

## “Basically... Porn is Everywhere”: A Rapid Evidence Assessment on the Effects that Access and Exposure to Pornography has on Children and Young People.

### Aims

From 2011 until 2013, the Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) conducted an inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups (CSEGG). The inquiry team quickly became aware that accessing and viewing pornography by young people and children was an issue of concern, an issue that may relate to young people's expectations and attitudes towards sexual activity and relationships. As a result, the OCC commissioned a review of the existing evidence in relation to pornography and its influences on children and young people.

### Key Findings

- A significant proportion of children and young people are exposed to or access pornography but there are differences in the literature regarding the regularity of exposure and access (or the rate of recurrence). This highlights the importance of considering frequency as well as regularity of use or exposure.
- Exposure is more prevalent than (ostensibly) deliberate access. However, there is considerable variation in the rates of unwanted exposure and some studies report high numbers of children and young people accessing pornography.
- Children and young people's exposure and access to pornography occur both online and offline with the internet and smartphones playing more dominant roles in recent years. There is some evidence that children and young people consider pornography easy to access and culturally prevalent. Accessing pornography through one method appears to be positively related to accessing it through others.
- Exposure and access to pornography appear to increase with age and there is greater likelihood of exposure with increasing age.
- Gender differences emerged as a continuous and highly pertinent theme. Boys and young men are more likely to access pornography than girls and young women and are more likely to do so more frequently, viewing it more positively. Girls and young women seemed more likely to consider pornography unwelcome and distasteful.
- Access and exposure to pornography affects children and young people's sexual beliefs. For example, pornography promotes unrealistic attitudes about sex, encourages beliefs that women are sex objects and leads to less progressive gender role attitudes.
- It is possible that young people learn from and may change their behaviours due to exposure and access to pornography. This finding is strengthened too by a workshop run with young people where it became clear that they used pornography to learn about sexual practices. There was also some limited evidence that for LGBT children, this was more likely as sex and relationships education (SRE) was reported to be even less relevant to them.

- Access and exposure to pornography are linked to children and young people's engagement in 'risky sexual behaviours' (e.g., engagement in sexual practices from a younger age and engaging in riskier sexual behaviours such as unprotected sex).
- There were a number of problems with the existing evidence base, including: lack of consistency in definitions; not being able to infer causality; cultural differences and context or content rarely being acknowledged or examined; few studies being child/young person centred; samples being mostly western, white, heterosexual and able-bodied.

### Methodology

The Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) appointed us, in early 2013, to conduct a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA), over three months, guided by three research questions focusing on the effects that exposure and access to pornography have on children and young people and drawing on research evidence published between January 1983 and January 2013. A REA is an established tool for synthesizing the available research evidence on a policy issue, as comprehensively as possible, within a specified time. 41,000 possible source materials were identified in our initial searches and assessed against strict criteria concerning relevance and quality; the final analysis considered 276 academic and other items. Initial findings of the REA were presented and discussed at a workshop with practitioners, policy makers, academics and members of the OCC team and subsequently in a workshop with 16 to 18-year-old young people.

### Background

The findings of the REA informed the CSEGG inquiry. The report of the REA was published in May 2013 and provoked widespread coverage and debate in the national and international media. The final OCC CSEGG inquiry report "*If only someone had listened: Office of the Children's Commissioner's inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups. Final report*" (Berelowitz et al., 2013) was published in November 2013, alongside two other research reports commissioned for the inquiry: "*Sex without consent, I suppose that is rape: How young people in England understand sexual consent*" (Coy et al., 2013) and "*It's wrong... but you get used to it: A qualitative study of gang-associated sexual violence towards, and exploitation of young people in England*" (Beckett et al., 2013). The final inquiry report includes a child-centred framework for professionals who commission, plan or provide services to tackle child sexual exploitation called 'See Me, Hear Me, a framework for protecting children' (Berelowitz et al., 2013).

**Source** The Office of the Children's Commissioner

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**Full report** [http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content\\_667](http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_667) and <http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/10692/>

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