



# Just Harmless Fun?

## Understanding the Impact of Pornography

*All healthy men, ancient and modern, Eastern and Western, know there is a certain fury in sex that we cannot afford to inflame, and that a certain mystery and awe must ever surround it if we are to remain sane.*

G.K. Chesterton

*More and more we are asked to believe that pornography is merely harmless “adult entertainment.” Polls show that most people don’t buy that line, but where do you find the evidence (rather than just rhetoric) to demonstrate its impact? To answer that question, Enough Is Enough has prepared this Special Report to provide an up-to-date overview of the evidence of harm. We survey recent empirical research, media studies, experience of clinical psychologists and other compelling information, and we respond to many of the porn advocates sound-bites.*

*Read the evidence and decide for yourself: is pornography “just harmless fun”?*

Should we be concerned about the increasing intrusion of pornography into our society? Interestingly, most people say “yes,” according to surveys giving as much as 75%<sup>1</sup> or even 94%<sup>2</sup> approval to pornography restrictions on the Internet.<sup>3</sup> This report will review the evidence that these concerns are eminently justified.

The advocates of pornography usually attribute such concerns to mere prudishness. Sex, however, is hardly just another appetite, like hunger for food. Our sexual appetites are a bit more complex than eating too much pizza, and the consequences of poor sexual decisions usually can’t be fixed with two Alka-Seltzers.

Most adults can intuitively relate to G.K. Chesterton’s wise caution above. Such shared experience isn’t a bad place to start, remembering the observation of eminent jurist Mr. Justice Cardoza that “all laws in western civilization are guided by a robust common sense.” In 1973, Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger, after quoting Cardoza, went on to write:

“The sum of experience including that of the past two decades affords an ample basis for legislators to conclude that a sensitive, key relationship of human existence (central to

family life, community welfare and the development of human personality) can be debased and distorted by crass commercialization of sex. Nothing in the Constitution prohibits a State from reaching such a conclusion and acting on it legislatively simply because there is no conclusive evidence or empirical data.”<sup>4</sup>

Law, however, is not the focus of this report. Rather, the focus is the considerable amount of work carried out since Justice Burger’s day to better understand the impact of pornography.

## Surveying the Evidence

A favorite tactic of pornography’s advocates is to argue that it is “harmless fun,” mere “adult entertainment.” They would have us believe that any difference between *Venus De Milo* and *Debbie Does Dallas* is simply personal taste, not discernment. They like to challenge the public to *prove* that pornography causes harm.

Well, there *is* proof of harm. The best-kept secret about pornography is that it causes real harm to real people.

Every Boy Scout knows that you can define any point on a map with two compass bearings from different perspectives: just draw the two cross-bearing lines on the map, and look where they intersect. In the case of pornography there are cross-bearings from many perspectives – all intersecting at the point of harm. Each perspective is persuasive in its own right. Taken together, the evidence of harm is difficult to ignore.

The different perspectives are:

1. Advertising
2. Impact of sexually-oriented businesses
3. Empirical research studies
4. Correlational studies
5. Media studies
6. Experience of clinical psychologists
7. Anecdotal evidence

This report will review each of these areas, then finally discuss factors particularly affecting children.

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## 1. Advertising

It has been said that the most disingenuous argument in the pornography debate is that porn doesn’t influence people. If images don’t influence attitudes and behavior, how do we explain the existence of the advertising industry?

Of course, none of us likes to admit we are influenced by advertising. Few proud car owners would say: “I bought my Volvo because their advertisements create an image of a thinking person’s car, and that appeals to my ego.” We value our self-image as rational beings and, as a result, most of us are in denial about the influence of advertising.

Those in the advertising business, however, know that images have impact. In 1997, America’s top ten advertisers *alone* spent a total of \$5.2 billion helping consumers part with their hard-earned cash.<sup>5</sup> It might be nice to think that investments like Nike’s Michael Jordan campaign are made out of blind hope, but market research predicts and confirms the impact of advertising. “The enormous advertising and marketing industries are built on the premise that the media do influence a wide range of behaviors.”<sup>6</sup>

To believe pornography does not impact attitudes and behavior is to believe we are not affected by what we see. Our collective state of denial of the impact of advertising illustrates that people can believe they are not affected. But the evidence illustrates how improbable that would be!

To argue that advertising has no impact (as opposed to merely being blind to it) requires impressive faith that we invariably intercept and rationally defuse the power of suggestion in advertising images. Oftentimes we do. But communications experts note that advertising works precisely *because* it appeals to human emotion rather than to rational considerations:

“TV commercials do not use propositions to persuade; they use visual images...and only rarely...verifiable assertions. Therefore, commercials are not susceptible to logical analysis [and] are not refutable...It is not facts that are offered to the consumers but idols, to which both adults and children can attach themselves with equal devotion and without the burden of logic or verification.”<sup>7</sup>

If the effectiveness of advertising is based upon its appeal to emotion, do we really believe that pornography appeals to reason? Pornography, ultimately, is a form of advertising. (Can you spell “sex sells”?) Pornography advertises a particular view of human sexuality, as surely as the Marlboro Man conveys a particular image of a cigarette brand. The only question is: what brand of sexuality is pornography promoting?

## **The messages of pornography**

The Hugh Hefners of the world sometimes describe their product as simply “the joys of consensual sexuality.” The reality is much less elevated and considerably more one-sided. Studies indicate that individuals use pornography to inform and teach themselves about sexual behavior.<sup>8</sup> So what does pornography teach?

### ***About sexuality:***

Scholars note that human sexuality in pornography is never more than physical, since “*depictions of other basic aspects of human sexuality—such as communication between*

*sexual partners, expressions of affection or emotion (except fear and lust)...and concerns about ...the consequences of sexual activities—are minimized.”<sup>9</sup>*

Pornography advertises sex without relationships, without commitment, and especially, without consequences. How many porn videos include the resulting teenage pregnancy with the child-mother dropping out of school? Or catching human papilloma virus (HPV), leading to infertility or cervical cancer, or even catching AIDS?

