

Teens Putting Themselves at Risk Online

By MATT APUZZO

NEW HAVEN, Connecticut (AP) - On Web sites such as MySpace.com, teenagers can find people around the world who share their love of sports, their passion for photography or their crush on the latest Hollywood star. But authorities say teens are increasingly finding trouble in an online environment where millions of people can, in seconds, find out where they go to school, learn their interests, download their pictures and instantly send them messages.

Police in the central Connecticut city of Middletown suspect that as many as seven girls were recently assaulted by men they met on MySpace. The FBI says it regularly receives calls from police trying to figure out how to stay ahead of popular technology that puts children a mouse click away from millions of strangers.

MySpace, one of several popular social networking sites, is a free service that allows people to create Web sites that can be personalized with information, pictures and movies. Searching for someone is as easy as typing the name of a high school and the photographic results are instantaneous.

"They're licking their lips and arching their back for the camera because they can, and they have no idea of the consequences," said Parry Aftab, an attorney and child advocate who runs WiredSafety.org, a site that helps inform parents and site managers about online predators.

MySpace said in a statement that it includes safety tips and prohibits children under 14 from using the site. Aftab said MySpace, a subsidiary of News Corp., has a great reputation for trying to keep the site safe.

Some teens keep their personal profiles scant, aimed only at their friends. Others describe their likes and dislikes, from the mundane to the profane, and encourage people to send them messages.

"That is a perpetrator's dream come true," said Middletown Police Sgt. Bill McKenna.

McKenna said several Middletown girls, between 12 and 16, told police they met men on the MySpace who claimed to be teenagers. When they met in person, he said, the girls were fondled or had consensual sex with men who turned out to be older than they claimed.

In at least one case, McKenna believes the assault happened at the girl's home while her parents were there.

Last month, 14-year-old Judy Cajuste was found strangled and naked in a Newark, New Jersey, garbage bin and 15-year-old Kayla Reed was found dead in a canal not far from her Livermore, California, home.

Both deaths remain unsolved and the use of MySpace.com has surfaced in both investigations.

As recently as a few years ago, Aftab said the profile of an online victim was a young woman who felt alone, didn't have many friends and craved attention.

Then, in 2002, 13-year-old Christina Long of Danbury was strangled in a Danbury mall parking lot by a 26-year-old man she met on the Internet. Long was a popular cheerleader, a good student and an altar girl. The profile went out the window.

Now, Aftab said, it's no surprise that a wealthy state such as Connecticut is seeing a spate of problems.

"This is a rich and upper-middle-class problem," Aftab said. "They have too much time, too much technology and their parents aren't around to keep an eye on them."

Connecticut's FBI office was the first in New England to launch an online, undercover program to catch sexual predators. Timothy Egan, the squad's supervisor, said parents often don't know their children are using these Web sites or what information is being released. The FBI hopes to train more local officers about these sites in coming months.

Chief State's Attorney Christopher Morano, who has strictly limited the information his 10- and 12-year-old children put on the Internet, said he was surprised to learn that they had been contacted by strangers they believed were pedophiles. His kids ignored it, Morano said, but parents need to closely monitor Internet activity.

"You wouldn't leave your kid on the side of the highway without supervision," Morano said. "You shouldn't put your kid on the Internet without the same type of supervision."