

POLICY PAGES

Harms of Pornography

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OVERVIEW

Pornography is now more readily accessible than at any other time in history through photographs, magazines, books, videos, and the internet. Smart phones, tablets, video game consoles or any device with internet connection puts graphic pornography one-click away for anyone, including children. Pornography is not only “incomparably more accessible,” but is also “more extreme than anything that existed even a generation ago.”¹

Easy “access, affordability, and anonymity”² available online drive the increased use and potential addiction to pornography. Estimates vary, but one survey found that 46% of men and 16% of women between the ages of 18 and 39 intentionally view pornography in a given week.³

Rather than being “just an innocent distraction and a harmless pastime,”⁴ pornography is “a social toxin that destroys relationships, steals innocence, erodes compassion, and breeds violence.”⁵ The increasing concerns about the harms of pornography led the Arizona Legislature to declare pornography a public health crisis in 2019.⁶

ANALYSIS

A growing number of Americans consider pornography morally acceptable, from 30% in 2011 to 43% in 2018.⁷ In spite of its growing acceptance, the cumulative evidence from peer-reviewed research literature, reports, and surveys suggests that pornography harms children and adolescents, contributes to the breakdown of the family, and fuels societal harms like “child sexual abuse, compulsive sexual behavior, violence against women, and commercial sexual exploitation.”⁸

PORNOGRAPHY HARMS CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Children and adolescents are routinely exposed to pornography, especially with its ubiquitous presence online. A study found that among college males, nearly 49% first saw pornography before



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age 13.⁹ Exposure to pornography, whether accidental or intentional, can lead to “a range of notable and often troubling effects” for children and adolescents because “pornography is a poor, and indeed dangerous, sex educator.”¹⁰

1. Emotional and Psychological Harm. A survey from Australia found 53% of children aged 11 to 17 “had experienced something on the Internet they thought was offensive or disturbing . . . [p]ornography dominated the list of content reported. . . making them feel ‘sick,’ ‘shocked,’ ‘embarrassed,’ ‘repulsed,’ and ‘upset.’”¹¹ The potential emotional and psychological harm is exacerbated by deviant and shocking sexual practices in online pornography, many of which are criminal.¹²

2. Unhealthy Notions of Sex. Consumption of internet pornography by boys and girls has been shown to “normalize the notion that women are sex objects.”¹³ A study of Canadian teenagers (average age of 14) found a correlation between “frequent consumption of pornography” and the belief that “it is acceptable to hold a girl down and force her to have sex.”¹⁴ Equally troubling, a growing number of youth are now being convicted of possessing child pornography.¹⁵

3. Risky Sexual Behavior. Use of internet pornography is correlated “to increases in problematic sexual activity at younger ages,” and leads to “a greater likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behavior, such as hookups, multiple sex partners, anal sex, group sex, and using substances during sex as young adolescents.”¹⁶

4. Sexual Aggression. A 36-month longitudinal study surveying 1,588 youth found intentional exposure to “X-rated” material was linked to “sexually aggressive behavior,” hypothesizing that “viewing pornography that portrays sexual aggression as rewarding may reinforce an individual’s own proclivity toward sexually aggressive behavior.”¹⁷ An Italian study of 14 to 19 year-olds found that boys who viewed pornography were significantly more likely to report they had sexually harassed another student or forced someone to have sex, and that girls who viewed pornographic videos were at significantly greater likelihood of being victims of sexual harassment or sexual assault.¹⁸

PORNOGRAPHY HARMS MARRIAGES AND FAMILIES

Pornography contributes to the breakdown of the family. Study after study has found pornography use “to be associated with less sexual satisfaction and commitment as well as more negative communication and infidelity among couples.”¹⁹

1. Dissatisfaction with Spouse. The more pornography a husband watches, the more likely he is to purposefully bring up pornographic images “during sex to maintain arousal, and to experience decreased enjoyment of intimate behaviors” with his wife.²⁰ A study of 15,246 Americans found that men that viewed pornography “reported being more critical of their partners’ bodies and less interest in actual sex.”²¹

