***“I was a child abuser!”: What we read when we read about child abuse***

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**Abstract** This paper studies the past two decades of mainstream magazine coverage of child abuse in American magazines, connects it to a broader historical and social context, and theorizes that analyzing these stories is a useful way to understand the causes and consequences of the historic and persistent hysteria and irrationality about this issue. The first part of this paper describes how child protection efforts emerge from the telling of sensational stories about abused children and abusive adults, transmitted in ways that support American cultural beliefs about individual responsibility for personal behavior and economic circumstances. This second part examines how this narrative persists in high-circulation, popular magazines, by examining the content and frequency of stories about child abuse during the past two decades. This paper seeks to show how such a narrative regarding the behaviors of evil and immoral people creates and maintains misguided and ineffective approach to child protection, in the structural realms of American social welfare, criminal and legislative policies and also influences adult and child interaction at the individual level.

*Keywords:* Child abuse, sex offenders, media and society, law and society

A recent headline in a Boston newspaper read, “Specter of Predators Puts Parents in Constant Vigil” (Teitell, 2012). The article focused on middle-class mothers who no longer allow their children to engage in any activity without constant supervision, lest sexual predators lurk around every corner. The article points out that even though the rate of child sexual abuse is declining, having dropped 62 percent since 1992, “parental anxiety seems to be on the rise” (Teitell, 2012). It is implicit that the fear of this parent, and the many like her, is that her children will experience sexual abuse by strangers. Child abuse is a profound problem, but neglect and physical abuse constitute the vast majority (91%) of child abuse victims, while 9.3% experience child sexual abuse (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Of child-victims of sexual abuse, strangers (non-family members or acquaintances) are the least likely perpetrators, with studies showing a range of 7% to 25% (Douglas & Finklehor). Stanley Cohen (1972) first conceptualized the idea of a “moral panic”, a situation that arises when social problems emerge as the focus of intense and widespread fear and panic, and numerous scholars and journalists have since applied his moral panic theory to an ongoing hysteria surrounding crimes against children (Best, 1993; Jenkins 2004; Levine, 2003; Nathan & Snedeker, 1996; Skenazy, 2010). For example, tales of abducted children are a staple of media crime coverage, even though the Department of Justice (2002) reports that about 115 children per year are victims of “stereotypical” kidnapping, meaning abduction off the street by a stranger, and the majority of these are teenage girls and not the young children featured in most news stories.

This paper examines how one media genre, popular magazines, creates and supports a moral panic characterized by irrational fears about “stranger danger”, and reinforces the inaccurate and damaging belief that blame for child abuse can be laid solely at the doorstep of individuals, irresolutely evil, who need to be punished. The stories we read in magazines about child abuse overwhelmingly focus on the most egregious cases, with special attention given to pedophiles, murderers and kidnappers, and the statistically rarest, but most terrifying, cases. Consequently, there is widespread public support for penalties for those accused of harming children and identifying those who *might* harm children, and little support for policies that support children and families and, in turn, prevent abuse. Child abuse is a severe and pervasive social problem, and this paper does not intend to minimize the extent or impact of crimes against children. However, it is precisely because the seriousness of the problem, and the prevalence (in 2012, 678,810 children were found to victims abuse) that we must work particularly hard to separate appearance from reality in an effort to think clearly and rationally about how to protect children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). When we allow ourselves to be blinded by the emotion and hysteria that quickly surfaces when we think about this issue actually harms children because it diverts efforts away from sane policies and behaviors.

**The Current Study**

The irrational nature of contemporary attitudes concerning crimes against children must be viewed in a larger and historical context. Initially, the media coverage of stories of abuse, served a useful purpose. They help shed light on an overlooked social problem by using the powerful lens of the personal story. They were important because they revealed that crimes can happen in the private realm of the home and family, and that the state should intervene when the law is violated, even when it happens in private. Today’s stories no longer aim to highlight a problem that is ignored or viewed without sufficient seriousness, and they focus not on the primary problem of family abuse but on stranger abuse. Of all known perpetrators of all types of child abuse, only 4.6% are strangers, yet the media story about children and safety is all about the statistically insignificant threat of the unknown abductor or abuser. This is also problematic because these are the very cases that cannot be prevented by crime or other policies, yet prompt blind, fear-induced support for ineffective and often unjust criminal justice policies that disproportionately harm minorities and the poor and inadvertently hurt families and communities already reeling from poverty, low educational outcomes, and other correlates of child abuse. The first part of this paper, therefore, highlights research about the profound links among child abuse, social structure and poverty, and how, on the other hand, the basis of the modern-day child protection system lies in narratives foregrounding individual responsibility. The second part of the paper illustrates concretely how popular magazines manufacture and maintain this ideology of fear, by telling and re-telling the most terrifying accounts of crimes against children. The overall aim of this paper is to show how media coverage of child abuse reflect problematic and sometimes plainly inaccurate attitudes regarding child abuse, and how the media both contribute to, and reinforce, a moral panic surrounding that phenomenon in contemporary society.

**Stories About Child Abuse: “Bad” Adults As the Sole Cause of Child Abuse**

Although the media suggests that good parents (and more vigilant ones), more legislation, and more punishment can protect children from danger, the reality is much more complex. First, research shows that the vast majority of child abuse is related to poverty, a link documented since the early 1970s (Newberger, 1972; Pelton, 1978). The connection between poverty and abuse continues to emerge, as shown in a very recent study (2012) on child abuse that found poor children on Medicaid had significantly (almost six times) higher rates of being victims of “serious abuse” than those with private insurance (Leventhal, 2012). Likewise, the 2010 National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) found that poor families experience rates of abuse three times greater and neglect (the most frequent category of child abuse) seven times greater (Sedlak et al., 2010). Another recent study linked increases in rates of serious child abuse, including traumatic brain injuries, to growth in mortgage-delinquency rates (Wood, 2012). The National Coalition for Child Protection Reform (2011) suggested that these rates are due to two factors: first, poverty itself is considered a form of neglect (e.g. Illinois defines neglect as not giving children the “proper or necessary support for a child’s well-being”), and, second, poverty causes stress and stress leads to child abuse: it is “well-known that poor families tend to be under more stress than rich families” (p. 1). In a study of the parental correlates of child abuse, Darcey Merritt (2009) found socio-economic factors are strongly linked to child abuse. Child abuse, she found, was more likely to occur in high-poverty neighborhoods and/or when parents have high child care burdens, and less likely to occur when parents are married, working full time, had at least a high school diploma, higher incomes, and support from families and friends. She concludes that policies aimed at preventing child abuse should focus on increasing family income, educational opportunities, and providing support for child care for families at with risk-factors for abuse. A study from the National Bureau of Economic Research recognizes the strong relationship between poverty and child maltreatment, with increases in the fraction of children in extreme poverty resulting in increases in maltreatment (Paxon and Waldfogel, 1999). The authors also find that half of the children referred to child protective services receive welfare, and more than half received welfare in the past, and they also conclude that child neglect rates increase in states that cut their welfare benefits.

