

**Policy Program Final Paper: Combating Sextortion**

Zachary Meagor

University of Southern California

PPD342: Crime and Public Policy

Professor Cobarrubias

May 9, 2025

## Introduction

On March 5, 2025, Wisconsin mother Brittney Bird entered her son Bradyn's room to wake him with news of a surprise ski trip. However, the bed was empty. Shortly after, Bird found her 15-year-old hanging from the basement ceiling. Police later found a note saying, "Make sure he gets caught. I'm so sorry. Everything is on my phone." The local investigation discovered that Bradyn was a victim of sextortion, whereby a criminal threatens to leak a minor's sexually explicit images if they do not pay up.

Bird spoke during a Wisconsin state assembly testimony, claiming that there is a lack of awareness around sextortion due to the stigma surrounding sexual crimes. She caused lawmakers to weep when she said, "I've never been ashamed of my kid. He's 15. He's doing what 15-year-olds do." In his death note, Bradyn displayed shame for his actions, despite him being one of thousands of victims every year. Bradyn's guilt, shame, and feeling of isolation prevented him from reporting the crime or telling a trusted adult. Instead, these overwhelmingly negative emotions placed him in a dark mental state where death was the only way out. Bird is advocating for increased transparency and an amendment of the Wisconsin penal code for harsher penalties on criminals involved in sextortion schemes.

Unfortunately, this story is not uncommon in contemporary society. Sextortion has been growing in occurrence, causing youth suicides and grief in families and communities. Sextortion presents a serious safety and financial risk, exploiting the vulnerability of teenagers to siphon money to criminals. However, the youth can be educated about this growing crime to prevent themselves from becoming victims and learn to receive support if victimized. In the end, suicides such as Bradyn's are preventable because teenagers need to know they are not in trouble and there is a way out the situation.

## Background

Sextortion, also known as sexually coerced extortion or financial sextortion, is when a criminal poses as a fake individual who is romantically interested in the victim, receives sexually explicit photographs from the victim, and then threatens to release the sexually explicit material unless the victim sends money (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2025). This differs from traditional sextortion which is when a victim is blackmailed into providing more sexual images. The main target of financial sextortion is male teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 years old (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2024). Adult predators create fake accounts as female teenagers on any site, app, messaging platform, or video game where people may meet or communicate (FBI, 2025). Most crimes occur on social media applications such as Instagram. Predators feign romantic interest in the victim and solicit sexually explicit photographs or videos, colloquially called “nudes.” Predators may even send pornographic materials so that the victim believes they are exchanging nudes (Tidy 2024). Once the predator receives explicit materials, they threaten the victim by saying they will send the content to the victim’s followers or post the pictures publicly (Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2025). Common demands for payment are wire transfers and gift cards, often in the range of \$100 to \$500 (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2024). If the victim complies, the criminal leaves them alone for a short period of time, then demands more payments. Predators operate efficiently using scripts and simultaneous conversations with multiple victims, allowing the timeline from initial contact to blackmail to occur in an hour or less (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2024). Usually the predator never intends to publicize the material, but in extreme cases predators may release the material regardless of payment. These serious cases require reports to law enforcement and the online platform’s content moderation team to remove the images.

Sextortion produces grave effects on the victim's mental health by feeding on their shame. The rapid switch from receiving and sending sexual material to being threatened leads to confusion then panic. Victims feel that they cannot tell anyone due to embarrassment, hopelessness, and isolation (ICE, 2025). The Internet Watch Foundation also publishes behavioral signs that a teenager may be victim to sextortion, which include emotional distress, mood swings, increased anxiety, social withdrawal, unusual behavior with money such as buying gift cards, drops in academic performance, sleep disturbance, and avoidance of electronic devices (Internet Watch Foundation, 2025). Repeated instances of threats and payments create a vicious cycle where the victim loses exorbitant amounts of money with no obvious escape from the dire situation. These circumstances may cause vulnerable victims to induce self-harm or even commit suicide because of extreme humiliation, shame, and feeling that support is not available (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2024). Overall, the impact of sextortion is financially draining but more importantly devastating on the mental health of youth.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) received 23,716 reports of sextortion in 2023, up from 10,731 reports in 2022 (Vaughan, 2024). The NCMEC receives far more reports than governmental records, with the FBI only reporting around 13,000 cases between October 2021 and March 2023 (Lehr, 2025). Sextortion represents an international crime, with cyber criminals commonly operating in organized crime groups from Nigeria, the Ivory Coast, the Philippines, and South Korea (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2024). Only a fraction of predators are based in the United States.

