



## **Protecting Vulnerable Youth from Pornography**

A submission from the Association for Reformed Political Action (ARPA) Canada

to

The Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs

Regarding

*Bill S-209, An Act to restrict young persons' online access to pornographic material*

October 3, 2025

The devastating impact of online pornography on Canadian youth requires action from Parliament. We thank the members of this Committee for the opportunity to provide a written brief. ARPA Canada supports Bill S-209.

### **The Problem of Pornography**

ARPA Canada believes that God created every human being in his image.<sup>1</sup> As such, every person possesses inherent and inalienable dignity. Pornography objectifies human bodies, exploits vulnerable people, sexualizes children, and causes familial, social, and community harms. The pervasiveness and effects of pornography today are unprecedented because of the advent of photo, video, digital technologies, the internet, and AI which make pornography easy to create, share, and access anonymously.<sup>2</sup> Canadian governments and law enforcement must do more to ensure the pornography industry stops exploiting vulnerable people, particularly young children.

Pornography consumption can lead to compulsive behaviour and addiction, with measurable physiological and neurological harms. Research by Dr. Norman Doidge shows that sexual preferences are malleable. When pornography connects torture and sexual arousal, for example, that visual connection “can cause previously unrelated neurons within the brain to learn to ‘fire’ in tandem so that the next time around, physical torture actually does trigger sexual arousal in the brain ... [Pornography] literally changes the physical matter within the brain so that new neurological pathways require pornographic material in order to trigger the desired reward sensation.”<sup>3</sup> As another researcher put it, “[N]eurological research has revealed that the effect of internet pornography on the human brain is just as potent—if not more so—than addictive chemical substances such as cocaine or heroin.”<sup>4</sup>

Habitual pornography users become less excited by the same type of images and often need more extreme images or narratives to continue to satisfy their desires.<sup>5</sup> Pornography is now increasingly dominated by violent, degrading, and deviant themes.<sup>6</sup> This contributes to negative views and

objectification of women.<sup>7</sup> Pornography mainstreams sexual violence by making it both common and “consensual” and so changes the way men and women interact.<sup>8</sup> Researchers note that “increasing numbers of men are being found guilty of violence against women where pornography consumption was implicated. Literature linking pornography use to sexual offending, sexual aggression and abuse is now strong.”<sup>9</sup> For example, nearly 24% of adult American women report feeling fear during intimacy due to porn-inspired choking.<sup>10</sup>

Pornography also destroys relationships. A longitudinal study in the U.S. found that pornography use doubled (for men) and tripled (for women) the likelihood of divorce.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, affection and intimacy decrease in relationships where one partner views pornography.<sup>12</sup> Viewing pornography hinders people’s ability to form and maintain meaningful relationships, which are the foundation for a healthy society.

Harvard law professor Catharine MacKinnon argues that “nothing else does what pornography does ... What pornography does, it does in the real world, not only in the mind.”<sup>13</sup> Pornography publicizes actual sex acts, many of them degrading or violent. Consuming pornography changes consumers’ perceptions and attitudes.<sup>14</sup> The harm to children, who are increasingly exposed to pornography at younger ages, necessitates restrictions on underage access to online porn.

## **Pornography and Minors**

The scope of Bill S-209 is limited to children’s access to online pornography. A recent survey commissioned by the United Kingdom’s Age-verification Regulator revealed that 51% of 11- to 13-year-olds reported that they had seen pornography, with over 60% of these saying it was unintentional. Some children had seen pornography as early as age seven or eight.<sup>15</sup> A report by the Children’s Commissioner in the UK found that 79% of 18–21-year-olds had seen violent pornography before the age of 18.<sup>16</sup> Evidence suggests that consumption of pornography is related to harmful attitudes towards women and girls, sexual coercion and aggression, and an increased likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behaviour.<sup>17</sup>

A 2021 study found that one in eight porn videos shown to first-time users on the home pages of mainstream porn sites feature sexual violence.<sup>18</sup> Children increasingly see pornography as sex education, and think that it is a realistic depiction of what sex is.<sup>19</sup> For example, 44% of boys between the ages of 11 and 16 who viewed pornography said that it gave them ideas of sex acts they wanted to try.<sup>20</sup> There has also been a disturbing rise in sexual violence against children, committed by children. A survey of grade 10 high school students found that exposure to pornography is linked with dating violence and sexual aggression. Boys exposed to violent pornography were 2-3 times more likely to perpetrate teen dating violence, while girls were 1.5 times more likely to do so than girls who were not exposed to violent pornography.<sup>21</sup> Another study found that the majority (76.7% for males and 70.1% for females) of sexual abuse and assault of children in the US is perpetrated by other young people.<sup>22</sup> Further, a study of youth ages 10 to 15 found that intentional exposure to X-rated material predicted a 6-fold increase in sexually aggressive behaviour.<sup>23</sup> The use of sexually explicit materials also has developmental effects on behavioral, cognitive, and emotional well-being.<sup>24</sup>

