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Rethink sex offender bans

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On the same day the New Jersey Supreme Court heard arguments on how to treat juvenile sex offenders, the Plainfield City Council banned sex offenders from living within the city's six square miles. Plainfield joins more than 53 other municipalities across New Jersey with similar laws.

While undoubtedly motivated by a genuine interest in protecting children, many of these laws are simply wrongheaded. Given the complexity of the cases and the vast differences among those who stand convicted of sex crimes, a more nuanced response is needed.

The case before the state's high court involves a man, now 19, who as a 12-year-old used a douche bottle to give himself and his 6-year-old half-brother an enema. An appeals court concluded his behavior was experimentation, not sufficient to warrant Megan's Law notification. Now the Supreme Court will decide whether to uphold that decision.

But the case illustrates an important point: Convicted sex offenders aren't all the same. Clearly some are more dangerous than others. Take the juvenile at the center of the court case. Should he be banned from his home town?

It may be a mistake to push all sex offenders away from what may be the only support system they know -- critical to preventing these offenders from committing more crimes, according to therapists.

Moreover, if every town bans sex offenders, the likely result will be that offenders simply won't register, a trend that is already emerging.

Since the 1994 murder in Hamilton Township of 7-year-old Megan Kanka by a convicted sex offender, a crime that rightly angered and outraged New Jerseyans, fear has driven public policy. People who are ordinarily reasonable are willing to support proposals that are not.

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