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**President:** John F. Knutson, [john-knutson@uiowa.edu](mailto:john-knutson@uiowa.edu)

**President-Elect:** Kaj Björkqvist, [kaj.bjorkqvist@abo.fi](mailto:kaj.bjorkqvist@abo.fi)

**Past President:** Craig A. Anderson, [caa@iastate.edu](mailto:caa@iastate.edu)

**Executive Secretary:** Michael Potegal, [poteg001@umn.edu](mailto:poteg001@umn.edu)

**Treasurer:** Eric F. Dubow, [edubow@bgsu.edu](mailto:edubow@bgsu.edu)

**Archivist:** Roger Johnson, [r66nj@yahoo.com](mailto:r66nj@yahoo.com)

**North American Editor of the ISRA Bulletin:** Eric F. Dubow, Bowling Green State University,  
Bowling Green, OH USA 43403, [edubow@bgsu.edu](mailto:edubow@bgsu.edu)

**European Editor of the ISRA Bulletin:** Manuela Martinez, University of Valencia, 46010 Valencia,  
SPAIN, [manuela.martinez@uv.es](mailto:manuela.martinez@uv.es)

**ISRA home page:** <http://www.israsociety.com>

**ISRA on Twitter:** <https://twitter.com/ISRASociety> Follow us: @ISRASociety

**Webmaster:** Brian Anderson, Center for the Study of Violence, Iowa State University, [csv@iastate.edu](mailto:csv@iastate.edu)

*The North American Editor produced this issue*

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## A SPECIAL ESSAY

### Guns, Games, and Mass Shootings in the U.S.

*A Contribution from ISRA's Past-President, Craig A. Anderson, Distinguished Professor, Iowa State University*



As most of you probably know, on December 14, 2012, Adam Lanza, a 20-year old white male, fatally shot twenty children and six adult staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Prior to driving to the school, Lanza had shot and killed his mother. When first responders arrived at the school, Lanza committed suicide by shooting himself in the head.

According to the popular press, this event shocked and horrified the nation. Frankly, although I am horrified by this event, I am not shocked. The easy availability of guns and ammunition in the U.S. make it a certainty that such events will continue to occur here. They are rare and extremely difficult to predict (some would say impossible), which may be why most people are surprised or shocked when they do occur, but such tragedies will persist as long as there are so many guns floating around.

There has been considerable fallout from this event, including some political posturing and much media nonsense. There also have been some very thoughtful pieces, but they tend to attract less attention. It is possible that some positive actions will result, but at this point in time it is too early to tell. I will describe some of the fallout in the remainder of this article.

#### **What is "the" cause?**

As usual in such cases, news media, pundits, and self-proclaimed experts immediately weighed in on this event, either seeking the one true or primary cause of such shootings, or claiming that they know the cause or causes of such events.

The president of the National Rifle Association (Wayne LaPierre) claimed that the cause was not easy availability of guns, but was "...an unknown number of genuine monsters. People that are so deranged, so evil, so possessed by voices and driven by demons, that no sane person can every possibly comprehend them." He went on to suggest that these are copycat killers, "... waiting in the wings for their moment of fame from a national media machine that rewards them with wall-to-wall attention and a sense of identity that they crave, while provoking others to try to make their mark." Another related cause, according to LaPierre, is the media violence industry. "And here's another dirty little truth that the media try their best to conceal. There exists in this country, sadly, a callous, corrupt and corrupting shadow industry that sells and stows violence against its own people. Through vicious, violent video games with names like *Bullet Storm*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Mortal Combat*, and *Splatterhouse*."

There are several interesting points about LaPierre's comments, not all of them bad. For example, there is a tacit recognition of the fact that there is more than one risk factor involved in extreme acts of violence. He notes at least three risk factors, albeit in somewhat nonprofessional terms: (1) certain types of people (what we would call personality traits, or clinical categories, such as antisocial personality disorder, or psychopaths...); (2) media-based glorification and fame for the shooters; and (3) media

violence. Of course, among the very many known risk factors for violence he left out a very obvious one for school shootings: the easy availability of something to shoot with (i.e., guns and ammo).

Naturally, the media picked up on the reference to violent video games. The video game industry and its apologists were quick to deny that there is any evidence linking video game violence to aggressive or violent behavior in the real world. As we know, there are studies linking media violence to violent behavior in the real world (not just mild aggression), some going back many years. Numerous reports by various expert groups, the most recent being our own [Media Violence Commission Report](#), have noted the link to real world aggression. For those of you who are interested in seeing some of these reports, I have posted some on my web site:

<http://www.psychology.iastate.edu/faculty/caa/StatementsonMediaViolence.html>

The media industries and web sites aren't the only ones who reacted strongly to LaPierre's statements. After news reports that Adam Lanza may have been diagnosed as autistic, or as having Asperger's Syndrome, many mental health professionals challenged the notion that either of these conditions are related to violence, a claim that my quick internet search seems to confirm. Other ISRA members undoubtedly know more about this than I do; please feel free to confirm or refute this in a future ISRA Bulletin note.

