



**REPRESENTATIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD AND URBAN VIOLENCE IN
BRAZILIAN MEDIA**

A FRAMEWORKS RESEARCH REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

The media analysis presented here was conducted by the FrameWorks Institute for the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, with funding from the Fundação Maria Cecília Souto Vidigal and the Bernard van Leer Foundation. It represents a critical component of a larger communications project that aims to document public understanding of early child development (ECD), and the impacts of urban violence on children in Brazil. The goal of the project is to give those working on issues of child development and urban violence in Brazil a set of empirically-tested communications strategies that will increase public understanding of these issues, and support for the solutions suggested by research in these domains.

Communicators pay attention to media coverage because it plays a powerful role in shaping and reinforcing how the public understands issues related to early child development and urban violence. The media is also fed and reinforced *by* dominant public understandings of children's issues.ⁱ This report empirically examines this cycle of influence by first documenting the frames that pervade media coverage of ECD and urban violence issues, then examining the likely impacts of these media frames on public understanding of these issues.ⁱⁱ

In this analysis, we examine the media frames — the patterned use of cues that structure specific definitions, causal interpretations and solutions to social problems — that are currently part of Brazilian public discourse on ECD and violence issues. Identifying patterns in media coverage is critical to understanding *why* gaps exist between public and expert accounts, and *how* the introduction of new narratives about ECD and violence can bridge these gaps. In the conclusion of this report, we identify reframing strategies that can be used to create new stories that will expand public understanding of ECD and violence, and increase support for the policies and programs advocated by experts.

The analysis that follows is divided into two parts: The first deals with general issues related to early child development, and the second focuses specifically on early childhood and violence.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Findings

The analysis of the media's coverage of early childhood development revealed the following themes:

- **Media coverage of cognitive development is concentrated on older children, with coverage of early childhood focusing on survival rather than development.** The media rarely focus on early childhood development (ages 0 to 3). Among those articles that did reference this period, approximately 59 percent concentrated on mortality rates, premature births and diseases such as HIV, diabetes, meningitis and obesity, among others. In sum, child survival is the

primary area of emphasis in media coverage regarding children ages 0 to 3. By contrast, media coverage of children over the age of 3 is primarily concerned with education issues — specifically, the lack of access to educational opportunities for many Brazilian children.

- **Early brain and non-cognitive skill development is largely absent from the media narrative about children’s issues.** The differentiation in coverage by age group has several important implications. First, media discussions of *early* child education are rare — if not non-existent — in the Brazilian media. The media primarily represent daycare centers as custodial institutions rather than important learning environments. Second, when covering education issues among older children, media coverage over-emphasizes cognitive development that occurs in formal education settings. This myopic focus on formal cognitive learning crowds out any discussion of other important skills, such as social and emotional skills. Finally, there is scant coverage of early child *brain* development: Less than 3 percent of articles focused on children’s brain development at any age.
- **Media coverage attributes the problems facing Brazilian children — including low levels of health and survival rates, and lack of educational opportunities — to government inefficiency.** The Brazilian media regularly hold the government responsible for failing to provide education services and basic infrastructure to improve child health and increase survival rates. The media focus on inefficiency and incompetence at the federal, state and municipal levels.
- **The media frequently blame negative child outcomes on parenting and caregiving practices, and assert that policy interventions should be targeted at changing these behaviors.** The media’s coverage of early childhood in Brazil attributes poor developmental outcomes to the habits and caretaking practices of individual families. These stories, which constituted over 14 percent of the sample, tend to focus on Brazilians from marginalized and under-resourced communities. Journalists regularly focus on how parents — particularly mothers — eschew expert advice in favor of family-based or cultural knowledge regarding child-rearing, often to the detriment of their children’s development and health. Not surprisingly, the primary solution offered by the media is to change individual families’ behaviors and address “ignorant” parenting practices. Largely absent from these stories is the social context in which parents care for their children — including the availability and affordability of healthy food, access to potable water, and access to quality health and education services, among other issues. As a result, policies designed to *change* these contexts are often left out of Brazilian media coverage of early child development.
- **The Brazilian media are primarily concerned with the economic impacts of promoting positive early childhood development.** Journalists regularly emphasize return on investment and adult employment as *the* primary desired outcomes of positive child development. Coverage consistently fails to consider

other, non-financial benefits that follow from policies designed to support children's development, such as protecting children's rights and ensuring that all children are able to reach their full potential and contribute to their communities. This focus on economic gains and return on investment obscures consideration of programmatic *quality* in interventions and policies designed to address children's issues.

