

# ISSUE

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## Is Exposure to Pornography Related to Increased Rates of Rape?

**YES:** Diana E. H. Russell, from "Pornography as a Cause of Rape," dianarusell.com (2004)

**NO:** Anthony D'Amato, from "Porn Up, Rape Down," *Northwestern Public Law Research Paper No. 913013* (2006)

### Learning Outcomes

After reading this issue, you will be able to:

- Discuss *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15 (1972), and its impact on the law of pornography.
- Discuss the implications of the following statement: "Pornography is somebody's life before it becomes the pornographer's free speech."
- Discuss college and high school students' attitudes about rape and sexual assault.
- Discuss the relationship between exposure to pornography and rape.
- Discuss whether Internet pornography has "de-mystified" sex.

### ISSUE SUMMARY

**YES:** Diana E. H. Russell argues that the evidence is overwhelming that exposure to pornography is a major causal factor of rape. She utilizes the concept of "multiple causation" to explain the relationship between pornography and rape.

**NO:** Anthony D'Amato, in contrast, argues that the incidence of rape has declined 85 percent in the last 25 years while access to pornography via the internet has become more freely available to teenagers and adults.

**T**he role of pornography in rape and sexual assault cases is a highly controversial issue. While many persons believe that the availability of pornography is directly or indirectly related to increasing rates of aberrant forms of sexual behavior, others believe that access to pornographic materials may be a healthy form of sexual expression. In some countries, pornography is readily available to virtually everyone. In the United States, serious efforts have been made through the legal system to control its distribution and availability, although there appears to be an ambivalent attitude toward pornography throughout society. This ambivalence is reflected in the decisions of U.S. court systems as they have struggled to define precisely what constitutes pornography.

For example, one of the U.S. Supreme Court's most important decisions on pornography was *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15 (1972). The Court had previously held that pornography, as a form of expression, is not protected by the First Amendment. In reaffirming that principle, the Court developed the contemporary legal standard for lower courts to use to determine whether a specific depiction of sexual behavior is pornographic. Chief Justice Warren Burger described this standard as whether:

- (a) the average person, 'applying contemporary community standards' would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest (b) whether the work depicts or describes,

in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law, and (c) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.

As a practical matter, the *Miller* standard has led to very few restrictions on the publication of sexually explicit materials in the United States. Attorneys arguing that state pornography laws should be upheld have often struggled to convince the courts that particular depictions lack serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. The result has been that even representations that most people would find to be highly offensive are protected by the First Amendment.

But what is the impact of exposure to pornography on the Internet, and elsewhere, on increased rates of rape? Diana E. H. Russell argues that the evidence is overwhelming: Exposure to pornography is a major causal factor in rape cases. She takes issue with the idea that pornography should not be viewed as a "cause" of rape because there are a number of other factors that are also contributing factors in rape cases. States Russell:

Because all viewers of pornography are not equally affected by it, many people conclude that pornography cannot be playing a causative role in rape and other forms of violence against women. This is similar to the tobacco industry's defense of cigarette smoking. They maintain that because many smokers do not die of lung cancer, and because some nonsmokers *do* die of this disease, it is incorrect to believe that smoking causes lung cancer. But the tobacco industry's reasoning here is faulty. They have no grounds for assuming that the proponents of smoking as a cause of lung cancer believe that smoking is the *only* cause.

Anthony D'Amato, in contrast, argues that the incidence of rape has actually declined 85 percent in the last 25 years while access to pornography via the Internet has become more freely available to teenagers and adults. States D'Amato:

From data compiled by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration in 2001, the four states with the *lowest* per capita access to the internet were Arkansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, and West Virginia. The four states with the *highest* internet access were Alaska, Colorado, New Jersey, and Washington. . . . While the nationwide incidence of rape was showing a drastic decline, the incidence of rape in the four states having the *least* access to the internet showed an actual *increase* in rape over the same time period.

Moreover, in the states with the *most* access to the Internet, three of the four states showed declines in the incidence of rape during the same time period. D'Amato concludes that "[I]nternet porn has thoroughly demystified sex," and has resulted in substantial decreases in rape and sexual assault.

Before reading these articles in their entirety, which of the positions embraced by these authors appears to be the more intuitively compelling one? Do you believe that exposure to pornography is directly related to increased or decreased rates of rape and other forms of sexual violence? The answer to this question has very significant implications for the future development of law and social policy in this country and will have a profound impact on our cultural conversation about appropriate sexual behavior in the twenty-first century.

**YES** 

**Diana E. H. Russell**

## **Pornography as a Cause of Rape**

### **Introduction: What Is Pornography?**

Proponents of the antipornography-equals-censorship school deliberately obfuscate any distinction between erotica and pornography, using the term erotica for all sexually explicit materials. In contrast, antipornography feminists consider it vitally important to distinguish between pornography and erotica, and support or even advocate erotica.

Although women's bodies are the staple of adult pornography, it is important to have a gender neutral definition that encompasses gay pornography, as well as child pornography. Animals are also targets of pornographic depictions. Hence, I define *pornography as material that combines sex and/or the exposure of genitals with abuse or degradation in a manner that appears to endorse, condone, or encourage such behavior.*

This article will focus on adult male heterosexual pornography because most pornography is produced for this market and because males are the predominant abusers of women. I define *heterosexual pornography as material created for heterosexual males that combines sex and/or the exposure of genitals with the abuse or degradation of females in a manner that appears to endorse, condone, or encourage such behavior.*

*Erotica* refers to *sexually suggestive or arousing material that is free of sexism, racism, and homophobia, and respectful of all human beings and animals portrayed.* This definition takes into account that humans are not the only subject matter of erotica. For example, I remember seeing a short award-winning erotic movie depicting the peeling of an orange. The shapes and coloring of flowers or hills can make them appear erotic. Many people find Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings erotic. But erotica can also include overtly or explicitly sexual images.

The definition's requirement of non-sexism means that the following types of material qualify as pornography rather than erotica: sexually arousing images in which women are consistently shown naked while men are clothed or in which women's genitals are displayed but

men's are not; or in which men are always portrayed in the initiating, dominant role. An example of sexualized racism which pervades pornography entails depictions of women that are confined to young, white bodies fitting many white men's narrow concept of beauty, i.e., very thin, large-breasted, and blonde.

Canadian psychologists Charlene Senn and Lorraine Radtke found the distinction between pornography and erotica to be significant and meaningful to female subjects in an experiment which they conducted. After slides had been categorized as violent pornography, nonviolent pornography (sexist and dehumanizing), or erotica (nonsexist and nonviolent), these researchers found that the violent and nonviolent images had a negative effect on the mood states of their women subjects, whereas the erotic images had a positive effect (1986, pp. 15–16; also see Senn, 1993). Furthermore, the violent images had a greater negative impact than the nonviolent pornographic images. This shows that a conceptual distinction between pornography and erotica is both meaningful and operational.

The term *abusive* sexual behavior in my definition refers to sexual conduct that ranges from derogatory, demeaning, contemptuous, or damaging to brutal, cruel, exploitative, painful, or violent. *Degrading* sexual behavior refers to sexual conduct that is humiliating, insulting, and/or disrespectful; for example, urinating or defecating on a woman, ejaculating in her face, treating her as sexually dirty or inferior, depicting her as slavishly taking orders from men and eager to engage in whatever sex acts men want, or calling her insulting names while engaging in sex, such as bitch, cunt, nigger, whore.

