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Bashing Youth

Media Myths About Teenagers

By **Mike Males**

"Unplanned pregnancies. HIV infection and AIDS, other sexually transmitted diseases. Cigarettes, alcohol and drug abuse. Eating disorders. Violence. Suicide. Car crashes."

The 21-word lead-in to a **Washington Post** (12/22/92) report sums up today's media image of the teenager: 30 million 12- through 19-year-olds toward whom any sort of moralizing and punishment can be safely directed, by liberals and conservatives alike. Today's media portrayals of teens employ the same stereotypes once openly applied to unpopular racial and ethnic groups: violent, reckless, hypersexed, welfare-draining, obnoxious, ignorant.

And like traditional stereotypes, the modern media teenager is a distorted image, derived from the dire fictions promoted by official agencies and interest groups.

During the 1980s and 1990s, various public and private entrepreneurs realized that the news media will circulate practically anything negative about teens, no matter how spurious. A few examples among many:

* In 1985, the National Association of Private Psychiatric Hospitals, defending the profitable mass commitment of teenagers to psychiatric treatment on vague diagnoses, invented the "fact" that a teenager commits suicide "every 90 minutes"--or 5,000 to 6,000 times every year. Countless media reports of all types, from the **Associated Press** (4/4/91) to **Psychology Today** (5/92), continue to report this phony figure, nearly three times the true teen suicide toll, which averaged 2,050 per year during the 1980s (*Vital Statistics of the United States*).

* In a 1991 campaign to promote school-based clinics, the American Medical Association (AMA) and the National Association of State Boards of Education published a report that inflated the 280,000 annual births to unmarried teenaged mothers into "half a million," and claimed a "30-fold" increase in adolescent crime since 1950. In fact, 1950 youth crime statistics are too incomplete to compare, and later, more comprehensive national reports show no increase in juvenile crime rates in at least two decades. (Contrast, for example, the FBI Uniform Crime Reports for 1970

and 1992.) The facts notwithstanding, the national media (e.g., **AP**, 6/8/90) dutifully publicized the organizations' exaggerations.

* In the early '80s, officials hyping the "war on drugs" orchestrated media hysteria about "skyrocketing" teenage drug abuse at a time when, in fact, teenage drug death rates were plummeting (down 70 percent from 1970 to 1982). In the late '80s, the same media outlets parroted official claims of a drug-war "success" when, in reality, youth drug death rates were skyrocketing (up 85 percent from 1983 to 1991--see **In These Times**, 5/20/92).

Today, official and media distortions are one and the same. Who's to blame for poverty? Teenage mothers, declares Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala in uncritical news stories (see **Los Angeles Times**, 12/12/93) that fail to note that teenage mothers on welfare were poor before they became pregnant.

Who's causing violence? "Kids and guns," asserts President Clinton, favorably quoted by reporters (**AP**, 11/14/93) who neglect to mention that six out of seven murders are committed by adults. Who's dying from drugs, spreading AIDS, committing suicide? Teenagers, teenagers, teenagers, the media proclaim at the behest of official sources, even though health reports show adults much more at risk from all of these perils than are adolescents.

Media Myth: 'Teenage' Sex

The strange logic of the modern media's attack on adolescents is nowhere stranger than its portrayal of "teen" sexuality. Consider its jargon: When a child is born to a father over age 20 and a teenage mother (which happened 350,000 times last year), the phenomenon is called "children having children." When an adult pays a teenager for sex, it is "teenage prostitution."

Some 2 million sexually transmitted diseases and a quarter-million abortions that result from adult/teen sex every year are headlined as "teenage" VD, AIDS and abortion. The causes of these "epidemic social problems" are teenage immaturity, risk-taking, and peer pressure. Their cure is more preaching, programming and punishment aimed at "teenage sex."

According to U.S. Public Health Service reports, 71 percent of all teenage parents have adult partners over age 20. California and U.S. vital statistics reports show that men over age 20 cause five times more births among junior high-age girls than do boys their own age, and 2.5 times more births among high school girls than high school boys do. Even though many more pregnancies among teenage females are caused by men older

than 25 than by boys under 18, media reports and pictures depict only high schoolers. By their choice of terms and images, the media blame the young and female while giving the adult and male a break.

This is exactly the image desired by thousands of agencies and programs who profit politically and financially from the issue--such as the Centers for Disease Control, which blames "teenage AIDS" on promiscuous "kids...playing Russian roulette" (**AP**, 4/10/92). The media have followed the official lead: The three leading newsweeklies have all run cover stories featuring the same formulaic reporting.

Newsweek's "Teens and AIDS" (8/3/92), **Time's** "Kids, Sex, & Values" (5/24/93) and **U.S. News & World Report's** "Teenage Sex: Just Say Wait" (7/26/93) all featured surveys of "kids," photos of suburban schools, sidebars lambasting sexy movies, and dire commentary on sexual irresponsibility among schoolboys and girls. **Time** and **U.S. News** both blamed "teenage sex" on "confused" kids, and held up sex and abstinence education as the cure.

