

# What You Need to Know About Sex Offenders in Your Community



**COPS**  
COMMUNITY ORIENTED POLICING SERVICES  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

NATIONAL CENTER FOR  
  
**MISSING & EXPLOITED**  
CHILDREN

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The Internet references cited in this publication were valid as of the date of this publication. Given that URLs and websites are in constant flux, neither the author nor the COPS Office can vouch for their current validity.

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE  
OFFICE OF COMMUNITY ORIENTED POLICING SERVICES  
Office of the Director  
145 N Street, N.E., Washington, DC 20530

**COPS**

*Dear Colleagues,*

*Few things frighten a community more than learning that a sex offender has moved into the neighborhood. With more than 740,000 currently registered sex offenders in our nation, community members are often anxious to know what they can do to protect their families. However, there is much misinformation and confusion as to the community's role regarding sex offender management.*

*Community residents are vital partners to law enforcement regarding this issue, and I am proud to offer this basic guidebook to help educate, inform, and empower residents to help ensure the safety of their families and communities. Uniquely written in a Q&A format, this guidebook poses five questions community members commonly ask law enforcement. The thought-provoking responses are intended to help residents address their concerns surrounding the presence of sex offenders in their communities.*

*Dispelling myths and instilling a sense of community ownership will help communities understand their role in sex offender management. Through the significant work of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) is pleased to offer this resource to help community members take an active and informed role in ensuring public safety.*

*Sincerely,*

*Bernard K. Melekian, Director  
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services*

## **Acknowledgments**

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### **Principal Author**

Stevyn Fogg, Research Team Supervisor, Case Analysis Division

### **Contributors and Reviewers**

Kristen Anderson, Executive Director, Training & Outreach Division

Staca Shehan, Director, Case Analysis Division

Brenda Brown, Special Project Coordinator, Training & Outreach Division

### **NCMEC Publications Team**

**2008–2011 law enforcement recipients of the Child Sexual Predator Program (CSPP)—**  
Funded through the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)—  
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## Introduction

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A June 2011 survey of sex offender registries conducted by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's (NCMEC) Sex Offender Tracking Team revealed there were approximately 740,000 registered sex offenders in the United States and its territories.<sup>1</sup> Despite increased knowledge and awareness surrounding sex offenders and increased media attention, many families are still unaware sex offenders reside among them or know what to do when they become aware any one of their neighbors may be a sex offender. Moreover, residents of communities are sometimes overlooked as partners in efforts to help ensure their safety from new or repeat crimes committed by those same sex offenders. As the “eyes and ears” of any community, residents, in fact, can and do have specific roles for helping to ensure the overall safety of their families, homes, and communities.

This guide outlines common questions and concerns people have about sex offenders and their role in sex offender management. Included is helpful information designed to:

- Highlight the important issues related to sex offenders in the community
- Outline the community's role in sex offender management
- Inform, educate, and empower residents
- Provide specific steps that can be taken

The most important thing to remember is that residents are essential partners in any efforts to manage sex offenders in their community.

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1. In an effort to determine the number of registered sex offenders in the United States, NCMEC conducts biannual surveys with the state and territorial sex offender registries. On the basis of the most recent survey, conducted April through May 2011 and finalized in June 2011, the cumulative total of registered sex offenders was determined to be 739,853.

## Background

Knowledge and awareness surrounding sex offenders has increased greatly in the past 20 years due, in part, to federal sex offender laws enacted between 1994 and 2006. Federal laws led to the passage of state<sup>2</sup> laws and created a climate of concentrated support for sex offender registries and awareness.

Megan’s Law and the Jacob Wetterling Improvements Act authorized community notification in a manner and method of discretion to individual states. Thus, great variability exists in how communities are notified, which agencies notify them, and what information is disseminated. A number of strategies—from programs and initiatives to publications and websites—have arisen in response to this variability, all focused on helping to ensure public safety and offender compliance.

Regardless of the resources available, inquiries made to law enforcement representatives should focus on these five concerns:



Many law enforcement agencies have strategies for communicating with their residents about sex offenders. Recipients of funding and support through the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) Child Sexual Predator Program (CSPP) report primarily using their agency websites, community meetings, and social-networking sites to communicate crime-prevention initiatives in general. Other mediums include brochures and pamphlets, guides, public-service announcements on the radio and TV, community newsletters and local newspapers, billboards, and a combination of these methods to get the word out about sex offenders and other relevant information of interest to the community. The fundamental message, whatever the method, is that residents are essential partners in managing sex offenders in every community. Likewise, residents should be a part of the activities that bring about solutions within their communities.

