

## Youth Involvement in Sexting: Findings from the Youth Internet Safety Studies

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This is the fourth of a series of bulletins highlighting the results of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS-3). YISS-3, conducted in 2010, was the first of the YISS studies to explore the issue of sexting. This bulletin documents the prevalence of youth involvement in “sexting” as well as key characteristics of the episodes.

Several concerns have fueled the considerable attention to the problem of “youth sexting” among the media, parents, professionals, educators and law enforcement<sup>1-3</sup>. (Sexting generally refers to sending sexual images and sometimes sexual texts via cell phone and other electronic devices.) One is that youth may be creating illegal child pornography, exposing them to possibly serious legal sanctions<sup>4,5</sup>. Another is that youth may be jeopardizing futures by putting compromising, ineradicable images online that could be available to potential employers, academic institutions and family members.

These concerns have been abetted by frequently cited statistics about the supposed widespread teen involvement in sexting. The most common reference has been to a National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy study<sup>6</sup> showing that 20% of teens had sent or posted nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves. However, this research as well as other often cited studies<sup>7,8</sup> have flaws that compromise their findings<sup>9</sup>. For example, the National Campaign study, used an Internet panel rather than a true population sample and included 18 and 19 year olds, and not just minors.

Moreover, none of these studies has made distinctions that allow a careful assessment of the problem from a policy perspective. Studies have asked respondents about “nude or semi-nude”, “nearly nude” or “sexually suggestive” images that might, in fact, be no more revealing than what someone might see at a beach. In some studies, sexting was defined to include text messages that could contain no images. And many studies did not distinguish between taking and sending an image of oneself as opposed to receiving or disseminating an image of another youth. For policy purposes, it is important to look at whether images are created or simply received and whether images might qualify as child pornography, but such information is not currently available.

### How YISS-3 was Conducted

- Telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,560 young Internet users, ages 10 through 17. See Table 1 for details of the 2010 sample.
- “Internet use” was defined as using the Internet at least once a month for the past six months at home, school, a friend’s home, a library, a cell phone, or some other location.
- One parent or guardian was interviewed first for about 10 minutes.
- With consent of the parent or guardian, youth were interviewed for about 30 minutes.
- Care was taken to preserve privacy and confidentiality during youth interviews.
- Youth participants received \$10 checks and information about Internet safety.
- The YISS interviews took place from August 2010 to January 2011.

**YOUTH INTERNET USE PATTERNS IN 2010**

Youth Internet use was widespread in 2010 (see Table 2).

- Almost all youth (97%) were using the Internet from home. Almost half of youth (47%) were using the Internet from cell phones.
- 94% of youth said they used the Internet in the past week.
- 32% of youth said they used the Internet for more than 2 hours per day.
- Many youth (69%) also said they used the Internet 5 to 7 days per week in 2010.
- Most youth used the Internet to talk with people they knew in person offline, like friends from school (93%); fewer talked with people they met online (40%).

**Table 1. Youth & Household Characteristics for the 2010 YISS Sample, %**

| Youth and Household Characteristics             | 2010 (n=1560) |
|---|---------------|
| <b>Gender (male)</b>                            | 50            |
| <b>Age</b>                                      |               |
| 10 to 12 years old                              | 21            |
| 13 to 15 years old                              | 45            |
| 16 to 17 years old                              | 34            |
| <b>Race</b>                                     |               |
| White, non-Hispanic                             | 67            |
| Black, non-Hispanic                             | 13            |
| Hispanic or Latino, any Race                    | 10            |
| American Indian/Alaskan Native                  | 3             |
| Asian   | 3             |
| Other (includes bi-racial)                      | 2             |
| Don't know/not ascertainable                    | 2             |
| <b>Parental marital status</b>                  |               |
| Married   | 78            |
| Living with a partner                           | 2             |
| Separated                                       | 2             |
| Divorced  | 10            |
| Widowed   | 2             |
| Single, never married                           | 6             |
| <b>Youth lives with both biological parents</b> | 66            |
| <b>Highest level of education in household</b>  |               |
| Not a high school graduate                      | 3             |
| High school graduate                            | 14            |
| Some college education                          | 19            |
| College graduate                                | 37            |
| Post college degree                             | 28            |
| <b>Annual household income</b>                  |               |
| Less than \$20,000                              | 12            |
| \$20,000 to \$50,000                            | 18            |
| More than \$50,000 to \$75,000                  | 16            |
| More than \$75,000                              | 45            |
| Don't know/missing                              | 9             |

