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'Dad, I screwed up': A year after their son's death, P.E.I. family speaks out about sextortion

Harry Burke's family want to protect other kids from this growing form of blackmail

[Kevin Yarr](#) · CBC News · Posted: Mar 21, 2024 3:27 PM EDT | Last Updated: March 21, 2024



Harry Burke died just hours after making contact on Snapchat with someone he thought was a girl but who turned out to be an extortionist. (Submitted by the family of Harry Burke)

Warning: This story deals with suicide. If you or someone you know has been the victim of sexual extortion, or is struggling with mental health, you can find resources for help at the bottom of this story.

As the first anniversary of 17-year-old Harry Burke's death approaches, his parents are going public with their story, driven by a desire for social media companies and governments to do more to make young people safe from international sextortion schemes.

Harry Burke, a student at Souris Regional School in eastern P.E.I., died by suicide just hours after he started a conversation with a new contact on Snapchat, who posed as a girl and tempted him into sharing intimate images. Once those pictures were sent, the contact threatened to ruin his career and destroy his life if he didn't send money.

It was April 24, 2023. Harry had just completed one of his last weekends of basic training for the Armed Forces reserves.

"He was very passionate about his country. He believed strongly in Canada," said his dad, Carl Burke.



The months since Harry's death in April 2023 have been filled with pain for his parents Carl Burke and Barbie Lavers. (Laura Meader/CBC)

"He said to me once, 'Dad, I want to change Canada. I want to make a difference.' I really felt he probably would have."

Harry was tired that day, and his dad suggested he stay home from school. They did some work around the house together. There was nothing unusual about the day, Burke said, until late that evening.

"Harry came to me about 9:30 that evening and said, 'Dad, I screwed up.' He said, 'I had shared pictures and now this person wants money.'"

More threats

Harry told his parents his first contact with the person had been at 4 p.m., less than six hours earlier.

Burke said he knew that paying money wouldn't solve anything and that demands would just keep coming. They sat down as a family to discuss it — Harry, his father, his mother Barbie Lavers, and his younger sister Ella. They decided to call RCMP in the morning and report the incident.

During the discussion, an alert went off on his mother's phone.

"This is how nasty these people can get," said Lavers.



Harry became a cadet when he was 14, and joined the armed forces reserves in the fall of 2022. (Family photo)

"This person that had been contacting Harry actually messaged me when Harry was speaking to us — and Ella was with us, we were talking about it as a family — messaged me and said they were going to ruin him. And I really wish Harry hadn't seen that message, because he was sitting with me when it came through."

Harry called one of his military friends, who told him some pictures had already been sent to him.

"You could see it wear on Harry, on his face. He was defeated," said Burke.

Lavers still has a clear memory of the last time she saw her son alive.

"When I said good night to him that night I said, 'What are you doing?' and he said, 'I'm writing down some thoughts.' And he did do some journaling so I didn't think anything of it, didn't push him to tell me what he was writing. And I turned around and said, 'I love you, Harry,' and he said, 'I love you, Mom.' But he was writing his note, and I didn't know."

When Burke went to Harry's bedroom the next morning, the bed hadn't been slept in. He found Harry dead.

'I keep looking in the mirror for him'

Burke and Lavers are trying to carry on with their lives, but every day without Harry is painful.

"For the three of us here in this house, it's left a large gap," said Lavers.

"Sometimes I can still hear him coming up the stairs, two at a time, and yelling 'Mom!'"



Harry with his parents and sister Ella, who was 18 months younger than him. (Family photo)

Burke remembers how they used to ride motorcycles together, side by side.

"He knew where I was and I knew where he was. I'd just glance in my mirror, and he was always there," he said.

"I can't ride anymore because I keep looking in the mirror for him, and he's never there."

Now, after months of grieving, Burke and Lavers are speaking out in the hopes they can make some small contribution to this never happening again.

"Within about 12 hours of Harry being contacted he was gone," said Lavers.

"I've heard other stories of other young boys and sometimes it's four hours, and it's just wrong. They're teenagers, they're just kids and they don't understand that's not the end of the world and these people mean nothing."

