The Social Construction of Local School Violence Threats by the News Media and Professional Organizations*

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The research presented here examines the social construction of local school violence threats in the context of national claims-making about school violence, particularly school shootings. In light of the news media glare surrounding other school shootings, school and police officials in Burlington, Wisconsin assessed the threat posed by five high-school youth who allegedly plotted to carry out a school attack in November 1998. Social constructionist scholarship has shown that claims made about a problem and the way it is framed in the news media and other informational contexts shape an audience's perception of a social problem's seriousness, prevalence, setting, and causes. But as William Gamson and others have pointed out, "readers" are not passive recipients of media messages; rather, they actively interact with those messages to construct meaning. This research project involved two components: (1) content analysis of the print media (in two periods 1992–1993 and 1997–1998) and law enforcement and school administrator publications and conference materials; and (2) in-depth, semistructured interviews with 13 respondents, including the 11 Burlington school and police officials who assessed and acted on this case. In this paper, I examine how the *(Racine) Journal Times* and professional organizations constructed (and reconstructed) school violence and how local decision-makers interpreted their own school violence threat in the context of the news media's and professional organizations' constructions.

On Saturday, November 14 1998, in Burlington, Wisconsin—a rural community of approximately 10,000 residents located less than forty miles from the urban areas of Racine and Milwaukee in the southeastern corner of the state—a confidential informant walked into the Burlington Police Department, sat down, and detailed for police officers an attack on Burlington High School that was to take place that Monday morning. The informant alleged that five students, ages fifteen and sixteen, were planning to enter the high school with guns, take the principal, assistant principal, and police liaison officer as hostages, lock down the building, and, by pulling school files, locate and shoot a list of targeted students who had allegedly mistreated the five boys. On Sunday, November 15, the five youths were taken into police custody and interviewed. Conspiracy to commit murder charges were eventually brought against three of the boys but after concerns over possible Miranda rights violations surfaced and evidence was consequently thrown out of court, reduced charges—reckless endangerment—were offered to the three who were given one-year probation. Two of the three were also sentenced to inpatient psychiatric treatment. All five boys were expelled from school. (Compiled from field notes 1998–2002)

The Burlington incident described above came on the heels of several nationally publicized school shootings, beginning in October 1997.[1] These

shootings alarmed the public because of their cold-blooded nature and the scale of harm. But the shootings also represented a shift in the context of violence: these acts were committed by boys from rural or suburban communities, communities thought to be immune to school violence. Once thought to be an urban phenomenon, school violence had now spread to quiet hamlets throughout the country.

While no one can challenge the seriousness of those incidents—numerous students and teachers were killed or wounded, families shattered—the climate following the shootings provides an opportunity for the examination of the social construction of threat. In the period following the first shooting, on October 1, 1997, the country experienced what seemed to be a rash of acts that could be considered precursors to violence: weapons found on school campuses, "hit lists," threats against teachers and students, and so on. Yet, in another context, those same incidents might have gone unnoticed or might have been dealt with casually, not seen as a real threat. A handful of school shootings became evidence of a broad and representative problem, creating a context in which other incidents were reinterpreted.

In this research, I explore how the threat of school violence was reconstructed in this climate, and how that reconstruction differed from past constructions of school violence. By examining the ways in which the national and local news media and professional organizations' media presented school shootings, I examine the context in which the Burlington police and school officials understood the seriousness of the threat posed by the five high-school youth there. Specifically, I analyze news media coverage of school violence in two periods 1992–1993 and 1997–1998. In what follows, I describe the news media's reconstruction of school violence as a particular kind of threat with particular kinds of perpetrators: random shootings by clean-cut white boys in rural schools. I also analyze the publications issued by the professional organizations to which Burlington officials belonged and that they used as references and show how news media constructions were reiterated and strengthened. Finally, I discuss how these constructions affect the assessment of local threats, as revealed in interviews with Burlington officials. Through their own newsletters, journals, conferences, and workshops, professional organizations combined with the news media to create an interactive informational context for understanding school violence as a national problem and, particularly for the Burlington officials, as a local threat. Hence, Burlington officials assessed their *local* threat in the context of news media's and professional organizations' constructions of this *national* problem.

The Burlington incident offers a unique research opportunity: This incident was not carried through by the perpetrators, as the plot was uncovered before it was to be implemented. A completed shooting confirms, indisputably, the reality of a construction. An event that was not carried out shows us the true power of constructions to shape reality as they shape how we react to, and thereby assess,

threats without the benefit of hindsight. Burlington police and school officials could not foresee the future. Nor did they make their decision to act in a social vacuum; rather, they made it in a specific context dramatically informed by media coverage of previous shootings. We will never know if this threat would have been carried through. Nonetheless, we are given the opportunity to examine the power of national and local news media's and professional organizations' claims-making about a social problem as that claims-making shapes our perceptions of local threats.

Constructing Public Concern—Constructing Threat

That reality is a social construction, an interpretation of symbols and images negotiated through interactions, is an assumption of the social constructionist perspective. Numerous studies have pointed to the crucial role of the media in constructing that reality (Tuchman 1978; Fishman 1980; Gitlin 1980; Best 1990, 1999; Kappeler, Blumberg, and Potter 2000) and shaping the American public's fears (Altheide 1997; Glassner 1999). As Ray Surette (1992) suggests, people use information received from the media to construct a view of the world. And the information provided by the media is shaped by claims-makers, including criminal-justice agencies that specifically control the flow of information about crime (Fishman 1980; Marsh 1991).

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Shaw and McCombs 1977) suggest that media effects may be subtle yet profound to the extent that they shape an audience's political consciousness. That is, the media perform an agenda-setting function, influencing what we think *about*. Craig Reinarman and Harry Levine (1995, p. 156) provide the example of the war on drugs: while only 1 percent of Americans polled in January of 1985 cited drugs as "the most important problem facing this country today," by September of 1989, following a presidential initiative and a "blizzard of media stories about drugs . . . 64 percent of those polled believed that drugs were now the most important problem." Similarly, Katherine Beckett (1994) shows that state and media attention to "street crime" in the 1960s was positively associated with increased public concern for the issue. Indeed, Timothy Flanagan and Edmund McGarrell's 1986 analysis of the National Crime Survey reveals a high degree of respondent reliance on the news media for information about crime, a disproportionate news media emphasis on violent crime, and respondents' overestimation of violent crime. Allen Liska and William Baccaglini (1990) show that it is the *type* of crime news coverage that matters in shaping fear: newspaper coverage of *local* crime heightens fear of crime, while newspaper coverage of *nonlocal* crime dampens fear.

