



Representations of youth in local media: Implications for library service

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ABSTRACT

This study is the first content analysis of news media representations of young adults specifically connected to the possible implications for library service for this age group. News and feature stories about young adults in two California newspapers surveyed over a consecutive three-month period between January and March 2007 identified common patterns in the collective representations of youth which raise questions about the potential institutional implications of these portrayals for young adult services. Analysis of the survey found young people were depicted routinely as troubled, troubling, and dangerous, a finding consistent with more than a decade of general media research. Examining these representations may help libraries become better and more critically informed about actual youth behaviors and thus initiate institutional debate about more effective service approaches with this age group which constitutes significant portion of library users.

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1. Introduction

In January 2007, Maplewood, New Jersey's, public library administrators threatened to close the doors between 2:45 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. on schooldays because, as the library board's vice president exclaimed, "We've done everything within our arsenal" (Kelly, 2007, p. B2). Youths attending the middle school next door were accused of exceeding the library's behavior policy and exasperating staff. "Its library officials, like many across the country, have grown frustrated by middle schoolers' mix of pent-up energy, hormones and nascent independence. Increasingly, librarians are asking: What part of 'Shh!' don't you understand?" the *New York Times* reporter declared. The story provided little evidence for its sweeping allegations such as "the decreasing civility of young people," and accepted official statements without question.

The library's policy (Maplewood Memorial Library, 2009) included the traditional restrictive definition of its function (a "quiet place for all who wish to read, study, research, write, select books to read, and consult with library staff") and prohibited a wide range of behaviors, including many that might not seem disruptive (i.e., "hairdressing or grooming of another person"). But the reporter and the library personnel quoted did not assess the policy's neutrality nor examine it for the potential of provoking conflicts with youthful patrons.

Libraries operate in an environment of increasing demographic divisions between older and younger age groups most visible in formerly white and now rapidly integrating suburbs such as Maplewood. U.S. Census Bureau (2000) reports show 18% of children and teens in the U.S. live in homes with incomes below federal poverty guidelines, compared to 8% of middle-aged adults. The

population is also increasingly diverse. Forty-three percent of the U.S. population under age 20 is nonwhite, while 25.4% of the population over age 40 is nonwhite (Males, 2006). These trends have strongly affected Maplewood, where the African American (black) population has grown rapidly to the point that blacks now substantially outnumber European Americans (whites) in the secondary school (age 10–17) population even as whites outnumber blacks 2–1 in the adult population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). So as youth of color become more numerous behavior norms rooted in differing cultures and economic striations may challenge traditional institutional standards.

Of course, not all libraries enact such restrictive use policies, or so strategically target their young adult patrons for retribution. Still, libraries have demonstrated an historic ambivalence, if not outright fear, of young people, enough to make anxiety about them a common feature of librarianship (Chelton, 2002). Resource inequities with respect to staffing levels and staff development, collections, and space allocations, among many other skill and service metrics of professional service have deep and historic institutional roots (Agosto, 2001; Alessio & Buron, 2006; DeWitt-Wallace-Readers Digest Fund, 1999). Furthermore, scholarly research on young adult services lags tragically behind most all other LIS research domains (Jenkins, 2000). This lack of research includes any systematic study to date advancing empirical evidence that youth misconduct is a massive, or even growing, problem in libraries.

While the nostalgic might long for the day in which newspapers and broadcast media simply covered library summer reading programs and art contests, a new depiction of libraries—particularly those in urban areas—as potential sources of youth danger has emerged and is gaining regular status in media-story rotation (Miller, 2006; Sternheimer, 2009). The alleged harm of secondhand pornography (in which youth are exposed to presumptively obscene online

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content), for instance, dominated stories about the San Jose Public Library in fall 2007 (Noyes, 2007).

Further, and more germane to this discussion, representations of young people in the news media, a major informer of public and policy-maker attitudes, should be of direct concern to those administering library services. Like many institutions, libraries participate in how young people are imagined and considered in a community. They assign resources. They enact and enforce particular policies. They operate with certain cultural assumptions that lead to real choices about service development, delivery, and evaluation. And naturally, as Chelton (2001, p. 5) has written, “Librarians are not immune to the almost constant negative media barrage about teenagers, so when adolescents appear for help in libraries, but do not behave in an expected ideal way, it becomes much too easy for librarians to attribute ‘troublemaker’ status to them.” Additionally, given the relatively small number of young adult librarian specialists in the field today, it is reasonable to inquire about the implications of these persistent images and representations on how libraries develop services responses (Alessio & Buron, 2006).

2. Review of the literature: Media images of young people

Consistent with over a decade of recent media studies, analysis finds that young people as an entire demographic category are depicted routinely as troubled, troubling, and dangerous (Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2000; Dorfman, Woodruff, Chavez, & Wallack, 1997; Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001; Yanich, 2005; Youth Media Council, 2000) an image for which the example in the introduction is only one of many. From small town to metropolis, news reporting on young people as a group proves to be consistently negative. For example, on the night of March 5, 2001, CBS news anchor Dan Rather opened his national broadcast with the statement, “School shootings in this country have become an epidemic” (Hancock, 2002, p. 76). Images of guns, frightened students, and frantic parents filled television screens as media stations across the country reported that one student killed two classmates and injured 13 others at Santana High School in Santee, California. That night, instead of reporting on the tragedy itself, or providing perspective, or context for understanding school shootings, the media deployed loaded language (i.e., *The Monsters Next Door*, 1999, cover) inflaming erroneous and unsupported fears of rising school crime in every neighborhood.

Over the past 10 years, studies of how adolescents are depicted in popular media have reached a near unanimous conclusion. An analysis of 327 stories in the *Los Angeles Times* in the first 6 months of 1997 found that even by conservative measurements, youths were represented in stories about homicide, violent crime, and violence as a public issue five times more frequently than adults (Males, 2006). Two other studies were produced by the Berkeley Media Studies Group (2000). The first found that two-thirds of the news reports on violence on major television stations featured youths or young adults (Dorfman et al., 1997). And the second examined more than 3000 articles in 2000 and found that violence and educational policy dominated newspaper coverage about youth (Dorfman et al., 1997). The Youth Media Council's (2000, p. 5) studies of San Francisco and Oakland, California news outlets found similar results. Citing the larger picture, high school youth investigators themselves reported: “Despite a 33 percent decline in juvenile crime since 1993, two-thirds of the American public still believe crime is rising.” Even a recent study of more than 8000 stories in British newspapers by the professional society, Women in Journalism, found negative stereotyping of young people as violent and “loutish” (Garner, 2009).