The analysis of the media's coverage of early childhood and violence revealed the following themes:

- **Media coverage of violence and children is rare, and narrowly framed.** Violence is rarely treated as an issue related to children. Approximately half the articles addressed statistical trends about the increase in violence among a certain demographic or in a particular region. The other half presented stories about the motivations, morality and psychological dispositions of individual perpetrators. These two frames create a sense of panic (that violence is increasing), and ingrain the notion that violence is caused by isolated acts perpetrated by immoral individuals.
- **The media rarely address the *impact* of violence on children's development.** There is no discussion of the impact of violence on brain development, or of the way regular and intense exposure to violence creates long-term negative health outcomes.
- **The primary solution promoted by the media to address violence against children is harsher punishments for perpetrators.** Consistent with the media's focus on individual perpetrators of violence, the operative solution presented by journalists and media commentators is to enact stricter laws and harsher punishment to deter violence against children.

Implications

- **The media's focus on child survival, and the absence of discussion of early brain development, is a missed opportunity to fill-in key missing aspects of the public's understanding of child development.** Previous FrameWorks research has shown that the Brazilian public places very little importance on cognitive development in early childhood (0 to 3).ⁱⁱⁱ Instead, the public assumes that early development at that age is about physical change and growth. Consideration of neurobiological processes is also absent from Brazilians' understanding of ECD. These same narrative holes exist in media coverage, and therefore the media coverage fails to advance public thinking even when they do report on these issues.
- **Media focus on educational *access* distracts from focus on the importance of *quality* of early childhood programs and interventions.** Although the way the

media frame the importance of universal education has some positive implications in the way it expresses concern for equality of education access for all Brazilians, the myopic focus on basic access will distract the public from the importance of the *quality* of those educational institutions (schools or daycare centers).

- **The representation of the government as ineffective and inefficient will dampen public support for ECD policy.** FrameWorks’ cultural models research shows that the Brazilian public has a complicated relationship with the role of social policy for ECD issues.^{iv} On the one hand, the public largely supports initiatives to improve public services for young children. On the other hand, they are skeptical and suspicious of large-scale government action — both because of distrust of politicians, and because those policies threaten to impinge on community and family-based authority. Furthermore, the cultural models analysis shows that the Brazilian public considers parenting practices — such as love and caring, on the one hand, and discipline and control on the other — to be critical determinants of developmental outcomes.^v Media coverage that emphasizes broken government further entrenches exclusive focus on the family as the sole determinant of developmental outcomes.
- **Blaming parents — especially parents in marginalized and under-resourced communities — will reinforce public distrust of scientific expertise.** The Brazilian public (probably for good historical reasons) is highly skeptical of governmental and expert medical intervention into what are often considered family concerns.^{vi} The media’s consistent devaluation of popular parenting practices in favor of expert knowledge will deepen existing gaps — and even antagonism — between these perspectives.
- **Focus on the economic benefits of ECD programs obscures other non-financial benefits.** As previously stated, our research shows that the public is largely supportive of policies that would improve public services, and therefore improve developmental outcomes.^{vii} However, the media’s exclusive focus on the economic impacts of such policies does not provide a full sense of collective benefit — such as allowing all children to reach their full potential and contribute to their communities as engaged citizens.
- **Failing to cover violence and early child development together misses an opportunity to tell a brain-development story.** The absence of media coverage about the developmental effects of exposure to violence represents another missed opportunity to engage the public in a robust discussion about the science of ECD, and the devastating effects of violence on the future generations of Brazil. This absence will further reinforce the public’s tendency to dismiss the influence of early childhood experiences on subsequent health and well-being.
- **The media’s focus on harsher punishments for individual perpetrators inhibits thinking about prevention and social contexts.** Violence in the media

is constructed as a problem of immoral individuals who commit isolated acts of violence against individual victims. The corresponding solution for this type of problem, then, is harsher punishments for those immoral individuals. This type of intensely individualistic coverage will impact the public's ability to evaluate more sociological accounts of the causes of, and potential solutions to, urban violence — making these accounts more difficult to consider. This is especially the case when policy solutions address preventative interventions rather than punitive ones.

