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Where is a sex offender to live?

Almost everybody wants them out of the neighborhood, but most people in the area live near one.

By BRADY DENNIS and MATTHEW WAITE

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Nobody wants them.

No matter the city, no matter the street, nobody wants a sex offender in the neighborhood.

But the fact is, 9 of 10 people in Pinellas, Hillsborough and Pasco counties live within a half-mile of a sex offender. With more than 2,600 offenders in the three counties, they live virtually everywhere.

These days, so does fear.

Since the murders of Jessica Lunsford and Sarah Lunde, residents have inundated the state's online database that tracks sex offenders. Phone calls to the sex offender hotline have tripled. Sex offenders' photos are popping up on street signs and telephone poles.

In Hernando County, one commissioner wants the photographs and addresses of sex criminals posted in public parks. The city of Oldsmar plans to list the Web address for the sex offender registry on water bills.

At a meeting Monday in Indian Rocks Beach, Jessica's father, Mark Lunsford, encouraged city leaders to drive sex offenders out of town.

"They are a nuisance on society," he told city commissioners. "Tell them to get out."



[Times file photo: Steve Thompson]

These signs went up in a New Port Richey yard when homeowners learned that a sex offender was living in the neighborhood.

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As the fear mounts, hard questions arise:

Where are they supposed to go? Who is willing to take them in? And how worried should we really be about the sex offender down the street?

* * *

The stigma of being a sex offender severely limits housing options. Any residence within 1,000 feet of schools, day care centers, playgrounds, parks or school bus stops is off-limits if the crime involved a minor.

So, offenders cluster in poor neighborhoods, staying in motels, apartments, mobile homes or anywhere that will take them, according to a Times analysis of sex offender data. The clusters tend to follow major thoroughfares such as Interstate 275 in Tampa and St. Petersburg and U.S. 19 in Pinellas and west Pasco.

Sex offenders end up there not only because of their financial situation, but because laws further restrict where they can live.

A recent study of 135 sex offenders - 95 of them from Tampa - found that upon their release from prison, half had to move because of legal restrictions. Nearly a fourth said they had to sell their home because of the 1,000-foot law.

"I couldn't live in an adult mobile home park because a church was 880 feet away and had a children's class once a week," one offender said.

But sympathy for sex offenders is in short supply. If anything, most people, alarmed by recent events, want them farther away than ever.

* * *

Standing outside a friend's house on 13th Avenue in St. Petersburg, Alisha Guice looked over a map of nearby streets, dozens of purple dots marking the home of sex offenders.

"There's so many of them and they're so close," said the 24-year-old Guice, whose extended family includes many children. "I think they should all be gated up. They're sick people."

Though a common sentiment, it is nearly impossible to distance yourself from every sex offender.

"You're going to find one in just about every neighborhood," Deputy Scott Summers of the Pinellas sheriff's sex predator/offender unit said recently.

That hasn't stopped people from trying.

Treasure Island is considering putting pictures of sex offenders on the city's cable-access TV channel.

The mayor of Miami Beach proposed an ordinance this month that would add 1,500 feet to the 1,000-foot barrier around schools, playgrounds, bus stops or places children gather, making the beach community off-limits to child sex offenders.

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City officials from Port Richey to Pembroke Pines have pondered similar proposals, despite questions about constitutionality. Zeal, rather than restraint, has dominated the debate.

"I don't really care where they live," North Miami resident Joe Celestin told the Miami Herald recently. "At this point I don't care if they live out of civilization."

* * *

How dangerous is the sex offender down the street?

The truth, unpopular as it may be, suggests some of the angst may be a bit overblown.

Jill S. Levenson, assistant professor at Lynn University in Boca Raton and one of the authors of the study on sex offender housing, said the Lunsford and Lunde cases are scary but also "very, very rare."

"What it looks like to the public is that every single person who has ever been convicted of a sex crime is a potential kidnapper and murderer," she said. "That just isn't the case. Not all sex offenders are the same."

As a group, they are 98 percent male, usually white, an average height of 5 feet 9 inches tall and 180 pounds. Most have brown hair, brown eyes. And, according to sex offender data, 70 percent of them have victimized a minor.

But that last figure is misleading. It lumps together, for example, a pedophile and an 18-year-old man who had sex with his underage girlfriend. On the state sex offender list, they are the same.

Hillsborough prosecutor Mike Sinacore says most offenders are not the stereotypical "rapist lurking behind the bushes."

"That's a different kind of person," he said.

Many sex offenses are crimes of opportunity in which an adult is supervising a child, he said. Frequently the victims know attackers through family or friends. Attacks by strangers are rare.

In fact, two federal government studies in the 1990s found that up to 80 percent of sex crime victims knew their attacker.

And while some experts say as many as 50 percent of sexual offenders are likely to abuse again, Wayne Porter would disagree.

Porter, a former profiler for the Florida Department of Law Enforcement who now gives polygraph tests to sex offenders in several counties, says that with supervision, the recidivism rate for sex crimes may be lower than 4 percent.

He said re-offense rates can "dramatically drop" with a combination of therapy, supervision and restrictions on where offenders live.

"Just having someone monitor their behavior and keep them in check is extremely important," he said.

Particularly, one study says, when they are in clusters.

The Colorado Department of Public Safety conducted a study in 2004 that showed sex offenders who live together, under supervision, tend to keep one another in line.

The findings were so significant that the department actually recommended having sex offenders live together.

Of course, not everyone would be willing to take on such an experiment.

* * *

John Watson is willing.

"Somebody needs to look at them with a little more compassion," the 60-year-old Tampa man says. "They've got to live somewhere."

Watson owns the Home Life Center on 138th Avenue in Tampa, a pair of rooming houses that usually are home to about 15 sex offenders, according to the state database.

Neighbors have complained.

"There's probably no other crime that's despised more than (sex crimes), even murder," Watson said. "I understand people's feelings. What are you going to do? Just isolate them somewhere and put leg braces on them? Or are you going to offer them help?"

Many people would choose the former. But sex offenders must live somewhere.

That's where people like Watson come in. He advocates strict monitoring but insists most are not repeat offenders or the violent attackers that garner media attention.

"You hear about the few that create the most problems. . . . There is another side to it," he said. "There are people that are sincerely trying to get their lives back together."

He offers the men reasonable rent and an optional Bible study each week. Most attend "because they sincerely want to."

He has found a friend in Pastor Tollie Elder of the Lutz First Church of the Nazarene. Last year, Elder began welcoming sex offenders into the congregation, which has no children.

Several members left. But most stayed. On most Sundays, the church gets half a dozen offenders, and Elder teaches a Sunday school class just for them.

"I'm not soft on sex offenders," said Elder, 68. "But we open the doors of our church to everyone that will come."

He, too, understands the hysteria that has gripped the public in recent months.

"It is justified," Elder said. "I have grandchildren that I don't want molested. All it takes is one."

But he points to people such as Watson.

Preventing even one sex offender from harming again may save some little girl's life, he says.

"That's where we're coming from."

Times researcher John Martin contributed to this report.

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