

Many teens are 'sextortion' targets

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(HealthDay)—Parents of teens can add "sextortion" to the list of things to worry about, because a new study shows that 5 percent of teenagers are targets of this cybercrime.

Another 3 percent of teens have likely done it to others, the study authors added.

Sextortion is threatening to share sexually explicit photos without consent if a person doesn't agree to certain demands, such as sexual favors or money.

Probably the most well-known case of sextortion was Canadian teenager Amanda Todd. She was only 12 years old when someone she met online talked her into lifting up her shirt in front of a web cam.

It turned out that that person wasn't another [teen](#). He was a grown man, and he threatened to share the images of her breasts at her school if she didn't put on another sexual show for him. She refused and he followed through on his threat.

In fact, he followed her online and shared the images again when she changed schools. He tortured her so relentlessly, and recruited others to do so as well, that she ended up taking her own life just before her 16th birthday.

"Some kids make mistakes, and today the consequences can be pretty major and can follow them and affect them deeply psychologically and socially," said study author Sameer Hinduja.

"Teens in first love believe they'll be together forever, and don't want to do anything to ruin the relationship," he explained.

Hinduja is a professor of criminology at Florida Atlantic University in Jupiter.

Hinduja said he hasn't seen a specific sextortion law, but that charges for these behaviors can be filed under existing laws, such as laws on

blackmail and extortion.

Dr. Richard Catanzaro, chairman of psychiatry at Northern Westchester Hospital in Mount Kisco, N.Y., said, "Sextortion is just the latest form of online predation. All predators work by preying on people who feel isolated and, because they think there is no recourse, are forced to submit."

The study included a nationally representative sample of more than 5,500 middle and [high school students](#) aged 12 to 17.

Males were much more likely to have participated in sextortion than females—either as a victim or the perpetrator.

Teens who identified as non-heterosexual were more than twice as likely to be the victim of sextortion. This finding is similar to other research that shows gay and transgender children are more likely to be involved in online abuse.

Fifteen appears to be the most common age to be involved in sextortion, the new study found.

One finding parents may find particularly alarming is that teens being victimized by sextortion attempts usually know the person trying to take advantage of them. They may have been a romantic partner or a friend. It's unusual for someone to be targeted by a stranger, the researchers said.

Hinduja advises [teens](#) to "be more vigilant with your relationships. You don't need to be obsessed with keeping a relationship at all costs."

Psychologist Judy Malinowski, from Ascension Health in Novi, Mich., pointed out that the "human brain isn't fully matured until the mid- to

late-20s." She explained that activities such as sex and aggression actually give kids a chemical surge in the brain (similar to one that people using drugs or gambling feel) that makes them feel good.

"The power of that feeling is overriding common sense. They're getting such an emotional surge that whatever conscious thought they might have about what could happen is being shut off," Malinowski said.

Both Malinowski and Catanzaro said that if a teen is being victimized, he or she needs to talk to a parent or other trusted adult.

"Find someone you can trust. Reach out to that one person—coach, counselor, aunt, teacher, whoever—and tell them this is happening and you don't know what to do about it," Malinowski said.

Catanzaro added, "Find one rational adult in which to confide and get support from peers by speaking to friends. And, when something like this happens, think about the worst-case scenario. All people have a way of catastrophizing. If you think of the worst possible outcome, you will probably realize it's not as bad as more sexual exploitation."

The findings were published online recently in the journal *Sexual Abuse*.

More information: Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D., professor, criminology, and co-director, Cyberbullying Research Center, Florida Atlantic University, Jupiter, Fla.; Richard Catanzaro, M.D., chairman, psychiatry, Northern Westchester Hospital, Mount Kisco, N.Y.; Judy Malinowski, M.A., psychologist, Ascension Eastwood Behavioral Health, Novi, Mich.; September 2018, *Sexual Abuse*, online

The American Academy of Pediatrics has advice on talking to your kids about [sexting](#).

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