

How do local media cover child abuse and neglect? A frame analysis of the *Lafayette Journal*  
*and Courier's* coverage of the Aiyana Gauvin case

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*Summary:* This study reports a content analysis of Lafayette *Journal and Courier* newspaper stories about child abuse over a three-year period of time, looking at how the issue of child abuse was framed in the wake of Aiyana Gauvin's death. Child abuse was framed most often as a crime story, though the degree to which this is true varied over time and across different sections of the *J & C* (new stories, opinion pieces, or letters to the editor).

*Background and Methods:* A frame is a central organizing idea that helps readers make sense of relevant events and interpret what is going on. Frames select and emphasize certain aspects of perceived reality and hence present a particular view of the nature of the problem, what causes the problem, what parties are responsible for the problem, and what can be done to address the problem (Entmen, 1993). Media frames usually are implicit and taken for granted, reflecting culturally-shared understandings of issues (Van Gorp, 2007). Still, they reflect choices by journalists and editors about what parts of a story to emphasize and what parts to downplay.

A search was conducted on *Newsbank*, an electronic database of newspaper archives, with the term "child abuse" in the *J & C* newspaper for the time period of July 2004 to June 2007. This time frame, beginning approximately six months before Aiyana Gauvin's death and running until two and one-half years after her death, includes the major events associated with the case (e.g., Aiyana's death, subsequent investigations, community forums/summits, a sheriff deputy's resignation, Michelle Urbanas Gauvin's plea bargain and the trial of Christian Gauvin). The *Newsbank* search initially produced 681 hits; however, about one half of these items made only passing reference to child abuse (one sentence or less) in discussions of other topics. Once these extraneous items were removed, the remaining 331 news stories, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor were analyzed in terms of how they "framed" the issue of child abuse.

Three frames were identified in the coverage: the criminal justice-descriptive (CJD) frame, criminal justice-evaluative (CJE) frame, and community asset building (CAB) frame. The first two frames both present child abuse as a crime story in which victims and perpetrators are involved in the legal system, but they differ in terms of tone and perspective. The CJD frame includes stories that provide descriptive information about the processes involved in child abuse investigations and prosecutions; such stories do not include explicit evaluations of these process or evaluative comments by participants in the system or observers of the process. The CJE frame, on the other hand, emphasizes negative consequences suffered by the victim (child), punishment of the perpetrator, and evaluations of those in the system (police, Department of Child Services) charged with protecting children and prosecuting perpetrators. In contrast, stories within the community asset building (CAB) frame implicitly assume that the entire community (not just DCS and law enforcement agencies) has a collective responsibility to create social and economic conditions under which children can thrive. Table 1 provides more detailed definitions and descriptions of the three frames, whereas actual examples of stories presented within each of the three frames are shown in the Appendix. The first author and another graduate student independently classified 18% of the 331 stories into one of the three frame types, achieving better than 90% agreement about which frame was predominant in each story.

Aside from classifying stories by type of frame, the research also analyzed each story – sentence by sentence – to identify a list of “themes” or concrete topics that were discussed regularly across the 331 articles. Based on a close reading by two of the authors, 29 themes were identified and grouped into five larger clusters: types of child maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect), causes (e.g., parental characteristics, causes originating outside of the

family), actors (e.g., parents or caretakers, children, courts, DCS, police, social service agencies, media), outcomes (e.g., injury, death, conviction), and strategies (intervention, prevention).

*Findings:* Major findings from the research include the following:

