



Terrorism Media Effects in Youth Exposed to Chronic Threat and Conflict in Israel

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Abstract

Purpose of Review This paper reviews the extant research on the effects of contact with terrorism media coverage on psychological outcomes in youth in the context of chronic threat and conflict in Israel.

Recent Findings The extant research is inconclusive with respect to the relationship between media contact and a variety of psychological outcomes in Israeli studies of youth exposed to ongoing threat and repeated terrorist attacks.

Summary Additional research is needed to examine potential differences in outcomes and the factors that influence youth coping and adaptation in an environment of chronic threat and extensive media coverage. Moreover, studies are needed to identify and evaluate potential parental, professional, and social strategies to enhance youth adjustment. Because political conflict in Israel is not likely to abate in the near future, the setting is ideal to conduct methodologically rigorous research including research using representative samples, prospective reporting, and longitudinal design.

Keywords Media · Mental health · Television · Terrorism · Terrorism threat · Youth

Introduction

Increased attention to the emotional and behavioral consequences of terrorism over the last 2 decades has generated a sizeable literature focused on potential media effects in adults and youth [1•, 2•, 3•]. Early studies addressed single acts of

terrorism including, for example, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and the September 11 attacks. Studies of single incidents generally have documented an association between contact with media coverage and adverse psychological outcomes in youth with diverse event exposures but have not established a causal relationship between media contact and

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outcomes [3••]. Media effects associated with coverage of terrorism in the context of repeated acts and the chronic threat of terrorism have received less attention. Longstanding political conflict in Israel has generated a body of research on the psychological outcomes associated with the consumption of coverage of pervasive terrorist threat [4–6], terrorism including repeated attacks [7–9], and ongoing military conflict [10, 11•] on youth. Youth reactions in these environments may differ from those associated with single incidents. In addition, Israeli youth, who are not exempt from conscription, anticipate and prepare for military service and readiness to respond to chronic violence which are both priorities in Israel. This review describes the literature from Israel, contrasts the findings of research on media coverage in the context of repeated attacks and chronic threat with the research on single incidents, offers guidance for mental health providers, and identifies areas for future consideration.

Description of the Extant Research

A literature search of PubMed, MEDLINE, PsycINFO, EBM Reviews (evidence-based medicine), EMBASE (biomedical and pharmacological), ERIC (education), Social Work Abstracts, and PILOTS (traumatic stress) databases using terms addressing the psychological effects (e.g., *posttraumatic stress disorder*, *PTSD*, *posttraumatic stress*, *depression*, *anxiety*, *stress*, *fear*, *anger*, *substance use*, *sleeping problems*, *eating problems*, *posttraumatic growth*) of media (*television*, *TV*, *radio*, *broadcast*, *print*, *newspaper*, *magazine*, *internet*, *web*, *social*) coverage of *disaster(s)*, *terrorist incident(s)*, *terrorism*, *political conflict*, *war*, and/or *mass trauma* identified eight empirical studies of terrorism media effects in youth. The samples, media forms, outcomes and predictors studied, and the methodological quality of the extant research are described below.

Samples, Event Exposures, and Media Contact

Of the eight studies identified for the current review, all but one, which assessed preschool children [9], evaluated pre-adolescents and/or adolescents. The included publications did not specify the ethnic, nationality, or religious composition of the samples studied. The samples varied widely with respect to event exposures. In two studies, all participants were exposed to attacks [10, 11•]. In a study of pre-school children, only 7.4% of the sample was directly exposed to attacks [9]. Oppenheimer and colleagues [6] compared youth residing in an area with frequent terrorist attacks to those in an area relatively free of attacks. One study assessed youth seeking psychological assistance [11•]. See Table 1.

Media Forms

Some studies investigated only television coverage [7, 9, 10, 11•], some examined other media forms including radio and newspaper as well as television coverage [4, 5], and one combined measures of television, Internet, newspaper, and radio contact for a “general news consumption measure” [6] (p. 154). One study did not specify media forms, instead querying participants about “media reports” [8] (p. 167). See Table 1.

