

## Analysis of Adolescent Audiences

A new analysis of a national survey of 2,023 adolescents in grades 7 through 12 revealed several potential audiences that could be targeted in future anti-violence campaigns.

- A MAJORITY OF AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS HAVE HAD PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH VIOLENCE.

More than half (52%) of the adolescents surveyed reported having been involved in violence, either by seeing, being in, or starting a fight, or by carrying a weapon within the previous year. Males were more likely than females to report having experience with violence.

- EXPERIENCE WITH VIOLENCE DIFFERS DRAMATICALLY AMONG ADOLESCENTS.

Seven groups of adolescents were identified based on their previous experience with weapons and fighting: *Aggressors*, *Defenders*, *Combatants*, *Carriers*, *Fist-fighters*, *Observers*, and *Avoiders*. These groups differed also by gender, family background, attitudes toward violence, and their willingness to participate in anti-violence programs in their communities. Summary profiles of these groups are presented in Table 9.

- ONE RELATIVELY SMALL GROUP OF ADOLESCENTS HAS HAD THE MOST EXTENSIVE EXPERIENCE WITH FIGHTING AND WEAPONS, BUT MAY NOT BE THE MOST RESPONSIVE TO ANTI-VIOLENCE MEDIA MESSAGES.

About 5% of the adolescents surveyed reported having carried weapons, and having started and been in fights. This group that we labeled *Aggressors* is predominantly male (87%), and is the most likely of all the segments to: 1) get hit at home by parents, 2) live in a home in which no adult has a full time job, 3) think that adults look down on them, and 4) have turned to gangs for respect and support. Since media messages typically are more effective in increasing awareness and reinforcing rather than changing existing behavior, anti-violence media campaigns aimed at this group that already exhibits a pattern of violent behavior may not be effective. Media campaigns directed at parents of young children that encourage nonviolent discipline and conflict resolution in the home may be more effective in reducing violence among this segment in the future.

- YOUTH WHO HAVE HAD SOME BUT NO EXTENSIVE EXPERIENCE WITH VIOLENCE CAN BE DIVIDED INTO FOUR AUDIENCE SEGMENTS THAT MIGHT RESPOND TO MEDIA MESSAGES DESIGNED ESPECIALLY FOR THEM.

*Defenders* (4% of the sample) haven't started fights in the past year, but they have been in fights and have carried weapons. They are almost as distrusting of adults as *Aggressors*, and a number find gangs attractive. *Defenders* are most likely to say police don't like people their age. Although a small audience segment, this group is a potentially important target audience because they are carrying weapons, apparently to defend themselves. Media messages aimed at this segment might be effective if they showed that the weapon carrier is likely to be the victim of his own weapon, and if alternative conflict resolution strategies are modeled. Adults should be portrayed as trusting and respecting of youth.

*Combatants* have started and been in fights, but haven't carried weapons. At 10% of the sample, they could be an important target audience, and probably would benefit from a campaign that reinforced their non-weapon carrying behavior, and modeled alternatives to fighting to resolve conflict.

TABLE 9

## Potential Adolescent Target Audiences for Anti-Violence Campaigns

AUDIENCES		CHARACTERISTICS	
<b>AGGRESSORS (5%):</b> carried weapons, started and been in fights.	⇒	Almost all males.	
	⇒	Most likely to experience violence in their homes.	
	⇒	Most feel violence is best way to solve problems.	
	⇒	Many feel gangs are "like family."	
<b>DEFENDERS (4%):</b> carried weapons, been in fights.	⇒	Three-fourths male.	
	⇒	Live in relatively dangerous neighborhoods.	
	⇒	Many turn to gangs for support and protection.	
	⇒	Most distrust adults.	
<b>COMBATANTS (10%):</b> been in fights, started fights.	⇒	Two-thirds male.	
	⇒	Second most likely to report getting hit by parent.	
	⇒	Most likely to live in a house where no adult has a full-time job.	
<b>CARRIERS (3%):</b> carried weapons, no fighting experience.	⇒	Two-thirds male.	
	⇒	Most feel safe at home but not on their own block.	
	⇒	Many worry about drive-by shootings.	
	⇒	Most are optimistic about the future.	
<b>FIST-FIGHTERS (18%):</b> been in fights, but did not start fights.	⇒	Two-thirds male.	
	⇒	Most feel safe at school.	
	⇒	Most are trusting of adults, optimistic about futures.	
	⇒	Most are willing to participate in anti-violence programs.	
<b>OBSERVERS (12%):</b> witnessed a fight with a weapon.	⇒	Predominantly female.	
	⇒	Some are fearful in their neighborhoods and don't trust police.	
	⇒	Most have family support, expect adults to respect them.	
<b>AVOIDERS (48%):</b> never been in or seen fights.	⇒	Two-thirds female.	
	⇒	Lowest levels of fear and highest levels of home stability.	
	⇒	Most have family support, expect adults to respect them.	
	⇒	Most willing to volunteer in community anti-violence programs.	

