On a damp and cloudy day late in 1989, I took the train from Albany, New York, and followed the Hudson River south to Ossining, where a correctional facility of the same name is located. The massive walls of the prison better known as Sing Sing are set on a craggy slope overlooking the tranquil waters of the Hudson. I walked down the slope to a small but forbidding entrance for visitors. Inside the doorway, I showed an officer behind a desk the card that identified me as part of a research team that had been approved entry to interview inmates for a study of drugs and homicide.

After answering the officer’s questions to his satisfaction, I passed through a metal detector without setting off any alarm. My hand was then stamped, and a second officer sitting in a cage at a console surrounded by video monitors automatically opened the first gate of bars that I would pass through that day. The bars slid to the side for me to pass, so I stepped in, before the bars quickly slid back to their original position, which left me in a small space with metal bars behind and in front of me, a concrete wall to my left, and to my right a window behind which sat the officer at the console. I showed my stamped hand to the officer and the next gate of metal bars opened to a long corridor, which my assigned guide and I followed into the prison.

After passing an assortment of additional security stations, I finally was brought to an area of offices that normally were used to counsel inmates with alcohol and other substance abuse problems. I met with my liaison officer, a treatment counselor, who found me an office in which to conduct interviews and began calling for the inmates who would be my respondents.

First to arrive was a middle-aged white man who was serving a life sentence for killing his wife. He was college educated and retired from the military. I told him about the project, explained the meaning of informed
consent, and with his approval began to ask him my questions. Among other things, I asked him to tell me about the murder. He proceeded to tell me the following story.

In the earliest hours of a summer morning in 1984, the respondent’s wife was found brutally murdered in her own home. She had been beaten with a fireplace poker, strangled, and stabbed several times. Just before 2 A.M., a neighbor heard screams coming from the house and called the police. The police arrived within minutes, but not until after the same neighbor claimed to have heard the footsteps of someone running from the house.

The respondent and his wife were going through a divorce, so he no longer lived in the house. He did, however, stop by every day to care for his numerous plants. The night before the early morning murder of his wife, he was in the house for a few hours. While there, he did see his wife’s son from a previous marriage and did call one of his two ex-wives. No one saw him leave that night, but he said he did. Before 10 P.M., he drove the short distance back to where he was living with his new girlfriend. By his account, when his wife was murdered, he was home in bed with his girlfriend. Nonetheless, before the sun rose the next morning he was picked up by the police and taken to the local police station where he was questioned for almost 20 hours. Besides unexplained scratches on his arms, no firm evidence linked him to the crime and he was released, though he was told not to visit the murder scene and not to attend the funeral.

The respondent considered himself a social drinker at the time and admits that he probably had a few beers with lunch the afternoon before the murder. He might also have smoked a few joints of marijuana during the days before that. And he did snort two lines of cocaine that evening when he was at the house; in addition to the two lines he had done that morning. His wife, he recalled, did not like cocaine, but in his opinion probably had been smoking marijuana. Still, he does not think that either one of them was high at the time of the murder.

This was not an easy case for the police to solve. There was no record of any items missing from the home, so burglary was ruled out. The wife’s new boyfriend might have been a suspect, but he had a solid alibi and no evidence pointed to him. For more than a year, no arrest was made.

Then, about 15 months after the murder, the neighbor who originally called the police called again. Fearful that a vicious killer might still be on the loose, she demanded action. She threatened to take the story of the failed police investigation in a middle-class suburb to the media. Piecing together a circumstantial case and highlighting a cocaine-violence connection, the police arrested the respondent and charged him with murder.

The police broke the story of the arrest, and the media reported it. The theme was that the respondent had a $3,000-a-month cocaine habit and was high the night of the killing. Of course, the respondent called that story ridiculous. He had been a cocaine user but used only the small amount he could afford with his salary and military pension. Besides, at the time of the murder, he was in a drug treatment program that his employer recommended he try.

