

THE ANNENBERG  
PUBLIC POLICY CENTER  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: April 8, 2010

CONTACT: Dan Romer, Director, Adolescent Health Communication Institute at the Annenberg Public Policy Center, University of Pennsylvania, at [dromer@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:dromer@asc.upenn.edu), 215-898-6776 (office) or 610-202-7315 (cell), or Patrick E. Jamieson at [Patrick@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:Patrick@asc.upenn.edu), 215-746-5374

For the [Journal of Adolescent Health](#) abstract see [http://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(10\)00079-0/abstract](http://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(10)00079-0/abstract)

For a copy of the article see <http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org>

## **Under MPAA's Rating System, PG-13 Movies Contain Increasingly Violent Content**

PHILADELPHIA – Research conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center has found that the Motion Picture Association of America's (MPAA's) rating system increasingly has assigned violent content to the PG-13 rating category. The PG-13 category was established in 1984 to warn parents about content in PG films that might not be appropriate for a child under 13. Instead of shielding young people from such content however, the research found that some content that previously would have received a restrictive R-rating is now assigned a PG-13 rating.

For example, a 13 year old today could see a movie like "Mission Impossible 2" (2000) with intense gun and fist fighting, but in the years before 1985, prior to the introduction of the PG-13 category, the same 13-year old would not have been allowed to view a movie with comparable explicit violence such as the R rated movie "Magnum Force" (1974), or even an R rated movie with less explicit violence such as "48 Hours" (1982), unless he or she was accompanied by a parent or other adult.

The repeated exposure of youth to potentially harmful content is a serious public health concern. Extensive research has shown that repeated exposure to explicit media violence can increase violent behavior.

Although violent content increasingly has been assigned to the PG-13 category, the MPAA system has been more consistent in screening explicit sexual content. Such content has more

consistently been assigned to the R category (children under 17 not admitted without a parent or guardian).

“Although the PG-13 rating was designed to provide parents with better information about films previously assigned to PG (parental guidance), the rating system seems to be much more useful for screening sex than violence,” said Dan Romer, one of the APPC researchers who led the study. “The PG-13 category has grown dramatically since its introduction in 1984 and has become increasingly violent as well.”

Released in the [Journal of Adolescent Health](#), the study examined trends in rating assignments since 1968, when the MPAA rating system was initiated. It found that the explicitness of violent and sexual content in films significantly increased since the system was put in place. However, during the period from 1984 to 2006, explicit violence that would have previously been rated R was increasingly assigned to PG-13. Although violence increased in both PG-13 and R-rated films, recent PG-13 movies from 2001 to 2006 were significantly higher in violent content than earlier R-rated movies from 1977 to 1984,

This “ratings creep” was evident only for films with explicit violence. Although sexually explicit content increased in R-rated films, the study did not find evidence of ratings creep in the assignment of sexually explicit content.

“The finding that PG-13 movies are becoming increasingly violent is worrisome given the fact that PG-13 movies now account for more than half of top-grossing film sales,” said APPC’s Patrick E. Jamieson. “Adolescents are more likely to engage in violent behavior as a result of viewing media models of violence, and films may reinforce the message that violence is an acceptable solution to people’s problems.”

The study was conducted by the Adolescent Risk Communication Institute at the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania as part of a global analysis of how changes in mass media entertainment content since 1950 may have affected adolescent socialization and health (see [YouthMediaRisk.org](http://YouthMediaRisk.org)). The study analyzed the amount and explicitness of violent and sexual content in half of the 30 top-grossing films each year from 1950 to 2006. Violence was defined as any intentional infliction of physical pain or harm on a character by another, or evidence of intention to harm. Sexual content was defined as any behavior that suggested a precursor to or engagement in sexual intercourse or other sexual activity.

The MPAA created the age-based rating system to help parents determine movies’ suitability for children. It created the Classification and Ratings Administration to assign ratings, such as Restricted and NC-17, which would prohibit ticket sales to youths under age 17. The PG-13 rating was introduced in 1984 to identify films in the PG category that may be inappropriate for

youths under age 13. Individuals ages 12-24 make up the largest segment of the U.S. movie-going audience.

Repeated exposure to explicit media violence is not only associated with increased aggression in youths but it also can cause fear in some viewers. It can also desensitize people to victimization by violence. Repeated exposure to explicit sexual content has been associated with teen pregnancy, early sexual initiation and unhealthy sexual attitudes among adolescents.

Portions of this work were funded by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.