

# New Report Confirms Smut's 'Devastating Impact'

by Joan Frawley Desmond

WASHINGTON — Recent headlines about pornography use at the Securities and Exchange Commission stirred public disgust with government officials who viewed thousands of hard-core images while Wall Street banks imploded. Yet experts and religious groups that have struggled for years to raise awareness about the destructive consequences of pornography use hope the news will contribute to a sea change in social attitudes. In fact, anti-pornography crusaders received another boost from the American Psychiatric Association, which just released new draft diagnostic guidelines that identified pornography addiction as a form of “hypersexual disorder” and thus worthy of serious study and treatment.

The breakthrough at the American Psychiatric Association provides additional context for a new report endorsed by a broad swath of academic leaders: “*The Social Costs of Pornography: A Statement of Findings and Recommendations*.” Sponsored by the Princeton University-based Witherspoon Institute, the report cites numerous social-science studies that confirm the often devastating impact of pornography on regular users, their families and society at large. It concludes with proposed guidelines for policy-makers, law enforcement, professional organizations and educators.

“While the cultural shift in attitudes about the harm caused by smoking has been quite rapid, we’re not yet there on pornography. Too many people say, ‘I have a right to it. Everybody does it,’” reported Mary Anne Layden, director of the Sexual Trauma and Psychopathology Program at the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for Cognitive Therapy. Layden co-authored the report with Mary Eberstadt, a research fellow at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution.

Americans have become attuned to the suffering and rights of victims of sexual violence, Layden observes, but they can’t explain what fuels sexual violence. Meanwhile, parents and educators are disturbingly ignorant about children’s online activities. The report summarizes the findings of numerous studies that confirm the potency and pervasiveness of Internet-supplied pornography on demand. Pornography use has been linked to sexual violence against women and children, marriage breakups and altered neurological patterns in the brains of addicts, but in a dramatic departure from past pornography use, adult movies, online images and interactive videos are now available in hotel rooms, homes, offices and public libraries, as well as on cell phones, personal laptops and office computers.

Dr. Sharon Cooper, a consultant to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, said she endorsed the report because Americans must be educated to confront an inconvenient truth: Any kind of pornography can contribute to the sexual exploitation of minors. There are an estimated 30 million digital images of children distributed online; the FBI’s cybercrime unit reported a 23-fold increase between 1996 and 2004 alone. “Child pornography on the Internet is illegal,” noted Cooper, adjunct professor in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. “But its presence results in cognitive distortions for would-be offenders. The online images of children suggest they are fair game.”

## College Campuses

Cooper cited several studies that establish a direct link between possession of child pornography and sexual contact with minors. The rise in child pornography is a pressing law-enforcement issue. But Cooper, who co-authored the textbook *Child Exploitation*, contends that children who consume a steady diet of adult porn are also at risk for becoming predators. “When children access adult pornography, we see an increase in offenses,” she said. “A diet of porn creates ‘disinhibited’ behavior, and that can put their peers and younger relatives at risk.”

Both Layden and Cooper challenge public complacency regarding the dangers of adult pornography. “Most don’t see the connection between the ‘permission giving’ role of rape in adult pornography and the problem of sexual violence directed against women,” said Layden. “They still say, ‘That can’t be true.’” But the cause-and-effect relationship between pornography and sexual violence is just one issue addressed in the Witherspoon report. The

pervasive impact of pornography also has reconfigured the social interactions of young Americans in ways that don't bode well for their future marriage prospects.

According to the report, "Every second, there are approximately 28,258 users viewing pornography. Every day, there are approximately 6,000 online searches for child pornography. In 2005, 13,585 hard-core pornographic video/DVD titles were released in the United States, up from 1,300 titles in 1988. One recent study of undergraduate and graduate students ... found that 69% of men and 10% of women in this sample viewed pornography more than once a month."

Bradford Wilcox, director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, notes that "pornography is one of the popular cultural influences that is undercutting the quality and stability of marriages. The mostly male viewers begin to discount the attractiveness of their own wife and become more interested in a great variety of sexual practices and partners, increasing the likelihood of divorce." The "mainstreaming" of pornography into American culture is fueled by popular entertainment, particularly music videos targeted at young viewers. U.S. college campuses celebrate pornography as a form of entertainment and creative expression. College administrators typically defend official sponsorship of pornography films and presentations by adult movie stars as a First Amendment right.

Feminist-minded faculty members once repudiated pornography for inciting violence against women. But the anti-pornography alliance forged between feminists and religious groups has largely receded. Today, the drumbeat of values-free female sexual empowerment can be heard in sex columns on university news websites and "sex positive" activities on campus. "It's ironic and sad that liberals rush to defend pornography. If other minority groups were portrayed in media as women are in pornography, there would be an outcry," observed Pamela Paul, author of *Pornified: How Pornography Is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families*. "Traditionally, liberals have been wary of corporate maneuvering of popular opinion, but they don't see how the porn industry has dictated to young men and women what is 'sex positive,'" said Paul, who hopes the American Psychiatric Association's policy shift will lead to a more informed consensus on the dangers of pornography use.

### **Addressing Addiction**

The Witherspoon report states that "both adolescent boys and girls who are exposed to a sexualized media environment are more likely to view women as sexual objects." The report cites a 2009 study at Princeton that used MRI scans to document how pornography encourages men to perceive women "more as objects than as humans." Other research suggests that exposure to sexually explicit material can harm the emotional health and encourage "sexually risky behavior" in teenagers of both sexes.

This isn't news to Bishop Robert Finn of the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo. He has collaborated with Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, Kan., to establish outreach programs for adult Catholics, theology-of-the-body study groups, and 12-step programs for pornography addicts and support groups for wives, who often blame themselves for their husbands' behavior. "Pornography can cause a physical addiction as powerful as cocaine and has proven to cause people to act out sexually against others. It "takes advantage of loneliness, sadness, poor self-image and lust. Use of pornography intensifies all these hurts and increases secretive behavior and isolation from loved ones," said Bishop Finn. The bishop applauds the decision by some local hotel owners to exclude pay-per-view adult movies: "They have accepted less profit so they can spare their patrons from these temptations." But he knows the ultimate goal — the eradication of pornography — requires a power greater than good intentions. "This is a spiritual battleground that requires supernatural help and every human effort to break," he said. Still, Mary Anne Layden believes the Witherspoon report is positioned to reshape the national conversation about pornography, and that should bolster local efforts by religious leaders like Bishop Finn.

The signatories of the Witherspoon report offer wide-ranging proposals that encourage therapists, educators and law enforcement to rethink their tolerance of pornography and become better informed about its dangers. "Obscenity laws are not being enforced — except regarding child porn. If you only penalize the extreme elements of pornography, people assume that everything is okay," Layden pointed out. "We need to learn that this is undermining the very foundation of the culture and that we want to target the most typical, accessible images."

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