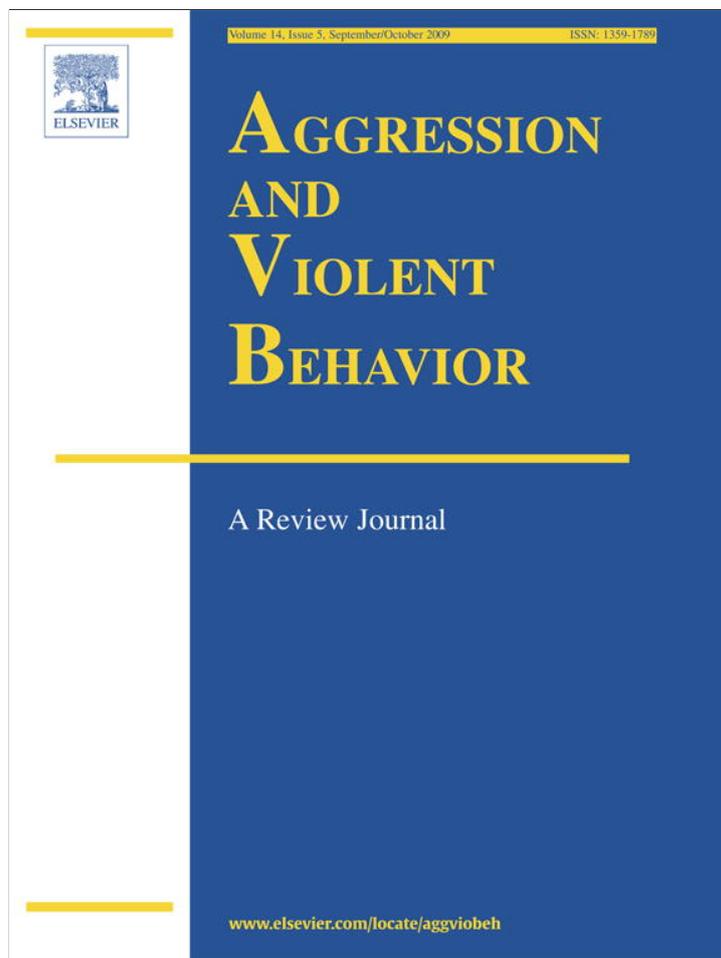


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Aggression and Violent Behavior



The pleasure is momentary...the expense damnable? The influence of pornography on rape and sexual assault

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ABSTRACT

The effects of pornography, whether violent or non-violent, on sexual aggression have been debated for decades. The current review examines evidence about the influence of pornography on sexual aggression in correlational and experimental studies and in real world violent crime data. Evidence for a causal relationship between exposure to pornography and sexual aggression is slim and may, at certain times, have been exaggerated by politicians, pressure groups and some social scientists. Some of the debate has focused on violent pornography, but evidence of any negative effects is inconsistent, and violent pornography is comparatively rare in the real world. Victimization rates for rape in the United States demonstrate an inverse relationship between pornography consumption and rape rates. Data from other nations have suggested similar relationships. Although these data cannot be used to determine that pornography has a cathartic effect on rape behavior, combined with the weak evidence in support of negative causal hypotheses from the scientific literature, it is concluded that it is time to discard the hypothesis that pornography contributes to increased sexual assault behavior.

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“The difference between pornography and erotica is lighting.”

~Gloria Leonard

“The pleasure is momentary, the position ridiculous, and the expense damnable.”

~Lord Chesterfield

Research on the topic of pornography has been controversial for several decades, particularly during the 1980s with the Meese Commission. Researchers, politicians, religious authorities, and feminists have argued over the potential deleterious effects of pornography, particularly regarding male assault behavior toward woman. Despite the rhetoric, evidence for negative effects for pornography, whether violent or non-violent has not always been consistent, and most industrial nations are currently experiencing a significant decline in rape and sexual assault rates despite the increasing availability of pornography. The current article examines the data on pornography and sexual assault.

