

Urban myth unsupported by evidence: Ice Cream Men are safe

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By Lenore Skenazy . . . Paul DiMarco has been selling ice cream in Poughkeepsie, New York, for two decades. He owns a fleet of trucks. When one mom confided to him, “You gotta be careful because there’s a lot of pedophiles in this world,” he recalls replying, “That attitude falls into the same category as ‘All black people that drive Cadillacs are pimps,’ and ‘All clowns kill little kids.’”

Of course, some real-life ice cream men do have soft-serve for brains. There were the guys in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, who sold weed from their truck. Elsewhere in New York, an ice cream guy named Kenneth Leiton was busted in 2009 for selling pills and coke; cops caught him when he was dumb enough to park the truck in front of his dealer’s house. In Philadelphia in 2011, an ice cream truck was spotted weaving through the streets. Its operator was found guilty of driving drunk, and in his freezer authorities found not only ice cream novelties but a couple of bottles of his frozen pee. (In his defense, I’ve read it’s hard to find a bathroom while on the job.)

And yes, even the classic nightmare scenario has happened: An

ice cream man in upstate New York was found guilty of violating a 9-year-old in his truck in 2004. The incident inspired a state law making it a misdemeanor for a sex offender to operate an ice cream truck. The New York State Senate is now considering bumping that up to a Class D felony.

But hard cases make bad law, and this is no exception. There are more than 700 Mister Softee trucks alone in 15 states, and that's not counting all the other brands. A predator or two, a gaggle of drug dealers, and a horror movie—1995's *The Ice Cream Man* didn't do the industry any favors—do not an entire profession dishonor.

Fear of ice cream peddlers points to a larger problem few parents want to admit to: our collective mistrust of any man who chooses to work with kids. From male day care employees to school bus drivers to Cub Scout leaders, they're all potential predators until proven otherwise.

And they can't prove otherwise. How can you prove a negative?

If we insist on background checking all ice cream salesmen, do we also have to background check all pet shop employees? All pediatric cardiologists? Is any male who interacts with a child automatically suspect? And how about women? They abuse kids, too.

Once you start insisting on government vetting, you're trusting a system that has made "sex offenders" out of teenagers in love, streakers, and public urinators (even the ones who don't freeze their pee). You're also buying into the mistaken belief that no one convicted of a sex crime can ever be rehabilitated—even though the actual recidivism rate is only around 5 percent. Most importantly, you're looking in exactly the wrong direction.

"It's so much more comfortable to fear the unknown, the stranger," says Sandy Rozek, spokeswoman for the National Association for Rational Sexual Offense Laws. "But that

doesn't fit the facts. Depending on the age of the child, between 90 and 99 percent of those who sexually molest children are the friend, the acquaintance, the family member." Not the ice cream guy.

DiMarco, the fleet owner, does run background checks on his operators, as state law requires. But the idea that ice cream men cruise around looking for victims is simply an urban myth. As he told that worried mom, "Let's get one thing straight. As far as these little kids go, there's only one thing I want and that's their money."

And in the end, that may be the real reason parents are so scared: Somewhere in this bubble-wrapped, baby-proofed world, one group of adults is treating kids as human beings, not snowflakes.

How chilling.

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