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# Public Awareness and Action Resulting From Sex Offender Community Notification Laws

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Few studies have examined the degree to which citizens access registry information or take preventative action in response. Survey responses from a representative sample of Nebraska residents were used to examine the degree to which people access registration information, the feelings this information invokes, and if preventative measures are subsequently taken by citizens. The results suggest that the majority of citizens had not accessed registry information, although the majority of people knew the registry existed, and few respondents took any preventative measures as a result of learning sex offender information. The implications of the results on notification laws are discussed.

**Keywords:** *sex offender legislation; sex offender notification; State of Nebraska Sex Offender Registry*

At a time when most measures of sex offending were depicting declines in sex crimes, sex offenders were receiving an extraordinary amount of legislative attention. For instance, from 1996 to 2005, the Federal Bureau of Investigation reported a 2.4% decline in reporting forcible rape to police (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2005), and a review of the National Crime Victimization Survey for this same period reveals a 35% decline in victimization for rape and sexual assault (Sample, 2001). Yet despite these reported declines in offending, many sex offender laws proliferated across the country during this same period including civil commitment, chemical castration, residency restrictions, prohibitions of sex offenders from some public places, and electronic monitoring of convicted offenders (Levenson, 2007; Sample, 2001). Few of these laws have been as far-reaching in terms of their application, however, than the community notification laws passed during the mid-1990s.

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Megan's Law was passed in 1996 as an amendment to the Wetterling Act (Title XVII of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, 42 U.S.C.A. §14071), making it mandatory for all states to disclose information about registered sex offenders to the public. The notification of sex offender information was further facilitated with the passage of the Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to End the Exploitation of Children Today ("PROTECT") Act of 2003 (PL-108-21, section 604), requiring all states to provide Internet websites of registration information.

Many scholars have suggested that the passage of these community notification laws was the result of a "moral panic" about sex offending, particularly the victimization of children (Gavin, 2005; Hinds & Daly, 2000; Jenkins, 1998; Quinn, Forsyth, & Mullen-Quinn, 2004; Sample, 2001; Steinbock, 1995; Zgoba, 2004). In other words, these laws are often seen as the products of exaggerated concern stimulated by extensive media coverage of a few isolated incidents of sexually related homicides against children (Sample, 2006). Legislation is often the natural outgrowth of a moral panic, as the very nature of moral panics implies that some action must be taken to address a problem (Ben-Yehuda, 1990; S. Cohen, 1972; Sutherland, 1950). In the case of sex offending, however, the passage of community notification laws was only one measure taken to address the behavior. Unlike other legislation often resulting from moral panics, these laws required that private citizens take some action as well.

Community notification laws are premised on the notion that citizens should be informed of sex offenders' information and whereabouts, so they may take some preventative action to protect themselves and their children (Caputo & Brodsky, 2003; M. Cohen & Jeglic, 2007; Levenson, 2007; Pawson, 2007; Tewksbury, 2002, 2005; Zevitz, 2006). Consistent with such theories as the routine activities perspective (L. E. Cohen & Felson, 1979), preventative measures may take many forms but often include "target hardening" techniques such as increased surveillance of people and places, additional security measures for homes, and improved self-defense procedures. These citizens' actions are expected to augment the public safety afforded by other sex offender legislation and law enforcement activities. To this end, private citizens have become somewhat responsible for community safety, as they are responsible for proactively accessing sex offender information and subsequently formulating some preventative action plan.

Although scholars have investigated the degree to which notification laws have the ability to achieve their informative goals (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Phillips, 1998), little research examines the degree to which citizens actually access registry information or take action in response (Lovell, 2007). This study examines the degree to which community notification laws inform the public of sex offender information and preventative action from citizens. Specifically, a random sample of Nebraska residents was surveyed to discern the degree to which people access registration information, the feelings invoked by this information, and the types of actions taken by citizens as a result of this information. Our examination is

not intended to diminish the sex offender problem, demean legislators' attempts at addressing the behavior, or make light of the harm that victims endure. Rather, our findings are meant to shed further light on the effectiveness of community notification laws at enhancing public safety. Our results, however, also have implications for the study of moral panic legislation, as they highlight the actions taken by the public as a result of moral panics beyond the subsequent enactment of legislation.

Our study begins with an examination of the impetus of community notification laws and a review of the effectiveness of this sex offender reform. We proceed with a discussion of our data collection and analytic techniques followed by a discussion of our results and the implications for the future of sex offender policies and reforms.

## **Background**

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, three specific incidents of sexual homicides against children were catalysts for contemporary registration and community notification laws. In October 1989, an armed, masked stranger abducted Jacob Wetterling, 11, near his home in Minnesota (National Criminal Justice Association, 1997) and he was never found. His case resembled that of a boy in a neighboring town who was abducted and sexually attacked earlier that year. The police believed that the same man was involved in both of the incidents, which led them to believe that they were searching for a repeat sex offender. Although the Wetterling abduction drew attention to the repetitiveness of sex offenders' behaviors, it was the homicide of Polly Klaas and Megan Kanka that brought this issue to the forefront of the policy agenda (Jenkins, 1998).

In 1993, the media widely disseminated the story of Polly Klaas, a 12-year-old girl who was abducted from her bedroom, sexually assaulted, and subsequently killed. Only one year later, the media reported that 7-year-old Megan Kanka was missing from her New Jersey home; she was later found sexually assaulted and murdered (Jenkins, 1998). Previously convicted sex offenders who were released from prison had murdered both Polly Klaas and Megan Kanka. The parents of these murdered children actively lobbied state and federal legislators for remedies to address the repeat behavior of sex offenders.

In 1994, the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act mandated that 10% of a state's funding under the Edward Byrne Memorial State and Local Law Enforcement Assistance grant program be used to establish a statewide system for registering and tracking convicted sex offenders (M. Cohen & Jeglic, 2007; Hinds & Daly, 2000; Levenson et al., 2007). Law enforcement personnel were responsible for creating sex offender registries, obtaining addresses, phone listings, driver's license numbers, photographs, and other information from sex offenders upon their conviction, in addition to verifying addresses, updating registry information, and apprehending persons for failure to

comply. To date, all states have complied with the requirements of the Wetterling Act (Sample, 2001).

The Wetterling Act was soon amended by the passage of “Megan’s Law” in 1996, which requires states to make sex offender registry information available to the public. This burden again fell on law enforcement personnel and could be accomplished in several ways, such as door-to-door solicitation, answering requests for information over the phone, or providing registry listings in media outlets and on the Internet. The implementation of Megan’s Law, however, has been affected by the passage of the federal PROTECT Act of 2003 (PL-108-21, section 604), which requires all states to create Internet websites that contain various information about registered sex offenders.

