Moving from *Them* to *Us*

Challenges in Reframing Violence Among Youth

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The paper draws on several bodies of work. The first comes from Berkeley Media Studies Group's collaboration with the Justice Policy Institute on the Building Blocks for Youth report, "Off Balance: Youth, Race, and Crime in the News," published in 2001. The assessment of news frames in the current paper builds on that foundation. We thank Elena O. Lingas, Diego Castaneda, William Randall, and Cozette Tran-Caffee for their assistance with the literature review on crime reporting and Eliana Bukofzer for her research assistance. The second body of work the paper draws from is the comprehensive series of research reports prepared by Cultural Logic for the FrameWorks Institute (see www.frameworksinstitute.org). Finally, we draw on the input from colleagues who joined us to discuss the framing dilemmas in talking about race, health, and government at "The Questions Meeting" in December 2008: Lauri Andress, Axel Aubrun, Rachel Davis, Joe Grady, Anthony Iton, Sonia Lee, Howard Pinderhughes, Bob Prentice, Erik Sahlin, Katherine Schaff, Anat Schenker-Osorio, Alyssa Wulf, and the staff of the Berkeley Media Studies Group.

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> Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where one class is made to feel that society is organized in a conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.
>
> Frederick Douglass

Introduction

At Berkeley Media Studies Group we study the news because it has a profound effect on how the public and policy makers understand public health issues and what can be done about them. This is especially true in the area of violence among youth. Our studies and others’ have shown that the news paints a distorted picture, emphasizing youth as perpetrators rather than as victims of violence; conflating race and violence; and giving short shrift to prevention. As violence dominates headlines, this distortion becomes more important, since the news coverage shapes policy debate. Public health advocates are then challenged to make the case for prevention in the face of fear and doubt. This is an important time to help policy makers and the public understand that violence is preventable, not inevitable, and that a comprehensive approach — what we would call a public health approach that addresses the root causes of violence — can help communities make a difference.

One national effort aimed at addressing the root causes of violence in cities across America is Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth (UNITY). The UNITY national consortium, supported by CDC and led by Prevention Institute, the Harvard School of Public Health, and the UCLA School of Public Health Southern California Injury Prevention Research Center, consists of more than 200 members from city government, national and state organizations, and community-based organizations across the country. UNITY helps institute policies and new practices that 1) prevent violence *up front*, before it happens, 2) intervene *in the thick of it* for families and neighborhoods already at risk, and 3) address the *aftermath* of violence to repair the trauma and help young people reenter society safely, successfully, and sustainably.

On behalf of UNITY, Prevention Institute asked BMSG to collect, summarize, and synthesize the work that has been done to date on framing youth and violence. This paper describes framing and the challenges particular to the context of violence prevention, with the goal of moving youth violence from being understood primarily as a criminal justice issue dealt with after the fact to being seen as a preventable public health issue. The paper explores how youth and violence have been portrayed in the news (based on BMSG’s as well as others’ studies); how the issue of race complicates depictions of youth and violence; and how public attitudes about government can inhibit public support for violence prevention. Based on this review,

we make recommendations to the UNITY National Consortium for reframing violence among youth.

The paper begins with an overview of framing generally, followed by a discussion of how framing applies to news in particular and how youth, race, and crime have been portrayed in news coverage. It is important to consider how race and government are framed in addition to how violence is framed because youth violence is conflated with race and because the solutions to violence are dependent on government participation. The paper then considers challenges for reframing violence among youth in the light of how race and government are framed. Based on this review, and drawing from our experience working on and studying violence prevention and other public health issues, we make recommendations for next steps to UNITY and its partners.

A Word about Framing

Framing: What It Is

Framing means many different things to people. Some think of framing as finding the right words for a message, others believe frames reflect notions of how the world works, and still others believe that frames tap complex moral structures that trigger how people react to a whole constellation of social and public policy issues in our society. We describe two types of frames, conceptual frames and news frames, that we believe have the most bearing on how to create messages that emphasize public health aspects of violence prevention. An important aspect of framing both conceptually and in news coverage is that it is much more than just finding and saying the right words; it is about how people create and derive meaning from the world around them.

Conceptual Frames

Cognitive linguists argue that frames are the conceptual bedrock for making sense of the world around us.[1] People are only able to interpret words, images, actions, or text of any kind because their brains fit those texts into an existing conceptual system that gives them order and coherence. Just a few cues — a word, an image — trigger whole networks of concepts that structure meaning. These cues trigger frames which lead to certain interpretations.

Frames are often expressed in metaphors that people use routinely to understand abstract issues: horse race metaphors are common in political campaigns; war metaphors are common in discussion of health threats; and sports and business metaphors are common in other areas.[2] For example, in California, the Chamber of Commerce regularly issues a list of “job killer” legislation it tries to defeat. The term is simple and evocative. *Killer* implies mortal danger — the situation is threatening, even dire. Killers must be stopped. They must be punished. Their targets need immediate protection and defensive maneuvers. The frame evokes these ideas before we have even an inkling of what the specific legislation might be about. In fact, if the Chamber is successful with its *job killer* frame, it won’t ever have to debate the merits of the bill. The frame evoked by this metaphor will preempt any discussion about the

benefits of the legislation. From the perspective of this frame, defenders of the bill will be viewed as promoting the threat, complicit with the *killer* and cold, distant, and uncaring about those who will lose their jobs as a result of the *job killer* bill. The question of whether or not anyone would actually lose his or her job is not even considered in the frame.[3]

A key concept here is that the brain interprets external stimuli — words, images, interactions — based on what it already knows. Political scientist Frank Gilliam explains the process this way:

> Frames are a composition of elements — visuals, values, stereotypes, messengers — which, together, trigger an existing idea. They tell us what this communications is about. They signal what to pay attention to (and what not to), they allow us to fill in or infer missing information, and they set up a pattern of reasoning that influences decision outcomes. Framing, therefore, is a translation process between incoming information and the pictures in our heads.[4]

It takes very few words to trigger a frame. Consider one example from a poll the New York Times conducted in 2000. By changing just a few words, pollsters registered a marked difference in audience response. When asked whether leaders in Washington should allocate an expected budget surplus to tax cuts or government programs, 60% chose tax cuts. But, when asked the same question in a slightly different way, “should the money be used for a tax cut, or should it be spent on programs for education, the environment, health care, crime-fighting, and military defense,” (in other words, government programs) 69% chose the more tangible list of government programs. Small differences in the poll question elicited significantly different responses, illustrating the power of language. But more than just the word, it is the conceptual framework that the word *government* evokes that is critical here. *Government* in this instance, likely triggers interpretations like waste, inefficiency, or giving people something they may not have earned, all interpretations that undermine public health’s role. The very word *government*, in effect, activates a much broader and powerful negative frame.

