

# Concerns about teen sexting overblown, according to new research

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Two new studies from the University of New Hampshire Crimes against Children Research Center suggest that concerns about teen sexting may be overblown. One study found the percentage of youth who send nude pictures of themselves that would qualify as child pornography is very low. The other found that when teen sexting images do come to police attention, few youth are being arrested or treated like sex offenders.

The studies were carried out by researchers at UNH's Crimes against Children Research Center, and published online today by the journal *Pediatrics*. The research is presented in the studies "Prevalence and Characteristics of Youth Sexting: A National Study" and "How Often Are Teens Arrested for Sexting? Data From a National Sample of Police Cases."

In the first study, UNH researchers surveyed 1,560 [Internet users](#) ages 10 through 17 about their experiences with sexting -- appearing in, creating, or receiving sexual images or videos via cell phone or the Internet. The study found that 2.5 percent of youth surveyed have participated in sexting in the past year, but only 1 percent involved images that potentially violate child pornography laws -- images that showed "naked breasts, [genitals](#) or bottoms."

"Lots of people may be hearing about these cases discovered by schools and parents because they create a furor, but it still involves a very small minority of youth," said lead author Kimberly Mitchell, research assistant professor of psychology at the UNH Crimes against Children

Research Center.

In the second study, researchers discovered that in most sexting cases investigated by the police, no juvenile arrest occurred. There was an arrest in 36 percent of the cases where there were aggravating activities by youth, such as using the images to blackmail or harass other youth. In cases without aggravating elements, the arrest rate was 18 percent.

The second study was based on a national sample of 675 sexting cases collected from a systematic survey of law enforcement agencies. The study also found that the very few teens who were subjected to sex offender registration had generally committed other serious offenses such as sexual assault.

"Most law enforcement officials are handling these [sexting](#) cases in a thoughtful way and not treating teens like [sex offenders](#) and child pornographers," said lead author Janis Wolak, senior researcher at the UNH Crimes against Children Research Center.

In both studies, researchers found that sexual images of youth rarely were widely distributed online as many parents, youth, and [law enforcement](#) fear. In the teen survey, 90 percent of the [youth](#) said the images they created did not go beyond the intended recipient. Even in the cases where the images came to the attention of the police, two-thirds of the images stayed on cell phones and never circulated online.

Provided by University of New Hampshire

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