

Submission  
No 27

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

**Organisation:** Australian Christian Lobby

**Date Received:** 4 November 2024

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# **SUBMISSION:**

## **NSW Government Inquiry: Impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health**

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**AUSTRALIAN CHRISTIAN LOBBY**

### About Australian Christian Lobby

Australian Christian Lobby's vision is to see Christian principles and ethics influencing the way we are governed, do business, and relate to each other as a community. ACL seeks to see a compassionate, just and moral society through having the public contributions of the Christian faith reflected in the political life of the nation.

With around 250,000 supporters, ACL facilitates professional engagement and dialogue between the Christian constituency and government, allowing the voice of Christians to be heard in the public square. ACL is neither party-partisan nor denominationally aligned. ACL representatives bring a Christian perspective to policy makers in Federal, State and Territory Parliaments.

[acl.org.au](http://acl.org.au)



Government of New South Wales  
GPO Box 5341,  
Sydney,  
NSW 2001.

Lodged via email to [Committee.SocialIssues@parliament.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Committee.SocialIssues@parliament.nsw.gov.au)

1 November 2024

Dear Sir/Madam,

**RE: NSW Government Inquiry: Impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health**

On behalf of the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL), I welcome the opportunity to make this submission in response to the *NSW Government Inquiry: Impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health*. The ACL would be very willing to meet with the NSW Government to discuss this submission.

Yours Sincerely,

**Joshua Rowe**  
ACL State Director NSW

## INTRODUCTION

In 1987, on the basis of information considered by a US government *Workshop on Pornography and Public Health*, the Surgeon General concluded that “pornography does stimulate attitudes and behavior that lead to gravely negative consequences for individuals and for society.”<sup>1</sup> Despite this conclusion being the subject of widespread consensus around the world and for so many years, policy actions taken to deal with this public health problem have been notable for their inadequacy.<sup>2</sup> The problem has only become more urgent with the advent of broadband access and the increased connectivity of teenagers associated with increased take-up of smartphones since 2012.<sup>3</sup>

In 2017, the ACL commissioned research into the impact of pornography on various aspects of public health. The report that resulted – *Pornography as a Public Health Issue: Promoting Violence and Exploitation of Children, Youth, and Adults* (hereafter, “*PPHI*”) – was subsequently published in a US peer-reviewed academic journal.<sup>4</sup> It has been downloaded over 5,000 times in 125 different countries. However, as a 2023 update to this report noted, “[o]nly 4% of those downloads come from government agencies, almost all of these are American. This raises the concern that the information in this report regarding the harms being caused by pornography – harms which particularly impact women and young people – is not reaching the people who most need it.”<sup>5</sup>

In the intervening five years since the report was first published, the evidence that pornography is causally connected to rising rates of sexual violence, including peer-on-peer sexual violence experienced by children, has only grown. Research conducted for the British Board of Film Classification in 2020 added still further support to the growing body of evidence that pornography access is affecting the way young people understand healthy relationships, sex, body image and consent. The Australian federal government’s 2020 *Protecting the Age of Innocence* report, recognising the evidence of harm, supported the implementation of age verification as a means of reducing the exposure of children and teenagers to online pornography.<sup>6</sup>

In the hope that it will facilitate the work of this inquiry, the ACL has taken this opportunity to attach our *PPHI* report (see Appendix A) and to highlight information of relevance to the following items in the terms of reference:

- (a) age of first exposure to pornography and impacts of early exposure to pornography;
- (c) impacts on body image;
- (d) the relationship between pornography use and respect and consent education;
- (f) the impact of exposure to violent and/or misogynistic pornography on children, teenagers and young adults;
- (i) the effectiveness of current restrictions on access to pornography and consideration of any need to improve these; and,

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<sup>1</sup> “[Report of the Surgeon General's Workshop on Pornography and Public Health](#)”, *American Psychologist*, vol. 42(10), October 1987, 944–945.

