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Sending of Sexual Images by Minors Isn't as Prevalent as Expected, Study Finds

By ANAHAD O'CONNOR

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One in 10 children ages 10 to 17 has used a cellphone to send or receive sexually suggestive images, but only 1 in 100 has sent images considered graphic enough to violate [child pornography](#) laws, a new study found.

The results of the study, published on Monday in the journal *Pediatrics*, are based on detailed telephone interviews with 1,560 children across the country. It is one of the largest surveys yet to look at the prevalence of sexting among minors, a phenomenon that has drawn concern from schools and law enforcement and that has [prompted nationwide legislation](#) trying to curb it.

An earlier, often-cited study had estimated that as many as one in five teenagers engaged in sexting, but it included 18- and 19-year-olds, most likely increasing the overall prevalence.

In recent years, high-profile cases in which teenagers were arrested for forwarding nude pictures of other minors have attracted nationwide attention. Despite sexting's reputation as a teenage pastime, surveys now suggest that it is actually more common among young adults than children.

"It only takes one or two cases to make people think this is very prevalent behavior," said [Janis Wolak](#), an author of the new paper and a senior researcher at the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. "This has been reported as if it were something that everyone was doing, not just in the teen population, but in the young adult population. It's really not the case."

Over all, the new report found, 149 youths interviewed for the study, or 9.6 percent, said they had sent or received images that included full or partial nudity in the previous year. Just over 2 percent of those who engaged in sexting said they had appeared in the pictures or had taken them themselves, and 7.1 percent said they received sexual images from someone else.

In most cases, the motivations for sending or forwarding sexual texts were not malicious. Most of the youths who sent such messages said that they did so with someone they were

involved in a relationship with, or that their messages were flirtatious gestures to someone they had a romantic interest in.

About 31 percent who appeared in or took sexual images said that alcohol or drug use had been a factor. And despite public concerns about lewd photographs of minors that start out as private messages becoming widely distributed, only 3 percent of the minors in the study said they had forwarded sexual photographs that they had received.

The fact that about a third of sexual messages were created or sent when alcohol or drugs were involved suggests that the children who are doing the riskiest messaging are engaging in other risky behaviors as well, said [Nancy Baym](#), a professor of communication studies at the University of Kansas and author of the book “Personal Connections in the Digital Age.”

But Dr. Baym, who was not involved in the study, said it was important that the research documented “that a considerable percentage of texting is not problematic, but an extension of the kinds of flirting and relationship-maintaining behavior that goes on in consensual teen relationships and stays within those relationships.”

In an accompanying study published in *Pediatrics*, Ms. Wolak and her colleagues also surveyed roughly 2,700 law enforcement agencies around the country in effort to look at incidents that led to police involvement. That study found that one-third of all incidents handled by the police involved adult sex offenders, who were usually soliciting sexual images from children.

Another third involved what the researchers called “aggravating circumstances,” like teenagers using pictures for blackmail or someone forwarding topless pictures of an ex after a breakup. The remaining third, which Ms. Wolak called “relatively benign,” were largely cases in which an adult discovered nude images on a child’s phone and then turned them over to a school or police official.

Most of the time, those cases did not lead to prosecution.

“It was reassuring that police did not seem to be overreacting,” Ms. Wolak said.

[Amanda Lenhart](#), a senior research specialist at the Pew Research Center in Washington, noted that the report’s findings dovetailed with Pew research released last month. In that study, which involved 800 minors between 12 and 17, only 2 percent said they had sent nude or almost nude pictures to someone they knew. In contrast, the center found that 17

percent of adults between 18 and 29 had sent sexually suggestive pictures, and that 5 percent of 30- to 49-year-olds admitted sending them.

“There’s a zeitgeist in America socially that suggests that sexting is something that’s really prevalent,” Dr. Lenhart said. “I think this research shows that it actually isn’t that prevalent. It happens, but the likelihood of it happening to any given person is pretty low.”