



Utah and Arkansas First U.S. States To Enact Legislation Criminalizing Cyber Sexual Extortion (“Sextortion”)

NEW YORK (April 4, 2017) - The Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, applauds the actions taken by the states of Utah and Arkansas which have enacted the first pieces of legislation in the U.S. that criminalize “sextortion”, a form of extortion where the currency of the bribe is sex or sexual images.

The [Arkansas statute](#) became law last Wednesday, following closely after [Utah’s legislation](#), which was signed by the governor on March 25.

In 2016, the Thomson Reuters Foundation’s pro bono legal programme, TrustLaw, partnered with the legal advocacy group, Legal Momentum, and the international law firm Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe, to produce a detailed report on the proliferation of sextortion over the past decade. The report, titled “[A Call to Action: Ending Sextortion in the Digital Age](#)”, outlined the need for legislative reform to tackle this heinous crime.

The FBI has called sextortion one of the fastest-growing crimes against children. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, [78 percent](#) of reported victims are girls, with an average age of 15. More than one-fifth of reported incidents involved multiple victims.

Victims of sextortion are bribed for sex, not money or goods, and those under the age of 18 are especially vulnerable. Sexual predators often pose as teenagers and use social media to entice a victim—frequently a teenage girl—into providing explicit personal images. Victims are told if they don’t comply, their reputations could be ruined or their families, friends, classmates, or livelihoods could be targeted. Until now, despite these dangerous consequences, sextortion has not been recognized legally as a crime.

The Foundation joins Legal Momentum in urging that the legislations adopted in Utah and Arkansas set an example across the country. Because technology evolves so quickly, current criminal laws do not necessarily address perpetrators of online sexual violence and both state and federal governments must address holes in current statutes.

“Sextortion is a new word for an old concept: corruption,” said Thomson Reuters Foundation CEO and TrustLaw Founder Monique Villa. *“The way we connect, interact and share information and personal data has been radically reshaped by technology, but the laws have not kept pace to ensure powerless victims are not targeted by unscrupulous criminals who can hide behind a computer or cell phone. I commend the moves made by Utah and Arkansas to tackle this growing crime, and urge other states to follow suit.”*

“We are very pleased that Utah and Arkansas have led the way with new laws to combat this fast-growing crime that harms children and teens,” said Penny Venetis, Legal

Momentum's Executive Vice President and Legal Director. *"We hope that more states will swiftly follow suit to provide prosecutors and law enforcement with the tools they need to protect vulnerable women and children and to hold perpetrators accountable."*

"We are extremely proud to have worked with Utah and Arkansas to pass this historic legislation, which provides crucial protections to the vulnerable victims of sextortion," said Ann Patterson, an Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe partner leading the firm's pro bono efforts to secure such legislation around the country. *"We look forward to working with other states to enact similar legislation, and are confident we will see Legislatures move in this direction across the United States."*

States including Texas, California and Illinois have been considering similar bills.

This legislative effort is only one element of Legal Momentum's partnership with Orrick and the Thomson Reuters Foundation to fight sextortion. In February 2017, Legal Momentum and Orrick filed the first-ever civil lawsuit in state court seeking money damages for cyber-sexual abuse. The plaintiff, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, was threatened with exposure of personal images that had been stolen from her computer by her landlord.

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About the organizations:

The Thomson Reuters Foundation

The organization runs initiatives that inform, connect, and ultimately empower people around the world: access to free legal assistance through TrustLaw, editorial coverage of the world's under-reported news, media development and training, and the Trust Conference.

Legal Momentum, the Women's Legal Defense and Education Fund, has been advocating on behalf of girls and women for nearly 50 years. Legal Momentum was instrumental in drafting and helping pass the Violence Against Women Act and other major legislation that protects girls and women.

Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe is an AmLaw 50 firm focused on serving the technology, energy and infrastructure, and finance sectors. *Chambers Global* 2016 rates the firm for excellence across 38 transactional, litigation and IP practice areas. Founded more than 150 years ago in San Francisco, Orrick today has offices in major markets worldwide.

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