

The child molester next door

There's no greater villain in our midst than a child molester. Everyone wants to lock him up and throw away the key.

Well, it's not going to happen. Child molesters are uncles, stepfathers, mommy's



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boyfriends or "friendly" neighbors. If the punishment is too severe, relatives and friends won't turn him in. Difficult as it may be to fathom how anyone with a conscience could hide a child molester, a woman is particularly vulnerable

to the man she depends on for support even when he's the man fondling her daughter or son.

Fewer than 10 percent of those imprisoned for sexual assault of children did it to strangers. Lawrence Singleton, a man with a history of violent sexual acts, in 1978 chopped off the arms of a 15-year old runaway girl, and she lived to testify against him. As unbelievable as his crime was, he served only 8 years of a 14-year sentence — the maximum allowed — and was able to strike again when he was released from prison. He was living in Hillsborough County, Florida, where he grew up and where most everyone knew about his past. But this couldn't empower his neighbors to prevent him from beating and killing a woman in his home.

His defiance suggests that Megan's Law — mandatory notification of a sexual predator living among us — will not protect our children. In fact, notification laws may lull a community into thinking

that it is safer than it is.

Sexual crimes differ in degree and obviously one kind of punishment will not fit all. But something sounds radically wrong with a criminal justice system that allows 60 percent of all sexual offenders to receive probation instead of going to jail.

Those imprisoned and released usually have a time-limited parole, which means that no officer of the state closely monitors them when parole or probation expires. Lawrence Singleton's parole, for example, ended several years before the police found him covered with blood, standing over a woman's body.

Sex offenders in state prisons have jumped from 20,500 in 1980 to 88,100 in 1994. The vast majority of these prisoners will return to the community. There aren't enough jail cells to imprison them for life, nor would all their sentences require that. Society must seek other solutions.

The American Alliance for Rights and Responsibilities (AARR), a non-profit national coalition of concerned citizens based in Washington, which looks for ways to find a legal balance between citizen rights and community responsibilities, wants states to adopt a uniform policy for all violent sex offenders who abuse children. It's called "Automatic Lifetime Supervision," and it deserves debate.

Roger Conner, executive director of AARR, argues that molesters ought be monitored for life, whether they are sentenced to probation or released from prison. The key is lifetime supervision. Currently, under typical state laws, probation often runs no longer than the maximum allowed for imprisonment.

New research published this year by the National Institute of Justice shows how trained probation and parole officers for sex offenders can prevent the unspeakable with treatment along with stringent rules against certain behavior — such as reading child pornography, visiting playgrounds, drinking alcohol. Frequent polygraph exams would monitor that behavior.

Civil libertarians will no doubt find fault with the idea of lifetime supervision for so-called "minor" sex offenders. Lifetime supervision may not accomplish all it promises, but it's an idea worth talking about. It's clear and simple, and puts public and victim first. Our children deserve consideration, too.

Suzanne Fields, a columnist for The Washington Times, is nationally syndicated. Her column appears here Monday and Thursday.