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Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC)

October 4, 2023

Attention Caregivers,

The Wisconsin ICAC Task Force recently advised law enforcement of a troubling trend occurring statewide in regards to financial sextortion. The ICAC Task Force reported a significant increase in reported sextortion incidents involving children & teens since the fall of 2021. If you have children or teens in your home or life, that are utilizing a smart phone, please take time to educate them on this topic, if age appropriate.

A typical incident of financial sextortion involves an offender duping a victim (trends indicate teenage boys) into sending nude or otherwise compromising images in-trade for other nude or compromising images via a variety of social media platforms. Upon receipt of the images, the offender will contact the victim and threaten to post or share the compromising material sent by the victims with the victim's family, school, friends, etc., unless money is sent to the offender via an electronic platform. (Giving in to the extortion and sending money, often leads to a request for more money.)

Unfortunately, this type of victimization has led to numerous suicides across the United States, as victims feel they have nowhere to turn. Most of the financial sextortion cases targeting youth originate in Nigeria, Philippines and the Ivory Coast in Africa, making prosecution very difficult.

Education & awareness is the most significant strategy in which to combat sextortion. There are many available resources: The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) has tools to remove and identify Child Sexual Abuse Material from common websites and platforms: [Take It Down \(ncmec.org\)](https://www.ncmec.org) Family resources are available at [NetSmartz Home \(missingkids.org\)](https://www.missingkids.org) Wisconsin DOJ also has resources on its website related internet safety [ICAC Task Force Home | Wisconsin Department of Justice \(state.wi.us\)](https://www.state.wi.us) and also have their own podcast Protect Kids Online (PKO). These resources are free to all.

Accompanying this situational awareness alert is an article published by the Washington Post on October 2, 2023 pertaining to sextortion that offers additional insight to this troubling trend.

Thank you for staying informed and educating our youth!

‘IDK what to do’: Thousands of teen boys are being extorted in sexting scams

An unprecedented number of cases is leaving families devastated

By Chris Moody

October 2, 2023 at 7:00 a.m. EDT

Lynn and Paul were sitting in their Seattle home one night earlier this year when their son, Michael, a 17-year-old high school football player, burst into the room and made a beeline for his mom’s purse on the dining room table. Paul asked what he was up to. Their son paused, took a breath and leaned against the wall.

“I’m being blackmailed,” he said.

He had been chatting with a person through Instagram and Snapchat who purported to be a 16-year-old girl. “She” saw his profile and told hi he was cute. Michael had never met the person, but the account was filled with photos and details about the girl’s life that made it appear real. The two flirted back and forth.

The person behind the account asked to see a photo of him naked, and specifically requested he include his face. Alone in his room that night, Michael dashed off a picture he took with his phone.

Suddenly, the person, who had seemed so sweet and fun while chatting for weeks, demanded Michael send hundreds of dollars through Zelle. Michael refused, the person threatened, they would send the nude photo to his family and friends. He tried to set up a Zelle account on his phone, but it required his social security number. That’s why he was digging in his mom’s purse: He was hoping she might have his card there.

Michael had fallen prey to what online safety and law enforcement experts call financial sextortion, in which predators befriend victims online under false pretenses, entice them to send incriminating photos and then demand payment under threat that they’ll expose the photos to family and friends.

The number of sextortion cases targeting young people “has exploded in the past couple of years,” with teen boys being specific targets, said Lauren Coffren, executive director of the Exploited Children Division at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC).

“They’re using shame, embarrassment and fear, and they’re tapping into that,” Coffren said. “They’re exploiting children’s worst nightmares.”

NCMEC, which serves as a [clearinghouse for records of abuse](#), received more than 10,000 tips of financial sextortion of minors, primarily boys in 2022 from the public as well as from electronic service providers, such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, which are [required by law](#) to report cases. By the end of July 2023, NCMEC had already received more than 12,500 reports, which is routed to law enforcement, with more continuing to pour in. Given the multiple reporting sources, it’s possible that some of those reports were duplicates, Coffren said, but the increasing number of cases is troubling.

Mike Prado, deputy assistant director at the Homeland Security Investigations Cyber Crimes Center, emphasized the importance of reporting sextortion cases, which is the only way for authorities to initiate an investigation and prosecute the cases, noting not all cases are reported.