- *Child abuse stories were written most often as crime stories.* The CJE frame was present in 45% (150 out of 331 items) and the CJD frame in 20% (64 out of 331 items) of all *J & C* news items (news stories + opinion pieces + letters to the editor) about child abuse from July 2004 to June 2007. Taken together, this represents about 2/3 of the *J & C*'s coverage of child abuse during the three-year time period that was analyzed.
- *A substantial percentage, albeit a minority, of child abuse stories adopted a community asset building frame.* About 1/3 of all *J & C* news items (117 out of 331 stories; 35%) were presented through the CAB frame, offering an alternative perspective on child abuse.
- *Stories mentioning specific themes tended to be presented through different frames.* News items that made mention of accused caregivers, trials, convictions, imprisonment, sexual abuse, custody issues, police, and the courts most often were presented through the CJE frame. Stories mentioning prevention, community, reform and causes originating from outside of the family tended to contain the CAB frame. Reform also was a common topic in stories containing the CJD frame. For more detail on how stories that made mention of specific themes varied in terms of framing, see Table 2.
- *The type of frame used differed significantly across different sections of the J & C.*  
As can be seen in Figure 1, most letters to the editor written by the public adopted one of the two crime frames: nearly two-thirds of letters (51 out of 79, 65%) published during the three-year time period framed the issue of child abuse within the CJE frame and another 20%

adopted the CJD frame. Fewer than 20% of letters adopted the CAB frame. In contrast, the majority of opinion pieces (28 out of 53, 52%) written by the *J & C* editorial staff or by individuals invited by the staff were presented through the CAB frame. This was the only type of news item where “crime” was not the modal frame. News stories written by *J & C* reporters were split fairly equally between the CJE (87 of 199 stories, 44%) and the CAB (77 of 199 stories, 39%) frames. When both crime frames are combined (CJE + CJD), however, the majority of news stories (122 out of 199, 61%) did frame the issue as a crime story.

- *The type of frame used varied significantly over time.* As can be seen in Figure 2, coverage in the *J & C* in the six month period during which Aiyana Gauvin died was dominated by the CJE frame; indeed, 58% (50 out of 81) of the news stories, letters to the editor, and opinion pieces written immediately after Aiyana’s death adopted the CJE frame. This reflects, in part, that a large number of letters to the editor were submitted and published immediately after Aiyana’s death (letters to the editor are the type of news content mostly likely to use the CJE frame). In contrast to the immediate reaction, the CAB frame is present in a larger percentage of stories during the last three time periods, though crime-based stories (CJE + CJD) still constitute 50% or more of all news items at all six time periods. These findings lend some support to Wilson’s (2006) claim that the local community’s reaction shifted over time from a focus on government systems that respond to child abuse only after it has occurred (first-order change) to the community’s collective responsibility to prevent child abuse (second-order change).

*Implications and Limitations:* The crime frame (especially the CJE frame) appears to be the “default” frame through which the public understands child abuse, as reflected in letters to the editor submitted to the *J & C*. The majority of news stories written by *J & C* reporters also adopt

the CJE or CJD frames. Having said this, *J & C* reporters also have published a substantial minority of news stories adopting the CAB frame, and the *J & C* editorial staff also have promoted this alternative view through its own editorials and invited opinion pieces. The study speaks only about *J & C* coverage over a fairly short span of time (2004-2007), and does not analyze how other local media covered the issue during that same time period.

Child abuse is a crime, and hence it is inevitable that some coverage will present the issue as a crime story (CJE and CJD frames). Too much emphasis on the crime frame, however, presents an oversimplified view of child abuse as something that can be addressed by having the government police “deviant” families more vigilantly. Such a view fails to reflect the complex set of risk factors associated with child abuse (some of which reside outside of the immediate family) and focuses only on systems that respond after child abuse already has occurred. If the only thing the public feels they can do about child abuse is report suspicions to DCS, then they not likely to feel empowered to take or support other actions that could make a difference in terms of children’s well being. The CAB frame presents an alternative view that suggests more avenues by which individuals and organizations can help prevent child abuse.

The intent of this research is not to bash local media. As our findings make clear, how the *J & C* framed the issue of child abuse and neglect is complicated, in that it varied across time and sections of the paper. Having said this, it is important to continue looking at media frames. Local media play a role not only in shaping which issues are salient in a community but also in how the community understands the nature, causes and hence possible responses to those issues (Entmen, 1993). Hopefully this research will generate conversations between multiple stakeholders about the media’s role in reporting on child abuse and neglect, including how the

media's interests and responsibilities are similar to or different from those of other stakeholders and how a greater focus on prevention could be encouraged.

### *References*

Entman, R.M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication, 43*, 51-58.

Van Gorp, B. (2007). The constructionist approach to framing: Bringing culture back in. *Journal of Communication, 57*, 60-78.

