

No. 25-1413 / 25-1414

**United States Court of Appeals
for the Sixth Circuit**

MARY DOE; JOHN DOE A; JOHN DOE B; JOHN DOE C; JOHN
DOE D; JOHN DOE E; JOHN DOE G; JOHN DOE H and MARY
ROE,

Plaintiffs – Appellants Cross-Appellees,

v.

GRETCHEN WHITMER, Governor of the State of Michigan; JAMES
GRADY, II, Colonel,

Defendants – Appellees Cross-Appellants

Appeal from the United States District Court
for the Eastern District of Michigan at Detroit,
Case No. 2:22-cv-10209 (The Honorable Mark A. Goldsmith)

**AMICUS CURIAE BRIEF OF CERTAIN INDIVIDUALS
IMPACTED BY SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN SUPPORT OF
PLAINTIFFS – APPELLANTS CROSS-APPELLEES AND IN
SUPPORT OF REVERSAL**

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STATEMENT OF INTEREST OF AMICI CURIAE

Amici curiae¹ Patty Wetterling, Tashmica Torok, and Amber Vlangas are three women whose lives have been indelibly impacted by sexual violence. Amici have an interest in dispelling the myth that all people impacted by sexual violence support sex offense registries. They submit this brief to rebut the promotion of such registries in the name of victims and survivors of sexual violence.

Pursuant to Fed. R. App. P. 29(a)(2), Amici state that all parties have consented to the filing of this brief.

SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

Victims and survivors of sexual violence are often painted as a homogenous group with interests and beliefs that include uniform support for the sex offense registry. But, as this brief hopes to make clear, that is not so.

The story of each Amicus is unique—one is the mother of a child who was abducted, raped, and murdered; one is a survivor of child sexual abuse; and one was sexually assaulted while serving in the Marines. Though their personal experiences differ significantly, Amici are united in their opposition to the sex offense registry.

¹ Pursuant to Fed. R. App. P. 29(a)(4)(E), amici curiae state that no party or a party's counsel authored this brief in whole or in part; no party or a party's counsel contributed money that was intended to fund preparing or submitting this brief; and no other person than the amici or their counsel contributed money that was intended to fund preparing or submitting the brief.

Amici offer their stories to help the Court assess any statements argued by any party that suggest there is one viewpoint shared by any and all people impacted by sexual violence.

ARGUMENT

A common misconception exists that victims and survivors of sexual violence uniformly support harsh measures for people convicted of sex offenses, including the sex offense registry. But people whose lives have been impacted by sexual violence hold views that are not uniform. Their views are varied, complex, and sometimes in mutual opposition.

While some victims and survivors of sexual violence undoubtedly support the registry, others oppose the registry in the strongest terms. In fact, there is statistical evidence that people who have experienced sexual violence are *less* supportive of sex offender registration and notification laws like Michigan's Sex Offenders Registration Act (SORA), M.C.L. §28.721 *et seq.* than people who have not experienced such harm.²

Amici come forward to share their stories and explain why they oppose the sex offense registry—including that the registry could not have prevented the harm

² Susanne Spoo, et al., *Victims' Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders and Sex Offender Legislation*, 62 INT'L J. OF OFFENDER THERAPY AND COMP. CRIMINOLOGY 11, 3385-3407 (2018).

they experienced, that the registry is ill-suited to address intra-familial sexual abuse, and that the registry does not meet the needs of survivors in the aftermath of sexual violence.

When considering matters of policy to address sexual violence, the voices of victims and survivors who oppose the registry cannot and should not be ignored. Any assertions made on behalf of victims and survivors should be viewed in light of the fact that the views of people impacted by sexual violence are not monolithic and should not be presumed to support a decision by the courts at any level following such assumptions.

Patty Wetterling

Though Patty Wetterling was instrumental in the passage of the 1994 federal law that required every state to establish sex offender registries—the Jacob Wetterling Act³—she now opposes sex offender registries.

In 1989, Patty’s 11-year-old son Jacob was kidnapped by a masked man at gunpoint. On that day, Jacob had biked with his younger brother and best friend to a convenience store to rent a video and buy candy. As they rode their bikes home, a masked man stopped the boys, ordered the other two boys at gunpoint to run to the woods, and took Jacob.

³ Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act, 42 U.S.C. §14071.

For nearly twenty-seven years, Patty and her family did not know what happened to Jacob. It was only in 2016 that Danny Heinrich admitted to abducting, sexually assaulting, and murdering Jacob.

Jacob was playful, sweet, emotional, and smart. He had a great sense of humor and loved just being with his friends and family. His disappearance devastated Patty's family—and really every family in the region.

After the abduction, it took Patty about two years to get on her feet. Patty became a child safety advocate, in the hope that she could prevent other children from experiencing what happened to her son and to prevent other families from experiencing the pain that her family experienced. Patty co-founded the Jacob Wetterling Foundation and became a Board Member—and eventually Chair of the Board of Directors—for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

Patty advocated for the Jacob Wetterling Act (“Jacob’s Law”) because at the time she believed that the registry would help law enforcement in cases of missing and exploited children by identifying a list of potential suspects who had been convicted of sexual violence against children. She thought that the registry would be a tool to bring missing children home and help build safer communities.

But in the years since the passage of Jacob’s Law, Patty’s views have changed. One thing she realized was that her son’s kidnapper would never have been on a registry because he had never been charged or convicted of a sex crime before

Jacob's abduction. Through decades of working as an advocate and educator on the issues of child abduction and exploitation, Patty also learned that what happened to Jacob is rare—that most sexual abuse happens within the family, or with people a child knows.⁴ From Patty's perspective, a registry is not going to provide parents better information about these family members and acquaintances, and those are not the people that end up on the sex offense registry. Additionally, knowing that the person who caused harm will end up on a registry way too often prevents the family from reporting what happened or even seeking counselling for the victim and treatment for the person who caused the harm—a side effect that Patty finds particularly chilling.

Three decades after the passage of Jacob's Law, Patty is clear that the registry does not prevent children from being sexually abused. Locking perpetrators up, labeling them, and not allowing them community support doesn't work. Instead of letting our anger drive us, Patty believes, the wise and prudent thing would be to take a look at what is—and isn't—working. Rather than pouring money into the registry, Patty believes that we need to fund prevention programs that stop sexual violence before it happens, and to help those who have offended so that they will not

⁴ David Finkelhor & Anne Shattuck. *Characteristics of Crimes Against Juveniles*. CRIMES AGAINST CHILD. RES. CTR. (2012), available at https://www.unh.edu/ccrc/sites/default/files/media/2022-03/characteristics-of-crimes-against-juveniles_0.pdf (last accessed September 30, 2025).

do it again. Patty knows that the registry is popular and that reallocating efforts to more effective measures may exact a high political price. But, to her, that is not too much to pay to prevent the kidnap, rape, or murder of another child.

Tashmica Torok

Some of Tashmica Torok's earliest memories as a child are of her father sexually abusing her—first in Germany, where she was born, and later in El Paso, Texas, where she grew up. Tashmica was raised to obey, to never talk back, and to be a good daughter. She did what her father told her to, including laying silently in her bed without calling out for help.

During the abuse, her father would tell her that he was teaching her how to be a wife and likened the abuse to pictures in National Geographic. He also told Tashmica that if she told anyone, she would destroy her family—and that his happiness and his reputation as an upstanding man of God and country depended on her silence. Afterward, Tashmica's father would make them pray together.

The abuse ended suddenly when she was eight years old. Tashmica's father was training to become a Green Beret in the Army. While paratrooping, a blood clot burst in his brain, and he died. His death was her salvation.

Had her father not died, Tashmica does not know whether she would have told anyone about the abuse. But after her father's death, she eventually disclosed the abuse to her mother. Though the revelation about her husband deeply upset

Tashmica's mother, she believed and supported Tashmica immediately. Tashmica never felt blamed or shamed into silence.

Tashmica became a survivor activist and eventually co-founded a nonprofit organization in Michigan to provide her community with healing-centered responses to child sexual abuse. Assisting more than 250 families, the organization provided free therapy and trauma-informed yoga to kids who had experienced child sexual abuse, and support groups for their caretakers.

For much of her life, Tashmica asked herself, "what kinds of interventions could have prevented the harm and violence of sexual abuse that I endured as a child?" There was a time that she believed the sex offender registry was such an intervention—but her perspective has changed. Over time, Tashmica came to learn that the registry does not decrease the incidence of child sexual abuse, and it also does not allow for flexibility for a survivor-led approach to addressing child sexual abuse within a family structure.

In Tashmica's view, true violence prevention will only come from investing our resources to create the conditions for a world where everyone belongs and has what they need—including housing, food, security, and mental health providers—and through community-based responses that permit those who cause harm to seek help, practice accountability, and end generational cycles of violence.

Amber Vlangas

In 1996, Amber Vlangas was a 19-year-old Marine, proud to serve her country. That pride was shattered when she was sexually assaulted by a fellow service member on the base where she was attending her military occupational school. This was a person Amber trusted and worked with. Young and away from home, Amber believed the military would protect her. After all, she had raised her own hand to protect and defend others.

Instead, Amber was met with disbelief, told to “get over it.” Leadership warned that she was tearing apart unit cohesion by coming forward. Amber received no services—no counseling, no advocacy, no acknowledgment of the harm done. Like most survivors, she was forced to navigate her pain in silence, believing herself to be the problem. Amber’s mental health deteriorated. She recalls that anxiety, depression, and mistrust became constant companions. The lack of safety, support, and validation left her adrift.

In those early years, Amber embraced what she now sees as lies—that registries and harsh, punitive policies are necessary to keep people like her safe. Amber believed the system’s story about “us” versus “them,” and thought the best way to prevent harm was to separate the “dangerous” from the “good.” It felt logical when she was hurting so deeply.

But as Amber began working with other survivors, her understanding shifted. The overwhelming majority of survivors she met had been harmed by someone they knew—a family member, a friend, a trusted colleague—not by the stranger the registry narrative focuses on. Survivors were often promised safety through punishment, only to find themselves still living with trauma, wondering why they didn't feel better. To Amber, it became clear that the system was failing our most vulnerable and that survivors were being used for political gain.

Eventually, Amber helped to found the Restorative Action Alliance, an organization that works to create solutions to end interpersonal and state violence, while honoring civil liberties and healing for all people. She is currently the organization's Executive Director.

What Amber knows now is that registries are built on false premises about how sexual harm happens. She does not believe that registries prevent harm, or that they address the real conditions that allow harm to occur. Through her work, Amber has learned that registries create the very destabilizing, isolating circumstances (poverty, homelessness, broken relationships) that decrease safety for everyone.

From Amber's perspective, registries remove any meaningful path to rehabilitation, which should be the cornerstone of real accountability. No person can be truly accountable in a state of perpetual condemnation and lack of safety. Too often, people who have survived sexual harm end up caught in the criminal legal

system themselves, and the cycle starts again. To Amber, the registry regime is like setting someone else's house on fire and wondering why everything burns.

Looking back, Amber thinks that if restorative justice had been available to her, she could have had the safety, acknowledgment, and accountability she needed. Instead, she was given a system that treated her as a symbol rather than a person—a system that weaponized her pain to enact policies that harm children themselves, whole families, and marginalized people and communities.

While Amber doesn't speak for anyone but herself, she does not want injustice committed in her name. Survivors deserve better than empty promises of safety wrapped in punitive measures. Amber finds the idea of stealing autonomy and rights from people in the name of survivors particularly egregious, especially when the outcomes leave us all worse off and siphon critical resources away from solving the real problem.

To Amber, it is deeply unsettling to see the government assert power to permanently control another person's body and movements, even after they have completed their sentence and often undergone extensive rehabilitation work. As a survivor who knows what it is like to have her own bodily autonomy upended, she is horrified to see that harm replicated by the state in her name.

Amber believes that we deserve approaches that prevent harm, support healing, and hold people accountable in humanizing ways that make lasting change

possible. This is what will break cycles. Her life experience and work demonstrate that registries are part of the problem—not the solution.

CONCLUSION

Amici's stories illustrate that people who have been directly impacted by sexual violence can and do oppose sex offense registries. Amici respectfully request that this Court consider the varied views of victims and survivors and reject any suggestion that they uniformly support sex offense registries like Michigan's SORA.

Dated: October 1, 2025

Respectfully submitted,

/s/ Richard D. Snyder

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CERTIFICATE OF COMPLIANCE

The undersigned, counsel of record for Amici Curiae, certifies that this brief has been scanned and is virus-free, and complies with the requirements of Fed. R. App. P. 32(a) and Sixth Circuit Local Rule 32 as follows:

(i) The name and version of the word processing software used to prepare the brief is Microsoft® Word for Microsoft 365 MSO (Version 2507 Build 16.0.19029.20136) 64-bit.

(ii) The font used in the brief is Times New Roman 14-point.

(iii) The number of words in the brief is 2,376, excluding the parts of the brief exempted by Fed. R. App. P. 32(f).

(iv) This brief uses a proportionally spaced typeface and contains 208 lines of text.

Dated: October 1, 2025

/s/ Richard D. Snyder
Counsel for Amici Curiae

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE AND FILING

Pursuant to Fed. R. App. P. 25 and Sixth Circuit Local Rule 25(a), I, Richard Snyder, counsel of record for Amici Curiae, hereby certify that on October 1, 2025, I caused the AMICUS CURIAE BRIEF OF CERTAIN INDIVIDUALS IMPACTED BY SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN SUPPORT OF PLAINTIFFS – APPELLANTS CROSS-APPELLEES AND IN SUPPORT OF REVERSAL to be filed electronically with the Clerk of Court for the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit using the CM/ECF system. I certify that all participants in the case are registered CM/ECF users and that service will be accomplished by the CM/ECF system.

Dated: October 1, 2025

/s/ Richard D. Snyder

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