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**Safe & Just**  
Michigan

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# Experts argue to end sex offender registries after evidence shows they make us less safe

*Federal courts have ruled parts of Michigan's registry unconstitutional*

LANSING — Sex offender registries, touted as a solution to keep communities safe, have not only failed in their mission, they actually leave communities [less safe than they would have been without registries in place](#)<sup>1</sup>. For that reason, sex offender registries should be eliminated, said a panel of experts participating in a discussion on sex offender registries hosted today by Safe & Just Michigan, a Lansing-based nonprofit working to lessen Michigan's over-reliance on incarceration and to create safe communities throughout the state. The discussion was moderated by Safe & Just Michigan Policy Analyst **Josh Hoe**, who was joined **Miriam Aukerman**, senior staff attorney for ACLU of Michigan; **Judith Levine**, journalist, feminist and co-founder of the National Writers Union and co-author of "The Feminist and the Sex Offender: Confronting Sexual Harm, Ending State Violence"; and **Vincent Schiraldi**, Senior Research Scientist at the Columbia University School of Social Work.

There are more than 44,000 people on Michigan's bloated sex offender registry — more people than are incarcerated inside Michigan prisons — and this number grows yearly. For more than 90 percent of people on this list, registration is for 25 years to life. While there is a process to petition for removal from the registry, in practice, these requests are rarely successful. Meanwhile, people on the registry are subject to distancing laws that place severe limits on where they can live in relation to places like schools, churches and daycare centers. The public nature of registries open them up to harassment and discrimination — or in the worst case, violence or even death.

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<sup>1</sup> "Do Sex Offender Registration and Notification Laws Affect Criminal Behavior?," J.J. Prescott & Jonah E. Rockoff, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1100663](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1100663)

“If we are going to give up some of our civil rights, it better be for a good reason,” Hoe said. “Evidence shows us that there is no good reason. These registries aren’t making anyone safe — not people in the community and not the people on the registry. These are bad laws that diminish freedom for no public benefit, and that should worry everyone.”

Michigan’s sex offender law was criticized by federal judges for being too vague and because subsequent changes to the law were applied retroactively to people who were already on the registry. ACLU of Michigan has supported challenges to the registry.

“Our state registry system is not just unconstitutional, as the courts have ruled again and again. It’s a total failure,” Aukerman said. “The registry is bloated, ineffective and makes Michigan communities less safe. And although the court repeatedly has ordered lawmakers to fix it, they have not. In fact, they recently proposed a new system that is just as broken and unconstitutional. Lawmakers are again wasting time and tax dollars on new registry rules that will continue to sabotage people’s efforts to reenter society in a positive way, make it extremely difficult for victims to report abuse, and impose an impossible burden on law enforcement to monitor 44,000 people. If these new proposed rules become law, lawmakers will have again failed the people they were elected to serve.”

Even so, registries are often defended by people who believe that neighbors, co-workers and community members need to know who among them has been convicted of a sex-related offense.

“The sex offender registry does no good and much harm,” Levine said. “It displaces real child protection with a false sense of security at the same time as it incites terror to justify itself.”

The fact that registry laws backfire should concern everyone, Schiraldi said, even though many people hesitate to sympathize with people who have been convicted of a sex offense. When someone on a registry finds themselves ostracized and struggling to find a good job or place to live, they are more likely to commit a crime and wind up back in prison. That means the registry laws lead to greater crime, putting everyone’s safety at stake.

“When I was New York City Probation Commissioner, I got an up close, insider view of how absolutely ridiculous so-called sex offender registries were,” stated Schiraldi, co-director of the Columbia Justice Lab. “They turn people into pariahs, negatively impact their post-conviction progress, and provide a false sense of security to a frightened public. They are both inhumane and unsuccessful at achieving either the safety or recidivism reduction goals they are purportedly aimed at. I applaud Safe & Just Michigan for taking on an issue that many run from.”

A video of the discussion on ending sex offender registries will be available on Safe & Just Michigan’s YouTube channel, located at [bit.ly/YouTubeSJM](https://bit.ly/YouTubeSJM), late Friday afternoon.

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Safe & Just Michigan ([www.safeandjustmi.org](http://www.safeandjustmi.org)) works to advance policies that end Michigan's over-use of incarceration and promote community safety and healing. We partner with Michigan organizations and leaders from across the political spectrum, including business and community leaders, faith communities, crime survivor organizations, formerly incarcerated individuals, prisoners and their families, as well as Michigan taxpayers statewide.