#### ***About women:***

In the words of one academic study: *“The characteristic portrayal of women in pornography [is] as socially nondiscriminating, as hysterically euphoric in response to just about any sexual or pseudosexual stimulation, and as eager to accommodate seemingly any and every sexual request.”<sup>10</sup>* Another study notes that women are depicted as *“malleable, obsessed with sex, and willing to engage in any sexual act with any sexual partner.”<sup>11</sup>*

Pornography presents women in stereotype, as insatiable sex machines to accommodate every possible sexual request. Women, it tells us, are here to please men, and if they say “no” it is just token resistance. In pornography, the typical woman is always ready, available, and eager to please, unlike a real woman who might have inconvenient expectations of her own.

#### ***About men:***

In pornography, men are apparently here to have sex with as many women as possible. Marriage is either a hindrance to their purpose, or irrelevant because fidelity is abnormal and possibly unnatural. In pornography, men certainly don’t value women for their minds, since they don’t appear to have discovered that women have such a thing.

### **False advertising?**

In our society, “the learning of sexual techniques and attitudes is too often left to chance, which may include such sources as X-rated video shops. As a result, a great number of people acquire faulty information and expectations that can impair their sexual enjoyment and adequacy.”<sup>12</sup> The message of pornography is that sex is the only human activity where there is no such thing as a poor choice, and where there are no consequences to actions.

Pornography’s portrayal of human sexual behavior is so erroneous as to be fraudulent. Most obvious are the unrealistic body types, unrealistic sexual situations, and routinely multi-orgasmic sexual performances. More subtly, the most desirable sexual behaviors are depicted as excluding monogamy, fidelity, responsibility, commitment, or even an established relationship of *any* sort between partners.

This stands in direct contrast to the most rewarding and satisfying sexual relationships in real life. In the most definitive scientific survey ever done on human sexual behavior, the vast majority of both males and females were found to have few sex partners over a lifetime. Once

married, the vast majority have no other sex partner than their spouse. Americans generally show considerably more sexual restraint than the entertainment media (including pornography) would suggest, but it is the couples who are married or cohabiting who have more frequent and more satisfying sex.<sup>13</sup>

There is a vivid contrast between pornography's portrayal of desirable sexual behaviors, and the behaviors found most satisfying by most individuals. Because people often judge themselves by how they perceive that others behave, individuals using pornography set themselves up for unrealistic expectations leading to damaged relationships.

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## 2. Impact of Sexually Oriented Businesses

The curiously toxic nature of pornography is also illustrated by the consistently negative impact that sex businesses have upon the areas in which they are located. This impact of sexually oriented businesses (SOBs) has been clearly demonstrated through land use studies.

U.S. courts allow restrictive zoning of SOBs because such businesses have significant negative impacts on their surrounding communities. These impacts are called "secondary harmful effects" (as distinct from the primary harmful effects on the mind of the porn-user, which are not a constitutional basis for zoning ordinances).

Such secondary harmful effects in neighborhoods with SOBs include a significant increase in property crimes and sexual crimes (including voyeurism, exhibitionism, and assault), and an overall decrease in property values. In the words of columnist George Will: "One doesn't need a moral micrometer to gauge the fact that the sex industry turned Times Square into a slum."<sup>14</sup>

Other examples of the negative impact of the sex industry include<sup>15</sup>:

- ◆ **Austin, TX** -- 1986 - in four study areas with SOBs, sexually related crimes were 177% to 482% higher than the city's average.
- ◆ **Indianapolis, IN** -- 1984-1986 - Between 1978-1982, crime in study areas was 46% higher than for the city as a whole. Sex related crimes were four times greater when SOBs were located near residential areas vs. commercial areas.
- ◆ **Garden Grove, CA** -- 1981-1990 - On Garden Grove Blvd., seven adult businesses accounted for 36% of all crime in the area. In one case, a bar opened within 500 feet of an SOB and serious crime within 1000 feet of that business rose 300% during the next year.
- ◆ **Phoenix, AZ** -- 1978 - Sex offenses, including indecent exposure, were 506% greater in neighborhoods with SOBs. Even excluding indecent exposure, the sex offenses were still 132% greater in those neighborhoods.

- ◆ **Whittier, CA** -- In comparison studies of two residential areas conducted between 1970-1973 before SOBs, and 1974-1977 after SOBs, malicious mischief increased 700%, assault increased 387%, prostitution increased 300%, and all theft increased 120%.

Virtually all SOBs, regardless of the city in which they are located, have similar negative effects upon their surrounding neighborhoods. The Indianapolis study concluded that: “Even a relatively passive use such as an adult book store [has] a serious negative effect on [its] immediate environs.” It is difficult to miss the implication that these harmful secondary effects simply reflect something harmful in the nature of the material.

### **3. Empirical Research Studies<sup>16</sup>**

In her book *Defending Pornography*, American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) President Nadine Strossen quotes with approval a writer’s observation that: “Pornography tells me...that *none* of my thoughts are bad, that anything goes [emphasis in original].”<sup>17</sup>

The message that *anything goes* is certainly inherent in pornography. Unfortunately, pornography makes short work of any distinction between sexual liberation (in the sense of a mature awareness and understanding of one’s sexuality) and sexual exploitation.

The characteristic message of pornography is that women are sluts (or, in the more measured terminology of scholarly analysis of content, “promiscuous sexual creatures who [are] subordinate and subservient to men”<sup>18</sup>). Empirical research sets out to test the obvious question: do users absorb the message that pornography is selling?

A useful way to overview the empirical research is to divide it into two chronological periods: the work reviewed by two government commissions, and the research that has taken place subsequently.

#### **The Government Commissions**

The then-available evidence as to the influence of pornography was assessed by two major Commissions established in 1970 and 1986, respectively. In 1970, the Presidential Commission on Obscenity and Pornography concluded that there was insufficient evidence that exposure to explicit sexual materials played a significant role in the causation of delinquent or criminal behavior. In 1986, the Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography reached the opposite conclusion, advising that available pornography was in varying degrees harmful. In effect, however, the two Commissions were answering different questions.

Between 1970 and 1986 the nature of the available material changed substantially. In 1970, full frontal nudity was rarely found in newsstand magazines, since it could be successfully prosecuted as obscenity. One scholar noted that “in 1970, many of the experimental studies utilized sexually explicit materials from sex research institutes . . . because of the difficulty of obtaining materials from the local market.”<sup>19</sup> Needless to say, by 1986 this was no longer a research constraint! By 1986, gynecological close-ups were available in newsstand magazines

and hard-core material (“penetration clearly visible”) was not difficult to find in adult video stores.

This complete change in the pornography “scene” contributed to the change in findings between 1970 and 1986. Also, in 1970 only a limited amount of research had been carried out, much of it originated by the Commission itself, in comparison to the extensive studies completed since then. The 1970 Commission was criticized for failing to adequately address the impact of violent pornography and, as a result, much of the research over the next sixteen years went into this area.

By 1986, there was “some convergent validation”<sup>20</sup> of the effects of violent pornography, including findings that sexually violent depictions led to:

- ◆ Aggression against women under laboratory test conditions.
- ◆ Significant increases by college males in the acceptance of rape myths and of sexual violence towards women.
- ◆ Seeing the rape victim as more responsible for the assault, with perpetrators absolved and viewed less negatively.
- ◆ More aggressive sexual fantasies.

Even certain scholars who attributed such results primarily to the violence component noted that *“a nonrapist population will evidence increased sexual arousal to media-presented images of rape ... when the female victim shows signs of pleasure and arousal, the theme most commonly presented in aggressive pornography.”*<sup>21</sup>

The Surgeon General’s Workshop on Pornography and Public Health met from June 22-24, 1986, and, like the 1986 Attorney General’s Commission, concluded that “pornography does stimulate attitudes and behavior that lead to gravely negative consequences for individuals and for society.”<sup>22</sup>

## **Subsequent Research**

Subsequent work has indicated that detrimental effects are not limited to violent pornography. Since social science studies are rarely unanimous in their findings (there are exceptions to every trend), the most compelling academic evidence comes from reviewing a multitude of research studies and looking for patterns. Such work can take the form of “review studies” (which review and compare the results of a number of original research studies) and “meta-analyses” (which aggregate the results of original research studies meeting stringent criteria of comparability). Some recent examples are:

- ◆ A review study in 1994, based on 81 original peer-reviewed research studies (35 using aggressive stimuli and 46 using non-aggressive stimuli), concluded that *“the empirical research on the effects of aggressive pornography shows, with fairly impressive consistency, that exposure to these materials has a negative effect on attitudes toward women and the perceived likelihood to rape.”* The study also noted that 70 percent of the 46 non-aggressive studies reported clear evidence of negative effects of exposure.<sup>23</sup>

- ◆ A meta-analysis in 1995, using the results of 24 original experimental studies, found that ***“violence within the pornography is not necessary to increase the acceptance of rape myths”*** (i.e. the myth that women secretly desire to be raped). The study noted that the link between acceptance of rape myths and exposure to pornography stems from a simple premise – ***“that most pornography commodifies sex, that women become objects used for male pleasure, and that as objects of desire, they are to be acted on.”*** The study also noted that such attitudinal changes are of concern because “several recent meta-analyses demonstrate a high correlation (about  $r = .80$ ) between attitude and behavior.”<sup>24</sup>
- ◆ A separate meta-analysis in 1995, using a set of 33 studies, found that ***“violent content, although possibly magnifying the impact of the pornography, is unnecessary to producing aggressive behavior.”***<sup>25</sup>

Another line of research into non-violent pornography makes the distinction between “non-violent erotica” and “non-violent dehumanizing pornography,” where dehumanizing pornography is characterized by depictions which degrade and debase women. Dehumanizing pornography is also referred to as “standard-fare” or “common” hard-core pornography by some academic researchers – ***“the characteristic portrayal of women in pornography as socially non-discriminating, as hysterically euphoric in response to just about any sexual or pseudosexual stimulation, and as eager to accommodate any and every sexual request.”***<sup>26</sup>

Examples from this line of research include:

- ◆ A study in 1989 for the Canadian Department of Justice found that “high-frequency pornography consumers who were exposed to the nonviolent, dehumanizing pornography (relative to those in the no-exposure condition) were particularly likely to report that they might rape, were more sexually callous, and reported engaging in more acts of sexual aggression. These effects were not apparent for men who reported a very low frequency of habitual pornography consumption.”<sup>27</sup> The authors noted that ***“the effects of exposure were strongest and most pervasive in the case of exposure to nonviolent dehumanizing pornography, the type of material that may in fact be most prevalent in mainstream commercial entertainment videos.”***

The study found that more than twice as many men indicated at least some likelihood of raping after exposure to this material – 20.4 percent versus 9.6 percent. Detailed analysis revealed that these effects occurred primarily for high P (psychotism) subjects – those who are inclined to be rather solitary and hostile, lack empathy, disregard danger and prefer impersonal, non-caring sex (although not meeting clinical criteria as psychotics).

