
Megan's Law and its Impact on Community Re-Entry for Sex Offenders

Jill S. Levenson Ph.D.,*
David A. D'Amora M.S., LPC, CFC†
and Andrea L. Hern M.A.‡

Community notification, known as “Megan’s Law,” provides the public with information about known sex offenders in an effort to assist parents and potential victims to protect themselves from dangerous predators. The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of community notification on the lives of registered sex offenders. Two hundred and thirty-nine sex offenders in Connecticut and Indiana were surveyed. The negative consequences that occurred with the greatest frequency included job loss, threats and harassment, property damage, and suffering of household members. A minority of sex offenders reported housing disruption or physical violence following community notification. The majority experienced psychosocial distress such as depression, shame, and hopelessness. Recommendations are made for community notification policies that rely on empirically derived risk assessment classification systems in order to better inform the public about sex offenders’ danger while minimizing the obstacles that interfere with successful community reintegration. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

In 1994 the United States Congress passed legislation requiring states to develop registries listing the addresses of sexual offenders (*Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act*, 1994). The law was named for an 11-year-old boy who was abducted in Minnesota in 1989 and whose case remains unsolved. Speculating that a previously convicted sex offender was perhaps responsible for the crime, Jacob’s parents advocated for policies that would enable law enforcement agencies to track the whereabouts of known sex offenders and therefore enhance the ability to more quickly apprehend suspects. In 1996, after the murder of Megan Kanka by a known sex offender in New Jersey,

*Correspondence to: Jill S. Levenson, Ph.D., Lynn University, College of Arts and Sciences, 3601 North Military Trail, Boca Raton, FL 33431, U.S.A. E-mail: jlevenson@lynn.edu

†Center for the Treatment of Problem Sexual Behavior, Middletown, CT, U.S.A.

‡Indiana Sex Offender Monitoring and Management Program, Indianapolis, IN, U.S.A.

the Wetterling Act was amended to allow the dissemination of sex offender registry information directly to the public. Community notification, known as “Megan’s Law,” provides neighborhood residents with information about convicted sex offenders in an effort to assist parents and potential victims to protect themselves from dangerous predators. The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of community notification on the lives of registered sex offenders.

BACKGROUND

Registration and notification were originally designed as distinct policies with different goals, but Internet access has now rendered them virtually interchangeable. In the first several years of community notification, popular mechanisms for distributing information to the public included press releases, informational flyers, and community meetings in which law enforcement officers advised citizens when sex offenders moved within close proximity (Levenson, 2003; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Matson & Lieb, 1996; Zevitz, Crim, & Farkas, 2000b). In 2003, all 50 states were mandated to make their registries available online, allowing for the easy and immediate retrieval of information about sex offenders living nearby. Now, publicly accessible registries appear to be the most common method of notification. About half of the states use classification systems and implement differential disclosure of information according to the level of threat posed by the offender to the community. Other states employ broad notification, publishing information about all registered sex offenders without an assessment of risk (Matson & Lieb, 1996).

Effectiveness of Community Notification in Reducing Recidivism

Little research has been conducted to determine whether registration or notification laws reduce sex offense recidivism or protect children from abuse (Welchans, 2005). Of the few studies that have been published, most have found no significant reduction in recidivism due to community notification. When the recidivism rates of 90 high risk sex offenders in Washington were compared with 90 similar offenders released prior to the enactment of notification policies, no statistically significant differences between the two groups were found (Schram & Milloy, 1995). Offenders subjected to community notification, were, however, apprehended more quickly than offenders in the comparison group. Similarly, in Iowa, 223 sex offenders who were subject to sex offender registration were followed for an average of 4.3 years, and their sex offense recidivism rates were compared with a control group of 201 sex offenders who were not required to register because they were released into the community prior to the passage of the law (Adkins, Huff, & Stageberg, 2000). Only 3% of registered Iowa sex offenders were convicted of a new sex crime, compared with 3.5% of unregistered sex offenders. The findings were not statistically significant. In Wisconsin, no statistically significant differences were found between 47 high-risk sex offenders subject to community notification (19% recidivism) and 166 high-risk sex

offenders about whom the public was not notified (12% recidivism) (Zevitz, 2006b). A time-series analysis examined the effect of registration and notification laws in ten states and found no systematic reduction in sex crime rates after the implementation of registration and notification policies (Walker, Maddan, Vasquez, VanHouten, & Ervin-McLarty, 2005).

One longitudinal analysis did conclude that felony sex offense recidivism rates in Washington declined significantly following implementation of notification policies when compared with the pre-notification rate (Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2005). Although the authors noted a 70% drop in recidivism, the absolute rates of recidivism were quite low both before and after the enactment of notification laws: 5% and less than 1% respectively. The authors concluded that notification may have contributed to the reduction in recidivism rates, but they acknowledged that other possible explanations (e.g. more severe sentencing guidelines which removed high risk offenders from the sampling frame, or other recently enacted law enforcement policies) were excluded from the study design. Because Washington uses risk assessment procedures and reserves its most aggressive community notification for its highest-risk offenders, these findings may not generalize to states with broad notification policies.

