

A warning to parents: Teen 'sextortion' cases unfolding throughout Utah

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FILE - Unified police detective Jerry Byam stands in a hallway as school ends for the day at Taylorsville High on Monday, March 13, 2017. According to Utah school and police officials, sexting is so widespread that many teens just accept it as commonplace for today's generation of high schoolers.

SALT LAKE CITY — The U.S. Justice Department has called it "by far the most significantly growing threat to children."

And based on recent investigations, the issue of "sextortion" isn't slowing down, including in Utah.

Sextortion is a form of online blackmail, typically targeting teenagers or preteens.

The average sextortion case starts with children who are 12 to 14 years old who are using social media and other apps to message others who they assume are also juveniles, said Steve Cagen, head of U.S. Homeland Security Investigations in Utah and three other states. Eventually, the other "juvenile" will gain the teen's trust and request a nude photo.

"But they're talking to a 40-year-old or 50-year-old man, who once they have one photo will then extort them for more. It's called sextortion. It's happening a lot. And we are asking parents to talk to your kids, because it can happen in every neighborhood," he said.

The emotional destruction a child suffers after being guilted into sending photos or videos out of fear of being exposed is gut-wrenching for even the most hardened of investigators.

"It is difficult when we have to look in the faces of children who have been exploited, who will never be the same again," Cagen said.

Often, the crime leaves child victims with severe depression and thoughts of suicide, according to the Justice Department.

"Sextortion is brutal. This is not a matter of playful consensual sexting," according to the Brookings Institution, a public policy organization that conducts research it hopes will help lead to solving societal problems. "Sextortion, rather, is a form of sexual exploitation, coercion and violence, often but not always of children. In many cases, the perpetrators seem to take pleasure in their victims' pleading and protestations that they are scared and underage.

"In multiple cases we have reviewed, victims contemplate, threaten or even attempt suicide — sometimes to the apparent pleasure of their tormentors."

Sextortion in Utah

Earlier this year, the Deseret News [examined with local police and school officials](#) the exploding problem of nude selfies being exchanged among Utah's high school students. The issue has become so prevalent that many teens have accepted it as normal. It's what our generation does, they say. Law enforcers and school administrators warned, however, that teens freely sending nude photos could also open themselves up to the possibility of extortion.

Those fears have been realized.

The Deseret News has uncovered several investigations through search warrants filed throughout the state over the past few months by law enforcement agencies of possible sextortion incidents. Many of these investigations are still ongoing. Some examples:

- In Uintah County last month, the sheriff's office was asked to investigate a 17-year-old boy who was allegedly being blackmailed by a woman.

"It was reported that (the boy) had recently accepted a friend request from (a woman) who (the boy) did not know. (The boy) at some point had been communicating with (her) via Facebook video and admitted that he had been naked in the video chat at some point," the warrant states. (The woman) then demanded \$500 or she would post the video online, according to a warrant.

- Also last month, West Valley police were called to investigate a complaint from a 17-year-old girl who reported "being exposed to the world." The girl said someone she knew "had shared nude photographs and videos of her" on Facebook and Snapchat, a warrant states.

The girl told detectives the videos were taken in 2014 when she was 14 and intoxicated. Those videos were later shared with at least two other people.

- In Millard County last month, a 13-year-old girl told police she had "sent hundreds of naked pictures of herself to other male juveniles" and has "received many pictures of naked males ranging in age from 12 years old to 17 years old. She has been asked for naked pictures of herself from all the males."

- In yet another case in August, Salt Lake police were asked to investigate a girl who was receiving messages on Facebook and Instagram from an unknown person demanding nude photos "or he will publicly post a nude photo he already has of her," a warrant states. The harassment continued as the person "repeatedly demanded more nude photos, and if she does not comply will post that nude photo of her on social media." The girl told investigators she gave a nude photo to an ex-boyfriend a few years earlier, but didn't know how someone else would have gotten it.

- In Mt. Pleasant, Sanpete County, in July, a 17-year-old boy told police he had accepted a friend request on Facebook from an unknown woman claiming to be from California. One day, the woman requested a video chat with the boy.

