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Pornography a Public Health Crisis in Utah

Candace A. Green

COUN 6785: Social Change in Action:
Prevention, Consultation, and Advocacy

Social Change Portfolio

Candace A. Green

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OVERVIEW

Keywords: Pornography, Addiction, Prevention, Sexuality, Public Health Crisis, Youth, Utah

Pornography a Public Health Crisis in Utah

Goal Statement: The goal is to reduce Utah's teenage pornography consumption by 25% through the implementation of an in-home program where parents and guardians can learn communication skills, teach their children about the risk factors and dangers of pornography addiction, and apply prevention strategies and protective measures in their own home.

Significant Findings: Pornography use is more prevalent now than at any other time in history. Much of this can be attributed to our cell phones and the 24-hour internet access we have at our fingertips which makes viewing sexually explicit material a few seconds away at all times. Utah was ranked number one in the nation for pornography subscriptions according to Edelman's 2009 study with 25% of all search engine requests being pornographic. The population I've focused this prevention program on are youth in Utah County who are addicted to pornography. For children, pornography use is dangerous with serious risk factors that can include impacting brain development and functioning, contributing to emotional and medical illnesses, shaping deviant sexual arousal, increasing the odds of teenage pregnancy and prostitution, increasing conduct problems and delinquent behavior, and leading to difficulty in forming and maintaining intimate relationships (Brown and Wisco, 2019). Recommendations at the micro level include positive self-esteem and personal standards and values. Recommendations at the mezzo level include parents learning why their kids are turning to pornography, becoming more informed of the dangers of pornography, and putting into place

safety measures and guidelines with internet use in their homes. Recommendations at the macro level include crafting laws that require pornographic websites to use age-verification measures to keep children off their platforms and electing representatives that aggressively address this public health crisis, pushing for policy changes that protect children from pornography.

Objectives/Strategies/Interventions/Next Steps: Research suggests that children are turning to pornography for sexual information because they are not able to get answers about sex from their parents (Healy-Cullin et al., 2021). In a community thick with religious culture a taboo approach to any sexual information can lead kids down dangerous roads of curiosity and finding answers from harmful resources like pornography. Understanding how to approach this sensitive topic can be culturally tricky in Utah County. Using communication theory and public marketing to address the public health crisis of pornography in Utah, would be a powerful and culturally acceptable way to share information on the risk factors of pornography addiction. Public health messaging can include commercials, billboards, social media campaigns, and email newsletters from trusted ecclesiastical leaders in the community. The strengthening family's program (SFP) is a universal family-focused prevention program that would be well received by this community as a protective measure to keep their kids away from the dangers of pornography addiction. Another existing evidence-based program that could be implemented for this target population is a recovery coach.

INTRODUCTION

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With our cell phones providing 24-hour access to the internet, pornography is only seconds away anytime, anywhere and puts a potential target on everyone's back. Consuming

sexually explicit content is easy and cheap. It can be done in secret, resulting in a pandemic of pornographic use that is more prevalent and normalized now than at any other time in human history. According to the National Center of Sexual Exploitation, 93 percent of boys and 62 percent of girls have been exposed to pornography in their adolescence. This social change portfolio will address the pornography addiction pandemic that is a public health issue for the youth of our nation. I will discuss the scope and consequences of this issue and the need to provide education, prevention, and policy change at the individual, community, relational, and societal levels to protect our youth from the destructive consequences of this epidemic that is harming our nation.

PART 1: SCOPE AND CONSEQUENCES

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Utah was ranked number one in the nation for pornography subscriptions according to Edelman's 2009 study with 25% of all search engine requests being pornographic. This grabbed the attention of state representatives who sponsored a resolution SCR9, which was approved in the Utah State Legislature in April 2016, declaring pornography a public health crisis. During Utah's 2021 legislative session, lawmakers passed HB72, which requires new cellphones and tablets sold in the state to come with activated porn filters.

The global trend of viewing pornography is increasing each year according to Pornhub's 30 billion hits that were reported on their site in 2018 and of those hits the United States was the biggest consumer with Americans staying on the site longer than any other nationality.

International studies have put porn consumption rates at 50% to 99% among men and 30% to

86% among women, according to research compiled by the American Psychological Association in 2014.