Outcomes and Predictors

Multiple adverse outcomes were examined including post-traumatic stress [4, 5, 10, 11•], “terror-related stress responses” [6] (p. 154), distress [10, 11•], depression [7], behavioral and emotional reactions [4, 5, 9], and psychological and psychiatric problems [4, 5, 10, 11•]. In addition to media contact, studies examined the influence of demographics [5–8, 10, 11•], event exposures [4–10, 11•], coping [4, 8], and life satisfaction [8, 10]. Oppenheimer and colleagues [6] queried participants’ perceptions of their vulnerability, cautiousness, and control over their safety. Lavi and colleagues [11•] examined the effect of parental involvement on outcomes, asking adolescents if their parents explained “what was broadcast on television” (p. 87). See Table 1.

Methodological Quality of the Literature

The studies were limited methodologically. All samples were convenience except one which did not specify the sampling approach [9]. All but one [7] were cross sectional. Questionnaires were administered to youth who provided self-report in all but one study which assessed preschool children using maternal report [9].

Key Findings

Research has examined the relationship between media contact and outcomes and has explored a number of issues including coping and parent involvement. Key findings are summarized in Table 1.

Amount of Coverage Consumed

Two studies described the amount of media coverage consumed by participants [6, 9] and unfortunately, neither of these studies reported assessing a representative sample. Oppenheimer and colleagues [6] found that 33% of their sample of tenth and eleventh grade students recruited from schools in areas of high (frequent terror attacks) and low (relatively free of terrorist attacks) risk spent more than 3 h a day watching television and 4.7% “almost never” watched

Table 1 Description of included studies

Study Event Media Form	Sample Size (<i>N</i>) Source Age/Grade	Study Design Sampling Informant	Findings
Barile et al. 2012 [7] Suicide bombing in Dimona, Israel Television	<i>N</i> = 90 Middle school students from economically disadvantaged Israeli towns in the Israeli Negev Grades 7–9	Longitudinal: 9 months before and 2 months after a suicide bombing Convenience Self-report	Girls who knew people affected by the bombing had higher levels of depression symptoms than girls who did not know people affected by the bombing; this was not true for similarly exposed boys Neither physical proximity to a suicide bombing nor contact with television coverage was associated with increased depression in boys or girls
Braun-Lewensohn et al. 2009 [4]* Chronic terrorism Television, radio, newspaper	<i>N</i> = 913 Students from schools in four locations in Israel Junior and senior high school (12–18 years)	Cross-sectional Convenience Self-report	Contact with media coverage was positively associated with PTS Frequency of event-related media contact was weakly associated with three forms of coping—problem solving, reference to others, and non-productive coping Adolescents who used problem solving coping strategies fared well Non-productive coping strategies were linked to more PTS and other emotional and behavioral symptoms Subjective exposure showed the strongest link to non-productive coping strategies
Braun-Lewensohn et al. 2009 [5]* Chronic terrorism Television, radio, newspaper	<i>N</i> = 913 Students from schools in four locations in Israel 12–18 years	Cross-sectional Convenience Self-report	Objective and subjective exposure and media contact were associated with PTS Objective and subjective exposure, but not media contact, were associated with behavior and emotional problems
Lavi et al. 2013 [10] 2006 Lebanon War/Rocket attacks Television	<i>N</i> = 2314 Students from Israeli schools along the northern border 12–15 years	Cross-sectional Convenience Self-report	Girls experienced more severe PTS and psychiatric symptoms and were less satisfied with their lives than boys Younger children reported more severe PTS than older children Media contact was significantly correlated with PTS even when television contact was purposefully avoided
Lavi et al. 2016 [11]• Operation Cast Lead/Rocket attacks Television	<i>N</i> = 65 Adolescents who had applied for psychological assistance in public clinics on the southern border with Gaza 11–18 years	Cross-sectional Convenience Self-report	Real life exposure predicted PTS and general distress; the effect of television contact on PTS and general distress was not significant Parental media mediation was not effective in ameliorating PTS but was effective in reducing general distress in adolescents whose event exposure was relatively low
Oppenheimer et al. 2011 [6] Chronic terrorism Television, internet, newspaper, radio	<i>N</i> = 147 Community sample from towns with high or low risk of terror attacks Grades 10–11 (16–17 years)	Cross-sectional Convenience Self-report	Girls had greater terror-related stress and felt more vulnerable than boys There was no difference in television viewing between genders, those residing in areas of high and low risk for attack, or those knowing or not knowing a terrorist victim There was a weak positive correlation between news consumption and terror-related stress responses There was no correlation between news consumption and vulnerability, a weak positive correlation between news consumption and perceived cautiousness, and a negative correlation between news consumption and perceived controllability Among three predictors of stress, living in the high risk area was the primary factor followed by news consumption and then gender
Tatar and Amram 2007 [8] Chronic terrorism Media form not specified; one item queried contact with “media reports”	<i>N</i> = 330 Students living in or near Jerusalem Junior and senior high school (12–18 years)	Cross-sectional Convenience Self-report	Students generally reported using productive coping strategies more often than non-productive coping strategies when dealing with terrorist attacks Male adolescents used more non-productive coping strategies and female adolescents sought more social support as a coping strategy Greater media contact was negatively correlated with use of productive coping There was a negative correlation between life satisfaction and non-productive coping
Wang et al. 2006 [9] Chronic terrorism Television	<i>N</i> = 95 children (mother-report) Source of sample not specified Children: 1–4 years	Cross-sectional Sampling not specified Mother-report	Compared to preschool children who had no contact with television coverage, those with 5 min or more of terrorism-related television contact daily were at increased risk for externalizing problems, emotional reactivity, sleep problems, aggressive behavior, and oppositional defiant problems

