

Chapter 2

Background and summary of the available evidence

2.1 This chapter presents an overview of key issues raised in submissions regarding the potential harms to children and young people arising from exposure to online pornography. It begins with a discussion of key definitions and concepts relied on for the inquiry, followed by an overview of the statistical research on exposure. The remaining sections of the chapter are devoted to introducing and summarising the evidence received on the various types of potential harm to children and young people arising from this exposure.

2.2 This chapter is intended to provide a guide to the principal matters raised. To ensure readers can appreciate the full scope of the potential harms that many submitters argued pornography exposure presents, the discussion of individual harms is necessarily brief. The committee received a large number of detailed submissions for this inquiry, many of which cited several research papers and reports. Readers interested in particular issues this chapter introduces are encouraged to consult the written submissions and the primary material cited within them for further detail.

Definitions and key concepts

2.3 This section discusses the terms 'online pornography', 'children' and 'harm' in the context of this inquiry.

Online pornography—definition and sources

2.4 The terms of reference do not define 'pornography'. Dr Michael Flood, an associate professor at the University of Wollongong who conducts research into gender, sexuality, and interpersonal violence, provided the following definition:

...'sexually explicit media that are primarily intended to sexually arouse the audience'...'Sexually explicit' representations include images of female or male nudity or semi-nudity, implied sexual activity, and actual sexual activity. Note that this definition is neutral rather than judgemental, and does not involve using 'pornography' as a negative term referring to representations of bodies and sexual activity which are necessarily offensive, obscene, or harmful.¹

1 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 6. The definition cited was from N Malamuth, 'Pornography', in NJ Smelser and PB Baltes (eds), *International encyclopedia of social and behavioral sciences*, vol.17, 2001, p. 11817.

2.5 The WA Commissioner for Children and Young People noted that pornography may 'range from nudity or other similar material (generally termed "soft-core") through to depictions of explicit actual sex, and in some cases beyond that into the realm of fetishism, violence or other extremes'.² Ms Maree Crabbe³ argued that some contemporary pornography challenges the standard definition of pornography as the material 'is sexually explicit, and may be arousing—or become arousing—for some viewers, but includes extreme, shocking content to the extent to which shocking the viewer may be considered its primary purpose'.⁴

2.6 Pornography can be accessed online on websites that 'provide free video streaming similar to YouTube'. These sites 'include user-generated material...archival content from defunct websites and often pirate[d] content from competitors, meaning they have enormous quantities of content that is often available for free, without any requirements for credit cards, age verification or email log in'.⁵ It has been reported that in 2015 Australia ranked seventh in worldwide traffic to one of the largest global pornographic websites.⁶

2.7 Online pornography, however, is also available from sources other than websites dedicated to hosting pornographic content. The authors of a 2015 report for the UK government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport compiled a non-exhaustive list of other means by which children and young people could conceivably view pornographic images online or otherwise using digital devices. The list included:

- photo or video-sharing platforms;
- search engine results;
- advertisements;
- interpersonal messaging apps and services;
- social network sites;
- peer-to-peer portal sites and torrent services for downloading films and videos;
- mobile and tablet apps;
- games;
- physical sharing of devices or USB sticks; and

2 Commissioner for Children and Young People (WA), *Submission 14*, p. 2.

3 Ms Crabbe is the co-founder of an Australian violence-prevention and community education project: *Reality & Risk: Pornography, young people and sexuality*. Ms Maree Crabbe, *Submission 340*, p. 1.

4 Ms Maree Crabbe, *Submission 340*, p. 7.

5 Ms Zahra Stardust, *Submission 287*, pp. 12–13.

6 The Salvation Army Australia Southern Territory, *Submission 282*, p. 2.

- the dark web.⁷

'Children'

2.8 Although the terms of reference do not indicate the age groups encompassed by the term 'children', the broader motion containing the terms of reference agreed to by the Senate referred to children as being under 18 years of age. This definition is often adopted in Australian legislation (where age is relevant) and is used in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Nevertheless, it is noted that different age thresholds do exist in statute for particular matters; a relevant example being the laws governing the age a person is considered capable of giving informed consent to sexual activity, which varies between 16 and 17 years of age depending on the state or territory.

2.9 When discussing potential harms from online pornography and tailoring policy responses, it may be useful to differentiate between young children and adolescents. This report adopts the term 'children and young people' to refer to individuals who are under 18 years old.⁸ The terminology the WA Commissioner for Children and Young People uses, who defines children as 0 to 12 years old and young people as 13 to 17 years old, is also relied on in this report.⁹

'Harm'

2.10 Harm is not defined in the terms of reference, although the first paragraph of the motion containing the terms of reference refers to links between online pornography and:

- 'measurable negative effects on brain development and behavioural outcomes';
- 'children's acceptance of violent attitudes and beliefs', particularly against women; and
- 'violence towards, and abuse of, children'.¹⁰

2.11 The terms of reference emphasise the effects of pornography on the 'development of healthy and respectful relationships'.¹¹

7 V Nash, J Adler, M Horvath, S Livingstone, C Marston, G Owen and J Wright, *Identifying the routes by which children view pornography online: implications for future policy-makers seeking to limit viewing*, November 2015, www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/500701/Report_of_DCMS_Expert_Panel_Autumn_2015_FINAL.pdf (accessed 6 October 2016), p. 10.

