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**Parents say intense gun violence in PG-13 movies
appropriate for teens 15 and older**

Gun violence more acceptable if seen as 'justified' than 'unjustified,' study finds

PHILADELPHIA – Parents are more willing to let their children see PG-13 movies with intense gun violence when the violence appears to be “justified,” used in defense of a loved one or for self-protection, than when it has no socially redeeming purpose, a new study finds.

But even when the gun violence in PG-13 movies appears justified, parents think that the movies are more suitable for teens age 15 and up, two years older than suggested by the movie industry ratings board’s PG-13 rating. Parents thought movies with unjustified but bloodless gun violence were more appropriate for 16-year-olds, the study finds.

The study, “Parental Desensitization to Gun Violence in PG-13 Movies,” by researchers at the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, was [published online](#) in the journal *Pediatrics* on May 14 and will be in the June issue.

“The findings suggest that parents may want a new rating, PG-15, for movies with intense violence,” said lead author [Daniel Romer](#), research director of the [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) (APPC). “Violent movies often get a PG-13 rating by omitting the consequences of violence such as blood and suffering, and by making the use of violence seem justified. But parents of teenagers say that even scenes of justified violence are upsetting and more appropriate for teens who are at least 15.”

The rise of gun violence in PG-13 movies

Past studies by APPC researchers found that gun violence in the most popular PG-13 movies [has more than doubled](#) since the rating was introduced in 1984, and now exceeds the gun violence [in comparable R-rated](#) films. In the earliest years of the PG-13 rating, less than a third of the 30 top-grossing movies were rated PG-13, but recently more than half were PG-13. In past research on the growing acceptance of gun violence in PG-13 films, APPC researchers found that [parents appeared to become desensitized](#) to violence as they watched successive movie clips.

The current experiment was designed to understand whether parents became more accepting of the movie violence because they were being emotionally numbed to it or whether the justification for the violence influenced them. Could justified violence be less upsetting than unjustified violence? And could parents who repeatedly saw the kind of bloodless, justified

violence featured in PG-13 movies become so accustomed to it that they experience a kind of “normative desensitization” that leads to greater acceptance of its viewing by children?

The experiment

In an online experiment, the APPC researchers showed movie clips to a national sample of 610 parents who have at least one child between the ages 6 and 17. Parents viewed a series of four 90-second clips of either justified or unjustified violence from popular movies. The scenes of justified violence came from the PG-13 movies “Live Free or Die Hard” (2007), “White House Down” (2013), “Terminator Salvation” (2009), and “Taken” (2008). The clips of unjustified violence came from the PG-13 movies “Skyfall” (2012) and “Jack Reacher” (2012) and the R-rated films “Sicario” (2015) and “Training Day” (2001).

Scenes from the R-rated movies were edited to remove graphic and potentially upsetting consequences such as blood and suffering to mimic the effect of PG-13 movies. (PG-13 means parents are strongly cautioned that some material “may be inappropriate for children under 13.” The more restricted R rating means viewers under 17 must be accompanied by a parent or adult.)

Parents less upset by justified violence

Instead of being emotionally desensitized, parents grew increasingly upset as they watched the succession of movie clips, whether the violence was justified or not. (Figure 1) But parents were less upset by the justified violence and more lenient in deciding the appropriate age for a child to watch it. Most of the parents said the movies with justified violence were suitable starting at age 15, while the movies with unjustified violence were appropriate starting at age 16. (Figure 2)

One exception: The parents who were frequent moviegoers were the most permissive, saying that movies with unjustified violence were suitable for 13-year-olds.

As parents watched the series of movie scenes of unjustified gun violence, they became more restrictive on the appropriate age for viewing, the study found. But that wasn’t true with the justified scenes of violence, where parents’ opinion of the appropriate viewing age held steady. The APPC researchers also found that when watching the successive justified movie clips, parents increasingly regarded the gun violence itself as justified.

Media violence and children

The American Academy of Pediatrics has been long concerned about the effects of media violence. In 2016 the academy pointed to a body of research showing that viewing violent media content can influence some youth to [become more aggressive](#).

