

HOW THE BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA KEEPS KIDS SAFE TODAY

August 14, 2019

This article was contributed by [Michael Johnson](#), National Youth Protection Director for the Boy Scouts of America.

Recent media reports have highlighted claims of abuse against the Boy Scouts of America (BSA). As Director of Youth Protection here at the BSA, I share the same concerns as anyone seeing these stories, and I have the utmost respect for the courage demonstrated by these men coming forward. These claims understandably raise questions about what we do to keep kids safe in Scouting today, and I'd like to take the time to address those questions.

Sadly, there have been times when individuals targeted youth in our organization and took advantage of our programs in order to harm children. This infuriates me and our entire organization. We are heartbroken for victims and apologize to anyone who was harmed during their time in Scouting. We believe victims, we support survivors, and we encourage them to come forward.

In my 24 years investigating child abuse cases as a police detective, I spoke with hundreds of victims and spent decades interrogating predators and sending them to prison. I know what we as an organization and as a society are up against.

I understand the scars victims carry throughout their lives and have seen firsthand the impact on families. Victims and survivors must be believed and supported unconditionally. Protecting children is a duty we all share.

The BSA understood this when it took the step of creating a full-time National Director of Youth Protection position in 2010, which is dedicated exclusively to working to keep kids safe from predators in Scouting programs. Contrary to many inaccurate reports, our youth protection policies are in line with – and sometimes even ahead of – society's knowledge of abuse and best practices for preventing abuse. We actively share and continually improve these policies through our mandatory youth protection training, our ongoing collaborations with groups such as the Centers for Disease Control^[1] and youth-serving organizations, and continuous engagement with survivors of abuse and top experts in this area. We also make our training and policies available [free to the public](#).

Our efforts began in the 1920s with what we now call the Volunteer Screening Database (VSD), formerly known as the Ineligible Volunteer Files. This system has been the subject of much misinformation, but it was established at a time when there were virtually no resources or tools for protecting youth. It was

intended as a screening mechanism to prevent individuals accused of abuse or inappropriate conduct from joining or rejoining our programs. Today, experts^[2] agree that maintaining such a database is one of the most effective ways to prevent predators from having access to children.

While local chartered organizations and parents are responsible for selecting their unit leaders, the national organization mandates criminal background checks as part of that selection process. It is worth noting, however, that background checks alone are not sufficient, as experts have found a significant amount of abuse goes unreported.^[3] This is why we will continue to push for the creation of a national database to serve as a clearing house for all youth-serving organizations and go beyond existing criminal databases. We believe all organizations such as ours should identify, document and report adults who have harmed children or have been suspected of harming children and report this information into a national registry so that these individuals cannot move from one organization to another, regardless of whether authorities pursue criminal charges.

In addition to mandating that volunteers complete comprehensive, research-based and expert-informed [youth protection training](#), we also require adherence to youth protection policies including “two-deep leadership,” which prevents one-on-one interactions between adults and children – both in person and via digital channels. Additionally, even when not required by state or local law, we mandate all volunteers and staff members nationwide immediately report any abuse allegation to law enforcement. We require this in every Scouting program across the country despite the fact some states have exceptions to the mandated reporting of child abuse.^[4] The child safety policies and procedures we utilize are among the most advanced and comprehensive of any youth-serving organization today.

It is a tragedy and a national epidemic that out of the general U.S. population, one in six boys and one in four girls experience sexual abuse or assault by the time they turn 18.^[5] This is an unacceptable public health and safety problem that must be addressed. I’m proud that our organization has long sought to be a part of a collective solution to confront this epidemic and work toward a holistic solution, and we will continue to do so.

I can’t say that I, or the BSA, have all the answers; nor will there ever be a simple solution, but I can say we are working with key stakeholders to identify solutions. Our organization has always sought to protect youth, both in and out of Scouting. If there’s one thing that we have learned, it’s that keeping children safe requires a commitment by experts, government officials, organizations, families and survivors across the country to work together to end the national crisis of child abuse and exploitation.

If you have been a victim of abuse or have any information about suspected abuse, please reach out to our 24/7 Scouts First Hotline at 1-844-Scouts1 for immediate assistance. For more on what the BSA is doing to keep kids safe, please visit: <https://www.scouting.org/training/youth-protection/>.

Michael Johnson is the National Youth Protection Director for the Boy Scouts of America. He is an internationally recognized expert on child abuse prevention and investigation, and for 24 years of his 28-year law enforcement career he served as a Detective and the Lead Child Abuse Investigator in the Criminal Investigation division of the Plano Police Department outside of Dallas, Texas. He has conducted more than 350 trainings for child abuse prevention professionals in 47 states and internationally.

[1] Child Safety in Youth Serving Organizations: Assuring Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships and Environments. The CDC Foundation.

[2] Saul J, Audage NC. Preventing Child Sexual Abuse Within Youth-serving Organizations: Getting Started on Policies and Procedures. Atlanta (GA): Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control; 2007.

[3] Michael L. Bourke, Lance Fragomeli, Paul J. Detar, Michael A. Sullivan, Edward Meyle & Mark O’Riordan (2014): The use of tactical polygraph with sex offenders, Journal of Sexual Aggression: An international, interdisciplinary forum for research, theory and practice, DOI: 10.1080/13552600.2014.886729

[4] Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2016). Mandatory reporters of child abuse and neglect. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau.

[5] Dube, S.R., Anda, R.F., Whitfield, C.L., et al. (2005). Long-term consequences of childhood sexual abuse by gender of victim. American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 28, 430-438.