

Prevention efforts are essential to reducing any category of crime. This is especially true in reducing criminal exploitation of children. In March, our office was notified a level 3 predatory offender was moving into Benton County. For those who missed this news, Brent Rahm moved into a residence in Alberta Township on March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023. More information on Rahm and the intensive supervision he will be subject to may be found on the Benton County Sheriff's Office website.

Meetings on these predatory offenders are intended to spur interest among the public in the offender and how the community can safeguard itself against the potential danger posed by this person. This information is good, but the predatory offenders we know about in our communities are only part of the issue. Keeping our children safe means protecting them from the predatory offenders in our community, those in other communities, and the offenders we don't know about yet. Approaching this problem by focusing on avoiding the finite list of offenders we know about quickly becomes an overwhelming task. There are over 18,000 registered predatory offenders in Minnesota (including more than 100 in Benton County) and a whole world of offenders lurking in the dark corners of the internet.

Those numbers are certainly enough to make parents and caregivers lose sleep searching for answers. In my experience, the most effective answer to this issue is a conversation. Having an age-appropriate conversation with your children about the dangers in the community and on the internet is the most important step a parent or caregiver can take. Children should know that there are people both in the community and online that are a danger and that if anyone makes them feel uncomfortable, they need to speak to an adult right away. In cases of child exploitation, the real danger to address comes from the offender who befriends and grooms their victim, not a stranger abduction. Stranger abductions make notable news stories and viral posts on social media, but they represent only about 0.1% of missing children cases annually. Rahm's case highlights the importance of conversations about the real danger posed by offenders who groom their victims.

Rahm sexually assault three teen-aged girls he met and groomed through social media. This kind of criminal activity is happening with alarming frequency online. In 2021, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reported receiving 44,155 tips on criminal activity categorized as "Online Enticement." In all grooming cases there is a point where the criminal transitions from pretending to be the victim's friend to becoming the victim's abuser. That point always involves a moment where the victim is uncomfortable with the criminal's request or demand. For a prepared child, this is the moment he or she recalls the conversations someone who cared for them had with them. This is the moment where his or her intuition and confidence in the adults in his or her life becomes a moment of intervention rather than a moment of victimization. For the sake of the children in your life, ensure they are prepared for how to handle a moment like this and ensure they can identify trusted adults in their lives who they could approach for help.

These conversations (especially with teens) may come at the cost of exasperated gasps, eye rolls, and overly dramatic statements of embarrassment. I'm inclined to believe that parents and caregivers have paid this price before and know that it is truly just your teenager's way of saying thank you for being brave enough to care about them. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at: <https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention>. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.