Book-length investigations have also found widespread, implacable bias against young people in news media treatments depicting supposed epidemics of violence, crime, drug abuse, mental illness, and immorality among young people (see Best, 2001, 2004; Glassner, 1996; Sternheimer, 2009). And there is ample evidence that these

negative portrayals of youth behavior are widely promoted in adult non-fiction literature as well (for a sampling of the monographs consistent with this claim, see Garbarino, 1999; Hardy & Laszloffy, 2005; Pipher, 1995; Prothrow-Stith & Spivak, 2006; Simmons, 2002; Twenge, 2006).

Vincent Schiraldi, president of the Justice Policy Institute, a research and public policy group based in Washington, DC stated, “Journalists are scaring the life out of parents and school officials about their violent kids. The truth is, kids are no more violent today than they were twenty years ago. And schools are not the locus of homicide that the media portrays” (Hancock, 2002, p. 77). Indeed, as discussed later, law enforcement, federal surveys, and public health reports on crime unanimously contradict these unrelenting and dire media representations.

The unbalanced and persistent portrayal of young people as violent has predictable effects on public perceptions. Polls by the advocacy group, Chicago's Youth Vision, the Orange County (California) survey, and nationwide pollsters have consistently found that representative samples of the public vastly overestimate the amount of crime young people commit and their own odds of being victimized by a violent youth (Males, 1999). A number of studies have found that due to media depictions, the public believes that crime by youths is perpetually rising, even when it has been falling for years, and that young people commit vastly more crime than they do; it supports harsher treatment of young people as a result of these beliefs (Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001). Surely libraries are not immune to the preponderance of these ubiquitous, negative, and erroneous images.

3. Procedures

This paper provides the first content analysis of news stories about young adults that also attempts to raise and tease out questions, concerns, and potential implications of how youth portrayals in the media may impact library service. It concentrates on news and feature stories about young adults in two daily California newspapers over a consecutive three-month period. The paper seeks to understand the institutional implications of these portrayals of young adults: How do popular media depict young adults? What are the potential connections between these media depictions and library policies? What are the implications for resources and services for young adults? In providing a critical examination of some of these media patterns, it may be possible to help libraries become better and more critically informed about the actual behaviors of youth, and thus begin institutional discussions about more realistic service approaches for and with the youth age group that constitutes such a large portion of library users.

Students in a graduate seminar at San Jose State University's School of Library and Information Science (SJSU SLIS) in California systematically executed a content analysis of print media depictions of young people with a particular eye toward communities that differed from the urban areas that have historically attracted attention. The intention was to see if media portrayals of young adults in California's smaller cities differed from those in its major cities. Students surveyed two daily California newspapers, the *Bakersfield Californian*, and the *El Dorado Mountain Democrat*.

These newspapers were read every day for 3 consecutive months between January and March 2007 and examined for the ways in which they portrayed young people in their respective communities. Each newspaper was read by a student in the class, which specifically examined representations of young adults and explored their potential impacts on the library's institutional responses. All articles that discussed youth as an age group or generation, including those that identified a behavior presumably of the entire age group (i.e., “teens threaten teachers”) were retrieved, examined, and coded by students. The coding was reviewed by the seminar instructor. A total of 149 articles met these criteria.

Students identified and discussed code and consistency first; then, each examined a media source systematically to code its depiction of youth as positive or negative. Student codings proved accurate in large part because, as the results and conclusions demonstrate, the news themes tended to follow a consistent pattern. Inter-rater reliability among the students and instructor approached 100%, since the news themes were not subtle or complicated. They tended to follow a consistent, unambiguous pattern, often using the same terminologies. That is, they either contained negative generalizations about youth as a population, or they did not.

A total of 111 stories were coded as negative because they linked teenagers as an age group or generation (that is, not simply as individual perpetrators) to crime, violence, other social problems, or rising problems, with a narrative rationale provided for each coding. To test if negative image of youth behaviors in the press stemmed simply from accurate reporting, police reports of crime and arrests by age and offense in the two jurisdictions were also examined for levels and trends of actual official offenses committed by youths.

Because the present study concerned general claims about youth as an entire class or generation, sports stories were excluded. There are, of course, positive sports stories as well as those covering civic participation of an individual youth or a school class that, for instance, volunteers to help senior citizens. These positive stories, however, are seldom generalized in the way negative stories are, to characterize all young people. It is far more common to observe claims within the story that the depicted young person as an exception to his/her generation (i.e., “while most teens are at-risk of bad behavior and focused on themselves, Amanda spends her afternoons working with deaf children . . .”). By definition, sports stars and teams represent singular or outstanding exemplars.

Each of the relevant story titles appears listed in the primary sources [see [Appendix A](#)].

The first analysis of local media coverage explored feature stories of youth ages 13–19 from *The Bakersfield Californian*, the largest and only daily newspaper serving Kern County, California (population 840,000). Over the course of 3 months, the newspaper published 129 articles that collectively constructed a general view of young adults.

The second analysis similarly involved the overall portrayal of young adults as reported by El Dorado County's *Mountain Democrat*, reportedly California's oldest periodical. It is currently the leading source of printed news for El Dorado County (population 180,000), with an average circulation of more than 13,000 readers ([Mountain Democrat, 2010](#)). The criteria for selection and examination process were the same as in the first analysis. A total of 30 news stories were retrieved and coded during the three-month period under consideration.

4. Findings: Media depictions of youth

Consistent with previous studies of youth representations in media, the data collected and synthesized from the 3 months under examination demonstrate that coverage in both newspapers strongly featured young adults in crime stories. Both *The Bakersfield Californian* and the *Mountain Democrat* predominantly featured crime and anti-social behavior in their reporting on young adults. Full citations for titles cited in the following sections can be found in [Appendix A](#).