Nevertheless, the legislative and organizational approach to child protection is based on finding and punishing parenting problems and ignoring economic ones. As psychologist Leroy Pelton, an expert on child abuse policies, explains, these systems are “based upon simplistic assumptions that parents alone are to blame for injuries to their children. The terms ‘child protection’ refers to protection from ‘child abuse and neglect,’ which in turn denotes the culpability of parents in harm or danger to their children” (Pelton 1998, p. 128). The child protection system is corrupted, argues Pelton, because it essentially acts as a judgmental and punishing force in the lives of poor families. It investigates abuse, and accuses and blames families instead of delivering support and services.

This is not to say that child abuse is only caused by poverty, but it is impossible to disaggregate the economic problems that characterize the majority of families involved with the child protection system from the other issues. We know that parental drug abuse is a huge predictor of child abuse and neglect, but addressing drug addiction without examining the socio-economic context is impossible. Journalist Nick Reding (2010) unravels this link, showing how the methamphetamine epidemic was driven by the loss of manufacturing and unionized jobs, and, in turn, how this drug epidemic resulted in an exponential increase in child protection caseloads. The underfunded and overworked child protection agencies can, at best, only serve to get the children into foster homes, and possibly coax the parents into drug treatment programs, but the problem of unemployment and economic decline that cause and aggravate the problem are unaddressed.

The child protection system is thus characterized, as are most of our social institutions, by deeply entrenched American attitudes about individualism, self-help, personal responsibility and charity as well as small government. The current approach to child protection reveals that stories with these themes created and continue to influence the present-day system, in the same way that narrative about individuals overcoming difficulties without help, such as Horatio Alger, are widely recognized as profound and sustained influences on our social welfare policies.

**The Early Child Protection Movement and the Story of an Abused Child**

It was, in fact, a sensational story helped launch the child protection movement in 1874, when the *New York Times* began lengthy and detailed coverage of Mary Ellen Wilson, a nine-year old girl beaten daily by her adoptive mother, including one story titled “Inhuman Treatment of Little Waif.” After a missionary tried unsuccessfully to remove her from her family, Henry Bergh, the founder of the ASPCA, and his lawyer, Elbridge Gerry, learned of her case and managed to get Wilson removed from her abusive home, and her adoptive mother convicted of cruelty to children. Bergh and Gerry were ultimately inspired to found the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC), which led in turn to the development of over 300 similar private agencies with no official government oversight or involvement. The story of Wilson was perfect for the American public. The victim could hardly be more deserving of sympathy: a young girl from a working-class family, who was abandoned in an orphanage by a destitute mother and suffered horrific and brutal abuse (daily beatings from her adoptive mother and confinement to a dirty tenement while being starved and neglected). And the savior was not any less ideologically appropriate: a philanthropist who took matters into his own hands, and did not ask the government for help to start a voluntary charity to save children (Myers 2008).

Private agencies like the NYSPCC managed child protection until the early 1960s. At that point, the government assumed responsibility after the problem exploded to the forefront of the American consciousness with the publication of the hugely influential article, “The Battered Child Syndrome” (Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller, and Silver 1962) in *the Journal of the American Medical Association*. Lead author C. Henry Kempe, who escaped Nazi Germany with his parents and became a physician after completing school in the United States, is credited as being the among the first in the medical profession to highlight child abuse as a definable medical problem. Kempe wrote the article after he worked in emergency rooms and saw broken bones, inflicted burns, and other injuries in children that were the result of parental abuse. Prior to this article, there was no medical assessment of child abuse as a “syndrome” or actual clinical condition. In the article, Kempe and his co-authors argue that it is the duty of doctors who see child abuse to intervene and protect the child, and that it is some problem of adults, rooted in their psychology, that causes them to abuse children. This assertion set the stage for the still predominant thinking that child abusers suffer from psychiatric defects and that child abuse is a problem of particular individuals with special flaws and defects.

Along with Kempe’s article, the American Medical Association issued a press release with the provocative title, “Parental Abuse Looms Large in Childhood Deaths” (1962), which that prompted mass media interest in the study. Barbara Nelson, in her work on the emergence of child abuse as a social problem, writes that “within a week”, *Time* and *Newsweek* published stories and “informed millions of readers that new ‘disease’ imperiled the nation’s children (Nelson, 1984:16). The *Saturday Evening Post* and *Life* also published inflammatory articles. In the *Post*, a “respected family magazine,” the article was titled “Parents Who Beat Their Children: A Tragic Increase in Cases of Child Abuse is Prompting a Hunt for Ways to Select Sick Adults Who Commit Such Crimes.” The piece claimed child abuse reports “read like a case book of a concentration camp doctor [including] welts, skull fractures, brain injuries, burns, cuts, gashes, gunshot and knife wounds, bites [and] eyes gouged out” (Nelson, 1984). Immediately, the mainstream media seized upon child abuse as an important story, and, notably, one that easily lent itself to journalistic creativity and aroused human interest.

These articles promoted a shift in awareness concerning child abuse. In addition to urging pediatricians and others who suspected child abuse to intervene and help children, they prompted many states to pass laws mandating reporting of mistreatment of children. The media coverage of child abuse erupted. Nelson’s analysis shows that virtually all publication on the subject between 1950 and 1980 occurred after 1962, including 124 magazine articles, 652 *New York Times* stories, and 1,756 scholarly articles (Nelson, 1984:129).

According to Eli Newberger, another pediatrician who worked to raise awareness of child abuse in the 1960s, these initial efforts to deal with the issue, by both states and medical professionals, were rooted in an understanding that abusers were troubled individuals, facing financial and other stressors, taking their frustrations out on their children. Thus, a “humane philosophy of intervention emerged” and, until the early 1970s, practitioners understood that the best way to deal with abusers was to help them with “an infusion of professional attention and personal good will and affection” (Newberger, 307).

