

 White Paper

## Using Groundbreaking Technology to Enhance Law Enforcement Efforts to Locate Sex Offenders

The more than 560,000 registered sex offenders in the United States pose great challenges to state and local law enforcement officials investigating child abductions and other crimes committed against children. First, a significant number of sex offenders have not complied with state laws requiring regular updating of their registry information, especially their addresses, effectively creating a loophole in state registry programs. Second, existing registry data on those sex offenders who are complying with state law does not include all of the information, such as known aliases, that can lead to a sex offender's current location. Third, law enforcement officials currently do not possess an automated tool that would enable them to effectively and efficiently determine the presence of any sex offenders in the vicinity of a crime scene, whether or not the sex offenders have registered at an address in that general area.

The technology now exists to assist law enforcement in locating all such sex offenders in near real-time, with potentially dramatic results for the safety of children.

### Background: Law Enforcement Efforts to Locate Sex Offenders

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reports that there are now nearly 564,000 registered sex offenders throughout the United States<sup>1</sup>. State registry programs require sex offenders to comply with sex offender registry requirements for a period of at least ten years<sup>2</sup>. Although these registry programs also require sex offenders to provide notice of change of address, this requirement has presented a serious flaw in the system. Under this "honor system," sex offenders notoriously have failed to report changes in their addresses.

According to a recent study by Parents for Megan's Law, approximately twenty-four percent of the nation's sex offenders are failing to comply with state registration requirements<sup>3</sup>. The number of non-compliant sex offenders is conservatively estimated at upwards of 100,000<sup>4</sup>. As one state official noted, "[a]n offender can give us an address today and pull up a moving van tomorrow . . . . There's a lot of incentive for an individual not to provide good information."<sup>5</sup>

Sex offenders who do not continue to live at their registered addresses present an increasingly daunting law enforcement problem. Recent cases of child abductions in Florida and Idaho demonstrate that sex offenders who move without registering, particularly across state lines, leave law enforcement officials without investigative leads, especially during the all-important forty-eight hours after a child is abducted<sup>6</sup>. Known as "absconders," these non-compliant offenders effectively have created a loophole in state registry programs that prevents law enforcement from determining their location<sup>7</sup>. Further complicating the process of locating both non-compliant and compliant sex offenders is the absence of critical information – such as aliases, dates of birth, and other identifiers – that, if known, would significantly enhance law enforcement's determination of offender locations.

As recent tragic events have shown, the inability to keep track of registered sex offenders presents enormous difficulties for law enforcement officials investigating child abduction cases. First, there is a

high risk that an offender will strike again, as the recidivism rate for sex offenders is four times higher than for non-sex offenders<sup>8</sup>. Second, an offender is likely to strike – and stay – close to home. Eighty-six percent of children abducted in a “stereotypical kidnapping” are held within fifty miles of the abduction site, which often is located within the abductor’s normal area of activity.<sup>9</sup> Third, the potential danger to an abducted child is acute: nearly fifty percent of non-family child abductions result in the child being sexually assaulted, and forty percent of children abducted in stereotypical kidnappings are killed.<sup>10</sup> Finally, law enforcement has only a brief window of time within which to recover a child unharmed. In the vast majority of cases, the abduction lasts less than twenty-four hours.<sup>11</sup> The first few hours after an abduction are particularly critical: in cases that end in homicide, seventy-four percent of the children are murdered within three hours of the abduction.<sup>12</sup>

Faced with the prospect of an abducted child, state and local law enforcement officials can and do apply traditional investigative methods, such as interviewing family members and witnesses, searching the family home and the abduction site, collecting forensic evidence, and canvassing the neighborhood.<sup>13</sup>

Thanks to recent advances in technology, law enforcement officials now have access to additional investigative tools, including web-based state sex offender registries and the Justice Department’s newly created National Sex Offender Public Registry (NSOPR).<sup>14</sup> But the absconder loophole and lack of important additional information has undermined the usefulness of these important tools. Without accurate, up-to-date, and comprehensive information as to the whereabouts of all registered sex offenders, state and local law enforcement officials cannot quickly locate all sex offenders present in the area of an abduction and perhaps recover the abducted child.

