



Sexual extortion of children

Special attention should be paid to how this term is used.

Sexual extortion, also called “sextortion”, is the blackmailing of a person with the help of self-generated images of that person in order to extort sexual favours, money, or other benefits from her/him under the threat of sharing the material beyond the consent of the depicted person (e.g. posting images on social media). Often, the influence and manipulation typical of groomers over longer periods of time (sometimes several months) turns into a rapid escalation of threats, intimidation, and coercion once the person has been persuaded to send the first sexual images of her/himself.

Sexual extortion is considered a feature of online solicitation of both children and adults, and there appears to be an increase of the use of this type of blackmailing, including more extreme, violent, sadistic, and degrading demands by offenders.²³¹ When carried out against children, sexual extortion involves a process whereby children or young people are coerced into continuing to produce sexual material and/or told to perform distressing acts under threat of exposure to others of the material that depicts them. In some instances, the abuse spirals so out of control that victims have attempted to self-harm or commit suicide as the only way of escaping it.²³²

Conclusion: The recommended term is “sexual extortion of children”, which emphasises that this is a form of extortion that is sexual in nature and that the act is carried out against a child. The colloquial, often-used term “sextortion” remains more debated in the field of child protection, as it does not show clearly that it is a matter of sexual exploitation against a child and risks trivialising a practice that can produce extremely serious consequences.

²²⁸ J.M. Petit, “Report by the Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography”, supra 162, Paragraph 13.

²²⁹ See Oxford British and World English Dictionary.

²³⁰ US Department of Justice, “National Strategy for Child Exploitation Prevention and Interdiction”, Report to Congress, August 2010, p.3 <http://www.justice.gov/psc/docs/natstrategyreport.pdf>, p.3.

²³¹ Virtual Global Taskforce, “Child Sexual Exploitation Environmental Scan”, supra 172.

²³² Ibid.