8 This is the terminology used by the Australian Human Rights Commission in its submission. See *Submission 261*, p. 3.

9 Commissioner for Children and Young People (WA), *Submission 14*, p. 1.

10 *Journals of the Senate*, 2 December 2015, p. 3586.

11 *Journals of the Senate*, 2 December 2015, p. 3587.

2.12 Potential consequences for both physical and mental wellbeing are discussed in submissions. Overall, submissions focused on physical and mental harm to children and/or young people who:

- view pornography themselves, with implications for their development during their childhood/adolescent years and subsequent life as an adult;
- are affected by other children or young people who have viewed pornography; and
- are affected by adults who have viewed pornography.

Unique issues presented by online pornography and social context

2.13 As pornographic material has been available in various forms prior to the internet,¹² it is necessary to consider whether online pornography presents unique issues for children and young people.

2.14 Submissions commented on the history of pornography and the sexualisation of western society. Professor Brian McNair, a professor of journalism, media and communication at the Queensland University of Technology, submitted that the 'sexualisation of western societies has been ongoing since the 1950s', with a 'pornographication' of mainstream culture since the 1990s.¹³ Professor McNair added that: 'At the same time as western culture has become more sexually explicit in general terms, the more specific form of pornography...has expanded its reach' due to the internet. He further noted that although 'pornographic imagery dates back to ancient Pompeii...its contemporary reach and accessibility are unprecedented'.¹⁴

2.15 Dr Michael Flood argued that the 'cultural context' for pornography consumption by young people is changing as a result of the 'increasing normalisation of pornography use and the pornographisation of mainstream culture'. Like Professor McNair, Dr Flood observed that there is 'an increased blurring of boundaries between pornography and mainstream media and artistic representations, and an incorporation

12 For example, a 1989 US study cited in a submission suggested that 'by the age of 15 years, 92% of boys had looked at or read Playboy, with average age of first exposure reported to be 11 years. Similarly, in regard to X-rated films, 92% of 13 to 15 years-olds reported that they had seen such a film'. South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault, *Submission 334*, p. 2; the study cited is J Bryant and D Brown, 'Uses of pornography', in D Zillmann and J Bryant (eds), *Pornography: research advances and policy considerations*, 1989, pp. 25–55.

13 Professor McNair explained: 'By "pornographication" I refer not to the narrow form of pornography itself, but the many ways in which the styles and codes of pornographic texts have become embedded in pop music, fashion, advertising and other cultural formats including "high art", as in the notorious work of Robert Mapplethorpe and Jeff Koons in the late 1980s. Madonna's *Sex* book of 1992 exemplifies the trend towards 'porno chic', with its deliberate evocation of pornographic poses and tropes in its imagery. Miley Cyrus' Wrecking Ball video, with its nudity and sexually charged performance, would be a more recent example of pornographication'. *Submission 55*, p. 1.

14 Professor Brian McNair, *Submission 55*, p. 1.

of the language and visual codes of pornography in mainstream media'. Dr Flood argued that these trends 'may intensify and normalise pornography use among children and young people'.¹⁵

2.16 The contrast between the availability of online pornography and the restrictions in place on the distribution of other pornographic material, such as DVDs or printed pornography, was noted. Pornographic DVDs and printed material are legally restricted to people 18 years old or above and there are further restrictions on how it can be sold and what it can contain.¹⁶ The WA Commissioner for Children and Young People submitted that:

Only around one-third of sites with sexually explicit content actually notify the user of that content, and in many cases require the user only to tick a box stating they are 18 or older. A few (only around 3 per cent) use age-verification software which requires a credit card number or other 'adult' identification.¹⁷

2.17 Despite the issues potentially presented by online pornography, it was acknowledged that children and young people can be exposed to sexualised content in advertisements, films, television programs, music videos and video games.¹⁸ The WA Commissioner noted:

In examining the potential harm of internet pornography to children and young people, it must be recalled that it exists within a wider context of society, and certainly is not the sole or even the main influence on children and young people.¹⁹

Statistics on exposure

2.18 Submissions presented a variety of data on pornography usage. Studies differed in terms of the age groups surveyed, how recently the research was undertaken, and how the data were collected. Several submissions recognised that most research on pornography has occurred in countries other than Australia, and ethical issues mean there is little research involving children.²⁰ Nevertheless, many

15 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 8 (citation omitted).

16 This material is classified X 18+ and is only available for sale or hire in the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory. See Guidelines for the Classification of Films 2012 (available on the Federal Register of Legislation: www.legislation.gov.au).

17 Commissioner for Children and Young People (WA), *Submission 14*, pp. 2–3 (citations omitted).

18 Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs AO, *Submission 2*, p. 1; Australian Council on Children and Media, *Submission 73*, p. 7; Digital Industry Group Incorporated, *Submission 75*, p. 2; Australian Catholic Bishops Conference: Bishops Commission for Family, Youth and Life, *Submission 84*, p. 2; Family Council of WA, *Submission 256*, p. 2.

