



# Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

BULLYING , MEDIA VIOLENCE

## Movie ratings rated PG for "Poor Guide"

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment March 9, 2012 03:00 AM

The recent controversy over the R rating preliminarily given to a forthcoming documentary about teenage bullying clearly exposes a real limitation to the existing movie rating system. The voluntary motion picture code of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), a brainchild of the late Jack Valenti, is designed to shield children from content inappropriate for their age and maturity level.

In the case of *Bully*, the mature rating was earned because of the frequent profanity uttered by the teens in the film. Unless either side (the MPAA or the film's producer) relents, the rating would restrict access to *Bully's* anti-violence message for the very group who would most benefit from seeing it teenagers.

Perhaps the MMPA expects that teens and their parents will attend the film together (permitted under the R restriction). But for many adolescents, there are few things more embarrassing than being seen in the theater sitting next to their parents. Alternatively, teenagers could always sidestep the MMPA morality marshals by waiting until the film is released on DVD or on cable.

Hopefully, the ratings mess surrounding *Bully* will be resolved in time for the film's release scheduled for the end of this month. Even so, there is a much larger problem associated with film ratings, as well as similar rating systems for TV and video games. Not only do rating systems fail to achieve the desired outcome, they often have the reverse effect. Ratings typically do more to attract young audiences to mature content than to deter them.

Experimental studies conducted by Professor Joanne Cantor at the University of Wisconsin have shown that movie-goers, particularly teenage boys, are most drawn to the media version of "the forbidden fruit"--to films that carry an R rating or a parental warning. In this research, boys shown a bland synopsis of a fictitious film but told that it was rated R were significantly more likely to indicate a desire to see the forthcoming movie than those subjects told that the film was PG.

For youngsters, the rating is a self-applied gauge of maturity. If you're not part of the "mature audience," then that must make you part of the "immature audience," and what self-respecting, red-blooded American adolescent wants to be labeled that?

So teens today can scan the movie section of the newspaper looking not for the number of stars given by the reviewers, but for the all-important letter given by the MPAA indicating age appropriateness. Any film

with parental guidance (PG or PG-13) is seen as "kids stuff," since most teenagers consider themselves to be too grown up to require guidance from their parents on what movies to see. By contrast, R-rated movies are definitely cool.

The rating system lets the motion picture industry off the hook. While some film-makers have toned down their teen-oriented scripts, too many others have placed artistic license over the public interest. They continue to spice up their movies with strong language, nudity, and scenes of rape and murder--ostensibly for the sake of realism but more to enhance box office appeal. Many films having plots that teenagers would enjoy are supposedly restricted from them because film-writers have thrown in a couple of swears or a pair of bare breasts in order to secure the more profitable R rating.

The end result of movie ratings is that they encourage gratuitous violence and nudity without effective controls in place. Rather than forcing the industry to act responsibly, the rating system shifts the responsibility over to parents and theaters to be the movie police, hardly a foolproof arrangement.

Also problematic is that the ratings system is overly simplistic, mixing apples and oranges, plus bananas and pears. The R rating, in particular, can signify a film that has profanity, nudity, explicit violence, blasphemy, or sensitive themes such as race, homosexuality or death. For example, the teen flick *American Pie* series (including the forthcoming *American Reunion*) and the hideously graphic *Hannibal* series carry the same R rating, yet are hardly similar in content.

I am not suggesting that we further complicate matters by adding separate codes for language, violence, and sexual situations (as TV has done), but that we scrap the ineffective and counter-productive system altogether. Replace it with a narrative description of the film content sufficiently detailed to help careful parents make informed choices. It may take some time and effort for mom and dad to investigate, but nothing done well comes easy.