<sup>2</sup> Paul C Perrin 1, Hala N Madanat, Michael D Barnes, Athena Carolan, Robert B Clark, Natasha Ivins, Steven R Tuttle, Heidi A Vogeler, Patrick N Williams, “[Health education's role in framing pornography as a public health issue: local and national strategies with international implications](#)”, *Promotion and Education*, vol. 15(1), 2008, 11–8. doi: 10.1177/1025382307088093.

<sup>3</sup> Professor Jean Twengy, Keynote address to the Social Media Summit in Sydney, NSW and SA governments, 10 October 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth Taylor, “[Pornography as a Public Health Issue: Promoting Violence and Exploitation of Children, Youth, and Adults](#)”, *Dignity*, vol. 3(2), 2018, 8ff.

<sup>5</sup> Attached as “Appendix A”.

<sup>6</sup> [Protecting the Age of Innocence](#), Commonwealth of Australia, February 2020.

(k) any other related matters.

## PARTICULAR ITEMS IN THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

### (a) age of first exposure to pornography and impacts of early exposure to pornography

An increase in the number of children being exposed to pornography at ever-younger ages is partly a function of technology, particularly driven by the advent of the smartphone. In only three years, between 2008 and 2011, as the smartphone was taken up, the percentage of children under the age of 13 exposed to pornography jumped from 14% to 49%.<sup>7</sup> Smartphones accounted for 79% of pornographic internet content in Australia in 2022, compared with 17% streamed through desktop computers.<sup>8</sup> According to the Commonwealth government report, *Protecting the Age of Innocence*, 69% of boys and 23% of girls first viewed pornography at age 13 or younger.<sup>9</sup>

A 2015 study by the UK's National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Childline found that nearly 10% of children aged 12–13 years old expressed worry that they were addicted to pornography, and 18% said that they had seen images that shocked or upset them. 12% admitted to making or being a part of a sexually explicit video.<sup>10</sup>

Research also suggests that children and adolescents may be disproportionately vulnerable to the negative consequences of exposure to sexually explicit material.<sup>11</sup> Puberty is a period of significant and critical physical, emotional, cognitive, social and sexual development. Studies indicate that lifelong sexual tastes are formed in puberty.<sup>12</sup> Concerns that the sexual acts depicted in pornography become normative – that vanilla pornography viewing habits will evolve to include more extreme content – apply to all age groups but are particularly acute for young people, whose sexual tastes are still being formed.

ACL's *PPHI* report details how early pornography exposure is associated with an increased likelihood of various types of risky sexual behaviour - including heteroanal sex, oral sex and multiple partner sex - and with an associated increased risk of sexually transmitted infections in young people, with

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<sup>7</sup> C. Sun, A. Bridges, J.A. Johnson and M.B. Ezzell, "Pornography and the Male Sexual Script: an analysis of consumption and sexual relations," *Archive of Sexual Behaviour*, vol. 45(4), May 2016, pp. 983–94. (Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25466233>), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-014-0391-2>.)

Seventy percent of porn viewing in Australia is over portable devices. "Going Down Under: Australia," Porn Hub, 5 November 2015. (Available at: <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/pornhub-australia>).

<sup>8</sup> "2022 Year in Review", *PornHub Insights*, 8 December 2022. (Available at: <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2022-year-in-review#devices-tech>).

<sup>9</sup> *Protecting the Age of Innocence*, 36, citing Collective Shout's, submission to this inquiry (Submission 178, pp. 4-5).

