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# Image-Based Sexual Abuse:

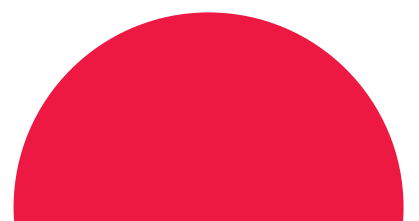
## An International Study of Victims and Perpetrators

**A SUMMARY REPORT**

February 2020

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# KEY SURVEY FINDINGS

## At a Glance

### Experiences of Victimization

- Overall 1 in 3 respondents experienced image-based sexual abuse victimisation
- Younger adults (20 to 29 years) are most commonly victims
- Sexuality diverse groups experience higher victimisation
- Ethnically diverse groups experience higher victimisation
- Men's and women's victimisation differs in nature rather than extent

### Self-Disclosed Perpetration

- Overall 1 in 6 respondents had engaged in image-based sexual abuse perpetration
- Men are more commonly perpetrators than women
- Young people are more commonly perpetrators
- Perpetrators have diverse motivations for abuse
- Most common sites for distribution are social media, email and mobile messages

### Different Dynamics of Image-Based Sexual Abuse

- Most victims are targeted by known perpetrators
- Women report greater negative impacts of victimisation than men
- LGB+ women experienced greater health, relational and harassing impacts

### Attitudes and Knowledge of the Law

- Most respondents agree that image-based sexual abuse should be a crime in their country
- Less than half of respondents were aware that image-based sexual abuse is a crime in their country
- Most respondents support bystander intervention when witnessing image-based sexual abuse

### A Growing Problem?

- Our survey suggests image-based sexual abuse has increased in Australia since 2016
- Non-consensual sharing and threats to share have almost doubled
- Self-disclosed perpetration of image-based sexual abuse has also risen
- Shifting practices in technology use, dating, sex and privacy play a role
- Victim-blaming and minimisation of the impacts of image-based sexual abuse also to blame



## Linda's Story

Linda (Australia) described discovering that she had been raped by a former male partner, when several friends told her that they had seen the footage:

*My partner and me had been drinking and then he gave me a bit of something else that I hadn't ever had and, basically, I was quite unconscious. He filmed a video of us. I actually wasn't aware of it at the time. I became aware of it when my friends started talking to me about this video that they'd all seen. So it turns out that he had shared that video with his guy friends over a few drinks and they were concerned and talked to me because they were like, 'you seemed completely out of it and actually unaware of this so we wanted to let you know because it's a pretty awful video'. A bit later down the track he was trying to blackmail me ... He threatened if I didn't let him [stay at my house] that he was going to send that video to my parents.*



sexual abuse is used by perpetrators of domestic violence who attempt to coercively control a current or former intimate partner.<sup>5</sup> Police and service providers have also described to us how images are used to threaten victims of sexual and domestic violence in order to prevent them from seeking help or reporting to police.<sup>6</sup> In other cases, nude or sexual images have been used as a form of bullying and harassment, particularly among younger people. This can have severe impacts on a victim's mental well-being, sometimes tragically resulting in self-harm.

While no terminology is perfect, we prefer the term 'image-based sexual abuse' because it better captures this diversity of behaviours, the nature and harms experienced by many victim-survivors, a much broader array of perpetrator motivations, as well as a range of digital devices and platforms that are used to abuse.

This 2020 report describes the key findings of a cross-national survey into image-based sexual abuse. This is a follow-up study to our 2016 Australian survey and extends the research to New Zealand and the United Kingdom. It provides data on respondents' experiences of image-based sexual abuse victimisation as well as self-disclosed perpetration behaviours. At the time of writing, this research is the first cross-national survey into victimisation and perpetration of image-based sexual abuse.

## Not Just 'Revenge Pornography'

In 2017, we released the report Not Just 'Revenge Pornography' which provided key findings from a victimisation survey of Australian residents (16 to 49 years) conducted by members of our research team in 2016.<sup>1</sup> In that earlier research, we asked Australian respondents whether they had ever experienced an incident where someone had taken, shared, or threatened to share, a nude, semi-nude or sexual image of them without their permission and across a range of circumstances. In other words, we asked whether they had ever experienced image-based sexual abuse.

Image-based sexual abuse is defined as the non-consensual taking, sharing or threats to share nude or sexual images (photos or videos) of a person.<sup>2</sup> It also includes digitally altered imagery in which a person's face or body is superimposed or 'stitched into' a pornographic photo or video, known as 'fake pornography' (including 'deepfakes' when synthetic images are created using artificial intelligence).<sup>3</sup>

Often referred to as 'non-consensual pornography' or 'revenge porn', image-based sexual abuse is an invasion of a person's privacy and a violation of their human rights to dignity, sexual autonomy and freedom of expression.<sup>4</sup>

Though the popular term 'revenge porn' implies that the non-consensual sharing of nude or sexual images is based on the spiteful actions of jilted ex-lovers, research has found that the motivations for these behaviours – and the impacts on victims – are far more varied. For instance, image-based

## Study Background

The focus of this summary report is foremost on the findings of a cross-national survey conducted in 2019. In total, there were 6,109 respondents aged 16 to 64 years across Australia (n=2,054), New Zealand (n=2,027) and the United Kingdom (n=2,028). Overall, 52.1% of respondents identified as female and 47.9% as male. Most respondents (88.9%) identified as heterosexual, while 11.1% identified as sexuality diverse including lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB+).<sup>7</sup> With regard to age: 6.1% of respondents were 16-19 years; 23.1% were 20-29 years; 25.9% were 30-39 years; 18.6% were 40-49 years; and 26.3% were 50-64 years. Finally, 73.6% of respondents identified as White/European/Pakeha, while 26.4% represented ethnically diverse groups including indigenous, as well as Black, Asian and minority ethnicities (BAME).

All respondents were recruited by Qualtrics Panels, an online panel provider, and informed that the purpose of the research was to examine attitudes and experiences of sex,

technology, and relationships. The research was approved by the RMIT Human Ethics Committee and followed guidelines as prescribed by the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

Consistent with our previous research into image-based sexual abuse,<sup>8</sup> we developed a survey instrument that comprised a range of items including those pertaining to: (1) demographic characteristics; (2) sexual image-based abuse myth acceptance; (3) online dating behaviours; (4) sexual self-image behaviours; (5) image-based sexual abuse victimization; (6) image-based sexual abuse perpetration; and (7) attitudes and knowledge of law.

