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## **Saving the Children**

### **Media Coverage of Children's Welfare Issues**

How have the media covered children's welfare issues? To find out we analyzed all stories on children that appeared in the television network newscasts, the *Washington Post*, and the weekly news magazines during the first six months of 1991. We examined 353 news items, including 144 stories broadcast on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news, 153 articles in the *Washington Post*, and another 56 in *Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report*.

#### **Major findings:**

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■ **Bad News** Four out of five sources criticized the Bush administration's handling of children's issues. *Page 5*

■ **Worse News** 82 percent of sources gave the American education system a failing grade. *Page 5*

■ **Better News** Policies favored by liberals fared better than those put forth by conservatives... *Page 4*

■ **More News** But conservative policies were debated more than three times as often as liberal ones. *Page 4*

#### **The Clarence Thomas Nomination**

■ **Borking Thomas** Clarence Thomas's news coverage was more negative than Robert Bork's pre-hearing coverage in 1987. *Page 6*

■ **Whose News?** Thomas's coverage was more positive in the *Washington Post* and CNN than the *New York Times* and the "big three" TV networks. *Page 6*



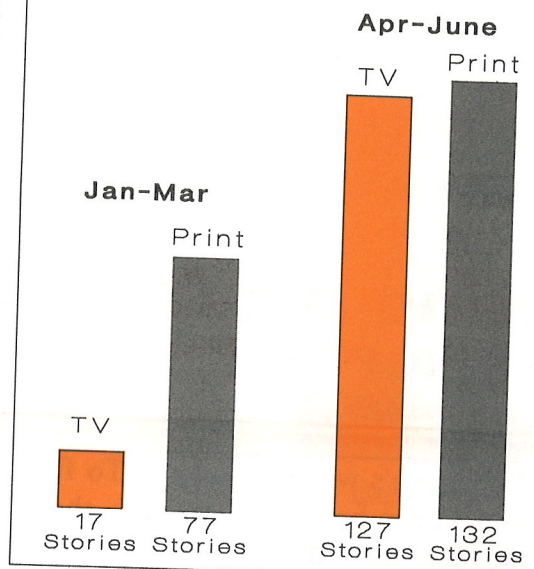
## Child - Centered News

The plight of American children came to the forefront of the news agenda during 1991. With attention drawn to the crisis facing Kurdish children after the Persian Gulf war, along with a long anticipated report from the National Commission on Children, the news media focused coverage on the youngest members of our society.

We analyzed all stories about children from January through June of this year. Included in the study were the evening newscasts of the three television networks, the *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. Television aired 144 stories on the topic with a cumulative airtime of six hours and 27 minutes. Largely due to a weeklong special focus on children during June, ABC led its competitors by airing 47 percent of all TV pieces (67 stories, 2 hrs and 56 min). CBS followed with 49 stories, but featured longer stories on average; two hours and 21 minutes of coverage. NBC aired 28 stories running one hour and ten minutes.

The *Washington Post*, because of its local as well as national focus, featured far and away the most coverage of children's issues (153 stories, over 3300 column inches). The news