[A recent study](#) by Ohio State University researchers found that children 8 to 12 years old who saw scenes of a PG-rated movie with guns played longer with a real gun and pulled the trigger more often than children who saw a movie without guns.

“Despite such evidence, we still don’t know whether repeatedly seeing movies with justified violence teaches children that using guns is OK if they think it’s justified,” Romer said.

He added that filmmakers appear to be taking advantage of the movie rating system.

“Hollywood is exploiting the movie rating system by leaving out harmful consequences like blood and suffering from PG-13 films,” Romer said. “By sanitizing the effects of violence, moviemakers are able to get a PG-13 rating and a wider audience for their films. But this gun violence may be just as brutal and potentially harmful to young viewers.”

In addition to Romer, the authors of the study are [Kathleen Hall Jamieson](#), director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center; [Patrick E. Jamieson](#), director of APPC’s Adolescent Health and Risk Communication Institute; Azeez Adebimpe, an APPC postdoctoral fellow; and Robert Lull, a former APPC postdoctoral fellow now at California State University, Fresno.

A sample from a justified movie clip [can be seen here](#). A sample from an unjustified clip [is here](#).

“Parental Desensitization to Gun Violence in PG-13 Movies” was published by Pediatrics and can be [found here](#). (Subscription may be required.)

The [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#) was founded in 1993 to educate the public and policy makers about the media’s role in advancing public understanding of political, health, and science issues at the local, state and federal levels. Follow APPC on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

Figure 1.

