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Media Framing and Policy Change After Columbine

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The 1999 Columbine school shooting incident in Colorado gained far more media attention across a broader range of issues than any school violence episode before or since. One might expect that Columbine would have had an influence on public opinion, public policy, and scholarship commensurate with the attention it gained. We find that the event did contribute in a limited but interesting way to scholarship on media framing. But the effect of Columbine on public opinion and the nature and substance of public policy was limited. Attention to school shootings peaked with Columbine, and the attention surrounding that event mostly spurred more rapid implementation of existing policies and tools that were already available to schools. In this article, the authors review first the media and public opinion research generated by Columbine; they then review the public policy research referencing Columbine and evaluate the "lessons" scholars have drawn from that event.

Keywords: *news media; framing; school violence; agenda setting*

Introduction

The April 1999 shootings at Columbine High School, in which Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold shot to death 12 students, 1 teacher, and themselves, became the most closely watched news event of the year, with 68% of the public reportedly paying close attention to the story (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1999). Surveys also registered a sharp increase in the public's concern over teenagers and the influences on them, including entertainment media and guns (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 1999). We might therefore expect that Columbine would have influenced public opinion, public policy, and scholarship commensurate with this attention. A review of the literature referencing Columbine does show that it contributed to a small but focused literature, exploring, in particular, the framing of public problems in the media. We describe and evaluate this literature below.

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The ultimate effect of Columbine on public opinion and public policy was arguably limited. As the research has documented, Columbine formed the peak of public attention to the problem of school shootings, but media framing of school violence subsequently shifted, the national school shootings "problem" faded from view, and enduring public attitudes thwarted attempts to change, in particular, gun policy in response to the tragedy. Columbine's lasting influence on national policy is therefore less definitive than one might expect, regardless of the claimed "lessons" of Columbine. We review first the media and public opinion research generated by Columbine and offer some observations about media coverage of more recent shootings; we then consider Columbine's policy effects and evaluate the lessons drawn from that event.

Columbine and the Framing of Public Problems

Scholars have long been interested in how perceptions of issues and events are shaped by the process of "framing"—that is, the communicative process of highlighting and focusing on certain aspects of reality. Sometimes unconsciously and unintentionally, but quite often through intentional action, issues and events take shape in public discourse as various actors make claims about causes and solutions (see Entman, 1993). Framing is virtually inevitable in human cognition and communication because reality itself is too multifaceted to be comprehended whole; policy action requires framing to focus attention and resources on particular problems to be remedied by particular means. The framing process is most visible when an issue or event is controversial. In those circumstances, we see most clearly the efforts of various actors—from politicians and activists to journalists and the public—to make sense of the issue by zeroing in on different frames.

The shooting at Columbine invited a framing struggle because it could be subjected to wide-ranging interpretations. Although its meaning may have seemed clear to differently situated actors, the event was in fact multifaceted and ambiguous. Columbine was the bloodiest school violence incident in the 1990s, creating a particularly strong urge to determine what caused it—an urge heightened by the fact that the public experienced the event vicariously via live coverage on television. Moreover, it took place in a setting unlike previous high-profile shootings—a largely White, solidly middle-class suburb outside the South. This prompted President Bill Clinton to observe on the evening of the shooting, "Perhaps now America would wake up to the dimensions of this challenge if it could happen in a place like Littleton" (quoted in Lawrence, 2001, p. 100).

Youth violence, particularly in populations not stereotyped as violence prone, more readily invites speculation about societal causes than violence committed by adults, coinciding, as Muschert (2007a) observes, with a long-standing public concern

about "juvenile delinquents" and "superpredators." The shooters' motives were opaque, and the fact that they took their own lives meant they could not provide their own narrative of their motivations. Moreover, a Western cultural norm of thinking in terms of cause and effect heightens the tendency to search for "reasons" for events like Columbine (Scharrer, Weidman, & Bissell, 2003): an event so dramatic in its effects "must," we tend to believe, have identifiable causes. But school shootings have many causes, ranging from individual factors, such as mental illness or a history of abuse, to community and societal factors, such as levels of school security, the quality of student and peer relationships, and predominant societal messages about violence and masculinity (Muschert, 2007b). The only constant across these events is access to guns, but guns merely contribute yet another facet to what Muschert (2007b) terms the "Rashomon effect," that is, "the subjective construction of reality in which observers of a single event perceive incompatible, yet plausible versions of what happened" (p. 61).

Into that void of understanding stepped the mass media with time and space to fill. One of the dynamics of event-driven media coverage is that the profit motive and the professional imperative to tell interesting stories often undermines sober analysis, leading to perceptions of public problems that are oversimplified and distorted (Lawrence, 2000; Muschert, 2007). We shall return to the question of how media interpretations of Columbine differed from those debated and acted on by policy makers. Here, we focus on what scholars have learned about how the media framed Columbine. These studies can be roughly categorized in terms of the kind of framing they identify: the degree to which Columbine was portrayed as a marker of a national or societal problem of school violence, and the substantive public problems to which Columbine was linked.

Columbine as an Indicator of a National Problem

Columbine received far more attention than any public school shooting before or since (Lawrence, 2001; Muschert, 2007b; Muschert & Carr, 2006). The media framed Columbine as the prime indicator of a growing national problem of school violence—quite apart from the actual statistics on school violence, which showed no significant increase in such events (Muschert, 2007b). A key question for researchers was therefore how a local event came to symbolize an alleged national problem.

