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Kaitlin Lounsbury

University of New Hampshire - Main Campus

Kimberly J. Mitchell

University of New Hampshire - Main Campus

David Finkelhor

University of New Hampshire - Main Campus, David.Finkelhor@unh.edu

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THE TRUE PREVALENCE OF “SEXTING”

KAITLIN LOUNSBURY, KIMBERLY J. MITCHELL & DAVID FINKELHOR

SUMMARY

This factsheet presents and critiques the findings of recent studies estimating the prevalence of youth “sexting.” The authors contend that research findings to date have been inconsistent and many widely-publicized studies have been flawed in their design. It is difficult to compare findings and draw clear conclusions due to inconsistent terminology between studies and the inclusion of material not of primary concern to the public and law enforcement, such as text-only messages, images of adults, or images of youth that do not constitute child pornography under legal statutes. These findings are then often reported in distorted or exaggerated ways by the media, leading to public misperception. The authors present a number of suggestions to future researchers and to journalists wishing to cite statistics on sexting.

The problem of teen “sexting” has captured a great deal of media attention, causing concern among parents, educators, and law enforcement officials. In reaction to these concerns, a number of studies have been conducted by researchers from many different organizations to estimate the prevalence of the problem, with widely-varying findings. This fact sheet will provide an overview of the most widely-cited studies, along with their strengths and weaknesses.

WHAT IS SEXTING?

Depending on the study, the term “sexting” has been used to describe a wide variety of activities. It is most commonly used to describe the creation and transmission of sexual images by minors. The majority of attention has been directed toward sexting via cell phone, but the term can apply to any digital media, such as e-mail, instant messaging, and social networking sites.^{1,2} The term can be used for producing and sending images of oneself, receiving images directly from the producer, or forwarding received images to other people.

A core concern about sexting, and what this fact sheet will focus on, is the prevalence of incidents where youth are creating images of themselves or other minors that meet *criminal definitions of child pornography*. Under current federal laws, any sexually explicit images of minors under age 18 are considered child pornography,³ even if the minors created the images themselves. Some officials have arrested and prosecuted teen “sexters” under child pornography production, possession, and distribution laws.⁴

The following studies were all conducted from 2008 to 2009 and concern the issue of sexting, either as the main focus or as part of a larger study. Table 1 shows the samples used in each study and how researchers defined sexting.

SEX & TECH SURVEY

One of the first and most commonly cited studies on sexting was conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy with the help of Cosmogirl.com.¹ The survey was conducted using an online sample of 1,280 respondents (653 teens age 13-19 and 627 young adults age 20-26).

Major Findings: 20% of teens, ages 13 to 19, including 18% of teen boys and 22% of teen girls had sent or posted nude or semi-nude pictures or videos of themselves on the Internet or through a cell phone. The majority of teens said they sent sexually suggestive content to boyfriends or girlfriends. However, 21% of teen girls and 39% of teen boys said they sent the content to someone they wanted to date or “hook up” with. Fifteen percent of teens who had sent sexually suggestive content did so to someone they only knew online.

Limitations: There are several points to keep in mind when interpreting the findings of the Sex & Tech Survey. First, the “teens” described in the study included 18- and 19-year-olds. It is legal for these *adults* to produce and share sexual photos of themselves. However, it is still the “20% of all teens” statistic that is most commonly cited, even though the major concern should be about sexual pictures of minors only, images that could be illegal.

Table 1. Summary of studies addressing youth sexting practices

	<u>Sample</u>	<u>Definition of “Sexting”</u>
Sex & Tech Survey	653 teens age 13-19 627 young adults age 20-26	“sent, or posted online, nude or semi-nude pictures or video of themselves”
Teen Online & Wireless Safety Survey	655 teens age 13-18	“sending sexually suggestive text messages or emails with nude or nearly-nude photos”
AP-MTV Digital Abuse Study	1,247 young people 14-24	“sending or forwarding nude, sexually suggestive, or explicit pics on your cell or online”
South West Grid for Learning Sexting Survey	535 students age 13-18	“the sharing of explicit images electronically” & “any of your friends shared intimate pictures/videos with a boyfriend or girlfriend”
PEW Internet & American Life Project	800 teens age 12-17	[sent or received] “sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photo or video”... “using your cell phone”

Second, the participants did not constitute a representative sample, meaning that the survey results cannot be considered characteristic of the youth population in general. The teens and young adults participating in the survey had all volunteered to do multiple online surveys through a survey center called TRU.¹ Participants were weighted to reflect the demographic composition of the U.S. population, but the researchers admitted that the respondents did not constitute a probability sample. A recent report from the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR)⁵ advised against using these types of nonprobability online panels to estimate the national prevalence of a particular phenomenon.

