From Play to Peril: A Historical Examination of Media Coverage of Accidental Shootings Involving Children*

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Objectives. To examine how firearms-related incidents are defined as social problems versus personal tragedies. This is achieved by examining a case of gun violence where the actors immediately involved are apparently blameless: child-involved accidental firearms deaths and injuries. Specifically, we examine changing narratives of these incidents from the mid-19th century to the present. *Methods.* A database of 314 *New York Times* articles on child-involved accidental shootings from the mid-1800s to the present day was compiled and analyzed using Atlas.ti. *Results.* Our content analysis shows that despite declining prevalence and coverage over time, these incidents were increasingly framed as social problems through narratives of *criminalization* and *responsibilization*. These discursive frameworks differ in how they allocate blame and advance appropriate social responses to child-involved shootings. First, "criminalization" involves a police response to both the child shooter and, especially after the 1911 promulgation of New York's Sullivan Act requiring a license for concealable firearms, to adult custodians. Second, "responsibilization" allocates responsibility for the proper management of guns to adults at home (since the 1970s) as well as to society at large (since the 1980s) within a discourse that frames child-involved accidental shootings as indicative of broader social disorder. *Conclusions.* Narratives of child-involved shootings reflect a broader social transformation of accidents into public problems that occurred in the 20th century. As such, the results provide insight into both the contemporary gun debate and the moral valuation of children.

In contemporary media representations of the gun debate, accidental shootings involving children act as a proxy for the failures of public policy. The child and the accident fulfill the same rhetorical functions by demonstrating a lack of individual (adult) and societal control over guns and constituting the victims and perpetrators of child-involved gun violence as tragic figures. These shootings evoke and politicize the melancholy associated with the loss of childhood as a protected time (Brown, 1993; Matzner, 2009) and heighten public concern about the issue of guns in American society. As Kahan and Braman (2003) remind us, however, how people understand guns as a social problem reflects their own cultural propensities regarding risk as much as a rational evaluation of the issue at hand. Consider the contrasting responses to high-profile shootings such as the December 14, 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT. Gun control advocates swelled in their demands for greater restrictions, especially regarding background checks and assault weapons; gun rights proponents purchased firearms in record numbers,

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a move that can be understood not just as a response to threats of impending regulation but also as an expression of armed self-defense as a solution to the problem of public safety.

Yet child-involved accidental shootings represent a different kind of harm, with an entirely different constellation of *blame* and *intention*, from events involving a malicious gun-wielding perpetrator. Our content analysis of 314 *New York Times* articles on accidental shootings involving children published between 1857 and the present reveals that contemporary representations of child-involved accidental shootings as acutely problematic take place at a particular historical moment. For much of the 19th and early 20th century, these shootings were generally framed as blameless accidents. Yet by the 1980s, newspaper coverage framed these incidents as a social problem for which we bear both individual and collective responsibility. Why did this shift take place?

One possible answer would be the prevalence of such shootings, as suggested by a March 13, 2016 *Guardian* article with the headline "The Macabre Truth of Gun Control in the US is that Toddlers Kill More People than Terrorists Do." According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 600 deaths and 16,000 injuries resulted from accidental shootings every year from 2005 to 2014; roughly 200 fatal and 6,700 nonfatal unintentional firearms injuries involved individuals 24 years of age or under. These figures are certainly concerning in their own right, but they represent a small and diminishing portion of the larger problem of gun violence. Accidental shooting deaths appear to have undergone a dramatic decline over the past 100 years, although changing data collection techniques make direct comparisons unfeasible Preston and Haines, 2014). According to the CDC, from 2005 to 2014, accidental firearms fatalities comprised 1 percent of all accidental injuries leading to death and 3 percent of all firearms deaths among 24 year olds and younger. Paradoxically, social concern over these shootings increased as their prevalence declined.

To make sense of this paradox, we draw on scholarship on risk and harm to situate changing narratives around child-involved accidental shootings within the social transformation of accidents into public problems over the 20th century. We argue that two key discourses problematize child-involved accidental shootings in line with broader trends in the framing of social problems: one, the criminalization of child-involved accidental shootings as legal offenses and increased reliance on criminal retribution; and two, the neoliberal responsibilization of child-involved accidental shootings as moral misdeeds and increased emphasis on guardians' personal accountability as well as societal responsibility through public policy. We use *criminalization* and *responsibilization* to unpack the different allocations of blame and different social responses surrounding child-involved shootings; at the same time, we emphasize that these narratives are not mutually exclusive but rather coexist to sustain the possibility of societal intervention.

Turning to *New York Times* coverage of child-involved shootings, we show that these narratives were generally absent in the initial period of study in the mid-to-late 19th century but became prevalent by the 1980s. Over the course of the 20th century, child-involved accidental shootings were socially constructed as problems by affixing blame to children who could be constructed as blameworthy and by affixing responsibility to parents who could be constructed as responsible. We conclude by discussing how the results provide insight into the social valuation of children.

