

TESTIMONY OF GEORGE GERBNER BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON TELECOMMUNICATIONS,
CONSUMER PROTECTION, AND FINANCE OF THE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE,
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, WASHINGTON, D.C. - October 21, 1981

Mr. Chairman:

I am George Gerbner, Professor of Communications and Dean of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications. I appreciate the opportunity to testify and share our research findings and views with your subcommittee, and am pleased to release today our Violence Profile No. 12.

I appear in the capacity of an individual researcher and not as a representative of our School, University, or any group or organization. The research I am reporting comes from the ongoing project called Cultural Indicators designed to investigate since 1967 the nature of television programming and its relationships to viewer conceptions of social reality.

We have conducted the longest-running and so far still only continuous and cumulative research on what it means to grow up and live with television. The project has been supported by funds from the President's Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, the National Institute of Mental Health, the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, The American Medical Association, the Administration on Aging, and the National Science Foundation. It is a team effort conducted by my colleagues Drs. Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, Nancy Signorielli and myself; I alone am responsible for the views expressed in this testimony.

In the limited time available I shall only sum up our findings and submit additional documentation for the record and the further information of those who may be interested.¹ These publications, issued in connection with Violence Pro-

¹ "Violence Profile No. 11: Trends in Network Television Drama and Viewer Conceptions of Social Reality 1967-1979." George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorielli. Philadelphia, PA.: The Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, April 1980.

"The 'Mainstreaming' of America: Violence Profile No. 11." George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorielli. Journal of Communication, Summer 1980.

file No. 11, contain the methodological and conceptual detail supporting our research and the theory of "mainstreaming" to which I will refer.

First I will highlight the latest findings of our research on television violence during the 1980-81 season.

Second, I will summarize the conclusions of our project about viewer conceptions of relevant aspects of social reality.

Third I will note the fundamental structural reasons why basic program ingredients such as violence are so prevalent and resistant to change. Every previous hearing has identified some of these but none has led to alternatives. Yet without economically and politically viable alternatives, and despite all good intentions, going through the same motions every few years remains an exercise in futility.

Our measures of television violence are its prevalence on programs and among characters and its rate per program and per hour. These measures are combined into the Violence Index to facilitate comparisons over time and across networks and program types. The methodology of monitoring is explained in detail in the additional documents. The analysis is focused on clear-cut and unambiguous physical violence in any context. (Available evidence indicates that humorous and fantasy violence is at least as effective in demonstrating its social lessons as so-called realistic and serious violence.) The Violence Index meets the critical statistical and empirical requirements of an index. Nevertheless, all component indicators that make up the Index are also reported in the attached Tables 1 and 2.

And now the findings.

Violence in weekend daytime children's programs, already the most violent on television, rose last year on every measure and on all three major networks. The most substantial rise was registered in the rate of violent incidents per hour. Weekend daytime programs bombard children with an average of over 25 violent acts per hour, up from 17 the year before, and well above the average rate in the 14 years of this project.

What used to be the "family viewing hour" (8:00 - 9:00 p.m. EST) is no longer a relatively low-violence zone. It became as violent as late evening two years ago, and rose again last year on two of the three networks. The third, CBS, reduced its prime time (but not weekend daytime) violence, accounting for the overall prime time mayhem remaining at the level of almost six violent acts per hour.

Despite these fluctuations, however, the overall Violence Index remained relatively stable. Figures 1 and 2 show the trends since 1967. Weekend daytime children's programs have always been the most violent and they still are.

While the "family viewing hour" was less violent through the 1970's, more violence shifted to the late evening, balancing out the overall prime time Index. Now violence is more evenly distributed in prime time, and close to the 14-year average.

The most impressive feature of the overall amount of violent representations on television is its resistance to change. Clearly, cosmetic manipulations and casual admonitions or pressure yield only marginal and fleeting results. Violence is a social scenario and dramatic ingredient that may be built into our system of television program production and that only structural adjustments can change.

Before we can meaningfully consider changes in the kind and amount of violence on the screen, we must first ask what violence means, how it functions, and why it is such a stable feature of our entertainment. That will bring us

to the second part of our findings, viewer conceptions of social reality.

Humans threaten to hurt or kill, and actually do so, mostly to scare, terrorize, or otherwise impose their will upon others. Symbolic violence carries the same message. It is a show of force and demonstration of power. It is the quickest and clearest dramatic demonstration of who can get away with what against whom.

On the whole, television tends to favor majority-type characters and to uphold the social order against illegitimate transgression. TV violence depicts these transgressions presumably not to subvert but, on the contrary, to cultivate the norms of the social order. For example, our research shows that when women and minority types encounter violence on television, they are more likely to end up as victims than are the majority types.

Violence is thus a scenario of social relationships. It has implicit lessons for those who may wish to exert power by physical force and for those who may be its victims. The real questions that must be asked are not just how much violence there is and why, but also how fair, how just, how necessary, how effective, and at what price.

Television took violence from other popular media and put it on the assembly line. Video mayhem pervades the typical American home where the set is on an average of six and a half hours a day. Violence strikes at the rate of almost six times per hour in prime time and 25 times an hour during weekend daytime children's programming. By changing the selective occasional exposure into a daily ritual, television has brought about a virtual immersion in violence that is historically unprecedented. In this violence-saturated symbolic environment,

with its stable pattern of power, the questions about the lessons of violence take on an equally unprecedented urgency.

Do viewers learn the lessons of violence and power? The evidence is now compelling that they do. The recently completed comprehensive review of ten years of scientific work provides convincing support for the original conclusion of the U.S. Surgeon General that there is a causal relationship between violence and aggression.

Our own research shows that the consequences of growing up and living in television's violent world are more complex and even more far-reaching than the instigation of an occasional act of violence, no matter how disruptive and tragic that may be.

Violence as a scenario requires the appropriate setting and cast of characters. The setting is what we call "mean world." In it most characters feel insecure and fear victimization while some are also willing or compelled to oblige them by acting violent and thus confirming the fears of many.