The Fundamental Attribution Error

Social psychologists have shown that in the U.S. the most common frame people use to understand the world emphasizes personal motivations, not the situations influencing personal decisions. Over the years, hundreds of experiments have demonstrated that people tend to “see the actors and miss the stage.”[5] For example, in an experiment where people watched different groups of basketball players and were asked why one group did better than the other, the observers suggested that the players were more skilled or practiced or talented. The observers understood the behavior in terms of individual characteristics. The observers did not notice that, in fact, the group that did poorly was playing in a gym where the lights had been deliberately dimmed as part of the experiment.[6] When explaining others’ behavior, people in the U.S. tend to emphasize personal attributes like skill, desire, or work ethic; their explanations tend to ignore the influence of the situation surrounding the person.

A basic finding from this literature helps explain why frames other than personal responsibility and rugged individualism are harder to trigger in the minds of audiences. This finding, called the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE), explains that people will attribute responsibility to personal characteristics rather than the circumstances

surrounding the person, even when presented with evidence about how the circumstances influenced the individual’s outcome.

So, if someone is asked why another person is low-income, most people will offer an explanation that has to do with personal failure, saying that the person didn’t try hard enough, or isn’t very skilled or smart, rather than an explanation that includes contextual factors like a lack of jobs, inadequate public transportation, or not enough affordable child care. Similarly, violence will be interpreted as a personal flaw, an irrational inability to control one’s temper, or a lack of self-restraint. Social psychologists say that it is easier for us to focus on the person rather than the situation the person is in — unless that person is us. People are more likely to think about contextual factors if they are analyzing the reasons behind their *own* behavior. But when it comes to assessing others, personal rationales dominate.

Experiments on the FAE show again and again that people frame their understanding in terms of personal characteristics or motivation, discounting the effect of the settings and circumstances on personal actions. One reason for this, psychologists suggest, is that it makes the world more manageable. It is easier for individuals to think they can control themselves than change the environment. People think to themselves, “That won’t happen to me. I’ll be different.” The alternative — that the broader social and economic circumstances, which are admittedly hard to change, determine what happens to us — makes the world a scarier place. Eric Schlosser described this very idea in a story about how families cope with homicide:

> People . . . distance themselves from such tragedy. One way is to assume that the victim was somehow responsible for his or her own death. Blaming the victim has a strong intrinsic appeal. It preserves the illusion that the world is rational and just, that things happen for a reason. It sustains the American belief that a person can control his or her destiny. And it gets everybody else — at times even the murderer — off the hook. If the victim is somehow to blame, according to this logic, then the rest of us are safe.[7]

The FAE is one way to understand the enduring pervasiveness of the default frame or master narrative in American culture: that individuals control their own destiny.

The Default Frame: Rugged Individualism and Personal Responsibility

Much like a spotlight illuminates an actor onstage but leaves the rest of the set in shadows, this tendency to focus on people’s motivations renders the surrounding elements almost invisible, essentially reinforcing the idea of personal responsibility and minimizing the role of larger structural forces. The personal motivation frame needs little prompting. That is why it is called it the default frame; if no alternative is presented, it is where people’s minds go first. This default frame — that people’s behavior is determined by personal motivation, not by the situations they find themselves in — makes advocating for healthy public policy challenging, since many policies are designed to change the conditions or situations surrounding individuals. It means that *rugged individualism* is the dominant meta-narrative in American culture and that personal responsibility is the default value. Unless a different frame is offered early in the communication, for most Americans, the default frame is the starting point for any discussion of public health policy, including violence prevention.

Advocates have a strong tendency to present the facts about violence prevention as if the problem were a lack of information. Piling on facts assumes that people use a rational basis for making decisions and that they don’t understand the causes or consequences of violence. It may be that some people don’t understand what violence has wrought and if they understood that dangerous neighborhoods inhibit opportunity and success or that violence costs cities enormous sums and strains local economies, then they would support prevention policy. But more likely it is the case that people interpret the facts in the face of the dominant frame reinforcing the idea that people ought to help themselves, regardless of the cause or consequences of violence. From the perspective of the default frame, people won’t deem environmental solutions important, if they are recognized at all.

Studying framing can help prevention advocates understand that there are no blank slates. That is, people come to any communication with ideas already in their heads. There are some who understand violence through the kinds of shared responsibility frames inherent in a public health perspective. There are those who understand violence exclusively as an individual, personal, behavioral problem. In many cases, people can hold both views simultaneously. But if most cues reinforce the default frame, the public health perspective remains hidden. It then becomes the job of public health advocates to articulate and make visible the public health frame by delivering messages that can activate a frame beyond individualism.

Frames are expressed in every communication from personal discussions to legislative testimony and speeches. One important place where frames are transmitted, and a place where they have a particular form and power, is the news media. The next section describes how youth and violence have been depicted in the news, and the implications of those depictions for advocates promoting prevention.

News Frames Pose Special Problems

News stories are especially important for two reasons. First, because they can influence policy makers. Second, because news stories set the frame for the vast majority of the audience without direct personal experience with violence or with young people. But typical news frames tend to reinforce the default frame. In part this is because reporters strive to “put a face on the issue.” Reporters try to illustrate the impact on a person’s life, rather than describe the context or policy implications, because they believe that readers and viewers are more likely to identify emotionally with a person’s plight than with a tedious dissection of policy options. They might be right. But this is a significant problem for violence prevention advocates. Seminal research from Shanto Iyengar[8] shows that news stories focused this way reinforce a *blame the victim* view and result in the solutions to social problems being seen as nothing more than individuals taking more responsibility for themselves, reinforcing the default frame and minimizing context.