Most scholars acknowledge that these laws were passed on misinformation and faulty assumptions about sex offenders and their behaviors, with no research-based evidence of effectiveness, and with little thought to the long-term consequences for offenders (M. Cohen & Jeglic, 2007; Levenson et al., 2007; Sample, 2006; Sample & Bray, 2003, 2006; Sample & Kadleck, 2008; Tewksbury, 2002, 2005; Zevitz, 2003; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000b). Nevertheless, researchers have recently started investigating the effectiveness of community notification laws at informing the public and the degree to which they may affect sex offenders’ behavior.

The utility of community notification laws is premised on the accuracy of sex offender information, yet empirical and journalistic investigations consistently reveal a significant amount of error in descriptions of sex offenders and their addresses (Lees & Tewksbury, 2006; Tewksbury, 2002). Not only is incorrect descriptive information about offenders often included on registry websites, sex offenders also provide false addresses for their residences, which should not be surprising given the magnitude of their past crimes. To this end, on their very surface, these laws may be ineffective at informing the public, increasing the surveillance of offenders, and preventing future assaults simply because of the inaccuracy of information included in registry listings.

Even when information on sex offender registries is assumed to be correct, and notification procedures occur as intended, there are scholars who are still skeptical of these laws’ ability to reduce offending (Adkins, Huff, & Stageberg, 2000; Avrahamian, 1998; Petrosino & Petrosino, 1999; Schram & Milloy, 1995; Tewksbury, 2002; Walker, Madden, Vasquez, VanHouten, & Ervin-McLarty, 2005; Zevitz, 2006; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000b). After a review of the literature, Lovell (2007) concluded that “there is no evidence that community notification has resulted in a decreased number of assaults by strangers on children,” and little evidence these laws have had an effect on reducing intrafamilial sexual abuse, which represents the majority of assaults against children. More specific, Zevitz (2006) examined sex offenders who were subject to notification procedures. He tracked the rates of return to prison during a 4.5 year period and found that, after controlling for demographic and criminal history variables, notification had no direct effect on the likelihood of being recommitted to

prison. These findings reaffirm those of Walker and his colleagues (2005) that suggested notification may do little to reduce incidents of rapes reported to police. Petrosino and Petrosino (1999) also suggest that notification has little deterrent effect on sex offenders' behavior. These authors found that, of the 12 offenders eligible for registration and notification in Massachusetts who were strangers to their victims, notification could have only potentially reached 6 of the 12 stranger-predatory cases.

Despite these findings of ineffectiveness, other scholars have suggested that notification laws may have an effect on changing offenders' attitudes toward reoffending (Elbogen, Patry, & Scalora, 2003; Levenson & Cotter, 2005). For example, Elbogen et al. (2003) surveyed 40 civilly and/or voluntarily committed sex offenders in a treatment facility and found that 72% regarded notification laws as a strong incentive to not reoffend, and 56% reported that these laws had a positive impact on their willingness to be treated. Levenson and Cotter (2005) also surveyed convicted sex offenders and found that some respondents noted an increased motivation to prevent reoffending as a function of notification laws and an increased honesty with friends and family regarding their past behaviors. To the degree that attitudes affect behavior, these studies offer some hope concerning notification laws' ability to reduce reoffending.

Beyond notification laws' impact on individual behavior, some researchers have begun investigating the effect of these laws on communities (Mustaine, Tewksbury, & Stengel, 2006; Telpner, 1997; Zevitz, 2003, 2004). Mustaine et al. (2006), for example, noted that after release from prison, sex offenders were placed into communities characterized with greater levels of social disorganization, and by implication, communities with fewer resources to monitor and prevent deviant behavior. Zevitz (2003) also notes that the relocation of sex offenders in the community often targets already fragile communities. Although the presence of sex offenders represents an initial destabilizing effect on neighborhoods, this destabilization may not be of such a magnitude that it permanently weakens a community's ability to recover and protect itself. Moreover, knowing of sex offenders in a community increased residents' fear of crime, and the strengthening of social ties among residents produced virtually no reduction in fear of child victimization (Zevitz, 2004). In sum, Telpner (1997) argued that notification laws potentially enable citizens to build communities on the premise that these neighborhoods are free from dangerous persons. This soothes citizens' psyches and permits a vision of their neighborhood as safe from crime. These notions are contradicted, however, by findings that suggest notification may increase residents' fear of crime and destabilize community organization.

Although the degree to which notification laws achieve their intended goal of reducing reoffending and promoting community safety remains unclear, most scholars agree that these laws have created unintended consequences, mainly for offenders. Researchers have begun noting the adverse effects that registration and notification may have on offenders and their behaviors (Levenson & Cotter, 2005;

Mustaine et al., 2006; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Zevitz, 2003). Sex offenders report experiencing harassment, social isolation, stigmatization, and feelings of vulnerability as a result of sex offender laws, all of which may prompt further misbehavior (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). Moreover, offenders have experienced loss of employment, loss of housing, loss of social relationships, and property damage as a result of notification procedures (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). Sex offenders are not the only individuals experiencing unintended consequences of notification, however. A study of probation and parole officers in Wisconsin revealed that these laws are accompanied by increased responsibilities and greater expectations for criminal justice agents (Zevitz & Farkas, 2000a). These authors concluded that any gains in public awareness and community protection resulting from notification laws come at a high cost for corrections in terms of personnel, time, and budgetary resources.

Increases in public safety and reductions in sexual assaults are ultimately the intention of notification laws. Although research findings are mixed with regard to the laws' ability to achieve these goals, these evaluations did not assess the mechanisms by which notification goals are to be achieved—particularly informing the public and prompting preventative action. Few scholars have directly investigated knowledge of notification laws or actions taken by citizens (Levenson et al., 2007; Lovell, 2007), and most of those inquiries are concerned with the public's perceptions of sex offender laws.

Several scholars have found widespread public support for sex offender registration and community notification (Levenson et al., 2007; Martin & Marinucci, 2006; Phillips, 1998). Phillips (1998), for example, found that 80% of residents surveyed in 1997 were familiar with Washington's notification law and believed it was very important at improving public safety. Moreover, the majority of the 400 residents sampled reported feeling safer against sex offenders when armed with sex offender addresses and information. Levenson and her colleagues (2007) also reported that the majority of their survey respondents generally knew how notification of sex offenders was achieved by law enforcement, believed that the public should have access to this information, and believed that notification strategies were effective at reducing sexual victimization. Caputo and Brodsky (2003) found that Alabama residents regarded notification as important legislation. This widespread support for notification laws may diminish, however, depending on the occupations of the residents surveyed. For example, Redlich (2001) surveyed community members, law enforcement officers, and law students to discern their attitudes toward notification laws. She found the groups significantly differed in their support for this legislation, with law students having less favorable opinions. Moreover, Malesky and Keim (2001) surveyed mental health professionals and found that more than 80% of the respondents did not believe that notification will affect child victimization rates. In sum, although there appears to be public support for notification laws, this support may be tempered by the educational level and occupation of respondents.