The following section lists responses to the questions commonly asked of law enforcement and other officials. The answers are intended to serve as a starting point for residents to educate themselves about the issues and challenges surrounding sex offenders.

2. Unless otherwise noted this guide uses the term “state” to also include American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the District of Columbia, Guam, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The authors have attempted to identify and note any situation in which specific programs, laws, or definitions may not include some or all of these territories.

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## Answers to Commonly Asked Questions

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Although many efforts exist to inform residents about the issues and challenges surrounding the presence of sex offenders in their community, education is still extremely important to clarify the issue. These first few statements are designed to frame the issue, so the answers provided below to the commonly asked questions have context.

As of June 2011, approximately 740,000 currently registered sex offenders reside in communities nationwide. Given this number, it is important to further define the term sex offender and understand the definition of a sex offense:

*A sex offender is “an individual who was convicted of a sex offense” (OJP 2008). This person can be male or female and an adult or juvenile.*

*A sex offense is “a criminal offense that has an element involving a sexual act or sexual contact with another” (OJP 2008). Offense types may vary somewhat by state. Offenses may include completed or attempted acts occurring between one or more people without the consent of the other person or involving a person who is unable to provide consent. The offense may include child pornography, rape, sexual assault, molestation, fondling, incest, exposure, and peeping. Victims may be adults, children, known well or not well by the offender, or those with disabilities rendering them unable to provide consent. A sex offense may be committed person-to-person, remotely via the Internet, or by using another person as a human agent.*

A sex offender may be of any age; be employed in any profession; attend any school; commit a sex crime in a variety of ways targeting different victims, not just children; and even be a family member.

### Why is a sex offender moving into my community?

In most cases, and as with any crime, an individual is sentenced to a specific amount of time of incarceration. He or she may be released at the end of that time with or without restrictions. In 2009, more than 729,000 offenders, including sex offenders, were released from state and federal prisons (Sabol and West 2010). Another 9 million are released from jail each year (Beck 2006). Some offenders are released into the community under the supervision of the court or correction system commonly referred to as probation or parole. By the end of 2009, more than 5 million people were on probation or parole (Glaze and Bonczar 2010).

Other offenders may be released from incarceration without restriction, which means they are not under court or community correctional supervision. Moreover, they may not be required to register as sex offenders; may not notify the local community authorities of their residence, so the public may have access to information about them; or may not be under the supervision of any criminal justice agency. The following are a few of the reasons sex offenders may be released free of supervision:

- They completed their entire sentence. For example, if an offender was sentenced to 12 years in prison and completed 12 years of incarceration as calculated by the correctional institution, then the sentence is deemed to have been satisfied.
- The offense for which they were convicted does not require registration or supervision.
- They have been adjudicated as a juvenile younger than 14 years of age who has committed an offense that is not specifically indicated in federal or state statutes.

This is neither an exhaustive list of examples nor do they apply to all states. Consulting your state legislative body or reading your state criminal code will provide specific incidents where an offender would be eligible for release without supervision.

Notwithstanding the lack of formal registration requirement, correctional institutions routinely communicate with local law enforcement when offenders are scheduled for release. In turn, law enforcement agencies sometimes informally maintain information about unsupervised sex offenders as part of existing sex offender initiatives although they are not required to do so.

Unless prohibited by federal or state law, state or local ordinances, or court-ordered restrictions, an offender is allowed to reside wherever he or she chooses. Some restrictions prevent sex offenders from living within certain distances of schools, parks and recreational facilities, daycare centers, and other places children frequent. If not in violation of any of these restrictions, sex offenders may legally reside anywhere within a community.

## How will I know if sex offenders are in my community?

Federal and state laws are in place to help ensure the public is aware when sex offenders return to or reside in a community through the primary sources of federal and state websites, court records, and agencies authorized to share information as part of community notification initiatives.

Title I of the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act (Pub. L. No. 109-248), also known as the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA), provides minimum standards for sex offender registration and notification in the United States. All 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and 51 federally recognized Indian tribes currently have sex offender websites. A national public website, the Dru Sjodin National Sex Offender Public Website ([NSOPW.gov](http://NSOPW.gov)) also contains sex offender data that is easily searchable by anyone with access to the Internet. Although sex offenders are required to provide a large amount of personal data, NSOPW and most state registries provide limited information, including:

- Personal information, such as name and any aliases, age, physical description, and current photos
- Home address, work address, and employment status

- Crimes convicted of, jurisdiction where convicted, date of conviction, relevant state statute, and age of victim if known

Additional details may be obtained from the sentencing court(s). Adult court records are public information unless sealed by order of the court.

