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# Iowa's Residency Rules Drive Sex Offenders Underground

By [MONICA DAVEY](#)

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CEDAR RAPIDS, Iowa — One cornfield beyond the trim white farmhouse where the Boland family lives and a road sign warns, "Watch for children and dogs," is a faded motel.

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Jason A. Cook for The New York Times

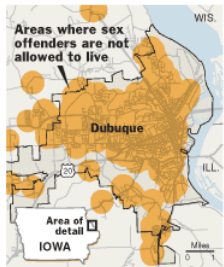
The Ced-Rel Motel in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, was home to 26 registered sex offenders by early March. Many other places either will not take them, or, under state law restricting where offenders may live, cannot.

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Articles in this series will explore what happens when convicts leave prison and return to their communities.

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The New York Times

State law bars sexual offenders from most of Dubuque, Iowa.

which passed an ordinance in January.

But even as new bans ripple across the Midwest, the rocky start of the Iowa law — one of at least 18 state laws governing the living arrangements of those convicted of sex crimes —

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For years a layover for budget-conscious motorists and construction crews, the motel has lately become a disquieting symbol of what has gone wrong with Iowa's crackdown on sexual offenders of children. With just 24 rooms, the motel, the Ced-Rel, was home to 26 registered sex offenders by the start of March.

"Nobody wants to have something associated with sex offenders right beside them," said Steve Boland, a farmer and father of two who learns about his newest neighbors every few weeks when sheriff's deputies stop by with photographs of them.

"Us showing the kids some mug shots sure wasn't going to help," Mr. Boland said. "How were they going to remember that many faces?"

The men have flocked to the Ced-Rel and other rural motels and trailer parks because no one else will, or can, have them. A new state law barring those convicted of sex crimes involving children from living within 2,000 feet of a school or day care center has brought unintended and disturbing consequences. It has rendered some offenders homeless and left others sleeping in cars or in the cabs of their trucks.

And the authorities say that many have simply vanished from their sight, with nearly three times as many registered sex offenders considered missing since before the law took effect in September.

"The truth is that we're starting to lose people," said Don Vrotsos, chief deputy for the Dubuque County sheriff's office and the man whose job it is to keep track of that county's 101 sex offenders.

The statute has set off a law-making race in the cities and towns of Iowa, with each trying to be more restrictive than the next by adding parks, swimming pools, libraries and bus stops to the list of off-limits places. Fearful that Iowa's sex offenders might seek refuge across state lines, six neighboring states have joined the frenzy.

"We don't want to be the dumping ground for their sex offenders," said Tom Brusch, the mayor of Galena, Ill.,

has led to a round of second-guessing about whether such laws really work.

"Nobody wants sex offenders in their area, and on its face, it makes sense that people wouldn't want them near day cares and schools," said Scott Matson, a research associate at the Center for Sex Offender Management, a nonprofit project financed by the [federal Department of Justice](#). "But there are consequences of removing them."

While some of the Iowa's largest cities, like Des Moines, have become virtually off limits for those convicted of sex crimes involving children, the new rules have pushed many to live in groups away from their families, in places like the Ced-Rel, or the Red Carpet Inn in nearby Bouton, where nine offenders rent rooms.

Michele Costigan, whose driveway is right across Highway 30 from the Ced-Rel in this rural stretch just outside Cedar Rapids, said she had stopped leaving any of her four children at home alone, had told them to dial 911 if anyone they did not recognize pulled into the family driveway, and was considering moving.

"If the point of his law was to make us safer, we are not," Ms. Costigan said.

Even more worrisome to law enforcement officials in Iowa, the restrictions appear to be leading some offenders to slip out of sight.

Of the more than 6,000 people on Iowa's registry of sex offenders, 400 are now listed as "whereabouts unconfirmed" or living in "non-structure locations" (like tents, parking lots or rest areas). Last summer, the number was 140.

"When it comes down to it, we would rather know where these people are living than to have the restriction," said Deputy Vrotsos. He said that he devoted at least 20 hours extra a week, along with the work of two clerks, to administering the new state law.

Last fall, Deputy Vrotsos told about 30 of the offenders that they would have to move to meet the requirements of Iowa's law, which he said made about 90 percent of the city of Dubuque off limits.

Some complied, he said, moving to trailer parks, across the Mississippi River into Illinois, to motels or, in the case of one man who had been living with his parents, to a truck at the Ioco Truck Stop on the outskirts of town. But at least three of the offenders have disappeared, Deputy Vrotsos said, giving false addresses or not providing any address at all.

The effectiveness and fairness of the restrictions has become a matter of great debate.

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*Gretchen Ruethling contributed reporting from Chicago for this article.*

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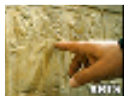
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