

A TALE OF THREE COUNTRIES

Homicide Rates Rise After Television's Arrival

An interview with Brandon Centerwall, M.D.

An epidemiologist at the University of Washington and a psychiatrist in private practice, Dr. Centerwall is the author of a groundbreaking study that compares television's impact on homicide rates following its introduction in the United States and Canada in the late 1940s and South Africa in the late 1970s. He recently talked to Media&Values Contributing Editor Barbara Osborn about the implications of the sharp rise in homicides that occurred in all three cases. Unlike previous short-term laboratory studies of TV and aggression, Centerwall's research—which focused on homicide rates among the white population of all three countries—was designed to determine the effects of exposure to television violence in childhood on adult criminal behavior. Dr. Centerwall was also hoping to determine whether studies conducted with small test samples could be generalized to larger populations. His research was reported in a major article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in June 1992.

M&V: What results did your comparison of the data from the U.S., Canada and South Africa yield?

Centerwall: Following the introduction of television in the United States, the white homicide rate nearly doubled. It increased by 93 percent within 10-15 years. The homicide rate in Canada, where television was introduced about the same time, also increased by 92 percent during approximately the same 10-15 year period.

During this same period in the 1950s and

'60s, there was no increase in the white homicide rate in South Africa—actually there was a slight decrease of about seven percent. After the introduction of television in South Africa in 1975, I predicted that the white homicide rate would double in 10-15 years. By 1987, the white homicide rate had increased even more, about 130 percent.



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M&V: Why did you compare only the white populations in the U.S. and South Africa?

Centerwall: In South Africa, whites and blacks live in very different conditions, and blacks in South Africa live under very different conditions from U.S. blacks (African Americans). I wanted to review comparable populations so I limited myself to the white population. If you compare the white populations of the U.S. and South

Africa they are really quite similar in terms of economic and cultural life. Since Canada is almost entirely white, I used the total population of Canada.

M&V: If TV has an effect on aggressive behavior, wouldn't the homicide rate go up right away?

Centerwall: If television had an immediate effect upon those adults and teenagers who were first exposed to it in the early 1950s, the homicide rate would go up immediately. The lag of 10-15 years indicates that television violence has the greatest effect upon preadolescent children under the age of 12. Because homicide is primarily an adult activity, children have to age 10-15 years before they are old enough to commit homicides.

M&V: Why are preadolescents susceptible to violence on television and adults are not?

Centerwall: Children are not born with set values. Part of their maturation process is learning and establishing that set of values which they carry into adult life. That set of moral values is pretty well

formed by age 12. Violence doesn't have much of an effect on adult audiences. Violence on TV has enormous effect on what adults do, but that's a result of violence viewed in childhood. Violence watched in adulthood does not change adult value systems.

M&V: What do you make of the increasing number of homicides being committed by minors?

Centerwall: That represents second generation effects. The first generation of children raised on TV became adults and got their value systems from TV, but they learned values from adults in their lives as well. Now we have second and third generation parents who were raised on TV. The balance of forces is not what it used to be. There's a snowballing effect.

M&V: *In your study, you say there would be 10,000 fewer homicides each year in the U.S. if television had not been introduced. How did you calculate that figure?*

Centerwall: There are now approximately twice as many homicides being committed as there were in the 1950s. The increase is entirely attributable to the introduction of television. Since there are approximately 20,000 homicides each year in the United States, half of them (10,000) can be attributed to the introduction of television.

M&V: *How can you be sure other societal factors weren't responsible for the increase in homicides?*

Centerwall: First, I looked at a variety of other factors, including the baby boom, urbanization, economic trends, alcohol consumption, capital punishment, civil unrest and the availability of firearms. None of these proved able to explain these results.

Canada's inclusion in the study controls for a number of important variables. It would be plausible to attribute the 1960s increase in the U.S. homicide rate on the Vietnam War or perhaps the turbulence of the civil rights movement. However, a comparable increase in the homicide rate

rate by about five years could be predicted. According to the data, that's exactly what happened. The white homicide rate in the United States began to increase in 1958, while the black homicide rate dropped and continued to go down until four years later in 1962.

Similarly, we can look at different regions of the United States which did not acquire television at the same time. New York and New Jersey acquired television long before other states and when one looks at the data you see that those regions which acquired television earlier had an earlier increase in the homicide rate.

M&V: *You've compared the struggle to reduce violence on television with the fight to make people aware of the dangers of smoking in the 1950s and 60s. What do you mean?*

Centerwall: Conclusive evidence about the causal relationship between cigarette smoking and lung cancer was available by the mid-1950s, but it wasn't for another 10 years that the U.S. government finally endorsed the position that cigarette smoking causes lung cancer. The government lags behind the evidence in a substantial way. Today, the evidence is in on television and violence, but I anticipate that it will also take a number of years before the federal government takes a stand on the issue.

M&V: *In the meantime, can we expect any changes within the television industry?*

Centerwall: The television industry has an enormous financial interest in keeping programming as profitable as possible, which is entirely reasonable in a capitalist

[TV programmers] are guilty of murder, as far as I can see. They all are. Me too.

Ted Turner

was observed in Canada, which was not experiencing those social movements, at the same time.

In addition, not every population in the United States acquired television at the same time. For example, in the early 1950s television sets were an expensive luxury, and the average white household acquired its first television set about five years before the average black household. Thus, a rise in the white homicide rate in the United States that preceded the black homicide

economy. One of the most reliable ways of generating profitable programming on television is through the use of violence.

So despite whatever statements might be made, over the past 20-30 years the television industry has consistently avoided any real change in the amount of violence it puts on television. I don't anticipate that will be different in the future.

To return to the cigarette analogy, it is not reasonable to expect the tobacco industry to behave in a socially responsible fashion

In 1990, handguns were used to kill:
10 people in Australia
13 in Sweden
22 in Great Britain
68 in Canada
87 in Japan
91 in Switzerland
10,567 in the United States

- Handgun Control, Inc., poster

about growing tobacco. That's how it makes its money. The idea of asking industry members to reduce the amount of tobacco they grow out of their sense of social conscience, is absurd. They won't do it. The same applies to the television industry and for exactly the same reasons. It is entirely against their interest to decrease the amount of violence on television.

M&V: *What, then, would you suggest concerned parents do?*

Centerwall: In 1990, The American Academy of Pediatrics issued a statement advising parents to limit their children's television viewing to one to two hours per day. That's an important first step. One to two hours of TV watching a day may not seem like much of a limitation, but if parents were to endorse such a limit it would mean a 50 percent reduction for most children.

Parents should also encourage other interests and activities besides watching television. It's often said that television will work well for children if parents will take the time to watch the programs with the child and discuss programs with them. I agree, but I also feel that if a parent is really going to spend time with the child, their time would be better spent not watching TV. Parents should be teaching their children how to create their own self-growth, hobbies, interests and friendships. Television has a very real role to play in a child's life, but it should be a lesser means of entertainment rather than the first choice.