

*MORAL PANIC OVER
YOUTH VIOLENCE:
Wilding and the Manufacture
of Menace in the Media*

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In 1989, while reporting the well-publicized attack on a female jogger in New York City, the media discovered wilding, a newly stylized word used to describe sexual violence committed by a group of urban teens. Sociologically, the term wilding became particularly significant due to its racial connotation, perpetuating a stereotype of young Black (and Latino) males belonging to a dangerous class. This work explores the contours of moral panic over wilding by attending to elements of race, class, and fear of crime, especially as they manifest in the media. The findings contribute to a critical understanding of youth in society by offering an interpretation of wilding, a distinctive form of moral panic that symbolizes not only a threat to society at large but also to a political economy that reproduces racial and social disparities.

As a conceptual framework, moral panic has improved our understanding of the social construction of crime, particularly those forms of lawlessness perceived as being *new*: for example, mugging (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978), crack babies (Humphries, 1999), crank (i.e., methamphetamine or “speed”) (Jenkins, 1994a), freeway violence (Best, 1991, 1999), and superpredators (Brownstein, 1996, 2000; also see Aceland, 1995; Glassner, 1999).¹ Whereas Jock Young is credited with the first use of the term in 1971, the idea of moral panic developed rapidly in the work of Stanley Cohen who offered its enduring definition. Moral panic has occurred when

a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interest; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians, and other right-thinking people. (Cohen, 1972, p. 9)

Cohen (1972) encountered moral panic while studying societal reaction to unconventional youths in England. In his ground-breaking treatise *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Cohen explored the roles of the media, politicians, and criminal justice officials in fueling anxiety over British youth culture in 1964 when Mods and Rockers were depicted as new threats to public safety. Together, the media and members of the political establishment publicized exaggerated claims of dangers posed by unconventional youths; in turn, inflammatory rhetoric was used to justify enhanced police powers and greater investment in the traditional criminal justice apparatus. With that phenomenon in mind, this work set out to examine moral panic emerging in New York City in 1989 after a young woman, while jogging in Central Park, was attacked and raped by seven youths. The tragic event popularly became known as *wilding*, a stylized term describing sexual violence committed by a group of urban teenagers. As a newly discovered menace to public safety, wilding consumed the media and also captured the attention of politicians and members of the local criminal justice establishment who campaigned for tougher measures in dealing with youth violence.

Although a common view of moral panic suggests that pseudo-disasters quickly burst into formation and then dissipate, this study stresses its lingering effects. As we shall see, moral panic over wilding reinforces racial biases prevalent in criminal stereotypes, particularly the popular perception that young Black (and Latino) males constitute a dangerous class. Compounded by sensationalistic news coverage on wilding, along with carjacking, gang banging, and other stylized forms of lawlessness associated with urban teens, minority youths remain a lightning rod for public fear, anger, and anxiety over impending social disorder, all of which contribute to additional law and order campaigns.

It is important to note that moral panic often touches on bona fide social ills. Still, rather than enlightening the public toward an in-

formed understanding of the problem, in this case, youth violence, the media and politicians pander to popular fear, resulting in renewed hostility toward people who are easy to identify and dislike. This study refines our comprehension of youth in society by integrating research on race, class, and fear of crime, especially as those phenomena become stylized in the media.² Whereas much of the pioneering work on moral panic emphasized its implications to the political economy, nowadays that facet of the paradigm tends to be neglected in contemporary scholarship. Returning to that earlier theme, our research demonstrates that moral panic over youth violence symbolizes not only a threat to society at large but also to a prevailing political economy that thrives on racial and economic inequality.

THE EMERGENCE OF WILDING

As is typically the case in moral panic, the source of immediate threat is discovered by the media in their search for an original twist to a news story. Customarily, the media convey the newness of a breaking story in the form of an expression, word, or phrase; indeed, wilding captured the public's imagination about crime, producing an amplified fear of sexual violence. Three days after the April 19, 1989, attack on the Central Park jogger, *The New York Times* reported,

The youths who raped and savagely beat a young investment banker in Central Park on Wednesday night were part of a loosely organized gang of 32 schoolboys whose random, motiveless assaults terrorized at least eight other people over nearly two hours, senior police investigators said yesterday.

Chief of Detectives Robert Colangelo, who said the attacks appeared unrelated to money, race, drugs or alcohol, said that some of the 20 youths brought into questioning had told investigators that the crime spree was the product of a past time called "wilding." (Pitt, 1989, p. 1)

As if details of the brutal attack were not sufficient to drive the story, the media relied on the word *wilding* for purposes of news sensationalism; conveniently, legal terminology (i.e., rape, assault, and attempted murder) was replaced by inflammatory language imbued with moral panic. Conforming to the classic genesis of moral panic, law enforce-

ment officials also participated in the initial reification of the term. The chief of detectives not only described wilding as a "pastime" for the suspects but contributed to its invention by suggesting that the activity was a new form of menace: "'It's not a term that we in the police had heard before,' the chief said, noting that the police were unaware of any similar incidents in the park recently" (Pitt, 1989, p. 1).

