No. 710 January 2025

Abstract | Sexual extortion of children is a growing global issue in which a perpetrator threatens to distribute intimate material of a victim unless they comply with certain demands.

This study systematically reviewed research into the impacts of sexual extortion victimisation on minors. Twelve studies were included, which varied methodologically.

Victims of sexual extortion who are under the age of 18 experience diverse short- and long-term impacts, including psychological harm, socio-environmental impacts, financial costs, risk of ongoing victimisation, and offending and criminal justice involvement. These findings support targeted approaches to reduce sexual extortion of minors, while also highlighting the support needs of victims.

The impacts of sexual extortion on minors: A systematic review

Heather Wolbers, Timothy Cubitt, Renee Carter and Sarah Napier

The rapid growth and development of online spaces has resulted in the emergence of new forms of technology-facilitated sexual violence (Cross, Holt & O'Malley 2022). One of these is sexual extortion—a form of blackmail in which a perpetrator threatens to distribute sexual images or videos of a victim unless they comply with certain demands (Açar 2016; Alsoubai et al. 2022; Chiang & Grant 2019; Henry, Flynn & Powell 2019; Liggett 2019). Demands are often for money, additional intimate materials, or sexual contact with the victim (Eaton, Ramjee & Saunders 2023; Kopecký 2017; Patchin & Hinduja 2020).

Although sexual extortion is perpetrated against both adults and children, children appear particularly vulnerable to this crime type (O'Malley & Holt 2022; Wittes et al. 2016; Wolak & Finkelhor 2016; Wolak et al. 2018). This is thought to be in part due to their increased time spent online, coupled with their elevated risk tolerance and lower social and developmental maturity (Açar 2016; Alsoubai et al. 2022; Douglass et al. 2018; Patchin & Hinduja 2020).

Sexual extortion is a significant online threat to children (Europol 2015). Similar to many forms of sexual violence and technology-enabled offences, under-reporting is common due to embarrassment, fear of retribution from the offender, and concern about punishment for behaving sexually online (Alsoubai et al. 2022; Wolak & Finkelhor 2016). The Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (2023) receives hundreds of reports each month of financially motivated sexual extortion of minors in Australia. However, research from the United States suggests that many child and young adult victims of sexual extortion do not report their experiences (Patchin & Hinjuda 2020; Wolak et al. 2018), meaning the true rate of victimisation is expected to be much higher. For example, a representative survey of United States school students showed that five percent of 12- to 17-year-olds had been sexually extorted; of these, only 6.9 percent said they reported it to police (Patchin & Hinduja 2020).

The sexual extortion of children contributes to the availability of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) online. Instances of sexual extortion involve the production and distribution of CSAM, as offenders groom and coerce children to self-generate sexual photos and videos. CSAM victims can experience helplessness, shame, anxiety, grief, betrayal and revictimisation through the production of their abusive content and its distribution online (Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2017; Salter et al. 2021). Like other online crimes against children, sexual extortion of minors is new and emerging, and thus little research has examined the impacts of this crime on children.

Objectives of this review

To ensure that the support needs of minors are met following experiences of victimisation and to understand the seriousness of this crime from a policy perspective, an accurate understanding of the impacts of sexual extortion on both their short- and long-term wellbeing must be developed. To do this, we use a systematic review methodology to assess what is known about the impacts of sexual extortion on individuals under the age of 18. Systematic reviews use search, screening and analytic techniques to collate evidence about a topic. Importantly, within the past decade, sexual extortion has been the focus of research and has been acknowledged as a significant and widespread problem among police, government and the not-for-profit sectors.

While sexual extortion overlaps with other forms of child sexual exploitation and cybercrime, it is currently unclear whether victims of sexual extortion experience different, or additional, impacts to their wellbeing. In particular, certain aspects of this crime make it unique, such as the use of coercion, threats and blackmail. Intimate materials can be obtained in a variety of ways (eg grooming or coercion, taking photos without consent, hacking), and threats of dissemination are made for a variety of motives (eg financial gain or sexual gratification). For these reasons, prior research into the impacts of other forms of child sexual abuse may not capture the totality of impacts experienced by victims of sexual extortion. Given the increasing use of the internet by minors (Anderson, Faverio & Gottfried 2023), and their vulnerability to technology-facilitated offending (Teunissen et al. 2024), understanding the impacts of sexual extortion is crucial in guiding interventions that protect children from online harms and informing future research into this growing crime type.

To assist in a broader study involving several separate systematic reviews on topics related to sexual extortion of minors, a pilot literature search was conducted in July 2023 by the Australian Institute of Criminology's JV Barry Library. This search found that the empirical research on prevalence and offender methods and tactics was not up to date with the rapidly changing trends in sexual extortion against minors demonstrated in police and not-for-profit reports (eg Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation 2022; National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) 2023). We therefore focused this systematic review on the *impacts* of sexual extortion on minors, a topic that is less likely to be influenced by rapid changes in offending methodologies. Our selection criteria captured academic and grey literature that included primary data on sexual extortion perpetrated against minors and the impacts of victimisation.