WATCH | Harry Burke's parents talk about sextortion and their son's death:

The family of P.E.I. teen Harry Burke is speaking about their son's death by suicide, which happened less than 12 hours after he shared intimate pictures with a new contact on Snapchat and became a victim of sextortion. Carl Burke and Barbie Lavers hope to raise awareness and protect other teens from sexual predators.

Thousands of reports every year

Sextortion, or sexual extortion, is a huge international problem, said Stephen Sauer, director of cybertip.ca at the Canadian Centre for Child Protection.

"We get an average of about 10 reports a day concerning sextortion from Canadian youth, and in the last 18 months have received nearly 6,000 reports," said Sauer.



Social media platforms need to take steps to improve protection for youth, says Stephen Sauer, director of Cybertip.ca at the Canadian Centre for Child Protection. (Karen Pauls/CBC)

"There's a lot of shame associated with this so it's really difficult for individuals to reach out. I think we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg with those who are in crisis looking for someone to help them through the situation, to intervene. There are certainly many more youth out there who are trying to manage these situations on their own."

The perpetrators are based overseas, said Sauer. They are loosely organized, sharing strategies for luring young people who live in countries richer than their own.

Males aged 14 to 24 are the primary target.

In the months since Harry's death, Burke said he's learned that extortionists will go after people like Harry, who have close family and community ties, and high hopes for their future. They find these profiles by scanning social media accounts.

It is a huge challenge for police.

Reports of extortion to police increased fivefold between 2012 and 2022. But over that same period, the rate of successful police investigations has plummeted. About one in three of the cases in 2012 resulted in charges. In 2022, it was fewer than one in 10.

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"There are seriously under-resourced units that are trying to investigate these crimes," said Sauer.

"Because of the international nature of what's happening here, you have to really have a co-ordinated effort."

That co-ordinated effort includes police agencies in the countries where perpetrators live, which adds another level of complication, he said. Relationships need to be developed before information is shared, and it can be difficult to navigate those networks, trying to work across different cultures.

Stopping incidents before they happen

Rather than trying to deal with the problem after it happens, Sauer suggests social media companies could do more to prevent incidents in the first place.

"We need these companies to be held accountable for what's happening on their platform," he said.

"They don't do any age verification. They really don't do any verification of accounts. They don't have any prevention things in place to ensure that people can't recreate accounts once they've been kicked off the platform."

Burke agrees that social media companies could be doing far more to ensure the safety of their product.

"These guys have an exorbitant amount of funds to do these sorts of things," said Burke.

"It's keeping our kids safe, and they can do that."

But Burke isn't letting governments off the hook, either. He notes that playground equipment and toys are heavily regulated to ensure their safety and says the same should be done for smartphones and social media platforms.

The situation is urgent, said Sauer.

"This is truly killing our kids, this epidemic, so we need to get out ahead of this," he said, noting his group saw reports rise eight-fold from 2018 to 2022.

"We're in an epidemic of online sextortion. The numbers seem to rise year after year in terms of the number of victims who are coming in to us."

Getting into the schools

There is one other avenue of prevention that Burke and Lavers would like to see pursued: better education for youth about the risks.

That could start in the schools. Burke says he is aware that police are running education programs, but he believes a personal story — his family's story — would have a bigger impact. And he is ready to take that on.

"To actually put a face and a name on what has taken place, it really hits home," he said.

The P.E.I. Legislature is taking a step toward ensuring Harry's story is not forgotten.

A private member's bill brought forward by Souris-Elmira MLA Robin Croucher would see April 25, the anniversary of Harry Burke's death, be proclaimed Cyberbullying Awareness Day.

The bill passed third reading unanimously on Thursday. Croucher hopes it is given royal assent in time for it to be recognized next month.

"It's important to have a day marked," said Burke.

"I hope it brings meaning to Harry's name. Harry wanted to make changes in Canada. Maybe this is his way."

If you or someone you know is struggling, here's where to get help:

- [Cybertip](#): a resource covering sextortion and other online harms.

- Canada's [Suicide Crisis Helpline](#): Call or text 988.
- Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868. Text 686868. Live chat counselling on [the website](#).
- Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention: [Find a 24-hour crisis centre](#).
- This guide from the [Centre for Addiction and Mental Health](#) outlines how to talk about suicide with someone you're worried about.

With files from Laura Meader

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