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Webcam Child Sex Abuse

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Webcam sex abuse: A booming industry born of poverty

Andrew Salazar logged on to a Yahoo chat forum from his suburban Tacoma, Wash., home. He typed under a fake name. He was used to aliases. He messaged a woman overseas. Soon, on his computer screen, the man in his sixties got his first glimpse of what he wanted: a girl, perhaps eight years old, clothed and lying on a bed in the Philippines. Near her was the woman. The woman negotiated with Salazar. They settled on a price. Sometimes the cost for Salazar was as low as \$10. It's close to the going rate. The payment went through Western Union. Other times he used PayPal. The woman said the girl was her daughter. She told the girl to follow his instructions. The girl obeyed. She took off her clothes.

She posed and masturbated. The woman relayed another request. The girl should touch and lick her breasts. The girl complied. Salazar asked the woman to touch the girl's vagina. She tried. She reached again. Each time, the girl closed her legs and pushed away the woman.

Just like previous sessions, Salazar recorded what unfolded. This would join his collection amassed over at least a year. Salazar had about 80 homemade videos to his name. If there were credits to those films, he would be the director. He dictated the action in one country. The events would take place before a web camera far away, in a different country.

Salazar is far from alone in haunting this dark corner of the Internet. Webcam child sex is a booming global industry, a twist in pedophilia as fast growing and difficult to police, according to law enforcement officials.

Salazar would later make a simple mistake that would lead to his arrest, but prosecutors, police and activists on four continents estimate there are far more who get away with this crime.

Salazar joined the ranks of more than 100 people around the world who have faced criminal charges for their predatory live camera web surfing. Yet that is a small number compared with the United Nations and FBI estimates that 750,000 child predators are online at any given time. Numbers on those engaged in directing and live streaming sex acts are difficult to know, but law enforcement portray it as a vast practice that continues to grow.

"The level of appetite for the consumption of child exploitation material is extremely alarming," said Commander Glen McEwen, manager of Cyber Crime Operations for the Australian Federal Police. "The internet expands the ability for people's consumption to be broader. Unfortunately where there is a will, there is a way."

The cases reveal a disturbing desperation wrought from global economics. The predators caught are from wealthier nations. The children live in abject poverty, and in many cases are put on view by their own families, dire for money.

There is one other factor: technology. The children live in developing nations different from other poor countries -- they live in places with faster Internet

connections. That, say experts, includes places in Southeast Asia and West Africa. In the Philippines alone, tens of thousands of children are estimated by the international children's advocacy organization Terre des Hommes to be victims of webcam child sex.

Salazar, a military veteran who later started his own janitorial business, kept a large number of printed photographs of naked 1-12-year-olds in a briefcase next to his bed and more than 1,000 images and videos of naked children masturbating and displaying their genitals on his computers. One of the printed photographs showed a female toddler's bleeding vagina. She appeared to be no more than two years old.

The defense said that Salazar was sexually abused as a child by his father who would take him to underground bars in San Antonio, Texas, assault him and let other men molest him in exchange for money.

Salazar has no connection to family or friends and all of his time and money were devoted to developing relationships with women in poor countries who were prostituting their children via webcam, said the prosecutors.

Salazar's case reveals other troubling predicaments for prosecutors and law enforcement.

This was not the first time Salazar preyed on the prepubescent. He is a repeat offender. He was convicted of raping a child in 1975, a 13-year-old who was dragged into bushes and assaulted by Salazar in Texas. Then, in about 2001, a now ex-wife accused him of collecting child pornography photographs. While his conviction came before United States laws registering and restricting sex offenders, there are other cases where convicted child molesters were able to skirt laws designed to limit the opportunities for perpetrators to prey again by logging online and using webcams.

Cecelia Gregson, senior King County prosecutor specially designated to child exploitation cases, who prosecuted Salazar's case, said supervision of convicted sex offenders works well on a federal level, but that it is a big challenge on state level.