*Carriers*, a proportionately small (about 3%), ethnically diverse segment, are the least likely to feel safe on their own block or around school. Almost half of this segment worry that they will be the victim of a drive-by shooting. *Carriers* apparently carry guns to protect themselves. They have not started or been in fights. This group might also benefit from a media campaign that showed that weapon carrying is potentially most dangerous for the weapon carrier, and alternative strategies for avoiding violence in their neighborhoods.

*Fist-fighters* (18% of the sample) haven't started fights and don't carry weapons, but they have been in fights. They feel relatively safe in their neighborhoods, but said they would rather watch a fight than walk away or get an adult to stop it. This segment might respond to messages that focus on alternatives to resolving conflict while preserving social status such as intervening in fights or serving as a mediator.

- ALMOST HALF OF AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS REPORT HAVING HAD LITTLE OR NO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH FIGHTING OR WEAPONS WITHIN THE LAST YEAR.

The group we labeled *Avoiders* comprise 48% of American adolescents. Youth in this group are three times more likely than *Aggressors* to say they would walk away if they saw a physical fight among strangers, and were the most likely to say they would try to get an adult to stop the fight. Two-thirds of the *Avoiders* are female. These adolescents report having had no personal experience with violence within the last year. This group has the highest levels of home stability, and lives in neighborhoods in which adolescents are less likely to encounter drug trafficking, crime, and gangs. *Avoiders* are the least likely group to benefit from anti-violence media campaigns, unless the campaign is designed to reinforce their inclination to avoid violence, or encourages their participation in programs designed to reduce violence among other youth.



# **RECOMMENDATIONS**

## **For the Television Industry**

ABOUT PROGRAMMING CONTENT

ABOUT RATINGS AND ADVISORIES

ABOUT ANTI-VIOLENCE MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

## **For Policy Makers**

## **For Parents**



# RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations offered here follow from the findings of the Year 2 report. They address several different audiences: the television industry, public policy-makers, and parents. The recommendations represent the collective views of the researchers at the four university sites.

## For the Television Industry

### About Programming Content

Last year, the study recommended that the television industry pursue creative efforts to change the ways in which violence is typically portrayed. Given that our report was released in February 1996, it would have been difficult for any industry response to our particular study to have affected the findings of our Year 2 report. In order to see change in the future, many people in the television industry will have to make concerted efforts to modify how violence is treated. If large-scale efforts are undertaken, we should expect to see them reflected in our Year 3 report.

Our recommendations are as follows:

**\*PRODUCE MORE PROGRAMS THAT AVOID VIOLENCE; IF A PROGRAM DOES CONTAIN VIOLENCE, KEEP THE NUMBER OF VIOLENT INCIDENTS LOW.**

We do not advocate that all violence be eliminated from television, nor do we profess to know exactly how much is "too much." But we do know that the overall amount of violence on American television has not changed appreciably from 1994-95 to 1995-96. It is still the case that more than half the programs in a composite week of TV contain some violence. Furthermore, most programs with violence feature numerous violent incidents rather than a single scene. Our recommendation is to begin efforts to cut back.

**\*BE CREATIVE IN SHOWING:**

- MORE VIOLENT ACTS BEING PUNISHED.
- MORE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES, BOTH SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM, FOR VIOLENCE.
- MORE ALTERNATIVES TO THE USE OF VIOLENCE IN SOLVING PROBLEMS.
- LESS JUSTIFICATION FOR VIOLENT ACTIONS.

This recommendation recognizes that not all violence is the same; that some portrayals pose more risk to the audience than others. Conveying the message that violence gets punished, that it is not always justified, that there are alternatives to aggression, and that violence causes serious consequences (i.e., pain and suffering) for the victims are all ways to reduce the risk of a negative influence on viewers. We encourage producers to move beyond the "old formula" where violence is presented as a defensible course of action to solve problems, where characters continually get away with such behavior, and where the suffering of victims is seldom shown. Fewer glamorized and sanitized portrayals would significantly reduce the risk for viewers, even if the overall number of violent portrayals were held constant.

**\*WHEN VIOLENCE IS PRESENTED, CONSIDER GREATER EMPHASIS ON A STRONG ANTI-VIOLENCE THEME.**

The use of an anti-violence theme on television continues to be rare. In both Year 1 and Year 2, only 4% of all programs in a typical week employed violence to emphasize an anti-violence message. This is an area where a substantial effort or initiative could make its impact felt clearly and immediately. We encourage the television industry to create more programs that: (1) present alternatives to violent actions throughout the program; (2) show main characters repeatedly discussing the negative consequences of violence; (3) emphasize the physical pain and emotional suffering that results from violence; and (4) show that punishments for violence clearly and consistently outweigh rewards.

**\*PROGRAMMERS SHOULD BE SENSITIVE TO THE TIME OF DAY THAT PROGRAMS CONTAINING VIOLENCE ARE AIRED.**

For example, violent reality programs, especially police programs and kindred non-news entertainment reality shows, should be scheduled in later-evening time blocks; where network-affiliated stations are unable to move programs into late prime time, they should consider moving such fare to late-night time blocks. A substantial number of violent reality programs are scheduled in the 6:00–8:00 p.m. block, and fewer, but still considerable number, in the 3:00–6:00 p.m. after-school block.

