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# Framing Responsibility for Bullying: An Ethnographic Content Analysis

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## Framing Responsibility for Bullying: An Ethnographic Content Analysis

Framing Responsibility for Bullying: An Ethnographic Content Analysis

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Sociology

by

Kayla Knight  
University of Arkansas  
Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice, 2012

May 2015  
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## Abstract

The purpose of the current study is to explore ways in which American print news media frame responsibility for adolescent and teen bullying. More specifically, how media portray responsibility for the underlying causes and consequences of bullying, as well as for responding to bullying, are examined. Drawing from media studies and the construction of social problems literature, the study is guided by two broad research questions, 1) *How do American news media frame responsibility for bullying?* and 2) *What news sources, or “claims-makers,” are selected as authorities on bullying in news media articles?* Articles published between 2009 and 2013 are collected through the *LexisNexis* news index based on several search words relevant to bullying. An ethnographic content analysis (ECA) of these articles is then conducted to better understand how news media package responsibility for bullying through the use of frames, emerging themes, and the inclusion of selected claims-makers. This study finds that schools are framed as primarily responsible for bullying, while families and individuals involved in bullying are framed as less responsible. Findings also suggest that news media coverage of bullying is more likely to center on responsibility in regards to needed responses to bullying, such as through raising public awareness, as opposed to addressing the underlying causes and consequences. Importantly, articles that did discuss the causes of bullying tended to place blame on advances in technology and victims’ sexual orientations and gender identities. The implications of key findings for policy and future research are discussed.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years there has been increasing interest in issues of bullying by educators, researchers, and policymakers (Crapanzano, Frick, Childs, & Terranova, 2011; Pozzoli, Gini, & Vieno, 2012; Ttofi, Farrington, & Losel, 2012; Wynne, & Joo, 2011; Zirkel, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Historically viewed as a private matter, anti-bullying campaigns and educational programs like *stopbullying.gov*<sup>2</sup> have more recently led to a broader public awareness of bullying as a more prominent social problem. Public concern over bullying has also in part been fueled by high-profile media cases of adolescents and teens responding to bullying through self-destructive behaviors. Research shows that consequences of bullying can range from physical to mental and emotional issues (Cuevas, Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod, 2007), while some of the most serious consequences of bullying include suicide and retaliatory violence by victims (Carbone-Lopez, Esbensen, & Brick, 2010; Klomek, Marrocco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2008) and other forms of criminal offending (Ttofi, Farrington, Losel, & Loeber, 2011). In one case last year, for example, twelve-year old Floridian Rebecca Sedwick committed suicide after being bullied by two friends over the Internet. Though the two girls were arrested for their crime (Alvarez, 2013; Carlton, 2013; Pearce, 2013), charges were eventually dropped. Despite increased media attention to bullying, to date it remains unclear as to who is responsible for responding to bullying and addressing its causes and consequences. Are responses to bullying within the domain of interpersonal relationships or of social institutions, such as the family, school, and criminal justice system? The answer to this question could have serious implications for public policies and programs aimed at countering adolescent and teen bullying in the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> Some studies published in the late 1980s and 1990s also examined issues of bullying (see Dodge & Coie, 1987; Olweus, 1994; Rivers & Smith, 1994; Smith & Thompson, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> This is a campaign led by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Most of the public lack direct experience with serious forms of face-to-face bullying and more recent forms of “cyberbullying,” so they learn about the causes, consequences, and what is being done about bullying from news media coverage of sensationalized cases. As with crime news more generally, news media rarely provide comprehensive coverage of bullying incidents and neglect to address bullying as a broader social issue. In addition to selecting which cases to cover, emphasize, and ignore, news media workers depend on reliable “frames” to efficiently package and simplify complex crime stories for audiences (Maher, 2001; Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, & Ghanem, 1991; Tankard, 2001). Frames constitute the boundaries or broad parameters that shape definitions of problems and their causes, make moral judgments, and suggest simple solutions to problems for audiences (Entman, 1993). Frames also grant prominence and signify authority to some news media sources by promoting their voices and interpretations of social issues while also de-emphasizing and altogether neglecting other possible sources. Iyengar (1991) suggests that media frame issues of responsibility for addressing social problems, a process that is “critical to the exercise of civic control” (p.7). In some instances, how media frame attributions of responsibility for social problems can have serious consequences for public opinion, policymaking, and the allocation of resources towards particular programs.

While scholars have examined how news media frame attributions of responsibility for some social issues (Iyengar, 1991; Sei-Hill & Willis, 2007; Sei-Hill, Carvalho, & Davis, 2010), there has been little research on media representations of bullying. Moreover, there have been no known studies examining how attributions of responsibility for adolescent and teen bullying are framed in news media. As a result, answers to important questions about the types of messages



being sent to audiences regarding the causes, consequences, and responses to bullying remain elusive.

## **The Current Research**

The current analysis of media framing fills current gaps in research by identifying frames of responsibility and news sources used in print media coverage of bullying. Bullying is defined as "...a repeated behavior (including both verbal and physical behaviors) that occurs over time in a relationship characterized by an imbalance of strength and power" (Espelage & Swearer, 2003, p. 368; see also Olweus, 1994; Roland, 1989; Smith & Sharp, 1994). The research questions that guide this research include,

- 1) *How do American news print media frame responsibility for bullying?***
- 2) *What news sources, or "claims-makers," are most prevalent in news media articles about bullying?***

To answer these questions, this study relies on the qualitative media (or document) analysis approach referred to as *ethnographic content analysis* (ECA) to identify prominent frames of responsibility for bullying (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). The purpose of ECA is to reflexively discover meaningful patterns in mediated messages. ECA begins with set parameters that guide the systematic analysis of media content, while new categories, frames, and themes are allowed to emerge from the data. In this way, ECA is about "...constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings and nuances" (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 26; see also Berg, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The unit of analysis for this study is the newspaper article.

Based on a review of scholarly literature and a preliminary examination of relevant news articles about bullying, six media frames package and help make sense of bullying, are

identified. It is premised that these frames potentially signal to readers who is most and least responsible for addressing the problem of adolescent and teen bullying. The specific media frames applied to news coverage of bullying include, 1) *bullying as a problem of interpersonal violence*, 2) *bullying as a school problem*, 3) *bullying as a criminal justice policy problem*, 4) *bullying as a family problem*, 5) *bullying as a public health problem*, and 7) *bullying as a technology problem*.

Within each of these frames of responsibility, themes, or reoccurring theses that run throughout news stories, are identified. Themes help to hone attention to specific dimensions of social problems (Altheide & Schneider, 2013), and directly shape what type of story is being told. Robert Entman (1993) describes themes as frame elements that help to tell stories by diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies (Entman, 1993). Therefore, each of these three “themes” will be explored within the context of each of the broader frames of responsibility.

Finally, discursive scripts, or vernacular expressing points of view, will emerge through processes of ECA. Scripts are often used by news media sources to promote various interpretations of reoccurring themes. In addition to adding nuance and meaning to news stories, scripts can be conceptualized as the angles taken by sources to advocate for an agenda and to promote “common sense” ways of thinking about particular social issues (Altheide & Schneider, 2013).

## **THEORY AND PRIOR EVIDENCE**

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) published one of the most influential modern works on the social construction of reality and knowledge. Influenced heavily by Luckmann’s mentor, Austrian sociologist Alfred Schutz, the pair suggested that reality and knowledge are

“constructed” through the routine social interactions of everyday life (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Constituting a mutually recursive relationship, social interactions are shaped by “common sense” assumptions about reality, while an evolving common knowledge is reified through these social exchanges. This shared knowledge is cultivated within the context of both direct and indirect forms of human engagement that are primarily dictated by language (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In this way, what becomes widely thought of as “true” about social problems is socially constructed largely through various forms of mediated messages.

### **Strict and Contextual Views of Social Problems**

Though social constructionists necessarily reject the objectivist position that reality consists *solely* of social facts and measurable conditions, constructionists hold varying views on the relevance of considering “actual” social conditions. *Strict constructionists* see little or no value in understanding how actual social conditions converge with other constructive processes. Woolgar and Pawluch (1985) suggested that other constructionists who aim to discover what is “true” and “untrue” about the “objective” social world take on a theoretically inconsistent stance, so much as to be engaging in “ontological gerrymandering.” Instead, strict constructionists focus their analytical purviews exclusively on the individuals and activities constituting a socially constructed reality (Best, 1995; Kitsuse & Schneider, 1989; Woolgar & Pawluch, 1985).

Some scholars have referred to a more moderate version of the constructionist perspective as *contextual constructionism*. For example, Best (1995) has suggested that objective and subjective views of reality and social problems may actually be more complementary than conflicting. Contextual constructionism conceptualizes social problems as part of a socially constructed reality that is also influenced by objective, observable conditions (Best, 1995). As such, contextual constructionists borrow from Berger and Luckmann (1966) who claimed that

reality exists only within the context of certain times and places. Constructionists seek to understand why certain social problems gain widespread attention while other seeming similar problems do not. One way contextual constructionists separate themselves from strict constructionists is in their belief that a more holistic consideration of objective and subjective conditions, and the interaction between these conditions, is necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of how and why some conditions become defined by society as problematic. Thus, contextual constructionists are also interested in the activities of those parties who seek to define certain social conditions as problematic.

### **The Role of Claims-makers**

Social problems originate with claims -- verbal, visual, or behavioral statements that seek to define social conditions as concerns (Loseke, 2003). Claims by media may begin with dramatic stories as examples of problematic conditions in order to grab readers' attention to a larger social issue (Best, 1995). Claims-makers are those who seek to persuade audiences to think or feel certain ways about troubling social conditions. While all have a vested interest in the social problem, some claims-makers have more credibility than others (Kappeler, Blumberg, & Potter, 2000). Loseke (2003) has described a hierarchy of claims-maker credibility, including scientists and those with academic credentials and institutional affiliations at the top, other professionals and experts in the middle, and categories of people whose views and opinions are often ignored at the bottom. Some common examples of claims-makers include academicians discussing their research, politicians discussing their policy positions, and social activists discussing the need for social change. One common way claims-makers define problems and their consequences is by relying on familiarity with other common or prominent social problems and connecting "new" problems with these better-understood sets of conditions. Doing so allows

audiences to more easily understand new problems through existing explanatory scripts established by previously successful claims.

Spector and Kitsuse (1977) also made significant contributions to the social constructionist paradigm by the discipline offering a so-called “sociology of social problems,” or a framework for analyzing how language is used in the process of defining conditions as problems. They began by defining social problems as “...the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions” (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977, p.75). Brushing aside philosophical debates over the nature of reality, they called for the empirical examination of language, value-laden symbols, and categorization schemes used to define certain social conditions as unjust, immoral, or harmful (Best, 1995; Loseke, 2003; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977).

### **News Media Constructions of Crime**

Issues of crime and delinquency and other forms of deviance have consistently ranked high as “important social problems” in the United States. A 2013 poll by Gallup measured Americans’ views on the seriousness of crime, finding that 55 percent of respondents answered extremely/very serious and 38 percent answered moderately serious (Dugan, 2013). Although crime remains a top issue of national concern, most Americans have very little direct experience with victimization. In lieu of direct experience, the public learns about crime primarily from various media sources, including news media (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987; Graber, 1980, Surette, 1992). Chermak (1994) and others have argued that mediated images and representations of crime help construct shared understandings of crime and responses to crime (Ericson et al., 1987; Graber, 1980; Surette, 1992). Research has consistently shown that crime stories do not necessarily reflect the reality of crime (Sacco, 1995; Sheley & Ashkins, 1981), often

misinforming the public and providing a distorted picture of the crime problem (McCorkle & Miethe, 2002). In some instances, public perceptions and the reality of certain types of crime can become drastically disjointed, leading to widespread anxiety amongst the public. Stanley Cohen has described these instances as “moral panics” or when social conditions, episodes, persons or groups become viewed as increasingly threatening to something sacred or fundamental to society. Exaggerated claims of the problematic nature of conditions are often supported by experts and sensationalized by mass media (Cohen, 1972; McCorkle & Miethe, 2002). Moral panics lead to widespread fear amongst the public, and can be especially harmful during times of social uncertainty and “moral malaise” (McCorkle & Miethe, 2002).