The broader project also involved qualitative interviews with victim-survivors in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, which are discussed in greater depth in a report released in 2019.<sup>9</sup> In total, 75 participants were recruited for semi-structured interviews in person or via Skype, with 25 from each country. For the purposes of this report, some quotes from victim-survivors who were interviewed for the project have been included, with pseudonyms used to protect their anonymity. These quotes provide further context into the nature and ongoing harms associated with image-based sexual abuse victimisation.

## Key Survey Findings

Far from its popular characterisation as typically an act of ‘revenge’ perpetrated by men against their women ex-partners, our survey indicates that image-based sexual abuse encompasses a diverse set of relational contexts, harms, as well as an array of differential victim impacts.

Notably, the survey found that overall victimisation rates are not markedly different according respondent gender, with males and females reporting similar overall frequency of victimisation. However, when contexts, harms and impacts are considered, there are significant differences according to respondent gender and other characteristics of inequality and/or privilege. In particular, there are distinct ways in

which women experience image-based sexual abuse in the context of multiple experiences of interpersonal harm and victimisation, including stalking, sexual violence and/or intimate partner abuse situations.

Patterns of image-based sexual abuse victimisation also differ for: younger as compared with older respondents; sexuality-diverse as compared with heterosexual respondents; and ethnically diverse as compared with White/European/Pakeha respondents.

## Experiences of Victimisation

### 1 in 3 Respondents Have Experienced Image-Based Sexual Abuse

Based on our survey, we found that image-based sexual abuse is pervasive. Overall, 1 in 3 respondents had experienced at least one form of image-based sexual abuse victimisation (37.7%) and these findings were comparable across Australia (35.2%), New Zealand (39.0%) and the United Kingdom (39.0%). This included:

- 1 in 3 respondents who reported that someone had taken a nude or sexual image of them without their consent (33.2%)
- 1 in 5 who reported that someone had shared a nude or sexual image of them without their consent (20.9%), and
- Almost 1 in 5 who reported that someone had threatened to share a nude or sexual image of them (18.7%)

We also found that 1 in 7 of those surveyed had experienced all three forms of image-based sexual abuse (14.1%).

Our survey findings showed a clear intersection of marginalisation experienced by victim-survivors, particularly in relation to age, sexuality, ethnicity and indigeneity, as discussed below.

Age	Images Taken	Images Shared	Images Threatened	One or more (Any)
16-19	37.5%	27.9%	27.9%	45.3%
20-29	43.9%	32.1%	29.9%	50.7%
30-39	39.5%	26.8%	23.8%	44.5%
40-49	30.4%	15.9%	13.0%	33.6%
50-64	18.7%	7.2%	5.7%	21.0%

Table: Image-Based Sexual Abuse Victimisation by Age

## Younger Adults (20 to 29 years) are More Commonly Victims

Our survey found significant differences according to age with younger respondents more likely than older respondents to report experiencing one or more forms of image-based sexual abuse. Overall, 1 in 2 (47.2%) respondents aged 16-39 years had experienced one or more form of image-based sexual abuse compared with 1 in 4 (26.2%) respondents aged 40-64 years.

Although the victimisation rate among adolescents (16-19 years) remains high, they were not the highest represented group in our survey. The findings indicate rather that young adults aged 20 to 29 years are the most likely age-group to be victims of image-based sexual abuse.

Overall, our survey findings support engagement in school-based education programming to address image-based sexual abuse among adolescents and provide support for younger victims. In addition, interventions are needed to target those adults in their 20s.

### Zahira's Story

Zahira (New Zealand) told us about how when she was in high school an image she had shared with a male partner was sent around the entire school via text message:

*I was dating a guy and we'd been dating for about two months and I cringe to look back on. I guess it was the thing to do, like you shared nudes with your partner or boyfriend, and we broke up. ... We didn't end on very good terms, and I didn't think that he would, so I wasn't too worried, but, you know, it was almost, like, trendy, I guess, to kind of send your ex's photos around the school. ... I didn't think that he would do it though, because I didn't think that he was that kind of person. But he did ... everyone kind of got my photo during class.*

## Sexuality Diverse Groups Experience Higher Victimization

There were significant differences according to sexuality with LGB+ respondents significantly more likely than heterosexual respondents to report having experienced all forms of image-based sexual abuse.

We found 1 in 2 (56.4%) LGB+ respondents had experienced one or more form of image-based sexual abuse compared with 1 in 3 (35.4%) heterosexual respondents.

Although international evidence is limited, some previous research has likewise indicated higher rates of sexual violence and harassment perpetrated against sexuality diverse, as well as transgender, intersex and gender-queer people.<sup>10</sup> As such, our survey findings may reflect these broader patterns of marginalisation and sexuality-based harassment experienced by many LGBTIQ people in the countries studied.

### Kyle's Story

Kyle (Australia) described how his Facebook account was hacked by a former male partner and his profile picture was changed to an intimate image:

*[I got] a call from my best friend who at the time had recently relocated... He never calls me. He doesn't do phone calls, so it was a bit weird. So, he called me up, and he said, 'What have you done with your Facebook page?' I'm just like, 'What are you talking about?' ... He's like, 'Yeah, okay, I didn't think it was you, you might want to check it out'. ... There was a nude picture of me using a sex toy on myself as the display picture on Facebook. I couldn't get into [my account], which I thought was really quite odd. I just was in shock and horror. ... [I was] totally mortified.*

## Ethnically Diverse Groups Experience Higher Victimization

It is noteworthy that Australian respondents identifying as Indigenous were significantly more likely than non-Indigenous respondents to report having experienced all forms of image-based sexual abuse. For example, 2 in 3 (65.6%) Indigenous respondents had experienced one or more form of image-based sexual abuse compared with 1 in 3 (34.3%) non-Indigenous respondents.

Although the overall trend was non-significant in New Zealand and the United Kingdom, there were significant differences in all three countries regarding respondents who reported having experienced all three forms of image-based sexual abuse. In Australia, 1 in 3 (35.9%) of Indigenous respondents had experienced all three forms of image-based sexual abuse compared with 1 in 8 (12.2%) non-Indigenous respondents. The equivalent percentages were 1 in 4 (28.4%) for Māori respondents and 1 in 7 (13.9%) for non-Māori respondents in New Zealand, and almost 1 in 4 (23.7%) for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) respondents compared with 1 in 8 (12.5%) for non-BAME respondents in the United Kingdom.

These findings are perhaps not surprising in light of previous research into sexual abuse more broadly which has found that women from racial minority groups, such as Indigenous women and BAME women, face a much higher risk of exposure to sexual violence, suffer more severe forms of abuse, and face culturally specific barriers to seeking support.<sup>11</sup>

Women victims (11.7%) were significantly more likely than men (4.8%) to report that the same perpetrator of their most significant experience of image-based sexual abuse had also made them feel afraid for their safety. There was also an overall trend whereby women were more likely to report multiple forms of abuse from the same perpetrator of the image-based sexual abuse relative to men.<sup>12</sup>

### Fatima's Story

Fatima (United Kingdom), like many victims, described how since the material was 'out there', beyond her control and constantly available to be viewed and re-shared there was really no end to the impact of the abuse:

*It is permanent ... and so people know it, you can't not know it. ... Maybe you could have something happen to you that was traumatic, but you don't have to necessarily feel like you're defined by it for the rest of your life. But with this, there's such a level of permanence which affects everything ... especially if it's impossible now to take photos down, especially if it's impossible to stop the dissemination of the images. ... There will never be a day in my entire lifetime that all of the images of me could ever be deleted.*

*It is so harmful and isolating... especially getting hate [online and] from 'friends' who don't want to associate with you ... because you're associated with something [they perceive to be] explicit and gross...*

### Rachel's Story

Rachel (New Zealand), discovered that her partner had been secretly filming sexual encounters or intimate, private moments:

*He was really into secretly filming us when we were having sex. So, quite a few times I would, sort of, turn around and see that he was filming, and then I would grab his phone and take it off him, delete the thing and say, 'You can't do that. That's totally not allowed'. ... There was also an incident, too, where I was in the shower and he was filming me without me knowing, and I pulled a tampon out to go and put it in the bathroom, and he filmed the whole thing, and I got mad at him for that. He said he was going to delete it, but that was one of the videos that he threatened me with, as well, in the end.*

Importantly, similar findings in relation to the gendered nature of image-based sexual abuse are beginning to emerge in other research, although the rates vary from study to study. Some research has found that women are more likely to be the victims of image-based sexual abuse, especially adolescent and young adult women.<sup>13</sup> Whilst other studies have found that victimisation rates appear similar for both male and female victims.<sup>14</sup> This suggests that further research into the complexity of image-based sexual abuse in relation to its gendered extent, nature and impacts is needed.

### Men's and Women's Victimization Differs in Nature Rather than Extent

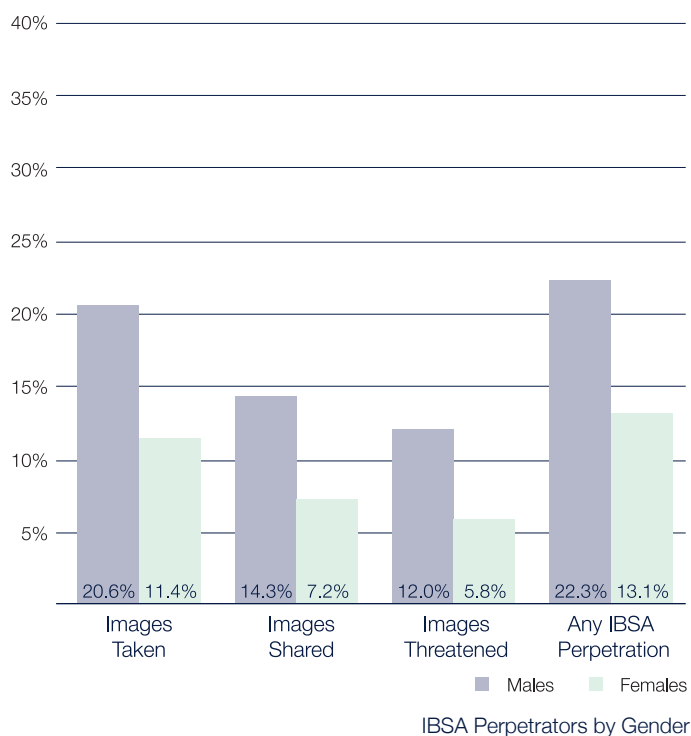
The overall rates of image-based sexual abuse victimisation did not differ greatly by gender, with similar rates for both women (38.1%) and men (37.4%). However, there were nonetheless different dynamics and impacts of image-based sexual abuse according to gender, as well as significant differences in perpetration (which we discuss further below).

	Females	Males	Overall
I did not experience other unwanted or harmful behaviours from this same person	40.8%	40.4%	40.6%
The same person engaged in image-based abuse more than once	17.7%	24.5%	20.8%
The same person kept contacting me after I asked them to stop	30.5%	25.6%	28.2%
The same person also made other threats of harm towards me	18.4%	13.8%	16.3%
The same person tried to control/limit my behaviour	22.1%	15.0%	18.8%
The same person physically hurt me	10.1%	6.1%	8.3%
The same person made me feel afraid for my safety	11.7%	4.8%	8.5%

Table: Co-occurrence of Abuse, Victims by Gender

### Men are more Commonly Perpetrators than Women

There was a clear gendered pattern of findings whereby 1 in 5 men (22.3%) reported having engaged in one or more image-based perpetration behaviour, as compared with 1 in 8 women (13.1%).



It is important to consider how the perpetration of image-based sexual abuse sits within broader patterns of gendered violence, not solely based on who the victim-survivor is, but also the way in which the perpetrator is conforming to particular gendered norms in engaging in this behaviour.

### Alice's Story

Alice (New Zealand) discovered through a female friend that both of their images, and the images of other women, were part of a collection that their partners had been 'pooling' together within their all male friendship group:

*Unbeknown to my friend and I ... she found on her boyfriend's laptop, pictures of me, her and another friend and she was also being taped in the shower. ... That's how I found out about it, through her. That they were, I guess, pooling these images ... which made me feel quite sick. ... I would say there would be at least 20 [photos] that I had taken but there would probably be maybe, at least that many more that he'd taken. Maybe 40, I don't know, I didn't keep track.*

For some men, image-based sexual abuse perpetration occurs within a context of broader male peer support<sup>15</sup> for sexual harassment and abuse. This trend is further evident in a recent study that involved 16 interviews with image-based abuse perpetrators. The study found that for many perpetrators, image-based sexual abuse is untroubling and normative within a context of male bonding and homosociality, through peer-to-peer competition and identification.<sup>16</sup>

### Young People are More Commonly Perpetrators

There were significant differences for age across all forms of image-based sexual abuse perpetration. Overall respondents aged 16-39 years (23.2%) were more likely than respondents aged 40-64 years (10.6%) to report engaging in one or more form of image-based sexual abuse.

<i>Males</i>	<i>Images Taken</i>	<i>Images Shared</i>	<i>Images Threatened</i>	<i>One or more (Any)</i>
16-19	26.6%	21.5%	19.8%	28.8%
20-29	30.6%	23.4%	19.5%	33.5%
30-39	28.1%	21.8%	18.6%	29.9%
40-49	16.3%	10.5%	9.8%	17.2%
50-64	10.2%	3.8%	2.3%	11.4%
<i>Females</i>	<i>Images Taken</i>	<i>Images Shared</i>	<i>Images Threatened</i>	<i>One or more (Any)</i>
16-19	14.8%	13.3%	9.7%	16.3%
20-29	18.0%	11.9%	10.8%	20.4%
30-39	12.3%	8.4%	6.3%	14.1%
40-49	7.5%	3.9%	2.8%	9.1%
50-64	4.5%	1.0%	0.4%	5.2%

Table: Image-Based Sexual Abuse Perpetration by Age and Gender

There were also important patterns in perpetration when examining both age and gender, as young men were more likely to self-disclose engaging in each type of image-based sexual abuse, as well as any and all forms of these harms, as shown in the table below.

These findings clearly demonstrate the importance of working with young men in order to respond to and prevent image-based sexual abuse.

### **Perpetrators have Diverse Motivations for Abuse**

We asked survey respondents who reported having taken, shared and/or threatened to share nude or sexual images to indicate their motivations for each of the three behaviours. Respondents selected how much they agreed that the following motivations reflected their experience: for fun, to flirt or be sexy, to impress friends, to maintain relationships, to obtain attention, for revenge or to get back at the person, to embarrass the person, to control the person, for financial gain or to obtain further images.

It was very common for perpetrators of image-based sexual abuse to describe their motivations as for ‘fun’ or to ‘flirt’ or be ‘sexy’ (61.2% for taking; 58.0% for sharing; 55.8% for threatening).

Other motivations included wanting to ‘impress friends’ and/or ‘trade the images’ (37.8% for taking; 54.9% for sharing; 54.9% for threatening); and wanting to ‘control the person in the image’ (45.0% for taking; 57.1% for sharing; 63.2% for threatening).

Finally, respondents reported being motivated to ‘embarrass’ and/or ‘get back at the person’ depicted in the image (38.0% for taking; 51.7% for sharing; 61.4% for threatening).<sup>17</sup>

These findings show a range of diverse motivations for engaging in image-based sexual abuse that extend well beyond those of the ‘vengeful’ or ‘jilted’ ex-partner. In some cases, perpetrators reported motivations which appeared to be less about personally targeting a specific victim and more about their own capacity to either make money or gain status (such as in responses of to ‘trade the images’, or to ‘impress friends’).

### **Jordan’s Story**

Jordan (New Zealand) was victimised in a sextortion scam, in which the perpetrator threatened to share his image unless he paid them \$200 (USD):

*I found one person, who’s an attractive woman, and talked for an hour with no hint of sexual stuff, nothing, it was just a convo [conversation]. And then she said, ‘Do you want to talk on Skype?’ ... So, I went quickly and made a new email address and a new Skype account and linked my Skype account to a new email address, so it’d be completely untraceable, in theory, back to me or so I thought. So Skyped for a bit, chatted for a bit. Probably two and a half hours of chatting at this point. And then she tried to step it up to something sexual, which I wasn’t entirely comfortable with. She revealed herself on camera. Exposed her breasts and stuff. ... And so, she asked me to show my penis on camera. So, I did. And that was really that, there was nothing else. At which point she probably shot off the camera as soon as I exposed myself and then sent me my full name and a list of my friends from Facebook. ... They asked for money.*

The survey findings on perpetrator motivations also suggest that those engaging in these behaviours may not fully understand or even give thought to the potentially very harmful impact upon victims.

Importantly, there appears to be a tendency among perpetrators not to recognise image-based sexual abuse as harmful, when they are also commonly describing their motivations as for ‘fun’ or to ‘flirt’ or be ‘sexy’. Crucially these findings are at odds with what many victim-survivors describe as serious and lasting impacts of image-based sexual abuse, as described in the excerpts throughout this report.

### **Most Common Sites for Distribution are Social Media, Email and Mobile Messages**

Overall, perpetrators of image-based sexual abuse commonly reporting having shared nude or sexual images on social media (such as 26.1% who said they shared images on Facebook, and 17.9% on Instagram), via email (18.5%), via mobile messaging or chat applications (17.9%), or via mobile phone messages (15.6%).<sup>18</sup> These findings suggest that many image-based sexual abuse perpetrators share the images where they will be observed by a victims’ social network, in turn indicating motivations to cause harm to victims.

Less commonly reported by perpetrators was sharing image-based sexual abuse imagery on pornography websites (14.0%), anonymous communities such as Reddit (6.3%), or specific ‘revenge porn’ websites (5.4%). Indeed, research suggests that there are many less public sites



where image-based sexual abuse material is shared by perpetrators, meaning that many victims may never discover that their nude or sexual imagery has been shared without their consent.<sup>19</sup>

## Different Dynamics of Image-Based Sexual Abuse

Of those respondents who had experienced at least one form of image-based sexual abuse, we asked them for further information about their most significant victimisation experience.

More than 1 in 3 (39.5%) of this subgroup of victims reported that their most significant experience had involved all three forms of image-based sexual abuse: taking nude or sexual images of a person without consent, sharing images without consent, or threatening to share images.

### Stephen's Story

Stephen (United Kingdom) discovered around 20 or so naked images had been taken of him by his former female flatmate without his knowledge or consent:

*Like there's me sleeping on the bed when I'm sick. There's me in the shower. There's – the most embarrassing of them all is like I'm in the shower, but I'm bent over and it's like the most, you know, visual shot that you can possibly imagine and it's obvious it's me. I mean you can see my face. You could see everything ... [I had] no idea how she was able to be in a position to take them...*

*[It's] having this continuing threat that the images could be re-shared, or re-emerge online, that new people could see these intimate images. ... And I think it's the unknowing; that not knowing aspect that you have to deal with every day.*

### Most Victims are Targeted by Known Perpetrators

Overall, a majority of victims of image-based sexual abuse reported that the perpetrator had been a partner or former partner (60.9%), or another known person (28.5%), with victimisation by strangers or unknown people comparatively less common (10.6%).

A similar pattern of targeting known victims was reported by perpetrators of image-based sexual abuse, whereby a

majority of those who had taken a nude or sexual image of another person without permission (63.0%), who had shared a nude or sexual image without permission (52.1%), or who had made threats to share (51.2%) reported that the victim was a partner or former partner.

## Women Report Greater Negative Impacts of Victimisation than Men

We asked victims of image-based sexual abuse about a range of negative impacts including negative feelings, health impacts (including mental health), reputational concerns and relational impacts.


A majority of victims (86.2%) reported experiencing many negative feelings as a consequence of image-based sexual abuse ('somewhat' or 'very much' to one or more feelings items), and 13.8% of respondents did not experience negative feelings ('neutral', 'not at all' or 'not really' to all feeling items).<sup>20</sup> Overall, women were much more likely to report experiencing negative feelings (92.1%) as compared with men (75.9%).

Many respondents (55.1%) reported experiencing negative health impacts as a result of the abuse, as well as reputational concerns (78.8%), and impacts on their relationships with others (55.7%). Again, negative health impacts were greater for women (61.0%) as compared with men (45.1%). Women (74.0%) were also much more likely than men (59.1%) to report experiencing reputational concerns as a result of the abuse. There were further differences by gender for relational impacts, with women (59.6%) more likely than men (48.8%) to report experiencing these impacts.

## LGB+ Women Experienced Greater Health, Relational and Harassing Impacts

Our survey found that LGB+ women victims of image-based sexual abuse were more likely to report greater health impacts (70.7%), as compared with heterosexual women (58.2%) and men (50.0% LGB+, 43.6% heterosexual), as a result of the image-based sexual abuse. Likewise, more LGB+ women reported negative impacts on their relationships with others (74.4%), as compared with heterosexual women (55.4%), and men (50.0% LGB+, 48.5% heterosexual).

More LGB+ women also reported experiencing greater subsequent harassment (50.0%) as compared with heterosexual women (34.1%). There were also notable trends



whereby LGB+ women reported experiencing concerns for their safety (80.5%), and reputational concerns (86.6%), at seemingly higher rates than did heterosexual men (57.1% and 70.6% respectively) and LGB+ men (65.4% and 76.9% respectively).<sup>a</sup>

These survey findings suggest that there is an interaction of sexuality and gender such that LGB+ women experience greater health and relational impacts as well as subsequent harassment as a result of image-based sexual abuse.

## Attitudes and Knowledge of the Law

### Most Respondents Agree that Image-Based Sexual Abuse Should be a Crime in their Country

We asked respondents whether they thought it should be a crime to take nude and/or sexual images without a person's consent, to share such images without consent, and to threaten to share nude and/or sexual images of a person. There was overwhelming community support in all countries for each of these behaviours to be criminal offences: 80.0% agreed (images taken); 83.2% agreed (images shared); and 81.8% agreed (images threatened).

Overall, women were significantly more likely to support criminal offences compared with men (85.6% vs. 73.9% for images taken; 88.1% vs. 77.8% for images shared; and 86.2% vs. 77.0% for images threatened). A similar trend was observed between heterosexual and LGB+ respondents, with higher levels of support for criminalisation among heterosexual respondents compared with LGB+ respondents (81.1% vs. 70.8% for images taken; 84.1% vs. 75.6% for images shared; and 82.5% vs. 75.8% for images threatened). The highest levels of support for criminal offences by key respondent demographics were among those aged 50 to 64 years (87.7% for images taken, 91.2% for images shared; and 89.2% for images threatened).

Not unsurprisingly, we found that those who had engaged in image-based sexual abuse behaviours themselves were less supportive of criminal laws than those who had not.

Across the whole sample, however, it was apparent that there is strong community support for treating image-based sexual abuse seriously through criminal justice responses; and similar levels of support for criminalising each of taking

nude or sexual images of a person without consent, or share such images without consent, or to threaten to share nude and/or sexual images of a person.

### Less than Half of Respondents were Aware that Image-Based Sexual Abuse is a Crime in their Country

Overall, we found that there was a lack of awareness among our respondents about whether image-based sexual abuse is currently a crime in their country.

Less than half (45.7%) of respondents believed that it is currently a crime to take images without consent in their country, 15.1% said that they do not think it is a crime, and 39.2% said that they do not know. Likewise, less than half (48.7%) of respondents believed that it is currently a crime to share images without consent in their country, 13.4% said they do not think it is a crime, and 38.0% said that they do not know. Finally, 40.5% of respondents believed that it is currently a crime to threaten to share images of a person in their country, 16.5% said they do not think it is a crime, and 43.0% said they do not know.

These findings are concerning. In Australia, there are criminal offences at the federal (national) as well as state and territory levels criminalising the taking, sharing, and threats to share nude, sexual or 'intimate' images without consent in every jurisdiction except Tasmania. In New Zealand, it is a criminal offence to post a harmful digital communication, which includes intimate visual recordings (e.g. photos, videos or digital images) that are created and/or published without the knowledge or consent of the individual who is depicted in the recording. And in the United Kingdom, there are a number of laws targeted at specific instances of image-based sexual abuse in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. As such, it is concerning that approximately half of respondents in each of Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom were not aware of the criminal nature of these harms.

### Most Respondents Support Bystander Intervention when Witnessing Image-Based Sexual Abuse

We asked respondents a set of questions to gauge their support for intervening as bystanders should they witness image-based sexual abuse, as well as whether they felt they would have the support of the peers for stepping in.

Our survey found that over 2 in 3 of our respondents (67.5%) across all three countries reported that they either would say

<sup>a</sup> These results were notable, though not statistically significant, which may in turn be an artefact of small sample sizes for these groups. This highlights the importance of qualitative research and targeted survey sampling methods for sexuality minorities in order to ensure their experiences of harassment and abuse are properly recognised.

or do something to express their disapproval, or would like to say or do something (but did not know how), if someone showed or sent them a nude or sexual image of another person without that person's consent. Female respondents (77.9%) were much more likely than male respondents (56.3%) to say that they would, or would like to, take action.

A majority of survey respondents (60.2%) also reported that they believed they would have the support of most or all of their friends for saying or doing something to express disapproval, and a further 1 in 5 (19.1%) reported that they would have the support of some or a few of their friends for taking such actions, if someone showed or sent them a nude or sexual image of another person without that person's consent. Once again, there were significant gender differences, with 2 in 3 female respondents (65.9%) compared with 1 in 2 males (54.1%) reporting that they felt they would have the support of all or most of their friends for taking action as a bystander.

We further asked respondents whether someone had ever actually shown or sent them a nude or sexual image of another person without that person's consent. Approximately 1 in 4 (26.4%) of our respondents reported this had happened to them at least once. This was somewhat higher for men (29.9%) than for women (23.1%) and was highest among younger respondents (42.4% of those aged 16 to 19 years, 39% of those aged 20 to 29 years, and 31.6% of those aged 30 to 39 years), as well as for LGB+ respondents (41.2%) as compared with heterosexual respondents (24.5%).

Finally, of these respondents who had the opportunity to intervene as bystanders, we asked if they did actually say or do something when this last happened. Just under half of those respondents (46.1%) who had the opportunity to intervene did so. Actual bystander action was much higher for women (54.9%) than for men (38.9%), as well as among LGB+ respondents (50.0%) as compared to heterosexual respondents (45.3%).

Overall, these bystander findings suggest that a majority of survey respondents believe that the sharing of a nude or sexual image without a person's consent is a serious enough harm to warrant individuals taking action to intervene. Yet not everyone is confident enough to take action in practice. Individuals might therefore benefit from being equipped with the tools and confidence to step in and say or do something when they witness image-based sexual abuse occurring.

## A Growing Problem?

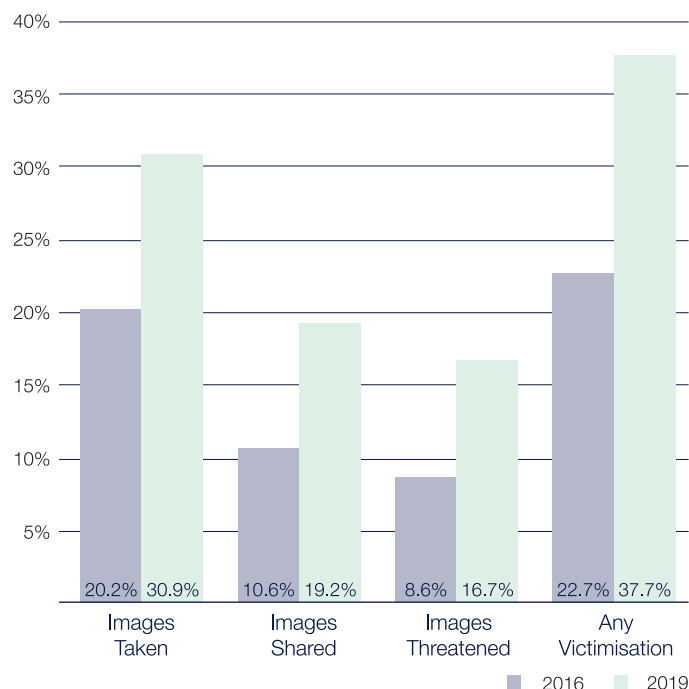
### Our Survey suggests Image-Based Sexual Abuse has Increased in Australia since 2016

This report has outlined key findings from our research across Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. However, we conducted a comparable survey with a substantial Australian sample in 2016, using many of the same survey items and a comparable survey methodology. As such, our 2019 survey has also revealed some interesting trends in the Australian respondents we have surveyed about their experiences of image-based sexual abuse.

Overall, it appears that image-based sexual abuse may have increased in Australia since our last survey. In 2016 we found that 1 in 5 (22.7%) of respondents had experienced at least one form of image-based sexual abuse. In 2019, that figure had risen to 1 in 3 (37.7%).

### Non-Consensual Sharing and Threats to Share have Almost Doubled

A greater proportion of respondents in our 2019 survey disclosed ever having experienced one of more forms of image-based sexual abuse, as shown in the figure below.

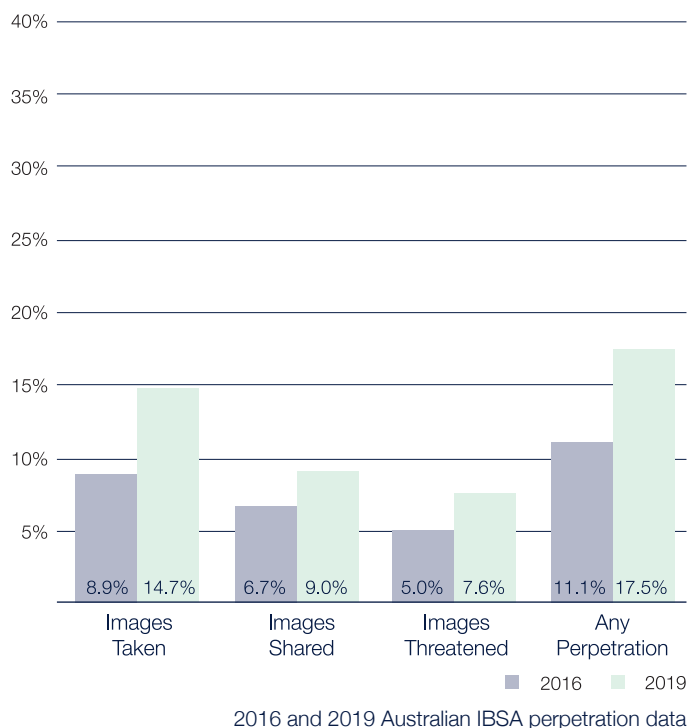


2016 and 2019 Australian IBSA victimisation data

The greatest increases in victimisation are in the non-consensual sharing of nude or sexual images, and threats to share nude or sexual images.

### Self-Disclosed Perpetration of Image-Based Sexual Abuse has also Risen

Rates of self-disclosed perpetration of image-based sexual abuse have also increased between those respondents surveyed in 2016, and those responding to our 2019 survey, as shown below.



For perpetration, the greatest increases are in the non-consensual taking of nude or sexual images, and the non-consensual sharing of nude or sexual images.

### Shifting Practices in Technology Use, Dating, Sex and Privacy Play a Role

It is difficult to say exactly what is driving these increases in image-based sexual abuse. Our previous research<sup>21</sup> has shown that individuals who have consensually shared nude or sexual images with a partner are more likely to experience image-based sexual abuse victimisation. Importantly though, our findings also demonstrate that even those who have never consensually shared a nude or sexual self-image can still be victims of the taking nude or sexual images of a person without consent, the sharing such images without

consent, or the threatening to share nude and/or sexual images. In short, individuals can become victims of image-based sexual abuse whether they themselves consensually take sexual selfies or not.

However it appears that between our 2016 and 2019 Australian surveys, there is little evidence of increases in consensual nude or sexual image-taking and sharing behaviours, as shown in the table below.

This suggests is that it is not necessarily the case that increases in image-based sexual abuse victimisation are a consequence of increases in consensual nude or sexual image sharing.

Rather, our research suggests that image-based sexual abuse may be increasing due to a lack of understanding in the general community of the seriousness of the associated harms, and the consent and privacy of victims not being given due attention by perpetrators. It is also possible that increases in victimisation of image-based sexual abuse are related to the passage of time, with more people becoming aware that their nude or sexual images have been shared without their permission since 2016. Though the comparable rises in self-disclosed perpetration of image-based sexual abuse suggest that more people are engaging in these harmful behaviours overall.

### Victim-Blaming and Minimisation of the Impacts of Image-Based Sexual Abuse also to Blame

Technology and an associated increased practice of sexual self-imagery may play a role in enabling greater access to victims, but ultimately it is the individual who chooses to take, share, or threaten to share, nude or sexual images without consent who is at fault.

Our findings demonstrate that perpetrators are more likely than other survey respondents to hold attitudes minimising the harms of image-based sexual abuse, and that place the blame onto victims.

	2016 (% yes, ever)	2019 (% yes, ever)
Sent someone you just met a nude or sexual photo or video	23.3%	22.3%
Let a sexual partner or date take a nude or sexual photo or video of you	29.9%	28.2%
Sent a nude or sexual image (photo or video) of yourself to a sexual partner	37.3%	37.3%
Make a nude or sexy video with a sexual partner	27.2%	27.1%

Table: Consensual nude and sexual image behaviours, Australia

## Recommendations

### Prevention through Community Education

Given the higher observation of image-based sexual abuse sharing behaviour among men and younger respondents, these findings suggest that such groups are particularly important subpopulations to work with in education and prevention interventions. In particular, incorporating bystander awareness and intervention training into school-based sex and relationship education programming may go some way towards addressing the peer support elements to image-based sexual abuse, particularly among young men. Our findings have also demonstrated a substantial lack of awareness in the general community, across each of the three countries studied, as to the current criminal nature of image-based sexual abuse behaviours. This suggests that broader community awareness-raising and legal education may be warranted to help address the issue now, as well as preventing its high prevalence for future young adults.

### Victim Support

Our research into image-based sexual abuse highlights the diverse range of contexts, impacts and experiences of victimisation. For some victims, image-based sexual abuse is a tool used by perpetrators of domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking as a way to coerce and control the victim. For other victims, nude and sexual images are used in peer and other known networks as a form of bullying and/or harassment. And for other victims, strangers attempt to blackmail and/or extort money through the threatened sharing of nude or sexual images as a particularly malicious form of cyber-attack.

While each of these contexts can present many severe harms and lasting impacts for victims, it is also important that support services and legal practitioners are equipped to recognise and respond appropriately to the different presentations of image-based sexual abuse. For example, it is particularly vital that domestic violence and sexual assault counsellors and legal advisors receive up-to-date training on the ongoing nature of these harms for victims and the actions that can be taken to address and attempt to limit the continuation of the image-based sexual abuse which may also be associated with additional stalking, physical and emotional violence.

Among the key findings from our qualitative interviews in particular, has been the continuing nature of the harms of image-based sexual abuse, as victim-survivors live with an ongoing fear that the images will re-emerge and continue to

be re-shared. This highlights the importance of image take-down assistance, such as that offered by the Office of the eSafety Commissioner in Australia, as for some victims there will be a recurring need for support and advice.

### Criminal and Civil Law Reform

Despite significant criminal law reform in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, as well as the United States and Canada, inevitably the law is still playing catch-up to properly address the harms of image-based sexual abuse. One of the key reasons for this is the failure of laws to capture all forms of image-based sexual abuse. For example, the current laws in England and Wales do not capture digitally manipulated images or 'deepfakes'. Furthermore, there are restrictive requirements in some jurisdictions like England and Wales and New Zealand that the perpetrator intended to cause harm or distress to the victim. This is problematic for several reasons including that it is difficult to define or quantify distress, and people differ considerably within the community about what would and would not cause distress. It also places victimisation experiences on a hierarchy. Further, the harm may not be measurable or felt by the victim at the time the offence is dealt with by the criminal justice system. It also means that prosecutions may not be able to occur where a victim is unaware their image has been shared, for example, where it has been traded privately or on a dedicated voyeurism website, and therefore the victim may not technically have experienced distress. Finally, as our data shows, perpetrators of image-based sexual abuse have diverse motivations, which are not always about revenge or causing harm. Thus, while some perpetrators intend to cause the victim distress, others are motivated by other factors such as sexual gratification, monetary gain, or social status building. Requiring an intent to cause distress means such diverse motivations are not captured in the laws.

Australia has some of the most advanced legislative responses to image-based sexual abuse globally. In nearly all jurisdictions, including at the federal level, following a public consultation period, legislators closely followed the advice and guidance from victim/survivors, academics, domestic and sexual violence support services, legal practitioners and others. This has meant that Australian jurisdictions have avoided many of the problems that have been identified in relation to international jurisdictions where the laws are restrictive and fail to provide justice to people who have experienced image-based sexual abuse. Problems in many other jurisdictions include the failure to cover either digitally altered images or threats to share nude or sexual images.

