Facebook to close U.S. prison inmate accounts

Alex Dobuzinskis, Reuters

Facebook has begun closing the accounts of California prison inmates after a convicted child molester viewed the pages of his victim from behind bars, authorities and the social networking site said.

Facebook has shut down the accounts of at least two prisoners and officials are working on identifying other accounts that had been accessed from behind bars, said the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

Though most prisoners in California do not have access to the Internet, they often log onto the Internet with contraband cell phones, despite an effort to crack down on the devices, corrections officials said.

California corrections officials, who formally announced the partnership with Facebook Monday, said they have received hundreds of complaints from victims who were contacted by prison inmates behind bars.

They include the convicted child molester, who prison officials said viewed the Facebook and MySpace pages of his victim, then mailed her family some drawings of the girl, officials said.

The victim was 10 years-old when she was molested and 17 when she was contacted by the offender, who had used the Web to learn how she wore her hair and her brand of clothes.

"Really, they're just limited by their imagination, you've got high ranking gang members shot-calling, ordering crimes to be committed on their behalf," California Department of Corrections spokeswoman Dana Toyama told Reuters.

Palo Alto, California-based Facebook lets inmates use the website if they are located in a state that allows them to access the Internet.

But since California prohibits inmates from using the Web, the company confirmed that it is working with state officials to remove them from Facebook.

The policy will not apply to inmates who created an account before they were sentenced and have not used it while incarcerated.

Facebook's policies prohibit an individual other than the registered user from updating a Facebook account, which happens occasionally when an inmate asks a friend or family member to access their page.

"We will disable accounts reported to us that are violating relevant U.S. laws or regulations, or inmate accounts that are updated by someone on the outside," Facebook spokesman Andrew Noyes said in a statement.

California has seen the number of contraband cell phones taken from inmates jump from 261 in 2006 to 10,760 last year, which shows the problem is increasing. "We're on track to way surpass last year's numbers," Toyama said.

Earlier this year, mass murderer Charles Manson was caught for the second time with a phone at a California prison.

(Reporting by Alex Dobuzinskis; Editing by Dan Whitcomb and Greg McCune)

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