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LOCAL

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Joshua Trujillo / P-I

Tim Kahn, left, who has been treating young sex offenders for nearly 30 years, works with teenage boys in a group therapy session in Bellevue.

## Juvenile sex offenders marked for life

Records of childhood transgressions, never sealed, limit options for adults

By CLAUDIA ROWE  
P-I REPORTER

They were neighbors, aged 13 and 10, who played together in a toy fort at the older boy's home. But one summer afternoon, the teen began talking about masturbation, then performed oral sex on the younger boy. He said they should do it again the next day. And they did.

Soon after, two sheriff's deputies arrived at the adolescent's Eastside home to read the seventh-grader his rights. Within two months, he was a registered sex offender, convicted of first-degree child rape.

"I didn't know that what I was doing was a crime -- that's not to minimize it -- I just didn't know," said Tyler, now 23, who agreed to talk with the Seattle P-I if identified only by his middle name.

"I was just some stupid kid growing up, who had an urge and he didn't know how to cope with it. Afterward, I always wondered, 'Is there something wrong with me? Is there some malfunction in my brain? Am I a pervert?' But it was just my inability to understand what I was feeling."

Since 1997, more than 3,500 children in the state -- some as young as 10, though on average about 14 -- have been charged and convicted as felony sex offenders, a mark that remains on their records forever, barring them from careers in medicine, teaching or a host of other professions that serve the vulnerable. It also frightens many into under-the-radar housing arrangements to avoid landlords who require background checks.

"Juvenile sex offenses cannot be sealed -- ever -- and that's huge," said Kim Ambrose, a former public defender who now runs the Child and Youth Advocacy Clinic at the University of Washington School of Law. "It messes you up with any public housing or any job that allows you access to children -- teaching, coaching, shoot, even cosmetology. The only thing that's available, basically, is to get a pardon from the governor."

Washington is among the few states to include juveniles in its sex offender management plan, assessing youths with tools designed for adults and funneling them through the courts with adult-sized punishments.

Next year, those laws could become even stricter if legislators decide to implement the Adam Walsh Act. The federal legislation, which financially penalizes states that decline to apply it, requires all offenders 14 or older to register with law enforcement for at least 25 years, no matter how upstanding they may have been since their crime.

Tyler, like most youths who get treatment, has never been charged with a sexual offense again. The court sentenced him to two years in an intensive therapy program designed as an alternative to incarceration. He attended school but had to avoid sports -- counseling appointments conflicted with practice -- and he lied desperately to keep his secret from friends.

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