

**Brief Submitted to the Standing Committee on Health
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Submitted by Cordelia Anderson, MA

Founder, Sensibilities Prevention Services, USA

Founder & Former Chair, National Coalition to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse & Exploitation, USA

Board Member, National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, USA

I want to begin with congratulations for passing M47. It is a powerful statement for a country to recognize the importance of studying what is known about the health effects of the ease of access and viewing of online violent and degrading sexually explicit material.

Background

For the past 40 years, I've worked to promote sexual health and prevent sexual harm. While my early work involved treating prostituted women, sex offenders and survivors of sexual abuse/sexual violence, most of my focus has been on prevention. In 1976, I began my work and study at the Program in Human Sexuality (PHS), University of Minnesota. There, I was trained that pornography was harmless and in fact a useful aid for couples and individuals with sexual problems. I learned a lot of excellent information about sexuality, the importance of promoting sexual health and the harms of sexual oppression. However, my work after that point challenged and changed my thinking related to pornography. Next, I was asked to develop a child sexual abuse prevention program (no others existed at the time) in the Hennepin County Attorney's Office and to work as a child victim advocate. Throughout this time, I also worked as a consulting therapist. I began to see a very different impact of pornography on individuals and culture.

I've conducted over 2,500 presentations and developed numerous educational materials including plays; most recently, "*Fired Up*" based on the stories of adult survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation. Throughout my career, I've tried to bring attention to what types of materials promote sexual health and functioning and what promotes sexual harms and dysfunction. In the 80's I co-authored a play, "*For Adults Only*" that addressed many of these issues and then after all the changes with technology, in 2011, I wrote a booklet, "*The Impact of Pornography on Children Youth and Culture.*" In the past, we had qualitative data from stories and information from clinical practices, but now there is extensive research that speaks to an altered impact from advances in technology and an increasingly egregious sexually exploitive content.

The Harms

As experts, such as Micheal Seto, Ph.D. and Gail Dines, Ph.D., point out, the extensive exposure to increasingly younger of Internet pornography is a significant unregulated social experiment that we are beginning to see a range of effects from; but don't know yet what the full impact will be.

Brain Research

Some of the most compelling research demonstrating current and potential impact of pornography is the growing body of neuroscience, the impact of viewing pornography and especially violent pornography on the brain development of our youth. Simply put, the neurons that fire together wire together and whatever the brain does a lot of, the brain gets good at. The potential for harm is not

related to the nudity but rather the drive for novelty. Neuroscience researchers and those experts including Neurosurgeon, Dr. Don Hilton, have offered excellent summaries that help us understand:

- Brain tissue is malleable
- *Mirror cells* in the brain mean that seeing is experienced as doing.
- Innate programming is triggered by unrealistic *supranormal stimulus*
- When there is a *spike in dopamine* and other feel good chemicals – such as there is with pornography use – it reduces the ability to achieve the same intensity with a real-life partner
- With exposure to, and use of pornography, it's easy to get *desensitized & habituated*
- Users can *develop craving for more* and the reward center of the brain wants its fix now
- When the brain is cued it *over responds*; the frontal lobe is rewired and the brains brake pads to reward center are gone/worn out.
- When the brains “brakes are gone and the brain is wired for reward, there is a growing link to problematic sexual behavior and sexual aggression.

Additional sources are included in the resource section of this testimony. One excellent source for the collection of the research and analysis of it is www.yourbrainonporn.com.

According to Jennifer Brown, Ph.D., adolescents are uniquely vulnerable to sexualized cues and media. Developmental characteristics make the adolescent brain more vulnerable:

- An innate vulnerability to neuroplasticity—the brain is rapidly strengthening the most used circuits and pruning the least used connections.
- An immature prefrontal cortex - no brakes - and an over responsive limbic system.
- An overactive stress response.
- An overactive dopamine system - dopamine is a major player in development of addiction.
- The ability of steroid hormones to exert an organizational effect on the brain.

