Violent Video Games and Public Policy

Christopher P. Barlett and Craig Anderson

Center for the Study of Violence

Iowa State University

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Abstract

The impact that violent video games have on aggressive behavior is a serious topic, with implications for video game players and non-players, school teachers, parents, and society, as a whole. Over two decades of empirical work using a variety of research methods has found conclusive evidence that violent video game play causes later aggressive behavior. However, to date, there are few public policies that effectively limit children's consumption of such violent media. The current chapter describes the results of empirical findings on violent video games and aggression, some of the barriers related to implementing effective public policy, and the current state of public policy concerning violent video games in the United States and in Europe.

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"I have been playing violent video games since I was young and I have not gone out and punched people or shot anybody."

This quote (paraphrased from a internet chat room) emphasizes the common misperception that many video game players and parents of these players have towards the effects that violent video games have on aggressive behavior: "I see violent media daily and I do not want to kill anybody. Therefore, violent video games don't affect me." The question of whether violent video game play is related to negative behavioral consequences (i.e., aggression) is not new, nor are the attempts by the scientific community to communicate these findings to public policy makers. However, rarely does effective public policy concerning media violence get implemented. To support this claim, consider the following questions:

    1. Does the scientific literature continually show strong relationships between violent media and aggressive thoughts, aggressive feelings, and aggressive behaviors? – Yes (see Anderson, 2004; Kirsh, 2006).

    2. Have the leading media violence experts testified before their governing body stating that violent media increases the probability of aggression in consumers? - Yes (see Anderson, Berkowitz, Donnerstein, Huesmann, Johnson, Linz, Malamuth, & Wartella, 2003).

    3. Are children still consuming violent mass media regularly? – Yes (see Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007).

    4. Are there effective policies in the United States that minimize the consumption of violent media by children of certain ages (e.g., under 15 years old)? –No (see Anderson & Gentile, 2008).

Thus, scientific research has found evidence to suggest that violent media consumption, including violent video games, increases the probability of thinking, feeling, and behaving aggressively in children and adults. These findings have been explicitly communicated to public policy makers. However, children still get a steady diet of violent media. Why is there such a huge disconnection between the scientific evidence of harm and public policy? To adequately answer this question, this chapter is organized

into three sections: the scientific evidence, public policy concerning the mass media, and the disconnect between the scientific community and the public.

Scientific Evidence

Media violence is just one of many risk factors for aggression. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss all of the known risk factors for aggression and violence, but what will be explained is the scientific research which has found a relationship between media violence and subsequent aggression. These findings will be organized by type of research design.

The first type is the cross-sectional correlational design. A correlation represents a relationship between two variables. For example, there is a relationship between height and weight, such that taller people typically weigh more. This is a positive correlation, because as the values of one variable (height) increase, so do the values of the other variable (weight). A negative correlation occurs when increases in the values of one variable are associated with decreases in the values of the other variable. For example, there is a negative relationship between the number of times a college student misses class and their grade in that class. Thus, as the number of times one misses class increases, grades tend to decrease. A weakness of cross-sectional correlational studies is that by themselves, they do not clearly establish causality, mainly because other variables are not typically controlled. For example, there is a strong positive correlation between ice cream sales and the number of murders. Does this mean that eating ice cream causes murders? No, rather ice cream sales occur most when it is hot outside and there is a positive relationship between heat and aggression (Anderson, Anderson, Dorr, DeNeve, & Flanagan, 2000). However, well designed correlational studies are useful for testing the generalizability of experimental findings and for testing alternative explanations.

Researchers using cross-sectional correlational designs have found that the amount of time participants play violent video games is positively correlated with aggressive delinquency (Anderson & Dill, 2000). Other research looking at different outcomes have found similar findings. For instance, Krahe and Moller (2004) found a significant positive relation between violent video game exposure and the endorsement of physical aggressive norms, suggesting that as the amount of violent video game play time increased, there was an increase in the acceptance to use physical aggression. Others

(e.g., Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2004) found similar results, while statistically controlling for sex of the participant and trait hostility, ruling out these factors as alternative explanations of the correlation between violent video games and physical aggression.

A second type of research design is experimental. Such studies can yield strong causal answers because they effectively rule out all alternative explanations. The hallmark of experiments is that participants are randomly assigned to the different conditions of the study. In addition, good experiments attempt to control for other variables that could influence the dependent variable (i.e., gender, trait aggression). Scientists can say that the independent variable (exposure to media violence) causes changes in the dependent variable (aggression).

Researchers using experimental designs have found that having participants play a violent video game causes higher aggression levels than having them play a non-violent video game (e.g., Ballard & Wiest, 1996). This effect occurs across a wide variety of individual difference variables. For instance, this effect has been demonstrated in children (Irwin & Gross, 1995) and college-aged samples (Carnagey & Anderson, 2005), high and low trait aggressive individuals, and males and females (e.g., Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007). Also, this effect has been found for a wide variety of video game types, including fighting video games (Ballard & Lineberger, 1999), shooting video games (Ivory & Kalyanaraman, 2007), and driving video games (Carnagey & Anderson, 2005).

A third type of study is a longitudinal design, in which the same participants are measured at least twice over time. Well-designed longitudinal studies also can provide strong support for causal hypotheses, again because they effectively rule out many alternative explanations. Such research has found that repeated exposure to violent video games is related to increased aggression (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007).

Finally, meta-analysis is a statistical technique which takes all of the scientific research done in an area of interest and aggregates the findings to answer global questions of the form: "Across the entire spectrum of research involving violent video game play, is exposure to this type of media violence related to aggression?" This technique is advantageous because it is less susceptible to reviewer biases than the typical