
Akron Beacon Journal

Home Schoolers May Be No Safer in Their Homes Than Other Children

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Behind doors

Marcus Wesson had 16 children.

He stayed home to tinker with a bus and a boat, and to educate the children.

His wife and older daughters went to work. When they were with him in public, the women were quiet.

On March 12, nine members of his family, ages 1 to 24, were shot in the face in their Fresno, Calif., home. Wesson, 57, has been charged with multiple counts of murder.

Local school officials found no record of contact with the family.

Home schooling isn't recognized as an option in California law, so responsibility for oversight is "very muddy," said Armen Bacon, spokeswoman for Fresno County schools. "They can slip through the cracks quite easily."

Perhaps if the children had been in school rather than home-schooled, one of them would have whispered to a teacher hints of incest at home. Maybe one would have revealed that Wesson was stockpiling coffins.

Then again, maybe being in school would have made no difference.

Just as the killing of 13 students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., in April 1999 aroused fear that public schools were unsafe, questions are raised about home-schooling families after tragedies such as the Wesson case.

The U.S. Department of Justice knows how many crimes occur at school, on the way to school and at home. Statistics show that, despite the events at Columbine, public school buildings remain among the safest places for a child.

But the department keeps no records on children schooled at home.

Consequently, crime experts can't answer the question: Are home-schooled children more or less at risk of violence than other school-age children?

Many school officials and social workers believe that a growing number of parents are operating under the guise of home schooling although they have no interest in educating their children, may have psychological problems, or, worse, are a threat to their children.

Home schoolers respond that the overwhelming majority of families in their movement are law-abiding and loving, and that existing laws are sufficient to catch criminals.

The dispute between the two sides goes unresolved because little is known about the safety of the approximately 1.1 million children schooled at home.

In a yearlong examination of home schooling and in an attempt to address safety issues, the Akron Beacon Journal combed through more than 5,000 newspaper articles from around the country.

From the beginning of 1999 through last month, criminal acts led to 116 deaths of parents and children in U.S. families identified as home schooling, the Beacon Journal found. Almost all the cases involved family members killing each other.

Of those, 41 were murders of children 5 to 16 years old -- an age range covering the vast majority of home-schooled students.

After comparing the number of deaths with FBI crime statistics, the newspaper found that the number of home-schooled children killed by a family member raises questions about some home-school students' safety within their homes.

The Beacon Journal's study of home schooling began in mid-2003 after Akron received national attention when starving children were discovered wandering a city street in the early morning. They had escaped confinement in a closet where they were made to eat from a cat litter box.

The case was the third troubling situation involving home schoolers in the area in about two years. The others involved children who feared retribution from their abusive father if they didn't win the National Spelling Bee -- a place where home schoolers have celebrated recent victories -- and a teen who was inseminated by her stepfather with the use of a syringe.

The Beacon Journal's examination revealed several cases nationally in which families were wiped out in murder-suicides. There also were bizarre, life-threatening diets; beatings in the name of God; and adolescent girls involved in pornography.

Home-schooled young people weren't always the victims. Sometimes they were the criminals.

Within eight days after the Columbine shootings, a home-schooled teen was arrested after attempting to detonate a bomb at a public school in Macon, Ga., and another home schooler, armed with a rifle, walked into a rural Alberta, Canada, high school near Montana and killed one student and injured another.

Among the dozens of other cases were boys charged with credit-card theft and counterfeiting, teen-age girls involved in methamphetamines, and a girl who was killed in a shootout with police after taking part in a carjacking.

Andrea Yates case

Stories about tragedies that involve home-schooling families typically include Andrea Yates of suburban Houston. The wife of a NASA engineer drowned her five children in a bathtub in June 2001.

A haunting tombstone in a cemetery along Interstate 45 south of Houston is etched with the images of the four smiling Yates boys and their baby sister.

Any murder -- and especially one like the Yates case -- is an aberration for all of society. The Beacon Journal's analysis attempted to determine whether aberrations occur among home schoolers, too, and at what rate.

Yates was found guilty of murder and sentenced to life in prison. Her husband, Russell, who has been the subject of much debate regarding his religious beliefs and support of his wife, could not be reached for comment.

Andrea Yates suffered from depression and attempted suicide twice. Given that doctors failed to foresee her destructive side, it's possible that daily interaction of the children with teachers would have made no difference.

Teachers are the No. 1 reporters of potential child abuse in the country, according to annual reports from the U.S. Administration for Children and Families.

