

# **Race and Class Differences in Print Media Portrayals of Crack Cocaine and Methamphetamine**

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Despite a growing body of research on moral panic theory, this framework has been largely inattentive to the role of race and class in the creation of moral panics over drug abuse. Using a content analysis of 124 newspaper articles, this study extends moral panic theory by examining whether the race and class of crack cocaine and methamphetamine users and traffickers shaped the print media's depiction of these drugs; and whether such depictions affected the official response. Findings reveal that media reports on crack cocaine frequently referenced African Americans and depicted the drug in conjunction with violent crime. However, articles on methamphetamine were more likely to reference poor Whites and associate this drug as a public health problem.

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*Keywords: Moral panic, Media, Race, Class, Crack Cocaine, Methamphetamine*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Racial/ethnic minority groups historically have been linked to illicit drug use (Reinarman and Levine, 1997; Musto, 1973). Chinese immigrants, for example, were depicted as primary opiate users in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; African Americans were considered "cocaine fiends" during the 1920s; Mexicans were associated with marijuana consumption in the 1930s. Poor urban African Americans and Hispanics were identified as crack users during the mid-1980s; more recently, poor rural Whites have been portrayed as the primary meth users (Potter and Kappeler, 1998; Tonry, 2004). In each instance, the media, the state, and/or criminal justice officials attributed use of a particular drug to a particular racial/ethnic group and/or to individuals with low socioeconomic status, which have at times resulted in moral panic.

Cohen (1972) was the first to formally identify a "moral panic," which is conceptualized as occurring when the majority perceives one social group or type of activity as threatening the stability of society (see also Young, 1971; Cohen and Young, 1973). Young (1973) developed the theory of the "deviance amplification spiral," arising when media coverage on a particular group generates public reaction that creates more deviant behavior, which further increases media attention; thus, resulting in the situation appearing to spiral out of control. Building on

Cohen's conceptualization of moral panic, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) identified five crucial elements that characterize a moral panic, which consist of concern, hostility, consensus,

disproportionality, and volatility. These criteria are important because they serve as indicators in determining when moral panics have taken hold of a given society.

A great deal of research has identified the powerful role of the media in constructing moral panics (Cohen, 1972; Young, 1973; Hall et al., 1978; Chermak, 1997; Potter and Kappeler, 1998), which result in members of society retreating in fear while placing pressure on the government to “do something.” Prior studies have focused a large amount of attention on explaining why the media create and sustain moral panics. These studies document that the media seek to make a profit (Koch, 1990; Mayer, 1987), reporters face the pressure of time and resources to come up with a story (Wallace, 2006), and journalists place heavy reliance on public officials who have their own agendas (Chermak, 1997; Hall et al., 1978; Young, 1973). Reliance on these sources affects how controversial issues, such as crime, are presented in news reports (Chermak, 1997).

While the moral panic framework illustrates why and how moral panics are generated, few studies have attended to the five elements that define a moral panic to determine if such panic occurred over drug abuse. Moreover, there has been limited attention to the role of race and class in the creation of moral panics over drug abuse (for exceptions see Chiricos, 1996). This is surprising given that the media typically exaggerate and distort the news (Potter and Kappeler, 1998; Chermak, 1997), and, at times, the media rely on racial stereotypes in reports on crime and criminality (Mann and Zatz, 2002). Given that the use of particular drugs has historically been linked to particular minority groups, further investigation that considers the impact of race and class on moral panics over drug scares is warranted.

Although scholars have demonstrated that the mass media are partly responsible for constructing moral panics, little is known about the impact race and class status have in generating moral panics over drug abuse. Drawing from a content analysis of *The New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* from 1985-1987 and 2001-2003, this study begins to explore this issue. The questions that motivate this research are, first, does the combination of race and class of crack cocaine and methamphetamine users shape the print media’s portrayal of these drugs? And, second, do such depictions shape official response?

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### *Minorities and Drug Use*

Medical historian David Musto (1973) claimed that substance abuse has long been identified with minority groups already feared by White (non-Hispanic) Americans during times of social crises. For example, during the nineteenth century, the Chinese immigrated to the western United States to build railroads. With them came the habit of smoking opium. While opium use in itself was not seen as problematic, concern arose when popular media frequently portrayed Chinese men as seducing innocent White women into a life of prostitution (Pugsley, 2003). Musto (1973) blamed politicians for associating minority groups with drugs because these social actors typically exaggerated the negative effects of substance use to gain partisan advantage.

Mirroring political campaigns against opiate use, racial fears were instrumental in sparking the 1930s cocaine scare (Musto, 1973). Anti-drug crusaders propagated the myth that cocaine use induced African American men to rape White women (Musto, 1973). Reinerman and Levine (1997) attributed this fear to anticipated retaliation by African American cocaine users for lynching, legal segregation, and Jim Crow restrictions. In other words, many southern Whites feared that African American men would rape White women to seek revenge for the removal of their political and social rights. Musto (1973: 7) claimed that panic over cocaine was not a response to the *drug* but rather to the “anticipation of African American rebellion inspired White alarm.”

As was the case with opium, federal officials relied on racial and ethnic fears in their campaign against marijuana in the 1930s (Musto, 1973). Smoking marijuana was associated with Mexicans, who were feared by the public and government officials, especially during the Great Depression when unemployment skyrocketed and violent crimes increased (Stanley, 1931). During this time period, “[m]arijuana was depicted as an alien intrusion into American life,” and by 1931 twenty-nine states had banned the drug (Schlosser, 2004: 20). Although marijuana use was legal in the United States prior to the 1930s, it was not until increased media portrayals of Mexicans smoking marijuana that the drug became outlawed.

