



Presbyterian Church of Victoria - CaN Committee

To: Committee Secretary, Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications

Re: Harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the Internet

Dear Senators,

The Presbyterian Church of Victoria welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission concerning 'the harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the Internet.'

Porn and Technology

The ubiquitous nature of smartphones means the ever-present nature of porn. Whether we like it or not, and whether we realise it or not, every parent who gives his or her child a smartphone gives that child instant access to pornography.

It was reported in the Australian Psychological Society (APS) that 12% of all websites are pornographic in nature and that over 25% of all search engine requests are for pornography.¹ Society, in general, is struggling to deal with what some call the 'porn pandemic', let alone its effects on children. According to the American Psychological Association, over 40% of children ages 10-17 visited porn sites each year.² Similarly, Australian sociologist Michael Flood stated that 38% of all boys ages 16-18 deliberately accessed pornography regularly.³

In 2014 the UK government, through Middlesex University and the UK Children's Commissioner, produced a report entitled, "Basically, porn is everywhere...": A Rapid Evidence Assessment on the Effects that Access and Exposure to Pornography has on Children and Young People."⁴ Significantly, while there were differences in some studies between exposure to and frequency of pornography (Swedish studies had figures as high as 99% for exposure of boys aged 15), a study of 876 young people aged between 15-25 visiting a youth centre in Sweden found:

*"Nearly all of the participants had viewed pornographic movies (among those 15 years of age, 98.9% of boys and 73.5% of girls). The majority of males (62.7%) responded positively toward pornography, describing it as 'stimulating' and 'cool,' but about all [sic.] 'exciting.'"*⁵

¹ <https://www.psychology.org.au/inpsych/2015/april/sampson/>

² Janis Wolak, *Paediatrics* (Feb. 2007. Vol. 119, No. 2) 247-257.

³ Michael Flood, *Journal of Sociology* (March 2007. Vol. 43, No. 1) 45-60.

⁴ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publications/basically-porn-everywhere-rapid-evidence-assessment-effects-access-and-exposure>

⁵ Wallmyr, G. & Welin, C., *Young People, Pornography, and Sexuality: Sources and Attitudes*. (2006. *Journal of School Nursing*. 22/5) 290-295.

While there are some differences in studies depending on the country, gender and ages, what is not debated in all the literature is that a significant proportion of children are exposed to and frequently access pornography and the numbers rise according to gender (boys) and age (Finding 3 & 4, pg. 23).⁶

Porn and Sexuality

Due to its proliferation, pornography plays an understated but increasingly important role in socialising children in the norms of human sexuality and intimacy. The APS have stated that:

*"...viewing highly sexualised or violent pornographic material has many risks for children's psychological development and mental health, by potentially skewing their views of normality and acceptable behaviour at a crucial time of development."*⁷

Jochen Peter, Ph.D., a communications researcher at the University of Amsterdam, has similar concerns. In one particular study he undertook of 471 Dutch teens aged 13 to 18, he found a link between porn usage in boys and the depersonalised view they had of girls they had sex with. The study also found that these teenagers felt it was unnecessary to feel affection towards people you had sex with.⁸

The UK Children's Commissioner, after sifting through 276 research papers, also found a link between exposure to pornography and the engagement in sexually "risky behaviours", such as unprotected sex, sex at a young age, sexting or aggressive behaviour towards the opposite sex. It noted that one UK study found 80% of young people believed watching pornography affected the way they had sex.

It also found a correlation between online usage of pornography and the grooming of children by sex offenders (e.g., Cline, 2001; Dombrowski et al., 2007; Independent Parliamentary Inquiry into Online Child Protection, 2012; Shrock & Boyd, 2008, 2011).⁹ It was reported that:

*"9% of 9 to 19-year-old children and young people in the UK Children Go Online project had been sent pornographic images from someone they know and 2 per cent from someone they met online."*¹⁰

Melinda Tankard Reist also lamented the increase in sexual bullying in a recent (March 7, 2016) opinion piece on the ABC *Religion and Ethics* website:

"In the survey report, entitled Don't send me that pic, participants reported that online sexual abuse and harassment were endemic. More than 80% said it was unacceptable for boyfriends to request naked images.

*Sexual bullying and harassment are part of daily life for many girls. Young people are speaking out more and more about how these practices have links with pornography - and so they should, because they have most to lose."*¹¹

She also went on to affirm the link not just between bullying and porn, but with teenage requests for certain sexual practices linked to and shaped by porn:

*"If there are still any questions about whether porn has an impact on young people's sexual attitudes and behaviours, perhaps it's time to listen to young people themselves. Girls and young women describe boys pressuring them to provide acts inspired by the porn they consume routinely. Girls tell of being expected to put up with things they don't enjoy."*¹²

⁶ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publications/basically-porn-everywhere-rapid-evidence-assessment-effects-access-and-exposure>

⁷ <https://www.psychology.org.au/inpsych/2015/april/sampson/>

⁸ Jochen Peter, *Journal of Communication* (Dec. 2006. Vol. 56, No. 4) 639-660.

⁹ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publications/basically-porn-everywhere-rapid-evidence-assessment-effects-access-and-exposure>

¹⁰ Ibid, 25.

¹¹ <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2016/03/07/4420147.htm>

¹² Ibid.