Moreover, media coverage has the potential to "normalize" a problem (Reeves and Campbell 1994) or, as Joel Best (1990) puts it, to promote the

notion of consensus concerning the extent and nature of and explanations for the problem. Shanto Iyengar (1991) points out that the way an issue is presented influences the public's interpretation of the problem, particularly in their attribution of responsibility for the issue. As Iyengar illustrates, an episodic format—characterized by its focus on specific events or cases—is more common to television than its counterpart, the thematic format, and leads "readers" to attribute responsibility to individuals, rather than structures.[3]

But viewers are not passive recipients of media messages, as William Gamson, David Croteau, William Hoynes, and Theodore Sasson (1992, p. 375) noted: "Reading media imagery is an active process in which context, social location, and prior experience can lead to quite different decodings. Furthermore, it is frequently interactive, taking place in conversation with other readers who may see different meanings." Personal experience and social location inform an individual's interpretation of media messages and imagery. Gamson (1988) suggests that interpretations are the product of two interacting systems: media discourse frames issues and provides information in a particular context of meaning, while the members of the public actively engage the discourse in the context of their own lives and relationships to construct their own meanings. Noah Fritz and David Altheide (1987) discuss these "other," extra-media contexts of meaning-making, suggesting that the mass media transmit images that define, select, and interpret information that are then carried over into other interactional contexts that amplify the images and themes. These "interactive informational contexts"—which, in the case of the missing children issue analyzed by Fritz and Altheide, included bulk mailings, milk cartons, and posters—extend beyond the mass media context but may continue to present claims and counterclaims surrounding the issue, thereby reinforcing the mass media message. Such a combination is powerful, as Fritz and Altheide (1987, p. 487) illustrate in the case of the missing children problem:

> The claims-makers, via mass-media formats, may provide an artful interpretation and "description" of the nature and extent of a problem, particularly if there has been a local victim. When these views are reified through *nonmass-media contexts*, such as grocery stores, then counterclaims will be less effective if they pass only through the mass media, because the essential message is reinforced and demonstrated wherever one turns. (emphasis added)

I include the media of professional organizations—here, law enforcement organizations and school administrator associations—in that interactive informational context.

In the case of the school shootings, the frames introduced by the national and local news media also appeared in professional organizations' publications and conferences. Together, the news media and professional organizations created

an interactive informational context that reinforced each others' messages and images, thereby constructing notions of threat. Frames presented by the professional organizations confirmed the news media frames and legitimized constructions of threat that located the threat in small towns, in unexpected places. Burlington officials then took those frames, read them in the context of their experiences and social location, and interpreted their own school violence threat.

Methods and Data Sources

This research project involved two components: a content analysis of the primary informational sources listed by Burlington school and police officials; and interviews with those officials.

Burlington police and school officials were asked to list the sources they used to keep informed in their professions and to understand current events. The predominant news media source identified by respondents was the Racine, Wisconsin daily newspaper, the *Journal Times*. Ten of the eleven respondents pointed to the *Journal Times* as either the primary or one of the primary sources through which they kept informed of current events. To analyze the informational context (and the constructions of the school violence threat therein) within which Burlington officials interpreted their own case, I conducted a content analysis of the *Journal Times*' coverage of school gun violence issues over two time periods: October 2, 1992–November 15, 1993 and October 2, 1997–November 15, 1998. The latter analysis period began with coverage of the Pearl, Mississippi shooting— the first of the nationally publicized shootings—and ended the day the Burlington police and school officials decided on a plan of action, the day after the plot surfaced. The same period in 1992–1993 was used as a point of comparison and was selected because it represents the national peak of violent juvenile arrests in the 1990s (as cited in Donohue, Schiraldi, and Ziedenburg 1999).

Articles were selected from the *Journal Times*' database using the search terms "school[s]" and "shootings" or "guns" or "threats" or "violence." During the 1992–1993 period, 29 stories on violence and the schools appeared in the *Journal Times*, though 15 were from the Associated Press (AP) or Knight Ridder News Service. During the 1997–1998 period, the newspaper published 75 stories on the topic, with 48 from the AP or Knight Ridder. In the content analysis, possible themes were first identified in a cursory reading of the material, identifying quotes and common phrasing. This was followed by a thorough analysis and tabulation of themes present in each story. In this sense, the themes were emergent, grounded in the particulars of this content. I conducted both phases of the content analysis.

The content analysis also involved analysis of other sources cited by respondents as information sources, primarily professional association sources— police association journals and workshops, school administration publications

and conferences, and so on. For this sample, only articles during the 1997–1998 period were analyzed. Where possible, feature articles in the sources they cited were analyzed. Unfortunately, most of the police association publications were not available for analysis. The sources are listed in appendix 1.

The other component of the research involved in-depth, semistructured interviews with eleven Burlington police and school officials who were instrumental in the investigation and/or decision-making surrounding this incident and school security issues. The pool of respondents represents all local police and school officials who were somehow involved in initially assessing the threat posed by the five boys. These interviews were conducted approximately two months after the Burlington case surfaced. Interviews lasted from 30 to 90 minutes; respondents were asked to reflect on their understandings of school violence, their understandings of Burlington teenagers, and the conditions of their own jobs, and the informational sources they used to stay current in their fields and to understand national and world events. These respondents are described in appendix 2. Finally, I also conducted brief interviews with a spokesperson with the state attorney general's office and an assistant principal from an area high school that experienced a gun incident shortly after the Burlington incident.

The findings presented here extend from these two research segments. I begin with a discussion of content analysis findings as these constructions structure Burlington officials' interpretations of school violence. I then introduce interview material that shows that the national and local news media and professional organizations worked together to construct the public's understanding of school violence and thereby create an interactive informational context within which Burlington officials interpreted their own incident of school violence.

Framing the School Violence Threat: The *Journal Times*' Coverage

Burlington school and police officials assessed their local threat in the context of national news media constructions of school violence. Recent research suggests that the way in which a particular social problem is framed—its nature and prevalence, the perpetrators and their motivations, the victims, and solutions—evolves as the sociopolitical context shifts.[4] As defined by Gamson and colleagues (1992, p. 384), a frame is "a central organizing principle that holds together and gives coherence and meaning to a diverse array of symbols." Tables 1 and 2 summarize the predominant news media themes and images of school violence in both periods under examination here. Constructions of the school violence threat differed dramatically in the two periods. As Tables 1 and 2 illustrate and the next two sections show, the construction of the school-violence threat shifted from depicting it as an urban, inner city problem associated with neighborhood gang violence that spilled into schools to showing it as

Table 1
School Violence Themes and Images in the (Racine)
Journal Times, 1992–1993

Themes and Catchphrases	Images of Location of Violence	Images of Offender	Images of Victim
Violence as an urban, inner city problem	urban, inner city	callous minority male, gang member	those involved in the conflict and the violent culture of inner city
Violence "carries over" from streets into schools			
Children "shrug off" gunfire near their homes			
Metal detectors in schools are "familiar sight"			
The violence is spreading to suburban and rural areas			

increasingly rural and carried out by an average All-American boy, thereby universalizing the threat.