In response to that question, Chyi and McCombs (2004) offer a model of media "reframing" of high-profile events over time. "During any news event's life span," they argue, "the news media often reframe the event by emphasizing different attributes of the event—consciously or unconsciously—in order to keep the story alive and fresh," a process they dub "frame changing" (p. 22). To track and analyze frame changing, they propose a two-dimensional model focusing on (a) how events are framed in terms of past, present, and future; and (b) how events are framed in

terms of the people and communities they effect, from the individual to the international levels. Their study of news coverage of Columbine in the first month after the shooting reveals that it was predominantly framed as an event with national, societal-level significance and that societal-level framing increased across the month's coverage. They also find that the media linked Columbine less to the past (e.g., unrelated previous events) or the future (e.g., policy implications) than to the present. Columbine thus lived out its media life largely in the "societal present."

The methodological contribution of this work is that it offers a way of comparatively analyzing how very different events are framed in media coverage. The substantive frames examined in the section below offer a window on how Columbine contributed to the social construction of particular public problems such as guns and violent pop culture. Chyi and McCombs' (2004) space-time model offers a broader context for those policy-specific questions and makes broader comparisons possible, highlighting how Columbine was processed, so to speak, in comparison to a wide range of high-profile media events.

Taking up this methodological invitation, Muschert and Carr (2006) analyzed media framing of nine rampage shootings in public schools between 1997 and 2001. They discovered a similar life cycle of school shootings stories: an initial emphasis on the individual- and community-level aspects of the story, followed by a growing emphasis on societal aspects as the story lived on in the news, with a final rebound in community coverage at around the 1-month anniversary of the event. A similar pattern is noted by Scharrer et al., (2003): Initial coverage closely focused on the who, what, where and how of the event, quickly followed by a second phase of expanding coverage into the "why." In other words, the research generated by Columbine discovered a media habit, as it were, of portraying such events in terms of their broader significance to the nation, not just their impact on the local communities in which they occurred.

Moreover, Muschert and Carr (2006) found a remarkably similar pattern in terms of how these events collectively contributed to the media's construction of a national school shootings problem. After the first shooting to receive significant national media attention (Pearl, Mississippi, in October 1997), the media quickly moved to framing the subsequent string of school shootings in terms of their larger societal significance. With the West Paducah, Kentucky, event just 2 months later, school shootings became (in media coverage anyway), a problem for the nation, not just for Pearl or Paducah. This framing peaked in coverage of Columbine.

Substantive Framing: Guns, Hollywood, or . . . ?

If Columbine and the string of media-covered school shootings that preceded it were treated as indicators of a national problem, what kind of problem did it represent? On one end of the continuum, very specific alleged causes of Columbine were emphasized in media coverage, most notably the wide availability of guns in

the United States and a pervasively violent popular culture. On the other end, very broad, even amorphous causes were sometimes discussed, reflecting a nagging sense that something is deeply wrong with a society that breeds young rampage killers. Our previous research (Lawrence & Birkland, 2004) catalogs the many meanings that were attributed to the Columbine killings. The two predominant frames in media coverage linked the event to a problem of guns and to a problem of pop culture. These two predominant frames, not coincidentally, matched the rhetorical themes emphasized by Democratic and Republican politicians in the days immediately following the event.

Pop culture was the culprit most explored in thematic news coverage (Lawrence, 2001). One review notes that "the Columbine shooting stands out as the one historical incident in which so many different popular-culture products were seen as responsible in so many different ways" (Scharrer et al., 2003, p. 82). In part, this way of framing Columbine followed a theme developed in coverage of previous school shootings. For example, quite coincidentally, just 1 week before the Columbine shooting, the parents of children killed in the 1997 Paducah shooting sued the makers of the film *The Basketball Diaries*, arguing that the Paducah shooter had been influenced by the film (Scharrer et al., 2003, p. 84). That suit helped set the context when Harris and Klebold went on their rampage, particularly since Paducah was framed in subsequent coverage as "leading up to" Columbine. Pervasively corrosive popular culture seemed a logical explanation for unrelated events in very different parts of the country. Hollywood was blamed for creating young killers with films like *The Basketball Diaries*, *The Matrix*, and *Natural Born Killers*,[1] along with music videos and video games.[2] But the pop culture frame also thrived because it was promulgated by congressional Republicans and to a lesser degree by President Clinton; for pro-gun Republican politicians, the pop culture frame offered a way of deflecting attention to guns and directing it toward a favorite enemy: "liberal" Hollywood (see Lawrence & Birkland, 2004).

Popular culture provides a convenient focal point for broader sources of social and cultural anxieties (Scharrer et al., 2003), such as consumerism and commercialism, alienation, dislocation, and social disconnection. Indeed, a cursory look at post-Columbine polls reveals that respondents often offered broad, vague responses to questions about the causes of Columbine until prompted to focus on more identifiable targets such as guns and pop culture. A Gallup poll conducted shortly after Columbine found that when simply asked in an open-ended format why the Columbine shootings occurred, the modal response focused on the parents and family of the shooters, with only 1% of respondents volunteering guns as a cause (Gillespie, 1999). This suggests that media framing matters—that confusing and discomfiting events take firmer shape as indicators of putative problems when framed by the media and the political actors they report on.