Children and Guns: An Accident Waiting to Happen

Accidental shootings most commonly occur at home or in other leisure spaces (Hemenway, Barber, and Miller, 2010) considered part of the private sphere, which is

"neither a realm of work nor of power but of nature, comfort, and regeneration" (Brown, 1992:18). Their presentation in the media involves an intrusion into the sacred made possible by a rupture in the boundary surrounding these "haven[s] in a heartless world" (Lasch, 1977). This rupture comes from the trauma of childhood injury or death by gun, which destabilizes the prevailing ideology that home is a place where individuals can retreat into safety.

The sacralization of the home is a postindustrial sensibility, and it is bound up with the sentimentalization of childhood and the valorization of children's lives (Zelizer, 1985). In *A World of Their Own Making*, John Gillis (1997) notes that ideals of "childhood," "home," and "family" are all at the center of individualized "symbolic universes," which in earlier times were based in the church and community. The Industrial Revolution made this domestic symbolic unit practically possible, breaking important ties between home, community, and church and isolating women's unpaid reproductive work inside the home and men's paid labor without. While in the preindustrial period, children participated in the family economy through direct labor in household-based production or service, today, "children . . . are compelled to work in ways which produce themselves as the embodied form of societal investment" (Qvortrup et al., 1994).

Though precious, children are not treated as wholly innocent by contemporary discourse. Rather, the "naturally developing child" of postindustrial society tends toward selfishness, but through proper socialization, can become an adult fully able to participate in the social contract (James, Jenks, and Prout, 1998). Thus, in the contemporary era, preindustrial discourses of "evil" and "innocence" persist together in a dualistic conception of the child as simultaneously endangered and dangerous (Meyer, 2007). These discourses are applied unevenly, as a "criminological triage" for youth tends to address youthful "problems" as private matters among white and economically privileged children while applying criminal labeling and penal or other state interventions to poor and nonwhite children (Feld, 1999; Lesko, 2001).

This dualism intensified in the 1960s, when children were treated simultaneously as "malleable creatures, highly susceptible to both corrupting and pro-social forces" and as a pathological population of "superpredators" (Shook, 2005:463). The "risk culture" of the 1980s refocused attention on the home as a place of safety from external threats for middle-class white children (James, Jenks, and Prout, 1998; Harden, 2000) while treating nonwhite and poor families as a source of risk for children who, in turn, pose a threat to society (Jenks, 1996; Cousins, 2001). Within this social context, guns that fall into the hands of children are doubly menacing, directly threatening the lives of innocent and unwitting children victims and indirectly representing a lack of social control over segments of society constructed as "dangerous."

Framing, Naming, Blaming: Criminalization and Responsibilization

Child-involved accidental shootings changed from private troubles to social problems as the social imagination expanded to include the public naming and shaming of private troubles. Our analysis reveals a broad discursive shift over time, though these discourses overlap through multiple historical moments (Foucault, 2002; Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983). These discourses framed the risks of guns in the home, transforming an unpredictable category of household harms into a "known world" of risk by contextualizing the source of harm, locating blame, and providing an appropriate social response (Marx Ferree, 2009:87).

Blameless Accidents

In the Anglo-American tradition, "accident" has long been used to designate "an unforeseen, generally tragic event, which alters the normal course of things" (Neira and Bosque, 2004). It refers to events that are unintentional, though they may derive from human error, and are distinct from the catastrophic action of superior forces such as storms, earthquakes, or floods known in both legal and everyday parlance as "acts of God" (Loimer and Guarnieri, 1996). Accidents describe a cause of mortality that falls *outside* the unpredictable and devastating scope of disease epidemics and is *separate* from deaths caused by intentional human action, such as homicide and suicide. Despite its common use in colloquial speech, the term accident does not frame public problems; a private mishap resulting in tragedy, it is the antithesis of a social problem. Thus, 20th-century public health professionals eschewed accident, which describes *events*, to instead focus on reducing harm by minimizing *risk* and preventatively treating particular forms of *injury* (Nilson, Gustavsson, and Bonander, 2014). In 2001, the *British Medical Journal* instituted a ban on the word "accident" because the term points to neither cause nor result (Davis and Pless, 2001); indeed, accidents imply a cause intended by neither God nor man, so their prevention is beyond the control of both the individual and society.

The traditional understanding of "accidents" as deaths of little public concern, caused by the normal hazards of life and part of the steady churn of death, framed 19th- and early 20th-century reports of child-involved shootings. Two historical developments, however, brought "accidents" under the rubric of public problems in modern discourse. First, escalating injury rates from industrial manufacture led a growing number of political elites to believe "that careless use of high-powered machinery had created unacceptable risks" that could be prevented through individual and societal action (Loimer and Guarnieri, 1996:33). Second, as disease control improved, doctors and public health officials began to turn their attention to *regular* causes of death instead of focusing on the extraordinary (Rosen and Imperato, 2015). Death by hazard became a problem worthy of prevention, especially among children (Zelizer, 1985).

