

Is digital crime increasing in Iceland?¹

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Abstract

In recent years crime control agencies such as the police have detected a shift of criminal activity from the “real world” to the internet. The web has increasingly been used as a source to target suitable victims all over the globe. By using the internet people worldwide can be connected offering all kinds of new opportunities including deviant activities and crime. A variety of internet-related threats are regularly being reported in the mass media, e.g. computer fraud, id thefts, cyber vandalism, cyberbullying and most recently cyberwarfare – all suggesting a new type of threat to public safety in postmodernity.

The first study in Iceland examining digital crime victimization among the Icelandic public was conducted in 2016 (Jónasson and Gunnlaugsson, 2016). According to the findings about 13 percent of the respondents admitted to digital victimization in the past three years prior to the survey. Slander and consumer fraud were the most common types of victimization. Respondents aged 30-44 years old were most likely to have been victimized.

In 2018 this same survey was repeated, using the same questionnaire as in 2016. The survey was placed online, as before, in cooperation with the Social Sciences Research Institute, to a sample of about two thousand respondents, reflecting the Icelandic population 18 years and older. Do we see an increase in digital crime victimization? Has the type of crime victimization changed since 2016? What social groups report the most victimization?

Data and methods

The data is derived from a web-based survey with participants older than 18 years old from Iceland. The questionnaire was only available in Icelandic thus only Icelandic speaking participants could take part in the research. Data collection was administrated by the Social Science Research Institute affiliated with the University of Iceland and the data was collected in May of 2018. All participants had agreed to be members of the institutes’ panel. We used a stratified sample mirroring the population in terms of basic socio-demographic variables of age, gender, residence, education level and income. The sample size was a total of 1800 members of the panel and the response rate was satisfactory, or close to 50 percent.

First, we examined how many had knowingly broken the Icelandic law by downloading copyrighted material or visited pornographic websites. The aim was to distinguish between legal and illegal online activity. Those who engage in risky behaviours are also more likely to be victimized than others (Cohen and Felson, 1979).

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The second objective of the study was to examine how many of the respondents had been victims of digital crime. This was measured by asking the respondents the following question: Have you been the victim of any of the following offences online in the past three years. The options given were slander or defamation of your character, threat of violence, identity theft, sexual harassment, blackmail, consumer fraud or had your photos shared online without your permission. With the last question we wanted to grasp the extent of sexual harassment in Iceland.

Main results and concluding remarks

The number of households with internet access has increased drastically worldwide in the past few years. Almost every Icelandic household is now connected to the internet (Eurostat, 2019). With increased internet use online victimization apparently also has increased. Research has shown that roughly 10 percent of internet users in the US have reported to have been victims of online scams or phishing (Norton, 2012 and 2016). Our data in 2018 showed that about 20 percent of Icelandic internet users had been victimized by digital crime of some sort during the last three years before the survey was conducted. Still, these figures cannot be fully compared to the US data because our survey asked about a wider range of victimization experiences. However, the Iceland figures for 2016 and 2018 are comparable.

Our data in 2018 shows a notable increase of victimization. Only about 13 percent of respondents admitted to digital victimization in 2016, jumping up to 20 percent in 2018. The relative share of each victimization type remained similar for most of the different types, apart from one notable difference. Percentage of those admitting to sexual harassment online rose dramatically, or from about 12 percent in 2016 up to 20 percent in 2018. This increase comes overwhelmingly from women. In 2016 fewer women admitted to digital victimization than men. In 2018 more women, or 21 percent, admitted to victimization, and 19 percent of men. It is noteworthy that the percentage of women reporting victimization increased from 12 percent in 2016 to 21 percent in 2018, while the increase for males being somewhat less, or from 15 percent up to 19 percent.

How can this almost twofold increase in women reporting victimization and the increase of those admitting to sexual harassment be explained? A plausible explanation may have to do with different social circumstances in 2018, and emergence of new social movements. Or, more specifically, with the movement linked to Me-Too. In 2017, women in different professional groups stepped forward in Iceland with stories and confessions of sexual harassment they had experienced in their professional life. These women came from different walks of life. From

the arts, academia, sports, banks, restaurants, immigrant women, to name a few of the groups. Thousands of anonymous stories were accumulated and published online (Beck, 2017). Understandably these confessions created an uproar in the public debate and the sheer volume came as a surprise to many. A social revolt against sexual discrimination came to the forefront in Icelandic public life, and awareness of this behaviour both increased and deepened. Most likely this movement has something to do with how many more women came forward in our study in 2018, admitting to digital victimization, especially sexual harassment.

The Me-Too confessions might also have something to do with why fewer women admit to visiting pornographic websites in 2018 compared to 2016. In 2016, a total of 12 percent of the women admitted to this use during the last three months before the survey was conducted, dropping to seven percent admitting to visiting such sites in 2018. This behaviour is probably not as accepted among women following the Me-Too movement; pornography now being viewed more as an expression of male dominance and sexual objectification of women. Interestingly, this shift in behaviour toward pornographic material did not have the same impact on men. Their use of porn online increased markedly, or from 39 percent admitting to visiting pornographic websites in 2016, up to 45 percent in 2018.

About one-fourth of the participants admitted to having downloaded copyright material illegally compared to one-third in 2016. The data showed a significant gender difference, unlike the 2016 findings, with more males admitting illegal downloading in 2018. Probably more legal access to websites such as Netflix and Spotify explain this downward trend in illegally downloading material.

The lifestyle-routine activity theory put forward by Cohen and Felson (1979) appears to have some relationship with digital crime in Iceland. In 2016 illegal downloading was related to digital victimization, yet we did not find this relationship in 2018. On the other hand, more respondents who had visited pornographic websites admitted to digital crime victimization in 2018 than others. Therefore, we found some support to routine activity theory. Risky behaviour online appears to have something to do with digital crime victimization. More online activity, especially online visits of pornographic sites, tends to increase online victimization.

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