Moral panic: youth slashing in singapore

Experience, Human Nature

ASSIGN BUSTER

1. Introduction

Slashing cases involving Singaporean youth gang members gain immense notoriety in 2010. The visibility of such criminal acts is amplified further by the mass media. Such reports provoke the public's latent fear of being attack by youth gangs especially so when high-profile cases such as the murder of Darren Ng at Downtown East was reported to occur in the evening between 5. 30pm and 5. 57pm at a time period where school-going children would be making their way home. This fuel the anxiety felt by already paranoid parents of school-going children.

Moreover easy access to gruesome and explicit pictures of the victim that were splashed across both printed and online medias, further fuel widespread panic of youth gang members being more daring to strike anytime in the day. Such panic is contrary to updated statistics proving that crime rates in Singapore have been steadily on a downward trend. The question at hand then is " What caused this mass panic of youth slashing in Singapore despite there being no actual spike in crime rates?"

In our assessment of Singapore youth slashing, several critical tenets of moral panic were identified; high concern over youth violence and gang associations, increase hostility towards the group seen as a threat (people, who were caught carrying weapons, at-risk youths), disproportionality in depiction of the problem and short life-span.

This paper seeks to investigate moral panic on youth slashing in Singapore. In our essay discourse, we argue that the surge in news reports youth and

gang violence attributes to the moral panic of youth slashing in Singapore. The increased visibility of such criminal acts and detailed reporting has push the issue of youth delinquency to the spot light.

This paper will first consider the crime trends in Singapore with an emphasis on youth statistics to ascertain whether the crime rates show any spikes which may be a cause for panic for citizens. In our use of statistics, we assume that all criminal acts were reported accurately. Next, a study of news reports by the Singapore printed English media- Straits Times and New Paper would be conducted to see how frequent such reports were published.

2. Crime Trends in Singapore

In the latest Singapore Police Force Annual 2009, it published a 10 year trend of crime rates for Singapore. It captures official crime statistics that includes only reported criminal cases.

Figure 1 show that the overall crime and overall crime rate is relatively stable, reaching its peak in 2005 and gradually decreasing over the next 3 years. The year 2008 saw a marginal increase of 1% in overall crime from 32, 796 cases in 2007 to 33, 113. However according to the SPF annual, the crime rate per 100, 000 population mark has actually fallen from 715 in 2007 to 684 in 2008. Further statistics from SPF website records that in year 2009, the number of overall crime cases recording a marginal increase of 0. 2% as compared to the previous year. However, overall crime rate in 2009 was 665, lower than 684 in 2008. In 2010 then, overall Crime reportedly fell by 0. 6% (or -200 cases), from 33, 186 cases in 2009 to 32, 986 cases in 2010. There

was no mention of crime rates. Comparing the total crime cases reported in 2010, the general crime trend for Singapore would be seen as gradually decreasing.

In 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2010 reports, youth crime was highlighted as a key crime concern. The majority of crimes among youths were for shop theft and other theft. Only in 2007, did rioting become the second most common crime among youths.

At the peak of 4608 recorded cases of crimes against persons in 2005, only 21 of them were murder cases (Singapore Police Force, 2010). 0. 004% of crimes against persons were murder cases at the peak of crimes against persons. There were no statistics that confirm what percentage of the murders was committed by youths. However, the overall crime against persons has remained relatively unchanged since 2006, and we would extrapolate that the number of murder cases would accordingly remain stable.

Contrary to the statistics, there was a surge in news reports youth and gang violence in 2010. In the official crime summary for 2010 it was reported that there has been an increase in the number of youths arrested for rioting from 468 persons in 2009 to 531 persons in 2010. However the number of youths arrested for rioting 2010 is still lower from that in 2007 whereby 573 persons were arrested for rioting. Yet in 2010, the responses towards youth and gang violence were more fervent. The public members were organising Citizens-on-Patrol (COP) Programmes (Lim, 2010) and increasing the frequencies of such patrols in the wake of the Bukit Panjang Slashing case.

One cannot help but ponder what incites such panic among citizens regarding neighbourhood safety when the statistics seem to show a relatively stable decrease in crime rate. In our essay, we argue that the surge in news reports youth and gang violence attributes to the moral panic of youth slashing in Singapore.

3. Literature Review

From a sub-cultural perspective, using Cloward & Ohlin(1960) theory of differential access in illegitimate society we could see street corner gangs as a form of conflict subculture, and their " senseless violence" a product of status frustration. Subcultural theories looked at how crime occur as individuals internalize a set of norms and values that brings them into conflict with the law. As described by Miller (1958) in the focal concerns theory of lower class where he identified " trouble, toughness, smartness, excitement, autonomy, fate" as concerns deeply embedded in the culture of the lower class.