Several more thoughtful and detailed responses to the whole media frenzy have been made, including several by ISRA members. Rowell Huesmann and Eric Dubow posted a [very useful piece](#) on the Aggression Research Program web site at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, a link we added to the ISRA site some time ago. Also, ISRA member Brad Bushman co-chaired a National Science Foundation committee that produced an excellent report on "[Youth Violence: What We Need to Know](#)," in response to a request by President Obama and some members of Congress. Both of these reports make the very important point that extreme acts of violence typically occur only when a large number of risk factors converge in the same place, person (or persons), and time. That is, there is no single cause of school shootings or of mass killings in general or even of the more mundane single homicide. Furthermore, almost none of the risk factors are necessary for these extreme events. The one exception, of course, is that you can't have a school shooting without a tool that shoots. Despite these reasoned comments by ISRA experts and others, though, the media and some politicians are still on the hunt for "the cause."

### **What is "the" solution?**

In the immediate aftermath of the Newtown killings, there were broad calls for legislative action, especially action concerning gun control. Those of you who don't live in the U.S. may be surprised to learn just how easy it is to buy, sell, and own a wide array of guns here, including civilian versions of standard military assault weapons. Indeed, in many States you don't even need a permit to purchase a handgun. Here is link to a recent story on guns, gun laws, and gun violence:

<http://247wallst.com/2013/04/15/states-with-the-most-gun-violence/> The U.S. Congress even passed a law several years ago giving manufacturers of guns immunity from lawsuits arising from the use of their products in criminal events (e.g., murder).

In general, most representative surveys of U.S. citizens find strong majority support (90%, in some cases) for increased gun controls of some kind. The results vary somewhat based on the specific issue, wording, and whether there has been a recent highly publicized school shooting. But the support is there.

However, the National Rifle Association is one of the most powerful lobbies in Washington, D.C., and they have been very successful in keeping serious gun control legislation from being considered or passed. Basically, Federal politicians are scared that getting on the NRA's bad side will mean that they lose their next election.

In the current case, there were early calls for banning private ownership of some types of assault weapons, for banning the sale of magazines that hold more 20 rounds (bullets, for you non-gun savvy folks), for requiring background checks of all prospective gun purchasers (currently, background checks are required only in certain types of stores, and certain types of transactions, and this varies by State). But, already these proposals have been greatly watered down in the only proposal that is currently being debated in the U.S. Senate. The ban on assault weapons appears dead, as is the ban on large capacity magazines. My initial guess was that if anything could pass at the Federal level, it would be some additional background checks required in some purchasing circumstances, though not in all purchases or exchanges of guns. However, even that has been failed in the U.S. Senate. On the positive side, at least two states (Connecticut, Maryland) have passed new laws tightening gun restrictions, largely in response to the Newton killings.

The other "action" that is currently taking place is based on a call from the Obama administration to further investigate the causes of gun violence (hence the NSF report by Brad Bushman's committee mentioned earlier), including the possible effect of media violence. Whether this will result in some new, good research being funded is unknown at this time. Another little tidbit for non-U.S. members (and perhaps many U.S. members as well) is the fact that in 1996 Congress passed a law (and it was signed by the President) that prohibited the CDC from funding research on gun violence. So, maybe this crazy law will be rescinded, but so far I've seen no movement on this.

### **APA's response**

The American Psychological Association has also started taking action, though I don't know whether this was strictly inspired by the Newton shootings, the President's call for more information on gun and media violence, the controversy surrounding the 2011 U.S. Supreme Court's ruling that laws restricting children's access to any violent video games are unconstitutional, or whether this is a response to the media industry (and their supporters within APA) pressure. Basically, someone at APA decided to form a new Task Force to investigate the media violence literature and to review past APA official statements on media violence effects. Furthermore, this Task Force is supposed to conduct a new meta-analysis of the research literature. This initially sounds like it might be a good idea. And it may be. But there are some very strange aspects about it that I would like to share with you.

