

NATIONAL TELEVISION VIOLENCE STUDY



VOLUME 3

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

*Stacy L. Smith, Barbara J. Wilson, Dale Kunkel, Daniel Linz,
W. James Potter, Carolyn M. Colvin, Edward Donnerstein*

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, CHAPEL HILL

Jay M. Bernhardt, Jane Brown, Shelley Golden

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

*Ellen Wartella, Charles Whitney, Dominic Lasorsa,
Wayne Danielson, Adriana Olivarez,
Nancy Jennings, Rafael Lopez*

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, MADISON

Joanne Cantor, Amy Nathanson

EDITED BY

Joel Federman

CENTER FOR COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL POLICY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

Executive Summary design by
Steven Brown
UCSB Artworks, Instructional Development
University of California, Santa Barbara

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INTRODUCTION

Foreword

JOEL FEDERMAN

CENTER FOR COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL POLICY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

This volume summarizes the final report of the National Television Violence Study. The report represents the efforts of more than 300 people, involving the videotaping of nearly 10,000 hours of television programming over a three-year period, and the participation of more than 1,600 individuals as study participants in five separate experiments. The project is a landmark in the history of television research in that its analysis of TV content is based on the most representative sample of the television landscape ever collected.

Project Overview

Violence on television has been the subject of national debate for decades. In the last few years, public concern over this issue has intensified in response to overwhelming scientific evidence that TV violence has harmful effects on society. Due to this public concern, policymakers called on the entertainment industry to more closely examine the way in which violence is shown on television. As a result, the National Television Violence Study (NTVS) was commissioned.

Initiated in 1994, the National Television Violence Study is a three-year effort to assess violence on television. The project is funded by the National Cable Television Association (NCTA). The National Television Violence Study involves the efforts of media researchers at four universities, an oversight Council of representatives from national policy organizations, and project administration and coordination.

Researchers at the University of California, Santa Barbara, have assessed violence in entertainment programming such as drama, comedy, movies, children's shows, and music videos. Researchers at the University of Texas at Austin have examined violence in a particular type of programming — reality-based shows such as tabloid news, talk shows, police shows, and documentaries. Researchers at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, have studied violence ratings and advisories used on television, including their impact on the viewing decisions of parents and children. Researchers at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, examined the effectiveness of anti-violence public service announcements.

The project also involves the efforts of an oversight Council, whose role has been to safeguard the integrity and independence of the study, provide advice and counsel to the researchers, ensure the scientific validity of the study, and identify implications from the findings. The Council is comprised of representatives from 17 national organizations that are concerned with the impact of television on society. These organizations represent the fields of education, medicine, law, violence prevention, psychology, sociology and communication. In addition, one third of the Council members represent the entertainment industry.

The administration and coordination of the study has been conducted by the Center for Communication and Social Policy at the University of California, Santa Barbara. This responsibility includes managing the

videotaping of more than 3,000 programs each year for content analysis, convening the NTVS Council, coordinating the research efforts among the four university sites, and releasing the study's report and findings. The initial phases of this project, including the taping of the Year 2 sample, were coordinated and administered by Mediascope, a nonprofit organization, before moving to UCSB in June 1996.

In very many ways, the study as a whole has been a collaborative effort. Though their studies were conducted separately, the researchers from the four universities met together frequently, particularly during the design phase of the project. In addition, the Council and researchers met together a total of six times during the course of the study, reviewing and vetting its design, results and recommendations.

Risks of Exposure to TV Violence

Prior to this study, it had already been well established that television influences many kinds of attitudes and behaviors by modeling them as appropriate and/or desirable. A highly successful multi-billion dollar advertising industry is built on that premise. More specifically, violence on television has been shown in hundreds of studies to have an influence on aggressive behavior. Over the past 20 years, numerous respected academic and public health organizations and agencies — including the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, the U.S. Surgeon General, and the National Institute of Mental Health — have reviewed the existing body of evidence in this area and have unanimously affirmed the validity of that conclusion. Three main effects of viewing televised violence have been noted in the literature: learning aggressive attitudes and behaviors, desensitization to violence, and increased fear of becoming victimized by violence.

Scientific evidence has also established that the portrayal of violence on television need not lead to the reinforcement of aggressive attitudes and behaviors. If the consequences of violence are demonstrated, if violence is shown to be regretted or punished, if its perpetrators are not glamorized, if the act of violence is not seen as justifiable, if in general violence is shown in a negative light, then the portrayal of violence may not create undesirable consequences. But if violence is glamorized, sanitized or made to seem routine, then the message is that it is an acceptable, and perhaps even desirable, course of action. Television can be a powerful influence on social mores concerning violence and aggression, for good or for ill.

The crucial questions then becomes: in which of these ways does television currently portray violence? Does television today encourage or discourage the learning of aggression? Does it increase the risk of desensitization or fear in viewers? These are the central questions addressed by the National Television Violence Study.

The study does not exaggerate the importance of televised violence among the myriad contributors to violence in society. It recognizes that the causes of violence are manifold, and include biological and psychological factors as well as broader social and cultural ones. It also recognizes that televised violence does not have a uniform effect on viewers. The relationship between viewing violence and subsequent behavior depends both on the nature of the depiction and the makeup of the audience. In some cases, the same portrayal of violence may have different effects on different audiences. For example, graphically portrayed violence may elicit fear in some viewers and aggression in others. Peer influences, family role models, social and economic status, educational level, and the availability of weapons can each significantly alter the likelihood of a particular reaction to viewing violence on television.

One of the most notable findings of this report is the relative lack of change in the portrayal of violence over three years. However, this finding does not necessarily mean that no efforts were made within the television industry to address the problem of violence. It may be that many well-intentioned production companies or television networks made efforts to limit or alter the nature of violent portrayals during the three-year study period. Any such efforts are certainly laudable, but the study shows they were not cumulatively sufficient to significantly alter the television environment overall.

The study reaches the conclusion that efforts by the television industry to alleviate or reverse the negative effects of violence in its programming must be undertaken with great care. As the study's Year 2 analysis of ratings and advisories shows, sometimes such efforts can have unintended consequences, such as attracting some younger viewers to programs that glamorize or trivialize violence. Likewise, the study indicates that funds and energies devoted to the production of anti-violence public service messages may be ill-spent when they are not designed to target the most appropriate audiences or their images are not crafted to reinforce their message.

Report Goals

The National Television Violence Study has been conducted with the goal of encouraging more responsible television programming and viewing. It does not, however, argue for government to censor television, or to otherwise legislate television content. In the context of a free society, it simply calls on the creators and viewers of television to reconsider their programming and viewing habits in light of the overwhelming evidence of the harmful effects of violence as it is currently portrayed on television.

Public concern about violence in the media, particularly television, has become highly politicized. The television industry has become a focal point for attention in the national attempt to redress the enormous social and personal costs of violence. It is hoped that the National Television Violence Study will contribute to a larger national dialogue about the causes and prevention of violence that places television violence in its broader context among many other factors contributing to violence in society, including gangs, the availability of guns, poverty and racism. Although it would be an error in judgment to place the burden of blame for violence on a single social institution, the study concludes that the effect of thousands of messages conveyed through the most powerful medium of mass communication cannot be underestimated.

Foundations of Research

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, CHAPEL HILL

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, MADISON

This project is *not* a study of the effects of television violence on viewers. Literally hundreds of studies have already been conducted on this topic. However, this research project is strongly based on previous studies of how TV violence affects viewers. Before beginning this project, we conducted an extensive review of all the scientific studies that have examined the effects of television violence. After reviewing this evidence, we derived four foundations as the basis for the National Television Violence Study.

FOUNDATION 1: TELEVISION VIOLENCE CONTRIBUTES TO HARMFUL EFFECTS ON VIEWERS.

Our conclusion that violence on television contributes to negative effects on viewers is hardly novel. That same conclusion has already been reached by virtually every major group or agency that has investigated the topic. The American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, the National Academy of Sciences, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the U.S. Surgeon General, among others, have all agreed that viewing TV violence can have a number of adverse effects on children and even on adults.

FOUNDATION 2: THREE TYPES OF HARMFUL EFFECTS CAN OCCUR FROM VIEWING TELEVISED VIOLENCE:

- LEARNING AGGRESSIVE ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS
- DESENSITIZATION TO VIOLENCE
- INCREASED FEAR OF BEING VICTIMIZED BY VIOLENCE.

Research clearly shows that television violence contributes to aggressive behavior in children, and that this effect can last into adulthood. One study, for example, found that exposure to television violence at age 8 helped to predict criminal behavior in a sample of adults. Recent opinion polls suggest that most adults now recognize that televised violence can teach aggressive attitudes and behaviors to young viewers. There are, however, other types of effects that have received less attention. Research demonstrates that repeated exposure to TV violence can cause viewers to become more callous, or desensitized, to the harmfulness of violent behavior. In addition, long-term exposure to violent portrayals can increase people's fears about real-world violence. In particular, people who watch a lot of televised violence show exaggerated fear of being attacked by a violent assailant. Although these three types of effects are very different in nature, they all deserve attention from parents, policymakers, and the television industry.

FOUNDATION 3: NOT ALL VIOLENCE POSES THE SAME DEGREE OF RISK OF THESE HARMFUL EFFECTS.

The same research that shows that televised violence can have harmful effects also demonstrates that not all violent portrayals are problematic. There are many ways to depict violence on television. For example, the violence may occur on-screen and be shown graphically, or it may occur off-screen but be clearly implied.

Violent acts may be shown close-up or at a distance. There are also differences in the types of characters who commit violence and their reasons for doing so. And there are differences in the outcomes of violence—some depictions focus on the pain and suffering of victims, whereas others avoid showing the negative consequences of physical aggression. Simply put, not all portrayals of violence are the same. Their context can vary in many important ways. Studies show that the way in which violence is presented helps to determine whether a portrayal might be harmful to viewers. Some features of violence increase the risk of a harmful effect, whereas others decrease that risk. In order to evaluate violence on television, then, we must look at the *contextual features* of different portrayals.

Based on an extensive review of all the studies in this area, we identified a range of contextual features that influence how audiences will respond to television violence. Below we describe each of these features and indicate whether it increases or decreases the risk of harmful effects. For a summary of these risks, see Table 1.

ATTRACTIVE PERPETRATOR

Different types of characters use violence on television. Studies show that viewers of all ages are more likely to emulate and learn from characters who are perceived as attractive. Thus, heroes and “good guys” who act violently pose more risk to the audience than do villains.

ATTRACTIVE VICTIM

Just as the perpetrator is an important contextual feature of violence, so is the victim. The nature of the victim is most likely to influence audience fear rather than learning. Studies show that viewers empathize with good characters more so than with bad ones, so violence against victims who are perceived as attractive can heighten audience fear.

JUSTIFIED VIOLENCE

Viewers interpret an act of violence differently depending on a character’s motives for engaging in such behavior. Certain motives like self-defense or protecting a loved one can make physical aggression seem justified. Studies show that justified violence increases the chance that viewers will learn aggression; such portrayals legitimize such behavior. In contrast, violence that is undeserved or purely malicious decreases the risk of imitation or learning of aggression.

CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS

Characters can use their own physical strength to enact violence against a victim or they can use some type of weapon. Conventional weapons like guns and knives can increase viewer aggression because such devices often trigger the memory of past violent events and behaviors. This type of priming effect is less likely to occur with novel or unconventional weapons such as a chair or a frying pan.

EXTENSIVE/GRAPHIC VIOLENCE

Television programs and especially movies vary widely in the extent and graphicness of the violence they contain. A violent incident between a perpetrator and a victim can last only a few seconds and be shot from a distance or it can persist for several minutes and involve many close-up views of the action. Research indicates that extensive or repeated violence can increase desensitization, learning, and fear in viewers.

TABLE 1

**How Contextual Features Affect
the Risks Associated with TV Violence**

CONTEXTUAL FEATURES	HARMFUL EFFECTS OF TV VIOLENCE		
	LEARNING AGGRESSION	FEAR	DESENSITIZATION
Attractive Perpetrator	△		
Attractive Victim		△	
Justified Violence	△		
Unjustified Violence	▼	△	
Conventional Weapons	△		
Extensive/Graphic Violence	△	△	△
Realistic Violence	△	△	
Rewards	△	△	
Punishments	▼	▼	
Pain/Harm Cues	▼		
Humor	△		△

Note. Predicted effects are based on a comprehensive review of social science research on the different contextual features of violence. Blank spaces indicate that there is no relationship or inadequate research to make a prediction.

△ = likely to increase the outcome

▼ = likely to decrease the outcome

REALISTIC VIOLENCE

Portrayals of violence that seem realistic are more likely to encourage aggression in viewers than are unrealistic scenes. Realistic depictions of brutality also can increase viewers' fear. However, this does not mean that cartoon or fantasy violence on television is harmless. Research shows that children under the age of 7 have difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy on television. In other words, what seems unrealistic to a mature viewer may appear to be quite real to a younger child. This helps to explain why younger children will readily imitate violent cartoon characters.

