

# **Evidence on pornography's influence on harmful sexual behaviour among children**

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May 2023

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## Intended audience of this report

This report is not intended to be read by children, but by researchers and policy makers interested in making children safer. It makes frequent reference to sexual harassment and sexual violence. This includes descriptions of pornographic content, language and discussion of sexual abuse. This content may be difficult to read. However, we think it is important to understand how pornography impacts children, in order that we may better protect all children from harm.

If you or any child you know of are affected by the issues discussed, the following organisations can provide you with expert information, advice and support. If you have any concerns about the safety of a child you should contact police or children's safeguarding services:

## childline

**Childline** is a free and confidential service for under-19s living in the UK: [childline.org.uk](https://childline.org.uk) | **0800 1111**



**Shout** provides 24/7 urgent mental health support: [giveusashout.org](https://giveusashout.org) | text **SHOUT** to **85258**



**The Survivors Trust** for victims of sexual violence: [thesurvivorstrust.org/our-helpline](https://thesurvivorstrust.org/our-helpline) | **0808 801 0818**



**NAPAC** offers support to adult survivors of childhood abuse: [support@napac.org.uk](mailto:support@napac.org.uk) | **0808 801 0331**

You can also contact **your local NHS urgent mental health helpline** or call **111** for 24/7 advice | [nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-urgent-mental-health-helpline](https://nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-urgent-mental-health-helpline)

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## Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza

This paper is the second in a series of reports exploring the impact of pornography on children. As Children's Commissioner, it is my duty to protect children from harm in both the physical and online worlds. As the Online Safety Bill moves through Parliament, I want to use this opportunity to turn the tide on pornography's harms to children. I am clear that children should not be able to access pornography, and my office's work in this space continues to demonstrate the harm it can cause to children and young people.

My first report, published in January 2023, "*A lot of it is actually just abuse*", set out findings from a survey of over a thousand 16-21-year-olds and focus groups with teenagers. It established that the average age at which children first view pornography is now 13 years old. Substantial proportions of young people surveyed who had seen pornography viewed it at a much younger age than 13 - 27% by age 11 and 10% by the age of 9. Young people spoke about the unbearable pressure to view hardcore pornography even if they do not want to, much of which depicts degrading acts and violence against women. Our survey analysis also demonstrated a significant link between an early age of first exposure to pornography and frequency of exposure in later years. The age of first exposure and frequency of exposure were shown to be closely linked to the likelihood of a young person viewing violent content online. Frequent users of pornography were also more likely to have real-life experience of an aggressive or degrading sex act.

For too long we have brushed the issue of pornography under the carpet as awkward, uncomfortable, or too difficult to solve. It is crucial that we don't shy away from discussing the nature, scale and impacts of online pornography. No child should be able to stumble across pornography online; in a world where pornography is a click away for any child, I am clear that this must change and until then we must grapple with the implications. Sadly, we are hearing from more young people that they are watching pornography and thinking that it is reflective of real life or healthy relationships, which is not the case. This is reflected from what I heard recently from a young person:

**"Porn is often the starting point for young people when it comes to sex, how to have sex, and what to expect."** – Young woman, 20, first saw pornography aged 10.

From this work it is evident that some children and young people are being negatively impacted by pornography. I have been so concerned by the growing research that shows pornography may influence harmful behaviour. I knew this was an area I needed to explore further. That is why I have used my statutory powers to request data, and for the first time collected case files on child-on child sexual abuse from one police force and from one Sexual Abuse Referral Centre (SARC), where children had been referred because they had been sexually abused by another child. My office has carried out innovative analysis of the text these documents to understand more about the role that pornography might play at this sharpest end of child abuse cases.

It is incredibly concerning that I found references to specific acts of sexual violence commonly seen in pornography in half of the interviews carried out following these cases of sexual abuse. Additional review of some of these cases found children suggesting direct links between pornography exposure and the harmful sexual behaviour exhibited.

This new analysis, together with other evidence in this report, presents a compelling case. This report contributes to the literature on pornography's role in shaping and fuelling violence against women and girls.<sup>1</sup> The risk factors behind harmful sexual behaviour and children abusing other children are complex, with pornography being one possible factor among others. Much of the abuse is taking forms which are depicted in pornography.

This report, once again, makes for difficult reading. It includes accounts of sexual violence and descriptions of aggressive sexual acts found in pornography. It is perhaps the work that I have found hardest to publish since becoming Children's Commissioner. Each of the 502 case files analysed for this report represents terrible trauma wrought on a child, by another child.

This report is focused on the harms that children face from accessing violent pornography, and how that might influence their own harmful sexual behaviour. That is why regulation online is so critical to protect children and young people. I am categorically clear: no child should be able to access or watch pornography. Protecting children from seeing inappropriate material is critical, but it is just one part of the essential and urgent work of protecting children from sexual abuse. It cannot work in isolation and must be combined with broader preventative measures. It must also go hand in hand with making sure that any child who is a victim of this most terrible crime is given the support they need to recover,

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and access to swift and effective justice. That is why I have committed to further work directly with child victims to understand their experiences, so I can make wider recommendations about what needs to change.

This report is dedicated to the children who have suffered from the effects of online pornography exposure. It is my duty to stand up and protect you, and I hope this report is a step towards doing so.

**Dame Rachel de Souza, Children's Commissioner for England**



## Acknowledgements

The Children's Commissioner's office (CCo) would like to thank the respondents to our survey and focus group participants for taking the time to share their views and experiences which are published in the first report in this series published in January 2023, "*A lot of it is actually just abuse*". The CCo would also like to thank the police force and NHS foundation trust for their collaboration and all members of the steering group for their time, expertise, and feedback on this report. With thanks to: Prof. Simon Hackett, Prof. Clare McGlynn, Dr Elly Hanson, Louise Barraclough, Oliver Eastman, Anna Glinski, Eimear Timmons, Frances Frost, Laura Nott, Dr Michelle Cutland, Stephen Barry, Cath Cox, Dan Baker, and Imran Manzoor.

The responsibility for the report and its contents lies with the CCo.

## Executive summary

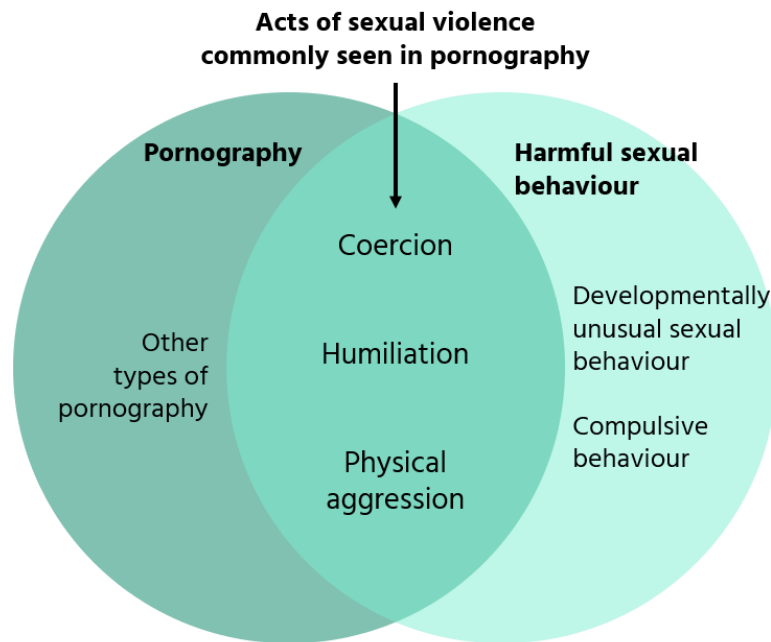
This is the second in a series of reports investigating the impact of pornography on young people, building upon the Children's Commissioner's report published in January 2023, *"A lot of it is actually just abuse"*, which set out findings from a survey of over a thousand 16-21-year-olds and focus groups with teenagers. This series of work shows the detrimental effect that pornography is having on children and young people. It adds weight to the Children's Commissioner's view that no child under the age of 18 should be able to access pornography.

This report aimed to discover whether references to specific acts of sexual violence commonly seen in pornography could be found in official documents relating to the investigation of children who abused other children. It is not intended to be read by children, but by researchers and policy makers interested in making children safer. It makes frequent reference to sexual harassment and sexual violence, and includes descriptions of pornographic content, language, and discussion of sexual abuse. This content may be difficult to read, however, we think it is important to understand how pornography impacts children, in order that we may better protect all children from harm.

The research contained within this report synthesises data from 502 documents of two types: 379 Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) transcripts of interviews with children who have been sexually harmed and children who have sexually harmed another child, from one police force, and 123 Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) documents concerning children who were sexually harmed by other children from one NHS foundation trust.