Other scholars have more closely examined how crime stories are produced to better understand the types of stories and claims-makers most and least likely to be selected by newsmakers (e.g., Chermak, 1994; Sacco, 1995). Based on his research, Chermak (1995) found that the most popular sources are representatives from criminal justice organizations. News media require cooperation from police departments to effectively deal with the pressures of meeting daily printing deadlines and other organizational constraints. News outlets must work to fill news slots on a daily basis with information about the latest crimes, thus requiring newsmakers to rely on reliable sources of information (i.e., police blotter) and those who are willing to routinely speak to media. In cities where crime is abundant, quick decisions must be made based on little information (Chermak, 1994). At the same time, police departments rely on news media for their own organizational goals, including the promotion of public safety, publicizing innovative programs, and publicizing crime fighting achievements.

Another important component of the newsmaking process is the selection of crime stories based on their newsworthiness. As news media workers are faced with more crime than they can

feasibly cover in a single news day, a story must be deemed important or interesting in some way. According to Gans (1979), stories are considered important when they involve important people, impact the national interest or large numbers of people, or have significance for the past and future. Of particular interest are stories that involve role reversal twists, human-interest angles, heroism, and “gee-whiz” moments (Gans, 1979). One common saying in the news industry is that “if it bleeds, it leads,” and several studies have confirmed that more violent crimes receive substantially more attention (Chermak, 1994; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997; Sacco, 1995; Sheley & Ashkins, 1981). News reporters have an interest in publishing sensational crime stories as a way to sell news and increase audiences. In this way, news media organizations are constrained by their need to be profitable (Chermak, 1994; Chibnall, 1977). Interpersonal violent crimes, such as murder, rape and robbery, are more reported in the news than less serious offenses (Chermak, 1994). In fact, Sheley and Ashkins (1981) found that homicides and robberies account for 80% of television news media stories and 45% of print news media, though crime statistics revealed that homicides and robberies made up only approximately 12% of all crime. It is also known that atypical and extreme stories stay in the news longer and are more capable of capturing the public’s attention (Sacco, 1995). For example, serial killer stories or violence involving bizarre circumstance receive the most news attention. News workers also understand that broad and evocative phrases, such as “schools are unsafe” and “the community is in a state of panic,” will garner more attention than the recitation of mundane crime statistics or descriptions of routine crimes (Kappeler et al., 2000). Crime stories that violate social norms are also more likely to receive disproportionate news attention. Pritchard and Hughes (1997) suggested that, in addition to novelty and crime seriousness, crimes that involve acts considered unhealthy, unclean, or perverted are judged to be relatively more newsworthy.

Finally, shared understandings about crime and criminals among newsroom members also shape news selection and coverage decisions. Crime news reporters rely on criminal typifications or stereotypes and other cues to tell stories that will connect with target audiences (Pritchard & Hughes, 1997). Kilty and Swank (1997), for example, found that images and descriptions of Black men as offenders were used more often in violent crime news stories as a result of institutionalized racism. Such images are familiar to the public and can be used as a frame of reference for understanding complicated crime stories. In other words, reporters frame crime stories by selectively presenting details to include and exclude based on common assumptions about offenders, victims, and the circumstances of crime. News media “frames” aid in swift decision-making about the packaging of complex social problems into more easily digestible stories that are familiar and accessible to audiences.

### **Media Framing**

Media frames not only indicate to audiences the relative importance of social problems but also what the problem entails (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Entman’s (2004, p. 5) widely used definition suggests that media framing involves “...selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution.” Frames allow a certain “slice” of a larger picture to be visible, while effectively hiding other “slices” (Tankard, 2001). One common way observations about social problems are classified and categorized, or framed, is by connecting them to larger social issues (Reese et al., 2001). Iyengar (1991) has referred to this as a form of *thematic framing*, or framing problems as symptomatic of broader social issues (Iyengar, 1991). Thematically framed stories are more inclined to include contextual information about the background of a social problem and how a problem relates to other social issues. These stories



tend to be abstract and impersonal, and avoid placing blame for problems on certain individuals or groups. In contrast, *episodic frames* are used to structure stories that focus on single events, individuals, or groups devoid of references to broader relevant social contexts. Episodic stories are more personal and directly related to specific human experiences. Unlike thematic stories, episodic stories more commonly place blame for problems on individuals and particular social groups involved.

Media frames are comprised of particular thematic elements that can suggest responsibility for social problems. One type of thematic element indicates *causal* responsibility for social problems by highlighting a problem's underlying causes and those responsible for creating the problem (Entman, 1993). Social problems can originate with people, institutions, groups, or broader social forces, and are featured as the primary topic of many crime stories. A second type of thematic element used to frame responsibility for social problems considers the other side of social problems by providing solutions (David, Atun, Monterola, & Monterola, 2011; Entman, 1993). These prescriptive or *responsive* themes suggest remedies and serve to justify purported treatments and predicted outcomes. Finally, *consequence* themes are another element of media frames that address the risks and benefits of particular social problems. Stories addressing the consequences of events or other social problems are often featured long after key events have occurred in order to keep stories relevant. Consequence themes provide moral judgments and bring attention to the (usually) negative effects, or consequences, of issues (Entman, 1993).

Media frames consist of “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation” that set the terms for debates and allow for complex emotional responses from audiences (Gitlin, 1980, p.7). News stories on child abductions are organized to emphasize the

punitive consequences for offenders and to appeal to the public's strong negative biases towards this type of individual and behavior. In this way, framing can be a powerful conceptual tool, as most audiences do not stop to consider how stories are being packaged when consuming news (Tankard, 2001). Consider also the media framing of drug-related crime. Beckett and Sasson (2000) found that drug crime stories were more likely to be framed as issues of "law-and-order" compared to other possible frames, including framing drug crime as an issue of "social welfare." This could have been the case for several reasons. Reporters may have judged that crime stories written to align with a law-and-order frame were more likely to be better received by audiences. It may have also been that information gathered from available news sources failed to support social welfare interpretations of the drug crime problem, as stories reliant upon police as news sources tend to emphasize individualized causes of crime as opposed to larger social forces (Sacco, 1995).

### **Bullying in the Media**

Despite a large literature on the construction and framing of crime news stories, previous research on media representations of bullying has been very limited. One exception is Cover (2012) who examined the news framing of bullying as one cause of suicides by "queer youth." The author concluded that articles centered on four types of news stories that emphasized statistical information, deviancy and/or shame of sexual orientation, survivor stories, or bullying of non-heterosexual persons. Examining print news articles from 1991 to 2011, he found that approximately 30% of articles reported *bullying* as a predicate to sexuality related suicide. Importantly, several important topics, such as heteronormativity, mental health, depression, were neglected in news coverage because they were not deemed newsworthy (Cover, 2012). In another study, Pacey and Flynn (2012) studied representations of LGBT youth in several online

print news media sources. The authors reported a discrepancy between online print articles and the reality of bullying. In particular, they found that females and minorities were systematically left out of the media for sexually-related bullying (Paceley & Flynn, 2012).

The few studies that have explored news media representations of bullying have focused primarily on LGBT victims, neglecting to explore how bullying has been framed by news media more generally. Therefore, the current study contributes to research on bullying and media framing literature in several ways. *First*, this study focuses on news media coverage of adolescent and teen bullying more generally, rather than limiting it to one victim group. *Second*, several frames, thematic elements, and interpretive scripts are systematically observed through ethnographic content analysis to advance a comprehensive understanding of how news media frame responsibility for bullying more generally, as well as the specific causes, consequences, and suggested responses to bullying. *Third*, the claims-makers represented in news media coverage are systematically observed in order to better understand the types of sources who are elevated in news stories as credible experts and authorities on the topic of bullying. *Fourth*, this study examines national and local news print media coverage across the United States over a five-year span to identify changes in how bullying has been framed over time.

## **THE CURRENT STUDY**

### **News Media Frames of Bullying**

Although there are inconsistencies in how “frames” and “themes” are conceptualized across disciplines, this study relies on Altheide and Schneider’s (2013) approach to content analysis and definitional schema. As such, frames are considered the broad parameters or

boundaries established for discussing particular events, including crimes and other systemic social issues. The current study also draws heavily on the work of Iyengar (1991) who utilizes the media framing approach to better understand representations of responsibility for social problems, like bullying. In particular, this study centers on how culpability for bullying is portrayed across six *frames of responsibility*; including 1) bullying as interpersonal violence, 2) bullying as a school problem, 3) bullying as a criminal justice problem, 4) bullying as a family problem, 5) bullying as a public health problem, and 6) bullying as a technology problem.

The first of the six frames portrays bullying as *interpersonal violence*, or an issue to be addressed by those individuals most immediately affected. This media frame emphasizes the personal responsibility of those persons involved, as opposed to broader social forces and institutions. For example, bullying may be attributed to lacking pro-social attitudes and other behaviors associated with teen and adolescent offenders (see Crapanzano et al., 2011). Stories relating the need to address physical and emotional harms inflicted upon victims of bullying would also be included. It is expected that the framing of bullying as interpersonal violence frame will be most prevalent in episodic, or incident-driven, coverage of specific adolescent and teen bullying cases.

The second frame of responsibility packages bullying as a problem faced by schools, highlighting the need for schools to *do something* about the bullying problem. Schools are where adolescents and teens spend the majority of their time when not at home, and it is where traditional forms of bullying most commonly occur. Within the school environment adolescents and teens face several strains that are conducive to stress and anxiety. For example, Higgins, Piquero and Piquero (2011) found that peer rejection, or the unfulfilled desire to be part of a group and inability to develop social networks, to be strongly related to bullying and other forms

of delinquency for both bullies and bullying victims. School news frames are expected to highlight how school environments and teacher behaviors contribute to bullying, while also signaling what types of school programs are needed to prevent and respond to bullying within educational settings. It is also expected that the school frame will be a prominent frame of responsibility because of the newsworthiness of school violence and safety issues more generally. In this way, reporters are expected to link issues of bullying to the broader responsibility of schools to curb violence and keep children safe while at school.

The third frame attributes responsibility for bullying to the criminal justice system, as it was done in the recent Rebecca Sedwick case. As bullying-related violence has become an increasing concern for parents and the general public, there may be a perceived increased need for harsher punishments for bullies. Adolescent and teen bullying may be linked by news media to other forms of juvenile violence, suggesting an increased need for involvement of the criminal justice system. News stories within this frame are expected to advocate for anti-bullying legislation, civil lawsuits, and other types episodic coverage of criminal justice responses to adolescent and teen bullies. Considering the perceived seriousness of school violence and widespread support for “get tough” policies amongst the public, it is expected that the criminal justice frame of responsibility will become increasingly popular.

The fourth frame characterizes bullying as a family problem, centering on the role that parents and guardians play in addressing issues of bullying. When adolescents and teens are not at school they are generally at home and in the company of family members. Recent research has examined how home life can contribute to bullying in addition to other anti-social behaviors (Espelage et al., 2013). Others have examined the deleterious effects of bullying on the family (Brown et al., 2013). It is expected that news media bullying frames of family responsibility will

emphasize how bullying manifests from problems at home, possibly focusing on the failure of parents to supervise their children while also considering ways that family life can be negatively affected by bullying.

