

Gun Violence, Videogames, and Libraries

The tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School this past December—and the courageous response of our school and library colleagues in Newtown, Connecticut—was a horrific reminder that senseless killing can happen anywhere.

Along with calls for ammunition and assault-weapon restrictions, as well as heightened school security nationwide, came renewed concerns about violent videogames. The Obama administration directed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in January to study the causes of gun violence, including the effects of violence in videogames, the media, and social media on real-life actions.

Inevitably, the presence of videogames in several community libraries also became part of the debate:

■ The Paterson (N.J.) Free Public Library board backed a staff petition February 27 to bar children from playing any online videogames onsite until they reach the 7th grade. Director Cindy Czesak told *American Libraries* the concern arose from the “boisterous behavior” that erupts at the main library during gameplay.

■ At the request of several patrons, Elmhurst (Ill.) Public Library is reviewing its policy of purchasing popular videogames rated M for “mature.” Patrons are already required to show identification to prove they are at least 17 to borrow an M-rated game, according to the March 18 *Chicago Tribune*.

Instead of considering bans, ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom recommends that libraries cultivate videogame creation, play, and contests. Many reluctant learners are at-risk youth, and gaming helps bring them into the library. James Paul Gee (*What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*) has documented how gaming leads to positive classroom outcomes, as has David Williamson Shaffer (*How Computer Games Help Children Learn*).

In 2005, California barred the sale of certain violent videogames to children without parental supervision. Unconvinced by the research claiming that engaging in

virtual violence leads to the real thing, the Supreme Court struck down that law 7–2 in 2011 (*Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association*), declaring that even violent videogames are protected by the First Amendment.

Adding dialogue to the data

Christopher Ferguson, chair of the Department of Psychology and Communication at Texas A&M International University, isn’t convinced either. “The research is inconsistent and weakened by methodological flaws,” he wrote in the January 10 *Chronicle of Higher Education* about several hundred studies with varying conclusions.

As for preventive measures, Harold Pollack, codirector of the University of Chicago’s Crime Lab, sees gun violence as a complex public health problem. In a February 14 interview with *The Atlantic*, he said the best mitigating influence on young people who are at risk is the “actual adult human beings” in their lives.

Library consultants at Chicago Public Library’s YOUmedia center are among the “actual adult human beings” who truly connect with teens. As a result, the space in the downtown Harold Washington Library Center is packed with young people after school and into the evenings, many of them from neighborhoods with pervasive gun-related crime. In mid-March, CPL partnered with Steppenwolf Theatre to tackle the issue of how guns affect communities head-on: Five branches hosted free performances of *How Long Will I Cry?* a play using the words of gun-violence victims, their families, and bystanders as captured in court and police documents.

Libraries are among the most trusted of institutions. It is time to use that trust to create activities and programs that help solve the problem of gun violence. ALA is working with the Kettering Foundation and with the Harwood Institute to promote such dialogue and, on June 28 at the ALA Annual Conference in Chicago, will host a community conversation about gun violence that will include young people who have been affected.

—Barbara Jones, director, Office for Intellectual Freedom

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