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Who accesses the sex offender registries? A look at legislative intent and citizen action in Nebraska

Amy L. Anderson*, Mary K. Evans and Lisa L. Sample

School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Nebraska at Omaha, USA

States are required to maintain an Internet-based sex offender registry in order to comply with community notification laws. Such legislation, however, relies on citizens to proactively access information regarding sex offenders' whereabouts in order to take precautions to protect themselves and their families. This study examines the legislative intent, in terms of the target audience for sex offender community notification laws, and whether this audience is in fact using the online community notification tools available to the public. Survey responses from a representative sample of Nebraska residents and logistic regression are used to examine who is likely to access the registry information and also who is likely to take preventative action in response. Our findings and the implications of the results on notification laws are discussed.

Keywords: sex offender legislation; sex offender notification; State of Nebraska Sex Offender Registry; community notification; citizen action

Introduction

This study examines citizen action related to two legislative acts mandating the collection and community dissemination of information regarding sex offenders. The first, 'Megan's Law,' required states to make relevant information on released sex offenders available to the general public (Adams, 2002). Megan's Law was premised on the notion that the general public should be informed about the presence of convicted sex offenders in the community. To date, all states have implemented community notification procedures (Sample, 2001). Megan's Law, however, failed to provide specific instructions to the states regarding how to disseminate this information to the public and, as a result, states differ in their notification procedures.

Ten years after the passage of Megan's Law, the Adam Walsh Child Protection Act of 2006 (Walsh Act) was signed into law (Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006, Pub. L. No. 109–248, 120 Stat. 587). The Walsh Act greatly enhanced federal sex offender policies by increasing penalties for those who sexually exploit children, expanding Internet investigations and prosecutions for child pornography, and most importantly, required the federal government to compile all state sex offender registries into one uniformed national sex offender registry, to be placed on the Internet. The lack of federal guidance to states on community notification procedures in Megan's Law was largely addressed by the passage of the Adam Walsh Act.

Given the public safety intentions of notification laws, and the role citizens are asked to play in achieving these goals, it is appropriate to examine the public utilization of these

*Corresponding author. Email: amyanderson@mail.unomaha.edu

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tools. With this in mind, we pose two research questions. First, who is more likely to access sex offender registry information? Second, who is more likely to act upon the knowledge of sex offenders in their community? We use survey responses from Nebraska residents to answer these questions.

Background

It seems intuitive that the intended audience for notification laws would be those citizens with children. Indeed, Megan's Law was titled as such for seven-year-old Megan Kanka, who was sexually assaulted and killed by a previously convicted sex offender who lived in her community. Upon reading the congressional record for the passage of Megan's Law (Public Law 104–145, Congressional Record, Vol. 142, 1996), however, the audience for this law appears to be broader in nature than simply those with children. Beyond providing the release of sex offender information to the public, the law also states:

> The designated State law enforcement agency and any local law enforcement agency authorized by the State agency shall release relevant information that is necessary to protect the public concerning a specific person required to register under this section … (Section 170101 (d))

This passage clearly infers the intent of Megan's Law by legislators, that of protecting the public from sexual offenders. Families with children were not singled out as only those in need of sex offender information, but rather the law suggests that all citizens should be informed as to sex offenders' whereabouts. This generalization to a broader audience is consistent with the ways in which modern society is organized, in that parents are not the only members of society concerned about the well-being of children. Not only do government officials, parents, and teachers care about children's welfare, but residents without children often offer an attentive eye to children in a neighborhood. For example, media outlets often share stories of strangers who have come to the aid of children in need, and most of us have noted and tried to help children who are alone and have lost their parents in public spaces, whether we ourselves are parents or not. It is in this way that even people without children of their own would be interested in learning sex offenders' residences, if not only to protect themselves from sexual attack, but also to protect neighborhood children.

The passage of the Walsh Act clarified, to some degree, the intention of notification laws and reaffirmed the need for the general public to have access to sex offender information. As stated in the Walsh Act:

> In order to protect the public from sex offenders and offenders against children, and in response to the vicious attacks by violent predators against the victims below, Congress in this Act establishes a comprehensive national system for the registration of those offenders. (Public Law 109–248, Section 102)

It goes on to list the 17 victims for which this legislative action was meant to acknowledge, all of whom had been sexually assaulted and killed. Of those 17 victims, 13 were children under 14 years of age, one was 16 years of age, and the remaining three were 20 years or older. This information clearly suggests that children are those who legislators are most trying to protect, but adult victimization is also acknowledged as well. Further, the Walsh Act mandates registration information was to be made available to the public through the Internet:

> … Each jurisdiction shall make available on the Internet, in a manner that is readily accessible to all jurisdictions and to the public, all information about each sex offender in the registry. (Public Law 109–248, Section 118)

Like Megan's Law, the Walsh Act does not identify only parents as those who are in need of sex offender information. In fact, the Walsh Act admits that adults can fall victim to homicidal sex offenders as well, and seeks to protect the public by giving them information about predators for defensive purposes. Seemingly, federal legislation suggests that all citizens, regardless of characteristics such as parental status, marital status, or gender, should not only have access to registration information, but should obtain this information and take steps to protect themselves and their families.

