

Sex Offender Management: Facts, Laws, and Public Safety

It is a reality of life that registered sex offenders live in almost every neighborhood in Dallas. We are not unique, however, in this regard as every city in America is experiencing a similar circumstance. Having such individuals living nearby can be disconcerting, but the fact is that their presence is not unmanageable nor is it cause for us to worry endlessly about our safety or that of our families. The following paragraphs are intended to help you put into perspective the issue of sex offender management, to understand fundamental rules and regulations governing offender registration, and to offer some simple guidelines for keeping yourself and your family safe in a modern urban environment.

Registration Basics

For most registered offenders there is no mandatory exclusionary zone or other barrier to their living near schools, parks, or other places people might gather. The major exception to this rule involves those offenders *currently* on probation or parole. If an offender is on community supervision (i.e., on probation or parole), a court or the corrections system may place residential restrictions on him. A judge or parole board may for example order that an offender not live within a certain distance (often, but not always 1000 feet) of a school, daycare facility, playground, and the like. This kind of restriction is a condition of probation or parole, remains in effect for the duration of his community supervision, and is enforced by his probation or parole officer. Questions regarding distance requirements on, or potential violations of distance restrictions by, a given registrant should be directed to the local probation or parole office.

The length of time an offender, whether on community supervision or not, must register varies depending on the type of offense committed and the circumstances surrounding the crime. A sex-based offense involving a weapon or other force and physical contact with a victim is likely to lead to a significant registration period, up to and including mandatory lifetime registration. Lesser offenses, however, such as simple exposure could lead to a less severe registration period. The important point to remember is that the registration period imposed may vary depending on an offender's history, what kind of offense took place, and the specific facts and circumstances surrounding it.

Related to the length of the registration period is how often an offender must report in person to local law enforcement to keep his registration current. All offenders have a mandatory seven-day period to report, in person, any change of home, work, or school address or other material change to their registration profile. If there is no such change to report most offenders guilty of less severe offenses must check-in with local law enforcement on a yearly basis. If an offender committed a more serious offense he may be required by a court or corrections to report more frequently – perhaps as often as every 30 days.

The Dallas Response to Sex Offender Registration

While offenders do retain some measure of freedom of movement and activity, they are not permitted free rein. There are several agencies in our city whose full-time job is to ensure they are in compliance with their registration requirements. The Dallas Police Department was one of the first in the country to create a dual-track approach to managing offenders. Dallas has registration detectives whose sole responsibility is to meet, in person, with every offender and to maintain an active database for use by law enforcement and the public. Additionally we have a full-time Sex Offender Apprehension Program (SOAP) squad whose job is to proactively verify offender compliance.

Apart from the officers the police department commits to this task of monitoring sex offenders, those individuals on probation or parole also have county officials who monitor them. Probation and parole officials have a variety of tools at their disposal – GPS monitoring, urinalysis testing, polygraphs, and the like – as they too work to keep offenders under close supervision. In short, substantial local resources are at work to keep track of offenders in our city.

Keeping Yourself Safe

While considerable public effort goes into monitoring local offenders, the effort becomes even more effective when all of us – police and the public – work together on the issue. Below are some simple steps that families can take to help us keep tabs on offenders and to dramatically reduce the chances of a registrant offending again.

- Arm yourself with information – When many eyes are watching it becomes very difficult for a registrant to re-offend. You can learn more about any registered offender in the city by going online to our public website at Dallaspolice.net. There you can run searches on sex offenders geographically, learn more about individual offenders, and sign up for automated e-mail alerts.
- Report suspicious activity to police – While this is sound advice generally it is especially important with regard to sex offenders. Officers responding to a 911 call can easily run a computer check on suspicious individuals to determine if they are an offender, where they are supposed to be, and can contact detectives after hours if they have questions about or need help with any given individual.
- Do not allow yourself to live in fear – All cities in all time periods of history have had a small percentage of individuals who commit crimes. But that group is small in number. We as a community are not. Through routine individual awareness of what is occurring in our neighborhoods, through collective efforts to watch out for each other and our property, and through close cooperation with law enforcement we possess considerable ability to keep ourselves safe and our neighborhoods our own.