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Video violence beyond a game: top cop

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By Simon Collins

Violent Xbox video games are being fingered by a top police officer as a possible cause of rising violence among young people.

Superintendent Bill Harrison, national manager of police youth services, says youth violence rates have jumped in the past two or three years throughout the Western world, coinciding with the rise of new products such as the Xbox.

Ministry of Justice figures given to a youth offending conference in Wellington yesterday showed sharp increases in the number of young people aged 14 to 20 caught by police for violent behaviour in 2005 and 2006.

The rate of all young people caught by police for all offences fell 17 per cent in the decade to last year, but the rate of young people caught for violence rose 25 per cent.

Mr Harrison told the conference the increased violence statistics partly reflected a shift in police resources to family violence, which was picking up more young people for violence against partners and other family members such as brothers and sisters.

But he said he started to wonder about the effect of video games when he found his 14-year-old son playing an graphic Xbox game involving "human beings killing each other".

"It was desensitising him to violence. It was shifting his norm about how he would deal with conflict," Mr Harrison said.

"You see these kids - their hands are wringing wet with sweat because their bodies are taking in what's going on on the screen and they are acting it out."

He said the Government's interdepartmental youth justice leadership group was commissioning research on the increase in youth violence and he wanted it to look at the effect of electronic games.

Research had shown young people could generally distinguish "cartoon" violence from "real" violence, but the interactivity involved in today's games seemed to pose a much bigger risk than previous generations of young people had faced.

But Auckland University psychologist Dr Ian Lambie said violent video games had no effect on most people.

"There is a subset of the population that is far more likely to be affected," he said.

"But we know that the problems are far more complex. It's learning issues, it's a whole range of other developmental problems."

A BOX FULL OF NASTIES

* *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Xbox and PlayStation): The player is a man working with gangs to unravel the plot behind his mother's murder. His mission includes murder, theft and destruction.

* *NARC* (Xbox and PlayStation): The player can choose between two narcotics agents attempting to take a dangerous drug off the streets. To enhance his abilities, the player takes drugs including marijuana, Ecstasy and LSD, enabling him to kick enemies' heads off. The game is banned in Australia.



The *Grand Theft Auto* series is famous for its graphic violence.

- * *The Warriors* (Xbox and PlayStation): The player gives commands to his gang, causing them to smash everything in sight.
- * *50 Cent: Bulletproof* (Xbox and PlayStation): A player becomes involved in gangster shootouts and robs the bodies of victims to buy new 50 Cent recordings and music videos.
- * *Crime Life: Gang Wars* (Xbox and PlayStation): The player roams streets and fights and kills for no reason.
- * *Condemned: Criminal Origins* (Xbox and Sega): The player is a serial killer using anything around, such as pipes and shovels, as weapons to kill enemies.
- * *Killer 7* (PlayStation and Nintendo): The player takes control of seven assassins who must combine skills to defeat a band of suicidal, monstrous terrorists. A player collects the blood of victims to heal himself and must slit his own wrists to spray blood to find hidden passages.