Finally, the definition of sexting used by these researchers (“nude or semi-nude pictures or video”) could include many types of images that are not illegal under federal law. For example, “semi-nude” could include images of youth in bathing suits or underwear, which would generally not be illegal. Since the major concern is the exchange of illegal images of youth, the findings of this study do not accurately address the primary issue at hand.

TEEN ONLINE & WIRELESS SAFETY SURVEY

Less than one year after the Sex & Tech Survey, Cox Communications² commissioned Harris Interactive to conduct a similar study looking at teens’ online and wireless safety practices. The study was conducted online and the sample included 655 teens ages 13-18 recruited online and weighted to be representative of the U.S. population of teens in that age range.

Major Findings: About one in five teens (19%) had engaged in sexting (sending, receiving, or forwarding text messages or

emails with nude or nearly-nude photos) and over one-third knew of a friend who had sent or received these kinds of messages. However, only 12% of teen girls and 6% of teen boys had sent a “sext.” Sext senders were more likely to be girls (65% vs. 35% boys) and older teens ages 16 to 18 (61% vs. 39% ages 13-15). Nearly all sext senders had also received a sext, although there were many who only received the content. Only 3% of all teens in the study forwarded a sext after receiving it from someone else. Teens mainly sent the messages to boyfriends and girlfriends or someone they had a “crush” on. However, about 1 in 10 sexters said they sent these messages to people they did not know and 18% of sext receivers did not know the person who sent the messages to them.

Limitations: The statement most commonly used to summarize the findings (“one in five teens has engaged in sexting”) distorts the true findings of this study. This “one in five” statistic is largely made up of teens who only received the images; only 9% actually produced and sent the messages themselves and only 3% forwarded messages. Production and distribution of sexual images are the primary concern with sexting, because these are the activities that have the highest potential to result in legal ramifications.

There are also problems with the study sample. Like the Sex & Tech Study, 18-year-olds were included in the sample, possibly distorting the findings, because sexting among these individuals would not be illegal. Cox Communications researchers did point out that 8 in 10 of the teens in their sample were under age 18, but the results were not broken down by age. Also, the sample was drawn from an online panel, which experts have advised against using for national prevalence estimates, as previously mentioned.⁵

AP-MTV DIGITAL ABUSE STUDY

Also in 2009, MTV and the Associated Press⁶ conducted a study on the prevalence of digital abuse, which included questions about sexting. A total of 1,247 respondents age 14 to 24 were surveyed from KnowledgePanel, an online panel that recruits participants using telephone- and mail-based sampling techniques. This recruitment method may have made the sample more representative of the U.S. population than studies that only surveyed online volunteers.

Major Findings: One of the most commonly cited statistics from this report is the finding that almost half of sexually active young people were involved in sexting, which has been described in media reports as “sending nude photos of themselves or their sexual partners via cell phone.”⁷ Sexting rates were higher among 18- to 24-year-olds (33%) compared to 14- to 17-year olds (24%).

It was more common for young people (29%) to have *received* messages with “sexual words or images” by cell phone or on the Internet. However, 17% of sext recipients admitted to forwarding the images to someone else, over half of whom shared the images with more than one person, demonstrating that there can be many unintended viewers of these images. Only 1 in 10 had actually shared a naked image of themselves and these rates were higher among females than among males. While females were more likely to *produce* the images (13% vs. 9% of males), males were more likely to *receive* the images (14% vs. 9% of females).

Limitations: Many media reports have misrepresented of the actual findings of this study. The findings do indicate that 45% of young people who reported having had sex in the past seven days also reported “at least one sexting related activity,” but this includes young people who have only *received* the images and nowhere does it state that those photos were necessarily of the respondents’ sexual partners. The actual percentage of sexually active young people who had shared naked photos of *themselves* was 17%, compared to 8% of non-sexually active young people.⁶ Also, these findings were not broken down by age, so it is possible that they are more applicable to the young adults in the study than to the teenagers.

SOUTH WEST GRID FOR LEARNING & UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH SEXTING SURVEY

In November 2009, researchers at the South West Grid for Learning in collaboration with the University of Plymouth announced the results to date of an on-going study on sexting.⁸ The head researcher, Dr. Andy Phippen, presented his study as evidence of a “significantly larger problem than we first imagined” and later went on to say that “it is immediately apparent that such practices are cause for concern.”

Major Findings: The researchers found that 40% of students knew friends who had sexted, defined as “sharing explicit images electronically.” Twenty-seven percent of the students said that sexting happens regularly or “all of the time.”

Limitations: A review of the research report suggests that this study should not be included in any estimates of sexting prevalence due to a number of serious flaws. First, the term “sexting” is loosely defined, as previously mentioned, as “the sharing of explicit images electronically.”⁸ There was little consensus amongst the students over what “explicit” meant, with some stating that topless and nude images were acceptable and others stating that pictures of fully clothed people in public were inappropriate. Such vast differences in opinion call into question responses to the other survey questions about sexting.

Second, the researchers did not ask students if they themselves had ever produced, received, or forwarded sexual images. Instead, students were asked, “Have any of your friends shared intimate pictures/videos with a boyfriend or girlfriend (sometimes referred to as “sexting”)?”⁸ The researchers defended this targeting of friends rather than respondents by saying they felt respondents would be more open about a friend’s practices than their own. However, it is conceivable that these 40% of students could have been referring to the same small group of friends that were known by their peers to be “sexters.” This would mean that only a small fraction of the students were actually producing sexual images, which should have been the main concern.

PEW INTERNET & AMERICAN LIFE PROJECT

In December of 2009, a study addressing sexting was conducted by researchers at the PEW Internet & American Life Project.⁴ The sample included 800 teenagers age 12 to 17, the population of most concern given that sexual images produced by these youth could be considered child pornography.

Major Findings: Four percent of teens said they had sent a “sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photo or video” of themselves to someone else via cell phone⁴ and only 15% of youth received such images (about one in seven teens).⁹

Older teens were more likely to both send and receive sexual images (8% and 30% of 17-year-olds respectively).⁴ In contrast, a much smaller percentage of 12-year-olds had “sexted” (4% sent and 4% received). Involvement in sexting was more likely among teens who used their cell phones on a regular basis, teens who had “unlimited” plans, teens who regularly used their phones to entertain themselves when they were bored, and teens who reported “always on” behavior, meaning that they did not turn off their phones except when they were required to. Teens were no more or less likely to engage in sexting if they knew their parents looked through their phones. However, teens *were* less likely to sext if their parents limited the *overall* number of messages the teens could receive.

Limitations: The study only addressed messages sent by cell phone, rather than including other digital means such as e-mail, instant messaging, and social networking sites. This could be a drawback of the study, since it leaves out many

communication channels popular among teens. It also makes it difficult to compare the findings to those of the other studies that included a wider variety of communication channels. Like other studies, the phrase “nude or nearly nude” could have also been interpreted to mean photos of minors in underwear or bathing suits, which would not generally be illegal.

CONCLUSIONS

Recent media reports have given the impression that “sexting” is a problem of epidemic proportions among teenagers today. However, analysis of the relevant research to date reveals that there is little consistency in the estimated prevalence of sexting among adolescents. In addition, the high estimates that have received the most media attention come from studies with a number of problems including unrepresentative samples, vaguely defined terms, and great potential for public misperception. Many otherwise valid findings have been presented by the media in ways that exaggerate the true extent of the problem. While sexting does seem to occur among a notable minority of adolescents, there is little reliable evidence that the problem is as far-reaching as many media reports have suggested. Although more conservative estimates do exist,⁴ these statistics are not as widely publicized.

Changes should be made to improve future studies on this topic. First, researchers should limit samples to only include minors (age 17 or younger) if they wish to address the primary concerns about youth-produced child pornography. While it may be interesting to study sexting rates among young adults, sexual images of this population are not illegal and should not be combined with estimates of sexting among minors.

Second, terminology should be consistent among studies, accurately reported by the media, and adequately explained to youth participants. Using terms such as “nude or nearly-nude images” may confuse teens participating in the studies and result in inaccurate estimates. It would also be best to focus only on images, not written exchanges, because sexual photographs of minors are illegal; sexual text messages between youth are generally not. If researchers used this standard terminology, more meaningful comparisons could be made between studies.

It is clear that a standardized definition of sexting is needed. Although sexting has become a popular term among the public, it has come to encompass too many activities to make it an appropriate term for formal research. Instead, the authors suggest using the term “youth-produced sexual images,” defined as images created by minors (age 17 or younger) that depict minors and that are or could be considered child pornography under criminal statutes.

Third, there should be a greater emphasis on who these youth are sharing sexual images with and their reasons for doing this. While most media reports focus on youth sexting among peers, some youth may be sending sexual images to people they barely know, such as people they meet online. These

online recipients could be adults who are pressuring teens into taking and sending the images. Most people would likely agree that these situations deserve more police attention.

Journalists and scholars seem eager to cite statistics about sexting, but this may be unwise due to the current lack of consistent findings and significant flaws in many studies. When citing the statistics, it is important to mention them in the context of other studies and also take into account the variety of circumstances that the term “sexting” can be used to describe. Until more reliable statistics are available, scholars and journalists should avoid citing the potentially inaccurate studies currently available. We suggest that journalists simply say: “there are no consistent and reliable findings at this time to estimate the true prevalence of the problem.” At the very least, study findings should be presented in ways that do not exaggerate the problem or mislead readers. Writers should also clearly state what behaviors the statistics are referring to and not simply use the umbrella term of “sexting” to refer to the many different activities covered in the studies.

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For more information, please contact:
Kaitlin Lounsbury at Kaitlin.Lounsbury@unh.edu or
Kimberly J. Mitchell at Kimberly.Mitchell@unh.edu