The fact that information is available online could affect the utilization of the sex offender registries. Obviously, since the federal mandate is to place the information on the Internet, individuals without a computer may be unable to check online sex offender registries. This is becoming less problematic over time, however, as access to a computer becomes easier to find or afford. For example, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, only 15% of Americans used the Internet in 1995, whereas by April 2006, nearly three-quarters of Americans used the Internet on a regular basis from home, work, or school (Fallows, 2005).

Even if people cannot access the Internet at home, work, or school, online access can be easily obtained at local libraries. Public libraries have placed Internet compatibility and accessibility as priorities, citing that even people who cannot afford Internet access can obtain critical information, particularly contained on governmental websites, by visiting their local libraries (Berlot, Jaeger, Langa, & McClure, 2006). This is confirmed by the increase of Internet capability at public libraries from about 21% in 1994 to 99.6% in 2004 (Berlot et al., 2006). Moreover, Rankin-Macgill (2007) found that 53% of individuals that had limited or no Internet access at home said they went to a library in the past 12 months to access the Internet. It seems that most (computer-competent) citizens should be able to access sex offender registries on the Internet, whether through a private or public computer.

Effectiveness of sex offender notification laws

There are a number of researchers who have studied sex offender notification laws, generally investigating assumptions underlying the laws and highlighting the lack of empirical information available to lawmakers (Cohen & Jeglic, 2007; Levenson, 2009; Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Sample, 2006; Sample & Bray, 2003, 2006; Sample & Kadleck, 2008; Shajnfeld & Krueger, 2006; Tewksbury, 2002, 2005; Zevitz, 2003; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000b; Zgoba, 2004). To date, however, there have been few empirical evaluations of the laws' effectiveness (Cohen & Jeglic, 2007). Researchers have recently begun to fill this void by exploring the effectiveness of community notification laws in terms of the degree to which they inform the public and affect sex offenders' behavior (Lovell, 2007; Phillips, 1998; Redlich, 2001). The effectiveness of sex offender laws can be examined in a number of ways. For example, some of what we know about sex offender legislation pertains to the public's knowledge and acceptance of these laws (Levenson, 2003; Levenson et al., 2007; Tewksbury, 2002, 2005; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000a). Several scholars, for example, have found widespread public knowledge and support for sex offender registration and community notification laws (Levenson et al., 2007; Martin & Marinucci, 2006; Phillips, 1998).

Despite the public support for these laws, there is some evidence that few citizens may access sex offender information or act upon the information learned (Anderson & Sample, 2008). Specifically, sex offender notification laws ask the public to proactively seek information concerning sex offenders and little is known about the extent to which citizens utilize what is available to them. One recent study found that while almost 9 in 10 Nebraskans knew there was a state sex offender registry, only one-third of the sample had actually checked the registry, and of those, only about one-third took any preventative action as a result (Anderson & Sample, 2008). Nevertheless, a vast majority (88% of the one-third that checked) of respondents felt personally safer, and safer for their families, knowing this information was available. It seems that few people may access sex offender information, yet being able to access this information may make people feel safer.

Of additional note is the variability in accessing sex offender information by demographic groups. Anderson and Sample (2008) found differences in checking the Nebraska Sex Offender Registry between men and women, different age categories, various marital statuses, whether or not children were present in the home, various education levels, low and high income, and living in an urban or rural area. Additionally, significant differences existed only between men and women and between respondents with children and those without children with regard to having taken preventative action as a result of accessing the sex offender registry. Although enlightening, this study was largely descriptive and cannot predict those more or less likely to access information or take action on such information.

This investigation expands on previous research by posing two questions. First, we are interested in whether some citizens are more likely to check the sex offender registry than others. Our second question asks who is more likely to take preventative action as a result of accessing the sex offender registry. Both questions are related to the goals of notification legislation.

Data and method

Nebraska Sex Offender Registry

The Nebraska State Patrol compiles the information for the registry from released sex offenders. The notification system used in the state is a three-tiered system based on an assessment of recidivism risk. Sex offenders who are assessed to be low risk must register, but their personal information is made available only to law enforcement for the purposes of monitoring and investigations. Law enforcement extends proper notification to schools, day care centers, and religious and youth organizations that are in the registrant's county of residence for offenders assessed at moderate risk. For offenders who are assessed at the highest risk for reoffending, community members are notified through media releases in the registrants' area of residence and through the state's Internet registration website, in addition to other methods such as news releases and/or direct contact with neighbors. In other words, in Nebraska, the sex offender registry that is accessed by individuals online only includes offenders that have been determined to be the most dangerous sex offenders. In this respect, Nebraska is well-suited for our research interests as there is reason to believe that all people would have a vested interest in accessing such information and subsequently taking preventative action in order to increase public safety in the community in which they live.