Research soliciting the public's perceptions of sex offenders and sex offender legislation suggests much knowledge and support of notification laws, yet none of these studies asked respondents about the degree to which they regularly access registration information, or how citizens use this information to protect themselves and their families. These questions appear particularly salient in light of the passage of the PROTECT Act and the requirement of Internet websites to inform the public as to the whereabouts of offenders. Given the access the public has to computers either at home, school, or public libraries, the PROTECT Act should provide information to virtually any citizen wishing to protect themselves and their children from convicted sex offenders, thereby enhancing public safety beyond what was witnessed under previous door-to-door, flyer, or news media notification procedures. These enhancements to community safety, however, can only be achieved to the degree that citizens access this information and act on it.

This study seeks to fill the gaps in our knowledge about the effectiveness of notification laws by investigating the degree to which people access information concerning sex offenders and subsequently take action based on this information. We also add to the body of literature on notification laws by investigating people's fear associated with sex offender information. To this end, our study is, in part, a replication of previous studies examining public perceptions of notification laws. Rather than concentrating on citizens' perceptions of the law and offenders, however, we focus on citizen access and actions associated with notification information.

## **Data and Methods**

This study employs a sample of residents from Nebraska to explore three specific research questions: To what degree do citizens access the sex offender registry information? Do citizens feel safer armed with this information? and Are actions taken as a result of learning sex offender information? All of these questions are consistent with the goals of notification legislation.

At least one of the goals of Nebraska's community notification law is clearly stated within the statute:

The legislature determined that state police should assist efforts of local law enforcement agencies to protect their communities by requiring sex offenders to register with local law enforcement agencies as provided by the Sex Offender Registration Act. This information is to be used to provide public notice and information about a registrant so a community can develop constructive plans to prepare themselves and their family. (NE 29-4002)

Although some may maintain that notification laws may have been passed simply to demonstrate legislators' abilities to respond to public fear and concern, the Nebraska statute makes specific inference to the public's need to take some proactive

preventative measures, or at the very least, construct a community protection plan. With this in mind, Nebraska legislators constructed a three-tiered notification system to inform citizens of sex offender information, based on a risk assessment of offenders' propensity to reoffend.

The Nebraska State Patrol (NSP) compiles information about convicted sex offenders. For sex offenders assessed as low/Level 1 risk for reoffending, NSP notifies only law enforcement agencies likely to encounter the sex offender. If the risk level for reoffending is moderate/Level 2, schools, daycare centers, and religious and youth organizations that are in the registrant's county of residence are notified, in addition to local law enforcement agencies. For offenders assessed as most at risk for reoffending, high/Level 3, the general public is notified through news media releases in the registrant's area and through the state's Internet registration website, which can be accessed by citizens 24 hours a day.<sup>1</sup> Level 3 notifications via the Internet began in Nebraska in January 2000. Local law enforcement agents may utilize additional news releases, community meetings, or direct contact with neighbors to provide further notice of sex offenders' presence in the community.

We believe the fact that Nebraska only informs citizens of the Level 3 offenders, or those offenders believed to pose the most danger to society, makes it well suited for our research purposes. The offenders listed on the sex offender registry are consistent with public perceptions of the type of sex offenders from which people would want to protect themselves and their families. It is possible, then, that Nebraska could represent the "best case" in terms of citizens proactively checking sex offender registries and taking action.

## **Sampling Design**

The interviewers for the Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS) used Random Digit Dialing (RDD) to select survey respondents. This was facilitated by the Genesys sample generation program, which generates telephone numbers based on known area codes, prefixes within each area code, and working phone number ranges within each prefix. Because several people aged 19 years or older often reside in telephoned homes, a probability process was necessary to select persons to be surveyed in each residence. In this process, the interviewers asked whoever answers the telephone the number of adults living in the home, and based on a random selection by computer, the interviewer requests to speak with the adult who is the oldest, youngest, middle, and so forth. If the designated respondent was not present in the home at the time of the call, the interviewer probed for a time when the respondent was likely to be home in order to make a return call to the designated person. The Nebraskans that were not contacted to participate in the survey included those who were younger than 19 years of age, in institutional custody, living in group quarters or military installations, transient, or without a telephone or a landline.

A total of 9,674 telephone numbers were sampled, of which 5,558 were households. Only 20% of the phone numbers for homes resulted in a ring but no answer

after 15 attempts and were subsequently excluded from the sample. In total, of the 5,558 contacts made, approximately 33% completed the survey resulting in a sample of 1,821 adult Nebraska residents aged 19 years or older. The demographic traits of the sample are presented in Table 1. One limitation of telephone survey research, which can be seen in the age distribution of the respondents, is that those aged 19 to 24 are underrepresented compared with population estimates due to factors such as transience and cell phones. Additionally, females were slightly overrepresented. Appropriately, weights were computed and used in all of our analyses that adjusted for these age and gender differences from population figures. Thus, the NASIS is a representative sample of individuals aged 19 and older living in the state of Nebraska.

As seen in Table 1, the weighted sample was split almost evenly between men and women, and the majority were presently married and living with their partners. Approximately 45% of respondents had children in the home, with about 20% of them having children aged 5 years or younger. This sample characteristic works well for our purposes, as one could logically argue that people with children in the home, particularly young children, should be most vested in accessing sex offender information and taking action as a result.

## **Survey Instrument and Variables**

Data for this study were collected as part of a larger survey conducted in Nebraska that elicits responses on a number of social well-being questions. Generally included in this survey are questions to determine citizens' financial well-being, their health and health care status, their access to state parks and other social services in the state, and their overall mental health status. In total, the survey instrument is 68 pages long and takes almost an hour to administer. We were allowed 1 minute of questions, which amounted to six questions on this survey. The interviewers collected the data from respondents from November 2006 to March 2007 using a standardized coding instrument. All questions included in the survey were closed-ended.