19 Commissioner for Children and Young People (WA), *Submission 14*, p. 7.

20 For example, see Burnet Institute, *Submission 61*, p. 8.

submitters reasoned that children are more likely to be exposed to pornography, including at younger ages, because of the high number of pornographic websites and high degree of internet use among children and young people.²¹

2.19 The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) suggested that the likelihood of unintentional exposure to internet pornography by children is increasing given the high number of pornographic websites.²² Similarly, Dr Michael Flood submitted that overall rates of deliberate and accidental exposure of young people to pornography are likely to be increasing, and it is also likely that children and young people are being exposed to pornography at younger ages.²³ Regarding the likely exposure at younger ages, Dr Flood noted that 'children's and young people's internet use and access is increasing, and pornography itself appears to be becoming a more normalised aspect of children's and youths' peer cultures'.²⁴

2.20 Dr Flood also argued that exposure to pornography is increasing via the internet, and that this exposure potentially involves increasingly violent, hostile and sexist content, although Dr Flood noted that conclusive statements about content are difficult as there has 'been little or no research which analyses pornography's content over time'.²⁵

2.21 This section will discuss a selection of the international studies and Australian data.

International studies

2.22 Although Dr Flood acknowledged that there is 'no direct longitudinal evidence' of an increase in rates of exposure in Australia, he suggested that findings in the US are likely to be similar in Australia. Dr Flood advised that a US study found that, after comparing data from 2000 and 2007, 'rates of unwanted exposure to pornography had gone from 9 to 19 per cent for those aged 10–12, from 28 to 35 per cent for those aged 13 to 15, and from 33 to 44 per cent for those aged 16 to 17'.²⁶

21 See, for example, Royal Australasian College of Physicians, *Submission 112*, p. 2; and Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 7.

22 The RACP noted that, although 'inherently difficult to quantify', one estimate claims that '12 per cent of all publically available websites are pornographic, and around a quarter of search engine requests relate to pornography'. *Submission 112*, p. 2 (citation omitted).

23 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 7.

24 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 7 (citation omitted).

25 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, pp. 7–8.

26 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 7.

2.23 A 2016 report based on a UK-wide survey of approximately 1000 secondary school students commissioned by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and the Children's Commissioner for England found that:

- at the age of 11, 28 per cent of children surveyed had seen online pornography;
- by the age of 15, 65 per cent had seen online pornography; and
- of those who had seen online pornography:
 - boys were more likely to view online pornography through choice than girls (59 per cent of boys compared to 25 per cent of girls), and
 - children 'were as likely to stumble across pornography as to search for it deliberately'.²⁷

2.24 An earlier UK study (2013) revealed an average first age of exposure to pornography of 11 years of age, with 100 per cent of 15-year-old males and 80 per cent of 15-year-old females surveyed 'reporting that they have been exposed to violent, degrading online pornography, usually before they have had a sexual experience themselves'.²⁸

2.25 Findings from the US published in 2007 indicated that the average age of first-time exposure to pornography was 12.2 years old.²⁹

Australian data

2.26 The RACP submitted that the available Australian studies have 'consistently demonstrated that a high proportion of young people are viewing pornography on the internet'. It explained:

One study has found that 28 per cent of 9 to 16-year-olds have seen sexual material online, though of particular concern is the indications that the percentage is 73 per cent for 15 to 16-year-olds. Other research found that among 13 to 16-year-olds, 93 per cent of males and 62 per cent of females had seen pornography online. Generally, young males are more likely to

27 E Martellozzo, A Monaghan, JR Adler, J Davidson, R Leyva and MAH Horvath, "I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it...": a quantitative and qualitative examination of the impact of online pornography on the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of children and young people, 2016, www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/MDX_NSPCC_OCC_pornography_report_June_2016.pdf (accessed 11 August 2016), p. 8.

28 Australian Psychological Society, *Submission 347*, p. 4. The study cited was commissioned by the UK Children's Commissioner and is: MAH Horvath, L Alys, K Massey, A Pina, M Scally, and JR Adler, *Basically...Porn is everywhere: a rapid assessment on the effect that access and exposure to pornography has on children and young people*, 2013.

29 These findings are from an unpublished doctoral thesis cited in Australian Psychological Society, *Submission 347*, p. 17.

access pornography (either intentionally or unintentionally) than young females.³⁰

2.27 The Burnet Institute advised that it recently undertook research to address the lack of up-to-date studies about pornography use among young Australians. The data were obtained from questions asked in the 2015 *Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll* study, which is part of a series of annual online surveys. In 2015, a convenience sample of 993 residents of Victoria aged 15–29 years were asked questions regarding their sexual health, sexual behaviours and alcohol and drug use. The study found that 100 per cent of male participants and 81 per cent of female participants had seen pornography, with the median age of first viewing at 13 years for males and 16 years for females.³¹

2.28 In addition to these survey results, the Burnet Institute cited research papers by other authors that indicate:

Young Australians have reported that they believe most, or all, young people watch pornography. Both teenage boys and girls report peer group pressure to watch pornography, and boys in particular are likely to believe pornography is 'cool' and share pornography among their friends.³²

2.29 Dr Flood cited a 2011 survey that found:

...44% of 9-16 year-olds had seen sexual images in the last 12 months, whether offline or online (defined in terms of images which are "obviously sexual—for example, showing people naked or people having sex")...Exposure was higher at higher ages. Among 9-12 year-olds, 27% of boys and girls had seen sexual images, while among 13-16 year-olds, 58% of boys and 61% of girls had seen sexual images. Focusing on images or video seen online of someone having sex, 6% of 11-12 year-olds, 11% of 13-14 year-olds, and 29% of 15-16 year-olds had seen such images online in the last 12 months.³³

2.30 A 2006 study of 13–16 year olds found that '93 per cent of boys and 61 per cent of girls reported exposure to pornography online'. It was noted that this study pre-dates 'the widespread use of smart phones and one-to-one laptop and tablet programs in schools'.³⁴

30 Royal Australasian College of Physicians, *Submission 112*, p. 2 (citations omitted).

31 Burnet Institute, *Submission 61*, p. 6.

32 Burnet Institute, *Submission 61*, p. 8 (citations omitted).

33 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 7. The study cited is L Green, D Brady, K Ólafsson, et al, *Risks and safety for Australian children on the internet: full findings from the AU Kids Online survey of 9–16 year olds and their parents*, ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, 2011.