Yet this move does not tell us *who* is responsible for fixing these hazards, or *how* they should be held accountable. To understand the discourses that addressed these questions, we turn to a rich sociological and anthropological tradition that examines how harm and risk become socially meaningful and blame becomes allocated through social processes (Beck, 1992; Cohen, [1972]2011; Critcher, 2009; David et al., 2011; Giddens, 1991; Hier, 2002, 2008, 2011; Rohloff, 2011; Siltaoja, 2013). Forwarding a "cultural theory of risk," Douglas and Wildavsky argue that because "no one person can know more than a fraction of the dangers that abound" (1983:5), individual and collective understandings of risk are based not on a total evaluation of the evidence but rather on cultural "short-cuts" that select risks that reflect and reinforce our moral biases and ignore risks that do not (see also Kahan and Braman, 2003). We identify two distinct but overlapping discourses that create accountability for accidental shootings: *criminalization* and *responsibilization*.

Criminalization

We first draw on moral panic theories to examine processes of criminalization by which certain individuals are made to stand in for social threats and rally collective punitive responses (Cohen, [1972]2011). Moral panics have framed social threats as diverse as crime, homelessness, and climate change. Moral panics constitute a social process (or "social

reaction") (Garland, 2008) according to which individualized "folk devils" (e.g., criminals) come to represent a collective threat to society. Starting with Jim Crow and accelerating in the post-1960s "War on Crime," crime has served as a socially resonant means of naming social problems, allocating blame, and enforcing order. Thus, the meting out of justice should not be read as the proportionate reaction to criminal threats but rather must be understood as an expression of anxiety, oftentimes racial anxiety. Consider the controlling image (Collins, 2002) of the "black rapist" that justified "southern justice" in the Jim Crow era (Feimster, 2009). This image exemplified the supposed "barbarity" of accused black men, which justified collective assertions of white supremacy, such as spectacle lynchings, in the face of changing racial (and, by extension, sexual) relations (Hale, 2010; Wood, 2011). As another example, consider the panic over so-called Satanic cults in the 1980s and 1990s (DeYoung, 1998, 2008). In this case, changing gender relations sparked anxiety as more women entered the workforce and relied on paid strangers to provide childcare. Day-care providers were accused of child abuse and subject to high-profile public witch hunts, but all accusations were ultimately found to be without foundation. These examples reveal how criminalization allocates blame and advances socially appropriate solutions: broad-based social anxieties become affixed upon individuals who are subject to collective punishment, whether direct (by a mob) or by proxy (through criminal justice channels).

Our goal in drawing on the moral panic literature is not to assert that outcry over child-involved shootings represents a pitched moral panic; in fact, the increased problematization of child-involved shootings was associated with depressed coverage over time, which contradicts expectations of a moral panic. Nevertheless, to the extent that this outcry is proactive and purposeful, it could be understood along the lines of a "good moral panic" (Rohloff, 2011). Indeed, as Critcher (2009) argues, the "discursive logic" (Siltaoja, 2013) underlying pitched moments of full-blown moral panics may shape broader framings of social problems. Thus, we posit that the criminalization of accidental child-involved shootings expresses deeper underlying anxieties by individualizing threat and collectivizing social responses.

Responsibilization

Moral panics are not the only form of "moral regulation," or the "long-term process of encouraging others to internalize codes of moral conduct and act on their own behavior to affirm a sense of phenomenal security in a world of perceived or potential insecurity" (Hier, 2011:528). According to risk society scholars, new risks emerged in late modernization, characterized by complex causation, unpredictability, undetectability, and broad scope (Beck, 1992; see also Ungar, 2001). Instead of appearing as the fault of individualized folk devils that warrant social punitiveness, these risks are "responsibilized" (Garland, 1996; O'Malley, 1996, 2010) such that people respond to *collective, amorphous* risk by *individualizing* tactics. These tactics, as Foucault summarizes in his 1978 lecture on biopolitics, revolve around regulating "the conduct of conduct"(Foucault et al., 1991). Thus, rather than *punish* individuals, responsibilization responds to threat by *empowering* individuals *through prudent choices* (O'Malley, 1996) in ways that align with broader, if diffuse, projects of social coordination.

Responsibilization is the expectation and cultivation of "self-help" in the absence of overt collective control. This may take the form of consumption through the purchase of home alarm systems, firearms, and even personal cell phones (Simon, 2007; Carlson, 2015), but it also entails socially stylized practices of self-regulation through which people—as

TABLE 1

Narratives of Child–Involved Accidental Shootings

Frame	Context	Focus of Blame	Social Response
Accident	Play	None	None
Criminalization	Crime	Children/parents	Punishment
Responsibilization	Statistics	Parents/policy	Personal/societal responsibility

enterprising individuals—maximize their own capacities for happiness, health, and success. Consider the example of gun carry (Carlson, 2015): gun carriers are engaged in a practice of self-help that "responsibilizes" the amorphous risk of crime (reflected in the mantra that crime can happen "anytime, anyplace"). Personal habits and dispositions revolving around gun carry in turn presumably ease reliance on collective mechanisms of protection (e.g., police, through the notion that "I don't dial 911!").