The accuracy of sex offender registries can affect their ability to provide a valuable service to the public. In Massachusetts, it was discovered that the whereabouts of 49% of registered sex offenders were unknown (Mullvihill, Wisniewski, Meyers, & Wells, 2003). In Kentucky, as many as 25% of sex offenders' registered addresses were found to be incorrect (Tewksbury, 2002). It was learned that nearly half of the sex offenders on Florida's registry were not living at their registered address or were dead or incarcerated (Payne, 2005). In Florida, over 50% of sex offenders surveyed reported registry inaccuracies, though it was unclear which pieces of information were thought to be invalid, or how significant the errors were (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). These reports call into question the capacity for state officials to continuously update sex offender databases quickly enough to maintain an accurate flow of information to the public.

In sum, thus far there is little empirical evidence that notifying communities about the presence of sex offenders results in enhanced community safety or that it aids in the prevention of child sexual abuse. An additional concern is the ability of state registries to maintain up-to-date records that can be helpful in prevention efforts.

Public Perceptions

Most citizens are familiar with Megan's Law and support the policy as an important public safety measure (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Proctor, Badzinski, & Johnson, 2002). The majority of 193 individuals surveyed in Florida indicated that they believe that most sex offenders will reoffend and therefore community residents should be told about all sex offenders living amongst them (Levenson et al., 2007). Though this data suggests that concerned citizens feel safer as a result of knowing where sex offenders live, other surveys have found that notification can increase anxiety because few strategies are concurrently offered for protecting oneself from sex offenders (Caputo, 2001; Caputo & Brodsky, 2004; Zevitz et al., 2000b;

Zevitz, 2004). A large majority of mental health professionals have expressed doubt that registration and notification can be successful in preventing child sexual abuse, and even speculated that such laws create a false sense of security for parents (Malesky & Keim, 2001). Nonetheless, public notification laws are widely supported.

Legal Issues

Legal scholars have debated the constitutionality of public notification, citing concerns about privacy rights, *ex post facto* punishment, and the potential for adverse consequences (LaFond, 2005; Lotke, 1997; Petrunik, 2003; Quinn, Forsyth, & Mullen-Quinn, 2004; Winick, 1998; Wright, 2003). A legal challenge to Connecticut's notification law argued that sex offenders should not be placed on an Internet registry without first holding a hearing to determine their danger to the community (*Connecticut Department of Public Safety v. Doe*, 2003). An Alaska case contended that registration and notification of sex offenders sentenced before the passage of the law constituted *ex post facto* punishment (*Smith v. Doe*, 2003). In both cases, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of community notification and, in particular, the Connecticut ruling paved the way for broad dissemination of registry information to the public.

Collateral Consequences

An emerging area of research has investigated the impact of registration and notification on sex offenders (Lees & Tewksbury, 2006; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005; Zevitz, Crim, & Farkas, 2000a). About one-third to one-half of sex offenders in Florida and Kentucky reported adverse events such as the loss of a job or home, threats, harassment, or property damage as a result of public disclosure (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Tewksbury, 2005). A substantial minority (5–16%) reported being physically assaulted after being publicly identified as sex offenders, and about 19% of sex offenders reported that negative effects had been experienced by other members of their households (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Tewksbury, 2005). In Wisconsin, many sex offenders reported housing problems (83%), isolation or harassment (77%), employment instability (57%), and harm to family members (67%) (Zevitz *et al.*, 2000a). A study of female sex offenders in Indiana and Kentucky revealed that 42% reported job loss, 32% reported housing disruption, 40% indicated a loss of social relationships, 34% had been harassed, and 10% had been assaulted (Tewksbury, 2004). As the time listed on a sex offender registry increased, these female offenders were more likely to experience adverse consequences.

The collateral consequences of community notification are important to investigate because they may potentially exacerbate risk factors for recidivism such as lifestyle instability, negative moods, and lack of positive social support (Hanson & Harris, 1998, 2001). Housing, social stability, and employment have been noted to be important factors in facilitating successful community re-entry for criminal

offenders (Andrews & Bonta, 2003; Colorado Department of Public Safety, 2004; Kruttschnitt, Uggen, & Shelton, 2000; Uggen, 2002; Uggen, Manza, & Behrens, 2004; Zevitz, 2006b). Policies such as community notification appear to create obstacles to reintegration, which may ultimately undermine goals related to public protection.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of community notification on sex offenders in Indiana and Connecticut in order to better understand the intended and unanticipated consequences of such laws on sex offenders' adjustment and reintegration. It was hypothesized that a majority of participants in both states would report negative consequences of Megan's Law, and that a minority of participants would endorse positive effects resulting from notification. Connecticut and Indiana were chosen because both states have broad notification policies that apply to all sex offenders. Neither state has a classification system differentiating between low risk and high risk individuals. A multi-state study provides the ability to compare the results of the two states to examine differences in diverse regions of the country. It was hypothesized that community notification would have similar effects in both states. Surveying sex offenders in two states also contributes to the emerging national picture of the impact of Megan's Law. It was expected that this study would add to the small but growing body of literature regarding the collateral consequences of sex offender notification by clarifying offenders' experiences and perceptions of the impact of community notification on their lives.