Recommendations

Based on this analysis, we recommend that experts and advocates begin to tell new kinds of stories in their own materials, and when engaging with the media:

- **Explain the processes of early brain development.** Currently, there is no discussion in the Brazilian media of *what* develops in early childhood and *how* development happens. Communicators should insert these types of explanations into conversations with members of the media, and should be specific about the ages during which key developmental processes occur.
- **Explain the interconnection of social, emotional and cognitive skills.** Media coverage of children's issues concentrates on children's experiences in formal education settings, and therefore emphasizes cognitive development. Experts and advocates should explain the interconnection of social, emotional and cognitive skills.
- **Emphasize programmatic quality.** The media overwhelmingly focus on the quantity of programs available to children, but rarely address how quality, evidence-based interventions are critical to improving outcomes. If experts can begin to insert discussions of programmatic quality into media stories, the public can better evaluate specific policy proposals regarding early childhood development.
- **Don't blame or alienate families.** In blaming and stigmatizing Brazilian families, especially those from certain regions or low socioeconomic status, the media are alienating an important segment of the population that impacts early child development. Parents must not be held as the only solution; however, they must certainly be considered part of a well-connected team of adults who coordinate to ensure the best conditions for children to develop. To appropriately follow this recommendation, thought must be given to the tone of communications as well as the messengers.
- **Make violence a children's issue.** The media coverage of these two topics together is extremely rare. When violence is discussed in relation to children, it is done in one of two ways — by presenting a dizzying array of statistics, or by discussing individual cases. Communicators should broaden the discussion by: a) making visible more subtle forms of violence, such as abuse and neglect; b)

delving deeper into societal factors that cause or influence rates of violence against children; c) linking those causes to more preventative solutions; and d) explaining the causal mechanisms by which violence directly impacts children's development.

- **Describe how high levels of violence can negatively impact the developing brain, with lifelong consequences for subsequent learning, health and behavior.** The public needs more information about the exact mechanisms by which exposure to violence negatively impacts children's development. Such information is critical for the public to fully engage in discussions about appropriate policies and interventions.

METHODS

The current analysis identifies the major themes in media coverage related to early child development and urban violence. In order to select appropriate sources from which to sample articles, we used the Agência de Notícias dos Direitos da Infância (ANDI) (Childhood in Media, 2010) ranking of newspapers, which tracks issues concerning childhood and adolescence in news reports. From there, we selected sources based on circulation, as well as their ability to represent geographical and political diversity. The sample of newspapers consisted of the following sources:

National Distribution:

1. Folha de São Paulo (SP)
2. Correio Braziliense (DF)
3. O Globo (RJ)

Regional Distribution:

1. Midwest: Folha do Estado (MT); Diário da Manhã (GO)
2. South: Zero Hora (RS); Gazeta do Povo (PR)
3. Southeast: O Estado de Minas (MG)
4. North: O Liberal (PA); O Estadão do Norte (RO)
5. Northeast: Correio da Paraíba (PB); O Povo (CE)

To identify major themes on these issues, researchers used a variety of search terms relating to early childhood, such as early child development, childhood, babies, infants, etc.

This yielded a final sample of 500 articles, which were subsequently coded using the following categories:

1. Storytelling style (episodic vs. thematic)
2. Tone
3. General topic of the article
4. Age group, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status of the children/students mentioned
5. Types of messengers/experts cited
6. Values
7. Metaphors
8. Mentions of specific policies and programs

Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses

After coding the full sample of 500 stories, we analyzed the frequency of codes in each category, as well as the relationships between selected codes. The purpose of this portion of the analysis was to chart the frequency of specific narrative components and frames, and to examine the co-occurrence of narrative elements, thereby documenting dominant narratives that run through media coverage of early child development and urban violence.

Following this quantitative analysis, we examined 100 randomly selected stories qualitatively in order to contextualize and enhance our quantitative findings. The qualitative analysis provided greater description and context for quantitative results by identifying common ways in which the media articulate specific narrative components (e.g., key themes in the media's discussion of government's role as a solutions actor in children's issues, or ways in which individuals were described as the cause of these issues). Because they are complementary, the results section integrates findings from both qualitative and quantitative analyses.

Cognitive Analysis

The cultural models findings referred to in this document are based on over 36 one-on-one, semi-structured interviews conducted between March 2012 and April 2013 on issues related to early child development and urban violence. Consistent with interview methods employed in psychological anthropology, cultural models interviews are designed to elicit ways of thinking and talking about issues.^{viii} Patterns of discourse, or common, standardized ways of talking, were identified across the sample, using a basic grounded theory approach to thematic analysis. These discourses were then analyzed to reveal tacit organizational assumptions, relationships, propositions and connections that were commonly made, but taken for granted, throughout an individual's transcript and across the sample. In short, analysis looked at patterns both in what was said (how things were related, explained and understood) as well as what was not said (shared, but taken-for-granted, assumptions).

FINDINGS:

I. MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT

The media representations of early child development contain a consistent set of dominant frames that were identified during quantitative and qualitative analysis. Together, these frames define, provide causal explanations and offer solutions related to early childhood development. Each frame is discussed in detail below.

