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## NEWS AND POLITICS

## How Sex Offender Registries Impact Youth

Many believe that including children on registries does much more harm than good.



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**T**en-year-old Leah pretended to have sex with her younger step-siblings. She said it happened a few times and that she was just acting out scenes from the movies. A couple years later, Leah's conduct was discovered by law enforcement.

Leah was 12 when she was convicted of criminal sexual conduct in juvenile court and labeled a sex offender. The law required her to remain on the **sex offender registry** for 25 years. She says she lost jobs and internships as a result. When she was about to enter her freshman year of college, an old friend called her up to tell her she'd seen Leah's name and photograph on the state's online public registry. Even though her friend knew the circumstances of Leah's conviction, it seemed all anyone would see when they searched her name was "sex offender."

According to the Center on Youth Registration Reform's estimates, Leah is one of the approximately **200,000 individuals** placed on sex offender registries for actions they engaged in before they were 18 years old. Proponents of laws that require children to be placed on sex offender registries argue that providing the public this information will help people keep their families safe from harm. But many believe that including children on registries does much more harm than good.

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While laws **differ from state to state**, sex offenders can include individuals who engaged in benign sexual experimentation, those who "sext" with their peers, as well as those who committed a forcible rape. The classification of offenses **differs by state**, but in all cases, registration is imposed after young people have been held accountable in the court system. Before they are deemed rehabilitated and fit to return to society, many offenders spend years incarcerated and undergo treatment to address their sexual misconduct. But the society **to which they return is not likely to accept them** when they're labeled sex offenders.

Depending on the state, registration can last anywhere from a few years to the individual's entire lifetime. During that time, they may be required to appear in person — in some cases every week and in others, every 90 days or more — to update and verify their information. This can include details like where one's car is parked, their online usernames, and, if they are homeless, a few places they may frequent. If a young person fails to provide this information or to return to the police station to report any changes in this information, they may be charged with a felony offense and incarcerated.

These laws are based upon the assumption that juveniles who commit sex offenses will commit them again. Research has showed that the overwhelming majority of juvenile sex offenders won't — **between 97% to 99%** of young people who commit a sexual offense never reoffend. **Not all** sex offenses committed by juveniles are sexually motivated; some young people who are required to register have cognitive or intellectual disabilities or are **on the autism spectrum**.

As they age, young registrants can have difficulty finding and keeping jobs. Many **registration laws** prohibit certain types of work or impose residency restrictions. Registrants can experience homelessness or family separation. Youth on the registry also can **suffer** from depression, and **one in five** registrants has reportedly attempted suicide. One state passed a law **prohibiting** registrants from using social media, which the U.S. Supreme Court **struck down as unconstitutional**.

In addition to the **many fees** young people are charged while in the court system, registration triggers a whole new set of monetary obligations. For example, in New Orleans, registered young people are required to **notify their communities by sending postcards** to their neighbors within a 0.3-mile radius, which cost one individual \$744.

When the community is aware of registrants, many youth and their families have suffered humiliation, victimization, and violence. Leah, mentioned above, **explained** that one time during college, she returned to her room to find a note attached to her door: "We know you're a sex offender. Get out of our dorm. You're not wanted here." After a few more incidents like this one, Leah dropped out of school. And **one father**, whose sons were labeled sex offenders at ages 10 and 12, said neighbors passed out pamphlets with his sons's photos on them, and someone threw a Molotov cocktail through his front window.

Maintaining juvenile sex offender registries has **failed** to keep communities safer. Some activists argue that rather than focusing on punishing young people for the rest of their lives, we should continue to hold youth accountable while investing in prevention and victims's services. For example, California **spends \$140 million a year** to register youth, compared with only \$46,000 it spends on victims's services and prevention.

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In October, California passed a law that includes prohibiting lifetime registration for children and permitting those tried in juvenile court to petition for removal from the registry after five or 10 years. Under this new law, a person like Leah would be able to ask the court to remove her name from the registry five to 10 years — but for many, the damage has already been done.



This op/ed is part of Kids Incarcerated, a Teen Vogue series on youth incarceration in the United States for National Youth Justice Awareness Month. To All the Boys I've Loved Before" Sequel, Everything author of this story, Riga Sanda Shah, is a senior supervising attorney at Juvenile Law Center, the oldest nonprofit, public interest law firm for women in the United States.

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