

# ISR Research Update

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH

## Understanding Aggression

Directed by psychologist **L. Rowell Huesmann**, the ISR Aggression Research Program studies the causes and prevention of aggressive and antisocial behavior, using laboratory experiments, longitudinal survey studies, and randomized clinical field trials. The program includes a variety of research projects, including a cross-national study of television violence and aggression, a study on preventing violence among urban youth, and studies on the long- and short-term impact of violent video games. Support for this work has come from the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Institute of Child Health and Development, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For more information, visit <http://www.rcgd.isr.umich.edu/aggr/>



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## THE IMPACT OF VIOLENT VIDEOS

In 1972, the U.S. Surgeon General declared that the evidence linking violent television shows to childhood aggression was strong enough to warrant “immediate remedial action.” Some of that early evidence came from the ISR Columbia County study, started in 1960 by U-M psychologist Leonard Eron to document how aggressive behavior develops from childhood through adulthood, and how it is handed down from one generation to another.

Now headed by L. Rowell Huesmann, that study and its pathbreaking successor, the Cross-National Television Violence Study, clearly show that the amount of violence children watch on television when they are young predicts how violently they will behave in adulthood.

The level of television violence has increased dramatically since the Columbia County study began. And today there are also violent video games, which “may be much more dangerous than watching violent television shows or movies,” according to ISR psychologist Brad Bushman, who is collaborating with Huesmann on a large-scale study of the impact of violent video games.

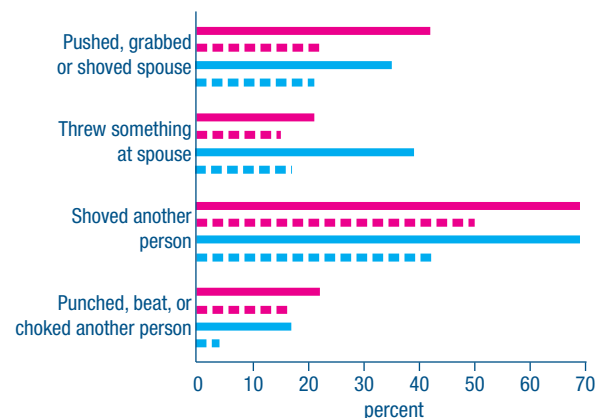
In one recent study, Bushman and co-authors Bruce Bartholow and Marc Sestir established that playing violent video games actually changes brain function, desensitizing chronic players to real-life violence and leading them to behave more aggressively. In another recent study, Bushman and co-authors Nick Carnagey and Craig Anderson showed that playing a violent game for just 20 minutes can decrease physiological arousal to real violence. In a related study, Huesmann and collaborators Jessica Moise Titus and Lucyna Kirwil showed that males who experience less anxious arousal when viewing scenes of extreme violence are more likely to behave violently themselves in the real world.

For more information on this research, see “Vicious Videos” in the Summer 2006 issue of *Michigan Today*.

## The Long-Term Legacy of TV Violence

Women as well as men who were heavy childhood viewers of violent TV shows were much more likely to have abused their spouses and assaulted another adult at least once last year, according to self-reports, reports by others and public records. Source: U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR)

■ Female Heavy Viewers n = 36  
■ Male Heavy Viewers n = 31  
■ Female Light Viewers n = 140  
■ Male Light Viewers n = 122



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## Q&A with Brad J. Bushman

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**Q.** *How did you first become interested in the causes of violent behavior?*

**A.** When I was a 14-year-old high school freshman, my hometown of Ogden, Utah, was the scene of a horrible crime committed by two men who had watched the Clint Eastwood movie *Magnum Force* over and over. This made a big impression on me at the time. When I went to college, I started out in engineering but a course I took on human aggression got me thinking about the topic of violence again, and I decided to switch fields.

**Q.** *What drew you to Michigan in 2003?*

**A.** One of the major reasons I came here was to collaborate with Rowell Huesmann at ISR. Our approaches to the ways that media violence affects aggressive behavior are complementary — he explores the long-term impact while I tend to focus on measuring the immediate physiological and psychological effects.

**Q.** *What other areas are you interested in?*

**A.** I've conducted studies that challenge a number of social myths. One of these is that venting anger reduces aggression. In fact, venting anger is like using gasoline to put out a fire. It only makes things worse. It feeds aggressive thoughts, angry feelings and arousal levels.

Another topic I've studied is whether violence and sex on TV sell products. What I found is that viewers are less likely to remember the brand of advertised products when the ads are shown in sexually explicit and violent programs. In short, if the TV program bleeds, memory for the brand recedes.

**Q.** *In addition to publishing your research results, are there other ways that you've tried to get the word out about your findings?*

**A.** I think it's important to make time to talk to journalists about the topic. Some of my work has been featured on the CBS Evening News, ABC News 20/20, the Jim Lehrer NewsHour and the Discovery Channel, and television reaches a lot of people. I've also been called as an expert witness in several court cases involving violent videos. One is a civil trial against a store that sold *Grand Theft Auto III* and other violent games to an Alabama minor.

I also believe in getting my findings out through op-ed contributions to newspapers. When the U.S. Army promoted "America's Army," a violent video game, to encourage recruits, I had to speak out against this. The U.S. Army has no more right to use taxpayer money to distribute this harmful product to potential recruits than the tobacco industry would have to use taxpayer money to introduce young people to cigarette smoking. Both reduce the chances of leading long and healthy lives.

**Q.** *So, back to television, what viewing rules do you have for your own children?*

**A.** "Most doctors recommend no more than two hours a day for all media, including computer games. So my wife and I try to follow those recommendations with our kids, who are 11, 10 and 6. Plus we block out all programs with violent ratings so they can't just flip through and find something. We don't buy violent video games for them. And we talk about what to do when you're at a friend's house, because it's impossible to monitor your child 24 hours a day.

**Q.** *So after all this time and all this research, why are violent games still being marketed and why are violent television shows still being produced and aimed at kids?*

**A.** Again, I have to make a comparison to the tobacco industry. It took court case after court case until finally the momentum shifted and the industry had to acknowledge that marketing this product was harmful to people.