Because sextortion schemes most often involve international perpetrators and American victims, the Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) has jurisdiction over enforcement. HSI cooperates with the FBI and the NCMEC to identify and prosecute sextortionists (ICE, 2025).

Victims may report cases to the NCMEC's online portal called CyberTipline, which then shares the information with federal law enforcement agencies. Victims and their families may also report cases by calling an FBI phone number, filling out a case on an online portal, or visiting their local FBI field office (FBI, 2025). HSI arrested 3,776 individuals for perpetrating crimes against children in the fiscal year 2021, a fraction of which are sextortionists (ICE, 2025). Law enforcement agencies such as HSI, FBI, and foreign agencies share intelligence to track and capture perpetrators (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2024). International criminals are extradited to the US and charged for child exploitation (Tidy, 2024). Domestic criminals may also be charged under various federal criminal laws by the FBI (Vives, 2013). Charges include identity theft, extortion, bribery, breach of trust, sexual coercion, sexual exploitation, sexual assault, and child pornography.

### **Criminological Theories**

Criminological theories help to explain the reasoning behind criminal involvement in sextortion schemes and sextortion's impact in causing deviant behavior in adolescents. Social structure theories link sextortions to international criminals who turn to such schemes as a result of poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage. Turning point theory and strain theory emphasize sextortion as a devastating event for adolescents which causes deviant behavior.

According to social structure theories, crime is the result of socioeconomic disadvantage rooting in the unequal distribution of wealth (Cobarrubias, 2025). Lack of economic opportunities creates the development of lower-class groups (Cobarrubias, 2025). Sextortionists are typically international and operate in developing countries in West Africa and Southeast Asia (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2024). Due to high income inequality, limited educational and economic opportunities in these countries, and general economic stress, individuals turn to online

criminal activities such as scams and sextortions. Individuals in the underclass form societal subgroups, as shown by the existence of organized sextortionist groups (Shaw et al, 2021). Crime groups develop subcultural values such as criminal efficiency (Shaw et al, 2021). Foreign crime groups are more efficient than individual sextortionists by utilizing optimal practices such as scripts, bait photos, and simultaneous conversations. In turn, this creates a deviant subculture whereby the crime is embraced as a highly successful money making operation rather than perceived as horrific exploitation of minors. Social structure theories emphasize that economic disadvantages create the social conditions underlying organized sextortionist operations and a deviant culture which perpetuates these activities.

Criminological theories also point to the impact on sextortion victims. Being victimized represents a turning point, or a significant life event that affects future actions and overall life course (Cobarrubias, 2025). The initial threat immediately places them in a dire situation where their dignity and safety are threatened. Out of desperation, victims comply with the criminal and send large sums of money. The perpetrator continues to demand money, trapping victims in a cycle of extortion. The victim's mental health worsens due to the belief that external assistance is not possible. They begin to display deviant behavior such as social withdrawal, emotional distress, mental breakdowns, and robbing family members for money to send (Internet Watch Foundation, 2025). Family members and friends may notice these sudden changes in the victim's behavior. In the worst cases, sextortion may also drive the victims to self-harm, and tragically, suicide.

Strain theory applies similarly to turning point theory in that sextortion represents a "feeling of mistreatment" and "activity that increases feelings of anger or frustration," (Cobarrubias, 2025). Sextortion falls under the category of "toxic stimuli" in strain theory

because the victim simultaneously feels isolated, embarrassed, and guilty. In addition, since a greater magnitude of strain causes deviant behavior in general, sextortion creates the significant possibility of deviant behavior (Cobarrubias, 2025). As explained in the previous paragraph, victimization leads to abrupt changes in behavior such as robbing others and causing self-harm. In other words, suffering from this crime may lead to victims participating in criminal-esque activities themselves. Turning point and strain theories establish connections between victimization and its harmful repercussions.

