

Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance (TA) Center

SEXTORTION IN SCHOOLS FACT SHEET

Incorporating Sextortion Into School Emergency Operations Planning

Background

Advances in technology such as the growth of the Internet, increased use of mobile devices, and the popularization of mobile applications, have given rise to new types of Internet-based crimes, including child pornography, identity theft, illegal access to data, and libel. As the largest group of Internet users and the segment of the population most likely to use social media (Perrin, 2015), youth are among the vulnerable populations at risk of being victimized by cyber-related crimes. Sextortion, which has been used to define crimes that occur “when someone threatens to distribute your private and sensitive material if you don’t provide them images of a sexual nature, sexual favors, or money,” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2015) is just one of these emerging crimes.

In the early 2000s, law enforcement agencies around the country began to see reports of social media sites being used to extort sex or sexual favors (Smith, 2016). Nearly 20 years later, news articles from across the nation have shown us that students at schools and in school districts have served as sextortion targets, as well as predators, and that educational agencies can play a role in the enforcement process. These include the story of three students from Oregon who received a financial settlement in 2015 after suing the Clatskanie School District for failing to respond appropriately after the girls proved they had been victimized by fellow students (“District Pays Former Clatskanie”, 2015). They also includes the story of a male student at Eisenhower High School in Wisconsin (Gross, 2009) who posed as a female on the Internet to convince 31 of his male classmates to send more than 300 sexually explicit pictures and videos, some of which he used as threats and as means to receive sexual favors. The case and the attention it received in the media and from the school community prompted school leaders to host a series of cybersecurity seminars for parents and families during the time of the student’s arrest. These stories and others highlight the need for education agencies to develop measures to prevent and protect students from sextortion, and to reintegrate and restore survivors into the learning environment.

A Look at the Issue Today

The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) have worked in collaboration with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) to investigate how sextortion impacts youth and to promote awareness about this emerging issue. Results from NCMEC’s analysis of more than 800 sextortion-related tips received on their CyberTipline between 2013 and 2015 show that the average age of a child at the time of victimization was 15 years old (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, n.d.). Female victims, who make up 78 percent of children victimized, experienced their first sextortion incident as young as 8 years old, compared to 11 years old for boys, who make up 12 percent of victims. Furthermore, an analysis of 43 sextortion cases involving child victims, which was conducted by the FBI in 2015, revealed that at least two victims committed suicide and at least ten more attempted suicide. Sextortion impacts youth from elementary to high school and as in other cyber-based crimes, perpetrators of sextortion, sometimes called “sextortionists,” do not discriminate based on a student’s color, ethnicity or socio-economic status.

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At the federal level, steps are being taken to address this issue via the National Strategy for Child Exploitation, Prevention, and Interdiction (National Strategy) (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016). In 2010, the National Strategy initiated the National Child Exploitation Threat Assessment, a multi-agency effort to analyze and address the risks posed by child exploitation, which includes sextortion as one of five key areas. Using insight gained from a survey of more than 1,000 investigators, law enforcement managers, prosecutors, analysts, victim service providers, and DOJ grant recipients, the federal government conducted a second assessment in 2016. Results revealed that:

- Sextortion continues to emerge as an evolving threat in the online context;
- Mobile devices have altered the techniques offenders use to abuse children and are used to target, recruit or groom, and coerce children; and
- Predators are skilled at tricking and pressurizing children who are online and often victimize youth in large numbers.

Furthermore, on May 17, 2016, a United States Senator sent a letter to the U.S. Attorney General, requesting that specific data be collected by a federal entity on online sexual extortion so that the federal government could learn the full extent of the crime (“Boxer Urges Department”, 2016). As attention to this matter becomes more evident on the federal, state and local levels, there are steps that education agencies can take to protect students now. This fact sheet provides details on some of those steps, including incorporating protection, prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery activities related to sextortion into emergency management programs within state and local education agencies.