A simple way to distinguish news frames is to imagine the difference between a portrait and a landscape. In a news story framed as a portrait, audiences may learn a great deal about an individual or an event, heavy on the drama and emotion. But, it is hard to see what surrounds individuals or what brought them to that circumstance. A landscape story pulls back the lens to take a broader view. It may include people and events, but connects them to the larger social and economic forces. Iyengar’s research shows that people who see news stories that have been framed more

broadly — like landscapes — are more likely to recognize solutions that do not focus exclusively on individuals. Instead, these news consumers will include in their ideas about solutions the policies and institutions that shape the conditions around people. Landscape stories connect the plight of the person to a broader context and thus highlight the importance of fixing the context as part of fixing the problem.

By reporting primarily episodic stories — stories framed like portraits — the news media “give cues that there is nothing citizens can do thus ignoring research to the contrary, increasing the public’s fear, and reinforcing the dominant ideology of blaming the individual with only vague references to greater social causes.”[9]

Iyengar’s findings about the implications of episodic (portrait) versus thematic (landscape) news reports gives us a solid direction for storytelling via news: if we can illustrate the landscape we have a better chance of triggering contextual, rather than exclusively individualized, interpretations of the problem. Except when it comes to race. The hopeful effect that Iyengar found for framing news stories thematically evaporated if the story was about African Americans (his study did not distinguish news stories about other racial or ethnic groups). For us, this finding is extremely disheartening and evidence of the extraordinary difficulty we have in this country when it comes to race. This is an enormous problem that simple prescriptions about storytelling cannot easily overcome. Given how race and violence are conflated in the news (discussed below), this poses a serious problem for violence prevention advocates.

The problem becomes even more serious when the media are the primary source of information about youth and violence. This is indeed the case for many adults. The public depends on the media even more for its pictures of crime done by or to minority youth because most of the public does not have personal experience with it. Eighty-one percent of white homicide victims are killed by other whites and whites are far more likely to be victimized by other whites than by people of color. There is a very small likelihood that a white adult will form an opinion about Black youth violence based on direct, personal experience. Consequently, America’s dominant voting and opinion setting block — its white adult population — simply must rely on the news to explain minority youth crime to them.[10]

If the news is presenting a distorted picture, then the power of the default frame is compounded by the repeated cues of *them* — the violent — as different from, and against, *us* — the nonviolent. In the next section, we describe the specific distortions in the cumulative picture of news about violence and news about violence among youth in particular.

Youth, Race, & Crime News Coverage

In 2001, with the Justice Policy Institute, BMSG published “Off Balance: Youth, Race, and Crime in the News.”[11] This report reviewed every available study on youth, race, and crime. We wanted to know: Does news coverage reflect actual crime trends? How does news coverage depict minorities and crime? Does news coverage disproportionately depict youth of color as perpetrators of crime? What are the implications for prevention and public health policy?

The studies we surveyed then covered a range of media — local and network television, newspapers, and broadcast and print news magazines[12] — from 1910 through 1999. In preparation for this report, we collected and examined any study on youth, race, and violence published since we collected studies for Off Balance (see Appendix for detailed search strategy description). After sifting through hundreds of research studies that touched on either youth, race, or crime, we found 37 that were directly relevant to this inquiry. Most of the studies examined either youth and crime in the news (12 studies) or crime and race in the news (12 studies). A few examined only race in the news (four studies) or only youth in the news (three studies). We also included six studies that addressed some aspect of the intersection of race, crime, and youth in the news but did not feature primary news data collection or content analysis (e.g., literature reviews or experiments). All 37 studies are listed in the Appendix.

News Presents a Distorted Picture of Youth, Race, and Crime

We examined each of these studies to assess whether they upheld the four key findings from Off Balance:

1. **News media report crime, especially violent crime, out of proportion to its actual occurrence.** The most consistent finding across media and across time is the significant distortion of the amount of violent crime.
2. **News media report crime as a series of individual events without adequate attention to its overall context.** The consistent depiction of crime as a series of isolated events unrelated to any broader context reinforces the default frame.
3. **The news media, particularly TV news, unduly connect race and crime, especially violent crime.** The overwhelming evidence from these studies is that in the aggregate, crime coverage is not reflecting an accurate picture of who the victims and perpetrators are. Most studies that examine race and crime find that the proportion of crime committed by people of color (usually African Americans) is over-reported and that Black victims are under-represented. Other studies find that crimes committed by people of color are covered in proportion with arrest rates, but that crimes committed by whites are under-covered.
4. **Youth rarely appear in news, and when they do, it is often connected to violence.** One study found depictions of youth in violence-related news stories as often as there were depictions of youth in stories about education.[13] Yet almost all young people are engaged in the education system, while a very small percentage of young people are engaged with the criminal justice system or law enforcement. Equalizing the two in news coverage distorts the overall picture of young people.

Taken together, the studies indicate that depictions of crime in the news are not reflective of either the rate of crime generally, the proportion of crime that is violent, the proportion of crime committed by people of color, or the proportion of crime committed by youth. The problem is not the inaccuracy of individual news stories, but that the cumulative choices of what journalists select — or do not select— to include in the news presents the public with a false picture of higher frequency and severity of crime than is actually the case. Rather than informing citizens about their world, the news reinforces stereotypes that inhibit society’s ability to respond to the problem of crime, including juvenile crime.

Since the publication of Off Balance in 2001, the picture has not changed. The majority (62%) of the recent studies confirmed at least one finding from Off Balance while only four studies (10%) contradicted or reported mixed results on one of the findings.[14] The news media continue to focus on episodic factors rather than context, and compared to crime trends, violence continues to be over-represented in all types of news media, particularly on local TV news.