Note the abuse and degradation in the portrayal of female sexuality in Helen Longino's description of typical pornographic books, magazines, and films:

*Women are represented as passive and as slavishly dependent upon men. The role of female characters is limited to the provision of sexual services to men. To the extent that women's sexual pleasure is represented at all, it is subordinated*

*to that of men and is never an end in itself as is the sexual pleasure of men. What pleases women is the use of their bodies to satisfy male desires. While the sexual objectification of women is common to all pornography, women are the recipients of even worse treatment in violent pornography, in which women characters are killed, tortured, gang-raped, mutilated, bound, and otherwise abused, as a means of providing sexual stimulation or pleasure to the male characters.*

(Longino, 1980, p. 42)

What is objectionable about pornography, then, is its abusive and degrading portrayal of females and female sexuality, not its sexual content or explicitness. A particularly important feature of my definition of pornography is the requirement that *it appears to endorse, condone, or encourage abusive sexual desires or behaviors*. These attributes differentiate pornography from materials that include abusive or degrading sexual behavior for educational purposes. Movies such as "The Accused," and "The Rape of Love," for example, present realistic representations of rape with the apparent intention of helping viewers to understand the reprehensible nature of rape, and the agony experienced by rape victims. I have used the expression "*it appears*" instead of "*it is intended*" to endorse, condone, or encourage sexually abusive desires or behavior to avoid the difficult, if not impossible, task of establishing the intentions of producers. My definition differs from most definitions which focus instead on terms like "obscenity" and "sexually explicit materials...." Members of WAVPM (*Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media*), for example, used to refer to record covers, jokes, ads, and billboards as pornography when they were sexually degrading to women, even when nudity or displays of women's genitals were not portrayed (Lederer, 1980).

Some people may object that feminist definitions of pornography that go beyond sexually explicit materials differ so substantially from common usage that they make discussion between feminists and nonfeminists confusing. First of all, however, there is no consensus on definitions among nonfeminists or feminists. Some feminists, for example, do include the concept of sexual explicitness as a defining feature of pornography. Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon define pornography as "the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words" (1988, p. 36). They go on to spell out nine ways in which this overall definition can be met, for example, "women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things, or commodities." James Check (1985) uses the term sexually explicit materials instead of pornography, presumably in the hope of bypassing the many controversies associated with the term pornography. But

these scholars have not, to my knowledge, defined what they mean by sexually explicit materials.

Sometimes there can be a good reason for feminists to employ the same definition as nonfeminists. For example, in my study of the prevalence of rape, I used a very narrow, legal definition of rape because I wanted to be able to compare the rape rates obtained in my study with those obtained in government studies. Had I used a broader definition that included oral and anal penetration, for example, my study could not have been used to show how grossly flawed the methodology of the government's national surveys are in determining meaningful rape rates.

But if there is no compelling reason to use the same definition as that used by those with whom one disagrees, then it makes sense to define a phenomenon in a way that best fits feminist principles. As my objection to pornography is not that it shows nudity or different methods of sexual engagement, I see no reason to limit my definition to sexually explicit material. Unlike MacKinnon and Dworkin, who sought to formulate a definition that would be the basis for developing a new law on pornography, I have not been constrained by the requirements of law in constructing mine.

My definition of pornography does not include all the features that commonly characterize such material since I believe that concise definitions are preferable to complex or lengthy definitions. Pornography, for example, frequently depicts females, particularly female sexuality, inaccurately. "Pornography Tells Lies About Women" declared a bold red and black sticker designed by *Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media* to deface pornography. It has been shown, for example, that pornography consumers are more likely to believe that unusual sexual practices are more common than they really are (Zillmann, 1989). These distortions often have serious consequences. Some viewers act on the assumption that the depictions are accurate, and presume that there is something wrong with females who do not behave like those portrayed in pornography. This can result in verbal abuse or physical abuse, including rape, by males who consider that they are entitled to the sexual goodies that they want or that they believe other men enjoy.

*Sexual objectification* is another common characteristic of pornography. It refers to the portrayal of *human beings—usually women—as depersonalized sexual things, such as "tits, cunt, and ass," not as multi-faceted human beings deserving equal rights with men*. As Susan Brownmiller so eloquently noted,

*(In pornography) our bodies are being stripped, exposed, and contorted for the purpose of ridicule to bolster that "masculine esteem" which gets its kick and sense of power from viewing females as anonymous, panting playthings, adult toys,*

*dehumanized objects to be used, abused, broken and discarded.*

(1975, p. 394)

However, the sexual objectification of females is not confined to pornography. It is also a staple of mainstream movies, ads, record covers, songs, magazines, television, art, cartoons, literature, pin-ups, and so on, and influences the way that many males learn to see women and even children. This is why I have not included it as a defining feature of pornography. . . .

## Pornography as Violence Against Women

*"I don't need studies and statistics to tell me that there is a relationship between pornography and real violence against women. My body remembers."*

—Woman's testimony, 1983

*"The relationship between particularly sexually violent images in the media and subsequent aggression . . . is much stronger statistically than the relationship between smoking and lung cancer."*

—Edward Donnerstein, 1983

When addressing the question of whether or not pornography causes rape, as well as other forms of sexual assault and violence, many people fail to acknowledge that the actual *making* of pornography sometimes involves, or even requires, violence and sexual assault. Testimony by women and men involved in such activity provide numerous examples of this (*Public Hearings*, 1983; *Attorney General's Commission*, 1986).

In one case, a man who said he had participated in over a hundred pornographic movies testified at the *Commission* hearings in Los Angeles as follows: "I, myself, have been on a couple of sets where the young ladies have been forced to do even anal sex scenes with a guy which [sic] is rather large and I have seen them crying in pain" (1986, p. 773).

Another witness testified at the Los Angeles hearings as follows:

*"Women and young girls were tortured and suffered permanent physical injuries to answer publisher demands for photographs depicting sadomasochistic abuse. When the torturer/photographer inquired of the publisher as to the types of depictions that would sell, the torturer/photographer was instructed to get similar existing publications and use the depictions therein*

*for instruction. The torturer/photographer followed the publisher's instructions, tortured women and girls accordingly, and then sold the photographs to the publisher. The photographs were included in magazines sold nationally in pornographic outlets."*

(1986, pp. 787-788)

. . . . It should not be assumed that violence occurs only in the making of violent pornography. For example, although many people would classify the movie *Deep Throat* as nonviolent pornography because it does not portray rape or other violence, we now know from Linda (Lovelace) Marchiano's two books (*Ordeal*, 1980, and *Out of Bondage*, 1986), as well as from her public testimony (for example, *Public Hearings*, 1983), that this film is in fact a documentary of her rape from beginning to end.

Many people, including some of the best researchers on pornography in this country, ignore the violence used by pornographers in the manufacturing of these misogynist materials (for example, see Malamuth and Donnerstein, 1984). Catharine MacKinnon points out the frequently forgotten fact that "before pornography became the pornographer's speech it was somebody's life" (1987, p. 179). Testimony presented at the hearings held on the antipornography civil rights ordinance in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1983, provides powerful evidence for the truth of this statement (*Public Hearings*, 1983; Russell, 1993a).

Because it is important to know the proclivities and the state of mind of those who read and view pornography, I will start by discussing some of the data on males' propensity to rape.

## Males' Propensity to Rape

*"Why do I want to rape women? Because I am basically, as a male, a predator and all women look to men like prey. I fantasize about the expression on a woman's face when I 'capture' her and she realizes she cannot escape. It's like I won, I own her."*

—Male respondent, Shere Hite, 1981, p. 718

Research indicates that 25 to 30 percent of male college students in the United States and Canada admit that there is some likelihood they would rape a woman if they could get away with it. In the first study of males' self-reported likelihood to rape that was conducted at the University of California at Los Angeles, the word rape was not used; instead, an account of rape (described below) was read to the male subjects, of whom 53 percent said there was some likelihood that they would behave in the same fashion as the man

described in the story, if they could be sure of getting away with it (Malamuth, Haber, and Feshbach, 1980). Without this assurance, only 17 percent said they might emulate the rapist's behavior. It is helpful to know exactly what behavior these students said they might emulate:

*Bill soon caught up with Susan and offered to escort her to her car. Susan politely refused him. Bill was enraged by the rejection. "Who the hell does this bitch think she is, turning me down," Bill thought to himself as he reached into his pocket and took out a Swiss army knife. With his left hand he placed the knife at her throat. "If you try to get away, I'll cut you," said Bill. Susan nodded her head, her eyes wild with terror.*

The story then depicted the rape. There was a description of sexual acts with the victim continuously portrayed as clearly opposing the assault (Malamuth, Haber, and Feshbach, 1980, p. 124).