The two periods also differed in the focus of the news-gathering and articles produced: the 1992–1993 period could be noted for its *trend* focus, while the 1997–1998 period demonstrated an *event* focus. During the 1992–1993 period, stories rarely discussed actual, specific incidents of violence. Six of the 29 stories covered actual shootings or stabbings in the areas surrounding schools; three stories documented weapons found at school. Only six stories documented specific shooting or stabbing incidents on school grounds, half of which occurred elsewhere in the United States. More common were stories that built on the perceived trend that we live in a more violent world, articles that cited statistics on crime and violence in schools, and commentaries on the increase in crime (in contrast to one feature that noted a decline in crime nationally and locally). By the 1997–1998 period, however, even as school crime declined nationally (Donohue, Schiraldi, and Ziedenburg 1999) and remained a disproportionately larger problem in schools with specific risk factors (Anderson 1998),[5] the news media focus was pulled in a different direction by the mass shootings of the period. The period commenced with stories on the Pearl, Mississippi shooting in which a 16-year-old boy killed his mother, then drove to school and

Table 2
School Violence Themes and Images in the (Racine) *Journal Times*, 1997–1998

Themes and Catchphrases	Images of Location of Violence	Images of Offender	Images of Victim
He didn't look like a killer • "He always seemed polite, like a nice guy" • "There were a few you'd never guess [could be violent]" • "He seemed like such a neat young man" • He "just struck out in anger at the world" • "School violence took on a new face this year"	small towns: quiet rural or suburban hamlets	clean-cut white, teenaged male	innocent rural children
We thought it couldn't happen here • "We had no idea that anything like this could take place at our schools" • "I thought my kids were safe here" • "We all have that false sense of security" in rural areas • "It can happen any place, anywhere"			
Warning signs ignored • "Something big's going to happen" • "He warned . . . that 'he had a lot of killing to do'" • "Is there a copycat situation here?" • "Maybe they didn't know, but they should have" • "You have to be proactive"			
The world and kids are different today • "'Regular' kids are doing the killing" • Teens are committing crimes of "hardened criminals" • School safety means "screening students for weapons and teaching kids . . . to dodge gunfire"			

shot and killed two students. This event focus characterized a significant number of the articles appearing during this period: the primary focus of 27 stories was one or the other of the five national school shootings that occurred during the period. In sharp contrast with the earlier period, only four articles discussed violence in or around urban schools.

The Journal Times' Coverage, 1992–1993

The *Journal Times* articles in this period proffered the theme of violence as an extension of life in tough neighborhoods. In one example, the *Journal Times* paraphrased Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent Howard Fuller when it noted that "the disproportionate representation of black students among those expelled and the frequent involvement of guns reflects the larger problems of Milwaukee's central city" (August 10, 1993, p. 3B). In such areas, as in parts of Racine, "[T]hese children shrug off frequent gunfire near their home" (July 21, 1993, p. 1A), as it has become commonplace. A Justice Department report, covered in the newspaper, documented record numbers of teen gun deaths and estimated that "100,000 children carry guns to school every day" (March 24, 1993, p. 3A), though black males were at the greatest risk. In this coverage, violence was associated with inner city life: "Centered largely in inner-city neighborhoods among black and Hispanic minorities, the rising teen death rate has generally been blamed on gangs and the drug trade" (March 24, 1993, p. 3A) so that "in the most beleaguered pockets of poor, mostly black, urban America, [Bureau of Justice] statistics bear out the country's concern" that a crime wave had engulfed the nation, even as violent and property crime fell in Racine proper and Racine County (October 21, 1993, p. 1A). Hence, teen gun violence was typified as an epidemic sweeping through minority populated, central city neighborhoods, places removed from the rest of America: "[T]he United States encompasses two distinct and separate worlds of crime. One of them is middle-class, mostly sub-urban and relatively safe despite its residents' fears; the other is poor, mostly urban and extremely dangerous despite the best efforts of its law-abiding citizens" (October 21, 1993, p. 1A). That central cities were dangerous, violent places was taken for granted. That typification was not contested.

During the 1992–1993 period, stories documented that such inner city violence affected schoolchildren, as gang violence takes place *near* schools. One story, followed over several days, illustrated a Hispanic youth's beating death in Racine by suspected gang members near a middle school. A March 20, 1993 AP story described a gang-related shooting that took place as four boys left their Milwaukee middle school. Stories documented how violence in rough neighborhoods could spill over into schools in those neighborhoods, including an AP story of a Connecticut gang member shot execution-style by a masked gunman as he entered his high school (November 6, 1993). Another series of

front-page stories described a gang-related stabbing at a middle school located in a crime-ridden area of Racine (May 12, 1993; May 13, 1993). Reports of the incident suggest the stabbing "was a carryover from a . . . fight or dispute that happened away from school" (May 12, 1993, p. 1A). In these stories, school violence was an extension of street violence. And because children attended neighborhood schools and violence was primarily restricted to urban areas, school violence was constructed as an urban problem. The *Journal Times* staff commentaries on urban violence and its move into urban schools reinforced the image of school violence as decidedly urban and increasingly common in poor areas of those cities (July 19, 1993). From stories of violence in urban centers elsewhere in the country to AP and *Journal Times*' staff stories about violence in Racine or Milwaukee, school violence was constructed as an *urban* social problem. Only one story about violence at rural schools—in this case, a shooting at a rural Kentucky school—appeared during this 13-month period.

But, while school violence was not typified through rural examples, some stories warned that the violence was spreading to suburban areas. Senator Christopher Dodd warned that such "[V]iolence knows no social, economic, racial, or geographic boundaries" (March 24, 1993). And an October 19, 1993 AP story suggested, through a quote by a Wisconsin legislator, a belief that the violence was encroaching on rural areas as well: "I think there's a perception Wisconsin is changing . . . Gangs are moving into smaller communities, instead of just being a Milwaukee problem. The level of violence is changing. Ten years ago, people weren't seeing kids bring guns to school" (David Travis, quoted in October 18, 1993 front-page story, 1A). This perception was reinforced by stories that gangs were spreading out of urban areas such as Racine and Milwaukee into rural communities such as Burlington (June 14, 1993).

The Journal Times' *Coverage, 1997–1998*

School violence was reconstructed as a different kind of national problem in the 1997–1998 period. By 1997, stories of gang violence spilling over into urban schools had been displaced by stories of mass shootings in rural and suburban schools: of the 75 stories on school violence in the *Journal Times* during this period, only four articles discussed violence occurring in or around urban schools. This was despite the fact that "Student crime is mostly in larger urban schools" (AP, March 20, 1998, p. 3A), school shooting deaths were down from their peak in the 1992–1993 school year (AP, July 30, 1998), and "[U]rban students had the highest risk of violent death at school" (AP, October 15, 1998, 3A).

Several themes ran through these stories. These themes represent ways of framing school violence for the readers: they lay out where school violence is most likely to occur, who the perpetrators are, who the victims are, and so on.

They construct our perceptions of threat by locating the threat for the reader, giving that threat a face. The new face of the threat to school safety was a clean-cut, rural teenaged boy, a boy who did not look like a killer. And the stories described communities that were stunned that such crimes could happen in their small, rural, or suburban hamlets, the lesson being that it can—and does—happen anywhere. Finally, increasingly throughout the year, the stories suggested that administrators, students, parents, and teachers ignored warning signs of impending violence. The shootings, and the warnings that preceded them, came to represent a cautionary tale, so that, by the end of the examination period, articles were pointing out how schools were now *planning* on shootings, building such scenarios into their school crisis plans.

"He Always Seemed Polite, Like a Nice Guy." While killers in the 1992–1993 period meshed with stereotypes of cold-blooded murderers (e.g., black or Latino gang members killing for drug business, for kicks, and so on), killers in the 1997–1998 period were noted for the ways in which they departed from those stereotypes. In six different articles, the descriptions of the shooters depicted them as either physically small geeks or seemingly good, clean-cut boys.[6] For instance, in describing the Paducah, Kentucky shooter, the AP reporter noted that "[T]hose who know the teen describe him as physically small and emotionally immature, but a good student with no serious discipline problems" (December 4, 1997, p. 6A). The Pearl, Mississippi shooter was described as a "polite . . . nice guy" having "shoulder-length brown hair and wire-rimmed glasses" (October 9, 1997, p. 8A).

