Since civilians typically do not have such training and experience, over-arming is an unavoidable risk to public safety (Crews et al., 2013).

An earlier point is also applicable when it comes to gun related legislation. Since policy enacted up to this point (i.e. zero-tolerance policy) has disproportionately affected urban, predominately minority schools, it stands to reason that further legislation related to school safety, including that which involves gun control policy, may continue to disproportionately affect urban, predominately minority communities (Cornell, 2015; Nance, 2013; Schept et al.,

2015). Therefore, if policies were enacted allowing or mandating teachers to carry weapons in schools, these schools may be subjected to it the most. This would cement the prison-like environment that many schools have already become, with teachers looking much more like correctional officers (Brooks et al., 2000; Cornell, 2015, Nance, 2013; Schept et al., 2015).

### *Mental Illness: Healthcare, Privacy Rights, and Stigma*

The subject of mental illness is an extremely common thread following school shootings since, on the surface, most agree that a youth (18 and under, in the case of this study) who would commit such an act must be somehow mentally disturbed (Klein, 2012; Martin, 2013; Rosenberg, 2014). Calls for increased investment in mental healthcare point out that “only about 20% of children and youth with mental illness receive any kind of mental health services” and that “the cuts in state mental health budgets of nearly \$4 billion over the last three years that have decimated the social ‘safety net’ of services could be restored” (Fritz, 2013, 8). Yet, Rosenberg (2014) explains that, although these are salient points that can and should be addressed by our government, it remains virtually impossible to discern would-be school shooters from those much more numerous individuals who may fit a similar profile but will not carry out a shooting. In fact, “the idea that violent students could be identified by psychological profiles has been unequivocally dismissed in reports by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Secret Service, and the U.S. Department of Education” (Cornell, 2015, 220).

Furthermore, previous research suggests that mental illness accounts for “only 3 to 5 percent of violence in the United States” (Pinals et al., 2015, 1), and that “even among this minority of individuals who are violent, only a small percentage of those violent acts (2-3% in a major study) involve guns” (Pinals et al., 2015, 1). With this combined with the relative rarity of

school shooting incidents, researchers are not able to confidently make inferences about the mentally ill population at large when it comes to this type of violence (Metzl & MacLeish, 2015; Neuman et al., 2015; Pinals et al., 2015). Even though some research suggests the possibility of undiagnosed mental illness being a factor in some school shootings, they likely “represent statistical aberrations that reveal more about particularly horrible instances than they do about population-level events” (Metzl & MacLeish, 2015, 241). In fact, individuals with diagnosed schizophrenia, one of the most stigmatized mental illnesses in terms of fear of violence, are *victimized* by the police at rates of 65 to 130 percent more frequently according to police incident reports (Metzl & MacLeish, 2015; Pinals et al., 2015).

In addition to calls for increased funding for mental healthcare, there have been calls for legislation preventing individuals with documented mental illnesses from purchasing firearms, some of which have been put into practice. Unfortunately, there are serious drawbacks to these protocols. Depending on the state, the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NCIS), used to run background checks on those purchasing firearms, can only retain records of those who have been “adjudicated as a mental defective or committed to a mental institution” (Gun Control Act of 1968, Pub Law No. 90-618)” (Rosenberg, 2014, 111).

At issue is the fact that, not only were many assailants undiagnosed at the time of the shootings (rendering the NCIS useless in terms of determining the mental health of those purchasing guns); some shooters who legally purchased weapons that we know of *were*, in fact, under the care of mental health professionals (Pinals et al., 2015). For example, Eric Harris, perpetrator of the 1999 Columbine shooting, was under the care of a psychiatrist and prescribed the psychiatric medication Luvox; his autopsy suggested that he was taking it as prescribed (CBS, 4/30/99). Asa Coon, perpetrator of the 2007 shooting at Success Tech Academy in

Cleveland, was under court-appointed psychiatric care after being charged with domestic violence. He was hospitalized, placed on psychiatric medications, and visited several times at his home by juvenile court officers (CNN, 10/10/07). Schildkraut and Hernandez (2013) explain that only those who have been involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital in an inpatient capacity could be reported to the NCIS, leaving out a large contingent of those suffering from and treated for mental illnesses (Pinals et al., 2015).

Furthermore, in many cases of students who were perpetrators of school shootings, the guns used were not purchased by them. They were often stolen from family members or neighbors, or else purchased illegally from individuals (Kleck, 2009, 1450), rendering the NCIS ineffective. Still, “National Rifle Association President Wayne LaPierre blamed ‘delusional killers’ for violence in the United States, while calling for a ‘national registry’ of persons with mental illness” (Metzl & MacLeish, 2015, 240). This idea effectively criminalizes the mentally ill, stifling their rights in a desperate bid to assign blame to something other than firearms and firearm access (Esposito & Finley, 2014).

If mental health professionals are able or required to report the mentally ill to a registry based on their professional judgment, it stands to reason that patients may lose trust and cease treatment. Indeed, they may be deterred from seeking treatment in the first place (Pinals et al., 2015). Stigmatization of the mentally ill already does more harm than good, and “the notion that ‘mental illness causes gun violence’ stereotypes a vast and diverse population of persons diagnosed with psychiatric conditions and oversimplifies links between violence and mental illness” (Metzl & MacLeish, 2015, 242). The mentally ill are, unfortunately, bearing the weight of the stigma that comes with moral panic perhaps now more than ever (Pinals et al., 2015).

Not only are the mentally ill stigmatized; minority adolescents are stigmatized as being more “criminal” than their white counterparts in the sense that issues of mental health are often disregarded when addressing all types of criminal behavior, including violent behavior such as what we see in school shootings. This stands in contrast to the eagerness and frequency with which media frames portray young white school shooters as mentally ill. In 2005, Teplin et al. found that minority youths, who made up 60 percent of individuals being held in juvenile placement facilities, were not receiving mental health treatment at rates consistent with need. They observed that, in 2005,

epidemiological studies estimate that between two thirds and three quarters of detained youths have 1 or more psychiatric disorders. More than 15% of detained youths have major mental disorders (e.g., affective disorders, psychosis) and associated functional impairments (Teplin et al., 1993, 2005)

This lack of treatment where needed reflects the ways that juvenile delinquency has been framed differently based on race and class. Moral attributions about poor, urban minorities are more frequently cited as explanations for violent behavior by juvenile minorities, whereas mental illness is very often used to explain the actions of white shooters (Holody, et al., 2013; Hurley et al. 2015; Larkin, 2009; Mastro, 2015; Shapiro, 2015).

### *Bullying in American Schools*

Bullying has been a central concern in the discourse of school shootings (Casebeer, 2012; Fisher et al., 2015; Jones & Augustine, 2015). The frame of a bullied outcast, usually male, is one of the first directions taken by news media following school shootings, especially when the shooter is white middle class (Shapiro, 2015). From the 1997 Heath High School shooting in



West Paducah, Kentucky into the 2000s, school shootings have been often viewed through the lens of bullying (Leary et al., 2003). One study has shown that out of

37 school shootings...identified and studied, 75% of the school shooters felt bullied, threatened, or were attacked or injured by others. Several of the shooters...reported on said they experienced long-term bullying and harassment from their peers (Duplechain & Morris, 2014, 146).

Recently, schools have enacted major efforts to bring awareness of bullying in their schools out in the open, encouraging children to intervene if they see a peer being bullied. Indeed, research suggests that in 57 percent of instances in which a peer intervenes in an episode of bullying, it ends within seconds (Hymel et al., 2015). However, it has proven to be difficult to encourage students to do so; the older the student gets, the less likely they are to intervene (Hymel, et al., 2015).

Recent social-psychological research on bullying in schools observes how deeply group dynamics run in social scenarios for youth. Children receive messages about groups in general and the groups that they belong to throughout their lives. For example, emphasis on the importance of being an American citizen (pledging allegiance to the flag in school), being on teams, grouping based on gender, or social grouping based on racial majorities/minorities all communicate that it is right to divide into such groups, and to favor certain groups over others (Connell et al., 2015). They are usually taught which groups are “better” or “worse” through group socialization, where,

[when] individuals (of any age) are put into groups, certain group processes naturally emerge. First, *between group processes* begin to operate, inevitably leading individuals in a group to behave in ways that favor their own group and discriminate against other groups. Specifically, *group contrast effects* reflect a natural tendency to emphasize the differences between groups, often in the service of enhancing self-esteem by viewing one's own group as “better”. Over time, these group contrast effects serve to widen

(perceived) differences between groups, as similarities are underemphasized (Hymel et al., 2015, 17).