**\*WHEN REALITY PROGRAMS PRESENT VIOLENT THEMES, PROGRAMMERS SHOULD INCLUDE EXPERT INFORMATION OR HELPLINES THAT SUGGEST ALTERNATIVE MEANS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION OR OTHER WAYS VIEWERS CAN APPROPRIATELY RESPOND TO VIOLENCE.**

Our report notes some progress on this front in the past year, but still just 11% of violent segments in reality programming included any such information. There is room for improvement.

## **About Ratings and Advisories**

**\*CONSIDER CHANGING THE NEW TELEVISION INDUSTRY RATING SYSTEM BECAUSE SIMILAR AGE-BASED RATINGS HAVE BEEN FOUND TO ATTRACT CHILDREN TO RESTRICTED CONTENT.**

The findings of the Year 2 experiment reconfirm and amplify the problems of age-based ratings that were observed in Year 1. The higher level MPAA ratings (“PG-13” and “R”) made movies more appealing to older children; none of the content-based rating systems showed this unwanted side-effect. Moreover, the higher level MPAA ratings attracted younger children who like to watch television the most and who by their own admission get involved in fights with other children more frequently. Finally, the MPAA rating of “PG-13” was especially attractive to older children who are the biggest fans of violent television.

**\*ENSURE THAT THE NEW RATING SYSTEM IS BASED ON WHAT RESEARCH SHOWS TO BE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF TELEVISION.**

Because research shows the effects of exposure to television differ according to the type of content viewed, and because there has been much more research to date showing the harmful effects of violence than of sex or language, it is important that parents be alerted specifically to the violent content of programs. It is also important that a rating system reflect the types and levels of violent portrayals that pose the most significant risk of negatively affecting children.

For example, this year we have identified the kinds of portrayals that pose the highest degree of risk for the learning of aggression among young viewers. Such portrayals feature an attractive perpetrator engaging in justified violence that goes unpunished and shows minimal consequences. Our findings indicate that a large proportion of these high-risk portrayals for children under 7 years of age are found in children's programming, particularly cartoons. The rating system ought to differentiate these high-risk depictions from those which have a lower level risk.

## **About Anti-Violence Media Campaigns**

### **\*ANTI-VIOLENCE PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS (PSAs) CAN BE BETTER DESIGNED TO MAXIMIZE THEIR IMPACT.**

Narrative PSAs featuring non-celebrity adolescent sources who have had negative experiences with violence may be more effective than celebrity testimonials because adolescents prefer stories rather than preaching, and may not believe celebrities who have been involved with violence.

Depictions of violence in anti-violence PSAs should include realistic consequences, as well as punishment (physical and social) for the perpetrator. PSAs should portray specific, realistic alternatives to violent behavior. In addition, PSAs ought to address behaviors that can lead to violence, such as carrying a gun to school or gang membership. Finally the length of sponsor tags should not overwhelm the anti-violence message.

### **\*PSA MESSAGES SHOULD BE THOROUGHLY PRE-TESTED TO MAXIMIZE THEIR EFFECTIVENESS.**

Many factors must be considered when choosing format, structure, sources, settings, and behavioral recommendations for PSAs. PSA producers should consider violence prevention theory and research, target audience profiles, and formative research and evaluation before designing messages. Prototype messages should be shown to samples of the target group to see if the various components of the message are designed most effectively. Pretesting can be a small percentage cost of production, especially for the more elaborate campaigns, and can significantly increase the effectiveness of the final campaign.

### **\*THOSE WHO CREATE ANTI-VIOLENCE MESSAGES SHOULD RECOGNIZE IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE ADOLESCENT AUDIENCE AND TARGET MESSAGES TOWARD SPECIFIC AUDIENCE SEGMENTS.**

Future media campaigns designed to reduce violence among youth should take into account the divergent experiences and attitudes of the adolescent groupings identified in this study and create messages that directly address the circumstances, fears, beliefs, and behaviors of those target audiences.

### **\*PARENTS MAY BE AN OVERLOOKED AND IMPORTANT TARGET AUDIENCE FOR ANTI-VIOLENCE MESSAGES INTENDED TO REDUCE YOUTH VIOLENCE.**

Adolescents who were most likely to report having started fights also reported the highest incidence of getting hit at home when they did something that made their parents angry. Campaigns aimed at reducing corporal punishment or enhancing parenting skills may therefore have a positive indirect effect of reducing future violence by adolescents in the community.

## For Policy Makers

- \*RECOGNIZE THAT CONTEXT IS AN ESSENTIAL ASPECT OF TELEVISION VIOLENCE AND RELY ON SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE TO IDENTIFY THE CONTEXT FEATURES THAT POSE THE MOST RISK.

Treating all acts of violence as if they were the same disregards a rich body of scientific knowledge about media effects. An appreciation of key contextual factors is crucial for understanding the impact of televised violence on the audience. Our high-risk composite analysis demonstrates that portrayals that are not necessarily explicit but that present violence as attractive, rewarding, and painless pose a significant threat of increasing children's aggressive behavior. At the base of any policy initiative in this realm is the need to define violence and, assuming that not all violence is to be treated equally, to differentiate types of violent depictions that pose the greatest cause for concern.