Wilson, S.R. (2006) First and second-order changes in a community's response to a child abuse fatality. *Communication Monographs, 73/4*, 481-487.

Table 1: Three Frames found in Coverage of the Aiyana Gauvin Case

Frame	Definition	Description
Criminal Justice Evaluative	<p>Stories that frame child abuse and neglect as a “crime” and hence emphasize negative consequences suffered by the victim (child), punishment of the perpetrator, and evaluations of those in the system (police, Child Protective Services) charged with protecting children and prosecuting perpetrators. This frame implicitly assumes that child abuse and neglect can be prevented by better “policing” and hence DCS and criminal justice agencies have primary responsibility for responding to child abuse and neglect and safeguarding children.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical and emotional injury</li> <li>• Criminal prosecution, references to trials, sentences, criminal allegations</li> <li>• Blame for mistakes made during investigations</li> <li>• Reflexivity in an attempt to “fix what was broken in the system” with reference to the Child Protective Services and the judicial system</li> <li>• Punishment and retribution</li> <li>• Evaluative comments made by actors in the story (e.g., family members of the victim) or those following the story (letters to the editor from citizens)</li> </ul>
Criminal Justice Descriptive	<p>Stories that frame child abuse and neglect as a “crime” and hence provide descriptive information about the processes involved in child abuse investigations and prosecutions. This frame also implicitly assumes that DCS and criminal justice agencies have primary responsibility for child abuse and neglect, but it does not include evaluations of responses by these agencies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More fact based, less evaluative</li> <li>• “Objective” – presents “the facts” without explicit evaluations by actors in the story or observers</li> <li>• Process focused e.g. appointment of the magistrate hearing juvenile cases, discussions on who can or cannot be in the courtroom, timetable</li> </ul>

**Community Asset Building**

Stories that frame preventing child abuse and neglect as outcomes that occur as part of the larger process of treating children as “assets” to be nurtured rather than “victims” to be protected or fixed. This frame implicitly assumes that the entire community (not just DCS and law enforcement agencies) has a collective responsibility to create social and economic conditions under which children can thrive.

of how the case is moving through the system

- Spirit of volunteerism
- Community involvement, collaboration
- Consideration given to causes of CA&N emerging outside the family such as lack of cost effective child care and health care
- An emphasis on prevention and awareness (rather than just intervention after the fact)
- The notion that community asset building is a continuous process
- A sense of collective responsibility for preventing child abuse
- Second order change

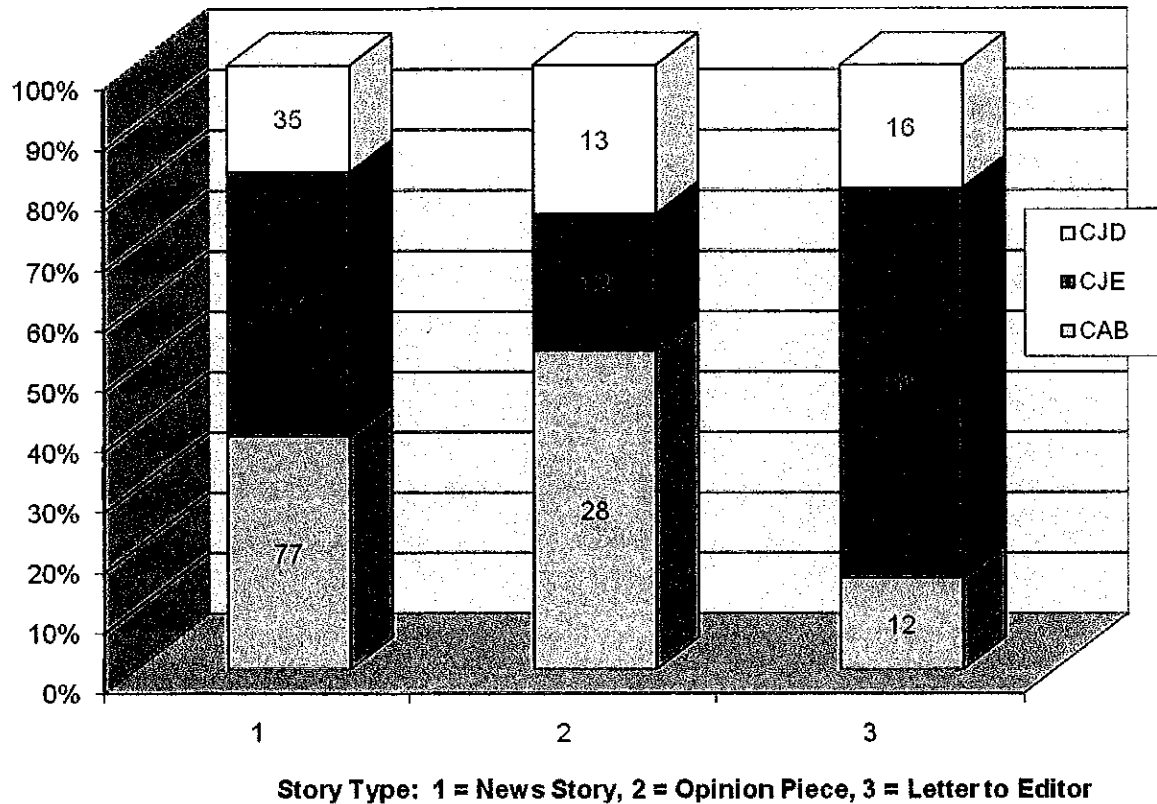
Table 2: Theme by frame cross-tabulation