### Coverage Over Time TV vs. Print

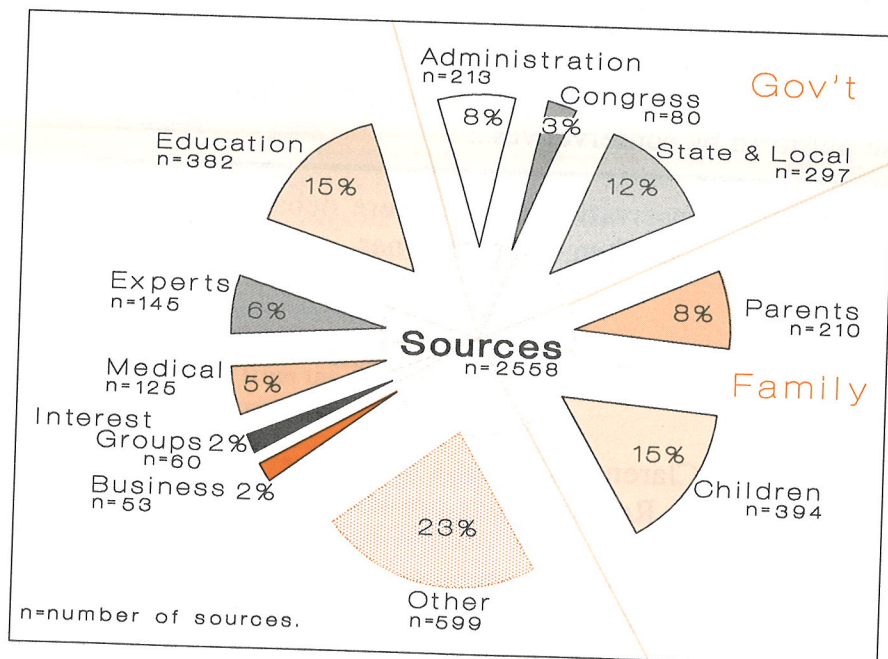


magazines together totaled only 56 articles. (*Newsweek's* special issue on children boosted its coverage. In fact, this issue alone accounted for a majority of all magazine stories.)

## Casualties of War

While innocence may be the first casualty of war, news coverage of the innocents was a casualty of the most recent war. Our study found fewer than one hundred stories (94) about children during the first three months of this year. In fact, television aired only 17 during this period.

The constraints faced by television news in wartime were made clear by the dramatic increase in coverage from April through June. While coverage picked up in both television and print, the networks lagged far behind (17 vs 77 stories) early on, yet achieved virtual parity with print (127 vs 132 stories) in the later months.



## Look Who's Talking

The news media quoted or cited children more often than any other single category of sources. Family members, those most involved in the welfare of children, accounted for 23 percent of all sources. Children were the most numerous (15%), followed by parents (8%).

Government officials were cited about as frequently as family members, 590 times or 23 percent of all sources. Unlike most policy discussions, however, the bulk of these voices did not come from Washington. State and local governments with 297 mentions (12% of all sources) were quoted more times than the administration and the Congress (213 and 80 citations respectively) combined.



Sources from educational institutions, such as teachers and principals, spoke 382 times or 15 percent of the total, while experts (such as scholars at "think tanks") were featured six percent of the time. Medical sources (5%), interest groups (2%), and business sources (2%) filled out the list of sources.

## From Tots to Teens

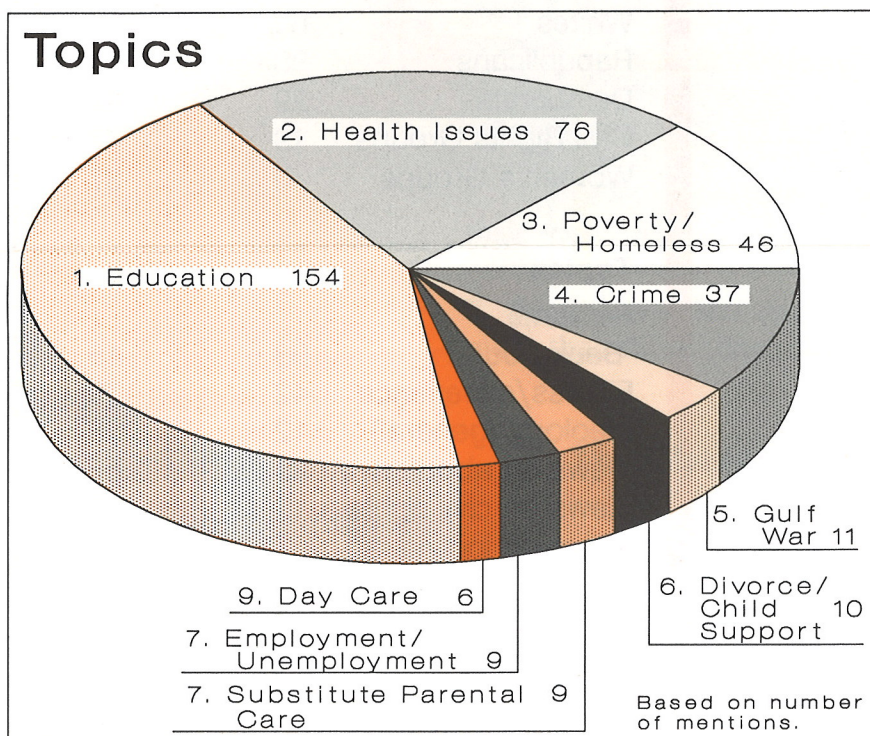
Education was the preeminent issue in news about children. Budgetary problems and innovations in schooling contributed to the 154 discussions of educational issues. This was more than twice the attention given to children's health issues (76 appearances), the next most frequently featured topic. Discussions of crack babies, AIDS prevention, and immunizations all contributed to this tally. The plight of poor and homeless children (46 discussions) struggling with problems of nutrition, and the lack of a stable family unit, ranked third. Crime news (37 mentions) included discussions of juvenile crime and prevention (16 stories), as well as crimes perpe-

