

THORN

Sextortion

Summary findings from a 2017
survey of 2,097 survivors

SEXTORTION – the threat to expose a sexual image in order to make a person do something or for other reasons, such as revenge or humiliation.



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Background

2015 REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

45%

Of perpetrators carried out threats

1 IN 3

Victims did not talk about their abuse with anyone

In 2015, the Crimes Against Children Research Center at UNH, in partnership with Thorn, conducted a survey to understand the growing trend we now know as “sextortion”. This survey invited young people (ages 18-25) who had experienced sextortion to share their stories. More than 1,600 victims responded.

From this survey, we got a first glance at what sextortion looks like, how it impacts victims, and how we can better protect our kids from this abuse. Key findings from the 2015 survey included:

KEY FINDING

Sextortion cases vary, but fall broadly into two groups:

1) Offline – The victim knows the person delivering threats in real life. Approximately 60% of participants reported this type of contact. In these cases, the perpetrator frequently sought to pressure the victim into returning to a relationship or was seeking to humiliate them.

2) Online – The victim has only met the person threatening them online. Approximately 40% of participants reported this type of contact. In these cases, the perpetrator frequently sought to get more sexual images of the victim or meet in person for sexual contact.

KEY FINDING

For nearly half of the participants, the perpetrator followed through on his or her threats. The threats are real and represent real and likely harms to victims. The most common threats were experiences of being stalked online and off, having explicit images sent to family/friends or posted online, and physical/sexual assault. Less frequently, some participants reported being extorted for money.

KEY FINDING

Sextortion is happening across a wide number of platforms and 45% of participants reported contact with their perpetrator on multiple platforms. Social media was the most common place to be threatened (54%), followed by messaging platforms (41%), and video call platforms (23%). Other less commonly reported locations included email, dating sites, and gaming platforms.

KEY FINDING

Many victims (1/3 of participants) are staying silent because of feelings of shame and embarrassment, though about half of participants did disclose to family or friends. Additionally, 1 in 5 reported to online platforms and 16% reported to law enforcement. However, the response by these groups is largely unsatisfactory.

In response to these findings, Thorn launched a campaign to raise awareness of the issue and destigmatize disclosures. The [campaign](#) and a complete [readout](#) of this survey can be found online at www.stopsextortion.com.

2015 REPORT HIGHLIGHTS**45%**

Involved more than one platform

Figure 1 | Where does sextortion happen?

Social Networks	54%
Messaging/Photo Apps	41%
Video Voice Call Apps	23%
Email	12%
Dating Apps	9%
Video Sharing Social Sites	6%
Image Board Sites	3%

Wave Two Research and Findings

In 2017, Thorn set out to update and expand our understanding of sextortion.

Nearly half (47%) of participants in the 2015 survey reported their sextortion began before they turned 18. While many of the insights we learned from the 2015 survey remain relevant to this younger audience, we needed to hear more specifically from kids and teens about their experiences with sextortion. To accomplish this, the 2017 survey expanded participation to include any 13–25 year olds who had experienced sextortion.

The resulting responses (N=2,097)¹ confirmed what we learned from victims of sextortion in the 2015 survey. In addition, we learned important new information about how this abuse is affecting kids and teens, how tech is being leveraged in the process, and how we might better protect them. This report summarizes the key updates from the 2017 survey and offers new recommendations for combating sextortion.

How Sextortion Unfolds

As in the 2015 survey, participants in the 2017 survey were nearly equally likely to have met the person threatening them through a new online encounter (48%) as an existing offline relationship (49%).²

In cases involving an offline offender, slightly more than half of participants (52%) reported having a prior romantic relationship with the offender. This suggests sextortion may be a type of dating violence exacerbated by technology.

Alternatively, most online victims initially met the person who threatened them on social media or via chat apps. Approximately 1 in 3 of participants reported they were first contacted via Kik, approximately 1 in 6 reported first contact on Facebook, and approximately 1 in 10 reported first contact on Snapchat. Additional platforms mentioned included, but are not limited to, Instagram, Skype, Gmail, Messenger, and Tinder.

¹ The overwhelming majority of participants were female (91%), White (79%), and nearly half (49%) identified as heterosexual/straight. An acknowledged limitation of this survey is the lack of diversity among survey respondents, a possible artifact of online recruitment without specialized targeting. Nearly two-thirds of the sample were under 18.

² 3% of participants did not answer or answered that they did not know.

