



# No.9

## **Sexually explicit and violent media material: research and policy implications**

**Compiled and written by Paul Wilson and Stephen Nugent**

*A Joint Select committee of the Federal Parliament, under the chairmanship of Dr Richard Klugman, currently is considering the effects of video material upon Australian society. The Committee received a submission from the Australian Institute of Criminology reviewing the current status of international research on the impact of sexually explicit and violent behaviour.*

*The Institute submission contends that research presents some dilemmas for policy makers. On the one hand, there appears to be no sustainable research evidence of a causative link between media violence and violent criminal events. More particularly, a direct association between exposure to sexually violent media material and sexually aggressive behaviour has yet to be proven.*

*Despite these findings, a significant proportion of Australians, including some researchers, believe that there is sufficient tentative evidence of the harmful effects of exposure to media violence to support official action curbing its availability to the community at large. According to that view, restricting the freedom of expression is justified by the competing value of ensuring a safe society.*

*For other persons, protection of freedom of expression is so important that it should not be restricted on such uncertain grounds.*

*Resolving this policy dilemma represents a major challenge to political leaders and to concerned citizens.*

**Duncan Chappell**  
**Director**

**P**ublic concern over the availability of sexually explicit and violent media material is considerable. The following headlines are taken from major newspaper and illustrate corresponding media concern with this issue:

- How video is breeding violent kids;
- Viewers see risk in sexually violent films,
- TV violence linked with delinquency: expert;
- irate groups berate the R-rates
- Horror film blamed for teen suicides;
- Junk violence for our children;
- Yes . . . Pornography can lead to sexual violence.

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Australian Institute  
of Criminology  
GPO Box 2944  
Canberra ACT 2601  
Australia

<http://www.aic.gov.au>

As these headlines suggest, much of the concern is centred on the effect which pornographic and violent material is having on the behaviour of individuals, particularly on the behaviour of children and teenagers. A number of studies, including one carried out by the South Australian Council for Children's Films and Television Inc.,<sup>1</sup> suggest that many young people under the age of 18 are gaining access to explicit material in the form of R-rated and X-rated videos. These studies have reinforced calls by some sections of the population for increased censorship of video movies.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, there are also many people opposed to such a position. These citizens believe that adults should be able to view what they like and argue that censorship is a violation of civil rights: rights that are an integral part of democratic society. The debate can be seen as an argument involving the alleged 'evils' of explicit material in videos, versus the alleged 'evils' of excessive censorship. This debate is certainly not a new one.

Indeed, Pearson in recounting the history of arguments concerning censorship, points out that in the 1840s and 1850s it is possible to find 'more recognisably modern forms of complaint brought against the "penny gaff" theatres and "two penny hop" dancing saloons for encouraging immorality and imitative crime among the young.'<sup>3</sup>

However, technology has shifted the grounds of the debate. The prerecorded video movie designed for consumption in the home first appeared in Australia in 1980. Since that time there has been a rapid increase in ownership, so that today almost half of all Australian homes contain a VCR.<sup>4</sup> Along with the proliferation of these machines, there has been a rapid increase in the number and range of video tapes being offered for sale or hire at a wide range of outlets all over Australia. The proliferation of both machines and video tapes raises very real problems concerning the home use of violent and sexual material, especially the use by young people of such material. Although this report concentrates on

