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## TELEVISION VIEWING BY JUVENILE OFFENDERS

By Sandra Miller, December 1978.

A survey of 180 juvenile offenders was conducted to learn about their television viewing habits.

The first study question asked if the selection of television programs by youths referred to Juvenile Court would be different than the selection of programs by most youths. Since 73% of the youths in the sample were non-white, it was necessary to consider the impact of cultural influences on television viewing habits. For the sample there were no differences in the number of violent programs viewed by white versus non-white juvenile offenders. Because the majority of the sample was nonwhite, the most popular television programs for the youths in the study were compared to the most popular programs for nonwhite viewers. The number of violent programs viewed by the sample and by nonwhite viewers was comparable. (The viewing habits of all nonwhite viewers was measured in a survey by A.C.Nielsen.)

The second study question focused on television viewing habits of nonviolent versus violent offenders. Would the juvenile offenders who watched violent programs commit more violent crimes than the offenders who watched nonviolent programs? The selection of violent television programs was studied in relation to the severity of the charged offense for each youth in the sample. For the juvenile offenders who participated in this study there were no differences in television viewing habits for nonviolent versus violent offenders

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CIRCUIT COURT OF COOK COUNTY, ILLINOIS  
COUNTY DEPARTMENT, JUVENILE DIVISION  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60612

~~X~~  
TELEVISION VIEWING BY JUVENILE OFFENDERS

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## S U M M A R Y

The Juvenile Court of Cook County, Illinois, conducted a survey of juvenile offenders to learn about their television viewing habits. Interest in the survey was stimulated by the current controversy over television violence and aggressive acts by youths. A previous study was conducted in the Clinical Department of the Juvenile Court by Dr. Irving D. Harris. He used his own clinical cases and found no correlation between viewing television violence and violent behavior for the one hundred youths in his study (Harris, 1977).

One hundred and eighty juvenile offenders participated in this study. Probation officers working in the Complaint Screening Division of Juvenile Court selected and interviewed some of the youths referred for delinquent or MINS behavior, regardless of the plea on the offense or complaint screening disposition. Based on the severity of the charged offense, each youth was classified as a nonviolent or violent offender. The youth sample included one hundred-six nonviolent offenders and seventy-four violent offenders.

The television questionnaire data was collected from the youths after the complaint screening intake session had been completed. The juvenile offenders were asked to identify preferred television programs, frequency of program viewing, and programs viewed on the day of the charged offense. Television programs were classified as nonviolent or violent based on the National Parent Teacher Association's definitions and ratings for prime time shows.

The first study question asked if the selection of television programs by youths referred to Juvenile Court would be different than the selection of programs by most youths. When the most popular television programs for the youths in the study were compared to the most popular programs for all youths the results were as follows. The top ten television programs for the juvenile offenders did include more violent shows than the top ten programs watched by all youths according to Nielsen ratings (Nielsen Television Index, Household and Persons Ranking Report, 1978). Since seventy-three percent of the youths in the sample were nonwhite, it was necessary to consider cultural influences in relation to television viewing habits. For the sample there were no differences in the number of violent programs viewed

by white and nonwhite juvenile offenders. When the most popular television programs for the youths in the study were compared to the most popular programs for nonwhite viewers the results were as follows. The number of top ranking violent television programs was comparable for the juvenile offenders and nonwhite viewers according to Nielsen (Nielsen Television Index, Television Viewing Among Whites and Non-Whites, 1975).

The second study question focused on television viewing habits of nonviolent versus violent offenders. Would the juvenile offenders who watched violent programs commit more violent crimes than the offenders who watched nonviolent programs? The selection of violent television programs was studied in relation to the severity of the charged offense for each youth in the sample. For the juvenile offenders who participated in this study, there were no differences in television viewing habits for nonviolent versus violent offenders.

This result was not surprising as one would expect that the juvenile offenders coming to court were more alike than different, particularly in relation to the selection of television programs. Since the research examined few variables and relied on youth-reported data, the style of the study may also have limited the possibility of finding a difference in television viewing habits of nonviolent and violent offenders.

