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THE IMPACT OF TELEVISED VIOLENCE

John P. Murray*

I. INTRODUCTION

Questions about the effects of television violence have existed since the earliest days of this medium. Indeed, the first expression of formal concern can be found in congressional hearings in the early 1950s. For example, the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency held a series of hearings during 1954-55 on the impact of television programs on juvenile crime.¹ These hearings set the stage for continuing congressional investigations by this committee and others in the House and Senate from the 1950s to the present.

These early congressional inquiries were focused on what we did *not* know about television and violence because social scientists were slow to respond to concerns about this medium of popular entertainment. Although there was a body of research on movies and comic books, these were quite different forms of media and different effects might be expected. Still, prominent social scientists, such as developmental psychologist Eleanor Maccoby and sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld, testified at the 1954-55 hearings that, although more research was needed, there were important reasons for concern about televised violence.²

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1. *Juvenile Delinquency (Television Programs): Hearings Before the Subcomm. to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Senate Comm. of the Judiciary*, 83d Cong., 2d Sess. (1954); *Juvenile Delinquency (Television Programs): Hearings Before the Subcomm. to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Senate Comm. of the Judiciary*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess. (1955).

2. *Juvenile Delinquency (Television Programs): Hearings Before the Subcomm. to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Senate Comm. of the Judiciary*, 83d Cong., 2d Sess. (1954); *Juvenile Delinquency (Television Programs): Hearings Before the Subcomm. to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Senate Comm. of the Judiciary*, 84th Cong., 1st Sess. (1955); *Effects on Young People of Violence and Crime Portrayed on Television: Hearings Before the Subcomm. to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Senate Comm. of the Judiciary*, 87th Cong., 1st Sess. (1961); *Effects on Young People of Violence and Crime Portrayed on Television: Hearings Before the Subcomm. to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Sen-*

In addition to the congressional hearings begun in the 1950s (which have continued through December 1992), there are landmark reports confirming the harmful effects of media violence on the behavior of children, youth, and adults who view such programming. These reports include: National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence;³ Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior;⁴ the report on children and television drama by the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry;⁵ National Institute of Mental Health, Television and Behavior Report;⁶ National Research Council violence report;⁷ and reports from the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Television and Society⁸ and the Commission on Violence and Youth.⁹

Despite decades of research, there is a perception that the research evidence on television violence is unclear or contradictory. This perception is incorrect. This review will address the following issues: What do we know about the impact of television violence? What are some of the major research findings that form the basis for concern? Without belaboring prior reviews, the main issues revolve

ate Comm. of the Judiciary, 87th Cong., 2d Sess. (1962); *Effects on Young People of Violence and Crime Portrayed on Television: Hearings Before the Subcomm. to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Senate Comm. of the Judiciary*, 88th Cong., 2d Sess. (1964); *Effects on Young People of Violence and Crime Portrayed on Television: Hearings Before the Subcomm. to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Senate Comm. of the Judiciary*, 89th Cong., 1st Sess. (1965); Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Why is So Little Known About the Effects of Television and What Can Be Done?*, 19 PUB. OPINION Q. 243-51 (1955); Eleanor E. Maccoby, *Why Do Children Watch Television?*, 18 PUB. OPINION Q. 239-44 (1954).

3. ROBERT K. BAKER & SANDRA J. BALL, *MASS MEDIA AND VIOLENCE: A STAFF REPORT TO THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON THE CAUSES AND PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE* (1969).

4. SURGEON GENERAL'S SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON TELEVISION AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR, *TELEVISION AND GROWING UP: THE IMPACT OF TELEVISED VIOLENCE* (1972).

5. GROUP FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF PSYCHIATRY, *THE CHILD AND TELEVISION DRAMA: THE PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACT OF CUMULATIVE VIEWING* (1982).

6. 1 NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH, *TELEVISION AND BEHAVIOR: TEN YEARS OF SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EIGHTIES—SUMMARY REPORT* (David Pearl et al. eds., 1982); 2 NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH, *TELEVISION AND BEHAVIOR: TEN YEARS OF SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EIGHTIES—TECHNICAL REVIEWS* (David Pearl et al. eds., 1982).

7. NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL, *UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING VIOLENCE* (1993).

8. ALETHA C. HUSTON ET AL., *BIG WORLD, SMALL SCREEN: THE ROLE OF TELEVISION IN AMERICAN SOCIETY* (1992).

9. 1 AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, *VIOLENCE AND YOUTH: PSYCHOLOGY'S RESPONSE—SUMMARY REPORT OF THE AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION COMMISSION ON VIOLENCE AND YOUTH* (1993); Edward Donnerstein et al., *Television and Film Violence*, in AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, *DRAFT REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON VIOLENCE AND YOUTH* (1992).

around the extent of exposure to violence and the correlational, experimental and field studies that demonstrate the effects of this viewing on the attitudes and behavior of children and adults.

