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Portrait of a Drug: Representations of Crack in the New York Times, 1985-1995

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Introduction

As an eleven-year-old, he tried alcohol; at twelve he smoked marijuana; and by sixteen he was stealing car radios to support his cocaine habit.[1] Over a four-month period he spent $4,000 on crack and cocaine.[2] This boy from Long Island was given a choice: jail or drug rehabilitation—he chose the latter.[3] Janet, an 18 year old from Harlem, had a different choice. Janet found out she was pregnant around the same time that crack became more prevalent in her neighborhood.[4] She quickly became a crack addict and her addiction continued even after the birth of her son—a baby who was born with traces of cocaine in his system.[5] Janet's mother gave her two options: get help or she would sue for custody of her grandchild. Janet went into a residential treatment program located in upstate New York while her mother cared for her baby.[6]

Baby X was not as lucky as Janet's son. Abandoned at birth, he weighed less than two pounds and by the time he was four months old, he had lived through two major surgeries and two major infections.[7] Baby X was born addicted to crack.[8] This child was one of many people pulled unwillingly into a growing crisis in New York City. Juanita Rodriguez, a 50-year-old life long resident of the Bronx, was sitting outside playing dominoes with her sisters, her friends and her husband, when a gunfight erupted on a known drug corner.[9] An unknown man "sprayed" the

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[1] Phyllis Bernstein, "Coming to Grips With Crack Abuse," *New York Times*, November 26, 1987.

[2] Bernstein, "Coming to Grips With Crack Abuse."

[3] Bernstein, "Coming to Grips With Crack Abuse."

[4] "Losing a Mother to Crack: Quick and Tragic Process," *New York Times*, February 9, 1987.

[5] "Losing a Mother to Crack: Quick and Tragic Process."

[6] "Losing a Mother to Crack: Quick and Tragic Process."

[7] Anna Quindlen, "Hearing The Cries Of Crack," *New York Times*, October 7, 1990.

[8] Quindlen, "Hearing The Cries Of Crack."

[9] Donatella Lorch, "Bronx Woman Killed as Shots Erupt on Street," *New York Times*, October 15, 1990.

scene with semiautomatic weapon fire, striking and killing Juanita.[10] On a different night and in a different borough, Rookie NYPD officer Edward Byrne was also shot and killed—but he was the assailants' target.[11] Officer Byrne was sitting in his patrol car outside the residence of a man from South Jamaica, Queens. This man had shared evidence with the police about crack dealers in his neighborhood and suffered their reprisals—his home had been firebombed twice.[12] A silent car glided up to Officer Byrne with its lights out and its engine cut—five shots were fired, three of which hit the 22-year-old officer in the head.[13] This is only a snapshot of the crack epidemic that the *New York Times* shared with its readership. Collectively, these stories represent some of the most dominant themes contained in the paper's coverage of crack—violence, adolescents succumbing to addiction, pregnant addicts, crack-addicted babies and the mounting costs of their care. New York was represented as a city under siege.

From 1985 through 1995, the *New York Times* made thousands of references to crack, including in-depth multi-week exposés on the drug, articles, editorials and even references to cocaine-related television and advertising. This expansive coverage reflected not only a national concern with a growing drug epidemic, but also the paper's recognition that certain New York City neighborhoods were among the most devastated by the drug's presence. Crack was a local news story with citywide and national implications. As the paper's journalists introduced its educated middle- and upper-class readership[14] to the drug that would become "the scourge of

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[10] Lorch, "Bronx Woman Killed as Shots Erupt on Street."

[11] Joseph P. Fried, "Officer Guarding Drug Witness Is Slain," *New York Times*, February 27, 1988.

[12] Fried, "Officer Guarding Drug Witness Is Slain."

[13] Fried, "Officer Guarding Drug Witness Is Slain."

[14] *See* http://www.nytimes.whsites.net/mediakit/pdfs/newspaper/MRI_NYTreaderprofile.pdf for a break down of the paper's reader demographics.

New York,"[15] it set the tone for coverage in the early years and reinvented crack as a new story, as it focused on different aspects of the drug over the next decade. For many, this confirmed what they were seeing on television and what they were hearing from politicians—that crack cocaine was devastating urban centers throughout the United States. For New Yorkers that read the *New York Times*, the coverage personalized the crack epidemic—it named the victims of the violence, it put a face on those terrorizing their city, and it illustrated how the city and its services were straining under the weight of crack-related violence, crime, and health risks. For many individuals, the news media, including the *New York Times,* was their only introduction to the crisis of crack, and they relied on these institutions to educate and inform them as they shaped their opinions and sometimes demanded action from their politicians.

As the crack epidemic waned in the early 1990s, a host of academics began analyzing the media's portrayal of the drug. Craig Reinarman and Harry Levine were two of the earliest social scientists to examine the media's representation of crack. In a scathing critique, these sociologists contended that media and political attention focused on crack because of the drug's link to poor minority urban communities.[16] In several articles and in an edited volume on crack, Reinarman and Levine argued that media outlets and politicians, seeking economic and political benefits, generated crack hysteria through their construction of the epidemic.[17] Even while admitting that crack had a variety of terrible consequences for certain people and in some urban neighborhoods, they contended that there was little factual evidence to support the claims made

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[15] Timothy Egan, "Crack's Legacy: A Drug Ran Its Course, Then Hid With Its Users," *The New York Times*, September 19, 1999.

[16] Craig Reinarman and Harry G. Levine, "The Crack Attack: Politics and Media in the Crack Scare," *Crack in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 19.

[17] Craig Reinarman and Harry G. Levine, "The Construction of America's Crack Crisis," in *De-Americanizing Drug Policy: The Search for Alternatives for Failed Repression,* ed. Lorenz Böllinger, (Frankfurt: P. Lang, 1994), *3.

by politicians and news media.[18] Michael Agar, an anthropologist and expert on drug abuse and trend issues, drew a similar conclusion in examining crack's association with African Americans. He noted that while people from varied demographic backgrounds tried crack when it first came out, there was a shift during the 1980s in the "*socially constructed* image" of cocaine users—from attractive affluent white powder cocaine users to minority crack users that were "menacing."[19] However, he concluded that African American communities did bear the brunt of crack's devastation.[20]

Donna Hartman and Andrew Golub examined the way in which the earliest coverage of crack in the print media was disseminated to the public and how this information informed the public's understanding of the crack epidemic. Through a content analysis of the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*, they concluded that news sources perpetuated fallacies or "myths" about crack, including that it was a new drug or purified version of cocaine, that those using crack were compelled to commit property crime, and that drug use, particularly crack use, was linked to inner-city minority adolescents, ignoring the pervasiveness of crack and other drug use among larger segments of society.[21] Further, they found that when corrective information about these myths became available, news media were either slow to correct their mistakes or, in some cases, corrective information was not provided at all.[22] The authors did note, however, that the *New York Times*, in a series of articles, demonstrated its willingness to publish articles on the decline of crack and the epidemic's construction (even though these article were published in the

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[18] Reinarman and Levine, "The Construction of America's Crack Crisis," *3.

[19] Michael Agar, "The Story of Crack: Towards A Theory of Illicit Drug Trends," *Addiction Research and Theory* 11, no. 1 (2003): 19-20.

[20] Agar, 25.

[21] Donna H. Hartman and Andrew Golub, "The Social Construction of the Crack Epidemic in the Print Media," *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 31, no. 4 (Oct-Dec. 1999), 425-426.

[22] Hartman and Golub, 423, 430.

late 1990s).[23]

Marian Meyers explored the way in which African American "crack mothers" were portrayed in the news media.[24] She contended that "paternalistic racism" was dominant in the discourse about African American mothers addicted to crack.[25] She argued that inherent in this rhetoric were statements about race, gender and class yet the articles fail to account for "the relationship between poverty, racism, powerlessness, sexism, violence, and drug abuse," when constructing the image of a poor black woman that "needs to be saved."[26] Drew Humphries also studied the construction of the "crack mother," focusing on their portrayal by prime time news shows.[27] He concluded that while the rate of drug use during pregnancy was higher among black women, more white women overall used drugs while pregnant.[28] For Humphries, the real disparity was in the media's demonization of black woman as "crack mothers," and the treatment of pregnant women. He noted that while women of both races had comparable levels of drug abuse at their first perinatal appointment, black women were much more likely than white women to be tested for illegal drug use at the time of delivery.[29] He concluded that paternalism allowed for merciful treatment of white middle-class pregnant drug users, yet for poor minority users, drug abuse during pregnancy was used as a justification to impinge on these women's reproductive rights.[30]

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[23] Hartman and Golub, 430

[24] Marian Meyers, "Crack Mothers in the News: A Narrative of Paternalistic Racism," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 2004 28, 3 (July 2004): 194-216.

[25] Meyers, 213.

[26] Meyers, 213.

[27] Drew Humphries, "Crack Mothers at 6: Prime-Time News, Crack/Cocaine, and Women," *Violence Against Women* 4, no. 1(February 1998): 57-58.

[28] Humphries, 57.

[29] Humphries, 57-58.

[30] Humphries, 57-58.

Other scholars examined the way in which media portrayal of crime and drugs creates an exaggerated sense of fear among readers and viewers, which in turn impacts political response to a situation. In a study of media representations of crime, Sarah Eschholz contended that both television and print media overrepresented the rate of violent crime because these stories were easy to report, generated high ratings and provided "safe" topics for politicians to embrace.[31] With regards to the crack epidemic, she argued that while drugs were an actual problem, particularly within the inner city, the media generated a "moral panic"—the creation of a threat to societal interests that is introduced to the public through the media—by depicting crack as spreading into "previously safe neighborhoods."[32] She explained that the media plays a significant role in generating a moral panic among the populace by "decontextualizing crimes and publicizing certain crimes in disproportion to their actual occurrence."[33] In the case of the crack epidemic, fear generated harsh law enforcement and legislative action targeting the perceived threat.[34]

Moral Panic

Steven Chermak, a criminal justice scholar, examined the types of officials that were relied upon in constructing the image of crime for public consumption.[35] He argued that since the public relies on news sources to shape its perception of a particular issue, news sources and politicians utilizing the media, construct news stories to further their own "social control agenda."[36] He argued further that financial considerations can direct the type of coverage given to a particular issue—for the crack epidemic, the focus was on inner-city violence as compared

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[31] Sarah Eschholz, "The Media and Fear of Crime: A Survey of the Research," *Univ. Florida Journal of Law and Public Policy*, 9 (Fall 1997): 37-51, 37-38.

