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Why are sex offenders allowed online? CBS12 Investigates

By Greg Angel 1479152531000

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Sex offenders must follow laws that control their physical location. But going online is a different story.

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PORT ST. LUCIE, FL —

More than 70,000 sex offenders live and work in the state of Florida.

They are restricted by law as to where they can reside and where they can physically go. This includes being no closer than 1,000 feet to a playground, daycare or school.

What many may find surprising is that while sex offenders are restricted in many aspects of their lives, they have essentially free access to roam the Internet.

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“I don’t think that’s right,” mother Jacqueline Josephs told CBS12. “It’s a shame and parents should know about it, I didn’t know about it.”

While sex offenders, including the more than 18,000 who reside in Palm Beach, Martin, St. Lucie and Indian River counties, are allowed to use the Internet, social media and other apps, they do have to register any username or email address they use online.

Neglecting to register this information is a felony and a sex offender could end up back in prison.

Officer Justin Kerns with Port St. Lucie Police Department is in charge of keeping tabs on the whereabouts of more than 105 sex offenders registered living within the City.

“We’re trying to keep an eye on them,” Officer Kerns said.

Officer Kerns has to regularly make sure sex offenders are where they say they are and living where they’re registered at. Part of the checkups also include they are not using the Internet improperly. During his last sweep he found 5 sex offenders using the Internet without registration.

“It’s a concern because you can do all sorts of instant messaging where it’s private, so if you’re communicating with someone it takes a lot of investigative work to track it down, figure out who that person is talking to,” Officer Kerns said. “If an offender were going to try to re-victimize someone, that would be how they do it, that’s how they groom their future victims, through social media.”

Local lawmakers told CBS12 that an Internet ban for sex offenders would be a violation of their rights. However, they pointed to expansions of sex offender laws that added reporting requirements, as have other states like Ohio and North Carolina.

Florida law initially only required sex offenders to register email addresses, however that changed during the 2016 Legislative session. That is when state lawmakers expanded the definitions of what Internet identification has to be reported to include social media and other new-age technology platforms.

[However, probation officers cannot log into a sex offender’s account or profile.](#)

CBS12 found that among the vast number of social media sites, few have policies in place specifically prohibiting sex offenders from using their service. Snapchat and Twitter are among those that we could not find any section of their Terms of Service prohibiting sex offenders from using their service.

Facebook, and Facebook-owned Instagram, do explicitly list in their [Terms of Service](#) that “...you will not use Facebook if you are convicted sex offender.”

That of course does not physically stop a sex offender from signing up and using the service. [Facebook and Instagram do offer ways for people to report sex offenders using their service.](#)

Officer Kerns says another concern about sex offenders using social media that the Internet allows people to conceal their true identities, although he says in many instances sex offenders he’s found use their real names and photos of themselves.

That's why he says it's important that parents and kids have an understanding about the potential pitfalls of who kids who talking to online.

"It's very scary, that's why I try to keep up with it," Officer Kerns said. "Take the extra hour or two, grab your kids' devices, see what they're doing on them, know their passwords, know the parental controls."

There are several things you can do.

Using the link above, you can report any sex offender that you may believe is using Facebook or Instagram.

You can also search [Florida Department of Law Enforcement's Sex Offender Registry](#), searching by address or by any [email address or username](#) to find out if it is linked to a registered sex offender.

You can also contact your local law enforcement agency.

West Palm Beach, FL

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