



## **Research Report**

# **The Relationship between Child Pornography and the Commission of Sexual Offences against Children: A Review of the Literature**

A report to the Department of Justice Canada

By

L. Jill Rettinger, Ph.D.  
Moyer and Associates

March 2000

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**Research and Statistics Division/  
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The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Department of Justice Canada.

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## Introduction

The current state of knowledge of the role of pornography in sexual offences against children is described in this report. The evidence on the link between adult and child pornography and child sexual abuse is reviewed, including clinical and retrospective studies from the social science literature as well as published anecdotal reports and expert opinion. The two main research questions addressed are:

1. To what extent do pedophiles<sup>1</sup> consume pornography, particularly child pornography?  
A corollary to this question is how and where the child pornography is obtained.
2. How is pornography used by pedophiles?

Child pornography refers to the sexually explicit visual depiction of a minor, including, but not limited to: photographs, negatives, slides, magazines, movies, and videotapes. Pornography may show the minor person engaged in sexual activity, or in sexually explicit poses, where the depiction is for a sexual purpose. Pornography also includes written material that advocates sexual activity with a minor child. In this report, pornography involving a child subject is specified as child pornography, where no such specification occurs the materials involve adult subjects.

This review encountered several obstacles. The primary problem is that very little empirical research has been undertaken on this topic, although there are a considerable number of anecdotal reports.<sup>2</sup> It is also difficult to draw conclusions based on the research that has been undertaken because of differences in: the definitions of pornography and child pornography, pedophile, and child molester; sampling methods and procedures; and the presentation of results. Inconsistencies in these areas make it difficult to compare results across studies. Another obstacle to drawing definitive conclusions about the link between the consumption of child pornography and the sexual abuse of children is the method employed by most research. Identified child molesters are questioned about their use of child pornography and inferences are made about the linkages between pornography use and sexual offending. This method fails to

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<sup>1</sup> The term pedophilia, as used in this report, refers to the condition in which an adult's primary sexual attraction is to minor children. Pedophiles are typically divided into two categories – fixated and regressed. “A fixated offender has from adolescence been sexually attracted primarily or exclusively to significantly younger persons. Sexual involvement with peer-age or older persons, where this has occurred, has been situational in nature and has never replaced the primary sexual attraction to and preference for underage persons. A regressed offender has not exhibited any predominant sexual attraction to significantly younger persons during his sexual development – if any such involvement did occur during adolescence, it was situational or experimental in nature. Instead, this individual's sociosexual interests have focused on peer-age or adult-persons primarily or exclusively.” (Groth and Birnbaum, 1978).

The “fixated” pedophile is also referred to as a “preferential” child molester, while the “regressed” pedophile is often referred to as an “opportunistic” molester (Lanning, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Among the reasons for absence of research are: the difficulty in locating a cooperative and representative group of pedophiles; the lack of appropriate comparison groups; and ethical and legal issues in using child pornography in experimental situations.

take into consideration that the reality that some persons who consume child pornography do not molest children.<sup>3</sup>

## **Do Pedophiles Consume Child Pornography?**

### **Anecdotal Evidence of Child Pornography Collection by Pedophiles**

The Report of the United States Senate Subcommittee on Child Pornography stated that "the fascination of pedophiles with child pornography and child erotica has been established by hundreds of arrests of pedophiles who are found to possess a large amount of sexually explicit material involving children" (Child Pornography and Pedophilia, 1986). Anecdotal information from police officers provides compelling evidence of the collection of child pornography by pedophiles. An officer from the Los Angeles Police Department estimated that child pornography was found in the possession of over half of the 700 child molesters in whose arrest he participated over a ten year period. According to Lanning, an FBI agent, preferential child molesters "almost always" collect child pornography and/or child erotica (1992).<sup>4</sup> Lanning (1985) and Hames (1993) provided several evocative examples where child pornography was found in the possession of individuals suspected or convicted of sexual offences against children.

Case study research and clinical reports involving both child sexual abuse victims (Bélanger et al., 1985; Child Pornography and Pedophilia, 1986; Itzin, 1997; Kelly, Wingfield, Burton, and Regan, 1996) and sex offenders (Erickson, Walbek, and Seely, 1988; Groth and Oliveri, 1989; Hartman, Burgess, and Lanning, 1985; Holmes, 1991; Schetky, 1988; Tate, 1992) also suggest that at least some individuals who sexually molest children consume child pornography. Testimonials of offenders convicted of sexual offences against children provide support for the assumption that pedophiles consume child pornography (Child Pornography and Pedophilia, 1985a, 1986).

Although anecdotal evidence demonstrates that some pedophiles use child pornography, by its nature, these reports give no indication of the proportion of child molesters who use such material. The cases are probably selected for presentation *because* they involve child pornography and therefore cannot necessarily be deemed representative of the experience of others. Police estimates of the proportion of pedophiles who use child pornography may be exaggerated since extensive investigations are more likely to occur when there is corroborating evidence in the form of child pornography. Cases that consume an officer's time are more likely to be recalled. Furthermore, the manner in which some child molesters come to the attention of police may serve to inflate the number of cases where child pornography is found. For example, persons identified by Customs and Excise and postal investigators as distributors or receivers of child pornography may subsequently be investigated and charged with sexual offences against children.

