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NEWS

Internet sex sting puts 24 alleged predators behind bars



At this hour, two-dozen alleged Internet predators are behind bars, facing federal charges.

Posted: 08/22/2006 08:11 pm
Last Updated: 08/22/2006 09:34 pm

Story filed by NewsCenter16 Reporter
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A big bust is helping to keep kids safe. Two-dozen alleged Internet predators are behind bars.

That includes men from South Bend, Berrien Springs, Knox and Plymouth.

The stings took place over the past three weeks, in St. Joseph, Porter, and Tippecanoe counties.

All the men face charges of attempting to coerce children to engage in sexual activity by using the Internet.

They all will face a request that they remain behind bars, until their trials.

The charges are federal charges, and there was a significant change in federal law in July.

As a result, the suspects, if convicted, face a mandatory minimum sentence of ten years behind bars.

In his 18 years as a police officer, Lt. Scott Ruskowski has worked the streets and the SWAT Team, but nothing quite prepared him for the work he recently did, posing as a 14-year-old girl in an Internet chat room.

It was just an unbelievable, eye opening, and sickening experience all at the same time.

Lt. Ruskowski explains, "I was on just whatever chat room it was, and it was a matter of 30-seconds before I started getting sex offers from this. I couldn't believe it. It wasn't just offers, but explicit photos and explicit remarks."

It was behavior bad enough to arrest 24-suspects on federal charges.

Some feel this time, the possible punishment, better fits the crime.

"For some of these people, quite honestly it's probably a more serious addiction than heroin or cocaine," says, Super Joseph Van Bokkelen, the U.S. Attorney for Northern Indiana.

He continues, "So these enhanced penalties my view is, they're necessary and warranted, because these people need to be off the street.

This is going to take them off the street for a minimum of ten years."

The mandatory minimum sentence for computer sex crimes increased in late July from five years to ten.

In each of these cases, the government will ask that the suspects remain behind bars until their trials.

You asked about detention. We had a case where we made an arrest late last night up in Bolling Brook, Illinois. He was currently out on bond from a state charge in Illinois for soliciting a minor on line. He's out on bond and he's right back doing it again.

A new, tougher stance on punishment is in store for people convicted of soliciting minors over the Internet -- a get tough attitude from law enforcement, the likes of which we haven't seen before.

Twenty-nine different agencies worked on this bust, and it's still ongoing.

Officials say more arrests are likely.

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