

Inquiry into child sexual abuse on Meta platforms leads to arrest of three men

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Three men have been arrested and charged with sexually preying on children via Meta's social networks in New Mexico, the state's attorney general announced on Wednesday. The arrests stemmed from an investigation into the potential harm to children caused by Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, codenamed "Operation MetaPhile". Undercover agents posed as children, whom the three men solicited for sex, according to the criminal complaint. The sting operation is part of an ongoing lawsuit launched by Raúl Torrez's office in December that alleges Meta has allowed its social media platforms to become marketplaces for child predators. "This operation was focused on one specific point, that is the danger presented by Meta, and its social media platforms don't just exist in the virtual world. They actually endanger children in the real world," Torrez said at a press conference. On Tuesday, Marlon Kellywood, 29, was arrested outside a motel in Gallup, New Mexico, and charged with child solicitation by electronic communication device and attempted criminal penetration of a minor. Earlier the same day, Fernando Clyde, 52, was arrested and charged with the same crimes. "This is Mark Zuckerberg's fault; this is the fault of executives of a company that has extraordinary resources at its disposal and has chosen time and time again to place profits over the interests of children," said Torrez. When approached for comment, Meta issued a statement: "Child exploitation is a horrific crime, and we've spent years building technology to combat it and to support law enforcement in investigating and prosecuting the criminals behind it ... We use sophisticated technology, hire child safety experts, report content to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and share information and tools with other companies and non-profits to help root out predators across the many platforms they use." The men had allegedly sent "extraordinarily graphic" material that was "truly horrifying" to the undercover agents they believed to be girls as young as 12 years old using Facebook Messenger. The third man, Christopher Reynolds, 47, is a registered sex offender and was brought into custody several weeks ago, Torrez said. Undercover investigators turned their focus to him after concerned parents reported he was targeting their 11-year-old daughter. He has been charged with child solicitation. "They expressed quite clearly a sexual interest in children," Torrez said. "These are individuals who explicitly used this platform to find and target children." The agents posing as children did not initiate conversations about sexual contact, per Torrez. Instead, they were all located and contacted by the three men charged, he said, who were able to find children through the design features on Facebook and Instagram. Since the New Mexico lawsuit was filed in December, Torrez's office has updated the legal filing several times to include a list of fresh allegations. Internal Meta documents obtained by the attorney general's office as part of its investigation have also revealed that the company estimates about 100,000 children using Facebook and Instagram endure online sexual harassment each day. The lawsuit also alleges Facebook and Instagram have been profiting from

placing corporate adverts from companies such as Walmart and Match Group next to content potentially promoting child sexual exploitation, citing internal company documents and emails. The suit follows a two-year Guardian investigation, which revealed that the tech giant was struggling to prevent people from using its platforms to buy and sell children for sex. In January, Torrez told the Guardian he wants his lawsuit to provide a platform to introduce new regulations that would see Meta change how it does business and “prioritize the safety of its users”. Meta has filed a motion to dismiss the lawsuit.