Stories that mention	Community Asset Building*	Criminal Justice Evaluative*	Criminal justice Descriptive*	Chi Square	Sig	Effect Size (V)
PhysicalAbuse	25.4%	55.9%	18.6%	9.714	0.008	0.171
SexualAbuse	17.8%	71.1%	11.1%	14.016	0.001	0.206
UnspecifiedAbuse	43.2%	36.4%	20.4	11.268	0.004	0.185
Prevention	71.0%	8.9%	20.2%	129.363	0.000	0.625
AccusedCaregivers	22.2%	62.6%	15.2%	61.055	0.000	0.429
Police	24.5%	59.6%	16.0%	11.059	0.004	0.183
Law	26.5%	55.3%	18.2%	15.687	0.000	0.218
Community	53.8%	26.4%	19.8%	71.200	0.000	0.464
Injury	17.3%	66.7%	16.0%	21.285	0.000	0.254
Imprisonment	11.8%	80.4%	7.8%	29.971	0.000	0.301
Conviction	13.5%	75.7%	10.8%	15.656	0.000	0.217
Trial	8.6%	79.3%	12.1%	34.063	0.000	0.321
Custody	22.9%	62.5%	14.6%	6.768	0.034	0.143
Reform	45.2%	14.3%	40.5%	22.672	0.000	0.262
CausesOutsideFamily	77.8%	11.1%	11.1%	32.416	0.000	0.313

\*For each theme (row), numbers in the first three columns report what percentages of stories mentioning that topic were framed as CAB, CJE, or CJD.