The repercussions of the abuse are devastating: At least a dozen boys died by suicide in 2022, after they were blackmailed, [according to the FBI](#). Meanwhile, social media companies are playing catch up to stem the tidal wave of sextortion scams targeting children.

Researchers who study sextortion say teens are particularly vulnerable because of the stage of their brain development.

“Our center receives an incredibly disproportionate number of help requests from male victims,” said Sameer Hinduja, co-director of the Cyberbullying Research Center and a professor of criminology at Florida Atlantic University. “Presuming that sexting is a precursor to sextortion, it is possible that females may send nudes more so in the context of a romantic relationship whereas males may do so more casual and experimentally. This fact makes males more of an easy target.”

The Washington Post interviewed the families of several boys who were targeted for financial sextortion over the past three years. Because the boys featured in this article are underage victims of sexual abuse and exploitation, they and their parents are identified only by their initials or middle names to protect their privacy and allow them to speak candidly about their experiences.

Michael’s parents were surprised he would find himself in this position, but immediately helped him navigate the next steps.

What to do if your teen is a victim of sextortion

If you’re in this situation, experts advise you to immediately stop responding and block the harasser. Do not delete the conversation so you have proof and can report it to the authorities. Do not send any money — even if the user has sent incriminating photos, giving into demands will rarely make the problem go away, and will often encourage them to demand more. Next, alert the platform. Most have a place to report sextortion.

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While the family was fairly permissive about online use for their teenage children, they communicated often with him and his younger sibling about safety. They didn’t let their children have access to social media until they were 13, the minimum age. They had spoken to them about avoiding strangers online. The family paid for Life360, a program that keeps track of their kids’ whereabouts. The kids had never been in any trouble before; they got strong grades in school and were actively engaged with sports.

“We’ve always had these conversations,” Lynn said. “So I was a little taken aback that he fell for it.”

Lynn told her son that they wouldn’t send a dime to the scammer. They took screenshots of their conversations as evidence, then blocked the account and reported it to Snapchat and Instagram. To Michael’s immense relief, the scammer didn’t follow through on the threats.

Michael’s parents responded to the threat appropriately, according to online safety experts.

Because of the nature of the scam, teens who fall prey to it often go through this terrifying ordeal alone. While parents should set rules and boundaries for tech use, regulations must come with a caveat that if their child finds themselves in trouble, they can come to their guardians for help, said Emily Mulder, program director for the Family Online Safety Institute.

“You don’t want it to be a case where your kids are so fearful that they broke the rules that they don’t want to tell their parents,” Mulder said.

‘I messed up’

Although scammers in these cases often move on and don’t follow through on their threats when victims stop responding, it’s not always guaranteed.

At 16, Christopher was one of the few students at his high school in northwest Ohio without a social media account. But with a trip to Europe with a school sports team coming up, he asked his parents if he could sign up for Instagram to share photos from the trip with friends and family back home. They were hesitant to allow it, but he had worked hard to raise the money to go and they felt he had shown ample signs of responsibility, so they agreed.

Before Christopher opened his account, Margaret and William sat him down for a serious talk: Don't accept requests from people you don't know, his parents told him. Don't post anything incriminating. Stay safe. Have fun.

In the week before the trip, Christopher built up his friend list and flew off to Europe with his team.

Christopher was gone for just two days when his parents started receiving a series of increasingly panicked texts from their son that started with *"I messed up."*

They looked at the clock: It was 3 a.m. where Christopher was, an ocean and thousands of miles separating him from their Midwestern home. When Christopher had landed in Europe, he was contacted through Instagram with an account that appeared to belong to a teenage girl with thousands of followers, his mother said. The "girl" had sent him nude photos and convinced him to send one of himself, insisting that he include his face, and he did.

Immediately, the scammer demanded \$300 in exchange for not sending the photo to his family. In his dark hotel room, Christopher tried to send the money through his bank account, but the amount was over his spending limit, so the transaction was declined.

Unable to speak with their son on the phone, his parents coached him through the crisis over text. Christopher begged them to send his tormentor the money, but they refused. They told him to block the account and urged him to deactivate his profile. Margaret and William continued texting with him through the night.

While they were texting with Christopher, his parents say they both received an ominous group message on Instagram from an unknown user. It included their son's account.

"hi"

A few seconds later, another message appeared.

"should I send them here?"

The threat was clear.

"That seemed to be the person's way of letting our son know, 'we do have a way of contacting people on your Instagram' to make the threat more real," Margaret said.

