

Lecture 1: Introduction to Adolescent Risk Taking

1

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The DC Sniper case

- The following events took place in Fall 2002
 - **September 21:** Two people shot (one mortally) outside a liquor store in Montgomery AL.
 - **October 2, 5:20 p.m.:** Windows shot out at a craft store in Aspen Hill, Montgomery County, MD.
 - **October 2, 6:04 p.m.:** James D. Martin, 55, of Silver Spring, MD, killed in grocery store parking lot in nearby Wheaton, Montgomery County.
 - **October 3, 7:41 a.m.:** James L. "Sonny" Buchanan, 39, of Arlington, VA, was killed while cutting grass at an auto dealership in White Flint area of Montgomery County, MD.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The DC Sniper case

- The following events took place in Fall 2002.
 - **October 3, 8:12 a.m.:** Taxi driver Prem Kumar Walekar, 54, of Olney, Md., killed at gas station in Rockville, Montgomery County, MD.
 - **October 3, 8:37 a.m.:** Sarah Ramos, 34, of Silver Spring killed outside Silver Spring post office. (Montgomery County)
 - **October 3, 9:58 a.m.:** Lori Ann Lewis-Rivera, 25, of Silver Spring slain as she vacuumed her van at a gas station in Kensington, Montgomery County.
 - **October 3, 9:15 p.m.:** Pascal Charlot, 72, of Washington, D.C., killed while standing on a Washington street.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The DC Sniper case

- Fall 2002 the following events took place
 - **October 4, 2:30 p.m.:** 43-year-old woman wounded in craft store parking lot in Fredericksburg, VA. (Spotsylvania County).
 - **October 7, 8:09 a.m.:** 13-year-old boy wounded as he is dropped off at school in Bowie, MD. (Prince George's County).
 - **October 9, 8:15 p.m.:** Dean Harold Meyers, 53, of Gaithersburg, MD, killed at gas station in Manassas, VA. (Prince William's County).
 - **October 11, 9:30 a.m.:** Kenneth H. Bridges, 53, of Philadelphia, killed at a gas station in Fredericksburg, VA.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The DC Sniper case

- Fall 2002 the following events took place
 - **October 14, 9:15 p.m.:** Linda Franklin, 47, of Arlington, Va., fatally shot at Home Depot store in Falls Church, VA. (Fairfax County).
 - **October 20, 2002:** Unidentified man, wounded at the Ponderosa Steak House parking lot in Ashland, VA. (Fairfax County).
- On October 24, the "sniper task force" arrested 41-year-old John Allen Muhammad and 17-year-old Lee Malvo who was described as Muhammad's stepson.

I. INTRODUCTION

B. Lee Malvo's Life

- Lee Malvo was born in Jamaica
 - Lived with his cousin for most of his life after his parents separated while he was a young boy.
 - In Jamaica, Lee was a bright and industrious student. His teachers remember him as helpful and polite, with no hint of violence.
 - When he was 13 years old, Lee's mother stowed him and herself away on a ship headed for Florida.

Both entered this country illegally and moved across the country from Florida to Washington State, where his mother found work.



I. INTRODUCTION

B. Lee Malvo's Life

- In the United States, Lee was a good student
 - When discovered to be an illegal immigrant, authorities arrested him and his mother and Lee was expelled from school.
 - Sometime after the school expulsion, he ended up living in a homeless shelter in Bellingham, Washington, at which time Lee's mother dated John Allen Muhammad.
 - Though Muhammad and his mother had split up, Muhammad, himself father of several children, none of whom he had custody, took to Lee and treated him like a son.

I. INTRODUCTION

B. Lee Malvo's Life

- People in Bellingham remember the two as being inseparable.
 - They lived at homeless shelters and regularly worked out at the YMCA.
 - They noted that Muhammad seemed to dote on Lee and he appeared authoritarian.
 - It seemed that when Muhammad and Lee ran out of money and odd jobs, they took off on a crime spree, killing a woman in Alabama in an armed robbery and ten people in the Washington, D.C.
 - They committed the 10 murders by hiding in a car and shooting with an assault weapon. They also demanded ten million dollars ransom money.

I. INTRODUCTION

B. Lee Malvo's Trial

- By November 7th 2002 Malvo offers a complete confession
- Malvo said he pulled the trigger in several of the fatal sniper shootings.
- Malvo charged in Virginia with capital murder
 - Under Virginia's post-9/11 anti-terrorism statutes, the death penalty may be applied if a murder is part of a plan to intimidate the government or to influence government policy.
 - Muhammad and Malvo's demand that the government pay them \$10 million qualified as intimidation to the prosecution's satisfaction.