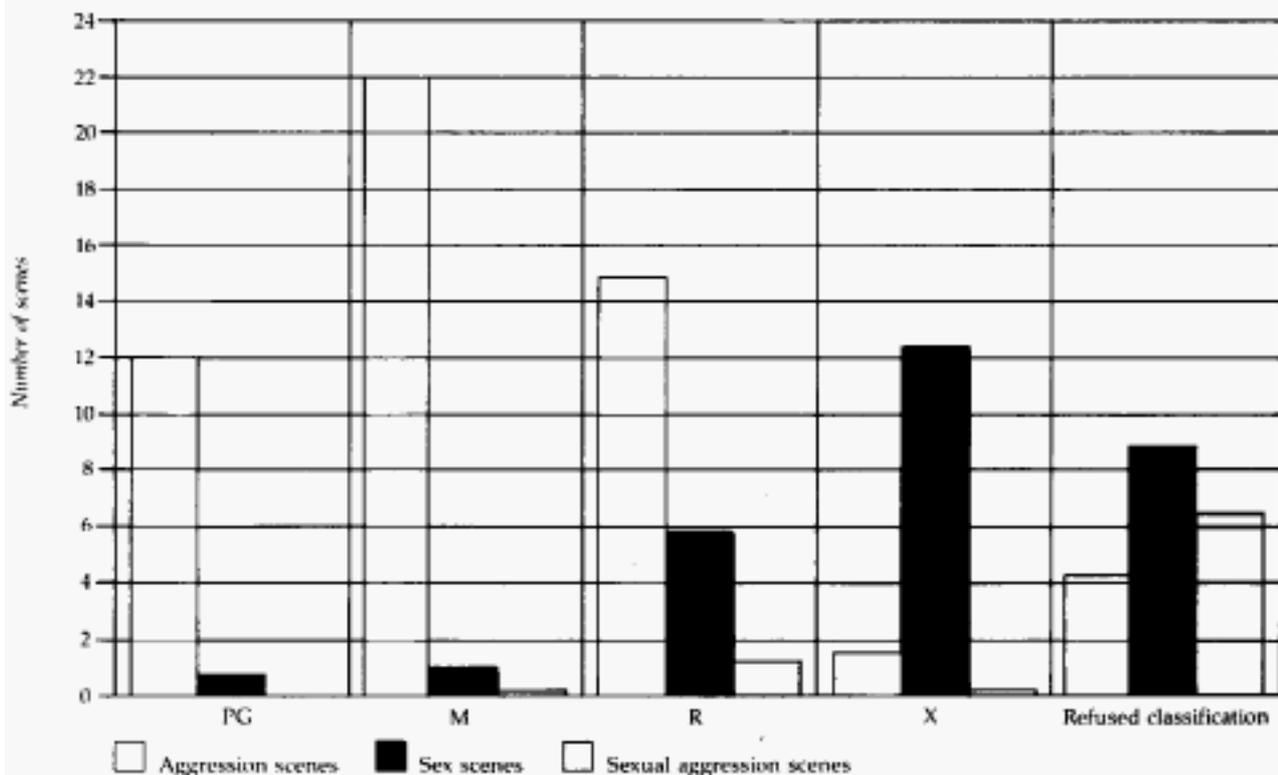
video material the findings are, we believe, generally applicable for film materials as well.

### The Nature Of Explicit Material

Many of the newspaper headlines mentioned at the start of this report refer to either violence or pornography. These two categories of material are the focus of public concern. The following definitions may help to clarify what is meant by these words. The portrayal of violence has been defined by Gerbner and his fellow researchers as 'the overt expression of physical force (with or without a weapon, against self or other), compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed, or actually killing or hurting'.<sup>5</sup>

A number of different definitions of pornography have been proposed. In its submission to the Joint Select Committee on Video Material, the Institute recognised the range of material covered by the generic term 'pornography' by distinguishing

**Figure 1 Amount of explicit material in videos according to censorship classification: raw data**



between 'soft' pornography, 'hard-core' pornography and hard-core incorporating violence.<sup>6</sup> Soft pornography is characterised by the fact that it contains, at most, implied or simulated sexual intercourse. Hard-core pornography, on the other hand, is far more explicit. It is characterised by the fact that it is quite clear that the sexual act is actually taking place. The final category contains hard-core sexual acts intertwined with apparent threat or violence (e.g. rape). These definitions, however, are more applicable to visual media and it is difficult to transfer them exactly to print media.

The following sections deal with exposure to explicit media material and the effect of such exposure to explicit media material and the effect of such exposure on viewer behaviour. This issue will be discussed in three parts based on the above distinctions. Three categories of explicit material will be discussed in turn. These are (1) *violent media material*, (2) *sexually explicit material*, and (3) *sexually violent material*. The sexually explicit category includes material defined as erotica, soft pornography, or hard-core pornography. Sexually violent material will refer to pornography which incorporates violence. Unfortunately, much of the research in this area fails to distinguish between these different types of material. However, the Australian videotape censorship guidelines distinguish between these categories of material in stating what is acceptable under each censorship classification.

## Violent Material

### Censorship

The censorship guidelines for videotapes contain the following in relation to violence.

- *General (G)*. Minimal and incidental depictions, and only if in a justifiable context.