Methods
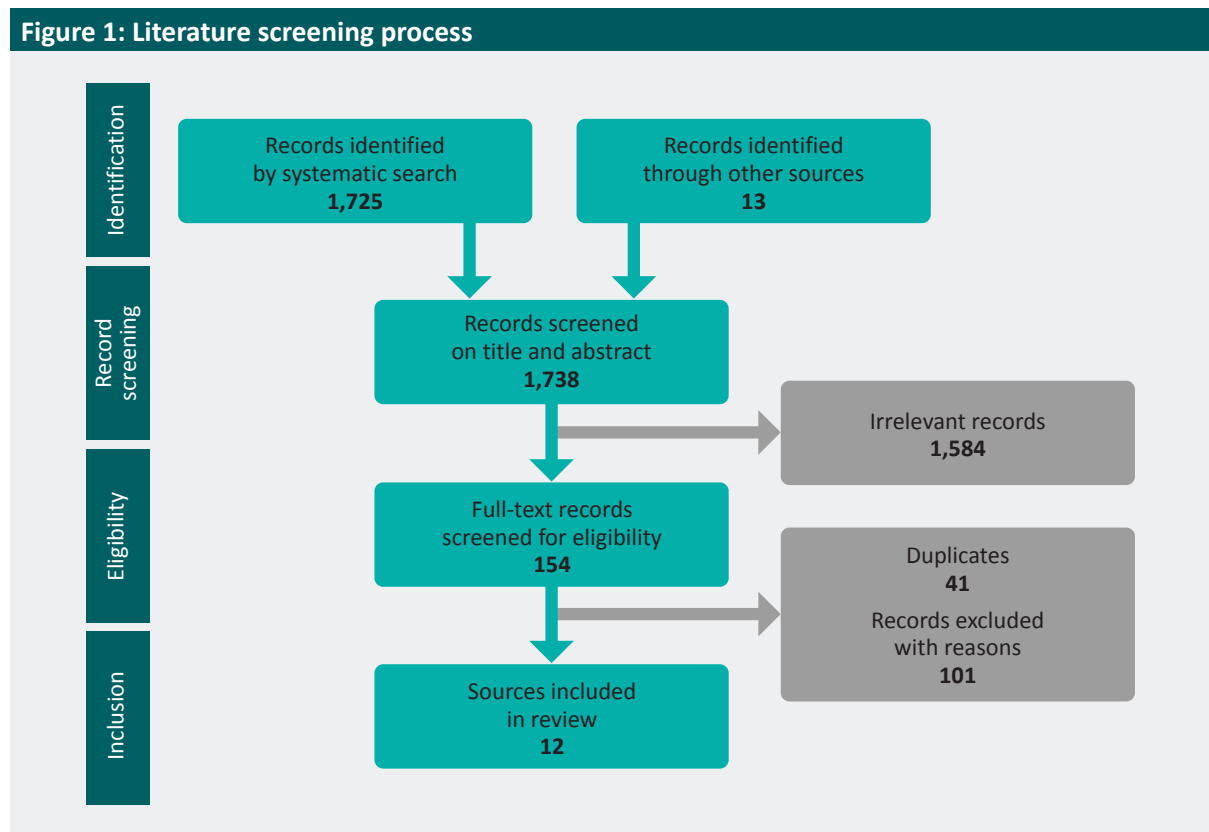
Systematic search strategy

This study draws on all available sources examining the impacts of sexual extortion where the victim was under 18 years of age, including impacts on mental health, social activities, finances, and future victimisation or perpetration. A full systematic literature search was conducted in December 2023. The search was limited to studies written in English that were published in the 20 years prior to the search (2003 onwards). Four databases were searched: the JV Barry Library catalogue, ProQuest, DeepDyve and EBSCO. The websites of relevant organisations such as the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, NCMEC and the Office of the eSafety Commissioner were also searched. We undertook additional screening of the first 200 results from Google Scholar and 100 links from Google to identify any sources that may not have appeared in the databases and websites. Finally, the reference lists of records that were ultimately included in the review were checked for any additional sources (ie backchaining).

Assisted by the initial pilot search, we developed a list of search terms to guide this systematic literature search. The search terms used combined keywords from three categories:

- *sexual extortion* (sextort* OR "sexual extort*" OR "cyber extort*" OR "online extort*" OR "cyber blackmail" OR "online blackmail");
- *age of the victim* (child* OR "young person" OR teenage* OR adolescen* OR youth OR minor OR "young adult"); and
- *impacts* (impact OR harm OR trauma OR mental health OR psychological outcome OR outcome OR suicid* OR consequence OR wellbeing OR financ* OR cost OR loss OR education OR employment OR long term OR short term OR ramification OR revictimi?ation OR "repeat victim*" OR polyvictimi?ation OR "victim-offender overlap" OR "victim to offender cycle" OR "criminal justice involvement").

