

Media Violence Does Not Cause Teen Violence

Critics of media violence like to claim that over one thousand studies have proven that viewing television violence causes violent behavior (some even say that three thousand such studies have been done). Based on these studies, sociologists and public health officials declare that media violence in general—including violence on television programs, motion pictures, video games, and rock and rap music—entices teenagers to commit violent acts. Even if it were scientifically valid to apply the findings of television violence studies to other media, these critics would still be wrong. In fact, fewer than one hundred studies have focused specifically on the causal link between television violence and real-life aggression. Moreover, contrary to the claims of alarmists, these studies do not prove that watching violent programs causes teens to commit violent acts.

Laboratory Studies

Many of the studies on television violence have been done in laboratories. Typically, one group of children is shown a violent program and another is shown a nonviolent program. Then both groups are tested on their aggressiveness. Some studies have found that the children who see violent programs are more likely to behave aggressively afterwards than those who view nonviolent programs.

While these studies seem convincing on the surface, they are problematic for several reasons. First, because they take place in laboratories, their results cannot be generalized to the real world. Second, it is impossible to determine whether the aggressive behavior observed is a reaction to the violent television show or an attempt on the part of the child to meet the adult researchers' expectations. As Kevin Durkin, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Western Australia, states, "Even quite young children are good at working out what adults want them to do, or will let them get away with."¹ Finally, the aggressive behavior seen in these studies is a short-term response to stimuli; it does not indicate that the child is on the path to becoming a violent career criminal.

Correlational Studies

In addition to laboratory studies, correlational studies have been done to determine whether the two variables (television violence and real-life violence) are related. Rather than taking place in the laboratory, these studies collect information on young people's viewing habits and on their behavior. The most widely cited correlational study was conducted by Leonard Eron of the University of Illinois and Rowell Huesmann of the University of Michigan. Beginning in 1960, they studied a group of eight-year-old boys and found a correlation between watching violent television shows and behaving aggressively. Eleven years later, the boys who had watched the most violent television at age eight were the most violent at age nineteen.

The main problem with correlational studies is that even though a correlation may exist between children's watching violent television shows and behaving aggressively, this does not prove that the violent television programs cause the violent behavior. It could just as reasonably be argued that viewing violent television programs is caused by the child's preexisting tendency to be aggressive. Jonathan Freedman, a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, explains the problem of assuming that a correlation implies causation:

Correlations do not prove causality. Boys watch more TV football than girls, and they play more football than girls, but no one, so far as I know, believes that television is

what makes boys more interested in football. Probably personality characteristics that make children more aggressive also make them prefer violent television programs.²

In addition, the correlation between viewing violent television shows and behaving violently may be caused by a third variable, such as poor parenting. As Durkin explains, "High television is correlated with lax parenting; aggressive behaviour in children is also correlated with lax parenting; hence, it is possible that the real source of the problem is family management."³

The argument that media violence causes real-life teen violence hinges primarily on overzealous claims about study findings. Those who say this or that study proves a link between television violence and aggressive behavior ignore the limitations of those studies. Durkin succinctly sums up the state of the research:

Each of the principal means of investigation of the effects of violent television content has its drawbacks and, quite properly, research into such a complex topic will inevitably be open to criticism. However, even if we accept the findings of the most prominent research, such as Eron and Huesmann's, they tell us that the relationship between viewing and aggressive behaviour is a weak one. Nobody has ever demonstrated otherwise.⁴

Gangsta Rap

Those who blame teen violence on the media are fond of targeting rap music—especially "gangsta rap"—for special criticism. The violent deaths of two major rap stars (Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G.) in the mid-1990s seemed to confirm that gangsta rap breeds violence.

Gangsta rap does often contain graphically violent lyrics that are delivered in an aggressive style. And it is obvious that many teenage boys, including whites, admire and emulate rap stars, assuming their aggressive postures, attitudes, and speech patterns. However, it is a huge leap of logic to conclude that just because these teens adopt an aggressive demeanor they believe that violent behavior is acceptable or that they are more inclined to commit violent acts. The vast majority of teens make the correct moral distinction between acting tough and committing violent crimes.

Rather than promoting violence, rap reflects the reality of life in the inner cities, which are plagued by unemployment, poverty, racial discrimination, and black-on-black violence. While the music may be disturbing, it points to a disturbing reality. Tricia Rose, an assistant professor at New York University, explains how rap music chronicles life in the inner cities:

Many rappers are able to codify the everyday experiences of demonized young black men and bear witness to the experiences they face, never see explained from their perspective, but know are true. Many a gangsta rap tale chronicles the experience of wandering around all day, trying to make order out of a horizon of unemployment, gang cultural occupation, the threat of violence from police and rival teens, and fragile home relationships.⁵

Instead of focusing blame on rap music, society should address the deplorable social conditions described in the music. As syndicated columnist Clarence Page writes, "It is not enough for us parents to denounce rap CDs and tapes and snatch them out of children's hands.... Rather we have to give kids something to believe in."⁶

Irresponsible Leadership

To state that media violence has not been proven to cause real-life violence is not to defend media violence on artistic or aesthetic grounds. Television programs, Hollywood films, rock and rap music, and other media do contain too much gratuitous violence. Young people would be better off reading a good book than tuning in to the latest Hollywood action adventure film or the newest gangsta rap CD. However, blaming media violence as the cause of real-world violence among teenagers is irresponsible.

The nation's leaders have chosen to blame media violence because it is easy. By criticizing the media for airing too much violence, they give the impression that they are doing something about the violence that pervades American society. In the process, they also deflect the public's attention from the real--and more difficult--causes of teen violence: poverty, unemployment, racial discrimination, easy access to guns, and a lack of legitimate educational and employment opportunities for inner-city youth. As Todd Gitlin, a professor of sociology at the University of California at Berkeley, states,

The attempt to demonize the media distracts attention from the real causes f--and the serious remedies for--the epidemic of violence.... Violence on the screens, however loathsome, does not make a significant contribution to violence on the streets. Images don't spill blood. Rage, equipped with guns, does. Desperation does. Revenge does. As liberals say, the drug trade does; poverty does; unemployment does.⁷

To prevent violence among teenagers, America's leaders must stop blaming fictional threats on TV, video, and movie screens and start addressing the real social problems that confront the nation's young people.