



Trained to Kill

I am from Jonesboro, Arkansas. I travel the world training medical, law enforcement, and United States military personnel about the realities of warfare. I try to make those who carry deadly force keenly aware of the magnitude of killing. So here I am, a world traveller and an expert in the field of “killology”, and the largest school massacre in American history happens in my hometown of Jonesboro, Arkansas. That was the 24 March 1998 schoolyard shooting deaths of four girls and a teacher. Ten others were injured, and two boys, ages 11 and 13, are in jail, charged with murder.

I spent the first three days after the tragedy at Westside Middle School, where the shootings took place, working with the counselors, teachers, students, and parents. None of us had ever done anything like this before. I train people how to react to trauma in the military; but how do you do it with kids after a massacre in their school?

Virus of violence

To understand the why behind Jonesboro and Springfield and Pearl and Paducah, and all the other outbreaks of this “virus of violence”, we need to understand first the magnitude of the problem. The per capita murder rate doubled in this country between 1957 — when the FBI started keeping track of the data — and 1992. A fuller picture of the problem, however, is indicated by the rate people are attempting to kill one another — the aggravated assault rate. That rate in America has gone from around 60 per 100,000 in 1957 to more than 440 per 100,000 by the middle of this decade. As bad as this is, it would be much worse were it not for two factors. First is the increase in the imprisonment rate of violent offenders. The prison population in America nearly quadrupled between 1975 and 1992. According to criminologist John J. Dilulio, *“dozens of credible empirical analyses ... leave no doubt that the increased use of prisons averted millions of serious crimes.”* If it were not for our tremendous imprisonment rate (the highest of any industrialised nation), the aggravated assault rate and the murder rate would undoubtedly be even higher.

The second factor is medical technology. According to the US Army Medical Service Corps, a wound that would have killed nine out of 10 soldiers in World War II, nine out of 10 could have survived in Vietnam. Thus, by a very conservative estimate, if we had 1940-level medical technology today, the murder rate would be 10 times higher than it is. The magnitude of the problem has been held down by the development of sophisticated lifesaving skills and techniques, such as helicopter medevacs, emergency phone operators, paramedics, CPR, trauma centres, and medicines.

However, the crime rate is still at a phenomenally high level, and this is true worldwide. In Canada, according to their Centre for Justice, per capita assaults increased almost fivefold between 1964 and 1993, attempted murder increased nearly sevenfold, and murders doubled. Similar trends can be seen in other countries in the per capita violent crime rates reported to Interpol between 1977 and 1993. In Australia and New Zealand, the assault rate increased approximately fourfold, and the murder rate nearly doubled in both nations. The assault rate tripled in Sweden, and approximately doubled in Belgium, Denmark, England-Wales, France, Hungary, Netherlands, and Scotland, while all these nations had an associated (but smaller) increase in murder. This virus of violence is occurring worldwide. The explanation for it has to be some new factor that is occurring in all of these countries. There are many factors involved, and none should be discounted: for example, the prevalence of guns in our society. But violence is rising in many nations with draconian gun laws. And though we should never downplay child abuse, poverty, or racism, there

is only one new variable present in each of these countries, bearing the exact same fruit: media violence presented as entertainment for children.

Killing is unnatural

Before retiring from the military, I spent almost a quarter of a century as an army infantry officer and a psychologist, learning and studying how to enable people to kill. Believe me, we are very good at it. But it does not come naturally; you have to be taught to kill. And just as the army is conditioning people to kill, we are indiscriminately doing the same thing to our children, but without the safeguards.

After the Jonesboro killings, the head of the American Academy of Pediatrics Task Force on Juvenile Violence said children don't naturally kill. It is a learned skill. And they learn it from abuse and violence in the home and, most pervasively, from violence as entertainment in television, the movies, and interactive video games.

Killing requires training because there is a built-in aversion to killing one's own kind. I can best illustrate this from drawing on my own work in studying killing in the military.

