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OUR OPINION

Child sexual abuse is challenge offline

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MUCH of the attention to sexual abuse of children in recent years has been directed at online exploitation, leading to sting operations that have been successful although limited. Sexual molestation within the victim's family is more difficult to detect, prosecute and provide counseling. The nonprofit Children's Alliance of Hawaii is campaigning this month to increase public awareness of the problem.

Child sexual abuse reports total as many as 80,000 a year nationally, but that may represent only a fraction of the offenses that actually occur. Sexual abuse can come from a parent, stepparent, sibling or other relative, a friend, neighbor, teacher or caregiver.

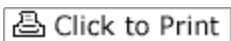
The stereotype of a stranger hiding behind a bush and attacking and sexually abusing a child is rare. A study conducted in the mid-1990s by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that one-fourth of women and one in six men reported having been sexually abused as a child, an experience with lifelong consequences. Experts estimate that at least 85 percent of child sex-assault cases on Oahu go unreported.

When a child reports the abuse, other family members are likely to come to the defense of the offender, says Thalia Murphy, a city deputy prosecutor who has taken such cases to court for the past 20 years. The child often becomes trapped by his or her affection or loyalty for the abuser.

The alliance was created in 1987 by the Rotary Club of Honolulu to help the judiciary create the Children's Justice Center near downtown, where children reported to be sexually abused are interviewed by professionals. The alliance last year began providing duffel bags full of new blankets, pillows, clothing and other items to make them feel more comfortable. Donations can be made through the alliance's Web site -- www.cahawaii.org.

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