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1. History of pornography

The types of images or media that are considered pornographic have changed considerably over time. For the purposes of the current article, pornography is defined as any media with sexual activity or nudity that is explicit and has sexual arousal as its main purpose. In the United States there are no explicit rules about which media are considered pornographic; standards vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and guidelines are generally vague. Pornography involving children, however, has been consistently labeled as obscene, and possession of this type of pornography is criminal. Some case law exists that has set general guidelines on obscene material. For instance, *Roth v. United States* (1957) ruled that material was obscene when it would be considered objectionable by an average person, using community standards, and where the media has only prurient, not artistic merit. *Miller v. California* (1973) provided further guidelines as to what materials were obscene. Under this ruling, any media which had undue interest in nudity, sex, or excretory functions and no redeeming social value were considered to be obscene. In the Miller case, the court specifically mentioned pornography, ruling most pornography has First Amendment protections because any media that portrays adults engaged in consensual sexual activity would not be considered obscene by community standards based on its popular consumption.

Depictions of humans engaging in sexual acts are not anything new. Numerous forms of erotic art originating in ancient Greece and Rome, and other Asian, African, and European cultures has been uncovered by archeologists. The *Kama Sutra* is a well-known Indian tome outlining various sexual acts and practices that is said to date back to the 2nd or 3rd century (Burton, 1883). Pornography, as it is known today, is said to be the product of Victorian England (Sigel, 2002). As pornography became more popular and its production increased, laws were enacted in attempts to restrict its availability to the public. With the advent of photography and motion pictures, access became more widely available. Because of pornography and obscenity laws, however, most pornography was probably produced by amateurs and bought and sold underground. By the 1950s and 1960s, Supreme Court cases began to limit censorship only to pornography considered hard-core; however, censorship of hard-core pornography would also gradually be challenged. After the film *Deep Throat* was released in 1972, New York's mayor ordered the theater where it was being shown closed down. Charges were also filed against Harry Reems, one of the actors in the film, for conspiracy to distribute obscene material. Reems was convicted of these charges but on appeal his conviction was overturned. Under the Miller v. California ruling considerable First Amendment protections were afforded to pornographic films. This allowed the pornographic film industry to rapidly expand and become a very profitable business.

The 1980s saw pornography becoming more widely available with the invention of the VCR and VHS video tapes. This prompted a significant counterattack to the availability of pornography by religious conservatives and feminists. They formed an unusual alliance and lobbied for censorship. This was also part of the impetus behind President Ronald Reagan convening the Meese Commission.

1.1. The national commissions on pornography effects

The two national commissions, one in the early 1970s and one in the early 1980s, attempted to provide the public with more definitive answers regarding the link between pornography exposure and aggressive behavior and crime. The 1970 Commission on Obscenity and Pornography concluded that there were no anti-social or adverse effects from exposure to sexually explicit material. Then in the mid-1980s, President Ronald Reagan commissioned another government inquiry into the effects of pornography. Attorney General Edwin Meese headed the commission, which some felt was padded with anti-pornography crusaders such as Father Bruce Ritter (who later

was involved in a scandal involving alleged sexual activity with male residents of a Christian shelter) and James Dobson of Focus on the Family (Wilcox, 1987). The Meese Commission invoked considerable controversy before its results were even released (Hertzberg, 1986). Predictably, the Meese Commission concluded that there was a causal link between viewing pornography and sexual violence toward women (Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, 1986). According to the report, viewing pornography changes perceptions of "typical" sexual behavior, trivializes rape, promotes rape myths and directly leads to male aggression toward women. Though the Meese Commission acknowledged that these effects were particularly prevalent for violent porn, these conclusions were generalized to include all pornographic material. The commission recommended that obscenity laws be strengthened and that the ability to sell or purchase pornographic materials be curtailed. Though the Meese Commission has supporters among academic psychology (e.g. Page, 1990), several psychological researchers have spoken out against the commission's conclusions. Two members of the commission, Becker and Levine, were also critical of the commission's general findings (Linsey, 1998).

Linz, Donnerstein, and Penrod (1987) questioned the causal link between pornography and male sexual violence proposed by the Meese Commission. Regarding male sexual violence, Linz et al. noted that research suggests that violent pornography, as well as "slasher" films, promote rape trivialization and rape myths, but non-violent pornography has not demonstrated increases in male sexual aggression. In fact, as noted by Palys (1986), non-violent pornography tends to depict few acts of sexualized aggression as well as egalitarian sexual relationships between males and females. Linz et al. (1987) suggest that the effects of pornography on the causation of male sexual aggression toward women are negligible.

