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## After 2 Cases in Florida, Crackdown on Molesters

By [ABBY GOODNOUGH](#)

**M**IAMI, April 30 - With a bill on a broad new crackdown on sex offenders awaiting Gov. Jeb Bush's signature, Florida will soon begin the nation's most aggressive monitoring of child molesters at a time when dozens of states and localities are re-examining their policies.

In sharpening their statutes, many jurisdictions are deciding that federal mandates, approved after highly publicized sex crimes against children in the 1990's, are not enough. Florida's renewed focus comes 12 years after Congress voted to require every state to establish a registry of sex offenders and nearly a decade after it passed Megan's Law, which orders law enforcement officials to notify communities about sex offenders in their midst.

As lawmakers contemplate just how far they can go to close loopholes that present themselves as new crimes are committed, tough questions abound on money, privacy and practicality. As Roxanne Lieb, director of the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, which tracks sex offender laws around the country, put it: "The issue is, what can you do short of putting them all in prison for the rest of their lives?"

States and counties are increasingly turning to electronic monitoring of freed sex offenders to try to make sure they stay away from schools, playgrounds and other places where children congregate. While the norm is to monitor only the most violent offenders, Florida's new law, which takes effect in September and will cost \$13 million in the first year, will require those who molest children younger than 12 to wear satellite tracking devices for life once they leave prison.

The law, which Governor Bush plans to sign Monday, will also force those offenders to stay in prison longer, establishing minimum sentences of 25 years for anyone convicted of "lewd and lascivious" acts against a child. That is roughly three times the average sentence currently imposed on child molesters in the state, according to the Florida Department of Corrections.

Other states are also considering increased supervision of child sex offenders, including more frequent visits from parole officers and limits on where offenders can live and work. Legislation pending in Illinois would require lifetime supervision of some serious offenders instead of the current three years. Ohio now lets local prosecutors evict sex offenders who move within 1,000 feet of a school, and New

Mexico requires sex offenders to submit DNA samples.

Laura A. Ahearn, executive director of Parents for Megan's Law, a national organization based in New York, said the best measures, such as longer sentences and lifetime supervision, are often dismissed as too expensive.

"It's a lot easier for lawmakers to say we're going to solve the problem by putting a bracelet on their ankle," Ms. Ahearn said. "They're stepping up to the mike and making political promises, but they want to get re-elected and they won't raise taxes."

Ms. Ahearn praised Florida's move toward longer sentencing for child molesters, though, and said that even before the new crackdown, the state had some of the harshest policies against sex offenders. There are more registered offenders here, about 35,000, than in any state but California and Texas.

The Legislature, which originally required sex offenders to remain on the registry for 10 years, increased it to 30 years under the new law. In New York, more than 3,000 offenders are scheduled to come off the registry next year, though Gov. George E. Pataki recently proposed keeping every offender on it for life.

Florida also has a costly law, enacted after a 9-year-old boy was raped and killed in Homestead in 1995, authorizing the indefinite confinement of offenders after their sentences expire if they have been defined as "sexually violent predators."

Though some 20 states have similar laws, Florida keeps among the most offenders, about 475, in confinement. The offenders are supposed to be treated until they are deemed fit to rejoin society, but the law has been met with criticism because few of those detained accept treatment and few are ever released.

Though every new sanction is meant to stop sex crimes against children, critics say many are largely symbolic efforts. Electronic monitoring, for example, is not failsafe because an offender can remove the device. Longer sentences are also no guarantee because children are often too young to testify accurately, allowing many offenders to plead guilty to lesser crimes.

"If they think it's going to help that much, they're ripe for a fall," John Skye, an assistant public defender in Hillsborough County in Florida, said of the Legislature and the new law. "Instead of creating new laws, I think we should be focusing on how to prevent these people from becoming the way they are."

The legislation was spurred by two recent cases in Florida. Because the men charged in the murders of Jessica Lunsford, 9, and Sarah Lunde, 13, were already registered as sex offenders, there is also renewed national interest in tightening registration compliance.

Ms. Ahearn's group estimates that of more than 500,000 registered offenders nationwide, up to a quarter are missing. John E. Couey, the man charged with killing Jessica, did not inform the state when he

moved to her neighborhood north of Tampa.

Under Florida's new law, offenders will have to check in at their local county jail twice a year or face felony charges. Other places have begun requiring offenders to provide exact home addresses instead of proximate ones, as well as workplace addresses, Ms. Ahearn said.

There is little consistency from state to state: some put photos and highly specific details about every offender on the Internet, while others provide information about only the most serious offenders or none at all. In Norfolk County, Mass., residents can sign up to receive e-mail messages alerting them when a sex offender moves nearby.

In Florida, curiosity about the registry and community notification rules has grown markedly since the deaths of Jessica and Sarah, state officials said. People searched the online registry more than two million times this month, up from 450,000 times in February, according to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

In Miami Beach, officials want to ban sex offenders from living within 2,500 feet of schools or parks, instead of the 1,000 feet required by state law, making it nearly impossible for offenders to reside there.

In some states, civil libertarians have tried to limit the posting of personal information on public registries and have fought the aggressive notification of communities about offenders. Howard Simon, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Florida, said lifetime satellite tracking of every child molester was too much.

"It ought to be decided on a case-by-case basis by a judge," Mr. Simon said.

Though some experts say that safeguards like electronic monitoring are pointless without treatment, research on its effectiveness remains spotty. State Senator Gary Siplin, a Democrat from Orlando, said he would push for Florida to provide more treatment for convicted molesters. But now, he said, was not the time.

"Their judgment is clouded right now," Mr. Siplin said of his colleagues, "which I understand, because it just doesn't make sense what happened to the little girls."

Still, Mr. Siplin said, "If people are in jail for however many years and get out and still have those desires and urges, they are going to harm someone else."

*Lynn Waddell contributed reporting from St. Petersburg, Fla., for this article.*