

Submission to the Standing Committee on Health on M47

The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada is the national association of evangelical Christians in Canada. Believing in the fundamental dignity of each person, and called to care for those who are vulnerable, we have been engaged for many years in addressing issues of sexual exploitation. Our work on human trafficking and prostitution has led us to take a serious look at the issue of pornography, and the role it plays in fueling sexual exploitation. A wealth of research and evidence points to a range of serious public health effects, links to sexual violence and aggression, and commercial sexual exploitation.

We are grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Committee's study. It is vital to consider how the proliferation, ease of access and nature of online pornography is influencing the sexual health, behaviours and attitudes of young people and adults, and in turn, how this contributes to rape culture, sexual violence and exploitation.

It is important to recognize that mainstream pornography today depicts aggressive, violent, and dehumanizing sexual activity.¹ It centers around the domination and humiliation of women. It is violent, degrading, and for the female participants, profoundly body-punishing. A peer reviewed study of 50 of the top-watched, top-selling scenes in pornography found that more than 88% of them had some form of emotional, physical or sexual violence against women.² As Dr. Gail Dines says, pornography is about "making hate" to women.³

And it has never been so accessible, to children or to adults. The internet feeds it into our homes, and to our mobile devices continuously, meaning it is often far more difficult to avoid than it is to access, and children are exposed at increasingly younger ages. The average age of exposure to online pornography – which is of particular concern – is between 10-12 years of age. Nine out of ten 8-16 year olds have viewed pornography online, most while doing homework.⁴

Pornography is a powerful teacher of beliefs and behaviours. Images are potent carriers of meaning, and unlike written text, visual information is absorbed quickly, and more readily understood to be 'truth.' This is especially true with children. Learning is also deeper in the presence of arousal, and we learn more quickly and deeply if we are rewarded for the behaviour, or observe others being rewarded for it. Because online pornography offers all of these elements, it provides the ideal conditions for learning.⁵

But what pornography teaches about relationships and the nature of sexuality is dishonest, inaccurate and harmful. Pornography teaches that sex is detached from intimacy, love, mutuality or respect. It

¹ Dines, Gail Dr./Culture Reframed, 2015, Pornography: A Public Health Crisis – US Capitol Hill Symposium, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7A62CdYyNSE>

² Bridges, AJ, Wosnitzer, R, Scharrer, E, Sun, C, Liberman, R (2010), Aggression and Sexual Behaviour in Best-Selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update, *Violence Against Women* 16(10):1065-85. (Of the 304 scenes analyzed, 88.2% contained physical aggression, and 48.7% contained verbal aggression.)

³ Dines, Gail (2015)

⁴ http://www.familysafemedia.com/pornography_statistics.html

⁵ Layden, Mary Anne, PhD, *Pornography and Violence: A New Look at Research*.

teaches that it is recreational, impersonal and adversarial. Much of what is available online teaches that violence in sex is normal and desirable. It teaches sexual narcissism; the idea that sex is not about mutuality, but rather is a one-way street in which one person's pleasure is attained at the expense of someone else's pleasure, reluctance, pain, or humiliation. It teaches sexual entitlement; that sex is a right, and something that men in particular are entitled to on their terms at any time. Pornography also influences behaviours and attitudes of men toward women.⁶ By legitimizing and normalizing extreme forms of objectification, it teaches that female bodies are primarily sexual entertainment for males, and that a woman's core value is rooted in sexual desirability.

As Dr. Bill Marshall states, this “may be pornography's most insidious influence; namely, the acceptance of the attitudes (some obvious, some more subtle) expressed in pornography. Pornography depictions of the sexuality of women and children distort the truth about desires of women and children, and legitimize men's sense of entitlement, and use of force, violence and degrading acts by the male actors.”⁷ A [recent meta-analysis of 22 studies](#) between 1978 and 2014 from seven different countries concluded that pornography consumption is associated with an increased likelihood of committing acts of verbal or physical sexual aggression, regardless of age.⁸

It is deeply troubling then that boys are getting their sex education primarily from internet pornography, beginning at very young ages when they have a limited understanding of sexuality and lack the ability to think critically about or deconstruct the messages and content in pornography. Might a boy whose expectations are shaped by pornography experience increased frustration with real life partners who say no, or have reduced awareness of the unwillingness of potential partners? Research indicates the earlier boys are exposed to pornography, the more likely they are to engage in non-consensual sex as adults.⁹

Pornography blurs the lines of consent in dangerous ways. In pornography, the female performers rarely reject sexual advances or acts, no matter how aggressive or insulting. Further, if she is reluctant or does say no, the encounter proceeds anyway, and she is ultimately depicted as enjoying it. This perpetuates the idea so prevalent on campuses and in bars that no means yes, or maybe, or “work harder to convince me and overcome my resistance.” The clear message is that no matter how much a woman protests, in the end it's what she really wants.

We find stories like those out of Western University¹⁰, or Dalhousie University¹¹ shocking, and rightfully so, but we must ask what role pornography is playing in rape culture. Could it be that kids are simply absorbing the messages in pornography and mimicking the behaviour they see, where it is commonplace to see non-consensual, aggressive sex, sexual assaults and rapes involving multiple male perpetrators and one female?

