

HOUSE No. 4291

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts



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To the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives,

In 2017 and in 2019, I filed nearly identical bills that responded to important concerns raised by the Governor’s Council to Address Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence regarding the laws governing the harmful distribution of sexually explicit visual materials by both adults and teenagers in Massachusetts. Today I am again submitting for your consideration “An Act Relative to the Harmful Distribution of Sexually Explicit Visual Material,” because parents, educators, law enforcement, the courts, and our communities continue to confront the same issues addressed by this legislation.

Our administration is deeply concerned by the serious harm and painful trauma suffered by individuals who are victimized by a perpetrator’s malicious and vengeful distribution of explicit images. Through frequent news reports and countless victim impact statements, we have heard the painful personal stories about the devastating and lasting effects of on victims of cyberbullying and the non-consensual dissemination of sexually explicit materials. Today, the Lt. Governor and I announced the filing of this legislation at a roundtable event where we were joined by several survivors whose stories the urgent need for the enactment of this legislation.

The legislation I am filing today responds to the Council’s concern about unintended problems of the current law banning child pornography in the Commonwealth. That law subjects a minor who engages in peer-to-peer distribution of sexually explicit visual material to criminal prosecution for the felony of distributing or possessing child pornography. While that conduct falls within the letter of the law, lawmakers did not intend for a minor engaged in such

conduct to be exposed to such a severe sanction. The legislation I am filing today addresses this issue in three ways.

First, the legislation creates a presumption that any child charged with distributing or possessing child pornography should be placed in an educational diversion program rather than go through the juvenile justice process and potentially be committed to the Department of Youth Services. District Attorneys and the Attorney General will retain prosecutorial discretion to use the juvenile justice process in appropriate cases, but the default should be diversion rather than prosecution.

Second, for those cases in which the juvenile justice system is appropriate, this legislation gives law enforcement a new tool, allowing minors to be charged with a misdemeanor rather than a felony. Juveniles prosecuted for this new misdemeanor offense would be entitled to the same presumption that they should be diverted from the juvenile justice system.

Third, and most importantly, this legislation requires schools to provide age-appropriate education on the risks and harmful effects of the creation, possession, and distribution of sexually explicit visual depictions of minors as they relate to cyber-bullying. Using school's existing cyber-bullying programming as a framework, this will promote prevention and early intervention, and reduce the number of teens engaged in harmful distribution of these sorts of images.

This legislation would also finally remedy a gap in Massachusetts law by criminalizing conduct widely referred to as "revenge pornography." Our laws do not currently prohibit a person from taking a sexually explicit image or recording that was lawfully obtained from a romantic partner and then distributing it with the intent to harm the person depicted and without that person's consent. Our laws should recognize the serious nature of this behavior with a serious consequence. This legislation closes the gap in our law by creating a new felony offense and empowering judges in criminal proceedings to issue appropriate orders to restrain or prevent the future commission of the new offense. Over thirty other states have taken similar steps to protect their citizens by criminalizing this conduct. The citizens of Massachusetts deserve the same level of protections.

This bill makes important corrections in the laws of the Commonwealth addressing non-consensual distribution of private and potentially harmful images. I urge your prompt enactment of this legislation.

Respectfully submitted,

Charles D. Baker,
Governor

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

**In the One Hundred and Ninety-Second General Court
(2021-2022)**

An Act relative to the harmful distribution of sexually explicit visual material.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Court assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:

1 SECTION 1. Section 37O of Chapter 71 of the General Laws, as appearing in the 2020
2 Official Edition, is hereby amended by striking out the second sentence of the definition of
3 "Cyber-bullying" and inserting in place thereof the following sentence:-

4 Cyber-bullying shall also include: (i) the creation of a web page or blog in which the
5 creator assumes the identity of another person; (ii) the knowing impersonation of another person
6 as the author of posted content or messages; or (iii) the violation of sections 29D or 108 of
7 chapter 272, if the creation, impersonation or violation creates any of the conditions enumerated
8 in clauses (i) to (v), inclusive, of the definition of bullying.

9 SECTION 2. Chapter 119 of the General Laws is hereby amended by inserting after
10 section 39M the following section:-

11 Section 39N. If a child is alleged to be a juvenile delinquent by reason of violating
12 sections 29B, 29C, or 29D of chapter 272, unless the district attorney or the attorney general
13 objects in writing stating the reasons for his objection, the court shall, if arraignment has not yet

14 occurred, indefinitely stay arraignment and direct that the child enter and complete an
15 educational diversion program approved by the district attorney or the attorney general. If the
16 district attorney or the attorney general objects, the minor shall not be diverted and the case shall
17 be arraigned in the ordinary course. If the court finds that the child has failed to complete the
18 diversion program, the court shall bring the case forward, arraign the child and restore the
19 delinquency complaint to the docket for further proceedings. If arraignment has already
20 occurred, unless the district attorney or the attorney general objects in writing stating the reasons
21 for his objection, at which point the case must proceed in the ordinary course, the court shall
22 place the child on pretrial probation under section 87 of chapter 276. The conditions of such
23 probation shall include, but not be limited to, completion of an educational diversion program
24 approved by the district attorney or attorney general. If the child fails to substantially comply
25 with the conditions of probation, the court shall restore the delinquency to the docket for trial or
26 further proceedings.

27 SECTION 3. Section 24C of Chapter 265 of the General Laws as appearing in the 2020
28 Official Edition is hereby amended by inserting after the figure “265,” in line 8, the following
29 words:-

30 or an arrest, investigation or complaint for unlawful sexual surveillance under section 105
31 of chapter 272, or an arrest, investigation or complaint for the harmful distribution of sexually
32 explicit visual material under section 108 of said chapter 272.

33 SECTION 4. Chapter 272 of the General Laws is hereby amended by inserting after
34 section 29C the following section:-

35 Section 29D. Whoever is a minor and violates sections 29B or 29C of this chapter may
36 be charged with being a delinquent child or youthful offender in accordance with the provisions
37 of chapter 119 or, in the sole discretion of the attorney for the commonwealth, may instead be
38 charged with being a delinquent child in accordance with the provisions of chapter 119 for
39 engaging in peer to peer dissemination of explicit visual material, which shall be deemed a
40 misdemeanor offense against the commonwealth. Adjudication as a delinquent child for
41 engaging in peer to peer dissemination of explicit visual material shall not be deemed a "sex
42 offense" under section 178C of chapter 6 of the general laws.

43 SECTION 5. Section 31 of Chapter 272 of the General Laws as appearing in the 2020
44 Official Edition is hereby amended by striking out, in lines 1 to 3, the words "twenty-eight,
45 twenty-eight C, twenty-eight D, twenty-eight E, twenty-nine, twenty-nine A, twenty-nine B,
46 thirty and thirty D," and inserting in place thereof the following 10 figures:- 28, 28C, 28D, 28E,
47 29, 29A, 29B, 30, 30D and 108.

48 SECTION 6. Subsection (b) of section 105 of said chapter 272, as so appearing, is hereby
49 amended by adding the following paragraph:-

50 Whoever willfully photographs, videotapes or electronically surveils another person who
51 is nude or partially nude, when that person is in a gymnasium, athletic facility, restroom, or
52 changing area, such that the person would have a reasonable expectation of privacy in not being
53 so photographed, videotaped or electronically surveilled, and does so without that person's
54 consent, shall be punished by imprisonment in the house of correction for not more than 2 ½
55 years or by a fine of nor more than \$5,000, or by both such fine and imprisonment.

56 SECTION 7. Subsection (c) of said section 105 of said chapter 272, as so appearing, is
57 hereby amended by striking out, in line 45, the words “and second” and inserting in place thereof
58 the following words: , second or fourth.

59 SECTION 8. Said Chapter 272 is hereby amended by adding the following section:-

60 Section 108. (a) As used in this section, the following terms shall have the following
61 meanings:

62 “Distribute”, give, sell, transfer, disseminate, publish, upload, circulate, broadcast, or
63 engage in any other form of transmission, electronic or otherwise.

64 “Harm”, physical injury, financial injury or substantial emotional distress.

65 “Identifiable”, identifiable from the visual material itself or information offered in
66 connection with the visual material.

67 “Partially nude”, the exposure of the human genitals, buttocks, pubic area or female
68 breast below a point immediately above the top of the areola.

69 (b) Whoever knowingly distributes visual material depicting another identifiable person
70 who is nude, partially nude, or engaged in sexual conduct, when the distribution would cause a
71 reasonable person to suffer harm, and does so with the intent to harm, harass, intimidate, threaten
72 or coerce, or with reckless disregard for the likelihood that the person depicted or the person
73 receiving will suffer harm, and, at the time of the distribution, knew or should have known that
74 the depicted identifiable person did not consent to the distribution shall be punished by
75 imprisonment in the state prison for not more than 5 years, or in the house of correction for not
76 more than 2 ½ years, or by a fine of not more than \$10,000, or both. For purposes of this

77 subsection, consent to the creation of visual material shall not, by itself, constitute consent to the
78 distribution of the visual material or any part, representation or reproduction thereof.

79 (c) Subsection (b) shall not apply to:

80 (1) visual material involving nudity, partial nudity or sexual conduct that is both (i)
81 voluntary and (ii) in a public or commercial setting or in a place where a person does not have a
82 reasonable expectation of privacy;

83 (2) distribution made in the public interest, including the reporting of unlawful conduct;

84 (3) lawful and common practices of: law enforcement, criminal reporting, corrections,
85 legal proceedings, or medical treatment;

86 (4) distribution of visual material that constitutes a matter of public concern; or

87 (5) interactive computer services, as defined in 47 U.S.C. § 230(f)(2), or information
88 services or telecommunications services, as defined in 47 U.S.C. § 153, for content solely
89 provided by another person.

90 This subsection shall not preclude other remedies available at law.

91 (d) Whoever threatens to commit the crime set forth in subsection (b) shall be punished
92 by imprisonment in the state prison for not more than 5 years, or in the house of correction for
93 not more than 2 ½ years, or by a fine of not more than \$10,000, or both.

94 (e) In a prosecution under this section, a justice of the superior court, district court or
95 juvenile court may issue appropriate orders to restrain or prevent the unlawful distribution of
96 visual material in violation of this section.

97 (f) A copy of visual material that is part of any court record arising from a prosecution
98 under this section shall not be open to public inspection and shall only be made available by
99 court personnel to a law enforcement officer, prosecuting attorney, defendant's attorney,
100 defendant, or victim connected to such prosecution for inspection, unless otherwise ordered by
101 the court.

102 SECTION 9. Section 1 shall take effect on July 1, 2023.