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Study Ties Television Viewing To Aggression Adults Affected As Well As Children

By Shankar Vedantam

Teenagers and young adults who watch even as little as an hour of television a day are more likely to get into fights, commit assaults or engage in other types of violence later in life, according to a provocative new study.

The more television people watch, the more likely it appears that they will later become violent, an effect that researchers argued bolsters the case that it is television that causes the aggression.

The study tracked the impact of television on violence among more than 700 young people over 17 years. Previous studies have found an association between television violence and aggression. But this is the longest study to track the consequences of TV viewing of any kind and the first to show that adults are affected as surely as children, the researchers said. If the study had examined violent programming alone, the link would have been more dramatic, they said."

The correlation between violent media and aggression is larger than the effect that wearing a condom has on decreasing the risk of HIV," said Brad Bushman, a professor of psychology at Iowa State University at Ames who wrote a commentary accompanying the study in today's issue of the journal *Science*. "It's larger than the correlation between exposure to lead and decreased IQ levels in kids. It's larger than the effects of exposure to asbestos. It's larger than the effect of secondhand smoke on cancer."

The findings renewed debate over whether media violence contributes to violent behavior.

Television and entertainment proponents said there was a long history of conflicting results on the issue. "The consensus is there is no consensus," said Dennis Wharton, a spokesman for the National Association of Broadcasters. The National Cable and Telecommunications Association said in a statement that it supports "responsible television viewing" and that its ratings system allows viewers to block violent programs.

Jonathan Freedman, a psychologist at the University of Toronto, said the study had failed to prove that television watching was the cause of the aggressiveness. "It has nothing to do with TV -- it has to do with lifestyle," he said. "People who watch more than three hours of TV are different than those who watch less than an hour."

The researchers said they tried to account for that possibility by statistically eliminating the effects of parental neglect, poverty, dangerous neighborhoods, a history of psychiatric disorder and other independent risk factors for aggression. Although all the participants were from upstate New York, the researchers said the group was broadly representative of the northeastern United States.

For the study, the researchers interviewed 707 teenagers about the amount of television they watched. In 1983, the average age of the group was 14. Eight years later, the scientists correlated the television statistics with police and FBI records of violence, and interviews with the participants.

Of the group that watched less than an hour of TV a day, 5.7 percent had committed a violent act that resulted in serious injury, such as a broken bone. Among those who watched one to three hours, 18.4 percent had been violent. Of those who watched more than three hours a day, the rate of aggression was 25.3 percent.

The researchers also re-interviewed the group about their television habits and followed up after another eight years. While 1.2 percent of the adults who watched less than one hour per day had committed a violent act, 10.8 percent of those who watched three or more hours had inflicted a bruise, scar or other assault. Men tended to be more likely to be violent than women.

The only definitive way to establish a causal link between television content and the violence would be to conduct an experiment where some people are randomly made to watch more TV for several years while others are made to watch less, the researchers said."

To force people to watch a certain amount of TV for a lengthy period would not be permissible," said Jeffrey Johnson, a Columbia University clinical psychologist and the lead researcher. "It's analogous to research on cigarette smoking. . . . You couldn't force people to smoke a lot and see if they got cancer."

Nielsen Media Research reports the average American household has the television on for more than eight hours a day. Children and teens between 2 and 17 years old watch TV more than three hours per day. Adult men watch more than four hours, and adult women more than five.

Television violence may desensitize viewers, or depictions of violence without its real-life consequences may prompt viewers to assume that it is acceptable, the researchers speculated.

George Gerbner, who has done pioneering work on television violence and is dean emeritus of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, argued that the biggest consequence of TV violence was insecurity, not aggression.

Watching programs about violent crime on dark streets, for instance, does not turn people into muggers -- it makes them fear becoming victims. Even as violent crime in American society has declined, he said, heavy television viewing was more likely to make the viewers believe they lived in an unsafe world.

"They may accept and even welcome repressive measures such as more jails, capital punishment, harsher sentences -- measures that have never reduced crime but never fail to get votes -- if that promises to relieve their anxieties," he wrote. "That is the deeper dilemma of violence-laden television."