



What's The Matter With Kids Today  
Television Coverage of Adolescents in America

Prepared for the Frameworks Institute

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# INTRODUCTION

Media coverage of youth or adolescents has long been faulted for its focus on youths as the perpetrators or victims of crime or, more generally, as a source of social disruption and disorder. Whether it is criminality, drug use, drinking, sex or education, it is argued that youth often appear in news stories as a social problem in need of a solution. Not surprisingly, polls and focus groups have shown that adults share many of these views of adolescents. This seems to be particularly true for adults who do not have regular contact with teens. It is this group of adults who must rely most heavily on the media for any information about teens and current trends among America's youth.

In addition to an overemphasis on crime and generally bad news about adolescents, the media are often faulted for the lack of attention they pay to kids engaged in positive activities. There is no shortage of stories on exceptional athletes or scholar-athletes or teens who do exceptional things like climb mountains or found their own Internet start-up companies, but the activities of more ordinary teens are overlooked. These outstanding youths are often seen as the exceptions that prove the rule. In sharp contrast to the heavy coverage of crime and disorder, two activities that occupy a great many teens, work and volunteer service, receive almost no attention at all in the media. In light of this dearth of coverage, it should not be surprising that adults routinely underestimate the percentage of teens who hold jobs or volunteer within their communities.

Even though news accounts often treat youth as a social problem needing repair, most studies have found that few stories attempt to explore solutions to these problems. Because of this model, problems appear to be insoluble or beyond meaningful intervention. When this trend combines with journalistic tendencies to treat stories as disconnected episodes, the result is a picture of unrelenting woe that seems unstoppable and unchangeable.

This study assesses how youth (particularly adolescents) are covered by television news. This study was designed to determine how often coverage falls back on long standing frames of youth reporting. These traditional frames would be indicated by a youth news agenda heavy on crime and rebellious or at-risk behaviors, stories that discussed adolescent behavior one disjointed scene at a time without broader connections and a tendency to overlook solutions to these problems.

The analysis also looked for elements of alternative frames of reporting to assess when they occur and in what ways. Alternative frames of youth reporting would be evidenced by a move away from coverage of crime and at-risk behaviors to reflect a more complete view of youth that plays up work and community involvement. More significantly, there would be shifts in the way stories are told. News stories that look for underlying causes or interconnections between adolescent behaviors would be evidence of an alternative frame. In addition to moving away from episodic coverage, an alternative frame of reporting would provide greater discussion of possible solutions. Any or all of these elements would be evidence that the story was applying an alternative frame to the news.

For this study the Frameworks Institute provided a sample of videotaped local and national evening news programming for a period of slightly more than one month, representing September 29 through October 24 and November 28 through December 5, 1999. The local sample consisted of the three broadcast network affiliates in Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, Seattle, and Columbia, South Carolina, or 15 stations overall. This selection offered an opportunity to assess news coverage in the number two market (Los Angeles), number three (Chicago), number six (Boston), and number 12 (Seattle), as well as a small-market station (Columbia).

In each city the hour of local news immediately preceding the national news was recorded. Some markets (such as Seattle and Boston) routinely offer full one-hour newscasts in this time period. In other cities (such as Chicago), two 30-minute newscasts were recorded. The network news sample consisted of ABC "World News Tonight," the CBS "Evening News," NBC "Nightly News," and the CNN news at six o'clock. These sampling procedures provided a combined local and national sample of 9678 stories and 206 hours 14 minutes of airtime. However, as noted below, the bulk of this report focuses on local news, owing to the minimal coverage of youth on national news programs during the sample period. The network results are reviewed briefly in a section that follows the more systematic presentation of results for local news.

# LOCAL NEWS OVERVIEW

Topics related to youth or young people made up a significant part of one out of every 12 stories (8% or 668 out of 8062) on local newscasts. (We obtained similar results when calculating this proportion on the basis of airtime rather than number of stories.) As Table 1 shows, nearly all these stories (94%) were self-contained items; only 39 stories, or 6 percent of the sample, were part of an ongoing series or recurring feature.

Similarly, most stories relied on an episodic narrative style that focused on clearly circumscribed events or experiences. Reports that discussed broader or more contextual and thematic information about youth were quite rare, accounting for only one out of every 14 stories (7 %) overall. This reflects the strong tendency of local newscasts to focus on particular events rather than on broader themes or trends, whose reporting can be broken up into several segments. Overall, 44 percent of the youths who were discussed were individuals, and another 43 percent were referenced in terms of some group to which they belonged. Just one out of eight stories referenced “youth” in the abstract, rather than focusing on a particular individual or group.