In the aftermath of the Meese Commission report, some pornographic magazines were removed from convenience store shelves but the report did little else to thwart the availability of pornography. By the 1990s several new concerns would arise because of increased accessibility to porn. The greatest change was the distribution of pornography via the internet. Advent of the internet made pornography easily available, and in a greater quantity, to anyone determined to access it. Such increased availability and consumption raised the issue once again as to pornography's effect on behavior, and especially the effect of the availability to those under the age of 18. Pornography could now be easily accessed over the internet and in the privacy of the consumer's home, and often at no charge. According to Internet World Stats (2009) as of December 2008, 73.2% of the US population had access to the internet, and by 2006 internet pornography sales had reached \$2.5 billion and roughly 12% (4.2 million) of websites on the internet worldwide were pornographic (Family Safe Media, 2008).

In response, Congress made several attempts to regulate the availability of porn via the internet. In 1996, they passed the Communications Decency Act, which criminalized making pornography available to minors. In 1997, however, in *Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union*, the act was rendered unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Their ruling stated that the law was vague, and too restrictive. Essentially it made website owners responsible for verification of the age of those visiting their websites. The Child Online Protection Act of 1998, which required commercial distributors of harmful material to restrict access to minors, followed and was also struck down as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Finally, in 2000 Congress enacted a watered down version of the Child Online Protection Act, re-titled the Child Internet Protection Act (CIPA) which mandated that schools and libraries install software to block the viewing of pornographic internet sites. CIPA had no requirements for home computers and did allow libraries to turn the blocking software off if an adult patron so requested. CIPA was challenged by the American Librarians Association on the grounds that the filtering

software blocked numerous non-pornographic sites, and that some pornographic sites got through the filter. Current guidelines require that pornographic internet sites make those viewing them certify their age. Although there is no way to actually verify the age of the internet user, the impetus of wrongdoing is placed on the user and therefore viewers cannot claim that they accidentally came across the website unknowingly.

2. The causal hypothesis of media violence and its extension to pornography

Aggression and violence has been the subject of a great deal of research in the United States and around the globe. Violence and aggression are not a uniquely American or even human phenomenon; research observes violence in other societies and in earlier human species as well as a number of non-human species (Goodall, 1979, 1977; McCall & Shields, 2008; Okami & Shackelford, 2001). Violence as entertainment has also been prominent for a long period of time. Early folklore and literature contained violent acts, and contemporary news and primetime television shows are replete with stories of aggressive and violent behavior (Felson, 1996). As such, much of the contemporary research on violence and aggression has focused on the influence of violence in movies, television, and video games as etiology for aggressive behavior. This research, however, has not provided an empirically clear link between media violence and aggressive behavior (Ferguson & Kilburn, 2009). Some studies have found evidence to support a link between the two (Friedrick-Cofer & Huston, 1986; Centerwall, 1989) but have also been criticized for promoting inconclusive evidence as “unequivocal” as well as for considerable methodological problems (Freedman, 1996; Ferguson, 2002; Pinker, 2002; Olson, 2004; Savage 2004; Moeller, 2005). Other studies have established that the extant literature does not provide support for the notion that violent media causes violent criminal behavior (Ferguson & Kilburn, 2009; Savage, 2004; Savage & Yancey, 2008), and no study to date has found that violence in the media correlates with high crime rates (Felson, 1996).

Pornography as a form of media has invited a great deal of interest and controversy, especially regarding behavior related to sex offending and rape. Despite the fact that most pornography is not violent, religious conservatives, politicians, scholars, and the general public have incited debate about whether exposure to pornography increases the risk of (mainly) male viewers committing future sexual assaults. Those contending that a causal association exists argue that pornography breeds negative attitudes toward women and makes those who consume it more inclined toward promiscuity and violence. Those calling for censorship believe that pornography is associated with increases in violence against women, increases in sexual assault, and increases in risky sexual behaviors. Those opposed to censorship call for greater First Amendment protections for media in general and pornographic media specifically. Although some pornography is assaultive in nature and some has even depicted rape and homicide, this type comprises a miniscule proportion of pornography in general and is not mainstream, or popularly consumed. Typical pornography represents adults engaged in mutually consenting sexual activity (Palys, 1986).