Pornography consumption by mentally healthy adults is different than pornography consumption by children with brains that are not fully developed. For decades pornography has been part of sex therapy (Robinson, 1999) and viewed as “extremely helpful” in helping clients “enrich their sexual relationships” (Striar & Bartlik, 1999). For children, pornography use can impact brain development and functioning, contribute to emotional and medical illnesses, shape deviant sexual arousal, increase the odds of teenage pregnancy and prostitution, increase conduct problems and delinquent behavior, and lead to difficulty in forming and maintaining intimate relationships (Brown and Wisco, 2019).

Another significant effect of pornography is sexting because children are encouraged to create, share, and send sexually explicit images and recordings to others. Surveys show that 19% to 38% of 13- to 19-year-olds have sent sexual images and 31% to 49% have received a sexual image (Steinberg et al., 2019). Research suggests that children are turning to pornography for sexual information because they are not able to get answers about sex from their parents (Healy-Cullin et al., 2021). When parents and guardians can become more available and open to having candid and real conversations about sexuality and sexual behaviors, without shame and judgment, children will no longer resort to pornography as their teacher.

My goal in addressing the Utah public health crisis of pornography addiction is to implement an in-home program where parents and guardians can learn and implement skills to help communicate with their children about the risk factors and dangers of pornography addiction. Within the privacy of each family’s home prevention strategies and protective measures can be put into place to guard against youth pornography addiction. Through these

prevention strategies, it is my goal to reduce Utah's teenage pornography consumption by 25%.

As parents learn why their kids are turning to pornography, become more informed of the dangers of pornography, and put into place safety measures and guidelines with internet use, they can create a safe and supportive environment where conversations about sexuality and sexual behavior can be discussed openly without shame and judgment, both of which perpetuate the addiction cycle.

PART 2: SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

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The social-ecological model suggests that prevention strategies are most successful when implemented simultaneously across all four levels of the model which include individual, relationship, community, and societal (The Social-Ecological Model: A Framework for Prevention). Effective prevention also entails assessing the risk and protective factors the target population is facing regarding the problem (SAMHSA). This section of the paper will address the complexity of the interplay between individuals suffering from pornography addiction and their social-ecological relationships including the risk and protective factors that exist within those arenas.

The first (individual) level of the socio-ecological model involves biological factors that can increase the chances of becoming a victim (The Social-Ecological Model: A Framework for Prevention). Pornography creates a biochemical rush for teenagers when epinephrine is secreted from the adrenaline gland into the bloodstream when exposed to arousing images. Other chemicals that are released into the body include adrenaline, serotonin, dopamine, and endorphins, which all are responsible for addictions and keep the teenager looking for every opportunity to experience this biochemical thrill again (Andrews, 2017). So, one of the major

individual risk factors of pornography is addiction. Other risk factors include emotional side effects such as nightmares and feelings of guilt, shame, anxiety, and confusion (Benedek and Brown, 1999). According to Hunt and Kraus, 2009, when children repeatedly experience overwhelming explicit sexual impulses too soon, it can affect their social development in a way that can cause personality and impulse disorders. Protective factors at this individual level might include religious or spiritual beliefs and a positive self-concept.

The second (relationship) level of the socio-ecological model includes an individual's closest social circle-peers and family members and how pornography addiction can affect these roles. Risk factors in this level might include friends who consume and have a positive view of pornography. Family risk factors might include a lack of communication about sexual information and education, family conflict, and lack of parental involvement and supervision or guidelines about internet use (Varner and Hoch, 2017). Protective factors include parents talking openly to their teens about porn and arousal addiction, updating parental controls and filtering and blocking software on computers, and teens creating a technology agreement with parents limiting screen time and access to alone time on the internet.

The third (community) level of the socio-ecological model encompasses school, church, workplaces, and neighborhoods, where social relationships exist and how these interactions are associated with becoming a victim to pornography abuse (The Social-Ecological Model: A Framework for Prevention). Cultures that are more conservative and have established standards of expectations defining what is appropriate with sexuality can make discussing the topic of sex taboo and uncomfortable. This creates fear, embarrassment, and shame as a major risk factor for teens that are struggling with pornography addiction leaving them to suffer in isolation. A recent study published in the *Journal of Religion and Health* suggests that "religious practice might

reinforce shame in the addiction cycle thus religious individuals may be more at risk of developing a compulsive pattern of viewing pornography” (Hotchkiss, 2021). Protective factors that can be implemented at the community level are educational programs and resources for adults and youth that discuss the risk factors of pornography, the reasons why youth are having encounters with pornography, how to respond and offer support to those who are suffering from a pornography addiction, how to implement safeguards and parental controls on computers to guard against pornography, and how to have safe conversations about sex education and the sexual things that youth want answers about (Andrews, 2017).