Imagine how different these stories would be if the media told the decidedly un-sexy truth about pregnant teens: the large majority are impoverished girls with histories of physical, sexual and other abuses by parents and other adults, and most are impregnated by adult men. When the **L.A. Times**, in an exceptional report (3/14-15/93), actually showed the bleak childhoods of pregnant, disadvantaged teens, the accompanying official rhetoric blaming **MTV** and "peer pressure" looked silly.

Media Myth: 'Teenage' Violence

On "teenage" violence, the media picture is similarly skewed: "Teen Violence: Wild in the Streets" (**Newsweek**, 8/2/93), "Kids and Guns" (**Newsweek**, 3/9/92), "When Killers Come to Class" (**U.S. News**, 11/8/93), and "Big Shots" (**Time**, 8/2/93) all follow a standard format. The lead-in details the latest youth mayhem, followed by selected "facts" on "the causes of skyrocketing teen violence": adolescent depravity, gun-toting metalheads, TV images, rap attitude, gang culture, lenient youth-court judges. And perhaps (in a few well-buried sentences) such small matters as poverty, abuse, racial injustice, unemployment and substandard schools.

Given the emphasis on "teen" violence, a California Department of Justice report (8/13/93) comes as a shock: It found that 83 percent of murdered children, half of murdered teenagers and 85 percent of murdered adults are slain by adults over age 20, not by "kids"--or, in President Clinton's stock phrase (**AP**, 11/14/93), "13-year-olds...with automatic weapons." In fact, FBI reports show 47-year-olds (people Clinton's age) are twice as likely to commit murder than are 13-year-olds.

But while the media champion official rhetoric on violence by youth, they rarely provide similar attention to the epidemic of adult violence against youth. The National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (5/93) reported that at least 350,000 children and teenagers are confirmed victims of sexual and other violent abuses every year by adults whose average age is 32 years. Comparison of these figures with crime reports shows that for every violent and sexual offense committed by a youth under 18, there are three such crimes committed by adults against children and teens.

The reporting of the 1992 National Women's Study of 4,000 adult women (**AP**, 5/22/92) is a case study in media bias. The *Rape in America* report found that 12 million American women have been raped; of these, 62 percent were raped before age 18. The half-million-plus children and teenagers victimized every year averaged 10 years of age; their rapists' average age was 27.

The media unrelentingly headline "children having children" and "killer kids," and endlessly wonder what is "out of control when it comes to the way many teens think" (**U.S. News**, 7/26/93). Surely the widespread adult violent and sexual attacks against youths are a compelling answer. Consistent research shows such abuses are the key factors in violence, pregnancy, drug abuse and suicide among teenagers (see **Family Planning Perspectives**, 1-2/92).

But the same media outlets with plenty of space to dissect sexy videos and dirty rap lyrics couldn't find room to examine the real rapes of hundreds of thousands of children and teenagers every year. **Time** gave it three paragraphs (5/4/92), while **U.S. News** didn't mention it at all. Neither did **Newsweek**, although in four years it has devoted five cover stories to the dangers of rock and rap music (3/19/90, 7/2/90, 6/29/92, 11/2/92, 11/29/93).

Similarly, the media have largely ignored the rising number of prison studies (including those at the Minnesota State Prison and the Massachusetts Treatment Center for Sexually Dangerous Persons) which show 60 percent to 90 percent of all inmates--and nearly all of those on death row--were abused as children. The most conservative study, by the National Institute of Justice, projects that 40 percent of all violent crimes (some half-million every year) result from offenders being abused as children (**In These Times**, 9/20/93).

In a similar vein, news outlets (other than a flurry of coverage of the National Commission on Children's report) have generally failed to examine the enormous increase in youth and young-family poverty, which rose by 50 percent from 1973 to 1991 (U.S. Census Bureau, *Poverty in the United States*). Nor have mainstream media seriously addressed the

devastating effects of racism, rising poverty and unemployment on a generation of young people of color.

The media portrait reflects politicians' unadmitted priorities: Condemning violence by youth is a guaranteed crowd-pleaser; focusing on adult violence against kids isn't as popular. (Most news consumers are adults, and kids can't vote.)

In a rare exception--a report that devoted more space to poverty and child abuse than to TV sex--**Time's** Oct. 8, 1990 cover article pointed out a truth long known to prison wardens and juvenile court judges: "If children are not protected from their abusers, then the public will one day have to be protected from the children." But most outlets continue to treat violent youth as mysterious freaks of nature: The lead headline in the Sunday **Los Angeles Times** (12/9/93) opinion section blared: "Who are our children? One day, they are innocent. The next, they may try to blow your head off."

Perhaps the **L.A. Times** (whose landmark 8/25/85 survey indicated that childhood sexual abuse is epidemic, affecting one-fifth of all Americans) should instead question its own media escapism. From July through September 1993, that newspaper carried 34 articles and commentaries on the effects of violent media, rap and video games on youth--but not one inch on the effects of child abuse in promoting youth violence.

While the **L.A. Times** gives prominent coverage to charges of child abuse involving the rich and famous--like singer Michael Jackson and the Beverly Hills Menendez brothers--when the L.A. Council on Child Abuse and Neglect reported 140,000 children abused in the county in 1992, the **Times** (11/4/93) relegated the story to an inside section with no follow-up or comment.

