

Prosecutors welcome app to track down child predators

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With more than half of all Americans now using smartphones to stay in touch, federal authorities are venturing into new territory in a bid to enlist the public's help to track down child predators.

A new smartphone application, the first of its kind in federal [law enforcement](#), allows users to receive alerts about wanted [predators](#) and to submit tips about their whereabouts.

Developed by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the software is part of an emerging trend in law enforcement to capitalize on new technologies that engage the public in solving crimes. In New Jersey's Bergen and Passaic counties, prosecutors on the front lines in the fight against child predators hailed the application as a promising innovation whose time has come.

The Operation Predator app was launched in September by ICE's Homeland Security Investigations Directorate, known as HSI. Within 36 hours, a series of tips led to the arrest in Michigan of one of the profiled suspects.

"The app allows everyone in the community - not just law enforcement - to work toward apprehending those who prey on our nation's most vulnerable, our children," said Andrew McLees, special agent in charge of HSI's Newark office.

The agency needs the public's help in locating child predators, and the

app goes a long way in getting agents timely information, he said.

The app shows photos and profiles of fugitives and unidentified suspects and allows the user to share that data with friends by email and on [social media](#).

Tips can be anonymously submitted directly by tapping a button on the app or by phone. The app also offers news about arrests and prosecutions of alleged child pornographers and predators as well as additional resources about ICE and its global partners in the fight against child exploitation.

The app can be downloaded for free from Apple's App Store or iTunes. ICE plans to expand its compatibility to other smartphones, but officials could not say when that would happen.

More than 82,000 people downloaded the app in the month after its Sept. 12 debut, said Khaalid Walls, an ICE spokesman in Detroit.

"Obviously, people are really excited about the app," Walls said. "And the fact that we had the Michigan arrest the first day and a half after its release shows it's an important law enforcement tool."

Brian Sinclair, who investigates online predators as head of the computer crimes unit in the Bergen County Prosecutor's Office, said the Operation Predator app is "a wonderful idea."

The app is a logical outgrowth of the kind of "crowd-sourcing" and multileveled outreach by law enforcement that followed the Boston Marathon bombings in April, said Sinclair, whose undercover unit has snared predators who traveled from as far away as Washington state and Florida to have sex with children.

"With cameras everywhere and people with smartphones everywhere, and the ability of the government to push this information and say to the public, 'Please help us locate this particular individual' ... I simply don't see the negative to that," he said.

"They knew that people could help law enforcement more than law enforcement just helping themselves," Sinclair said of the Boston investigators. "And I think this (app) is really just an extension of that."

Joseph Del Russo, chief assistant prosecutor in charge of the Special Victims and Megan's Law units in the Passaic County Prosecutor's Office, sees the app as a new-fangled "way of turbo-charging our traditional tip lines."

"You need to go where the people are, and the people are in large part these days communicating and paying attention to social media, and to websites and the Internet," Del Russo said.

"You can share things very easily, and in a sense our search for these predators has the capacity to go viral," he said, as users of the app post the alerts on Facebook, Twitter and other social media accounts.

"Anything that gets information out, and gets information out to a broader group of people, is good for law enforcement."

In announcing the initiative, ICE acting Director John Sandweg talked of the importance of embracing new crime-fighting tools in the Internet age.

"When children are being sexually abused and exploited, it's a race against the clock to rescue the child and bring the predator to justice," he said.

"These investigations are one of our highest priorities, and in today's

world, we need to be technologically savvy and innovative in our approach," Sandweg said.

On a five-week operation in May and June, part of ICE's efforts to catch abusers and child pornography distributors and to rescue victims of online sexual exploitation, the agency and task forces across the country arrested 255 alleged predators and identified 61 child victims.

Investigators uncovered a disturbing trend: Child predators are increasingly using the Internet to entice children to share sexually explicit material online, ICE said. In some cases, they were also sexually extorting, or "sextorting," the minors into producing increasingly graphic images and videos by threatening to expose previously obtained material, ICE said.

At the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children in Alexandria, Va., officials have seen a steady increase in the number of tips coming into its cyber tip line over the past few years.

"The numbers are continuing to go up and a lot of that is because the companies ... the Facebooks, Microsofts, the Googles ... they're very proactive in monitoring their networks and making sure they're not hosting that type of material," said John Shehan, executive director of the center's exploited children division.

The center received more than 400,000 reports last year, the vast majority related to the possession, manufacture and distribution of child pornography, Shehan said. It is on track to exceed that number this year, he said.

"So when I see apps like this that are being created and targeted to the public to increase reporting and awareness, it's so vital," Shehan said of ICE's new [app](#).

"Because the public has information, or sometimes just a gut feeling, about something that's going wrong and needs to be reported," he said. "And the best way to stop this cycle of abuse is to report and to provide law enforcement the opportunity to investigate these crimes."

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