As a story-telling institution, the media relied on the dramatic style of infotainment in their coverage of the Central Park jogger attack. Moreover, the story's repetition reinforced popular notions of violence, victimization, and criminal stereotypes, all of which fueled moral panic. Consider the following features of the criminal event. The attack occurred in New York City's Central Park, a city and a public space that have been mythologized with a notorious reputation for predatory violence. The victim was a White female whose physical attributes, social status, and personal biography were injected into virtually every media account. She was described as young, beautiful, and educated as well as a Manhattan investment banker (Barth, 1989, p. 8). Perhaps adding to the story's enduring level of interest, the victim remained anonymous.³

Seven youths were charged as adults with rape, assault, and attempted murder. Eventually, charges against one suspect were dropped and another youth turned state witness and as part of a plea bargain, he plead guilty to one count of robbery (for an earlier incident, not in connection to the rape incident) and all other charges against him were dropped (Wolff, 1989). Although being acquitted of attempted murder, three youths were convicted of first-degree rape and first-degree assault and sentenced to maximum juvenile prison terms of 5 to 10 years (Sachar, 1990). A sixth youth was convicted of attempted murder and rape; although 14 years old at the time of the crime, he was sentenced to a maximum 5- to 10-year prison term as a juvenile. Finally, the seventh defendant was acquitted of attempted murder and rape but convicted of assault, riot, and sexual abuse and sentenced to 8½ to 26 years in prison (Phillips, Nolan, & Pearl, 1990). As we shall see later, the race of the victim and that of the suspects figured prominently in the invention of the term wilding and the development of moral panic.

The trial may have put to rest the legal concerns of the crime, but in the public consciousness, a new form of menace had been discovered.

Wilding had been added to a growing roster of crimes associated with urban culture, along with mugging, looting, gang banging, drive-by shootings, and carjacking. Moreover, those buzz words generally are racially biased because they are introduced to describe Black (and Latino) lawbreakers more so than White offenders. Although initially used by the media to stylize infotainment, the term wilding made a greater impact on society and culture by becoming another synonym for youth violence, contributing to fear of crime and moral panic. Not only does youth violence have a new name, wilding, it also has a face, typically that of young Black (and Latino) males residing in urban centers. As a complex phenomenon, the invention of wilding feeds moral panic by drawing on racial criminal stereotypes.

WILDING AND ITS INDICATORS OF MORAL PANIC

In our companion article, a content analysis shed light on various themes and nuances of the use of the term wilding in the New York City press.⁴ Whereas the primary scope of that investigation did not encompass the conceptual components of moral panic, many of its findings deserve another round of interpretation. To answer the commonly asked question “How do we know when a moral panic takes hold in a given society?” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 33), we turn to our data set for evidence of moral panic over wilding. By doing so, we develop a critical understanding of a phenomenon known as wilding by attending to each indicator of moral panic, namely, concern, consensus, hostility, disproportionality, and volatility (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). These criteria are significant because they serve as conceptual guideposts in determining whether moral panic has taken place.

CONCERN

The first indicator of moral panic is a heightened concern over the behavior of others and the consequences such conduct is believed to have on society. Sociologists insist that concern ought to be verifiable in the form of an observed and measurable manifestation (Cohen, 1972; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Welch, Fenwick, & Roberts,

TABLE 1
Articles Containing the Term Wilding in New York City Newspapers^a

<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Number of Articles</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>New York Newsday</i>	97	62
<i>New York Post</i>	33	21
<i>The New York Times</i>	14	9
<i>New York Daily News</i>	12	8
Total	156	

a. 1989 to 1997.

1997). In the case of wilding, the volume of immediate media attention provides verifiable evidence of the emergence of a new form of social threat. Between 1989, the year of the attack on the Central Park jogger, and 1997, 156 articles were published in four New York City newspapers in which the term wilding was used to describe youth violence⁵ (see Table 1). The word wilding spread rapidly as a popular sound bite connoting something dangerous and sinister.

Wilding. For more than a month, the word has chilled and titillated us. In two staccato syllables, it encapsulates the slithery dread many New Yorkers feel at the menace lurking out there in the dark. . . . The term came to us first through the chief of detectives, quoting one of the accused as saying: "We were going 'wilding.'" But police in the precincts had never heard the word before; nor had street kids surveyed by reporters. Some suspect the accused told the police that they were after "the wild thing"—a euphemism for sex—from the rap song of that name. (Lukas, 1989, p. 4)

While engaging in claims-making activities, the media and the local criminal justice establishment claimed that wilding was something new and not fully understood; consequently, both of those institutions contributed to public anxiety over this previously unknown threat to society. Becoming part of the popular lexicon for crime, journalists continued to use wilding in their news stories about juvenile delinquency largely for dramatic purposes.

On April 19, 1989, a young woman went jogging through Central Park. She was accosted by a group of young men, raped, beaten and left for

dead. Americans learned a new piece of street slang “wilding.” The crime and the concept shocked the nation. (Pinkerton, 1994, p. A52)

Although wilding appears to represent a form of lawlessness, its exact definition appeared elusive; hence we set out to interpret precisely what was meant by wilding in the press. We learned that several different types of criminal offenses and antisocial acts were characterized as wilding. The prevailing definition of wilding was sexual violence, denoted in 79 articles in our sample (51%), especially in reference to the rape of the Central Park jogger. Blurring its definition, however, 32 articles (21%) used wilding to describe assault and battery (other than sexual violence). Consider the following items published in the New York City press: “Wilding—randomly attacking anyone they found” (Marzulli, 1989, p. 3) and “ ‘Wilding’—the street word for random pack violence” (Clifford, Giordano, Huth, Jordan, & Smith, 1989, p. 3; also see Weiss, 1989).

When the term first surfaced in reference to the Central Park jogger case, robbery was specifically removed from its meaning. Later, other media accounts departed from the original definition and included robbery and theft as components of wilding. Six articles (4%) adopted that revised definition of the term. “Wilding is the street term for beating, robbing, and torturing complete strangers for fun” (Charen, 1989, p. 64). In related press coverage, the definition drifted even further, encompassing vandalism (3 articles, 2%) and a host of miscellaneous acts (12 articles, 8%), including incidents in which youths hassled store merchants and “terrorized” people by yelling at them. Whereas the press referred to those acts as wilding, police officially termed them criminal mischief, criminal trespassing, and truancy (McAlary, 1989; Santangelo & Nagourney, 1989).

