

NY Man Gets 6 Years In Prison For Accessing Child Sex Images

BY TAMI ABDOLLAH
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A New York man was sentenced Thursday to six years in federal prison for receiving and accessing child pornography, according to the Justice Department.

Kirk Cottom, 45, of Rochester, New York, pleaded guilty in an Omaha, Nebraska courtroom on Aug. 3 to accessing images of child sexual exploitation on a locally-operated website.

Authorities said Cottom accessed the site on what's known as the dark web through a special address entered into Tor, an anonymous online network that helps mask a user's activity.

Cottom's personal computer contained more than 600 images of child exploitation and evidence of significant online history accessing child porn websites.

He is the 19th man convicted as part of an ongoing investigation targeting three child porn websites on Tor.

Tor was originally developed for protecting U.S. Navy communications.

A representative didn't immediately respond to an emailed request for comment.

The three websites had a total of 13,000 members and were dedicated to child sex exploitation, according to a senior Justice Department official who provided details on the cases on condition of anonymity to speak freely. The official showed reporters several screen shots of the sites and users' conversations over message boards. One website included a sidebar of categories advertising preteen boys, "MJB" or male jail bait and a "babies/toddlers" section, as well as areas to request more photos of specific boys or girls.

A rules section included the description of one site as "a communication tool for fellow pedos (pedophiles) to discuss their interests and share content." One rule advised that "bestiality is allowed only if it involves children or jb" (jail bait) and another advises against snuff or gore.

The operator of the websites, Aaron McGrath,

was sentenced to 20 years in prison last January, after he was convicted of engaging in a child exploitation enterprise. FBI agents found McGrath in his bedroom on his laptop, in the midst of administering one of the sites when they served the search warrant. They were able to seize the laptop before he closed it and activated its encryption.

The sites hosted thousands of files depicting child sex exploitation images or videos. One site had more than 28,000 files, another 6,000. Users participated in message board conversation that serves as a sort of support group for their activities, discussing the latest popular video participating in polls.

Among the 18 other men convicted was Timothy Defoggi, then 56, of Gaithersburg, Maryland, who was the acting director of Cybersecurity Operations for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. He was convicted of engaging in a child exploitation enterprise and accessing with intent to view child pornography

and sentenced to 25 years in prison in January.

Last June, Jason Flanary, then 42, of Chicago, Illinois, was sentenced to 20 years in prison after pleading guilty to engaging in a child exploitation enterprise for traveling to the Philippines and Guam to create child porn images he posted online for others to view.

Wesley Cameron, then 22, of Ashford, Alabama, was sentenced to 15 years in prison last October for offering to produce images of his unborn daughter; his partner was unaware.

A military judge sentenced a 28-year-old staff sergeant to 20 years in prison after he pleaded guilty to engaging in sexual contact, indecent liberties and conduct with a minor and producing and possessing child porn in the only case that didn't get prosecuted in Nebraska. The AP is withholding the name of the man convicted because it could identify the victim.

Justice Department officials estimated that more than half-a-dozen victims were rescued or saved because of the operation.

Nebraska State Agency's Payment Errors Under Scrutiny

BY GRANT SCHULTE
Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. — A Nebraska agency that serves developmentally disabled people faced tough questioning Thursday from lawmakers who recently learned of payment errors that cost the state millions.

The division's new leader said the state has repaid nearly \$20 million to the federal government because it mistakenly paid service providers at rates the federal government hadn't yet approved.

The developmental disabilities division absorbed some of the cost by pulling money from its community-based services aid, but still expects to ask lawmakers for \$11.3 million during the legislative session that begins in January.

Courtney Miller, the newly appointed head of the state's developmental disabilities division, said state officials discovered the errors and voluntarily

reported them to the federal government to avoid additional penalties.

The division "is committed to a transparent, inclusive approach to addressing the challenges presented to you today," Miller said in testimony to a special investigative committee.

