

KEY FACTS

Spring 2003

TV Violence

Since the advent of television, the effect of TV violence on society has been widely studied and vigorously debated. Based on the cumulative evidence of studies conducted over several decades, the scientific and public health communities overwhelmingly conclude that viewing violence poses a harmful risk to children. Critics of the research challenge this conclusion and dispute claims that exposure to TV violence leads to real-life aggression. As we move into the digital era with enhanced images and sound, media violence will undoubtedly continue to be a focus of public concern and scientific research.

Prevalence of Violence on TV

The National Television Violence Study is the largest content analysis undertaken to date. It analyzed programming over three consecutive TV seasons from 1994 to 1997.¹ Among the findings:

- Nearly 2 out of 3 TV programs contained some violence,² averaging about 6 violent acts per hour.³
- Fewer than 5% of these programs featured an anti-violence theme or prosocial message emphasizing alternatives to or consequences of violence.⁴
- Violence was found to be more prevalent in children's programming (69%) than in other types of programming (57%). In a typical hour of programming, children's shows featured more than twice as many violent incidents (14) than other types of programming (6).⁵
- The average child who watches 2 hours of cartoons a day may see nearly 10,000 violent incidents each year, of which the researchers estimate that at least 500 pose a high risk for learning and imitating aggression and becoming desensitized to violence.⁶
- The number of prime-time programs with violence increased over the three years of the study, from 53% to 67% on broadcast television and from 54% to 64% on basic cable. Premium cable net-

works have the highest percentage of shows with violence, averaging 92% since 1994.⁷

The UCLA Television Violence Monitoring Report also analyzed three years of programming from 1994 to 1997. This study relied on the qualitative judgments of a team of student monitors and staff researchers, rather than a systematic content analysis, to determine whether individual violent depictions "raised concern" for viewers.⁸ Among the findings:

- Children's Saturday morning TV shows that feature "sinister combat violence" raised the most serious concerns for these researchers. These are fantasy live-action shows and animated cartoons in which violence is central to the storyline, the villains and superheroes use violence as an acceptable and effective way to get what they want, and the perpetrators are valued for their combat ability. Among the most popular shows for children, the number of troubling shows in this genre decreased from seven to four over the three years of the study.⁹
- The number of prime time series that raised frequent concerns about violence steadily declined over the three years, from nine such series in 1994–95 to just two in 1996–97.¹⁰
- TV specials was the only category that raised new concerns at the end of the three years. In the second year five live-action reality shows featured real or re-created graphic images of animals attacking and sometimes killing people. By the third year, the number of such shows had increased again.¹¹

Scientific Studies of TV Violence Effects

Researchers hypothesize that viewing TV violence can lead to three potentially harmful effects: increased antisocial or aggressive behavior, desensitization to violence (becoming more accepting of violence in real life and less caring about other people's feelings), or increased fear of becoming a victim of violence.¹² Many researchers believe that children age 7 and younger are particularly vulnerable to the effects of

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viewing violence because they tend to perceive fantasy and cartoon violence as realistic.¹³

Since the 1960s, a body of research literature has been accumulating on the effects of TV violence. Taken together, the studies conclude that TV violence is one of many factors that contribute to aggressive behavior. Following are examples of the various types of research studies that have been conducted:¹⁴

Laboratory experiments are conducted in a controlled setting in order to manipulate media exposure and assess the short-term effects. Participants are randomly assigned to view either a violent or nonviolent film clip and their subsequent behavior is observed.

- A series of classic experiments conducted in the 1960s provided the earliest evidence of a link between TV violence and aggression. In these studies, children who were exposed to a TV clip of an actor hitting an inflatable doll were more likely than children who did not see the clip to imitate the action in their play, especially if the aggressive actions in the film clip were rewarded.¹⁵
- Other laboratory experiments have indicated that exposure to media violence increases children's tolerance for real-life aggression. For example, when third- and fourth-graders were left in charge of two younger children they could see on a TV monitor, the ones who viewed an aggressive film were much more reluctant than those who had not seen the film to ask an adult for help when the younger children began to fight, even though the fight was becoming progressively aggressive.¹⁶

Field experiments are conducted in a more naturalistic setting. As with the laboratory studies, children are shown video clips and their short-term post-viewing behavior is monitored by researchers. Over the past 30 years, numerous field studies have indicated that some children behave more aggressively after viewing violence.