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<sup>3</sup> A "best guess" estimate from the FBI, Postal, Customs, and law enforcement agencies in the United States is that 25 to 50 percent of child pornography collectors sexually abuse children; hence, 50 to 75 percent of child pornography collectors may not molest children (Lanning, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Lanning (1997) notes that preferential child molesters account for a minority – perhaps only 30 to 50 percent – of child molesters.

## **Retrospective Studies of Pornography Consumption by Sex Offenders**

An indication of the proportion of child molesters who collect child pornography is provided by Howitt's (1995) detailed histories of eleven pedophiles undergoing assessment or treatment in a private clinic for sex offenders in Great Britain. The men interviewed had long histories of offending and in all cases, the sexual offence was against children; none had any known convictions for offences against adult females. The interview lasted for two to three hours, with a broad range of topics covered. Howitt reported that there was no strong evidence of denial; comments made by some offenders suggested that some of the information revealed would have been withheld in a correctional setting.

Of the eleven men interviewed, 18 percent (two persons) reported using commercial child pornography; one of the two had a large collection of both child and adult materials. The child pornography medium mentioned most often was magazines. However, one man reported taking videos of his victims "for my own gratification at a later date", while two others said that they wanted to take photographs of their victims, but had refrained from doing so. As Howitt commented, the men interviewed acted out their deviant feelings directly through assaults on children. They therefore may have been less likely to need child pornography for stimulation, as they could fantasize about actual experiences. Several of the men said that they did not achieve orgasm during their offences, but rather masturbated to fantasy about the offence at a later time.

In contrast to their lack of exposure to child pornography, a sizeable proportion of offenders (64 percent) in Howitt's study used adult pornography at some point. At least one offender imagined that the material involved children rather than adults. Use of both adult pornographic magazines and "blue" videos was reported.

Pedophiles also consume licit materials. Almost three-quarters of Howitt's sample of child molesters reported using "non-pornographic pornography" as a source of fantasy. These materials included advertisements, mail order catalogues, children's movies (e.g., Walt Disney films), and television programs. One man in the study stated:

... naked children don't turn me on at all. I know it's strange, but...I could see naked photographs and there'd be no sexual attraction there at all...the fantasy would have to be...either in their underwear or shorts or something like that.

The relatively infrequent use of child pornography reported in Howitt's research is comparable to offender self-reports in retrospective studies. Many of these studies indicate that a number of sex offenders use adult pornography but use of child pornography is seldom reported. It is possible that, like the offender quoted above, a proportion of child molesters are not sexually aroused by child pornography. This hypothesis is supported by Marshall, Barbaree, and Christophe's (1986) report that over one out of five (22 percent) of the pedophiles assessed in their research were excluded because they failed to show sufficient arousal (less than 10 percent of full erection) to any of the stimuli during phallometric assessment. The two types of stimuli were coloured photographs of nude females in sexually explicit poses, with the subjects ranging in age from 3 to

14 years, and audiotaped descriptions of sexual interactions between an adult male and a female child. While these pedophiles may have been able to control their arousal or were inhibited by the setting, it is also possible that they did not find the stimuli sexually provocative.

Becker and Stein (1991) investigated the use of pornography by 160 adolescent males who had been referred to an outpatient evaluation and treatment clinic for sex offenders. Information on the use of pornography was obtained by means of a structured clinical interview. The majority of offenders (89 percent) reported using sexually explicit material featuring adults. Pornographic magazines were most commonly used (35 percent), followed by videotapes (26 percent). A further 15 percent reportedly viewed sexually explicit materials on television, and 13 percent read sexually explicit books. No relationships were found between type of material used, number of victims, or self-reported arousal. None of the adolescent sex offenders had been exposed to child pornography.

Abel, Mittelman, and Becker (1985) found frequent use of pornographic materials in their sample of sex offenders who were outpatient volunteers at a sexual behaviour treatment clinic. This study is notable because the sample was not under a court order to attend the clinic and there was an elaborate system to protect the confidentiality of participants. It was found that 88 percent of males who had sexually abused children under the age of 14 years used pornography. Unfortunately, neither the medium of the pornography (e.g., magazines, videos, or books), nor the type (child or adult) was specified.

Taken together, the research by Howitt, Becker and Stein, and Abel et al. indicates that a substantial proportion of sex offenders use adult pornography (64 percent to 89 percent). However, it may be that sex offenders do not use adult pornography any more frequently than do non-offenders. Three studies have attempted to compare sex offenders with a comparison group. Two of these studies reported little or no difference in rates of pornography use between sex offenders and males who self-reported no history of sexual offending. The third research, which focused on "hard-core" pornography, did find a difference. Each study is described in turn.

## **Pornography Use by Offenders Compared to Non-offenders**

Nutter and Kearns (1993) administered anonymous questionnaires to 25 non-incarcerated adult male sex offenders who had engaged in repetitive child molesting (repetitive was defined as more than once) and a control group of 25 males. The two groups did not differ in terms of frequency of pornography use (including books, magazines, pictures, films, and videotapes), frequency of intercourse, frequency of masturbation, or age at first masturbation. Twenty-four percent of the child molesters and 17 percent of the comparison group used pornography during their first masturbation experience, while 52 percent of the child molesters and 43 percent of the comparison sample experienced their first masturbation experience before their first exposure to pornography. Neither of these differences was statistically significant. Child molesters were, however, significantly older than the comparison group at the time of first exposure to sexually explicit material (15 years compared to 12 years of age).