Survey instrument and sampling design

Data for this study were derived from a larger annual survey conducted in Nebraska by the Bureau of Sociological Research (BOSR). These data were collected between November

2006 and March 2007. Questions on the Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Survey (NASIS) focus on issues such as aspects of well-being, access to parks and recreational activities throughout the state, and various social services. The survey instrument consisted of 68 pages and took roughly one hour to administer. We were allowed one minute of questions, which amounted to six closed-ended questions on the survey.

The interviewers who administered the NASIS used random digit dialing to select survey respondents. In order to obtain a representative sample, a probability process was used to select persons to be surveyed in each telephoned home. This process began with the interviewer asking the person answering the telephone the number of adults living in the home. Based on a random selection by computer, the interviewer requested to speak with the adult who is the oldest, middle, youngest, and so forth. If the randomly selected respondent was not available at the time of the call, the BOSR interviewer probed for a time when the respondent was likely to be available in order to make a return call. The sample is limited in that it was drawn from an adult population consisting of non-institutionalized persons in households with telephones.

A total of 9674 telephone numbers were sampled, of which 5558 were households. Only 20% of the telephone numbers for homes resulted in a ring but no answer after 15 attempts, these households were subsequently excluded from the sample. Of the 5558 households that were selected, 1821 (33%) adult Nebraska residents aged 19 years or older completed the survey. Appropriately, weights were computed by the BOSR and used in all of our analyses that make the NASIS a representative sample of individuals aged 19 and older living in the state of Nebraska.

Independent variables

The independent variables we included in our analyses were gender, age, marital status, education, children, income, race, Internet access, and whether the respondent lived in an urban area. These variables were created from the demographic information collected from respondents and given to us along with our data on citizen action regarding the sex offender registry, with the exception of the question concerning Internet access, which we were granted permission to use by the BOSR. Descriptive data for these variables can be found in Table 1.

Gender was coded to represent females (females = 1). *Children* represented the presence of children in the home (at least one child in the home = 1). *Internet* was based on a single question that asked the respondents whether they had access to the Internet from home or at work for personal use (Internet access = 1). It should be noted that this is a conservative measure as the question does not allow for a wider range of options regarding access to the Internet, such as a local library or a friend's house. *Urban* was based on one question that asked respondents whether they lived on a farm or in the open country or a city or town (city or town = 1). The response categories for *race* were the same as found in the Census, and included Caucasian, African-American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander/Hawaiian, Native American, and respondents who responded as 'Other' or those who self-identified with more than one racial or ethnic category. A dichotomous race variable was created (other/multiple racial/ethnic groups = 0, Caucasian = 1) because 91% of the sample identified themselves as being Caucasian and there were too few people in the remaining groups for any further differentiation.

The measure of *income* was based on a dichotomous question that asked the respondent to identify whether the family income was $20,000 or more or less than $20,000 (family income above $20,000 = 1). There were other questions on the survey that asked respondents

Table 1. Characteristics of sample ($N = 1821$).

Variables	Categories	Frequency
Independent variables		
Sex	Males	901 (49.5%)
	Females	919 (50.5%)
	Missing	1 (0.0%)
Age range	19–24	217 (11.9%)
	25–44	667 (36.6%)
	45–64	616 (33.8%)
	65+	312 (17.1%)
	Missing	9 (0.5%)
Marital status	Married	1246 (68.4%)
	Single/never married	313 (17.2%)
	Divorced, separated, living apart	157 (8.6%)
	Widowed	101 (5.6%)
	Missing	4 (0.2%)
Education	Less than high school	82 (4.5%)
	High school/GED	474 (26%)
	Some college or more	1262 (69.3%)
	Missing	3 (0.2%)
Children in the home	No children in the home	998 (54.8%)
	Children in the home	823 (45.2%)
Family income	Less than $20,000	182 (10%)
	$20,000 or more	1539 (84.5%)
	Missing (recoded to mean value of 0.9)	101 (5.5%)
Race	Caucasian only	1628 (89.4%)
	Other/multiple racial/ethnic group(s)	191 (10.5%)
	Missing	3 (.2%)
Urban/rural	City or town	1445 (79.3%)
	Farm or open country	375 (20.6%)
	Missing	1 (0.1%)
Internet	Internet access at work or home	1535 (84.3)
	No access to Internet at work or home	286 (15.7)
	Missing	1 (0.0%)
Dependent variables		
Ever accessed the registry?	Yes	558 (34.8%)
	No	1046 (65.2%)
Took preventative action?	Yes	209 (37.6%)
	No	346 (62.4%)

to identify which $5000 categorical bracket of income represented the family income. Preliminary data analyses revealed that the dichotomous variable best captured the relationship between income and the dependent variables. The dummy variable had fewer missing values and all of the 'action' relative to the dependent variables was in the very low end of the income scale. Due to the number of missing values ($n = 101$) and our desire to have the

power to examine the categorical variables, we replaced the missing values with the mean of 0.9.