- In one study, researchers showed children episodes of either *Batman* and *Spiderman* or *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* over several weeks and then observed their behavior for two weeks afterwards. The children who viewed violent cartoons were more likely to interact aggressively with their peers, while those children who watched *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* became more cooperative and willing to share toys.¹⁷
- In another study, researchers exposed children to an episode of *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* and then observed their verbal and physical aggression in the classroom. Compared to children who had not seen the episode, viewers committed seven times as many aggressive acts such as hitting, kicking, shoving, and insulting a peer.¹⁸

Cross-sectional studies survey a large and representative sample of viewers at one point in time. Since the 1970s, a large number of these studies have concluded that viewing TV violence is related to aggressive behavior and attitudes.¹⁹ These studies are correlational and do not prove causality; that is, it is difficult to know whether watching violence on TV is causing the increase in aggression or whether viewers who are already aggressive prefer watching violent content.

- In one study, 2,300 junior and senior high school students were asked to list their four favorite programs, which were analyzed for violent content, and to provide a self-reported checklist of activities that ranged from fighting at school to serious delinquency. Researchers found that teens whose favorite programs were violent tended to report a higher incidence in overall aggressive and delinquent behavior.²⁰
- A recent study demonstrated a relationship between children's bullying and their exposure to media violence. Third-, fourth-, and fifth-graders who were identified by their peers as being the ones who spread rumors, exclude and insult peers, and behave in ways that hurt others, were more likely to view violence than nonaggressive children.²¹

Longitudinal studies offer the best way to study long-term effects of exposure to violent TV content. These studies survey the same group of individuals at several different times over many years to determine whether viewing violence is related to subsequent aggressive behavior. This method is designed to detect causal relationships and statistically control for environmental, family, and personal characteristics that might otherwise account for aggression.

- One study demonstrated that TV habits of children in the 1960s were a significant predictor of adult aggression, even criminal behavior, regardless of children's initial aggressiveness, IQ, social status, or parenting style. In this study, which spans more than 20 years, boys who preferred and viewed more violent programming at age 8 were more likely to be aggressive as teenagers and have arrests and convictions as adults for interpersonal crimes such as spousal and child abuse, murder, and aggravated assault.²²
- Television exposure during adolescence has also been linked to subsequent aggression in young adulthood. A 17-year longitudinal study concluded that teens who watched more than one hour of TV a day were almost four times as likely as other teens to commit aggressive acts in adulthood (22% versus 6%), taking into account prior aggressiveness, psychiatric disorders, family income, parental education, childhood neglect, and neighborhood violence.²³

Meta-analyses use a statistical procedure to combine the results from many different studies.

- The largest meta-analysis on TV violence analyzed 217 studies conducted between 1957 and 1990, and found that viewing violence was significantly linked to aggressive and antisocial behavior, especially among the youngest viewers. The overall effect size was .31, meaning that exposure to TV violence was estimated to account for 10% of the variance in antisocial behavior.²⁴

Opposing Viewpoint

A small number of critics of the scientific evidence have concluded that TV violence does not contribute to real-life aggression. For the most part, they do not base their conclusions on studies with contrary findings, but argue that the studies that have been conducted are flawed.²⁵

- One of the leading critics challenges the notion that young children cannot distinguish between fiction and reality. He agrees that children may learn from what they see, but contends that the main messages they see are that good will prevail over evil, and that it is the evil forces who are first to use violence.²⁶
- One group of researchers conducted two large-scale longitudinal studies over a three-year period in the 1980s. They concluded that the results did not meet their established criteria for detecting a documented effect of media violence on behavior.²⁷
- Over the years, some researchers have hypothesized that watching violence on television should reduce angry feelings and aggressive actions in real life. Several studies have attempted to prove this relationship, known as the "catharsis hypothesis," but the evidence has not been supportive.²⁸
- The method used to study media violence has been a main target of criticism. For example, experimental studies have been criticized for their artificial viewing situations, unrealistic measures of aggression, and short-term effects. Correlational studies have been dismissed for not proving causation, and longitudinal studies have been criticized for not demonstrating strong or consistent results.²⁹

Conclusions Drawn by the Public Health Community

Over the years, major medical and public health organizations have reviewed the research and the critiques, and made their own assessments of the evidence.

