

Letter to APA on policy statement on violent media

Dear APA Science Directorate:

As you know, many individuals within the scientific community have been concerned about the APA's past policy statements on violent media. Many of us welcome the APA's review of past policy statements, but also worry about potential pitfalls within that process. Given, that approximately 230 media scholars, psychologists and criminologists have signed a statement urging the APA to refrain in the future from declarative policy statements as these are likely to do more damage to the field and mislead the public than be helpful. I attach the statement below.

Cordially,

Christopher J. Ferguson

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Statement:

(Updated 9/25/13)

We welcome the appointment of a Task Force charged with examining research on media violence, and previous statements on the subject by the APA. The issue of video game and other media violence continues to be contentious among both the general public and the scholarly community. Particularly in the wake of the Sandy Hook shooting, whether rightly or wrongly, much discussion has focused on this issue. Much is at stake regarding the way scientific information is communicated to the general public, the way in which policy statements can set scientific agendas and the credibility of the field as a careful and objective science. We very much welcome the appointment by the APA of a new Task Force to revisit the issue, pursuant to new research that has questioned previously held views. We appreciate the APA's efforts to revisit the topic and believe that, given the scientific progress in the field, there are unprecedented opportunities to develop a solid basis for a careful and nuanced communication of research findings to the general public. We also express concern that there are risks involved, particularly in light of methodological and sociological issues well known to impact this field. Below we highlight several issues that we hope the APA Task Force will consider as they reflect on this matter.

We express the concern that the APA's previous (2005) policy statement delineated several strong conclusions on the basis of inconsistent or weak evidence. Research subsequent to that 2005 statement has provided even stronger evidence that some of the assertions in it cannot be supported. As an important scientific discipline that helps shape the public discourse on issues of behavior, policy statements that are rigid or ideological can serve to stifle scientific innovation and new theories and may inadvertently serve to increase publication bias, particularly given concerns about both disregard for null findings and researcher degrees of freedom (Simmons et al., 2011).

Against this background we further express the belief that it is possible for responsible scholars to make good faith arguments both that media violence may have some influence on aggression or other outcomes, or that media violence may not have such effects. Similarly, we believe that pressure to produce "positive" findings is present throughout the review and publication process as

well as in grant-seeking. Obviously, positive findings should certainly be welcomed, but so should “negative” findings or failed replications. Without care taken to encourage publication of non-replications, we will not have a full view of the data in this field.

We also acknowledge that meta-analysis has its place, but express the concern that meta-analysis in this realm can be misleading. For instance, many previous meta-analyses have relied on bivariate effect sizes, which is normal due to the homogeneity assumption of meta-analysis, but which may be of limited value in this realm. As a simple matter, boys both consume more violent media and are more aggressive, so small correlations may reflect gender effects. Naturally, other variables may well explain small correlations as well. From our observation, considerable research data bears this belief out. Unfortunately, it is our observation that, in communicating results to the general public, scholars and the APA’s previous policy statements have tended to focus on bivariate effect sizes, which may be more misleading than informative. Similarly we are skeptical of a “the average effect size wins” approach to meta-analysis, which could be used to smooth over inconsistencies and failed replications. Previous meta-analyses have disagreed on the presence of publication bias, but given the issue of researcher degrees of freedom, some forms of scholar-driven bias may simply be hard to detect.

We also express concern about the overgeneralization of controversial laboratory measures of aggression to public health issues and violent crime. Laboratory measures certainly have their place, but we believe that greater caution should be used in generalizing them to real-life behaviors they may only obliquely measure. Further, the unstandardized and “ad hoc” nature of many of these measures is of concern to us, given they may create false positives.

During the video game epoch, youth violence in the United States and elsewhere has plummeted to 40-year lows, not risen as would have been expected if the 2005 APA resolution were accurate. Although we do not assert video games are responsible for this decline (such would be an ecological fallacy), this decline in societal violence is in conflict with claims that violent video games and interactive media are important public health concerns. The statistical data are simply not bearing out this concern and should not be ignored.

Fundamentally, we are of the belief that the task force has a tremendous opportunity to change the culture of this research field to one which is less ideological and open to new theories, data and beliefs. So too, should scholars feel free to argue for existing theories. We believe that the field is beginning to undergo theoretical and data-driven changes that challenge previously held beliefs. Only with the freedom for data to sort itself out can this field progress. We would endorse any attempt to properly reflect these differences in data, theories, and beliefs. Such a policy statement might be less conclusive, but certainly more sophisticated, and it could do much to restore the credibility of this field. Policy statements based on inconsistent and weak evidence are bad policy and over the long run do more harm than good, hurting the credibility of the science of psychology. We are certainly happy to help the Task Force however we can in support of their important work.

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