

KNOWING THE SEX OFFENDERS IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

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You can find anything on the Internet, right? Even the names and addresses of convicted child sex offenders?

Maybe yes and maybe no.

The premise of community notification when a convicted child molester is released from prison started in New Jersey. Maureen Kanka had no idea when she let her 7-year-old daughter Megan go outside to play that a convicted sex offender lived nearby. The rape and murder of Megan in 1994 led to the first Megan's Law here in New Jersey, a law eventually passed in other states.

So where do you find the names and addresses? That was the question raised by a reader, who e-mailed me to say: "My daughter is trying to find the Web site for the local sex offenders in her neighborhood. She can't locate it. Is it published?"

The central clearinghouse for information on Megan's Law and the location of sex offenders around the nation seems to be www.stopsexoffenders.com. This group offers links to Web sites and laws in states across the country. The Web site for the Klaas Kids Foundation (www.klaaskids.org) -- named after the abducted and murdered child Polly Klaas -- offers similar information.

Via the Stop Sex Offenders Web site, you can, for example, search the North Dakota attorney general's sex offender Web site either alphabetically (by offender's name) or by ZIP code.

At Arizona's Web site, you can search for sex offenders within a certain distance of a given address: your home, for example, or your child's school. Arizona also has a list of "absconders" -- sex offenders whose whereabouts are unknown.

New York has a 900 number sex offender registry hot line. For a fee of 50 cents, you can inquire about up to five individuals. The caller must have the individual's name and at least one of the following: the individual's street address and apartment number, driver's license number, Social Security number, or birth date.

In July, acting Gov. Donald T. DiFrancesco signed legislation to create a Megan's Law registry Web site in New Jersey. But just a few weeks ago, a federal judge decided that New Jersey's Web site could not list the addresses of convicted child sex offenders. The Web site -- which is supposed to be up and running within the month -- can list the name, county of residence, and the make, model, and license plate number of the sex offender's car -- along with a photo of the person.

But listing the house number, street name, and town in which he lives would be a violation of the offender's constitutional right to privacy, the judge ruled.

Here's the national backdrop: Some 30 states already have Internet sites, and all but three include the sex offender's street address.

Certainly, there are limitations to these online sex offender registries. They generally list only the so-called "high risk" and "moderate risk" offenders. So the guy down the block who molested his own children or stepchildren would likely not be included.

Plus, as an Associated Press survey in California pointed out, approximately 30 percent of sex offenders in that state were living somewhere other than where they were listed with the state. People move, and they don't always let the state know.

Right now, in New Jersey, when a low-risk offender is released back into the community, only the local police are told. For an offender judged to be a moderate risk, schools, Scout troops, and other child-oriented organizations are told. For high-risk offenders -- those repetitive and often violent offenders who lure children they don't know into their snares -- neighbors are notified, but those neighbors are supposed to keep that information to themselves.

Some praise this delicate balancing act between an offender's right to get on with his life once he's done his time and families' right to protect their children. child play in the yard or go on a playdate, I'd want to know who's been convicted of child molestation in my area, including the guy down the block who abused "only" his own kids.

Yes, I know, as parents, we have to exercise utmost vigilance at all times.

But, as it is, to exercise that vigilance in New Jersey, we'll probably have to go around with license plate numbers and grainy reproductions of photos of offenders from our county and neighboring ones.