Porn, the Brain and Sexual Violence

There are many studies that show how porn works on the brain to create and consolidate new neuropathways fuelled by dopamine, based on viewing pornography. As Michael Cusick notes:

*"These neuropathways are like footpaths across a field of waist-high grass. Walking across the field when the grass is so high requires significant effort. But each time you walk along the path, it gets easier. The grass gets trampled, worn down, and eventually becomes a dirt path."*¹³

This also leads to desensitisation and the pursuit of even more explicit porn. A *Guardian* opinion piece, based on a study led by Cambridge University neuropsychiatrist Dr Valerie Voon, stated:

*"Worse, over time, a damaged dopamine system makes one more 'tolerant' to the activity and needing more stimulation, to get the rush and quiet the craving. 'Tolerance' drives a search for ramped-up stimulation, and this can drive the change in sexual tastes towards the extreme. The most obvious change in porn is how sex is so laced with aggression and sadomasochism. As tolerance to sexual excitement develops, it no longer satisfies; only by releasing a second drive, the aggressive drive, can the addict be excited. And so – for people psychologically predisposed – there are scenes of angry sex, men ejaculating insultingly on women's faces, angry anal penetration, etc. Porn sites are also filled with the complexes Freud described: "Milf" ("Mothers I'd like to f*ck") sites show us the Oedipus complex is alive; spanking sites sexualise a childhood trauma; and many other oral and anal fixations."*¹⁴

Not only does porn rewire the brain and reward systems leading to addiction as well as more extreme sources of pornography, but it is also linked to sexual violence. The National Coalition to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation noted a disturbing relationship between violent and non-violent pornography and the attitudes of aggression towards the opposite sex:

*"The result of a recent meta-analysis shows a significant overall relationship between pornography consumption and attitudes supporting violence against women in non-experimental studies."*¹⁵

According to a recent disturbing report in Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* (6 Feb. 2016), in 2015 adults committed 44% of sexual assault cases reported on school grounds, the remainder were committed by children:

*"The NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research data for the 12 months to last September show juveniles aged between 10 and 17 carried out 56 per cent of the cases of sexual assault and indecent acts reported on school grounds."*¹⁶

However, what is telling is when this is juxtaposed with earlier periods. Ten years earlier (2005) adults committed 70% of sexual assaults and children aged between 10-17 committed 30%. And, if you go back a further ten years to 1995, the differences are even more pronounced, with children aged 10-17 involved in only 11% of sexual assaults.

In the last 20 years, with the proliferation of pornography – and, in particular, a technology that makes it easily available to children – we have seen a 500% increase in the number of children aged 10-17 committing sexual assaults in NSW schools. And while correlation does not mean causation, it is an alarming statistic and requires further research and explanation.

Recently the UK *Telegraph* reported on a case of a boy aged 12 who raped his sister aged seven after watching porn on his Xbox. The article went on to discuss the rising rates of child-on-child sexual assaults, quoting Jon Brown from National Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC):

¹³ <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/life/whole-life/features/29332-this-is-your-brain-on-porn>

¹⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/sep/26/brain-scans-porn-addicts-sexual-tastes>

¹⁵ Hald, G., Malamuth, N., & Yuen, C. *Pornography and attitudes supporting violence against women: Revisiting the relationship in nonexperimental studies. Aggressive Behaviour* (2009, 35) 1-7.

¹⁶ <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/child-sex-concern-prompted-by-rising-figures-of-assault-and-indecency/news-story/4877feeb14623482b32ceaf26d2b25f2>

"We asked police forces in England and Wales to provide figures for the number of sexual offences committed by under18s on other children. The shock response was that over a two-year period more than 5,000 had been recorded – and some of those had been carried out by children as young as five. As bad as that was, the real picture is even more depressing as only two-thirds of the 43 forces were able to give details. There have always been cases of child-on-child abuse, but we think the proliferation of online pornography is making it far more likely that the number of these crimes will increase."¹⁷

Again, while further research is required, it is the view of our committee that there are enough studies and concerns from various experts that should cause legislators to do all within their powers to ascertain the facts around these issues and ameliorate those concerns as best as possible with the legislative tools available to them.

Porn and Undesirable Outcomes

It is the unequivocal view of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria that any sexual activity involving children is inappropriate and should not be encouraged in any way. We also believe that sex is best kept for the covenant of marriage, and that pornography for both adults and children is unhelpful in any society and transgresses the will of God for humanity.

Regarding our specific concerns relating to the Senate inquiry, the Church and Nation Committee of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria are concerned that the rising exposure, frequency and, in some cases, addiction to pornography among children have the following undesirable effects:

1. Pornography rewires the brain to depersonalise sexual activity and tends to objectify the participants, particularly women and girls. This both challenges and changes societal sexual norms and expectations in the minds of many children.
2. It leads to risky sexual behaviours and can lead to some extreme sexual activities. It may also leave some children open to the added danger of sexual grooming.
3. There is increasing evidence that it also leads to sexual bullying and harassment for both genders but in particular girls.
4. Many studies confirm its association with aggressive attitudes towards the opposite sex, in particular, girls and it would also seem to fuel the reported rise in child-on-child sexual assaults.
5. Little or nothing has been done, from a regulatory standpoint, to curb children's access to pornography. It is our view that the government should:
 - A) Act decisively to compel all Internet Service Providers to filter adult-rated internet content.
 - B) Do more to educate parents on the danger that pornography poses to children.

Sincerely,

Rev. Darren Middleton, Dip.Min, B.Th, MA.Th

Convener, PCV and GAA Church and Nation Committee

¹⁷ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/10674065/Pornography-a-dark-influence-on-children-NSPCC.html>