The fourth (societal) level of the social-ecological model evaluates the social and cultural norms that contribute to pornography abuse. Cultural shame is one of the major contributing factors for teens struggling with pornography addictions in religious climates such as Utah. Providing a setting where information can be shared, and non-judgmental support can be provided is a wonderful place to start so protective factors can be put into place. Ecclesiastical leaders need to talk more openly about pornography addiction to their congregations so the conversations can start to be less taboo. Studies show that teenagers’ number one reason for seeking out pornography is to get information on sexual behavior (Healy-Cullin et al., 2021). A societal protective factor will exist when parents, teachers, and trusted leaders become more available and open to having uncomfortable conversations about sexuality and sexual behavior, so teenagers no longer resort to pornography as their educator.

PART 3: THEORIES OF PREVENTION

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A theoretical perspective is used by researchers and practitioners to investigate answers to the “why,” “what,” and “how” public health problems should be addressed. The answers are then used for program planning, implementation, and monitoring to ensure the program is impacting the target population (National Cancer Institute, 2005). A 2017 research study observed that substance and gambling addiction behaviors are similar to pornography addiction behaviors and suggest drug prevention strategies and programs are warranted in helping pornography addiction (Goala et al., 2017). Understanding “what” pornography addiction is, teaches us to approach it with similar preventative strategies as drug addiction so the right theoretical perspective can be implemented to support the target population. “How” teenage pornography addiction should be addressed in a conservative culture such as Utah County can be challenging. Understanding the cultural climate of a target population and their community enables researchers to carefully develop a program that will be socially accepted and successful.

“Public health communications can increase knowledge and awareness of a health issue; influence perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes that factor into social norms; prompt action; demonstrate or illustrate healthy skills; increase support for services; debunk misconceptions and strengthen organizational relations” (Office of Cancer Communications, 2001). Using communication theory to address the public health crisis of pornography in Utah would be a powerful and culturally acceptable way to share information on the risk factors of pornography addiction. “Public health messaging can have an enormous impact on shaping how individuals within society behave and can ensure it is in a safe and responsible way” (Edwards, 2021). Social marketing with media campaigns and public messages on commercials and billboards would be an effective way to get the message out that pornography is a public health crisis for Utah’s youth. The social marketing campaigns would include resources by providing websites, links,

phone numbers, and further information on protective factors, support groups, treatment centers, and counselors available who specialize in sexual addictions. Supporting this approach with action steps of how parents can protect their youth from this attack would empower families and advance the public's health from the inside out, starting privately within the walls of every home.

The strengthening family's program (SFP) is a universal family-focused prevention program specifically crafted to increase Protective Factors and reduce Risk Factors that lead to substance abuse and youth depression (Chilenski, Welsh, Perkins, Feinberg, & Greenberg, 2016). SFP “teaches and has youth and parents practice skills involved in bonding (creating warm, loving relationships), setting clear, firm boundaries, and monitoring their children’s emotional well-being by promoting activities and drug-free social environments” (Kumpfer, 2020). Research conducted on 275 families who participated in the SFP experienced positive changes in family dynamics and family functioning by strengthening parenting skills, family unity, resilience strategies, and creating a positive family atmosphere of mutual respect (Sanchez, et al., 2020). Utah County is known for its deep-seated beliefs in the importance of family unity. The SFP approach would be well received by this community as a measure to protect youth from the dangers of addiction.

An existing evidence-based program that could be implemented for this target population is a recovery coach. A research study conducted in 2018 provided data showing clients were highly satisfied with their recovery coach and viewed them as integral to their success and improved addiction behaviors (Magidson, et al., 2021). Having a recovery coach for teens suffering from pornography addiction would be another form of strength-based support that would serve on a more private level to help teens and their families overcome the many obstacles they face while overcoming addiction. The coaches can help find appropriate resources to

maintain progress, give family support and continued education, and offer guidance, strength, and encouragement.