## RESEARCH REPORT

The following report summarized the methodology of the study. The research was initiated by Michael Brennan who designed the questionnaire and conducted the first stage of the data collection. The author completed the research design, the second stage of the data collection, the data analysis, and the research report.

### A. Study Questions

1. Will the selection of television programs by youths referred to Juvenile Court be different than the selection of programs by most youths?
2. Will the juvenile offenders who watch violent programs commit more violent crimes than the offenders who watch nonviolent programs? It was hypothesized that the violent offenders would report watching more

violent television programs than the nonviolent offenders.

B. Definition of Concepts

The major concepts of the study included violent and non-violent offense, violent television program, and frequency of television viewing. The definitions of these terms are presented below. The process of defining violent versus nonviolent offense took into consideration the Criminal Code of Illinois and the practice of the Complaint Screening Division of the Juvenile Court. If a youth committed several offenses, the most serious offense was selected for the study.

Aviolent offense was defined to include murder, Class X offenses, Class I felonies and other offenses where serious injury or threat of serious injury was inflicted on a victim. Violent offenses for the study included murder, reckless homicide, involuntary manslaughter, rape, deviate sexual assault, unlawful restraint, battery, aggravated battery, and armed robbery.

A nonviolent offense was defined as either less serious crimes against individuals, or nonviolent crimes such as crimes against property. Nonviolent offenses for the study included burglary, theft, robbery, ungovernable or runaway, drug possession, disorderly conduct, assault, and aggravated assault, resisting arrest, crimes against land and property, i.e. possession of a stolen vehicle.

Unlawful use of a weapon, arson, and strong armed robbery were considered violent or nonviolent offenses depending on further information regarding the offense. For example, a youth having a gun in his possession was considered non-violent, while a youth who discharged a gun at a group of peers was considered violent.

Youths were classified as violent or nonviolent offenders based on the current charge at the time of complaint screening intake. It was possible that some youths would have been classified differently had previous offenses been examined. Due to the limited scope of the study, previous offense history was not considered.

A violent television program was defined in accord with the PTA coding system for prime time programs. Violence

was defined as "all incidents in which one human or human-like character (1) hurts another human, human-like creature, or property, (2) forces action on threat of being hurt or killed" (National PTA TV Action Center, Individual Monitoring Form, 1978, p3). The PTA had available ratings on prime time television programs.

The definition of a violent television program selected for the study closely followed the PTA definition. A violent television program was defined as a show which depicted scenes of violence toward a person. These programs were primarily crime dramas. The following shows are illustrative of programs defined as violent: Kojak, Baretta, SWAT, Police Story, Starsky and Hutch, etc. Cartoons and sports were defined as nonviolent, particularly since such programs were less representative of street crime situations than were crime dramas.

PTA prime time program ratings were utilized with an extension of the same rating system for programs not shown during prime time hours. The list of television programs identified by each youth was categorized as including: 1) all nonviolent programs, 2) one violent program, or 3) two or more violent programs.

To determine frequency of television viewing, youths were asked how often they viewed the shows. Three categories were used: 1) daily viewing or several times a week, 2) weekly viewing, and 3) less than weekly viewing.

### C. Setting and Sample

The setting for the study was the Complaint Screening Division of Juvenile Court of Cook County. Probation officers working in this division were the interviewers who collected the questionnaire data from the youth after the complaint screening intake session had been completed.

The youth sample consisted of one hundred-eighty juveniles, ages ten to seventeen, who came to court in response to a petition being filed by police or parent. Most of the charges on the petitions were for delinquent behavior and a few were for minor in need of supervision. Youths were included in the sample on the basis of court referral, regardless of the plea on the offense or complaint screening disposition.

Data was collected on youths who were referred to the court between April, 1978, and November, 1978 with a focus on spring and fall court referrals. It was necessary to extend the data collection time frame for the violent offenders by six weeks to obtain enough participants for this category of offense.

The final sample was drawn at the discretion of complaint screeners who selected youths for the study. This purposive selection of participants limited the study as the results cannot be considered representative of all youths referred to court.

