These teenage boys were blackmailed online – and it cost them their lives

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USA TODAY, February 25, 2025; updated April 22, 2025

High school senior James Woods was obsessed with comics. He could quote every episode of “The Flash,” idolized the superhero Green Arrow and often sported a Naruto-inspired headband he insisted helped him run faster in track meets. He looked forward all year to a trip his family and friends planned for the Dream Con comic book convention the following summer.

Three months into the school year, just before Thanksgiving, the 17-year-old died by suicide. His parents were shocked, grieving and baffled. James, who lived in Streetsboro, Ohio, had not struggled with mental health, they said.

When police looked through James’ phone, they discovered he had fallen victim to financial sextortion, a crime that occurs when a predator threatens to distribute private material or harm a victim if they don’t comply with the predator's financial demands. The scam is the fastest-growing cybercrime targeting children in North America and most commonly exploits young men, particularly boys ages 13 to 17.

Sextortion has been connected to at least 30 deaths of teen boys by suicide since 2021, according to a tally of private cases and the latest FBI numbers from cybersecurity experts.

In more than a dozen interviews, male sextortion victims and the parents of teenage boys who died by suicide described how predators established a false sense of trust before blackmailing their victims. All of the parents USA TODAY spoke with said their teens died by suicide within 24 hours of being threatened – though the window was often shorter.

James’ predators falsely told him he would face jail time for sending nude photographs, that his parents would stop loving him, and that he would never be able to run track again or go to college. In the next 19 hours, they would send James more than 200 messages, a technique predators use to instill a sense of urgency and prevent giving the victim time to think or reach out for help.

“They eliminated his desire for a future,” says his mother, Tamia Woods. “I don't think that James knew he was a victim.”

More: These young men were tricked into sending nude photos, then blackmailed: The nightmare of sextortion

'Your pics are really cute haha'

The messages often begin innocuously and come from someone who appears to be a teenage girl.

"Hey, I found your page through suggested friends," a cybercriminal wrote in one exchange reviewed by USA TODAY. "Your pics are really cute haha."

Predators establish trust and quickly steer the conversation toward sexual topics or send unsolicited nudes. They typically move the conversation to a second app such as Snapchat, WhatsApp or private text message.

The blackmail starts minutes later. Predators isolate the teens by threatening to send their nude photos to their contacts or friends on social media if they don't pay a sum of money − creating fear and humiliation and discouraging them from telling a trusted adult. The blackmailers also accuse teens of being criminals for exposing themselves and warn they will be put on sex offender lists.

The night of March 24, 2022, 17-year-old Jordan DeMay was at home in Marquette, Michigan, when he received an Instagram message from a pretty girl his age. She said she was from Texas but was going to school in Georgia. They shared a mutual friend, she wrote.

They exchanged intimate photos, and the conversation immediately changed.

The criminals behind the account threatened to release the images, demanding money. Jordan sent his predators the $300 he saved for a car payment. When he told the blackmailers he was suicidal after they asked for more money, they responded, "We're going to watch you die a miserable death."

When he told them he was intent on killing himself, they replied: "Good. Do that fast, or I'll make you do it. I swear to God."

At 3:45 a.m., less than six hours after he received the initial message, Jordan died by suicide.

The teenage girl who messaged him was really a group of cybercriminals that included Samuel Ogoshi and Samson Ogoshi, Nigerian brothers who in September 2024 were sentenced to 17½ years in prison and extradited to the U.S. The group of predators targeted Jordan and more than 100 others, including at least 11 minors.

More: Nigerian brothers get 17 years for sextortion that led to Michigan teen's death

'I am only 15. Why are you doing this to me?'

The day before 15-year-old Braden Markus received unsolicited sexual messages on Instagram, he was "literally on cloud nine" from his coach's praise at their Friday and Saturday football games, recalls his mother, Jennifer Argiro-Markus. The teen from Columbus, Ohio, spent Saturday night playing XBox with his cousins and eating his favorite Japanese takeout.

At 11:01 on Sunday morning, a predator posing as a teenage girl contacted Braden and persuaded him to send nude images. He died by suicide less than 30 minutes later.

In the final five minutes of Braden's life, he told the predator over and over: "I am only 15. Why are you doing this to me? I am only 15, you will ruin my life."

In these moments, teens are often actually communicating with a group of three to four foreign cybercriminals who simultaneously contact the victim, handle a money transfer, and conduct research to find their family members, contacts and school.

South Carolina state Rep. Brandon Guffey had never heard of sextortion before it happened to his 17-year-old son, Gavin, who died by suicide in July 2022. In the months after Gavin's death, his sextortionist continued to reach out to family members from new accounts on Instagram.

While Guffey and his wife were on a weekend trip to Myrtle Beach in August, trying to take a break to sort through their own trauma, Guffey got a message from the scammer: “Did I tell you your son begged for his life?”

Guffey championed Gavin's Law in South Carolina. Passed in 2023, the legislation makes sextortion a felony offense and an aggravated felony if the victim is underage or a vulnerable adult or suffers bodily injury or death related to the crime. Local school districts are required to teach the law.

Financial sextortion is on the rise in the U.S.

The majority of sextortion attempts are traced to predators in West African countries including Nigeria and Ivory Coast and Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines, according to the FBI, which makes it challenging to track down criminals.

In 2022, the FBI issued a public safety alert about "an explosion" of sextortion schemes that targeted more than 3,000 minors that year. From 2021 to 2023, tips received by NCMEC’s CyberTipline increased by more than 300%. The recently tabulated 2024 numbers reached an all-time high, the organization says.

The rise in financial sextortion coincides with a youth mental health crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which left teenagers isolated. In 2021, suicide was the third-leading cause of death among 14- to 18-year-olds, according to the CDC. The same year, more than 42% of high school students reported experiencing persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.

'He was so afraid of the trauma of what would come'

Research shows that a variety of risk factors can increase the chance a child or teen may take their life. Mental health disorders including anxiety, depression and substance abuse are correlated with higher suicidal ideation. Environmental factors − such as access to firearms and drugs, or life events like experiencing a parent’s divorce − also affect suicide rates, in addition to historical factors such as family history of suicide, childhood trauma and generational trauma.

Boys also die by suicide at three to four times the rate of girls.

Mary Rodee, whose son Riley Basford took his own life in 2021 six hours after he was sextorted, says her son had “a mom and dad who he knew would do anything for him.”

Rodee and other parents say their teens made “a permanent decision for a temporary problem.”

“The thing that made Riley the life of the party is also that the thing that makes a 15-year-old do what Riley did,” says Rodee, of Canton, New York. “It's impulsivity, it's wanting to be liked and funny, and he was so afraid of the trauma of what would come.”

Teenagers’ executive functioning, abstract thinking and decision-making skills continue to develop through age 25. Teens often focus more on the “here and now” than future orientation and are at higher risk for attention and hyperactivity problems, which can contribute to impulsive suicide attempts, according to Jill Harkavy-Friedman, senior vice president of research for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

“That's part of what might lead teens to act more quickly on something, to not really weigh all the risks and jump right into something that seems appealing,” Harkavy-Friedman says.

Parents, experts have a message: Talk to your teens

The night before 16-year-old Carter Bremseth died by suicide after he was sextorted, he was volunteering as an altar server at church. He had downloaded Snapchat only six months earlier.

His mother, Jaime Bremseth, a licensed mental health counselor, had “lengthy conversations” with Carter about the harm of sending nudes, but she says adults are behind the curve on understanding social media and online platforms.

“I really wonder if he felt like he was safer sending his picture out to somebody that wasn't really a real person in his life, or so he thought,” Bremseth says.

“They just shamed him. They made him feel like he was a terrible person.”

In sextortion-related suicide cases, the short window of time between a predator’s initial contact with a victim and the teen’s death made it nearly impossible for parents to notice a change in their teen’s demeanor.

The timing, investigators say, is how predators succeed in extortion. They don't give their victims time to talk to anyone, to have a break without a barrage of messages, to look away. They bank on victims becoming consumed in the moment.

Cybersecurity experts and parents recommend having conversations about sextortion and internet safety early on, which can help build trust and confidence over time.

“We can't bank on the hope that we will see something changing in them as a signal that they need help,” says Melissa Stroebel, vice president of research and insights at the technology nonprofit Thorn. Stroebel encourages parents to help their teens develop a “stop, drop and roll” plan.

“Make sure that they've got that in their back pocket so they don't have to come up with a plan in the heat of the moment," Stroebel says.

Sextortion can happen to anyone: Here's what to do about it.

Experts say telling teens to avoid social media platforms or not engage with strangers online is outdated advice given the sheer scale of the problem.

The narrative of how parents discuss nude imagery and exploitation has to evolve with the rise in new technology threats, says Lauren Coffren, executive director of the Exploited Children Division at at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, or NCMEC. The rise of generative artificial intelligence tools has enabled scammers to create highly realistic deepfake images and videos. In some cases, children and teens were blackmailed even when they didn’t send a nude image. Roughly 1 of 10 reports Thorn reviewed involved artificially generated content.

“We've seen so much shaming of teen boys who may have shared imagery, and then it kind of gets flipped around, like, ‘Well, if you just don't share, you won't be in this circumstance,’” Coffren says. “I contend that's not really true anymore.”

Parents USA TODAY interviewed say it's most important for teens to know there are open doors waiting for them, even if they make a mistake. Parents should create an amnesty policy that allows teens to turn to them for help in a dangerous situation, regardless of what happened, suggests Dr. Katie Hurley, senior director of clinical advising at The Jed Foundation, a nonprofit that focuses on emotional health and suicide prevention for teens and young adults.

Ultimately, the most crucial message teens need to know is that the blackmailer is to blame – not them. Even if they regret their choice, it's the predator who committed a crime. Victims experiencing sextortion should tell a trusted adult. Those in need of immediate mental health assistance can call or text the 988 suicide hotline.

"You may feel humiliated, but life will go on," says Jordan DeMay's mother, Jennifer Butta. "It is so much better to seek out that help, because it's a situation that you're not prepared to handle on your own."

Experts say parents and communities should work together to share information and talk openly about online safety. Hurley emphasized that it's not just parents who need to be ready to have these kinds of conversations. Teens often wind up confiding in another adult they trust.

That's the situation one 73-year-old Colorado grandmother found herself in last summer when her 17-year-old grandson told her he was being sextorted.

She encouraged him to tell his parents and coached him on what to say. When the teen realized his father was supportive, he "immediately relaxed," recalls Kathy, who asked that her last name be withheld to protect her grandson's privacy.

"It's critical that (teens) have someone that they can trust and know that there won't be judgment," Kathy says. "We need to attack this from all sides."

If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, help is available. Call or text 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org.

This article is part of an ongoing USA TODAY series investigating a surge in financial sextortion and its mental health impact on teenage boys. The first article in the series discussed online terminology that should raise red flags to teens and parents. Click here for advice on what to do if you or your teen is sextorted.

If you'd like to share your experience with sextortion, cybercriminals or recovery scammers, please contact us here.

Rachel Hale's role covering Youth Mental Health at USA TODAY is supported by a partnership with Pivotal Ventures and Journalism Funding Partners. Funders do not provide editorial input. Reach her at rhale@usatoday.com and @rachelleighhale on X.