- ◆ A 1989 review of a series of studies of “common” pornography found that its consumption led to insensitivity towards victims of sexual violence, trivialization of rape as a criminal offense, trivialization of sexual child abuse as a criminal offense, increased belief that lack of sexual activity leads to health risks and increased acceptance of pre- and extra-marital sexuality. The study noted that ***“habitual male consumers of common pornography appear to be at greater risk of becoming sexually callous”*** towards female sexuality and concerns.<sup>28</sup>

- ◆ A review of the literature and research in 1994 discusses the “sexual callousness” effect associated with standard-fare pornography, noting that: ***“Enhanced perceptual and behavioral callousness toward women is most apparent following consumption of materials that unambiguously portray women as sexually promiscuous and indiscriminating – a depiction that dominates modern pornography.”***<sup>29</sup>

## Straw Men

It is customary for pornography advocates to counter such findings by overstating them. For example: “It is ridiculous to suggest that one look at Playboy turns a man into a rapist.” Of course that would be ridiculous: it’s also not what the research is suggesting. Or: “Pornography can’t *compel* anyone to act in a particular way.” True, and neither did liquor or tobacco advertisements (now banned or restricted) *compel* anyone to buy their products. Or: “Pornography doesn’t affect *everyone* the same way.” True, and neither did tobacco or liquor ads – but their influence was undeniable.

What the research does show is that pornography is a strong, negative influence affecting attitudes and behavior. It promotes the same attitudes towards women that breed sexual harassment and destroy relationships. It promotes the same attitudes towards sexuality that breed promiscuity and the spread of STDs. It teaches that the main function of “a sensitive, key relationship of human existence” is simply self-gratification at the expense of others. And it is sold without even a “Surgeon-General’s Warning.”

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## 4. Correlational Studies

The research in the previous section was conducted largely in controlled circumstances, to measure cause and effect without extraneous variables. Another type of research looks at the “laboratory of life” to measure actual experience, although with less ability to neutralize extraneous variables. This type of research can prove *correlation* (i.e. that certain things happen together) without necessarily proving *causation* (i.e. that one thing caused the other).

Correlational research may be conducted when, for any number of reasons, causal research is impractical, impossible, or unethical. For example, if you want to learn the impact of brain damage on speech patterns, you obviously can’t go around bopping people on the head. Rather, you identify a number of subjects who already have brain damage. Your findings would indicate correlation, not causation, but would still be relevant.

There is a great deal of correlational evidence about the effects of pornography. Examples include:

- ◆ **Oklahoma City:** During the years 1984 to 1989, Oklahoma City closed 150 out of 163 sexually oriented businesses. During the same period, reported rapes declined 27% in Oklahoma City while rising 19% in the remainder of the state. Law officers were aware of no other likely cause of the difference.<sup>30</sup>
- ◆ **Porn magazines and rape rates:** A number of studies have found “strong evidence of a very robust, direct relationship between the circulation rates of sex magazines [in a state] and rape rates,”<sup>31</sup> even after controlling for other variables.
- ◆ **Police records:** A study by Darrell Pope, a former Michigan State police officer, found that of 38,000 cases of sexual assault on file in Michigan over a 20 year period, 41% involved the use of pornography just prior to or during the act.<sup>32</sup>

The advocates of pornography usually reject correlational evidence of pornography’s harm, saying it provides no evidence of causality. Of course, they also challenge experimental studies as “true in the laboratory, perhaps, but unproven in the real world” – thus precluding almost any conceivable input from social science research! Setting the hurdle impossibly high is the same device the tobacco companies used for decades to evade the link between smoking and cancer.

Porn advocates often challenge correlational findings with questions like: “Does pornography lead to rape, or are rapists simply the sort of people who use pornography?” Curiously, no one asks: “Does drunk driving cause accidents, or are reckless drivers simply the sort of people who drink a skinful?” In some fields, correlational research is all there is. The evidence against drunk driving is based largely on correlation, it being difficult to obtain research funding to ply test subjects with liquor then set them loose on the nearest Interstate.

Correlational results must be used with caution, since they do not always speak to the causal direction of a link (for example, between rape rates and porn usage). In the case of pornography, however, correlational studies are a complement to the experimental lab research discussed earlier. Taken together like scissors, with one blade for causality and the other for real-world application, the results are certainly indicative that porn is a “potent catalyst for sexually abusive behaviors, such as rape.”<sup>33</sup>

## **Experience In Other Countries**

One area where porn advocates are happy to talk about correlational studies is in relation to Denmark, where the government lifted pornography restrictions in 1969. Studies in the early 1970s by Berl Kutchinsky of the University of Copenhagen suggested that the easy availability of pornography had caused sex crimes to decrease by acting as a “safety-valve” for potential offenders.

Although this study is still quoted today, subsequent reviewers identified serious flaws in the conclusions. In particular, two factors distorted the results: (1) at the same time that pornography was legalized, a number of other sex crimes were decriminalized, including

voyeurism (peeping), “indecent towards women,” and certain categories of incest; and (2) Kutchinsky grouped rape along with other lesser categories of sex crime. The study thus obscured the fact that the more serious types of sex crimes such as rape actually increased in number and rate following the legalization of pornography in Denmark.<sup>34</sup>

Porn advocates are usually quieter about the results of studies of Sweden, Great Britain, New Zealand and Australia, where “as the constraints on the availability of pornography were lifted ... the rates of rape in those countries increased.”<sup>35</sup> For example, “in two Australian states between 1964 and 1977, when South Australia liberalized its laws on pornography and Queensland maintained its conservative policy ... over the thirteen-year period, the number of rapes in Queensland remained at the same low level while South Australia's’ showed a sixfold increase.”<sup>36</sup>

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## 5. Media Studies

The tragic shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in the summer of 1999 brought renewed public focus on the impact of media violence. Tensions run high in the wake of trauma, and some media representatives were quick to deny that movies and TV have any influence at all, suggesting that the impact of media violence on actual behavior is an undecided question.

