

The Relationship Between Sex Offender Registry Utilization and Awareness

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Although registries of convicted sexual offenders are widely popular, little is known about the impact of the policies. The goal of this research was to measure one aspect of the impact of registry policies: patterns of usage of publicly available registries. Using a computer-assisted telephone survey, Michigan residents were questioned about their utilization of the sex offender registry and whether they believed any sex offenders lived in their community. The authors found that few respondents had looked at the registry. Reasons respondents provided for nonuse included lack of interest in the registry, living in a "safe" area, and not having children. Although it was found that registry use was related to awareness of offenders in the community, after viewing the registry, nearly half of the survey participants still believed no offenders lived in the community. Logistic regression was used to predict both registry use and awareness of offenders in the community.

Keywords: *sexual abuse; community notification; offender registration; sex offenders; social policy*

Beginning in the mid-1990s, federal laws were enacted to require states to make registries including the name and address of convicted sex offenders available to the public. These registries, mandated through Megan's Law, have generally been popular with the public (Phillips, 1998; Proctor, Badzinski, & Johnson, 2002). However, little research is available on the degree to which such policies have increased awareness of offenders in the community. Additionally, research on the actual impact on recidivism of public notification laws is similarly limited. Concerns have also been raised that the public registry may have important unintended consequences, such as increasing offenders' fear of seeking treatment and making victims and their families more hesitant to report crimes (Edwards & Hensley, 2001). The goal of this research is to examine offender registry usage and determine if this usage affects awareness in the community of offenders.

The intent of sex offender registries was multifaceted. In part, registration was intended to protect the public from sexual violence by raising awareness of the presence of individuals in the community who had been convicted of sexual violence (Farkas & Stichman, 2002). The existence of these registries provides the public with the perceived ability to avoid dangerous individuals (Freeman-Longo, 1996, Malesky & Keim, 2001). However, this sense of safety may be skewed by misperceptions that most sex offenders victimize children and are strangers to the victim (Craissati & Beech, 2004; Fuselier, Durham, & Wurtele, 2002; Jacobs, Hashima, & Kenning, 1995; Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Wilcox, Jordan, & Pritchard, 2006). Notably, those who do not have children may be less likely to use the registry, despite research that recidivism for sexual crimes against strangers is higher among those who assault adults than children (Duwe, Donnay, & Tewksbury, 2008).

Additionally, research indicates that approximately 90% of abuse perpetrators are known to the victim (Finkelhor, 1994; Ullman, 2007; Vogeltanz et al., 1999). In a study of urban college students, Ullman (2007) noted that 22.8% reported experiencing child sexual abuse. Of those reporting abuse, "89.4% were abused by a known perpetrator. Of these known offenders 28.2% were neighbors, 37.8% were family members, 13.5% were friends, and the remainder (less than 5%) had multiple offender types" (p. 27). In a national study on sexual abuse, between 21.2% and 26.8% of respondents were abused by an adult man or woman who was not in the respondents' family, although it is not known what percentage of these were strangers. This category included strangers but could also have included perpetrators who were known to the victim (Vogeltanz et al., 1999). In 2000, the Bureau of Justice Statistics determined that 34% of child sexual abuse cases in police reports were perpetrated by a family member and that 59% of the cases were by an acquaintance (Snyder, 2000) although some evidence suggests that police reports may underrepresent intrafamilial crimes. Therefore, it is likely that offenders on the registry were most likely not strangers to the victims but, in most cases, someone the victim and family know and trust.

In addition to increasing awareness, registries were intended as a deterrent to potential offenders (Farkas & Stichman, 2002). Furthermore, the resulting public scrutiny, shaming, and ostracism are seen as means of encouraging convicted offenders to avoid recidivism (McAlinden, 2005; Phillips, 1998). The hope is that the threat of public awareness of the offender's crime would serve to deter those who have not yet committed a sexual crime.

