



NATIONAL CENTER ON SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

The Public Health Harms of Pornography

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Hello my name is Dani Pinter and I am Senior Legal Counsel with the Law Center for the National Center on Sexual Exploitation in Washington DC.

The pornography of today has created an unprecedented epidemic of sexual harm. Children and young people are being exposed to violent and degrading content, which by default has served as their sex education.

The term public health harm, hazard, or crisis is used to broadly define both physical and social problems—from cigarette smoking to bullying—and it unequivocally applies to pornography, because pornography is a serious, harmful problem that impacts individuals and groups beyond their capacity to correct alone.

We recently heard from a mother who was looking for age-appropriate online games with her child, when they were both unintentionally exposed to hardcore pornography. This mother was doing everything right – trying to be involved and conscious in her child’s online world. But the reality is that no parent can adequately protect their child from being exposed to pornography. At least 27% of young adults first viewed pornography before puberty.¹ This number only grows as electronics become interwoven in younger generations lives.

Like other public health issues, not everyone exposed is effected in the same way or to the same degree. However, for many, repeated exposure and use of pornography is linked to severe harms. I want to highlight some of the research for you here.

The Brain:

Since 2009 there have been 40 neurological studies that support the reality of compulsive porn use and the negative impacts of pornography on the users’ brain structure and function.²

A 2014 study found that increased pornography use is linked to decreased brain matter in the regions of the brain associated with motivation and decision making. This shrinkage was more pronounced in the heaviest users.³

Compulsive porn users' brains light up in the pleasure centers just like a cocaine addict's when shown activity-specific cues. This is a hallmark of addiction or compulsive use.⁴

The Body:

Pornography use is linked to negative body image, increased pressure and coercion in sexual relationships to perform acts seen in pornography,⁵ risky behaviors linked to increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases⁶ and porn induced sexual dysfunctions.

For example, a 2016 study of young men found that pornography use was linked to lower sexual satisfaction with a partner, and lower erectile function.⁷ This happens because chemical queues for arousal in the brain sometimes become wired to pixels on a screen instead of a real sexual partner, in some heavy pornography users. There are few things more sex negative than a substance that decreases the ability to have sex with a real partner.

Sexual Violence & Gender Inequality:

Pornography shapes the user's sexual template around themes of degradation, unclear consent, and violence.

A 2018 study of online pornography found a significant trend of eroticized violence against women.⁸ Females of all ages in this study were *more likely* to display pleasure in videos where they endured violence and aggression than videos where they did not.⁹

Pornography teaches that violence against women is sexy. The pin ups in Playboy magazines are now obsolete, the typical Internet pornography that is being consumed revolves around themes of rape, racist sexual stereotypes, and incest-themes, including films like “feminist slut gets ruined by rough f***ing” and “Drunk step-dad f***ing his nasty step daughter.”

The messages pornography sends are being heard loud and clear. A meta-analysis of 46 studies reported that the effects of pornography use are “clear and consistent,” and puts one at increased risk for committing sexual offenses and accepting rape myths—such as that women enjoy rape.¹⁰ Even the CDC acknowledges that “Pornography can be connected to...public health issues like sexual violence.”¹¹

Further, remember that many viewers of this content are children. Research shows that early exposure to pornography has been linked to increased likelihood of child-on-child sexual abuse¹²

including a study that found that children are more than five times more likely to exhibit sexually aggressive behavior if they've watched violent pornography.¹³ Child on child sexual abuse is a growing problem in our country as families struggle to speak out for fear of ruining the offending child's life. For example, we recently heard of an 11-year-old boy who regularly watched pornography, and then sexually abused a 4-year-old neighbor, while making his other young sibling watch, as if it were a pornographic film.

Is that the kind of sexual education we want in America?

Today, pornography is pervasive and normalized, but the same could be said of cigarettes and the tobacco industry in the 1950s. But as we learned through experience, a public health model that unites government acknowledgment, public awareness, and more can greatly reduce the impact of a toxic industry.

If we take the first step by acknowledging the public health harms of pornography, we will move one step closer towards helping families and individuals become aware and empowered to protect themselves.

Thank you.

¹ Barna Group, "News Conference on Barna's New Study: 'The Porn Phenomenon,'" (January 15, 2016) <https://www.barna.org/blog/culture-media/barna-group/porn-press-conference#.VrS9OrSJndI> (accessed June 27, 2016).

² Your Brain on Porn, "Brain Studies on Porn Users," (2014) <http://yourbrainonporn.com/brain-scan-studies-porn-users> (accessed July 13, 2016).

³ Simone Kühn and Jürgen Gallinat, "Brain Structure and Functional Connectivity Associated with Pornography Consumption," *JAMA Psychiatry* 71, no. 7 (2014): 827–834.

⁴ Mechelmans, D.G., Et. Al. (2014) Enhanced Attentional Bias Towards Sexually Explicit Cues in Individuals with and without impulsive Sexual Behaviors. *PlosOne*. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0105476

⁵ Julie M. Albright, "Sex in America Online: An Exploration of Sex, Marital Status, and Sexual Identity in Internet Sex Seeking and Its Impacts," *Journal of Sex Research* 45 (2008): 175–186.

⁶ Paul J. Wright and Ashley K. Randall, "Internet Pornography Exposure and Risky Sexual Behavior among Adult Males in the United States," *Computers in Human Behavior* 28 (2012): 1410–1416.

⁷ Aline Wéry and Joel Billieux, "Online Sexual Activities: An Exploratory Study of Problematic and Non-Problematic Usage Patterns in a Sample of Men," *Computers in Human Behavior* 56 (2016): 257–266.

⁸ Eran Shor, "Age, Aggression, and Pleasure in Popular Online Pornographic Videos," *Violence Against Women* (2018): 1–19, doi: 10.1177/1077801218804101. Of note, videos including more than two participants were not included in the analysis.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Paolucci-Oddone, Mark Genuis, and Claudio Violato, "A Meta-Analysis of the Published Research on the Effects of Pornography," *The Changing Family and Child Development*, ed. Claudio Violato, Elizabeth Paolucci, and Mark Genuis (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), 48–59.

¹¹ Jacqueline Howard, "Republicans are calling porn a 'public health crisis,' but is it really?" <https://www.cnn.com/2016/07/15/health/porn-public-health-crisis/index.html>

¹² Natasha E. Latzman, Jodi L. Viljoen, Mario J. Scalora, and Daniel Ullman, "Sexual Offending in Adolescence: A Comparison of Sibling Offenders and Nonsibling Offenders Across Domains of Risk and Treatment Need," *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 20, no. 3 (2011): 245-263.; George Leibowitz, David Burton, and Alan Howard, "Part II: Differences between Sexually Victimized and Nonsexually Victimized Male Adolescent Sexual Abusers and Delinquent Youth: Further Group Comparisons of Developmental Antecedents and Behavioral Challenges." *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 21, no. 3 (2012): 315-26.;

¹³ Ybarra et al., "X-Rated Material and Perpetration of Sexually Aggressive Behavior among Children and Adolescents: Is There a Link?" *Aggressive Behavior* 37, (2011): 1-18.