I heard rumors of a new Task Force early this year. I was first contacted about it in an email request from Dr. Lauren Fasig on February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Lauren is the Director, Children, Youth & Families Office, Public Interest Directorate, American Psychological Association. This email went to 25 people, most of whom have published at least something in the media violence area, and many of whom are legitimate experts. There also was one very vocal critic of mainstream media violence research on the list, whom I shall not name. Here is the main part of the email:

We are writing to request your assistance in identifying experts to serve as members of the APA Task Force on Violent Media. The Task Force will oversee a meta-analysis and review of the empirical literature addressing violent television, video games (both interactive and non-interactive),

and other visual programming, such as apps and internet sites. The Task Force will also review the APA Resolutions relevant to this topic as part of their charge.

The Task Force will include seven members with extensive methodological and/or topical expertise and will represent a balanced range of viewpoints and interpretations of the scientific literature in order to achieve the most rigorous review possible. Statistical and methodological expertise will be crucial in this project, so individuals with strong skills in these areas may be included, regardless of whether they have personally conducted research related to the topic. To identify potential members of the Task Force, we are asking knowledgeable and prominent researchers to suggest as many as 5 individuals whom they feel will be best suited to this work. Task Force membership is not limited to psychologists; we are interested in putting together the best working group possible, regardless of discipline.

**Please provide the names, and where possible, contact information, of the 5 individuals you believe to have the appropriate methodological and/or topical expertise for this Task Force.**

How the initial list of 25 people who received this was created, and who created it, is still unclear. This email (and all subsequent official emails from APA on this) was sent with three APA officials identified as the senders (along with Dr. Fasig, who has handled the actual correspondence): Dr. Gwendolyn P. Keita, Executive Director, Public Interest; Dr. Steven J. Breckler, Executive Director, Science; and Dr. Gary R. Vandenbos, Publisher.

This first email appeared to suggest that the Task Force members would include members with "topical expertise," which most of us assumed meant expertise in conducting and publishing media violence research in top tier journals. More on this in a moment. This first email also said, "We are also seeking nominations of literature to be included in the Task Force's review. You may receive a second letter in the near future requesting your assistance with identifying the strongest relevant articles published between 2000 and 2013." This suggests that the Task Force was only going to look at published articles (a clear deviation from normal meta-analysis practices), and only those published after 2000 (which would inappropriately exclude a huge research literature on television and film violence effects).

On February 7<sup>th</sup>, Dr. Fasig sent an email (in the names of the three APA officials mentioned earlier) requesting nominations of literature to include in the APA Task Force review, again specifying articles published in the 2000-2013 time period. In response to some questions that I sent to her, Dr. Fasig indicated that, "We will conduct a comprehensive search of the related literature to be used in the review, but we are asking for nominations of publications in order to ensure that we include all of the relevant research for consideration by the Task Force. We anticipate that most of the nominated publications may also be identified in the literature search." This suggests that the literature review will be more comprehensive, not limited to the last 13-14 years.

Most recently (April 5<sup>th</sup>), Dr. Fasig sent an email to me and at least some of the original group of 25 (maybe all, maybe not), announcing the appointment of a Task Force on Violent Media, and requesting assistance in providing information to the Task Force as questions are generated by them this summer. This email did not include a list of Task Force members, or an explanation of how members were chosen.

Eventually, the membership was made public, and much to my surprise, there are no major media violence experts on the Task Force. Not one. So, what happened to the nominations of experts that were solicited in the February 5<sup>th</sup> email? I can't imagine that ISRA members Rowell Huesmann, Brad Bushman, and Doug Gentile didn't receive multiple nominations.

The selected Task Force members certainly are recognizable scholars, with expertise in meta-analysis (Larry Hedges), quantitative psychology (Mark Appelbaum), violence (Sherry Hamby), developmental psychology (Ken Dodge), and psychopathology (Gordon Nagayama Hall). One member (Sandy Calvert) has done some excellent work on media and children, including a little bit of media violence work. Another (Sandra Graham) has done excellent work in attribution theory, motivation, and peer-directed aggression. I thank them all for their willingness to serve on this rather unusual and difficult Task Force.

One possible explanation for this composition is that perhaps the APA Board of Directors was trying to create a "balanced" task force that is "unbiased." They seem to have accepted the media industry claim that the research is mixed, and that the experts are about equally divided two warring camps, those who find a true harmful effect versus those who claim that no harmful effects exist. Of course, this claim is like the tobacco industry claims in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that medical researchers were evenly split over whether cigarettes caused lung cancer. By not having anyone who has ever published an original empirical media violence article in a top tier journal on the Task Force, they can claim that the results they obtain are unbiased. A recent email from Elizabeth Carll (who chaired the 2005 Task Force) seems to confirm this line of thinking.

