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My Word: Forget broad brush for sex offenders

By Shana Rowan

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As executive director of USA FAIR Inc., an advocacy group formed by the family members of registered sex offenders, I was both saddened and concerned to read about the murder of 8-year-old Cherish Periwinkle. Donald Smith, a registered sex offender in Florida, has been charged with the crime.

If he's found guilty, he deserves nothing less than the full weight of Florida law.

As one of the millions of family members of registered sex offenders in this country, I — along with law-abiding former offenders — condemn this senseless act. I also share the fear that Smith's alleged horrible actions could become the latest inspiration for even tougher sex offender laws, when in reality, the majority of registrants share little with Smith other than the fact that their names also are on a registry.

Those calling for review of Florida's sex offender policies in the wake of this tragedy must ensure their proposals are founded in fact. Contrary to the widely held myth, sex offenders have one of the lowest recidivism rates.

Smith is part of a very small, but dangerous subset of repeat offenders — sex offenders with long rap sheets filled with non-sex related crimes.

John Evander Couey, who murdered Jessica Lunsford, for example, had 29 non-sex crime convictions in addition to the prior sexual offense that landed him on the registry.

The Cherish case is yet another example of how the sex offender registry is a political placebo that does little to prevent further victimization.

Florida's registry laws are among the toughest in the country, and Smith verified his address with police on the very morning of the murder.

Besides severely impacting the lives of compliant, law-abiding former offenders and their families, the registry did nothing to prevent a true sexual predator from committing his next violent act. No registry law

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could have prevented Cherish's murder.

A proper legislative response to this tragedy would be to look at why such a dangerous repeat offender was on the street in the first place — and to examine the extensive recent research on sex offenders and registry laws that could lead to better policies that focus on the truly dangerous.

Shana Rowan is executive director of USA FAIR Inc.

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