We all know that you can't have an argument or a discussion with a frightened or angry, human being. Vasoconstriction, the narrowing of the blood vessels, has literally closed down the forebrain — that great gob of gray matter that makes you a human being and distinguishes you from a dog. When those neurons close down, the mid-brain takes over and your thought processes and reflexes are indistinguishable from your dog's. If you've worked with animals, you have some understanding of what happens to frightened human beings on the battlefield. The battlefield and violent crime are in the realm of midbrain responses.

Within the midbrain there is a powerful, God-given resistance to killing your own kind. Every species, with a few exceptions, has a hardwired resistance to killing its own kind in territorial and mating battles. When animals with antlers and horns fight one another, they head butt in a harmless fashion. But when they fight any other species, they go to the side to gut and gore. Piranhas will turn their fangs on anything, but they fight one another with flicks of the tail. Rattlesnakes will bite anything, but they wrestle one another. Almost every species has this hardwired resistance to killing its own kind.

When we human beings are overwhelmed with anger and fear, we slam head-on into that midbrain resistance that generally prevents us from killing. Only sociopaths — who by definition don't have that resistance — lack this innate violence immune system.

Throughout human history, when humans fight each other, there is a lot of posturing. Adversaries make loud noises and puff themselves up, trying to daunt the enemy. There is a lot of fleeing and submission. Ancient battles were nothing more than great shoving matches. It was not until one side turned and ran that most of the killing happened, and most of that was stabbing people in the back. All the ancient military historians report that the vast majority of killing happened in pursuit when one side was fleeing.

In more modern times, the average firing rate was incredibly low in Civil War battles. Patty Griffith demonstrates that the killing potential of the average Civil War regiment was anywhere from five hundred to a thousand men a minute. The actual killing rate was only one or two men a minute a regiment.

At the battle of Gettysburg, of the 27,000 muskets picked up from the dead and dying after the battle, 90 per cent were loaded. This is an anomaly, because it took 95 per cent of their time to load muskets and only 5 per cent to fire. But even more amazingly, of the thousands of loaded muskets, over half had multiple loads in the barrel — one with 23 loads. In reality, the average man would load his musket and bring it to his shoulder, but he could not bring himself to kill. He would be brave, he would stand shoulder to shoulder, he would do what he was trained to do; but at the moment of truth he could not bring himself to pull the trigger. And so he lowered the weapon and

loaded it again. Of those who did fire, only a tiny percentage fired to hit. The vast majority fired over the enemy's head.

During World War II, US Army Brigadier General L. A. Marshall had a team of researchers study what soldiers did in battle. For the first time in history, they asked individual soldiers what they did in battle. They discovered that only 15 to 20 per cent of the individual riflemen could bring themselves to fire at an exposed enemy soldier.

That is the reality of the battlefield. Only a small percentage of soldiers are able and willing to take part. Men are willing to die, they are willing to sacrifice themselves for their nation; but they are not willing to kill. It is a phenomenal insight into human nature; but when the military became aware of that, they systematically went about the process of trying to fix this "problem". From the military perspective, a 15 per cent firing rate among riflemen is like a 15 per cent literacy rate among librarians. And fix it the military did. By the Korean War, around 55 per cent of the soldiers were willing to fire to kill. And by Vietnam, the rate rose to more than 90 per cent.

Desensitisation

How the military increases the killing rate of soldiers in combat is instructive, because our culture today is doing the same thing to our children. The training methods militaries use are brutalisation, classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and role modeling. I will explain these in the military context and show how these same factors are contributing to the phenomenal increase of violence in our culture.

Brutalisation and desensitisation are what happens at boot camp. From the moment you step off the bus you are physically and verbally abused: countless pushups, endless hours at attention or running with heavy loads, while carefully trained professionals take turns screaming at you. Your head is shaved, you are herded together naked and dressed alike, losing all individuality. This brutalisation is designed to break down your existing mores and norms and to accept a new set of values that embrace destruction, violence, and death as a way of life. In the end, you are desensitised to violence and accept it as a normal and essential survival skill in your brutal new world.

Something very similar to this desensitisation toward violence is happening to our children through violence in the media — but instead of 18-year-olds it begins at the age of 18 months when a child is first able to discern what is happening on television. At that age, a child can watch something happening on television and mimic that action. But it isn't until children are six or seven years old that the part of the brain kicks in that lets them understand where information comes from. Even though young children have some understanding of what it means to pretend, they are developmentally unable to distinguish clearly between fantasy and reality.