Not only does race and ethnicity play a role in shaping media portrayal of drug users alone, but so does class. More contemporary drug scares involved crack cocaine during the mid-to-late 1980s. Although cocaine use was prevalent among middle- and upper-class users in the late 1970s, media and political attention did not arise until the mid-1980s when cocaine smoking became popular among poor urban African American and Hispanic youths (Reinerman and Levine, 1997). Enduring structural problems in the inner-cities (i.e. unemployment, poverty, and racism) in the midst of recession resulted in many young urban male residents trafficking drugs, particularly crack cocaine, to gain monetary success (Sullivan, 1988). However, during the rise of crack cocaine, violent crime rates also increased greatly from 7.9 per 100,000 in 1985 to 9.8 per 100,000 in 1991 (Blumstein and Rosenfeld, 1998, 1999). Although evidence suggests that inner-city crack markets during the 1980s led to violent crime, particularly youth violence, the link between drug use and predatory crime has remained unclear (Blumstein et al., 1985). Nonetheless, during the 1980s many politicians decided to “get tough” on drug crimes (Reinerman and Levine, 1997), while ignoring structural inequalities permeating the lives of so many economically distressed African Americans and Hispanics.

Panic over methamphetamine has flourished since the onset of the new millennium. Unlike previous drug scares, this one focused on poor Whites residing in rural regions and metropolitan areas of the South and Midwest as primary methamphetamine users (Weisheit and Fuller, 2004). Methamphetamine is considered a dangerous stimulant for a number of reasons. First, methamphetamines are addictive and when smoked produced a high that last 8-12 hours (Covey, 2007). According to the National Institute of Drug Abuse (2002), after the initial “rush,” users become highly agitated and violent. Second, methamphetamine is synthesized from precursor chemicals that are designed for legal possession and use, including relatively inexpensive over-the-counter ingredients and household chemicals often made in clandestine laboratories (Huddleston, 2005). Because methamphetamine is cheap, easy to manufacture, and long lasting, the drug has been considered dangerous and even more popular than cocaine in

some cities within the United States (Hunt, 1997). Finally, methamphetamine production and use has been associated with public health and environmental problems (National Drug Control Strategy, 2006). In contrast to prior drug scares, a moral panic over methamphetamine has arisen, in part, because of public health issues associated with the drug.

### *Moral Panic Theory*

The term “moral panic” was first referenced by British sociologist Jock Young, in 1971, in his discussion on the social meaning of drug abuse. His colleague, Stanley Cohen (1972), introduced the concept of moral panic in his study of the “Mods and the Rockers” in Britain during the 1960s. Cohen (1972: 9) defined a moral panic as:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible.

Cohen’s study identified the media, the general public, agents of social control or law enforcement, policymakers and politicians, and action groups all as crucial actors in moral panics. According to Cohen, the media are the first actor who project moral panics in a sensationalized, stylized, and stereotypical fashion, and make predictions that subsequent events will follow with dire consequences. The second actor is the public who react with increasing concerns over a given issue. The third actors are social control agents and law enforcement that propose new remedies to handle the problems faced by the alleged threat. Legislature and politicians are the fourth actors who are typically in favor of implementing new legislation. The last actors are actions groups who believe that existing solutions are insufficient to coping with the new-existing threat. According to Cohen, moral panics are also characterized by “folk devils” – individuals or groups who deviate from socially accepted values – who are stripped of all favorable qualities and exclusively characterized with negative attributes. Once the media refer to particular individuals or groups as folk devils or deviants, all mention of them focuses exclusively on their negative characteristics.

Despite the numerous characters identified in a moral panic, Cohen argued that moral panics are generated largely by the media, “in ways that depended on established patterns of crime reporting, on journalists’ own perceptions of a ‘good story,’ or simply on the absence of any alternative news” (Hunt, 1997: 634). Some scholars assert that the police and judiciary are also influential factors in creating moral panics, as both are often accessible sources that journalists heavily rely on to obtain media reports (Young, 1973; Hall et al., 1978; Chermak, 1997). Because the media rely on public officials for information, journalists who construct the news that is unfavorable to those in power risk being cut off from sources that are needed to construct the news (Brownstein, 1991). Young (1973), for example, argued that the police and the media maintain a ‘symbiotic’ relationship in which the former agree to release information to the press as long as they notify the police when the public first become informed. Similarly, British sociologist Stuart Hall and his colleagues (1978) argued that while the media play a powerful role in shaping the public’s opinion about contentious issues, police officers and the

judiciary system are both responsible for constructing moral panics, which are then heightened by the media. According to this view, the media are not responsible for creating the news but for reproducing and sustaining the dominant ideologies of those in power, functioning then as an instrument of state control (Hall et al., 1978: 220-222). Yet, Hall and colleagues (1978: 56) admit that the media “represent the primary, and often, the only source of information about many important events and topics,” indicating just how much power the media have in shaping public perception over certain issues.

Expanding Cohen’s conceptualizations, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) present a contemporary model identifying five distinct stages of a moral panic. During the first stage, there is increased public concern over the behavior and actions (whether the concern be real or perceived to be real) of a certain group and the consequences that the behavior may cause for the rest of society. In the second stage, there is a heightened level of hostility towards the group of people viewed as threatening societal values. This creates a dichotomy between “us” – the law-abiding citizens – and “them” – criminal “others.” The third stage includes widespread societal agreement that the threat, both real and serious, has been caused by the behavior of specific, identifiable groups. The fourth stage is increasing public concern that is usually disproportionate to the nature of the threat and greater than empirical support justifies. Finally, during the fifth stage, officials in power respond to moral panics. Moral panics are volatile; however, they may recede, be displaced by new sources of panic, or evolve (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994).

