



Ohio Prosecuting Attorneys Association

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House Bill 531
Proponent Testimony
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Chair Abrams, Vice-Chair Williams, Ranking Member Brown and members of the House Criminal Justice Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to offer our support for House Bill 531 to criminalize what is known as sextortion.

Sextortion is a form of extortion where one person, through threat or manipulation, coerces another person, usually under the age of 18, into producing a sexually explicit image and sending it over the internet. It can start on any website, app, messaging platform, or game where people meet and communicate online. Most often, it starts when the victim believes they are communicating with someone their own age who is interested in a relationship. But it can also be the offender offering something of value to the victim or claiming that they already have an image that they will release. It can take a couple of different forms, both of which involve the victim sending sexually explicit material to the extortionist who then threatens to publish the material online to get the victim to either produce more sexually explicit material or to send money or some other thing of value to the offender. These are violent online predators and the crime is leading to tragic consequences for youth in Ohio and across the country including depression, anxiety, hopelessness, fear and even attempted suicide and suicide.

According to both the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and the FBI there has been a significant increase in the number of these cases in recent years. In 2023 alone, NCMEC received 26,718 reports of financial sextortion, up from 10,731 reports in 2022.¹ According to the FBI, in 2022 they “received thousands of reports related to the financial sextortion of minors, primarily boys, representing an exponential increase from previous years.”² They also report being aware of more than a dozen suicides following these incidents.

House Bill 531 will help prosecutors and law enforcement hold these violent online predators accountable by providing parents and legal guardians with expedited access to the electronic communications and other digital assets of a deceased minor, which will help further investigations

¹ <https://www.missingkids.org/blog/2024/ncmec-releases-new-sextortion-data>

² <https://www.fbi.gov/news/press-releases/international-law-enforcement-agencies-issue-joint-warning-about-global-financial-sextortion-crisis>

of these crimes, and providing for severe penalties, especially when it results in great bodily harm to the victim or results in the victim's death.

Ohio should join the growing list of states addressing this issue. The protection of Ohio's most vulnerable citizens, including children, should be of the highest priority for policymakers and for law enforcement. House Bill 531 puts another tool in our toolbelt to help put a stop to this and sends the right message to these predators that preying on Ohio children will not be tolerated. We commend the bill sponsors Reps. Lear and Lorenz for their advocacy on this. We are discussing with them the possibility of a few clarifying amendments but we support their efforts to address this and encourage the committee's favorable consideration of this legislation.

I would be happy to answer any questions.