In another study, 356 male students were asked: "If you could be assured that no one would know and that you could in no way be punished for engaging in the following acts, how likely, if at all, would you be to commit such acts?" (Briere and Malamuth, 1983). Among the sexual acts listed were the two of interest to these researchers: "forcing a female to do something she really didn't want to do" and "rape" (Briere and Malamuth, 1983). Sixty percent of the sample indicated that under the right circumstances, there was some likelihood that they would rape, use force, or do both.

In a study of high school males, 50 percent of those interviewed believed it is acceptable "for a guy to hold a girl down and force her to have sexual intercourse in instances such as when 'she gets him sexually excited' or 'she says she's going to have sex with him and then changes her mind'" (Goodchilds and Zellman, 1984). . . .

Looking at sexual arousal data alone (as measured by penile tumescence), not its correlation with self-reported likelihood to rape, Malamuth reports that:

- About 10 percent of the population of male students are sexually aroused by *very extreme violence with a great deal of blood and gore that has very little of the sexual element* (1985, p. 95)
- About 20 to 30 percent show substantial sexual arousal by depictions of rape in which the woman never shows signs of arousal, only abhorrence (1985, p. 95)
- About 50 to 60 percent show some degree of sexual arousal by a rape depiction in which the victim is portrayed as becoming sexually aroused at the end (personal communication, August 18, 1986).

Given these findings, it is hardly surprising that after reviewing a whole series of related experiments, Neil Malamuth concluded that "the overall pattern of the data is . . . consistent with contentions that many men have a proclivity to rape" (1981b, p. 139).

Shere Hite (1981, p. 1123) provides data on men's self-reported desire to rape women from the general population outside the university laboratory. Distinguishing between those men who answered the question anonymously and those who revealed their identities, Hite reports the following answers by the anonymous group to her question "Have you ever wanted to rape a woman?": 46 percent answered "yes" or "sometimes," 47 percent answered "no," and 7 percent said they had fantasies of rape, but presumably had not acted them out—yet (1981, p. 1123).

Surprisingly, the non-anonymous group of men reported slightly more interest in rape; 52 percent answered "yes" or "sometimes," 36 percent answered "no," and 11 percent reported having rape fantasies. (Could it be that many men don't think there is anything wrong with wanting to rape women?) Although Hite's survey was not based on a random sample, and therefore, like the experimental work cited above, cannot be generalized to the population at large, her finding that roughly half of the more than 7,000 men she surveyed admitted to having wanted to rape a woman on one of more occasions suggests that men's propensity to rape is probably very widespread indeed. . . .

The studies reviewed here suggest that at this time in the history of our culture, a substantial percentage of the male population has some desire or proclivity to rape females. Indeed, some males in this culture consider themselves deviant for not wanting to rape a woman. For example, the answer of one of Hite's male respondents was: "I have never raped a woman, or wanted to. In this I guess I am somewhat odd. Many of my friends talk about rape a lot and fantasize about it. The whole idea leaves me cold" (1981, p. 719; emphasis added). Another replied: "I must admit a certain part of me would receive some sort of thrill at ripping the clothes from a woman and ravishing her. But I would probably collapse into tears of pity and weep with my victim, unlike the traditional man" (1981, p. 719; emphasis added). . . .

## A Theory About the Causative Role of Pornography

. . . In *Sexual Exploitation* (1984) I suggest many factors that may predispose a large number of males in the United States to want to rape or assault women sexually. Some examples discussed in this book are (1) biological factors, (2) childhood experiences of sexual abuse, (3) male sex-role socialization, (4) exposure to mass media that

encourage rape, and (5) exposure to pornography. Here I will discuss only the role of pornography.

Although women have been known to rape both males and females, males are by far the predominant perpetrators of sexual assault as well as the biggest consumers of pornography. Hence, my theory will focus on male perpetrators. . . .

As previously noted, in order for rape to occur, a man must not only be predisposed to rape, but his internal and social inhibitions against acting out his rape desires must be undermined. My theory, in a nutshell, is that pornography (1) predisposes some males to want to rape women and intensifies the predisposition in other males already so predisposed; (2) undermines some males' internal inhibitions against acting out their desire to rape; and (3) undermines some males' social inhibitions against acting out their desire to rape.

## The Meaning of Cause

Given the intense debate about whether or not pornography plays a causal role in rape, it is surprising that so few of those engaged in it ever state what they mean by "cause." A definition of the concept of *simple causation* follows:

*An event (or events) that precedes and results in the occurrence of another event. Whenever the first event (the cause) occurs, the second event (the effect) necessarily or inevitably follows. Moreover, in simple causation the second event does not occur unless the first event has occurred. Thus the cause is both the sufficient condition and the necessary condition for the occurrence of the effect.*

*(Theodorson and Theodorson, 1979)*

By this definition, pornography clearly does not cause rape, as it seems safe to assume that some pornography consumers do not rape women, and that many rapes are unrelated to pornography. However, the concept of *multiple causation* is applicable to the relationship between pornography and rape.

*With the concept of multiple causation, various possible causes may be seen for a given event, any one of which may be a sufficient but not necessary condition for the occurrence of the effect, or a necessary but not sufficient condition. In the case of multiple causation, then, the given effect may occur in the absence of all but one of the possible sufficient but not necessary causes; and, conversely, the given effect would not follow*

*the occurrence of some but not all of the various necessary but not sufficient causes.*

*(Theodorson and Theodorson, 1979)*

As I have already presented the research on males' proclivity to rape, I will next discuss some of the evidence that pornography can be a sufficient (though not necessary) condition for males to desire to rape. I will mention when the research findings I describe apply to violent pornography and when to pornography that appears to the viewer to be nonviolent.

## I. The Role of Pornography in Predisposing Some Males to Want to Rape

*"I went to a porno bookstore, put a quarter in a slot, and saw this porn movie. It was just a guy coming up from behind a girl and attacking her and raping her. That's when I started having rape fantasies. When I saw that movie, it was like somebody lit a fuse from my childhood on up . . . I just went for it, went out and raped."*

*Rapist interviewed by Beneke, 1982, pp. 73-74*

According to Factor I in my theoretical model, pornography can induce a desire to rape women in males who previously had no such desire, and it can increase or intensify the desire to rape in males who already have felt this desire. This section will provide the evidence for the four different ways in which pornography can induce this predisposition that are listed alongside Factor I.

### (I) Pairing Sexually Arousing/Gratifying Stimuli with Rape

The laws of social learning (for example, classical conditioning, instrumental conditioning, and social modeling), about which there is now considerable consensus among psychologists, apply to all the mass media, including pornography. As Donnerstein testified at the Hearings in Minneapolis: "If you assume that your child can learn from Sesame Street how to count one, two, three, four, five, believe me, they can learn how to pick up a gun" (Donnerstein, 1983, p. 11). Presumably, males can learn equally well how to rape, beat, sexually abuse, and degrade females.

A simple application of the laws of social learning suggests that viewers of pornography can develop arousal responses to depictions of rape, murder, child sexual abuse, or other assaultive behavior. Researcher S. Rachman of the Institute of Psychiatry, Maudsley Hospital, London, has demonstrated that male subjects can learn to become sexually aroused by seeing a picture of a woman's boot after repeatedly seeing women's boots in association with sexually arousing

slides of nude females (Rachman and Hodgson, 1968). The laws of learning that operated in the acquisition of the boot fetish can also teach males who were not previously aroused by depictions of rape to become so. All it may take is the repeated association of rape with arousing portrayals of female nudity (or clothed females in provocative poses).