The articles suggested that one did not expect violence from these boys. "Person-on-the-street" interviews assisted in constructing this frame. One student who was interviewed after the Pearl, Mississippi shooting remarked that the shooter's friends—some of whom were taken into custody and later charged—seemed rather average: "There were a few you could tell something wasn't right. But there were a few you'd never guess" (October 9, 1997, p. 8A). Similarly, an AP reporter illustrated the extent to which one of the Jonesboro, Arkansas shooters blended seamlessly into a religious community, a testament to these complicated times when killers are no longer distinguishable: "'I thought when they were talking about the camouflage clothes [the shooter wore], he must have more camouflaged on the inside than what we could see on the outside,' Janice Holt, the pastor's wife who taught [the boy] at the Bono Tabernacle, said Wednesday. 'He seemed like such a neat young man'" (March 26, 1998a, p. 7A). In the context of these articles, readers might conclude that those who would carry out mass shootings in schools were not clearly different from those who would not commit such acts. It was no longer clear who the criminals were and where they would strike.

It Couldn't Happen Here . . . Or Could It? In 13 articles—with 11 of the 13 coming in April and May, after Pearl, Paducah, and Jonesboro—residents and school administrators from the towns in which the shootings occurred voiced their utter shock that the violence normally thought to be a function of the urban setting could happen in their community. Rural and suburban communities were assumed to be safe, and now that assumption was being called into question. Their dismay in the face of a cruel reality represented a cautionary tale for the rest of the nation. Readers were left wondering, "Could it happen here, too?"

After the first shooting in Pearl, parents and administrators voiced their shock. One Pearl school board representative said, "We had no idea that anything like this would ever take place at our schools," a point underscored by a parent who said, "I thought my kids were safe here" (October 2, 1997). Even as juvenile crimes were dropping for the second straight year, a trend illustrated in a story that appeared the day after the Pearl shooting hit the papers (October 3, 1997), the *places* the public associated with youth violence were shifting. Shortly after this shooting, the *Journal Times* ran a story that linked the national context to local troubles. The paper reported on the racial tension Burlington—a small, nearly all-white community—was experiencing after the high school hired a Latino principal, evidence that Burlington, too, was experiencing change. Increasingly, the reader could conclude that teen violence had moved into small communities, those thought to be immune to such acts. The latter perception was reinforced by an AP story that noted that "[T]he murders and arrests have unnerved many in Pearl, a town of 22,000, just outside of Jackson" (October 9, 1997, p. 8A).

This notion that extreme violence was spreading to small communities was confirmed after the Paducah shooting and later the Jonesboro shooting. Shortly after the Jonesboro shooting, Wisconsin experienced a string of what were thought to be copycat crimes, again linking the national context to local troubles. In Plainfield, Wisconsin, a town of 839 in rural central Wisconsin, a gun was found outside a school. An AP story in the *Journal Times* quoted a Plainfield waitress who said "[E]verybody was pretty shocked by it this morning . . . It's not something you just hear of every day in a small town like this, but it was a pretty small town down there in [Arkansas], too" (March 28, 1998, p. 3C). Likening small towns in Wisconsin to small towns that experienced school shootings became common. A shooting at Oakfield Middle School, again in rural Wisconsin, was reported to have "frightening similarities" to the Arkansas shootings a week earlier (April 1, 1998, p. 5A). Two weeks later, at a school in Pardeeville, Wisconsin—yet another town located in rural central Wisconsin—a 14-year-old student and a 15-year-old student shot a school janitor.

By April, school shootings had become synonymous with small towns. The relocation of the threat of school violence from urban schools to rural or suburban schools was nearly complete. After an eighth-grade student shot and killed

a teacher at a school dance in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, an AP story quoted a Pennsylvania State Education Association spokesperson as saying, "Too many of us believe that violence is unique to urban areas. The tragedy Friday in Edinboro proves that belief false" (April 26, 1998, p. 1A). Noting the spillover of urban violence into communities once deemed safe havens in our collective consciousness, the AP quoted an Edinboro minister as saying, "Some of us came to Edinboro to escape the large city. We all have that false sense of security that we are in a rural part of the state, so we are safe" (April 27, 1998, p. 1A).

To compound the anxiety in small-town America—perhaps not by design, but in effect—the *Journal Times* ran an AP story on May 1, 1998 that listed a litany of situations—including large cities along with small towns—in which students threatened violence against teachers or other students. The story offers a glimpse into nine different incidents across the country, in addition to references to the shootings in Pearl, Paducah, Jonesboro, and Edinboro. Even in an AP story that reported a *drop* in serious crime, crime was reestablished as an increasingly rural phenomenon: "'Many small towns, especially in southern areas, are playing catch up with big cities', said professor Jack Levin . . . 'These small towns thought they were immune from teenage violence and didn't prepare for the onslaught'" (May 18, 1998, p. 1A), a reminder that communities and schools had been given warning signs that they ultimately ignored.

Hence, school violence was reconstructed as a predominantly small-town phenomenon. Communities previously thought to be sheltered from the violence of the urban world were now the playgrounds of young male assassins. In its reconstruction, the threat of school violence had been transfigured, magnified, and relocated, upsetting old notions of criminality and the tranquility and safety of small towns.

"Warning Signs Ignored": A Cautionary Tale. Increasingly, throughout the year, the AP stories printed in the *Journal Times* pointed to the warning signs that were evident before each school shooting. Eighteen articles documented the warning signs missed by administrators, teachers, parents, and students in each of the five incidents. By the end of the observation period, this had become a clarion call, one warranting change in the organization of American schools and in the relationship between students and school staff.

As Pearl marked the beginning of the perceived school-shooting spree, warning signs were, as yet, not noted. As a pattern seemed to emerge, first with Paducah, then with Jonesboro, reports that the shooters had given warning as to their intentions prior to each event became more prevalent. The "warning signs," however, became more ambiguous—behaviors that might, in a different context and without the benefit of hindsight, have been interpreted differently in the past. The first AP report of the Paducah shooting began by citing a warning: "A

14-year-old boy who warned last week that 'Something big's going to happen' inserted earplugs, drew a gun and shot eight students as a prayer meeting ended in a high-school lobby" (December 2, 1997, p. 3A). This same student, we learned in a report two days later, allegedly "urged at least a few friends not to attend" the prayer meeting (December 4, 1997, p. 6A). But the warnings, as a December 5, 1997 AP story noted, started a year before the incident. Warnings surrounding the third shooting, in Jonesboro, were more ambiguous: of one of the two Arkansas shooters, a neighbor said, "He was always threatening people" (March 26, 1998a, p. 7A); and "[F]riends said [one of the shooters] was angry about being jilted by a girl and had warned classmates a day earlier that 'he had a lot of killing to do'" (March 26, 1998b, p. 7A). Coverage of this incident marked the beginning of calls for school administrators to act, even if the signs were not clear: one parent defined that increased responsibility when she said "[M]aybe [the shooters' parents and school administrators] didn't see the signs, maybe they didn't know, but they should have" (March 26, 1998b, p. 7A). These stories and the increasing call for action informed the decisions of school officials across the country. In particular, in regard to the gun found outside the Plainfield, Wisconsin school, a school district administrator admitted that "[M]y first reaction was one of, 'Is there a copycat situation here as it pertains to the Jonesboro, Arkansas situation?'" (March 28, 1998, p. 3C).