Questions remain. If he was in drug treatment at the time, why did he snort four lines of cocaine the day before the killing? If he was home in bed with his girlfriend when his wife was killed, why did no one believe her? No matter. The story that accompanied his arrest easily explains how a white, middle-class and middle-aged, college-educated man with a good job and an honorable military career could do something so wicked. Every violent act must have its devil, and in 1985 in the United States, cocaine was one of the most fearsome.

To understand and explain complex social phenomena, social scientists, public officials, and the mass media simplify and condense the lives and experiences of countless individuals. Through numbers and words, they typify reality to make comprehensible what is inherently complicated and obscure. In so doing, they tell stories that render intelligible the phenomenon in question while at the same time trivializing the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and actions of those who participate in its social realization. Effectively, the various literary forms of the storyteller are used to shape public opinion and to make public policy. In the case of the social phenomenon of violence, the theme of these stories inevitably is one of good versus evil.

This is a book about violence and violent crime. More precisely, it is about the social meaning of violence in American society in the twentieth century. Building on the theoretical notion that reality is socially constructed, this book illustrates from the American experience those stories that have been used in the social construction of drug-related violence, stranger violence, family violence, female violence, youth violence, violence by the poor and minorities, and violence at the workplace. To tell these stories, the book weaves together official statistics, media reports, and research findings, including personal accounts from interviews conducted for my own research with people who have experienced violence as victims, offenders, and witnesses.

This chapter describes and explains the process by which violence is socially constructed. It demonstrates how and why we have come to define and measure violence primarily in terms of violent crime.

The Social Construction of Reality

In the introduction to the essays in their book Constructing Crime, Gary Potter and Victor Kappeler ask, "What does the public really know about crime and how do they know it?" The authors ask this question because they wonder how people, most of whom have never been and never will be
the direct victim of crime, can be so convinced of the risk to their personal safety that they adjust the patterns of their lives in response to that risk. The answer, Potter and Kappeler suggest, is that people learn about crime from what they are told, not only through personal interaction with others but also through the mass media. In other words, people do not really know much about crime, but from what they learn from others, they think they do. Individually and collectively, they construct the problem of crime and declare it to be real. The idea that reality is a social construction is not new.

There was a time, not too many decades ago, when thousands of students of sociology were introduced to the study of society through a brief but persuasive book by Peter Berger. In his *Invitation to Sociology*, Berger explains and describes the seemingly paradoxical nature of society. Yes, it is possible to view society as “the walls of our imprisonment in history,” but, as Berger makes clear, “Our bondage to society is not so much established by conquest as by collusion.” Simply, that means that society may appear to us as an objective reality, but, in fact, we subjectively contribute to making it what it is. As Peter and Brigitte Berger write in their introductory sociology textbook, “Something is objectively real when everyone (or nearly everyone) agrees that it is actually there, and that it is there in a certain way.” Society appears to us to have that quality. However, it has that quality because we subjectively—through our actions, through the decisions we make, through the way we interpret things, for example—give it that quality. We construct social reality.

As those invited by Peter Berger to enter the field of sociology grew to their professional maturity, his thesis was not lost on them. Consequently, as we reach the close of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that social constructionism has come to dominate social problems theory and has made significant inroads into scholarly thinking about crime. This perspective is particularly useful for understanding violence.

From the social constructionist perspective, social reality is a product of social interaction in the form of individual decisions, interpretations, and actions. In that individuals act and interact, make decisions, and interpret their experience in the context of their unique social positions and interests, social reality and hence all social phenomena are necessarily constructed in an ideological and political context. That is, the social world in which we live is designed by us in the context of our own values and interests, or, more precisely, by those among us who have the power to design that world in the context of their own values and interests.

How is it that images and ideas constructed subjectively in our individual and collective consciousnesses appear to us objectively as things existing outside of us? From a variety of positions and in support of a variety of interests, interacting individuals collaborate and compete in the social arena to define and construct social reality. In the language of social problems theory, they make claims about social reality. The purpose of this claims making is to construct from subjective experience a representation of some particular social phenomenon that will confront other members of society as objectively real. Claims makers generate from their subjective experience all sorts of social phenomena that become objectified in that they are “available both to their producers and to other men as elements of a common world.”