In the view of home schoolers, Yates' teaching of her two school-age children at home was not a factor in the tragedy.

The Beacon Journal counted the five Yates murders among the 19 violent deaths involving home-schooling families in 2001 that were reported in daily newspapers.

However, few of the others received the same national media attention.

Three weeks later, in a rural area near San Miguel, N.M., Wesley Snyder used a handgun to shoot his wife, home-schooled daughters ages 8, 10 and 12, and himself in their mobile home. Local newspapers said depression and alcohol were factors.

Outside New Mexico, the story of the Snyders appeared mostly in national briefs columns, and many newspapers deleted references to home schooling.

A few weeks after the Snyder murders, three North Carolina home-schooled teens were found shot to death at their dilapidated mobile home in a remote area southeast of Raleigh. Police determined that Brandon Keith Warren, 14, shot his 19-year-old sister and 13-year-old brother, then turned the gun on himself.

The reason for the Warren shootings remains unknown. According to the Charlotte Observer daily newspaper, court records detailed an environment of poverty, "Old Testament discipline" and abuse.

About the same time, police in rural Tioga, La., were still trying to piece together the cause of a house fire in January that killed three children. A girl, 10, and a boy, 6, had been home-schooled. The third was a toddler.

Authorities believe the fire was set. Newspaper reports said the children's mother, Amanda Gutweiler Hypes, was distraught about the two school-age children mimicking a sex act the day before the fire. She is charged in their deaths and is awaiting trial.

Other home schoolers were slain in 2001, among them a 6-year-old beaten to death by her stepfather and dumped in a Houston ditch; an 11-year-old killed in her Kershaw County, S.C., mobile home by her father; and a 12-year-old Chicago girl, whose parents are awaiting trial on charges that she was beaten to death with an electrical cable as the parents administered corporal punishment.

Numbers compared

Anecdotal evidence proves that murders happen among home schoolers, but it leaves unanswered the question of whether home-schooled children are at greater risk than children in the general population.

In an effort to explore that question, the Beacon Journal compiled a list of deaths beginning with 1999 -- the year of the Columbine High School shooting -- through this year and compared the results with crime statistics available from the FBI.

The newspaper found 36 deaths of children ages 5 to 16 in the years 1999-2003 -- and five more this year.

That age group represents the vast majority of home schoolers and also corresponds with an age range available in FBI crime statistics.

The total number of home-school homicides found by the Beacon Journal in the five-year period from 1999 through 2003 represented about 1.3 percent of all national homicides of children in that age range.

Over the five-year period, home schoolers made up 1.9 percent to 2.1 percent of the school-age population, according to the U.S. Department of Education. If the department's estimate is correct, then the 1.3 percent of homicides documented by the Beacon Journal is not high enough to suggest that home schoolers are at greater risk.

However, further breakdown of the homicides reveals that all but two home-school homicides were committed by someone in the immediate family (or a family member has been charged).

When home schoolers are compared on the basis of homicides by family members, the picture is different: Home-school cases account for 1.9 percent of all U.S. homicides of school-age children within a family.

It's almost certain the Beacon Journal undercounted the home-school deaths, for these reasons:

- The primary source of information on the deaths was a national database known as Lexis-Nexis, which contains many, but not all, U.S. newspapers.
- Research depended on stories' identifying victims by their type of schooling. Some newspapers initially did not identify victims as home-schooled. Follow-up stories or Beacon Journal research later identified them as such.

Arthur Blumstein, a crime specialist at Carnegie Mellon University, said that home schoolers are a small group, thus making statistical examination difficult.

He said that because the Beacon Journal found so few murders committed by someone outside the family, "the home schoolers' arguments that 'We are protecting our kids from injury by peers' seems to make sense."

As a result, the case can't be made with the numbers at hand that, "in the aggregate, they're at greater risk" than the general population.

However, he cautioned that if the home-school community is vastly white -- as it is believed to be -- then comparing its murder rate with the national murder rate, in which 48 percent of victims are black, may not adequately represent the risk among home schoolers.

He said that, if numbers indeed show that home-schooled children may be at greater risk in their homes, then greater surveillance could be warranted once a family is under suspicion of abuse or neglect.

"I think a strong argument can be made that child-protection services people ought to give it more attention because there are not other means of surveilling what's going on with those kids. Other kids get surveilled in school and other external activities."

Blumstein, who reviewed the Beacon Journal's data, also suggested that some parents may have character issues that make them a threat to their children. He said it sounded as if the movement may include a "set of weird families who choose to do home schooling who do pose higher risks."

