

Dangers in MySpace.com



NEW HAVEN, Conn. (AP)- Mar. 3, 2006 - Two men used the Web site MySpace.com to set up sexual encounters with underage Connecticut girls, authorities said Thursday in what they described as the first federal sex cases involving the popular networking site.

The two unrelated cases come after weeks in which the site's potential dangers have been the topic of discussion for law enforcement, parents and school officials nationwide.

"The Internet has allowed people to invade our own homes, to have conversations with our children in the privacy of our own homes without us ever knowing about it," U.S. Attorney Kevin O'Connor said.

In one case, Sonny Szeto, 22, traveled from Jersey City, N.J., to Connecticut in October and molested an 11-year-old girl in her playroom while her parents slept upstairs, according to an FBI affidavit.

In the other case, Stephen Letavec, 39, molested a 14-year-old Connecticut girl in his car while visiting from Elrama, Pa., in October, according to another FBI report. The FBI said Letavec made several visits to see the girl between last summer and January.

"I showed you what love is and how it feels," Letavec wrote in an e-mail found in the girl's school locker, according to the FBI report. "I want to show you how making love feels too, not just sex because there is a difference."

The girl signed onto MySpace as an 18-year-old, but told Letavec she was 14 before he visited, the FBI said.

Both men face federal interstate sex charges. Szeto, who has since moved to Queens, N.Y., was ordered placed on house arrest with his parents in Nashua, N.H. As of Thursday morning, prosecutors said he was still being held until his family could post \$600,000 bond and cancel his Internet connection.

A message was left with the public defender's office, which represented Szeto.

Letavec, a volunteer firefighter, is being held without bond pending his arraignment in Connecticut. He was represented in Pennsylvania by a public defender, W. Penn Hackney, who would not comment and it was not immediately clear who his attorney would be in Connecticut.

MySpace, a division of News Corp., allows its 54 million users to find online friends by searching for their school or their interests. The site prohibits minors 13 and under from joining, discourages users from posting personal information and provides special protections for those 14 and 15.

"While we cannot comment on specific investigations, MySpace works with law enforcement at every level and fully supports the arrest and prosecution of those individuals found guilty of criminal offenses," MySpace said in a statement released Thursday.

While Internet safety advocates say the site has a good reputation for working to prevent illegal activity, they say children often lie about their age to get around those restrictions. Many profiles include suggestive photographs and lots of personal information.

Messages were left Thursday seeking comment from the company.

O'Connor said MySpace isn't at fault but rather is being exploited by pedophiles. But he raised concerns by some MySpace functions, including one that allows users to search for people who are questioning their sexual orientation.

And he said he would have "very serious reservations" about letting his own young children use

such sites.

"MySpace should be completely innocent. Children should be allowed to go on MySpace and meet their own peers and have conversations with them," said FBI Agent Thomas Veivia. "But the people with nefarious intentions exploit that technology and target our children."

Police in Middletown, Conn., are investigating recent reports that as many as seven local girls were sexually assaulted by men in their 20s who contacted them through MySpace pretending to be teenagers.

Veivia said MySpace is getting a lot of attention but predicts that, like Internet Relay Chats and American Online chat rooms, it will soon give way to new technology that children and young adults will start using - with sexual predators and law enforcement following.

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