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June 23, 2016

UNH Researchers Find Sextortion Leaves Painful Aftermath and Limited Help Options

DURHAM, N.H. – “Sextortion”, a form of blackmail often using sexual images to threaten victims into sexual favors, can spark life-altering crises in the lives of young people, according to new research by the University of New Hampshire.

The study was conducted by [UNH’s Crimes against Children Research Center](#) in partnership with [Thorn](#), a non-profit dedicated to driving technology innovation to fight child sexual exploitation. It revealed that one in four victims had to seek medical or mental health care, one in eight felt the need to move, and 45% were unable to confide in friends or family.

“Sextortion is a pressing issue and it is time for policy makers and technology companies to take action against perpetrators and provide remedies to victims,” said Janis Wolak, senior researcher in the center and lead researcher on the study. “So many survey participants felt they had nowhere to turn for help or found only obstacles when they sought assistance. They need quicker and more effective responses from both technology sites and law enforcement, as well as better guidance about actions they could take to help defeat threats.”

Researchers conducted the survey mainly by recruiting over 1,600 young women and men through ads on social media, including Facebook and Twitter, and asked them to complete anonymous surveys about being targets of sextortion. Almost half of the respondents were under the age of 18 when the sextortion happened and the rest were between the ages of 18 and 25. While the reported targets were mostly women, men experienced about 15% of the episodes.

Overall, the survey found that sextortion dynamics were serious and diverse, and often occurred in two broad contexts. The first was typically in the wake of face-to-face romantic or sexual relationships in which sexual images were taken or shared and then an aggrieved partner threatened to disseminate images either to force reconciliation or to punish their former partner. The second context was when a perpetrator met a victim online and used a sexual image to demand more photos or sexual interactions.

While the study shows that some episodes were resolved quickly, close to a third of the respondents said they were threatened on a daily basis. For 22%, the threats continued for more than six months.

In addition to exposure of sexual images, the threatening behaviors included stalking, sexual assault, physical violence, hacking into accounts, and extorting money. Perpetrators were successful in carrying out their threats in 45% of the cases.

Shame, embarrassment, and self-blame kept many respondents from seeking help from friends and family, or from reporting to technology companies or law enforcement. Only one in five sought help from or reported the episode to the website or app. Similarly, only 16% reported to police.

Respondents described a wide range of technology platforms that perpetrators used to contact them – including social media networks, instant messaging apps, video sharing websites, email, and gaming sites. About 45% of respondents reported contact on more than one platform.

“This is one of the first sextortion studies that lets us hear the voice of the victims of this emerging crime,” said Julie Cordua, Thorn CEO. “Perpetrators are not making idle threats and often follow through with violence online and in person. Therefore, it is critical that parents and educators, policy makers, law enforcement and the technology industry develop better ways of protecting and assisting young people. This study and its conclusions offer a starting place.”

The full report can be found here: www.wearethorn.org/sextortion

[Thorn](#) drives technology innovation to fight child sexual exploitation. Thorn partners with non-profits and academic institutions to gather new insights into the role technology plays in child sex trafficking, the creation and proliferation of child pornography, and the normalization of child sexual exploitation. Thorn then goes beyond insight to action to develop the tools, systems and approaches to help address these issues. Thorn has also created a Technology Task Force — a group of more than 25 technology companies that collaborate on technology initiatives to fight child sexual exploitation. Participating companies include Google, Facebook, Salesforce, Microsoft, Symantec, SV Angel, Twitter, Expedia, Connotate, Irdeto, Mozilla, Digital Reasoning, Palantir, Sabre, Pinterest, Amazon Web Services (AWS) and others. For more information on Thorn, please visit <http://www.wearethorn.org/>, follow us on Twitter [@THORN](#) and [facebook.com/wearethorn](https://www.facebook.com/wearethorn).

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