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Sextortion: Keys Findings from an Online Survey of 1,631 Victims

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CCRC in partnership with Thorn*

"My ex-boyfriend wanted me back very badly after I broke up with him... He threatened suicide...He sent me horrible texts and Facebook messages and left me mean voicemails saying since I hurt him, he was going to make me hurt just as bad. He threatened to send naked pictures of me that I had sent him during our relationship to my college or to my parents over Facebook."

"He was choking a cat [on a video chat site] and told me if I didn't do as he said he would kill the cat. So I showed him my breast and he stopped hurting the cat. He then showed me the video he had of me showing my breast and said that if I leave [the site] he knows where I live and will post it to my Facebook page."

The survey and survey goals

Thorn and the Crimes against Children Research Center of the University of New Hampshire conducted an online survey of persons ages 18 to 25 who have been targets of threats to expose sexual images, or "sextortion" (n=1631). Respondents were recruited mainly through ads on Facebook and asked to complete anonymous surveys. Our goal was to inform pro-active strategies that will reduce these incidents by

- Educating the public and practitioners about sextortion;
- Improving mechanisms for reporting to websites, apps and other technology programs that are being used for sextortion; promoting reporting to technology companies by targets of sextortion and increasing effective responses to such reports;
- Equipping technology companies with more knowledge and information about how their platforms are being used in sextortion so they can create proactive strategies to combat the problem; and
- Encouraging help-seeking by targets of sextortion and providing them with resources.

Details about how the survey was conducted can be found in the full report.

Summary of key findings

We defined sextortion as threats to expose sexual images in order to make a person do something or for other reasons, such as revenge or humiliation.

The respondents in our sample were primarily female (83%) and teenagers (ages 18 and 19); about 40% were in their early 20s.

About 45% described sextortion incidents that occurred when they were minors (younger than 18).

The sextortion episodes they reported were diverse, but incidents broadly fell into two groups:

- a) In the wake of face-to-face romantic or sexual relationships during which sexual images were taken or shared, an aggrieved partner threatened to disseminate images either to force reconciliation or to embarrass or humiliate the respondent.
- b) A perpetrator who met a respondent online used a sexual image obtained from the respondent or some other source to demand more images or sexual interactions.

There was notable diversity in these episodes, however. Some respondents were male; demands were not always sexual in nature; and some perpetrators used elaborate deceptions to acquire images and threaten respondents.

"I met this 'girl' online, who turned out to be a man. He threatened to rape and beat me on camera if I didn't continue sending him sexual pictures. I had never sent pictures to this person but they had fabricated some pictures."

The more serious cases involved stalking and physical and sexual assault in addition to sextortion and threats that lasted for 6 months or more.

"After I ended it, he started stalking me both online and in person, and sending me threatening texts, calls, voicemails, messages, emails. This is still going on [two years later]."

"[T]hey both said they had photos of me that they would share on Facebook if I didn't meet them in person and I couldn't tell anyone. I went to meet them and they tried to rape me. I had brought my friend with me and he saved me."

Perpetrators carried out threats or otherwise harmed respondents in about 45% of cases, more frequently in the face-to-face relationship group than in the online encounter group. They disseminated sexual images in about 30% of cases.

"He posted sexual photos of me on a site that degrades exes and had random people he knew message me on my Facebook asking for sexual favors. He posted my real name and age on the photos. Co-workers and friends were sent links."

The personal and psychological toll on respondents could be quite intense, with 24% seeing a medical or mental health practitioner and 12% having to move as a result.

"It felt like someone was not only invading my privacy, but also mentally (and almost physically) assaulting me when I saw the images go public."

"I'm still on medication for anxiety [years later]. This has ruined my self-image, my relationships, and my trust of others. I still to this day don't feel like myself."

"He threatened to hurt me and my family, and he followed me to work, school, etc. I had to...change schools, transfer my job, and move 30 minutes away."

Shame, embarrassment and self-blame were common feelings that kept many respondents from seeking help from friends and family or from reporting to technology companies that ran websites or apps used for sextortion.

"I felt helpless and ashamed because I couldn't even talk to my friends or family about it. I was raised in a religious home and my family would hate me. I would be forever judged on what I did."

Only 1 in 5 respondents sought help from or reported the episode to a website or app. Respondents were more likely to make reports when perpetrators posted images online. Of those who did not report incidents, half reported skepticism that a website or app could help. Forty percent of those who did report to websites or apps said that the responses that they received were not helpful.

"I was able to click on my posts [on myex.com] and found a "remove my name" link. The first time I tried, the website said I had to pay thousands of dollars to remove my name. The second time, there were more options, so I tried the option [that the pictures showed a minor] and my request has been ignored."

Complaints about unhelpful responses from technology companies included complicated documentation requirements, unsympathetic attitudes, lengthy delays, lack of follow-up about what was being done, and responses that did not fully address the problem.

Only 16% of respondents reported episodes to police, but police involvement was considerably more common among those who disclosed sextortion incidents to family or friends, were victims of violence or threats of violence in addition to the sextortion, or who saw a doctor or mental health professional as a result of the incident.

"I was told there was nothing that could be done because I was over 18 years old when the photos were taken and they weren't my personal property because they were taken by my ex-boyfriend himself."

"The police threatened to bring me up on charges of distribution of child pornography."

Respondents described barriers to police assistance, including lack of criminal laws addressing sextortion, lack of jurisdiction when perpetrators lived in other states or countries, and difficulties proving the identity of perpetrators. Some reported being shamed or blamed by police and some who were minors during incidents were threatened with prosecution for producing child pornography.

The report includes recommendations to

- Increase public awareness of sextortion in order to promote disclosure and improve support networks for victims
- Mobilize the education system to implement prevention curricula and provide support resources
- Mobilize bystanders to stop perpetrators and support victims
- Encourage the technology industry to develop proactive interventions, improve the experience of victims who report incidents, adopt practices and policies that prohibit sextortion, and increase collaboration across the industry
- Increase law enforcement's capacity to respond to sextortion cases and improve sensitivity to victims

The full report is posted on our website: <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/>.

**This research was conducted in partnership with Thorn, a non-profit dedicated to driving technology innovation to fight child sexual exploitation.*