[32] Escholz, 49-50.

[33] Escholz, 49-50.

[34] Escholz, 49-50.

[35] Steven Chermak, "The Presentation of Drugs in the News Media: The News Sources Involved in the Construction of Social Problems," *Justice Quarterly* 14, no. 4 (December 1997): 687-718.

[36] Chermak, 688, 716.

to drug treatment because violence and crime control were in sync with the political agenda of the War on Drugs.[37] He stated that it is the interplay between reporters and news sources that determine what social issues are presented to the public and how these issues are conveyed.[38]

There is a general consensus among these scholars that news media not only impacted public perception of the crack epidemic but also exaggerated the actual threat of crack, while failing to explore the more complex social realities behind drug use and class-dependent treatment options available to addicts. Yet, it could also be argued that these scholars oversimplify the very complicated tensions within cities that were greatly impacted by crack use and its associated social ills. Moreover, they fail to account for whether the proximity of the newspaper to crack-infested neighborhoods impacted its coverage. The *New York Times* offers a singular opportunity to explore these questions; New York City was one of the first cities significantly impacted by crack and the paper, based in Manhattan, was at the forefront of covering the crack epidemic. This paper examines the way in which the *New York Times*, a national newspaper reporting on a local news story, constructed its narrative about the crack epidemic.[39] Particularly, this study identifies broad themes that the paper emphasized and how these themes changed over the course of the decade-long coverage of the crack epidemic.[40]

[37] Chermak, 713-714.

[38] Chermak, 716.

[39] A keyword search was performed on ProQuest's historical New York Times database. It was a full text search and each article had to contain both of the words "crack" and "cocaine" somewhere within the text. The results of the full text keyword search were as follows: 1985, 13 articles, only one of which was relevant; 1986, 231 articles; 1987, 160 articles; 1988, 230 articles; 1989, 310 articles; 1990, 242 articles; 1991, 122 articles; 1992, 138 articles; 1993, 108 articles; 1994, 134 articles; 1995, 174 articles.

[40] This paper does not include an analysis of the paper's coverage of international efforts against the cocaine trade, institutional, political or citizen response to the crack epidemic—a fourth theme identified in the research. Since those articles focused more on political rhetoric and less on representations of the drug, they were not included in this study.

Part I

Constructing The Language of Threat

The *New York Times* published its first article about crack on November 29, 1985. This was also one of the earliest published stories about crack in any newspaper. In a seemingly prescient fashion, journalist Jane Gross identified some of the major themes that would surround the coverage of crack over the next ten years, including crack's particular threat to adolescents, its link to urban communities, the fear that crack abuse would spread to suburban and rural America, the correlation between crack use and sexually transmitted diseases, and the sexual degradation of women. The article did not forecast, however, the level of violence surrounding the drug or that crack would become synonymous with poor urban communities and would be used to highlight issues of minority motherhood, families and values.

While noting that the drug had been sold in the Bronx for at least one year, the article focused on "a vulnerable population": two 17-year-old white, college-bound, suburban youth, who, after using crack, missed school, stole from their parents and lied to their friends.[41] This image, in many permutations, came to symbolize the threat of crack. Specifically, that crack would move beyond poor urban neighborhoods like the Bronx and spread not only to surrounding suburban areas but infect America's youth across the entire nation.

A second theme identified by Gross centers on the nature of the drug. Crack was identified as "the wave of the future" for drug abusers seeking the "ultimate high."[42] Crack was depicted as being nearly instantaneously addictive, causing users to go on crack binges.[43] At the time Gross reported on the drug, crack was such a new form of cocaine that the evidence she

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[41] Jane Gross, "A New Purified Form of Cocaine Causes Alarm as Abuse Increases," *The New York Times*, November 29, 1985.

[42] Gross, "A New, Purified Form of Cocaine Causes Alarm as Abuse Increases."

[43] Gross, "A New, Purified Form of Cocaine Causes Alarm as Abuse Increases."

cited to support these claims was anecdotal—provided by a retired police officer working for the New York State Division of Substance Abuse Services and the two crack-using teens, who were in drug rehabilitation. Yet despite the lack of hard evidence, Dr. Washton, the director of addiction research and treatment at Regent Hospital, predicted that crack abuse would become an "epidemic."[44] This word came to dominate the rhetoric about crack and its associated problems between 1985 and 1995.

The article also warned readers about some of the known health implications of using cocaine—coronary arrest, strokes, and possible seizures. It also noted the unknown risks of using crack—a drug described as causing a "compulsion to repeat the experience" of getting high—physiological damage that could come to "people who blow themselves out for days."[45] The medical specialists that Gross interviewed concurred that crack was so "qualitatively and quantitatively" different from powder cocaine "that it is almost like we're talking about a different drug."[46]

Completing the powerful illustrations of crack's dangers, Gross introduces her readers to "crack houses," places one could go to purchase and use crack, engage in "'uncontrollable outrageous' sexual activity," where users, especially women engaged in acts of sexual degradation to support their use.[47] Crack houses symbolized the vilest of crack's hazards to women—rape, prostitution, sexual degradation, sexually transmitted diseases and the spread of HIV/AIDS. From here the discourse would expand into issues of pregnant addicts, crack-addicted babies, absent parents, and the overcrowded foster care system.

The paper's first article on crack was a platform on which the above-identified themes

[44] Gross, "A New, Purified Form of Cocaine Causes Alarm as Abuse Increases."

[45] Gross, "A New, Purified Form of Cocaine Causes Alarm as Abuse Increases."

[46] Gross, "A New, Purified Form of Cocaine Causes Alarm as Abuse Increases."

[47] Gross, "A New, Purified Form of Cocaine Causes Alarm as Abuse Increases."

would expand and evolve to more definitively portray issues of class, race and gender. In a few short years, crack would transform from a threat to upwardly mobile middle and upper class white people to a drug entrenched in the "ghetto," draining society's resources meant to assist those poorest of urban dwellers.

"Crack Addiction Spreads Among the Middle Class"[48]

The question of who would use crack and how far the drug would spread dominated the initial discourse on crack. The *New York Times* portrayed this "threat" by depicting crack as a drug that could corrupt anyone—from business executives to kindergarten teachers. While there were some articles discussing the plight of poor minority neighborhoods and their struggle against crack and the increase in church activism to combat crack,[49] much of the earliest coverage of crack highlighted middle and upper class individuals who were caught using or selling the drug. Police officers were a favored target for this type of coverage.

Six months after the paper published its first article on cocaine, a short article appeared stating that a North Bergen police officer was arrested after delivering a kilo of "raw" cocaine to an operation that manufactured crack.[50] One month later, the paper reported that New York City Police Commissioner, Benjamin Ward, supported unannounced drug testing for all police officers.[51] He also commented that "drugs are the No. 1 crime problem in the city and nation and that the rapid proliferation of crack, a potent form of cocaine, appears to be pushing up the incidence of violent crime."[52] Neither Commissioner Ward nor the paper provided any concrete

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[48] Peter Kerr, "Crack Addiction Spreads Among the Middle Class," *New York Times*, June 8, 1986.

[49] *See* Ari L. Goldman, "Clergy Expands Its Role in Fight Against Crack," *New York Times*, August 4, 1986.

[50] "Officer Seized in Drug Case" *New York Times*, May 18, 1986.

[51] Todd S. Purdum, "Ward Asks Drug Test for All Officers," *New York Times*, June 11, 1986.

[52] Purdum, "Ward Asks Drug Test for All Officers."

evidence linking the rise of crack to increasing crime.

In the fall of 1986, journalist Cynthia Nix wrote an in-depth story covering the "temptation" that drugs presented to officers, particularly crack, which "strained the line between law enforcement and drug involvement."[53] According to Nix, the officers she interviewed hoped that they would not succumb to the "temptation" that the heaviest drug neighborhoods presented—constant access to drugs and money. Other officers stated "both the temptation and the amount of drugs on the street is about the same as it always has been," but that crack had "generated tremendous public concern and scrutiny."[54] Two days later, the paper reported that thirteen Brooklyn police officers were suspended after it was found that they had been extorting money and drugs from dealers.[55]

The greatest concentration of stories about police officers and crack were published in 1986, but one of the most powerful series of stories were published in 1990 and centered on the fall of Officer Robert Biangazzo. The articles, including a front-page profile, covered Biangazzo's repeated drug use, including smoking cocaine on the night that he graduated from the police academy.[56] The articles stated that the officer smoked and snorted cocaine with fellow officers even while spending his two years in service on an anti-drug task force.[57] On one night, he traded his service revolver for 10 vials of crack (worth $100); returning a few hours later, he traded his police badge for five additional vials and finally his new sneakers.[58] The journalist noted that Mr. Biangazzo's story demonstrates that even with drug testing, "blatant drug

[53] Crystal Nix, "Drug Influx a Strain on the Beat," *New York Times*, September 26 1986.

[54] Nix, "Drug Influx a Strain on the Beat."

[55] "Officers Suspended in City Drug Case," *New York Times*, September 28 1986.

[56] Ralph Blumenthal, "He Wore a Badge, Then Sold it For Crack," *New York Times*, May 8, 1990. *See also*, "Career Is Over; But Problem Isn't," *New York Times*, May 8, 1990; Ralph Blumenthal, "Snorting Cocaine with Colleagues," *New York Times*, May 8, 1990.

[57] Blumenthal, "He Wore a Badge, Then Sold it For Crack."

[58] Blumenthal, "Snorting Cocaine with Colleagues."

addiction can flourish undetected in the ranks of the 25,600 members of the nation's largest police department.[59]

Just as coverage of drug users in 1986 focused on police officers, 1989 demonstrated a concentration of stories about teachers using and selling drugs. In February, 25 year-old Lynn Schiowitz, a ninth grade math teacher at Roman Catholic Preparatory School in the Bronx was arrested purchasing heroin at an intersection in the Bronx.[60] Journalist Jesus Rangel went on to noted that in the previous years "more than a dozen teachers, mostly from public schools, have been arrested in connection with illegal drugs.[61] The article identified Principal Mathew Barnwell as having purchased two vials of crack and a fourth grade teacher from Mott Haven who purchased heroin and crack.[62] The spring and summer brought additional stories on teachers and illegal drugs. In May, a Brooklyn high school teacher and Board of Education administrator were arrested for selling cocaine to undercover police officers.[63] One month later, a gym teacher was arrested for possessing 10 grams of crack[64] and a Long Island kindergarten teacher was also arrested for crack possession.[65]

The coverage of crack use by teachers and police officers sends a powerful message to the paper's readership—that those trusted to protect their children and their communities were vulnerable not only to crack addiction but once addicted, they would sacrifice their career and subject themselves to prison. While there were numerous poor individuals addicted to crack

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[59] Blumenthal, "He Wore a Badge, Then Sold it For Crack."