4.1. *The Bakersfield Californian*

Overall *The Bakersfield Californian* published 129 articles on teens, with 70% coded as negative. The topics that received the most attention included teenage violence and crime, victimization of teenagers, and teenagers in the school environment ([Fig. 1](#)).

In general, the newspaper overemphasized violence and crime; 53% of the total articles illustrated teenagers as victims or perpetrators of violence and crime, or both. The articles explicitly identified not

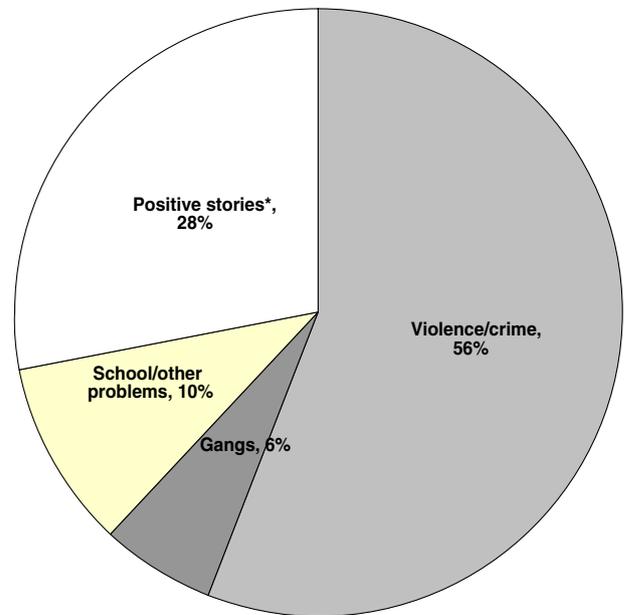


Fig. 1. Distribution of youth issues stories in the *Bakersfield Californian* and *Mountain Democrat* (El Dorado County). *For coding, see [Procedures](#).

individuals but the entire teenage social category with crime (e.g., “Teens try to create fake snow day with post on school site,” “Two teens accused of tagging,” “Teens arrested for blaze at garage used as mosque,” “Teen arrested in Ridgecrest in assault with go-cart,” “Teens’ fight leaves one seriously injured,” “Mystery handgun not linked to teen’s stabbing,” “Teen shoots another teen in face at entrance to ER,” and “Two teenage boys killed in mysterious garage blaze”). Aside from the journalistic ethics at question in categorizing an entire age demographic based upon discrete incidents, the images of all young people are advanced as the problem, not the behaviors of particular individuals. This journalistic practice constitutes media-hype and would likely not pass an editor’s scrutiny for any other social group ([Vasterman, 2005](#)).

Stories on teenagers and gang violence accounted for another 7% of the articles (“Death of 14-year-old likely gang-related”). In particular, stories that mentioned racial minorities, such as Blacks, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, typically focused on violence or crime. This theme of racializing youth crime was not only apparent in the Maplewood Library discussed above but is also consistent in many other sources detecting negative media portrayals of nonwhite populations (see [Dorfman et al., 1997](#); [Males, 1999](#)).

Nearly 40% of *The Bakersfield Californian* articles connected teenagers and education. Of these, a quarter, or 10% of the total sample, concerned school violence. Victimizers included teachers and other school authorities (“Teacher accused of having sex with student gets 10 years,” “Teacher accused of duct-taping student’s mouth is reassigned”) and other students (“Student arrested on suspicion of murder in school shooting,” “Teen shoots ex-girlfriend in one of two fatal school shootings,” “Bomb threat in Ridgecrest causes high school evacuation,” “Third Ridgecrest bomb scare in 2 days closes middle school,” “Gang threat averted: Internet posting leads Delano to warn schools”).

On the other hand, while not all newspaper articles treating youth in school settings were coded as negative, others concentrated a good deal on education policy rather than on youth themselves. Furthermore, most of the articles on teenagers and education that did not concern school violence presented a positive image of teens as students succeeding at school or in a school-related event, such as an academic competition (e.g., “Area schools get top marks in Virtual Enterprise competition”). Nevertheless, 13% focused on education

problems (“Proficiency level lagging for some Kern eighth graders,” and “Local dropout rates on par with statewide totals”). Overall *The Bakersfield Californian* described teens much more positively when classifying them as students rather than by demographic category as teenagers.

Nine percent of articles depicted teenagers in need of rescue by adults, implicitly projecting or anticipating potential problems without adult intervention (“Teens get tuneup: Shop owner helps lead kids away from a ‘going-nowhere’ future,” and “Selling teens on safety: Ads urge youth to speak up when careless peers are behind the wheel”). Three percent of the 129 articles touched on issues of teenager health and illness (e.g., “Autism in young adults: Options narrow, grow costly as children with disorder age”).

Significantly, and also consistent with other media studies (i.e., Dorfman et al., 1997; Males, 1999) and potentially questionable journalist ethics of youth representations, the newspaper coverage of teenagers in the present analysis strongly favored authoritative sources such as police, school officials, and other officials without balancing the accounts with youth perspectives or the accused. Nearly 39% of articles deployed police representatives as sources, while 16% cited school officials, 11% attorneys (including both prosecutors and defense attorneys), 10% politicians, 10% other officials, and 9% (12) cited professional youth experts.

Not a single article in 129 gave a voice to an accused teenager. Only 10% of the articles on teenage violence or crime quoted teenagers at all (although 29% of articles (38) quoted teens, these citations occurred predominantly in articles related to school or academic achievement). Only one article out of 129 featured an official youth advocate as a source, although 9% of the articles cited parents and, occasionally, other adults who advocated on behalf of youth.

Furthering these negative and compromised representations of youth, *The Bakersfield Californian* rarely published articles on youth engagement in civic or public life. Only three articles in 129 mentioned political activism (e.g., “Students from 9 KHSD schools rally against tobacco at Capitol”). All three did so in the context of youth-as-students not as private teenaged citizens. One article in 129 addressed social issues surrounding young people (“Teen laws violated in workplace”).