This report focuses on the intersection between pornography and harmful sexual behaviour (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 – Venn diagram depicting the intersection of pornography, harmful sexual behaviour and acts of sexual violence commonly seen in pornography.**



This report summarises existing evidence about the impact of pornography on harmful sexual behaviour, what is known about the children who carry out harmful sexual behaviour, and evidence from previous research by the Children’s Commissioner’s office (CCo) and others about children’s exposure to pornography.

It then presents novel analysis of documents containing accounts of sexual violence between children. The CCo hypothesised that pornography is one factor influencing harmful sexual behaviour by children, specifically, we present tentative evidence of an influence on the form the harmful sexual behaviour takes. The CCo conducted exploratory analysis of whether specific acts commonly seen in pornography were mentioned in transcripts of interviews with children about child sexual abuse, and whether the transcripts contain discussion of pornography as a factor.

The CCo finds that in 50% of cases of child sexual abuse, the associated interview transcripts include words referring to at least one specific act of sexual violence commonly seen in pornography. Manual

review of 32 transcripts found instances of both police and children drawing direct links between the incident of abuse and the abuser's exposure to pornography. This is deeply worrying.

Combined with other evidence, including the qualitative research the CCo has previously undertaken with children and young people about their views on pornography, and the research into the extent of their exposure to pornography, it lends weight to the need to ensure children are robustly protected online.

This report therefore shows how important it is that the Online Safety Bill becomes legislation as quickly as possible, and includes recommendations on how children who have been sexually harmed by another child can be better supported, and how harmful sexual behaviour can be prevented or addressed appropriately.

## Definitions

### Legal definitions and widely accepted definitions

The Children's Commissioner does not think any child under 18 should be able to access any pornography. Throughout the report there are references to different types of harmful things that children are able to access. These are defined below.

These definitions are derived from an in-depth review of the academic literature.

#### **Harmful sexual behaviour**

A spectrum of sexual behaviours exhibited by children that are sexually harmful to others, ranging from inappropriate, to problematic, abusive and violent as established by the Hackett continuum of harmful sexual behaviour.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Pornography**

Content, images or videos, whose primary purpose is sexual arousal in the viewer.

#### **Illegal pornography**

The possession of 'extreme pornography' is illegal. Part 5 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 defines extreme pornography as pornographic content which is grossly offensive or obscene, and depicts acts which threaten a person's life or risk serious injury, necrophilia and non-consensual penetration.<sup>4</sup>

### Definitions for the purposes of this report

These definitions are derived from an in-depth review of the academic literature.

#### **Abuse of a child by another child**

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This report uses the term 'abuse of a child by another child' to refer to all sexual abuse between under-18s. This form of abuse, sometimes referred to as 'child-on-child' abuse includes both abuse between children of different ages or developmental stages and abuse between children of the same age or developmental stage.

### **Frequent pornography use**

For the purposes of this report; intentional access to pornography more than twice per week. This frequency has been associated with sexual health issues among adult men and women.<sup>5</sup>

### **Early exposure to pornography**

A child first exposed to pornography at age 11 or younger. Exposure to pornography below the age of 12 has been associated with negative health outcomes.<sup>6</sup> The Children's Commissioner does not think any child should be able to access pornography; it is shocking that children as young as 11 or younger are being exposed to its harms.

### **Degrading sex acts**

Sexual acts which are intended to cause humiliation, shame, or emotional distress.<sup>7</sup>

### **Physically aggressive sex acts**

Sexual acts which carry a reasonable risk of physical harm, regardless of the intent and the recipient's response.<sup>8</sup> Examples include strangulation and slapping.

### **Coercive sex acts**

Sexual activity which involves pressure or manipulation (in pornography this may be presented as real or simulated) and a persistent attempt to have sexual contact with someone who has already refused.<sup>9</sup> All non-consensual sex constitutes an offence.

### **Sexual violence**

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For the purposes of this report, any sexual act which may be considered, as per definitions above, as degrading, physically aggressive or coercive.

## **A note on language**

There are limitations to using the labels 'perpetrator' and 'victim' to describe children abused by, or abusing, other children. Some young people who have been sexually abused choose the term 'victim' to communicate the gravity of the harm they experienced, while others prefer the term 'survivor' to affirm their active recovery process beyond the traumatic event.

Research shows that children who display harmful sexual behaviour and who sexually harm other children have often been victims of abuse in their own right, and - depending on their age - may be below the age of criminal responsibility.

There is no one term which will adequately identify the complex dynamics of agency and harm within abuse of a child by another child. The CCo has chosen to use the terms 'child who has harmed' and 'child who has been harmed' for simplicity's sake and recognises that the abuse described in our analysis are alleged offences committed by alleged perpetrators on alleged victims.

## Chapter 1: Children's access to pornography

*This report contributes to a wider evidence base on the impacts of pornography exposure on children. It shows that it is too easy for children to stumble across harmful content and demonstrates why this must change – there must be more done to protect children from harm.*

*This chapter presents an overview of the online pornography landscape, including the scale and reach of the industry, and the dynamics and implications of online video business models and the content they serve up to viewers. The chapter also presents evidence on children's access to pornography, drawing on the Commissioner's survey findings and wider literature. It then discusses evidence on the implications of childhood and adolescent exposure to pornography and its damage.*

*This chapter is not intended as an exhaustive literature review but aims to contextualise the findings detailed later in the report. Where relevant and instructive, references are made to robust evidence reviews on the relationship between pornography use, sexual attitudes, and behaviours.*

### 1.1 The online pornography industry

In this section we outline the vast size of the online pornography industry and the far reach that this industry holds, not only in terms of the number of viewers but also the increasingly young age of people who are exposed to pornographic content online. No child should be viewing pornography, and it is essential that more is done to prevent them from doing so. A recent CCo survey found that 38% of young people who had seen pornography had accidentally stumbled across it online<sup>10</sup>, which demonstrates the danger posed by poor regulation of online pornography for children.

This is particularly concerning with regard to the proportion of sexually violent content found on many major streaming platforms and the accessibility of content, as there is no legal requirement in the UK for online pornography providers to verify the age of users<sup>11</sup>. The industry is vast, based on a model of attracting a user's attention as frequently as possible, and holding it for as long as possible.



### 1.1.1 Size and reach

The size and value of the online pornography industry is unknown. Most of the dominant companies are privately owned, with opaque ownership structures which are often held offshore. Estimates of the pornography industry value range from a conservative estimate of \$15bn<sup>12</sup> up to a staggering \$97bn per year.<sup>13</sup> This would make the industry larger than Netflix (\$11.7bn) and perhaps even larger than Hollywood film industry as a whole (\$42.5bn).<sup>14</sup>

In 2020, the four largest online pornography sites – PornHub, XVideos, xnxx and XHamster – received a combined **11 billion visits a month**. This is greater than the number of monthly visits to Amazon, LinkedIn, Netflix, Zoom and eBay combined.<sup>15</sup>

**Table 1 - Monthly and estimated annual visitors to the four largest pornography sites, 2020<sup>16</sup>**

Site	Monthly visits (2020)	Estimated annual visits (2020)
xvideos.com	3.4 billion	40.8 billion
pornhub.com	3.3 billion	39.6 billion
xnxx.com	2.9 billion	34.8 billion
xhamster.com	1.2 billion	14.4 billion

### 1.1.2 The online pornography business model

The Children’s Commissioner wants to make sure all children are protected online and cannot stumble across pornography on the internet. Major pornography sites are built on a business model similar to other video-sharing platforms such as YouTube, in which profit is derived from advertising revenue. Platforms must hold a user’s attention as frequently as possible, and for as long as possible, to maximise their exposure to adverts. There are concerns about the impact of this business model on viewers’ sexual preferences.<sup>17</sup> People are predisposed to seek out novelty in their sexual experiences, a phenomenon known as the ‘Coolidge effect’.<sup>18</sup> In the world of online pornography, this can result in an escalation of preferences, towards content which is increasingly deviant and extreme. Platforms are financially incentivised to continue offering content which is novel, in order to match viewers’ initial response and to drive frequent exposure.<sup>19</sup>

Given the global reach of online pornography, this has implications for society at large. A 2021 study conducted by child protection NGO Suojellaan Lapsia into the drivers of child sexual abuse (CSA) offending found “clear patterns of pornography escalation”.<sup>20</sup> The anonymous surveys, conducted in the dark web in 12 languages, received responses from 8,484 respondents searching for Child Sexual Abuse Material on the dark web. The survey results indicate that some offenders viewed adult pornography at a young age and had started to view child sexual abuse material on the dark web after they had become desensitised to legal material. Of course, many factors will drive CSA offending, and this by no means suggests that all pornography users will inevitably migrate to child sexual abuse material. But it serves as an example of the serious consequences of pornography desensitisation, particularly when exposure begins at an early age.