[60] Jesus Rangel, "Ninth-Grade Bronx Teacher Arrested in Heroin Purchase," *New York Times*, February 22, 1989.

[61] Jesus Rangel, "Ninth-Grade Bronx Teacher Arrested in Heroin Purchase."

[62] Jesus Rangel, "Ninth-Grade Bronx Teacher Arrested in Heroin Purchase."

[63] Thomas Morgan, "Teacher and a School Official Are Charged in Cocaine Sales," *New York Times*, May 10, 1989.

[64] John McQuiston, "Teacher Seized on Drug Charges," *New York Times*, June 22, 1989.

[65] "Kindergarten Teacher Is Held in Crack Raid," *New York Times*, June 11, 1989.

during this same time period, the paper's earliest focus on public servants, and middle-class crack users generally, generated a sense of fear that crack was a particular threat corrupting working middle-class individuals.

The paper expanded its coverage beyond teachers and police officers, and published additional articles depicting crack as the drug of choice for the middle and upper class. In May 1986, journalist Jo Thomas wrote a story about residents in the Northwest Bronx who organized block associations to fight drugs in their neighborhood.[66] Although the article discussed a primarily African American and Latino neighborhood battling against drug dealers and drug use in their community, the reporter interviewed an officer from the local police precinct who stated that since the police began arresting customers instead of dealers, he noted that "ninety percent are from Westchester County, Scarsdale. Yonkers. Upper-class rich kids."[67]

One month later, in an article titled "Crack Addiction Spreads Among the Middle Class," Peter Kerr wrote "as crack use has spread through the city and suburbs in the last six months . . . a growing number of upper-middle-class, casual drug users are surprised to find themselves suffering from a severe crack addiction."[68] Kerr also interviewed Dr. Arnold Washton, who noted, "'[w]e are seeing business executives who have switched from cocaine powder to crack, and it hasn't turned out well for them.'"[69] Less than a year later, Kerr again reported that a large federal drug bust demonstrated that cocaine use was pervasive among Wall Street traders and business people working in lower Manhattan.[70] Interestingly, although the 1987 article mentioned that people were purchasing crack, cocaine and marijuana, the users identified were

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[66] Jo Thomas, "Residents Rising To Battle Drugs," *New York Times*, May 25, 1986.

[67] Thomas, "Residents Rising To Battle Drugs."

[68] Peter Kerr, "Crack Addiction Spreads Among the Middle Class," *New York Times*, June 8, 1986.

[69] Kerr, "Crack Addiction Spreads Among the Middle Class."

[70] Peter Kerr, "Agents Tell Of Drug's Grip On Wall Street," *New York Times*, April 18, 1987.

all using powder cocaine.

"Rich vs. Poor: Drug Patterns are Diverging" [71]

Around the same time that Peter Kerr reported that business executives were snorting cocaine, there was a noticeable shift in the paper's portrayal of crack users. In 1987, rather than focusing on white middle-class users, the articles were primarily about poor, minority users—although articles continued to forecast crack's spread to the suburbs and increased usage by middle- and upper-class individuals. Esther Iverem reported on a vigil in Brooklyn sponsored by a group of black churches.[72] The journalist noted that while the vigil was held annually, this particular vigil "took on deeper meaning because of the rise of crack . . . [which] those present said was ravaging many of the city's black neighborhoods." [73] The article featured stories of addicts seeking forgiveness for stealing from their families to support their addiction; one addict admitted cooking cocaine on the stove while her five year old watched.[74] The article demonstrated that crack was a serious and pervasive problem in minority communities even though the paper's earliest coverage failed to denote significant attention to these communities.

In August 1987, Peter Kerr wrote an article focusing on the diverging drug patterns between rich and poor crack users.[75] He explained that while recent studies noted that those who were "the most educated and affluent" were turning away from illegal drugs, the "poorest and least-educated have continued or increased their drug use." [76] Kerr interviewed David Musto, a

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[71] Peter Kerr, "Rich vs. Poor: Drug Patterns Are Diverging," *New York Times*, August 30, 1987.

[72] Esther Iverem, "Crack is Lamented at Emotional Vigil," *New York Times,* July 19, 1987.

[73] Iverem, "Crack is Lamented at Emotional Vigil."

[74] Iverem, "Crack is Lamented at Emotional Vigil."

[75] Kerr, "Rich vs. Poor: Drug Patterns Are Diverging."

[76] Kerr, "Rich vs. Poor: Drug Patterns Are Diverging."

professor of psychiatry at Yale and researcher on drug epidemics who explained that "'[t]he question we must be asking now is not why people take drugs, but why do people stop . . . In the inner city, the factors that counterbalance drug use—family, employment, status within the community—often are not there. It is harder for people with nothing to say no to drugs.'"[77] Importantly, Kerr included drug experts' findings that "crack has largely remained a poor people's drug. Its rise in the past two years has had devastating effects on poor neighborhoods, but it has failed to make the same inroads into the middle class."[78] The 1987 shift in coverage from middle-class users to poor users was necessitated by the fact that crack did not materialize as the middle- and upper-class threat suggested by the paper's coverage in 1986.

The coverage of the poorest New Yorkers' addiction to crack was highlighted through articles on crack dealing at city shelters;[79] the lack of publicly financed drug treatment programs for poor, young crack addicts,[80] and the burden on the city's foster care system as more women were arrested for drug cases and their children become wards of the state.[81] As the discourse shifted socioeconomic focus, the articles increasingly focused on how poor drug users were straining the city's services. While the articles commented that more money was needed to provide treatment to the city's poorest addicts, there was a marked shift in tone from the paper's earlier articles. The articles of 1986 are best summarized as the language of threat—particularly

[77] Kerr, "Rich vs. Poor: Drug Patterns Are Diverging."

[78] Kerr, "Rich vs. Poor: Drug Patterns Are Diverging."

[79] Josh Barbanel, "Crack Use Pervades Life in a Shelter," *New York Times*, February 18, 1988.

[80] Peter Kerr, "Young Crack Addicts Find There's No Help for Them," *New York Times*, May 2, 1988.

[81] Celestine Bohlen, "Number of Mothers in Jail Surges With Drug Arrests," *New York Times*, April 17, 1989.

to middle class and upper class white users, as well as suburban and rural communities.[82] As crack use lessened in these communities—or failed to reach the level of addiction suggested by some of the experts interviewed by the paper—it was necessary for journalists to reposition crack's narrative to address the serious problems surrounding crack use in poor communities. As the next to sections show, this narrative diverged along gender lines.

Part II
Women & Crack: Pregnancy, Motherhood and Health

"Losing a Mother to Crack: Quick and Tragic Process"[83]

From the first article published on crack, the plight of female crack abusers was a consistently reported on topic by the *New York Times*. In May 1986, the paper interviewed a 17-year-old girl from Queens, who admitted that after spending all of her money on crack, she "had sex with the operators of the base house and other customers."[84] Her crack binge lasted for four days, during which "she slept little, ate nothing and occasionally took short walks outside."[85] She explained "[w]hen you run out, that is just what you do . . . With me, I didn't care because it was just about getting high."[86] In November 1986, an article highlighted a new problem related

[82] For articles covering crack's spread to rural America *see* William E. Schmidt, "Police Say Use of Crack Is Moving To Small Towns and Rural Areas," *New York Times*, September 10, 1986 (reporting that police officials state that there is an increase in crack in rural areas of Georgia and North Carolina and in areas outside of Los Angeles,); Julie Johnson, "Drug Gangs and Drug Wars Move Into the Rural States, U.S. Warns," *New York Times*, August 4, 1989 (citing the Justice Department as stating that crack and cocaine trafficking have expanded beyond cities and into rural states like Wyoming and Iowa); and Michael Massing, "Crack's Destructive Sprint Across America," *New York Times,* October 1, 1989 (reporting that crack is "striking with swift fury" rural communities in Virginia, Alaska, Wyoming, Delaware and South Dakota).

[83] "Losing a Mother to Crack: Quick and Tragic Process," *New York Times*, February 9, 1987.

[84] Peter Kerr, "Opium Dens for the Crack Era," *New York Times*, May 18, 1986.

[85] Kerr, "Opium Dens for the Crack Era."

[86] Kerr, "Opium Dens for the Crack Era."

to crack—who would care for the children of crack-addicted mothers?[87] The journalist reported that during a breakfast with the mayor and black church leaders, the mayor asked those in attendance to "recruit foster parents in *their communities*" since the city was having a difficult time placing babies with crack-addicted mothers in foster care.[88] This article, and the mayor's request, suggests that the problems associated with crack-addicted babies and mothers are problems within the black community. Later that year, in an article discussing increased crime associated with young crack users on Long Island, the Chief of Nassau County Child Bureau remarked "[a]s long as we produce one-parent families that have very little interest in children, we will have a very desperate situation."[89] While this article doesn't specifically mention female-headed households, the underlying message is clear that these types of homes are contributing to the increase in crack-related crime. These last two articles demonstrate a shift in the coverage and perception of women and crack—from vulnerable teens falling prey to the drug to irresponsible black mothers (who may also be teens) unable to care for their children.

"Crack's Smallest, Costliest Victims"[90]

As coverage moved away from women as a vulnerable population, articles increasingly focused on pregnant addicts and their children born with crack addiction. In 1987, the paper profiled Janet, an 18 year-old from Harlem who became addicted to crack while she was pregnant.[91] Fortunately for Janet, her mother was able to care for her child while she went to a

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[87] "Who Will Care for the Boarder Babies?," *New York Times*, November 30, 1986.

[88] "Who Will Care for the Boarder Babies?"

[89] Shelly Feur Domash, "Behind L.I. Crime: Drugs, Poverty," *New York Times*, December 7, 1986.

[90] "Crack's Smallest, Costliest Victims," *New York Times*, August 7, 1989.

