

Psychologists explore public policy and effects of media violence on children

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Although hundreds of studies link media violence to aggression in children and adolescents, most public policy attempts to reduce children's media violence exposure in the U.S. have failed. Efforts to restrict children's access to violent video games have been struck down by the courts as infringing on children's First Amendment rights.

Three Iowa State University psychologists have authored a new study that reviews the literature on children's exposure to media violence and assesses the lack of effective public policy response to curb the risks. They also recommend more effective public policy strategies in the future.

ISU Assistant Professor of Psychology Douglas Gentile, Distinguished Professor of Psychology Craig Anderson, and psychology graduate student Muniba Saleem collaborated on the paper, titled "Public Policy and the Effects of Media on Children." It appears in the debut issue of the *Journal of Social Issues and Policy Review*.

"There are far more public policy options available than have yet been explored," said Gentile. "Public policy isn't just about legislation. We typically only think about writing laws, but many other opportunities exist for effective policy. A large part of the motivation for this article is to try to make it clear that more can be done than has previously been tried, particularly in these political times when many presidential candidates are talking about possible public policy options."

The ISU researchers identified four reasons why past public policy efforts to curb children's exposure to media violence have failed:

-- An apparent gap between what scientific findings suggest and what the U.S. courts and society understand, partially due to different conceptions of causality used by scientists and the legal system

-- Confusion about scientific findings in court, partly due to opposing "expert" testimony -- such as video game industry "experts" who would not be considered by the scientific community as real experts on media violence

-- Different standards of causality applied by courts than by most medical and behavioral scientists, and these standards change depending on the type of legal issue. In particular, U.S. courts are appropriately conservative about regulating freedom of speech because it is at the core of democracy.

-- Lack of precedent. Legislation to restrict access is unlikely to survive First Amendment challenges, because courts rely on precedent. They are unlikely to rule differently until enough time has passed for new research to be conducted and new evidence presented.

There are also reasons why the public hasn't called for more preventative measures.

"One reason is what's called 'the third-person effect' -- that it's a lot easier to notice these types of effects on other people rather than in ourselves and those closest to us. So most parents don't think media violence affects their kids," Gentile said. "That's partly because media violence effects accumulate slowly and people aren't good at detecting small changes -- even though those changes could be big by the end.

"Another reason is that the news media primarily focus on violent media effects in terms of atrocities like Columbine," Anderson said. "This confusion about equating media violence with extreme atrocities allows people to think that there are no effects on them because we all know that we've watched lots of media violence and never gone on a shooting rampage, but that's not where we should look for the effects. The effects are more subtle. In order to do something seriously violent, one must have multiple risk factors for aggression – media violence is only one risk factor, and it's not the largest one. It's also not the smallest."

According to Gentile, much public policy action has been taken on media violence in reaction to such major tragedies. "That's a knee-jerk reaction in terms of public policy," he said. "And that's probably not how we should make public policy because it only focuses on part of the puzzle."

The authors suggest several public policy alternatives. The first is to provide a public forum for research to be discussed and potential solutions debated to provide legislators an avenue for translating scientific research into publicly accessible language. It may also prompt legislators to regulate better the information provided to parents through media ratings.

They report several serious problems with the U.S. ratings systems as they currently exist, with multiple studies suggesting that the ratings are neither reliable nor valid.

"Perhaps the single most effective policy that could be created to help parents manage children's media would be to mandate the creation of one universal rating system that could be used for all media, including TV, movies, video games, and recorded music," they wrote.

The ISU researchers recommend that helpful policy initiatives could be

instituted at the school, district, state, or federal levels for implementing a set of media literacy standards for children.

They demonstrate how public policy regarding children's media could be successfully implemented below the federal level, and by non-governmental entities. For example, they suggest that the national or state chapters of the American Academy of Pediatrics could create policies that require pediatricians to be trained about the research about positive and negative media effects, and to provide parents with that information during well-child visits.

Source: Iowa State University

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