REWARDS AND PUNISHMENTS

Violence that is glamorized or rewarded poses a risk for viewers, but so does violence that simply goes unpunished. Studies show that rewarded violence or violence that is not overtly punished encourages the learning of aggressive attitudes and behaviors. In contrast, portrayals of punished violence can decrease the chances that viewers will learn aggression. Rewards and punishments can influence audience fear as well. Viewers who watch violence go unpunished are more anxious and more pessimistic about the consequences of real-life violence.

PAIN/HARM CUES

Another important contextual feature involves the harmful consequences of violence. Studies indicate that showing the serious harm and pain that occurs from violence can discourage viewers from imitating or learning aggression.

HUMOR

Viewers interpret violence that is cast in a humorous light as less devastating and less harmful. Humor also may seem like a reward for violence. For these reasons, the presence of humor in a violent scene can increase the chances that viewers will imitate or learn aggression from such a portrayal. Humor can also desensitize viewers to the seriousness of violence.

SUMMARY OF CONTEXTUAL FEATURES

Looking across all the contextual features of violence, a portrayal that poses the greatest risk for the learning of aggression contains:

- an *attractive perpetrator*
- *morally justified reasons* for engaging in aggression
- *repeated* violence that seems *realistic* and involves a *conventional weapon*
- violence that is *rewarded* or goes *unpunished*
- *no visible harm or pain* to the victim
- a *humorous* context

As a comparison, a portrayal that poses the greatest risk for desensitization contains:

- *repeated* or extensive violent behavior
- a *humorous* context

Finally, a portrayal that poses the greatest risk for audience fear involves:

- violence that is aimed at an *attractive victim*
- violence that seems undeserved or *unjustified*
- violence that is *repeated* and that seems *realistic*
- violence that goes *unpunished*

FOUNDATION 4: NOT ALL VIEWERS ARE AFFECTED BY VIOLENCE IN THE SAME WAY.

In their viewing of television violence, both children and adults are influenced by the contextual features described above. For example, rewarded violence *increases* the likelihood of learning aggression regardless of the age of the viewer, whereas punished violence *decreases* that risk. Nevertheless, some unique concerns arise when we think about young children, particularly those under age 7.

Because young children's cognitive abilities are still developing, they often interpret television messages differently from mature viewers. For instance, younger viewers are more likely to perceive fantasy and cartoon violence as realistic, making this type of content more problematic for young ages. In addition, younger children are less capable of linking scenes together to make sense of events that occur at different points in a program. Therefore, if punishment for violence is delayed until the end of the program, this deterrent may go unnoticed by a young child. Punishment or any other contextual feature must occur in the same scene in order for a younger viewer to connect it to the original violent behavior.

These differences in cognitive ability mean that not all viewers will be affected in the same way by a violent portrayal. Children below the age of 7 may be especially vulnerable because they cannot easily discount fantasy violence as unreal and have trouble connecting events in the plot unless they are in the same scene. It is important to consider the age of the viewer when thinking about the harmful effects of television violence.

Summary of Foundations

To summarize, several important ideas provide the foundations for this research project. Based on an extensive body of evidence, we know that television can have harmful effects on viewers, and that at least three types of effects can occur: a viewer can learn aggressive attitudes and behaviors from watching violence on television, become desensitized to the seriousness of violence, and feel frightened of becoming a victim of real-life violence. These effects are more likely to occur with certain types of violent portrayals. In other words, not all violence on television poses each of these risks or even any of them. Indeed, some depictions may be prosocial for some audiences. Contextual features like an attractive perpetrator, justification for violence, and violence that goes unpunished can increase the risk of harmful effects. But other features such as showing the harmful consequences of violence can actually reduce the likelihood of harmful effects occurring. Finally, the risks associated with television violence depend not only on the nature of the portrayal but also on the nature of the audience. Younger children are more vulnerable to certain types of depictions because of their limited abilities to make sense of television.

National Television Violence Study Council Members*

TRINA MENDEN ANGLIN, M.D., Ph.D.
Society for Adolescent Medicine

ANN MARCUS
Caucus for Producers, Writers and Directors

DECKER ANSTROM (Ex Officio)
National Cable Television Association

VIRGINIA MARKELL
National Parent Teacher Association

CHAR BEALES
*Cable and Telecommunications:
A Marketing Society*

ROBERT MCAFEE, M.D.
American Medical Association

DARLENE CHAVEZ
National Education Association

E. MICHAEL MCCANN
American Bar Association

BELVA DAVIS
*American Federation of Television
and Radio Artists*

GENE REYNOLDS
Directors Guild of America

CARL FEINSTEIN, M.D.
American Psychiatric Association

DONALD F. ROBERTS, Ph.D.
International Communication Association

CHARLES B. FITZSIMONS
Producers Guild of America

DON SHIFRIN, M.D.
American Academy of Pediatrics

CARL GOTTLIEB
Writers Guild of America, West

BARBARA C. STAGGERS, M.D., M.P.H.
National Children's Hospital Association

FELICE LEVINE, Ph.D.
American Sociological Association

BRIAN L. WILCOX, Ph.D.
American Psychological Association

*The Council Statement reflects the views of Council members only.
Organizations listed for identification purposes only.

Year 3 Council Statement

The third-year report of the National Television Violence Study (NTVS) builds upon and extends the two previous reports to present what is arguably the most extensive analysis of violent television content, of content advisories, and of anti-violence public service announcements (PSAs) ever conducted. The scope of the research and the stability of the findings have serious implications for the public — especially parents, the television industry, and the policy-making community.

Debates regarding the effects of violence on television date from the medium's inception and continue almost unabated. Critics and researchers of TV violence argue that violent portrayals teach beliefs, attitudes, and behavior that are harmful to viewers in general and children in particular; defenders question whether "make-believe portrayals" really affect social behavior. Fortunately, the 50 years since television's introduction have also witnessed a remarkable outpouring of research addressing the violence issue and there now are literally hundreds of carefully controlled studies demonstrating that viewing of portrayals of violence can have deleterious effects on viewers' beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. As a result, within the scientific community there has emerged a remarkable consensus that exposure to television violence contributes to violence in society.

There are, of course, caveats associated with some of the studies. Not all portrayals of violence necessarily lead to deleterious consequences and some may have positive consequences. Similarly, not all viewers respond in the same way: some may learn aggression, some may become desensitized, some may become fearful — and some may be completely unaffected. Indeed, over the past decade, researchers have shifted attention away from investigating whether TV violence poses a problem, to focus on exploring conditions under which different kinds of negative consequences are more or less likely to occur. We now realize a need to look more closely at the nature of television content, asking not just how much violence occurs, but more important, how the medium portrays the motives and consequences of violence, its associated moods, its realism and so on — the context in which television portrays violence. New questions are also being posed concerning what kinds of associated messages (parental advisories, anti-violence public service announcements) can be crafted to help moderate potential harmful influences... perhaps even to increase the potential for positive consequences.

With support from the National Cable Television Association, the National Television Violence Study addresses these new sorts of questions on a scale never before attempted. Over the past three years, the study has gathered and analyzed the largest sample of television content ever examined in a more detailed way than ever before attempted. It has also studied parents' and children's responses to various types of content advisories, and explored different anti-violence public service announcements and how adolescents respond to them.

The Council and Its Role

The National Television Violence Study Advisory Council was established to fulfill two primary roles: to protect the integrity of the research, and to provide the researchers a source of advice and feedback representing a variety of perspectives and interests.

Given the highly politicized nature of the television violence issue, the Council has taken its primary responsibility to be assuring the autonomy and integrity of the research. The Council has operated to keep the study free of influence from any of the many different parties perceived to have a vested interest in the results.

As with past reports, we continue to affirm that the conclusions drawn in this study have not been affected by extraneous considerations. The research teams have continued to state their conclusions without constraint, and remain free to present their findings in any public forum and to publish them independently.

Our second role, to provide the university-based research teams with comment and advice throughout the course of the study, has also continued. The Council met periodically with the researchers to provide a sense of the kinds of questions the non-academic community has about the issue of television violence, as well as to give input on specific research questions and feedback on findings and interpretations. Council discussions ranged from detailed analyses of methodological questions, through broad considerations of conceptual and theoretical issues, to debates over the best ways in which to present the findings to the various constituencies at which they are aimed. In short, we have attempted to assist the researchers by providing both a sounding board and a multiplicity of perspectives on the violence issue, and the Council is unanimous in its appreciation for the courteous and careful consideration the researchers consistently gave to our input.

Council Recommendations and Conclusions

Perhaps the Council's most important realization over the past three years concerns the value of the steady accumulation of evidence over an extended period of time. This kind of longitudinal research is important and powerful. We congratulate the National Cable Television Association for its support of the first three years of the NTVS. We sincerely believe that the work should continue, and we hope that a concerned foundation, some sort of industry consortium, the federal government, or some combination of these will find a way to extend the life of the study. An impressive baseline has now been established, but U.S. parents, the television industry, and the country at large need and deserve to know if changes will follow — something only continual monitoring of both content and the new rating system can tell us.

If the NTVS content analyses make nothing else clear, they remove any question that violence is a staple in the television diet. Violence is frequently portrayed and is frequently talked about. More important than the simple prevalence of violent content, however, is the consistent finding that when violence does occur, it is portrayed all too often in ways that a body of research suggests will increase the likelihood of negative consequences to viewers. For example, very few programs have anti-violence themes and very few show long-term negative consequences associated with violence. Roughly three-quarters of all violent scenes show no remorse, criticism, or penalty for violence; violence is associated with humor about 40% of the time; over half of all violent interactions show no pain. At a minimum, such findings should stimulate program producers to think more carefully about the ways in which they portray violence.

In this same vein, the Council again wishes to draw attention to the findings related to cartoon programming intended primarily for young children. The NTVS continues to find that cartoons contain high rates of violence portrayed in ways that many existing studies agree will increase the probability of harmful effects. Children under 7 years are particularly at risk because of limited ability to distinguish fantasy from reality. Parents, programmers and producers alike should take particular note of the high frequency with which cartoon violence is performed by attractive characters, seems justified, goes unpunished, and results in minimal consequences for the victim — all characteristics likely to promote young children's learning of aggressive behaviors.

One of the most striking features of the accumulated findings of the NTVS content analysis is the remarkable degree of stability in violent portrayals. Little changed from Year 1 to Year 2; little has changed from Year 2 to Year 3. The stability of the findings speaks well of the reliability of the methods used in the study, giving us confidence that the results are “real” and that a true baseline measure of television violence has been established. Any changes in portrayals of television violence found in the future are likely to reflect “true” changes rather than error in the measurement of violence. To some extent the lack of significant change is not surprising. Data for the Year 2 study were already being collected when the Year 1 report was released, precluding opportunity for the television industry to respond. Similarly, the time between the first two research reports and this third one has been relatively brief. The television industry is large and complex. Change, if and when it occurs, comes slowly. However, we had hoped that at least some change would have occurred during this three-year period. We would welcome such changes and the continuation of research that documents them.

Just before the first NTVS report was released, Congress mandated the installation of a “V-chip” in new television sets and directed the television industry to develop a content rating system to implement the new filtering technology. Industry introduction of age-based TV ratings in January 1997 led to a remarkable outpouring of public and government dissatisfaction with the system’s lack of content information, and the system was modified to include indicators of violent, sexual, or objectionable language less than a year later. The accumulated findings of the three years of NTVS research on ratings and advisories suggest that the new content rating system warrants careful examination. The research results point to possible unintended negative effects from age-based ratings, and there is good reason to ask whether combining age restrictions with minimal informational icons (e.g., V, S, L) might result in unexpected and unintended outcomes.

The issue of television content ratings leads to another point that the Advisory Council believes is important. As noted earlier, diverse viewpoints are represented on the Council, and nowhere was this more evident than in discussions of ratings — their legitimacy, their merits, even the criteria measuring their effectiveness. Nevertheless, Council members concur that discussion and criticism of violence on television is not synonymous with a call for censorship, nor does it mandate constraints on the content and creative development of programming. The Council recognizes the difficulty of balancing the best interests of children in the audience against the best interests of a society that guarantees freedom of expression to all. If nothing else, continuation of the debate over how best to handle television content advisories and continuation of empirical research examining the functioning of such advisories will help provide the energy to struggle toward that balance. The Council also believes that whatever content advisory system ultimately emerges, its successful implementation will require a large-scale public education campaign. Parents must be informed how best to use the system, and the mass media (print and the Internet as well as television), various national professional organizations and parent-child advocacy groups, and even local, state, and national government could all play a role here. To this end, the Council hopes that press coverage of this and similar reports will focus less on individual statistics and more on the conceptual issues raised by such research. In the same vein, we strongly encourage inclusion of content rating information in all television program listings.

We again note rarity of both anti-violence programming and public service announcements (PSAs) likely to foster anti-violence attitudes or behavior. The few such PSAs that do appear too often rely on celebrity appeals, infrequently portray negative consequences, and seldom contain concrete anti-violence strategies. The Council believes that, at minimum, anti-violence PSAs should make use of the accumulated body of research identifying the kinds of portrayals and messages most likely to be effective with at-risk youth.