#### D. Method of Data Collection

After each youth had completed the complaint screening process and learned the complaint screening disposition on the petition, the complaint screener asked the youth to respond to the three questions on the television questionnaire. These questions focused on identification of television programs, frequency and duration of viewing these programs, and television viewing on the day of the offense in question. As the youth responded to each question, the complaint screener completed the questionnaire. Additional information on the questionnaire included date of complaint screening intake, youth name, birthdate, offense, and date of offense.

Additional court data sources for the study included the complaint screening referral sheet and social data sheet. Information was also obtained from the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and A.C.Nielsen Company.

#### E. Television Viewing Habits

From the youths' responses to the questionnaire items, it was clear that some youths gave vague or minimal answers, while other youths gave detailed responses, i.e. nine names of television programs. For purposes of the study, it was assumed that the responses were reflective of television viewing habits. For data analysis the actual number of violent programs was identified as a measure of violent input, while all nonviolent television programs were identified as neutral input for the youths.



For question one youths were asked to identify television programs that they watch. Youth responses ranged from no television viewing to nine specified programs. The median response was two television programs. Twelve percent of the youths reported that they do not watch television. Program responses were tallied for the eighty-eight percent of the youths who reported television viewing. The results are presented below in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Ten Most Popular Television Programs\* Identified by the Juvenile Offenders. The Programs are Ranked in Descending Order from the Most Popular Program. Percentage\*\* and Number of Youths Viewing the Programs are Presented in the Columns to the Right.

Rank	Program	Viewers	
		Percentage	Number
1	*Starsky and Hutch	23%	41
2	Cartoons	19%	35
3	Good Times	16%	29
4	Happy Days	15%	27
5	*Baretta	14%	26
6	What's Happening	9%	17
7	Sanford and Son	9%	16
8	*Incredible Hulk	8%	14
9	*Charley's Angels	6%	11
10 tied	*Police Story	6%	10
	Three Stooges	6%	10

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\*Crime dramas which were coded as violent programs have been marked with an asterisk.

\*\*Percentages were rounded.

Five of the eleven most popular television programs were considered as violent shows for the study. Because the data collection spanned two television seasons, some programs were cancelled or viewing time changed. Thus, it was not surprising that the percentages of viewers were low for the programs in Table 1.

To compensate for the changes in television seasons, the programs were grouped by type of program according to TV Guide classifications (TV Guide, Chicago Metropolitan Edition, 1978 publications).

The youths identified a total of one hundred-three different television shows. These programs were grouped by type of show. Table 2 presents the breakdown of programs by categories.

TABLE 2. Number of Television Programs by TV Guide's Classification of Programs.

<u>Type of Program</u>	<u>Number of Programs</u>
Comedy	180
Crime Drama	97
Cartoons	53
Children's Shows	15
Sports Programs	11
Movies	9
Serials	8
Others, Misc.	36
	<u>409</u>

While five of the eleven most popular programs were crime dramas, this category of show comprised only twenty-four percent of all programs identified by the youths.

For question two regarding frequency and duration of viewing the programs, the responses were not related to specified programs. The responses on duration were not utilized due to vagueness, i.e., "since a child", "since program began". For the frequency of television viewing one general response was classified for each youth. The viewing frequencies of nonviolent and violent offenders are presented below in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Frequency of Television Viewing by Percentages\* for Nonviolent and Violent Offenders.

<u>Frequency of Viewing</u>	<u>Nonviolent Offenders</u>	<u>Violent Offenders</u>
Daily to several times weekly	26%	32%
Weekly	49%	49%
Less than weekly	13%	5%
No TV Viewing	<u>11%</u>	<u>14%</u>
	99%	100%

\*Percentages by columns total to approximately 100%.

Comparison of the percentages indicated that thirty-two percent of the violent offenders watched TV daily in comparison to twenty-six percent of the nonviolent offenders, not much of a difference. The frequency of television viewing was similar for nonviolent and violent offenders. Daily viewers were frequently watching cartoon programs.

