



University
of Suffolk



Revenge Porn
Helpline

revengepornhelpline.org.uk



swgfl.org.uk

The Revenge Porn Helpline: An evaluation of annual Helpline data from April 2017- March 2018.

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"I would say your charity does such fantastic work, you were great personally, I've been so impressed with how quickly you've done everything and I couldn't fault any of your service - it really is a lifeline for those who feel so desperate. It really has meant a lot to me and in turn kept me going knowing that someone else is helping fight my corner. Thank you"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Coinciding with the introduction of new legislation in the UK to protect victims of revenge pornography by law, the Revenge Porn Helpline was set up in February 2015 to provide advice, support and practical help for victims. The Revenge Porn Helpline is hosted by South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL) who also run the well-established Professionals Online Safety Helpline (POSH) which offers support with all aspects of digital and online issues for professionals working with children and young people.

During the year April 2017 to the end of March 2018 the Revenge Porn Helpline had 4,337 contacts with clients and they offered individualised support, advice and provided practical help to 1,177 individual cases trying to get online images and videos removed from websites and a variety of social media platforms.

“I am so grateful for your amazing support I’m so happy to see that they have come off the site. Thank you soooo soo much! Honestly it’s a massive relief!”

1.1 Revenge Pornography

The affordances and interoperability of mobile internet technologies has enabled the easy photographing and filming of both the self – the selfie - and others in previously private spaces, which can be quickly made public at a click or the touch of a screen. Whilst sexting has attracted considerable academic¹ and political attention, to date there is little research on non-consensual, image-based abuse, commonly known as revenge pornography. There is, however, increasing evidence that it is a rapidly escalating phenomenon with extremely distressing and often devastating personal consequences. Often there can also be professional consequences, as people have had to leave their jobs because of embarrassment after photos have been shared or because they are frightened by a threat that images will be published.

It is important to remember that revenge pornography is often a form of domestic abuse. The actual number of people affected is very hard to quantify because of the embarrassment, humiliation and fear that victims experience and, like domestic abuse, the majority of cases remain unreported. Furthermore, due to the proliferation of dedicated revenge pornography sites and the unprecedented number and variety of social media platforms and personal mobile applications, the actual number of these types of images and abusive behaviours is impossible to estimate. Where the image(s) and video content are originally posted is not always the main issue in tackling the problem as, even though the image(s) or

¹ Bond, E. 'Sexting' in Brown, M. and Rafter, N. (Eds) *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Crime, Media and Popular Culture* online DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.013.142.

video(s) can be removed, they can remain searchable and, therefore, still exist on search engines like Google. This is especially so if the image has been tagged or associated with a person's name².

There is an increasing body of evidence which demonstrates the psychological consequences of revenge pornography and the devastating impact it can have on a victim's emotional and mental wellbeing. Furthermore, the 'posting revealing photos of non-consenting others along with identifying information potentially leads to humiliation and embarrassment and could increase the potential for online and "real-life" harassment'³.

1.2 Legislation

Revenge pornography is defined by the Ministry of Justice as:

The "sharing of private, sexual materials, either photos or videos, of another person without their consent and with the purpose of causing embarrassment or distress".

According to the Ministry of Justice the offence applies both online and offline and to images which are shared electronically or in a more traditional way. This includes the uploading of images on the internet, a social media site, sharing by text and e-mail, or showing someone a physical or electronic image⁴. However, it should be noted that the offence came into force on 13 April 2015 and can only be committed if the disclosure took place on or after this date. The legal implications of sexting, more commonly associated with young people⁵, are more established. Yet, in spite of anti-sexting campaigns over the last five years making it likely that most adolescents are aware of the potential severe legal consequences of sexting, they are still choosing to produce them⁶. Sexting behaviours in relation to adults are, however, often overlooked in both media and policy discourses yet it is increasingly becoming a notable aspect of both romantic attachment and sexual attraction in contemporary adult relationships⁷.

According to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)⁸, revenge pornography is an offence under Section 33 of the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 and carries a maximum sentence of 2 years' imprisonment. According to an article published in The Guardian in October 2015, there were 175 cases of revenge pornography reported to the police in the first six months of the new law being introduced. Whilst cases of revenge pornography are beginning to be brought to court, victims are very often unaware that an image or a video has been posted of them. Sometimes images are online for a

² The Google 'Right to be forgotten' initiative can, however, be helpful here as it remove specific results for queries that include their name, where the interests in those results appearing are outweighed by the person's privacy rights.

³ Stroud, S. R. (2014) The Dark Side of the Online Self: A Pragmatist Critique of the Growing Plague of Revenge Porn in Journal of Mass media Ethics, Vol. 29 (3) pp. 168-183.

⁴ Ministry of Justice Revenge Porn the Facts https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/405286/revenge-porn-factsheet.pdf

⁵ Bond, E. (2010) 'The mobile phone = bike shed? Children, sex and mobile phones' in *New Media & Society*, Vol. 13 no. 4 pp. 587- 604.

⁶ Gregory, T. (2015) 'Sexting and the politics of the image: when the invisible becomes visible in a consensus democracy. Porn Studies, Vol. 2 (4) pp. 342-355.

⁷ Weisskircha, R. S. and Delevib, R. (2011: p. 1697) "'Sexting" and adult romantic attachment' in *Computers in Human Behavior* Volume 27, Issue 5, Pages 1697-1701

⁸ http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/p_to_r/revenge_pornography/

considerable time before victims are aware of them. During that time images are often reposted to multiple sites or copied to other social media before the victim is able to report the image and request or attempt to get it removed. Many victims may also be unaware of the new legislation designed to protect them and that other aspects of legislation may also be helpful.