### **Policy Program: Combating Sextortion**

#### *Overview:*

An educational program is necessary to teach the youth about all aspects of sextortion. This program called “Combating Sextortion” is an hour-long crash course for California 9th graders. As such, it is developed and mandated by the California Department of Education (CDE). Students learn the definition of the crime, the operations of sextortion schemes, the warning signs or red flags that a student is being targeted, action steps to avoid becoming a victim, and support resources if a student becomes a victim of sextortion. Freshmen ages 14-15 years old are prime targets for sextortionists. In addition, this is about the age where teenagers create social media accounts and therefore need to recognize online social media scams. Teenagers also begin entering sexual relationships around this age, so they need to know about sextortion to prevent the chances of victimization. Combating Sextortion may be integrated in general sexual health units such as sexual assault awareness and consent education.

#### *Objectives:*

Combating Sextortion has multiple goals:

1. Increase awareness about the crime of sextortion

2. Prevent instances of victimization
3. Prevent financial harm of victims and their families
4. Direct victims to support resources and law enforcement
5. Combat social stigma around the victims and mental health

*Lesson Plan:*

Combating Sextortion comprises an opening survey questionnaire, thirty-minute informational video, and subsequent mandatory quiz including a post-lesson survey, totaling an hour to complete.

The opening survey questionnaire asks participants about their knowledge of sextortion and available support resources. Questions are scaled from 1 to 5 ranging from not familiar, barely familiar, somewhat familiar, familiar, and very familiar. Questions include:

1. Do you know the definition of sextortion?
2. Do you know how sextortion schemes work?
3. Do you know the warning signs that you may be targeted in a sextortion scheme?
4. Do you know what steps to take to prevent yourself from being targeted?
5. Do you know what steps to take if you become a victim to sextortion?
6. Do you know what resources are available for sextortion victims?

The students take the same survey at the end of the crash course. Their answers for the second survey should be higher than the initial survey.

The informational video contains a main narrator covering the definition, operations, warning signs, action steps, and support resources for sextortions. The video also includes teenagers sharing their stories of being targeted. This further emphasizes the seriousness of the crime and illustrates the risks of becoming a victim. In addition, the narrator tells the stories of



teenagers who committed suicide. Although this may frighten some students, the goal is to emphasize that sextortion is more common than the average person may think, and victims should never feel guilty about reporting an issue and asking for help.

Students learn about the warning signs that they are being targeted (FBI, 2025):

1. Receiving unsolicited explicit content
2. Being followed by an account whose name you do not recognize
3. Being followed by an account with very few followers or friends
4. Being followed by an account with no “mutuals” (i.e. the teenager does not know anybody who follows the account)

Students learn about action steps to prevent victimization (ICE, 2025):

1. Change social media accounts and other profiles to private rather than public
2. Turn off location data services on social media accounts
3. Only follow or friend people who you know in real life
4. Do not tell online strangers personal information including phone numbers, email addresses, passwords, or online accounts
5. Do not click on suspicious links from emails or text messages
6. If you think someone is acting suspiciously, block them

Students learn about actions steps if victimized (Internet Watch Foundation, 2025):

1. Stay calm because this is not your fault
2. Ask for assistance from a trusted adult
3. Do not pay any money or comply with the sextortionist’s requests
4. Preserve evidence if possible such as messages, photos sent, and any other communications

5. Block the sextortionist account
6. Report the account on the online platform
7. Report the crime to local law enforcement or at [report.cybertip.org](https://report.cybertip.org)
8. In serious cases where explicit material is distributed, report the case to the FBI at the online portal, over the phone, or in person

The video concludes by emphasizing that being victimized is never the victim's fault. It is not something worth robbing your family over, inducing self-harm, or committing suicide. The most important thing to do is to be aware of sextortion and report the crime immediately.

After the video, the teacher asks the class whether they have any questions. The lesson concludes with a 15-minute quiz and a post-lesson survey. The quiz asks the students to recall the definition of sextortion, warning signs, action steps to prevent victimization, and action steps if victimized. Each student must score an 80% or higher to pass the crash course. Students must pass the assessment to finish the 9th grade. The final survey should also reflect their newfound knowledge of sextortion.

*Obstacles:*

The main obstacle to the success of Combating Sextortion is students' engagement during the lesson. The students may display immature and inappropriate behavior during the lesson because they cannot take the crime seriously. This could lead to students not paying attention to the video and failing the concluding assessment. Instructors should note at the beginning of Combating Sextortion that students must pass the quiz to complete the lesson. If they score below 80%, they will have to retake the quiz during lunch, after school, or another school day. Students do not pass 9th grade if they do not pass the assessment. This creates a negative

incentive for them to pay attention during the lesson. Students can also be taken outside by the instructor if they are extremely disruptive.