34 Ms Maree Crabbe, *Submission 340*, p. 9. The study cited is MJ Fleming, S Greentree, D Cocotti-Muller, KA Elias, and S Morrison, 'Safety in cyberspace: adolescents' safety and exposure online', *Youth and Society*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2006, pp. 135–54.

Limitations of the data

2.31 The Burnet Institute and the WA Commissioner for Children and Young People both noted that there is little research on the types or content of material being accessed by young people.³⁵ It was also noted that the available research 'generally does not distinguish accidental versus intentional pornography exposure', with accidental exposure possible for many reasons. The Burnet Institute submitted that accidental exposure can occur from 'improperly "tagged" photos in image searches, "pop-up" advertisements, spam emails and social media viruses...[and] processes called "mousetrapping" and "page-jacking", where users become "trapped" on certain websites or follow a seemingly official link'.³⁶

2.32 Studies also differ in how they define pornography and in the assumptions they make about exposure. The WA Commissioner for Children and Young People noted that these differences complicate efforts to analyse research about online pornography exposure and in 'making any definitive statements on its effects'. The Commissioner explained:

In the 2011 Rapid Evidence Assessment carried out for the Children's Commissioner for England, the researchers pointed out that although it was known that children and young people were exposed to and/or accessing pornography, the studies generally were not specific about how they had defined 'pornography'. Some studies used a broad descriptor which may have encompassed non-pornographic websites, such as art or sexual health sites. Others appear to have inferred that if a certain 'type' of pornography was available on the internet, it necessarily followed that children and young people were accessing it. What studies had been done (with young adults or adults) showed a wide range of rates of exposure to violent sexual content, and so determining exactly what children and young people may see on the internet is unclear.³⁷

2.33 There is also a lack of government data. For example, the Northern Territory government advised that it does not collect trends on online pornography consumption by children.³⁸

35 Commissioner for Children and Young People (WA), *Submission 14*, pp. 2–3; Burnet Institute, *Submission 61*, p. 7.

36 Burnet Institute, *Submission 61*, p. 8.

37 Commissioner for Children and Young People (WA), *Submission 14*, p. 2 (citations omitted).

38 The government explained that this statement is based on information from the Department of Correctional Services, Department of Education, police, fire and emergency services. Northern Territory Government, *Submission 255*, p. 1.

Key impacts and harms identified

2.34 This section outlines the impacts and harms to children and young people from online pornography that were discussed in submissions. Evidence received about the reliability of this information and issues to consider when analysing it are also outlined.

List of potential impacts

2.35 Overall, the following potential impacts were identified in submissions:

- pornography as a sex educator, including whether it influences attitudes towards sex;
- pornography as a source of distress for younger children;
- pornography viewing as a habitual or 'addictive' activity;
- changing sexual practices influenced by sexual practices which are routine in pornography;
- consequences for body image and self-esteem;
- implications for the development of respectful relationships due to changing male views on women, including seeing women as sex objects and pornography normalising violence against women; and
- children's sexual offending inspired by pornography.

2.36 The remaining paragraphs of this chapter discuss these potential impacts in turn.

Pornography as sex education

2.37 Dr Michael Flood submitted that the use of pornography 'informs greater sexual knowledge and more liberal attitudes towards sex among children and young people (and how one assesses this depends then on one's wider assumptions)'.³⁹ Dr Flood wrote:

Experimental and correlational studies find associations between exposure to sexual media content and for example, greater acceptance of pre-, extra- and non-marital sexual relations, the belief that one's peers are sexually active, and a more favourable attitude towards recreational sex...and acceptance of prostitution and pornography itself...⁴⁰

39 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 10.

40 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 10 (citations omitted).

2.38 Dr Flood added that online pornography may also have particular educational uses for same-sex attracted people. He observed:

In the context of a silence about homosexuality and other non-normative sexualities in their everyday lives, young men and women may use pornography to learn what to do when having sex, to improve their knowledge about sexual behaviour, or as a substitute for sexual relationships.⁴¹

Distress for younger children

2.39 Submissions raised the potential for exposure to online pornography to be distressing for children. Dr Michael Flood cited a 2002 publication that noted children and young people of various ages may react differently to sexually explicit material. Dr Flood provided the following extract:

The youngest children may not find such images remarkable or memorable because they do not have the cognitive abilities or understand the social meaning of explicit images. In contrast, because they are becoming curious about sex and are experiencing changing bodies and a changing social landscape, those in the 9 to 12 age range may be more vulnerable to disturbing portrayals of sex and sexual activity...[Older children] noted that they were exposed to similar material in every other part of their lives, and they now found it more annoying than upsetting.⁴²

2.40 Dr Flood added that some children who are inadvertently exposed to online pornography are 'upset not by its content but by the potential reactions of their parents'.⁴³

Pornography viewing as a habitual activity

2.41 Some submissions noted concerns that the use of online pornography can become a habitual or even an addictive activity. These concerns are applicable to both young people and adults. For example, Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs submitted that there 'is research evidence that pornography affects the brain in much the same way as drugs. It can become addictive'.⁴⁴ The Alannah and Madeline Foundation submitted:

While addiction to pornography is not listed as an addictive disorder in the American Pediatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of

41 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, pp. 10–11 (citation omitted).

