

SPECIAL REPORT

Experts vexed at what to do with sex offenders

Authorities try new methods for tracking them

By Gayle M.B. Hanson
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Laura Snow had long since left California when she received a visit that changed her past as well as her future. "I was living in Seattle," she recalls, "and I received a phone call from the District Attorney's Office in the county where I used to live. She told me she wanted to send up one of her assistants to speak to me about this old boyfriend of mine who was an anesthesiologist. She said they had some pictures they wanted to show me. Well, after they described the pictures, I said I wasn't going to talk to some man."

The district attorney herself flew in the next day and showed her the pictures. "What happened was that during the four years of our relationship, he had drugged me and made photographs and videotapes of himself having sex with me," says Ms. Snow. "They had found the pictures after they searched his house when another woman had pressed charges against him."

Today Ms. Snow — not her real name — lives in fear of her assailant, who is serving a 13-year sentence for a drug and domestic violence conviction. He is eligible for parole in five years. "I live in terror," she says. "He has threatened to kill me when he gets out. ... I don't believe that he can be cured. Believe me, I've read every report there is, and if what I read is true, he's just going to go back out on the street and do it again."

Unfortunately for Ms. Snow, there is no easy solution to the problem of sexual predators. But just as people across the country have clamored for tougher sentences for career felons, they also are condemning a criminal justice system that seems unable to address the high recidivism rates among serial sex offenders.

Last summer, for example, Californians were outraged when Melvin Carter was released from prison after serving only half of a 25-year sentence for 12 convictions of rape. The former engineer from Colorado had earned an early release for good behavior behind bars. Carter has admitted to raping more than 100 women, yet the criminal justice system had no alternative but to release him.

"I am tired of hearing about so-called 'good time' for criminals," says Ms. Snow. "Let me tell you, if you are a victim there is no 'good' time."

The brutal abduction and murder of California teen-ager Polly Klaas — a convicted sex offender has been charged with the crime — underscores Ms. Snow's outrage. Many Americans are debating the delicate balance between individual rights and public safety. Some 27 states already have enacted legislation that forces serial sex offenders to register with local law enforcement agencies upon moving into a community.

A galvanizing case

But do such laws actually deter rape and other crimes? In Washington state, they're not only asking the question, they are finding some answers.

Washington is home to Earl Shriver. If an individual could be singled out as being responsible for the wave of community registration programs for sex offenders, he is that person. In 1989, Shriver forced a 7-year-old boy off his bike in the woods near his Tacoma home. There he raped the boy, stabbed him, choked him and cut off his penis.

Miraculously, the boy survived to accuse his attacker, who, it turned out, had a 24-year history of sexual violence and had spent a decade in prison after kidnapping and raping two 16-year-old girls.

If the violence of Shriver's crime sent the residents of this bucolic state reeling, the revelation that prison authorities knew he was so dangerous galvanized them. After all, Shriver was a man who had admitted to a cellmate that he fantasized about outfitting a van with cages — the better to kidnap, molest and murder children.

In the ensuing political frenzy, Gov. Booth Gardner formed a task force to examine the laws governing sex offenses. After a year of study, the task force delivered bold recommendations, including indeterminate sentences for sex crimes. As part of this policy, unanimously passed into law by the Washington legislature in 1990, the state may continue to incarcerate sex offenders after their sentence is up — if the convict's crimes involve a pattern of manipulation and forethought and if he has been judged to suffer from a "personality disorder or mental abnormality" that predisposes him to criminal behavior.

"Certainly the most controversial aspect to community protection is the civil commitment component," says Victoria Roberts, who administers the Community Protection Program for the state corrections department. "It is a very long and arduous process."



A school principal in Alexandria escorts a pupil onto a school bus. A serial molester's presence in the community has had people taking special precautions.

Photo by Ruth Fremson/The Washington Times



Earl Shriver had a 24-year history of sexual violence and spent a decade in prison before he raped, stabbed and mutilated a 7-year-old.



Washington Gov. Booth Gardner formed a task force to examine laws governing sex offenses.



Leroy David Fulton, who served 10 years for raping young boys, is said to be "highly manipulative."

"About eight months prior to release, an investigator is assigned to start reviewing past criminal history. ... We'll talk to the prosecutor in the county of conviction, and we'll try and determine whether the individual is a sexually violent predator. If it looks like he is a sexual predator, he will be committed for a 45-day evaluation period."

A jury trial then occurs, Ms. Roberts says, and at the end of the trial the jury can confirm that the individual poses a risk. The offender then can be sent to a special commitment center.

Ms. Roberts says she would like to see the definition of "sex offender" expanded.

"I think that we have released some very dangerous people because they don't fit that narrow definition," she says.

From March 1990 to March 1993, 216 sex offenders were released from prison in Washington state. According to a report by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, which studied the recidivism rate of offenders who were convicted between 1985 and 1991, 24 percent likely will be re-arrested.

Rights vs. security

In his mug shot, Alan Jay Groome appears anything but threatening. A pasty-faced 19-year-old with an overbite and thick glasses, he looks like someone who has spent a lot of time in a library rather than three years in a Wash-

ington prison for raping two boys, ages 4 and 10.

These days he is a free man, but he lives the life of a fugitive — not from the law, but from a society that at once rejects him, yet needs to probe the most intimate details of his life. Because of the nature and seriousness of his crime, he has been labeled a Class 3 sex offender — one who is very likely to commit additional crimes.

"What happens is, when a person who is a sex offender is released, they have to come to us and register," says Detective Glenn Quantz of the Thurston County Sheriff's Office. "They are photographed and fingerprinted. And then we get to work assembling as much information as possible about their criminal history so we can figure out how likely they are to offend again."

If an individual is a Class 1 offender, explains Detective Quantz, it means that it is very unlikely he will offend again, so the department's only action is to notify other law enforcement agencies about him.

"If they are a Class 2 offender, then we know there is a higher risk that they'll offend, so we'll do community notification," he says. "My partner, Detective Ed Thompson, and I will go door to door with fliers in a community to let them know that a sex offender is moving into the neighborhood."

"With a Class 3 offender like Groome, we'll also notify the local news media and have them do a story."

When Groome moved into an Olympia apartment with his mother and grandmother in January 1993, Detective Quantz and his partner knocked on 700 doors

Community effort helped police get Alexandria arrest

By Greg Seigle
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Prompted by the May 1 abduction and sexual assault of an 11-year-old girl in Alexandria — which bore remarkable similarities to 30 other incidents involving young girls in Northern Virginia — police united with parents, school officials and community leaders to arrest a suspect exactly a month later.

Fliers depicting the then-unknown suspect circulated throughout the area warning children to be wary of strangers. Neighbors talked of creating "safe houses," homes children in trouble can run to if they feel threatened. Elementary school principals carrying walkie-talkies and worried expressions escorted students onto buses one at a time, afraid to leave them alone.

But despite every precaution, parents felt especially vulnerable with a sex offender roaming their community — especially when it was learned the man the FBI and a task force of local police arrested had been living in an apartment complex teeming with young children not far from most of the abductions.

Adelmo "Ely" Gomez, 32, of Fairfax County, was arrested Wednesday. Mr. Gonzalez,

charged with abduction with intent to defile, is being held without bond at the Alexandria Detention Center.

The management of the complex where Mr. Gonzalez lived — Orleans Village, owned by Charles E. Smith Co. — failed to alert residents that an abductor had been preying on young girls in the area.

"It's awful," said Ana Blanco, 23, who lives across the hall from Mr. Gonzalez's basement apartment with her 4-year-old daughter. "I didn't know [the suspect] lived so close."

Police, who were besieged with hundreds of tips, believe Mr. Gonzalez, a native of Guatemala who is married and has a 3-year-old son, molested or tried to abduct at least 30 girls ages 6 to 13 in Alexandria, Arlington and Fairfax County over the past five years.

Alexandria police say they are still getting calls from parents reporting that their children were approached by a man fitting Mr. Gonzalez's description.

And a 14-year-old girl was abducted and raped in the Old Town section of Alexandria on Saturday, raising fears that another serial molester is still at large.

Mr. Gonzalez was arrested after someone called St. An-

thon's Church in Falls Church to talk about him as a suspect. He was caught outside his apartment after a brief foot chase.

Before Mr. Gonzalez was arrested, residents were fearful for their children.

"It's real scary" knowing a molester is on the loose, John Green said last month. Mr. Green lives with his 7-year-old son, Matthew, about a mile from the site of the 11-year-old's abduction. "I'm afraid it will escalate the crime."