II. EXTENT OF VIEWING

Children begin watching television at a very early age, sometimes as early as six months, and they are ardent viewers by the time they are two or three years old. The general pattern of viewing is one of a steady rise in the number of hours viewed from early childhood through pre-adolescence, with a sharp drop in viewing during the adolescent years. According to audience rating surveys,¹⁰ the typical American household has the television set on for more than seven hours each day, and children ages two to eleven spend an average of twenty-eight hours per week viewing.¹¹ Naturally, the content viewed is more important than the amount of viewing, and televised violence is one of the chief concerns.

The most extensive analyses of the incidence of violence on television are the studies conducted by George Gerbner and his colleagues on the nature of American television programs.¹² The results of these yearly analyses of the level of violence on American television for the twenty-two year period 1967-89 indicate a consistently high level of violence. There were some minor fluctuations in the early 1970s followed by a steady increase to 1976, a sharp decline in 1977, and then a steady climb to an all-time high in 1982-83. According to Gerbner's initial analysis, eight out of every ten plays broadcast during the survey period in 1969 contained some form of violence, and eight episodes of violence occurred during each hour of broadcast time.¹³ Furthermore, programs especially designed for children, such as cartoons, are the most violent of all programming. Later

10. A.C. NIELSEN & COMPANY, THE 1988 NIELSEN REPORT ON TELEVISION (1988).

11. JOHN C. CONDRY, THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TELEVISION (1989); ROBERT M. LIEBERT & JOYCE SPRAFKIN, THE EARLY WINDOW: EFFECTS OF TELEVISION ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH (3d ed. 1988); Margaret S. Andreasen, *Evolution in the Family's Use of Television: Normative Data from Industry and Academe*, in TELEVISION AND THE AMERICAN FAMILY 3-55 (Jennings Bryant ed., 1990).

12. George Gerbner & Nancy Signorielli, *Violence Profile, 1967 through 1988-89: Enduring Patterns* (1990) (unpublished manuscript, on file at the Annenberg School of Communications of the University of Pennsylvania).

13. George Gerbner, *Violence in Television Drama: Trends and Symbolic Functions*, in 1 TELEVISION AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR: MEDIA CONTENT AND CONTROL (George A. Comstock & Eli A. Rubenstein eds., 1972).

analyses by George Gerbner and Larry Gross indicated that there was some decline in violence levels from 1969 to 1975, at least in terms of the prominence of killing.¹⁴ However, the level of violence dramatically increased in 1976¹⁵ and was followed by a decline to one of the lowest levels in the 1977 season.¹⁶ This decline was quite dramatic. From the "bumper-crop violence harvest" of 1976 to the relatively placid 1977, the percentage of programs containing violence fell from 90 to 75.5; the rate of violent episodes per hour fell from 9.5 to 6.7; and the rate of violence per program fell from 6.2 to 5.0 episodes. However, this downward trend was reversed in 1978 and through the early 1980s. Violence in weekend children's programs reached 30.3 violence episodes per hour in the 1982-83 season.¹⁷ Overall, the levels of violence in prime-time programming have averaged about five acts per hour, and children's Saturday morning programs have averaged about twenty to twenty-five violent acts per hour.

In addition to broadcast television, cable television adds to the level of violence through new, more violent programs and by recycling older violent broadcasts. A recent survey by the Center for Media and Public Affairs identified 1,846 violent scenes broadcast and cablecast between 6 a.m. and midnight on one day in Washington, D.C.¹⁸ The most violent periods were between 6 a.m. and 9 a.m., with 497 violent scenes (165.7 per hour) and between 2 p.m. and 5 p.m., with 609 violent scenes (203 per hour). Most of this violence is presented without context or judgment as to its acceptability. And, most of this violence in the early morning and afternoon is viewed by children and youth.

What are the effects of this exposure to these levels of televised violence? What do we know about the influence of television vio-

14. George Gerbner & Larry Gross, *Violence Profile No. 6: Trends in Network Television Drama and Viewer Conceptions of Social Reality 1967-1973* (1974) (unpublished manuscript, on file at the Annenberg School of Communications of the University of Pennsylvania); George Gerbner & Larry Gross, *Living with Television: The Violence Profile*, 26 J. COMM. 173-99 (1976); George Gerbner & Larry Gross, *The Scary World of TV's Heavy Viewer*, PSYCHOL. TODAY, Apr. 1976, at 41-45, 89.

15. George Gerbner et al., *TV Violence Profile No. 8: The Highlights*, 27 J. COMM. 171-80 (1977).

16. George Gerbner et al., *Cultural Indicators: Violence Profile No. 9.*, 28 J. COMM. 176-207 (1978).

17. Gerbner & Signorielli, *supra* note 12.

18. ROBERT S. LICHTER & DANIEL AMUNDSON, *A DAY OF TELEVISION VIOLENCE* (1992).

lence from the broad range of correlational, experimental and field studies that have been conducted over the past forty years?