Heavy viewers are most likely to express the feeling of living in that self-reinforcing cycle of the "mean world". Our analysis of large scale surveys (reported in detail and tabulated in the additional documents submitted) indicates how the cycle works. Responses to questions about chances of encountering violence, safety of neighborhoods, fear of crime, etc., have been combined into an Index of Images of Violence. Table 3 and Figure 3 show that heavy viewers in every education, age, income, sex, newspaper reading and neighborhood category express a greater sense of insecurity and apprehension than do light viewers in the same groups. (Previous results also showed that heavy viewers are more likely to acquire new locks, watchdogs and guns "for protection.")

The data show sizeable group differences, reflecting inequalities of

risk and power. Even though most heavy viewers feel more at risk than light viewers, the most vulnerable to the "mean world" syndrome are women, older people, those with lower education and income, those who do not read newspapers regularly, and those who live in large cities.

However, on some questions some groups respond differently. Television viewing may blur some distinctions and bring groups closer together into what we call the television "mainstream." Viewing may also leave some groups relatively unaffected while making others extremely responsive to the television image.

Figure 4 shows the "mainstreaming" implications of viewing. Those who live in suburbs and non-metropolitan areas are so convinced that "crime is rising" that television adds little or nothing to that perception. But those who live in cities (small and large) express an equally near-unanimous belief in the rising crime rate only if they are heavy viewers.

Similarly, high and medium income (but not low income) respondents overestimate their chances of becoming involved in violence if they are heavy viewers. The more affluent heavy viewers share the violent "mainstream" with all lower income respondents.

Figure 5 depicts the association between television, images of violence in large cities, and race and class. Among whites living in large cities there is little if any relationship for high income respondents, and a slight relationship for low income respondents. Among blacks living in large cities there is an inverse relationship: high income blacks feel relatively secure as light viewers but much less so as heavy viewers. Low income blacks, on the other hand, feel most insecure if they are light viewers, and exhibit less insecurity when heavy viewers. High and low income city blacks join in the television "mainstream" from opposite directions.

Figure 6 shows that fear of crime is a most serious personal problem

for nonwhites, and that television, despite its prevalence of violence, again seems to be associated with less rather than more fear among nonwhite respondents. Whites, however, fear crime much more as heavy than as light viewers. Again, whites and nonwhites blend into the television "mainstream" from opposite directions.

Expressions of fear by residence alone show that while suburban heavy viewers fear crime more than their light viewing counterparts, it is big city heavy viewers who respond most (what we call "resonate") to television's violence message.

These group differences illustrate the complex interplay of demographic and real world factors and television viewing. They show that for some groups, like big city blacks, the real world may appear even more violent than the world of television; at least, viewing tends to moderate their apprehension. Others feel highly insecure regardless of viewing. Still others live in an environment that seems relatively safe for those who do not watch much television, but extremely dangerous for those who do; heavy viewers seem to "resonate" to the television message. On the whole, the most general and prevalent association with television viewing is a heightened sense of living in a "mean world" of violence and danger.

I believe that a corrosive sense of insecurity and mistrust invites not only aggression but also repression. Fearful people are more dependent, more easily manipulated and controlled, more susceptible to deceptively simple, strong, tough measures and hard-line postures--both political and religious. They may accept and even welcome repression if it promises to relieve their insecurities. That is the deeper problem of violence-laden television.

In recent years we have gone beyond violence in our study of the dynamics of living with television. We have investigated the images

and the cultivation of conceptions of sex roles and minorities, aging, occupations, educational achievement and aspirations, science and scientists, family, sex, and health and medicine. We are currently at work on the analysis of the association of television viewing with political position-taking and viewers' political tendencies. We find that heavy viewers say they are "moderate" but their views tend to be conservative on social and populist on economic issues.

Our studies and the research of other investigators suggest that television presents a relatively stable world of characters and actions. It is a world that is resistant to substantial and lasting change because it works so well for the institutions producing it, even if not necessarily for society as a whole, and because television is relatively insulated both from the ballot box and the box office.

Under the law television is a publicly licensed trustee of the airways, operating in the "public interest, convenience, and necessity." In fact, however, it is a private business producing audiences for sale to advertisers.

The basic formula that guides program production is "cost per thousand." The less costly the program and higher the rating the more profitable the enterprise. But ratings are no indicators of real popularity. They only show which of the programs aired at the same time attract more viewers. As viewers watch mostly by the clock rather than by the program, the total audience at any one time is relatively stable. So although there is keen competition, it is with the same type of appeal for the same market.

The market for television production is not free in any sense of the word. A handful of production companies create the bulk of the programs and sell them to broadcasters, not viewers. The cheapest and least

offensive programming is the most profitable. Violence becomes a cheap industrial ingredient in a formula-ridden, narrowly conceived and rigid production system.

The system operates on a lucrative but restrictive basis of advertising moneys. The law that makes these advertising expenditures a tax-deductible business expense is the economic foundation of the television industry. The cost of advertising is included in the price products we buy. Unlike other business costs, but like taxation (without representation, to be sure), the cost must be paid by all whether or not they use the service. According to the annual financial report compiled by Broadcasting magazine (August 10, 1981, pp. 50-52), the television levy per household in 1980 ranged from about \$90 in Atlanta to \$29 in Wilkes-Barre--Scranton, Pa. In my city of Philadelphia it was \$59.36. That is what the average Philadelphia household paid for television, included in the price of products they bought, whether or not they watched. Net revenues for the television industry totaled \$8.8 billion, pre-tax profits 1.6 billion.

The only way to reduce violence and, more importantly, the price we pay for its inequities as well as for its saturation of the life space of every television generation, is to allocate these and perhaps even additional resources to that end. In other words, it is to extend the economic support for a broader view of the social and cultural mission of television. Such a move would not infringe on First Amendment rights. On the contrary, it would extend the First Amendment's prohibition of abridgement of the cultural marketplace to also cover corporate restrictions of control, purpose, and function.