These efforts to first pass laws to protect children emerged simultaneously with the birth of corresponding social movements concerned with human and civil rights, as well as the expansion of other social welfare programs. Newberger acknowledges that he, and other children’s advocates along with him, would nothave pushed for the passage of expansive child abuse reporting laws if they had known that support for social programs would rapidly contract in the 1970s. Kempe himself edited a book of essays in 1972 that collectively argued that abused children are best placed back with their families after a period of treatment and therapy. Thus the first child abuse laws can be understood as a response to a newly defined social problem, and the intent of these laws was both to protect children and to help their parents and families. The idea of a child abuser as a flawed individual, with profound but treatable psychological difficulties, is at the root of these early efforts led largely by concerned pediatricians.

Parallel to these growing efforts to challenge traditional norms about families, gender, and childhood was an effort to fight child abuse in the medical and social service communities. The fight to protect children was linked to the growing youth rights movements, in the sense that both movements believed that children deserved the same human rights and civil liberties as adults, and were related to the overarching assumption that the personal is political. At the same time domestic violence and rape were becoming social issues. It became widely accepted that what happened within the home or the family was not immune from the protection of the state. Battered women’s shelters started to appear in the early 1970s, and the first rape crisis hotline was implemented in 1972. Before the feminist struggle to define rape and domestic violence as crimes, it had been extremely difficult to charge and prosecute men for these offenses. The work of feminist and social movement activists changed the understanding of these forms of violence against women, which were no longer seen as less serious violations than crimes committed against strangers. This major development set the stage for the unfolding campaign to prevent and stop child abuse. Previously, since child abuse took place in the private sphere, one reason for lack of attention to it was the assumption that state intervention in any family matters was invasive. Thus no less than domestic violence and rape, the problem of child abuse was also becoming politicized. In the context of the optimism of the 60s, policymakers began to craft relevant laws. In the spirit of the Great Society programs, these measures viewed family problems as structural; they addressed the causes of poverty and inequality and not only the outcomes of these larger social problems.

**Modern Child Protection Policy and the Story of An Abusive Parent**

Legislators began to propose funding programs to help abused children and their families. One such lawmaker was Walter Mondale, then a senator from Minnesota, who pushed for comprehensive federal child abuse legislation in the early 1970s. In his memoir, he writes that during the debate over the bill, he received many letters to the effect that the bill “represented a government effort to undermine parental authority and subvert traditional American values”; discussion of the bill was characterized as “a debate over whether parents should spank their children” (Mondale, 2010:104). Prior to his efforts to pass a law authorizing funding for child abuse, Mondale lost his bid to get more funding for Head Start, the free preschool program for low-income children. He, along with a bipartisan group of supporters, sought to increase substantially the funding for Head Start under the Comprehensive Child Development Act of 1971. President Nixon vetoed this bill that would have ultimately given billions of dollars to Head Start (as much as $7 billion by 1975). Social conservatives and the religious right opposed the legislation on the grounds that it was effectively “Sovietizing” American youth (Mondale 2010:99). Further, Nixon’s Title XX of the Social Security Act, prompted in 1972 by a contracting economy and a growing hostility towards the poor and minority groups, resulted in a dramatic decrease in funding for social service and entitlement programs. Mondale maintains that his efforts to obtain significant funding for educational opportunities for all children were characterized by the right as being somehow opposed to family values; the right, he argues, presented help extended to families as a promotion of dysfunctional behaviors that discouraged them from helping themselves.

During the 1973 hearings prior to passage of Mondale’s Child Abuse Protection and Treatment Act (CAPTA), the growing political opposition to broad social programs and governmental intervention into family life came to a head, forcing him to modify the bill. Mondale arranged for an abusive mother who “cured” herself by starting the self-help group Parents Anonymous to testify at the hearing. The woman was introduced only as Jolly K., since like AA members, those of Parents Anonymous do not reveal their names. She later told a *Life* (1979) reporter that she assumed the moniker Jolly during her days as a Hollywood hooker. Jolly K. told her story of personal redemption, detailing how as a single mother between marriages, she abused her child and was unable to find help from social service agencies. Eventually, she came across a sympathetic psychologist who helped her form a therapy group where abusive parents could help support one another, which eventually became Parents Anonymous. Mondale knew that focusing on Jolly K. and child abuse as a treatable psychological problem was a key to passing the bill.

At the hearing, Jolly K. admitted that though family stressors, like poverty, increased the likelihood of abuse, she also told the committee that child abuse was an epidemic social problem crossing all social and economic boundaries, at least according to the experiences she gleaned at her own Parents Anonymous group. When child abuse expert David Gil testified that it was important to recognize the relationship between poverty and child abuse, Mondale responded that “this is not a poverty problem” (Congress of the U.S. and Public 1973). Thus he made it clear that the purpose of the bill was not to address poverty—no doubt hoping to ensure that his conservative colleagues would vote for it. According to Ellen Hoffman, who helped draft the bill, Jolly K.’s testimony on national television—where she recounted her struggles to restrain her anger and her history of abusing her young daughter—made her “perhaps the single most effective witness” (Hoffman 1979). Jolly K. told the panel that if people abuse their children, this was due to stress and personal problems, and the solution was for the abuser to get help. She continued: “So many times I hear in society that social services has to do this, Congress has to do that, the President has to do this, and everything else. Everyone keeps forgetting it is our problem and we have to something about it” (Congress of the U.S and Public 1973:51). Senator Randolph commended Jolly K. for taking responsibility for her actions and for promoting an organization entirely staffed by volunteers. The CAPTA hearings were thus characterized by the classic inspiring and very American story of someone pulling herself up by her bootstraps and starting a volunteer organization that did not require government funds. Little did it seem to matter that she talked about abusing her 6-year-old daughter in graphic terms, saying, for example, “once I threw a rather large kitchen knife at her and another time I strangled her because she lied to me,” or that she abused her child “to the point of almost causing death several times. It was extreme physical abuse.” Rather, her words captivated and inspired the committee, no doubt because she was confessing her sins and describing her (non-government-funded) salvation (Congress of the U.S and Public 1973).

CAPTA passed in 1973, and, since then, child protective legislation has grown exponentially at both the state and federal levels. According to Hoffman and other observers of the hearing, Jolly K.’s testimony was the most riveting and most persuasive, and critical to getting the law passed. Political scientist Barbara Nelson sums up the significance of having a storyteller like Jolly K. at the hearing:

She was, figuratively, a sinner who had repented and been saved by her own hard work and the loving counsel of friends. But, more importantly, she embodied the American conception of a social problem: individually rooted, described as an illness, and solvable by occasional doses of therapeutic conversation…[a] gripping witness, a figurative example of both sin and redemption, with the sin being child abuse, compounded to some extent by the lack of public response, and redemption being the range of demonstration programs which might be funded under the bill, including, by inference, some assistance to struggling private programs such as Parents Anonymous (Nelson 1984:2, 105).