Figure 1

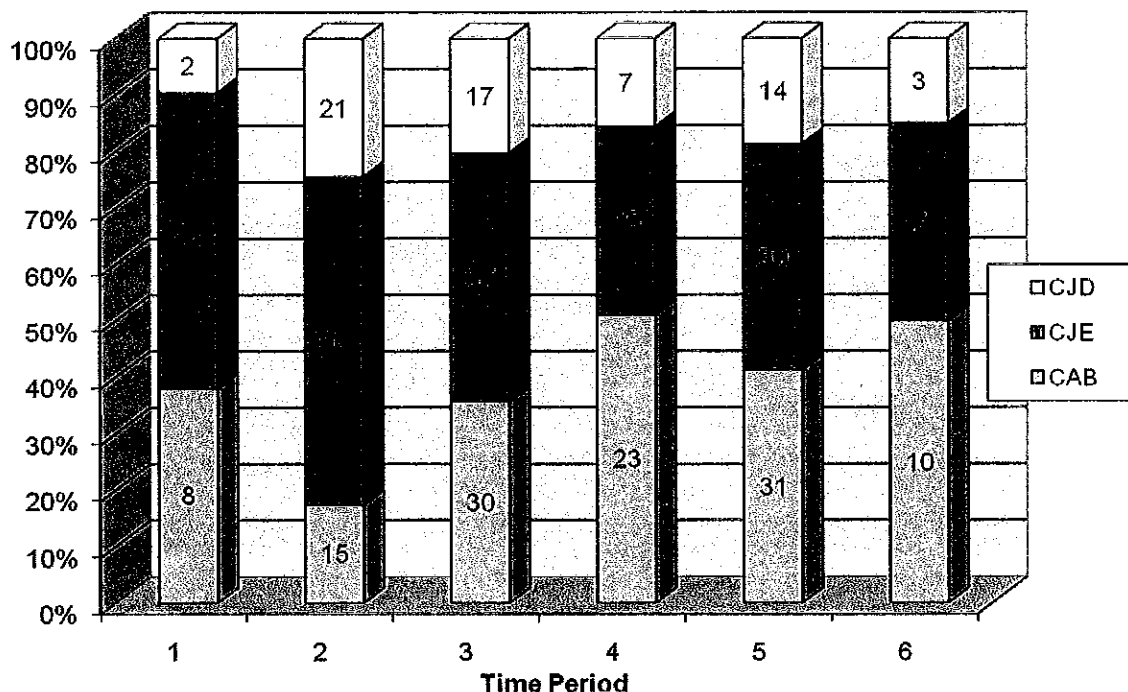
## Framing by Story Type (# in bars = frequencies)



*Note:* Each bar shows the percentage of stories of that type adopting a particular frame over the three year period; for example, 53% (28 out of 53) of opinion pieces (middle bar) adopted the CAB frame over the three-year period. Numbers within each bar show the frequencies of stories of that type; for example, 28 opinion pieces adopted the CAB frame, 12 adopted the CJE frame, and 13 adopted the CJD frame (total = 53 opinion pieces over the three year period).

Figure 2

## Framing Over Six Time Periods (# in bars = frequencies)



*Note:* Each bar shows the percentage of all news items (news stories + opinion pieces + letters to the editor) during a six-month time period adopting a particular frame. Time period 1 = July-Dec. 2004; period 2 = Jan-June, 2005; period 3 = July-Dec., 2005; period 4 = Jan.-June, 2006; period 5 = July-Dec. 2006; period 6 = Jan.-June, 2007. For example, 17% (15 out of 86 items) adopted the CAB frame during time period 2. Numbers within each bar show the frequencies of stories of that type during that time frame; for example, 15 items adopted the CAB frame, 50 adopted the CJE frame, and 21 adopted the CJD frame during time period 2 (total = 86 items).

## *Appendix*

### *Examples of Child Abuse Stories Display Three Different Frames*

The Criminal Justice-Descriptive (CJD) frame includes stories that provide descriptive information about the processes involved in child abuse investigations and prosecutions. For example the following article talks about access to records related to the Aiyana Gauvin case.

Judge Thomas Busch of Tippecanoe Superior Court 2 ruled during a status conference Friday that attorneys for Michelle and Christian Gauvin should have access to records of Aiyana's history with DCS, formerly Child Protective Services. (Defense lawyers get access to Aiyana's files, 2006)

Another example of the CJD frame is an article that talks about who can be included or excluded from hearings in juvenile court cases.

A juvenile magistrate Friday ordered the public to leave a court hearing concerning injuries to a baby girl. At the hearing, Miller's attorney requested that a Journal and Courier reporter be excluded because what he wrote might harm Miller and her child. A representative of child protective services also asked that he be made to leave because his presence would prevent some information from being kept confidential, she said. (Shaw, 2006)

The criminal justice evaluative (CJE) frame emphasizes negative consequences suffered by the victim (child), punishment of the perpetrator, and evaluations of those in the system (police, DCS) charged with protecting children and prosecuting perpetrators. The following story emphasizes a very young child's injuries and the perpetrator's actions that caused harm.