2. Sense of Betrayal and Humiliation. A survey of individuals that experienced “adverse consequences of their partner’s cybersex involvement,” found that in response to finding out about their partner’s secretive “online sexual activities,” the survey respondents felt “hurt, betrayal, rejection, abandonment, devastation, loneliness, shame, isolation, humiliation, jealousy, and anger, as well as loss of self-esteem” and that “[b]eing lied to repeatedly was a major cause of distress.”²²

3. Adultery. A study found that persons who commit adultery are three times more likely to have used internet pornography than non-users.²³ Another study found pornography use is linked with more positive attitudes toward committing adultery.²⁴

4. Divorce. Researchers in a national longitudinal study (2006-2014) found the probability of divorce roughly *doubles* for men and women who begin watching pornography, while women who quit watching pornography were significantly less likely to get divorced.²⁵ A survey of attorneys found that 56% of divorce cases involved heightened use of internet pornography by one partner.²⁶

PORNOGRAPHY HARMS SOCIETY

Pornography “perpetuates a sexually toxic environment that damages all areas of our society,”²⁷ contributing to child sexual abuse, compulsive sexual behavior, violence against women, and commercial sexual exploitation.

1. Child Sexual Abuse. First, child pornography by definition involves the exploitation and victimization of children. Second, pedophiles use child pornography both for arousal and for validation of their sexual abuse of children. Seeing images of children in sexual situations allows the user to imagine that his activities or obsessions are “normal,” thus encouraging his desire to act out. Pedophiles, and sexual predators more broadly, are known to show pornography to minors to groom them for abuse, which is “a deliberate strategy to undermine [their] ability[y] to avoid, resist, or escape sexual abuse.”²⁸

Third, exposure to pornography drives up child on child abuse. A study that analyzed 166 cases of male sex offenders aged 13 to 17 from 1994 to 2005, found that sibling perpetrators had “higher rates of pornography exposure” than non-sibling perpetrators, and concluded that “exposure to pornography may negatively impact the sibling-victim in addition to the sibling-offender,” and “early exposure to pornography may impact a child’s view of what is normative and impair the ability to avoid, deter, or negotiate from dangerous situations.”²⁹

2. Compulsive Sexual Behavior. Whether or not the labels of “addiction, compulsion, dependency, hypersexuality” are used, “the intoxicating nature of pornography cannot be denied.”³⁰ Many consumers of pornography become “addicted” to pornography, and as with any addiction, it can destroy their lives. A recent survey found that 11% of male college students “spend anywhere from five to 20 hours per week” on the internet for “sexual purposes.”³¹ A study of

married couples found “when one partner is *preoccupied* with pornography, there is also a deterioration of romantic, family, and work life.”³²

Frequent exposure to pornography can act like a drug, so that it “highjacks the brain’s reward system” and leads to compulsive sexual behavior.³³ Exposure to pornography not only increases the desire for more pornography, but the frequent use of pornography leads to a greater tolerance of sexually explicit material, “requiring the viewer to consume more novel and bizarre material to achieve the same level of arousal or interest.”³⁴

3. Violence Against Women. Pornography teaches consumers that “women enjoy sexual violence and degradation.”³⁵ An analysis of 172 videos from PornHub.com³⁶ uploaded to the site from 2000 to 2016 found that 43% of the videos included what researchers categorized as “visible aggression” and 15% included “nonconsensual aggression.”³⁷ “Females of all ages [including teenagers] were more likely to display pleasure in videos featuring physical aggression than those that did not.”³⁸ The researchers expressed concern that the amount of aggressive and demeaning acts in the videos featuring teenagers, “may signal to viewers of all ages that these acts are not only normative and legitimate, but perhaps even expected.”³⁹

The violence against women that permeates pornography is bound to affect how consumers view and treat women. A meta-analysis of 46 studies (1962-1995) concluded that the effects of viewing pornography are “clear and consistent”—those who consume pornography are more likely to commit sexual offenses and accept rape myths (i.e., women cause rape, should resist or prevent it, and rapists are normal).⁴⁰