Our independent variables were created from basic demographic information collected from respondents and included: gender, age, marital status, children, education, income, race, and whether the respondent lived in a rural or urban area. Gender was a dichotomous variable where male = 0 and female = 1. Age, in years, was a categorical variable and was coded 19 to 24 years = 1, 25 to 44 years = 2, 45 to 64 years = 3, and 65 and older = 4. Additionally, marital status was also a categorical variable and was coded so that those who were never married = 0; currently married and living together = 1; divorced, separated, or married but living separately = 2; and widowed = 3. The presence of children in the home was a dichotomous variable and was coded 0 if there were no children in the home and 1 if there were at least one child in the home. The education measure was coded as a categorical variable where those with less than a high school degree = 0, a high school degree only = 1, some college or

**Table 1**  
**Demographic Characteristics of Sample (N = 1,821)**

Independent Variable	Category	Frequency
Gender	Male	901 (49.5%)
	Female	919 (50.5%)
	Missing	1 (0.0%)
Age range	19 to 24	217 (11.9%)
	25 to 44	667 (36.6%)
	45 to 64	616 (33.8%)
	65 and older	312 (17.1%)
	Missing	9 (0.5%)
Marital status	Married	1246 (68.4%)
	Single/never married	313 (17.2%)
	Divorced, separated, living apart	157 (8.6%)
	Widowed	101 (5.6%)
	Missing	4 (0.2%)
Education	Less than high school	82 (4.5%)
	High school/General Equivalency Diploma (GED)	474 (26%)
	Some college or college graduate	963 (52.9%)
	Some graduate school or graduate degree	299 (16.4%)
	Missing	3 (0.2%)
Children in the home	No children in the home	998 (54.8%)
	Children in the home	823 (45.2%)
Family income	Less than \$20,000	182 (10%)
	\$20,000 or more	1,539 (84.5%)
	Missing	101 (5.5%)
Race	Caucasian only	1,628 (89.4%)
	Other/multiple racial/ethnic group(s)	191 (10.5%)
	Missing	3 (.2%)
Urban/rural	City or town	1,445 (79.3%)
	Farm or open country	375 (20.6%)
	Missing	1 (0.1%)

college degree = 2, and 1 to 6 years of graduate school = 3. Finally, the respondents that reported living on a farm or in the open country were coded 0 and respondents were coded as a 1 if they reported living in a city or town. The income measure was a dichotomous variable coded 0 if the family income of the respondent was less than \$20,000 and was coded 1 for those that made more than \$20,000 a year.<sup>2</sup>

A dichotomous variable was created for race (Caucasian = 1). The respondents were asked, What race or races do you consider yourself to be? The response categories were the same as found in the U.S. Census and respondents could choose multiple categories. The responses were recoded such that each respondent fell into one of the following mutually exclusive categories: (a) Caucasian; (b) African American; (c) Hispanic/Latino; (d) Asian, Pacific Islander, or Hawaiian; (e) Native American;

and (f) respondents who responded as Other or those who self-identified with more than one racial or ethnic category. Those that responded being Caucasian and no other racial or ethnic group made up more than 91% of the sample, with the next largest racial/ethnic group being those in the Other/multiple race group (3.5% of the sample). Each other group was about 2% of the sample or less. This limited distribution of non-White respondents led to our decision to create a White/non-White dichotomous variable.

People's awareness and access of sex offender registry information first was assessed by asking respondents if they were aware of the sex offender registry in Nebraska (no = 0, unsure = 1, and yes = 2). Those who answered *yes* were asked if they had ever accessed Nebraska's sex offender registry (no = 0, yes = 1). If they had, then respondents were asked how many times they had accessed this information and the responses were coded as once = 1, 2 to 5 times = 2, and 5 times or more = 3.<sup>3</sup> To determine people's opinions of registry information, respondents were asked if they felt safer knowing registry information, and if they thought this information would help keep their families safer (no = 0, yes = 1). Finally, respondents were specifically asked if they had taken any preventative measures as a result of registry information (no = 0, yes = 1).<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the information gathered through the above closed-ended questions, qualitative data were also collected. Specifically, interviewers recorded any comments citizens gave while responding to the questions. For instance, when asked if they had ever accessed registry information, respondents often volunteered more information beyond *yes* or *no*. Some stated they read information in the paper, some specifically stated they had never been on the Internet registration website, and still others suggested that other members of the family had accessed information but the specific respondent had not. The interviewers collected these unsolicited comments as direct quotes. Although some of the questions received more qualitative responses than other questions, none had more than 22 recorded responses. This low qualitative response rate could be a function of the length of the survey or people's unwillingness to articulate further thoughts and opinions. Regardless of the reason, this response rate should be kept in mind when interpreting our results.

## Analytic Technique

As noted earlier, the quantitative data gathered from our closed-ended questions were weighted to adjust for gender and age differences from population figures. We begin by presenting univariate statistics based on these weighted data. This is followed by our results of the chi-square tests on the cross tabulations to determine the degree to which responses varied by demographic traits.<sup>5</sup> Only significant differences between demographic traits of respondents are reported in our results ( $p < .05$ ).

Qualitative data were analyzed using a conceptual ordering technique. Conceptual ordering is the organization of data into categories based on the properties and description of the information (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which ultimately was used

to develop key themes. These themes became our conclusions with regard to respondents' comments.

## Results

We disaggregate the results into three sections. First, we examined respondents' knowledge of and access to the Nebraska sex offender registry. Second, we examined respondents' perceptions of safety, both personal and familial, resulting from accessing the registry. Finally, we examined whether respondents took any preventative measures after they accessed the registry.

We begin each section by presenting the overall results for our main research questions (see Table 2), which is merely presenting the frequencies for each category for each question. We then present any significant findings from chi-squared tests, which determined whether there was an association between the demographic characteristics of the survey respondents and their answers to questions about the sex offender registry. We do not report these results in a single table, however. Rather, we discuss the demographic data frequency distributions for each question followed by individualized discussions of statistically significant (i.e.,  $p < .05$ ) chi-squared tests where appropriate. Table 3 presents a summary of the significant and non-significant findings for all six questions asked of the survey respondents.

### Awareness and Access of Registry Information

The overwhelming majority of Nebraska respondents were aware that a sex offender registry existed in their state (89.8%). Results of the chi-squared tests showed an association between being aware of the registry and gender ( $\chi^2 = 9.494$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .009$ ), age ( $\chi^2 = 70.377$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p = .000$ ), marital status ( $\chi^2 = 52.241$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p = .000$ ), education ( $\chi^2 = 89.487$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p = .000$ ), children ( $\chi^2 = 13.802$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .001$ ), income ( $\chi^2 = 39.675$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .000$ ), and race ( $\chi^2 = 105.23$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

Specifically, men were more likely to be unsure if there were a registry (10.8%) compared to women (7.6%) or to say there was no sex offender registry in Nebraska (1.5% to .6%). The respondents with children were more likely to say yes (92.6%) compared to those with no children in the home (87.6%), although those with no children were more likely to say they were unsure (11.5% to 6.4%). Respondents whose race was Caucasian only were less likely to answer that there was not a registry (.4%) or to be unsure (7.8%) than respondents who were not Caucasian only (6.6% and 21.9%, respectively). Almost 92% of White respondents were aware that there was a sex offender registry in Nebraska, compared with 71.6% in the Other racial/ethnic category.