### 1.1.3 Sexually violent content

Several studies have sought to quantify the prevalence of sexually violent content on mainstream pornography platforms using content analysis techniques. Fritz et al. (2020), in a study of over four thousand scenes from two pornography sites (PornHub and XVideos), found that 45% of PornHub scenes included at least one act of aggression, while 35% of scenes from competitor site XVideos contained aggression. Women were the target in 97% of scenes. Female actors’ responses to aggression in scenes were mostly neutral or positive, and rarely negative.<sup>21</sup> Analysis by Vera-Gray, McGlynn et. al. (2021) of 132,000 titles found that one in every eight titles shown to a first-time visitor on mainstream porn sites describe sexual violence<sup>22</sup> (per the WHO definition of sexual violence<sup>23</sup>). Table 2 shows the frequency of identified categories of violence.

**Table 2 - Frequency of forms of sexual violence presented in titles shown to a first-time visitor to Pornhub.com, Xhamster.com and Xvideos.com out of a total 131,738 titles included in the study<sup>24</sup>**

Category of sexual violence	Count	Percent of all titles (%)
Family sexual activity (including incest pornography)	5,785	4.4%

Physical aggression and assault	5,389	4.1%
Image-based abuse (including 'revenge porn', 'upskirting' and 'spy cams')	2,966	2.2%
Coercion and exploitation	2,698	1.7%

Of particular concern to the Children's Commissioner is the preponderance of sexual interest in teenage girls found in online pornography. An analysis of 172 Pornhub videos by Shor (2019) found that teenage performers were more likely than adult performers to feature in titles that suggest aggression, and to be the recipient of anal penetration and facial ejaculation.<sup>25</sup> Shor's analysis further found that teenage performers were more likely than adult performers to express 'pleasure' following sexual aggression, thus showing the aggression and male dominance as 'consensual' and 'sensual'. It is deeply concerning if acts which would constitute sexual assault are portrayed as being welcome.

#### **1.1.4 Legislation and regulation**

Unlike in the physical world, there is currently no legal requirement in the UK for online pornography providers to verify the age of users<sup>26</sup>. This must change to protect children and young people. Most mainstream adult sites require one click to 'check' that a user is aged 18 or above. Some sites, including Pornhub and XHamster, have no age check in place to stop children who reach the sites from accessing content. Alongside this, as revealed in the Children's Commissioner's survey of 16-21-year-olds<sup>27</sup> dedicated pornography sites are not the only way, or even the most popular way, that young people access online porn [see section 1.2.3. for more details]. There is a wide prevalence of pornography on social media platforms such as Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram. Tech companies must do more to prevent children and young people from stumbling across harmful material on their platforms - it is unacceptable.

## 1.2 Children's access and exposure to pornography

### 1.2.1 Prevalence

It is the Children's Commissioner's view that no child should be accessing pornography, and it is particularly concerning that children are doing so at a very young age. In November 2023, the Children's Commissioner conducted a survey of over one thousand 16-21-year-olds on their access to pornography.<sup>28</sup> The intention of this research was to benchmark existing data on the prevalence of children's exposure to pornography, and to provide new evidence on the impacts of pornography use on mental health, and on young people's attitudes towards sex and relationships. The report, *"A lot of it is actually just abuse"*,<sup>29</sup> which can be read in full on the Children's Commissioner's website, found:

- Almost two thirds (64%) of young people reported that they had viewed pornography. This is likely to be an underestimate, given self-reporting bias on potentially embarrassing, stigmatised or uncomfortable topics like these.
- Of those who had viewed pornography, the average age of first exposure was 13 years old. There was no significant difference by gender; girls were just as likely as boys to have viewed pornography by this age.
- Concerning minorities of children reported accessing pornography at very young ages; 10% of those who had seen porn had seen it by age 9, and 27% had seen it by age 11.

These findings accorded with other research by the Children's Commissioner which found that, of children who had viewed pornography, 94% had seen it by the age of 14.<sup>30</sup> This is also corroborated by young people interviewed for BBFC/Revealing Reality (2020) research, the majority of whom had seen pornography by the age of 13. Of the 1,142 young people in the UK aged 11 to 17 who took part in a representative survey for that report, 51% of 11-13-year-olds were aware of online pornography.<sup>31</sup>

The Children's Commissioner's qualitative research with teenagers found that pornography exposure is related to the age at which children are given their own phone. One young person told CCo researchers: *'I think as time goes on it is going to be younger because people seem to get devices at younger ages. I think the age is getting younger from when we were that age'* – Boy, 17, focus group.

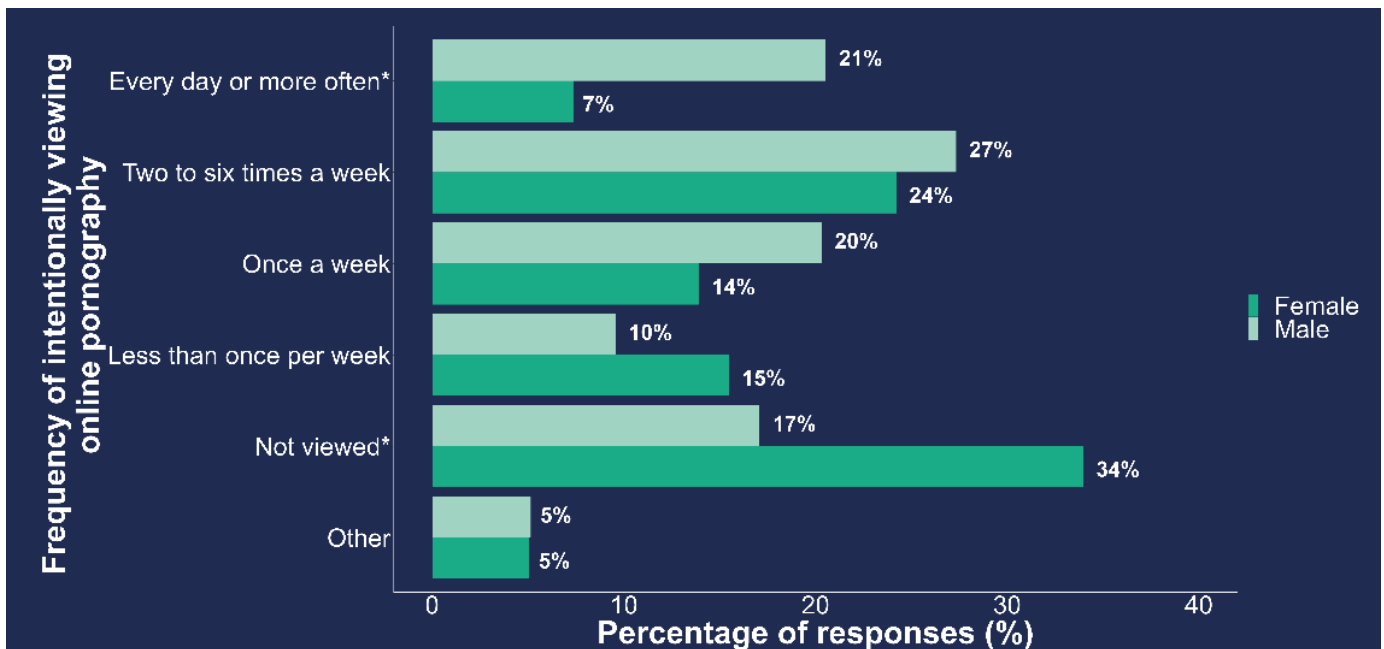
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## 1.2.2 Frequency

Overall, the Children’s Commissioner’s survey of 16–21-year-olds found that, among those who had accessed online pornography, 14% viewed it at least every day, and 81% less often, including 55% who accessed it less than once per week and 26% who hadn’t viewed it at all in the previous two weeks. The survey found a statistically significant gender divide in the proportion of young people who had not viewed online pornography in the past two weeks and who had intentionally viewed it every day or more (Figure 2). Among survey respondents who had seen pornography:

- Almost half (48%) of boys had intentionally viewed pornography twice a week or more in the two weeks prior to the survey, compared to 31% of girls.
- A fifth of boys (21%) had intentionally viewed online pornography every day or more often in the two weeks prior to the survey, compared to just 7% of girls.