They said everything they could to calm Christopher, who suffered from anxiety and depression. "We were very concerned about his mental space and health at that point," William said. Instead of castigating him for causing the trouble, they praised their son for having the courage to ask them for help. They had heard horror stories in the news about teenage boys who had ended their lives when faced with similar situations. "We were so fortunate that he did reach out and not let that pressure and anxiety build up to the point where that was the case for us," William said. "These kids feel like they have to go it alone and they can't ask for help."

Now that Christopher had blocked the scammer, the issue seemed resolved. But when William and Margaret awoke the next morning, William had a new message alert on his phone. He opened Instagram, and his phone's screen filled with the nude photo of his son. The scammer had followed through on his threat. William was alarmed: His son might be safe, but now his phone, which he used for work, contained sexually explicit photographs of a minor. They called the local police to file a report to protect themselves but also in fear of what could happen next. "We didn't know what else to do," William said.

A police officer took down their report. They were told there was little that could be done. “He was very nice, but not very helpful,” Margaret said.

The couple constantly checked in on their son. They considered flying him home early, but decided to let him stay to finish the tournament. “It was absolutely gut-wrenching,” Margaret said. “It’s something I would not wish on any other parent.”

William and Margaret felt alone in dealing with the issue.

“We didn’t know who to go to,” William said. “I was relying on my police department to tell me what I should do. When they came and said there’s nothing they could do, I thought, ‘What good would it do to report it to the FBI?’”

They reported the account to Instagram, but the scammer kept messaging William with threats, and the profile remained active for three weeks. William felt completely unnerved having the photos on his phone, but he kept the account active for evidence.

“It was just absolutely insane the amount of worry and pressure that existed from that event and having no assistance,” William said.

After three weeks of harassment, the account finally disappeared, and the harassment stopped.

“Instagram needs to own a partial responsibility for this,” Margaret said. “We hold our son accountable. He made a bad choice. We’re not saying it’s Instagram’s fault. But I still feel like they should care more about trying to protect these kids.”

A spokesperson for Meta, the parent company of Instagram and Facebook, declined to comment on this specific case, but urged users to report both the accounts and the direct messages to speed up the investigation and have a profile removed. (The Washington Post viewed confirmations that the family reported the account.)

Meta established policies last year so that users younger than 16 would automatically have high privacy settings enabled, making it more difficult for people they don’t know to communicate with them. These changes happened months after Christopher’s victimization. In partnership with Thorn, an organization that combats child sex trafficking, Meta also launched a sexortion hub to help users report the harassment.

Meta products also restrict users over 19 years old from sending messages to teens who don’t follow them. (Of course, any user can fake birth dates when establishing an account.) Meta’s Parental Supervision tools allow parents to see when their teenager has blocked or reported an account.

Snapchat recently created a reporting tool specifically for quickly alerting the company about cases of financial sextortion. It lets the users notify the platform by clicking the “Nudity or sexual content” reporting tab and then clicking, “They leaked / are threatening to leak my nudes

“I can’t stress enough that we have to encourage users to report bad actors to us, and we have expanded our in-app reporting tools to include tailored reporting reasons specifically around financial sextortion,” said Jacqueline Beauchere, Snapchat’s global head of platform safety. (The company did its own study this year that found that 65 percent of the teenage and young adult respondents in Australia, France, Germany, India, the United Kingdom and the United States had either been targeted or knew someone targeted for sextortion in some way.)

The company also provides parents with a Family Center feature that enables guardians to see their child’s list of friends and any accounts they interact with. For users aged 13 to 17, the app will send a pop-up warning when users that are not in their contact list or connected to a mutual contact attempt to communicate with them. The company restricts teen user accounts from showing up in search results or as a friend suggestion unless they already have several friends in common.

‘Just pay me’

Financial sextortion made international news in 2022 when 17-year-old Jordan DeMay died by suicide after being targeted by scammers in West Africa. Three men from Nigeria face charges. In August, two of the men, brothers Samson and Samuel Ogoshi, were extradited to the United States and were charged with being part of an international sexual extortion ring. They have pleaded not guilty. Their attorneys decline to comment.

DeMay's parents, Jennifer Buta and John DeMay, have publicly said they want their son's story told as a warning to other parents.

"Our family has forever been changed by this heinous crime, and our objective is to prevent another individual from being victimized," they said in a statement. "Kids, teenagers, young adults and even adults can be a target of sextortion. We urge you to have discussions about this and have a plan for your children to reach out if it does happen to them."