A month later, stories of school shootings had landed on the front page and, though the warning signs were ever more broadly defined, stories highlighted the belief that someone should have known about and acted to prevent these atrocities. The Edinboro shooter reportedly "joked about killing people and then committing suicide" a month before the shooting (April 26, 1998, p. 1A). The next day, in a front-page AP article entitled "Warning Signs Ignored" (April 27, 1998, p. 1A), Dr. Burt Singerman was quoted as saying, "I really think this has occurred enough times that teachers, principals, and guidance counselors need to think about how they would handle students who make these statements about wanting to hurt people." Stories increasingly placed these shootings in the context of the previous shootings and warnings: "One of the teens accused in the Arkansas killings talked about shooting people the day before he did, but fellow students didn't take him seriously. The 14-year-old accused of shooting into a prayer circle in West Paducah warned friends to stay away from the gathering" (April 27, 1998, 1A). Two days after the Jonesboro, Paducah, and Edinboro shootings were linked by the warning signs frame, the *Journal Times* reported on a confrontation with a parent at a Burlington grade school, again constructing local threats in the national context. Police were called to the scene when the parent became belligerent, lobbing threats at the teacher and administrator. The story also reported on a threat made by a student at a Waterford, Wisconsin grade school, a small town less than ten miles from Burlington.

By the close of the 1997–1998 school year, the message being sent to school administrators was loud and clear. One claims-maker, Pamela Riley, executive director of the Center for the Prevention of School Violence, put the onus on school staff when she said, "It can happen any place, anywhere. Safe school planning is a necessity for every school in the country. We've got to work upstream rather than waiting for something to happen" (May 1, 1998, 9A). That same AP story (May 1, 1998, 9A) noted that "[T]ragedies like Edinboro, Jonesboro, West Paducah and Pearl can be averted if adults act on student threats and keep their guard up." Such stories and their calls for action did two things: they placed responsibility on school staff to make schools safe again; and they gave license to administrators and law enforcement officials to take even the most minor threat seriously.

While school let out in June of 1998, the issue did not "let out." The national conversation on safe schools continued, as the focus shifted to policy: the *Journal Times* coverage included 12 different articles, consisting mostly of AP stories, over the course of the summer, all covering—at least in part—policy issues related to safe schools.[7] The 1998–1999 school year began, then, with the issue and the events of the previous year foremost in the minds of school administrators, teachers, law enforcement officials, parents, and students. Wisconsin State Attorney General James Doyle reminded his Racine audience and the readers of the *Journal Times* that school threats should be taken seriously when he noted that "When I talked to officials in Pearl, Miss. about the shooting there . . . they said they couldn't believe how many kids knew what was going on . . . but no one bothered to tell an adult" (August 21, 1998). Doyle's remarks and the previous year's coverage of the shootings validate and even mandate attention to information gained from student informants. In this vein, an article on safety tips recommended that schools "Act on rumors. When you hear of a criminal or unsafe incident rumored to occur, immediately warn students" (August 16, 1998a). In another article, a Wisconsin administrator concurred, noting that "You have to be proactive . . . If you're not proactive, you're reactive" (August 16, 1998c).

The World is a Different Place Now. Toward the end of the examination period, a handful of stories emerged to reflect on the passing school year and postulate that somehow kids and the world were very different now. The stories of the 1997–1998 school shootings suggested that kids had changed, and schools must change with them. A December 1, 1997 AP story suggested a change in kids and parents and in communities' responses to those perceived changes when it pointed to the growing popularity of city curfews to "reduce crime and truancy and force mom and dad to set rules for teenagers" (p. 4A). In an editorial, a University of Wisconsin–Parkside professor noted that "[T]he face of

juvenile violence is beginning to change. More and more, 'regular' kids are doing the killing" (August 24, 1998). In an editorial in the *Journal Times*, a school psychologist from North Carolina claimed that today's children are inherently different than children of the past: "[T]eens have become downright dangerous to themselves and others" and are "now committing violent crimes once associated exclusively with hardened criminals" (June 9, 1998).

With the assumption that kids and schools are different today firmly planted after the stories of the past year, the 1998–1999 school year was ushered in by newspaper reports of school districts' responses to this new era. An article on "Safety Tips for Schools" (August 16, 1998a) listed 12 precautions schools should take to ensure student safety. As an indication of the perception that school safety was now a different matter, 10 of the 12 tips specifically addressed school security measures. The other two were at least tangentially related to security. Another article that same day began by confirming the shift in conceptualizations of school safety: "School safety used to mean teaching kids not to run in the hallway and to look both ways before crossing streets. These days, the term means screening students for weapons and teaching kids such emergency techniques as staying away from windows and dropping to the floor and under desks to dodge gunfire" (August 16, 1998c). As the *Journal Times* showed in a third August 16, 1998 story, this shift applies to Wisconsin schools as well and is embodied in the rural Oakfield, Wisconsin middle school. In 1996, the school was rebuilt after it was destroyed by a tornado, the kind of safety crisis for which schools had long prepared. "But trouble of a different sort struck the town of 1,000 March 31, 1998, when a 14-year-old eighth-grade student opened an outside door and shot several bullets into a hallway of the newly rebuilt middle school" (August 16, 1998b). Because school administrators, teachers, parents, and students believed school violence was on the rise—as noted in one Wisconsin principal's statement that "Every time you pick up a newspaper, school violence becomes more prevalent"—and because the readers were constantly reminded that "school violence took on a new face this year," school crisis plans shifted to include this new threat (August 16, 1998c). New events were interpreted through the lens of this newly constructed threat, and school policy and organization were altered to respond to this brave new world.

Professional Organizations' Coverage and Framing of School Violence

Burlington officials also cited professional organizations when asked which sources they use to stay informed. The sources cited were quite diverse, and there was little overlap of professional-organization memberships across the group of respondents. It is worth noting that many of the sources cited, including the quarterly magazine of the Wisconsin Professional Police Association and

numerous publications for educators, published no articles on school violence. The discussion below, then, draws only on those sources that addressed the issue of school violence, threats or shootings.

Burlington High School's principal and assistant principal, both primary parties in deciding the seriousness of this school attack threat, cited a variety of journals published by professional organizations of administrators as important sources of information about school violence. *The NASSP Bulletin* published an article, "Leadership Theory and Student Violence: Is There a Relationship?" by Linda Watson Moore, in its March 1998 issue, following the Pearl and Paducah shootings and just prior to the Jonesboro shooting. The article is an important informational source for its readers. It provides at least 27 different statistics that, even though they are from 1993 or earlier, paint a picture of a widespread problem. With the exception of four statistics, none show a *change* in the number of violent incidents in schools or in the context of that violence. Instead, the statistics are completely decontextualized. In the absence of specificity, the article framed the problem for the uncritical reader as pandemic and pervasive across diverse school settings, universalizing it. The years of the studies cited in the article—1985–1993—are also important in that the statistics are drawn from the peak periods of school violence, when school violence was (and still is) a predominantly urban problem. But the 1998 article's statistics are read and interpreted in the context of rural school shootings. For example, the article cited "an increase [between 1989 and 1990] in the number of students being attacked in school and going to and from school" (Moore 1998, p. 50).

The Focus, a publication of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, was cited by the Burlington principal as a professional resource. As a precursor to an examination of school policy on locker searches, one brief provided statistics on the number of school expulsions related to possession of firearms and students' use of weapons "on school premises to injure or kill their classmates or school personnel" (v.16, n.1). Moreover, it pointed out that "[M]any districts have seen an increase in the number of threats made by students to bring weapons or explosives to school or to cause physical harm to someone at school" (v.16, n.1).