In fact, the question was decided long ago. Film critic Michael Medved notes that: “More than 3,000 research projects and scientific studies between 1960 and 1992 have confirmed the connection between a steady diet of violent entertainment and aggressive and anti-social behavior”<sup>37</sup> The American Academy of Pediatrics concluded: “The vast majority of studies conclude that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between media violence and real-life violence. The link is undeniable and uncontestable.”<sup>38</sup>

Even *Time* magazine has noted: “As for media violence, the debate there is fast approaching the same point that discussions about the health impact of tobacco reached some time ago – it’s over. Few researchers bother any longer to dispute that bloodshed on TV and in the movies has an effect on the kids who witness it.”<sup>39</sup>

If there is an undecided question, it comes from overstating the claims of the research. Thus, nay-sayers like to point out there is no proof that media violence is the “principal” cause of actual violence. True – but what the research says is that media violence is clearly a contributing factor, escalating the problem. Heart disease is caused by heredity, blood pressure, cholesterol and smoking - should concern be limited to only the “principal” cause?

Nay-sayers also point out that the number of clear “copycat” incidents, mirroring actual scenes in movies or on TV, is relatively small (though certainly not non-existent). True – but the greater concern is the broader desensitization that breeds wider acceptance of violent solutions.

Military psychologist Lt. Col. David Grossman points out that media violence fosters the same desensitization the military strives for in combat training.<sup>40</sup>

In a rare admission that media violence does affect behavior, a 1994 survey found that “87% [of the Hollywood elite] say that violence in the media is a factor in contributing to violence in society.”<sup>41</sup> Although such public admissions are rare, there is no doubt Hollywood recognizes the value of its media impact. “Product placements” in movies, where companies pay a fee to have their product featured on-screen (think of the BMW roadster in the James Bond movie *Goldeneye*, or Bond’s Ericsson cell-phone), bring in multi-millions of dollars for major movies – and enhanced sales for the products advertised.<sup>42</sup>

Hollywood also takes pride in scripts written to subtly promote behavior the producers view as responsible, such as seat belt use, avoiding cigarette smoking, condom use and environmental responsibility.<sup>43</sup> Their expectation that positive images can improve behavior is an intriguing counterpoint to their public posture that negative images have no impact.

Since studies indicate that violence in the media affects violence in society, and since Hollywood believes positive media images can influence individuals to behave in a more “responsible” manner, one might reasonably expect sexual images to influence people also. True enough, considerable research demonstrates that “the assumptions, beliefs and values of heavy viewers differ systematically from those of comparable groups of light viewers.”<sup>44</sup>

One of the most common findings from media studies is that “increased media viewing is associated with more stereotypical views, especially about gender,” and that “being exposed to consistent and repeated stereotypical gender images shapes cognitive structures.”<sup>45</sup> Simply stated, what we see affects how we think.

In some quarters - as with the analogous research on pornography - there is a reluctance to review the evidence objectively in case the cure is worse than the disease. Thus Hollywood producers and others are often quick to leap-frog past the research and claim their First Amendment right to produce whatever they choose. But they miss the point, which is about choices, not rights. Nothing in the First Amendment forces anyone to choose to contribute to violence in society.

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## 6. Experience of clinical psychologists

The May 15, 1999 cover story of the highly-regarded business magazine *Fortune* was a feature article, “**Addicted to Sex – Corporate America’s Dirty Secret**,” discussing the destructive effects of pornography, promiscuity and prostitution in the business world. It is ironic that, while the pornographers make intellectual arguments that their product is harmless, businesses in the real world are dealing with its consequences.

The sub-head for the *Fortune* article was: “Companies used to wink at these troubled executives, now they send them to desert clinics for ‘The Cure.’” One such clinic is run by Dr. Patrick J. Carnes, a leading expert on sexual addictions, who commented in the article that: “Most of my patients are CEOs or doctors or attorneys or priests. We have corporate America’s leadership marching through here.”

*Fortune*, of course, has no advocacy position on either side of the pornography debate and its interest was simply to report a growing problem for business. For years, however, some clinical psychologists have expressed concern about pornography because of the evidence of their patients’ experiences. In a previous study by Dr. Carnes, for example, 90% of the men and 77% of the women (out of 932 sex addicts) indicated that pornography played a significant role in their addiction.<sup>46</sup>

Other clinical psychologists who have published their work include:

- ◆ Dr. Gary Brooks, who describes five principal symptoms of a “pervasive disorder” linked to consumption of even soft-core pornography like Playboy:<sup>47</sup>
  - *Voyeurism* - An obsession with visual stimulation trivializing all other mature features of a healthy psychological relationship.
  - *Objectification* - An attitude where women are rated by size, shape and harmony of body parts.
  - *Validation* – Where men who never come close to sex with their dream woman feel cheated or unmanly.
  - *Trophyism* – Where women become the property of the man as a symbol of accomplishment and worthiness.
  - *Fear of true intimacy* – A preoccupation with sexuality, handicapping the capacity for emotional or non-sexual intimacy.
  
- ◆ Dr. Victor Cline of the University of Utah, who identifies four stages of viewing pornography following the initial exposure:<sup>48</sup>
  - *Addiction* - The desire and need to keep coming back for pornographic images.
  - *Escalation* - The need for more explicit, rougher, and more deviant images for the same sexual effect.
  - *Desensitization* - Material once viewed as shocking or taboo is seen as acceptable or commonplace.
  - *Acting out* - The tendency to perform the behaviors viewed, including exhibitionism, sadistic/masochistic sex, rape, or sex with minor children.Although not all men are equally vulnerable to habitual porn use, Dr. Cline concluded that for some men pornography “is the gateway drug to sexual addiction.”

