

Sexual abuse of Explorer Scouts has gone on for decades across the nation

[Andrew Wolfson, Louisville Courier Journal](#) May 18, 2017

When a police officer in Largo, Florida, took his own life after being accused of having sex with a 16-year-old Explorer Scout, he left behind a chilling suicide note:

“I’m not the only person who’s having sex with a minor at the police department,” John Ferraro wrote in 1998. “They really need to tighten up the rules.”

The police chief dismissed the claims of a wider scandal as groundless, but an outside investigation found that 11 officers in the department near St. Petersburg had had sex with Explorers, dating to the previous decade.

Nearly 20 years later, across the United States, the exploitation of Explorers by law enforcement officers continues.

In the wake of [Louisville’s own Explorer scandal, in which two former officers have been accused of sexually abusing Scouts and the police department of covering it up](#), the Courier-Journal found that over the past 40 years, at least 137 girls and 26 boys have been allegedly raped, seduced, fondled, kissed, dated or otherwise exploited in 28 states by at least 129 law enforcement officers, firefighters and other advisers.

The youngest victims were 13. One was in the sixth grade.

One officer tried to set up three-way sex with Explorers. Another took surreptitious photographs of Explorers’ underwear. A third took bondage photos of boys he took on Civil War re-enactment camping trips. In Warick, Rhode Island, six officers had sex with one girl. In Bandon, Oregon, five officers made a sex tape featuring two girls and two boys.

Seventy-five cases resulted in criminal charges and 19 in lawsuits, including one that cost Irwindale, California, a city of only 1,422 people, \$2.75 million to settle.

And court testimony shows the victims, like one girl in Rossford, Ohio, who was sexually abused in 2015, suffered incalculable emotional and psychological losses — as well as shattered dreams.

“When I first met you, you were a kind person to me, someone I could trust to teach and support me on my journey to becoming a great firefighter,” the girl said to Thomas Watson in a victim statement when he was sentenced in 2015. “Because of your actions, I struggle daily to wake up and function as a normal, happy 18-year-old.” The girl’s mother said she had struggled with seizures and suicide attempts.

The Courier-Journal's review found that allegations have been swept under the rug by some police departments and that Learning for Life — the Boys Scouts of America affiliate that runs the Explorer program for young people ages 13 to 21 — waited for years to adopt some safeguards and haven't enforced others, leaving police departments to police themselves.

Former Explorers in Louisville said they had no contacts with Scout officials other than police officers.

Diane Thornton, national director for the Dallas-based Learning for Life, and Michael Johnson, the Boy Scouts youth protection director, declined to be interviewed. The organization also declined to respond to more than two dozen written questions, including what parents of prospective Explorers should make of the program's track record.

BIn a prepared statement issued through its public relations wing, Johnson said, "We are outraged there have been times when Explorers were abused" and "nothing is more important than the safety of our youth members."

He said the organization seeks to safeguard Explorers by creating "barriers to abuse," including a screening process for adult leaders and staff, requiring youth protection training of all adult leaders and volunteers, and the prompt mandatory reporting of any allegation or suspicion of abuse.

But rules for the Explorer program include a huge exemption from a major tenet of the Boy Scouts' policy — forbidding one-on-one contact between Scouts and Scout leaders. Explorers are allowed to ride alone with police advisers on "ride-alongs" in their cruisers, which experts like David Finkelhor, the director of the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center, said provides an "intimate setting for potential abuse."

In Eureka, Missouri, for example, after two officers were accused of having sex with a 16-year-old girl they took on ride-alongs, the officer assigned to investigate the allegations took the girl on a ride-along of his own, during which he also had sex with her, according to news reports.

Former Louisville Metro Police Officer Brandon Wood with his attorney, Steve Schroering *(Photo: Courier-Journal)*

In Louisville, a former Explorer identified only as N.C. alleges in a lawsuit that he was sexually abused by Officers Kenneth Betts and Brandon Wood in squad cars as well as their homes. Both have denied the allegations and have moved to dismiss the suit, which also charges that the department destroyed records and used intimidation to conceal the allegations.