PART 4: DIVERSITY AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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For prevention programs to be successful they must address how culture affects behavioral change and then implement programs that entail cultural characteristics tailored to the participants (Reese and Vera, 2007). It can be extremely uncomfortable for a teenager to discuss their sexuality and their culture will influence the degree to which they share such personal information. A female from a Southeast Asian immigrant family will approach the topic very differently than a male from Central America, so it is crucial that the counselor be sensitive to these differences (Thornburg and Lin, 2004). Cultures have gender expectations that influence sexual expectations and norms. It is also important to be sensitive to the tendency for female clients to want to work with female counselors and vice versa when dealing with sexual behaviors like pornography and masturbation.

“Pornography is addictive because it hijacks the brain’s natural systems process and some researchers suggest that sexual addictions are more difficult to overcome than drug addictions, so imagine what pornography may be doing to the brains of children who have a heightened sensitivity to sexually explicit material” (Brown and Wisco, 2019). A meta-analysis of 22 studies from seven different countries revealed that “on average, individuals who consume pornography more frequently are more likely to hold attitudes conducive to sexual aggression and engage in

actual acts of sexual aggression than individuals who do not consume pornography” (Wright et al., 2016). Most of today’s pornography portrays a sexual relationship that consists of aggression, dominance, disrespect, and objectification. Research shows that children want to repeat what they see in pornography resulting in sexual aggression in boys and sexual victimization in girls. A 2019 study conducted amongst tenth-grade students in the United States reveals that “boys exposed to violent pornography were two to three times more likely to commit sexual violence against a dating partner” (Romney, 2021). Pornography addiction that continues into adulthood brings with it crime (Wright et al., 2016), prostitution (Wright, 2013), marital dissatisfaction (Brown et al., 2017), extramarital sex (Wright, 2013), and a higher likelihood of divorce (Perry and Schleifer, 2018).

One mechanism I would like to implement that would increase the cultural awareness of pornography addiction and be well received in Utah County would be Sunday evening “Firesides.” This is an hour to an hour and a half meeting that takes place at an LDS church where one or two speakers discuss a topic that is of importance to the audience (members of the LDS faith) that consists of adults and youth, but no children under 12 years of age. The speakers would be professionals in the field of counseling who would address the risk factors of teenage pornography addiction, along with the protective measures that can be put into place within every home. Another mechanism that would increase the cultural awareness of pornography addiction would be newsletters that can be e-mailed from ecclesiastical leaders throughout the community to their congregation members. The newsletters can have information on teenage pornography addiction and resources for more support and tips on how to protect youth from the harmful dangers of pornography addiction.

Stakeholders need to be made aware of the harmful risk factors that are associated with children and pornography addiction. First, the public needs more information and education about this public health crisis and how dangerous pornography is for our youth. This will help the public to elect representatives that will aggressively address this issue and push for policy changes that will protect children from pornography. Second, pornography distributors need to be ethically accountable and educated about the dangers of children becoming addicted to pornography and implement age verification systems as protective factors. Third, legislators need to be more aware of this public health crisis and be intentional in implementing policies and seeking out solutions and new ways to protect our youth from pornography dangers. Fourth, youth need to understand all the risk factors of pornography addiction and be more proactive in safeguarding against accidental and intentional pornographic media consumption.

In a highly religious community like Utah County, a counselor must understand how this culture can weigh heavily on a teenage client who is entrenched in pornography addiction. The topic is extremely sensitive and uncomfortable and surrounded with much shame and embarrassment for both the client and their parents. The American Counseling Association's (ACA) *Code of Ethics* (2014) emphasizes the importance of trust and how it acts as the cornerstone of the counseling relationship, and counselors have the responsibility to respect and safeguard the client's right to privacy. In section B.1.c. counselors are admonished to protect confidentiality, disclosing information only with consent or legal or ethical justification (ACA, 2014).