*The studies reported in the two papers by Braun-Lewensohn and colleagues [4, 5] examined the same sample of participants

television; only 9% of the total television viewing time was of the news (p. 157). There was no difference in viewing between those residing in areas of high and low risk for terrorist attack [6]. Wang and colleagues [9] found that 22.3% of their preschool sample watched terrorism-related television coverage for more than 5 min daily.

Relationship Between Contact with Media Coverage and Outcomes

Findings related to the relationship between terrorism-related media contact and a variety of adverse outcomes were mixed across these studies. For example, in their study of youth residing in areas subjected to multiple missile attacks, Lavi and colleagues [10] found higher posttraumatic stress (PTS) levels in youth who watched television “many times during the day” than in those who watched less often (p. 25). In their studies of adolescents from four locations across Israel, Braun-Lewensohn [4, 5] found that contact with media coverage was positively associated with PTS [4, 5], but it was not associated with behavioral and emotional problems [5]. In a comparison between tenth and eleventh grade students from an area with frequent attacks and those from an area relatively free of attacks, Oppenheimer and colleagues [6] found a weak, but significant, positive correlation of news consumption with terror-related stress responses, which included both behavioral and emotional responses to terrorism threat (e.g., avoidance of public activities, vigilance in public, worry about loved ones, concern about safety). Further, news consumption correlated positively with perceived cautiousness (i.e., youth’s sense of how cautious they were) and negatively with perceived controllability (i.e., youth’s belief in how much control they had over their safety). There was no association between news consumption and vulnerability scores (i.e., how likely students thought they would witness or be involved in a terror attack, compared to their peers). Among the three predictors examined in this study, the primary predictor was living in the high risk area followed by news consumption and then gender [6]. In another study, preschool children who had contact with 5 min or more of terrorism-related television coverage on a daily basis were at increased risk for emotional reactivity, externalizing problems, aggressive behavior, oppositional defiant problems, and sleep problems relative to their counterparts who had no contact with television coverage [9]. Not all studies found a media effect [7, 11•], however, perhaps due to insufficient statistical power.

Coping

Two studies addressed coping in relation to media consumption. In their study of coping, Braun-Lewensohn and colleagues [4] found that the frequency of event-related media contact was weakly associated with three forms of coping—problem solving (e.g., attempt to solve the

problem, keep fit), reference to others (e.g., discuss concerns with others, pray for help), and non-productive coping (e.g., worry about what might happen in the future, wish for a miracle). Junior and senior high school students who participated in another study generally reported using productive coping strategies more often than non-productive coping strategies when dealing with terrorist attacks, but those who reported greater contact with media coverage were less likely to use productive coping strategies [8].

