

## **National Television Violence Study**

### **Year Three: 1996-97**

Despite continued public concern, the final report of the three-year National Television Violence Study finds TV violence continues to pose a serious risk of harm to children. The final study also concluded that the proportion of prime-time broadcast and basic cable shows with violence has increased since 1994. The researchers determined that the way TV violence is portrayed encourages children to learn aggressive behavior, among other risks. The study also found that most age-based ratings do not provide information about the presence of violence in programs, affirming the TV industry's decision to add content descriptors, such as "V" for violence, to the new TV rating system.

The study focused on key features of violent portrayals that either increase or diminish the risk of harmful effects on viewers, especially children. Previous research has established that exposure to TV violence can contribute to aggressive attitudes and behaviors, to desensitization to real-world violence, and to increased fear in viewers. However, said Dr. Ed Donnerstein, study senior researcher and dean of social sciences at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), "the effect of violent content depends on how it is portrayed, and not all violent depictions pose the same degree of risk for viewers."

The study found that most violence is glamorized and sanitized. Across the three years of the study, nearly 40% of the violent incidents on television are initiated by "good" characters who are likely to be perceived as attractive role models. The long-term negative consequences of violence are portrayed in only 15% of programs, when averaged over the three years. "These patterns teach children that violence is desirable, necessary, and painless," said Dr. Dale Kunkel, associate professor of communication at UCSB, and a senior researcher for the study.

Nearly three-quarters of violent scenes contain no remorse, criticism, or penalty for violence, and "bad" characters go unpunished in 40% of programs. Programs that employ a strong anti-violence theme remain extremely rare, averaging 4% of all violent shows. Overall, the percentage of programs on television that contain some violence is virtually unchanged at 61%, compared to 61% last year and 58% in 1994-95.

However, programs containing violent content have become more frequent in prime time, rising by 14% (from 53% to 67%) on the broadcast networks and 10% (from 54% to 64%) on basic cable since 1994. "For those who think the TV violence problem is solved, it is not," said Dr. Daniel Linz, study senior researcher and chair of the law and society program at UCSB. "This increase in prevalence is problematic since the portrayal of most TV violence poses risks, and prime time also attracts the

largest number of viewers.” During the three-year study period, premium cable networks consistently have contained the highest percentage of programs with violence, averaging 92% since 1994.

Researchers at UCSB examined the largest and most representative sample of television content ever evaluated in a single study. For three years, programs on 23 TV channels were selected over a nine-month period to create a composite week of programming. Since 1994, more than 6,000 hours of programming have been analyzed.

The report highlights portrayals of violence that pose a high risk for children. These portrayals include a cluster of plot elements that increase the risk that children who watch will learn aggressive attitudes and behaviors. A high-risk portrayal includes all of the following elements: (1) a perpetrator who is attractive; (2) violence that seems justified; (3) violence that goes unpunished; (4) minimal consequences to the victim; and (5) violence that seems realistic to the viewer.

The study found that violent incidents that qualify as high risk for children under 7 are found most often in cartoons. “Younger children have difficulty distinguishing televised fantasy from reality, and are therefore at increased risk of imitating cartoon violence,” said Dr. Barbara J. Wilson, a study senior researcher and professor of communication at UCSB. The average American preschooler who watches mostly cartoons is exposed to over 500 high-risk portrayals of violence each year.

The study was undertaken at four research universities, each of which conducted independent studies--the University of California, Santa Barbara; the University of Texas, Austin; the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; and the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

### **Ratings Deficient Without Content Descriptors: University of Wisconsin, Madison**

The study also involved the first systematic investigation of the TV Parental Guidelines, the industry's rating system, which was implemented in January, 1997. There are six rating levels: TVY and TVY7 for children's programs, and TVG, TVPG, TV14, and TVMA for general audience programs. The study's sample of programs was collected before the industry added content descriptors, such as “V” for Violence, to the ratings.

The report showed that for most programs, the rating a program received was completely unrelated to whether or not the program contained violence. Although the ratings of children's programs in the sample distinguish between programs with vs. without violence, 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 general audience programs, the distribution of ratings is virtually identical for programs with and without violence.

These findings show that the agreement by most networks and cable channels to add content labels including a V for violence was necessary for the identification of violence in programs. "If the purpose of the V-chip is to help parents shield their children from violent programs, it will not be able to do its job unless all networks adopt the amended system with content labels," remarked Dr. Joanne Cantor, the University of Wisconsin professor who led the ratings research. The report's recommendations urge NBC, which has refused to adopt the amended system, to join the other networks in using the more informative ratings.

### **Showing Consequences of Violence Changes Adolescent Beliefs: University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill**

After testing prototype anti-violence public service announcements (PSAs) with adolescent audiences, researchers at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (UNC), found that PSAs that depict negative consequences of violent behavior are more effective at influencing youth beliefs about handgun violence than those that do not. Many recent anti-violence public service messages analyzed by the researchers portray violence with no depiction of negative consequences. "This research shows that any effort to combat the overwhelming number of violent images with anti-violence messages must make clear that violent behavior can be personally harmful," said UNC senior researcher Jay M. Bernhardt.

### **Violence in Reality Programs: University of Texas, Austin**

The overall level of violence in nonfictional "reality" programming remained stable across the three years of the study, with just under two-fifths of all reality programs displaying at least one instance of violence (39% in Year 3, 37% in Year 2, 39% in Year 1). This level is below the level of violence in programming overall. In all three years, however, there are important differences in violent presentations by reality program sub-genre. "Police reality shows invariably contain violence in all three years, and tabloid news programs are more violent than most other reality shows," noted Dr. Ellen Wartella, dean of the college of communication at University of Texas at Austin. "At the same time, talk shows feature relatively little visual violence," she said. Across the three years of the study, violent reality programming is typically found during the evening.

## **Project Background**

The project was commissioned for three years by the National Cable Television Association. An advisory council oversees the research and ensures its independence and scientific integrity. Chaired by Dr. Donald Roberts of Stanford University, it includes representatives from such organizations as the American Medical Assn., the National Education Assn., the National PTA, and the American Academy of Pediatrics, as well as the writers', directors', and producers' guilds. The study is coordinated by the Center for Communication and Social Policy at UCSB.

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### **Also see:**

Year One: 1994-95 Project Overview and Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Year Two: 1995-96 Project Overview and Summary of Findings and Recommendations