For over 30 years, social scientists have studied both behavioral and attitudinal effects of exposure to pornographic materials. Concerns about the possible links have spawned two national commissions and numerous meta-analyses of research studies on the subject. This research has focused on attitudes regarding sexual behavior as well as criminal sexual offending and has utilized both soft-core (including nudity and simulated sexual activity) and hard-core (including explicit sexual penetration) pornography (Bauserman, 1996). The results of this scholarly research and the findings of the two national commissions have reached mixed conclusions regarding the relationship between exposure to pornography and sexual attitudes and behavior.

3. Experimental research on the effects of exposure to pornography

Evidence of the influence of exposure to pornography on sexual assault is inconsistent at best (Dwyer, 2008; Segal, 1994). Some contend that availability of, and exposure to, pornography increases negative attitudes about females and sexuality. Those with this view suggest that exposure to pornography desensitizes viewers thereby increasing the risk of committing sexual assault or rape. Others believe pornography may be something of a catharsis for those with pent up sexual aggression and that viewing pornography may actually reduce the desire to engage in sex crimes such as rape. This latter hypothesis has arguably received at least equal empirical support as the other alternatives (D'Amato, 2006). Empirical research has also shown that some persons have greater inclinations toward aggression and violence regardless of the type of media they view (e.g., Ferguson, Cruz, et al., 2008; Ferguson, Rueda, et al., 2008). What the above opposing views agree upon is that those who are not predisposed to sexually aggressive or violent behavior will be less affected by exposure to pornography. Likewise, those who have this predisposition are the most likely to be affected, either as a catharsis or a negative influence.

Results of existing experimental research on the effects of pornography and sexualized violence have been reviewed in several meta-analyses (Allen, D'Allesio, & Emmers-Sommer, 2000; Odone-Paolucci, Genuis, & Violato, 2000; Gunter, 2002). These analyses conclude that results are generally mixed and the type of research methodology used in the study often greatly affects the outcome. For instance, Malamuth and Ceniti (1986) studied male college students and self-reported likelihood of rape. The experiment included 42 subjects who were exposed to violent pornography, non-violent pornography, or non-pornographic material. Participants were studied over a 4-week period and were exposed to the media 10 separate times. They were then administered a questionnaire testing anger towards females, a desire to hurt females, and rape proclivity. The authors state in their study abstract that the violent and non-violent pornography affected aggression but there was no difference in proclivity to rape between those exposed to the violent versus non-violent pornography, or the non-pornographic media. There were also no significant effects found over the desire to hurt females. In conclusion, neither violent nor non-violent pornography viewed over time, affected aggressiveness toward females or the likelihood to rape. This study also provides an example of a remarkable mismatch between the claims stated in the abstract and the actual data presented in the results section of the paper.

Linz, Donnerstein, and Penrod (1988) studied 156 college males who were exposed randomly to either an R-rated movie containing a mix of sex and violence, an R-rated movie containing sex without violence, a non-violent pornographic movie, or no movie at all. Participants then filled out a questionnaire rating their anxiety, depression, as well as sympathy toward a rape victim. Surprisingly, those who had viewed the violent movie were less anxious and depressed. Results show no significant effects for the random exposure and sympathy of a rape victim, but a significant yet negligible effect was found for those who viewed the violent movie; they exhibited slightly greater acceptance of rape.

Another study by Fisher and Grenier (1994) exposed male college students to violent pornography, with both positive (a female enjoying the act) and negative (the female not enjoying the act) outcomes, non-violent pornography and neutral media. Students were then asked to fill out a questionnaire testing attitudes toward women, rape myth acceptance, and acceptance of violence. This study concluded no effects on any of the outcomes for either violent or non-violent pornography.

The studies discussed above are only a sampling of studies on pornography, although they are by well-known authors and are

generally representative of the state of the literature. Results of these experimental research studies reveal that effects appear negligible, temporary and difficult to generalize to the real world. Studies such as these are also fraught with many limitations, some of which include validity issues with “aggression” measures, brief exposure times, complexities of correlating attitudes with behavior, and difficulties in generalizing results from college students to actual sexual offenders and rapists (Mould, 1988).