In response to question three regarding television viewing on the day of the charged offense, seventy-nine percent of the youths did not respond, did not watch television, or could not remember what they had viewed. Fifteen of the nineteen (79%) nonviolent offenders who reported television viewing were watching nonviolent programs. Sixteen of the nineteen (84%) violent offenders who reported television viewing were watching nonviolent programs. Again, the two groups of offenders were similar.

F. Results on the Study Questions.

Question One

Question one asked if the selection of programs by youths referred to Juvenile Court was different than the selection of television programs by most youths.

It was possible to compare the ten most popular programs identified by the sample with the ten most popular teen programs for prime time viewing according to ratings available from A.C.Nielsen Company. The ratings were based on information from the A.C.Nielsen Television Index, Household and Persons Ranking Report. The prime time viewing information for teens, ages 12-17, was from a national random sample for the last two weeks of September 1978 (Nielsen Television Index, 1978).

There were two differences between the national teen sample and the sample of juvenile offenders. First, the juvenile offenders reported television viewing at any time of day while the national teen sample was restricted to prime time viewing. Second, the juvenile offender sample had a lower percentage of females than the national teen sample.

Differences in male and female viewing habits were not considered for the study. Information on male versus female teen viewing by A.C.Nielsen indicated that both male and female viewers included the same number of violent shows in the top ranked programs. Violent programs ranked second and third in popularity with males as opposed to sixth and eighth with females (Nielsen, Teen and Child Viewing, 1977, pp33-34).

Table 4 presents a comparison of the top ten programs for the national teen sample and the juvenile court sample.

TABLE 4. Comparison of Top Ten Ranked Television Programs by Teens Nationwide and by Juvenile Offenders.\*

<u>Rank of Program</u>	<u>All Teens</u>	<u>Juvenile Offenders</u>
1	Laverne & Shirley	*Starsky & Hutch
2	Happy Days	Cartoons
3	Three's Company	Good Times
4	*Battlestar Galactica	Happy Days
5	Mork & Mindy	*Baretta
6	Taxi	What's Happening
7	What's Happening	Sanford and Son
8	*Charley's Angels	*Incredible Hulk
9	M-A-S-H	*Charley's Angels
10	Flying High	*Police Story Three Stooges

\*Violent television programs.

Forty-five percent of the top ten programs viewed by the sample were violent in comparison to twenty percent for all teens. Since seventy-three percent of the court sample was nonwhite, the possibility of cultural patterns in television viewing was considered. A 1974 Nielsen report on Television Viewing Among Whites and Non-Whites indicated that nonwhites, adults and children, watched more violent programs than did whites (Nielsen Television Index, 1975). Thus, the television viewing habits of the sample may have been culturally influenced. The number of top ranking violent television programs was comparable for the juvenile offenders and the nonwhite viewers. Thus, the viewing habits of the juvenile offenders were more typical of nonwhite viewers than of teen viewers.

For the juvenile sample, white and nonwhite viewers were compared for number of violent television programs viewed. Comparing percentages across rows for Table 5 indicates that white and nonwhite youth were similar in the viewing of violent programs.

TABLE 5. Percentage\* Comparison of Number of Violent Television Programs Viewed by White and Nonwhite Juvenile Offenders.

<u>Number of Violent Programs</u>	<u>White Youth</u>	<u>Nonwhite Youth</u>
None	49%	42%
One	27%	31%
Two or More	24%	27%
	100%	100%

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\*Percentages by columns total to 100%.

### Question Two

Question two asked if juvenile offenders who watched violent programs committed more violent crimes than offenders who watched nonviolent programs. The number of violent television

programs which a youth viewed was compared with the violence of the reported offense. The results are presented in Table 6 below.

TABLE 6. Percentage\* Comparison of the Number of Violent Television Programs Viewed and the Severity of the Youth's Offense.\*\*

<u>Offense</u>	<u>Number of Violent TV Programs</u>		
	<u>None</u>	<u>1 Violent Show</u>	<u>2 or More Violent Shows</u>
Nonviolent	59%	54%	66%
Violent	<u>41%</u>	<u>46%</u>	<u>34%</u>
	100%	100%	100%
Number of Youths	68	46	41

\*Percentages by columns total to 100%.

