

Susan Nall Bales

Curriculum Vitae

Susan Nall Bales is president of the FrameWorks Institute, a project of the College-University Resource Institute in Washington, D.C. The FrameWorks Institute conducts communications research on social issues. Current projects involve interdisciplinary teams of scholars in focused work on public perceptions and media presentations of adolescence, global issues, children's oral health, violence prevention, gender equity, and children's issues. This work is supported by the Annie E. Casey, the Caroline and Sigmund Schott Foundation, the Aspen Institute, and the W.T. Grant Foundation, among others.

For six years, Ms. Bales served as director of strategic communications and children's issues at the Benton Foundation where she was the founding editor of www.connectforkids.org, and award-winning website on children's policy issues, and the recipient of the number one ranked public service advertising campaign in the nation in 1997.

Over the past decade, Ms. Bales initiated numerous national public opinion surveys which probe the public's understanding of and support for children's programs. These include Kid's Clout (July 1990), State of the Child (January 1992), Mandate for Children, and Great Expectations (1997). She is editor of *Effective Language for Discussing Early Childhood Education and Policy* (Benton Foundation with the Human Services Policy Center, University of Washington, Fall 1998) and *Effective Language for Communicating Children's Issues* (Coalition for America's Children with the Benton Foundation, May 1999). Her essay on childcare as a public issue was published in June/July 1999 in the Zero to Three Bulletin.

She is a founder of the Coalition for America's Children and helped create the "Who's for Kids and Who's Just Kidding?" campaign. Ms. Bales serves on the Board of the National Funding Collaborative for Violence Prevention and is a fellow of the Advocacy Institute. She is a member of the Adolescence the 21st Century Study Group of the Society for Research on Adolescence, and the Learning Circle on Constituency Building of Grantmakers for Children, Youth and Families. A graduate of the University of California at Los Angeles, she received her M.A. degree Middlebury College.

How Youth Are Framed in Today's Media: A Review of the Existing Research

Susan Nall Bales and Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr.
FrameWorks Institute, Spring 2000

Media matters. How people understand social issues is critical to their support of, or opposition to, particular public policies. For example, the dominant media frame of youth as superpredators --- remorseless, slack jawed, alienated youth --- has been shown to affect public willingness to support public policies designed to benefit young people (Gilliam and Iyengar, 1998). The policy outcome is that the public increasingly supports punitive approaches to issues like juvenile justice (e.g., trying juveniles as adults). Understanding the way media frames interact with public opinion about teenagers is a critical first step toward considering whether the "pictures in our heads," as Walter Lippmann described them, support or impede policies that further positive youth development.

Content analyses of the depictions of youth by the media have consistently revealed a bias toward negative coverage in which youth are most likely to be featured in the context of crime stories (Kunkel, 1994; Berkeley Media Studies Group, 1995, 1997; Woodruff 1998; Dorfman and Woodruff, 1998).

During the month of November 1993, Dale Kunkel examined coverage of children's issues in five major newspapers (Atlanta Constitution, Chicago Tribune, Houston Chronicle, Los Angeles Times, New York Times) as well as nightly newscasts on three major TV networks (ABC, CBS, NBC). He found (Kunkel, 1994) that coverage of violence accounted for nearly half (48%) of all TV coverage of children, with only slightly less (40%) in the newspapers. By contrast, the issue of children's health accounted for only 11% of the stories in each media. Only one in three stories addressed any public policy concerns. Kunkel concluded that this imbalance "seems to skew the information the press provides to the public, which in turn diminish the public's perception of the relative importance of other child-related concerns"(www.childrennow.org, online version).

In a study of "Frames on Children and Youth in US Newspapers" (1995), the Berkeley Media Studies Group studied four major papers during one week and concluded that when children appear in the news, it is most often as victims of violence and crime (p. 4). Moreover, "virtually every time youth or teenagers were used as examples...it was in a negative context...The phrases reflect our stereotypic icons of youth: 'teenage mothers,' 'student athletes on drugs,' 'teenagers too embarrassed to ask about sex,' high school graduates who know 'less than nothing about computers,' and 'troubled teen-agers.' Writers assert that 'much violent crime is impulsive, committed by young people,' and 'liquor is quicker for youthful consumers'."

In a 1997 update to their original content analysis, focused on children's health in three months' coverage from both national and regional newspapers and National Public Radio, the Berkeley Media Studies Group (p. 6) found that "younger children appear to be far more newsworthy than teens." Most coverage of children's health problems presented no solutions at all, and when an

approach was discussed, it was most often “in the form of information to parents about what they could do to protect their children.” Children or youth themselves were quoted in only 8% of the pieces, and only one piece quoted a young person talking about a positive program. In reviewing the frames of presentation, BMSG concluded that “parental responsibility is repeatedly stressed, while the public health approach to children’s health and safety appears in a few rare but significant pieces.” In other words, the vast majority of the news coverage of youth is “episodic,” and tends to attribute responsibility to parents and the youth themselves, rather than to institutions or policies.