When young children see somebody shot, stabbed, raped, brutalised, degraded, or murdered on TV, to them it is as though it were actually happening. To have a child of three, four, or five watch a "splatter" movie, learning to relate to a character for the first 90 minutes and then in the last 30 minutes watch helplessly as that new friend is hunted and brutally murdered is the moral and psychological equivalent of introducing your child to a friend, letting her play with that friend, and then butchering that friend in front of your child's eyes. And this happens to our children hundreds upon hundreds of times.

Sure, they are told: "Hey, it's all for fun. Look, this isn't real, it's just TV." And they nod their little heads and say okay. But they can't tell the difference. Can you remember a point in your life or in your children's lives when dreams, reality, and television were all jumbled together? That's what it is like to be at that level of psychological development. That's what the media are doing to them.

The *Journal of the American Medical Association* published the definitive epidemiological study on the impact of TV violence. The research demonstrated what happened in numerous nations after television made its appearance as compared to nations and regions without TV. The two nations or regions being compared are demographically and ethnically identical; only one variable is different:

the presence of television. In every nation, region, or city with television, there is an immediate explosion of violence on the playground, and within 15 years there is a doubling of the murder rate. Why 15 years? That is how long it takes for the brutalisation of a three to five-year-old to reach the “prime crime age”. That is how long it takes for you to reap what you have sown when you brutalise and desensitise a three-year-old.

Today the data linking violence in the media to violence in society are superior to those linking cancer and tobacco. Hundreds of sound scientific studies demonstrate the social impact of brutalisation by the media. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* concluded that “*the introduction of television in the 1950s caused a subsequent doubling of the homicide rate, i.e. long-term childhood exposure to television is a causal factor behind approximately one half of the homicides committed in the United States, or approximately 10,000 homicides annually.*” The article went on to say that if, hypothetically, television technology had never been developed, there would today be 10,000 fewer homicides each year in the United States, 70,000 fewer rapes, and 700,000 fewer injurious assaults (10 June 1992).

Classical conditioning

Classical conditioning is like the famous case of Pavlov’s dogs, who learned to associate the ringing of the bell with food. Once conditioned, the dogs could not hear the bell without salivating.

The Japanese were masters at using classical conditioning with their soldiers. Early in World War II, Chinese prisoners were placed in a ditch on their knees with their hands bound behind them. And one by one, a select few Japanese soldiers would go into the ditch and bayonet “their” prisoner to death. This is a horrific way to kill another human being. Up on the bank, countless other young soldiers would cheer them on. Comparatively few soldiers actually killed in these situations but, by making the others watch and cheer, the Japanese were able to use these kinds of atrocities to classically condition a very large audience to associate pleasure with human death and suffering. Immediately afterwards, the soldiers who had been spectators were treated to sake, the best meal they had had in months, and to so-called comfort girls. The result? They learned to associate committing violent acts with pleasure.

The Japanese found these kinds of techniques to be extraordinarily effective at quickly enabling very large numbers of soldiers to commit atrocities in the years to come. Operant conditioning (which we will look at shortly) teaches you to kill, but classical conditioning is a subtle but powerful mechanism that teaches you to like it.

This technique is so morally reprehensible that there are very few examples of it in modern US military training; but there are some clear-cut examples of it being done by the media to our children. Our children watch vivid pictures of human suffering and death, and they learn to associate it with their favourite soft drink and sweets, or their girlfriend’s perfume.

After the Jonesboro shootings, one of the high school teachers told me how her students reacted when she told them about the shootings at the middle school. “They laughed,” she told me with dismay. A similar reaction happens all the time in movie theatres when there is bloody violence. The young people laugh and cheer and keep right on eating popcorn and drinking pop. We have raised a generation of barbarians who have learned to associate violence with pleasure, like the Romans cheering and snacking as the Christians were slaughtered in the Colosseum.

