

Human traffickers' new tool to lure children: online video games

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The arrest of seven people for a St. Petersburg case of human trafficking highlights a new social media vulnerability: online video games.



A card provided by The Salvation Army provides the phone number for the National Human Trafficking Resource Center

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ST. PETERSBURG — Parents know they need to be vigilant monitoring their kids' social media accounts. But online video games are giving parents something new to worry about.

Last week's arrest of seven adults on charges that they kept two boys prisoner in a St. Petersburg mobile home serves as a warning that predators are using popular gaming platforms such as Fortnite and Minecraft to lure in children. At least one of those boys was contacted through the online gaming app Discord.

Curtis Lee Gruwell, 34, communicated with a 17-year-old boy living in Louisiana through the app's chat platform, earning his trust over time before picking him up and driving him to Florida with the promise of a better life, according to St. Petersburg police.

Instead, he joined a 16-year-old boy who had already been held prisoner for nearly a year, police said. The younger boy had been repeatedly sexually abused by four men who kept him trapped inside a squalid mobile home, police said. The boys were freed in May, and after a lengthy investigation their alleged captors were rounded up last week.

Days after those arrests, Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody announced the arrest of a man in Broward County who allegedly engaged in sexual activity and solicited pornographic photos and videos from a minor he first contacted through the online game Fortnite. Authorities believe there could be as many as 20 additional victims.

"Anywhere where people have access to the internet and access to kids, some people are going to try to use it as a tool to lure kids out," said FBI Special Agent Kevin Kaufman of Orlando. "You're pretty much inviting the world into your living room with these online gaming apps."

Video games have evolved from using text-based communication to offering text and audio options. Lots of games have dynamic voice chats where players can communicate to large groups or in one-on-one settings. It's common for players to chat frequently with people they've never met, both inside the game and on related apps, said Patrick Vilkinofsky, assistant professor of cybersecurity at Daytona State College.

"The idea is that people can coordinate within the game," he said. "But just like any other form of communication, it can be abused."

Kaufman said connecting with children through video games has become a common technique for predators. Some predators eventually meet those kids in person, then trap them for human trafficking purposes.

"Many parents are unaware or they think these are harmless games," Kaufman said. "But the chance is always going to be there when you're interacting with strangers online, even with video games."

The problem of human trafficking in Tampa Bay isn't new. Many acknowledge the problem has existed here and in cities across the United States for decades. But only in the past five to seven years has awareness of the issue permeated into spheres such as law enforcement, community advocates and political leaders.

Still, identifying the crime remains complicated. Visions of drugged women smuggled into the country in boxes is more a product of pop culture than reality. The more insidious cases — teens wooed by adults promising them travel and an escape from the struggles of their current lives, then forced to perform sex acts for money — that can be harder to recognize.

Convicting perpetrators can be even more difficult. To distinguish sex trafficking from prostitution, the state must prove force, fraud or coercion.

"Human trafficking is a business of exploitation, in very simplified words," said Dotti Groover-Skipper, Florida's Anti-Trafficking Director for The Salvation Army. "The contact starts innocently and then these predators lure their victims with false promises."

In situations where victims are contacted through video games, Kaufman said, it's not uncommon for perpetrators to offer children gift cards for a game in exchange for a photo, or to meet them in person.

"It's a grooming process," the special agent said. "They're soliciting kids with video gaming cards, PayPal, sending them games in exchange for regular photos. And those progress to more risqué photos."

While it's impossible to make the internet a completely safe space, Kaufman said there are ways for parents to protect their children. In this case, being a "helicopter parent," is a good thing. He encouraged parents to check their kids' phones or ask to listen in to the audio during a game chat.

There are plenty of settings within most games and related apps that allow both players and parents to block people and limit who can send messages, Vilkinofsky said. In many games, individuals can also choose how much of their personal information, such as their name, age or location, is displayed.

"It's pretty much like an extension of social media," he said. "Don't put something out there that you don't want everyone to know."

Parents can also go in and read text messages sent through the games. Most platforms keep a message history, as long as the player doesn't delete it.

Groover-Skipper listed some warning signs for parents monitoring their kids' gaming: Is your child secretive about the game they're playing or to whom they're talking? Are there texts and calls on their phone from numbers you don't recognize? Do they change immediately change the screen when an adult walks into the room?

Most importantly, she said, it's important that parents talk with their kids about the risks of interacting with strangers online, on any platform including video games. Kids should know the warning signs, too, including whether someone starts asking for their personal information, tries to talk to them about sex or warns them to keep their conversations private.

"Law enforcement is always playing catch-up with new technology and the hundreds of apps that come out every day," Groover-Skipper said. "That's why parents and our kids have to be educated, know the signs to look for, and not fall prey into these traps."

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