Narratives of criminalization and responsibilization appear increasingly in coverage of child-involved accidental shootings over time. We treat these narratives as analytically distinct, but in practice, they are intertwined and at times mutually reinforcing. As compared to framing these incidents as "melancholy accidents," these narratives construct child-involved accidental shootings as social problems; see Table 1. These new discourses entail a shift in the social context in which these incidents are embedded, from play (accidents) to the crime scene (criminalization) and the home (responsibilization). These discourses focus blame where blame had not been placed before: on children lawbreakers alongside, at times, parent lawbreakers (criminalization) or irresponsible parents/guardians (responsibilization). This allowed for responses where none had been articulated before, including criminal justice mechanisms such as arrest (criminalization) and calls for more deliberate practices of parental responsibility such as locking firearms (parental responsibilization) as well as calls for a policy response through increased gun regulation (societal responsibilization).

Methods

To understand changing narratives surrounding child-involved shootings, we turn to newspapers, which allow us to examine shifting discursive frames across time (Saguy and Gruys, 2010). To this end, we created a database of newspaper coverage in the *New York Times,* the paper of record with the largest readership among American dailies. Furthermore, back issues of the *New York Times* are available on ProQuest as far back as the late 1850s, allowing us to capture a long historical trajectory of nearly 160 years from June 1857 (the start of the data set) to June 2016. We selected this lengthy time period based on the existing literature on risk, which shows a major shift in discursive framings of risk from the early industrial period (mid- to late 19th century) to industrial capitalism (early to mid-20th century) and into neoliberalism (late 20th century).

To compile the database, we searched ProQuest for mention of a child (e.g., child, children, girl, boy, son, or daughter) and an accidental shooting (accidental shooting, accidental discharge, negligent discharge, accidentally shot, or accidentally discharged). Though "unintentional" is the term preferred by the CDC, we used these search terms to capture a colloquial use of "accidental shootings" that did not depend on contemporary public health or legal discourses. Search results returned 2,469 articles; in order to facilitate in-depth qualitative analysis we created a smaller subset of articles (Altheide and Schneider,

2012) by ordering the articles temporally and sampling every fourth article for an initial database of 617. Next, we read each article and removed 303 articles that were not substantively related to child-involved accidental shootings (the majority featured shootings exclusively involving adults), resulting in a final data set of 314 articles (260 involved a child shooter, 284 involved a child victim, and 70 involved a self-inflicted shooting). See the Supporting Information Appendix.

We used deductive and inductive techniques to code and analyze data using Atlas.ti (Altheide and Schneider, 2012). We first deductively developed an initial coding scheme by identifying various anticipated categories of news framing, including the context of the shooting (play, hunting, crime); the presence/actions of adults (parents, guardians, police); and the outcome (injury, death). As we coded, we took a modified grounded theory approach that allowed for new categories and themes to emerge inductively from the data, including social scientific narrative strategies (statistics, public health perspectives); counternarratives (gun rights); and the moral tenor of the articles (moralizing, criminalizing, responsibilizing). Once codes were inductively established for the data set, we returned to articles coded early in the analysis process and recoded as needed. See the Supporting Information Appendix for graphs of framing over time. One author did all initial coding and reviewed codes with the second author. The second author then independently coded all articles in the final sample for core themes. Discrepancies between coders were few, and all were resolved through mutual decision.

Blameless Accidents

Early coverage treated child-involved accidental shootings as macabre but commonplace curiosities. Starting as early as the 1870s, accounts contained subtle elements of blame and law-and-order responses that would constitute a social problem by the mid-20th century. However, prior to that point, the dominant frame treated child-involved accidental shootings as incidental private troubles, not systematic public concerns.

Early coverage of child-involved accidental shootings appeared as short stories in much longer "local news briefs" for the greater New York area and beyond, usually in the contexts of "play" or "hunting." For example, one brief in 1871 reported, "James Birney, aged twelve years, of No. 707 Seventh-avenue, accidentally shot himself in the left hand, yesterday, while playing with a pistol." The vignette appears alongside other peculiar stories: a severe injury caused by a clock that fell from a wall; a death caused by a falling embankment; the feeding times of monkeys, bears, lions, and leopards at Central Park; an injured seven-year-old who fell from an ice cart; the arrival of 96 Mormons by steamship (08/09/1871). The appearance of child-involved accidental shootings in these long lists of incidents created the impression that they were merely one of many unfortunate circumstances that could befall residents of New York.

Given their short length and the conventions of reporting at the time, early articles tended to emphasize gender, age, and the brief details of the shooting. During this early period, children are often described in the context of "playing":

> A boy named Willie Greenman, who is boarding, with his parents, at the Latourette House, Bergen Point, accidentally shot himself with a gun he was playing with, supposing it to be unloaded. The ball entered his breast and lodged under the armpit, inflicting a serious wound. (07/18/1880)

The framing of these incidents as examples of boyish play (almost all of the shooters are boys) situates them as blameless, if regrettable, incidents, erasing any suspicion of malice on the part of the shooters. From 1857 to 1920, nearly 50 percent of all articles placed the shooting in the context of play, as opposed to 30 percent in the later periods, and "play" was involved in over 60 percent of articles from the 1870s and 1880s.