1. The *Child Survival* Frame:

When the media reference early child development (*desenvolvimento na primeira infancia*), they are primarily focused on the first three years of a child's life (47 percent of articles focus on those years). In fact, although the Brazilian term "primeira infancia" is technically for 0 to 6 years old, when the media use this term, they are consistently referring only to those first three years.

When the media address those first three years, they do so almost exclusively through the *Child Survival* frame. Approximately 59 percent of the articles that focused on children ages 0 to 3 concentrated on health issues (39 percent) and mortality rates (19.6 percent). These articles focused on child mortality, premature births and diseases such as HIV, diabetes, meningitis and obesity, among others. Articles that employed the *Child Survival* frame were primarily concerned with how to increase infants' survival rates, and tended to focus on Northern and Northeastern Brazil, typically highlighting poverty and instability in those regions.

The focus on infant survival often comes at the expense of attention to development issues. Compared to the 59 percent that focused on child survival, only 15.6 percent of the articles analyzed covered issues related to early childhood development. Of that total, 5.5 percent were on physical development; 3.8 percent on emotional development; 2.5 percent on brain development; and 3.8 percent mentioned the topic in a general sense. The stories on development were concerned with topics ranging from breastfeeding to new research findings about children's development. The articles describing academic research tended to focus on international studies, and there was little effort to establish how those findings might be applicable in the Brazilian context.

2. The *Universal Education* Frame:

When the media refer to older children, they use the more general term for child, "criança." In the media, this is an imprecise age frame that usually implies children older than 3 but not yet adolescents. Of all the media coverage analyzed, 17.5 percent of the articles discussed these older children's access to formal education. The underlying assumption is that everyone in Brazil should have access to formal education, as is illustrated in the example below:

During the debate at the National Education Conference (Conae), the secretary of elementary education from the Ministry of Education (MEC), Maria do Pilar Lacerda, argued that there are still 3.5 million children between the ages of 4 and 7 who do not attend school in the country.^{ix}

While an important topic, the media's focus on lack of access to education crowds out other topics that are critically important, including instructional quality, more general discussions of the purposes and goals of education, and specific proposals for improving education and learning in Brazil.

The *Universal Education* frame was also applied to daycare contexts in which journalists described how many Brazilians lack access to public daycare. Media articles concentrated on the *physical* condition of existing childcare centers, and demonstrated how many were in desperate need of sanitation and other kinds of improvements. Discussions of daycare quality were primarily concerned with infrastructural concerns. In general, childcare centers were represented as places for children to be watched while parents worked, rather than a critical early-learning environment. The following excerpt is an example of the media's focus on limited access and basic quality of early childcare:

The public prosecutor is suing for the right to daycare for children up to 3 years of age in São Paulo, beginning next year. The case is supported by a written opinion from professors from the School of Education at the University of São Paulo (USP), who blame lack of infrastructure in the city preschools (Emeis) on their inability to serve this group. Their opinion goes so far as to point out that the infrastructure is also inadequate for 4- and 5-year-olds.^x

Similar to articles about primary education, the media focus is on available slots rather than preschool curricula, the role of preschool or the appropriate dynamics for a nursery school setting, all of which experts contend are critical for improving developmental outcomes.^{xi}

3. The Broken Government Frame

Almost a quarter of the media coverage of early childhood in Brazil blamed the *broken government* for problems that occur in early childhood. Simply put, journalists who employ the *Broken Government* frame argue that federal, state and municipal governments fail to take action, to the detriment of children's development. For example, the following article describes governmental failure to implement basic screening services:

According to speech therapist Vanessa Furtado, 10 municipalities have legislation that requires them to perform the hearing test, but the law never leaves the paper it was written on. "Lack of political initiative," she states.^{xii}

This *Broken Government* frame extended to media discussions of the impact of historical inequalities on children's development. For example, articles that covered underserved communities (including black, indigenous, rural, low income, and those living in poverty) explained how governmental neglect had severe consequences for several aspects of early

development. According to Zilda Arns, founder and national director of Pastoral da Criança,

Thousands of children have their rights violated even before they are born, “because their families do not have access to the means necessary to ensure their physical, intellectual, social and spiritual development.” To Zilda, social inequality, lack of public policies and intersectoral actions committed to the provision of quality education and health are major problems in Brazil and most developing countries.^{xiii}

While the *Broken Government* frame largely focuses on negative effects from governmental inefficiency, the positive aspect of the *Broken Government* frame is that government is considered responsible for addressing issues related to early childhood development, including the implementation of services and the development of effective policies (41.6 percent of the sample).