A strength of this study is that the members of the comparison group were the same age as the offender group, thereby reducing the possibility of finding differences between the groups that might have been due to age differences. A criticism of the research is that the comparison group may have been biased in favor of males with more than an ordinary interest in sexual activities, as the volunteers were recruited after attending a lecture on human sexuality. Its major limitation is that, despite the fact that the offenders were repetitive child molesters, they were not questioned about their use of child pornography. Rather participants were asked about their exposure to specific magazines (*Chic, Club, Gallery, Genesis, Hustler, Oui, Playboy, Penthouse, and Forum*). These magazines primarily depict adults and may not be of much interest to males who have a predominant sexual interest in children.

The second study did, however, examine the use of child pornography. Langevin et al. (1988) found that child molesters reported relatively infrequent use of child pornography. Two groups of sex offenders participated in this research – one group from Ontario and a second group from Alberta. In the Ontario sample, pedophiles were defined as individuals who had sexual interactions with minors 15 years of age or younger. Incest offenders were defined as offenders who had sexual contact with their daughters, stepdaughters, or other relatives. All Ontario cases were being assessed for court purposes, either pre-trial or for probation/parole. Of the 97 in the Ontario sample, 38 percent were pedophiles, 37 percent were incest offenders, and 25 percent were males who had been sexually aggressive with females over the age of 16 years. The Alberta sample was made up of males who had been convicted and were in treatment. Of the 130 in the sample, 45 percent were males convicted of sexual assault against a female under the age of 12 years (heterosexual pedophiles); 22 percent had been convicted of sexual assault against a male child under 11 years (homosexual pedophiles); 6 percent were bisexual pedophiles; and, 28 percent were incest offenders. These offenders were compared to 52 community volunteers recruited for the study. The data were collected by means of a self-administered questionnaire.

Participants were asked about purchasing or otherwise seeking out pornography as opposed to exposure to pornography. The assumption was that the act of purchasing is indicative of greater commitment and desire for the material. The authors investigated the use of pornography from three media – magazines, attendance at films, and renting videos. Although use of child pornography per se was not examined for all offenders, all participants were asked about their preferred subject matter. The Alberta sex offenders and the comparison group were specifically asked about their exposure to "child erotica", which appears to be another term for child pornography.

Compared to the sex offenders, proportionately more of the community controls reported buying pornographic magazines, attending movies, and renting videos both ever and regularly; however, few members of any of the groups *regularly* attended such films or rented pornographic movies. Ninety-four percent of the comparison group had bought a pornographic magazine, 68 percent had attended a pornographic film, and 71 percent had rented a sexually explicit video at least once. Corresponding percentages for the Alberta and Ontario sex offender groups, respectively, were: 74 percent and 73 percent (magazines); 45 percent and 10 percent (films); and 44 percent and 27 percent (renting videotapes). Therefore, the comparison group was more likely to seek out these types of material. The community controls were also more likely to have used pornography from all three media (42 percent) compared to the sex offenders (22 percent and 10 percent of Alberta and Ontario sex offenders, respectively). The sex offenders were more likely



to have used only one medium of pornography: 26 percent of the Alberta sex offenders, 40 percent of Ontario sex offenders, and 10 percent of controls. Somewhat surprisingly, the sex offenders were more likely to report never using pornography of any kind: 17 percent of Alberta sex offenders and 29 percent of Ontario sex offenders compared to only 2 percent of controls said they had never sought out pornography.

The groups did not significantly differ in terms of the type of subject (adult or child, male or female) or the types of acts depicted (consensual sex, solitary subjects, and "hard-core" material). Approximately three-quarters of the sex offenders in both samples, as well as the controls, preferred magazine content portraying adult females.

Oddly, 20 percent of the comparison group reported a preference for pornographic magazines depicting female children, whereas this was the case for 15 percent of the Alberta sex offenders and 11 percent of the Ontario sex offender sample; these differences were not statistically significant. Periodicals in this genre included "sunbather" and "nudist camp" magazines. Similarly, 25 percent of the comparison group preferred pornographic videos or movies with female children, compared to only 5 percent and 8 percent of the sex offenders from Alberta and Ontario, respectively. These findings are unexpected.

When asked specifically about "child erotica", significantly more sex offenders had seen or purchased such material (16 percent) compared to the non-offender group (8 percent). There was also a tendency for the material used by sex offenders to be more explicit, with adult-child sex depicted in 10 percent of the material used by sex offenders; similar acts were shown in only 5 percent of the "child erotica" seen or purchased by the comparison group. It can be hypothesized that the difference between these findings and those reported in the last paragraph may be explained by non-offenders lacking access to "child erotica", whereas sex offenders are more knowledgeable about how to obtain this material. Non-offenders may want to consume child pornography but do not know how to go about locating it.