Even for males who are not sexually excited during movie portrayals of rape, masturbation subsequent to the movie reinforces the association. This constitutes what R.J. McGuire, J.M. Carlisle, and B.G. Young refer to as "masturbatory conditioning" (Cline, 1974, p. 210). The pleasurable experience of orgasm—an expected and planned—for activity in many pornography parlors—is an exceptionally potent reinforcer. The fact that pornography is widely used by males as ejaculation material is a major factor that differentiates it from other mass media, intensifying the lessons that male consumers learn from it.

## **(II) Increasing Males' Self-Generated Rape Fantasies**

Further evidence that exposure to pornography can create in males a predisposition to rape where none existed before is provided by an experiment conducted by Malamuth. Malamuth classified 29 male students as sexually force-oriented or non-force-oriented on the basis of their responses to a questionnaire (1981a). These students were then randomly assigned to view either a rape version or a mutually consenting version of a slide-audio presentation. The account of rape and accompanying pictures were based on a story in a popular pornographic magazine, which Malamuth describes as follows:

*The man in this story finds an attractive woman on a deserted road. When he approaches her, she faints with fear. In the rape version, the man ties her up and forcibly undresses her. The accompanying narrative is as follows: "You take her into the car. Though this experience is new to you, there is a temptation too powerful to resist. When she awakens, you tell her she had better do exactly as you say or she'll be sorry. With terrified eyes she agrees. She is undressed and she is willing to succumb to whatever you want. You kiss her and she returns the kiss." Portrayal of the man and woman in sexual acts follows; intercourse is implied rather than explicit.*

(1981a, p. 38)

In the mutually consenting version of the story the victim was not tied up or threatened. Instead, on her awakening in the car, the man told her that "she is safe and that no one will do her any harm. She seems to like

you and you begin to kiss." The rest of the story is identical to the rape version (Malamuth, 1981a, p. 38).

All subjects were then exposed to the same audio description of a rape read by a female. This rape involved threats with a knife, beatings, and physical restraint. The victim was portrayed as pleading, crying, screaming, and fighting against the rapist (Abel, Barlow, Blanchard, and Guild, 1977, p. 898). Malamuth reports that measures of penile tumescence as well as self-reported arousal "indicated that relatively high levels of sexual arousal were generated by all the experimental stimuli" (1981a, p. 33).

After the 29 male students had been exposed to the rape audio tape, they were asked to try to reach as high a level of sexual arousal as possible by fantasizing about whatever they wanted but without any direct stimulation of the penis (1981a, p. 40). Self-reported sexual arousal during the fantasy period indicated that those students who had been exposed to the rape version of the first slide-audio presentation, created more violent sexual fantasies than those exposed to the mutually consenting version *irrespective of whether they had been classified as force-oriented or non-force-oriented* (1981a, p. 33).

As the rape version of the slide-audio presentation is typical of what is seen in pornography, the results of this experiment suggests that similar pornographic depictions are likely to generate rape fantasies even in previously non-force-oriented consumers. As Edna Einsiedel points out (1986, p. 60):

*Current evidence suggests a high correlation between deviant fantasies and deviant behaviors . . . Some treatment methods are also predicated on the link between fantasies and behavior by attempting to alter fantasy patterns in order to change the deviant behaviors.*

. . . When children do what they see in pornography, it is even more improbable than in the case of adults to attribute their behavior entirely to their predispositions. . . .

Almost all the research on pornography to date has been conducted on men and women who were at least 18 years old. But as Malamuth points out, there is "a research basis for expecting that children would be more susceptible to the influences of mass media, including violent pornography if they are exposed to it" than adults (1985, p. 107). Bryant's telephone interviews show that very large numbers of children now have access to both hard-core and soft-core materials. For example:

- The average age at which male respondents saw their first issue of *Playboy* or a similar magazine was 11 years (1985, p. 135).

- All of the high school age males surveyed reported having read or looked at *Playboy*, *Playgirl*, or some other soft-core magazine (1985, p. 134).
- High school males reported having seen an average of 16.1 issues, and junior high school males said they had seen an average of 2.5 issues.
- In spite of being legally under age, junior high students reported having seen an average of 16.3 "unedited sexy R-rated films" (1985, p. 135). (Although R-rated movies are not usually considered pornographic, many of them meet my definition of pornography.)
- The average age of first exposure to sexually oriented R-rated films for all respondents was 12.5 years (1985, p. 135).
- Nearly 70 percent of the junior high students surveyed reported that they had seen their first R-rated film before they were 13 (1985, p. 135).
- The vast majority of all the respondents reported exposure to hard-core, X-rated, sexually explicit material (1985, p. 135). Furthermore, "a larger proportion of high school students had seen X-rated films than any other age group, including adults": 84 percent, with the average age of first exposure being 16 years, 11 months (1985, p. 136).

... Clearly, more research is needed on the effects of pornography on young male viewers, particularly in view of the fact that recent studies suggest that "over 50 percent of various categories of paraphiliacs (sex offenders) had developed their deviant arousal patterns prior to age 18" (Einsiedel, 1986, p. 53). Einsiedel goes on to say that "it is clear that the age-of-first-exposure variable and the nature of that exposure needs to be examined more carefully. There is also evidence that the longer the duration of the paraphilia, the more significant the association with use of pornography" (Abel, Mittleman, and Becker, 1985).

The first two items listed under Factor I in my theoretical model both relate to the viewing of *violent* pornography. But sexualizing dominance and submission is a way in which nonviolent pornography can also predispose some males to want to rape women.

#### ... (IV) *Creating an Appetite for Increasingly Stronger Material*

Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant have studied the effects of what they refer to as "massive exposure" to pornography (1984). (In fact, it was not particularly massive: 4 hours and 48 minutes per week over a period of six weeks.) These researchers, unlike Malamuth and Donnerstein, focus on trying to ascertain the effects of *nonviolent* pornography and, in the study to be described, they use a sample drawn from a non-student adult population.

Male subjects in the *massive exposure* condition saw 36 nonviolent pornographic films, six per session per week; male subjects in the intermediate condition saw 18 such movies, three per session per week. Male subjects in the control group saw 36 nonpornographic movies. Various measures were taken after one week, two weeks, and three weeks of exposure, including the kind of materials that the subjects were most interested in viewing.

Zillmann and Bryant found that a desire for stronger material was fostered in their subjects. "Consumers graduate from common to less common forms of pornography," Zillman maintains, that is, to more violent and more degrading materials (1984, p. 127). Zillmann suggests this may be "because familiar material becomes unexciting as a result of habituation" (1984, p. 127).

According to Zillmann and Bryant's research, then, pornography can transform a male who was not previously interested in the more abusive types of pornography, into one who is turned on by such material. This is consistent with Malamuth's findings (described on p. 53) that males who did not previously find rape sexually arousing, generate such fantasies after being exposed to a typical example of violent pornography.

## II. The Role of Pornography in Undermining Some Males' Internal Inhibitions Against Acting Out the Desire to Rape

*"The movie was just like a big picture stand with words on it saying 'go out and do it, everybody's doin' it, even the movies'."*

*(Rapist interviewed by Beneke, 1982, p. 74.)*

Evidence has been cited showing that many males would like to rape a woman, but that an unknown percentage of these males have internal inhibitions against doing so. Some males' internal inhibitions are likely to be weak, others' very strong. Presumably, the strength of internal inhibitions also varies in the same individual from time to time. . . .

### (I) *Objectifying Women*

The first way in which pornography undermines some males' internal inhibitions against acting out their desires to rape is by objectifying women. Feminists have been emphasizing the role of objectification in the occurrence of rape for years (e.g., Medea and Thompson, 1974; Russell, 1975). Objectification makes it easier to rape them. "It was difficult for me to admit that I was dealing with a

human being when I was talking to a woman," one rapist reported, "because, if you read men's magazines, you hear about your stereo, your car, your chick" (Russell, 1975, pp. 249-250). After this rapist had hit his victim several times in her face, she stopped resisting and begged, "All right, just don't hurt me." "When she said that," he reported, "all of a sudden it came into my head, 'My God, this is a human being!' I came to my senses and saw that I was hurting this person." Another rapist said of his victim, "I wanted this beautiful fine thing and I got it" (Russell, 1975, p. 245).

Dehumanizing oppressed groups or enemy nations in times of war is an important mechanism for facilitating brutal behavior toward members of those groups. Ms. U, for example, testified that: "A society that sells books, movies, and video games like 'Custer's Last Stand' ['Custer's Revenge'] on its street corners, gives white men permission to do what they did to me. Like they [her rapists] said, I'm scum. It is a game to track me down, rape and torture me" (Russell, 1993a). However, the dehumanization of women that occurs in pornography is often not recognized because of its sexual guise and its pervasiveness. It is important to note that the objectification of women is as common in nonviolent pornography as it is in violent pornography. . . .

## **(II) Rape Myths**

If males believe that women enjoy rape and find it sexually exciting, this belief is likely to undermine the inhibitions of some of those who would like to rape women. Sociologists Diana Scully and Martha Burt have reported that rapists are particularly apt to believe rape myths (Burt, 1980; Scully, 1985). Scully, for example, found that 65 percent of the rapists in her study believed that "women cause their own rape by the way they act and the clothes they wear"; and 69 percent agreed that "most men accused of rape are really innocent." However, as Scully points out, it is not possible to know if their beliefs preceded their behavior or constitute an attempt to rationalize it. Hence, findings from the experimental data are more telling for our purposes than these interviews with rapists.

As the myth that women enjoy rape is widely held, the argument that consumers of pornography realize that such portrayals are false, is totally unconvincing (Brownmiller, 1975; Burt, 1980; Russell, 1975). Indeed, several studies have shown that portrayals of women enjoying rape and other kinds of sexual violence can lead to increased acceptance of rape myths in both males and females. In an experiment conducted by Neil Malamuth and James Check, for example, one group of college

students saw a pornographic depiction in which a woman was portrayed as sexually aroused by sexual violence, and a second group was exposed to control materials. Subsequently, all subjects were shown a second rape portrayal. The students who had been exposed to the pornographic depiction of rape were significantly more likely than the students in the control group (1) to perceive the second rape victim as suffering less trauma; (2) to believe that she actually enjoyed it; and (3) to believe that women in general enjoy rape and forced sexual acts (Check and Malamuth, 1985, p. 419).

Other examples of the rape myths that male subjects in these studies are more apt to believe after viewing pornography are as follows: "A woman who goes to the home or the apartment of a man on their first date implies that she is willing to have sex"; "Any healthy woman can successfully resist a rapist if she really wants to"; "Many women have an unconscious wish to be raped, and many then unconsciously set up a situation in which they are likely to be attacked"; "If a girl engages in necking or petting and she lets things get out of hand, it is her own fault if her partner forces sex on her" (Briere Malamuth, and Check, 1985, p. 400).

In Maxwell and Check's 1992 study of 247 high school students described above, they found very high rates of what they called "rape supportive beliefs," that is, acceptance of rape myths and violence against women. The boys who were the most frequent consumers of pornography and/or who reported learning a lot from it, were more accepting of rape supportive beliefs than their peers who were less frequent consumers and/or who said they had not learned as much from it.

*A full 25% of girls and 57% of boys indicated belief that in one or more situations, it was at least "maybe okay" for a boy to hold a girl down and force her to have intercourse. Further, only 21% of the boys and 57% of the girls believed that forced intercourse was "definitely not okay" in any of the situations. The situation in which forced intercourse was most accepted was that in which the girl had sexually excited her date. In this case 43% of the boys and 16% of the girls stated that if was at least "maybe okay" for the boy to force intercourse.*

*(1992, abstract)*

According to Donnerstein, "After only 10 minutes of exposure to aggressive pornography, particularly material in which women are shown being aggressed against, you find male subjects are much more willing to accept these particular myths" (1983, p. 6). These males are also more

inclined to believe that 25% of the women they know would enjoy being raped (1983, p. 6).

### (III) Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence

Males' internal inhibitions against acting out their desire to rape can also be undermined if they consider male violence against women to be acceptable behavior. Studies have shown that viewing portrayals of sexual violence as having positive consequences increases male subjects' acceptance of violence against women. Examples of some of the attitudes used to measure acceptance of interpersonal violence include "Being roughed up is sexually stimulating to many women"; "Sometimes the only way a man can get a cold woman turned on is to use force"; "Many times a woman will pretend she doesn't want to have intercourse because she doesn't want to seem loose, but she's really hoping the man will force her" (Briere, Malamuth, and Check, 1985, p. 401). . . .

### (IV) Trivializing Rape

According to Donnerstein, in most studies on the effects of pornography, "subjects have been exposed to only a few minutes of pornographic material" (1985, p. 341). In contrast, Zillman and Bryant examined the impact on male subjects of what they refer to as "massive exposure" to non-violent pornography (4 hours and 48 minutes per week over a period of six weeks; for further details about the experimental design, see page 27). After three weeks the subjects were told that they were participating in an American Bar Association study that required them to evaluate a trial in which a man was prosecuted for the rape of a female hitchhiker. At the end of this mock trial various measures were taken of the subjects' opinions about the trial and about rape in general. For example, they were asked to recommend the prison term they thought most fair.

Zillmann and Bryant found that the male subjects who were exposed to the massive amounts of pornography considered rape a less serious crime than they did before they were exposed to it; they thought that prison sentences for rape should be shorter; and they perceived sexual aggression and abuse as causing less suffering for the victims, even in the case of an adult male having sexual intercourse with a 12-year-old girl (1984, p. 132). They concluded that "heavy exposure to common non-violent pornography trivialized rape as a criminal offense" (1984, p. 117). . . .

### (V) Desensitizing Males to Rape

In an experiment specifically designed to study desensitization, Linz, Donnerstein, and Penrod showed ten hours of R-rated or X-rated movies over a period of five days to male subjects (Donnerstein and Linz, 1985,

p. 34A). Some students saw X-rated movies depicting sexual assault; others saw X-rated movies depicting only consenting sex; and a third group saw R-rated sexually violent movies—for example, "I Spit on Your Grave," "Toolbox Murders," and "Texas Chainsaw Massacre." Donnerstein (1983) describes "Toolbox Murders" as follows: There is an erotic bathtub scene in which a woman massages herself. A beautiful song is played. Then a psychotic killer enters with a nail gun. The music stops. He chases the woman around the room, then shoots her through the stomach with the nail gun. She falls across a chair. The song comes back on as he puts the nail gun to her forehead and blows her brains out. According to Donnerstein, many young males become sexually aroused by this movie (1983, p. 10).

Donnerstein and Linz point out that, "It has always been suggested by critics of media violence research that only those who are already predisposed toward violence are influenced by exposure to media violence" (1985, p. 34F). These experimenters, however, actually preselected their subjects to ensure that they were not psychotic, hostile, or anxious.

Donnerstein and Linz described the impact of the R-rated movies on their subjects as follows:

*Initially, after the first day of viewing, the men rated themselves as significantly above the norm for depression, anxiety, and annoyance on a mood adjective checklist. After each subsequent day of viewing, these scores dropped until, on the fourth day of viewing, the males' levels of anxiety, depression, and annoyance were indistinguishable from baseline norms.*

(1985, p. 34F)

### III. The Role of Pornography in Undermining Some Males' Social Inhibitions Against Acting Out Their Desire to Rape

*"I have often thought about it [rape], fantasized about it. I might like it because of having a feeling of power over a woman. But I never actually wanted to through fear of being caught and publicly ruined."*

(Male respondent, Hite, 1981, p. 715)

A man may want to rape a woman and his internal inhibitions against rape may be undermined by his hostility to women or by his belief in the myths that women really enjoy being raped and/or that they deserve it, but he may still not act out his desire to rape because of his

social inhibitions. Fear of being caught and convicted for the crime is the most obvious example of a social inhibition. In addition to Hite's respondent quoted above, a second man's answer to her question on whether he had ever wanted to rape a woman illustrates this form of inhibition:

I have never raped a woman, but have at times felt a desire to—for the struggle and final victory. I'm a person, though, who always thinks before he acts, and *the consequences wouldn't be worth it. Besides I don't want to be known as a pervert.* (1981, p. 715). . . .