The Environment

The environment we live in has changed and continues to do so. It is hard to accept, but we now live in a sexually toxic environment where sex fused with violence and pornography are normalized, expected and protected in mainstream culture. Access to extremely violent pornography is easily available. Further, access to helpful, inclusive and accurate information is often limited. An example of normalization is when those who question any possibility of harm are accused of being the problem or of *not being with the program*. (Anderson, 2011) Public health responses on any other issue helps us to understand the impact of the problem and the importance of maintaining a healthy environment Unfortunately, in toxic environments, toxic unhealthy decisions make sense. (Briere, 2007)

Children & Youth

Of 14-21-year-olds studied, 9% reported having perpetrated some form of sexually abusive behaviors, and that 9% had significantly higher exposure to, and use of, violent sexual materials. (Ybarra, 2013)

When the average age of first exposure to pornography is 11-years-old and sexual sensation-seeking, behaviors (encouraged using pornography) signaled sexual risk taking among young adults (both female and male) then we as a society have an urgency to respond. (NEARI Press summary of Sinkovic et al, 2013)

A study of over 300 teens media consumption and sexting behavior, found a statistically significant link between pornography use and sexting in both boys and girls. (Van Ouystel, J. et al, 2014)

For Peggy Orenstein's book, *Girls & Sex*, she interviewed over one hundred girls. Many of them spoke about being emotionally disconnected from their bodies and said they expected sex to hurt. Further, they believed they shouldn't say anything. It is noteworthy that these are some of the messages for women and girls that are integral to the emerging porn culture. Increasingly, instead of valuing consent and their own needs, girls are learning when it comes to sex, they just need to learn to take it.

In a 2016 study of 1,163 Italian male high school students

- 77.9% admitted to consumption of Internet pornography
 - of these, 8% (93) daily use
- 59% (686) males reported it was always stimulating
- 21.9% (255) define it as habitual
- 10% (116) reported it reduced interest in real life partner
- 9.1% (106) report a kind of addiction
- 19% report abnormal sexual response;
for the regular users that was 25.1%

Clay Olsen, founder of Fight the New Drug and Fortify Program provided statistics from the Fortify Program from (2/14 to 9/16). The Fortify Program is an online resource for those who are concerned about how their pornography use is affecting them and want help.

- Study included 35,310 youth and 14,922 adults
- 87% male - 13% female
- 75% first viewed pornography between the ages of 9-13
- 85% demonstrated a reduction in depression symptoms by the end of program
- 88% reported reduction in pornography viewed by the end of the program
- 95% of users feel that Fortify is moving them toward complete freedom from pornography
- 60% increase in overall accountability (meaning upon signing up most don't have anyone helping or supporting them through this struggle. By the end of the program they saw a 60% jump in overall accountability.)

There is a second-hand impact from pornography. In a 2006 study of Cambodian children, in-depth interviews demonstrated that not only does pornography have a strong impact on the behaviors of children who viewed it, but on other children as well. They noted increased levels of physical and verbal sexual harassment of girls, and a general increase in sexualized discourse among children.

Child sexual abuse materials and images, are still referred to as child pornography in the USA. It is recognized as documentation of a sex crime scene and as harmful. Given "teen" porn is the, or one of the top searched for types of pornography, the inclusion of references to children and youth in "adult" legal pornography is a key concern. Since pornography has been packaged and sold by its supporters as sex, and made easily accessible by technologies, increasing numbers of children and youth learn about sex, gender and sexual expectations from today's pornography. While it may be more appropriate for a 13-year-old to look at images of other 13-year-olds than of adults, he or she may not realize that such crosses into the illegal territory. For young users who as they age stay fixated on a given age and don't grow out of it, they develop problematic and potentially dangerous sexual templates. For adults who get used to seeing youth and younger children depicted as sexual objects in mainstream media, and get further exposure through pornography, then crave more novelty – it is not difficult to see the possible links between the demand for more novelty pornography and child sexual abuse materials. (Griffin, E.)

The sheer volume of users of child sexual abuse materials shows the people who download these images are not all pedophiles solely sexually aroused by sexual images of children but rather are seeking new images of any kind to feed desires pulled by novelty.

