



Singapore Journal of
Scientific Research

ISSN: 2010-006x

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Violent Games Not to Blame for Youth Aggression, Study Suggests

How depressed young people are strongly predicts how aggressive and violent they may be or may become. Contrary to popular belief, however, exposure to violence in video games or on television is not related to serious acts of youth aggression or violence among Hispanics in the US, according to new research by Dr. Christopher Ferguson from Texas A & M International University.

His findings are published online in the Journal of Youth and Adolescence.

The potential negative effects of violent video games on adolescent antisocial behavior, and youth violence in particular, is a highly debated issue, both in academic circles and among the general public and policy makers. However, to date, the research is inconclusive largely due to methodological problems.

Ferguson recruited 302 mainly Hispanic youth between the ages of 10 and 14 years, from a small Hispanic-majority city population on the border of Mexico, as part of a larger study of youth violence. They were interviewed twice -- once at the start of the study and again 12 months later. Ferguson looked at their exposure to violence both in video games and on television as well as negative life events, including neighborhood problems, negative relationships with adults, antisocial personality, family attachment, and delinquent peers. He also assessed the styles of family interaction and communication, adolescents' exposure to domestic violence, depressive symptoms, serious aggression, bullying and delinquent behavior.

His analyses show that 75 percent of young people played video games within the past month on computers, consoles or other devices, and 40 percent played games with violent content. Boys were more likely than girls to play violent

games. One year later, 7 percent reported engaging in at least one criminally violent act during the previous 12 months, the most common being physical assaults on other students or using physical force to take an object or money from another person. Nineteen percent reported engaging in at least one nonviolent crime during the same period, with shoplifting and thefts on school property at the top of the list. In addition, Ferguson found that depressive symptoms were a strong predictor for youth aggression and rule breaking, and their influence was particularly severe for those who had preexisting antisocial personality traits. However, neither exposure to violence from video games or television at the start of the study predicted aggressive behavior in young people or rule-breaking at 12 months.

Ferguson concludes: "Depressive symptoms stand out as particularly strong predictors of youth violence and aggression, and therefore current levels of depression may be a key variable of interest in the prevention of serious aggression in youth. The current study finds no evidence to support a long-term relationship between video game violence use and subsequent aggression. Even though the debate over violent video games and youth violence will continue, it must do so with restraint".

Ferguson CJ (2010). Video games and youth violence: a prospective analysis in adolescents. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, DOI: 10.1007/s10964-010-9610-x