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Analysis of 48 Hours of Television News Coverage Following the Columbine High School Shooting

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ABSTRACT

On April 20, 1999, two Columbine High School students started a shooting rampage, ultimately killing 12 students and one teacher, wounding 21 victims, then completing suicide. Using media frame analysis (MFA), we examined 265 transcribed major network television news stories aired during the 48 hours following the shooting. In these stories, we investigated the frequency of warning signs of youth violence. Though later disputed, stories included warning signs that fortified the myth of the juvenile superpredator. Television news coverage of school shootings often spotlights perpetrators, fuels false narratives, creates an inflated sense of risk and vulnerability, and fails to place such events in the larger context of youth violence. We urge professionals to contextualize news stories within a broader framework of youth violence; to support fact-based communication between the media, school administrators, and law enforcement; to eliminate the spotlight on perpetrators; and to carefully consider reactionary responses that are not evidence-based nor proven effective.

IMPACT STATEMENT

Television news coverage following the Columbine High School shooting demonstrates how the media portrays details and frames a story that fuels public concern and fear. In contrast, data from the 1990s to the present day describe a significant decline in youth violence and crime. However, the media's portrayal of Columbine failed to provide a broader context of decreasing youth violence and the extremely rare occurrence of school shootings. Following Columbine, flawed school safety and discipline policies led to increased school expulsions and youth incarceration. Additionally, national organizations created a list of youth violence risk factors. However, these risk factors do not accurately predict or explain extremely violent acts, such as school shootings.

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INTRODUCTION

On April 20, 1999, two Columbine High School students entered their school and began shooting (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2019). The attack lasted approximately 45 minutes, killing 12 students and one teacher and wounding 21 individuals. The shooting ended when the shooters took their own lives. During the ensuing media frenzy, reporters attempted to make sense of what happened. With information gathered from traumatized students, teachers, and parents, stories were pieced together and released to the public. Locally and around the world, all were desperate to know how many students and teachers were killed, the identity of the shooters, the motivation for the shooting spree, and how such a tragedy could occur (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2019). Following this school shooting, many wondered if this rampage could have been prevented (Mears et al., 2017). Many questioned if warning signs could preemptively identify future perpetrators and prevent such tragedies (American Psychological Association [APA], 1999; Dwyer et al., 1998; Mears et al., 2017).

According to the Pew Research Center (1999), during 1999, the news coverage of the Columbine High School shooting drew more public interest than any other news story. Over 20 years since the event, time has given us the advantage of seeing this incident from a more informed perspective. We now know that presumptive rumors ascribed false attributes to the two shooters (Bushman, 2018; Consalvo, 2003; Mears et al., 2017; Muschert, 2007, 2019). At the time, according to the media, the two perpetrators were portrayed as victims of bullying taking revenge on those who made their lives miserable (Mears et al., 2017); as gang members, part of the Trench Coat Mafia (Frymer, 2009; Ogle et al., 2003); as outcasts who snapped suddenly (Frymer, 2009); and as narcissistic martyrs for their own cause (Mears et al., 2017; Muschert, 2007).

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Countering the stereotypical image of a school shooter, the two Columbine perpetrators were not social outcasts (Bushman, 2018; Mears et al., 2017). Everyone was their target that day, not solely jocks and bullies as commonly claimed (Bushman, 2018; Mears et al., 2017; Muschert, 2019). The shooters sought attention and notoriety (Bushman, 2018; Lankford & Madfis, 2018). Unfortunately, media coverage of Columbine gave instant and long-lasting mythological status to the two perpetrators (Lankford & Madfis, 2018). Specific details of Columbine, particularly the death count and notoriety of the shooters, fueled and continue to fuel narcissistic motives of school shooters who seek recognition and fame (Lankford & Madfis, 2018). Therefore, in this article we will not use the two shooters' names. We want to avoid adding to their name recognition and associated notoriety (Johnston & Joy, 2016; Lankford & Madfis, 2018).

News Coverage of School Shootings

Mass media has great influence over its audience (Silva & Capellan, 2019a, 2019b; Butts, 2020; World Health Organization, 2017; Zimring, 2013). When a sensational story is covered by the media, the general public's attention is instantly riveted to the television screen (Cramer, 1994; Curran et al., 2020; Lawrence & Birkland, 2004). In particular, news stories covering school shootings that involve the deaths of innocent children often create a culture of fear, fuel false narratives, and scatter misinformation (Brooks et al., 2000; Burns & Crawford, 1999; Muschert, 2019).

Among news stories, mass shootings are one example of a crime that does not fit neatly into the typical pattern of daily news. Making up less than 1% of all violent crimes in the United States, mass murders, including school shootings, are incredibly rare (Cornell, 2017; Hurst, 2005). However, when school shootings occur, these incidents are highly publicized, creating a hyper focus on such events and fortifying the illusion that such acts are typical and that all schools are at risk (Brooks et al., 2000; Cornell, 2017, 2020; Douthat, 2013; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013, 2019; Verlinden et al., 2000).

Media and Legislative Agenda

In fact, this culture of fear surrounding school shootings, coupled with misleading information, strengthened the myth of the juvenile *superpredator*. The superpredator, a title coined by DiIulio in the early 1990s, was a homicidal, uncontrollable youth hiding within communities where crime and violence are rare (DiIulio, 1995a, 1995b). In particular, this myth was further propagated following Columbine (Cornell, 2017; Muschert, 2007). Across time, misinformation and false narratives served to spotlight the Columbine shooters' notoriety (Bushman, 2018; Johnston & Joy, 2016; Lankford & Madfis, 2018).

School shootings led to an increased emphasis on youth violence risk factors and the need to tighten school security (Curran et al., 2020; Jonson, 2017; Lawrence & Birkland, 2004). In response, schools added police and security officers to their roster of employees (Addington, 2019; Muschert, 2019) and strictly enforced exclusionary discipline associated with *zero tolerance* policies (Brown et al., 2020; Gregory & Cornell, 2009; Henry, 2009). Following Columbine, these fast moving and broadly enforced changes disproportionally affected students of color, particularly Black students, and further entrenched the *school-to-prison pipeline* (Heitzeg, 2009; Hughes et al., 2019; Mallett, 2016; Skiba, 2015).