4. Correlational studies of pornography effects

Results of correlational studies are even more varied. Usually correlational studies compare different types of participants on their consumption of pornography. Such consumption data are self-reported and usually entails asking questions about age of first consumption, as well as amount and frequency of consumption. Much of the correlational research concludes that pornography exposure may actually serve to protect the consumer against engaging in sexual violence. Garos, Beggan, Kluck, and Easton (2004), for instance, found that pornography protects against negative attitudes toward women. However, pornography consumers may be more prone to *benevolent sexism*, which involves beliefs that women should be protected from harm. McKee (2007), however, found no relationship between pornography consumption and negative attitudes toward women.

Although results are not consistent, others have found an association between pornography use and self-reported sexual aggression (Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000; Vega & Malamuth, 2007). Results of these studies, however, must be taken with a grain of salt as they used college students only. Other studies which compare groups reveal that sex offenders are generally not exposed to pornography as early as non-offenders and also consume less pornography (Becker & Stein, 1991; Goldstein & Kant, 1973; Kendall, 2006; Nutter & Kearns, 1993; Walker, 1970). Kingston, Federoff, Firestone, Curry, and Bradford (2008) studied child molesters and the influence of pornography on risk for recidivism. Their results revealed that use of pornography was not a significant predictor of recidivism for crime, in general, or for sex offenses, specifically. They did find, however, that exposure to pornography was associated with recidivism for non-sexual assault; these associations, however, were very weak. The authors concluded little support for an influence of pornography on risk of sex offenders re-offending.

5. Pornography consumption and rape

Although both experimental and correlational studies find mixed results, critics still contend that pornography has a considerable effect on committing sexual assault and rape. Rape, however, is not a uniquely contemporary phenomenon (Zillmann, 1984). Numerous ethnographers have observed prevalence of rape throughout history and in both civilized and uncivilized societies (Ellis, 1989). Despite this, contemporary researchers have attempted to test the assumption that increased availability of pornography in general will be associated with increases in sexual assault victimization. As stated earlier, pornography became widely available in the 1970s because of court rulings regarding first amendment protections. Rape rates also were thought to be increasing at this time and some concluded a causal relationship. In the early 1990s, however, pornography became widely available via the internet, during a time in which rape rates were rapidly declining. As such, numerous researchers have attempted to assess the true relationship between pornography consumption and incidents of rape in various parts of the United States. Winick (1985) and Scott and Cuvelier (1987a,b, 1993) found through content analysis that sexually violent depictions in adult men's magazines were not only uncommon but were gradually decreasing. Baron and Straus (1984) analyzed subscriptions to pornographic magazines and rape rates in the United States and found a moderate to strong correlation

between consumption of pornography and rape rates. Research by Scott (1985), however, found no correlation between semi-hard-core pornographic magazine consumption and rape rates, but consumption of more soft-core magazines were correlated with rape. This is a somewhat surprising finding that contradicts contentions that hard-core pornography increases rape rates as the soft-core magazines were found to be correlated with rape rates and more hard-core magazines were not. Scott further found that prevalence of adult entertainment venues such as strip clubs and book stores were not correlated with rape rates but circulation rates of neutral magazines (e.g., *Field and Stream*) did correlate with rape rates. Again, a both surprising and contradictory finding. Other studies have found no significance between pornography consumption and rape rates (Gentry, 1991; Scott & Schwalm, 1988), and at least one study concluded that crime rates were lower in neighborhoods that had pornographic stores than in neighborhoods where they were not present (Linz, Paul, Land, Ezell, & William, 2004).

Studies in other countries and those using aggregated national US data report findings that pornography consumption may actually reduce rape and other sex offending. For instance, decriminalization and subsequent increased consumption of pornography in Denmark in the 1960s correlated with decreases in sexual assaults (Ben-Veniste, 1971; Kutchinsky, 1973). Other studies cite statistics from countries, such as Japan, where rape rates are much lower than in the United States despite the much greater availability of sexually deviant and violent material (Abramson & Hayashi, 1984). Empirical analyses in Japan also find that increasing availability of pornography is associated with declining rates of rape and other sex crimes (Diamond & Uchiyama, 1999). Kutchinsky (1991) examined pornography consumption and rape rates in four countries: West Germany, Denmark, the United States, and Sweden. Results of this research revealed that increases in pornography consumption were associated with constant or decreased rape rates in each of the countries except the United States. Kutchinsky stated that stable or increasing rape rates in the 1970s were coincidental to court challenges to pornography censorship and this coincidental relationship was probably responsible for the United States exception.