While educators can think about ways to encourage positive social interaction in how they structure their classes, being mindful of the unspoken messages they may send about group dynamics, deeply ingrained social dynamics can span generations, being very difficult to change (Chen, L.M., 2015; Hase et al., 2015; Hymel et al., 2015). A study conducted by Shetgiri et al. (2013) also suggests that bullying behavior tends to correlate with problems in the child's home life, creating an even more complicated dynamic.

With group dynamics in mind, it is interesting to note the difference in the framing of bullying as a cause for school shootings and other violence when it comes to race and class. Some urban, predominately minority environments experience issues related to gangs. Teenagers involved in similar behaviors, such as social exclusion, pressure to conform, mocking, or violence would likely be framed as bullies in suburban or rural environments. Although "bullying is associated with the reasons why individuals join gangs and with gang-related behavior" (White & Mason, 2013), Decker & Kempf-Leonard's 1991 study found that in inner-city environments, gang activity was the more commonly attributed frame to this behavior. Later, Turner et al. (2015) similarly proposed the need for another take on bullying by including behaviors not typically defined that way, such as "peer sexual assault and "peer perpetrated property crimes" (367). They explain that bullying tends to be seen in a one-dimensional way; one might think of the typical scenario of a socially awkward, white "nerd" being picked on by "cool" kids. However, there are many ways that children can be victimized by other children outside of this commonly narrow conception of bullying.

Klein (2012) expanded by pointing out the issues of gender and sexuality that are often overlooked in discussion of school shootings. She points out that,

the obsession with gender, status, obedience, and competition that occupies our students undermines their relationships with themselves and with others, as well as their ability to learn and thrive (2).

School shooters have been male in the vast majority of instances, and many of them were reported to have been bullied in a manner that belies the social pressures to conform to a rigid standard of masculinity (Klein, 2012). Looking at past incidents, Leary et al. (2003) catalogued 15 school shooting incidents occurring between 1996 and 2001, from which they concluded that,

in at least 12 of the 15 incidents, the perpetrator(s) had been subject to a pattern of malicious teasing or bullying—for example, teased for their weight or appearance, maliciously taunted and humiliated (regularly called a “nerd,” “dweeb,” or “faggot,” for example), or otherwise picked on (210).

Homophobic slurs from fellow males and romantic rejection from females are both threats to the socially defined ideal of masculinity that is culturally upheld, destroying self-esteem and potentially causing children and teens to lash out; not only as revenge, but as proof of their masculinity and worthiness of fear and respect (Klein, 2012; Leary et al. 2003; Warnick, 2015).

For example, Klein (2012) points to the statement of a Columbine High school football player regarding the social group that shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold belonged to:

Columbine is a good, clean place except for those rejects. Most kids didn't want them there. Sure we teased them. But what do you expect with kids who come to school with weird hairdos and horns on their hats? It's not just the jocks; the whole school's disgusted with them.... If you want to get rid of someone, usually you tease 'em. So the whole school would call them homos (379).

Harris and Klebold's rampage, Klein (2012) explains, was their way of asserting their dominance within the very social world they claimed to despise. She writes,

Eric and Dylan internalized the status hierarchies in their school. They despised the “bullies” who tormented them, but they didn't seek to defend other targets of bullying. Instead they became the biggest bullies, in an apparent effort to momentarily be at the top of the school hierarchy themselves—torturing those they had learned to believe were categorically inferior (389).

Warnick et al. (2015) similarly explained that the school environment can socialize students to respond violently to disappointments. In their analysis, school comes to symbolize force due to the rules and regulations experienced by the children. They are simultaneously given a cultural narrative promising friends and relationships at school, so when things do not turn out as they wanted and expected, Warnick et al. (2015) postulate that the disappointment could prompt them to respond with force in the school environment.

Arguably, the prominence of the bully frame in news media in relation to school shootings has functioned as a self-fulfilling prophecy, propagating future incidents in which the rationalization was that the shooter was seeking revenge against bullies. Larkin (2009) revisited the heavily publicized Columbine example to expand on the significance of the incident in terms of its influence on the school shootings that followed. He pointed out that the Columbine shooting

first [it] provided a paradigm about how to plan and execute a high-profile school rampage shooting that could be imitated. Second, it gave inspiration to subsequent rampage shooters to exact revenge for past wrongs, humiliations, and social isolation. Third, it generated a “record” of carnage that subsequent rampagers sought to exceed. Fourth, Harris and Klebold have attained mythical status in the pantheon of outcast student subcultures. They have been honored and emulated in subsequent rampage shootings and attempts. In all cases, perpetrators either admitted links with Columbine or police found evidence of Columbine influences (Larkin, 2009, 1314).

The fact that so many school aged children can relate to the experience of being bullied, combined with the intensive coverage of the Columbine shooting's prominent bully narrative, may have transformed shooters Harris and Klebold from mass murderers to avenging heroes in the eyes of some bullied children (Klein, 2012; Larkin, 2009; Leary, 2003; Warnick, 2015).

*Violent Media: Correlation, Not Causation*

With increased attention to school shootings in the 1990s came speculation on whether or not links could be found between violent media (video games, music, movies, television, etc. with violent content) and school shootings (Klein, 2012; O'Dea, 2015). After the 1997 Heath High School shooting in West Paducah, Kentucky, the young Michael Carneal claimed to have been inspired by a dream sequence from the film *The Basketball Diaries* in which the main character shoots his classmates (Calvert, 2002). Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, perpetrators of the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, listened to heavy rock bands with dark themes, such as Marilyn Manson or Rammstein (Calvert, 2002; Frymer, 2009). In their journals, these boys wrote often about their planned shooting, comparing themselves to characters in the film *Natural Born Killers* (Anderson, 2004; Frymer, 2009). Video games were of particular concern to news media (Clements, 2012; Klein, 2012), particularly the hyper-violent "first-person shooters" such as *Doom*, a favorite of Harris and Klebold (Calvert, 2002). This also, very much like media focus on mental illness, almost exclusively applied to white shooters, who are disproportionately highly represented in video games (Dill et al., 2005).

While it may be true that many young school shooters were known to consume violent media, there have been no causal links uncovered between it and violent behavior (Clements,

2012; Copehaver, 2015; Fox & DeLateur, 2014). The overwhelming majority of the millions of consumers of violent video games, music, movies, and television do not exhibit violent behavior in such an extreme manner. Furthermore, while it makes logical sense that youth with a propensity toward violence might be likely consumers of violent media (Clements, 2012; Fox & DeLateur, 2014), there is nothing substantial to suggest that the entertainment itself *causes* violent behavior (Kaplan, 2012).

With that in mind, Kaplan (2012) points to several studies that found a correlation between increased aggression in children and the usage of violent video games where

high exposure to fast-paced violent games can lead to changes in brain function when processing violent images, including dampening of emotional responses to violence and decreases in certain types of executive control. But there also is some evidence that the same type of fast-paced violent games can improve some types of spatial-visual skills, basically, ability to extract visual information from a computer screen (Kaplan, 2012, 1).

The only link found between school shooters and violent media is that these individuals often consumed it (Kaplan, 2012). As Kaplan (2012) notes,

despite the links between media violence and aggression, Anderson stressed, ‘media violence is only one of many risk factors for later aggressive and violent behavior. Furthermore, extremely violent behavior never occurs when there is only one risk factor present. Thus, a healthy, well-adjusted person with few risk factors is not going to become a school-shooter just because they start playing a lot of violent video games or watching a lot of violent movies.’ (1)

The moral panic regarding violent media is yet another example of an oversimplified, inaccurate focus on one narrow aspect of a shooting’s story (O’Dea, 2015). In an effort to avoid censorship, it is important to understand the realities behind the effects of violent media on young minds, yet from the research, one can conclude that a child *could* potentially be influenced by violent

media, but that this alone is not enough to predict violent tendencies in youth populations (Clements, 2012; Kaplan, 2012).

## **Methodology**

Adler and Clark (2008) defined content analyses as “method(s) of data collection in which some form of communication (speeches, TV programs, newspaper articles, films, advertisements, even children’s books) is studied systematically” (362). This method of research is widely utilized in the sociological study of school shootings, as Mongan (2013) notes;

overall, the methodology has become a preferred method for examining how media portrays and defines certain social phenomenon, as well as how media affects the public’s perception about social objects in the world (107).

Examining the media content of the past serves the purpose of ascertaining the most prominent narratives surrounding school shootings at the times they occurred. It also gives insight into the most commonly held beliefs about school shootings and whether those beliefs changed over time. Researching widely viewed and read news reports about school shootings will reveal tendencies toward certain frames; associating these frames with surrounding factors allows for even further observation about the social factors influencing them.

