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DICTIONARY OF YOUTH JUSTICE

News Reporting

The news media representation of children and young people as victims and offenders of crime.

Discussion

The most striking thing about media reporting of young people with respect to crime and criminal justice is their overwhelming representation as offenders rather than victims.

Research consistently finds well over half of young people surveyed to have suffered some form of criminal victimisation within the past 12 months (Muncie, 2004). Yet their experiences as victims of all but the most serious offences would appear to be of little interest to journalists.

Even as victims of serious crime, not all young people are deemed equally newsworthy. The gender, age, ethnicity and social class of the victim interact with the dynamics of news production and the wider socio-political environment to produce a 'hierarchy of victimhood' that can dramatically influence levels of media attention and public interest. The right 'type' of young victim may dominate the headlines, generate significant changes to criminal justice policy and practice and, in murder cases, invoke public mourning on a global scale. Those juveniles who never achieve legitimate victim status may pass virtually unnoticed in the wider social world (Greer, 2007).

Whilst the everyday criminal victimisation of young people is under-represented in the news, their everyday criminality remains a topic of perennial media interest. In line with the key determinants of newsworthiness – including drama, novelty, and personalisation – crimes of interpersonal violence such as muggings and assaults feature prominently. Reporting is often racialised, and black youths – whether as muggers, rioters or gun-toting gang members – are routinely portrayed as the dangerous ‘criminal other’ (Webster, 2007). Following demonstrations against the first and second Gulf Wars, and the culture of fear and suspicion that characterises the post-9/11 ‘war on terror’, the association between ethnicity and crime has more recently extended to Asian youth. (Alexander, 2000). And the visibility of female youth offending has also increased in recent years, with British girls reported in 2006 to be ‘among most violent in world’ (*Guardian*, 23rd Jan, 2006).

At times, sensationalist reporting of particular forms of youth ‘deviance’ – from children who kill, to drug taking, to subcultural affiliations – may form the basis of ‘moral panics’ (Cohen, 2002), typified by exaggerated public concern and authoritarian methods of control or exclusion. The high profile reporting of individual incidents or ‘crime waves’ against a mediatised backdrop of everyday offending reinforces the image of ‘youth’ as a problem to be solved. Since media explanations of youth crime tend to be individualistic, portraying feckless, hedonistic juveniles, out-of-control in a permissive society, rather than social-structural and related, for example, to relative deprivation in a ruthlessly exclusive consumer culture, proposed solutions tend to involve more punishment and control, rather than wider social change.

Young people may respond to their distorted representation in a variety of ways, from passively accepting or cynically rejecting media images, to embracing and defiantly flaunting precisely those characteristics that are being demonised. Whatever the response, much media reporting merges the 'problem of youth' and the 'problem of crime' into one conceptual category, and presents youth offending as a visible index for society's ills.

References

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