**TABLE 1**  
**YOUTH NEWS FORMATS (%)**

<b>STORY TYPE</b>		
	<b>STAND ALONE</b>	<b>94</b>
	<b>ONGOING SERIES</b>	<b><u>6</u></b>
		<b>100%</b>
<b>NARRATIVE STYLE</b>		
	<b>EPISODIC</b>	<b>93</b>
	<b>THEMATIC</b>	<b><u>7</u></b>
		<b>100%</b>
<b>REFERENCE POINT</b>		
	<b>INDIVIDUAL</b>	<b>44</b>
	<b>GROUP</b>	<b>43</b>
	<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b><u>13</u></b>
		<b>100%</b>

## DEMOGRAPHICS

As a visual medium, television presents information about America's youth primarily by telling stories about particular individuals or groups of young people. To determine how well television's collective image of youth corresponds to the real world, we examined some key demographics of the young people who were the subjects of TV news stories. These results are presented in Table 2.

The young people who were the topic of news reports were skewed toward the older segments of this population. Only 16 percent were identified as being middle-schoolers or in their early teens, compared to a plurality of 41 percent who were high school students or individuals in their mid-teens, and 27 percent who were identified as high school graduates or in the 18 through 20 age group. About one out of six young people in the news were not identified in terms of age group or were of an indeterminate age.

There was a considerable demographic imbalance, relative to the real world population, in terms of gender. Nearly three out of four (74%) stories were clear as to the gender of the young people in the discussion. Among these stories, depictions of males were over three times as common as those of females. Individual males or groups of males accounted for 59 percent of all instances, compared to only 18 percent that focused on females. The remaining 23 percent dealt with mixed groups of boys and girls.

For just under half (48%) of all stories, the race of young people could be identified on the basis of either visual inspection or verbal depiction. In cases where an individual's race was known, people of color were strongly represented. Fewer than half (49%) of racially identifiable youths were white, one out of six (16%) were black, four percent were Hispanic, one percent were Asian, and 30 percent consisted of racially mixed groups.

<b>TABLE 2</b>		
<b>DEMOGRAPHICS OF YOUTH DISCUSSED (%)</b>		
<b>AGE LEVEL</b>		
	<b>Middle School</b>	16
	<b>High School</b>	41
	<b>Post-High School</b>	27
	<b>Unclear</b>	<u>16</u>
		100%
<b>GENDER</b>		
	<b>Male</b>	59
	<b>Female</b>	18
	<b>Mixed Group</b>	<u>23</u>
		100%
<b>RACE</b>		
	<b>White</b>	49
	<b>Black</b>	16
	<b>Hispanic</b>	4
	<b>Asian</b>	1
	<b>Mixed Group</b>	<u>30</u>
		100%

# TERMINOLOGY

To explicate the image of youth in television news, we first examined the terminology that reporters or sources in news stories used to describe members of this age group. Our goal was to get some sense of whether they were depicted in terms that emphasized their relative youth (e.g., “kids”), their numerical age (e.g., “teens”), their status as students (e.g., “high schooler”), etc. The results appear in Table 3. By far the most common descriptor to appear was “teens” or “teenagers,” which was used 93 times. This was followed in frequency by the term “student,” with 58 instances, “kids” with 43, and “children” with 25. No other term was used as many as 20 times during the sample period.

When we examined all such terms that were used, we found that they fell into three general categories of roughly equal size – descriptors that emphasized this chronological stage of life (primarily “teenager,” with rare references to “adolescents”) accounting for 32 percent; terms that focused on their relative youth (such as “children,” “juveniles,” or “kids”) comprising 31 percent; and terms that emphasized their status as students (“high schooler,” “co-ed,” etc.) making up 34 percent. By contrast, only rarely did such descriptors emphasize their maturity or proximity to adulthood. Terms such as “young adults,” or young men or women, made up only 3 percent of these references.

<b>“TEENS”/ “TEENAGER”</b>	31
<b>KIDS</b>	15
<b>CHILDREN</b>	8
<b>OTHER CHILD-LIKE</b>	2
<b>S/T</b>	(25)
<b>STUDENTS</b>	20
<b>OTHER SCHOOL STATUS</b>	14
<b>S/T</b>	(34)
<b>ALL OTHER</b>	<u>10</u>
	100%

## VISUAL CONTEXT

In addition to verbal information that provides descriptive labels about youth, television's visual cues serve to locate young people within particular social context. The visual backdrops are presented in Table 4. The absence of home or work from the lives of youths was reflected in both the visuals and the language that framed news coverage. A mere two percent of these individuals were portrayed in the home, while just one percent were shown in a work setting.