[91] "Losing a Mother to Crack: Quick and Tragic Process," *New York Times*, February 9, 1987.

residential treatment center in upstate New York.[92] On the same day that the paper published the story about Janet, journalist Peter Kerr's article on the effect of crack on inner city children also appeared.[93] This article squarely placed the problem of crack addiction and motherhood in poor inner city neighborhoods. Kerr reported that as crack replaced heroin as "the favorite hard drug among the young of the inner city, a far higher proportion of women have become addicts."[94] He explained that "so many poor families are headed by single mothers that the sudden increase in women becoming crack addicts has caused disproportionate damage to families," which is reflected in an increase in child abuse and neglect cases.[95] He interviewed experts who stated that they were concerned over the "drug's long-term impact on the already fragmented family structure of the underclass."[96] Kerr also provided his readers with a basic description of the medical issues that babies addicted to crack were likely to suffer, such as prematurity, and being eight times more likely to be underweight. He noted, however, that according to "doctors at several hospitals," most of the babies "appear to recover well and show fewer symptoms of withdrawal than infants born to heroin users."[97] The rate of recovery of babies born to crack-addicted mothers and the cost of their care became the focus of a shifting discourse on crack.

As discussed above, the initial concern about babies born to crack-addicted mothers centered on the difficulty finding foster homes for these children. In addition, one article noted that nearly one-third of babies born to crack users showed signs of neurological disorders.[98] In

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[92] "Losing a Mother to Crack: Quick and Tragic Process," *New York Times*, February 9, 1987.

[93] Peter Kerr, "Toll From Crack Addiction Is Heavy for Women and Children in New York," *New York Times*, February 9, 1987.

[94] Kerr, "Toll From Crack Addiction Is Heavy for Women and Children in New York."

[95] Kerr, "Toll From Crack Addiction Is Heavy for Women and Children in New York."

[96] Kerr, "Toll From Crack Addiction Is Heavy for Women and Children in New York."

[97] Kerr, "Toll From Crack Addiction Is Heavy for Women and Children in New York."

[98] Peter Kerr, "Babies of Crack Users Fill Hospital Nurseries," *New York Times*, August 25, 1986.

1987, the paper reported a concern voiced by Susanne D. Kaplan, director of the Office of Education of Children, that education costs were going to rise in the city, particularly for handicapped children because "we're beginning to get 'crack babies.'"[99] Later that year, the paper reported on a study that found that babies could ingest cocaine through their mother's breast milk.[100] The article noted that the Detroit authorities were determining whether they could bring criminal charges against an 18 year-old who breastfed her child after smoking crack.[101] The child died two days later, but the article did not report whether crack caused the child's death—only that crack could cause a child's death if the concentration was high enough.[102] This December article foreshadowed what would be the next phase of coverage related to pregnant addicts in 1990: criminal prosecution.

By 1989, the discourse about crack-addicted babies emphasized the increasing medical costs of caring for these children and their inability to succeed in schools and eventually in society. In an article titled, "Tiny Miracles Become Huge Public Health Problem," journalist Howard French reported on the army of nurses, doctors, staff and medical equipment that was necessary to keep these severely premature babies alive.[103] One nurse noted, in reference to a baby weighing 1½ pounds; "about 10 percent of them survive, and their chances of [i] being totally normal is slim.'"[104] In August 1989, the paper stated that a task force was created to inform the President what should be done about "'crack babies' –the thousands born brain-

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[99] Donna Greene, "Expense Rising for Education Of Disabled," *New York Times,* March 22, 1987.

[100] "Breast Milk Can Transfer Cocaine, Study Says," *New York Times*, December 8, 1987.

[101] "Breast Milk Can Transfer Cocaine, Study Says."

[102] "Breast Milk Can Transfer Cocaine, Study Says."

[103] Howard W. French, "Tiny Miracles Become Huge Public Health Problem," *New York Times*, February 19, 1989.

[104] Howard W. French, "Tiny Miracles Become Huge Public Health Problem."

damaged, malformed or seizure prone because their mothers smoked crack."[105] One month later, Sandra Blakeslee reported that a recent study on babies born to mothers addicted to crack revealed that "in early childhood they have serious difficulty relating to their world, making friends, playing like normal children and feeling love for their mothers or primary caretakers."[106] While the majority of the article discussed studies focusing on babies born to cocaine abusing mothers, the statistics, which were bolded and set off as "300,000 Infants Affected," related to all babies born with some traces of any illegal drugs. A reader would need to continue reading the lengthy article to see that the statistic did not refer only to cocaine abuse.[107] While the first page mentions that there is a "hopeful note"[108] for these babies, which was explored in some detail at the end of the lengthy article, the underlying message was that these babies were going to need increased interventions and attention, in school and at home, if they were going to function normally in society.[109]

The next series of articles followed "crack babies" into schools to measure their performance. In 1990, the paper reported that there was a national debate as to how to handle "crack-exposed children" entering school.[110] Cities around the country were holding teacher workshops to inform teachers how to identify "common symptoms" found in crack-exposed children.[111] In New York, the city's Board of Education was "revamping" its early childhood

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[105] "Crack's Smallest, Costliest Victims," *New York Times*, August 7, 1989.

[106] Sandra Blakeslee, "Crack's Toll Among Babies: A Joyless View, Even of Toys," *New York Times*, September 17, 1989.

[107] Blakeslee, "Crack's Toll Among Babies: A Joyless View, Even of Toys."

[108] The "hopeful note" referred to a daycare center in Florida designed to work with babies born addicted to cocaine. Staff found that after a year of being in the program, which focused on giving the children structure and personal contact, the children seemed to be playing with toys more creatively. Something they were unable to do when they first arrived. Blakeslee, "Crack's Toll Among Babies: A Joyless View, Even of Toys."

[109] Blakeslee, "Crack's Toll Among Babies: A Joyless View, Even of Toys."

[110] "Unprepared As a Nation,'" *New York Times*, May 25, 1990.

[111] "Unprepared As a Nation."

education program and was exploring the idea of having the preschool programs in housing projects.[112] The journalist noted that "[t]hese new programs are not intended for drug-exposed children, although New York has one of the nation's largest populations of such children."[113] Dr. Chesnoff, a researcher that works with crack-exposed children, cautioned "that not all cocaine-exposed children are poor; middle-class children often go undetected because their mothers are not tested."[114] This is a telling statement on where poor people seek medical attention—public hospitals that report to city and federal agencies on their patient's addiction status.

On the same day, another article appeared noting that "researchers cannot be sure exactly how crack affects children . . . Symptoms vary considerably from child to child; most crack users also take other drugs, and may crack-exposed children have also endured abuse, neglect or numerous placements in foster care homes. It is difficult to tell whether crack or the children's environment hurt them most."[115] Yet, it wasn't until 1993, three years after cocaine use and infant mortality declined in New York City,[116] that the paper reported that there was "hope" for children born to crack using mothers.[117] Joseph Treaster explained that "eight years after crack hit New York and other cities around the country, and concern about a generation of 'crack babies' began spreading, medical experts say their worst fears are not being realized: While up to a third appeared to have been seriously damaged, 20 to 40 percent seemed unscathed."[118] Moreover, even those who were harmed by cocaine abuse "can be greatly improved with therapy

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[112] "Unprepared As a Nation."

[113] "Unprepared As a Nation."

[114] "Unprepared As a Nation."

[115] "Widespread Use; Effects Vary,'" *New York Times*, May 25, 1990.

[116] Celia W. Dugger, "Cocaine Use and Infant Mortality Decline Together in New York City, " *New York Times*, April 20, 1991.

[117] Joseph B. Treaster, "For Children of Cocaine, Fresh Reasons for Hope," *New York Times*, February 16, 1993.

[118] Treaster, "For Children of Cocaine, Fresh Reasons for Hope."

and other special attention. Not all recover fully, but many do."[119] This last "corrective" article appeared after eight years of repeated articles predicting how these babies would be a drain on society's resources and stigmatizing these children as substandard from birth. Additionally, as coverage increased on these children, criminal prosecutors, arguably persuaded by news media and public outrage over these children, shifted their focus to pregnant addicts.

"Drug Use in Pregnancy: New Issue for the Courts"[120]

As the crack narrative increasingly focused on crack addicted babies, the paper began covering a changing trend in the treatment of pregnant addicts. In February 1990, journalist Tamar Lewin noted that the courts were faced with a new legal issue—the prosecution of pregnant addicts for delivering cocaine to a minor, i.e. their unborn fetuses.[121] Pregnant women were also being arrested for child abuse for being intoxicated while pregnant. The article notes that prosecutors were "upset by the serious harm being done to babies and must find a way to prevent it."[122] This new type of prosecution was "growing out of frustration in the media and legal communities about the increasing number of drug babies."[123] While some of the cases were dismissed, the legal debate was whether a fetus has legal rights separate from its mother, and prosecutors argued that women had a legal obligation to "guard the fetus."[124] The article stated that both doctors and lawyers considered where the legal line should be drawn—can women be arrested for gaining too much weight during pregnancy or how many alcoholic drinks

[119] Treaster, "For Children of Cocaine, Fresh Reasons for Hope."

[120] Tamar Lewin, "Drug Use in Pregnancy: New Issue for the Courts," *New York Times,* February 5, 1990.

[121] Lewin, "Drug Use in Pregnancy: New Issue for the Courts."

[122] Lewin, "Drug Use in Pregnancy: New Issue for the Courts."

[123] Lewin, "Drug Use in Pregnancy: New Issue for the Courts."

[124] Lewin, "Drug Use in Pregnancy: New Issue for the Courts."

makes a pregnant woman criminally responsible? [125]

Later that year, Gina Kolata reported that "[m]ost women prosecuted for using illegal drugs while pregnant have been poor members of racial minorities . . . even though drug use in pregnancy is equally prevalent in white middle-class women." [126] These women tended to be prosecuted at higher rates because they sought healthcare at public hospitals, which are "most vigilant in their drug testing and more likely than private hospitals to report women whose tests show drug use." [127] The ACLU calculated that eighty-percent of women charged with delivering drugs to a minor were black, Hispanic or from other minority groups.[128]

A few months later, the paper published profiles of pregnant women in Michigan that were being prosecuted for delivering drugs to their infants. The profiles included Lynn Bremer, a 38-year-old white attorney and Kim Hardy, whose race was not identified.[129] This in-depth article focused on the women's addiction, the circumstances surrounding their arrests, the lack of residential treatment options available for pregnant addicts and eventually how these women stopped using crack while awaiting their trials.[130] Interestingly, one of Kim Hardy's attorneys noted that "'[t]his crusade is not about getting women into treatment or protecting babies . . . It's about winning the war on drugs." [131] The journalist described Tony Tague, the District Attorney prosecuting the cases as "tough, of course, but also politically astute and ambitious. In putting his own imprimatur on the war on drugs, Tague has become a bona fide [local] celebrity."[132]

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[125] Lewin, "*Drug Use in Pregnancy: New Issue for the Courts.*"

[126] Gina Kolata, "Bias Seen Against Pregnant Addicts," *New York Times,* July 20, 1990.