Another obstacle is that conversations around sexuality in general may be uncomfortable. The stigma around these topics may lead students to disregard the importance of the lesson or feel fidgety and slightly anxious. There could be moments of awkwardness since this is a new topic for students. Instructors should say that students can leave the classroom for short moments if they feel uncomfortable. However, instructors should preface that sextortion is an uncomfortable topic, but everyone needs to understand it for their own safety.

*Evaluation Criteria:*

The main evaluation criteria for this program is a comparison in the monthly average of sextortion cases within the state of California before and after the program's implementation. The program is successful if there is a statistically significant decrease in the monthly number of cases at least two years after the program's implementation. This decrease shows that students are taking appropriate action steps to prevent victimization. To gauge the effectiveness in decreasing severe cases, another evaluation criteria is a comparison in the monthly average of suicides resulting from sextortion before and after the program's implementation. A statistically significant decrease in monthly suicides indicates that victims are taking the appropriate action steps.

To evaluate students' retention, sophomores must take the same post-lesson assessment and survey one year after Combating Sextortion. Average scores close to the initial scores indicate that students retained the knowledge. The survey scores show students' confidence in how well they may recognize, prevent, and potentially report the crime. There are two additional questions: "On a scale from 1 to 5, how well did Combating Sextortion teach me about online

safety?” and “Do you have any additional comments on improving the program’s effectiveness?” These new questions allow students to explain whether the program can be changed to better suit learning styles and support retention.

If Combating Sextortion displays considerable success in California, the program should be implemented nationwide or in other states. In this way, Combating Sextortion acts as a pilot program to address the nationwide issue of sextortion.

*Funding:*

Two sources of funding for Combating Sextortion include the federal Department of Justice and California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES). The Department of Justice provides grant funding to support states’ public safety initiatives and programs which assist victims of crime (Department of Justice, 2025). Cal OES administers multiple grants with one-time funding for prevention and education efforts in areas such as sexual violence intervention (Orbach-Mandel, 2024). The California Department of Education may apply for multiple grants from the DOJ or Cal OES to fund the Combating Sextortion program. If Combating Sextortion proves to be successful, then a percentage of the program’s funding should be included in CDE’s annual budget. CDE should coordinate with local school districts to allocate the funding necessary for each district. This resembles the funding of sexual violence prevention campaigns, which utilize a combination of federal grants and state funding (Orbach-Mandel, 2024).

Grant funding should firstly be utilized for production of the video lesson. CDE itself may create the video or collaborate with various nonprofits such as the National Council on Mental Wellbeing, WeProtect Global Alliance, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. CDE may also collaborate with the Department of Homeland Security’s

digital safety campaign called Know2Protect to create an educational video geared for high schoolers. Know2Protect has already created videos that are mostly intended for parents (Department of Homeland Security, 2025). Although educational videos created by various nonprofits and governmental agencies exist, none are fully adequate for the comprehensive educational program of Combating Sextortion.

### **Political and Social Considerations**

Sextortion represents a growing public safety, mental health, and financial issue for youth and their families alike. As such, increasing awareness yields support for victims and calls for preventative measures across the political spectrum. Combating Sextortion would likely receive bipartisan support because governmental agencies and political representatives want youth to be protected and educated against sextortion. In the case of Bradyn Bohn, his mother advocated for a Wisconsin bill to classify sextortion as a Class H felony, punishable by up to six years in prison and additional penalties if the victim is underage (Lehr, 2025). Wisconsin officials including Republican representative Patrick Snyder and Democratic Attorney General Josh Kaul have expressed support for this reform (Lehr, 2025). Due to increased awareness of this issue, state governments are willing to impose harsher penalties on sextortion with hopes of bringing justice to victims and decreasing criminal cases.

Another social consideration is educating parents about sextortion. Parents must also be educated on the issue, and they have the right to know what the educational system is teaching their children. Before students undergo the crash course, schools should send an email to all parents of freshmen. The email should include the video lesson for Combating Sextortion, links to third party sources such as Know2Protect so parents can do their own research, and an invitation for parents to call or email the school over any concerns about the program. In this

way, parents are educated about sextortion themselves and prepared to answer their high schoolers' questions should they have any.