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Marshall, W.L. (2000). Revisiting the use of pornography by sexual offenders: Implications for theory and practice. *The Journal of Sexual Aggression*, p.6.

⁸ Wright, P, Tokunaga, R, Kraus, A, (2016) A Meta-Analysis of Pornography Consumption and Actual Acts of Sexual Aggression in General Population Studies, *Journal of Communication*, 66:183-205.

Doi:10.1111/jcomm.12201

⁹ Layden, Mary Anne, (2014) <https://vimeo.com/111104070>

¹⁰ http://www.westerngazette.ca/news/no-means-yes-written-on-student-house-near-king-s/article_a7092012-783f-11e6-b707-33e3282ccee9.html

¹¹ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/dalhousie-suspends-13-dentistry-students-from-clinic-amid-facebook-scandal-1.2889635>

Men who regularly use pornography show increased belief in rape myths, such as the victim actually enjoyed the rape, that she “got what she wanted,” that women who are raped don’t suffer very much, that women make false accusations of rape all the time, and so on.¹² Men who view pornography are more likely to hold a callous and adversarial view of sex; to be more accepting of sexual violence; to see women as sexual objects; to use physical or verbal coercion, or drugs or alcohol to coerce women to have sex. A growing number of studies indicate that the regular use of pornography, even pornography that does not include sexual violence, changes users’ beliefs about rape and sexual violence.¹³ As the recent report on family violence by the Chief Public Health Officer points out, “The belief that violence is acceptable and a normal way to behave can increase the risk for child abuse and intimate partner violence.”¹⁴

Regular porn users are more likely to be adult sex offenders, child molesters or incest offenders; to be more sexually attracted to children and more willing to have sex with 13-14 year olds.¹⁵ Why? Because teen, schoolgirl, and stepdaughter pornography depicting girls as young as 12 or 13 is fully in the mainstream of online pornography.¹⁶ Under Canadian law, it is illegal if the persons photographed or filmed are under the age of 18 or *depicted to be underage*. Yet this material is readily available online – to adults and children. In fact, in 2014, ‘teen’ was the top search term on PornHub, one of the top free online pornography websites.¹⁷

Research indicates that children exposed to pornography before age 18 are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviour, including earlier initiation of sex, having more sexual partners, being more likely to use drugs or alcohol during their last sexual encounter, and less likely to use contraception. They are more likely to engage in forced, non-consensual sex, and to hold less progressive gender role attitudes. Boys are more likely to perpetrate sexual harassment and see women as objects.¹⁸

Girls exposed to pornography are also absorbing messages about what is normal and desirable in sexual relationships. Girls who watch pornography are more likely to accept sexual harassment and to be victims of non-consensual sex.¹⁹ In a hyper-sexualized culture that teaches girls from a young age that what matters most is how desirable they are, girls learn to treat their bodies as things that exist to please others. Self-objectification has been identified as a “key process whereby girls learn to think of and treat their bodies as objects of others desires,”²⁰ and is easily observed on social media sites or apps. Girls are taught by pornography and mass media that in order to be visible, accepted, and popular, they need to be sexualized. A 12, 13 or 16-year old girl isn’t self-objectifying as an expression of her sexuality, she is trying to be visible in a pornified culture.

Studies have also shown a range of health consequences for habitual porn users, including:

- impotence or erectile dysfunction; meaning habitual users can get aroused for porn, but not for partners

¹² Check & Guloien (1989)

¹³ Layden, Mary Anne, (2014) <https://vimeo.co/111104070>

¹⁴ <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/canada/public-health/migration/publications/departement-ministere/state-public-health-family-violence-2016-etat-sante-publique-violence-familiale/alt/pdf-eng.pdf>

¹⁵ Layden, Mary Anne, PhD, *Pornography and Violence: A New Look at Research*

¹⁶ <http://www.headstuff.org/2017/03/we-need-to-talk-about-porn/> **warning: graphic language

¹⁷ <http://www.pornhub.com/insights/2014-year-in-review>

¹⁸ Layden, Mary Anne, PhD, *Pornography and Violence: A New Look at Research*

¹⁹ Layden, Mary Anne, PhD (2014)

²⁰ Frederickson, B.L., Roberts, T.-A (1997). Objectification Theory: Toward understanding women’s lived experience and mental health risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21, 173-206.

- changing porn tastes; viewers deviate to material once considered ‘out of bounds’²¹
- severe social anxiety and depression
- decreased working memory and concentration, lack of motivation²²

Sexual dysfunction among young men is another serious concern. One in 4 new erectile dysfunction patients is under the age of 40.²³ Young boys and men who regularly watch pornography online are being sexually conditioned to be aroused by images on a computer screen, by constant novelty, in their rooms, by themselves, with devastating consequences.