The National Television Violence Study has broken new scientific ground. Perhaps more important, the Council believes the study can have an impact far beyond the scientific community; it has the potential to reshape the way we all think about television. Some findings can help parents identify the kinds of violent content that are most problematic; some findings can help programmers understand ways in which violence, when it is an integral part of a narrative, can be portrayed in ways less likely to engender harmful effects; some findings speak directly to policymakers about how potential harmful effects of violent content might be mitigated. But all of the findings have import only insofar as they are attended to and taken seriously. Ultimately, the value of the research will be judged by whether and how it helps transform violent images on the screen and how viewers respond to those images.

An excellent example of the kind of response to the NTVS findings the Council hopes for is provided by the actions of Court TV in conjunction with leading cable companies. Earlier NTVS reports motivated executives of Court TV to apply many of the research principles and findings to the design of an ongoing educational curriculum, entitled "Choices and Consequences," aimed at increasing young viewers' understanding of various risky behaviors. Their production of video and print materials for home and in-school use illustrates how scientific research can inform the actions of the television industry. The Council congratulates Court TV for its efforts to provide leadership to the television industry in responding to these findings.

Which returns us to where we began — to a need for continuous examination of television violence and the attitudes and behaviors it can influence. The Council strongly encourages continuing support for the kinds of research exemplified by the NTVS. External monitoring of what is being portrayed and how it is being depicted is necessary for anyone — television executive or individual parent — to understand fully the nature of television violence and to react accordingly. Absent such monitoring, we have no way of knowing whether and how the landscape changes in the future. Continuation of this kind of work is in the best interests of the well-being of our society.

Finally, we commend the NCTA for supporting a project of this magnitude and importance. We also thank the NTVS research teams for the courteous and careful consideration they consistently gave to our comments and suggestions, and congratulate them for creating a series of reports that have increased society's knowledge about television violence while providing a baseline for future research and action.

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METHODS

Television Violence and Its Context: A Content Analysis

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, AUSTIN

Researchers at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), and the University of Texas, Austin (UTA), conducted separate content analyses of violence in television programming for the National Television Violence Study. However, they crafted together and shared the same definition of violence and sampling methodology. The shared methods used to analyze violence programming at the two universities are outlined below. Utilizing these shared methods, the scholars at UCSB conducted a content analysis of violence on television overall, including drama, comedy programs, movies, music videos, reality programs and children's shows. The sample of reality programming (including news magazine shows, documentaries, police reality shows, and talk and interview programs) was further analyzed by UTA researchers.

In some instances, the researchers from the two universities utilized differing measures to accomplish their specific goals. The methods that differ at the two universities are described on pages 21–23.

Definition of Violence

Any study of violence on television must first establish what types of depictions qualify as violent. Our definition of violence stipulates that several key aspects must be present: the involvement of animate beings, a clear intent to harm, and harm that is physical in nature as opposed to psychological or emotional.

Violence is defined as any overt depiction of a credible threat of physical force or the actual use of such force intended to physically harm an animate being or group of beings. Violence also includes certain depictions of physically harmful consequences against an animate being or group that occur as a result of unseen violent means.

Thus, three forms of violence are included in our findings: credible threats, behavioral acts, and harmful consequences of unseen violence.

Sample

The findings in this report are based upon the largest and most representative sample of television content ever evaluated by a single research project. During a nine-month period each year from October 1994 to June 1997, we randomly selected programs on 23 television channels to create a composite week of content for each source. We monitored programs between the hours of 6:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m., a total of 17 hours a day across seven days of the week, yielding a sum of approximately 119 hours per channel.

The 23 channels we studied represent the television sources most frequently viewed by the American public with the exception that we did not evaluate sports or news and thus omitted channels such as CNN and ESPN (see Table 2 below). The channels we assessed can be grouped into five categories: broadcast networks, independent broadcast, public broadcast, basic cable, and premium cable. In total, we sampled nearly 10,000 hours of television programming over a three-year period.

TABLE 2
Channels in Sample

BROADCAST NETWORKS	INDEPENDENT BROADCAST	PUBLIC BROADCAST	BASIC CABLE	PREMIUM CABLE
KABC	KCAL	KCET	A&E	Cinemax
KCBS	KCOP		AMC	HBO
KTTV (Fox)	KTLA		BET	Showtime
KNBC			Cartoon Network	
			Disney	
			Family Channel	
			Lifetime	
			MTV	
			Nickelodeon	
			TNT	
			USA	
			VH-1	

Violence in Television Programming Overall

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

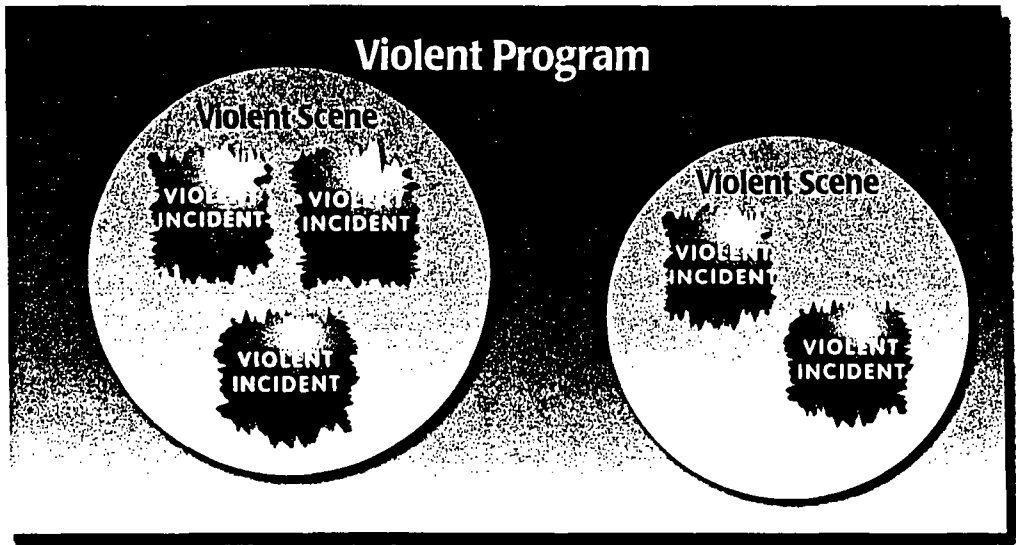
The research at the University of California, Santa Barbara focuses on the entire landscape of television. During the three years of the study, we examined the amount and the nature of violent portrayals on television. Our emphasis has been on the contextual features of violence that pose risks for the audience. In addition to studying television overall, we looked at variability in the portrayal of violence across different types of channels (broadcast networks, independent broadcast, public broadcast, basic cable, and premium cable), and in different genres of programming (children's, comedy, drama, movies, music videos, reality-based).

We also assessed whether the profile of violence on television has changed from year to year. The same procedures were employed each year so that direct comparisons could be made.

Measuring Violence: Incidents, Scenes, and Programs

We examined three different aspects of the program when assessing how violence is portrayed on television (see Table 3). First, we identify each *violent incident*, or interaction between a perpetrator and a victim. Second, we analyzed each *violent scene*, or instance of ongoing, uninterrupted violence. A violent scene, such as a bar fight, often contains several violent incidents between different types of characters. Finally, we analyzed the entire *violent program*. Some contextual features of violence reflect what happens between characters at the most micro-level or portion of the plot, which we label the violent incident. Other contextual features require that we consider larger chunks of content such as an entire violent scene or even the whole program. For example, the full program must be evaluated to determine if there is an overall theme of anti-violence in a show. By analyzing violence at all three of these levels — the incident, the scene, and the overall program — we provide rich information about the meaning of violence in television programming.

TABLE 3
Levels of Program Analysis



Coding and Reliability

Many precautions were taken to ensure that a consistent standard of judgment was used to evaluate the television programming in the sample. An elaborate codebook was developed to provide detailed and precise definitions of terms and rules of judgment for coders to follow. We trained more than 50 undergraduate research assistants each year to become thoroughly adept at applying the rules laid out in the codebook. The research assistants received 40 hours of classroom training and 20 hours of laboratory practice in making coding judgments prior to beginning coding programs for this study.

Coders worked individually in quiet labs as they assessed programs for violence. Every two weeks, each coder was tested to make sure the same rules and definitions were used across individuals. Agreement or reliability among the coders was consistently high throughout the coding process, underscoring the scientific rigor of the study.

Violence in Television “Reality” Programming

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

This section represents our efforts to study violence within “reality” programming, meaning television programming which represents, or purports to represent, the “real world.” As is true in the overall report from our Santa Barbara colleagues, we used the same procedures in 1996–97 as were used in the two prior years to be able to make direct comparisons among the three years in a typical week of television programming. Similar to our UCSB colleagues, we describe the amount and nature of violent reality programming overall, and variations in those presentations by program sub-genre, channel type and time of day that programs appear. We offer one mode of analysis different from the overall measures in the Santa Barbara report. We add the category of “Talk About Violence” in reality programming, or discussions of violence and its consequences *absent* visual depictions of violence.

Definition of Violence

The definition of violence we use is the same as for all other programming. In addition, we created a category called *Talk About Violence*, which is defined as *the verbal recounting of threats, acts and/or harmful consequences by a person or person-like character appearing on screen or heard from off-screen. Verbal abuse per se is not coded as Talk About Violence*, and Talk About Violence is considered a secondary category: if a sequence contains both Visual Violence and Talk About Violence, it is coded as violence as defined on page 19.

In our analyses, violence is generally coded at the same “levels of analysis” as in the UCSB report, with two exceptions: a majority of reality programs are *segmented*, meaning that a single program (e.g., *60 Minutes*) contains several narratively distinct stories that are coded essentially as separate programs. Further, we do not code specific incidents of violence as they are coded in the Santa Barbara analysis, but many of the variables in that analysis are coded at the sequence level of analysis in our report.

Sample

The reality program analysis is based on a subsample of programs selected from the full sample as described on pages 19–20. In all, 526 reality programs were analyzed in 1996–97, compared with 494 in the Year 2 sample, and 393 in 1994–95.

Reliability

Trained coders were monitored continuously for their ability to make reliable or replicable coding decisions. As noted in the full report, overall intercoder reliabilities were very high.

Ratings and Advisories

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, MADISON

The third year of research on ratings and advisories explored how often, at what times, and on what channels the different types of ratings and advisories appeared in the composite week of television. As in previous years, the analyses involved advisories, Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) ratings, and the content codes developed by the premium channels HBO, Showtime, and Cinemax. In addition, we conducted the first systematic analysis of a random sample of programming that included the new TV Parental Guidelines, which were implemented beginning on January 1, 1997.

The TV Parental Guidelines were designed by representatives of the television industry in response to the Telecommunications Act of 1996. That act mandated that within two years of passage, most new televisions be manufactured with a "V-chip," to permit parents to block their children's exposure to content they consider harmful. The V-chip works by reading a code imbedded in the transmission of the program. The Act included the provision that television programming that contains sexual or violent material be rated or labeled in a form that would be readable by the V-chip.

As originally designed, the TV Parental Guidelines were similar to the Motion Picture Association of America's (MPAA) decades-old movie rating system. Like the MPAA ratings, the TV Parental Guidelines gave general ratings that indicated the appropriateness of programs for different age groups. Programs not specifically designed for children were given one of four ratings: TVG (General Audience), TVPG (Parental Guidance Suggested), TV14 (Parents Strongly Cautioned), and TVMA (Mature Audiences Only). A separate, two-level ratings system was also included for programs that were considered to be designed for children: TVY (All Children) and TVY7 (Directed to Older Children). News and sports programming were considered exempt from the ratings.

As a result of public criticism, the television industry agreed to amend its rating system in July 1997. The revised rating system added content letters to denote the presence of coarse language, sex, violence, and sexual dialog in a program. The revised system began being implemented on October 1, 1997, on all major networks except NBC and Black Entertainment Television (BET).

Because sampling for the composite week of television began on October 5, 1996, and ended on June 6, 1997, part of the sample was selected before the original version of the TV Parental Guidelines was in use. The analyses of the TV Parental Guidelines were by necessity restricted to the programs sampled in the January-June period. The entire sample was collected before the revised system, adding content letters, went into effect. The analyses presented here, therefore, report how the original system was used during its first five months of implementation.

Designing Anti-Violence Messages for Television

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, CHAPEL HILL

The research conducted at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, has explored ways in which television can be used to help *reduce* violence among adolescents. In Year 1, we conducted seven studies to assess the effectiveness of anti-violence television programs and public service announcements (PSAs) among adolescent audiences. We found that almost all of the anti-violence messages we tested, especially those featuring celebrity spokespersons, were ineffective for addressing adolescent violence prevention. The PSAs that elicited the highest interest and arousal from different adolescent audiences were narrative in structure and featured at least one violent scene.