Using archival television news footage and internet articles from major news networks regarding school shooting incidents between the years of 1995 and 2014, this study undertakes a content analysis to determine whether differences in framing language are present based on race, class, and socioeconomic status of the shooters, victims, their families, and communities where they occurred. Although class and socioeconomic status are similar, one’s class is more of a

static position in society while socioeconomic status is more changeable depending on factors such as race, gender, starting economic position, and others. The language used to frame school shooting incidents in news reports and the moral panics they produce shape the perception of audiences and can substantively affect public opinion and policy. Cataloguing and comparing the framing language used in these news reports will reveal important differences as patterns emerge.

My expectation is that the research will demonstrate differences in the level of news media coverage of school shooting incidents based on race and class. Specifically, school shootings that occur in low income communities with predominately minority populations will tend to receive less media coverage for a shorter period of time. Additionally, I expect to see differences in the framing of mental illness when it comes to school shooters; this will be applied to white shooters more often than minority shooters. There will also be differences in the framing of bullying based on race and class, with middle-to-upper class shooters from predominately white communities being more often framed as having been bullied in school. For minority shooters and those from low-income predominately minority communities, the frame of violent communities and gang activity will be more common than the bullying frame. In addition to the mental illness and bullying frames when it comes to middle-to-upper class, mostly white shooters, violent media will be framed as a causal or influencing factor of the actions of school shooters. Finally, I expect to see differential effects on urban communities resulting from the framing of gun control surrounding school shooting events that occurred in suburban or rural communities.

For the purposes of this study, “school shooting” was defined using the following criteria:



- Shooting occurred in a school or on school property
- Shooter was a current student or a previous student up to and including the age of 18
- Shooter targeted fellow students and/or teachers/administration/staff

Shootings occurring in a school or on school property were the minimum qualifier in order to be defined as a “school shooting.” This is noteworthy because many studies include school related shootings in their research on school shootings (i.e. a shooting at a sporting event away from school property, a school dance, or other off-school-grounds location at which many students were present). This will also help to avoid confusion about shooting incidents that happened near a school but had no direct connection to the school.

Shootings in which a current or recently previous student is the shooter have a specific significance due to the fact that it is often a child lashing out at his/her peers and/or authority figures. This rules out outside actors who may have any number of motives, social influences, or other effects on the decision to victimize students. The social and psychological world of school-aged children are studied specifically through the context of their age and attendance at schools. Setting these narrow parameters was a difficult decision, as the tragic 2012 shooting in Newton, Connecticut was left out of the data because the perpetrator, Adam Lanza, was an adult, not a school-aged child. Society reacts in a different way to assailants who are children.

Focusing on Kindergarten – 12th grade students who targeted fellow students, teachers and/or administration and staff also helps to foster a coherent and cohesive discussion of a specific type of school-based violence. Additionally, because this study is focused on media representations, it was necessary to focus on incidents that received national news coverage. With that in mind, additional exclusions to the data set were necessary.

*Exclusions:*

- Instances of suicide/suicide attempts on school grounds where the individual was not targeting anyone else
- Instances of teachers shooting at co-workers or students
- Shootings that occurred on college campuses
- Shootings that did not receive national news coverage

A student attempting suicide without attempting to bring physical harm to anyone else is exhibiting a very different behavior than a student who shoots at his/her classmates and teachers. The societal and media response to events such as this is likely to move in a different direction than an event in which a student is shooting at other students.

Teachers who shoot at their co-workers or students are adults, eliciting an entirely different societal response than children who are shooters. Adults shooting at each other near children or at children are likely to be framed as a person who is responsible for their own actions; in the case of teachers, they may also be judged based on their responsibility of the children.

Similarly, shootings at college campuses were not included. This was another difficult decision, as the deadliest shooting in a school environment to date took place at Virginia Tech in 2007, and recent campus shootings in Oregon have grabbed national news headlines. College students are legally adults, which makes them different from children in both the eyes of the law and of the larger society.

It is also useful to note that shooters who were 18 years old at the time of the shooting, but still students at a high school, were included in the study (provided the shooting fit the other parameters as well). Although they are legally adults, they are still a part of their high school

student communities and therefore subject to the same social norms, expectations and environment of their other school-aged peers.

Shootings that did not receive national news coverage were not included in this study, because the focus here is on the most widely used frames created by specific language used in popular media. However, all school shootings that have been reported via any media outlet were listed in order to determine the following: a.) How many *reported* school shootings within the parameters of this study occurred between 1995 to 2014, and b.) Demographic information about the shooter, victims, and communities where these shootings took place, wherever this information was available.

The media outlets used in this study include CNN, Fox News, ABC, NBC, and CBS, in both television broadcast and internet article form. The highly popular conservative-leaning outlet Fox News did not exist until October 1996, therefore it was mainly used to analyze later shootings about which it had reported extensively after gaining tremendous viewership. These news outlets are quite widely viewed and read, although ratings and viewership for both network and cable television news have fallen over the years. The Nielsen ratings for all three network news outlets dropped from 26.4 million in 1995 to 16.8 million in 2014 (Pew Research Center for Journalism & Media, 2015). Since several of the school shootings under discussion in this study occurred in years with higher television news viewership, analysis of this medium is essential. Between 1995 and 2015, the internet became an integral tool for news reporting. For example, CNN's web site had 64,288 unique visitors in January of 2015 (Pew Research Center for Journalism & Media, 2015). Analyzing both television and web mediums will ensure that both the frames that are the most pervasive over time and the frames that change over time are observed.

Throughout the observations, notes were taken using a developed recording and scoring instrument to manually chart the discussion of the following:

- Race of the Shooter(s)
- Race of the Victim(s)
- Social Class of the Shooter(s)
- Social Class of the Community
- Role of the Parents of the Shooter and Victims in the Community
- Mental Illness
- Gun Control
- Psychiatric Drugs
- Bullying
- Violent Media

The social class of the shooter(s) and community was determined by utilizing a combination of U.S. census data (2010) on income levels and information from media reports. The units-of-analysis for mentions of these categories were sentences or paragraphs depending upon the length of the article, since some articles were significantly shorter and less detailed than others, even at the national news level. It was important to include these shorter articles because that is precisely one aspect of what I am analyzing; differences in amount of coverage. Analyses of both manifest and latent content were performed; in other words, superficial information such as lists of shootings, locations, and demographic information were used in addition to deeper analysis of framing messages communicated through more than a single word or phrase. Moreover, the communities of each school were classified as either urban, suburban, or rural based on population size, density, and location, using the definitions provided by the United States Census Bureau (2010).

Previous research has shown that these points are some of the most salient in terms of media framing of school shootings. By cataloguing the mentions and qualitatively analyzing the

context of these topics, this content analysis will explore the question of whether the race, class, or socioeconomic status of school shooters and community in which school shootings occur affect the language that is used by the media to frame the school shooting incident. Using these observations, this study will discuss the frames that were constructed and their effects, including the moral panics they produced.

### **Limitations**

Since this study focuses on the content of news articles and television broadcasts, it is limited by the availability of materials, some of which were published/aired as long as 16 years ago. The increasing popularity of the internet as a tool to archive news content dictates that articles and broadcasts regarding school shootings that occurred more recently are more readily available than those regarding earlier incidents. A portion of the observed content, particularly dealing with earlier school shooting incidents, was retrieved from the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive, while the rest was retrieved via internet sources. Additionally, this study did not examine other media sources such as newspapers, magazines, or television networks other than those previously identified. Therefore, it is possible that shootings recorded in this study as having not received coverage actually did receive some coverage at the time of the shooting.

### **Findings**

#### *Inclusions and Omissions*

The content observed in this study consisted of 231 internet news articles and 366 minutes 47 seconds of television news clips. A total of 66 shooting incidents across the United States between 1995 and 2014 met all but one criteria for this content analysis. There were 24 of

these 66 incidents excluded from the framing language analysis because they were not covered at the national news level. Therefore, the number of school shootings about which framing language was observed was 42. However, the full list was used to look at demographic information. It was compiled using media reports, the *National School Safety Center's* "Report on School Associated Violent Deaths," and *Everytown for Gun Safety's* "Analysis of School Shootings." The fact that the 24 schools that did not receive national news coverage may share commonalities is significant for understanding the data and answering the question of whether or not there are differences in framing language and level of coverage based on race, class, and socioeconomic status.