- \*CONTINUE TO MONITOR THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF VIOLENCE ON TELEVISION.

Evidence of the harmful effects associated with televised violence is well established. The stakes are high in terms of social implications in this realm not so much because of the effects of viewing any one violent program but more because of the fact that most everyone watches TV, most people watch a lot, and most of television contains violence.

## For Parents

Perhaps the most important consumers of this report are the nation's parents. It may take years to alter significantly the profile of violence on television. In contrast, parents can begin immediately to change the way they think about violence on television and the way they make decisions about their children's viewing.

- \*TAKE AN ACTIVE INTEREST IN YOUR CHILDREN'S TELEVISION VIEWING AND WATCH AND DISCUSS PROGRAMS WITH THEM.

Parental involvement in children's viewing is essential. By watching and discussing television with children, parents can prevent many of the harmful effects that can occur and help make viewing a learning experience. For example, children who watch with their parents are better able to interpret story-lines, recognize stereotypes, and discriminate what is real from unreal on television. In this study, children of parents who took a more active role in their television viewing were more likely to avoid programs with restrictive ratings when making their own viewing choices. The recommendations that follow continue to emphasize parental involvement, but focus especially on ways to deal with television violence.

- \*BE AWARE OF THE THREE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH VIEWING TELEVISION VIOLENCE.

Evidence of the potential harmful effects associated with viewing violence on television is well established. The most troubling of these involves children's learning of aggressive attitudes and behaviors. Arguably more pervasive and often under-emphasized are the other two risks associated with television violence: fear and desensitization. An appreciation of these three effects will help parents to recognize the role of television in children's socialization.

**\*CONSIDER THE CONTEXT OF VIOLENT DEPICTIONS IN MAKING VIEWING DECISIONS FOR CHILDREN.**

As demonstrated in both of our reports, not all violent portrayals are the same in terms of their impact on the audience. Some depictions pose greater risks for children than others, and some may even be prosocial. When considering a particular program, think about whether violence is rewarded, whether heroes or good characters engage in violence, whether violence appears to be morally condoned, whether the serious negative consequences of violence are avoided, and whether humor is used. These are the types of portrayals that are most harmful.

**\*CONSIDER A CHILD'S DEVELOPMENTAL LEVEL WHEN MAKING VIEWING DECISIONS.**

Throughout this project, we underscore the importance of the child's developmental level or cognitive ability in making sense of television. Very young children are less able to distinguish fantasy from reality on television. Thus, for preschoolers and younger elementary school children, cartoon violence and fantasy violence cannot be dismissed or exonerated because it is unrealistic. Indeed, younger children identify strongly with superheroes and fantastic cartoon characters, and often learn from and imitate such portrayals. Furthermore, younger children have difficulty connecting non-adjacent scenes together and drawing causal inferences about the plot. Therefore, punishments, pain cues, or serious consequences of violence that are presented later in a plot, well after the violent act, may not be comprehended fully by a young child. For younger viewers, then, it is particularly important that contextual features like punishment and pain be shown within the violent scene, rather than solely at the end of the program.

**\*RECOGNIZE THAT CERTAIN TYPES OF VIOLENT CARTOONS POSE PARTICULARLY HIGH RISK FOR YOUNG CHILDREN'S LEARNING OF AGGRESSION.**

Our findings suggest that certain animated programs can be particularly problematic for younger viewers. We have identified a type of portrayal that we label "high risk" because it contains an array of elements that encourage the learning of aggressive attitudes and behaviors. In particular, a high-risk portrayal for learning is one that features *an attractive character who engages in violence that is condoned and that does not result in any serious consequences to the victim*. Parents of younger children should closely monitor cartoon programming with an eye for this type of portrayal. Parents of older children and adolescents, on the other hand, should review movies and drama programs because these genres are most likely to contain realistic portrayals of the type defined above that pose high risk for more mature viewers.

**\*RECOGNIZE THAT SOME TYPES OF RATINGS MAY MAKE A PROGRAM MORE ATTRACTIVE TO YOUR CHILD.**

The type of rating system now being implemented has been shown to attract many children to restricted programs. This may necessitate greater supervision of your children's viewing, or it may be the source of increased parent-child conflict over viewing choices.

## CREDITS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As with any large and creative undertaking, this study was a collaborative effort involving over two hundred different individuals acknowledged below. Each person enhanced this project in some way, whether through time, ideas, vision, problem solving, or other forms of support and encouragement. One person not on the list, Senator Paul Simon of Illinois, should be singled out for special recognition because the original idea for an independent assessment of violence on television was his.