In our search for other verifiable evidence of concern leading to moral panic, we discovered another key element, namely, proposed legislation. Moral panic typically manifests in lawmaking designed to combat a putative problem. Moreover, it is at the legislative level of moral panic that the nature of the problem becomes increasingly politicized and criminalized, often for the benefit of candidates campaigning for public office. In reaction to the wilding attack in Central Park, Manhattan borough president David Dinkins, a mayoral candidate, called for a “new ‘antiwilding law’ to increase penalties for anyone

TABLE 2
Use of the Term Wilding: Nature of Offense^a

<i>Offense Category</i>	<i>Number of Articles</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Sexual violence	79	51
Assault and battery	32	21
Robbery and theft	6	4
Vandalism	3	2
Miscellaneous	12	8

a. Content analysis based on 156 articles.

who commits a crime as part of a group.” Rounding out his criminal justice platform, Dinkins advocated additional coercive social control measures by recommending that more police officers be hired “to ease crime in the city” (Murphy & Hemphill, 1989, p. 4; also see Trye & Holland, 1989). Another candidate for mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, “sounding stern at a news conference headquarters, said harsh measures are necessary to combat ‘mindless violence’ perpetrated by marauding gangs on ‘wilding’ sprees” (Flynn, 1989, p. 8). Not to be outdone, incumbent Mayor Ed Koch called for the death penalty in incidents of wilding (“The Central Park Rape,” 1990) (see Table 2).

CONSENSUS

In becoming a recognizable phenomenon, moral panic requires a certain degree of consensus among members of society. By no means does such agreement need to be universal or even representative of the majority. Nevertheless, there must exist a widespread belief that the problem at hand is real, it poses a threat to society, and something should be done to correct it. Social institutions commonly participate in the formation of moral panic, especially the media, the criminal justice establishment, political parties, and their lobbyists. By directing enormous attention to wilding, the media contributed to a growing consensus that there was a new menace threatening society. As mentioned previously, politicians weighed in on the problem by proposing legislation that would create harsh penalties for wilding. Each of these interdependent activities implied that there was a general belief that the community faced a new menace that should be confronted by specific crime control measures. Providing additional evidence of con-

sensus, neighborhoods organized public forums where they expressed their concerns to local political leaders. Susan D. Alter, a city councilwoman from Brooklyn, said that “wilding was growing, and the Flatbush, Midwood, and Canarsie had become targets of gangs on the subway.” One fearful parent told the panel, “I might have to bury my child. No, I don’t want that. I want my children to bury me” (Budner, 1990, p. B3). As a form of moral panic, so-called crime waves generally ride the crest of consensus. As the media set into motion the perception that crime is on the rise, public fear of crime increases; in turn, politicians manipulate that fear of crime for political gain (Fishman, 1978; Humphries, 1981; Welch, 1996, 1999).

HOSTILITY

By definition, moral panic arouses intense hostility toward an identifiable group or category of people who become vilified as social outcasts; indeed, that outrage is fueled by a dichotomization process whereby folk devils are distinguished from folk heroes in a morality play of good versus evil (Cohen, 1972; Katz, 1988). Stereotypes figure prominently in the formation of moral panic given that hostility is aimed at a segment of society that already is disliked and mistrusted. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994, p. 34) note a “parallel between the stereotyping process and the routine processing of criminal suspects” especially given that police respond to characteristics laden in stereotypes: age, race, presumed socioeconomic status, physical appearance, and location.

In the case of the Central Park wilding incident, hostility was channeled through racial criminal stereotypes that adversely affected the way the suspects were initially processed by the police. Ordinarily, New York City police withhold the names of minors who are accused of crimes; however, detectives said they made public the names of the youths charged in the Central Park attack because of the seriousness of the incident. Creating a feeding frenzy characteristic of tabloid journalism, the media immediately—and repeatedly—identified the suspects (five of whom were under the age of 16) by name and photograph; moreover, the media released the suspects’ street addresses, apartment complexes, and the schools they attended (McCarthy, 1996). Adding to a sense that African Americans were being stereo-

typed as criminals, the press inaccurately reported that the suspects, five Black and two Latino, resided in Harlem, a predominately Black community (Pitt, 1989). In fact, the suspects lived in East Harlem, commonly known as Spanish Harlem, a neighborhood located on the opposite side of upper Manhattan.

As an indication of the swiftness by which the term *wilding* was racially stereotyped, the following entry was published in the *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang* just 1 year after the infamous attack.

wilding (noun): running amock. A black vogue term, seemingly first published in *The New York Times* on 22 April 1989. A beautiful woman jogger viciously gang-raped and left in a coma by a mob of "wilding" youths in New York's Central Park has woken from the dead. (Thorne, 1990, p. 563)

Curiously though, the term *wilding* has its roots in contemporary music and urban culture, specifically Tone-Loc's rap remake of the 1960s' pop tune "Wild Thing." It is widely believed that *wilding* is an abbreviated pronunciation of "Wild Thing." Still, music critic Dave Marsh doubts the suspects ever used the term to describe the attack on the Central Park jogger: "In fact, it's a fantasy, dreamed up in a reporter's shack or a precinct house. Nobody has ever heard kids use anything like that phrase; you can be sure you won't hear it in any of the taped confessions in the trial" (Marsh, 1990, p. 50). Marsh contends that the term *wilding* was invented as a reaction to anti-hip-hop hysteria. " 'Wilding' retains its forceful currency because here in New York, cradle of rap and hip hop though it is, the powers-that-be don't approve of that culture" (Marsh, 1990, p. 50). Marsh joins many social commentators who condemn the use of the word *wilding* to describe the attack on the Central Park jogger because it trivializes the brutal nature of the offense and contributes to racial tension (Gates, 1990).