Other aspects of legislation include:

- *Stalking and harassment offences under S2, S2a, S4, S4a of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997.*
- *Sending a communication that is grossly offensive, indecent, obscene, menacing or false under Section 127 of the Communications Act 2003.*
- *Sending a communication that is grossly offensive, indecent, obscene, conveys a threat or is false, with intent to cause distress or anxiety, under Section 1 of the Malicious Communications Act 1988.*
- *Offences under Section 1 of the Protection of Children Act 1978 (where the image was taken before the subject turned 18).*
- *Coercion and control legislation introduced in December 2015⁹.*
- *Unauthorised access to computer material under Section 1 of the Computer Misuse Act 1990 (where the images have been obtained through computer hacking).*
- *Blackmail.*

1.3 Helpline

The Revenge Porn Helpline was launched in February 2015 with the specific mandate of assisting and advising people who have been the victim of revenge pornography. The Helpline is provided by South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL) Trust, a not-for-profit charitable trust providing schools and other establishments with safe, secure, managed and supported connectivity and associated services, learning technologies to improve outcomes, and online safety solutions. SWGfL is a world leader in online child safety, a founding member of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety as well as an advisor to Governments and the lead partner in the UK Safer Internet Centre.

⁹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/482528/Controlling_or_coercive_behaviour_-_statutory_guidance.pdf

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted in this evaluation is based on data collected and collated by the Revenge Porn Helpline from April 2017 – end of March 2018. The evaluation adopted a mixed methods approach and the evaluation team reviewed polices and the anonymised quantitative data from the phone logs, email records and website data collected and also the anonymised qualitative data from clients' emails. **Due to the nature of the confidential service provided by the Revenge Porn Helpline and the agreement that the Helpline has with its clients - that they will not be contacted by any third party - the evaluation team did not engage in any communication with the clients themselves.**

'When studying the revenge pornography sites themselves, one should refrain from producing pieces of textual evidence from posts and comments; this would be a way of reproducing specific harm from these sites'¹⁰. As such, this report does not include any material either visual or text based which was published as revenge pornography from websites or social media. The data is presented in the form of tables and graphs and some anonymised verbatim quotes from emails, in which all identifying details have been removed, to illustrate the key findings presented in the report.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Governance

The operational management of the Helpline is the responsibility of the Online Safety Operations Manager and calls to the Helpline are answered by the operations manager or by the two dedicated and experienced members of the Revenge Porn Helpline staff. SWGfL works closely with its partners in the UK Safer Internet Centre to ensure areas of expertise are recognised and none of the staff working on the Helpline are delivering any clinical casework or counselling. The Revenge Porn Helpline also operates under the guidance of an advisory board comprising of internal and external e-safety group members, law enforcement, education and social care. This monitoring has included key performance indicators such as volume of calls, quality of response and advice and follow-up actions as well as numbers of contacts with specific groups of clients. There has also been continuing quality monitoring carried out by the

¹⁰ Stroud, S. R. (2014) The Dark Side of the Online Self: A Pragmatist Critique of the Growing Plague of Revenge Porn in Journal of Mass media Ethics, Vol. 29 (3) pp. 168-183.

Operations Manager, who periodically observes Helpline staff taking calls for quality assurance and to ensure suitability of responses.

As an organisation, the Revenge Porn Helpline has a number of key policies in place, which provide the cornerstones for effective and responsible governance. Drawing on the experience from POSH, sound governance of the Revenge Porn Helpline is maintained through specific policies and procedures to which all workers are expected to adhere. The Helpline operates according to clear guidelines, which are contained in an operating guidelines document. The Helpline staff have a comprehensive programme of induction and training and are fully cognisant of the guidelines before taking on the responsibility of responding to callers.

3.2 The Revenge Porn Helpline website

The Revenge Porn Helpline website (<http://www.revengepornhelpline.org.uk/>) has had, since it was launched in February 2015, **in excess of 23,920 visitors to April 2018. The impact of this should not be underestimated.**

3.3 The operation of the Helpline

The telephone Helpline operates from Monday to Friday from 10am to 4pm. In practice, however, the Helpline operators also respond to enquiries outside the set working hours in order to reply promptly, offer reassurance or advice or to update a client on the progress of their case. Ways of contacting the Helpline fall into three distinct categories:

- *email*
- *telephone*
- *Whisper (an anonymous online reporting tool)*

The email and Whisper (anonymous contact) can be accessed at any time - 24 hours per day. The telephone Helpline is closed on national holidays and in line with SWGfL office closures but contact can still be made via email and Whisper on those days. This information is clearly outlined on the Revenge Porn Helpline website.

There is clear process of best practice in responding to callers. The feedback from clients provides sound evidence of this as exemplified in the following quote:

“I felt the Helpline dealt with the issue promptly, professionally, diligently and delicately. I would be happy to recommend the Helpline to anyone else in a similar dilemma.”

3.4 Evaluation of the Helpline data

The following section presents an analysis of the nature of enquiries to the Helpline, to consider top level statistics and trends. The examination of enquiry types illustrates both the breadth of calls and also the broad nature of revenge pornography issues faced by the individuals who contacted the Helpline in the past year. It is based on the evaluation of 1,177 cases helped and supported by the Helpline between April 2017 and the end of March 2018 and includes information on their characteristics and demographics where available. The analysis presented here examines the data collected by the Helpline over the course of the year, to consider trends in volume and nature of cases and the types of issues victims faced.

3.5 Feedback from clients

All staff working on the Helpline have up-to-date and very current knowledge of online issues specifically in relation to privacy, copyright and revenge pornography, and they receive training in both customer care and dealing with difficult issues and emotional situations.

“Such a friendly service and so nice to have that support! Thank you so much! I felt so alone at the time and your helpline got me through.”

The advice is clear and supportive and includes how to block emails and the legal implications of the situation. The practical advice also includes encouraging victims to take screen shots and to keep copies of emails, threatening texts and messages on social media.

“I was very pleased with the support and advice. I hope nothing ever comes from this but feel confident that I would be able to go to police and press charges. If necessary.”