#### Proposed Solution: Advanced Sexual Offender Search Technology

Fortunately, advances in data collection and integration technology provide law enforcement officials with options that can aid in the prevention and solution of sex crimes. Advanced Sexual Offender Search (ASOS) technology is a reliable, accurate, and secure technology that can assist law enforcement officials in locating all registered sex offenders in near real-time.

As currently employed, the ASOS technology is part of an efficient, easy-to-use desktop application offered by LexisNexis that provides officials investigating a child abduction with enhanced, near real-time information regarding the likely locations of sex offenders. Based on an initial query identifying the address of the abduction site, the ASOS technology correlates information from state sex offender registries with a comprehensive repository of billions of disparate records of public and commercially available data. In less than three seconds, the ASOS technology produces a response that pinpoints all likely sex offender locations within a given radius of the abduction site. To permit investigators to focus on the locations mostly likely to produce results, the response classifies the locations into four categories:

REGISTERED (“R”) – any location within the given radius that is a sex offender’s registered address;

UNREGISTERED (“U”) – Current addresses for registered sex offenders not reported in a public registry (i.e., an absconder’s address);

HISTORICAL (“H”) – any location within the given radius at which a sex offender lived at some point in the past; and

ADDRESS OF INTEREST (“A”) – any location within the given radius with which a sex offender may have a connection.

To maximize the usefulness of the response, the ASOS technology includes an integrated geo-spatial (geographic information systems, or GIS) mapping component and a link-analysis visualization capability. With this capability, investigators can produce the response not only in tabular form, but also as a map that allows agents to visualize in a single view the registered, unregistered, historical, and address-of-interest locations of sex offenders within the specified radius.

To ensure system integrity, the ASOS technology is secured by comprehensive administrative, physical, and network security safeguards. Privacy interests are protected by restricting use of the ASOS technology to law enforcement. In addition, the ASOS technology complies with all applicable privacy laws and is subject to the LexisNexis Data Privacy Policy.<sup>15</sup>

In sum, the ASOS technology can immediately assist law enforcement officials in locating all registered sex offenders in near real-time and help solve the problem presented by non-compliant sex offenders. The ASOS technology is a tool that can enhance the existing capabilities of law enforcement agencies with potentially dramatic results for the safety of children.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> REGISTERED OFFENDERS IN THE UNITED STATES, NAT'L CENTER FOR MISSING & EXPLOITED CHILDREN (NCMEC), [http://www.missingkids.com/en\\_US/documents/sex-offender-map.pdf](http://www.missingkids.com/en_US/documents/sex-offender-map.pdf) (last visited Aug. 23, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act, Pub. L. No. 103-322, tit. XVII, subtit. A, § 170101 (1994) (codified as amended at 42 U.S.C. § 14071); e.g., KAN. STAT. ANN. § 22-4906 (2004).

<sup>3</sup> MEGAN'S LAW REPORT CARD, PARENTS FOR MEGAN'S LAW, INC., <http://www.parentsformeganslaw.com/html/links.lasso> (last visited Aug. 23, 2005); see also SEX-OFFENDER LAWS, NCMEC, [http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PageServlet?LanguageCountry=en\\_US&PageId=1545](http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/PageServlet?LanguageCountry=en_US&PageId=1545) (last visited Aug. 23, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> SEX-OFFENDER LAWS, NCMEC.