<sup>10</sup> Patrick Wintour, op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> E.W. Owens, R.J. Behun, J.C. Manning, R.C. Reid, "The impact of internet pornography on adolescents: a review of the research," *Sex Addict Compulsivity*, vol. 19, 2012, pp. 99–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720162.2012.660431>; Frances E. Jensen and Amy Ellis Nutt, *The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist's Survival Guild to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults*, New York, 2015); Tamara L. Doremus-Fitzwater, Elena I. Varlinskaya, and Linda P. Spear, "Motivational Systems in Adolescence: Possible Implications for Age Differences in Substance Abuse and Other Risk-Taking Behaviors," *Brain and Cognition*, vol. 71(1), 2010, pp. 114–123. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bandc.2009.08.008>

<sup>12</sup> "Porn, A User's Manual: Hardcore, abundant and free: what is online pornography doing to sexual tastes—and youngsters' minds?" *The Economist*, 26 September 2015. (Available at: <http://www.economist.com/news/international/21666113-hardcore-abundant-and-free-what-online-pornography-doing-sexual-tastesand>)

potentially deleterious consequences for fertility. (Please see pp. 22–34 of *PPHI* for details). In addition, there is an increased risk in unwanted sexual behaviours up to and including rape (*PPHI*, pp. 34–38).

Unsurprisingly, experiences of sexual violence have long-term consequences for the victims of this abuse, and this shows up clearly in US CDC data monitoring risk factors for youth:

*“In 2021, nearly 30% of female students drank alcohol during the past 30 days. Almost 20% of female students experienced sexual violence by anyone during the past year and 14% had ever been physically forced to have sex. Although these numbers are high, the rates of poor mental health and suicidal thoughts and behaviors are even higher. In 2021, almost 60% of female students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the past year and nearly 25% made a suicide plan.”<sup>13</sup>*

Those who habitually use pornography, particularly young people, are learning and reinforcing associations between what they see in pornography and feelings of gratification that will ultimately prove detrimental to their ability to form sexually satisfying relationships with real people.<sup>14</sup> Pornography use compounds the feelings of social isolation (which is also a predisposing factor in pornography use)<sup>15</sup> and exacerbates anti-social behaviours (*PPHI*, pp. 23–24).

### (c) impacts on body image

The connection between pornography viewing and lower body image (in girls) and anxiety about sexual performance (in boys) has been recognised for over a decade. In 2012, examining the extensive body of international research on the effects of exposure to pornography in adolescence, Eric Owens and his colleagues listed several behaviours associated with more frequent consumption of pornography for adolescents. These include:

- attitudes towards sex that regard it as primarily physical and casual, rather than affectionate and relational;
- greater sexual uncertainty due to dissonance between the sexual attitudes and beliefs communicated through pornography and those instilled by families or schools;
- beliefs that pornography can contribute to a more stimulating sex life;
- stronger preoccupation with sex to the exclusion of other thoughts; high levels of distraction;
- fewer progressive gender role attitudes for both males and females; acceptance of the narrative of male dominance and female submission;
- increased likelihood that adolescents, regardless of gender, would regard women as sex objects, sexual playthings, eager to fulfil male sexual desires;
- positive attitudes toward casual or recreational sex, uncommitted sexual exploration and extramarital sexual relations;
- increased likelihood of having casual intercourse with a friend, group sex, oral sex, anal sex and using drugs or alcohol during sex;
- earlier reported ages for sexual intercourse;

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<sup>13</sup> “Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary and Trends Report 2011–2021”, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Paul J. Wright, Robert S. Tokunaga, Ashley Kraus, and Elyssa Klannm, “Pornography Consumption and Satisfaction: A Meta-Analysis,” *Human Communication Research*, vol. 43(3), March 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12108>

<sup>15</sup> Mark H. Butler et al., “Pornography Use and Loneliness: A Bi-Directional Recursive Model and Pilot Investigation,” *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 7 March 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2017.1321601>

- among boys, increased sexual harassment of female peers;
- increased insecurity for boys about their ability to perform sexually;
- increased insecurity for girls about body image; and
- increased levels of social maladjustment.<sup>16</sup>

Those adolescents with lower degrees of social integration or who lack functional support networks of friends and family seem most susceptible to being drawn to pornography, consuming pornography more frequently, and being more adversely affected by this exposure. (See *PPHI*, p. 24).