I. INTRODUCTION

B. Lee Malvo's Trial

- Lee Malvo's trial took place in Virginia during December 2003.
- Defense adopted an insanity defense.
 - The claim was that Malvo had been brainwashed by Muhammad and couldn't be held legally responsible.
 - Defense argued that the brainwashing made Malvo incapable of distinguishing right from wrong. They also claimed that Malvo lacked the marksmanship skills to have done the shootings and suggested that Malvo confessed to the shootings in order to protect Muhammad.
- The prosecution counters that there is no mental illness and so no diminished capacity.
 - Claimed defense confusing "indoctrination" with "insanity".

I. INTRODUCTION

C. Lee Malvo's Trial

- On December, 18th, jurors returned a guilty verdict on the capital murder charges
 - They rejected claims that the teenager was brainwashed by John Allen Muhammad into taking part in the three-week reign of terror that left 10 people dead.
 - They also dismissed the expert witness' claims that Malvo's instability and insecurity as an adolescent could have become tools of control for a strong-minded person such as John Allen Muhammad.

I. INTRODUCTION

C. Lee Malvo's Trial

- The same jury then deliberated on whether Lee Malvo would be given the death penalty.
- On December 23, 2003, jurors recommended life without parole.
 - They deliberated for 8 1/2 hours before deciding to reject the death penalty for Lee, who was 17 years old at the time of the crimes.
- On March 9th, John Allen Muhammad was given the death penalty for a guilty verdict on exact same charges on which Malvo was convicted and given life.

I. INTRODUCTION

C. Discussion

- There are two central questions to address
- Should Malvo been acquitted of capital murder?
 - Is there any reason to accept the defense's claim that merely being an adolescence made him vulnerable to John Alan Muhammad's manipulation?
- Given his guilt above, should Malvo been given the death penalty?
 - Is it right that there was difference in Malvo's and Muhammad's punishments, given they were convicted of exactly the same crime?

I. INTRODUCTION

C. Discussion

- These questions address what role Malvo's status as an adolescent should have played in the trial?
- Should his age mitigate his legal responsibility for the crime?
 - For what reason or under what conditions should age mitigate legal responsibility?
- Given his legal responsibility, should his age mitigate his punishment for the crime?
 - Should age ever mitigate punishment?
 - Under what conditions should the age of a person mitigate punishment?

II. LESS GUILTY DUE TO ADOLESCENCE

A. Definition of Adolescence

- To better discuss whether his age should have impacted Malvo's trial, we need to define *adolescence*.
- The period of time that there is a process of accommodation to puberty and the adoption the adult responsibilities and social roles as defined by the culture.
- Multiple Processes: Focus on changes in a range of processes.
 - There are changes not only in biological but also in cognitive (changes in thinking) and social (changes in self and social relations) functioning which are related.

II. LESS GUILTY DUE TO ADOLESCENCE

A. Definition of Adolescence

- Strengths continues
 - Socio-historical Context: Focus on social, cultural, and historical factors associated with the adolescence.
 - The definition is sensitive to socio-historical context.
 - Imagine what it might be an adolescent today vs. 100-years ago in Utah. Which time would it be easier?
 - Interactionist: Focus on the fact that there is an interaction between biological and social factors associated with adolescence.
 - The physical changes adolescents faced during puberty interact with the social context in which they find themselves.

II. LESS GUILTY DUE TO ADOLESCENCE

A. Steinberg's Claim

- Laurence Steinberg (a leading researcher) generally claims that teenagers who commit crime may be less guilty by reason of being adolescents
- Adolescents as a group might be less responsible than adults for the same acts.
 - Adolescents don't think through future consequences of their actions as reliably as adults do and that are more impulsive (act out of passion) than adults
- The "reasonable adult" legal standard can not be applied to adolescents.
 - What is reasonable for adults may not be reasonable for adolescents (i.e., resistance to peer pressure).

II. LESS GUILTY DUE TO ADOLESCENCE

A. Steinberg's Claim

- He denied that 16-year-old killers will become 25-year-old killers
 - *It would be very difficult to look at someone who is 15 or 16 and say with any degree of certainty that we know what that person is going to be like when he is 25, that he is a bad person. There is a fairly extensive body of research that indicates that there are many people who engage in antisocial behavior during adolescence who stop at the end of adolescence or in early adulthood. In fact, that's the normative pattern... You may think you will be able to pick out the bad seed, but you will be wrong more often than you are right.*

II. LESS GUILTY DUE TO ADOLESCENCE

A. Steinberg's Claim

- He claims that one major cause of adolescents' unique legal status is new evidence of their brain maturation.
 - *There is evidence of structural change in the prefrontal cortex, which is the area that governs cognitive skills like planning ...and its connection to the limbic system where a lot of emotional stimuli are processed... We believe, this might lead to an improvement in decision-making, so that, in the younger adolescent's brain, it's more likely that a very strong emotion will overwhelm rational decision-making... This is speculative and we need to be very cautious*