METHOD

Participants

The sample ($N = 239$) was drawn from a pool of registered sex offenders attending outpatient sex offender counseling centers across Indiana ($n = 148$) and Connecticut ($n = 91$). In Indiana, data were collected from sex offenders in treatment programs in Indianapolis, Mishawaka, and New Albany. In Connecticut the treatment programs were located in Norwalk, New Haven, and Stamford. All of the geographical areas are urban and ethnically diverse with the exception of New Albany, IN, which is a rural town located 115 miles from Indianapolis. Clients attending treatment at the facilities were invited to complete a survey about the impact of sexual offender policies on their community reintegration. We acknowledge that treatment samples may represent only one subgroup of registered sex offenders. However, sex offenders are a difficult population to reach due to their concerns about anonymity and their distrust of what they perceive to be an oppressive society. Most attempts to randomly select sex offenders for survey research have resulted in small sample sizes (see, e.g., Tewksbury, 2004; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Zevitz et al., 2000a). Out of 200 surveys we administered in Indiana, 148 were returned, a response rate of 74%.

Table 1. Demographics of sample

		Percentage
Age	Under 25	10%
	25–64	85%
	65 or over	5%
Ethnicity	White	65%
	Black	22%
	Hispanic	9%
	Other	3%
Marital status	Currently married	28%
	Never married	30%
	Divorced or separated	40%
	Widowed	2%
Education	High school graduate or GED	37%
	Attended some college	29%
	College graduate	14%
Income	\$30,000 per year or less	82%
Victims	Age 12 or under	30%
	Minor teens	41%
	Adults	13%
	Victims of multiple age groups	17%
	Female only	84%
	Male only	6%
	Both genders	10%
Relation to victims	Extrafamilial only	54%
	Relatives only	31%
	Victims inside and outside the family	14%

In Connecticut, all 91 clients invited to participate agreed to do so. The demographics of the sample are described in Table 1.

Connecticut requires lifetime registration for repeat offenders and for those convicted of “sexually violent offenses” or crimes involving victims younger than 13 years of age, and ten years registration for other types of sex crime. Connecticut limits dissemination of registry information to law enforcement only if public access is not deemed necessary for public safety or may reveal the identity of the victim; most sex offenders are listed on the state’s Internet registry. Indiana’s law requires lifetime registration for repeat offenders, those who victimize children under 12 years of age, and those who use force or threat of force or cause serious bodily injury or death. All other sex offenders in Indiana are required to register for 10 years. All sex offenders in Indiana are listed on the state’s publicly accessible Internet registry.

Instrumentation and Variables

The survey was a replication of that used by Levenson and Cotter (2005), which was designed to elicit an understanding of the impact of community notification on sex offenders. Client demographic data and information regarding offense history were obtained using forced-choice categorical responses in order to better protect anonymity. Participants were asked to rate dichotomous (yes/no), three-point, and five-point Likert scales indicating their degree of agreement with

survey questions. Questions were asked exactly as they are described in the corresponding tables.

The questions were conceptualized to capture a range of potential effects of community notification identified in previous research (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005; Zevitz et al., 2000a). First, participants were asked about practical consequences, which measured the variables of job loss, housing disruption, harassment, physical assault, property damage, and suffering of offenders' family members. Next, participants were asked to report on the psychosocial effects of notification, including stress, isolation, disruption to social relationships, fear for one's safety, shame and embarrassment, and hopelessness. Finally, the positive effects of Megan's Law were reflected in variables such as willingness to manage risk, motivation to prevent reoffense, restricted access to victims, increased honesty, others' support for recovery efforts, and community safety. Participants were also asked questions about their perceptions of the fairness and accuracy of public notification.

Respondents were given the opportunity to provide narrative responses, which were categorized according to emerging themes.

Data Collection Procedures

Clients were invited to complete the survey during a group therapy session. Respondents were instructed not to write their names on the survey, and to place the completed questionnaire in a sealed box with a slot opening. Data were collected in December 2005. The research was approved by an Institutional Review Board and was conducted in accordance with federal guidelines for the ethical treatment of human subjects. Data were analyzed using the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*, Version 14 (SPSS, 2006).

RESULTS

Participants were asked to identify the strategies by which community notification took place in their jurisdictions. Only a small proportion were aware of active procedures such as flyers being posted (3%), door-to-door notification by police (8%), neighborhood meetings (5%), press releases (10%), or automated phone calls (8%). The only significant difference between states was the use of automated phone calls ($X^2(1, N = 239) = 13.618, p < .01$). No respondents in Connecticut reported that automated phone calls are utilized, but 20 offenders in Indiana were aware of this strategy in their communities.

