

MASOC PRACTICE UPDATE: Prevention and Progress



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[Sextortion of Minors: Characteristics and Dynamics](#)

BOTTOM LINE

Without a contact offense, it is easy to lose sight of the impact of sextortion on those who have been targeted. Understanding the impact as well as who is causing the harm are the first steps towards prevention and more effective interventions.

RESEARCH

Sextortion differs from other forms of online sexual harassment (e.g., sexting) because it focuses on the *threat* to expose a sexual image to coerce someone into doing something even if exposure of the image never happens. It is not a legal term that defines a crime in federal or state law. There is growing awareness and concern because youth who are victimized by sextortion or other forms of teen dating violence report significantly more health complaints and problem behaviors than non-victims. A 2016 report by the USDOJ found that sextortion is the most significantly increasing form of online child exploitation based upon responses of law enforcement. This study offers insights into the context, characteristics and dynamics of sextortion.

As expected, most adolescent cases involved perpetration by someone known to the person victimized. However, 40% of these cases involved perpetration by someone that the teens met online. More than 90% of individuals perpetrating sextortion were boys or men. The authors point out that this gender imbalance is consistent with other studies. The more extreme the sexual aggression and intimidation, the more pronounced is the gender imbalance. Intimidation included pressure to produce sexual images, online stalking, threats of assaults, and demands to harm themselves. The study also found that threats, harassment, and other harm to minors were more serious in many respects than what was done to those victimized as young adults. Nearly 25% endured threats that lasted more than six months and nearly half of youth said the threats were carried out.

Adolescent victims also said they were reluctant to seek advice or help. Only half told anyone, a significant difference from the greater willingness to seek help by teens who experience other forms of teen dating violence. The authors suggest that this may be a result of greater shame and embarrassment from the mostly female victims and fears that they would be blamed for the situation.

The article offers resources for those victimized who are able to seek help. The article also offers information for addressing sextortion through various programs aimed at middle and high school

students. The evidence-based programs include Safe Dates, Green Dot, and The Fourth R. Each of these programs address some of the crucial social-emotional developmental skills, information about healthy and unhealthy relationships and educating bystanders about how to intervene when they see pressured interactions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

These findings highlight just how harmful sextortion can be. As with other non-contact crimes such as exhibitionism and voyeurism, it can be easy to dismiss these behaviors as “nuisance offenses” compared to contact sexual offending; this is a mistake. Professionals will want to screen for sextortion and related behaviors when interviewing and/or working with young people, and provide education or more intensive interventions when these issues emerge.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

The early days of our field were noteworthy for attempts to understand the risk for sexual offending as well as the harm it causes. The focus was often on contact offending, and this is – understandably – where much of our focus remains. This study shows once again that the internet has become a game-changer; behaviors reflecting poor judgment in the moment can now have life-altering, disastrous consequences. Early education is crucial for prevention when the person causing the harm is also a young person. For older individuals, emerging public policy regarding privacy protections may have a larger impact on what behaviors can be done in secrecy and what can be tracked and effectively prosecuted.

CITATION:

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Sextortion (threats to expose sexual images to coerce victims to provide additional pictures, sex, or other favors) has been identified as an emerging online threat to youth, but research is scarce. We describe sextortion incidents from a large sample of victims (n = 1,385) and examine whether incidents occurring to minors (n = 572) are more or less serious than those experienced by young adults (n = 813).

Methods: We ran advertising campaigns on Facebook to recruit victims of sextortion, ages 18–25, for an online survey. We use cross tabulations and logistic regression to analyze incidents that began when 18- and 19-year-old respondents were minors (ages 17 and younger) and compare them with incidents that began at ages 18–25 years. Most minor victims were female (91%) and aged 16 or 17 when incidents started (75%).

Results: Almost 60% of respondents who were minors when sextortion occurred knew perpetrators in person, often as romantic partners. Most knowingly provided images to perpetrators (75%), but also felt pressured to do so (67%). About one-third were threatened with physical assaults and menaced for >6 months. Half did not disclose incidents, and few reported to police or websites. Perpetrators against minors (vs. adults) were more likely to pressure victims into producing initial sexual images, demand additional images, threaten victims for >6 months, and urge victims to harm themselves.

Conclusions: Sextortion incidents were serious victimizations, and often co-occurred with teen dating violence. We describe resources so that practitioners can help victims find support and legal advice and remove posted images.