

Impact of pornography on young people survey report summary

NOVEMBER 2024

Summary

This report includes data not previously released from an online survey Our Watch commissioned. The survey involved 832 young Australians aged 16 to 20 years and asked them about the topics of gender roles, sex, dating and relationships, including their attitudes towards pornography (porn).¹

This report also identifies potential recommendations and priorities that governments across Australia can consider as part of their role in addressing the harmful impacts of pornography on children and young people.

Context

Pornography can be highly influential in shaping how young people understand sex, relationships, gender roles and identities.² Most young people in Australia now own personal data enabled phones, which means access to pornography has never been easier.³ This can mean some children may see pornography before they have been given the tools to understand what they are seeing. Our Watch recognises that pornography is not inherently problematic; rather, it is the way some people are represented in pornography that raises concerns, and that some pornography depicts criminal and harmful acts, most commonly perpetrated against women.⁴ **Pornography can perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes and strengthen attitudes supportive of violence against women** and, unfortunately, this type of pornography is prevalent.⁵



Research indicates that a significant amount of online pornography features verbal, physical and sexual violence towards women.

A report by a French equality watchdog for example, found that as much as 90% of pornography content online features verbal, physical and sexual violence towards women.⁶ Another research report by the Children's Commissioner in the United Kingdom, similarly found that children are frequently exposed to violent pornography.⁷ Additionally, the production and dissemination of deepfake or artificial intelligence (AI) generated pornography now offers new mechanisms for image-based abuse which needs to be further explored.⁸

Online pornography is prevalent in the lives of young people.

Research from the Australian eSafety Commissioner has found that education is perceived by most young people as the best way to reduce the negative impacts of online pornography, though two in five felt that current education about sexuality and relationships did not meet their needs and that this prevented them from asking for help to manage the potential negative impacts of online pornography.⁹

Key findings



13.6 years old

The **average age** at which the participants have **first seen porn** was 13.6 years (young men: 13.2, young women: 13.9). This is relatively consistent across ages, genders, sexuality and whether they had a non-English speaking parent.

Of the young men who have seen porn:



53%
watch porn at least **once a week.**



12%
watch porn **every day or most days.**

Young women: 19% at least once a week and 1% daily



72%

of responders **do not feel at all comfortable discussing porn** with a parent or carer.



2 years earlier

Surveyed **young women** are on average **first seeing porn** at 13.9 years old, this is **two years earlier** than they did in an Our Watch survey **in 2018.**



31%

One third (31%) of **young people** are **watching porn as a form of sex education** - even though many know it's not a good way to learn about sex.



16 to 17 year olds

The younger cohort (16 to 17 years) were **more likely to see porn as realistic** (25%) than their older peers (15%).

Impact



While some research emphasises the positive impact pornography has on young people's sexual socialisation and experiences, the large majority identifies that **early exposure to pornography can have a significant negative impact on the development of young people's attitudes and practices about gender roles, identities and relationships.**¹⁰

Our Watch's *Background Paper: Pornography, young people, and preventing violence against women*



collates much of the evidence and maps the broader impacts across four expressions of gender inequality which consistently predict higher rates of violence against women.¹¹

Our Watch's research through the online survey also found that:

- **84% of participants agree that porn pushes stereotypes** of what is expected of men and women in sex (young men: 79%, young women: 88%).
- **79% agree that porn impacts how women are viewed** in real life (young men: 72%, young women: 85%).
- **73% agree that porn is degrading to women** (young men: 65%, young women: 80%) and **69% agree it is harmful** (young men: 64%, young women: 73%).
- **72% agree that porn often shows aggression and violence** against women (young men: 67%, young women: 76%).
- **60% agree that porn is degrading to people of certain races** (young men: 52%, young women: 67%).

Priorities for governments

Young people will continue to access all kinds of material, both in pornography and in other forms of media, to understand sex and relationships. Often these materials include messages and images that reinforce the drivers of violence against women and are therefore potentially harmful.

There are a range of important measures that governments can lead to ensure young people and communities are equipped and supported to critically engage with and prevent the impacts of harmful pornography. Prevention approaches, such as respectful relationships education (RRE) build young people's critical awareness of gender roles in sexual interactions and provide tools for critically challenging violence-endorsing messages in all forms of media.¹² Access to information and education about pornography also has the potential to help mediate the negative impacts of pornography on young people, their wellbeing and relationships.

