



Stereotyping/Labeling of Sex Offenders

Position:

In order to reduce the victimization of children, society -- and its manifestations, the media and the legislatures -- must avoid stereotyping and labeling. To prevent child sex abuse, offenders must be encouraged to seek professional help, without media or legal reciprocity. Offenders are much less likely to seek help, if as a result of that effort they get stereotyped and labeled in the most generalized and emotionally negative terms in our society along with a criminal record!

The Problem:

The scope of the definition of sexual abuse is very wide and encompassing those, at perhaps the innocuous end, who take photos of sleeping nude children to the most horrid cases that receive national media attention. Because of the publicity given to the horrific crimes and the label "child sex offender" attached to the perpetrator of those crimes, the swath of offenders from the photographer on up are stereotyped as the worst. This stereotyping and labeling generates and perpetuates the current extremely hostile political and societal attitudes concerning child sex offenders regardless of the severity of their offense. These hostile views are a barrier to those offenders who seek therapeutic help.

Mandatory reporting laws in many cases would subject the offender to a course of arduous events including, perhaps significant prison time. In many cases, rather than being labeled a "monster" the offender tries, in vain, to control their own behavior without seeking professional help only to fail and victimize further.

The use of the word 'predator' evokes an image of a school-ground-lurker or a van-driver slowly cruising looking for kids to grab off of the street. Thank goodness, those cases are very few, yet the term, when used indiscriminately, cheapens the word and unjustly paints many who have committed lesser offenses. The state legislatures have contributed to the cheapening of this word by legal definitions. An example is from Oregon, where some voyeurs of unsuspecting victims are classified as "predatory."

To further illustrate the point, there is an analogy between the offenses of child sexual abuse and traffic violations. If a person, driving while intoxicated, causes an accident that results in the death of a family of five, that person could be described as a traffic violator. Similarly, someone who double-parks is a traffic violator. We as a society do not censor the double-parker to the same extent as the drunk driver. In such an analogy the term "traffic offender," while valid, would represent such a broad range of offenses that the term is meaningless. All traffic violators are not stereotyped or labeled as the worst.

Relatively few child sexual offenders are psychopaths who cannot correct their behavior. We must understand the full gamut of offenders - those who look at or take photos of children; who fondle; who indulge in various forms of sexual stimulation such as intercourse, oral sex, insertion of foreign objects, mutual masturbation, viewing of pornography; who are attracted to pre-pubescent children, and those who are attracted to adolescents. Most use seduction and expressions of compassion ("grooming") to victimize, while a minority use or threaten physical violence. As defined in DSM-IV, some are "fixated" while others are "regressed." This litany represents a broad scope of behavior, victims, and tendency to recidivate; yet, all are stereotyped and labeled as "child sex offenders."

Why We Endorse This Position:

As stated previously, society -- and its manifestations, the media and the legislatures -- must avoid stereotyping and labeling in order to reduce victimizing children because it masks the real problem of dealing with child sex abuse. Here are the specific recommendations:

- Avoid the use of the phrase "child sex offender." It has become so generic as to be meaningless.
- Use specific words to define the crime. If an offender fondled a child, use the word "fondle." If a child was shown pornography, say so. If exposure of genitals was the limit of the offense, so state.
- Avoid the use of the word "predatory" unless that word, as commonly defined, is undisputedly warranted.
- Use words that describe the act and the age and sex of the victim. If the victim was a teenage boy, so state. An act of oral sex with a 16-year-old male elicits a different public response than a rape of an 8-year-old girl.
- Do not describe a crime as "violent" except in the case where true physical violence (as used in normal speech) occurs. Most child sex abuse cases involve "grooming" and seduction - and are not physically "violent" in the accepted usage of the word. The mere "defining" of a crime as "violent" degrades the meaning, results in misunderstandings and eventually will make the word meaningless.

In conclusion, we believe sweeping generalizations should be dropped and redefined in specific, descriptively accurate terms to better focus on the problem of child sex abuse.

05/04