Impact of viewing violent movies is surprising

by John Wilkens

Gordon Dahl, a young economist at University of California San Diego, is part of a wave of creative thinkers in his field moving beyond the familiar - inflation, unemployment - to study such eyebrow-raising topics as sumo wrestlers and the Ku Klux Klan.

THERE WON'T BE BLOOD - Economist Gordon Dahl has written a paper about the impact of violent movies on crime. The study says that over a period when violent films were aired in theaters, on average, there were 1,000 fewer assaults that same weekend in the U.S. Still, the research doesn't mean violent movies are good, he warns. CNS Photo. But even he would admit he's an unlikely candidate to write a paper about the impact of violent movies on crime - especially one that shows the number of assaults actually goes down.

Dahl, 39, is a Mormon and in his words "fairly religious." He doesn't watch gore-fests because he doesn't "like the way they make me feel." He thinks brutal fare is "bad in the long run" for society, desensitizing people.

Dahl and his wife, Katherine, won't allow their four children to see violent films - even going so far as to buy a special DVD player for Christmas that automatically scans for offending scenes and skips over them.

But his scholarly juices were stirred one day while he was consulting kids-in-mind.com, a Web site that helps parents decide which films are suitable by offering detailed descriptions of sexual and violent content. He started to wonder whether there might be a way to measure the effect of violent films in the real world.

He knew what numerous laboratory experiments had shown over the years: People exposed to violent clips demonstrate increased aggression immediately afterward. He expected the same thing would prove true in the crime stats.

He was wrong.

What he learned instead is that during the past decade, the airing of violent films in theaters meant there was, on average, 1,000 fewer assaults every weekend in the U.S.

"That's 52,000 fewer weekend assaults in a year," Dahl said. "That's a pretty significant reduction."

Surprised, he and a colleague, Stefano DellaVigna of University of California Berkeley, worked for more than a year to understand the results. Then they wrote a paper - "Does Movie Violence Increase Violent Crime?" - and presented it at a national economics convention last month.

The paper made a splash in the media.

Tongues wagged on the Internet in the usual places, and in the usual ways, which meant folks who had never bothered to read the paper were soon flogging the authors for encouraging impressionable kids to flock to the latest slasher flick.

Maybe that's why, in a recent phone interview from Princeton University, where he is a visiting professor this year, Dahl made a point right away: "Our research does not mean violent movies are good. If someone gets that idea, they've reached the wrong conclusion."

What's happening, he said, is that people (young males, mostly) who might otherwise be smashing heads are getting their mayhem fix in darkened theaters. They're taking themselves out of circulation for the night. Dahl calls that "voluntary incapacitation." And he thinks it's a good thing.

But midnight basketball leagues might be just as effective, he said, as would other movies proven to attract the same clientele - Adam Sandler comedies, for example.

"A Julia Roberts movie is not going to do anything for crime," Dahl said.

An assistant professor, Dahl came to UCSD in 2006, having moved west from the University of Rochester. He got his bachelor's from Brigham Young University and his master's and doctorate from Princeton, all in economics.

He is a behavioral economist, a branch popularized by the recent book "Freakonomics," which looks at, among other things, the effect of abortion on crime rates and the "abject working conditions of crack dealers."

In other papers, Dahl has studied tithing, early marriage and poverty and the impact of family income on a child's achievement in school.

He said economics is "about choices," and more and more scholars are understanding that those choices are influenced by elements of psychology, sociology and political science.

"We bring a slightly different perspective and set of tools to the debate," he said.

Although he was surprised by the results of the movie-violence study, he wasn't disappointed, his own distaste for the fare notwithstanding.

"Part of the fun of science is, when you have something counterintuitive, what is the explanation for it? In this case, we wanted to unravel the puzzle, to figure out why the numbers came out the way they did.

"What you think the answer might be should not determine what the answer is. The data should."

Although the study appears to contradict laboratory findings about movie violence and aggression, Dahl doesn't see it that way. He believes such films do encourage violence, "but compared to what?"

In a lab, the comparison is between violent films and nonviolent films. In the field, for that segment of the population most likely to be violent, the choice may be between watching Freddy Krueger and doing something even more inciting - like getting drunk and then slugging someone.

The study is expected to become part of an ongoing debate about the effect of violent media on people, especially youngsters. That debate has flared numerous times in recent years - over heavy metal music, over video games, over television.

Dahl welcomes the debate, but acknowledged concern about people misinterpreting his work or using it to suggest there's no need to worry about the long-term effects of exposure to simulated murder and mutilation.

"For policymakers, our research doesn't mean that violent movies should be promoted," he said. "But what it does say is that if you could divert people who are at risk for committing violent acts into other things, we would be much better off."

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