As a more specified form of play, incidents often took place in the context of hunting (or during boys' playful excursions to the woods with their guns):

> Julius Cummings, 12 years old, was accidentally shot . . . on Saturday evening by a young companion named Charles French, and died to-day. They had a gun in their possession, loaded with buckshot, and it was unaccountably discharged while the boys were in the woods. (02/13/1882)

As this vignette suggests, hunting, as a form of boyhood (and manly) leisure (Haag, 2016; Messner, 2011), had the same effect as "play" in situating child-involved shootings as a mere accident rather than social problem; indeed, the dangers of hunting were outweighed by the social ritual it represented for boys and men. Hunting was involved in over 20 percent of articles in each decade between the 1880s and 1930s, after which its prevalence declined to virtual nonexistence by the 1970s.

Whether referencing the specific activity of hunting or the general context of play, lengthier coverage was often reserved for well-to-do children, such as the sons of senators (01/23/1889) and famous architects (06/20/1909) and students at elite prep schools (11/20/1920). Implicit markers, especially reference to class status, suggested that the vast majority of incidents covered involved white children; only seven incidents in the pre-1960s period explicitly identified the children involved as "negro" or "colored." These status markers combined with the context of play and leisure to accentuate the "accidental" nature of these incidents; rather than involving morally dubious individuals, these were unfortunate accidents that could happen to anyone—even elites.

Yet as early as the 1880s, narratives that would frame child-involved shootings as more than mere accidents were taking shape. Statistics were periodically referenced in early coverage; some articles reported numbers of hunting-related deaths on the eve of hunting season or injuries and deaths related to Fourth of July celebrations. In these statistics, accidental shootings involving children were not isolated as a particular kind of event; rather, adult-involved accidental or intentional shootings and injuries or deaths by other causes were covered alongside accidental shootings involving children. Children were not yet framed as a particular constituency in need of societal protection, and gun accidents were not yet framed as a particular class of threat; these framings emerged over time alongside shifts in the discourse regarding both contexts of and responses to accidental shootings.

Criminalization

The prominence of narratives surrounding crime and criminality as a means of making sense of, and problematizing, social disorder grew dramatically from the late 1800s to the present. In the mid-to-late 1800s, urban law enforcement agencies were fledgling municipal bureaus vying for legitimacy (Monkkonen, 2004), and stereotypes surrounding criminals as poor black urban men had yet to solidify (Muhammad, 2011). It was not until the 1960s that American politicians would capitalize on American fears surrounding urban black crime and frame social problems as distinct as poverty, unemployment, and

education through the lens of crime and criminality (Beckett, 1997; Simon, 2007), with police situated as front-line fighters in the so-called War on Crime. In the *New York Times* articles we reviewed, child-involved accidental shootings became entangled within this broader discourse of "criminalization," making these incidents legible as social problems.

Early coverage reported accidental shootings in pithy vignettes that left much to the imagination about their ramifications, but these vignettes periodically referenced child arrests. Consider the first two (of 124) articles mentioning criminal justice responses to accidental shootings:

> Yesterday afternoon, a young girl named Kate Lyons, was accidentally shot and fatally injured while sitting near a window at No. 156 Washington Street. George Hammer, who fired the shot, has been arrested. (08/27/1867)

> About 7 o'clock last evening Michael Fueim, fourteen years of age. . . . while carelessly handling a pistol in the store [he worked at] accidentally discharged one of the barrels. The ball took effect upon Fannie Elsie . . . killing her instantly. The accident caused great excitement, and the boy was arrested. (08/09/1871)

In both of these cases, boys were arrested for shooting and killing a girl in a nonhunting context. Death, rather than injury, prompted these arrests; many of the very early accidental shootings involving injuries involved no criminal justice response whatsoever.

That changed with the 1911 passage of the Sullivan Act, which required the registration of any concealable gun with the State of New York. The Act strengthened police enforcement capacities by allowing them to book possessors of unregistered firearms, especially those who drew attention through a shooting. Thus, whereas all police interactions reported prior to 1910 were with shooters (both children and adults), 13 percent of articles in the 1920–1969 period involved arrests of unregistered gun owners.

Prior to the 1920s, articles that mentioned parents' ownership of the gun treated this simply as a fact surrounding the incident rather than as a source of criminal responsibility or even blame. In the late 1800s, a few newspaper articles referenced child or parental stupidity as the source of gun accidents (e.g., "Another fool with a pistol" 01/30/1885; "accidents . . . emphasize the folly of permitting the indiscriminate use of these dangerous articles by small boys and their ignorant elders" 07/20/1877; "another case of 'didn't know it was loaded'" 11/26/1886). However, in these early years, parents were rarely sanctioned with arrest. Consider one of the few early examples of direct parental approbation, which occurred in 1873:

> The jury impaneled by Coroner Miller, of Morrisania, to hold an inquest upon the body of Henry Dooley, who was accidentally shot by one of his companions while the party were firing at a target, exonerated Alfred Boullard from all blame and censured the practice of parents allowing their children the use of firearms.