The negative consequences that occurred with the greatest frequency included job loss, threats and harassment, property damage, and suffering of household members (see Table 2). A minority of sex offenders reported having to move from a home following community notification. Physical assaults were experienced by 10% of the sample. The only significant difference between states was that offenders in Connecticut were more likely to be forced to move from a rental property after a landlord found out about the sex offender's status ($X^2(1, N = 239) = 9.54, p < .05$). There was only one significant difference between rapists and child molesters

Table 2. Practical consequences of Megan's Law

	<i>N</i>	Total reporting "yes"	% in CT reporting "yes"	% in IN reporting "yes"
I've lost a job because a boss or co-workers have found out.	237	21%	23%	19%
I've had to move out of an apartment or house that I rented because a landlord found out.*	239	10%	18%	5%
I've had to move out of an apartment or house that I rented because a neighbor found out.	239	8%	9%	7%
I've had to move out of a home that I own because a neighbor found out.	236	3%	3%	3%
I've been threatened or harassed by neighbors.	239	21%	22%	20%
I've been physically assaulted or injured.	238	10%	12%	8%
My property has been damaged.	239	18%	20%	17%
A person who lives with me has been threatened, harassed, assaulted, injured or suffered property damage.	239	16%	14%	18%

* $p < .01$, indicates a significant difference between states.

regarding the negative consequences: child molesters were more likely than rapists to be forced to move from a rental property by a landlord following community notification ($X^2(1, N = 238) = 4.85, p < .01$). The length of time on probation was significantly correlated ($r = .21; p < .01$) only with the likelihood of being physically assaulted or injured.

The majority of sex offenders reported experiencing psychosocial distress related to public disclosure, such as isolation, shame, embarrassment, and hopelessness. Nearly half expressed that they were afraid for their safety because their sex offender status was known to others (see Table 3).

The participants were also asked to identify positive effects of Megan's Law (see Table 4). Nearly three-quarters agreed that that community notification inspired motivation to prevent reoffense. Though almost one-third agreed that they are more willing to manage their risk factors as a result of public disclosure, the majority did not believe that registration and notification helped to prevent offending, that they have less access to children due to public scrutiny, or that citizens are safer because they know where sex offenders live.

Table 3. Psychosocial impact of Megan's Law

	<i>N</i>	Agree or strongly agree
Megan's Law makes my recovery more difficult by causing stress in my life.	239	62%
I feel alone and isolated because of Megan's Law.	239	54%
I have lost friends or close relationships because of Megan's Law.	236	50%
I am afraid for my safety because of Megan's Law.	235	46%
Shame and embarrassment due to Megan's Law keep me from engaging in activities.	236	58%
I have less hope for the future now that I will be a registered sex offender.	238	55%
Sometimes Megan's Law makes me feel hopeless—"no one believes I can change, so why even try?"	239	44%

Table 4. Positive consequences of Megan's Law

	<i>N</i>	Agree or strongly agree
I am more willing to manage my risk factors because neighbors are watching me.	236	31%
I am more motivated to prevent reoffense to prove to others that I am not a bad person.	233	74%
I think that registration and notification help me prevent offending.	237	22%
I have less access to potential victims because neighbors keep children or others away.	232	20%
Megan's Law has helped me be more honest with people.	236	32%
I find that most people who know that I am a sex offender are supportive of my recovery.	239	58%
Communities are safer when people know where sex offenders live.	238	34%

Only 10% of sex offenders surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they presented a risk to reoffend, and 33% agreed or strongly agreed that it was fair for the public to know about their risk. About 52% said they agreed or strongly agreed that the information listed about them on the Internet registry was correct; 38% said they did not know and 10% disagreed or strongly disagreed that the information was correct. However, only 25% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement: "the information listed on the Internet registry helps the public to know how to protect themselves from me."

Respondents were also asked to provide narrative responses to tell us about the ways in which Megan's Law affected their lives. Several communicated difficulties securing employment due to their sex offender status. A large number of respondents lamented the loss of job opportunities, saying "[Megan's Law] keeps me from pursuing my music career," "...holds me back from a great future," and "I am unable to resume my prior career." Several related that they were unable to live with or visit with their minor children or grandchildren, although this may have been more a function of probation restrictions than community notification. However, some noted that it was difficult to be involved in their children's lives or activities because of public awareness about their offenses.

Another common theme was what one offender referred to as "increased discrimination," with others describing sentiments such as "people regard me as an inferior person," "this law has a negative impact on my family," "I am reluctant to make friends," "I rarely leave my apartment for fear that I will be assaulted," and "there is so much stress from the pressure of being identified." Themes of anxiety and depression emerged as well: "I experience constant worry," "I've contemplated suicide," "I am alienated," "I have a general sense of aloneness and sadness," and "[notification] lowers my self-esteem." Some offenders seemed to feel little motivation in their lives due to the loss of privacy and a lack of intimate relationships. Difficulties understanding how to comply with complex registration laws and "remembering to always notify the authorities of changes" also were common.

Some participants described positive effects of Megan's Law. One offender noted "my life is more meaningful because I try harder to be a good person."

Several others agreed that Megan's Law helped them to take responsibility for their behavior and to be more honest, reporting that as a result they were "changing for the better." Many indicated that they were motivated to not reoffend as a result of public disclosure.