Visually, television news stories heavily emphasized school settings, with secondary emphasis on the criminal justice system and the role of youths in the larger community. Out of a total of 412 visual images, a majority of 52 percent involved a school setting. Among the stories that depicted educational backdrops, the images were divided about evenly among extracurricular activities (18%) such as sports or club meetings; social interaction with other students (17%); and participation in academic activities, such as taking exams (17%).

When not shown in school, youths were most likely to be seen as part of community activities or in a crime-related or other socially dysfunctional setting. These clusters of categories each accounted for about one in five of all visual images. Community activities ranged from social groups (8%) to volunteer work (7%), and simple socializing, like hanging out in a mall (5%). Scenes of youths in criminal justice venues included courtrooms, crime scenes and, more specifically, schools where shootings occurred. This group of visuals also encompassed engaging in at-risk behaviors, such as drinking, smoking or sexual activities.

**TABLE 4**  
**VISUAL CONTEXT OF SETTING (%)**

<b>SCHOOL</b>			<b>52</b>
	<b>Student Interaction</b>	18	
	<b>Extracurricular</b>	17	
	<b>Academics</b>	17	
<b>AT-RISK SETTINGS</b>			<b>25</b>
	<b>Crime Scene</b>	9	
	<b>Courtroom</b>	6	
	<b>Police Custody</b>	4	
	<b>Other</b>	6	
<b>COMMUNITY</b>			<b>20</b>
	<b>Volunteerism</b>	7	
	<b>Group Activity</b>	8	
	<b>Socializing</b>	5	
<b>HOME</b>			<b>2</b>
<b>WORK</b>			<b><u>1</u></b>
			100%



## NEWS AGENDA

The image of youth on television news is defined not only by the individuals who are shown but also by the topics that are discussed. We identified 28 different topics that generated 10 or more separate discussions on local television newscasts. The results, which appear in Table 5, are reminiscent of the long-time criticism of local television news that “if it bleeds it leads.” The three most frequently reported topics of youth news were crime victimization (129 stories), accidents involving young people (99 stories) and violent juvenile crime (69 stories). In fact these three topics together accounted for nearly half (46%) of all coverage of all frequently reported topics that are presented in Table 5.

The heavy emphasis on crime victimization can be partly attributed to the basic structure of news coverage, wherein victims are more accessible and hence more likely to be interviewed than are perpetrators. For example, the sample included reports on a pedophile who preyed on middle school students in Seattle, a series of rapes of college students in Columbia, and a gang-related homicide in Chicago, which prompted the victim’s mother to lead a public campaign to find the killer. The flip side of this story, of course, is the coverage of violent crime that focuses on the perpetrators, often showing them being taken into police custody. Such stories ranged from a rash of fake fire alarms that precipitated a brawl in a Boston-area high school to a Chicago case in which two teenagers were arrested for murdering a woman to steal a winning lottery ticket.

Thus, young people are presented most often as either the agents or victims of violent events, whether intentional or accidental. Indeed, accidents are a staple of youth violence stories that are noted far less frequently by critics of news coverage than is violent crime. The sample included the crash of a plane piloted by two teenaged girls, a college student who fell two stories after attempting to slide down a bannister, and fatal auto accidents that were linked to underage drinking and the failure of many young people to use seatbelts.

Five other frequently reported topics were also intrinsically “negative” in the context in which they presented young people: property crimes committed by juveniles (13 stories), domestic violence or sexual abuse (19 stories), alcohol abuse (15 stories), individual health problems (16 stories), and other at-risk behaviors (25 stories). The latter category combines several occasionally discussed topics, ranging from underage smoking to teen suicide, none of which were discussed frequently enough to make the list as individual topical categories. One unusual activity was a game called “blackout,” in which young teens took turns choking each other until they passed out. Together these eight topics, which all emphasize the dangers and negative outcomes associated with youth, accounted for nearly 60 percent of all discussions among the topics listed.

