

# New sexting laws put college students at risk

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More than half of all college students have received sexually suggestive images via text messaging, and nearly 80 percent have received suggestive messages, according to research by University of Rhode Island faculty in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies.

Assistant professors Sue K. Adams and Tiffani S. Kisler led a team on two ongoing studies, plus one previous study. They are examining the impact of technology use on physical and mental health, as well as [interpersonal relationships](#) in college [students](#). The prevalence of such activity combined with Rhode Island Gov. Lincoln Chafee signing a bill earlier this month outlawing sexting by minors makes education on technology practices vital for college students, according to Kisler and Adams.

In their survey of 204 college students conducted last spring, they found that 56 percent of the students had received sexually suggestive images, and 78 percent had received sexually suggestive messages. Two-thirds of the group had sent sexually suggestive messages. While most of the messages (73 percent) were sent to a relationship partner, 10 percent were sent without consent of the person who originally sent the message.

"It is important to help everyone, especially students, understand the importance of setting boundaries around their use of technology," Kisler said.

According to the bill passed by Chafee, minors who create and send

sexually explicit images of themselves can be charged with a "status offense" and referred to family court. Minors and adults who possess or forward sexual images of anyone younger than 18 may be charged under the state's child pornography laws.

"It is a delicate situation with the new laws that are in place," Kisler said. "While it is important to protect minors and help them recognize the short- and long-term implications of sending sexually explicit images, opening them up to something as serious as potential child pornography charges may not be the most effective course of action."

"College freshmen are right at that 17- and 18-year-old threshold," Adams said. "Whether it is classmates in college or friends from high school, we have to wonder how many students are thinking about the ages of the people they are communicating with."

According to the [sexting](#) portion of the research, there is an issue with explicit messages being passed on by recipients. Seventeen percent of those surveyed said they had forwarded sexually explicit messages they had received to other people.

The danger for many students, Kisler said, is that they don't realize the lack of control they have over who is seeing their messages.

"At the young age of most college students, people are filtering through relationships at a faster rate," Kisler said. "People want to feel a sense of belonging, so they are sharing more of themselves with people they are still getting to know. Once they click that 'send' button, they don't know where else a message will wind up."

Adams and Kisler also have found texting and cell phone use is affecting important aspects of students' physical health. In their study of 236 college juniors and seniors, 47 percent reported that they were awakened

by texts messages, and then responded before falling back asleep. It also was reported that 40 percent of the students answered phone calls during sleep. Students who use such technology throughout the night were averaging as much as 44 minutes of lost sleep per week due to text messages and calls received. This pattern of sleep interruption showed indicators of other serious issues for students, particularly poor sleep quality, depression and anxiety.

"At first glance 44 minutes doesn't seem like much, but combined with the fact that college students are the most sleep deprived population across all age groups, the implications are significant," Adams said.

"More often than not, the interruptions caused by texting come with the first few hours of sleep, which is the most important time for restorative sleep. If students are constantly interrupting their sleep cycle, they place themselves at risk for sleep debt, which can impact multiple areas of their life, including academic performance."

When it comes to communication among [college students](#), texting is rampant in all areas. More than 93 percent of students surveyed reported texting while driving, and more than 82 percent reported they had sent messages while at the wheel since the state law banning texting and driving was passed.

"Although the texting-while-driving ban has decreased the behavior for some, the difference is probably not as significant as law makers would have hoped," Adams said. "It is possible that students do not believe that they will get caught, or that the penalty is minimal enough to risk texting while driving. Many students are also confused about the definition of the law. They are unclear if it includes sending or reading a text while driving or stopped."

Kisler and Adams point out that technology has been helpful for many students as they make the transition into college life. For the majority of

the students, texting is a primary communication tool used both for maintaining existing friendships and establishing new bonds. Tools like Facebook have been helpful in getting roommates from differing regions better acquainted before school sessions begin. Many students reported that texting and other social media tools helped ease feelings of homesickness, as they were able to keep up with friends and family from a distance.

"The important point that needs to be stressed is setting boundaries around technology, both in terms of what we share and how often we are sharing it," Kisler said. "There is value in the technology, but we need to make smart choices in how we use it."

Provided by University of Rhode Island

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