Policing 'sextortion': improving understanding of the nature, extent and experiences of (re)victimisation

A mixed methods co-produced project addressing knowledge gaps about the nature and extent of 'sextortion' (re)victimisation, capturing victims' experiences and aiming to improve police responses.

Key details

Lead institution	University of Central Lancashire
Principal researcher(s)	Dr Emily Cooper, Dr Clare Scollay, Dr Scott Keay and Dr Nathan Birdsall ecooper2@uclan.ac.uk
Police region	North West
Collaboration and partnership	- Revenge Porn Helpline - We Fight Fraud - Lancashire Police - Edge Hill University (Dr Scott Keay) - University of Manchester (Dr Clare Scollay) - Vulnerability and Policing Futures Research Centre (funder)
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	May 2025
Date due for completion	April 2026

Research context

'Sextortion' is a type of image-based sexual abuse (IBSA) often referred to as 'financially motivated sexual extortion', or online blackmail, whereby intimate images/videos are recorded or manufactured and the victim is extorted, often for financial gain.

The 2024 [VAWG Strategic Threat Risk Assessment](#) states that IBSA is likely to be the fastest growing threat in the next 12–24 months (VKPP 2024). While all types of IBSA have become a priority for academic, police and government activity (Department for Science, Innovation and Technology 2024), sextortion has received less attention, despite reports rising significantly for children and adults (Revenge Porn Helpline 2023, National Crime Agency 2024).

This project will provide a novel empirical evidence base to advance academic, police and practitioner knowledge. It will explore how 'sextortion' is defined, recorded and responded to by police and capture the characteristics and prevalence of victims' experiences and perpetrator tactics, to support the development of police responses.

The project will use partner organisations with experience and knowledge of victim-survivor support (The Revenge Porn Helpline) and lived experience of fraud and cybercrime perpetration (We Fight Fraud) to understand the needs of victim-survivors and processes of victimisation more holistically, and co-produce police performance-enhancing resources.

In order to create this knowledge, the project has four research questions, collaboratively developed by the team and partners:

- what is the nature and prevalence of sextortion and how does it manifest across different digital platforms and victim/perpetrator relationships?
- how do police record and respond to incidents of sextortion, either when victims directly present to the force, or when data is shared by organisations such as Action Fraud?
- how often does re/victimization occur, and what forms does this take?
- what are victims' experiences of the response to their reporting or help-seeking from the police and/or other organisations?

Research methodology

Existing research demonstrates the widespread impacts of IBSA on victim-survivors (Henry and others 2020), but there is a significant knowledge gap about sextortion re/victimisation methods,

what communities are affected (particularly using an intersectional lens), how police identify and respond to it, and victim-survivor experiences of reporting and help-seeking (Henry and others 2024, Ray and Henry 2025). Thus a mixed methods approach was developed.

Co-production is an integral feature of the project, and two datasets will be generated and analysed:

- Dataset 1: a victim-survivor survey, to provide a national overview of prevalence, experiences and practice gaps
- Dataset 2: a detailed quantitative and qualitative assessment of Lancashire Police crime data on sextortion cases.

The combination will likely capture both reported and unreported victim-survivor experiences which is important for developing practice responses that are inclusive.

An interactive workshop with research partners and other key stakeholders will be used to contextualise and agree findings and co-produce a toolkit, which Lancashire Police will pilot.

The research aims and methodology have been co-produced with We Fight Fraud, a leading organisation in fraud prevention comprised of lived experience, academic, and practitioner colleagues; the Revenge Porn helpline, a charity supporting victims of all forms of image-based sexual abuse; and Lancashire Police. All partners will be involved in co-analysing data and co-producing outputs.

Research participation

The project team will be seeking victim-survivors of sextortion to respond to their survey when it is circulated. Please contact the project team for further information.

References

Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. 2024. 'Crackdown on intimate image abuse as government strengthens online safety laws'. Accessed 21 December 2024.

Henry N and others. 2020. 'Image-based sexual abuse: A study on the causes and consequences of non-consensual nude or sexual imagery'. Routledge.

Henry N. and Umbach R. 2024. 'Sextortion: Prevalence and correlates in 10 countries'. Computers in Human Behavior, 158, p 1082980.

National Crime Agency. 2024. 'Financially Motivated Sexual Extortion'. Available at: Sextortion - National Crime Agency. Accessed 1 November 2024.

Ray A. and Henry N. 2025. 'Sextortion: A Scoping Review'. Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 26(1), pp 138–155. .

Revenge Porn Helpline. 2023. Annual Report.

Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP). 2024. VAWG Strategic Threat Risk Assessment. Accessed 30 December 2024.

Related resources

Project website. Vulnerability and Policing Futures Research Centre.