2017 REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

1 IN 4

Participants were 13 or younger when threatened

Technology plays a central role in all forms of sextortion. Both online and offline offenders use it to stalk, groom, and threaten victims of sextortion. Following the initial friend request, online offenders asked for cell phone numbers and additional screen names in 1/3 of cases. In 1/4 of cases, the offender suggested moving to another platform to continue communicating. Across the entire sample, a variety of common apps were listed as involved in a victim's sextortion, including but not limited to: social media, chat, dating, gaming, and email.

In offline sextortion attempts, men were overwhelmingly the offenders (91%), with nearly all female participants (93%) and just under half of the male participants (47%) in the sample

reporting that their offender was male. Because in most online cases the offender's true identity remained unknown, gender is not reported.

Victim Demographic Trends

The 2017 survey showed us that sextortion is not isolated to teens and adults; nearly 1/4 of the 2017 participants were 13 years old or younger when they were sextorted.

Gender and age do seem to impact how a young person experiences sextortion, including where they are sextorted, how or if they know their offender, and the responses they receive when reporting sextortion.

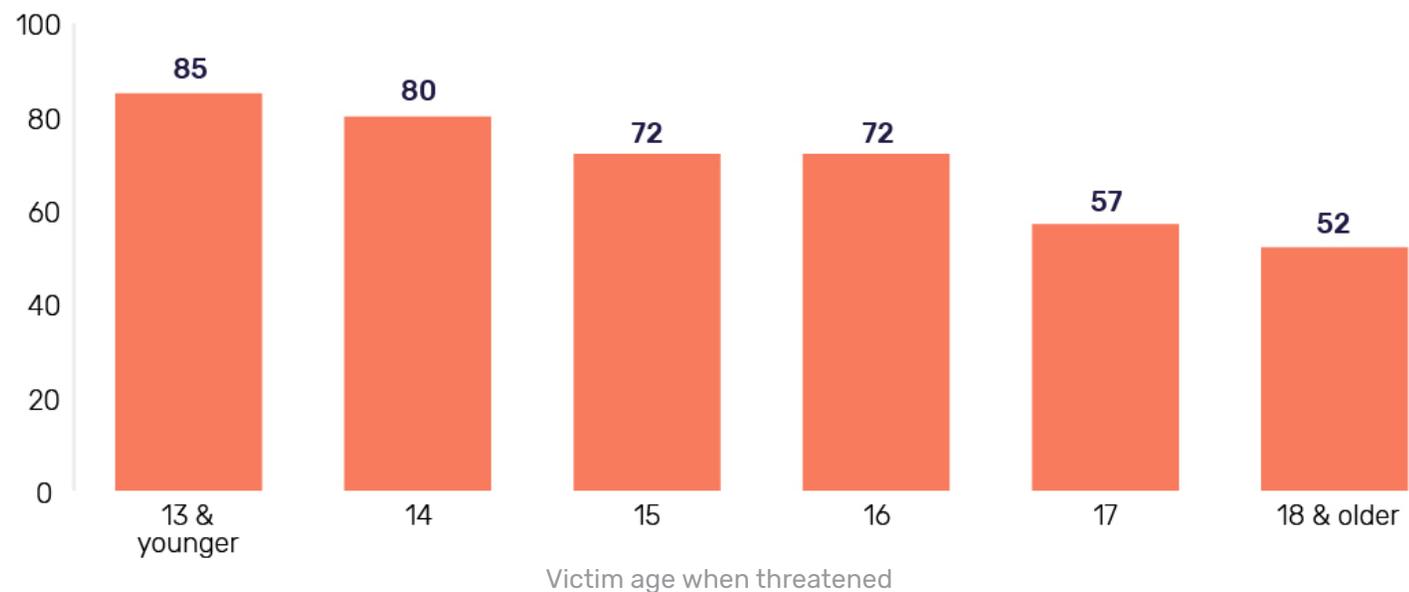
"It was someone I didn't know and he messaged me on [social networking site]. He was requesting me to do sexual acts for money and I declined. He threatened to come to my home and I said no, leave me alone. He then sent my address to me as proof he knew where I lived and claimed to have pics of me which he then sent to me. He threatened to mail them to my family and post them online."

— 15 YEAR OLD FEMALE VICTIM, ONLINE OFFENDER

Younger victims were more likely to experience sextortion via an online offender and be threatened for explicit imagery. Approximately 60% of participants who were ages 13 and younger when threatened, and slightly more than 50% of participants aged 14, did not know their offender offline. Conversely, teenage participants ranging in age from 15-17 were the most likely (57%) participants to be threatened by an offender they knew offline. While threats for explicit imagery were the most common demands across the sample, younger participants were more likely than older participants to have experienced this.

