

Teen describes life as Web porn victim

House panel told 1 of 1,500 customers has been arrested

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- Justin Berry, who for five years appeared in his own webcam child pornography business, told a House panel Tuesday that the Justice Department is moving too slowly to round up 1,500 pedophiles whose information he surrendered last year.

"I believed that the government would protect the children being abused. I believed they would act quickly," Berry, now 19, told the House Energy and Commerce Committee. "I was wrong."

Justice Department spokesman Bryan Sierra disputed that, citing a threefold increase in federal prosecutions of child pornography and abuse cases nationally over the past decade. The unit investigating Berry's case, which Sierra could not discuss, has seen its workload increase 450 percent in the last four years. (Watch Berry describe how taking off his shirt became much more -- 2:49)

"One of law enforcement's highest priorities is the protection of innocent children from sexual predators who lurk on the Internet," Sierra said. The same committee will hear from the Justice Department, among other federal agencies, on Thursday.

Berry's story of a lonely teenager who sought friends on the Internet but instead grew rich attracting pedophiles was reported in December by the New York Times after a six-month investigation. Its author, Kurt Eichenwald, told the Energy and Commerce Committee on Tuesday that Berry is the first such teenage witness known to turn over such a vast cache of evidence to the government.

But Berry's catalog of his clients' names, credit card numbers and other details has resulted in only one arrest, he and Eichenwald said.

"From the time that the government was notified of Justin's information to the point where the children in direct danger were saved, more than 50 days passed," Eichenwald told the panel. "Some people identified as perpetrators literally could not get themselves arrested if they tried."

Berry embarked on his sordid journey into the world of pedophilia and drugs when at 13, living in Bakersfield, California, he acquired a Web camera as part of a deal with an Internet service provider. A lonely kid of a divorced family without many friends, Berry hoped to use the device to make friends his own age. Instead, a pedophile sent him an instant message within minutes of Berry's image landing on a Web site called Spotlife.com. More followed; then men worked to earn his trust.

"At 13, I believed these people were my friends," Berry told the panel. "They were kind. They complimented me. They wanted to know about my day." A few weeks later, he said, "everything changed" when one man proposed to pay Berry \$50 to take off his shirt for a few minutes in front of the webcam. The man helped Berry set up an account with Paypal, an online money payment system.

Last June, Eichenwald approached Berry for a story he was doing on Internet pornography. Berry agreed to help with the story and tell law enforcement what he knew about other children being exploited. But the Justice Department and other massive federal agencies were slow to respond, Berry and Eichenwald told the House panel. Berry said he has feared for his life.

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