4.2. Mountain Democrat

The generalization of crime specifically to teenagers as a demographic was similarly apparent in the *Mountain Democrat* between January and March 2007, occupying 75% of the paper's 20 stories treating young people as a group or generation. Ten other stories on teenagers were rejected for this analysis because they featured youth as individuals. In contrast to *The Bakersfield Californian* findings, the *Mountain Democrat* did not feature a particular topic or story more than once. Nevertheless, stories (ranging from genuinely serious incidents of shooting at cars, an armed robbery, a fatal accident caused by street racers, and a stabbing at a local apartment complex, to less serious stories) were extrapolated into a larger and more generalized social menace.

One less serious story, “Sheriff's report: teen threatens girl with plastic gun at school” (14 March 2007), illustrates how images of youth are created, exploited, and projected. In this story a young teen male had been accused of pointing a plastic gun at a female student. The article stated that although the female student did not feel threatened by the action school, officials nevertheless felt obligated to report the incident to the sheriff's department. The male student was not only reported to law enforcement, but also subsequently suspended and recommended for expulsion from school by administrators reacting more to larger public opinions and fears than to the incident itself. The newspaper's addition of obtrusive headline tags, “threatens” and “gun,” exaggerated the imagined criminal dimension of the situation. And yet the journalist went further to depict teenage

violence in schools as prevalent everywhere and further editorialized (without substantiation) that the only resolution was to call in law enforcement for strict action and punishment.

In one typical article (“Parents key to keeping kids from going astray”), teenagers as a group are depicted as crime-prone, yet only two girls appear as examples. The source is the county's chief probation officer, who urges parents to directly challenge teenager behavior. The author, without citing evidence, depicted youthful criminal activity as rising. Another piece, an editorial (“Stop the killers”), depicted street racing by teenagers as increasing, again without citing evidence. Few of the negative stories quoted the young people involved and none featured Hispanic youth, whose share of the county's population increased from 9% in 1990 to 15% in 2007 (Demographic Research Unit, 2010).

No articles in either newspaper depicted youth civic engagement or positive contributions to the local community. Recent scholarship on the images of youth in popular film reinforce the thesis presented here. “Hollywood films featuring youth promote an image of teenagers as self-absorbed, violent, disconnected from parents, and disengaged from civic life” (Stern, 2005, p. 24). No articles portrayed youth actively absorbed in family life, contributing in the workplace, participating in religious institutions, volunteering, providing community service, or extracurricular activities outside of school; none appeared in a library context. And, despite the fact that one in six California youths lives in poverty, stories about youth poverty, social conditions, and their implications were entirely missing (Males, 2006).

Thus a clear pattern emerges of the coverage of youth in these communities. On the one hand, poor behavior is exaggerated, frequently without evidence, and extrapolated across the entire demographic group, followed quickly by projections of public policy implications. On the other hand, socially positive behaviors and other factors that better contextualize social behaviors are ignored. Further, youth are nearly erased from the record as socially positive civic agents and sources.

As a consequence of these factors, readers could rationally come to understand youth as a demographic category as problematic at best, with little information balancing their perspectives, much exaggeration of a few incidents, no authentic contrasting voices, and no larger social context within which to account for occurrence of these presumptive behaviors. Moreover, analyses have repeatedly found such negative journalistic practices toward youth to be consistent in other media markets. More importantly still, the consistent negative portrayals of youth appear counterfactual.

4.3. The evidence about youth crime and safety in public records

Taken together, the images of teenagers presented in the media under review here (as in other studies) persistently indicate that youth commit a large and/or growing share of crime and violence. But the facts as reported by authoritative sources of crime information present a dramatically different image.

The Criminal Justice Statistics Center (2010) provides detailed annual reports on crime by California county. In the counties these two newspapers serve, Kern and El Dorado, youth crime has declined sharply over the last decade. Indeed, in the area covered by the *Mountain Democrat*, youth offenses actually appear quite rarely. In the 4 years between 1995 and 1999, Kern County youths accounted for an average of 10 murder arrests, 600 violent offenses, and 2500 felonies every year. In 2007, 10 youths were also arrested for murder, but just 480 for violent crimes, and 1900 for felonies.

During those same years, youths age 12–17 comprised 12% of the Kern County's murder and assault victims; in 2007, just 5%, including just two of its 69 homicide victims. Over the entire 1995–2007 period, for instance, just two El Dorado teenagers were arrested for murder, including none in the most recent 5 years. In 2007, violence arrests

had dropped to 31 and total felonies to 186. Between 1995 and 1999, an average of only 50 youths was arrested for any violent offense and 250 for felonies each year.

Public health tabulations by coroners and hospital emergency departments (EPICenter, 2009) confirm and reinforce the trend toward declining violence involving youth. In El Dorado, just one of the county's total of 42 murder victims over the 1995–2007 period was a youth (in 2000), and juvenile assault victimizations dropped from around 12% of the county's total in 1995–1999 to just 6% in 2007. None of these statistics or representations appeared or was referred to in any of the articles in either of the newspapers during the three-month study period.

Declining youth crime, violence, and victimization are also consistent with statewide and national¹ statistics. Between 1995 and 2007, California youth posted 50% declines in felony rates, along with declines of 35% in violent crime and a decline of 64% in homicide (Criminal Justice Statistics Center, 2010). From 1995 through 2006, the rates of murders of youths age 10–17 dropped by 50% nationwide and by 54% in California, and assault injuries of youths reported by hospital emergency departments, which are not aggregated nationally, dropped by 43% in California (EPICenter, 2009). Nationwide, rates of serious, Part I felonies involving youthful arrestees fell by 47% from 1995 through 2007, including declines of 43% in violent crime and 64% in murder rates (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009). The National Crime Victimization Survey (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009), which captures offenses not reported to police, reports even larger declines, exceeding 50%, in both youthful violent offending and victimization through the latest report in 2006. Both at the state and national levels, murder rates of youth declined by 50% from 1995 through 2006 (National Center on Injury Prevention and Control, 2009). The demonstrated decline in anti-social behavior cannot be attributed to youth population declines. Kern County's youth population rose by 20% from 1995 to 2007; El Dorado's youth population increased by 23% (Demographic Research Unit, 2010).

