



# FAST FORWARD TO VIOLENCE

## Violent visual imaging and serious juvenile crime

The effects of media violence on the behaviour of children and younger adolescents are controversial. From the earliest days of television, parents and social critics have expressed concern about the possible negative effects of the medium on children. The effects of media violence have been examined by researchers from diverse backgrounds from many different countries. Review of the body of literature (Health 1989) suggest that an association does exist between media violence and aggression. Rosenthal (1986) has agreed that where a problem as serious as violence is involved, even a small effect must be taken seriously. Snyder (1992) in an overview of "movies and the adolescent" emphasises that the adolescent of today, perhaps as much as any generation, is in search of identity. Films may provide either acceptable or inappropriate role models that adolescents utilise as examples for social learning.

There have always been delinquent and violent children and adolescents. The causes are multiple; social and physical environment, family, parenting, social control and individual psychological make-up all interact.

Human beings are in constant interaction with their environment, reacting to information they take in and adjusting to demands placed upon them. Increasing attention is being paid to the specific psychological reaction patterns of children experiencing both direct and indirect childhood trauma. Indirect trauma includes witnessing or observing disturbing interactive experiences, which makes the role of the media an important one to consider.

Childhood actions are based on the child's regard and caring for others as well as on self respect and flexibility. Behaviour patterns reflect the private internal world of the child.

Previously, when adolescent and adult offenders were studied in terms of the contribution of past events to their current criminality, the emphasis has been on the event itself, rather than on the subject response and reaction to the event. Unaddressed traumatic and early damaging experiences to murderers, as children, set into motion certain thinking patterns. A structure of thinking begins to emerge that motivates and sustains deviant behaviour through developmental and interpersonal failure and through the alliance of distorted perceptions. Of particular importance is the activation of aggression and its link to

sexual expression. In a recent review in the United States, the childhood sexual experiences of 36 adolescents and adults who later commit sexual homicide, reveal that the offenders placed a strong reliance on visual sexual stimuli, pornography ranked highest (81%) (Ressler et al).

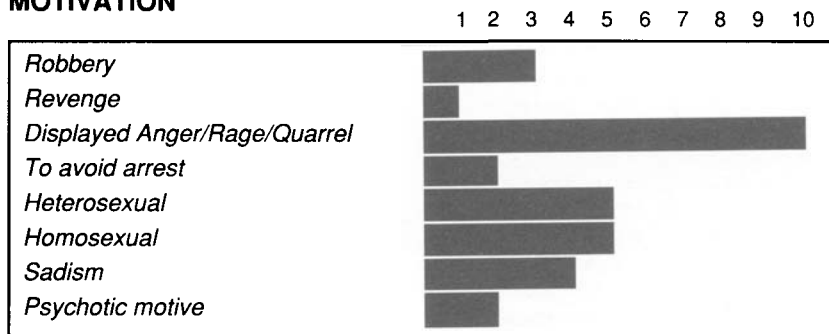
### A New Study

Our study of 40 adolescent murderers, 20 aged 5 to 18 years and 20 aged 18 to 21 years have revealed findings similar to the

classic studies of Lewis in the States (Lewis 1985) i.e. past history of violence but coupled with neuropsychiatric vulnerabilities, parental brutality, mental illness within the parent group and a history of the youngster being 'out of control' within home, community and school, in the months prior to the offence.

