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*Complete a one-page, double-spaced report describing the legal, ethical, and privacy issues associated with databases used in crime fighting. An Internet search using the phrase such as "crime fighting databases" should provide you with many examples to choose from. Please include the URLs of sites you use.*

I know of many people, especially parents, who have used online Sex Offender Database Registries to learn about the number of people convicted of sex offences in their neighborhoods with surprising results. All of the people I've spoken to who have done this research were shocked at how many sex offenders lived in their neighborhoods, even just down the street from them and their children.

However, many of these same parents were also frustrated at the lack of details concerning the nature of the sex offender's crimes. How old was the offender when they were convicted of the crime? These parents told me that an 18 year old having sex with a 16 year old wasn't what they were scared of, but the registries did not provide them with enough information to know whether they really needed to be afraid of their children walking by the house down the street on their way to school.

My own parents are neighbors to someone listed in one of these directories, for an indecency with a minor committed 30 years ago with a 17 year old. Several parents I've talked to have said that this is exactly the kind of offense they aren't too worried about; however, since being added to the registry nearly a decade ago, my parents' neighbor regularly receives death threats and is the victim of vandalism to his property.

However, the age of the victim in his case or any details about the case really can't be listed in such a registry, because protecting the identity of the victim in these cases is crucial. If a victim of sexual abuse, rape, or indecency with minor knew their

information, the details of their case, were to be listed in such a directory, it would deter them from pressing charges.

The websites that host these directories have very different strategies for presenting the information. One site, “Family Watchdog,” provides a searchable nationwide database, with Google maps mashups and locations of schools in relation to the offenders. I was disturbed to find this site advertising Lysol cleaners and Vonage cell phone service along with their data, which was obviously mined from online government sources.

The “Virginia Sex Offender and Crimes Against Minors Registry” was a state-sponsored website. Before being able to access the information, I was required to prove I was human by entering a word in a textbox shown in an image. This was obviously to deter sites like “Family Watchdog” from data mining. Also before being allowed to access the data, I had to acknowledge a Terms of Service agreement stating the information could not be used to harass anyone listed in the database.

Family Watchdog

<http://www.familywatchdog.us>

Virginia Sex Offender and Crimes Against Minors Registry

<http://sex-offender.vsp.virginia.gov/sor/>