**TABLE 5**  
**LOCAL TV YOUTH NEWS AGENDA**

	NUMBER OF STORIES
<b>Crime Victimization</b>	129
<b>Accidents</b>	99
<b>Violent Juvenile Crime</b>	69
<b>General Education Issues</b>	60
<b>Sports</b>	46
<b>Race Relations</b>	35
<b>Health Issues in General</b>	26
<b>Other At-Risk Behaviors</b>	25
<b>Education Policy</b>	24
<b>Community Activities</b>	23
<b>Lifestyle/Family Issues</b>	18
<b>Domestic Violence/Sexual Abuse</b>	17
<b>Individual Health Problems</b>	16
<b>Alcohol Use</b>	15
<b>Property Crimes by Juveniles</b>	13
<b>Youth and Technology</b>	12
<b>Educational Achievement</b>	10
<b>Community Support for Youth</b>	10

Not surprisingly, the most frequently covered policy issue was that of education policy (60 stories), including news about curricula, school closings, public funding of private schools, debates over teaching methods, etc. Another substantive issue area that received frequent coverage included race relations (46 stories), ranging from interracial personal relationships to racial discrimination. One prominent story originated in a high school in the Seattle suburb of Puyallup, after a white student apparently showed up in blackface on school picture day. The resulting brouhaha included racial threats, the involvement of parents and community activists, and broader debate over racial tensions in the school.

A third issue area concerned health policies (26 stories), such as school immunization programs, nutrition and obesity problems among youth. The most prominent health policy debate during this period was stimulated by outbreaks of meningitis at various colleges around the country. Several stations looked for a local angle by going to area campuses, as the Centers for Disease Control issued new guidelines regarding inoculations for college students.

Among the lighter topics covered were reports on sports (60 stories) and lifestyle issues (18 stories) such as fashion trends, and youthful slang terms. In keeping with our findings on the social settings in which young people were presented, there were relatively few stories about such topics as the community activities of young people (23 stories), including community service and volunteer work; and employment-related issues, which failed to cross the threshold of 10 discussions that was necessary to make the list.

## CONCERNS ABOUT YOUTH

The topical areas of discussion are only an indirect indicator of the expressions of concern over the problems of youth that are raised on the news. We also noted every instance in which a reporter or source specifically voiced some concern about the risks or dangers that are faced by young people. The results appear in Table 6. The 242 sound bites that we identified were heavily concentrated in two areas – violence (33%) and other at-risk behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use, dangerous driving practices, etc. (31%)

Thus, these two categories accounted for nearly two out of every three expressions of concern. The clearest example of an expression of concern over violence was local news coverage of a national poll released during the sample period, which showed that a majority of students feared that a Columbine-style assault might happen in their own school. More typical were the on-camera concerns, voiced by several black parents in Puyallup, that tension stemming from the blackface controversy might lead to violence.

Expressed concern over other at-risk behavior was driven mainly by underage drinking, smoking, and traffic accidents. For example, following the arrests of many Boston College students for drinking, both university officials and neighbors voiced concern about the wild parties and alcohol use. Smoking became an area of concern after a study showed that retailers do not actively try and prevent sales to minors, and that local police almost never enforce the law. Concerns over auto accidents were raised in conjunction with reports on a public campaign in Massachusetts to increase seatbelt use. The governor, state troopers and others voiced concern over the low level of seatbelt use among teens.

No other areas of the youth news agenda attracted a large number of expressions of concern. The categories of violence and at-risk behavior were followed in frequency by expressed concern over educational achievement or related policies (12%), health issues apart from at-risk behavior (11%), and a variety of lifestyle issues, ranging from child-rearing difficulties of working parents to the influence of popular culture on young people (13%). As in the topical list, conspicuously absent are such economic topics as youth employment and consumption habits, along with references to broader community involvement or social and political activism.

Consistent with the more general tendency of television news to concentrate more heavily on problems than on potential solutions, only about one in three expressions of concern (87 out of 242) were accompanied by any discussion of the locus of responsibility for solving whatever problem was indicated. As Table 7 indicates, the schools were the most frequently referenced problem-solving agent (30% of all instances), followed by government at 26 percent (divided roughly evenly among the federal government with 10%, state governments 7%, and local governments 9%). Parents were seen to be responsible for solving the problems of young people 23 percent of the time, and

**TABLE 6**  
**AREAS OF CONCERN EXPRESSED (%)**

<b>Violence</b>	33
<b>At-Risk Behavior</b>	31
<b>Education</b>	12
<b>Health</b>	11
<b>Lifestyle/Family</b>	13
<b>Other</b>	<u>1</u>
	101% *

\*Does not sum to 100 percent due to rounding error.

