

# Crime fighting is no job for amateurs

Jenny Wiltshire

The police have been sending mixed messages to vigilante paedophile hunters, who risk putting children at harm.

Vigilantism has been a hot topic because of the Stuart Highway storyline in the BBC soap EastEnders.

Even the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) responded to the storyline, warning the public not to take the law into their own hands. While so-called paedophile hunters have existed for years, only now are we waking up to just how far this brand of vigilantism has been allowed to go.

The police are guilty of sending mixed messages to vigilantes. In September Chief Constable Simon Bailey, the council's national lead for child protection, said that paedophile hunters were putting the lives of children at risk, yet he indicated that he was open to working with them.

At the same time, NPCC internal guidance tells officers that "it is not recommended ... in any way" to endorse activities of vigilante groups, but on the other hand says that prosecutions on the basis of evidence gathered by vigilantes are possible.

Concerns over child protection are understandable. Inadequately resourced police forces cannot investigate quickly enough to make the internet a safe space. Yet it is not clear that vigilantes are helping.

While the police use evidence gathered by paedophile hunters, it is unclear whether that evidence is central to charging decisions. NPCC guidance states that the quality of such information is "frequently low and significant output is required to develop it".

Worse, online hunters can undermine police investigations, according to the NPCC.

There is a risk that child victims could be exposed to harm when a suspect who has been confronted by vigilantes wants to ensure further evidence of his offending remains hidden. The NPCC points out that vigilantes "have no way of safeguarding child victims".

Other problems exist. Should the police entrap a suspect, the defence will make an abuse of process argument, normally ensuring that evidence gained via entrapment is deemed inadmissible.

However, when the entrapment has been carried out by vigilantes, no such argument can be made. It seems nonsensical that rules to protect suspects should cease to apply when those wielding power over suspects are vigilantes.

Confrontations between vigilantes and suspects have led to suicides and attacks. The live-streaming of confrontations oppresses suspects. Public shaming is not in line with the presumption of innocence. The rule of law depends on punishing the guilty according to the law, not to the tastes of one group.

Vigilantes are not vetted. In 2013 the Association of Chief Police Officers said "one of our worst fears is that groups such as these are infiltrated by the very people they are trying to identify".

Multiple paedophile hunters have been arrested for blackmail. Another was accused of giving inaccurate and misleading evidence in court. Another was reported to have dressed as Batman before handing evidence to police.

It is time to ask whether these are the right people to investigate serious crime.

Ministers must decide whether creating a framework for regulating vigilantes or adequately resourcing the police is the safer option.

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