However, counter to public and political opinion, these efforts had no discernable effect on reducing school violence (American Psychological Association, 2008; American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2006; Hughes et al., 2019; Mallett, 2016; Mears et al., 2017). Simultaneously, debates and moral panic were sparked over guns and gun control laws (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009; Lawrence & Birkland, 2004; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013, 2019); high school cliques, outcasts, and subcultures (e.g., goths; Frymer, 2009; Henry, 2009; Larkin, 2007, 2009); bullying (Mears et al., 2017; Zehr, 2001); and excessive violence in video games and movies (Ferguson, 2007; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013, 2019).

In the case of Columbine, inaccurate information reported out of context evolved into false narratives, or *myths* (Krisberg et al., 2009; Mears et al., 2017). For example, the initial and ongoing explanation of being bullied as the perpetrators' primary motivation for carrying out the school shooting (Zehr, 2001) was largely unfounded (Mears et al., 2017). Some researchers reported that minimal, if any, evidence linked bullying or other forms of persecution to the perpetrators' rampage (Cullen, 2010). Yet, directly stemming from Columbine, numerous states immediately set into motion school-based bully prevention mandates (Zehr, 2001).

Additionally, scholars recognize the link between agendas driven by the media and politicians who constantly vie for public attention and monetary support (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Lawrence & Birkland, 2004). Together or against one another, the media and politicians seek to spotlight specific events that trigger, focus, frame, and ultimately define a narrative—leveraging public opinion to either support or refute certain political agendas (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009; Douthat, 2013; Giles & Shaw, 2009; Lawrence & Birkland, 2004). In general, based on their agenda, the media and politicians selectively identify

which news events are spotlighted and how the story's details are tailored to pique and influence public opinion (Birkland, 2019; Lawrence & Birkland, 2004).

The Myth of the Juvenile Superpredator

Extending from the media's portrayal of school shootings and youth violence in communities, an epidemic of fear drew attention to the purported rise of the juvenile superpredator. During the 1990s, the media reported news of a rapidly expanding juvenile crime wave (DiIulio, 1995a, 1995b; Miller et al., 2006). Scarce and localized incidents of youth violence were spotlighted on prime-time news, reviewed on popular television talk shows, and formed the storylines of popular television dramas (Bazelon, 2000; Burns & Crawford, 1999). These storylines and images continuously "seep[ed] back into the national consciousness to influence public opinion in 'a feedback loop of reciprocal mythmaking,' which continued to enhance the perceived threat of youth violence" (Bazelon, 2000, pp. 165–166).

Rather than providing an appropriate context of crime statistics that actually indicated a decline in youth violence, the media provided stories that solidified the public's growing misperceptions of an increase in youth violence (Grosholz & Kubrin, 2007; Krisberg et al., 2009; Zimring, 2013). Even though these fears were not factually based, politicians, professionals, and the general public concluded that schools and communities were being overwhelmed with the ever-increasing youth violence perpetrated by juvenile superpredators (Burns & Crawford, 1999; Douthat, 2013; Grosholz & Kubrin, 2007; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013).

Schildkraut and Muschert (2013) reported that following a school shooting, the public is deeply troubled and wants to know *how* and *why* such a tragedy could occur. In general, Schildkraut and Muschert identified two major groups that narrate and create the rationale for such senseless acts of violence: the mass media and politicians. Mass media breaks the news, provides the initial details about the targeted victims and the perpetrators, relates the specifics about the shooting, and makes comparisons with prior school shootings. After the public receives the media's information, they turn to the politicians who are expected to provide official statements and reactions. The public expects answers that explain why the school shooting occurred. They expect their political leaders to identify the problem, take a stand that explains the cause of the problem, and ultimately take action to prevent future school shootings (Schildkraut & Muschert, 2013, Schildkraut et al., 2018).

Because the media selectively includes certain details in their reporting, they *frame* a particular story, interpreting details in such a way that convinces the public of a "higher frequency and severity of crime than is actually the case" (Krisberg et al., 2009, p. 27; Zimring, 2013). Describing the coverage of school shootings, Miller et al. (2006) noted, "In short these reports were indicative of a highly selective presentation of facts by journalists, designed to both frighten and titillate the general populace" (pp. 174–175). Silva and Capellan (2019a) note, the media's draw on the public's attention increases when stories include "higher casualties and injuries, as well as perpetrators that are young…" (p. 77). News of school shootings draw in large audiences and support the popular adage, *if it bleeds it leads*.

Youth Violence Risk Factors

Numerous studies indicate that youth violence stems from underlying influences such as "bad parenting, violent popular culture, mental illness, unhealthy school climates, and availability of firearms" (National Consortium on Violence Research, 1998; Verlinden et al., 2000, p. 5). In order to effectively address and prevent youth violence, we must first understand the underlying interplay of risk factors that perpetuate youth violence (Bushman et al., 2018; Farrington et al., 2017; Hawkins et al., 1998).

National groups such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI; Band & Harpold, 1999); the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP; Dwyer et al., 1998); the National School Safety Center (NSSC; Stephens, 1998); and American Psychological Association (1999, 2008) have identified youth violence risk factors. These risk factors are listed in Table 1.

Acknowledging the complex manner in which ecological systems interact and influence child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and for practical purposes, we grouped violence risk factors into four major categories: individual, family, peers and school, and socioenvironmental. This type of categorizing or grouping of factors contributing to youth violence is also recognized in studies conducted by numerous researchers around the time of the Columbine shooting (Farrington, 1998; Herrenkohl et al., 2000; Resnick et al., 2004) and in more recent research (Bushman et al., 2018; Sitnick et al., 2017). Resnick et al. (2004, p. 424.e8) reported, "The field of violence prevention is evolving rapidly toward a broader ecological perspective that identifies elements of risk and protection at the individual, family, school, and community levels."

