

Perceptions and Coping With Punishment

How Registered Sex Offenders Respond to Stress, Internet Restrictions, and the Collateral Consequences of Registration

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This study examines how registered sex offenders (RSOs) experience, respond to, and attribute stress regarding sex offender registration and notification process and policies. In addition, the frequency and reasons for Internet access is assessed, with a focus on how new legislation in New Jersey (P.L. 2007, C.219) limits or blocks such access. Drawing on survey data from a random sample of 1,000 RSOs in New Jersey, responses from 107 RSOs show significant levels of stress, significant losses due to restrictions on Internet access, and coping methods associated with higher and lower stress levels. The most significant loss reported by the sample related to employment search difficulties. Factors associated with increased levels of stress include using self-distraction for coping and not accepting the situation. Surprisingly, being forced to move because of financial reasons is associated with lower levels of stress.

Keywords: *sex offender; registry; stress; Internet*

Crime and criminals, especially violent and sex offenders, are major public policy issues in today's world. Contemporary responses to criminal offenders focus on a combination of punishment and incapacitation. Punishment is (typically) achieved through incarceration. Incapacitation is achieved through incarceration and stricter and longer monitoring of offenders in the community, either following incarceration or in place of it. In regards to sex offenders, the past two decades have seen a sharp increase in public concerns and increasingly harsh official responses, despite the fact that the rate of officially reported offenses decreased 14% between 1997 and 2006

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and 6.6% from 2002 to 2006 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2007). The Bureau of Justice Statistics also reports that the number of annual victimizations for both violent crime generally and sex offenses specifically have been decreasing in recent years (Rand & Catalano, 2007). In New Jersey (the site of the present study), contrary to popular belief, arrests for sexual offenses have been decreasing on a consistent basis since the late 1980s according to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports (Veysey, Zgoba, & Dalessandro, *in press*).

Since the passage of Megan's Law in 1994, public attention toward sex offenders and increasingly severe sanctions have rapidly expanded; included in these public responses have been the growing popularity, visibility, and mounting size of sex offender registries and the accompanying community notification processes. The anticipated goals of such laws are to enhance community protection through informing community members—especially parents—about the identities and locations of known sex offenders.

Assessments of sex offender registration and notification are not widely prevalent but to date have suggested that such policies are only minimally effective at reducing recidivism and victimizations (Duwe, Donnay, & Tewksbury, 2008; Veysey et al., *in press*; Welchans, 2005). A Minnesota study showed a lower rate of recidivism for high-risk sex offenders released from prison with broad community notification compared with a group of sex offenders released prior to community notification laws (Duwe & Donnay, 2008).¹ However, when compared with lower risk sex offenders released but not subject to community notification, no differences were revealed (Duwe & Donnay, 2008). Proposed reasons for this lack of efficacy may include incomplete and inaccurate registry information (Mercado, Alvarez, & Levenson, 2008; Tewksbury, 2002) and a lack of knowledge or use of registries (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006, 2007).

Accompanying registration and community notification are additional sanctions and restrictions many jurisdictions impose on registered sex offenders (RSOs). These include restrictions on where RSOs may live, restrictions on employment options, and most recently prohibitions on accessing the Internet. Residential restrictions have been shown to impose severe limitations on available housing options for RSOs (Barnes, Dukes, Tewksbury, & De Troye, *in press*; Levenson, 2008; Levenson, D'Amora, & Hern, 2007; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Levenson, Zgoba, & Tewksbury, 2007; Mustaine, Tewksbury, & Stengel, 2006a; Tewksbury, 2007; Zandbergen & Hart, 2006; Zgoba, Levenson, & McKee, *in press*) and to make access to both treatment services and providers (Levenson, 2008; Levenson & Hern, 2007) and supportive family and friends (Levenson & Hern, 2007) more difficult. Employment restrictions in various jurisdictions include prohibitions on RSOs from working in schools, day care centers, and other (both paid and unpaid) positions where access to children is easy and common. In regards to Internet restrictions, many jurisdictions now require RSOs to report their e-mail addresses and screen names to law enforcement officials (who sometimes include this information on sex offender

