A FrameWorks Institute E-Zine
Out of Whack with the Facts: The Stubborn Case of Youth Violence in Public Perception

Americans become understandably concerned when disproportionate numbers of our youth perpetrate or are the victims of violence. After all, it is a fundamental obligation of adult society to nurture and protect the young. The escalation of youth violence from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s in the United States led to public outcry, sensational media coverage, scholarly warnings, and punitive juvenile justice policy. And, while the incidence of youth violence has significantly abated over the last fifteen years, it remains a cultural, political and social dilemma that continues to dominate public discourse. What makes this issue so durable, despite improvements in the overall trends documenting decreased violence among youth and improving conditions overall? What accounts for its seeming immunity from factual analysis? Why are "true facts" discounted in favor of old realities? That is the focus of this e-zine, which provides an opportunity for experts and advocates to consider how the pictures in our heads drive the discourse, trumping, twisting and triumphing over all information to the contrary.

The persistence of youth crime as a central concern of public discourse is a function of three important elements:

1. Trends in youth violence;
2. The conflation of race and youth violence; and
3. The role of media in the race-violence linkage.

As we will discuss, the relationship between these factors helps explain why it is difficult for violence prevention advocates to gain traction towards a progressive youth policy agenda. Additionally, advocates face two more challenges: difficulties in the public's thinking about "prevention" and difficulties considering violence in the context of surrounding environments. Most importantly, the way in which youth violence is *framed*, rather than its actual incidence, likely determines how the public perceives the issue. This, in turn, suggests strategies for reframing violence prevention messages as a mechanism to drive alternative public considerations of the problem. This e-zine draws from a decade of FrameWorks' research on violence in related issue areas to suggest why certain strategies fail and why others might succeed.

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Trends in Youth Violence

Public opinion data indicate that Americans continue to perceive crime as a serious problem, particularly at the national level. For example, Gallup reports that in 2010, three in five Americans believe that crime is an “extremely” or “very serious” problem (Figure 1). This figure is up noticeably from levels in the middle of the decade and is at about the same level as in 2000. Another way to measure this view is to examine perceptions over time about the extent to which crime has risen compared to the previous year (Figure 2). Here we see a v-shaped trend. From the late-1980s to about 2000, people perceived crime to have decreased relative to the previous year. After 2000, however, crime was seen as having risen from year to year, although in truth, it has not returned to late 1980s levels.[i]

Figure 1

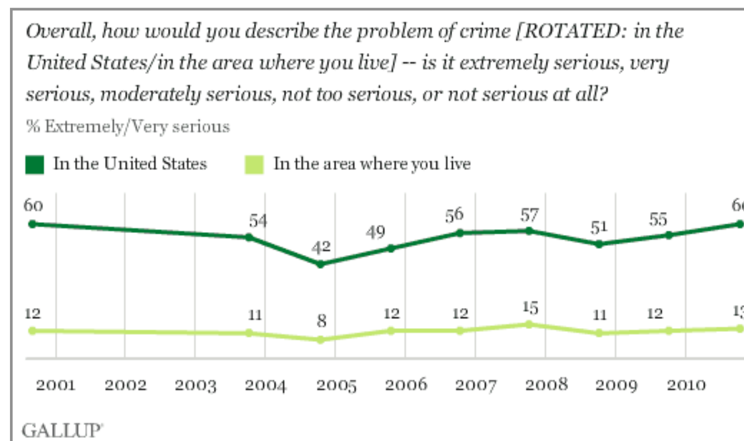
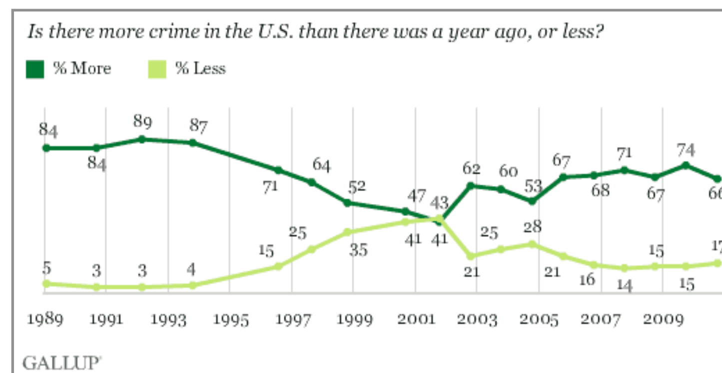