trated against children (such as child abuse and neglect, 15 stories). Finally, the culture of crime and violence in which many children live was the subject of six stories.

A second tier of topics included discussions of the Persian Gulf war (11 stories), which was said to be having a negative effect on children, and issues concerning divorce and the need for stricter enforcement of child support payments (10 stories). Youth unemployment and substitute parental care, each with nine mentions, and day care (6 stories) rounded out the list of frequently discussed topics.

## Tough Choices

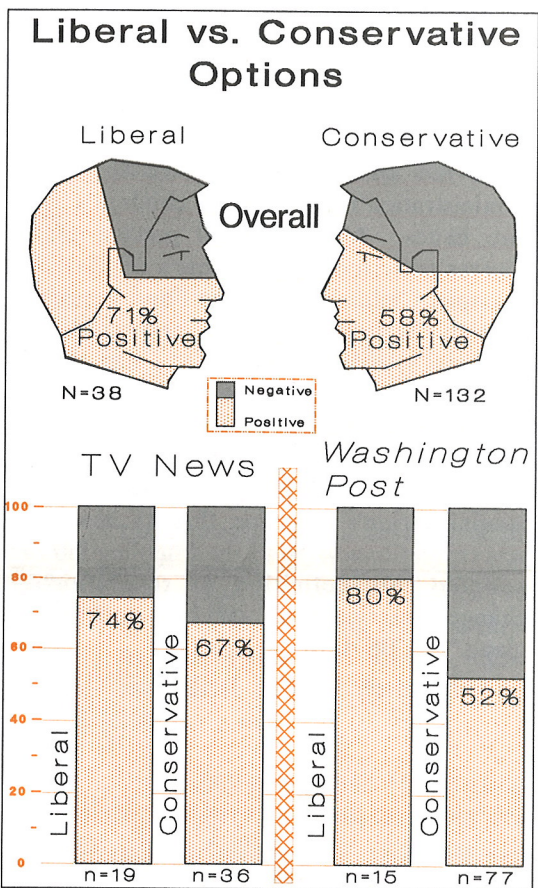
The policy debate revolved around new proposals rather than the efficacy of existing programs. Further, the media dialogue was carried on mainly by sources who advocated their own alternatives rather than criticizing the competition. As a result, most proposals that were deemed newsworthy received relatively good press. Controversial policies ranging from standardized national testing to condom distribution programs were praised by large majorities of news sources. For instance, advocates of national testing outnumbered detractors by three to one (75% positive). Thus, the head of the National Endowment for the Humanities argued, "It is very important that we send a message to the education system that says to kids what your teachers are trying to teach you is important." (CBS 4/18) Tax credits to families with children were also frequently debated and received nearly unanimous support (90% positive). According to ABC's Rebecca Chase, "Changing the tax code would be a simpler way for government to offer middle class parents real help. It will be costly, but it may be the price of keeping families strong." (4/11) Proposals that offered students a choice of schools to attend received almost two to one positive coverage. A former New York City school official said choice can influence student performance because, "The key is ownership, and ownership comes from choice." (U.S. News 5/27)





Other policy options generated lively debate. Solutions such as magnet schools (69% positive), condom programs in schools (67% positive), and school uniforms (80% positive) all received passing grades. A few policy options, however, were soundly rejected. Corporal punishment was criticized by almost four out of five sources. As one psychologist argued, "School discipline should be instilled through the mind, not the behind." (*Washington Post* 4/11) The use of public tax dollars to support private schools (60% negative) and the policy of self-segregating schools to increase awareness of one's culture (57% negative) were panned by the majority of critics.