### NATIONAL TELEVISION VIOLENCE STUDY COUNCIL

#### Members

Trina Menden Anglin  
Philip Barry  
Char Beales  
Belva Davis  
Darlene Chávez  
Charles FitzSimons

Carl Gottlieb  
Felice Levine  
Virginia Markell  
Robert E. McAfee  
E. Michael McCann

Robert T.M. Phillips  
Gene Reynolds  
Donald F. Roberts  
Donald Shifrin  
Barbara C. Stagers  
Brian L. Wilcox

#### Alternates

Joan McCord

Arthur Allan Seidelman

Richard Verdugo

#### Ex Officio

Decker Anstrom

### UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

#### Center for Communication and Social Policy

Marie Baba  
Edward Donnerstein

Joel Federman

Faye Nennig  
Paulina Ospina

#### Senior Researchers

Edward Donnerstein  
Dale Kunkel

Daniel Linz

W. James Potter  
Barbara J. Wilson

#### Graduate Research Assistants

Mike Berry  
Eva Blumenthal

Carrie Colvin  
Stacy L. Smith

#### Undergraduate Research Assistants

##### Coders

Cynthia Beaulieu  
\*Aloha Benedict  
\*Carolyn Bennett

Shawn Flynn  
\*Bill Foderaro  
\*Mandy Fraser

Lorin Merin  
Cristie Marks  
Jennifer Morris

Kim Bennett  
 Carolyn Benton  
 Melanie Blodgett  
 \*Alan Braun  
 Tori Burak  
 Steve Cannon  
 Carrie Carmona  
 Denise Cassuto  
 Bryan Chan  
 Lisa Chin  
 \*Carrie Colvin  
 Joanna Cooper  
 \*Steve Cox  
 Kym Elayda  
 Nancie Fadelli  
 Laura Fila

Catherine Gargaro  
 Liz Goodhue  
 Tara Green  
 Gary Griffiths  
 Jamie Grossman  
 Darby Herrick  
 \*Joy Holman  
 Codie Holroyd  
 Laura Innes  
 \*Chris Ishibashi  
 River Johannsen  
 Shar Kamin  
 Sarah Kochly  
 Brett Lindstrom  
 Bridgette Loyd  
 Diana Malouf

Elizabeth Motamedi  
 Ingrid Nelson  
 Akane Nelson  
 Kristy Parrish  
 Isabelle Ramos  
 Alec Reisner  
 Emma Rollin  
 \*Lori Roudebush  
 Julie Rusher  
 Laura Scott-Monck  
 Jesse Sherman  
 Michelle Sibbitt  
 Jennifer Siewert  
 \*Amy Spaniard  
 Brendan Sullivan  
 Thomas Tiwana

**Reliability**

Amy Hoffman                      \*Julie Robinson

**Data Entry**

Matt Adams  
 Shirley Craven

Veronica Moon  
 Anong Moua  
 \*Lab Supervisor

Carlos Silva  
 \*Nancy Woo

**Community and Organization Research Institute**

Richard Appelbaum  
 Rosanna Brokaw  
 Jeanie Cornet

Sarah Jo Daughters  
 Barbara Herr Harthorn

Jan Jacobson  
 Jerrel Sorensen

**UCSB Artworks**

Steven Brown

**UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, CHAPEL HILL**

**Senior Researchers**

Frank Biocca                      Jane Brown

**Graduate Research Assistants**

Jay M. Bernhardt      Lois Boynton      Greg Makris

**Research Associates**

Gary Gaddy                      Richard Simpson

**Student Videographers**

Jennifer Barker                      Matt Kryder  
Kristi Daughtridge                  Amy Reavis

**Off-Campus Community Advisors**

Katherine Binns    Erin Donovan    Ann Duffett

**UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS, AUSTIN**

**Senior Reseachers**

Wayne Danielson                      Ellen Wartella  
Dominic Lasorsa                        Charles Whitney

**Graduate Research Associates**

Nancy Jennings                      Rafael Lopez  
Marlies Klijn                              Adriana Olivarez

**Coders**

Robert Branum	Andree Kauschke	*Pamela Rivero
Alison Cabral	Julie Lane	Reseanne Simms
Justin Cain	Jay Miller	Hanna Sliz
Henry Elliot	Daniel Pereya	Sarah Jo Stevens
Veronica Garcia	Eloy Perez	Ian Tennant
Angie Hale	Arlene Rivero	Brad Wilson
Amy Herrup		

\*Coding Supervisor

**University Staff**

Anne Reed                      Robert Risher    Jackie Srensky

**UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN, MADISON**

**Senior Researcher**

Joanne Cantor

**Graduate Research Assistants**

Kristen Harrison                      Amy Nathanson

**Interviewers**

Steve Backhaus	Ascan Koerner	Emily Ronning
Linda Frei	Stacy Leidel	Brian Smith
Beth Glinski	Rebecca McAfee	Sheila Sussek
Linda Godbold	Eugenia Peck	Kyle Tusing
Brooke Kincaid	Paisley Pingree-Hawkins	Gina Wegner

**University Staff**

Dave Fritsch                      Debbie Hanson                      Linda Henzl

**Milwaukee School District Administrators and Staff**

Char Guten                      Sylvia Llanas                      Marsha Staum  
Helen Harris                      Donna Ludke                      Theadoll Taylor  
Debra Hightower-Williams      Thomas McGinnity

**MEDIASCOPE, INC.**

**Administration**

William Boyd                      Linda Evans                      David Stoll  
Stephanie Carbone                      Marcy Kelly                      Elena Sweet  
Maisha Closson                      \*Victoria Valice  
\*Taping Coordinator