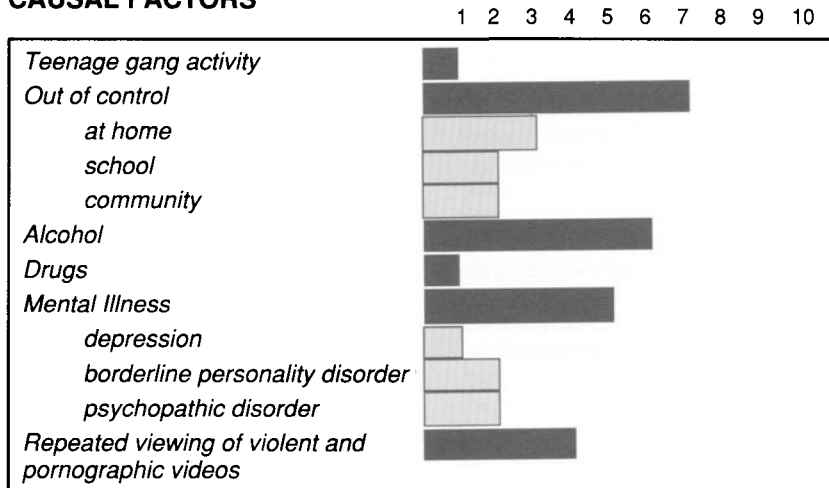
Study of the offence in terms of motivation, cause and other features surrounding the offence in the under 18 group revealed the following:

### MOTIVATION



Over half the murderers had more than one motivating factor

### CAUSAL FACTORS



A review of 200 adolescent sex offenders assessed by The Gardener Unit has revealed; a high psychiatric morbidity in the family of sexual offenders, offenders themselves have high psychiatric morbidity, there is a high incidence of offenders being victims themselves, they start to offend at an early age and the group have been responsible for many offences, which result in many victims. In individual cases, particularly those where most aggression has been shown in the sexual act and especially towards young and elderly victims, when in anger and rage, the adolescent has re-enacted elements of sex and aggression

first gleaned from violent visual imaging. Within the group of adolescents offending within a family and, in particular, a baby-sitting context, histories reveal easy access of the adolescent baby-sitter to violent and pornographic videos, sometimes seen in the presence of the young victims, and providing a potent source of immediate arousal for the subsequent act.

It is too simple in the current social climate to look for an easy target to explain away and place blame for the serious acts of some older children and adolescents.

However children who have few, or no, internal boundaries have to rely on external



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stimulation to guide their behaviour towards what is and is not acceptable. For vulnerable children, violent images from videos, film and television affect the nature of their dangerous acts. Killing and offences against the person are usually driven by distorted ideas, unstable and violent feelings, as well as deviant role models from real or fictional sources.

The technology of visual imaging, in particular the arrival of such imaging directly into our own homes, has in many ways advanced too quickly for us to deal with.

Where there is appropriate, consistent, nurturing parenting, youngsters exposed to the real violence of the world through news programmes, can be supported, offered explanation, and their anxieties can hopefully be dealt with. The media, in particular

television and film, monitor their own violent and sexual imaging, but in the final analysis in the case of television have to assume that parents will exercise control and censorship in terms of the viewing habits of children and adolescents. In vulnerable children and adolescents, in vulnerable families, it is likely this censorship will not take place. Of equal concern, is the relative ease with which children and adolescents can gain access to videos with violent and pornographic content. Beyond the actual content is the as important 'message' of the video, in some cases that violence and sexual abuse, are acceptable, and related to individual success. Viewing of such videos for adolescents who currently have no prospect of 'success' in their own lives, no sense of vocation or constructive avocation, together with the potential for such youngsters to view such videos for hours on end, focusing on fast forward, to the points of most violence, will contribute in particular to the nature and content of their later offences. Whilst not suggesting that society interfere with the freedom of art forms or the rights of us all to receive honest visual communication about distressing local, national and world events, this should currently be tempered with the need to protect the 'vulnerable' child and

adolescent, and in doing so, protect their future victims.

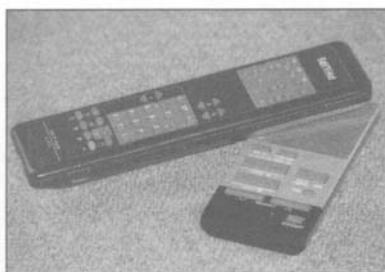
Parents alone cannot be expected to take full responsibility for the current deviant pathway of some children. In the final analysis parents are only as good as the social environment which trains and supports them, appropriately or not as the case may be.

The challenge should be thrown out to the media in all its forms to take a constructive responsible role within society.

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#### References

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