

# **The extent of exposure to pornography among children and young people**

Prepared by Dr Michael Flood, January 2009. Revised, May 2018.

## **Overview**

A growing body of international scholarship documents that significant proportions of children and young people are exposed to pornography. Different studies define 'pornography' in varying ways or allow research participants to do so, and some do not distinguish between different kinds of pornographic media (videos, internet sites, and so on) or between accidental and deliberate exposure. Nevertheless, it is clear that large numbers of young people, particularly boys, are growing up in the presence of sexually explicit media.

The deliberate consumption of pornography is highly gendered among young people, as it is among adults. Males are more likely than females to use pornography, to do so repeatedly, to use it for sexual excitement and masturbation, to initiate its use (rather than be introduced to it by an intimate partner), to view it alone and in same-sex groups, and to view more types of images (Cameron *et al.* 2005; Flood 2007: 51, 56; Flood and Hamilton 2003: 13-14; Nosko 2007: 2). Males are more likely than females to be sexually aroused by pornography and to have supportive attitudes towards it (Sabina *et al.* 2008: 691; Johansson and Hammaren 2007: 60-64; Wallmyr and Welin 2006).

## **Exposure to pornography**

'Exposure' here refers to both deliberate and accidental exposure to pornography. See below for statistics which distinguish between these.

- A recent Swedish study among 16-year-old males found that almost all (96%) had watched pornography (Mattebo *et al.* 2013).
- In a US study among early adolescents, by age 14, two-thirds (66%) of males and more than one-third (39%) of females reported having seen at least one form of sexually explicit media in the past year (Brown and L'Engle 2009).
- In a Swiss study of youth aged 16-20 who had used the internet in the last 30 days, 74.9 per cent of males and 35.9 per cent of females reported exposure to sexually explicit materials online (both unwanted and intended) in the last 30 days (Luder *et al.* 2011).
- A Swedish study found that 30 per cent of adolescent boys and only three per cent of adolescent girls watched pornography at least once a week (Forsberg 2001: 161).
- In another Swedish study, 92 per cent of young men and 57 per cent of young women aged 15-18 had watched a 'porno film' (Johansson & Hammaré 2007: 60).
- In another, 99 per cent of boys and 74 per cent of girls aged 15 had viewed pornographic movies (Wallmyr & Welin 2006: 291).
- In an Italian study of 804 adolescents aged 14 to 19, 67 per cent of boys and 15 per cent of girls had viewed pornographic videos (Bonino *et al.* 2006: 273).
- In Canadian research among teenagers with an average age of 14, 90 per cent of boys and 60 per cent of girls had watched pornography, with one-third of the boys but only two per cent of the girls doing so at least once a month (Check 1995: 89-90).

- In an Australian study among 16 and 17-year-olds, 73 per cent of boys had watched an X-rated video, with one in twenty watching them on a weekly basis while more than a fifth watch an X-rated video at least once a month. Only 11 per cent of girls had watched an X-rated video, all of them less often than once every two to three months (Flood 2007).
- In an Australian survey, 44% of 9-16 year-olds have seen sexual images in the last 12 months, whether offline or online (defined in terms of images which are “obviously sexual – for example, showing people naked or people having sex”) (Green *et al.* 2011: 28). Exposure was higher at higher ages. Among 9-12 year-olds, 27% of boys and girls had seen sexual images, while among 13-16 year-olds, 58% of boys and 61% of girls had seen sexual images.
- Similar findings come from other countries such as Taiwan (Lin and Lin 1996; Lo *et al.* 1999; Lo and Wei 2005).

### Online exposure

Note: Also see statistics below focused on deliberate or intentional exposure.

- A UK survey found that by 15-16, 65 per cent of children had seen online pornography, whether accidentally or deliberately (Martellozzo *et al.* 2016).
- Among 13- to 16-year-olds in Australian schools, 93 per cent of males, and 62 per cent of females have seen pornography online (Fleming *et al.* 2006: 145).
- In an Australian survey of 9-16 year-olds, 28% had seen sexual material online in the last 12 months (Green *et al.* 2011). About one in six had seen genitals (17%) or images of sexual acts (16%) online. Exposure increased with age. For example, for images or video of someone having sex, 6% of 11-12 year-olds, 11% of 13-14 year-olds, and 29% of 15-16 year-olds had seen such images online in the last 12 months.
  - Children were more likely to see sexual images online than in other media. 28% had seen sexual images on any websites in the last 12 months, 22% on TV, film, or video / DVD, 12% in a magazine or book, and 6% by text or otherwise on a mobile phone (Green *et al.* 2011: 29). Exposure was higher at higher ages. Among 9-12 year-olds, 16% of boys and 13% of girls had seen sexual images online, while among 13-16 year-olds, 45% of boys and 39% of girls had seen sexual images online.
- In a US study, 31 per cent of children aged 10 to 17 with a computer at home had seen a pornographic web site, including 45 per cent of those aged 14 to 17 (Thornburgh & Lin 2002: 132-133).
- In a UK-based national survey of 1,511 youth aged 9 to 19, more than half (57 per cent) had come into contact with online pornography, and most was viewed unintentionally (Livingstone & Bober 2004).
- Based on retrospective reports among US university students, 93 per cent of males and 62 per cent of females had seen online pornography before age 18, with a mean age of 14.3 for males and 14.8 for females (Sabina *et al.* 2008: 691-692).
- In a nationally representative survey in the US, 42% of 10-17 year olds reported any exposure to X-rated material online (Wolak *et al.* 2007).