**Tape Engineers**

Weldon Gordon                      Richard Roraback  
Sandra Pena                      Greg Wiczorek

**Tape Reviewers**

Elizabeth Betts                      Bikki Johnson                      David Rumsey

**NATIONAL CABLE TELEVISION ASSOCIATION**

Helen Dimsdale                      Jill Lockett

To obtain additional copies of this Executive Summary, contact:

**THE CENTER FOR COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL POLICY**

Community and Organization Research Institute (CORI)

University of California, Santa Barbara

Santa Barbara, California 93106

Phone: (805) 893-7879

Fax: (805) 893-7390

E-mail: [ccsp@omni.ucsb.edu](mailto:ccsp@omni.ucsb.edu)

World Wide Web: <http://research.ucsb.edu/cori/ccsp.html>

Executive Summary, National Television Violence Study, Volume 2, 1997 (March)  
60 pages / \$10.00 (p)

To order the full Year 1 or Year 2 report, contact:

**SAGE PUBLICATIONS, INC.**

2455 Teller Road

Thousand Oaks, CA 91320-2218

Phone: (805) 499-9774

Fax: (805) 499-0871

E-mail: [order@sagepub.com](mailto:order@sagepub.com)

World Wide Web: <http://www.sagepub.com>

National Television Violence Study, Volume 1, 1996 (September)  
568 pages / \$69.95 (h) 08013 / \$32.95 (p) (08021)

National Television Violence Study, Volume 2, 1997 (March)  
561 pages / \$69.95 (h) 10875 / \$32.95 (p) (10883)

PUBLISHED BY  
THE CENTER FOR COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL POLICY  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

Cover Design: Ravi Balasuriva, Sage Publications and UCSB Artworks

**PART III**

**RATINGS AND ADVISORIES  
FOR TELEVISION PROGRAMMING  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON STUDY**

**YEAR 2**

**Dr. Joanne Cantor  
Kristen Harrison  
Amy Nathanson**

## SUMMARY

The second year of research on ratings and advisories explored how different rating and advisory systems affect children's interest in programs and movies. It also analyzed the use of ratings and advisories in the composite week of television.

The main experiment involved 374 children between the ages of 5 and 15, from three public schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Children were given booklets presenting choices of programs to view, with the same program receiving different ratings in different booklets. Children voted anonymously for programs they wanted to see later in the session. Eight different rating and advisory systems were tested. We retested the Motion Picture Association (MPAA) ratings and two advisories, "parental discretion advised" and "viewer discretion advised" (with and without the phrase "contains some violent content"). We also included tests of the effects of the violence codes used by some premium cable channels (e.g., "MV: Mild Violence"), the Recreational Software Advisory Council (RSAC) ratings used for video games (e.g., "Violence: Creatures Killed"), and the violence ratings used in Canada in conjunction with early implementation of the V-chip (e.g., "brief violence"). In addition, we tested a rating that simply indicates the age-appropriateness of a program (e.g., "not for kids under 8"), and one that indicates that a program has won various types of awards (e.g., "Teens' Choice Award").

Most of the ratings and advisories did not significantly affect children's interest in programs, but there were a few exceptions. For younger children, "parental discretion advised" increased the interest of boys, but decreased the interest of girls. The phrase "contains some violent content" did not affect children's interest. The only rating system that increased children's eagerness to see programs was the MPAA ratings. Among older children, the more restrictive ratings of "PG-13" and "R" increased a program's attractiveness, and the "G" rating decreased it. Although the MPAA ratings did not affect younger children overall, those who were more aggressive and those who liked watching TV more were attracted by the "R" rating and showed decreased interest in a movie with the "G" rating. The only other significant effect of ratings on children's interest in programs was that of the premium channel violence codes on younger children. These children were *less* interested in a program when it had the content codes of "MV: Mild Violence" and "GV: Graphic Violence" than when it had no rating.

As in Year 1, very few programs were aired with advisories (3%). Premium channels again made heavy use of MPAA ratings and content codes. However, an analysis of movies that had both MPAA ratings and content codes showed that "PG" and "PG-13" were not well differentiated from each other in content. Moreover, both of these ratings represented highly diverse combinations of violence, sex, and adult language.

## INTRODUCTION

The second year of research on ratings and advisories sought to amplify the findings that were reported in the first year. Specifically, we again explored how ratings and advisories are being used on television, and replicated and extended our study of how ratings and advisories affect children's interest in programs and movies.

With the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the questions being investigated at Wisconsin have become of even more urgent public interest. The Act mandates that within two years of passage, new televisions be manufactured with a "V-chip," which will permit the blocking of objectionable content, and that television programs be rated or labeled to provide information that will be readable by the V-chip. Shortly after passage of the Act, entertainment industry executives agreed to develop a rating system that would be implemented in early 1997. The new system was unveiled on December 19, 1996, and was modeled after the Motion Picture Association (MPAA) rating system for movies.