- *Parental Guidance (PG)*. Discreet, inexplicit and/or stylised depictions.
- *Mature (M)* Depictions of realistic and sometimes bloody violence but not if gratuitous, exploitative, relished, cruel or unduly explicit.
- *Restricted (R)*. Explicit depictions of violence, but not detailed and gratuitous depictions of acts of considerable violence or cruelty.
- *Extra-restricted (X)*. No specific guidelines.
- *Refused classification*. Detailed and gratuitous depictions of acts of considerable violence or cruelty.

In a recent study carried out by the Institute and the Attorney-General's Department, a comprehensive content analysis of 58 frequently-hired videos was undertaken.<sup>7</sup> As Figure 1 illustrates, the viewers of PG-, M- and R- rated videos were exposed to relatively frequent depictions of aggressive activity.

A further, more detailed, analysis of the degree of severity in the aggressive scenes revealed that, although R-rated videos had the highest number of very severe scenes, M- and PG-rated videos contained a 'severity' score only minimally lower than that obtained in the R-rated classification.

### Usage

In a previous report we outlined the hiring patterns at two video outlets in Canberra and Queanbeyan.<sup>8</sup> The result of this analysis are presented in Figure 2.

R-, M- and PG-rated videos appear to account for the great majority of hires from video outlets. These categories also contain scenes of aggressive activity, some severe in their depictions. Much of this violence is readily accessible to young people under the age of 18 (M- and PG-rated videos). These findings, we believe, reflect the degree to which our society accepts aggression, and the extent to which it exposes its young people to

filmed violence. The possible effects of such exposure will now be discussed.

### Effect on behaviour

In the submission to the Joint Select Committee on Video Material, the Institute stated that the research evidence available at the time could not be said to establish a causative link between media violence and violent offences. Research conducted since the preparation of that submission has still not, in our opinion, conclusively established such a link. *Even so, it appears that many of the researchers in the area are now convinced that excessive media violence increases the chances that at least some viewers will behave more violently.*<sup>9</sup>

It is also possible that exposure to media violence may result in undesirable effects other than aggressive behaviour. Linz, Penrod and Donnerstein, in a recent review of the literature, suggested that exposure to media violence may numb the ability of the viewer to feel empathy, or may reduce the viewer's capacity to be emotionally aroused at the sight of violence (a process referred to as desensitisation).<sup>10</sup> They also suggest that media violence may produce changes in attitudes that indirectly affect aggressive behaviour.

Numerous studies have considered the effect of media violence on a specific population, namely children. Professor Peter Sheehan, one of the leading Australian researchers in this area, believes that the research data suggest that a relationship exists between children's viewing of television violence and their behaving aggressively.<sup>11</sup> However, he says that this relationship has not been proven to be causal in nature.

Even though exposure to media violence has not been proven as a direct cause of violent behaviour, there appears to be enough evidence of its 'harmful' effects to warrant real concern. This concern is reinforced by the findings on the amount and severity of aggressive and violent

depictions in popular video movies. Possible responses to this concern will be discussed in the final section of the report.

**Sexually Explicit Material**

*Censorship*

The following videotape censorship guidelines relate to acceptable sexual content for the various classifications.

- G. Very discreet verbal references or implications only if in a justifiable context.
- PG. Discreet verbal and/or visual suggestions and references to sexual matters.
- M. Depictions of discreetly implied sexual activity.
- R. Implied, obscured or simulated depictions of sexual activity.
- X. Material which includes explicit depictions of sexual acts involving adults, but does not include any depiction suggesting coercion or non-consent of any kind.
- Refused classification. Child pornography, bestiality.

The video content analysis undertaken by the Institute and the Attorney-General's Department provided a tentative measure of the degree to which these censorship guidelines were being adhered to. As can be seen from Figure I, the X-rated videos contained far more sex scenes than did the other categories. Further analysis revealed that the number of sex scenes as a proportion of total scenes, was on average, 40 per cent for X-rated movies. In addition, the sex scenes were far more explicit in the X-classification than in other categories with few sex scenes in the PG and M classifications rated as relatively explicit. We concluded that based on these findings, it appears that censorship guidelines in relation to sexual content were adhered to by classification authorities.