registry listings) and prohibitions on offenders accessing social networking sites. Most recently and most restrictive are laws such as P.L. 2007, C.219 in New Jersey, which prohibits RSOs from accessing the Internet. To comply with these restrictions, offenders will be required to submit to periodic, unannounced examinations of their computer equipment and to install hardware or software systems on their computer to monitor their use. Florida and Nevada are the only other states with restrictions placed on sex offender usage of the Internet. Furthermore, sex offenders must inform law enforcement authorities if they have access to the Internet at home or at their place of employment. Each of these varieties of restrictions obviously presents potential limitations on social, employment, and other opportunities for RSOs and may have far-reaching individual and social consequences. Despite this, to date only residential restrictions have been assessed for negative consequences for individual sex offenders.

Scholarly attention to whether and how sex offender registration and accompanying sanctions and restrictions impose collateral consequences on RSOs have shown a variety of negative outcomes. Studies focused on sex offenders themselves have drawn on both survey and interview data to demonstrate social, economic, and psychological consequences for offenders. Collateral consequences include relegating sex offenders to less desirable communities (Mustaine, Tewksbury, & Stengel, 2006b; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2006), difficulties finding and maintaining housing (Levenson, 2008; Levenson & Cotter, 2006a, 2006b; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005, 2007; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Tewksbury & Mustaine, in press; Zandbergen & Hart, 2006), employment difficulties (Brannon, Levenson, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Levenson & Cotter, 2006a; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Mercado et al., 2008; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005; Tewksbury & Mustaine, in press), relationship difficulties (Brannon et al., 2007; Levenson & Cotter, 2006a, 2006b; Mercado et al., 2008; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Tewksbury & Mustaine, in press), and heightened perceptions of vulnerability and stigmatization (Brannon et al., 2007; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Mercado et al., 2008; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Tewksbury & Mustaine, in press; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). Collateral consequences affect all RSOs; despite the policy focus and common assumptions about registrants being primarily child molesters, there are few differences in how the effects are experienced across offenders convicted and registered for crimes against adults or children (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2007).² Interestingly, although most RSOs report experiencing multiple forms of collateral consequences, offenders also report believing that registries are at least moderately valuable tools for community safety (Brannon et al., 2007; Tewksbury, 2006; Tewksbury & Lees, 2007; however, also see Levenson, 2008).

Increased feelings of vulnerability, anxiety, and stigmatization can be important precursors of stress and are related to greater likelihood of recidivism (Colorado Department of Public Safety, 2004; Cortoni & Marshall, 2001; Griffith, 1999; Hanson & Harris, 1998, 2001; Kruttschnitt, Uggen, & Shelton, 2000). Persistent stigmas are

known to be powerful inhibitors of prosocial community engagement, employment, and educational pursuits (Uggen, Manza, & Behrens, 2004), as are general lifestyle instabilities (Colorado Department of Public Safety, 2004; Hanson & Harris, 1998, 2001; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004) and may therefore work against sex offenders' successfully (e.g., law-abidingly) reintegrating into communities. These negative experiences are most likely to affect younger offenders (Levenson & Hern, 2007), who are also at greatest risk of recidivating (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Thornton, 1999).

Directly related to all forms of collateral consequences are likely to be enhanced experiences of stress. Few attempts to assess the stress levels of RSOs have been completed, although experts contend that such stresses are likely to contribute to recidivism (Levenson, 2008). Tewksbury and Mustaine (in press) surveyed RSOs in two states, one with residential restriction laws (Oklahoma) and one without (Kansas). Their results show that RSOs report a moderate to high level of stress resulting from their listing on the sex offender registry. Experiences of stress are relatively consistent across both states, suggesting that residential restriction laws are not especially stress inducing for aspects of life beyond finding and maintaining housing. In addition, few differences are seen in reported experiences of stress for urban- and rural-residing RSOs. Participation and completion of a sex offender treatment program, however, shows mixed results regarding experiences of stress. Tewksbury and Mustaine (in press) report that treatment completion is associated with lower levels of reported stress, but Mercado et al. (2008) report that RSOs in treatment report higher degrees of feelings of isolation, fear, shame, embarrassment, and hopelessness.

