

## *Yet Another Reason to Think Before You Sext: Pedophile Porn Sites Are Stealing Girls' Pics*

WHETHER THAT PROVOCATIVE PHOTO IS SAVED ON YOUR COMPUTER OR BURIED IN YOUR PHONE, IT'S NOT SAFE.

**by Alyssa Giacobbe, Photographed by Jennifer Livingston**



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Hannah was 14 when she took the photos— a series of three selfies shot in front of her bathroom mirror, her long auburn hair framing her smiling face—and texted them to her boyfriend. In one of the images she wore a pair of white underwear; in the others she was completely naked. "He promised not to send them to anyone," Hannah says. "I made him promise me a thousand times."

Months later, after the couple had broken up, Hannah began to suspect that the pictures had gotten around her high school. "Boys would say

things in class or throw their phone numbers at me in the hallways," she recalls. "Once, a guy told a friend of mine that he'd seen some pictures of me, but I just thought, There's no possible way."

It wasn't until the summer after Hannah's senior year that she found out just how many people had seen the photos, and would see them still: A girl from her class messaged Hannah to say that the pics had been posted on an anonymous image-sharing site—along with her first name, high school, and year of graduation. Hannah's Facebook account was soon flooded with friend requests and messages from people she didn't know. "Lots of kids my age," she says, "but much older guys, too."

By now, most girls are well aware of the dangers of sexting, which extend far beyond a small-scale scandal. Some states consider it a crime if teens own or distribute these types of photos, and charges have even been filed for simply storing someone's naked snapshot on a phone. Yet the number of young people who sext keeps growing. A study published in 2012 in the *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* found that more than half of 14- to 19-year-olds have been asked to send a nude photo of themselves to someone, while 31 percent had done the asking, and 28 percent had followed through—higher numbers than those found in earlier studies.

Here's what's unsettling: As sexting has risen in popularity, the consequences have grown far more serious. According to estimates, hundreds of websites now specialize in the anonymous—and unauthorized—posting of girls' explicit photos, often accompanied by details about where they live or go to school, along with links to their social media accounts. In many cases, the photos are of people like Hannah who, at some point, had willingly supplied them to someone they knew. "Before, images might have been shown or passed around to other kids in person, which is bad enough," says Danielle Citron, a law professor at the University of Maryland School of Law and the author of an upcoming book about online harassment called *Hate Crimes in Cyberspace*. "But now they're being posted online in very public and permanent forums."

According to the U.K.'s Internet Watch Foundation, self-generated content is also now a major source of what pedophiles look at online; one study found more than 12,000 photos and videos teens had taken across nearly 70 pedophilic websites. And while boys can be targets too, the majority of those affected are female—as many as 86 percent. Not surprisingly, the victims of unwanted photo posting often experience severe emotional distress, ruined relationships with family and friends, difficulty concentrating at school or work, and bullying or even stalking by others who have seen their photos.

But there can be a more malicious system at work here than just vindictive ex-boyfriends: Hackers are stealing pics from girls' phones and computers, and accessing "private" photos from social networking sites. Citron tells the story of a student who recently came to her for help after a classmate received an alarming e-mail out of the blue. "It said, 'I have your naked photos and I'm going to send them to your father unless you send me more,'" Citron says. "Then the person used the images to create a fake Facebook profile in her name." The girl had no idea how the harasser had gotten the photos off her computer—and no idea how to stop him from posting them wherever he pleased.

For California native Kayla, there was less of a mystery, not that it softened the blow. When her topless selfie (along with her full name, city, and a screenshot of her Twitter account) was posted on a website called Is Anyone Up?, she barely left her house for months. "I was just so embarrassed. I didn't want to go anywhere," she recalls. She'd taken the photo one night when she was just "messing around" in front of her bedroom mirror. "It was the first time I ever took a picture like that," she says.

Thinking it would be safe, she e-mailed it to herself and filed it away in a folder called "pics," which, she later learned, a hacker accessed by first compromising her Facebook account, then using the information there to figure out her e-mail password.

Though some girls have filed civil suits to try to fight back, most of the websites that host these photos are protected by a federal law that says they're not responsible for what their users post. Only two states have laws that make uploading unauthorized explicit content to such sites a crime—New Jersey and California, though others have proposals in the works—but even still, the laws aren't always all-encompassing (the California one, for example, doesn't protect victims who took the photos themselves). Meanwhile, "these images can become a permanent and crushing part of your online identity," Citron says, especially since for every site that gets shut down, another pops up, often with many of the same images. According to the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative, 11 percent of "involuntary porn" victims report that they even have difficulty finding a job or getting into school.

Which is why opting out of sexting altogether might be the easiest way to avoid trouble, at least until the laws get more protective. Now 20 and a sophomore in college—one she chose partially because no one else from her high school was going there—Hannah has tried for nearly two years to get her photos removed from the Internet. The police, she says, seem to want to help, but her calls are "passed around a lot." Last summer her ex reiterated that he didn't send the pics to anyone, but how they got online doesn't matter to her anymore. "I'm still so angry, but I can't waste time on that. It's not going to fix anything," she says. "So what I try to do now is help others avoid this. My best advice? While he may seem like The One right now, you just never know what'll happen. So if he asks for a photo, tell him no. If he loves and respects you, he'll understand." And if he doesn't, well, maybe he's not the kind of guy you want to entrust with your reputation after all.

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