

## **BETTER TOGETHER**

2018 ATSA Conference | Thursday October 18 | POSTER

### **Abusive Sexting Behavior: Differences between Youth who Commit Sexual and Non-Sexual Crimes and Association with Dating Violence**

Jamie R. Yoder, PhD, MSW  
Colorado State University

Sexting behavior among juveniles is a phenomenon that is rapidly increasing in popularity due to the expansion of technology and addition of smartphone applications (Spooner & Vaughn, 2016; Ibtesam, 2017). The state of Colorado has recently passed progressive legislation that differentiates *innocent* and *abusive* sexting for juveniles, effectively eliminating blanket charges and increasing judicial discretion. It may be important, therefore, to allocate resources to and assess impacts of abusive sexting, or sexting behavior that is non-consensual in nature, rather than non-abusive sexting. However, the rates of sexting among youth involved with juvenile justice is still unknown, and more research is needed to determine if sexting behaviors are unique to juveniles who commit sexual offenses, or are common experiences across groups of youth, irrespective of criminal status.

Furthermore, research is only beginning to untangle how sexting is associated with other risky behaviors. One large meta-analysis found that sexting is related to increased rates of consensual sexual intercourse and risky sexual behaviors including unprotected intercourse, multiple sexual partners, and ingestion of drugs and/or alcohol before intercourse (Van Ouystel, Walrave, Ponnet, & Heirman, 2015). While there are connections between sexting behaviors and violent behaviors, there is a dearth of research on how sexting behaviors can link to dating violence as an outcome. Given that dating, or intimate partner violence has a strong association with other offending behaviors including sexual offending (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003), it may be important to assess the precipitating risks to such behavior. It is likely that abusive sexting is one example of the means by which individuals commit violence in intimate partnerships. However, abusive sexting outside of intimate partnerships may also create risk for engaging in dating violence; abusive sexting may be a veiled opportunity for youth to reinforce perceptions of violence or power and control manifested in dating situations. So, abusive sexting outside of intimate relationships may be an antecedent to dating violence, but this relationship has yet to be tested.

The current study investigated the rates of abusive sexting and motivations of sexting behaviors; (2) comparatively examined differences between adolescents who have committed sexual and non-sexual crimes on rates of abusive sexting and motivations; and (3) tested the linkage between abusive sexting and dating violence, while controlling for other relevant covariates. Using data from Colorado on adolescents adjudicated of sexual and non-sexual crimes ( $N=200$ ), results revealed that 90 youth (45%) endorsed texting sexual words or images to partners in a romantic relationship, friends, acquaintances, or strangers. On average, youth in the sample engaged in sexting behaviors between one time a day to one time a week ( $M=.49$ ,  $SD=.54$ ) and abusive sexting (non-consensual) behaviors

## **BETTER TOGETHER**

2018 ATSA Conference | Thursday October 18 | POSTER

closer to one time a day ( $M=.26, SD=.44$ ). The primary reason youth reported sexting sexual words ( $M=1.55, SD=1.47$ ) and sexual pictures ( $M=1.14, SD=1.49$ ) was because they wanted to have sex with the person they were sexting. There were no statistically significant group differences between youth who commit sexual ( $M=.35, SD=.52$ ) and non-sexual crimes ( $M=.19, SD=.35$ ) on abusive sexting ( $t=1.57, p=.134$ ). In a multivariate linear regression model ( $F(5)=11.54, p<.001$ ), abusive sexting outside of a romantic relationship was related to dating violence ( $B=.570, p<.001$ ) with 48.6% of the variance in dating violence explained by this model.

The findings from this research have significant practice and policy implications. Results align closely with existing Colorado delineating abusive and non-abusive forms of sexting and designing responses that better address youth that engage in abusive sexting. Other states can adopt similar policy that accounts for nuance of sexting behavior. Prevention practices can introduce technological advancements that more comprehensively educates youth on developing healthy consensual relationships and the responsible use technology in these relationships. Such programming may interrupt the relationship between sexting and dating violence.

### **References**

- Ibtesam, R. (2017). On teenage 'sexting' and the law. *Hamline Journal of Public Law & Policy*, 37(1), 245-277.
- Smith, P. H., White, J. W. & Holland, L. J. (2003). A longitudinal perspective on dating violence among adolescent and college-age women. *American Journal of Public Health*, 93(7), 1104-1109.
- Spooner, K., & Vaughn, M. (2016). Youth sexting: A legislative and constitutional analysis. *Journal of School Violence*, 15(2), 213-233. doi:10.1080/15388220.2014.974245
- Van Ouytsel, J., Walrave, M., Ponnet, K., & Heirman, W. (2015). The association between adolescent sexting, psychosocial difficulties, and risk behavior: Integrative review. *The Journal of School Nursing*, 31(1), 54-69. doi:10.1177/1059840514541964

**Jamie R. Yoder, PhD, MSW** is Assistant Professor of Social Work at The School of Social Work, Colorado State University. Dr. Yoder has practice experience working with sexually abusive youth and victims of sexual crimes. Her research interests span etiology, prevention initiatives, and equitable and effective intervention strategies for sexually abusive youth with a particular focus on systemic strength-based services. Her scholarship record thus far exemplifies her dedication to advancing theory, practice, and policy in the delinquency and sexual abuse fields. Dr. Yoder has been a lead author and has co-authored many peer-reviewed articles related to these topics. Yoder is has statistical and analytical expertise, evidenced by her substantial academic record as an emerging scholar.