



## **Victims, Witnesses and Public Protection Network**

***The characteristics of reports of the disclosure  
of private images and social media-enabled  
domestic harassment offences***

[Full Report](#)

30 June 2017

Academic Lead: Dr Karen Lumsden  
Research Assistant: Dr Alex Black



**Loughborough  
University**

## Research Background

Media reports and public debate concerning the dark side of the web now focus on various forms of online abuse, such as trolling, hate crime, cyber-bulling, e-bile, revenge pornography, stalking, and sexting. Police and criminal justice agencies report difficulties in keeping up with the rise in the number of reports of online crimes and abuse, while there are currently ineffective means of legislating against, investigating and prosecuting cases of online abuse (Travis, 2017). Social media corporations, such as Twitter, have been called to task for their slow response to dealing with online abuse, and largely place responsibility with the individual users of social media who are advised to ‘police themselves, and each other’ (Laville, 2016).

Whilst there is a developing spectrum of policing responses, online abuse contexts and settings mean that they are usually perceived as ‘different’ – in fact, less serious. As reports of online abuse and offences increase, there is a need for more open discussion of the policing and regulation of online space. For instance, it is now estimated that half of all calls received by police relate to online offences such as threats on social media. Twitter crimes are said to have doubled in the last three years. As the Head of the College of Policing, Alex Marshall, explained: ‘...it will not be long before... every investigation that the police conduct will have an online element to it’ (Moore, 2014). With the privacy and anonymity the internet can afford users, we see traditional offences conducted from the comfort of people’s own homes, and often by strangers. In addition, in many instances trolls target those who are already vulnerable (for instance via RIP trolling, and instances of islamophobia and homophobia). In addition, post-Brexit vote there has been an increase in the reporting of hate crime both in online and offline settings, causing further concern with regards to the potential increase in this when the UK leaves the EU (Lyons, 2016).

Despite the growing concern and reports of online abuse, and the increase in demand for police forces, there is little known about the experiences of victims, including why they opt to report certain cases of online abuse, and also which forms of abuse are reported. There is also little known about their experiences with criminal justice agencies and the police in

terms of the response to online crime.

This study therefore adds to our knowledge of reports of online abuse, providing an evidence-base for policing, and the support offered to victims. It specifically explores the characteristics of reports of online crimes, focusing on the disclosure of private sexual photographs and films with intent to cause distress, and the role of social media in domestic harassment cases. The offence of the disclosure of photographs and films will be referred to throughout this report as ‘Image-based sexual abuse’, as developed by McGlynn and Rackley (2017). This term is offered as an alternative to the often used ‘revenge pornography’ that focuses too much on the intention of the offender rather than the harm caused to the victim. Revenge pornography as a term, it is argued, limits legislative debate to be about the extent of pornographic content of the image and implies some agency on the part of the victim. ‘Image-based sexual abuse’ places ‘revenge pornography’, and other terms like it (upskirt, celebgate) within its overarching phenomenon of sexual harassment and abuse (McGlynn and Rackley, 2017). As this is a largely understudied area, with huge gaps in knowledge at the present time, this project aims to set the scene for further research into victims’ reports of online crime, police recording of these reports, and the support offered to victims.

## Study Aims

- To explore how the online element contributes to and/or enables victimization;
- To gain insight into the types of online abuse which victims report to police;
- To understand the emotional, physical, and psychological impact on victims;
- To explore the general characteristics of revenge porn and online-enabled domestic abuse incidents, including location (i.e. social media / online platforms), relationship between victim and suspect, and type of harm involved;
- To explore the relationship between the victim and suspect;
- To provide an evidence-base for the policing of online abuse.

## Methods

- Qualitative and quantitative analysis of a sample of 20 image-based sexual abuse crime reports and 20 domestic violence related harassment crime reports where there is an online element to the offence (i.e. where the ‘online flag’ has been applied).
- The crime reports include the following:
  - Demographic data relating to the characteristics of the victim and suspect (not including names/addresses or any other identifying information) including age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, location type and any other relevant demographic data available;
  - The relationship between the victim and offender;
  - The details and write ups of the incidents, including the nature, location, language used, conduct, and a summary of the investigation.