*Usage*

Figure 2 shows that R- and X-rated videos accounted for 33.4 per cent of hires from two video outlets in June/July 1986. It is apparent that videos containing relatively frequent depictions of sexual activity do not appear to account for the majority of video hires. Little is known about the psychology of those who regularly view X-rated material. Most (88 per cent) are male but in other social and demographic characteristics (age, social class, marital status) they do not appear to differ from irregular and non-users of explicit material. Although such material may interact with personality characteristics of sexual offenders it is possible that explicit sexual scenes may also serve a cathartic or therapeutic purpose for those who are predisposed to sexual aggression or who are sexually inadequate. Thus Kutchinsky (1973) in his study of the increased availability of pornography in Denmark presents strong evidence to suggest that decreases in child molestation may be directly attributable to the availability of such material. The argument here is that those with a predisposition towards child molestation 'used' explicit material instead of acting out their

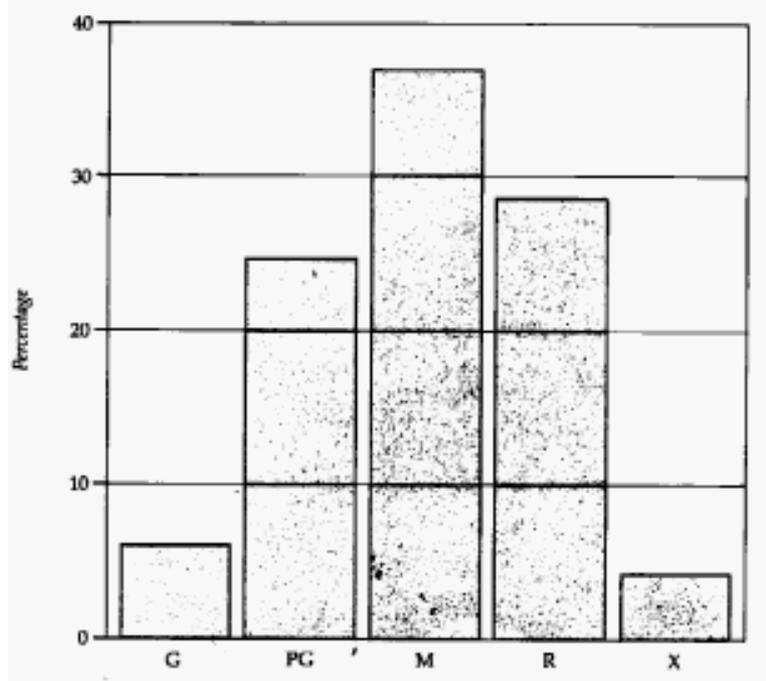
predisposition with children.<sup>12</sup>

*Effect on behaviour*

Stage two of the three part video project conducted by the Institute and the Attorney-General's Department, involved a sample of video users in Canberra and Queanbeyan completing a questionnaire which sought information on viewing habits and attitudes towards availability.<sup>13</sup> One section of the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate the extent of their agreement with a series of statements regarding the effects of R- and X-rated videos on society. Approximately half the respondents (50.3 per cent) strongly agreed or tended to agree with propositions stating that X-rated videos led some people to commit sexual crimes and commit crimes of violence. The equivalent figures in relation to R-rated videos were 34.3 per cent for sexual crimes and 40 per cent for crimes of violence.

A number of government enquiries in different countries have considered the effect of pornography on society. The first major enquiry was the 1970 Federal Commission on Obscenity and Pornography in the United States (the Lockhart Commission). Other government reports produced since that time include the 1979 Williams

Figure 2 Censorship classification share of total videos hired from two outlets: June/July 1986



Committee Report in the United Kingdom, the 1985 report of the Fraser Commission in Canada, and the 1986 report of the Meese Commission, again in the United States.

Most of these reports have distinguished between different categories of pornography in making recommendations. For example, the Fraser Commission distinguished between three levels of pornography in recommending action for regulation. These levels were: (1) child pornography; (2) sexually violent pornography—material in which physical harm or abuse is portrayed in a sexually explicit context; and (3) visual pornographic material—material that includes depictions of genital, oral or anal intercourse, masturbation, fondling of the breasts or genitals, or nudity.<sup>14</sup> It is this third category of pornography that is the subject of this section. Sexually violent pornography will be discussed in the next section.