Relation to EOP Development and Emergency Management Planning

The federal *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans (School Guide; <http://rem.ed.gov/K12GuideForDevelHQSschool.aspx>)* notes that “effective school planning depends on a consistent analysis and comparison of the threats and hazards a particular school faces” (“Guide for Developing High-Quality”, 2013). As core emergency management planning teams at education agencies across the country work to identify and assess the risks posed to them by adversarial- and human-caused threats, they should conduct research to determine whether to add sextortion to their “watch lists.” A clear picture of student experiences with sextortion might be gained by conducting a culture and climate assessment as well as requesting information from partners, including local and federal law enforcement, on the number of reported cases in a school community.

After assessing the level of risk posed by sextortion in a school or school district, emergency management planning teams should work to determine goals and objectives to achieve the best outcome for (1) before, (2) during, and (3) after an incident of sextortion occurs, as illustrated in the examples below.

- **Sextortion Goal Example 1 (before):** Prevent a student from becoming a sextortion victim or predator.
 - Objective 1.1: Add a sextortion prevention training for all students and staff as a part of health education, cyber safety and security, and/or anti-bullying programs.

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- **Sextortion Goal Example 2 (during):** Use reporting and intervention services in collaboration with law enforcement and mental health partners.
 - Objective 2.1: Require reporting of all incidents of sextortion to the proper authorities.
- **Sextortion Goal Example 3 (after):** Provide restoration services to students to reintegrate into the learning environment.
 - Objective 3.1: Provide continued school counseling services to survivors of sextortion.

Once goals and objectives have been developed, school core planning teams can work to create courses of action to begin preventing, responding to, and helping students recover from sextortion. The ultimate goal is to create a program that is informed and guided by national, state, and local research and legislation; framed around prevention, response, and recovery; and designed for sustainability. There are numerous sextortion cases from the news, FBI, and NCMEC that education agencies can use to support scenario-based planning, which helps ensure that staff are not only sure what to do, but who is supposed to do what, and how quickly.

Methods to Address the Issue

By working through the six-step planning process for high-quality EOP development (as outlined in the *School Guide*), education agencies can collaborate with community partners to prevent, respond to, and help students recover from sextortion. In some states, school districts have already begun adding sextortion to EOP planning. Additionally, school districts are integrating the topic of sextortion with the student training for everyday cyber safety and security. Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) signed between two school systems and two local police departments in Massachusetts (Newton Public Schools and the Newton Police Department [“Memorandum of Understanding Between Newton”, n.d.], and Natick Public Schools and the Natick Police Department [“Memorandum of Understanding Between Natick”, n.d.]) cite sextortion as a mandatory reportable incident. In other words, superintendents, school principals, vice principals, housemasters, and prevention/intervention counselors must report any incident related to sextortion to the local police department.

There are various methods that schools and school districts can use to address the issue of sextortion. A comprehensive sextortion program addressing prevention, protection, response, and recovery may include the following courses of action for key populations:

- **School Emergency Managers:** Add sextortion to the list of adversarial- and human-caused threats within school EOPs, and work to develop goals, objectives, and courses of action for faculty, staff, and community partners, including law enforcement.
- **School Instructional and Curriculum Development Staff:** Include instructional materials on sextortion as a part of health education, cyber security, and/or anti-bullying programs and/or curriculums.
- **School Mental Health Staff:** Train school counselors and mental health practitioners on risk factors, and signs that students are or may become victims or perpetrators of sextortion. Train

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counselors and practitioners on how to implement counseling services to support sextortion survivors, perpetrators, and families.

- **Teachers:** Create checklists for teachers on what to do when they suspect a student has become a victim of or is perpetrating the crime of sextortion.
- **Students:** Create a peer-to-peer network of student leaders who encourage students to report incidents of sextortion and suspected perpetrators, and to not participate in the photo-sharing aspect often associated with the crime.
- **Community Partners:** Develop MOUs and Memorandums of Agreement with community partners that outline how schools and partners will work together to report, respond to, and help students and school communities recover from cases of sextortion.
- **Parents/Guardians:** Provide information and tips to parents via school and/or school district Websites and/or publications that help them protect youth at home and at school and that teach youth the legal consequences of sextortion. Protection strategies may include raising awareness to the issue and providing examples of steps families can take to help ensure their children are safe online. Prevention tips may include adding layered security to home computers, emphasizing cyber security, and teaching youth how to safely navigate the world of social media. Schools can also create posters illustrating what happens when a student becomes a perpetrator—the legal and psychological implications.