4. The *Bad Parents* Frame:

In addition to the *Broken Government* frame, the media coverage of early childhood in Brazil attributes poor developmental outcomes to the habits and caretaking practices of individual families, especially parents. This frame was observed in 14.1 percent of the articles in the study. According to the *Bad Parents* frame, inadequate parenting practices have long-lasting, negative impacts on children. The following article illustrates this frame:

The research also revealed that children are fed inappropriate foods beginning at an early age, such as packaged candy, cookies and even soft drinks. The vast majority of mothers (66.7 percent) are guided by their own experience or advice from their families when preparing family meals. The guidelines passed on by pediatricians are secondary.^{xiv}

In this passage, mothers are represented as eschewing expert advice in favor of their own knowledge and family experience. Poor development outcomes are attributed to families and their reliance on “backward,” “uncivilized” and “ignorant” practices to raise children. In addition, the above article examines parents’ food choices but disregards the influencing contextual factors such as the availability and affordability of fruits and vegetables, and access to potable water, among other issues. The *Bad Parents* frame stigmatizes poor families, as they are consistently represented as ignorant of, or resistant to, adopting healthier habits.

It is not surprising, therefore, that journalists and other commentators argue that the solution to problems in early childhood development can be solved by addressing habits and practices of individual families. As exemplified in the following excerpt, the media articles often promoted awareness campaigns or parental education as the most effective way to address poor developmental outcomes:

Representatives of NGOs, the court, and the federal, state and city government are creating a safety net for Brazilian children, age 0 to 6. The goal is to provide training for 10 million families on how to better care for their children. Participating families will participate in trainings, and receive calendars and educational materials on how to care for young children. Community health workers, doctors and nurses will participate in the program.^{xv}

Again, journalists disregard the diversified social contexts in which parenting occurs and promote the idea that there is a singular, universal and science-based method of parenting that all families should follow. The result is that “science” is implicitly pitted against traditional and culture-bound parenting practices.

5. The Return On Investment Frame:

In the Brazilian media, the solutions to development problems were often portrayed through an appeal to an economic *Return On Investment* frame (41.6 percent of articles). This frame provides a primarily economic rationale for why Brazilians should devote public resources to issues related to early childhood development, namely, that a government investment would yield a large financial return. The following is one instantiation of this frame:

According to experts on education, the period of 0 to 3 years of age is crucial for child development. If a child is well stimulated, fed and cared for during this phase, she will have a greater chance of becoming an [economically] productive adult.^{xvi}

This frame singles out economic productivity as the primary and desired outcome of ECD and fails to consider other non-financial aspects of addressing developmental issues, such as the protection of children’s rights, ensuring that all children are able to reach their full potential, or enabling children to contribute fully to their communities. Furthermore, the *Return On Investment* frame often privileges large-scale interventions and projects that may potentially yield a big return over those more local projects with a smaller national return (though potentially more chance for success).

In general, the *Return On Investment* frame sets unrealistic expectations that minimal investment in ECD programs and policies will yield huge returns. When those returns then fail to come to pass, the *Broken Government* frame explains why these interventions failed to yield such results.

II. VIOLENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

One of the most important findings from our media analysis on violence and early childhood was the striking lack of *any* attention on this specific topic in the media. In searching the wide ANDI database for articles, we had to go back to October 2011 in order to find even 50 articles that fell within the search criteria. Despite the significant

impact of violence on the lives of Brazilian children, the topic receives very little media attention.

Maltreatment and pedophilia were the dominant forms of violence related to children covered in the media, with 37.4 percent and 28 percent of mentions, respectively. The majority of the articles in the sample (60 percent) focused on the North and Northeast, regions often associated with rural, lower income and minority communities. In large urban centers, apart from pedophilia and maltreatment, violence was also portrayed as a negative consequence of drug trafficking, and stray bullets resulting from conflicts with the police. Unlike the coverage of early childhood development, the violence coverage focused predominately on older children, often interchangeably using the terms for child and adolescent. Very early childhood was almost completely absent from the coverage. We identified three dominant frames among articles that covered issues of violence and ECD, which are detailed below.