"The state department of corrections is not able to review perpetrators' computers or phones even though the judgment orders that the defendant should be under supervision," said Gregson. "If the department of corrections doesn't have the software and training they can't monitor the defendant effectively."

She said that this might not change until one of these agencies are sued for not monitoring a sex offender properly.

"This might be a scenario where somebody gets in trouble and then change happens," she said. "Even if you have smart people on the front line doing the work, certain decisions need to be done higher up... Sometimes the entities are so big and

they have so many offenders, so many pressing issues, and very real budget concerns that they tend to react instead of proact.” Washington state where Gregson works really needs help in that department, she said.

When Salazar was discovered, the police didn't have the resources to investigate the case so the prosecutors asked secret service for help. “Washington state's economy is pretty good,” said Gregson. “So it surprises me that not all of our police departments have forensics.”

Salazar made clear in chats with the woman in the Philippines that he was interested in more than a livestreamed show. In his messages, he disclosed that he hoped to become a sex tourist and visit a young girl in the Philippines before her teens and engage in sex acts with her.

“So if I come stay with you next year you will let me fuck both of you,” he wrote the woman in the Philippines.

“Maybe yes, maybe when she is 14 yrs old u can fuck her,” the woman responded. “I want her at age of 10, I find girl in other country and she is 7,” said Salazar.

That will never happen. Salazar was convicted for his child pornography collection, and was sentenced to 20 years in prison. He was discovered by “sheer fate” as the prosecutors wrote in their sentencing document: One day in May, 2014, Salazar went to a Sprint Store to transfer photos and data from his old phone to his new one. While transferring the data, store employees saw photos of naked girls who appeared to be younger than 10 years old on Salazar's phone. They called the police. Gregson said she believes it is more difficult to catch perpetrators like Salazar than molesters who do a more hands on kind of abuse.

“When you're physically abusing the kid in your backyard or another place that kid can probably talk to other people about it,” she said.

“It's easier to catch them that way than if you're dealing with a virtual stranger.”

Salazar was not convicted for directing the actual abuse inflicted on the girls. Rather, he pled guilty on April 13, 2015, to charges of possessing and receiving images of child pornography. His defense attorney wrote in one case document that Salazar's offense is different than a physical abuse.

“...the nature of a sexual assault is fundamentally different than the nature of a pornography offense. This is because a sexual assault requires physical contact with a victim where as a pornography crime involves only the possession of documents,” wrote Jesse Cantor, Salazar's public defender.

American prosecutors who work on cases like Salazar's still have to use charges like possession of child pornography from a time before law enforcement even knew about this type of webcam child sex abuse.

But Gregson said that today's laws are applicable and that it is preposterous to argue that perpetrators like Salazar are not abusing children just because they don't have physical contact with them.

"I think we have laws that we can apply now," she said. "Because he is still caught in a sexual abuse of a minor through the Internet and that is illegal. It's a crime."

Mitali Thakor, a PhD candidate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who has researched transnational politics of digital forensics technology developed to address sex crimes, said that U.S. law enforcement doesn't have a strategy for dealing with these types of cases.

"One of the challenges for American law enforcement is that there isn't a system for prosecuting these crimes," she said. "My impression is that it's very case-by-case. There is no standard for how this should go forward."

Thakor said that new laws would be useful in prosecuting these cases but very difficult to enforce and probably require more surveillance.

"I'm very torn on whether it's a good idea to criminalize the act of live streaming abuse of boys and girls," she said. "It would be useful but I think that it would be so hard to monitor people's online activities. It has tricky implications for surveillance and needs to be thought through. Surveillance doesn't necessarily prevent perpetrators from preying on children online. So I don't think the answer is more surveillance," she said.

Jeffrey Herschell, another American customer of webcam child sex, is also a repeat offender. In February, 2010 he sent money from his home in Pennsylvania to the Philippines for an online sex show with a 12-year old girl. He was sentenced in May, 2013 to 12 years in prison for coercing and enticing a minor to engage in illegal sexual activity.