Langevin et al. reported that responses to most questions on pornography use did not vary according to the type of sex offender (incest offender versus homosexual and heterosexual pedophiles and in the case of the Ontario sample, also males who had been sexually aggressive towards females). Two significant trends were reported. The homosexual pedophiles in the Alberta sample tended to prefer a wider range of pornographic subjects: 56 percent preferred adult females, 13 percent adult males, 13 percent female children, and 13 percent male children. These offenders also showed a trend for affirmative responses to the question "Have you ever seen or bought pornographic magazines showing pictures of naked children?" Almost one-third of the homosexual pedophiles said that they had, compared to 14 percent of the heterosexual pedophiles, 13 percent of the bisexual pedophiles, and 8 percent of the incest offenders.

The third study that compared the use of pornography by sex offenders to its use by a comparison group was conducted by Marshall (1988). This study differed in an important respect – participants were told that the investigator was not interested in the use of "soft-core" products. "Hard-core" pornography was defined as materials "depicting explicit sex acts with nothing kept to the imagination", while "soft-core" was defined as the magazines typically displayed and available at corner stores, such as *Penthouse*, *Playboy*, *Hustler*, and *Swank*. Participants were questioned about the use of magazines, films, and videotapes depicting consenting sex between

adults, forced sex between an adult male and a female, and sex between an adult male and a child.

In total, 89 patients attending a sex offender's clinic were interviewed about their use of sexually explicit materials. Seventy-four percent admitted to having engaged in sexual acts with children and 26 percent had committed or attempted rape of an adult female. Of the child molesters, 23 percent had committed incest and 77 percent had molested children other than their relatives. Of the non-familial child molesters, 35 percent were homosexual molesters and 65 percent were heterosexual molesters. Approximately 69 percent of the sample were at some point in the criminal justice process, but none were incarcerated or hospitalized at the time of assessment.

The comparison group was made up of 24 males with no self-reported history of sexual offending, selected from a larger pool of volunteers in order to approximately match the sex offenders in terms of age, intelligence, and socioeconomic class. A weakness in the membership of the comparison group is that they had all volunteered for research on erotic preferences, thus introducing a potential bias towards males with a heightened interest in sexual topics.

Unlike the research by Nutter and Kearns and Langevin et al., Marshall found that non-offenders had less current exposure to pornography than did offenders. Only 29 percent of the non-offenders reported current consumption of "hard-core" pornography, compared to 83 percent of the rapists, 53 percent of the incest offenders, and 67 percent of both the heterosexual and homosexual child molesters. The exact rates of use of the different types of pornography (adult or child) were not provided. Rather, it was stated that the type of pornography used at puberty or currently did not match the offender group categorization; that is, child molesters did not report greater use of child pornography compared to the other groups. It was also noted that use of child pornography was infrequently reported.

An advantage of the Marshall study is that the use of pornography was obtained after offenders had attended at least five sessions at the clinic; in cases where satisfactory rapport had not been established, additional sessions were completed before questioning about pornography use occurred. The data were collected in two to three sessions. Members of the comparison group were questioned about pornography use during their third research contact. This method differs from that of other studies, which typically question offenders about their use of pornography in one session or use a self-report questionnaire. It is certainly possible that an increased number of contacts with the investigator would decrease the likelihood of socially desirable (and untruthful) responses. In addition, using interviews and questioning participants over a number of sessions might facilitate recall compared to "one-shot" interviews and questionnaires.

On the other hand, if the increased personal contact and questioning over more than one session increased the veracity of response by offenders, the lack of identical contact with the comparison group may have introduced a bias leading to artificially inflated differences between the groups. This potential bias must be considered, as the sex offenders in the Langevin et al. (1988) study did not report more frequent use of hard-core pornographic materials compared to a non-offender comparison group.

In summary, although the results of the studies and reports reviewed indicate that a sizeable proportion of sex offenders use adult pornography, it has not been established that their use of

"soft-core" materials markedly differs from that of non-offenders. Additional research on the use of "hard-core" pornography is recommended before conclusions can be drawn about its differential use.

## **The Discrepancy between Anecdotal Reports and Retrospective Study Findings**

According to retrospective clinical studies, most sex offenders, including those convicted of offences against children, report minimal or no exposure to child pornography. This is at odds with the anecdotal reports by law enforcement officials, which imply that the majority of preferential child molesters collect child pornography. These discrepancies may, in part, be due to sampling differences. For example, the retrospective studies typically rely on self-reports by convicted child molesters, while police impressions of the prevalence of child pornography collection are based on all persons who are suspected of and investigated for child molestation. The convicted sex offenders comprise a subset of the pedophiles investigated by police.<sup>5</sup>

Another possible explanation for the discrepancy is that self-reported rates of child pornography consumption may be lower than actual rates of consumption; child molesters may not be truthful in their reports of child pornography use. Sex offenders tend to minimize the full extent and frequency of their sexually aberrant behaviour (Abel, Mittleman, and Becker, 1985; Langevin and Lang, 1985) and distort their self-reported behaviour (Marshall, Barbaree and Christophe, 1986). For example, Abel et al. found that in a sample of 24 referrals to a sex clinic, complete agreement between self-reported clinical history and phallometric assessment was found in only 30 percent of the cases. In the remaining cases, the psychophysiologic assessment showed paraphiliac (i.e., same sex) arousal that was not self-reported. When confronted with the discrepancy, 70 percent of the offenders admitted to their paraphiliac interests. Although this study did not examine disclosure of child pornography use, the findings suggest that even with detailed consent and confidentiality procedures,<sup>6</sup> and clinical interviews conducted by experienced therapists, sex offenders deny some sexually deviant behaviour.

