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Gun violence: are media fanning the flames?

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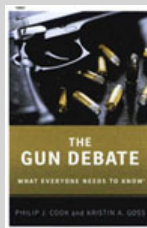
Philip J. Cook and Kristin A. Goss, "The Gun Debate--What Everyone Needs to Know." Oxford University Press, Oxford. 280 pages., \$12.19

With an apparent increase of mass casualty shootings over the last decade in schools, public | spaces and military bases, the debate over gun control and guns rights has intensified. The complexity of gun violence issues as well as the social and political views regarding the gun culture collide in heated and emotional debates. But do the mass media encourage gun violence within our society?

Philip J. Cook and Kristin A. Goss have combined their knowledge to address some of these issues in their book "The Gun Debate--What Everyone Needs to Know." Cook is a Professor of Public Policy and Professor of Economics and Sociology at Duke University. Goss is an Associate Professor of Public Policy Studies and Political Science at Duke.

"The Gun Debate--What Everyone Needs to Know is written in a question-and-answer format. Information covering both sides of the debate has been provided to serve as a foundation for discussions. The authors discuss numerous topics such as the costs and causes of gun violence, the effectiveness of firearm policies and public opinion / political party positions on guns to name a few. Mass media are discussed throughout this book.

The authors explore prolonged 24/7 media coverage of mass shootings and concerns of copycat crimes. They discuss whether violence on television, motion pictures and video games influence and might possibly contribute to gun violence in our society. In addition, the book examines what happens after a high-profile shooting, and if tragic events such as school shootings can shift public opinion on policy changes to gun control. Questions surrounding whether the media favor gun control and the drama surrounding tragic events are mentioned as well.



Discussions surrounding violent video games, especially the first-person-shooting (FPS) genre, have drawn heavy criticism for a role they are perceived to play in mass shootings, especially when the shooter is a young adult. In many instances, the press tries to find a connection between the killers and violent role-play gaming. A survey conducted in 2000 found more than 75 percent of Americans felt violent video games contribute somewhat or a great deal towards real-life violence. Research in this field indicates there might be evidence of anti-social behavior and low-level aggression that could aggravate an at-risk child, but there is not enough evidence to prove a connection between fantasy gaming and real-world mass shooting incidents.

Violence within television and motion pictures has been criticized for contributing to the rash of violence in America. Many studies have been conducted to determine if exposure to violence in mass media and television increases aggression or criminal activity. Most scholars agree that moderate aggression can be attributed to watching violence, more so prevalent in children over the short term, and that viewing dramatic violence can numb our senses to reality. However, over the long term, this has been difficult to prove with controlled, measured research. Numerous factors need to be taken into consideration such as unstable mental health issues, poverty, drug abuse, poor upbringing can be the trigger(s) that may contribute more to actual committed violence in real-life than simply viewing violence in programs or movies.

Non-stop media coverage of high profile gun-related events such as the Sandy Hook Grade School shooting and public area incidents such as the Aurora, Colo, movie theater shooting have been brought into the debate whether 24/7 coverage is a motivation for others to commit similar acts. The media are expected to cover the news, but to what extent and duration are debatable. There are fears media attention the killers receive may influence others to commit copycat crimes of a similar nature. The NRA's president brought up the concern of other possible copycat shootings due to the constant media coverage of the Sandy Hook massacre. Fortunately, no other mass school shootings happened during 2012-13. Currently not enough research has been conducted to tell if there is a strong connection regarding mass school shooting and attention seeking individuals. However, there is strong evidence documenting the phenomenon of copycat crime is real. The authors discussed media coverage of women and celebrity suicides are the most studied copycat phenomenon. US public health agencies have developed guidelines discouraging reporting and sensationalizing suicides.

The topic of gun violence, gun control, regulations and mass media involvement will continue to be debated for years to come. This book does an excellent job of presenting facts, research, statistics and history on a variety of gun-related issues. Mass media may play a role in the encouragement of violence, however much more research is needed in the long term.

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