In this case, blame is explicitly allocated from the child shooter to his parents, but the impact of blame is decidedly different: Alfred Boullard faces (but is cleared of) criminal sanctions, and his parents face only moralizing.

Beginning in 1921, when parents or other adults were mentioned as owning firearms involved in accidental shootings, these mentions were tied to an arrest on weapons charges. For example, the following incident is recounted under the headline "Pistol in Queens Home Brings Booking of Father":

> The police of the 103d Precinct in Jamaica, Queens last night charged Aliviro Gomes, 62 years old . . . with violation of the Sullivan Law. His oldest son, Alvirino, 19,

> accidentally shot a younger brother, Adolph, 14, in the head yesterday afternoon with an unregistered revolver, according to police. Alvirino was booked on a charge of felonious assault. (10/31/1948)

Here, this family is triply punished: the accidental shooting of Adolph, the booking of Alvirino on a felonious assault charge, and the arrest of Aliviro on violation of the Sullivan Law. In another case covered in 1966, a father is arrested after his son critically injures himself:

> Vincent Centamore, a fireman, was arrested yesterday on charges of violating the weapons law after his 4-year-old son Anthony accidentally shot himself with his father's unlicensed pistol. (01/28/1966)

The criminalization of parents was a steady theme in articles on child-involved accidental shootings during 1920–1969, but the proportion of articles mentioning weapons arrests surged to 56 percent in the 1970s and 40 percent in the 1980s. In these articles, teens as well as parents are subject to weapons arrests. This startling increase represents the maturation of the War on Crime (Simon, 2007) in the 1970s–1990s, which supplied a frame (Beckett, 1997) to understand accidental shootings as problems of crime associated with poor black urban Americans. Though crime was very rarely involved in the framing of stories prior to 1960, coverage of incidents post-1960 was more likely to involve the contexts of crime, poverty, and foul play. Thirty-one percent of stories between 1960 and 2010 are presented in the context of crime, often with the racialized overtones of "gangs" and "urban gun violence." Eighteen of 29 stories including the context of crime occur in the post-1960 period, even though this latter period only accounts for 20 percent of coverage.

Contrasted to the "blameless accidents" of the early period of coverage, child-involved accidental shootings after 1960 were framed as criminal incidents—in terms of both allocation of responsibility and context. Take, for example, these two descriptions of child-involved accidental shootings included in longer articles on gang violence from 1960 and 1992:

> A 12-year-old girl was accidentally shot in the cheek before the gang battle began Friday outside a Ridgewood playground called Evergreen Park. (08/16/1960)

> "We pioneered this corner," said the man who was interviewed days before a six-year-old was critically wounded by a gun shot after the school bus in which he rode was caught in a gang-related shootout on nearby Frank Street. "And nobody's going to take it away from us." (07/05/1992)

The type of accidental shootings described in these articles—an accidental victim hit by an intentionally fired gun—is not new to the post-1960s period. Forty-one total articles mention this type of shooting across the sample, and 63 percent of these come from the pre-1960s period. What is new, however, is the presentation of these accidents both as a type of crime and in a broader context of criminal activity in relation to gangs and drugs.

As play in general and hunting in particular receded as contexts for child-involved accidental shootings, crime became more prominent. This reflects a dramatic decline in hunting: the number of respondents reporting to the General Social Survey (GSS) that they or their spouse participated in hunting plummeted from 31.6 percent in 1977 (the first time that this question was asked) to 15.4 percent in 2014 (Smith and Son, 2015), while hunting licenses fell from nearly eight in 100 U.S. residents in 1960 to less than five in 100 in 2010 according to Census and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service data. It also reflects spiking crime rates in the 1960s (Pinker, 2011), followed by a transformation in

the politics of crime over the 20th century and into the 21st that amplified these surges and increased fear of crime and crime-related expenditures disproportionate to the rates of increase in crime (Beckett, 1997; Simon, 2007). The problematization of accidental shootings framed through a lens of crime reflects an emphasis on individualized folk devils (i.e., urban criminals) and indicates a collective response (i.e., punishment through criminal justice channels).

