
Response

Pornography, “Serious Rape,” and Statistics: A Reply to Dr. Kutchinsky

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I. Introduction: Responsible Social Science

Apparently there are lies, damned lies, statistics, and then Childress’s review essay. My essay has “transmitted false information,” as Dr. Berl Kutchinsky puts it (1992:447),¹ as well as fomenting “considerable confusion” about the outcome of various population studies on pornography and violence (*ibid.*). Yet since Kutchinsky points to no erroneous figures or data that I cited, other than assuming I misunderstood his own studies, at bottom the misinformation is a “false inconclusiveness verdict on the criminological pornography research” (p. 453). Worse, my essay is censorial because it calls for further study when, apparently, such testing wastes everyone’s time as the matter has been definitively settled by Kutchinsky’s own research.

My reply: Given the current state of the research and the weaknesses I discussed previously and in more depth below, I would have been irresponsible to express the scientific certainty that Kutchinsky feels. And my essay as a whole cannot be fairly read as a call to censorship (see Childress 1991:179, 204–5, 208). Indeed, a call for *less* examination of these difficult social and political issues simply because one believes he has the answer seems a bit more censorial than is my call for further study using improved methodology.²

Even so, my own views on the data’s suggestiveness, if not conclusiveness, are so close to what Kutchinsky and others have argued over the years—as is clear from my essay as a whole—that it is surprising that I would be given this opportu-

¹ Further page references to Dr. Kutchinsky’s essay are given in parentheses throughout the text.

² Moreover, Kutchinsky often confuses me with the authors and political actors I criticized. This is particularly surprising when their lapses were the point of my own criticism. For example, I did not fail to recognize John Court (p. 448 n.2) as the same Court I mentioned throughout my essay; instead, I wrote (Childress 1991:199 n.22) that *the text I reviewed* mentioned Court without explanation.

nity to delve more deeply into cautions we should carry with us in interpreting data that look innocuous.

Those cautions are crucial in such a difficult debate, and this response continues to maintain that an “inconclusiveness verdict” for the population studies Kutchinsky details is not “false” or “misinformation” but is in fact the only reasonable status for now. I do not intend to undermine my own no-censorship conclusion or to imply that Kutchinsky’s studies wholly fail in their effort. They are helpful, deservedly famous, and in many ways an improvement over Court’s statistics, as was made clear in my essay (cf. Kutchinsky, p. 451). But they are not the end of the matter.

II. Correlation and Crime

Kutchinsky’s population studies, like those of others including Court, attempt to correlate availability of pornography with crime rates, especially sexually related crimes such as rape. Because all such studies have worked with defined populations, they are in some sense nonrandom. Kutchinsky has tended to focus on four countries: Denmark, Sweden, West Germany, and the United States. They were chosen nonrandomly because they had high availability of erotica (e.g., Kutchinsky 1991:51). Donnerstein, Linz, and Penrod (1987:62–66) fairly raise the question of whether these countries are representative of all societies.

Moreover, such studies often work from availability of pornography rather than consumption as such, leading Donnerstein et al. to ask, especially as regards Court’s statistics from Japan, whether increased availability accurately tracks higher consumption. This issue also has implications for the statistics Kutchinsky employs.

Correlation studies usually raise a fair question of whether some independent third variable not used influences the correlation between the independent and dependent variables (see *ibid.*, pp. 60–61). Even if Kutchinsky’s studies attempt to control for some confounding third or fourth factor, it is fair to question his success and to suggest a multivariate methodology like regression analysis. For example, other studies which seemed to correlate magazine availability with crime showed, on introduction of a third variable of macho attitude, no relationship at all (see Childress 1991:187; Fisher & Barak 1991:75). Perhaps Kutchinsky’s finding of no effect could similarly disappear on introducing another factor.

Population correlations simply do not always control for confounding social events, and while they are useful, they are usually not seen as conclusive proof of a relationship, especially proof of a causal relationship. One such confounding factor, of

course, might be the general liberalization of society and attitudes that occurred during the 1960s and early 1970s.

Beyond the inherent limitations of correlation studies is the fact that their results are crucially dependent on the variables used and the evidence assigned to measure those variables. On this front, too, Kutchinsky's approach has some basic weaknesses.³ The most serious of these is a questionable reliance on rape statistics.

