

October 2024



**Suicide Prevention
Australia**

Inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography on mental, emotional and physical health

Submission

For general enquiries:

02 9262 1130 | policy@suicidepreventionaust.org | www.suicidepreventionaust.org

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Introduction

Suicide Prevention Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the New South Wales inquiry into the impacts of harmful pornography use on mental, emotional and physical health.

Suicide Prevention Australia is the national peak body for the suicide prevention sector. We have over 350 members representing more than 140,000 employees, workers, and volunteers across Australia. We provide a collective voice for service providers, practitioners, researchers, local collaboratives, and people with lived experience.

We are deeply concerned about the increased risk of suicide among people who engage in harmful pornography use. While we acknowledge that not all pornography use is harmful, the correlation of suicide risk and pornography use increases with both the content of the pornography and excessive or compulsive use of it. The research suggests that pornography use can be harmful when it leads to isolation, interferes with daily functioning and relationships, impairs ability to work and lowers wellbeing and life satisfaction.^{1,2,3,4,5} These negative outcomes serve to increase the risk of suicide.^{6,7,8}

Pornography, often consumed as entertainment, can also promote unrealistic sexual expectations which can lead to feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem and cause relationship strain.^{9,10} In addition, exposure to violent and degrading pornography can foster harmful behaviours and attitudes and can encourage sexual violence.¹¹ Research also shows that individuals with traditional religious or conservative values may experience inner conflict and shame over their pornography use, even at low levels.^{12,13} All of these factors may further heighten suicide risk.^{14,15,16}

Distribution and threats to distribute pornographic material can also be used to coerce, control, intimidate or harass another person in the context of domestic, family and sexual violence.¹⁷ Worryingly, both victims and perpetrators of domestic, family and sexual violence are more likely to die by suicide compared to the general population.¹⁸

Generative AI has also introduced new concerns and can be used to create pornographic videos or audio through deepfakes.¹⁹ These deepfakes can be developed through nudifying apps and refers to the process of digitally altering and manipulating images to produce a fake but convincing representation of another person.²⁰ This can be devastating for victims and sadly, there have been several reports in Australia of suicidal behaviour and suicide deaths linked to both the dissemination and threat to circulate non-consensual pornographic material.^{21, 22,23,24,25} Each suicide death is a tragedy which has a devastating ripple effect and impacts a further 135 lives.²⁶

We are also concerned that children and young people may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of harmful pornography. Exposure to pornography is common and generally occurs years before a child or young person's first sexual experience with a partner.²⁷ In particular, an Australian study found that just under 6% of boys and 5% of girls have viewed pornography by age 10 and that among 15–20-year-olds over 85% of males and just under 70% of females have viewed pornography.²⁸

While children and young people may initially view pornography out of sexual curiosity or to access sex-related information, repeated exposure to violent or unrealistic content can lead

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to harmful outcomes, including developmentally inappropriate sexualised behaviour and greater likelihood of sexual violence, depression, anxiety, and loneliness.^{29,30,31}

Worryingly, these outcomes may increase the likelihood of experiencing suicidal behaviour.

Given the strong link between harmful pornography and suicide it is critical that the New South Wales Government takes action to address harmful pornography use. On this basis we would like to provide input relations to five of the terms of reference for this inquiry:

- a. Age of first exposure to pornography and impacts of early exposure to pornography;
- b. The production and dissemination of pornography, including deepfake or AI-generated pornography;
- c. The impact of exposure to violent and/or misogynistic pornography on children, teenagers and young adults;
- d. The effectiveness of any current education programs about use and misuse of pornography, and how these may be improved; and
- e. The effectiveness of current restrictions on access to pornography and consideration of any need to improve these.

Summary of Recommendations

1. The New South Wales Government should design and promote a suite of free online resources for parents and carers to improve ability to discuss safe and healthy pornography use with children and young people, and to enhance knowledge of technology blocking and filtering tools to prevent unwanted exposure to online pornographic material on devices.
2. The New South Wales Government should expand sexual health education delivered in schools so that all children and young people in upper primary and secondary school are upskilled to identify harmful pornography and report related materials and experiences.
3. The New South Wales Government should invest in:
 - 3.1 A free phone-based and online service which children, young people, victims of revenge pornography, parents and carers can access to report harmful pornographic material and to receive support from an appropriately trained mental health professional or peer worker to reduce suicide risk; and
 - 3.2 A public campaign to raise awareness of this service among children, young people, parents and carers.
4. The New South Wales Government should make training on youth suicide prevention mandatory for secondary school teachers and teachers in the tertiary, and vocational education training sectors to ensure that young people impacted by harmful pornography use who are at risk of suicide are identified and referred to appropriate support services.
5. The New South Wales Government should update the Sexual Violence Plan 2022-2027 to include clear and targeted actions to prevent suicide among people exposed to violent pornography and forced to watch or participate in pornography.