Responsibilization

The increasing problematization of child-involved accidental shootings is also linked to the discourse of responsibilization, which involves two moments: the responsibilization of parents/guardians and societal responsibilization. While the former moment is detectable in early coverage, the latter does not emerge until the 1980s and onwards. As with criminalization, the move toward responsibilization is embedded in broader social shifts toward neoliberalism, according to which individuals—now imagined as citizen-consumers—are increasingly tasked with "downloading" social responsibilities and asked to change their personal behaviors habits accordingly. Beginning in the 1970s, as parents were arrested on weapons charges and as guns were linked to broader social anxiety regarding urban crime, accidental shootings involving children were attributed to lackadaisical parental attitudes. Only four pre-1970s articles on child accidental shootings advocate for specific home safety measures, but a growing proportion of articles addresses this topic in recent decades, from 11 percent in the 1970s and 1980s to 19 percent in the 1990s, to 25 percent in the 2000s, and finally 33 percent in 2010–2016. For example, these articles suggest:

> People who have guns should always store them unloaded, separate from their ammunition, and secured with a gun lock, gun alarm or other tamper-proof device that prevents unauthorized use or renders the gun inoperable. Trigger locks are not adequate protection . . . studies in several cities show that about 30 percent of families with children keep loaded guns in the home. (05/21/1995)

Reacting to news articles about toddler-involved accidental shootings, featured readers wrote:

> When I had toddlers, I child-locked all the rooms in the kitchen and bathroom cabinets, I gated off the stairs, I child-proofed the house . . . the thought of leaving anything dangerous within their grasp let alone a gun gave me anxiety. What kind of person leaves a gun anywhere near a child? (05/07/2016)

> Our very high rate of accidental gun deaths means a great deal to all of us who value a civilized society . . . we should be deploring and correcting the unfettered availability of firearms to children. (03/01/2016)

Whereas the moralizing of the late 1800s occasionally dismissed irresponsible parents as "fools," these later writers see child-involved shootings as indicting parents' fundamental moral turpitude (What kind of person leaves a gun anywhere near a child?) and even threatening the basic social fabric (accidental deaths mean a great deal to all of us who value a civilized society).

Furthermore, since the 1980s, gun control advocacy provided a narrative through which the problem of accidental shootings could become politicized (25 percent of articles during 1990–2016 advocate gun control). The first reference to gun control in the data set occurs in 1989 under the headline "Children Shooting Children: Move is on for Gun Control."

The story features many of the attributes that mark other problematized coverage of child-involved accidental shootings since the 1980s: statistics emphasizing the breadth of the problem; a few vignettes of tragic deaths; and a clarion call for parental responsibility. However, for the first time, accidental deaths are not simply the result of "foolish" parents or criminally at fault children: they are byproducts of firearm availability, as the opening statement of this article asserts:

> Five Florida children have been shot, two fatally, in accidents with their parents' guns in the last two weeks, setting off an emotional debate in this state, which has long opposed tightening of gun controls . . . proponents of gun control say the problem is a broader one concerning the general availability of firearms, where 60 percent of the households have at least one gun, a rate that is tied with that in Texas as the highest in the country. (06/18/1989)

This call for gun control turns the "blamelessness" of early coverage on its head: with a public health perspective, accidental shootings move from blameless to hyperblameworthy. Instead of "no one" to blame, everyone—or at least, everyone participating in gun culture—is to blame.

Furthermore, according to this narrative, child-involved accidental shootings provide an ideal case for restrictions on gun ownership by demonstrating that stricter gun laws that fall short of minimizing gun ownership will fail to prevent these shootings because of the dangers inherent in exposing children to guns:

> Even under stricter gun laws [regulating waiting periods and restricting concealed carry], the authorities said, it is unlikely that any of the people whose guns were used in the five shootings [covered earlier in the article] would have been denied the ability to purchase them. . . . The Center to Prevent Handgun Violence . . . reports that a study of 533 accidental handgun shootings of children . . . found that 66 percent occurred when children were home alone [with guns].

Unlike other kinds of gun tragedies (e.g., gun crime, botched self-defense, and suicide), accidental shootings with children as the perpetrators are easily rendered blame-free, especially in a context where children are presumed innocent, precious, and inherently valuable. Thus, child accidental shootings provide an ideal case to argue for gun restrictions by diffusing blame.

In presenting this ideal case, the responsibilization frame did not always operate on its own; rather, it often worked together with the criminalization frame as a preferred lens through which gun control advocates justified greater gun restrictions (Goss, 2006). The post-1980s period includes many lengthy stories situating accidental shootings within the context of crime and connecting them to broader problems of violence and inequality. One October 30, 1995 story, running under the headline of "Kids Pay the Price," explains that America is "awakening to gun violence" as it recounts statistics on gun deaths, separating out the 5,000 children killed in 1992. With Oprah Winfrey as a quoted expert, the story recounted vignettes of children who lost their lives to gun violence on the streets of Chicago, highlighting accidental shootings of "mistaken identity" endemic to high-crime racially marked urban areas (a little girl killed because a father thinks he sees a burglar; a promising track athlete killed because a gang member mistakes him for another gang member). The story ends with a paraphrased plea from Winfrey to recognize the "humanity that is sacrificed" in the gun-related death toll:

> Not just the lives lost, but the humanity in all of us that is sacrificed by our acceptance of the mass manufacture, mass sale and mass use of firearms in this country. She tries to lift

at least a corner of our blanket of denial, to disturb and maybe even awaken us. After all, she seems to be saying, children are dying.