The uncle of a 4-month-old girl who is recovering from five broken bones told investigators he had seen the infant mistreated by her mother. Justin Dobson, the child's uncle, told investigators he had seen his sister yank Jasmine by the arm while angry. He lives with his sister and her husband, Afflerbach said. Another time, he heard a "thump" and saw his sister pick Jasmine off the ground. The infant was crying so hard that she could not catch her breath, Justin Dobson, 26, said. (Voravong; 2006, June 21).

Another example of the CJE frame discusses a lie told by a Sheriff's deputy regarding a well being check on the child, Aiyana Gauvin. We see here a combination of reflexivity (I made a bad decision) and retribution (confession and resignation).

At the Gauvin home on June 5, 2004, Keller spoke at the door with Michelle and Christian but left without ever laying eyes on Aiyana. He reported to dispatchers that he had seen the girl and saw no injuries. "I made a bad decision, a poor decision," Keller said in court Tuesday. "I didn't go into the house to check on the child." Seventeen months later, Keller, a 3year member of the sheriff's department, repeated the lie during the deposition. But two days later, he confessed to Sheriff Smokey Anderson and resigned. (Gerrety, 2005 Dec 21).

The Community asset building frame (CAB) assumes that the entire community has a collective responsibility to create social and economic conditions under which children can thrive. The following story talks about filling a need for child care in the community.

Parents who need child care for infants and toddlers might welcome news about the former Durgan Elementary School. With the Lafayette School Corp. board approving a lease, Tippecanoe County Child Care eastside center will move to Durgan, and the center plans to expand services to include care for infants and toddlers this fall. Forums about child abuse and neglect last year revealed a need for child care for infants and toddlers. Working parents will soon have another option. (Filling a need; 2006, June 14).

Another example of the CAB frame discusses the role of education for parents provided by a low cost clinic for infants in preventing child abuse. The piece identifies causes of abuse such as need for parent education programs, immediate contextual factors such as frustration with a crying infant which are more complex than the "parent as a monster" frame.

The clinic also provides education, which might be just as important as affordable treatment, especially when it comes to preventing child abuse. Frustration is a normal part of parenting, and a baby crying for hours can make anyone feel like a failure. Knowing what behavior is normal can be a comfort to parents. It might provide a moment of calm during a late-night crying session and prevent adults from taking their anger out on a helpless child. (Help for infants, parents; 2006, April 26).

## **Media Panel Format**

The panel is 60 min long (9:00-10:00am). I'm attaching a summary of the research that we'll use to get the discussion going - it's a content analysis of three years of J&C coverage about child abuse (news stories, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor) starting approximately 6 months before Aiyana's death and running for 2.5 years afterwards. Although the project was motivated by seeing how that case impacted coverage, the analysis isn't limited only to stories about Aiyana - it includes any J&C story mentioning child abuse. The focus is on how the issue gets framed - e.g., as a crime story vs. in other ways - and how that varies across sections of the paper and changes over time. We'll take a maximum of 10 min to describe the research.

We'll then ask each of you (as people who work - or have worked - in the local media to give brief impressions and reactions to the research. You'll each have 3-5 min to do this. My colleague (Professor Mohan Dutta) will also give a quick reaction as someone who studies media.

At that point we'll open things up for questions from the audience. My colleague Professor Jane Natt (who teaches media writing classes at Purdue) is going to moderate the discussion. As part of the presentation, I will list some questions that we think might be discussed in light of the project but people in the audience will likely have their own questions too. I'll send a final list of questions by mid-week (we have another planning meeting on Monday - let me run them by the planning group first to get their reaction) but here are some I can imagine:

1. Why is the way in which local media "frame" their coverage of child abuse and neglect important?
2. What responsibilities and interests do local media have in covering the issue of child abuse and neglect? How are those similar or different from the responsibilities and interests of other groups? (government and law enforcement, social services, academics...)
3. How has the J & C moved beyond stories that adopt the crime frame to also create coverage that emphasizes prevention, children as assets to be nurtured, and the community's collective responsibility to create conditions where children can thrive? What else might be done along these lines?
4. Is the current state of the newspaper industry (or TV industry) affecting how issues such as child abuse get covered? What about new technologies? How?