## Findings

### Image-based sexual abuse reports

- Overall, police crime reports of image-based sexual abuse offences are often inconsistent and incomplete, and key demographic information is missing.
- Nonetheless, some tentative conclusions can be drawn from the quantitative data in relation to reports of image-based sexual abuse.
- Overall, the data suggest a strong *interpersonal* element to the majority of the analysed image-based sexual abuse reports, with the suspect/offender being known to the victim.
- Social media platforms like Facebook are utilised in the majority of reported offences, and thus the potential audience includes family and friends of the victim.
- In addition, the offence was often facilitated via contacts with friends or acquaintances in terms of being able to access the images, and also in their distribution.

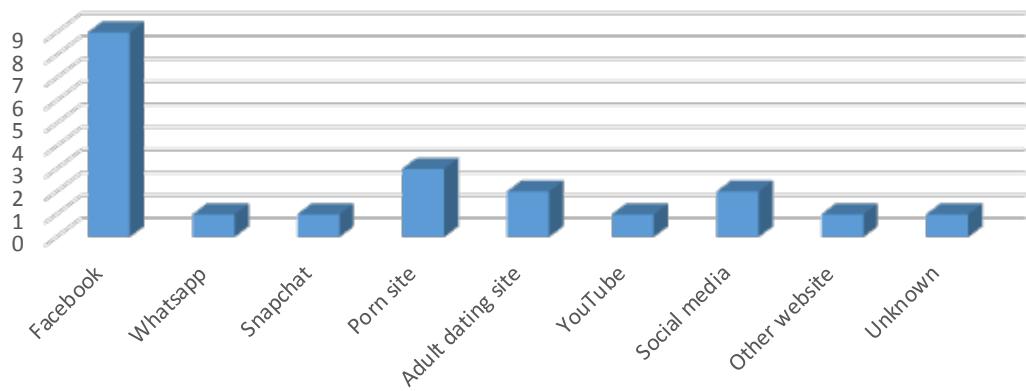
***Suspects and offenders:***

- The offender or suspect is known to the victim in the majority of reports of image-based sexual abuse crime (65%) as either ex-partner (50%) or a friend (15%).
- Where the information was available, data suggests the majority of suspects/offenders to be in the age ranges of 17-25 or 26-40 years old.
- The majority of suspects/offenders in these crime reports were male (55%).

***Social media platforms and websites used to distribute images:***

- The reports contained mention of the following social media / online platforms as utilised in the image-based abuse offences: Facebook, Whatsapp, Snapchat, adult dating websites and, pornography websites.
- One report contained the threat of posting images on more than one site: Facebook and YouTube.
- The vast majority of reports referred to Facebook as either being utilised, or used as a threat for distribution of images, in these reports:

**Social media platforms and websites mentioned in reports of image-based sexual abuse**



***Victims of image-based abuse:***

- The majority of victims who reported image-based abuse were female (65%).
- The majority of victims (where age was recorded) were in the 17-25 and 26-40 age groups although there was missing data concerning age in the majority of reports.

***Access to images:***

- In half of the instances the images/videos in question had been obtained when the victim and offender were in a relationship.
- In one instance the image had been shared when the victim and offender had been engaged in a sexual relationship online only.
- In two instances the victim's mobile phone had been stolen by a friend.
- This again demonstrates the interpersonal nature of these offences.
- Three of the victims reported having their device/account hacked by an unknown source. However it is unclear whether or not the suspect did indeed know the victim. For example, in one report, the victim's Snapchat account was hacked and the images distributed around her college, indicating that they were known to each other to some extent.

***Wider audience of images:***

- As previously mentioned, social media platforms (predominantly Facebook) were used to distribute the images (or threatened to distribute the images).
- In only 7 of the 20 reports was an external website (e.g. You Tube) or pornography website used to distribute or threaten to distribute the images. In all other instances the images were circulated around the social media/messaging platform of the victim or offender (or both).
- This suggests that the external audience of these images were often in close personal proximity to the victim.