The emergence of the term *wilding* is significant to our understanding of moral panic because much like other media inventions, it contributes enormously to the reproduction of criminal stereotypes along lines of race. Through our content analysis, we found that race of the suspect(s) was identified in the text of 13 articles (8% of the sample) and race of the victim was revealed in 8 stories (5%); furthermore, 11 articles (7%) mentioned the race of both the suspect(s) and victim. In

all incidents labeled wilding by the media, and in which race was mentioned in the text, the suspects were listed as either Black or Latino males. Conversely, the victims in each of those news stories were all identified as White females with the exception of one article reporting the wilding murder of a Black woman in Boston (“N.Y.-Style,” 1990, p. 16).⁶

Whereas examining the text of articles allows us to discern the frequency by which newspapers specifically address race, textual analysis has its research limits. Obviously, the media has other ways to convey the race of suspects and victims, most notably through photographs and film footage. Once race is determined, news coverage does not have to repeat such information because the public already knows the racial configuration of the crime. In the case of the Central Park jogger incident, the race (and ethnicity; i.e., Black and Latino) of the suspects was revealed in photographs published in each of the newspapers in our sample. The public also received information from other media sources, most notably television news programs that broadcasted film footage identifying the race of the suspects. Similarly, published photographs and film footage of the victim’s parents indicated that the victim was White.

The significance of race in the reification of wilding becomes clearer as we detect racial disparities emerging in the application of the term. In 1991, *New York Newsday* reported that Alfred Jermain Ewell, a Black 17-year-old, was attacked and seriously wounded by a “gang of White toughs” in Atlantic Beach. Black members of the community questioned why the incident was not characterized in the media as a case of wilding, insisting that the word was reserved for Black suspects, especially when the victim is a White female (Nagourney, 1991). Referring to news coverage of the Central Park jogger case, civil rights activist Reverend Al Sharpton criticized the media for concentrating more on White female victims than women of color: “Black women are attacked by ‘wilders’ and mugged every day, and it’s not even newsworthy. The fact that she [the Central Park victim] is white is the only reason the city is concerned” (Clifford et al., 1989, p. 3).⁷ In sum, our findings support the contention that the term wilding is biased racially, reserved predominately for Black and Latino males, particularly under the unique circumstances in which the victim is a White female.

Amid a flurry of hostility generated by moral panic, villains are quickly labeled enemies of respectable society and their conduct is viewed as not only harmful to innocent victims but also threatening to the larger social order. In the construction of social outcasts, pariahs, and folk devils, reliance on metaphors serves to dehumanize villains. Looking carefully at the linguistic structure of the term wilding, it is difficult to overlook its wild essence; one can intuitively interpret wilding as a threat conceived as menacing, savage, untamed, uncivilized, erratic, unruly, and ferocious. Sensing a connection between the word wilding and similar metaphors, we searched for further evidence of that form of stereotype used to describe suspects accused of wilding. We found that in 52 articles (33% of the sample) other wild synonyms were employed. The most frequently cited metaphor was *wolf pack* (or *pack*), appearing in 27 articles (17% of the sample). In describing the suspects in a wilding attack, *New York Newsday* reported, "They were a wolf pack. What they did was *savage*" (Barth, 1989, p. 8). Likewise, the term pack, implying a pack of wolves or other wild animals, was evident in the following media account: "When she jogged on the sunken path, she ran into some of life's losers, a pack of teenagers from the surrounding neighborhood who were out 'wilding' . . . [who] have dark impulses. . . . The punks were telling her the park belongs to terror" (McGrory, 1989, p. 2; also Lipson, 1992; Pearl, Murray, & Bollinger, 1989; Pearl & Pessin, 1989a).⁸

Also contributing to the dehumanization of suspects arrested in wilding incidents, the press used the word *animals* in five articles (3%). Drawing on a rich vocabulary, journalists tapped into numerous other metaphors as a means of capturing the essence of wilding, including marauders, beasts, monsters, thugs, urban terrorists, bloodthirsty teens, demons, evil, hoodlums, lower orders, mob, morons, mutants, and urban killing machines. Indeed, such terms were introduced to underscore the menacing nature of wilding; for example, "Once again marauding hoodlums have wreaked their unspeakable horror on us" (Trye & Holland, 1989, p. 3; also see Duggan, 1990b; Pearl & Pessin, 1989a; Siefman, 1989). The use of the terms wilding, wolf pack, and other metaphors not only serves the media's interest in dramatizing news stories but they contribute to stereotypes produced by hostility, thus contributing to moral panic and fear of crime. Moreover, animal references facilitate the punishment response whereby

lawbreakers are humiliated, vilified, and dehumanized; certainly, harsh penalties are easily justified for criminals regarded as animals or members of a wolf pack. Suggesting a Durkhemian effect, the persecution of villains solidifies communities in their fight against crime, evil, and other sources of menace (Erikson, 1966; Katz, 1988; Welch, Fenwick, et al., 1997; Welch, Fenwick, & Roberts, 1998). Wilding fits the modern morality play insofar as the villains or so-called wolves are cast out from society. Still, the underlying racial meaning of the word wilding ought to be emphasized, considering that the term appears to be reserved for offenders who are Black (and Latino) males (see Rothenberg & Heinz, 1998; Schanberg, 1990).