The influence of Jolly K. and her story in getting the first federal child abuse bill passed is not surprising when one considers the combined reality of economic decline and decreasing support for social welfare programs in the 1970s, and also mass media coverage of Kempe’s article that portrayed child abuse as a psychological problem. In a piece on Jolly K. in a 1979 issue of *Life* magazine, her tale was told again in a way that emphasized individual triumph over adversity. It quotes her saying, “I’m so lucky. The odds against a happy ending for me were overwhelming... I’m making it” (Barthel 1979:82). Jolly K. eventually committed suicide during her third marriage, but her story of conquering her fears endures both institutionally in the form of CAPTA and culturally in our cultural obsession with self-help. Parents Anonymous continues to celebrate Jolly K. and her legacy.

The next part of this study analyzes the extent to which popular magazines tell similar stories. However, these tales have become scarier. They transgress more taboos, arouse greater moral panic and hysteria, and keep at bay any notion that child abusers are human beings with identifiable problems like Jolly K.

**Method**

**Popular Magazines and the Child Abuse Story**

Studies using cultivation theory find that exposure to mass media enhances fear of crime (Romer, Jamieson, & Aday, 2003), and also influences our understanding about the frequency of crime, our responses to the threat or perception of risk and even our daily behaviors and actions (Nabi, 2001). Popular magazine coverage of child abuse fits the television model, because stories about child abuse cases are regular features that focus on dramatic events, include details about particular cases, and provoke fear. Additionally, although most studies that apply cultivation theories to mass media analyze the effects of television, there is evidence that magazines also influence perceptions and behaviors in similar ways (Kim, 2004; Tiggemann, 2003).

Criminologists such as Matthew Robinson (2011) have observed that the media tend to depict criminals as motivated by “individual factors such as jealousy, emotional instability, mental illness, greed, and so forth” (Robinson 2011:125). This characterization easily applies to stories about those who commit crimes against children. The reason crime has always been the “most popular” story on television in history, Robinson argues, is primarily due to profit, because coverage of crime generates viewership, especially when coverage focuses on “dramatic and sensational” events, with an emphasis on “anecdote and graphic detail about individual cases [and] connected to fear which is a staple of the entertainment format” (Robinson 2011:109, 114). Thus, viewers will only absorb and re-absorb these stories when they are offered simple and easy explanations for unthinkable crimes, like blaming video games for school shootings, a link that is unsupported by research yet told over and over in media stories (Ferguson, 2008),

Mainstream magazines offer a useful way to understand how we tell stories about child abuse. First, large numbers of Americans consume the most popular magazines, and, in spite of the perception that the internet has replaced print material, a 2012 Pew Research Center study found that 42 percent of young people under age 30 read magazines, and as do 50 percent of older people (Zickuhr 2012:30). Second, newspapers publish a significant number of stories about child abuse, but magazines are a more useful sub-group of mass print media to study because they reach a larger audience. For example, in September 2012, *USA Today* had a circulation of 1.7 million (Circulations 2013).

Although this study is limited to an analysis of print media, it is important to recognize that television reaches huge numbers of people: thus in January 2013, Dateline NBC had 5.7 million viewers (Nielson 2013). Many existing studies have analyzed how shows that tell stories about child abusers, particularly news magazine formats like *20/20* and *Dateline* and, in particular, *To Catch a Predator*, bring forth irrational attitudes and perceptions about crimes against children (Adler 2011, Gunter 1987, Kibble 2008, Marwick 2008, Romer, Jamieson and Aday 2003, Schlesinger and Tumber 1994, Sparks 1992).

In an effort to quantify what stories magazines tell about child abuse, and how they tell them, this paper analyzes the frequency and content of coverage of child abuse in a sub-group of seven of the most frequently read general interest, family, and news magazines in the United States over the past two decades (1992-2012). The data are those of the Audit Bureau of Circulations, and the magazines studied include:

1. *Reader’s Digest* (rank 5, circulation 5.6 million)
2. *Good Housekeeping* (rank 7, circulation 4.33 million)
3. *People* (rank 10, circulation 3.56 million),
4. *Time-The Weekly Newsmagazine* (rank 11, circulation 3.33 million),
5. *Parenting* (rank 25, circulation 2.22 million),
6. *Redbook* (rank 26, circulation 2.21 million), and
7. *Newsweek* (rank 50, circulation 1.52 million) (2012).

Selection of the magazines included in the study was based on four specific criteria, detailed below:

1. The first cut was from the top 50 most widely circulated magazines, whose total paid and verified circulation numbered over 1.5 million in 2012.
2. Of this group, magazines were excluded that that were unlikely to cover stories related to general interest and news topics (e.g. *AARP The Magazine* (rank 1), *Game Informer Magazine* (rank 4), and *National Geographic* (rank 6)).
3. Only magazines included in searchable, full-text online databases, with coverage from 1992-2012, were included. Thus higher-ranking magazines that published stories about child abuse, such as *Woman’s Day* (Rank 8), *Family Circle* (rank 9), and *Ladies’ Home Journal* (rank 12), were excluded because they were unavailable for the time period studied in searchable, full-text online databases.
4. Only stories with the following subject terms were included: "adult survivors of child abuse", "abused children," "child abuse,", "child abuse, sexual," "child pornography," "pedophilia," or "childhood sexual abuse”.

In total, there were 540 stories that met the criteria for the study. Each story included in the study was coded into specific categories, based on the key theme in each piece. Stories were generally brief, and each story was read in its entirety in order to code it into a key theme category. The key themes of each story fell into thirteen distinct categories, including, in descending order of story frequency: Abuse in the Catholic Church, Online Predators/Child Molesters/Sex Offenders, Bad/Abusive Parents, Kidnapping/Murder/Extreme Abuse, Celebrity Abusers (e.g. Michael Jackson); False Allegations/Hysteria About Abuse, Abusive Teachers/Caregivers/Coaches, Celebrities Overcoming Abuse and/or Helping Victims, Heroes Helping/Saving Victims of Abuse, Religious Cults and Abuse, Preventing and Reporting Abuse, Non-celebrities Overcoming Abuse, and International Abuse Issues/Sex Tourism/Trafficking.

