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## **Tracking predators: a job that never ends**

### **The Internet has multiplied opportunities to stalk children**

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Inside a nondescript building, in a cubicle decorated with his kids' pictures, a Maryland State Police investigator peers at his computer screen. A Yahoo chat room is open; category: romance, Maryland.

He types: "any1 into wrestling? with boys..."

It's a Monday morning at 11:17, a time when most kids are in school and most adults at work. Yet, in just eight minutes he gets a lead - and that's a slow day.

The number of offenders sexually exploiting children, particularly through pornography, has skyrocketed with use of the Internet, law enforcement professionals say. That has led to a more than 20-fold increase in cases investigated since the late 1980s and an even bigger jump in those prosecuted at the federal level, which ramped up efforts through the Project Safe Childhood initiative in 2006. Since then, sex offender registry laws have been tightened, millions of dollars in new national grants disbursed, databases built, state initiatives launched in Maryland and elsewhere, and federal and local partnerships created.

But the concentrated attack has a tiny impact on a large and burgeoning problem. The Maryland State Police has just four full-time investigators focusing on such child exploitation; they work roughly 30 active cases at any given time. If they had the resources, they "could have 180" cases, said Lt. John Wilhelm, commander of the state police's computer crimes division.

Child sexual abusers once had to find their prey in the schoolyard or neighborhood and risk receiving pornography in the mail. But the Internet gives them easy access to kids through social networking sites, pornography through peer-to-peer sharing sites, and a community of like-minded people through online chat rooms.

The Internet has simply made it easier to be a predator, and some - including Maryland U.S. Attorney Rod J. Rosenstein - say that has made for more predators. At any given time, according to federal data, about 50,000 pedophiles are seeking victims online. As the number of offenders mushrooms, authorities say they can't keep up.

The perception is largely anecdotal; definitive trend data is difficult to come by. Organizations have different ways of defining abuse and collecting information, and much abuse goes unreported. Some sources suggest that the number of victims is decreasing, while others say it's rising.

One thing is certain, however: The problem is receiving more attention than ever from both law enforcement and the media, through news reports and shows like Dateline NBC's To Catch a Predator.

Maryland investigations have unmasked some seemingly unlikely offenders, including former state Delegate Robert A. McKee, who recently pleaded guilty to child porn possession and was sentenced in November to 37 months in federal prison. Because they're at home, trolling the Internet, pornography predators often feel safe, anonymous and removed from the crime, leading them to take risks online they might not otherwise, officers said.

"We could have our entire squad working it, and there would still be more work to do," said David Musgrove, the supervisory special agent in charge of the FBI's cyber crime unit in Baltimore. There, six full-time investigators work roughly 80 active child sexual exploitation cases. Nationwide at the end of October, there were 5,300 such FBI cases open.

"The best we can do is make people see it's a really big problem," he added

A Department of Justice report released last month says the ramped-up efforts to combat sexual crimes against children has led to a backlog of FBI digital evidence, which can take as long as nine months to review. The agency plans to open a new lab in Linthicum this year to speed things up and to comply with a congressional mandate, said Special Agent Richard Wolf, spokesman for the FBI's Baltimore field office.

The FBI regularly goes into schools to talk about the issue and warn children and families of the dangers. Yet agents still see parents letting their children troll the Internet unmonitored and young teens taking sexual pictures of themselves with their cell phones, then sending them to friends or boyfriends. If those relationships sour, the exes often launch the images into cyberspace, where they become part of a collection of pornography, said FBI Special Agent Marc Southland.

It's a tough, never-ending job. To catch predators, agents, many with kids of their own, spend all day looking at horrible images of children - babies sometimes - being sexually assaulted, humiliated, tortured. They have to go for psychological evaluations annually to make sure the work is not messing with their heads.

"The bottom line is, it's for the kids," Wilhelm said. "Who else is going to defend the kids?"

In 2006, former Attorney General Alberto Gonzales announced the launch of Project Safe Childhood, describing it as a targeted effort designed to better coordinate federal and local prevention, investigation and prosecution of sexual predators.

He asked every U.S. attorney to build partnerships among law enforcement agencies and develop regional strategies. Among the goals was a higher rate of prosecution at the federal level, where sentences are often longer and the trauma to the victims is lessened because they frequently don't have to testify.

A federal law passed last fall has a similar goal. The Protect Our Children Act of 2008 directs the U.S. attorney general to develop a national strategy for preventing child exploitation and maintaining data. It also creates a National Internet Crimes Against Children task force within the Department of Justice.

Already in Maryland, such federal prosecutions are up significantly since 1988 when fewer than three cases were filed, according to Department of Justice Statistics. Still, just 37 suspects were charged during fiscal 2008, which ended in September - that's about 5 percent of all the federal cases in Maryland.

While the 2008 charging rate was nearly even with 2007's, the conviction rate was 41 percent higher - 38 compared to 27. Sentences were longer, too. The number of people receiving prison terms between 10 and 15 years rose from five to 10, and those receiving more than 15 years jumped from two to seven.

Rosenstein said the longer sentences can be attributed to the way his office chooses cases, "working with state and local authorities and taking the most significant offenders."

Baltimore County State's Attorney Scott D. Shellenberger, for example, asked the U.S. attorney's office to take on a case involving a 39-year-old Dundalk man, Christopher Blauvelt, accused of possessing child pornography, giving cocaine to a 14-year-old girl and, separately, videotaping intercourse with her.

"If the case is particularly horrific and we can get good sentences" at the state level, it will stay there, Shellenberger said. But if the sentences are stronger at the federal level, as in Blauvelt's case, he'll defer to the U.S. attorney's office.

Producing child pornography carries a minimum mandatory federal sentence of 15 years, and there is no probation at the federal level. In November, a federal jury convicted Blauvelt of possessing child pornography, distributing drugs to minors and sexually exploiting a minor to produce explicit pictures. Sentencing is scheduled for Feb. 6; he faces the 15-year minimum for child porn production, but could receive up to 81 years on all counts.

Law enforcement officials want such sentences to be a deterrent. But they realize it's unlikely. "With this type of predator, even though I think they know there's a chance of getting caught," Shellenberger said, "they still do what they're going to do."

#### **safe social networking**

- Never post your personal information, such as your cell phone number, address, or the name of your school or school team, and be careful about identifying information you post on blogs. Predators could use it to pretend they know you or gain your trust.
- Only add people as friends to your site if you know them in person.
- Never meet in person with anyone you first "met" on a social networking site. Some people may not be who they say they are.
- Think before posting your photos. Personal photos should not have revealing information, such as school names or locations. ... The name of a mall, the license plate of your car, signs, or the name of your sports team on your jersey all contain information that can reveal your location. And never post sexually provocative photos of yourself or your friends.
- Never respond to harassing or rude comments posted on your profile. ... Report these comments to the networking site or internet service provider if they violate that site's terms of service.
- Check the privacy settings of the social networking sites that you use:
- Set privacy so that people can only be added as your friend if you approve it.
- Set privacy so that people can only view your profile if you have approved them as a friend.
- Protect your friends by not posting any names, passwords, ages, phone numbers, school names, or

locations. Refrain from making or posting plans and activities on your site.

Source: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children

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