Cohen’s conception of moral panics explains why they occur and how moral panics are created, transmitted and sustained. Goode and Ben-Yehuda’s contemporary model, which define the elements of a moral panic, further expands our understanding of how moral panics arise. The concept of moral panic contributes to our understanding of social structure, social process, and social change by clarifying normative and moral boundaries in society (Potter and Kappeler, 1998). Moral panic theory highlights societal reaction to a real or perceived threat to certain “positions, statuses, interests, ideologies, and values” (Cohen, 1972: 191).

Understanding why the media construct moral panics is important because there are negative social consequences to creating “folk devils” in the unfettered press. Indeed, there is growing recognition that the mass media “help shape our view of the world and our deepest values; what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil” (Kellner, 1995: 24). In an era where the public relies heavily on the mass media for information about crime, researchers must consider how and to what extent the media use race and class in stereotypical ways. Since Cohen’s (1972) conceptualization of moral panics, a number of scholars have explicitly examined the role of race and class in the creation of moral panics over muggings (Hall et al., 1978), gangs (Zatz’s, 1987; McCorkle and Meithe, 1998), violence (Chiricos, 1996; Welch et al., 2002), and drugs (Chiricos, 1996). For example, Zatz (1987) maintains that the social imagery of Chicano youth gangs, rather than their actual behavior, lay at the root of the gang problem in Phoenix, causing a moral panic to ensue in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In their content analysis of newspaper articles, Welch and colleagues (2002: 5) conclude that moral panic over youth violence “symbolizes not only a threat to society at large but also to a prevailing political economy that thrives on racial and economic inequality.” Chiricos (1996) claims that moral panics are ideological and the consequence of such panic over violence and drugs have resulted in a disproportionate number of African American men in prison.

To date, however, few studies have encompassed the five conceptual components of moral panic, introduced by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), to examine how such panic is created over drug abuse. In addition, limited attention has been given to the role of race and class to the development of moral panic over drug scares. This study attempts to fill this gap in the literature. Using Goode and Ben-Yehuda's model in identifying the elements of a moral panic, I attempt to refine moral panic theory by taking into consideration the impact race and class has on media depictions on drugs. More specifically, I conduct a content analysis of four major newspapers from 1985-1987 and 2001-2003 to examine whether the race and class of crack cocaine and methamphetamine users have shaped the print media's representation of these drugs; and whether such depictions affect the official response.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### *Sample of Articles on Crack Cocaine and Methamphetamine*

To examine the two research questions, I conducted a content analysis of newspaper articles, focusing on the nature and context in which the print media presents to the public the manufacturing, use and distribution of crack cocaine and methamphetamine. Drawing on Chermak's (1997) study, I utilized content analysis to determine the presence of relevant concepts in newspaper articles, to analyze the presence and meaning of such concepts, and to make inferences about the messages conveyed by these concepts. The print media were examined because they are known to be a credible, corroborated source.

Like Welch and colleagues' (1997) use of content analysis, the sample of articles used in the present study comes from four major newspapers: *The New York Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. These papers were selected based on their large circulation, their reputation for offering readers national coverage of news, and their geographical representation. The archives of each print media source were searched between 1985 and 1987, using the keyword "crack cocaine" within the title and text, and again between 2001 and 2003, using the keyword "methamphetamine" within the title and text. This time period covered one year before and one year after crack cocaine and methamphetamine peaked in use respectively.<sup>i</sup> Only stories on crack cocaine and methamphetamine in the United States were considered; articles were selected if they featured either crack cocaine or methamphetamine or substantially discussed both drugs.<sup>ii</sup> A total of 124 newspaper articles were included in the study; 41 from *The New York Times*, 28 from the *Chicago Tribune*, 15 from *The Washington Post*, and 40 from the *Los Angeles Times* (see Table 1).

### *Procedure*

Each newspaper article was systematically examined for emerging themes and to determine whether reporters addressed race and class. In addition to noting the explicit mention of race and class, implicit proxies for race and socioeconomic status were also examined. Because journalists commonly utilize euphemisms to avoid tackling issues of race and class and to divert attention away from unresolved issues (May, 1985), it is important to analyze "code words" for race and class. According to Sampson and Raudenbush's study (2005) on

neighborhoods and perception of disorder, residents' perception of neighborhood disorder is largely influenced by both race and class composition of the neighborhood. Racial composition, then, is used as a proxy for neighborhood conditions.

Just as race can serve as a proxy for conditions of an area, I argue that neighborhood descriptions can, in turn, function as proxies for both race and class. For coding purposes, I constructed categories of race and class: African American, White, working/lower-class, and middle/upper-middle class.<sup>iii</sup> "Urban" and "inner-city" were used as euphemisms for African American; "rural" was used to signify White. Common neighborhood descriptors used by reporters were "poor," "impoverished," "ghetto," "less affluent," "crime-ridden" and "drug-infested" to signify working or lower-class; and "affluent" and "elite" were typically offered as neighborhood descriptions signifying middle and upper-class.<sup>iv</sup>

## FINDINGS

Recall, the current study explores two research questions: 1) does the race and class of crack cocaine and methamphetamine users shape the print media's representation of these drugs? and, 2) do such depictions affect the official response? To address the research questions, I proceed with two distinct steps. First, I describe the sample of articles with respect to race, class, and drug use. After the sample has been thoroughly described, I move to the qualitative component of the research.

### *Sample Description*

Table 1 shows that there were 73 articles focusing on crack cocaine between 1985 and 1987 and 51 articles on methamphetamine featured between 2001 and 2003. That is, 59% of the print article in the sample focused on crack cocaine, and 41% on methamphetamine. There were no articles that featured or substantially covered crack cocaine in 1985. Only when the "War on Drugs" was initiated in 1986 did more articles follow on crack cocaine, which remained relatively stable in 1987, a non-election year. Interesting, a high number of crack articles featured in *The New York Times* ensued in 1987, which may have possibly been a feature of moral panic.