DISPROPORTIONALITY

Another key element of moral panic is its disproportionality, meaning that the perceived danger is greater than the potential harm. In essence, moral panic means that there is a consensus among many members of the society that a more sizable number of individuals are engaged in the behavior in question than actually are. Furthermore, the threat, danger, or damage believed caused by the behavior is far more substantial than “a realistic appraisal could sustain” (Davis & Stasz, 1990, p. 129; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 36). Perhaps by any reasonable view of wilding, it could be concluded that public anxiety was excessive. From an empirical standpoint, our content analysis on 156 newspaper articles revealed that 110 articles (71% of the sample) made reference to a single incident of wilding, namely, the attack on the Central Park jogger. Forty-six news stories (29%) pertained to other wilding incidents and 14 articles (9%) referred to both the Central Park jogger case and other incidents of wilding, often as a means for comparison. Even though the highest concentration of articles focused on the Central Park case, the press continued to contribute to moral panic over wilding by keeping the perceived threat in the public mind. For some consumers of the media, the Central Park tragedy was lived and relived vicariously by repeated news coverage. However, given the thousands of various acts of lawlessness in New York City in any given year, the chances of falling victim to a wilding was so remote that it would be difficult to justify a statistical calculation of risk, especially inasmuch as wilding has been defined by an array of crimi-

nal offenses. Moral panic over wilding resembles other fears of crime, a phenomenon that researchers have found to exceed actual risk of victimization (Warr, 2000). To reiterate our main point, we conclude that the perceived danger of wilding is disproportionate to the potential harm.

As is the case with other moral panics, claims makers contribute to public anxiety by publicizing false or exaggerated claims about the putative problem, often by generating and disseminating statistics and figures. Upon closer scrutiny, however, the authenticity of such information is highly suspect. As another example of how government leaders manipulate public fear of crime for political leverage, New York City councilman Andrew Stein issued the following claim without official documentation: "On Halloween last year, the fear of mob violence kept many New Yorkers at home. Thousands of teenagers went on bloody rampages in several boroughs. They moved spontaneously in packs of 20 or 30 and assaulted people at random" (Stein, 1990, p. 27).

Another manifestation of disproportionality is the use of hyperbole in describing the identifiable group blamed for the problem in question. Cohen (1972) reminded us that the media relies on hyperbole in a manner that *stylizes* the image of a threatening group and, in doing so, adds to its menacing reputation. As noted previously, the press delivered a steady flow of metaphors, depicting suspects in wilding incidents as urban terrorists and animals. Just as the word *pack* projects a danger to society, the term *gang* also implies a similar threat. In our analysis, we found that the press, for dramatic effect, further stylized wilding by using the term *gang* rather than *group* in its description of several participants involved in the same crime. Whereas *group* appears to be a neutral term, *gang* is heavily loaded, conjuring potent images of predatory urban street gangs. A chief reason why a *gang* seems more menacing than a mere collection or group of lawbreakers is that the term implies that its members are organized, thus more committed to violence and mayhem (Best, 1999; Best & Hutchinson, 1996; Jackson, 1993; McCorkle & Miethe, 1998; Zatz, 1987).

Through a content analysis, we found that in 86 articles (55% of the sample), the term *gang* was used to describe suspects accused of wilding. Upon closer inspection, however, we discovered that in 83 ar-

ticles, the word gang was employed as a synonym for a group of criminals rather than a specific street gang. The following item typified the use of the term gang in the context of wilding. “Seventeen teenage boys and girls were arrested yesterday and charged with being part of a gang that assaulted two workers at a Bronx golf course” (Rivera, 1989, p. 4). Only three articles about wilding contained any references to known street gangs; moreover, in just one news story was a known street gang (i.e., the Decepticons) accused of wilding (Hane, 1991). Based on these findings, we conclude that much like the use of the terms *wolf pack* and *pack*, the word gang is employed by the press to suggest a greater danger posed by wilding. By stylizing wilding as a gang phenomenon, the nature of the threat is inflamed, sensationalized, and exaggerated, thus underscoring the disproportionate criteria of moral panic.

Moral panic typically evokes claims that a particular social problem poses a much more sinister threat to the prevailing social order than is realized initially. For many claims makers, wilding is symbolic of a deeper moral decline in civilized society, a belief that punctuates the disproportionate character of moral panic. The following interpretation exemplifies what moral panic researchers refer to as a “disaster mentality” (see Cohen, 1972; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Welch, 2000).

This America was destroyed somewhere between the start of World War II and the end of the Vietnam War. It will never be recovered. . . . The liberals contributed to its destruction by attacking its values, despising conformism. . . . Out of this, though, has come an America of morally isolated people. . . . The salient fact about the Central Park attack was not that its perpetrators were black or Latino, but that they existed in a moral void. It is where too many people in the United States today exist. (Pfaff, 1989, p. 56)

Interestingly, even some scholars joined the chorus on moral decline in suggesting that wilding represents a cultural crisis for the nation. In his book *The Wilding of America*, Boston College sociologist Charles Derber (1996) adapted the term wilding to describe an array of social behavior:

We shall see that there are many less extreme forms of wilding, including a wide range of antisocial acts that are neither criminal nor physically violent. Wilding includes the ordinary as well as the extraordinary, may be profit oriented or pleasure seeking, and can infect corporations and governments as well as individuals of every race, class, and gender. (pp. 3-4)

Critics wasted little time in pointing out the flaws in the “moral decline” argument. Derber was denounced for attempting to reduce complex issues to a simple metaphor and using the term wilding as a metaphor suggesting that the nation is in moral decline. “Wilding, Mr. Derber argues, has become epidemic, and is not limited to inner city youths. It is happening on Capitol Hill and on Wall Street and wherever, as he puts it, a ‘degenerate form of individualism’ runs amock” (Cose, 1996, p. 20). In the end, Derber and others subscribing to the moral decline argument become so reductionistic in their thinking that the term wilding is such a “catchall for greed and selfishness that it shines little light on just what has gone wrong” (Cose, 1996, p. 20).