4. Commercial Sexual Exploitation. Pornography feeds sexual exploitation and sexual exploitation feeds pornography. According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, over 70% of all reported cases of human trafficking in 2018 involved sex trafficking, and among those over 537 cases involved individuals being used in the production of pornography.⁴¹ Those who consume pornography have no way of knowing whether the individuals in a pornographic image or video are a victim of force, fraud, or coercion.⁴²

In addition, the consumption of pornography by American adult males is associated with “engaging in paid sex.”⁴³ Similarly, a Swedish study found that 18-year-old males that frequently used pornography were “significantly more likely to have sold and bought sex than other boys of the same age.”⁴⁴

For more information on the harms of pornography, see [The Public Health Harms of Pornography](#) from the National Center on Sexual Exploitation.

BATTLING THE HARMS OF PORNOGRAPHY

Combating the harms of pornography begins in the home by ensuring that every member of the family is aware of and protected from the devastating effects of pornography. The following resources are available:

- To protect children and youth from online dangers [Protect Young Eyes](#) recommends the following tech resources:
 - [Mobicip](#) (iPhone, Android, Chromebooks; through middle school)
 - [Boomerang](#) (iOS and Android; through high school)
 - [CovenantEyes](#) (internet accountability; all ages)
 - [Bark](#) (social media; all ages)
 - [Circle with Disney](#) (router filtering system; through middle school)
 - [CleanBrowsing](#) (filtering service; all ages)
 - To combat pornography addiction, [Covenant Eyes](#) and [National Center on Sexual Exploitation](#) provide helpful resources.
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CONCLUSION

Despite its growing cultural acceptance, pornography undermines the foundations of a healthy society. The cumulative evidence from peer-reviewed research literature, reports, and surveys strongly suggests that pornography harms children and adolescents, contributes to the breakdown of the family, and fuels societal harms, including child sexual abuse, compulsive sexual behavior, violence against women, and commercial sexual exploitation.

TALKING POINTS

- Pornography is not just an innocent distraction and a harmless pastime. Pornography is a social toxin that destroys relationships, steals innocence, erodes compassion, and breeds violence.
 - Pornography is a predatory industry that has our children as its target.
 - The endless supply of new pornographic images available online fuses the concepts of sex and violence into the developing brains of today's children and youth.
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¹Fight The New Drug, "Porn's Harm Is Changing Fast," August 23, 2017, <https://fightthenewdrug.org/porns-harm-is-changing-fast/> (last visited November 20, 2019).

²Al Cooper, *Sexuality and the Internet: Surfing into the New Millennium*, 1 CyberPsychology & Behavior (2009).

³M. Regnerus et al., *Documenting Pornography Use in America: A Comparative Analysis of Methodological Approaches*, 52 *The Journal of Sex Research*, 873-81 (2016).

⁴Fight the New Drug, “Why Porn Is Full of Lies,” August 23, 2017, <https://fightthenewdrug.org/why-porn-is-full-of-lies/> (last visited November 20, 2019).

⁵National Center on Sexual Exploitation, *THE PUBLIC HEALTH HARMS OF PORNOGRAPHY* 4 (2018), https://endsexualexploitation.org/wp-content/uploads/NCOSE_SymposiumBriefingBooklet_1-28-2.pdf (last visited November 20, 2019).

⁶*HCR 2009 Denouncing Pornography as a Public Health Crisis*, Fifty-fourth Leg., First Reg. Sess. (AZ 2019).

⁷Andrew Dugan, More Americans Say Pornography Is Morally Acceptable, Gallup, June 5, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/235280/americans-say-pornography-morally-acceptable.aspx> (last visited November 18, 2019).

⁸National Center on Sexual Exploitation, *supra* note 5.

⁹*Id.* at 4 (citing Chyng Sun et al., *Pornography and the Male Sexual Script: An Analysis of Consumption and Sexual Relations*, 45 *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 983-94 (2016)).