"When (the boy) opened the video chat, he found the woman naked on her bed," a warrant states. The woman convinced the boy to also take his clothes off.

"The woman told him she recorded the video and that he needed to pay her \$3,000 or she was going to send the video to YouTube and all his friends on his Facebook list."

- In June, St. George police investigated a case of a high school girl who started getting requests on Instagram for nude photos.

"(The girl) didn't know who the person was but he kept telling her that he had other sexually explicit pictures of her. (She) admitted to having sent pictures of herself to other boys two years prior to this event. (She) said it was these photos that she was being blackmailed with," a warrant states.

The person later told her that "if she blocked this message he would send out photos of her to everyone at the school."

- Also in St. George in May, police were called to investigate the case of a 13-year-old girl who met a male on an app. The two continued to talk via Skype. The male, who used the name

"Demon Paradox," never turned his video chat on, but convinced the young girl to take her clothes off, the warrant states.

"I observed there were six videos sent to the male," an officer wrote.

Average age 15

As of January 2015, the Exploited Children Division of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reported that the organization's Cyber Tipline had received more than 3.3 million reports of alleged exploitation. Between October 2013 and April 2016, the group analyzed more than 1,400 sextortion reports received on the tip line and found that girls accounted for 78 percent of victims, with the average age of all victims being 15.

But even law enforcement may not be fully aware of how deep the problem runs.

"While the FBI has issued numerous warnings about sextortion, the government publishes no data on the subject," a 2016 study by the Brookings Institution states. "Unlike its close cousin, the form of nonconsensual pornography known as 'revenge porn,' the problem of sextortion has not received sustained press attention or action in numerous state legislatures, in part because with few exceptions, sextortion victims have chosen to remain anonymous."

Last week, Cagen joined U.S. Attorney for Utah John Huber to discuss the problem of sextortion and child pornography, and to urge parents to do their part to combat the problem.

Huber's office prosecutes, on average, 40 federal cases of child pornography each year. Those cases represent the "worst of the worst," he said, and don't include the "dozens to hundreds" of cases being prosecuted in state courts throughout Utah.

Like sextortion, those who engage in child pornography typically use all of the latest technology available and utilize tools such as the darknet and various apps to conduct their illegal activity. The Brookings study noted that sextortion was being "fueled by ubiquitous internet connections and webcams."

Meanwhile, federal officials warn that predators have also become very good at posing as juveniles on social media.

Predators seek to take advantage of naivete of teens who, in the age of social media, often post multiple pictures or videos of themselves and seek to have a strong social networking presence, federal officials say.

'Don't give in'

The solution to the problem will be a community effort, not just a law enforcement operation, Cagen said.

"I'm asking parents to have the difficult conversation with your children," he said, emphasizing that the conversation should start with the dangers of sending nude photos to anyone.

A big step to stopping the problem is simply never sending a nude photo — especially to a someone the sender has never met, said Cagen, who added that children shouldn't even be accepting friend requests on social media from someone they've never met in person.

"One of biggest things is not engaging in conversations with someone you don't know," he said. Parents can find resources on how to have a conversation with their children at iGuardian, an online resource set up by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Local police agencies say they are also available to help. And if a child is too uncomfortable or embarrassed to go directly to police or tell their parents, they should find a trusted friend to accompany them to the police department.

"Being blackmailed is never a reason to give in to what the demands are. A person shouldn't be forced into sending more of that kind of stuff," said Salt Lake police detective Richard Chipping.

Chipping cautions people, particularly teenagers, about sending nude or compromising photos. "The nude photos really do have the potential to be used against them at a later time," he said. St. George police officer Lona Trombley said even if a teen is being threatened with extortion, never give the perpetrator what they want.

"Don't give in. It doesn't matter what they're telling you. Don't feel forced to do what they're telling you to do. This is a crime. And for another person to try and force you to do something like this is criminal, and you do have other options," she said.

"You don't need to feel trapped. We can help you. But we can't help you if you don't let us know what's going on."