The other major focus of media framing was guns. While the media expended the most energy exploring the putative role of pop culture in creating young killers, the

topics of guns and gun control were mentioned more often in conjunction with Columbine than any other alleged cause (Lawrence & Birkland, 2004). In large part, this was because congressional Democrats and President Clinton immediately framed Columbine in these terms, and a political battle to pass tougher gun laws ensued, driving even further media coverage of this frame. Ultimately, however, the media frame was not written into law, and the effects of Columbine on public opinion proved ephemeral.

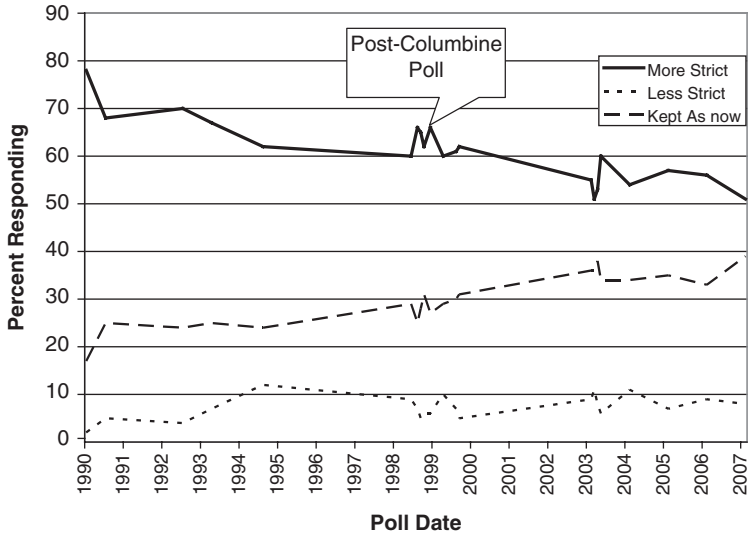
Influence on Public Opinion

It would be easy to assume, given the high levels of reported public interest in the Columbine story, that the incident had a significant influence on public opinion regarding relevant policy questions—in particular, policy regarding guns. But the evidence of any lasting impact on public policy is mixed at best. Figure 1 shows that although there was a slight spike in support for stricter gun laws after the Columbine shooting, the main trajectory of opinion on that question since the early 1990s has been downward—and opinion quickly settled back into that trend post-Columbine.

One reason for the limited influence of Columbine on public opinion (toward gun control at least) is simply the passage of time and the dynamics of the "issue-attention cycle" identified long ago by Downs (1972), in which the media and the public move from one intense interest to another. Another reason may be that there are frames within frames, so to speak. While media coverage prominently linked Columbine to the problem of guns, that problem itself is susceptible to multiple framings, including an "individual rights" frame that deflects efforts to impose greater limits on gun ownership. While Columbine may have highlighted for many Americans a putative problem of easily available guns, others have built-in resistance to that frame stemming from conservative, pro-gun, and pro-individual liberty attitudes. Some Americans are attitudinally prone to support greater gun control, and Columbine may have had more effect on them than on others.

In an experimental study, Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2001) found that framing permissive concealed handgun laws as public safety problems increased opposition to such laws, but framing these laws in terms of an individual right to bear arms decreased opposition. In another experiment framing the Columbine shooting in terms of a "blame guns" or a "blame violence in the media" frame, they found that respondents were more likely to blame guns when so prompted by the framing of the survey question (and likewise for the media-blaming frame). But they also found that groups attitudinally prone to blame guns, namely Democrats and women, were most likely to do so, whereas Independent and Republican men were more resistant to that frame. In fact, they found that frames do affect how people attribute responsibility for events but may be most effective at simply reinforcing preexisting

Figure 1
Public Attitudes Toward Gun Control



Source: Gallup Poll, various dates; summarized at Saad (2007).

attitudes. Thus, the effects of Columbine on levels of support for changes to U.S. gun policy would have been provisional at best.

Thus, despite the claims of gun control advocates that "Columbine has made a lasting impact on swing voters" (Kristen Rand of the Violence Policy Center, quoted in Tapper, 1999a), the basic political dynamics of struggles over gun control did not change dramatically. The Pew Research Center found that 1 year after Columbine, "the vast majority of the public believes it is the responsibility of parents to ensure that such tragedies are not repeated. In fact, a plurality identifies poor parenting—not peer pressure or violence in the media—as the primary cause for school shootings, like the one at Columbine." Indeed, the center found that even as the anniversary of Columbine approached and President Clinton challenged Congress to follow through on tougher gun control measures, "Americans continue to support gun control. . . . But tougher gun laws are not regarded as a panacea, and just 6% believe such laws would prevent a recurrence of incidents like the one at Columbine" (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2000). Almost a decade later, in 2007, the center found support for gun control in decline, echoing the Gallup data reported in Figure 1 (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2007).