Potential measures Our Watch sees as a priority for all governments include:

- ✓ Ensure, as part of a **commitment to respectful relationships education** across school sectors, to:
 - **Integrate information on the topic of pornography in age-appropriate and sequential ways into RRE,** comprehensive sexuality education and media literacy education.
 - **Develop a professional learning strategy** that provides ongoing professional learning on sexuality and respectful relationships education, which includes information on the topic of pornography to ensure schools are prepared to undertake this work effectively and appropriately.

- **Develop communication materials for a range of audiences** including school staff, parents and community members to support understanding of RRE, including the impacts of pornography on young people's attitudes and beliefs about sex, relationships and gender roles.
- ✓ **Work in partnership with experts and uses co-design processes with young people** to develop information and practical resources specifically for young people on pornography.
- ✓ **Provide resources and training for other professionals who work with young people** (including youth workers, health promotion workers and others) to develop their understanding of the issue of pornography and support them to integrate appropriate actions to address its impacts on young people into their work.
- ✓ **Partner with research organisations to collect robust nationally representative data** about young people's pornography exposure and access, to inform ongoing work and responses.
- ✓ **Apply an intersectional approach,** which considers gender in relation to multiple forms of discrimination and oppression, to all work in this area.
- ✓ Our Watch advises that the **recommendations should be implemented in consultation with experts.**

Endnotes

- 1 The project received Human Research Ethics Committee approval through Victoria University. Our Watch commissioned Quantum Market Research to undertake the survey in 2022 and recruited participants through an online panel with parental consent obtained for those aged 16-17. The data was weighted for age and gender.
- 2 Our Watch. (2020). *Pornography, young people and preventing violence against women*, Melbourne, Australia.
- 3 Flynn, A., Powell, A., Scott, A. J., & Cama, E. (2021). *Deepfakes and Digitally Altered Imagery Abuse: A Cross-Country Exploration of an Emerging form of Image-Based Sexual Abuse*. The British Journal of Criminology, 62(6).
- 4 The High Council for Equality between Women and Men. (2023). Report – Pornocrime: let's put an end to the impunity of the pornography industry. Accessed 16 October 2024 <[Report - PORNOCRIME: let's put an end to the impunity of the pornography industry! - High Council for Equality between Women and Men \(haut-conseil-egalite.gouv.fr\)](#)> Children's Commissioner. (2023). 'A lot of it is actually just abuse' – Young people and pornography. Accessed 15 October 2024 <['A lot of it is actually just abuse' - Young people and pornography | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](#)>
- 5 Our Watch. (2020). *Pornography, young people and preventing violence against women*, Melbourne, Australia.
- 6 Angelique Chrisafis. (2023). 'French equality watchdog finds that 90% of online pornography abuses women.' *The Guardian* Accessed 15 October <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/27/online-pornography-breaks-french-law-equality-watchdog-france>>
- 7 Children's Commissioner. (2023). 'A lot of it is actually just abuse' – Young people and pornography. Accessed 15 October 2024 <['A lot of it is actually just abuse' - Young people and pornography | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](#)>
- 8 Okolie, C. (2023). Artificial Intelligence-Altered Videos (Deepfakes) and Data Privacy Concerns. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 25, 13. Flynn, A., Powell, A., Scott, A. J., & Cama, E. (2021). Deepfakes and Digitally Altered Imagery Abuse: A Cross-Country Exploration of an Emerging form of Image-Based Sexual Abuse. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 62(6).
- 9 E-Safety Commissioner. (2023.) *Accidental, unsolicited and in your face: Young people's encounters with online pornography: a matter of platform responsible, education and choice*.
- 10 Crabbe, M., Flood, M., & Adams, K. (2024). Pornography exposure and access among young Australians: a cross-sectional study, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 48, No. 3, p. 1.
- 11 Our Watch. (2020). *Pornography, young people and preventing violence against women*, Melbourne, Australia.
- 12 Our Watch. (2020). *Pornography, young people and preventing violence against women*, Melbourne, Australia.