Two Sides, Same Bias

The extraordinary lack of context and fairness in media coverage of youth stems from two elemental difficulties. First, the standard media assumption is that fairness is served by quoting "both sides"--but on youth issues, "both sides" frequently harbor adult biases against teenagers.

In the much-publicized debates over school programs to reduce "teen" pregnancy, for example, the press quoted "liberal" sources favoring condom handouts balanced by "conservative" sources demanding abstinence education (e.g., **USA Today**, 11/19/91). However, both lobbies based their arguments on the same myth--that heedless high school boys are the main cause of "teen" pregnancy--and avoided the same disturbing fact: that even if every high school boy abstained from sex or used a

condom, most "teen" pregnancies would still occur.

The second difficulty is that "teenage" behavior is not separate from "adult" behavior. Such hot topics as "teen pregnancy," "teen suicide," and "youth violence" are artificial political and media inventions. In real-world environments, teenagers usually act like the adults of their family, gender, race, class, location and era, often because their behaviors occur with adults.

For example, *Vital Statistics of the United States* shows that white adults are twice as likely to commit suicide as black adults, and white teens are twice as likely to commit suicide as black teens. From 1940 to 1990, unwed birth rates rose 4.7 times among teenage women and 4.6 times among adult women. The FBI's 1992 Uniform Crime Reports show that men commit 88 percent of all adult violent crime; boys commit 88 percent of all juvenile violent crime.

Why are adult contexts, common to media reports on youth prior to the 1970s, only rarely cited today? Because that would prevent adolescents from serving as the latest scapegoats for problems that affect society in general.

And there is a subtler reason: The interests circulating negative images of teens want the source of malaise located within youth, where it can be "treated" by whatever solutions the publicizing interest groups profit from, rather than in unhealthy environments whose upgrading will require billions of dollars in public spending. Thus short-term political and corporate profit lies not in fixing environments, but in fixing kids.

The treatment industry's message is clear: "Our teenagers have lost their way," declares the AMA. The press has been a key element in the campaign to persuade the public that the cause of youth pregnancy, violence, suicide and drug addiction lies within the irrational psychologies and vulnerabilities of adolescents.

A standard news and documentary feature is the "troubled teen" rescued by the teamwork of "loving parents" and "get-tough" professionals. (For an example justifying the abduction of youth by "therapeutic programs," see the **Los Angeles Times**, 6/2/93). Despite melodramatic media splashes advertising the "success" of this program or that therapy (often based on testimonials or the promoter's own "study"), controlled, long-term research finds efforts to "cure" troubled teenagers generally ineffective.

On the other hand, the publicity campaigns for such treatments--disguised as news--have been quite successful. During the 1980s, the number of teens forced into intensive psychiatric treatment quadrupled,

while adolescent commitments to drug and alcohol treatment tripled. If institution and treatment industry claims are valid, we should have seen dramatic improvements in youth behavior.

Exactly the opposite is the case. In the last five to 10 years, intense media and government attacks on various behaviors--chiefly drug abuse, violence and pregnancy--have been followed by rapidly rising problems among teenagers. Stable violence rates and rapidly declining birth rates and drug death levels prior to 1985 have suddenly reversed: All three rose rapidly from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. The media's unwillingness to question official policy and its failures helped make these reverses possible.

Beyond Youth-Bashing

A few journalists refuse to kowtow to official myths, and instead publicize the enormous racial imbalances inherent in "youth violence," the fundamental sexism of the current debate over "teen" pregnancy, the realities of millions of raped, beaten and neglected children, the skyrocketing rates of youth poverty imposed by ever-richer American elites, and the futility of modern behavior modifications, laws and treatments aimed at forcing the young to "adjust" to intolerable conditions.

Ron Harris's **Los Angeles Times** series on juvenile crime (8/22-25/93) analyzed the crucial factors of racism, poverty and abuse in creating today's youth violence, and exploded the popular fiction of lenient sentencing. (Teens, in fact, serve prison terms 60 percent longer than adults for equivalent crimes.) Kevin Fedarko's perceptive eulogy (**Time**, 1/20/92) to post-industrial Camden, New Jersey, "a city of children" relinquished to poverty and prostitution, may stand as the decade's finest illustration of 1990s America's abandonment of its young.

J. Talan's expose (**Newsday**, 1/7/88) of the profiteering behind the skyrocketing rate of fraudulent adolescent psychiatric commitments to "fill empty beds" in "overbuilt hospitals" was one of the few to question official "treatment" claims. **Time**'s indictment of the "shameful" selfishness, abuses and uncaring attitudes of adults toward "America's most disadvantaged minority: its children" (10/8/90) also stands as an indictment of today's media obsequiousness.

These articles' debunking of conventional wisdom does not stop the same children-blaming myths from showing up in day-to-day coverage of youth problems. But these occasional exceptions do suggest how media responsibility could halt today's political assault on youth and heal spreading intergenerational hostilities.

See FAIR's Archives for more on:

Youth

Ageism