**Table 2. Youth Internet Use Patterns in 2010**

| Internet Use Characteristics  | 2010 (n=1560) |
|---|---------------|
| <b>Location(s) youth used Internet in past year <sup>a</sup></b>            |               |
| Home  | 97            |
| School  | 89            |
| Friend's home   | 70            |
| Cellular telephone  | 47            |
| Other place (includes library)  | 38            |
| <b>Last time youth used Internet</b>  |               |
| Past week   | 94            |
| Past 2 weeks  | 3             |
| Past month or longer  | 3             |
| <b>Number of hours youth spent on Internet on a typical day when online</b> |               |
| 1 hour or less  | 38            |
| More than 1 hour to 2 hours   | 31            |
| More than 2 hours   | 32            |
| <b>Number of days youth went on Internet in a typical week <sup>b</sup></b> |               |
| 1 day or less   | 4             |
| 2 to 4 days   | 27            |
| 5 to 7 days   | 69            |
| <b>How youth used Internet</b>  |               |
| Went to chat rooms <sup>c</sup>   | 48            |
| Social networking sites   | 80            |
| <b>Who youth talked to online <sup>d</sup></b>                              |               |
| People youth knew in person offline   | 93            |
| People youth knew only online   | 40            |

<sup>a</sup> Multiple responses possible.

<sup>b</sup> Based on youth who used Internet in the past 2 weeks (n=1491).

<sup>c</sup> Includes video and non-video capable chat rooms.

<sup>d</sup> Answers not mutually exclusive.

Note: Some categories do not add to 100% because of rounding and/or missing data.

**Measurement of Sexting**

In 2010 we created a series of five screener questions that asked about three types of sexting involvement: 1) receiving nude or nearly nude images, 2) forwarding or posting such images, and 3) appearing in or creating such images. When youth answered yes to screeners, follow-up questions gathered details about their responses, including the content of the "nude or nearly nude" images. The screeners asked:

1. Has anyone ever sent you nude or nearly nude pictures or videos of kids who were under the age of 18 that someone else took?
2. Have you ever forwarded or posted any nude or nearly nude pictures or videos of other kids who were under the age of 18 that someone else took?

3. Have you ever taken nude or nearly nude pictures or videos of yourself?
4. Has someone else ever taken nude or nearly nude pictures or videos of you?
5. Have you ever taken nude or nearly nude pictures or videos of other kids who were under the age of 18?

When youth responded positively to a screener question, interviewers asked if the incident occurred in the past year. Interviewers then asked extensive follow-up questions about up to two unique *past year* sexting episodes. Our prevalence estimates were created based on youth-level data, some of whom reported more than one sexting type incident. An algorithm was used to choose incidents for follow-up with a hierarchy that selected first for incidents in which pictures were taken and second for incidents in which pictures were distributed. No youth were left uncounted based on this algorithm. Follow-up questions included whether the images depicted breasts, genitals or someone's bottom which we used to define images that were "sexually explicit."

### Types of sexting involvement (Figure 1 & Table 3)

- A total of 149 youth (9.6%) reported appearing in or creating "nude or nearly nude" images or receiving such images in the past year.
- We differentiated three dimensions of the incidents that youth reported.
  1. The first dimension was whether youth appeared in or created images versus receiving images. Of youth reporting involvement in sexting, 39 (2.5%) appeared in or created images; 110 youth (7.1%) received images, but did not appear in or create them.
  2. The second dimension, among those who appeared in or created images, was whether a youth was pictured in an image.
  3. The third dimension was whether images were sexually explicit (i.e., might qualify as child pornography).
- Of the 39 youth who appeared in or created images, 61% were girls, 72% were ages 16 or 17 and 6% were 10 to 12. Most youth created images of themselves (1.8% of sample, n=28); some were photographed by someone else (0.3%, n=5); and some photographed other youth (0.4%, n=6).

- Of the 110 youth who received images but did not appear in or create them, 56% were girls; 55% were ages 16 or 17 and none were younger than 12.

