



## CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE OF SYDNEY

### **Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional, and physical health - suggested responses to survey questions**

Access the survey here: <https://forms.office.com/r/j3u8vTgXT1>

<b>Questions 1-4</b>	These are questions that ask for your name, contact details and whether you are a resident of New South Wales.
<b>Question 5</b> <b><i>What do you think are the impacts of early exposure to pornography?</i></b>	<p>Studies have shown that early exposure to pornography is linked with children being more likely to report having sex before the age of 16<sup>i</sup>, increased willingness to engage in casual sex<sup>ii</sup>, the normalisation of risky sexual behaviours<sup>iii</sup>, increased sexual aggression<sup>iv</sup> and teen dating violence<sup>v</sup> and decreased academic performance<sup>vi</sup>.</p> <p>In 2022, a 44 per cent increase in indecent assaults in NSW public schools was linked to increased pornography consumption<sup>vii</sup>.</p>
<b>Question 6</b> <b><i>Does harmful pornography impact some groups in the community more than others? If so, which groups and how?</i></b>	<p>Yes. There are specific impacts on young people due to early exposure to pornography (see response to question 5), a link between pornography and violence against women (see response to question 13) and a risk of human trafficking (see response to question 15.) Additionally, men are the biggest users of pornography, with 39% of Australian men under the age of 30 reporting use of pornography daily, and another 46% reporting use of pornography weekly<sup>viii</sup>.</p>
<b>Question 7</b> <b><i>What is the impact of pornography on the formation and maintenance of relationships?</i></b>	<p>Pornography use has been linked to relationship dysfunction in many ways, such as decreased relationship satisfaction<sup>ix</sup>, reduced commitment to one's partner and increased infidelity<sup>x</sup>, and the likelihood of divorce<sup>xi</sup>.</p>

<p><b>Question 8</b></p> <p><b>How does pornography impact attitudes towards sex of those viewing pornography?</b></p>	<p>Pornography distorts the reality of authentic sexual encounters, creating unrealistic expectations for sexual intimacy. It is often associated with violent, demeaning and non-consensual conduct (see response to question 13) and associated with the viewing of women as sex objects<sup>xii</sup>. This is especially problematic for young people exposed to pornography, whose initial exposure to sex education will be framed in an unrealistic and distorted manner.</p>
<p><b>Question 9</b></p> <p><b>What do you think are the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional and physical health?</b></p>	<p>As noted in the response to question 5, pornography has been linked with an increase in risky sexual behaviours and sexual aggression, each of which can cause physical and emotional damage. It has also been linked to erectile dysfunction in young men<sup>xiii</sup>. In terms of mental health, pornography is an addiction similar to substance dependence<sup>xiv</sup>.</p>
<p><b>Question 10</b></p> <p><b>How does access to harmful pornography impact body image?</b></p>	<p>Pornography negatively impacts the body image of both men and women<sup>xv</sup>. By portraying often digitally-altered images of the human body, unrealistic expectations are created for both men and women, leading to low self-esteem and insecurity.</p>
<p><b>Question 11</b></p> <p><b>What do you think are the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional and physical health of the family of the consumer, such as partners, children or parents?</b></p>	<p>As noted in the response to question 7, pornography has a detrimental effect on relationships, including decreased relationship satisfaction, infidelity and divorce, each of which impacts all members of the family.</p> <p>Spouses of pornography users can feel a sense of betrayal similar to that experienced when discovering infidelity, however, this sense of betrayal may not be acknowledged as having the same gravity.</p> <p>Children who discover that a parent is using pornography can be placed in a difficult position of being forced to either keep their discovery a secret or making it known and risking family conflict.</p>
<p><b>Question 12</b></p> <p><b>What is the relationship between pornography use and respect and consent education?</b></p>	<p>Respect and consent education tend to ignore the influence of pornography, when it is a central issue to each of respect and consent. For example, the NSW Department of Communities and Justice's recently released strategy for the prevention of domestic, family and sexual violence <i>Pathways to Prevention</i><sup>xvi</sup>, includes education about 'respectful relationships' in schools but omits anything about the link between pornography and violence. This is an oversight that should be remedied, such that all 'respectful relationships' education in schools should address the dangers of pornography.</p>

<p><b>Question 13</b></p> <p><b>Do you think there a link between harmful pornography and violence against women?</b></p>	<p>Yes. The <i>National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032</i><sup>xvii</sup>, produced by the Australian Government’s Department of Social Services notes that pornography “often depicts physical and verbal aggression towards women, male dominance and female submission, and non-consensual behaviours... perpetuating sexist, misogynistic and degrading views about women.” The report names it as “a serious concern in addressing the drivers of violence against women and children.”</p>
<p><b>Question 14</b></p> <p><b>Does pornography teach consumers that “no” does not always mean no? Why/ why not?</b></p>	<p>Yes. Pornography often depicts – and normalises – non-consensual behaviours, with various studies finding that pornography viewing is associated with belief of “rape myths,” including false beliefs that blame victims of sexual assault while excusing perpetrators<sup>xviii</sup>.</p>
<p><b>Question 15</b></p> <p><b>Do you think there is a link between harmful pornography and human trafficking? Why/ why not?</b></p>	<p>Yes. It is well known that many human trafficking victims are victims of sexual exploitation, with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reporting that more than 1 in 5 victim-survivors of forced labour were used for commercial sexual exploitation, including known cases in Australia<sup>xix</sup>. While many of these victims will be forced into prostitution, experience in other jurisdictions demonstrate that some are forced into the production of pornographic materials.</p> <p>In the United States, for example, recruiters for pornography websites have been convicted and imprisoned for sex trafficking<sup>xx</sup> and the parent company of popular website Pornhub admitted to receiving proceeds of sex trafficking and agreed to pay a fine and compensation to victims<sup>xxi</sup>.</p>
<p><b>Question 16</b></p> <p><b>Are you concerned that pornography can be used to groom children? How?</b></p>	<p>Yes. “Grooming” is defined as including exposing a child to indecent material and is prohibited because grooming behaviour can make it easier for an adult to procure a child for unlawful sexual activity<sup>xxii</sup>. Early exposure to pornography can normalise the sharing of indecent material, desensitising children to its harms and making them easier targets for unlawful sexual activity.</p>