In other words, the majority of the public seems ultimately to have framed Columbine differently than the media did—an outcome consistent with other research that shows

only an imperfect fit between media frames and the frames the public ultimately adopts for understanding issues (Crigler, Just, & Neuman, 1992; Gamson, 1992). As we found in our previous research, only a small fraction of media coverage focused on poor parenting as the likely cause of the shooting, though that framing seems to have prevailed in public opinion. The predominant media frames, meanwhile, did not seem to stick in majority opinion.

Moreover, despite the media coverage it generated, Columbine had relatively little actual influence on public policy, at least in the two policy areas most emphasized publicly by leading Democrats and Republicans at the time. The most direct influence of Columbine on policy making at the congressional level was in areas less often discussed by the media: beefing up school security and cracking down on juvenile offenders (Lawrence & Birkland, 2004). This focus on security may be a function of Congress's problem-solving orientation, whereas the news media are oriented to explaining why an event occurred. Ultimately, therefore, the influence of Columbine may have been more significant in the scholarly realm than in the real world—claims we take up in the next section.

Columbine as a Blurry Focusing Event: School Violence Policies After 1999

Columbine was a significant event. But was it a "focusing event" (Kingdon, 1995)? Birkland's (1997) definition of the term suggested that a *focusing event* focuses attention to an issue and clarifies and narrows the range of possible policy responses. The event thus drives consensus both that something must be done and that a particular tool or narrow set of tools is appropriate. But in our 2004 study, we found that focusing events like Columbine likely have much more of an effect on the volume of attention to a problem than they do on the potential solutions to problems.

Columbine was the event that focused the greatest media, legislative, scholarly, and professional attention to the problem. But it did not yield novel policy responses, and it certainly did not serve to build consensus as to what should be done. Thus, while the news media and members of Congress seized on the rich imagery and symbolism the event engendered, either to score rhetorical points or to contribute to finding solutions, the effect of Columbine on the nature of state and local school policies relating to school violence was quite limited. We find in the policy research that there was increased policy making relating to discipline in all its forms (judicial and in-school) and on particular forms of school security. But we find that Columbine's influence on the broader issue of "school violence" was less than one would suppose from reviewing media coverage of the event. Instead, the attention to the problem simply spurred more rapid implementation of existing policies and tools that were already available to schools.

To substantiate our claims, we first analyze empirical data on policy changes enacted pre-and post-Columbine. We then review the scholarly and professional literature pertaining to school violence before and after that event. We conclude with some propositions about why it is that even major media events like the Columbine shooting may have quite limited effect on public policies. We can therefore call Columbine a "blurry" focusing event, because, although Columbine focused attention on school violence broadly, it was not the event that actually shaped subsequent policy making; other important forces were arguably more influential in the long run.

The data on state legislation analyzed here is derived from a list of state school violence enactments provided by the National Council of State Legislatures (NCSL) on its Web site (National Council of State Legislatures, 2008). The years covered are 1994 to 2001. Although this list appears comprehensive for the period it covered, it ends with 2001, which may suggest that the issue no longer seized the same attention of the NCSL and its members after 2001, 2 years after the Columbine crisis.

Our data on the professional, academic, and elite press are derived from a keyword search of the Ebsco Academic Search Premier data set on the keywords *school violence* and *United States*. The program Endnote was used as the search interface. Due to the nature of our coding scheme and some problems with the database (many imported articles did not include the publication year and were therefore omitted), the list is heavily weighted toward professional and academic sources. The data set runs only from 2000 to mid-July 2008; before 2000, there were less than 50 articles, due both to Ebsco's keyword scheme and its limited backfile.

We code the data by "frame" similar to the method used in Lawrence and Birkland (2004). It is important to consider the framing of public problems in legislation because the ability to frame the problem is also the ability to set the terms of debate (Schattschneider, 1975). Our coding scheme allows laws to contain more than one frame, but scholarly articles are coded by their dominant frame, as reflected in the article's title (the most conservative coding scheme).

State Legislation on School Safety and Security

Table 1 summarizes the volume and substance of state legislation before and immediately after Columbine. The 1999 Columbine shootings led to both a significant change in the number of legislative enactments and a broader legislative agenda than had been seen before, reflecting our finding of the increase in the size of the "public arena" without a consensus on action. The previous peak year for legislation was 1994, when all the issues we identified except for character education were encompassed in state legislation. The 1999 shootings led to only one state enactment on character education. The overall span of issues is also reflected by the fact that no one problem frame accounts for more than 27.8% of the coded

legislation, while the legislative agenda in 1995 was fixated on guns, largely in response to the federal mandates to address this problem.

What Columbine appears to have done is mobilize local schools to implement state laws and federal programs more aggressively than they had before and to mobilize local resources (and federal grants) to address the school shooting problem. The NCSL data show that in the period from 1994 to 2001, the most intensive period of legislation was in 1999, with a second wave in 2001.[3]

From 1994 to 1996, the modal problem on state legislators' agenda was the matter of guns in schools and the stiffer punishments for weapons. By 2000, nearly all schools had some mandatory expulsion system for bringing guns, and by 2006, all schools claimed to have such a policy. These data reflect two key trends before 1999: stricter discipline as a tool for controlling violence and policies intended to address those who bring guns and other weapons to school. Indeed, the issue of "guns" and other weapons was the modal issue in 1994, 1995, and 1997. The 1994 and 1995 responses are directly related to the enactment of the federal mandate. Discipline programs are modal in all years except 1994 and 1999; the only other matter to become a modal issue—and only barely, in the key year 1999—was changes to the criminal justice system to more effectively and stringently punish violent young offenders. We can therefore conclude that guns, discipline, and the criminal justice system (an extreme form of discipline) commanded the greatest amount of attention in the 1990s into 2001 among state legislatures.