Whether in the specific context of crime or the broader context of personal and societal responsibility, news stories of the contemporary period tend to reiterate the perception that the broad-based nature of child-involved accidental shootings does not make them blameless but rather implicates us all. Reflective of the social construction of accidental gun deaths as a problem, these stories emphasize a solution requiring broad-based action to change *individual* behaviors and control individualized threats: namely, tightened gun restrictions and penalties for unsecured firearms.

Discussion and Conclusion

Eighty-one percent of accidental firearms-related fatalities involve a shooter aged 25 or under (Hemenway, Barber, and Miller, 2010). Like U.S. homicide statistics, accidental firearm deaths set the country apart: the U.S. rate of accidental firearm deaths is 5.2 times that of other countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Richardson and Hemenway, 2011). Yet accidental shootings account for only 2 percent of firearm-related deaths, which means that discursive "work" must go into framing accidental shootings as social problems worthy of concern alongside more prevalent incidents of homicides and suicides. To that end, this article reviewed *New York Times* coverage of accidental shootings involving children since the mid 1800s and identified three dominant discursive frameworks over that period. From 1860 to 1920, these shootings were treated as *blameless accidents* that occurred in the context of play, especially hunting. Most incidents were reported in pithy summaries of the context of the accident and its result (injury or death). The passage of the 1911 Sullivan Act, requiring registration of concealable guns, initiated an increase of the frame of *criminalization* as both children and parents were sometimes arrested and charged as a result of these incidents. But not until after 1960 did criminalization become a prominent frame that implicated racialized perceptions of criminals and indicated a broader social anxiety over shootings in the context of crime. Finally, in the 1970s, a *responsibilization* framework shifted blame onto "irresponsible" parents and gun owners, prescribing personal gun safety measures as a solution. This *responsibilization* of parents and guardians was extended to include all of society after the 1980s, as articles overwhelmingly advocated gun control measures as the appropriate solution.

This article provides insights into the discourses of *criminalization* and *responsibilization* that together serve to make guns a social problem that the public is broadly responsible for solving, even as only certain individuals—criminal offenders and irresponsible gun owners—are to *blame* for gun-related injuries and death. *New York Times* articles since the 1980s call for increased gun control. Meanwhile, an emphasis on personal responsibility and fear of the criminalized other facilitates other solutions, such as the practice of responsible gun ownership by "law-abiding citizens" (in line with a gun rights position) and harsh consequences for lawbreakers (favored by gun rights and gun control advocates alike).

In addition to revealing nuance within the gun debate, this analysis sheds light on how—and which—children are constructed as inherently valuable and worthy of protection. Heightened concern about child victims of accidental shootings enacts a form of morality that asserts that the public sphere is responsible for protecting the private—in this case, childhood innocence. Yet not all children are necessarily included in this sphere of childhood innocence (O'Connell Davidson, 2005). As moral panic theories remind us, this reassurance

also requires the existence of "folk devils," "monsters" (O'Connell Davidson, 2005), or "child super predators" (Pizarro, Chermak and Gruenewald, 2007) whose transgressions we can condemn. The emergence of twin narratives of blame within the context of child-involved shooting accidents—namely, *criminalization* and *responsibilization*—provides a means of squaring childhood innocence with childhood transgression, especially amid exaggerated media accounts of the threat of armed children and teens of color (Perrone and Chesney-Lind, 1997; Ruddell and Decker, 2005). Given the racialization of crime in the media, our analysis is suggestive of a racial distinction in narratives of accidental shootings, as criminal involvement can serve as an "colorblind" marker of racial status (Omi and Winant, 2014; Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Future research should focus on the period in which narratives of criminalization and responsibilization emerged to investigate these racial differences. Because of the relatively low frequency of coverage in this later period, such research would benefit most from using a census design and/or sampling multiple periodicals.

Thus, our analysis suggests that while in the hands of some children, a gun represents the failure of parental responsibility, in the hands of other children, especially children in high-crime, urban settings, a gun reflects a criminal propensity. This analysis of child-involved accidental shootings reminds us that the problematization of formerly private issues may reflect a changing sensibility toward the valuation of the lives of children as a whole while reproducing and reinforcing tropes of difference and inequality among children.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

Figure 1: Number of Sampled Articles Citing Accidental Shootings Involving Children by Decade
Figure 2: Percentage of Articles Articulating the Discursive Context of Play by Decade
Figure 3: Percentage of Articles Articulating the Discursive Context of Hunting by Decade
Figure 4: Percentage of Articles Articulating the Discursive Context of Crime by Decade
Figure 5: Percentage of Articles Articulating the Discursive Context of Statistics on Accidental Shootings Involving Children by Decade
Figure 6: Percentage of Articles Describing a Criminal Justice Response by Decade
Figure 7: Percentage of Articles Describing a Response by the Application of Weapons Charges by Decade
Figure 8: Percentage of Articles Suggesting a Response by the Implementation of Firearms Safety Measures at Home by Decade
Figure 9: Percentage of Articles Suggesting a Response by the Implementation of Gun Control Measures as Public Policy by Decade