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New Sports Scandals Offer “Teachable Moment” for Us About the Continuing Child Sexual Abuse Crisis

Laws in New York are so lax that many perpetrators evade exposure by waiting out the short statute of limitations and may continue to abuse yet more children in the future. I want to change that.

Details continue to unfold about the shocking scandals over allegations of child sexual abuse and cover-up at Penn State University and at Syracuse University here in New York.

It seems to me that this may be one of those “teachable moments” where there is something important to learn about the scourge of this type of crime in the broader world where terrible incidents like this don’t usually get the same headlines.

Shocking as the details of the Penn State case are, the rape and sexual abuse of children is sadly a national epidemic that is all too familiar to those who work with issues affecting the welfare of boys and girls. The statistics about this national plague are startling:

- 20 percent of America’s children suffer sexual abuse, according to the National Institute of Justice
- Of those, 56 percent suffer their abuse at the hands of family members or other people they trust and respect
- Only 10 percent of predators are ever exposed

With these statistics firmly in mind, there are several parallels between what we are seeing played out in the wake of the devastating revelations from Syracuse and PSU that apply to other instances that have not received such widespread attention. Here are five lessons we can draw from the headlines we are reading today.

Abusers Exploit a Power Relationship

People who abuse kids have a power relationship with their victims. They are often family members, family friends or relatives; but sometimes they are also coaches, religious leaders, doctors, and youth workers. The one thing all abusers have in common is that they hold a position of influence and trust in the life of a child and use their power to violate that trust.

Leaders Often Place Reputation Ahead Of Kids

When cases of abuse arise, there is a tendency for leaders of an organization to act to protect their institution first. What happened at Syracuse and Penn State is no different than the practices we have seen



repeatedly exposed over the past decade in the Catholic Church and other religious denominations; in scouting and other youth organizations; or even within families. When officers and leaders of a school, university, church or youth group fail to report credible allegations of these crimes, the real damage they do is to the children who are the victims.

Abusers Are Free To Continue Their Crimes

When an institution fails to report an incident of abuse to law enforcement, the pedophile not only avoids punishment for a crime, but is free to continue to prey on yet other youngsters. Experts say the average pedophile has more than 100 victims in a lifetime. As we saw in the Penn State case, a grand jury specifically identified eight victims, but since the case broke into the headlines, another 20 potential victims of this one coach have contacted law enforcement and more are expected to speak up.

Pedophiles Count On Delay by Victims

Victims often need a long time to come forward to talk about what happened to them and most never do. Many aren't able to understand or report their abuse before they are well into adulthood. Mental health experts say only ten percent of those abused ever come forward. That means most perpetrators — and those who helped hide them — are never publicly exposed. We need to do more through legislation and educational programs to make parents and the public aware of the signs of child sexual abuse in order to enable victims to come forward in order to identify and prosecute criminal abusers.

Laws Vary Widely and New York's Are Extremely Lax

Laws about reporting abuse vary from state to state, and so do criminal and civil statutes of limitations on these crimes. Some of them, as is the case here in New York, are so

unreasonably short that perpetrators evade exposure because they can simply wait out the statute of limitations – and they may continue to abuse more children. New York laws are so lax that victims have had to go to other states to get justice for the crimes against them. A victim of childhood sexual abuse at the hands of a coach from a parochial high school in Queens had to go to Boston to get justice. Eight victims of a priest from the Albany RC Diocese earlier this year had to take their case to Berkshire County, MA, to see their abuser sentenced to jail.

My Child Victims Act ([A5488](#)) will extend the existing statute of limitations in New York State. It will also create a civil “window” that will completely suspend the statute for one year in New York, helping expose those who are guilty of earlier crimes. This “window” will make it possible to identify previously-hidden abusers through the discovery process in court and expose them ensuring that they can never abuse a child again.

In considering the lessons we can draw from these sports world scandals we should not overlook the focus and tone of what we are reading. In reviewing the coverage about the case, there is a lot of discussion about the impact of the allegations on collegiate sports and the reputation of the schools involved. Politicians are shocked; law enforcement officials are troubled; and community leaders are sad. But the word I see missing from most accounts is “rage.”

When the extent of child sexual abuse in our society first came to my attention eight years ago, “rage” is what I felt – and I still do every time I hear about yet another incident of rape or a sexual crime against a child.

For this latest child sexual abuse scandal to be a truly “teachable moment” I think it is important for all of us to express a lot of rage and then we all need to do something about it. What I am doing is trying to make the Child Victims Act of New York become state law.