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Online pornography use during the COVID-19 pandemic: Should we worry? Part II

By Kasia Uzieblo & David Prescott

Note: This blog is broken into two sections. This post is part 2, with part 1 having appeared previously. Kieran

In the last blog we argued that an increase of sexualized coping might be one of the knock-on effects of the current pandemic chaos. Another question that might arise is whether an increase in pornography use predicts an increase in sexual offending behavior? There seems to be no robust empirical findings to substantiate this assumed relation. A recent review by Mellor and Duff (2019) indicates that no consistent relationship exists between early exposure to pornography and sexual offending, and between exposure to pornography and offending shortly after exposure in males. Hence, the common assumption that behaviors being observed in pornography elicits sexual offending behavior seems to lack robust empirical evidence to the present. However, individual differences can still occur: the use of pornography during an offence is more common among people who sexually abuse children compared to those who abuse adults, and there appears to be a link between recidivism and pornography use in high risk offenders.

A third issue that is not depicted in the Pornhub statistics (but is nonetheless a major reason for concern) is the increase of online searches for child sexual exploitation material (CSEM) since the start of the crisis as observed by [Europol](#). This rise doesn't imply that there are suddenly more people with pedophilic interests. It might, however, indicate that there are people having trouble coping with current stressors which might motivate them to explore illegal online material. A recent study by Knack, Holmes, and Federoff (2020) found that people experiencing sexual frustration, certain sexual interests, and poor coping strategies in response to negative affect resulting from loneliness, boredom and stress motivate the use of CSEM. Schulz, Bergen, Schuhmann, and Hoyer (2017) also identified



Kieran McCartan, PhD
Chief Blogger



David Prescott, LICSW
Associate Blogger

SAJRT Bloggers' Profile
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social anxiety, loneliness and problematic internet use as motivators for using the internet to solicit with minors. Hence, several similar mechanisms that underlie excessive pornography use, might also be of relevance here.

A final question comes to mind. Could there be an evolutionary component to the increase in pornography use during crises? Perhaps with the potential for loss of life, people experience a biologically based urge for procreation beyond their awareness – one aimed at helping our species to survive. Of course, in the absence of empirical study, this is simply conjecture, but it points to the idea that many forces may be at play in the current crisis.

Taken together, these increased numbers of pornography use are not worrisome in themselves. Many people now have more time to satisfy their curiosity by exploring new sexual content online. For others it may serve as an adaptive way to cope with stressors and sexual desire. In order to best prevent sexual violence, professionals can be aware that the current worldwide lockdown measures together with related job, family, and other stressors can also increase a problematic use of online pornography in people who feel distressed, anxious, lonely, powerless, and who lack adaptive coping behaviors.

The current situation poses a serious challenge to practitioners. How can we identify, reach out, and help people who are vulnerable to developing maladaptive coping behaviors? How can we provide online and/or offline help and assistance in coping with distress related to the Coronavirus crisis? It is certainly a time in which everybody, including practitioners, should be vigilant for signs of problematic coping behaviors, including excessive pornography use and the use of CSEM. It's also a time in which prevention programs as Stop it Now! should receive more attention in practice, media and on relevant websites. The most important thing is to let people know that help is out there, even in these unseen, harsh times we are currently in.

References

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