In a statewide study of youth and race on local TV news, based on 26 California stations (Woodruff, 1998: 43), one analyst found that “violence appears to be particularly newsworthy when it involves children or youth” and more than two-thirds of violence stories did involve youth. Woodruff also found the reverse to be true; “when youth appeared on the news, it was most often as the victim or perpetrator of violence.” Fifty-three percent of all youth stories involved violence. Finally, in order for youth to be portrayed positively, they had to “perform an extraordinary feat” such as flying solo across the country or winning a national beauty contest. Woodruff concludes, “despite the fact that most young people are not violent, local television news draws a direct link between youth and violence, and this likely contributes to cementing negative views in the minds of viewers...(S)stories about productive, nonviolent youth are the exception rather than the rule.”

Additionally, this study of California local TV coverage uncovered important differences in the roles accorded youth of color compared to white youth. More white youth were given opportunities to speak in local news stories. In every violence-related role where youth did speak -- either as a victim, a witness of violence, a criminal or suspect -- youth of color were heard in these roles in higher proportions than their white counterparts. A higher percentage of white youth spoke in the role of victim of unintentional injury. There were also marked differences in the circumstances in which white youth and youth of color were used for “person on the street” interviews, with youth of color being far more likely to be shown in situations related to crime, drug dealing and gangs.

Nor do young people fare better in entertainment television. Katherine Heinz-Knowles analyzed early morning, afternoon, prime time and Saturday morning cable and broadcast television programs featuring child characters and concluded that children see a distorted picture of themselves on these shows. Children shown on entertainment television are motivated most often by peer relationships and romance, and least often by school-related or religious issues; society or community motivated only 16% of the characters. Entertainment television almost never shows children grappling with important issues, she concludes. And, while child characters frequently engage in anti-social behaviors, those behaviors often yield positive results for the child (Heinz-Knowles, 1995, www.childrennow.org, online version).

Contrast this portrayal with past views of adolescents. In a review of views on youth, Elkind (1998: 5) concludes, “these stories tended to portray young people as good-hearted, hard-working and well-meaning, but within the context of a larger, protective adult world.”

Nor is there a strong basis for the media's assertions that the news we get responds to consumer preference. In a series of focus groups conducted for the Coalition for America's Children and the Benton Foundation, analyst Margaret Bostrom (CAC, 1998: 10) found a clear preference for solutions-oriented stories. Participants in these seven groups conducted in 1998 were asked to rank a series of headlines or lead paragraphs based on which they would be most likely to read. Each headline and lead paragraph took a different approach to discussing an issue. This exercise was designed to uncover the components of a story that would make it interesting. To avoid issue bias, the same approach was used for two issue areas, health care and poverty. In each instance, the positive headlines and lead paragraphs were judged most interesting. "Program Successful in Helping Children" proved even more attractive to these readers than more colorful, human-interest style stories.

Perhaps the most publicized trope or script about America's youth concerns the issue of juvenile crime. The increased visibility of juvenile crime to the public through the news media has given credence to the view that today's youth are a new breed of "superpredators" – violent, remorseless, and impulsive pre-adults responsible for widespread mayhem. The subtext of the superpredator thesis is that a disproportionate number are from racial minority groups. To be sure, minority youth offenders are arrested for violent crimes at rates exceeding their population sizes (Gilliam, 1998). And many believe that the media only add to this distortion because of an exclusive focus on violent crime (Gilliam and Iyengar, 1998). In sum, the dominant crime news frame is simpatico with the superpredator thesis – young people of color commit violent crime.

In a recent paper, Gilliam and Iyengar (1998) test the impact of the superpredator news frame on the viewing public. Utilizing a novel experimental design they show that a mere five second exposure to a mug-shot of African-American and Hispanic youth offenders (in a fifteen minute news tape) raises levels of fear, increases support for "get-tough" crime policies, and encourages racial stereotyping. These effects, however, vary a great deal by the race of the viewer. While superpredators in the news heighten fear among all viewers, this anxiety is translated into punishment and racism only among Whites and Asians. African-American and Hispanic viewers, it appears, are reminded of injustice and prejudice. The end game, we fear, is further group polarization.

Gilliam and Iyengar discuss three main implications of their study. The first is that the practice of journalism must be revised. Without commenting on intent, it is enough to say that "body-bag" journalism, particularly as it focuses on young people, has a corrosive influence on the viewing audience. Journalists must be motivated to think about different ways of covering crime. Organizations such as the Berkeley Media Studies Group, and television stations like KVUE in Austin, Texas have offered guidelines for reporting on crime and violence. The second calls attention to the fact that the viewing public (and its advocates) bears some of the responsibility. If the American public is truly "turned off" by this type of reporting then they ought to voice their displeasure. Television executives pay attention when hundreds of letters flood the station. The third implication of the study reminds us that in the minds of the viewing public, youth crime is as much about race as it is about crime. Efforts to curb youth violence must ultimately deal with a host of vexing social problems facing young people of color.