Only one of the studies reviewed examined the honesty of sex offenders in answering questions about pornography use. Langevin et al. (1988) noted that since there is a perception that sex crimes are associated with the use of "erotica", sex offenders may be reticent to report using such materials. These authors hypothesized that sex offenders who denied their offence and/or deviant sexual preferences would be less likely to report use of pornography than males who admitted deviant sexual interests. Although fewer non-admitters reported use of any form of

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<sup>5</sup> One might suppose, however, that the convicted child molesters (the sex offenders used in the retrospective studies) would be the subset of those investigated most likely to be "collectors", as child pornography provides corroborating evidence of sexual offences against children.

<sup>6</sup> First, the offender signs a consent form indicating specifics of a crime will not be provided. Second, specific information that is inadvertently provided by the offender is not recorded. Third, each offender is given an ID number so no names appear on any of the records. The offender knows the ID number. To obtain the patient's chart, he must provide the number. There is no master list of ID numbers and names. If the records of an offender are subpoenaed, the legal system is advised that the records can only be accessed if the offender in question provides the ID number.

“erotica” ever or regularly compared to the admitters, the difference was not statistically significant. Analysis of the MMPI validity scales led to the conclusion that “information on the possible veracity of reporting erotica use was negative”, regardless whether the offenders admitted their offence or not. It was noted that offenders may be honest if it does not affect their current situation. However, this conclusion runs counter to the lack of disclosure found by Abel et al. (1985) when repercussions to admitting deviant behaviour were quite unlikely. More research on the validity of self-reports of sex offenders is required.

The seeming differences between anecdotal reports by police and retrospective studies in the rates of child pornography use may also be related to differences in what is defined as child pornography. It is clear that the anecdotal reports identify child pornography as sexually explicit photos of children taken by the offender, or other "amateur" photographs and videos, as well as hand-drawn sketches, and journals and letters describing fictitious or actual incidents of adult-child sex. In contrast, the few retrospective studies that actually investigated use of child pornography asked only about exposure to what might be termed "commercial" child pornography; that is, purchased pornography in the form of videos or magazines. One reason for the reported lack of use of commercial child pornography may be the difficulty in obtaining such material (Langevin et al., 1988). Finally, even when the researcher takes precautions to maximize confidentiality, pedophiles may be cautious about reporting the use of child pornography because of the legal ramifications that may arise. Howitt (1995) noted that the males in his sample mentioned the deterrent effect of criminal prosecution for possession of child pornography.

## **Availability of Child Pornography**

Although a comprehensive review of the availability and sources of child pornography is beyond the purview of this report,<sup>7</sup> some general statements concerning the production and distribution of child pornography can be made. Given the illegal and therefore clandestine nature of child pornography in many Western countries, it is impossible to provide exact figures on the commercial production and distribution of such materials. The estimates that have been derived indicate that child pornography accounts for only a small portion of pornography production (Badgley, 1984; Kutchinsky, 1985). It has been estimated that child pornography constitutes two to seven percent of the overall pornography market (Sansom, 1999; Schetky, 1988).

There appears to be consensus in the literature that the majority of child pornography is produced by pedophiles for their own use (Badgley, 1984; Gough, 1993; Hames, 1993; Howitt, 1995; Lanning, 1992; Tate, 1992). Child pornography is produced in a "cottage industry" by abusers. While some of this "home-made" pornography may be sold to commercial producers, most is either traded or is kept by individual collectors (Hartman, Burgess, and Lanning, 1985; Lanning, 1985).

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<sup>7</sup> See *Computer-Mediated Child Pornography: Towards an Empirical Baseline* (Sansom, 1999) for a review of the availability of child pornography by email and Internet.

The retrospective studies reviewed for this report did not address how or where the subjects obtained child pornography. The impression drawn from the case study and anecdotal descriptions supports the notion that most was "home-made". For instance, of the pedophiles interviewed by Howitt (1995), only two admitted to having "commercial" child pornography, while another made his own videos, and two wanted to photograph their victims. While some of the individual cases presented in the literature did involve commercial child pornography, the majority also, or solely, involved offenders possessing, or creating, their own child pornography (Lanning, 1985; Hartman, Burgess, and Lanning, 1985; Itzin, 1997; Bélanger et al., 1985; Kelly et al., 1996; Tate, 1992).

## **How Does the Pedophile Use Child Pornography?**

### **Motivations for Child Pornography Use**

The finding that child and adult pornography has been found in the possession of individuals suspected or convicted of sexual offences against children says little about the uses to which the pornography is put. Several motivations for collecting child pornography have been suggested by law enforcement officials and clinicians (Lanning, 1985, 1992; Groth and Oliveri, 1989; Hames, 1993), many of which are either directly or indirectly related to the sexual abuse of children. The most frequently cited motivations for creating and collecting child pornography are listed below. The first three motivations do not independently consist of illegal acts, while motivations numbered four through seven would appear to contravene criminal statutes.

