Illinois sheriff posts fake ads for prostitution that nab 570 men in nationwide sting

By Associated Press
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CHICAGO -- A sting operation led by an Illinois sheriff, who once went after websites that allowed ads for prostitution, ended on Super Bowl Sunday with the arrests of hundreds of men around the United States who did not realize the online ads they were responding to had been posted by police.

In all, the ninth "National Day of Johns Arrests" resulted in the arrests of 570 men. Of those, 408 were taken into custody after answering fake ads placed in Backpage.com. Another 40 were arrested as a result of fake ads posted on Craigslist.

Among the police departments to participate was the one in Phoenix, just a few miles from where the Super Bowl was played -- and where authorities say officers arrested 22 so-called johns as well as several women who told police they'd been trafficked to the area in the days leading up to the big football game. The day after the game, Phoenix officers announced they'd arrested former Hall of Fame lineman Warren Sapp on suspicion of soliciting a prostitute, though Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart's office said the arrest was not a result of the sting.

Dart said the sting was successful because investigators used the same technology the sex trade has increasingly relied on.

"It used to be we'd stake out corners, make arrests there, get license plates (of pimps) so we could track them," he said Tuesday. "But now with the Internet, they can set up dates with computers at different sites, transfer money, use cash cards and aliases, so it is much harder to connect the woman to the guy she's working for."

This year's operation -- the ninth one since Dart launched it four years ago -- was the largest yet. It lasted about two weeks before ending the day of the Super Bowl and involved 37 law enforcement agencies in 17 states.

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The sheriff sued Craigslist in 2009 for running what he called the "largest source of prostitution in America." The site vowed to drop its erotic services section and monitor future adult ads, and a judge threw the lawsuit out.
The 570 arrests from the latest sting bring the total arrests the operation has netted since the first one in 2011 to more than 2,900. The operation also resulted in 23 suspects being charged with pimping, sex trafficking or promoting prostitution. A news release from Dart's office said 68 women and juveniles who were victims of human trafficking were "rescued."

The johns paid more than $340,000 in fines and police seized 18 weapons while making the arrests, the release said.

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