“Just want to say thank you for the support I received. Really great that the helpline is available, much needed I'd say. Really grateful for the removal of content from websites; for contacting an actual Facebook employee to hash the photos, which has been huge help for me; and also for the help and advice from Becca and her colleague whose name escapes me and is in my old inaccessible email address, my apologies. Thank you ladies!!”

Whilst we were not party to telephone conversations, the emails from the clients evidence the high quality, personalised manner that each person was responded to, giving detailed advice and guidance, and appropriate reassurance but also stressing the need to contact the police where necessary.

“Just thought I’d let you know that your work was very much appreciated, and the manner in which you dealt with my query was extremely kind. If only everybody I came into contact with was so nice it would be a much better world”

3.6 Helpline Use

The number of cases receiving assistance from the Revenge Porn Helpline fluctuates over time, with an increase after December (*Figure 1*). The total number of cases across the year period was 1,177, with on average 98 cases receiving help and support each month.

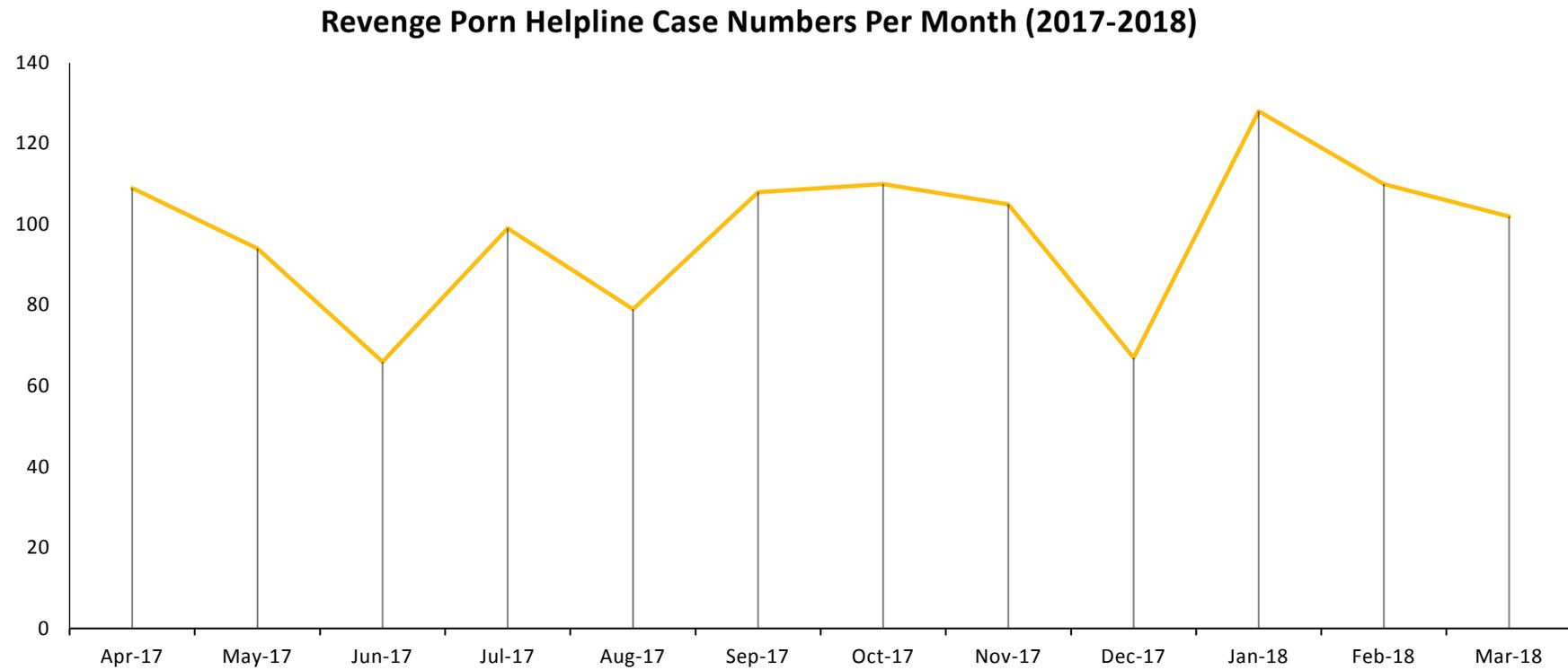


Figure 1: Number of cases of revenge porn receiving assistance from the Helpline per month over a year period.

3.7 Number of contacts

The number of contacts made to the Revenge Porn Helpline also fluctuates overtime, with peaks during May, July, January and February (*Figure 2*). The total number of contacts made to the Revenge Porn Helpline from April 2017 – end of March 2018 was 4,337. On average, the Revenge Porn Helpline receives 361 contacts, either via phone, email or Whisper (anonymous online reporting tool) per day.