The new system is different in some ways from the MPAA ratings. A separate, two-level rating system is used for programs that are considered to be designed for children ("TV-Y, All Children" and "TV-Y7, Directed to Older Children"). Other programs are designated with one of four ratings: "TV-G, General Audience," "TV-PG, Parental Guidance Suggested," "TV-14, Parents Strongly Cautioned," and "TV-M, Mature Audiences Only." The important similarity between the new ratings and the MPAA ratings is that they both give parental guidelines for viewing by different age groups and do not tell specifically what type of potentially inappropriate content is in the program.

## Chapter 1

### THE IMPACT OF RATINGS AND ADVISORIES ON CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMING CHOICES

The findings of the Year 1 research showed clearly and unequivocally that ratings and advisories can have a significant impact on children's viewing choices in unintended ways. In our research, we found that the frequently used admonition "parental discretion advised" significantly increased the number of boys selecting a program, and the effect was especially strong for older boys (age 10-14). This advisory had no effect on girls' interest in programs, however. In contrast, the label "viewer discretion advised" did not affect boys' tendency to choose a program, but it significantly decreased girls', and particularly younger girls' (age 5-9) interest in viewing it.

The first year of research also showed that children's interest in seeing a movie was strongly affected by the different MPAA ratings "G," "PG," "PG-13," and "R," and the effect again depended on the age and sex of the viewer. For younger girls, interest in the movie decreased as the restrictiveness of its rating increased. For older girls and younger boys, interest peaked with the "PG-13" rating. For all three of these groups, interest in a movie was lowest when it was rated "R." The older boys, however, showed the strongest interest in the movie when it was rated either "PG-13" or "R," and completely avoided the movie when they thought it had a "G" rating.

The Year 2 research sought to extend the generality of these findings in several ways. First, we wanted to replicate these findings with a more ethnically diverse sample than the one that was tested in Madison in Year 1. To accomplish this, the Year 2 experiment was conducted in schools in Milwaukee, where there is a much wider mix of ethnic groups. Second, the research was designed to test the effects of other existing or proposed rating systems on children's interest in programs. Since the results of the Year 1 research brought out some unintended and undesired consequences of both "parental discretion advised" and the more restrictive MPAA ratings, it seemed only fair to subject other rating systems to the same test, to determine whether they, too, would increase some children's interest in restricted programs.

In addition to retesting the parental and viewer discretion advisories and the MPAA ratings, we included tests of the effects of the violence codes used by some premium cable channels, the Recreational Software Advisory Council (RSAC) ratings used for video games, and the violence ratings used in Canada in conjunction with early implementation of the V-chip. In addition, we tested two types of ratings that have been discussed publicly but are not currently in use: one that simply indicates the age

appropriateness of a program and another that indicates that a program has won various types of awards.

Beyond testing the effects of each rating system on children's desire to see a program, we attempted to gather further information to explain the reasons behind any observed effects. Two possible rationales suggested themselves for children's increased interest in programs with advisories and restrictive ratings (see Cantor, Harrison, & Krmar, in press). One rationale could be called the "forbidden fruit" hypothesis, which involves the psychological notion of "reactance" (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Reactance theory posits that when people perceive that their freedom is being restricted, they are motivated to restore their freedom by performing the restricted behavior. This process has been invoked by Bushman (Bushman & Stack, 1996) to explain the results he observed when college students showed increased interest in movies with warning labels. It is possible that in the Year 1 experiment, those children who showed more interest in programs labeled "parental discretion advised" and movies with the more restrictive MPAA ratings were reacting against these implied threats to their freedom of choice. It may well be, then, that these ratings are perceived as saying "this is not for you," or "this is not for kids," or "you're too young to see this."

The other explanation, which we will refer to as the "information hypothesis," contends that restrictive ratings and advisories simply provide information about content. According to this reasoning, these labels imply that a violent show has more violence or more intense violence than one without a label. Therefore, those viewers who want to see violence choose fare with these labels to obtain access to the content they desire. It may be, then, that programs advertised with advisories and more restrictive ratings are sought out by some children because they are expected to be more violent.

The findings of Year 1 provided some data that could be used to evaluate these two rationales. At the end of our main experiment, we asked children to rate the advisories and ratings according to the type of content they expected in programs associated with them, and in terms of the meanings they understood in the ratings. These results provided more support for the "forbidden fruit" hypothesis than for the information hypothesis. Children's interpretations of the MPAA ratings supported both explanations, in that the higher-level ratings were perceived both as more restrictive (at least by the older children) and as containing more violence than lower-level ratings. However, children's interpretations of the advisories were clearly more consistent with the forbidden fruit effect since "viewer discretion advised," which was perceived to be more violent than "parental discretion advised," did not provoke increased interest. Moreover, it was perceived by the older children as involving less parental control over their behavior than "parental discretion advised."

To gather further data on what it is about the various ratings that influences children's choices, our Year 2 experiment involved asking children to rate each program description a second time, this time in terms of how violent they expected the program to be and what age they thought it was appropriate for. Because the Year 1 research also showed that children who had been scared by something on television were less likely to choose programs with advisories, we also asked children to rate how scary they expected each program to be.

As we did in Year 1, we again assessed whether a movie's violence rating would affect interpretations of the content of the movie. In Year 1, we observed that MPAA ratings had very little impact on evaluations of the movie, with the one exception that the "R" rating increased perceptions of how severely the hero had been hurt in the violent encounter. In Year 2, we tested the effect of the violence codes currently used by some premium cable channels on children's interpretations of a movie scene.

