

# The Star-Ledger

## **19 men arrested for allegedly trying to lure children for sex**

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NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published Oct. 31, 2019

Cops have arrested 19 men who allegedly tried to lure children for sex, officials announced Thursday.

The alleged predators chatted online or on apps with officers posing as underage boys and girls. The men arranged to meet the “kids” at two homes, and were arrested when they arrived.

The arrests began Oct. 23 and ended Monday as part of a sting called “Operation Open Door.” The undercover officers who posed as 12, 13 or 14-year-olds were part of the state’s Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force, and state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said police and prosecutors all over New Jersey had assisted, as well as the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

“We have no higher priority than protecting our children,” Grewal said in a statement. He added that families should be vigilant when their kids use online games or chat apps.

“We hope that this collaborative operation will be eye-opening for parents,” Somerset County Prosecutor Michael Robertson said.

At a press conference in Somerville, officials highlighted 27 apps and games they said parents should closely monitor, including Facebook, Minecraft and Fortnite. Grewal said officials had recently started handing out information to kids about protecting themselves online.

Lt. John Pizzuro, with the state police, said these arrests had increased in recent years. While 143 people were arrested for similar charges in 2015, he said, cops had already brought in 350 people this year. He attributed that change to increased smartphone use.

Pizzuro said apps that don’t require age verification are particularly worrisome, and that app developers often don’t have the staff to monitor their own content. Grewal added that while there is a precedent for holding developers liable, it is a difficult case to make.

“We can’t arrest our way out of this problem,” Pizzuro said.

The youngest man arrested was 20, the oldest 55. Two were from Indiana and one was from Pennsylvania, while the rest came from cities around New Jersey. One was a volunteer firefighter, another owns a business.

All are currently being held in the Somerset County jail.

Seven were charged with second degree luring and third degree attempted endangering the welfare of a child:

- Brayan Alvarado, 25, of Middlesex.
- Jihaad Brown, 23, of Franklin Park.
- Rafael Martinez-Lezama, 37, of New Brunswick.
- Michael Schumacher, 55, of Somerset.
- Zulfiqer Sekender, 47, of Piscataway.
- Alexander Ulikowski, 20, of Branchburg.
- Adam Zeigler, 34, of Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Six were charged with second degree luring, third degree attempted endangering the welfare of a child and second degree attempted sexual assault:

- Michael Brown, 28, of Edison.
- Julio Cubia-Aviles, 27, of West Orange.
- Duraikandan Murugan, 40, of Jasper, Indiana.
- Nimeshbha Patel, 48, of Piscataway.
- Niraj Patel, 46, of Somerset.
- Conrado Vasquez-Vasquez, 38, of New Brunswick.

Two were charged with second degree attempted promotion of prostitution of a child, in addition to other charges:

- Brian Davis, 28, of Somerset. He was also charged with second degree luring and attempted endangering the welfare of a child, third degree.
- Asif Iqbal, 53, of Mount Holly. He was also charged with second degree luring, second degree attempted sexual assault and attempted endangering the welfare of a child, third degree.

Three were charged with second degree attempted sexual assault, in addition to at least one other charge:

- Juan Lopez, 42, of Passaic. He was also charged with attempted endangering the welfare of a child, third degree.
- Jose Martinez-Mejia, 32, of West New York. He was also charged with second degree luring, third degree attempted endangering the welfare of a child and third degree attempt to promote obscene material to a child.
- Naveen Thangaraj, 36, of Edison. He was also charged with second degree luring.

One man was a previous sex offender:

- Randal Wise, 42, of Crawford, Indiana. He was charged with second degree luring, second degree attempted sexual assault, third degree attempted endangering the welfare of a child and third degree attempt to promote obscene material to a child.

The luring, sexual assault and prostitution charges each carry a possible sentence of 5 to 10 years. The endangerment charge can carry a sentence of 3 to 5 years.