Helping Youth Navigate Online Sextortion and Exploitation

Sexually Motivated Sextortion, Financially Motivated Sextortion, and Sadistic Online Exploitation

As children spend seemingly ever-increasing amounts of time online, including on social media and online gaming, the threats to children — especially threats involving exploitation and abuse — continue to grow. This document focuses on three especially pernicious manifestations of these threats —

(1) sexually motivated sextortion, (2) financially motivated sextortion, and (3) sadistic online exploitation

— by outlining the threats, offering initial thoughts on what you can do to respond, and providing resources for further information and assistance.

In this document:

1. **Know the issues**

2. **What can you do?**

3. **Resources, additional information, and requests for guidance**

1 Know the issues

A. Sexually Motivated Sextortion (SMS)

In the typical sexually motivated sextortion fact pattern, an offender—a stranger or acquaintance, an adult or peer—obtains sexually explicit imagery of a targeted minor—for example, by persuading or enticing the minor to create and send the imagery—and then threatens to widely distribute that imagery, or to physically harm the minor, unless the minor provides more imagery.[1] In many cases, these sextortion offenders are adult men who pretend to be similar-aged to their minor victims. The offenders' ultimate goal in this type of sextortion scheme is to obtain sexually explicit imagery of the targeted minor. To achieve their ends, offenders often groom children and build relationships with them, sometimes over sustained periods of time.

The rise and ease-of-use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) exacerbates and complicates the threat. Now, offenders can use AI to morph a benign image of a minor (say, an image taken from the minor's social media page) to create a highly realistic deepfake that appears to show the minor engaging in sexually explicit conduct. The offender can then threaten to widely release that AI-generated image unless the minor produces and shares authentic sexually explicit imagery.[2]

B. Financially Motivated Sextortion (FMS)

FMS is similar to sexually motivated sextortion, except that FMS offenders' ultimate goal is money, not additional sexually explicit imagery. In the typical FMS fact-pattern, an offender—usually an adult male—targets a minor victim—usually an early-to-mid teenage boy. The offender adopts the persona of a peer (usually a girl) of the targeted minor, engages the minor over social media, and persuades the minor to send a sexually explicit image of himself to the offender. Once the minor sends the image, the offender reveals himself to be an extortionist and, through a crushing fear and pressure campaign, threatens to release the imagery to the minor's friends, family, school, etc., unless the minor sends the offender money—usually in the form of payment through online payment providers or gift cards. Many FMS offenders are located in Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria, though offenders live in many different countries, including the United States.

Here, too, generative AI exacerbates the threat. Now, offenders can (and sometimes do) take a benign image of the victim, use AI to morph that image into an image that makes it seem as though the minor is engaging in sexually explicit conduct, and then threaten to release that image unless the minor pays the offender.

The FBI has reported an alarming increase in FMS,[3] as has the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC). And we believe that, due to the nature of the offense and the resulting victimization, these reported numbers understate the scope of the problem, as we suspect that many minors will not report out of shame, embarrassment, fear of getting arrested, and the like.

FMS has devastating consequences for the child victims, even resulting in a number of teenage boys dying by suicide as a direct result of having been the victims of FMS. Any number is too many, and countless other victims have otherwise suffered deeply.

C. Sadistic Online Exploitation (SOE)

SOE presents a related but separate threat to children. In the SOE context, the offenders—usually boys and men—target vulnerable children and persuade, induce, entice, or coerce them into recording themselves engaging in various types of degrading, humiliating, and violent acts, including, for example, carving the offender's name (or alias) into their chest or upper thigh with a knife; producing sexually explicit material of themselves; harming themselves, pets, family members, and others; and committing suicide. Other times, the offenders use threats—of violence, or to disclose sensitive material showing the victim, or otherwise—to coerce a victim's compliance.

SOE offenders often operate in concert with others where they provide advice to one another, encourage one another, and share the degrading, humiliating, and violent material that they obtain from their victims—often in an effort to gain or enhance their status in the network. Like sexually and financially motivated extortion, the SOE problem is global, as SOE offenders and victims are located in the U.S. and abroad. Also like FMS, the SOE problem is rapidly expanding at alarming rates, with NCMEC even seeing an over 200% increase in reports in a single year, and we expect the numbers to continue to grow. We also expect that offenders will start to use AI to facilitate their efforts at exploiting kids in this way.

2 What can you do?

Understand the Problem.