VOLATILITY

In this conceptual framework, the element of volatility indicates that moral panic erupts suddenly then subsides. Admittedly, some forms of moral panic may become institutionalized in legislation, enforcement practices, and methods of punishment, despite waning public anxiety (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Welch, 2000). Wilding as a form of moral panic clearly was volatile, given the burst of immediate media attention, along with criminal justice and political rhetoric, all of which faded after the Central Park trial. Similarly, public anxiety over wilding seemed to have vanished as the threat disappeared from news headlines. Still, remnants of the wilding phenomenon linger, particularly in a lexicon of urban crime that reinforces racial criminal stereotypes. As a result, prejudice and discrimination in the criminal justice system are reproduced.

To illustrate the volatile nature of wilding, we found that 82 stories (53% of the sample) were published in 1989, the year of the attack on the Central Park jogger, followed by 35 articles (22%) in 1990, the year of the trial. The term wilding was used less frequently as years

passed; however, several articles occasionally mentioned wilding in relation to the Central Park jogger case, thus extending the life of the story as well as the term. Over the next few years, eight articles were published in 1991, eight in 1992, four in 1993, four in 1994, and three in 1995. In 1996, a noticeable spike of 10 articles (6%) surfaced. That year, the word wilding was used to describe another attack on a woman in Central Park. The term also was revisited in reference to one of the defendants convicted in the 1989 Central Park jogger case, who after being released after more than 5 years of his prison sentence had been falsely accused of robbery. In addition to being used to describe other incidents of youth violence in 1996, the term wilding—as part of the vocabulary for urban crime—was used in commentaries on aggression at sporting events and violent themes contained in computer video games. Whereas the attack on the Central Park jogger and the subsequent trial were events, wilding emerged as moral panic, a volatile phenomenon that dissipated in due course. Moreover, moral panic over wilding was a form of collective behavior whose chief participants included the media, the political and criminal justice establishment, and the public. Altogether these social actors produced a complex expression of fear and anxiety over the threat of wilding.

WILDING, MORAL PANIC, AND THREATS TO THE POLITICAL ECONOMY

To recapitulate, the media stylized the term wilding so that it would appear to be a new form of social threat. As one news story reads, “‘Wilding’ . . . encapsulates the slithery dread many New Yorkers feel at the menace lurking out there in the dark” (Lukas, 1989, p. 4). Sociologists note that moral panic typically goes beyond concern for a particular problem insofar as there is a suspicion that a much deeper and more sinister force threatens society (Cohen, 1972; Hall et al., 1978; Welch, 2000). The notion of wilding fits the classic formula for moral panic in that it sounds the alarm for impending social disorder. According to one journalist, “The youthful rampage in Central Park, outlandishly referred to as ‘wilding’ that has left an innocent victim of unabashed brutality in a life threatening coma has sounded a red alert for

our survival as a civilized society” (Gunning, 1989, p. 62; also see Pfaff, 1989). Likewise, moral panic is rooted in the suspicion that anti-social behaviors are driven by cultural forces considered by political and religious conservatives as permissive and immoral: “It’s not surprising that some men of the cloth are now blaming pornography for the Central Park Jogger attack” (Bloch, 1989, p. 88).

As the concept of moral panic took shape in the sociological and criminological literature, scholars reminded us that moral panic, in conjuring notions of social disorder, also symbolizes a threat to the prevailing political economy (Cohen, 1972; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Hall et al., 1978; Rothenberg & Heinz, 1998; Schissel, 1997). Underlying the hysteria over a putative social threat exists class conflict in which the source of the problem is believed to be rooted in the lower, so-called dangerous class and in a predatory manner creeps up the social ladder (Gordon, 1994). That interpretation explains why moral panic often is driven by institutions influenced by the upper classes, including the media, legislatures, and the criminal justice apparatus (Brownstein, 1996; Jenkins, 1994b; Reinerman & Levine, 1997).

As told by the media, the tale of wilding involving the attack on the Central Park jogger was laden with class conflict. As working-class resentment toward “Yuppies” (young, urban professionals) in New York City mounted in the late 1980s, the Central Park jogger case served as a type of backlash to anti-Yuppie attitudes. Indeed, the lower classes were depicted as dangerous, unleashing their fury at resourceful and virtuous members of the new class of capitalists. The media routinely described the victim by her profession, a “young Manhattan investment banker” and a “Wall Street executive” (Barth, 1989, p. 8). The victim’s social status was not lost in the numerous media accounts, adding that she resided on the Upper East Side of Manhattan after moving from the “affluent Pittsburgh suburb of Upper St. Clair” where her parents were “active in Republican politics” (Jetter, 1989, p. 5). Other items in the victim’s biography conveyed privilege but also merit; one journalist wrote, “She was a winner: Phi Beta Kappa from Wellesley, a double-graduate degree from Yale, an investment banker at Salomon Brothers in New York” (McGrory, 1989, p. 2). Further elevating her persona, the press depicted her as a virtuous capital-

ist: “She wanted to use her financial expertise to help develop the Third World” (Goldstein, 1990, p. 9).