Adults

A 2015 meta-analysis of 22 studies from 7 countries pointed out that “as with all behavior, sexual aggression is caused by a confluence of factors and many consumers are not sexually aggressive.” They concluded “the accumulated data leave little doubt that, on average, individuals who consume pornography more frequently, are more likely to hold attitudes conducive to sexual aggression and to engage in actual acts of sexual aggression than those who don’t consume porn or who consume it less frequently.” (Wright, 2015)

In a study of 1,883 heterosexual men and women researchers found that those who used pornography more frequently were more likely to have tried aggressive acts; men were 2-3x’s more likely than women to slap, choke or role play rape. (Sun, et al, 2014) Another study found that more pornography use was negatively associated with enjoying sexually intimate behaviors with a partner. The more porn a man watches, the more likely he was to:

- use it during sex
- request pornographic sex acts of his partner
- deliberately conjure images of porn during sex to maintain arousal & have concerns over his own sexual performance and body image.

(Bridges, 2016)

Contrary the suggestion that pornography is a harmless, sexual aid, the increase of erectile dysfunction related to pornography use is getting the attention of the medical community and of users. While erectile dysfunction use to be unusual particularly in young men, 1 in 4 new erectile dysfunction patients are under age 40. (Cappogrosso, et al J of Sexual Medicine, 2013) Erectile dysfunction rates range from 27% among those under age 40 to 33% of those older than 40. (www.yourbrainonporn.com) High school boys who consume porn more than once a week have ED (and other sexual dysfunction) levels twice as high as those who consume less than once a week. (Damiano, et al 2015)

A Public Health Response

We can’t arrest, prosecute, incarcerate, legislate, treat or *educate* our way out of this. It will take all of that and more. The *more* is broad based social & environmental change. While attention is needed to respond to the needs of those harmed after the harm is identified, systemic changes are also needed to prevent the initial harm.

Public health focuses on safeguarding and improving the physical, mental, and social well-being of the community. It is ... *What we do collectively to assure the conditions in which people can be healthy.* According to the World Health Organization, Public Health is “the art and science of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through the organized efforts of society” (Acheson, 1988; WHO). When a public health problem is a social issue, it becomes imperative that social leaders and public health advocates become involved to help create a protective environment. (Perrin, 2008)

The Center for Disease Control and Injury Prevention, USA, explains four key elements of a Public Health Model:

- Define and monitor the problem
- Identify risk and protective factors
- Develop and test programs and strategies
- Assure widespread adoption of effective efforts

As effective public health initiatives, have shown, change cannot focus solely on individual education but needs to include such education and professional training within systemic changes including policies, organizational practices, social norms campaigns and broad based coalitions. As Megan Johnson explains in “The Porn Paradox” her TedxGreenville presentation, selling and buying sex is generally illegal unless it is filmed and distributed online. Then it’s culturally celebrated and protected. The porn industry is sex trafficking; bought sex on camera. She challenges viewers to consider that if you use, you need to recognize the price you pay and how it drives demand.

Possible Actions:

- Ensure that every child who graduates high school has received some form of comprehensive sexuality/relationship education that includes accurate research based information on the impact of pornography.
- Establish requirements for a wide range of professionals to have meaningful and effective training on the impact of pornography on children, youth and the developing brain.
- Focus additional resources to ensure that professionals in the healing and health professions understand the impact of pornography.
- Create advertising standards so that ads don’t inadvertently become an ad for pornography by using pornographic or hyper-sexualized imagery.
- Place warning labels on pornography like what was required on cigarettes
- Begin and fund A Truth campaign such as occurred in the USA because of lawsuits and policy changes related to recognition of the harms the tobacco industry perpetrated. The campaign can speak to the harms of pornography, help people make “informed consent” choices and engage the broader community in solutions.
- Examine and fund research to explore meaningful ways to address the links between child sexual abuse material/images and pornography.
- Facilitate and fund easier access to therapy for those who’ve been harmed by pornography
- Ensure that those harmed by pornography have easy access to systems of justice and/or restitution.
- Explore Don’t Buy It model of programs that engage men in being part of the solution and recognize the connections between sex trafficking, sexual violence and pornography. <https://www.dontbuyitproject.org>;
- Establish national standards for reasonable responses, that are informed by research, to children/youth who’ve developed problematic sexual behaviors because of trauma and/or their exposure to pornography.
- Work towards Agreements with technology companies to put filters on technologies that adults who want access to pornography can alter and can provide other filters to protect children in their homes.
- Mandate Age verification strategies.