

Media saw no story in girls-as-targets angle

Some Jonesboro residents complained at a "Speak Out" that by emphasizing the "Southern gun culture" theory, journalists missed an important aspect of the story: that the suspects specifically targeted girls in a gender-based attack.

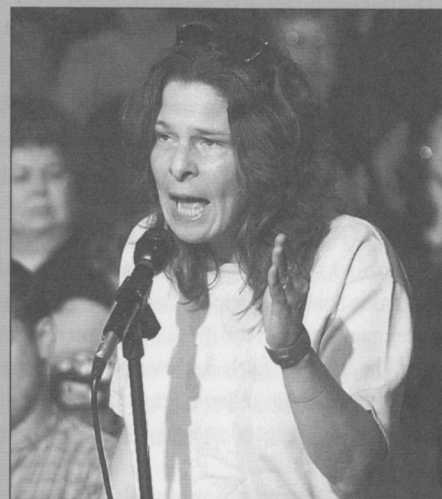
"I have waited and waited and waited to hear the world discuss what we in Jonesboro know was part of this attack," said Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman, an assistant professor of history at Arkansas State University. "[We] know that this was not just some 'random event.' ... 11-, 13- and 12- year-old girls ... are out there on the killing field. ... This was a concerted strike on the girls."

One of Wilkerson-Freeman's students, Mindy Anadell, called the attack "a massacre against females. ... I think that the media did not do appropriate coverage of how boys are taught to treat girls, about how men are taught to treat women."

In initial reports of the shootings, most of the national news media said that most of the victims apparently were female, and that 13-year-old suspect Mitchell Johnson reportedly was angry over a breakup with his girlfriend.

In later accounts, the idea of adolescent male anger toward female classmates was mentioned as a possible contributing factor in the killings, but the theory rarely was examined further. The availability of guns, and the suspects' ability to use them, was the dominant explanation for the attack.

- *U.S. News & World Report* (April 6) mentioned Johnson's rejection by a female classmate on the third page of its main story, but did not pursue the angle. Three paragraphs from the end of the story, other possible reasons for the attack were mentioned, including media glamorization of violence and misogyny.
- *Newsweek* (April 6) reported that a teacher said the suspects would know that girls would be using the exit they had targeted.
- *The New York Times* (March 26) cited mental health professionals who said the attack could have been the trickle-down effect of adult sexual patterns of stalking and abuse against women. But that was only one of several theories put forward.
- During "Talk of the Nation" (March 31) on National Public Radio, Ray Suarez noted that a listener had been angered that the media had not talked about the boys targeting the girls, but there was no further discussion of the topic. The rest of the show focused on gun rights.
- NBC News' "Saturday Today" (March 28) program featured an interview with a psychologist who talked about boys' naturally aggressive behavior.
- CNN's "The World Today" (March 25) featured a child psychiatrist who talked about the "echoes of domestic violence" in the crime.



Sarah Wilkerson-Freeman: "I have waited and waited and waited to hear the world discuss what we in Jonesboro know was part of this attack. ... This was a concerted strike on the girls."

As scores of journalists searched feverishly for fresh approaches to the story, the idea of boys targeting girls received only passing mention. Whether the shootings were a "concerted strike" on girls may not be known unless the suspects choose to talk about it.

— Christy Mumford Jerding