

FBI and partners issue National Public Safety Alert on financial sextortion schemes

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The FBI, in partnership with Homeland Security Investigations and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, is issuing a national public safety alert regarding an explosion in incidents of children and teens being coerced into sending explicit images online and extorted for money—a crime known as financial sextortion.

Over the past year, law enforcement has received over 7,000 reports related to the online financial sextortion of minors, resulting in at least 3,000 victims, primarily boys, and more than a dozen suicides. A large percentage of these sextortion schemes originate outside of the United States, and primarily in West African countries such as Nigeria and Ivory Coast. As many children enter winter break this holiday season, the FBI and our partners implore parents and caregivers to engage with their kids about financial sextortion schemes so we can prevent them in the first place.

“The FBI has seen a horrific increase in reports of financial sextortion schemes targeting minor boys—and the fact is that the many victims who are afraid to come forward are not even included in those numbers,” said FBI Director Christopher Wray. “The FBI is here for victims, but we also need parents and caregivers to work with us to prevent this crime before it happens and help children come forward if it does. Victims may

feel like there is no way out—it is up to all of us to reassure them that they are not in trouble, there is hope, and they are not alone.”

“The protection of children is a society’s most sacred duty,” said Assistant Attorney General Kenneth A. Polite, Jr. of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division. “It calls on each of us to do everything we can to keep kids from harm, including ensuring the threats they face are brought into the light and confronted. Armed with the information in this alert message, parents, caregivers, and children themselves should feel empowered to detect fake identities, take steps to reject any attempt to obtain private material, and if targeted, have a plan to seek help from a trusted adult.”

Financial sextortion schemes occur in online environments where young people feel most comfortable—using common social media sites, gaming sites, or video chat applications that feel familiar and safe. On these platforms, online predators often use fake female accounts and target minor males, between 14 to 17 years old but the FBI has interviewed victims as young as 10 years old.

“The sexual exploitation of children is a deplorable crime. HSI special agents will continue to exhaust every resource to identify, locate, and apprehend predators to ensure they face justice,” said Steve K. Francis, HSI Acting Executive Associate Director. “Criminals who lurk in platforms on the internet are not as anonymous as they think. HSI will continue to leverage cutting-edge technology to end these heinous acts.”

Through deception, predators convince the young person to produce an explicit video or photo. Once predators acquire the images, they threaten to release the compromising material unless the victim sends money or gift cards. Often the predators demand payment through a variety of peer-to-peer payment applications. In many cases, however, predators release the images even if payments are made. The shame, fear, and confusion that victims feel when they are caught in this cycle often prevents them from asking for help or reporting the abuse.

“This is a growing crisis and we’ve seen sextortion completely devastate children and families,” said Michelle DeLaune, CEO of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. “As the leading nonprofit focused on child protection, we’ve seen first-hand the rise in these cases worldwide. The best defense against this crime is to talk to your children about what to do if they’re targeted online. We want everyone to know help is out there and they’re not alone.”

What if you or your child is a victim?

If young people are being exploited, they are victims of a crime and should report it. Contact the FBI Portland Field Office, call 1-800-CALL-FBI, or report it online at tips.fbi.gov.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) has outlined steps parents and young people can take if they or their child are a victim of sextortion, including:

Remember, the predator is to blame, not your child or you.

Get help before deciding whether to pay money or otherwise comply with the predator. Cooperating or paying rarely stops the blackmail and continued harassment.

REPORT the predator's account via the platform's safety feature.

BLOCK the predator and DO NOT DELETE the profile or messages because that can be helpful to law enforcement in identifying and stopping them.

Let NCMEC help get explicit images of you off the internet.

Visit missingkids.org/IsYourExplicitContentOutThere to learn how to notify companies yourself or visit cybertipline.org to report to us for help with the process.

Ask for help. This can be a very complex problem and may require help from adults or law enforcement.

If you don't feel that you have adults in your corner, you can reach out to NCMEC for support at gethelp@ncmec.org or call NCMEC at 1-800-THE-LOST.

Take a moment to learn how sextortion works and how to talk to your children about it. Information, resources, and conversation guides are available at fbi.gov/StopSextortion.