Content analysis of 100 PSAs in Year 2 revealed that anti-violence PSAs that feature violent scenes rarely depict any negative consequences to the perpetrator. We hypothesized that anti-violence PSAs would be more effective if they demonstrated negative consequences of violent behavior.

Depicting Consequences

Based on findings from Years 1 and 2, the violence prevention literature, and behavioral science theory, we created “prototype” anti-violence PSAs. The structure and plot for these PSAs were based on one PSA tested in Year 1 (*Ei Tu Brutus*) that was found to be “interesting” to adolescents but had a confusing ending. Each of the new PSAs we created features a different portrayal of consequences of violent behavior. In one PSA, the teenage male perpetrator of handgun violence is shot in the back and paralyzed when his gun goes off upon being dropped during a chase. In another PSA, the perpetrator is shot in the chest and killed when his dropped gun discharges. In the comparison condition PSA, the perpetrator suffers no physical consequence of his handgun use.

Evaluating PSA Effectiveness

We evaluated the prototype anti-violence PSAs using a three-group, randomized, controlled experiment. Middle school students (grades 6–8) from two after-school programs in suburban North Carolina participated in a “theater test” where anti-violence PSAs were embedded twice within 20 minutes of music videos and commercials. The ninety-two study participants ranged in age from 11 to 15 and were distributed relatively evenly across the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. There were more males (61%) than females and more African-American participants (84%) than whites (15%). Pretest measures included demographics, and experience with and exposure to violence; posttest measures included beliefs about handgun violence. An additional exposure to the three PSAs was followed with measures of perceptions and comparisons of the PSA content and messages. The participants were told that the study was about perceptions of music videos, and study measures were mixed with foils.

FINDINGS

Violence in Television Programming Overall

Violence in Television “Reality” Programming

Ratings and Advisories

ANALYSIS OF TV PARENTAL GUIDELINES

ANALYSIS OF ADVISORIES, MPAA RATINGS,
AND CONTENT CODES

**Evaluating Anti-Violence Messages
for Television**

FINDINGS

Violence in Television Programming Overall

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

- THE WAY THAT MOST TV VIOLENCE IS PORTRAYED CONTINUES TO POSE RISKS TO VIEWERS.

Much of TV violence is still glamorized. Good characters are frequently the perpetrators of violence, and rarely do they show remorse or experience negative repercussions for violence. *Across the three years of this study, nearly 40% of the violent incidents on television are initiated by characters who possess qualities that make them attractive role models* (See Table 4). Viewers of all ages are more likely to emulate and learn from characters who are perceived as attractive.

Another aspect of glamorization is that physical aggression on television is often condoned. For example, *more than one third of violent programs feature “bad” characters who are never punished anywhere in the plot.* For the audience, violence that goes unpunished poses risk because it is more likely to be imitated or learned than violence which is condemned. However, for very young viewers, penalizing the bad character toward the end of the story may not be enough to lessen risk. Viewers below the age of 7 often lack the capability of linking these later consequences to the earlier antisocial behavior. Therefore, violence that goes unpunished in the short run poses serious risk to children under 7. *Fully 71% of violent scenes contain no remorse, criticism, or penalty for violence at the time that it occurs,* and this finding has been stable from 1994 to 1997.

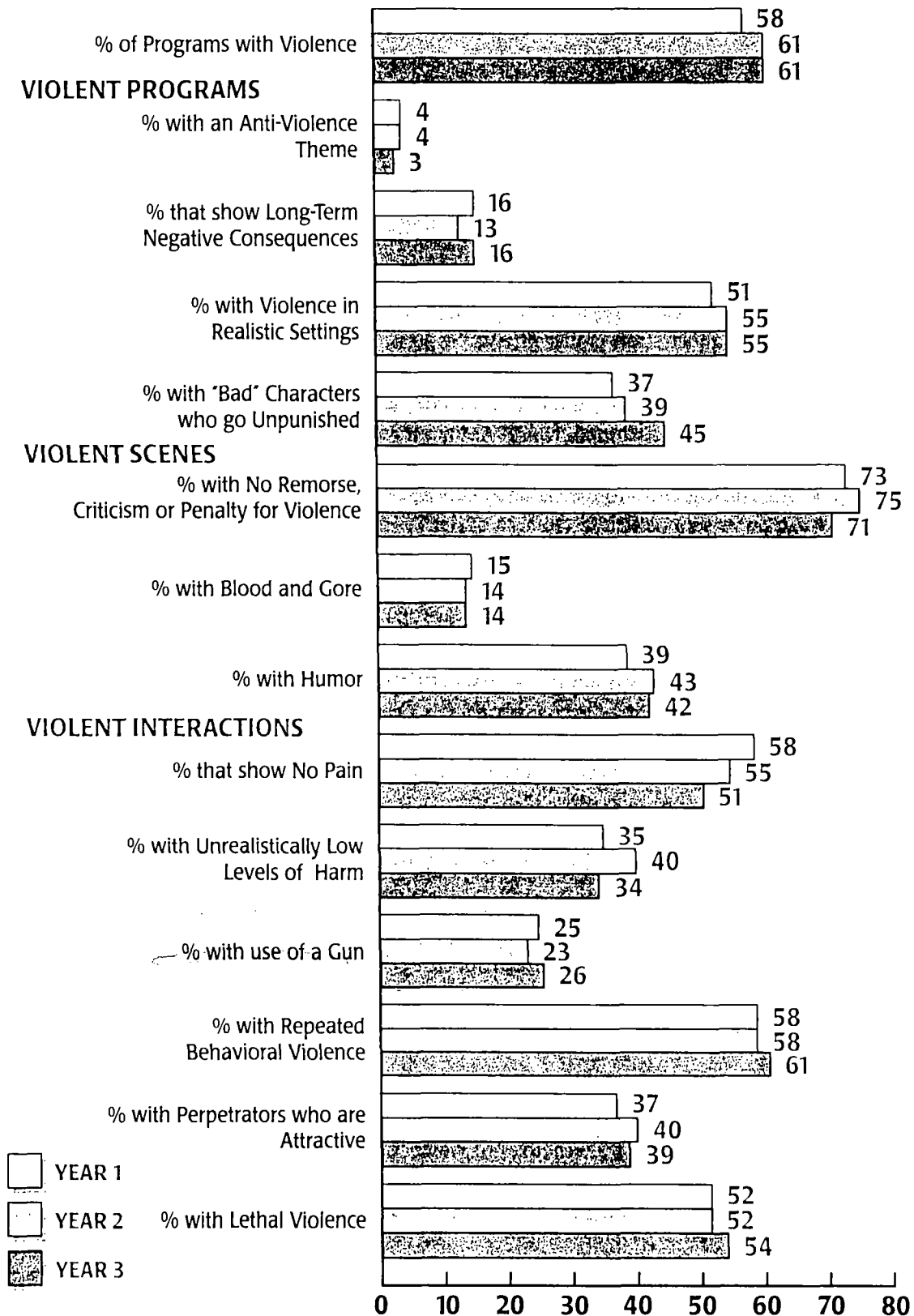
Most violence on television continues to be sanitized. Television often ignores or underestimates what happens to the victims of violence. *In fact, roughly half of the violent incidents on television show no physical harm or pain to the victim.* Again, this finding has been consistent over three years. Not only are short-term outcomes often missing, but so are long-term consequences. Over the three-year period, *less than 20% of the violent programs portray the long-term damage of violence to the victim’s family, friends, and community.* Research indicates that portraying the outcomes of violence, such as pain and suffering, can decrease the chances that viewers will learn aggression from media violence.

Much of the serious physical aggression on television is still trivialized. Violent behaviors on television often are quite serious in nature. Across the three-year study, *more than half of the violent incidents feature physical aggression that would be lethal or incapacitating if it were to occur in real life.* In spite of very serious forms of aggression, much of this violence is undermined by humor. *At least 40% of the violent scenes on television include humor.* Repeated exposure to serious violence that is made to seem trivial can contribute to both desensitization and learning among viewers:

Very few programs emphasize an anti-violence theme. A program can include violence in a way that is actually educational rather than harmful for the audience. For example, violence can be shown to have strong negative consequences to the victim, or alternatives to violence can be emphasized. *Less than 5% of violent programs feature an anti-violence message across the three years of the study.* Translating this figure, only 232 programs of the nearly 5,000 programs with violence analyzed since 1994 convey a strong prosocial message about violence.

TABLE 4

Overall Industry Averages: Three-Year Comparisons



EXAMPLE OF AN ANTI-VIOLENCE THEME IN A COMEDY SERIES

The following situation comedy tells the story of an 8-year-old boy who gets his remote controlled toy car stolen by the neighborhood bully. The bully threatens to beat up the little boy if he tells anyone about the theft. After grappling with the issue of what to do, the younger child decides to go back and fight the bully the very next day. Using some newly learned karate skills, he wins the battle and succeeds in regaining the car.

There is no father figure in the little boy's life, but the closest role model is a young man in his twenties who rents a room from the child's mother. The young man is an athlete, and obviously quite strong physically. When the youngster returns home after his fight, he is followed shortly thereafter by the bully's angry father. The father wants to pick a fight with someone, so he focuses his fury on the athletic young man.

The young man's response is calm and cool, but the bully's father keeps insisting on a physical confrontation and makes insulting comments in order to provoke a fight. Despite his rising anger, the young man refuses to use violence but instead he pummels a nearby punching bag so hard that it shreds apart. Sensing the physical mismatch, the bully's father backs off and both men agree that it would be stupid to fight. A poignant scene follows in which the young man gains the respect of others in the show for his nonviolent approach, and the little boy learns a valuable lesson about resolving conflict with words instead of fists. The show conveys the message that violence should be avoided and depicts a concrete example of a strong character who shows how to do it.

EXAMPLE OF AN ANTI-VIOLENCE THEME IN A MOVIE

This film begins with the rape of a 17-year-old girl by several members of a fraternity at a campus homecoming party. After the rape, which is the only violence in the film, the girl is left alone in a drunken state and dies from suffocation after vomiting. The rape occurs in the first few minutes of the story, with the rest of the film focusing on the remorse felt by two of the fraternity brothers who participated in the rape. As a result of growing guilt, one of the fraternity brothers drops out of school. By the end of the story, we learn that he commits suicide.

The other fraternity brother initially suffers psychological pain as he fears getting punished by the police. He tells his father, a lawyer, what happened so that his father can help him and his friends avoid arrest. We see the father suffer the pain and trauma of trying to protect his son while hoping that he will do the right thing. We also see the father struggle with the issue of telling his wife about the incident. When he finally tells her, we see the mother's shock and grief. The film ends with the college student realizing that he cannot continue to hide from his responsibility to confess to police. Accompanied by his family, he finally turns himself in.

The movie has a clear theme that violence can have extreme consequences for perpetrators, and that this harm radiates to others close to those individuals. Nowhere in this film is violence ever glamorized; to the contrary, it is consistently characterized as painful and repugnant.

- VIOLENCE CONTINUES TO PERVADE AMERICAN TELEVISION.

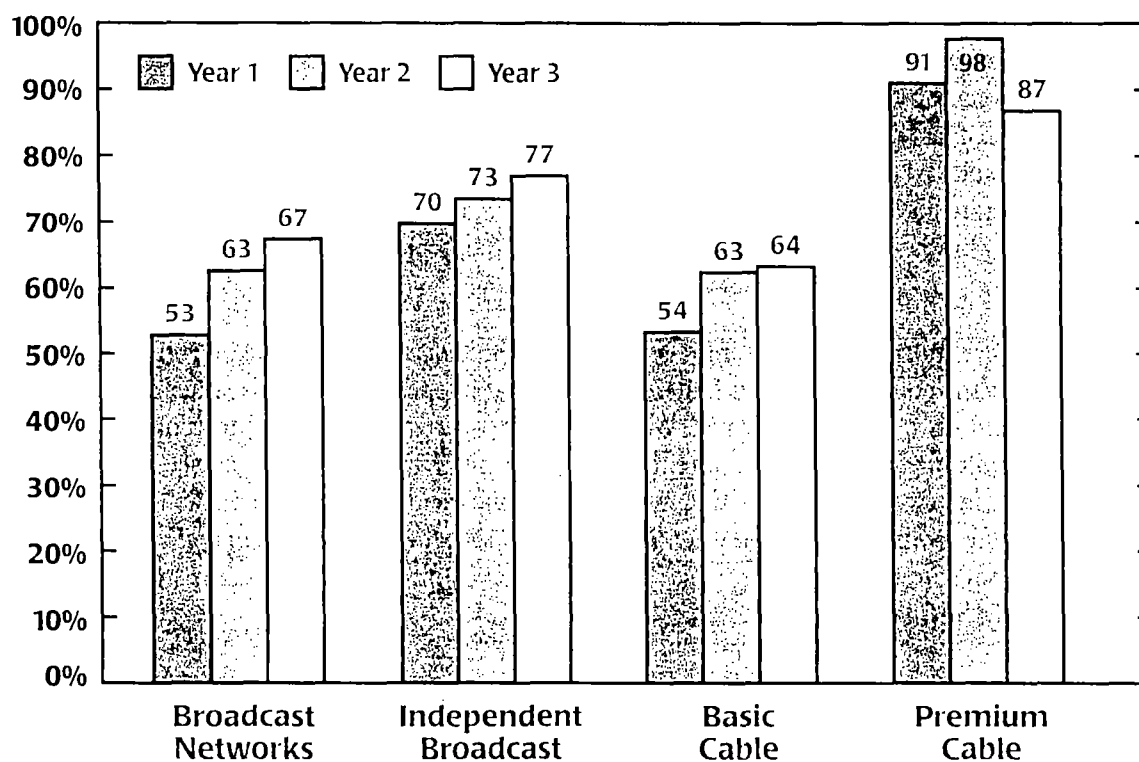
Across the three years of this study, a steady 60% of TV programs contain violence. The proportion of shows that contain violence has varied by only 3% during this study: 58% in 1994–95; 61% in 1995–96; and 61% in 1996–97. These figures are based on a 7-day, 6:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. composite week representative sample of roughly 2700 programs each year.

