

Submission  
No 14

## INQUIRY INTO IMPACTS OF HARMFUL PORNOGRAPHY ON MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

**Organisation:** Anglican Church, Diocese of Sydney (Social Issues Committee)

**Date Received:** 30 October 2024

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# Anglican Church Diocese of Sydney

28 October 2024

Standing Committee on Social Issues  
socialissues@parliament.nsw.gov.au

## **Submission to the inquiry into the ‘Impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health’**

1. We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry of the Standing Committee on Social Issues into the ‘Impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health’.
2. This submission is made by the Social Issues Committee of the Anglican Church Diocese of Sydney (the Diocese). The Diocese is one of twenty-three dioceses that comprise the Anglican Church of Australia. The Diocese is an unincorporated voluntary association comprising 270 parishes and various bodies constituted or incorporated under the *Anglican Church of Australia Trust Property Act 1917* (NSW) and the *Anglican Church of Australia (Bodies Corporate) Act 1938* (NSW). These bodies include 38 Anglican schools, Anglicare Sydney (a large social welfare institution, whose community services include family, parenting and youth support) and Anglican Youthworks. The Diocese, through its various component bodies and through its congregational life, makes a rich contribution to the social capital of our nation, through programs involving social welfare, education, health and aged care, overseas aid, youth work and not least the proclamation of the Christian message of hope for all people.
3. We give consent for this submission to be published. Our contact details are as follows:  
Full Name:           The Very Reverend Sandy Grant
4. We are highly supportive of the NSW Government’s ongoing efforts to address the domestic, sexual and other forms of abuse and violence that are rife within NSW society. We concur that the widespread dissemination of pornography, especially amongst

young people, contributes to the prevalence of this societal ill and so commend the NSW Government for being the first Australian state to hold an inquiry of this sort.

5. Our submission contains a range of general remarks relevant to the inquiry's Terms of Reference. However, we would also like to direct the Committee's attention to the more detailed submission made by Rev Dr Marshall Ballantine-Jones. Dr Ballantine-Jones is a licensed member of clergy within the Sydney Anglican Diocese. He has completed a doctorate focused on the societal and personal impacts of pornography as well as solutions to pornography addiction. He also has extensive pastoral experience amongst young people and, in more recent years, with those who are battling pornography addiction.

Dr Ballantine-Jones was the chair of the Sydney Anglican Archbishop's Taskforce for Resisting Pornography (who produced the [resistporn.org](https://resistporn.org) website).<sup>1</sup> We highly commend his submission to the Committee. We are particularly appreciative of his more detailed engagement with data concerning the prevalence, impacts of, and proposals about addressing pornography consumption in society and especially amongst young people.

6. We note the inquiry's focus on the 'Impacts of harmful pornography' is made with particular reference to pornography that is violent and misogynistic; AI or deepfake generated; detrimental to body image, respect and consent; and particularly damaging to young people and minority groups. We commend attention being paid to these matters. However, we would strongly encourage the Committee not to limit its consideration merely to forms of pornography it has subjectively determined to be harmful, but to instead recognise that *all* pornography is inherently harmful—to the individual consumer, those they are (or may be in the future) in a relationship with, and society more broadly.
7. Indeed, pornography's impacts are often heightened amongst particularly vulnerable individuals—especially young people whose brains are still undergoing full development, individuals who are susceptible to exploitation, those with poor mental health, specific disabilities or who are otherwise vulnerable. However, we fear that a narrow targeting of pornography use amongst and impacts upon these specific groups will fail to protect them from the “downstream” effects of pornography's more pervasive consumption within society.

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<sup>1</sup> Resistporn.org. 2024. <https://resistporn.org/>.

8. Pornography consumption amongst adults produces consequences that are not, indeed, cannot be restricted to those users alone but inevitably flow downstream to those who are younger, more vulnerable, and, by virtue of their situation, less able to respond in mature and healthy ways when exposed to pornography and its ills.

For instance, it is very difficult for a society to maintain that pornography is highly detrimental to young and vulnerable people while normalising its consumption amongst adults. It is even more difficult to facilitate ready access to pornography amongst those adults while successfully restricting and regulating the same within other demographic groups. Furthermore, young people model much of their thinking and behaviour on the adults in their lives. If those adults are allowing pornography to shape their psychology (especially through the cultivation of misogynistic, violent or objectifying attitudes towards women), this will have inevitable flow-on effects for the younger people in their lives—male and female alike.