1. Justification: To convince the child molester that his obsession is not abnormal.
2. Arousal: To use as a personal aid in fantasy and masturbation.
3. Preservation of the child's youth: To ensure the pedophile always has a moment or depiction of a child at the preferred age.
4. Lower a child's inhibitions: To show children that this is "normal" behaviour that other children or adults engage in; to sexually arouse pubescent children; and to suggest or demonstrate the specific sex acts the child is to perform. Pornography is used in what is referred to as the "seduction" or "grooming" process and may include the creation of pornography. "Innocent pictures progress to... nude or partially nude pictures, which then can escalate into sexually explicit pictures" (Lanning, 1992).
5. Blackmail: To keep the child from revealing the abuse.
6. A medium of exchange: To exchange for other pornographic materials, or to gain access to other victims.
7. Profit: Although many pedophiles do not sell child pornography, some do, and others may exchange the material in private collections for copies of commercial child pornography.

### **Anecdotal Reports of How Child Pornography Is Used**

Support for these purposes is found in anecdotal reports by law enforcement officials, victims of sexual abuse, and convicted child sex offenders.

The use of child pornography in the creation of fantasy has been identified by several researchers. Both Hartman, Burgess, and Lanning (1985) and Howitt (1995) presented case studies of child molesters who admitted to creating fantasies about pictures/videos of nude children and masturbating to them. Marshall (1988) found that a portion of the child molesters in his sample used sexually explicit materials to induce fantasies. Langevin et al. (1988) and Carter et al. (1987) stated that some of the offenders in their samples reported using erotica as a substitute for acting out. Unfortunately these data were not reported in proportions and the type of pornography used for cathartic purposes was not specified.

Pornography – either child or adult, or both – is used in the commission of sexual offences against children by some offenders, sometimes to lower the child’s inhibitions<sup>8</sup> and/or to “teach” them what to do. This usage of pornography can include the display of sexually explicit materials to intended victims and the production of pornography.<sup>9</sup>

In an archival study that reviewed case notes from 78 children who contacted a United Kingdom telephone help-line for children over a six month period, it was found that 41 percent reported that their sexual abuse was associated with “either being shown pornography magazines or videos or becoming involved in the making of abusive videos” (Kelley et al., 1996, p. 2). The subject of the pornography shown to the children was not specified. The case described by Itzin (1997) also involved the showing of pornography to a child. The woman interviewed recalls:

My uncle would make me look at pornographic literature and then take photographs of me doing it naked when he was baby-sitting. This is age 4 to 11 that I remember. He’d show me photographs of adults, men and women with whips and leather and children and animals. It would be photographs of oral sex, penetrative sex, both vaginally and anally... Then he would make me act out some of them. (p. 65)

Other examples of the use of pornography as a means of lowering the inhibitions of sexual abuse victims come from the analysis of sex rings.<sup>10</sup> In an analysis of 55 sex rings, Bélanger et al. (1985) found that adult pornography was shown to children in 62 percent of the cases; in 18 percent of the cases, pornography was not shown; data were unavailable for 11 percent of the rings. The rings described by Bélanger et al. also illustrated how pedophiles recorded the abuse of children through the creation of pornography.

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<sup>8</sup> One victim who testified at the U.S. Senate Subcommittee hearings (1985b) said that his abuser (an uncle) first took “innocent” photographs of him, with poses then progressing to involve nudity.

<sup>9</sup> The child pornography created in an attempt to lower a child’s inhibitions may also serve any or all of the other purposes listed above. This comment is not meant to imply that this pornography is any different than that traded or sold; rather, at the time of its creation it may simply serve an additional purpose.

<sup>10</sup> A sex ring refers to any situation in which at least one offender is simultaneously involved with more than one child. In solo rings, only one adult is involved with a group of children, while in transition sex rings, the adult exchanges or sells pornographic materials of the children and pressures the children into the next ring level – the syndicated ring. The syndicated ring consists of a structured organization formed for the purposes of recruiting children for sexual exploitation, producing pornography, delivering sexual service by children, and establishing a range of customers (Belanger, et al, 1985).

Offender recollections of their own sexual abuse as children also provide evidence of the use of pornography to disinhibit victims. One of the males in Howitt's (1995) sample was shown adult pornography during his abuse, and Carter et al. (1987) reported that several of the child molesters in their sample had themselves been sexually abused as children and that this abuse often involved pornographic materials.

Direct offender testimony corroborates victim reports. Two convicted child molesters studied by the United States Senate Subcommittee on child pornography and pedophilia (1985a; 1986) acknowledged that they showed their victims child pornography in an effort to lower their inhibitions and to suggest specific sex acts. In the Langevin et al. (1988) study, 15 percent of the incest offenders and 10 percent of the pedophiles in the Alberta sample used erotic videos or magazines to stimulate the child victim and/or themselves. In a study of 229 offenders who had molested children under the age of 14 years, Erickson, Walbek, and Seely (1988) determined that some of the offenders had shown pornographic movies to their victims and some had photographed them. The proportion of offenders engaging in these acts was not specified; nor was the type of pornography shown.

