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# Violent video games may stop crime by keeping criminals busy playing violent video games



[Evan Dashevsky \(/author/Evan-Dashevsky/\)](#) | [@haldash](#)  
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Everyday, young men across the world are spending hours killing, maiming, and engaging in all manner of [violent anti-social behavior \(http://www.techhive.com/article/2051376/grand-theft-auto-v-actors-think-their-game-is-violent-and-thats-okay.html\)](http://www.techhive.com/article/2051376/grand-theft-auto-v-actors-think-their-game-is-violent-and-thats-okay.html)—virtually.

This [vast digital blood orgy \(http://www.techhive.com/article/2041623/hordes-of-zombie-games-overrun-e3.html\)](http://www.techhive.com/article/2041623/hordes-of-zombie-games-overrun-e3.html) must have *some* kind of effect on society, right? There is data suggesting that it does, however it may not be the effect most would have expected. As it turns out, the steady parade of console-fitted gore-tainment may directly contribute to making society *less* violent.

Well, at least that's one theory.

There have been numerous studies attempting to find a link between question of whether violent games do, in fact, correlate with real-life aggression. And the findings have been [annoyingly inconclusive \(http://kotaku.com/5976781/25-video-game-violence-studies-summarized\)](http://kotaku.com/5976781/25-video-game-violence-studies-summarized). Indeed, the crime rate in the US has sharply decreased as video games have continually upped the viscera factor.

According to the economist Steve Levitt, the most interesting take-away hidden in the numbers is that violent video games may have directly contributed to the

decrease in real-world violence. According to Levitt, potential criminals aren't committing crimes because they are spending so much time playing violent video games (<http://www.techhive.com/article/2048987/grand-theft-auto-v-records-a-whopping-800m-in-first-day-sales.html>).

That's one of the issues tackled in a fascinating recent episode of the Freakonomics podcast (<http://freakonomics.com/2013/11/14/who-runs-the-internet-a-new-freakonomics-radio-podcast/>). As Levitt explains:

[M]aybe the biggest effect of all of having these violent video games is that they're super fun for people to play, especially adolescent boys, maybe even adolescent boys who are prone to real violence. And so if you can make video games fun enough, then kids will stop doing everything else, right?

They'll stop watching TV, they'll stop doing homework, and they'll stop going out and creating mayhem on the street. But I think evidence that we have, it's relatively scant, but the evidence we do have is actually that that [theory] is far more important [than the questions of whether video games cause aggressive behavior] in influencing real-world violence.

Basically Levitt is arguing that on a macro scale, if young men—those who are most likely to commit violent acts—are kept busy in front of their TVs and computers for hours on end, they will be too busy to go out into the streets and do real violent things.



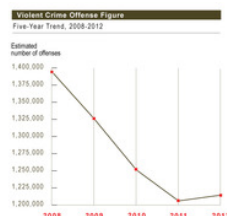
Don't worry--this is just a zombie (thus, already dead) getting bashed in Dead Rising.

## As good as its ever been

The Harvard Psychologist Steven Pinker documented in his 2011 book *The Better Angels of Our Nature* that despite the high-profile acts of digital savagery, we are actually living in the safest period in the history of history ([http://www.edge.org/3rd\\_culture/pinker07/pinker07\\_index.html](http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/pinker07/pinker07_index.html)).

According to FBI statistics

(<http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2012/crime-in-the-u.s.-2012>), while there was a slight uptick in violent crime in 2012 over 2011 (0.7 percent), 2012 still managed to have 12.9 percent fewer violent crimes than 2008.



(<http://images.techhive.com/images/article/2013/11/crime-rates-100154498-orig.png>)

The crime rate continues to plummet.

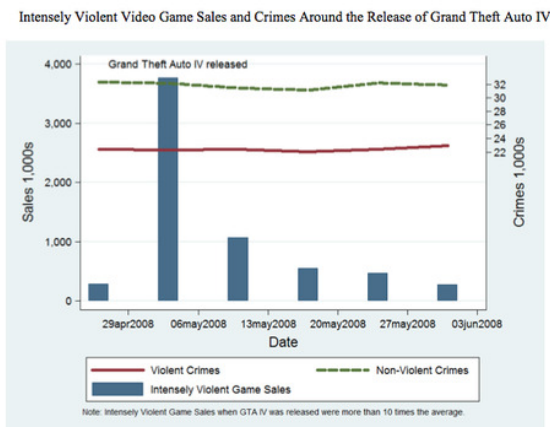
This five-year trend generally falls in line with what we've seen over the past two decades. Despite slight deviations and a few mass carnages, there has been a precipitous drop in crime over the past 20 years.

We should note that there is *no consensus* among criminologists as to the reason for this drop in crime. It's probably a combination of factors. However it is interesting that this plummeting rate of real-world violence has taken place in the midst over the outcry against video game violence, which has been brewing in the

While a one percent increase in violent games is associated with up to a 0.03% decrease in violent crime, non-violent games appear to have no effect on crime rates.

Furthermore, a recent study from the [Social Science Research Network](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1804959) ([http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1804959](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1804959)) plotted the acts of violent crimes against the sales of big console games on a week by week basis between 2005 and 2008. The researchers concluded that—within the scope of this limited study—the release of major video games, particularly *violent* video games, led to a slight *downtick* in violence.

According to the findings "while a one percent increase in violent games is associated with up to a 0.03% decrease in violent crime, non-violent games appear to have no effect on crime rates."



<http://images.techhive.com/images/article/2013/11/crime-rate-100154493-orig.png>

A sharp rise in violent video games has correlated with a very slight downtick in violent crime. (Though this doesn't necessarily prove anything.)

While it is very difficult to draw a definitive conclusions on criminal trends—a sphere influenced by many many variables—Levitt's basic theory appears to have some validity: If you keep young men busy reaping virtual havoc for hours on end (or alternatively, busy doing *anything*), the percentage of real life havoc should go down dramatically.

To reiterate—there is very little academic research to back this theory. But as the recent releases of the [Xbox One](http://www.techhive.com/article/2064509/xbox-one-review-for-gamers-yes-but-youll-like-it-too.html) (<http://www.techhive.com/article/2064509/xbox-one-review-for-gamers-yes-but-youll-like-it-too.html>) and [PS4](http://www.techhive.com/article/2064513/playstation-4-review-sonys-best-console-yet-is-off-to-a-shaky-start.html) (<http://www.techhive.com/article/2064513/playstation-4-review-sonys-best-console-yet-is-off-to-a-shaky-start.html>) systems keep [millions of gamers](http://www.techhive.com/article/2064400/sony-playstation-4-sales-cross-1m-units-on-first-day.html) (<http://www.techhive.com/article/2064400/sony-playstation-4-sales-cross-1m-units-on-first-day.html>) (mostly *young male gamers*) glued to their sets over the next few months, Levitt's theory at least gives us some hope that 2014 will be one of the safest years on record.

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**Evan Dashevsky** Staff Writer

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Evan lives in Brooklyn, NY and enjoys writing about what future may hold and taking long romantic walks on the beach.

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