

# Motion Picture Ratings Fail to Distinguish Violent Content

May 3 2005

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What do the family film "The Jungle Book" and the action thriller "True Lies" have in common? Both contain similar amounts of violence despite respective PG and R ratings.

A new study led by researchers at the UCLA School of Public Health shows that parents and filmgoers who use the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) ratings system to gauge movie content receive little meaningful guidance related to violent content.

The study was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Published in the May 1 edition of the peer-reviewed journal *Pediatrics*, the study analyzes violent content in the 100 top-grossing films of 1994, as identified by the *Hollywood Reporter*. The research team uses an objective analytical model to study the relationship between rating, degree of violent content and industry labels used to explain the rating assignment.

The study finds that while the total average number of violent acts for each rating category increased from PG (14 acts) to PG-13 (20) to R (32), the MPAA ratings fail to predict the frequency of violence in individual films. For example, PG films contained anywhere from a single act of violence to 97 acts of violence; the range for R films was remarkably similar, ranging from one to 110 acts. In addition, the three ratings categories fail to distinguish the amount of violent content for films listing violence as a primary reason for the rating and containing

the highest level of explicit violence. Among these films, those with R ratings averaged 62 violent acts, PG-13 averaged 55 and PG averaged 56.

"The movie industry's rating system and its prose explanations frequently hide more offensive elements behind euphemistic and innocuous terminology. This makes informed parental choice extremely difficult," said one of the study's authors, Theresa Webb, a researcher in the department of epidemiology and the Southern California Injury Prevention Research Center at UCLA's School of Public Health.

"Objective content descriptions and measures of explicit violence are far better measures of big screen violence than a film's rating," the study's lead author, Lucille Jenkins, added. "Parent and other organizations have been calling for meaningful content- rather than age-centered ratings for years, and now there is scientific evidence to support that argument."

The MPAA's Classification and Ratings Administration is the film industry's self-appointed watchdog agency. The stated goal of the Classification and Ratings Administration board is to keep parents informed about objectionable content in movies. A survey of 500 parents in 2000 showed that nearly 70 percent of parents "always" and an additional 15 percent "often" check film ratings in deciding whether to allow a child to view a film. Several studies in recent years found that parents label the board's ratings as too lenient and most parents would prefer content-based rather than age-based ratings categories.

The UCLA study examined the primary factor of the supplemental content descriptions accompanying the rating of each film in relation to the actual violent content to determine if PG, PG-13 and R represent three distinct categories in regards to violence. The study sample encompassed 98 of the 100 top-grossing films of 1994. A single G and single unrated film were excluded.

To measure the seriousness of violent action, researchers used a three-level scale ranging from pushing and chases without weapons to violent acts executed with deadly force. To rank the explicitness of the violent content, researchers used a four-part scale ranging from violence framed by the narrative but without action, to graphic bodily destruction or damage to a person. These measures enabled researchers to quantify each individual act of violence in each film. Specially trained graduate students from the UCLA Department of Film and Television conducted the analyses.

In contrast, the MPAA does not define its rating system as scientific or objective, but rather as a collective judgment from a group of parents.

In addition to Jenkins and Webb, other members of the research team included A.A. Afifi and Jess Kraus of the UCLA School of Public Health and the Southern California Injury Prevention Research Center at UCLA, and Nick Browne of the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television.

Source: UCLA

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