I understand this strategy, even though I don't agree with it. I understand their goal of deflecting criticism by media violence skeptics. But frankly, the media industries and other denialists will not be convinced or silenced. At best, a few middle of the road folks who are interested in the topic but who haven't carefully examined the literature may be better persuaded by this unbiased--but non-expert--group than by a Task Force that includes a representative sample of true experts. Maybe this is a valuable goal.

In any case, this is very different from the approach ISRA took with our recent Media Violence Commission, in which real media violence experts generated a very important summary report. Nonetheless, despite some misgivings, I have agreed to help the Task Force (as has Brad Bushman, Rowell Huesmann, Doug Gentile, and probably several other ISRA members).

But, let's be clear that there are real risks to APA's approach. The overarching risk is that they will get it wrong. The underlying assumption of APA's approach is that a group of very bright, well-meaning researchers will *necessarily* produce a good, accurate meta-analysis even if they don't know all of the relevant theoretical and methodological issues involved in the area that they are trying to summarize. I don't believe that this assumption is true, especially the "necessarily" part. They might end up with a summary that is accurate, but there are many possible errors and pitfalls that must be avoided in order for an accurate meta-analysis to result. What are the proper ways to measure or manipulate media violence? What are the best ways to measure aggression, violence, and aggression-related variables? What kinds of controls are appropriate, and which are inappropriate? What do various research designs tell us? What theoretical approaches are most appropriate as guides to making some of these decisions? What are inclusion and exclusion rules for determining which studies go into the meta-analysis? Many studies, for example, claim to have a measure of aggressive behavior, when in fact they have measured

something that is only vaguely related to modern definitions of "aggression." In one such study, frequently touted by the video game industry and its apologists, the measure of aggression is arguments with a friend. Well, that fails as a measure of aggression on multiple points, including whether or not the arguing was intended to hurt the other person. It also fails as being very relevant on theoretical grounds to violent video game effects on physical aggression, which has been the focus of video game studies because they primarily model physical aggression, not relational aggression.

My point is not that the Task Force members don't know about the importance of such issues. In fact, given the decision to not have true domain experts on the Task Force, the group that was selected is in my view an excellent one (although the lack of a primarily laboratory-based experimental social psychologist is a bit troubling, perhaps leading to an undervaluation of such studies). These are careful, thoughtful, skilled scholars. But still, I worry about the lack of true media violence experts. I, for one, would not want to be in a position of having to make the kinds of decisions required in a good meta-analysis— that is, decisions about best practices, based on theory and practice—in a domain in which I was not an expert, such as the effects vitamin E supplements on grooming behavior in rhesus monkeys. The bottom line, I guess, is that I hope that the Task Force: (1) is given the time and resources to make full use of the true experts in this domain; (2) they make use of the true experts; and (3) they successfully distinguish between the true experts and the industry apologists who have garnered a lot of attention with faulty methods and claims.

### **Coda**

In the first 4 months since the Newtown killings, there were over 3481 gun deaths in the U.S. ([http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/crime/2012/12/gun\\_death\\_tally\\_every\\_american\\_gun\\_death\\_since\\_newtown\\_sandy\\_hook\\_shooting.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2012/12/gun_death_tally_every_american_gun_death_since_newtown_sandy_hook_shooting.html)). The NRA claims that we need more guns in the hands of citizens, so that they can shoot crazed individuals who attack schools. Some politicians and pundits want to arm school teachers and staff. Other groups (including some NRA folks) have volunteered to post armed guards at schools; in some cases the guards would be real police officers, in other cases they would be citizen volunteers, perhaps NRA members. One element missing in the discussion is the fact that even if, at the point of sale, you screen out certain individuals deemed unfit to own a gun, there still will be many high risk individuals who have easy access to almost any type of gun on the market. Some will get them from friends and family. Some will be legitimate originally-low-risk owners of guns whose life circumstances have turned them into high risk people now (think of divorce, infidelity, being fired from a job, new drug habit...). Some will get them from person-to-person sales, which are not regulated at all. And some will be stolen. A second missing element is the fact that many gun deaths are the result of accidents and suicides.

Other approaches to reducing violence, in the U.S. or elsewhere, also need serious attention and resources. Reducing children's and adolescents' exposure to media violence issue is one such approach. But the many other known risk factors also warrant attention and resources, such as factors that increase impulsivity and hostility in the developing child, adolescent, and young adult; physical environmental factors of many kinds (e.g., various chemicals in food, water, air); social environment factors (e.g., parenting styles/skills; poverty); and others too numerous to list here. In sum, there is no "one" cause and no "one" solution to societal violence, as ISRA members know. Perhaps all of us can use the tragedies of recent events to inform and educate our various general publics, students, and public policy makers about the multi-causal nature of aggression and violence, and the multi-dimensional solutions that are needed.