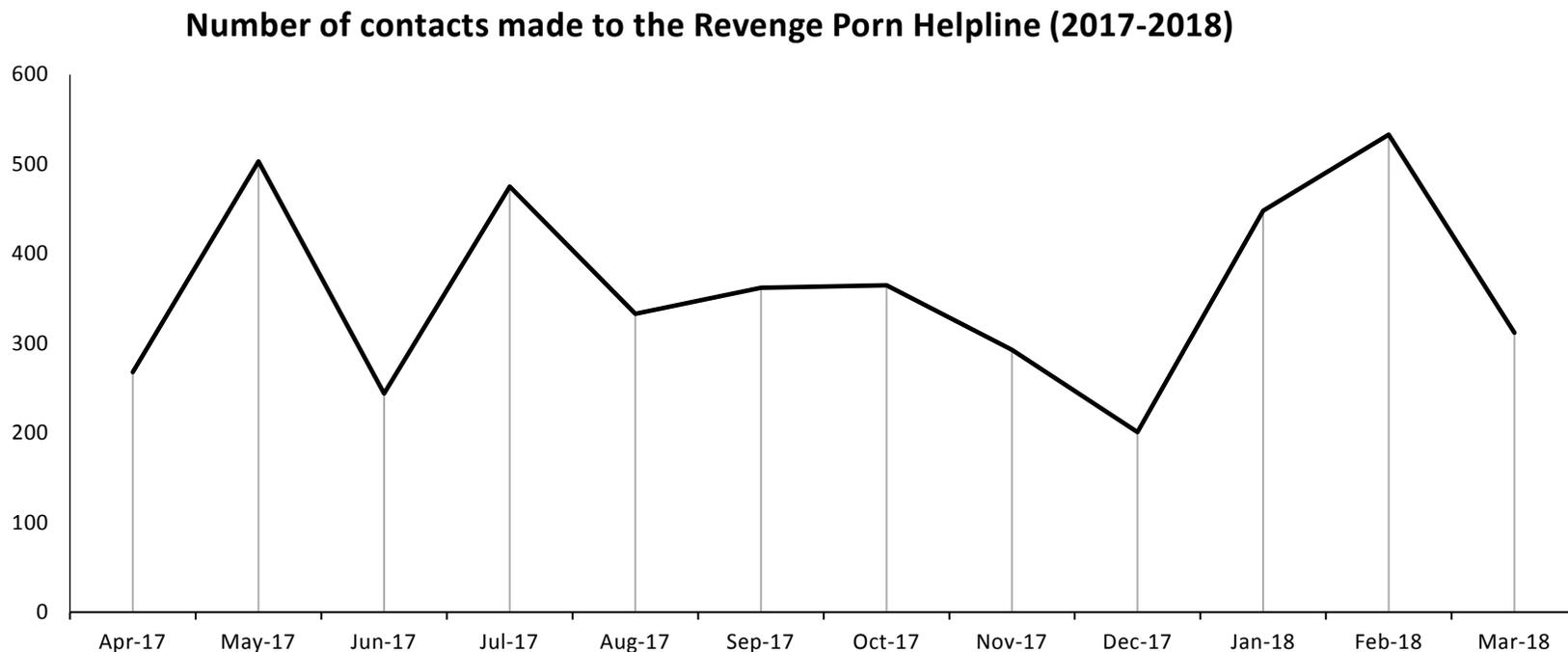


Figure 2: Number of contacts made to the Revenge Porn Helpline per month, over a year period.

3.8 Gender of callers

The majority of clients reporting to the Revenge Porn Helpline are female at 64%, followed by males at 25% of the total (*Figure 3*). Individuals who prefer not to state their gender, or where the gender is not known, (not reported to RPH) make up 11% of the total clients.

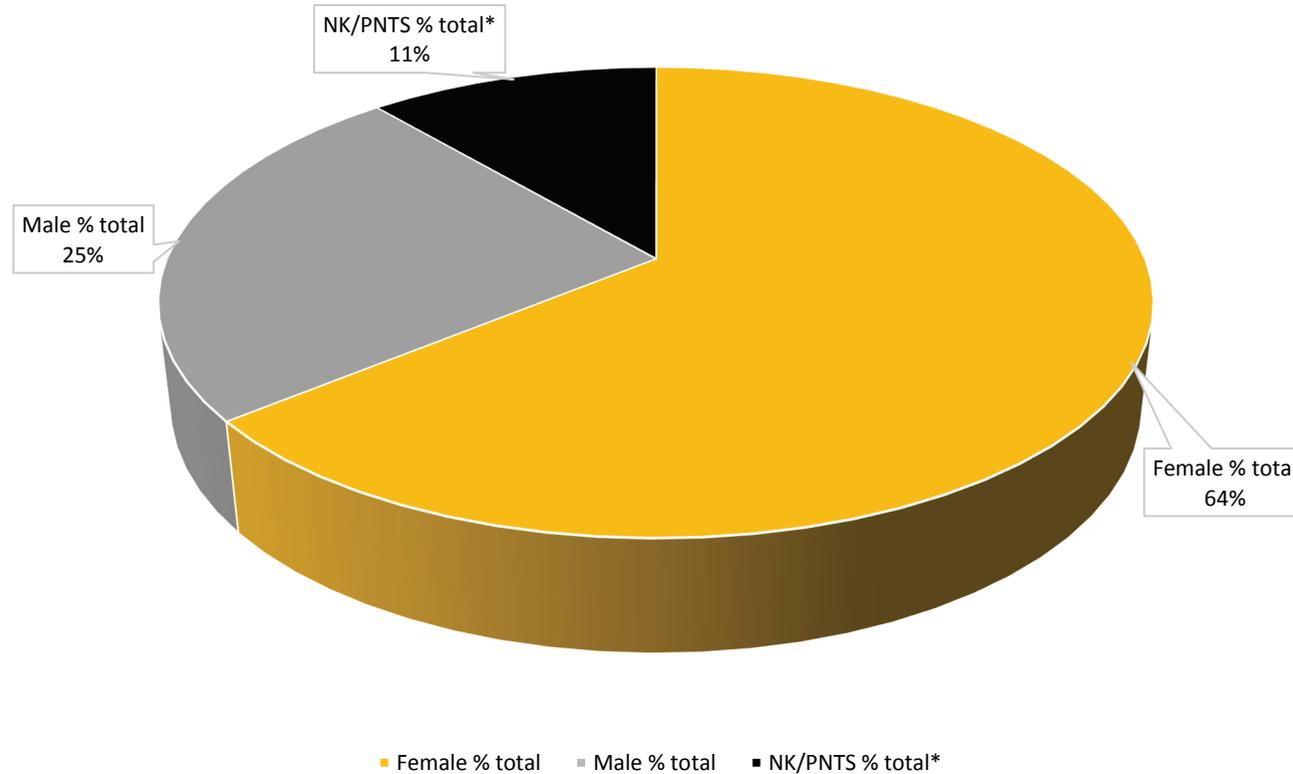


Figure 3: Gender of Revenge Porn Helpline clients from April 2017- March 2018

3.9 Callers to the Helpline

The majority of individuals making contact with the Revenge Porn Helpline are victims (77%, $n = 903$) of revenge pornography. During this year, 13% ($n = 142$) of callers were making contact with the Revenge Porn Helpline on behalf of someone else.