The fifth news media frame of responsibility suggests that adolescent and teen bullying is a public health problem that prompts a shared responsibility of government agencies and other social institutions to inform the public about its causes and effects. In this way, bullying is viewed as a social “disease” that is spreading across the United States. Public health frames will likely focus on how some risk factors increase the likelihood of bullying, and on how education and other prevention strategies can be employed to curb the spread of bullying. Public health frames are expected to be a prominent frame of responsibility, as media campaigns are an integral way that government and advocacy groups to get the word out about bullying and its effects on the public.

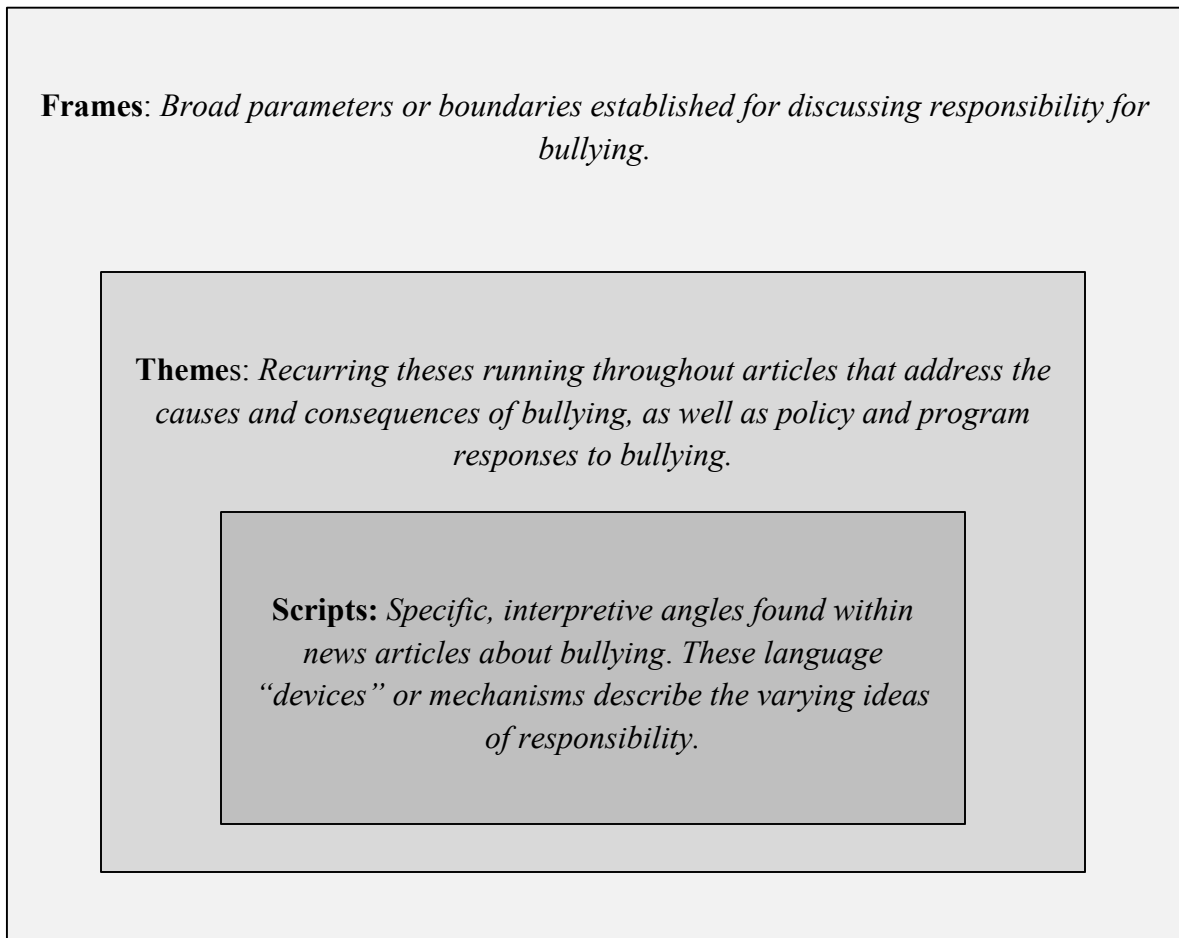
The last news media frame examined in the current study suggests that advances in technology are in some ways responsible for adolescent and teen bullying. This frame of responsibility characterizes modern forms of bullying as unintended consequences of rapidly evolving forms of will likely be placed on social media services or parents and guardians for not monitoring the use of the Internet by adolescents and teens. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) discusses the growing concern of the use of technology as a mechanism for bullying and youth violence more generally (Vivolo, Holt, & Massetti, 2011), describing electronic aggression, or “cyberbullying,” as an “important and emerging health problem” (Madlock & Westerman, 2011, p.3543; see also David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007). Cyberbullying has been defined as “bullying via electronic communication tools” (Li, 2005, p.1778) and “willful and repeated harm inflicted though the medium of electronic text” (Patchin & Hinduja,

2006, p.152). Computers and other communication devices become tools used for bullying by adolescents and teens. As the impact of social media on society is a popular news topic more generally, it is also expected that the role technology plays in the perpetuation of the bullying more specifically will also be frequently addressed by news media.

### **News Media Themes and Interpretative Scripts**

While frames of responsibility are determined prior to conducting the ethnographic content analysis, thematic emphases and interpretive scripts that give meaning and help readers understand issues of bullying are expected to emerge from the data. News media themes are conceptualized as recurring theses that establish the “kind” or “type” of story presented in each article (see Iyengar, 1991). Drawing from Entman (1993) and David et al. (2011), this study explores how responsibility for bullying is portrayed in news media stories, themes suggesting types of *causes* of bullying, *consequences* of bullying, and *responses* to bullying are captured.

**Figure 1. Conceptualizing Frames, Themes, and Scripts.**



In addition to broader frames and themes, identifying specific language conventions are key to understanding how issues of bullying are discussed in news media coverage. Therefore, the current study identifies *scripts*, or the interpretive tools used by reporters to discuss responsibility for bullying. Altheide and Schneider (2013) suggest that scripts provide “the parameters of relevant meaning that one uses to talk about things” (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 53). Others have described scripts as specific angles that help define events and shape social reality (Reese et al., 2001). Finally, scripts can also be conceptualized as what Gamson and

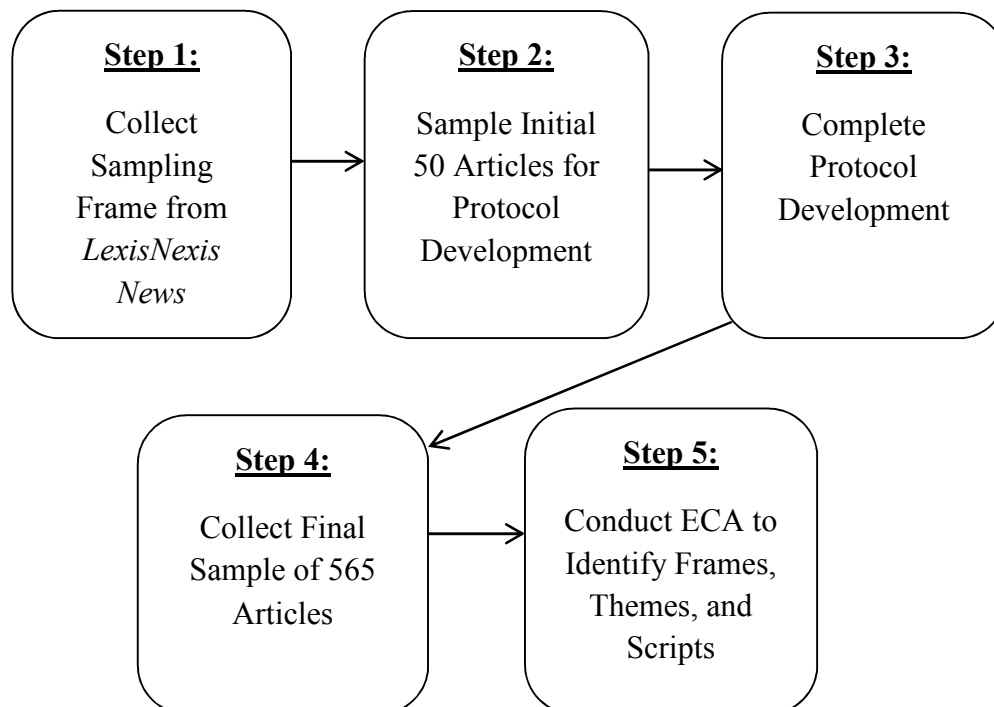


Modigliani (1989) refer to as “devices,” including metaphors, catchphrases, and other exemplars that are able to communicate both manifest and latent messages to audiences.

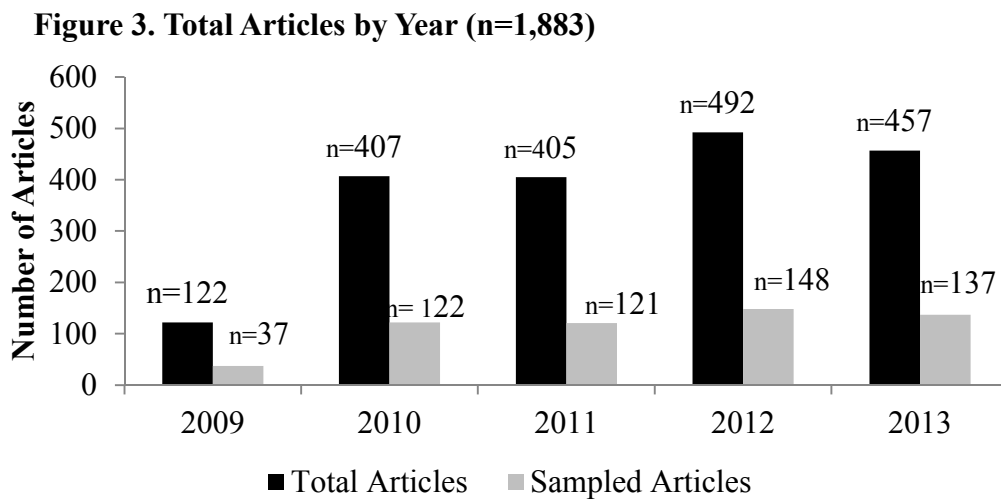
### ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTENT ANALYSIS

The current study examines news framing of bullying by conducting an ethnographic content analysis of news print articles published from 2009 to 2013. Ethnographic content analysis (ECA) is a reflexive and interactive process for systematically observing the content of media documents in ways that facilitate both qualitative and quantitative description. The first step of ECA involves constructing a sampling frame of articles from the *LexisNexis News* index (see Figure 2). Relevant “search terms,” such as *bullying*, *cyberbullying*, and *bullying and suicide*, that appearing in the headline or lead paragraph of articles are used to identify relevant news articles. Coverage of specific adolescent and teen bullying incidents, opinion pieces, and broader coverage of bullying and responses to bullying are all included in this study.

**Figure 2. Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) Steps**



Articles excluded from the sampling frame are those stemming from print wire services (e.g., *Associated Press*) that present duplicated information. Other articles that discuss alternative forms of bullying, such as workplace bullying, are also excluded. News print articles meeting the inclusion criteria are downloaded from the news index and saved as separate article documents. All news articles are uploaded to the qualitative analysis program, *NVivo*, for purposes of content analysis. In total, 1883 news media articles constitute the sampling frame.



As shown in Figure 3, the year with the least number of bullying articles was 2009 (n=122), while the year with the most articles was 2012 (n=492). Discussed in more detail below, the bullying news articles dramatically increased between 2009 and 2010, nearly quadrupling the number of articles published on adolescent and teen bullying during this time period.

After establishing the sampling frame, the second step in the ECA is to collect a small sample of articles to be used for purposes of protocol development. An initial non-random sample of 50 articles, 10 articles selected from each year, is drawn.<sup>3</sup> Third, a preliminary version

<sup>3</sup> News articles were selected from the beginning, middle and end of each year between 2009 and 2013, totaling approximately 9 percent of the total sample frame.