## **International Age-Verification**

Exposure to pornography harms the sexual and psycho-social development of children and youth while also increasing risk to those the young viewers interact with. Several jurisdictions have taken

significant steps towards preventing minors from having easy access to sexually explicit content online. The United Kingdom recently took steps to improve protection of children and adults online through its Online Safety Act (2023), which made social media companies more responsible for users' safety, particularly pertaining to removing illegal content, and preventing children from accessing age-inappropriate content.<sup>25</sup>

The French government has also mandated age-verification through a variety of methods, including a digital certificate where users prove their age through a trusted third party and are provided with a token that confirms their age and can be used anonymously.<sup>26</sup> The European Union is also implementing age-verification for Member States through the Digital Services Act.<sup>27</sup>

Twenty-five U.S. states have passed age-verification laws, and many of these have gone further to recognize pornography as a public health crisis.<sup>28</sup> Texas' age-verification law withstood a recent legal challenge at the Supreme Court of the United States in *Free Speech Coalition v. Paxton*. The Court noted clearly in that decision that "Adults have no First Amendment [free speech] right to avoid age verification."<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, the United States Senate is currently considering the 2025 SCREEN Act, which would mandate age-verification measures across the country.<sup>30</sup>

Since Louisiana passed age-verification legislation in 2023, traffic to Pornhub dropped by 80 percent. In response to legislation in some states, Pornhub chose to stop operating in those areas.<sup>31</sup> While age-verification measures are relatively new, early reports indicate some effectiveness in curbing online pornography consumption.

With no age-verification requirements in place in Canada, we continue to lag behind what other jurisdictions are doing to protect vulnerable children.

## Privacy

One argument commonly used against age-verification is the importance of privacy for users. Bill S-209 does not prescribe exactly how age-verification or age-estimation will be done. Nor does it designate a particular enforcement authority.

Age-verification processes may make it less convenient for adult users to access pornography sites. In addition, depending on the mechanism used, a person may be required to provide personal information. People need to verify their age or identity for many online transactions today. Some people may fear their viewing habits being exposed if they share information with online platforms. But it's not so different from using ID to get into any age-restricted facility. Concern about having viewing habits exposed illustrates that viewing pornography may make people feel ashamed, but also indicates a distrust of pornography companies. Most people are not concerned about giving identifying information to Amazon or Netflix, or even certain online gambling platforms. People can choose which sites they use or don't use, also depending on the level of privacy and trust.

There are several ways to implement age-verification and respect privacy concerns. One such method is third-party verification, whereby users' identities are verified by a third-party, which provides a digital token that they can then present to any restricted site.<sup>32</sup> This approach is used in France.<sup>33</sup> The third-party does not know where an online token will be used. When the token is presented to a restricted site, the site owners do not know the person's identity. A survey of French citizens revealed a 74% approval of such an approach.<sup>34</sup> Of course, Bill S-209 also rightly provides for methods that help ensure privacy no matter which age-verification or age-estimation is used.

In the United Kingdom, third-party Ofcom is responsible for implementing the government's recent Online Safety Act. Ofcom lists multiple age-verification methods that are highly effective, including requirements for data protection. Ofcom rejects weaker age-verification methods including self-declaration and online payment methods other than credit cards.<sup>35</sup> Other jurisdictions have chosen instead to require users to upload identification to view pornography. In Louisiana, for example, websites that have at least one third of their content as pornography must verify the user's age through ID or other proof of age.<sup>36</sup> In ARPA's view, this one-third of content rule is unnecessary. Age-verification can be required for access to any website that regularly or continuously hosts pornographic content. Age-verification requirements may also incentivize companies to ensure their websites do not host pornographic content, or that any pornographic content that gets posted on their platform is swiftly removed.

While the exemption provided in Bill S-209 for organizations that do not deliberately provide pornography is understandable, the federal government cannot let social media companies off the hook for making pornography accessible to children. After all, X was the platform where young people were most likely to see pornography in a 2023 study (41 percent).<sup>37</sup> X policies permit pornography, but supposedly do not allow children to view explicit content. Instagram (33 percent) and Snapchat (32 percent) closely followed pornography sites (37 percent), even though these social media sites officially ban pornography on their platforms.

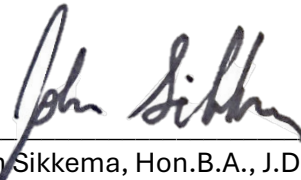
#### **Recommendation # 1**

ARPA Canada recommends that this Committee support Bill S-209. The seriousness of pornography's impacts on young Canadians necessitates effective age-verification legislation.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of ARPA Canada,



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