Screening process

The systematic search yielded 1,725 studies. An additional 13 studies were identified through wider reading, resulting in identification of an initial 1,738 records. Titles and abstracts were screened to exclude irrelevant studies (*n*=1,584). This screening yielded 154 studies, of which 41 were identified as duplicates and subsequently removed. The remaining 113 sources were assessed for eligibility against the selection criteria with full-text screening, and 101 were excluded because they did not analyse primary data (eg literature reviews), examine impacts on child victims of sexual extortion or provide sufficient detail on the data source. In total, the systematic search of literature yielded 12 sources providing primary information on the impact of sexual extortion on victims who were minors (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Literature screening process

Identification
- Records identified by systematic search **1,725**
- Records identified through other sources **13**

Record screening
- Records screened on title and abstract **1,738**
- Irrelevant records **1,584**

Eligibility
- Full-text records screened for eligibility **154**
- Duplicates **41**
- Records excluded with reasons **101**

Inclusion
- Sources included in review **12**

Limitations

The sample of 12 studies contained a variety of measures of sexual extortion and its subsequent impacts, and featured a variety of data sources and sampling methodologies. Not all studies that met the inclusion criteria reported sufficient quantitative data to calculate standardised effect sizes, while some used qualitative research methods. Ultimately, this meant that conducting a meta-analysis of these studies was not possible (Moher et al. 2009). Studies also varied by cultural context, meaning the interpretation of findings contained culture-specific nuance. Accordingly, the following sections provide a qualitative synthesis of the eligible studies with discussion of the strength or magnitude of the effect, where the sample size allowed. These limitations mean caution should be employed when comparing the results between studies.

Results

Characteristics of eligible studies

Studies that met the inclusion criteria were primarily from the United States (*n*=8), but were also drawn from Israel (*n*=2), Australia (*n*=1), and the United Kingdom (*n*=1; See Table 1). Four studies used qualitative methods, three used quantitative methods and five used both. Despite searching for literature over the last 20 years, published research was only available from 2016 onward, highlighting that sexual extortion of minors is a current and emerging issue.

Table 1: Studies included in the systematic review			
Study	**Country**	**Data source**	**Method**
Peer-reviewed literature			
Alsoubai et al. (2022)	United States[a]	45,955 posts (3,767 for harassment/sextortion) made by 13- to 17-year-olds on an online peer support platform	Mixed
Dolev-Cohen (2023)	Israel	Semi-structured in-depth interviews with 32 Arab educational counsellors, 8 with instances of sexual extortion	Qualitative
Dolev-Cohen, Nezer & Zumt (2023)	Israel	Semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 Jewish or Arab school counsellors who treated female students who were sexually extorted online	Qualitative
Finkelhor, Turner & Colburn (2023)	United States	Nationally representative online survey of 2,639 young adults asked retrospectively about childhood; 81 were victims of sexual extortion	Quantitative
Nilsson et al. (2019)	United Kingdom[a]	Publicly available online material on 3 cases of teenagers who committed suicide after being sexually extorted	Qualitative
O'Malley & Holt (2022)	United States	Open-source news articles and court documents regarding 152 cases of cyber sexual extortion which occurred from 2008 to 2018; 80 were minor focused offenders	Qualitative
Patchin & Hinduja (2020)	United States	Nationally representative survey of 5,568 middle and high school students administered from Aug to Oct 2016	Quantitative
Wolak et al. (2018)	United States	Online survey of 1,628 people aged 18–25 years who had experienced sexual extortion; 572 recent cases were under 18 when threats began	Quantitative
Grey literature			
AUSTRAC (2022)	Australia	Financial transactions for sexual extortion	Mixed
NCMEC (2016)	United States	1,428 reports of sexual extortion of a child received by CyberTipline from Oct 2013 to Apr 2016	Mixed
Thorn (2019)	United States	Online survey of 2,097 people aged 13–25 years who had experienced sexual extortion	Mixed
Wolak & Finkelhor (2016)	United States	Online survey of 1,631 people aged 18–25 years who had experienced sexual extortion; 740 were a minor when threats began	Mixed

a: Sample was multi-national

While there were marginal differences in how sexual extortion was described, all included studies featured the threat to disseminate intimate material in their definition (Table 2). Some studies identified the intention of the extortion activity, most commonly being to obtain money, additional intimate material or sexual contact (Alsoubai et al. 2022; Dolev-Cohen 2023; Finkelhor, Turner & Colburn 2023; NCMEC 2016; Patchin & Hinduja 2020; Wolak et al. 2018). However, intent was more broadly conceptualised in others (Dolev-Cohen, Nezer & Zumt 2023; Nilsson et al. 2019; O'Malley & Holt 2022; Patchin & Hinduja 2020; Thorn 2019; Wolak & Finkelhor 2016). Several studies focused on technology-facilitated sexual extortion (Alsoubai et al. 2022; Nilsson et al. 2019; O'Malley & Holt 2022), or financial sexual extortion (AUSTRAC 2022).