Thus, in addition to the journalistic practices under examination here, it is also reasonable to consider what potential implications these perpetual and consistent images have on libraries as institutions, and what these images suggest to library staff who are asked to play direct public service roles with youth on a daily basis.

5. Discussion

5.1. How do media depictions of young adults impact libraries?

The larger purpose of focusing on media representations of young people in local media is to inaugurate a discussion about what implications these consistently negative and counterfactual portrayals might have on library practitioners, libraries, and on the direct public service relationships that connect the institution to young people. To what degree might these media representations and their translations into funding, policy, service, and research impact resources for young adults?

5.2. Implications for library policy

Like advocates for youth services in many fields, libraries must present their appeals to policy, funding, and governing bodies and other agencies within the context of this environment of consistently

¹ Nationally, FBI Uniform Crime Reports (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009) estimate that in 2007, persons under age 18 accounted for just 12.3% of all violent crimes, including 5.6% of the crime gaining the most media attention, homicide. This is a substantially lower proportion than in 1995, when youths accounted for 14.1% of violent crimes and 8.8% of murders. Since middle- and high-school-age teens age 12–17 comprise about 12% of the total over-12 population, youths appear to contribute no more violent crime, and considerably fewer murders, than do adult age groups in proportion to their share of the population.

negative and erroneous media depictions of their clients and users. These popular images may well foster, reflect, and exaggerate long-standing fearful public attitudes toward youth. The media have a strong influence on the beliefs and attitudes of society through an agenda-setting effect, where they give prominence to an issue by reinforcing the opinions and views the public is assumed to hold on a topic.

When news media connect crime to teenagers as a social category in ways not applied or acceptable to other groups in society, to what degree do these negative representations perpetuate a view that youth as an entire demographic are problematic and thus less entitled to an equitable distribution of resources? When teen crime stories are frequent, or when even minor incidents are used to upholster elaborate generalizations of anti-social behavior, the public comes to assume that crime by youths is widespread and rising (Hancock, 2002; Youth Media Council, 2000). Other news media depictions are more mixed, depicting student constructions of youth more positively than teen constructions while still lending distinct impressions of generational and intergenerational conflict. The above news stories were cited to illustrate that negative coverage of young people as perpetrators and victims of violence, crime, and danger is not confined to the large media markets previously studied, such as San Francisco, Chicago, and Los Angeles but extends to smaller cities and even towns as well.

Pervasive and powerful negative media representations of youth were found in the media under study. When compared to police and public health reports, however, these negative depictions of youth bear little resemblance to established sources of factual data. Can it be too far a stretch to implicate these perceptions as contributing to the constant concern of libraries and librarians on young people in libraries? The issue of youth behavior continues to remain one of the most popular in-service training topics for library staff. To what degree then do dubious media depictions of young people continue as a factor in the calculations and formations of young adult library services and policy?

5.3. Implications for the library professionals and direct YA services

The challenges and implications of these findings for direct library services to young adults are significant and involve many aspects of the library's professional community. As news coverage continues to focus primarily on criminalized representations of teenagers, the media-consuming public's beliefs that youth crime is rising continues to deepen, as do beliefs that young adults are generally dangerous and need to be controlled. What are the implications for library usage rules and enforcement on the daily interactions between staff, the public, and youth? Might library staff grow resentful, based on these assumptions, by seemingly or actually being placed in charge of policing, rather than providing profession service? What feelings does this approach engender among staff, in terms of being prepared for delivering service? Questions might also be raised not simply about the topics and content of youth services professional development, but their frequency and availability as well. In the wake of a negative media spiral, are there implications for withholding, denying, or ignoring resources that might otherwise be devoted to professional development and LIS curriculum and research?

Before considering staff development, however, there might be questions to ask of LIS student experience, as well. Do persistently negative portrayals of youth impact the choice of library school students to emphasize children's librarianship over young adult specialization? Do they impact the way in which YA librarians review their collections (both fiction and non-fiction)? Do consistently poor representations of youth dissuade LIS scholars from advancing a young adult services research agenda? These concerns are consistent as well with impressions of youth shared among pre-service teachers (Finders, 1998/1999). At the very least, it is reasonable to conclude

that library professionals might be hesitant to consider youth as civic participants.

It also seems reasonable to assume that library administrators and governmental officials, who may have little personal daily contact with young people, can be especially susceptible to prevailing and consistent representations of youth in local media. If they obtain their information about this age group from news media, what might their impressions of teenagers, especially males, be? To what degree do library administrations, governing bodies, and non-youth services library staff hold similar beliefs? What do library leaders and policy makers expect of the library as a consequence? Do they believe that youth are as dangerous as media portray? A little less dangerous? If so, then how do they intend to enact these beliefs in policy and service provision to protect the larger population of library users? Similarly, how do these stereotypical perceptions influence resource allocations for young-adult services? Under these circumstances, it is easy to understand how assumptions might form that teenagers, as an entire age demographic, represent a nuisance needing to be controlled, merely tolerated, difficult to work with, or require stricter rules and firmer regulation. What are the consequences when libraries fear or anticipate that common youth behaviors seem to escalate out of control, as illustrated in the Maplewood library example above? These questions raise issues that are far from seeing this demographic as young citizens deserving specialized professional skills, techniques, methods, spaces, resources, and research.

There may be other service implications, as well. In this era of teen advisory groups (TAGs), library administrators and staff may only look fondly on particular profiles of young adults, such as those found in rare, positive portrayals of youth in newspapers: honor students, academic Decathlon champions, and prospective college students. What is the likelihood that these specially anointed youth become singled out as generational models, while those youth who may not fit those profiles (a much larger percentage) continue to be institutionally and systematically marginalized? This aspect of selective patron preference, long a preoccupation of reference librarians, also raises the serious and ever-present questions of racial, gender, and social class bias, all layered over anti-youth attitudes. To what degree are these attitudes, present everywhere in our culture, at play in library youth policies, services, and practices?

