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## Teens caught 'sexting' face porn charges

By Wendy Koch, USA TODAY

A growing number of teens are ending up in serious trouble for sending racy photos with their cellphones.

Police have investigated more than two dozen teens in at least six states this year for sending nude images of themselves in cellphone text messages, which can bring a charge of distributing child pornography. Authorities typically are notified by parents or schools about so-called "sexting."

This week in Spotsylvania, Va., two boys, ages 15 and 18, were charged with solicitation and possession of child porn with intent to distribute after an investigation found they sought nude pictures from three juveniles — one in elementary school.

"It's absolutely becoming a bigger problem," says Michelle Collins of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

Of the 2,100 children the center has identified as victims of online porn, she says, one-fourth initially sent the images themselves.

She says some did it for fun and others were tricked into it by adults they met online.

"They may not realize the danger they are exposing themselves to," says William Shaw, district attorney for Clearfield County, Pa. "When they put it online, they lose control."

Last month, Shaw filed a juvenile petition against a 15-year-old girl for sending nude photos of herself over the Internet. He says his objective isn't to jail her but to get her counseling or other help. The 27-year-old man who enticed her to do it has been sentenced to 10 years for having sex with her.

Lawmakers are debating penalties. On Wednesday, the Utah Legislature passed lighter penalties, from a felony to a misdemeanor, for sexting.

In Cuyahoga County, Ohio, Juvenile Court Judge Thomas O'Malley struggled to figure out what to do with eight teens, 14 to 17, caught trading nude cellphone pictures of themselves. He says the father of one of the girls found the images.

If the 17-year-old who sent the nude photos to an ex-boyfriend were convicted of a child-porn charge, he says, she would be a registered sex offender for 20 years.

"These kids have no record, not even a parking ticket," says O'Malley, a father of four teens.

He required each to do community service and to ask peers if they knew sexting was a crime. They told O'Malley they surveyed 225 teens; 31 knew.

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