Additionally, the identified youth violence risk factors have remained fairly stable across the past three decades (Bushman et al., 2018; Hawkins et al., 1998; Meyers & Schmidt, 2008; Verlinden et al., 2000). Although youth violence risk factors have increased our understanding of the context and development of aggressive and violent behaviors, predicting who will perpetrate a school

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Table 1. Youth Violence Risk Factors Reported by Major Television News Networks During the First 48 Hours Following the Columbine High School Shooting ($N = 265$)[a]

Youth Violence Risk Factors[a]	n[b]	%*
Individual violence risk factors	**231**	**87**
Brought a weapon to school	215	81
Made a detailed plan to attack/hurt others	112	42
Suicidal ideation/attempts/completion	80	30
Animal cruelty	1	<1
Violent drawings/writing (including online drawings/writings)	42	16
Medical or physical condition	1	<1
Impulsivity/hyperactivity	1	<1
Psychological/psychiatric conditions	7	3
History of aggression/difficult temperament/history of threatening others	29	11
Substance abuse	4	2
Attitudes/beliefs	70	26
Criminal record/discipline problems	24	9
Motive for attack	76	29
Gender	154	58
Age	39	15
Race	4	2
Family risk factors	**15**	**6**
Insufficient monitoring/supervision	11	4
Exposure to family violence/antisocial or violent parents	1	<1
Child abuse/neglect	4	2
Parental substance abuse	0	0
Marital conflict and/or divorce	0	0
Family conflict	3	1
Peers and school risk factors	**117**	**44**
Antisocial/violent peer group	10	4
Low school commitment or achievement/academic failure	4	2
Gang involvement	99	37
Social isolation/peer rejection	66	25
Persecuted and targeted by bullies	39	15
Socioenvironmental risk factors	**105**	**40**
Socioeconomic status	17	6
Exposure to violent media/violent culture	57	22
Easy access to weapons	66	25

Note. Percentages are based on 265 transcribed television news articles.

[a]Youth violence risk factors align with information provided by Band and Harpold (1999), Dwyer et al. (1998), Meyers and Schmidt (2008), Stephens (1998), and Verlinden et al. (2000). [b]Because one article may have mentioned numerous subcategories, the sum of the numbers in the subcategories do not add up to the number in the major category.

shooting is a nearly impossible task (Cornell, 2020). Researchers note that youth violence risk factors describe many youth who do not pose an immediate threat to school safety and will never be involved in a school shooting (Cornell, 2020; Dwyer et al., 1998; Sewell & Mendelsohn, 2000).

In this study, each major category of risk factors is composed of several subcategories. The major categories include (a) *individual violence risk factors,* (b) *family risk factors,* (c) *peers and school risk factors,* and (d) *Socio environmental risk factors*. These major categories and associated subcategories are listed in Table 1.

Youth Violence and Crime Statistics

Although the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicate that homicide is the second leading cause of death among youth (ages 5–18), less than 2% of these homicides occur on school grounds, while students are traveling to and from school, or while students are being transported to/from school-sponsored events (CDC, 2019). Furthermore, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) summarized 26 years of annual reports from *Nonfatal Student Victimization—Student Reports* (Wang et al., 2020). In this summary, across 26 years (from 1992 to 2018), the total youth victimization rate at school—including rates of crimes, such as thefts and violent victimizations—steadily declined for students ages 12–18 (see summary of report on the NCES website [https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=490]). Wang et al. (2020) indicate that from 1992 to 2018, the total victimization rate at America's schools declined from 181 victimizations per 1,000 students to 33 victimizations per 1,000 students—more than an 80% decrease.

Purpose of Study

News coverage of Columbine induced strong political and public reaction—fortifying the school-to-prison paradigm (Heitzeg, 2009; Rocque & Snellings, 2018). Although

intended to increase school safety, ultimately this punitive paradigm failed to make schools safer and further marginalized youth of color (American Psychological Association, 2008; Cornell, 2017; Mallett, 2016; Mayer & Jimerson, 2019). It is important to understand the manner in which the media reports incidents perpetrated by youth offenders (DeVos et al., 2018; Lankford & Madfis, 2018; Mears et al., 2017). Also, understanding media reporting of school shootings will prepare school psychologists to better serve as *knowledge brokers* who are capable of explaining data and the youth violence research within the proper context (Bielak et al., 2008; Cornell, 2017; Meyer, 2010; Ward et al., 2009).

Research Questions

In this study, we investigated major television news outlets' portrayal of the Columbine School Shooting, specifically the first 48 hours following the school shooting. We investigated the media's portrayal of the perpetrators and the information offered that aligned or failed to align with specific youth violence risk factors and the myth of the juvenile superpredator (Cornell, 2017; Muschert, 2007). Our purpose was to gather information that would assist us in answering the following research questions:

1. In describing the Columbine school shooting and the perpetrators, to what extent did the media report details related to youth violence risk factors?
2. How did the media frame and contextualize the Columbine school shooting?

METHOD

In this study, our data collection and analysis are based on the framework of media framing analysis (MFA; Giles & Shaw, 2009). In addition to MFA, in this study we also included media content analysis (Macnamara, 2005; Neuendorf, 2016; Riffe et al., 2019).

In a commonly referenced definition, Entman (1993, p. 52) described MFA:

> Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.

In MFA, a *media frame* describes the bits of information that compose the perspective of a story and define *how* the story is told (Giles & Shaw, 2009). *Framing* influences how information is presented in such a manner that anticipates listeners' interpretation of the story being told (see *Frame Analysis*; Goffman, 1986).

MFA adopts features that are relevant to investigating the psychological aspects of a documented event portrayed in the media. The event's coverage does not merely include the facts, but includes the story's *narrative* and *characterization* of the event and individuals involved in the event, along with societal and environmental factors that impact how the story is presented, contextualized, and ultimately interpreted (Giles & Shaw, 2009; Hertog & McLeod, 2008; Pavelka, 2014).

Giles and Shaw (2009) emphasize the psychological impact of media on human behavior. They encourage the merging of quantitative and qualitative methods to offer two levels of framing data analysis: looking at the bigger picture and investigating the underlying details that illustrate and support the bigger picture. More specifically, in our data collection we relied on major categories (the bigger picture) that are composed of subcategories that more fully describe the underlying details.