II. LESS GUILTY DUE TO ADOLESCENCE

A. Steinberg's Claim

- Finally Steinberg commented on the Malvo case directly.
 - *I think that, if it is in fact proven that he was influenced by this older man to commit the crime, then it ought to mitigate his responsibility, but I'm not sure a jury will agree with that... I think the question in this trial is, in the real world, when these things are happening day to day, should we expect an ordinary 17-year-old to be able to resist the pressure of an older person who has some control over him?... The jury is going to ask whether an ordinary 17-year-old in this situation would have the wherewithal to walk away from it.*

III. ADOLESCENT VULNERABILITY

A. Definition

- Goal of the seminar is to understand adolescent vulnerability to risk taking.
- About three-quarters (11 weeks) of the course is designed to present a bio-psycho-social model of adolescent risk-taking to fully understand its nature.
- The other quarter (4 weeks) of the course is designed for you to explore issues of adolescent risk taking of interest to you.
- As a preliminary definition, we will define risk-taking as activities not in the long-term interest of a person.

III. ADOLESCENT VULNERABILITY

A. Definition

- But, are adolescents particularly vulnerable to engage in activities that are not in their long term self-interest?
- Lindberg (Urban Institute) surveyed adolescents' tendency to engage in risk-taking.
 - Risk-taking was defined as voluntary behaviors that threaten the well-being of teens and limit their potential for achieving responsible adulthood.
- Distinguished *risk-taking* from *risk outcomes*, which are the consequences of risky behavior.
 - For example, unprotected sexual intercourse is a risk behavior and was included in Lingberg's analysis, while teenage pregnancy is a risk outcome and was not examined.

III. ADOLESCENT VULNERABILITY

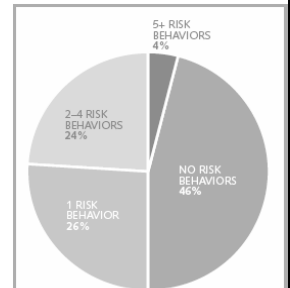
A. Data

- The data came from over 60,000 teens in a representative sample (a sample which systematically reflects characteristics of the population).
- Sample collected over 10 years in a series of national governmental surveys.
- Participant engagement in 10 of the most prevalent risk behaviors were examined
 - Regular alcohol use, Regular binge drinking, Regular tobacco use, Marijuana use, Other illegal drug use, Fighting, Weapon carrying, Suicidal thoughts, Suicide attempts, Risky sexual activity

III. ADOLESCENT VULNERABILITY

A. Data

- A majority (54%) engaged in at least one risky behavior, with a sizable minority (28%) engaging in two or more.
- But note, a plurality engage in no risky behavior

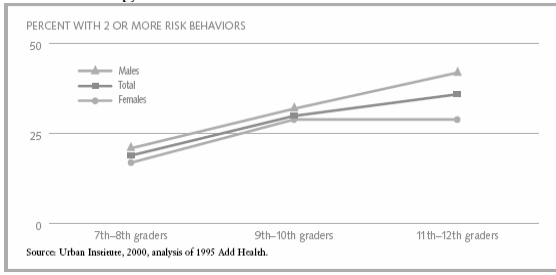


Source: Urban Institute, 2000, analysis of 1995 Adl Health.

III. ADOLESCENT VULNERABILITY

A. Data

- The percentage of multiple risk takers increase over age.

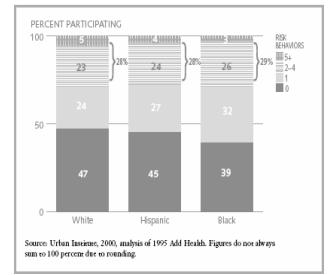


III. ADOLESCENT VULNERABILITY

A. Data

- Risk taking weakly related to ethnicity (note: ethnicity may be confounded with SES)

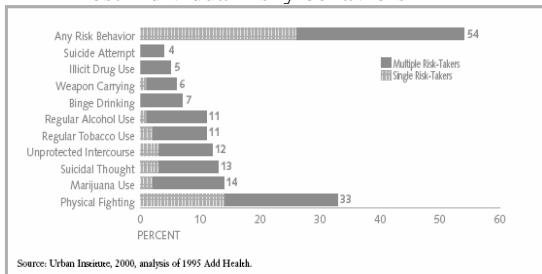
Black students' elevated rate of participation in one risk behavior derives primarily from their higher rate of fighting (44%), as compared with white (29%) and Hispanic (39%) students



III. ADOLESCENT VULNERABILITY

A. Data

- Multiple risk takers were the ones who engage in most individual risky behaviors



III. ADOLESCENT VULNERABILITY

A. Discussion Questions

1. What makes adolescents engage in risky behavior?
Identify factors you think distinguish adolescents who do and don't engage in risk taking.
2. What kind of factors seem to matter in your theory of adolescent risk-taking?

Biology: Is there a biological basis (genes, hormones, neurology) for adolescents engaging in risky behavior?

Psychology: Are adolescent risk takers more irrational or immoral than those who are not risk-takers?

Social-Cultural context: Do adolescent risk takers have in common a particular set of environment features (parents, peers, neighborhoods, cultures). If so what are these social-cultural features?