The September 1998 issue of *Educational Leadership*, cited by the principal, published two articles on school violence. The first article reminded its readers immediately of the same frames they had likely encountered in the mainstream print media: "We see it in the news every day. A teacher is assaulted in her classroom by an angry student. An 8th grade boy is tortured by a bunch of bullies. A teenage girl is shot by her jealous ex-boyfriend. Violence and fear of violence are very real problems in today's schools" (Remboldt 1998, p. 32). The author (Remboldt 1998, p. 32) quickly told the reader that "[C]hildren and adolescents today are more violent than ever," but then provided a list of

static statistics that showed the level of violence but did not show the change—change over time or change in the context of school violence—to which she had referred. The other article confirmed the prevalence of violence, but a closer look revealed that the threat involved violence outside of schools (Lederhouse 1998).

Education Week, cited by the school district's superintendent, reaffirmed many of the themes introduced by the *Journal Times*. While several articles showed drops in school violence, as in the drop in the average number of school-related violent deaths ("News in Brief" 1998), those same statistics were usually surrounded by claims that the threat, while perhaps not statistically significant, was nonetheless a universal threat. For instance, while one article told the readers that school violence was "far more likely in cities than in rural or suburban communities" (Sandham 1998), *Education Week* noted on more than one occasion that "[O]ne in 10 American schools had at least one serious violent incident last year" (Portner 1998a). By not explicitly stating, in conjunction with the latter statistic, *where* the violence occurred most often, *Education Week* globalized the threat.

Various testimonials in *Education Week* also democratized the threat of school violence, as in the common refrain "It can happen anywhere" (Johnston 1998) or "[I]f it can happen [in a rural community like Springfield, Oregon], it can happen anywhere" (Portner 1998d). Noting that the problem can spread in unpredictable ways, one Kentucky School Boards Association member said that "[T]hings that your big-city school districts may be prepared for can just as easily happen in a rural setting" (Portner 1998d). Even safety-conscious schools could be vulnerable, as the following suggested: "Administrators and teachers have not lacked for recent examples that violence can strike even in unusually safe schools" (Portner 1998b).

Education Week featured examples of school district policy changes in terms of both safety plans and school programming to identify potentially violent students and deal with student problems. Descriptions of newly refocused safety drills in districts across the country confirm officials' beliefs that the problem is real and that action is mandated and appropriate: "Shooting drills such as the one . . . conducted here are one of the hottest professional-development activities in education these days, even in districts that are virtually untouched by violent crime" (Portner 1998d). Such reporting reaffirmed the belief that school safety had taken on a different meaning in all schools (Portner 1998c), a theme presented in the news media as well. The prevailing message was, "This is real; take action." As one Kansas principal noted, "[W]e didn't want to have to react . . . we wanted to be proactive" (Portner 1998b). That the problem was real—and that the construction of the threat as universal was accurate—was taken for granted in the article. The focus was on action. Even after noting the

uneven distribution of school violence, *Education Week* cited a spokesperson for the National School Safety Center who stated that officials taking such actions should be lauded, not criticized, for their school safety efforts (Sandham 1998).

The claims presented by the news media and the professional media were given further strength by conferences and workshops held by professional organizations and government agencies. The state attorney general held a "Regional School Violence Prevention Training Session" in September 1998, just two months before the Burlington shooting. The sessions were held in seven different locations throughout the state. Because the problem was no longer viewed as an urban problem, sessions were held in the less populous western and northern parts of the state as well as in the urban centers in the south. The one-day sessions, attended by three Burlington police officers, focused on five areas: developing safe school plans, conflict resolution, legal issues, police liaisons in schools, and a local case study. These areas took as their assumption that rural schools were now threatened with unprecedented violence. When asked why the conference was held, a spokesperson for Wisconsin's Department of Justice told me that "[I]t was a reaction to Jonesboro, Oregon, [and] Pearl, Mississippi. It got everyone thinking again about school safety." But, as this analysis has shown, those shootings got everyone thinking differently about school safety, about the locus of violence and who posed a threat. Parroting a common refrain, the spokesperson claimed that "[N]o school is immune to [this sort of violence]."

Likewise, at two conferences of professional educators' associations (see appendix 1), presenters discussed their school district's mock shooting drill in an effort to encourage such crisis planning. By drawing on the notion— presented in the news media, professional media, and at conferences—that others had ignored warning signs, with catastrophic implications, police and school officials could act on local incidents without the criticism of arbitrariness. In the context of these nationally publicized shootings, local decisions to act were legitimated.

The Construction of a Local Threat

In the case of school shootings, the news media and professional organizations, in tandem, reconstructed the threat of school violence. Through news-media coverage, five school shootings became evidence of a broad and representative problem (Kappeler, Blumberg, and Potter 2000), creating a context in which other incidents—including Burlington's—were interpreted and understood on the local level.

In interviews, Burlington police and school officials suggested that the previous shootings weighed heavily on their decision to take their local threat

seriously. One comment illustrates the ways officials built on news media typifications, professional organizations' responses, and their own practical experience to read the various messages and interpret their own situation:

> I can't speak [for the other officers]. However, based on our training, based on the national coverage of the tragedies that happened throughout the US at school before, based on two of the actors or defendants [in this case], it's [a question of] "why not"? So add those three things up and you come with your decision. (Respondent #3)

While the officers were not merely passive recipients of media messages, those messages did shape their thoughts and actions as the chief of police illustrated: "There've been school shootings now the past couple of years. So you start thinking about it and start planning 'what ifs'" (Respondent #1). Professional organizations, coupled with the more pervasive news media images, shaped perceptions of new threats and the preparations to be made:

> Am I preparing today for something I don't know about yet? Probably not. But as things happen, as we hear about them happening in different areas of the country, that then becomes something that is now on the seminar plan. *And they'll bring in those people to tell you about "here's what happened to us and we didn't expect it either."* (Respondent #1; emphasis added)

In the following sections, I explore how Burlington officials interacted with both news media and professional media images to interpret their school-violence threat. In a reflexive proposition, the officials moved between the universal (i.e., the news media and professional media coverage) and the particular (i.e., their knowledge and understandings of Burlington). They used media images that globalized the threat and added interpretation that was locally grounded in their own experiences to construct the Burlington threat.

Relocating Violence

The news media coverage of school shootings in the 1997–1998 period democratized the risk of school violence by constructing it as a potential threat to every child in American schools, something that could happen anywhere. The reality of school violence—that it is still largely an urban, central city problem and that, for the most part, schools are remarkably safe—was ignored, as was the relationship between race and class and victimization. Instead, in the voices of the stunned and distraught community members, the message was clear: "It could happen to you, too, so be prepared." Schools throughout the country have taken that message to heart by hiring safety consultants, reformulating safety policy, staging mock shooting drills, and increasing spending to secure schools from the new assailant—the one inside the school.