Data Collection and Analysis

The initial step of providing the framework for analyzing news media content is the construction of a *code book* (Macnamara, 2005). The code book specifies the identified variables and outlines the primary framework for coding transcripts' content (Macnamara, 2005; Neuendorf, 2016). In short, a code book operationalizes the coding decisions. By categorizing the information, we were able to collect data and subsequently describe, compare, and analyze the information from a broader overarching perspective, the bigger picture (Krippendorff, 2018).

Guided by code words (Giles & Shaw, 2009), we began by searching for media coverage of the Columbine School shooting in a database that compiles news coverage. We relied on the database *LexisNexis* (https://www.lexisnexis.com/ap/academic/form_news_tv.asp), which compiles news media transcripts. In this case, we specified Columbine as the primary code word.

The next step is relating each transcript within our analysis to the specific *source event, time frame*, and *audience* (Giles & Shaw, 2009). Our source event was the Columbine High School shooting, specifically the immediate aftermath of the school shooting. The end point of data collection was identified as 48 hours immediately after the school shooting occurred, thus our time frame included 48 hours following the shooting, from April 20 through April 22, 1999.

Television news coverage of the tragedy peaked on April 22, 1999 (Muschert, 2007). We wanted information that was immediate and unfiltered in order to better investigate the raw context of this event. The *audience* included those individuals who watched the major networks' television coverage of the Columbine High School shooting during that time frame.

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To narrow down our search, we included only the news from the major television networks at the time of the event (ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC). We selected national news sources due to the salience of coverage and broad national audience. Additionally, by extension, our audience also included those individuals who, across time, watch the media available on YouTube and through the networks' historical depositories of news coverage.

Next, we broke down the data into preidentified content categories, a key step in MFA (Giles & Shaw, 2009). We categorized and organized information based on thematic risk factors of youth offenders, originally compiled by Verlinden et al. (2000). In our current study, we categorized the subcategories of youth violence risk factors under four major category headings: Individual Factors, Family Factors, Peers/School Factors, and Socioenvironmental Factors. Refer to Table 1 for the full listing of youth violence risk factors.

In addition to coding the youth violence risk factors, we included an additional major category heading, *Details in the Aftermath of the Shooting*. Subcategories under this major heading included whether or not the following items were mentioned in the transcripts: memorials (activities or language expressed to memorialize lives lost in the shooting), community and national (how the community and nation were responding to the event), victims (if the victims were acknowledged and their situations described), Columbine High School (if the high school was specifically mentioned), law enforcement, parents and families of Columbine students/victims, accurate death toll (13 victims, 15 including the two perpetrators), and perpetrators' names. We were curious about *who* the media focused on following the tragedy.

After identifying the major categories and subcategories to be coded, the next step involved identifying *character(s)*. Character analysis is an important feature of MFA because researchers are interested in media's portrayal of psychological aspects of events (Giles & Shaw, 2009). Looking at the bigger picture, we identified the two Columbine shooters as our main characters because they perpetrated the shooting and were frequently mentioned in the stories. We were also interested in how the media portrayed the two shooters in relationship to the preidentified youth violence risk factors. Additionally, secondary characters were also identified, namely the victims of the massacre, along with individuals and groups associated with the school, community, and nation as a whole.

Coding Transcripts

Before training the identified coders, each of the 265 transcribed television news stories were randomly assigned to coding team members. A *Media Frame and Content Analysis Flowchart* is included in Figure 1. The finished code book was created in an Excel spreadsheet. For each article, coders specified if the transcribed news article mentioned the preidentified categories. Coding was conducted manually rather than using computer software designed specifically for coding textual data. We wanted to fully consider the *context* of content (Macnamara, 2005). For ease of entering and interpreting data, data were entered into a shared Excel spreadsheet. Excel also allowed us to conduct intercoder reliability checks and to easily tally data (Neuendorf, 2016). Each coder also typed in additional information, making comments about the coding decisions and providing specific examples of the coded information. Insights and unique information were also typed in the comment column of the Excel file.

Coders

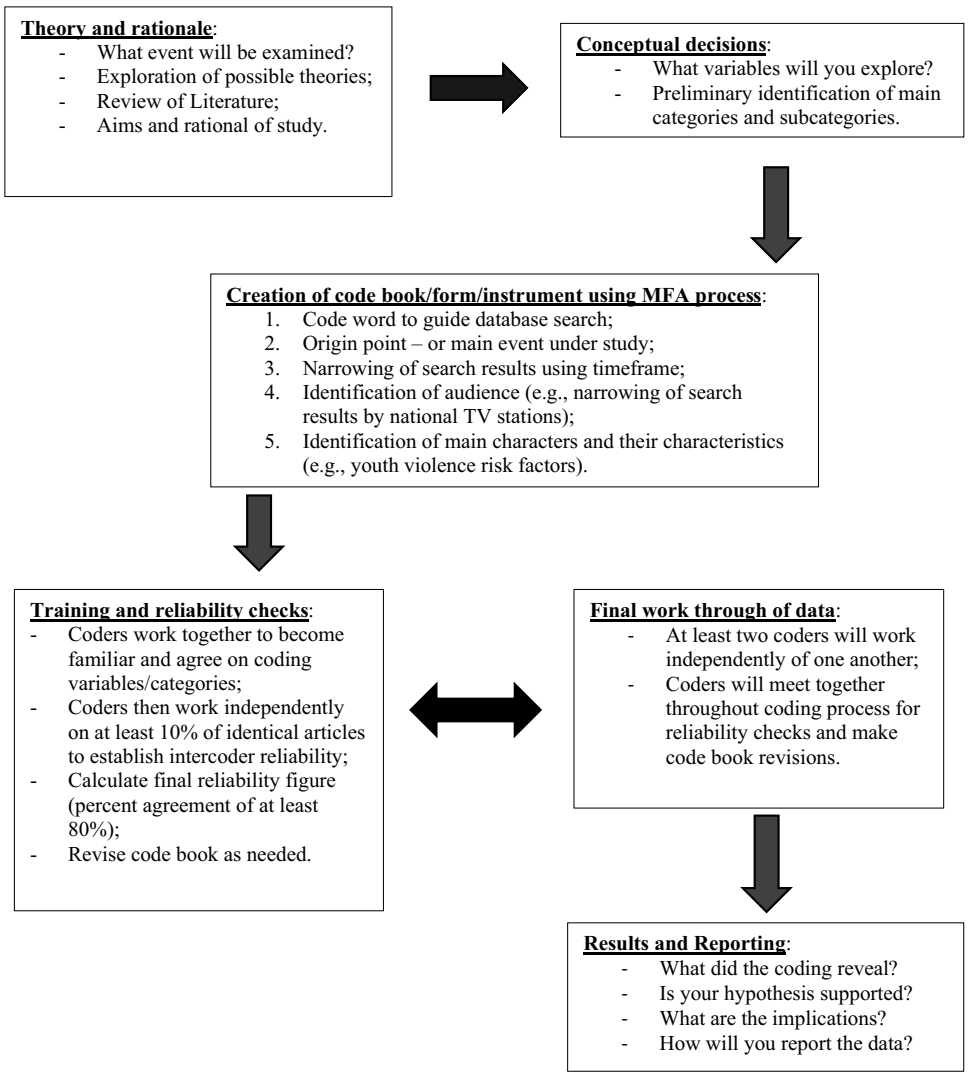
Transcribed stories were carefully reviewed, and categories were independently analyzed by four individuals (coders). Coders included one school psychology professor and three school psychology graduate students, who were all trained in coding methodologies. Prior to coding, the coders met to review coding principles, to become familiarized with the preidentified youth risk factors, and to operationally define the youth violence risk factors. Training consisted of three 1-hour sessions in which coders were trained to review the transcripts and practice coding. In developing the code book and training the coders, we followed the steps listed in Figure 1. After training, ongoing discussions about coding were included in 1-hour sessions held weekly over the course of three months.