Figure 2



In 2007 The National Council on Crime and Delinquency commissioned a national survey of Americans’ attitudes about juvenile crime and justice. Over one-half of the survey respondents “strongly agreed” with the statement that “crime committed by young people is a problem in our communities,” while another 35% “somewhat agreed” with the statement.[ii] The point is that Americans continue to see youth violence as an important problem. What is interesting, however, is that public *perceptions* of the salience and

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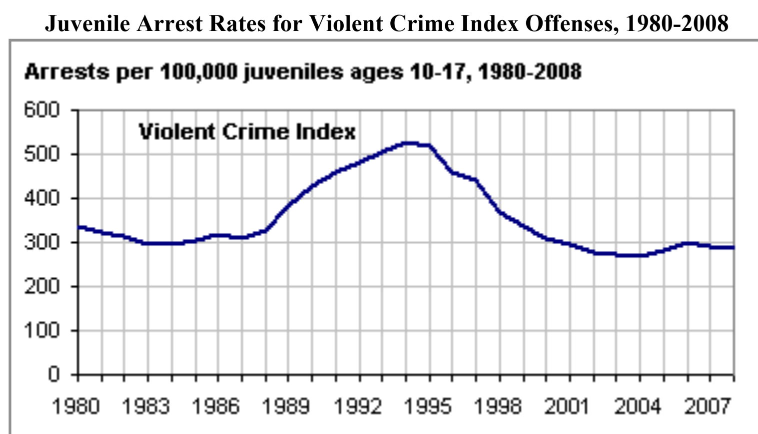
incidence of crime, particularly as it relates to youth, do not correlate very tightly with variations in the actual crime rate.

In Figure 3 we see that the incidence of juvenile violence – as measured by juvenile arrest rates for violent crime over the last three decades – exhibits great variability, spiking in the mid-1990s. At the time, pundits, reporters, and scholars issued dire warnings of "super-predators," roving bands of remorseless, soulless young people intent on committing random acts of violence throughout their communities. The afterglow of this narrative clouded the fact that, since the mid-1990s, there has been a significant drop in juvenile arrests for violent crimes. This drop was so steep, in fact, that by the mid-to-late 00s, arrest rates dipped below 1980 levels.

Figure 3

Juvenile Arrest Rates for Violent Crime Index Offenses, 1980-2008



Source: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Programs (OJJDP)

This national trend is reflected in most states. In California, for instance, juvenile arrest rates were more than three times as high in 1993 as they were in 2007.[iii] In sum, despite a noteworthy reduction in the incidence of violent crime, public perception remains stubbornly at odds with the facts of the matter. This type of disjuncture is not uncommon; there are many forces that can result in a public discourse that is out of whack with the facts. This e-zine focuses on a prime suspect: the "pictures in our heads" or the degree to which learned and mediated expectations about the world drive perceptions.[iv] When the American public considers violence generally, or youth violence more particularly, their thinking is informed by *cultural models*,[1] the implicit shared understandings and assumptions that guide thinking about social issues. In the following sections, we

[1] Individuals rely on a relatively small set of broad, *general* cultural models to organize and make sense of information about a wide range of *specific* issues and information. Some of the models that individuals use are what we call "dominant," while others are more "recessive," or latent, in shaping how we process information. Dominant models are those that are very "easy to think." They are activated and used with a high degree of immediacy and are persistent in their power to shape thinking and understanding. Once a dominant model has been activated, it is difficult to shift to or employ another model to think about the issue. Recessive models, on the other hand, are not characterized by the same immediacy or persistence.

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investigate the cultural models that people use to reason about violence in its many forms, combined with images of youth, stereotypes about race and misunderstandings about prevention.