The prevalence of violence takes on special meaning when coupled with the harmful formulas outlined above. Not only do the majority of programs contain violence, but much of the violence is glamorized, sanitized, and trivialized.

In prime time, the proportion of programs with violence has increased on the broadcast networks and on basic cable. During the 3-hour per night prime-time period, the period that draws the most viewers, the percentage of programs that contain violence on the four broadcast networks has risen by 14% since 1994 (See Table 5). In the first year of the study, 53% of programs on prime-time network broadcast channels contained violence, and by the third year, 67% of the programs do. It is important to point out that many of the newest television series are found during prime time on these four channels. In addition, the proportion of programs that contain violence during prime-time on basic cable rose by 10%, from 54% in 1994 to 64% three years later. None of the other channel types shows any statistically meaningful change in the prevalence of violence during prime-time hours. It should be noted, however, that of all channel types, premium cable continues to feature the highest percentage of programs with violence during this time period.

TABLE 5

Prime-Time Programs with Violence, Three-Year Comparisons



Note: We excluded public broadcasting from the prime-time analysis because the number of public broadcasting programs containing violence in prime-time was too low for any reliable statistical comparisons to be made.

The typical violent program contains at least 6 violent incidents per hour. This means that on average, a viewer watching American television will be exposed to at least six different violent interactions between a perpetrator and a victim per hour. Furthermore, each of these violent interactions can entail multiple acts of aggression. In fact, it is rare for a perpetrator to hit, stab, or shoot someone only once. *More than 60% of the violent incidents involve repeated behavioral acts of aggression.*

- FOR CHILDREN UNDER 7, HIGH-RISK PORTRAYALS OF VIOLENCE THAT TEACH AGGRESSION ARE FOUND MOST OFTEN IN CARTOONS.

Certain depictions can be labeled “high risk” because several plot elements that encourage aggressive attitudes and behaviors are all featured in one scene. These high-risk portrayals involve: 1) a perpetrator who is an attractive role model, 2) violence that seems justified, 3) violence that goes unpunished (no remorse, criticism, or penalty), 4) minimal consequences to the victims, and 5) violence that seems realistic to the viewer.

For younger viewers, such harmful features of violence come together most often in cartoons. This type of programming is most likely to feature heroes engaging in justified violence that goes unpunished and results in minimal harm to the victim. To be sure, cartoons pose little risk for older, more mature viewers who routinely discount this content as unrealistic. Yet younger viewers, particularly those under the age of 7, have difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy on television. Thus, preschoolers are capable of imitating and learning from fantasy portrayals of violence in cartoons.

EXAMPLE OF A HIGH-RISK PORTRAYAL FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN

One example of a high-risk portrayal for younger children comes from an animated children’s series featuring three anthropomorphized cats who fight evil. In this particular episode, some bad guys, also anthropomorphized animals, are allegedly running a modeling school but in reality are scouting for young women to kidnap and train as soldiers. The high-risk portrayal features the hero cats using their ninja skills and sharp swords to battle the villains. After numerous sword slashes, several of the villains crumble to the ground but two of them escape from the scene.

This violent depiction has all the components that qualify it as high risk for encouraging aggressive attitudes and behaviors in young viewers. The perpetrators are primary characters who are readily identifiable and attractive in nature. The violence seems justified because the heroes have exposed the true purpose of the modeling school and are trying to save innocent young women from peril. Furthermore, there is no punishment or remorse for the violence. On the contrary, the heroes are exalted in individual spotlights just prior to the battle scene, each being introduced by name. Finally, the repeated and potentially serious aggression against the bad characters does not produce any lasting harm. In fact, several of the bad characters appear later in the program, apparently unscathed by the sword attack. Though this portrayal involves anthropomorphized creatures in a cartoon setting, it still qualifies as high risk for children under the age of 7 because such younger viewers have difficulty distinguishing fantasy from more realistic depictions.

The average American preschooler who watches mostly cartoons is exposed to over 500 high-risk portrayals of violence each year. Research indicates that the typical preschooler in the United States watches about 2–3 hours of television a day. Our study shows that there is nearly one high-risk portrayal of violence per hour in cartoons. Extrapolating from this, a preschooler who watches 2 hours of cartoons daily will see over 500 of these hazardous portrayals that encourage aggression each year. Table 6 shows the distribution of high-risk portrayals among television genres.

This statistic reflects only a portion of the actual violence such a young child sees. In fact, a preschooler who watches about 2 hours of cartoons a day is exposed to nearly 10,000 violent incidents each year. Many of these incidents contain elements of risk, but at least 500 of them feature a *potent set of contextual features* making them high risk for teaching aggressive attitudes and behaviors. We ask readers to consider the following: even *one* televised depiction that encouraged a child to drink poison or play with fire undoubtedly would come under great public attack. We should be just as critical of recurrent portrayals of violence that encourage young children to think of physical aggression as an acceptable and innocuous way to solve problems.

TABLE 6

Young Children: High-Risk Patterns for Learning Aggression by Genre and Time

TIME OF DAY	DRAMA	COMEDY	CHILDREN'S	MOVIES	MUSIC VIDEOS	REALITY-BASED
Before School (6:00a.m.–9:00a.m.)						
During School (9:00a.m.–3:00p.m.)						
After School (3:00p.m.–6:00p.m.)						
Early Evening (6:00p.m.–8:00p.m.)						
Prime Time (8:00p.m.–11:00p.m.)						

	No High-Risk Incidents
	Minimal # of High-Risk Incidents
	Moderate # of High-Risk Incidents
	Substantial # of High-Risk Incidents

Violence in Television "Reality" Programming

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, AUSTIN

We now have three consistent years of results to support several key findings regarding the presentation of violence in television "reality" programming, nonfictional programming in which the portrayal is presumed to present current or historical events or circumstances, in productions presenting themselves as being realistic accounts.

- WHILE REALITY PROGRAMMING IS PREDOMINANTLY A FEATURE OF DAYTIME TELEVISION, VIOLENT REALITY PROGRAMMING IS CONCENTRATED IN THE EVENING.

A majority of reality programming occurs during daytime hours, but most violent reality programming occurs in the evening. Early evening reality programming (6–8 p.m.) is as likely, and data from Years 2 and 3 suggest perhaps even more likely, to feature visual violence as later programming. In major part, the prevalence of violent reality programming in evening hours is a function of reality genre: Police and Tabloid News programming is concentrated in the evening, while other reality genres are spread across the broadcast day. A third-year rise in the level of visual violence in the late afternoon (3–6 p.m.) may be a cause for concern.

- REALITY PROGRAMMING IS LESS VIOLENT THAN TELEVISION PROGRAMMING OVERALL.

Reality shows are less likely to include any violence than other genres of television programming. In 1996–1997, 39.2 percent of reality programs contained at least one visually violent instance, compared with 61 percent of programming overall. These proportions are virtually the same as in the first year of the study. As in the first year, most reality programs are concentrated on network and basic cable stations, although independent stations are heavy programmers of a sub-genre, Talk shows.

- THERE IS NO CHANGE IN THE OVERALL LEVEL OF VIOLENCE IN REALITY PROGRAMMING ACROSS THE THREE SEASONS.

In the 1996–1997 season, 39 percent of reality programs contain visually depicted violence compared with 37 percent in Year 2 and 39 percent in Year 1.

- THE PREVALENCE OF "TALK ABOUT VIOLENCE" IN REALITY PROGRAMMING HAS DECLINED SLIGHTLY BUT CONSISTENTLY ACROSS THE THREE YEARS.

Instances of discussion of violent acts without the presence of any visual display of violence are coded only for reality programs, a genre marked by reporting and other forms of talk rather than action. In 1994–1995, 18 percent of reality programs contained instances of "Talk About Violence" without any visual violence. In 1995–1996, 14 percent did, and in 1996–1997, 10 percent did. The overall ratio of sequences of visual violence to Talk About Violence has consistently been about two to one across all three years.

- THERE ARE STRIKING DIFFERENCES IN THE PRESENTATION OF VIOLENCE AMONG GENRES OF REALITY PROGRAMS. THESE DIFFERENCES ARE CONSISTENT ACROSS THE THREE YEARS.

In 1996–1997, *every* Police-reality program analyzed portrayed visual violence, as was also true in both prior years. Other genres high in the incidence of visual violence were the Tabloid News (79% in 1996–1997, 69% in 1995–96, 85% in 1994–1995) and Documentaries (66% in Year 3, 53% in Year 2, 73% in Year 1).

Entertainment News and Review programs, News and Public Affairs shows, and Entertainment Non-news programs are close to the average of 39 percent of programs with some visual violence, and Talk Shows are well below average (16% in Year 3, 15% in both prior years). Talk shows are most likely to present Talk About Violence (21% in 1996–1997, 29% in 1995–1996, 30% in 1994–1995). The only reality genre to show consistent changes in the overall level of violence over the study was Entertainment News and Review programs, in which the prevalence of visual violence increased from 21 percent of programs in the genre in Year 1, to 31 percent in Year 2, to 42 percent in Year 3.

- THERE HAS BEEN A FURTHER INCREASE IN THE AMOUNT OF REALITY PROGRAMMING IN YEAR 3.

The 526 reality programs in the 1996–1997 sample represent a six percent increase from 1995–1996 (494 programs), and a 34 percent increase from the first year (393 programs in 1994–1995). This is the case even though the sample design remains the same across the two years — a representative week of programs on 23 channels, 17 hours per day.

TABLE 7

Profile of Reality Program Violence Across Genres, Year 3

	Overall %	Police Shows	Ent'ment Non-News	Ent'ment News and Review	Documentary	News and Public Affairs	Tabloid News	Talk Shows
% of programs with some visual violence	39%	100	33	42	66	29	79	16
% of programs with some talk about violence	10%	0	7	1	8	13	7	21
Among Programs that contain violence								
Violence in visual sequences: % of sequences...								
Depicting acts	67%	61	75	67	65	59	69	76
Depicting credible threat	36%	56	38	47	30	39	10	26
Showing no harm and pain	44%	32	41	70	34	65	36	64
In which violence occurs off screen	9%	6	12	7	7	8	11	12
In which a gun is used	43%	72	39	50	34	52	27	26
In which perpetrators are rewarded	11%	15	17	8	13	14	4	0
In which perpetrators are punished	35%	55	22	24	49	30	37	48
In which violence is extremely intense	19%	33	22	9	19	13	33	10
In which violence is very graphic	9%	6	11	1	12	12	10	10
Violence in "talk about violence" sequences: % of sequences...								
Discussing acts	78%	72	66	80	67	84	77	88
Discussing credible threat	22%	30	38	20	24	14	19	16
Involving no harm and pain	29%	21	54	77	20	39	24	21
In which a gun is used	26%	49	25	53	30	15	34	16
In which perpetrators are rewarded	14%	17	15	14	20	17	5	9
In which perpetrators are punished	46%	53	29	38	53	41	56	51
In which talk is graphic, concrete	55%	56	71	40	50	44	56	58
Involves first person testimony	34%	20	31	20	18	28	28	53
Involves second person testimony	29%	27	23	40	46	35	12	23
Involves third person testimony	52%	63	50	60	53	48	76	45

Ratings and Advisories

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, MADISON

Analysis of TV Parental Guidelines

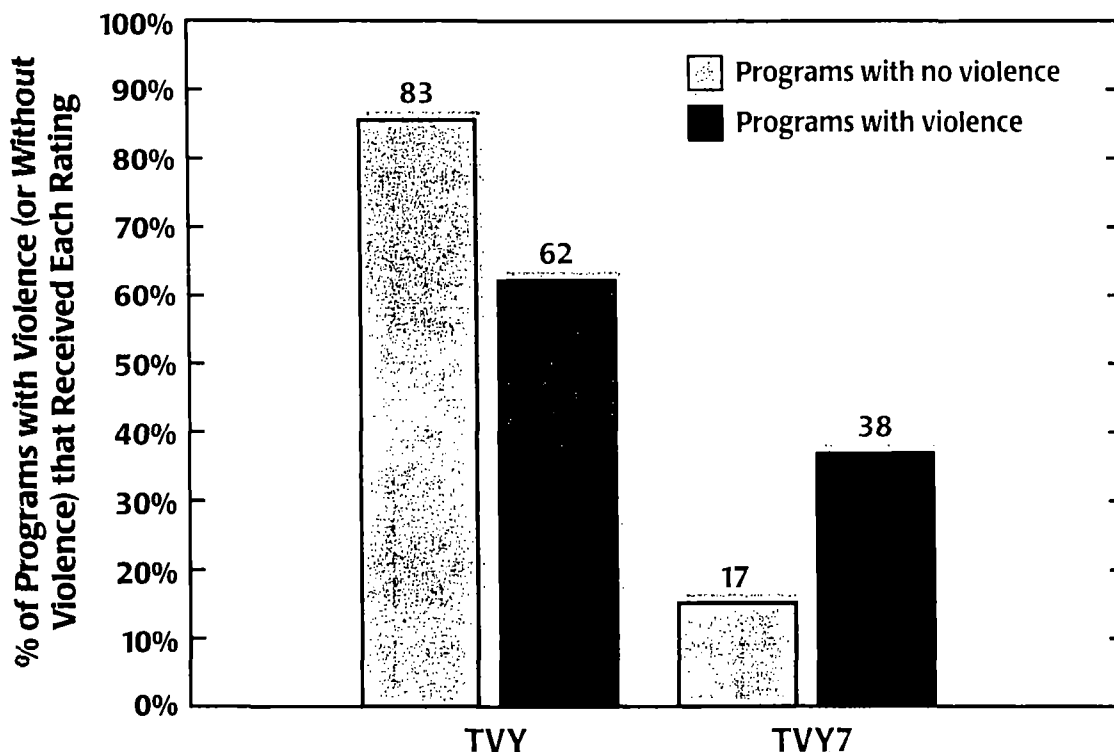
The TV Parental Guidelines were implemented beginning January 1, 1997. Therefore, the analyses presented here are limited to the National Television Violence Study sampling period from January 1 through June 6, 1997. Because news and sports programs were considered exempt from ratings, the findings reported here exclude those types of programs from the analysis.

- FOR MOST PROGRAMS, AGE-BASED RATINGS WITHOUT CONTENT DESCRIPTORS HAVE NO RELATION TO THE PRESENCE OF VIOLENCE.

Our analyses compared the distribution of ratings for programs that contain violence to the ratings of programs without violence. Although the ratings of children's programs distinguish between violent and non-violent programs, the ratings of general audience programs do not. Specifically, among programs designated as TVY (All Children) or TVY7 (Directed to Older Children), a higher proportion of violent than nonviolent programs are rated TVY7. In contrast, among programs not specifically designated for children, the distribution of ratings (TVG, TVPG, TV14, and TVMA) is virtually identical for programs with and without violence. These findings are displayed in Tables 8 and 9.

TABLE 8

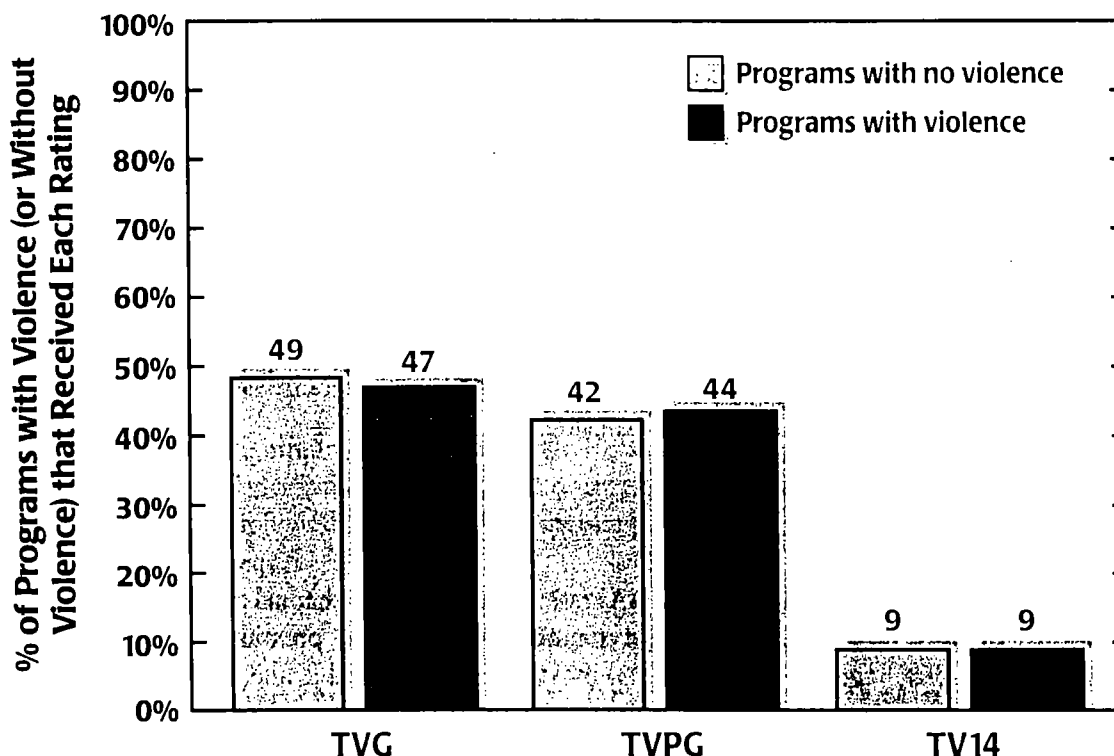
Ratings and the Presence of Violence in Children's Programs*



*341 children's programs were rated.

TABLE 9

Ratings and the Presence of Violence in General-Audience Programs*



*Of the 677 general audience programs that received ratings, only 1 was rated TVMA.

- THE ON-SCREEN PRESENTATION OF A PROGRAM'S RATING IS RARELY ACCOMPANIED BY A VOICE-OVER ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE RATING.

Of the 1018 programs in the composite week that received TV Parental Guidelines, almost all are presented in written form only. Only 2% of the ratings can be heard as well as seen.

- ACROSS ALL NETWORKS, TVG AND TVPG ARE THE MOST FREQUENTLY USED RATINGS.

TVG was used on 32% of rated programs, with TVPG a close second at 29%. TVY was used on 23% of rated programs, and 11% of rated programs were dubbed TVY7. TV14 was used 6% of the time. The most restrictive rating, TVMA (Mature Audience Only), was used only once in the composite week. Channels varied greatly, however, in their distribution of ratings across programs.

- OVERALL, THE TV INDUSTRY WAS QUICK TO APPLY THE TV PARENTAL GUIDELINES TO PROGRAMS, ALTHOUGH INDIVIDUAL CHANNELS VARIED GREATLY IN THEIR IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SYSTEM.

By March 1997, the Guidelines were being used on about two-thirds of all television programs. The majority of broadcast network programs and almost all programs on children's channels were rated. In addition, the majority of the programs on five out of six of the general entertainment cable channels were rated, the exception being American Movie Classics (AMC). The music channels and the independent broadcast chan-

nels used the ratings at somewhat lower rates. The Guidelines were used on only one-fourth of eligible premium channel programs. However, almost all of the programs on premium channels received some form of rating or advisory. Only two channels did not use the new ratings system at all during the period studied, Black Entertainment Television (BET) and the PBS affiliate station (KCET). PBS adopted the rating system once the content descriptors were added.

Analysis of Advisories, MPAA Ratings, and Content Codes

- THE USE OF ADVISORIES DID NOT CHANGE MUCH OVER THE THREE-YEAR CONTENT ANALYSIS PERIOD.

Advisories continued to be used on a very small proportion of programs (5% of the programs in the Year 3 sample, and 7% of programs containing violence). Advisories were rarely informative about the content to be expected. Year 3 showed the emergence of advisories that recommend programs (8% of the advisories) as distinguished from those that urge caution about exposure.

- THE USE OF MPAA RATINGS AND PREMIUM CHANNEL CONTENT CODES REMAINED RELATIVELY CONSTANT OVER THE THREE YEARS OF THE STUDY.

Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) ratings and premium channel content labels were used heavily and almost exclusively by the three premium channels. Again in Year 3, premium channels were showing predominantly PG (36%) and PG-13 rated (32%) movies, with 14% rated R, and very few rated G (fewer than 1%). A new analysis in Year 3 showed that movies that were rated G or R when originally released are more frequent on nonpremium channels, however. Again in Year 3, AL: Adult Language (68% of premium channel movies) and AC: Adult Content (50%) were the most frequently used content codes.

- THE USE OF ADVISORIES AND MORE RESTRICTIVE RATINGS OCCURS WITH INCREASING FREQUENCY AS THE DAY WEARS ON.

In general, advisories, restrictive ratings, and labels indicating more controversial content increase over the course of the day, with the greatest occurrence of such ratings and advisories during prime time.

Evaluating Anti-Violence Messages for Television

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, CHAPEL HILL

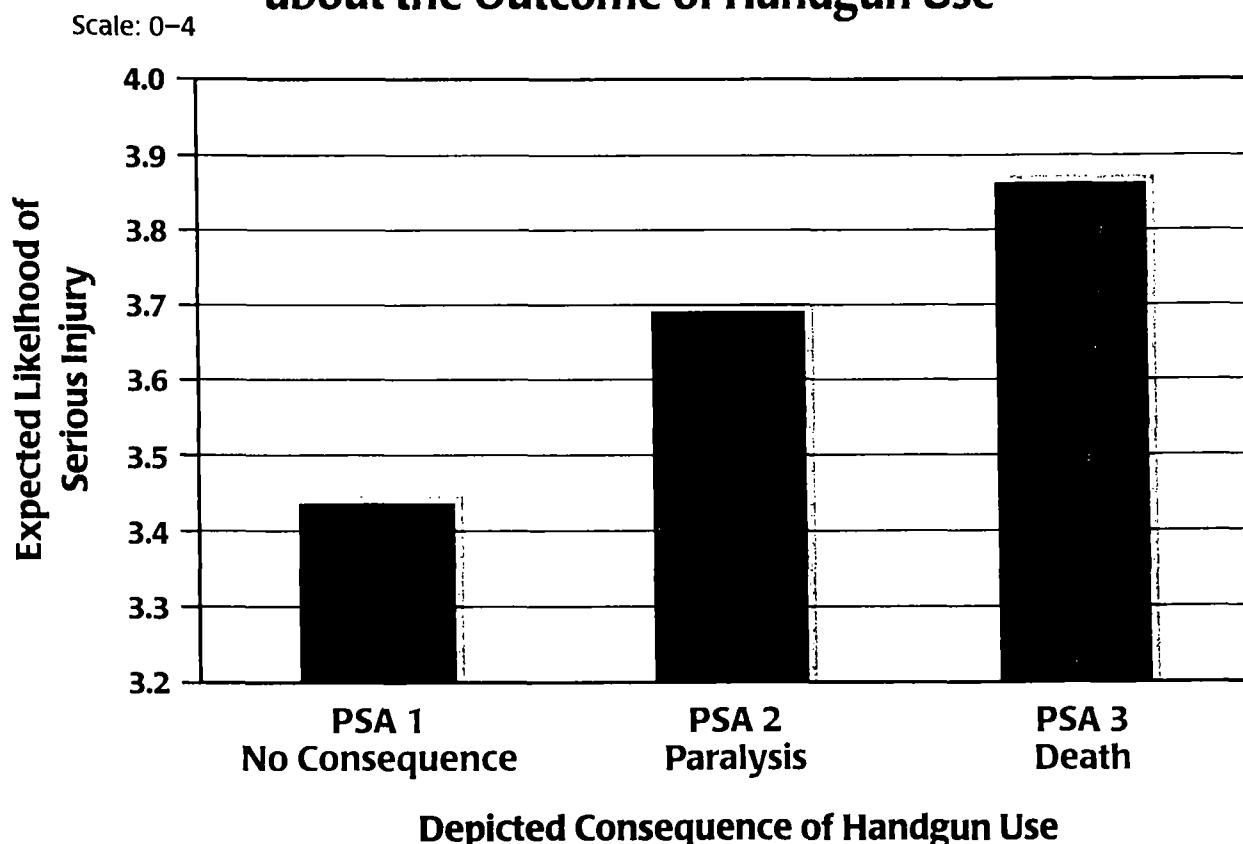
The analysis of the effectiveness of public service announcements (PSAs) involved ninety-two study participants who ranged in age from 11 to 15 and were distributed relatively evenly across the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. Each of the participants viewed three PSAs: one in which a teenage male perpetrator of handgun violence is shot in the back and paralyzed; another in which the perpetrator is shot in the chest and killed; and a third in which the perpetrator suffers no physical consequence of his handgun use. Several significant findings were observed:

- DEPICTING NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENT BEHAVIOR IN ANTI-VIOLENCE PSAS IS MORE EFFECTIVE AT INFLUENCING ADOLESCENTS' BELIEFS ABOUT VIOLENCE THAN SHOWING NO CONSEQUENCES.