How RSOs experience and manage stress has important policy implications. If stress can trigger reoffending (or other deviant forms of behavior), it is in the public's best interest to know how such stresses can most effectively be managed; such approaches would be desirable to encourage and support. As with all individuals, when RSOs experience significant stress, they will seek to relieve such feelings. One potential manner is through sexually acting out. Tewksbury and Mustaine (in press) report that the most common methods for RSOs to manage their stresses are through recreation, staying busy and not thinking about it, and seeking support (through conversation) from friends and family. Regarding patterns in means of managing one's experience of stress, the only difference reported across the two states' sex offenders was that urban RSOs reported drinking more frequently than rural RSOs. Clearly, understanding how stresses are experienced and managed are important for policy makers to adequately and safely address the needs of RSOs and communities.

The focus of this study is to examine the ways that RSOs experience and respond to the stresses they experience and attribute to sex offender registration and notification. In addition, this study also examines the frequency and reasons for accessing the Internet among a sample of RSOs and how they would be affected by the new legislation in New Jersey that seeks to limit or block their Internet access.

Method

The present study was completed with RSOs in the State of New Jersey. Offender information was received through the New Jersey Department of Corrections' partner agency, the New Jersey State Parole Board (SPB). The SPB maintained the greater part of the relevant data because the majority of sex offenders in New Jersey fall under the purview of Community/Parole Supervision for Life, whereby they are monitored after their release from incarceration. By way of this monitoring, sex offenders receive increased supervision by parole officers and often must participate in sex offender treatment and counseling. These specialized parole officers often do home address queries that monitor the whereabouts and living arrangements of sex offenders. As such, the New Jersey SPB maintains a wealth of rich information concerning each offender, including validated sex offender home addresses. Building on this available information, surveys were sent to where sex offenders lived.³ Interviewing any offender is a sensitive issue; however, mailed surveys are a recognized technique for administering questionnaires to difficult populations or those asking sensitive questions. In addition, they allow for geographic flexibility, time convenience for respondents, and elimination of interviewer bias and offer a low-cost alternative to other types of interviews (Fox, Crask, & Kim, 1988; Larson & Poist, 2004).

Procedure

To examine the detailed information on sex offender coping and stress and how the Internet ban affected sex offenders, surveys were distributed to a sample of sex offenders in New Jersey. Home addresses of all sex offenders registered in New Jersey were obtained from the SPB. These addresses are considered more valid than those posted on the online sex offender registry because they are confirmed by the SPB and visited frequently while the offender is under supervision. In addition, updating online addresses on the sex offender registry has historically been delayed. Of the approximately 10,000 confirmed sex offender addresses, a random sample of 10% was chosen. This yielded a sampling framework of 1,000 sex offenders that received surveys to their home addresses. Surveys were sent via regular mail and offenders were provided with preaddressed and stamped envelopes to ease the return process and increase the response rate. Of the 1,000 surveys that were sent out, 71 (7.1%) were returned to the researchers because the sex offender had moved and was not receiving mail at the address any longer. Despite the increased reliability of the SPB information, some erroneous information was to be expected.⁴ Of the remaining mailed surveys, the researchers received back 107 surveys, yielding a response rate of 11.5%. This response rate is consistent with previous mailed surveys to sex offender populations (Tewksbury, 2004, 2005; Tewksbury & Mustaine, in press). Burchfield and Mingus (2008) reported a response rate of less than 15% in their study, whereas Tewksbury and Lees (2006) reported a 12% response rate for

qualitative interview invitations. Furthermore, the Council of American Survey Research Organizations indicated that a typical response rate for mail surveys ranged from 10% to 30% (www.casro.com). This is further complicated by the sensitivity of the sex offender sample and the subject at hand.