In the United States today rape and sexual assault rates have continued to decrease even as pornography, especially via the internet, has become increasingly and more widely available. Fig. 1

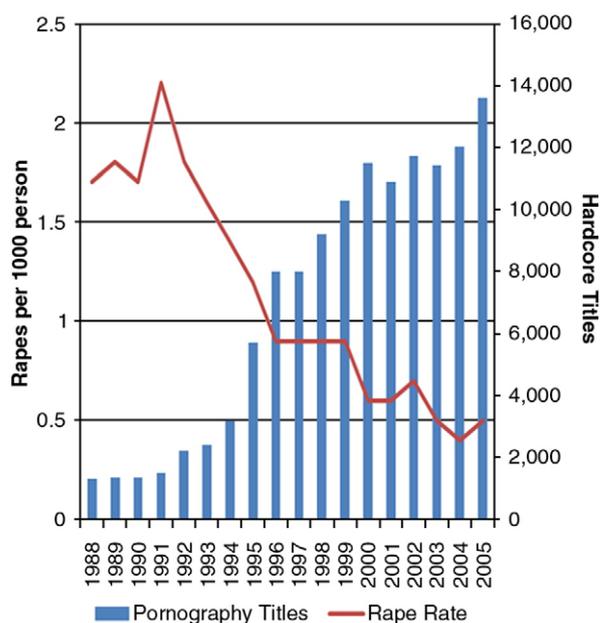


Fig. 1. Trends in pornography availability and rape in the United States 1988–2005.

presents data on the number of hard-core pornography titles released and rape victimization statistics in the United States. The data for hard-core movie releases were collected from the Family Safe Media website, information on the availability of pornography is only given for the years 1988–2005. Rape rates were gathered from the Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) for the same years. As can be seen in Fig. 1, rape rates are negatively related to increases in pornography releases. Increasing availability of pornography in other words is associated with declining rape rates.

These statistics would lead to conclusions that there is little correlation between incidents of rape and the availability of pornography. These statistics especially counter the idea that availability of pornography is somehow related to increases in rape. Rape rates in the United States today are at their lowest levels since 1960 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). This trend continues despite the fact that availability of pornography (number of titles released and number of pornographic websites) increases annually. Although data on pornography consumption are not available prior to 1988, from the early 1970s up until 1988, rape rates were relatively stable.

6. Rape myths and etiology

Although incidents of rape probably occur in greater numbers than either official or self-reported statistics reveal due to the measurement limitations inherent in each (MacNamara & Sagarin, 1978), they are the only statistics available for study. The difference between actual incidents and self- or officially-reported incidents is not known. Under reporting may be prevalent where the rape victim knows or is related to their attacker. NCVS statistics reveal that not all rapes are similar. Rape ranges from a highly predatory and harmful stranger perpetrated act to violations between acquaintances or even those romantically involved where sexual boundaries have been overstepped. NCVS statistics also reveal the latter to be the most common occurring type of rape. In 2007 for instance, only 28% of rape victims did not know their attacker (Rand, 2008). Other surveys report similar findings (Bryden & Lengnick, 1997; Palermo & Farkas, 2001). These rape incidents, where a victim knows their attacker, have come to be known as acquaintance or date rapes. Despite evidence to the contrary, most of the general public believes that rapists are psychopathic, sexually frustrated individuals, who are unable to control their sexual urges (Allison, Adams, Bunce, Gilkerson, & Nelson, 1992). Those with this view believe that most rapes are predatory and stranger perpetrated and will involve serious physical pain or bodily injury. Victimization surveys and other research contradict this idea (Seligmann et al., 1984), and some have even found that many rapists are married (Allison & Wrightsman, 1993), although it is unclear if these marriages involve healthy sexual expression. Some surveys reveal that rapists may portray characteristics that would be considered normal in the male population (Allison & Wrightsman, 1993), not abnormal or psychotic. These statistics raise the issue of whether rape is about sexual gratification. The issue of whether sex is the motivation behind rape has broader implications for the hypothesis that availability and exposure to pornography will increase the prevalence of rape.

