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# JUSTICE

## RESEARCH NOTES

### What Is the Relevance of Justice Research and Development in the 1990s?

**T**he dramatic social, political and economic changes taking place in Canada today bring into question many assumptions about long-held societal values and goals and the legal and other mechanisms that can best serve indi-

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vidual and national aspirations. This complex of forces poses an enormous challenge for the development of fair and equitable justice policies.

The Department of Justice Research and Development Directorate recently undertook a planning exercise that resulted in a comprehensive three-year plan to help the Department meet the demands of the 1990s. Uppermost in this plan was the development and maintenance of a sound information base.

The following excerpts from that planning document illustrate the overall rationale for the research and development program. It will also help to explain why the Department believes it is important that its research reports and the results

of the development activities generated here be shared more widely. A continuing objective is to make these materials available for comment, criticism and use by all Canadians who believe that good information — and, in particular, information obtained from good social science research and demonstration projects — provides a powerful instrument for sensitive and innovative problem solving. That, for example, is one of the major purposes of *Justice Research Notes*.

### Organization of the Policy Research Function

The Research and Development Directorate is responsible for a highly interdependent set of functions, all of which are intended to support and improve the ability of the Department to be innovative and effective in response to challenges and opportunities. The Directorate is responsible for all the social science-based (empirical) research; for the development and evaluation of demonstration projects; for statistical analysis; and, in conjunction with the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics and the Ministry of the Solicitor General, for the promotion and development

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### IN THIS ISSUE

Justice for Canada's Native People	1404 <sup>132</sup> 3
Native People - Sentencing Study	1404 <sup>133</sup> 7
Effects of Pornography	1404 <sup>134</sup> 9
Responding to Wife Assault	1404 <sup>135</sup> 11



# Studies Examine Social and Psychological Effects of Pornography

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**P**ornography and its attendant effects have been of concern to the federal government for some time, and two major federally appointed committees have looked at this issue.

In 1980, the ministers of Justice and Health and Welfare established the Committee on Sexual Offences Against Children And Youths — the “Badgley Committee” — which made numerous recommendations on pornography involving children.

In 1983, the Minister of Justice appointed the Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution — the “Fraser Committee” — which recommended legislative, social and educational action on pornography.

Both committees identified pornography as an issue of special concern to women because, according to their investigations, it is mainly women who are “used”, in an exploitive sense, as models in photographs or as actors in films. Some social scientists have claimed that there is a link between the viewing of certain types of pornography and actual acts of violence against women.

In support of Bill C-54, the proposed 1987 legislative amendments on pornography, Barry Leighton prepared Part 1 of a study entitled *A Guide to the Social Science Evidence on the Effects of Pornography*. His research covered the period

from 1970 to 1987 and was updated (Part 2) by Augustine Brannigan of the University of Calgary. The results were published by the Department in 1990 as a working document.

## Objectives and Approach of the Research

Part 1 is a synthesis of selected empirical social science evidence that addresses the link between pornography and presumed harmful effects. The review of research is restricted to North American studies conducted since 1970. Selected for comment are those cited most frequently in the literature as landmark studies. The review is comprehensive but not exhaustive.

The focus of the report is mainly on the impact of pornography on adult males, particularly the sexual aggression they may exhibit

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toward adult females. All relevant research is described, whether or not the findings support a link between pornography and harmful effects.

The report is designed to be used by those having little or no background in social science research. Accordingly, a pornography classification system used by many social scientists is provided, along with a note on the variety of ways to logically link pornography with its effects, a catalogue of current theories of how these links are developed, and a brief review of the merits and problems associated with this method.



## Findings on Effects of Nonviolent Pornography (Part 1)

► *Effects on behaviour.* On balance, the research findings on the effect of nonviolent pornography on consumers are mixed or inconclusive. Although there is evidence that, under certain laboratory conditions, nonviolent pornography has some short-term deleterious effects on some consumers, there is also evidence that under similar conditions it can have a cathartic effect. There is also mixed evidence about the relationship of changes in pornography legislation to changes in criminal behaviour — that is, sexual assaults. The research shows that criminal behaviour is linked to broader cultural and social factors.

► *Effects on attitudes.* Much of the laboratory research in this study found little effect of nonviolent pornography on laboratory aggression. One attitudinal change noted is that after viewing idealized actors and actresses, respondents often found their own partners less attractive.

## Findings on Effects of Violent Pornography (Part 1)

Violent pornography is defined as that which is tangible, identifiable and specific, as opposed to implied.

► *Effects on behaviour.* In general, laboratory research that examined the effects on men of sexually explicit violent pornography concluded that there are significant deleterious effects as indicated by increased aggression against women, but that it is the violent component of the pornography that generates this effect. Violence appears to cause the laboratory aggression; pornography is the vehicle. Other research on sex

offenders, such as rapists, suggests that explicit pornography does not play a causal role in the offence.

► *Effects on attitudes.* The main laboratory effect of violent pornography on male attitudes was to reinforce and strengthen already existing negative attitudes toward sexual aggression against females. The research suggests that for violent pornography to have an effect on male attitudes toward rape, the response of the female victim must be depicted as positive or pleasurable.

## Impact Is Mainly on Attitudes

The Brannigan update (1988-1989), Part 2 of the report, examines recent studies on the impact of violent pornography on aggressive behaviour. The report confirms that the psychological harm arising from pornography is mainly attitudinal and appears to result in aggressive behaviour very rarely, except in those men already predisposed to view women negatively. Little evidence was found that would suggest a relationship between the circulation of pornography and the rates of sexual aggression/rape in different countries. ◀

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*A Guide to the Social Science Evidence on the Effects of Pornography.* (Part 1), Barry Leighton. (Part 2), Augustine Brannigan. Working Document. WD1990 8a. Research Section, Department of Justice. For copies, contact: Research Section, Department of Justice Canada, Ottawa K1A 0H8 (613) 957-9632.