

Reason agrees: No red dots marking those on sex offense registry at Halloween

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By [Jacob Sullum](#) . . . Every year in the run-up to Halloween, *Patch* [publishes maps](#) showing the homes of “registered sex offenders” in various cities. Ostensibly, this information is aimed at helping parents who worry that their children might be molested while trick-or-treating. But research shows that such fears have [no basis in reality](#), and these stories—like the [warning signs](#) and [restrictions](#) imposed by local police prior to Halloween—mainly serve to stigmatize people who have already completed their sentences, along with their spouses and children, who have committed no crimes at all. That stigma invites harassment, vandalism, and violence. Like much local journalism, the practice of publishing these maps is ill-informed sensationalism masquerading as a public service.

This fall a [petition](#) organized by the National Association for Rational Sexual Offense Laws (NARSOL) is urging *Patch* and other outlets to cut it out. Noting the “total lack of evidence that the publication of these addresses at Halloween keeps children safe,” the petition asks news organizations to “cease a hurtful publication practice that has no positive effect at all on child protection or public safety.”

The irrationality of that practice is clear once you understand a few basic facts:

1. Sex offender registries include a [wide range](#) of people, many of whom were not convicted of crimes against children.

2. Sex offenders stay on the registry long after they have completed their official punishment, even though they are [less likely](#) to commit new offenses of the same type than people convicted of other crimes. According to a [2019 report](#) from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), less than 8 percent of people who had served sentences for rape or sexual assault were rearrested for a similar crime within nine years after they were released. That report also shows that the annual risk of recidivism falls dramatically over time.

3. The vast majority of sexually abused minors—93 percent, according to a 2000 BJS [report](#)—are assaulted by relatives, family friends, or other people they already know.

4. The vast majority of convicted sex offenders—86 percent, according to another BJS [report](#)—have no prior convictions for this category of crime, so they would not have shown up in registries.

5. There is no evidence that children face a higher risk of sexual assault on Halloween than they do the rest of the year. A 2009 [analysis](#) of 67,000 cases, reported in the journal *Sexual Abuse*, found “no increased rate on or just before Halloween.”

The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA) [amplifies](#) that last point: “A heightened risk of being sexually abused is NOT one of the dangers children face at Halloween. The simple fact is that there are no significant increases in sex crimes on or around Halloween. There is no ‘Halloween effect.’ There is no change in the rate of sexual crimes by non-family members during Halloween. That was true both before and after communities enacted laws to restrict the activities of registrants during Halloween.”

In light of this evidence, the NARSOL petition argues, pre-Halloween stories showing the homes of people on the sex offender registry are gratuitous, unethical, and reckless.

NARSOL adds that the focus on a nonexistent threat distracts attention from the main perpetrators of sex offenses against children, which are rarely committed by strangers, and from the main danger that kids face on Halloween: traffic accidents. *The Washington Post* [reports](#) that “children are three times more likely to be fatally injured by a car on the holiday, and the risk grows to 10 times for kids 4 to 8.”

The 150 or so signatories include ATSA, activists and journalists (including *Reason* contributor [Lenore Skenazy](#)) who support reform of sex offense laws, and an impressive list of professionals and academics. Among them are Elizabeth Letourneau, director of the Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse at Johns Hopkins University; Jill Levenson, a professor of social work at Barry University; Fred Berlin, director of the National Institute for the Study, Prevention, and Treatment of Sexual Trauma; Carleton University psychologist Karl Hanson; Arizona State law professor Ira Ellman; Southwestern Law School professor Catherine Carpenter; and University of Delaware sociologist Chrysanthi Leon.

Might these experts know more about this subject than the editors and writers who [insist](#) that parents should “find out where the registered sex offenders are living...before the kids go out trick-or-treating”? Perhaps *Patch* will consider the possibility.