### What Youth Said about Sexting

#### Youth who appeared in or created images

"I was just dating a boy and he wanted a picture and I just sent him my picture." - Girl, 17

"Well, I did not have a boyfriend at this time, and I was curious as to what my body would look like to other people ..., so I took some pictures." - Girl, 17

"I was getting dressed at my boyfriend's house and this girl was there and she took a pic of me and sent it to someone and it got around the school, and after a month it went away." - Girl, 16

"We were just messing around and being guys. It wasn't anything sexual." - Boy, 16

"It was like 10PM at night and I couldn't sleep and I just took a picture." - Girl, 13

#### Youth who received images

"Someone sent me a picture of my boyfriend and another girl, and he's no longer my boyfriend.." - Girl, 17

"[I was] sitting in room and playing guitar. Got text message. Opened it. It showed pictures of breasts, vagina. I immediately erased it." - Boy, 15

"This boy had 4 pictures of a naked girl – he was showing everybody in the classroom." - Girl, 16

"In girls locker room and some girl asked if anyone wanted to see a pic of her and her boyfriend and we thought it would be them hanging out but they were in bed together." - Girl, 14

"I saw a little girl with an older guy and she was down in his personal area." - Girl, 13

**Were images sexually explicit? (Table 4)**

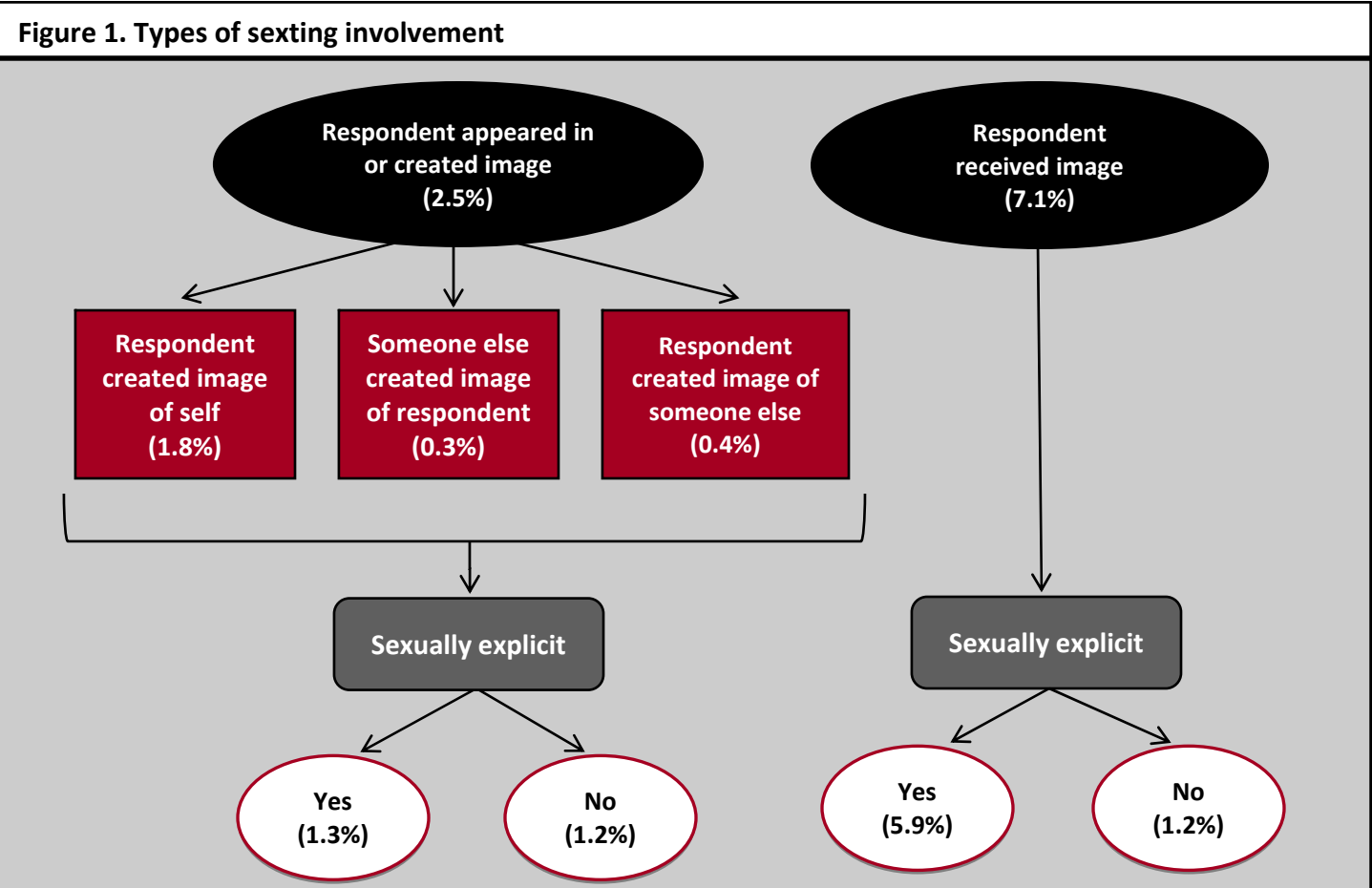
One of the goals of this study was to determine how youth define “nude or nearly nude”, since this phraseology has been used in previous studies and been the basis of reported statistics on sexting. We asked youth whether images “showed breasts, genitals, or someone’s bottom”.