Ellis (1989) provides three contemporary and competing theories that explain rape etiology: social learning theory, feminist theory, and evolutionary theory. Social learning theory contends that human behaviors, including aggressive and violent ones, are imitations (Bandura, 1977). In other words, people model the behavior of others, and that behavior eventually becomes reinforced in various ways. These imitations could be real life observations or media depictions. If anti-social behaviors go unnoticed, or unpunished, they may be reinforced as normal (Ellis, 1989). In other words, rape is the product of socialization and learning; wrongful behaviors are learned in the same way that pro-social behaviors are learned, through a series of rewards and punishments. For social learning theorists, both culture

and individual personal experiences are responsible for engaging in violent or sexually assaultive acts. Pornography for social learning theorists would promote greater tendencies toward rape for those exposed through modeling behaviors observed in pornographic media, perpetuation of rape myths through the treatment of women in pornography, and desensitization (Ellis, 1989). Some social learning theorists may distinguish different motivations for acquaintance versus stranger rape, citing that those who rape someone they know may indeed have a desire to have sex with their victim, but they still purport that this behavior is learned.

Feminist theories of rape are similar to learning theories in that they believe rape results from social and cultural traditions but believe it originates in societies where “males have dominated nearly all important economic and political activities” (Ellis, 1989, p. 10). For feminist theorists, society and culture treat women in subservient ways and males are socialized to be dominant over females, treating them as nothing more than property. Feminist theories of rape believe that prostitution and pornography portray males as dominant, and depict females in a degrading and demeaning manner. Similar to learning theories, feminist theories believe that men treat women exactly as they are depicted in pornography, therefore increases in the availability of, and exposure to pornography will increase the incidence of rape and sexual assault. Unlike some social learning theorists, feminist theorists do not distinguish between stranger and acquaintance rape. Feminist theory purports that sexual gratification is not the motivation of rapists, rather rape is the use of sex by men to dominate, control, and demean women (Ellis, 1989).

Evolutionary theories of rape propose that there may be reproductive advantages for males to mate with numerous female partners. Evolutionary theorists regard “aggressive copulatory tactics as an extreme response to natural selection pressure for males generally to be more assertive than females in their attempts to copulate” (Ellis, 1989, p. 15). They also believe that for females, on the other hand, it is reproductively advantageous to choose mating partners who demonstrate a commitment to helping raise their offspring. Rape for evolution theory is the result of the pressure between the male versus female reproductive approaches and therefore not directly about sexual gratification but rather genetic reproduction (although sexual gratification arguably promotes the latter). Ellis (1989) states that this reproductive difference between the sexes derives from “the fact that males can produce offspring (in potentially large numbers) without gestating them, whereas females cannot (p. 16).”

Each of these theories explains motivations and causes for rape in a slightly differing manner, citing differences between males and females due to socialization or reproduction. None of them, however, can account for all types of rape or explain how motivations for stranger versus acquaintance rapists may be very different (Allison & Wrightsman, 1993). If these behaviors are learned through exposure to pornography, what can explain the dramatic decline in rape coupled with the large increase in the availability and consumption of pornography? If rape is about domination and control of females by males, can the advanced integration of females into more economically and politically powerful positions explain the decline in rape rates irrespective of the increases in availability and consumption of pornography? Further, if it is reproductively advantageous for males to mate with multiple female partners and in some cases force copulation, do declining rape rates signify a change in the natural selection pressure experienced by males or a difference in the evolutionary approaches female are taking regarding reproduction? Finally, if most pornography is of a non-violent nature, and some research has actually shown a catharsis effect of exposure to pornography, is it time to rethink the relationship between pornography and sexually assaultive behaviors? These are all questions that the extant research has not fully answered nor contemporary theories fully explained.