Both officers also have been indicted, Wood on criminal charges of sexually abusing N.C. and Betts on charges of sexually assaulting two other people.

After the suit was filed, Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer [suspended the program](#).

The Scouting affiliate also is allowed to pull charters of posts but wouldn't say how many times, if ever, it has done that.

Learning for Life also said it couldn't provide the number of Explorers in law enforcement programs, or the number of posts. But proponents note that sexual misconduct incidents are rare, given the number of participants. They also say the programs offer leadership training and an opportunity for young people to see up close if they want a career in law enforcement.

Learning for Life also offers Explorer programs in other fields, including medicine and sports. Last year 116,000 Explorers participated in all programs nationwide, a spokesman said, including programs sponsored by police and fire departments.

Kevin Patterson, field director for the Cascade Pacific Council in Portland, Ore., told the Oregonian newspaper in 2006 that abuse in law enforcement posts is "certainly a lot more prevalent than any other Exploring program that we have."

He added: "We do have guidelines that programs are supposed to follow ... so your guess is as good as mine as to why it happens more there than anywhere else."

Experts on sexual abuse of children and teens say Explorers are particularly vulnerable because police officers, with their uniforms and firearms, command special authority and because Scouts look up to them as mentors and role models.

"Officers are dealing with young people in a special role of trust and authority," wrote Professor Samuel Walker, who headed the Police Professional Initiative at the University of Nebraska Omaha, in a 2003 paper in which he found that nearly half of all cases of police abuse of women in the United States involved Explorers.

Finkelhor also said parents are more likely to trust police.

"How could we not?" asked the mother of a 16-year-old girl who was molested on a camping trip by a 34-year-old officer. "He was a law enforcement officer," she said in 2003 at his sentencing. "He was invited to our daughter's graduation dinner at our home. He shook our hands, gave me hugs, and all of the time, he was betraying our trust."

The girl, explaining why she didn't report the abuse sooner, said, "I was scared that if I said anything, I would get into trouble and I would have to leave the sheriff's department."

Walker also attributed the volume of Explorer abuse cases to a failure by police departments to "supervise these programs ... and really investigate allegations of misconduct."

The Courier-Journal found that some departments have ignored warning signs, covered for accused officers and transferred others after they were accused.

► In Brownwood, Texas, after a female Explorer complained that a police sergeant who had founded the department's Explorer program forced himself on her, fondled her and bragged about the size of his penis, the chief ignored her complaint and accused her of making it up. Three years later, the same officer, Sgt. Vince Ariaz, 53, was convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison for sexually assaulting another Explorer, who was 15. The city was forced to pay her family \$300,000 to settle a suit that also named the police chief and the Boy Scouts.

► In Madison, Connecticut, the chief resigned in disgrace in 2009 after an investigation found he had overruled a subordinate who had barred an officer from having ride-alongs with a teenage female Explorer with whom he was suspected of having a sexual relationship. The investigation found the chief's actions allowed the inappropriate relationship to continue unimpeded.

► In Tualatin, Oregon, more than a dozen officers acknowledged in 2000 that they knew police were having sex with Explorers but didn't do anything about it, even though state law required them to report sexual abuse of minors.

► In Los Angeles, after a 14-year-old female Explorer cadet alleged that she was fondled by a police officer in one division, he was transferred to another division, where he was accused of sexual misbehavior with another cadet and inappropriately touching two others.

The city of Los Angeles was home to the first major Explorer scandal — in the mid-1970s, when Hollywood officers began taking Law Enforcement Explorer Girls, as they were known, on overnight camping trips in appreciation for their service at public events. After one girl complained the outings were little more than orgies, the Los Angeles Times reported, then-Chief Daryl Gates discounted the seriousness of the allegations.

"There was no rape, no seduction," he said. "There was a lot of agreement." But ultimately it was discovered that at least six officers had sex with at least 16 girls. Some officers involved were fired, others remained in their jobs.

A decade later, Scout officials in California still seemed unprepared to deal with abuse. In 1987, despite three reports of sexual misconduct in three months, the executive for Ventura County's Boy Scouts council told the Times: "This rarely happens, so we have no guidelines. So we haven't really had to worry much about it."