Coding Reliability

Reliability within MFA and content analysis relies on the clarity of the categories and the skill and accuracy of the coders (Holsti, 1969). We followed Macnamara's (2005) strategies to boost intercoder reliability. We worked together, as we came to agreement on coding variables. We continuously referred to the code book, revising and clarifying the coding categories as needed. In an effort to increase reliability, we included four coders and coded independently of one another, as suggested by Macnamara (2005).

To establish initial intercoder reliability and to refine our code book, 33 randomly selected articles (12.5% of total articles) were coded independently by the four coders. We met back to determine the level of coding reliability, a basic percent agreement. Our intercoder reliability for the pilot coding phase of our sample articles resulted in 98.1% agreement among the coders. Macnamara (2005) notes that in most coding studies, reliability coefficients ≥

Figure 1. Media Frame and Content Analysis Flowchart



Note. This flowchart is adapted from Macnamara (2005), Giles and Shaw (2009), and Neuendorf (2016).

0.80 are considered acceptable. After the initial coding, at least two coders coded each of the remaining articles. In the event of coding disagreement, the four coders discussed the coding decision and met with a minimal agreement of 3 out of 4 votes to finalize a coding decision. All coding accuracy prior to discussions remained above 85%.

Validity of Data

Over several decades, youth violence has been a highly investigated area of research in which specific risk factors have been consistently identified (American Psychological Association, 1999; 2008; Armstead et al., 2018; Bushman et al., 2018; Dwyer et al., 1998; Meyers & Schmidt, 2008). However, even though the relative importance of particular risk factors and using risk factors to predict youth violence have been contested (Farrington et al., 2017), these factors remain relevant. The consistency of these risk factors across time supports both the face validity and content validity of these coding categories of youth violence risk factors. Indeed, content analysis is rooted in face validity because face validity is the *gatekeeper* of all other types of validity (Krippendorff, 2018).

MFA also demands the linking of media transcript to form generalizations, both explicit and implicit, that may be related to the ongoing phenomena (Giles & Shaw, 2009). Validity in content analysis is subsequently accomplished through an understanding of our research objectives and a prior knowledge of the content under study (Macnamara, 2005). Generalizations within media content analysis and MFA become *media templates*, which are "long-running stories that have been given an almost

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mythical status by both media sources and their audiences" (Giles & Shaw, 2009, p. 389). This analysis of MFA and media templates allows researchers to describe how the media portrayed a traumatic and highly publicized incident such as the Columbine High School shooting.

RESULTS

In total, 265 transcribed television news programs were reviewed and coded. Tables 1 and 2 list the percentages and number of transcribed scripts that mentioned each specific subcategory. Each of the percentages in the specific major coding categories and subcategories are calculated based on the 265 television transcripts that were reviewed.

Details in Aftermath of Shooting

Prior to coding the television news stories, we decided to include coding subcategories that would offer a few details about the aftermath of the shooting. The data from this coding are included in Table 2. These details are included in the following paragraphs.

Of the 265 television news stories, 74% ($n = 196$) included information about the *victims*; 34% ($n = 89$) mentioned the Columbine High School shooters by name. As would be expected, most of the stories mentioned *Columbine High School* (65%, $n = 172$).

Moving beyond the school, 56% ($n = 149$) of the stories specifically mentioned the *parents and families of the Columbine student victims*; 60% ($n = 159$) mentioned *law enforcement*; and 65% ($n = 171$) mentioned the *community and national* implications or considerations. Overlapping with *Columbine student victims*, *Columbine High School*, and the *community and national* subcategories, 68 mentioned *memorials* or memorializing those who lost their lives during the school shooting.

To give an indication as to the accuracy of reporting following the school shooting, we included the subcategory, *accurate death toll*. Of the 265 stories, 25% ($n = 66$) reported that 13 individuals and the two perpetrators were deceased. However, we did not include a count specifically for inaccurate estimations. We only indicated that 66 of the stories included an accurate account in their story. After the coding was completed, we realized that this oversight was a shortcoming in the data collection.

