

Senate Public Safety Subcommittee on Gangs, Guns, and Drugs
Written Testimony

I thank you for this opportunity to submit written testimony to the Senate Public Safety Subcommittee on Gangs, Guns, and Drugs hearing on the issue of media violence effects. I am writing because I am recognized as one of the leading experts on the topic of video game and media violence in the academic community. I was, for instance, one of the experts invited to Vice President Biden's task force hearing on video games in January. I am also a husband and parent. As such I can only begin to imagine the pain experienced by the families of the victims of the tragic December shooting in Newtown Connecticut which has reignited debates in this area. My heart goes out to them and they are in my prayers.

I wish mainly to speak to the issue of research on video game and media violence and how this relates to societal violence. I will also speak to the ways in which societies respond to new media historically. About these issues, much bad and erroneous information tends to cycle, particularly during times of national tragedies. Here, summed briefly, is the evidence we have:

First, there is a relatively large pool of studies of media and video game violence regarding what academics call aggression. It's important to note that what academics mean by "aggression" differs from its use in the general public. Most of these aggression measures involve filling in the missing letters of words (so "explode" as opposed to "explore" would be aggressive) or giving small bursts of white noise to someone who appears to be consenting. It is not possible to generalize these types of measures to the societal violence politicians and the public are interested in. Further, this pool of research has always been inconsistent. Some studies suggest media and video game violence may increase these mildly aggressive behaviors, others suggest there are no effects, and still others suggest video game or media violence may reduce these behaviors. I'm aware that some activists, politicians and even, unfortunately, some parts of the scholarly community have tried to sell this research as consistent, but it is not. Thus, this pool of research doesn't help us much.

Second, a much smaller pool of research actually examines correlations between media and video game violence and actual violence related outcomes such as youth violence, bullying, dating violence, criminal arrests, etc. Although, as with the first pool of research, this pool also has inconsistencies, this body of research has generally not indicated any cause for alarm. When well-validated measures of clinically significant aggression are used and other important factors such as family violence or mental health are controlled, this research does not support the conclusion that media and video game violence contributes substantially to youth violence.

Third, during the years in which video games have become vastly more popular, not to mention graphic, and other forms of violent media have become more accessible, youth violence has plummeted cross-nationally to 40-year lows. Nations which consume more video games per capita than do the US such as The Netherlands or South Korea have much lower violence rates than do we. Our media culture is nearly identical to that in Canada, yet our nations' violence rates are very different. This is true whether you look at gun violence or non-gun violence such as assaults. There is no evidence for a correlation between societal violence and the media culture consumed by that society.

Lastly, consumption of violent video games or violent media is not a common element between mass shooters. As a society we experience confirmation bias, paying attention to only cases of shooters who conform to the stereotype of the "mad" gamer or violent movie enthusiast, and ignore cases which do not fit. This creates the illusion of a correlation when none exists. Given that almost all young men and boys play violent video games and watch violent movies at least occasionally, it is not hard to spuriously "link" a crime committed by young men to video games or violent media. Yet, in the several

months after the Newtown shooting we have seen a spate of violent acts committed by older men, none of whom were gamers or known consumers of violent media. 62-year old William Spengler shot two firefighters, a man in his 70s attacked a law office in Phoenix, a man in his 60s instigated a dramatic stand-off after kidnapping a 5-year old boy and a former police officer died after setting off a rampage in which he killed several others. In Serbia a 60-year-old man killed 13 with a gun several months ago. None of these cases fit the gamer stereotype, yet as a society we simply ignore these cases that don't fit the stereotype of a media/societal violence "link." In 2002 the US Secret Service found that perpetrators of school shootings did not consume high amounts of violent media. The commonalities between shooters are not media use, but a history of rage and anger coupled with mental health problems.

Thus, although no one pool of evidence is conclusive in itself, in the aggregate it becomes clear that, if we are to be serious about tackling societal violence, focusing on video games or media is the wrong path. More research is always welcome of course. Our lab is currently investigating whether children with preexisting mental health issues might be more susceptible to violent game or media effects. The evidence we have to date suggests that, no, violent games and media have no more effect on mentally vulnerable children than for other children. But we certainly welcome more investigation of this issue.

Reviews of this research have been done by the governments of Australia and Sweden (independently) and are publically available. Both concluded that the research on video game violence (their area of focus) is, at best, inconsistent and often methodologically flawed. Both concluded that links between violent video games and societal violence have not been demonstrated. These reviews should do much to put the mind of the Senate Public Safety Subcommittee on Gangs, Guns, and Drugs at ease about video game violence and help them to focus on more pressing issues such as mental health care.

Lastly, let me point out that we know historically that society tends to go through periods in which media are blamed for societal ills. This is particularly common after major tragedies such as the Newtown shooting. It is a normal human response to need something to blame we could, theoretically, do away with, as this helps us to assert a sense of control over the uncontrollable and give ourselves the feeling that we are "doing something." These moral panics, as they are known, are well documented and often ridiculed retrospectively. In the 1950s comic books were thought to be a major contributor to youth violence, with psychiatrists testifying to this effect before the US Congress. We've seen similar panics over everything from jazz, rock and rap music to dime novels, kids cartoons, movies and even religious books (which themselves often contain considerable violence). Yet, we have trouble learning from these historical patterns when confronted by new and unfamiliar media.

Such moral panics can be damaging, however comforting though they may be in the short term. They can distract important social and financial resources away from deeper, more intractable problems such as poverty, education and mental health care. For example, during the years from 2005-2011 the State of California spent millions defending an ill-thought effort to regulate violent video games sales through to the Supreme Court, where violence in video games was ruled constitutionally protected, even for consumption by minors. That was money that, even had California been successful, would have helped no children, and that could have been better spent on mental health care for children and families at risk, something that could have had real positive impact.

Thus I conclude by stating that I understand the Senate Public Safety Subcommittee on Gangs, Guns, and Drugs is sincere in seeking to protect children and understand gun violence. But as one who is very familiar with the research on these issues, I assure the subcommittee that focusing on violent media is the wrong path. More critically, indulging in this moral panic may actually do more damage than good, to the extent it distracts society from real causes of violence. I hope that the Subcommittee

will remain focused on issues we know are important if we are serious in tackling societal violence, namely our mental health care system, poverty, and educational disparities.

Signed,
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