National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. In a 1969 report, the Commission stated: "Violence on television

encourages violent forms of behavior. . . We do not suggest that television is a principal cause of violence in society. We do suggest that it is a contributing factor."³⁰

Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior. In 1972, the Committee commissioned a five-volume set of research on TV's impact on children. They concluded that the evidence supports "a preliminary and tentative indication of a causal relation between viewing violence on television and aggressive behavior" for "some children [who are predisposed to be aggressive]. . . in some environmental contexts."³¹

National Institute of Mental Health. In 1982, the Institute concluded: "The consensus among most of the research community is that violence on television does lead to aggressive behavior by children and teenagers. . . Not all children become aggressive, of course, but the correlations between violence and aggression are positive. In magnitude, television violence is as strongly correlated with aggressive behavior as any other behavioral variable that has been measured."³²

American Psychological Association. In 1993, the APA Committee on Media and Society concluded: "There is absolutely no doubt that higher levels of viewing violence on television are correlated with increased acceptance of aggressive attitudes and increased aggressive behavior."³³

Joint Statement of the Public Health Community. In July 2000, the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, American Psychological Association, American Medical Association, American Academy of Family Physicians, and American Psychiatric Association issued a joint statement that concluded: "At this time, well over 1,000 studies point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children. . ."³⁴

Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General. In 2001, the Surgeon General's report on youth violence concluded that "media violence increases children's physically and verbally aggressive behavior in the short term," but also noted that "the causal links. . .are more firmly established for aggressive . . .than for violent behavior."³⁵

¹ Center for Communication and Social Policy, University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), National Television Violence Study, Executive Summary, Volume 3, 1998. Commissioned by the National Cable Television Association, the study analyzed almost 10,000 hours of broadcast and cable programming randomly selected from 23 channels over the course of three TV seasons from 1994 to 1997.

²Ibid., 30. Researchers defined three main types of violent depictions: credible threats, behavioral acts, and harmful consequences.

³ Ibid., 33.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Barbara Wilson et al., "Violence in Children's Television Programming: Assessing the Risks," *Journal of Communication* 52 (2002): 5–35.

⁶ Center for Communication and Social Policy, UCSB, 33–34.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸ UCLA Center for Communication Policy, UCLA Television Violence Monitoring Report, 1998, <<http://ccp.ucla.edu/Webreport96/tableof.htm>> (28 September 2002). Commissioned by the National Association of Broadcasters, the researchers analyzed more than 3,000 hours of TV over three consecutive TV seasons from 1994 to 1997. TV shows with violence were divided into four different categories based on the level of concern, ranging from high levels of violence and serious concern to no serious concern because the context is appropriate.

⁹ *Ibid.*, <<http://ccp.ucla.Webreport96/network.htm#kids>> (28 September 2002).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, <<http://ccp.ucla.Webreport96/network.htm#Series>> (28 September 2002).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, <<http://ccp.ucla.Webreport96/network.htm#specials>> (28 September 2002).

¹² American Psychological Association, Report of the American Psychological Association Commission on Violence and Youth, Volume 1, 1993, 33; Stacy L. Smith and Edward Donnerstein, "Harmful Effects of Exposure to Media Violence: Learning of Aggression, Emotional Desensitization, and Fear," *Human Aggression: Theories, Research, and Implications for Social Policy*, eds. R. Geen and E. Donnerstein (New York: Academic Press, 1998), 167–202.

¹³ Brad Bushman and L. Rowell Huesmann, "Effects of Televised Violence on Aggression," *Handbook of Children and the Media*, eds. D. Singer and J. Singer (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001), 223–268.

¹⁴ For summaries of these studies, see Bushman and Huesmann, 2001; Victor Strasburger and Barbara Wilson, "Media Violence," *Children, Adolescents & the Media* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), 73–116; W. James Potter, *On Media Violence* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999).

¹⁵ Albert Bandura, Dorothea Ross, and Sheila Ross, "Transmission of Aggression through Imitation of Aggressive Models," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 63 (1961): 575–582; Albert Bandura, Dorothea Ross, and Sheila Ross, "Imitation of Film-Mediated Aggressive Models," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 66 (1963) 3–11; Albert Bandura, Dorothea Ross, and Sheila Ross, "Vicarious Reinforcement and Imitative Learning," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67 (1963) 601–607.

¹⁶ Ronald S. Drabman and Margaret Hanratty Thomas, "Does Media Violence Increase Children's Tolerance of Real-Life Aggression?" *Developmental Psychology* 10 (1974): 418–421; Ronald S. Drabman and Margaret Hanratty Thomas, "Does Watching Violence on Television Cause Apathy?" *Pediatrics* 57 (1976): 329–331.

¹⁷ Aletha Huston-Stein and L.K. Friedrich, "Television Content and Young Children's Social Behavior," *Television and Social Behavior, Volume II, Television and Social Learning*, eds. J. Murray, E. Rubinstein, and G. Comstock (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 207–317.

¹⁸ Chris J. Boyatzis, Gina M. Matillo, and Kristen M. Nesbitt, "Effects of the 'Mighty Morphin Power Rangers' on Children's Aggression with Peers," *Child Study Journal* 25: 1 (1995): 45–55.

¹⁹ See, for example, Bushman and Huesmann, 2001; Strasburger and Wilson, 2002; Potter, 1999.

²⁰ Jennie McIntyre and James Teevan Jr., "Television Violence and Deviant Behavior," *Television and Social Behavior, Volume III, Television and Adolescent Aggressiveness*, eds. G. Comstock and E. Rubinstein (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 383–435.

²¹ Audrey Buchanan et al., "What Goes in Must Come Out: Children's Media Violence Consumption at Home and

Aggressiveness at School," <<http://www.mediafamily.org/research/reports/issbd.shtml>> (28 September 2002).

²² L. Rowell Huesmann et al., "Stability of Aggression Over Time and Generations," *Developmental Psychology* 20 (1984): 1120–1134. This study was begun in 1960 with a sample of 875 youths in New York state; ten years later 427 were re-interviewed, and twelve years later 409 were interviewed and criminal justice data was collected on 632 of the original subjects.

²³ Jeffrey Johnson et al., "Television Viewing and Aggressive Behavior During Adolescence and Adulthood," *Science* 295 (March 29, 2002): 2468–2471. The longitudinal study was conducted over a 17-year time span with a sample of 707 families. Criminal arrest and charge data (assault or physical fights resulting in injury, robbery, threats to injure someone, or weapon used to commit a crime) were obtained.

²⁴ Haejung Paik and George Comstock, "The Effects of Television Violence on Antisocial Behavior: A Meta-Analysis," *Communication Research* 21:4 (August 1994): 516–546.

²⁵ See, for example, Jonathan Freedman, *Media Violence and Its Effect on Aggression* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); this review was commissioned by the Motion Picture Association of America. See also Jib Fowles, *The Case for Television Violence* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1999).

²⁶ Freedman, 2002, 1996.

²⁷ J. Ronald Milavsky et al., *Television and Aggression: A Panel Study* (New York: Academic Press, 1982). This research was undertaken by NBC's Department of Social Research. A summary of this study was published in *National Institute of Mental Health, Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties, Volume 2, Technical Reviews*, eds. D. Pearl, L. Bouthilet, and J. Lazar (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), 138–157. Other researchers have since reviewed these results and interpreted them differently, concluding that the relationships were weak but not inconsistent with other studies of long-term effects. See for example, Thomas Cook et al., "The Implicit Assumptions of Television Research: An Analysis of the 1982 NIMH Report on Television and Behavior," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47:2 (1983): 161–207.

²⁸ Bushman and Huesmann, 2001, 240.

²⁹ Freedman, 2002; Fowles, 1999.

³⁰ National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, *Mass Media and Violence* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969).

³¹ Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, *Television and Growing Up: The Impact of Televised Violence* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 11.

³² National Institute of Mental Health, *Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties, Volume 1, Summary Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), 6.

³³ American Psychological Association, *Violence & Youth. Report of the American Psychological Association Commission on Violence and Youth, Volume I*, 1993, 33.

³⁴ Congressional Public Health Summit, *Joint Statement on the Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children*, July 26, 2000, <<http://www.aap.org/advocacy/releases/jstmtevc.htm>> (28 September 2002).

³⁵ U.S. Surgeon General, "Violence in the Media and Its Effect on Youth Violence," *Youth Violence: A Report of the Surgeon General, Appendix 4-B* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001), <<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/youthviolence/chapter4/appendix4b.html>> (28 September 2002).

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