Table 2. Additional Details Reported by Major Network Television News During the First 48 Hours Following the Columbine High School Shooting ($N = 265$)

Additional Details Reported in Aftermath of Columbine	*n*	%*
Memorials	68	26
References to impact on community and nation	171	65
Victims	196	74
Columbine High School	172	65
Law enforcement	159	60
Parents, family of Columbine students/victims	149	56
Reports an accurate death toll: 13 victims, 15 including perpetrators	66	25
Mentions perpetrators by name	89	34

Note. Percentages are based on 265 transcribed television news articles.

Individual Risk Factors

The majority of story transcripts (87%, $n = 231$) included Individual Risk Factors for youth violence. This major category received a higher count than Family Risk Factors, School/Peer Risk Factors, or Socioenvironmental Factors (refer to Table 1). As might be expected, the majority of articles (81%; $n = 215$) explicitly mentioned that the perpetrators *brought a weapon to school*. Weapons included guns, homemade bombs, and propane tanks that were intended for detonation. In regard to frequency, this subcategory dominated the largest portion of transcribed news programs that made mention of youth violence risk factors. Coders noted that the majority of mentioned weapons included the perpetrators' vast amount of guns and ammunition.

Within the major category of Individual Risk Factors, *brought a weapon to school* was followed by *gender* (58%, $n = 154$); *made a detailed plan to attack/hurt others* (42%, $n = 112$); suicidal *ideation/attempts/completion* (30%, $n = 80$); *motive for attack* (29%, $n = 76$); and *attitudes and beliefs* (26%, $n = 70$). The other 10 subcategories listed under Individual Risk Factors were mentioned in less than 25% of the transcripts.

The following subcategories were only mentioned once in all of the 265 transcripts: *animal cruelty*, *medical or physical condition*, and *impulsivity/hyperactivity*. Only 7 (3%) transcripts mentioned *psychological/psychiatric conditions* and only 4 (2%) mentioned *substance abuse*. *Race* of the two perpetrators was only mentioned in 4 (2%) transcripts. Based on the limited counts in these areas, in regard to individual *Youth Violence Risk Factors*, the Columbine School shooters clearly did not fit the typical profile of adolescent risk factors for perpetrating violence (American Psychological Association, 1999; Band & Harpold, 1999; Dwyer et al., 1998; Stephens, 1998).

Family Risk Factors

Subcategories under Family Risk Factors were rarely mentioned. In total, only 15 (6%) of the 265 transcripts included information about Family Risk Factors. These subcategories included *poor monitoring/supervision; exposure to family violence, antisocial or violent parents; child neglect and/or abuse; parental substance abuse*; *marital conflict or divorce;* and *family conflict*. Again, the

Columbine High School shooters did not fit the typical family profile associated with youth violence risk factors.

However, even though there were few references to Family Risk Factors, a few comments about the family demonstrated society's and professionals' harsh attitude about parents who reared such children as the Columbine High School shooters. In the research notes taken while coding, one coder summarized a transcript from 4/22/1999 ABC's *Frontline*. The coder commented,

> The show included parents and survivors from several school shootings, including Columbine. It was an open show with several commenting. There were ALOT of comments about taking responsibility for what happened—parent responsibility was a big topic.

Another coder noted that on CBS, 4/21/1999, Colorado Governor Bill Owens (Republican) talked about the school shooting in Littleton. Owens commented that such events stemmed from a *lack of parenting*, "how we're raising our children."

On CBS, 4/22/1999 three individuals who lost family members during the Columbine shooting discussed their feelings about the Columbine High School shooting. One parent stated, "I'm crying out to all these parents that's not watching their children … we are going to have to do something to stop this madness." Several Columbine students and parents mentioned that although the perpetrators' parents seemed like *nice people*, they surely had to be aware of the massive trove of guns, ammunition, and other red flags they viewed as clear warning signs leading up to the school shooting.

Another coder noted that one ABC news story aired on 4/21/1999, *Warning Signs Ignored*, pointed the finger at the parents and indicated they should have known about their children. The news story indicated that the perpetrators' parents should have known about and seen the warning signs. This story also indicated that the perpetrators' parents gave these children guns "when they were young."

CNN aired a television special on 4/21/1999, titled *Shock and Horror Grip Littleton and the Nation in the Wake of Columbine High School Shooting*. One emphasis in this program was on parents' responsibility. Michael Gurian, a nationally recognized marriage and family counselor spoke during the program. He stated, "Ultimately parents have to take the responsibility for this, because they are the ones who have the kid for the longest period of time." Later in the program, he stated, "Boys are not getting two big things: enough moral development and enough emotional bonding." Another news show included CBS Health Contributor, Dr. Bernadine Healy. She declared, "… these are suffering, ill children. They need attention" (quoted from the television story, *How the Columbine High School Tragedy Could Have Happened and How It Might Have Been Prevented*, aired on CBS 4/22/1999).

Peers/School Risk Factors

Coding for the major category of the Peer/School Factors, identified 117 (44%) of the total 265 stories as referring to one or more of its subcategories. Of the subcategories under this major category, *gang involvement* was most commonly coded (37%, $n = 99$). One coder noted that in a television program titled, *Phenomenon of the Goth Movement*, aired on ABC, 4/21/1999, presenters promoted the myth of the juvenile superpredator. The story described the Goth Movement as a "troubling trend in suburban America" and further defined the movement as …"White suburban gangs built around a fascination with the grotesque and with death." Another program aired by CNN on 4/20/1999 was titled, *Trench Coat Gang Goes on Shooting Rampage at Colorado High School*. On 4/20/1999, NBC also aired a similar news story titled, *Two Students Dressed in Trenchcoats Enter Littleton, Colorado, School and Begin Shooting Rampage*.

Social isolation/peer rejection, another subcategory under Peers/School Risk Factors, was noted in 66 (25%) of the 265 transcribed television shows. From these shows, coders quoted some of the language used to describe the two shooters: "angry at the world and their peers;" "jocks hated the trenchcoats and the feelings were mutual;" "weren't a very friendly bunch;" "don't talk to people, they give people dirty looks;" "not many people were their friends;" and they "isolated off with the trenchcoats." These details came mainly from a variety of Columbine students who offered comments to the media after the shooting. Overall, the two perpetrators were described by the media as being isolated from the mainstream of students.

