

OVERVIEW

Purpose of the Report

From certain perspectives, the question of restraining the availability and use of pornography is a relatively straightforward issue. For the active moralist, for example, it is an instance in which the government should fulfill its obligation to provide a healthy public atmosphere for the development of its citizens. For the ardent feminist, government restrictions can combat a system that promotes the active subjugation of women and the fostering of the public perception that women actually desire subjugation. For the avid civil libertarian, restrictions in this area should be resisted as dangerous indicators of a government's capacity to control information and thus undercut our basic freedoms. Although the particulars of governmental action are not resolved by any of these general positions, the limits of acceptable action are clearly set by them.

This report does not attempt to side with, reconcile, or even comment upon the general positions that can be taken on restricting pornography. The aim is much more modest. This report summarizes the consensus of a group of social scientists and mental health professionals regarding the nature and extent of evidence about the effects of pornography, especially the effects on children and adolescents. The purpose of this assessment is not to prescribe public policy. To assume that social science or clinical practice offers such dispositive wisdom would be to greatly overestimate both the scope and accuracy of professional knowledge. Public policy decisions are better decided by the balancing of tensions engaged in by judges, legislators, and social critics.

An examination like the present one informs those more central to the policy process about the views of a group of social scientists regarding what is known in an area and what yet needs to be known in order to make more definitive statements. In performing this function, social scientists help to clarify the evidence that supports or refutes arguments for certain courses of social action. Expert commentary on the validity of assumptions of fact or the adequacy of theory is valuable to the policy formation process because it highlights the line between accepted social science evidence and values or morality. Ideally, it can thus force discussion of these latter issues to be done more openly.

Previous Investigations Into the Effects of Pornography

The Surgeon General's workshop that generated this report was not the first governmentally sponsored effort to examine the question of the social effects of pornography. In the late 1960's, the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography was formed, and after funding much research and holding many hearings, released its report in 1970. Its findings were basically summarized in its introduction: "Empirical research designed to clarify the issue has found no reliable evidence that exposure to sexually explicit materials plays a significant role in the causation of delinquent or criminal sexual behavior among youth or adults." The report was criticized by both Commission members (Cline, 1970) and others (see Krafska, 1985) for flaws in the design of some commissioned research, misinterpretations of some of the research, limitations of the scope of much of the research done. Despite criticisms, however, the general conclusion of the Commission—that pornography has no marked social effects—has continued to be the generally accepted and often cited wisdom in this area.

In response to a growing concern over child pornography in particular, both houses of Congress held hearings into the issue of child pornography in 1977. During these hearings, witnesses estimated that between 300,000 and 600,000 children were involved in the production of pornography and that more than 260 child pornography publications were being produced (Pierce, 1984). Subsequent to these hearings, the federal government and nearly all state governments enacted laws against the production, distribution, and possession of child pornography.

In 1979, the British government sponsored the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship. The conclusions of this Committee, based in large part on a research review by Yaffe and Nelson (1979) were similar to those of the 1970 United States Commission on Obscenity and Pornography. Like its predecessor, however, this committee report was also criticized for its failure to include what were considered relevant research studies (Court, 1980).

The Canadian government convened the Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution, which delivered its report in 1985. The Committee found that while individual research projects had shown some of the effects of pornography, as a whole, the research was contradictory and inconclusive, and could not be relied upon as a guide for policy formation.

The United States Attorney General's Commission on Pornography was formed in 1985 in response to a number of concerns: (a) continuing criticism of the findings of previous commissions; (b) recent technological advances and changes in social standards that had allowed both youth and adults easier access to pornography; (c) recent research (e.g., Malamuth & Spinner, 1980; Smith, 1976) indicating that the

content of both "hardcore" and traditional "softcore" pornography had changed in the 1970's and 1980's to include considerably more sexually violent material; and (d) preliminary research suggesting that these new forms of pornography had different effects on viewers' attitudes and behaviors than the pornography studied earlier. These developments called for a reassessment of the possible impact of the changes in the content and patterns of use. Moreover, a new research approach had emerged, emphasizing that the message communicated by the pornography might have at least as much effect as the explicitness of the sexual content, and an evaluation of new findings thus seemed in order.

The mandate of the Commission was in part to "determine the nature, extent, and impact on society of pornography in the United States, and to make specific recommendations to the Attorney General concerning more effective ways in which the spread of pornography could be contained, consistent with constitutional guarantees." Although no new research was funded by this Commission, it did undertake public hearings in which current research was explained and information about the current manufacture and distribution of pornography was gathered. Numerous witnesses who viewed themselves as victims of pornography also testified.

The Surgeon General of the United States was asked to testify before the Attorney General's Commission, and subsequently agreed to provide the Attorney General with a report summarizing the evidence that was available from the scientific community regarding the effects of pornography on public health. In order to provide this information, the Surgeon General's Workshop on Pornography was convened, consisting of 20 members from the communications, medical, mental health, and social science fields. The goal of the Workshop was to provide the Surgeon General and the U.S Public Health Service, as well as the Attorney General's Commission, with information regarding three general questions: (1) what is known, with a reasonable degree of certainty, about the effects of pornography on the mental and physical health of those in the United States, especially on children and young people; (2) what additional effects are justifiably suspected and how these posited effects could be verified or refuted ; and (3) what actions could be taken by those in the medical, mental health, and public health fields in order to combat any negative effects of pornography.

Papers were prepared by five experts who had either conducted research into the effect of pornography or were familiar with the effects on youth who had participated in the production of pornography. These papers and discussant reactions to the papers served as focal points for the first part of the Workshop. Three consensus sessions were then held: one to summarize current knowledge about the effects of pornography on children and adolescents, a second to suggest prevention and intervention measures for those who might be or have been affected by pornography (either as con-

sumers or as participants in its production), and the third to outline a course of future research.

This report captures the essence of the discussions held during the two days of the Surgeon General's Workshop on Pornography. A general discussion of the process of research in this area is presented first. Then, the conclusions of the Workshop participants regarding the effects of pornography are presented, as well as the evidence upon which these conclusions were based. Finally, recommendations for prevention and treatment and for future research are given.