Measures

Stress was measured using the four-item version of the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-4; Hewitt, Flett, & Mosher, 1992). The original PSS (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983) consists of 10 items reflecting adaptation symptoms and coping abilities and has been found to have good internal consistency. The scale has also been found to be correlated with depression (Hewitt et al., 1992). The current study used the short, four-item version of the scale, with the score being the sum of the responses to the four 5-category items indicating whether the respondent experienced such feelings *never*, *almost never*, *sometimes*, *fairly often*, or *very often*. Items included in the short PSS are “In the last month, how often have you . . . 1) felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life, 2) felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems, 3) felt that things were going your way, and 4) felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?” Possible scores ranged from 4 to 20. The PSS-4 has been found to be associated with elevated psychological distress and adverse life events (Cohen & Williamson, 1988).

Measures of coping are means for coping with stress that were measured using the Brief COPE scale (Carver, 1997). This is an instrument using twenty-eight 4-point Likert items to yield 14 scales of means of coping with stress. The instrument produced scores ranging from 2 to 8, with higher scores indicating more frequent use of the coping method. The following means of coping with stress were assessed: active coping, planning, positive reframing, acceptance, humor, religion, using emotional support, using instrumental support, self-distraction, denial, venting, substance use, behavioral disengagement, and self-blame (see Carver, 1997, for definitions).

Control variables were also assessed through common demographic measures (age, sex, race, marital status, and total number of persons living in the RSO's household). Respondents were also asked about the victim(s) of the offense(s) for which they are registered. Dichotomous measures of victims' sex, status as minors, and whether there were multiple victims involved, and a nominal measure of relationship (relative, acquaintance, or stranger) were included.

Computer and Internet use measures were obtained from asking RSOs specific questions on the surveys. They were asked to report whether they own a computer with Internet access, the amount of time they spent on the Internet in a given week (open-ended), and how frequently they engaged in 16 different forms of activities online, including reading news, playing games, chatting with family, friends, or strangers, visiting social networking sites, participating in online support or therapy

groups, doing schoolwork, searching for employment, watching television and movies, researching health information, downloading music, viewing sexually explicit pictures or videos, reading sexually explicit stories, and seeking or meeting sexual partners. These items are ordinal measures reflecting whether the respondent engages in them daily, two to four times per week, weekly, monthly, a few times a year, or never.

Results

Consistent with previous studies on demographics of sex offenders, the sample for this study comprised primarily White, middle-aged, male sex offenders (Hanson & Bussiere, 1996, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004; Zgoba & Levenson, 2008). The vast majority of sex offenders were either married or living long-term with a partner and had an average of two adults in the household. Most likely as a result of their classification as sex offenders, only a small minority of offenders indicated that children lived in their home. The victims of these sex offenders were primarily female children who were either relatives or acquaintances to the offenders. Fewer than 1 in 10 of the offenders had multiple victims. Almost 30% of sex offenders who answered the survey reported that they looked at their own registry information online (see Table 1).

Across the sample, just less than one half (44.3%) of RSOs owned a computer with Internet access in their home. However, when asked how much time in a typical week they spent on the Internet, 96% of the sample reported at least some time on the Internet. These individuals reported spending an average of 4.5 hr per week on the Internet. Only 1 in 7 (13.9%) of all RSOs reported spending an average of more than 1 hr per day (or 7 hr per week) on the Internet.

As shown in Table 2, in this sample of RSOs the activities most commonly engaged in online were reading news and e-mailing with family and friends. Very few respondents reported using the Internet for sexual purposes, communicating with strangers, visiting social networking sites, schoolwork, or participating in online support groups.

When RSOs were asked about the most significant loss or costs for them of not being permitted to use the Internet, they offered responses that can be summarized in four broad categories. The most significant loss reported (42%) related to difficulties finding and applying for employment. In addition, 28% reported that their most significant loss was that their communications with family and friends were hindered, 18% reported a loss of a valued form of recreation, and 10% reported that they would not be able to continue to do their banking online.