Research has indicated that registration and community notification do not result in a significant decrease in sexual offenses (Caputo & Brodsky, 2004; Pawson, 2002; Prescott & Rockoff, 2008). Quasi-experimental research by Duwe and Donnay (2008) examined the impact of community notification on recidivism. This study compared 155 Level 3 offenders, those considered the highest risk to the community, with 155 Level 1 and Level 2 offenders, who were not subject to notification because they were in lower-risk categories. A third control group included 125 retrospectively assigned

Level 3 offenders who were released before the community notification laws were in place. Results showed that, when controlling for mediating factors (e.g., prior criminal history and risk assessment), offenders subject to community notification significantly reoffended more quickly. Prescott and Rockoff (2008) conducted a multistate examination of first-time offenders and recidivism rates. This research resulted in a more complicated picture of the impact of community notification. The study found that, in communities with a small number of registered offenders, such as those that include only highest-risk offenders, notification was effective in reducing recidivism. Registries that included a larger number of offenders actually resulted in increases in recidivism.

Edwards and Hensley (2001) and Prescott and Rockoff (2008) express concern about the broad implementation of sex offender registries and propose examining the costs and benefits of such policies. These studies indicate that the resulting social and financial constraints on registered sex offenders may increase recidivism. Prescott and Rockoff (2008) suggest that the deterrent effect of registration on both first-time offenders and recidivism is greatest when the data are available only to public safety officials but not to the general public. Furthermore, restricted availability appears to mitigate the potential negative consequences of public notification.

Recent research on the utilization of the sex offender registry is emerging. Anderson and Sample (2008) found that less than one third of a sample of Nebraska residents accessed the sex offender registry, either online or in the newspaper. Craun (in press) attempted to determine what percentage of residents who actually lived near a registered sex offender was aware of that fact. The county they sampled utilized passive notification, requiring residents to view the sex offender registry on the Internet to get the information. The study found that less than one third of residents living near a registered sex offender were aware that someone in their neighborhood had been arrested for a sexual offense (Craun, in press).

Some research indicates that community notification may result in increased fear in the community. Zevitz (2004) surveyed residents who lived in a neighborhood with a registered sex offender. On first learning of the presence of an offender, 35% of the respondents reported increased fear for their children or themselves, although, within a short time period, the percentage of respondents expressing fear dropped to one fourth (Zevitz, 2004). Another study of those who attended community meetings regarding offenders in the areas found that about one third of the residents were more fearful after the meeting, whereas another third reported less fear (Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). Caputo and Brodsky (2004) found a positive correlation between beliefs about the importance of public notification and higher fears after being notified of an offender in their area. Additionally, some research has indicated that those who have viewed the registry made few behavioral changes to protect themselves and their families (Anderson & Sample, 2008; Caputo & Brodsky, 2004). These findings raise important questions about the advisability of increasing usage of the public registries.

The goal of our research is to explore the effectiveness of offender registration in raising awareness of the presence of convicted offenders in the community. We examined utilization rates of an offender registry to assess frequency of use and identify the factors that increase the likelihood that an individual will view the registry. We also explored reasons for nonuse. Finally, we examined the impact of use of the registry on awareness of offenders in the respondents' zip codes.

Method

Participants

A total of 733 individuals from across the state of Michigan were surveyed using computer-assisted telephone interviewing. We used random digit dialing to sample participants, with sampling conducted more heavily in the Detroit metropolitan area. Only individuals with residential phone numbers and were above the age of 18 were eligible to participate. The response rate for qualified phone numbers was 44%. The questions used in this study were part of a larger survey, which included questions on topics such as lead poisoning and relationships.