7. The 1990s crime decline

The early 1990s saw a dramatically decline in the number and rates of criminal offending, a trend that has generally continued into 2009. Many jurisdictions throughout the country credited increased numbers of law enforcement personnel and increased incarceration rates as contributing to the crime drop. Others questioned whether increasing police presence could be solely or partly responsible for the crime drop in general and for declining rape rates. Most critics of this “incarceration reduced crime,” or “more police reduced crime” debate, believe this presents an overly simplistic view of the causes and cures of crime. They cite that the states with the highest incarceration rates, and the cities with the most police officers also have the most crime. Researchers further contend that police officers actually spend a very small portion of their time fighting crime (Cox & Wade, 1998; Fyfe, Greene, Walsh, Wilson, & McLaren, 1997; Wroblewski & Hess, 2000).

Some believe that increased incarceration rates alone can explain some of the decline in criminal offending (Levitt, 2004). Conservative and crime control oriented policies and laws have proliferated in the last 30 years. If rapists also commit other criminal offenses as well, this explanation may be partly true; the belief is that locking up more offenders may decrease the number of potential rapists in society. However, if a majority of rape is acquaintance rape, then this explanation wouldn't necessarily make sense. Others believe that increased opportunities of females in the labor market may have something to do with the decline (Blumstein, Rivera, & Rosenfeld, 2000). This research may support a feminist approach to rape etiology. There have been changes in the participation of females in traditionally male occupations and women have gained increasing earning status and economic independence, but has this altered the way sexual assault and violence against women is viewed?

Demographic shifts in the population may also provide an explanation for declining rape rates. In one highly controversial argument, Levitt (2004) credits legalization of abortion with explaining 25–30% of the drop in crime in the United States over the last 20 years. The argument here is that not only did legalizing abortion in 1973 change the number of young male adults (potential rape offenders) that would have otherwise been present in the population in the early 1990s, but that “women who have abortions are the most at risk to give birth to children who would engage in criminal activity” (Zimring, 2007, p. 86). Others are not so optimistic about the percentage of the crime drop that can be attributed to the legalization of abortion (Foote & Goetz, 2005; Rosenfeld, 2004). Again, in much the same way that it is difficult to demonstrate a causal link in studies of the effects of pornography on rape rates, it is equally as complicated to utilize demographic statistics to predict criminal offending (Zimring, 1998).

8. Conclusions

Considered together, the available data about pornography consumption and rape rates in the United States seem to rule out a causal relationship, at least with respect to pornography availability causing an increase in the incidence of rape. One could even argue that the available research and self-reported and official statistics might provide evidence for the reverse effect; the increasing availability of pornography appears to be associated with a decline in rape. Whatever the explanation is, the fact remains that crime in general, and rape specifically, has decreased substantially for the last 20 years. Concurrently, availability of pornography has increased steadily in the last 20 years. These data give the impression of a catharsis effect; that exposure to pornography may actually provide a means to alleviate sexual aggression. Of course, this association parallels a broader downward decline in violent crime in general, as well as increasing depictions of violence in the media in general. Therefore, a caveat must be considered when interpreting aggregated statistical data. Any

relationships are purely correlational by nature and inferring cause is a very precarious endeavor. Available data and extant research, however, seem to lead to a discounting of the notion that pornography has causally increased the prevalence of sexual assaults and rapes.

Controversy over the effects of pornography on human behavior has waned a great deal since the Meese Commission conclusions in the early 1980s, when critics were particularly adamant about a positive correlation. Whether this is due to public and political consciousness about declining crime rates and the idea that pornography and rape rates are not related, or a more general cavalier attitude toward pornography among younger generations today is not known. Violent pornography is rare, and not routinely viewed by the majority of consumers (Monk-Turner & Purcell, 1999). It may still be the case that this type of pornography does present a concern to those worried about violent and sex related crimes. Although these concerns may continue due to the psychological community's dogged, if not always data-based, concerns about violence in the media, the attention to pornography as a cause of rape or sexual assault seems to be fading. There are still arguments that greater limits need to be placed on the media, and the Supreme Court continues to hear cases about the debate over definitions of obscenity and first amendment protections. Such continued cycle of blaming the media for violence and crime is not surprising given that new forms of media often replace old ones as sources of concern. Likewise, exploration of the relationship between violence in media and aggressive behavior are likely to continue to be the focus of research studies. It is also likely that these topics will continue to be of import to crime etiology.

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