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Long Island

False Security on Sex Offenders

Hide your children, and pass out the measuring tapes. Lawmakers on Long Island, doing their part to prevent sexual abuse, are busily weaving a tight web of laws restricting where convicted sex offenders can live and lurk. The laws, like others around the country, are a sort of geography-based epidemiology, treating each sex offender as a one-man roaming toxic zone that must be kept at a rigorous distance from places where children gather.

The distances vary, with Suffolk County (a quarter-mile from schools, day-care centers and playgrounds) and Nassau (1,000 feet from schools, 500 feet from public parks) setting benchmarks that some communities are emulating. East Rockaway includes “any school, place of worship, child day-care center, community center, public library, public park, playground and other recreational facility” in its 1,000-foot no-go zones. The City of Long Beach is considering similar legislation, and since restricted areas would include its long, long beach, sex offenders could effectively be driven entirely out of that skinny city. Huntington Town is jumping on the bandwagon, with a bill expanding on Suffolk’s list of restricted places and forbidding offenders to own or live in houses used as apartments.

The first thing that needs to be said about laws like this is that they are a sham. There is no evidence linking buffer zones to a reduction in sex crimes, and no way that buffer zones will do anything about the bulk of the sex-offender problem, which is the abuse of children by relatives and other people they know. The laws are simplistic, emotion-based formulas that cloak politicians in an aura of decisiveness while doing nothing to tackle a ferociously difficult problem.

The second thing is that they are a dangerous waste of law-enforcement time and resources. Police departments are already obliged under a welter of federal and state laws to register and monitor sex offenders. Prosecutors and sheriffs around the country have complained that adding map-reading and buffer-zone enforcement to their large and growing offender-management portfolios only hampers their ability to fight crime.

The final and most important point is that buffer zones and housing restrictions send offenders underground. We may all find these men fearsome and creepy, but if communities systematically banish them, denying them the chance to find housing and to lead stable lives under close supervision, they end up doing the logical thing. They congregate in unincorporated poor areas. Or they disappear.

Lawmakers stress how important it is to keep children safe. But the laws they are trumpeting risk turning sex offenders into unstable, rootless individuals, harder to track and arguably more dangerous.

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