The result is a phenomenon that functions much like AIDS, which I call AVIDS — Acquired Violence Immune Deficiency Syndrome. AIDS has never killed anybody. It destroys your immune system, and then other diseases that shouldn’t kill you become fatal. Television violence by itself does not kill you. It destroys your violence immune system and conditions you to derive pleasure from violence. And once you are at close range with another human being, and it’s time for you to pull that trigger, Acquired Violence Immune Deficiency Syndrome can destroy your midbrain resistance.

Operant conditioning

The third method the military uses is operant conditioning, a very powerful procedure of stimulus-response, stimulus-response. A benign example is the use of flight simulators to train pilots. An airline pilot in training sits in front of a flight simulator for endless hours; when a particular warning light goes on, he is taught to react in a certain way. When another warning light goes on, a different reaction is required. Stimulus-response, stimulus-response, stimulus-response. One day the pilot is actually flying a jumbo jet; the plane is going down, and 300 people are screaming behind him. He is wetting his seat cushion, and he is scared out of his wits; but he does the right thing. Why? Because he has been conditioned to respond reflexively to this particular crisis.

When people are frightened or angry, they will do what they have been conditioned to do. In fire drills, children learn to file out of the school in orderly fashion. One day there is a real fire, and they are frightened out of their wits; but they do exactly what they have been conditioned to do, and it saves their lives.

The military and law enforcement community have made killing a conditioned response. This has substantially raised the firing rate on the modern battlefield. Whereas infantry training in World War II used bull's-eye targets, now soldiers learn to fire at realistic, man-shaped silhouettes that pop into their field of view. That is the stimulus. The trainees have only a split second to engage the target. The conditioned response is to shoot the target, and then it drops. Stimulus-response, stimulus-response, stimulus-response — soldiers or police officers experience hundreds of repetitions. Later, when soldiers are on the battlefield or a police officer is walking a beat and somebody pops up with a gun, they will shoot reflexively and shoot to kill. We know that 75 to 80 per cent of the shooting on the modern battlefield is the result of this kind of stimulus-response training.

Now, if you're a little troubled by that, how much more should we be troubled by the fact that every time a child plays an interactive point-and-shoot video game, he is learning the exact same conditioned reflex and motor skills.

This process is extraordinarily powerful and frightening. The result is ever more home-made pseudo-sociopaths who kill reflexively and show no remorse. Our children are learning to kill and learning to like it; and then we have the audacity to say: "Oh my goodness, what's wrong?" One of the boys allegedly involved in the Jonesboro shootings (and they are just boys) had a fair amount of experience shooting real guns. The other one was a non-shooter and, to the best of our knowledge, had almost no experience shooting. Between them, those two boys fired 27 shots from a range of more than 100 yards, and they hit 15 people. That's pretty remarkable shooting. I've run into these situations often — kids who have never picked up a gun in their lives pick up a real gun and are incredibly accurate. Why? Video games.

Role models

In the military, you are immediately confronted with a role model: your drill sergeant. He personifies violence and aggression. Along with military heroes, these violent role models have always been used to influence young, impressionable minds.

Today the media are providing our children with role models, and this can be seen not just in the lawless sociopaths in movies and TV shows, but it can also be seen in the media-inspired, copycat aspects of the Jonesboro murders. This is the part of these juvenile crimes that the TV networks would much rather not talk about.

Research in the 1970s demonstrated the existence of "cluster suicides" in which the local TV reporting of teen suicides directly caused numerous copycat suicides of impressionable teenagers. Somewhere in every population there are potentially suicidal kids who will say to themselves: "Well, I'll show all those people who have been mean to me. I know how to get my picture on TV, too."

Because of this research, television stations today generally do not cover suicides. But when the pictures of teenage killers appear on TV, the effect is the same: Somewhere there is a potentially violent little boy who says to himself, "Well, I'll show all those people who have been mean to me. I know how to get my picture on TV too."

Thus we get copycat, cluster murders that work their way across America like a virus spread by the six o'clock news. No matter what someone has done, if you put his picture on TV, you have made him a celebrity, and someone, somewhere, will emulate him. The lineage of the Jonesboro shootings began at Pearl, Mississippi, fewer than six months before. In Pearl, a 16-year-old boy was accused of killing his mother and then going to his school and shooting nine students, two of whom died, including his ex-girlfriend. Two months later, this virus spread to Paducah, Kentucky, where a 14-year-old boy was arrested for killing three students and wounding five others.

