There are several approaches to the study of the role of pornography in the etiology and maintenance of sexual crimes. One may (1) study the correlation between pornography consumption in the general population and the incidence of sexual crimes, (2) examine this relationship cross-culturally, (3) examine the effect of these materials on normals in the laboratory, (4) examine the effects of these materials on sex offenders, or (5) attempt a synthesis of this research through a comparative study of the similarities and differences between sex offenders and other males. The simple approach is to draw a sample of sex offenders and ask them about their pornography consumption. All of these approaches have basic flaws, but each contributes to the complete picture.

These approaches are attempts to gain some insight into the role that pornography consumption plays in contributing to sexual crimes. The most frequently asked research questions are: Does exposure to pornography predispose persons to become sexually deviant? Does exposure to pornography cause those who are sexually deviant to commit sexual crimes? Or conversely, does exposure to pornography suppress the urges of those sexual deviants who are likely to otherwise commit sexual crimes? Is pornography consumption simply part of a deviant lifestyle, or does pornography consumption act to validate the beliefs supporting that lifestyle? Is there any difference in pornography consumption between those who commit sexual crimes and those who do not? None of these questions are likely to be definitely answered in the near future, but we can integrate the available evidence in an attempt to arrive at some reasonably plausible conclusions.
AVAILABILITY OF PORNOGRAPHY AND THE INCIDENCE OF SEXUAL CRIMES

Two of the earliest studies on the relationship between the incidence of sexual crimes and the availability of pornography were Danish studies commissioned by the 1970 President’s Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (Ben-Veniste, 1971; Kutchinsky, 1971). These reports stressed the tentative nature of the results, and both cast some doubt on the assertion that the decrease in sexual crime rates was due simply to a reduced tendency to men to commit sexual crimes. However, the commission interpreted these studies to mean that the reduction in the reported incidence of sexual offenses in Denmark was due to the liberalization of the pornography law (Cline, 1974; Court, 1984).

Ben-Veniste (1971) reported that the increased pornography use in Denmark had not led to an increase in sexual crimes. However, he also reported that Denmark at that time had very little sexually violent pornography, that this variety of pornography was becoming increasingly available, and that future study was needed to determine if this change would lead to an increased crime rate. Kutchinsky (1971) interviewed a representative sample (N=398) of the Danish population regarding four different sexual crimes: (1) exhibitionism, (2) peeping, (3) “physical indecency” toward women, and (4) “physical indecency” toward girls (child molestation). Subjects were asked to report their reactions if they or a member of their family were to become a victim of one of these offenses. Kutchinsky (1971, 1973) concluded that much of the reported decrease in exhibitionism and in physical indecency toward women could be explained by the decreased likelihood of the victim to report the crime. The decrease in reported rates of peeping and child molestation, however, could not be explained by a decreased likelihood to report. Changing police attitudes toward the seriousness of the crime was suggested as a possible factor in the case of peeping, but not for child molestation. Therefore, the decrease in the reported rate of female child molestation could not be explained either by a reduced tendency for adults to report or by a failure of the police to act on those reports.

Neither study separated the effects of changing incidence rates of violent sexual crimes from the effects of changing incidences of relatively nonviolent sex crimes such as peeping (Court, 1984). An examination of the reported incidence of sexually violent crimes in Denmark in the same period reveals a quite different picture. The change in the Danish pornography law occurred in 1965, and while the overall incidence of violent sex crime from 1966–1970 in Denmark showed an 8% decrease from that reported in 1960–1964 (Cline, 1974), the reported incidence of rape increased by 22% in Copenhagen.

Court (1984) attempted to relate the longitudinal changes in rape rates to changes in government policy concerning censorship of pornography. For example, he showed that the rape rates from the years 1964–1974 increased dramatically (Range = 84–160%) in five areas where pornography laws were liberalized (United States, England, Copenhagen, Australia, and New Zealand) but did not increase as much (< 60%) in areas where pornography laws were not