<sup>5</sup> Josh Mitchell, *In Harford, Knocking on Doors of Convicted Sexual Offenders*, BALT. SUN, Aug. 7, 2005, at 1B (quoting the state official in charge of the Maryland state registry); Laura Barnhardt, *Steps to Keep Tabs on Sex Offenders Vary Widely*, BALT. SUN, Aug. 5, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Several recent child abductions receiving nationwide attention have involved registered sex offenders whose location was unknown to law enforcement. For example, Joseph Edward Duncan III, the registered sex offender charged with kidnapping eight-year-old Shasta Groene and her nine-year-old brother Dylan from their home in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, left his registered address in Fargo, North Dakota without informing authorities. John Miller, *Idaho, Utah, Nevada Among First 20 States On National Sex-Offender Registry*, ASSOCIATED PRESS, July 21, 2005. Registered sex offender John Evander Couey, accused of kidnapping, assaulting, and murdering nine-year-old Jessica Lunsford, went six miles across town to stay at his half-sister's mobile home in Homosassa, Florida without changing his registered address. Abby Goodnough, *Florida Legislature Is Near an Agreement on Sex Offenders*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 22, 2005, at A14. The mobile home was less than 150 yards from Jessica's house. Mitch Stacy, *Florida Slayings Illustrate Difficulty in Tracking Sex Offenders*, ASSOCIATED PRESS, April 20, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Keith Morelli, *Sheriff's Unit Helps Track Sex Offenders*, TAMPA TRIBUNE, May 15, 2005, at 3; e.g., SEX OFFENDER LAWS, supra note 1 (referring to the "loopholes" in current state registry programs); Jason Grotto & Luisa Yanez, *1,800 Sex Offenders Missing*, MIAMI HERALD, Mar. 29, 2005, at 1A (quoting Florida officials' statements that "[t]here is a loophole, a breakdown in the system" and that "you have a system with huge holes in it").

<sup>8</sup> Criminal Offenders Statistics: Corrections Facts at a Glance, U.S. Dep't of Justice, <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/crimoff.htm#recidivism> (last visited Aug. 23, 2005); PATRICK A. LANGAN, ERICA L. SCHMITT & MATTHEW R. DUROSE, U.S. DEPT OF JUSTICE, *RECIDIVISM OF SEX OFFENDERS RELEASED FROM PRISON IN 1994* 24 (2003), available at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/rsorp94.pdf> (last visited Aug. 23, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> DAVID FINKELHOR, HEATHER HAMMER & ANDREA J. SEDLAK, U.S. DEPT OF JUSTICE, *NONFAMILY ABDUCTED CHILDREN: NATIONAL*

ESTIMATES AND CHARACTERISTICS, NATIONAL INCIDENCE STUDIES OF MISSING, ABDUCTED, RUNAWAY, AND THROWN AWAY CHILDREN (“NISMART”) 9 (2002), available at <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/ojdp/196467.pdf> (last visited Aug. 23, 2005); KENNETH A. HANFLAND, ROBERT KEPPEL & JOSEPH WEIS, STATE OF WASH. & U.S. DEPT OF JUSTICE, CASE MANAGEMENT FOR MISSING CHILDREN HOMICIDE INVESTIGATION: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY (“HOMICIDE INVESTIGATION”) 1 (1997), available at <http://findthekids.org/pdf/casemanag.pdf> (last visited Aug. 23, 2005). A “stereotypical kidnapping” is “[a] nonfamily abduction perpetrated by a slight acquaintance or stranger in which a child is detained overnight, transported at least 50 miles, held for ransom or abducted with the intent to keep the child permanently, or killed.” NISMART, at 2.

<sup>10</sup> NISMART, at 2, 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 10.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. DEPT OF JUSTICE, WHEN YOUR CHILD IS MISSING: A FAMILY SURVIVAL GUIDE vii & 5 (3d ed. May 2004), available at <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/ojdp/204958.pdf> (last visited Aug. 23, 2005); HOMICIDE INVESTIGATION, at 1.

<sup>13</sup> E.g., INVESTIGATIVE CHECKLIST FOR FIRST RESPONDERS, NCMEC, [http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/ResourceServlet?LanguageCountry=en\\_US&PageId=827](http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/ResourceServlet?LanguageCountry=en_US&PageId=827) (last visited Aug. 23, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* NCMEC also provides law enforcement with technology resources such as the CyberTipline, LOCATER poster technology, and AMBER Alert system. E.g., FOR LAW-ENFORCEMENT PROFESSIONALS, NCMEC, [http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/ResourceServlet?LanguageCountry=en\\_US&PageId=826](http://www.missingkids.com/missingkids/servlet/ResourceServlet?LanguageCountry=en_US&PageId=826) (last visited Aug. 23, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> LexisNexis & Privacy: Privacy Protection, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/terms/privacy/data/people.asp> (last visited Aug. 23, 2005).