- Only 54% of the 39 youth who appeared in or created images reported pictures that met these criteria, as did 84% of the 110 youth who received images.
- For 46% of youth who appeared in or created images and 16% of those who received images, “nude or nearly nude” included youth wearing underwear or bathing suits, sexy poses with clothes on, and pictures focused on clothed genitals.

**Other key features of sexting (Table 4)**

- Twenty-one percent of respondents appearing in or creating images reported feeling very or extremely upset, embarrassed or afraid as a result, as did 25% of youth receiving images.
- Twenty-eight percent of youth who appeared in or created images and 28% of those who received images reported incidents to an authority (e.g. parent, teacher, police) or an authority found out some other way.

- Youth stated that over half of the incidents in both categories occurred more than once in the past year.
- In most of the episodes the person responsible (when it was not the respondents themselves) was someone the youth knew in person.
- The most commonly reported reason for incidents was “romance as part of an existing relationship;” pranks and jokes or trying to start a relationship were also noted.
- A notable minority of incidents where youth appeared in or created images (31%) included an aggravating component – usually alcohol or drug use.
- Adults were involved in a minority of sexting incidents; they were all young adults, ages 18 to 21.
- One of the concerns about sexting is that youth will forward and distribute images they create or receive. However, only a small proportion of youth reported forwarding or posting images. Pictures were distributed in 10% of incidents when youth appeared in or created images and 3% when youth received images.



