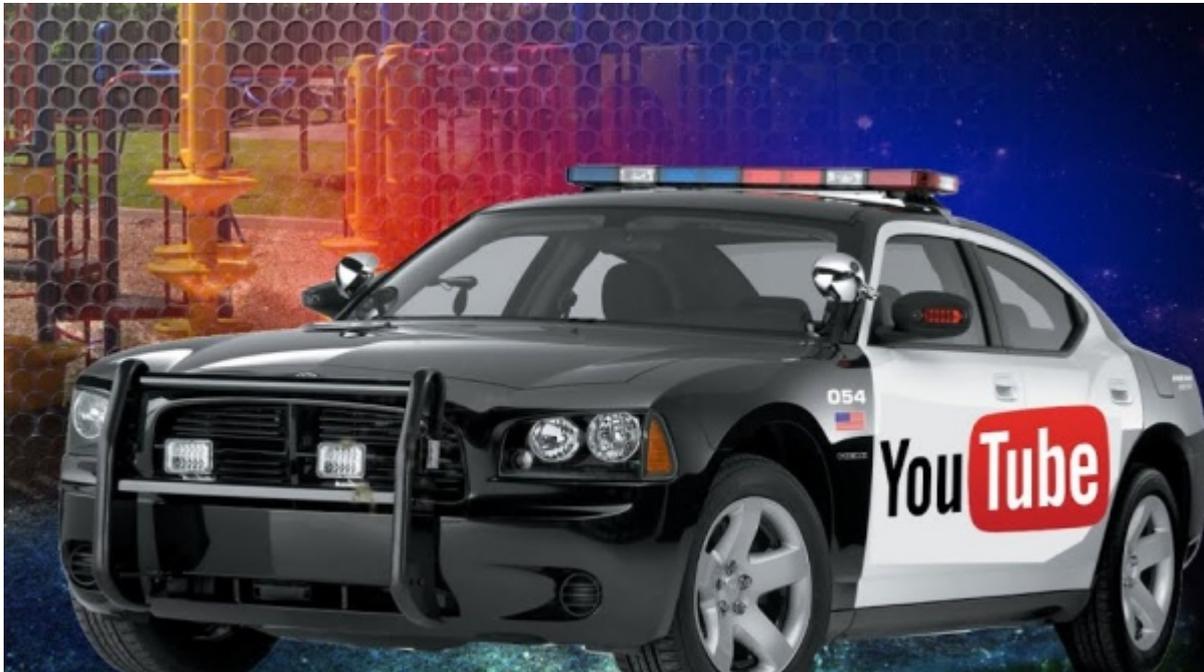


# YouTube vigilante faces charges stemming from “sting”

written by Matthew Snell | October 25, 2022



By Matt . . . A Minnesota man is facing sexual assault charges after a [May 2022 incident](#) in which the YouTuber claims that the alleged victim was coming to meet an underage decoy set up by his group, “Midwest Predator Catchers-Rochester,” on their **YouTube** channel. The victim in this case told law enforcement that he was chatting with a 15-year-old male and he told the juvenile that he did not want anything sexual. He said that the boy was having issues coming out as gay. Police in Rochester, Minnesota, confirmed that was a fair representation of the conversation and that the victim had no prior sex offenses. However, when confronted by a camera and the **YouTube** personality, the victim was hit in the face and genitals multiple times according to the criminal complaint. If convicted, the vigilante will be required to register as a sexual offender.

This is not the first time this man has had run-ins with law enforcement. Of the more than one hundred videos of stings performed by the group, only one has resulted in any arrest.

In that case the vigilante was arrested along with the group's target and charged with assault. The target was spit on and verbally threatened during the altercation.

This incident is just one of the growing number of vigilante sting operations around the country that target adults by using underage personas to try to lure adults into seemingly compromising situations. Authorities across the country have mixed views on vigilante sting operations, but the Rochester, Minnesota Police and Olmsted County Attorney's Office released the following joint statement: "RPD investigators have talked with Mr. Johnston several times and informed him that the best way to file complaints is through the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. NCMEC properly handles evidence and works closely with law enforcement..."

The **YouTube** group "MrWeb" has found law enforcement in the Garden State to be welcoming of the group's amateur sting operations, particularly in Atlantic City, New Jersey. In an [interview with NJ.com](#), MrWeb's creator, who lives in Florida, stated, "The police and the district attorneys (in Florida) unfortunately don't respond to me the same way. They actually hate that we do this." The vigilante leader stated that he travels to Atlantic City because law enforcement there appreciates his group's efforts. The police in Atlantic City in July 2022 arrested 17 individuals because of MrWeb's stings.

Localities in New Jersey, Connecticut, and California have a history of cooperating with vigilante sex sting groups. It is not always clear which specific localities cooperate with these vigilantes, and NARSOL was unable to confirm any statewide cooperation with these groups.

While some in the vigilante groups would have the public believe that their "sting" operations are altruistic, [MrWeb's YouTube channel](#), which has garnered over 66 thousand subscribers, offers membership levels ranging from 99 cents

per month to \$24.99 monthly. Another prolific channel that purports to conduct sting operations, "[People Vs. Preds](#)," has over 84 thousand subscribers and a "merch" store where fans can purchase \$18.99 ceramic coffee mugs and \$39.99 sweatshirts featuring the group's logo. The wave has reached across the Atlantic, with one group in the UK called "UKPP2 Predator Hunter" having membership tiers ranging from 99 cents to \$9.99 per month. Groups seeking to profit from these vigilante stings span the country, with one NBC report finding over 30 groups that focus on sex stings in the United States in 2019.

In 2008, [the infamous TV show "To Catch a Predator,"](#) from which the vigilante groups seem to take their inspiration, was taken off the air. A man set to be featured as a predator on the show committed suicide. A lawsuit was filed against the networks of the show, and the show was canceled shortly after. In 2019 The *Daily Mail* attributed at [least three suicide deaths](#) to vigilante groups operating over **YouTube**.

The darker side of these vigilante groups comes from their mistakes and oversteps. The sheriff in Sandusky County, Ohio, [released a statement](#) against such groups, saying regarding "Dads Against Predators" (DAP), a local vigilante group, "Its intentions may be well-intended, but their methods and outcomes are improper and unacceptable. The 'exposed' individuals may be exactly what DAP says they are, but they also may not be. DAP's careless and reckless regard for law and order and due process has resulted in the loss of life, and the situation has gotten out of hand."

The **YouTube** videos of the "stings," some of which have racked up over 1 million views, generally make no effort to blur the faces of the individuals or disclaim that they are innocent until proven guilty in a court of law. The vigilante groups have been accused of being aggressive and, in the most recent case, have allegedly sexually assaulted the people they are filming. Prosecutors from across the nation have pointed to the evidentiary issues with presenting the videos to a court,

and law professors have weighed in on the inadmissibility of such videos in some states.

No state has made statements of support for the vigilante behavior. To be sure, only certain localities support these types of operations. If the locality does arrest and prosecute persons using these videos, the victims of these stings face the prospect of prison time and registry. These sorts of "sting" operations, apart from being vigilante justice, contribute to putting people on a registry that does not work based on something they "might" do.