

Recently Joan Thalmann, principal of Our Lady of Victory School, a grade school on the Northwest side of Chicago, wrote a letter to parents notifying them that a convicted sex offender was living a few blocks from the school. Partly inspired by Principal Thalmann's example, the Chicago City Council is considering an ordinance that would require police officers to disclose publically the addresses of all sex offenders, and the Illinois House of Representatives unanimously approved a similar measure restricted to ex-convicts whose targets had been children.

Are notice laws concerning the places of residences of convicted sex offenders, such as the measure enacted by the Illinois House of Representatives, and the ordinance being considered by the Chicago City Council, morally justifiable? If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: Public notice concerning the places of residence of convicted sex offenders are morally unjustifiable. These laws create a strong possibility of harassment, in some cases involving serious violence against individuals convicted in the past for sexual offenses, who have served their sentences. Subjecting these individuals to such dangers might be justified only if one could say with great confidence that public notice laws will make it possible to prevent a large number of sex offenses that otherwise would have occurred. This is not the case, however. In the overwhelming majority of sex offenses, the offender is acquainted with the victim -- e.g. spouses, boy friends, family members, classmates, etc. Public notice laws do not, and cannot, address this kind of problem.

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