**TABLE 7**  
**AGENT RESPONSIBLE FOR SOLVING PROBLEMS (%)**

<b>SCHOOLS</b>			<b>30</b>
<b>GOVERNMENT</b>			<b>26</b>
	<b>Federal</b>	10	
	<b>State</b>	7	
	<b>Local</b>	9	
<b>PARENTS</b>			<b>23</b>
<b>YOUTHS</b>			<b>14</b>
<b>OTHER</b>			<u><b>7</b></u>
			<b><u>100%</u></b>

# TONE OF COVERAGE

In terms of the topical focus, we have seen that much of the youth news agenda is dominated by “bad news” – human tragedies, personal problems, social crises, and the like. Even if the coverage stressed the downside of youth, however, it could not fairly be said to be down on youth. That is, the overall tone of news stories tended to be empathetic in style or tone to the people (and their problems) who were being described. We sought to capture the overall tone of youth news by looking for overall story frames that either portrayed youth empathetically, as a phase of life that elicits sympathy, or else objectifies youth by treating this age group as something that is alien or apart from “adult” society.

The former “positive” stories see youth as a phase of life that everyone eventually outgrows, or try to make sense out of youthful behavior that may seem inexplicable to adults. The latter “objectifying” style of story does not make concessions to the difficulties of growing up and presents a generally unsympathetic portrayal of this age group. Of course, many stories lack any clearly judgmental viewpoints or mix sympathetic and unsympathetic views together in a way that prevents the story from having an overall tone one way or another.

For example, when some Seattle teenagers used pepper spray to attack and rob an elderly woman at a bus stop, one local station presented contrasting views of the neighborhood youth culture. The reporter interviewed a neighbor who “didn’t see the attack but arrived several minutes later to find a familiar group of youth on the corner.” The neighbor complained, “These kids are terrible. They have been harassing everyone in the neighborhood.”

However, the same story quoted another neighbor “who says the kids who hang out at the bus stop aren’t all bad: ‘If we opened up some activities centers and gave these kids something to do, maybe they wouldn’t be hanging out at the bus stop.’” Similarly, a Boston television report on a group of college students arrested for underage drinking included a quote from one student, “Every one’s a good kid. Some of the kids who have done, like, a service project on Saturday in Worcester, that night ended up getting arrested.”

In fact, as Table 8 shows, over four out of five stories had no discernable tone (81%) and another eight percent had a tone that was mixed or unclear. That left only 77 stories that could be characterized as generally either sympathetic or unsympathetic to youth. Among this subset of stories, however, the portrayal of youth was overwhelmingly positive, by a margin of 72 to five, or 14 positive stories for every negative one. Thus, despite focusing frequently on the difficulties that young people face and even the problems that they cause, the news rarely presents an overtly despairing or hostile tone toward “kids today.”

**TABLE 8**  
**OVERALL TONE OF STORY**

<b>Empathetic to youth</b>	11
<b>Objectifies youth</b>	1
<b>Mixed</b>	8
<b>Unstated</b>	<u>81</u>
	101% *

\*Does not sum to 100% due to rounding error.

We also sought to identify potentially positive images of youth by examining individual anecdotes (rather than overall stories or typical discussions). This involved seeking out feature stories or other characterizations of young people who were presented as exemplars or exceptional cases. Of course, such material by its nature emphasizes the atypical nature of such individuals and their behavior, relative to their peer group. Nonetheless, it provides a potential source of positive images of young people in the news. However, we found only 37 such characterizations in the entire local news sample, and the majority of these (20 cases or 54%) celebrated exceptional athletic achievement. This total eclipses the nine instances of teens praised for their involvement in community service or humanitarian work and a mere six students who were singled out for their exceptional educational achievements.



# NEWS SOURCES

In addition to examining the focus and tone of the coverage, we sought to determine whose voices were heard most often in discussions and debates over youth. To do so, we noted every source who was quoted or cited in the newscasts that we examined. The result shows heavy reliance on young people themselves and their parents, followed by roughly equal groups of school system employees and government authorities, with a much smaller representation of experts and activists. These findings are presented in Table 9.

Of the 1073 sources who could be identified, young people made up just over one-third (34%) and their parents just under one-fourth (23%). Thus, youths and parents made up a majority of all sources cited in the news. Also frequently cited were school teachers and administrators, who made up one out of seven sources (14%), and government representatives, who made up one out of every six (17%).

Among the latter group, local government officials predominated, accounting for three out of every four government sources. It is worth noting, however, that most government sources were affiliated with law enforcement agencies, who accounted for over two-thirds of this category of sources. If they are considered as a separate group, law enforcement officials alone accounted for about one out of every eight sources (12%), while all of the other government sources combined only totaled 5 percent.