Clearly, such institutional adjustments will take time and study, as well as determined effort. The last Subcommittee hearing that pro-

posed investigation of the structure of the television industry ran into fierce private pressure. The staff member assisting with the original draft was fired and the final majority report was watered down to the usual platitudes. Those who would want to move television toward a more open system should know what they are up against.

Nevertheless, the effort is in the long-run interest of the industry as well as of our society. The rigid imperatives of television production will have to give way to a freer marketplace of ideas, problems, conflicts, and their resolutions. Freedom, time, and talent are needed to create a greater diversity of human scenarios and thus reduce violence to its more legitimate and equitable dramatic functions. The resource base for television will have to be broadened to liberate the institution from total dependence on advertising monies, purposes, and ratings.

Further hearings are needed to examine the ways in which democratic countries around the world manage their television systems. The subcommittee should recommend a mechanism that will finance a freer commercial system, one that can afford to present a fairer, more peaceful, and more democratic world of television. The mechanism should also help protect creative professionals from both governmental and corporate dictation. Only then will TV's professionals be free to produce the diversified and entertaining dramatic fare they know how to produce but cannot under existing constraints and controls.

Table 1

Violence Index Components
(1967 - 1980-1)

	67,68 ¹	69,70 ¹	71,72 ¹	73,74 ²	1975 ²	1976	1977 ³	1978	1979	1980 ⁴ - 81	Total
<u>All Programs</u> N =	183	232	203	291	226	110	192	111	126	130	1804
% Programs w/violence	81.4	80.6	79.8	78.0	77.4	89.1	75.5	84.7	81.0	85.4	80.4
Rate per program	4.8	4.9	5.0	5.4	5.2	6.2	5.0	5.8	5.0	5.7	5.2
Rate per hour	7.2	8.1	7.2	6.9	7.7	9.5	6.7	8.3	8.1	10.0	7.7
% Characters involved in violence	69.5	65.1	59.8	61.4	64.2	74.8	60.9	64.8	62.7	67.3	64.2
Violence Index	190	178	174	175	177	204	166	183	174	187	179
<u>Weekend-Daytime</u> N =	62	107	81	114	92	49	53	48	62	68	736
% Programs w/violence	93.5	97.2	88.9	93.9	90.2	100.0	90.6	97.9	91.9	97.1	93.9
Rate per program	5.2	6.5	6.0	5.6	5.1	6.9	4.9	7.5	4.6	6.0	5.8
Rate per hour	22.3	25.5	16.0	12.6	14.2	22.4	15.6	25.0	17.2	25.4	18.2
% Characters involved in violence	84.3	89.7	73.5	73.8	81.1	85.6	77.2	86.0	74.8	87.6	80.4
Violence Index	242	253	208	205	211	247	209	249	210	249	224
<u>Prime-Time</u> N =	121	125	122	177	134	61	139	63	64	62	1068
% Programs w/violence	75.2	66.4	73.8	67.8	68.7	80.3	69.8	74.6	70.3	72.6	71.1
Rate per program	4.5	3.5	4.4	5.2	5.3	5.6	5.0	4.5	5.4	5.4	4.8
Rate per hour	5.2	3.9	4.8	5.3	6.0	6.1	5.5	4.5	5.7	5.8	5.2
% Characters involved in violence	64.4	49.4	53.9	53.7	55.0	67.4	55.5	52.9	53.7	52.0	55.3
Violence Index	176	140	159	159	160	183	154	153	153	152	158
<u>8-9 P.M. EST</u> N =	74	73	55	86	61	25	65	27	31	28	525
% Programs w/violence	77.0	60.3	74.5	60.5	52.5	72.0	66.2	59.3	71.0	71.4	65.7
Rate per program	4.9	2.8	4.2	4.0	2.7	3.8	4.2	3.0	5.6	5.6	4.0
Rate per hour	6.4	3.9	4.8	4.3	4.1	4.7	5.3	4.0	6.3	6.5	4.9
% Characters involved in violence	66.3	46.1	50.0	44.2	37.0	55.1	53.2	39.2	53.1	52.4	49.4
Violence Index	186	127	150	134	104	145	140	116	156	153	141
<u>9-11 P.M. EST</u> N =	47	52	67	91	73	36	74	36	33	34	543
% Programs w/violence	72.3	75.0	73.1	74.7	82.2	86.1	73.0	86.1	69.7	73.5	76.2
Rate per program	4.0	4.3	4.5	6.4	7.6	6.9	5.8	5.6	5.2	5.2	5.7
Rate per hour	3.8	3.9	4.8	6.1	6.9	6.8	5.7	4.8	5.2	5.3	5.4
% Characters involved in violence	61.5	54.2	57.1	62.5	68.4	75.7	57.1	62.5	54.1	51.7	60.7
Violence Index	162	158	167	183	203	209	165	180	150	150	174

¹ These figures are based upon two samples collected in the fall of each of these years.

² The figures for 1973-74 include a spring 1975 sample and those for 1975 include a spring 1976 sample.

³ The Fall 1977 sample consists of two weeks of prime-time and one weekend-morning sample of network dramatic programs.

⁴ These figures are based upon a one-week sample collected in the spring of 1981.