There was a sizable difference with respect to income and knowledge of the registry, as almost 93% of those making \$20,000 or more reported being aware of the registry, compared to only about 79% of those making less than \$20,000.

**Table 2**  
**Awareness, Feeling, and Action Resulting From Notification**

Dependent Variable	Yes	No	Unsure	Valid <i>N</i>
Aware of registry	1,609 (89.8%)	18 (1.0%)	164 (9.2%)	1,791
Accessed registry	558 (34.8%)	1,046 (65.2%)		1,605
Feel family is safer	478 (87.6%)	68 (12.4%)		546
Personally feel safer	484 (88.0%)	66 (12.0%)		551
Taken preventative action	209 (37.6%)	346 (62.4%)		555
	1	2 to 5	5 or More	
Times accessed the registry	119 (21.3%)	278 (49.8%)	161 (28.9%)	558

**Table 3**  
**Summary of Findings**

	State of Nebraska Sex Offender Registry Questions					
	Know of Registry	Access Registry	Times Accessed	Will Keep Family Safe	You Feel Safer	Action Taken
Gender (female = 1)	**	**	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	*
Age (4 categories)	**	**	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	**	<i>ns</i>
Marital status (4 categories)	**	**	*	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Children (yes = 1)	**	**	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	**	**
Education (4 categories)	**	**	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Income (\$20,000 or more = 1)	**	**	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
Race (Caucasian only = 1)	**	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>
City or town (yes = 1)	<i>ns</i>	**	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>

Note: Significance values are based on chi-squared tests. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Additionally, more than 20% of those making less than \$20,000 reported being unsure whether there was a sex offender registry, whereas less than 7% of those making \$20,000 or more reported being unsure.

An examination of the association between age and registry awareness showed considerable variation between the age categories. For example, just about 79% of respondents between the ages of 19 and 24 reported knowing the registry existed, whereas another 19% were unsure and 2.4% said no. This compares with more than 93% of respondents between both the ages of 25 and 44 and the ages of 45 to 64 who knew of the registry. Similarly, of those aged 65 and older, about 82% knew of the registry but almost 17% of this age group reported being unsure (compared to 5.3% of 25 to 44-year-olds and 6.4% of 45- to 64-year-olds who reported being unsure).

The association between marital status and awareness of the registry also varied by the marital category examined. About 92% of respondents who were either currently

married or had been married in the past but were separated or divorced said they were aware there was a registry in Nebraska. These percentages compare with about 80% of widowed respondents and 82% of never-married respondents who reported being aware of the registry. Similarly, 15% of the never-married respondents and more than 16% of widowed respondents reported being unsure as to whether there was a registry, although only about 7% of married respondents and 8% of divorced or separated respondents said they were unsure. Finally, the never-married and widowed were more likely to say that the registry did not exist compared with the married and divorced or separated groups (3.3% and 3.1% compared to .4% and 0%, respectively).

With regard to education, results indicated that as education increased, awareness of the registry increased and uncertainty of the registry decreased. For example, 6.3% of respondents with less than a high school degree said there was no registry, just more than 25% said they were unsure, and 68.4% said there was a sex offender registry in Nebraska. These numbers compare to 1.1%, 15.5%, and 83.5% for those with a high school degree only; .7%, 5.9%, and 93.4% for those with some college or a college degree; and .7% who said no, 5.1% who were unsure, and 94.2% who said yes that had 1 to 6 years of graduate education. It is clear that having at least some college is associated with having knowledge of the sex offender registry.

Despite the widespread awareness of the registry, only a little more than one third (34.8%) of respondents had accessed this information. The majority of the respondents accessing sex offender information were women ( $\chi^2 = 35.431, df = 1, p = .000$ ), had children in the home ( $\chi^2 = 81.815, df = 1, p = .000$ ), had a family income of \$20,000 or more ( $\chi^2 = 7.220, df = 1, p = .007$ ), and lived in a city or town ( $\chi^2 = 19.962, df = 1, p = .000$ ). Additionally, an association was found between accessing the registry and age ( $\chi^2 = 136.251, df = 3, p = .000$ ), marital status ( $\chi^2 = 13.745, df = 3, p = .003$ ), and education ( $\chi^2 = 30.049, df = 3, p = .000$ ).

Specifically, almost 42% of females reported accessing the State of Nebraska sex offender registry, whereas only about 27% of males reported actually accessing the registry. Similarly, about 46% of respondents with children in the home said they had accessed the registry, whereas only about 25% of those without children said they had accessed the registry. Those with a higher income were also more likely to check the registry (36.1%) than those who made less than \$20,000 a year (24.6%), and respondents who lived in a city or town were more likely to have checked the registry than respondents who lived on a farm or in the open country (37.6% to 24.6%).

In terms of the association between age and checking the registry, the highest percentage was for the age group of 25 to 44, with 50.3% of this age category saying they had checked the registry. This compares with about 32% of 19- to 24-year-olds who checked the registry, 29.1% of 45- to 64-year-olds, and only 10.9% of those aged 65 and older. In terms of marital status, the results showed that comparable percentages of those never-married, married, or divorced and separated respondents had checked the registry (34.7%, 36%, and 35.9%, respectively), whereas considerably fewer widowed respondents reported accessing the sex offender registry (15.4%).

Finally, the association between checking the registry and education was similar to the findings for awareness of the registry. In particular, only 17% of those with a high school degree reported checking the registry and about 25% of respondents with only a high school degree said they had checked. These percentages compare to about 39% of respondents with some college or a college degree and 38.8% of those with 1 to 6 years of graduate education that reported checking the registry.

Most of these people (78.7%) who had accessed registry information had done so more than once, with about half of the respondents who did access the registry reporting doing so between two and five times (49.8%) and another 28.9% checking it five or more times. The only demographic variable significantly associated with the number of times a respondent reported checking the registry was the respondent's marital status ( $\chi^2 = 13.396$ ,  $df = 6$ ,  $p = .037$ ). Married respondents were more likely to have checked the registry across all response categories (about 20% checked it once, about 51% checked it two to five times, and 29% checked it five or more times), whereas those respondents who reported being separated, divorced, or married living separately were disproportionately likely to have reported checking the registry five or more times (44%, with 32% checking between two to five times and 24% checking once). About 25% of respondents that had never been married said they checked it once, more than 55% said they checked it two to five times, with not quite 20% saying they checked it five or more times. For widowed respondents, 30% reported checking the registry once, 60% had checked it two to five times, and only 10% of this group reported checking the sex offender registry five or more times.