***Domestic abuse implications:***

- The offences discussed here were recorded primarily with the Home Office Code 008/71: *Disclosure of private sexual photographs and films with intent to cause distress*. There

were however, obvious over laps with domestic and/or sexual abuse conducted by ex-partners.

- For example, in one report the distribution of the image was part of domestic harassment by her ex-partner:

*"Suspect is ex-partner has been messaging victim calling her abusive names and making threats to visit her address, he has then changed his profile picture on the mobile application whatsapp to a photograph of the victim with her breasts on show which was sent to him during the course of their relationship which has caused distress to the victim." (Crime report 13)*

#### ***Outcome of reports:***

- As can be seen below, 6 out of the 20 offences sampled had some form of action taken (charge, caution, community resolution).
- The remaining 14 had no action. In seven of these, 14 suspects were identified but there was either not enough evidence or the victim declined to take it further.
- In the 4 instances where there were evidentiary difficulties, 3 of those involved images being uploaded to websites, possibly indicating the difficulty of tracing their origin.

Outcome status	Number
Charge	2
Charge Alt	1
Adult caution	1
Community resolution	2
Police no public interest	1
Suspect NFA evi diff	4
Suspect victim declines	3
No suspect inv complete	5
Unresolved	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>20</b>

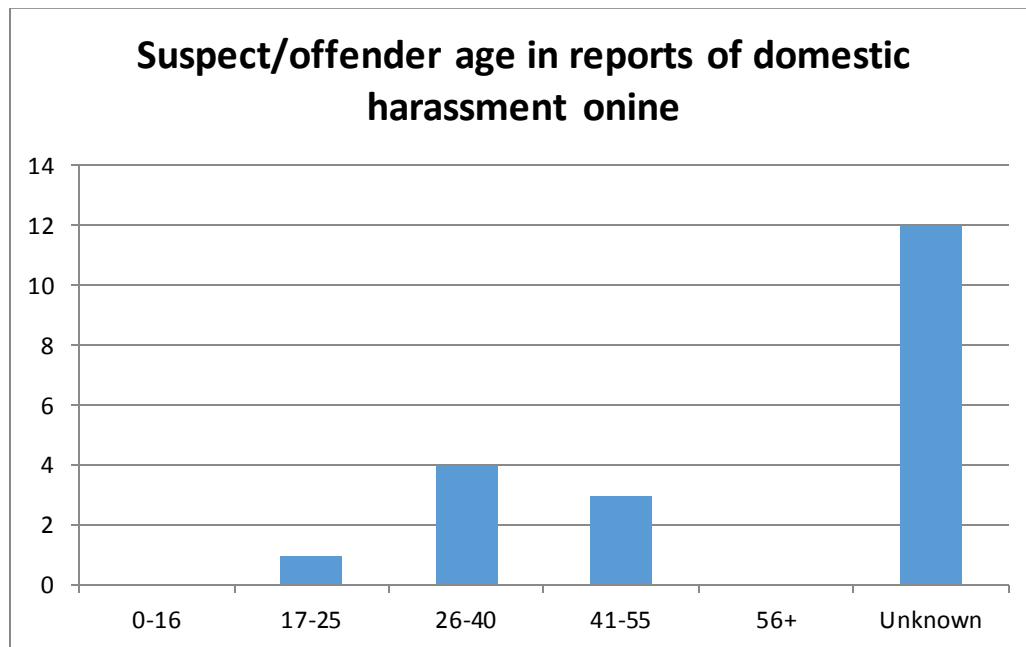
#### **Domestic harassment with an online element**

- In almost all instances the offences were conducted by an ex-partner of the victim.
- Some key demographic data was missing (e.g. gender and age of the suspect).
- In most cases the online platform was being used in conjunction with other means of making unwanted contact with the victim.

- Facebook was the most commonly used online platform.
- Facebook was used in some instances to post offensive messages *about* the victim, rather than *to* the victim.