Table 2

Violence Index Components
for 1979 and 1980-1* by Network

	All Networks		ABC		CBS		NBC	
	1979	1980-1	1979	1980-1	1979	1980-1	1979	1980-1
<u>All Programs</u> N =	126	130	34	43	56	51	36	36
% Programs w/violence	81.0	85.4	70.6	81.4	87.5	84.3	80.6	91.7
Rate per program	5.0	5.7	4.4	5.7	5.1	5.5	5.4	5.9
Rate per hour	8.1	10.0	6.4	10.4	9.9	10.6	7.7	9.1
% Characters involved in violence	62.7	67.2	52.2	64.9	69.1	68.5	64.7	69.4
Violence Index	174	187	145	180	190	188	179	196
<u>Weekend-Daytime</u> N =	62	68	11	20	32	30	19	18
% Programs w/violence	91.9	97.1	90.9	100.0	93.8	96.7	89.5	94.4
Rate per program	4.6	6.0	6.5	6.7	4.8	6.7	3.1	4.2
Rate per hour	17.2	25.4	15.8	30.7	23.7	27.7	10.5	16.7
% Characters involved in violence	74.8	87.6	87.5	98.0	73.4	88.0	69.2	74.4
Violence Index	210	249	223	273	224	256	186	213
<u>Prime-Time</u> N =	64	62	23	23	24	21	17	18
% Programs w/violence	70.3	72.6	60.9	65.2	79.2	66.7	70.6	88.9
Rate per program	5.4	5.4	3.5	5.0	5.4	3.9	7.9	7.7
Rate per hour	5.7	5.8	4.2	5.9	5.9	4.2	6.9	7.3
% Characters involved in violence	53.7	52.0	38.3	47.4	64.4	47.9	60.9	65.5
Violence Index	153	152	116	138	173	135	175	192
<u>8-9 P.M. EST</u> N =	31	28	13	11	11	10	7	7
% Programs w/violence	71.0	71.4	61.5	63.6	81.8	60.0	71.4	100.0
Rate per program	5.6	5.6	3.5	5.8	5.5	3.9	9.6	7.6
Rate per hour	6.3	6.5	4.6	7.2	6.8	4.2	7.7	8.8
% Characters involved in violence	53.1	52.4	35.9	49.0	59.4	44.1	72.0	72.7
Violence Index	156	153	116	141	172	129	198	210
<u>9-11 P.M. EST</u> N =	33	34	10	12	13	11	10	11
% Programs w/violence	69.7	73.5	60.0	66.7	76.9	72.7	70.0	81.8
Rate per program	5.2	5.2	3.4	4.2	5.2	3.8	6.8	7.8
Rate per hour	5.2	5.3	3.8	4.8	5.2	4.2	6.2	6.6
% Characters involved in violence	54.1	51.7	40.5	45.8	68.3	51.4	53.8	60.6
Violence Index	150	150	115	135	174	140	160	180

*These figures are based upon a one-week sample collected in the spring of 1981.

Table 3

Components of Images of Violence Index

	Percent Overestimating Chances of Involvement in Violence			Percent Agreeing that Women are More likely to Be Victims Of Crime			Percent Saying Their Neighborhoods are Only Somewhat Safe or not Safe at all			Percent Saying that Fear of Crime Is a very Serious Problem			Percent Agreeing that Crime is Rising		
	Percent Light Viewers ²	CD ³	gamma	Percent Light Viewers ²	CD ³	gamma	Percent Light Viewers ²	CD ³	gamma	Percent Light Viewers ²	CD ³	gamma	Percent Light Viewers ²	CD ³	gamma
Overall	71	+10	.14***	72	+10	.18***	55	+11	.10***	20	+9	.12***	94	+4	.30***
controlling for:															
Age															
18-29	76	+14	.28***	73	+6	.11**	49	+11	.09**	16	+11	.21***	93	+4	.27***
30-54	68	+9	.11**	70	+10	.18***	53	+12	.09***	17	+11	.12***	96	+3	.27**
over 55	71	+4	.07*	77	+10	.22***	65	+9	.06*	31	+1	-.01	94	+4	.38***
Education															
No College	76	+7	.13***	70	+12	.20***	58	+10	.07***	24	+8	.11***	96	+3	.28***
Some College	53	+9	.10*	76	+7	.06	49	+9	.07*	13	+5	.09*	91	+5	.22**
Newspaper Reading															
Sometimes	75	+14	.25***	70	+15	.26***	58	+17	.10***	23	+11	.14***	94	+4	.27***
Everyday	69	+7	.10***	74	+17	.13***	53	+8	.09***	18	+8	.11***	95	+4	.36***
Race															
White	69	+10	.13***	73	+9	.17***	53	+10	.09***	17	+10	.14***	94	+4	.29***
Non-White	86	+7	.25**	70	+12	.21**	72	+16	.09**	46	-6	-.07	95	+4	.37**
Urban Proximity															
City over 250,000	69	+10	.13**	77	0	-.00	71	+14	.19***	26	+20	.19***	88	+10	.52***
City under 250,000	74	+3	.05	64	+24	.42***	59	+8	.04	22	+5	.09*	89	.11	.57***
Suburban	67	+13	.18***	75	.10	.19***	50	+13	.13***	19	+10	.12***	96	+2	.13
Non-Metropolitan	77	+8	.13**	70	+9	.17***	51	+7	.01	18	+2	.08**	98	0	.10
Income															
under \$10,000	84	0	.04	67	+18	.32***	61	+14	.10***	35	-2	-.00	96	+4	.51***
\$10,000 - \$25,000	68	+8	.12***	74	+6	.12***	55	+6	.04	16	+9	.16***	93	+5	.35***
over \$25,000	62	+18	.13**	76	0	-.03	49	+1	-.01	10	+16	.11**	96	-1	-.13
Sex															
Male	68	+8	.09**	68	+10	.20***	38	+16	.16***	21	+4	.07**	95	+2	.07
Female	76	+8	.15***	78	+6	.14***	73	+1	-.01	20	+12	.14***	94	+5	.55***

1

"On the average weekday, about how many hours do you personally watch television?"