Some of these proposals, such as funding for "Head Start," received substantial support on both sides of the political spectrum. But others have a partisan cast. For example, tax vouchers for private school payments are favored mainly by conservatives, while support for self-segregated minority schools comes mainly from the political left. To determine how each side's pet proposals fared in the media, we compared evaluations of liberal options (parental leave, condom distribution, multiculturalism, etc.) with those of conservative options (corporal punishment, school "choice," stricter sentencing for juvenile offenders, etc.). Overall, liberal solutions fared better than conservative ones, by 71 percent to



58 percent good press. But both sides received support from a majority of sources evaluating them. Further, conservative proposals had far more visibility, generating 132 opinions compared to only 38 opinions on liberal proposals. Politically neutral or nonpartisan options got the best press of all -- 82 percent positive evaluations.

The different media carried somewhat different messages about partisan proposals. The television networks gave liberal solutions only slightly more favorable coverage (74% vs 67% positive). By contrast, sources in the *Washington Post* supported liberal views 80 percent of the time, compared to only 52 percent support for conservative notions. (Debate over these proposals in the news magazines was too infrequent to permit meaningful comparisons).

Policy Options		
	% Pos	N
Increase "Head Start" Funding	100%	7
Fund Immunization	100%	8
Tax Credits to Families	90%	31
Uniforms in Schools	80%	10
National Test	75%	48
Day Care	71%	7
Magnet Schools	69%	16
Condom Programs	67%	12
School "Choice"	64%	33
Self-Segregated Schools	43%	7
Public Funds for Private Schools	40%	10
Corporal Punishment	22%	27

Based on opinions by news sources.



## "Kids Ain't Us"

Despite majority support for the more conservative solutions to the problems of children, few gave high marks to the Bush administration's handling of children's welfare issues. More than 80 percent of all sources criticized the President's efforts. For example, Children's Defense Fund President Marian Wright Edelman criticized the President's budget, saying it, "... has chosen to ignore last year's message of hope and continue the budgetary neglect of the 1980's." (*Washington Post* 1/3) Similarly, Rep. Richard Gephardt (D-MO) contradicted the administration's assertion that its new plan was revolutionary: "Had the founding fathers adopted this definition of revolutionary change, America would still be a part of England." (CBS 4/18)

### Administration Handling

#### Report Card

Date January - June  
Name Bush Administration  
Subject Handling of Children's Welfare Issues

Grade

Positive 19%

Negative 81%

N=21

Based on opinions by news sources.

Kevin was found one day climbing into a trash can. According to *Post* reporter Tracy Thompson, "Asked what he was doing, the boy said he was worthless and wanted to be thrown away." (2/7)

By contrast, anecdotes featuring programs or community activities (31 anecdotes) were seen sunny side up. Thus, ABC highlighted a Missouri program designed to teach parenting skills. One expert declared, "Any program that reaches the parents at a critical time and gives those parents a sense of being important to the child is going to change that child's future." Driving home the program's effectiveness, Rebecca Chase reported, "Missouri has found that starting early is paying off. Test scores are up, child abuse is down, but perhaps the most long-lasting result is that parents who get involved early, stay involved." (ABC, 4/3) As this story illustrates, successful educational experiments were the most frequent source of upbeat anecdotes. Conversely, downbeat anecdotes usually focused on the problems of poverty, crime, and inadequate health care.

## Intimate Moments

Coverage of children's issues focused on individual experiences as well as more abstract policy debates. The news frequently humanized this story through personal vignettes and anecdotes that illustrated broader issues or social concerns. Although descriptive in tone, such anecdotes may impart a moral about the needs of children and the effectiveness of social and political programs designed to meet those needs.