In 1998 he molested his girlfriend's child and was later convicted. The mother of that child told the FBI that she had found child porn on his computer.

CHAPTER SUBHEAD : THE BIG PICTURE

To get a sense of how this practice has grown, perhaps it is best to look at Operation Endeavor.

In 2012, an international consortium of law enforcement personnel probed webcam child sex tourism. It is perhaps the first documented instance of law enforcement investigating this type of crime. Operation Endeavor was led by the National Crime Agency in the United Kingdom, and joined by the Australian Federal Police, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and others. The effort led to 29 arrests in 12 countries. The perpetrators were so bold they used their own credit cards and did not bother setting up prepaid accounts that might have somewhat shielded their identities.

That effort was followed by another international cooperative investigation, Operation Toric. The inquiry found 138 individuals globally were making payments to a group in the Philippines who worked as middlemen for those seeking children.

Those cases represent just a fraction of the number of perpetrators that lurk on the internet, according to law enforcement officials.

“We are dealing with absolutely huge numbers of people who are doing this, and we’re seeing that from investigations we are doing now,” said Kelvin Lay, lead investigator for the National Crime Agency in the UK. He said the number of incidents involving webcam child sex cases reported to the NCA has steadily increased.

In the U.S., prosecutors are working on more of these types of webcam child sex cases right now. One is Jerry Powers’ case. From his Bellingham, Wash. home, Powers has been paying to watch and direct live cyber sex shows involving children in the Philippines since at least 2011. In one show, he told a mother to place her less than 12-year old daughter in a chair and have her spread her legs. In another, he watched an adult woman perform oral sex on a 4-5 year-old boy. Powers was even in the process of recording another live sex show on April 15, 2015, the morning his home was searched. He has pled guilty to receipt and possession of child pornography and will be sentenced on Jan. 21, 2016.

For people like Powers who live in the U.S. or countries with similar economies like Australia and the UK, the cost for each act is relatively small. Lay estimated the going rate is about \$14 a session.

Lay visited the Philippines. He went to Angeles City there, and saw houses where children engaged in sex acts before web cameras. Outside those buildings, he recalled seeing barefoot children in shorts with no tops, queuing up, waiting to be abused. They would enter houses that were behind locked gates.

Children would do that three times a day, Lay said. That was because they were servicing molesters in three different time zones.

For the most part, according to Lay, mothers and fathers were involved in the abuse and took the money.

McEwen of the Australian Federal Police put it bluntly, “We are dealing with people who are capitalizing on poverty.”

“You never know who has an appetite in this type of activity,” he said. “It could be an attraction for a registered sex offender, not to say that a person who is not identified as being an offender would not do it. You can’t tell by a person’s lifestyle choice.” David Tallman is one of the webcam child sex offenders with no criminal history. On a December day, in 2012, inspectors from the Customs and Border Protection and a special agent from Homeland Security boarded a navy fleet that had just returned to Norfolk, Virginia from overseas. The inspectors searched the fleet and the special

agent interrogated one of the crew members: David Tallman. He had been identified as a purchaser of livestreaming of sex shows involving children in the Philippines.

Tallman was alone with the special agent in the Chiefs' lounge.

At one point, the agent asked if Tallman had ever viewed child pornography online. Tallman said that years ago while watching adult pornography he was redirected to a child porn site, but that he left the site as soon as he realized that it involved children. The agent then told Tallman that the inspectors on the ship were going to look through his computer and asked if they would find any child pornography. Tallman reacted by putting his head down. He hesitated for a moment before admitting that there would be a little child pornography on his computer. He said that he had received the child porn from women that he had communicated with online. He also said that naked children were sometimes part of live webcam sex shows he had watched. He estimated that he had paid around \$4,000 in total to the women he chatted with online.

Tallman said that he did not know why he was looking at the child pornography. It didn't interest him, he said. He stated that he got overwhelmed with all the attention from the women and was probably "guilted" into sending them money.