The statistically significant findings (see Table 10) suggest that the PSA that showed death as a consequence of handgun violence is most effective at increasing adolescents' expectations that injury will occur as a result of handgun use, followed by the PSA that showed paralysis as a consequence, which is more effective than observing no consequence.

TABLE 10

Effects of PSAs on Adolescents' Beliefs about the Outcome of Handgun Use



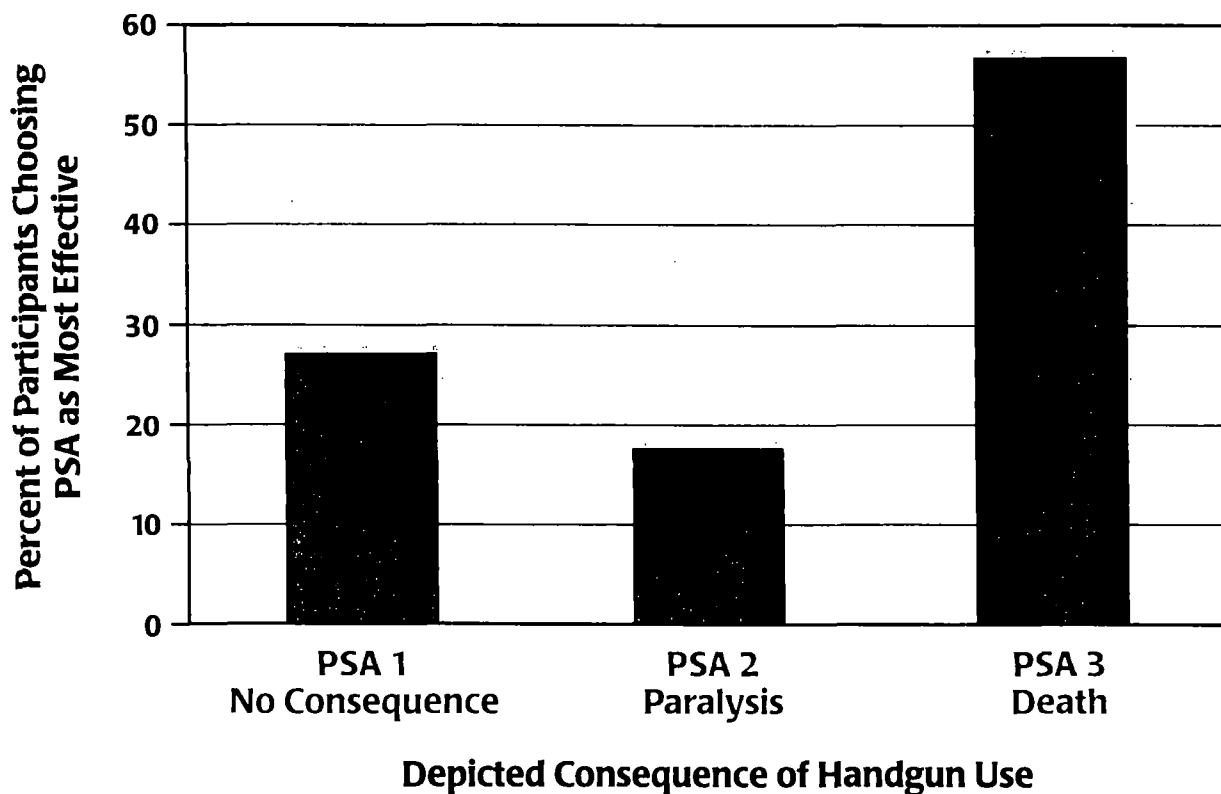
Although we conclude that depicting death — when compared to no consequence — as a result of handgun violence, can be effective at influencing adolescents' expectations about the outcome of handgun violence we are reluctant to dismiss paralysis as a potentially effective consequence. The relatively weaker effect of paralysis may be due to its very brief depiction in the PSA (less than 3 seconds). When portraying paralysis, however, one should consider the possible stigmatizing effect to those already living with such disabilities.

- ADOLESCENTS KNOW THE IMPORTANCE OF DEPICTING NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES.

The participants were also asked to select the *least* and *most* effective PSAs for teenagers like themselves. For *least* effective, nearly three quarters of the participants (73%) picked the no consequence PSA, 16% picked the PSA with death as the consequence, and 11% picked the PSA with paralysis. For *most* effective (see Table 11), more than half of the participants (56%) selected the PSA with death as the consequence, one quarter (26%) selected the no-consequence PSA, and 18% selected the paralysis PSA.

TABLE 11

Most Effective PSA According to Adolescent Participants



RECOMMENDATIONS

For the Television Industry

ABOUT PROGRAMMING CONTENT

ABOUT RATINGS AND ADVISORIES

ABOUT ANTI-VIOLENCE MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

For Policymakers

For Parents

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are three distinct audiences for this report: the television industry, policymakers, and parents. This section reviews the implications of the study's findings over the entire three-year period of the project for each of these audiences, and offers recommendations that are appropriate in light of the data. The recommendations represent the collective views of the researchers at the four university sites.

For the Television Industry

Recommendations About Programming Content

Each of the recommendations indicated below holds the potential to substantially reduce the risk of harm to America's youth that is posed by their cumulative exposure to thousands of violent acts across their formative years.

- * PROGRAM PRODUCERS SHOULD MAKE EFFORTS TO SHOW:
 - MORE FREQUENT REMORSE, CRITICISM OR PENALTY ASSOCIATED WITH VIOLENT ACTS.
 - MORE OF THE SERIOUS NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE.
 - LESS JUSTIFICATION FOR VIOLENT ACTS.

The study emphasizes the fact that not all violence is the same, that some portrayals pose more risk to the audience than others. Conveying the message that violence gets punished, that it is not always justified, that there are alternatives to aggression, and that violence causes serious consequences (e.g., pain and suffering) for the victims are all ways to reduce the risk of a negative influence on viewers when violence is included in a story.

Unfortunately, the study's findings indicate that most of the violence on television is formulaic, and the most common patterns include violence shown without punishment and without any emphasis on the suffering of victims. This includes aggression that is shown as justified because it is practiced by "good guys" who are bringing the "bad guys" to justice. It is important to note that this formula, while commonly accepted, contributes to the risk of children learning aggressive attitudes and behaviors from television.

- * WHEN VIOLENCE IS PRESENTED, CONSIDER GREATER EMPHASIS ON A STRONG ANTI-VIOLENCE THEME.

Since the outset of the NTVS project, we have encouraged the television industry to create more programs that: (1) present alternatives to violent actions throughout the program; (2) show main characters repeatedly discussing the negative consequences of violence; (3) emphasize the physical pain and emotional suffering that results from violence; and (4) show that punishments for violence clearly and consistently outweigh rewards. Whenever a program emphasizes one of these elements, it is classified by the study as containing an anti-violence theme.

Our data show that the use of an anti-violence theme on television continues to be rare. It characterizes only between 3–4% of all violent programs since 1994. This is one of the most disappointing findings of the study because this statistic is arguably the best indicator of a responsible, prosocial approach to depicting violence.

Some organized efforts to promote these approaches would seem to be required to accomplish any change. One way to stimulate such efforts might be an annual award given for the creative portrayal of an anti-violence theme. Workshops for writers, directors and producers to sensitize them to these issues are another possibility.

- * PRODUCE MORE PROGRAMS THAT AVOID VIOLENCE; IF A PROGRAM DOES CONTAIN VIOLENCE, KEEP THE NUMBER OF VIOLENT INCIDENTS LOW.

The primary aim of this study is to focus attention on the way that violence is portrayed and not simply its frequency. However, the prevalence of violence on television is, by itself, an important factor associated with the risks of harm outlined in this report. The need for a reduction is underscored by the fact that the average American child watches 2–3 hours of TV a day and thus is at risk for cumulative exposure to thousands of such portrayals during her or his childhood. There has been no reduction since 1994 in the percentage of programs that contain violence, or in the percentage of programs that contain nine or more violent interactions.

We do not advocate that all violence be eliminated from television, nor do we profess to know exactly how much is “too much.” But we do know that the overall amount of violence on American television has not changed appreciably since this study began to measure it during the 1994–95 television season. It is still the case that more than half the programs in a representative composite week contain some violence. Furthermore, most programs that contain violence feature numerous violent incidents rather than just an isolated act. Our recommendation is to begin efforts to cut back.

- * REDUCE THE NUMBER OF HIGH-RISK PORTRAYALS OF VIOLENCE IN CHILDREN’S CARTOON PROGRAMS.

We have identified the kinds of portrayals that pose the greatest degree of risk for the learning of aggression among young viewers. Some might assume these would be the most explicit or graphic examples of violence on television, but that is not the case. Portrayals with the greatest risk of increasing young children’s aggressive behavior are those that feature *an attractive perpetrator engaging in justified violence that goes unpunished and shows minimal consequences*. Our data indicate that a surprisingly large proportion of such portrayals are found in children’s programming, particularly in certain types of cartoons. The frequent use of this formula in children’s shows is a problem in and of itself, and one that the industry should address by actively avoiding such depictions.

- * IN REALITY PROGRAMS, PRODUCERS AND PROGRAMMERS SHOULD PRESENT MORE ALTERNATIVES TO VIOLENCE AND STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH ITS EFFECTS.

Only 6% of reality programs and segments that contain violence in the Year 3 sample suggest alternatives to violence or ways of coping with its aftermath, a percentage relatively unchanged from the first two years of the study. Program creators, when dealing with violence as a topic, should provide more information about avoiding violence, suggest alternatives to violent means, and/or present ways of coping with the aftermath of violence. For example, programs that deal with violence could provide more information about relevant hotlines and helplines.

- * ENTERTAINMENT REALITY PROGRAMS WITH SUBSTANTIAL VIOLENT CONTENT SHOULD BE SCHEDULED LATER IN THE EVENING.

In all three years studied in this report, the prevalence of violence in reality programming was greatest in evening programming. In Year 3, violence increased in the 3–6 p.m. block, when substantial numbers of young

people are watching. Violent reality programs, especially police programs and kindred non-news entertainment reality shows, should be scheduled in later-evening time blocks. Where network-affiliated stations are unable to move programs into late prime time, they should consider moving such fare to late-night time blocks. Our 1997-1998 reality program findings indicate that visual violence has declined in late prime time and increased in the late afternoon. We again strenuously urge the nation's programmers to put their most violent fare later in the evening.

Recommendations About Ratings and Advisories

- * CONSIDER FURTHER REVISION OF THE TV PARENTAL GUIDELINES TO AVOID POTENTIAL "FORBIDDEN FRUIT" EFFECTS.

The Year 1 and Year 2 research highlighted a drawback of age-based rating systems that urge parents to control their children's access to programs: many children are drawn to programs designated as appropriate for older children. Our research also showed that content labels that indicate the level of violence in a program but do not urge restrictions do not exert such a "forbidden fruit" effect. Because of this unintended side-effect of age-based ratings, and the superiority of alternatives, the initial choice of age-based ratings was unfortunate. Although the addition of content letters in the amended system represents a step in the right direction in terms of informativeness, there is no evidence to date regarding the attractiveness of ratings that indicate both content and age. All those concerned with television ratings should be on the alert for the potential enticement effect, and modifications of the system should be contemplated that will reduce such effects while enhancing the informativeness of the ratings.

- * NBC AND BET SHOULD BE ENCOURAGED TO ADOPT THE AMENDED RATING SYSTEM, WHICH INDICATES THE CONTENT OF PROGRAMS.

Because Year 3 research shows that ratings of TVG, TVPG, and TV14 by themselves do not differentiate between programs that contain violence and those that do not, the addition of content markers to indicate the reasons for a program's rating should be helpful to parents in determining program content. Such content markers may be the only direct indication of the presence of violence in a program. In this way, the amended rating system is superior to the original one, and all channels should be encouraged to adopt it. Since the NTVS content analyses reveal that most violence on television is presented in ways that are harmful, especially to children, every effort should be made to provide parents with advance warning about the presence of violence in television programming.

- * ENSURE THAT ANY CHILDREN'S PROGRAMS THAT PRESENT HIGH-RISK PORTRAYALS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN ARE RATED IN A WAY THAT CLEARLY WARNS PARENTS.

Because many children's shows contain portrayals that pose a high risk for the learning of aggression, it is important that parents be properly warned about these programs. Under the television industry's current rating system, children's shows can receive a designation of TVY7 (Directed to Older Children), as distinct from TVY (All Children), as well as the content warning label "FV" for more intense "fantasy" violence. We recommend that children's programs that contain any high-risk portrayals be rated in the TVY7 category with an FV descriptor.

- * PRESENT RATINGS ORALLY AS WELL AS VISUALLY.

Although we found that the TV Parental Guidelines have been widely implemented, it is unfortunate that most of the ratings are being communicated visually only, without accompanying sound. The addition of

sound would make these guidelines much more accessible and much more likely to be noticed. The presence of a voice-over announcement would no doubt be appreciated by parents, who may not always be watching television with their children, but who may be nearby and might hear and respond to an oral rating message.