A very important step in the spread of this copycat crime virus occurred in Stamps, Arkansas, 15 days after Pearl and just a little over 90 days before Jonesboro. In Stamps, a 14-year-old boy who was angry at his schoolmates, hid in the woods and fired at children as they came out of school. Sound familiar? Only two children were injured in this crime, so most of the world didn't hear about it; but it got great regional coverage on TV, and two little boys in Jonesboro, Arkansas, probably did hear about it.

And then there was Springfield, Oregon, and so many others. Is this a reasonable price to pay for the TV networks' "right" to turn juvenile defendants into celebrities and role models by playing up their pictures on TV? Our society needs to be informed about these crimes, but when the images of the young killers are broadcast on television, they become role models. The average preschooler in America watches 27 hours of television a week. The average child gets more one-on-one communication from TV than from all her parents and teachers combined. The ultimate achievement for our children is to get their picture on TV. The solution is simple, and it comes straight out of the suicidology literature: the media have every right and responsibility to tell the story, but they have no right to glorify the killers by presenting their images on TV.

Unlearning violence

What is the road home from the dark and lonely place to which we have traveled? One route infringes on civil liberties. The city of New York has made remarkable progress in recent years in bringing down crime rates, but they may have done so at the expense of some civil liberties. People who are fearful say that is a price they are willing to pay. Another route would be to "just turn it off"; if you don't like what is on television, use the off button. Yet, if all the parents of the 15 shooting victims in Jonesboro had protected their children from TV violence, it wouldn't have done a bit of good. Because somewhere there were two little boys whose parents didn't "just turn it off".

On the night of the Jonesboro shootings, clergy and counsellors were working in small groups in the hospital waiting room, comforting the groups of relatives and friends of the victims. Then they noticed one woman sitting alone silently. A counsellor went over to the woman and discovered that she was the mother of one of the girls who had been killed. She had no friends, no husband, no family with her as she sat in the hospital, stunned by her loss. "I just came to find out how to get my little girl's body back," she said. But the body had been taken to Little Rock, 100 miles away, for an autopsy. Her very next concern was "I just don't know how I'm going to pay, for the funeral. I don't know how I can afford it." That little girl was truly all she had in all the world. Come to Jonesboro, friend, and tell this mother she should "just turn it off". Another route to reduced violence is gun control. I don't want to downplay that option, but America is trapped in a vicious cycle when we talk about gun control. Americans don't trust the government; they believe that each of us should be responsible for taking care of ourselves and our families. That's one of our great strengths — but it is also a great weakness. When the media foster fear and perpetuate a milieu of violence, Americans arm themselves in order to deal with that violence.

And the more guns there are out there, the more violence there is. And the more violence there is, the greater the desire for guns.

We are trapped in this spiral of self-dependence and lack of trust. Real progress will never be made until we reduce this level of fear. As a historian, I tell you it will take decades — maybe even a century — before we wean Americans off their guns. And until we reduce the level of fear and of violent crime, Americans would sooner die than give up their guns.

Fighting back

We need to make progress in the fight against child abuse, racism, and poverty and in rebuilding our families. No one is denying that the breakdown of the family is a factor. But nations without our divorce rates are also having increases in violence. Besides, research demonstrates that one major source of harm associated with single-parent families occurs when the TV becomes both the nanny and the second parent.

Work is needed in all these areas, but there is a new front — taking on the producers and purveyors of media violence. Simply put, we ought to work toward legislation that outlaws violent video games for children. There is *no* constitutional right for a child to play an interactive video game that teaches him weapons-handling skills or that simulates destruction of God's creatures.

The day may also be coming when we are able to seat juries in America who are willing to sock it to the networks in the only place they really understand — their wallets. After the Jonesboro shootings, *Time* magazine said: *"As for media violence, the debate there is fast approaching the same point that discussions about the health impact of tobacco reached some time ago — it's over. Few researchers bother any longer to dispute that bloodshed on TV and in the movies has an effect on kids who witness it"* (6 April 1998).