Having heard it at conferences and read it in the *Journal Times* and in professional journals, Burlington officials repeated the refrain. School and police officials described the relocation of violence. One police officer, for instance,

voiced the perception that "[you] hear about it in these small towns all over the country and Burlington's no different" (Respondent #7). Another noted that "[W]e're no different than most of the other small towns" (Respondent #1)—that is, the communities in which shootings occurred. When asked if he was surprised by the Burlington event, one officer said, "[M]ildly surprised? Yeah. Completely surprised? No." He went on to say:

> We're a smaller, rural community, and it seems that that's where this stuff is developing. In my job, you don't take anything for granted. *Anything can happen anywhere. . . . We're no different than any other community.* (Respondent #5; emphasis added)

A school official assessed the situation:

> [School violence has] always been a problem. It's nothing new. It's just that it's now coming to small towns. (Respondent #10)

One police officer noted the previous assumptions about where crime happens and how the knowledge that violence was now a rural problem affected him:

> We, like many other people, become comfortable with that being a big city issue . . . You're aware of it; you're cognizant of it. I think we're always aware it could happen. [But] we tend to believe that we are immune from other activities and I don't think that, as police officers, we're any different. (Respondent #2)

Another officer spoke of how the other events seep into one's thoughts, framing how one views the larger world and one's own world: "[A]s you start hearing about the shootings in small communities, you start thinking about it" . . . and preparing for it, as he articulates in the next section (Respondent #5).

Legitimizing Warning Signs

The news media's descriptions of warning signs, too, democratized risk. Though the identification of warning signs of impending violence might seem to narrow or specify the threat by allowing observers to distinguish between real and false threats, the ambiguity and breadth of warning signs instead served to alarm.

The warning signs discourse was quite powerful in shaping Burlington officials' actions, particularly since they received a warning sign in the form of an informant. Nearly every respondent pointed to the fact that in the preceding shootings, someone had known it would happen. Moreover, every Burlington respondent underscored that, in this case, an informant had stepped forward. The school principal said:

> You have to act. You can't just blow it off. Certainly Paducah and Pearl and Springfield and other communities had an impact on our decision, but because in those situations someone was aware of things, other students, and they never stepped forward. In our case, one student stepped forward, confidential informant stepped forward and that was the key. (Respondent #10)

Professional organizations and the news media sculpted this perception and its importance, alerting officials to take the warning signs seriously, as one officer noted:

> Did you ever hear about Pearl, Mississippi before the shooting? How about Edinboro, Pennsylvania? Jonesboro? Springfield? So, again, I think this is where our training kicked in of saying "why not"? Now I've learned that down in Pearl, there were rumors, there were signs that they chose to ignore and the tragedy continued. *So the press and the training we get at various in-services and schools we go to, I think, did us a favor*. We didn't ignore the signs. (Respondent #3; emphasis added)

Another officer noted the value of attending the Wisconsin Attorney General's conference on school violence:

> In every one of those other cases, people had heard it was going to happen, one way or another. But they didn't take it seriously. And what the conference was trying to tell everyone was, "You've got to take it serious." (Respondent #2)

Another officer underscored—rather indelicately—the importance of professional organizations for framing understandings of when and where school violence now takes place:

> We go to conferences and we find out about incidents that happened at other schools, you know, similar to ours but we caught ours in time. I'd hate to be on news cleaning up the mess. (Respondent #6)

The knowledge conveyed through the news media and professional organizations of warning signs in the other shootings served to legitimate action; they warranted action, as the following comments from one officer illustrate:

> If we didn't act the way we did and it would have gone down, we would have gotten strung out. . . . [W]e needed to do something. We are not going to let that happen here in Burlington. We'll do what we can to prevent it. And I think what we did was the right thing to do. We started it as an investigation and as we got further into the investigation, it became more clear . . . to us that, yes, this was going to happen and we needed to intervene. (Respondent #5)

By embracing the media's narrative of warning signs, coupled with an embodiment of that narrative (the confidential informant), local officials were able to counter charges of arbitrariness. Their construction of the threat, given the national context and their informant, was more solidly built on those other experiences, legitimizing their action.

Reconstructing Perpetrators

As with constructions of the location and signs of violence, the news media's reconstruction of the perpetrator—no longer the urban, minority gang member of the 1992–1993 period, now the small-town, adolescent, white male—distributed risk across the population. The polite, clean-cut boy in the

new construction was an unexpected killer, not the callous killer of previous constructions. Moreover, the professional media cited by officials reiterated news media claims that "[K]ids are more violent than ever," that kids and the world today are different than in the past.

For the average reader, the perceptions of a new killer and the greater propensity for violence among today's kids were reinforced by the press through interviews with the "person on the street." Such news conventions might produce "news," but because the individual is usually not speaking from a position of authority or knowledge, the effect is a heightened and distributed—almost random—sense of risk. Such descriptions of those from whom violence is *not* expected imply that violence *is* expected from someone else. That the violence does come from this unexpected person, then, distributes the risk for the reader, making it a "real" threat to all.

However, to Burlington law enforcement professionals and administrators who had regular contact and personal knowledge of the local youth, the "perpetrator" was not just any student—not the polite, clean-cut boy. Because of their knowledge, risk was not distributed for these readers as it might have been for the average reader. As active readers of the messages of news media and professional organizations, law enforcement and school officials understood the threat from their unique social location. That is, while two school officials noted that "[T]he kids here in Burlington are no different from the kids in Paducah . . . and Jonesboro" (Respondent #11) and "[These students] weren't all that different from other kids" (Respondent #9), they also suggested that two of the perpetrators were "known" to school administrators and law enforcement. So, when the confidential informant named these two among the five, one school official noted "[T]here was no question. There was no second guessing" (Respondent #10).

The claim that "our kids are no different" might seem a contradiction. I suggest, however, that, given the context of the other shootings, that claim supports the decision to take the confidential informant's allegations seriously. But the knowledge of particular students and their histories further buttressed Burlington officials' decision to act. Here, the local officials were able to take claims from the national shootings and, by building on them with intimate knowledge of the boys involved in their local case, legitimate a case for action. The blend of "what has happened elsewhere" with "what was known about these boys" created a framework for the construction of threat and for local action.

Conclusion

In two ways, news media's and professional organizations' frames of school violence are important for understanding the social construction of threat. First, they distribute risk across the population. As what we mean by school violence

and our understanding of the places with which it is associated become more elastic, threat is more broadly distributed. Such claims-making is powerful according to Best (1999, p. 25) who notes that the seeming randomness of violence "demands our concern, because it questions the stability of social order and makes us fear for our own safety, and for the safety of everyone around us." Robert Stallings (1995) notes similar framings of the equal opportunity threat posed by earthquakes. And Michael Fumento (1990) describes similar constructions of threat by claims-makers who claimed that everyone was at risk of contracting AIDS. As I have shown here, the national and local news media's and professional organizations' constructions—of killers as clean-cut, polite boys, of warning signs as ambiguous, and of the settings as ordinarily quiet, safe hamlets—democratized the threat of school violence, making anyone a potential victim.

Second, the Burlington incident points to the importance of the news media and professional organizations in shaping local officials' interpretation of local school violence threats. The news media and professional organizations provided an interactive informational context in which school violence, once constructed as an urban problem, was relocated and reconstructed as both a national and a rural or suburban phenomenon. Themes presented in the news media were reiterated and strengthened by professional organizations' claims. Burlington officials encountered news media stories that laid the groundwork for these frames, read journal articles that confirmed this view of the world, spoke with others at work and at conferences who were similarly informed and alarmed, and then interpreted real events in their own communities through that lens. Through such news media constructions, professional organization reiterations, and daily network interactions, a new understanding of the threat of school violence—its contexts, perpetrators, and responsibilities—was constructed. Burlington officials reflexively read these messages in the context of their own social location and experiences, thereby constructing the threat on the local level.

These constructions of school violence, of course, have profound implications for students, for school officials, and for law enforcement. Framing school violence in such a way legitimizes greater surveillance, a consequence of police constructions of risk highlighted by Richard Ericson and Kevin Haggerty (1997). Heightened school security to guard against these rather ambiguous threats—in the forms of security guards, security consultants, cameras, and metal detectors—has fiscal costs. Since these five school shootings and the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, there has been a renewed call for "zero tolerance" policies, which automatically expel students for bringing weapons or items that look like weapons to school, even though such policies have had little effect at previously unsafe schools (Ashford 2000). Schools also incur additional financial burdens as they design buildings intended to keep kids safe from the intruder

inside the building: classrooms that lock from inside, two-way radio communications with classrooms, systems to communicate directly with the police, and so on. Burlington's new high school building has implemented some of these design features, a response to the new face of school violence (Respondent #9). Other public policy responses include efforts to end after-school programs, to increase the police presence in schools, and to charge and punish school shooting perpetrators as adults (Donohue, Schiraldi, and Ziedenburg 1999).

There are social costs associated with this construction of school violence as well. Increased security, particularly when aimed at a vague and amorphous threat, can affect campus climate. It can "suggest to students and teachers that they learn and teach in a violent environment where students cannot be trusted and are under suspicion," thereby magnifying fear and tension in schools (Thompkins 2000, p. 65). Moreover, buildings designed for safety can feel cold and prison-like. In addition, the time dedicated to instruction is limited by drills and evacuations, as schools respond to threats—or, more precisely, the fear created by threats. And, of course, there are privacy and freedom of expression concerns associated with responses such as locker searches, increased scrutiny of student writings, and mandated school uniforms. Because school shootings have been framed as coming without warning from seemingly nice kids, all of these measures may seem plausible.

We must ask, then, if our efforts, our monies, and our fears are being directed toward "real" threats. This is a difficult prospect when no threat is assessed in a social vacuum isolated from the larger, socially constructed context. To answer that question, we must understand how threats are socially constructed in the national context—by news media, professional organizations, and a broad range of claims-makers—and then interpreted by local decision-makers. Further research into school violence and the social construction of threat should also expand the scope of the interactive informational context to explore interactions with parents, teachers, and students for the ways in which those interactions construct school violence threats.

ENDNOTES

[1]The five nationally publicized school shootings began with the shooting in Pearl, Mississippi on October 1, 1997. Four more followed: on December 1, in West Paducah, Kentucky; on March 24, 1998 in Jonesboro, Arkansas; on April 24, 1998 at a school dance in Edinboro, Pennsylvania; and on May 21, 1998 in Springfield, Oregon.

[2]Here I use William Gamson and colleagues' (1992, p. 375) notion of "readers" as those who "'read' or decode sights and sounds as well as printed text."

[3]See Beckett (1996) for a discussion of child sexual abuse and Lowney and Best (1995) on stalking.

[4]David Anderson (1998) reviews the literature on school violence and shows an association between violence and certain risk factors: violence was more common in inner city schools, junior high schools, schools with high rates of poverty among the student body, and schools in which family and community violence were high.

[5]It should be noted that, since the articles were describing the physical traits of specific shooters, these shooters were described in only six articles covering the five nationally publicized school shootings. Twenty-seven articles of the 75 examined in this period covered those five shootings.

[6]Summer 1998 articles on policy issues related to safe schools: June 4, 1998, June 18, 1998, June 22, 1998, July 2, 1998, July 9, 1998, July 19, 1998, July 21, 1998, July 22, 1998, July 23, 1998, July 29, 1998, July 30, 1998, August 13, 1998.

[7]And, as Emily Ignacio pointed out, the threat in previous constructions was racialized (personal communication).

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Appendix 1: Professional Association Sources Analyzed

1. Publications

Educational Leadership: publication of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development; published seven times annually. Issues analyzed: November 1997; December 1997/January 1998; February 1998; March 1998; April 1998; May 1998; September 1998; October1998; November 1998.

Education Week: weekly publication. Issues analyzed: from October 1, 1997 through November 11, 1998. The following issues specifically referenced school violence: December 10, 1997, March 4, 1998, March 25, 1998, April 1, 1998, May 6, 1998, May 20, 1998, May 27, 1998, June 3, 1998, June 17, 1998, June 24, 1998, July 8, 1998, August 5, 1998, September 9, 1998, October 7, 1998, October 14, 1998, October 21, 1998, October 28, 1998.

The Focus: monthly publication of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards; covers policy and legal issues in schools. Issues analyzed: October 1997; November 1997; December 1997; January 1998; February 1998; March 1998; April 1998; May 1998; June 1998; July 1998; August 1998; September 1998; October 1998; November 1998.

Journal of Staff Development: quarterly journal of the National Staff Development Council. Issues analyzed: fall 1997; winter 1998; spring 1998; summer 1998; fall 1998.

NASSP Bulletin: publication of the National Association of Secondary School Principals; published nine times a year. Issues analyzed: October 1997; November 1997; December 1997; January 1998; February 1998; March 1998; April 1998; May 1998; September 1998; October 1998; November 1998. Special section on website devoted to "school safety resources."

Policy Perspectives: monthly publication of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards; publication covers policy and legal issues in schools. Issues analyzed: October 1997; November 1997; December 1997; January 1998; February 1998; March 1998; April 1998; May 1998; June 1998; July 1998; August 1998; September 1998; October 1998; November 1998.

Results: publication of the National Staff Development Council; published eight times a year. Issues analyzed: November 1997; December/January 1997/1998; March 1998; April 1998; September 1998; October 1998; November 1998.

Tools for Schools: publication of the National Staff Development Council; published six times a year. Issues analyzed: October/November 1997; December/January 1997/1998; February/March 1998; April/May 1998; August/September 1998; October/November 1998.

Wisconsin Police Journal: bimonthly publication of the Wisconsin Professional Police Association. Issues analyzed: November 1997; January 1998; March 1998; May 1998; July 1998; September 1998; November 1998.

2. Conferences/Workshops

Association of Wisconsin School Administrators: annual conferences, October 1997 and October 1998, and periodic workshops.

Wisconsin Association of School Boards: annual state conference, January 1998.

Wisconsin Attorney General's Office: "Regional School Violence Prevention Training Session" workshops held throughout state in conjunction with state superintendent of schools, September 1998.

Appendix 2: Description of Respondents (as of time of Burlington incident in 1998)

Respondent #1: chief of police; white, male, 51 years old.

Respondent #2: assistant chief of police; white, male, 51 years old.

Respondent #3: detective sergeant; white, male, 40 years old.

Respondent #4: detective; white, male, 33 years old.

Respondent #5: school liaison officer and investigator; white, male, 48 years old.

Respondent #6: patrol sergeant; white, male, 34 years old.

Respondent #7: patrolman; white, male, 41 years old.

Respondent #8: superintendent of schools, Burlington Area School District; white, male, 57 years old.

Respondent #9: superintendent of buildings and grounds, Burlington Area School District; white, male, age unknown.

Respondent #10: principal, Burlington High School; Latino, male, 49 years old.

Respondent #11: assistant principal, Burlington High School; white, male, 56 years old.