\*\*Twenty-five youths were excluded due to non viewing or vague responses.

Comparison of the percentages indicated that the strongest difference between viewing habits of nonviolent and violent offenders was in watching two or more violent shows. It was hypothesized that violent offenders would report watching more violent programs than nonviolent offenders. The results did not support this prediction, rather indicated the opposite. Sixty-six percent of the youth watching two or more violent programs were nonviolent offenders.

When the hypothesized relationship between number of violent programs viewed and violence of youth offense was controlled for old versus new court cases, the percentages were similar to those presented in Table 6 except for the category of two or more violent shows. Table 7 presents the comparison between old and new court cases.

TABLE 7. Percentage\* Comparison for Number of Violent Television Programs Viewed by Severity of Youth Offense by Old Versus New Court Referrals.\*\*

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<u>Old Court Cases</u>	<u>Offense</u>	<u>Number of Violent TV Shows</u>		
		<u>None</u>	<u>One</u>	<u>Two or More</u>
	Nonviolent	61%	55%	82%
	Violent	<u>39%</u>	<u>45%</u>	<u>18%</u>
		100%	100%	100%
	Number of Old Cases	38	22	17
		Total 77 Youths		

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<u>New Court Cases</u>	<u>Offense</u>	<u>Number of Violent TV Shows</u>		
		<u>None</u>	<u>One</u>	<u>Two or More</u>
	Nonviolent	57%	54%	54%
	Violent	<u>43%</u>	<u>46%</u>	<u>46%</u>
		100%	100%	100%
	Number of New Cases	30	24	24
		Total 78 Youths		

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\* Percentages by columns total to 100%.

\*\* Twenty-five youths were excluded due to nonviewing or vague responses.

Only eighteen percent (3) of the old court clients who watched two or more violent shows were violent offenders as opposed to eighty-two percent (14) who were nonviolent offenders. While the numbers were small for this comparison, it is important to note that the finding for youths who had a court history and who watched two or more violent shows did not support the original prediction. For the youths who were new referrals to court there was no difference in television viewing habits for nonviolent and violent offenders.

Controlling for frequency of television viewing, there was no difference between the number of violent programs viewed and severity of the offense. Controlling for ethnic background, there was no difference between number of violent programs viewed and severity of the offense. When nonviolent offenders previously known to the court were dropped from the comparison, there were no differences in television viewing habits of new nonviolent offenders and violent offenders.

#### G. Summary of Findings

The top ten ranked television programs for the sample did include more violent shows than the top ten ranked programs watched by all youths. However, the number of top ranked violent programs for the sample was comparable to the number of top ranked violent programs watched by nonwhite populations.

The number of violent television programs which a juvenile offender reported watching did not correlate with severity of the offense on the petition at the time of court referral. These findings were similar to those obtained by Dr. Harris when he studied a different sample of juvenile offenders.



## APPENDIX I

### Description of the Sample

One of the interesting results of the study was the similarity of the nonviolent and violent offenders on most of the demographic characteristics. Of the one hundred-six nonviolent offenders, eighty-five percent were male and fifteen percent female. There were seventy-four violent offenders in the study, eighty-four percent male and sixteen percent female.

In terms of age, the nonviolent offender group had more twelve and thirteen year old youths, while the violent offender group had more fourteen and fifteen year old youths. The age breakdown for each group is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Age Distribution by Percentages\* for Nonviolent and Violent Offenders.

<u>Age</u>	<u>Nonviolent Offenders</u>	<u>Violent Offenders</u>
17 years	16%	14%
16 years	26%	24%
15 years	24%	32%
14 years	16%	19%
13 years	11%	8%
12 years	4%	1%
11 years	2%	-
10 years	1%	1%
	<u>100%</u>	<u>99%</u>

\* Percentages by columns total to approximately 100% due to rounding.

For ethnic background seventy-four percent of the nonviolent offenders were nonwhite and twenty-six percent were white.

For the violent offenders seventy-three percent were nonwhite and twenty-seven percent were white.

