

## 4.2: The Myth of Moral Panics

**Moral panic** has been defined as a situation in which public fears and state interventions greatly exceed the objective threat posed to society by a particular individual or group who is/are claimed to be responsible for creating the threat in the first place. <sup>[1]</sup>

Moral panics arise when distorted mass media campaigns create fear and reinforce previously held or stereotyped beliefs, frequently centered around ethnicity, religion, or social class. Often, moral panics occur swiftly, focusing attention on the behavior and then fluctuating concern over time. The most problematic aspect of the moral panic is that the hysteria often results in a need to “do something” about the issue and most commonly “results in the passing of legislation that is highly punitive, unnecessary, and serves to justify the agendas of those in positions of power and authority.” Moral panics focus attention on what we should fear and who we should blame for that fear. Instigators of moral panics frequently misinterpret data for their own agenda. Cohen (1972) said at least five sets of social actors are involved in a moral panic. These include 1) folk devils, 2) rule or law enforcers, 3) the media, 4) politicians, and 5) the public. <sup>[2]</sup>

### Moral Panics, Sex Offender Registration, and Youth

In her article, “There Are Too Many Kids on the Sex Offender Registry,” Lenore Skensazy discusses the unpopular view that perhaps sex offender registration is more harmful than helpful. The purpose of sex offender registries is to prevent one of the worst of the worst crimes: sexual assault. However, Roger Lancaster, author of “Sex Panic and the Punitive State” suggests that “Only a tiny fraction of sex crimes against children are committed by people who are on the registry.” About 5 percent of people on the list go on to commit another crime, a far lower recidivism rate than almost any other class of criminals, including drug dealers, arsonists, and muggers (Skenazy, 2018, para 4).

“Available research indicates that sex offenders, and particularly people who commit sex offenses as children, are among the least likely to re-offend,” Human Rights Watch has found. Furthermore, the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that the “single age with the greatest number of offenders from the perspective of law enforcement was age 14.” This means that 14-year-olds, more than any other age, are being placed on a lifetime registry.

Sometimes this results from minors engaging in consensual sexual encounters simply because they are underage and cannot legally consent. And in some states, sexual contact is not required to end up on the registry. In some instances, sexting under the age of 18 is a felony and can earn someone a place on the registry. Until recently, Missouri offenders were grouped together in one category regardless of the offense so individuals who urinated in public endured lifelong registration and were categorized with the worst of the rapists and molesters. There was no distinction or tier structure.

Is lifelong registration appropriate punishment or is it being strictly punitive? Most offenders serve their time in prison and therefore serve their debt to society. This is not the case with life long sex offender registrants who can’t live near a school, park, or playground and must report to authorities anytime they get a new job, a new place to live, or even a new hairstyle. They can never fully re-enter society and are seen as never being able to be rehabilitated.

All these requirements are based on the “flawed but pervasive idea that those convicted of sex offenses became incurable and predatory monsters requiring—and deserving—lifetime punishment,” writes Emily Horowitz, a professor of sociology at St. Francis College and author of two books on this subject.

What would happen if the registry were to disappear? All other criminal laws would remain in place, including increased penalties for repeat offenses. Only the list, and the dehumanization it wreaks would be gone.

“If my child was victimized, I’d want to kill a person,” Horowitz says. “But what if my child was a victimizer? I’d also want them to have a chance” (Skenazy, 2018, para 15).

Read more at: <https://reason.com/archives/2018/04/09/there-are-too-many-kids-on-the>



Frame	Cause	Policy
Faulty system	Crime stems from criminal justice leniency and inefficiency.	The criminal justice system needs to get tough on crime
Blocked opportunities	Crime stems from poverty and inequality	The government must address the “root causes” of crime by creating jobs and reducing poverty.
Social breakdown	Crime stems from family and community breakdown	Citizens should band together to recreate traditional communities.
Racist system	The criminal justice system operates in a racist fashion	African Americans should band together to demand justice
Violent media	Crime stems from violence in the mass media	The government should regulate violent imagery in the media
Narrative	Costume	Characteristic
The PI	Cheap suit and car	Loner, cynical, shrewd, shady but dogged
The rogue cop	Plainclothes, disguise, often has special high tech equipment	Maverick, smart, irreverent, violent but effective
The sadistic guard	Unkempt uniform	Low intelligence, violent, racist, sexist, perverted, enjoys cruelty and inflicting pain and humiliation
The corrupt lawyer	Expensive suite and office	Smart, greedy, manipulative, dishonest, smooth talker and liar, able to twist words, logic, and morality
The greedy businessman	Very expensive office and home, trophy wife	Very smart, decisive, and a polished, unquenchable sometimes psychotic need for power and wealth

[Footnote]Surette, R. (2011). *Media, crime, and criminal justice: Images, realities, and policies* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing. [/footnote]

### Framing Techniques

Framing techniques per Fairhurst and Sarr (1996):

- Metaphor: To frame a conceptual idea through comparison to something else.
- Stories (myths, legends): To frame a topic via narrative in a vivid and memorable way.
- Tradition (rituals, ceremonies): Cultural mores that imbue significance in the mundane, closely tied to artifacts.
- Slogan, jargon, catchphrase: To frame an object with a catchy phrase to make it more memorable and relate-able.
- Artifact: Objects with intrinsic symbolic value – a visual/cultural phenomenon that holds more meaning than the object itself.
- Contrast: To describe an object in terms of what it is not.
- Spin: to present a concept in such a way as to convey a value judgment (positive or negative) that might not be immediately apparent; to create an inherent bias by definition. (Fairhurst, G. & Sarr, R. 1996. *The art of Framing*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.)

Fourth, politicians are also protagonists in a moral panic. They spin the public opinion and present themselves as the safeguards of the moral high ground. They are similar to law enforcement in this drama and they have an obligation to protect society from folk devils.

The fifth and final category of moral panic is the public. The public is the most important actor on the stage. Public anxiety and fear over the folk devils is the central theme of moral panics. A moral panic only exists because the public cries out for policymakers and law enforcement to “do something” and save them from the alleged threat that has been created.

Carlson, M. (2018). Fake news as an informal moral panic: The symbolic deviance of social media during the 2016 US presidential election. *Information, Communication, and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1505934>

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## References

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2. Cohen, S. (1972). *Folk devils and moral panics: The creation of the mods and rockers*. London: MacGibbon and Key Ltd. ↵
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4. Crow, D.A., & Lawlor, A. (2016). Media in the policy process: Using framing and narratives to understand policy influences. *Review of Policy Research*. 33(5): 472-495 ↵

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