In its submission to the Joint Select Committee on Video Material, the Institute stated that, in relation to soft pornography, there was 'no convincing criminological or psychological evidence that exposure to such material produced measurable harm to society'.<sup>15</sup> In relation to hard-core pornography, the Institute was of the opinion that there was no proven link between this category of material on the one hand, and sex offences on the other. The Institute considered most of the research evidence available to the four government commissions in formulating these opinions. The first of the American commissions, along with the British and Canadian reports, came to the same conclusion as the Institute in relation to non-violent pornography. The Meese Commission concluded that substantial exposure to non-violent pornography bears some relationship to adverse attitudinal changes relating to rape and other forms of sexual violence.<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that there have been suggestions of alleged political bias in

the formation and determinations of the Meese Commission. Nobile and Nadler believe that the Commission's verdict was a foregone conclusion due to its leading terms of reference and its conservative membership.<sup>17</sup>

Given that the censorship guidelines for X-rated videos prohibit depictions of sexual violence, the research evidence does not appear to support those respondents (50.3 per cent) in Institute surveys who believed that X-rated videos led some people to commit sexual crimes and to commit crimes of violence. In addition, X-rated videos appear to constitute a relatively small proportion of total video hires. *Based on findings of commission that we have reviewed, it is suggested that videos containing non-violent pornography are less of a 'threat' to society than are videos containing depictions of aggression and violence.*

## Sexually Violent Material

### Censorship

Sexually violent material is governed by the following videotape censorship guidelines

- R. Depictions of sexual violence only to the extent that they are discreet, not gratuitous and not exploitative.
- X. Material which includes explicit depictions of sexual acts involving adults, but does not include any depiction suggesting coercion or non-consent of any kind.
- *Refused classification.* Explicit or gratuitous depictions of sexual violence against non-consenting persons.

In Institute studies the incidence of sexually aggressive material in classified videotapes was remarkably low. Although Figure 2 shows that there were some sexual aggression scenes in X-rated videos, these relate to videos classified prior to the 1984 guidelines.

Despite the relatively low frequency overall of sexually aggressive scenes it was disturbing to note that R-rated videos (legally available in all states) contained nearly half of all sexually aggressive scenes found in our content analysis. Although these scenes were not nearly as explicit as those found in the pre-1984 X videos, they intertwined sex with violence in a direct manner.

### Usage

Figure 2 shows that R-rated videos accounted for 28.3 per cent of all video hires from two video outlets in June/July 1986. It is not doubted that some videos which have been refused classification are available for hire or purchase at certain video outlets. However because they are not legally available, there are no statistics on the extent of their usage.

### Effect on behaviour

Respondents to Institute questionnaires, administered as stage two of the video project, appeared to see sexually violent material as potentially more harmful than non-violent pornographic material. Only 5 per cent of respondents thought that X-rated videos should be banned, whereas over 60 per cent thought that videos featuring sexual violence should be banned. Our assessment is that public attitudes towards sexual violence seem justified given the research findings in relation to the effects of exposure to sexually violent material. As with violent media material, it is difficult to demonstrate conclusively a causative link between exposure to such material on the one hand, and criminal offences on the other. However, the Meese Commission concluded that depictions of violence in sexually explicit contexts were likely to increase the incidence of sexually violent behaviour.<sup>18</sup> The Fraser Commission in Canada considered much the same as its American counterpart. Despite having reservations about the value of the social science data, the Canadians came to the conclusion that violent

pornography is harmful to women. The harm resulting from violent pornography was said to include its impact on the fundamental values of Canadians. It was seen as denying the validity of female aspirations to be 'treated as full and equal citizens within the community'.<sup>19</sup>

A recent, comprehensive review of all the evidence in this field confirms the finding of official commissions. Malamuth and Briere, in their review, conclude that exposure to media sexual aggression may adversely affect the thought patterns of some men, and that there appears to be a link between thought patterns condoning sexual violence and sexually aggressive behaviour. However, they caution against concluding that this link is a cause and effect relationship.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, there are strong arguments suggesting that sexually violent media material played a part in the psychology of persons who commit some violent murders (see Wilson, 1985) although this evidence is anecdotal and inconclusive.<sup>21</sup>

A direct link between exposure to sexually violent media material and sexually aggressive behaviour has not been proven, and is unlikely to be proven in the near future given the nature of the problem and the research methodology available. A vast array of methodological problems are evident in the literature. These problems include the questionable applicability of the laboratory studies to the real world, the use of unrepresentative subjects (usually university students), material presented to subjects out of context and the use of laboratory measures of aggression not equivalent to sexual assault.<sup>22</sup> Despite the difficulties in imputing a causal relationship between sexually violent material and aggression (sexual or non-sexual) there appears to us to be enough tentative evidence of possible harmful effects of such material to place it alongside violent material as a cause for at least some concern for the community at large.