42 D Thornburgh and HS Lin (eds), *Youth, pornography, and the internet*, 2002; cited in Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 13. Some anecdotes in submissions from individuals support this; for example, the author of *Submission 200* argued: 'Kids filter things out. I found my brother's porn collection at a young age and thought it was pretty weird. The next time I found it puberty kicked in so it was more interesting'.

43 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 13 (citations omitted).

44 Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs AO, *Submission 2*, p. 2.

Mental Disorders...many believe its existence. Some consumers of pornography use it in ways that are obsessive, compulsive and have damaging consequences for themselves or others...Brain studies have shown that pornography viewing is associated with brain changes 'similar to those observed in addiction' and that 'adolescents take longer than adults to recover from...[these changes]' possibly due to the younger age of exposure to the material.⁴⁵

2.42 Based on current evidence, objections have been made to descriptions of pornography as being 'addictive'. For example, a submitter cited an open letter signed by several academics, journalists, campaigners and others in response to a survey by the NSPCC, which stated:

The very existence of 'porn addiction' is questionable, and it is not an accepted medical condition. Dr David J Ley, a psychologist specialising in this field, says: 'Sex and porn can cause problems in people's lives, just like any other human behavior or form of entertainment. But, to invoke the idea of "addiction" is unethical, using invalid, scientifically and medically-rejected concepts to invoke fear and feed panic.'⁴⁶

2.43 Dr Flood acknowledged an 'emerging scholarship on sexual, internet, and cybersex "addiction" suggests that some pornography consumers come to use pornography in ways which are obsessive, compulsive, and have damaging consequences for themselves or others'. However, he added that 'there is little data on what proportion of pornography consumers use pornography in such ways'. Dr Flood noted that some habitual patterns of use may be more accurately described as 'impulse control disorders, akin to eating disorders or pathological gambling'.⁴⁷

Changing sexual practices and engaging in risky behaviour

2.44 Many submissions expressed concern that pornography exposure is changing young people's view on normal sexual practices and leads to greater risk-taking. For example, the Australian Medical Association (AMA) submitted:

Evidence indicates that exposure to and consumption of internet pornography is strongly associated with risky behaviour among adolescents. The AMA is also aware of a range of studies that demonstrate a strong link between internet exposure to sexually explicit material and earlier and more diverse sexual practice that can result in adverse sexual and mental health outcomes.⁴⁸

45 The Alannah and Madeline Foundation, *Submission 89*, p. 8 (citations omitted).

46 Name withheld, *Submission 120*, p. 4. The letter is also published at: <http://sexandcensorship.org/2015/04/open-letter-nspsc-re-porn-addiction-study/>. The NSPCC's response is available here: www.nspcc.org.uk/fighting-for-childhood/news-opinion/nspcc-response-to-sex-censorship-criticism1

47 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 14 (citations omitted).

48 Australian Medical Association (AMA), *Submission 11*, p. 2.

2.45 The 2016 UK study prepared for the NSPCC and the Children's Commissioner for England (see paragraph 2.23) reported that 21 per cent of 11–12 year olds, 39 per cent of 13–14 year olds and 42 per cent of 15–16 years olds 'wanted to try things out they had seen in pornography'. Boys were more likely to want to emulate pornography than girls (44 per cent for boys compared to 29 per cent for girls).⁴⁹

2.46 The Australian Psychological Society (APS) submitted that online pornography 'can be a disturbing introduction to human sexuality'. It explained:

Pornography increasingly plays a significant role in shaping social norms in relation to sexuality, and in shaping sexual tastes, particularly among young people. This is associated with increased confusion and anxiety as young people feel pressured to behave in ways commonly displayed in pornography. Crabbe and Corlett (2013), in their ground-breaking Australian research, show clearly that young men actually believe that what they are watching provides real templates for sexual activity...Young women, conversely, risk feeling pressured to go along with it, and to participate in sexual acts they may not feel comfortable with.⁵⁰

2.47 Specific evidence about children engaging in risky sexual behaviour following exposure to pornography was provided by Professor Briggs, who advised that in research undertaken for New Zealand Police:

...we found that most children had seen pornography by the age of ten, that around 50% were engaging in casual sex by the age of twelve, that boys avoided using contraceptives and did not relate sex with pregnancy. From the age of twelve, children were 'partying' at weekends and girls said the aim was to get drunk and 'get laid' as soon as possible. Neither the boys nor the girls said they enjoyed the sex but they did it to be popular and this was the expectation of the peer-group.⁵¹

2.48 Dr Flood submitted there 'is clear evidence that pornography is shaping young men's sexual practices', with findings to this effect from cross-sectional studies corroborated by longitudinal studies.⁵² Dr Flood also stated that pornography use may increase practices of unsafe intercourse as 'the vast majority of pornography shows sex without condoms'.⁵³

49 E Martellozzo et al, *"I wasn't sure it was normal to watch it..."*, p. 10.

50 Australian Psychological Society, *Submission 347*, p. 6. The material cited is *Love and sex in an age of pornography*, directors M Crabbe and D Corlett, Rendered Visible and Looking Glass Pictures, 2013.

51 Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs AO, *Submission 2*, p. 4.

52 See Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 11.

53 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 12.

2.49 Pornography viewing may also influence decisions about sexual practices, including unsafe practices⁵⁴ and practices in which partners are pressured to participate. For example, it was submitted that there is evidence 'young men are initiating sexual practices they have observed in pornography...often to young women's displeasure'.⁵⁵ The Gold Coast Centre Against Sexual Violence submitted that it 'deals with victims of sexual violence daily' and the 'majority of the recent sexual violence perpetrated involves porn inspired sexual acts which women and young women have not consented to'.⁵⁶

2.50 A contrary perspective was provided by the Digital Industry Group Incorporated (DIGI), which represents Google, Facebook, Twitter, Yahoo! and Microsoft. DIGI submitted that the 2013 study *Does viewing explain doing?* 'suggests that exposure to explicit material has only a modest impact on the sexual behaviour of young people'. DIGI added:

Professor John de Wit, director of the National Centre in HIV Social Research at the University of NSW and co-lead of the research project, said the findings suggest that the increasing prevalence of sexually explicit material was having less impact on sexual behaviours than previously thought.⁵⁷

Body image and self-esteem

2.51 The potential impact of pornography on young people's body image was noted in submissions. The Burnet Institute submitted that there is 'conflicting evidence' on this 'although young women have reported feeling pressured to achieve an "ideal body" that is often represented in pornography'.⁵⁸

2.52 The AMA submitted that there is a 'growing body of research' showing that 'premature exposure to sexualised images and adult sexual content has a negative impact on the psychological development of children, particularly on self-esteem, body image and understandings of sexuality and relationships'.⁵⁹ The AMA, however, noted that online pornography is one type of the sexualised images available; it pointed to 'sexualised representations of children in advertising and the circulation of sexualised content through social media' as other sources.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the AMA

54 Australian Psychological Society, *Submission 347*, p. 6.

55 Ms Maree Crabbe, *Submission 340*, p. 3. See also Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs AO, *Submission 2*, p. 1.

56 Gold Coast Centre Against Sexual Violence, *Submission 77*, p. 4.

57 Digital Industry Group Incorporated, *Submission 75*, p. [3].

58 Burnet Institute, *Submission 61*, p. 9 (citations omitted).

59 Although the AMA noted that online pornography is only one type of the sexualised images available, also pointing to 'sexualised representations of children in advertising...[and the] circulation of sexualised content through social media'. AMA, *Submission 11*, p. 2.

60 AMA, *Submission 11*, p. 2.

commented on a possible relationship between online pornography and a dramatic increase in demand for genital cosmetic surgery, although the Burnet Institute noted that to date, no research has been conducted into a relationship between pornography and rates of labiaplasty.⁶¹

2.53 Self-esteem effects were also noted. The RACP referred to a study that noted 'boys may feel they lack the virility of on-screen actors, whereas girls reported feeling physically inferior to women they viewed in pornographic material'.⁶²

Development of healthy and respectful relationships

2.54 Several submissions commented on the messages pornography conveys about the nature of relationships between men and women, and the impression these messages leave on children and young people. The significance of this for young people was emphasised by the APS, which advised that '[m]any young people often do not have the critical frameworks required to deconstruct and understand these messages'.⁶³

2.55 The AMA submitted that online pornography is increasingly playing a role in shaping young people's attitudes towards sexuality. The AMA added that many adult websites 'feature what can only be termed "extreme" material, which to a young and vulnerable person without an understanding of sex education, could be quite damaging'. The AMA:

...believes that children viewing highly sexualised pornographic material are at risk of negatively affecting their psychological development and mental health by potentially skewing their views of normality and acceptable behaviour at a critical time of development in their life.⁶⁴

2.56 One of the issues specifically raised is the theme of male dominance and female submission that heterosexual pornography generally conveys.⁶⁵ The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare submitted that pornography 'normalises sex acts that many women may experience as degrading, painful or violating'. The Centre argued that this 'raises serious implications for young people's capacity to develop a positive sexuality that incorporates mutual pleasure, respect and the negotiation of free and full consent'.⁶⁶ The APS added:

61 AMA, *Submission 11*, pp. 2–3; Burnet Institute, *Submission 61*, p. 9 (citations omitted).

62 Royal Australasian College of Physicians, *Submission 112*, p. 3.

63 Australian Psychological Society, *Submission 347*, p. 5.

64 AMA, *Submission 11*, p. 2.

65 The APS added that similar issues exist with homosexual pornography. See *Submission 347*, p. 7.

66 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, *Submission 13*, p. 2 (citation omitted). See also Ms Maree Crabbe, *Submission 340*, p. 4.