III. "Serious Rape" and Rape Reporting

Throughout his essay and his prior work (e.g., 1991:51–58), Kutchinsky moves easily from "reported rape" and "rape rates" to simply "rape." I do not make the jump so readily. He recognizes that rape may be underreported, especially in some forms, but then seems to assume that it would be underreported consistently over time (see, e.g., p. 451 n.5). Yet it is clear that such reporting is itself affected by societal events, as Kutchinsky himself often demonstrates when explaining increased reporting.⁴

The differentiated reporting may well vary by such events rather than holding steady. If so, and the assumption is not corrected for, then the lack of correlation between the availability of pornography and reported sex crimes may mean nothing. Kutchinsky seems to argue (p. 451 n.5) that at worst we can assume a higher rate of reporting over time. This is a reasonable assumption, but hardly a given. For example, Kutchinsky finds it difficult to imagine developments in the 1980s that would make rape victims less likely to admit victimization (*ibid.*). Radical feminists might argue one such development that is inherent in his studies: the increasing availability and legitimation of pornography that by their definition keeps a woman in her place. Another possible factor is the still-existing popular confusion as to when a rape has occurred (cf. "dark figures" and "subjective definition," p. 450). Perhaps these effects are constant over time, but perhaps not.⁵

Even using Kutchinsky's own statistics raises questions concerning the changing rates of various "types" of rape. From

³ One example is the availability/consumption assumption, discussed previously.

⁴ This is especially true of his reliance in most countries on crime reports rather than victimization surveys, since the former are notoriously affected by police attitudes, categorizations of crime, and social stigma. Even his laudable use of Danish police reports rather than national crime rates (e.g., 1985:317, 323–24) may be affected by such factors. Rape is an area where these factors intuitively loom larger to cause underreporting and possibly *varying* reporting.

⁵ Another varying factor is the liberalization of some crimes to which Kutchinsky refers (p. 449). While he assigns me to a rigid definition of legal change and then shows he excluded legislative changes, my point is that his studies *were* based on offenses which became less "criminal" over the decade, again calling for greater sensitivity to the confounding events of the times.

his own analysis one can perhaps infer that increased pornography results in relatively *higher* incidences of those sex crimes that are “not serious” by his terms. This is because he often couples a showing of an overall decrease in all sex crime with an aside that decreases in serious rapes were dramatically greater (e.g., pp. 449–50, 450 n.4). This is especially apparent in an earlier study (see 1991:56–58).

The manipulation of “types” of rape is rooted in a more serious flaw shared by Kutchinsky, rape reporting, and even rape victims at times: People have different definitions of what rape is and differing opinions concerning the “seriousness” of various categories of rape. Kutchinsky’s classification of and emphasis on “serious rape” is a repeated tool in his analysis (e.g., *ibid.*, p. 57). I would not so easily relegate date rape, mate rape, and other sex crimes to a classification that seems less important and, coincidentally, does not make Kutchinsky’s point as well. As a colleague of mine commented, would one prefer to be raped by someone they knew and trusted?

Kutchinsky’s data may also support the argument that in some periods pornography correlates somewhat with all but stranger rape. Surely the radical feminist approach could co-opt that result by arguing that legitimization of subjugated sex roles through pornography would be expected to have its biggest impact on those rapes and sex crimes caused by friends, dates, office co-workers, older people, and family—the very people who might not be the stereotypic inborn rapist precisely because they have been fed a steady diet of violence against women. Yet none of these crimes might be “serious” or “forcible” enough to be isolated within Kutchinsky’s charts.⁶ I am unwilling to classify nonstranger rape as “not serious” or to assume that stranger rape is the paradigm sex crime that would be most influenced by pornography. Hence, a call for more study.

IV. Conclusion: Less Is Not More

Kutchinsky’s renowned research contributes to a body of work that suggests more helpful directions for further research than just the uncritical assumption that pornography increases real-world crime. However, it does not render others’ studies, among different populations or using an experimental model, irrelevant or unimportant. Studies such as Kutchinsky’s can be improved by randomness, multivariate testing, use of consumption rates, and a clearer picture of rape, crime, and crime reporting.

⁶ Alternatively, one might agree that Kutchinsky proves overall that increased pornography relates to lower *reporting*—a harm consistent with a radical feminist theory of pornography’s subjugating influence.

In the process, the research of others cannot be ignored—including Court, whose work, though subject to real criticism over the years, has been an important influence on many, such as the 1986 Meese Commission. Kutchinsky may have the better of the argument (and I do not mean to say that the Meese Commission is an example of responsible social science), but he does not occupy the field.

In graduate school, a friend and I used to make fun of the tag line—often trite and true—found in so many book reviews: “ultimately the book raises more questions than it answers” (cf. Fisher & Barak 1991:65). In this case, while I sympathize with Kutchinsky’s leanings and thought I had made that clear previously, I fear that ultimately his commentary answers more questions than it raises.

References

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