Parental Involvement

Only one study addressed parental involvement in their children’s media behaviors [11•]. Studying a service-seeking sample of adolescents exposed to years of rocket shelling, Lavi and colleagues [11•] asked participants if their parents had explained television coverage to them. Parental involvement did not mediate the relationship between media contact and PTS. While cause and effect cannot be assumed, parental involvement was associated with lower general distress in adolescents who reported the lowest levels of actual exposure to attacks [11•].

Discussion

The findings related to terrorism media consumption among youth in Israel in the context of repeated acts and the chronic threat of terrorism, the relationship between media contact and outcomes, and contrasts between these findings and findings in studies of coverage of single incidents are discussed. Guidance for mental health professionals and considerations for future research are offered.

Amount of Coverage Consumed

The amount of media coverage consumed by youth in Israel is unclear given the absence of studies assessing representative samples. The study by Oppenheimer and colleagues [6] suggests that adolescents may have relatively little contact with terror-related television news coverage and that there may be no difference in media consumption based on either residence in high or low risk areas or interpersonal exposure (knowing or not knowing a terrorism victim). It is unclear if news coverage and youth news consumption would be greater in the acute aftermath of an attack.

Relationship of Media Contact and Outcomes

A recent review of studies of coverage of single terrorist incidents (e.g., the Oklahoma City bombing, the September 11 attacks) generally found an association between media contact and adverse outcomes in youth [3••]. This finding is supported

by a meta-analysis of 43 adult and youth mass trauma media studies, including research conducted in and outside of Israeli, which documented a statistically significant effect between media contact and PTS for both adults and youth, in proximal and distal samples, and with television and combined media (television and other media forms) coverage of specific incidents [12]. The current review of youth studies in Israel addressing media coverage in the context of repeated terrorist attacks and ongoing threat failed to reveal a consistent association between media contact and adverse outcomes. The distinction for chronic stressors is likely due to the smaller number of studies examining media effects in this context, but it also may reflect characteristics of the coverage, the samples, and/or the context.

The studies in this review were conducted in Israel, a nation with adequate resources and a well-established infrastructure for terrorism preparedness, response, recovery, and resilience. The media constitute an important element of that infrastructure to support risk communication and public education. Media coverage of terrorist incidents in Israel typically provides information regarding the incidents, political commentary, and mental health content on expected reactions, advice, and support [8]. Coverage can help build consensus for social and political action, and it can foster ideological beliefs that give a sense of purpose to distress and suffering and moderate the effects of terrorism on youth [13].

Media coverage in regions like Israel with repeated attacks or the chronic threat of terrorism may be influenced by the recognition of the potential for deleterious effects. Media coverage can promote individual coping [5]. For example, in one study, the more adolescents from four locations consulted the media “to find out about” an attack, the fewer behavioral and emotional problems they experienced suggesting that information seeking through media coverage may constitute an adaptive coping strategy for children [5] (p. 855). Extensive contact with media coverage also can dampen emotional reactions to coverage and to actual events, thus desensitizing youth who are exposed to repeated acts or chronic threat.

Longstanding political conflict in Israel has influenced attitudes and life style choices of the population. In general, the public in Israel understands risk reduction and has learned personal safety and precautionary strategies, which may enhance their sense of control. This does not necessarily translate into confidence that those strategies will lessen their susceptibility to terrorism, however, especially when the risk is realistic [6, 14]. In a display of resilience, many youth in Israel maintain their usual routine even in the face of ongoing terrorist threat. A study of adolescents in Jerusalem revealed that youth who had been exposed to terrorist attacks did not differ from those who had not been exposed with respect to maintaining their routine [15]. This may reflect “an illusion of invulnerability,” denial, or a deliberate decision that promotes a sense of personal control over unpredictable and terrifying

events [15] (p. 203). There is some evidence that terrorism media consumption may be related to distress in some youth. For example, in a study of adolescents residing in areas at both high and low risk of terrorist attack, heavier news consumption was associated with terror-related stress responses and with less perceived control over their personal safety; further, those who consumed more news saw themselves as more cautious than those who consumed less news [6]. Thus, despite the incorporation of media as part of the terrorism management infrastructure, attention to the importance of reducing potentially detrimental aspects of coverage and to promoting coping in coverage, and measures taken to inform and prepare the public, contact with media coverage may have negative effects at least for some youth.