**Results**

**Headlines, Categories, and Key Themes of Child Abuse Stories**

The headlines alone from many of these stories would strike panic in any parent’s (or child’s) heart. While the stories are less frightening or produce less anxiety than the headlines, it is important to highlight the nature of headlines because far more people see them than read the stories. Headlines intend to provoke interest and prompt readers to look inside the magazine, and therefore they reveal the most blatant and crass efforts to bait emotional responses. Some examples of the most stress-inducing headlines, from every publication in the study, include, from 1996 until 2012, include:

* “Tracking the Cyberspace Predator” (*Reader’s Digest*, November 1995);
* “Pedophiles: Wolves Among Our Lambs” (*Reader’s Digest*, December 1996);
* “Child Molesters on the Internet: Are They In Your Home?” (*Redbook*, April 1997);
* “How to Tell if a Caregiver Has Hurt Your Child” (*Parenting*, March 1998);
* “If You Suspect a Child is Being Mistreated” (*Parenting*, March 1998);
* “Kidnapped Sons for Sale” (*Newsweek*, September 7, 1998);
* “Main Street Monsters (*Time*, September 14, 1998);
* “Russia’s Gulags for Children” (*Newsweek*, December 21, 1998);
* “When Parents are the Threat (*Time*, May 8, 2000);
* “Should You Let Your Son Join the Boy Scouts?” (*Redbook*, April 2001);
* “The Web’s Dark Secret” (*Newsweek*, May 19, 2001);
* “Keeping Babies Safe” (*Parenting*, November 2001);
* “Tracking Kiddie Porn” (*Time*, August 19, 2002);
* “Teachers Who Prey On Kids: Why They Are Still Going Free” (*Good Housekeeping*, December 2003);
* “Did They Starve Their Kids?” (*Time*, February 21, 2005);
* “The Sex Offender Next Door” (*Good Housekeeping*, May 2005);
* “Why Did These Kids Live in Cages?” (*Time*, October 3, 2005);
* “The Bad Babysitter” (*Good Housekeeping*, June 2006);
* “Protect Our Kids!” (*Reader’s Digest*, January 2007);
* “The Slave in the Garage (*Reader’s Digest*, May 2008);
* “The Dangers of Sexting” (*Time*, March 30, 2009); and
* “A Young Girl’s Sexting Trauma: ‘I was naked, out in the world’” (*Redbook*, November 2011).

**Categories of Child Abuse Stories**

Table 1 shows the number and percentage of stories in the general category of child abuse across all magazines by thematic sub-category. All stories were coded into one of these exclusive sub-categories, based on the *primary* topic of the articles. Thus, though some articles crossed more than one category, the articles were only coded into the sub-category that related to the main thrust of the story. Of the monthly publications, *Good Housekeeping* published the most stories (n = 58) related to child abuse, and, of the weekly publications, *People* published the most stories (n = 168). Table 2 shows the most frequent child abuse story sub-categories within each publication.

**Abuse in the Catholic Church*.*** The majority of stories (n = 77, or 14% of stories) focusing on child abuse across the entire time period studied were, not surprisingly, on the child sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church. The frequency of coverage of the scandals differed significantly by magazine, though, with *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *People* each devoting numerous stories to the topic. The other publications essentially ignored the story (*Reader’s Digest* and *Redbook* each published one story, and *Good Housekeeping* and *Parenting* published none). Stories about the Church scandal accounted for over 30% of pieces on child abuse published in the two major newsweeklies. Yet while that story was the most frequently reported one in those of all articles about child abuse in those publications, it did not make the top three in any of the others studied. Articles in this sub-category tended to focus on the structural problems within the Church that led to sexual abuse by priests, but they also told personal stories of victims and abusers, such as in this excerpt from a *Newsweek* article: “Between 1968 and 1985, wielding good looks, charisma and the cachet that comes with being a popular parish priest, Conway lured a succession of eight teenage boys into his sexual traps. He stopped only when a nun found one of them in his bed, he says. Every day since has been a battle to redeem his soul. ‘I was a predator. I claim full responsibility. Whatever damage I've done to these men can't be undone by me now, but I am deeply regretful for what I did. How do you make up for something as awful as child abuse?” (France 2002).

**Online Predators/Child Molesters/Sex Offenders.** All the magazines in the study, with the exception of *Parenting*, published numerous pieces (six or more) on the threat of sexual predators to children, either online or in communities, and accounted for 13% of all articles in the study. *Reader’s Digest* published almost 20% of its stories on the topic, and *Newsweek*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Redbook*, and *Time* each published 15% or more of their child abuse stories in this area. Articles in this category emphasized the prevalence of child pornography and/or sexual predators online, such as the *Reader’s Digest* article "r u in yr pjs?" which claimed that “Toronto Police Det.-Sgt. Paul Gillespie’s child-exploitation section was created five years ago. In 2004 alone, they arrested 37 people and seized more than three million images” (Morgan, 2006).

**Bad/Abusive Parents.** A total of50 stories, or 9% of all stories, focused on detailed stories of “bad” parents, such as physical abusers, drug users, and neglectful parents. *People* and *Parenting* both published a significant number and percent of detailed stories about abusive parents. *People* published the most stories about “bad” parents who abuse, neglect, or even murder their own children. *Parenting* published 30% of its stories about evil parents who harm their children intentionally. These “bad” parent stories often included lurid details of abuse, and the children in these stories either ended up dead or saved by foster or adoptive parents. Some typical stories included those on “Munchausen by proxy,” a condition where mothers deliberately make their children sick in order to get attention, with headlines like “How Her Mother Hurt Her, in the Name of Love,” or a *Redbook* article written as a confessional by a victim of this form of abuse. Another story that received significant attention, characterized in *Time* as “Home Alone 2-½: The Real Thing,” told of a couple from an upscale Illinois suburb who went on vacation to Mexico and left their two children, ages 9 and 4, without any supervision for two weeks.

**Kidnapping/Child Murder/Extreme Abuse.** These magazines published 47 horror tales about extreme abuse, including kidnapped and murdered children, totaling 9% of stories. Pieces in this category focused on extreme cases of horrific and extreme abuse, involving children deliberately starved to death, locked in closets, exposed to long-term brutal abuse, chained to beds, or kidnapped and murdered by sex offenders. Most stories in this sub-category appeared in *People*, which published 25 pieces about these nightmare scenarios; they constituted its most frequently reported child abuse feature. *Parenting* and *Good Housekeeping* did not publish any stories of this nature, and *Redbook* published just one. The details of these stories are gruesome, like the “caged kids” in *People*, which was about a couple on trial who apparently kept “some of their 11 adopted and foster children penned up in wood-and-wire cages sleeping on thin mats, soaked in their own urine” (Jerome 2006).