Most of the participants (82.5%) identified their primary racial or ethnic origin as White/Caucasian and 12% as Black/African American. Small percentages identified as Latino/Hispanic, American Indian/Aleut/Inuit, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Arab/Middle Eastern. These percentages approximate the racial composition of the state: 79.5% Caucasian and 14.1% Black/African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Survey participants ranged from 18 to 95 years, with an average age of 50.5 years ($SD = 16.8$). The sample overrepresented females, with 67.3% of the participants identified as female and 32.7% as male. Only 5.1% of the participants reported a level of education less than completion of high school; 45% reported having a high school diploma; and the remaining 44.2% of the participants reported having completed education beyond the high school level. Of the sample, 36% had children below the age of 18, 27% had been or had known someone who was a victim of a sex crime, and 3% had been convicted of a crime.

Instrumentation

Participants were first asked about their knowledge of the offender registry in Michigan through two questions. The first question asked if they were aware that convicted offenders were required to register. The second asked if they knew the information was publicly available. Both were asked as a yes or no dichotomy.

We measured registry usage by three questions. First, participants were asked if they had ever accessed the offender registry with a binary yes or no question. Those who responded "yes" were then asked how they had accessed the registry in an

open-ended question. Use of this open-ended question provided some additional support that they had utilized the registry and were not just responding in a socially desirable way. Those who had not accessed the registry were asked in a single open-ended question why they had not. Participants were able to provide one or many responses to this question. Two researchers coded both open-ended questions. Interrater reliability was 97%, calculated as the percentage of cases for which both coders agreed for the open-ended question regarding where a respondent goes to view the registry. Interrater reliability was 91% for responses regarding why participants had not looked at the registry. After the coders had open discussion about their choices and were unable to agree, a third coder made the final decision.

Finally, to measure the effectiveness of the registry in affecting awareness of local offenders, participants were asked if they were aware of any sex offenders living in their communities. This was measured by a single yes or no response. Data on the number of offenders living in each zip code, which was operationalized to measure communities, were gathered from the Michigan offender registry Web site. One limitation of this approach is that it is possible that respondents' definition of "community" differed from the one we extracted from data of the sex offender registry at the zip-code level. Unfortunately, it was not possible to get more precise address information. In addition, as approximately half of stranger-perpetrated child sexual abuse occurs more than a mile from the offender's home (Duwe et al., 2008), a broader definition of community is useful.

Data Analysis

The analyses conducted included bivariate analysis of the two dependent variables, use of the registry, and knowledge of offenders. We conducted these analyses using chi square and independent samples *t* tests to determine which variables were related to having viewed the registry and knowledge of offenders in the community.

We produced a model predicting the use of the registry with a logistic regression. We also used logistic regression to examine the factors related to increased awareness of registered offenders in the community. The selection of demographic and personal history variables for inclusion in the logistic regression were based on factors related to higher risk of victimization or communities with higher concentration of sex offenders. Being younger, being female, and having children were identified risk factors for victimization. Because registered sex offenders have been found to be more likely to live in communities with higher percentages of racial minorities and more transient resident populations (Mustaine, Tewksbury, & Stengel, 2006), the variable of race (recoded to minority/nonminority) and time living in residence were included. Last, personal experiences with crime that may influence beliefs and behavior about criminal justice policy were included.

Results

Use of the Offender Registry

The majority of participants were aware that sex offenders are required to register their address with the police (94.5%) and that the registry is publicly available (88.6%). However, only 37% of the participants had looked at the registry. Of those who had viewed the registry, 90% used the Internet to view it. The remaining 10% viewed the registry at a local or state police department or a media outlet. Respondents at greatest risk for sexual victimization viewed the registry as follows: 59% of families with children less than the age of 18 years, 40% of women, and 49% of individuals aged 30 years and younger.

The 63% of the participants who had never looked at the registry were asked to provide an open-ended explanation. These 458 people provided 554 reasons as to why they had not consulted the registry (see Table 1). The percentages in the table reflect the percentage of respondents who provided this reason for not looking at the registry. As a percentage of total responses provided, the three main reasons given were that they had no need to look at the registry or had no interest in it (34%), felt safe in their neighborhood (15%), or do not have children who might be at risk (10%).