It should be noted, however, that the gun frame for policy in the schools is not the same as the gun frame in broader media and public discourse. The policies contained in state law are not broad "gun control" measures but rather address the illegal possession of guns or other weapons (such as knives) in the schools themselves. Indeed, the enactment of the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 (GFSA) (20 U.S.C. 8921) required schools, as a condition of receiving federal funding, to expel students who were found in possession of weapons at school.[4] Thus, the "takeoff point" for state and local adoption of discipline for students carrying weapons to school was 1994, not 1998 or 1999, the 2 worst years of public school violence.

In contrast to the relatively narrow focus of pre-Columbine legislation, policy making immediately after Columbine contemplated a wide range of issues. The history of this legislation is interesting for what it reveals about the role of Columbine as a trigger for action. In 1996, before Columbine, Rep. Bill McCollum (R-FL) introduced the Violent Youth Predator Act of 1996, HR 3565. The stigmatizing language in this legislation was a reaction to the notion of the teen superpredator that was discredited later in the 1990s (Lindsay, 1998). Key features of the "predator" were retained in the Violent and Repeat Offender Juvenile Act of 1997, S. 10, which contained stiffer punishments for juvenile offenders and allowed juveniles to be tried for federal crimes in federal court. The bill failed to become law but was on the agenda when the Columbine shootings occurred.

Indeed, immediately after Columbine, S. 10 was resurrected on April 21, 1999, as the Violent and Repeat Juvenile Accountability and Rehabilitation Act of 1999

Table 1
Legislative Enactments by Policy Type, 1999 to 2001

Frame	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	Total
Criminal justice	26.7%	11.1%	20%	25%	33.3%	27.8%	22.2%	16.4%	22.8%
Guns, weapons	46.7	85.2	40	25	33.3	22.2	25.9	10.4	29.6
Count of drugs	6.7	0	15	15	16.7	8.3	7.4	0	6.8
Character	0	0	0	0	0	2.8	0	0	1
Mental health	3.3	0	0	5	0	5.6	3.7	1.5	3.2
Parents, adults, community	6.7	0	15	15	8.3	10.2	3.7	10.4	9
School programs—discipline	6.7	63	60	25	41.7	23.1	29.6	40.3	32.5
School programs—Nonsecurity	23.3	14.8	20	20	0	20.4	22.2	20.9	19.6
School programs—security	30 5	0 0	10 2.8	10 7.4	8.3 13.4	5.6 5.8	11.1	3	8
N	30	27	20	20	12	108	27	67	311
N of frames this year	9	4	7	9	6	10	9	8	

Source: National Council of State Legislatures (2008).

(106th Cong., H.R. 1150, S. 254). Its date suggests its provenance as a direct response to Columbine (Tapper, 1999b). But a careful review suggests that HR 3565 and S. 10 were amalgamations of a variety of issues percolating among policy makers: stricter federal juvenile justice laws, with federal funding to encourage similar programs in the states; stringent gun control measures designed to reduce minors' access to guns; and a grab bag of other frames, such as parenting support and education programs, antitrust exemptions for "Voluntary Media Agreements for Children's Protection," "character education," and a requirement that Internet service providers make free content filters available to consumers.

The conference committee failed to reconcile the House and Senate versions, and the bill died. It was again resurrected, with the juvenile justice issues intact but the media, parenting, and gun control aspects removed in 2002, when it became the Consequences for Juvenile Offenders Act of 2002, enacted as part of the 21st Century Department of Justice Appropriations Authorization Act, PL 107-273 (2002). Despite its stern-sounding name, the "consequences" for juvenile offenders laid out in this law are indirect, at best, because the law authorizes federal funding for a range of juvenile justice programs at the state level but does not compel any action.

The policy outcomes of Columbine were therefore limited and unfocused. The attention to the broad range of frames for understanding the problem ran into the reality of the legislative process, which is characterized by limits on what Congress can do constitutionally and by what is politically feasible. Liberals and conservatives could not live with each other's provisions on noncore issues, and so the bill was stripped

Table 2
Policy Adoptions in Local Schools

Policy	1994	2000	2006
Districts prohibiting fighting	91%	97.1%	98.6%
Districts prohibiting weapon possession or use	80%	99.1%	100%
Districts prohibiting gang activity	22%	62.5%	78.5%

Source: Centers for Disease Control, Student Health Policies and Programs Study Fact Sheets for 1994, 2000, and 2006, available at http://www.cdc.gov/shpps.

to what we might consider its more essential elements, on which there was bipartisan agreement.

Local School Policy Adoption

Finally, it is worthwhile to examine data on local schools' adoption of antiviolence policy tools during a similar period. Table 2 shows the rate of adoption of three types of local policies.