**Table 1: Articles on Crack Cocaine and Methamphetamine in *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times***

	Crack Cocaine			Methamphetamine			Total
	1985	1986	1987	2001	2002	2003	
The New York Times	0	10	23	2	6	0	41
Chicago Tribune	0	11	4	5	4	4	28
Washington Post	0	4	5	3	2	1	15
Los Angeles Times	0	12	4	8	7	9	40
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>124</b>

Table 2 provides information on the word counts of the four major newspapers from 1985-1987 and 2001-2003 covering crack cocaine and methamphetamine respectively. The average word count for all articles on crack cocaine from 1985-1987 was 1,010, with more words occurring in 1986 and averaging less than 1,000 words per article in 1987. Combining word counts and number of articles, it is clear that the four major newspapers in the sample devoted considerable amount of attention to crack cocaine in 1986. As suggested in the moral panic framework, the first stage invoking moral panic is increasing concern over a certain group's behavior and actions. The data revealed increasing media coverage of crack cocaine in 1986, an election year.

**Table 2: Distribution of Articles across Time in The New York Times, the Chicago Tribune, the Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times**

	Total Number of Articles	Total Number of Words	Average Length of Articles	Word Count Range
1985	0	0	0	0
1986	37	37,996	1,027	69-3675
1987	31	30,712	991	348-2991
2001	15	13,510	901	323-1929
2002	17	16,553	974	324-1880
2003	14	11,275	805	277-1898

Methamphetamine reporting from 2001 to 2003 occurred less frequently than on crack in the mid-1980s. Of the total number of articles examined here, 41% (N=51) of print media coverage focused on methamphetamine from 2001 and 2003; 35% (N=18) of the articles on meth appeared one year before the drug peaked in use, increasing slightly in 2002, and declining somewhat in 2003. The average word count for all articles on methamphetamine was 899, with relatively lengthier articles occurring in 2002 (see Table 2). When word counts and number of articles were combined, relatively more attention was given to issues on meth in 2002. Following the moral panic framework, it appeared that a rise in concern over methamphetamine arose in 2002. However, findings demonstrate that during the years that crack cocaine and methamphetamine were both popular in use, the media coverage provided greater coverage on crack related issues.

The current study examines whether reporters mentioned race and class in articles featuring crack. Of the total number of articles on crack cocaine, 12% (N=9) made explicit mention of race. Among the articles that mentioned race, African Americans were referenced 56% (N=5) of the time; Whites were referenced 44% (N=4) of the time. In other words, African Americans were mentioned slightly more than Whites in articles on crack cocaine. When explicit and implicit terms for race were included in the analysis of crack articles, the percentage that mentioned race *doubled* to 25% (N=18) (see Table 3). In the crack article sample, direct and indirect terms for African American (e.g. urban and inner-city) were mentioned 76% (N=13) of the time, compared to 33% (N=6) for Whites (e.g. rural). Differences between African Americans and Whites were wider when both explicit and implicit terms were counted. In sum, journalists were more likely to mention African Americans than Whites in articles on crack.



**Table 3: Portrayals of Crack-Cocaine and Methamphetamine (N=124)**

	<b>Crack Cocaine N=73 (59%)</b>	<b>Methamphetamine N=51 (41%)</b>
<b>References to Race</b>	<b>18 (25%)</b>	<b>20 (39%)</b>
African American	13 (76%)	2 (10%)
White	6 (33%)	18 (90%)
<b>References to Class</b>	<b>20 (27%)</b>	<b>9 (18%)</b>
Lower/Working Class	10 (50%)	7 (67%)
Middle/Upper Class	10 (50%)	3 (33%)
<b>Associated Characteristics</b>		
Widespread/Proliferating	20 (27%)	10 (20%)
Associated Violence	33 (45%)	10 (20%)
Public Health Concerns	11 (15%)	23 (45%)
Public Policy	10 (14%)	3 (6%)

With regards to explicit mention of class status (e.g. under-class, lower class, lower-middle class, middle class, upper-middle class, and upper class), 18% (N=13) of crack articles made explicit reference to class. Among the items overtly mentioning class status, 62% (N=8) referenced middle-class or upper-middle class, compared to 39% (N=7) mentioning working-class. When explicit and implicit proxies for class were both analyzed, the percentage of articles discussing class increased to 27% (N=20) (see Table 3). Interestingly, of the crack articles that directly or covertly discussed class status, 50% (N=10) mentioned the working-poor or the lower middle-class and 50% (N=10) mentioned the middle-class or upper-middle class. Findings revealed that imagery on crack were more likely to be class-based than race-based.

Like stories on crack, the 51 articles that provided coverage on methamphetamine mentioned race 12% (N=6) of the time. Among the sample that discussed race, Whites were mentioned 100% of the time. That is, no mention of African American was made. When both the explicit and implicit terms for race were considered in meth articles, the percentage referencing race more than *tripled* to 39% (N=20) (see Table 3). In the meth article sample, direct and indirect terms for White were mentioned 90% (N=18) of the time, compared to 10% (N=2) for African Americans. Overall, Whites were significantly more likely to be mentioned in articles on meth compared to African Americans.

Among the meth articles, only 8% (N=4) specifically mentioned class status. Of this sample, 75% (N=3) referenced middle- or upper-middle class, compared to 25% (N=1) that mentioned working-class. With regards to the use of the explicit and subtle terms of class in these articles, results demonstrated that the percentage more than doubled to 18% (N=9) (see Table 3). In contrast to the explicit use of class, when proxies and covert terms for class were analyzed, 67% (N=6) made mention of the working or lower-middle class. Unlike crack representations, findings indicated that portrayals of methamphetamine were more likely to be race-based than class-based.