[127] Kolata, "Bias Seen Against Pregnant Addicts."

[128] Kolata, "Bias Seen Against Pregnant Addicts."

[129] Kolata, "Bias Seen Against Pregnant Addicts."

[130] Kolata, "Bias Seen Against Pregnant Addicts."

[131] Kolata, "Bias Seen Against Pregnant Addicts."

[132] Kolata, "Bias Seen Against Pregnant Addicts."

While no one would advocate using illicit drugs during pregnancy, the media furor surrounding crack and children born to crack-addicted mothers created a public and political response that fueled the prosecution of pregnant addicts. Even though crack addiction increased the number of pregnant addicts, drug use during pregnancy did not begin with the crack epidemic. For example, five-percent of all pregnant women seeking treatment at Harlem Hospital tested positive for heroin.[133] Yet, there does not appear to be a comparable prosecutorial backlash against these women. While there was a sharp surge in the number of pregnant addicts, which was linked to crack abuse, the pervasive media coverage generated public outrage, which in turn spurred politicians and prosecutors to take action to protect against the reported irreparable damage done to "crack babies." However, as an examination of the *New York Times* demonstrates, prosecutorial zeal preceded scientific evidence about the extent of damage done to these babies. Moreover, prosecution of addicts disparately impacted poor minority pregnant addicts—yet prosecution of these women was consistent with the portrait the *New York Times* painted of pregnant addicts. While the paper may have stated that there were white pregnant women who used crack, their articles featured poor minority women. The rhetoric surrounding "crack babies" and pregnant addicts shows how coverage of a particular issue effects policy decisions. As the next section demonstrates, rhetoric also shaped public perception and heightened fear about another epidemic plaguing New York City.

"Crack and Resurgence of Syphilis Spreading AIDS Among the Poor" [134]

At the same time that the country was focused on the crack crisis, the AIDS epidemic was capturing attention, especially as increasing numbers of heterosexuals were testing positive

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[133] Kerr, "Toll From Crack Addiction Is Heavy for Women and Children in New York."

[134] Peter Kerr, "Crack and Resurgence of Syphilis Spreading AIDS Among the Poor," *New York Times,* August 20, 1989.

for the disease. As the discourse in 1987 shifted to focus on racial minorities and crack, the *New York Times* also began reporting on the connection between drug abuse, AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. In 1987, when Peter Kerr reported that middle class drug use was declining while drug abuse in poor communities was rising, he also noted that experts concluded that "the most deadly impact of illegal drug use is probably yet to come, as tens of thousands of intravenous drug users, their sexual partners and their children contract acquired immune deficiency syndrome. Most of these people will be poor."[135] While intravenous drug use was directly linked to AIDS, the article also suggested that poor drug users would spread the disease through sexual contact. This pronouncement, coupled with the image of crack as leading to increased sexual activity with multiple partners, linked the two epidemics in both the media and the public's mind.

Two months later, this link was cemented in article discussing the rise of syphilis. Robert Pears reported that there was a "dramatic increase" in the incidence of syphilis, particularly among minority men and women in urban neighborhoods. [136] Two reasons for this increase were provided by Dr. E. Russell Alexander, an epidemiologist for a federal program for the control of venereal disease; the first was that "more inner-city women may be selling sexual favors for drugs, especially crack . . . The women often cannot remember or will not disclose the names of their sex partners." [137] The second reason was that money had been diverted from venereal disease programs into the fight against AIDS.[138] The article also stated that untreated syphilis could facilitate the spread of AIDS and lead to a rise in congenital syphilis among infants.[139]

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[135] Kerr, "Rich vs. Poor: Drug Patterns Are Diverging."

[136] Robert Pears, "Sharp Rise Found in Syphilis in U.S.," *New York Times*, October 4, 1987.

[137] Pears, "Sharp Rise Found in Syphilis in U.S."

[138] Pears, "Sharp Rise Found in Syphilis in U.S."

[139] Pears, "Sharp Rise Found in Syphilis in U.S."

In June 1988, the paper reported that New York had twenty-five percent of all AIDS cases and that it needed money for the treatment of AIDS and intravenous drug use.[140] A few weeks later, the paper reported that "[h]ealth experts are increasingly concerned that crack use in poor neighborhoods may be accelerating the spread of AIDS among heterosexuals."[141] The article went on to quote the director of the Division of Sexually Transmitted Diseases at the CDC as stating "[t]oday's crack house may be comparable to the gay bathhouse of the late 1970's and early 1980's . . . In crack houses there is sex and multiple partners . . . Whatever infection happens to be prevalent in those environments is going to be the one that gets transmitted."[142] The article explained further that many of the men that go to crack houses had used intravenous drugs and are infected with the HIV virus.[143] By using the image of San Francisco bathhouses, the article linked the powerful associations between sexual promiscuity, gay men and AIDS to a new heterosexual sexual deviant—poor crack using women. By linking both groups, gay men and female crack users, to the spread of AIDS—a topic of national concern—the article provided its readers with a scapegoat for the escalating health crisis. One year later, in an article titled "Crack and Resurgence of Syphilis Spreading AIDS Among the Poor," the paper confirmed that experts' fears about crack were realized.[144]

As coverage shifted in 1987 to poor minority users, the discourse on crack diverged along gender lines. Crack-abusing women were portrayed as sexually promiscuous, uncaring mothers, criminals, the cause of crack-addicted babies and ultimately, the conduit by which a deadly

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[140] Michael Marriott, "Who Will Pay New York City's AIDS Costs?," *New York Times*, June 5, 1988.

[141] Peter Kerr, "Syphilis Surge With Crack Use Raises Fears on Spread of AIDS," *New York Times*, June 29, 1988.

[142] Kerr, "Syphilis Surge With Crack Use Raises Fears on Spread of AIDS.

[143] Kerr, "Syphilis Surge With Crack Use Raises Fears on Spread of AIDS.

[144] Peter Kerr, "Crack and Resurgence of Syphilis Spreading AIDS Among the Poor," *New York Times*, August 20, 1989.

disease was spread. Even though male users were the individuals believed to bring HIV/AIDS into crack houses, crack-abusing women, through their sexually irresponsible behavior, were portrayed as the reason the disease proliferated. At the same time that these women were being judged as whores and destructive mothers, African American and Latino men were increasingly being associated with crime, violence and as the perpetuators of the crack epidemic.

Part III

Men & Crack: Crime, Violence and Incarceration

"Study Shows Sharp Rise in Cocaine Use by Suspects in Crimes"[145]

The earliest coverage of crack-related crime and violence centered on crack users committing crimes to support their addiction. In April 1986, Todd Purdum reported that an off-duty police officer was arrested for robbery—he became so impatient while waiting to buy crack that he robbed the dealer.[146] Three days later, an article described a former Transit Authority police officer that turned himself in for the armed robbery of 20 taxi drivers.[147] The man admitted that he was addicted to crack and that he committed those robberies to support his habit.[148] In a story warning readers how to protect themselves from burglaries, Police Commissioner Benjamin Ward was quoted as saying that the increase in the city's burglaries were attributable to people stealing in order to buy crack.[149]

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[145] Scott Bronstein, "Study Shows Sharp Rise in Cocaine Use by Suspects in Crimes," *New York Times*, February 19, 1987.

[146] Todd S. Purdum, "Off-Duty Policeman Is Arrested On Robbery and Drug Charges," *New York Times*, April 16, 1986.

[147] "Ex-Officer Surrenders In 20 Taxi Robberies," *New York Times*, April 19, 1986.

[148] "Ex-Officer Surrenders In 20 Taxi Robberies."

[149] William R. Greer, "Most Burglars Look for Easy Ways To Slip Unseen Into Empty Homes And Head Straight for the Bedroom," *New York Times*, July 10, 1986.

Crack-related crime stories turned more violent in the spring and early summer of 1986. In May, the paper ran a story from the Associated Press that detailed how a 16-year-old boy, who lived at Lexington Avenue and 98th Street in Manhattan, stabbed his mother to death after she caught him smoking crack and began "screaming at her son." [150] One month later, a 65-year-old Brooklyn man stabbed his 27-year-old son to death, after the son lunged at his father and they began to fight. [151] A neighbor was quoted as saying the father and son often fought about money—police investigators determined that the son "needed the money to buy crack."[152] In September, George James reported that a 21-year-old man was convicted of murdering two elderly people in Queens. [153] The Queens District Attorney dubbed the verdict the "'first crack killing trial conviction'" in Queens County. [154] The defendant killed the two residents during an attempted burglary when he was high on crack—a crime he committed so that he could purchase more drugs.[155] In November, the paper reported on a Bronx woman who threw her two sons from their fourth-story apartment window and then she jumped out after them. [156] The children were ages four and six. [157] A police investigation discovered crack vials in the apartment. [158]

Beginning in 1987, the paper reported on perceived links between serious crimes and cocaine use. Isabel Wilkerson, reporting on the national rise of urban homicides in the United States, commented that "New York City has 1,309 homicides in the first 10 months of 1986, a

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[150] *The Associated Press* "16-Year-Old Confesses To Killing His Mother," *New York Times*, May 5, 1986.

[151] Josh Barbanel, "Father Fatally Stabs His Son in Brooklyn; He Is Not Arrested," *New York Times*, June 16, 1986.

[152] Barbanel, "Father Fatally Stabs His Son in Brooklyn; He Is Not Arrested."

[153] George James, "Killer of Couple Is Convicted," *New York Times*, September 19, 1986.

[154] James, "Killer of Couple Is Convicted."

[155] James, "Killer of Couple Is Convicted."

[156] James Barron, "Woman Throws Her 2 Sons From 4th Floor," *New York Times*, November 28, 1986.

[157] Barron, "Woman Throws Her 2 Sons From 4th Floor."

