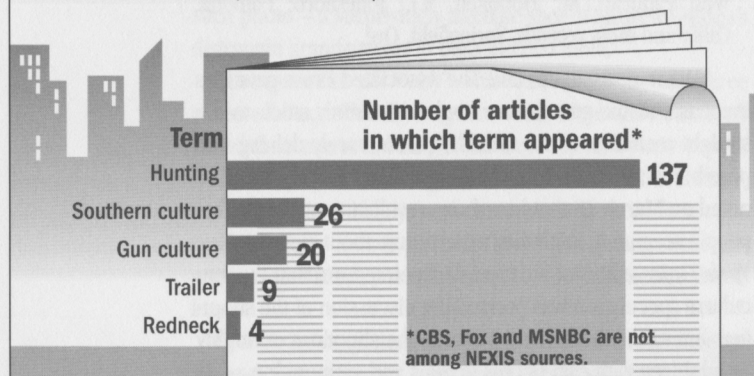


Few demeaning terms found

Jonesboro residents complained that stereotypical and derogatory terms were used to describe them, their community and the South in articles about the shootings at Westside Middle School. A NEXIS search of 870 Jonesboro articles from newspapers, wire services, magazines and television from March 24-31 found the terms shown here, but others, such as "barefoot," "good ol' boys," "Li'l Abner" and "white trash," did not turn up.



Jeff Dionise

sage oftentimes associated with the hunting culture, and the South does kind of go ahead and expound the notion of the gun culture much more vigorously than just about every other part of the country, except for the West."

The news media's emphasis on the Southern gun culture angle evoked deep resentment in the community.

"A lot of fingers were pointed at the 'gun culture,'" author Dave Grossman, a Jonesboro resident, said. "And yet the one finger that wasn't pointed was the media pointing the finger back at themselves, particularly the network news."

Stan Mitchell, a reporter for *The Jonesboro Sun*, said, "I don't care for them referring to us as all 'gun toting.' I don't own a gun. I know a lot of people who don't own guns in this city. We're a rural state. A lot of people do own guns."

Another *Sun* reporter, Paul Holmes, said, "I guess as a Southerner, and a lifelong hunter, [the Southern gun culture angle] sort of offended me. I'm curious to hear what the explanation would be if it happened in the Northeast or in the far West. It's a pretty glib explanation, and it's convenient."

But *U.S. News & World Report's* Jonah Blank, one of the main writers of the April 6 story, said the magazine's characterization of the boys' actions was appropriate. He said the shootings were compared to deer hunting because Golden was an "avid hunter whose family chose to photograph him in hunting clothing at a very young age; the kids were dressed in hunting camouflage at the time of their capture immediately after the shooting; the alleged killers set up a concealed ambush to shoot their targets, much as deer hunters might; the two children were apprehended with a variety of hunting rifles; [and] deer hunting is a very popular sport in the area."

He continued, "We are not surprised that some might object to the suggestion that gun and hunting culture (which we note is prevalent in, but not unique to, the South) might have played a part in the recent tragedies. [But] the task of a good journalist is to ask questions that people sometimes do not wish to answer. ... Why is it acceptable for commentators

to attribute urban violence to the supposed 'values of the black inner city,' but not acceptable to ask whether community values might play a part when the killers are white and live in rural areas?"

Some journalists and columnists resisted the gun culture story line. *The Washington Post's* John Schwartz, who covered the story in Jonesboro, wrote a column in which he said that he "grew frustrated as I tuned into the national television newscasts and picked up the national newsweeklies and saw story after story that laid out the causes starkly and simply. ... Most commonly, stories blamed some combination of guns and violent Southern culture."

Schwartz said he knew of reporters who wrote stories that didn't point at the gun culture and "were stymied by higher-ups. ... One who showed real compassion for the people he was covering was told by his editors that they wanted him to focus on 'why young white crackers are killing one another.'" Schwartz declined to name the reporters or news organizations he referred to in his column.

In a column in *U.S. News & World Report*, John Leo lamented the news media's desperate search for easy explanations. "Why did the Jonesboro massacre happen? Nobody seemed to have much of a clue. Details were sketchy, but everyone jumped in anyway, offering standard responses."

He said journalists, commentators and experts jumped on gun access too quickly. "Children's access to guns makes me nervous, too, but so do commentators who speak as though guns themselves turn innocents into killers. In the South and West, hundreds of thousands of children grow up hunting with rifles and never shoot anybody."

John Troutt Jr., editor of *The Jonesboro Sun*, said in an interview that he thinks the national and international media seized on the "Southern gun culture" conclusion because they focused on the shooters, not the victims, and in doing so, tried to find answers for a story that may not have an answer.

"The shooters are in jail; they're not going anywhere," Troutt said. "Certainly, we'd like to know why they did it, but there were no answers out there. We interviewed psychologists and that kind of people and ran the stories ... but no, you were not going to get any real answers. The victims' stories — the town story — all of that was far, far more important."

— Christy Mumford Jerding and Cheryl Arvidson



Dave Grossman: "A lot of fingers were pointed at the 'gun culture.' And yet the one finger that wasn't pointed was the media pointing the finger back at themselves."