Cultural Models About Youth

There is little doubt that the cultural models that Americans harbor about adolescents strengthen a negative association between youth and socially undesirable behavior, including crime.[v] FrameWorks' research has found that Americans:

- Believe today's teens grow up in a more dangerous environment than in the past, with more potential for risk-taking and destructive behaviors, and more determinism in the outcomes;
- Believe youth today are fundamentally different from past generations; and
- Believe that many negative outcomes are the direct result of a decline in values among today's youth.

Furthermore, most people are not persuaded by factual rebuttals that demonstrate most American youth to be respectful, engaged in volunteering, and in tune with adult values. In this respect, one might say that Americans are good learners, as FrameWorks' research demonstrated *no* incidence on entertainment television of an adolescent involved in the community and few examples in news media of ordinary youth going about their peaceful introduction into community roles.[vi] These negative cultural models interfere with their ability to assimilate new information about incidence and trends in youth violence, to reason thoughtfully about the issue, and to see an array of potential solutions. These already extant ways of thinking about youth serve to explain and perpetuate a sense that youth are at the root of crime and that this is an escalating problem. But this is not the only cultural model at work in driving public thinking about violence.

Youth Violence and Race

It will come as no surprise that race has been a confounding factor in the public discussion about youth violence. Some of this is based on fact. It is widely known that African-American and Latino youth are disproportionately arrested for violent crimes. Yet, the public's misperception about violence in general persists despite the fact that arrests for African-American juveniles have decreased more than for any other racial group between the mid-1990s and 2008 (Figures 4a-4b).

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Figure 4a

Juvenile Arrest Rates for Violent Crime Index Offenses by Race, 1980-2007

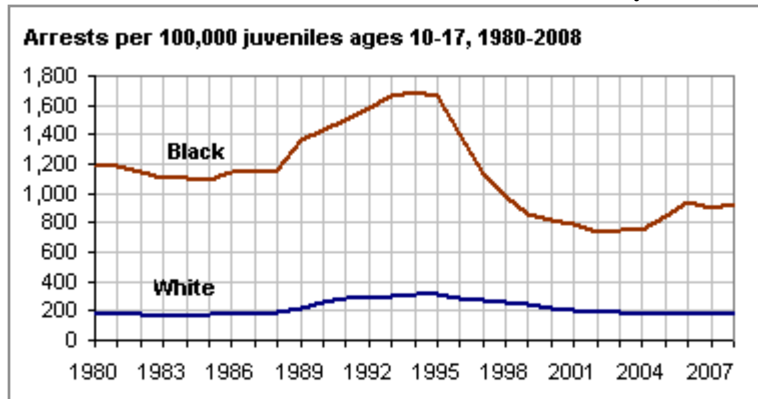
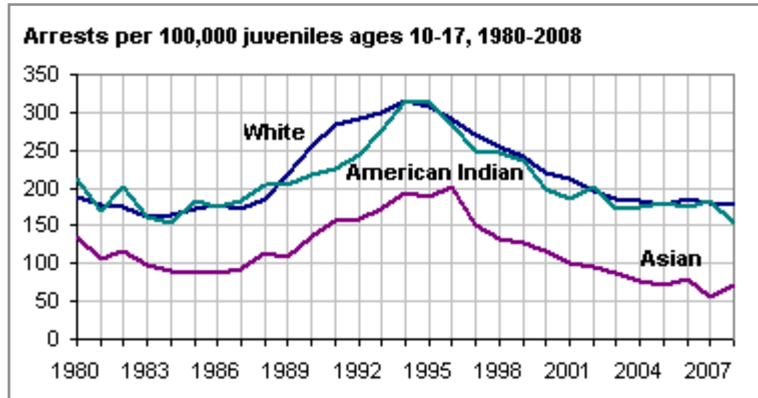


Figure 4b



Source: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Programs (OJJDP)

Nonetheless, the arrest rate for African Americans is still disproportionate to their share of the population. This disparity feeds into a broader narrative about race in this country: the story of the irresponsible and dangerous minority community. This is a community, so the story goes, that allows its youth to be dominated by gang culture, rap music and indiscriminate violence. The upshot is that these youth become emblematic of the failure of some groups to instill the proper values into the younger members of their community. This dynamic prevents the public from asking the question that cries out from the data – why did the violent crime arrest rate drop so dramatically in the African-American community? Part of this omission can be traced to the relationship between the mass media and youth violence, as we discuss below. Moreover, patterns in media coverage connect to these habits of thinking, creating even more challenges for communicators.

