

Study reveals extent of technology-facilitated abuse in Australia

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The nature and extent of technology-facilitated abuse in Australia has been laid bare, with a new survey revealing victims are subjected to stalking, psychological abuse and physical threats.

They have also had their [digital devices](#) and accounts hacked and have been coerced into sending nude or sexual content online.

Many [victims](#) don't report the [abuse](#) to police, due to the threat of violence and / or the release of intimate images or information, highlighting a need for urgent system-wide reform.

A team led by Monash University researcher Associate Professor Asher Flynn, alongside Associate Professor Anastasia Powell and Sophie Hindes surveyed 338 sector stakeholders who work with victims or perpetrators of technology-facilitated abuse to better understand its extent, nature and impact.

Funded by Australia's National Research Organization for Women's Safety (ANROWS) and the Department of Social Services, the researchers' findings were collated into the report titled "Technology-Facilitated Abuse: A Survey of Support Services Stakeholders," released today.

Survey participants reported the majority of victims are women aged up to 34 years, or are girls aged 17 and under, as well as transgender, non-binary and intersex people.

The main perpetrators were men up to 34 years of age, as well as boys, with former intimate partners, de facto or spouses most likely to initiate the abuse in order to intimidate or control the victim, cause distress or fear, or isolate them and restrict their activities.

The survey asked sector workers to respond to a series of topics describing behaviors of technology-facilitated abuse: monitoring, stalking or controlling behaviors; psychological or emotional abuse or threats; sexual abuse and image-based abuse; and sexual harassment and dating harassment.

In the professional experience of workers surveyed:

- 83 percent reported working with victims who were sent put-downs or insulting or harassing messages by digital or online means
- More than three-quarters had experienced perpetrators maintaining unwanted contact with victims via digital or online means
- More than half:
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 - Worked with victims who were monitored by perpetrators via constant phone calls, messages, GPS tracking and [social media](#) monitoring (58 percent)
 - Experienced victims who had their access to a telephone, mobile phone or the internet controlled (56 percent)
 - Knew of perpetrators threatening to physically assault the victim via digital or online means (55 percent)

More than a third of workers also reported perpetrators had insisted victims share passwords and provide access to their device and / or online accounts, and 33 percent said they were aware of the hacking or accessing of victims' emails, social media or other online accounts without their consent.

Some perpetrators used internet-connected household devices such as Google Home or even children's toys to monitor or keep track of their victim.

Nearly 40 percent of workers were aware of perpetrators posting offensive or unwanted messages, images or personal information on the internet about victims and more than a third reported the use of anonymous accounts to send threats or abusive or harassing messages to

victims.

Image-based abuse was also mentioned by participants, with more than a quarter aware of victims who had been threatened with the posting of a nude or sexual photo or video online, or sent to others, and one in five said they had worked with victims who were pressured, coerced or blackmailed into sending nude or sexual photos or videos of themselves when they did not want to.

Respondents reported last year's bushfire crisis and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated the abuse—with less ability to assist clients.

Associate Professor Flynn, lead researcher and Monash criminologist, said a key theme in the findings was how the constant monitoring and abuse through technology created a sense of omnipresence for victims, feeling as though they were always being watched by the [perpetrator](#).

"Support services workers said this made victims hypervigilant and fearful, feeling as though the abuse would never end and they would never be able to escape. This has the ability to impact all facets of victims' lives: they don't feel safe at home, work, study or in social situations," she said.

"They feel isolated—many end up having to disable social media accounts, change phone numbers and restrict their use of technology, which may see them lose contact with friends and family and struggle to seek help from support and emergency services.

"The impacts are far-reaching. Perpetrators can impact victims' finances through hacking bank accounts or, by harassing them at work, they can lose employment. Beyond this, there are significant impacts to victims' mental wellbeing—from helplessness and shame through to anxiety,

depression and suicidal thoughts."

Workers also said police don't always pursue criminal investigations or charges in relation to technology-facilitated abuse, and technology providers were not responding adequately to the risks.

They also expressed interest in more training and professional development to better understand the intricacies of technology-facilitated abuse.

"These findings demonstrate more needs to be done to improve the responsiveness of state- and territory-based victims of technology-facilitated crime, particularly those with diverse backgrounds," Associate Professor Flynn said.

"It is clear technology-facilitated abuse is an extended form of gendered violence and there is an urgent need for training and resources directed to frontline support services."

The findings from this report represent stage one of a three part project into the extent, nature and contexts of technology-facilitated abuse in Australia.

More information: Technology-facilitated abuse: A survey of support services stakeholders (Research report, 02/2021). ANROWS.

www.anrows.org.au/publication/...rvices-stakeholders/

Provided by Monash University

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