To rephrase the question raised by Potter and Kappeler, what do people know about violence, how do they know it, and why do they respond the way they do? The answer is that violence has been socially constructed in the United States in response to various claims made about what violence is, where it is found, who is affected by it, and so on. Those claims have been made by a wide variety of claims makers—not only people we know personally or the mass media—within various ideological and political contexts to give meaning to particular acts, action, or activity as violent. It is on the basis of those claims that we define the nature of violence and measure its scope in our society.

**The Meaning of Violence**

Consider the following news accounts, all of which appeared in the *Washington Post* on Thursday, June 4, 1998.

- On page D7, an article by Wendy Melillo, “Teen Admits Role in Gang-Related Killing,” tells how yesterday a 17-year-old boy from Fredericksburg, Virginia, “acknowledged his role as the driver in the Feb. 27 attack at Marshall High School that resulted in the shooting death of David C. Albrecht, of Falls Church.”
- On page D1, “In Frostburg, Wreckage and Relief,” by Paul W. Valentine, tells how a man “surveyed what was left of his house—a modest bungalow with shattered windows, gaping holes in the walls, and doors ripped from their hinges—mute testimony to Tuesday night’s freak tornado.”
- On page A1 is a picture of a “High-Speed Catastrophe,” a story about a train wreck in Germany described in an article on page A25 called “High-Speed Train Crash Kills Scores in Germany.”
- Also on page A1 is a story by Christine Spolar called “Albanians in Border Towns Gird for War” about the intensification of filming in a Serbian province that is “forcing thousands of ethnic Albanian refugees to flee to Albania.”
- The lead story on page A2, “U.S. Takes Alleged Terrorist Into Custody Years After Pan Am Blast,” is about the indictment of a man believed to have prepared the bomb 15 years ago that caused an American airline to explode 26,000 feet in the air.
social or intentional may be viewed as violent. Newman raises a number of questions about the meaning of violence that evince a broader definition. Must violence be inclusive of physical force and, to the extent that it must, what constitutes physical force? Are the violent consequences of acts of nature distinct from human acts of violence? To what extent must violent acts by humans be related to violent emotions such as anger, hate, or rage? In the end, the decisions, interpretations, and actions that define what to us is violence depend on our place in history and our place in society. In the case of social activity, in particular, what we view as violent is determined in the ideological and political contexts of values and interests, not by the nature of the act alone. That is, the forms of social activity that we consider violent are those that in our judgment symbolize and represent physical force and domination.

While recognizing that violence may be more broadly defined, our attention in this book is on violence in the social realm. That is, we focus specifically on how social activity is defined as violence. We use examples of activity in a variety of social realms to explore how we individually and collectively consider violence depends on who we are and where we are placed in public life and on claims about the nature of violence to which we are exposed. It also depends on how we measure the extent of violence in our society, though how we measure violence itself depends on what we are trying to accomplish with that measurement.

**The Measurement of Violence and Violent Crime**

The measurement of violence is important for two reasons. First, assuming that members of a society have mutually agreed on and accepted a common definition of violence, any subsequent social or public response to violence requires knowledge of its scope, magnitude, and location in society. Second, in that measures of violence are themselves grounded in the actions, decisions, and interpretations of those individuals who measure it, the very act of measurement is itself an aspect of reality construction. That is, how we measure violence has an impact on where in society we say it is located, how extensive we believe it to be, and therefore what we propose to do about it.

The determination that it is possible to assess the scope, magnitude, and location of violence in society implies that particular forms or elements of social activity not only constitute violence but are observable and measurable as well. In the United States in the late twentieth century, violence as a social phenomenon is observed, measured, and therefore studied and addressed primarily in two realms of social activity: criminal justice and public health. Some argue that the primary focus should be on mortality and morbidity statistics. Nonetheless, violence in the United States is for-
mally and officially recognized and addressed first as a crime problem and then, to a lesser extent, as a health problem.