#### *Differences in Level of Coverage Based on Race and Class*

The amount of news coverage following school shootings differs between poor urban centers and middle class suburbs, particularly those that are predominately white communities of high socioeconomic status. Urban areas account for 13 of the 24 incidents that did not receive national coverage, along with 8 suburban towns and 3 that occurred in rural environments (Table 1). Of those suburban and rural areas, 3 were low-income communities, 2 were low-to-middle income, and 6 were middle income (Table 2).

**Table 1**  
**School Shootings 1995-2014 without National Coverage:**  
**Delineation of Geographical Areas (U.S. Census)**

<b>Urban</b>	<b>Suburban</b>	<b>Rural</b>
Cardozo High School in Washington D.C. (1/5/95)	Sacred Heart School in Redlands, CA (1/24/95)	Wind River Middle School in Carson, WA (12/13/02)
Garfield High School in Seattle, WA (1/12/95)	Talladega High School in Talladega, AL (4/11/96)	Larose Cut Off Middle School in Larose, LA (5/18/09)
Memorial Middle School in Laredo, TX (8/29/95)	Dekalb Alternative School in Decatur, GA (9/25/96)	North Panola High School in Sardis, MS (8/23/13)

Cypress Junior High School in Memphis, TN (9/12/95)	Jacksonville Senior High in Jacksonville, AR (10/9/96)	
Thomas A. Edison High School in Queens, NY (11/28/95)	Deming Middle School, Deming, NM (11/19/99)	
East High School in Memphis, TN (1/26/96)	Cahokia High School in Cahokia, IL (1/23/09)	
Sumner High School in St. Louis, MO (10/13/96)	West Orange High School in Winter Garden, FL (12/4/13)	
Pershing High School in Detroit, MI (3/17/97)	Salisbury High School in Salisbury, NC (2/10/14)	
Ribault High School in Jacksonville, FL (11/7/97)		
Anacostia Senior High School in Washington D.C. (10/30/03)		
Ballou High School in Washington D.C. (2/2/04)		
Pinson Valley High School in Birmingham, AL (1/13/06)		
Westbury High School in Houston, TX (11/28/06)		

**Table 2: Suburban/Rural School Shootings without National Coverage  
Class of the Communities (U.S. Census)**

<b>Schools/Communities/Dates of Shootings</b>	<b>Low Income</b>	<b>Low/Middle Income</b>	<b>Middle Income</b>
Sacred Heart School, Redlands, CA (1/24/95)			✓
Talladega High School, Talladega, AL (4/11/96)		✓	
Dekalb Alternative School Decatur, GA (9/25/96)			✓
Jacksonville Senior High Jacksonville, AR (10/9/96)			✓
Deming Middle School Deming, NM (11/19/99)	✓		
Wind River Middle School			✓

Carson, WA (12/13/02)			
Cahokia High School Cahokia, IL (1/23/09)		✓	
Larose Cut-off Middle School Larose, LA (5/18/09)			✓
North Panola High School Sardis, MS (8/23/13)	✓		
West Orange High School Winter Garden, FL (12/4/13)			✓
Salisbury High School Salisbury, NC (2/10/14)	✓		

When looking at the shooting incidents that did not receive national coverage, it is noticeable that more of those particular shootings occurred in urban settings than in suburban or rural settings (Table 1). Additionally, only six towns that could be safely categorized as “middle class” experienced a school shooting that did not receive national coverage (Table 2).

Of those incidents that did receive coverage, there were 19 that occurred in urban areas, 14 in suburban areas, and 9 in rural areas. Although the number of urban incidents nationally covered is higher, the percentage is actually lower when taking into account the number of shootings in urban schools that actually occurred. In other words, of the 32 urban school shootings, 59.4 percent were covered by national news outlets. When it comes to suburban school shootings, 63.6 percent were covered nationally. Rural shootings received the highest percentage, with national news coverage in 75 percent of cases (Table 3).

**Table 3: Media Coverage of Selected School Shootings 1995-2014**

<b>Location of School: Geographic Classification</b>	<b>National Coverage</b>	<b>Local Coverage</b>	<b>Percentage Covered Nationally</b>
<b>Urban</b>	19	13	59.4%



<b>Suburban</b>	14	8	63.6%
<b>Rural</b>	9	3	75.0%

Also noteworthy is the fact that, out of the 24 incidents that did not receive national coverage, there were 7 instances in which the shooter and victim/s were identified as African American, and 3 instances where they were identified as Hispanic/Latino. That makes 10 instances out of 24 in which the race of the shooters/victims were able to be confirmed; there were several instances where identifying information was not given about the children involved. It can be stated, however, that of the 14 incidents about which this information was not available, nearly all of the schools were located in large cities (or a handful of small towns) with predominately African American or Hispanic populations and/or neighborhoods. Namely, the schools were located in Laredo, Texas, Memphis, Tennessee (2 occurred here), Queens, New York, Talladega, Alabama, Decatur, Georgia, Jacksonville, Arkansas, St. Louis, Missouri, Detroit, Michigan, Jacksonville, Florida, Carson, Washington, and Birmingham, Alabama. The two shootings that occurred in predominately white suburban or rural communities without national coverage were in Carson, Washington and Decatur, Georgia. This leads to the conclusion that 22 of the 24 instances that did not receive national coverage were either known to involve African American or Hispanic/Latino youths, or occurred in schools matching those prominent demographics.

School shootings that occur in low-income communities with predominately minority populations tend to receive less media coverage over a shorter period of time. As previously mentioned, many of the shootings that occurred in urban, low-income minority communities were not covered nationally. Of those that were, the coverage remained minimal compared to

others occurring in predominately white middle-to-upper class areas that were weeks or months-long news events. The schools that experienced shooting incidents but received minimal coverage compared to the others were Tavares Middle School (1995) in Tavares, Florida, Armstrong High School (1998) in Richmond, Virginia, Lew Wallace High School (2001) in Gary, Indiana, Anacostia High School (2003) in Washington, D.C., Rocori High School in Cold Spring, Minnesota (2003), Venice High School (2006) in Venice, California, Henry Foss High School in Tacoma, Washington (2007), Central High School in Knoxville, Tennessee (2008), Dillard High School in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida (2008), Wilson High School (2009) in Long Beach, California, Discovery Middle School in Madison, Alabama (2010), Millard South High School in Omaha, Nebraska (2011), Price Middle School in Atlanta, Georgia (2013), Carver High School in Winston-Salem, North Carolina (2013), Liberty Technology Magnet High School in Jackson, Tennessee (2014), Berrendo Middle School in Roswell, New Mexico (2014), and Delaware Charter Valley High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (2014). Considering the minimal national coverage that these 15 incidents received in combination with the 24 incidents that received no national coverage serves to indicate a significant disparity in national coverage of school shootings in urban, poor, or predominately minority areas.

This minimal coverage (or complete absence of coverage) that some incidents received stands in contrast to others that were covered extensively over a longer period of time. In most cases, these school shootings occurred in predominately white, middle-to-upper class communities. For example, using CNN's web archive to search for stories either solely concerning or making mention of the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colorado, one will find at least 89 articles dating from the days immediately following the incident to 2014. Similarly, internet searches for articles and video concerning the shootings at

Frontier Junior High School in Moses Lake, WA (1996), Pearl High School in Pearl, MS (1997), Stamps High School in Stamps, AR (1997), Bethel Regional High School in Bethel, AK (1997), Heath High School in West Paducah, KY (1997), Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, AR (1998), Thurston High School in Springfield, OR (1998), Heritage High School in Conyers, GA (1999), Santana High School in Santee, CA (2001), Red Lion Area Junior High School in Red Lion, PA (2003), Red Lake High School in Red Lake, MN (2005), Campbell County Comprehensive High School in Jacksboro, TN (2005), Weston High School in Cazenovia, WI (2006), E. O. Green Junior High School in Oxnard, CA (2008), Chardon High School in Chardon, OH (2012), Taft Union High School in Taft, CA (2013), Arapahoe High School in Centennial, CO (2013), Reynolds High School in Troutdale, OR (2014), and Marysville-Pilchuck High School in Marysville, WA (2014) will yield a large number of articles and news reports. Out of these heavily covered shooting incidents, the vast majority of the shooters were white. The only ones that did not involve white shooters were in Bethel, AK, Red Lake, MN, and Marysville, WA, all of which involved Native American shooters. Red Lake High School is situated on Native American reservation land, while Marysville-Pilchuck High School is adjacent to a reservation. Additionally, the majority of communities in which these shootings occurred were suburban or rural and/or predominately white. The urban exceptions to this were the incidents occurring in Jonesboro, Santee, Oxnard, and Marysville. It is important to note that some of the shootings covered more intensively had a higher number of victims than those with less coverage; at Columbine, 13 were killed and 21 injured, at Jonesboro 5 were killed and 10 injured, and at Springfield, 4 were killed and 23 injured. This should be taken into account when interpreting the meaning of the differences in levels of coverage.