Policies prohibiting fighting or weapon possession and use existed in the majority of districts pre-Columbine. A significant increase is seen after Columbine in the prohibition of gang activity, although, given that Columbine was not broadly constructed as a "gang" problem, it is likely that increase in concern was driven by other factors, or that the term *gang* symbolized a range of youth misbehavior in schools. But the most telling figure is the fraction of districts prohibiting weapon possession or use—from high compliance in 1994 to total compliance in 2006, a direct reflection of the implementation of the GFSA. Furthermore, states and school districts have often been as strict in punishing students in possession of any weapon as they have been in punishing gun possession (Redding & Shalf, 2001), in large part because 1995 amendments to the GFSA broadened the definition of "firearm" to any weapon (Casella, 2003).

Schools also have considerable discretion in the choices of physical tools used to promote school security (Table 3). Despite the intensive media coverage of metal detectors in schools, only 8.4% of schools in 2006 reported using these tools, down from 10% in 2000. But other tools—the use of uniformed police and security guards and the use of security cameras—became much more popular among schools by 2006. The adoption of security cameras is a function both of their perceived greater effectiveness (Casella, 2003) and the ready availability of additional federal funding for these tools. Teachers' desire for greater security in classrooms contributes to the substantial increase

Table 3
Physical Tools for Promoting School Security

Tool	1994	2000	2006
Assign staff/volunteers to monitor halls		81.9	80.4
Assign staff/volunteers to monitor bathrooms		59.3	53.7
Uniformed police/security guards	13%	30.1	54.2
Uniform policy		10.4	17.7
Routine checks of bags, desks, and lockers	61%	44.7	43.2
Use of metal detectors	10%	10.0	8.4
Use of cameras		24.2	60.3
Staff use of communication devices		79.8	92.5

Source: Centers for Disease Control, Student Health Policies and Programs Study Fact Sheets for 1994, 2000, and 2006, available at http://www.cdc.gov/shpps.

in the number of mobile and landline telephones available in classrooms (Zehr, 1999). However, the outcomes of these increased security measures are hard to evaluate. Data linking these "improved" school violence policies to lower incidence of catastrophic violence are hard to find, largely because such events are so rare. Indeed, those who claim such a link exists with respect to, say, metal detectors or zero-tolerance policies may be experiencing "superstitious policy learning" (May, 1992, pp. 336-337), in which people believe that particular policy interventions are effective even in the absence of evidence.

School Violence and Scholarship

It is now worthwhile to examine Columbine's influence on scholarship and whether the matters of interest to scholars are congruent with policy makers' interests. Like media coverage and state legislative activity, Columbine clearly influenced the volume of material published, as shown in Table 4, which also considers the substance of the articles.

Two broad results are particularly striking. First, in 2000 and 2001, there are more articles on this subject than in any year thereafter. This volume of interest is driven by the Columbine incident. Second, in every year, the dominant frame of the scholarly and professional literature is school safety and security programs. Our coding did not differentiate types of security, such as guards, metal detectors, or locker searches. What is clear is that professional and academic writers share the schools' primary concern: how to keep the schools safe from catastrophic violence. The "root causes" issues are rather less important, although it is worth noting that, excluding school security and safety, the modal category of professional and

Table 4
Scholarly, Professional, and Elite Literature on School Violence, 2000–2008

Frame	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	Total
School programs—Safety and Security	25%	31%	48%	34%	45%	34%	35%	50%	39%	36%
Teen life	13%	15%	14%	22%	14%	17%	23%	19%	17%	17%
Guns	17%	13%	0%	9%	9%	0%	12%	19%	9%	11%
Criminal and juvenile justice	8%	13%	10%	3%	18%	21%	12%	0%	9%	10%
Mental health	13%	12%	10%	13%	5%	7%	4%	6%	13%	10%
School programs—Nonsafety and security	9%	3%	5%	3%	9%	14%	12%	6%	0%	6%
Parents, adults, community	9%	3%	0%	6%	0%	0%	0%	0%	9%	4%
School programs—discipline	6%	7%	10%	6%	0%	7%	4%	0%	4%	3%
School programs—zero tolerance	2%	3%	5%	0%	0%	3%	4%	0%	4%	2%
Drugs	0%	1%	5%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%
N	53	67	21	32	22	29	26	32	23	308

Note: 2008 data are through July 20, 2008.

research interest in 6 of the 9 years is "teen life," which we define as "social difficulties of adolescence" (e.g., peer pressure, cliques, "jock culture"). This gets considerable academic attention because all aspects of adolescent behavior—their social life, their learning style, and some teens' predisposition to violence—are issues of central importance to schools. These behavioral questions are not really the province of state legislators, who feel that they have to act immediately and worry about the why questions later. This is reflected in data for the 2 overlapping years of the professional literature and legislative activity, 2000 and 2001 (see Table 5).

There is some clear divergence in the research versus legislative agendas but also some very interesting convergence. The major divergence between the professional and legislative agendas was the former's focus on discipline and the latter's focus on security. State concerns are driven by their desire to address directly discipline problems, both within and outside the GFSA. Professional and academic literature was focused on security measures, in large part because the audience for this literature was largely local school officials, whose main policy tool seemed to be the various security measures described earlier: metal detectors, cameras, security guards, and the like. Notably, this interest is reflected in Title IV, part A[5] of the 2002 federal No Child Left Behind Act, which allowed for additional spending on such tools.