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6. The New South Wales Government should ensure that education programs to address pornography related harms are co-designed with children and young people from diverse backgrounds, parents, and carers.
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7. The New South Wales Government lobby the Commonwealth Government to provide \$15 million in funding for the National Suicide Prevention Research Fund to continue operations and undertake research over a four-year period. Part of this funding will enable the Research Fund to commission research which identifies effective education programs to address harmful pornography use to reduce suicide risk.
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8. The New South Wales Government should lobby the Commonwealth Government to increase the powers of the eSafety Commissioner to intervene and prevent children and young people from accessing and viewing harmful pornography.
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Prevent early exposure to pornography

Research indicates that the average age children first view pornography is 13, with nearly 30% having viewed it by age 11.³² A major concern is that children can encounter pornography unintentionally while browsing the internet.³³ Research has found that 60% of youth have been inadvertently exposed to a distressing sexual material in the last year, and that just under 10% of unintentional exposures were among 11–12-year-olds.³⁴

It has also been found that exposure to pornography at an early age can encourage children to engage in harmful sexual behaviour that is inappropriate for their stage of development.³⁵ This is troubling, especially given substantial evidence showing that exposure to pornography by age 14 can normalise sexually aggressive behavior and increase the risk of becoming a victim or perpetrating sexual violence against other children or youth.^{36,37,38}

Additionally, in 2016 a Federal inquiry into the impact of internet pornography on Australian children uncovered deeply troubling accounts of child-on-child abuse linked to early exposure to pornography.³⁹ It is critical that action is taken to prevent early exposure to pornography so that children don't engage in problematic sexual behaviours that are outside the norm of a child or young person. The research shows that children who have experienced sexual abuse are significantly more likely to die by suicide compared to their peers.^{40,41}

Given the significant risks associated with harmful pornography use, it is essential that parents and carers have the skills to discuss safe and healthy pornography use with their children. Having these conversations early can help mitigate harm and prevent the development of harmful behaviors when children first encounter pornography.

Australian research has also found that children and young people are more likely to view pornography at home and on an electronic device.⁴² This suggests that parents and carers can play an important role in preventing early pornography exposure and ensuring safe use. To help prevent children from being inadvertently exposed to pornographic material, parents

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and carers should be familiar with technology blocking and filtering systems which prevent access to pornographic content on household and children's devices.

Recommendation

1. The New South Wales Government should design and promote a suite of free online resources for parents and carers to improve ability to discuss safe and healthy pornography use with children and young people and to enhance knowledge of technology blocking and filtering tools to prevent unwanted exposure to online pornographic material on devices.

Discourage the production and dissemination of harmful pornography

An Australian study found that among young people aged 16-19 that one third have been the victim of revenge-based pornography.⁴³ The study also identified that 25% of people aged between 20-29 have been the victim of revenge-based pornography and that victims were nearly twice as likely to report experiencing high levels of psychological distress compared to their peers.⁴⁴

Revenge-based pornography also known as non-consensual pornography involves the non-consensual creation, distribution or threats to distribute nude or sexual images or videos.⁴⁵ Worryingly, it has been reported that the circulation of pornographic images through online platforms such as WhatsApp or Snapchat is not unusual among children and youth and occurs more frequently than adults realise.^{46,47,48} One study found that nearly 90% of girls and 50% of boys report that their peers have shared pornographic images and videos that they do not want to view.^{49,50}

It is important to address this issue given that there is significant and growing interest in deepfake pornography. It has been found that during 2022 there were over 57 million online hits for deepfake pornography on Google.⁵¹ Research has also identified an 464% increase in the production of deepfake pornographic videos between 2022 and 2023.⁵² There is also a concerning gender impact, as over 90% of deepfakes online are non-consensual pornographic images or videos of women.^{53,54}

Given that children and young people are frequently exposed to pornography it is important that they have the skills to identify and report harmful pornographic content. This should be taught in all sexual education classes so that all children and young people in upper primary and secondary schools across New South Wales are upskilled to identify harmful pornography and report related materials and experiences.

This will help discourage the production and dissemination of harmful pornographic material and will also ensure that children and young people have the skills and knowledge to recognise and reject inappropriate content. Empowering children in this way reduces feelings of helplessness when encountering harmful pornographic material and lowers the risk that young people may become victims of sexual violence, grooming, or exploitation, which will help prevent suicide.

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Children and young people should also have access to a free phone-based and online service which they can use to report harmful pornographic material to ensure that immediate action is taken to limit its circulation. There should also be supports in place for victims of revenge porn to help reduce suicide risk. The phone-based and online service could provide this support and could facilitate access to an appropriately trained mental health professional or peer worker who can provide information and guidance to prevent suicide. A public campaign should also be implemented to raise awareness of this service among children, young people, parents and carers.

In addition, given the heightened risk of suicide among young people exposed to harmful pornography and among victims of image-based sexual abuse, all New South Wales secondary school teachers and teachers in the tertiary and vocational education sectors should have the skills to recognise and support at-risk individuals. Teachers are uniquely positioned to play a critical role in preventing suicide among students and should be required to complete mandatory suicide prevention training.

Suicide prevention training will ensure that teachers have the right set of skills and the confidence to recognise the warning signs of suicide and refer at-risk individuals to appropriate services. With the right training teachers can have a conversation with a student which may shift their mental health, wellbeing, or suicide risk.