### *Qualitative Results*

This section focuses on the qualitative component of the analysis. I divide the discussion into the following sections: characteristics of crack cocaine and methamphetamine users, specifically race and class; the spreading contagion of crack and meth; the association of crack cocaine and methamphetamine with violence; the association of crack and meth with public health problems; and public policy.

#### *Examination of Race, Class and the Depictions of Crack*

One of the major themes that emerged from the analysis was that when middle- or upper-middle-class individuals were identified as crack users, they were portrayed as affluent or well-to-do Whites going to poor, drug-infested neighborhoods to purchase drugs 60% (N=6) of the time compared to purchasing drugs elsewhere. The following quotes offered a typical illustration of how crack was depicted as a problem among poor minority communities:

The neighborhoods where the crack problem is the worst and continues to grow are poor and working class neighborhoods like Harlem and Washington Heights in Manhattan and Jamaica and Jackson Heights, Queens. (Peter Kerr, *The New York Times*, September 1, 1986)

But in the last few years an influx of crack dealers, most from New York City, have transformed the character of the corner ... Community leaders and the police said the corner, as the shopping center and its parking lot are known, is a wedge of urban blight in this otherwise comfortable, predominately working-class village of 15,000 people in the town of Babylon. (Eric Schmitt, *The New York Times*, October 13, 1987)

Coverage on crack, thus, was typically linked with impoverished minority neighborhoods. Journalists have frequently portrayed crack use and crack-related crime as primary problems of African American urban communities. Studies do show that during the popularity of crack, the drug was widely available in poor minority communities (Baumer et al., 1998; Blumstein and Rosenfeld, 1999). However, when Whites and/or middle-class affluent clients in the sample were directly or indirectly identified as purchasers of crack, they were profiled as *victims* of the drug 67% (N=4) of the time. The following statements illustrated how affluent White drug users were portrayed as victims:

Primarily middle-class people with no criminal records who are buying the potent form of cocaine ... Almost all of the arrested drivers and passengers were White ... had no previous criminal records and appeared to regard themselves as law-abiding citizens ... They expressed shock that they would lose their cars and ... They also said that the punishment was far out of proportion to the offense. (Peter Kerr, *The New York Times*, January 21, 1987)

But the perception of disparity makes a big difference. If you're poor and everybody else is poor, you can live with it better. But if you look around and see a lot of people driving big cars, living in big houses, that's different. You get some White kids in a sports car driving into the projects, and the dealer knows, 'Hey, this kid's got more money than he's giving me.' And he rips him off. (Dirk Johnson, *The New York Times*, January 26, 1987)

Although these narrative accounts illustrated White middle-class drug users purchasing crack for their personal use, they were portrayed as victims rather than criminals. Such images reinforce racial stereotypes that Whites, by their very nature, are noncriminals (Miller et al, 2002). Despite having broken the law, White users were sympathetically portrayed as suffering from crack addiction or from the “unfair” consequences of purchasing illegal drugs and then being penalized. The last excerpt identified cultural differences as the reason why White, middle-class users faced additional perils when they purchased drugs in poor neighborhoods. The article suggested that drug dealers were people of color and this recognition of social economic disparities could easily lead to White victimization when a drug deal goes amiss. What is compelling about this reporting was that White middle-class crack users were portrayed as blameless targets of drug crimes, occurring primarily at the hands of poor men of color. As long as crack cocaine was presented as a rampant occurrence among working-class neighborhoods, to the extent that middle-class Whites were portrayed as victims when they purchase drugs from poor neighborhoods, such reports would feed hostility towards poor minorities, which is the second element of a moral panic.

During this stage, “deviants” are regarded with intense hostility for threatening societal value. Some scholars argue that hostility is likely to arise towards minority groups because they are stereotyped by the dominant group who seeks to serve their own social needs (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). Mann and Zatz (2002: 223) claim that racial stereotypes reinforce the views of the dominant group, typically Whites, and “strengthens their notion of Euro-American superiority.” As a result, when Whites are victimized, they are often depicted as “deserving” of public sympathy. The media routinely emphasize stereotypes to create a division between “us” – good respectable people – and “them” evil criminals. Thus, study findings depicting White drug users as innocent victims support the view that stereotypes serve the interests of the dominant group.

#### *Examination of Race, Class and the Depictions of Meth*

Interestingly, in the sample, newspaper coverage portrayed middle or upper-middle-class methamphetamine users as hard workers attempting to fulfill multiple errands 33% (N=3) of the time. Although small in number, these depictions have racial undertones insofar that methamphetamine was generally favored by White users. Scholars who critically examine race assert that because the media typically portrays Whites as not being criminally inclined by nature,

White individuals who do deviate from such images need to be explained (Miller et al., 2002). Consider the following statements framing the various tasks of the stressed-out working woman:

[A] startling number of them are middle-class working moms who are trying to top off their energy so they can make it through a working mom’s day ... Women who abuse meth see it as a jolt of energy for a life/work dance that is more intricate and frenzied than it was before. (Lisa Belkin, *The New York Times*, June 23, 2002)

I think for a lot of women, especially single mothers, it gives you the energy that you think you need to keep the house, the kids, the yard, the cars, the groceries, the laundry, everything going ... At least, that’s how it took me over. (Miranda Leitsinger, *Chicago*)

*Tribune*, June 19, 2002)

These working, single mothers were portrayed as societal *victims*, from whom too much is demanded. They ostensibly used methamphetamines as an energy booster, possible the only way that these dutiful women could meet all of their responsibilities. The women must have been successfully managing their task until the drug “took over” to the point where they lost control. In the sample, journalists attempted to justify the actions of these middle-class women who were methamphetamine users deserving of sympathy.