When the federal government established in the late 1960s the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, the renowned members of the commission immediately turned to the available data and statistics on violent crime. Similarly, the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice, formed by Executive Order in 1965, defined and examined violence in terms of violent crime. Since that era, violent crime has become the principal measure of violence in the United States. As Albert Reiss and Jeffrey Roth write in their report for the Panel on Understanding and Preventing Violence of the National Research Council, "Violent behaviors that society identifies as crimes are counted more completely and classified more accurately than those that are not."22

For most of this century, the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), prepared annually by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) since the 1930s, has been the official measure of violent crime in the nation. Statistics are collected and compiled by the FBI from every state in the nation, with each state collecting and compiling its statistics from local law enforcement jurisdictions. The most familiar and widely used component of the UCR is its count of crimes known to the police, particularly its index of seven major crimes. The index of violent crime includes nationwide counts of murder or nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. Whenever a news account suggests that violence or violent crime is up or down in a particular location, it is usually referring to a change in the violent crime index of the UCR in that location. Also included in the UCR are counts of arrests reported by police departments around the country. Counts of crimes known to the police, including those for violent crimes, are broken down for the UCR by location; arrests made by the police are also broken down by location and by age, gender, and race of offenders.

Over the years, questions have been raised about the reliability and validity of UCR statistics. These concerns have been exacerbated in recent years by the introduction of another measure of violent crime, the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). Established in 1973 by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), the NCVS (sometimes identified as the NCS) is a victimization survey of a sample of individuals older than age 11 and their households. The purpose of the NCVS is "to learn more about crimes and the victims of crime... to measure crimes not reported to the police as well as those that are reported."26

Inevitably, the number of violent victimizations reported by the NCVS is going to be greater than the number of violent crimes known to the police reported by the UCR, suggesting that the UCR may not be an adequate measure of violent crime. However, a more thoughtful interpretation of the inconsistency between these statistical reports concludes that while neither the UCR nor the NCVS is by itself an adequate measure of violence, each in some way is an estimate of the scope and nature of violent crime. That conclusion leads to the recognition that there must be other measures of violence, as well, and in recent years, more attention has been given in the United States to public health statistics as measures of violence. Specifically, students of violence have paid more attention to mortality and morbidity statistics, particularly in the area of what are called intentional injuries.

In that no one measure of violence adequately represents the true scope and nature of the phenomenon, it seems reasonable to make use of a variety of measures to arrive at a best estimate. The problem is that the vast differences in quantity observed among the variety of measures are not statistically reconcilable. For example, the UCR reported that there were 1,864,168 violent crimes known to the police in all of the United States in 1994.27 For that same year, the NCVS reported that there were 9,796,920 incidents of violent victimization in the United States, of which 2,922,850 were actually completed.28 For 1993, the UCR reported that 32 percent of all murders, robberies, and aggravated assaults involved firearms,29 while the Public Health Service reported for that same year 15.6 firearm injuries per 100,000 population.30 To understand the relationship between the variety of measures of violence, then, it is necessary to understand how they are socially constructed and why they are constructed as they are.

Arguing that measurement is not an end in itself but rather an element in the service of scientific inquiry, Abraham Kaplan writes, "The failure to recognize this instrumentality of measurement makes for a kind of mystique of quantity, which corresponds to numbers as though they were the repositories of occult powers" (emphasis in original). That is, the measure itself does not possess an intrinsic scientific value but rather serves as a tool by which the scientist may standardize and categorize the social phenomena that are the objects of study.31

Violence takes many forms, and no one measure can or should be expected to adequately represent it. In social life, what we consider to be violence is the product of individual and group decisions, interpretations, and actions. Through similar processes we determine how we can and should count those occurrences of violence and how we can then arrive at the best estimate of violence in society. Immediately, a problem becomes apparent. Writing a review of a book about how students are admitted to elite colleges, David Nyberg writes, "We can't measure all the important things, so we make what we can measure more important than it is."32 That has been the case with the measurement of violence. The statistic representative of violence that has been most accessible and easiest to calculate has been the UCR violent crime index. So the greatest emphasis in the social construction of a measure of violence in the United States has been given to the UCR index.
Measuring violence in terms of the measurement of violent crime does not, however, prove to be as simple or straightforward as it would appear. In addition to the introduction of the NCVS, the debate over the validity of UCR statistics was stimulated by an article by John Kitsuse and Aaron Cicourel in which they suggest that the UCR official crime statistics were in fact social constructions.26 They write that these statistics “specifically [reflect] organizational contingencies which condition the application of specific statutes to actual conduct through the interpretations, decisions, and actions of law enforcement personnel.”27 The UCR violent crime index is the product of the interpretations, decisions, and actions of public officials, researchers, law enforcement officers, bureaucrats, and even data entry clerks.28 Different decisions are made in different jurisdictions, different actions are taken in different offices, different people interpret things differently, and so on. A simple decision by a bureaucrat in state government such as when to close a file and stop accepting data from individual police departments that are delinquent in submitting monthly UCR reports, for example, could have a significant impact on the number of violent crimes reported for that state.

