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RESEARCH FINDINGS No. 65

THE EFFECTS OF VIDEO VIOLENCE ON YOUNG OFFENDERS

Kevin Browne and Amanda Pennell

In 1995, the Home Office commissioned a study of the effects of video violence on young offenders. Groups of offenders and non-offenders were shown a violent video film. Immediate reactions were monitored, as well as impressions and memories of the film some while later. They were also psychologically assessed and asked about film preferences.

KEY POINTS

- ▶ More differences were found between offenders and non-offenders than between violent offenders and non-violent offenders in terms of film viewing preferences and reactions to violent films.
- ▶ Offenders spent longer watching video films than non-offenders. Violent offenders were more likely than non-violent offenders to prefer violent films.
- ▶ Ten months after viewing a violent video, twice as many offenders as non-offenders recalled and identified with vindictively violent characters.
- ▶ Offenders had a lower level of moral development than non-offenders, were less able to appreciate the viewpoints of, or empathise with, others, and were more likely to have aggressive temperaments and distorted perceptions about violence.
- ▶ The findings suggest that individuals from violent families are more prone to offending behaviour and having a preference for violent films, but this may be modified by personality and moral values.

BACKGROUND

There have been recent assertions that violent films and videos may influence young people who commit violent acts. Some people have linked over-exposure to television violence in childhood with later involvement in violent crime; others have emphasised that experiencing 'real' violence as a child has a greater impact. Ways in which screen violence may be thought to affect behaviour include:

- imitation of violent roles and aggressive acts
- triggering aggressive impulses in pre-disposed individuals
- desensitising feelings of sympathy towards victims.

A study by the Policy Studies Institute found little difference in young offenders' and school children's viewing habits (Hagell and Newburn, 1994). This suggests that to understand how violent videos

influence violent behaviour, it is essential to determine what meanings and importance people ascribe to violent scenes and characters seen on film. Individual differences may reflect not what is watched but rather what is remembered.

AIMS AND METHODS OF THE STUDY

The research was concerned with whether violent young offenders do view violent videos differently from (a) non-violent offenders and (b) non-offenders. Four specific questions were addressed. Do violent young offenders:

- view video films more often than the other two groups?
- identify more often with violent scenes and characteristics?
- remember more from violent videos?
- have more violent childhood experiences which influence their video film...

122 males aged between 15 and 21 years took part in the research. There were three groups:

- 54 violent offenders (all had been convicted at least once of an offence against the person)
- 28 non-violent offenders
- a control sample of 40 non-offender school/college students.

Participants were asked about their viewing habits and shown a violent video film appropriate for their age, i.e. Cert '15' or '18'. They were then interviewed about their recollections and interpretations of the film immediately afterwards, four months later and again after ten months. Participants were also assessed for family background, predisposition towards anger, empathetic concern and moral maturity. Interviews with offenders took place at two secure institutions and with non-offenders at their places of study.

CHOICE OF VIDEO AND FILM MATERIAL

Offenders spent more time watching satellite and television films: 53% watched three or more days a week whereas most school/college students (72%) watched only one or two days. Preferred programmes also differed – offenders were significantly more likely than non-offenders to choose soap operas (74% compared with 35%) and police dramas (40% compared with nil). Violent offenders were more likely than non-violent offenders to prefer police dramas.

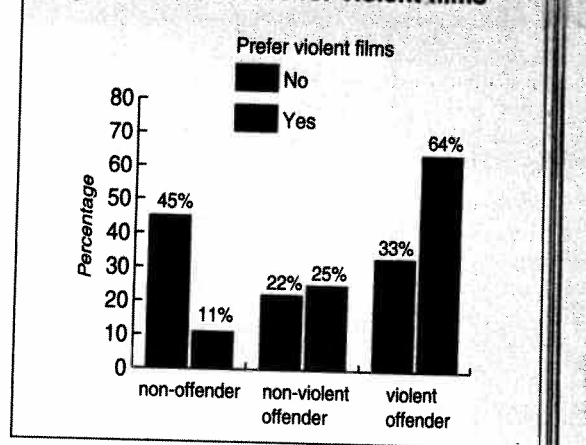
Offenders spent significantly longer watching video films than non-offenders. Nearly two-thirds watched more than two days a week compared with only 20% of school students. Non-offenders tended to prefer science fiction and comedy films. The general preference of offenders was for violent films and violent offenders were more likely than non-violent offenders to favour such films (see Figure 1). Of all those who chose violent films as their favourite, 89% were offenders and only 11% non-offenders.

An '18' certificate film was named as the favourite or last film watched by about 70% of offenders and non-offenders. There was no difference between 15-17s and 18-21s (whether offenders or not) in naming an '18' certificate video as their favourite (even though 15-17s should not legally be supplied with such films). The participants, whether or not in a secure institution, therefore appear to be watching age-inappropriate films. The violent film shown as part of the study was age-appropriate and may have been considered 'tame' in comparison to films usually watched.