Beyond the potential implications for library policy, staff, and administration lurk additional questions about relationships among and between youth themselves (De Groof, 2008). Unlikely to be immune from popular negative media stereotypes of young people, libraries have a stake in asking: Do youth themselves harbor negative assumptions of their own age group? While some probably imagine themselves and their friends to be somehow special and different, do youth develop views that the majority of other teenagers are rowdy library troublemakers? If so, this can present tangible and negative implications for libraries initiating youth-oriented programming. If youth, or their parents, perceive other youth as dangerous, then the possibilities for libraries to serve as a core community-building asset among youth can be compromised. Young people may also avoid a library populated with librarians and other unfamiliar adults (patrons) because they might feel that all adults regard them antagonistically and with distrust. These and other implications of prevalent negative youth representations clearly contribute to the enduring numbers of teenagers who have historically viewed their own libraries with disdain, disinterest, and distaste (Chelton, 2002; Cook, Parker, & Pettijohn, 2005; Marston, 2001; Rothbauer, 2009; Rubin, 2004).

Perhaps the best way to approach the possible implications of negative images of youth and library services is through an examination of the physical spaces libraries allocate for young adults. Space institutionally manifests what services and what populations matter. And a recent study of small public libraries, for example, found that libraries devoted approximately only 2.2% of facility square footage to their young adult users, this despite the widely received

estimate that youth represent nearly 25% of all users (Bernier, 2009). Certainly this inequitable distribution of library space is consistent with popular representations of young adults in the media. It systematically limits the degree to which youth feel welcome and represented in their libraries. It limits the size of collections, staff, and other information resources targeted at their interests and needs. It tangibly endorses youth as a marginalized and nearly invisible population of library users to staff, parents, teachers, administrators, policy makers, and youth themselves. More generally, unless libraries are somehow immune from these constant and widely promoted negative views of youth, then they are likely to be as susceptible to exaggerations and fears of adolescents in public space as the general population.

5.4. Areas for continuing research

A key potential for future research lies in articulating and probing connections between youth representations in popular media and library services. To what degree, for instance, are the historically meager resources allocated to young adult services due to institutional visions of who youth are and what they do? Are there connections between policies, resources, services, and research the library provides and the community of decision-maker perceptions of youth? What data, analysis, and vision of youth inform these perceptions? How and to what degree are these policies instituted, enforced, documented, and evaluated? What institutional and educational processes are necessary to measure and update the profession's attitudes about young adults?

Like other institutions, libraries are to some degree vulnerable to incessant and inaccurate representations of particular populations. Thus, it should come as no surprise that libraries have over time institutionally lacked sufficient professional capacity to attract and hold young adults as consistent library users. And while the New Jersey library profiled in the introduction did eventually amend and enhance its young adult service offerings, persistent negative images of youth initially made the story a popular rallying cry for all those who felt validated and vindicated upon learning of the library's initial response.

6. Conclusion

Library professionals might use these findings about the negative and erroneous representations of youth in media for several purposes. Formally addressing stereotypical viewpoints about young people might be advanced within library administrations to facilitate discussions about service, policy, planning, resource allocation, and evaluation for young adult library services. Youth librarians might circulate the findings advanced here among their colleagues to begin informal conversations on how the representations of teens in the media impact library services and staff attitudes toward youth. Libraries could further promote adult and youth interactions by more thoroughly involving library staff in the training of young adult volunteers. Libraries might also find ways strategically in which to increase the number of positive exchanges between young adult volunteers and adult patrons by assisting older adults with the library's growing digital resources and in navigating the internet. Finally, knowing that the vast majority of young people do not behave as depicted in popular media might also reduce and better mediate library claims with respect to otherwise specious, vague, and over-generalized youth-at-risk constructions many continue to engage and promote.

In terms of working directly with youth, library professionals could furthermore employ the current analysis to discuss issues of youth representation in the media among young people themselves (Elmborg, 2006). Through envisioning and developing teen advisory groups (TAGs) and/or teen volunteer programs (TVP) as mechanisms for promoting critical media consumption about, among, and between

youth, libraries can better facilitate self-advocacy for improved media coverage of young people. These youth development practices are increasingly common among young adult specialist librarian professionals (Young Adult Library Services Association, 2002). Both approaches can actively address, contrast, and invert negative stereotypes of teenagers. Such projects could use library resources to research facts about actual documented local youth behavior and engage media outlets as advocates for fair representation, as well as respond to distorted or biased coverage (for a variety of examples of such responses, see YouthFacts.org, 2010). Libraries might also invite local journalists to participate in interviews conducted by TAG or TVP members, establishing the library as a powerful venue and voice in which to challenge poor local coverage, or recognize more balanced new stories. By involving youth in the process, libraries would not only increase critical media consumption, but also provide library administrators and staff with positive impressions of civically engaged young adults (Poyntz, 2006; Sternheimer, 2009).

Beyond the library itself, these findings can help initiate relationships cultivating youth's own media organs to offer more accurate, balanced, and objective news coverage of their peers, while challenging local media coverage through editorials and opinion essays (among many such youth-produced media). Articles might include stories about the library and youth writing for their own school papers. Making budding journalists aware of the bias and disparity that exists in local newspaper coverage of youth means that if some of these young people become established journalists themselves, they may serve as advocates both for libraries and youth in their professional practice.

Beyond being the first scholarly attempt to examine what connections may exist between social views of youth and library services, the study is also innovative in using content analysis as a methodological approach to vexing LIS concerns (Robinson, 2006). While this three-month content analysis of the representations of young adults in mid-sized and small local community newspapers produced results consistent with previous national research on media portrayals of youth, many concerns linger. The continuing loss of readership by major print media, especially newspapers, suggests two implications. First, the exploitation of youth for attention-getting headlines manufactured from even their smallest behavioral mishaps is likely to worsen, not abate. Second, as alternative forms of media continue building popularity, particularly among young people themselves, media amenable to and capable of supporting more youth-produced journalism potentially positions adolescents to better control their own representations and advance countervailing narratives. Libraries might be well advised, then, to better explore, deepen, and promote their collections of these youth-produced media, in order to balance the negative images of young people likely to continue in mainstream media outlets.