### Conclusion

In voicing this concern over the possible harmful effects of sexually violent material, we would urge that such material be clearly differentiated from non-violent sexual material, suggested to be less of a threat or no threat to the community in quoted research. Such a differentiation allows in the minds of legislators, policy makers and the community of material with a possible potential to cause harm. Furthermore, a clear identification of sexually violent material could promote more efficient monitoring, regulation and perhaps reduction of such material in the Australian community.

### Notes

1. South Australian Council for Children's Films and Television Inc., *Kids and the Scary World of Video: A Study of Video Viewing Among 1498 Primary School Children in South Australia*, 1985.
2. See for example: Irate Groups Berate the R-Rates, *Sydney Daily Mirror*, 20 February 1987.
3. See p. 97 of Pearson, G., *Falling Standards: A Short Sharp History of Moral Decline*, in M. Baker (ed.), *The Video Nasties: Freedom and Censorship in the Media*, Pluto Press, London, 1984.
4. A study conducted by Yann Campbell Huare Wheeler in November 1986 found that 48.1 per cent. Of all Australian households contained video player. A Television Bureau of Advertising study conducted by McNair Anderson in the same month found a penetration rate of 47.4 per cent. Both studies were reported in: Shoebrieger, N., *A Remarkable Love Affair*, *Business Review Weekly*, 6 March 1987, p. 79
5. See p. 2 of Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M. And Signorelli, N., *Violence Profile No 11: Trends in Network Television Drama and Viewer Conceptions of Social Reality, 1967-1979*, Annenburg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa, 1980.
6. Australian Institute of Criminology *Senate Select Committee on Video Material:*

*Submission of the Australian Institute of Criminology*, AIC, 1985.

7. The following report discusses the findings of the content analysis: Brooks, T., Fox, D., Nugent, S. and Wilson, P., *Sexually Explicit and Violent Video Material: A Content Analysis*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, 1987.
8. Findings of the first stage of the video project are discussed in the following report: Brooks, T., Fox, D., Wilson, P., Walters, A., and Pope, T., *Video Viewing Patterns: A Preliminary Investigation* Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, 1986.
9. Huesmann, L.R. and Malamuth, N.M., *Media Violence and Antisocial Behaviour: An Overview*, *Journal of Social Issues*, 42(3), 1-6, 1986.
10. Linz, D., Penrod, S. And Donnerstein, E., *Issues Bearing on the Legal Regulation of Violent and Sexually Violent Media*, *Journal of Social Issues*, 42(3). 171-93, 1986.
11. Sheehan, P.W. *Age Trends and the Correlates of Children's Television Viewing*, *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 35, 417-31, 1983.
12. Kutchinsky, B., *The Effects of Easy Availability of Pornography on the Incidence of Sex Crimes: The Danish Experience*, *Journal of Social Issues*, 29, 163-81, 1973.
13. Findings of the second stage of the video project are discussed in the following report: Pope, T., Wilson, P., Brooks, T., Fox, D., and Nugent, S., *Video Viewing Behaviour and Attitudes Towards Explicit Material: A Preliminary Investigation*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, 1987
14. *Special Commission on Pornography and Prostitution in Canada, Report of the Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution* (Vol.1), Canadian Government Publishing Centre, Ottawa, 1985.
15. See p.9 of submission referenced at note 6.
16. Attorney-General's Commission on Pornography, *Final Report*, (Vol.1) US Department of Justice, Washington, DC, p. 332 July 1986.
17. Nobile, P. And Nadler, E., *United States of America vs Sex: How the Meese Commission Lied About Pornography*, Minotaur Press, New York, 1985.
18. See p. 324 of US Commission Report referenced at note 16.
19. See p. 103 of Canadian Commission Report referenced at note 14.

20. See p. 75 of Malamuth, N.M. and Briere, J., Sexual Violence in the Media: Indirect Effects on Aggression Against Women, *Journal of Social Issues*, 42(3), 75-92, 1986.
21. See Wilson, P., *Murder Of the Innocent: Child Killers and Their Victims*, Rigby, Sydney, 1985.
22. For a detailed critique of inadequacies in experimental studies in this field see Lab, S.P, Pornography and Aggression: A Response to the US Attorney- General's Commission, *Criminal Justice Abstracts*, June, 301-21, 1987.

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Inquiries about the Trends and Issues series should be forwarded to:  
The Director  
Australian Institute of Criminology  
GPO Box 2944  
Canberra ACT 2601 Australia