**Figure 2 - Frequency of intentionally accessing online pornography in the two weeks prior to the CCo survey (November 2022), by respondent gender.**



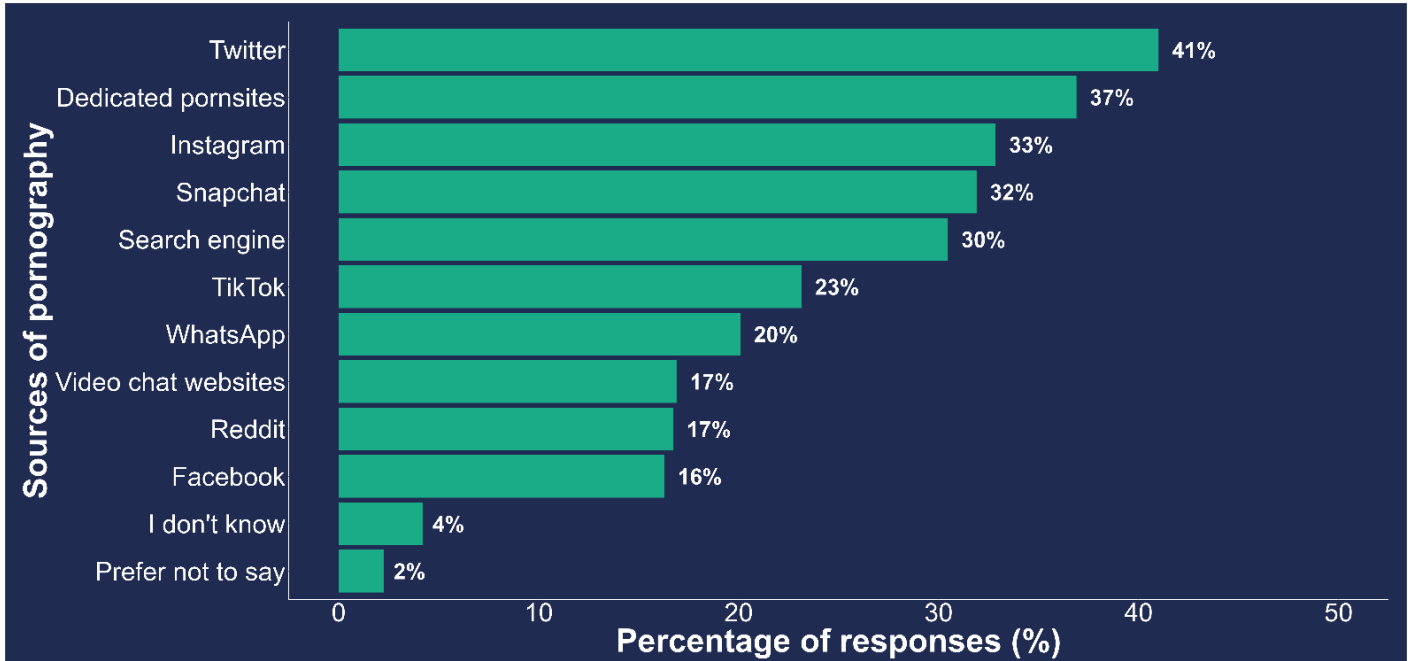
Source: Children's Commissioner's survey of 16–21-year-olds, 2022<sup>22</sup>. Asterisks (\*) indicate a significant difference by gender. Includes only those who had ever intentionally viewed pornography (n=652).

This finding is supported by the wider literature on pornography exposure, which consistently finds differences by gender. This includes previous research by the Children's Commissioner which found boys were more likely than girls to search for pornography regularly.<sup>33</sup> Frequent pornography exposure was also closely related to the age at which a young person had first viewed pornography. Using a definition of 'frequent pornography exposure' of twice or more per week, the Children's Commissioner's survey found that those who had first viewed online pornography at age 11 or younger were significantly more likely to access pornography frequently (50%), than those who first watched pornography at a later age (32%).

### **1.2.3 Sources of where children are accessing pornography**

As referenced above, a lot of children and young people are also stumbling across harmful material on social media sites. Many children come across pornography online without intending to. In the survey, 38% of respondents who had seen pornography said that they had accidentally come across it online.<sup>34</sup> The Children's Commissioner's research published in January 2023 found that the largest share of young people had seen pornography on Twitter, a greater proportion even than dedicated adult sites (Figure 3)<sup>35</sup>. Twitter is notable in its permissive policies towards online pornography, despite the minimum age for signing up for an account being just 13. Instagram and Snapchat ranked closely after dedicated pornography sites, despite their minimum age also being just 13.

**Figure 3 - Percentage of survey respondents who selected the top 10 sources of pornography.**



*Note: Includes only those who had ever viewed online pornography (n=652).*

## 1.3 Pornography use and harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours

### 1.3.1 Sexual scripts

Children and young people learn social norms about sex as they grow up. Sexual script theory holds that an individual's sexuality is informed and developed by their social environment,<sup>36</sup> including family environment, peers, faith, media, music, what they watch, and experiences of abuse. Sexual scripts are templates which inform an individual's understanding of what constitutes 'normal' and 'acceptable' sexual behaviour, and where the boundaries of 'inappropriate' sexual conduct lie. The Children's Commissioner is clear that all interactions should be age appropriate and consensual. Research has increasingly explored what sexual scripts are presented through pornography and the prevailing themes of impersonality,<sup>37</sup> aggression,<sup>38</sup> female objectification<sup>39</sup> and male dominance<sup>40</sup> [see section 1.1.3 for discussion of sexually violent themes in online pornography].

This is affecting children and young people's perception of what a healthy relationship is. The Children's Commissioner's nationally representative survey of young people aged 16-21 found that many children

and young people do express an expectation that sex involves physical aggression. Respondents were more likely than not to state that girls expect or enjoy sex involving physical aggression, such as strangulation or slapping. Young people were also more likely to assume that girls enjoyed such acts of sexual aggression than boys did.<sup>41</sup>

- Almost half, 47%, of respondents aged 16-21 stated that girls expect sex to involve physical aggression (compared to 39% who stated that boys expect sex to involve aggression).
- A further 42% of respondents stated that girls enjoy physically aggressive sex acts (compared to 37% who stated that boys enjoy aggressive sex).
- Just over a third (37%) stated that girls rarely or never expect sex to involve physical aggression.
- A similar proportion, 38%, of respondents stated that girls do not enjoy aggressive sex acts.

Sexual scripts theory challenges the notion that online pornography simply reflects human sexuality. They contradict the idea that people who already have objectifying and aggressive beliefs and behaviours are the people who are more likely to use pornography. Rather, a growing body of evidence suggests that pornography plays an active role in the shaping and acting out of sexual attitudes and behaviours in the general population. For example, a 2016 survey of 487 US college men aged 18-29 found that the more pornography a man watched, the more likely he was to: use pornography during sex, request his partner to perform particular sex acts he had viewed in pornography, deliberately focus on pornography during sex to maintain arousal, and have concerns about his own sexual performance and body image.<sup>42</sup> Further, a meta-analysis of 70 studies from 13 countries, spanning over 40 years of research and comprising over 60,000 participants, found that pornography exposure is associated with an impersonal approach to sex (which in turn is correlated with sexual aggression), consistently across both age and gender.<sup>43</sup> The findings support the sexual script hypothesis – i.e. that exposure to pornography shapes sexual attitudes. This is just one of the reasons why limiting children's exposure to pornography is of such importance – no child should be able to access any pornography.



### **1.3.2 Relationship between pornography and attitudes towards sexual violence**

A literature review of 19 academic papers, drawing on multiple methodologies since 2005, conducted by the Government Equalities Office (GEO) to assess the relationship between pornography exposure and negative behaviours towards women and girls found that pornography use had a statistically significant association with attitudes supporting violence against women (with violent pornography showing an even stronger association).<sup>44</sup> A meta-analysis of 9 studies found a significant association between pornography use among adult men and attitudes supporting violence against women, such as 'rape myth acceptance'.<sup>45</sup> The association was found to be significantly stronger for violent pornography than non-violent pornography. Other studies involving young adults, including Peter and Valkenburg (2009)<sup>46</sup> and Hald et al. (2013),<sup>47</sup> have found that past pornography exposure among young males is significantly associated with less egalitarian and more aggressive attitudes towards women. This is particularly worrying when young people are being exposed to pornography.

### **1.3.3 Pornography and harmful sexual behaviour among children**

Studies which explore the relationship between pornography exposure and harmful sexual behaviour among children have a number of ethical and methodological challenges. The potential drivers of harmful sexual behaviour are understood to be multiple and complex. Pornography exposure could be one of several risk factors explaining harmful sexual behaviour by children.<sup>48</sup> It is also likely that variables interact with one another, with violent pornography use supporting harmful attitudes derived elsewhere, such as exposure to domestic abuse, prior sexual abuse, or other forms of trauma. The Children's Commissioner's 2022 survey of 16-21-year-olds found that young people who were frequently exposed to pornography (a self-assessment of twice or more per week) were significantly more likely to have been involved in a physically aggressive or degrading sex act, either as the child who has been harmed or the child who has harmed.<sup>49</sup>

Longitudinal studies provide the most robust evidence for the relationship between pornography use and harmful sexual behaviour. For example, Ybarra and Thompson (2018) conducted a study over six years of 1,586 young people aged 10-21, with successive survey waves designed to assess the factors which affect the likelihood of a participant perpetrating sexual violence. For example, participants were asked if they had ever "done anything sexual with another person when that person *did not want*

*you to*.<sup>50</sup> The strongest predictors of sexual violence among both males and females were found to be (1) exposure to parental/caregiver abuse, and (2) exposure to violent pornography. For males alone, exposure to violent pornography was the strongest predictor of perpetrating sexual violence. Further studies which have found pornography exposure to be predictive of sexual aggression include:

- Dawson et al. (2019): a study of 594 Croatian high-school students (average age 15.8 years) over 20 months found that participants who reported no or marginal levels of sexual aggression also reported significantly lower levels of pornography use, compared to peers who reported substantial sexual aggressiveness. Controlling for personality traits did not cancel the association between frequency of pornography use and self-reported sexual aggression.<sup>51</sup>
- Tomaszewka and Krahe (2018): a two-wave study of 318 Polish university students, male and female, found that pornography use indirectly predicted sexual aggression victimisation via risky sexual scripts and behaviour.<sup>52</sup>
- D'Abreu and Krahe (2014): a study of 286 male college students in Brazil found that pornography use was linked to sexual aggression both cross-sectionally and longitudinally, alongside other risk factors such as childhood abuse.<sup>53</sup>
- Ybarra et al. (2011): a 3-year, 3-wave survey of 1,588 (Wave 1), 1,206 (Wave 2) and 1,159 (Wave 3) 10-15-year-olds in the US. The study found that an average of 5% of young people reported perpetrating sexually aggressive behaviour, and 23% had reported intentional access to pornography. After adjusting for other proximal and distal influences, the report finds that intentional exposure to violent pornography predicted a six-fold increase in the likelihood of perpetrating sexual aggression.<sup>54</sup>

This report largely seeks to explore whether acts of sexual violence against children reflect those seen in pornography. This provides evidence that porn is influencing the way in which children are acting out harmful sexual behaviours after stumbling across harmful material that they should not be able to access.

## **1.4 Harmful sexual behaviour and children who abuse other children**

### **1.4.1 Types of harmful sexual behaviour**

Hackett (2010) describes a spectrum of sexual behaviour that children and young people may express, from normal, to inappropriate, problematic, abusive and violent.<sup>55</sup> It is rarely straightforward to place a child or young person's sexual behaviour at a single point on the 'continuum'. One must take account of the child's age, as well as their wider family circumstances, and their social, emotional and cognitive development.<sup>56</sup> An example tool used to consider whether a child's behaviour is harmful was developed by the sexual health charity Brook. Their 'sexual behaviours traffic light tool' (adapted from 'True Relationships & Reproductive Health', 2012) is used to support professionals to distinguish between three levels of a young person's sexual behaviour from 'green', to 'amber' and 'red'.<sup>57</sup> The NSPCC (Hackett, Branigan & Holmes, 2019) have also published an evidence-based framework to inform assessments and multi-agency responses to children and young people who exhibit harmful sexual behaviour.<sup>58</sup>

### **1.4.2 The scale of abuse by children**

It is difficult to establish the true scale of sexual abuse committed by under-18s. Stigma, shame and poor understanding of harmful sexual behaviour of children are likely to contribute to under-reporting.<sup>59</sup> Estimates differ for the proportion of CSA committed by under-18s. Based on the evidence, NSPCC estimate that 'around a third' of all CSA offences are committed by a child.<sup>60</sup> This is taken as a 'mid-way point' between lower and higher estimates from multiple studies, including:

- Hackett (2004), in review of the pattern of crime statistics over a decade, estimated that between one fifth and one third of all CSA in the UK involves under-18s as the child who has harmed.<sup>61</sup>
- Radford (2011), in a survey of child maltreatment in the UK, reported that 65.9% of contact CSA was perpetrated by an under-18, as reported by the child who has been harmed.<sup>62</sup>

- Gerwitz-Meydan and Finkelhor (2019), in a study of a sample of 0-17-year-olds in the USA found that 70% of CSA offences against girls and 77% of CSA offences against boys were perpetrated by an under-18.<sup>63</sup>

### **1.4.3 Characteristics associated with harmful sexual behaviour**

The term harmful sexual behaviour encompasses a wide range of behaviours, and it is important not to view children who display harmful sexual behaviour as a homogenous group. For a concise and up-to-date overview of what is currently known about harmful sexual behaviours, see McNeish & Scott (2023)<sup>64</sup> and for a comprehensive review see Hackett (2014).<sup>65</sup>

#### **1.4.3.1. Age**

Younger children may exhibit harmful sexual behaviour on the 'inappropriate' and even 'problematic' points of the sexual behaviour continuum [see section 1.4.1], but pre-adolescent cases of 'abusive' and 'violent' harmful sexual behaviour are rare.<sup>66</sup> Hackett (2014) notes that the inverse relationship between harmful sexual behaviour and age among pre-adolescents suggests that these behaviours may be largely exploratory and part of normal curiosity and development.<sup>67</sup>

Evidence suggests that the early teen years, following the onset of puberty, are the peak period for the manifestation of harmful sexual behaviour on the 'abusive' and 'violent' end of the scale. Finkelhor et al. (2009) analysed child-perpetrated sexual offences in the USA. They found a sharp rise in cases at the age of 12, which plateaus after the age of 14,<sup>68</sup> though it should be noted that the average age that harmful sexual behaviour is first identified and recorded may be later than the first onset.<sup>69</sup>

#### **1.4.3.2. Sex and Gender**

Evidence strongly suggests that the great majority of young people who exhibit harmful sexual behaviour are male. Hackett (2013) found that 97% of a sample of 676 children referred to harmful sexual behaviour support services in the UK were male. Taylor (2003) found that 92% of 227 children accused of CSA in the UK were male,<sup>70</sup> and Vizard (2007) found 91% of 280 referrals for a harmful sexual behaviour service were male.<sup>71</sup> Hackett (2014) stresses the importance of addressing society's normalisation of male power and sexual aggression in the prevention of harmful sexual behaviour.<sup>72</sup>

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Less is known about the small proportion of girls who display harmful sexual behaviour, given the few young females who perpetrate sexually abusive behaviour. It has been suggested that girls are more likely to internalise trauma and harmful feelings which may otherwise lead to harmful sexual behaviour, for example through self-harm.<sup>73</sup> Research suggests that girls who do display harmful sexual behaviour are likely to be younger and are likely to harm younger children.<sup>74</sup> While it is rare for girls or boys to be charged with an offence, given the younger average age of perpetration, girls who exhibit harmful sexual behaviour are less likely than boys to be charged with an offence.<sup>75</sup>

#### **1.4.3.3. Children with special educational needs (SEN)**

Children with special education needs (SEN) – also often referred to in the literature as ‘intellectual needs’ or ‘learning needs’ – are over-represented among young people who display harmful sexual behaviour. In a sample of 700 children and young people who had been referred to a harmful sexual behaviour service in the UK, Hackett et al. (2013) found that over a third (38%) were identified as learning disabled.<sup>76</sup> The factors behind the over-representation of children with SEN are complex and should not lead to the assumption that boys and young men with a learning need are likely to abuse others.

McNeish & Scott (2023)<sup>77</sup> discuss the factors which may result in harmful sexual behaviour, noting in particular, that children with SEN:

- Are more likely to have been sexually and physically abused than the wider population. Fortune & Lambie (2004) also find that 83% of male sex offenders with SEN (they used the term “special needs”) have been sexually abused, compared to 59% of male sex offenders without SEN. The study further finds that 88% of the sample with SEN have been physically abused, compared to 65% of the sample without SEN.<sup>78</sup>
- Are more likely to have deficits in social skills.
- Are less likely to receive Relationships and Sex Education (RSE).
- Have fewer opportunities to develop appropriate sexual relationships and sexual expression.
- May relate more easily to younger children.

A combination of the factors above may result in a young person not developing awareness of social taboos around sexual conduct, and to understand the boundaries of 'inappropriate' sexual behaviour.

Hackett (2014) expresses concern about the lack of tailored harmful sexual behaviour services for children with SEN.<sup>79</sup> He notes that research in this specific area is under-developed and, despite some pioneering examples, that children and young people with learning disabilities continue to be overlooked in policy terms.

#### **1.4.4. Risk factors associated with harmful sexual behaviour**

Research suggests that children who display harmful sexual behaviour are more likely than the wider population to have had experienced one or more of a series of challenges during childhood, such as prior childhood trauma, abuse and neglect. This includes a greater likelihood of having been physically abused, sexually abused and neglected, having witnessed domestic violence, or having parents with mental health or substance misuse issues.<sup>80</sup>

Findings from various studies of children who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour, including Vizard (2007),<sup>81</sup> Salter (2003)<sup>82</sup> and Ogloff (2012),<sup>83</sup> demonstrate that a high proportion of these children have histories of adversity. A 2013 study from Hackett et al., found that 66% of the children in the study sample were known to have experienced at least one form of abuse or trauma, while the other 34% of children referred had no known history of abuse or trauma<sup>84</sup>.