**Table 3. Youth and Incident Characteristics Based on Type of Sexting Involvement in 2010 (Continued next page)**

| YOUTH CHARACTERISTICS   | Respondent appeared<br>in or created image<br>(n=39), % | Respondent<br>received image<br>(n=110), % | $\chi^2$   |
|---|---|--|------------|
| <b>Age of youth</b>   |   |  |            |
| 10  | 3   | 0  | 13.6*      |
| 11  | 3   | 0  |            |
| 12  | 0   | 0  |            |
| 13  | 10  | 11   |            |
| 14  | 0   | 15   |            |
| 15  | 13  | 19   |            |
| 16  | 31  | 27   |            |
| 17  | 41  | 28   |            |
| <b>Mean age (SD) <sup>a</sup></b>   | <b>15.7 (1.7)</b>                                       | <b>15.5 (1.3)</b>                          | <b>0.7</b> |
| <b>Gender of youth</b>  |   |  |            |
| Girl  | 61  | 56   | 0.3        |
| Boy   | 39  | 44   |            |
| <b>INCIDENT CHARACTERISTICS</b>   |   |  |            |
| <b>Nature of the incident</b>   |   |  |            |
| Youth saw nude or nearly nude pictures/videos of other kids who were under the age of 18 that someone else took | 0   | 100  |            |
| Youth took nude or nearly nude pictures or videos of self   | 72  | 0  |            |
| Someone else took nude or nearly nude pictures/videos of youth  | 13  | 0  |            |
| Youth took nude or nearly nude pictures/videos of other kids who were under the age of 18                       | 15  | 0  |            |
| <b>Youth distributed the sexual images</b>  | <b>10</b>   | <b>3</b>                                   | <b>3.6</b> |
| <b>Number of times this happened in past year</b>   |   |  |            |
| Once  | 41  | 39   | 1.7        |
| Twice   | 23  | 33   |            |
| 3 to 5 times  | 26  | 22   |            |
| 6 or more times   | 10  | 6  |            |
| <b>Technology used</b>  |   |  |            |
| Social networking site  | 5   | 8  | 0.4        |
| Text messaging  | 44  | 56   | 1.9        |
| Cell phone camera/cell phone  | 21  | 26   | 0.5        |
| Instant messaging   | 10  | 6  | 0.6        |
| Digital/video camera  | 21  | 2  | 16.1***    |
| <b>Disclosed to authority</b>   | <b>28</b>   | <b>28</b>                                  | <b>0.0</b> |
| <b>Distress: Very/extremely</b>   |   |  |            |
| Upset   | 15  | 22   | 0.7        |
| Embarrassed   | 21  | 12   | 1.8        |
| Afraid  | 13  | 4  | 4.3*       |
| <b>Any of the above</b>   | <b>21</b>   | <b>25</b>                                  | <b>0.4</b> |
| <b>Why respondent thought it happened</b>   |   |  |            |
| Romance as part of existing relationship  | 51  | 54   | 7.7        |
| Bullying/harassment   | 0   | 1  |            |
| Prank/joke  | 23  | 11   |            |
| Blackmail, coercion, threats  | 3   | 2  |            |
| Conflict or revenge (not related to romance or bullying)  | 0   | 1  |            |
| Trying to start relationship  | 5   | 11   |            |
| Get someone to notice you   | 3   | 7  |            |
| Some other reason   | 13  | 7  |            |
| Don't know  | 3   | 6  |            |

<sup>a</sup> F statistic

\* p ≤ .05; \*\*\* p ≤ .001.

**Table 3 Cont. Youth and Incident Characteristics Based on Type of Sexting Involvement in 2010**

| YOUTH CHARACTERISTICS                      | Respondent appeared in or created image (n=39), % | Respondent received image (n=110), % | $\chi^2$ |
|--|---|--------------------------------------|----------|
| <b>Person responsible</b>                  |   |                                      |          |
| Youth respondent                           | 87  | 0                                    | 124.8*** |
| Someone met online                         | 3   | 18                                   |          |
| Boy- or girlfriend (or ex-)                | 3   | 6                                    |          |
| Friend or acquaintance from school         | 5   | 61                                   |          |
| Friend or acquaintance from someplace else | 3   | 9                                    |          |
| Knew some other way or not sure            | 0   | 6                                    |          |
| <b>Gender of this person</b>               |   |                                      |          |
| Male                                       | 39  | 56                                   | 3.7*     |
| Female                                     | 61  | 44                                   |          |
| <b>Age of this person</b>                  |   |                                      |          |
| Younger than 18 years                      | 97  | 92                                   | 1.5      |
| 18 or older                                | 3   | 8                                    |          |