Pornography activates the reward circuitry of the brain, and repeated use can lead to compulsive behaviour and addiction. Habitual porn users become desensitized to what they’ve been viewing, and move on to more shocking or violent material, and often onto material involving teens and children. Most child porn users claim they first saw it online by accident when viewing adult porn. On sites like PornHub,²⁴ for example, this content is quite often found on the first page.

Pornography’s influence is insidious. It shapes what both boys and girls expect and accept in relationships and impacts the ability to develop and maintain healthy relationships. It contributes to a sexually toxic, violent and exploitive culture. It is associated with a range of individual health impacts, including impaired sexual function, addiction and compulsive behaviour, severe social anxiety, depression, and loss of productivity, and so on. A broad-based, multi-disciplinary public health approach is needed to address the harms of pornography to children, youth and our culture.

A public health issue is defined as one that affects individuals or societies beyond their capacity to change or correct. Once something is seen as a social or public health issue, the responsibility shifts from the affected individual to holding external social causes or influences accountable.²⁵ According to the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), public health programs target entire populations – not just individuals – by identifying and reducing health threats through collaborative action involving many sectors of society. Public health is “a combination of programs, services and policies that protect and promote the health of all Canadians.”²⁶

Pornography impacts all dynamics of health – emotional, physical, psychological, relational and spiritual. It is contributing to a sexually toxic environment, which is impacting the health of individuals and society on a number of levels. As Dr. Gail Dines has said, “Individual families can’t protect their kids from pornography. That’s like telling parents to keep their kids from breathing polluted air.”

The PHAC references several public health related activities that are relevant to a public health approach to pornography. These include Health Protection, Health Surveillance, Disease and Injury Prevention, Population Health Assessment and Health Promotion.²⁷ The Center for Disease Control

²¹ The Social Costs of Pornography, A Statement of Findings and Recommendations, The Witherspoon Institute, 2010

²² Layden, Mary Anne, PhD (2014)

²³ Cappogrosso, et al, One Patient Out of Four with Newly Diagnosed Erectile Dysfunction is a Young Man – Worrisome Picture from Everyday Clinical Practice; *Journal of Sexual Medicine*, July 2013, p.1833-1841.

²⁴ PornHub, along with most other top free porn sites, is owned by a company called MindGeek, which moved its head offices to Montreal in 2016.

²⁵ Wallack, L., Woodruff, K., Dorfman, L., & Diaz, I (1999), *News for a Change: An Advocate’s Guide to Working with the Media*, Los Angeles. Sage.)

²⁶ <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cphorsphc-respcacsp/2008/fr-rc/cphorsphc-respcacsp05a-eng.php>

²⁷ <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cphorsphc-respcacsp/2008/fr-rc/cphorsphc-respcacsp05a-eng.php>

lists four key elements of a Public Health Model: i) Define and Monitor the Problem, ii) Identify Risk and Protective Factors, iii) Develop and Test programs and Strategies, and iv) Assure widespread adoption of effective efforts.

Canada has developed strategies for dealing with mental health, addiction and family violence. These can inform the development of a strategy to address the harms of online pornography. The [Family Violence Initiative](#), for example, is a 15 department federal initiative led by the Public Health Agency of Canada, that “aims to prevent family violence, promote public awareness on its risk and protective factors, work across sectors, and support data collection, research and evaluation.”²⁸

Recommendations

1. That the Health Minister suggest this be a focus of discussion at the next Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministers Meeting.
2. That the Health Minister work with the Provincial and Territorial Ministers to develop a comprehensive Public Health Strategy to address the public health harms of online pornography.

As part of a strategy, the Minister could:

- Encourage provincial and national professional health care regulatory bodies, the Canadian Public Health Association, and the Public Health Agency of Canada to conduct research studies and to develop position statements on pornography.
 - Initiate ongoing, systematic data collection and analysis of the effects of violent sexual images online. For example, asking about pornography use and exposure on intake questionnaires for child and adult sex offenders, sex buyers, victims of sexual assault, child sex abuse and incest, individuals charged with sexual assault or harassment, etc.
 - Conduct population health assessment to understand the factors related to increasing consumption of violent sexual images online that pose potential risks to healthy relationship development, particularly among children and adolescents.
 - Establish standards for the training of a wide range of health, healing and education professionals on the impact of pornography on children, youth and the developing brain; addiction, and spousal/partner trauma
 - Encourage accurate, research-based education on sexuality, relationships and pornography’s impact and harms in schools
 - Initiate a Public Awareness and Education campaign, to ensure Canadians understand the harms of pornography consumption and are able to make informed consent choices about its use
 - Ensure warning messages/labels are posted on pornography sites and printed materials indicating the potential harms, as on cigarette packages
 - Mandate meaningful age verification strategies for pornography sites
3. That the Health Minister encourage the Minister responsible to develop legislation or agreements with internet service providers to block pornographic content by default, while still allowing adults to be able to opt-in. It should also be made mandatory for schools, libraries and other public places where children and teens may access the internet to put filters in place.

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²⁸ <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/canada/public-health/migration/publications/department-ministere/state-public-health-family-violence-2016-etat-sante-publique-violence-familiale/alt/pdf-eng.pdf>