

# Police sex offender entrapment stings produce convictions without victims

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[By Michael Winerip](#) . . . Jace Hambrick worked as an apprentice laborer during the week, renovating homes around Vancouver, Wash., and at a neighborhood gas station on weekends. Much of the rest of his life was online. He was hard-core, amassing a collection of more than 200 games. People told him it wasn't smart to be so cut off from reality, but his internet life felt rich. As a dungeon master in Dungeons & Dragons, he controlled other players' destinies. As a video warrior, he was known online by his nom de guerre and was constantly messaging fellow gamers, particularly his best friend, Simon. Though the two had never met in person, over the last few years they paired up as teammates playing Rainbow Six Siege and Rocket League and grew close.

At 20, Hambrick was still living at home with his mother to save money for college, where he hoped to study game design. .

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The problem, he knew, was that he was a nerd. Sometimes he was too open with people. As a boy, he took medication for A.D.H.D. His mother, Kathleen, describes him affectionately as her “introverted, sensitive, immature, coddled, nerdy son.” They are very close. She would prod him to get out more, but he wasn’t someone who could meet women at a bar. Online, it was different. Starting when he was 18, a few times a month, he clicked through the Casual Encounters section of Craigslist, looking for sex. There were so many listings, but when he tried messaging, it was rare to get a response. If people did respond, they often went dark after a few emails. . . .

He once replied to a post describing an attractive 21-year-old, but when he arrived at the address she gave him, an old man answered the door. He got out of there fast. Every once in a while, it worked out: In the past few years, he had sex with five or six women he met this way.

One Friday after work in February 2017, Hambrick came across a Casual Encounters “w4m” (woman searching for man) post that seemed meant for him.

“Jus gamer gurl sittin’ home on sunny day,” it read. “we can chat as long as im not lvling!”

Hambrick emailed back. “Sounds like fun. What game you playin?”

“i am HOOKED on ALIEN ISOLATION,” Gamer Gurl replied.

“forget sex,” Hambrick wrote. “Let me come watch I haven’t gottn that one yet,” adding that he was 20. Fifteen minutes later, Gamer Gurl replied that she was 13.

Hambrick was confused. “why did you post an ad in craigslist if your 13? You mean 23?”

She asked for his cellphone number and they switched to

texting, exchanging photos. Gamer Gurl was beautiful, he thought, if he wasn't being pranked: Big eyes, cute white cap, soft smile, gazing up at the camera serenely with a really nice set of headphones. . . .

Was this an elaborate game? Again she claimed to be 13. The photo seemed to tell a different story, and the gaming chair she was seated in looked too expensive for a kid. . . .

Her driving directions seemed too specific for 13. Hambrick texted that he would be driving a red Prius – his mother's – and Gamer Gurl replied she would be wearing a gray sweatshirt and ripped jeans.

It was a 20-minute drive to the house in suburban Vancouver. After stopping for condoms, he arrived at 7 p.m., three and a half hours after their first emails. She came to the door just as she'd said, in torn jeans and gray sweatshirt, as beautiful as her photo. She didn't look 13 at all, more like she was in her 20s.

"You made it," she called out and waved for him to follow, court documents would later show. When he got inside, she disappeared down a hallway. Suddenly two police officers wearing bulletproof vests appeared from a back room, ordered him to lie on the floor and handcuffed him.

"What's going on?" Hambrick asked.

"We're gonna advise you you're under arrest."

"OK, why?" he said.

"We'll explain it all in just a moment," one of the officers answered.

"Is it possible I could talk to my mom?" he later asked.

"That's not possible right now."

**Since 2015, nearly 300 men in cities and towns across**

Washington State have been arrested in online-predator stings, most of them run by the State Patrol and code-named Operation Net Nanny. The men range in age from 17 to 77, though about a quarter are 25 or younger. As many as two dozen have been rounded up in a single sting and charged with attempted rape of a child, as Jace Hambrick was, even though no actual children were involved. The emails and texts offering sex are written by undercover officers. The "girls" in the photos are not 13. They are police officers, typically the youngest women on the force.