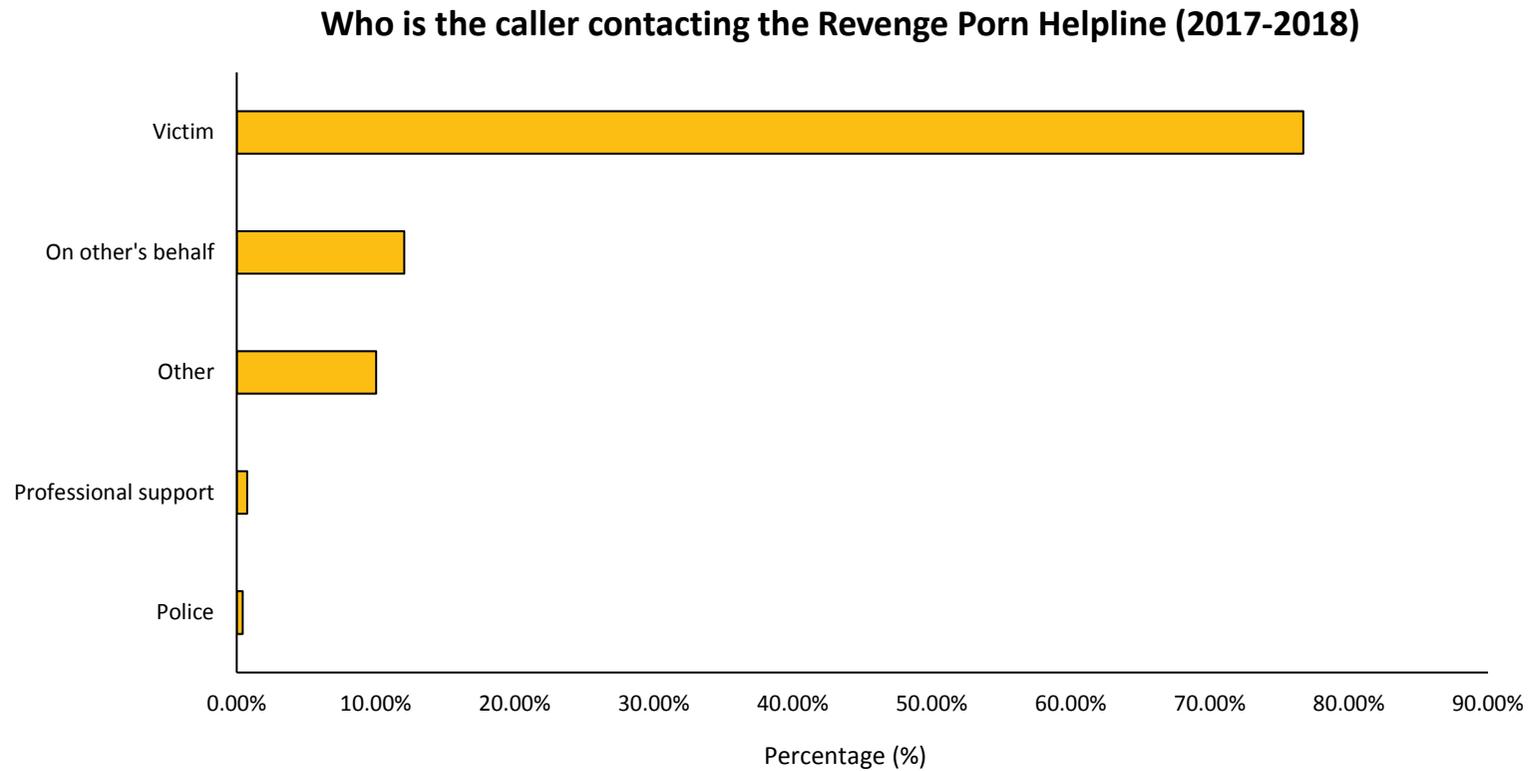


Figure 4: Categorisation of callers making contact with the Revenge Porn Helpline

3.10 Channel of enquiry

The most common methods used to make enquiries to the Revenge Porn Helpline are email (57%, $n = 674$) and phone (36%, $n = 419$) (Figure 5). Other methods of enquiry also include Whisper (4%), the Revenge Porn Helpline's anonymous reporting tool.

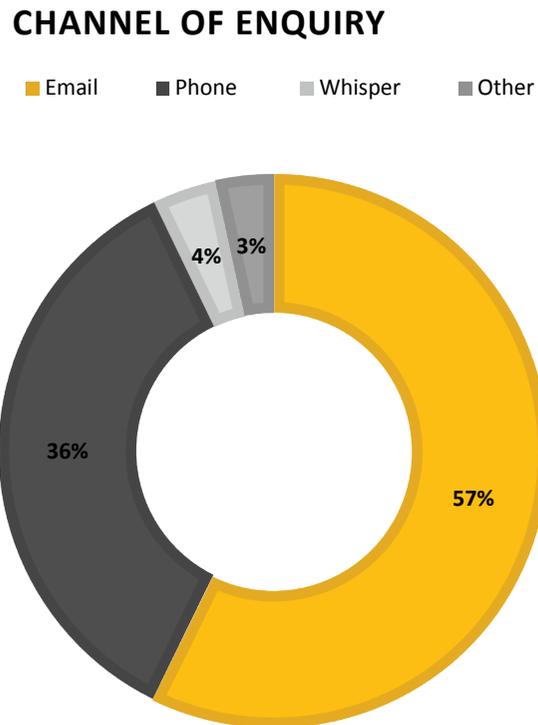


Figure 5: Channel of enquiry most frequently used by clients of the Revenge Porn Helpline (April 17- March 18)

3.11 Location of images

The majority of images reported to the Revenge Porn Helpline are located on general porn sites (23%, $n = 142$), followed by multiple locations (21%, $n = 129$), email/message (20%, $n = 124$) and other social media channels (19% $n = 113$) (*Figure 6*). Of those located on Facebook or Twitter, the majority of cases report images located on Facebook ($n = 80$). Images reported are least likely to be found on dedicated revenge porn websites.

