

The Michigan Daily



*Edited and managed by students at
the University of Michigan since 1890.*

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FROM THE DAILY

Branded for life

Sex offenders need rehabilitation, not public shaming

The Michigan state Senate unanimously passed a bill on Jan. 29 that would expand the online registry of sex offenders to include more crimes involving minors. The current law, overhauled in 2011 to comply with federal regulations, categorizes criminals under three tiers. It requires the names of offenders who've committed Tier 2 and 3 crimes — including rape and child pornography — be posted publicly online. Though protecting children from the heinous acts of sex offenders must be of paramount importance, this bill is misguided. As a society we must stop shaming criminals indefinitely, and this bill would only serve to stigmatize past offenders and distract from reintegration.

The current registry system is arbitrary. The rationale used to distinguish between Tier 2 and Tier 3 crimes is ambiguous, which creates room for abuse. From punishing public urination for life to labeling high-school couples as "sex offenders," there's ample evidence that these abuses are far too common. The proposed bill does little to alleviate the actual problem of sexual violence and instead gives courts the power to hand down the same lifetime registration sentences to perpetrators of felonies and misdemeanors alike.

The purpose of laws is to mete out punishments for societal transgressions. When these lifelong punishments exceed the harm of the initial crime, our system makes the re-entry process into normal life excessively difficult. If criminals have served out their sentences, paid their debts and wish to reintegrate into society, then this proposed legislation will bar them from acclimating back into society — an injustice in itself.

According to University researcher J.J. Prescott, public notification requirements have been shown to actually increase the incidence

of re-offending. This trend has been attributed to a nothing-left-to-lose mentality that stems from the psychological and social costs public shaming imposes on previous offenders, making the possibility of living a crime-free life seem less feasible. Embittering criminals against society is no way to prevent them from committing future crimes.

Acceptance of these laws ultimately stands as a testament to the protection of children. Crimes perpetrated against young people are appalling, and offenders deserve to be justly punished. But the punishment should end at the final sentencing date; it shouldn't continue for life. Instead, extend prison terms or set conditions on required rehabilitation programs for sex offenders.

If this legislation is put into effect, some crimes that don't even merit fines greater than \$2,000 will now be accompanied with a public branding for life — sex offender. This is truly unjust. The Michigan legislature shouldn't perpetuate the harmful impacts of the current sex offender registry, and must not pass this bill.

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