Light: under 2 hours
 Medium: 2 - 4 hours
 Heavy: over 4 hours

2

Percent Light Viewers = percent of light viewers giving the "Television Answer"

3

CD = Cultivation Differential; percent of heavy viewers minus the percent of light viewers giving the "Television Answer"

* $p \leq .05$ (tau)** $p \leq .01$ (tau)*** $p \leq .001$ (tau)

Data Source: Opinion Research Corporation

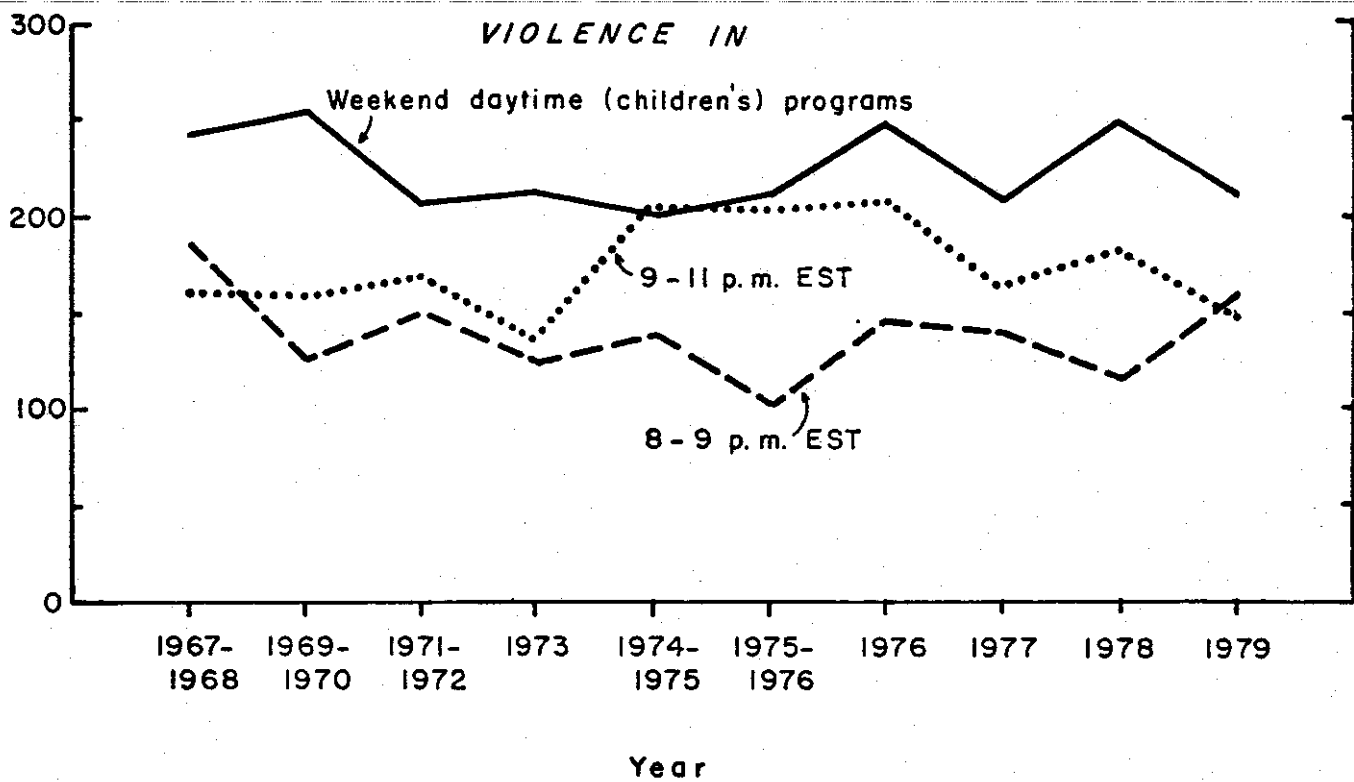


FIGURE 1: VIOLENCE INDEX IN CHILDREN'S AND PRIME TIME PROGRAMING, 1967-1979

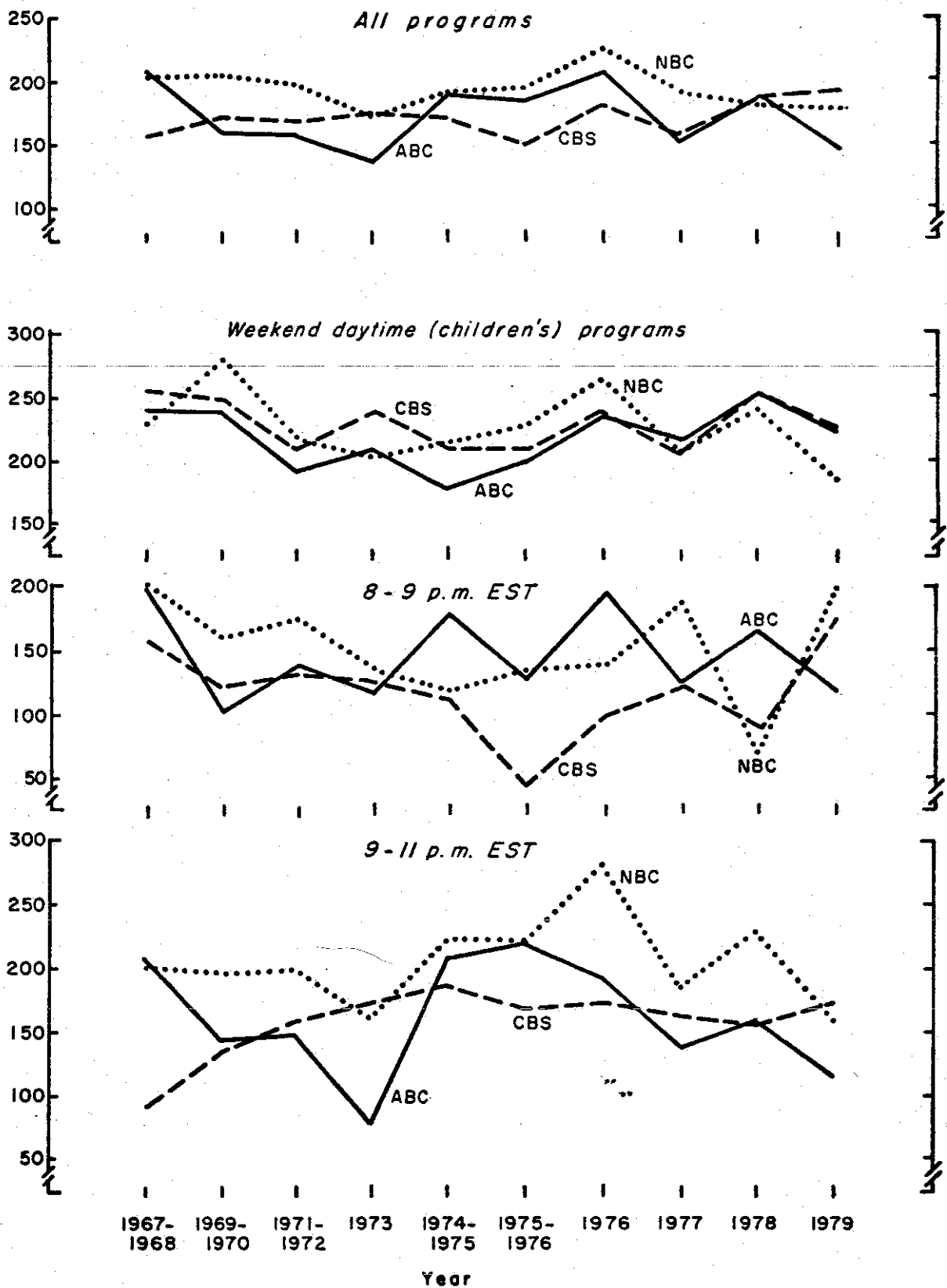


FIGURE 2: VIOLENCE INDEX BY NETWORK AND PROGRAM TIME 1967-1979

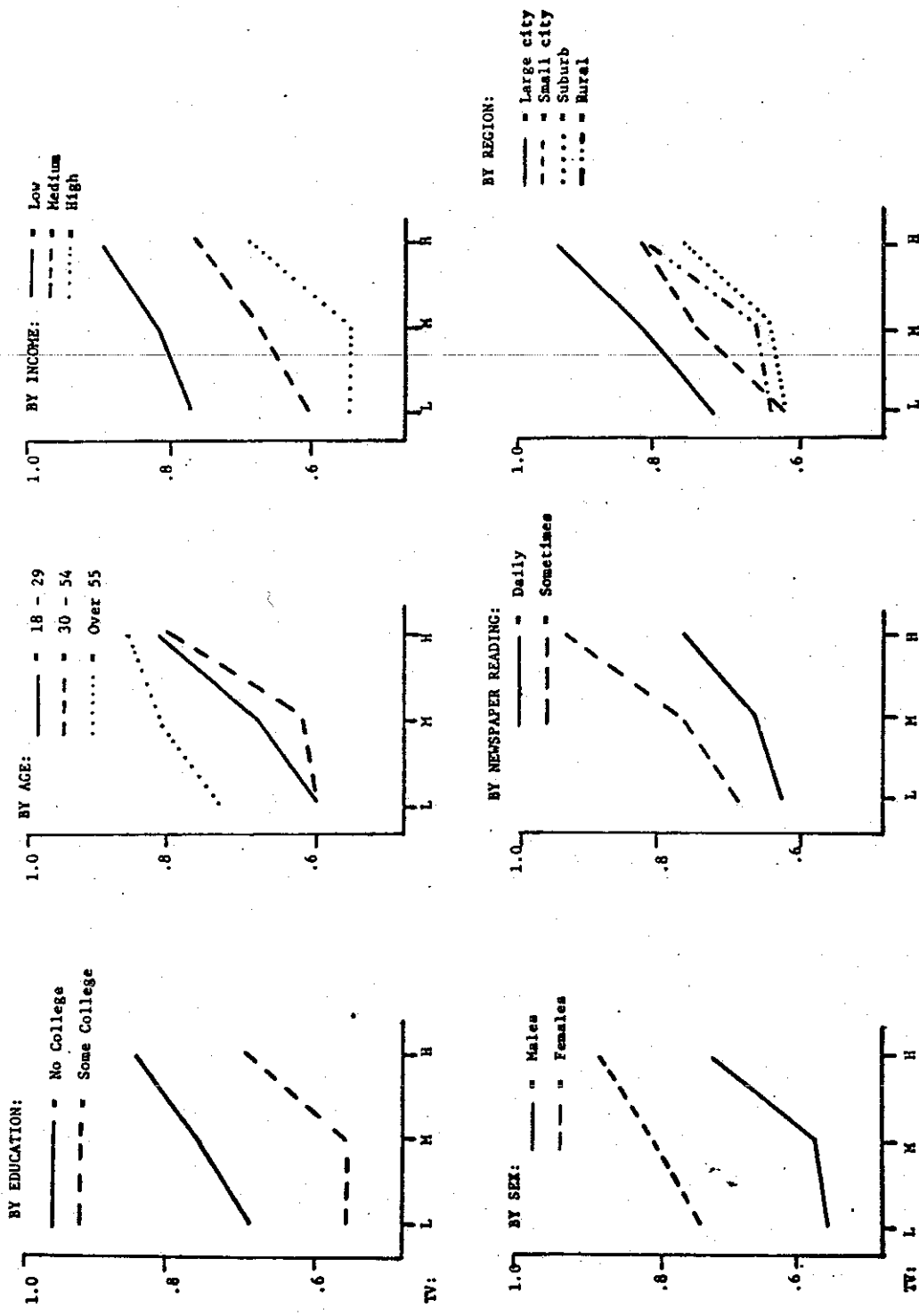
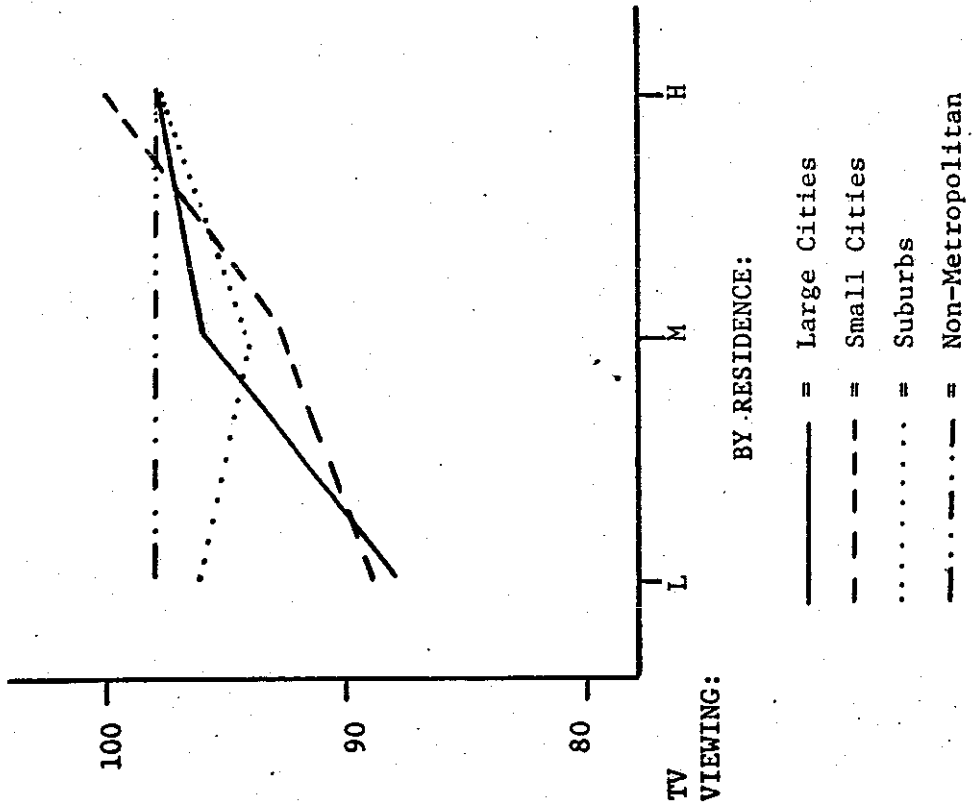


Figure 3

Relationship between Amount of Television Viewing and an Index of Images of Violence, within Major Demographic Subgroups

Percent who Agree that
"Crime is Rising"



Percent Overestimating Chances of
Involvement in Violence

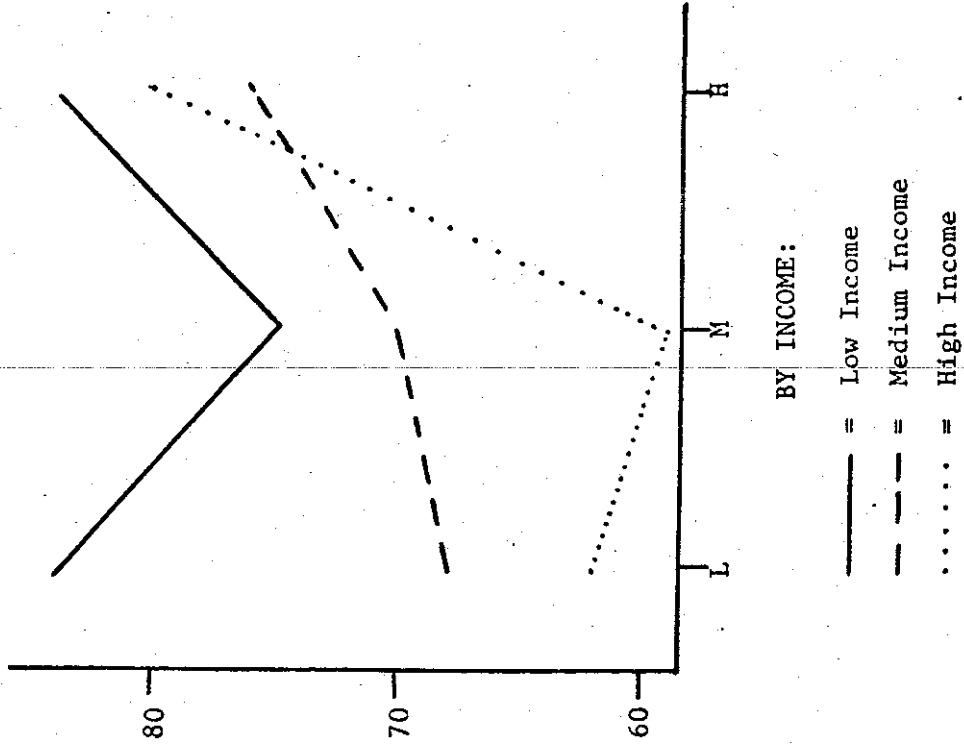


Figure 4
Examples of "Mainstreaming"

