

Have LEGO toys become more violent over time?

June 28 2016, by Andreas Vilhelmsson



LEGO Star Wars. Credit: Lego.com

When I think of the Danish company LEGO, the first image that comes to mind is their classical LEGO brick, and I am sure I am not the only one. This simple but advanced toy was designed to spur children's imagination and creativity by allowing them to build almost anything by putting bricks together, with or without instruction. Today, LEGO is the world's largest toy maker and their products have come a long way from

the original LEGO brick of my childhood to [branded toy collections](#) for popular franchises, such as the Star Wars series, taking over toy stores. LEGO's popularity has even culminated in a [2014 film](#) that anthropomorphize the toy collection.

Recently, a *PLOS ONE* article with a creative research focus received substantial attention from many news outlets, including [Foreign Policy](#), [The Guardian](#), [The Atlantic](#), and even received coverage in Sweden. The researchers investigated if LEGO products have become more violent over time. When I was a child growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, LEGO had always foremost been regarded as a nonviolent toy, but apparently there is some [evidence](#) that the [toys](#) are becoming increasingly weaponized over time. In order to pinpoint exactly how violent LEGO products have become, the researchers conducted two types of studies. First, they analyzed the frequency of weapon bricks in LEGO sets produced over time. Second, researchers empirically investigated how the perceived violence of LEGO products has changed through an assessment of LEGO product catalogs between 1978–2014.

By combining a serious issue like violence and weapons with a seemingly innocent toy, such as LEGO bricks, you suddenly have a creative article destined to garner attention. Typically, discussions of the impacts of violence on childhood development surrounds [violent video games and their potential link to aggressive behavior](#). The public generally considers LEGO to be a family-friendly company with products intended to [inspire children through creative play](#), and is rarely discussed in the context of violence.

But, as the authors discovered, LEGO products have become more violent over time. Today, 30% of all LEGO sets contain at least one weapon brick, and the chances of observing violence in a LEGO catalog pages has increased steadily by 19% per year since 1973. This research brings to light a contradiction to LEGO's policy: Their [products aim to](#)

[discourage pretend violence as a primary play incentive](#), yet there is an annual increase in weapon bricks LEGO produces.

The emphasis on violence in terms of weaponized toy sets is not exclusive to LEGO. I believe the evolution of LEGO products reflects an increasingly violent world in arms. The sheer volume of international transfers of major weapons has grown continuously since 2004, and rose by 14% between 2006–2010 and 2011–2015, according to [new data](#) on international arms transfers published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). The spike in the weapons trade is likely correlated with the spike in conflict globally. Today, more than [65 million](#) refugees have been displaced, [the highest number since the Second World War](#), and [125 million people are currently affected by humanitarian emergencies](#), which range from armed conflicts to disease outbreaks and natural disasters. Since early 2011, the main reason for the acceleration of armed conflicts with accompanying refugees and migrants has been the war in Syria, [now the world's single-largest driver of displacement](#), but major conflicts span the globe.

Along with these conflicts comes terrorism. Between 2013 and 2014, [deaths from terrorism increased by 80%, resulting in 32,000 casualties](#). Seventy-eight percent of all deaths and 57% of all attacks occurred in just five countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan and Syria. The terrorist groups [Boko Haram and ISIL](#) were jointly responsible for 51% of all claimed global fatalities from terrorism in 2014.

Today, not even health care facilities and humanitarian organizations are immune from violence. As discussed on MSF Scientific Days, attacks on healthcare facilities and health workers in emergency settings between 2014 and 2015 killed 959 people and injured 1561. The recent attacks on [Médecins Sans Frontières \(MSF\)](#) medical facilities in Afghanistan and [Yemen](#), which killed MSF staff, have put the spotlight on this disturbing development, where health workers are not even safe from

'friendly fire'.

The increase in attacks on health care workers and health facilities is both tragic and worrisome, since hospitals, health workers and patients in war zones are supposed to be protected by [international humanitarian law](#). If [health workers](#) are under attack and cannot do work during armed conflicts, this means that the [rules of war](#) are put out of play. Without wartime parameters, I feel we risk giving up the respect for the very essence of life itself.

Violence must never become the natural state, and we all must discuss, scrutinize and report on this negative cultural development. The *PLOS ONE* study investigating a toy company making building bricks for children is a creative way of addressing this cultural shift.

More information: Christoph Bartneck et al. Have LEGO Products Become More Violent?, *PLOS ONE* (2016). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0155401](#)

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