

Is American media too violent?

The age-old question must be revisited in the wake of Sandy Hook -- even if it offers no final answers

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The horrific massacre of schoolchildren and their teachers in Newtown, Connecticut, has unleashed an unprecedented debate about how to address the problem of mass violence in our country. There is an increasing sense that American society is incapable of protecting its citizens, including young children, the most vulnerable among us.

Yes, it's important to focus attention on the increase in the size and [savagery of the murders](#): Six of the 12 most deadly shootings in our history have occurred within the past five years. The vast majority of the world's worst mass shootings have taken place in the United States. And there have been 65 mass shootings since Rep. Gabby Giffords was shot in 2009. Still, despite their horror, mass murders like Newtown are thankfully rare. So we must pay attention to the daily violence, too. Nearly 13,000 homicides were committed in the [U.S. in 2010](#), 8,775 with firearms. So in addition to the most heartbreaking, large-scale killings, the problem is pervasive and the bloodshed overwhelming.

What About Violence in the Media?

It's revealing that amidst the millions of written words, TV discussions and proposed solutions, regulating the violence that pervades the mass media -- movies, TV, the toy industry, gaming, and the Internet -- is not often seen as a productive avenue for reform of our violent culture. This seems especially true of liberals and progressives. We invest a great deal of energy pushing strongly for gun control, which is more concrete and tangible, with clearly defined targets and enemies. But we stop short of going after purveyors of violence in the media. Traditionally, this has been more of a priority for conservatives.

But when we looked into the impact of violence in the media, we were shocked at what we found. We, like many people we know, and perhaps you reading this, had a series of

wrong-headed notions about the nature of the problem. We found that the issue has been studied for well over 40 years, and has been the subject of over 1,000 studies -- including reports from the [Surgeon General's office in 1972](#), and the National Institute of Mental Health. The studies "point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children," according to the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#).

We were especially surprised to learn that researchers, as summarized by the French Canadian media activist and [researcher Jacques Brodeur](#), claim to have proven that "the effect of media violence is bigger than the effect of exposure to lead on children's brain activity, bigger than the effect of calcium intake on bone mass, bigger than the effect of homework on academic achievement, bigger than the effect of asbestos exposure on cancer, bigger than the effect of exposure to secondhand smoke on lung cancer."

Are you surprised? We certainly were. If you are like us, you probably think that the research linking steady exposure to violence in the media to anti-social attitudes and acts has not been proven, which of course, is what the entertainment industry has insisted over and over again.

In line with arguments made by the entertainment industry, you might also have bought into the notion that violence in the media simply reflects the violence in society -- even though that is patently absurd when you look at the numbers. Or, because the First Amendment is sacred, expressions of violence, no matter how unrealistic, inaccurate or gruesome, are protected or should be protected.

Most media violence is a commercial creation, designed to addict people to violence and make billions of dollars.

Consider how the "killer" toys aimed at toddlers, moves to the most violent video games imaginable, then to films and television shows with numerous acts of violence, seen daily by hundreds of millions of people. Many of these depictions glorify brutishness, macho insensitivity, misogyny, racism, and barbaric behavior. According to [Sophie Janicke](#) of Florida State University, who references the National Television Study (1998), "two out of three TV programs contain violence, amounting to six violent acts an hour. It has been estimated that by the age of 18, the American youth will have seen 16,000 murders, and 200,000 acts of violence only on television."