According to the indictment, the men allegedly purchased hacked social media accounts belonging to real teenage girls and lured teenagers into sexual conversations. DeMay was targeted through his Instagram account. The men allegedly gathered publicly available information about their victims while engaging them, including their hometowns, high schools and workplaces and their close friends. In addition to DeMay, the three men made similar attempts on as many as 100 other teenagers.

The government alleges that, after the men persuaded DeMay to send nude photos, they announced their intentions in chat logs, now made public by the Justice Department.

According to the indictment, Samuel Ogoshi used the name "dani.robertts" to extort DeMay and others, and also urged victims to commit suicide.

dani.robertts: I have screenshot all ur followers and tags can send this nudes to everyone and also send your nudes to your Family and friends Until it goes viral ... All you've to do is to cooperate with me and I won't expose you

dani.robertts: Are you gonna cooperate with me

dani.robertts: Just pay me rn [Just pay me right now]

dani.robertts: And I won't expose you

Jordan DeMay: How much

dani.robertts: \$1000

DeMay sent \$300, which failed to stop the extortion. They demanded more and increased their threats. DeMay told them he would kill himself and they urged him on.

dani.robertts: Enjoy your miserable life

Jordan DeMay: I'm kms rn [I'm killing myself right now]

Jordan DeMay: Bc of you [Because of you]

dani.robertts: Good

dani.robertts: Do that fast

dani.robertts: Or I'll make you do it

dani.robertts: I swear to God

Following his interaction with the men, DeMay shot himself.

The indictment also details another case in which similar tactics were used against an unnamed 21-year-old from Wisconsin, who was also urged to commit suicide, according to the indictment.

dani.robertts: I'll make this go viral

dani.robertts: I will make you regret you[r] life

dani.robertts: I will make u commit suicide

dani.robertts: I promise you I swear

The men, who were only a few years older than the boys they allegedly targeted, are being charged on four counts, including sexual exploitation and attempted sexual exploitation of a minor resulting in death, conspiracy to sexually exploit minors and conspiracy to distribute child pornography. If convicted, they face decades in prison in the United States.

'I'm just calling to tell you goodbye'

N., a 21-year-old with autism and bipolar disorder, was struggling to adjust after he moved with his parents from Colorado to Idaho in 2020. Feeling lonely, N. turned to Facebook, which he had joined to keep up with his old friends. He was surprised when he started receiving messages from what appeared to be a young woman through the app, according to his mother in interviews. The person was kind to him. He embraced the new online friendship that was developing.

After several days of chatting, the person sent N. an enticing nude photo and asked for him to send one of himself in return. N. had just finish work and was sitting in his car in the parking lot when he responded by sending a photo of his genitalia. The picture also included his face and his work uniform that identified the name of his employer.

The betrayal from his supposed new friend was swift and vicious. The person demanded \$500 or else the photo would be sent to his entire contact list on Facebook, including family, friends and work colleagues. N. would be humiliated, perhaps lose his job and maybe even be prosecuted. He tried to negotiate. He had only \$200 to offer, but he struggled setting up the payment app that the scammer required.

When N. took too long to send the money, the scammer blasted the photo to 15 of his family members, his mother said. They included N. in the message so he would know what happened.

In his car, N. called his mother. "He was hysterical," she recalled. "You could tell in his voice that something horrible had happened. It was something he felt he couldn't live through. He was frantic."

N. told her she wouldn't see him again. "I'm just calling to tell you goodbye," he told her. Rae didn't know anything about the Facebook photo but she knew her son was in trouble.

While he was still on the line, N. found a knife in his car and began cutting into his wrists. She begged him to wait for her, to hold on, that everything would be okay.

She was 10 minutes away and drove toward the store as fast as possible. Along the way, she called her husband, who was still working inside the store. He ran toward his son's car and found him covered in blood. His father grabbed the knife and comforted his son. Rae arrived a few minutes later.

N. survived, but the ramifications of his victimization remain.

The family went to the police, but were told that nothing could be done. For victims like N., a legal adult, there was little recourse, even with his disability.

The increase in sextortion cases has captured the attention of federal law enforcement agencies that, because of the international scope of the threat, have dispatched teams to specifically handle these cases.

“It’s a relatively new phenomenon in the last couple of years that we’ve seen this significant growth,” Prado said.

