

SHINING LIGHT ON DARK SECRET

Cops making more child pornography arrests, but keeping pedophiles locked up is bigger challenge

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Staff Writer

The three-person Internet child porn team in York Regional Police's child abuse unit began last year by wrapping up the case against foster parent Wayne Relf.

In February 2004, the 50-year-old Keswick man was sentenced to 28 months in prison for making a video of his 13-year-old mentally disabled foster daughter taking off her clothes.

He also pleaded guilty to possession of child pornography after officers found more than 500 pornographic images on his computer, including graphic pictures of men having sex with toddlers.

Because of credit for time spent in custody prior to his sentence, Mr. Relf is already out on parole.

Technology has created a brazen new underworld for child pornography.

But investigators are also hoping technology will help them catch purveyors of child pornography around York Region and the rest of the world.

No doubt there was child porn before the advent of the Internet, just not as much of it, York Regional Police Det. Rob Thomson said.

It also wasn't as disturbing, according to one of his partners in the Internet child porn investigative unit, Det.-Const. Anthony Torressan.

"The victims have gotten younger and it has become even more violent," he said. "Whatever you can think of adults doing, they're doing it with children. Anything you can imagine."

The Internet has allowed pedophiles to buy, sell and trade images faster, more often and with relative impunity, police said.

As a result, chasing down child porn connections has kept York officers busy.

Investigators have spent the first three months of 2005 working on 21 cases and have made five arrests.

Last year, the team tackled 75 cases, busting eight people.

But the issue isn't any worse in York Region than anywhere else, Det. Thomson said.

Back in 1999, authorities in Texas discovered a live child porn website and managed to pull credit card records for thousands of the site's customers.

They shared the information with police around the globe in what became known as Project Snowball.

York Regional Police were handed 57 leads and made nine arrests from the information.

But Project Snowball is a thing of the past.

These days, investigators rely on tips from the public, leads from the National Child Exploitation Co-ordination Centre and information from the website Cyber-tip.ca, Canada's national tipline for reporting online child exploitation.

"We also get a lot of tips from spouses. Usually during breakups," Det. Thomson said. "And repair shops when somebody takes their computer in to get fixed."

Among high-profile arrests is a Vaughan taekwondo instructor busted on Internet luring charges in October 2004. He is accused of convincing a 12-year-old boy to strip in front of a web cam and doing the same himself.

In February 2005, a 64-year-old long-time York Region gymnastics and trampoline coach was charged with possession of child pornography.

Acting on a tip, police said they found more than 100 child porn images on computer hard drives in his home.

Just one month later, a swim coach, who teaches children as young as six in Toronto, was arrested at his Markham home and charged with possessing child pornography. Police seized a computer, CDs, discs and around 650 videotapes.

"It's unfortunate, but the kind of people that are into child porn like to put themselves in positions of trust and authority over children," Det. Thomson said. "And they're not going away."

There are ways, however, for parents to protect their children.

Det. Thomson suggests not owning a web cam unless it's absolutely necessary

and keeping the family computer in a place where a child's online activities can be monitored.

"You wouldn't let your 10-year-old wander around alone in downtown Toronto at night. On the Internet there's any number of strangers they could be talking to," Det.-Const. Torressan said. "Parents just need to educate themselves about what their kids are up to."

Parents should take advantage of the technology available as well, he said.

Check out your children's online contact lists so you know who they're talking to. There are several software titles allowing you to log every keystroke so you know what they're talking about.

"But, most importantly, sit down with your kids and talk to them," Det. Thomson added.

To identify victims, officers are forced to view every seized image. The work is so horrific officers are required to move to a different unit within six years.

In the meantime, officers try to remain professional in dealing with the kind of criminals even criminals detest.

"We all have strong families," Det. Thomson said. "And we lean on each other."

A first-hand account of the kind of images officers have to see was enough to convince Microsoft Canada to provide technological support.

The Child Exploitation Tracking System (CETS), designed by Microsoft, was

unveiled in Toronto last week and made available free to cops across the country.

Microsoft Canada got on board after receiving an e-mail from the head of the Toronto Police child exploitation unit containing graphic descriptions of images police had discovered.

Based at the RCMP's National Child Exploitation Centre in Ottawa, the system will be accessible to all Canadian police agencies, allowing investigators to trade and internationally cross-reference information.

The database will include e-mail addresses, credit card numbers and computer user names from cases across the globe, which police can match up with ones they are working on.

