

Law enforcement internet “stings” – do they help protect children?

written by admin | December 20, 2022



By [Steve Yoder](#) . . . On July 8, 2018, Norman Achin, then a 50 year-old public school teacher living in Northern Virginia, signed up for the adults-only dating app Grindr. Two days later, he was contacted by someone calling himself AlexVA. Soon after they started talking, AlexVA told Achin that he was 14 years old. “I was looking for adult fun. Did not expect to run into your age,” Achin responded through the app on July 12. “Not interested in that kind of relationship with a boy.” The next day, he reported AlexVA to Grindr for violating its terms of use, and Grindr suspended AlexVA’s account.

In reality, AlexVA was a police officer in the Fairfax County Police Department who had been communicating with a number of men on Grindr as part of an undercover investigation.

On July 22, Achin sent a nude photo to the suspended AlexVA account—he says he doesn’t know how it happened and that he’d

been communicating with other Grindr users, all adults. Achin had made similar mistakes before. On July 12, he'd sent texts intended for another adult user to AlexVA. AlexVA responded but didn't tell Achin that he had the wrong person until they'd been exchanging messages for several hours. Achin apologized.

"You want something with an adult" he texted to AlexVA. "That's a bad idea. Don't you see?"

Despite Achin's apparent efforts to dissuade AlexVA from seeking sex with adults, he was arrested on July 23, and in May 2019 a Fairfax County judge found him guilty of using a communications device to solicit a minor.

State records show Achin had no prior criminal history, nor did the prosecutor introduce evidence at trial that he'd ever sexually abused children or possessed child pornography. Still, Achin was sentenced to seven months in prison and was put on the state's sex offender registry. He lost his job teaching at a public school and his pension. He now has a retail job and does gig work to make ends meet and pay off thousands of dollars of legal debt, he says.

Achin's arrest was part of a bigger trend in policing. From 2018 to 2020, law enforcement agencies across the country launched almost 2,500 such "proactive" sting investigations. These investigations are carried out by special task forces funded by the federal government as part of a national strategy to prosecute online sex crimes against children. (2020 is the last year for which data is available for most task forces.)

However, the law enforcement agencies that run these task forces receive funding based in part on how many arrests and convictions they get. This may create an incentive to pursue fictitious-victim sting operations, which are often cheaper and less time-intensive than investigations of crimes with

real victims. But experts on child trafficking say it's unclear how many crimes against children these stings actually prevent, and the federal government hasn't looked into whether the money spent on these task forces is actually keeping kids from being victimized.

[Read the full piece here at The Appeal.](#)