



States call pornography a public health crisis; porn industry decries 'fear mongering'

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From Idaho to Pennsylvania, lawmakers in more than a dozen states have adopted resolutions declaring pornography a public health crisis.

This week the Arizona Senate approved a measure urging the state to prevent exposure and addiction to porn, drawing criticism from some experts who say the approach is misguided and poses risks.

At least one legislative chamber has adopted a similar measure in 15 states, including South Dakota, Tennessee, Florida and Virginia, and the Republican Party added it to its national platform in 2016.

Linking pornography to violence against women, sexual activity among teens and unplanned pregnancies, Republican Arizona Sen. Sylvia Allen supported the measure.

"It is an epidemic in our society, and this makes a statement that we have a problem," Allen said.

Some in the adult entertainment industry say blaming pornography for those social issues is "compete fear-mongering," including Mark Kernes, a senior editor at the trade publication Adult Video News media network.

While the Arizona resolution does not ban pornography production or consumption, the number of resolutions calling it a public health crisis has trended upward since 2016.

Many resolutions are based on a model written by the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, an anti-porn group whose members argue individuals can't fight porn-related problems alone.

Although research has raised questions about how explicit material impacts young kids, Emily Rothman, a community health sciences professor at Boston University, said there aren't clear connections to often-cited issues such as human trafficking.

She added the resolutions fail to call for more robust sex education for teenagers while risking creating stigma for marginalized groups, such as LGBT people.

"If you stub your toe, that might be something you can't solve yourself, but that doesn't make it a public health issue," Rothman said.

Several Arizona Democrats said issues such as measles, opioid addiction, homelessness and suicide deserve more action than pornography.

Some argue porn can even benefit society. Pornography can contribute to a healthy adult sex life, said Albuquerque-based sex therapist David Ley. He described the resolutions as a backlash against changing attitudes about sexuality.

“It’s just virtue signaling, there’s literally no effect,” he said.

The 15 states where at least one legislative chamber has declared porn a public health crisis are: Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Montana, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah and Virginia.

Building on those resolutions, supporters may push to prevent accessing porn on publicly funded internet at schools and libraries.

“We think these resolutions are really powerful, although they’re non-binding, because they raise awareness and educate the public, and hopefully can lay the groundwork to make more resources available to those people who potentially struggle with pornography,” said Haley Halverson with the National Center on Sexual Exploitation.

But restrictions on pornography could threaten First Amendment rights, said David Boaz, executive vice president of the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute.

“When you declare it as a public health crisis, people see that as a blank check for the government to do something about it,” he said.