**Suspects and offenders:**

- The offender or suspect is known to the victim in all reports of domestic harassment, with ex-partner making up the most common relationship status (90%).
- Where the information was available, data suggests the majority of suspects/offenders to be in the age ranges of 26-40 or 41-55 years old:



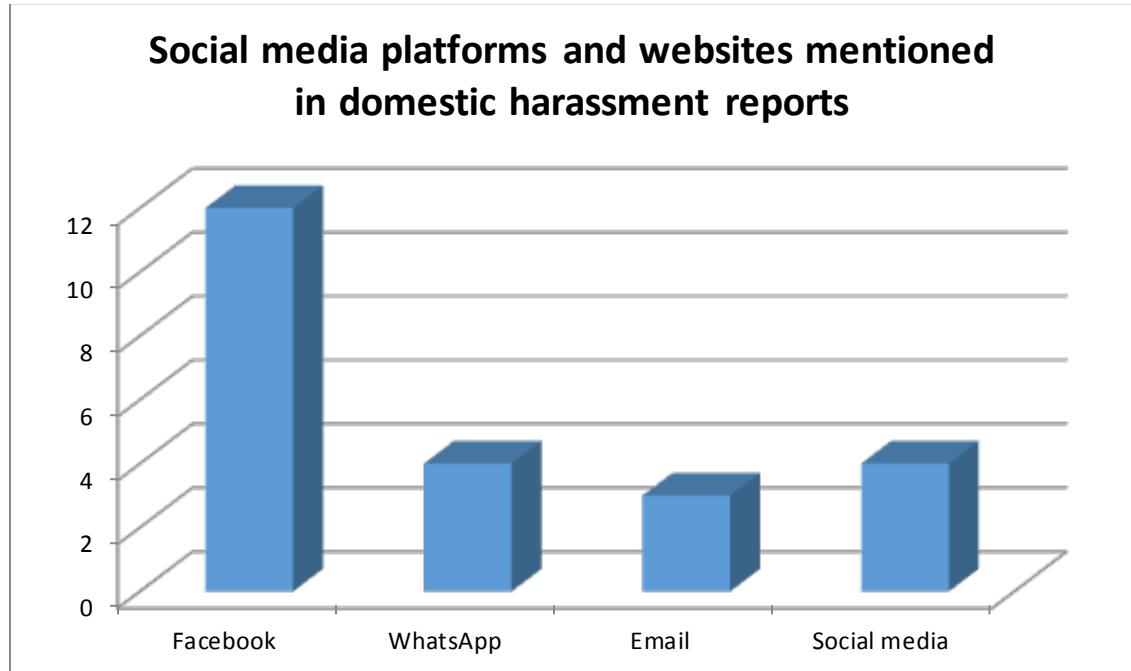
- The gender of the suspect was only recorded in 8 out of the 20 reports. However, from reading thorough the description of the cases the majority of suspects/offenders gender could be identified. The majority were male (60%).

**Social media platforms and websites used to harass victim:**

- The reports contained mention of the following social media / online platforms as utilised in the domestic harassment offences (some reports contained more than one): Facebook, Whatsapp, email, and social media.
- Six of these reports mentioned the use of mobile phones in conjunction with the online

platforms to harass the victim.

- Three of the reports used social media/Facebook in conjunction with WhatsApp to harass the victim.
- In one report the suspect utilised Facebook to obtain the telephone number of the victim through which the victim was then harassed.
- Facebook was the most common platform through which people were harassed.



***Victims of online domestic harassment:***

- The majority of victims who reported online domestic harassment were female (55%), while 30% were male.
- The victims' ages were recorded in nearly all of the incidents (90%). Most victims were in the 26-40 age group.
- One third of the victims were in the younger age groups 0-16 and 17-25.

***Use of online platforms:***

- In just over half of all the incidents in the sample, online platforms were used in conjunction with other methods in order to harass the victim.
- The online platform was one of a range of ways that the suspect made unwanted contact, as per the below example:

*"Caller has been receiving numerous phone calls, SMS messages, social media messages etc from her ex-partner since splitting up with him. This contact is unwanted and the caller feels harassed. Caller has asked the perpetrator to stop contacting her but he is refusing to do so." (Crime report 32)*

- In four of the reports the online platform was the only method of harassment mentioned in the report. In three of these instances Facebook was used to send unwanted messages to the victim. In one instance unwanted emails were being sent to the victim. It is not known whether other forms of harassment have occurred at other times.
- In three of the reports, Facebook was being used by the suspect to post comments/statements about the victim that the suspect's Facebook 'friends' could see, for example:

*"Victim's ex-partner posted a message on Facebook stating victim's cousin had told her victim had committed sexual offences some years ago, that her new boyfriend was aware of this & wanted victim's family "done over". Victim & his family were made aware of the post by a mutual friend." (Crime report 127)*

- In one instance Facebook had been used by the suspect to set up a fake account in the victim's name to then befriend the victim's contacts.

#### ***Outcome of reports:***

- As can be seen below, no action was taken by the police in any of the incidents reported. In 8 of 20 incidents suspects were identified but the victim declined to take it further.

Outcome Status	Number
Police no public interest	2
Suspect to ill	1
Suspect NFA evi diff	3
Suspect victim declines	8
No suspect inv complete	3
Other agency investigating	1
Suspect Inv not in Pub interest	1
Unresolved	1
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>20</b>

# Summary

## Data quality

- The gender of the victim and offender reported in these offences (both the image-based abuse and the online domestic harassment) show that the majority of the victims were female (65% and 55% respectively) and the majority of offenders were male (55% and 65% respectively). This follows the same gender patterns that have been identified in other studies (Sutherland and Dowling 2015; Hadley 2017).
- However, in all cases, 20% of the suspects' gender was missing and 17.5% of the victims' gender was missing. It would be useful if all fields were completed within the reports so that proper trends can be ascertained.
- The age of the suspects of both image-based abuse and the online domestic harassment were not recorded in 60% of the reported cases making it very difficult to establish any reliable trends.
- The age of the victim was recorded in only half of the cases of image-based abuse again making it difficult to have a reliable picture.
- The age of the victims in the online domestic harassment cases were recorded in 90% of the cases. The most common age group of victims were between 26-40 years old (40%).

## Overlap of offence types – implications for online abuse

- The findings suggest a significant overlap between incidents reported as online domestic harassment and the offence of the disclosure of private sexual photographs and films with intent to cause distress. In both sets of offences the victim and offender were known to one another in the majority of offences (100% and 65% respectively).
- In 30 out of the total 40 cases analysed the suspect was the ex-partner of the victim. This adds support to McGlynn and Rackley's (2017) work that suggests that disclosure of private sexual photographs and films with intent to cause distress should be considered as part of a wider focus on sexual and domestic forms of abuse and referred to as 'image-based sexual abuse'. The benefit of this is that the offence is re-framed as one on the continuum of abuse and sexual violence of which it is usually a part, and make connections with the root causes of these offences which are often located in wider

gendered practices of abuse, including victim blaming (McGlynn and Rackley, 2017).

- The findings indicate that the online forms of domestic harassment, and some of the reports of image-based abuse, are often an online extension of existing offline harassment behaviours. This supports the findings from a report compiled by Women's Aid for the All Party Parliamentary Group that women harassed online are also often harassed offline and that these behaviours form part of a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour and should be responded to as such by the police (Hadley, 2017). It is important that officers understand the connections between the online and offline forms of behaviour and how they relate to coercion and control.

## **Offence outcomes**

- The domestic harassment offences analysed in this report produced no positive outcomes, even in one instance where the offender had a restraining order preventing him from making contact. Some investigation into how online offences are treated as compared with the offline forms of harassment would be useful, especially the use of Non-Molestation Orders and Domestic Violence Prevention Orders in response to online offences.
- Just under half of the online domestic harassment incidents were not taken any further as the victim declined to prosecute. It would be useful to understand their reasons for doing so and to be able to support victims in taking forward a prosecution. Previous studies have shown how offenders who engage in online harassment often have a history of offline domestic abuse or had targeted other people before, who did not press charges (Sutherland and Dowling, 2015).

