

Testimony of the Human Trafficking Prevention Project

BILL NO: House Bill 194
TITLE: Education – Family Life and Human Sexuality Curriculum – Sexting
COMMITTEE: Ways and Means
HEARING DATE: January 27, 2022
POSITION: **SUPPORT**

House Bill 194 would require that public schools incorporate age-appropriate instruction on the risks of sexting as part of the Family Life and Human Sexuality curriculum in every grade in which the curriculum is taught. The Human Trafficking Prevention Project at the University of Baltimore School of Law supports this bill because it will reduce youth vulnerability to trafficking by teaching about consent, healthy relationships, and the permanence of digital content.

Defined as “the sharing of sexually explicit images, videos, or messages through electronic means,”¹ the frequency of sexting has increased exponentially in the lives of adolescents given the current prolific use of smartphones among youth and the wide availability and acceptance of virtual social interaction. According to a recent report by the Journal of the American Medical Association, over 1 in 4 adolescents report having received a sext,² lending “credence to the notion that youth sexting may be an emerging, and potentially normal, component of sexual behavior and development.”³ However, the study also found that 12% of the adolescents surveyed reported that they had forwarded a sext without consent while 8.5% percent said that a sext of theirs had been forwarded without their consent.⁴

The use of coercion in sexting among youth has been identified as an indicator of other forms of coercion that occur offline.⁵ In one survey of youth who reported at least one dating or sexual partner in the past 12 months, 12% reported coercive sexting victimization and 8% acknowledged pressuring a partner to sext.⁶ Other studies have identified a connection between victims who are coerced into sexting also being victimized by other forms of teen dating violence, including sexual, physical and emotional abuse,⁷ all of which make youth more vulnerable to the crime of human trafficking, a crime in which coercion and abuse feature prominently.

HB 194 follows on the heels of the sexting legislation enacted in 2021, which drew an important distinction between consensual sexting and youth who are threatened or victimized by sexting. However, this legislation must be followed by conversations between educators, parents, and young adults about what sexting is, the risks inherent in it, and the how sexting may impede the formation of healthy relationships. House Bill 194 begins this crucial process. Therefore, the Human Trafficking Prevention Project at the University of Baltimore School of Law supports House Bill 194 and respectfully urges a favorable report.

¹ Sheri Madigan et al., *Prevalence of Multiple Forms of Sexting Behavior Among Youth: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis*, 172 JAMA Pediatrics 327–335 (2018).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ HyeJeong Choi, Joris Van Ouytsel, and Jeff R Temple. 2016. *Association between sexting and sexual coercion among female adolescents*. Journal of Adolescence 53: 164–68.

⁶ Poco D. Kernsmith, Bryan G. Victor, and Joanne P. Smith-Darden. 2018. *Online, offline, and over the line: Coercive sexting among adolescent dating partners*, Youth & Society 50: 891–904.

⁷ Melinda Lemke & Katelyn Rogers, *When Sexting Crosses the Line: Educator Responsibilities in the Support of Prosocial Adolescent Behavior and the Prevention of Violence*. Soc. Sci. 2020, 9, 150.