The Rutgers DSW Program

Module Title: The Social Injustice of Moral Panics: Understanding the Impact on Vulnerable Populations
Instructor: 
Residency: November 2018
Date: 

Module Description:
Moral Panic theory emphasizes how exaggerated accounts of particular types of social problems (and sub-populations) are used to influence public opinion, scapegoat vulnerable populations for societal insecurities, and shape reactive and discriminatory social policies. The occurrence of a moral panic does not suggest that a social problem does not exist; however, in a moral panic, the claim of threat posed by the problem is disproportionate to its actual risk and becomes sensationalized through media discourse meant to enhance hostility towards a targeted group (usually those outside the societal “mainstream”) and foster consensus toward immediate action (Cohen, 1972; 2002). During moral panics, the causes of social problems are seen to lie in individualistic behavior that is often perceived to be immoral and structural causes are minimized or ignored. Policies enacted during such times typically lead to enduring political and cultural shifts that seek to further marginalize sub-populations as ‘non-normal’ and engender societal injustice and/or criminalization of certain behaviors (Cohen, 1972; 2002; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). By better understanding moral panics, the structural and contextual causes of inequality become more apparent, shifting the focus away from more individualistic and/or simplistic explanations of social dysfunction (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). This focus can help social workers contextualize social problems within broader societal structures (as opposed to individual pathology), challenge rhetoric that provokes social injustice, and address the impact of unjust policies on marginalized groups.

In this module, we will explore the core elements of moral panic theory and, using a structured framework of key questions, discuss how to analyze the construction of social problems and recognize potential moral panics. We will then explore examples of how social discourse is used to enflame the dynamics of moral panics around a vulnerable sub-population (e.g., Lesbians and gay men, transgender communities, immigrants) in the United States.

Module Objectives:
As a result of this module, students will be able to:

1) Describe the key components of moral panic theory and discuss the theory’s relevance to social work
2) Recognize and understand the impact of social discourse on the construction of social problems;
3) Identify the reactive quality of policies that disproportionately impact marginalized populations.
**Required Reading:**

**Recommended Readings**

**Supplemental Readings:**