

NEWS

Internet sex sting nabs 13

By **DAILY NEWS** | |

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Thirteen men – including five from the San Fernando Valley and one from Simi Valley – were nabbed in a sting targeting suspects who troll the Internet seeking sex with underage girls, officials said Friday.

The undercover operation mirrored the popular “To Catch a Predator” segments on NBC’s “Dateline,” with undercover FBI agents and police officers portraying adolescent girls in online chat rooms.

Some of the men who made dates with the “girls” arrived at an undisclosed Valley location bearing gifts, ranging from alcohol and jewelry to teddy bears and ballet slippers, officials said.

“This is a reality check for parents in the San Fernando Valley,” said Deputy Police Chief Michel Moore, whose Valley Bureau partnered with the FBI in the crackdown.

“They are a profile of a typical male living either in the San Fernando Valley or in parts of this region,” Moore said. “Their occupations – attorneys, technicians. They work a variety of occupations.”

Moore said the Valley was chosen for the sting because the Los Angeles Police Department already had a team in place targeting Internet fraud, not because of a particular problem with child predators.

The Valley is home to some 1,500 registered sex offenders, although none of those nabbed in the sting had a record of previous offenses.

Those arrested in the sting, conducted between July 21 and Aug. 2, face state felony charges, as well as possible federal charges.

The suspects include: Babak Habashi, 24, of Winnetka; Abraham Aleksanyan, 30, of Van Nuys; David Mazlin, 23, of Valley Village; Oscar Hernandez-Garcia, 25, of Sherman Oaks; David Avram Cohn, 49, of Woodland Hills; and Shalendra Avi Parasram, 27, of Simi Valley.

The seven other suspects were identified as John Hwang, 27, of Anaheim; Richard Joseph Buttery, 49, of La Mirada; Evan Greene, 28, of Seal Beach; Antonio Perez, 21, of Huntington Park; Kenneth Grajeda, 23, of Stanton; Eric Lozoya, 21, of Inglewood; and Kristopher P. Duke, 33, of Las Vegas.

The state charges carry prison terms of at least a year upon conviction, officials said.

Peter Brust, special agent in charge of the FBI’s Cyber Division in Los Angeles, said other arrests could be made as authorities continue their investigation.

“This operation is proof of the real problem we face in Los Angeles alone involving the sheer amount of people prepared to sexually victimize children,” Brust said.

Most of the suspects were charged with traveling to meet with a minor for the purpose of engaging in lewd or lascivious behavior.

One of the suspects, Hernandez-Garcia, arranged to meet an underage teenager but did not show up for the date.

He was still arrested July 27 and charged with arranging to meet with a minor for the purpose of engaging in lewd or lascivious behavior.

Cohn was charged with attempted molestation of a child, according to authorities.

Calls to the homes of Cohn, Habashi, Aleksanyan and Mazlin were not returned. Other suspects could not be reached for comment.

Habashi, Mazlin, Aleksanyan and Parasram were released after posting \$75,000 bail each. Hernandez-Garcia was released on \$5,000 bail. Cohn was released on \$100,000 bail.

Some of the gifts from predators – including alcohol, jewelry and flowers – were on display Friday at a news conference at FBI headquarters in Westwood where officials announced the arrests.

Also on display were photographs of the men, as well as some of the expensive vehicles seized from the suspected predators, including a late-model Mercedes-Benz.

“These are faces of a typical American,” Moore said. “They approach this as if they are on a date with another consenting adult. They romance or pursue these individuals in such a manner, as well.

“And of course, as parents, we need to be mindful that these are people who are very effective in this pursuit.”

Both FBI and LAPD officials stressed that there is no definitive stereotype of a sexual predator.

“There’s a misperception that the predator is this bogeyman, this monster,” said Brust. “Certainly a monster in his action.”

But, Moore said, “The profile of the offender is not one with a criminal past. They have otherwise been productive members of society and employed – and gainfully so – and as to the victims, these victims are not latchkey or individuals that are terribly out of sync with the family.

“They are sons and daughters that many of us may have in our own home.”

Authorities said that unlike the televised arrests on “Dateline,” the Valley sting was not videotaped on a hidden camera.

At the news conference, Danielle Helms of Orange County offered a mother’s cautionary tale for other parents.

In 2005, she said her daughter Kristin Danielle Helms, then 14, fell prey to an online predator who pursued her even after her parents took away her computer, in part because the teenager believed she had fallen in love.

The following summer, the predator – Kiley Ryan Bowers, 28, of Texas – came to California, where he talked Kristin into a secret late-night meeting.

After having sex with the predator, the teenager slipped into what her mother called “serious clinical depression” when Bowers ended the relationship.

Within weeks, Kristen had taken her life.

Authorities said Bowers was soon arrested and in June sentenced to nine years in prison.

“My daughter was a very compliant, easygoing child to have in the house,” said Helms, who worked from home to be close to her children.

“She was doing well in school. She was on the cross-country team ... the honor roll.

“It can happen to anyone if it can happen to my child.”

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