We performed independent *t* tests and chi-square tests to see which factors significantly increased the likelihood of using the registry. The independent *t* tests showed that younger persons, $t(707) = 7.217, p < .001$, and respondents who had lived in their current residence a shorter length of time, $t(717) = 4.747, p < .001$, were significantly more likely to view the registry. The chi-square test of independence showed that females were more likely to view the registry than males, $\chi^2(1, N = 725) = -5.009, p < .025$. Respondents with children, $\chi^2(1, n = 719) = 19.555, p < .000$, were more likely to have looked at the registry than childless participants. If the participant or someone they knew had been a victim of a sex crime, $\chi^2(1, n = 714) = 14.115, p < .001$, they were also more likely to have viewed the registry.

We used logistic regression to determine the most significant predictors of registry use (see Table 2). The model was found to significantly predict registry usage ($p < .001$), and it correctly predicted 67% of the users. Having school-aged children, being younger, and having been or knowing a victim of a sex crime had significant partial effects. The odds ratio for children indicates that, when holding all other variables constant, a parent of children between 5 and 17 has 1.7 times higher odds of having looked at the registry than a nonparent or parent of only younger children. Those with a victimization history had 1.6 times higher odds of looking at the registry. The odds ratio for age was .98, indicating that age was inversely related to likelihood of viewing the sex offender registry.

Table 1
Reasons Given for Not Looking at the Registry

	<i>N</i>	Percentage ^a
No interest		
No interest (nonspecific)	188	41.0
Prefer not to know	7	1.5
Feels safe or unaffected		
Feels safe (nonspecific)	82	17.9
Lives in rural area	31	6.8
Older adult/does not affect them	16	3.5
Lives in a retirement community	6	1.3
Children		
No children/young children	57	12.4
Close supervision of children	8	1.7
Knowledge/access		
Do not know how	39	8.5
No access to computer/Internet	38	8.3
Did not know the registry existed	14	3.1
Physical barrier	4	0.9
Web site was not working when they tried to access	2	0.4
Other		
No time	18	3.9
Do not know	18	3.9
Someone else they know looks at the registry	14	3.1
Does not agree with the registry/believes it is ineffective	11	2.4
Will lead respondent to cause harm against offender	1	0.2
Total	554	

a. Percentage refers to the percentage of respondents who gave each answer. As respondents were able to provide multiple responses, these will not total to 100%.

Table 2
Logistic Regression of Registry Usage

	β	Wald χ^2	Odds Ratio
Age	-.025	14.08	0.976*
Male	-.213	1.31	0.808
Victim of sex crime	.487	6.86	1.627*
Convicted of any crime	.076	0.03	1.079
Caucasian	-.005	0.22	0.995
Have preschool children	.387	2.16	1.473
Have school-aged children	.522	7.81	1.686*
Time in residence	-.004	0.249	0.996

* $p < .05$.

Table 3
Logistic Regression of Awareness of Registered Offenders

	β	Wald χ^2	Odds Ratio
Viewed registry	1.999	81.60	7.38*
Age	.001	0.02	1.00
Male	-.309	1.74	0.734
Victim of sex crime	.294	1.72	1.34
Convicted of any crime	.300	0.28	1.35
Caucasian	-.027	0.50	0.973
Have preschool children	-.036	0.013	0.965
Have school-aged children	.537	5.34	1.71*
Time in residence	.013	1.71	1.01

* $p < .05$.

Awareness of Offenders in the Community

Data collected from the Michigan Sex Offender Registry indicates that 99.5% of the survey respondents live in a community/zip code where an offender is registered. The number of offenders per zip code ranged from 0 to 187, with an average of 43 ($SD = 39.07$) offenders per zip code. The number of offenders per 10,000 population ranged from 0 to 120.48. The average density of offenders per 10,000 population was 19.25 ($SD = 12.29$).

However, only 27% of the respondents reported that they believed an offender lived in his or her community. Those who have looked at the registry are significantly more likely to be aware that an offender is living in the community, $\chi^2(1, n = 630) = 14.115, p < .001$. However, even among those respondents who have looked at the registry, only 51% reported believing an offender lived in that community. Among these, only one lived in a zip code in which no offender was registered.

We conducted logistic regression to determine the factors related to being accurately aware of the presence or absence of offenders in the community. The model (see Table 3) was found to significantly predict awareness of offenders ($p < .001$). The model correctly predicted 76% of the cases. Respondents who had viewed the registry were the most likely to be aware ($p < .001$), with those who had looked at the registry having more than 7 times higher odds of being accurately aware of a registered offender. Parents with school-aged children (ages 5-18) were nearly twice as likely to be aware of offenders in the community. However, it is important to note that awareness was based only on the presence of a registered offender, as unregistered offenders could not be measured.

Discussion

The findings of the public's awareness and usage of the Michigan Sex Offender Registry indicate that the initial goals of the federal policy are potentially not being

met. Data indicate that less than half of the respondents indicated that they had utilized the registry. Predictors of utilization included age, having children, and having been the victim of a sex crime. Therefore, those with the most reasons for feeling concern about sex offenders are utilizing the registry, which can be viewed as a success.

Only about one fourth of the residents were aware of an offender living in their community, despite the fact that registered offenders resided in all but 0.5% of zip codes. Predictors of awareness included utilization of the registry and having children in the home. However, more than half of those who had looked at the registry were still unaware of registered offenders in the community. This indicates that, although the registry is making progress in increasing awareness, the population is still largely unaware of potential offenders in their own community.

We believe our study has improved on previous work that examined residents' awareness of local registered sex offenders (Craun, in press), by measuring the respondent's use of the sex offender registry. It was unexpected that the variables measured in this survey to predict registry utilization did not have similar statistical significance to the predictors of awareness of local sex offenders found by Craun. Specifically, Craun (in press) found no relationship between having children in the home, age, and awareness of a neighborhood sex offender. Craun's study asked participants about sex offenders in the "neighborhood," which may have suggested a smaller area in the participants' minds than did our study, which used the term *community*. Perhaps parents were more likely to be cautious and agree that there were sex offenders in the community, based on size alone. Future research should attempt to clarify the differences in outcomes between these two studies.

There was some concern that the existence of the registry may lead to a false sense of security about sexual offenders and the likelihood of perpetration (Trivits & Reppucci, 2002). When residents in one county in Florida were surveyed, they tended to disagree with the notion that having the community aware of local sex offenders provided a false sense of security (Levenson et al., 2007). However, another study empirically illustrated that people who knew that a person arrested for a sexual offense resided in their neighborhood were more likely to worry about strangers sexually abusing children, as compared to people the children knew (Craun & Theriot, 2008). In fact, in a third study, only 10% of the individuals surveyed thought that community notification or registration was effective in decreasing sexual abuse (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007). Sex offenders who are required to register but fail to comply and offenders who have committed a sexual crime but were either not prosecuted or prosecuted for a nonsexual charge also diminish the registry's usefulness.

Obviously, the registry is of no use among residents who do not review it regularly. Understanding the reasons Michigan residents chose not to look at the registry has important implications for the creation of intervention programs to increase utilization. This is the first study we are aware of that allowed respondents to express in their own words why they do not use the sex offender registry, which can provide valuable insight into avenues for intervention. We found that the most frequently

cited reason for lack of use was lack of interest in the registry, followed by a feeling that the registry is irrelevant because the participant already felt safe. Another common reason was not having children. Taken together, these responses indicate there are misperceptions about sexual offenders and the sex offender registry. Most notably, responses seemed to indicate a belief that only those who offend against children are included on the registry. Additionally, older adults and those living in rural communities seemed to feel safe from sexual offenders. It appears that a simple intervention point may be to inform residents that sex offender registries include offenders who offend against adults, as well as children. Furthermore, because the study demonstrated that utilization is a significant predictor of awareness of sex offenders in the community, it is important to raise awareness among residents that the registry can help them learn more about local offenders.

An increase in usage by the public would have both positive and negative consequences. There is potential for registry users to become more informed about offenders in their community and, therefore, take appropriate steps to protect themselves and their families. This may be driven, at least in part, by an increase in the level of fear among the public. Conversely, researchers suggest that the registry also provides a false sense of security, because it cannot include information on unidentified perpetrators and those who have not yet been convicted. Higher rates of registry use may also lead to further social isolation of those offenders identified in the registry. Research also has shown that these negative effects of registration may actually contribute to higher rates of recidivism.

Limitations

This research is limited in some ways, and further research is needed to verify the results. Specifically, presence of an offender in the community was measured at the zip-code level. A study using a more precise measure could examine this with greater geographic specificity to the respondent. This is important because respondents may not think of the entire zip code as representative of the community, particularly in rural areas where zip codes may cover a geographically large area, or, conversely, in densely populated communities, which may encompass multiple zip codes. However, as 86% of serial rapes occur more than 3 miles from the offender's home (Warren et al., 1998) and 49% of stranger-perpetrated child sexual abuse occur more than 1 mile from the offender's home (Duwe et al., 2008), measurement at the level of the neighborhood may be too narrow.

This study did not attempt to obtain information from respondents regarding other ways in which they might have become aware of sex offenders in their community beyond their use of the Internet registry. Therefore, there may be greater numbers of citizens aware of sex offenders in their community who obtained information through other means. Furthermore, we did not ask participants if they were registered sex offenders or if they knew someone on the registry. These factors might affect the percentage of respondents using the registry.

Additionally, the cross-sectional design we used presents difficulty in determining causality. It is possible that those who believed there might be an offender residing in the community would be more likely to use the offender registry. Therefore, it was difficult to determine if registry use actually increased the perception of offenders in the community. Additionally, we did not measure social desirability in the cross-sectional survey.

Last, the use of the phone survey strategy may limit the generalizability of the study. The study is limited by a response rate of only 44%, because those who chose not to participate may have led to a biased sample in some ways. Additionally, as the survey could only reach those who had land telephone lines and spoke English, some members of the population were excluded.

Future Research

Future research should consider both the positive and negative effects of registry use and measure awareness of registered sex offenders. Estimates about negative consequences, such as threats or vandalism toward registered sex offenders, vary from as little as 4% (Welchans, 2005) to as many as half of those registered (Human Rights Watch, 2007; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Tewksbury, 2005). Can these negative reactions to awareness of registered sex offenders be predicted? How can empirical research inform dissemination practices to allow for the appropriate circulation of information about registered sex offenders, while still considering their civil rights?

As this study provides some insight into why residents choose not to use the sex offender registry, future research can determine if interventions directed toward changing these perceptions can increase use and, therefore, awareness of offenders in the community. Finally, the current research assumes that utilization and awareness will lead to the appropriate identification of community offenders. However, after looking at the registry, can residents identify registered sex offenders after a certain amount of time? Can they identify them by name, by sight, or only by location of residence? This is important because the distance traveled by convicted, repeat sex offenders was more than 1 mile for almost 20% of one sample (Duwe et al., 2008). Although nearly 60% reoffended within their residence (Duwe et al., 2008), it is crucial to know if residents who use the registry should be focusing on locations, names, or photographs of the sex offenders.

The authors of this study wanted to determine the percentage of residents in Michigan who had utilized the registry and identify predictors of utilization, the percentage of residents who believed there was a sex offender in their community, along with predictors of belief of local sex offenders. Another important point was understanding the reasons or barriers to utilization of the registry, to help policy makers and practitioners determine where to attempt to intervene to increase use. Although this study only considered reasons for nonuse of the registry, reasons for *use* could further shape this discussion. Additionally, we found that utilization and

awareness were low. The predictors of each also provide some additional information on where to target interventions for better awareness and utilization.

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