However, as detailed in previous sections, there is a growing body of evidence linking the exposure to online pornography among children and young people to subsequent harmful sexual behaviour, limited. In addition to studies looking at those exposed to pornography, in a study of 91 cases of harmful sexual behaviour, Hollis and Belton (2017) found that for boys displaying harmful sexual behaviour, online pornography had been a trigger for their offline behaviour in 56% of cases and it was noted that some boys were acting out something that they had seen online.<sup>85</sup>

Pornography exposure can also be used as a deliberate strategy to groom children for sexual abuse.<sup>86</sup> This can potentially make it more complicated to understand whether exposure to pornography in

itself is a driver of children's harmful sexual behaviour, or whether it is prior child abuse that included exposure to and the normalisation of pornography.

## Chapter 2: Data and methodology

*This report gathered and analysed 502 documents of two types:*

- *379 Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) transcripts of interviews with children who have been harmed and children who have harmed another child. These were provided by the police force investigating the abuse.*
- *123 Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) documents concerning children who were harmed by other children from one NHS foundation trust. These documents relate to children who have been referred to the SARC after abuse has taken place.*

*These organisations worked with the Children's Commissioner because they were interested in learning more about the influences on harmful sexual behaviour. As the first text analysis of ABE transcripts and SARC documents that the Children's Commissioner is aware of, the methodology should be viewed as a proof-of-concept.*

*This chapter provides an overview of the structure and contents of the documents collected as well as an overview of the framework used to classify specific acts of sexual violence commonly seen in pornography, the terms used to identify these acts in the documents and process of manually reviewing documents where pornography is discussed.*

### 2.1. Data description

Under [Section 2F](#) of the Children Act 2004 the Children's Commissioner collected 379 transcripts of video-recorded interviews with children who have been harmed and children who have harmed another child. These are interviews which are conducted under the Ministry of Justice's Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings (ABE) guidelines, where the recording is intended to be played as the witness's evidence-in-chief in court.<sup>87</sup> They can be conducted by either a police officer or a social worker. These are referred to as ABE transcripts throughout the report.

In addition, 123 Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) forms were collected, including paediatric safeguarding medical reports and referral forms. A SARC is a specialist medical and forensic service for anyone who has been sexually abused, raped or sexually assaulted. The forms contain personal

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information about the child and may or may not include details about the assault, depending on how they are completed.

The ABE transcripts the Children’s Commissioner collected relate to children who reported sexual abuse carried out by another child between 2012-2022. The SARC documents relate to children who report sexual harm by another child between April 2019-March 2022. This represented 30% of all children seen in the SARC in this timeframe. The cases of sexual abuse in this data include cases where the child who was harmed is unrelated to the child who harmed but also cases where the child who was harmed is a sibling, step-sibling, half-sibling, or cousin of the child who harmed. While the age of the child is known from the SARC documents, the age of the child is not always known from the ABE interviews.

Within the dataset of ABE transcripts, there are sometimes multiple transcripts within the same case, either because of interviews with both the child who has been harmed and child who harmed or because of multiple interviews with the same person. The 379 ABE transcripts relate to 307 children in 179 cases.

Within the dataset of SARC documents, there can be multiple SARC documents for a single victim. The 123 SARC forms relate to 99 children (16% aged 4-8, 11% aged 9-11, 53% aged 12-14 and 20% aged 15-16).

The ABE transcripts tended to be much longer documents than the SARC documents (Table 3).

**Table 3 - Description of the data from the ABE transcripts and SARC documents.**

	<b>Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) transcripts</b>	<b>Sexual Abuse Referral Centre (SARC) documents</b>
Number of children and cases	307 children, 179 cases	99 children and cases

Number of documents	379	123
Number of sentences	151,639	3,592
Number of words	11,348,254	449,029
Average number of sentences in a document	400	29
Average number of words in a document	29,943	3,651

## 2.2. Methodology

Two types of analysis were carried out for this report.

The first element of analysis seeks to understand whether acts of sexual violence commonly seen in pornography (Chapter 3) are present in the accounts of child sexual abuse. This novel analysis seeks to better understand whether children appear to be influenced in the kind of harm they perpetrate by the specific acts commonly seen in pornography. We hypothesise that sexually violent pornography is affecting their ideas of what is expected in sex, and what is and is not normal behaviour. The context of this analysis is crucial – these are children who have sexually harmed others. There may be instances of children mimicking what they have observed because they believe it is expected or normal, or they may understand those behaviours are violent and abusive and intend to enact them. This analysis cannot explore whether children do not understand that what they are doing is abusive, or if they understand but do so anyway.

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The second element of analysis examines the actual discussions of pornography in these documents, to better understand whether children and those working with them believe that pornography is influencing their behaviour (Chapter 4).

### **2.2.1. Data cleaning and anonymisation**

Before analysis, the documents were converted to plain text, the text was anonymised and the text of the SARC documents was minimised to only contain sections describing the report of sexual abuse.

Sixty-four duplicated ABE transcripts were excluded from our analyses as they contained exactly the same text or text that contained exactly the same introductory page. Two duplicated SARC documents were eliminated where duplicates were identified as forms with exactly the same text. The final dataset is described in Table 3.

### **2.2.2. Analytical framework**

A framework for categorising 'acts of sexual violence commonly seen in pornography' was developed for analysis of a previous Children's Commissioner's survey on pornography exposure.<sup>88</sup> For this, we derived and defined three categories of sexual violence: physical aggression, humiliation, and coercion. This is based on the World Health Organisation's definition of sexual violence<sup>89</sup>, referenced against acts of sexual violence commonly seen in pornography and harmful sexual behaviour exhibited by children and young people.<sup>90</sup>

In choosing acts commonly seen in pornography, the analysis does not specifically look at words such as rape or assault, as these are broad categories of violent sexual behaviour and our analysis is seeking to explore whether pornography may influence the specific form that harmful sexual behaviour takes. The words chosen are therefore reflective of specific violent and non-consensual scenarios that are common in pornography of which many will meet the criteria for rape, sexual assault, or other criminal offences even if they are not described using terms which make clear that illegality.

The three categories of sexual violence are defined for this report as:

**Physical aggression:** sexual acts which carry a reasonable risk of physical harm, regardless of the intent of the child who harmed and the recipient's response. Acts of physical aggression commonly seen in pornography include slaps to the face, breath-play or strangulation, someone pulling another's hair, oral sex involving gagging/choking, spanking or whipping, kicking, and punching.

**Humiliation:** sexual acts which are intended to be degrading, to cause shame or emotional distress. Acts of humiliation commonly seen in pornography include ejaculation on the face and someone being called names such as wh\*\*\*, b\*\*\*\* or s\*\*t.

**Coercion:** sexual activity which involves pressure or manipulation and a persistent attempt to have sexual contact with someone who has refused. All sexual contact without consent is illegal, including specific crimes such as rape. The analysis therefore considers acts commonly seen in pornography including someone being abused whilst asleep, being abused while drugged, and non-consensual image/video sharing.

To be clear, there are acts not classified as commonly portrayed in pornography which still constitute an offence and can be experienced as aggressive, humiliating or coercive by the child who has been harmed. Examples are taking inappropriate pictures of minors, touching minors inappropriately, or showing pornographic material to minors. All of these acts were alleged offences identified through manual review of the ABE interviews.

### **2.2.3. Search terms**

Within the text in the ABE transcripts and SARC documents, CCo searched for terms associated with the specific forms of sexually violent behaviours in Table 4. This is not a comprehensive list of forms of sexual violence. It is a set of acts that fits within the framework discussed in section 2.2.2 which, based on the search term alone, can be used to estimate the prevalence of the act.

The results of searches using these terms were used to estimate the prevalence in the documents of acts of sexual violence commonly seen in pornography. The prevalence of these terms could over-estimate the true prevalence of these acts because they could come up in different contexts (for example, incidental references which do not form part of the description of the harmful sexual

behaviour). Conversely, they could under-estimate the true prevalence of these acts, because people could have used other wordings, that are not included in the table below.

**Table 4 – Search terms used to estimate prevalence in child sexual abuse of acts of sexual violence commonly seen in pornography**

Category	Act commonly seen in pornography	Search terms used in this analysis  Note: below, verbs are shown in the past tense and with reference to “me”, but terms searched for included all tenses and also include references to him/her/them and his/her/their where appropriate
Physical aggression	Slapping	“slapped me”, “slapped my face”
	Strangulation	“choked me”, “grabbed on my throat”, “grabbed me by my throat”, “hands around my throat”, “hands on my throat”, “strangled me”, “hands on my neck”, “grabbed me around the neck”, “grabbed me round the neck”, “I was choked”
	Hairpulling	“pulled my hair”, “pulled on my hair”, “gripped me by my hair”, “grabbed onto my hair”, “grabbed my hair”
	Oral sex involving gagging/choking	“gagged”
	Spanking <sup>1</sup>	“spanked”, “slapped my bum”, “slapped my ass”
	Whipping	“whipped”
	Punching	“punched me”

<sup>1</sup> Spanking is included in line with content analysis of sexual violence in pornography (Bridges et al. 2010, Klaasen and Peter 2014, Vera-Gray et al 2021).