Most of all, the American people need to learn the lesson of Jonesboro: Violence is not a game; it's not fun, it's not something that we do for entertainment. Violence kills.

Every parent in America desperately needs to be warned of the impact of TV and other violent media on children, just as we would warn them of some widespread carcinogen. The problem is that the TV networks, which use the public airwaves we have licensed to them, are our key means of public education in America. And they are stonewalling.

In the days after the Jonesboro shootings, I was interviewed on Canadian national TV, the British Broadcasting

Company and by many US and international radio shows and newspapers. But the American television networks simply would not touch this aspect of the story. Never in my experience as a historian and a psychologist have I seen any institution in America so clearly responsible for so very many deaths, and so clearly abusing their publicly licensed authority and power to cover up their guilt.

Time after time, idealistic young network producers contacted me from one of the networks, fascinated by the irony that an expert in the field of violence and aggression was living in Jonesboro and was at the school almost from the beginning. But unlike all the other media, these network news stories always died a sudden, silent death when the network's powers-that-be said: *"Yeah, we need this story like we need a hole in the head."*

Many times since the shooting I have been asked, "why weren't you on TV talking about the stuff in your book?" And every time my answer had to be, "The TV networks are burying this story. They know they are guilty, and they want to delay the retribution as long as they can."

As an author and expert on killing, I believe I have spoken on the subject at every Rotary, Kiwanis, and Lions Club in a 50-mile radius of Jonesboro. So when the plague of satellite dishes descended upon us like huge locusts, many people here were aware of the scientific data linking TV violence and violent crime.

The networks will stick their lenses anywhere and courageously expose anything. Like flies on open wounds, they find nothing too private or shameful for their probing lenses — except themselves, and their share of guilt in the terrible, tragic crime that happened here.

A CBS executive told me his plan. He knows all about the link between media and violence. His own in-house people have advised him to protect his child from the poison his industry is bringing to America's children. He is not going to expose his child to TV until she's old enough to learn how to read. And then he will select very carefully what she sees. He and his wife plan to send her to a daycare centre that has no television, and he plans to show her only age-appropriate videos. That should be the bare minimum with children: Show them only age-appropriate videos, and think hard about what is age appropriate.

The most benign product you are going to get from the networks are 22-minute sitcoms or cartoons providing instant solutions for all of life's problems, interlaced with commercials telling you what a slug you are if you don't ingest the right sugary substances or wear the right shoes.

The worst product your child is going to get from the networks is represented by one TV commentator who told me: "Well, we only have one really violent show on our network, and that is *NYPD Blue*. I'll admit that that is bad, but it is only one night a week."

I wondered at the time how she would feel if someone said: "Well, I only beat my wife in front of the kids one night a week." The effect is the same.

Education about media and violence does make a difference. I was on a radio chat show in San Antonio, Texas. A woman called and said, "I would never have had the courage to do this two years ago. But let me tell you what happened. You tell me if I was right. My 13-year-old boy spent the night with a neighbour boy. After that night, he started having nightmares. I got him to admit what the nightmares were about. While he was at the neighbour's house, they watched splatter movies all night: people cutting people up with chainsaws and stuff like that. "I called the neighbours and told them, 'Listen: you are sick people. I wouldn't feel any different about you if you had given my son pornography or alcohol. And I'm not going to have anything further to do with you or your son — and neither is anybody else in this neighbourhood, if I have anything to do with it until you stop what you're doing'."

That's powerful. That's censure, not censorship. We ought to have the moral courage to censure people who think that violence is legitimate entertainment.

There are many other things that the Christian community can do to help change our culture. Youth activities can provide alternatives to television, and churches can lead the way in providing alternative locations for latchkey children. Fellowship groups can provide guidance and support to young parents as they strive to raise their children without the destructive influences of the media. Mentoring programs can pair mature, educated adults with young parents to help them through the pre-school ages without using the TV as a babysitter. And most of all, the churches can provide the clarion call of decency and love and peace as an alternative to death and destruction, not just for the sake of the church, but for the transformation of our culture.

David Grossman

©2017
www.christianstudylibrary.org