There were a few bright spots in the studies of more recent news coverage. One study found that national broadcast news does not misrepresent the number of white or African American perpetrators in violence stories as compared to police statistics[15] and another study found that Los Angeles print media report contextual factors significantly more when writing about gang violence and also found that ethnicity was not correlated to how a homicide story is reported.[16] Overall, however, the picture of youth, race, and crime in the news remains greatly distorted.

Misinformation Synergy

The Off Balance report showed, and studies since then have upheld, that a “misinformation synergy” occurs in crime news that profoundly misinforms the public. The synergy results from the simultaneous and consistent presentation of three significant distortions in print and broadcast news. It is not just that African Americans are overrepresented as criminals and underrepresented as victims, or that young people are overrepresented as criminals, or that violent crime itself dominates news coverage. It is that all three occur together, combining forces to produce a terribly unfair and inaccurate overall image of crime in America. Add to that a majority of readers and viewers who rarely have any personal experience with crime by Black youth, and a white adult population who must rely on the media to tell them about youth crime, and the result is a misinformed public motivated by fear to be more accepting of punishment-oriented public policies that are often discriminatory.

Each study’s findings, taken alone, may not be cause for alarm. After all, crime is a serious problem that demands news attention and political action. But if news audiences are taking the crime coverage at face value, they are accepting a serious distortion. They are likely to believe that most crime is extremely violent and that perpetrators are Black while victims are white. If news audiences have little contact with young people, they are likely to believe that youth are dangerous threats, in part because there are so few other representations of youth in the news to the contrary.

If people harbor distortions about who commits crime and who suffers from it, and they believe it is a consequence of personal failing, they will be less likely to support policies that can prevent violence.

Reframing Race

There are several reasons why it is important to consider race in any attempt to reframe violence. The first is that, as we’ve demonstrated, there are consistent and persistent distortions in news coverage of crime that conflate race and violence and result in a misinformation synergy. This news likely influences what is evoked for people if they hear the term *youth violence* without other contextualizing information. Another reason it is important to consider race is that most cities and urban centers

in the U.S. are highly segregated by race.[17] Consequently, many people’s only contact with people of color, and with youth of color in particular, may be from distorted news coverage. Based on the media picture and the lack of direct, personal experience with crime, we suspect that when most Americans are prompted with the term *youth violence*, they visualize young men of color.

Race in News Coverage

In the face of the default frame, people understand violence as a personal failing. Add to that America’s persistent difficulty in rectifying racial inequality, or even have an on-going conversation about it, and the magnitude of the problem expands. Still, America has transformed some of its conversation about race — and many of its most egregious practices. The civil rights era in the 1950s and 1960s saw tremendous progress. But even there, as the storyline changed from one of individual triumph over personal prejudice to institutional constraints on race and class, the story got harder to tell, the landscape harder to illustrate. Journalism professor William Drummond suggests that as the made-for-TV drama of racial segregation — with dramatic footage of Southern sheriffs turning dogs and hoses on Blacks protesting for equal rights — gave way to more complicated stories about economic development, jobs, and institutional racism, the civil rights story disappeared from headlines and from TV news.[18]

Professor Robert Entman has shown that since the Civil Rights era, images of African Americans on television news have been relegated to few categories: victims, criminals, demanding politicians, and reporters and anchors.[19] The repeated juxtaposition of these images, Entman concludes, reinforces underlying tendencies toward individualism. Nightly appearances by highly successful Black anchors and reporters support the default thinking that anyone can succeed if they try hard enough.

When news organizations have addressed race directly the results have often been disappointing. Communications strategist Makani Themba-Nixon has shown, for example, how the *New York Times*’ celebrated 2001 Pulitzer Prize-winning 14-part series, “How Race is Lived in America”, neglected context almost entirely. Themba-Nixon notes that the *Times* presented its story of race as a series of portraits. “In more than a dozen vignettes on race relations and their impact,” she writes, “little attention was paid to the larger factors that shaped the lives of people of color as they ‘lived race.’”[20] By choosing to view race through the lens of personal storytelling, the *Times* ended up portraying the story of race in America as “personal and not political.” Instead, Themba-Nixon says, race “must be painted as a landscape so we can begin to understand how we fit within it.”

News coverage such as the *Times* series reinforces people’s tendency to understand race-related problems in terms of personal failings rather than structural inequities, and to view racism as a product of personal prejudice, not systems or conditions. In this view, any remnants of inequality can be easily attributable to personal flaws such as lack of discipline and perseverance.

News coverage can tell a broader story. Themba-Nixon shows how the Associated Press series, “Turn from the Land”, published in 2001, used disaggregated data to explain the history of how African Americans in the South and Southern border states “had been driven from their land by thievery, intimidation, violence, and murder.”[21] The

reporters connected dots between racist acts in the past and structural economic disparities in the present. This sort of investigative journalism depicts systemic problems that help readers see the need for going beyond pleas for tolerance and togetherness to why broad-based, structural solutions are essential for rectifying inequities and solving many social problems, including violence.

The analyses that find racism to be a structural rather than a personal problem have important implications for violence prevention. The structural analysis points to institutions in society that must be transformed — in many cases the same institutions that foster conditions that exacerbate violence. The structural analysis is also consistent with a public health approach that indentifies social determinants of health and aims to reduce health inequities.

Challenges in Reframing Race

With the election of President Barack Obama in 2008 has come suggestions that the U.S. is now a "post-racial" society. President Obama's election seems to be evidence of a steady progression toward equality. And research shows that the general public — particularly white people — believes that racism is a thing of the past because discrimination has been outlawed.[22] Thus if racism persists, this narrative goes, it is because individuals are racist. It is individuals that need reforming then, not society. This narrative fits neatly within the confines of the default frame. From this perspective, explanations for disparities are accommodated by the idea that "bad" people, be they those who harbor racist attitudes or those who haven't pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, must simply try harder. Societal remedies aren't appropriate, in this world view, because 1) there will always be "bad" people and 2) people are responsible for their own fates.