Some police chiefs and sheriffs have tried to publicly minimize the extent of the misconduct.

In Nogales, Arizona, for example, after an officer was sentenced to prison for 11 counts of sexual misconduct with a minor in 2010, its chief said, "Every police department has issues that come up with employees — it doesn't matter what agency it is and how thorough a background check may be."

And some officers who admitted misconduct received only minor punishments, or none at all, because of questions about the Explorer's age at the time and whether they could legally consent.

In Bremerton, Washington, for example, after one officer was found to have had sex with an 18-year-old female Explorer — and other officers to have allowed her to sleep over at their homes — the officer was given only a reprimand, and the other officers were allowed to remain on the force. Only after the scandal did the city's police department ban social relationships between officers and Explorers.

Officers have offered a variety of excuses for their misconduct.

In Killeen, Texas, for example, a police officer who was sent to prison for five years for having sex with a teen Explorer claimed he took her to hotels to get her out of the cold and help her find a safe place so she wouldn't run away from home. In South Miami, a detective who was cleared of seducing female Explorers but pleaded guilty to providing alcohol to minors, claimed he bought them drinks only to "loosen them up" and get "fresh ideas" for the Explorer competitions.

In Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, an officer who was fired after a 17-year-old female Explorer testified that they'd had sex more than 10 times denied the allegation but admitted sending her a dozen roses and a cookie bouquet on "Sweetest Day," the third Saturday in October that is observed in some states as a day to share romantic deeds or expressions.

Other officers insisted they'd done nothing wrong because they were in love.

A 31-year-old in Oregon City, Oregon, for example, said he had no apologies for his relationship with an Explorer, which began when she was 17. He was charged with contributing to the sexual delinquency of a minor, but the case was dismissed when the victim told a judge that she planned to marry the ex-deputy. In Peoria, Arizona, a 46-year-old officer who was fired for having a relationship with an Explorer nearly 30 years his junior, said he was living with her and they planned on moving together out of state. He blamed department supervisors for not keeping better tabs on the program.

Some departments, after suspending Explorer programs following scandals, have revamped them to include more safeguards for Scouts.

In Killeen, Texas, for instance, the mayor appointed a "child safety coordinator," a civilian, to run its program after one of its officers was convicted of a sex charge and sentenced to five years in prison.

The chief in Peoria, Arizona, a Phoenix suburb, overhauled his program to prohibit employees from one-on-one meetings with Explorers and to ban ride-alongs with officers of the opposite sex.

Experts say Learning for Life should adopt additional safeguards, including banning ride-alongs after dark; requiring training for Scouts in addition to officers; adding female co-leaders; and assigning Explorers buddies so they are never alone with police.

Learning for Life officials declined to say what additional safety measures it is considering or why it hasn't adopted some that have been recommended for years.

Johnson, the Boy Scouts youth protection director, said only that “we are closely reviewing this matter to determine where additional safeguards can be implemented.”

Walker, an emeritus professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, said the International Association of Chiefs of Police scurried to address the issue after his report uncovered a "disturbing pattern" of officers sexually exploiting Explorers. A task force eventually produced a general guide for preventing and addressing sexual misconduct by law enforcement that called for additional employment screening and immediate reporting and sanctions. The guide didn't specifically address Explorer programs.

And Walker said the incidents involving Scouts and law enforcement advisers have continued unabated.

“The disturbing thing is that things haven’t changed,” he said.

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By the numbers

Here's a look at the findings on sexual misconduct cases involving Explorers by the numbers. The cases date to 1975.

- ▶ Cases: 115
- ▶ Victims: 163
- ▶ Girls: 137
- ▶ Boys: 26
- ▶ Law enforcement officers, firefighters and other advisers: 129 (One woman and 128 men)
- ▶ Age of youngest victims: 13
- ▶ States with cases: 28
- ▶ Criminal charges: 75 cases
- ▶ Criminal convictions: 50
- ▶ Acquittals: 4
- ▶ Longest sentence: 22 years
- ▶ Lawsuits: 19
- ▶ Largest settlement: \$2.75 million
- ▶ Average settlement: \$488,000