As we had done in Year 1, the Year 2 research also assessed various background characteristics of children to determine how children's level of aggressiveness and anxiety, and the degree to which their parents were involved in their viewing would relate to the impact of advisories and ratings on their viewing choices.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The sample of participants consisted of 374 children from three schools in the Milwaukee Metropolitan School District, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Permission was secured from the schools and the participants' parents prior to the study. All children were tested during the school day. An incentive was paid to the participating schools for their cooperation.

Participants, who were in kindergarten through eighth grade, ranged in age from 5 to 15 years. Many of the analyses compared subjects in two age groups. The "younger" group was composed of children between the ages of five and nine years ( $n=175$ ; 44% male). The "older" group was composed of children between 10 and 15 ( $n=199$ ; 46% male). The majority of the children participating in the study were African-American (60%), followed by Caucasian (19%), Hispanic (6%), Asian (2%), and American Indian (1%). In addition, 11% of the children described their ethnicity as some combination of the above groups, and 1% identified themselves as part of an "other," non-listed group.

## **Procedure**

Each research session began with the administration of a background questionnaire, followed by a program-interest questionnaire, and a questionnaire assessing expectations about the content of the programs just rated. Then participants were shown an 8-minute movie clip, after which they filled out a brief questionnaire about their reactions to it. The entire session took between 25 and 35 minutes. Children in kindergarten, first, and second grades were questioned individually by trained interviewers. The older children were tested in groups of 10 to 26 by two research assistants. In all cases, children were told not to put their name on any of the booklets, and were assured that their answers would be completely anonymous.

The first questionnaire booklet consisted of two parts: a background questionnaire and a selective exposure questionnaire in the form of an eight-page mock television programming schedule. Children were instructed to read the program description that appeared on each page of the programming schedule, and to indicate how much they would like to see that program or movie. There were two random orders of programs, with half of the children reading the descriptions in each order. Either the second or the last page of the booklet, depending on the questionnaire order, featured the description of the movie the children would ultimately see. Children were told that they would be shown a video clip after completing the questionnaire and that their ratings of how much they wanted to see each program would be used to help the researchers decide which video clip to show.

Once the first questionnaire was completed, it was collected by a research assistant who then tallied the children's "votes." In the meantime, the children proceeded to fill out the second questionnaire, which consisted of the same eight program descriptions they had read in the first questionnaire, followed by questions assessing how violent and how scary the child expected each program or movie to be. Children were also asked to indicate the minimum viewer age they thought the program was meant for. After the children had completed the second questionnaire, they were shown the video clip. All groups were shown the same video clip, regardless of their programming choices.

Children were told to gather around one large (27") video monitor to watch the video clip from the program that the group "wanted to see most." At least one research assistant remained in the viewing room with the children during the showing of the video to discourage any talking that might take place during the video presentation.

Immediately after viewing the video clip, the children filled out a third booklet, containing a variety of questions designed to assess their reactions to the movie clip. This

questionnaire also contained measures of family size and ethnicity, and a manipulation check question to determine how well the children remembered the rating that had been assigned to the movie clip they saw. After completing this questionnaire, the children were thanked, given a small gift (a decorative pencil), and dismissed.

### **Background Questions**

The background questions first asked about the participants' age, grade, and sex. Then there were questions about the child's enjoyment of various activities, including "I like to watch TV," with four response options: "not at all," "a little bit," "pretty much," and "very very much" (coded as 0 through 3, respectively). Four questions tapped the frequency with which children viewed various types of programs, including "When I watch TV, I watch programs with action or violence." Responses options were "never," "some of the time," "most of the time," and "all of the time" (coded as 0 through 3, respectively). As in the research for Year 1, there were several questions related to aggressiveness (e.g., "I get into fights with other kids"), several related to anxiety (e.g., "seeing scary things on TV upsets me"), and several related to parental guidance of the child's viewing (e.g., "when I watch TV my parent watches with me"). Response options for these three types of questions were "never," "some of the time," "most of the time," and "all of the time."

Finally, participants were asked to indicate the number of hours of TV they had watched the day before, by circling a number from zero to 9 or circling "10 or more."

### **Selective Exposure Questionnaire**

The second part of the first booklet consisted of TV program descriptions similar to those featured in such publications as *TV Guide* and daily newspapers. There were eight program titles and descriptions in all, one title and description per page. Names of old movies that children would be unfamiliar with and fictitious names that sounded like real programs were used because in the previous year's pilot testing, many young children automatically chose programs whose names they recognized, such as *Rescue 911*, and did not pay attention to the program descriptions. Children were told that all the programs were real, but that some were not currently being broadcast locally.

Each program was associated with variations of a different rating or advisory system. The particular form of each rating or advisory in each booklet was determined randomly. After reading the description of the program (or, in the case of kindergarten through second graders, listening to an interviewer read the descriptions), the children indicated how much they would like to see it by circling one of five possible responses: "Hate to see it," "Don't want to see it," "OK," "Like to see it," or "Love to see it." In our