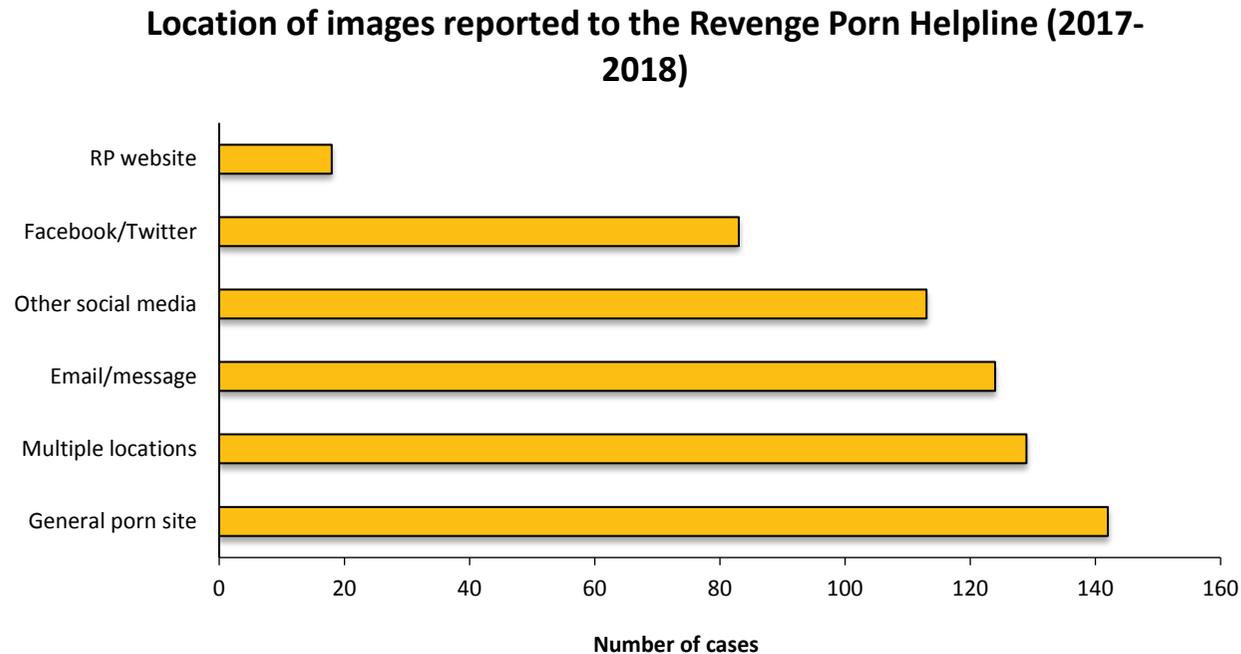


Figure 6: Location of images reported to the Revenge Porn Helpline

3.12 Extortion

A total of 104 extortion cases were reported for the year 2017-2018 (Figure 7), with an average of 9 cases per month. The highest frequency of cases were reported during January 2018, with a total of 17 cases, a similar pattern to number of overall cases, as well as cases including a threat to share (Figure 8). On average, 85% of extortion cases were reported to the Revenge Porn Helpline by males.

Frequency of Extortion cases by month (2017-2018)

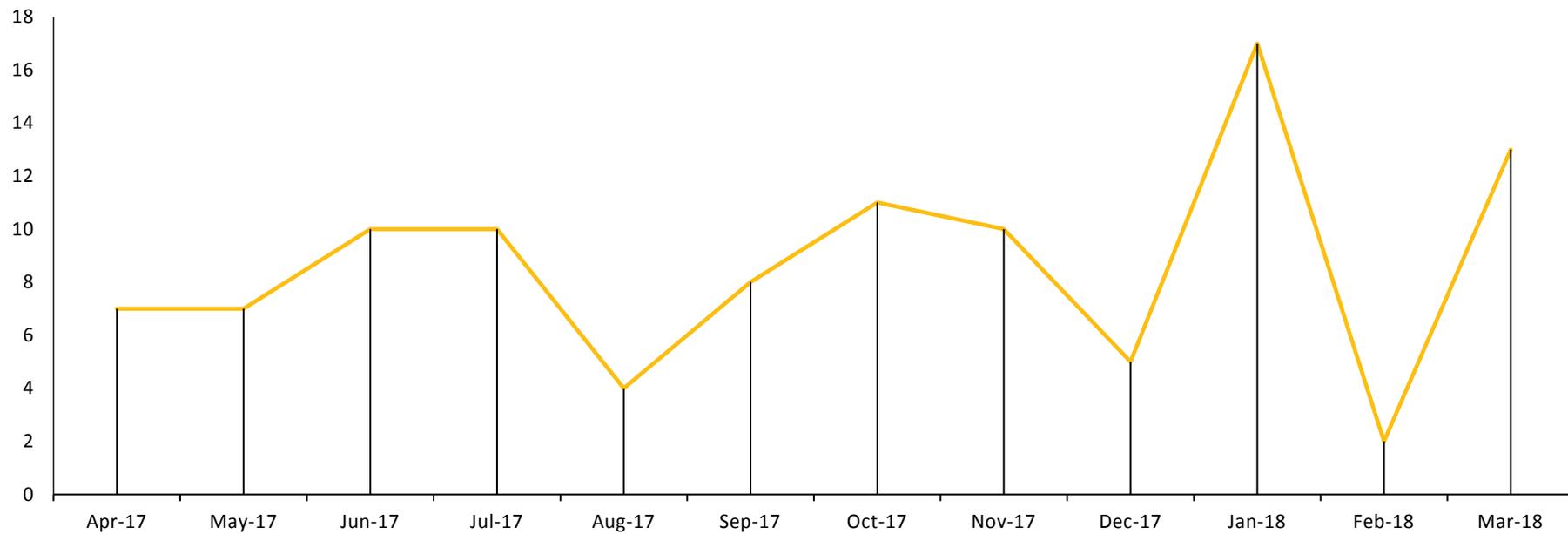


Figure 7: Number of Extortion cases reported to the Revenge Porn Helpline by month from April 2017 – March 2018