Porn...gives the impression that everyone wants to have sex all the time, but it does not teach young people that consent is crucial, nor how to communicate with your partner how and when you would both like to have sex, and how to respect their needs as well as meet your own.⁶⁷

2.57 'Sexting', which is the sending of sexually explicit photographs, videos or messages via mobile phones, is a related concern. Collective Shout argued that '[a] further outworking of pornography's shaping influence is seen in the demands from boys for sexual images of girls'. Collective Shout submitted:

This year, Plan Australia commissioned a survey of a random sample of 600 Australian women and girls aged 15–19. Key results:

- Seven out of ten young women surveyed agreed that girls are often bullied or harassed online.
- 58% agreed that girls often receive uninvited or unwanted indecent or sexually explicit material such as texts, video clips, and porn.
- 51% agreed girls are often pressured to take 'sexy' pictures of themselves and share them.
- 82% believe it is unacceptable for a boyfriend to ask their girlfriend to share naked photos of themselves.
- 44% do not feel comfortable reporting abusive online behaviour.⁶⁸

2.58 However, most submissions that commented on pornography's impact on relationships focused on the consequences of young people's exposure to 'extreme' and violent pornography. The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare emphasised that online pornography is often violent and aggressive as 'producers seek to push the market boundaries'. It explained:

Research conducted in 2007 showed that almost 90 percent of scenes in pornographic videos portrayed physical aggression, while nearly half contained verbal aggression, and that 94 percent showed the aggression perpetrated against women. In particular, the portrayal of violence and degrading behaviour during sex has the potential to negatively influence children's attitudes to relationships and sexual expectations and norms.⁶⁹

67 Australian Psychological Society, *Submission 347*, p. 5.

68 Collective Shout, *Submission 288*, p. 3. See also Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs AO, *Submission 2*, p. 2.

69 Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, *Submission 13*, p. 1 (citations omitted). Figures on violent content were also provided by the Australian Psychological Society: see *Submission 347*, p. 4.

2.59 Dr Michael Flood argued that 'the most troubling dimensions of pornography's negative impact, among children and adults alike' are its 'influences on sexist and violent attitudes and behaviours'.⁷⁰ Dr Flood cited several studies associating the consumption of pornography with 'more sexualised and sexually objectifying views of women'.⁷¹ In addition, Dr Flood cited a 2007 report by the American Psychological Association that found 'exposure to pornography...leads men to rate their female partners as less attractive...to indicate less satisfaction with their intimate partners' attractiveness, sexual performance, and level of affection...and to express greater desire for sex without emotional involvement'.⁷²

2.60 On whether pornography influences aggressive tendencies, the RACP submitted that there is 'some evidence to suggest that this is dependent on what type of pornographic content is being consumed'. It explained:

Simple nudity may actually reduce aggressive tendencies, whereas sexually violent pornography is likely to increase aggressiveness. Other evidence has suggested that violent pornography in particular can lead children and young people self-reporting higher rates of sexually aggressive behaviour.⁷³

2.61 Dr Flood described an 'overwhelming' body of evidence linking pornography to sexual violence against girls and women.⁷⁴ Dr Flood cited three longitudinal studies that 'support the claim that pornography increases the likelihood that individuals will perpetrate sexual violence'.⁷⁵

2.62 The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), however, submitted that although '[r]esearch indicates that children's and young people's attitudes and behaviour may be influenced by viewing pornography...there appears to be only limited empirical evidence that viewing pornography causes children and young people to engage in coercive, aggressive or violent sexual behaviour'.⁷⁶

70 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 15.

71 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 15.

72 American Psychological Association, *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*, 2007, p. 29; cited in Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 15.

73 Royal Australasian College of Physicians, *Submission 112*, p. 3 (citations omitted).

74 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 15.

75 See Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, pp. 16–17.

76 Australian Human Rights Commission, *Submission 261*, p. 3 (citation omitted).

Sexual offending by children inspired by pornography

2.63 Some submissions asserted that online pornography has resulted in child-on-child abuse. This issue featured in Professor Freda Briggs' submission, which argued that:

Sexual exploration is a normal part of healthy child development but children (usually boys) who are sexualized prematurely through access to pornography or personal experience may engage in sexual behaviours that are not within normal bounds.⁷⁷

2.64 Professor Briggs advised that 'young children are acting out what they have seen and experienced, sexually abusing others in schools, kindergartens and child care settings'. Professor Briggs argued:

There are only three explanations for children sexually abusing younger children:

- (a) They have been traumatized/influenced by exposure to pornography and repeat what they have seen. In the writer's interviews with more than 700 children...some boys aged 6–8 years revealed that 'fun' activities with their fathers included watching pornography on the internet because 'that's what guys do'.
- (b) They have been traumatized by sexual abuse and are repeating what they have experienced.
- (c) They have inappropriately witnessed sexual activity in the home environment.

All of the above constitute child abuse and should be reported, investigated and therapy provided (by specialists) for perpetrators and victims as well as counselling for the parents of both victims and offenders. The problem is that neither teachers, police nor social workers appear to be trained to take these behaviours seriously and respond appropriately.⁷⁸

2.65 Pages 14–16 of Professor Briggs' submission summarises cases indicating that children of various age groups who abused other children were influenced by pornography. The cases also indicate that instances of child-on-child abuse are not being handled appropriately. Professor Briggs stated that:

Child-on-child abuse should not only be reported to child protection services but therapy should be provided because of the risk that (a) the perpetrator will continue to create victims; (b) the child's premature sexual experience will be recognised by paedophiles and s/he will then be at risk of being abused repeatedly.⁷⁹

77 Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs AO, *Submission 2*, p. 14.