**Celebrity Abusers**. Surprisingly, *Time* published the majority (n = 13) of stories about celebrity abusers, followed by *Good Housekeeping*, *People*, and *Newsweek*. These stories focused mainly on Michael Jackson’s sex abuse trial. *Time* and *Good Housekeeping* were the only publications where stories related to Michael Jackson ranked in the top three most reported subjects. Interestingly, the articles about Jackson often had mocking titles, such as “From Moonwalk to Perp Walk,” “Dangerous,” “Neverland Lost,” “Can He Get a Witness?” “Facing the Music”, and “Further Proof He’s no Ward Cleaver”, suggesting the stories were farcical rather than actual instances of child sexual abuse.

**False Allegations/Hysteria about Abuse.** There were 40 stories published about wrongful convictions for child abuse or parents falsely accused of abuse. *Redbook* published the most articles in this area (n = 9), with 20% of its articles about child abuse examining cases of innocent people charged with crimes against children. It was the only publication where this ranked first in frequency among all articles related to child abuse. However, these stories appeared in all publications, and focused on high-profile cases involving daycare workers or innocent parents wrongfully charged with abuse. Such was the the *Redbook* (2000) article, “Was it Murder or a Bad Vaccine?” about parents accused of child abuse when in fact their children had fatal reactions to bad vaccines.

**Abusive Teachers/Caregivers/Coaches.** *People* published the majority of stories (n = 15) in this sub-category, followed by *Good Housekeeping*, and *Redbook*. These stories featured threats from teachers, babysitters, and coaches who sexually or physically abused children. This was the most frequent child abuse sub-category reported in *Redbook* (n = 7). The stories in this category are often frightening, suggesting that this is a pervasive problem. In a *Redbook* article, the author suggests that teachers are not punished for their crimes and move from school to school, and that there are teacher “predators” lying in wait for children, noting, “As case after case emerges around the country, it's clear that it will take more than headlines to keep predatory teachers away from children. Most are repeat offenders; once the publicity of a case dies down, they move on and find new victims—unless there's a system to stop them. It's up to society to create that system—a network of schools, prosecutors, judges, and lawmakers who will work to protect kids, not the predators waiting to harm the” (Foglino 2003).

**Celebrities Overcoming Abuse/Celebrities Helping Victims.** *People* also published almost all (n = 24) the stories about celebrities overcoming abuse, which was second in frequency among its child-abuse stories. These articles told personal stories of actors or celebrities detailing their own experiences of sexual or physical abuse, such as Oprah Winfrey, Sandra Dee, Melissa Etheridge, and an American Idol winner. Often, the featured celebrity discusses the work she does to help other victims. A *People* article about Cheryl Burke, a cast member on the reality competition show *Dancing with the Stars*, reveals how, sexually abused as a child, “she also suffered physical abuse by two high school boyfriends and has struggled with body image. But, she insists, ‘all the trauma didn't stop me from realizing my dreams. There's no shame.’ Adds her mom, Sherri, 56: ‘Anyone who didn't have a strong foundation would have gone the other way. She's definitely a survivor’” (Chiu, 2011).

**“Heroes” Helping Victims of Abuse/Saving Children.** *People* also published the most (n = 20) stories about non-celebrities who work to save child victims of abuse, followed by *Redbook* and *Reader’s Digest*. These stories told dramatic stories of people, often referred to in *Reader’s Digest* as “angels” or “everyday heroes,” who work tirelessly against great odds to save children in need. The focus in these stories is on both the heroism of the adult saviors as well as the terrible (and often detailed) abuse suffered by the children prior to their rescue. One such story was about a woman who started an “underground railroad” where mothers could hide their children from abusive husbands and fathers fighting for custody. A *Good Housekeeping* story, about an abused child saved by adoption, begins, “She was badly abused as a baby, and no one wanted her. Then a childless couple opened their hearts” (Gehrman 2006).

**Religious Cults and Abuse.** *People* (n = 11), *Newsweek* (n = 7), and *Good Housekeeping* dominated the coverage of fringe religious groups charged with sexually abusing children, with particular focus on the case of the polygamous sect led by Warren Jeffs. These stories emphasized the plight of young girls forced to marry older men, and the abuse they suffered from the polygamous relationship as well as the overall confines of the church/cults. In *Newsweek*, an article about a Mormon sect in Utah described one case of abuse and incest in typically graphic terms: “When the dark-haired 16-year-old girl straggled into the Chevron station in rural Box Elder County, Utah, to call 911, her back, arms and legs were badly bruised and her face was bloodied... The girl said she'd run away from a husband she'd been forced to marry at the age of 15. David Ortell Kingston had made her his 15th wife; he is also her uncle” (Murr 1998).

**How to Prevent Abuse/How to Report Abuse.** Almost all (n = 12) the stories in this area appeared in *Parenting* magazine, where it was the most reported child-abuse story. These stories suggest ways to stop observed or suspected abuse; the most usual recommendation to report such cases to authorities. At the same time, many stories focus on how parents can relieve stress in order to avoid any temptation to abuse their children; techniques to prevent shaken baby syndrome; and advice about discipline. *Good Housekeeping* also published stories (n = 7) in this sub-category. A typical article from *Parenting* warns parents that the best way to prevent child sexual abuse is to never to leave your child unsupervised with any other adults, including relatives: the best “line of defense” against child sexual abuse, it explains, “is to minimize the situations in which your child is left alone with an adult you don't thoroughly know and wholly trust—even if it's Grandpa (Sachs. 2003).”

**Personal Stories of Overcoming Abuse.** *People* (n = 10) published the most stories in this area, followed by *Good Housekeeping* (n = 7). These articles featured adults’ revealing the abuse they suffered as children, and often ended with their working to help child victims and/or prevent child abuse. An article in *People* features a former Miss America, “discuss[ing] her lifelong secret that she was sexually abused by her father between the ages of 5 and 18. Her desire to work through her feelings of shame has prompted her to speak out” (Van Derbur Alter 1991).

