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Sextortion Affecting Thousands of US Children

Summary

Sextortion is a type of online sexual exploitation in which individuals coerce victims into providing sexually explicit images or videos of themselves, often in compliance with offenders' threats to post the images publicly or send the images to victims' friends and family. The FBI has seen a significant increase in sextortion activity against children who use the Internet, typically ages 10 to 17, but any age child can become a victim of sextortion.

Technical Details

The FBI is seeking to warn parents, educators, caregivers, and children about the dangers of sextortion. Sending just one inappropriate image to another person online could become the catalyst for sextortion if that image, shared publically or with their family and friends, is considered compromising to the victim. Offenders easily misrepresent themselves online to appear to be friendly and age appropriate or simply an adult who will listen to a child. This relationship can be manipulated to groom the child to eventually send inappropriate images or video to the offender. Furthermore, children may send images or videos to a known individual on purpose, but an offender may come into possession of those images or videos through the sextortion of the original recipient or if the original recipient puts the image on the Internet and the offender comes across it. Younger children can become victims when their friend or sibling is being sextorted and the offender threatens to make images or videos public if their requests to include the sexual abuse of younger children in the images or videos are not satisfied.

Threat

Children tend to be trusting online and will befriend people of any age or sex they may not know. Offenders take advantage of this naivety and target children who openly engage others online or have a strong social networking presence. In most instances, they openly post pictures or videos of themselves. Offenders can gain information from the online presence of potential victims by reviewing posts and "friends lists" and pose as an acquaintance, another teen from the same or a different school, or a stranger with similar interests. "Friends lists" may serve as a source to identify additional victims once the sextortion process starts. Once a child becomes a victim of sextortion, the victimization may last for years. Victims have reported having to meet demands for sexually explicit images and videos multiple times per day. The FBI has identified cases in which children committed suicide, attempted suicide, or engaged in other acts of self-harm due to their sextortion victimization. In one instance, the victim purposely engaged in activity that

put them in the hospital to get a break from their offender's demands. As soon as the victim was released from the hospital, the victimization continued.

Defense

Sextortion is a crime. The coercion of a child by an adult to produce what is considered child pornography carries heavy penalties, which can include up to life sentences for the offender. The FBI does not treat a child as an offender in the production of child pornography as a result of their sextortion or coercion. In order for the victimization to stop, children typically have to come forward to someone—normally a parent, teacher, caregiver, or law enforcement. The embarrassment of the activity a child was forced to engage in is what typically prevents them from coming forward. Sextortion offenders may have hundreds of victims around the world, so coming forward to help law enforcement identify the offender may prevent countless other incidents of sexual exploitation to that victim and others.

The following measures may help educate and prevent children from becoming victims of this type of sexual exploitation:

- Make children aware that anything done online may be available to others;
- Make sure children's apps and social networking sites' privacy settings are set to the strictest level possible;
- Anyone who asks a child to engage in sexually explicit activity online should be reported to a parent, guardian, or law enforcement;
- It is not a crime for a child to send sexually explicit images to someone *if* they are compelled to do so, so victims should not be afraid to tell law enforcement if they are being sexually exploited;
- Parents should put personal computers in a central location in the home;
- Parents should review and approve apps downloaded to smart phones and mobile devices and monitor activity on those devices;
- Ensure an adult is present and engaged when children communicate via webcam; and
- Discuss Internet safety with children before they engage in any online activity and maintain those discussions as children become teenagers.

What to do if you believe you are or someone you know is the victim of sextortion:

- Contact your local law enforcement agency, your local FBI field office (contact information can be found at www.fbi.gov), or the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (1-800-the-lost or Cybertipline.org);
- Do not delete anything before law enforcement is able to review it; and
- Tell law enforcement everything about the encounters you had online—it may be embarrassing, but it is necessary to find the offender.