

**Deciphering Rampage:
Assigning Blame to Youth Offenders in News Coverage of School Shootings¹**

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¹ The authors acknowledge Joanne Belknap, Karen Cerulo, Del Elliott, Gary T. Marx, Tom Mayer, and Doug Porpora for their comments. Dawn Carr and Anne Johnston provided research assistance.

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Deciphering Rampage:

A Study of Sequencing in News Coverage of School Shootings

Abstract: It is often difficult to assign blame to youthful violent offenders, and journalists may be uncertain how to determine the moral culpability of performers of horrific crimes such as school shootings. In order to examine journalists' assignment of moral responsibility for school shooting events, this article examines the sequencing dynamic present in article lead sections from 112 *New York Times* articles about nine rampage school shootings occurring in the U.S. between 1997 and 2001. Analysis revealed that journalists initially tended to select sequences that more clearly assigned blame. Over time journalists tended to rely on contexts which highlighted the contextual elements, rhetorically reducing the moral responsibility of the perpetrators. School shootings may ultimately be remembered as horrible events, but the contexts of the events will tend to mitigate the shooters' moral culpability.