In sum, media depictions of youth as "superpredators" underscore the problem of moving public will to-act on behalf of kids. If people believe the superpredator frame, and it appears they do, media institutions must be encouraged to "reframe" juvenile behavior.

George Lakoff refines this work by identifying the ways common youth frames resonate with ideologically different populations. At the most basic level, there are differences in the very definition of youth, with

WHITE HOUSE PRESENTATION

Susan Nall Bales, President, FrameWorks Institute

I believe we have a distorted view of today's youth. The research that I and my colleagues do at the FrameWorks Institute, with funding from the W. T. Grant Foundation, is on the *perceptual* barriers to valuing and supporting youth. For it is not merely that we lack the resources to invest in youth. We lack the public will and the public priority to put programs for youth in place. Why is this the case?

Adults believe that teens today are "different" than in the past, that they have rejected traditional American values. In a FrameWorks review of recent public opinion about adolescents, my colleague Margaret Bostrom reports that only 1 in 6 Americans say that young people share most of their moral and ethical values. When asked what word applies to young people today, most adults chose "selfish" and "materialistic" for youth today, compared to "patriotic" and "idealistic" for the youth of 20 years ago.

The reality is that teens place high value on honesty and hard work, and the vast majority are thinking and planning seriously for the future. Among those values teens say they rank highest are "being honest" "working hard" "being a good student", and "giving time to helping others." And majorities of teens say they volunteer, attend church or synagogue weekly, read the newspaper regularly and attend cultural events.

Yet in six focus groups FrameWorks conducted this summer, it was the rare parent who believed these statistics. People are absolutely convinced that teens are dangerous and in danger, silly and self-absorbed, lazy and corrupted by consumerism. And they blame the parents whom they believe to be uninvolved if not entirely absent.

What's going on here? Are adults simply "misinformed" about the lives and attitudes of today's youth? Where are we getting the views that fly in the face of reality? What accounts for a distortion so powerful that it reconfigures the facts to fit the negative stereotypes?

"Television is a cultural storyteller," says my colleague Katharine Heintz-Knowles. To identify the stories we are being told about teenagers today through entertainment television, she examined prime-time series aired during Fall 1999 on the six broadcast networks. She found adolescent characters on television are not connected to a wider community, including even their own family. TV teens are seen as independent and isolated, living in an adolescent world whose problems are mainly social in nature. They do not require anyone's help beyond their small immediate peer group, and in fact their parents are often portrayed as ineffective or as causing problems. This FrameWorks report concludes that TV reinforces the notion of today's teens as self-absorbed and interested only in trivial matters.

On the news side, youth are most likely to be featured in the context of crime stories. Most recently, the Berkeley Media Studies Group studied three California newspapers over the course of a year. They found that education and violence dominate the coverage, and each receives about one quarter of the news attention accorded youth. Think about that. Only 3 young people in 100 perpetrate or become victims of serious violence in a given year, but we show violence as a factor in kids lives as often as schools.

As journalist Richard Rodriguez has said, “the stories invent us.” Because crime and kids are in our faces every day on the news, the fear of crime shuts out considerations of healthy child and adolescent development. We see this first in the early years, as the number one criteria for daycare becomes safety. That kind of thinking makes the daycare center into a passive container, not a rich, interactive environment in which the teachers and curriculum are understood to nurture a child’s social, moral and intellectual developmental.

For adolescents too, crime eclipses healthy youth development. We fear for our children’s safety and the role of parenting evolves into protection, often protection FROM the community at precisely the time when youth need to be acculturated INTO the community. This flies in the face of the literature on youth development, and puts all the responsibility on the parent, and none on the community. That’s bad for both of us. If teens are isolated from the community, we are more likely to believe and act upon these depictions of silly, self-absorbed, dangerous teens that we see on TV.

We need to change the lens with which we view our kids — to see them on the track and on track for achievement. To see them in plays and soup kitchens and to know they are learning old American values like teamwork, commitment, and responsibility. We need to put our fear of crime in proper perspective, so we don’t act on a bad risk assessment.

Television news and entertainment have a big part to play in whether we will make the right choices as citizens and voters to support young people. In every one of the last dozen focus groups FrameWorks conducted, adults said ‘give us more news about solutions — how to help children achieve. Show us programs that work.’ Everyone here knows there are hundreds of such programs around the country. Why then can’t we get the news we need?

We need to tell ourselves a new story about youth in America today. And unless we do, we will put resources in metal detectors, incarceration and other remedies that hardly relate to what experts tell us youth need to succeed.