Anecdotal reports also support the "trading" and "selling" purposes of child pornography. Lanning (1985) presents a case study of an offender who traded pornographic photographs with other pedophiles. Indeed, some of the photographs found in "Bob's" possession were stamped with reproduction rights/retention declarations. The following is an excerpt from a letter written by a pedophile serving an indeterminate sentence in a state hospital for molesting his child. The letter, which was sent to an undercover police officer, provides evidence of pedophiles trading child pornography with one another, as well as selling pornography.

I'm enclosing a small photo of Karen taken last year when she was seven. This is the best I can do right now, but I promise when I get out I'll send you some more interesting ones of her, okay?

I was into photography quite a bit, and managed to take some nice shots of Karen and several of my students. I used to exchange my photos with men around the world and even sold some outright to men who didn't have any to exchange... Please send me some more slides or photos of Jan, preferably nude or action. (Hartman, Burgess, and Lanning, 1985; pp. 108-109)

In a more directly commercial vein, a man convicted in 1985 of the sexual abuse of two 12-year old girls, self-reportedly built up a child pornography business as a by-product of his pedophilia (Tate, 1992). Case studies of victims of child sexual abuse provide evidence that some pedophiles produce child pornography for profit. In an example reported by Itzin (1997), a woman recalls that some of the pornography made during her abuse was for the abuser(s), while some was for sale.

I'd be taken to places for group sex, group pornography and group prostitution. It had already been mapped out before I actually got there... We were taken out where we met strangers and other children... It was after one of these sessions – where we'd be in group sex, but without the cameras – that I saw my

grandfather buy the pictures, and I knew he must have been involved in the pornography too. In the making of pornography, prostitution is taking place. They go together and I was prostituted to make the pornography. ... This film wasn't necessarily sold, it was for the individuals that were there, as distinct from the pornography which was for sale. (p. 67)

An offender who testified in front of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee admitted that pornography filled several roles. He said (1985a):

With some pedophiles, it is a stimuli to have other victims. And in some cases, a pedophile will show pornographic pictures to a child. In my case, with still pictures, it helped ease the tension. With the films it was a stimulant to seek and reestablish actual relationships with a child. ...also... to diminish the child's resistance.

This offender photographed the children he molested and then traded them for others. The cathartic effect of viewing child pornography was also noted by this offender.

As Erickson, Walbek, and Seely (1988) aptly concluded, the role of pornography in the lives of pedophiles is not easy to quantify.

Collectively, these reports provide considerable insight into how pornography is used by some pedophiles. Some of the purposes of collecting child pornography constitute independent criminal offences, while others facilitate the commission of sexual offences. However, the information reviewed does not establish that pornography consumption (adult or child) causes child sexual abuse. Although such a causal relationship is unlikely to be established unequivocally, some efforts have been made to address this question. Researchers have attempted to untangle the relationship between pornography use and sexual offending by directly asking offenders what role pornography played in their sexual offences. Although self-report has the advantage that offenders can describe the exact elements of their arousal and offending behaviour, including their use of pornography, self-reports are subject to both the offender's honesty and insight.

## **Retrospective Studies on the Role of Pornography in Offending**

Becker and Stein (1991) asked a sub-sample of 20 youths (from a larger sample of 160 adolescent sex offenders) if sexually explicit materials had influenced their sexual offending. Of the adolescents questioned, only two (10 percent) reported that pornography might have played a role in their sexual offences, 70 percent reported that pornography did not play a role, while the remaining 20 percent denied committing an offence. The pornography referred to depicted adult subjects. For the purposes of this report, a major drawback to this study is that the type of sex offender was not specified; the number of child molesters is unknown.



When asked about the relationship between pornography and their sexual offences, 84 percent of the child molesters in the Nutter and Kearns (1993) study did not believe that pornography led them to engage in child molesting. However, the pornography referred to had adult subjects.

Although the study by Proulx, Perreault, and Ouimet (1999) did not directly question sex offenders about the role of pornography in their offence, their review of file data on 44 extra-familial child molesters imprisoned at a maximum security federal correctional institution revealed that only 25 percent had used pornography (unspecified subject matter) during the 12 hours prior to the offence. This suggests that consumption of pornography could not have been a “direct” instigator in the majority of cases – there was no temporal relationship between pornography use and offending in 75 percent of the cases. Unfortunately, this study did not address the potential indirect longer-term or cumulative effects of pornography use on offending, but rather focused only on behaviours immediately preceding the offence.

In the Proulx et al. research, the offenders who were most likely to have used pornography were those who had: planned their offence; engaged in deviant sexual fantasies before the offence; and, molested a male victim in whom they perceived psychosocial vulnerability and who was not familiar to them. The offences by these offenders tended to be longer in duration and involved noncoital activities without coercion (physical force).

In contrast to these studies that found pornography to play a potential role in only 10 percent to 25 percent of the cases, in Marshall’s study over half (53 percent) of the child molesters and 33 percent of rapists reported viewing “hard-core” pornography as part of their deliberate pre-offence preparations. In addition, Marshall (1988) found that child molesters with higher deviant quotients (penile responses to deviant stimuli) and those with more than three victims were more likely to use pornography as an instigator for their crime. Heterosexual child molesters with high frequencies of masturbation (42 percent of the group) were more likely to use pornography currently and to use these materials as an instigation to offend.