As the victim’s high social status resonated in the media, it is not difficult to detect an ideological spin from which the piety of capitalism was exalted. Against that backdrop, the rape of the “young Manhattan investment banker” seems to represent a symbolic attack on the political economy by the so-called dangerous class, particularly by Black (and Latino) males who, rather than benefiting from capitalism, are generally marginalized by social conditions created by market forces (e.g., high unemployment, poor education, inadequate health care, and unaffordable housing) (see Welch, Bryan, & Wolff, 1999; Welch, Wolff, & Bryan, 1998). As mainline politicians pushed for harsher penalties for wilding, the law and order campaign earned greater support, especially among the upper classes. Capitalist mogul Donald Trump took out full-page advertisements in four New York City newspapers demanding the death penalty of the defendants in the Central Park jogger case (“The Central Park Rape,” 1990). Due to his immense wealth, Trump enjoyed easy access to the media by purchasing ample advertising space to publicize his views on criminal justice, another reminder of the significance of class conflict in moral panic.

Interestingly, the media also characterized the local economy as another victim of the attack on the Central Park jogger: “ ‘When tragedy like this occurs,’ Marshall Murdaugh, president of the New York Convention and Visitors Bureau said yesterday, ‘it has an unmeasurable negative impact. And the impression is compounded by other incidents that have occurred over the years’ ” (Henican, 1989, p. 25). Like other forms of moral panic, the story of the Central Park jogger attack offers subtle messages about class conflict in the political economy. Along with the commitment of the criminal justice establishment, capitalism shall be protected from the dangerous class and the threat of wilding. As an epilogue to the story of the Central Park jogger, follow-up news coverage embraced further the Protestant work ethic insofar as the media became enamored not only with the victim’s recovery but also with her ability to resume a career in the financial industry.

The Central Park jogger has returned to her old job as an investment banker—just seven months after she was gang-raped and left for dead

by a wilding wolf pack. . . . The jogger is an associate in the corporate finance department of the firm at 1 New York Plaza—the same position she held before she was savagely attacked in Central Park April 19. (Pearl & Pessin, 1989b, p. 7; also see Clifford, 1990; Furse, 1996)

As the news story completed its cycle, the media also reminded their audiences that the villains, members of the dangerous class, were brought to justice, convicted, and incapacitated. Moreover, that accomplishment was attributed in large part to the commitment of prosecutors and local law enforcement, a prominent theme in crime news whereby criminal justice personnel are honored for their dedication and service (Barak, 1994; Fishman & Cavender, 1998; Welch, Fenwick, et al., 1997).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To reiterate its interlocking components (i.e., concern, consensus, hostility, disproportionality, and volatility), moral panic “locates a ‘folk devil,’ is shared, is out of synch with the measurable seriousness of the condition that generates it, and varies in intensity over time” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994, p. 41). Based on our analysis, the wilding phenomenon satisfies the classic criteria of moral panic insofar as young Black (and Latino) males, as an identifiable group, were viewed as a menace, thus targeted by the criminal justice machinery. Relatedly, the threat of wilding was stylized and greatly exaggerated in the media, a form of attention that dissipated along with public concern soon after the Central Park jogger case had been tried in court. Left in its wake, however, wilding resonates in the public imagination as a stark criminal stereotype affixed to young Black (and Latino) males. In that sense, wilding emerged as a symbolic expression of anxiety over youth violence resulting in young men of color being scapegoated as villains, folk devils, and other representations of evil; indeed, animal metaphors (e.g., wolf packs) used to dehumanize minority men come easily to the media, criminal justice and political officials, and the public.

Still, Cohen (1972) reminds us that the point of moral panic is “not that there’s nothing there” but that societal responses are “fundamen-

tally inappropriate” (p. 204). Violence certainly is a significant concern in American society, but to neglect its underlying sources (e.g., socioeconomic inequality and other forms of repression) merely compounds the problem (Gil, 1996; Sullivan, 1980). Moreover, as political and criminal justice elites enact ambitious measures of coercive social control (e.g., more police, penalties, and prisons) violence as a social problem is reproduced rather than resolved. In the end, people who are easy to identify and dislike, namely, young Black (and Latino) males, are criminalized according to prevailing racial stereotypes.

In sum, social interventions that ignore the roots of violence while creating coercive forms of control and scapegoating unpopular people are the legacies of moral panic, becoming embedded in the social order long after the initial wave of public anxiety has subsided. Altogether, those aspects of coercive intervention maintain the dominant, or hegemonic, ideology insofar as they are used to justify a social policy that funnels an unprecedented number of African American (and Latino) males into incarceration, even as crime rates plummet (Chiricos, 1996; Mauer & Huling, 1995; Miller, 1996; Tonry, 1995; Welch, 1996, 1999). The dominant ideology fueling moral panic over wilding is functional for the status quo insofar as it diverts attention from a political economy that generates vast socioeconomic disparities and recasts public frustration onto what Lynch and Sabol (1992) call a “privileged target group” composed of minority men. According to Melossi (1985), moral panic provides a “vocabulary of punitive motive” used to justify controlling relatively powerless people in the surplus population. Wilding and various animal metaphors contained in a vocabulary of punitive motive are so deeply racist in their connotation that specific references to Black (and Latino) individuals are not necessary to convey the message that men of color are to be met with suspicion and, at times, feared.

