

The Continuing Rise of Gun Violence in PG-13 Movies, 1985 to 2015

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The Motion Picture Association of America created the parental guidance for children under age 13 years (PG-13) movie rating in 1984 to “strongly” caution parents about content that may not be suited for children of that age. According to that industry-supported group, “There may be depictions of violence in a PG-13 movie, but generally not both realistic and extreme or persistent violence,” (www.filmratings.com). Unlike PG-13 films, which are open to all, those rated R can only be seen in theaters by those under 17 years who are accompanied by a parent or other adult.

In a 2013 issue of *Pediatrics*,¹ we reported that portrayals of gun violence in top-grossing PG-13 movies had more than doubled since 1985, the first full year of the PG-13 category. Indeed, such depictions were even more frequent in 2012 PG-13 films than in those rated restricted to age 17 years and older unless accompanied by an adult (R). What increasingly differentiates the instances of gun violence in PG-13 films from those rated R is not only the higher frequency in the PG-13 category but also these films’ erasure of the consequences (eg, blood and suffering) and greater likelihood that the violence will be perpetrated by or on comic book-inspired heroes and antiheroes (eg, Batman, Avengers, and X-Men). As the director of the Motion Picture Association of America’s ratings board told a journalist,² it deems violence by such comic book figures as “representing a less realistic kind of violence that’s neither graphic nor brutal,” and hence by implication less harmful to children than the violence in R-rated films. Consistent with this philosophy, the violence in PG-13 films can be extensive but largely bloodless. For example, the 2016 comic book-inspired PG-13 film, “Suicide Squad,” features supervillains induced to do battle to save the world from an evil sorceress. “Expect lots of action violence, from close-up execution-style murders to large-scale battles and widespread destruction that leads to the deaths of innocent bystanders,” Common Sense Media tells parents.³ Parent Previews advises that “Violence is seen throughout the film including onscreen shootings (with no blood or explicit details)...”⁴

The pattern of increasing violence we have identified coincides with an increase in the proportion of top-30 box office films rated PG13. In the first 3 full years of the rating (1985 to 1987), 29% of the top-30 grossing

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films (according to domestic box office sales) were PG-13. In 2013 to 2015, PG-13 films accounted for 51% of the top 30. Over the same period, films with an R rating declined from 40% to 23% within the top-30 category, paralleling a gradual shift of violent content in top-grossing movies from the R to PG-13 category.⁵

As a result, movie-going families are now undergoing an experiment in which children of any age can enter a theater to watch a PG-13 film in which the protagonists gain power, settle conflicts, and kill or are killed by lethal weapons. At the same time, tolerance for such fare is being heightened. The more parents watch these violent movies, the more they become desensitized to them and the less likely they are to prevent their children from watching them.⁶ It is likely that children experience the same desensitizing effect. This is problematic because, as a recent policy statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics noted,⁷ repeatedly viewing violent media content can influence some youth to become more aggressive.

To determine whether the PG-13 gun violence trend we identified earlier has continued, we updated our analysis of gun violence in top-30 movies to include 2013, 2014, and 2015. The pattern we reported earlier persists. The amount of gun violence in PG-13-rated movies continues to exceed that in movies

rated R and does so even more clearly than in 2012 (see <http://bit.ly/2d4ftMw> for a figure with these trends).

Such findings should give us pause. Research on content that portrays smoking or drinking without featuring the harmful consequences demonstrates that some adolescents, as a result of repeated exposure, are prone to imitate such screen behaviors.^{8,9} Why would acceptance of gun violence be any different? In addition to the valuable suggestions presented in the latest American Academy of Pediatrics statement,⁵ and until we learn more, pediatricians should consider advising parents to be cautious about exposing their children to the gun violence in PG-13 movies. In addition, research should address the hypotheses offered by the Motion Picture Association of America that bloodless gun violence perpetrated by comic book characters produces less problematic effects than filmic gun death accompanied by blood and perpetrated by realistic characters, such as gangsters, vigilantes, or the person next door.

ABBREVIATIONS

PG-13: parental guidance for children under age 13 years

R: restricted to age 17 years and older unless accompanied by an adult

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