When respondents noted reasons for being aware of or accessing the registry, the majority noted they had read this information in the newspaper (15 of 22 people). Some specifically stated that they had not accessed this information online.<sup>6</sup> To this end, it appears that the media may provide a more effective venue for community notification than the computer.

Approximately 65% of respondents stated that they had not accessed sex offender registry. Few respondents offered reasons for why they had not personally accessed the information. When respondents did comment on reasons for not checking the registry, people suggested that it was friends', neighbors', family members', or schools' responsibility to inform them of sex offender information. Respondent 18 noted, "[Notification is] done through school." Others explained, "sister-in-law accesses the information" (Respondent 10), "my wife has" (Respondent 7), or "[my neighbor], she's a teacher and she gets the neighborhood registry" (Respondent 22). Still others noted that "friends have" (Respondent 2), and "my daughter has because she has a son" (Respondent 16). These findings suggest that notification of sex offender information is a rather passive endeavor, with people learning of information in a secondhand manner. They also suggest that citizens may not take the responsibility for learning about sex offender information personally, and see this as a duty better left to others.

Even when respondents do access registry information, it seems that this access is more related to employment needs or requirements than personal interest and

safety. Respondent 15 noted, “[Work] in a licensed day care, automatically on an alert list.” Respondent 12 explained, “[Access] due to her job, I work with mentally handicapped, so it helps to make them aware to protect themselves.” Respondent 7 explains that he or she had not accessed the registry at home, “but at business and school.” Landlords, such as Respondent 13, also noted they “look at it because they have tenants.” In sum, it appears that accessing registry information has become more of a professional responsibility than a personal one.

### Perceptions of Safety Resulting From Registry Information

Only a total of 551 people of 1,821 (30.2%) responded to questions regarding their perceptions of personal safety as a result of sex offender information due to the fact that only 34% had accessed registry information and the skip pattern of the survey. Of these respondents, approximately 88% reported feeling safer after learning the whereabouts of convicted sex offenders.

The only demographic variables related to whether the respondent felt personally safer knowing the information were children in the home ( $\chi^2 = 7.965$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .005$ ) and age ( $\chi^2 = 20.874$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Ninety-one percent of respondents with children in the home reported feeling personally safer with the information provided by the sex offender registry compared to about 83% of respondents with no children who reported feeling safer.

The association between age and feeling personally safer after retrieving the sex offender information was somewhat interesting. In particular, 100% of respondents between the ages of 19 and 24 reported feeling safer after checking the registry. This compares with about 89% of those aged 25 to 44, 85% of those 45 to 64, and about 67% of those aged 65 and older that reported feeling personally safer. Those older than the age of 65 appear to be the most skeptical group in terms of translating the sex offender information into a feeling of personal safety, whereas those aged 19 to 24 could be considered the least skeptical, as they feel considerably safer as an age group when accessing the sex offender information. Both of these findings are interesting in light of the evidence presented earlier that these are the very groups least likely to have known about or checked the registry in the first place. It seems that when they do check it, the young people feel safer while the older respondents have more mixed views.

The findings that respondents generally felt personally safer may be overstated, however. When further comments were offered by respondents, most qualified their response by stating that registry information made them feel only *somewhat* or *a little* safer. Furthermore, some citizens “question the accuracy” (Respondent 4) and quantity of information about sex offenders. Respondent 8 noted, “Would like it [information] to be more specific as to what kind of sex offender they are, whether adult or child.” Respondent 17 explained, “You can only see Level 3 offenders in Nebraska and would like to see all levels.” Despite concerns regarding the quality and quantity of information, some respondents explained that the information “will

make you more aware, which makes you safer” (Respondent 20). To this end, some citizens appear to have derived a casual model for public safety with regard to sex offenders in which registry information makes them more aware, and awareness translates to some enhanced level of perceived public safety.

In addition to feeling personally safer after learning sex offender information, the majority of respondents (87.6%) also felt that the registry would help keep their families safe as well. There were no significant differences across the demographic variables in terms of whether the respondent believed the information would help keep them and their family safe. Respondents’ comments suggest that this information may only “somewhat” (Respondent 8) or “to a certain extent” (Respondent 21) make their families safer, or the information “could increase safety” (Respondent 13). One respondent concludes, “[The information does] not necessarily make your family safer, it will just make them more aware.” Moreover, the accuracy of information was again in question. As one respondent stated, “It should [make families safer], if they register and are where they are suppose to be.” On the other hand, another respondent noted that “only when they’re behind bars” will families be safer.

### **Preventative Measures Resulting From Registry Information**

A little more than one third of respondents answered *yes* when asked if they had taken any preventative measures as a result of sex offender registry information. The chi-squared tests revealed a significant association between taking preventative action and both gender ( $\chi^2 = 4.007$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .045$ ) and having children ( $\chi^2 = 6.337$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = .012$ ). Approximately 41% of females said they had taken preventative measures, whereas only about 32% of males reported taking preventative action. Similarly, about 42% of those with children reported taking preventative action, whereas 31% of those with no children in the home reporting taking action.

Respondents’ comments suggest that the most common action taken by citizens if they obtain sex offender information may be to “spread the word” (Respondent 12). Respondent 3 stated, “I talked to my kids,” and Respondent 15 mentioned, “I told my daughters.” Beyond sharing the information with children, Respondent 20 explained, “I forwarded the information [to friends].” Respondent 21 stated, “I used to look it up for children and send it to their parents.” Additionally, two respondents explained that they inform tenants and/or renters about the presence of a sex offender on their properties.

Although sharing sex offender information was a common response to receiving it, the respondents took other actions as well. Respondent 14 reported “locking the door when I’m home alone.” Respondent 12 explained, “I’m a little more cautious.” Still another respondent, Respondent 4, stated that upon learning the whereabouts of sex offenders, “I had to evict one from my apartments. They’re there and children are there.”

Surprisingly, 62% of the respondents who answered this question reported that they had not taken any preventative measures. It is difficult to shed further light on

why people do not take action because respondents offered no qualitative comments in this regard. Perhaps the enhanced feelings of safety reported by the majority of respondents precluded any further action.