Returning to the notion that moral panic serves the prevailing political and economic order, Chiricos (1996) points out that “moral panic keeps the vast majority of Americans—who are ‘doing with less so that big business can have more’—focused on the ostensible dangers from the underclass instead of the policies and profits of the investors of capital” (p. 45). From a Marxian perspective, the dominance of the ruling class extends beyond the ownership and control of the means of

material production and exerts influence over the means of mental production. Moral panic over wilding represents a mental product that is transformed and transmitted in line with the imperatives of the dominant ideology, thereby determining what is socially thinkable. Above all, the dominant ideology serves the interests of the upper classes by protecting and reproducing their way of life. Still, the dominant ideology also exhibits universal qualities to ensure that the elite worldview is shared to some degree by subordinate classes (Marx, 1978; also see Gramsci, 1971; Larrain, 1983; Sahin, 1980). The emergence of wilding as a new menace should be understood as manifestation of shared latent social anxiety given that violence is a significant problem concerning people of all social classes. As the media dwells on a particularly tragic event, that latent social anxiety is unleashed, causing an outpour of moral outrage. Media coverage on the attack on the Central Park jogger precipitated a moral panic in large part because the idea of wilding hit a public nerve sensitive to youth violence, race, class, and gender.

Despite its contributions to the study of youth in society, this research contains some methodological and conceptual limitations worth noting. By relying on a content analysis of newspaper articles, this research does not allow us to ascertain how stories about wilding are actually being received by the public, considering that several reporters and columnists were critical of the term.⁹ Our findings also are limited by the fact that the press is just one of several media outlets; undoubtedly, the public consumes news from the electronic media as well. Further research on media coverage on wilding should examine radio news and, perhaps even more important, television news programs. A driving force behind the emergence of infotainment is competition among television networks along with around-the-clock cable news programs. With this realization in mind, additional research on wilding and other so-called new crimes would benefit tremendously from examinations devoted to visual communication, especially given that stereotypes are what Lippman (1922) insightfully called "pictures in our heads." Finally, the study of youth in society would be enhanced from analyses that determine whether crime news influences criminal justice policies and tactics, particularly in light of such controversial law enforcement practices as racial profiling.

NOTES

1. Since the 1970s, the concept of moral panic has enjoyed growing popularity among sociologists studying the social construction of deviance and crime (Best, 1987; Chermak, 1997; Chiricos, 1996; Cohen & Young, 1981; Ferrell, 1996; Fishman, 1978; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978; Hickman, 1982; Hollywood, 1997; Jenkins, 1994a, 1994b; McCorkle & Miethe, 1998; Potter & Kappeler, 1998; Surette, 1998; Welch, 2000; Welch & Bryan, 2000; Welch, Fenwick, et al., 1997, 1998).

2. In a companion piece, we explored media coverage of the wilding phenomenon by administering a content analysis on 156 newspaper articles published in the New York City press between 1989 and 1997 (Welch, Price, & Yankey, in press). Among other things, we unveiled evidence of sensationalism in the media, commonly referred to as infotainment because it blends news and entertainment formats (see Barak, 1994; Fishman & Cavender, 1998; Surette, 1998; Welch, 1996).

3. Although the police released the woman's name, print and electronic journalists in New York City did not reveal her identity because they do not ordinarily identify rape victims without their permission.

4. The sample for our study was drawn from newspaper articles published in the four largest daily metropolitan newspapers in New York City: namely, *The New York Times* (with a daily circulation of 1,074,741), *New York Daily News* (721,256), *New York Newsday* (568,914), and *New York Post* (436,226) ("100 Largest U.S. Newspapers," 1998). Relying on a computerized literature search, we located suitable articles by using wilding as the key word. With the technique of content analysis at our disposal, we designed a coding scheme intended to decipher the use of the term wilding and its various nuances. Several thematic categories were formulated to assist the investigation. Specifically, data were classified into categories enumerating various definitions of wilding and whether the term was used in reference to the Central Park jogger case, another incident, or both. Data similarly were coded to take into account references to race (of the victims and suspects) and gangs. Finally, the content analysis served as a means to extract other modifiers and metaphors (e.g., animals) used to describe criminal suspects involved in wilding.

5. Specifically, 97 articles were published in *New York Newsday*, 33 in *New York Post*, 14 in *The New York Times*, and 12 in *New York Daily News* (refer to Table 1).

6. Although race was not revealed in a 1989 wilding spree on a New York golf course, the victims were identified as three men and the perpetrators consisted of a "gang" of 11 boys and 6 girls. Revealingly though, the names of those involved were published: The victims' last names were of Anglo origin (i.e., Mayer, Mangan, and Paquette) and the last names of the suspects were of Hispanic origin (i.e., Bravo, Espilco, Rodríguez, Rivera, and Vasquez) except for one youth named Barnett (Santangelo & Nagourney, 1989, p. 25).

7. There were other examples of a racial bias in the use of the term wilding in the New York press. For instance, in 1991, seven White male lacrosse players at St. John's University (Queens, New York) were accused of raping a Black female student. Media coverage was criticized for keeping the suspects in a favorable light; indeed, terms such as wilding were noticeably absent (Clark, 1991; Newfield, 1989).

8. Research on crime news has unveiled the significance of animal metaphors, especially in depicting criminals as wolves. Surette (1998) demonstrated that in crime news, police are likened to sheep dogs patrolling communities and keeping citizens, the sheep, safe from predatory wolves.

9. In our sample, 10 newspaper articles (6%) issued critical commentaries about the term wilding (see Clark, 1991; Clifford, Giordano, Huth, Jordan, & Smith, 1989; Cose, 1996;

Duggan, 1990a; Gates, 1990; Gunning, 1989; Marsh, 1990; Nagourney, 1991; Newfield, 1989; Schanberg, 1990).

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