Male participants (age 18+) were the most likely group of participants to be threatened within two weeks of first contact (72%)³ and were most likely to be threatened for money (66%). Male victims also generally reported a more positive experience with law enforcement (if they reported to them) with 37% finding them helpful, compared to 29% of female victims. In general, however, reporting to law enforcement across the sample was limited (17%).

Figure 2 | Percentage of victims threatened for explicit imagery



³ Other groups included males <18 (43% within two weeks), females 18+ (36% within two weeks), females <18 (36% within two weeks).

2017 REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

60%

Of online victims are threatened within 2 weeks of initial contact

47%

Of all victims experienced threats daily

Demands

The nature of the relationship—either offline or online—continues to yield different experiences in the timing, nature, and duration of threats.

Threats did not typically begin immediately in offline relationships—for the majority (86%) of these cases, participants reported threats began at least 2 weeks after first meeting the offender. Threats frequently lasted for an extended period of time: approximately 1 in 3 reported the threats lasted for 3 months or longer.

Threats began quickly in cases involving online offenders, with 60% of online victims receiving threats within 2 weeks of first contact—1/4 of whom were threatened during their first contact with the offender.

Across the sample, **threats were made frequently, with nearly half (47%) of participants reporting being threatened daily**, and repeatedly, with more than half (52%) of participants reporting receiving threats between 1 and 9 times per day, 1 in 4 being threatened between 10 and 19 times per day, and 1 in 4 being threatened more than 20 times per day.

Threats overwhelmingly involved demands for explicit imagery.⁴ Demands for explicit imagery were reported by 86% of victims threatened by online offenders and 62% from offline offenders. Across the sample, other demands included telling the victim how to look or what to do in pictures or videos (41%), getting the victim to stay in a relationship (40%), meeting online for sexual activity via webcam (30%), meeting in-person (18%), telling the victim to hurt themselves (16%), send sexual pictures or videos of someone else (friend, sibling, others) (10%), and rarely, money (7%)

“He said that if I didn’t send nudes to him he would post pictures he already had online and make sure all my friends and family saw them, then proceeded to take screenshots of people I was friends with on Facebook.”

– 15 YEAR OLD FEMALE VICTIM, ONLINE OFFENDER

⁴ Typically this included depictions of sex acts or exposing genitalia.

2017 REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

62%

Of victims complied with demands in an effort to make the threats stop

68%

Of victims reported that threats became more frequent after they complied with demands

In nearly 1 in 3 cases, offenders actually carried out or attempted to carry out threats against the victim. Threats were more often carried out when the offender and victim knew each other in-person (38% of the time) compared to those who knew the perpetrator online (20% of the time).

“Showed up at my house and job a few times. Would message me randomly about once a month or so to tell me how worthless I am and how he hopes I fail in life.”

– 13 YEAR OLD FEMALE VICTIM, OFFLINE OFFENDER

When threats were carried out, they most typically involved sharing explicit images of the victim (57%), harassment via voice call and text (48%), online stalking (42%), and offline stalking (36%). Other less frequently reported threats carried out included things such as getting the victim in trouble with school/family (34%), sexual or physical assault (30%), posting personal information about the victim (22%), and setting up fake profiles of the victim (14%).

Breaking the Cycle of Threats

Sextortion has a significant and lasting impact on victims. Victims report feelings of shame, embarrassment, and fear. It is impacting both their online and offline lives—they are losing friends, changing schools, and relocating to new neighborhoods.

Frequently, victims reported attempting to address the threats themselves. Nearly 2 in 3 victims blocked the perpetrator in an attempt to stop the threats; however for 45% of these participants the offender merely leveraged other accounts and platforms to continue threatening the victim.

Nearly 2 in 3 victims complied with threats in hopes the offender would be satisfied and go away; however, for more than half (64%) the threats continued. In fact, for those who complied with threats, 68% said the threats became more frequent in the aftermath.

“I always blocked him in every way even reported him online but he would still make fake profiles to make my life a living hell.”

– 17 YEAR OLD FEMALE VICTIM, OFFLINE OFFENDER

Many victims are seeking help—from friends, family, law enforcement, and tech platforms. However, as in the 2015 survey, nearly 1 in 3 participants of the 2017 survey stayed silent about being sextorted.

Of participants who disclosed, slightly more than half (54%) reported their experience to a friend or family member; within this group, they were most likely to report to a friend or a non-adult family member (65%) and about equally likely to turn to a parent (37%) or other trusted adult (36%). Few are reporting to platforms (26%) and even fewer report to law enforcement (17%). For those who did report to law enforcement or tech companies, approximately 1 in 3 found the response unhelpful. These participants reported a range of experiences—from no action or response at all, to being blamed.

