

# TV VIOLENCE: WHO GETS HURT?

## Introduction

The Canadian government recently announced new initiatives to combat what it feels is the increasing amount of gratuitous or unnecessary violence on television. Both Federal Communications Minister Perrin Beatty and Keith Spicer, chairman of the Canadian Radio and Telecommunications Commission, have issued a number of warnings in various speeches to representatives of the television industry that this issue must be addressed. After a high-profile conference in Toronto in February 1993, attended by representatives from interested parties from the television industry and consumer groups, a National Action Group on Violence was formed. Laurier Lapierre, broadcaster and the group's chairperson, has outlined specific goals such as the implementation of codes, classification systems, and media literacy guidelines.

The general public's concern about the effects of television violence has increased with the perception that society in general is becoming increasingly violent. In seeking answers and solutions, political leaders, psychologists, sociologists, media consultants, and parents are increasingly examining not only television and its effects on viewers, in particular on children, but the possible cause and effect relationship of television violence. But is such a connection valid or accurate? Ever since the first broadcasts, there have been studies, reports, and books written about television, analyzing its influence on its viewers. Despite numerous studies, there appears to be little concrete scientific evidence that violent programming has any harmful effects. Moreover, determining what is unwarranted and gratuitous violence often demands interpretive and subjective analysis, although many critics of television violence cite common sense as a fundamental guideline. Certainly, everyone who is involved in the debate acknowledges that television has an impact on individuals, at least to some degree. The apparent ability of commercial television to influence consumers has been used to support the view that television also has an influence on an individual's general behaviour.

Are Canadians concerned about this issue? Virginie Larivière, a young girl from Quebec, collected over 1.3 million signatures of Canadians who feel something must be done about violence on television. In 1992 her younger sister was raped and murdered. Virginie and her family believe that such violent crimes may result from violence seen on television. If we are resolved to act on this issue, can we ask the television industry to regulate itself with various codes, much in the way that movies are classified? Or is legislation required to precisely define acceptable and appropriate depictions of violence and to prescribe limits? Are we prepared as a society to restrict — some would say censor — the creative efforts of the thousands of people who create television programs? Conversely, there is the argument that it must be the quality of the stories, the scripts, and the news reporting that should determine the content and the inclusion or exclusion of violent acts in the shows that we watch.