### **Reflections and Conclusion**

This policy investigation and proposal taught me that some crimes require educational campaigns for prevention, especially when criminals are difficult to identify and prosecute. Sextortion matters to me because a student at my high school committed suicide after falling victim. In May 2025, around four years later, HSI finally identified and extradited the responsible criminal to the US. Because sextortion often represents an international crime perpetuated by organized groups in foreign countries, the federal government may not be able to deliver retributive justice to its victims. As a result, the best domestic approach is to educate American teenagers to avoid getting themselves in these situations. If California had an educational program, that student at my school might not have committed suicide.

Combating Sextortion is a mental health campaign, sexual health course, and public safety campaign all rolled into one. Teenagers need to implement online safety measures, recognize red flags of online sextortionist accounts, and learn the action steps if they fall victim to sextortion. In addition, sextortion's consequences on mental health, including depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide must be underscored to emphasize the severity of the crime.

Despite our society's stigma around mental health issues and sexuality in teenagers, we need to demonstrate that sextortion presents serious risks to the safety and dignity of American youth. Instead of shying away from these topics, public policy must address the fact that mental health and sexuality are intertwined. If public sentiment continues to ignore the heinous crime of sextortion, then more and more teenagers will suffer in addition to massive financial losses.

Self-harm and suicide are ultimately the worst consequences of sextortion, but they are always preventable. The victim is never at fault, so victims should never feel hopeless or helpless.

The educational system is a valuable tool for spreading awareness, teaching valuable lessons to youth, and ingraining certain principles and attitudes around mental health. Public awareness is necessary so people know that resources exist and victims never have to deal with sextortion alone.

## References

- Cobarrubias, Candace. (2025). *Social Control and Life Course Theories, Sociological-Victimology Theory, Social Control and Developmental Theories, Interpersonal Violence*, University of Southern California
- Henderson Vaughan, Emma. (2024, April 15). *NCMEC releases new sextortion data*. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.  
<https://www.missingkids.org/blog/2024/ncmec-releases-new-sextortion-data>
- Lehr, Sarah. (2025, April 28). *Bradyn Bohn, 15, a Victim of Sextortion, Died by Suicide*. Urban Milwaukee.  
<https://urbanmilwaukee.com/2025/04/28/bradyn-bohn-15-a-victim-of-sextortion-died-by-suicide/>
- Maslin Nir, Sarah. (2024, May 15). *What to Do if You Are Threatened With Sextortion*. The New York Times.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/15/nyregion/sex-scam-extortion-what-to-do.html>
- Orbach-Mandel, Hannah. (2024, March). *Understanding and Addressing Domestic and Sexual Violence*. California Budget and Policy Center.  
<https://calbudgetcenter.org/resources/at-risk-governors-proposal-fails-to-fund-domestic-and-sexual-violence-prevention/>
- Shaw, C. R., McKay, H. D., Merton, R., Durkheim, E., Lombroso, C., Young, J., & Cohen, A. (2021). *Theories and causes of crime*. The Scottish Center for Crime and Justice Research.  
<http://www.sccjr.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/SCCJR-Causes-of-Crime.pdf>



Tidy, Joe. (2024, June 8). *Dead in 6 hours: How Nigerian sextortion scammers targeted my son.*

British Broadcasting Corporation. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c2llzppyx05o>

Vives, Ruben. (2013, December 10). *Glendale man sentenced to 5 years in “sextortion” case.*

Los Angeles Times.

<https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-glendale-sextortion-sentence-20131209-story.html#axzz2n6bWNlor>

*Digital Safety Series: What to Do if It Happens.* (n.d.). U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

<https://www.dhs.gov/medialibrary/assets/video/53935>

*Grants.* (2025, April 1). US Department of Justice. <https://www.justice.gov/grants>

*Sextortion.* (n.d.). Federal Bureau of Investigation. Retrieved April 29, 2025, from

<https://www.fbi.gov/how-we-can-help-you/scams-and-safety/common-frauds-and-scams/sextortion>

*Sextortion: It's more common than you think.* (2025, February 10). Immigration and Customs

Enforcement. <https://www.ice.gov/features/sextortion>

*Sextortion or Sexually Coerced Extortion Help & Support.* (n.d.). Internet Watch Foundation.

Retrieved April 29, 2025, from <https://www.iwf.org.uk/resources/sextortion/>

*The rise of sextortion and responses to a growing crime.* (n.d.). WeProtect Global Alliance.

<https://www.weprotect.org/thematic/sextortion/>