<b>TABLE 9</b>		
<b>SOURCES (%)</b>		
<b>YOUTHS</b>		<b>34</b>
<b>PARENTS</b>		<b>12</b>
<b>EDUCATORS</b>		<b>14</b>
Teachers	3	
<b>GOVERNMENT</b>		<b>17</b>
Law Enforcement	12	
Other	5	
<b>EXPERTS</b>		<b>5</b>
<b>ACTIVISTS</b>		<b>5</b>
<b>OTHER ADULTS</b>		<b>10</b>
<b>OTHER</b>		<b><u>3</u></b>
		<b>100%</b>

## PROFILES OF YOUTH

Thus far we have examined the depiction of youth as an undifferentiated collective group. To gain some indication of the diversity of portrayals, however, we examined the topical focus of news according to the age, gender, and race of the young people whose activities were being covered. The results of this analysis appear in Tables 10 through 12. (The patterns of findings were similar when the demographic categories were cross-tabulated against types of visual image and areas of concern. We present the data for topical focus because the number of cases is considerably greater than for the other variables.)

At the outset of this discussion, we outlined the general demographic distribution of young people who were the focus of news reports. We now see that the topical focus of youth news is quite different for the various groups. First, media focus on crime and at-risk behavior varies directly with age. Post-high schoolers are over twice as likely as middle schoolers (by 44% to 20%) to be the focus of crime news. Similarly, they are three times as likely as middle schoolers to be the focus of reports on other at-risk behavior (16% versus 5%).

Overall, three out of five reports (60%) on the post-high school age cohort concerned crime and at-risk behavior, compared to a minority (45%) of reports on high schoolers and only one out of four (25%) reports on middle schoolers. The youngest group attracted the most diverse news focus, with the main topical areas roughly evenly divided among crime, accidents, education, and lifestyle/family topics. For high school students, the coverage peaked in two quite different areas – crime (34%) and lifestyle/family (31%). These two foci together accounted for nearly two-thirds of all news items. Only among the oldest age group was the focus centered on a single topic. For late teens, crime was clearly the modal area of media attention to youth.

Perhaps surprisingly, however, there were few differences in the portrayals of males and females. It should be noted that this conclusion depends upon one's perspective on the data. For example, males accounted for over 80 percent of the crime news. But that is because they also accounted for nearly 80 percent of the individuals whose gender could be determined. (As noted above, some stories contained only verbal references to youths which provided no information as to race or gender.) In terms of the proportion of news about a particular gender that was related to crime, the difference diminishes sharply – to 44 percent of reports on males versus 37 percent of reports on females. Similarly, we might expect sexual stereotyping to produce much heavier coverage of females in the area of lifestyle and family issues. There is a difference, but it is not particularly great – 20 percent of stories about males fall into this category compared to 31 percent of news about females.

**TABLE 10**  
**NEWS FOCUS BY AGE GROUP (%)**

	MIDDLE SCHOOL	HIGH SCHOOL	POST-HIGH SCHOOL
<b>Crime</b>	20	34	44
<b>At-Risk</b>	5	10	16
<b>Accidents</b>	20	9	16
<b>Education</b>	20	11	9
<b>Health</b>	10	4	4
<b>Lifestyle/Family</b>	23	31	11
<b>Other</b>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>
	100%	100%	100%

**TABLE 11**  
**NEWS FOCUS BY GENDER**

	MALE	FEMALE
<b>Crime</b>	44	37
<b>At-Risk</b>	10	11
<b>Accidents</b>	18	10
<b>Education</b>	3	6
<b>Health</b>	5	6
<b>Lifestyle/Family</b>	20	31
<b>Other</b>	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>
	101% *	101% *

\*Does not sum to 100% due to rounding error.

**TABLE 12**  
**NEWS FOCUS BY RACE**

	WHITE	NONWHITE
<b>Crime</b>	35	52
<b>At-Risk</b>	9	8
<b>Accidents</b>	20	2
<b>Education</b>	4	2
<b>Health</b>	9	0
<b>Lifestyle/Family</b>	24	35
<b>Other</b>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
	101% *	99% *

\*Does not sum to 100% due to rounding error.

Finally, there were also racial differences in the focus on crime news. Coverage of crime accounted for about a third of news about white youths (35%), but a majority of news about non-whites (52%). However, the two groups did not differ in terms of coverage of other at-risk behavior. Whites were also the focus of considerably greater coverage of accidents (22 to only 2% of the respective coverage) and health concerns (9% versus no coverage for non-whites). Young people of color were also the focus of a somewhat greater proportion of coverage of lifestyle and family issues by 35 to 24 percent.

