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Pedohunting: How vigilantes exacerbate the problem of child abuse

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Please note that although we don't think the term 'pedohunter' is an appropriate term, we will use this term throughout the blog given that this is the term used in the media. In other venues, we have also recently heard the terms "predator poacher" and "sexual predator hunters" used as well.

At the end of 2020, the [Netherlands](#) and [Belgium](#) were in an uproar over the disturbing and sometimes criminal actions of so-called 'pedohunters'. The term 'pedohunters' refers to individuals who pose as minors on social media with the aim of getting in touch with people who - allegedly- want to abuse children. As this was happening, many pedohunters made appearances on TikTok and Youtube, causing quite a stir in various countries. These individuals try to arrange an actual meeting with whoever has made contact with them. The pedohunters' aim is to 'teach them a lesson' and to publicly expose them by sharing the confrontation on social media where they might say: "You here to meet a 15-year old?". These altercations can involve threats, intimidation, and possibly serious violence, and even death. For instance, in [Arnhem](#), in the Netherlands, a man lost his life after being severely abused by several teenagers.

The goal of these pedohunters is to prevent child sexual abuse (CSA) by taking matters into their own hands. They state that the police and judiciary are failing to adequately address the problem. But aside from these "ideological" goals, other motives can also be delineated: Creating followers on social media, addressing boredom, connecting with peers, the search for an identity, and gaining social status. In addition, this phenomenon falls within a larger and more troubling trend of anti-pedophile vigilantism on social media platforms that can be observed worldwide.

Despite their "noble" motive – to save children from abuse – their behavior poses a wide range of judicial and societal problems. After all,



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The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy, and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment, and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are risk to abuse.

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simple solutions to complex problems rarely work. In fact, there are reasons to believe that their behavior might even exacerbate the problem of CSA. Although laws often don't strictly forbid the pursuit of people (alleged) to be a child abuser, the evidence they collect is often rendered useless for further police investigation and judicial prosecution. Citizens often lack the necessary knowledge of procedures and precautions to be considered in gathering and handling evidence, thus risking any further criminal procedures to be compromised.

In addition, people who could potentially abuse children are prematurely alerted by the actions of these pedohunters before law enforcement can take any action. Consequently, many cannot be prosecuted due to a lack of useful physical evidence and/or the absence of actual criminal behavior. Moreover, the pedohunter himself is often treading on very thin ice, especially when the confrontation is accompanied by threats, extortion, and violence. This often results in additional (investigative) work for the police and the judiciary, and – notice the irony – precious time that could otherwise go to the detection and prosecution of people who sexually abuse children is lost.

In addition, when people with bad intentions know that pedohunters are active to lure them into a trap, chances are high they will retract themselves into the shadows and dark corners of the internet. There they find recognition among like-minded people and end up in closed groups that society can no longer oversee. Feelings of isolation, social loneliness, and exclusion by society are factors that aggravate a person having not much to lose and consequently pose an even greater risk to society. Thus, while the goal, according to the pedohunters, is to prevent CSA, they presumably achieve the exact opposite.

Another underlying issue of pedohunting and the attention it gets from media is that by only focusing on strangers deemed to engage in CSA, we close our eyes to where CSA is really taking place and who engages in it. After all, the majority of CSA is committed by a family member, (family) friend or acquaintance, not by an unknown perpetrator (Finkelhor, 2012).

Another consequence of these hunts on social media is that CSA and pedophilia are far too often carelessly lumped together. Only about 50% of people committing CSA exhibits a pedophilic preference (Schaefer et al., 2010). Furthermore, a Dutch report shows that in all persons suspected of CSA who were subjected to psychiatric/psychological assessment, only 20% exhibited a paraphilia, including pedophilia but also others; thus 80% did not manifest any paraphilias (Nationaal Rapporteur Mensenhandel en Seksueel Geweld tegen Kinderen, 2014). In addition, it is assumed that numerous individuals with pedophilic interests manage to live an offense-free life. Thus, the dogmatic belief that *'pedophiles must be hunted down at all cost'* is erroneous and has major consequences for non-offending individuals with sexual interests in children.

So, if this dogmatic belief persists and communities support these vigilantes, changes become even smaller than individuals with pedophilic interests will dare to discuss their feelings, interests, and worries. The misconception that pedophilia by definition leads to CSA is not only very stigmatizing for people with pedophilic interests; it does not contribute to prevention. People with pedophilic interests do experience multiple barriers for seeking help because they fear that professionals would react negatively, report them to the police, or misunderstand their problems. Enhancing this stigma will only render them more reluctant to seek help and support. And when help is needed but not sought or not found, this is when situations may become risky. Given the numbers of people reaching out to support groups, it is simply not accurate to say that these are people who uniformly seek out opportunities to offend.

So, what is the right approach to prevent CSA? Offender treatment and various prevention programs, like Stop it

Now!, have already proven their importance and usefulness. By reaching out to those who are concerned about their (pedophilic) sexual feelings and/or behaviors towards minors and offering support for their problem, CSA can be prevented. Vigilantes hunting them down is clearly not the solution to the CSA problem.

References

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