## **Use of online platforms**

- Facebook was used in the majority of image-based abuse and online domestic harassment offences either to make contact with the victim, to post public messages about the victim or to distribute images of the victim. There needs to be a way to establish a safe environment and prohibit unwanted behaviours on social media that do not rely on self-policing. Victims are often viewed as solely responsible for their online safety. The focus needs to remain fully on the prevention and sanction of the offender

(Lewis et al., 2016). Nor should the victim be expected to self-exclude, for example expecting a victim to delete their Facebook profile. Social media and the internet is such a central part of people's lives that it is not realistic and its use should not be expected to be restricted for victims (Hadley, 2017).

- There was a strong interpersonal element to the reports of image-based abuse. Most were circulated via social media and messaging platforms amongst friends and acquaintances of the suspect, and at times friends and acquaintances of the victim also. This demonstrates the close proximity of the victim to, not only the offender, but the recipients of the images/videos also. This can have implications for the harm caused to the victim, and can result in the withdrawing of the victim from public and social spaces (McGlynn and Rackley, 2017). This outcome of course may be the intended consequence of controlling and coercive behaviour.

## Recommendations

- Police crime reports of image-based sexual abuse offences are often inconsistent and incomplete, and key demographic information is missing. The report therefore recommends that recording practices regarding forms of online crime such as these must be more rigorous.
- The strong interpersonal element to the offences which are reported in terms of victim and suspect suggest the need to consider how online technologies can further exacerbate or facilitate harassment and domestic violence, also making it easier for offences to be conducted.
- Facebook was used in the majority of both reported offences and therefore there is a need to consider further the investigation and reporting of crimes facilitated via this, and other, social media platforms, and how these can be used as evidence.
- The study echoes recommendations made by McGlynn and Rackley (2017) who suggests that disclosure of private sexual photographs and films with intent to cause distress should be considered as part of a wider focus on sexual and domestic forms of abuse and referred to as 'image-based sexual abuse'. The benefit of this is that the offence is

re-framed as one on the continuum of abuse and sexual violence of which it is usually a part.

- Women who are harassed online are also often harassed offline and these behaviours form part of a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour and should be responded to as such by the police (Hadley, 2017). It is important that officers understand the connections between the online and offline forms of behaviour and how they relate to coercion and control.
- Thus further training is required for frontline officers regarding the recording and investigation of these offences and the support offered to victims.
- Further investigation into how online offences are treated as compared with the offline forms of harassment would be useful, especially the use of Non-Molestation Orders and Domestic Violence Prevention Orders in response to online offences.
- Just under half of the online domestic harassment incidents were not taken any further as the victim declined to prosecute. Further research is required regarding their reasons for doing so, and how to better support victims in taking forward a prosecution.

## References

- Hadley, L. (2017). *Tackling Domestic Abuse in a Digital Age*. All-Party Parliamentary Group on Domestic Violence. Available online at: <https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/APPGReport2017-270217.pdf>
- Laville, S. (2016). Top tech firms urged to step up online abuse fightback. *The Guardian*. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/11/facebook-twitter-google-urged-to-step-up-online-abuse-fightback>
- Lewis, R., Rowe, M. and Wiper, C. (2016). Online Abuse of Feminists as an Emerging Form of Violence Against Women and Girls. *British Journal of Criminology*. azw073. doi: 10.1093/bjc/azw073.
- Lyons, K. (2016) Racist Incidents Feared to be Linked to Brexit Result. *The Guardian*. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/26/racist-incidents-feared-to-be-linked-to-brexit-result-reported-in-england-and-wales>
- McGlynn, C. and Rackley, E. (2017). Image-Based Sexual Abuse. *Oxford Journal Legal Studies*.

*gqw033. doi: 10.1093/ojs/gqw033.*

Moore, K. (2014). Social media 'at least half' of calls passed to front-line police. *BBC News*.

Available online at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-27949674>

Sutherland, C. and Dowling, S. (2015). The Nature of Online Offending Explored from Crown Prosecution Service Case Files. *Home Office Research Report 82*. Available online at:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/468067/horr82.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/468067/horr82.pdf)

Travis, A. (2017). Police are 'only in the foothills' of tackling online abuse, MPs told. *The Guardian*. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/feb/21/police-are-only-in-the-foothills-of-tackling-online-abuse-mps-told>