<p><b>Question 17</b></p> <p><b>What are the strengths and weaknesses of current laws and regulations regarding pornography?</b></p>	<p>Current criminal laws rightly prohibit the creation, distribution or possession of child abuse material<sup>xxiii</sup>, but only prohibit the production of adult pornography if the recording or distribution is non-consensual<sup>xxiv</sup>. The weakness in this approach is that it sets “consent” as the appropriate measure of whether adult pornography can be distributed, rather than being concerned with the content.</p> <p>Additionally, the law surrounding the classification of explicit material has not been amended to take into consideration the proliferation of online pornography, but rather still frame penalties around sale and public exhibition of pornographic material<sup>xxv</sup>. This ignores the significant harms that occur online.</p>
<p><b>Question 18</b></p> <p><b>Do you support the use of mandatory age verification for access to online pornography? Why/ why not?</b></p>	<p>Yes. The federal parliament recently prohibited social media for children under the age of 16<sup>xxvi</sup>, recognising the harms that these platforms can cause. However, pornography websites were not included in the ban because they are not counted as social media. Given the wealth of evidence about the harms of early access to pornography to the user and the potential harms to others, it is appropriate that age verification is used.</p> <p>Such age verification would not be without precedent. France recently enacted a law that requires mandatory age verification for sites offering pornographic content, with sizeable penalties and/or blocking in French territories for non-compliant platforms<sup>xxvii</sup>.</p>
<p><b>Question 19</b></p> <p><b>Do you support the use of mandatory tools such as internet service provider filtering to block all access to sites that contain harmful pornography? Why/ why not?</b></p>	<p>Yes. The significant evidence about links to violence, acceptance of rape myths and links to coercion and even trafficking refute the suggestion that pornography is somehow ‘victimless’ – it contributes to the risk of sexual violence against, and exploitation of, women and children especially. This has been acknowledged by the Department of Social Services<sup>xxviii</sup>. The government should not leave anything off the table when it comes to reducing sexual violence and the use of internet service provider filtering is one tool that could assist in this reduction. As noted in response to Question 18, this is being used as an enforcement tool in France. If it is not implemented, it is difficult for any government to credibly say that it is serious about protecting women and children from violence.</p>
<p><b>Question 20</b></p> <p><b>Do you support age limits for access to pornography? Why/Why not?</b></p>	<p>Yes. While pornography consumption is harmful at any age, there is a particular risk to young people from early exposure to pornography. These risks are outlined in the answers to questions 5 and 6.</p>

<p><b>Question 21</b></p> <p><b><i>Are you concerned about the presence of pornography on social media sites? Why/Why not?</i></b></p>	<p>Yes. The Australian eSafety Commissioner reported that the majority of young people who encounter online pornography do so unintentionally, with three-quarters of those reporting that it popped up online or was shared over social media. The issue is not just with social media sites, but with pop up advertisements on unrelated sites, particularly gaming sites<sup>xxix</sup>.</p>
<p><b>Question 22</b></p> <p><b><i>What measures should be taken to educate the public, especially children and young people, about the harms of pornography?</i></b></p>	<p>Families should be supported to shield their children from pornography, including with age-appropriate education materials encouraging children to report any inadvertent encounter with pornography to a responsible adult.</p> <p>There should be education about the harms of pornography in schools, including that it does not reflect healthy sexual behaviours and should not be imitated, its addictive properties and its link with sexual and other violence.</p> <p>There should also be a targeted education program for young women to ensure they know that they must not be pressured into taking intimate images or performing acts that have been seen in pornographic materials.</p>
<p><b>Question 23</b></p> <p><b><i>What resources or support services are needed for individuals, especially children and young people, at risk from or affected by harmful pornography?</i></b></p>	<p>Until governments are willing to place internet service provider filtering on pornographic websites, effective filtering services and training on how to use them should be available to parents for free or at a subsidised costs so that they are able to shield their children from the impacts of pornography. Additionally, there should be widespread addiction recovery programs for those who have a pornography addiction (in a similar way to gambling and smoking addiction assistance) and support for families of those addicted.</p>
<p><b>Question 24</b></p> <p><b><i>Do you have any specific recommendations for policymakers to address any impacts of harmful pornography?</i></b></p>	<p>Given its addictive properties and potential for harm to the individual user and to others, pornography should be treated in a similar way to other addictive substances, ie an outright prohibition or limited access and only for adults, with mandatory warnings of addictive properties, publicly-funded addiction recovery programs and support for those affected.</p>
<p><b>Question 25</b></p> <p><b><i>What additional research is required into the impacts of harmful pornography on individuals, relationships and society?</i></b></p>	<p>There is already a significant amount of research into the harmful effect of pornography. More research should be conducted into effective treatments for pornography addiction.</p>

## References

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