Yet the evidence on health disparities betrays the idea that racial inequality is a thing of the past.[23] Insofar as those disparities are understood as the consequence of individual failings, the remedy remains in personal behavior. This is indeed how the *New York Times* series interpreted racial inequality. This traditional view of racism attributes the problem to feelings or beliefs people hold. Therefore, individuals are either racist or they're not. To be racist, a person must intentionally display an attitude or act in a way meant to harm a person of color.[24] This understanding of racism ignores the effects that institutions have on whole populations.

The structural racism framework offered by legal scholars Andrew Grant-Thomas and john powell provides a much more complete understanding of the origins and consequences of racism. In this view, whether a person thrives in society is dependent upon the opportunities available, and opportunities are "produced and regulated by institutions, institutional interactions and individuals" together.[25] Those interactions among institutions have a certain gestalt. Scholars liken it to a bird in a birdcage because it's the network of bars working together, not a single bar, that traps the bird. Thinking about how structural racism exacerbates crime and violence, researcher Keith O. Lawrence puts it this way:

> This useful image helps us perceive, for example, how an inequitable public school system that pushes kids out of school, inadequate local job markets that push people into the informal (sometimes illicit) economy, and a lack of affordable housing that denies families shelter and stability can interact to reinforce criminal justice inequities.[26]

FrameWorks Institute has conducted a series of studies to identify promising frames for shifting public understanding about race toward policy-oriented solutions to reduce inequality. FrameWorks suggests that to reframe race, communicators must begin by emphasizing shared fate, interconnection, and ingenuity (or “Can-do” spirit). Local elected officials are one group in a good position to evoke the frames and values FrameWorks recommends and point to the structures that need changing. They can talk about linked fate and interdependence in terms of contiguous cities, neighborhoods, regions, and links among residents, business, and government. They can emphasize Can-do Spirit and lead with solutions, which can also influence frames in local news coverage. They can also fortify their communications with strong shared values, including stewardship and their elected public duty to protect and serve the entire city.

Ultimately, discussions about race begin from the same default frames as discussions about violence. This means that data about racial inequities, if not first put in a context that primes an environmental understanding, will prompt people to hold individuals to blame, discounting circumstances that may be unfair or unjust. Public health advocates and leaders can counter this and reframe violence prevention by starting with *place* to avoid the default frame which starts with the *person*.

Reframing Government

A leader of the modern conservative movement, Grover Norquist, is famous for saying he’d like to shrink government “down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub.”[27] He and others have promulgated the conservative imperative to reduce the role of government in favor of private enterprise, saying that the power of an unencumbered marketplace will satisfy social needs. The effect has been widely felt and, until recently, some would say wildly successful as government has come to be seen as a negative force in society.

The negative view of government, while perhaps deserved on some counts, presents a problem for advocates of a public health approach to preventing violence. If communities don’t believe their government can bring people together and solve problems, they won’t support the sorts of policies that can prevent violence before it starts.

Others committed to broader social issues such as democratic participation and social justice have also been concerned about the demonization of government. Demos, a non-partisan public policy research and advocacy organization, is one such group. Demos and the Council for Excellence in Government partnered with the FrameWorks Institute to help them identify promising avenues to reframe government. Demos is not simply promoting new ways to talk about government but is “hoping to create public imagination and aspiration for a government that works for everybody, that embodies Americans’ values, that has the capacity to meet the challenges ahead, and that can engage the public in a vision for the future.”[28] Demos’ project is the most comprehensive to date on understanding and reframing government.

How Government Is Currently Framed

Demos learned from the FrameWorks research that most people are stuck in a polarizing “rhetorical mode” of reasoning that closes off thinking about the role of government. When they do think of government, the public tends to view it either as elected officials or a bungling bureaucracy. Both conceptions distance people from government, as the leadership is seen as unapproachable and the bureaucracy is seen as an inefficient morass. And even when people have expressed more positive viewpoints, understanding that the goal of government is to be “of and by the people,” that perspective is diminished because people think of that idea as an artifact of the past. While people do see government as a public service, they also consider it vulnerable to special interests or as a wasteful bureaucracy. When government is seen as a service provider, that frame places people in the role of consumer rather than citizen. And the public has trouble distinguishing between the goals of the private and public sectors, which can result in an inappropriate expectation of business-like efficiency from government.[29]

Research found that the most positive view comes when people see government as a *protector* from physical or financial harm or *problem solver* that can address social issues or provide opportunity.

Based on this research, Demos recommends that advocates focus on using a *protection* or *common good* frame when talking about government connected to an expression of government’s physical infrastructure and organizing systems, such as “the postal system for delivering mail and the courts for settling business disagreements.” The *protection* frame emphasizes government’s duty to “protect citizens from physical and financial harm”; the *common good* frame emphasizes the role of government as a facilitator of collective problem-solving. In this frame, citizenship is understood as public participation. Demos has developed a set of tools to help advocates incorporate these frames, repeat them often, link them to various topics, and illustrate them with vivid examples.[30]

Challenges in Reframing Government

Demos’ recommendations should help advocates characterize government so that members of the general public are more accepting and supporting of government. Both frames Demos recommends, *protector* and *problem-solver*, could have natural application in the context of violence prevention. A *protector* should help residents avoid violence and a *problem solver* would be able to figure out how to do it. However, in the area of violence prevention, the *protection* frame in particular may be problematic in that it could lead to a divisive “us versus them” posture because it implies that the public needs protection from a group, an “other.” This conception could undermine support for prevention policies if the participatory emphasis of government as problem solver frame had not been well established. For that reason, and to better understand the limits and potentials of the research to date, we asked cognitive linguists at Real Reason to assess the Demos research to identify potential areas for further research.[31]

Real Reason suggested several promising directions for further research. The first was to explore frames that emphasize *shared purpose* (which would link nicely to the *linked fate* frame FrameWorks recommends for talking about race[32]). The

challenge, and paradox, in this frame would arise when government programs, often characterized as benefiting everyone, directly benefit minorities of the citizenry and only indirectly contribute to the common good. The proximity of the benefits to the larger population are harder to illustrate, and for some, government has a legitimate role in redistributing resources that benefit some and not others. Some argue that Demos’ current recommendations would mask this role for government.