**Abuse of Children Internationally.** *Newsweek* (n = 10) and *Time* (n = 7) published the most stories in this area. Most stories in this category featured the problems of child abuse and maltreatment in developing countries, in relation to sex tourism, corrupt and problematic international adoption practices, or child labor. These stories suggest that children are worse-off in other lands, particularly poor ones. Thus in this dramatic story from *Time*, “the woman had abandoned the boy, leaving him with her parents in a remote village in Thailand—until she needed money. Then, her mother said, ‘she came out of the blue and told me that she would give him away...for...$260’” (*Time* 2000).”

**Themes of Child Abuse Stories**

Although there are obvious differences within and across publications, what emerges is the extent to which the child abuse stories in high-circulation U.S. magazines continue to emphasize child abuse as a pervasive problem that should elicit panic, caused by damaged individuals with moral defects, with individual causes and individual solutions. Table 2 shows the top three categories of abuse for each of the magazines in the study. This table reveals that for each magazine (with the exception of *Parents*), stories in the categories involving the statistically rarest forms of child abuse, Kidnapping/Murder/Extreme Abuse and Online Predators/Child Molesters/Sex Offenders, are in the top three most common story categories. Only 4.6% of child abuse involves stranger perpetrators, according to 2012 federal data, yet these cases are the primary focus in these two story categories. In *Parents* magazine, the most common category is Preventing and Reporting Abuse, another area that is not related to the statistical or other realities of child abuse. These stories overwhelmingly suggest that parents should be more vigilant and aware of child abuse in order to protect their children, and gives them tips to keep tabs on the threats of the adults the children know, outside of the home and family, and ignoring the reality that abuse is strongly linked to poverty and other stressors. Moreover, the vast majority of child abuse (84.5%) actually involves parents (including adoptive, biological, step-parents, and unmarried partners of parents) or other relatives (6.1%), and only about 1% of perpetrators of child abuse involve teachers, coaches, other professionals or daycare providers that are the focus of these articles when they aren’t focusing on stranger danger (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012, p. 71-71).

There are, however, three categories of stories that are inherently critical of some larger structural or narrative context. These are composed by pieces on the Catholic Church, false allegations of abuse, and child abuse in developing countries. While the majority of even this subset of stories often remain in the realm of human interest even when they touch on social or cultural issues—at least in these publications - they reveal the potential for a telling more nuanced, realistic, and accurate stories about child abuse. For example, the stories about false allegations overwhelming accent the personal experiences of someone mistakenly charged with child abuse, and the fight to clear his or her name, but they also touch on the context of hysteria that makes these cases all too common. In turn, the stories about the Catholic Church tend to stress the need to punish abusive priests (and/or how the church failed to act quickly enough) or the terrible experiences of one person and the lasting effects of the abuse, yet they also hesitantly and timidly begin to address the structural reasons sexual abuse was tolerated and overlooked for too long. The stories about abuse in developing countries and the problems of sex trafficking are also more willing to connect problems of child abuse to poverty and structural problems, even if this is caused by an ability and willingness to be more objective and critical about others.

It is useful therefore to exclude these three sub-categories—because the articles they include do not focus on purely individual cases—and to assess the remaining 400 personal-interest articles, which make up 74% of all child abuse stories. Table 3

shows the child abuse story sub-categories, excluding these three areas, in descending order of frequency. These 400 stories can be divided into two key areas:

1. Descriptive/narrative tales of children being abused (bad parents, abusive teachers, bad celebrities, bad cults, evil sex predators, child murderers, sexual tourists, child pornographers, or online dangers); or
2. Descriptive/narrative tales of adults overcoming the effects of abuse (telling their own stories and/or volunteering, adopting, donating to charity, saving children, getting therapy, writing memoirs, confronting abusers, punishing abusers, or reporting abusers).

These stories also leave us with a terrifying and unresolvable dilemma. They tell us that that the family is the only locus where attempts to protect children pay off—while it is also a particularly propitious context for allowing harm to come to children. In other words, home is the safest place, because there are predators virtually everywhere in the outside world, but, simultaneously, it is the least safe place, because predators also lie within the home, in the form of online threats, family members, babysitters, etc. Thus, there is virtually no way to protect our children from the good adults who love them and the bad ones who hate them. This dilemma leaves us with an overwhelming sense of anxiety and suspicion about everyone around us. Further, Table 3 highlights that stories about abusive parents comprise only 13% of stories of abuse, yet data shows that almost all (84.5%) of child abuse involves parents themselves. Therefore, there stories not only promote fear, but they give us a lopsided idea about the realities of most abuse, and distort public understanding of child abuse. In concrete terms, this helps explain why there is widespread support for sex offender policies targeting threats from strangers, and little support for policies that support poor families, because the media story about child abuse ignores the reality of child maltreatment and family poverty as well as the fact that the vast majority of abuse happens in the home itself.

Although there are obvious drawbacks to studying only the highest-circulation magazines, they do offer a meaningful lens through which we can see this unanswerable dichotomy. These stories, with lurid details and ominous headlines, are exciting to read. They are classic “true crime” stories, like those about Katie Beers, who spent 17 days locked in the basement of a pedophile before being saved, or Elizabeth Smart, who spent years with a polygamous pedophile before being saved (and then being on the cover of *People* magazine).

Even stories about the decline in child sexual abuse warn parents that children are still in danger and they must be mindful. One such case is the recent *Newsweek* article about the decline in sexual abuse cases. The story warned parents the statistical drop in case does not mean they can relax; two recent high-profile cases involving teachers/coaches are significant by “alerting still more people to watch for abuse,” and ends on the note that “the more often someone blows the whistle, the more children are kept safe. And the more likely that the offender will get help. Because the stranger is rarely the danger. It's the depressed, impulsive uncle or teenager or dad next door” (Graff 2012). Thus what the decrease in child sexual abuse indicates would actually be an increase, because the reality is that we aren’t doing a good enough job catching the sex predators around us. The message we get, then, is not, as the headline puts it, “Child Molestation Is on the Wane,” but rather that we are letting more child molesters into our lives because we don’t realize that literally our own neighbors, such as “the dad next door,” are out to harm and corrupt our children.

**Discussion**

The problem with this coverage is that while, on one level, it appears to just be pulp-y and harmless and a way to entice readers, it also changes behavior and relationships between adults and kids. All adults are under suspicion, and all kids are potential victims in an *Amber Alert* scenario. The parents in the *Boston Globe* article noted in the introduction might appear over-protective and even pathological, but their behavior actually makes sense in the context of these headlines. There is virtually no recognition that crimes against children, particularly serious abuse, are related in any way to the stress brought on by poverty or lack of preventative services. So we respond with fear, seeing every adult as a potential abuser and every child as a potential victim, and we pass legislation that make it *appear* that children are safer, like Megan’s Law and residency restrictions for sex offenders—measures that are costly, ineffective, and address psychological and emotional impulses rather than social problems.