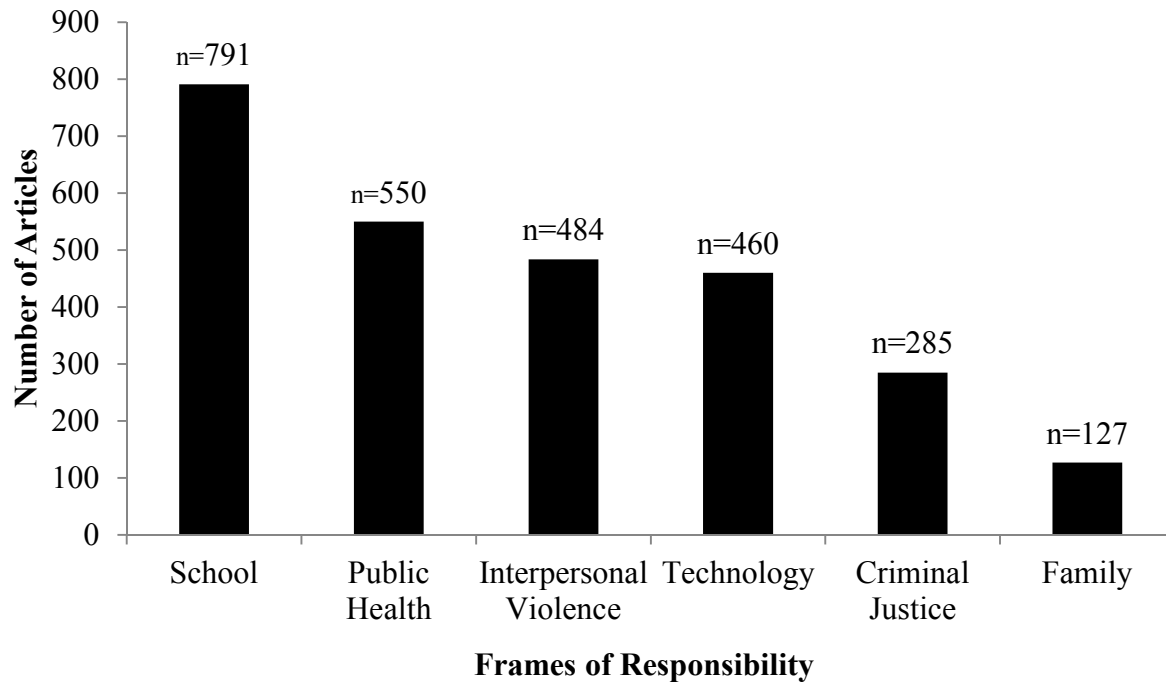
of the protocol is applied to the sample of 50 news articles and bullying causes, consequences, and responses, as well as interpretive scripts and claims-makers, are identified for each frame of responsibility. At this point, the protocol begins to take form and is nearly complete. Fourth, approximately 30% of the total articles (n=1883) are selected to make up the final sample. A stratified random sampling approach is used to collect a proportional amount of news coverage from each year. The total of articles of the full sample for each year are as follows; 2009 had 37, 2010 had 122, 2011 had 121, 2012 had 148, and 2013 had 137. The final sample includes a total of 565 news media articles (see Figure 3).

The fifth step in the ECA process is the application of the protocol to the final sample of bullying articles. The extent to which particular frames, themes, and scripts are found in news coverage of bullying is considered. It is expected that themes and interpretative scripts associated with each of the established frames of responsibility will emerge and be added to the protocol in the early stages of coding. The types of claims-makers in news articles, and the extent to which they promote particular frames and themes are also captured.

## **FINDINGS**

Several interesting findings emerged from the ECA regarding how news print media framed responsibility for adolescent and teen bullying. Across the six frames of responsibility, 55 different types of causal, consequence, and response themes were captured, while several interpretive scripts were identified to help us understand the varying dimensions of responsibility for bullying.

**Figure 4. Total Number of Articles by Frame of Responsibility (n=2,697)\***

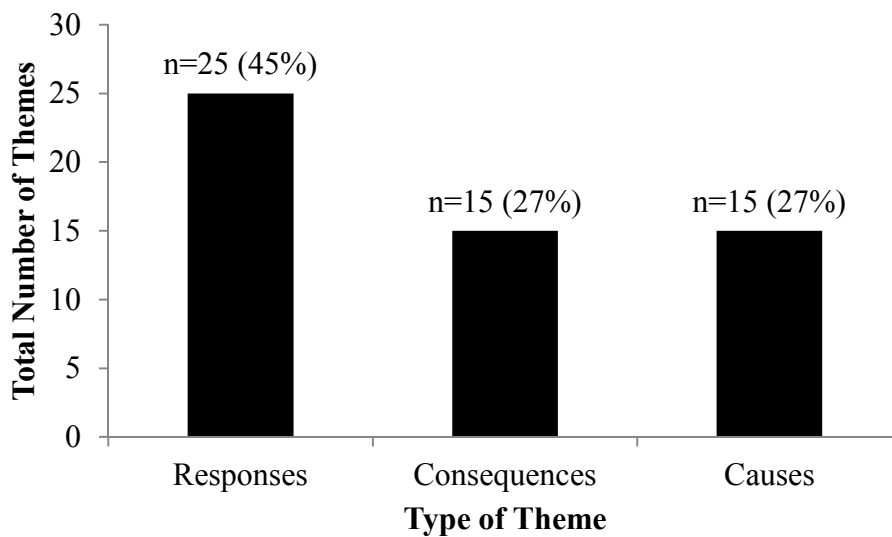


\* Totals may exceed number of articles in sample; an article may have multiple themes.

In Figure 4, the frames of responsibility are ranked by prevalence of themes found in the sample of bullying articles. It is clear that bullying was framed most prominently as a school problem. Interestingly, those closest to the bullying behaviors, including those victims and offenders immediately involved (i.e., interpersonal violence), were associated less with responsibility for bullying by news media than school officials and the general public (i.e., public health frame). Also notable, despite the increase in relevance of technology and public interest in cyberbullying, the technology frame of responsibility ranked fourth in overall frame prevalence. Importantly, responsibility for framing associated with the family was the least commonly evoked media frame overall. Indeed, the family, including parents of bullies, was held less responsible in news print media coverage of bullying than victims, the general public, and other key social institutions.

This study also found that the most prevalent type of theme was that of responses to bullying (see Figure 5). Out of the 55 themes overall, 25 (45%) address responses to bullying. Articles addressing responses often discussed the aftermaths of particular bullying incidents or set of bullying cases. In contrast, themes capturing the underlying causes and various consequences of bullying (e.g., suicide) were proportionately less common in news coverage.

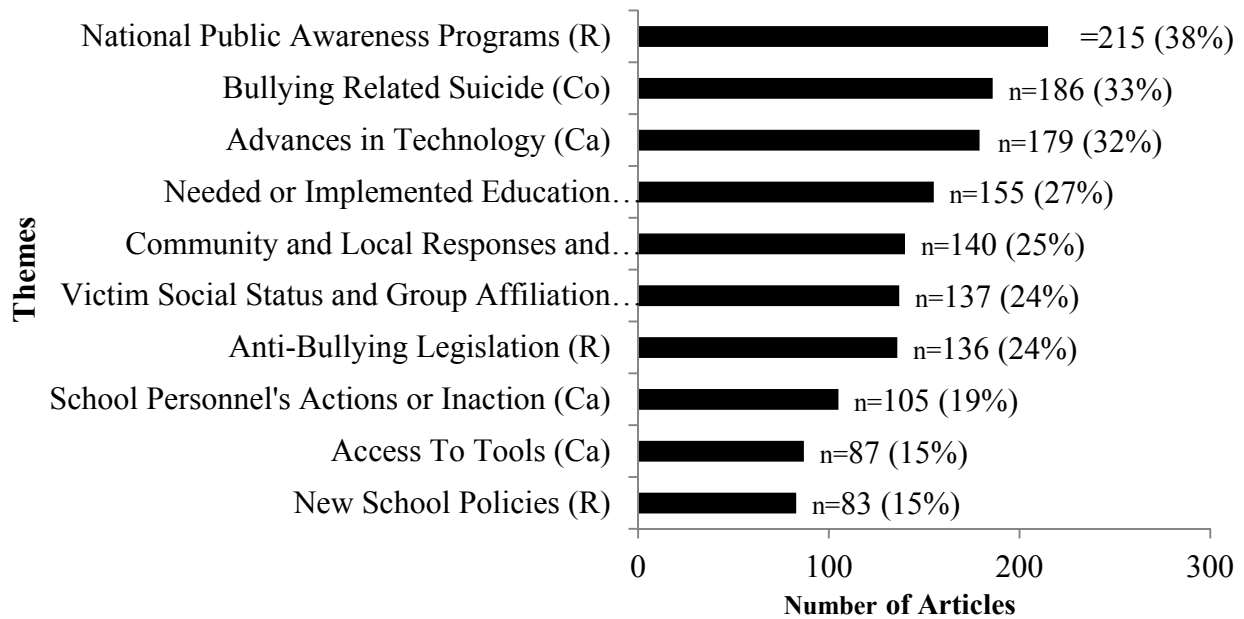
**Figure 5. The Prevalence of Theme Types (n=55)**



Another way to examine prevalent themes is to show the top ten most common themes identified in this study (see Figure 6). Five of the top 10 themes reflect responses to bullying. The most prevalent theme overall suggested that there was a shared responsibility for spreading awareness about bullying. This theme captures several different types of awareness programs aimed at countering adolescent and teen bullying. The second most prevalent theme highlights suicide as a serious consequence of bullying. Suicide cases have garnered substantial media attention, especially when they involve young teens and adolescents. The third most prevalent theme addresses issues of advancing technology as a cause of bullying. In particular, articles

address how the Internet has allowed bullies to target victims through social media websites, like *Facebook* and *Twitter*.

**Figure 6. Top Ten Most Prevalent Themes Overall\***



**R=** Response Theme **Co=** Consequence Theme **Ca=** Cause Theme

\*Totals may exceed the number of articles in the sample because an article may have multiple themes.

Several types of claims-makers were represented in bullying articles and associated with all six frames of responsibility. Table 1 lists which claim-makers emerged from most to least often across all articles and by frame of responsibility. The most prevalent claims-makers in news print coverage of bullying were school officials. School officials were most commonly relied upon as new sources for articles framing bullying as the responsibility of schools, but also a responsibility for bullying by the general public (public health frame) and those individuals personally involved in bullying (interpersonal violence frame). News articles that framed bullying as a public health problem were the most likely to include quotes from claims-makers, and included quotes from social activists, school officials, victims, parents of victims, students,

and governmental officials. One explanation for this is that those claims-makers seeking to define bullying as a shared public concern were the most likely to view media coverage as a conduit for social change. In effect, they were the most they likely to make themselves available to the press.