While many studies have attempted to explain street corner gangs and youth violence, there are also many others that looked at the social construction of the crime. Media constructions of crime have been immensely studied in the field. Research on media and crime generally agreed that " crime is staple in news and popular programming" and that " uncommon events" tend to be overrepresented (Pizarro, Chermak, & Gruenewald, 2007).

In studies of gang and youth violence, it is established that particular media portrayals of gangs and youths have shaped the identity of this group and the society's attitude towards them (Dorfman et. al, 1997; Thompson, et. al, 2000). Esbensen & Tusinski (2007) discussed media's tendency of stereotyping gangs and their associations with violence and organizational capacity.

Where youth violence is concerned, there are also studies particularly on school shootings in US public schools (Frymer, 2009; Waldron, 2002; Muschert, 2007) and " knife crime" in UK (Squires, 2009; Wood, 2010).

The concept of moral panic however goes further to explore the profound influence of media as an instuitution of social control through amplifying deviance. Attention is given to the ideological role of media and the construction of meanings. In Cohen's work of mods and rockers this concept is useful in understanding how they were labelled and controlled, as well as explaining how and why the society's reaction was formed.

Concept of moral panic can be characterised by a heightened fear over " evildoers" and the threat they bring to society. It must have a " scapegoat" and an obeject to be panicked about. This usually brings about a strengthening of social contol apparatus such as stricter regulations. The indicators of moral panic included high concern over the problem, increasing hostility toward the group engaged in the behavior, widespread agreement that the threat is real, disproportionality in the depiction of problems and volalitily (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994) used three theories to explain what brings about the panic. Interest-group theory

looks at " moral entrepreneurs" use media to publicise their concerns – '
their claims taken up by significant section of the media and presented as
factual' (Jenkins, 1992). Elite-engineered theory see the ruling class as
deliberately and conciously creating a moral panic over an issue which they
see as not terribly harmful to the society to divert the public from more
serious issues. The third- grassroots theory- presented by Goode & Ben-
Yehuda (1994) is a bottom-up rather than top-down theory of moral panic.
This theory looks at public participation in moral panic, where media then
magnify ' real' public fears about crime.

There has been increasing application of this concept in studying youth and
gang violence (Welch, Price, & Yankee, 2002; Bartie, 2010; Killingbeck,
2001), and we believe that this concept is relevant to the current issue we
are studying. Yet it would be inadequate to dismiss Singapore slashing case
merely as a moral panic. As Squires (2009) argued, Cohen (1972) study of
Mods and Rockers did also present how " moral entrepreneurs" have
exploited society's reaction for their own agenda. Henceforth, this paper
would like to discuss whether the attention given to local cases could be
attributed to moral panic.

4. Case Studies of Youth Slashing in Singapore

One of the first incidents, though did receive much attention include one at
Pasir Ris on 5th March. The incident was only reported in June where the
attackers were prosecuted (tell me if you find another article about this). The
other is at Kallang area where a a gang of Sarawakian robbers committed 4

violent thefts, where 1 Indian national was murdered. Below are the high-profile cases:

1) 30th October 2010 at Downtown East

19-year-old Darren Ng Wei Jie died after being assaulted by a group of gang members. The attack started with staring and angry words before he was attacked with choppers and knife. A total of 11 youths were arrested and charged with murder, all of whom were Chinese. The incident was seen as gang-related. Ng was later found out to be a member of one of the gangs.

2) 8th November 2010 at Bukit Panjang

20-year-old Jayasiva Shangar Guru was slashed and stabbed by a group of gang members. The gang also attacked at Jelapang Road, where another six youths were assaulted. In both incidents, the victims were attacked after denying being a member of ' Pak Hai Tong' gang. The attackers were believed to be members of ' Sah Lak Kau'. There were speculations that night's incident was related to a gang fight earlier that day at 6pm where a group of men were chasing after a teenager taunting him to fight back. A total of fifteen men were arrested.

Following the two high-profile slashing cases, there were reports of three others. On 18th November at Ang Mo Kio, two youths got into a dispute outside a fast-food outlet, where eventually one of them attacked the other with a knife. On 24th November at Teck Whye, an off-duty auxiliary cop was attacked by 7 street-gang members who deliberately bumped into him. In December at Yishun Ring Road, a 23-year-old man was reported to have

been assaulted by 3 youths of age 13, 15 and 18 after a dispute of missing handphone.