9. If society is to protect young people and other vulnerable members from the devastatingly harmful impacts of pornography, we must first recognise that *pornography itself* is ubiquitously harmful rather than this harm being limited to certain types of pornography as consumed by certain people.
10. The societal regulation of cigarette smoking provides an apt analogy. While certain members of society are highly susceptible to tobacco addiction and its ill effects, Australian society has come to recognise that smoking results in highly detrimental physiological and psychological effects on *all* those who consume the product, as well as those around them and society more generally. We also came to recognise the extent to which the tobacco industry was highly motivated to ensure its products would remain easily accessible to an ever-growing market of consumers. And so, even as our society recognised the rights of consenting adults to smoke tobacco should they so wish, we declined to hold that as an absolute right able to be exercised at the expense of others. To protect all members of our community, and vulnerable members in particular, our society implemented strict restrictions on tobacco access and consumption. Similar discussions are currently underway about the extensive societal harm caused to Australians by the gambling industry. We believe it is urgent we now do the same with regard to pornography.
11. Scientific research is conclusive: prolonged exposure to pornography results in significant and destructive neurological, biological and psychological harm to the individual. We refer the Committee to the data, analysis and references found at <https://resistporn.org/about/porn-harms-the-user/> as well as the discussion contained in Dr Ballantine-Jones' submission.
12. While the neurological impacts of prolonged pornography exposure are concerning for all users, it is particularly harmful for those whose brains are still in development (and,

by logical implication, those whose intellectual ability may be otherwise delayed). Forensic paediatrician Dr Sharon Cooper's research suggests that:

...children and youth are more vulnerable to pornographic images than adults because of mirror neurons in the brain, which convince people that they are actually experiencing what they see. Mirror neurons play an important role in how children learn. Children learn in large part by imitation, with mirror neurons involved in the process of observing what other people do and imitating those behaviors.<sup>2</sup>

13. Pornography use is also linked with (and in some cases, predictive of) poor mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, personality disorders, relational disassociation, poor self-esteem, addiction and more. Its consumption places young people at particular risk of not only experiencing such detrimental mental health outcomes themselves but also of being exploited by others as a result.
14. Exposure to pornography also encourages young people to engage in more permissive, harmful and, at times, violent sexual activity. For instance, young consumers of pornography tend to exhibit higher rates of 'casual dating and "one-night stands," [...] a higher incidence of "friends with benefits" behavior, [hook] up often with their sexual partners, and [intend] to have more sexual partners in the future'.<sup>3</sup> A direct connection exists between the consumption of pornography and young people engaging in substantially risky, unsafe and destructive sexual behaviours.
15. Pornography also exposes young people and other at-risk individuals to increased sexual aggression, objectification and destructive attitudes towards others, particularly women. For instance:

A landmark study of 304 scenes from a random sample of the top 275 selling adult movies in 2005 revealed an extraordinary portrayal of the level of violence in contemporary pornography. It showed that 88% of scenes contained physical violence (including choking, spanking, gagging, slapping, and hair-pulling); 49% contained verbal violence; 94% of the recipients of violence were women; and 95% of the violence was received neutrally or with pleasure.<sup>4</sup>

16. In the twenty years since that landmark study was published, violently inclined amateur pornography has proliferated across the internet. It is now able to be uploaded and

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<sup>2</sup> Allison Baxter, 'How Pornography Harms Children: The Advocate's Role.' *Child L. Prac.* 33 (2014): 113.

<sup>3</sup> S. Chatterjee and S.K. Kar, 'Teen Pornography: An Emerging Mental Health Challenge'. *Journal of Psychosexual Health.* 2023;5(1):30-34.

<sup>4</sup> "Porn Harms the User – Resist Pornography." 2016. Resistporn.org. <https://resistporn.org/about/porn-harms-the-user/>. Referencing, Bridges, A.J., et al., *Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best-Selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update.* Violence Against Women, 2010. 16(10): p. 1065-1085.

downloaded at a click of a button by people of any age across the globe, and then shared with countless others at another click of a button. The grassroots pornographic industry has proven itself to be not only tragically resilient (propped up as it is by a highly motivated industry) but also tragically complicit in the normalisation of violence and misogyny within the sexual practices of young people.

For example, in July 2024, the Sydney Morning Herald reported that the mainstream pornographic practice known as “sexual choking”—which features heavily in contemporary pornography—is now ‘so widespread that 57 per cent of those aged 18 to 35 have been strangled during sex [... and a study of 4702 young people around Australia showed that] more than half (51 per cent) had strangled a partner during sex’.<sup>5</sup> The same article notes that almost 33 per cent of those who had been choked during a sex act had first experienced it between the ages of 19 and 21.

