Do Child Abuse Rates Increase on Those Days on Which Professional Sporting Events are Held?

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This paper examines possible relationships between days on which professional sports events are held and daily rates of substantiated physical abuse of children by males. Three different hypotheses about possible relationships between various types of sporting events and rates of child abuse are examined using statewide data drawn from the Missouri Division of Family Services. Hierarchical OLS Multiple regressions were used to test for these relationships. Effects were controlled for the month in which the abuse occurred and the day of the week during which the incident occurred. The findings do not support the hypothesis that sporting events yield increases in number of substantiated male-perpetrator child abuse cases.

KEY WORDS: child abuse; relationship; rates.

INTRODUCTION

The possible association between viewing violent sports and the propensity for males to commit acts of violence has recently become a matter of substantial public concern. These concerns were particularly pronounced prior to Super Bowl XXVII in 1992, when national news coverage labeled game day “the day of dread.” At that time, a series of claims regarding massively increased risks of violence by males against women was made, including that it was the “biggest day of the year for violence against women” (Ringle, 1993, p. A1). Although the above cited concerns relate to spousal abuse, connections between viewing violent sports and engaging

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in other kinds of violent behaviors, such as murder, have been debated and examined empirically. For example, Phillips (1983) found a 12.46% increase in the U.S. homicide rate following heavyweight championship prizefights. A substantial theoretical and empirical research literature exists exploring the connection between viewing violence and subsequent aggression (Berkowitz, 1984). Conceptually, this represents a fairly straightforward application of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1973). If aggression is seen as rewarded when performed by others, then the likelihood of an observer modeling such aggression is enhanced.

A number of experimental studies have demonstrated that aggressive behaviors or attitudes are more likely following the viewing of violence. A recent meta-analysis by Paik and Comstock (1994) reviewed a large number of recent works, partitioning by research design and participant characteristics, and found a "positive and significant correlation between TV violence and aggressive behavior" (p. 516). This conclusion is congruent with findings from other overview studies and literature reviews examining mainly controlled experimental studies (Andison, 1977; Lazar, 1994; Young and Smith, 1989).

Empirical support for the hypothesis that viewing violence on television predisposes to the commission of criminal acts of violence is more limited, however, with relatively few studies examining this issue directly (Coakley, 1989). Some studies have been carried out which show an increase in homicide rates in the days following major boxing matches (Baron and Reiss, 1985; Miller et al., 1991; Phillips, 1983). White et al. (1992) examined professional football games, their findings showing that women in northern Virginia had significantly more emergency room admissions for injuries the day following a Washington Redskins victory. They suggest that a victory by a local football team may "provide the male viewer with a heightened sense of power and may increase domination over his spouse or partner" (White et al., 1992, p. 167). White et al.'s study is the first to look specifically at violence within the family unit and must be considered exploratory in nature. It does, however, provide empirical support for the notion that viewing violent sports can predispose individuals to commit acts of violence within the home.

Although these prior studies have probed linkages between professional sporting events and homicides and woman battering, our study is the first to extend this inquiry to the linkage between professional sporting events and violence against children. Absence of research in this area may be in part due to the extreme difficulty inherent in tracking violence, especially within the home. Battery is frequently unreported, making police or court records an imperfect source of data. Given the nature of violence in our society, with low reporting rates and serious confidentiality concerns,