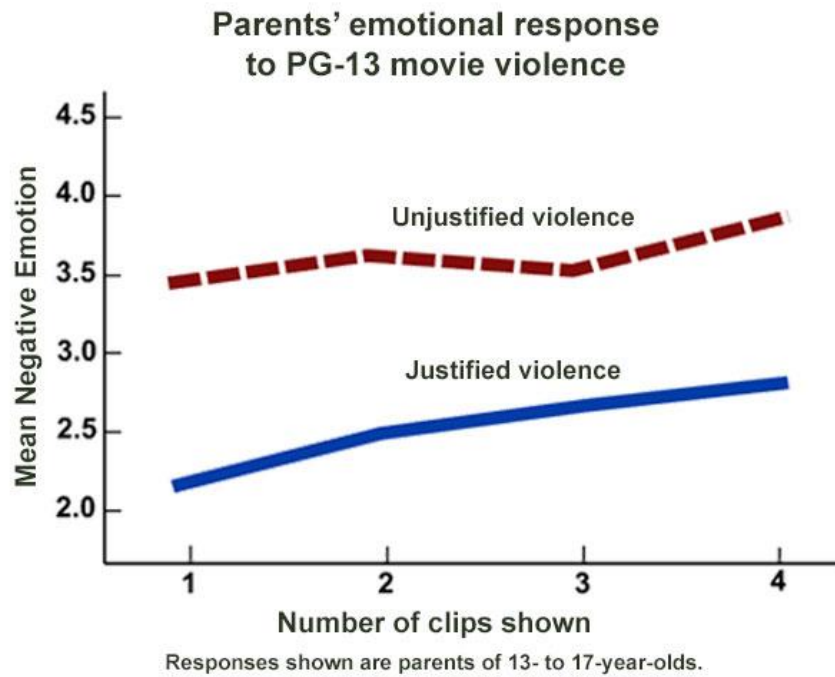
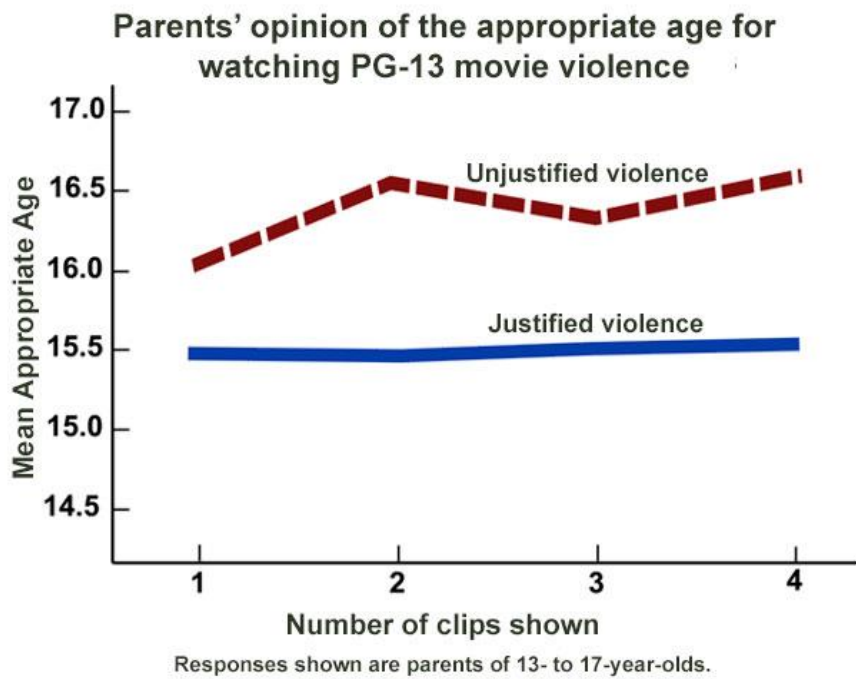
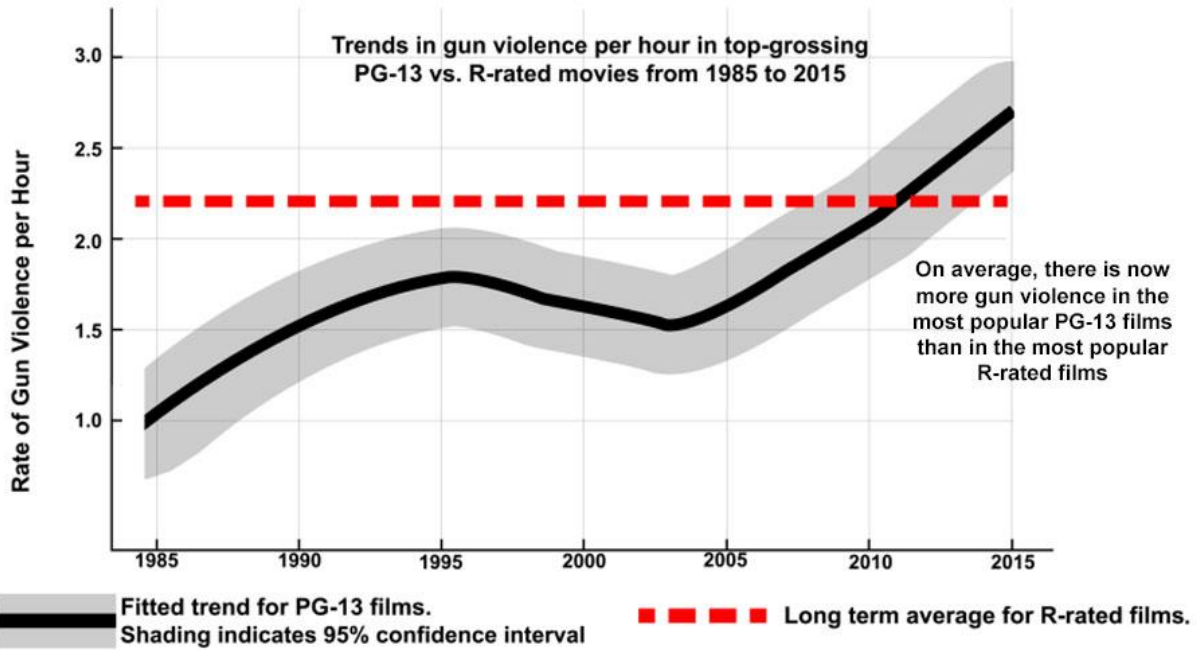


Figure 2.



From "Parental Desensitization to Gun Violence in PG-13 Movies" by Dan Romer, Patrick E. Jamieson, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Robert Lull, and Azeez Adebimpe. Published in Pediatrics in June 2018.

The rise of gun violence in PG-13 vs. R-rated movies



From "The Continuing Rise of Gun Violence in PG-13 Movies, 1985-2015" by Daniel Romer, Patrick E. Jamieson, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. Published in Pediatrics in January 2017.