PART 5: ADVOCACY

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Counselor, Coach, Change Agent, Healer, Teacher, Advocate, Advisor, Facilitator, Motivator, Leader, Listener, etc., all are job titles that are given to those in the “helping field” of Clinical Mental Health Counseling. One cannot serve in such a capacity without recognizing the privilege, opportunity, and responsibility such a role entails. According to the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) multicultural and social competent counselors are self-aware of their privilege, beliefs, and bias, understand their client’s worldview, understand how values and beliefs influence the counseling relationship, and intervene on clients’ behalf advocating at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, public policy, and international levels promoting multiculturalism and social justice (Ratts et al., 2015). Encompassing the role of an advocate and change agent comes with the awareness that clients will often need more than what one counselor can provide. To give clients the best opportunity for growth within their environment a counselor will bump up against societal barriers of discrimination, injustice, and systemic oppression. According to Toporek and Liu (2001) advocacy is “action taken by a counseling professional to facilitate the removal of external and institutional barriers to clients’ well-being” (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009). This section will address the institutional, public policy, and community barriers and roadblocks that stand in the way of protecting our youth from the dangers of pornography addiction and actions that can be taken to overcome these barriers.

To protect children from consuming sexually explicit material when purchasing pornographic magazines an ID is required to verify age. The same action is expected from merchants to protect minors from gaining access to an R-rated movie or entering a strip club or

sex shop. The problem is children have undeniable access to unlimited amounts of violent and extreme pornography through the online world of internet pornography. Pornography is more accessible now than ever before and children, by accident or curiosity, are frequently exposed to this harmful material because they share the same digital space as adults (Peter and Valkenburg, 2016). This is an example of an institutional barrier that must be rectified for the safety of our children. Social advocacy at the institutional level entails “removing systemic barriers and connecting with supportive individuals within social institutions to help alter inequities influencing marginalized clients” (Ratts et al., 2015, p. 12). One way we can take action in preventing this problem of undenied internet pornography access for our youth is to require pornographic websites to use age-verification measures to keep children off their platforms.

A public policy barrier that affects our ability to protect children from exposure to internet pornography is the First Amendment which protects indecent sexual expression that is not considered obscene, therefore content-based regulations must pass judicial strict scrutiny before they can be passed and implemented (*American Civil Liberties Union v. Reno*, 1996). This barrier makes it challenging for the United States to push forward any laws and legislation that can protect our children from sexually inappropriate and harmful content on the internet. As citizens, we need to be proactive in electing officials that are aware of the public health crisis of pornography addiction and the risk factors our children face when exposed to inappropriate sexual content through the internet. Public policy advocacy involves social action to alter the local, state, and federal laws and policies that benefit privileged clients at the expense of marginalized clients” (Ratts et al., 2015, p. 13). We need to be diligent and intentional about creating protective laws and measures that can be put in place, so pornography is not so easily accessible for our children.

At the community level, cultural issues like shame and embarrassment accompanied by lack of information, stand as barriers when trying to protect our youth from the harmful dangers of pornography addiction. Children grow, develop, and become curious about their bodies and sexual nature, this is normal and to be expected. Self-discovery, sexuality, and becoming aware of one's sensual desires can and should be talked about within the safety of a loving home with parents willing to share healthy information about these topics. When sexual topics are taboo at home then children will go elsewhere to find answers, and this can lead down dangerous paths (Healy-Cullin et al., 2021). Multicultural and competent counselors are aware of how "community norms, values, and regulations embedded in society hinder the growth and development of their clients" (Ratts et al., 2015, p. 13). If parents do not know what they are up against, how can they properly gear up for battle or fortify their homes from these attacks on their children? Once we empower parents with knowledge and tools to protect their families, then we can begin to have honest conversations about sexuality, so children no longer go elsewhere to get answers about sex.

Lasting social change always starts at the grassroots level within the walls of our own homes. Parents need to take accountability and understand the risk that comes with making sexual conversations taboo in their homes. Educating the community with resources about pornography will create empathy instead of shame and judgment. Getting emailed information with links and resources for at-home education on how to protect children from the dangers of pornography will enable parents to receive this sensitive information within the comfort of their own homes. If they do not instruct their kids about sex then pornography will...and when it does, parents need to be a resource of compassion and hope, so healing and change can take place. "If you put shame in a petri dish, it needs three ingredients to grow exponentially: secrecy, silence,

and judgment. If you put the same amount of shame in the petri dish and douse it with empathy, it can't survive" (Brown, 2004).

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SIGNATURE: Candace A. Green

DATE: 2/10/2022

DIRECT EMAIL ADDRESS: Cancan23482@gmail.com