J. Michael Smith, president of the Home School Legal Defense Association, welcomed the examination.

"It's a pretty insignificant number," he said. He said that those involved in the troubling situations "are not true home schoolers. They're not even trying to comply with home-school laws."

"We get lumped in with that -- that's not fair to us," Smith said. "Legitimate home-schooling families are not murdering or killing their kids."

Smith didn't oppose tracking of home-school crimes. He said it would exonerate the movement. "I think it would disprove the arguments that we need to regulate home schoolers," he said.

Child abuse, neglect

Murders are hard to hide. They are covered in the news media and entered into national crime statistics.

That's not necessarily the case with other forms of abuse. Child-abuse laws generally prohibit public disclosure by state agencies, and newspapers often have policies against naming young victims.

Still, cases do make it into the news.

In October 2003, four males in their teens were found in a Collingswood, N.J., home nearly starved to death. They were identified as home-schooled.

The case broke when police found a 45-pound, 19-year-old man rummaging through trash. When investigators tracked him to his home, they found three boys who were equally weak and thin. Alarms were found on the kitchen door and the refrigerator lest they try to eat or escape, newspapers reported.

The four males had been adopted, and the family was receiving state support checks for their care.

Two home-school advocacy groups said the New Jersey family was out of the ordinary, and they challenged the news media to prove that this was indicative of a widespread problem.

In its analysis, the Beacon Journal found 52 young people from home-school settings who were starving or malnourished -- including the four from New Jersey -- in the same period examined for murders.

Six victims -- four infants and two of school age -- died in those malnourished home-schooling families.

When a New Jersey lawmaker proposed new accountability standards, home schoolers reacted angrily with e-mails, phone calls and demonstrations at the state capitol. Home schooling is virtually unregulated in that state.

The New York Times said in an editorial that the absence of home-schooling regulations might be allowing dangerous situations to go undetected.

Smith, the president of the Home School Legal Defense Association, quickly responded in a letter to the Times, saying: "It is unfair to take, as the Times did, a sensational case involving an alleged home-school family and imply that many other home-school families are likely to be abusing their children as well."

Tim Haas, president of the New Jersey Homeschool Association, in a widely distributed e-mail, took issue with the legislative proposal that would require registration and academic accountability.

"There are eight other states with laws like New Jersey's, including populous ones like Texas and Illinois," Haas wrote. "Where's the evidence that a lack of oversight is harming children? Where's the evidence from the 41 other states that have varying degrees of oversight that there's a trend of homeschooler abuse?"

No one responded with statistics -- because there are none.

In an e-mailed response to questions from the Beacon Journal, Haas said that even in states with a high degree of contact with public officials, "There's no evidence that homeschoolers are abusing their children."

"If there were any credible evidence that even a small number of homeschoolers were abusing their kids, it would have been trumpeted from the rooftops by now," Haas wrote.

However, eight weeks before the New Jersey discovery, three seriously malnourished children were taken out of an Indianapolis home where they had been made to drink vinegar and eat peppers.

The Indiana case occurred three months after the discovery of the Akron boys roaming streets in search of food. Other cases include: a 25-pound, 8-year-old girl in a mobile home in Hutchins, Texas; two Houston-area brothers banished to the garage, where they ate garbage and dog food; and a dozen San Francisco children ages 8 months to 16 years -- many of them suffering from severe malnutrition and rickets -- in a bizarre, cultlike situation that included one infant death from starvation.

There were many other kinds of abuse: California children tortured in 1999 when guardians shot staples into their bodies; a young immigrant woman in Detroit who was turned into a slave by her

adoptive parents, made to live in the basement and sexually abused; and a white Kansas pastor who killed a black adopted child and abused three others. Cages were used to contain the children.

Texas -- considered one of the least regulated states in the nation -- led the Beacon Journal list for child abuse and deaths in home-school situations.

Smith, of HSLDA, countered that some other states identified by the Beacon Journal with high incidences of crime -- Florida and Oregon among them -- have more regulations than Texas.

Sex and pornography

Valerie Charlene Lucie, 11, of upstate New York, and her four brothers were home-schooled because her religious parents wanted to limit their exposure to ideas about evolution and Harry Potter, according to the Post-Standard in Syracuse.

In September 2003, Valerie was found hanged in her bedroom a few hours after her father raped her.

Timothy Lucie was convicted of rape and sodomy in June.

After neglect and physical abuse, sexual abuse ranks third as the most common form of child maltreatment in America.

The Beacon Journal found several cases of home-schooled girls sexually abused by men in the household.

Early this year, a tipster monitoring the Internet found a live pornographic site in which a man was performing a sex act with a child. The tipster was able to discern that the event was originating in Bastrop County, east of Austin, Texas, and notified the local police, said Investigator Curtis Davis of the Bastrop County Sheriff's Department.

Davis said police found three home-schooled children in the home. The oldest was a 10-year-old girl.

The story was carried on the Associated Press wire service and published in newspapers as far away as Chicago. However, the fact that the victim was home-schooled wasn't part of the story.

That information came from a Beacon Journal source in Texas. Davis verified it.

The mother said she pulled her children out of public school a few years earlier because the "oldest had a slight learning disability and was at the time being made fun of," Davis said.

The stepfather is serving a 45-year prison sentence, he said.

In the same Texas county last fall, a 16-year-old girl was charged with shooting her stepfather in the head.

The stepfather had repeatedly raped her, sometimes videotaping the assaults, a Bastrop County investigator said. A grand jury decided not to indict the girl for the shooting.

There also were two highly publicized cases of incest.

A DNA test showed that Marcus Wesson -- the man charged with killing nine family members in Fresno this year -- was the father of at least one of his grandchildren.

In Glades County, Fla., in early 2002, police arrested Samuel Thomas Patrick, who was 52 at the time and living with his sister, Debra, who is eight years younger. They had lived together for 28 years and had nine children together, and police said DNA results showed that Samuel Patrick had fathered at least three of his four grandchildren. He is awaiting trial.

Police were quoted as saying the family was secluded and, when the children were removed from the home, they didn't understand that anything was wrong.

Home schoolers' views

In interviews and focus groups, home schoolers were protective of their movement, quick to disassociate themselves from abuse or violence, and critical of those who suggest that abuse occurs in their ranks.

One home-schooling mom said she recently was told of a public school kindergarten student who was "beat up."

"Where was the kindergarten teacher on that? You know how many kids are abused? Teachers don't see everything," she said in a focus group, where participants were granted anonymity.

"It is not fair to say if these home-schooled kids were under the government eye, or under some watchful eye of a social worker, that it wouldn't happen. There are rotten parents everywhere. You can't look at home schoolers and say, 'It is going to be different with you.'"

Home-school advocates address troubling situations in one or more ways:

- By their definition, home schooling is practiced only by loving, caring families. Bad families, therefore, are not home schoolers. "If you're going to home-school, you are doing it because you care about your kids," one home educator said.
- When criminal activity in a home-schooling family goes undetected, it is the fault of the government or the medical community. Home schooling is not a factor.
- Abuse happens. Laws cannot protect all children in public schools, nor can more laws protect all home-schooled kids.

Without question, many of the crimes in home-schooling families occurred in homes where education was not occurring. Those parents, however, were using existing home-schooling laws as a way to avoid accountability for their children.

In the Akron starvation case, the children were properly registered as home schoolers, according to local school officials.

"Look at what happened with the psycho woman who kept her kids out of school, put them in the closet and then said, 'Well, I was home schooling,'" a home-schooling mom said of the Akron case.

"That woman was no more home schooling than the man on the moon. She just didn't take her kids to school, and she was a child abuser. Those people are freaks," she said in a Beacon Journal focus group. "They are not home schoolers."

A few months after the focus group, a Summit County task force concluded that home schooling was a contributing factor because it allowed the mother and her partner to conceal starvation.

Two other task forces -- one in North Carolina and one in Florida -- have drawn similar conclusions.

North Carolina home schoolers said the murders of two teens by their brother, Brandon Keith Warren, who then committed suicide, were the fault of protective service workers, who had been monitoring the family. And, because the Warrens didn't file papers to teach their children at home, they weren't real home schoolers.

A task force said, however, that the practice of home schooling -- legal or not -- made the job of protective service workers more difficult and made it easier for the three deaths to occur.

In August of this year, a special Florida task force that investigated the abuse of two home-schooled children -- one of whom was a 29-pound, sexually abused 10-year-old girl -- recommended that home-schooled children who live with someone other than their parents be checked every six months by social workers.

Peggy Daly-Masternak, a Toledo home schooler and co-coordinator of the Ohio Home Education Network, responded to the Summit County report with a guest column published in the Beacon Journal. She said the blame in the Akron case rested with the county Children Services Board. She cited a performance audit and fatality review report that showed that employees were overworked and failed to heed warning signs.

She also took issue with the report's suggestion that home schooling was a factor. She said that unless the Akron family was properly registered and that every piece of paperwork was in place, they were not home schoolers.

"It must be stated that there has been no reported evidence documenting claims that the... children were home schooled," she said. She asked whether the local school superintendent formally excused them from compulsory attendance, as required by law.

"If not, the children must be considered to have been forced truants, not home schoolers," she said.

However, the Beacon Journal learned from school officials that the children were not only properly registered for home schooling, but the school district also had received mandatory annual academic assessments, which said the children were making adequate progress.

Informed of this after her column was published, Daly-Masternak declined to be interviewed.

A convenient escape

The lack of home-schooling accountability in most states provides a convenient escape to abusive families or those uncommitted to educating their children, many school officials and social workers told the Beacon Journal.

"It is a 'Get out of Jail Free' card," said a school official in a focus group. She handles home-school registrations and is prohibited by law from challenging parents' intentions when they announce they are withdrawing their children to home-school.

If a family is about to be prosecuted for not getting a child to public school, "The thing to do is to say, 'I elect not to come anymore. I will be schooled at home,'" she said.

Sometimes, it's the parent trying to escape prosecution.

In July 2003, six children died in a fire near Charlotte, N.C. Twelve people were living in a single-wide mobile home, including a 15-year-old with an infant. The mom, Mary Alice Turner, told neighbors she was home schooling, according to news reports.

After the fire, neighbors learned otherwise. They learned that Turner -- whom they knew as Lisa Jones -- was hiding from social service agencies and police in two other counties. Social service agencies wouldn't reveal why they were looking for the family. Police said she was wanted over forged checks and missing rental furniture.

When the family moved into the trailer park near Jacksonville, Turner told all the children to go by new names and kept them away from public school.

“Unfortunately, some of my worst cases were home-schooled children,” said an Akron-area protective services worker in a focus group. There are “significant sex abuse issues going on, too. That makes it dark for me.”

'Battle for the front door'

Social workers hear it from both sides. They're blamed for missing warning signs, but they often are accused of being too aggressive in pursuing allegations of abuse.

This has created an adversarial relationship with home-schooling parents and tests America's delicate balance between parents' constitutional rights and the idea that society has a role in protecting all children.

Home schoolers have proved in court that social workers sometimes violate Fourth Amendment rights against illegal searches. The Home School Legal Defense Association calls it the “battle for the front door.”

When congressional hearings were called early this year to discuss the New Jersey starvation case, Home School Legal Defense Association senior counsel Christopher Klicka testified that the nation's system of child-abuse prevention is far too aggressive.

“I have seen firsthand the trauma innocent families have experienced at the hands of social workers pursuing anonymous tips,” Klicka told the congressional committee.

He said social workers have told him they are trained to bully their way into homes. He also said that many have claimed that time is wasted investigating anonymous tips, most of which they say are unfounded.

Although there are no national statistics on the reliability of anonymous tips, HSLDA has been proved right in court regarding social workers' violating the rights of parents.

In U.S. District Court in Toledo in 2003, a home-schooling family won its lawsuit against Erie County Children Services workers and Vermilion police who blocked a family in its driveway and frisked and threatened to arrest the father unless he allowed entry into the home and interviews with their home-schooled children.

They had no search warrant.

“Despite the defendants' (social workers and police) exaggerated view of their powers, the Fourth Amendment applies to them,” U.S. District Judge James G. Carr said. “There is... . no social worker exception to the strictures of the Fourth Amendment.... .”

Klicka proposed to Congress that tipsters be required to leave their names and be warned that intentionally filing false accusations could result in prosecution. He also said families should have the right to know who made the allegations and to pursue charges if an investigation determines that the allegations are false.

Arizona and HSLDA's home state of Virginia have such laws in place.

In Texas, where the Beacon Journal found the largest number of crimes reported in home-school settings, HSLDA successfully lobbied the legislature in 2003 for a law requiring Child Protective Services workers to be instructed in Fourth Amendment rights, which protect citizens from unlawful searches.

“We at HSLDA believe that abuse by the Child Protective Services is the single greatest threat to homeschoolers in Texas,” HSLDA said on its Web site after the requirement was inserted into a state budget bill and subsequently became law.

The nonprofit HSLDA generates money by selling memberships and promising that if a social worker or other official comes to the house, a lawyer will advise the family by phone.

HSLDA warns parents that if they're not dues-paying members, they risk strip searches of their children, offensive questioning and loss of custody.

The organization's Web site includes a state-by-state accounting of social workers and school officials who HSLDA says are overzealous and threaten the privacy of the home.

In one such posting, the HSLDA said an Ohio family with four children was reported for sexual abuse because three of the children -- ages 10, 9 and 7 -- “were seen kissing and hugging in public.”

HSLDA said testimony from the family doctor and an interview with the parents were required to satisfy the social workers, who initially demanded to interview the children alone.

“If HSLDA had not intervened in this case, these innocent children would most likely have been taken for private interviews with social workers, who would have felt compelled to ask extensive questions about sexual behavior and possibly strip-searched the children,” the HSLDA said.

The Web site didn't identify in which county the case arose. The HSLDA lawyer who handled it told the Beacon Journal he didn't remember.

Research blocked

Home schoolers have used the lack of national crime statistics to their advantage.

In 2002, when Pennsylvania was considering a dramatic relaxation of home-school regulation, HSLDA's Klicka testified in support of the change because there was no evidence that crime is a problem among home schoolers.

Pennsylvania and Arkansas have tough laws about who may home-school, Klicka said, but “there is nothing to indicate that such laws actually provide any protection to children. It has not been a problem in the other states where there are no such laws.”

While anecdotal evidence found by the Beacon Journal might raise questions about Klicka's claim, no statistics exist to support or undermine his argument.

Georgia home schoolers worked to keep it that way.

In 1996 and 1997, home schoolers blocked an attempt in Georgia to gather such data.

Social workers employed by Georgia school districts went to state Rep. Carolyn Fleming Hugley to say that they were detecting a troubling number of abusive situations among home schoolers.

Hugley proposed legislation requiring that home-schooling parents have a college degree -- which would make it much harder to qualify. After being inundated with phone calls and letters from angry home schoolers, she suggested semiannual academic assessments instead.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, in an editorial, criticized Hugley and social workers.

“There is... . no credible evidence that parents are using the home-school option as an excuse to let their children stay out of schools or that the truants out there would claim to be home schooled,” the newspaper said.

Hugley pressed social workers for data to answer her critics.

Current members of the social workers union no longer recall the details, but news reports said they distributed a survey among themselves. They asked not for names of victims but for numbers of home schoolers in each district, numbers of cases involving abuse, numbers of children who were discipline problems before they were withdrawn for home schooling, and other, similar information.

The Home Education Information Resource, a home-school support group, obtained a copy of the survey, called it “defamatory” and demanded an apology “for this unfortunate lapse in sensitivity.” They also argued that the sharing of statistics across district boundaries violated state law.

So while those who were raising questions were criticized for their lack of proof, they also were overwhelmed by resistance when they attempted to gather it.

In late 1997, Hugley’s proposal died. So did the social workers’ survey.

A death in Texas

Child abuse and home schooling “are not two terms that are natural partners,” said a child-care professional in a Beacon Journal focus group. Many others agreed: Home schooling should not be equated with abuse.

But for Anna Farmer, the combination played a role in her death.

The 12-year-old was found dead in her rural mobile home south of Houston on Dec. 29, 2003. She had been beaten and was severely malnourished.

Police found Anna’s body after her mother, Bridgett Farmer, called paramedics. By the time they arrived, the mother and her live-in boyfriend, James Kevin Yost, had fled in different directions. Yost has since been charged in Anna’s death.

Protective services workers had been looking for the family because of a previous run-in with the law, said Estella Olguin, a spokeswoman for Child Protective Services.

Nineteen months earlier, Anna and a sister were living in another county on the opposite side of Houston. They were pulled from their home when caseworkers discovered that Yost had sexually molested a 14-year-old cousin, Olguin said.

The family moved and reunited about 20 miles away on an isolated, dead-end road with four mobile homes.

Olguin said the agency was unable to find them.

In an interview with the Beacon Journal, a neighbor of Farmer's, Kevin Schild, said he was told Anna was home-schooled.

Schild said he didn't have much contact with Anna except for a time when she was trying to make money by mowing yards. Yost came out and took her money, he said.

In the middle of the night a few days after Christmas, Schild awoke to flashing red and blue lights next door.

Olguin said there was one significant difference between Anna's death and the case 19 months earlier that resulted in her being pulled from the home.

In the first incident, Yost's victim was in school, where she could be seen and heard. This time, the victim was home-schooled.

Schild, the neighbor, said: ``You never saw her."''