Age was recorded based on respondents' answer to a categorical variable, coded 19–24 years of age, 25–44 years, 45–64 years, and 65 and older. For some analyses that were based on smaller sample sizes (discussed later), this variable was further recoded to a dichotomous variable representing those that were ages 19–44 (coded 0) and those 45 years of age and older (coded 1).

Marital status was recoded from a question that asked whether respondents were married, never married, divorced, widowed, separated, or married but living apart. We recoded married status to a categorical variable reflecting those who were never married, currently married, divorced, separated, or married but living separately, and widowed. For some analyses, this variable was recoded to represent those that were never married, previously married, and currently married.

Education was originally measured as a continuous variable that ranged from 0 (no schooling) through 22 (6th year grad school), and a final category for those with a GED/GED equivalent. The responses were then collapsed into categories ranging from elementary school education to doctorate degree. We created a categorical variable that represented the following categories of education: less than a high school degree, a high school degree only, and some college or college degree. For some analyses, this variable was further recoded to a dichotomous variable representing those that had a high school degree only or less (coded 1) compared to those with at least some college (coded 0).

Dependent variables and analysis plan

We used two dependent variables to measure citizen action regarding the sex offender registry. The first dependent variable was based on one question that asked the respondent 'Have you ever accessed the State of Nebraska's sex offender registry?' (no = 0, yes = 1). The second dependent variable was based on one question that asked the respondents who had accessed the registry, 'Have you taken any preventative measures as a result of the information?' (no = 0, yes = 1). These two variables serve as the basic citizen functions asked by the legislators in that citizens are asked to both check the information and use the information to protect themselves and the community.

Logistic regression and SPSS were used for all of the analyses. There were three categorical independent variables (age, marriage, and education), which were denoted as such and separate coefficients were estimated for each category of each variable. While this approach was not problematic for the analyses using the 'ever accessed' dependent variable, it was problematic for the 'preventative action taken' dependent variable due to the smaller sample size. In these models we recoded the three categorical variables where appropriate, as noted in the independent variables section, in order to have at least 20 respondents within each category. We note our recoded variables in the text as appropriate.

Results

Ever accessed the Nebraska Sex Offender Registry?

Logistic coefficients, odds ratios, standard errors, and Wald statistics are presented in each table (see Tables). Negative coefficients represent a decrease in the odds of the dependent variable, while a positive coefficient reflects an increase in the odds. Due to the small sample size for some models, a p-value of $p < 0.10$ was chosen as the cut-off value for statistical significance.

The first objective was to determine whether some demographic groups were more likely to check the sex offender registry than other groups. Consistent with this, the first model examined which characteristics were related to whether a respondent checked the Nebraska Sex Offender Registry (see Table 2).

Table 2. Logistic regression for ever accessed the Nebraska Sex Offender Registry.

	Ever accessed the NSOR?			
Independent variables	*b*[a]	OR[b]	Wald	
Female	0.80 (0.12)	2.23	46.72	**
Age			40.48	**
(19–24 years = reference)	–	–	–	
25–44 years	0.51 (0.24)	1.67	4.74	*
45–64 years	–0.16 (0.26)	0.85	0.39	
65+ years	–0.98 (0.34)	0.38	8.38	**
Marriage			0.35	
Never married	–0.03 (0.21)	0.97	0.02	
Divorced/separated	0.02 (0.21)	1.02	0.01	
Widowed	–0.20 (0.37)	0.82	0.30	
(Married = reference)	–	–	–	
Education			9.11	**
Less than high school	–0.96 (0.41)	0.38	5.47	*
High school only	–0.31 (0.15)	0.74	4.48	*
(Some college + = reference)	–	–	–	
Children	0.43 (0.14)	1.53	9.47	**
Urban	0.72 (0.15)	2.05	22.40	**
White	–0.03 (0.21)	0.98	0.02	
Internet access at home or work for personal use	0.91 (0.25)	2.50	13.09	**
Income of $20,000 or more	–0.03 (0.02)	0.97	0.02	
Constant	–2.58 (0.08)	0.08	29.15	**
		n = 1588		

[a]Standard errors in parentheses.
[b]Odds ratios, or the exp(*b*), where a 1.0 represents even odds.
†$p < 0.10$; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$.

