

SUMMARY

It may have been the hope of some that this Workshop would produce a profound summary statement or authoritative, comprehensive package of findings about the effects of pornography. What was produced instead was more of a progress report. All of the facts are not in yet regarding the effects of pornography, but enough facts are in that an assessment of future directions for research and prevention can be made.

What is known about the effects of pornography can be broken down into two bodies of knowledge. First, considerable clinical material has documented the personal tragedies and continuing problems for youth who are involved in the production of pornography. This form of sexual victimization has been seen to have longstanding, adverse effects on youth. The amount of unique influence that pornography involvement has on the development of psychological and social problems in the youth seen cannot be accurately determined, however. It is often one of many influences that have contributed to an already dismal childhood. There does not seem to be any clear rationale, however, for maintaining that this involvement is not a significantly damaging factor in the lives of the youth who become involved in the production of pornography. Pure and simple, it is another form of sexual victimization of vulnerable youth.

Second, a body of knowledge has demonstrated that exposure to pornography, especially violent sexual pornography, has effects on beliefs, attitudes, and laboratory behavior. Repeated exposure in controlled conditions alters the beliefs of late adolescents about the frequency of certain uncommon sexual practices in the general population. Exposure to violent sexual pornography in which the victim is aroused by assault produces more acceptance of the use of coercion in sexual relationships. Exposure to violent pornography also produces more aggressive behavior toward women in laboratory simulation tasks. Finally, it appears that the presence of attitudes condoning the use of sexual coercion (the same ones that are altered by exposure) appear to coexist with reported or detected sexual aggression.

These bits of knowledge, however, do not yet form a totally coherent picture of the real world effects of exposure to pornography. We still know little about actual

patterns of use or the power of attitudes in precipitating sexually aggressive behavior. Much research is still needed in order to demonstrate that the present knowledge has significant real world implications for predicting behavior. Pornography is one of many potential influences on behavior and it must be assessed in conjunction with some of these other factors in order for more global statements about effects to be warranted.

While highlighting the need for more research, the presently incomplete state of knowledge does not preclude reasonable preventive actions from being taken. Programs for youth involved in the production of pornography or likely to be lured into such involvement should be supported. These have to be street-based, innovative approaches in order to be efficient rather than just pro forma prevention. On a more primary prevention level, labeling of materials should be done and media literacy programs should be developed. These initiatives could help educate the public about both the types of materials available to youth and the development of sexual attitudes.

As emphasized from the outset, the purpose of this Workshop was to give a reasoned professional opinion on the effects of pornography. It was not to prescribe policy or make grand calls for reform. What is evident after examining the evidence in this light is how disturbing, intriguing, and incomplete our knowledge of this topic really is.