

Violent video games blamed more often for school shootings by white perpetrators

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People are more likely to blame violent video games as a cause of school shootings by white perpetrators than by African American perpetrators, possibly because of racial stereotypes that associate minorities with

violent crime, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

Researchers analyzed more than 200,000 news articles about 204 mass shootings over a 40-year period and found that [video](#) games were eight times more likely to be mentioned when the [shooting](#) occurred at a [school](#) and the perpetrator was a white male than when the shooter was an African American male. Another experiment conducted with [college students](#) had similar findings.

"When a violent act is carried out by someone who doesn't match the racial stereotype of what a violent person looks like, people tend to seek an external explanation for the [violent behavior](#)," said lead researcher Patrick Markey, Ph.D., a psychology professor at Villanova University.

"When a white child from the suburbs commits a horrific violent act like a school shooting, then people are more likely to erroneously blame video games than if the child was African American."

The research was published in the journal *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*.

Numerous scientific studies have not found a link between violent video games and mass shootings, but some politicians and media coverage often cite violent video games as a potential cause, particularly for school shootings. Video games are often associated with young people even though the average age of players is in the 30s, Markey said.

"Video games are often used by lawmakers and others as a red herring to distract from other potential causes of school shootings," Markey said.

"When a shooter is a young white male, we talk about violent video games as a cause for the shooting. When the shooter is an older man or African American, we don't."

In one experiment in this study, 169 college students (65 percent female, 88 percent white) read a mock newspaper article describing a fictional mass shooting by an 18-year-old male youth who was described as an avid fan of violent video games. Half of the participants read an article featuring a small mug shot of a white shooter while the other half saw a mug shot of an African American shooter. In their responses to a questionnaire, participants who read the article with the photo of a white shooter were significantly more likely to blame video games as a factor in causing the teen to commit the school shooting than participants who saw an African American shooter.

Participants who didn't play video games also were more likely to blame violent video games for school shootings. Participants were asked if the perpetrator's "social environment" contributed to the school shooting, but their responses to that question didn't affect the findings.

The researchers also created a large database by collecting 204,796 news articles about 204 mass shootings in the United States dating from 1978 (a year after the release of the Atari 2600 [game](#) console) to 2018. A mass shooting was defined as having three or more victims, not including the shooter, that wasn't identifiably related to gangs, drugs or organized crime. The analysis found different results for school shootings than mass shootings in other settings. Video games were mentioned in 6.8 percent of the articles about school shootings with white perpetrators, compared with 0.5 percent for school shootings with African American perpetrators. However, video games were mentioned at essentially the same frequency in [news articles](#) about [mass shootings](#) at other locations for white shooters (1.8 percent) or African American shooters (1.7 percent).

In 2015, the APA Council of Representatives issued a [resolution](#) based on a task force report about violent video games. The resolution noted that more than 90 percent of children in the United States played video

games, and 85 percent of video games on the market contained some form of violence. The task force's review of relevant research found an association between violent [video game](#) exposure and some aggressive behavior but insufficient research linking violent video games to lethal violence. However, some recent research hasn't found any link between violent video games and aggressive behavior.

Blaming violent video games for school shootings by white perpetrators could be a sign of a larger racial issue where African American perpetrators are assigned a greater degree of culpability for their crimes, which could lead to unfair treatment in the justice system, Markey said.

More information: "He Does Not Look Like Video Games Made Him Do It: Racial Stereotypes and School Shootings," by Patrick M. Markey, PhD, and Erica B. Slotter, PhD, Villanova University; James D. Ivory, PhD, Virginia Tech; Mary Beth Oliver, PhD, Pennsylvania State University; and Omar Maglalang, BA, University of Houston; *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, published online September 16, 2019.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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