To begin, there was no significant relationship between checking the sex offender registry and marital status, being Caucasian, or having an income greater than $20,000. The strongest predictor of whether a respondent checked the sex offender registry, however, was sex. Not surprisingly, females were found to have roughly twice the odds as males to check the sex offender registry. Age was another strong predictor of whether or not an individual accessed the registry. Specifically, one's chances of checking the sex offender registry decreased with age. Respondents who indicated that they resided in an urban area had twice the odds of accessing the sex offender registry as compared to those individuals who lived in a rural environment.

Not surprisingly, those respondents with Internet access at home, at work, or for personal use had 2.5 times the odds of accessing the registry online than those without access. Although significant, this finding was surprising in that the Internet variable was not the strongest predictor in the model. Instead, the sex, age, and urban variables had stronger effects on whether someone accessed the sex offender registry. Also surprising was that the effect of children, while significant, was also smaller in magnitude than the above-mentioned independent variables. Specifically, the odds of checking the registry were 1.5 times greater for those with children than those with no children. Finally, there was a significant relationship between education and accessing the registry. In particular, the less education one has the less likely they are to check the sex offender registry.

Although online community notification is intended to target and protect everyone, it was not surprising that sex had the strongest effect on checking the registry. It seems reasonable to believe that women would be more likely to access sex offender registry information since they may fear sexual victimization more so than men. Additionally, men may feel that they can adequately defend themselves against a sexual perpetrator. Also, if a male is married or has children, there may be more of a perceived need and motivation to know the location of sex offenders. For these reasons, in addition to the sex variable being the strongest predictor, sex-specific models were run for the dependent variables. In doing so, however, this made the sample size smaller for the 'take preventative action' variable, thus more collapsing of our variable categories was needed. This is noted in the text and tables where appropriate.

As can be seen in Table 3, for both sexes, age clearly played a large role in accessing the registry. These effects, however, went in the opposite direction for males and females. For males, the group least likely to check the registry was the 19–24 year olds, however, this was the age group most likely to check the registry for females. Additionally, the odds of checking the sex offender registry decreased for women, as they get older. On the other hand, the odds of checking the registry increased significantly for males aged 25–44 relative to the younger age group, which may suggest that males in the 25–44 age group may be more inclined to check due to other factors such as young children living in the home or being married.

Other interesting differences in accessing the registry emerged between males and females, particularly for the children, urban, and Internet variables. Males with children, or currently residing in an urban environment, were more likely to access the sex offender registry. For women there was no significant effect for children and the significant effect for urban environment was less important than age, education, and access to the Internet. Lastly, while having access to the Internet was strongly related to accessing the registry for women, however, it was less important for men.

Finally, there were some differences between men and women accessing the Nebraska Sex Offender Registry with regard to education and marital status. Education was significantly related to checking the registry for females. Specifically, women with less than a high school

Table 3. Logistic regression for ever accessing the Nebraska Sex Offender Registry: sex-specific models.

	Ever accessed the NSOR? Females				Ever accessed the NSOR? Males			
Independent variables	*b*[a]	OR[b]	Wald		*b*	OR	Wald	
Age			28.76	**			18.38	**
(19–24 years = reference)	–	–	–		–	–	–	
25–44 years	–0.11 (0.33)	0.89	0.12		1.15 (0.38)	3.16	9.37	**
45–64 years	–0.83 (0.35)	0.44	5.54	*	0.53 (0.42)	1.70	1.58	
65+ years	–1.99 (0.47)	0.14	18.01	**	0.24 (0.53)	1.27	0.20	
Marriage			5.29				7.23	†
Never married	–0.31 (0.30)	0.73	1.07		0.39 (0.31)	1.47	1.56	
Divorced/separated	–0.34 (0.27)	1.40	1.62		–0.48 (0.38)	0.62	1.61	
Widowed	–0.73 (0.52)	0.48	1.97		1.10 (0.60)	2.99	3.33	†
(Married = reference)	–	–	–		–	–	–	
Education			10.38	**			3.03	
Less than high school	–1.76 (0.60)	0.17	8.66	**	0.14 (0.58)	1.15	0.06	
High school only	–0.31 (0.20)	0.74	2.39		–0.39 (0.23)	0.68	2.84	†
(Some college + = reference)	–	–	–		–	–	–	
Children	0.17 (0.19)	1.19	0.85		0.75 (0.21)	2.13	12.59	**
Urban	0.49 (0.19)	1.63	6.79	**	1.19 (0.29)	3.29	16.96	**
White	0.23 (0.30)	1.26	0.60		–0.26 (0.29)	0.77	0.83	
Internet access at home or work for personal use	1.16 (0.34)	3.20	11.55	**	0.74 (0.40)	2.09	3.48	†
Income of $20,000 or more	–0.04 (0.33)	0.96	0.02		–0.01 (0.41)	0.99	0.00	
Constant	–1.29 (0.61)	0.28	4.41	*	–3.54 (0.80)	0.03	19.74	**
		$n = 821$				$n = 768$		

[a]Standard errors in parentheses.
[b]Odds ratios, or the exp(*b*), where a 1.0 represents even odds.
†$p < 0.10$; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$.

degree were significantly less likely to check than those with at least some college. For men, those with a high school degree only were about two-thirds as likely to check the registry as men with some college or more ($p < 0.10$).

