

CYBERCRIME NEWS

A Pedophile's New Tool of Choice

As pedophiles turn to the Web, are sex crimes on the rise?

By James Hamilton September 30, 1999

A three-day global conference dedicated to combating child pornography kicked off today in Vienna, Austria.

 For Alex Wellen's report, click here.

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The problem seems worse than ever and the Internet is at the center of many of these cases. In the last two weeks alone ZDTV has reported half-a-dozen cases.

Two include stings by the Sexual Assault Felony Enforcement Team, or SAFE, which operates out of the FBI's Los Angeles bureau.

The most publicized case was the arrest of Infoseek executive Patrick Naughton who was charged with soliciting sex from a 13-year-old girl. Then there was Enoch Jarrett, a California high school coach charged with using the Web to distribute lewd material to a minor. Also, Dominic Merak of Wisconsin was sentenced by a judge to 12 years in prison for using the Internet to lure a 12-year-old to his home.

In a new case, the People vs Costello, the defendant was charged under California penal code 288.2b. This law makes it a crime to knowingly send a minor material "with the intent of arousing, appealing to, or gratifying the lust or passions or sexual desires of that person with the intent, or for the purpose of seducing a minor."

But that case was dismissed this week. Defense attorney John Forsyth argued that the law is unconstitutional. "By a state attempting to regulate anything on the Internet, they are violating the Commerce Clause of the United States Constitution," said Forsyth. "The Internet does not know state lines or state boundaries. The Internet is all over."

The court never got to that question. The district attorney's office reportedly dropped the case because it didn't have strong enough evidence.

With all this recent activity, are these kinds of cases on the rise?

That question was put to Laura Bosley, a spokesperson at the FBI's SAFE team in Los Angeles. "To say they've increased in recent months, I don't think that's the case. I think that if the person involved [has a high profile], that may garner more attention, but it's not uncommon we make these types of arrests. They're more or less routine," answered Bosley.

The SAFE program, which started in 1995, is part of the FBI's "Innocent Images" initiative. The program boasts more than 400 cases with a 80 percent-plus rate of conviction.

To see Alex Wellen's full report, click on the video icon above.