

More Internet predators are challenging agents

March 23 2009, By TODD RICHMOND , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Eric Szatkowski is a Wisconsin Justice Department special agent, but on that Sunday afternoon he entered an online chat room as a 14-year-old boy. He claimed he was into weightlifting, AC/DC and muscle magazines. Then he waited.

Within hours, screen name Paul2u sent a message: "Hi. u realy 14?"

Over the past decade, agents and computer experts have gone after hundreds of people like Paul2u who solicit sex from kids or trade child pornography online. Police efforts around the country were all the rage with the media in the early 2000s, reaching a crescendo with Dateline NBC's "To Catch A Predator" series.

Despite the publicity then and now, the bad guys haven't gone away. They've quietly multiplied. Trading child porn online and grooming underage targets in chat rooms has exploded nationwide. With arrests more than quadrupling in 10 years, Wisconsin's agents and analysts feel overwhelmed.

"I don't think we've made significant progress at all," Wisconsin Attorney General J.B. Van Hollen said. "Our community leaders don't even know how bad the problem is. The general population has no idea."

In the past year, Van Hollen has raised the profile of Wisconsin's Internet Crimes Against [Children](#), or ICAC, unit, recruited local police departments to help and asked for more state dollars to help agents like

Szatkowski, who adopted the 14-year-old's persona.

"If I'm too young that's ok," the agent wrote back to Paul2u that Sunday back in 2002, adding: "Lots of dudes call me jail bait."

"Well, yeah, if you get caught," Paul2u replied, "but if you're willing its doable."

The hook was set.

The Internet was just gaining traction when an online child porn arrest was made by Wisconsin's Justice Department in 1995. The next year saw six arrests. The year after that, 13. By then agency officials realized what the future held, said Mike Myszewski, administrator of department's Criminal Investigation unit.

Using \$300,000 in federal seed money, he set up one of the first units to combat Internet crimes against children. Today about 60 such task forces exist nationwide.

Szatkowski, a homicide investigator with years of undercover experience, was an early volunteer for the group, which focused at first on "travelers," people like Paul2u who solicit sex from children online and arrange meetings with them. The unit made 18 arrests the first year, 36 in 2000 and 24 in 2001.

The numbers from units across the country were so encouraging federal officials thought they could eradicate chat room solicitation within three years, Myszewski said.

Then computers and Internet connections got cheap. More people could

afford to go online. The bad guys got smarter, too. They wanted to talk to the person on the other end of the modem and see photographs. "To Catch a Predator" only made them more cautious, Szatkowski said. Wisconsin arrests dropped, from 24 in 2001 to 17 in 2002 to 11 in 2003.

Meanwhile, online child porn became more sophisticated. New peer-to-peer file sharing software enabled porn purveyors to send photographs and videos directly to each other's computers in seconds, anywhere in the world.

Szatkowski and Paul2u exchanged messages for an hour.

Paul2u asked Szatkowski about his sexual experience with men and said he'd love to see him more than once. At one point Paul2u asked Szatkowski if he was a cop. They agreed to exchange photos.

Szatkowski sent a photo of Racine County Sheriff's Deputy Matt Prochaska when Prochaska was 13. Szatkowski typed that he could sneak out but didn't want to spend all night with him. He had school in the morning.

Fine, Paul2u replied. They could "do it" in his van.

Paul2u asked Szatkowski to call him. Prochaska made the call and agreed to meet Paul2u in half an hour.

Szatkowski glanced at Paul2u's photograph, hit print and rushed out of the office without taking a second look. Later, he wished he had.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children's cyber tip line took 85,301 reports of child porn and 8,787 reports of online enticement last year. Investigations of Internet crimes against children resulted in 3,000 arrests nationwide in 2008, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

The statistics show how an entire generation has moved online, seeking reinforcement from others with the same abhorrent sexual tastes, said Michelle Collins, executive director of the missing children center's exploited child division.

Most disturbing is the correlation between child porn and enticement, said Wisconsin forensic computer analyst Dave Matthews. Viewing leads to doing, he said.

"They're grooming themselves," Matthews said.

Wisconsin's unit moved from busting travelers to taking down porn users. The state justice department began training every criminal agent in its Division of Criminal Investigation to help, Msyzewski said. Arrests have hovered around 100 annually since 2004.

