

April 12, 2007

Letter to the Editor

In response to the Herald editorial, *Housing bans don't stop sexual crimes*, as the children's advocacy center charged by Florida statute to coordinate all child sexual abuse cases in Miami-Dade, we thought it important to comment on some points presented in the editorial.

First, we agree that an extraordinary amount of financial resources and work hours are being expended by law enforcement to monitor convicted sexual offenders. Further, we know that the rates of charges, and actual convictions of child sexual offenders, is way out of proportion with what national studies find are the incidences of abuse: one in three girls and one in seven boys are sexually abused by the time they reach 18. And finally, we know of no reliable data that this approach of monitoring the small percentage of those perpetrators convicted and released has an effect on reducing the incidents of child sexual abuse.

Why is this? Child sexual abuse is difficult to identify, verify, prosecute and treat. It is an insidious form of abuse as perpetrators are often beloved family members. In 90% of cases, the abuser is known to and trusted by the child and/or family. Their betrayal often leaves psychological scars not only on the child victim, but on the child's mother and siblings. Compounding the problem is that a large number of sexual abuse cases remain unreported. Research indicates that three-quarters of children do not disclose within the year of the first incident. The children remain silent because of confusion, guilt and the fear of family upheaval that comes with disclosure.

In Florida, we need to examine why our child victim rates and trends are not mirroring those of the rest of the nation, where songs of cautious optimism are being sung because reports of child physical and sexual abuse have been declining for the past 15 years. While other parts of the country are looking at what is bringing about success in turning the tide (a combination of factors including economic prosperity, increasing agents of social intervention, and psychiatric pharmacology are suspected), our community, and now with this story, the entire nation, is focused on five people under a bridge. In the meantime, at Kristi House hundreds of sexually abused children are passing through our doors each year...819 last year, to be exact.

Many explanations could be given as to why our unique and wonderful community is struggling with child victimization. We hope that our policymakers look at the encouraging nationwide trends and collaborate with researchers and practitioners to understand what is going on and why, and what are the policy and practice implications. If we can answer these questions, we may be much closer to bringing this trend to South Florida. The Herald editorial referred to the sex-offender recidivism rate as not exactly epidemic; I would suggest that mischaracterizes the problem since epidemics generally are defined by their effect on the victims...those hundreds of innocent children we treat each year.

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