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Gun Violence: From the Screen to the Streets

In today's world, you see many bullets flying and bodies dropping. Whether you turn on your television, play a video game, or listen to the radio guns usually seem to be present. On top of that, actual gun violence and gun related deaths are a huge problem in the United States and all over the world. Many people have different opinions on whether or not media contributes to real violence. With that being said, this issue is not very clear cut because the relationship is not necessarily direct or indirect. Outliers exist in society and some people are more vulnerable to the effects of media than others. This makes me wonder, does media's portrayal of gun violence lead to more gun use in the real world?

Many people believe when people are exposed to excessive amounts of violence, their mind may cause them to mock the actions they see. Shortly after the tragic shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School, President Obama called for research on effects media has on gun violence. The White House stated, "The entertainment and video game industries have a responsibility to give parents tools and choices about the movies and programs their children watch and the games their children play" ("Obama..."). This quote implies that President Obama along with many other high powered White House officials believe that media contributes to violence on the streets. Not only does the Obama administration believe in this relationship, but experts in psychology do too. In response to the White House's concerns, *The British Journal of*

Psychiatry published an in depth article discussing their similar concerns and plans for scientific research to either prove or disprove this belief. Malte Elson and Christopher Ferguson, the authors of this piece, wrote, “We acknowledge the administration’s efforts to reduce violent crime in society and their obligation to dedicate resources to matters of public interest, such as media effects” (Elson).

Not only do you see these beliefs from authors in scholarly articles, but you see identical concerns from different types of sources. Brian Fairrington, a freelance cartoonist who has worked for *The Republic* for more than 15 years expresses his similar stance on media and violence in the real world. In 2005, Fairrington published a cartoon illustrating a father reading the daily newspaper. The father is reading an article titled, “School Shootings,” and has a thought bubble coming from his head that reads, “Where do kids learn to be so violent?” Sitting on the ground directly behind his father is his kid. His kid is glued to the screen of his television while gripping a video game controller tightly. The video game he is playing is titled “Cop Killer.” Also, lying next to the kid is a giant rocket launcher. This cartoon clearly shows that Fairrington objects obsessive violence being shown in the media. I found this same opinion in the educational film, *Tough Guise*. *Tough Guise* was directed in 1999 by Sut Jhally, a professor of communications at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Jhally won numerous teaching awards and has published numerous books about cultural studies and the media. The film spends 82 minutes examining the direct relationship between today’s media and the effects it has on men. Jackson Katz, the narrator of the film, offers examples from the toy industry, video game industry, movies, and even news broadcasts. Jhally puts the majority of the blame on the media for the amount of shootings, murders, and other violent crimes committed nationwide today.

Katz explains that the media puts pressure on men to be more manly. When men see their favorite movie characters killing and fighting people, they begin to think that being manly means turning to violence. Movies and TV shows falsely portray that using violence can lead to popularity and picking up more women.

Many credible people argue for restrictions on media because they believe it directly impacts real life gun violence. However, the main aspect in proving this relationship is through research. If research does not lean to the side of media directly impacting violence, how can one say it does?

In 2007, Cynthia Cooper wrote a very powerful book titled, *Violence in the Media and its Influence on Criminal Defense*. Her book descriptively covers every aspect of the media violence debate. Cooper not only analyzes the media violence debate, but provides information on the history of media violence as well as information on popular research studies. One of the studies that grabbed my attention was a study done by Leonard Eron. In the 1960's, Eron composed a study to measure the connection between children's television habits and their aggression. To compose this study, Eron and his team surveyed parents of 800 third grade children from Hudson, New York. The survey asked parents to estimate the amount of time their children spent watching television, what shows they usually watched, and how much aggression they exhibited. Eron then traveled back to Hudson, New York 10 years, 20 years, and 30 years later to observe the children's behavior. As he expected, the participants who watched more violent television shows as a kid were more likely to commit crimes as adults (Cooper 35). However, this study was done in a completely different era and may not be as accurate of a representation compared to a study done more recently.