Some model examples of recent laws in Australia that are compressive and inclusive include NSW and the ACT, as well as the federal Australian Civil Penalty Scheme that is administered by the Office of the eSafety Commissioner.

In all countries, there is still a way to go in relation to education, police and criminal justice agency training, and prevention.

### Amara's Story

Amara (Australia) found that people she did not know had created digitally altered non-intimate images of her by superimposing her face onto pornographic images and posting these online:

*People had been following me on social media and stealing or lifting ... photos [of me] – ordinary photos of me and then doctoring them or altering them into pornography and then posting them online. That was involved with a lot of very, very highly explicit sexual commentary with my details, like name, where I lived, where I studied. ... They'd Photoshop my face onto naked women. They would Photoshop me onto images where I was having sexual intercourse. They Photoshopped me into images where I was being ejaculated on...*

### Police Resources and Training

Findings from our broader research into image-based sexual abuse have shed light on the varying responses that victim-survivors can receive when reporting to police. Whilst some victim-survivors can have positive experiences from police members who treat them with dignity and respect whilst pursuing an investigation, there also appears to be a continuing lack of awareness among some police of the serious harms to victims or the existence of new laws on image-based sexual abuse.<sup>22</sup> Adequate resourcing for police to conduct investigations and gather digital evidence in relation to image-based sexual abuse, including in often complex multi-jurisdictional contexts, continues to be vital. Our research also suggests that additional training in relation to image-based sexual abuse is needed for frontline police who are often the first port of call for victim-survivors, as well as investigating officers.

### Heather's Story

Heather (United Kingdom) described her experience of reporting to police, which caused her further harm in addition to the initial abuse victimisation:

*The case officer I was given came around two days after I reported it and they took my first statement. So, I had to tell them everything that happened ... and they instantly like victim blamed me for what had happened. She said 'well I guess you've learnt your lesson'. ... It felt like if the police didn't have any sympathy or anything then nobody else probably would either. So, it made me feel really bad. And I had to get my friend to come over that night because I felt really unsafe in myself, I thought I'd probably harm myself ... I dreaded every phone call from [the officer] because I just found her so unhelpful.*

### Improving Technical Responses

While clear and consistent laws are crucial, online platforms also play an important role in preventing and responding to image-based sexual abuse. Companies such as Facebook, Google and Microsoft, have made significant in-roads to limiting the spread of image-based sexual abuse material on their platforms. Measures such as strong community standards banning image-based sexual abuse as well as mechanisms for victim-survivors to report abuse images remain vitally important.

A key challenge is that it is difficult for online platforms to distinguish between consensual and non-consensual nude or sexual images, unless victims themselves discover their images and contact the site to request those images be removed. Yet victims may only become aware of the image-based sexual abuse material when they start receiving harassing communications, sexual requests, or are otherwise alerted to the presence of the images – often by friends or family who first discover them. By then, the harm is often already done. Technical solutions, such as better automated detection of images that have been reported by victim-survivors as non-consensual, may offer an additional way forward. Though ultimately, we need to see attitudinal change among individuals, peer groups, families, workplaces and organisations, that takes the harms of image-based sexual abuse seriously and places the responsibility onto perpetrators rather than onto victims.

## Conclusion and Future Research

There is little doubt that nude and sexual images are increasingly being used to coerce, threaten and abuse victims. These harms extend well beyond the vengeful actions of a 'jilted lover' and cross over into perpetration of domestic and sexual violence, stalking, bullying and sexual harassment. Thankfully, the seriousness of this social and legal problem is increasingly being recognised. However, our research suggests more needs to be done to protect and support victims, hold perpetrators responsible for their actions, and to drive the awareness and attitudinal change needed to prevent these harms in the first place.

Further research is also needed to capture the diversity of victimisation experiences, particularly across more minoritised groups, who have been over-represented as victims in our survey to improve responses and understandings of this form of abuse.<sup>23</sup> An additional key research gap exists in better understanding, particularly qualitative work, the motivations and practices of perpetrators in order to inform prevention and education in this space, as well as improving responses.<sup>24</sup> Finally, it is important to engage in research on bystander prevention in relation to image-based sexual abuse to safely empower those who witness instances of abuse in supporting the victim(s) and/or seeking ways to respond to perpetrators.<sup>25</sup>

As a community, we need to continue to challenge the blame and stigma too often directed at victims, and communicate a clear message that it is the perpetrators and those who knowingly share these images whose actions must be condemned. It will take a combination of legal and non-legal measures to create the societal change needed to support victims, hold perpetrators accountable, and ultimately prevent image-based sexual abuse before it occurs.

## Acknowledgements

The authors and RMIT University acknowledge the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the eastern Kulin Nations on whose unceded lands we conduct the business of RMIT University (Melbourne, Australia). The authors and RMIT University respectfully acknowledges their Ancestors and Elders, past and present.

The authors would further like to acknowledge and thank the victim-survivors of image-based sexual abuse who have participated in this research. Without your willingness to share your experiences with us, we would not be able to continue to advocate for justice.

This summary report is supported by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Grant (Revenge Pornography: The Prevalence and Nature of Non-Consensual Imagery and the Implications for Law Reform, DP170101433). The project team includes: Associate Professor Nicola Henry (RMIT University), Associate Professor Asher Flynn (Monash University), Associate Professor Anastasia Powell (RMIT University), Professor Clare McGlynn (Durham University), Professor Erika Rackley (University of Kent), Professor Nicola Gavey (Auckland University) and Dr Adrian Scott (Goldsmiths, University of London). The views expressed here represent those of the named researchers and not of the Commonwealth of Australia.

The authors of this report would like to acknowledge the contributions of our collaborators whose work has contributed to the larger project, in particular our partner investigators Professors Clare McGlynn, Erika Rackley and Nicola Gavey. We would also like to gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Dr Kelly Johnson, Dr Jessamy Gleeson, Georgina Dimopoulous and Stefani Vasil.

### Suggested citation

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- <sup>17</sup> Note: Respondents were able to make multiple selections, and as such percentages across types do not add up to 100%.
- <sup>18</sup> Note: Respondents were able to make multiple selections, and as such percentages across types do not add up to 100%.
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