Dr. William Marshall and Dr. Gene Abel have published important research with child molesters, rapists and other sexual offenders.<sup>49</sup> Abel’s research indicated that more than 50% of sex offenders used pornography, and that offenders who used it were less able to control their behavior than those who did not. Abel’s findings contradicted the “safety-valve” or “catharsis” theory (which has basically died from lack of supporting evidence in the last twenty years). Marshall found that, in a study of outpatient sex offenders treated over a six-year period, one-third reported they had used pornography immediately before at least one of their crimes.

The body's biological responses are one reason pornography's effects are so powerful. Research reveals biochemical and neurological responses in individuals who are emotionally aroused, regardless of the stimuli. The adrenal hormone epinephrine is released, locking memories into the brain, and explaining why men can remember pornographic images seen years before<sup>50</sup>. Chemicals called opioids, released by nerve endings in response to pleasure, then reinforce the body's desire to repeat the process.

In other words, chemical responses to sexual arousal and gratification cause the body to desire to repeat a rewarding behavior—which may be the use of pornography. Thus the biological drive to return to rewarding behavior can lead to an actual dependence or addiction.

In addition, the release of epinephrine and opioids in the body are associated with *both* the triggering sexual image *and* the message it conveys. Thus the biological response to pornography rewards and hence reinforces the messages presented - which, as discussed earlier, often include anti-social attitudes about women, relationships, and behavior. Simply stated, in terms of pure body chemistry, sex sells!

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## 7. Anecdotal Evidence

In addition to the experience of psychologists and therapists, the harms of pornography are attested to by those who have experienced them directly – users and spouses of users. In the words of Enough Is Enough President Emeritus Dee Jepsen: “Some say pornography doesn't have any victims. I know better. I look into the tear-filled eyes of victims nearly every time I speak about the Enough Is Enough campaign.”<sup>51</sup>

This sort of qualitative evidence does not generate the neat, clinical percentages of experiments under controlled circumstances. But the wife whose marriage has been destroyed by her spouse's pornography addiction has little interest in whether the latest research studies confirm that pornography might have harmful effects. To the men and women whose lives have been damaged by pornography, this is not an academic issue.

In the 1986 Final Report of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography,<sup>52</sup> testimony after testimony demonstrated pornography's damage to individuals and families. Women spoke of husbands who insisted they imitate scenes from pornography, whether they wished to or not. Doctors spoke of sexual dysfunction and unrealistic expectations due to pornography. Law enforcement officials spoke of pornography's connection to sexual crimes. And men spoke of the damage they had witnessed, or caused, because of pornography use.

Other anecdotal evidence includes the worst-case scenarios of mass-murderers like Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, Gary Bishop and others where pornography played a role in their crimes. Obviously, millions of men use pornography without ever going to these extremes. But while “no one supposes that every addict of such material will act out his fantasies, it is willfully blind to think that none will.”<sup>53</sup>

Some of the victims' testimony is disturbing, but all of it demonstrates the human cost of pornography. The person taking a first glass of wine doesn't expect to become an alcoholic – but some do. The evidence of victims is received daily in the offices of agencies addressing the pornography issue. None of this information comes from “hard empirical studies,” but to ignore it is to ignore pornography's human toll.

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## Factors Particularly Affecting Children<sup>54</sup>

Although no evidence will ever sway some porn advocates to concede its potential for harm in the lives of adults, one might expect less dispute in the case of children. After all, children usually have less maturity and discernment. How can children deal wisely with hard-core sexuality that is (usually and hopefully) beyond their experience of life? If a neighbor exposed your child to hard-core pornography, wouldn't you regard that as sexual abuse?

Unfortunately, even the protection of children from pornography is now challenged in some circles because, the argument runs, the harm to children has never been “proved.” This is a recurring topic, for example, in the Internet discussion groups of the self-styled “intellectual freedom” arm of the American Library Association (ALA). Similarly, in 1999, two North American court decisions were based in part on the idea that pornography's harm to children has not been “proved.”<sup>55</sup>

By the same logic, one might argue that the harm of crack cocaine to children is also unproven, since in neither case is experimental research conducted on children. In both cases the omission is a simple matter of ethics – what kind of researcher exposes a child to putatively harmful matter, to see if harm does, in fact, result?

The Ethical Principles of the American Psychological Association (APA) state that “the fundamental requirements are the participants have made *a fully informed and competent decision* to participate and that they emerge from their research experiment unharmed—or, at least, that the risks are minimal, *understood by the participants*, and accepted as reasonable” [emphasis added].<sup>56</sup> Clearly, no child can give such informed consent, which is why no ethical researcher would conduct experimental studies on pornography and children. In short, **studies including children do not exist because they would violate professional and ethical guidelines.**

This does not mean there is no evidence of harm to children. Firstly, all the considerations already discussed with respect to adults apply at least equally to children. Secondly, there are other considerations that particularly impact children:

### Cognitive development

Although children mature at different rates, there are four or five stages of cognitive development which are fairly standard in their occurrence.<sup>57</sup> The child starts as the center of his or her universe and advances through concrete thought and abstract thought to eventually be

capable of relationships. Every teacher knows that algebra is not taught in elementary school, for example, because the child hasn't yet developed sufficient faculty for abstract thought.

It is a maxim of parenting that you don't give children more information than they are ready to handle. For example, when a child asks "where do I come from?" the wise parent knows that sometimes the right answer may simply be "Pittsburgh." Premature exposure to hard-core sexuality is a bit more complex than premature exposure to algebra – particularly if the images themselves are misleading (see "False Advertising?" above). One therapist writes:

"When a child experiences reality beyond their readiness, they have no means of processing the material intellectually or emotionally. At that time, they will bury the experience in their unconscious, where it will lurk in the shadows haunting them, possibly for the rest of their lives."<sup>58</sup>

Such interruption is of particular concern because during this same period, children are developing morally. "Most research supports the view that cognitive development is a necessary but not sufficient condition for advances in moral understanding."<sup>59</sup> If a child experiences something beyond his understanding, particularly something traumatic, it can hinder both his mental and moral development.