These stories are rooted both in the significance of individual narratives to provoke social responses, and in the historical shift ever the more to demonize child abusers, and particularly child sex offenders, as the ultimate “other.” Scholars such as Philip Jenkins (2004) have recognized the culture of “moral panic” about child molesters as a relatively new phenomenon. In his book, *Moral Panic‬: Changing Concepts of the Child Molester in Modern America*, Jenkins argues that we used to view those who sexually abused children as troubled individuals in need of therapy and help, and not as the monsters and vicious psychopaths we read about in popular media today.

A recent study, *Sex Fiends, Perverts, and Pedophiles: Understanding Sex Crime Policy* *in America*, by sociologist Chrysanthi Leon (2011), outlines how the public has historically supported policies aimed at therapy and rehabilitation rather than the draconian punishments we seek today. Researchers debated the effects of child abuse, and some argued that the harm caused by abuse was not always or necessarily the most devastating thing to happen to children. Leon argues that the shift in thinking about child abusers is due to the post-1980 view that the experience of child abuse, particularly child sexual abuse, is unquestionably and profoundly traumatic, has lifelong consequences. Moreover, punishing abusers in the harshest way possible simultaneously came to be seen as a crucial strategy in the prevention of future offenses and the only way victims could hope to heal. In fact, Leon points out that before 1980, it was common to base the dangerousness of a molester “on whether the child experienced any harm or on whether the offender might use force in the future (p. 74).” Like other theorists, Leon attributes the current attitude about sex offenders, which views them as freakish monsters devoid of human characteristics, as related not only to the work of feminists and child advocates who sought to humanize and support previously ignored victims, but to the growing pro-victim and anti-offender movement in psychiatry and criminal justice. The convergence of these factors in the late 1970s led, Leon believes, to “the assumption that sexual deviance would progress from noncontact to contact offenses, and from offenses that caused minor to major harm (p. 74).”

In *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media*, Anne Rothe argues that the talk shows that started in the 1980s, such as *Oprah Winfrey*, *Geraldo*, and *Phil Donohue*, ushered in a new era of stories about abuse. According to Rothe, these TV programs featured stories about abuse, with an emphasis on turning victims of trauma into survivors. When victims revealed the details of personal sufferings, they became survivors because they told the most horrible secrets that would otherwise have destroyed them. Rothe insightfully concludes, though, that when victims confess what happened to them, there ensues a media spectacle that—and this is most significant—makes victims/survivors (and those watching) uninterested in “the larger socio-economic causes of what they subjectively experience as personal problems” (Rothe 2011:60). The sensational stories we read about child abuse have, sadly, the same effect. We focus obsessively on the details of cases, yet fail to understand how to prevent abuse. The random and bizarre stories told in the media foster a public unable to think clearly or rationally about child abuse, gripped with fear because there appears to be no solution or cause. In a paper written over a decade ago, economists Christina Paxson and Jane Waldfogel (1999) found that cutting welfare benefits placed children at increased risk for maltreatment, and find that children in states that cut welfare benefits see an increase in child neglect cases. They hypothesize that forcing parents (particularly single mothers with absent fathers) off welfare and into jobs that don’t pay more than welfare causes parental stress and can harm children. Nevertheless, “pro-family” candidates like Mitt Romney continue to push for more welfare reform, even though welfare reforms in 1996 cut benefits so severely that by 2010, only 27 of ever 100 families with children in poverty even received welfare benefits, a drastic drop from the 68 out of every 100 families in 1996 (Klein, 2012). Political discourse about welfare reform focuses on how helping poor families discourages parents from working, even though data shows that cutting welfare pushes more families into poverty and puts children at risk for maltreatment.

Anthropologist Jared Diamond (2012) places these attitudes in a historical and cultural context with his observations of small-scale, hunter-gatherer societies where children are treated not as possessions to be protected but as autonomous human beings allowed to take risks and learn from their mistakes. Diamond correctly observes that letting young children have the freedom to interact with children of all ages and different sexes and to take care of each other creates responsible adults and parents with ample childcare experience. Clearly, there are profound differences between these small-scale societies and our own, but it is useful to examine them in order to see that there serious drawbacks to the desire to protect and save children at all costs. The anxiety associated with childrearing is displaced, because being exposed to danger and threat has the potential prepare children for adulthood. When we read about child abuse, we respond with overprotective and ineffective efforts to save our children, and we are less likely to interact with the world in a way that helps our children and those of others.

**Concluding Statements**

Sadly, this trend does not seem to be changing for the better, even as researchers continue to document the irrationality of polices and legislation related to child protection. New laws condemn adults to prison or institutions *for life* for viewing child pornography online, even when there is no evidence or claim that they have ever touched a child (and even when the images are downloaded accidently, as many defendants claim). Yet it is unacceptable to even question these policies without being accused of being anti-child or anti-victim or anti-survivor. As the *Boston Globe* article about parental anxiety about child molesters concludes, “even as education increases, and abuse rates drop, many parents say the only time they feel truly safe is when their kids are in view. ‘Their lives can be destroyed so quickly,’ said Christine Nolan, a Somerville mother of three who supervises as many of their activities as possible. ‘If I can prevent that, I’m going to. They’re all I have’.” (Teitell, 2012).

What is most damaging, though, is not just that parents worry incessantly and unnecessarily about their children, thus changing relationships between adults and children, but that these stories lead to the documented injustice for those involved with the child protection system. Further, they also result in increased support for ineffective and also extraordinarily expensive policies (like Amber Alerts and Megan’s Laws) as well as a child protective system that emphasizes investigating child abuse instead of social service delivery.

To return to our title: what do we read about when we read about child abuse? Terrifying stories that captivate us. The complicated causes of the vast majority of all forms of child abuse are not compelling to pore over in print media or see analyzed on TV. Reportage on the need for policies that support families is dull in comparison to lurid tales. Stories of abductions, kidnappings, and child murder are horrific, and readers can’t help consuming them, any more than those driving by a car crash can keep themselves from rubbernecking. It is equally tempting to vote for politicians who promise to develop policies to stop the sex predators they claim are all around us. The prevalence of these stories suggests that instances of abuse are everyday occurrences instead of the exceedingly rare, extreme events they actually are.

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