## Conclusion

Despite federal legislation mandating public access to sex offender registries, it seems that the majority of people in Nebraska do not proactively seek sex offender information using the Internet-based sex offender registry. A lack of awareness of the registry cannot explain this finding, as most people reported being aware of the availability of sex offender information. When the public accesses this information, however, it appears to make people feel safer themselves and for their families, yet most do not take any preventative measures to ensure these perceptions of safety. Respondents' comments did not suggest any situational crime prevention techniques taken on behalf of themselves or their families, such as installing home security systems, enhancing locking devices, installing security cameras, or more actively monitoring public spaces where children dwell. This is surprising given the concern and attention that sex crimes against children invoke; however, it is likely that people do not live in a constant state of moral panic.<sup>7</sup> These findings suggest several implications for not only community notification procedures but also for the resulting legislation of moral panics more generally.

## Implications for Notification Laws

To the degree that community notification laws were intended to make people feel safer, the provision of reporting sex offender information to the public may have achieved this goal. If the laws were intended to have appreciable effects on actual public safety, however, it seems likely that these laws will fall short of that goal. It will be difficult for notification to inform the public of sex offenders' whereabouts and thereby increase the informal surveillance of offenders if only about one third of the population accesses this information. Moreover, only about one third of people armed with sex offender information take any preventative measures, so it is likely that even if more people access this information, few will act on it. Although the optimum percentage of the public that should access registry information or take protective measures as a result remains unknown, it seems likely that legislators intended community notification to be a broad-based policy intended to aid as many citizens possible. To this end, it is likely that more than one third of the population was the target of this legislation. If greater enhancements to public safety, particularly for children, are going to be observed, it seems some adjustments are needed to community notification procedures.

Although the public appears aware of the sex offender registry, few reported accessing this information using the Internet. Because people are deriving information about

sex offenders through the media, states would be wise to advertise registry websites in media outlets to increase the access to this information. Public service announcements may go a far way to publicizing the ease with which citizens can access sex offender information online. Simply providing sex offender information to the public may not be enough, however.

Few people took any preventative action based on the sex offender information they had learned. It is possible that people believe that simply accessing sex offender information is a protective action in and of itself. It may be more likely, however, that citizens do not take preventative measures after learning of sex offenders' whereabouts simply because they do not know what actions to take. Campaigns could be conducted by law enforcement agencies to inform the public what preventative measures may be taken as a result of sex offender information. It would be prudent to include prevention information on sex offender registry websites, in news releases of registry information, and at community meetings about sex offenders' presence (Evans, 2007). To the degree to which notification laws were intended to enhance public safety through private actions, media campaigns and more prevention information appears imperative to accomplish this goal. This is not to say, however, that this information will automatically spur the public into preventative action. Given the results of this research, it is possible that these efforts will have little effect on community action plans or parents' protective measures toward their children.

In order for people to devise prevention strategies, they need accurate information about offenders and trends in offending. Citizens need to be reassured that the information in sex offender registry is accurate and up-to-date. Law enforcement agencies should inform the public as to their verification procedures. If citizens were aware of the ways in which law enforcement agents monitor the movements of sex offenders, they may have more confidence in the information included in registration listings. More important, prevention strategies should be founded on empirical information about sex offenders' patterns of behavior.

Media accounts of children sexually assaulted and killed by strangers who were repeat sex offenders leave the public with the impression that they have more to fear from strangers than from people known to them (Sample, 2006; Sample & Kadleck, 2008). Empirical evidence, however, suggests that most sexual assaults are committed by persons known to their victims (Sample, 2001; Snyder, 2000), that few sex offenders kill their victims (Francis & Soothill, 2000; Sample, 2006), and that the vast majority of sexual assaults reported to police occurred in a residence and not in a public park or school zone (Snyder, 2000). To that end, campaigns to inform the public about prevention strategies should include discussions about techniques by which to recognize signs of victimization in the home.

### **Implications for Legislation Resulting From Moral Panics**

Scholars have documented moral panics about crime-related problems for decades (Ben-Yehuda, 1990; S. Cohen, 1972; Loseke, 1989; Sutherland, 1950). Regardless of

crime type, a process seems to occur by which public fear is aroused by initial isolated incidents of deviance or crime. Many people, with varying degrees of power, prestige, and credibility, then offer their interpretations and definitions of the behavior (Becker, 1963; Ben-Yehuda, 1990; S. Cohen, 1972). These “moral entrepreneurs” often use the media to manipulate political and moral symbols to mobilize support for their specific definitions and gain control over public opinion (Ben-Yehuda, 1990). Once public support for specific definitions has been generated, solutions for the problem are offered that are congruent with the popular definitions (Conrad & Schneider, 1980), and these solutions almost always result in the passage of law. To this end, moral panics, by their very nature, imply that some action must be taken to address problem behavior, and the passage of legislation appears to be the answer.

Many argue that much of the sex offender legislation we have today is a result of this moral panic process (Gavin, 2005; Hinds & Daly, 2000; Jenkins, 1998). As with other moral panic legislation, notification laws were intended, at least in part, to demonstrate a willingness by public officials to address citizens’ concerns and ease public fear (Sample & Kadleck, 2008). Our results suggest that the passage of notification laws as a result of a moral panic appears to have accomplished these goals. Unlike panics for other crimes, such as drug abuse, domestic violence, or stalking, however, the simple enactment of legislation was not the only action intended to address the sex offender problem. Community notification requires action from citizens as well. These laws require that private citizens take some personal responsibility for addressing problem behavior, as they require proactively accessing information and subsequently acting on it. With this in mind, it seems that sex offender legislation broke new ground in the way in which we view the results of moral panics.

The notion that the public fear and concern about sex offending could be abated by simply passing legislation was negated once notification laws were enacted requiring the proactive involvement of citizens. By its extension, notification law implies some action beyond the enactment of legislation, which has not been implied by the legislation resulting from moral panics for other criminal behaviors. Laws enacted to address the crack cocaine problem in the 1980s, the gang problem in the 1990s, or the stalking/domestic violence problem in the 1990s increased penalties for offenders, enhanced prosecutions for crimes, or allowed greater apprehension of offender by law enforcement. Few moral panic laws have placed some of the responsibility for a problem’s abatement on private citizens. Community notification laws, however, suggest that the public is somewhat responsible for ensuring their own safety. To this end, we seem to be witnessing a new era of moral panic legislation, one in which citizens are called upon to act.

It is possible that the intention of moral panic legislation is simply to affect people’s attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of the problem to be addressed, but it is equally likely that these laws are intended to create changes in behavior. For instance, the increased penalties for crack cocaine dealers, as a result of laws passed in the 1980s, were undoubtedly intended to reduce the number of substance abusers

and the violence associated with the crack cocaine trade (Gaines & Kraska, 2003). In most cases, however, the behavior to be changed is that of criminal offenders. Notification laws take this one step further by hoping to change the behavior of citizens as well. They encourage the development of prevention strategies by the public to better guard against sexual victimization. Citizens, however, do not appear to be embracing this new responsibility. To this end, the legislation resulting from the sex offender panic may affect people's attitudes and opinions about the problem but has little appreciable effect on behavior, that of either offenders or citizens.