A list of state-, territorial-, and tribal-managed sex offender websites can be found by visiting the “Public Registry Sites” web page, accessible from [NSOPW.gov](http://NSOPW.gov).

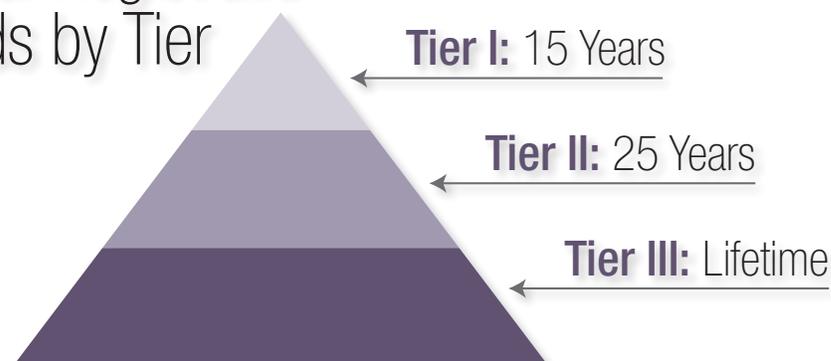
### ***Registration Guidelines***

Most jurisdictions require sex offenders to register where they work, attend school, or reside for more than seven days, or notify them of their status, if the locale is not their primary residence. Registries may also include the names and addresses of educational institutions within which an offender is or will be enrolled. This includes public and private primary and secondary schools, trade or professional schools, and institutions of higher learning.

Not all states use the term “tier” to classify offenders, but there is a general system of classification to determine which sex offenses require registration, how long sex offenders remain on registries, and how often they are required to register. Classification is determined by the type of crime, victim, and level of risk to reoffend as determined by the courts and community-supervision officials. Therefore, communities may be told an offender is considered a Tier III or high-level offender.

The federal standard SORNA set indicates the minimum amount of time a sex offender is required to register and how often. Tier I is the least serious classification that includes misdemeanor and felony sex offenses. Tier I offenders must register for 15 years and update their registration every 12 months. Tier II sex offenders are required to register for 25 years, must renew their registration every 6 months, and may have been previously convicted of a Tier I crime. Tier III carries a lifetime registration requirement. A Tier III sex offender is also required to renew his or her registration every three months. Individual states, territories, and tribes may have legislation requiring longer or more frequent registration than is required by the federal standard.

## Federal Registration Periods by Tier



### ***Modifications to Registration Guidelines***

Individuals convicted of qualifying sex offenses as determined by SORNA are required to register as sex offenders and keep their registration current based on the requirements of the state in which they reside. Qualifying sex offenses include a variety of offenses of a sexual nature for which an offender has been convicted under the law of any jurisdiction, such as federal, military, state, territorial, local, tribal, and foreign law.

While sex offender registries are helpful tools, some offenders may not be required to register, or their name may not appear on a public registry. For example, juvenile offenders ages 14 and older convicted of serious sex crimes and any juveniles convicted as adults for similar crimes are required to register. States may, however, determine whether the juvenile offenders' information is visible and searchable on state registries.

Community residents may contact their local state registry officials to obtain information about juvenile sex offenders in their community. A more complete list of qualifying sex offenses may be found in *The National Guidelines for Sex Offender Registration and Notification* (OJP 2008).

### ***Restrictions***

In some cases, a state registry indicates if the sex offender is on probation or parole supervision. If a link to the appropriate probation and parole website for the supervision jurisdiction is provided, this information may be used to obtain information about conditional restrictions based on the type and severity of the crime(s) the offender committed. For example, some offenders may be required to follow conditions prohibiting contact with children. This may mean they cannot reside in homes children inhabit; reside near schools, recreational facilities, or daycare centers; or participate in activities involving children, such as Halloween trick-or-treating or school performances.