## LOCAL VS. NATIONAL NEWS AGENDA

We noted at the outset of this report that the network news sample produced too few stories on youth to permit reliable conclusions or comparisons to local news. The three broadcast network evening news shows combined to air only 62 youth-related stories, representing only about 4 percent of their coverage, or one out of every 25 stories. That is almost precisely half the rate that we observed on local news shows, an average of only about three youth-related stories per network per week.

This small sample produced raw numbers that were far too low to permit meaningful analysis on most variables. For example, among young people who were the focal point of discussions in news stories, we could determine the gender of only 16 and the race of only 14 individuals. There were only 42 visual images that placed young people in a social context; most of these showed school settings, and a few were in law enforcement venues such as courtrooms. Only 20 stories mentioned potential solutions to any youth-related problems, and so forth.

However, the one area in which comparisons may be both legitimate and useful is that of the overall news agenda itself. For example, one noteworthy difference is the very fact that national newscasts carried only half as much coverage of youth-related news as did a diverse selection of local stations (assuming these differences hold true over longer time periods). Further, in the context of their more limited coverage, the networks focused on somewhat different aspects of youth than did local news. Most significantly, the central focus of youth-related news on the networks was education, in contrast to the focus on crime and other at-risk behaviors on local newscasts.

The results can be seen in the comparison of leading topics locally and nationally that appear in Table 13. On network news, the leading topic was general education issues with 12 stories, followed by stories that focused specifically on educational achievement (12 stories). Tied for third place on the network news agenda, with eight stories apiece, were crimes committed by juveniles and discussions of young people who were the victims of crime. Tied for fifth place, with six stories apiece, were education policy discussions and reports of accidents involving young people. Thus, the top two network news categories and three of the top five, revolved around education. On local news, crime-related discussions and accidents made up the top three topics, and education issues accounted for only one of the top eight.

Some of the reasons for this difference are obvious. Local news covers events and activities in a small geographical area, including events involving the young people in that area. As a result, much of the focus is on particular crimes and accidents involving local youths. By contrast, the network news reports stories of national interest and therefore seeks out broad trends and commonalities. A network story may be illustrated by anecdotes or newsworthy events from a particular city, but the emphasis is often on the bigger picture. Thus, it is not surprising that network news stories were far more likely to be thematic in nature than were local news reports. A majority (52%) of network stories were thematic rather than episodic, compared to the mere six percent that we found among local stories.

**TABLE 13**  
**TOP TEN TOPICS: NETWORKS VS. LOCAL NEWS**

<b>NETWORK</b>		<b>LOCAL</b>	
<b>TOPIC</b>	<b>NUMBER OF STORIES</b>	<b>TOPIC</b>	<b>NUMBER OF STORIES</b>
<b>1. General Education Issues</b>	16	<b>1. Crime Victimization</b>	129
<b>2. Education Achievement</b>	12	<b>2. Accidents</b>	99
<b>3. Violent Juvenile Crime</b>	8	<b>3. Violent Juvenile Crime</b>	69
<b>3. Youth as Crime Victims</b>	8	<b>4. General Education Issues</b>	60
<b>5. Accidents</b>	6	<b>5. Sports</b>	46
<b>5. Education Policy</b>	6	<b>6. Race Relations</b>	35
<b>7. Youth and Technology</b>	4	<b>7. Health Issues in General</b>	26
<b>8. Sports</b>	4	<b>8. Other At-Risk Behaviors</b>	25
<b>9. Race Relations</b>	4	<b>9. Education Policy</b>	24
<b>10. Five tied at two apiece</b>	2	<b>10. Community Activities</b>	23



This means that the activities of individual young people are less likely to be of intrinsic interest to the networks, except insofar as they are used to illustrate national trends or policy debates. Among the education stories that were featured on the network news during the sample period were debates over the effectiveness of computers and Internet connections in secondary schools, problems of deteriorating physical plants of schools, and a “back to school” series on ABC concerning the process of college admissions from the standpoints of both high school hopefuls and college administrators.

Similarly, local crimes involving juveniles rarely made the network news unless they had a national angle. Crime and victimization coverage were geared more toward stories like a follow-up on the Columbine shooting, which provided a jumping off point for discussions of school shootings and school violence in general. The arrest of a Florida State University football player on theft charges led to a debate over whether star athletes get special treatment from their colleges. And the arrest of a 13-year-old boy for murder renewed the debate over prosecuting juveniles as adults. Whatever the reasons for the different news agendas however, the result is that the networks provided more “positive” portrayals of young people, when compared to the local news focus on crime, accidents, and other social disruptions and personal foibles associated with youth.

