

Northern suburbs allege that sex offenders being shunted from city to their neighborhoods

The north metro suburbs say they're taking the brunt of housing Level 3 offenders.

By [Shannon Prather](#) Star Tribune

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Two years after Hennepin County probation officials quietly stopped allowing Level 3 predatory sex offenders to move into a handful of already oversaturated Minneapolis neighborhoods, inner-ring suburbs say the problem is being pushed out to their residential areas.

Last week, an ordinance was introduced before the Brooklyn Center City Council that would prohibit new Level 3 offenders — those considered most likely to reoffend — from moving there. Six now live in Brooklyn Center, more than in any other Hennepin County suburb, and most of them arrived within the last year.

In neighboring Brooklyn Park, home to three offenders, leaders are discussing their options with city attorneys, said Deputy Chief Mark Bruley. Nearby Columbia Heights and Hilltop in December passed emergency one-year moratoriums on new Level 3 offenders after learning they're home to five of Anoka County's 11 Level 3 offenders.

The debate over where the state's 368 Level 3 offenders should live upon release from prison is happening as the Minnesota Sex Offender Program prepares to fulfill a federal court order by releasing some of the 720 rapists and pedophiles held in state hospitals.

Brooklyn Center Police Chief Tim Gannon said his city took notice after the number of Level 3 offenders who planned to live there spiked last fall.

It's illegal to ban predatory offenders, but city leaders say that's not what Brooklyn Center is doing. The proposed ordinance would create 2,000-foot buffer zones around schools, public playgrounds and licensed child care facilities.

Those zones would effectively make nearly every corner of the city off-limits to predators. The council plans to take a final vote in March.

"Why do the northern suburbs seem to be the epicenter of predatory offenders?" said Gannon, pointing out that Bloomington, Hennepin County's largest suburb, has just one. But Hennepin County officials counter that Minneapolis already shoulders most of the burden, and that suburbs can't slam the door on all offenders. The County Board will discuss the decision to stop placing them in the five Minneapolis ZIP codes at a briefing April 21.

Constitutional concerns

According to the Minnesota Department of Corrections, 124 of the 146 Level 3 offenders in Hennepin County live in Minneapolis. Of those in Minneapolis, 75 live in five ZIP codes west of downtown and on the North Side: 55403, 55405, 55411, 55412 and 55430. The idea of using ZIP codes to locate offenders was intended to better disperse them.

"What we are dealing with now will be a sliver of what we will wind up dealing with," said Mark Thompson, Hennepin County assistant county administrator for public safety.

"It's tough. No one wants them to relocate to their community. The U.S. Constitution requires it. They have paid their debt and are no longer an immediate threat. Courts have ruled they can be back in the community."

Hennepin County does more than its share, Thompson said, because outstate offenders relocate there to be near treatment options. He said Brooklyn Center's actions were disheartening.

There's no plot to load up any city or neighborhood with offenders, Thompson said. But offenders, who have some say in where they live, tend to select cities with affordable housing and access to transportation, he said.

State corrections officials denounced Brooklyn Center's ordinance.

"While well-intended, city ordinances interfere with the effective supervision of sex offenders and do not improve public safety," said spokeswoman Sarah Latuseck. "Public safety is increased when offenders have stable housing and a support system in place when they re-enter the community."

Gannon said the city won't evict the offenders already living there, but he said efforts should be made to spread the population to other suburbs.

Brooklyn Center Mayor Tim Willson said his city is tired of the "greater good speech" because the burden — whether it is sex offenders or affordable housing — always seems to fall on Brooklyn Center and Brooklyn Park, Minnesota's two most racially diverse cities.

"I am not a conspiracy theorist," Willson said, "but more and more it looks like the metro has determined the northwest corner is where all the stuff is going to go that nobody else wants. I haven't noticed any Level 3s in Edina."

Not about NIMBY

Columbia Heights Police Chief Scott Nadeau said this is not about NIMBY — the Not-in-My-Backyard syndrome — but about ensuring a more equitable distribution.

There's one predatory offender for every 0.7 square miles of Columbia Heights and Hilltop, compared to one offender for every 74 square miles in the rest of Anoka County, Nadeau said.

"We have an obligation, like other communities, to be a part of the solution. We want to make sure we are not the only solution," Nadeau said.

Gannon and Nadeau said that more candid discussions about offender placement are needed.

"I do think it's time we get the partners at the table from the Minnesota Department of Corrections, community corrections and local elected officials to start to have a discussion," Nadeau said.

Thompson agreed. "This has to be a statewide solution," he said.