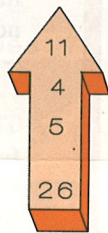
Almost 25 percent of all stories contained such anecdotes. In fact, 40 percent of ABC's coverage included some anecdotal discussion. The news media used anecdotes both to dramatize the problems of children and to illustrate potential solutions. The struggles of children (36 anecdotes) and families (17 anecdotes) were the most frequent subjects of downbeat vignettes. For example, the *Washington Post* reported on a young product of the city's foster care system. Having spent time in five foster families, eight-year-old

### Anecdotes

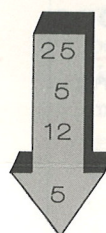
Doing Well

Subject

Doing Poorly



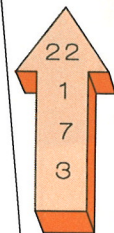
Child  
Adult  
Family  
Program/  
Community



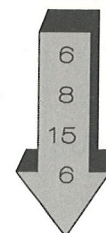
Positive

Issue

Negative



Education  
Health Issues  
Poverty  
Crime



Based on number of anecdotes.

## Blaming The System

Although anecdotes about education focused mainly on positive experiences, debate over the state of the present educational system was markedly negative. Among the 17 sources who evaluated education in America today, 82 percent found the system wanting, either in absolute terms or in comparison with other countries. For example, columnist George Will charged, "Never has the nation been safer, and never before has the nation been graduating students less well educated ... Today the principal threat to America is America's public education establishment." (*Washington Post* 6/2)



## Doubting Thomas

### Initial Media Coverage of Supreme Court Nominee Clarence Thomas

Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas's initial media coverage has been more negative than Robert Bork's was at a comparable stage of his 1987 confirmation battle. We coded all evaluations of Judge Thomas that appeared in 157 news stories from the ABC, CBS, NBC and CNN evening newscasts, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*, from his July 1 nomination through August 15. We also coded separately all 35 editorials and op-ed pieces that ran in the *Post* and *Times* during this period.

Among all 337 evaluations of Thomas by news sources, three out of five (60%) were negative. Sample positive: "the best man for the job." (George Bush, *Washington Post*, 7/2) Sample negative: "an extremist who is out of step with the Bill of Rights." (NOW official, NBC, 7/6)

By comparison, Bork's pre-hearing assessments in 1987 were evenly balanced between positive and negative assessments. (*Media Monitor*, 9/87) Although most sources condemned Bork's conservative philosophy, a majority praised his judicial abilities. But most sources have criticized both Thomas's ideology (88% negative) and his abilities (58% negative). Only his personal background, i.e. his rise from poverty to prominence, has consistently received plaudits.

Judge Thomas's press was mainly negative at all seven media outlets analyzed. But he fared worst - roughly two to one negative - at the big three networks and the *New York Times*. The coverage was more balanced at the *Washington Post* and on CNN. Among sources, his praise came mainly from the Bush administration and Congressional Republicans. Opposition was varied most frequently by Congressional Democrats, civil rights groups, and women's groups. Finally, he fared better in the opinion pages than the news sections. In both the *Times* and the *Post*, a majority of evaluations in opinion articles favored Thomas.

### Judging Clarence Thomas

	Percent Positive	Number of Evaluations
News Stories	40%	337
Opinion Articles*	54	65
<b>Outlet</b>		
ABC	34	35
CBS	36	28
NBC	33	24
CNN	44	34
<i>Washington Post</i>	46	113
<i>New York Times</i>	36	103
<b>Sources</b>		
Blacks	41	96
Whites	60	108
Republicans	93	57
Democrats	29	42
Civil Rights Groups	19	77
Women's Groups	0	37
<b>Topics</b>		
Personal		
Background	93	15
Fitness/experience	42	79
Ideology (general)	12	25
Views on abortion	25	12
Views on civil rights	17	35
Views on individual rights	0	12

\*Print editorials and op-ed pieces. All other figures are evaluations by sources in news stories.