Miller said state officials enacted the new rates in July 2014, but the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services didn't approve the rate methodology until July 2015. The difference between the rates the federal government had approved and what the state paid totaled about \$19.6 million.

In addition, Miller told lawmakers that the state also has to refund nearly \$1 million in federal money that was used for a state ward pilot project. The money should have come from the state instead.

Lawmakers on the committee voiced concern about the errors and questioned whether they could happen again.

"What did we do wrong, and how are

we going to stop ourselves from doing this in the future?" said Sen. Burke Harr of Omaha.

Sen. Al Davis of Hyannis asked why the spending wasn't overseen by someone who could have caught the mistakes.

Miller, who was chosen as the division's permanent director this month, said many of the problems originated under the administration of former Gov. Dave Heineman. Miller said the division is working on reforms and is advertising for a new finance director to replace staff members who have left.

Sen. Kate Bolz of Lincoln said that despite the problems, the programs themselves served a worthy goal. The state ward pilot program was designed to keep more neglected children with their families as long as steps can be taken to keep them safe.

"There were some timing issues, but a lot of the things we've done are in the best interest of the state," she said.

Snowstorm Moves Out Of The Dakotas But Problems Linger

BY BLAKE NICHOLSON
Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. — Rural electric cooperatives in central and southern North Dakota were still trying Thursday to restore power to homes and businesses left in the dark by a two-day snowstorm.

Verendrye Electric Cooperative in the Minot-Velva area, which lost about 64 power poles during the storm, reported about 80 customers still without power Thursday afternoon. Four other co-ops affected

by the storm reported that either all of their customers had electricity or only a handful were still waiting.

"We are very happy about that," said Mor-Gran-Sou Electric Chief of Staff Jackie Miller. "The weather is finally cooperating. The sun is shining today."

The outages, caused by heavy frost on electrical wires, numbered more than 4,000 at one point during the storm, which began early Tuesday and moved out late Wednesday.

About 80 outages also were reported at one point

on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Tribal officials reported only "spotty" outages Thursday morning and hoped to have everyone back online by the end of the day, said Richard Smith, a regional director for the American Red Cross.

Only one of the four emergency shelters that were opened on the reservation during the storm was still operating, he said, and residents were using it only as a warming place and not for permanent shelter.

"They're resilient people," he said.

The storm dumped a foot of snow in western South Dakota, more than half a foot in eastern North Dakota and lesser amounts in other parts of the two states, creating hazardous conditions for motorists.

The state Transportation Department on Thursday afternoon issued a travel alert for Grand Forks, Cavalier, Michigan, Cooperstown, Drayton and surrounding areas due to icy road conditions.

Several schools in northeastern North Dakota and northern South Dakota started classes late Thursday.

Freddie Gray Mistrial Tarnishes Image Of Baltimore Police

BY JULIET LINDERMAN
Associated Press

BALTIMORE — The Baltimore Police Department is a clear loser in the no-win situation left by a hung jury in the state's first effort to convict an officer in the death of Freddie Gray.

Both defense attorneys and prosecutors portrayed the department as so dysfunctional its officers either aren't aware of mandatory orders or ignore commands without consequence. First responders described being unfamiliar with first aid. Officers said they only check their email once a month, on old computers that barely work.

When Gray finally arrived at the Western District station injured and comatose, Officer Zachary Novak testified that he tried to revive him with a "sternum rub" — a pain stimulus that involves grinding the chest with a fist. "I was never qualified to do it. I just saw it a few times in my career," Novak said.

The jury deadlocked Wednesday on all four charges against Officer William Porter: manslaughter, assault, reckless endangerment and misconduct. Prosecutors portrayed Porter as a callous officer who intentionally failed

to buckle Gray into a seat belt and didn't call an ambulance even after Gray indicated he needed medical aid. But Porter said officers rarely belted prisoners, if ever, despite their general order requiring them to do so. He called it common practice to avoid calling ambulances.