Approximately 15% ($n = 39$) of the television transcripts included information about the two perpetrators *feeling persecuted and targeted by bullies*. Although bullying was mentioned, there were no verifiable events to back this claim.

Under the subcategory *low school commitment or achievement/academic failure*, very few comments were made about the perpetrators having a difficult time academically. In fact, the perpetrators were noted as "bright." However, one Columbine student commented that the two perpetrators did not like those in authority and that the perpetrators had a "problem with authority." However, although these two perpetrators were not viewed as fitting perfectly into the school's social scene, they were not perceived as struggling academically or at risk for school failure.

Under the major category Peers/School Violence Risk Factors, the two shooters appeared to align with some of the youth violence risk factors. However, later information

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indicated that the perpetrators were not part of a gang, were socially accepted and involved in school activities, and were not rejected by their peers (Cornell, 2017; Lankford & Madfis, 2018; Mears et al., 2017). Therefore, although the immediate news stories supported some of the risk factors, ultimately the youth violence risk factors under this major category did not accurately describe the two Columbine shooters.

Socioenvironmental Factors

The major category, Socioenvironmental Factors, was included in 105 (40%) of the 265 stories. Information related to the perpetrators' *socioeconomic status* was mentioned in 17 (6%) of the transcribed television stories. This school shooting did not fit the expected profile of a violent youth from a poor inner-city neighborhood. In general, shock was expressed that this shooting happened in a safe *well-to-do* neighborhood. The 2000 federal census reported 3.9% of Littleton families lived below the poverty line (United States Census Bureau, 2003), compared to the national average of 11.3% of Americans who lived below the poverty level (Dalaker, 2001).

Exposure to violent media/violent culture was another subcategory under the major category, Socioenvironmental Factors. This subcategory was mentioned in 57 news programs (22% of 265). Comments from stories mostly centered on blaming the media for promoting guns and violence, in particular specifying violent video games as playing a major part in motivating the two perpetrators' actions. Several stories commented about the two perpetrators' excessive online gaming and interactions that focused on violence. According to one of the Trench Coat Mafia group, the two perpetrators prepared for the massacre by watching video games, then practicing with paint ball guns (*Colorado School Shooting: Trenchcoat Mafia Member Speaks-Out*, aired on CNN 4/22/1999). The following three video games were specifically mentioned: *War Games, Doom*, and *Natural Born Killers*. Another individual told of the perpetrators viewing "bomb making videos" on the internet.

Easy access to weapons was mentioned in 66 (25%) of the 265 stories. A few news stories referred to websites where youth were instructed on how to make bombs with ingredients available from any hardware store. In general, the easy availability of guns was and continues to be a major point of concern for many professionals, politicians, and citizens. The vast majority of comments expressed concerns about the easy availability of guns, particularly for youth. However, in the story titled, *Gov. Owens: Problem of Youth Violence 'A Lot Deeper' Than New Gun Laws*, aired by CNN on 4/21/1999, Colorado's governor stated that current gun laws are strict and that the perpetrators broke four gun laws—so he expressed that making stricter laws would most likely fail to deter youth from using weapons in school shootings.

DISCUSSION

A false narrative developed immediately following the Columbine High School massacre, one that has been and continues to be promoted by the media. The results of our study's MFA clearly demonstrate the emerging narrative on youth violence and school shootings. The media's focus on the warning signs of the perpetrators' violent risk factors (i.e., *social isolation/peer rejection, felt bullied or persecuted, exposure to violent media/violent culture, gang involvement*) bolstered the mythmaking status of the Columbine High School shooting (Dwyer et al., 1998; American Psychological Association, 1999). The media quickly disseminated a mixture of information, even before the perpetrators' bodies were found in the school (Cullen, 2010). To the general public, the perpetrators were rampage killers with a ruthless motive to kill, hiding in plain sight, carefully planning and preparing their attack (Cullen, 2010).

In our review, the media reported information that led viewers to believe that the two shooters had gang affiliations, had limited social interactions with peers, and planned the attack to seek revenge on those who bullied them. Unfortunately, these assumptions reported by the media about the two shooters were later shown to be inaccurate (Mears et al., 2017). Cullen (2010) notes that the two shooters had limited association and affiliation with the Trench Coat Mafia, which proved to be a nonviolent school social group with no gang ties. Additionally, Cullen (2010), who was a journalist at the time of the massacre, reports that the two shooters were not socially isolated or bullied. They had many friends, worked together at the same job, had girlfriends, and attended school dances (Cullen, 2010). The revenge motivation (aimed at bullies and jocks) promoted by the media was not validated. By most accounts, teachers considered both perpetrators as good students who excelled academically in school (Cullen, 2010). According to Cullen (2010), other than a minor criminal offense a few years before the massacre, the two perpetrators were well-behaved and were not considered *troublemakers* at school.

Regardless of motivation, the media's spread of misinformation created fear in the general public and contributed to the emerging myth of the juvenile superpredator (Krisberg et al., 2009; Mears et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2006). Building the hype and fortifying the belief that *all* schools were at risk for such an event, the media fueled an

atmosphere of fear. In response, the general public, school leadership, and politicians demanded public policy to address youth violence and to protect schools from future horrific events. This led to enforcing punitive disciplinary measures and further entrenching zero tolerance policies and the school-to-prison pipeline (American Psychological Association, 2006, 2008; Heitzeg, 2009). Ultimately, these extreme measures unjustly treated students for minor offenses, ultimately diminished supportive school environments, increased student dropout, and increased the number of adjudicated youth (Heitzeg, 2009; Mallett, 2016).