Sexually motivated sextortion, FMS, and SOE harm all sorts of children, from the particularly vulnerable (e.g., children without strong family systems, who struggle academically or emotionally, who are lonely) to those who seem to have everything going for them (e.g., strong family supports, academic / athletic / extracurricular successes, lots of friends). Individuals working with children—counselors, school psychologists, social workers, teachers, administrators, coaches, youth-serving professionals, caregivers, and others—need to learn about these threats, the ways they sometimes manifest (e.g., acts of self-harm, unexplained changes in behavior, etc.), and the ways that AI can exacerbate and complicate them, so that they can understand what a child may be enduring and ensure an appropriate response.

Develop and implement a victim-centered response program.

Child victims of sexually motivated sextortion, FMS, or SOE can be deeply traumatized as a result. Professionals who work with children need to understand that and respond accordingly. For example, whether a private image is sent or generated by AI, a child whose private image is shared and who is subsequently sextorted should be treated as a victim, not as someone who himself is a wrongdoer or is blameworthy, and a child victim of these offenses should not be made to feel like it was their fault that the victimization happened. It is hard enough for a child to come forward and seek help when they been victimized in these deeply personal, deeply sensitive ways, and

there is a need to respond in ways that support and respect, and do not exacerbate feelings of shame and judgment. Professionals should also anticipate that a child victim who produced and sent imagery of him- or herself may have a different constellation of emotions, fears, and worries than a child whose victimization involved offender-created deepfake material, although these victims, too, often suffer severely as a result of such imagery.

Invest in prevention programming.

It is imperative to implement prevention programming for students, parents, and professionals working with youth. Bringing awareness to the problem, helping children and parents identify warning signs, and educating children and parents on ways to make children's online activity safer are just some of the steps that can be taken. And although prevention programming in this space can be difficult—due to the subject matter, the harms involved, and for other reasons—there are resources and partners available to help provide prevention programming to students, families, and staff.

For example,

OCEPI has published a document outlining Ten Best Practices for Prevention Programs, available at: **bit.ly/OCEPI-BP**

OCEPI has also published guidance for school-based professionals and school leaders on children's misuse of AI technology to create sexually explicit deepfake imagery of others, including of other children; that guidance is available at: **bit.ly/OCEPI-AI**

3 Resources, additional information, and requests for guidance

Combatting sexually motivated sextortion, FMS, and SOE is a complicated and evolving undertaking that requires a careful, deliberate, and multi-pronged response. There are a number of resources available to help. For example, NCMEC, the United States's leading non-governmental child protection organization, has multiple resources:

- Sextortion information: **ncmec.org/sextortion**

- 24-hour hotline for children and families: 1-800-THE-LOST (1-800-843-5678)

- CyberTipline, which allows victims to file formal reports that NCMEC reviews and assesses before making available to the appropriate law enforcement agency: **report.cybertip.org**

- Take It Down: allows children to anonymously take proactive steps in an effort to remove sexually explicit content depicting them from various online platforms: **takeitdown.ncmec.org**

The Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force Program is a national network of 61 coordinated task forces, representing more than 5,400 federal, state and local law enforcement and prosecutorial agencies. Regional ICAC Task Forces may be able to assist with prevention efforts, provide prevention materials, and exist as a resource for questions and concerns regarding technology-facilitated crimes against children: **icactaskforce.org**

In addition, OCEPI is available to provide additional resources, information, and guidance There are resources and partners available to help develop policy and practices, as well as for providing prevention programming to students, families, and staff. Please visit our website: **www.icactaskforce.org/ocepi** and reach out to us through the "Contact Us" link on our website if we can help.

Warning signs to watch for

- Self-harm

- Carving/defacing things with names or numbers

- Sudden anxiety or withdrawal

- Unexplained changes in behavior, especially after being online

- Kids can be targeted in open forums or community/support groups

Changes in teenage behavior can have many causes. Whatever the reason, we want to check in on red flags, and remember to include online activity in the 'check-in' conversations.

[1] For instance, in May 2025, a man in Silver Spring, Maryland admitted having sextorted 108 girls online, including by threatening to post compromising pictures of the girls and threatening to go to the girls' homes. **www.justice.gov/usao-md/pr/silver-spring-man-pleads-guilty-sextortion-more-100-minors-located-throughout-united**

[2] This is far from the only way in which offenders use AI to harm children. For example, offenders have been known to use AI to create fake headlines and spread misleading or false information about children.

[3] **www.fbi.gov/how-we-can-help-you/scams-and-safety/common-frauds-and-scams/sextortion**

Provide feedback on resources: