

Guns, media violence and mass shootings: What psychological scientists know

desmoinesregister.com

March 8, 2018

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In the wake of the Florida school shooting, President Donald Trump is reviving an old debate over whether violent video games can trigger violent behavior. But Dr. Louis Kraus, a child psychiatrist, calls that approach a "red herring." (March 8) AP



Parents and other caregivers are well positioned to reduce children's exposure to violent screen media.

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Assault guns, mental illness and violent video games are the "big three" targets lobbyists and pundits claim as causes of mass and school shootings.

The gun lobby blames violent video games. The video game lobby points its finger at guns and mental illness. Politicians take pot shots at their donors' favorite target, and caution against taking action against their donors' interests.

A few of the loudest voices have some academic credentials, but they are in fact selling the public a bill of goods, not accurately portraying what the best science has repeatedly found as reported in vetted reviews. Before discussing the Big Three, first review some facts about violent behavior in general:

- There are dozens of risk factors for aggressive/violent behavior.
- Violent behavior occurs only when multiple risk factors are present. No single risk factor is the cause of mass shootings or school shootings.
- No single risk factor is necessary for violence. For example, not all mass shooters grew up in a violent family.

Understanding the Big Three

Target 1: One cannot have a shooting without a gun, and guns capable of rapid fire with large capacity magazines enable killing large numbers.

Target 2: It certainly “feels” as if mental illness must be a cause of mass shootings. It feels so because we can't imagine ourselves doing such a thing unless we were extremely distressed and out of control. But the truth about mental illness and violence is more complex. We must distinguish the shooter's state of mind from whether or not the shooter has a diagnosable mental illness. Diagnosable mental illnesses persist for relatively long periods, and decades of research find that the mentally ill are not more likely to commit violent crimes than those who are not mentally ill. Being highly distressed and angry is related to violence, but is not in itself a mental illness. It would be more useful to screen gun buyers on known risk factors for violence than on mental illness.

Target 3: It is simply a lie for industry "scientists" and lobbyists to claim there is no evidence linking media violence to real-world violent behavior. The scientific consensus from the psychological, psychiatric, pediatric and medical communities has been that exposure to violent entertainment media (including video games) is a known causal risk factor for multiple types of aggressive behavior, including the types of physical aggression

called “violence.”

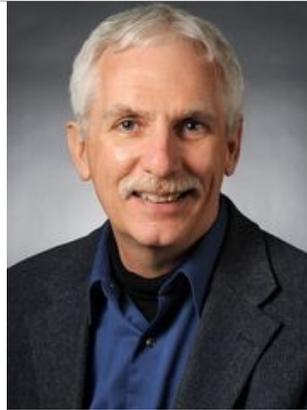


Photo by: (Photo: Special to the Register)

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For example, the largest and most scientifically sound analysis of violent video game effects, published in 2010, found the dozen studies that measured violent behavior yielded essentially the same average effect of violent video game play on violent behavior as on less extreme physical aggression. Earlier studies of TV effects, and recent studies of video games, also have linked media violence to criminal violence.

Does this mean violent video games are the single cause of mass and school shootings? No. Media violence is neither the largest risk factor, nor the smallest, but falls in the middle in terms of its size or importance. To reduce excessively aggressive and violent behavior (with or without guns), society must address the known risk factors, most of which are very expensive.

We can address one risk factor by simply recognizing the well-documented harm of violent entertainment media, and subsequently reducing children’s and adolescents’ exposure to violent screen media. Parents and other caregivers are well positioned to do this, once they learn the scientific truths about the harm caused by such media. This costs almost nothing.

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