

MySpace.com also a host to predators

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MySpace is the "in" thing for teens - and child molesters.

Sexual predators prowling on the Internet is not a new concept, but many believe the advent of Web sites like MySpace.com - and the freedom of information that comes with them - has given child molesters the ultimate tool in tracking down prey.

"You have access to more info than you would get with a private investigator," said John Sheehan of the Exploited Child Unit for the Washington-based National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. "The predators are following it."

And they have left their mark all over the country. Among recent incidents:

- * In Westford, Mass., a 22-year-old man was charged with raping a 15-year-old girl he met on MySpace.

- * In Honolulu, a 29-year-old man faces charges of sexually assaulting a 15-year-old girl he met on MySpace in March.

- * In Abernathy, Texas, a 39-year-old man faces similar charges.

The predatory trail also has reached the Inland Empire.

- * In Fontana, 48-year-old Michael Ramos was arrested by police in March after he tried to meet a 15-year-old girl he met on MySpace, authorities said. The "girl," however, was actually a fake account set up by a group of boys looking to cheer up a friend with a pseudo-love interest.

- * Perhaps the most notorious MySpace sting took place Jan. 6-8 in Mira Loma. The group Perverted-Justice.com used fictional teen profiles to lure adults looking for sex. Those who arrived ended up being arrested by Riverside County sheriff's deputies. The operation was featured on NBC's "Dateline."

The result was 50 arrests in three days. All but two of the men arrested have pleaded not guilty, according to Riverside Superior Court records.

Xavier Von Erck, founder of Perverted-Justice.com, said although MySpace seems to be getting most of the attention when it comes to predators, the site is one of the more diligent when it comes to helping law enforcement.

"They've done some things we've requested, and unlike a lot of sites, they'll investigate and act on concerns," he said.

On Tuesday, the site named Microsoft online-safety czar Hemanshu Nigam as its chief security officer. Nigam will be the point man for the site's safety, education and privacy programs as well as any dealings with law enforcement, according to a news release from MySpace.

Also last week, News Corp., which owns MySpace, announced its partnership with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

The two will promote online safety via a slew of public-service announcements that would air on Fox Interactive Media's vast empire of programming.

Sheehan says the help can't come soon enough.

"The industry needs to go above and beyond," he said. "The kids need protecting."

The MySpace generation

With more than 70 million accounts, MySpace is among the most popular of the social-networking Web sites, along with Friendster, Facebook and LiveJournal.

At these sites, people from all walks of life can catch up with friends, find new ones or simply share their thoughts. Everything from photos to messages are exchanged. At MySpace, users often send "friend" requests, and many have friend stables that number in the hundreds.

"We've given them a place to express themselves and connect around a shared interest," said Chris DeWolfe, MySpace chief executive officer and co-founder. "It's a place where they can manage their social lives, find entertainment, keep in touch with old friends, all sorts of things."

Teens make up a sizable chunk of the MySpace member pool - reportedly 22 percent of its users are 18 or younger, although the site requires users to be at least 14. Many new users sign on because of encouragement from their peers.

"It seemed like everyone had one, so why not me?" said Ally Szerlip, 17, a junior at Martin Luther King High School in Riverside. "It's a new way of communication. People don't even call anymore, now it's 'Check your MySpace, I left a message.' "

This increasing connectivity among teens is exactly what predators want, Sheehan said. And many predators are adept at using a site's features to meticulously stalk their targets.

"They'll use the search functions. Whatever the hot topic is - a particular band, video games - and they'll identify these individuals with similar interests," he said. "Then they'll research the topics as a way to groom the child."

Sheehan also cited cases where predators set up profiles, posing as younger kids in an attempt to engage children in conversation.

Although there's no set attack pattern, many sexual predators keep extremely detailed reports on the children they have in their sights.

"So when that screen name pops up, they remember everything they've talked about," Sheehan said.

Some MySpace sites feature detailed information about a user - even down to home address, phone number or where they're going to be at a certain time.

Jessi, 18 and a senior at Calabasas High School, was approached two years ago at Starbucks by a 23-year-old man who saw her MySpace profile.

"He was like, 'Can I buy you a drink? I have this really cool car, this really cool house, this really cool job,' " said Jessi, who asked that her last name not be used. "Then he started to threaten my friends."

The man got Jessi's phone number off her profile. He called her earlier that day, identifying himself as Steve. He sounded like Jessi's friend, also named Steve. She told him she would be at Starbucks that night.

"It scares you," she said.

'They're all linked'

Ally said she tries not to put any personal information on her site, and she's pretty selective about the friend requests she approves.

"I've gotten some weird messages from old guys. You see their picture and they look older," she said. "Me and my friends, we're not going to add someone we don't know. My sister gets messages from guys my age, and I'm like, 'Noooo, I don't think so.' "

Her sister, Amy, is 13 and a student at Amelia Earhart Middle School in Riverside. She said she's on MySpace every day, chatting with her friends.

She said she's not a fan of the litany of suggestive pictures one can find by simply browsing the site profiles.

"I think it's horrible," she said. "When girls have their tops off and guys have their pants off - I'm like, wow, why did they do that? On mine, it's just me smiling or something."

Amy said her parents check her MySpace page every day, "to make sure I don't have our street address out there. I get a little scared about people reading that."

However, Sheehan said even the most well-intentioned users can get burned - sometimes unintentionally by their friends.

"Your child might not have their personal information online, but their friends might," he said. "That's when it runs rampant. They're all linked."

Other threats

Von Erck of Perverted Justice points out that teens aren't the only ones networking online.

"There are hundreds of sites that cater to predators and pedophiles," he said. "Just like groups who get on and talk about pottery, there are groups that talk about molesting children."

Von Erck added that online predators are starting to migrate to another place: the video-game universe. The Associated Press reported the January arrest of a 26-year-old man on charges that he molested a 14-year-old he met on Microsoft's Xbox Live service.

Von Erck said he believes it might get worse.

"I was playing 'Halo 2' and there was a guy going, 'Any young boys in here?' " he said. "He was probably joking, but that's the kind of thing that can happen."

Greg Fellows, senior investigator for the Riverside County sheriff's Computer And Technology Crime High-Tech Response, or CATCH, team, said although law enforcement has made a commitment to investigating all types of online crimes, it is parents who must ultimately step up.

"The Internet isn't a trinket anymore. Parents need to educate themselves - they need to get on these sites so they make a determination about what's best for their children," he said. "And if they don't have the time to do that, then maybe their kid shouldn't be online."

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