

Protecting America's Children from Sexual Predators

By Stacie D. Rumenap



While the recent guilty verdict in the trial of John Couey, the convicted sex offender who abducted, raped, and murdered nine-year-old Jessica Lunsford will deliver some justice for Jessica and her family, the fact that Couey was free to commit his crimes

in the first place highlights the need for states to impose tougher mandatory minimum penalties for those who commit sexual crimes against children.

Couey, a registered sex offender, abducted Jessica from her Homosassa, Florida home on the night of February 23, 2005 and repeatedly sexually assaulted her before stuffing her in garbage bags and burying her alive in a shallow grave behind his home.

Sadly, the sexual victimization of children is overwhelming in magnitude yet largely unrecognized and underreported. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reported that one in five girls and one in ten boys are sexually exploited before they reach adulthood, and less than 35 percent of those sexual assaults are reported to authorities. Worse, the average child sexual predator victimizes anywhere from seven to over 200 victims in his or her lifetime.

Many of these sex offenders are released into society soon after they are convicted. According to the most recent available data from the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), the average sentence imposed on child molesters is seven years and the average offender is released after serving only three. This early release comes despite the fact that the same BJS study shows that sex offenders are four times more likely than other criminals to be arrested again for a sex crime. Indeed, we are repeatedly faced with news reports where child offenders have been set free only to harm innocent children again.

Because the law was inadequate to protect children like Jessica from the danger of sexual predators, Stop Child Predators launched federal and state campaigns to educate the public and lawmakers about needed policy changes to enhance public safety. We brought together an unprecedented coalition of legislators, law enforcement organizations, community groups, victims' rights advocates, and concerned parents to lead public awareness campaigns to help prevent sexual crimes against children and to keep child protection at the forefront of the public agenda.

At the federal level, Stop Child Predators worked with Congress, who recognized the gravity of the problem facing families, and passed The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act—named after Adam Walsh who was abducted from a Hollywood, Florida shopping mall just over 25 years ago. This sweeping new law mandates 25-year minimum sentences for sex offenders convicted of sex crimes against children, allows for electronic monitoring of paroled child predators, and links states' sex offender registries to one another to create a unified national database of all registered sex offenders.

Stop Child Predators also recognized that in order to be effective in the states, it was necessary to gain the support of legislators from across the country. We did that by partnering with the American Legislative Exchange Council and passing model legislation, the *Sexual Offenses Against Children Act* (available at www.alec.org), based on the Florida version of "Jessica's Law."

This partnership with ALEC has helped us secure increased penalties for those who commit sexual offenses against children, including mandatory sentencing minimums and electronic monitoring. Further, Jessica's Law strengthens the reporting requirements for adjudicated sexual offenders. To date, our model legislation has become law in 31 states across the country, making children safer and helping to keep dangerous criminals behind bars.

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