#### (d) the relationship between pornography use and respect and consent education

It is common sense to suppose that the visual tutor of pornography is unlikely to be countered by subsequent information delivered in the classroom about appropriate sexual behaviour. Consent education may raise general awareness among students of some unhealthy aspects of pornography consumption, but this information is unlikely to override the narrative developed by prior engagement with pornographic content.

For this reason, our submission has not focused on the issues raised in items (h) and (i) in the terms of reference. Although it is important to ensure that education programs and resources to support parents in educating their children about pornography are optimised, the priority should be to address the question of how to prevent the exposure of children to pornography.

In and of themselves, improved educational material cannot be expected to counteract the impact of pornographic messaging. Indeed, care needs to be taken to ensure that consent education – intended to address the harms of pornography exposure – does not itself become the means of exposing children to novel sexual concepts and normalising these concepts.

#### (f) the impact of exposure to violent and/or misogynistic pornography on children, teenagers and young adults

Pornography perpetuates various myths about rape and sexual coercion – that women enjoy it, or, even if they don't enjoy it, that they deserve it; that they are 'dirty sluts' who 'asked for it.' Women in pornography never say 'no,' and even when they do, the projected narrative is that 'they don't really mean it.' The sexual excitement generated for the viewer is predicated upon the woman's powerlessness and the man's (or men's) unrestricted prerogative to do whatever he wants to her. It is abundantly clear that the fantasy world depicted in pornography is impacting real-world behaviours, with real-world consequences.

The latest NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR) figures released in June 2024 show a 42.1% increase in sexual assault reports since 2020 (up 9.2% per year on average). According to Executive Director of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Jackie Fitzgerald, "the increase is mostly driven by a rise in adult sexual assault victims (up by 62% or 1,606 additional incidents) ... Historical child sexual assault reports also increased by 92% or 1,137 additional incidents."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Owens, E.W., Behun, R.J., Manning, J.C. and Reid, R.C., "The impact of internet pornography on adolescents: a review of the research," *Sex Addict Compulsivity*, vol. 19, 2012, pp. 99–122, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720162.2012.660431>

<sup>17</sup> "[Significant rise in four major criminal offences in NSW since 2019](#)", *NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research*, 13 June 2024.

According to Australian Institute of Health and Welfare figures relating to family, domestic and sexual violence, 59% of recorded sexual assault victims had an age at incident under 18 years in 2022, meaning that sexual assault is disproportionately affecting children and teenagers.

Statistics on their own hardly do justice to the victims of these behaviours. Each one of these numbers represents a life impacted negatively, with flow-on effects for friends and family. In 2020, the ABC told the story of Kimberly, who was assaulted at school (including in the classroom) by boys inspired by pornography.<sup>18</sup> These assaults are acknowledged to be under-reported, but the fact that there were 1121 such assaults in NSW schools in 2022 – an increase of 55% from the previous year – demonstrates that something must be done.<sup>19</sup>

*PPHI* includes further examples of how behaviours that mimic porn scripts are affecting Australian women. Examples include:

- the death of Lynette Daley in 2011 from severe internal haemorrhaging caused by ‘fisting’ from her sexual partner (*PPHI*, p. 13–14);
- the 2017 gang rape of a mentally impaired 16-year-old girl by three men, aged 25–27, in Sydney (*PPHI*, p. 14–16);
- the experience of young women being choked during sex by young men who apparently expect them to enjoy this experience (*PPHI*, p. 16–20).

#### (i) the effectiveness of current restrictions on access to pornography and consideration of any need to improve these

Restrictions on pornography apply mainly to print media or free-to-air TV ratings systems and therefore do not affect pornography accessed over broadband internet (and particularly via the smartphone), where the majority of consumption takes place. This is obviously a wholly inadequate state of affairs. Given such abundant evidence of an urgent problem, not to mention bipartisan support for the recommendation of the *Protecting the Age of Innocence* inquiry for age verification technology to be introduced, public consternation at the continued inaction of the federal government on this matter is understandable.