Federal authorities have pointed to West African nations, particularly in Nigeria and Ivory Coast, as major sources of the attacks on teenagers the United States and other English-speaking countries.

Prado and his team are specifically targeting the Ivory Coast, which does not have an extradition treaty with the United States. The two governments remain in communication about how to better charge networks of scammers, which they suspect are targeting American teenagers, Prado said. Prado hosted the Ivorian government’s security minister at the Cyber Crimes Center in Washington earlier this year to discuss this issue. In the fall, Prado and Rebecca Kudgus, chief of HSI’s Child Exploitation Investigations Unit, plan to travel to the Ivory Coast for talks with authorities there.

“We can only do so much in the United States and in our attaché offices in identifying likely suspects,” Prado said. “It’s incumbent on our foreign law enforcement officers to follow through on the investigative leads we provide to them. They have shown a willingness to work with us.”

In partnership with Homeland Security Investigations and NCMEC, the FBI issued [a national public safety alert](#) on sextortion in January.

In February, law enforcement agencies from the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom [released a joint warning](#) about the rising problem.

“Financial sextortion has a far wider impact than just our country and our kids — it is a global crisis that demands everyone’s attention,” FBI Director Christopher A. Wray said in the warning.

‘He’s on the phone, Mom!’

Navigating and regulating tech use for teenagers is an issue for many parents struggling to protect their children online while also giving them freedom to grow and learn. Parents of older teenagers have a particularly challenging time knowing how to strike the right balance.

This was true of L., a central Virginia mom whose 16-year-old son, D., called her in a panic at 2 a.m. from his father’s house last fall. She could hear a second voice on the line in the background, a man aggressively shouting at her son.

“Send me the money! Send me the money! Send me the money!” the voice said.

D. had called his mother after sending a nude photo to a new contact through Snapchat that he thought was a fellow teenager. Now the person who had persuaded him to send the picture was on the line screaming at him in his bedroom in the middle of the night.

“He’s on the phone, Mom!” her son kept saying. The man on the other line was relentless.

L. told her son not to send money and to put the phone down. She told him to block the account. He pleaded with her to help him send it, and that this man had photos of his nude body. L. drove to her ex-husband’s house. When she arrived, she found her son quivering in his room.

The phone had become a compulsion lately, his mother said. He spent hours a day on Snapchat sending messages and photos to friends. His social life was wrapped up in the app.

“He lives in his phone,” L. said.

Before the pandemic, L. and her new husband set rules that the phones would be closed in a drawer during evenings, but they fell out of the practice when the world moved online during the pandemic. As D. grew older, it became harder to police his use.

“It’s easy when they’re under 12. You just tell them ‘no.’ But when they get to be 15 or 16, you realize that every kid they know at school is on Snapchat and how much they’re left out if they’re not and how many plans are made, it becomes literally a piece of who they are,” L. said. “And if you take it away from them or don’t allow them to have that, they genuinely miss out on a lot. I don’t agree with it, but that’s how these apps are made. They’re made to pull them in.”

For parents struggling to find that balance, Mulder recommends keeping lines of communication as open as possible with children, talking to them often about their digital life while giving them opportunities to explore and grow.

“It’s hard for kids to learn how to stay safe if they’re unable to access the world they’re going to be existing in. The world is only going to get more connected more quickly if you try to take them away from that, you’re removing a learning opportunity,” she said. “It’s less about trying to keep kids off and more about keeping themselves safe while they’re in.”

Michael’s accounts now have the highest degree of privacy, and he avoids engaging with people online he doesn’t know in person. His mother Lynn, has sought support and encouragement from online communities for parents. She discovered a Facebook group for parents of teenage children — that mysterious in-between space beyond childhood, but before adulthood — when the lines begin to blur. She shared her story in the forum, and dozens of other parents said their kids had been through the same thing.

The repercussions for each of the families linger.

Christopher, who was targeted while on the school trip, stayed off his phone for a while and has recently eased back on with a more vigilant eye. Meanwhile, his mother continues to replay the “what ifs” of introducing him and her younger teenage son to social media.

“Maybe we looked at this the wrong way, and we should’ve exposed them to it sooner so they could get acclimated to it before the hormones were raging,” Margaret said. But, she acknowledged, maybe that wouldn’t have helped, either. “There’s just no good answers anywhere.”

If you or someone you know needs help, visit 988lifeline.org or call or text the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988.