



Sexual predators

Should society allow one strike... or two before putting sexual predators away for life?

COMMENTARY

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"I hope he rots in hell," the words of Mark Lunsford, father of 9-year old Jessica Lunsford concerning 46-year old convicted sexual predator and career criminal John Evander Couey, the man who has confessed to kidnapping young Jessie from her own bed and then sexually assaulting and murdering her while he was under the influence of drugs. Couey's history of inappropriate behavior towards children dates back decades, as does his over-all criminal record, yet the criminal justice system turned him loose on society to stalk and now kill one of our more innocent citizens.

Jessica's father and others across the country have and continue to call for consideration of a national "one-strike law" concerning sexual predators. Couey's actions have made us consider the hundreds, in reality thousands of known sexual predators who walk our streets and have access to our children on a daily basis. Westley Allan Dodd was one of these predators. Dodd, a stone cold sociopath, was sentenced to death for the brutal torture and murder of three young boys. In a statement to the court Dodd stated, "If I do escape, I promise you I will kill and rape again, and I will enjoy every minute of it." The State of Washington insured that Dodd would never get the chance to carry out his threat.

The U.S. Department of Justice has indicated that "the average child molester," as if any such two-legged monster that could be considered "average," commits 380 acts of child molestation during his lifetime. A 1992 study in one state looked at almost 800 child molesters and rapists who had completed psychiatric treatment as part of their sentence, and noted that these "graduates" were arrested more often for new sex crimes than were those who had not been treated. An international study found a 43% rate of "known" recidivism among child molesters, with the more violent the offense, the greater the chance for repeat behavior, while another study indicated that a group of less than 250 known child molesters had admitted to attempting over 55,000 molestations involving almost 20,000 victims. And finally, California Sen. Dennis Hollingsworth indicated that there were 33,000 sexually violent felons missing or unaccounted for in that state, a sure recipe for future crimes against children and others.

Every time we have another kidnap, sexual assault and/or murder of a child (roughly one every other day in this country), we have anguished parents and an aggrieved community crying out for sanctions against those who would take both the innocence and the very life from our most vulnerable. Although you and I must rely on our state and federal legislators to craft the laws of our land, it is the parents, grandparents, and caretakers of children who must demand that our children be protected from sexual predators. But should we have a one-strike, a two-strike, or a 380-strike law? Most may agree that the kidnapping, sexual assault, or murder of a child is worthy of a one-strike law— by this, if you are found guilty of any such offense you never see the light of day as a free man (or woman) again. But should we allow for a mistake, a momentary slip of the conscience, say, perhaps, the inappropriate touching a child? Can we give someone a second chance when the stakes are so high?

We elect our representatives; therefore, they should hear our collective voice in this matter. But let's say we agree on one-strike for the more serious offenses, and two-strikes for any other related offense— we've made the country a little safer for our children, while still providing the chance for an offender to make one mistake and not become a ward of the state for life, at least not for his first offense.

But first serious or second less serious offense— you go to — for what, for life? Who pays the bill for the implementation of such new laws and where do we put these thousands of potential offenders? Our prison population increased by over 40,000 in a recent year and there are now more than two million men and women behind bars in America. It can cost \$25,000 to \$50,000 per year to keep someone in jail, and new jail cells cost about \$100,000 apiece to build, housing two prisoners each. Federal prisons currently operate at 33 percent over capacity and some state prisons are 17 percent over capacity. Do we also need to consider decriminalizing certain offenses, perhaps possession and/or minor sale of marijuana to make room for more sexual predators?

This brings us to the point that should we agree as a nation that we cannot allow serious and/or repeat sexual predators to live as free citizens, and the reality of capital punishment is that the appeal process can take up to 20 years before a condemned prisoner is put to death. We must not only insist that the states and the federal government hear our demands to deal harshly with sexual predators, but we must also be willing and ready to pay the bill when it comes. By this, we'll need to have one hand on our child's shoulder and the other on our wallet, prepared to both protect our child and pay the cost for the state to take these offenders off the street and out of our neighborhoods, permanently.

It's your call; one-strike or two?

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(Downloadable facts on child protection and other personal security issues can be found at www.LiveSecure.org.)

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