

## THE FACTS ABOUT VIDEO GAME VIOLENCE

*...it is reasonable to presume that exposure to images bears a causal relationship to changes in attitudes and beliefs<sup>1</sup>*

Toronto, Ontario, June 10, 2005: On May 25, Danielle LaBoissier, Executive Director of the recently-created Entertainment Software Association of Canada (ESAC), presented to the Regional Municipality of York Police Services Board to provide what she called "The Facts About Video Game Violence". She was responding to a Resolution on violent video games passed by the Board and forwarded to the Ontario Association of Police Services Board (OAPSB) and the Canadian Association of Police Services Boards (CAPSB) for consideration at their annual general meetings in May and August 2005. The York Resolution states, in part:

- That the OAPSB and the CAPSB urge provincial and federal governments to ban the purchase, sale and distribution of all video games, including Grand Theft Auto - San Andreas, that depict the injuring and killing of police officers, women and children;
- That the OAPSB and CAPSB work with the OACP [Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police] and the CACP [Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police] in encouraging police services and their community partners to develop effective public awareness strategies aimed at reducing young people's consumption of violent video games.

During her presentation, Ms LaBossiere regurgitated the hackneyed, patronizing arguments of her American counterparts at the Entertainment Software Association, some of which imply that people who lobby against violent video games are ignorant sods with too much time on their hands. For example, "Advocating the ban of certain violent games distracts from addressing the real, proven causes of violent behaviour", and "The causes of real life violence are much more complex"<sup>2</sup>. The causes of violent behaviour are indeed complex, but they **do include** media violence as one of the "real, proven causes", which is why people spend time lobbying on the issue.

*... the media violence effect on aggression is bigger than the effect of exposure to lead on IQ scores in children, the effect of calcium intake on bone mass, the effect of homework on academic achievement, or the effect of asbestos exposure on cancer.*

Below are some of the "facts" provided by Ms LaBossiere to the York Police Services Board, along with rebuttals.

### MEDIA VIOLENCE RESEARCH

*ESAC: Experts agree consensus is lacking on a substantial link between exposure to violent video games and real life violence or crime<sup>3</sup>*

*ESAC: Much of the research demonstrating a link to real life violence has been found to be methodologically flawed and inconsistent<sup>4</sup>*

While there are those who dispute the research, the majority of medical and mental health experts in North America agree that exposure to violent media can have harmful effects, particularly on

children. This was reflected in an unprecedented joint statement released in July 2000 by the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychological Association, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, American Medical Association, American Academy of Family Physicians and the American Psychiatric Association. Their *Joint Statement on the Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children*, presented to a Congressional Public Health Summit in July 2000, stated:

*At this time, well over 1,000 studies -- including reports from the Surgeon General's office, the National Institute of Mental Health, and numerous studies conducted by leading figures within our medical and public health organizations -- our own members -- point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children. The conclusion of the public health community, based on over 30 years of research, is that viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behavior, particularly in children. Its effects are measurable and long-lasting.<sup>5</sup>*

In addition to the above-noted prestigious organizations, the following have also acknowledged the harmful influence of violent media and endorsed the research findings:

American Academy of Mental Health, American College of Physicians-American Society of Internal Medicine, American Medical Association Alliance, American Nurses Association, American Public Health Association, Canadian Paediatric Society, National Institute of Mental Health (U.S.), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

These groups are not fringe players, but represent the very backbone of the medical and mental health establishment in North America.

In testifying before a U.S. Senate Commerce Committee hearing on the impact of video games on children, Professor Craig Anderson<sup>6</sup> provided the following facts regarding the influence of violent television and movies:

*Fact 1.* *Exposure to violent TV and movies causes increases in aggression and violence.*

*Fact 2.* *These effects are of two kinds: short term and long term. The short-term effect is that aggression increases immediately after viewing a violent TV show or movie, and lasts for at least 20 minutes. The long-term effect is that repeated exposure to violent TV and movies increases the violence-proneness of the person watching such shows. In essence, children who watch a lot of violent shows become more violent as adults than they would have become had they not been exposed to so much TV and movie violence.*

*Fact 3.* *Both the long term and the short-term effects occur to both boys and girls.*