1. The *Crisis Statistics* Frame

Approximately half of all the violence articles analyzed employed the *Crisis Statistics* frame, in which increasing statistical levels of violence were used to create a sense of crisis or panic. The titles alone dramatically produce a certain fear or panic about levels of increase in violence (*The Number of Sexual Crimes Against Children and Adolescents Grows!*).^{xvii}

The articles often presented a staggering amount of statistical information, but without any deeper analysis of the meaning of the violence, the causes or potential solutions. This is exemplified in the following excerpts:

From 2009 until the beginning of this month, Paraná recorded 21,500 reports of violence, according to data released this week by the State Department of Health. Of this total, 49 percent are cases involving children or adolescents. The numbers led to the creation of a “Viva Children” campaign, launched last Monday, the 21st, in Curitiba. The study showed that the most common types of violence in children and adolescents are neglect or abandonment, which correspond to 48 percent of reported cases last year. Sexual violence is in second place and occurs primarily against girls. Physical violence, which is the third highest incidence, happens more often against boys. In 2010, of the cases of violence reported in Parana, 48.6 percent were against children and adolescents, according to the Department of Health.^{xviii}

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The statistics of rape, collected in the offices of the Federal District, show how much children and adolescents are exposed to sexual violence. In the first months of this year, 328 victims under 17 years old were abused in some region of the DF. The quantity represents 77.5 percent of the 423 cases registered from January to May in 2013 — an average of 84 per month.^{xix}

Expert opinions and in-depth debate are rarely featured. Of the experts who are quoted or consulted, most have a criminal justice or legal background rather than expertise in child development. The statistics alone are treated as the news story, with virtually no contextualization and no discussion of causes, impacts or potential solutions.

2. The *Immoral Perpetrator* Frame

Whether in matters of maltreatment or pedophilia, when the causes of violence against children are addressed, the issue is most often framed as being perpetrated by immoral individuals. This focus on bad individuals obscures coverage of more systemic analyses of the causes of, and solutions to, urban violence, and it remains even when the media focus on *institutions* with high rates of violence, such as the church or the military. The example below illustrates how these articles focus on single perpetrators and single victims:

The Rio Justice Department shall fix a new penalty against retired prosecutor Vera Lúcia de Sant'Anna Gomes, who was convicted of torturing a child of 2 years who was under her custody for purposes of adoption. In the first instance, she was sentenced to eight years and two months in prison. There was an appeal by the defense and prosecution, but the sentence was upheld. The defense then filed for habeas corpus in the Superior Court of Justice (STJ), arguing that the penalty was fixed above the legal minimum without proper reasoning. The penalty for the crime of torture is six years. The Fifth Chamber of the Supreme Court, by majority, held that the fixing of criminal action should be above the legal minimum, considering the specific elements of this crime of torture, cruelty and intolerance.^{xx}

3. The *Harsher Punishment* Frame

Increasing punishment of perpetrators — including enacting stricter laws and creating harsher penalties — was the primary solution to addressing issues of violence promoted by the media. The *Harsher Punishment* frame is built on two assumptions: (1) that law enforcement agencies lack the institutional capacity to apprehend and prosecute perpetrators of violence, and (2) that stricter laws will help reduce the rising violence levels. Regarding the first point, journalists often write about public campaigns whereby citizens can pick up the slack for insufficient law enforcement, such as for more crime-tip hotlines. And regarding the second point, the media focus on punishment to the exclusion of prevention programs or more systemic causes of violence, as seen in the example below:

The Committee on Constitution and Justice (CCJ) of the House of Representatives yesterday approved the draft of law 6719/2009, known as the Joanna Maranhao Law, amending the statute of limitations for sexual crimes against children and adolescents. Already approved in the Federal Senate, the text must now be examined by the plenary and then go to the presidential for approval. The text

proposed by the CPI on Pedophilia in 200, guarantees sexual abuse victims more time to report the offender. Under the new law, the time of limitation shall run from the date the victim of a sexual crime is 18 years old. Today, the Penal Code provides that the count period begins on the date of the crime.^{xxi}

ABSENCES:

Along with the frames identified in this analysis, this review revealed important absences in Brazilian media about issues related to early child development. We discuss these absences below.

- **Absence of the private sector:** Government and individual families were the primary actors cited for both causing and solving issues related to early child development. The private sector was cited as a responsible causal actor in only 2 percent of the articles, and was never mentioned as a solutions actor. Health insurance in Brazil is increasingly provided through businesses, and is often critiqued for poor service. It is, then, problematic that this sector is not part of the story of early child development in Brazil, given that access to health care is critical for positive outcomes. Non-governmental organizations are discussed as actors even more infrequently than private sector organizations, appearing in fewer than 1 percent of the articles included in this analysis.
- **Absence of causal story:** Almost 57 percent of the articles sampled contained no clear causal story about developmental issues for children. Furthermore, there is virtually no discussion of the historical roots of the problems facing children in Brazil. Parenting practices are rarely placed in a historical or political context, and concrete steps to support parents with young children are rarely mentioned. Social inequality, which is at least partly the root of most of the ECD problems identified in the media, is rarely addressed. Therefore, these deep causes of structural inequalities are largely invisible. For example, the following article describes how sanitation is lacking for a large proportion of Brazilian children, but fails to analyze why such basic infrastructure is non-existent:

