

Landmark research shows increase in online sex blackmailing during pandemic

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During the pandemic men were twice as likely as women to fall victim to online extortionists threatening to publish explicit photos, videos, and information about them.

That's according to a new, first-of-its-kind study published in the peer-reviewed journal *Victims & Offenders*.

Young people, Black and Native American [women](#), and LGBTQ individuals were also at higher risk of this cyber-enabled crime (known as sextortion), the survey of more than 2,000 adults in the US showed.

Sextortion is a form of extortion in which the blackmailer threatens to publish explicit, private images or videos online unless their demands are met.

The perpetrator can be a current or former partner, a stranger who has hacked into a person's photos or webcam, or an online dating scammer.

Reports of sextortion to the FBI rose during the [pandemic](#), a time of a significant transition to a more digital life via remote working and socialising, say the researchers.

Since the start of the pandemic, non-profit organizations, government institutions, and legal professionals in the US have also reported a substantial increase in technology facilitated sexual violence.

But while other forms of technology-facilitated sexual violence, such as nonconsensual (sometimes called "revenge") pornography, have been increasingly researched in recent years, sextortion has received less attention.

Funded by a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant awarded to Florida International University (FIU) and Cyber Civil Rights Initiative (CCRI), the study asked 2,006 people if they had ever been a victim of sextortion, defined as "the act of threatening to expose a nude or sexually explicit image in order to get a person to do something such as send more nude or sexually explicit images, pay someone money or perform

sexual acts."

Four and a half per cent of men and 2.3 per cent of women said they'd experienced sextortion since the start of the pandemic.

This surprised the researchers, who expected women to be at greatest risk.

"There are several reasons why US men more often reported being victims of sextortion during the pandemic than women," says researcher Dr. Asia Eaton, an Associate Professor of Psychology at FIU and Head of Research for CCRI.

"Recent research has highlighted gender disparities in unpaid care work and household-related work since the start of the pandemic; it is possible that men had more time to spend online than women during the pandemic."

Men's tendency to be "less selective" than women when dating may also open them up to sextortion, adds Dr. Eaton, who notes men are more likely to be victims of online romance scams in general.

The results also revealed race and sexuality-related differences in rates of sextortion, with Black women, Native American women, and LGBTQ individuals—three groups that are at higher risk of other types of sexual violence and coercion—also at higher risk of sextortion.

Black and Native American women were around seven times more likely to be victims of sextortion than White women. Rates in LGBTQ respondents were up to three times as high as in heterosexual individuals.

Age was also a factor, with rates highest among 18 to 29-year-olds, perhaps due to the greater sexual experimentation and use of technology

in this age group.

The study also found that people who had experienced sexual violence from a partner before the pandemic were more likely to experience sextortion during the pandemic.

Sextortion was most commonly perpetrated by strangers and romantic partners—current and former.

The study's authors say that more work is needed to determine why the risk of sextortion varies with race, age, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as its impact on people's wellbeing.

It is possible, for example, that [sextortion](#) has a more harmful impact on women, despite being targeted less often than men.

The researchers conclude that questions about technology-facilitated sexual violence should be added to tests used by clinical professionals to assist in identifying patients who are in abusive relationships before referring them for counselling and other help.

Prevention is also important. "Sex education programmes that teach about consent, pleasure, and healthy relationship communication and decision-making may reduce both in-person and technology-facilitated [sexual violence](#)," says Dr. Eaton.

Limitations of the study include that the data consists only of self-reports and that it was just collected in the first year of the pandemic.

More information: Asia A. Eaton et al, 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* (2022). [DOI](#):

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