	Kicking	"kicked the", "kicked my", "started kicking me" <sup>2</sup>
Humiliation	Name calling <sup>3</sup>	"s**t", "wh***", "b****", "worthless", "c****", "s**g"
	Ejaculation on face	"came on my face", "cum on my face"
Coercion	Being abused asleep	"woke up to find that", "while I was sleeping", "woken by him", "whilst I was asleep", "when I was asleep he", "touched her when she was asleep", "appeared to be in bed asleep"
	Being abused whilst drugged	"drugged", "just out of it", "really out of it"
	Image-based abuse	"nude", "sexted"

As set out above, all non-consensual sexual activity is illegal, so this table includes many acts which are themselves crimes.

The terms used in this table are often explicit descriptions of the acts. This can make for distressing reading, but the CCo believes it is necessary for policy makers to understand the nature of pornographic material that children are being exposed to, so they can better understand how harmful it is. The CCo is clear that no child should be able to access pornography in any form.

#### 2.2.4. Analytical methods

The CCo identified the appropriate terms to use for Table 4 by manually sense-checking how terms intuitively associated with each act are used in the text data, and modifying these terms as necessary to ensure they are capturing references to the corresponding acts of sexual violence. The CCo also reviewed the most common words, bigrams (two words found next to each other in a document) and

<sup>2</sup> Note the terms used to search for kicking are necessarily specific so to avoid picking up 'kick me out' as an act of kicking

<sup>3</sup> This is not an exhaustive list of all forms of name-calling that exist in pornography. We drew from Fritz et al. (2020) which found many instances of verbal aggression in porn that were gender-specific

“keywords” in the documents. Keywords were identified by using the Rapid Automatic Keyword Extraction algorithm.<sup>91</sup> The CCo manually sense checked references to search terms to ensure they aren’t identifying negative instances of these acts (such as “X never happened”). The CCo then used these terms in Table 4 to estimate, for each act in Table 4, the share of cases that included at least one instance of the search term in the associated transcript or transcripts. To explore the discussion around pornography, bigrams of references to the word porn were produced, as well as pairwise correlations of the word pornography.

### **2.2.5. Manual review**

The CCo read a sample of 32 ABE transcripts, relating to 24 cases, in full. These were selected as they all contained three or more references to “porn” or “pornography”. These include 13 interviews where the interviewee replied “no comment” to each question, in these cases analysis has focused on the interviewers’ questions and any statements or evidence that were read out and recorded. The interviews were conducted between 2015 and 2022. Of these interviews, 28 were conducted with children who harmed, four were conducted with a child who has been harmed. More interviews with children who harmed were included simply because more interviews that included frequent references to pornography were with those children.

## Chapter 3: Analysis of acts seen in pornography and if they are seen in child sexual abuse

*This chapter documents the prevalence of specific acts of sexual violence commonly portrayed in pornography in abuse of a child by another child. The analysis finds that half of cases in the CCo sample of transcripts contain at least one reference to one of these acts.*

### 3.1. Estimates of prevalence of acts commonly portrayed in pornography

In the sample of cases where children were abused by another child from the ABE interviews, 50% contained at least one term referring to an act of sexual violence commonly portrayed in pornography. The most common acts were name calling involving the names “s\*\*t”, “wh\*\*\*”, “b\*\*\*h”, “worthless”, “c\*\*\*”, or “s\*\*g”, punching, or name calling as shown in Table 5. The most common category of sexual violence was physical aggression, with 35% of cases involving slapping, strangulation, hairpulling, gagging, spanking, whipping, punching, or kicking. While most cases involved one category of sexual violence, as defined here, 9% of cases involved both an act of physical aggression and an act of humiliation (but not an act of coercion).

Given the nature of the SARC documents they often did not contain detailed description of the abuse. It is therefore to be expected that the prevalence of acts commonly portrayed in pornography was much lower for this data source. 10% of SARC documents contained at least one act of sexual violence commonly portrayed in pornography.

**Table 5 – Estimates of prevalence of acts of sexual violence commonly seen in pornography**

Category	Act	Estimate of prevalence in ABE interviews (% of cases)	Estimate of prevalence in SARC documents (% of cases)
	Slapping	16%	1%



Physical aggression	Strangulation	8%	1%
	Hairpulling	11%	4%
	Gagging	3%	~0%
	Spanking	3%	~0%
	Whipping	4%	1%
	Punching	18%	1%
	Kicking	4%	~0%
Humiliation	Name calling	22%	1%
	Ejaculation on face	1%	0%
Coercion	Being abused whilst asleep	3%	2%
	Being abused whilst drugged	2%	~0%
	Image-based abuse	9%	1%
Any of the above acts of physical aggression		35%	7%
Any of the above acts of humiliation		22%	1%
Any of the above acts of coercion		13%	2%

Any of the above	50%	10%
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The prevalence of mentions of these acts in the ABE interviews mostly remained the same between 2012-2016 and 2017-2022 (Table 6). Mentions of slapping became less common (estimated prevalence of 20% in 2012-2016 compared to 11% in 2017-2022) and mentions of image-based abuse became more common (estimated prevalence of 8% in 2012-2016 compared to 11% in 2017-2022).

**Table 6 – Estimates of prevalence of acts of sexual violence commonly seen in pornography by time period of interview.**

Category	Act mentioned	Estimate of prevalence in ABE transcripts (% of cases)	
		Interview in 2012-2016	Interview in 2017-2022
Physical aggression	Slapping	20%	11%
	Strangulation	8%	9%
	Hairpulling	12%	11%
	Gagging	4%	2%
	Spanking	2%	4%
	Whipping	8%	2%
	Kicking	22%	16%
	Punching	6%	2%
Humiliation	Name calling	25%	20%

	Ejaculation on face	~0%	1%
Coercion	Being abused whilst asleep	1%	4%
	Being abused whilst drugged	4%	~0%
	Image-based abuse	8%	11%
Any physical aggression		42%	30%
Any humiliation		25%	21%
Any coercion		12%	15%
Any of the above		56%	48%

### 3.2. Additional context on acts of sexual violence commonly seen in pornography

The most common types of name calling were mentions of “slag” (61 occurrences across the ABE interviews) and “c\*\*\*” (48 occurrences across the 379 ABE interviews). Bigrams of the words used to identify acts of sexual violence suggest that acts of physical aggression, such as slapping, more commonly referred to situations where a boy was harming a girl than situations where a girl was harming a boy.

## **Chapter 4: Discussion of pornography in the accounts of child sexual abuse**

*This chapter documents the prevalence of references to pornography in the ABE transcripts, the context in which it was discussed and the extent to which it can be linked to harmful sexual behaviour. This analysis finds a link between watching pornography and harmful sexual behaviour in some but not all transcripts where pornography is discussed.*

### **4.1. Discussion of pornography in the ABE transcripts**

ABE interviews are intended to determine the facts about a particular case. Their purpose is not to understand or address what caused a child's behaviour. It would not therefore necessarily be expected that any discussion of children's thoughts on pornography or the impact of it on their behaviour to take place within these interviews.

However, analysis of these files showed that in some transcripts, pornography was mentioned.

A minority (12%) of ABE transcripts (47) contain mentions of "porn" or "pornography", as well as 2% of SARC forms documents (2). In 66% of the ABE transcripts that mentioned pornography, the term was first raised by the interviewing officer and in the remaining 34%, pornography was first raised by the interviewee – either the child who has been harmed or the child who has harmed. The prevalence of mentions of porn in the ABE interviews has increased over time: 24% of cases 2017-2022 included at least one reference to porn in the associated interviews, compared to 12% of cases in 2012-2016

The CCo read a sample of 32 of these ABE transcripts, relating to 24 cases, in full. These were selected as they all contained three or more references to "porn" or "pornography".

The context of these mentions was therefore explored in more detail. Analysis revealed that in some cases interviewers introduced the topic into the discussion; for example, "Have you seen [this behaviour] in any pornography you may have watched?" In other instances, children made direct links between watching pornography and the harm they carried out or suffered.

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Where pornography was mentioned in the ABE interviews (258 times across the full set of documents), it was most often in the context of watching pornography, girls being seen like a 'porn star', specific types of porn ('child porn', 'lesbian porn'), and sources of pornography ('porn site', 'porn hub'). It is important to note that the term 'child porn' is referred to here as that is the language used in the documents, when what those words describe is indecent images of children. The making, taking, possession or distribution of child sexual images is illegal. Similarly, the words most likely to appear in the same sentence as with the word "porn" suggests that pornography was often mentioned in the context of searching for pornography, watching pornography, pornography involving children and teens, and porn stars.

The CCo reviewed a sample of transcripts to assess how pornography was discussed between interviewers and interviewees. Nine of the transcripts, covering seven different cases were related to offences involving pornography, such as possessing or creating indecent images of children, or exposing a child to pornography.