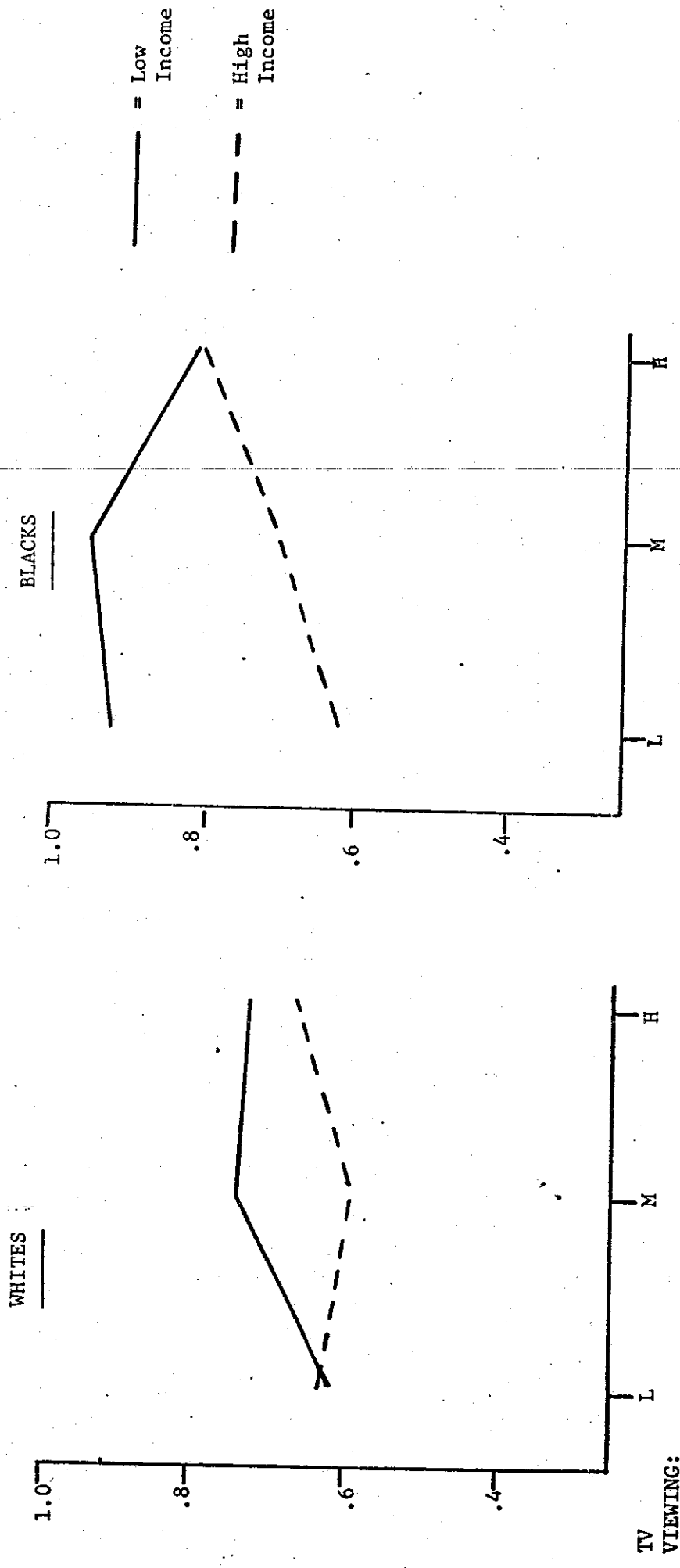


Figure 5

Relationship between Amount of Television Viewing and an Index of Images of Violence, for Residents of Large Cities, and by Race and Income

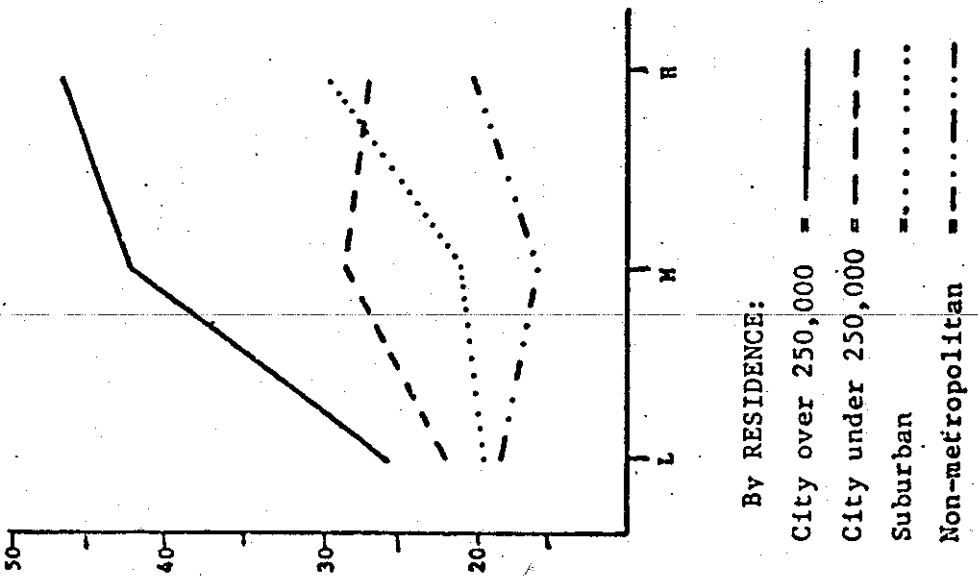
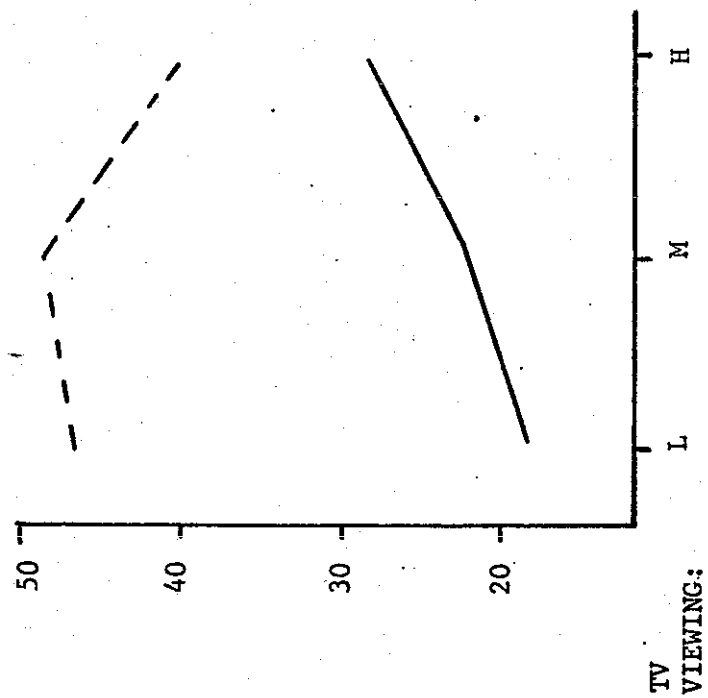


Figure 6

Percent of Respondents who Feel that "Fear of Crime is a Very Serious Personal Problem," by Amount of Television Viewing, Controlling for Race and Residence