Marital status was moderately related to checking the registry for men, with widowed men being significantly more likely than married men to check the registry ($p < 0.10$). The

overall pattern of results for marital status revealed differences between men and women, although marital status was not a significant predictor of accessing the registry for women. The only group more likely to check the registry than married women was divorced or separated women, which may indicate that women who live alone may feel the need to check the registry for safety reasons. For men, those who were divorced or separated were less likely to check than those who were married. Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that characteristics associated with women checking the registry are not necessarily the same as they are for men.

Was preventative action taken as a result?

Respondents who had accessed the sex offender registry were then asked some follow-up questions, including whether the respondent had taken preventative action as a result of obtaining information from the registry. Due to the smaller sample size (n = 549) for this analysis, variables in corresponding categories that had less than 20 respondents in another category were recoded.

Specifically, we did not have enough widowed respondents or those with less than a high school education. As a result, we created a 'previously married' variable by combining widows with the divorced or separated group. Additionally, we created a dichotomous education variable, where less than a high school education and high school education only were combined (coded 0), and the variable represented respondents with at least some college education or more (coded 1).

As indicated in Table 4, only four characteristics were associated with taking preventative action: sex, Internet access, children, and education. Females had roughly 1.5 times the odds of males to take preventative action as a result of checking the sex offender registry. Those respondents that checked the registry and had children in the home had nearly twice the odds of taking preventative measures as those who checked and did not have children. A surprising finding was the negative relationship associated with Internet access that indicated the odds of taking preventative action for those with Internet access was small (0.26) compared to those without access. Lastly, respondents having a high school education or less are more likely to take action than those respondents with some college or more.

Again, in order to examine sex-specific models, the age variable was recoded, as there were not enough respondents in the youngest and oldest age groups. As in earlier models, there were differences between men and women in the characteristics that were related to taking preventative action (see Table 5).

For example, the odds were greater for women with children to take preventative action than for women without children. While men with children were more likely than men without children to take preventative action, this relationship was not significant. There were also sex differences regarding the urban variable. Specifically, women in urban environments had nearly twice the odds of taking preventative action as those women who lived in rural environments. For men, living in an urban environment reduced the odds of taking action relative to men in a rural environment, although this effect was not significant.

Reflecting the negative effect of access to the Internet at home or at work noted in the model with the full sample, men with access to the Internet had significantly lower odds of taking action than men without access to the Internet at home or at work. The only other characteristic that was significant for men were having a high school degree or less as compared with men with some college or more. Specifically, the odds of taking preventative action were approximately 2 times the odds for men with less education than they were for

Table 4. Logistic regressions for whether took preventative measures as a result of checking the Nebraska Sex Offender Registry.

	Take preventative action as a result?			
Independent variables	*b*[a]	OR[b]	Wald	
Female	0.48 (0.20)	1.61	5.87	*
Age			0.03	
(19–24 years = reference)	–	–	–	
25–44 years	0.04 (0.38)	1.04	0.01	
45–64 years	0.02 (0.42)	1.02	0.00	
65+ years	–0.03 (0.61)	0.97	0.00	
Marriage			1.62	
Never married	–0.10 (0.33)	0.91	0.09	
Previously married	0.36 (0.31)	1.44	1.38	
(Married = reference)	–	–	–	
High school only or less	0.45 (0.23)	1.57	3.76	*
Children	0.57 (0.24)	1.78	5.97	*
Urban	0.34 (0.27)	1.41	1.64	
White	0.04 (0.34)	1.04	0.01	
Internet access at home or work for personal use	–1.36 (0.48)	0.26	7.99	**
Income of $20,000 or more	0.06 (0.43)	1.06	0.02	
Constant	–0.41 (0.82)	0.67	0.24	
		$n = 549$		

[a]Standard errors in parentheses.
[b]Odds ratios, or the exp(*b*), where a 1.0 represents even odds.
†$p < 0.10$; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$.

men with higher education levels. The effect of having a high school education or less was also significant for women, where the odds of taking preventative action were roughly 1.5 times the odds for women with less education than women with at least some college education. More research is needed with a larger sample of men to increase the power of detecting significant effects.

The general pattern of findings for marital status was interesting, although none of the effects reached a significance level ($p < 0.10$). Women who were single, whether divorced or separated or never married, had greater odds of taking preventative action than married women. For men, those that were previously married were more likely to take preventative action than men that were married, while men that were never married had about half the

Table 5. Logistic regression for whether preventative action was taken as a result of checking the Nebraska Sex Offender Registry: sex-specific models.