*Differences in Mental Illness Framing Based on Race and Class*

Framing school shootings in terms of the mental illness of the shooter is more often applied to white shooters than minorities. The articles and news footage observed in this study showed that there were 58 mentions of mental illness regarding the 26 school shooting incidents perpetrated by white shooters (Table 4). When it came to shooters who are minorities, only 8 mentions of mental illness were discussed in the news coverage of those 16 incidents.

**Table 4: 5 Incidents with the Most Media Mention of Mental Illness**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Race of Shooter</b>
Pearl High School, Pearl, MS (10/1/97)	White
Columbine High School, Littleton, CO (4/20/99)	White
Heritage High School, Conyers, GA (5/20/99)	White
Success Tech Academy, Cleveland, OH (10/10/07)	White
Arapahoe High School, Centennial, CO (12/13/13)	White

In fact, the news articles reporting on urban school shootings in predominately minority communities tend to show little interest in the root causes or psychological motives of the individual shooter. Instead, the focus tends to be on concisely stating what occurred. At times, the phrasing included in articles and broadcasts indicate resignation rather than the interest in any root cause, as is common for reporting of school shootings in predominately white, upper middle class communities. For example, this CNN article regarding a 2013 shooting incident at Price Middle School in Atlanta, Georgia, a school in which the overwhelming majority of the children are African American, stated:

police detectives were interviewing the victim in the hospital, his mother told WSB-TV. He knows the assailant, who the mother said was "talking smack" to her son between classes before pulling out a gun and firing, the station said (Kavanagh 2/1/2013).

Although the tone of the article is not uncaring, it is not overly sympathetic; it is concise and gets to the point. Articles conveying the detail and gravitas of the situation are featured in many school shooting reports regarding white communities, yet were few and far between when it came to urban shootings in predominately minority areas.

Contrasting the brief and business-like tone of the previous report, the coverage of the shooting at Arapahoe High School in Centennial, Colorado that same year speculates at great length on the mental health of the shooter. In addition to occurring within the same year, these incidents both resulted in one casualty. There was live television coverage of the incident at Centennial on CNN, automatically increasing the level of impact since viewers are able to see and hear from worried family members anxiously waiting to find out if their children are safe. Celebrity psychiatrist Dr. Drew Pinsky and anchor Wolf Blitzer deliberated at length on *why* this shooting may have happened. Mental illness is the common thread of the discussion. Dr. Drew asserts that:

two things concern me: one is, what's going on in Colorado? That seems to be ground zero for a lot of these events, for young people...is there something about the mental health issues in that state? Is there something about the availability of guns? What exactly is going on in Colorado?... it's going to be an untreated mental health issue. Think about how agitated a young person would have to be to come in, walk in, with a shotgun openly in hand, scare and cause other students to scatter (CNN, 12/13/13)

Because young people from middle class or affluent families and neighborhoods regarded as symbols of high status are considered less likely to commit violent acts than their counterparts of lower class and socioeconomic status, mental illness can be framed as the only viable explanation for it. Socioeconomic status is “often measured as a combination of education, income and occupation” (apa.org). It is distinct from class as a designation in the sense that one’s

socioeconomic status is, to varying degrees depending on factors such as race and gender, more changeable than one's class. The framing language most often used in these instances expresses incredulity that youths from such "good" backgrounds would be capable of a school shooting (Shapiro, 2015).

Conversely, low income and minority communities are framed as the explanation for violence in and of itself, rather than speculating as to reasons unique to the individual assailant such as mental illness. There is a moral attribution to high income communities and low income communities; that the former is wholesome and "good," while the latter is the place for vice and immorality (Holody et al., 2013; Larkin, 2009; Metzl & McLeish, 2015).

The school shooting observed in this study that received the most media attention was in 1999 at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. The number of students killed and injured surpassed prior shootings, and it had occurred in a place considered to be safer and more wholesome than urbanized or lower-income neighborhoods. These two factors created a long lasting media event where several frames were conveyed. As one NBC report emphasized,

they come from good homes, good schools, good families. NBC news has learned that 3 of the 4 parents are indeed professionals- one an educated geologist, one retired military, one even an educator, but somehow, few would disagree, these kids went wrong... These two boys, 18 days from high school graduation from an honored school, living in an upscale community, both parents at home, described as attentive and concerned (NBC, 4/21/99)

The positions of their parents and the communities in which the shooters lived were emphasized in many media reports of the Columbine shooting. Their actions, becoming the most prolific school shooters at that time in terms of how many people they killed, are irreconcilable with the

commonly accepted “goodness” of upper-class white suburbia. The mental illness frame was one of the common “explanations” for the incident.

in general, you have to understand that kids who are troubled for some other reason will piggyback whatever bad things happen in the larger world to them...it’s true of the boys who commit these acts, that they’re vulnerable, sad boys, and they take on the weight of the culture, and they’re attracted to the dark side in our culture, and it’s always these vulnerable boys who show us the worst that can happen in any of these situations (ABC, 4/21/99)

**Table 5: Frames for White Shooters and Minority Shooters**

<b>Framing Points</b>	<b>White Shooters (26)</b>	<b>Minority Shooters (16)</b>
Mental Illness/Psychiatric Drugs	58	8
Gun Control/School Security	80	23
Violent Media	64	6
Bullying	83	14
Class of the Community/Family of the Shooter/Victims	84	12

*Differences in the Framing of Bullying Based on Race and Class*

There are also fewer mentions of bullying when it comes to shooting incidents at urban, low income, ethnically diverse schools. Conversely, when it comes to suburban or rural shootings in middle or upper-class, predominately white communities, bullying is one of the most frequent frames used to portray both the reason for the shooting and the shooter him/herself. When it came to shooting incidents involving white shooters, bullying was mentioned 64 times out of the 26 incidents being discussed (Table 5).

When it came to minority shooters, the third most frequently mentioned topic was bullying, with 14 mentions out of the 16 shooting incidents involving minority shooters (Table 5). Interestingly, only one of these mentions applied to an African American shooter. The rest applied to incidents involving Hispanic/Latino, Native American, and Middle Eastern shooters; namely, the shootings at Marysville-Pilchuck High School in Washington, Sparks Middle School in Nevada, Discovery Middle School in Alabama, Red Lake High School in Minnesota, and Bethel High School in Alaska. Interestingly, one media report quoted the attorney of Hammad Memon, perpetrator of the Discovery Middle School shooting. He addressed the race of his client, stating:

he was “very, very concerned” about Memon's future in an Alabama state prison. “I know what happens down there and it's not pleasant,” he said. “I hope the authorities take some measures to protect him. He's Pakistani and in the current climate, that's not a good thing to be. There was at least some talk that he was gang-affiliated and there's a gang culture in the prison system. And this is a murder case where Hammad Memon killed a young, black man” (AL.com, 5/28/13).

Media reports discussing urban school shootings, particularly schools with either significant racial diversity or a predominately African American or Hispanic/Latino population, often made reference to whether or not the incident was “gang related.” It was mentioned whether in the context of suspicion of gang activity, or the context that the shooting was not gang related. There were 5 mentions of gangs out of the 16 shootings perpetrated by minority children as opposed to 2 out of the 26 perpetrated by white children. Also noteworthy is that the latter 2 articles were regarding the 2007 Success Tech Academy shooting in Cleveland, Ohio, carried out by 14 year old Asa Coon. The context of these articles was less about speculating on the potential gang involvement of Coon; mostly there was discussion of the urban crime problems of Cleveland.



Much like the framing of mental illness in relation to school shooters, bullying provides an explanation as to the reasoning behind the actions of the shooter. For urban schools in low-income, minority areas, the default explanation tends to be gang activity, a morally charged frame that elicits far less sympathy than the frame of a bullied young person. This is an interesting distinction since the actual behaviors involved in adolescent gangs are extremely similar, if not identical, to common bullying behaviors. However, the framing of “gang activity” vs. “bullying” elicits an entirely different reaction and level of understanding from readers and audiences.