Tallman said he had never engaged in any sexual activity with an underage girl and would never hurt a child. He was even sponsoring kids in Cambodia, he said.

It turned out that Tallman had watched and directed several live sex shows of children in the Philippines via webcam. On Tallman's computer, the agent found more than 4,000 images and 9 videos of child pornography of Asian girls and boys.

In one image, a naked girl, about 4-6 years old, is sitting on the floor with her legs spread, exposing her vagina.

Another photo showed a 6-8-year-old girl and a 15-16-year-old girl inserting sex toys into their vaginas, while a third showed the older girl perform oral sex on the younger girl.

There was also a photo of a 5-7-year-old boy and a 8-10-year-old girl standing next to each other, naked, looking into the camera. In another photo, the girl is performing oral sex on the boy.

In e-mails Tallman asked for images depicting particular sexual acts and he specifically requested young girls.

In July 2013, Tallman, 53 at the time, was sentenced to 12 years in prison for transporting and shipping child pornography. His offense took place over a number of years before he faced the court.

CHAPTER SUBHEAD: THE NGO STING

In 2013, a 10-year-old girl named Sweetie logged into a chat forum. As soon as she identified herself as a girl from the Philippines, men started approaching her online. They wanted her to undress and touch herself.

What they did not know was that Sweetie wasn't a real girl. The international children's advocacy organisation Terre des Hommes, headquartered in the Netherlands, created a virtual girl who looks like a real girl. Four researchers logged into 20 different chat forums and posed as Sweetie.

Children's advocates say that there are well over 40,000 of these public chat rooms. Thousands approached Sweetie. The activists said that out of those, they managed to identify 1,000 potential molesters from 71 different countries. Of the 1,000, 254 were Americans, the highest number from any single nation.

"All chat rooms focusing on children or teenagers are hunting grounds for pedophiles who love to get in contact with kids," said Hans Guyt, the director of special projects for Terre des Hommes who led the Sweetie experiment. "They contact kids on dating sites, social networks and public chat rooms. It's a huge phenomena and only increasing because of Internet coverage spreading to other parts in the world."

The NGO first discovered the practice around 2011. They had been working in the Philippines for 15 years, but then discovered a shift. Young prostitutes told them that they moved to Internet cafes to chat with men in other countries who paid for sex shows. They would typically charge \$5-10 per show, said Guyt.

Around the same time they discovered a much more ominous development. Guyt calls it "a cottage industry." Parents force their young children – 4 to 6-year-olds – to perform sexual acts in front of a webcam in exchange for money from richer people in foreign countries.

The amounts that molesters pay are relatively small – 4-500 dollars being one of the highest payments for the most extreme sex acts.

"We see rape scenes and torture scenes," said Guyt. "It's very extreme and very young people are involved." He said the highest price molesters pay is for watching a child have sex with a dog.

It's getting increasingly difficult to identify the perpetrators, said Guyt, and it's not always possible to follow the money. Some perpetrators try to protect themselves by using bitcoins or prepaid credit cards that are difficult to trace.

Others don't make direct payments: A perpetrator in the U.S. can transfer the money to a

Filipino national who lives in the U.S. who then transfers the money to co-conspirators in the Philippines.

"The predators feel safe and anonymous," said Guyt. "They use fake names and live far away."

Within the Philippines, Guyt said abuse is most common on the island Cebu, a popular tourist destination and one of the nation's most developed provinces.

Webcam child sex is also reaching the country's rural areas as internet coverage improves.

One of the reason that this type of child abuse is common in the Philippines is that English is an official language there and that the Internet is widespread, well-covered and very cheap. For a few dimes you have access to the Internet for a few hours. Family bonds in the Philippines are strong and it's not uncommon for one member of the family to sacrifice him or herself for the benefit of the family as a whole, said Guyt. And that is usually expected from the children.