3.13 Threat to share

A total of 256 cases reported to the Revenge Porn Helpline included a threat to share, an average of 22% of the overall total of cases reported to the Helpline (*Figure 8*). On average, 21 cases with a threat to share are reported each month to the Helpline.

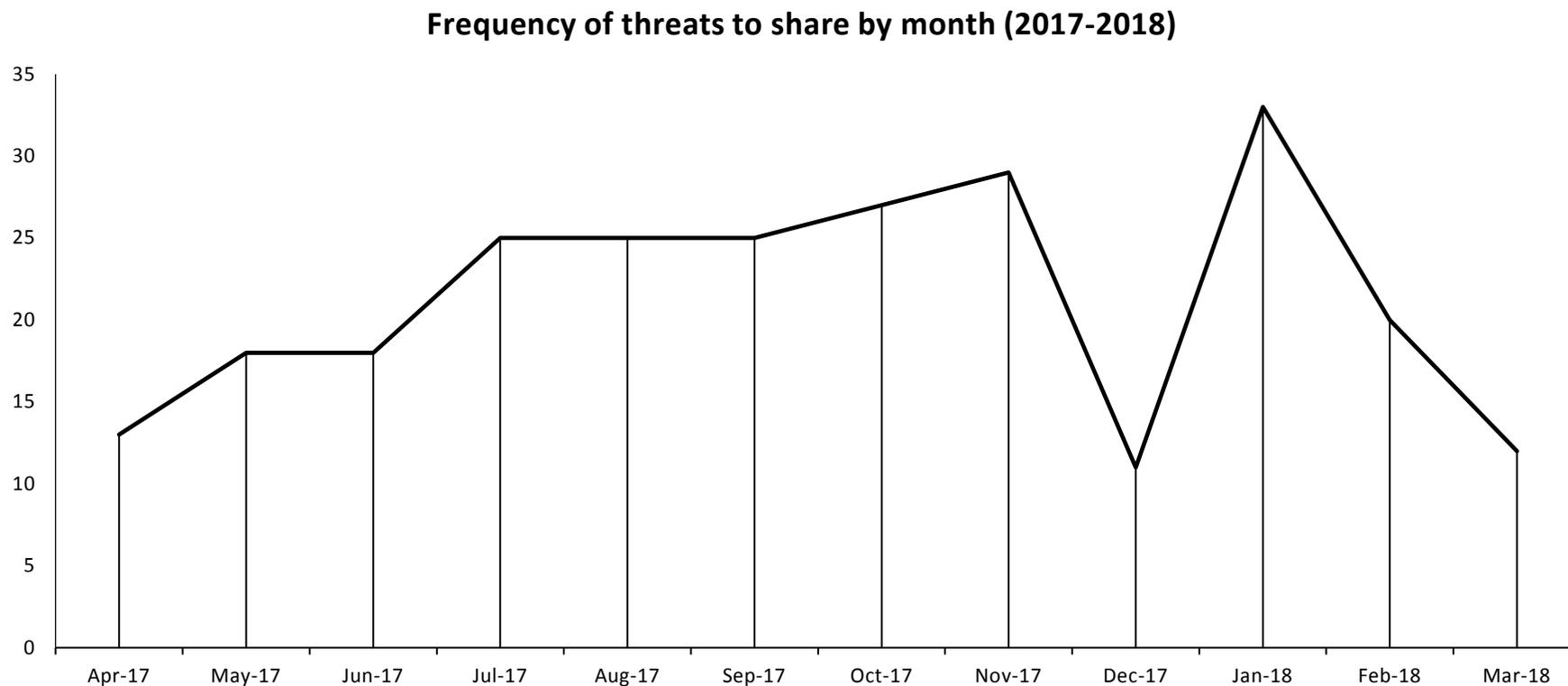


Figure 8: Number of cases with a threat to share reported to the Revenge Porn Helpline by month from April 2017 – March 2018

3.14 The Revenge Porn Helpline: Social Media and Website Statistics

The Revenge Porn Helpline uses a variety of channels to raise awareness and promote their work. The Twitter account for the Helpline @RPhelpline has a total of 3,811 followers. From April 2017- March 2018, the Revenge Porn Helpline Twitter account has received 5,776 profile visits, and 34 mentions in the Twitter accounts of others. The @RPhelpline account has also had 81,300 impressions in the last month. The Revenge Porn Helpline also has a Facebook community of 302 followers, and 299 likes. In terms of visits to the Revenge Porn Helpline website, from April 2017 – April 2018, the Helpline website (<https://revengepornhelpline.org.uk/>) has a total of 26,196 website hits during this period. During this period, website traffic was typically organic (55%), direct (23%) or via referral (via sources outside of the search engine) (16%) (Figure 9), similar findings were evident for new users.