If there were more effective social sanctions against pornography, this would almost certainly increase the reluctance of some people to participate in the pornography industry. There are many reasons why progressive people are strenuously opposed to government efforts to censor pornography. There are, however, many alternative kinds of sanctions that need to be explored. For example, many women have been forced to participate in pornography against their will. I would have thought that pornographic publications that publish photos of these women would be accessories after the fact to false imprisonment, rape, assault, and sometimes, possibly, murder.

#### (1) *Diminishing Fear of Disapproval by Peers*

Fear of disapproval from one's peers is another social inhibition that may be undermined by pornography. Zillman, for example, found that "massive" exposure to nonviolent pornography caused subjects to overestimate the number of people who engage in uncommon sexual practices, such as anal intercourse, group sexual activities, sadomashochism, and bestiality (1985, p. 118). Rape is portrayed as a very common male practice in much violent pornography, and the actors themselves may serve as a kind of pseudo-peer group and/or role models for consumers. Further research is needed to evaluate these hypotheses.

In general, I hypothesize the following disinhibiting effects of viewing violent pornography, particularly in "massive" amounts: (a) Viewers' estimates of the percentage of other males who have raped women would probably increase; (b) viewers would be likely to consider rape a much easier crime to commit than they had previously believed; (c) viewers would be less likely to believe that rape victims would report their rapes to the police; (d) viewers would be more likely to expect that rapists would avoid arrest, prosecution and conviction in those cases that are reported; (e) viewers would become less disapproving of rapists, and less likely to expect disapproval from others if they decided to rape. . .

. . . . The exposure of sex offenders to pornography is another area of research that is relevant to the causal connections between pornography and rape. It is well known that many sex offenders claim that viewing pornography affects their criminal behavior. Ted Bundy is perhaps the most notorious of these males. For example, in one study of 89 nonincarcerated sex offenders conducted by William Marshall, "slightly more than one-third of the child molesters and rapists reported at least occasionally being incited to commit an offense by exposure to forced or consenting pornography" (Einsiedel, 1986, p. 62). Exactly a third of the rapists who reported being incited by pornography to commit an offense said that they deliberately used pornography in their preparation for committing the rape. The comparable figure for child molesters was much higher—53 percent versus 33 percent (Einsiedel, 1986, p. 62).

However, as these sex offenders appear to have used the pornography to arouse themselves after they had already decided to commit an offense, it could be argued that it was not the pornography that incited them. To what extent they actually required the pornography in order to commit their offenses, like some perpetrators require alcohol, we do not know. Even if these perpetrators were eliminated from the data analysis, however, that still leaves 66 percent of the rapists and 47 percent of the child molesters who claimed that they were at least sometimes incited by pornography to commit an offense.

Gene Abel, Mary Mittleman, and Judith Becker (1985) evaluated the use of pornography by 256 perpetrators of sexual offenses, all of whom were undergoing assessment and treatment. Like Marshall's sample, these males were outpatients, not incarcerated offenders. This is important because there is evidence that the data provided by incarcerated and non-incarcerated offenders differ (Einsiedel, 1986, p. 47). Abel and his colleagues reported that 56 percent of the rapists and 42 percent of the child molesters implicated pornography in the commission of their offenses. Edna Einsiedel, in her review of the social science research for the 1985 *Attorney General's Commission of Pornography*, concluded that these studies "are suggestive of the implication of pornography in the commission of sex crimes among some rapists and child molesters" (p. 63, emphasis in original).

In another study, Michael Goldstein and Harold Kant found that incarcerated rapists had been exposed to hard-core pornography at an earlier age than males presumed to be non-rapists. Specifically, 30 percent of the rapists in their sexual offender sample said that they had encountered hard-core pornographic photos in their

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preadolescence (i.e., before the age of 11; 1973, p. 55). This 30 percent figure compares with only 2 percent of the control group subjects exposed to hard-core pornography as preadolescents. (The control group was obtained by a random household sample that was matched with the offender group for age, race, religion, and educational level; 1973, p. 50.) Could it be that this early exposure of the offenders to hard-core pornography played a role in making them rapists? Hopefully, future research will address this question.

## Conclusion

... I have described my theory that pornography—both violent and nonviolent—can cause rape, citing the findings of recent research that support this theory. I believe that my theory can also be adapted to apply to other forms of sexual assault and abuse, as well as to woman battering and femicide (the misogyny—motivated killing of women). I have done the preliminary work on such an adaptation to the causal relationship between pornography and child sexual abuse and plan to publish this work in the future.

In conclusion, I believe that the right and varied data now available to support us from all kinds of sources, when considered together, strongly support my theory:

- A high percentage of nonincarcerated rapists and child molesters have said that they have been incited by pornography to commit crimes;
- Pre-selected normal healthy male students say they are more likely to rape a woman after just one exposure to violent pornography;
- A high percentage of male junior high students, high school students, and adults in a non-laboratory survey report imitating X-rated movies within a few days of exposure;
- Hundreds of women have testified in public about how they have been victimized by pornography;
- Ten percent of a probability sample of 930 women in San Francisco and 25 percent of female subjects in an experiment on pornography in Canada report having been upset by requests to enact pornography (Russell, 1980; and Senn and Radtke, 1986);
- Many prostitutes report that they have experienced pornography-related sexual assault (Silbert and Pines, 1984; Everywoman, 1988; and Russell, 1993a);
- The laws of social learning must surely apply to pornography at least as much as they do to the mass media and general. Indeed, I—and others—have argued that sexual arousal and orgasm are likely to

serve as unusually potent reinforcers of the messages conveyed by pornography;

- A large body of experimental research has shown that the viewing of violent pornography results in higher rates of aggression against women by male subjects.

It is no wonder that Donnerstein stated that the relationship between pornography and violence against women is stronger than the relationship between smoking and lung cancer.

One of the effects of viewing nonviolent pornography discovered by Zillmann is that "the more extensive the exposure, the more accepting of pornography subjects became" (Zillmann and Bryant, 1984, p. 133). Although females expressed significantly less acceptance than males, this effect also applied to females. Pornography has expanded into a multi-billion dollar-a-year industry, and I believe we are seeing on a massive scale some of the very effects so brilliantly and carefully documented in some of the experiments by Malamuth, Donnerstein, Zillmann, and their colleagues. Donnerstein's description of the desensitization that occurred in healthy pre-selected male students after only five days of viewing woman-slashing films may apply to ever-growing segments of our society (Donnerstein, Linz, and Penrod, 1987).

Van White, the Chairperson of the *Hearing on Pornography* in Minnesota in 1983, commented as follows on the impact of the testimony by the survivors of pornography-related abuse: "These horror stories made me think of the history of slavery in this country—how Black women were at the bottom of the pile, treated like animals instead of human beings. As I listened to these victims of pornography, I heard young women describe how they felt about . . . the way women's breasts and genitals are displayed and women's bodies are shown in compromising postures. I thought about the time of slavery, when Black women had their bodies invaded, their teeth and limbs examined, their bodies checked out for breeding, checked out as you would an animal, and I said to myself, 'We've come a long way, haven't we.'"

Today we have an industry . . . showing women in the same kind of submissive and animalistic roles" (1984).

United States' culture appears to have been affected by the very effects the research shows. The massive propaganda campaign is working; people now actually *see* differently. Pornography has to become increasingly extreme before people are disturbed by, or even notice, the violence and degradation portrayed in it. Very few see the real abuse that is happening to some of the women who are photographed. As Zillmann and

Bryant show, "heavy consumption of common forms of pornography fosters an appetite for stronger materials" (1984, p. 127). What was considered hardcore in the past has become soft-core in the present. Where will this all end? Will we as a culture forever refuse to read the writing on the wall?

**DIANA E.H. RUSSELL** is a feminist writer and social activist. She was born in Cape Town, South Africa, moved to England in 1957, and then to the United States in 1961. She has been involved in research on sexual violence against women for many years.



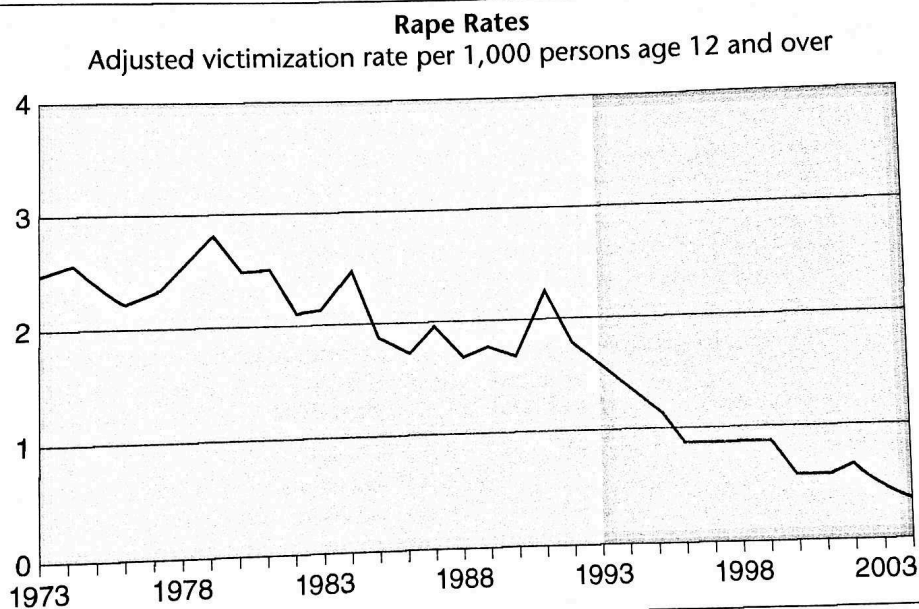
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 **NO**

## Porn Up, Rape Down

The headlines are shouting RAPE IN DECLINE!<sup>1</sup> Official figures just released show a plunge in the number of rapes per capita in the United States since the 1970s. Even when measured in different ways, including police

reports and survey interviews, the results are in agreement: there has been an 85% reduction in sexual violence in the past 25 years. The decline, steeper than the stock market crash that led to the Great Depression, is depicted in this chart prepared by the United States Department of Justice:



Source: U.S. Department of Justice • Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey. The National Crime Victimization Survey. Includes both attempted and completed rapes.

As the chart shows, there were 2.7 rapes for every 1,000 people in 1980; by 2004, the same survey found the rate had decreased to 0.4 per 1,000 people, a decline of 85%.

Official explanations for the unexpected decline include:

- less lawlessness associated with crack cocaine;
- women have been taught to avoid unsafe situations;
- more would-be rapists already in prison for other crimes;
- sex education classes telling boys that "no means no."

But these minor factors cannot begin to explain such a sharp decline in the incidence of rape.

There is, however, one social factor that correlates almost exactly with the rape statistics. The American public is probably not ready to believe it. My theory is that the sharp rise in access to pornography accounts for the decline in rape. The correlation is inverse: the more pornography, the less rape. It is like the inverse correlation: the more police officers on the street, the less crime.

The pornographic movie *Deep Throat* which started the flood of X-rated VHS and later DVD films, was released in 1972. Movie rental shops at first catered primarily to the adult film trade. Pornographic magazines also sharply increased in numbers in the 1970s and 1980s. Then came a seismic change: pornography became available on the new internet. Today, purveyors of internet porn earn a

combined annual income exceeding the total of the major networks ABC, CBS, and NBC.

*Deep Throat* has moved from the adult theatre to a laptop near you.

National trends are one thing; what do the figures for the states show? From data compiled by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration in 2001, the four states with the *lowest* per capita access to the

internet were Arkansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, and West Virginia. The four states with the *highest* internet access were Alaska, Colorado, New Jersey, and Washington. (I would not have guessed this.)

Next I took the figures for forcible rape compiled by police reports by the Disaster Center for the years 1980 and 2000. The following two charts display the results:

Table 1

STATE	Internet 2001	Rape 1980	Rape 2000
Arkansas	36.9	26.7	31.7
Kentucky	40.2	19.2	27.4
Minnesota	36.1	23.2	45.5
W. Virginia	40.7	15.8	18.3

All figures are per capita.

Table 2

STATE	Internet 2001	Rape 1980	Rape 2000
Alaska	64.1	56.8	70.3
Colorado	58.5	52.5	41.2
New Jersey	61.6	30.7	16.1
Washington	60.4	52.7	46.4

All figures are per capita.

While the nationwide incidence of rape was showing a drastic decline, the incidence of rape in the four states having the *least* access to the internet showed an actual *increase* in rape over the same time period. This result was almost too clear and convincing, so to check it I compiled figures for the four states having the *most* access to the internet. Three out of four of these states showed

declines (in New Jersey, an almost 50% decline). Alaska was an anomaly: it increased both in internet access and incidence of rape. However, the population of Alaska is less than one-tenth that of the other three states in its category. To adjust for the disparity in population, I took the combined population of the four states in each table and calculated the percentage change in the rape statistics:

Table 3

Combined Per Capita Percentage Change in Incidence of Rape

Aggregate per capita increase or decline in rape

Four states with lowest internet access	Increase in rape of 53%
Four states with highest internet access	Decrease in rape of 27%

I find these results to be statistically significant beyond the .95 confidence interval.

Yet proof of correlation is not the same thing as causation. If autumn regularly precedes winter, that doesn't mean that autumn causes winter. When six years ago my former Northwestern colleague John Donohue, together with Steven Levitt,<sup>4</sup> found that legalized abortion correlated with a reduction in crime, theirs would have only been an academically curious thesis if they had not identified a causal factor. But they did identify one: that prior to legalization there were many unwanted babies born due to the lack of a legal abortion alternative. Those unwanted children became the most likely group to turn to crime.

My own interest in the rape-pornography question began in 1970 when I served as a consultant to President Nixon's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography. The Commission concluded that there was no causal relationship between exposure to sexually explicit materials and delinquent or criminal behavior. The President was furious when he learned of the conclusion.

Later President Reagan tried the same thing, except unlike his predecessor he packed the Commission with persons who passed his ideological litmus test. (Small wonder that I was not asked to participate.) This time, Reagan's Commission on Pornography reached the approved result: that there does exist a causal relationship between pornography and violent sex crimes.

The drafter of the Commission's report was Frederick Schauer, a prominent law professor. In a separate statement, he assured readers that neither he nor the other Commissioners were at all influenced by their personal moral values.<sup>5</sup>

Professor Schauer's disclaimer aroused my skepticism. If the commissioners were unbiased, how could the social facts have changed so drastically in the decade between the Nixon and Reagan reports as to turn non-causality into causality? My examination of the Commission's evidence resulted in an article published by the *William and Mary Law Review*.<sup>6</sup>

Although the Reagan Commission had at its disposal all the evidence gathered by psychology and social-science departments throughout the world on the question whether a student's exposure to pornography increased his tendency to commit antisocial acts, I found that the Commission was unable to adduce a shred of evidence to support its affirmative conclusion. No scientist had ever found that pornography raised the probability of rape. However, that the Commission was not seeking truth; rather, as I said in the title to my article, it sought political truth.

Neither Professor Schauer nor the other Commissioners ever responded to my *William & Mary* article. Now

they can forget it. For if they had been right that exposure to pornography leads to an increase in social violence, then the vast exposure to pornography furnished by the internet would by now have resulted in scores of rapes per day on university campuses, hundreds of rapes daily in every town, and thousands of rapes per day in every city. Instead, the Commissioners were so incredibly wrong that the incidence of rape has actually declined by the astounding rate of 85%.

Correlations aside, could access to pornography actually cause a decline in rape? In my article I mentioned one possibility: that some people watching pornography may "get it out of their system" and thus have no further desire to go out and actually try it. Another possibility might be labeled the "Victorian effect": the more that people covered up their bodies with clothes in those days, the greater the mystery of what they looked like in the nude. The sight of a woman's ankle was considered shocking and erotic. But today, internet porn has thoroughly de-mystified sex. Times have changed so much that some high school teachers of sex education are beginning to show triple-X porn movies to their students in order to depict techniques of satisfactory intercourse.

I am sure there will be other explanations forthcoming as to why access to pornography is the most important causal factor in the decline of rape. Once one accepts the observation that there is a precise negative correlation between the two, the rest can safely be left to the imagination.

## Notes

1. SE.G., *Washington Post*, June 19, 2006; *Chicago Tribune*, June 21, 2006.
2. Statistics on Internet Access compiled from National Telecommunications and Information Administration, at . . .
3. Statistics on forcible rape compiled from . . .
4. Author of *Freakonomics* (2005).
5. U.S. Dept. of Justice, *Final Report: Attorney General's Commission on Pornography* 176-79 (1986) (personal statement of Commissioner Schauer).
6. Anthony D'Amato, "A New Political Truth: Exposure to Sexually Violent Materials Causes Sexual Violence," 31 *Wm. & Mary L. Rev.* 575 (1990), downloadable at . . .

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## EXPLORING THE ISSUE



### Is Exposure to Pornography Related to Increased Rates of Rape?

#### Critical Thinking and Reflection

1. What is the significance of *Miller v. California* for the law of pornography in the United States?
2. What are the implications of the following statement: "Pornography is somebody's life before it becomes the pornographer's free speech"?
3. What are college and high school students' attitudes about rape and sexual assault?
4. What is the relationship between exposure to pornography and rape and sexual assault?

#### Is There Common Ground?

This very interesting question has intrigued researchers for years. On an intuitive level, it may seem more likely that exposure to pornography would lead some susceptible individuals to commit rape and sexual assault. As the articles in this issue illustrate, however, arguments that seem to make sense on an intuitive level may lead to conclusions that are not accurate when tested empirically and legally. Moreover, while it may be difficult legally to prevent depictions of sexual relations between consenting adults, there seems to be little debate that states may prohibit depictions of sexual behavior involving children. U.S. courts have adopted a much less tolerant stance in these cases and have held consistently that depictions of sexual activity involving children is not a form of expression protected by the First Amendment.

In *New York v. Ferber*, 458 U.S. 747 (1982), a New York law prohibited knowingly promoting a sexual performance by a child under the age of 16 by distributing materials that illustrated such acts. The law defined "sexual performance" as any one that included sexual conduct by a child, which was described as actual or simulated sexual intercourse, deviant sexual intercourse, sexual bestiality, masturbation, sadomasochistic abuse, or lewd exhibition of the genitals. A New York City bookstore operator was convicted under the law for selling films of young boys masturbating. The New York Court of Appeals reversed the conviction, holding that the law violated the First Amendment. The State of New York appealed the case to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Writing for a unanimous Supreme Court, Associate Justice Byron White upheld the New York law. Stated Justice White:

It is evident beyond the need for elaboration that a State's interest in 'safeguarding the physical and

psychological well-being of a minor' is compelling. 'A democratic society rests, for its continuance, upon the healthy, well-rounded growth of young people into full maturity as citizens.' Accordingly, we have sustained legislation aimed at protecting the physical and emotional well-being of youth even when the laws have operated in the sensitive area of constitutionally protected rights. . . . The prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse of children constitutes a government objective of surpassing importance. . . . We shall not second-guess this legislative judgment. (757-758) [Citations omitted].

In addition to state laws prohibiting child pornography, the U.S. Congress has made it a felony to possess or distribute pornographic depictions of sexual activities involving children. In the Internet age, given the ease with which virtually any material may be "forwarded" to others, this is an important law. Title 18, U.S.C. Section 2252, is titled "Certain Activities Relating to Material Involving the Sexual Exploitation of Minors." This statute prohibits the possession or distribution of materials or a visual depiction that "involves the use of a minor engaging in sexually explicit conduct." The law further provides that persons violating these provisions may be fined and imprisoned for "not less than 5 years and not more than 20 years." If, however, a defendant has a prior conviction for a sexual offense under applicable state or federal law, he or she may be fined and imprisoned "for not less than 15 years or more than 40 years."

It is important to know as well that the law states that it is a defense to these charges if a recipient "promptly and in good faith," and without providing access to the materials to others, "took reasonable steps to destroy each such visual depiction, or reported the matter to a law enforcement

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agency and afforded that agency access to each such visual depiction." The rule that emerges from this law is an easy and important one to remember: If you receive an email message or other material that you believe may depict children engaging in sexually explicit conduct, take immediate steps to destroy it or report it to law enforcement authorities. Under no circumstances should you print or convey it to anyone other than law enforcement authorities.

The preceding discussion has focused on the legal issues regarding pornographic materials. The authors of the articles in this section focused more closely on what is perhaps the most compelling empirical question in the pornography debate: What is the impact of exposure to pornography on rape and sexual assault?

Diana Russell argues that the evidence is overwhelming that exposure to pornography is a major causal factor of rape and sexual assault. Russell's position is compelling intuitively. Excessive exposure to pornographic materials has long been associated with aberrant sexual behavior. Moreover, her contention that exposure to pornographic materials may exert a desensitization effect on susceptible males seems to be an accurate one. Further, as Russell suggests, the actors and actresses involved in the production of pornography should be considered victims as well.

Russell's contention that exposure to pornography is a central "cause" of rape is more problematic, however. Like the relationship between body type and crime, perhaps it may be more accurate to describe the relationship between exposure to pornography and rape as one that demonstrates a correlation, rather than a causal one.

It is also difficult to dismiss Anthony D'Amato's analysis of the relationship between exposure to

pornography on the Internet and declining rates of rape and sexual assault. If, in fact, the incidence of rape has declined 85 percent in the last 25 years while access to pornography via the Internet has become more freely available to teenagers and adults, it may suggest that exposure to this medium is a healthy and positive thing. While this data does not constitute conclusive proof of a cause-and-effect inverse relationship between Internet usage and the incidence of rape, it is certainly compelling evidence.

## Additional Resources

- Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Women's Lives, Men's Laws* (Belknap Press, 2005).
- Philippe Bensimon, "The Role of Pornography in Sexual Offending," *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity* (vol. 14, no. 2, 2007).
- Janis Wolak, Kimberly Mitchell, and David Finkelhor, "Unwanted and Wanted Exposure to Online Pornography in a National Sample of Youth Internet Users," *Pediatrics* (vol. 119, no. 2, 2007).
- Chiara Sabina, Janis Wolak, and David Finkelhor, "The Nature and Dynamics of Pornography Exposure for Youth," *CyberPsychology & Behavior* (vol. 11, no. 6, 2008).
- Alan McKee, "The Relationship Between Attitudes Towards Women, Consumption of Pornography, and Other Demographic Variables in a Survey of 1,023 Consumers of Pornography," *International Journal of Sexual Health* (vol. 19, no. 1, 2007).

## Internet References

California Coalition Against Sexual Assault (CALCASE), "What is the Influence of Pornography on Rape?" March 19, 2010.

[www.calcase.org](http://www.calcase.org)

Milton Diamond, "Pornography: Good For Us?" March 19, 2010.

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