78 Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs AO, *Submission 2*, pp. 4–5.

79 Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs AO, *Submission 2*, p. 9.

2.66 Submissions from individuals articulated how they were distressed by media reports on children perpetrating sexual abuse against other children in environments such as schools and childcare centres.⁸⁰

2.67 Dr Michael Flood also commented on the role of pornography in children's sexual offending. However, Dr Flood warned about claims that have not been tested. He stated:

Simplistic claims regarding pornography's role in sexual violence have been evident in Australia lately particularly in relation to children's sexual offending...The claim that pornography exposure is fuelling a significant increase in children's sexual abuse of other children comes from various quarters, including from people who work with children showing sexually abusive or problematic sexual behaviours. Such impressions by frontline workers are important, but they should be tested by empirical research.⁸¹

2.68 In Dr Flood's opinion:

Pornography's role in children's sexual offending is likely to be similar to its role in adults' sexual offending. Yes, pornography exposure is a significant risk factor for sexual violence perpetration by children and young people...There is no doubt: pornography exposure increases the risk of children's and young people's perpetration of sexual assault.

At the same time, pornography exposure is likely to increase the likelihood of perpetration for some children and young people more than others, depending on their pre-existing attitudes and behaviours. In addition, children's pornography exposure itself may be a part or symptom of a range of forms of abuse and trauma experienced by children who themselves are engaged in problem sexual behaviour...⁸²

2.69 Other concerns about children's sexual offending included children becoming producers of child pornography. Professor Briggs submitted:

In July, 2008, Victoria Police confirmed that more and more children were being reported for sex offences. An eight-year-old boy stored pornography on a mobile phone. In the 2006 crackdown, 12% of those arrested for downloading child pornography were adolescent boys. They also outnumbered adults at a ratio of two to one in the manufacture of pornography...Boys aged 10 were among 61 young people accused of making child porn in 2007-8. More 15- to 19-year-olds were caught producing child porn than any age-group in 2007.⁸³

80 For example, see *Submission 128*, p. 1.

81 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 19 (citations omitted).

82 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 19 (citations omitted).

83 Emeritus Professor Freda Briggs AO, *Submission 2*, p. 22.

Reliability of evidence and other considerations

2.70 Many submissions emphasised that care needs to be taken when analysing data and individual accounts about children's and young people's exposure to pornography. The following paragraphs outline some of the matters raised.

2.71 Dr Michael Flood argued that '[w]e must move beyond simplistic, deterministic claims and towards more sophisticated and evidence-based accounts of pornography's effects'.⁸⁴ He submitted that the impact of pornography on its viewers is mediated by various factors, as follows:

- The characteristics of the viewer, such as age, gender, maturation, sexual experience and parental involvement.
- The viewer's 'sexual, emotional and cognitive responses to the material'; Dr Flood explained there is evidence that 'effects are greater for people who are more active and involved viewers', although he added 'little is known about children's and young people's active engagements with pornography'.
- The character and circumstances of exposure, such as 'the type of material involved, the duration and intensity of viewing, and the context (whether voluntary or involuntary, and whether solitary or collective)'.⁸⁵

2.72 The Burnet Institute submitted that:

Research indicates that pornography use is associated with some harms (in adolescent and adult populations), particularly with regards to viewing violent pornography and when watching pornography frequently. These harms should be taken seriously.

However, there is little evidence, at least in an Australian setting, to say that pornography causes harms in adolescents and young adults, although there is a significant body of cross-sectional and qualitative evidence suggesting a link between them.⁸⁶

2.73 Similarly, the WA Commissioner for Children and Young People submitted that although research shows correlations between access and exposure to pornography and various behavioural changes, 'there has not been demonstrated evidence of a causal role for pornography' in these changes.⁸⁷

84 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 4.

85 Dr Michael Flood, *Submission 250*, p. 9 (citations omitted).

86 Burnet Institute, *Submission 61*, p. 4.

87 Commissioner for Children and Young People (WA), *Submission 14*, pp. 5–6.

2.74 Finally, the Scarlet Alliance, which is the peak national sex worker organisation in Australia, presented the following perspective in response to claims about the influence of pornography:

The assertion that pornography is, or contributes to, violence against women, is often stated as fact, when it is theory that is not proven. While anti-porn advocates have heralded studies showing a causal link between porn and misogyny, sexual abuse, and domestic violence, an equal number of studies show no link at all. It is also important to note that even if some studies purport to create a causal link; this is not evidence of causation. Anti-porn advocates present anecdotal research that gives an "extremely biased picture of pornography that stands in stark contrast to sound scholarly research."⁸⁸

Conclusion

2.75 This chapter has introduced key concepts that are relevant when considering how children and young people may be exposed to pornographic material. It has also provided an overview of the possible harm that submitters consider exposure to this material may cause to some individuals.

2.76 The following chapter discusses the various proposals that were put forward to respond to this evidence.

88 Scarlet Alliance, *Submission 119*, p. 3. The quotation is from R Weitzer, 'Pornography's effects: the need for solid evidence', *Violence Against Women*, vol. 17, no. 5, 2011, pp. 666–75.