#### *Framing of Gangs and Violent Communities as a Causal Factor for Non-White Males*

It can be argued that school shootings in inner city environments have been declining steadily since the 1990s, even as suburban and rural shootings experience peaks and valleys statistically. Zero-tolerance weapons policies, which have been shown to negatively affect urban, low-income schools disproportionately, have come with increases in other types of security such as metal detectors, cameras, and police officers (Cornell, 2015; Mongan & Walker, 2012; Nance, 2013; Schept et al., 2015).

This study found that mentions of gang activity were nearly exclusively restricted to urban communities, with a single suburban exception in Madison, Alabama. Additionally, there was only one instance where gang activity was mentioned where the incident included a white shooter; these articles/broadcasts were concerning the previously mentioned shooting at Success Tech Academy in Cleveland, Ohio. It is also worth noting that the context of the articles placed emphasis on the community in which the shooter lived, not necessarily suggesting that the shooter himself was involved in gang activity.

When gang activity is mentioned, the lack of detail and expressiveness in the article compared to descriptions of non-urban school shootings is quite apparent. The tone suggests that the reason for the shooting incident is self-evident in the fact that it took place in a certain location and involved “gang activity.” This is also directly stated at times, such as in this excerpt from an article regarding a school shooting in Venice, California:

police said Contreras was shot after he went to the aid of his two brothers, who were involved in a fight with at least five young men. What provoked the fight was unclear, but authorities said they believe it stemmed from a gang dispute...The 40-square-block Oakwood neighborhood...is known for gang violence. The gentrification of Venice has included Oakwood, but the neighborhood's income levels are still low, said Lopez. Venice High has long experienced problems linked to gang-plagued neighborhoods surrounding the campus. ‘The kids that feed into this school come from a community that has active gangs, and the schools are a reflection of this,’ school Police Officer Jose Santome said.

Unlike school shootings that occur in more well-to-do areas, these incidents appear to be seen as almost mundane given the social problems that blight low-income urban communities. Other frames frequently applied to school shootings, such as mental illness, bullying, or violent media, appear to be irrelevant when framing the cause for incidents occurring in communities with gang activity and high rates of crime in general.

#### *Framing of Violent Media as a Causal Factor for White Males*

Violent movies, music, and video games have long been primary targets for blame for school shootings. Contrasting the common frame of gang-motivated criminal activity for minority school shooters, white male shooters have been framed as being strongly influenced by violent media. There were 64 mentions of violent media as a potential influencing factor for the 26 shootings in this study perpetrated by white males (Table 6). This frame was more common in the 1990s and early 2000s, as the frequency of mentions decreases after 2007. Broadcasts from

that time expressly discuss it as a *cause* for violent behavior, dedicating entire segments to this frame. One such segment aired on ABC on May 12, 1999, focusing on the question, “do violent video games make for violent kids?” (ABC, 5/12/1999).

**Table 6: 5 School Shootings with Most Video Game Mentions**

Location	Name & Race of Shooter/s
Columbine High School in Littleton, CO (1999)	Eric Harris & Dylan Klebold, white
Heath High School in West Paducah, KY (1998)	Michael Carneal, white
Richland High School in Lynnville, TN (1995)	Jamie Rouse, white
Pearl High School in Pearl, MS (1997)	Luke Woodham, white
Frontier Junior High School in Moses Lake, WA (1996)	Barry Loukaitis, white

Lawsuits against 18 video game companies brought by parents of victims of the 1998 school shooting in West Paducah, Kentucky were discussed, alleging that these companies are liable for shooter Michael Carneal’s violent actions. Shots of children playing arcade shooting games were shown as the narration described “first-person shooters,” video games which allow the player to put themselves in the position of the shooter in the game. The overall frame of the segment was suggesting that these sorts of games teach players how to shoot in addition to numbing their emotional response to killing. Using charged statements such as “call them murder simulators” and “it only takes a minority of one or two spraying bullets” clearly emphasizes this frame (ABC, 5/12/99).

Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, perpetrators of the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, were frequently framed as having been influenced by violent media. Specifically, the video game “Doom” was mentioned often, emphasizing that “They spent hours playing violent video

games” (ABC 4/21/99). This particular game has been cited in discussion of numerous school shootings in addition to non-school related mass shooting incidents. One article asserted that,

Columbine shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold and Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik, have been linked to violent video games. And some experts worry that as the games get more violent and more realistic, so does their power to blur the line between fantasy and reality in alienated gamers. ‘Doom,’ ... was all the rage in the 1990s, but primitive by today’s standards, where gamers can play first-person shooters with movie-like graphics on high definition televisions. ‘More than any other media, these video games encourage active participation in violence,’ said Bruce Bartholow, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Missouri (Fox News, 9/12/13).

This framing is designed to warn of supposed imminent danger posed by “alienated gamers” in spite of prior research concluding that other factors must be at play in order for violent games to affect the actions of the player (Clements, 2012; Copenhaver, 2015; Fox & DeLateur, 2014). It not only posits that violent games influenced violent acts that have already occurred; it forebodingly suggests that the improved graphics quality of today’s video games will create even more violent behavior. It has been such a prevalent frame over the years that it has become a trope; the white, male, “nerdy,” isolated outcast, barricaded in his bedroom and dreaming of violence against those who do not accept him.

This frame applies overwhelmingly to white male shooters (Table 6). This study found that mentions of violent media were nearly nonexistent when it came to non-white shooters. The only mentions observed were regarding Jeff Weise, perpetrator of the 2005 Red Lake High School shooting in Red Lake, Minnesota, and Evan Ramsey, perpetrator of the 1997 Bethel Regional High School shooting, who were both Native American.

*Framing Gun Control: Differential Effects on Urban Communities*

School shootings that are covered in the media almost always elicit a conversation about gun control. Often, school security measures were mentioned when it came to urban school shootings, along with very frequent politically focused discussion regarding gun control policy when it comes to school shootings overall. While gun control was often mentioned in some capacity in articles about all school shootings regardless of the class of the community, it was more often the most prominent frame, or even the sole frame, of several of the urban school shootings in this study (Table 5, Table 7). In the content observed for this study there were 103 total mentions of gun control and school safety regarding the 42 school shootings. There were 23 mentions of gun control in articles regarding the 16 school shootings in this study that occurred in urban areas.

Panic regarding the shootings occurring in suburban and rural schools led to flawed legislation such as zero-tolerance policies, disproportionately affecting low-income, minority communities. In addition, heightened security such as metal detectors, cameras, and police officers in schools was also applied more to these communities (Cornell, 2015; Mongan & Walker, 2012; Nance, 2013; Schept et al., 2015). Articles concerning urban school shootings often default to asking how the weapon was physically brought into the school when in many cases “there were metal detectors at the entrance,” leaving the police to “figure out how someone could have gotten in with a gun” (Fox News, 1/18/14). This stands in contrast to the frequently posed question in articles regarding suburban or rural school shootings, as in the following statement regarding the Columbine shooting: “They’re still questioning how it could happen here in this nice, quiet, middle class community” (NBC, 4/21/99).

**Table 7: Gun Control/School Security as Most Prominent Frame by Geographical Delineation & Racial Demographics (U.S. Census, city-data.com)**

Location	Geographical Delineation	Racial Demographics
Armstrong High School in Richmond, VA (6/15/98)	Urban	47.5% Black, 39.9% White, 6.4% Hispanic, 3.9% Two or more races, 2.0% Asian, 0.2% Native American, 0.2% Other race, 0.03% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander
Dillard High School in Fort Lauderdale, FL (11/12/08)	Urban	50.9% White, 29.0% Black, 17.2% Hispanic, 1.4% Asian, 1.0% Two or more races, 0.3% Other race, 0.2% Native American
Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, CA (10/30/09)	Urban	42.1% Hispanic, 28.7% White, 12.9% Black, 12.4% Asian, 2.6% Two or more races, 0.8% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, 0.3% Other race, 0.2% Native American
Carver High School in Winston-Salem, NC (8/31/13)	Urban	46.1% White, 33.9% Black, 16.2% Hispanic, 1.6% Two or more races, 1.2% Asian, 0.4% Native American, 0.4% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, 0.1% Other race
Price Middle School in Atlanta, GA (1/31/13)	Urban	51.5% Black, 37.0% White, 5.4% Hispanic, 4.2% Asian, 1.6% Two or more races, 0.2% Other race alone, 0.1% Native American, 0.02% Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander
Delaware Valley Charter High School in Philadelphia, PA (1/17/14)	Urban	41.8% Black, 36.2% White, 13.3% Hispanic, 6.7% Asian, 11.7% Two or more races, 0.3% Other race, 0.1% Native American

## Discussion

### *Considering the Coverage Disparity*

The findings of this study did support the research statements. There are differences in the way that school shootings are framed in news media based on race, class, and socioeconomic status. School shootings were a problem in the United States' inner cities prior to the first spate of media frenzy surrounding the issue. The frequent dissection and discussion of school shootings came about only when these events began to be perceived as a threat to white suburbia because urban minority communities were relegated to the zone of the "other" (Klein, 2012; Shapiro, 2015) This finding is present in my collected data, where, for example, the 1995

shooting at Tavares Middle School in Tavares, Florida was the first of the year to be covered nationally even though it was preceded by 5 other school shootings that same year, 4 of which occurred in urban schools (Table 1).

