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Online child predators more dangerous during COVID-19 crisis, N.J. officials say. 21 arrests show why.

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Child predators are more dangerous than ever since the coronavirus pandemic pushed daily life online, New Jersey's top law enforcement officials said Wednesday, and they offered up recent arrests of 21 alleged abusers as horrifying examples.

A 40-year-old from Keansburg convinced a 14-year-old girl he met on social media to carve his initials into her legs, officials said, and he then sent photos of the abuse to the girl's mother.

In March, a 34-year-old from Oklahoma traveled to Atlantic City to try to have sex with 11- and 12-year-olds. He was arrested when the men he thought would provide him underage girls turned out to be undercover officers.

A 21-year-old babysitter from Newark filmed herself sexually assaulting a toddler, officials said. She was arrested after she posted the video on the internet.

"We began this operation in March at the start of the COVID-19 state of emergency — this was no coincidence," state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said during an online press conference. As kids spent more time on apps and video games, Grewal said, many of those platforms were increasingly "prime hunting ground" for predators.

From the beginning of March through the end of July, there were 3,600 tips about potential threats to kids sent to the New Jersey Regional Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, according to State Police Lt. John Pizzuro.

In comparison, there were only 1,200 tips during the same period last year.

Not all of those involved alleged predators, Pizzuro said, but he estimated criminal tips increased 50%. In addition, he said they'd seen an increase in 7-, 8- and 9-year-olds creating sexually explicit videos after being groomed by online predators.

It was also no coincidence that online tips increased while other child abuse and domestic violence reporting decreased, said Col. Patrick Callahan, acting superintendent of the State Police. Abuse was obviously continuing, he said, even if fewer teachers and coaches had the opportunity to witness its effects.

Officials implored parents to closely monitor kids' online activity, from keeping smart phones out of bedrooms, changing security settings so children could only chat with friends and flagging if kids tried to hide online conversations. Screen names could

inadvertently reveal someone's age or gender, details which could later be exploited, Grewal said.

More than a dozen local and federal agencies helped with "Operation Screen Capture."

Jason Berry, the 40-year-old from Keansburg, was arrested June 18 and charged with first degree manufacturing child pornography and second degree sexual assault, among other charges. The 14-year-old who allegedly carved his initials into her legs also sent him nude and sexually explicit photos, officials said.

Aaron Craiger, the 34-year-old from Oklahoma, was the only defendant from outside New Jersey. He was charged with two counts of second degree attempted aggravated sexual assault and second degree distribution of child pornography, among other child abuse and marijuana charges.

Alize Tejada, the 21-year-old babysitter, was arrested July 15 and charged with first degree aggravated sexual assault and first degree manufacturing child pornography.

Craiger's most serious charge could result in up to a decade in state prison and a possible \$150,000 fine. Berry and Tejada could each be sentenced to up to 20 years in prison and \$200,000 fines for their first degree charges. All three remain in custody, officials said.

A dozen more were charged with third degree possession of child pornography, which could put them in prison for up to five years along with a possible \$15,000 fine:

- Christopher Crispino, 45, of Bellmawr, arrested July 31.
- Michael Gilpin, 42, of Union Beach, arrested July 26.
- Loic Atse, 18, of Aberdeen, arrested July 23.
- Brett Warfield, 21, of Carney's Point, arrested July 15.
- Henry Ziolkowski, 66, of Toms River, arrested July 10.
- Kevin Carrieri, 34, of Toms River, arrested July 10.
- Matthew Marzullo, 20, of Hopatcong, arrested July 1.
- Julian Ceballos, 31, of Hamilton in Mercer County, arrested June 26.
- Roy Dantz, 71, of Mount Laurel, arrested June 18.
- Shawn Daily, 45, of Browns Mills, arrested June 12.
- Edward Kross, 66, of Carteret, arrested May 28.
- Timothy McMahan, 46, of Piscataway, arrested May 21.

Five people were charged with second degree distribution of child pornography and third degree possession of child pornography, and face years in state prison and more than \$100,000 in fines:

- Dwayne McCormick, 25, of Orange, arrested July 8.
- Raymond Radziewicz, 53, of Bloomfield, arrested July 7.
- Michael Ascough, 39, Pompton Plains, arrested July 5.

- Donovan Falconer, 25, of Plainsboro, arrested June 25.
- An unnamed 15-year-old boy from Gloucester County.

One was charged with second degree distribution of child pornography, which carries a possible sentence of up to a decade in prison and up to a \$150,000 fine:

- Joseph Benestante, 65, of Bergenfield, arrested July 21.

It was not immediately clear if any had lawyers.