

## **Despite high-profile cases, sex-offense crimes decline**

By Wendy Koch, USA TODAY

Megan Kanka, Jessica Lunsford, Shasta Groene.

[Many] girls, believed to be sexually molested or killed by men, have generated headlines, prompted states to stiffen penalties against offenders and caused many parents to fear their child could be next.

Yet gut-wrenching as these high-profile cases are, they don't tell the whole story of sex offenders in America. They don't reflect the surprisingly good news: **Sex crimes against children have dropped dramatically in the last decade.** An online national sex-offender registry was launched in July. And recent research shows doctors can better predict which offenders may strike again.

"There's a success story here," says Roxanne Lieb, director of Washington state's Institute for Public Policy. She sees a "trickle-down effect" as famous cases raise public awareness and legislatures toughen public policy.

**The headline-grabbing cases tend to be anomalies, because kids are rarely abused by strangers, and even less often killed.**

"It's not the creepy guy who moves in next door you need to be most concerned about, but family, friends — people who have access to your children on a regular basis," says Pamela Schultz, author of *Not Monsters: Analyzing the Stories of Child Molesters*. She says most kids are abused by people they know. And only a tiny fraction of abuse cases end in murder, says David Finkelhor, director of Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. Of the 60,000 to 70,000 arrests each year for sex crimes against children, he says about 40 to 50 involve homicide.

Child advocates fear, though, the ability of serial sex offenders to escape detection and hurt more children. "There are still huge gaps in the system," says John Walsh, host of the Fox network's *America's Most Wanted*, whose son Adam was murdered by a pedophile in 1981. "There's no good tracking" of repeat offenders, he says. All states now require convicted sex offenders to register, but Walsh says oversight and penalties for non-compliance are insufficient.

### **Signs of progress**

Finkelhor says parents have a right to be outraged by sex crimes but should take heart by what he sees as progress. "There's been some fear on the part of advocates that some enthusiasm (for tougher laws) will go away if people think the situation is getting better," he says. Experts argue it is, citing these developments:

- Dramatic drop in cases.** Government figures show the rate of sexual assaults against adolescents ages 12 to 17 plunged 79% from 1993 through 2003, and the number of substantiated sex-abuse cases involving kids of all ages fell 39% in the same time period. Finkelhor, who has analyzed the data, sees multiple reasons for the decline: Greater incarceration of offenders, more therapy and use of psychiatric drugs, economic improvement in the 1990s and heightened public concern.

•**Online sex-offender registry.** On July 20, the Justice Department activated its online National Sex Offender Public Registry, which now links the registries of 23 states and the District of Columbia. The registry will help the police and the public track offenders who cross state lines. The department expects its Web site, [www.nsopr.gov](http://www.nsopr.gov), will soon link all states once software compatibility issues are resolved.

•**Improved screening for risk factors.** Canadian psychologist Karl Hanson, an internationally recognized expert on sex offenders, says doctors are better able to assess which offenders are at higher risk of re-offending and focus on treating them.

Hanson says no single factor determines who will commit another sex crime. "It's a combination," he says. He finds those at highest risk tend to be antisocial and have a sexual deviancy, such as an interest in children and strangers. Some were abused as kids but **most kids who have been sexually abused don't become perpetrators.**

Government data show most sex offenders are male, and the majority of victims are female. The offenders are less likely to be rearrested after prison for any type of crime than other former inmates, although those who are rearrested are more likely to be charged with another sex crime, according to a 2003 study by the Department of Justice.

## 10 TIPS FOR PREVENTION

These are tips for kids to help prevent them from being abused:

1. Check with a parent before accepting gifts or going anywhere with anyone.
2. Hang out in groups. Try not to walk or go out alone.
3. Trust your instincts.
4. Don't feel compelled to keep secrets from parents.
5. If someone touches you inappropriately, say "no" loudly, get away and tell an adult.
6. Dial 911 in emergencies.
7. Know your full name, phone number, address and parents' phone numbers.
8. Never give personal information online or meet online friends in person.
9. Report scary or explicit e-mails.
10. Have names and phone numbers of five trusted adults for emergencies.

*Source: Jacob Wetterling Foundation*

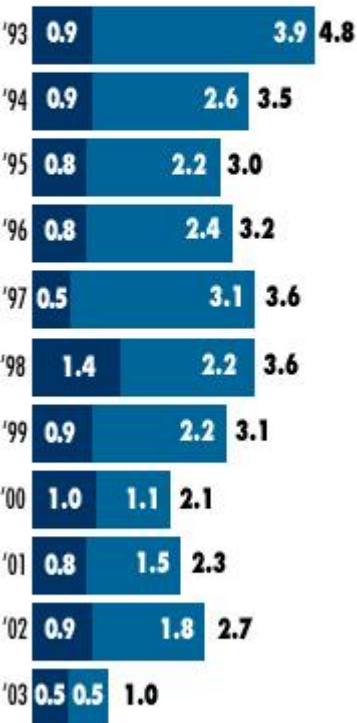
•**Treatment helps.** Group therapy dropped the recidivism rate from 17% to 10%, according to a 2002 study that Hanson co-wrote. He studied 9,454 sex offenders in 43 states. A similar 1999 study found that those participating in relapse-prevention programs had a rearrest rate of 7.2% after five years, compared with 17.6% for those who weren't treated. The study, sponsored by the Justice Department, looked at 11,000 offenders. Doctors typically use cognitive therapy that teaches offenders to avoid risky behavior, such as living or working near children. They sometimes prescribe antidepressants or other drugs.

## Sexual assaults decline sharply

The rate of sexual assaults per every 1,000 children ages 12-17 fell 79% from 1993 to 2003.

### Rate of total offenders

■ Known offenders<sup>1</sup>  
■ Unknown offenders



1 - Family members or acquaintances

Source: Analysis by Crimes Against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, of data from National Crime Victimization Survey

"You can't cure it anymore than you can cure alcoholism, but you can successfully treat it," says Fred Berlin, founder of the Sexual Disorders Clinic at Johns Hopkins University. Berlin says sex offenders are a diverse group, including pedophiles as well as older teens convicted of having sex with underage teens. He argues some are mentally ill. "Who in their right mind would be sexually attracted to young children?"

### Gaps remain

For bereaved parents, progress in reducing sex crimes may offer little consolation. They see a system too broken to protect their kids.

"I will never see Jessie go on her first date. I will never be a grandfather to her children," Mark Lunsford said this Spring as he stood with members of Congress who were proposing tougher penalties. His daughter Jessica, 9, was killed in February in Florida by convicted sex offender John Couey, who didn't register that he was living across the street from her.

Of the 551,000 sex offenders registered in the USA, about 100,000 are missing or have failed to give a current address, says Ernie Allen, president and CEO of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. He says compliance varies widely by state. He argues the public, at a minimum, needs to know where repeat offenders are.

Joseph Edward Duncan, 42, accused of molesting 8-year-old Shasta Groene and killing three members of her family, was a repeat offender suspected of molesting a boy in Minnesota when a judge released him in April on a \$15,000 bail. He fled. A month later, he kidnapped Shasta and her brother, Dylan, police say. The bodies of her mother, another brother and the mother's boyfriend were found bludgeoned in their rural Idaho home. Dylan's body was later found. USA TODAY does not usually identify alleged underage victims of sexual assault, but the search for Shasta was so publicized that her name is widely known.

On Tuesday, non-guilty pleas were entered on Duncan's behalf to six charges of murder and kidnapping, each of which carries the death penalty. He is also being investigated in the deaths of a 10-year-old California boy in 1997 and two Washington state girls in 1996. Walsh calls Duncan "a poster boy" for gaps in the system, a repeat offender "who knows the system doesn't work."

Aside from registering offenders, states must now also provide information to the public on offenders' addresses. Congress passed this requirement, known as Megan's

Law, after the 1994 murder of 7-year-old Megan Kanka by a twice-convicted sex offender living on her street in Hamilton Township, N.J. It did not require states to actively notify the public, such as by letter, but they must make the information available. Laura Ahearn, executive director of Parents for Megan's Law, says many people assume that if a known sex offender moves in next door they will be notified. "That's one of the largest betrayals," she says. "People have been led into this false sense of security." She says 22 states do not require active notification, forcing parents themselves to seek out the information.

Critics say the registries also fall short because most sex crimes are not reported and most sex offenders are not caught. "Public notification laws make the public feel better, but they certainly don't target the people who haven't been caught," says Joseph Giovannoni, who has counseled sex offenders for 28 years in Hawaii.

Experts say more parents are reporting sex crimes against their children, but they remain a distinct minority. "What we're confronted with is a faceless crime," Ahearn says, arguing many families hope to preserve a sense of normalcy by not going public.

Hanson, the psychologist, estimates that **40% of kids molested by strangers report the abuse, but only 10% molested by someone they know do so.** "Even low rates are too high," he says. "We still have a long way to go."