	Take preventative action? Females only				Take preventative action? Males only			
Independent variables	*b*[a]	OR[b]	Wald		*b*	OR	Wald	
Aged 45 years and older	–0.11 (0.30)	0.90	0.13		0.04 (0.41)	1.04	0.01	
Marriage			1.49				3.44	
Never married	0.25 (0.39)	1.29	0.43		–0.80 (0.51)	0.45	2.50	
Previously married	0.41 (0.36)	1.51	1.30		0.43 (0.65)	1.54	0.43	
(Married = reference)	–	–	–		–	–	–	
High school only or less	0.50 (0.31)	1.65	2.70	†	0.84 (0.41)	2.31	4.14	*
Children	0.78 (0.29)	2.18	7.26	**	0.10 (0.41)	1.11	0.06	
Urban	0.58 (0.31)	1.79	3.65	†	–0.40 (0.58)	0.67	0.49	
White	0.40 (0.48)	1.49	0.70		–0.20 (0.52)	0.82	0.15	
Internet access at home or work for personal use	–0.81 (0.62)	0.44	1.73		–1.89 (0.79)	0.15	5.70	*
Income of $20,000 or more	–0.24 (0.51)	0.79	0.22		1.25 (0.90)	3.47	1.93	
Constant	–0.85 (1.0)	0.43	0.72		0.26 (1.31)	1.30	0.04	
		$n = 341$				$n = 208$		

[a]Standard errors in parentheses.
[b]Odds ratios, or the exp(*b*), where a 1.0 represents even odds.
†$p < 0.10$; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$.

odds of taking preventative action as married men. Finally, the non-significant positive relationship between being Caucasian and taking preventative action as a result of checking the sex offender registry indicated that non-white males and white females were more likely to take action.

Discussion and conclusion

Researchers are beginning to examine the effects of sex offender community notification laws, for example, in terms of whether the laws reduce recidivism or whether citizens approve of such laws (Levenson et al., 2007; Lovell, 2007; Phillips, 1998; Sample & Bray, 2006; Schram & Milloy, 1995; Zevitz, 2006). Little is known, however, about whether citizens are proactively accessing the information contained in these public tools. The language of relevant legislation suggests that communities and society benefit from members checking the registries in order to do what is necessary, at both the family and community level, to be sure all citizens are 'safe.' In this sense, the goal is to provide information to citizens in order for them to take whatever preventative action they deem appropriate.

Our study presents the first multivariate examination of the characteristics associated with accessing a sex offender registry and taking preventative action. The findings suggest, not surprisingly, that the information tended to be accessed by those with the most to gain from a defensive perspective – women, younger respondents, those who lived in an urban environment, and by those with children in the home. Not unexpectedly, the largest predictor of checking the registry was being female. Females also had greater odds of taking preventative action than men, as did respondents with children and respondents with a high school education or less. Given that females represent the overwhelming majority of sexual assault victims and have traditionally been the primary caregivers for children, it is logical that they would be more interested in where sex offenders live and more prone to take action on such information. The fact that the effects varied between men and women for both of our dependent variables perhaps highlights the different social worlds of men and women with regard to sexual victimization, and underscores the importance of examining the motivations for checking the sex offender registry separately by sex.

Additionally, the odds of checking the Nebraska Sex Offender Registry were significantly greater for respondents who had access to the Internet. The odds of checking the registry were significantly reduced for respondents that had less than a high school degree or a high school degree compared to respondents that had at least some college education. Those that were more likely to take preventative action, however, were those with a high school degree or less. This seems counter-intuitive. The fact that people with higher education accessed the registry, yet took no action based on the information, may suggest that this group checks the registry simply out of curiosity. Alternatively, it may also suggest that those with higher levels of education find that sex offenders generally do not live in their communities, and therefore, no preventative action is necessary. There is a growing body of literature that suggests sex offenders, after release from prison, are often relocated in communities characterized with greater levels of social disorganization, and by implication communities with fewer resources to monitor and prevent deviant behavior (Mustaine, Tewksbury, & Stengel, 2006; Zevitz, 2003, 2004). To the degree that education level correlates with income and neighborhood of residence, it is possible that more highly educated people have the skills and knowledge to check sex offender registries online, yet have little need to take protectionist actions. This possibility deserves further investigation in future studies.

Those that live in an urban area were more likely to access sex offender information than those in rural environments, but only females living in an urban setting were significantly likely to take some preventative measures. This makes sense in light of the close proximity in which people live in urban areas and the social cohesion often found in rural environments. Those who reside in metropolitan areas often live within feet of other residents, visit city parks often full with people, and send their children to schools found within the heart of dense neighborhoods. The increased contact urban dwellers have with others would naturally make them more interested in the sexually criminal activities of others, and would make females logically more protective in nature. In contrast, rural environments are less densely populated, so residents live further from one another and come into contact less often. Moreover, it is likely those in rural settings know their neighbors and their patterns of behavior personally and feel no need to check formal notification mechanisms. Regardless of potential explanation, this geographical difference in accessing information and taking protective action deserves further investigation.