For law enforcement, stings are an efficient way to make high-profile felony arrests and secure convictions. In June 2016, John Garden, a State Patrol detective, emailed a fellow trooper about joining him on a sting in Spokane. "See if you can come play" and "chat some guys in," he wrote, according to a court filing. The conviction rate in cases that go to trial is about 95 percent, though most don't get that far. There is such shame associated with a sex crime, let alone a child sex crime, that a majority of the defendants plead guilty rather than face a jury. At least five of the men have committed suicide, including a 66-year-old caught in the same operation as Hambrick who then fled to California. As the police there moved to make the arrest, the man shot himself in the head.

An analysis of court records in Washington State stings, as well as interviews with police and prosecutors, reveals that most of the men arrested have no felony record. A strong predictor of predatory behavior is an obsession with child pornography, but at the time of their arrest, according to the State Patrol, 89 percent have none in their possession and 92 percent have no history of violent crime. They are nonetheless sentenced, on average, to more than six years in prison with no chance of parole, according to my analysis of the 271 arrests I was able to confirm. (State police calculate the average is just over five years.) Once released, the men are listed on the state's sex-offender registry for at least 10

years – and often for life. Almost all were caught up in Operation Net Nanny, although [the sting in which Hambrick](#) was arrested was a joint venture between the State Patrol and the Vancouver police.

The men caught in these cases can wind up serving more time than men who are convicted of sexually assaulting and raping actual children. While there are no statistics comparing sentencing among different states in such predator stings, Washington's criminal code has some particularly draconian provisions that result in unusually lengthy sentences. The legal standard for making an arrest in police stings is not high. Washington law allows undercover officers to use ["deception, trickery or artifice."](#) They can fake sympathy or friendship. The police need only demonstrate that their target took a "substantial step" toward meeting the undercover officer. In Hambrick's case, that step was following the officer into the house. It can also be stopping to buy condoms or even just parking near the sting house.

Jurors who serve in Net Nanny cases often express surprise that the defense doesn't argue entrapment. In fact, an entrapment defense is almost never successful in sting cases, according to Jessica Roth, a professor of criminal law at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law in New York. In most criminal trials, prosecutors present their version of events, and the defense lawyer tries to poke enough holes in their account to produce reasonable doubt in jurors' minds. But entrapment is an affirmative defense that effectively requires the defendant to admit wrongdoing ("Yes, I wrote those texts that talk about having sex with a 13-year-old") while at the same time arguing that he was manipulated by the police into doing something he wouldn't normally do (engage in talk about having sex with a 13-year-old). In entrapment cases, the accused often take the stand to give their side of the story, which rarely works in their favor. "Even the most law-abiding person, subject to cross-examination, can look unreliable,"

Roth says. Of the nearly 300 Washington State sting arrests, I was able to find only one case in which an appeals court threw out the charges on grounds of entrapment. . . .

[M]ost men caught in these raids pose a low risk to the public, according to Dr. Richard Packard, a past president of the Washington State chapter of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, and Dr. Michael O'Connell, a member of the state's sex-offender policy board, who have examined about three dozen men arrested in cyberstings around the state. They say that relatively few – maybe 15 percent of men they saw – pose a moderate to high risk. Many have addiction problems, suffer from depression or anxiety, are autistic or are, as O'Connell described them to me, simply “pathetic, lonely people.” He went on: “Some are in marriages where things aren't going great. They're socially inept, but this is the way of having sex and having a relationship. They're just stupid and making not very well thought out decisions. They weren't looking for kids, but there was this one ad that caught their attention.” And a sizable percentage of those arrested are themselves in their late teens and early 20s and may, according to current scientific research, exercise poor judgment because the regions of the brain that control risk taking are not yet fully developed. . . .

After Jace Hambrick was arrested, the police checked his criminal history. He had none. He gave them permission to examine his phone for child porn. They found none. He consented to a search of his vehicle. That didn't turn up anything either. He waived his Miranda rights and answered all their questions. . . .

They pressed him on why he wanted to have sex with a 13-year-old. He answered, repeatedly, that he didn't believe she was 13: Her picture didn't look like she was 13; he thought she might be a grown woman engaging in role play; people online lie all the time, so he went to see for himself; when a woman who appeared to be in her 20s opened the door, he followed her

inside for sex.

“I do not believe that you came here to verify if this girl was 21,” the detective said. “You couldn’t help yourself.”

“If she was 13, I was going to turn around and walk away,” Hambrick said.

**[Find out what happened to Jace by reading the full piece here at The New York Times Magazine.](#)**