

Anonymity of Internet Emboldens Predators

BY TIMOTHY F. KIRN
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SAN DIEGO — The Internet is expanding the number of sexual predators who prey on children, because the anonymity of the computer allows these individuals to start indulging their fantasies actively with impunity, several speakers said at a conference on sexual and physical abuse of children.

If there is one thing he has learned from doing a television series about Internet sexual predators, it is that strangers who will attempt to get close to children “are not just the guys who would have prowled the parks in the past,” said Chris Hansen, a television journalist who has been doing a series called “To Catch a Predator” for NBC News Dateline.

In the series, Mr. Hansen and his colleagues pose as young girls interested in sex who converse in Internet chat rooms and try to lure the men to a house where the cameras and the police await them.

So far, they have caught men from all occupations, including teachers, doctors, a New York City firefighter, and even a rabbi, Mr. Hansen noted at the conference, which was sponsored by the Chadwick Center for Children and Families at Children’s Hospital and Health Center, San Diego.

Mr. Hansen said he was astounded at the number of men coaxed to the houses the network has developed for the series. In addition, he’s been amazed by how varied the backgrounds of the men have been.

The series has set up houses in nine cities so far and has caught hundreds of men. In Long Beach, Calif., for example, 51 men have been arrested for their Internet chats and for showing up at the house; 12 of them already have pleaded no contest.

The rabbi caught by the series, David Kaye, in Fairfax County, Va., may have been the most surprising and illustrates how the Internet is widening the ranks of child predators, Mr. Hansen said.

The rabbi had no previous record of sexual misconduct, and he had been involved in work with Jewish high school students. Mr. Kaye, recently sentenced to 6 years in federal prison, will have his name on a sexual predators list for at least 10 years.

Law enforcement officials estimate that there may be as many as 50,000 sexual predators of children online, said Lieut. Chad Bianco of the Riverside County (Calif.) Sheriff’s Department, which co-

operated with the series.

The Internet has “allowed all these strangers right into the bedroom,” he said. “The access the Internet allows these people is just incredible.”

Adults tend to use the Internet to access data, while children tend to use it to make social connections. But children often are not properly supervised, because young people tend to be more computer literate than adults are, Lieut. Bianco said.

And that problem has affected even his own family, which is surprising since he has been involved with the television series, and everyone in the family is aware of it, he said.

His underage niece lives with his in-laws, who are relatively computer illiterate. When he was on their computer recently, he discovered that his niece was involved in electronic conversations with a number of adult men, he said.

The Internet and its clandestine opportunities probably are bringing about an ex-



“Dateline’s” Chris Hansen confronts a potential online sexual predator during an investigation in Petaluma, Calif.

plosion of child pornography as well, which directly contributes to the problem of predation, said Ms. Regina B. Schofield, an assistant attorney general in the U.S. Department of Justice.

She said that the initial estimate of the number of pornographic images of children available on the Internet was about 100,000. Now, data indicate that there are probably 3.5 million images, and Internet child pornography is thought to be a \$20 billion a year industry.

When investigators have interviewed those arrested for having child pornography, those individuals have said they used the images for masturbation and also as fuel to help act out their fantasies, Ms. Schofield said.

One of the solutions to the problem is that parents and caretakers need to talk with their children and remind them of the dangers of the Internet—as well as the inappropriateness of communications with unknown adults, Lieut. Bianco and the other speakers said.

Turning off the computer at home is not protection enough, because anyone can go down to the local coffee shop and access a wireless connection, the speakers said. ■

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Reference: I. Barkley RA, Fischer M, Smallish L, Fletcher K. Young adult outcome of hyperactive children: adaptive functioning in major life activities. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry.* 2006;45:192-202.

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