Last, marital status was a significant predictor for checking sex offender information, particularly for men. Married and widowed men were more likely to check the registry than single men, but they were not significantly likely to take any action as a result. It is possible

that this simply represents 'paternalistic curiosity.' Traditional gender roles dictate the protection of women by men, and this can be particularly prevalent in traditional patriarchal marriages. It is possible that married men seek out information about sex offenders' whereabouts in an effort to protect their wives from sexual victimization. For the widower, it is likely that these paternalistic tendencies do not fade quickly after the loss of a spouse. Although these men did not take any significant specific action based on the information they learned, it is possible that, for these men, the simple act of checking the registry was their way of taking preventative steps. In the future, this difference among married and never-married men should be further explored.

The results also suggest that Internet access at home or at work is an important determinate of people taking advantage of the information notification laws offer. But the significant and positive effect of access to the Internet on accessing the Nebraska Sex Offender Registry combined with the reduced odds of taking preventative action based on information received perhaps points to the basic convenience of having online access at home or at work. In other words, it may be that checking the registry is merely something interesting to do while 'surfing' the Internet, so preventative action was unlikely unless something particularly troublesome emerged. Future research should explore in more detail the reasons why people decide to check a sex offender registry.

Future research should also determine whether citizens are not interested in these law enforcement tools, which can be costly to maintain. In Nebraska, the expenditure estimates for the fiscal year 2006–2007 totaled $150,025 for Trooper salaries and benefits for two research analysts, a staff assistant, and an IT tech person to maintain the sex offender registry (an increase from the FY 2005–2006 NE SOR estimate of $92,800). There are additional costs associated with the daily maintenance of the registry itself, assessment of sex offenders, the hearing process, litigation, or investigations of registration violations. The cost involved would make determining the motivations for checking or not checking the registry of great importance to policymakers and criminal justice agents alike. For example, it may be that married men rely on their wives to obtain this type of information and younger men are just curious, but ultimately do not care about the information collected in sex offender registries and could do without them. This would be useful information for legislators to have in assessing the impact of their legislation as perhaps there is a target-focused, less costly way of providing the same service to the people who are most likely to want and use the information. Additionally, if people are only looking because they have the ability to look, but really it is just out of curiosity, then perhaps cheaper forms of community notification will suffice in informing the public.

Other dissemination procedures that may be as effective but less costly than Internet-based community notification could include sending registry information home with children from school or holding community notification meetings in conjunction with school activities (i.e., back-to-school night, parent–teacher conferences). This technique may have an increased chance at reaching a greater number of parents then if solely relying on a parent to proactively access such information online. In fact, if such a procedure was utilized in states like Nebraska, the public would not only know about the Level III sex offenders living in the community but also the Level II sex offenders who do not have their whereabouts disseminated to the general community.

Another cost-effective measure may be to include registry information in newspapers, on public access channels, or in other mass media outlets; such measures may reach a broader audience especially if one does not have immediate access to the Internet. For example, many cities have public access channels that display city jobs, upcoming activities, and city council meetings. Perhaps a segment could be devoted to displaying sex offender

registry information by zip code or neighborhood; this way all who have a television can access such information. Lastly, word-of-mouth originated by the former suggestions may be an effective measure of disseminating registry information. For example, it is possible that individuals, particularly those with children, could receive registry information from friends and neighbors, as seen on public access channels. It would prove especially useful if individuals then passed the information around to other individuals they knew in the neighborhood, as this type of word-of-mouth would be incredibly cost-effective. This could be facilitated through organized neighborhood watch groups that could meet to discuss various sex offenders living within a neighborhood. Future research should explore exactly how people receive information concerning sex offenders' whereabouts in order to discern if individuals use the Internet as the main dissemination tool.

Finally, the Walsh Act's mandate to place national registry information online may bias the target audience for this information toward more educated urban residents. It seems prudent, given our findings, for state and federal legislators to advertise the availability of sex offender information if notification laws are to more fully inform the public. It seems important for states to continue to offer sex offender information in newspapers and in community fliers. The utility of this information also should be explained to people without children, who live in rural settings, and who are older in years, as it appears that these groups are less likely to access Internet registries. In order for notification laws to achieve their goals, it will be essential to attract the largest audience possible for information and teach citizens how they can protect themselves and their families.

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Notes on contributors

Amy L. Anderson is an assistant professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Her research interests include social contexts and delinquency.

Mary K. Evans is doctoral student in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Her research interests include criminal justice policy and gender related issues.

Lisa L. Sample is an associate professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Her research interests include criminal and juvenile justice policy.

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