Ultimately, libraries could use this analysis as a springboard for strengthening relationships between news outlets, administrations, elected officials, staff, the general public, and a broader vision of the civic roles youth can play in their communities. It is difficult to imagine that libraries as institutions would be entirely immune from the potential consequences of constantly viewing youth as liabilities. Without critical assessments of the ways in which major media portray young adults, the circumstances in which libraries serve young people will likely remain difficult or worsen. The degree to which unmitigated and unsupportable negative media portrayals of youth impact services across the library's profile remains an important and deserving topic for future research.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix A. Primary sources, sorted by title

A.1. *The Bakersfield Californian*

- 500 high school students face off at Lee Webb Math Field Day. 2007, March 12, p. B4.
- Abducted boy likely kept in mental bind. 2007, January 15, p. A6. Leonard, C.
- Antioch adopts curfew for teens after shooting death. 2007, March 22, p. A10.
- Area schools get top marks in Virtual Enterprise competition. 2007, March 31, p. B4.
- Armed teen brought to KMC with stab wound, officials say. 2007, January 4, p. B5.
- Athlete blends faith, baseball. 2007, January 24, p. B1. Branco, S.
- Attempted kidnapping suspect arrested after hiding in Jacuzzi. 2007, March 21, p. B5.
- Autism in young adults: Options narrow, grow costly as children with disorder age. 2007, March 18, pp. A1, A6. Schencker, L.
- Black college fair offers scholarships, admittance. 2007, February 9, p. B3. Branco, S.
- Black youth disclose hope, pain in survey: Report aims to go beyond broad stereotypes. 2007, February 1, p. A6. Irvine, M.
- Bomb threat in Ridgecrest causes high school evacuation. 2007, March 22, p. B5.
- Boy charged with murder in fight that ended in stabbing. 2007, January 12, p. B3.
- Cataloging out casualties: BHS class, veterans research the stories behind Kern's fallen. 2007, March 5, pp. B1, B2. Mayer, S.
- Christian youths rally in S. F.: 2-day evangelical event attracts few protestors. 2007, March 11, p. B8. Wong, M.
- Cold case heats up: DNA test yields clues that lead to murder arrest. 2007, February 2, pp. A1, A3. Belton, D. C.
- Community rallies for anti-gang bill. 2007, March 17, p. B3. Kotowski, J.
- Court ponders intent of 'Bong Hits 4 Jesus.' 2007, March 20 p. A5. Sherman, M.
- Court says CYA not right place: Teen convicted in boy's shooting death can be rehabilitated elsewhere. 2007, January 16, pp. B1, B2. Logan, J.
- Death of 14-year-old likely gang-related. 2007, March 26, pp. B1, B2. Shepard, S.
- Delano teacher charged in alleged choking of student. 2007, January 24, p. A1. Schencker, L.
- Delano teen arrested on suspicion of stealing property. 2007, March 5, p. B3.
- Dream builders honored. 2007, March 25, p. B6.
- Drive-by shooting injures 2. 2007, January 13, p. B4.
- EBTV keeps East High tuned in: News program run by students airs daily. 2007, January 15, pp. A1, A3. Branco, S.
- Event focuses on youth leaders. 2007, March 29, p. B4. Medina, L.
- Ex-coach, recruiter accused of having sex with teens. 2007, January 28, p. A11. Adcox, S.
- Experts tout restrictions of licenses for teens. 2007, February 12, p. A4. McCormick, J.
- Ex-priest pleads not guilty to sex with teen. 2007, March 17, p. B6. Associated Press.
- Firewoman of the future: BFD's explorer program lets Liberty High junior learn ropes before joining academy. 2007, January 22, pp. B1, B2. Kotowski, J. F.
- For teens, the car is the danger zone. 2007, February 6, pp. A1, A3. Brody, J. E.
- Four KHSD students injured after vehicle hits school bus. 2007, March 21, p. B5.
- Gang threat averted: Internet posting leads Delano to warn schools. 2007, March 31, pp. B1, B2. Burger, D.
- Girl's 'so gay' remark stirs debate over hate speech: Parents: Teens shouldn't be punished for slang. 2007, March 1, p. A5. Leff, L.