One of the most frequently mentioned frames that this study found was the mention of the class of the communities in which the schools are located (Table 5). Again and again in reports of shootings in middle-to-upper class schools, the sentiments expressed were more or less, “how could it happen here, in such a nice place?” The news media reflect the cultural biases of society that say white, affluent people are essentially good, while the poor and minorities are dangerous and morally lacking (Shapiro, 2015). The notion that the rich deserve to be rich and the poor deserve to be poor is never far from the surface, subtly bleeding through in the framing of events such as school shootings. The lack of media reaction and attention to urban school shootings is the result of a society that both expects and accepts that violence is normal in cities, particularly in areas primarily inhabited by minorities (Klein, 2012). This finding is present in the collected data of this study, where articles regarding school shootings in urban areas are far shorter, less detailed, and less likely to communicate the drama and traumatic impact of the incidents. Additionally, the findings of this study align with prior research suggesting that gang violence in schools is “normal” if relegated to inner-city communities.

Moral panics are not necessarily born out of something completely false. This is why media framing has such an influence on shaping moral panics; a singular aspect of a story is focused on and magnified, distorting the truth (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009; Denham, 2008; Fox & Delateur, 2014). The framing of school shootings through specific lenses resulted in outrage and blame focused on specific components of the stories. The findings of this study demonstrated that the racial and class biases of society reflected in the reporting of school

shootings affect a.) which incidents are focused on and which incidents are overlooked, and b.) the frames applied to the shootings deemed worthy of attention.

Mental illness, ease of access to guns, bullying, and violent media have been highlighted as social problems demanding action in the wake of school shootings; not just any school shootings, but those that have occurred in the suburbs, rural, or predominately white areas. Using Cohen's (2011) definition of moral panic as when "a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests," (1) my findings can be applied to demonstrate their presence in society. Mental illness and ease of access to guns are conditions that, through media framing, have been defined as threats to the societal interest of having safe public spaces for the education of children in the wake of school shootings, mainly those occurring in middle-to-upper class, predominately white communities. The findings of this study show that gun control is mentioned a total of 103 times, with 80 mentions regarding shootings perpetrated by white shooters. Additionally, mental illness is mentioned a total of 66 times, with 58 mentions regarding shootings perpetrated by white shooters. Bullying and violent media involve a "person or group of persons" who are threats in that young people are thought to be alienated by bullying and influenced by violent media, driving them to commit acts of violence in schools. Bullying was mentioned 97 times total, with 83 of these mentions regarding shootings with white perpetrators. Violent media was mentioned 70 times total, with 64 mentions applying to reports about white perpetrators. Additionally, the very occurrence itself of an "episode" of school shooting in a predominately white, upper class area could in and of itself be framed as cause for moral panic; the problems of the ghetto bleeding over into the supposed safety of the suburbs. The racial and class differential reflected in my findings bolsters this idea.



### *Considering the Framing of Mental Illness*

The framing of mental illness as the most prevalent cause presented by the media for school shootings, like most prominent frames, is based only on partial truths. In this study, observed data has shown the differential framing of mental illness based on race, class, and socioeconomic status, finding that this frame is more often used when the incident took place in a predominately white, middle-to-upper middle class community (Table 4). In addition to this apparent bias, previous research has shown that an unfortunate trend of scapegoating the mentally ill for violent behavior has emerged in recent years (Metzl & MacLeish, 2015; Neuman et al., 2015; Pinals et al., 2015; Rosenberg, 2014). While it would be prudent to invest in proper mental health care for youth, this frame can serve to shift public focus away from other potentially salient issues such as gun control, economic problems, and other social problems. Additionally, the potential for discrimination is very high when politically biased news outlets and interest groups publically suggest putting the mentally ill on a registry (Metzl & MacLeish, 2015, 240). This is apparent in the findings of this study, where, particularly in recent years, mental illness was at times directly stated to be the first and foremost cause of school shootings. For example, when covering the 2014 school shooting in Troutdale, Oregon, a Fox News contributor posited that,

I think Americans may finally be getting the idea that the first thing they should think about is mental health gone awry, and this system we have that is so fractured, and people slip through the cracks. But the anti-gun nuts, they will be out in force saying it's all the guns. I predict, again, that we'll find yet another person who used a gun, was compromised by one or more psychological or psychiatric illnesses that had not been detected. Because that's how the odds stack up. It's been the case again and again and again that you say 'how could this possibly happen,' but I don't say that, because I work as a psychiatrist, and I see and get these calls from ERs where they say, 'we want to send this person home, he threatened to kill his mother and his family last night, but now he's promising he's fine and we've got to get him out of here because the insurance company is on our backs.' That's the system, that's why this is happening (Fox News, 6/10/14).

This particular finding not only directly declares that mental illness is the single most important cause of school shootings; it also polarizes gun control as its opposite, implying that it has no relevance to the incident at all.

*Considering the Framing of Bullying and Gang Activity*

The framing of the bullied school shooter, like the other frames under discussion, differs based on race and class (Table 5). Although adolescent gang activity involves bullying behaviors such as social pressures, exclusion, ridicule, and physical assault at times, it tends to be framed strictly as criminal pursuit as opposed to the presumed socialization issue of bullying. School shooters from upper class rural or suburban communities are more likely to be framed as bullied children, while urban school shooters are judged along the lines of an adult criminal despite their youth (Klein, 2012). This study found that mention of gang activity was most prevalent in the coverage of shootings at Lew Wallace High School in Gary, Indiana, Price Middle School in Atlanta, Georgia, Henry Foss High School in Tacoma, Washington, Discovery Middle School in Madison, Alabama, Armstrong High School in Richmond, Virginia, Venice High School in Venice, California, Success Tech Academy in Cleveland, Ohio, and Berrendo Middle School in Roswell, New Mexico.

Additionally, the findings of this study suggest differential framing when it comes to bullying based on race and class; specifically, that situations of perceived harassment of the shooter leading up to the shooting incidents are more likely to be framed as bullying when the shooter is white and the school is in a middle-to-upper class community. All of the above mentioned shootings but one occurred in urban environments. The one shooting in which the

shooter was not a minority was at Success Tech Academy in Cleveland, where the urban problems of the city were a focal point of the articles.

Frequently, phrases that are somewhat dismissive were used in these articles, such as “He knows the assailant, who the mother said was ‘talking smack’ to her son between classes before pulling out a gun and firing” (CNN, 2/1/13). In the case of the school shooting in Gary, Indiana, this comment was included in one CNN article:

Lew Wallace High School is in a tough neighborhood of Gary, said a man who lives near the school. ‘Shootings happen all the time around here,’ he said (3/31/01).

The situation that led up this particular shooting shares many qualities with stories about which bullying is the centerpiece. One article explains that,

the victim, Neal Boyd, had been part of a group of boys who beat his son in the fall of 1999, sending him to the hospital, said Donald Ray Burt, father of Donald Ray Burt, Jr. ‘They jumped on him and beat him up pretty bad,’ the senior Burt said. Afraid of rematches, the junior Burt stopped attending school after the beating...he remained out of the school for more than a year (CNN, 3/31/01).

Similar stories were told about school shooters from more privileged backgrounds. For example, reports about Columbine shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold explained that,

One athlete in particular liked to taunt them. ‘Dirtbag,’ he’d say, or maybe, ‘Nice dress.’ Others called them ‘faggots,’ inbreeds, harassing them to the point of throwing rocks and bottles at them from moving cars (CNN, 4/26/99).

Although these two school shooting incidents had very different casualty counts (with many more killed and injured in the Columbine shooting), it is worth noting that the bully frame is quite often applied to the latter story while the former is far more focused on gang activity. This

contributes to the understanding that there is in fact a difference in the way that bullying is framed following school shootings based on race and class.