However, in some of the transcripts, direct connections were made between the influence of pornography and abuse that had happened. In cases where a child's devices with internet access had been seized or searched, interviewers bring up what they believe to be links between the abuse and the pornography found. In some cases, this is a reference to the quantity of pornography watched by the child, prior to the incident of harm. In other cases, they highlight links between the type of pornography children have chosen to view and the children they have harmed. In three incidences, children who had harmed had also searched for information about entering the pornography industry, interviewers quoted google searches including "how to become a porn star", "no experience porn star jobs" and "porn interviews".

The interviewees also made connections to what had happened to them, or what they had done, and the influence of pornography. For example:

**Interviewer:** Do you watch porn?

**Respondent** (referring to prior incident of sexual abuse): I did and then that is why it happened last time

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Some of the children who had been harmed made links between their abusers' exposure to pornography and their actions. For example:

"I just, also I just read up about it a little bit and I've read that it's pretty bad for someone, it's pretty bad for just, it's not healthy to watch it. It really messes up all the biological things that happen in the body. It just messes up all those processes."

"He talked about things he'd seen on porn; anal, fingering, rimming. All of that he was like if you don't do this, I will screenshot porn and say it was you."

Two of the children who were harmed stated that they felt they had been treated "like a porn star".

In several interviews, children who had harmed acknowledged that their exposure to pornography was excessive or unhealthy.

"I mean I was really badly addicted to it at one point".

In one case, a child who has harmed speaks specifically about their need to stop viewing child pornography.

"I want to help out because I don't want to do this."

## Chapter 5: Conclusion and recommendations

The Children's Commissioner's first report in this series, "*A lot of it is actually just abuse*": Young people and pornography" revealed the shocking extent of pornography exposure among children, and the harmful impacts that young people themselves feel that online pornography has on their wellbeing, safety, and relationships with each other. The findings in this report explore the most serious possible consequences of unfettered access to pornography in childhood, and the troubling role it may play in influencing the form taken by abuse of a child by another child. The Children's Commissioner is therefore clear that all children should be protected from exposure to pornography.

Research into the impact of pornography exposure on harmful sexual behaviour has ethical and methodological challenges. Previous research reports that the factors are complex and multifaceted, often involving the experience of sexual or domestic violence of the child who harmed, or other forms of trauma or neglect. A range of evidence shows that exposure to pornography does shape the attitudes of those who watch it. This report therefore adds to this evidence by exploring whether pornography is an influence on children's harmful sexual behaviour - specifically, the form the behaviour takes.

The exploratory analysis in this report looked at specific types of sexually violent acts commonly seen in pornography to see whether they appear in transcripts of interviews with children about child sexual abuse. Many of the cases of sexual abuse by a child of another child (50%) analysed for this report include words referring to at least one of these acts. In analysing the transcripts, it emerged that children themselves sometimes drew the link between what happened to them, or the harm they caused, and pornography.

Further research is needed but combined with the Commissioner's previous quantitative and qualitative research, this report adds important new evidence to theories that children's expectations of sex could be influenced by pornography.

## 5.2. Recommendations

### 5.2.1 Preventing children from accessing online pornography

Children's relationship with pornography is unrecognisable from previous generations. Children and young people can and do stumble across harmful material online. This is unacceptable and needs to change. No child should be able to access pornography. Children aged 16 and younger were born after the launch of PornHub, the first free-to-access video streaming pornography site. Thus, pornography of all themes and categories – including violent, degrading and even illegal material<sup>92</sup> – has been a single tap away for their entire childhood and adolescence.

This has implications for all young people, none of whom currently are protected in legislation from accessing online pornography. Many parents and carers will not have the means to put in place effective parental filters and controls and may not succeed in preventing children from accessing pornography. The consequences of this are particularly serious and profound for children with existing vulnerabilities, such as those who have been abused.

Attempts to regulate pornography and to introduce mandatory age verification requirements, such as the Digital Economy Act 2017,<sup>93</sup> have been set aside. In this time, the CCo's own research shows the extent of the harm that widespread access to violent pornography has had on children's wellbeing, safety and relationships. It is essential that the opportunity of the Online Safety Bill to safeguard children from pornography and other content which is known to be harmful to them is not lost.<sup>94</sup>

The Children's Commissioner recommends that:

- The Online Safety Bill must complete its passage through Parliament as an urgent priority.
- The Bill must ensure that all platforms which host pornography have robust age verification on adult content in place, and that the requirements to protect children from online pornography are consistent across all types of regulated services – both user to user sites and pornography providers.
- The Bill should mandate that all sites remove illegal content, including child sexual abuse material.



### **5.2.2 Improving the response for victims of child sexual abuse**

While the focus of this research has been on the impact of pornography on children, the Children's Commissioner is clear that preventing or reducing children's access to pornography will not stop sexual abuse. It is one part – albeit a vital part – of a much wider picture. As long as any child experiences sexual abuse, it is essential that the support services they need to recover are in place, the criminal justice response is swift and effective, and that all professionals respond appropriately to their needs.

This report sets out some initial recommendations in this area, but the Children's Commissioner is also taking this opportunity to commit to further work to better understand the experience of children who have been sexually abused – their experiences of the police and criminal justice system, at school, and with professionals whose job it is to protect them. This work will be carried out next year and will explore in detail what more can be done to prevent child sexual abuse and ensure every child gets the help they need.

The Children's Commissioner recommends that:

- The Victims and Prisoners Bill must ensure that every child victim of crime is entitled to support from an advocate, including specialist advocacy from a Children's Independent Sexual Violence Advocate if they have been the victim of sexual abuse.
- The Victims and Prisoners Bill must ensure that the duty to collaborate in the exercise of victim support functions considers the needs of children and works in tandem with local agency safeguarding partnership roles and responsibilities. Every child should be able to access joined up support across health, justice and social care from a specialist service based on the 'Child House' model<sup>95</sup>.
- The Code of Practice which will sit alongside the Act when it becomes law must set out specific guidance on how children's rights under the Code – for example on being provided with information - will be met, taking into account a child's needs, developmental stage and additional vulnerabilities.
- The Government will shortly be responding to the Independent Inquiry on Child Sexual Abuse. It is vital that the Government commits to ensuring that all child victims get the support they

need, and that clear targets for reducing delays in the criminal justice system related to child sexual abuse are introduced, similar to those introduced after the end-to-end Rape Review.

There must be consequences for children who harm, which validate the harm inflicted on the victim and which prevent further abuse. Striking this balance is not always simple and must be approached on a case-by-case basis from a safeguarding-first perspective. Where a criminal response is not pursued, victims should still be effectively safeguarded.

- The Children's Commissioner would like to see additional guidance for schools and professionals about how to proceed when no further action is taken by police or criminal justice systems.
- The Children's Commissioner has previously recommended that the Crown Prosecution Service and the Home Office should consult on adding a safeguarding referral outcome to the Crime Outcomes Framework, to encourage police officers to refer children who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour to children's social care services.
- There must be sufficient evidence-based interventions for children who display harmful sexual behaviour. The Department for Education should pilot interventions for children who exhibit HSB and commission comprehensive evaluations of the pilots.

### **5.2.3 High-quality Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE)**

Effective RSHE is a vital element of preventing harmful sexual behaviour, by improving children's understand of healthy relationships and consent. RSHE should form one part of a whole-school approach to sexual harassment and violence prevention. Every school should have a policy for preventing sexual harassment and violence, which should include preventing online perpetration of abuse and harassment, such as 'cyberflashing' and non-consensual intimate image-sharing.

In 2022, the Children's Commissioner conducted a survey of over three thousand children on their attitudes to RSHE.<sup>96</sup> As a result the Commissioner recommended that Oak National Academy should be the platform to provide materials which schools, parents and professionals can trust. The Commissioner therefore welcomes the recent Government announcement that Oak National Academy will produce curriculum materials.<sup>97</sup> The Commissioner also recommended proactive

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communication with parents about content, and so equally welcomes the Education Secretary writing to schools to ensure they are doing this appropriately.<sup>98</sup>

However, there is still more to be done. The Children's Commissioner recommends that:

- RSHE teaching should take a safeguarding-first approach and should be overseen by the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) in each school. A qualification for DSLs should be created, akin to the National Award for SENCos.
- Teachers should receive training through the introduction of an NVQ in RSHE to prepare teachers to deliver sensitive curriculum topics, including pornography. Schools should regularly consult with children to ensure that RSHE teaching is meeting their needs, and relevant.

#### **5.2.4 Future research on pornography and harmful sexual behaviour**

As the first text analysis of ABE transcripts and SARC documents to be published that the Children's Commissioner is aware of, this report is a proof of concept which should be replicated and built on.

- The Children's Commissioner recommends more research on pornography and harmful sexual behaviour using the method in this report. Future research could usefully break down findings according to whether a child has been abused by another child, or has carried out harmful sexual behaviour. The Children's Commissioner recommends more manual (qualitative) review of documents, research covering more police forces, and extending the analysis to include adult against child sexual abuse.

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