Recommendations

2. The New South Wales Government should expand sexual health education delivered in schools so that all children and young people in upper primary and secondary school are upskilled to identify harmful pornography and report related materials and experiences.
3. The New South Wales Government should invest in:
 - 3.1 A free phone-based and online service which children, young people, victims of revenge pornography, parents and carers can access to report harmful pornographic material and to receive support from an appropriately trained mental health professional or peer worker to reduce suicide risk; and
 - 3.2 A public campaign to raise awareness of this service among children, young people, parents and carers.
4. The New South Wales Government should make training on youth suicide prevention mandatory for secondary school teachers and teachers in the tertiary, and vocational education training sectors to ensure that young people impacted by harmful pornography use who are at risk of suicide are identified and referred to appropriate support services.

Reduce the risk of suicide among people exposed to violent pornography

Concerningly research has identified that just under 90% of scenes in popular pornographic videos involve physical aggression, while nearly 50% contain verbal aggression.⁵⁵ Consuming this type of pornographic content can desensitize individuals to violence and aggression and distort a person's expectations and understanding of healthy relationships

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and intimacy. This may lead to social isolation and relationship dysfunction which are key risk factors for suicide.⁵⁶

Further, people who are forced to watch or participate in pornography are also at heightened risk of suicide. Individuals who are coerced into viewing or participating in pornography may experience shame, anxiety, trauma and depression which may lead to suicidal feelings and behaviours. Concerningly, individuals forced into pornography are often vulnerable and may be exposed to additional risk factors for suicide such as homelessness or prior abuse which may further heighten suicide risk.^{57,58}

To help address this and reduce suicide risk, the Sexual Violence Plan 2022-2027 which provides the New South Wales Government with the strategic direction to prevent and respond to sexual violence should contain clear targeted standalone actions to prevent suicide among people exposed to violent pornography and forced to watch or participate in pornography.⁵⁹

Recommendations

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5. The New South Wales Government should update the Sexual Violence Plan 2022-2027 to include clear and targeted actions to prevent suicide among people exposed to violent pornography and forced to watch or participate in pornography.
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Improve the effectiveness of education programs which address pornography use

All education programs to address harmful pornography use which target children and young people should be co-designed with children, young people, parents and carers. This will ensure that the education programs are fit for purpose and will help encourage active participation and engagement.

It is also important that children and young people from diverse backgrounds are involved in the co-design process to provide insight into crucial cultural and religious considerations which should be addressing in the program design. This is critical given that due to various cultural and religious factors children and young people may feel shame and stigma surrounding their pornography use which may heighten suicide risk. This will also help ensure that all education programs to address harmful pornography use are culturally sensitive and inclusive which will help improve outcomes.

Research should also be undertaken to identify effective education programs which can reduce suicide risk among children and young people exposed to harmful pornography. Suicide prevention research is funded by the Commonwealth Government at a national level through the National Suicide Prevention Research Fund (Research Fund).⁶⁰

The Research Fund aims to support world-class research and to facilitate the translation of knowledge into more effective suicide prevention services for individuals, families and communities. Suicide Prevention Australia manages the Research Fund on behalf of the Commonwealth Government. Yet, as of 30 June 2025, the Commonwealth Department of Health's funding for this crucial initiative will conclude.

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An additional \$15 million in the National Suicide Prevention Research Fund will enable Suicide Prevention Australia to deliver an enhanced research program over four years. Part of this funding can be used towards research which identifies effective evidence-based education programs to address harmful pornography use which can help reduce suicide risk.

Recommendations

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6. The New South Wales Government should ensure that education programs to address pornography related harms are co-designed with children and young people from diverse backgrounds, parents, and carers.
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7. The New South Wales Government should lobby the Commonwealth Government to provide \$15 million in funding for the National Suicide Prevention Research Fund to continue operations and undertake research over a four- year period. Part of this funding will enable the Research Fund to commission research which identifies effective education programs to address harmful pornography use to reduce suicide risk.
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Enhance the effectiveness of current restrictions

We are aware that work is progressing within New South Wales and at a national level to ensure a safe online environment for children and young people.⁶¹ However, we remain concerned that children and young people continue to be exposed to harmful pornography through online channels. Research has found that young people who report unintentional exposure to pornography often encounter it through online search engines or pop-up advertisements.^{62,63,64} This highlights that regulatory and technical measures should be implemented as a matter of urgency to minimise online exposure.

It is important that current restrictions are improved, and that steps are taken to prevent children and young people from accessing harmful pornographic content and that harmful pornographic material is quickly removed from circulation. To facilitate this, the powers of the eSafety Commissioner should be strengthened through enhanced regulatory authority, improved reporting mechanisms and collaboration with technology companies. These measures will help cultivate a culture of safety and mitigate the risk of suicide.

Recommendation

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8. The New South Wales Government should lobby the Commonwealth Government to increase the powers of the eSafety Commissioner to intervene and prevent children and young people from accessing and viewing harmful pornography.
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For general enquiries:

02 9262 1130 | policy@suicidepreventionaust.org | www.suicidepreventionaust.org

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