[158] Barron, "Woman Throws Her 2 Sons From 4th Floor."

year in which crack seemed to be an epidemic"—a rate nearly twenty-percent higher than same time period in 1985.[159] One month later, Scott Bronstein reported on a new study that found that "cocaine use among men arrested for serious crimes in Manhattan almost doubled in two years, to nearly eighty-percent."[160] The commander of New York City's narcotics division remarked that there's "no question there is a high correlation between the recent increases we've experienced in violent crime and the increase this study has shown in the use of drugs."[161] According to the Justice Department, "[t]he use of drugs [was] the accelerator to criminal activity."[162] In a study conducted on 5000 men arrested and detained in central booking in Manhattan, 85% of the men submitted a urine sample for testing, and of that sample 78% tested positive for cocaine—although only ¼ of those men admitted that they had tried crack.[163]

New York City was not alone in linking the rise of crime with crack. According to the paper, Bridgeport, Connecticut blamed their increased murder rate on the growing drug traffic in their community.[164] A sergeant in the Bridgeport police department remarked, "[w]hen you are mixing that kind of money with drugs and guns, you're going to have violence."[165] The reporter stated that drug-related violence had not penetrated into more affluent neighborhoods—nearly half of the "slayings" were linked to public housing. Yet, a criminologist remarked that as affluent suburbanites "sojourn[ed]" into poor neighborhoods to purchase drugs, this "clash of cultures" may in and of itself be feeding crime—the poor may view the affluent's wealth paraded

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[159] Isabel Wilkerson, "Urban Homicide Rates in U.S. Up Sharply in 1986," *New York Times*, January 15, 1987.

[160] Scott Bronstein, "Study Shows Sharp Rise in Cocaine Use by Suspects in Crimes," *New York Times*, February 19, 1987.

[161] Bronstein, "Study Shows Sharp Rise in Cocaine Use by Suspects in Crimes."

[162] Bronstein, "Study Shows Sharp Rise in Cocaine Use by Suspects in Crimes."

[163] Bronstein, "Study Shows Sharp Rise in Cocaine Use by Suspects in Crimes."

[164] Dirk Johnson, "In Bridgeport, A Sharp Rise In Murder Rate," *New York Times*, January 26, 1987.

[165] Johnson, "In Bridgeport, A Sharp Rise In Murder Rate."

into poor neighborhoods as an invitation for robbery and even murder.[166] Of those arrested for the "slayings," four were juveniles, including a 13-year-old girl who shot and killed a 14-year-old girl.[167] This article shifted the conversation about crack-related crime from addicts to dealers, particularly to violent young dealers who became the national symbol of urban violence associated with crack.

"Submachine Guns and Unpredictability Are Hallmarks of Crack's Violence" [168]

While there were sporadic reports in 1986 and 1987 of violence associated with youth crack dealers, this topic dominated the discourse on crack in 1988. In February 1988, Robert Rheinhold reported that in Los Angeles, "black gangs are the best organized, fighting for control of the drug traffic with a disdain for human life; their own and others."[169] This article noted that African American community members expressed anger, ~~criticizing~~ claiming that it wasn't until individuals in more affluent neighborhoods were killed that the police and media focused on the problem—a problem that they say had been devastating urban communities.[170] While this article focused primarily on gang and drug violence in Los Angeles, less than three weeks later New York City was shocked by the murder of a rookie police officer protecting a citizen who reported on crack dealers in Queens.[171] This killing sparked a surge in articles addressing New York City's drug gang related violence. The day after it was reported that 22-year-old officer Edward Byrne was shot three times in the head while on duty, Joseph Fried reported that the murder was

[166] Johnson, "In Bridgeport, A Sharp Rise In Murder Rate."

[167] Johnson, "In Bridgeport, A Sharp Rise In Murder Rate."

[168] Peter Kerr, "Submachine Guns and Unpredictability Are Hallmarks of Crack's Violence," March 8, 1988.

[169] Robert Reinhold, "Gang Violence Shocks Los Angeles," *New York Times*, February 8, 1988.

[170] Reinhold, "Gang Violence Shocks Los Angeles."

[171] Joseph P. Fried, "Officer Guarding Drug Witness Is Slain," *New York Times*, February 27, 1988.

linked to a "drug turf war" in Queens.[172] Fried followed up on this story the next day and reported that there were as many as ten different "groups plying their drugs and vying for turf in southeast Queens."[173] The article identified several of the drug crews' leaders, including Lorenzo "Fat Cat" Nichols, a 29 year old who was recently sentenced to 25 years to life in prison for drug trafficking. A second case was being built against Nichols for second-degree murder of his parole officer.[174] By early March, the paper reported that four men had been arrested in connection with Officer Byrne's murder—all of them were under the age of 24.[175]

Coverage of drug gang related violence continued throughout 1988. In attempting to explain the increase in crack-related violence in New York City, Peter Kerr reported that law enforcement officials focused on the causes that contributed to the unpredictability of crack trafficking. They posited three reasons for increase in violence associated with crack trafficking. First, crack organizations were built very quickly in order to respond to the "new market and industry."[176] Second, those intimately involved with the new organizations are typically immigrants, who come from countries "where violence against the police and innocent bystanders is more common."[177] Lastly, law enforcement officials explained unlike other drug dealers, crack dealers are often addicted to crack. These three factors add "to the violence and unpredictability that surround the crack trade."[178] DEA Special Agent Richard Stutman was quoted as saying that, before crack, law enforcement "had not seen this kind of violence . . . We

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[172] David Pitt, "Battle for Crack Trade in Queens May Hold Key to Officer's Killing," *New York Times*, February 28, 1988.

[173] Pitt, "Battle for Crack Trade in Queens May Hold Key to Officer's Killing."

[174] Pitt, "Battle for Crack Trade in Queens May Hold Key to Officer's Killing."

[175] Joseph P. Fried, "2 More Held in Slaying of Officer," March 5, 1988.

[176] Kerr, "Submachine Guns and Unpredictability Are Hallmarks of Crack's Violence."

[177] Kerr, "Submachine Guns and Unpredictability Are Hallmarks of Crack's Violence."

[178] Kerr, "Submachine Guns and Unpredictability Are Hallmarks of Crack's Violence."

never saw the use of automatic weapons. Most of all, we had never seen dealers like this attempt to intimidate law enforcement."[179] One week later, the paper published an article that linked 523 murders in five years to violent drug gangs in upper Manhattan.[180] Five days later, the paper reported that 200 murders in 1987 were linked to crack.[181]

Journalist Selwyn Raab identified "a new breed of criminal in New York City: young members of crack-peddling gangs who murder on a whim."[182] He quoted Sterling Johnson Jr., the city's special narcotics prosecutor as saying that "[c]rack has spawned an allied industry, young hit men who kill for the slightest reasons."[183] Less than a week later, an article informed the paper's readership that young dealers "with no regard to life" were holding Jamaica, Queens hostage.[184] Readers of the *New York Times* were inundated with articles about violence and crime surrounding crack. Yet, this coverage did not fully explain that the majority of violence associated with crack was dealer against dealer violence. For the most part, crack violence was not impacting most New York City neighborhoods. However, even if most neighborhoods did not suffer the immediate impact of crack's violence, there was a real fear among New Yorkers that this violence could spill over into their communities. Crack was not an isolated problem—while some neighborhoods were hit harder by crack and its associated violence, the *New York Times* coverage of the crack crisis indicated that the effects of crack would be felt citywide.

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[179] Kerr, "Submachine Guns and Unpredictability Are Hallmarks of Crack's Violence."

[180] Selwyn Raab, "Brutal Drug Gangs Wage War Of Terror in Upper Manhattan," March 15 1988.

[181] Raab, "Links to 200 Murders in New York City Last Year."

[182] Raab, "Links to 200 Murders in New York City Last Year."

[183] Raab, "Links to 200 Murders in New York City Last Year."

[184] Jane Gross, "Weathering the Crack Storm in Queens," *New York Times*, March 21, 1988.

"The Crack Crackdown's Jail Backlash" [185]

As the city responded to increased crack dealing and violence with targeted policing, additional police officers and mass arrests, the city's criminal justice system was severely strained. Just as the *New York Times* reported how residential treatment centers throughout the New York area were unable to handle the dramatic increase in addicts seeking treatment,[186] and the foster care system was unable to place children of addicts or babies born addicted to crack,[187] the paper also addressed the consequences of mass arrests and prison overcrowding as a result of crack. In a September 1986 editorial, Anthony F. Japha, a former director of the drug law evaluation project of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York, stated that severe antidrug legislation would not work as a deterrent because the courts and the jails could not handle the influx of new cases and new criminals. [188] He argued further that in order for the city to effectively handle crack cases, significant resources must be dedicated to the criminal justice system.[189] One month later, the paper reported that the city's jails were overcrowded because of summer policing strategies targeting crack. [190] The article stated that the dramatic increase in the prison populations, as a result of crack-targeted policing, "produced inmate revolts, a job action by guards, an apparent outburst of guard brutality, the removal of senior wardens and

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[185] "The Crack Crackdown's Jail Backlash," *New York Times*, October 22, 1986.

[186] See e.g., Peter Kerr, "Drug Treatment in City Is Strained By Crack, a Potent New Cocaine," *New York Times*, May 16, 1986 (stating that drug treatment centers in New York City and its suburbs are filled to capacity, and critics assert that the state has been neglectful in dealing with the threat of cocaine/crack) and Linda Martin, "Drug Outreach Strains Facilities," *New York Times*, October 26, 1986 (noting that New Jersey State treatment centers are filled, with 40% of new patients addicted to cocaine).

[187] See e.g., "Who Will Care for the Boarder Babies?," *New York Times*, November 30, 1986 (noting the difficulty in placing babies in foster care whose mothers are addicted to crack, cocaine or heroin); and Peter Kerr, "Toll From Crack Addiction Is Heavy for Women and Children in New York," *New York Times*, February 9, 1987 (growing burden placed on foster care system because most drug treatment does not allow addicted mothers to bring their children and because addicts are sent away for 18 to 24 months).

[188] Anthony F. Japha, "Laws Alone Won't Stop Crack," *New York Times*, September 2, 1986.

[189] Japha, "Laws Alone Won't Stop Crack."