Finally, sex offenders offered their suggestions for improvement of Megan's Law. Common themes included "all sex offenders are not the same," with suggestions for "case by case" risk assessment and a classification system by which high risk offenders could be distinguished from lower risk offenders. As well, some participants were concerned that the public should "know the true facts, not media hype," and understand that "we are not monsters." Others emphasized that "sex offenders can change" and suggested that those who have completed treatment should be exempt from community notification.

DISCUSSION

We hypothesized that a majority of sex offenders surveyed in Indiana and Connecticut would experience negative consequences of Megan's Law in both practical and psychosocial domains. Less than one-quarter of sex offenders in both states identified practical consequences such as job loss, housing disruption, harassment, physical assault, property damage, and suffering of offenders' family members, with job loss and harassment occurring most frequently. Only one significant difference between states was found, suggesting that the effect of Megan's Law on sex offenders is similar in diverse regions of the nation. Offenders in Indiana were more likely than those in Connecticut to experience eviction by a landlord, but child molesters in both states were more likely to be evicted than rapists. This finding suggests that landlords are concerned about liability, and that when the presence of a sex offender (especially a child molester) becomes known, they are inclined to remove the threat rather than take a chance of being found culpable should a reoffense occur.

This sample of sex offenders reported a lower frequency of adverse events than those in other states. For instance, in Florida, 27% reported job loss, 15–20% related housing disruption, 33% described threats and harassment, and 21% experienced property damage (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). In Kentucky, sex offenders reported substantially higher frequencies of job loss (43%), housing problems (45%), and harassment (47%) (Tewksbury, 2005). In Wisconsin, the overwhelming majority of sex offenders reported such events (Zevitz *et al.*, 2000a). The current sample reported a higher number of physical attacks than sex offenders in Florida (5%) and Wisconsin (3%), but a lower frequency than those in Kentucky (16%).

Some possible explanations for the differences between samples will be considered. First, it is possible that citizens in Kentucky, a more rural, conservative, "bible-belt" state, are less tolerant of sex offenders than citizens in the major metropolitan areas of Florida, Connecticut, and Indiana where crime is more commonplace and perhaps people become somewhat desensitized to the presence of criminals. Second, it is possible that as Internet registries become the mainstream method of community notification the "mob mentality" of more aggressive notification strategies is diminished. For example, as individuals independently

search their state registries and identify sex offenders living nearby, they may file that information away in their minds without necessarily sharing it with others. However, when a community meeting is held, or flyers are distributed to many neighbors at once, the opportunity for discourse may be greater and a shared hysteria may emerge, making it more likely that a group of individuals would seek to initiate action.

Our hypothesis that a majority of sex offenders would report experiencing negative psychosocial consequences was supported by the data. Similar to findings in Florida, Kentucky, and Wisconsin (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Tewksbury, 2005; Zevitz et al., 2000a), most sex offenders did report stress, isolation, disruption to social relationships, fear for one's safety, shame and embarrassment, and hopelessness. Finally, as hypothesized, a minority of participants endorsed the positive effects of Megan's Law such as willingness to manage risk, restricted access to victims, increased honesty, and a belief that notification enhances community safety.

Surprisingly few of these sex offenders were aware of active community notification tactics taking place within their neighborhoods. Comparatively higher proportions of sex offenders surveyed in Florida (Levenson & Cotter, 2005) described notification procedures such as flyers (30%), door-to-door warnings (28%), and press releases (18%). One possible explanation for this observed difference might be that as Internet access has become more commonplace, and as states are now required to post registry information online, more costly and time-consuming methods of notifying the public are on the decline. On the other hand, implementation of notification is left up to the states, so different strategies simply might be utilized in Indiana and Connecticut compared with Florida. If, however, our findings do reflect a declining trend in aggressive notification strategies, people living in impoverished communities might have less access to sex offender registry information than those living in more affluent neighborhoods. Residents in low income areas may be less able to afford computers and Internet access. Sex offenders have been found to be more likely to live in economically deprived and socially disorganized communities (Mustaine, Tewksbury, & Stengel, 2006; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2006; Zevitz, 2004, 2006a). Therefore, communities most likely to house sex offenders might ironically be the same communities with limited access to public notification.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Mental health professionals should be mindful of the stress created by public disclosure and attend to dynamic risk factors, which fluctuate according to environmental conditions, as an integral part of ongoing assessment and treatment planning. Although risk assessment and community management are important (English, Pullen, & Jones, 1998), treatment professionals have a primary duty to promote the recovery of the offender (Glaser, 2003; McCulloch & Kelly, 2007). Treatment practitioners play a crucial role in the psychological and social rehabilitation of offenders, which is ultimately in society's best interest.