According to the same article that published Obama's call for research to be done on how media and video games effect gun violence, a more recent study was done that argues against that belief. President Obama appointed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to research the causes of gun violence. The research gathered suggests that for the most part there is not a connection between violent entertainment and real life violent actions. The only possible connection the research found was with obsessive video game play. Research found through various mass shooters and killers that obsessive video game play may have led them to their despicable actions. Based on the results of this research, the Entertainment Software Association said, "The same entertainment is enjoyed across all cultures and nations, but tragic levels of gun violence remain unique to our country [...] Scientific research on international and domestic crime data point toward the same conclusion: Entertainment does not cause violent behavior in the real world" ("Obama..."). The ESA clearly holds bias in favor of the entertainment industry, but they do offer some compelling arguments. Although this study showed a negative correlation between action movies and television shows to real life violence, many government officials are calling for changes in the video game industry. Specific call to actions by these officials consist of getting rid of or at least putting limits on first person shooting games. I agree with these call to actions. Although, research showed a negative correlation, society has to realize that it only takes one person to kill hundreds of people. Outliers cannot be ignored when it comes to a decision of life and death.

The British Journal of Psychiatry came up with very similar results to the research done by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Malte Elson and Christopher Ferguson

state, “First, the empirical evidence regarding the impact of media violence on human aggression is fairly mixed, and as such inconclusive.” They also go forth in saying,

“The second part of the answer relates to the academic debate on violent media, and how the empirical evidence is (mis) represented by politicians, pundits and scholars. The conclusiveness of existing research on violent game effects is frequently overstated, and indulgence in ideological claims commonly go beyond what scientific evidence supports, posing a risk to the credibility of media effects research” (Elson).

After conducting research on this topic, the researcher’s hypothesis was challenged. However, many social scientists still challenge the results found in the laboratories. The research found does not support the idea that media leads to more violence on the streets in regards to the general population, but scientists do acknowledge the chance of outliers and high risk individuals. A chunk of people in this world have extreme mental issues and can be more prone to violence than others. From an article by *Charisma News*, 14 mass shooters in the past decade were linked to obsessive video game play. Some even used the games to help train for their massacres (Fletcher). Just because this research did not show a direct relationship between media and violence, that does not mean the research is over according to Elson and Ferguson. Psychologists and research companies continue to study media patterns of violent offenders to get more analysis on media causing human aggression (Elson).

The Progress and Freedom Foundation came out with a graph in 2005 that analyzes the relationship between video game sales to youths and the number of violent crimes committed by youths. The data was collected between the years 1996 to 2005. Also, going against my

opinion and popular belief, the graph shows a negative correlation. The amount of video game units sold in millions is illustrated by a bar graph and violent crimes committed by youths is illustrated by an overlapping line graph. It shows that the least amount of video games was sold in 2006, but 2006 had the largest number of youth violent crimes. It shows that 2004 had the most video game units sold, but the second to least amount of violent crimes committed in the 10 year span. This graph clearly shows a negative correlation between video game usage and actual violence and contradicts what many experts believed to be true. A similar graph was constructed by the Entertainment Software Association. The graph compared violent crime offenses to video game sales between 1996 and 2007. From 1996 to 2004 the graph shows that computer and video game sky rocketed up. Then, in 2005 and 2006 went down a little. In 2007, sales shot back up again and reached its highest point in those 11 years. However, violent crime offenses were shown to slowly decrease year by year in the 11 years. This graph also defends the side of video games having no correlation to criminal offenses.

Although, most recent research studies do not show a direct relationship between images and sounds from the media to actual violence, media can play a role in the amount of violence that occurs on the streets. The relationship is not large enough to make laws and bans, but it is large enough to take action. The majority of the world can play endless amounts of shooting games, watch endless hours of violent film, and never commit an act of violence. However, that is not the case with the smaller chunk of people that have serious mental conditions. I believe that more action needs to be done on the side of mental health rather than the side of media. Parents can also do a better job of monitoring their children's violent media consumption. Nobody knows their child like a parent does. If a child seems to have an obsessive

personality and uses aggressive behavior more often, than the parents need to take immediate action. Whether they are turning the television off or bringing their child to a psychiatrist, parents can make all the difference with this issue. I am not putting the blame on the parents of mass shooters all over the nation, but it is hard for me to put all the blame on media after analyzing the information I have found. Media's role does exist in the issue of violence, but the solution does not fall on the hands of the outlets of media.

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