POW! CRACK! What we know about video games and violence

By Suzy Khimm, Updated: January 17, 2013

Do video games cause gun violence? President Obama wants to devote federal dollars to answer the question. His newly unveiled plan to reduce gun violence recommends more research into the “links between video games, media images, and violence”: First, he’s using executive authority to direct the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other agencies to look into the causes and prevention of gun violence. He also wants Congress to devote $10 million more to the CDC to conduct further research, which would focus in part on the impact of video games and other media.

But though there’s been a wide range of academic research on the subject, there’s little to no conclusive evidence that playing video games results in real-life violence, much less criminal acts. In 2011, the Supreme Court struck down a California law restricting the sale and rental of violent video games to minors in a 7-2 ruling. The majority cited the state of existing research in its opinion:

Psychological studies purporting to show a connection between exposure to violent video games and harmful effects on children do not prove that such exposure causes minors to act aggressively. Any demonstrated effects are both small and indistinguishable from effects produced by other media…California also cannot show that the Act’s restrictions meet the alleged substantial need of parents who wish to restrict their children’s access to violent videos.

Researchers like Chris Ferguson, a professor at Texas A&M International, believes that the research conducted over the past 20 years has been “quite inconsistent,” leading the Supreme Court to dismiss such findings in its ruling. While there are studies that find that violent video games do increase a desire for aggressive behavior, they’ve been notoriously hard to replicate, and they haven’t been able to find links between aggression in the lab and violent or criminal acts in real life, Ferguson explains. What’s more, he points out, “video games have become more popular and more violent, while youth violence has declined.”

In one 2012 article for the Journal of Psychiatric Research, Ferguson and his co-authors examined 165 participants over three years and found that playing violent video games was not linked to youth aggression or dating violence. Instead, they found that “depression, antisocial personality traits, exposure to family violence and peer influences were the best predictors of aggression-related outcomes.”

That said, there is evidence that violent video games may have a tendency to make children who are already aggressive more hostile and more aggressive — at least in the context of playing a video game, Ferguson explains. “Openly aggressive children tend to intensify their preference for games with a brutal and bloody plot over time,” researchers wrote in a 2011 article for Media Psychology that examined 324 German grade-schoolers over one year. Ferguson points to another 2011 study from the American Psychological Association that
found that video games were linked to aggression but not for the reasons you might expect. “It appears that competition, not violence, may be the video game characteristic that has the greatest influence on aggressive behavior,” the researchers conclude.

That said, there are other researchers who believe there is a distinct and potentially dangerous link between video games and violent behavior. Brad Bushman, a professor at Ohio State University, was among the researchers who filed an amicus brief to the Supreme Court arguing that video games do lead to aggression in ways that should be of concern to both parents and lawmakers. While Bushman believes it’s too simplistic to blame gun violence on video games, he says that “it shouldn’t be dismissed as a trivial cause either.” In a 2002 paper for the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, Bushman found that “violent video game participants expected more aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors from the main characters in the stories,” even after just 20 minutes of playtime.

But it’s worth remembering how aggression is measured in the lab, as compared to the outside world. Bushman’s study, for instance, measured aggression in part by tabulating aggressive thoughts by participants about the characters in the video game. (“For example, one person who played a violent video game expected the main character in the ‘going to a restaurant’ story to think about ‘setting the table cloth on fire,’” he and his co-author write.)

And the 2011 APA study relies on what’s known as the “Hot Sauce Paradigm,” in which one participant creates a hot sauce for another participant to imbibe, with the ability to scale up or down the hotness. While the Hot Sauce Paradigm has been linked to physical aggression in the lab, as the authors note, “no study has measured its association with aggressive behavior outside the lab.”

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