*Fact 4.* *The effects of TV and movie violence on aggression are not small. Indeed, the media violence effect on aggression is bigger than the effect of exposure to lead on IQ scores in children, the effect of calcium intake on bone mass, the effect of homework on academic achievement, or the effect of asbestos exposure on cancer.<sup>7</sup>*

Much of the research has concentrated on television violence, but can, according to the experts, be extrapolated to violent video games. Professor Anderson made this point in his testimony:

*Why consider the TV and movie violence research literature when discussing video game violence? There are three main reasons. First, the psychological processes underlying TV*

*and movie violence effects on aggression are also at work when people play video games. The similarities between exposure to TV violence and exposure to video game violence are so great that ignoring the TV violence literature would be foolish. Second, the research literature on TV violence effects is vast, whereas the research literature on video game violence is small. Researchers have been investigating TV effects for over 40 years, but video games didn't even exist until the 1970s, and extremely violent video games didn't emerge until the early 1990s. Third, because the TV/movie violence research literature is so mature, there has been ample time to answer early criticisms of the research with additional research designed to address the criticisms.*

*Thus, the various shoot-from-the-hip criticisms and myths created by those with a vested interest in creating and selling various kinds of violent entertainment media have been successfully tested and debunked.<sup>8</sup>*

He also provided responses to a number of myths relating to media violence:

*Myth 1. The TV/movie violence literature is inconclusive. Any scientist in any field of science knows that no single study can definitively answer the complex questions encompassed by a given phenomenon. Even the best of studies have limitations. It's a ridiculously easy task to nitpick at any individual study, which frequently happens whenever scientific studies seem to contradict a personal belief or might have implications about the safety of one's products. The history of the smoking/lung cancer debate is a wonderful example of where such nitpicking successfully delayed widespread dissemination and acceptance of the fact that the product (mainly cigarettes) caused injury and death. The myth that the TV/movie violence literature is inconclusive has been similarly perpetuated by self-serving nitpicking.*

*Scientific answers to complex questions take years of careful research by numerous scientists interested in the same question. We have to examine the questions from multiple perspectives, using multiple methodologies. About 30 years ago, when questioned about the propriety of calling Fidel Castro a communist, Richard Cardinal Cushing replied, "When I see a bird that walks like a duck and swims like a duck and quacks like a duck, I call that bird a duck." When one looks at the whole body of research in the TV/movie violence domain, clear answers do emerge. In this domain, it is now quite clear that exposure to violent media significantly increases aggression and violence in both the immediate situation and over time. The TV/movie violence research community has correctly identified their duck.*

*Myth 2. Violent media have harmful effects only on a very small minority of people who use these media. One version of this myth is commonly generated by parents who allow their children to watch violent movies and play violent games. It generally sounds like this, "My 12 year old son watches violent TV shows, goes to violent movies, and plays violent video games, and he's never killed anyone." Of course, most people who consume high levels of violent media, adults or youth, do not end up in prison for violent crimes. Most smokers do not die of lung cancer, either. The more relevant question is whether many (or most) people become more angry, aggressive, and violent as a result of being exposed to high levels of media violence. Are they more likely to slap a child or spouse when provoked? Are they more likely to drive aggressively, and display "road rage?" Are they more likely to assault co-workers? The answer is a clear yes.*

*Myth 3. Violent media, especially violent games, allow a person to get rid of violent tendencies in a non harmful way. This myth has a long history and has at least two labels: the catharsis hypothesis, or venting. The basic idea is that various frustrations and stresses produce an accumulation of violent tendencies or motivations somewhere in the body, and that venting these aggressive inclinations either by observing violent media or by aggressive game playing will somehow lead to a healthy reduction in these pent-up violent tendencies. This idea is that it is not only incorrect, but in fact the opposite actually happens. We've known for over thirty years that behaving aggressively or watching someone else behave aggressively in one context, including in "safe" games of one kind or another, increases subsequent aggression. It does not decrease it.*

*Myth 4. Laboratory studies of aggression do not measure "real" aggression, and are therefore irrelevant. This myth persists despite the successes of psychological laboratory research in a variety of domains. In the last few years, social psychologists from the University of Southern California and from Iowa State University have carefully examined this claim, using very different methodologies, and have clearly demonstrated it to be nothing more than a myth. Laboratory studies of aggression accurately and validly measure "real" aggression.*