## CONCLUSION

When a perplexed father lamented, “What’s the matter with kids today?” 40 years ago in “Bye Bye Birdie,” he was expressing widespread exasperation with a younger generation that seemed a breed apart – an age group with one foot in the cradle and the other in rock and roll. Ever since then, the media have exhibited a curious dualism in their portrayal of youth, on one hand glamorizing adolescent rebellion and self-expression, on the other warning of its dire consequences for traditional morals and behavior.

Indeed, complaints that the mass media promote or pander to a youth-oriented culture are so well ingrained that they hardly seem controversial anymore. Such complaints may well be true of the world of entertainment. However, television news shares no such love affair with youth. Our study found that local news stories about youth tend to treat adolescence as a source of personal problems and social disruptions that need to be addressed by adults. Missing from most news accounts is coverage of young people as productive workers, volunteers in their communities or active members of families – the very things that might promote a more positive image of youth culture.

About one out of every 12 stories on local newscasts dealt in some way with youth or young people. These stories were overwhelmingly episodic in nature, focusing on particular events and discrete occurrences, without providing any thematic context or otherwise linking them to broader trends or issues. When journalists decided what aspects of behavior among young people were most newsworthy, the operant principle seemed to be “if it bleeds it leads.” The three most frequent subjects of youth news were the victims of crime, the perpetrators of crime, and the victims of accidents (often involving car crashes). There were over twice as many discussions of crime and violence among young people as there were of educational issues and student achievement. Other at-risk behaviors that were frequently covered included sexual abuse, underaged drinking, and other illegal drug use.

There are indications that network news provides a less doleful portrayal of young people, although the small amount of network coverage limits its potential impact (as well as arguing for caution in interpreting the results). The leading topics of network news were educational issues and student achievement, and education-related discussions outnumbered the combined totals for violence and other at-risk behaviors. But the low story count precludes further analysis of network news as a counterweight to more negative local news images.

Since local newscasts concentrate so heavily on crime and other at-risk behavior, it is not surprising that frequent expressions of concern were voiced for “kids nowadays.” Over a third of all stories contained overt expressions of concern about the youths depicted or youth more generally. About a third of these discussions focused on the threat of crime and violence, and another third concerned other risky behavior, such as underaged drinking, smoking, other illegal drug use, and unsafe driving habits.

Not only verbal discussions but also visual backdrops reinforced the image of youth at risk. The criminal justice system accounted for one out of every four visual backdrops. This category, the second most frequent visual context in which young people were seen on television, included crime scenes, courtrooms, police stations, etc. And another one in five images showed community settings, ranging from volunteer work to shopping malls and street corners. Notably absent from this (literal) picture of American youth were home and workplace settings. Thus, young people were frequently shown as students, as the perpetrators or victims of crimes, and as kids hanging out or otherwise socializing in their neighborhoods. But they were very rarely seen as workers or employees, sons or daughters, brothers or sisters.

This analysis of youth in general obscures some differences in the portrayal of young people of different ages, genders and races. However, the distinctions are not as great as one might expect. First, stories on crime and at-risk behavior were most frequent in the oldest age groups. Such topics accounted for three out of five stories about the post-high school group – young people entering college or the full-time work force. More surprising, perhaps, is the relatively small difference between boys and girls in this regard, with slightly elevated levels of crime stories, but not other at-risk behavior, among males.

The racial differences are more substantial, with crime reports associated with just over one-third of whites but a majority of nonwhites (mostly African-Americans). However, the proportion of news about other at-risk behavior was actually slightly higher among whites, and reports on their involvement in accidents were substantially higher. Overall, in light of continuing concern over the stigmatization of inner city youth, these differences in negative story lines were not as great as we might have feared.

More clearly in the category of silver linings was our finding that few stories contained overt generalized criticism of youth in general. More frequent were expressions of empathy for the problems that young people face in difficult times at a confusing and challenging stage of life. However, most stories contained no such generalities, neither bemoaning “kids today” nor asserting that “the kids are alright.” Despite the absence of overt generational conflict as a theme of the coverage, however, local news presents a troubled and troubling image of American youth. Stories are disproportionately tilted toward visual and verbal images of the young as either dangerous or endangered, and of adolescence as a time of life associated with personal foibles and social disruption. But before we despair of the state of today’s youth, we might do well to ask, “What’s the matter with news today?”