Website hits: Types of channel used

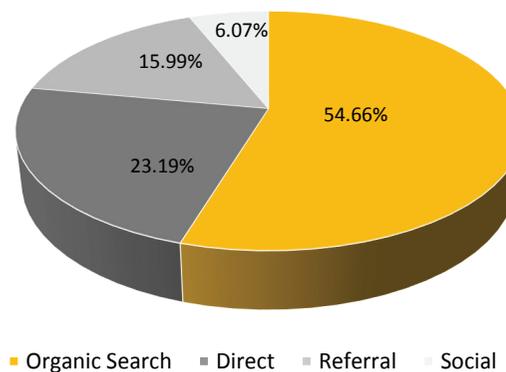


Figure 9: Types of channels used to access the Revenge Porn Helpline website April 2017 – March 2018

3.15 Website activity

During a month period, April 2018 - May 2018, the website had a total of 1,111 visits, with a bounce rate (% of individuals who enter the site and then leave) of 58%, a decrease since the previous year (*Figure 10*). During this period, the majority of website visitors accessed the website via desktop (56%) or via mobile phone (40%). Website traffic was typically organic (33%), direct or unknown (35%) or via referral (via sources outside of the search engine) (29%).

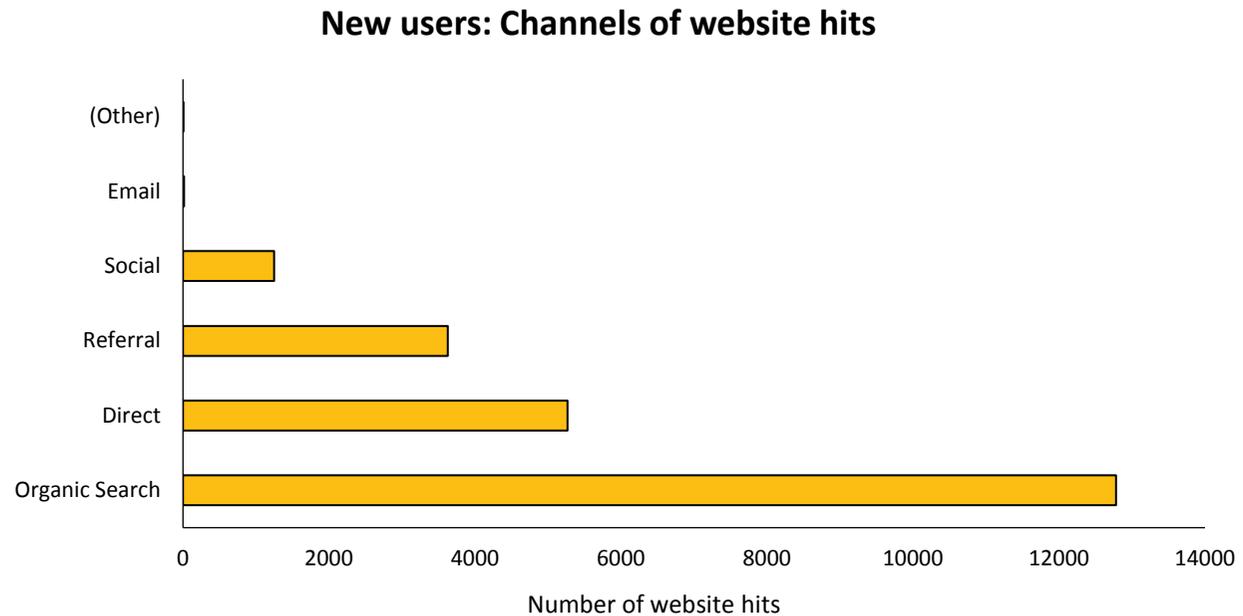


Figure 10: Type of channels used to access website by new users

4. CONCLUSIONS

This report presents an evaluation of the most recent year of activity (April 2017 – end of March 2018) for the Revenge Porn Helpline. The picture that emerges overall from these findings is that the Helpline is highly successful in providing a specialist Helpline service to offer advice, and signpost victims to all the options available to them including legal support and removal of content. Victims need both emotional support and practical help and the Helpline is very effective in meeting both these areas of need and victims value both aspects of the Helpline's service highly.

“They have acted very quickly and I hope they have find this people who are trying to blackmail other people in to giving them money....it was my first and last experiencecan't trust anyone online dating....thanks for your help”

“I really don't know how to thank you and what to do to show you how relieved I am and how happy at the moment after almost everything is gone”

Our evaluation illustrates that the Helpline is becoming increasingly busy with the majority of contacts being made from victims themselves who need information, advice, support or practical help. Revenge pornography has a devastating, often long-term impact on victims either when image(s) or video(s) are posted or shared or when there is the threat that someone will do this. Responding to the issue of revenge pornography is not always straightforward because of the nature of digital content (images can be easily copied and posted elsewhere) and the complexity of abusive relationships. Victims can live in constant fear of images appearing online or being posted on social media and feel stigmatised, having to relive the shame and humiliation time and time again. Across the 1,177 cases considered here it is clear that revenge pornography is a complex, complicated and difficult issue to respond to and ‘this complexity makes dealing with revenge porn as a monolithic whole a difficult matter’¹¹.

The Helpline, through their relationship with POSH and the UK Safer Internet Centre, has successfully built on their collaborative relationships with the internet industry, social networks and ISPs to ensure swift resolution of issues which is of tremendous benefit to victims.

¹¹ Stroud, S. R. (2014). The dark side of the online self: A pragmatist critique of the growing plague of revenge porn. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 29(3), 168-183.

“OMG I cannot tell you how happy I am right now I cannot express my gratitude I have been fighting with all this for years I did not think this will even be remotely possible.

I am so extremely grateful for this God Bless you all who helped me

OMG thank you so much”

Raising awareness of revenge pornography is essential and the Helpline has had a highly visible and very significant role to play in raising public and political awareness of the issue since it started in February 2015. The data, together with the emails from clients, suggest that the Revenge Porn Helpline provides a unique, valuable, high quality, sensitive, responsive yet also practical service for victims.

“I can’t thank you enough for your response; it’s honestly given me so much reassurance and taking a lot of weight off my shoulders. You have honestly picked me up from a mega low, and I’m can’t be any more grateful!!!”