"In so many cases with victims of cyber sex, mothers and fathers don't want your grandmother to die and put a lot of pressure on these kids to do a lot of things they don't want to do but they feel they have to sacrifice themselves for other family members."

Some of the children who have been abused turn to drugs or alcohol to try to cope with their traumas. Many are afraid that the images of them will pop up somewhere later in their lives. They have a strange or no relationship with their families and parents.

"When their own parents forced them to do this kind of thing or organized the rape or the neighbor's dogs it's worse than incest," said Guyt. "The children are really seriously damaged. Some of the parents say 'what are you talking about, this is just cyber sex, no real abuse is going on,' but we found out that this cottage industry is much more sinister and extreme involving animals, rapes and torture."

He estimates that tens of thousands of children are victims of this type of abuse in the Philippines alone. The crime will only become more common, he said.

"Webcam child sex tourism is spreading like a disease," he said. "There are perpetrators in almost all countries. As long as there is demand it will happen. With the extension of the internet and the decreasing prices of the internet it will get more and more accessible, not just for the western part of this globe, but also for the developing world, which means that there will be more victims. There will be more children exposed to this phenomenon."

The problem is so widespread that it its impossible to fix it by arresting all the perpetrators, said Guyt. Instead law enforcement should react with more proactive policing online.

"Police need to be more present than they are at the moment to make the Internet a safer place for kids," he said. "I personally don't see a big difference between allowing police to patrol the street, beaches, parks and other public areas and giving them mandate to patrol public areas on the Internet such as chat rooms."

Police should make themselves visible online to prevent the crime from happening but they should also work undercover to expose molesters who are secretly paying for the abuse, he said – for example the way the Terre des Hommes researchers did when they posed as 10-year-old Sweetie.

"I'm a big advocate of undercover operations but in Western Europe only few countries like the UK allow it," he said.

In the U.S., an FBI operation led to the arrest of Donald Snyder, a veteran, who exploited three young Philippino girls aged 7, 10 and 14 from his bedroom in Union City, California.

Snyder repeatedly chatted with a woman in the Philippines and arranged to watch via webcam sex shows of young girls. Snyder did not refer to the girls by their names but by their ages: "7," "10" and "14." He specifically directed the woman as to what he wanted the naked girls to do in front of the camera. He even sent money to the woman so that she could buy a digital camera and encouraged her to take more photos of the girls and sell them: "u send pic's to men like me and they pay u," he told the woman. "Get some pic of her in the shirt and no panties..." he said of the 10-year-old girl.

Later that month, Snyder, directed the same woman to take sexually explicit photos of the 7-year-old girl. "I want to see cute little p---y," he told the woman.

In many ways, the defense tried to portray Snyder as a decent man who had made serious mistakes: He was a man who enlisted in the Army in 1980, received two good conduct medals and an honorable discharge, according to the defense. He left the army to take care of his widowed mother after his father suddenly died of cancer and he worked several jobs to support his family, according to the defense. The defense also said that Snyder volunteered at a hospital and with the Union City Emergency Response Team.

Snyder has a twin brother and a sister. He has been divorced twice and had a daughter with his second wife. After his last divorce, he moved in with his 22 years older sister. In a letter to the judge, the sister mentioned that Snyder volunteered at her church.

"Don would do anything for anyone," she wrote. "He is a very caring person."

According to the sister Snyder became depressed and lonely and started to spend time by himself using online chat rooms, "which led him to the wrong people."

She said that Snyder had started attending meetings at a group called "Sex Addict Anonymous."

Snyder pled guilty to conspiring to produce child pornography. On January 25, 2011, Snyder, 47 at the time, was sentenced to 20 years in prison with lifetime, supervised release.

Snyder apologized for his actions in a letter to the judge.

"I have spent a lot of time thinking about what I did," he wrote. "Both why I would do something like this and how much harm it did to the victims and my family. I am ashamed of what I did."

Near the end of the letter he wrote:

"Sometimes you can forget that even when you on the computer in your own room, you can cause real harm to people."