III. CORRELATIONAL STUDIES

The weight of evidence from correlational studies is fairly consistent: viewing and/or preference for violent television is related to aggressive attitudes, values and behaviors. This result was true for the studies conducted when television was new, and the measures of children's aggression were teachers' ratings. It is still true for more recent studies when the measures of aggressiveness have become more sophisticated.

To choose several studies as examples: Robinson and Bachman found a relationship between the number of hours of television viewed and adolescent self-reports of involvement in aggressive or antisocial behavior.¹⁹ Atkin, Greenberg, Korzenny, and McDermott²⁰ used a different measure of aggressive behavior. They gave nine to thirteen-year-old boys and girls situations such as the following: Suppose that you are riding your bicycle down the street and some other child comes up and pushes you off your bicycle. What would you do? The response options included physical or verbal aggression, along with options to reduce or avoid conflict. These investigators found that physical or verbal aggressive responses were selected by forty-five percent of heavy-television-violence viewers, compared to only twenty-one percent of the light-violence viewers. In a further study, Peter Sheehan followed two groups of Australian children, first and third-graders, for a three-year period.²¹ He found that for the older group, now third through fifth grade, both the overall amount of violence viewing and the intensity of viewing were significantly related to the child's level of aggressive behavior as rated by their classmates. Finally, in a study focused on adults, Phillips investigated the effects of the portrayal of suicides in television soap operas on the suicide rate in the United States, using death records compiled by the National Center for Health Statistics.²² He found, over a six-year

19. John P. Robinson & Jerald G. Bachman, *Television Viewing Habits and Aggression*, in 3 TELEVISION AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR: TELEVISION AND ADOLESCENT AGGRESSIVENESS (George A. Comstock & Eli A. Rubinstein eds., 1972).

20. Charles K. Atkin et al., *Selective Exposure to Televised Violence*, 23 J. BROADCASTING 5-13 (1979).

21. Peter W. Sheehan, *Age Trends and the Correlates of Children's Television Viewing*, 35 AUSTRALIAN J. PSYCHOL. 417-31 (1983).

22. David P. Phillips, *The Impact of Mass Media Violence on U.S. Homicides*, 48 AM.

period, that whenever a major soap opera personality committed suicide on television, within three days there was a significant increase in the number of female suicides across the nation.

IV. EXPERIMENTAL STUDIES

The major initial experimental studies of the cause and effect relation between television/film violence and aggressive behavior were conducted by Albert Bandura and his colleagues, working with young children,²³ and by Leonard Berkowitz and his associates, who studied adolescents.²⁴ In a typical early study conducted by Bandura,²⁵ a young child was presented with a film, back-projected on a television screen, of a model who kicked and punished an inflated plastic doll. The child was then placed in a playroom setting, and the incidence of aggressive behavior was recorded. The results of these early studies indicated that children who had viewed the aggressive film were more aggressive in the playroom than those children who had not observed the aggressive model. These early studies were criticized on the grounds that the aggressive behavior was not meaningful within the social context and that the stimulus materials were not representative of available television programming. Subsequent studies have used more typical television programs and more realistic measures of aggression, but basically Bandura's early findings still stand.

Another early study investigated young children's willingness to hurt another child after viewing videotaped sections of aggressive or neutral television programs.²⁶ The boys and girls were in two age groups, five to six-years-old and eight to nine-years-old. The aggressive program consisted of segments of *The Untouchables* while the neutral program featured a track race. Following viewing, the children

SOC. REV. 560-68 (1983).

23. Albert Bandura et al., *Imitation of Film-Mediated Aggressive Models*, 66 J. ABNORMAL & SOC. PSYCHOL. 3-11 (1963) [hereinafter Bandura et al., *Imitation*]; Albert Bandura et al., *Transmission of Aggression Through Imitation of Aggressive Models*, 63 J. ABNORMAL & SOC. PSYCHOL. 575-82 (1961) [hereinafter Bandura et al., *Transmission*].

24. LEONARD BERKOWITZ, *AGGRESSION: A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS* (1962); Leonard Berkowitz et al., *Film Violence and Subsequent Aggressive Tendencies*, 27 PUB. OPINION Q. 217-29 (1963); Leonard Berkowitz & Edna Rawlings, *Effects of Film Violence on Inhibitions Against Subsequent Aggression*, 66 J. ABNORMAL & SOC. PSYCHOL. 405-12 (1963).

