

## **Porn studios raided to ensure adult-only casts**

By Claire Hoffman / Times Staff Writer / January 12, 2007

The Federal Bureau of Investigation has recently stepped up raids of porn studios in the San Fernando Valley, saying it wants to ensure that children are not being sexually exploited. About a dozen porn production facilities in pornography hot spots such as Van Nuys and Chatsworth have been taken by surprise in the last three months by a barrage of federal agents at their doors. The probes come on the heels of a May 2005 change in the regulations that require producers to take two forms of government-issued identification from performers and keep them on file indefinitely. Those records must be referred to on the labels of all videos and DVDs sold. Violations are federal felonies and can carry a prison sentence.

The Justice Department has prosecuted only one company to date under the new law, said Bryan Sierra, a spokesman for the department. In September, the founder of the "Girls Gone Wild" video empire, Joe Francis, pleaded guilty to two felonies, and his production company pleaded guilty to 10 additional felony counts. Industry leaders doubt that the FBI will find many other violators. Jeffrey J. Douglas, a criminal defense attorney and the chairman of the Free Speech Coalition, an industry trade organization, estimates that there have been only about a dozen occurrences of minors working in the industry in the last 25 years.

Public policy experts wonder whether the raids are the best use of taxpayer money. "The FBI has limited what they investigate since 9/11, so moving into this area does raise the question of resources," said Athan G. Theoharis, a professor emeritus of history at Marquette University who has written extensively on the FBI. "Is this at the expense of investigating the Enrons or the WorldComs that have far more effect on the lives of American citizens?" Theoharis said the crackdown on pornography hearkened back to the bureau's early days, when J. Edgar Hoover boosted the FBI's reputation with a high-profile campaign of prosecution against pornographers and prostitutes. "It was sort of a PR move at the time to burnish their image and it reflected American sensitivities," he said.

The current crackdown may not unearth the biggest violators, according to industry executives. The worst offenders of child pornography, they say, are not the well-established producers the FBI has targeted but the underground, fly-by-night operations that by all accounts escape examination. "Why would I jeopardize \$10 million a year to shoot an underage girl?" said Kevin Beechum, owner of K-Beech Inc., a longtime producer and distributor of X-rated movies based in Chatsworth that was raided in December. "We're not stupid."

Early one morning, computers in hand, the agents knocked on K-Beech's door, demanding to see government-issued identification certifying that the performers in 10 sexually explicit films dating to 1995 were not minors. The company was found to be in compliance.

The FBI would not comment on the scope of its probe or the facilities it has visited. But the agency takes issue with questions about the effectiveness of the raids. "If their feeling is there's nothing to worry about, then complying with the inspections shouldn't be a problem," Sierra said. He said to his knowledge the inspections had taken place only in California. He would not elaborate on whether any inspections had led to criminal investigations. He said those instances had all been the result of fraud fake identification presented by performers with the intention of deceiving producers. "If you were so incredibly crazy to film a minor, you surely would not get a copy of their junior high school ID," Douglas said.

Although the public perception of porn producers often tends to be that of a wild and unseemly underworld, many of the Valley's X-rated entities are tightly run multimillion-dollar companies. Douglas said that complying with the rules had buried X-rated producers in paperwork. He said one of his clients employed a staff of eight who worked full time to maintain and organize federally required records. The surprise visits from federal agents began in earnest after an October meeting between the FBI and the Free Speech Coalition, along with representatives from six of the Valley's largest porn companies including mega-producers Vivid Entertainment, Larry Flynt Publications and Digital Playground, along with three porn industry lawyers, according to a person who was there who asked not to be named because the meeting was confidential.

The agents gave a slick presentation on what to expect, warning the producers that they would be visiting facilities at random, with a minimum of five agents, the person said. They were told that the inspectors would be equipped with images assembled by a group of agents who were reviewing tapes pulled from adult book and video stores, culling material in search of performers with a suspiciously youthful glow. Steven Hirsch, founder of Vivid Entertainment, the world's largest adult entertainment company, said that large porn purveyors such as his had been militant about record keeping and age verification for years, dating to the scandal surrounding Traci Lords, a 15-year-old girl who lied about her age during the 1980s, shot dozens of porn films and rose to become a celebrated porn star before she turned 18. After word of her real age leaked out, federal authorities cracked down on the industry and prosecuted production companies and others involved in her career all of which denied any knowledge of her deception. Hirsch said the scandal cost the industry millions and put the fear in producers throughout the Valley. "The FBI is being decent and fair about it," Hirsch said. "But I don't think it's an issue. There's plenty of girls of age who are willing to do this."