Real Reason’s second suggestion was to find effective ways to frame people in groups rather than as individuals. Demos recommends that advocates illustrate the structures and systems of government by highlighting the role of individuals such as teachers or fire fighters who can personify positive and necessary manifestations of government. Yet there is a pressing need to find effective ways to think and talk about people in groups: racial and ethnic groups, labor unions, congregations, neighborhoods, etc. Real Reason suggests that we need to “conceptually repopulate the structures of government” to make visible the role of an active citizenry.

Third, Real Reason suggests elaborating a tangible vision of government focused on diversity, inclusiveness, fairness, and justice. This builds on Demos’ advice to put forth the values and mission of government to be sure it goes beyond a technocratic vision of a well-functioning government focused solely on efficiency and transparency. Overall, this would have to be connected to a set of values that emphasizes duty to others. Politically, groups often hold up children when they promote policy, because there is no doubt that society, including government, holds collective responsibility to protect children (the current efforts around childhood obesity are but one example). Real Reason asks, what would it take to move beyond children to the general population where the conception of government-as-us would be the baseline?

Finally, Real Reason suggests that there may be a frame to help people distinguish the public from the private sector. In the current recommendations, Demos asks advocates to cast government in the role of regulating “rogue” businesses. It should. However, the conception also perpetuates a *bad apple* frame that points to the egregious behavior of an outlier rather than revealing systemic problems. It would be useful to identify frames that expand the role for businesses beyond the idea that they simply not cause harm to the public. In addition, we need frames that communicate that government’s role, and the public’s expectation of government, shouldn’t be equated with that of business.

More research is needed to pursue Real Reason’s suggestions, as they are a direct counterpoint to the default frame of rugged individualism. Indeed, members of Cultural Logic and Public Knowledge, two firms that contributed substantially to the initial FrameWorks research for Demos, have indicated that their pursuit of some of these themes did not yield strong enough results to recommend specific action or new frames. Efforts to challenge the default frame and elevate America’s second language[33] of communitarianism and interdependence — in the context of both race and government — will be a necessary part of reframing violence.

Summary

The fundamental challenge in reframing violence is moving from *them* to *us* — or, in the case of violence among youth, from *he* to *we*; until violence among youth is understood as a broad-based problem, it will be difficult to muster support for broad-based solutions, especially those policies that bridge various sectors in society to prevent violence before it starts. To reframe violence among youth, the UNITY consortium will have to understand and address several interrelated issues:

- **The default frame works against primary prevention.** By its nature, the default frame turns exclusive attention to individuals. Primary prevention, on the other hand, locates most of its efforts in changing the environments that surround individuals. Preventing violence before it happens means ensuring that young people have, at minimum, sound education, job opportunities, outlets for recreation, safe neighborhoods, supportive adults in their lives, protection from guns and alcohol, good nutrition, and stable housing. But do those working in education, economic development, affordable housing, or alcohol prevention see themselves as working to prevent violence among youth? Violence prevention’s self-definition needs to expand so those at the systems-change end of the spectrum understand their role and potential contribution to preventing violence among youth. Violence prevention loses its identity when it moves upstream. The connections are not obvious, and the default frame makes them hard for people to accept even when they are described.

- **News sets the policy agenda and frames debate but most stories reinforce the default frame.** Moving from portraits to landscapes in news stories is not easy to do, but it is crucial. It is perhaps the single most difficult and important lesson for prevention advocates. Framing is important to understand because if advocates don’t recognize the default frame, they may fall into framing traps. One trap is offering up a “better” individual story that doesn’t help illuminate why the environment can prevent or facilitate violence. Well-intentioned advocates who rightly want to see more diverse news stories about young people, for example, may promote stories of individual triumph that are more likely to reinforce the idea that people can and should fend for themselves rather than the idea that the surrounding circumstances are an important determinant of outcomes.

- **Race, youth, and violence are conflated in the news.** Decades of studies of youth and violence in the news show that coverage too closely associates crime with youth of color. This distorted picture compounds problems our society already has talking about youth and race. We need new ways to communicate that don’t trigger stereotypes with strong racial overtones.

- **Racial inequities, when they are recognized at all, tend to be attributed to individual failings.** Many in the U.S., particularly whites, see racial problems a thing of the past, and when they do surface, as the result of bad actors rather than systemic problems. Racial inequities are therefore often interpreted as the consequence of individuals not trying hard enough rather than the result of conditions surrounding individuals. In the context of violence, these perspectives — reinforced by the default frame — will diminish support for a public health approach to preventing violence.

- **Government is the problem, and government is the solution.** Government is part of the problem when it is supporting ineffective programs or is attending only to law enforcement or criminal justice approaches that do not give prevention adequate resources. Yet government is also the solution since community-wide prevention efforts, brought to scale, will have to come from government. The suspicion many people view government with, as noted above, makes gaining support for government solutions difficult.

Addressing these issues is not easy or straightforward. In some cases, more research about how to frame youth, race, government, and violence will help point the way to more productive frames that support primary prevention. In addition to research, there are steps that UNITY members could take that would, in our opinion, increase support for primary prevention policy that would help ameliorate violence among youth.

Recommendations

Based on this assessment, we make the following recommendations:

- Foster Cross-sector Action on Violence Prevention
- Transform News Reporting on Violence
- Determine Effective Ways to Talk about Race and Government in the Context of Violence

The recommendations require participation from private and public sectors as well as cross-disciplinary work (see Table 1). Each is elaborated below.

Foster Cross-sector Action on Violence Prevention

By cross-sector action we mean that in the context of city government, different departments should understand how their realm fits into the broader problem and greater solution to violence among youth. With that understanding, organizational practices can be instituted that would actively reframe how violence prevention is conceptualized and achieved. To illustrate the power of focusing on actions (rather than messages alone) to reframe, we offer these examples:

- **No second class citizens.** There is a natural tendency to think that the right frames will lead to the right words, and with the right words we can convince anyone of the virtue of our path. However, framing is not just about words, though words are important. Reframing can be about actions. Consider, for example, how the community organizing that was ignited by Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her seat on a Birmingham bus one Thursday afternoon communicated a shift in attitude. And consider how the thousands who came out in support of the Birmingham bus boycott the following week literally got their marching orders — that level of community organizing did not happen over a weekend. Strategies were developed and acted upon; words were important, but the actions communicated powerfully as well.

