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DHS ICE Targets Child Predators In Expanding Homeland Security Mission

By: Judi Hasson
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Most people don't think of child sex crime cases as a homeland security threat. But it most certainly is, and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is bearing down on a worldwide epidemic with an arsenal of 21st century tools.



When the redesigned US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) became part of DHS in 2002, it also became a critical component in the overall DHS mission of protecting the homeland in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

And that included child sexual exploitation crimes, now thriving in cyberspace -- a real threat to the safety of America's children and children worldwide.

"The Internet has afforded a lot more opportunity to trade in this contraband," said Ian Quinn, Deputy Assistant Director of ICE's Cyber Crimes Center. "If there's a buck to be made, there are people trying to make it."

Once a paper-driven crime with provocative printed images sent through the mail, this network of crime has now turned to the Internet, requiring a whole new set of cyber skills to track down sexual predators around the world and stop them.

"When someone is trading pictures, they are working with someone else. It's definitely a crime that takes multiple entities," said Patrick Redling, Unit Chief of ICE's Child Exploitation Investigations unit. "Predators do work together, unfortunately, across globe."

ICE conducted almost 2,000 search warrants in 2012. It's common for investigators to develop hundreds of leads just from one investigation and to find thousands of child porn images during a search, Quinn said.

But that's not all. ICE has stepped up its drive to find child predators with a worldwide partnership -- The Virtual Global Task Force -- that works with other countries with the mandate to find predators and take them out of business.

It's established 74 offices in 48 foreign countries around the world. In addition, it coordinates investigations with foreign law enforcement agencies and provides training to their officers.

The agency uses sophisticated multiple techniques to develop leads, including online undercover work in the federal government and outside government, as well as investigation leads from its global partners. ICE may have an agent in the field posing as a parent offering a child up for porn, or it may track a suspected predator from the US to other countries.

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In addition, ICE has an international tip line which receives thousands of tips about child sex abuse.

In 2012 alone, the hotline collected 180,853 tips, 85 percent coming via the telephone hotline on an internationally accessible phone number 802-872-6199.

And it is part of a multi-pronged approach to hunt down predators and stop them cold. In many cases, a single apprehension can lead to many more arrests of persons involved in the same network or related networks.

ICE works closely with the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, which has a clearing house that receives thousands of leads every year, including many that have a foreign basis.

"We're committed to protecting kids everywhere," said ICE press secretary Barbara Gonzalez. "Predators are in it for the thrill of it. The greed aspect of it is not necessarily fueling it."

ICE has built an incredible international footprint in fighting these crimes:

- Under federal law, ICE has authority to pursue sexual predators that travel overseas and engage in sex with children. It has offices set up in foreign countries that work with local authorities.
- In FY 2012, ICE ratcheted up its overseas arrests, with 114 apprehensions. So far in the first quarter of 2013, there have been 90 overseas arrests, according to Gonzalez. ICE is working with online protection centers in the United Kingdom, Australia, United Arab Emirates, Italy, Indonesia, South Korea, Interpol and Europol, among others.

And domestic arrests are reaching new numbers, too. In fiscal year 2012, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) special agents arrested a record number of child predators (1,655) on criminal charges related to child sexual exploitation.

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Just in the first five months of fiscal year 2013 (Oct 1, 2012 to March 1, 2013), there have been 800 criminal arrests. Since 2003, HSI has initiated more than 24,000 cases and arrested 8,720 individuals for these types of crimes. HSI arrested 1,335 predators in 2011 and 912 in 2010.

It's a far cry from the paralyzed past when sex crimes investigators had no technology or computers to track down and stop child sex offenders. With no cyber tools, they were unable to find and break many of these notorious child predator gangs.

Today, ICE investigators surf through message boards where they can often identify a predator. They then keep unraveling the threads of what is often a complex enterprise to find other culprits.

"Basically if we can identify that there is a website somebody has put up for child exploitation and can show it is in the US, we can seize the website," Redling said.

[Editor's note: Earlier this year, as part of the government's redoubled efforts across the spectrum of federal agencies to combat human trafficking, DHS, the Department of Transportation and Amtrak announced a new partnership to battle the trafficking of humans]

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