Nonetheless, in the United States in the late twentieth century, violent crime largely has become a proxy for all violence. The public and its social representatives have constructed the social meaning of violence in terms of violent crime. There are notable examples in which other forms of violence had to be criminalized before becoming recognized as violence, as was done with domestic violence over the last 30 years.29 The answer to the question of how we measure the nature and extent of violence in our lives, then, is that we measure it in terms that are most easily observable and quantifiable: We measure it in terms of violent crime.

**Why We Tell the Stories We Tell about Violence**

The question that remains is why we tell the stories we tell about violence in our society. Ultimately, public opinion, public policy, and public practice with regard to violence are the products of claims making. Claims are made through stories that are told by government officials, the media, and other social actors with a stake in the meaning given to violence in order to support a representation of violence that is favorable to their own values and interests. For example, to address the problem of violence, we must first define and measure it. It should be clear at this point that violence is essentially a subjective phenomenon and that these are not simple tasks. Still, for those among us with the responsibility to manage the problem, the nature of violence and the difficulty of these tasks cannot be an impediment to action. What would appear to be a dilemma, however, can inadvertently protect public officials from public judgment. Public officials are best served when a problem is defined in simple terms and measures of its magnitude are easily quantifiable.30 The subjective nature of violence and the resulting difficulty in its definition and measurement give officials responsible for the management of violence in society the ability to define and measure it in ways that best serve their own goals and objectives.

In the early 1990s, Max Weber suggested that the basis for social action can be rational or nonrational. The reason for making claims or telling stories that represent violence one way or another similarly can be rational or nonrational. For Weber, action is rational when the actor “tries to achieve certain ends by choosing appropriate means on the basis of the facts of the situation as experience has accustom us to interpret them.”31 Following Weber’s distinction, the reason for making a claim through a particular story is rational when the purpose of the story is to achieve an objective that is reasonable in the context of the experience of the storyteller. The reason for making a claim through the telling of a story is nonrational when the purpose cannot necessarily be understood in the context of who the storyteller is, such as in the case of a story told in support of tradition or emotion. Stories that have been told in the United States in support of claims about violence have been told for both rational and nonrational reasons.

Stories that reflect and support the values and interests of the storyteller arguably are rational in that they are told in support of claims consistent with the experience of the storyteller. Such storytelling is inherently compatible with the way policy is made and programs are developed in the United States. Making policy, designing programs, and establishing practices in the public arena are actually processes of prioritization and resource allocation.32 To get higher priority and more resources for their favored goals and projects, individuals and agencies involved in these processes must assert their claims on behalf of their values and interests. This process is illustrated in terms of violence policy through an example I witnessed when I worked for the state government in New York.