### **Social Learning Theory**

Pornography's effect on individuals and society can be explained in terms of Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which maintains that people learn about the world by responding to the stimuli around them. Social learning explains that "the consumer accept the behavior portrayed as rewarding (to be imitated) or punishing (to be extinguished)"<sup>60</sup>

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to accepting media portrayals of sexuality, in part because they are just beginning to seek out such information. For example, "after viewing less than an hour of MTV... adolescents were more likely to approve of premarital sex than adolescents not having viewed MTV."<sup>61</sup> Numerous studies have demonstrated that when such distortions of reality are present, "heavy consumers of those media tend to distort their own perceptions of the world around them."<sup>62</sup>

Adolescents who are not presented with honest portrayals of possible consequences of sexual activity will likely downplay the possibility of such consequences in their own lives. "These biased perceptions and attitudes could lead teens and young adults to be sexually active and to mimic the nonrealistic sexual activity portrayed in these media."<sup>63</sup>

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## **Conclusion**

Can the harms of pornography be proved with the certainty of a proposition in geometry? No, because that is not the standard applied to research in the social sciences. The correct standard is to assess the preponderance of the evidence.

In the case of pornography, the preponderance of the evidence clearly demonstrates that the material is not “just harmless fun.” Although almost all men are attracted by it, there are clearly perils associated with its use – which no doubt explains why so many men are willing to resist their own hormones and try to keep away from pornography.

Pornography is not about real human sexuality: it’s about a dehumanized, synthetic version of sex that eliminates love, honor, dignity, true intimacy and commitment. The image of sexuality offered by pornography comes without relationships, responsibility or consequences— a largely fraudulent picture. Porn movies never show a girlfriend getting pregnant at 16, or a young man getting AIDS – or a married man resisting the temptation of another woman.

Unfortunately, the research demonstrates that pornography’s fraudulent messages are ingested, affecting attitudes and behavior. Countless studies show that the basic messages of pornography – that a woman’s function is to satisfy a man sexually, that women have no value, no meaning, and their desires and needs are irrelevant – breed sexual callousness and acceptance of the rape myth (i.e. that women secretly desire to be raped).

These are the attitudes that lead to sexual harassment, failed relationships, early promiscuity and the spread of STDs. And, unless one believes that attitudes and behaviors are unrelated, it is difficult then to be surprised by the evidence of correlation between pornography usage and sexually abusive behaviors.

We protect ourselves and our communities, in part, through the values we affirm as important. Treating every human being with respect, equality, and dignity, are values we should all be able to embrace, as a society and as individuals. The harms of pornography result from replacing respect, equality and dignity with a candy-coated message of hate.

*Just Harmless Fun?*

*By Bruce Watson and Shyla Rae Welch  
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<sup>1</sup> State of the First Amendment 1999, Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, Nashville, TN, 1999

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<sup>2</sup> USA Today, June 27, 1997

<sup>3</sup> In addition, a Wirthlin poll commissioned by Morality in Media in 1997 found that 80% of adult Americans supported “vigorous enforcement” of federal obscenity laws. [www.moralityinmedia.org](http://www.moralityinmedia.org) (visited February 16, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> *Paris Adult Theatre I v. Slaton*, (1973) 413 U.S. 49, 63

<sup>5</sup> Parade Magazine quoting Advertising Age, August 16, 1998, p.14.

<sup>6</sup> Surret, R. (1992). Media, Crime and Criminal Justice: Images and Realities, Brooks/Cole Publishing, p.104.

<sup>7</sup> Postman, N. (1994). The Disappearance of Childhood, New York: Vintage Books, p.107-108.

<sup>8</sup> Duncan, D. (1990). “Pornography as a source of sex information for university students,” Psychological Reports, 66, p.442.

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<sup>9</sup> Brosius, H.B., Weaver, J.B., & Staab, J.F. (1993). “Exploring the social and sexual ‘reality’ of contemporary pornography,” The Journal of Sex Research, 30, p.162.

<sup>10</sup> Zillman, D. & Bryant, J. (1984). “Effects of massive exposure to pornography,” in Malamuth, NM & Donnerstein, E, (Ed), Pornography and sexual aggression, . Orlando, FL: Academic Press, p.134 (Quoted by Check and Guloien – note 27 below)

<sup>11</sup> Diamond, S. (1985). “Pornography: Image and Reality,” in Burstyn, V (Ed.), Women Against Censorship, Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, p.42. (Quoted by Brosius, Weaver & Staab – note 9 above.)

<sup>12</sup> Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life (1992). Eds. Carson, R.C., & Butcher, J.N. “Sexual disorders and variants,” HarperCollins: New York, p.347.

<sup>13</sup> Michael, R.T., Gagnon, J.H., Laumann, E.O., & Kolata, G. (1994). Sex in America. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

<sup>14</sup> Will, G.F. (November 11, 1996). “Big Stick Conservatism.” Newsweek, 96.

<sup>15</sup> National Law Center for Children and Families (1997). NLC summary of “SOB land use” studies.

<sup>16</sup> Parts of this section draw on material written by one of the present authors in the case of *Amatel v. Reno* (1998), for a 1998 *amicus* brief to the U.S. Court of Appeal, District of Columbia Circuit on behalf of the National Coalition for the Protection of Children & Families (NCPCF). A more technical review of the empirical research can be found in the paper “Pornography – A Review of the Scientific Literature” by Stan Weed, Ph.D., available from NCPCF ([www.nationalcoalition.org](http://www.nationalcoalition.org)).

