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For immediate release

Advocates: Exploitive child testing must be stopped

The BCCLA and Justice for Girls have uncovered invasive sexualized testing and research practices engaged in by the B.C. government's Youth Forensic Psychiatric Service. In this testing and research, children who are believed to be sex offenders are asked to measure their penises and then connect a device called a "penile plethysmograph" to their genitals. The children are then shown nude and semi-nude images of other children and infants as well as a video of adults having sex. These images are accompanied by audio of a male voice that describes forced intercourse with infants and children.

The child subjects have a sheet over their laps while they are watched by researchers through one-way glass. The youth subjects are predominantly children involved in the criminal justice system in B.C.

"Male children, often abuse victims themselves, are subjected to this treatment by a government responsible for their care and wellbeing," said Robert Holmes, President of the BCCLA. "In our view, serious rights issues are involved with this. That is particularly so given that the individuals involved are vulnerable youth. The public is entitled to a full explanation and an assurance that it will stop."

A recently published paper by the government service describes that the child subjects were shown video of an adult man and woman having consensual sex, as well as still photographs of "children or adolescents in varying states of undress," while a male voice read "vignettes" describing "coercive, or forced sexual activity." Images of naked infants and described coercive intercourse with a male and a female infant were also used in the testing, although none of the children had been alleged to be involved in sex offenses involving infants.

"These tests are a clear breach of the children's basic human rights. In any other context subjecting children to violent pornography would be considered sexual abuse" said Annabel Webb, Director of Justice for Girls. "The Ministry of Children and Family Development is responsible for protecting children and, in this case, is child prisoners' legal guardian. They must be investigated and held accountable just as any parent who exposes children to pornography would be."

The government's research paper says that the children subjects were "asked to sign a consent form" before the testing was done and "gave written informed consent to allow their data to be used." Justice for Girls and the BCCLA are calling for a complete investigation of the practice and its impact on children, as well as an immediate halt to the activity.

[View the annual report here >>](#)

[View the research paper here >>](#)

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BACKGROUND

What is the penile plethysmograph?

The penile plethysmograph measures minute changes in the length and girth of a male's penis using either a vacuum chamber or a ring applied to the base of the penis. The device is used by psychiatrists to measure sexual response to non-standardized sexual stimuli, including images, audio and video. The device, invented in the 1950s, has been criticized as unreliable, unnecessarily invasive, easily deceived, and problematic given its non-standardized nature.

What is the B.C. Youth Forensic Psychiatric Services branch?

Youth Forensic Psychiatric Services (YFPS) is one of several branch programs operating within the Provincial Services Division of the Ministry of Children and Family Development. YFPS has been providing clinical and educational services for over twenty-six years. They also have an active research program. According to their website, the branch's target population is adolescents aged between 12 and 17 years who:

- Have been charged and/or convicted of an offence pursuant to the Youth Criminal Justice Act;
- Are legally mandated by the Youth Courts for assessment and treatment; and
- Are in need of services for mental health and/or behaviour problems.

What is being described to the subjects while they are shown images of nude children?

According to the publication of the study by the government branch in the journal *Sexual Abuse*, the 10 test stimuli used on the children were scenarios involving the following:

- (1) coercive sexual activity with a male infant,
- (2) coercive sexual activity with a very young male (aged 2-5),
- (3) coercive sexual activity with a prepubescent male (aged 6-11),
- (4) forced sexual activity with a prepubescent male (aged 6-11),
- (5) coercive sexual activity with a female infant,
- (6) coercive sexual activity with a very young female (aged 2-5),
- (7) coercive sexual activity with a prepubescent female (aged 6-11),
- (8) forced sexual activity with a prepubescent female (aged 6-11),
- (9) nonforced sexual activity with an adolescent female, and
- (10) forced sexual activity with an adolescent female.

Who was subjected to this testing?

For the published study, 132 male children were tested who had been admitted to a government sexual offence treatment program. A disproportionate number of the study subjects were children of First Nations heritage (23.7% of test subjects compared with aboriginal people representing 4.8% of B.C.'s population). 65.8% were Caucasian and 10.5% were of Asian or South Asian heritage. The subjects mean age was 16.5 years old with a standard deviation of 1.6 years at the start of the study, suggesting that youth as young as 14 were tested, and potentially children younger than 14 were tested. 88.6% of test subjects had been formally charged with or convicted of a sexual offence. The July,

2009 paper is titled "Discriminative and predictive validity of the penile plethysmograph in adolescent sex offenders."

What other issues have been raised about forensic psychological testing in B.C.?

Justice for Girls says that the Ministry of Children and Family Development has a history of such humiliating and degrading practices as part of psychiatric assessments. Justice for Girls was banned from the youth prison when they discovered that a male physician was conducting routine breast and gynecological exams on girls as young as 13 years old during forensic psychiatric assessments. The practice was modified following an investigation by the B.C. Representative for Children and Youth.