One fall day during the early 1990s, Governor Mario Cuomo of New York called together several of the commissioners of his various agencies to work together on The Governor’s Agenda to Reduce and Prevent Violence. Commissioners came from the Departments and Divisions of Health, Mental Health, Social Services, Housing and Community Renewal, Education, Human Rights, Alcoholism and Substance Abuse, Urban Development, and Youth among others. They also came from Criminal Justice, State Police, Parole, Probation, and Corrections. As staff to the project, I was present while the most powerful officials of the executive branch of the state government were asked to provide ideas, recommendations, and proposed initiatives toward the governor’s agenda. It was the State Director of Criminal Justice, also Commissioner of the Division of Criminal Justice Services, who had called them together, and it was he who was chairing the meeting.
Over the next few weeks, the various agencies each submitted ideas, recommendations, and initiatives, and these were consolidated into a single preliminary report to the governor. This preliminary report, prepared by staff of the Division of Criminal Justice Services, was the basis of the second meeting, at which several commissioners were represented by their deputies. The report was supposed to be an integration of the material submitted in the form of a reasonable and intelligent strategy for dealing with the problem of violence. They looked at the listing of more than 100 proposals. As a discussion ensued, the criminal justice agency heads argued for a strong emphasis on enforcement. Most other agency officials argued for an integrated approach, giving as much attention to prevention as to enforcement. But it was the staff from Criminal Justice who were putting the report together. When everyone else left, their commissioner turned to them and said, "If the governor wanted prevention, he would have given this project to the 'quiche eaters.' But he gave it to me. So he wants enforcement." Other agencies continued to provide data and statistics for the report, but in the end, The Governor's Agenda to Reduce and Prevent Violence was essentially a report about violent crime with an emphasis on law enforcement.

Stories told in support of claims about violence are nonrational to the extent that they are grounded in something other than experience of the claims maker or storyteller. For example, a story may be told in response to an emotional need, such as fear. Typically, however, they are told in support of some moral claim about right and wrong or good and evil.

In an analysis of morality and politics in terms of social deviancy, Nachman Ben-Yehuda defines morality as "the process through which an object or process is evaluated as good or evil." In that same context, he suggests that sociologically the main function of morality is "to orient and direct social actions toward specified goals" through a "complicated structure of symbols... attached to various societal issues." Thus claims can be made through stories told to symbolically link violence to any number of social actions or phenomena in the name of moral dogma. In any society, there are people who act as moral crusaders or moral entrepreneurs who, as defined by Howard Becker, find some evil in the world that so "profoundly disturbs" them that they feel "nothing can be right in the world until rules are made to correct it." When these moral entrepreneurs see what they believe to be evil overtaking good in society, they create a moral panic aimed at stigmatizing the social action or phenomena so offends them. Defining some form of social action as violent or linking violence to a social phenomenon is a simple way of symbolically associating that action or phenomenon with evil.

The following chapters of this book all tell stories of the social construction of a particular form or manifestation of violence in U.S. society in the twentieth century. Not all are specifically about violent crime, but because of the centrality of violent crime to the way we view violence, to some extent, every one is told through its connection to crime and the criminal justice system. Stories are included that clearly have a rational basis for having been told, such as the story in Chapter 2 about how Harry Anslinger, the first head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, used a campaign against marijuana to build his agency and his own reputation. Stories are also included that clearly demonstrate a nonrational basis for having been told, such as the story in Chapter 7 about the coming age of youthful superpredators, pitting good people against bad. However, in the end it should be clear that all the stories told about violence are told for both rational and nonrational reasons. The concluding chapter considers how public policy and public opinion on violence and violent crime, as mediated by official records and news accounts, are typically formed in the wake of urgency and in the absence of knowledge and are oriented to the values and interests of those who make the claims and tell the stories of violence in the United States.

Endnotes

1. Throughout this book, I will refer to findings and interview responses from a series of studies I have participated in since 1985. I was co-principal investigator for two studies conducted through National Development and Research Institutes (NDRI) and funded by grants from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) involving data from almost 1,800 homicide case records and more than 400 active homicide investigations. I was co-investigator for five additional studies involving interviews with more than 1,000 individuals incarcerated or detained in New York State for a violent offense, most conducted through NDRI (one was conducted through John Jay College of the City University of New York) and all funded by grants from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). The interviews provided detailed information not only about the violent event in which the individual participated but also about their prior experiences with violence, drugs, crime, personal maltreatment, and so on. The studies were all in some way about the relationship between violence and drugs. More detail about these studies is provided in the preface to this book. When stories from them are used, they are cited using an acronym (defined in the preface) and an identification number. The story that follows is from DRE (1994).


44. Ben-Yehuda 1990:50.