Among the methamphetamine articles noting class status, 70% (N=7) depicted meth users as poor Whites or working-class residents living in rural counties. Consider some of the following remarks about individuals associated with methamphetamine:

[I]t’s mostly Beavis and Butthead labs, with poor White kids making meth out of their cars. (Timothy Egan, *The New York Times*, December 8, 2002)

Methamphetamine use is highest in rural areas ... Observers site the poverty and isolation of rural areas as keys to their growing drug trade ... ‘You have many rural areas that are persistent poverty areas, in essence rural ghettos.’ (Fox Butterfield, *Chicago Tribune*, February 11, 2002)

When class was mentioned in coverage of methamphetamine articles the reporters often portrayed the drug as a problem of lower-class Whites residing in rural areas. The second excerpt renders methamphetamine primarily as a *ghetto* problem, due to constant poverty. Reporters suggested that poor rural neighborhoods resembled poor urban neighborhoods, making poverty “the cause” of an illicit drug industry. As the moral panic framework would have us believe, dichotomization between “us” versus “them” makes it more likely to generate hostility towards those engaging in behaviors viewed as threatening the interests of middle- and upper-class Whites. Characterizations regarding meth users were comparable to depictions of crack users, in that both portrayed illicit drugs as a problem found predominately among the poor, working-class residing in impoverished neighborhoods.

### *The Rapid Spread of Drugs*

Moral panic over crack has risen primarily because of the widespread and destructive nature of the drug. The words “plague,” “epidemic,” “crisis,” and “genocide” were routinely used by the news outlets to warn the public about the dangers of using crack. Dangerous behaviors common to inner-city neighborhoods were reported as *suddenly* spreading, especially to middle America. One article remarked about alarmist reactions to crack cocaine spreading everywhere:

The highly purified and rapidly addictive form of cocaine is so pervasive that law enforcement officials say they are almost powerless to stop its speed ... Sterling Johnson Jr., the city’s special narcotics prosecutor, who calls the crack crisis ‘the most serious problem in New York City today.’ (John Goldman, *Los Angeles Times*, August 1, 1986)

Additional comments implied that crack spread all over the place. Every child, family, neighborhood, city and state in America was cautioned that crack cocaine could jeopardize their own lives. Approximately 27% (N=20) of the articles repeated the message of crack as a plague pervading American life; of those articles, 85% (N=17) mentioned that the drug was rampant in 1986. Although the data did not speak specifically to the various stages of a moral panic in the selected time frame, the sample of articles demonstrated depictions of crack as widespread in 1986, the year the drug was most popular in use. Such presentations illustrated the use of crack as serious, which is the third stage of a moral panic. Brownstein (1996) stated that the media and the government constructed the crack scare and consequently, instilled fear to the public. However, scholars have demonstrated that three years after the drug scare, crack remained primarily in the inner-cities (Reinarman and Levine, 1989; Brownstein, 1996). Indeed, the evidence did not support claims that crack cocaine was threatening every American neighborhood.

Thus, the concern generated over crack cocaine may not have been proportionate to the nature of the threat, invoking the fourth element of a moral panic. Even though crack was readily available in poor urban neighborhoods, the cocaine derivative was portrayed as a pandemic that quickly destroyed lives. Such media images of crack afforded politicians the ability to deflect attention away from endemic structural inequalities (Brownstein, 1996). Hence, the crack problem in the mid-1980s served as a convenient scapegoat to complex problems, such as deteriorating conditions in urban neighborhoods.

Some scholars claim that racial and class-based stereotypes were the prime reason for crack use being depicted as rampant, resulting in a disproportionate response. The public's perception of crack users and traffickers associated with African Americans can be traced to the media and policymakers (Brownstein, 1996). Zatz and Mann (2002) contend that the media is a powerful conveyor of racist ideology, presenting images that inaccurately capture the realities of crime in America. By portraying crack abusers as violent, animalistic and racial/ethnic and their victims as more innocent and helpless, the public comes to see people of color, particularly African Americans, as threatening. This not only reinforces the stereotype of African Americans as "evil" but diverts public attention away from racial and class oppression of people of color in America. Therefore, it can be said that the cocaine derivative afforded politicians an excuse to ignore enduring structural problems in urban cities (Bell, 2002; Reinarman and Levine, 1996).

During the height of methamphetamines, one-fifth (N=10) of stories about meth depicted the drug as pervading American society. The danger of methamphetamine was regularly reported as spreading to unaffected parts of the country, such as the Midwest, potentially contributing to the creation and maintenance of public fear regarding the drug. The following statement revealed such alarm:

[Meth] has been growing tremendously in the last five or six years ... methamphetamine has [been] called the worst drug that has ever hit America... Government officials consider methamphetamine the fastest-growing illegal drug in this country, in Canada and in parts of Europe feeding an epidemic of addiction that they say rivals that of heroin and cocaine over the past few decades. (Evelyn Nieves, *The New York Times*, May 13,

2001)

Mirroring articles on crack cocaine, methamphetamine frequently was represented as a destructive drug running rampant in America. Such portrayals can generate public fear and agreement that the threat of methamphetamine use was a serious problem, introducing the third criteria of a moral panic. Many authorities indicated that meth use and distribution had been spreading throughout the United States and increased to “epidemic” proportions.

Methamphetamine users, however, account for a small percent of the total number of people in the population. A recent national survey found that an estimated 4.9% – 12 million people aged 12 and over – reported having tried meth at least once in their lifetime (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2005). Although millions of people have admitted to trying the drug, methamphetamine use has not been pervasive, as suggested by media reports. Thus, public concern may not be proportionate to the actual nature of the problem; the fourth element of a moral panic. It is difficult, however, to make definitive claims that alarm has been disproportionate with the data. While the use of meth has not been pervasive, over the years meth use, manufacturing, and distribution have spread to some regions of the country and had devastating effects on users and their families (Covey, 2007). Study findings do reveal that the “epidemic threat” of crack and methamphetamine are framed in similar ways, both portrayed as pervading American society.

