

78% of UK 16- and 17-year-olds have seen online pornography (and recently)

May 6 2021, by Chris Lines



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With the UK government looking to its [Online Harms White Paper](#) to protect children from online pornography, a new survey of 16- and 17-year-olds by City, University of London supports the case for its introduction—but illustrates the size of the government's task.

The survey found that 78% of respondents had seen online [pornography](#)

on various platforms, and that their exposure was relatively recent.

Although respondents had viewed pornography an average of six days ago, it was most common for them to have already viewed it on the day of the survey.

The results showed that more (63%) had seen pornography on [social media](#) platforms than on pornographic websites (47%).

However, pornography was much more recently viewed on pornographic websites than on social media.

Furthermore, the study found that 46% of 16- and 17-year-olds had used a virtual private network (VPN) or Tor browser.

Lead author on the study, Professor Neil Thurman, said:

"Until now, there was scant evidence on which media platforms and technologies children use to access pornography, and to what extent; this new survey fills that gap."

"The results suggest that the UK government was right to target social media platforms in its latest proposals.

"However, that 16- and 17-year-old users spend an average of more than two hours a month on dedicated pornography sites shows how important the regulation of such sites remains."

The UK government's Online Harms White Paper is designed to do what Part 3 of its 2017 Digital Economy Act (which was never implemented) did not—i.e., clamp down on [social media platforms](#) and search engines.

However, the extent to which 16- and 17-year-olds are familiar with

VPNs makes clear that any regulation will not be a magic bullet.

Professor Thurman, an honorary senior research Fellow in City's Department of Journalism, said:

"Our finding that 46% of 16- and 17-year-olds had used a VPN or Tor browser adds weight to concerns that restrictions on legal internet pornography—such as age verification checks—imposed by a single country may be circumvented by those the restrictions are designed to protect.

"Measures taken in individual jurisdictions, or that focus on only some [media](#) platforms, are unlikely to reduce children's exposure to online pornography as much as some hope."

The study is published in the international peer-reviewed journal, *Policy & Internet*.

More information: Neil Thurman et al. The regulation of internet pornography: What a survey of under-18s tells us about the necessity for and potential efficacy of emerging legislative approaches, *Policy & Internet* (2021). [DOI: 10.1002/poi3.250](https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.250)

Provided by City University London

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