Table 2: Conceptual definitions of sexual extortion used by included studies	
Study	**Definition**
AUSTRAC (2022)	Coercion of Australian children into producing explicit images and extorting them for money
Alsoubai et al. (2022)	Threats to expose sexual images to coerce victims to provide additional pictures, sex, or other favours
Dolev-Cohen (2023)	Threat of dissemination of sexual images of the subject and extortion to force the victim to send additional sexual images, pay money, engage in sexual intercourse, or to prevent the victim from leaving a relationship
Dolev-Cohen, Nezer & Zumt (2023)	A person threatens another with the distribution of sexual content on the internet, to obtain more pictures or videos, money, or have some other demand met
Finkelhor, Turner & Colburn (2023)	A threat to disseminate sexual images in their possession to obtain money, additional pictures, or other sexual activities
NCMEC (2016)	Utilisation of non-physical forms of coercion, such as blackmail, to acquire sexual content of the child, obtain money from the child or engage in sex with the child
Nilsson et al. (2019)	Facilitated by the use of online environments where perpetrators gain the trust of vulnerable individuals in order to obtain sexually explicit material and then use it to coerce victims for the purposes of sexual, personal or financial gain
O'Malley & Holt (2022)	Occurring through a technological medium, threats to distribute intimate images or videos unless specific demands were met
Patchin & Hinduja (2020)	The threatened dissemination of explicit, intimate, or embarrassing images of a sexual nature without consent, usually for the purpose of procuring additional images, sexual acts, money, or something else
Thorn (2019)	The threat to expose a sexual image in order to make a person do something or for other reasons, such as revenge or humiliation
Wolak & Finkelhor (2016)	Threats to expose a sexual image in order to make a person do something or for other reasons, such as revenge or humiliation
Wolak et al. (2018)	Threats to expose sexual images to coerce victims to provide additional pictures, sex, or other favours

Impacts of sexual extortion victimisation on minors

The impacts of sexual extortion on minors were diverse, ranging from immediate effects through to those that lasted or manifested years later. These impacts could be separated into five categories: emotional and psychological wellbeing, socio-environmental, financial, ongoing and poly-victimisation, and offending or criminal justice involvement (Table 3).

Table 3: Summary of the impacts of sexual extortion victimisation on minors	
Impacts on emotional and psychological wellbeing	
Poor mental wellbeing (4, 7, 8)	Feelings led to non-reporting of extortion (10, 12)
Feelings of fear, anger, shame, helplessness, hopelessness or loneliness (2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10)	Required care from a mental or medical health professional (10, 12)
Anxiety and depression (4, 5, 6)	Self-harm and suicide (6, 7)
Socio-environmental impacts	
Experienced social isolation (3, 5, 10, 12)	Had to change or take time off school (3, 10, 12)
Experienced reputational damage (3, 7)	Lost or had to change their job (12)
Experienced or risked damage to family relationships (3, 4)	Had to move to a different location (10, 12)
Had to modify their online presence (10)	
Financial impacts	
Incurred financial costs (12)	When there were demands for money, victims usually sent between $50 and $1,500 (1)
Ongoing victimisation and poly-victimisation	
Sexual extortion could be prolonged, with threats received for over a month (12)	Threats were carried out by perpetrators in around 1 in 4 cases (9, 12)
Complying with the demands could lead to continuation of sexual extortion (10, 12)	Sexual extortion was often accompanied by at least one other form of victimisation (9, 12)
Additional, different threats often accompanied extortion of intimate materials (12)	
Offending and criminal justice involvement	
Criminal proceedings considered against victims for CSAM offences (11)	Victims of sexual extortion had often been perpetrators of sexual extortion as well (9)
Victims were coerced by perpetrators into sexually offending (8)	

Note: 1—AUSTRAC (2022); 2—Alsoubai et al. (2022); 3—Dolev-Cohen (2023); 4—Dolev-Cohen, Nezer & Zumt (2023); 5—Finkelhor, Turner & Colburn (2023); 6—NCMEC (2016); 7—Nilsson et al. (2019); 8—O'Malley & Holt (2022); 9—Patchin & Hinduja (2020); 10—Thorn 2019; 11—Wolak & Finkelhor (2016); 12—Wolak et al. (2018)

Impacts on emotional and psychological wellbeing

Most of the examined studies included information on the emotional and psychological wellbeing of victims following sexual extortion. Poor general mental wellbeing and distress was reported in three studies (Dolev-Cohen, Nezer & Zumt 2023; Nilsson et al. 2019; O'Malley & Holt 2022). However, some studies detailed specific emotional and psychological impacts of sexual extortion on minors. Several studies found that minors who were sexually extorted experienced fear (Alsoubai et al. 2022; Finkelhor, Turner & Colburn 2023; NCMEC 2016; Nilsson et al. 2019; Thorn 2019), or shame and embarrassment (Alsoubai et al. 2022; Dolev-Cohen, Nezer & Zumt 2023; Finkelhor, Turner & Colburn 2023; Nilsson et al. 2019; Thorn 2019). Three studies found that sexual extortion was associated with feelings of helplessness or hopelessness (Alsoubai et al. 2022; NCMEC 2016; Nilsson et al. 2019), and anxiety or depression (Dolev-Cohen, Nezer & Zumt 2023; Finkelhor, Turner & Colburn 2023; NCMEC 2016). Two studies found that minors who were sexually extorted experienced loneliness and sadness (Dolev-Cohen, Nezer & Zumt 2023; Finkelhor, Turner & Colburn 2023), while one study found that victimisation was associated with anger (Finkelhor, Turner & Colburn 2023).