5. Societal Response

5. 1 Media Attention

The series of attacks have triggered a search for explanations on the " phenomenon" of rising gang violence. Society seeked to explain the nature of fights, whether it is random or due to revenge, and the structure of gangs, now observed as loose associations different from tradition secret societies. Following Downtown East incident, many reports talked about youth gangs-how staring incidents can lead to violent fights, why youths joined these gangs. News reports of ensuing cases tend to remind readers about the significant attack at Downtown East and Bukit Panjang that inadvertently create concerns over gang-related violence in Singapore. There were also follow-up reports to keep public updated on who has been arrested and charged. Reports of being arrested were frequent to remind the society of the strict laws and the consequences of such acts. 40 suspected gang members were arrested in ' blitz' carried out by police officers (Yong, 2010). Although there were no details mentioned, the report came with comments by Minister of Home Affairs, K. Shanmugam, to assure the public tough acts were taken to tackle youth gangs. Comments by public figures like Minister of MCYS also bring public attention to at-risk youths on the importance of increase community initiatives to prevent them from gang associations.

Beyond print media, interactive news media seems to play a role in public discourse over the slashing incidents. According to Straits Times on 6th and 4th November 2010, online articles related to the incidents were most read and commented on. News of Bukit Panjang slashing received overwhelming amount of comments from members in ST forum and STOMP and Asiaone News (STOMP: Singapore Seen, 2010;, The Sraits Times Discussion Board, 2011; Asiaone News, 2010). While many comments were neither constructive nor substantial, they do reflect public's concern over gang violence and more importantly, question the safety and security of Singapore society. Again, comments are a way of making sense of the incidences: they were many questions of what is happening in society and the youths and whether there is a come-back of gangs. News and visuals in interactive media allow netizens to fuel speculations and fear over these incidences.

5. 2 Legislation: Tackling Gangs

In the wake of perceived insecurity at Downtown East, police patrols were stepped up. " Zero-tolerance" policy was affirmed, as showed in reports where teenagers carrying offensive weapons were arrested and suspected of involvement in gang activities (Straits Times, 2010). In a parliamentary debate, Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam stated that 93 gang members were arrested since end October 2010. He also stated the possibily of giving police additional power to prevent gang formations which include getting youths to observe curfew hours or to attend intervention programmes (Parliament of Singapore, 2011). There was also a suggestion of considering regulating the sale of knives (Parliament of Singapore, 2011). Youth crime

was one of the three crime types identified by the police this year (Singapore Police Force, 2011). This is despite a decrease in total number of rioting cases last year. Police efforts of combating youth crime which include working with schools in identifying youths at risk and the StreetWise Programme- that aims to divert youths away from involvement in crime- have been re-emphasized. Such focus can be seen as a way to assure public that something is done to contain the problem of street gangs.

It is clear that the series of incidents heightened the fears over youth violence. Before 2010, reports of such slashing incidents were rare. (keywords " youth violence" and " gang violence" produced mainly stories from US about American street gangs in Factiva search builder when sources are limited to Straits Times and New Paper.) And because there were little reports, there were little discussions in online forums about gang violence. In list of parliamentary reports from 2006, youth violence only came into attention recently after the incidents. Minister of Home Affairs have emphasised that the crime rates have continually decreased over the years and there is no increase of gang violence lately in Singapore (Parliament of Singapore, 2011). Henceforth, one can conclude that the attention given by the public on slashing and gang violence are a product of a moral panic constructed by the various media portrayals of the incident.

6. The Media Politics of Youth Violence in Singapore

Therefore, by concluding that the public concerns on slashing and gang violence are formed as a result of moral panic, we can also conclude that the media plays a pivotal role in the construction of moral panic.

The media has universally being respected as one of the major actors of disseminating information over the years. Therefore, the media has been trusted to convey the information to the public, operating as moral entrepreneurs informing the readers the goods and bads of society (Cohen, 1972). This influence has made almost every " fact" conveyed in the media being perceived as the truth, and when the moral value conveyed in the media intercepts with the societal value that needs to be protected, even the minor happenings in society will generate concerns and instigate fear that some measures should be taken.