<sup>a</sup> F statistic

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

**Table 4. Characteristics of Nude or Nearly Nude Images or Videos of Minors in 2010**

| Incident Characteristics                                      | Respondent appeared in or created image (n=39), % | Respondent received image (n=110), % | $\chi^2$    |
|---|---|--------------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>Pictures showed breasts, genitals, or someone's bottom</b> |   |                                      |             |
| Yes   | <u>54</u>   | <u>84</u>                            | 13.9***     |
| Naked breasts   | 31  | 63                                   | 11.9***     |
| Genitals  | 36  | 56                                   | 4.8*        |
| Someone mooning camera  | 10  | 15                                   | 0.6         |
| Someone's bottom (not mooning)                                | 21  | 28                                   | 0.9         |
| Someone completely nude                                       | 26  | 53                                   | 8.5**       |
| Sexual intercourse  | 0   | 5                                    | 2.2         |
| Masturbation  | 10  | 13                                   | 0.2         |
| Some other sexual contact                                     | 0   | 9                                    | 3.8*        |
| No or don't know / not ascertainable                          | <u>46</u>   | <u>16</u>                            |             |
| Kids wearing underwear  | 31  | 10                                   | 9.5**       |
| Kids wearing bathing suits                                    | 18  | 8                                    | 2.9         |
| Focused on private parts but clothed                          | 10  | 5                                    | 1.1         |
| Sexy poses with clothes on                                    | 23  | 9                                    | 5.1*        |
| <b>Number children in images</b>                              |   |                                      |             |
| One   | 82  | 90                                   | 3.5         |
| Two   | 13  | 5                                    |             |
| 3 to 5  | 0   | 2                                    |             |
| 6 or more   | 5   | 3                                    |             |
| <b>Adult (18+) was in images</b>                              | <b>8</b>  | <b>5</b>                             | <b>0.3</b>  |
| <b>Aggravating features</b>                                   |   |                                      |             |
| Kids under influence of alcohol or drugs                      | 13  | 8                                    | 0.7         |
| Violence  | 3   | 1                                    | 0.6         |
| Trickery or deception   | 3   | 3                                    | 0.003       |
| Without person's knowledge                                    | 8   | 7                                    | 0.007       |
| Against will  | 5   | 1                                    | 2.6         |
| Money exchanged   | 3   | 0                                    | 2.8         |
| Other promises or gifts                                       | 10  | 3                                    | 3.6         |
| <b>Any of the above</b>                                       | <b>31</b>   | <b>15</b>                            | <b>4.3*</b> |

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$

There is a tendency in our rapidly evolving society to be easily alarmed about changing youth mores, a tendency we have referred to elsewhere as “juvenoia”<sup>10</sup>. Sexting has been greeted in many media portrayals as yet another sign of the hyper-sexualization of youth and extreme risk-taking. In fact, however, many indicators of youth sexual behavior such as teenage pregnancy, and the number of youth with multiple sexual partners have been improving in recent years<sup>11</sup>, in spite of such concerns. It is incumbent on youth-serving professionals not to respond or abet media portrayals that promote alarm. Sexting may not indicate a dramatic change in youth risk-taking or youth sexual behavior. It may just make some of that behavior more visible to adults and other authorities. Good research and sympathetic clinical assessment is necessary to understand the nature and extent of activities such as sexting, before strong recommendations about how to counsel and educate youth and their families are developed and disseminated.

### MAJOR FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

1. **Estimates of youth involved in sexting vary considerably depending on what activities are included in the concept of sexting.** The percentage of youth who have, in the past year, appeared in or created sexually explicit sexual images that potentially violate child pornography laws is small (1%). But if sexting is defined as appearing in, creating or receiving sexually suggestive rather than explicit images, the survey finds 9.6% of youth who used the Internet in the past year involved in this way. Many previous surveys on sexting have used the more expansive definition that captures sexually suggestive images and includes receiving such images, with percentages similar to our 9.6%<sup>9</sup>. However, the much more detailed information obtained by the current survey suggests that the percentages of youth who appear in or create sexually explicit photographs that could meet the definition of child pornography, is much smaller.
2. **Results about sexting are reassuring.** Only a small percentage of young people are appearing in or creating sexting images that could be considered illegal child pornography. Moreover, few of these images were being forwarded or posted, situations that could put youth at risk of having their images circulated online. Our lower and more accurate measurements may be particularly important for those interested in applying a norms-based approach to prevention, one that tries to dissuade youth from the perception that risky behaviors are the norm within their peer group.

But receiving and thus possession of potentially illegal images among young people is widespread enough that education about this and its consequences is strongly warranted. Young people need to be instructed that the possession of sexually explicit images of minors is currently a criminal offense, and that such images should be deleted and never retransmitted.

3. **Sexting of explicit images involves a small percentage, but still a considerable number of youth.** This raises the question of how the law should treat such cases. Subjecting youth to severe penalties for activities that would be legal for an 18 year old as long as no exploitation was involved is increasingly being recognized as not appropriate. States like Vermont have taken steps to decriminalize some forms of this behavior, while others have reduced the severity to misdemeanor status<sup>12,13</sup>.

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**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION**

More information about the Youth Internet Safety Surveys and other youth victimization is available on the Crimes against Children Research Center web site: <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/internet-crimes/>



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