25. Bandura et al., *Imitation*, *supra* note 23.

26. Robert M. Liebert & Robert A. Baron, *Short Term Effects of Television Aggression on Children's Aggressive Behavior*, in 2 TELEVISION AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR, TELEVISION AND SOCIAL LEARNING (John P. Murray et al. eds., 1972).

were placed in a setting in which they could either facilitate or disrupt the game-playing performance of an ostensible child playing in an adjoining room. The main findings were that the children who viewed the aggressive program demonstrated a greater willingness to hurt another child. One could ask, does the same effect hold for cartoons? The answer seems to be yes. Several studies have demonstrated that one exposure to a violent cartoon leads to increased aggression.²⁷ Moreover, Hapkiewitz and Roden found that boys who had seen violent cartoons were less likely to share their toys than those who had not seen the aggressive cartoon.²⁸ It seems clear from experimental studies that one can produce increased aggressive behavior as a result of either extended or brief exposure to televised violence, but questions remain about whether this heightened aggressiveness observed in the experimental setting spills over into daily life.

V. FIELD STUDIES

In the typical field experiment, the investigator presents television programs in the normal viewing setting and observes behavior where it naturally occurs. The investigator controls the television diet either by arranging a special series of programs or by choosing towns that, in the natural course of events, receive different television programs.

One early field experiment was a study conducted by Aletha Stein and Lynette Friedrich for the Surgeon General's project.²⁹ These investigators presented ninety-seven preschool children with a diet of either "antisocial," "prosocial," or "neutral" television programs during a four-week viewing period. The antisocial diet consisted of twelve half-hour episodes of *Batman* and *Superman* cartoons. The prosocial diet was composed of twelve episodes of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (a program that stresses such themes as sharing possessions and cooperative play). The neutral diet consisted of

27. Glenn T. Ellis & Francis Sekyra III, *The Effect of Aggressive Cartoons on Behavior of First Grade Children*, 81 J. PSYCHOL. 37-43 (1972); O. Ivar Lovaas, *Effect of Exposure to Symbolic Aggression on Aggressive Behavior*, 32 CHILD DEV. 37-44 (1961); Paul Mussen & Eldred Rutherford, *Effects of Aggressive Cartoons on Children's Aggressive Play*, 62 J. ABNORMAL SOC. PSYCHOL. 461-64. (1961); Laura B. Ross, *The Effect of Aggressive Cartoons on the Group Play of Children* (1982) (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Miami University).

28. Walter G. Hapkiewitz & Aubrey H. Roden, *The Effect of Aggressive Cartoons on Children's Interpersonal Play*, 42 CHILD DEV. 1583-85 (1971).

29. Lynette K. Friedrich & Aletha H. Stein, *Television Content and Young Children's Behavior*, in 2 TELEVISION AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR, TELEVISION AND SOCIAL LEARNING 202-317 (John P. Murray et al. eds., 1992).

children's programming which was neither violent nor prosocial. The children were observed through a nine-week period, which consisted of three weeks of pre-viewing baseline, four weeks of television exposure, and two weeks of post-viewing follow-up. All observations were conducted in a naturalistic setting while the children were engaged in daily school activities. The observers recorded various forms of behavior that could be regarded as prosocial (i.e. helping, sharing, cooperative play) or antisocial (i.e. pushing, arguing, breaking toys). The overall results indicated that children who were judged to be initially somewhat aggressive became significantly more so, as a result of viewing the *Batman* and *Superman* cartoons. Moreover, the children who had viewed the prosocial diet of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* were less aggressive, more cooperative and more willing to share with other children.

In another field experiment, Ross Parke and his colleagues found similar heightened aggression among both American and Belgian teenage boys following exposure to aggressive films.³⁰ In the Belgian study—which replicated the findings of two similar studies conducted in the United States—teenage boys residing in a minimum-security institution were presented with a diet of either aggressive or neutral films. This study included a one-week baseline observation period, followed by one week of film viewing, and a one-week post-viewing observation period. There were four cottages involved. Two cottages contained boys with high levels of aggressive behavior; two contained boys with low levels of aggression. One of each pair of cottages was assigned to view the aggressive films, while the other two viewed the neutral films. Only the two initially high-aggressive cottages were affected by the movies. Those boys who saw the aggressive movies increased their level of aggression, while those who were exposed to the neutral films reduced their level of aggression.

Still, one might ask whether such results are found when the variation in television diets occurs naturally rather than by special arrangement. Tannis Williams and her colleagues had the opportunity to evaluate the impact of televised violence on the behavior of children before and after the introduction of television in a Canadian community.³¹ They compared children living in the before/after tele-

30. Ross D. Parke et al., *Some Effects of Violent and Nonviolent Movies on the Behavior of Juvenile Delinquents*, in 10 *ADVANCES IN EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY* (Leonard Berkowitz ed., 1977).

31. Lesley A. Joy et al., *Television Exposure and Children's Aggressive Behavior*, in

vision town with their peers in two other towns where television was well established. The three towns were called Notel (no television reception), Unitel (receiving only the government-owned commercial channel—CBC), and Multitel (receiving CBC and three American commercial networks—ABC, CBS and NBC). Children in all three towns were evaluated at Time 1, when Notel did not receive a television signal, and again at Time 2, after Notel had television for two years (it had received the government channel-CBC). Results indicated that there were no differences across the three towns at Time 1, but at Time 2 the children from the former Notel town were significantly more aggressive, both physically and verbally, than the children in the Unitel or Multitel towns. Moreover, only children in the Notel town manifested any significant increase in physical and verbal aggression from Time 1 to Time 2.

VI. EXTENT OF EFFECTS

We get a clearer picture about the extent of television violence effects when we know more about the way children watch televised violence. For example, Paul Ekman and his associates found that those children whose facial expressions depicted the positive emotions of happiness, pleasure, interest or involvement while viewing televised violence were more likely to hurt another child than were those children whose facial expressions indicated disinterest or displeasure.³²

The long-term influence of television has not been extensively investigated, but we do have indications from several major studies. In an initial longitudinal study, Monroe Lefkowitz and his colleagues were able to demonstrate long-term effects in a group of children followed-up over a ten-year period.³³ In this instance, Leonard Eron had previously demonstrated a relationship between preference for violent media and the aggressive behavior of these children at the age of eight.³⁴ One question now posed was: Would this relationship

THE IMPACT OF TELEVISION: A NATURAL EXPERIMENT INVOLVING THREE TOWNS (Tannis MacBeth Williams ed., 1986); see generally THE IMPACT OF TELEVISION: A NATURAL EXPERIMENT INVOLVING THREE TOWNS (Tannis MacBeth Williams ed., 1986).

32. Paul Ekman et al., *Facial Expressions of Emotion as Predictors of Subsequent Aggression*, in 5 TELEVISION AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR, TELEVISION'S EFFECTS: FURTHER EXPLORATIONS (George A. Comstock et al. eds., 1972).

33. Monroe Lefkowitz et al., *Television Violence and Child Aggression: A Follow-Up Study*, in 3 TELEVISION AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR, TELEVISION AND ADOLESCENT AGGRESSIVENESS (George A. Comstock & Eli A. Rubinstein eds., 1972).

34. Leonard Eron, *Relationship of TV Viewing Habits and Aggressive Behavior in Chil-*

hold at later ages? To answer this question, the investigators obtained peer-rated measures of aggressive behavior and preferences for various kinds of television, radio and comic books when the children were eight-years-old. Ten years later, when the members of the group were eighteen-years-old, the investigators again obtained measures of aggressive behavior and television program preferences. The results for boys indicated that preference for television violence at age eight was significantly related to aggression at age eight ($r = .21$), but that preference for television violence at age eighteen was not related to aggression at that age ($r = .05$). A second question posed was: Could this adolescent aggressiveness be predicted from our knowledge of their viewing habits in early childhood? The answer seems to be yes. The important finding here is the significant relationship, for boys, between preference for violent media at age eight and aggressive behavior at age eighteen ($r = .31$). Equally important is the lack of relationship in the reverse direction; that is, preference for violent television programs at age eighteen was not produced by their aggressive behavior in early childhood ($r = .01$). The most plausible interpretation of this pattern of correlations is that early preference for violent television programming and other media is one factor in the production of aggressive and antisocial behavior when the young boy becomes a young man.

In more recent, short-term, longitudinal studies conducted by Lefkowitz, Eron, and their colleagues, some short-term effects of viewing violence on aggressive behavior of children were found in the United States, Australia and Finland.³⁵

Finally, the twenty-two-year longitudinal study³⁶—a follow-up to the earlier Lefkowitz et al. study³⁷—has found significant causal-correlations ($r = .41$) between violence viewing at age eight and serious interpersonal criminal behavior at age thirty.

In a different approach, a study by William Belson has substantiated other long-term effects, and has helped pin down which types of

dren, 67 J. ABNORMAL & SOC. PSYCHOL. 193-96 (1963).

35. Leonard Eron, *Parent-Child Interaction, Television Violence and Aggression of Children*, 27 AM. PSYCHOLOGIST 197-211 (1982); L. Rowell Huesmann et al., *Intervening Variables in the Television Violence-Viewing-Aggression Relation: Evidence from Two Countries*, 20 DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOL. 746-75 (1984); Sheehan, *supra* note 21.

36. L. Rowell Huesmann et al., *Stability of Aggression over Time and Generations*, 20 DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOL. 1120-34 (1984).

37. Lefkowitz et al., *supra* note 33.

programs have the most influence.³⁸ Belson interviewed 1,565 youths who were a representative sample of thirteen to seventeen-year-old boys living in London. These boys were interviewed on several occasions concerning the extent of their exposure to a selection of violent television programs broadcast during 1959 through 1971. The level and type of violence in these programs were rated by members of the BBC viewing panel. It was thus possible to obtain, for each boy, a measure of both the magnitude and type of exposure to televised violence (e.g., realistic, fictional, etc.). Furthermore, each boy's level of violent behavior was determined by his own report of how often he had been involved in any of fifty-three categories of violence over the previous six months. The degree of seriousness of the acts reported by the boys ranged from only slightly violent aggravation, such as taunting, to more serious and very violent behavior such as: "I tried to force a girl to have sexual intercourse with me"; "I bashed a boy's head against a wall"; "I threatened to kill my father"; and "I burned a boy on the chest with a cigarette while my mates held him down." Approximately fifty percent of the 1,565 boys were not involved in any violent acts during the six-month period. However, of those who were involved in violence, one hundred eighty-eight (twelve percent) were involved in ten or more acts during the six-month period. When Belson compared the behavior of boys who had higher exposure to televised violence to those who had lower exposure (and had been matched on a wide variety of possible contributing factors), he found that the high-violence viewers were more involved in serious violent behavior. Moreover, he found that serious interpersonal violence is increased by long-term exposure to (in descending order of importance):

1. plays or films in which close personal relationships are a major theme and which feature verbal or physical violence;
2. programs in which violence seems to be thrown in for its own sake or is not necessary to the plot;
3. programs featuring fictional violence of a realistic nature;
4. programs in which the violence is presented as being in a good cause; and
5. violent westerns.³⁹

In summarizing the extent of the effects, we agree with Comstock that there are multiple ways in which television and film

38. WILLIAM BELSON, *TELEVISION VIOLENCE AND THE ADOLESCENT BOY* (1978).

39. *Id.*

violence influence the viewer.⁴⁰ Comstock suggests four dimensions: *Efficacy* relates to whether the violence on the screen is rewarded or punished; *Normativeness* refers to whether the screen violence is justified or lacks any consequences; *Pertinence* describes the extent to which the screen violence has some similarity to the viewer's social context; and *Suggestibility* concerns the predisposing factors of arousal or frustration.⁴¹ Drawing on these four dimensions, Comstock suggests situations for which we have experimental evidence of the effects of violence in film or television:

1. rewarding or failure to punish those who act aggressively;⁴²
2. viewing the aggressive behavior as justified;⁴³
3. identifying cues in the portrayed violence which have similarity to those in real life;⁴⁴
4. recognizing similarity between the aggressor and the viewer;⁴⁵
5. strongly identifying with the aggressor, such as imagining being in their place;⁴⁶
6. behavior that is motivated to inflict harm or injury;⁴⁷
7. lowering the consequences of violence, such as no pain, sorrow, or remorse;⁴⁸
8. violence that is portrayed more realistically or seen as a real event;⁴⁹
9. violence which is not subjected to critical commentary;⁵⁰

40. GEORGE COMSTOCK & HAEJUNG PAIK, *TELEVISION AND THE AMERICAN CHILD* (1991).

41. *Id.* at 254-55.

42. *E.g.*, Bandura et al., *Imitation*, *supra* note 23.

43. *E.g.*, Berkowitz & Rawlings, *supra* note 24.

44. *E.g.*, Edward Donnerstein & Leonard Berkowitz, *Victim Reactions in Aggressive Erotic Films as a Factor in Violence Against Women*, 41 *J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL.* 710-24 (1981).

45. *E.g.*, Mary A. Rosekrans, *Imitation in Children as a Function of Perceived Similarities to a Social Model of Vicarious Reinforcement*, 7 *J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL.* 305-17 (1967).

46. *E.g.*, Charles W. Turner & Leonard Berkowitz, *Identification with Film Aggressor [Covert Role Taking] and Reactions to Film Violence*, 21 *J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL.* 256-64 (1972).

47. *E.g.*, Russell G. Geen & David Stonner, *Context Effects in Observed Violence*, 25 *J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL.* 145-50 (1973).

48. *E.g.*, Berkowitz & Rawlings, *supra* note 24.

49. *E.g.*, Charles K. Atkin, *Effects of Realistic TV Violence vs. Fictional Violence on Aggression*, 60 *JOURNALISM Q.* 615-21 (1983).

50. *E.g.*, Herbert M. Lefcourt et al., *Anticipated Social Censure and Aggression-Conflict as Mediators of Response to Aggression Induction*, 70 *J. SOC. PSYCHOL.* 251-63 (1966).

10. portrayals which seem to please the viewer;⁵¹
11. portrayals of violence that are unrelieved by other events;⁵²
12. violence that includes physical abuse in addition to or in comparison with verbal aggression;⁵³
13. violence that leaves the viewer in a state of arousal;⁵⁴
14. when viewers are predisposed to act aggressively;⁵⁵ and
15. individuals who are in a state of frustration after they view violence, either from an external source or from the viewing itself.⁵⁶

VII. CONCLUSION

Let me end by saying that the impact of television violence on children, and adults for that matter, turns on the four basic principles enunciated by George Comstock: "efficacy," "pertinence," "normativeness," and "suggestibility."⁵⁷ These principles will determine whether you as an individual are going to be influenced, and the extent to which you are going to be influenced by violence on television. These, of course, are discussions of the rather unusual cases which have been acted out and have some direct link in some very dramatic programs such as *The Deer Hunter*, as we discussed earlier, or *The Doomsday Flight*.

Thus, although there is continuing discussion about the interpretation of research evidence concerning the impact of television violence, most researchers would agree with the conclusion contained in the report by the National Institute of Mental Health⁵⁸ which suggests a developing consensus among members of the research community that:

[V]iolence on television does lead to aggressive behavior by children and teenagers who watch the programs. This conclusion is based on laboratory experiments and on field studies. Not all chil-

51. E.g., Ekman et al., *supra* note 32.

52. LIEBERMAN RESEARCH, CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO VIOLENT MATERIAL ON TELEVISION—REPORT TO THE AMERICAN BROADCASTING COMPANY (1975).

53. E.g., *id.*

54. E.g., Dolf Zillman, *Excitation Transfer in Communication-Mediated Aggressive Behavior*, 7 J. EXPERIMENTAL SOC. PSYCHOL. 419-34 (1971).

55. E.g., Donnerstein & Berkowitz, *supra* note 44.

56. E.g., Stephen Worchel et al., *The Effects of Commercial Interruption of Violent and Nonviolent Films on Viewer's Subsequent Aggressiveness*, 12 J. EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOL. 220-32 (1976).

57. COMSTOCK & PAIK, *supra* note 40.

58. 1 NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH, *supra* note 6.

dren become aggressive, of course, but the correlations between violence and aggression are positive. In magnitude, television violence is as strongly correlated with aggressive behavior as any other behavioral variable that has been measured. The research question has moved from asking whether or not there is an effect, to seeking explanations for the effect.⁵⁹

While the effects of television violence are not simple and straightforward, meta-analyses and reviews of a large body of research⁶⁰ suggest that there are clear reasons for concern and caution with regard to the impact of televised violence. To be sure, there are many factors that influence the relationship between viewing violence and aggressive behavior, and there has been considerable debate about the nature of these influences and the extent of concern about televised violence.⁶¹ Nevertheless, it is clear that there is a considerable

59. *Id.* at 6.

60. HUSTON ET AL., *supra* note 6; Susan Hearold, *A Synthesis of 1043 Effects of Television on Social Behavior*, in 1 PUBLIC COMMUNICATION AND BEHAVIOR 65-133 (George Comstock ed., 1986); Wendy Wood et al., *Effects of Media Violence on Viewers' Aggression in Unconstrained Social Interaction*, 109 PSYCHOL. BULL. 371-83 (1991).

61. 1 AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, *supra* note 9; AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, *Violence on Television* (1985); COMSTOCK & PAIK, *supra* note 38; JOHN C. CONDRY, *THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TELEVISION* (1989); EDWARD DONNERSTEIN ET AL., *THE QUESTION OF PORNOGRAPHY: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS* (1987); GROUP FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF PSYCHIATRY, *THE CHILD AND TELEVISION DRAMA: THE PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACT OF CUMULATIVE VIEWING* (1982); HUSTON ET AL., *supra* note 8; J. RONALD MILAVSKY ET AL., *TELEVISION AND AGGRESSION: A PANEL STUDY* (1992); JOHN P. MURRAY, *TELEVISION AND YOUTH: 25 YEARS OF RESEARCH AND CONTROVERSY* (1980); 1 NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH, *supra* note 6; 2 NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH, *supra* note 6; NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL, *supra* note 6; SURGEON GENERAL'S SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON TELEVISION AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOR, *supra* note 4; *TELEVISION AND THE AGGRESSIVE CHILD: A CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISON* (L. Rowell Huesmann & Leonard D. Eron eds., 1986); Brandon S. Centerwall, *Television and Violence: The Scale of the Problem and Where to Go from Here*, 267 JAMA 3059-63 (1992); Thomas D. Cook et al., *The Implicit Assumptions of Television Research: An Analysis of the 1982 NIMH Report on Television and Behavior*, 47 PUB. OPINION Q. 161-201 (1983); Jonathan L. Freedman, *Effect of Television Violence on Aggressiveness*, 96 PSYCHOL. BULL. 227-46 (1984); Jonathan L. Freedman, *Television Violence and Aggression: A Rejoinder*, 100 PSYCHOL. BULL. 372-78 (1986); Lynette Friedrich-Cofer & Aletha C. Huston, *Television Violence and Aggression: The Debate Continues*, 100 PSYCHOL. BULL. 364-71 (1986); William J. McGuire, *The Myth of Massive Media Impact: Savagings and Salvagings*, in 1 PUBLIC COMMUNICATION AND BEHAVIOR 173-257 (George Comstock ed., 1986); John P. Murray, *Television and Violence: Implications of the Surgeon General's Research Program*, 28 AM. PSYCHOLOGIST 472-78 (1973); John P. Murray & Susan Kippax, *From the Early Window to the Late Night Show: International Trends in the Study of Television's Impact on Children and Adults*, in 12 ADVANCES IN EXPERIMENTAL SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY 253-320 (Leonard Berkowitz ed., 1979).

amount of violence on television, and that this violence on the small screen may translate into changes in attitudes, values, or behavior on the part of both younger and older viewers.

Although there are differing views on the impact of television violence, one very strong summary is provided by Eron⁶² in his recent Congressional testimony:

There can no longer be any doubt that heavy exposure to televised violence is one of the causes of aggressive behavior, crime and violence in society. The evidence comes from both the laboratory and real-life studies. Television violence affects youngsters of all ages, of both genders, at all socio-economic levels and all levels of intelligence. The effect is not limited to children who are already disposed to being aggressive and is not restricted to this country. The fact that we get this same finding of a relationship between television violence and aggression in children in study after study, in one country after another, cannot be ignored. The causal effect of television violence on aggression, even though it is not very large, exists. It cannot be denied or explained away. We have demonstrated this causal effect outside the laboratory, in real-life, among many different children. We have come to believe that a vicious cycle exists in which television violence makes children more aggressive and these aggressive children turn to watching more violence to justify their own behavior.⁶³

Additionally, the recent report by the American Psychological Association Task Force on Television and Society⁶⁴ notes that: "the behavior patterns established in childhood and adolescence are the foundation for lifelong patterns manifested in adulthood."⁶⁵

Furthermore, the recent summary released in August 1993, of the American Psychological Association ("APA") Commission on Violence and Youth⁶⁶ confirms the findings noted above and reaffirms the need to consider ways to reduce the level of violence in all media. In particular, the APA Commission suggests the development of rating systems for television programs and videotapes that would move beyond the existing rating system used by the Motion Picture

62. Leonard Eron, *The Impact of Televised Violence: Testimony on Behalf of the American Psychological Association Before the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs* (June 18, 1992) (on file with the author).

63. *Id.* at 1.

64. HUSTON ET AL., *supra* note 8.

65. *Id.* at 57.

66. 1 AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, *supra* note 9.

Association of America ("MPAA") by focusing on more relevant behavioral descriptors and indicators of potential harm to children and youth. Other organizations, such as Media Scope, have also suggested reviews of the rating system in the context of experiences in other countries where ratings are more attuned to the special needs of children.⁶⁷ In addition to ratings issues, the APA Commission directed two strong recommendations for policy change to the Federal Communications Commission:

We call upon the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to review, as a condition for license renewal, the programming and outreach efforts and accomplishments of television stations in helping to solve the problem of youth violence. This recommendation is consistent with the research evidence indicating television's potential to broadcast stations to "serve the educational and informational needs of children," both in programming and in outreach activities designed to enhance the educational value of programming. We also call on the FCC to institute rules that would require broadcasters, cable operators and other telecasters to avoid programs containing an excessive amount of dramatized violence during "child viewing hours" between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m.⁶⁸

To be sure, most of the research reviewed above is based upon a broad conception of media influence rooted in social learning theory. There are also alternative conceptions of media influence and viewer response, such as uses and gratifications theory,⁶⁹ which place greater emphasis on the active role of the viewer in determining the effects of media through selective use. Additionally, there are a number of scholars who have offered alternative interpretations of some of the research on television violence. For example, Thomas Cook and his colleagues⁷⁰ point out some cautionary notes in interpreting the range of studies reviewed by the National Institute of Mental Health in its 1982 report, entitled *Television and Behavior*.⁷¹ William McGuire expressed strong concern about the overemphasis placed upon the

67. JOEL FEDERMAN, *FILM AND TELEVISION RATINGS: AN INTERNATIONAL ASSESSMENT* (1993).

68. 1 AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, *supra* note 9, at 77-78.

69. Elihu Katz et al., *Uses and Gratifications Research*, 37 *PUB. OPINION Q.* 509-23 (1974); Susan Kippax & John P. Murray, *Using the Mass Media: Need Gratification and Perceived Utility*, 7 *COMM. RES.* 335-60 (1980).

70. Cook et al., *supra* note 61.

71. 1 NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH, *supra* note 6.

powerful effects of television.⁷² These are important tempering views which need to be understood in the context of the large body of research findings noted above. However, one must not dismiss the extensive, cumulative evidence of potential harmful effect associated with viewing violence in film, video, and television.

72. McGuire, *supra* note 61.

