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Blasting a Way into Crime or Just Clean Fun?

Two recent studies by Ferguson and Smith examine play with toy weapons and shooter games as an indicator for criminal behavior.

DELAND, Florida, May 29, 2018 – Many children are drawn to using toy weapons in creative play and will spend the summer chasing siblings, yelling bang or exchanging the foam bullets of a Nerf gun with friends. But, does this behavior indicate a propensity for future violence?

In a recently published paper, [Blasting A Way into Crime: Aggressive Play with Weapon Symbols and Its Implications for the Law](#), Christopher Ferguson, Ph. D., and Sven Smith, Ph. D., of Stetson University examined the relationship between weapon play and concurrent aggression, and later violent crime. The pair found toy weapon use to be an unlikely risk marker for criminal behavior.

Ferguson and Smith also examined the role of violent video games in the development of youth psychopathy and as a crime indicator in [A Longitudinal Analysis of Shooter Games and Their Relationship with Conduct Disorder and Crime](#), concluding that the role of violent video games in the development of youth psychopathy is very little, if any.

In both studies, Ferguson and Smith examined survey data collected from the [Bristol's Children of the 90s](#) longitudinal study which recruited pregnant mothers and gathered data from the moms at different stages of their children's lives until the child reached 15.5 years old.

Blasting a Way into Crime

Many scholars and policy makers are concerned that violent toy play will encourage aggressive behavior in a way that influences the public's well-being. In the past, researchers agreed stating that children's mere exposure to the use of weapons encourages deviant displays of aggression. However, there was little research in the past 20 years regarding weapon play as an indicator of violence. The research conducted by Ferguson and Smith was designed to determine if there was a link between play with toy weapons and criminal behavior, while controlling other factors that could encourage crime.

"In recent years, we have heard some people complain that boys playing with guns might contribute to what's being called 'toxic masculinity,'" said Ferguson, professor of psychology at Stetson. "Our analysis could not find evidence for this concern. It appears that playing with toy weapons, whether among boys and girls, is a fairly innocuous activity and is not associated with negative outcomes in kids long-term."

Ferguson and Smith examined data collected from more than 2,000 mothers on the Children of the 90s study when children were age 3 and 15, for correlations between children's play and criminality. While the initial

analysis shows a significant relationship between toy weapon play and later criminality, when other variables were introduced that may account for this correlation — including gender, diagnosis of ADHD and diagnosis of depression — the relationship was noticeable reduced. The study found the relationship between toy gun use and later teen criminality was trivial in size and, therefore, not a risk marker for later criminology.

“Parents can probably feel a lot better letting their kids play with toy weapons if their kids are so inclined. This does not appear to be a risk factor for negative outcomes among kids,” added Ferguson.

Shooter Games and Their Relationship with Conduct Disorder and Crime

As school shootings continue to devastate far too many communities, the media and law makers are often quick to point to violent video game play as a cause of violent behavior. For more than 30 years, there has been a concern among the public and lawmakers that violence depicted in video games may have an impact on violent behavior and delinquency in youth and young adults. Similarly, scholars have disagreed about whether violent video games impact behavior.

In this study, Ferguson and Smith examined Children of the 90s data to determine the impact of the shooter game genre use in childhood on later adolescent conduct disorder and criminal behavior. It compared violent video game use to later violent behavior, along with other variables that could impact behavior.

The research revealed that early childhood mental health symptoms at age 7 related to ADHD, depression and early conduct disorder predicted criminal behavior at age 15. Male gender also increased the likelihood of violent behavior at 15, but exposure to shooter games did not predict adolescent conduct disorder or criminal behavior at any statistically significant level.

“Our analysis adds to a growing body of literature that indicates shooter game play is not associated with violence or severe conduct problems among kids. If policy makers are serious about tackling issues of violence in society, they would be better suited to consider other issues that are more clearly linked to violence and conduct related outcomes,” said Ferguson.

Christopher Ferguson is a professor of psychology at Stetson University and co-author of *Moral Combat: Why the War on Violent Video Games is Wrong*. He has clinical experience particularly in working with offender and juvenile justice populations as well as conducting evaluations for child protective services. In 2013, he was awarded a Distinguished Early Career Professional Award from Division 46 (media psychology and technology) of the American Psychological Association. In 2014, he was named a fellow of the American Psychological Association through Division 1 (General Psychology, effective January 2015). In addition to his academic work, he has published a historical mystery novel entitled *Suicide Kings*.

Sven Smith is a legal and an organizational sociologist and an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Stetson University. His life's work incorporates thought from a variety of disciplines. He has worked at the think tank for the American Bar Association, the American Bar Foundation in Chicago, Illinois, where he worked as a lead researcher/supervisor on The American Jury Project, interpreting data from a set of videotaped, actual jury trial deliberations using social-psychology, sociology and legal theory. He is also an attorney and has extensive trial and appellate experience, trying cases and arguing appeals in the criminal, civil and administrative arenas.

About Stetson University

Founded in 1883, [Stetson University](#) is the oldest private university in Central Florida, providing a transforming education in the liberal arts tradition. Stetson stresses academic excellence and community-engaged learning, and consistently earns high marks in national rankings. Stetson encourages its students to go beyond success to significance in their lives, the lives of others and their communities. [Stay connected](#) with Stetson on social media.

About Children of the 90s

Based at the University of Bristol, Children of the 90s, also known as the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), is a long-term health research project that enrolled more than 14,000 pregnant women in 1991 and 1992. It has been following the health and development of the parents and their children in detail ever since and is currently recruiting the children and siblings of the original children of the study. It receives core funding from the Medical Research Council, the Wellcome Trust and the University of Bristol. Find out more at www.childrenofthe90s.ac.uk.