The social stigma and shame of sex offender registration can preclude or discourage participation in prosocial roles and activities, including employment, education, parenting, and property ownership (Uggen *et al.*, 2004). Uggen *et al.* (2004) asserted that self-concept, civic participation, and one's perceived identity as a conforming and engaged citizen are related to criminal offenders' desistance from crime. Citizenship is not only a legal status, but also a symbolic one that emphasizes an individual's connection to the rights, responsibilities, roles, and resources that society offers (Rowe, Kloos, Chinman, Davidson, & Cross, 2001; Uggen, Manza, & Thompson, 2006). The marginalization and social exclusion of sex offenders reduces their citizenship potential and may in turn diminish their investment in mainstream social values and increase their resentment toward society (Uggen *et al.*, 2006). Rowe *et al.* (2001) underscored that it is in a society's best interest to restore the functioning of disengaged citizens to as high a level as possible, increasing the potential for all individuals to be assets rather than threats to their communities.

It has been noted that the practical, legal, and social consequences of crime are more severe for sex offenders than for other criminals (Lees & Tewksbury, 2006; Uggen *et al.*, 2006). Hardships related to housing and employment, social stigma, a sense of vulnerability, and relationship problems should be recognized as factors that can facilitate recidivism (Lees & Tewksbury, 2006). Conversely, employment, social bonds, and stability increase the likelihood of successful reintegration for criminal offenders (Kruttschnitt *et al.*, 2000; Petersilia, 2003; Uggen, 2002; Uggen *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, social policies that ostracize and disrupt the stability of sex offenders are unlikely to be in the best interest of public safety.

The vast majority of sex crimes against children are committed by relatives, friends, and acquaintances (Berliner, Schram, Miller, & Milloy, 1995; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002). Community notification laws were passed in response to abductions of children by strangers, but such events are extremely rare and are therefore specious cases on which to base broad public policy (Levenson, 2007; Levenson & D'Amora, 2007; Zgoba, 2004). Despite commonly held beliefs to the contrary, it is well established that the majority of convicted sex offenders are not rearrested for new sex crimes (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Harris & Hanson, 2004) and that sex offenders reoffend at lower rates than other criminals (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Sample & Bray, 2003, 2006). Some sex offenders, however, are more dangerous than others, and risk assessment instruments have been developed that use empirically derived factors to estimate the likelihood of recidivism (Hanson & Thornton, 1999, 2000; Hare, 1991; Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1998). The Iowa registration and recidivism study analyzed the relationship between risk assessment scores and recidivism rates for both the registry and pre-registry groups, and found larger proportions of recidivistic sex offenders as risk assessment scores increased (Adkins *et al.*, 2000). This suggests that empirically based risk assessment can indeed assist in identifying the registered sex offenders who are more likely to reoffend, and would be useful in alerting citizens about the most dangerous sex offenders. Such practices would also result in more efficient distribution of fiscal resources by reserving the most intensive and restrictive interventions for higher risk offenders. Finally, differential disclosure according to risk would minimize the collateral consequences experienced by lower risk sex offenders and their families with little probability of compromising public safety.

Limitations

This study was limited by its reliance on self-reported data from sex offenders, as we had no opportunity to corroborate their responses with objective information. As well, self-selection bias might imply that those who volunteered to participate in the study were those who had negative opinions that they wanted to “vent.” The responses were not overwhelmingly negative, however, suggesting that participants attempted to answer questions fairly and thoughtfully. Another limitation of this research design is that treatment samples might differ in important ways from offenders not in therapy and therefore might not fully represent the population of registered sex offenders. Treatment settings might also introduce bias, as they are potentially coercive environments, which could influence results. The surveys were administered in a way that protected anonymity, and participants were clearly advised that their involvement was completely voluntary, but nonetheless some clients might have felt compelled to comply or to answer in a perceived desired direction.

Conclusions

More research is needed to better understand the costs and benefits of community notification to offenders and society. Sex offender policies have been developed and implemented with little discussion about the research by which they should be informed, or the potential unintended consequences for offenders, their families, and communities. These policies enjoy widespread support despite the absence of evidence indicating that they achieve their stated goals (Levenson et al., 2007). As Tewksbury (2004) observed, sex offenders often experience “collateral consequences that have serious deleterious effects on their social, economic, and physical well-being” (p.33). Others have concurred that the social and economic marginalization of criminals, especially sex offenders, contradicts the principles empirically associated with successful community reintegration (Tewksbury, 2004; Uggen et al., 2004, 2006).

Broad notification policies are more likely to undermine the stability of sex offenders than to provide the sweeping protection they intend to achieve. Defiance theory postulates that criminal sanctions produce desistance from crime only when offenders perceive sanctions as fair and when they have strong bonds to their communities (Sherman, 1993). Our sample indicated that Megan's Law is experienced by sex offenders as unfair and that it disrupts ties to community. As well, they indicated that the law has little deterrence effect. The potential for Megan's Law to sabotage offender reintegration should therefore be stalwartly considered, as it might render these laws counterproductive and ultimately not in the best interest of public safety.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to Darren Allen for completing the data entry for this study while a graduate research assistant at Lynn University.