Witness after witness told similar stories reflecting institutional failures and chaotic, dangerous situations. Young officers on patrol weren't adequately trained or mentored, they said, and simply tried to do their best despite next-to-no experience. Porter even described how his academy training was disrupted when a teacher accidentally shot a student during an exercise.

Prosecutors sought to show that a single officer failed in his duty. The defense exploited deep fissures between the police and the people of Baltimore, saying the department failed its officers as well as the city it's designed to protect.

As the three-week trial progressed, jurors got schooled in aspects of policing that rarely show up on TV.

"The case is emblematic of a bigger issue: In the wake of scandal, the bureaucrats roll out an official police department that doesn't really exist,"

said Eugene O'Donnell, a former officer who teaches at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. "Cops are alienated from the public, like in Baltimore. But in every department, cops are often alienated from their own bureaucracy, and that's a huge issue."

Officer Mark Gladhill testified that he had never belted a prisoner, and couldn't recall any of his emergency medical training, let alone what he should do when prisoners struggle to breathe. Officer Matthew Wood said he had never seen anyone buckle a prisoner in a van during more than 100 arrests.

Prosecutors said such testimony reflects a "culture of silence" in which police protect their own, but that argument could have backfired. If the problem is bad barrels rather than one bad apple, "we want the entire institution to be held accountable," said Brian Garrett, a University of Virginia professor who specializes in policing and civil rights litigation.

"We know police departments have a bad culture of tolerating brutality, but it's incredibly difficult to challenge a culture in a court case. It's these officers who are on trial, but the reputation of the

police department was irreparably damaged when Freddie Gray died."

Baltimore's history is already rife with allegations, investigations, lawsuits and expensive court settlements over how officers treat people on the streets and in custody.

As mayor from 1999-2007, Democratic presidential candidate Martin O'Malley championed aggressive policing in response to endemic crime. The NAACP and ACLU sued, blaming systemic abuse of power for the arrests of thousands of people without probable cause.

The city settled in 2010 for \$870,000, agreed to retrain officers and publicly rejected zero-tolerance policing, but complaints continued: A Baltimore Sun investigation last year revealed the city had paid roughly \$5.7 million in police brutality settlements, involving 102 instances of excessive force, since 2011.

Abuses linger in the collective memory of neighborhoods like Sandtown-Winchester, where Gray was arrested when he tried to flee from officers. His neighbors said it can be safer to run from police than risk interacting with them at all.

EU Sets Deadline To Rule On Border Plan

BRUSSELS (AP) — European Union leaders on Thursday set a six-month deadline for deciding whether to push ahead with plans for a border guard agency that could deploy to member states unable or unwilling to manage their borders as thousands of migrants continue to arrive in Europe daily.

The border and coast guard project is chiefly aimed at protecting Europe's external borders in countries like Greece and Italy as people fleeing conflict or poverty for better lives in Europe overwhelm coast guards and reception facilities.

In a statement released during their summit in Brussels, the leaders tasked EU ministers to "rapidly examine" the scheme and to rule on its future by June 30 at the latest, side-stepping a potentially divisive debate on Thursday over the issue.

While the leaders note that "it is indispensable to regain control over the external borders" of Europe, the idea that the agency could send personnel, ships or planes to a country even if that nation opposes the deployment is reviving old fears about a loss of national sovereignty to unelected officials in Brussels.

Countries farther north in Europe like Germany and Sweden — the preferred destinations of many migrants — are particularly keen to have tighter controls along Greece's twisting maritime border with Turkey to ease the flow of people, as is France.

Buyer Of Guns Charged With Terrorism

RIVERSIDE, Calif. (AP) — The man who bought the assault rifles used by his friend in the San Bernardino massacre was charged Thursday with terrorism-related counts for plotting an earlier attack that was aborted.

Enrique Marquez, 24, was charged with conspiring to provide material support to terrorists. The charges allege he plotted with gunman Syed Rizwan Farook to launch attacks in 2011 and 2012 at a community college and a congested freeway at rush hour, but they never carried out their plans.

Marquez also was charged with illegally purchasing two assault rifles that Farook and his wife, Tashfeen Malik, used to kill 14 people at a holiday meeting of Farook's health department co-workers on Dec. 2.

The shooters died hours later using those same firearms in a gunbattle with police.

Marquez was working at a Riverside bar at the time of the shooting and is not alleged to have had a role in the attack, but prosecutors said he was linked to the killings by the guns and bomb-making materials he bought that the couple planned to detonate.

House OKs Tax-Cut Package

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans overwhelmed divided Democrats to whisk tax breaks for businesses, families and special interests through the House on Thursday as Congress sped toward final votes on a year-crowning budget accord that will also bankroll the government in 2016.

The tax measure, approved 318-109, includes political coups for both parties. More than 50 expiring tax cuts will be extended with more than 20 becoming permanent, including credits for companies' expenditures for research and equipment purchases and reductions for lower-earning families and households with children and college students.

"Finally with this tax bill, families and businesses are going to have the long-term certainty that they need instead of scrambling year after year to find out what's next," declared House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis.

Ryan, who just six weeks ago succeeded the deposed former Speaker John Boehner, all but claimed the bill's passage as a personal triumph, citing it as an example of his drive "to get our House back on track." The Senate aimed to approve the tax bill Friday.

Both chambers also planned Friday votes on the second leg of the budget compromise, a \$1.1 trillion measure financing government, after which Congress was ready to adjourn until January.

Exec Who Jacked Up Drug Price Arrested

NEW YORK (AP) — A boyish-looking entrepreneur who became the new face of corporate greed when he jacked up the price of a lifesaving drug fiftyfold was led away in handcuffs by the FBI on unrelated fraud charges Thursday in a scene that left more than a few Americans positively gleeful.

Martin Shkreli, a 32-year-old former hedge fund manager and relentless self-promoter who has called himself "the world's most eligible bachelor" on Twitter, was arrested in a gray hoodie and taken into federal court in Brooklyn, where he pleaded not guilty. He was released on \$5 million bail.

If convicted, he could get up to 20 years in prison. He left court without speaking to reporters. His attorneys had no immediate comment.

Online, many people took delight in his arrest, calling him a greedy, arrogant "punk" who gave capitalism a bad name and got what was coming to him. Some cracked jokes about lawyers jacking up their hourly fees 5,000 percent to defend him in his hour of need.

Prosecutors said that between 2009 and 2014, Shkreli lost some of his hedge fund investors' money through bad trades, then looted Retrophin, a pharmaceutical company where he was CEO, for \$11 million to pay back his disgruntled clients.

Activists In Hiding After IS Group Killing

ISTANBUL (AP) — The killing of the young Syrian activist took place close enough to his home in southern Turkey that his youngest brother heard his piercing scream. Ibrahim Abdelqader's attackers stabbed him dozens of times and left his partially decapitated corpse hanging from a doorframe.

His family and colleagues say he was killed by a secret operative from the Islamic State group who befriended him before the attack. The message from IS was clear: Its enemies are not safe, even across borders.

More than a month after the slaying of Abdelqader and his friend Fares Hamadi, the media collective that Abdelqader belonged to — which secretly documents life at the heart of the Islamic State group's self-proclaimed caliphate — has been forced into deep hiding.

IS claimed responsibility for the killings in a video message warning that "every apostate will be slaughtered silently." It was a grim riff on the media collective's name — Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently, a reference to the Syrian city of Raqqa that has become synonymous with IS and its efforts to build a caliphate.

Last month, the activist media group received the 2015 Committee to Protect Journalists' International Press Freedom Award for its work in one of the most terrifying cities of the world, monitoring IS and countering its steady stream of propaganda with factual accounts.

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