Table 5
Scholarly and Legislative Frames, 2000 and 2001

	2000		2001	
Code	Legislation	Research	Legislation	Research
Criminal justice	22%	9%	16%	16%
Drugs	7%	0%	0%	2%
Guns, weapons	26%	20%	10%	16%
Mental health	4%	15%	1%	14%
Parents, adults, community	4%	11%	10%	4%
School programs—discipline	30%	7%	40%	5%
School programs—nonsecurity	22%	11%	21%	4%
School programs—security	11%	28%	3%	37%
Teen life	7%	0%	13%	4%
N	27	46	67	57

Note: Legislation found in the Library of Congress THOMAS dataset, at http://thomas.loc.gov. Research articles found through a search of Ebsco Academic Premier for "school violence."

Criminal justice is one important frame in which research and legislative attention are roughly congruent. Researchers have sought to understand and explain whether and to what extent more stringent criminal law or juvenile justice measures are effective in dissuading students from acting violently. Still, criminal justice matters have still had relatively less to do with post-Columbine policy making than have other aspects of policy.

In our research for this article, an important frame in the literature and in legislation emerged: the widespread concern and state crackdowns on bullying in the schools. Bullying is another aspect of teen life and was not coded separately in our 2004 study. But its emergence as a particularly important aspect of schoolchildren's experience is a recent phenomenon. Legislative attention was the direct result of learning that teens who felt bullied or that they were social outcasts were apparently prone to reacting violently, as most notably seen in Columbine but also in the Springfield, Oregon, shooting in 1998. Thus, some states have been active in promoting antibullying legislation because it is "one of the most enduring problems" in our schools. Antibullying policy is controversial, however; some conservatives believe that it is intended to protect gays and lesbians (Greenya, 2005, p. 103). Still, given the links between bullying and escalating violence, this is one area where there appears to be substantial perceptual and policy change—what Peter May (1992) calls evidence of both instrumental and social policy learning.

Explaining Policy Outcomes

Why was Columbine less influential than one might think? First, because of the string of shooting incidents in the 1990s, Columbine cannot be isolated as a source trigger of policy innovation or for sudden, "alarmed discovery" (Downs, 1972, p. 38) of a new problem. *CQ Researcher* had already covered the issue in a research brief in 1992 (Glaser, 1992) after disturbing incidents of violence had begun to occur in "safer" suburban schools. The problem and the search for solutions had entered the policy process before Columbine. A spate of ideas about the causes of shootings in West Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; and Springfield, Oregon, among others, had already entered public and policy maker discourse.

What made Columbine distinctive was its scale of casualties and spectacular, acute period of crisis complete with dramatic TV images of students and teachers fleeing the school and SWAT officers descending on a school in a non-Southern, largely White suburb. Columbine opened up the public arena (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988) to a wider range of ideas about what could drive students to commit such heinous acts. That wide range of debate was not necessarily conducive to policy change, however.

The second reason why post-Columbine policy change was limited is that rank-and-file members of Congress often made claims in the media that were inconsistent with existing law and realistic policy options for addressing the school shooting issue. While elected officials could wax rhetorical about the easy availability of guns or the corrosive effect of movies and video games, these problems are far less tractable (practically and constitutionally) than are the daily problems of schools (Lawrence & Birkland, 2004). When the shock of the Columbine event began to cool, policy makers realized that they had to find realistic tools that were constitutionally, politically, and practically feasible—particularly given the public and interest group resistance to fundamental reform of gun laws. Instead, policy makers found more feasible tools—involving withholding school funding—to be very close at hand.

We therefore see rather limited policy change after Columbine at the national level, reflected in school violence policies that use the threat of withholding funds as their primary enforcement tool, accompanied by disparate responses of local school authorities on issues other than guns in schools, where compliance was high.[6] Implementation is, practically speaking, the province of schools and street-level bureaucrats, such as teachers, councilors, and police officers, with varying degrees of discretion granted under state law.

Third, compounding the challenge of comprehensive policy change was the fact that the gun problem transcends schools. Indeed, many school violence incidents occur just because the school is near to where garden-variety criminality is taking place, although schools themselves are generally safer places than are the communities

that surround them (Del Prete, 2000). But at the level of public schools, policy changes focused on the school environment at least partially in isolation from the broader environment. The particular problems of public schools—at-risk students, bullying, disciplinary problems, and the like—therefore became more prominent policy frames than pop culture or guns in society at large, in large part because the school-level problem is more tractable than are guns and pop culture.

Concluding Comments on Media Events and Policy Change: What Has Been Learned?

Central to the idea of policy learning is the application of new information to existing problems, existing information to new problems, or new information to new problems (Busenberg, 2001). Postdisaster learning is normatively assumed to be both desirable and common (Birkland, 2006). Focusing events should yield even more opportunity to learn because greater attention to problems usually means greater dissatisfaction with public programs and more pressure for change (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993).

Social policy learning involves acting on new information about problems, their causes, and their potential solutions. *Instrumental policy learning* involves learning whether and to what extent existing policy instruments—laws, regulations, norms, standard operating procedures—successfully achieve their goals; problems of coordination and implementation are also part of instrumental learning. Postdisaster policy change can involve both types of learning, reflecting new knowledge generated after the recent disaster: learning about causes and about the policy tools that would improve policy outcomes. More subtle treatments of postevent policy change also consider *political learning*: whether participants in the policy process have "learned" how to better advocate for change or for maintaining the status quo (May, 1992).