IDENTIFICATION WITH FILM CHARACTERS

When asked 'if you could be anyone in a film, who would you be', similar proportions of the groups wanted to be a violent character. However, when asked 'why they would be that character', 20% of offenders but only 5% of non-offenders said 'because they were violent'. When asked to select favourite actors, two-thirds of offenders named

Figure 1 Preference for violent films



stars like Van Damme, Schwarzenegger or Stallone who typically play violent characters. Only one quarter of school/college students listed such actors. Again, this preference was more pronounced for violent offenders.

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE EXPERIMENTAL VIOLENT VIDEO FILM

Characters in film

In the initial and four-month follow-up interviews, offenders and non-offenders were broadly similar in terms of which film character they identified with most or remembered best. But after ten months, significantly more offenders (82%) than non-offenders (43%) identified with a vindictively violent character. When asked 'why they would be that character' or 'why they remembered them the most', offenders were more likely to give reasons related to the character's violent nature.

Recalling scenes and storyline

In the follow-up interviews, there was no difference between offenders' and non-offenders' recollections of the 'gist' of the film. Offenders were slightly more likely to recall (incorrectly) the start as being violent. Violent scenes were more likely than other kinds to remain in the memories of both violent and non-violent offenders.

Attitude to the film

72% of violent offenders said that a violent part of the film excited them the most, compared with 65% of non-offenders and 35% of non-violent offenders. In the follow-up interviews, more offenders than non-offenders thought the film lacked violence (40% versus 18%) and action (39% versus 23%).

Film influences

Participants were asked about the influence on them of both the study film and any others seen since the last interview. Non-offenders were more likely to say they had copied dialogue from a film. No-one said they had copied violent behaviour from the study film. One non-offender and one offender said they had copied violent aspects of other films. Three offenders said that a film seen in the last three months had influenced them. One 'liked the idea of robbing a bank and getting away with it'

(unnamed film), another 'wanted to get a driving licence' (*Licence to Drive*) and a third 'wanted to nick a Porsche and get a gun' (*Bad Boys*).

At the four-month follow-up interview only three people (none at the ten-month interview) claimed the study film had influenced them. Two were offenders. One said 'it gave me a high afterwards' and the other 'I know to check for police when robbing' (*No Surrender* – police had caught the film characters in the act of stealing motorbikes). The non-offender said the film (*ID* – about football violence) had depressed him. One violent offender (still in prison when followed up) thought it was a good idea to slash the victim's Achilles tendons so he could not escape (as shown in *Last Gasp*).

Psychometric assessments

The film had no immediate influence on empathy or the participant's state or level of anger. However, there were pre-existing group differences in these and other respects. Offenders:

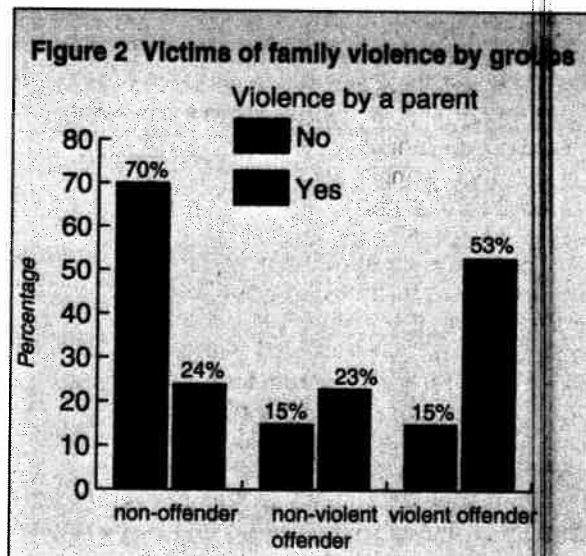
- had a lower level of moral development
- were less able to appreciate others' viewpoints or empathise
- were more likely to have aggressive temperaments and distorted perceptions about violent behaviour.

These differences indicate that low moral development and distorted perceptions about violence underlie preferences for violent films and violent film characters. Low empathic concern plus higher aggression could lead to individuals seeking out violent films for entertainment. Films may then reinforce these thoughts and feelings, creating more entrenched cognitive and behaviour patterns. Nevertheless, the study provides little evidence that offenders were more influenced by the experimental film than non-offenders, although they did recall vindictively violent characters twice as often.

VIOLENT CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES AND FILM PREFERENCES

Participants were asked how conflicts at home were typically resolved, ranging from 'reasoning behaviour' to 'severe violence'. Highly significant differences emerged between the groups in the use of violent behaviour to resolve parent-child conflicts. Violent offenders had most often suffered violence from both parents and responded aggressively (see Figure 2). Non-violent offenders tended to have experienced violence more from their fathers/step-fathers than their mothers. Offenders were also more likely to have witnessed inter-parental violence. Non-offenders both witnessed and suffered family violence less often than the other two groups. These findings support the victim-to-offender concept – i.e. that victims may be particularly prone to become offenders – and highlight the possible influence of home violence on violent film preferences.