The hope is the \$2.5-million technology will save time and eliminate duplication in investigations, Det. Thomson said.

"It's going to be a great help," he said. "We have to keep up with the times. We know the bad guys are, so we have to."

But technology can only take police so far without help from the justice system.

Child porn possession carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison and judges have been reluctant to go there.

"A lot of times they're getting conditional sentences," Det. Thomson said.

"It's tough when you don't have the victims. Most of the time we're not bringing that little person into court so a judge can see them. Plus, they have to go by case law and a lot of the case law is conditional sentences."

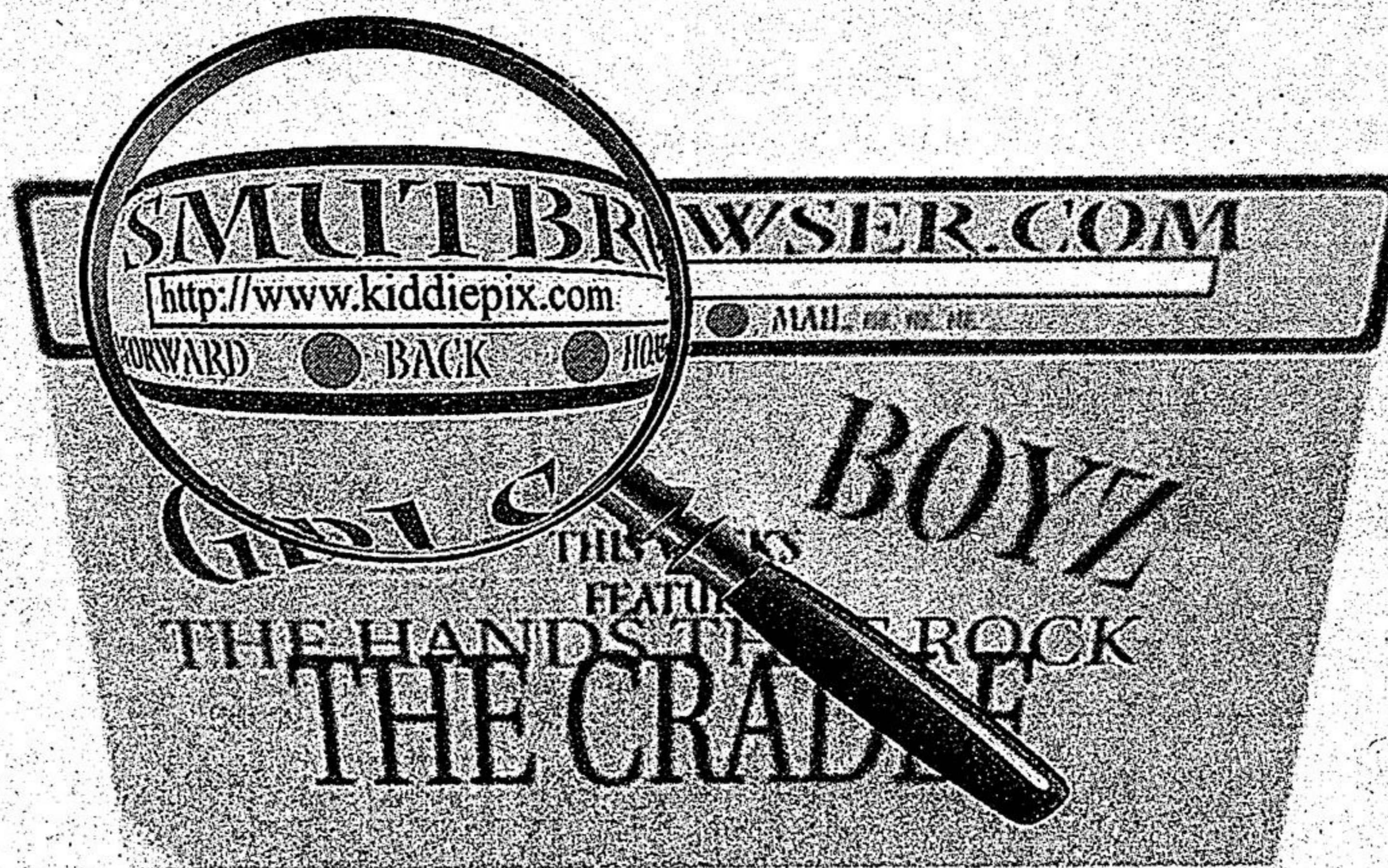


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