*Myth 5. The magnitude of violent media effects on aggression and violence is trivially small. This myth is related to Myth 2, which claims that only a few people are influenced by media violence. In fact, as noted earlier the TV violence effect on aggression and violence is larger than many effects that are seen as huge by the medical profession and by society at large. Furthermore, preliminary evidence and well-developed theory suggests that the violent video game effects may be substantially larger.<sup>9</sup>*

#### **YORK RESOLUTION "PROBABLY" NOT CONSTITUTIONAL**

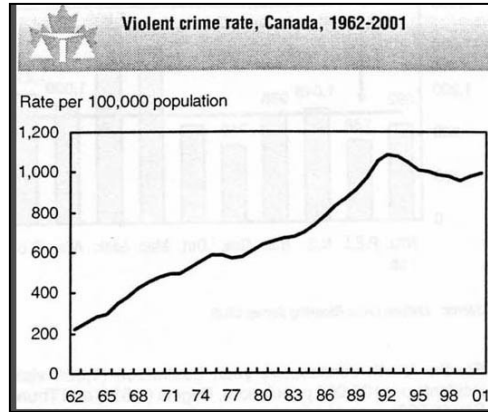
Ms LaBoissiere offered her opinion that banning certain video games would "probably" be unconstitutional<sup>10</sup>, but that's all it is -- an opinion. The *Charter* freedom of expression guarantee is predictably trotted out on occasions such as this and held up as an insurmountable barrier to bringing in legislation but, in fact, it is no such thing. The Supreme Court of Canada has rendered several decisions upholding laws that restrict various forms of expression because of the harm they cause to society -- e.g., television advertising to young children (*Irwin Toy*), hate propaganda (*Keegstra*), obscenity (*Butler*), indecent performances (*Mara*), possession of child pornography (*Sharpe*) -- and there is every reason to believe they would uphold an expansion of the *Criminal Code* to restrict the "undue exploitation of violence" that would cover all forms of media, including video games. In fact, this has been recommended many times over the years, although the federal government has refused to act to protect the public, which is one of the reasons entertainment violence has reached such horrific levels.

While there is ample research the government could provide to justify curbs on violent media, the Supreme Court stated in *Butler*

*While a direct link between obscenity and harm to society may be difficult, if not impossible, to establish, **it is reasonable to presume that exposure to images bears a causal relationship to changes in attitudes and beliefs.** (emphasis added)*

## VIOLENT CRIME STATISTICS

***ESAC: Violent crime rates in Canada fell 11% between 1993 and 2003, while video game use has soared<sup>1</sup>***



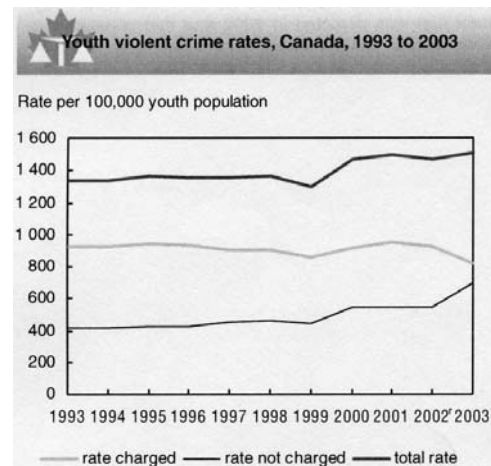
crime chart at the left illustrates this alarming increase (Statistics Canada, *Crime Statistics in Canada, 2001*).

What Statistics Canada actually said about the 2003 violent crime rate is this: "The 2003 violent crime rate was 11% lower than its near-peak in 1993, but still 66% higher than 25 years ago." (Statistics Canada, *Crime Statistics in Canada, 2003*). As for the decrease cited by ESAC, the Canadian Council on Social Development notes that the proportion of Canadians between the ages of 15 and 25 (a high crime group) dropped sharply -- by 18% -- in 1991 and this is partly responsible for the decrease in violent crime. The Council also said, "Despite decreases in both the proportion of teens aged 15 to 19 and crime rates in the 1990s, overall rates of violent crime are still three times higher than they were in the 1960s."<sup>12</sup> The 2001 violent

## VIOLENT CRIME - YOUTH

The Statistics Canada report, *Children and Youth in Canada*, states: "In 1999, violent crimes accounted for one in five youths charged with a *Criminal Code* offence. The rate of youths charged with violent crimes began to fall only recently, with a 2% drop in 1997, a 1% decrease in 1998, and a 5% drop in 1999. **Despite these declines, the 1999 youth violent crime rate remained 41% higher than it was a decade earlier.**" (emphasis added)

Commenting on the 2003 violent crime statistics, Statistics Canada said: "Throughout the past decade, the trend in the rate of youth violent crime was relatively stable until it began a general increase in 2000", an increase illustrated in the chart at the right (*Crime Statistics in Canada, 2003*).



## PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY VS GOVERNMENT REGULATION

***ESAC: Canadian households overwhelmingly place responsibility with parents<sup>13</sup>***

Ms LaBoissiere offered the results of an AC Nielsen poll indicating that 72% of "Canadian households" believe parents are "best suited to guide children in their choice of PC and video games". What she didn't mention was a Decima Research poll conducted a year ago for the industry trade journal, Canadian NEW MEDIA, showing that the "vast majority of Canadians say video games should be regulated by the government to warn users about violence and sexual content"<sup>14</sup> -- 59% of respondents "strongly agreed" and 24% "agreed" with the statement, "The government should regulate video game content by requiring that games be rated measuring such things as violence and sexual content". Commenting on the poll results, Canadian NEW MEDIA

editor, Jeff Leiper, said, "Industry self-regulation has been the mantra of gaming industry executives for a long time, but the results demonstrate that Canadians would be willing to accept -- and embrace -- government regulation."<sup>15</sup>

### **POLICE SERVICES BOARD REMAINS STEADFAST**

The arguments presented by Ms LaBoissiere were so simplistic as to be insulting, especially considering that she was speaking to a police services board. In any event, her presentation apparently failed to have the desired effect, because the Board "remained firm on its resolution urging provincial and federal governments to ban the purchase, sale and distribution of all video games that depict the injuring and killing of police officers and other people".<sup>16</sup>

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For further information, contact Valerie Smith at [valsmith@fradical.com](mailto:valsmith@fradical.com) or visit the Free Radical web site at [www.fradical.com](http://www.fradical.com). For additional information on media violence research, please see the *Action Agenda: A Strategic Blueprint for Reducing Exposure to Media Violence in Canada*. The York Resolution and the ESAC presentation are posted at: [www.fradical.com/ESAC\\_presents\\_to\\_York\\_Police\\_Services\\_Board1.htm](http://www.fradical.com/ESAC_presents_to_York_Police_Services_Board1.htm).

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<sup>1</sup> *R v. Butler*, Supreme Court of Canada, 1992

<sup>2</sup> *The Facts About Video Game Violence*, Entertainment Software Association of Canada PowerPoint presentation to the Regional Municipality of York Police Services Board, May 25, 2005

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>5</sup> *Joint Statement on the Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children* presented to the Congressional Public Health Summit by the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychological Association, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, American Medical Association, American Academy of Family Physicians and the American Psychiatric Association, July 2000

<sup>6</sup> Craig Anderson is Professor of Psychology and Chair of the Department of Psychology at Iowa State University, has studied human behaviour for over 25 years, and wrote the "Human Aggression and Violence" articles for both the *Encyclopedia of Psychology* and the *Encyclopedia of Sociology*

<sup>7</sup> Testimony of Professor Craig A. Anderson, Ph.D., before the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee hearing on The Impact of Interactive Violence on Children, March 21, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *Banning cop killer game unconstitutional*, police told, Metroland, May 28, 2005

<sup>11</sup> *The Facts About Video Game Violence*, Entertainment Software Association of Canada PowerPoint presentation to the Regional Municipality of York Police Services Board, May 25, 2005

<sup>12</sup> *Crime Prevention Through Social Development*, Canadian Council on Social Development

<sup>13</sup> *The Facts About Video Game Violence*, Entertainment Software Association of Canada PowerPoint presentation to the Regional Municipality of York Police Services Board, May 25, 2005

<sup>14</sup> *Regulate violent, sexy video games, Canadians say in Decima Research survey*, Decima Research news release, May 11, 2004

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>16</sup> Draft Minutes, Regional Municipality of York Police Services Board, May 25, 2005