Turning to the degree of stress that these RSOs reported experiencing, it is notable that there was a moderate degree of stress reported, with only 1 in 20 respondents having reported a high level of stress. Scores on the brief form of the Perceived

Table 1
Sample Descriptives

| Variable | Values |
|-------------------------------------|--------|
| Sex, % | |
| Male | 98.1 |
| Female | 1.9 |
| Race, % | |
| White | 60.2 |
| African American | 19.4 |
| Hispanic or Latino | 16.5 |
| Other | 3.9 |
| Age | |
| Mean | 48.8 |
| Median | 49.0 |
| Relationship status, % | |
| Married or partnered | 47.6 |
| Single, dating one person | 13.6 |
| Single, dating several | 3.8 |
| Single, not dating | 35.0 |
| Number of adults in household | |
| Mean | 2.0 |
| Median | 2.0 |
| Number of children in household | |
| Mean | 0.4 |
| Median | 0.0 |
| Ever looked at own registry page, % | |
| Yes | 29.4 |
| Type of victim, % | |
| Female | 83.5 |
| Male | 16.4 |
| Child(ren) | 62.6 |
| Relative | 27.1 |
| Stranger | 7.5 |
| Multiple victims | 9.3 |

Stress Scale show that on the 16-point scale (scored from 4 to 20) of perceived stress, the mean score was 10.4 (median = 10). Only 9% of the sample reported a score of 16 or higher.

Coping with stress can be achieved in a variety of ways. To assess how RSOs cope with and attempt to manage the stress that they experience in life arising from their registration as a sex offender, the Brief COPE scale (Carver, 1997) was administered to the sample. As shown in Table 3, across the sample, the most common forms of coping with the stresses they reported arising from their status as an RSO are active coping (“taking action to try to make the situation better” and “concentrating efforts to do something about the situation”), acceptance (“learning to live with

Table 2
Sex Offender Online Behavior

| Activity | Two to Four | | | | | Few Times Per Year | Never |
|---|-------------|----------------|--------|---------|---------|-----------------------|-------|
| | Daily | Times Per Week | Weekly | Monthly | Monthly | | |
| Reading news | 22.6 | 10.4 | 4.7 | 6.6 | 7.5 | 48.1 | |
| Playing games | 8.0 | 7.0 | 4.0 | 5.0 | 5.0 | 71.0 | |
| E-mail or chat with family | 16.7 | 2.9 | 9.8 | 4.9 | 5.9 | 59.8 | |
| E-mail or chat with friends | 13.6 | 7.8 | 7.8 | 6.8 | 4.9 | 59.2 | |
| E-mail or chat with strangers | 0.0 | 1.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 7.0 | 92.0 | |
| Social networking sites | 02.9 | 1.0 | 1.0 | 0.0 | 4.9 | 89.2 | |
| Online support group | 02.9 | 1.0 | 1.0 | 2.9 | 4.9 | 87.4 | |
| School-related work | 03.1 | 4.1 | 1.0 | 0.0 | 3.1 | 87.8 | |
| Looking for employment | 07.8 | 4.9 | 5.8 | 11.7 | 7.8 | 62.1 | |
| Watching TV or movies | 06.9 | 3.0 | 6.9 | 3.0 | 5.0 | 75.2 | |
| Downloading music | 04.8 | 3.8 | 4.8 | 6.7 | 10.5 | 69.5 | |
| Viewing sexually explicit pictures or videos | 0.0 | 1.0 | 1.0 | 3.9 | 5.8 | 88.3 | |
| Reading sexually explicit stories | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 1.0 | 2.9 | 96.1 | |
| Seeking or meeting sexual partners | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 2.9 | 97.1 | |

Table 3
Methods of Coping With Life Stress

| Subscale on Brief COPE Scale | Mean Score of Sample |
|------------------------------|----------------------|
| Active coping | 6.1 |
| Planning | 5.8 |
| Positive reframing | 5.0 |
| Acceptance | 6.1 |
| Humor | 2.5 |
| Religion | 5.3 |
| Using emotional support | 5.5 |
| Using instrumental support | 5.0 |
| Self-distraction | 5.9 |
| Denial | 3.4 |
| Venting | 3.8 |
| Substance use | 2.8 |
| Behavioral disengagement | 3.2 |
| Self-blame | 4.9 |

it” and “accepting the reality of what has happened”), self-distraction (“turning to work or other activities” and “doing something to think about it less”), and planning (“trying to come up with a strategy about what to do” and “thinking hard about what

steps to take”). Two forms of coping—use of humor and substance use—were substantially less frequently used by RSOs than all other methods of coping.

When looking specifically at the RSOs who reported a high level of stress, of the four coping methods, three methods were used more frequently and one method was used less frequently. *T* tests indicate that RSOs who reported higher levels of perceived stress more frequently used behavioral disengagement (mean scores of 4.3 and 3.0, $p = .028$), self-blame (means 6.3 and 4.7, $p = .022$), and planning (means of 7.1 and 5.7, $p = .050$). However, high perceived stress levels were also associated with less frequent use of acceptance methods of coping (means of 4.8 and 6.3, $p = .028$).

Examination of coping methods across RSOs of different demographic characteristics and those with different types of victims revealed few statistically significant differences in the frequency of using coping method varieties. White RSOs reported using the coping method of denial significantly less frequently (means of 2.98 and 4.1, $p = .002$) than non-White RSOs. Married RSOs reported using the method of self-distraction less frequently than single RSOs (means of 5.4 and 6.3, $p = .016$). RSOs who reported having at least one child victim used behavioral disengagement less frequently (means of 3.6 and 2.9, $p = .029$) as a means of coping with their stress. RSOs who reported at least one relative as a victim reported using acceptance (means of 6.9 and 5.8, $p = .013$) and religion (means of 6.0 and 4.9, $p = .035$) more frequently and denial (means of 2.7 and 3.7, $p = .037$) and behavioral disengagement (means of 2.7 and 3.6, $p = .035$) less frequently.

Multivariate regression was used to identify predictors of RSOs' score on the PSS-4. Results indicate that there was a significant relationship ($p = .000$) between three variables and the score on the PSS-4. The Adjusted R^2 indicated that 22.3% of the variance in the score on the PSS-4 was accounted for by the variables in the model. Specifically, acceptance coping ($p = .004$), self-distraction coping ($p = .016$), and being forced to move because of financial issues and costs ($p = .024$) were all significantly related to an offender's score on the scale. Not using acceptance coping and using self-distraction coping both predicted higher stress scores. However, counterintuitively, being forced to move as a result of financial issues and cost was associated with lower stress scores.

Discussion

The various types of restrictions placed on RSOs obviously may present potential, and serious, limitations on social, employment, and other opportunities and may have far-reaching individual and social consequences. However, to date the primary foci of restrictions and consequences for RSOs have been collateral consequences, including geographic assessments of RSOs' residence and relationships of location and recidivism. Although the collateral consequences of registration and community notification have been well established, this study is the first to examine restrictions related to Internet access for RSOs.

Table 4
Regression of Factors Predicting Registered Sex
Offenders' Score on the Perceived Stress Scale

| Predictor | Score on the Perceived Stress Scale | | | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|-----------|---------|----------|----------|
| | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | β | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
| Acceptance coping | -0.640 | 0.214 | -.312 | -2.985 | .004 |
| Self-distraction coping | 0.552 | 0.224 | .260 | 2.464 | .016 |
| After placement—been forced to move because of financial issues or cost | -2.097 | 0.913 | -.242 | -2.297 | .024 |
| After placement—lost a friend when they found out about placement on the Sex Offender Registry | -1.125 | 0.816 | -.144 | -1.379 | .172 |

Note: Adjusted $R^2 = .223$; $F = 6.671$; $p = .000$.

The present results, showing that nearly all surveyed RSOs continue to use the Internet despite a state statute prohibiting such behavior, suggest that there are potentially serious drawbacks to the enforcement of this statute. As reported by these RSOs, their primary online activities were centered on maintaining socially supportive contacts with family and friends, obtaining news, and seeking employment. All of these are prosocial activities that assist in the successful reintegration of offenders. However, by prohibiting such activities, there are likely to be weakened supports for RSOs and therefore fewer and weaker barriers to reoffending.

Not only did this sample of RSOs report potentially serious deleterious effects of the statutory Internet access ban, but so too did they report moderately high levels of stress and restricted means of coping with their stress. How RSOs, in fact all persons, manage and cope with life stress is important for maintaining a positive, crime-free life. As shown in this study, RSOs were most likely to cope with their perceived stress through means of activity, self-distraction, and acceptance. It is encouraging that the most self-destructive approaches to coping with stress—denial, disengagement, and substance abuse—were among those RSOs least frequently used (see Table 4).

