



MONSTERS among us

Site provides digital vigilance to help you keep track of sexual predators in your neighborhood

The internet, like life, is full of many wonderful things. And, like life, there also are many unpleasant things. **FamilyWatchdog.us** is a way to use the internet to keep track of one of the most unpleasant things in life so you can avoid it.

The website keeps track of where sexual offenders live. You can enter your address, or the address of your child's school or caregivers, and the site will generate a map pinpointing the location of all the registered sex offenders in the area.

The best self defense is an awareness of your surroundings. If you see danger before it happens, you can avoid it, or be better prepared to confront it. Using this site to learn where potential predators live in your neighborhood is a simple, common sense step you can take to increase your awareness.

Knowing that a sexual offender lives on your block doesn't mean you should gather an angry mob, light

torches and hand out pitchforks. You can use the knowledge to avoid interacting with known offenders, to warn your kids about them and to practice increased vigilance if you must interact with them.

The site uses Google maps to generate the locations of the offenders, which are represented by color-coded pins on the map. The colors indicate the type of offense they have committed: red for crimes against children; yellow for rape; blue for sexual battery; and green for other offenses.

If you click on a pin you get more specific information on the offender. A mugshot is displayed, along with a physical description. The offender's address, specific criminal charges, markings — such as scars and tattoos — and any known aliases also are provided.

You can visit the site from time to time to look for offenders in your neighborhood, or you can register for automatic notices. Family Watchdog claims to update its information daily. When a new offender moves into your neighborhood, or an old one moves out, registered users will receive a notification.

Information incomplete

While the information on the site is useful, it is not complete or completely accurate. The data is compiled from public records generated by multiple law enforcement and other government agencies. If those records are not up to date then the website won't be either. A lot of the address information relies on criminals — who have been convicted of some of the worst types of crimes — honestly self-reporting their whereabouts. Someone who would sexually assault a child would probably have no qualms about lying on a government form.

In addition to typing in an address, there are a couple of other ways to locate offenders on the site. You can search for a specific person by name, you can review a state's sexual offenders registry, or you can search by municipality.

There are answers to frequently asked questions and definitions of related laws and legal terms. Another section provides general information on sexual abuse.

While the focus of Family Watchdog is sex offenders, it

also has information on other potential threats to your family. The Safety section has information on Food and Drug Administration alerts, food allergies, product recalls and medicine recalls. There's also a monthly digital newsletter you can subscribe to.

While all of these features are free to access, the site does have some services it charges for. It offers its database and mapping services for sale to companies that want to use it on websites or apps. It also offers background checks. Additionally, the site sells advertising space on its pages.

Family Watchdog is easy enough to use, with simple and intuitive navigation. The site could use a redesign to be more effective. The layout, typography and color palette are not terrible, but they're not great either. The site could utilize its space better and include more art elements. The maps should be much bigger.

This website, while not perfect, is a useful resource. It's too bad that it's needed.

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