REFERENCES

- Adkins, G., Huff, D., & Stageberg, P. (2000). *The Iowa sex offender registry and recidivism*. Des Moines, IA: Iowa Department of Human Rights.
- Andrews, D. A., & Bonta, J. (2003). *The psychology of criminal conduct* (3rd ed.). Cincinnati, OH: Anderson.
- Berliner, L., Schram, D., Miller, L., & Milloy, C. D. (1995). A sentencing alternative for sex offenders: A study of decision making and recidivism. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 10*(4), 487–502.
- Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2002). *Criminal victimization*. Retrieved November 16, 2002, from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/cvictgen.htm>
- Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2003). *Recidivism of sex offenders released from prison in 1994*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.
- Caputo, A. A. (2001). Community notification laws for sex offenders: Possible mediators and moderators of citizen coping. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 61*(9-B).
- Caputo, A. A., & Brodsky, S. L. (2004). Citizen coping with community notification of released sex offenders. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law, 22*(2), 239–252.
- Colorado Department of Public Safety. (2004). *Report on safety issues raised by living arrangements for and location of sex offenders in the community*. Denver, CO: Sex Offender Management Board.
- Connecticut Department of Public Safety v. Doe (01-1231) (U.S. Supreme Court 2003).
- English, K., Pullen, S., & Jones, L. (1998). The containment approach: An aggressive strategy for community management of adult sex offenders. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, 4*(1/2).
- Glaser, B. (2003). Therapeutic jurisprudence: an ethical paradigm for therapists in sex offender treatment programs. *Western Criminology Review, 4*(2), 143–154.
- Hanson, R. K., & Bussiere, M. T. (1998). Predicting relapse: A meta-analysis of sexual offender recidivism studies. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 66*, 348–362.
- Hanson, R. K., & Harris, A. J. R. (1998). *Dynamic predictors of sexual recidivism*. Ottawa: Department of the Solicitor General of Canada.
- Hanson, R. K., & Harris, A. J. R. (2001). A structured approach to evaluating change among sexual offenders. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, 13*(2), 105–122.
- Hanson, R. K., & Morton-Bourgon, K. (2005). The characteristics of persistent sexual offenders: A meta-analysis of recidivism studies. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 73*(6), 1154–1163.
- Hanson, R. K., & Thornton, D. (1999). *Static 99: Improving actuarial risk assessments for sex offenders* (User Report 1999-02). Ottawa: Department of the Solicitor General of Canada.
- Hanson, R. K., & Thornton, D. (2000). Improving risk assessments for sex offenders: a comparison of three actuarial scales. *Law and Human Behavior, 24*, 119–136.
- Hare, R. D. (1991). *The Hare Psychopathy Checklist—Revised*. Toronto: Multi-Health Systems.
- Harris, A. J. R., & Hanson, R. K. (2004). *Sex offender recidivism: A simple question* (No. 2004-03). Ottawa: Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada.
- Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act, Public Law 103-322 (1994).
- Kruttschnitt, C., Uggen, C., & Shelton, K. (2000). Predictors of desistance among sex offenders: The interaction of formal and informal social controls. *Justice Quarterly, 17*(1), 61–88.
- LaFond, J. Q. (2005). *Preventing sexual violence: How society should cope with sex offenders*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Lees, M., & Tewksbury, R. (2006). Understanding policy and programmatic issues regarding sex offender registries. *Corrections Today, 68*(1), 54.
- Levenson, J. S. (2003). Community notification and civil commitment of sex offenders: A review of policies designed to combat sexual violence. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 12*(3/4), 17–52.
- Levenson, J. S. (2007). The new scarlet letter: Sex offender policies in the 21st century. In D. Prescott (Ed.), *Applying Knowledge to Practice: Challenges in the Treatment and Supervision of Sexual Abusers*. Oklahoma City, OK: Wood and Barnes.
- Levenson, J. S., Brannon, Y., Fortney, T., & Baker, J. (2007). Public perceptions about sex offenders and community protection policies. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy, 7*(1), 1–25.
- Levenson, J. S., & Cotter, L. P. (2005). The effect of Megan's Law on sex offender reintegration. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice, 21*(1), 49–66.
- Levenson, J. S., & D'Amora, D. A. (2007). Social policies designed to prevent sexual violence: The emperor's new clothes? *Criminal Justice Policy Review, 18*(2).
- Lotke, E. (1997). Politics and irrelevance: Community notification statutes. *Federal Sentencing Reporter, 10*(2), 64–68.
- Malesky, A., & Keim, J. (2001). Mental health professionals' perspectives on sex offender registry web sites. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, 13*(1), 53–63.
- Matson, S., & Lieb, R. (1996). *Sex offender community notification: A review of laws in 32 states*. Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