## **What is being done about the sex offenders in my community?**

Law enforcement agencies have developed various strategies for helping to ensure offender compliance and public safety. State sex offender websites are designed to provide viewers with information about sex offenders residing, working, attending school, or visiting for an extended period, so they can make informed decisions regarding their family's safety. Some registry websites allow any person or entity to sign up for automated e-mails to learn, for example, when a sex offender moves into the community. Those without Internet access or preferring other methods may receive community notification via the U.S. Postal Service. In some cases, a fee is charged for this service. In addition to registries, other strategies are available:

- **Address verification and compliance checks** – Some law enforcement and probation agencies conduct joint unscheduled visits to the homes, workplaces, or schools of registered sex offenders to help ensure the accuracy of the information on file.

- **Monitoring and surveillance to facilitate offender compliance** – Technologies such as global positioning systems (GPS) can be used to verify the information sex offenders report regarding their whereabouts.
- **Education, outreach, and engagement to the community regarding prevention efforts** – Community education is a crime-prevention tool, focusing on engaging residents to enhance neighborhood safety and reducing the incidence of recidivism and new crimes.
- **Investigative follow-through regarding reported violations** – When residents provide information about suspected violations, agencies responsible for oversight are required to investigate to determine if and what charges to file. Failure to comply with supervision conditions, community or other restrictions, and the law may require the offender be returned to incarceration. Examples of violations are failure to maintain contact with the probation or parole officer; failure to register as a sex offender in all relevant jurisdictions, such as home, work, or school; or committing new or repeatedly committing old crimes.
- **Partnering with other agencies with sex offender oversight to provide seamless supervision** – Courts, prosecutors, law enforcement, probation/parole, social services, and community-based organizations across the country have joined together to share information about the sex offenders residing in their jurisdictions. This open communication provides a forum for helping to prevent harm to the community before it occurs.

## **What can I do to protect my family from sex offenders in my community?**

Law enforcement encourages residents to work in concert with them in their efforts to enforce offender compliance and public safety. The following examples list ways residents can do so:

- Learn the potential level of risk to children in your community. Remember, not all sex offenders target children.
- Recognize that sex offenders may be anyone. Learn to detect behavior that may indicate an individual is an undetected or not-yet-convicted sex offender. Read publications that may provide helpful information, such as the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's safety education materials located on its "Child Safety" web page, accessible from [MissingKids.com](http://MissingKids.com).
- Monitor state sexual registries on a regular basis. Some websites are updated daily.
- Learn and understand the classification system used for sex offenders in your state. This helps to ensure offender compliance and reduce the level of risk to your family if the offenders are a threat.
- Practice proactive parenting. Be aware of your surroundings and those individuals who take an interest in your family. Always know where your children are, who they are with, and who their friends are.

- Use the information about sex offenders to augment precautions already in place or develop new approaches for securing your family's safety. For example, devise a "check first" system with your family members: children must check with their parents or guardians before changing known plans.
- Teach children about and monitor Internet and social media usage at all times. Set up rules for usage, and know who your children are communicating with online.
- Learn basic prevention tactics, and attend training sessions held by law enforcement.
- Encourage and support convicted sex offenders who are relatives to comply with their conditions of supervision, relevant restrictions, and the law. Learn about the crimes they were convicted of and the victim(s) they targeted. Use this information to make appropriate arrangements to help ensure the offender remains in compliance and any family members fitting the offender's favored victim types are protected from harm. For example, if the offender has been convicted of committing sex crimes against children of a particular age range, ensure the offender does not come in contact with children of that age range. Refrain from allowing the relative to reside or stay in a residence that might put him or her in violation of restrictions. Make plans for the children to be away from the home during visits by that family member, or meet away from the children's home. When planning family events, be certain the offender is not in jeopardy of being within proximity of prohibited distances. In some cases, this may mean an offender family member cannot attend graduation or other school functions.

## **What can I do as a member of this community?**

Use all tools available to you, including law enforcement and community organizations, sex offender registries, and neighbors. The following examples list ways residents can do so:

- Report any observed or described violations by sex offenders to law enforcement immediately. Advise local authorities if a known sex offender is residing at an unreported address, observed loitering in prohibited areas, or actively engaging in prohibited behavior.
- Participate in law enforcement-led community meetings about sex offenders to learn about specific offenders in the community, wanted or absconded sex offenders, and tips for ensuring safety.
- Contact law enforcement about their sex offender management initiatives and prevention efforts. Attend relevant law enforcement and community-education workshops, read newsletters, and visit websites maintained by law enforcement. Another strategy is to volunteer to assist law enforcement with their prevention efforts. This helps to ensure your efforts are sanctioned by and not in contrast to their efforts.

- Take an active role in detection. Talk with neighbors to find out what's occurring in the community. Contact community or faith-based organizations that may provide guidance and support about this issue, such as neighborhood or crime-watch organizations. Talk with local schools about their awareness of sex offenders who live in the community and those who may attend local schools.
- Educate your neighbors or encourage them to become knowledgeable about the specific crimes, classification, tiers, risk levels, and registration requirements attributed to sex offenders in your state. Use your state's sex offender registry website. These websites often contain the state's legislation and requirements for sex offenders. If you become aware an offender has violated or is otherwise not in compliance with a particular law or regulation, contact local law enforcement and provide specific details. Obtain the names of the individuals you communicate with, in case you need to contact them again or if you are contacted for follow-up.

## Conclusion

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Residents are community partners in efforts to help ensure public safety. In one respect, residents look to law enforcement to serve as protectors. On the other hand, residents can and do have active roles in helping to ensure the safety of their homes, properties, and communities. Therefore, forming partnerships is crucial for any community and should likewise be part of the activities that bring about solutions. This requires a concerted effort by law enforcement with community support to successfully reintegrate sex offenders and help ensure their compliance. An informed and empowered community is one tool in helping to ensure this success.



**You are an  
essential  
partner in  
managing  
sex offenders  
in your  
community!**

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## Resources

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Center for Sex Offender Management (CSOM)

[www.csom.org](http://www.csom.org)

International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP). Sex Offender Management

[www.theiacp.org/PublicationsGuides/Projects/ViolenceReductionStrategies/SexOffenderManagement/tabid/493/Default.aspx](http://www.theiacp.org/PublicationsGuides/Projects/ViolenceReductionStrategies/SexOffenderManagement/tabid/493/Default.aspx)

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC)

[www.missingkids.com](http://www.missingkids.com)

The National Reentry Resource Center

[www.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org](http://www.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org)

Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)

[www.cops.usdoj.gov](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov)

Office of Justice Programs (OJP). Corrections & Reentry

[www.crimesolutions.gov/TopicDetails.aspx?ID=2](http://www.crimesolutions.gov/TopicDetails.aspx?ID=2)

Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering,  
and Tracking (SMART)

[www.ojp.gov/smart](http://www.ojp.gov/smart)

U.S. Marshals Service (USMS). Fugitive Investigations: Sex Offender Investigations  
Branch (SOIB)

[www.usmarshals.gov/investigations/index.html](http://www.usmarshals.gov/investigations/index.html)

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## About the COPS Office

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The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territory, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing is a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies that support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques, to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder, and fear of crime.

Rather than simply responding to crimes once they have been committed, community policing concentrates on preventing crime and eliminating the atmosphere of fear it creates. Earning the trust of the community and making those individuals stakeholders in their own safety enables law enforcement to better understand and address both the needs of the community and the factors that contribute to crime.

The COPS Office awards grants to state, local, territory, and tribal law enforcement agencies to hire and train community policing professionals, acquire and deploy cutting-edge crime fighting technologies, and develop and test innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders and all levels of law enforcement. The COPS Office has produced and compiled a broad range of information resources that can help law enforcement better address specific crime and operational issues, and help community leaders better understand how to work cooperatively with their law enforcement agency to reduce crime.

- Since 1994, the COPS Office has invested nearly \$14 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing.
- By the end of FY2011, the COPS Office has funded approximately 123,000 additional officers to more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies across the country in small and large jurisdictions alike.
- Nearly 600,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office-funded training organizations.
- As of 2011, the COPS Office has distributed more than 6.6 million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs.

COPS Office resources, covering a wide breath of community policing topics—from school and campus safety to gang violence—are available, at no cost, through its online Resource Information Center at [www.cops.usdoj.gov](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov). This easy-to-navigate website is also the grant application portal, providing access to online application forms.

Communities are often uncertain about the steps they can take to protect their families and neighborhoods from child sexual predators. *What You Need to Know About Sex Offenders in Your Community* is a powerful resource dedicated to helping community members understand their role regarding sex offender management. Uniquely written in a Q&A format, this guidebook poses five questions community members commonly ask law enforcement. The thought-provoking responses are intended to help residents address their concerns surrounding the presence of sex offenders in their communities.



U.S. Department of Justice  
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services  
145 N Street, N.E.  
Washington, DC 20530

To obtain details on COPS Office programs,  
call the COPS Office Response Center at 800.421.6770.

Visit COPS Online at [www.cops.usdoj.gov](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov).