



Who are the people in your neighborhood? A descriptive analysis of individuals on public sex offender registries

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing focus on registration and notification systems as central elements of national sex offender management practice, there has been remarkably little systematic analysis of the content of these registries and the diversity of individuals contained within them. Specifically, little research attention has been paid to examining the heterogeneity of the population of registered sex offenders — a circumstance that may obscure important distinctions within the population and, in turn, may undermine the ostensible purpose of SORN to prevent sexual victimization. Addressing this significant gap in our current knowledge, this article sets forth a national profile of the registered sex offender (RSO) population, drawn from an analysis of data on 445,127 RSOs obtained from the public registries of 49 states, Washington, DC, Puerto Rico and Guam. In contrast with the homogenized perception about registered sex offenders that permeates much public discourse, the analysis illuminates the wide diversity of registrants across a range of demographic, offense-related, registry status, and risk-oriented variables. Policy and practice implications concerning risk, prevention, and the public safety utility of sex offender registries are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, amidst public demand for expanded social control over those who have committed sexual crimes, sex offender registration and notification (SORN) policies have emerged as prominent and ubiquitous elements of the nation's public safety infrastructure. While laws requiring sexual criminals and others to register with law enforcement date back to the 1940s, contemporary SORN policies gained traction in the early 1990s as several states passed legislation calling for expanding the use of registration and asserting the public's right to access certain information about sex offenders (Logan, 2009).

In 1994, the U.S. Congress passed the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children Act (Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children & Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act, 1994), requiring that all states develop systems of tracking convicted sex offenders in the

community. Over the ensuing decade, the scope of this general mandate was broadened significantly through a sequence of amendments including Megan's Law in 1996 which required states to make certain registration data publicly available. In 2006, federal involvement in SORN-related issues reached a new level with the passage of the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act (Adam Walsh Sex Offender Registration & Notification Act, 2006), which repealed the Wetterling provisions and replaced them with a new and significantly more prescriptive set of requirements. Partly in response to federal actions, SORN systems now operate in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories, with jurisdictions reporting over 700,000 individuals contained in their registries (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2010).

Despite large numbers of registrants and growing focus on registration and notification systems as central elements of national sex offender management practice, there has been remarkably little systematic analysis of the content of these registries and the diversity of individuals contained within them. More specifically, little research attention has been paid to examining the heterogeneity of the population of registered sex offenders — a phenomenon that may obscure important distinctions within the population and, in turn, may undermine the ostensible purpose of SORN to prevent sexual victimization.

Addressing this significant gap in our current knowledge, this article describes the results of an effort to set forth a national profile of

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the registered sex offender population, drawing from data obtained directly from state registries. In contrast with the homogenized perception about registered sex offenders that permeates public discourse, the analysis illuminates the wide diversity of registrants across a range of demographic, criminal history, registry status, and risk-oriented variables. Following a report of the study results, our discussion examines the challenges faced in the analyses of these data and explores what these challenges might tell us about the utility of the information contained in the nation's registry systems. We also examine the policy and practice implications of the study's findings as they relate to risk, prevention, and the public safety utility of sex offender registries.

1.1. Legislative background

Over the past two decades, protecting communities from repeat sexual offenders has emerged as a prominent concern for U.S. lawmakers. In efforts to expand social controls over known sex offenders and to reduce reoffending, a range of federal, state, and local laws has been implemented across the United States. These provisions include the expansion of mandatory minimum sentences, post-release tracking and monitoring, restrictions on where sex offenders can live, work, and congregate, and laws providing for post-incarceration civil commitment of those designated as sexual predators. While the relative emphasis of these diverse strategies has varied from state to state, the practice of sex offender registration and notification (SORN) has evolved as a universal element of state-based sex offender management policies. Under SORN, individuals convicted, or in some cases adjudicated delinquent, of designated sexual crimes are required to register their whereabouts with law enforcement authorities and to regularly verify that information. Further, state laws provide that registration information be made available on public internet sites, allowing citizens an easily accessible mechanism to check for the presence of sexual offenders in their neighborhoods.

The initial federal guidelines related to The Wetterling Act and Megan's Law granted a fair degree of latitude to the states in implementing registration and notification laws. For instance, states could determine procedures for assessing risk, categorizing offenders, choosing which sex offenders would be subject to the release of information, and disseminating registry information to concerned citizens. The resulting variation among states – along with expanded federal focus on developing a national public sex offender registry – led to the 2006 passage of the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act (AWA), which sought to establish uniform national standards. Among its provisions, the AWA set forth an offense-based categorization system. The AWA required all registered sex offenders to be listed on public state and national registry websites, expanded the scope of sex offenders who must register (including mandated inclusion of certain juveniles adjudicated delinquent for specified sexual offenses), dictated specific requirements for duration of registration and frequency of reporting, and required the retroactive registration of certain classes of offenders (*Adam Walsh Sex Offender Registration & Notification Act, 2006*).

The AWA's unprecedented assertion of federal authority over state-based SORN systems prompted a good measure of concern among states, particularly those that had invested considerably in developing systems that contravened the new federal mandates. Prominent among these concerns was the contention that the federally-mandated systems of classification failed to adequately distinguish between registered offenders who present significant threats to public safety and those who present less of a risk (*Freeman & Sandler, 2009; Harris & Lobanov-Rostovsky, 2010*). Indeed, research has suggested a potential "net widening" effect of implementing the AWA-mandated classification system, which places a significant majority of registrants into the highest category of offenders, contradicting evidence suggesting that the highest risk of sexual re-offense

is concentrated among a much smaller group of offenders (*Harris et al., 2010*).

1.2. Policy and practice context of present study

In the context of the above-referenced issues, and with the nation's SORN systems reportedly encompassing nearly three quarters of a million individuals (*National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2010*), understanding the characteristics of those on the registries surfaces as a vital component in the policy picture. Notably, the types of cases that have typically given rise to more stringent SORN policies – stereotypical stranger abductions of children – are statistically improbable events that occur approximately 115 times per year (*Finkelhor et al., 2002*). Sexual assaults by strangers represent a relatively small proportion of sexual offenses in the United States (*Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000, 2008*), and in turn a relatively small proportion of individuals contained on registries (*Letourneau et al., 2010; Levenson et al., 2010; Zgoba et al., 2009a; Zgoba et al., 2009b*). Moreover, a significant body of research suggests that convicted sexual offenders – even those convicted of seemingly comparable criminal charges – should be considered a heterogeneous group displaying a wide range of motivations, psychological characteristics, victim preferences, treatment needs, and risk of re-offense (*Andrews & Bonta, 2007; Hanson et al., 2009; LaFond, 2005; Levenson & D'Amora, 2007; Levenson & Prescott, 2007; Marshall et al., 1999; Ward et al., 2004*). Accordingly, amidst the ongoing policy debates over the future of the nation's sex offender registration and notification laws, it becomes imperative that we gain a greater understanding of exactly who are on the registries.

1.3. What is known about the registered sex offender (RSO) population?

To date, limited research has been done to shed light on the characteristics of registered sex offenders, such as their demographics, the types of offenses they have committed, their victim preferences, and the risk they may pose for future criminal behavior. Such analyses have been complicated by the decentralized nature of publicly available registry data and the general lack of availability of these data to researchers. Although federally mandated, states maintain their own registries, and despite the recent creation of a national sex offender registry, no national database exists by which researchers can draw data from multiple states. Therefore, the few studies that have included descriptive data of samples from registered sex offenders have been conducted in individual states, and there is no standardization or uniformity to the types of characteristics that have been described in various studies.

In New York, a sample of 17,165 registered sex offenders (*Freeman & Sandler, 2009*) revealed that about 64% were white, the mean age was thirty three years old, 80% were under parole or probation supervision, and only 4.7% lived in rural counties (as opposed to midsize or urban counties). They found that 34% were assessed to be low risk level one offenders, 38% were listed as level two, and 25% were assessed as high risk level three offenders. The mean number of prior violent felony arrests was less than two, as was the number of prior sex offenses. 83% had female victims only, and 1.5% had victims of both genders. In about 38% of the cases, the victims were age twelve or under, 33% had teen victims, and about 14% had adult victims only. The mean number of victims was slightly above one. The registered sex offenders were rearrested for a new sex crime at a rate of 7% over five years (*Freeman & Sandler, 2009*).

In an Iowa study involving 233 individuals who were placed on the Sex Offender Registry in 1995 and 1996, 97% were male, 87% were white, and the median age when placed on the registry was thirty four years old (*Adkins et al., 2000*). About 25% had prior sex crime arrests and 33% had an arrest for a prior non-sexual crime; 3% were reconvicted for a recidivistic sexual offense.

Of the 6044 active cases on Oklahoma's registry (those dwelling in the community) in 2009, 96% were male, and 77% were white (Harris et al., 2010). An additional 1085 were listed as incarcerated, 2145 were residing out of state, and 913 had successfully completed their registration period. Regarding age, 13% were in their twenties, 25% in their thirties, 29% in their forties and 33% were age fifty or older. When considering risk, 66% were determined to be non-habitual, non-aggravated offenders, while 34% were rated as aggravated or habitual. In Ohio, of the 24,994 adult sex offenders, 76% were considered low risk "sexually oriented offenders," and 20% were considered to be "sexual predators" (Harris et al., 2010).

A study of 2970 registered sex offenders in South Carolina revealed that 98% were male, 60% were white, and the mean age at initial registration was thirty seven (Levenson et al., 2010). About 21% of the sample had a prior sex offense conviction. Victim characteristics were available in a minority of cases; most of the cases involved female victims (89%) and minors (85%). The sexual re-arrest rate was 8.9% (Levenson et al., 2010). South Carolina does not classify risk and all registered sex offenders are listed on the state's publicly accessible website.

These various profiles of registered populations suggest variability across states, both in terms of the offenders themselves and the systems employed to categorize them. The purpose of this exploratory study is to analyze the characteristics of the sex offender population in the United States, utilizing a nationwide database compiled directly from state internet registries. By generating descriptive data about their characteristics, demographics, victim preferences, offense characteristics, and risk distribution, we hope to contribute to the literature by providing a better understanding of the composition of sex offender registries. Furthermore, where possible, we will draw some conclusions about how registry information might best be synthesized and interpreted by the public. Finally, implications for policy, criminal justice practice, and mental health treatment will be discussed.

2. Methodology

The dataset used in this study was compiled between January 2010 and July 2010 from public sex offender registries maintained by U.S. states, Puerto Rico, the District of Columbia, and Guam. The majority of the data were gathered via an automated "data scraping" process in which a computer program scrolled through each state registry and extracted offender-level and offense-level information from each case. Scraping programs can be utilized for many types of data extraction. For this purpose, a program was created for each state. The program takes a copy of each offender entry and copies the data into a previously specified format. Data from six jurisdictions – Florida, Texas, Georgia, Illinois, North Carolina, and Arizona – were collected via comprehensive database files provided directly from the state registries. Additionally, data from the District of Columbia were gathered and coded through manual review of individual-level registrant records, as the setup of the District of Columbia registry makes it impossible to automate a download.

It should be noted that only a subset of states provides public access data files that reflect all RSOs. The six aforementioned states provided comprehensive databases and were chosen for use over "scraped" data because all relevant variables were included. While some other states provided a publicly accessible file, the omission of certain key data precluded the use of these files for the current analysis. For instance, Missouri provides an Excel document listing all registered sex offenders, but the file only accounts for name, address, offense, number of counts and compliance. South Carolina includes a "report generator" which allows the individual to run reports based on specific variables, but does not provide for offense level data.

Upon extraction from the registries, data were mapped to a universal set of variable fields, and merged into an Access database

containing two major tables – the first containing registrant-level data (e.g. personal identifiers, dates of birth, offender characteristics, addresses, and registry status designations), and the second containing offense-level data (e.g. offense descriptions and codes, conviction dates, victim age and gender information). Records in the consolidated registrant table were each assigned a unique identifier, which was subsequently linked to registrants' respective offense records.

The initial data collection produced 498,536 registrant records. Of these, 53,409 records were eliminated from the analysis: all 36,774 cases extracted from the Michigan registry were excluded due to significant missing data, an additional 13,515 cases were eliminated as duplicate records within state databases,³ and 3120 were excluded based on no indications of sexual offending history.⁴ The resulting dataset contained information on a total of 445,127 registered sex offenders. With the exclusion of Michigan, this figure represents approximately 66% of the total number of individuals that the National Center on Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) estimated in June 2010.⁵

Table 1 compares the numbers of registrants contained within the study dataset (445,127 cases) to the numbers reported by NCMEC. There are several potential reasons for this variation in figures, but one significant factor stands out. While many states publicly list all registrants, many others restrict access to information on lower-risk offenders to law enforcement and other designated parties. Hence, the study dataset includes only those registrants whose information is available on public internet registries, while NCMEC estimates are intended to capture all individuals contained on state sex offender registries, including those who are not subject to public disclosure. It should be noted that the data contained within this analysis for certain states likely excludes those offenders deemed to be lower risk – a factor that we explore in the analysis.⁶

Following the initial mapping of the data fields and the consolidation of individual records as described above, several additional variables were generated based on text searches and manual reviews of selected fields (most prominently address and offense fields). Additionally, certain data fields were standardized to facilitate analysis (e.g. date fields converted into a uniform format, racial designations such as "Caucasian" and "African American" were changed to "White" and "Black").

3. Results

The present study represents the first phase of a multi-part research initiative that will examine the demographic, geographic, and offense characteristics of the nationwide population of registered sex offenders (RSOs) who are subject to public notification. Additionally, the project aims to critically examine the range and content of state public sex offender registries and to explore sources of inter-state operational variation. The analysis undertaken was primarily exploratory in nature,

³ Duplicates were identified based on a match of name, date of birth, and in some cases addresses. Only those records representing duplicates within a registry were omitted from the analysis – duplicates across state registries (i.e. individuals registered in more than one jurisdiction) were retained in the dataset.

⁴ Kansas publicly notifies communities about drug and violent offenders. Montana publicly registers sex and violent offenders, but only provides full data on sex offenders. Individuals not listed as registered sex offenders were eliminated from the analysis.

⁵ NCMEC estimates from June 2010, gathered via phone survey of state registries, listed a total of 716,750 registrants, of which 46,020 were from Michigan.

⁶ Beyond differences attributed to the level of public disclosure, additional variance between NCMEC estimates and the study dataset may be explained by temporal factors and by inter-state variation in the criteria applied in deriving the estimates reported to NCMEC. The authors of this study have undertaken a supplemental analysis to delve further into these sources of variation.

Table 1
Data from the current study compared to data reported by NCMEC.

State	Count reported by NCMEC 6/10	Analysis population	% difference
Alabama	12,561	7710	-39%
Alaska	1831	2547	39%
Arizona	14,549	4248	-71%
Arkansas	10,055	4365	-57%
California	120,782	45,254	-63%
Colorado	11,085	7022	-37%
Connecticut	5153	5062	-2%
Delaware	4166	2748	-34%
District of Columbia	924	880	-5%
Florida	54,166	54,547	1%
Georgia	18,419	18,455	0%
Guam	593	507	-15%
Hawaii	3091	661	-79%
Idaho	3407	3379	-1%
Illinois	20,941	24,378	16%
Indiana	10,639	12,937	22%
Iowa	6510	5003	-23%
Kansas	8065	4303	-47%
Kentucky	8034	6071	-24%
Louisiana	9389	9357	0%
Maine	3000	3007	0%
Maryland	6511	6066	-7%
Massachusetts	10,995	3074	-72%
Minnesota	15,989	183	-99%
Mississippi	5990	2272	-62%
Missouri	10,807	11,041	2%
Montana	1944	2379	22%
Nebraska	3119	3023	-3%
Nevada	6447	2734	-58%
New Hampshire	2311	2017	-13%
New Jersey	13,309	3142	-76%
New Mexico	2650	2508	-5%
New York	30,436	18,081	-41%
North Carolina	12,831	15,949	24%
North Dakota	1110	399	-64%
Ohio	19,288	18,283	-5%
Oklahoma	6506	6518	0%
Oregon	16,808	697	-96%
Pennsylvania	10,177	7043	-31%
Puerto Rico	2121	2451	16%
Rhode Island	1565	304	-81%
South Carolina	12,154	10,252	-16%
South Dakota	2688	2651	-1%
Tennessee	13,800	1832	-87%
Texas	60,994	60,807	0%
Utah	6596	6531	-1%
Vermont	2446	1288	-47%
Virginia	16,813	10,773	-36%
Washington	20,419	5927	-71%
West Virginia	3496	3175	-9%
Wisconsin	21,394	10,204	-52%
Wyoming	1401	1082	-23%
Overall total	670,475 ^a	445,127	-34%

^a This number was derived from data retrieved from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) at http://www.missingkids.com/en_US/documents/sex-offender-map.pdf. NCMEC reports indicate that 716,750 sex offenders are living in the United States and its territories. The total count for NCMEC in Table 1 accounts only for states and territories included in our analysis. Michigan, The U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands are not included.

focusing on generating a range of descriptive measures aimed at illustrating the scope of the RSO population and isolating sources of inter-state and regional variations. To these ends, the study aimed to examine three sets of variables: *demographic* variables, including age, gender, and race; *offender status* variables such as incarceration, homelessness/transience, community supervision status, and assigned risk/management levels; and *offense characteristic* variables. Beyond examining these variables at the national and state levels, our review also aimed to identify relevant sub-groups for further analysis and to generate hypotheses for further investigation.

3.1. Demographics: race/ethnicity, gender and age

Tables 2 and 3 present state-by-state breakdowns of the sample's demographic profile.

3.1.1. Gender

The total sample consisted of 435,016 male registrants (97.7% of the total) and 10,226 females (2.3%). While most states were similar in terms of their proportion of female sex offenders, the Louisiana registry and the Wyoming registry had higher than average proportions of females (6.9% and 5.1% respectively). The state with the lowest percentage of females was Massachusetts, but females constituted fewer than 1% of registrants in Rhode Island, Minnesota, Hawaii and New Mexico.

Table 2
Demographic snapshot.

	Race/Ethnicity (%)						Gender (%)
	White	Black	Hispanic	Native	Asian	Other	Male
Alabama	63	37	0	0	0	0	98
Alaska	36	4	0	57	2	1	99
Arizona	79	10	0	0	0	11	98
Arkansas	75	25	0	0	0	1	98
California	46	17	31	1	3	1	99
Colorado	89	9	0	1	1	1	98
Connecticut	51	29	19	0	1	0	98
Delaware	58	42	0	0	0	0	98
District of Columbia	0	0	0	0	0	100	99
Florida	74	25	0	.1	.1	.2	98
Georgia	57	43	0	0	0	0	97
Guam	0	0	0	0	0	100	94
Hawaii	19	3	3	0	64	10	99
Idaho	95	1	0	3	1	0	97
Illinois	58	31	0	0	1	10	98
Indiana	81	17	1	0	0	2	98
Iowa	88	10	0	1	1	0	98
Kansas	83	13	0	1	1	3	97
Kentucky	71	23	0	1	0	5	98
Louisiana	51	47	1	1	0	1	93
Maine	0	0	0	0	0	100	96
Maryland	0	0	0	0	0	100	98
Massachusetts	73	23	0	0	1	3	100
Minnesota	54	36	2	7	1	0	98
Mississippi	71	28	0	0	0	1	98
Missouri	83	17	0	0	0	0	97
Montana	66	1	0	10	0	23	97
Nebraska	84	12	0	0	1	3	98
Nevada	71	24	0	2	2	1	99
New Hampshire	97	3	0	0	0	0	98
New Jersey	49	43	0	0	0	7	99
New Mexico	79	4	0	0	0	17	99
New York	49	31	18	1	1	1	99
North Carolina	59	36	0	0	0	5	97
North Dakota	75	3	0	18	1	3	99
Ohio	72	25	2	0	0	0	97
Oklahoma	78	11	3	7	1	0	96
Oregon	90	8	0	0	0	1	99
Pennsylvania	75	24	0	0	0	1	98
Puerto Rico	0	0	0	0	0	100	97
Rhode Island	69	20	11	0	0	0	99
South Carolina	70	28	0	1	0	1	98
South Dakota	71	4	0	25	0	1	98
Tennessee	73	23	0	2	1	0	97
Texas	78	21	0	0	0	0	98
Utah	81	3	10	3	1	2	98
Vermont	96	3	0	0	1	2	98
Virginia	70	26	1	2	1	2	98
Washington	77	13	2	3	2	2	98
West Virginia	95	4	0	0	0	0	96
Wisconsin	79	16	0	3	1	1	97
Wyoming	91	2	0	5	0	2	95
Overall total	66	22	5	1	1	5	98

Table 3
Age distribution by state.

	N	Mean	Median	Percentage within age categories						
				<18	18–25	26–35	36–45	46–55	56–65	66+
Alabama	7710	46.1	46	0	2	19	29	30	14	6
Alaska	2547	42.5	42	0	6	27	29	25	10	4
Arizona	4248	44.4	44.5	0	7	21	25	28	13	6
Arkansas	4365	45.3	45	0	4	22	27	26	14	7
California	45,254	52.4	52	0	2	10	20	32	22	16
Colorado	7022	45.8	46	0	4	20	25	29	15	7
Connecticut	5062	42.2	42	0	9	25	28	25	9	5
Delaware	2748	39.1	37	2	14	31	23	19	8	4
District of Columbia	880	46.4	48	2	3	16	22	34	18	6
Florida	54,547	45.7	45	0	4	22	26	27	13	8
Georgia	18,455	41.5	42	0	7	27	33	23	8	3
Guam	507	42	43	2	6	25	26	25	11	4
Hawaii	661	48.6	47	0	2	13	27	32	15	11
Idaho	3379	45.4	45	1	7	20	24	25	15	9
Illinois	24,378	41.6	40	0	7	29	28	23	9	4
Indiana	12,937	41.7	41	0	8	26	26	24	11	5
Iowa	5003	39.6	38	0	13	31	24	20	8	4
Kansas	4303	37.9	36	1	16	31	22	18	8	5
Kentucky	6071	46.1	46	0	3	19	27	30	14	8
Louisiana	9357	40.8	40	1	8	31	26	22	9	4
Maine	3007	47.9	48	0	3	18	23	30	17	9
Maryland	6066	44.5	44	0	4	24	26	28	13	6
Massachusetts	3074	46.1	46	0	4	16	28	33	14	6
Minnesota	183	41.5	40	0	1	32	33	26	6	2
Mississippi	2272	45.4	45	0	3	22	26	29	12	8
Missouri	11,041	45.8	46	0	4	19	26	29	15	7
Montana	2379	36.6	41	0	6	17	22	27	17	10
Nebraska	3023	41.5	40	0	8	30	25	23	10	5
Nevada	2734	46.8	46	1	3	12	31	33	15	6
New Hampshire	2017	47.1	47	0	5	16	24	29	17	9
New Jersey	3142	46	46	0	3	20	26	30	13	8
New Mexico	2508	47.1	46	0	2	18	27	30	15	9
New York	18,081	45	45	0	4	20	28	29	13	6
North Carolina	15,949	42	41	0	7	28	28	23	10	4
North Dakota	399	39.8	37	0	15	29	25	18	10	4
Ohio	18,283	42.6	42	0	7	27	26	24	11	5
Oklahoma	6518	41.6	43	0	4	22	26	27	14	7
Oregon	697	48.8	49	0	1	12	25	35	20	8
Pennsylvania	7040	43.7	44	0	5	21	33	26	10	5
Puerto Rico	2451	47.2	46	0	4	19	25	25	15	12
Rhode Island	304	44.1	42.5	0	3	24	30	23	14	5
South Carolina	10,252	43.1	43	0	7	25	26	25	11	6
South Dakota	2651	44	44	0	8	23	23	26	14	6
Tennessee	1832	45.6	45	0	3	20	27	30	13	6
Texas	60,807	44.4	44	0	7	22	24	26	14	7
Utah	6531	41.6	40	0	9	28	25	22	10	6
Vermont	1288	43.9	43	0	5	26	25	23	13	6
Virginia	10,773	44	44	0	7	22	27	26	13	6
Washington	5927	42.3	43	1	9	21	31	25	10	4
West Virginia	3175	43.4	44	0	7	16	36	27	10	3
Wisconsin	10,204	42.4	41	0	7	27	27	23	10	5
Wyoming	1082	41.8	42	0	7	26	32	23	8	4
Overall total	449,534	44.8	44	0	6	22	26	26	13	7

3.1.2. Race

About two thirds of the total sample was white and the remainder included minorities who were primarily black (see Table 2). Approximately 5% of the sample had a race listed as other or unknown and specific states and territories account for this. The District of Columbia, Guam, Maine, Maryland and Puerto Rico do not contain sufficient information on race or ethnicity and were excluded from these calculations. Reflecting national demographic patterns, the ethnic distribution of the sample varied considerably across states. Twenty-two percent of the overall sample was Black, but eight states had a percentage of Black RSOs above 30%.⁷ An additional 12 states had

below 5%⁸ listed as Black. According to the 2007 American Community Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau, 67.3% of the population is white (non-Hispanic) and 12.2% is black (non-Hispanic). Blacks appear to be over-represented on U.S. sex offender registries, and especially so in the states of Delaware, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, and North Carolina.

3.1.3. Age

The majority of cases in the sample (360,493 of 445,127) contained date of birth fields that were utilized to calculate registrant

⁷ Alabama, Delaware, Georgia, Louisiana, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, and North Carolina. In these same states, the reported proportion of Blacks according to the U.S. Census Bureau is: Alabama 26%, Delaware 19.8%, Georgia 28.7%, Louisiana 32.5%, Minnesota 4%, New Jersey 13.1%, New York 15.8%, and North Carolina 21.2%.

⁸ Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

age. Additionally, 64,620 cases contained separate age fields. In 1694 cases no birth date or age information was available, and an additional 47 cases were deleted from the analysis as invalid due to problematic date fields. The mean age, accounting for invalid and unknown cases, was 44.8 ($SD = 13.32$) with a range of 12–99 ($n = 449,534$).

3.2. Offender status

The second dimension of the analysis examined the sample across a range of offender status variables. Some of these data were based on dedicated fields contained within the registries, while others were derived from text searches of the address field.

3.3. Institutional status

States differed in their methods for designating incarcerated or otherwise institutionalized individuals. In some states, a specific data field captured institutionalized status. For instance, Wyoming, Tennessee, Maryland, Kentucky, Georgia and Florida provide a specific variable that accounts for incarceration status. For the majority of states, incarceration and civil commitment were captured using the physical address field. A text filter was utilized to capture terms such as incarcerated, jail, prison, corrections, commitment, detention center and new variables for incarcerated and civilly committed were created from these text queries. Approximately 11% of publicly listed registrants ($N = 47,971$) were identified on the registries as currently incarcerated in a jail or prison or otherwise residing within an institution (e.g. civilly committed and psychiatric hospitalization).⁹ Forty-five states report on the number of individuals currently incarcerated and nine states report those who are civilly committed.

3.4. Deported, out-of-state, and otherwise inactive

As with incarceration status, the data suggest significant variation in the extent to which states include deported or inactive individuals in their registries and/or the extent to which registry data is updated to capture deportations, movements out of state, and registrant deaths. Table 4 provides a breakdown of the percentage of individuals indicated by the registries as living within each state, as well as the number of people listed as incarcerated or civilly committed, deported, and deceased. Less than 1% of listed registrants ($N = 3251$) were listed as deported, and 4% ($N = 17,227$) were noted in the address field as having moved to another state. A limited number of state registries identified 1028 registrants as deceased. Approximately 12% ($N = 52,248$) of RSOs appear to not be living in the community, with a total of 47,978 people incarcerated or civilly committed, 1028 listed as deceased, and 3251 listed as deported. One particular anomaly is Florida, where over 14,400 registrants were listed as living out of state and an additional 16,925 were institutionalized.

3.5. Homelessness and transience

As noted in Table 5, a limited number of jurisdictions included designations of registrants specifically recorded as “homeless” or “transient.” Across the dataset, 6923 individuals from forty three states were flagged as such, with the majority of these cases concentrated in California, Washington, and Florida.

⁹ California includes incarcerated individuals on their public registry, but anomalies in our data acquisition process precluded these cases from being collected. Specifically, the Megan’s Law homepage for the state of California states that 60,000 individuals are subject to some form of public notification in the state. Our automated program only downloaded 45,242 cases. Upon further research, it was determined that the individuals listed on the California registry for which a valid case could not be found in our database were actually incarcerated. These individuals, though on a state registry, were not included in any analysis.

Table 4
Those living in the community and those who are not.

	Living in community (%)	Living in community (N)	Institutionalized = n (incarcerated and/or civilly committed)	Deported = (n)	Deceased = (n)
Alabama	95	7292	402	16	0
Alaska	84	2138	409	0	0
Arizona	82	3492	581	31	144
Arkansas	100	4357	6	1	1
California	100	45,251	3	0	0
Colorado	94	6567	439	16	0
Connecticut	83	4207	853	2	0
Delaware	97	2673	4	71	0
District of Columbia	100	880	0	0	0
Florida	63	35,243	16,925	1991	388
Georgia	81	14,880	3423	74	78
Guam	71	358	76	73	0
Hawaii	73	482	51	29	99
Idaho	100	3379	0	0	0
Illinois	72	17,659	6718	1	0
Indiana	84	10,845	2080	11	1
Iowa	79	3973	892	138	0
Kansas	96	4134	169	0	0
Kentucky	79	4784	1130	10	147
Louisiana	94	8767	426	0	164
Maine	100	3007	0	0	0
Maryland	84	5110	956	0	0
Massachusetts	63	1935	1119	20	0
Minnesota	98	180	3	0	0
Mississippi	92	2098	171	2	1
Missouri	100	11,041	0	0	0
Montana	98	2329	50	0	0
Nebraska	92	2780	243	0	0
Nevada	100	2732	2	0	0
New Hampshire	100	2017	0	0	0
New Jersey	90	2834	308	0	0
New Mexico	88	2211	297	0	0
New York	81	14,627	3289	165	0
North Carolina	88	13,985	1485	479	0
North Dakota	53	212	187	0	0
Ohio	100	18,276	7	0	0
Oklahoma	100	6515	3	0	0
Oregon	96	671	26	0	0
Pennsylvania	82	5794	1246	0	0
Puerto Rico	95	2335	115	1	0
Rhode Island	77	234	68	2	0
South Carolina	99	10,188	53	11	0
South Dakota	80	2116	535	0	0
Tennessee	86	1578	243	6	5
Texas	100	60,803	4	0	0
Utah	100	6525	3	3	0
Vermont	100	1288	0	0	0
Virginia	83	8886	1791	96	0
Washington	91	5413	512	2	0
West Virginia	100	3168	7	0	0
Wisconsin	95	9733	471	0	0
Wyoming	82	885	197	0	0
Overall total	88	392,867	47,978	3251	1028

3.6. Absconded/missing, non-compliant, and unknown address

Table 5 also indicates offender status designations related to absconded, missing, and non-compliant registrants.¹⁰ Nationwide, a total of 5349 offenders were officially listed in the public registry data as

¹⁰ While the operational uses of these designations vary considerably, it is important to distinguish between them. “Absconded” generally refers to individuals for whom there have been unsuccessful attempts to locate, whereas “non-compliant” may refer to those whose address may be known but who have failed to comply with legal registration requirements.

Table 5
Other special status.

	Transient/ homeless	Absconder	In violation	Whereabouts/address unknown
Alabama	2	89	1	3
Alaska	10	0	0	0
Arizona	7	74	0	115
Arkansas	100	210	710	0
California	3854	2490	2	2
Colorado	44	0	8	0
Connecticut	15	15	0	0
Delaware	55	0	0	0
District of Columbia	NR	NR	NR	NR
Florida	607	841	0	26
Georgia	16	392	0	1
Guam	0	12	1	0
Hawaii	5	178	138	24
Idaho	14	0	2	0
Illinois	226	1	424	847
Indiana	30	56	12	9
Iowa	14	0	92	0
Kansas	NR	NR	NR	NR
Kentucky	20	14	367	0
Louisiana	13	10	0	143
Maine	NR	NR	NR	NR
Maryland	69	0	6	2
Massachusetts	177	0	1024	0
Minnesota	18	0	0	0
Mississippi	5	0	0	0
Missouri	70	94	0	0
Montana	22	2	0	0
Nebraska	30	143	0	0
Nevada	106	0	0	0
New Hampshire	15	0	0	0
New Jersey	23	71	0	0
New Mexico	37	34	0	0
New York	148	158	0	80
North Carolina	31	312	0	2
North Dakota	0	13	0	0
Ohio	139	0	0	0
Oklahoma	25	0	883	0
Oregon	14	0	0	0
Pennsylvania	16	39	0	0
Puerto Rico	NR	NR	NR	NR
Rhode Island	2	2	0	2
South Carolina	27	0	0	0
South Dakota	17	2	6	0
Tennessee	47	74	0	5
Texas	0	3	1	0
Utah	2	0	0	0
Vermont	NR	NR	NR	NR
Virginia	27	1	0	0
Washington	814	15	411	1
West Virginia	0	0	21	2
Wisconsin	2	0	0	0
Wyoming	8	4	43	0
Overall total	6923	5349	4152	1264

absconded; 1264 were listed as missing/unable to be located and 4152 were listed as having failed to comply with registration requirements. California, Florida, Georgia, Arizona, Illinois, North Carolina, Arkansas, and North Carolina accounted for the majority of offenders listed as absconded or missing (65% of the total). Offenders with “non-compliant” labels (e.g. failure to register and failure to comply) were concentrated in six states – Massachusetts, Illinois, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Washington, and Kentucky – which together accounted for 92% of all listed non-compliant offenders (N = 3819).

3.7. Risk and/or management levels

Within the dataset, extracted information from twenty four states included risk and/or management level designations for listed offenders. The labels for these designations varied considerably across

Table 6
Risk / Management Levels.

Classification systems with three tiers (low/med/high risk)						
State	Low		Med		High	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Arizona			657	64	3516	36
Arkansas			2707	15	1541	81
Delaware			2193	80	555	20
Guam	252	50	84	17	171	34
Indiana	505	20	69	3	13	1
Minnesota						100
Mississippi	10	<1	1	<1	57	3
Nebraska						100
Nevada			2480	9	227	8
New Jersey			2893	92	249	8
New York	0		10,522	58	7559	42
Ohio ^a	2209	12	3852	21	2504	14
Oklahoma	800	12	272	4	4886	75
Virginia	265	2	78	1	1437	13
Washington	643	11	3472	59	1686	28

Classification systems with sexual predator designation				
State	Predator (or SVP)		Violent	
	N	%	N	%
Arizona	273	6		
Colorado	1	<1		
Florida	8296	15		
Georgia	162	1		
Illinois	11,399 ^b	47		
Indiana	933	7	919	7
Kentucky	10	<1		
Mississippi	12	1	573	25
Oregon	1	<1		
Pennsylvania	272	4		
South Carolina	141	1		
Virginia			7279	68
Wisconsin	81	1		
Wyoming	11	1		

^a Ohio recently began classifying offenders with AWA standards. As such, this total only reflects those offenders for which post-AWA classifications.

^b Includes those listed as sexually dangerous (n = 98) and sexually violent (n = 239). If these cases were removed from the total, 45% (n = 11,062) of individuals on the Illinois registry would be classified as sexual predators.

jurisdictions, reflecting significant current variation in state practices. Within this domain, states generally fall into three broad categories – those using multi-tier systems that assigned each offender a risk or management level, those using one-tier systems that made no distinctions among registrants, and those that only utilize a “sexual predator” designation for a limited group of cases.

The distribution of risk and management levels for those states for which such data was captured in the dataset is presented in Table 6. The table's first section provides a listing of states utilizing risk or management level designations to distinguish among RSOs. For purposes of presentation, these levels were divided into three categories – tier/level I (denoting the lowest risk or management level); tier/level II (denoting a medium level); and tier/level III (denoting the highest level). In total, fifteen states had assigned levels that appeared in the study dataset, and two states – Minnesota and Nebraska¹¹ – were established to include only high risk offenders in their public database.

The second section of Table 6 provides information on those listed within the dataset as having sexually violent predator status (SVP) (thirteen states) and violent offender status (three states). This portion of the analysis was complicated by the fact that states

¹¹ Nebraska recently began adhering to Adam Walsh standards. The data utilized in this study were accessed prior to the change in legislation.

Table 7
Victim age as indicated by offense records.

Specific Age Listed	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative%
0–5	10,536	8%	8%
6–10	30,999	25%	33%
11–14	46,469	37%	70%
15–17	25,175	20%	90%
18–21	3747	3%	93%
22–30	4770	4%	97%
31–40	2510	2%	99%
>40	1487	1%	100%
Subtotal	125,693		

	Frequency	Percent
<i>Victim age range or minor status indicated</i>		
Other <18	33,492	74%
Other 18+	11,494	26%
Subtotal	44,986	
<i>Combined victim age breakdown</i>		
17 and under	146,671	86%
18 and older	24,008	14%
Total	170,679	
<i>Victim gender as indicated by offense records</i>		
Both	473	1%
Female	70,139	87%
Male	10,130	13%
Total	80,742	

appear to assign various meanings to labels such as “predator” and “dangerousness,” and further that the dataset used in this study may have missed some data fields that might have flagged additional registrants with such labels. Hence, caution should be exercised in interpreting these data. For the purposes of this study individuals specifically listed as sexually dangerous, sexual violent, or sexual predator were included in the SVP category. Over 21,000 offenders were listed as sexually violent predators, representing 4.9% of the overall population of registered sex offenders. The majority of states for which SVP status was available had 1% or less of its offenders listed as SVP. Four states had higher percentages, with Illinois being the highest at 45%.¹²

3.8. Offense characteristics

As with many of the offender variables, states varied considerably in the manner in which offenses were captured and reflected on the public internet registry. This variation occurred across multiple dimensions, including the extent to which individual offenses were recorded as multiple or single (i.e. consolidated at the offender level) data fields; the level of standardization and uniformity of offense coding; and the number and type of offenses included (e.g. inclusion of non-sexual offenses, technical violations, and sexual offense histories beyond qualifying offense). Additionally, information pertaining to victim characteristics and the events surrounding the instant sex offense were often inconsistently provided by states, even among those that specifically attempted to reflect this type of information. Some states provided detailed narrative descriptions of the sex crime (e.g. “subject repeatedly molested his 9 year old and 11 year old cousins over a period of two years”) while others conveyed offense information using strictly statutory language (e.g. “indecent liberties with a child” or “second degree sexual assault”).

While the implications of this type of variation for policy and practice will be explored in the Discussion section, from a research standpoint these variations presented a particular set of challenges in

¹² This percentage does not account for those listed as sexually dangerous or sexually violent. When those classifications are included the percentage increases to 47%.

Table 8
Offenders with indications of specific offense types (N = 350,263).

	Frequency	Percent of offenders
Offense against child	193,000	55%
Rape	45,974	13%
Sodomy	14,045	4%
Computer/internet	1326	<1%
Aggravated	39,851	11%
Pornography	5787	2%
Kidnapping/abduction	3037	1%
Solicitation/enticement	3805	1%
Force/forcible	16,406	5%
Nuisance (exposure/voyeurism)	9014	3%

framing the offense profiles of RSOs contained within the sample. Following extensive coding and review of the data, the selected strategy for this portion of the analysis was to: 1) generate a general victim profile for those cases in which such information was readily available; and 2) set forth the relative characteristics of the listed offenses, based on a series of dichotomous (yes/no) variables.

The results from the first portion of the analysis are illustrated in Table 7, which indicates victim and gender for a subset of cases. The age analysis reflects data from 170,679 cases — 125,693 for which specific victim age was provided, and 44,986 for which age ranges or victim age categories were furnished, permitting distinctions between adult and minor victims. Of those cases containing age-specific data, approximately 90% of victims were minors, and approximately one-third were ten years of age or younger. The categorical age data reveal that the proportion of minor victims was somewhat lower (74%). While there are several possible explanations for this discrepancy, it should be noted that data from states furnishing specific victim age contained missing age values for many cases, raising the possibility that age-specific information for minor victims may be more readily accessible in official records than similar information for adult victims, and therefore over-represented in the registry sample. Other researchers have found that when collecting data about sexual offenders, victim age was more likely to be missing when the crime was committed against an adult (Levenson & Morin, 2006). The gender analysis, based on a total of 80,742 cases where victim gender was provided, indicated that 87% of recorded offenses were committed against female victims and 13% against male victims, with a relatively small number indicating both male and female victims.

The second portion of the offense analysis examined a total of approximately 460,000 offense records, which were tied to approximately 350,000 individual offenders. Since many states carried only one offense field per offender (which may or may not have included multiple offenses) while others itemized offenses as separate records, the analysis was performed at the offender level (e.g. what proportion of offenders had at least one indication of a child pornography offense?). For each listed offense record, a series of dichotomous variables aimed at capturing offense characteristics was generated using a combination of text searches and manual cross-check review.¹³ Duplicate value filters were applied at the offender level for each of the noted variables (hence, for example, an offender with three listed child porn offenses was only captured once — same as an offender who had only one such listed offense). We were unable to tell, however, how these offenses reflected the criminal history of the offender in terms of identifying first-time and repeat sex offenders. The results of this analysis are reflected in Table 8.

¹³ For example, offenses involving children were identified through a search for the terms “child,” “minor,” “juvenile,” as well as age-based operators identified based on manual review of the data (e.g. “under 16,” “12–15,” “<16,” and “<12”); and offenses involving pornography were identified via terms such as “porn,” “explicit matter,” “possession,” and “distribution,” also followed by a manual check of flagged cases.

4. Discussion

We embarked on this exploratory study with the goal of describing the characteristics of the nation's population of registered sex offenders who are subject to public internet disclosure. Equally important, through the process of data collection, preparation, and analysis, we also sought to better understand the scope and limitations of the public registries themselves. In this way, we hoped to appraise the promise and potential that registry data may hold for researchers and those engaged in sex offender management policy and practice (Table 9).

This initial attempt at developing a comprehensive descriptive summary of the RSO population has met with mixed results, and we offer some caveats up front. Notably, the substantial differences in state registry variables produced challenges in developing standardized measures by which to conduct data analyses. These limitations themselves are instructive in understanding the significant operational and definitional challenges facing the nation's SORN systems, which are particularly germane to current policy deliberations occurring at national, state, and tribal jurisdictional levels concerning the future of registration and notification policy and practice. Readers are also reminded that the sample of sex offenders in this study comprised only those contained on publicly accessible state registries; those offenders *not* subject to public disclosure (approximately 37% of the nation's registered sex offenders) are ostensibly rated as lower risk and therefore the current sample reflects a higher risk group.

In light of these issues, our discussion focuses on four main areas: 1) the inferences that can reasonably be drawn concerning the nation's RSO population based on the study's results; 2) the limitations of the data and the research methods and what they might tell us about the current state of sex offender registry systems; 3) the potential research utility of public registry data and emergent avenues for future empirical investigation; and 4) implications for policy development, mental health services, and criminal justice practice.

4.1. What does the study tell us about the United States RSO population?

The presentation of aggregate data describing the RSO population was hampered by significant inter-state inconsistencies regarding the range of individuals captured on public registries, the scope of available offender information, and the various terms and definitions used to denote offender status and offense characteristics. Though these limitations precluded the development of a fully inclusive portrait of the nation's sex offenders, the study results do reveal several notable facets of today's RSO population.

First, registered sex offenders are overwhelmingly male and white. It is perhaps unsurprising that few females are found on registries, as victims may be less likely to report abuse by females because it can often be disguised as caretaking or nurturing (Sandler & Freeman,

2009; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). Though most RSOs are white, blacks are over-represented compared to estimates that they comprise less than 13% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), and they appear to be especially over-represented in certain states. This may be expected, since blacks and minorities are often over-represented in general criminal justice populations for a complex array of reasons (Miller, 1996).

Second, individuals of all ages are found on the nation's registries, but the average RSO is in his mid-forties. This is noteworthy, because as more people are placed on registries for long durations (or life) with little attrition, the mean age will continue to grow older. This anticipated trend contradicts research indicating that risk declines with age for all criminals (including most sex offenders) and sex offense recidivism is especially rare with advanced age (Hanson, 2002; Thornton, 2006). Over time, the age of the population will become more skewed toward the older range and include a growing proportion of aging or elderly individuals who probably pose lower risk for reoffense.

Third, a considerable number of RSOs do not reside in the community. Public internet registries were designed to alert citizens to the presence of sex offenders living nearby so that action can be taken to potentially prevent victimization. It is unclear why deported or deceased offenders remain on public registries, as the public safety value of this information seems dubious. The funding allocated for tracking the nation's sex offenders is based on the registry count reported by NCMEC — an inflated figure that includes individuals for whom no tracking is needed because they are institutionalized, dead, or deported. In one particular example, of over 54,000 registered sex offenders in Florida, more than half are not living in Florida communities. About 28% are institutionalized and about one-quarter are living in other states. This information is not readily apparent in the data reported by NCMEC; rather, it was evident only after downloading a publicly available datafile from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement website and speaking with the state's registry data manager to resolve discrepancies. In other words, many publicly identified RSOs may not be living among us.

Fourth, we identified 17,688 RSOs who are designated to be transient, homeless, absconded, non-compliant, or whose address or whereabouts are otherwise unknown. We had no way of specifically confirming the number of fugitive sex offenders, since states had a wide variety of methods for classifying absconders, registration violators, and others whose locations are uncertain. Despite some reports that over 100,000 sex offenders are missing or noncompliant (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2010), the public registries analyzed in this study provide little direct evidence to support this assertion.

Finally, we can extrapolate and draw some general inferences about the relative risk of the U.S. RSO population. Through our data collection process, we know that approximately 33% of the number of RSOs reported by NCMEC is not on public registries. Thus, we presume that about one-third of the nation's sex offenders have been assessed by their state's sex offender management procedure to pose low risk for future offending. Even among those found on public registries, a distribution of risk exists, with a minority designated in most states as high risk, predator, or sexually violent.

4.2. Data limitations and conclusions about current registry systems

Throughout this article, we have continually noted the significant variability in the scope, content, and format of information contained within state registries. In the context of our efforts to develop and present a comprehensive portrait of the nation's RSO population, this variability has created significant challenges. Though certain aggregated demographic characteristics can be reported with a reasonable degree of confidence, and data from selected states has provided some useful perspective regarding the status and risk profiles of RSOs,

Table 9
National snapshot summary.

Age (mean)	44.3
% white	66
% male	98
% with minor victims	90
% with victims <14	70
% with victims <10	33
% designated as high risk or SVP (pf states reporting)	N = 29,872 (25) 13% ^a
# designated specifically as absconded	N = 5236
# specifically designated as homeless/transient (# of states reporting)	N = 6943 (43)
# specifically designated as living in community (not reported as deceased, deported, or institutionalized)	N = 392,867

^a This percentage does not include those listed as sexually violent or sexually dangerous. When those individuals are accounted for, the summary of those designated as SVP changed slightly (N = 30,209) or 14%.

painting a national picture remains elusive and is confounded by the fragmented nature of the nation's sex offender registry system.

Clearly, public sex offender registries have not been designed – nor should they be primarily intended – to fulfill the needs of researchers. Yet it should be noted that the significant cross-jurisdictional variation encountered raises implications that transcend the research enterprise and carry over into fundamental questions about the public safety utility of today's registries. Indeed, Congressional concern over jurisdictional inconsistency was a primary impetus behind the 2006 passage of the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA; also known as Title I of the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006), which sought to introduce greater uniformity of sex offender registration and notification systems. We concur that standardized definitions and measures across states would help close gaps that currently exist and provide for needed consistency in policies. These findings, however, highlight shortcomings associated with the means by which the new federal law seeks to achieve that goal.

Specifically, the rules by which SORNA seeks to impose jurisdictional uniformity – rules that rely on a common offense-based classification scheme and ignore other germane risk factors – are far more likely to obscure important differences among registered offenders than to shed more light on them. As suggested by this analysis, statutorily-based designations may cover a wide and diverse spectrum of behavior patterns, and may obscure important distinctions impacting a given offender's public safety risk. Some jurisdictions have adopted more refined approaches (e.g. those utilizing empirically derived risk assessment methods) to assist the public in distinguishing the most dangerous offenders and to assist in the efficient allocation of resources concordant with an offender's threat to the community. SORNA's system under the Adam Walsh Act, however, will potentially render certain aspects of those systems obsolete, mandating increasingly more inclusive public internet disclosure that ultimately might prove to be less informative for concerned citizens.

Hence, the considerable obstacles encountered in carrying out the status and offense portions of our analysis reflect fundamental structural issues that potentially may be exacerbated rather than ameliorated under SORNA. For instance, the varied uses and meanings of particular terminology (e.g. “non-compliant,” “missing,” or “absconder”) and the missing data about factors such as victim age, gender, and victim-offender relationships obscure information that would be most helpful for the public to identify the specific types of danger posed by an individual.

In considering the study limitations, it should also be noted that certain inconsistencies and gaps in available data may have been rooted less in the contents of the registries themselves than in the limitations of the data scraping methodology. With much of the data collection carried out via a multi-step automated process, the potential for error or omission in the collection of state-based records remains a source of concern. For example, during the course of the analysis, cross-checks with secondary sources indicated that the data scraping process had failed to capture a proportion of cases that were contained on certain state registries. Where these problems were identified, supplemental scraping was performed – generally with success – to capture the missing records. Despite this, and despite the fact that there is little evidence to suggest that such errors introduced systematic bias into the analysis, our experience with this process warrants some measure of caution in this regard. Future analyses should, wherever possible, utilize datasets provided directly by the state registries in favor of those pulled through such automated processes.

Finally, it should be noted that RSOs as a group should not be equated with the population of those who perpetrate sexual violence. Studies of this type introduce reminders about the under-reporting of sexual crimes. Though we anticipate seeing the population of RSOs grow over the coming decades, many sex offenses continue to go

unreported or undetected and the majority of sex crimes are committed by first time offenders not previously listed on registries (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008; Sandler et al., 2008).

4.3. Prospects and directions for future research

The current study sets out to achieve a seemingly straightforward goal of describing the scope and substance of the nation's registered sex offender population. While we achieved modest progress toward that goal, the most critical output of this study lies in its exploration of the challenges and opportunities inherent in analyzing public sex offender registry data. Despite the significant barriers encountered, our conclusion regarding the prospects of these data for future research is promising and optimistic.

First, while the uneven nature of the data suggests that records from many state systems are not yet suited for rigorous research, it also reveals that many state systems are indeed capable of generating rich, robust, and comprehensive datasets that include features such as historical address information and multiple linked offense fields. Moreover, many of these more fully developed models appear to be similar to one another in the range and format of available data, permitting some measure of aggregation across jurisdictions. While limiting inquiry to a subset of states may raise questions of generalizability of results, significant potential exists for detailed examination of factors beyond those explored in this analysis.

A second avenue of inquiry involves the potential for comparative and multivariate analyses of critical sub-populations identified in this study, including registrants identified as homeless/transient, those who are incarcerated or under community correctional supervision, female registrants, juvenile registrants, and RSOs with particular offense profiles (e.g. child pornography offenders, adult victim offenders, and non-contact offenders). Critical covariates in these analyses might include offense characteristics, demographics, noted histories of non-compliance, and other variables captured by targeted state registries.

A third and particularly promising domain for future inquiry involves geographic and spatial analysis. Registry data are particularly well-suited for such investigation, given that zip code and address fields tend to be among the most complete elements of public registry information. Using geocoding technology, significant promise exists for studies modeling temporal RSO migration, relative residential concentrations of RSOs compared to the general population, and comparative impacts of certain policies (such as residence restrictions or expanded monitoring requirements) on clustering and migration patterns.

Fourth and finally, these findings suggest that the contents of public sex offender registries represent fertile ground for examining the operational challenges facing our nation's SORN systems. Given the significant confidence that federal and state lawmakers have placed in registration and notification policies, it is imperative that these systems be subject to ongoing critical evaluation concerning their validity, reliability, and public safety utility. In this respect, future research should continue to review the extent to which individual state registries are organized and operated in a manner that meets both efficiency and public safety needs.

4.4. Implications for policy development, criminal justice practice, and mental health services

We found considerable heterogeneity in the RSO population across multiple dimensions, contrasting the stereotypical views of sex offenders that permeate public perception. For instance, sex offenders are often described as a group of repetitive, compulsive, predatory and potentially violent abusers of young children (Levenson et al., 2007a; Lieb & Nunlist, 2008). Notwithstanding the limitations of our data analyses, we found a range of risk designations suggesting that policies should: 1) effectively differentiate risk levels among offenders using empirically derived methods; 2) provide front-line practitioners with

sufficient latitude to adapt the terms of supervision, monitoring, and treatment according to individual risks and needs; and 3) furnish the public with the information necessary to distinguish between those RSOs who call for attention and diligence and those who present a lesser degree of risk. Offense titles as defined by the Adam Walsh Act are insufficient to determine an individual's relative threat to a community or to adequately inform law enforcement officers responsible for supervision and monitoring. Those charged with case management need empirically derived and clinically sound information by which to formulate appropriate prevention and intervention strategies.

Another notable factor highlighted by the results pertains to the significant number of RSOs labeled as homeless or transient — an issue that has received growing attention among practitioners and researchers, particularly in light of the proliferation of residence restrictions that has diminished housing options for many RSOs (Barnes et al., 2009; Chajewski & Mercado, 2009; Zandbergen & Hart, 2006; Zgoba et al., 2009a). While only a limited number of states in this study appeared to systematically track housing stability in their public registries, the data do affirm homeless and transient sex offenders as a critical population for further study.¹⁴ Interestingly, many of these transient offenders were from California, Florida, and Georgia — states that have very restrictive laws that have been discussed controversially in the media. While typically of little concern to the general public, residential instability among sex offenders represents a potentially crucial community safety issue, not only due to its relationship with re-offense risk (Meredith et al., 2007; Schulenberg, 2007; Williams et al., 2000; Willis & Grace, 2008, 2009) but also due to the practical challenges involved in monitoring transient offenders.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to make an effort to describe the population of registered sex offenders in the United States. We obtained data directly from publicly accessible registry websites, providing us with a large sample representing two thirds of total registrants. The variation between state registries resulted in problems creating standardized measures by which to conduct data analyses. These limitations illuminate the significant operational and definitional challenges facing the nation's registries, and highlight a need for uniformity. Current federal policy efforts to eliminate some of these cross-jurisdictional disparities, while sound in their general intent, may do little to promote the development and diffusion of evidence-based SORN policies and practices. In this respect, this study may raise more questions than it answers about the best ways to monitor and track the heterogeneous groups of offenders living in our communities. Hopefully, continued dialog will incorporate research evidence that will help us better understand this population as we seek to reduce their recidivism potential and efficiently allocate our nation's public safety resources.

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¹⁴ It should also be noted that homelessness/transience designation likely underestimates the broader problem of residential instability, as many RSOs with addresses may simply be using temporary addresses of friends, parents, or others.