If the Columbine school shootings provided "new information" about causes, policy tools, and political advocacy, how did policy makers learn from this event and apply new information to public policy problems? This is not an entirely straightforward question because to assess the lessons of Columbine, one must know what those lessons are. As the research we review shows, the many different ways of framing the Columbine attack constituted their own lessons, although those lessons are often advanced to pursue disparate policy goals. Some therefore claimed that the lessons were "violent media are bad for kids" or that "lax parenting leads to youth violence" or that "more aid to schools is needed."

The evidence of post-Columbine learning is mixed. Many school districts have sought to address the school violence issue, but much of that effort preceded

Columbine, and the effectiveness of these policy changes is unclear. The Columbine shootings appear to have caused little political learning (i.e., learning about how to make effective arguments in the policy process) because the frames chosen by journalists and advocates were largely preexisting frames pertaining to gun violence and pop culture. The pop culture frame has been used to explain social breakdown, "juvenile delinquency," and the "youth problem" since as early as the 1830s (Springhall, 1998). In sum, the range of frames that could be fitted to the school shootings problem was broad, but Columbine and the earlier 1998 shootings revealed few frames that had not been encountered in policy debate before 1999.

Meanwhile, the research reviewed above suggests that the national problem of school shootings has run its course, at least for now. Violence in schools continues sporadically, but the problem of "school shootings" has been replaced by other national concerns. In part, this is simply because Columbine-scale (K-12) school shootings have not recurred, providing no new fuel for media attention. Muschert and Carr (2006) discovered that attention to shootings at public schools had already immediately waned post-Columbine, even when smaller-scale events that did happen failed to resurrect the issue in public discourse.

One reason the school shootings problem has waned is that the media, politicians, and commentators have constructed boundaries around subsequent events that limit and redirect those events' imaginative impact. Perhaps the two most notable shootings involving students in recent years were the October 2006 shooting at the West Nickel Mines School located in an Amish community in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in which a local resident killed five young girls and wounded five more, and the 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech. At this point, the best data are qualitative, but we can detect some significant differences between the treatment of these shootings and the school shootings of the 1990s. Although the 2006 and 2007 shootings occurred in schools, neither was predominantly described as a school shooting in media coverage. Although media coverage occasionally linked them to Columbine, Columbine was not invoked systematically as context for these new events—unlike the pattern during the 1990s spate of school shootings, in which each new shooting brought numerous references to the previous events.

The Pennsylvania shooting was framed primarily as an event affecting the local Amish community—the very opposite of the "national problem" framing—in large part because of its locale. Not only is an Old Order Amish community an unusual locale for gun violence, it is a tightly knit community foreign to much of the larger public. Ironically, even though President Clinton's admonition after Columbine could be said of the West Nickel Mines shooting as well ("if it could happen in a place like Littleton"), that framing was for the most part eschewed. The media narrative focused tightly on the West Nickel community—in large part because the Amish residents showed extraordinary grace even in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy (see Kraybill, Nolt, & Weaver-Zercher, 2007).

Meanwhile, the deaths of 32 people in the Virginia Tech shooting in April 2007 brought substantial media attention once again to the issue of guns and gun control. But that event was for the most part not framed as a school shooting, a phrase that seems to be reserved in media discourse for shootings at elementary and secondary schools. In the case of K-12 schools, the very specter of violence in or near a school is particularly worrisome because schools are socially constructed as safe (and guarded) places to educate children. College students, conversely, are presumed to be adults, and college campuses are open places where the entire community is presumed welcome to partake in the cultural, intellectual, sporting, and even aesthetic benefits these places offer. Again, the locale of the tragedy was crucial, and the array of problems identified by the Columbine shooting was not necessarily taken up again after Virginia Tech (other than the rather frequent comparisons between the mental health status of the Virginia Tech and Columbine shooters). Rather, Virginia Tech itself became the focus of considerable critical attention—again, localizing rather than nationalizing the tragedy. It remains to be seen whether future events will revive the school shootings problem on the national agenda.

Notes

1. Ralph Larkin (2007) isolates *Natural Born Killers* as a strong influence on Harris's and Klebold's behavior. Whether or not such empirically verifiable causal arrows really exist, our point is that others have framed the problem in this manner.

2. Video games came in for particular criticism after Columbine. Although research has suggested a link, Ferguson (2007) argues that in fact the scientific literature shows little support for the notion that violent video games breed real-life violence.

3. Six states did not have regular legislative sessions in 2000 (and many states had short sessions in those years), so this dip in 2000 may be attributable to the normal legislative schedule of many states.

4. Although the federal law did provide for some discretion in expulsions, many schools went the opposite direction and adopted "no-tolerance" policies for any perceived misbehavior, citing the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 (20 U.S.C. 8921) as the rationale, even though such policies went far beyond the federal mandate (Koch, 2005).

5. This section is known as the Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Act (20 U.S.C. 7101 et seq.).

6. On the preconditions for successful intergovernmental policy implementation, see Goggin, Bowman, Lester, & O'Toole (1990).

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