#### *Drugs and Violent Crime*

Crack cocaine, perceived as a “Black” drug, was frequently associated with violence. In the current sample, the association of crack-and-violence accounted for approximately 45% (N=33) of stories on crack cocaine. The following statement revealed the hysteria created over crack-related violence:

The growth of the crack business, the police say, has given birth to violent and increasingly sophisticated drug organizations throughout southeast Queens. The police say drug buyers feel less threatened in these neighborhoods. As a result, in previously peaceful areas residents now talk of ‘the crack wars’ – the rising toll of killings, the blasts of machine pistols at night and a growing fear among residents that they could be

punished for knowing, seeing or saying too much. (Peter Kerr, *The New York Times*, October 19, 1987)

Not surprisingly, media portrayals of crack as a demonizing drug linked to violent crime occurred regularly. “Crack wars” were said to occur in areas “rampant” with crack cocaine, paving the path to deadly encounters, such as shootouts, slayings and murders. The news media flooded the public with almost daily images of drug-related violence and murder to illustrate that the crack epidemic ‘spilled over’ out of the ghetto. The belief that crack use was lethal and addictive reached epidemic proportions, and was responsible for the vast majority of violent crime, which soon became objectified in the public mind as a result of media reports and government announcements (Brownstein, 1996; Miller, 1996; Mauer, 1999).

While almost half of the articles on crack associated the drug with violence, only one-

fifth (N=10) of those focusing on meth made direct or indirect claims associating methamphetamine with violent criminal activity. Interestingly enough, those stories that linked meth to violent crime discussed violence as a side effect of using meth, usually within a sentence. Unlike coverage on crack, media reports on meth did not demonize the drug. Thus, compared to crack users, meth abusers were less likely to be viewed as threatening to the public. As a result, the notion of Whites as non-criminals remains unchallenged.

#### *Drugs and Public Health Issues*

Another distinction regarding media coverage of crack cocaine and methamphetamine centers on the association, or lack of association, of both drugs with public health issues. Approximately 45% (N=23) of the articles on methamphetamine framed the drug as a major public health and environmental issue, discussing the physical and environmental effects of using the drug. Most articles that made mention of physical health problems associated with meth discuss consequences such as psychosis, delusions and hallucinations, and brain damage among users. Some articles also reported environmental consequences to the manufacturing, use, and distribution of methamphetamine. Environmental health reports highlighted the chemical byproducts of meth laboratories on individuals, wildlife, and the community in general. With heavy emphasis on the health and environmental effects of meth and less attention devoted to violence, it is clear that moral panic arising over methamphetamine had much more to do with public health and environmental concerns.

Although nearly half of the meth articles associated the drug with health issues, the link between crack and health was discussed less frequently. Only 15% (N=11) of stories on crack cocaine mentioned the health effects of abusing crack. Similar to reports on methamphetamine, most journalists mentioned that the physical health costs of using crack could lead to depression, psychotic behavior, seizures, stroke, and heart attack. Interestingly, while media reports on “crack mothers” and their babies increased during the late 1980s (Gomez, 1997; Humphries, 1999), in the current sample, only three articles discussed the effect crack addiction had on the health of women and their infants. Overall, coverage on crack cocaine documented few health concerns and more association with violence, possibly contributing to public fear and inciting moral panic.

#### *Drugs and Public Policy*

Moral panic over crack cocaine was also characterized by reports of radical expansions of punitive controls. Panic led policymakers to link drug abuse with the need for state intervention:

Reagan blamed Hollywood and the music industry for glamorizing drug use and said drug pushers deserve the death penalty. Asked if the U.S. should institute capital punishment for drug traffickers, as Malaysia has, Reagan said: ‘while we haven’t come to final decisions on this ... I know they deserve it.’ (Dorothy Collin, *Chicago Tribune*, August 4, 1986, 1)

The last stage of moral panic is characterized in terms of responding to threatening conditions by officials in power. This is important because media representations tend to correspond with political goals and sometimes, media misinformation and propaganda is used to couple conservative drug policy. Although few in number, 14% (N=10) of crack articles

reviewed here incorporated the inclusion of stiff penalties for crack.

A clear exemplar of the media-drug policy relationship occurred in 1986 when the Reagan Administration launched a war on drugs to calm public fears about the violence associated with the sale of crack in inner-city neighborhoods. In response to the public demand to “do something” about the drug problem, Congress enacted the Anti Drug Abuse Act of 1986, resulting in a 100-to-1 punishment differential between crack and powder cocaine (Tonry, 2004). Two years later, the Act established mandatory minimum sentences of five years for individuals convicted of possessing 500 grams of powder cocaine, while only five grams of crack triggered the same penalty (Miller, 1996; Mauer, 1999; Scalia, 2001). Consequently, because the drug war focused on crack cocaine, African Americans and Hispanics were targeted, arrested, and imprisoned in disproportionate numbers (Miller, 1996; Mauer, 1999; Austin and Irwin, 2001). Many scholars charge that this policy discriminates against African Americans drug users who are more likely to use crack cocaine over powder cocaine, whereas Whites are more likely to use the latter (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; U.S. Sentencing Commission, 2002).