Mr. Green and Stephanie Spell, mother of 6-year-old DeSean, have arranged secret passwords to communicate with their children if they cannot pick them up from school or other activities.

But some parents say they realize their children do not always listen to authority figures. "They're young and impressionable, and they don't always do what their parents tell them," said Lydia Sirinani, as she loaded her 7-year-old daughter, 5-year-old son and a nephew into her car.

Ms. Spell said news of the molester is "just a constant reminder" of problems lurking in her neighborhood. Drug dealers congregate near her house, and her son has asked if they can move away from the imposing street toughs.

"He's scared, so we talk about it a lot," she said.

in the neighborhood, handing out fliers featuring Groome's photo and address. The building landlord immediately forced Groome to move. From there, he went to a shelter for the homeless in another part of the state.

"I'm not too sure where he is now," says Detective Quantz. "This is very difficult, because when you take someone and you bound them from their community and they can't get a job, then it means that they are more likely to re-offend. Alan J. Groome has the right to live someplace. But the question is, where?"

Whether sexual offenders such as Groome can be rehabilitated is an unanswered question. The general public is inclined to lump sex offenders together, although predators are far more likely to commit certain crimes than others. Perpetrators of incest, for example, are extremely unlikely to reoffend once they've been caught, while exhibitionists are at high risk to offend again.

Trying treatment

Dr. Arthur Gordon is the director of the Sex Offender Treatment Program at the Twin Rivers Correction Center in Monroe, Wash. Approximately 200 of the 800 inmates receive treatment at the facility. Most eventually will be released.

Dr. Gordon adamantly believes that the reported recidivism rates of 40 percent to 60 percent are statistically invalid. "The reality is that you are looking at a much lower percentage, around 7 percent to 15 percent," says the soft-spoken therapist. "The problem is that people aren't interested in hearing about successes. Who wants to read the headline 'Of-

fender fails to re-offend?'"

Among the approaches employed by therapists to rehabilitate sex offenders is "relapse prevention." By using a combination of individual and group therapies, they help offenders learn to recognize and control their deviance.

Dr. Gordon and other therapists also utilize on offenders an assessment tool called the penile plethysmograph, an electronic device that measures sexual interest.

Does such therapy work? Dr. Gordon claims the program has been especially successful with pedophiles. A study of 278 inmates by the Washington State Institute for Policy Studies, however, found little difference — 1 percent — in recidivism rates between sex offenders who have received treatment and those who are released without benefit of therapy.

"One of the problems is that the public wants a 100 percent success rate," says Dr. Gordon. "And we can't do that."

In Texas, a judge is promoting the reinstatement of castration as a way to deal with serial sex offenders. In Florida, the legislature recently passed a bill mandating chemical castration for twice-convicted rapists.

Although the notion of chemical restraints may seem repugnant, researchers say antidepressants such as Prozac may offer hope to sex offenders. "What we are looking at is redefining some kinds of sexual crimes as being obsessive-compulsive disorders," says John Bradford, a psychiatrist and one of the world's foremost experts in the use of chemicals to treat sex offenders.

"It stands to reason that drugs that have been used very success-

fully in treating those disorders in the general population could be successful with some kind of sexual behaviors."

Some drugs, most often depo-provera, already are used to treat sex offenders, but monitoring the medication remains a problem. Once offenders stop taking a drug, they easily can slip back into criminal behavior.

Detectives Quantz and Thompson say they would welcome a pill or two to ease the burden of tracking some 300 sex offenders loose in Thurston County.

"We received notice just recently that one offender, Leroy David Fulton, a guy who was sentenced to three life sentences for raping young boys and served 10 years in jail, has been out in the community trying to make contact with young children," muses Detective Quantz.

"This is a highly manipulative person," he says. "He got his master's degree in psychology while he was in prison and he is extraordinary. Sex cons are the most manipulative of criminals."

Among the provisions of the crime bill currently on the congressional docket is a national registration network to track convicted pedophiles. Only 24 states now have such registration programs, and offenders such as Fulton easily can sink from one state to another.

"Leroy David Fulton is not on parole," says Detective Quantz. "He has to tell us if he is leaving the state, and we would try and contact the community where he was headed. But if he left here and went to Idaho and then on to another state without a registration program, he could lose us very easily. And yes, that worries me."