[190] "The Crack Crackdown's Jail Backlash."

resignations from a specialized unit."[191] The article noted that the "crisis all summer concerned crack" and now the "crisis is jail crowding."[192]

As the judicial system was unable to cope with increasing crack arrests,[193] the city instituted a special drug court to address the backlog of cases.[194] While city officials praised the drug court for successfully handling the overwhelming number of cases, Peter Kerr reported that defense lawyers charged that the new court and new procedures were "trampling the constitutional rights of many poor defendants."[195] Advocates claimed that because of the enormous pressure placed on the court to push cases through the system, defendants were "pressured into pleading guilty before their lawyers [could] study the case and before a grand jury has heard the facts."[196]

With the city mired in a crack crisis, Michael Marriott reported that three years after the city began fighting crack, spending $500 million dollars in one year alone, the drug and its associated implications were more violent, more pervasive and more detrimental, particularly among the poor.[197] Crack was responsible for a high murder rate, triple the number of cocaine users, triple the number of child abuse cases, and a dramatic increase in the prison population.[198] The article stated that crack had become the drug of choice among New York City's poor.[199] Marriott asserted further that "the ramifications of crack are now being felt citywide. Almost

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[191] "The Crack Crackdown's Jail Backlash."

[192] "The Crack Crackdown's Jail Backlash."

[193] Peter Kerr, "Crack Burdening a Justice System," *New York Times*, November 24, 1986.

[194] Peter Kerr, "Drug Court Cuts New York Backlog," *New York Times*, February 6,1988.

[195] Kerr, "Drug Court Cuts New York Backlog."

[196] Kerr, "Drug Court Cuts New York Backlog."

[197] Michael Marriott, "After 3 Years, Crack Plague In New York Only Gets Worse," *New York Times*, February 20, 1989.

[198] Marriott, "After 3 Years, Crack Plague In New York Only Gets Worse."

[199] Marriott, "After 3 Years, Crack Plague In New York Only Gets Worse."

daily new crack-inspired horror stories jolt the city's collective psyche, rendering New York City—real or imagined—less livable, more menacing."[200]

Mariott's conclusion drew to a close the most pervasive coverage of the crack epidemic in New York City. While crack continued to be both a national and local news story for the *New York Times*, the rhetoric surrounding the drug and the questions being asked by reporters changed with the new decade. While coverage in the 1980s firmly positioned crack in inner city neighborhoods, coverage in the 1990s focused on racial bias in sentencing, targeting of poor minority users and dealers at the expense of white cocaine and crack users, and retrospective looks at crack as the drug waned and heroin reemerged as the major drug threat to urban populations. This discourse shifted, in large measure, around the prosecution of one man—Washington D.C. Mayor Marion Barry.

Part IV
Concluding the Conversation on Crack

In March 1989, David Pitt quoted Police Commissioner Benjamin Ward, as stating that "[m]iddle- and upper-class drug users consume 70 percent of the cocaine used in New York City and the police should go after them just as aggressively as less-affluent crack users."[201] Ward made these comments while setting forth new drug law initiatives targeting crack.[202] Despite Ward's comments, the article did not report on a strategy to target more affluent cocaine users. This article was published around the same time as a story reporting allegations that the then

[200] Marriott, "After 3 Years, Crack Plague In New York Only Gets Worse."

[201] David E. Pitt, "Heavy Drug Use In Middle Class Noted by Ward," *New York Times*, March 24, 1989.

[202] Pitt, "Heavy Drug Use In Middle Class Noted by Ward."

current Washington D.C. mayor, Marion Barry, used drugs.[203] This story captured national attention as the mayor was arrested in January 1990 for crack possession.

According to David Johnston, Marion Barry was the target of a sting supervised by federal prosecutors, which resulted in a bust at a downtown hotel.[204] The mayor was charged with one count of possession of crack cocaine, a misdemeanor that carried a maximum prison sentence of one year.[205] The article stated that both Mr. Barry's attorney and the U.S. Attorney hinted to the press that a deal might be negotiated whereby the mayor would agree to resign in exchange for "escaping more serious charges."[206] Less than a month later, Barry was quoted as saying that his indictment for five counts of misdemeanor possession and three felony counts for lying about his drug involvement, "'represents a continuation of the political lynching and excesses' by the Justice Department in a "multiyear, multimillion-dollar effort to investigate me."[207] According to the paper, Barry was refusing to resign his office.[208]

As Barry's criminal case worked its way through the system, William Safire, in an essay published in the paper, claimed that there was a "double standard of justice" within the prosecutor's office.[209] According to Safire, "[n]ever had the Federal Government stooped so low to make a case;" he claimed that Barry's arrest was based on the "sleaziest entrapment yet perpetrated on a suspect."[210] Barry was "taunted and dared" into using crack cocaine by an "attractive former girlfriend," and when he did, Attorney General Richard Thornburgh's men

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[203] B. Drummond Ayres, Jr., "Capital Mayor's Coalition Unraveling," *New York Times*, March 6, 1989.

[204] David Johnston, "Prosecutor Sees 'Catharsis,'" *New York Times*, January 21, 1990.

[205] Johnston, "Prosecutor Sees 'Catharsis.'"

[206] Johnston, "Prosecutor Sees 'Catharsis.'"

[207] B. Drummond Ayres, Jr. "Felony Counts of Perjury Are Raising Stakes for a Beleaguered Leader," *New York Times*, February 16, 1990.

[208] Ayres, Jr. "Felony Counts of Perjury Are Raising Stakes for a Beleaguered Leader."

[209] William Safire, "Thornburgh at Bay," *New York Times,* May 28, 1990.

[210] Safire, "Thornburgh at Bay."

"banged on the door and nailed him for a misdemeanor."[211] Safire contrasted this with Mr. Thornburgh's exercise of prosecutorial discretion when one of his "closest aides," was being investigated by a Harrisburg grand jury for drug distribution.[212] Safire's disgust was attributed to Mr. Thornburgh's decision to recuse himself from the case—calling his conduct "the most egregious double standard in prosecutorial discretion."[213] He stated further "[i]f the Attorney General chose to be a zealot in the Barry cocaine case he cannot be an ostrich in the cocaine case that may involve his right-hand man."[214] While Mr. Thornburgh may have had valid reasons for recusing himself, this charge of a double standard of justice became a theme echoed in other articles in the paper.

One month later, in a June 1990 article titled "Line Between Villain and Victim Blurs As Barry Takes Case to Capital's Blacks," Felicity Barringer reported that some African Americans saw Barry's prosecution "as the inevitable persecution of brash black leaders," whereas others thought Barry brought his problems on himself.[215] Later that summer, the paper reported that Barry accused the F.B.I. of trying to "sting black elected officials around the country," a theory that was worked into trial as part of his defense.[216] In October, the paper reported that Barry was sentenced to six months in jail for possession.[217]

The coverage of Barry signaled a changing focus on the prosecution of crack. Following the stories of crack holding urban neighborhoods hostage were articles that reported on shifting

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[211] Safire, "Thornburgh at Bay."

[212] Safire, "Thornburgh at Bay."

[213] Safire, "Thornburgh at Bay."

[214] Safire, "Thornburgh at Bay."

[215] Felicity Barringer, "Line Between Villain and Victim Blurs As Barry Takes Case to Capital's Blacks," *New York Times,* June 8, 1990.

[216] B. Drummond Ayres Jr., "Barry says F.B.I. is After Blacks," *New York Times*, July 27, 1990.

[217] B. Drummond Ayres Jr., "6 Months in Jail for Mayor Barry In Cocaine Possession Conviction," *New York Times*, October 27, 1990.

perceptions about the prosecution of crack users and dealers in minority neighborhoods and about the outbreak of the AIDS and crack epidemics in these communities. Cecil Williams, the pastor of Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco, equated crack to genocide:

> What I'm talking about is genocide, 1990's style: when the spirit of a people is destroyed, when the culture of a people is eradicated, when basic human relationships are ripped apart, when large numbers of people are killed because of drug-related crimes and overdoses. I am talking about the spiritual and physical death of a race."[218]

Pastor Williams linked crack to genocide nearly five years after the *New York Times* reported Councilman Wendell Foster drawing the same conclusion about the drug and its impact on African American communities in New York City.[219] While Williams admitted that drug dealers were "the agents of genocide," he contended that "cocaine is foreign to the African-American culture. We did not create it; we did not ask for it. Crack is an import, and while members of other races use crack, its full destructive fury was unleashed on the black community."[220]

Later that year, Jason DeParle reported that a broad group of African Americans, with varied backgrounds, were questioned whether AIDS and crack were part of a racial conspiracy targeted to eliminate the African American population.[221] DeParle stated that a *New York Times*/WCBS-TV poll found that 10% of African Americans interviewed believed that AIDS was deliberately created to "infect black people," and 19% said that such theory could possibly be true; only 63% said it was almost certainly not true.[222] Some public health officials stated that belief in this conspiracy was widespread enough to undermine public health workers' ability

[218] Cecil Williams, "Crack Is Genocide, 1990's Style," *New York Times,* February 15, 1990.

[219] *See* Ari L. Goldman, "Clergy Expands Its Role in Fight Against Crack," *New York Times*, August 4, 1986.

[220] Williams, "Crack Is Genocide, 1990's Style."

[221] Jason DeParle, "Many Blacks See Ills As Part of Conspiracy," *New York Times,* October 29, 1990.

[222] DeParle, "Many Blacks See Ills As Part of Conspiracy."

to adequately provide information about AIDS and its transmission.[223]

While federal and state judges were not embracing the language of conspiracy, some were examining the disparate impact the mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines, enacted at the height of the crack epidemic, were having on minority communities. In December 1990, the *New York Times* reported that Judge Pamela Alexander of Hennepin County District Court in Minnesota found that the state law mandating a four-year prison sentence for first time crack users as compared to probation for powder cocaine users was "racially biased and thus unconstitutional."[224] A few weeks later, journalist Robb London explained the basis for the judge's decision as well as the reaction by prosecutors and legislatures nationwide.[225] The judge commented that "[t]here better be a good reason for any law that has the practical effect of disproportionately punishing members of one racial group. If crack was significantly more deadly or harmful than cocaine, that might be a good enough reason. But there isn't enough evidence that they're different enough to justify the radical difference in penalties."[226] According to London, the legislature was "stunned" by the judge's finding, stating that they never intended to target a particular group and that they relied on "reliable," albeit anecdotal evidence to support their decision regarding the penalties.[227]

Two years later, in 1993, the paper reported on a Justice Department appeal filed after a judge ruled that the mandatory minimum sentencing guidelines for crack "disproportionately affect blacks."[228] The judge found that African Americans dealing crack served substantially

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[223] DeParle, "Many Blacks See Ills As Part of Conspiracy."

[224] "A Law Distinguishing Crack From Other Cocaine Is Upset," *New York Times,* December 29, 1990.