<sup>17</sup> Strossen, N. (1995). Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex and the Fight for Women’s Rights, New York: Anchor Books, p.161.

<sup>18</sup> Brosius, Weaver and Staab – see Note 9 above.

<sup>19</sup> Einsiedel, E.F. (1995).” Social Science and Public Policy: Constraints on the Linkage,” Prevention in Human Services, 12, p.93.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Donnerstein, E. & Linz, D. (1986) “Mass Media Sexual Violence and Male Viewers,” American Behavioral Scientist, 29 (5), p.603

<sup>22</sup> Koop, C.E., (October, 1987). “Report of the Surgeon General's Workshop on Pornography and Public Health.” American Psychologist, 42 (10), p.944

<sup>23</sup> Lyons, J.S., Anderson, R.L. and Larsen, D., “A Systematic Review of the Effects of Aggressive and Nonaggressive Pornography,” in Zillman, Bryant & Huston (Ed.), Media, Children & the Family: Social Scientific, Psychodynamic, and Clinical Perspectives, Hillsdale, N.J., J. Erlbaum Associates, p.305

<sup>24</sup> Allen, M., Emmers, T., Gebhardt, L., & Giery M. A. (1995). “Exposure to Pornography and Acceptance of Rape Myths.” Journal of Communication, Winter, p.19 and pp.7-8.

<sup>25</sup> Allen, M., D’Alessio, D., & Brezgel, K. (1995). A Meta-analysis Summarizing the Effects of Pornography II. Human Communication Research, 22, p.271.

<sup>26</sup> Zillman & Bryant – see note 10 above.

<sup>27</sup> Check, J. V. P., & Guloien, T. H. (1989). “Reported Proclivity for Coercive Sex Following Repeated Exposure to Sexually Violent Pornography, Nonviolent Dehumanizing Pornography, and Erotica,” Pornography: Research Advances and Policy Considerations, p.160.

<sup>28</sup> Zillmann, D. (1989). “Effects of Prolonged Consumption of Pornography,” In Zillman & Bryant (Ed.), Pornography: Research Advances and Policy Considerations, p.155.

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- <sup>29</sup> Weaver, J. B. (1994). "Pornography and Sexual Callousness: The Perceptual and Behavioral Consequences of Exposure to Pornography," in Zillman, Bryant & Huston (Eds), Media, Children and the Family: Social Scientific, Psychodynamic, and Clinical Perspectives, p.224.
- <sup>30</sup> See letter of Feb.22, 1991 from Hon. Robert Macy, District Attorney, Oklahoma County, to Mr. George Harper; and letter of March 2, 1990, from Mr. Ray Pasutti, UCR Supervisor, Oklahoma Bureau of Investigation, to Mr. Harper.
- <sup>31</sup> Weaver (see note 29), describing study by Baron and Strauss (1987). Weaver also discusses similar findings by Scott and Schwalm (1988), Jaffee and Strauss (1987), and Court (1984).
- <sup>32</sup> Cline, V.B. (1994). Pornography's Effects on Adults and Children, New York, Morality In Media p.9.
- <sup>33</sup> Weaver – see note 29.
- <sup>34</sup> Court, J.H., (1977). "Pornography & Sex Crimes," International Journal of Criminology & Penology, 5, p 129. Quoted in Cline – note 32, at page 9.
- <sup>35</sup> Work of John H. Court, described in Marshall, W.L. and Barrett, S. (1990) Criminal Neglect: Why Sex Offenders Go Free, Toronto: Doubleday, p.141.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> Medved, Michael, Hollywood vs. America (1992), New York: HarperCollins, p.243
- <sup>38</sup> "Media Violence," (1995) Pediatrics 95, American Academy of Pediatrics, p. 949
- <sup>39</sup> Time, (April 6), 1998, p.39
- <sup>40</sup> Grossman, D., Trained to Kill, Christianity Today, August 10, 1998, pp. 31-39.
- <sup>41</sup> Boliek, B. "Hollywood Owns Up to Role in Violence, Study Finds." The Hollywood Reporter, May 2, 1994, at [www.dove.org/research/stats/htm](http://www.dove.org/research/stats/htm) (visited February 23, 2000)
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- <sup>49</sup> Marshall and Barrett – see note 35, at page 129
- <sup>50</sup> McGaugh, J.L. (February, 1983). "Preserving the Presence of the Past," American Psychologist, p. 161
- <sup>51</sup> Empty Embrace video (1994), Enough Is Enough and National Coalition for the Protection of Children and Families.
- <sup>52</sup> Final Report of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography (1986), Rutledge Hill Press Inc., Nashville, p.197-223
- <sup>53</sup> Bork, Robert H, (1996). Slouching Towards Gomorrah, New York: Regan Books, p. 145
- <sup>54</sup> Parts of this section draw on material written by one of the present authors in connection with her Master's Degree thesis (unpublished).
- <sup>55</sup> U.S. v. Playboy, concerning "signal bleed" on pornographic cable TV channels; and, in Canada, R. v. Sharpe, concerning possession of child pornography. Both decisions were subject to appeal at the time of writing.
- <sup>56</sup> American Psychological Association. (1982). Ethical Principles in the Conduct of Research with Human Participants (p. 18).
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- <sup>58</sup> Williams, L. Letter to Enough Is Enough newsletter, Vol.6, December 1998.
- <sup>59</sup> Fogel, A., & Melson, G.F. (Eds.), Child Development: Individual, Family, and Society (1988). St. Paul: West Publishing, p. 418.
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- <sup>61</sup> Greeson, L.E., & Williams, R.A. (1986). "Social Implications of Music Videos for Youth: An Analysis of the Content and Effects of MTV." Youth and Society, 18(2), pp. 177-189. Quoted in Buerkel-Rothfuss et al – note 62 below.

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