¹⁰Michael Flood, *The Harms of Pornography Exposure Among Children and Young People*, 18 *Child Abuse Review* 384, 384-400 (2009).

¹¹*Id.* at 389 (citing K. Aisbett, “The Internet at Home: A Report on Internet Use in the Home,” Australian Broadcasting Authority (2001)).

¹²*Id.* at 389 (citing Chiara Sabina et al., *The Nature and Dynamics of Internet Pornography Exposure for Youth*, 11 *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 1, 1-3 (2008), with minors reporting having seen online sexual activity involving bondage, multiple partners, same-sex intercourse, sexual activity involving urination and defecation, bestiality, child pornography, sexual violence, and rape).

¹³National Center on Sexual Exploitation, *supra* note 5, at 13 (citing Jochen Peter and Patti Valkenburg, *Adolescent’s Exposure to a Sexualized Media Environment and Their Notions of Women as Sex Objects*, 56 *Sex Roles* 381-395 (2007); Jane D. Brown and Kelly L. L’Engle, *X-Rated: Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors Associated with U.S. Early Adolescents’ Exposure to Sexually Explicit Media*, 36 *Communication Research* 129-151 (2009)).

¹⁴Flood, *supra* note 10, at 393 (citing J. Check, *Teenage Training: The Effects of Pornography on Adolescent Males*, in *The Price We Pay: The Case Against Racist Speech, Hate Propaganda, and Pornography* 89-91 (1995)).

¹⁵*Id.* (citing D. Moultrie, *Adolescents convicted of possession of abuse images of children: a new type of adolescent sex offender?* 12 *Journal of Sexual Aggression* 165-174 (2006)).

¹⁶National Center on Sexual Exploitation, *supra* note 5, at 14 (citing various studies).

¹⁷*Id.* at 14-15 (citing Michele L. Ybarra et al., *X-Rated Material and Perpetration of Sexually Aggressive Behavior among Children and Adolescents: Is There a Link?*, 37 *Aggressive Behavior* 1-18 (2011)).

¹⁸*Id.* at 20 (citing Silvia Bonino et al., *Use of Pornography and Self-Reported Engagement in Sexual Violence Among Adolescents*, 3 *European Journal of Developmental Psychology* 265-288 (2006)).

¹⁹Megan K. Maas et al., *A Dyadic Approach to Pornography Use and Relationship Satisfaction among Heterosexual Couples: The Role of Pornography Acceptance and Anxious Attachment*, *Journal of Sex Research* 55, 772-782 (2018) (citing various studies).

²⁰National Center on Sexual Exploitation, *supra* note 5, at 27 (citing Chyng Sun et al. *Pornography and the Male Sexual Script: An Analysis of Consumption and Sexual Relations*, 45 *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 983-994 (2014)).

²¹*Id.* (citing Julie M. Albright, *Sex in America Online: An Exploration of Sex, Marital Status, and Sexual Identity in Internet Sex Seeking and Its Impacts*, 45 *Journal of Sex Research* 178-86 (2008)).

²²Jennifer P. Schneider, *Effects of cybersex addiction on the family: Results of a survey*, 7 *The Journal of Treatment & Prevention* 31-58 (2007).

²³National Center on Sexual Exploitation, *supra* note 5, at 28 (citing Steven Stack et al., *Adult Social Bonds and Use of Internet Pornography*, 85 Soc. Sci. Quarterly 75, 83 (2004)).

²⁴National Center on Sexual Exploitation, *supra* note 5, at 28 (citing Paul J. Wright et al., *More Than a Dalliance? Pornography Consumption and Extramarital Sex Attitudes among Married U.S. Adults*, 3 Psychology of Popular Media Culture 97-109 (2014)).

²⁵*Id.* (citing Samuel Perry and Cyrus Schleifer, *Till Porn Do Us Part? A Longitudinal Examination of Pornography Use and Divorce*, 55 Journal of Sex Research, 284-296 (2018)).

²⁶Maas, *supra* note 19 (citing Press Release, J. Dedmon from The Dilenschneider Group, Is the Internet bad for your marriage? Online affairs, pornographic sites playing greater role in divorces (Nov. 2002)).

²⁷[HCR 2009 Denouncing Pornography as a Public Health Crisis](#), *supra* note 6.

²⁸Flood, *supra* note 10, at 393 (citing D. Russell and N. Purcell, *Exposure to pornography as a cause of child sexual victimization*, in Handbook of Children, Culture, and Violence (N. Dowd, D. Singer, and R. Wilson eds., 2005)).

²⁹National Center on Sexual Exploitation, *supra* note 5, at 9 (citing Natasha E. Latzman et al., *Sexual Offending in Adolescence: A Comparison of Sibling Offenders and Nonsibling Offenders Across Domains of Risk and Treatment Need*, 20 Journal of Child Sexual Abuse 245-263 (2011)).

³⁰Luke Gilkerson (Covenant Eyes), “Your Brain on Porn” 18 (2019), https://learn.covenanteyes.com/your-brain-on-porn-1/?_ga=2.188892779.1581747923.1574286806-712887522.1573663665&_gac=1.52703004.1574286806.EAIAIqObChMllcHtpuP55QIVlqDsCh3i_wofEAAYASAAEgiYkPD_BwE (last visited November 25, 2019).

³¹*Id.* at 19 (citing MICHAEL LEAHY, PORN UNIVERSITY: WHAT COLLEGE STUDENTS ARE REALLY SAYING ABOUT SEX ON CAMPUS 155 (2009)).

³²Maas, *supra* note 19 (citing ST Zitzman and MH Butler, *Wives’ Experience of Husbands’ Pornography Use and Concomitant Deception as an Attachment Threat in the Adult Pair-Bond Relationship*, 16 Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity 210-240 (2009)).

³³National Center on Sexual Exploitation, *supra* note 5, at 25 (citing various studies).

³⁴Gilkerson, *supra* note 30, at 17 (citing Dolf Zillmann, *Influence of unrestrained access to erotica on adolescents’ and young adults’ disposition toward sexuality*, 27 Journal of Adolescent Health, 41-44 (2000)).

³⁵National Center on Sexual Exploitation, *supra* note 5, at 7.

³⁶A popular pornography website that reported in 2016, people watched 4.6 billion hours of pornography on its site alone. National Center on Sexual Exploitation, *Id.* at 4.

³⁷*Id.* at 7-8 (citing Eran Shor, *Age, Aggression, and Pleasure in Popular Online Pornographic Videos*, 25 Violence Against Women, 1018-1036 (2019)).

³⁸*Id.* at 8.

³⁹*Id.*

⁴⁰Elizabeth Oddone Paolucci et al., *A Meta-Analysis of the Published Research on the Effects of Pornography*, in THE CHANGING FAMILY AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT 48-59 (Claudio Violato and Elizabeth Paolucci eds., 2000).

⁴¹Polaris, “2018 Statistics from the National Human Trafficking Hotline,” https://humantraffickinghotline.org/sites/default/files/Polaris_National_Hotline_2018_Statistics_Fact_Sheet.pdf (last visited November 20, 2019).

⁴²Fight The New Drug, “The Porn Industry’s Dark Secrets,” August 23, 2017, <https://fightthenewdrug.org/the-porn-industrys-dark-secrets/> (last visited November 20, 2019).

⁴³National Center on Sexual Exploitation, *supra* note 5, at 26 (citing Paul Wright and Ashley Randall, *Internet Pornography Exposure and Risky Sexual Behavior among Adult Males in the United States*, 28 Computers in Human Behavior 1410-1416 (2012)).

⁴⁴*Id.* at 11 (Citing Carl Göran Svedin et al., *Frequent Users of Pornography. A Population Based Epidemiological Study of Swedish Male Adolescents*, 34 Journal of Adolescence 779-788 (2011)).