- McCulloch, T., & Kelly, L. (2007). Working with sex offenders in context: Which way forward? *Probation Journal*, 54(1), 7–21.
- Mullvihill, M., Wisniewski, K., Meyers, J., & Wells, J. (2003, November 5). Monster next door: State losing track of sex offenders. *Boston Herald*.
- Mustaine, E. E., Tewksbury, R., & Stengel, K. M. (2006). Residential location and mobility of registered sex offenders. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 30(2), 177–192.
- Payne, M. (2005, December 18). Sex offender site criticized. *Southwest Florida News-Press*.
- Petersilia, J. (2003). *When prisoners come home: Parole and prisoner reentry*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Petrunik, M. (2003). The hare and the tortoise: Dangerousness and sex offender policy in the United States and Canada. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 45(1), 43–72.
- Proctor, J. L., Badzinski, D. M., & Johnson, M. (2002). The impact of media on knowledge and perceptions of Megan's Law. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 13(4), 356–379.
- Quinn, J. F., Forsyth, C. J., & Mullen-Quinn, C. (2004). Societal reaction to sex offenders: A review of the origins and results of the myths surrounding their crimes and treatment amenability. *Deviant Behavior*, 25, 215–232.
- Quinsey, V. L., Harris, G. T., Rice, M. E., & Cormier, C. A. (1998). *Violent offenders: Appraising and managing risk*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Rowe, M., Kloos, B., Chinman, M., Davidson, L., & Cross, A. B. (2001). Homelessness, mental illness and citizenship. *Social Policy and Administration*, 35(1), 14–31.
- Sample, L. L., & Bray, T. M. (2003). Are sex offenders dangerous? *Criminology and Public Policy*, 3(1), 59–82.
- Sample, L. L., & Bray, T. M. (2006). Are sex offenders different? An examination of rearrest patterns. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 17(1), 83–102.
- Schram, D., & Milloy, C. D. (1995). *Community notification: A study of offender characteristics and recidivism*. Olympia, WA: Washington Institute for Public Policy.
- Sherman, L. (1993). Defiance, deterrence, and irrelevance: A theory of the criminal sanction. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 30(4), 445–473.
- Smith v. Doe (01-729) (U.S. Supreme Court 2003)*.
- SPSS. (2006). *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*. Chicago, IL.
- Tewksbury, R. (2002). Validity and utility of the Kentucky sex offender registry. *Federal Probation*, 66(1), 21–26.
- Tewksbury, R. (2004). Experiences and attitudes of registered female sex offenders. *Federal Probation*, 68(3), 30–34.
- Tewksbury, R. (2005). Collateral consequences of sex offender registration. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 21(1), 67–82.
- Tewksbury, R., & Lees, M. (2006). Consequences of sex offender registration: Collateral consequences and community experiences. *Sociological Spectrum*, 26(3), 309–334.
- Tewksbury, R., & Mustaine, E. E. (2006). Where to find sex offenders: An examination of residential locations and neighborhood conditions. *Criminal Justice Studies*, 19(1), 61–75.
- Uggen, C. (2002). Work as a turning point in the life course of criminals: A duration model of age, employment and recidivism. *American Sociological Review*, 65, 529–546.
- Uggen, C., Manza, J., & Behrens, A. (2004). Less than the average citizen: Stigma, role transition, and the civic reintegration of convicted felons. In S. Maruna, & R. Immarigeon (Eds.), *After crime and punishment: Pathways to offender reintegration*. Devon: Willan.
- Uggen, C., Manza, J., & Thompson, M. (2006). Citizenship, democracy, and the civic reintegration of criminal offenders. *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 605(1), 281–310.
- Walker, J. T., Maddan, S., Vasquez, B. E., VanHouten, A. C., & Ervin-McLarty, G. (2005). *The influence of sex offender registration and notification laws in the United States*. Retrieved December 15, 2005, from www.acic.org
- Washington State Institute for Public Policy. (2005). *Sex offender sentencing in Washington State: Did community notification influence recidivism?* Olympia: Author.
- Welchans, S. (2005). Megan's Law: Evaluations of sexual offender registries. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 16(2), 123–140.
- Winick, B. J. (1998). Sex offender law in the 1990's: A therapeutic jurisprudence analysis. *Psychology, Public Policy and Law*, 4(1/2), 505–570.
- Wright, R. G. (2003). Sex offender registration and notification: Public attention, political emphasis, and fear. *Criminology and Public Policy*, 3(1), 97–104.
- Zevitz, R. G. (2004). Sex offender placement and neighborhood social integration: The making of a scarlet letter community. *Criminal Justice Studies*, 17(2), 203–222.
- Zevitz, R. G. (2006a). Sex offender community notification and its impact on neighborhood life. *Crime Prevention and Community Safety: An International Journal*, 5(4), 41–62.

- Zevitz, R. G. (2006b). Sex offender community notification: Its role in recidivism and offender reintegration. *Criminal Justice Studies*, *19*(2), 193–208.
- Zevitz, R. G., Crim, D., & Farkas, M. A. (2000a). Sex offender community notification: Managing high risk criminals or exacting further vengeance? *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, *18*, 375–391.
- Zevitz, R. G., Crim, D., & Farkas, M. A. (2000b). Sex offender community notification: Examining the importance of neighborhood meetings. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, *18*, 393–408.
- Zgoba, K. M. (2004). Spin doctors and moral crusaders: The moral panic behind child safety legislation. *Criminal Justice Studies*, *17*(4), 385–404.