“They actually made me feel like the perpetrator, not the victim. This is an epidemic for young teens. They are victims! Because of police involvement, I developed anxiety, depression, and PTSD. This is not okay. They made me feel uncomfortable and scared.”

— 13 YEAR OLD FEMALE VICTIM, ONLINE OFFENDER



Shame continues to be the leading reason victims do not report sextortion. **Eighty-four percent of participants who didn't disclose said shame/embarrassment prevented them from telling family or friends and more than half said it stopped them from telling the police (64%) or reporting to a platform (52%).** In addition, 79% of participants said fear of getting in trouble stopped them from telling a family member or friend. Other leading concerns included a belief they could handle it themselves, a belief that reporting wouldn't do any good, and concern that the offender would find out.

Participants reported a wide range of changes in their offline and online lives as a result of their experiences. Many modified online habits including changing passwords (45%), closing accounts (38%), and changing usernames (36%).

Approximately 1 in 3 sought medical attention, 1 in 8 changed schools, and 1 in 10 moved entirely.

"It made me feel worthless. Everyone at school pegged me as a slut off of some weak moments, and it made me very depressed. I had honestly thought suicide was the answer for a while."

— 14 YEAR OLD FEMALE VICTIM, OFFLINE OFFENDER

Figure 3 Percentage of victims:	FAMILY OR FRIENDS	POLICE	ONLINE PLATFORM
Feeling embarrassed or ashamed	84%	64%	52%
Fear of getting in trouble	79%	--	--
Belief they could handle it themselves	55%	--	--
Belief that it wouldn't do any good	32%	45%	54%
Fear the offender would find out	33%	37%	38%
Threats ended before reporting	19%	32%	16%
Didn't occur to them	--	16%	30%

Moving Forward

The 2017 survey shared important information about how young people experience sextortion and how we can better protect them. Sextortion is happening to kids and teens and the shame and fear associated with disclosing sextortion is leaving them vulnerable and isolated from help.

Right now, offenders use technology to threaten, stalk, and entrap sextortion victims. We must continue to improve our ability to proactively detect sextortion attempts on platforms to prevent harm and, when that fails, take the burden off victims to report. Critically, **we must also improve how platforms respond to reports of abuse that are being made**—to ensure early warning signs are not overlooked and victims are protected. Too many participants of the 2017 survey shared they found platforms unhelpful or unresponsive.

“My family thinks it’s still my fault, and they don’t want to be around me as much. People from my school found out private details about me, and it ruined my social life. I’ve only just rebuilt myself.”

– 16 YEAR OLD FEMALE VICTIM, ONLINE OFFENDER

Platforms are a critical piece of the puzzle, but cannot alone protect kids from sextortion. In order to truly put kids’ health and safety first, the shame and embarrassment experienced by victims, for the malicious acts of another, must be eliminated. **Blame and consequences must focus on the perpetrator, not the victim.** To make this a reality, a concerted effort is needed across communities, within our social networks of friends and families, and among law enforcement, to better support victims and hold offenders accountable.

At Thorn, we are continuing to build technology to protect kids from sexual exploitation and combating harmful stigmas associated with victimization. At stopsextortion.com, we offer tools and tips for peers, educators, caregivers, policymakers, and tech companies to support kids who have experienced sextortion.

Growing up in a digital age should not mean kids can’t continue to explore and be curious. Just the opposite. However, it does change some of how we keep them safe. We must meet them where they are and deliver the tools and conversations they need—building safe digital environments, arming them with the knowledge to navigate digital risks, and creating an atmosphere that encourages seeking help should they need it.

This report was made possible with the marketing research and analysis conducted by consultants, Alice Gold and Melissa Perrot.

Insights in this report were built upon findings from our 2015 survey collaboration with the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire: [Sextortion: Findings from a Survey of 1,631 Victims](#).

THANK YOU

We are grateful to each and every sextortion survivor who took time to complete our survey. Without their gracious participation and willingness to provide detailed and heartfelt descriptions of their experiences, we would not be able to share these key insights on how sextortion is perpetrated. With their help, we have been able to develop resources like stopsextortion.com to help prevent this issue before it happens and provide key resources for those who need help.

We would also like to thank Facebook for providing Thorn with ad coupons to assist in the recruitment of survey respondents, and our many partners for their feedback, assistance, and support in this research.