Thus, the media has used this authority by providing news that instigates fear to the public and arouses concerns about the slashing issue. The frequent follow-ups of the Pasir Ris slashing incident are continuous in nature whereby it tracks down from the initial crime down to the news coverage of the murdered teen's funeral and the eventual revelation that he is part of the gang. This surge of news reports are aimed to cause panic and fear of the crimes, and also warns the public about the dangers of gang involvement-as seen from the reports that Darren is part of gang- and the consequences of engaging in such acts. This has instigated fear to the public whereby concerns were directed to the safety of the neighborhood, and parents not allowing their children to return home late at night since the incident happen. The incident in Bukit Panjang has encouraged more residents to take part in the Citizens on Patrol (COP) programme formed by the Zhenghua division in Bukit Panjang, in order to beef up security in the area. (Ismail, 2010)

In addition to that, the interest groups, the state as well as the grassroots have used the media as a social control agent to express their concerns towards the conditions of the society. These moral entrepreneurs reach the public through the media such that the news will generate some concerns from the public and get their support in controlling the crime before it goes off-hand. The media amplified the situation by describing the criminals as young, in their teenage years and living in subcultural environment of gang violence (Wong, 2010). These facts have amplified the public's response towards the crime when Teen Challenge, a voluntary welfare organization received 20 percent more calls from parents since the slashing cases. The grassroots leaders are working with schools in order to control the issue of gang violence. This is to allow the youths to feel that they are part of the community, and they will feel how important it is to feel accepted by the society. There is therefore, a profound influence of the media as a social control by reporting deviance in a moral provoking manner.

7. Criticism of Moral Panic

The moral panic concept has its own criticisms. The problem lies with the proportionality between the cases reported in the media and the reality.

The media's role as the medium of disseminating information is regulated by the higher political and commercial forces, The news were received by citizens at second hand which means that is has been manipulated (cohen, 1972). Therefore, the citizen's panic might not be justified since the reality of the case is not known. The issue reported by the media might not carry the same severity as the reality. As most of the time, the media is amplifying the

slashing cases in order to instigate fear and gain concern from the public. However, in actual reality, statistics provided by the home affair ministry have shown that crime cases, which include the case of gang violence, have been decreasing (Parliament of Singapore, 2011). It is only when the citizen's panic has reached its point (which means that the government has received enough support and concern from the citizens), will then the reality of the case is revealed and the public will then realize that the case that they have been panicky about was an isolated one. On example of this is the Downtown east incident, whereby Pasir Ris MP Dr Ahmad Magad said that the case is an isolated one, and the neighborhood is peaceful. This was stated after receiving feedbacks from worried parents about the safety of their children and security around the neighborhood has already beefed up by the citizen as well as police patrols (Toh, Tee, 2010). This has shown the proportionality between the case reported on media, and the reality, and the citizen's agenda of using the media to exaggerate the case only to gain support and concern from the public.

Another point is that the public's reaction towards the issue might not be directly due to panic generated from the media reports, those reaction might be one of the society's concern towards the issue and they would like to help the state take control of the problem before it becomes worse. This is also evident from the states intervention of the matter, describing the re-examining the sentencing options as allowing an " early intervention ", in order to help the gangs who are yet to commit criminal offences (Ismail, 2010). This implies that the situation is not as serious as it seems to be, and

the state is only exercising measures to control the spread of youth violence by controlling its growth before it is too late.

In addition to that, the media labeling of the criminals highly deviant" and depiction of the gangs as a danger to the not only serves as a self-fulfilling prophecy to the deviants and induce them into committing more offences in the future. Thus, the moral panic not only causes the heightened attention by the public, but also exerts the identity to the gangs that they should be feared. They gain their self-defined meaning of " success" through displaying their masculinities and these hateful reports are only making these gangs to pursue their goals (Mcrobbie, Thornton, 1995). On example is the follow-up of slashing cases since the downtown east incident, one of which is the Bukit Panjang slashing incident involving 6 youths. It was featured in the Straits Times entitled " beware the rise of copycat gangs" as well as discussion forums such as Stomp and Straits Times, sparking interests that the case in Bukit Panjang might be a sequel of copycat gang-related attacks to the one in Downtown East. This shows that the moral panic caused by the media did not really help to engage the community and help to eradicate the crime but rather helped the criminals in engaging with more acts as labeling them as gangsters will just reassert their identity and make them continue with their criminal behaviors.

However, the media is still regarded as the most reliable medium to get current news reports and therefore its credibility rarely goes unchallenged. The frequent follow-ups by the media, portraying the numerous pictures of the crime scene viewable on the television brings these cases close to

reality, with the pictures of the victim that could engage the viewers into believing that something needs to be done with these criminals.(Estrada, 2001)

8. Conclusion

The case of youth slashing incidents in Singapore has illustrated to us how the media induces moral panic in a society. The concept of moral panic further to explore the profound influence of media as an instuitution of social control through amplifying deviance. Attention is given to the ideological role of media and the construction of meanings.

This paper also suggests that moral panic is superficially created by incessant reporting of youth slashing incidents rather than a significant spike in crime rates. In other words, this paper argues that rather than an increase in crime rates involving youths, there was an increase in visibility of such criminals act through exposures from mass media.