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Cultural Models About Race

FrameWorks' research on how Americans think about race reveals several dominant cultural models that reinforce this negative association between African Americans and Latinos and criminal behavior.[vii] They depend on three models, all of them problematic.

1. Historical Progress and Personal Racism
Much of the public reasoning about race is related to the widespread belief that racial matters have improved dramatically in America in the last fifty years. The improvement, many people believe, is the direct result of changes in antidiscrimination laws and policies. What we are left with is the notion that there are still some "bad" racist people, but there is no racism in the culture at large. This makes talking about inequities in law enforcement, sentencing, etc., a non-starter because people don't understand racial bias as existing within systems and institutions.

2. The Self-Making Person
The Self-Making Person narrative is the common belief that one's success or failure in life is individually constructed. In this narrative, a person's ultimate success depends, more than anything else, on themselves – their character, their effort, etc. Racial inequality, then, is explained as a failure by minorities to apply themselves with sufficient effort. Violence is not seen as rooted in environments and conditions surrounding those involved, but becomes completely nested inside one's moral character.

3. Separate Fates
Finally, minority concerns are understood as being disconnected from the shared concerns and aspirations of the broader society. Whites and non-Whites are perceived as having separate fates. Linking violence prevention to improvements in community conditions is a tough sell to those living outside those communities because they don't feel a sense of interconnection. It might be viewed as unfortunate that certain geographic locations experience high crime rates, for example, but it's not a concern to those who don't live there.

These models are primed and reinforced by the media. A FrameWorks review of media coverage of race in four issue areas – health, education, early child development and employment – repeatedly found these three cultural models reinforced and amplified in news coverage. Disparities between racial groups in health and educational outcomes, early childhood, and employment were neatly explained as being due to individual acts of racism; poor character on the part of under-achieving minorities; and of little concern beyond the effects on the individual and his or her immediate family.[viii]

Highlighting disparities as the starting point for a discussion about youth violence prevention is likely to be ineffective for one further reason: explicit racial cuing hardens racial resentment toward minorities and it hardens it most among those who have the highest level of racial resentment to start with.[ix] These findings should not be

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misinterpreted as a recommendation to ignore or deny that race is a part of the structure of inequality in this country. Rather, communicators need to make the race-specific argument in their policy proposals *after* establishing the broader values and models that will shape public thinking about violence prevention. This reminds people that equity, integration, the resolution of disparities, etc., are in service to overall goals that they acknowledge for the society, as opposed to ends in themselves.

Media and Youth Violence

The media hysteria that gave way to the "super predator" narrative in the mid-1990s remains operative to this day. This frame calls hyper-attention to violent episodes and does little to contextualize youth violence. The laser-like focus on violent and dangerous individuals makes it virtually impossible to see breakdowns in the systemic and structural environment.

There are a limited number of issues the media focuses on when it reports on youth. FrameWorks and others have all issued reports over the years demonstrating that media coverage of youth consistently relies on incidents of violence to the exclusion of any number of more "positive" or, better yet, accurate depictions. The three most frequently reported topics of youth news on the local stations reviewed by FrameWorks were crime victimization, accidents involving young people, and violent juvenile crime, accounting for nearly half (46%) of all coverage of youth. Five other frequently reported topics were also negative: property crimes committed by juveniles, domestic violence or sexual abuse, alcohol abuse, individual health problems, and other at-risk behaviors. The conclusion? "Together, these eight topics, which all emphasize the dangers and negative outcome associated with youth, accounted for nearly 60 percent of all discussions [of youth]." Visual backdrops of news reports about youth were also highly reinforcing of negative views; for example, the criminal justice system accounted for one out of every four visual backdrops in local news. [x]

Experts have noted that this type of coverage causes more confusion than clarity because it distorts the real-world experiences of young people. It exposes the public to a very narrow slice of the adolescent experience. Such an incomplete narrative has corrosive consequences on the development of sensible violence prevention policy and practice.

