

US Authorities Arrest 14 in Porn Website Involving 251 Children

Authorities have arrested 14 men in a secret, members-only child pornography website that involved 251 children, mostly boys, in the United States and five other countries, U.S. officials said on Tuesday.

Some of the men assumed female online personas to connect with the children, who ranged in age from 3 to 17 years, on popular social networks, officials from the Department of Homeland Security and Immigration and Customs Enforcement said.

The alleged U.S. victims, who have been identified and contacted by authorities, were from 39 U.S. states. The majority were between 13 and 15 years old and all but a handful were boys. Authorities said 23 of the 251 victims were identified in Britain, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Belgium.

"Never before in the history of this agency have we identified and located this many minor victims in the course of a single child-exploitation investigation," said Daniel Ragsdale, the ICE deputy director.

Eleven of the men were charged in the Eastern District of Louisiana.

The website had more than 27,000 subscribers, many of whom have been charged in individual cases, according to James Kilpatrick, a program manager for the ICE Cyber Crime Center.

He did not have figures on how many suspected subscribers have been arrested on lesser charges but said at least 300 others in the United States and abroad are under investigation.

The underground website was a hidden service board on the Tor network of Darknet, investigators said, referring to a hidden online network sometimes used for illicit activities.

The website shared videos of boys enticed into providing sexually explicit material through Tor, which allows online anonymity by routing Internet traffic in a way that conceals a user's location, authorities said.

The men were charged with conspiracy to operate a child exploitation enterprise.

The network was identified after an item was sent through the U.S. Postal Service to a child, said Kilpatrick.

That led authorities to the website's main administrator, Jonathan Johnson, 27, of Abita Springs, Louisiana, who has been in custody since June 13, 2013. Johnson faces 20 years to life in prison, said Kenneth Allen Polite, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Louisiana.

Authorities said 20 of the child victims were from Louisiana, 19 from Texas, 12 from North Dakota and 10 from Colorado.

Ragsdale said ICE is seeing a growing trend of children being enticed into sharing sexually explicit material online. "We cannot arrest our way out of this problem: education is the key to prevention," he said.

"The fact is that many other children are still in danger," added DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson.

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