Multivariate analysis confirmed that personality and social background were more important in

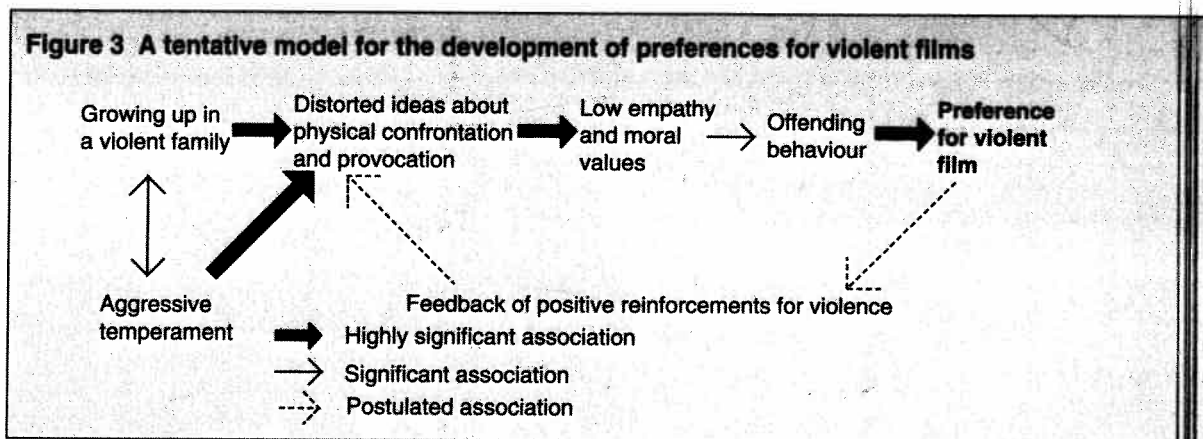


identifying those who commit offences than factors associated with violent films. Table 1 lists characteristics which discriminated offenders in the study (whether violent or non-violent) from non-offenders, ranked according to the strength of association with offending behaviour.

Table 1 Characteristics which discriminated offenders from non-offenders ranked in decreasing order of importance

- Physical confrontational thoughts
- Stepfather present (previous family breakdown)
- Angry temperament
- Low level of moral development
- Low empathy score
- Parental violence to young person
- Low intellectual ability
- Preference for violent films
- Young person violent to parents
- Young person witness to spouse violence
- Favourite actor plays violent roles
- Identification with 'bad guy' in film
- Film lacks violent action
- Poor reading ability
- Violent reason for remembering actor in film

A theoretical model is proposed in Figure 3. This is based on the findings that a history of family violence, distorted thoughts about physical confrontation, low empathy and poor moral development are associated directly or indirectly with offending and a preference for violent films. Through growing up in a violent family, young people are more likely to witness, be victims of and perpetrate aggressive acts after seeing real violence in their homes. The victim-to-offender concept, following on from physical and emotional maltreatment as a child, is well established. However, only one in six victims become offenders. Lack of an angry temperament or high empathy and moral standards may act as protective factors (Browne and Herbert, 1997).



CONCLUSIONS

Previous research has suggested that viewing violent television is a precursor to violent behaviour. In contrast, this study suggests that the well-established link between poor social background and delinquent behaviour extends to the development of a preference for violent films. This, in turn, may reinforce distorted perceptions about appropriate means of resolving conflict and responding to frustration and provocation. Indeed, in the absence of parental violence there was no significant relationship between offending and a preference for violent film or characters. When parental violence was present, offenders and non-offenders differed significantly, with offenders distinctly preferring violent film and characters. The implication is that both a history of family violence and offending behaviour are necessary pre-conditions for developing a significant preference for violent film action and role models.

The research cannot prove whether video violence causes crime. Nevertheless, it does show that, when factors associated with offending are present (e.g. growing up in a violent family, aggressive personality, distorted perceptions about conflict resolution, lack of empathy and morals), a preference for violent films and characters can distinguish offenders. However, no firm predictive claims can be made without examining future offending behaviour.

Fewer differences emerged between violent offenders and non-violent offenders than between offenders generally and non-offenders. However, violent childhood experiences did distinguish violent and non-violent offenders, and violent offenders were more likely to prefer violent films. The research highlights the importance of family background and the offender's own personality and thoughts in determining the effects of film violence. This research confirms that video film violence is seen differently by young offenders, especially those from violent homes. Offenders were more likely to prefer actors who typically play characters whose use of severe violence appears positive and successful – a dangerous role model for young people, particularly those predisposed to crime and delinquency. There is some evidence that young people do imitate films (e.g., the Black Museum at Scotland Yard has a copy made by a young offender of the deadly glove used by Freddie Kruger in *Nightmare on Elm Street*) but there is no firm evidence of the extent of such copycat behaviour.

Overall, the research points to a pathway from having a violent home background, to being an offender, to being more likely to prefer violent films and violent actors. Distorted perceptions about violent behaviour, poor empathy for others and low moral development all enhance the adoption of offending behaviour and violent film preferences.

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Kevin Browne and Amanda Pennell are members of the Forensic Psychology Group, School of Psychology, University of Birmingham.



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