Stress is not universal, nor uniformly experienced. As shown in the results of the regression analysis, there were three variables that are statistically significant predictors of higher levels of perceived stress for RSOs. Individuals whose coping methods involved self-distraction and did not include accepting the situation and the sanctions imposed reported higher levels of perceived stress.

One finding of this study was unexpected, the negative relationship between being forced to move as a result of financial pressures and lower stress scores. Previous research is replete with findings showing that residential restrictions on sex offenders are ubiquitous and associated with negative experiences for offenders. Therefore, it

was anticipated that being forced to move would be associated with increased levels of stress. However, the issue presently is not whether RSOs were forced to move because of residential restrictions (this variable was not a statistically significant predictor of stress) but instead whether individuals were forced to move because of financial reasons. It may be that RSOs who found it necessary to move to more affordable locations did not associate such experiences with their status as an RSO, or this may be something that was viewed as a normal aspect of life and therefore not stress inducing. This is an issue that future research should address.

This study is not without limitations. The sample is drawn from only one state, and results regarding how RSOs in New Jersey experienced, responded to, and attributed stress regarding registration and notification processes and policies may not be generalized to sex offenders in other states. Furthermore, the response rate was less than ideal (although similar to other studies surveying RSOs); a small sample size is not uncommon to research involving RSOs (i.e., Sack & Mason, 1980; Vandiver & Walker, 2002). This is a population that is difficult to access and subsequently evaluate. Most studies of sex offenders include samples of offenders who are either incarcerated or in treatment and are thus more accessible. The sample of sex offenders in the present study, however, was limited to those sex offenders who have been released from a prison facility and are living within a community setting. Further constraining the response rate is the inability to survey this particular sample with the aid of a computer-based survey via the Internet, which may have otherwise provided for an increase in responses. As a result, data collection was restricted to a one-time mailed survey. Although it is recognized that multiple mailed surveys provide for an increase in survey response rates (Heberlein & Baumgartner, 1978), given time and fiscal constraints, this was an impossibility. Future research regarding RSOs that use a mailed self-administered questionnaire should intend to send follow-up surveys when initial response rates are lacking.

There are other limitations to this study as well. Although standardized instruments were used to assess the respondents' levels of perceived stress and means of coping with their stresses, it is possible that other experiences and responses may be common among RSOs but were not included in these measures. In addition, some respondents may have responded in what they perceived to be socially desirable manners, leading to underreporting of Internet use (a prohibited activity for these individuals). However, the majority of the findings of this study supported and expanded on the existing literature, suggesting that the sample size and instrumentation used were not overly problematic.

In the end, the results of this study suggest that sex offender registration and notification, and accompanying legal restrictions such as bans on Internet access and use, are both potentially problematic for offenders' successful community reentry and reintegration and such policies may be very difficult, if not impossible, to effectively monitor and enforce. Recall that despite the sample being drawn from the New Jersey SPB records, which are "confirmed" addresses that are "frequently"

visited by agency representatives, 7.1% of addresses were still found to be inaccurate. This suggests that it may not be possible to effectively monitor the activities of RSOs, as there is a high rate of errors in even knowing where these individuals reside. Given law enforcement's potential inability of tracking Internet usage among RSOs in New Jersey, and the known positive effects of active reentry practices for offenders, the results call into question whether such a restriction serves the community in the most effective, meaningful manner.

Notes

1. In Minnesota, sex offenders evaluated as "high risk" are subject on release from incarceration to have law enforcement officials hold public meetings and use the media to distribute information about the offender to the community. These efforts, which accompany listing on the publicly accessible sex offender registry in Minnesota, are not completed for offenders deemed low or moderate risk.

2. Similarly, examinations of sex offenders' experiences and locations by race reveal few significant differences between White and non-White registered sex offenders (RSOs; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2008).

3. Other survey methods, such as use of online surveys, were not possible, because of New Jersey's prohibition on RSOs' accessing the Internet.

4. Invalid addresses were provided back to the State Parole Board for their records.

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