- **The air belongs to the nonsmoker too.** Tobacco control offers another example. While using media campaigns to warn the public about the dangers of smoking, advocates also developed policies to reduce access and exposure to cigarettes. Buoyed by research that revealed the damaging effects of cigarette smoke on nonsmokers, advocates lobbied for clean indoor air laws. While the work is by no means complete — 19 states across the country are still without comprehensive clean indoor air laws[34] — most would argue that the tobacco issue has been successfully reframed so that now the air belongs to the nonsmoker. This success ensued despite bickering over whether the proper term is *environmental tobacco smoke, secondhand smoke*, or *sidestream smoke*.

- **Cars and roadways to bicycles and pathways.** In a current example from public health, advocates and funders concerned about obesity and related health problems are acting to change the built environment so it encourages daily activity like walking to work. But major structural changes require significant resources. In the case of changes to roads and sidewalks, these resources can be found in the federal transportation legislation to be authorized by Congress in 2010. These funders, therefore, are providing public health groups with resources to work on transportation. And, they are providing resources to transportation reformers to work with public health. Their collective actions will help reframe transportation so it is understood and acted upon as a public health issue.[35]

The question for violence prevention advocates is, what actions, by whom, will reframe and prevent violence among youth? Certainly public health departments taking on violence as a public health policy issue is one important mechanism. Likewise, there are actions that other sectors of government can take to ensure violence prevention is manifest everywhere that will have an impact. According to UNITY, violence prevention requires cross-sector work that will demand that government agencies work differently with each other and with community-based organizations. This could mean, on the one hand, a wholesale transformation of how government plans and implements its activities. At minimum it means that governmental departments should consider what they now do — even within their silos — in terms of how to prevent violence and in terms of what additional activities they should implement in their sector to prevent violence.

Because primary prevention occurs well before the violence would occur — and if it is successful, violence doesn’t occur at all — primary prevention activities may not be recognized as violence prevention at all. For example, research shows that high-quality early care and education for children can prevent violence among that cohort of children as they age. Yet quality preschool is rarely understood as a violence prevention endeavor (and it doesn’t need to be to have its violence prevention effect). Similarly, youth development programs can prevent violence and yet never mention the word.

Violence prevention resides in almost every government department because it touches on schools, housing, and employment. This distance between when the prevention activities occur and when the violence is prevented (sometime in the future) makes it harder for elected officials and other leaders to recognize violence prevention activities not identified as such. The problem of violence is deeply interconnected with a wide range of social conditions. Our solutions, however, tend to

be isolated from one another. Our solutions need to be as comprehensive and interconnected as the problems they seek to address. The challenge is to recognize natural allies whose work has an impact on violence prevention but whose motivation or interest may not be specifically about violence prevention. Whole cities, together, need to rethink what constitutes a violence prevention program.

Immediate Action

Create and disseminate across disciplines tools to make it easier for those focused on particular sectors within government and in community-based programs to see the role for violence prevention in their current and future activities. The tools should illustrate different sectors’ roles in preventing violence and provide a lens through which people can see their own work and link with others engaged in preventing violence. Once tools have been used, evaluate whether violence prevention activities are integrated across sectors.

Transform News

Reporting on Violence

If news provides most people their information about youth and violence, then how the news is reported must become a focus of change. We see two major thrusts for such an effort. The first is that violence prevention advocates must become frequently cited sources of stories for reporters, particularly for local TV news. They must address crime stories as they happen but, if they are concerned about distorted pictures of youth in general, they must also provide alternative stories apart from violent incidents that expand the frame so young people are seen regularly outside the context of violence. We address both below.

Develop Media Advocacy Capacity Among Public Health Practitioners to Reframe Violence in the News and Reach Policymakers

Portrayals of youth and violence in news coverage are ultimately the responsibility of reporters. They decide on the pictures and report the story; advocates have no control over what journalists select. But public health advocates do bear some responsibility. As sources, they need to know how to package information so reporters can use it. As advocates, they need to know how to emphasize matters regarding the policy solutions they seek. Advocates can acquire these skills through experience and through media advocacy training. Media advocacy is the strategic use of mass media to support community organizing and advance healthy public policy.[36]

Yet before developing a media strategy, advocates must articulate their overall strategy. It is extremely important that, before talking with reporters, advocates be able to clearly name the specific solutions they seek, and know what it will take to put them in place. Solutions are notoriously absent from news coverage in general, and earlier research has shown that even when prevention strategies are mentioned in the context of violence reporting, they are most often descriptions of personal protections rather than collective actions.[37]

Reframing violence among youth is also about news that has nothing to do with violence but everything to do with youth. If young people are seen most often in the context of violence, increasing the number of stories about young people in general will help rectify that imbalance. For example, an article on the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle*’s Home & Garden section, “Oakland's fruit doesn't fall far from the tree,”[38] described a program in the city that helped young people gather fruit from residents’ backyards. The young people collected hundreds of pounds of fruit that they took to homeless shelters, food banks, and shared with seniors. The story

sported big pictures, all of youth of color. It was a rare depiction of youth in the news doing something positive for their community. It was an important departure from much of the recent news which had been about robberies and crime escalating in Oakland. If newspapers are to print more stories about other things young people do, then advocates will have to pitch newsworthy stories that give attention to young people doing well.

It is one thing to say that violence among youth ought to be framed in terms of prevention rather than criminal justice, but it is another to do it effectively. Advocates need the courage of their convictions, the knowledge that their communications are framed effectively, and the confidence to express their support for policy in highly contentious public settings. Even framed effectively, there will be opposition to policies that take resources from one sector and redeploy them in another. Media advocacy training and strategic consultation can help UNITY members advocate effectively.