## Accidental or unwanted exposure online

Studies of children's online exposure often distinguish between accidental and unwanted exposure on the one hand, and deliberate exposure on the other, given the ease with which pornography may be encountered.

- In a Swiss study of youth aged 16-20 who had used the internet in the last 30 days, 46.7 per cent of males and 34.5 per cent of females reported having been exposed to sexually explicit materials in an unwanted manner in the last 30 days (Luder *et al.* 2011).
- In a US survey of 1,500 Internet-using youth aged 10 to 17 in 2000, one quarter had one or more unwanted exposures to sexual material ('pictures of naked people or people having sex') while online in the past year (Mitchell *et al.* 2003: 340-342).
- There is US evidence that rates of unwanted exposure to pornography are increasing. Five years after their 2000 survey, Mitchell *et al.* (2007: 120) report that rates of unwanted exposure to pornography had gone from 9 to 19 per cent for those aged 10-12, from 28 to 35 per cent for those aged 13 to 15, and from 33 to 44 per cent for those aged 16 to 17.
- In another US study, of 15 to 17 year-olds who had ever gone online, 70 per cent had accidentally stumbled across pornography (Kaiser Family Foundation 2001).
- In an Australian study among 16 and 17-year-olds, 84 per cent of boys and 60 per cent of girls had been exposed accidentally to 'sex sites' (Flood 2007).
- In a nationally representative survey in the US, 17 percent of boys 10 to 11 years of age had unwanted exposure in the past year, as did 22% of boys 12 to 13 years of age, 26% of those 14 to 15 years of age, and 30% of those 16 to 17 years of age. (Wolak *et al.* 2007: 251). Unwanted exposure in the past year also increased with age among girls, from 16% of those 10 to 11 years of age to 38% of those 16 to 17 years of age.
- Among Dutch children aged 8 to 12 with home access to the Internet, 35 per cent had had a negative Internet experience involving an encounter with pornography (Soeters & van Schaik 2006: 34).

## Deliberate exposure online

Rates of deliberate consumption of Internet pornography among minors in international studies appear to vary from around one-tenth to one-third.

- In an Australian study of young people aged 15-29, 84% of young men and 19% of young women watched pornography on a weekly or daily basis. The median age at first pornography viewing was 13 years for males and 16 years for females (Lim *et al.* 2017).
- In a Czech study among adolescents aged 11-17, 61.8% of boys and 52.6% of girls had ever seen pornography online. There were various gender contrasts in patterns of use. For example, boys were more likely than girls to use online pornography alone (80.6% versus 64.5%), and boys were far more likely than girls to use online pornography for the purpose of arousal (69.8% versus 21.5%) (Ševčíková and Daneback 2014).

- In a Greek study among high school students, 88% of males and 12% of females had used pornographic internet sites. 91.2% of males and 8.8% of females had used such sites frequently (three or more times per month) (Tsitsika *et al.* 2009). Users of pornographic internet sites were 10 times more likely to be male than female, and frequent users were 14 times more likely to be male than female.
- In a Swiss study of youth aged 16-20 who had used the internet in the last 30 days, 29.2 per cent of males and 1.4 per cent of females reported deliberately viewing online pornography in the last 30 days (Luder *et al.* 2011).
- In the US survey of Internet-using youth aged 10 to 17, eight per cent had reported seeking out X-rated Internet sites (Mitchell *et al.* 2003: 349).
- In the UK-based survey, 10 per cent of 9-19 year-olds had visited a pornographic website on purpose, including 15 per cent of 16-17 year-olds (Livingstone & Bober 2004: 29).
- In an Australian study among 16 and 17-year-olds, 38 per cent of boys aged 16-17 and only two per cent of girls had searched the Internet for sex sites (Flood 2007).
- In a nationally representative survey in the US, rates of deliberate (wanted) exposure to online pornography among boys in the past year were 1% for 10- to 11-year-olds, 11% for boys 12 to 13, 26% for boys 14 to 15, and 38% of those 16 to 17 years of age. Rates among girls were much lower. Rates of wanted exposure to online pornography were between 2% and 5% for girls 10 to 15, and 8% for girls aged 16 to 17 (Wolak *et al.* 2007: 251).
- In a recent longitudinal study of US youth aged 10 to 15, with three phases of data collection over 2006-2008, 19% of youth reported exposure to X-rated material in the past 12 months at Wave 1, 27% at Wave 2, and 22% at Wave 3. By mode, 14% reported exposure to X-rated movies, 12% to X-rated magazines, and 11% to X-rated websites (Ybarra *et al.* 2011).

## Contact

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