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PubPol 580: Reading Notes for Class 16 (November 3, 2009)

On Tuesday we'll hear presentations about sex offender registries and also discuss strategies like geographical constraints on former sex offenders that have become popular but controversial.

We'll start with presentations on "What's a "good" sex offender registry look like?" and "What's a "bad" sex offender registry look like?"

The argument for sex offender registries is usually that they empower parents and others to assess the local threats and act in ways that may reduce risks associated with sex crimes. Or that their mere presence has a deterrent effect. What features would make a registry effective at this? Or not effective? I'd like the presenter for the first question to focus on this as a policy problem—if it was your job to design a good sex offender registry, what would you want up there and why? And the second presenter might say something about what you wouldn't want up there and maybe illustrate that with some actual website examples. We'll have the presentations back to back again.

If you haven't looked at a registry, you should take a look at the Michigan registry and think about how helpful it might be in helping citizens to protect themselves. You can plug in your ZIP code (or pick a college or university or an age) and see photos and addresses and offenses of sex offenders who live near you. You can also sign up for email alerts. The Michigan site is at: <http://www.mipsor.state.mi.us/>. So the goal for this presentation to lay out the properties of a "good" sex offender registry and defend that registry in terms of effectiveness and the other ethical issues involved. Emmanuel found an article for an iPhone app that links to sex offender registries: <http://www.cnn.com/2009/CRIME/09/29/iphone.app.fight.crime/index.html>. So those of you with iPhones might see what you think of that.

After some conversation about registries we can shift to a discussion of geographic (and other) restrictions on the activities, living arrangements, etc. of sex offenders who have been convicted and are not currently incarcerated. These have become very popular in recent years but are they good public policy? As in the discussion of registries, the goal here is to assess such restrictions in terms of their effectiveness and other important moral considerations.