When advocates propose alternatives to a menu of parental responsibility, discipline, and punishment, it is these cognitive and media environments in which they land. The interplay of violence, the media, and race produces a public narrative that denigrates America's youth. Is it any wonder, then, that proposals to reduce youth crime are often drowned out by discussions of adult adjudication of juveniles, boot camps, metal detectors in schools, and the like? This is the connection between the public framing of youth and the nature and direction of youth policy.

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Violence and the Language of Prevention

The public health community has taken up youth violence prevention as a core issue, connected to one of its fundamental approaches to health problems – prevention. In 1995, future Surgeon General David Satcher, then head of the Centers for Disease Control, issued the call for the public health community to consider violence as a public health issue and announced the implementation of a violence prevention program at the CDC.[xi] However, to a large extent, this voice has failed to gain traction in the public discussion of youth, race, crime and policy interventions. This is partly due to inherent difficulties with the concept of "prevention" in the public's mind.

Public health advocates and others might easily assume that "prevention" will provide a conceptual anchor for the public and a way to open up a robust discussion about policies and programs. However, the term "prevention" alone does not effectively establish a prevention mindset because it does not connect the dots back to a point in time where a societal investment, program or policy would have made a difference in a person's outcome.[xii] Therefore, a critical task in reframing lies in establishing causality in discussions of prevention. That is, how exactly would health care access, high-quality early education programs, safe affordable housing for families and the like prevent violence? Too often, a lengthy list of programs and initiatives is presented with the mistaken assumption that it will make sense to the audience, without any causal explanation. However, in the public's default ways of thinking, if youth who commit crime are "bad kids," making poor choices and engaging in deviant behavior, then providing decent housing, job training and access to support programs is not going to help reduce violence. As the report on the initial findings from FrameWorks' sexual violence research states, "Rather than communications that state that prevention *is possible* … much more fundamental reframing work is required to give the public a concrete and working understanding of *how* prevention happens. This is a major challenge but one that must be overcome if public understanding on this issue and its solutions is to move forward."[xiii]

Another challenges lies in the fact that, as FrameWorks' research has demonstrated, "Prevention" can too easily transform into "Protection" (from alcohol, drugs, etc.) and can seem overly idealistic. As Morgan notes in an unpublished report for FrameWorks on violence prevention framing, "This framing [of prevention] incites public skepticism. We know from previous research that the public has a hard time believing that violence, for example, can be 'prevented,' although they do believe it can be reduced. This result follows from the belief that violence is endemic in 'bad neighborhoods,' and that bad parents are unlikely to change their patterns of behavior. Given this, the idealistic language associated with prevention seems impractical."[xiv]

From this, we can understand why FrameWorks' research on both child development and child abuse and neglect prevention found that prevention, when used as a *value,* did not increase support for effective prevention policies. FrameWorks' latest research reveals a similarly undeveloped understanding of prevention in the context of sexual violence. In this inquiry, research informants believed that prevention of sexual violence can only

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occur through individual actions, such as parents teaching children to protect themselves, dress appropriately, or avoid dangerous situations. How to prevent sexual violence from happening in the first place proved very difficult for people to conceptualize.[xv]

However, prevention *can* be explained successfully by connecting it to larger goals that are societal, not individual. In FrameWorks' research on child development, the public supported prevention programs and policies when primed with an effective value and offered a more complete understanding of development. In FrameWorks' research on community health, prevention worked as a value to support health-supporting policies when it was expressed in an environmental, rather than individual, context. However, too many discussions of approaches to violence prevention take place with limited acknowledgement of the goal for which prevention policies are the means. What does a violence-free community look like? How will violence prevention contribute to broader goals of a healthy, well-functioning, prosperous society for everyone? What's at stake when we take on this serious problem? Answering these questions will make "prevention" a more effective value.

Environments and Violence Prevention

In general, Americans have a difficult time understanding how environments contribute to social problems. Whether physical environments or policy environments, the institutions, systems, and practices that comprise these environments are invisible to most people most of the time. Instead, the individual looms large, and most consideration of solutions to social problems stops at the point of individual behavior change. At worst, the public blames the affected individuals for their own situations and outcomes. At best, they are able to take a charitable position, feeling sympathy or pity. However, this stance fails to engage people fully as citizens and problem-solvers in remedial and promotional policies.

This failure to understand a wider range of ecological and systemic factors that impinge upon juvenile life outcomes is an omission with devastating implications for effective policy and program development that would improve the lives of young people, particularly young people of color. For example, as there are racial disparities in arrests, there are also racial disparities in rates of poverty. As Figure 5 indicates, African-American and Latino youth were about three times as likely to live in poverty as White (and Asian) youth. Given the link between crime and poverty, this is a glaring absence in the public discourse.

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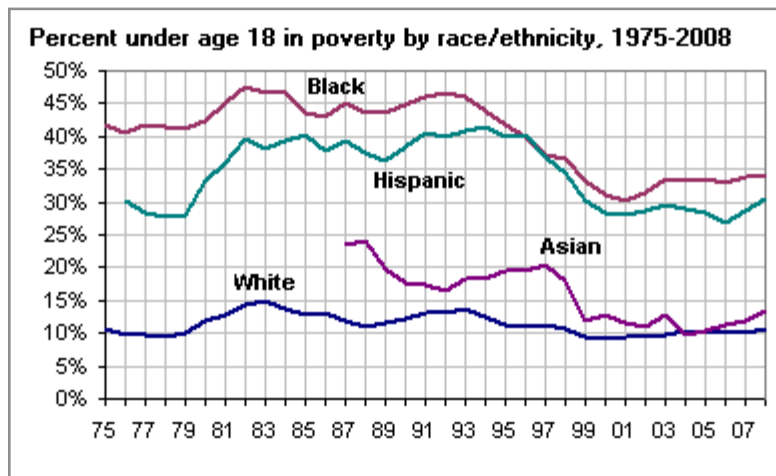
Figure 5



Note: Poverty statistics on American Indians and Alaska Natives were not presented in the source reports. Race categories do not include persons of Hispanic ethnicity.

Source: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Programs (OJJDP)

Moreover, media frames about race and its relationship to a spectrum of social problems further reinforce this belief. There is a persistent pattern of assigning responsibility for racial disparities to individual prejudice, rather than looking for societal explanations and remedies. As a FrameWorks report on this issue notes, "… the most common solution proposed to ameliorate racial inequality in health care, education and employment was to increase diversity and racial sensitivity courses for doctors, teachers, school administrators and employers, not to open opportunities to minorities in these fields. Furthermore, because articles typically centered on individual stories about racism in a certain context, solutions were often confined to a specific school, health care center or workplace, rather than more systemic solutions that address racial inequalities across institutional contexts."[xvi]

Similarly, the public conversation on juvenile violence also hides the failures of and flaws in the juvenile justice system. From the initial contacts with law enforcement officials, many argue minority youth are at a disadvantage. Such contributing factors as differential application of the decision to arrest or incarcerate; shortcomings in custodial programming and services; difficulties with probation compliance; and poor re-entry supports are concealed in the broader public discussion about youth violence. These issues are very much on the minds of advocates for criminal justice system reform. Their expert stories offer multiple explanatory factors for disparities in incarceration rates, including racial profiling, joblessness, lack of access to mental health services, inequitable drug laws, and the like, along with an exhaustive list of solutions.[xvii] Very little of this important nuance is present in the public debate.

Education reform is another part of the equation that is often overlooked. After the Columbine shootings, school administrators have increased their attention to school violence. Many believe, however, that the tendency toward punitive sanctions and over-

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bearing monitoring has obscured the need for higher levels of support for a wide range of educational support services, particularly in under-performing schools. Put differently, should the debate be about controlling "bad kids" or about comprehensive educational reforms? FrameWorks' research on education reform reveals that the public holds a narrow view of education as a triangle of teachers-parents-students operating in an irreparably broken system. Moving beyond the discussion of undisciplined, under-motivated students, bad parents, and uncaring teachers will require a consistently applied communications strategy that accounts for this cognitive challenge.[xviii]

Finally, one of the least commented on ecological factors affecting youth is the presence of wide-ranging community violence. Spousal abuse/domestic violence, gangs, the drug trade, and street culture all contribute to an "environment of violence" that surely has an impact on how young people view their life chances. The individualist nature of the dominant frame of youth violence makes it difficult to have a conversation about the types of community supports necessary to reduce youth exposure to community violence.

Simply using the word "community" will be insufficient to overcome this lack of attention to environments because "community" is both geographically and racially constructed; the concept does not automatically include everyone. In particular, the Separate Fates cultural model makes it difficult for Whites to see the consequences of exclusion. They resist the assertion that their "community" includes minorities, or that predominantly minority communities affect the well-being of non-minorities.

FrameWorks' research across various issues also found that the public is skeptical about the ability of one's own community to improve. In FrameWorks' research on community health, efforts to elevate successful communities as exemplars of change revealed a reluctance to believe that one's own community would be capable of implementing similar initiatives.[xix]

Finally, the public often considers the community itself to be a source of danger. In FrameWorks' investigation of American thinking about child abuse and neglect, "the community" was viewed by many informants as dangerous to children and part of the problem, not the solution.[xx] This is compounded by the media's advancement of the frame of the "imperiled child." From this perspective, children are not only endangered by each other, they are at risk from their parents, other adults, and from the broad array of "bad" individuals who, collectively, comprise their environment. As seen on the local news, the world is a dangerous place.[xxi]

Violence Prevention in Need of a Developmental Perspective

The dominant frame of youth violence conceals one of the most important, yet least understood, aspects of youth violence, namely, a developmental perspective. These are *young* people. The burgeoning literature in neuroscience makes clear that the brain is still developing at this age. The dominant frame that the public holds, by contrast, is that "genes are set in stone."[xxii] Media depictions of children's mental health issues further

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reinforce this frame. These narratives routinely rely on examples of extremely disruptive and violent behavior which cue the public's existing models of *mental illness*, in which children are understood to be destined by their genetic makeup to mental health or illness. Such stories leave out developmental considerations of *how* and *why* children develop mental health problems which further obscures the potential of programmatic efforts to improve and promote mental health. [xxiii] This determinism leads to the conclusion that troubled or violent youth are not redeemable. It does not allow for a conversation about how the underdevelopment of certain brain functions temporarily and predictably contributes to poor choices and anti-social behavior. There is much we can learn from the developmental perspective as we develop and design programs and policies directed at youth violence. There is also much we can learn from the translation of this developmental science in advocating for better programs to effectively address youth violence.

Advocates have tried to educate the public about risk and resilience factors in young people. One might expect that, given their highly individualistic frames about social problems and their solutions, people would be somewhat amenable to the concept that adverse early experiences can contribute to later criminality. This is a challenging task, however, as demonstrated by FrameWorks' research on child development which surfaced the deep-seated belief that "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" and that children can triumph over even the worst circumstances through effort and will. For example, informants in FrameWorks' research on child abuse and neglect expressed the belief that children can "get over" exposure to abuse or neglect without lasting biological effects.[xxiv] This is coupled with a very limited understanding of the impact of environments more generally on healthy child development and mental health. The cultural models that the public holds about mental health and mental illness in children are highly individualistic (it's about controlling one's emotions and/or a genetic chemical imbalance), as are the solutions (better parenting, pharmaceuticals). [xxv]

In the end, the public discussion about youth violence still turns on a paradigm that was developed in response to the youth violence surge of the mid-1990s. This is all the more unfortunate given that the public has clearly come to see that punitive approaches are not the best way to reduce juvenile crime (Figure 6).[xxvi] The disjuncture between this and the types of policies the public supports deserves much closer scrutiny.

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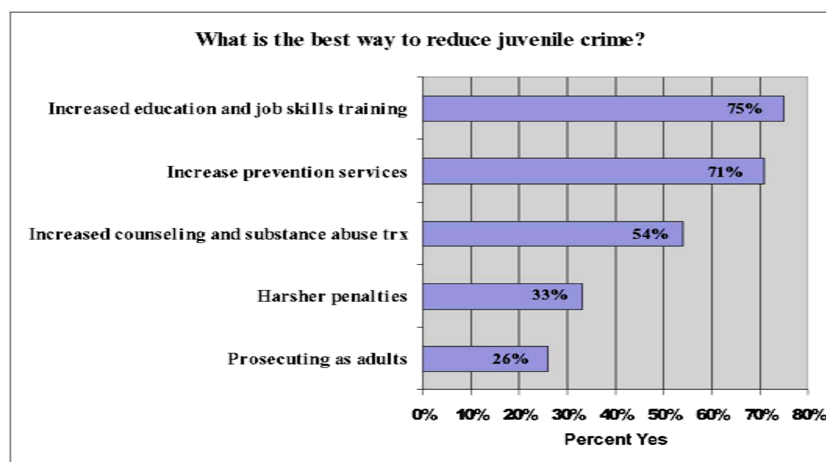
Figure 6



Much of FrameWorks' research is devoted to making the structures that contribute to social problems visible and understandable, primarily through the development of metaphorical simplifying models. This, in turn, opens the window on potential solutions. For example, when most Americans think about the causes of poor health, they immediately leap to willpower, character, and personal choice as the primary contributors. Without a carefully constructed alternative message, they remain stuck in this loop of personal responsibility, even when presented with policy alternatives and examples of community success. However, when health outcomes are explained through a simplifying model, such as the Food and Fitness Environment, i.e., "Where we live or work is one of the most important things determining whether we end up fit and healthy or not," people are better able to overcome their default thinking and consider the environments that either support or constrain individual health behaviors.[xxvii]

Establishing the connection between early experiences and later behavior is hard to do without attention to the deficits in the public's thinking. The simplifying model of Toxic Stress proves highly effective in overcoming these challenges.[xxviii] The model can be expressed in many ways, but here is one iteration:

> *Experiencing a chronic stressful condition such as neglect or abuse can cause what scientists call toxic stress, and can disrupt developing brain architecture. It is important to distinguish among three kinds of stress. We do not need to worry about positive stress (which is short-lived stress, like getting immunized), or stress that is made tolerable by the presence of supportive relationships, like a strong family when a loved one dies. But toxic stress lasts longer; occurs without consistent supportive relationships; and leads to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health.*

Essentially, the Toxic Stress simplifying model offers a nuanced explanation of the consequences of poor early environments; distinguishes this harm from beneficial stress

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(the kind that does, indeed, "make one stronger"); and establishes the long-term effects of Toxic Stress on overall health and development.

The task facing violence prevention advocates is this: they must move people beyond the cognitive rut of delinquent youth, frightening minorities, bad communities, crime and punishment to consider the antecedents of violence, the factors that contribute to healthy communities, the effect of programs and policies on reducing violence, and the power of citizen action.

We end by summarizing our recommendations from FrameWorks' prior research on related issues to improve communications about violence prevention and help overcome the communications challenges identified above.

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DO

- Remind people of the shared, positive outcomes of violence-free communities.
- Talk about youth from a developmental perspective.
- Talk about race only *after* establishing the broader values and models that will shape public thinking about violence prevention.
- Explain exactly how prevention works to decrease violence.
- Highlight the contribution of environments to violence prevention in an explicit, causal way.

DON'T

- Focus solely on the problem rather than the solutions.
- Talk about youth apart from development and environments.
- Begin communications with explicit racial cues.
- Rely on the concept of "prevention" without connecting it to environments and shared societal goals.

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About the Institute

About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector, at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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