- Going the extra mile: Couple go out of their way to make kids feel welcome. 2007, March 3, p. B1. Burger, D.
- Hearing set for Delano teacher: Not guilty plea entered in choking case. 2007, January 30, p. B2. Schencker, L.
- Hiccups back for Florida girl. 2007, March 17, p. A13. Associated Press
- High school board passes motion on surveys. 2007, February 6, p. B5. Kotowski, J.
- High School Champs: East High soccer team meets with Schwarzenegger. 2007, March 16, pp. B1, B3. Pollard, V.
- High school seniors not making progress on math, reading tests. 2007, February 23, p. A7. Zuckerbrod, N.
- Hispanic girls: Black groups beat them. 2007, February 5, p. B6. Associated Press.
- Holocaust survivor, youth talk history. 2007, March 9, pp. B1, B3. Mayer, S.
- Home latest to be hit by vehicle. 2007, February 12, p. B1. Schuster, R.
- Investigation ongoing into case of violent family feud. 2007, February 6, p. B3.
- Japanese students to visit city 2007, March 22, p. B5. Medina, L.
- Jesus chant lands students in sensitivity training. 2007, February 25, p. A5.
- Juvenile faces 128 charges, including theft, vandalism. 2007, March 15, p. A8.
- Kern teams take second, third in contest. 2007, February 10, pp. B1, B3. Shepard, S.
- L. A. gang crackdown launched after death. 2007, January 19, p. B8. Marquez, J.
- L. A. steps up battle against gangs: Rising bloodshed cited as primary motivation. 2007, February 9, p. A4. Glazer, A.
- L. A. to crack down on gang problem: Officials, targeting rise in violence, vow action. 2007, January 22, p. A4. Marquez, J.
- Local actress wows kids. 2007, March 2, p. B1. Branco, S.
- Local dropouts rates on par with statewide totals. 2007, February 25, p. A1, A3. Kotowski, J.
- Making the tough choices: Students, business leaders learn from dialogue at Business Leadership and Ethics conference. 2007, March 7, pp. B1, B3. Schencker, L.
- Man arrested on suspicion of sexually assaulting teen. 2007, February 15, p. B5.
- Man sentenced to two months in case involving young boy. 2007, March 21, p. B5.
- Man, son facing arrest for actions linked to stabbing. 2007, March 21, p. B5.
- Men, teens charged in attempted carjacking. 2007, February 1, p. B4.
- More teens smoke: Fewer stores selling to minors, but tobacco use is still on rise. 2007, March 8, pp. A1, A3. Hagedorn, E.
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- Mystery handgun not linked to teen's stabbing. 2007, January 5, p. B5.
- Names of other drive-by shooting victims released. 2007, March 27, p. B6.
- Nine of 10 black youths convicted in beatings. 2007, January 27, p. B6. Risling, G.
- Oildale teen's good deed on the money: North High student finds \$8900 in street, tracks down owner. 2007, March 3, pp. A1, A3. Shearer, J.
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- Parents rally for children's acquittal: Black youths accused of assailing white trio. 2007, January 22, p. B3. Associated Press.
- Parents speak out against teacher: Man wouldn't have attacked student, supporters say. 2007, January 14, pp. A1, A3. Belton, D. C.
- Police searching for 14-year-old. 2007, March 21, p. A3. Branco, S.
- Police seek Secret Witness caller for shooting details. 2007, January 26, B2.
- Pride, prose for students: Months of work pay off in county language festival. 2007, January 21, pp. B1, B3. Schencker, L.
- Proficiency level lagging for some Kern eighth graders. 2007, January 9, pp. B1, B3. Kotowski, J.
- Prosecutors won't seek teens' death: Age a factor in case of homeless man's slaying. 2007, January 6, p. A6. Alanez, T.
- Racially charged beating trial puts community on edge. 2007, January 26, p. B9. Risling, G.
- Relatives cited in party: Family's home site of event with underage drinking. 2007, February 16, pp. B1, B3. Kotowski, J.
- The road to college: Sallie Mae Fund tour bus brings financial aid information to local schools. 2007, January 27, pp. B1, B3. Branco, S.
- Search still on for answers to teen's motives for shooting. 2007, February 15, p. A4.
- Second person arrested in connection with killing. 2007, January 13, p. B4.
- Selling teens on safety: Ads urge youth to speak up when careless peers are behind the wheel. 2007, January 25, p. A3.
- Senator faces charges in boy's suicide. 2007, March 28, p. A9. Nephin, D.
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- Stockdale again takes first place: Delano's Chavez High takes second; BHS third. 2007, February 4, pp. B1, B5. Burger, J.
- Stockdale fails to advance. 2007, March 25, p. B6. Shearer, J.
- Stockdale students win local pageants. 2007, January 28, p. B9. Branco, S.
- Stockdale takes fourth in state championships. 2007, March 26, p. B1.
- Striving for excellence: Arvin students prepare for We the People state event. 2007, February 2, pp. B1, B3. Schencker, L.
- Student arrested on suspicion of murder in school shooting. 2007, January 4, p. A4.
- Student tags school bus with L. A. mayor onboard. 2007, February 27, p. A8.
- Students demand Chavez holiday. 2007, March 31, p. B5. Prengaman, P.
- Students from 9 KHSD schools rally against tobacco at Capitol. 2007, March 27, p. B5.
- Students put their ideas to the test: Annual science fair draws about 600 young people. 2007, March 22, pp. B1, B4. Schencker, L.
- Students shine with power of their words. 2007, March 2, p. A4. Burger, D.
- Students take medals in state Academic Decathlon. 2007, March 19, p. B3. Price, R.
- Students' event honors families of local soldiers. 2007, March 4, p. B1. Hagedorn, E.
- Survey: Youth's obsession with materialism growing each decade. 2007, January 23, p. A5. Irvine, M.
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- Teen charged as adult in murder. 2007, February 10, p. B5. Associated Press.
- Teen dies at same spot as friend while attending memorial. 2007, March 26, p. A7. Associated Press.
- Teen dies of gunshot wounds. 2007, January 28, p. B7.
- Teen laws violated in workplace. 2007, March 5, p. A6. Johnson, C. K.
- Teen shoots another teen in face at entrance to ER. 2007, February 20, p. A4.

- Teen shoots ex-girlfriend in one of two fatal school shootings. 2007, March 8, p. A6. Associated Press.
- Teen suspected of shooting five partygoers, killing one. 2007, March 12, p. A5.
- Teen's death spurs suit. 2007, February 10, p. B1. Branco, S.
- Teenage mother to stand trial in infant daughter's death. 2007, March 7, p. A5.
- Teens accused in slaying now also face conspiracy charges. 2007, March 28, p. B5.
- Teens arrested for blaze at garage used as mosque. 2007, February 3, p. A4.
- Teens convicted in beating of woman get probation. 2007, February 3, p. A4. Schwartz, N.
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- Teens try to create fake snow day with post on school site. 2007, February 12, p. A6.
- Teens' fight leaves one seriously injured. 2007, January 24, p. B1.
- Third Ridgecrest bomb scare in 2 days closes middle school. 2007, March 23, p. B9.
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- Tourney halted after fight escalates. 2007, March 25, p. B1. Schuster, R.
- Tracking students with an ID key to lowering dropout rate. 2007, February 25, p. A3. Williams, J.
- Truancy sweep nets dozens. 2007, January 25, p. B3. Schencker, L.
- Two teenage boys killed in mysterious garage blaze. 2007, January 16, p. A4.
- Two teens accused of tagging. 2007, February 14), p. B6.
- Verdict same: Stockdale on top: Team wins for 11th straight year, advances to state event. 2007, January 28, pp. B1, B3. Medina, L.
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- Manufacturing class builds more than projects. 2007, March 14, p. B1. Flinn, Daniel.
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