Recommendations About Anti-Violence Media Campaigns

The following recommendations are intended to assist the television industry and violence prevention organizations in creating more effective anti-violence public service announcements.

- * ANTI-VIOLENCE PSAs SHOULD BE TARGETED TO SPECIFIC ADOLESCENT AUDIENCES, IN TERMS OF THEIR EXPERIENCE WITH, AND EXPOSURE TO, FIGHTING AND WEAPONS. PSA CREATORS SHOULD CONSIDER TARGETING NON-ADOLESCENT AUDIENCES AS WELL.

Since adolescence are not a homogeneous audience with respect to violent beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, audience segments should be considered when developing and pretesting anti-violence mass media campaigns and when selecting delivery channels. Our Year 2 analysis revealed seven mutually exclusive segments: Aggressors (who have started fights and carried weapons), Combatants (who have started fights), Defenders (who have been in fights and carried weapons), Fist Fighters (who have been in fights), Carriers (who have carried weapons), Observers (who have seen fights with weapons), and Avoiders (who have never seen fights). Other variables that may be meaningful for audience segmentation include gender, racial or ethnic group, and geographic location.

In addition, audiences other than adolescents can be targeted to reduce interpersonal violence among adolescents. For example, parents can be targeted with messages to reduce corporal punishment or enhance parenting skills. Families and communities can be targeted with messages promoting cohesion. Citizens can be targeted with messages to encourage support of policies that restrict handgun access to adolescents and that promote economic opportunities for low-income communities. Each of these distinct audiences can have a strong effect on reducing interpersonal violence among adolescents and in society as a whole.

- * CREATE MORE ANTI-VIOLENCE PSAs WITH NARRATIVE — AS OPPOSED TO CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENT — FORMATS.

In Year 1, we found that celebrity endorsement PSAs scored lower on interest and memory measures among adolescents than PSAs with a narrative format. In Year 2, we found that half of all existing anti-violence PSAs featured a celebrity endorsement. Although they may be easier and less expensive to produce, celebrity endorsement PSAs should only be used when the goal is to raise awareness, not to change knowledge, attitudes or behavior. Narrative PSAs that feature a dramatic scene being modeled will be more effective for campaigns that seek to change individual behaviors. If celebrities are to be used at all, spokespeople must be selected who are credible and likeable to the targeted audience segment. In addition, public service announcements with celebrity actors would be more effective when the actor performs a dramatic scene than when he or she sits on a stool and reads a cue card.

- * ANTI-VIOLENCE PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS THAT MODEL VIOLENT SCENES SHOULD DEPICT PUNISHMENTS AND NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF THE VIOLENT BEHAVIOR.

Our findings show that many existing anti-violence PSAs contain messages that are unclear and confusing to adolescents. Therefore, effective anti-violence PSAs need to present their messages in a clear way that is accessible and understandable to the target audience. Narrative messages are likely to be more effective than those which are merely verbal or written.

NTVS research demonstrates that PSAs that depict the negative consequences of handgun use can lead to a greater awareness of the negative consequences of handgun use among adolescents than PSAs that depict no such consequence. Therefore, anti-violence PSAs that model violent scenes should depict appropriate consequences. The depicted consequence can be *physical*, as in the Year 3 prototype PSAs, *emotional*, such as depictions of suffering among victims or their families, *criminal*, such as depictions of perpetrators being arrested and jailed, or *social*, such as depictions of loss of social capital or respect from peers after acting violently.

Our research reveals that PSAs that depict death as an immediate physical consequence of handgun violence may have a greater impact for adolescent audiences than PSAs that depict paralysis. Portraying pain, suffering, and/or the physical limitations of injuries may make portraying consequences such as paralysis more effective among adolescents. PSA developers, however, should be sensitive to the potential stigma caused by portraying people with disabilities in a negative light.

- * KEEP CORPORATE LOGOS AND TAG LENGTH TO A MINIMUM.

Our research shows that most existing anti-violence PSAs have tags or corporate logos that identify the producing television network. These tags often fill the entire screen, and appear for an average of 18% of the total PSA time. Organizations and networks that produce anti-violence PSAs should refrain from including excessively long tags that detract from or shorten the message.

Recommendations For Policymakers

This study was stimulated in large part because of increasing public concern about violence on television. Numerous regulatory alternatives have been proposed, and some action has been taken, such as the approval of legislation that led to the V-chip and a TV industry rating system. This study does not argue for or against any specific policy proposal to address the issue. Rather, it provides information to help policymakers better understand the problems associated with violence on television. It also establishes a benchmark for comparisons over time in the levels of televised violence. Our recommendations to policymakers are as follows:

* CONTINUE TO MONITOR THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF VIOLENCE ON TELEVISION.

Evidence of the harmful effects associated with televised violence was firmly established well before this study began. The unique contribution of the NTVS research is to apply that knowledge to track the presence of violence that poses a risk of harm.

Therefore, we urge policymakers to continue to monitor the nature and extent of violence on television. The importance of the issue warrants continued attention to help sensitize the television industry as well as to help alert and inform the public.

* RECOGNIZE THAT CONTEXT IS AN ESSENTIAL ASPECT OF TELEVISION VIOLENCE.

Treating all acts of violence as if they are the same disregards a rich body of scientific knowledge about media effects. An appreciation of key contextual factors is crucial for understanding the impact of televised violence on the audience.

Consider the following example. Policy-makers, as well as television critics and others, often voice concern about “graphic” or “explicit” violence. Indeed, the new TV industry rating system reserves its most restrictive category (TV-MA) solely for graphic violence. At one level, this situation reflects a sensitivity to context; that is, it recognizes that graphic violence ought to be treated differently than other non-graphic portrayals. Yet because “graphic” or “explicit” violence is the *only* element that qualifies a portrayal for this most restrictive category, the special treatment accorded to graphic depictions may implicitly convey that other types of depictions are not as problematic for viewers. That is not necessarily true.

Our high-risk analysis demonstrates that portrayals that are not necessarily explicit but that present violence as attractive, rewarding, and painless pose a significant threat of increasing children’s aggressive behavior. From this perspective, such an array of context factors deserves to receive as much attention as that given to graphic portrayals. Unfortunately, this typically has not been the case. The lack of concern over such high-risk portrayals, we believe, results from inadequate attention to the scientific evidence regarding the influence of different context features associated with televised violence.

At the base of any policy initiative in this realm is the need to define violence and, assuming that not all violence is to be treated equally, to differentiate types of violent depictions that pose the greatest cause for concern. Accomplishing this task requires the careful consideration of the contextual elements we have identified in this study, as well as the elaborate base of empirical evidence that establishes their importance.

* RESEARCH ON TELEVISION RATINGS SHOULD CONTINUE, AND PARENT EDUCATION SHOULD BE A PRIORITY.

The findings on the use of ratings reflect merely the beginning of a new phase of information availability about television program content. Research on the use of the amended rating system is clearly needed, as well as research that shows trends over the years in the utilization of ratings. In addition, national surveys will be needed to determine how parents are reacting to the amended system, how well they understand it, and how helpful they find it.

The results of the Year 1 and Year 2 research indicate that age-based ratings that urge parental control have a strong "forbidden fruit" element, and tend to attract many children to the very programs the ratings are designed to protect them from. Research should explore whether the addition of content letters to the age-based system attracts children further, or whether it dampens some of the attraction by eliminating curiosity over which type of controversial content is in a program. Ultimately, the ideal system will maximize the availability of information to parents while minimizing the enticement factor.

Television ratings that properly inform parents of the risks associated with programs and that do not entice children to restricted programs would be an enormous aid to parents. No system can be optimal at the start. Research can point the way to useful modifications in the system to accommodate parents' needs and to adapt to changes in program content.

Recommendations for Parents

Perhaps the most important consumers of this report are the nation's parents. It may take years to significantly alter the profile of violence on television. In contrast, parents can begin immediately to change the way they think about violence on television and the way they make decisions about their children's viewing.

* BE AWARE OF THE THREE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH VIEWING TELEVISION VIOLENCE.

Evidence of the potential harmful effects associated with viewing violence on television is well established and fully documented in our Year 1 report. Perhaps the most commonly noted of these involves children's learning of aggressive attitudes and behaviors. Arguably more pervasive and often under-emphasized are the other two risks associated with television violence: fear and desensitization. An appreciation of these three effects will help parents to recognize the role of television in children's socialization.

* CONSIDER THE CONTEXT OF VIOLENT DEPICTIONS IN MAKING VIEWING DECISIONS FOR CHILDREN.

As demonstrated in each of our annual reports, not all violent portrayals are the same in terms of their impact on the audience. Some depictions pose greater risks for children than others, and some may even be prosocial. For example, when considering a particular program, think about whether violence is rewarded, whether heroes or good characters engage in violence, whether violence appears to be morally sanctioned, whether the serious negative consequences of violence are avoided, and whether humor is used. These are the types of portrayals that are the most likely to encourage aggressive attitudes and behaviors.

* CONSIDER A CHILD'S DEVELOPMENTAL LEVEL WHEN MAKING VIEWING DECISIONS.

Throughout this project, we underscore the importance of the child's developmental level or cognitive ability in making sense of television. Very young children are less able to distinguish fantasy from reality on television. Thus, for preschoolers and younger elementary schoolers, cartoon violence and fantasy violence cannot be dismissed or exonerated because it is unrealistic. Indeed, younger children identify strongly with superheroes and fantastic cartoon characters, and often learn from and imitate such portrayals. Furthermore, younger children have difficulty connecting non-adjacent scenes together and drawing causal inferences about the plot. Therefore, punishments, pain cues, or serious consequences of violence that are presented later in a plot, well after the violent act, may not be comprehended fully by a young child. For younger viewers, then, it is particularly important that contextual features like punishment and pain be shown within the violent scene, rather than solely at the end of the program.

* RECOGNIZE THAT CERTAIN TYPES OF VIOLENT CARTOONS POSE PARTICULARLY HIGH RISK FOR YOUNG CHILDREN'S LEARNING OF AGGRESSION.

Our findings suggest that certain animated programs can be particularly problematic for younger viewers. We have identified a type of portrayal that we label "high risk" because it contains an array of elements that encourage the learning of aggressive attitudes and behaviors. In particular, a high-risk portrayal for learning is one that features *an attractive character who engages in violence that is sanctioned and that does not result in any serious consequences to the victim*. Parents should closely monitor programming with an eye for this type of portrayal.

As it turns out, many of these high-risk depictions show up in cartoons. Adults often assume that violent cartoons are not a problem for children because the content is so unrealistic. However, this assumption is directly contradicted by research. Numerous studies show that animated programming such as *Batman* and *Superman* can increase aggressive behavior in young children. Even more compelling, a recent metaanalysis of 217 experiments found that cartoons show the single largest effect for increasing aggression compared to six other types of television content. Thus, animated programming cannot be dismissed as benign, particularly for children under 7 years of age, who have difficulty distinguishing reality from fantasy.

- * MAKE AN EFFORT TO OBTAIN AS MUCH INFORMATION AS POSSIBLE ABOUT THE CONTENT OF PROGRAMS BEFORE DECIDING WHAT YOUR CHILDREN SHOULD WATCH.

Although it is important to watch television with your children, we recognize that most parents cannot be in the room every minute their children are watching television. Previewing programs and reading reviews and plot synopses can be helpful in making program choices. Although we have identified some major shortcomings of the rating system currently in place, and it is too soon to know whether the ratings are being applied accurately, TV ratings are another potential source of useful information. We urge parents to take notice of the ratings and come to their own conclusions regarding whether they are being used in a manner that is helpful.

- * LET YOUR OPINIONS ABOUT TV VIOLENCE AND THE NEW TELEVISION RATING SYSTEM BE KNOWN.

You can contact your local TV stations or cable company. You can also contact the Oversight Board of the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board, (P.O. Box 14097, Washington, D.C. 20004; phone: 202-879-9364; email: tvomb.usa.net) the Federal Communications Commission (1919 M Street, N.W., Washington D.C. 20554; toll-free phone: 888-225-5322) or your congressperson or senators. In addition, make your feelings known to other parents through letters to the editor in your local paper and through organizations of parents, teachers, and other groups that are concerned about children's welfare.

CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As with any large and creative undertaking, the third year of the National Television Violence Study was a collaborative effort involving nearly two hundred different individuals acknowledged below. Each person enhanced this project in some way, whether through time, ideas, vision, problem solving, or other forms of support and encouragement. One person not on the list, former United States Senator Paul Simon, deserves special recognition for originating the idea of an independent assessment of violence on television.

NATIONAL TELEVISION VIOLENCE STUDY COUNCIL

Trina Menden Anglin	Charles FitzSimons	E. Michael McCann
Decker Anstrom (Ex Officio)	Carl Gottlieb	Gene Reynolds
Char Beales	Felice Levine	Donald F. Roberts
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