The ACL strongly supports Collective Shout’s call for age verification to at least be trialled.<sup>20</sup> We do not accept the federal government’s claims that age verification technologies are too immature to be adapted to this purpose. Age verification systems can and are being successfully used in many parts of the world, including the UK. Similarly, practical solutions to privacy concerns could be developed if there were a political will to do so. The federal government’s strategy is to outsource responsibility for protecting Australia’s children to digital platform providers through the eSafety Commissioner’s favoured “safety by design” approach. While industry codes are being agreed upon and methods of ensuring accountability are developed, 25 children per week are being sexually assaulted in NSW schools.

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<sup>18</sup> Janine Fitzpatrick, Jessie Davies and Benjamin Sveen, “[‘Get over it’: A NSW school's failure to protect students from a predator left this family broken](#)”, *ABC News*, 17 October 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Lisa Wachsmuth, “25 Sexual attacks in schools a week”, *Daily Telegraph*, 25 March 2023.

<sup>20</sup> “[Open Letter: Women’s safety and child protection experts call for age verification pilot](#)”, Collective Shout, 19 September 2023.



Without imagining that age verification represents a silver bullet to the problems associated with pornography use, it holds out the promise of at least helping arrest the current upward trajectory of harms caused by pornography use.

### (k) any other related matters

Although the terms of reference mainly address the impact of pornography on children and young people, the negative impact of sexualised behaviours also affects women in the workplace. The Collective Shout's recent report on *Sexual Harassment of Teachers (SHOT)*<sup>21</sup> documented the results of a survey of over 1000 school teachers, which indicated an increase in sexualised behaviour in schools occurring in children at a younger age than previously. Of note, among the teachers surveyed:

- 79.9% Reported an increase in sexualised behaviours in schools
- 46.9% had experienced sexual harassment within a school environment
- Of those teachers who had experienced sexual harassment at school, 80.6% were harassed by a student
- 58.9% reported feeling unsafe in the classroom/school grounds following sexual harassment.<sup>22</sup>

Many teachers indicated that they had been threatened with rape, propositioned, subjected to sexist slurs and subjected to behaviour mimicking sex acts students had seen in pornography. Sexual harassment was having a serious impact on the physical, mental and emotional health of teachers experiencing it, and many had changed schools or left the profession as a result. The SHOT report includes several recommendations for addressing this problem in schools and we commend this report to your attention.

The Federal Government has acknowledged the role pornography plays in violence against women in its *National Plan to Address Violence Against Women and Children (2022–2032)*, which stated:

*“With pornography now overwhelmingly consumed online and via mobile devices, it is both prevalent and pervasive, perpetuating sexist, misogynistic and degrading views about women. This is a serious concern in addressing the drivers of violence against women and children.”*<sup>23</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The ACL commends the NSW government for initiating this important inquiry. A robust response is needed to address the abundantly well-evidenced problems associated with pornography use. While consent education may help the community to reach a better understanding of the harms caused by pornography use, we agree with Collective Shout's assessment that “respectful relationships and consent education, while welcome, cannot compete with the world's largest department of education – the global pornography industry.”<sup>24</sup> We urge this Committee to consider acting on the recommendations of the *Protecting the Age of Innocence* report by introducing age verification

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<sup>21</sup> Collective Shout and Maggie Dent, [Sexual Harassment of Teachers \(SHOT\)](#), 2024.

<sup>22</sup> Collective Shout and Maggie Dent, [Sexual Harassment of Teachers \(SHOT\)](#), 2024, 7.

<sup>23</sup> [National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032](#), Commonwealth of Australia, 2022, 52.

<sup>24</sup> [“Open Letter: Women's safety and child protection experts call for age verification pilot”](#), Collective Shout, 19 September 2023.

technology to restrict access to pornography for children and young people at the earliest opportunity.