17. Much more could be said about how the impacts of pornography’s consumption upon the individual user. All of this suggests NSW society must urgently implement increasingly comprehensive education, regulation, and restriction to pornography. And yet the harm is not limited to the individual user alone.
18. Pornography consumption has highly detrimental effects on those the user has relationships with. Young people who consume violent pornography are significantly more likely to victimise others through teen dating violence (TDV). Research suggests that, ‘Boys exposed to violent pornography were 2-3 times more likely to report sexual TDV perpetration [...] while girls exposed to violent pornography were over 1.5 times more likely to perpetrate threatening TDV compared to their non-exposed counterparts’.<sup>6</sup> Studies undertaken amongst women who “were abused by a romantic partner revealed a positive association between women’s reports of their pornography use and women’s sexual IPV, rape, and stalking victimization”.<sup>7</sup>
19. Not only are the intimate partners of pornography consumers placed at heightened risk of physical and psychological harm, but many such persons, especially women, are conditioned to accept sexually aggressive and violent victimisation as normal and indeed expected.
20. However, research suggests that pornography consumption doesn’t need to result in actual violence or victimisation to still have harmful impacts on others, whether that be intimate partners (e.g., pornography consistently decreases relational trust and

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<sup>5</sup> Wendy Tuohy. 2024. “Sexual Strangulation Can Mean ‘Minutes to Death’, yet Half of Young People Do It.” The Sydney Morning Herald. July 2024. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/sexual-strangulation-can-mean-minutes-to-death-yet-half-of-young-people-do-it-20240620-p5jni9.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Whitney L. Rostad, et al., “The Association Between Exposure To Violent Pornography And Teen Dating Violence In Grade 10 High School Students.” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 48 (2019): 2137-2147.

<sup>7</sup> Megan J. Brem, et al., “Problematic Pornography Use And Physical And Sexual Intimate Partner Violence Perpetration Among Men In Batterer Intervention Programs.” *Journal Of Interpersonal Violence* 36, no. 11-12 (2021): NP6085-NP6105.

satisfaction in marriage), or members of society more broadly (e.g., one study recorded that ‘eight-out-of-ten young women (77%) claim that pornography has pressured them “to look a certain way”, whilst 75% say that it has led to pressure “to act a certain way”’.<sup>8</sup>

21. Pornography facilitates prostitution, caters to paedophilia and is responsible for the horrific exploitation and entrapment of countless vulnerable individuals, the majority of whom are women and children. For example, the New York Times revealed that in 2020, the internet site Pornhub was:

...infested with rape videos. It monetizes child rapes, revenge pornography, spy cam videos of women showering, racist and misogynist content, and footage of women being asphyxiated in plastic bags. A search for “girls under18” (no space) or “14yo” leads in each case to more than 100,000 videos.<sup>9</sup>

22. Contemporary pornography production and consumption is a scourge on our society and presents a real and active threat to the mental, emotional and physical health of its members. A powerful and highly motivated pornography industry is committed to normalising the medium amongst new generations and so conditioning them towards ever more dangerous, destructive and damaging sexual attitudes and behaviours. Pornography’s pervasive consumption is cultivating increased violence towards women, feeding ongoing domestic abuse and placing children at an ever more significant risk of predation.
23. We urge the Standing Committee on Social Issues and the NSW Government more broadly to consult with experts in the field (including Rev Dr Marshall Ballantine-Jones) to determine what increased educative and regulative efforts urgently may be implemented to address the highly detrimental impacts of all pornography on all members of our society.
24. Once again, thank you for the opportunity to make this submission for your consideration and your attention to this critical matter.

Yours sincerely,

The Very Reverend Sandy Grant  
Chair of Social Issues Committee, Anglican Church Diocese of Sydney

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<sup>8</sup> “Porn Harms Relationships – Resist Pornography.” 2016. Resistporn.org. <https://resistporn.org/about/porn-harms-relationships/>. Referencing, Parker, I. and I.f.P.P. Research, *Young people, sex and relationships: The new norms*. 2014: Institute for Public Policy Research.

<sup>9</sup> Kristof, Nicholas. 2020. “The Children of Pornhub.” *The New York Times*, December 4, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/04/opinion/sunday/pornhub-rape-trafficking.html>.