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Evicting sex offenders just moves the problem

By Fred Grimm

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The headline reached out and grabbed you by the shirt collar. Twenty-four sex offenders evicted from the same motel on the same day. Twenty-four. As if the motel had come under control of a perverse cabal.

The Sun-Sentinel reported on its front page Wednesday that 24 residents had been tossed from the Budget Inn in Fort Lauderdale, one of those weary, low-rent anachronisms clinging to an address on North Federal Highway until a big box retail store usurps the space. The owner had ordered the evictions, professing surprise when he was told by reporters that a startling number of his long-term guests happened to be registered sex offenders. Twenty-four sex offenders had been residing in the 50-room motel. It seemed inexplicable.

But clusters of convicted sex offenders were among the unintended consequences of local ordinances in South Florida that restrict where they can live. Last year, 16 were evicted en masse from the Homestead Studio Suites after the corporate bosses learned their hotel had become a refuge for sex offenders.

Overlapping residency laws — banning sex offenders from living within 1,400 feet in Fort Lauderdale (more than 2,000 feet in other cities) from schools, parks, playgrounds, day-care facilities, even school bus stops in some towns, have sent them, like refugees, to the last few places on the South Florida map outside those restrictive circles.

Many of the sex offenders who lived in cars, tents and shacks in the unsanitary mess of a homeless camp under the Julia Tuttle Causeway back in 2007, '08 and '09, had been sent there by probation officers at a loss to suggest a permissible alternative. When the Tuttle was finally fenced off last year, more because it had become an international embarrassment than a humanitarian disaster, the offenders didn't quite scatter. I found nine had moved to River Park, a decrepit trailer community just west of the Miami city limits at 2260 NW 27th Ave.

The convicted offenders, banned from South Florida's better neighborhoods, were able to move into a shabby trailer park populated, for the most part, by very poor immigrant families. The same mad ordinances supposedly conceived to keep sex offenders away from children had funneled nine of them into a trailer park teeming with children. Of course, these were poor children, many of them undocumented, who didn't matter so much.

I checked the Florida sex offender registry on Wednesday: 43 offenders, 13 of them classified as predators, now reside among the hapless kids at 2260 NW 27th Avenue.

In Broward, several sex offenders still list "under the bridge" as their registry address, though this particular bridge is among the tangle of roads and overpasses at the confluence of Interstate 595 and U.S. 441. Jill Levenson of Lynn University, a clinical social worker and a national expert on sexual violence, worried that a number of the men evicted from the Budget Inn, for want of a legal alternative, will be forced to join the other outcasts consigned to the bowels of the 441 bridge. Levenson already has a client living there and his health has been deteriorating.

She was adamant that separating these offenders from familial support and forcing them into unstable living environments, or outright homelessness, created the very conditions in which they were statistically more likely to re-offend.

“These laws don’t protect the community,” said Levenson, a member of the Broward County sex offender task force that reached the same conclusion two years ago. And was ignored. Few politicians dare trying to fix these counter-productive residency laws and have their opponents tag them as “easy on sex offenders.”

Still, forcing offenders to cluster in cheap motels or run-down trailer parks or under the 441 bridge hardly represents the worst effect of the Draconian residency laws. The state registry listed 785 sex offenders who, rather than try to abide by Kafkaesque restrictions, just absconded, their addresses now listed as “whereabouts unknown.”

No probation officer monitors their behavior, no clinical social workers treat their problems, no neighbors know their background.

Count them as 785 unintended consequences of ill considered laws.

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