Basic sanitation services are still lacking for 21.9 million Brazilian children up to 14 years of age, or 48 percent of the population in this age range. According to the 2012 Social Indicators Synthesis, released yesterday (28) by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Social Indicators (IBGE), there is a deficit in at least one of the essential infrastructure requirements: water supply, proper sewage treatment, garbage collection, and electricity. Based on data from the past year, the survey shows that among these children, 4.8 million were at serious risk of disease because they live in locations where all of the items were inadequate. The Northeast had the worst conditions in the country, with 17.2 percent, while the Southeast had the best conditions, 3.7 percent.^{xxii}

- **Absence of the science of ECD:** The analysis of both early childhood and violence articles showed a clear absence of any specific science related to

childhood development. Brain development was absent from the articles, and development scientists were rarely cited as experts for any issues related to childhood (less than 2 percent). This absence then influenced the way that causes and solutions were framed. Even when discussing violence against children, the media did not mention the impact of violence on early developmental processes.

- **Absence of the collective impacts and benefits of ECD.** The notion of social interdependence is almost completely absent in the media. The topic of early childhood is not represented as a collective issue with adverse effects felt both directly and indirectly by all social classes and, thus, as a shared responsibility. On the contrary, it is represented as a problem unique to the lower socio-economic classes, whose own poor parenting is to blame for adverse outcomes.

COGNITIVE IMPLICATIONS

Based on FrameWorks' analysis of cultural models that the public employs to think about early childhood, we conclude that exposure to the media frames described above is likely to have the following effects:

- **The media's focus on child survival, and the absence of discussion of early brain development, is a missed opportunity to fill-in key missing aspects of the public's understanding of child development.** Previous FrameWorks research has shown that the Brazilian public places very little importance on cognitive development in early childhood (ages 0 to 3).^{xxiii} Instead, the public assumes that early development at that age is about physical change and growth. Consideration of neurobiological processes is also absent from Brazilians' understanding of ECD. These same narrative holes exist in media coverage, and therefore the media coverage fails to advance public thinking even when they do report on these issues.
- **Media focus on *education access* distracts from thinking about the importance of the *quality* of early childhood programs and interventions.** Although the universal education frame has positive implications, its myopic focus on access will distract the public from the importance of the quality of those educational institutions, be they schools or daycare centers. The media do not focus on teacher quality, learning spaces, educator supports or curricular strength. In addition, the way that the media focus only on formal education classrooms as the place for cognitive development will continue to reinforce public thinking that cognitive development occurs only in classrooms.^{xxiv} This distracts from thinking about the importance of cognitive development for very young children, as well as thinking about informal contexts as important places for cognitive development.

- **The consistent representation of the government as ineffective and inefficient will dampen public support for ECD policy solutions.** FrameWorks’ cultural models research shows that the Brazilian public has a complicated relationship with the role of public policy for ECD issues.^{xxv} On the one hand, they largely support initiatives to improve public services for young children. On the other hand, they are skeptical and suspicious of large-scale government action — both because of distrust of politicians, and because those policies threaten to impinge on community and family-based authority. Furthermore, the cultural models analysis shows that the Brazilian public considers parenting practices — such as love and caring, on the one hand, and discipline and control on the other — to be critical determinants of developmental outcomes.^{xxvi} Media coverage that documents broken government around children’s issues does not provide the public with a positive model of how community-based policies can be employed to improve children’s outcomes. This coverage further entrenches exclusive focus on the family as the sole determinant of developmental outcomes.
- **Blaming parents — especially parents in marginalized and under-resourced communities — will reinforce public distrust of scientific expertise.** The Brazilian public (probably for good historical reasons) is highly skeptical of governmental and expert medical intervention into what are often considered family concerns.^{xxvii} The media’s consistent devaluation of popular parenting practices in favor of expert knowledge will deepen existing gaps — and even antagonism — between these perspectives. Placing the blame on families, and holding them responsible for solutions, will also distract from more systemic solutions that could address public services to help families and child outcomes.
- **Focus on the economic benefits of ECD programs obscures other non-financial benefits.** As previously stated, our research shows that the public is largely supportive of policies that would improve public services, and therefore improve developmental outcomes.^{xxviii} However, the media’s exclusive focus on the economic impacts of such policies does not provide a full sense of collective benefit — such as allowing all children to reach their full potential and contribute to their communities as engaged citizens. Additionally, this narrow approach to the benefits of early child interventions misses an opportunity to address the public gap in understanding the integrated nature of cognitive, social and emotional learning that experts describe as critical to the developmental process.^{xxix}
- **Failing to cover violence and early child development together misses an opportunity to tell a brain development story.** The absence of media coverage about the developmental effects of exposure to violence represents another missed opportunity to engage the public in a robust discussion about the science of ECD and the devastating effects of violence on the future generations of Brazil. This absence will further reinforce the public’s tendency to dismiss the influence of early childhood experiences on subsequent health and well-being. In addition, the media focus on particularly sensational types of violence, such as sexual violence,

distracts attention from the much more common types of violence such as abuse and neglect.

- **The media's focus on harsher punishments for individual perpetrators inhibits thinking about prevention and social contexts.** Violence in the media is constructed as a problem of immoral individuals who commit isolated acts of violence against individual victims. The corresponding solution for this type of problem, then, is harsher punishments for those immoral individuals. This type of intensely individualistic coverage will impact the public's ability to evaluate more sociological accounts of the causes of, and potential solutions to, urban violence — making these accounts more difficult to consider. This is especially the case when policy solutions address preventative interventions rather than punitive ones.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the Brazilian media, early childhood development is covered primarily in relation to child health and survival in the early years, and formal education in later childhood. The specific science of how children develop cognitively, socially and emotionally is entirely lacking, as are the societal conditions and educational factors that could improve developmental outcomes. Furthermore, the causes of problems associated with early child development are attributed to pathological parenting practices and governmental inefficiencies. Interestingly, government is represented as responsible for implementing solutions to these problems, but only insofar as those solutions reap substantial economic return on investment. And governmental solutions typically involve targeting parenting practices.

Although experts would argue that violence is a critical factor that disrupts healthy development, the media rarely put these two topics together. When they do, they do so typically at a surface, statistical level, without delving into causes or solutions. When coverage explores causes and solutions, they are extremely individualistic — violence is caused by idiosyncratically immoral offenders who must be punished more harshly.

These findings have dramatic implications for the way advocates and scientists should approach their communications and their interactions with the media. Below are concrete steps that communicators can take in order to shift the frames used to discuss early child development and violence in Brazil:

Recommendations

1. **Explain the processes of early brain development.** Currently, there is no discussion in the Brazilian media of *what* develops in early childhood and *how* development occurs. Communicators should seek to insert these types of explanations into conversations with members of the media, and should be specific about the ages during which key developmental processes occur. Especially important will be emphasizing the importance of cognitive

development in the earliest years. To use a cliché, children must “survive *and* thrive.”

2. **Explain the interconnection of social, emotional and cognitive skills.** Media coverage of children’s issues concentrates on children’s experiences in formal education settings, and therefore emphasizes cognitive development for these older children. Experts and advocates should explain the interconnection of social, emotional and cognitive skills in the early and later childhood years. FrameWorks will be testing a metaphor of *Weaving Skills* that has been shown to be effective in the United States for this task, and may potentially be productive for the Brazilian context as well.
3. **Emphasize programmatic quality.** The media overwhelmingly focus on the quantity of programs and slots available to children, but rarely address how quality, evidence-based interventions are critical to improving children’s outcomes. Talking about the importance of all Brazilian children having access to education is not bad practice, but only if communicators can also begin to insert discussions of the factors that make for quality programs into media stories. If they are able to do this, the public may be better equipped to evaluate specific policy proposals regarding early childhood development.
4. **Don’t blame or alienate families.** In blaming and stigmatizing Brazilian families, especially those from certain regions or low socioeconomic status, the media are alienating an important sector of the population directly responsible for more effective child development. Parents must not be held as the only solution; however, they must certainly be considered part of a well-connected team of adults who coordinate to ensure the best learning conditions for children to develop. To appropriately follow this recommendation, thought must be given to the tone of communications, as well as the messengers. This recommendation echoes that from a previous report in which FrameWorks found the Brazilian public distrusting of politicians and certain medical professionals, especially those who communicated with them in an arrogant or condescending way.^{xxx}
5. **Make violence a children’s issue.** The media coverage of these two topics together is extremely rare. When violence is discussed in relation to children, it is done in one of two ways — by presenting a dizzying array of statistics or by discussing individual cases. Broaden the discussion by a) making visible more subtle forms of violence such as abuse and neglect; b) delving deeper into societal factors that cause or influence rates of violence against children; c) linking those causes to more preventative solutions; and d) explaining more about the causal mechanisms by which violence directly impacts children’s development (see below).
6. **Describe how high levels of violence can negatively impact the developing brain, with lifelong consequences for subsequent learning, health and behavior.** The public needs more information about the exact mechanisms by which exposure to violence negatively impacts children’s development. Such

information is critical for the public to fully engage in discussions about appropriate policies and interventions.

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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Notes:

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