Therefore, not only are scholars skeptical in notifications laws' ability to influence sex offenders' behavior (Adkins et al., 2000; Avrahamian, 1998; Petrosino & Petrosino, 1999; Schram & Milloy, 1995; Tewksbury, 2002; Walker et al., 2005; Zevitz, 2006; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000b), but our study suggests that the laws may do little to affect the behavior of citizens. The implications for moral panic legislation are then dismal with respect to stimulating changes in the behavior of criminals or law-abiding citizens. Perhaps we should see these laws as nothing more than attempts to ease public fear and be more realistic in terms of their ability to appreciably affect the problem. Our evaluations of legislation's effectiveness would then focus less on the way in which it affects behaviors and more on the way in which laws make people feel.

## **Limitations**

As with all survey research, participation in this study was voluntary. To this end, despite our efforts at randomization and the weighting of data, participants' views may vary significantly from those who chose not to participate. The extent to which this selection bias affects our results remains unknown and this should be kept in mind when reviewing our research findings.

Another caveat concerns the degree to which our results can be generalized beyond Nebraska to residents in other states. Although the PROTECT Act of 2003 mandates all states to create Internet websites, there is variability across the states concerning the types of offenders included in sex offender registries and the type of information included about offenders (Sample & Bray, 2003). Nebraska includes only sex offenders assessed as high risk for reoffending on their website, whereas other states (e.g., Illinois) include all convicted offenders in their notification procedures, regardless of assessed risk. Some states include photographs of offenders and the exact crime for which offenders were convicted, and others do not. To the degree that registries and notification procedures vary across states, it is unlikely that the findings from Nebraska citizens can be generalized to all citizens at large. This study is exploratory in nature, however, and therefore was not intended to be representative of residents in other states. Our purpose was simply to explore the degree to which the public accesses registry information and the results thereof, thereby providing a baseline for other researchers.

## Future Directions

Despite methodological limitations and the small sample size for qualitative remarks, this study suggests that notification laws may have difficulty achieving their goals. Although the laws appear effective at informing people of the existence of sex offender registries, and people report feeling safer as a result of these laws, actual increases in public safety may not be achieved. Few people access registry information and even fewer take preventative action based on the information they receive. To the degree that notification laws' public safety goals rely on the proactive involvement of citizens, this study suggests that no real appreciable effects may be observed.

Future studies should more thoroughly investigate why citizens are not accessing sex offender information or taking action on such. Qualitative investigations, employing focus groups or open-ended questions, could advance our state of knowledge in this regard. Given that the PROTECT Act establishes Internet access to all states' sex offender registries, perhaps a national survey of citizens is in order, rather than simply surveying the public state by state. It would appear prudent to determine the access of sex offender information nationwide to better assess notification's effectiveness. It also seems necessary for scholars to work with state law enforcement agencies to better help them find ways to inform the public about sex offender information.

Other sex offender laws also need evaluated in terms of their effectiveness at addressing public fear and changing people's behaviors. For instance, has the passage of civil commitment legislation for sex offenders also made people feel safer, as well as the passage of residency restrictions and electronic monitoring provisions? Given that many sex offender laws were passed within a short period of time, is it possible that community notification laws themselves make people feel safer, or is this finding confounded by the passage of other legislation during this same period? More important, have residency restrictions and electronic monitoring of sex offenders produced changes in their behaviors, and are citizens' behaviors affected by the passage of these laws? The plethora of sex offender legislation passed in recent decades provides researchers with a wealth of questions that need to be examined.

It may also be time to investigate the outcomes of other moral panic legislation passed. Did the enhancements of federal prison terms for drug users and dealers make people feel safer, as sex offender legislation has seemed to accomplish? Have stalking and domestic violence laws made women safer, or at least engendered this perception? As scholars, we often review the impetus and process by which laws are passed, yet seldom are we able to survey citizens to determine if they are aware of these laws, or how the passage of these laws make them feel. We also seldom assess the effects these laws have on the behavior of people, particularly law-abiding citizens.

Community notification laws are simply another example of the way in which public fear and panic can result in legislation. Given that most people in Nebraska have not accessed sex offender information or acted on this information, it seems

that just the passage of law can address people's fears and concerns. This may do little, however, to address the problem of sexual victimization for which the law was intended. The confluence of the passage of law, people's feelings after law is passed, citizens' impressions of the law's effectiveness, and empirical evidence of actual effects on behavior is fertile ground for investigation, and one often overlooked.

## Appendix

### State of Nebraska Sex Offender Registry Survey Questions

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**Q:SOR1**

Is there a sex offender registry in the State of Nebraska?

Would you say . . .

1 Yes

5 No

7 Or you are unsure

if (SOR1 > 1) END

**Q:SOR2**

Have you ever accessed the State of Nebraska's sex offender registry?

1 Yes

5 No

if (SOR2 > 1) END

**Q:SOR3**

How many times have you accessed the State of Nebraska's sex offender registry?

Would you say . . .

1 Never

2 Once

3 Two to five times

4 Five or more times

If (SOR3 = 1) skip to END; if (SOR3 > 4) skip to END

**Q:SOR4**

Have you taken any preventative measures as a result of the information?

1 Yes

5 No

**Q:SOR5**

Do you think this information will help keep you and your family safe?

1 Yes

5 No

**Q:SOR6**

Do you feel safer knowing this information?

1 Yes

5 No

## Notes

1. The Nebraska Sex Offender Registry can be found at <http://www.nsp.state.ne.us/sor/>.
2. We chose this measurement of income as results using two more refined income variables, one with six categories and the other with three, did not reveal significantly different results.
3. The original responses allowed respondents to answer *never* to the number of times they checked the registry. Ten respondents answered *yes* when asked if they had checked the registry and answered *never* when asked the number of times they checked it. These 10 respondents' data were recoded to *no* for whether they had checked the registry and then were set to missing for the number of times following the skip pattern.
4. The appendix presents the original survey question, coding, and skip pattern for each of the dependent variables.
5. Our goal is not to predict who is more likely to retrieve sex offender information, but rather simply to determine if people do, and what preventative measures they may take as a result. To this end, the following analyses are presented to provide a context for the degree to which people access registry information and not to determine if the notification law is targeting the intended population.
6. Twenty-eight open-ended responses indicated that the respondent received the information through other media sources (e.g., newspaper). Thirteen of these responses indicated that the other media source was the sole source for the sex offender registry information obtained by the respondent.
7. We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

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