Guidelines for Reporting

Our analysis showed that media focused on more sensational aspects of the perpetrators, such as supposed gang involvement and their access to weapons and bomb-making materials. Ultimately these details were challenged and proven to be unsupported (Cullen, 2010; Mears et al., 2017). Additionally, about a third (33.6%, $n = 89$) of the transcripts in our analysis mentioned the perpetrators by name. In 2016, APAs panel explained, "the prevalence of mass shootings has risen in relation to the mass media coverage of them and the proliferation of social media sites that tend to glorify the shooters and downplay the victims" (Johnston & Joy, 2016). In recent years, some media outlets have adopted the guidelines set forth by the *No Notoriety Campaign* (Stelter, 2015) which encourages news outlets from "not using shooters' names or photos, but instead focusing on facts and victims" (DeVos et al., 2018, p. 13; Lankford & Madfis, 2018).

When sharing information about school shootings, school officials, law enforcement, and the media should strongly consider adopting guidelines from the *No Notoriety Campaign* (https://nonotoriety.com/). The Federal Commission on School Safety (DeVos et al., 2018) recommends that schools work closely with law enforcement and community leaders in developing their media response plans, ensuring consistent messaging, and maintaining clear lines of responsibility and authority.

School Safety and School Discipline

The coverage of the Columbine High School massacre brought school safety to the forefront of public attention. Almost immediately, school disciplinary policies were influenced by mass media coverage of the horrific event, which eventually led to exclusionary and punitive disciplinary policies to prevent school violence (Mayer & Jimerson, 2019). Mayer and Jimerson (2019) found that inappropriate school discipline is disruptive to students' education and jeopardizes academic achievement. In fact, research has shown that arresting students most often leads to lowered academic achievement, greater likelihood of dropping out of school, and an increased risk for future involvement with the juvenile justice system and incarceration (Nance, 2016).

Limitations

The primary limitation of this analysis was our limited focus on 48 hours of major network television coverage of the Columbine High School massacre. Our limited time and news coverage only provides a snapshot of media response to this catastrophic school shooting. This limited peek into the media coverage is overshadowed by the massive amount of media coverage on the Columbine High School shooting. For example, in the 30 days following Columbine, *The New York Times* released 170 articles that reviewed this school shooting (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Schildkraut et al., 2018; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2019). More locally, in the 30 days following the Columbine High School shooting, the *Denver Post* released nearly 750 Columbine-themed articles (Chyi & McCombs, 2004; Schildkraut et al., 2018; Schildkraut & Muschert, 2019). During 1999 and 2000, in the first year following Columbine, over 10,000 news articles on Columbine were published in America's 50 largest newspapers (Newman, 2006).

Another limitation to consider when interpreting the data, some of the coded risk factors were possibly seen by television viewers, but these visual aspects of the news story were not described in the news narrative transcript. For example, mentioning the perpetrators were boys/males was not necessarily included in the script, but when viewing the television program, viewers could see that the perpetrators were White males. Additionally, the socioeconomic status of the perpetrators was mentioned infrequently, yet viewers possibly assumed that the community of Columbine was considered to be middle to upper middle class.

Additionally, we had no comparison group for this study. In other words, the accuracy of the news reporting and the content of the news reporting may or may not be typical of the reporting that covers such events.

Another drawback is the nature of this retrospective study and the possibility of inherent bias when investigating past events. Likewise gathering past data about news following a school shooting is challenging, due to the uneven news coverage of school shootings (Schildkraut et al., 2018). Additionally, Farrington et al. (2017) note the importance of conducting longitudinal studies in order to gain a better understanding of the development of youth violent tendencies and associated risk factors. Future research must consider the importance of conducting longitudinal studies to investigate the development of violent tendencies when considering a multitude of risk factors.

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Lessons Learned: Implications for School Psychologists

For over 20 years, Muschert, a professor of sociology, studied school shootings, with a special focus on Columbine (Muschert, 2019). He indicated that his research on mass shootings took a toll on his personal life, often leaving him with a feeling of hopelessness. Although he struggled to make sense of senseless violence, he offered three insights about constructively moving forward following school shootings.

First, we must carefully consider how current and future school safety and discipline policies have emerged following Columbine and subsequent school shootings (Addington, 2019; Skiba, 2015; Skiba et al., 2016). In particular, school psychologists and school administrators must discuss the increasing reliance on police and school resource officers on school campuses. This is particularly relevant considering the Black Lives Matter movement and the current anger toward police brutality and racial disparity within the legal and justice system (Skiba et al., 2016; Turner & Beneke, 2020). School psychologists must take part in these important discussions involving strategies to avoid punitive discipline policies that marginalize students from diverse backgrounds, particularly Black students who have received and continue to receive harsher punishments than their White peers (Addington, 2019; Muschert, 2019).

Second, rather than spending money on police, resource officers, and surveillance in schools—subsequent realities in the post-Columbine era, Muschert (2019) emphasizes the need to increase school-based mental health services. He states that money spent on mental health "would do more to alleviate the problem of mass violence in schools than would any increased investment in police and surveillance technologies" (p. 368).

Third, school psychologists must participate in discussions with the local media and school administrators about limiting publicity that focuses on perpetrators of school violence (Lankford & Madfis, 2018; Muschert, 2019). Additionally, when school psychologists are asked to participate in a discussion about school shootings, they must always emphasize that the media's attention makes a rare event seem commonplace. School psychologists must provide context that clearly specifies that school shootings are extremely rare events and are not likely to occur in the vast majority of schools around the nation (Cornell, 2017, 2020).

Placing information in the proper context helps diminish public fear, allowing schools and communities to make more rational decisions regarding school safety. Additionally, school psychologists must be informed and ready to explain statistics about trends in school shootings and school violence, which the media may not provide. Bottom line, school psychologists must be prepared to serve as *knowledge brokers* who can adequately explain data and the youth violence research within the proper context (Bielak et al., 2008; Cornell, 2017).

School psychologists must also work proactively to support potentially violent students who may pose a safety risk to themselves and others. Although purported youth violence risk factors have remained consistent across time, it should be further noted, that there is currently no "single instrument [that] has been validated for use in risk assessment for serious juvenile violence…[and] there is no single psychological profile or assessment method that has received wide support" (Bushman et al., 2018; Verlinden et al., 2000, p. 47). School psychologists must understand the limitations of risk assessment as they help schools assess potentially violent students and create proper supports for them (Modzeleski & Randazzo, 2018).

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