Nilsson et al. (2019) described how victims felt ongoing fear of the next demand from the perpetrator, and fear of the reputational damage associated with people in their life finding out about the sexual extortion. Some victims reported that law enforcement had limited ability to respond to these offences, or feeling that they may not be taken seriously, coupled with a fear that their content could be shared online, resulting in feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. They often blamed themselves for the victimisation, and when the perpetrator shared the content victims experienced a deep sense of humiliation and shame. Two studies described how these negative emotions, particularly fear and shame, were the reason victims chose not to disclose the sexual extortion experience to anyone (Thorn 2019; Wolak et al. 2018). In two studies that reported the relevant information, about a third of victims sought mental or medical health advice as a direct result of victimisation (1 in 3, Thorn 2019; 28.7%, Wolak et al. 2018).

Importantly, NCMEC (2016) reported that four percent of all sexual extortion victims who submitted reports had engaged in self-harm or threatened or attempted suicide after the victimisation. These impacts were further supported by Nilsson et al. (2019), who focused on three teenagers who lost their lives to suicide following sexual extortion. These findings illustrated that sexual extortion can have extreme consequences for individuals under the age of 18.

Socio-environmental impacts

It was common for victims to report becoming socially isolated and losing friends due to sexual extortion (Dolev-Cohen, Nezer & Zumt 2023; Thorn 2019; Wolak et al. 2018). Wolak et al. (2018) showed that 46 percent of minors who were sexually extorted lost a relationship with a friend or family member, while Finkelhor, Turner and Colburn (2023) revealed that 96 percent of sexual extortion victims in their sample felt they were alone, all of whom felt like they could not trust people. Victims of sexual extortion also reported having to modify their online identity, specifically closing accounts (38%) and changing usernames (36%; Thorn 2019).

Many experienced what they perceived to be damage to their reputation (Dolev-Cohen, Nezer & Zumt 2023; Nilsson et al. 2019). Furthermore, interviews with school counsellors in Israel highlighted that minors who were sexually extorted had additional social and safety concerns about their families finding out about the sexual extortion (Dolev-Cohen 2023; Dolev-Cohen, Nezer & Zumt 2023). These findings demonstrated that the impacts of sexual extortion could be influenced by context and could be culture-specific.

The literature additionally showed that victims experienced disruptions to other aspects of their lives. Many missed school or had to change schools entirely (13.6%, Wolak et al. 2018; 1 in 8, Thorn 2019; see also Dolev-Cohen, Nezer & Zumt 2023). Similarly, in one study disruptions to employment were reported by around eight percent of victims (Wolak et al. 2018). Two studies found that, in one in 10 cases, victims had to leave their community or town by moving their residential location (Thorn 2019; Wolak et al. 2018). These findings suggest that the impacts of sexual extortion extended beyond emotional or psychological, to material changes in circumstances that could relate to friends, family, education, employment and housing.

Financial impacts

While sexual extortion was not always financially motivated (Thorn 2019; Wolak et al. 2018), we identified two studies that discussed financial impacts on victims of sexual extortion. In the first study, four percent of minors who were sexually extorted received demands for money, and a further 7.9 percent incurred some kind of financial loss (Wolak et al. 2018). The second study, which focused solely on financial sexual extortion, found the average child or adolescent victim paid between $50 and $1,500, either as a lump sum or incrementally, before they ran out of funds (AUSTRAC 2022). However, some victims paid up to $10,000. While not all sexual extortion involved demands for money, among those that did the costs could be significant. Further, when the demands for money were not complied with, or the victim no longer had access to finances, victimisation still involved financial costs such as help-seeking and psychological care.

Ongoing victimisation and poly-victimisation

Several studies discussed coercion and threats as a continuing, often drawn out impact of sexual extortion. For more than a quarter of victims (26.9%) in one study, threats continued for more than six months and just 17.0 percent said the threats lasted for less than a week (Wolak et al. 2018). In another study threats were commonly received daily (47%) and repeatedly, with about half of victims receiving between one and nine threats each day (52%; Thorn 2019). Importantly, complying with a perpetrator's demands did not often appear to stop victimisation. For almost two-thirds of victims who complied (64%), the threats continued (Thorn 2019).

Perpetrator threats went beyond sharing the extorted material with others and were often accompanied by threats of offline harm such as the victim getting in trouble at work or school, or that the perpetrator would harass or stalk the victim in person (Wolak et al. 2018). Some victims received threats that they would be assaulted, sexually assaulted, killed or otherwise hurt if they did not comply (29.2%). Two studies reported that in around a quarter of cases, threats were carried out and the victim's intimate materials were shared (Patchin & Hinduja 2020; Wolak et al. 2018). Wolak et al. (2018) further found that threats, regardless of the type, were carried out in almost half of the cases considered (47.2%).

During sexual extortion incidents, including when threats were being carried out or as part of intimate partner abuse, victims were harmed in a variety of ways. Victims experienced their accounts being hacked or fake accounts being made; being stalked or harassed online and in person; getting in trouble at school or work; having their family, friends, or pets harmed; and being beaten, raped or physically hurt (Patchin & Hinduja 2020; Wolak et al. 2018). Among the studies that measured ongoing and poly-victimisation, findings suggested that these impacts were common, and while they varied case by case they often involved serious and prolonged threats of physical or non-physical offending against the victim.

Offending and criminal justice involvement

Three studies included information on offending or criminal justice involvement among minors who had been victims of sexual extortion. In the first, as minors were often tricked or coerced into producing and sharing intimate materials of themselves, some victims reported that police had considered taking action against them for CSAM offences (Wolak & Finkelhor 2016). These cases were in the minority and featured in the oldest study in the present review. Nevertheless, this is an important finding as it highlights that sexual extortion can position the victim as a perpetrator, creating barriers to reporting and help-seeking.

The second study found that during the sexual extortion incidents some victims were coerced into committing sexual offences. For example, in some cases the perpetrator demanded that the victim engage in the sexual abuse of other children, or engage in other sexually deviant behaviour (eg bestiality; O'Malley & Holt 2022). This not only put victims at risk of criminal charges but was also used by perpetrators to further intimidate and scare the victim with threats of serious legal action.

The third study indicated an overlap between victimisation and perpetration of sexual extortion. Patchin and Hinduja (2020) found that, among minors who perpetrated sexual extortion, 73 percent reported being victims of sexual extortion in the past. Further, 44 percent of victims of sexual extortion in the sample reported perpetrating sexual extortion. Without time-series data, it is difficult to determine the exact relationship between victimisation and perpetration of sexual extortion among minors in Patchin and Hinduja's study. However, their findings suggest a potential pathway from perpetration to victimisation and vice versa. The authors suggested this may indicate a lack of support after initial victimisation, or possible mutual experiences of sexual extortion in relationships between minors.

Challenges and opportunities for research into sexual extortion of minors

While each of the studies detailed significant impacts experienced by victims, it is important to acknowledge the challenges in studying sexual extortion against minors. Children can be a difficult population to access and study for many reasons, including ethical concerns, especially when dealing with sensitive topics such as sexual extortion. To overcome this challenge, some of the included studies relied on open-source information (eg news articles), interviews with participants who served as proxies for victims (eg school counsellors), or official or informal reports of victimisation. While contributing to the knowledge area, these data sources may introduce biases emerging from small sample sizes or from a reliance on third parties rather than the victims themselves. Alternatively, many studies depended on self-report data through surveys. While surveys may be limited by poor recall and impression management (Chan 2010), they can nevertheless allow researchers to draw representative samples and collect specific information about the topic of interest.

Challenges also arise when defining what constitutes sexual extortion of a minor. When researching an emerging topic such as this, conceptual and operational definitions can vary between studies. While we limited the systematic review to studies fitting certain definitional parameters, some differences were still apparent, such as studies focusing only on online sexual extortion or financial extortion. While allowing for insight into specific subject matter, these approaches can introduce challenges with cross-study comparisons and the development of a cohesive field of research.

Although secondary sources such as news articles or interviews with proxies for victims can provide insight into sexual extortion, is important that, where possible, opportunities are taken to conduct research using primary sources. These include interview or survey data relating to victims or perpetrators of sexual extortion. Further, it is pivotal that consistent definitions are adopted to allow development of a comparable field of knowledge. Together, these opportunities offer a pathway to strengthening the growing knowledge base on sexual extortion of minors, and in turn informing prevention, intervention and support approaches.

Discussion

Minors who were victims of sexual extortion experienced a range of psychological, social-environmental, financial and offending or criminal justice impacts both immediately following the extortion and for prolonged periods after. Victims also experienced impacts related to ongoing and poly-victimisation, including physical assaults, stalking, or threats of assault. The psychological impacts of sexual extortion victimisation were the most common reported in the literature reviewed, and included poor mental wellbeing, distress and anxiety, fear, shame, humiliation, hopelessness, anger, self-blame, self-harm and, in some cases, attempted or actual suicide. Victims also commonly reported social isolation, and some had their schooling, employment and living situation disrupted. Financial costs were also incurred by victims, relating to both the extortion of money and the financial burden of help-seeking associated with victimisation. Importantly, some victims reported that police considered taking action against them for the production or dissemination of CSAM, while for others victimisation was associated with the development of offending behaviours.

These impacts should not be viewed in isolation; it is unlikely that a victim of sexual extortion would experience only one of these impacts. Rather, it is more likely that each harm may exacerbate or increase the likelihood of another. For example, social isolation may enhance the impact of victimisation on mental wellbeing, and the financial burden of extortion may lead to or enhance the psychological or social impacts on victims. The research included in this review typically sought to understand what types of impacts were associated with experiences of sexual extortion among minors. Future research should consider how impacts interrelate and connect, to build a more accurate picture of the harms produced by sexual extortion.

Future research should also consider the context in which sexual extortion is experienced, and whether this influences the severity of the impacts. Broader research has found that many instances of sexual extortion of a minor were perpetrated by an intimate partner (57%, Finkelhor, Turner & Colburn 2023; 31.9%, Patchin & Hinduja 2020; 64.2%, Wolak & Finkelhor 2016), and such cases of sexual extortion may form part of a pattern of abuse including other forms of simultaneous harm. These scenarios differ considerably from those involving online predators or profit-motivated cybercrime. Importantly, when sexual exploitation is experienced by minors online, it may influence the likelihood of revictimisation later in life (Teunissen et al. 2024). Understanding these differences and how they relate to the impacts of sexual extortion on victims is an important area for future research.

Implications

The varied short- and long-term impacts of sexual extortion experienced by minors emphasises the importance of diverse and holistic prevention activities. Importantly, there are key differences between minors and adults in how sexual extortion is experienced, as well as how and why it occurs (Wolak et al. 2018), highlighting the need for prevention and support approaches to be tailored to and targeted towards children. Further, children as young as eight years old reported experiencing sexual extortion (NCMEC 2016). It is therefore pivotal that responses are age appropriate and relevant to the experiences of minors. Responses may include the provision of age-appropriate online safety and sexual education for children or their parents. An education approach could help equip children and young people with knowledge on risky online behaviours, and where to seek help, publicising programs that offer early intervention.

Improvements to help-seeking and reporting mechanisms are also important. Prior research indicates that many minors do not report sexual extortion (Wolak & Finkelhor 2016), and these findings emphasise that sexual extortion can be a prolonged experience without intervention (Açar 2016; Alsoubai et al. 2022; Wolak et al. 2018). Help-seeking is crucial to prevent victims from complying with demands, which in turn may help reduce their vulnerability to repeat victimisation (Thorn 2019; Wolak et al. 2018), while also providing support that can mitigate the impacts on wellbeing. To improve this, greater public awareness and accessibility of reporting avenues is needed (eSafety Commissioner 2019). Further, anonymous reporting may help improve bystander reporting of harmful online behaviour by reducing fear of repercussions (eSafety Commissioner 2019).

Proactive action could also be taken to prevent sexual extortion through initiatives such as Safety by Design, which redistributes the responsibility for protecting children online to service providers (eSafety Commissioner 2019). This is particularly relevant to sexual extortion as it often occurs on popular social media platforms (Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2022). Prevention approaches using Safety by Design principles may include ensuring accounts are set to private by default; introducing age and identity verification; and using artificial intelligence to detect, flag and remove harmful content (Meurens et al. 2022). Blocking malicious actors from being able to easily contact children online is an important measure in reducing perpetration and subsequent harms.

Sexual extortion of minors is an emerging issue with a growing body of research. Given the speed at which sexual extortion is proliferating and online spaces are developing, future research should continue to measure the prevalence of sexual extortion of minors, alongside changes to the impacts they experience, to help inform prevention and intervention initiatives and enhance the support available to victims.

Acknowledgements

References

URLs correct as at September 2024

*Sources included in review

Açar KV 2016. Sexual Extortion of Children in Cyberspace. *International Journal of Cyber Criminology* 10(2): 110–126. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.163398

*Alsoubai A et al. 2022. From 'friends with benefits' to 'sextortion:' A nuanced investigation of adolescents' online sexual risk experiences. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 6(CSCW2): 1–32. https://doi.org/10.1145/3555136

Anderson M, Faverio M & Gottfried J 2023. *Teens, social media and technology 2023*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2023/12/11/teens-social-media-and-technology-2023/

*AUSTRAC 2022. *Combating the sexual exploitation of children for financial gain: Financial crime guide*. AUSTRAC. https://www.austrac.gov.au/business/how-comply-guidance-and-resources/guidance-resources/combating-sexual-exploitation-children-financial-gain

Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation 2023. *Sextortion: Messaging kit*. https://www.accce.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/Sextortion_messaging_kit_October2023.pdf

Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2022. An analysis of financial sextortion victim posts published on r/sextortion. https://protectchildren.ca/en/resources-research/an-analysis-of-financial-sextortion-victim-posts-published-on-sextortion/

Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2017. *Survivors' Survey: Full report 2017*. Winnipeg: Canadian Centre for Child Protection. https://protectchildren.ca/en/resources-research/survivors-survey-results/

Chan D 2010. So why ask me? Are self-report data really that bad? In CE Lance & RJ Vanderberg (eds), *Statistical and methodological myths and urban legends: Doctrine, verity and fable in organizational and social sciences* 1st ed. Routledge: 329–356. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203867266-22

Chiang E & Grant T 2019. Deceptive identity performance: Offender moves and multiple identities in online child abuse conversations. *Applied Linguistics* 40(4): 675–698. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amy007

Cross C, Holt K & O'Malley RL 2022. "If u don't pay they will share the pics": Exploring sextortion in the context of romance fraud. *Victims & Offenders* 18(7): 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2022.2075064

*Dolev-Cohen M 2023. A qualitative study of how Israeli Arab educational counselors handle image-based sexual abuse of female adolescents. *Violence Against Women*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012231179219

*Dolev-Cohen M, Nezer I & Zumt AA 2023. A qualitative examination of school counselors' experiences of sextortion cases of female students in Israel. *Sexual Abuse* 35(8): 903–926. https://doi.org/10.1177/10790632221145925

Douglass CH, Wright CJC, Davis AC & Lim MSC 2018. Correlates of in-person and technology-facilitated sexual harassment from an online survey among young Australians. *Sexual Health* 15(4): 361–365. https://doi.org/10.1071/SH17208

Eaton AA, Ramjee D & Saunders JF 2023. The relationship between sextortion during COVID-19 and pre-pandemic intimate partner violence: A large study of victimization among diverse U.S men and women. *Victims & Offenders* 18(2): 338–355. https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2021.2022057

eSafety Commissioner 2019. Safety by design overview. Australian Government. https://www.esafety.gov.au/industry/safety-by-design

Europol 2015. *The Internet Organised Crime Threat Assessment (IOCTA) 2015*. https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-events/main-reports/internet-organised-crime-threat-assessment-iocta-2015

*Finkelhor D, Turner H & Colburn D 2023. Which dynamics make online child sexual abuse and cyberstalking more emotionally impactful: Perpetrator identity and images? *Child Abuse & Neglect* 137: 106020. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106020

Henry N, Flynn A & Powell A 2019. Responding to 'revenge pornography': Prevalence, nature and impacts. Report to the Criminology Research Advisory Council. https://www.aic.gov.au/crg/reports/crg-0815-16

Kopecký K 2017. Online blackmail of Czech children focused on so-called "sextortion" (analysis of culprit and victim behaviours). *Telematics and Informatics* 34(1): 11–19. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2016.04.004

Liggett R 2019. Exploring online sextortion. *Family & Intimate Partner Violence Quarterly* 11(4): 45–56

Meurens N, Notté E, Wanat A & Mariano L 2022. *Child safety by design that works against online sexual exploitation of children.* Down to Zero Alliance. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.15152.23043

Moher D et al. 2009. Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses: The PRISMA statement. *Annals of Internal Medicine* 151(4): 264–269. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000097

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children 2023. *CyberTipline 2022 report*. https://www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/2022-CyberTipline-Report.pdf

*National Center for Missing & Exploited Children 2016. *Trends identified in CyberTipline sextortion reports*. https://www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/ncmec-analysis/sextortionfactsheet.pdf

NCMEC—see National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

*Nilsson MG, Tzani-Pepelasis C, Ioannou DM & Lester D 2019. Understanding the link between sextortion and suicide. *International Journal of Cyber Criminology* 13(1): 55–69. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3402357

*O'Malley RL & Holt KM 2022. Cyber sextortion: An exploratory analysis of different perpetrators engaging in a similar crime. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 37(1–2): 258–283. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520909186

*Patchin JW & Hinduja S 2020. Sextortion among adolescents: Results From a national survey of U.S. youth. *Sexual Abuse* 32(1): 30–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/1079063218800469

Salter M et al. 2021. Production and distribution of child sexual abuse material by parental figures. *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* no. 616. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. https://doi.org/10.52922/ti04916

Teunissen C, Cahill M, Napier S, Cubitt T, Boxall H & Brown R 2024. Sexual exploitation of children on dating platforms and experiences of revictimisation as an adult. *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice* no. 697. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. https://doi.org/10.52922/ti77482

*Thorn 2019. *Sextortion: Summary findings from a 2017 survey of 2,097 survivors*. Thorn. https://www.thorn.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Sextortion_Wave2Report_121919.pdf

Wittes B, Poplin C, Jurecic Q & Spera C 2016. Sextortion: Cybersecurity, teenagers, and remote sexual assault. *Brookings.* https://www.brookings.edu/articles/sextortion-cybersecurity-teenagers-and-remote-sexual-assault/

*Wolak J & Finkelhor D 2016. *Sextortion: Findings from an online survey about threats to expose sexual images*. Crimes Against Children Research Center and Thorn. https://www.unh.edu/ccrc/sites/default/files/media/2023-05/sextortion-report-final-june-2016.pdf

*Wolak J, Finkelhor D, Walsh W & Treitman L 2018. Sextortion of minors: Characteristics and dynamics. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 62(1): 72–79. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.08.014

Dr Heather Wolbers is a Senior Research Analyst in the Online Sexual Exploitation of Children (OSEC) Research Program at the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC).

Dr Timothy Cubitt is a Principal Research Analyst at the AIC.

Renee Carter is a former intern at the AIC.

Dr Sarah Napier is Research Manager of the OSEC Research Program at the AIC.