These “get-tough” penalties and changes in criminal law, however, accounted for only 6% (N=3) of coverage on methamphetamine stories. Although sanctions for possession and distribution of meth were proposed, get-tough policies for the possession and sales of crack cocaine were recommended much more frequently. The crack problem was beneficial to American policymakers largely because it allowed them to shift public attention from durable structural problems, such as poverty and unemployment, to individuals as the source of the problem. When individuals are identified as the problem, politicians can develop policies that separate those individuals from the rest of society (Reinarman and Levine, 1989). This is relatively simple to do when compared to the challenge of reducing social and economic structural inequities.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Previous studies examining moral panic theory have explored why and how moral panics are generated. Yet, few studies have examined whether a moral panic occurred over drug scares using the five criteria that define a moral panic. Furthermore, a consideration of the impact race and class has in influencing the creation of moral panics over drug abuse is largely absent. The lack of attention to race and class is surprising given that the media has been shown to generally rely on racial stereotypes when reporting on crime (Mann and Zatz, 2002). In this study, I expand moral panic theory by examining the print media’s construction of drugs through the lens of color and socioeconomic status. Drawing from a content analysis of four major newspapers, I examine whether the race and class of crack cocaine and methamphetamine users have shaped the print media’s depictions of these drugs, and whether such depictions affect the official response.

The research shows that both race and class played a role in shaping the media’s depictions of crack cocaine and methamphetamine during their popularity. Nonetheless, findings reveal qualitative differences in media portrayal for both drugs. In most cases, crack is described as a problem primarily afflicting impoverished African American communities. Ironically, when journalists’ identified White middle-class or affluent users as purchasing crack, they are often



profiled as victims of the drug instead of criminals.

While crack use is largely viewed as a problem among poor African American inner-cities, methamphetamine use is depicted as a problem among poor rural Whites. Interestingly, I found that when middle or upper-middle-class individuals are referenced as methamphetamine users, they are often depicted as hard-working mothers attempting to fulfill multiple errands. Special explanations by the media are provided to explain why these women turned to drug activity. I suggest that the outcome is an attempt to gain public sympathy and understanding as to why middle-and upper-class Whites resort to using drugs. Research suggests that while great effort is typically made by the press to explain why middle-class Whites become criminal offenders, the question of “why” (or offender motivations and justifications) is not the focus when the offender is a person of color (Miller et al., 2002).

Perhaps the most important feature of drug activity that shape media depictions is the role of violence. Findings reveal that crack, often portrayed as a “Black” drug, was two times more likely than reports on methamphetamine to be associated with violence. Although methamphetamine use can cause users to become violent, the drug is less likely to be linked to violence and more likely to be presented as a major public health and environmental problem. Thus, it appears that panic over meth arose, in part, because of the deleterious public health concerns connected with the drug. While moral panics arose over crack cocaine and methamphetamine, which have both been cited as addictive and destructive, there appears to be a different type of public hysteria over the use of both drugs.

The second research question that I posed is: do media depiction of crack cocaine and methamphetamine affect official response? Findings suggest that print media representation of crack cocaine did affect official response. Articles on crack were two times more likely than meth articles to express the need for harsher crime control policies. Journalists’ reported several calls for “get tough” policies, such as the war on drugs, mandatory prison terms, and three strike laws, in response to the alleged crack epidemic in the mid-1980s. Some researchers suggest that the media manufactured the crack scare to carry out political agendas (Brownstein, 1996; Reinerman and Levine, 1997). Reporters rely quite heavily on public officials to obtain media reports (Young, 1973; Hall et al, 1978; Chermak, 1997). Thus, it is easy to understand how the media’s reliance on government officials for information about crime provides political governments the opportunity to advance their own partisan interests through the use of propaganda.

Findings suggest that race and class are important for understanding why moral panics arose over crack cocaine and methamphetamine. Evidence suggests that race and class influenced both the perception of crack and meth abusers and the response to crack users. It appears that it is not just the depiction of drugs that create moral panics but media representation of crack and meth *to* particular groups of people are what lead the drug to be viewed as dangerous. Subordinate groups that are viewed by the public as threatening appear to impact print media depictions and responses to drug users.

This study, however, is explorative in nature. The sample size for articles on crack and meth limits the ability to make definitive conclusions; therefore, a larger sample size for articles

on both drugs would be ideal. Also, some of the codes used in the study reference race by using class-based words; however, they were not differentiated. Race and class components of these findings are so intertwined that it is difficult to disentangle them. Moreover, this study did not examine the role ethnicity plays in media depiction of drug scares. Given the impact of immigration since 1980 and the increasing growth of the Latino population, racial dichotomies of Black versus White no longer reflect the ethnic composition of the United States (Lauritsen and White, 2001; Lee, Martinez, and Rosenfeld, 2001; Martinez, 2002). Future research on the creation of moral panic over drug abuse could be advanced by investigating the role Latino's and other ethnic groups play in the development of moral panic over drug abuse. Comparative approaches across media sources will also yield important insights of the collective media for understanding its role in constructing moral panic.

#### ENDNOTE

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<sup>i</sup> The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) Monitoring the Future (2005) illustrate that trends in reported crack use among high school seniors peaked in 1986. The Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN) Report (2003) showed that from 1994-2002 methamphetamine trends in drug-related emergency department visits peaked in 2002. Recently, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (2005) reported that methamphetamine use among the civilian population aged 12 years and older remained stable between 2002 and 2004. Monitoring the Future provided the best available evidence on crack use in the mid-1980s (Inciardi and Surratt, 2001). Other official statistics, such as Drug Use Forecasting (DUF) program and the Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN) do not separate crack use from other cocaine use, and the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse did not distinguish between crack and cocaine use until 1988.

<sup>ii</sup> News briefs, book, film, and television reviews and documentaries were excluded from the analysis.

<sup>iii</sup> While the coding strategy is appropriate, it is imperfect.

<sup>iv</sup> Some of these codes reference race by using class-based words, such as "ghetto" and "inner city," however, they were not differentiated. It is important to note that class and race are so intertwined that it is difficult to disentangle the two variables.