#### *Considering the Framing of the Effects of Violent Media*

Violent movies, music, and video games have been frequent scapegoats for encouraging violent behavior in adolescents, especially, as this study reflects, when it comes to white males. This was particularly prevalent in the 1990s and early 2000s when moral panics based around entertainment were quite prevalent (Calvert, 2002; Clements, 2012; Copehnhaver, 2015; Fox & DeLateur, 2014; Frymer, 2009; Klein, 2012; O’Dea, 2015). This study found that the framing differences between white male shooters and minority shooters when it comes to this frame is remarkable, with 64 mentions when it came to white shooters and only 8 mentions regarding incidents in which the shooter was a minority (Table 5). This is somewhat surprising since news media has focused on “urban” entertainment such as rap music when it comes to other social problems apart from school shootings. However, it does agree with the findings overall when considering the race and class differential in terms of overall coverage of school shooting incidents (Tables 1, 2, & 3).

#### *Considering the Framing of Gun Control*

For decades, gun control has been one of the most hotly debated issues in politics and the media. Each time a public shooting of any type occurs, the debate over what will best protect children ensues; disarming or increasing arms for the purpose of protection. Since the United States has more gun violence than other first-world countries, the fact that it is a prominent issue is not surprising (Esposito & Finley, 2014; McLeigh, 2015; Metzl & MacLeish, 2015; Shuffleton, 2015; Towers et al., 2015). Like anything else, however, framing gun control as the

sole issue to be dealt with can be deceptive. Zero-tolerance policies were intended to keep guns and other weapons out of schools, but have had negative effects on children belonging to the most vulnerable communities (Cornell, 2015; Mongan & Walker, 2012; Nance, 2013; Schept et al., 2015). This study found that mentions of gun control related topics such as metal detectors, cameras, and security guards were more numerous when it came to most nationally covered urban school shootings than any of the frames commonly attributed to incidents occurring in suburban or rural areas. While the panic shows a tendency to be brought on by school shootings occurring in predominately white, middle-to-upper class suburbs and rural areas, the calls for tighter security in urban areas are apparent in this study and reflected in prior research (Cornell, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

This study found that there were indeed differences in framing and level of coverage of school shootings based on race, class, and socioeconomic status. Urban schools and schools primarily attended by minorities were not covered with the same frequency or length of time. When they were covered, they were often framed through the lens of “gang activity,” or as typical occurrences. In contrast, suburban school shootings were covered extensively and framed in various ways including conversation about mental illness, bullying, gun control, and violent media. There were also pervasive expressions of incredulity at the fact that violence of that sort could occur in “good” schools. This study can be read as a complement to other research in the areas of media framing, moral panic, school violence, juvenile delinquency, race, and class. News media are businesses that reflect the demands of their consumers; usually, they demand a single identifiable and fixable cause. The immediate search for the single cause of school shootings reflects the reluctance of society to critically evaluate itself as an overall culture. It is

far easier to identify something wrong with one aspect of society or with an individual than to acknowledge the more abstract and pervasive problems which culturally underpin school violence.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This study could be replicated with a larger and wider scope of articles and footage, including more news mediums such as newspapers or magazines, in order to hone the accuracy of the findings. Moreover, there are other research questions that would contribute a great deal to the conversation about school shootings. One aspect not addressed in this study is the possible difference between targeted shootings and random or “rampage” shootings; public mass shootings are frequently studied, but focusing on mass shootings in schools may result in new knowledge. Additionally, the Columbine shooting, specifically, clearly had a significant impact on the media discourse about school shooters. An interesting question would be whether the news media coverage of Columbine had a *trackable* influence on subsequent public shooters, eliciting “copy-cat” shootings. This may seem obvious to some, but more solid data to back it up would expand the general base of knowledge. Additionally, media coverage of school shootings where the student survivors were interviewed could be compared with interviews of parents in order to look for differences in their perceptions of the incident. Another fascinating direction would be looking at the polarizing video game released in 2005, *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* and analyzing reactions to it. This would be valuable to view through the lens that video games had already been constructed as a cause for violence in the wake of the Columbine shooting; the social response to a violent video game about this very shooting is bound to be complex. Finally, a study on the clear prevalence of male school shooters over female school

shooters could be explored, especially through the lens of culturally defined masculinity as a potentially causal factor of violence.

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## News Clips and Articles

ABC (n.d.) "Columbine High School Shootings News"

<http://abcnews.go.com/topics/news/columbine-high-school-shootings.htm>

ABC (n.d.) "Missed Warning Signs: Cleveland School Shooter Had History of Mental Illness"

<http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=3712960&page=1>

ABC (n.d.) "TIMELINE: Cleveland School Shooting"

<http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=3715316>

ABC (n.d.) "Chilling Images Capture Cleveland's School Shooting"

<http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=3779726>

CNN (n.d.) "Shooter Gave Many Warnings"

<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/2007/news/school.shooting/>

ABC (n.d.) "EXCLUSIVE: Santana School Shooter"

<http://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/story?id=132072>

ABC (n.d.) "Boy Takes the Stand in Teacher Killing" <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=93352>

ABC (n.d.) "Brazill Apologizes to Teacher's Family" <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=92780>

ABC (n.d.) Amanda Riddle "Jury Sees Brazill's Taped Statement"

<http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=93363>

ABC (n.d.) "Ga. School Shooter Gets 40 Years" <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=95037>

ABC (n.d.) "Jonesboro victim's family 'dreading' release of the shooter"

<http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/jonesboro-victims-family-dreading-release-shooter/story?id=1025853>

ABC (n.d.) "Paducah Families Accept Shooting Settlement"

<http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=96287>

ABC (n.d.) "Does pathological shyness make for school shooters?"

<http://abcnews.go.com/Health/Healthday/story?id=4508353&page=1>

NBC (n.d.) "Columbine 15 years later" <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/columbine-15-years-later>

CNN (11/15/95) "Teacher killed in school shooting"

[http://www.cnn.com/US/9511/school\\_shooting/](http://www.cnn.com/US/9511/school_shooting/)

NBC (3/1/96) "In depth: NBC news investigation: A look one month after student goes on an in school shooting rampage"

[http://www.nbcuniversalarchives.com/nbcuni/clip/5112568017\\_s04.do](http://www.nbcuniversalarchives.com/nbcuni/clip/5112568017_s04.do)

CNN (10/1/97) "Teen kills 2 at school; mother found dead at home"

<http://www.cnn.com/US/9710/01/shooting.update/>

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<http://www.cnn.com/US/9710/02/miss.shooting.folo/>
- CNN (12/1/97) West Paducah. *NBC Nightly News* with Tom Brokaw.
- CNN (12/2/97) "Third student dies in Kentucky school shooting"  
<http://www.cnn.com/US/9712/02/school.shooting.on/>
- CBS (12/4/97) West Paducah. *CBS Evening News*.
- CNN (12/4/97) West Paducah. *CNN Worldview* with Bernard Shaw.
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- CNN (3/24/98) Jonesboro. *CNN Worldview* with Bernard Shaw and Judy Woodruff
- NBC (3/24/98) Jonesboro. *NBC Nightly News* with Tom Brokaw.
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<http://www.cnn.com/US/9803/26/school.shooting/>
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- CBS (3/31/98) Jonesboro. *CBS Evening News* with Dan Rather.
- CBS (5/21/98) Kip Kinkel, Oregon. *CBS Evening News* with Dan Rather.
- ABC (5/21/98) Kip Kinkel, Oregon/ School shootings. *ABC Nightline* with Ted Koppel.
- CNN (5/21/98) "Charging 15 year olds as adults common in Oregon"  
<http://www.cnn.com/US/9805/21/school.shooting.oregon.law/index.html>
- CNN (5/21/98) "Blood stains Oregon high school"  
<http://www.cnn.com/US/9805/21/shooting.pm/>

ABC (5/22/98) Kip Kinkel, Oregon. *ABC World News Tonight* with Peter Jennings.

CNN (5/22/98) "Accused Oregon shooter shows no emotion in court"  
<http://www.cnn.com/US/9805/22/oregon.shooting.pm/>

CNN (5/23/98) Kip Kinkel, Oregon. *CNN Worldview*

CNN (6/4/98) "Teen in Mississippi killings 'saw demons'"  
<http://www.cnn.com/US/9806/04/woodham.trial.pm/>

CNN (6/5/98) "Pearl school shooting suspect gets life for stabbing mom"  
<http://www.cnn.com/US/9806/05/woodhamverdict.folo/>

NBC (6/9/98) "Teenager Luke Woodham to Face Trial for Shooting Rampage at Pearl High School" [http://www.nbcuniversalarchives.com/nbcuni/clip/5112989185\\_s11.do](http://www.nbcuniversalarchives.com/nbcuni/clip/5112989185_s11.do)

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