

A Poison in the Home

Special Report

The latest social science research on the destructive effects of pornography

By Patrick F. Fagan

The fact that marriage rates are dropping steadily is well known. But the impact of pornography use and its correlation to fractured families has been little discussed. The data show that as pornography use and sales increase, the marriage rate drops.

The costs of this kind of pornographic saturation are becoming more and more visible. Much is made of the effects of pornography on men and rightly so, but its most tragic effects can be seen in the marriages and families of men who are habitual users, for pornography and infidelity are almost interchangeable, at least in the heart. And in family life the heart counts most. Pornography is a powerful acid that weakens the capacity to marry or sustain a marriage.

Here are the key findings on the effects of pornography from the most recent social science research:

THE FAMILY AND PORNOGRAPHY

- Married men who are involved in pornography feel less satisfied with their conjugal relations and less emotionally attached to their wives. Wives notice and are upset by the difference.
- Pornography use is a pathway to infidelity and divorce, and is frequently a major factor in these family disasters.
- Among couples affected by one spouse's addiction, two-thirds experience a loss of interest in sexual intercourse.
- Both spouses perceive pornography viewing as tantamount to infidelity.
- Pornography viewing leads to a loss of interest in good family relations.

THE INDIVIDUAL AND PORNOGRAPHY

- Pornography is addictive, and neuroscientists are beginning to map the biological substrate of this addiction.
- Users tend to become desensitized to the type of pornography they use, become bored with it, and then seek more perverse forms of pornography.
- Men who view pornography regularly have a higher tolerance for abnormal sexuality, including rape, sexual aggression, and sexual promiscuity.
- Prolonged consumption of pornography by men produces stronger notions of women as commodities or as "sex objects."
- Pornography engenders greater sexual permissiveness, which in turn leads to a greater risk of out-of-wedlock births and STDs. These, in turn, lead to still more weaknesses and debilities.
- Child-sex offenders are more likely to view pornography regularly or to be involved in its distribution.

OTHER EFFECTS OF PORNOGRAPHY

- Many adolescents who view pornography initially feel shame, diminished self-confidence, and sexual uncertainty, but these feelings quickly shift to unadulterated enjoyment with regular viewing.
- The presence of sexually oriented businesses significantly harms the surrounding community, leading to increases in crime and decreases in property values.

THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN

The impact of a parent's use of pornography on young children is varied and disturbing. Pornography eliminates the warmth of affectionate family life, which is the natural social nutrient for a growing child. Other losses and traumas related to the use of pornography when a child is young include:

- encountering pornographic material a parent has acquired;
- encountering a parent masturbating;
- overhearing a parent engaged in “phone sex”;
- witnessing and experiencing stress in the home caused by online sexual activities;
- increased risk of the children becoming consumers of pornography themselves;
- witnessing and being involved in parental conflict;
- exposure to the co-modification of human beings, especially women, as “sex objects”;
- increased risk of parental job loss and financial strain;
- increased risk of parental separation and divorce;
- decreased parental time and attention—both from the pornography-addicted parent and from the parent preoccupied with the addicted spouse.¹

Also, parents may disclose their struggle with the addiction to pornography to their children, intentionally or unintentionally, thereby distorting their children’s sexual development.²

THE IMPACT ON MARRIAGE

Pornography use undermines marital relations and distresses wives.³ Husbands report loving their spouses less after long periods of looking at (and desiring) women depicted in pornography.⁴

In many cases, the wives of pornography users also develop deep psychological wounds, commonly reporting feelings of betrayal, loss, mistrust, devastation, and anger in response to the discovery or disclosure of a partner’s pornographic online sexual activity.⁵

Wives can begin to feel unattractive or sexually inadequate and may become severely depressed when they realize their husbands view pornography.⁶ The distress level in wives may be so high as to require clinical treatment for trauma, not mere discomfort.⁷

Viewers of pornography assign increased importance to sexual relations without emotional involvement,⁸ and consequently, wives experience decreased intimacy with their husbands.⁹

The emotional distance fostered by pornography and “cybersex”—a form of sexually explicit interaction between two people on the Internet—can often be just as damaging to the relationship as real-life infidelity,¹⁰ and both men and women tend to put online sexual activity in the same category as having an affair.¹¹

In a study on the effects of cybersex researchers found that more than half of those engaged in cybersex had lost interest in sexual intercourse, while one-third of their partners had lost interest as well. In one-fifth of the couples both husband and wife or both partners had a significantly decreased interest in sexual intercourse. Stated differently, this study showed that only one-third of couples maintained an interest in sexual relations with one another when one partner was engaged in cybersex.¹²

Prolonged exposure to pornography also fosters dissatisfaction with, and even distaste for, a spouse’s affection.¹³ Cynical attitudes regarding love begin to emerge, and “superior sexual pleasures are thought attainable without affection toward partners.”¹⁴ These consequences hold for both men and women who have had prolonged exposure to pornography, with the decline in sexual happiness being primarily due to the growing dissatisfaction with the spouse’s normal sexual behavior.¹⁵

Finally, pornography users increasingly see the institution of marriage as sexually confining,¹⁶ have diminished belief in the importance of marital faithfulness,¹⁷ and have increasing doubts about the value of marriage as an essential social institution and further doubts about its future viability.¹⁸ All this naturally diminishes the importance for them of having good family relations in their own families.¹⁹

INCREASED INFIDELITY

Dolf Zillman of the University of Alabama, in one study of adolescents, shows that the steady use of pornography among adolescent males frequently leads to abandonment of fidelity to their girlfriends.²⁰ Steven Stack of Wayne State University and colleagues later showed that pornography use increased the marital infidelity rate by more than 300 percent.²¹ Another study found a strong correlation between viewing Internet pornography and sexually permissive behavior.²² Stack’s study found that Internet pornography use is 3.7 times greater among those who procure sexual relations with a prostitute than among those who do not.²³

Cybersex pornography also leads to much higher levels of infidelity among women. Women who engaged in cybersex had about 40 percent more offline sexual partners than women who did not engage in cybersex.²⁴

SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

Given the research already cited, it is not surprising that addiction to pornography is a contributor to separation and divorce. In the best study to date (albeit a very rudimentary opportunity study of reports by divorce lawyers on the most salient factors present in the divorce cases they handled), 68 percent of divorce cases involved one party meeting a new paramour over the Internet, 56 percent involved "one party having an obsessive interest in pornographic websites," 47 percent involved "spending excessive time on the computer," and 33 percent involved spending excessive time in chat rooms (a commonly sexualized forum).²⁵ Cybersex, which often takes place in these chat rooms, was a major factor in separation and divorce; in over 22 percent of the couples observed, the spouse was no longer living with the cybersex addict, and in many of the other cases spouses were seriously considering leaving the marriage or relationship.

CONCLUSION

Pornography is a visual representation of sexuality which distorts an individual's concept of the nature of conjugal relations. This, in turn, alters both sexual attitudes and behavior. It is a major threat to marriage, to family, to children, and to individual happiness. In undermining marriage it is one of the factors in undermining social stability.

Social scientists, clinical psychologists, and biologists have begun to clarify some of the social and psychological effects, and neurologists are beginning to delineate the biological mechanisms through which pornography produces its powerful negative effects. This much is clear: we are dealing with a phenomenon that is big, nasty, and devastating.

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End notes:

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16. Zillmann, "Influence of Unrestrained Access to Erotica," 42.
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