In terms of living arrangements, seventy-three percent of the nonviolent offenders were either with both parents (21%) or with the mother only (52%). In contrast, eighty-three percent of the violent offenders were either with both parents (28%) or with mother only (55%). It was interesting that violent offenders had either one or both parents more available than nonviolent offenders, although the percentage difference was not that strong. The majority of youths were from broken homes.

Any juvenile who had previous court contact was considered an old case in contrast to a juvenile who was new to the system. Again, the difference between nonviolent and violent offenders was minimal in terms of new versus old cases. Fifty percent of the nonviolent offenders were new cases, while fifty-five percent of the violent offenders were new cases.

As might be expected, only seventy percent of the nonviolent offenders had the petition filed while eighty-two percent of the violent offenders had the petition filed in court by the Complaint Screening Division.

Eighty-seven percent of the youths resided in the city and thirteen percent in the suburbs. The suburban proportion was small as the suburban screening units did not participate in the study. For the city of Chicago, the westside was defined to include police districts 10, 11, 12, and 13. The region to the west and north of these police districts was considered as northside, and the region to the south was considered as southside. Using these geographic boundaries, the home address of nonviolent and violent offenders may be compared using Table 2.

TABLE 2. Percentage\* Comparison of Nonviolent to Violent Offenders by Geographic Areas.

<u>Geographic Areas</u>	<u>Number of Youths</u>	<u>Percentage of Nonviolent Offenders</u>	<u>Percentage of Violent Offenders</u>
City Northside	42	55%	45%
City Westside	39	56%	44%
City Southside	75	65%	35%
Suburban	24	50%	50%
	<u>180</u>		

\*Percentages by rows total to 100%.

The southside of the city had the highest percentage (65%) of nonviolent offenders and the lowest percentage (35%) of violent offenders. The other geographic areas had a more even distribution of nonviolent to violent offenders.

The frequency of various offenses was examined for the juvenile participants. For the nonviolent offenders, the most frequent offense was burglary, then theft. Table 3 presents the distribution of all offenses for the nonviolent offenders.

TABLE 3. Distribution of Offenses for the Nonviolent Offenders.

<u>Offense</u>	<u>Number of Youths</u>
Burglaries	33
Theft	22
Runaway, ungovernable	16
Robbery	11
Assault, agg. assault	6
CTTV & poss. stolen car	5
Disorderly conduct	4
Other offenses	9
	<u>106</u>

For the violent offenders, the most frequent charge was armed robbery, then aggravated battery. Table 4 shows the distribution of all offenses for the violent offenders.

TABLE 4. Distribution of Offenses for the Violent Offenders.

<u>Offense</u>	<u>Number of Youths</u>
Armed robbery	24
Aggravated battery	22
Battery	14
Murder, homicide	5
Rape	2
Arson	2
Unlawful Use of Weapon	2
Other Offenses	3
	<u>74</u>

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APPENDIX II

DATE:

SURVEY OF TELEVISION VIEWING BY COURT WARDS

CASE NAME:

OFFENSE:

DATE OF BIRTH:

DATE OF OFFENSE:

1. I'M WONDERING WHICH TELEVISION PROGRAMS YOU HAPPEN\* TO WATCH?

2. (For each program mentioned:)

A. ABOUT HOW OFTEN DO YOU HAPPEN TO WATCH THIS PROGRAM?  
(e.g., weekly, 2 or 3 times a month, monthly, less often)

B. FOR ABOUT HOW LONG DO YOU HAPPEN TO HAVE BEEN WATCHING THIS PROGRAM?  
(How many weeks, months, years?)

3. DO YOU HAPPEN TO REMEMBER WHAT YOU WERE WATCHING ON TV THE DAY YOU HAPPENED TO GET INVOLVED IN THE OFFENSE YOU'RE ON PROBATION FOR?

(This is the LAST question, since it hints at a connection between TV and wrongdoing, which might make respondent more guarded on subsequent answers if asked earlier.)

\*"Happen" is part of questions so that they will seem less investigative.

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**END**