Immediate Action
Integrate the latest framing research in a media advocacy curriculum for violence prevention, and provide media advocacy training for UNITY cities and other locales that have identified prevention policies, the target for the policy, and those who can be mobilized to put pressure on the target. The curriculum would include examples of how to frame stories in terms of landscapes rather than portraits in the context of current policy debate and action on violence prevention at the local level.

Support Journalists to Include a Public Health Perspective When They Report on Crime and Violence
The second thrust is that reporting itself must change to include a more accurate picture of violence. Several organizations have developed models for reporters in this regard. The Maynard Institute provides training for news organizations that want to apply its “Faultlines” approach to covering localities.[39] Criminal Justice Journalists provides peer support for working journalists eager to improve their ability to tell a more accurate crime story in the face of newsroom pressures.[40] Organizations like Columbia Journalism Review[41] and the American Society of Newspaper Editors[42] have developed guides to help reporters cover the topic comprehensively. Naturally, we are fond of BMSG’s own Reporting on Violence project in which we developed a rubric for reporting on violence to include a public health perspective[43] (for a description of the project, or to download handbooks for reporters and a curriculum for journalism professors, see http://www.bmsg.org/proj-violence-reporting.php).

Immediate Action
Adapt Reporting on Violence materials for reporters in each of the UNITY cities. Provide training in newsrooms in the new approach to reporting. Create an award for journalists who demonstrate sound reporting that reflects a complete and accurate portrayal of the circumstances surrounding violence and what the community and local government are doing to prevent it, including a clear-eyed journalistic assessment of what is and isn’t working.

Determine Effective Ways to Talk about Race and Government in the Context of Violence

Reframing violence includes reshaping perceptions of race and government since both are implicated in public perceptions of violence prevention.

Reframing race in relation to violence is necessary so we can move from *them* to *us*. That is, the reframe needs to place violence in a structural context as opposed to the individual default frame that reinforces the individualistic view that violence happens to *them* or is the domain of young men of color. To get from *them* to *us* — the idea that violence affects not simply unfortunate or morally bankrupt individuals but entire communities — the frame needs to evoke the systems and structures that shape communities. Given the way news stories conflate youth and violence, as well as our nation’s difficulty in addressing race, this remains an exceedingly difficult task. Elsewhere, we’ve reviewed the research on talking about inequality in general and the recommendations so far are unsatisfying.[44]

Reframing government in relation to violence is necessary so government’s role in prevention is evident. Government is an essential partner for preventing violence. But we need to “rehabilitate” what government means to people to make it a truly effective partner. This is challenging because at the same time violence prevention advocates are making the case that prevention be located in the environment — the settings and circumstances that surround individuals — they will have to position government’s role as viable and essential. Further research is required that can demonstrate for advocates how to frame government’s shared purpose, participatory basis, and duty to others (following the research suggestions highlighted by Real Reason, discussed earlier).

Typically, government gets little recognition when it works smoothly (water comes from the tap, mail is delivered, garbage is collected, electricity is delivered, etc.). But when the economy fails or crime is up, government is seen as failing. Insofar as local government acts to reduce and prevent violence, particularly with activities outside law enforcement — for example, by implementing the cross-sector actions described in our first recommendation — and makes its achievements widely known through news and other venues, it may be able to counter those public perceptions. A key task should be reframing government as an actor distinct from residents to government as a participatory endeavor *of* residents that is competent, fair, responsive, and honest.

As we emerge from a period when the value of government has been undermined and questioned, we have an opportunity to reconsider what government means in general and in relation to preventing violence. Successfully reframing government will require more than words. It will take action. When government acts successfully to reduce violence or improve community life, it will give violence prevention advocates something to talk about. The language will be important, but deeds must come first.

The challenge, and the reason more research is needed, is that we do not believe violence prevention can be addressed effectively unless government is adequately rehabilitated and we can find a way to talk effectively about race.

Immediate Action

Conduct research to identify frames that help people see the value of policies to prevent violence when the role of government and attitudes about race are explicit. Foster dialogues about race and the role of government in UNITY cities. Develop and disseminate case studies based on local experience in UNITY cities or elsewhere that describe how the chasms of race and class or age and gender were crossed. Highlight practices or policies that can be transferred to other locales.

Conclusion

There are many dedicated people and good organizations inside and outside of government working to prevent violence and improve the public’s health. What is lacking is a coherent, consistent force to push violence prevention up the public agenda and keep it there. We lack this force in good part because we don’t have an infrastructure that can adequately link people across issues. With that infrastructure in place, the right frame can facilitate the necessary understanding so people can work in unison across sectors toward a common goal: cities, neighborhoods, streets, and homes free from violence.

Table 1. Suggestions for who can carry out the recommendations and immediate actions.

	Recommendations & Immediate Next Steps		
Actors	**Foster Cross-sector Action**	**Transform Violence Reporting**	**Reframe Race & Gov't in the Context of Violence**
UNITY cities	• Help develop tools • Implement tools • Establish best practices for cross-sector violence prevention work • Help evaluate tools	• Receive media advocacy training • Receive TA to support training • Share news coverage that frames violence as a public health issue	• Foster dialogue & contact among different populations • Apply and test frames developed in research
CDC	• Fund development of tools • Create and disseminate tools • Offer training and TA	• Support media advocacy training • Support training and develop materials for journalists • Develop award criteria for journalists	• Commission research • Link to health inequities work • Evaluate application of research
Philanthropy	• Fund development and pretesting of tools • Fund evaluation and case studies of cross-sector work	• Fund development & implementation of curriculum, training and TA • Develop and fund award for journalists	• Commission research • Disseminate findings across sectors • Evaluate application of research
Partners (e.g., NACCHO, etc.)	• Contribute to creation, implementation, and dissemination of tools • Offer TA to cities • Share best practices for cross-sector violence prevention work	• Contribute to materials development for prevention advocates and for journalists • Disseminate to non-UNITY cities	• Link to health inequities work • Adapt materials for other cities and regions

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