Szatkowski, his partner, Mike Hoell, and Prochaska sat at a Country Kitchen in Racine, watching the clock as they waited for Paul2u. Prochaska, playing the role of the boy, wore a yellow jacket and backward baseball cap.

They talked about everything Paul2u had said to Szatkowski online and how they hoped he would park in front, where they'd see him. They kept looking around, making sure Paul2u hadn't come in through a back door.

Around 10:45 p.m., a brown Ford van pulled into the parking lot and flashed its lights at Prochaska.

Ramping up the fight against child cyber crime comes with a price.

The Wisconsin task force's five full-time agents and six full-time computer analysts are swamped, mentally and physically. They analyze hard drives, catalog tips, write search warrant affidavits and criminal complaints, break down doors, and interview children as young as 3.

On a recent winter morning, agent Jenniffer Price was working 43 cases, all stacked neatly on her Madison office desk.

"We simply don't have enough cops on the street to do the work that needs to be done," Price said. "We've got so many offenders out there. I just see the balloon getting bigger and bigger and bigger."

The work takes its toll.

Szatkowski barred his children from sleepovers, instant messaging, social networking and online games when they were young.

Matthews, a unit analyst since 2005, specializes in tracking down porn users. In the last six months he's identified about 50 leads for agents that have resulted in cases.

He said the Internet has become an adult bookstore that pushes sexual deviants to act on their desires for children. He copes by not socializing with other ICAC agents and keeping his imagination in check.

"Mainly you just shut down a part of your brain that makes you feel like

crap," Matthews said.

Analyst Chris Byars spends days scanning seized porn for clues. Last summer she sat outside her home in central Wisconsin, trying to watch people stroll by, and had to go inside.

"All of a sudden I'm wondering how many people in Lodi right now are assaulting or abusing their children," she said. "I don't think you can turn it off."

Meanwhile, Van Hollen, the attorney general, has worked to draw attention to cyber crimes and get ICAC help. News releases trumpet each bust, and the state has sponsored 300 public workshops on cyber crime.

Van Hollen also has pushed local law enforcement leaders to join the unit as affiliates, creating a statewide net of cyber sleuths and easing the burden on his agents. Seventy-four agencies have joined. Hundreds haven't.

When they plead that they lack resources, he has a ready answer: "I say what's more important - these 10 speeders getting tickets or this kid not getting sexually molested?"

Van Hollen asked Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle for \$732,000 in the 2009-2011 state budget to hire two more agents and three more analysts, despite the state's \$5.7 billion deficit. Doyle allocated funds for one agent and one analyst. The federal stimulus package could add money.

Analyst Matthews just wants help, saying: "If pedophiles in this state feel that the odds are in their favor when they're browsing for and downloading child pornography, that they probably won't get caught, right now, I'll tell you that's true."

The van sat in the Country Kitchen parking lot.

The agents' adrenaline surged. Paul2u's action in simply pulling into the parking lot was enough for them to make an arrest. The sheriff's deputies closed in and ordered the driver out.

Hoell and Szatkowski stepped into the wet, 35-degree night and started walking toward them.

Then Szatkowski stopped short.

He recognized Paul2u.

The cyber predator was 46-year-old Robert E. Thibault - Szatkowski's children's religion teacher. Szatkowski had seen him in church that morning.

Hoell found a bag of sex toys in the van. Thibault told Hoell later that he would have had sex with the boy if they liked each other, adding he'd had about 20 conversations with minor males online over the last couple years.

Later that night Szatkowski looked at the photograph on his printer. He thought about how Thibault had been at his daughter's First Communion.

"It just reinforced ... you don't put faith in a person," he said. "In my heart, I can forgive anyone for anything, including him. Forgiveness is huge if you're going to be a good Catholic. (But) that feeling of betrayal will be there forever."

A judge sentenced Thibault to 10 years in prison on conspiracy to

sexually assault a child, but stayed the time and ordered him to spend a year in jail with work release. That was modified to electronic monitoring. The jail was too crowded.

Since the arrest in the Country Kitchen parking lot, Szatkowski has lured priests, teachers, police officers - even a mayor. In January, the agent posed online as a 14-year-old girl and allegedly engaged in a conversation with Racine Mayor Gary Becker. According to a criminal complaint, Becker showed up at a suburban Milwaukee mall hoping to meet the girl for sex. Becker, who has since resigned, faces eight felony counts. He pleaded not guilty and awaits trial.

"When you're a child, you shouldn't have to be exposed to this stuff," Szatkowski said.

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