Guidance for Mental Health Providers

Mental health care professionals have several potential roles in assisting youth by working with youth themselves; with their parents and families; and with schools, the media, and other social institutions. With respect to youth themselves, providers should explore youth motivations and goals in accessing the media; take a media history to assess their media behaviors and practices; help them process and express their event exposures, experiences, and reactions; and address their reactions to coverage [16].

Mental health providers may serve an important role in educating parents about potential effects of media contact and how parents may help their children understand and cope with media content. Parents influence youth’s reactions to media coverage in general [17] by shaping and regulating their children’s media behavior [18, 19] and by helping them interpret and evaluate media coverage [17, 18] and process their reactions [18, 19]. Parents also may role model reactions to media coverage and teach children coping strategies [17–19]. The results of the study by Lavi and colleagues [11•] of assistance-seeking adolescents provides some support for parental involvement in the context of terrorism even though parental mediation was effective for general distress only in youth with relatively low exposure to rocket shelling. Comer and colleagues [20] found that typical parental actions (i.e., those not guided by training in coping and media literacy) with their children related to news coverage may not decrease their children’s perceptions of threat. Instead, parents may need training in intermediation to assist their children in confronting inaccurate thoughts, in encouraging attention to positive issues and hope, and in reinforcing adaptive coping. Thus, providers should help parents identify and implement appropriate intermediation strategies.

Mental health professionals have a role in educating other health care providers, school personnel, media professionals, and professionals in other social institutions and systems about the potentially negative influence of media coverage

on children and in advocating for attention to media concerns. With respect to their involvement with the media, mental health professionals can help frame and shape content included in messages and news coverage.

Future Directions

A comprehensive understanding of media effects in the context of repeated terrorist attacks and chronic threat requires additional study. The child media research in Israel has assessed a number of diverse outcomes including, for example, distress, depression, and behavioral and emotional problems as well as posttraumatic stress, but more studies are needed to draw more definitive conclusions regarding the association of these outcomes with media contact. Additional research is needed to explore positive outcomes associated with media contact in youth and to identify the factors that influence the sensitizing and desensitizing effects of media contact. Other issues that warrant consideration include the effects of an expanded array of media forms including social media; the source of media (e.g., public, private, political parties, community); aspects of coverage; and the influence of various characteristics of youth (e.g., development, pre-existing conditions, culture, ideological beliefs, religion, coping, perceptions of control and vulnerability), their event exposures, their media practices, and the context of their media consumption (e.g., solitary consumption, parental involvement). For example, only one study in the extant research addressed assistance-seeking youth in Israel [11•] and one study assessed perceived vulnerability [6], which may represent risk for adverse outcomes. A growing literature has addressed coping in youth exposed to mass trauma in general [21•], with limited research on the relationship between terrorism media contact and coping strategies [4, 8]. There is room for studies of the potential role of the media in promoting adaptive coping (through for example, information delivery) and studies to identify what characteristics of coverage, youth, and context of media contact are associated with the use of maladaptive coping strategies. Only one study [11•] addressed parental involvement, a promising issue for exploration. Moreover, studies are needed to identify and evaluate potential parental, professional, and social strategies to enhance youth adjustment.

Conclusions

These Israeli studies suggest that media contact may have a negative effect on youth in the context of ongoing threat and repeated terrorist attacks though additional research is needed to further examine these effects and the factors that influence youth coping and adaptation. The issue of parental involvement, examined in one of the studies [11•], is ripe for

exploration to identify effective parental strategies. The relatively extensive terrorism media coverage in Israel and its psychological, social, and political influences—potentially affecting beliefs and actions of the society at large—make media coverage an important subject for study. The literature considered in this review establishes a foundation on which to build. Because political conflict is not likely to abate in the near future, and because Israel employs resources and an infrastructure to support terrorism preparedness, response, recovery, and resilience, the country offers an ideal setting to conduct methodologically rigorous research including research using representative samples, prospective reporting, and longitudinal design.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest Betty Pfefferbaum is a section editor for *Current Psychiatry Reports*.

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