Key Resources

Several federal and national Websites are available that provide resources on the topics of sextortion, crimes against children, and cyber safety. These include:

- **Investigative Programs, Crimes Against Children, Federal Bureau of Investigation.** This Website provides an overview of initiatives and background and links to programs and resources related to violent crimes against children. The office supports efforts of states and localities to enhance the capabilities of their law enforcement investigators through programs, investigative assistance, and task force operations. <http://www.fbi.gov/hq/cid/cac/crimesmain.htm>
- **Privacy Technical Assistance Center, U.S. Department of Education.** This Website serves as a comprehensive resource that education agencies can use to get answers to questions and address concerns related to privacy, confidentiality, and security practices. The site provides valuable information related to information sharing guidelines such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (“Guide for Developing High-Quality”, 2013) and legislation such as the Children's Internet Protection Act (Federal Communications Commission, 2015). <http://tech.ed.gov/privacy/>
- **Project Safe Childhood Website, U.S. Department of Justice.** This national initiative was launched in May 2006 by the U.S. Department of Justice and is led by the U.S. Attorneys' Offices and the Criminal Division's Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section (CEOS). The goal is to provide federal, state and local resources to better locate, apprehend and prosecute individuals who exploit children via the Internet, as well as to identify and rescue victims. <https://www.justice.gov/psc>

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- **Sexting and Sextortion: Keeping Kids Safe Webinar, Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention.** This Webinar provides a basic overview of sexting and sextortion and techniques parents and educators can use to protect students from becoming victims. The Federal Partners in Bullying Prevention include the U.S. Departments of Justice, Education, and Agriculture; the Federal Bureau of Investigation; and the Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC) Task Force Program.
<https://www.nttac.org/media/trainingCenter/980/Sexting%20and%20Sextortion%20Webinar%20PPT.pdf>
- **Sextortion Affecting Thousands of U.S. Children, U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation.** This press release warns parents, educators, caregivers, and children about the dangers of sextortion. It outlines technical details related to sextortion, including a description of how predators and children interact online; an overview of why it poses a threat to children, specifically; and details on defensive mechanisms that can be used to prevent children from becoming victims of sextortion. <https://www.fbi.gov/pittsburgh/press-releases/2016/sextortion-affecting-thousands-of-u.s.-children>
- **Sextortion CyberTipline and Web Page, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.** The NCMEC operates the CyberTipline and conducts research on crimes against children. The CyberTipline is operated in partnership with the FBI, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, U.S. Postal Inspection Service, U.S. Secret Service, military criminal investigative organizations, U.S. Department of Justice, Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force program, as well as other state and local law enforcement agencies. <http://www.ncmec.org>
- **Sextortion of Children in the United States: A Fact Sheet for Parents and Children, U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation.** This fact sheet provides a description of sextortion, how it happens, how it relates to “sexting” and bullying, who is at risk, and the impact, key cases between 2005 and 2014, tips on protecting kids, and how to report suspected incidences of sextortion.
<https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2015/july/sextortion/stop-sextortion-brochure>

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REMS TA Center Resources

The REMS TA Center Website also provides several resources that can help schools and IHEs with this topics. These include:

- [EOP ASSIST Online and Offline Tool, REMS TA Center](#). EOP ASSIST is available for state agencies, school districts, and schools as either a Web-accessible software application or offline tool. The resource directs planning team members through a process that will result in the output of an EOP according to federal guidelines for developing a high-quality school EOP. <http://rems.ed.gov/EOPinteractivetools.aspx>
- [Incorporating Sextortion into School Emergency Management Planning Webinar, REMS TA Center](#). This Webinar provided background details on sextortion in schools, as well as a look at the issue today. Representatives from the REMS TA Center, U.S. Department of Justice's Federal Bureau of Investigation, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children also provided details on how federal, state and local agencies are collaborating to address the issue. https://rems.ed.gov/TA_Webinars.aspx

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Search **#SextortionInSchools on Twitter** to track the federal and national conversation about this topic.

<https://twitter.com/hashtag/sextortioninschools?f=tweets&vertical=default&src=hash>