Trends identified in CyberTipline sextortion reports

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's CyberTipline receives reports regarding child sexual exploitation, including "sextortion". Sextortion is a relatively new form of sexual exploitation that occurs primarily online and in which non-physical forms of coercion are utilized, such as blackmail, to acquire sexual content (photos/videos) of the child, obtain money from the child or engage in sex with the child.

Since the CyberTipline began tracking sextortion in October 2013, these reports have been on the rise. In just the first two full years, between 2014 and 2015, there was a 90% increase in the total number of reports; a pattern that has continued, with sextortion reports up 150% within the first several months of 2016 compared to the number of reports in that same time-frame in 2014.

To review this increasing form of sexual victimization in greater depth, NCMEC analyzed the CyberTipline sextortion reports received between October 2013 through April 2016 (n=1,428) and found the following results regarding the child victims, the reporters to the CyberTipline and the offenders' behaviors:

Who are the child victims?

- 78% of the reports involved female children and 15% involved male children (In 8% of reports, child gender could not be determined).
- Male and female children each ranged in age from 8-17 years old and had an average age of fifteen years old; however, compared to female children, it was less common for male children to be on the younger end of the spectrum.
- In 24% of the reports, reporters mentioned that they suspected or knew that additional children were targeted by the same offender.

Who are making the reports to the CyberTipline?

- Overall, Internet companies were the most common reporter of sextortion to the CyberTipline (33%), followed by the child victims (24%) and parents/guardians (22%). However, almost half of Internet company reports made to the CyberTipline were known to have originated as self-reports, making the child victims the most common direct or indirect reporter of sextortion incidents that were ultimately processed by the CyberTipline (38%).

- o Other reporters to the CyberTipline included peers (e.g. friends, romantic partners, siblings; 7%), authority figures (e.g. police, teachers, counselors; 5%) and online strangers to the child (3%).
- Despite these overall patterns, important child gender and age differences emerged:
  - o While male children were significantly more likely than female children to self-report, female children were significantly more likely than male children to have Internet companies and peers report on their behalf. Parents/guardians and other authority figures were equally likely to report for male and female children.
  - o While self- and Internet company-reports were more likely among older children, parent/guardian-, authority figure- and online stranger-reports were more likely among younger children. Peers were equally likely to report for older and younger children.

Where, when, how and why is sextortion occurring?

Where?

- Sextortion most commonly occurred via phone/tablet messaging apps, social networking sites and video chats.
- Of the reports in which an online location was mentioned, the total number of platforms that offenders used to communicate with children ranged widely from one platform to as many as seven platforms. While over half of reports (56%) indicated that only one platform was involved, the use of multiple platforms was indicated in 42% of the reports. When communication occurred across multiple online locations, a common pattern emerged whereby the offender would intentionally and systematically move the communication with the child from one online platform type to another.
  - o In a typical incident involving multiple platforms, the offender approached the child on a social networking site where they learned personal information about the child, such as who their family and friends are or where they go to school. The offender then attempted to move the communication to an anonymous messaging app or live-stream video chat where they obtained sexually explicit content from the child. These images and/or videos were then used as blackmail against the child, such as by threatening to post the explicit content of the child on those same social networking sites for their family and friends to see unless the child produced additional sexually explicit content, paid them money or met them in person for sex.

When?

- In 39% of incidents, there was enough information to determine the waiting period between the time the offender acquired the sexually explicit content of the child and the

time they blackmailed them with it. Of the cases in which it was known, most (80%) appeared to occur the same day. However, 20% of these reports indicated prolonged waiting periods before the child was blackmailed with the acquired content; in some cases, as long as years later.

- When the blackmail was delayed for an extended period of time, it appeared to commonly cause the child confusion, such as not remembering even taking the picture or, if they did remember taking it, not understanding how the offender could have acquired it from their online account or from "someone else" who was initially given the image.

How?

- Many different manipulation tactics were used by offenders, often in combination, to achieve their apparent objectives. The most common tactic that reporters indicated were the offender threatening to post previously acquired sexual content online (67%) and, often, specifically threatening to post it in a place for family and friends to see (29%) if the child did not comply.
- Other tactics used by the offenders include:
  - Reciprocation, whereby the offender coerced the child into providing sexual content by promising reciprocity ("I'll show you if you show me")
  - Developing a bond by establishing a friendship/romantic relationship
  - Secretly recording sexually explicit videos of the child during video chats
  - Physically threatening to hurt or sexually assault the child or family members
  - Using multiple online identities against a given child, such as the person blackmailing for sexual content as well as pretending to be a supportive friend or a sympathetic victim of the same offender
  - Pretending to be younger and/or a female
  - Accessing the child's online account without authorization and stealing sexual content of the child
  - Threatening to create sexual content of the child using digital-editing tools to merge the child's face with another person's body
  - Threatening to commit suicide if the child does not provide sexual content
  - Creating a fake profile as the child and threatening to post sexual content of the child
  - Initially offering something to the child, such as money or drugs, in exchange for sexual explicit photos/videos
  - Pretending to work for a modeling agency to obtain sexual content of the child
  - Saving sexually explicit conversations with the child and threatening to post them online

- While the majority of these manipulation tactics were used equally against male and female children, there were significant differences in the use of certain methods. More specifically, when child victims were male, offenders were significantly more likely to pretend to be younger and/or a female, offer to engage in sexual reciprocity through shared images or by live-streaming, record the child unknowingly and then threaten to post the images/videos so family and friends could see. In contrast, when child victims were female, offenders were significantly more likely to offer something to get initial sexually explicit content from them, such as money or drugs.

Why?

- Based on the information that was indicated or known when the CyberTipline report was made, offenders appeared to have committed sextortion with one of three primary objectives (In 2% of these reports, multiple objectives were indicated; in 11% of reports, the objective could not be determined):
    1. To acquire increasingly more explicit sexual content (photos/videos) of the child (78%)
        - Female children were blackmailed significantly more often for sexually explicit content (84%) compared to male children (53%).
        - When sexually explicit content was the apparent objective, offenders commonly escalated in their demands, both in the quantity of images/videos and/or in the level of egregiousness. It was not uncommon for children to believe that complying would make the blackmail stop. In some extreme instances, reports indicated that the sextortion had escalated to the child being blackmailed for videos of a certain length while performing specific sexually explicit behaviors and sometimes for the child to even include other children, such as siblings or peers, in the images/videos.
    2. To obtain money or goods from the child (7%)
        - Male children were blackmailed significantly more often for money/goods (32%) compared to female children (2%)
        - When money/goods were the apparent objective, offenders commonly demanded for money to be sent via a money transfer service or online payment system. It was also increasingly common for offenders to try to get credit card information, either directly or by having the child sign up for a particular website that required them to enter that information. Less commonly, offenders sometimes demanded other payments or goods, such as game currency, cell phones or clothing.
    3. To have sex with the child (5%)

- There was no statistically significant difference between male (3%) and female (5%) children in the rate that they were blackmailed to meet for sex.
- In contrast to the majority of sextortion reports made to the CyberTipline, when sex was the apparent objective, there was more commonly an indication in the report that the offender might be someone that the child knows in person, such as an ex-boyfriend or other individual in their community. However, when that was not the case and the offender seemed to want anonymity, demanding sex appeared to be a ploy to achieve their real objective of acquiring sexually explicit content. In these reports, the offender first demanded sex and then subsequently demanded content instead, likely as a way to make their second demand appear as a relatively more desirable option and increase the chances of compliance.

What are the effects of sextortion?

- As a result of sextortion, child victims commonly experienced a range of negative outcomes, including hopelessness, fear, anxiety and depression. Overall, it was indicated in 13% of CyberTipline sextortion reports that the child victim had experienced some type of negative outcome. Of those reports with some type of negative outcome, it was indicated that about 1 in 3 children (31%; 4% of all sextortion reports) had engaged in self-harm, threatened suicide or attempted suicide as a result of the victimization.
  - There were no child gender or age differences in regard to negative outcomes; negative outcomes were indicated equally for male and female children as well as for younger and older children, even among the more severe outcomes.
- Regardless of children's gender or age, when it was indicated in the report that they had experienced a negative outcome as a result of the sextortion, it was also common that concern was expressed for other potential victims of sextortion and was a likely reason for making the report.

For more information, visit our website at www.missingkids.org or contact us at 1-800-THE-LOST® (1-800-843-5678).