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Sex offender registry failing

Authorities throughout the country can't find thousands despite laws

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Requiring convicted sex offenders to register where they live is one thing. Making sure they do so has proved more difficult.

Across the country, law enforcement agencies are losing track of thousands of sex offenders despite registration laws.

In California, authorities cannot account for 44 percent of the state's registered sex offenders. Washington law enforcement agencies do a better job of tracking registered sex offenders, but even so, cannot verify addresses for about 10 percent of those offenders. In Seattle, slightly more than 20 percent of the registered sex offenders cannot be located.

Seattle's missing sex offenders include about 10 level 3 offenders, including 29-year-old Blaine Olds, whose criminal record includes a 1992 conviction for third-degree rape. In that case, Olds was found guilty of attacking and raping a 15-year-old girl in her apartment.

He has also been convicted of sexually assaulting a 7-year-old girl and attacking a 16-year-old girl in her garage.

Experts say sex offender databases nationwide have fallen short of their promise.

"We're expecting sex offenders to be reporting their addresses and that's the problem," said Laura Ahearn, executive director of Parents for Megan's Law, a national victims' rights group.

As of Jan. 2, there were 17,393 registered sex offenders in Washington state, said Toni Korneder, Washington State Patrol's criminal history records manager.

Law enforcement officers were unable to verify the address of 1,753 of those offenders, she said, or about 10 percent.

Failing to register as a sex offender when required is a felony in Washington, and can result in an arrest warrant.

Other monitoring mechanisms are built into the state law requiring sex offender registration.

Washington's Community Protection Act of 1990 requires law enforcement officers to confirm the information provided by sex offenders, rather than relying on ex-cons to report in.

Offenders required to register must provide their information to the

sheriff of the county in which they will live. The sheriff's office passes that information along to local police or public safety departments, who must verify the address of the offender.

The type of verification can vary, but at a minimum police must send a verification form to the offender by registered mail. The offender has 10 days to sign and return that form.

For level 3 offenders, those considered sexual predators who are considered most likely to reoffend, the letters are sent every 90 days. For level 1 and 2 offenders, minimal contact is every year.

And some police agencies go beyond state requirements.

In Seattle, two police detectives are assigned to personally contact all registered sex offenders in the city.

Detective Bob Shilling said that means the detectives have between 80 and 160 people to contact each month. The most recent tally showed 1,296 registered sex offenders living in Seattle, he said.

Registration compliance has sometimes been higher than 90 percent, though it currently stands at about 75 percent, with a little more than 300 registered sex offenders listed as missing, Shilling said.

When offenders are not at the addresses they have listed, detectives find a variety of reasons. Some move out of the city or state and register but fail to notify local police. Other times, they move and don't register.

Some live in shelters or are otherwise transient and are difficult for detectives to contact, Shilling said. In Seattle, about 140 registered sex offenders have no home address or live in shelters.

Countywide, of the 3,900 registered sex offenders, about 300 list themselves as transient or homeless, according to the King County Sheriff's Office Web site. Of those, more than 60 are level 3 offenders.

"Homelessness is a growing problem" among sex offenders, Shilling said. Many communities make it difficult for registered sex offenders to move into their neighborhoods.

"A lot of places have just closed their doors totally to taking in these offenders," he said.

In California, the problem of missing sex offenders is much worse.

According to 2002 data provided to The Associated Press after repeated requests over nine months, the state does not know the whereabouts of at least 33,296 sex offenders, or 44 percent of the 76,350 who registered with the state at least once. These rapists and child molesters vanished after registering.

"We don't know where they are," acknowledged Margaret Moore, who until recently ran California's sex offender registry.

The total number of convicted sex offenders whose whereabouts are unknown may be even higher: No one knows how many offenders never registered at all after leaving prison.

Sex offenders in California are not checking in with law enforcement, which in most cases is a felony. Failing to register could put high-risk offenders in jail for up to three more years, but most police departments are not enforcing the law.

No one knows how many of these missing sex offenders have struck again. But nationally, 52 percent of rapists are arrested for new crimes within three years of leaving prison, according to the U.S. Justice Department.

The 1996 law is named for 7-year-old Megan Kanka, a New Jersey girl who was raped and killed by a child molester who had moved in across the street. All states have similar laws designed to warn communities about the presence of such ex-cons.

Megan's Law databases are supposed to help the public and police monitor convicted sex offenders by keeping track of their home and work addresses and other personal details. Adults can search the database at sheriffs' offices or police departments.

But no one audits California's database for accuracy. State Justice Department officials cannot even say how much the program costs.

Attorney General Bill Lockyer touts the sex offender database as a valuable tool for the public, one that is updated daily and available in 13 languages. But when presented with the AP's findings -- the first-ever analysis of the database's accuracy -- he acknowledged changes are needed.

"Our system is inadequate, woefully inadequate," he said. "It can only be improved by putting money into the local law enforcement agencies. It's a matter of resources."

Former state Assemblywoman Barbara Alby, the child advocate who wrote California's Megan's Law, said she was appalled by the findings.

"We've got to put some teeth in the law for law enforcement," she said. "We should tie some of their funding to making sure this is getting done."

Among the bright spots in California are Los Angeles and San Jose, which spends \$600,000 on a staff of seven people working full-time to monitor 2,700 rapists and child molesters.

In San Jose at least, police say they can instantly identify every known molester living or working nearby as soon as they learn of an attack on a child.

Most other local efforts are less organized and understaffed.

"We could definitely use some help," said Detective Terry Chew, the lone officer responsible for tracking Sacramento's 1,945 registered sex offenders.

He said he thinks 300 or more are not complying, but "there's so many of them out there, it's hard to keep track."

But Seattle's detective Shilling said it's not realistic to expect 100 percent compliance.

"You're going to have some, no matter what you do, that are going to be missing," he said.