**Table 1. Number of Claims-Makers by Frame of Responsibility (n=853)\***

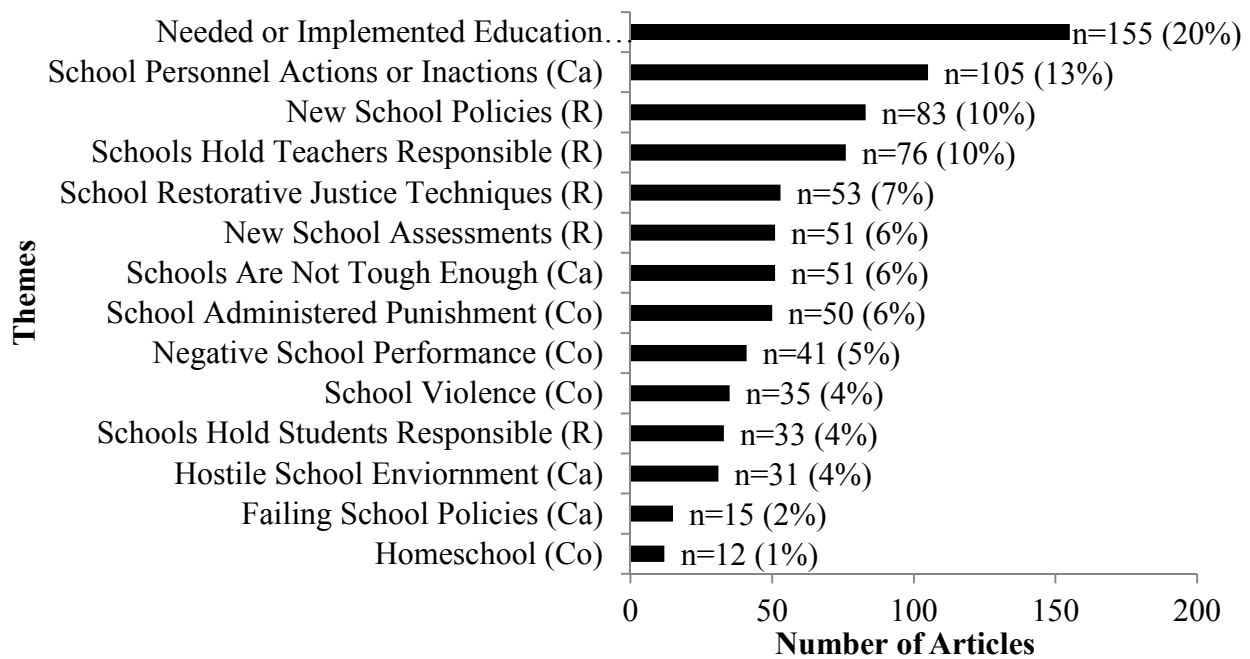
	<b>Total Claims- Makers</b>	<b>Public Health</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>Tech.</b>	<b>Inter. Violence</b>	<b>Criminal Justice Policy</b>	<b>Family</b>
<b>School Officials</b>	<b>199</b>	40	63	25	40	15	15
<b>Social Activists</b>	<b>146</b>	70	26	14	11	12	9
<b>Parents of Victims</b>	<b>99</b>	24	37	12	8	13	2
<b>Government Officials</b>	<b>84</b>	19	18	10	3	31	3
<b>Students</b>	<b>63</b>	27	14	6	13	3	--
<b>Victims</b>	<b>59</b>	28	15	5	7	1	3
<b>Lawyers</b>	<b>50</b>	7	13	13	4	13	--
<b>Academics</b>	<b>47</b>	7	9	12	9	4	3
<b>Law Enforcement</b>	<b>36</b>	3	11	10	2	10	--
<b>Mental Health Professionals</b>	<b>30</b>	11	6	3	6	--	3
<b>Celebrities</b>	<b>29</b>	16	4	4	4	1	--
<b>Medical Professionals</b>	<b>16</b>	2	1	3	6	1	3
<b>Parents of Bullies</b>	<b>7</b>	--	2	1	1	2	1
<b>Total Claims-makers by Frame</b>		<b>254</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>42</b>

\*There are more claims-makers than sampled articles because articles may include quotes from multiple claims-makers.

## School Responsibility for Bullying

In the next sections, the relative frequency of themes and news claims-makers associated with each of the six frames of responsibility are considered. The school frame, which places the onus of bullying on schools, was determined to be the most prevalent frame of responsibility in regard to the number of identified themes. Within the school frame, responsibility was focused primarily on responses to bullying, as opposed to causal and consequence themes. In fact, six of the fourteen different types of school-related themes that emerged during the coding of news articles mentioned responses to bullying (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7. Number of Articles by Theme Within the School Frame of Responsibility (n=791)\***



**R= Response Theme Co= Consequence Theme Ca= Cause Theme** \*Totals may exceed the number of articles in the sample because an article may have multiple themes.



The most prevalent theme in the school frame of responsibility addresses needed or previously implemented bullying educational programs, which was also the fourth most prevalent theme overall (see Figure 6). This educational theme included calls for additional bullying educational opportunities for students, school personnel, and students' families. Educational programs were discussed as ways to train students, teachers and faculty, and parents on how to recognize, approach, and react to bullying. News content associated with this theme not only called for educational responses to bullying, but also suggested that educational programs were needed to prevent future bullying from occurring. One particular educational program that was frequently discussed in news articles was the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program,<sup>4</sup> which refers to itself as the "world's foremost bullying prevention program." This program offers entire bullying prevention program curriculum that can be purchased by schools.

The second most prevalent theme within the school frame of responsibility condemned the actions (or inactions) of school personnel as one key cause of bullying. This theme squarely placed responsibility for bullying on schools employees. This causal theme suggested that adults within schools could actually facilitate bullying behaviors through negative actions or by failing to actively respond to the bullying episodes. Several observed scripts were used by newsmakers, such as "failed to address the situation," "neglected to take action," "no follow through," "school officials ignored repeated bullying," and "warning signs gone ignored," made it clear that it was what school employees were *not* doing that was the source of the problem. Other scripts that gave meaning and provided context to the actions of school personnel included, "teachers singling out students," "treating students differently," and "allowing bullying to occur in the classroom."

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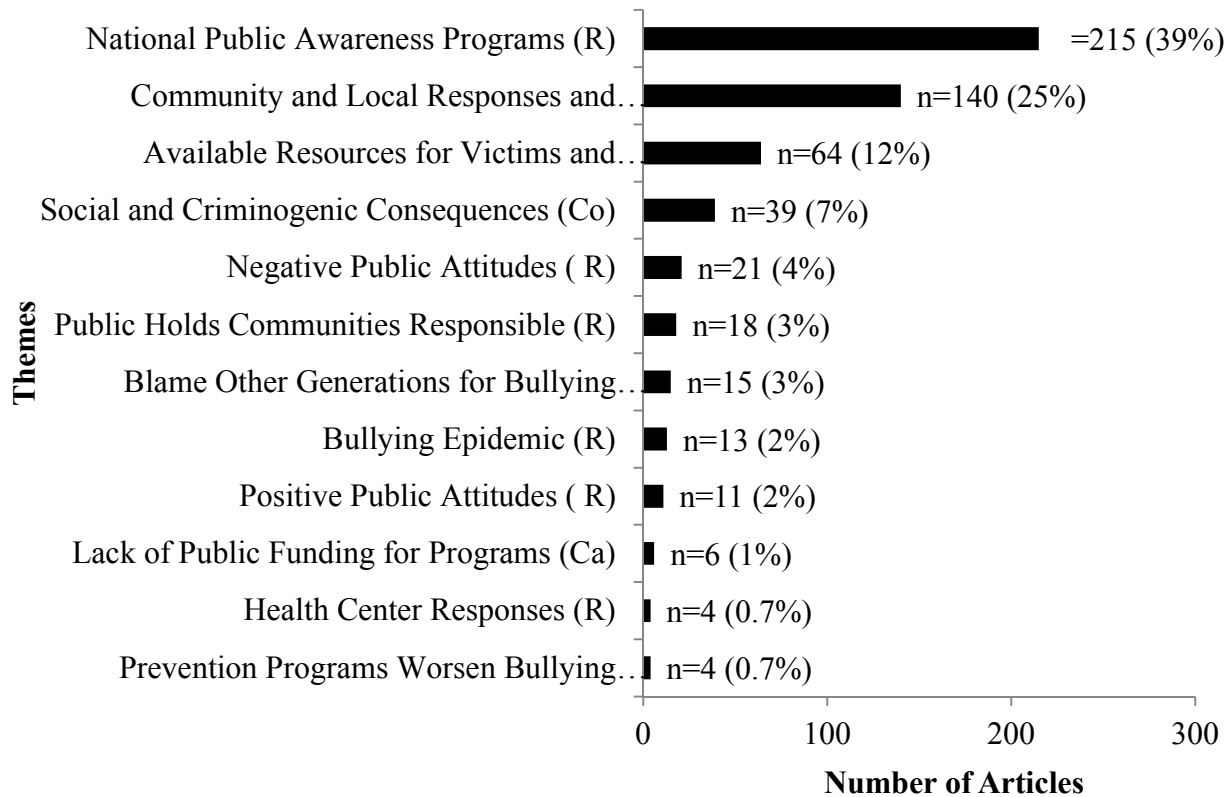
<sup>4</sup> Information about this bullying prevention program can be found at <http://www.violencepreventionworks.org/public/bullying.page>.

Finally, the third most prevalent theme within this frame called for new school policies as a response to bullying. Over 80 articles detailed various types of policies being considered or used in schools to respond to and prevent future bullying. New policies were designed to foster changes in school climates and to change the ways that schools dealt with bullying issues.

### **Public Responsibility for Bullying**

The public health frame places responsibility for bullying on the general public, portraying bullying as a national issue. As shown in Figure 8, the emphasis on responses to bullying over causes and consequence was also evident in articles associated with this frame. In fact, approximately two-thirds of all public health themes emerged as needed responses to bullying, such as broad awareness programs and public campaigns.

**Figure 8. Number of Articles by Theme Within the Public Health Frame of Responsibility (n=550)\***



**R**=Response Theme **Co**=Consequence Theme **Ca**=Cause Theme \*Totals may exceed the number of articles in the sample because an article may have multiple themes.

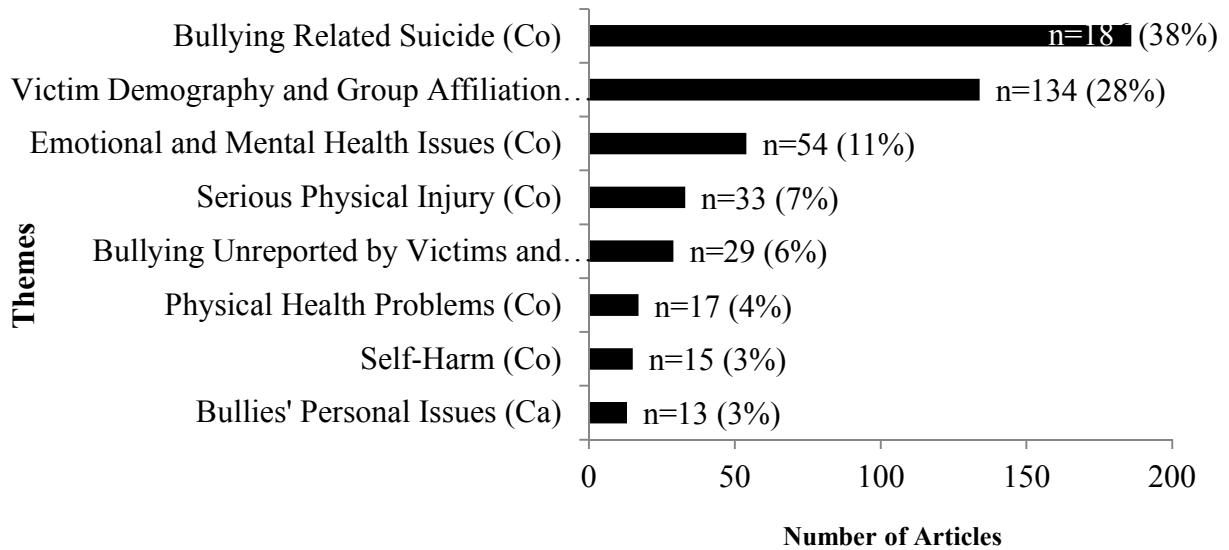
Spreading the message of anti-bullying practices occurred through media coverage of fundraising programs, lectures, and legislation summits were common. Several reoccurring scripts were used by reporters in news articles to indicate ways that bullying awareness could be advanced, including “outreach programs,” “anti-bullying programs or campaigns,” “presentations about bullying,” and “anti-bullying conferences.” Community-level (or local) responses to bullying was the second most prevalent theme within the public health frame of

responsibility, highlighting the need for specific community involvement in responses to bullying. The community efforts theme was denoted by phrases such as, “community forums,” “local educators and politicians discussing bullying,” “school and community partnerships,” “the town hall meetings,” “the (local) community center will hold an anti-bullying rally,” and “presentations for parents and the community.” The third most prevalent theme was the provision of available resources for victims of bullying and the parents of bullied adolescents and teens. The news print media articles provided information on available bullying literature, programs, and links to websites where parents and victims could go for assistance. While many different resources emerged, some appeared more frequently, including *stopbullynow.gov*, *wiredsafety.org*, *stopcyberbullying.org*, and *ikeepSAFE.org*.

### **Bullying as Interpersonal Violence**

The interpersonal violence frame is unique from all other frames, as it places culpability on adolescents and teens directly involved in bullying activities rather than on broader social forces or institutions. In contrast to thematic coverage of bullying as a social problem, themes emerged from episodic coverage placing responsibility for bullying squarely on victims and offenders. Packaging bullying as interpersonal violence often entails personal details of participants and the situational circumstances involved in particular bullying incidents.

**Figure 9. Number of Articles by Theme Within the Interpersonal Violence Frame of Responsibility (n=484)\***



**R**= Response Theme **Co**= Consequence Theme **Ca**= Cause Theme

\*Totals may exceed the number of articles in the sample because an article may have multiple themes.

The majority of interpersonal violence theme identified centered on the most severe of consequences for victims of bullying, adolescent and teen suicide. In fact bullying related suicide was found to be the second most prevalent theme overall, observed in 33% of the articles sampled. This theme was almost exclusively found in episodic news coverage of bullying cases resulting in adolescent and teen bullying-related suicide. Such cases grabbed the attention of news media, often resulting in celebrated national news coverage. Three widely published cases included bullying victims, Rebecca Sedwick (age 12), Ty Field (age 11), and Tyler Clementi (age 18). Explanatory and interpretive scripts bullying-related suicide included, “suicide of a student,” “suicide following months of harassment,” “bullycide,” and “attempted suicide.” The second most prominent theme is causal rather than consequential, and suggested those victim social minority statuses or identities were contributing factors to bullying incidents. Group

identity of victims was evoked in 24% of the sampled articles overall, while most causal themes suggested that victims were bullied primarily because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. Relevant scripts used to place blame on bullying victims included, “the student was targeted because he was gay” and “lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) youth suffer more.” Another prevalent interpersonal violence theme emphasized the emotional and mental health consequences of bullying for teens and adolescents. For example, some articles quotes psychologists on the increased rates of depression and loneliness associated with bullying. Supporting prior research on the newsworthiness of crime stories, this study found that the most violent and statistically rare consequences of bullying were discussed the most. On the other hand, common effects of bullying, like depression and self-harm of victims, was less newsworthy.

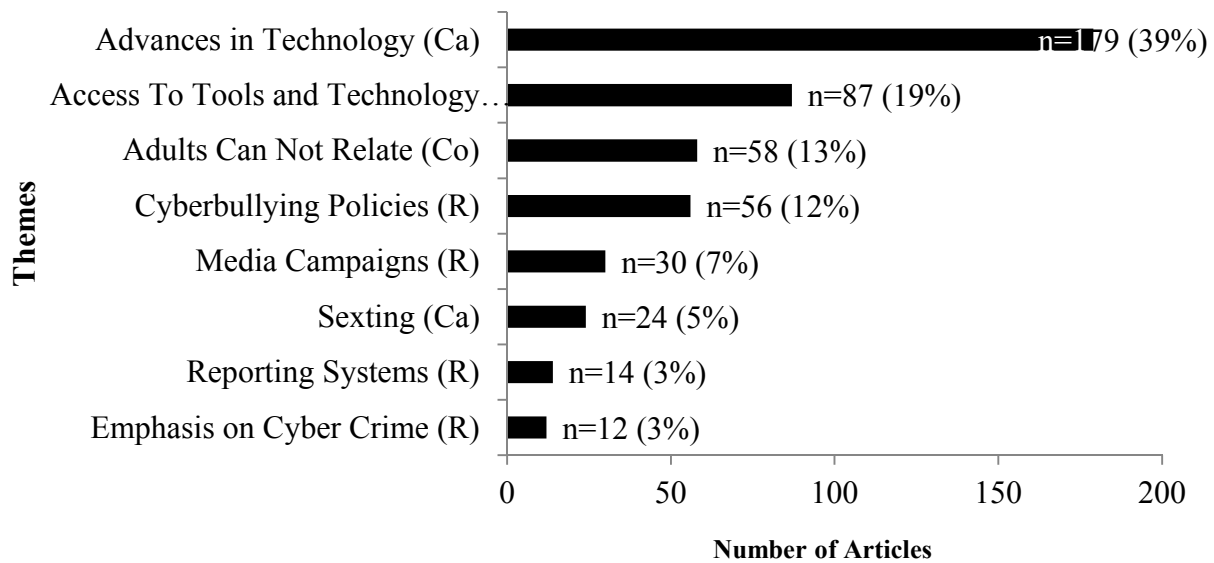
### **Technology and Bullying**

The effects of new technologies on bullying are not yet well understood by parents, schools, and other social institutions responsible for keeping adolescents and teens safe and accountable for their actions. Nevertheless, it is clear that 21<sup>st</sup> century media and communication technologies are changing the ways that bullying occurs. Several prominent themes emerged during the ECA emphasizing the causal role that technology now plays in adolescent and teen bullying.

As show in Figure 10, the most prominent of all technology themes centered on advances in technology that lead to bullying, specifically cyberbullying. This theme emerged in 39% of articles identified as having a technology frame and was the third most prevalent theme overall (see Figure 6). Advances in technology were contextualized using interpretive scripts that helped

readers understand the underlying nature of this “new” problem, including, being “harassed online,” “text messages and social networking,” “Internet and electronic means,” “social media sites,” and bullying taking “place on home computers outside of school.” Those claims-makers advancing the technology frame of responsibility were most often school officials.

**Figure 10. Number of Articles by Theme Within the Technology Frame of Responsibility (n=460)\***



**R=** Response Theme **Co=** Consequence Theme **Ca=** Cause Theme

\*Totals may exceed the number of articles in the sample because an article may have multiple themes.

In addition, this study found that the next prevalent theme was access to technological devices and other communication tools by adolescents and teens as a cause of bullying. In this way, bullying was largely blamed on access to computers, cell phones, and the Internet. Access to these tools provides ample opportunities for students to engage in bully behaviors. Several school officials, for instance, claimed that with technology bullying is moving from the school halls to more non-traditional forms and places. One principal quipped that, “Kids are in 24-hour-

a-day communication... And that makes things really perplexing for schools, because even though cyberbullying might not happen in the hallways, we end up dealing with the repercussions” (Worland, 2011, p. G1). Simple access to technology was not the only cause of bullying presented in articles addressing the culpability of technology in bullying. Some news articles placed blame on parents for failing to monitor and restrict adolescents’ and teens’ online activity. As indicated by the third most prominent technology theme, parents and other adults were also framed as being unable to relate to adolescents or teens today or to grasp new forms of bullying. Often emphasized were the disconnects between generations and how adults have trouble relating to young people about forms of non-traditional bullying. The generation gap, as it relates to bullying, was expressed with scripts that included, “back in the day” kids could “go home and be safe,” but today it is a “constant battle.” One source was quoted as saying that, “It’s tough being a kid today...[t]imes have changed,” and phones have become “a popular... tool for bullies to spread vicious gossip, rumors and threatening messages” (Todd, 2012, p. B1).

Although most claims addressed the negative effects of technology on bullying, some actually framed media and social communication technologies as tools for educating students, raising awareness, and reporting bullying and cyberbullying. For example, one program discussed in news media coverage was *SchoolTipline*, a program that involved forwarding students’ text messages and emails to anonymously report bullying to school administrators.

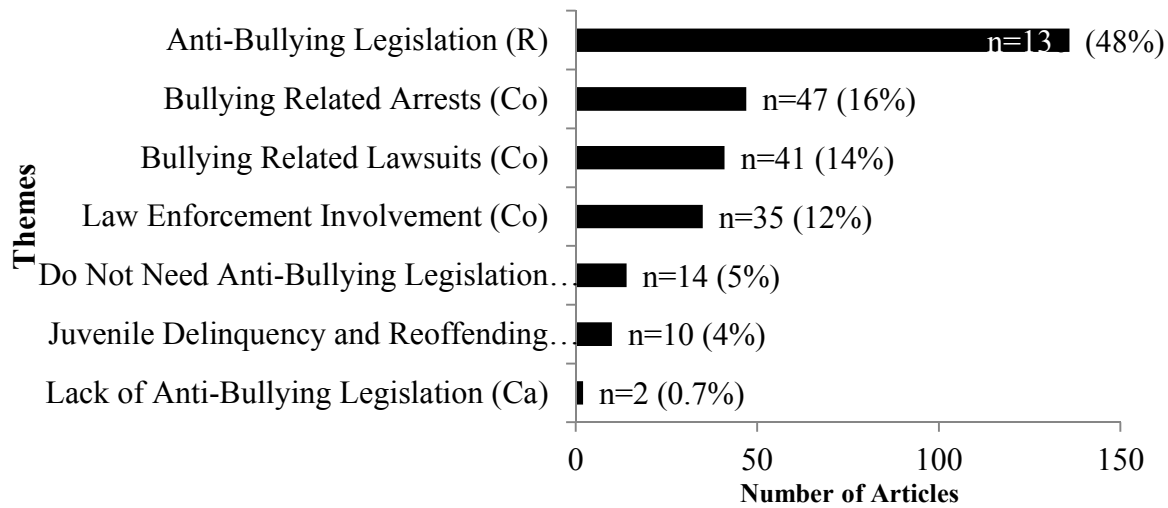
### **Criminal Justice Policy and Bullying**

Recent celebrated news media coverage of high profile bullying cases has in some instances required the criminal justice system to formally respond to bullying. While some news articles addressed the responsibility of the criminal justice system specifically, more often articles addressed the need for new or changed laws more generally. Indeed, nearly half (48%) of



the news articles in the criminal justice policy frame and nearly a quarter of all articles (24%) focused on the need for new bullying-related legislation. While several legislated changes were discussed in the news articles, the most prominent type of legislation mentioned was the requirement of schools to “get tough” on bullying and develop specific anti-bullying policies to address bullying as a crime, and not simply a disciplinary issue to be handled by school staff. Re-occurring scripts in the legislation theme included those seeking to further criminalize bullying behaviors, including “new state laws,” “anti-bullying bills,” “misdemeanor crimes of bullying,” and “needs for stronger laws.” In contrast, approximately 5% of themes within the criminal justice policy frame suggest that there is no need for new or revised bullying laws, and that it is not the responsibility government officials and the criminal justice system to get involved in such matters. Opposition to new laws was largely based on the inclusion of sexual orientation in new anti-bullying legislation. For example, government official claims-makers supporting this theme argued that specifically protecting LGBT students with new laws and introducing educational materials on sexual orientation for students was part of a broader “gay agenda.”

**Figure 11. Number of Articles by Theme Within the Criminal Justice Policy Frame of Responsibility (n=285)\***



**R=** Response Theme **Co=** Consequence Theme **Ca=** Cause Theme

\*Totals may exceed the number of articles in the sample because an article may have multiple themes.

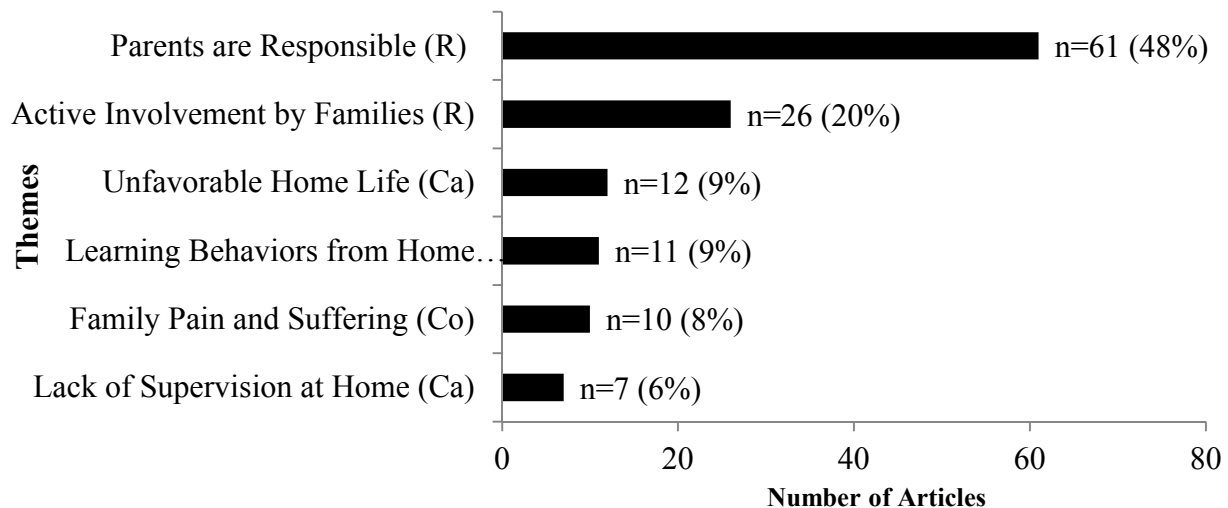
The second most prevalent criminal justice theme related to bullying-related arrests.

When bullying involves breaking the law, adolescents and teens could potentially be held legally responsible. Interestingly, articles tended to focus more on the police and their actions than the bullies. The arrest scripts overall were straightforward. For instance, one school assistant superintendent addressed the criminal justice aspect by saying, “We need to teach them they can go to jail” (Ackerman, 2010, p. 1). The third most prevalent criminal justice policy theme focused on civil lawsuits as a consequence of bullying. To a large extent, articles discussed legal actions by parents or families of victims who were suing the school or school district for failing to protect their child or to respond appropriately to bullying incidents.

## Bullying and the Family

When adolescents and teens are not at school, they are usually at home. For some adolescents and teens, the home can become a refuge from school bullying. The most prominent theme emerging from news articles framing bullying as family problem maintained that parents were responsible for the actions of their child, even when at school. This not only placed the responsibility for the causes of bullying on parents, but parent were also held responsible for the consequences and responses to bullying. This was especially true for cyberbullying, as this form of bullying most often occurred at home where parents were expected to monitor their children's online activity.

**Figure 12. Number of Articles by Theme Within the Family Frame of Responsibility (n=127)\***



**R= Response Theme Co= Cosequence Theme Ca= Cause Theme**

\*Totals may exceed the number of articles in the sample because an article may have multiple themes.

The most prominent claims-makers associated with the family responsibility frame were school officials, who often claimed that unless they received assistance from parents to stop bullying many of their efforts at school would be in vain. One school official explained, “Schools only have partial responsibility for handling cyber-bullying situations. Parents carry more weight of the issue because they know their child better than a school administrator, who deals with hundreds of students” (Rizer, 2011, p. B1). Another prominent response theme emphasized the active involvement of family members affected by bullying. When bullying, or the consequences of bullying, affected families, parents sometimes made it a personal mission to stop bullying through participation with anti-bullying campaigns and lobbying efforts. An example of active involvement by families included the father of 11-year-old Ty Field, who committed suicide after being suspended from school for retaliating against his bullies. Ty’s father has since used his son’s story to help change the bullying laws in Oklahoma. The third most prevalent theme emphasized the causal role of unfavorable home life conditions. This theme explained how the negative influences of homes may negatively influence students’ behaviors at school. Bullies’ homes were often described as “broken.” One article directly addressed the responsibilities for bullying on parents by reporting that, “[b]ullies... tend to come from homes where the parents either aren’t involved, are overly permissive parents or parents with harsh physical discipline” (Thompson, 2011, para. 11).

## **DISCUSSION**

Several important findings have emerged from the current study, resulting in new insights into how responsibility for bullying has been framed by news print media. In this final section, three key findings and their implications for understanding bullying as a socially constructed problem are highlighted. The first key finding emphasizes how *responses* to adolescent and teen

bullying were more common than either the *causes* or *consequences* of bullying. The second key finding centers on the important differences in frames that attribute responsibility for bullying to schools, families, and individuals. While both schools and families remain socially proximal to the problem of bullying, schools were framed as disproportionately responsible for bullying in news media coverage. Third, how responsibility for bullying was primarily allocated to victims, rather than bullies and other social institutions is addressed. The ways in which some topics related to victimization, like suicide, are considered newsworthy, while cultural stereotypes fueling bullying against particular social minority groups and important mental health issues are virtually ignored, are also discussed.

This study found that responses to bullying was the most common theme type overall, and was the foci of prominent school and public health frames of responsibility. Competing voices battled to give attention to bullying awareness campaigns, educational programs, and to bring attention to the seriousness of bullying. These messages were offered most often by two groups of claims-makers deemed as authorities on bullying, school officials and social activists. While school officials generally “owned” the problem of responding to bullying, social activists were a dominant voice calling for increased public awareness. The primary message sent by news media was that bullying was now a serious social problem in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requiring a serious response. In contrast, causes and consequences of bullying were given much less attention.

This study also found that bullying was generally considered a “school problem” in news media coverage. Indeed, schools were framed as primarily responsible for the responses, causes, as well as the consequences of adolescent and teen bullying. At the same time, families, and specifically parents, were framed as those least responsible by news media. During the few times

that families were framed as responsible, the focus was usually on the need for parents to respond to specific bullying episodes. While school claims-makers placed the onus of bullying on the schools, so did parents who believed that schools were responsible for the safety of their children. In this way, it appeared that families failed to accept responsibility for bullying in news media coverage; instead, the media chose to shift the blame onto schools. When the responsibility of families was evoked, it was usually in the context of school officials suggesting that parents could assist them in responding to bullying. In fact, school-related news sources were the claims-makers most likely to place responsibility on the family (see Table 1). With considerable access to news media, school officials have been granted substantial power to define bullying as a social problem, while the influence of parents and other family members to do so has been marginalized. Since both families and schools have considerable contact with adolescents and teens involved in bullying, the stark contrast between the framing of bullying as a school versus family responsibility raises several questions. Schools may be where traditional forms of bullying occur most frequently, but personal computers used at home are becoming another common setting where bullying occurs. So why are news media reluctant to frame bullying as a problem for the family? One explanation is that blaming families has the possibility of countering the organizational goals of news media agencies, such as making a profit off of the sale of newspapers. That is, assigning responsibility to schools rather than families is less likely to alienate media consumers. Second, school officials may be viewed as more credible than family members, especially families who have been personally affected by bullying. Teachers, principals, and other school staff members are generally respected and trusted by the public. Therefore, schools may be framed as largely responsible for bullying in part because school officials make good news sources. Finally, a third explanation is that school claims-makers are

more accessible than families affected by bullying, making them much more convenient news sources for reporters. Reporters must meet daily deadlines to fill news space. Identifying family members to interview for news stories requires time that news reporters may not have to spend on a single story.

When responsibility for bullying was placed on individuals, rather than the general public or specific social institutions, the focus was primarily on the serious consequences for victims. On the other hand, the responsibility of those engaging in bullying was rarely discussed and there was very little attention paid to the causal factors leading adolescents and teens to engage in this form of behavior. In this way, bullying was portrayed differently than other types of juvenile delinquency, which is more likely to be framed in terms of individual failings. Instead of focusing on the responsibility of bullies for their actions, or changing the behaviors of bullies, the most common response theme within the interpersonal frame of responsibility focused on the need to teach victims to speak up. The message being sent was that better reporting by victims can lead to more effective responses to bullying by parents and school officials. In fact, school officials were the most prominent claims-makers supporting this message. In one article, for example, a superintendent suggested that, “Sometimes it’s very difficult to get kids to share with us what’s going on until it erupts. We work really, really hard to communicate with parents and students. If we don’t know about it, we can’t do anything about” (Barber, 2013, “The School’s Response”, para. 21). This type of message effectively placed the responsibility of bullying on victims instead of juvenile offenders.

Suicide, like other serious violent crimes, is a newsworthy topic. Adolescent and teen victims make “worthy” victims that are likely to receive substantial news attention.

Bullying-related suicide stories are “human interest stories” that are written in ways to elicit emotional responses from audiences. This study found that news stories on bullying went into great detail about the suffering of victims like Rebecca Sedwick (age 12), Ty Field (age 11), and Tyler Clementi (age 18), and how they coped with being bullied prior to their deaths. In contrast, details of the bullies were rarely included, and articles failed to comment on the underlying reasons of bullies’ deviant and criminal behaviors. Instead, the focus of news media stories was on the tragic victimization of children who should have spoken up before it was too late. While news articles about victim suicide were common, curiously few articles addressed other important related social issues. For example, there was very little attention paid to more common mental, emotional, and physical consequences of bullying as either causes or consequences of bullying. In addition, though many articles alluded to bullying victims’ sexual orientation or gender identity as contributing factors to their victimization, the causal roles that cultural stereotypes and bigotry played in bullying went unaddressed. Consequently, the message being sent by media was that victims’ social identities and memberships in social minority groups were the reason that they were being bullied.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

As this study was an exploratory study of bullying frames of responsibility in news print media, there are still many questions on this topic to be explored. For example, this study only analyzed a single type of media in news print media. With new technologies being developed every day, the news media landscape is quickly evolving. Unfortunately, this study was unable to make comparisons in the framing of bullying across media types. This study also sampled news print articles from 2009 to 2013. Nonetheless, bullying was a problem before 2009. Without sampling bullying articles from previous years and different media types, there is no way to



know how the patterns found in the bullying articles compare to previous time periods and media.

This research lends itself to several future research studies in regards to how bullying is framed in news media. For example, a useful avenue for future research is studying how news print media frames of responsibility influence public opinion on bullying. This study was able to track and analyze what was being consumed by the public about bullying, but it was not able to capture how coverage affected the public and their ideas about responsibility for bullying. Also widening the research to more types of news media, entertainment media, and social media could illuminate how bullying is being framed across multiple media platforms. Future researchers may also wish to compare media framing of responsibility for bullying to media framing of other forms of juvenile delinquency and youth related social problems. Are other forms of youthful deviant behavior framed as primarily school problems? Lastly, technology is being blamed for the changes in types, forms, and settings of bullying. However, it is not clear who should be held responsible for controlling how technology impacts our youth. Should new media technology companies be charged with protecting our children from bullying or does responsibility lie with families and schools? Can new technologies be engineered in ways to combat bullying? As there is still so much we do not know about bullying in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these and other questions can serve as the foundation for future research on the intersections of media and adolescent and teen bullying.

## **Conclusion**

The current study content analyzed news mediated messages regarding responsibility for adolescent and teen bullying. In general, bullying was framed as the responsibility of schools as

opposed to families or the bullies themselves, and responding to bullying was deemed much more important by news media than addressing its causes or consequences. It is also clear that school officials and social activists to a lesser extent, emerged as the clear authorities on the bullying problem. In order to advance a more balanced conversation about who is responsible for bullying it will be necessary for news media to also explore the responsibility of bullies for their own actions, as well as the responsibility of social institutions for stopping this type of serious behavior. Doing so will also require alternate news sources (e.g., academics) to be introduced into media's bullying discourse such that the causes and consequences of bullying can also be emphasized across varying frames of responsibility.

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### Appendix 1. Prevalence of Themes

Themes	Frame of Responsibility	Type of Theme	# of Articles	% of Articles Overall
National Public Awareness Programs	Public Health	Response	215	38%
Bullying-Related Suicide	Interpersonal Violence	Consequence	186	33%
Advances in Technology	Technology	Cause	179	32%
Needed or Implemented Education Programs	School	Response	155	27%
Community and Local Responses and Efforts	Public Health	Response	140	25%
Victim Demography and Group Affiliation	Interpersonal Violence	Cause	137	24%
Anti-Bullying Legislation	Criminal Justice Policy	Response	136	24%
School Personnel's Actions or Inaction	School	Cause	105	19%
Access To Tools and Technology	Technology	Cause	87	15%
New School Policies	School	Response	83	15%
Schools Hold Teachers Responsible	School	Response	76	13%
Available Resources for Victims and Parents	Public Health	Response	64	11%
Parents are Responsible	Family	Response	61	11%
Adults Cannot Relate	Technology	Consequence	58	10%
Cyberbullying Policies	Technology	Response	56	10%
Emotional Mental Health Issues	Interpersonal Violence	Consequence	54	10%
School Restorative Justice Techniques	School	Response	53	9%
New School Assessments	School	Response	51	9%
Schools Are Not Tough Enough	School	Cause	51	9%
School Administered Punishment	School	Consequence	50	9%
Bullying Related Arrests	Criminal Justice Policy	Consequence	47	8%
Negative School Performance	School	Consequence	41	7%

Bullying Related Lawsuits	Criminal Justice Policy	Response	41	7%
Social and Criminogenic Consequences	Public Health	Consequence	39	7%
School Violence	School	Consequence	35	6%
Law Enforcement Involvement	Criminal Justice Policy	Consequence	35	6%
Schools Hold Students Responsible	School	Response	33	6%
Serious Physical Injury	Interpersonal Violence	Consequence	33	6%
Hostile School Environment	School	Cause	31	5%
Media Campaigns	Technology	Response	30	5%
Bullying Goes Unreported by Victims and Bystanders	Interpersonal Violence	Response	29	5%
Active Involvement by Families	Family	Response	26	5%
Sexting	Technology	Cause	24	4%
Negative Public Attitudes	Public Health	Response	21	4%
Public Holds Communities Responsible	Public Health	Response	18	3%
Physical Health Issues	Interpersonal Violence	Consequence	17	3%
Failing School Policies	School	Cause	15	3%
Blame Other Generations for Bullying Culture	Public Health	Response	15	3%
Self-Harm	Interpersonal Violence	Consequence	15	3%
Do Not Need Anti-Bullying Legislation	Criminal Justice Policy	Response	14	2%
Reporting Systems	Technology	Response	14	2%
Bullying Epidemic	Public Health	Response	13	2%
Bullies' Personal Issues	Interpersonal Violence	Cause	13	2%
Homeschool	School	Consequence	12	2%
Emphasis on Cyber Crime	Technology	Response	12	2%
Unfavorable Home life	Family	Cause	12	2%
Learning Behaviors from Home	Family	Cause	11	2%
Positive Public Attitudes	Public Health	Response	11	2%
Juvenile Delinquency and Reoffending	Criminal Justice Policy	Consequence	10	2%
Family Pain and Suffering	Family	Consequence	10	2%
Lack of Supervision at Home	Family	Cause	7	1%

Lack of Public Funding for Anti-Bullying Programs	Public Health	Cause	6	1%
Health Centers Responses	Public Health	Response	4	0.7%
Prevention Programs Worsen Bullying Problem	Public Health	Cause	4	0.7%
Lack of Anti-Bullying Legislation	Criminal Justice Policy	Cause	2	0.3%

## Appendix 2. Prevalence of Themes Within Frames of Responsibility

Frame of Responsibility	Type of Theme	Themes	# of Articles	% of Articles Within Frame
School	Response	Needed or Implemented Education Programs	155	20%
School	Cause	School Personnel's Actions or Inaction	105	13%
School	Response	New School Policies	83	10%
School	Response	Schools Hold Teachers Responsible	76	10%
School	Response	School Restorative Justice Techniques	53	7%
School	Response	New School Assessments	51	6%
School	Cause	Schools Are Not Tough Enough	51	6%
School	Consequence	School Administered Punishment	50	6%
School	Consequence	Negative School Performance	41	5%
School	Consequence	School Violence	35	4%
School	Response	Schools Hold Student Responsible	33	4%
School	Cause	Hostile School Environment	31	4%
School	Cause	Failing School Policies	15	2%
School	Consequence	Homeschool	12	1%
Public Health	Response	National Public Awareness Programs	215	39%
Public Health	Response	Community and Local Response and Efforts	140	25%

<b>Public Health</b>	Response	Available Resources for Victims and Parents	64	12%
<b>Public Health</b>	Consequence	Social and Criminogenic Consequences	39	7%
<b>Public Health</b>	Response	Negative Public Attitudes	21	4%
<b>Public Health</b>	Response	Public Holds Communities Responsible	18	3%
<b>Public Health</b>	Response	Blame Other Generations for Bullying Culture	15	3%
<b>Public Health</b>	Response	Bullying Epidemic	13	2%
<b>Public Health</b>	Response	Positive Public Attitudes	11	2%
<b>Public Health</b>	Cause	Lack of Funding for Anti-Bullying Programs	6	1%
<b>Public Health</b>	Response	Health Center Responses	4	0.7%
<b>Public Health</b>	Cause	Prevention Programs Worsen Bullying Problem	4	0.7%
<b>Interpersonal Violence</b>	Consequence	Bullying Related Suicide	186	38%
<b>Interpersonal Violence</b>	Cause	Victim Demography and Group Affiliation	134	28%
<b>Interpersonal Violence</b>	Consequence	Emotional and Mental Health Issues	54	11%
<b>Interpersonal Violence</b>	Consequence	Serious Physical Injury	33	7%
<b>Interpersonal Violence</b>	Response	Bullying Goes Unreported by Victims and Bystanders	29	6%
<b>Interpersonal Violence</b>	Consequence	Physical Health Problem	17	4%
<b>Interpersonal Violence</b>	Consequence	Self-Harm	15	3%
<b>Interpersonal Violence</b>	Cause	Bullies' Personal Issues	13	3%
<b>Technology</b>	Consequence	Advances in Technology	179	39%
<b>Technology</b>	Cause	Access To Tools and Technology	87	19%
<b>Technology</b>	Consequence	Adults Can Not Relate	58	13%
<b>Technology</b>	Response	Cyberbullying Policies	56	12%
<b>Technology</b>	Response	Media Campaigns	30	7%
<b>Technology</b>	Cause	Sexting	24	5%
<b>Technology</b>	Response	Reporting Systems	14	3%
<b>Technology</b>	Response	Emphasis on Cyber Crime	12	3%
<b>Criminal Justice Policy</b>	Response	Anti-Bullying Legislation	136	48%

<b>Criminal Justice Policy</b>	Consequence	Bullying Related Arrest	47	16%
<b>Criminal Justice Policy</b>	Response	Bullying Related Lawsuits	41	14%
<b>Criminal Justice Policy</b>	Consequence	Law Enforcement Involvement	35	12%
<b>Criminal Justice Policy</b>	Response	Do Not Need Anti- Bullying Legislation	14	5%
<b>Criminal Justice Policy</b>	Consequence	Juvenile Delinquency and Reoffending	10	4%
<b>Criminal Justice Policy</b>	Cause	Lack of Anti-Bullying Legislation	2	0.7%
<b>Family</b>	Response	Parents are Responsible	61	48%
<b>Family</b>	Response	Active Involvement by Families	26	20%
<b>Family</b>	Cause	Unfavorable Home Life	12	9%
<b>Family</b>	Cause	Learning Behaviors from Home	11	9%
<b>Family</b>	Consequence	Family Pain and Suffering	10	8%
<b>Family</b>	Cause	Lack of Supervision at Home	7	6%

### Appendix 3. Prevalence of Themes by Type of Theme

Themes Type	# of Articles	% of Articles Within Theme Type
<b>RESPONSES TO BULLYING</b>		
<b>National Public Awareness Programs Needed or Implemented Education Programs</b>	215	15.68%
<b>Community and Local Responses and Efforts</b>	140	10.21%
<b>Anti-Bullying Legislation</b>	136	9.91%
<b>New School Policies</b>	83	6.05%
<b>Schools Hold Teachers Responsible</b>	76	5.54%
<b>Available Resources for Victims and Parents</b>	64	4.66%



<b>Parents are Responsible</b>	61	4.44%
<b>Cyberbullying Policies</b>	56	4.08%
<b>School Restorative Justice Techniques</b>	53	3.86%
<b>New School Assessments</b>	51	3.71%
<b>Bullying Related Lawsuits</b>	41	2.99%
<b>Schools Hold Students Responsible</b>	33	2.40%
<b>Media Campaigns</b>	30	2.18%
<b>Bullying Goes Unreported by Victims and Bystanders</b>	29	2.11%
<b>Active Involvement by Families</b>	26	1.89%
<b>Negative Public Attitudes</b>	21	1.53%
<b>Public Holds Communities Responsible</b>	18	1.31%
<b>Blame Other Generations for Bullying Culture</b>	15	1.09%
<b>Do Not Need Anti-Bullying Legislation</b>	14	1.02%
<b>Reporting Systems</b>	14	1.02%
<b>Bullying Epidemic</b>	13	0.94%
<b>Emphasis on Cyber Crime</b>	12	0.87%
<b>Positive Public Attitudes</b>	11	0.80%
<b>Health Center Responses</b>	4	0.29%
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>	1371	

### CONSEQUENCES OF BULLYING

<b>Bullying Related Suicide</b>	186	28.97%
<b>Adults Can Not Relate</b>	58	9.03%
<b>Emotional and Mental Health Issues</b>	54	8.41%
<b>School Administered Punishment</b>	50	7.78%
<b>Bullying Related Arrest</b>	47	7.32%
<b>Negative School Performance</b>	41	6.38%
<b>Social and Criminogenic Consequences</b>	39	6.07%
<b>Law Enforcement Involvement</b>	35	5.45%
<b>School Violence</b>	35	5.45%
<b>Serious Physical Injury</b>	33	5.14%
<b>Physical Health Issues</b>	17	2.64%
<b>Self-Harm</b>	15	2.33%
<b>Homeschool</b>	12	1.86%
<b>Juvenile Delinquency and Reoffending</b>	10	1.55%
<b>Family Pain and Suffering</b>	10	1.55%
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>	642	

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**CAUSES OF BULLYING**

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<b>Advances in Technology</b>	179	26.28%
<b>Victim Demography and Group Affiliation</b>	134	19.67%
<b>School Personnel's Actions or Inaction</b>	105	15.41%
<b>Access To Tools and Technology</b>	87	12.77%
<b>Schools Are Not Tough Enough</b>	51	7.48%
<b>Hostile School Environment</b>	31	4.55%
<b>Sexting</b>	24	3.52%
<b>Failing School Policies</b>	15	2.20%
<b>Bullies' Personal Issues</b>	13	1.90%
<b>Unfavorable Home Life</b>	12	1.76%
<b>Learning Behaviors from Home</b>	11	1.61%
<b>Lack of Supervision at Home</b>	7	1.02%
<b>Lack of Public Funding for Anti-Bullying Programs</b>	6	0.88%
<b>Prevention Programs Worsen Bullying Problem</b>	4	0.58%
<b>Lack of Anti-Bullying Legislation</b>	2	0.29%
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>	681	

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