Carter et al. (1987) also found that, in comparison to rapists, child molesters made more frequent use of pornography both before and during the commission of criminal offences, and they rated pornography as having a greater influence on their lives. Indeed, only 7 percent of the child molesters reported pornography as having a “low” influence on their lives. The data in the Carter et al. study were not reported in proportions, so it is impossible to compare the rates of pornography use in this child molester sample to that in other studies. The type of pornography used by the child molesters in the Carter et al. study was not described.

On the other hand, Nutter and Kearns (1993) found that only 16 percent of their child molester sample reported that pornography was an instigator to their offending. This figure is much lower than the 53 percent reported by Marshall (1988). This difference may be attributable to the various methods employed (interview versus questionnaire) and definitions of pornography (“hard-core” versus “soft-core”).

Although some of these results may be interpreted as evidence of a link between the consumption of pornography and the perpetration of child sexual abuse, caution must be taken in arriving at this conclusion. Despite the relationships between the use of sexual stimuli as instigation to offend and the strength of deviant sexual interest, rates of masturbation, and number of victims,

Marshall's findings are correlational and may not be causal. The results may simply suggest that some child molesters are preoccupied with deviant sexual thoughts, seek out materials that are consistent with their deviant interests, and act on their sexual impulses, either through masturbation or offending, at fairly high rates.

Moreover, offenders' claims about the influence of pornography on their behaviour may be affected by psychological and social self-serving motivations, such as avoiding self-blame or adverse consequences within a correctional or assessment setting. These motivations may be particularly relevant in the Marshall study, where 69 percent of the offender sample were at some point in the legal process, including pre-adjudication. It could be argued that males who have not been convicted of a sexual offence are less likely to admit personal responsibility and are more likely to divert blame to an external source. That is, offenders may have exaggerated their use of the materials.

## **Conclusions**

Clearly, not all sex offenders are alike; nor do they all consume adult and/or child pornography. There is a wide range of individual differences among sex offenders with regard to the interest they demonstrate in sexually explicit material. At one end of the continuum are sex offenders who have virtually no interest in pornography of any kind, while at the other end are offenders who report being preoccupied with it. Of those who do use pornographic materials, not all seek out the same types of sexually explicit materials – some use materials depicting children, some use adult pornography, and some use both. In addition, "non-pornographic pornography" appears to be a source of stimulation to many pedophiles.

Reports by sex offenders who acknowledge being consumers of pornography indicate that it may be used in a number of ways. Some offenders report that viewing child or adult pornography activates sexual fantasies and/or masturbation, much as it does for non-offenders. Some offenders report that pornography arouses their urge to assault someone, while others indicate diminishes their impulse to sexually offend (Carter et al., 1987; Nutter and Kearns, 1993; Groth and Oliveri, 1989). Case study reports indicate that some offenders use pornography during the commission of sexual offences, particularly to lower the inhibitions of the intended child victim.

In other words, sex offenders may become involved with pornography for a variety of reasons. Despite this involvement, there is no evidence of a causal link between viewing adult or child pornography and the commission of sexual crimes. The fact that some sex offenders, including child molesters, consume pornography, and some use it during the commission of a sexual offence does not mean that the pornography caused the offence to occur.

Retrospective studies done by means of self-administered questionnaires or in-person interviews have been conducted to answer questions about the use of pornography in sexual victimization. One limitation of these studies is that samples are not randomly selected members of the general population of offenders; offenders usually selected on the basis of convenience (they are being assessed or treated by the researchers). They are often compared to a non-random sample of self-reported non-offenders. The offender samples are unlikely to be representative of adults in the

general population who have engaged in similar sexual behaviour, but who have not been identified by the justice system. This limitation could actually inflate the relationship between child pornography and offending, as males who have been processed criminally might be more likely to have had tangible evidence of their crimes – such as being in possession of child pornography. Moreover, it is also possible that offenders are untruthful in their reports of child pornography use for a variety of reasons. A critical limitation of this research method is that it ignores the potentially sizable group of individuals who consume child pornography, but who do not act out against children.

Authors of retrospective research studies and clinicians generally conclude that many sex offenders have deviant fantasies and/or behaviours that preceded preferences for specific sexually explicit material, such as child pornography (Nutter and Kearns, 1993; Groth and Oliveri, 1989). Howitt (1995) also noted that none of the participants in his study had been exposed to pornography prior to their first abusive sexual experiences; childhood experience with pornography was either contemporaneous with or occurred later than their initial abuse experience. The one offender who reported extensive use of child pornography first saw it at 16 years of age, when his history of abusing was already well established. Similarly, the offender who testified at the U.S. Senate Subcommittee hearings stated that by the time he was 24 years of age, he had molested 14 young girls. He was 40 years of age when he was first exposed to commercial child pornography. These findings indicate a proclivity for child sexual abuse that is independent of exposure to child pornography.

In summary, child and/or adult pornography is a feature in the lives of many pedophiles and other sex offenders, just as it is a feature in the lives of some persons who do not commit sexual offences. Alternatively, some sex offenders do not use pornography of any kind. There appears to be no strong and consistent evidence that sex offenders are more avid consumers of pornography than other males. A simple, direct causal link between pornography and sexual offending is not supported by the literature.

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