Ethical issues of asking youth sensitive questions about aggressive and seriously violent behaviors

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Growing Up With Media

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Background

- Self-report surveys about violence are a major source of epidemiological data that lead to public health intervention and prevention efforts.

- In the absence of self-report surveys, youth violent behavior, as well as many other socially undesirable behaviors impacting health would go largely undercounted.

Background

All researchers are mandated by ethical standards to convincingly argue that the benefits of the research outweigh the risks associated with obtaining it

→Child and adolescent health researchers must make the argument for a **specially protected research population**.

Problem Statement

A major gap in our understanding of the ethics of asking sensitive health questions to children and therefore a major gap in our ability to address related concerns, is the impact these questions have on youth.

→ Do sensitive questions about violence make youth upset?

→ What about the questions make them upset?

Growing up with Media (GuwM) Methodology

- Baseline data collected August-September, 2006

- 1,588 households (one caregiver, one child) were surveyed online

- Participants recruited from Harris Poll On Line

- Youth eligibility:
  - Aged 10-15 years
  - Use the Internet at least once in the last 6 months
  - English speaking

GuwM Youth characteristics (n=1,588)

- 48% Female

- Mean age: 12.6 years (SE: 0.05)

- 71% White, 13% Black, 9% Mixed, 7% Other

- 19% Hispanic

- Median time spent online on a typical day: 31 minutes – 1 hour

Definitions

Distress:
→Did any of the questions about violence make you upset? (yes/no)

Validity of questions:
→A survey like this should ask these questions about violence. (5-point Likert: agree-disagree)

Survey process:
→Where are you now doing the survey? (alone, in a room with other people)

Measures of violence victimization

In-person victimization (e.g., How often in the last year has another person or group attacked you - for example, an attack at home, at someone else's home, at school, at a store, in a car, on the street, at the movies, at a park or anywhere else")

Exposure to Community violence (e.g., In real life, have you ever seen someone get attacked on purpose with a stick, rock, gun, knife, or other thing that would hurt)

Measures of violence perpetration

Aggressive behavior (e.g., Threatened to hurt a teacher)

Delinquent behavior (e.g, How many times have you banged up or damaged something that did not belong to you?

Seriously violent behavior (e.g., Hurt someone badly enough that they needed to be treated by a doctor or nurse)

Conduct disorder-like behavior (e.g., Started a fire on purpose, where you wanted something to get damaged or destroyed)

Results

23% of all youth said 'yes' to whether any of the questions about violence made them upset

■ 56% were female (OR: 1.6, p=0.01)

■ 25% were 10 years of age (vs. 12% who were 15 years old; OR: 3.1, p<.001)

■ No differences by race or ethnicity

Themes of reasons for being upset

Theme	N	% of upset youth (n=393)	% within whole sample (n=1,588)
Specific types of questions were upsetting:			
Violence / weapons	110	28%	7%
Cruelty to animals	48	12%	3%
Sex (Internet questions)	32	8%	2%
Drugs	7	1%	0.4%
General Denial: I just don't want to think about or talk about or imagine bad stuff. I don't like to think that people (or kids) do or experience this stuff…. That this is in the world…. That people can be this mean or like this….	93	24%	6%

Themes of reasons for being upset

Theme	N	% of upset youth	% within whole sample
Emotional Reaction: It is scary/upsetting/disturbing; doing this changed my mood. It was weird. I was shocked (angry)….	74	19%	5%
Personal Intrusiveness: I am not this kind of person; I don't do this stuff; these questions were too personal. The fact that I was even asked….	49	12%	3%

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Themes of reasons for being upset

Theme	N	% of upset youth	% within whole sample
Too young. Sheltered or Immature for this: I learned about bad things that I am too young or sheltered to know about. These questions shouldn't be asked to children my age. I am too young to be asked these questions.	21	5%	1%
It brought up bad memories or reminded me of bad experiences	17	4%	1%
Everything / generalized feelings	13	3%	0.8%
It is against my religious beliefs or moral code. Jesus wouldn't do this or approve of this. It (or these things) is unacceptable.	4	1%	0.3%

Results: Survey experience

Upset youth were not significantly more likely to report someone was in the room when they were completing the survey versus un-upset youth (56% vs. 49%, p>.05)

Upset youth were 2.5 times more likely to somewhat or strongly disagree that 'questions like these about violence should be asked in a survey like this' (24% vs. 11%, p<.05)

Results: Victims and Perpetrators

Of the 11 questions asked about victimization, 2 were significantly related to being upset:
- Social exclusion: OR = 2.1, p<.001
- Seeing someone be attacked with a weapon: OR = 0.5, p=0.01

Of the 20 questions asked about perpetration, none were significantly related to being upset.

Proxy indicators of distress

- **Refusing to answer a question:** almost all questions about victimization and perpetration had less than 1% 'decline to answer'

- **Terminating the survey early:** 2% (n=36) of youth who started the survey did not complete it (no significant differences by sex or age).

- **Caregiver communication:** we received 30 inquiries about the incentives, 1 about the survey content.

- **Follow up response rate:** response rates were similar for those who were upset by the violence questions at Wave 1 (70%) vs. those who were not (77%).

Summary

Almost one in four youth 10-15 years of age were upset by our questions about violence

- These youth were more likely younger (10 y.o. vs. 15 y.o.) and female
- Victims of violence were not more likely to be upset
- Proxy indicators of being upset did not suggest high rates of distress

Discussion

We were surprised by the high rates of distress

- You never know until you ask. Almost all questions came from previously fielded surveys within a similar age group (e.g., Youth Internet Safety Survey)
- Pilot study → none were distressed

Discussion

The proxy rates of distress do not suggest youth had extremely negative responses to the survey.

Although answering questions about violence is upsetting (isn't it 'normal' to be upset by thinking about murder?), responding to these survey questions does not appear to be particularly traumatizing or risky for youth

Limitations

"Upset" is intentionally vague to not bias but makes interpretation more challenging. Also, it's unclear *how* upset they were (relative to what? ER or CSI?)

The adult sample is from HPOL, who are experienced survey takers
- More likely to contact Harris Interactive (good)
- Perhaps more used to consent process

Implications

Sensitive surveys need to query for distress:

- Can be used to flag youth for follow-up information or phone call

- Can help researchers better understand the affect their survey is having on participants

Implications

We must include children in surveys
- To not create an artificial floor for epidemiological estimates, and
- To help craft prevention efforts for those not yet engaging in the target behavior in large numbers.

75% of 10 year olds were NOT upset by the questions about violence. Nonetheless, they are 3 times more likely than adolescents to be upset.

Informed consent and appropriate follow up is crucial