[225] Robb London, "Judge's Overruling of Crack Law Brings Turmoil," *New York Times*, January 11, 1991.

[226] London, "Judge's Overruling of Crack Law Brings Turmoil."

[227] London, "Judge's Overruling of Crack Law Brings Turmoil."

[228] "U.S. Appeals a Case Defying Sentence Guides," *New York Times,* August 29, 1993.

longer sentences than those white dealers who sold powder cocaine.[229] The article also mentioned that a similar finding was made by the U.S. Sentencing Commission—a Commission report noted that blacks were serving significantly longer prison sentences because of crack and that more than 90% of defendants in crack cases were black as compared to only 25% who were incarcerated for selling powder cocaine.[230] Throughout the first half of the 1990s, the paper continued to publish articles, letters and editorials that both justified mandatory minimum sentences for crack and that severely critiqued these laws because of the racial disparities.

Arguably, the shift in the discourse to address the propriety of the sentencing guidelines may have been in part, as the paper informed its readership, that by 1990 cocaine use and the crack epidemic were on the decline in New York City and nationally.[231] As the threat of cocaine waned, the paper published stories of rehabilitation and redemption—personal vignettes to let its readers know that of those individuals that suffered the worst of crack's addictiveness, some were finding their way back to life and starting over.[232] Yet, even while the paper reveled in redemption stories and celebrated crack's decline in popularity, it also warned that heroin was making a comeback, both locally and nationally.[233] The paper identified Manhattan neighborhoods where the heroin trade flourished and reported that police officials admitted that "[w]e haven't really put that much of a dent in the heroin trade."[234] With a new threat established, much of the paper's focus on the crack epidemic drew to a close.

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[229] "U.S. Appeals a Case Defying Sentence Guides."

[230] "U.S. Appeals a Case Defying Sentence Guides."

[231] Joseph B Treaster, "U.S. Cocaine Epidemic Shows Signs of Waning," *New York Times,* July 1, 1990.

[232] *See* Douglas Martin, "A Man's Struggle With the Siren That Is Crack," *New York Times*, December 13, 1989; Joseph B. Treaster, "When Young Love Is Soiled By Agony of the Drug World," *New York Times,* June 8, 1990; Peter Kerr, "The Detoxing of Prisoner 88A0802," *New York Times,* June 27, 1993;

[233] Jennifer Kingson Bloom, "Crack Trade Making Way For Heroin," *New York Times*, March 5, 1995.

[234] Bloom, "Crack Trade Making Way For Heroin."

Conclusion

In 1986, amidst the height of news coverage on crack's threat to rural and suburban, middle- and upper-class people, journalist Peter Kerr reminded *New York Times'* readers that it was still unknown how far crack use would spread.[235] Specifically, he cautioned that it was "unclear how far crack use [would] spread *beyond the poor and working class*."[236] He used words like "speculation" when describing crack addiction among middle- and upper-class communities. Yet most of the paper's coverage from 1986 did not offer words of caution, it invoked language of threat. Crack was portrayed as the corrupter of middle- and upper-class individuals. Politicians and other officials quickly added their voices to the anti-drug rhetoric abounding in the mid 1980s. Yet, as Kerr remarked in his article, politicians and officials also made remarks that were inaccurate—U.S. Attorney Rudolph Giuliani was quoted as saying that sixty percent of high school students had tried cocaine; the actual percentage was seventeen.[237] One could justifiably argue that if more than half of high school students had tried cocaine, there was a drug crisis among American youth. But could the same argument be made if less than twenty percent tried the drug?

The dramatic increase in the coverage of drug abuse, particularly the threat of crack, coincided with an increase in public concern about illegal drugs.[238] Social scientists have demonstrated that the level of emphasis news media places on a particular issue may influence the significance that the public places on that issue.[239] The media's coverage of certain issues generates fear, support, public outrage and sometimes spurs action. Moreover, not all media

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[235] Peter Kerr, "Crack Use: The Future," *New York Times*, September 1, 1986.

[236] Kerr, "Crack Use: The Future."

[237] Kerr, "Crack Use: The Future."

[238] Pamela J. Shoemaker, ed., *Communication Campaigns about Drugs: Government, Media, and the Public* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1989), 1.

[239] Shoemaker, 2.

generates the same influence. In a study examining the relationship between the media's changing coverage of drugs and the public concern over drugs, Pamela Shoemaker, Wayne Wanta and Dawn Leggett found that media coverage impacted people's degree of concern over drug issues.[240] Further, they determined that some newspapers had more influence than other forms of news media. Their research showed that the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* were responsible for most of the differences in public opinion about drugs.[241] In fact these two newspapers "had more influence on public concern with drugs than [did] all three major television networks and all three major news magazines combined."[242] What the *New York Times* chose to emphasize directly impacted public perception about drugs and issues related to drug abuse.

As demonstrated in this paper, the coverage of crack in the *New York Times* featured different subjects related to crack, which shifted over time and varied along socioeconomic, race and gender lines. In 1986, addicts were presented as mostly middle-class victims—those who fell under the corrupting influence of crack. As the focus shifted towards poor crack users, the paper reported on how these users strained the city's services. Articles on crime shifted from addicts stealing to support their habit to young violent minority drug dealers. Pregnant addicts, primarily minorities, were prosecuted under novel legal theories because of the "growing [] frustration in the media and legal communities about the increasing number of drug babies."[243] These same babies were repeatedly stigmatized until science finally corrected the media's portrayal of these children. These corrections were also printed in the *New York Times*.

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[240] Pamela J. Shoemaker, Wayne Wanta, Dawn Leggett, "Drug Coverage and Public Opinion, 1972-1986," in *Communication Campaigns about Drugs: Government, Media, and the Public*, Pamela J. Shoemaker, ed., (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1989), 67, 78-79.

[241] Shoemaker, et al., 79.

[242] Shoemaker, et al., 79.

[243] Lewin, "Drug Use in Pregnancy: New Issue for the Courts."

Throughout the paper's coverage of crack, there are occasional examples, like Peter Kerr's article reminding readers that it was unknown how far crack would spread, that urged caution, questioned claims of crack's pervasiveness and challenged readers and the paper's staff to be wary of the hysteria surrounding the drug. The *New York Times* also printed competing viewpoints of the drug epidemic. In the same month, the paper reported that Councilman Wendell Foster referred to crack as a new form of "genocide;"[244] and also published an article that stated that New York was having "one of its periodic drug hysterias . . . characterized by the overuse of the word 'epidemic.'"[245] Was it hysteria, genocide, or did the crack crisis represent a combination of both of these characterizations?

In attempting to explain the dramatic increase in the media's coverage of drug use in 1986—when there was not a corresponding dramatic increase in actual drug use—journalist Peter Kerr summarized the viewpoints of social scientists, drug treatment experts and others.[246] These individuals argued that: the attitudes toward drug abuse had shifted, Americans only recently began to understand that cocaine use could become an addiction, there was a contrast between cocaine use as an affluent drug and heroin as a poor inner city drug, crack was highly addictive at a faster rate than powder cocaine, and that crack had a "devastating" effect on inner-city neighborhoods located near major national news organizations.[247] Kerr also pointed to an increase in cocaine-related emergency room visits and cocaine-related deaths—all of which he contended contributed to increased media coverage of drug abuse.[248] He argued further that increased coverage contributed to shifting public perceptions about drugs, which in turn

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[244] Gary Gately, "On City Street Corners, Night of Antidrug Vigils," *New York Times*, July 22, 1986.

[245] Russell Baker, "Same Old Junk," *New York Times*, July 26, 1986.

[246] Peter Kerr, "Anatomy of the Drug Issue: How, After Years, It Erupted," *New York Times*, November 17, 1986.

[247] Kerr, "Anatomy of the Drug Issue: How, After Years, It Erupted."

[248] Kerr, "Anatomy of the Drug Issue: How, After Years, It Erupted."

"galvanized" politicians to incorporate drug policy into their political rhetoric.[249] Put simply, rhetoric drives fear and fear drives policy.

Yet, media-generated fear alone cannot explain the public's reaction to crack. While the *New York Times* may be guilty of contributing to the overblown pronouncements of crack's threat beyond urban confines, crack and its associated violence and societal costs also generated fear. While this fear or threat of crack may not have been justified on a national level, it was certainly understandable in places such as New York City. Just because the more affluent Upper West Side neighborhood was not under siege from violent drug dealers, does not mean that residents were not justified in their concern that drug violence could spread from Washington Heights, one of the most notorious crack neighborhoods in New York, which was located less than fifty blocks away. It cannot be a coincidence that the newspapers found to have the greatest impact on public perception about drugs, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, were located in two of the cities most devastated by crack. These papers could personalize the effects of crack in their urban communities for a local and national audience. Social scientists may be right in arguing that the way in which the media constructed its narrative on crack was simplistic, biased and overshadowed important issues of race, gender, and class. This is exemplified in the *New York Times'* coverage of pregnant addicts—the paper noted that there were middle-class white pregnant addicts but they profiled poor, minority addicts. Yet, failing to acknowledge that crack was devastating to urban communities, particularly poor communities of color, also overshadows important issues of race, gender, and class.

The *New York Times'* portrait of crack was complicated. It was reshaped and refined depending on scientific studies but also based on the direction the paper chose to focus its

[249] Kerr, "Anatomy of the Drug Issue: How, After Years, It Erupted."

stories. During the decade between 1985 and 1995, crack represented many things on the pages of the *New York Times.* In 1986, crack was primarily portrayed as a threat to white, upper and middle class adults and adolescents. In 1987, the drug was repositioned in the ghetto, where minority women gave birth to crack-addicted babies, spread AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and abandoned their families to the city's care. In 1988, crack coverage symbolized brash, violent minority youths who cared little for the lives of others. In 1989, as stories of "crack babies" increased, so did attempts to prosecute pregnant addicts. Coverage in the 1990s reported on crack's decline but also the bias in prosecuting both minority men and women, calls for change in the sentencing guidelines, and redemption stories of addicts. While the stories the paper published may have been true, or corrected when mistakes were made, how the paper chose to construct its narrative influenced how the public perceived crack—as primarily an inner-city problem, threatening upwardly mobile whites, which prompted punitive responses to address the threat. For New Yorkers living near or around crack's devastating influence, the paper's coverage may have reflected their genuine feelings that their city, "real or imagined—[was] less livable, [and] more menacing."[250]

[250] Marriott, "After 3 Years, Crack Plague In New York Only Gets Worse."

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