



Vigilantes or public heroes? A look at online "predator hunters"

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ALTON - "To Catch a Predator" no longer runs new episodes, but the accessibility of communication created by the internet and its many apps and functions continues to allow potential sexual predators easy access to their underage victims.

News stories from across the country detail horrifying tales of underage teens utilizing dating apps such as Tinder and OKCupid to meet strangers. While each of these apps requires users to be 18 or older, some teens lie to get around the restrictions. Even after they reveal their true age, however, several would-be suitors are not fazed. Other potential predators use Facebook to send unsolicited messages to people they know are under 18. In many of these, potential predators offer to send or ask to receive illicit nude images or suggest the two meet in person.

Yes, these horror stories shown in screenshots around social media do in fact happen. That part is hard to dispute in the face of countless pieces of evidence. What should be done about it, however, is what becomes controversial. Attempted preying on children often invokes a visceral and primal reaction – especially from parents – demanding something be done immediately to ensure the safety of children and punishment of these would-be offenders.

Enter vigilantes. Predator hunters are becoming commonplace around the country. These people pose as underage victims and allow such pedophile mavens to come to them with sexual offers. While laws often prevent such methods from being viable for convictions or even charges, they seem to garner a huge following on Facebook. Posting of the names, locations and even phone numbers of these people (usually older males), can often lead to a sort of witch hunt.

According to the law of the land, people are innocent until proven guilty, and that guilt usually comes with a sort of plea followed by a verdict rendered by a jury of their peers.

That is followed by a sentencing to some sort of prison or probation based on the magnitude of the crime and how many times the offender has previously offended.

In the world of predator hunting online, however, such pleas and jury trials are almost archaic. The evidence is screenshots of people soliciting who they believe to be young women under the age of 18 for items of a sexual nature. When the number 14 is revealed, many of the men continue their conversation, excusing that fact with such tired cliches as “age is only a number, sweetheart,” or “you sure don't look it.” Their words are then posted for the entire world to see if they want. Their words are attached to their names and a photo of their face. There's no official guilt, and there's no censorship.

But does it work?

In the Riverbend, the most popular such predator hunter seems to be Kyle Swanson. Swanson operated a Facebook page with thousands of followers. On it, he posted screenshots of himself or one of his fellow nameless hunters having conversations with people they believe to be pedophiles, based entirely on the content of these messages, which nearly always seem incriminating.

Facebook, however, deleted Swanson's page and Swanson said he had his IP address blocked from creating more such pages on Facebook. Instead of a page, now, Swanson currently operates a closed Facebook group in which users must request entry. Within that closed group, Swanson's posts are joined by members of his online community, who suggest people he should target and post illicit messages sent from people to their children or other underage loved ones.

When asked, officials well-versed in charging and prosecuting such cases said Swanson's efforts create nothing more than Facebook traffic and attention for Swanson. These people asked to remain anonymous, but their credentials were provided to a reporter of Riverbender.com. They said what Swanson does will not ultimately lead to convictions, adding the posting of such conversations on a public forum may cause such people to be more cautious with their methods when speaking with an actual child with sexual intentions.

Before his page was deleted by Facebook for “violating its terms and services,” Swanson answered several questions sent via Facebook messenger by a reporter from Riverbender.com, so he could speak of his mission in his own words.



The Interview

RB: What is your name and how would you describe what it is that you do?

KS: My name is Kyle Swanson, what I do is online stings to catch local pedophiles in order to warn the public how many people are out there that want to harm our children.

RB: What got you started in the “To Catch a Predator” game?

KS: I started really by accident. A friend of mine was getting strange messages from an older man in O'Fallon, Illinois one day. She gave him my number, because she wanted me to get him to stop messaging her. I randomly told him I was 14. He kept insisting to still meet up. That lit my curiosity of how many adults that are out there like that.

RB: How do you do what you do? What media do you use? Who do you pretend to be? What do you say?

KS: We use all different types of social media. A lot of time we will make random dating apps you can find throughout the Apple and Google app stores We make an account, let them know of our age in our description, then we wait for people to message us. We will never message first. I don't want to disclose exactly what we say so we don't tip off predators.

RB: How often do people go along with it? I'm sure there are times saying you're not of legal age to have consensual sex results in people bailing. Tell me about that, too.

KS: In a typical day, I have at least two to three predators go along with the conversation and realize they were in the wrong and block us. At least one a day stays with the entire conversation and insists on meeting up. We do get plenty of adults that report us because of our age and stop talking immediately.

RB: Tell me about some of the most surprising messages you've received. I'm sure you've got some doozies.

KS: Some conversations we have we will never post, because they get way too graphic. I have men describing what they would do to the child. I have had a man say this wouldn't be his first underage female he has engaged in sexual contact with.

RB: Have you ever physically met up with these people, or is it all via digital communications?

KS: Illinois is a two-party state. To meet up with a person is very hard here. You must have permission to record audio of both parties. We have met up with a gentleman in Pontoon Beach, Illinois, once, but he acted like he did no harm. Our main goal is just to let people know who these guys are.

RB: Have any of your efforts resulted in charges or convictions? If not, tell me what your end goal is.

KS: We have been contacted many times by police departments. We have only started in early December (2018) and have only led to one conviction that we know of so far. I posted a status two days ago. From what I experience it's hard to get evidence pushed through in Illinois. In order to convict someone, you have to be very careful of what you're saying on our end, you can never ask for sex. The perpetrator has to do the talking, If this doesn't lead to an arrest, at least the public knows who they are.

My end goal is not only just to catch predators, but to be a part of our community and make it stronger. We also just started a campaign this morning to help homeless people throughout St. Louis during this cold winter. So not only am I helping keep these guys off the streets, I want to be there for the entire St. Louis and Riverbend area.

Will it continue?

While Swanson's efforts will seldom lead to charges and convictions, his followers will continue to seek his help. Many in his group lament what they believe to be the incompetence of law enforcement to properly convict these would-be sex criminals. They often post stories in the group of how criminal sex offenders get released from prison early on technicalities or only get limited sentences after being convicted. One posted a meme featuring a photo of bullets with the words "Cure for pedophilia" in white text above it.

Regardless of what the authorities and Facebook state on the matter, people such as Swanson and his followers will most likely have an audience and support, due to the instant gratification of shaming such potential offenders on a public forum. In such an emotionally-charged issue as childhood sexual abuse, people will continue to want condemnation with as little time and procedure as possible as long as they feel it protects their children.

To preserve his mission outside of the fickle hand of Facebook, Swanson recently established his own website. Fans of his work will be able to find him on www.KyleSwansonPredatorHunter.com as long as the domain remains active. Currently, more than a thousand people have joined his Facebook group, despite it being created only late last week.