

Sex Offender Community Notification

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Introduction

Recent stories in the media have brought sex offenders and their victims right into the homes of every person in America. Because of cases like those of Polly Klaus and Megan Kanka no one is unaware of their existence. The thought that predators might be living among us has caused the legislatures of every state to finally deal with a problem that law enforcement agencies have been aware of since statistics on crime have been kept.

Since 1995, the North Carolina General Assembly has required sex offenders to account for their whereabouts. North Carolina General Statute 14-208 requires are offenders convicted, who do not receive an active sentence, and all offenders released from prison or jail after January 1, 1996 to register with the Sheriff of the county where they reside. The information they provide to the Sheriff's Office is posted and maintained on an Internet website by the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation as a means of notifying the community of a sex offenders presence. Anyone, from any computer with Internet access can obtain this information.

As the Deputy assigned to Sex Offender Registration in Onslow County I have found myself asking; Do the citizens of Onslow County know about this website and are they making use of its existence?

To answer this question I went in search of studies and information already available about the issue of community notification. Then I set forth my ideas for finding out if the citizen's of Onslow County know about and access the website.

Literature Review

Sex offender community notification laws are a recent addition to the law enforcement arsenal, many not being enacted until after 1996. Few research studies have been conducted on their implementation and their effect on the community and offenders. Reviewing the research, I found only four studies directly addressing these issues. The overall consensus of the research is that community notification is working, but it is having an unexpected cost in money and manpower on the agencies responsible for its

implementation. At the same time, community notification is having the expected result of making daily living uncomfortable for the sex offenders. One study even goes as far as making definite suggestions for the management and treatment of sex offenders.

Topics in the Literature

The studies I located were mostly conducted in the State of Washington. Washington has had sex offender registration laws longer than almost any other state, having implemented their first registration laws in 1989 and 1990. Phillips (1998) asked, what is the public's opinion of the community notification law? Schram and Milloy (1995) wanted to know how community notification laws had been implemented. English, Pullen, and Jones (1997) targeted parole and probation agencies on how they managed the sex offenders they had that were subject to community notification laws. The most recent study, conducted in Wisconsin by Zevitz and Forkas (2000) sought to measure the impact of community notification on the residents of the community, law enforcement agencies, probation and parole agencies, and the sex offenders themselves.

Phillips (1998) sought to show that the general population of the State of Washington was very familiar with the community notification law in that state and endorsed the implementation of such a law. Schram and Milloy (1995) believed that a comparison of two different groups of sex offenders, those subject to community notification and those that were not, would show that community notification was having no affect on the re-offense rates of offenders subject to notification. In their study, English, Pullen and Jones (1997) sought to substantiate indications in existing data that sex offenders should be managed by probation/parole agencies differently than other convicted criminals. The expectation that data would indicate the impact of community notification on law enforcement, probation and parole and the offenders themselves as being much larger than initially anticipated by governing bodies was used by Zevitz and Forkas (2000).

Three of the four studies used surveys to gather their data. One used data previously collected by law enforcement agencies and the department of corrections in that state. Phillips (1998) used random digit dialing telephone surveys to contact 400

residents in urban and rural areas of both eastern and western Washington State. English, Pullen, and Jones (1997) used telephone and mail surveys of 732 probation and parole supervisors and used field research to reinforce their findings. Zevitz and Forkas (2000) had the most thorough sampling by conducting surveys at 22 community notification meetings, surveying 188 law enforcement agencies, 77 probation and parole agents, and conducting face to face interviews with 30 convicted sex offenders.

Zevitz and Forkas (2000) attended community notification meetings and passed out questionnaires to the attendees after the meeting was over. They also mailed standardized questionnaires designed to assess the attitudes of law enforcement agencies about the new law and its provisions. They questioned probation and parole supervisors about the management of offenders, and their specific responsibilities in respect to notification. Schram and Milloy (1995) compared two groups of sex offenders using names obtained from 39 county and 18 urban law enforcement agencies. They compared 125 adult sex offenders subject to community notification with 90 adult sex offenders not subject to community notification by comparing data previously collected by law enforcement agencies and the department of corrections in that state (Schram, Milloy 1995). Schram and Milloy (1995) used the data obtained from records maintained by the Washington State Department of Corrections.

All the researchers found that sex offender community notification laws were meeting their intended goals of making the public aware of the presence of convicted sex offenders within their neighborhoods. Phillips (1998) found that age, gender, and education levels affected how threatened individuals felt by the presence of a sex offender in their neighborhood, and how they allowed that presence to influence their decisions relative to personal safety.

Zevitz and Forkas (2000) and Schram and Milloy (1995) had similar findings that there were costs not anticipated by law enforcement both budgetary and in man-hours. The expected costs, personal and financial, for the sex offenders themselves were approximate to those anticipated with the implementation of the law. English, Pullen and Jones (1997) proposed specific methods for the management of sex offenders in the community to include collaboration between agencies and consistent public policies.

The information provided by these studies reassures and affirms to America's legislatures and legislators that the laws they enacted, in reaction to the murder of Megan Kanka and disappearance of Jacob Wetterling, were not overreactions, nor have they incited the American citizenry to vigilantism directed toward convicted sex offenders. There have been very few incidences of open or violent harassment on the sex offenders living in their midst. However, all four studies concluded that more research, over an extended period, is needed to authenticate the results obtained thus far.

My plans are to take this information and use it to define the parameters for my own study. I not only wish to know if community notification is working, I want to find out how many citizens in Onslow County are even aware of community notification. I want to know if they know how to access the information.

Methods

My proposed experiment entails accessing the information I need from the sex offender registry maintained by the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation's website.

First, let me explain how the website works. Once you have accessed the registry website, you can look up sex offenders by county or by individual name. Accessing by county gives the visitor a list of all the sex offenders registered in that county. They are listed alphabetically by name. Also listed are their street addresses. To look at an individual offender you just click on their name. Each offender has his or her own page. On that page is a picture of the offender, demographic information about the offender, and a list of every address they have had listed since registering. This is the same page a visitor would access if they looked the offenders up by name from the opening web page.

The experiment would consist of asking the SBI agent in charge of the WebPages to attach counters to the individual pages of each sex offender registered in Onslow County. I would ask that the counters be set at zero on the first day of the experiment and allowed to run until the end of a thirty-day period. There would be two periods consisting of thirty days each, one before the intervention and one after the intervention.

The first thirty-day period would begin at midnight on the first day of the month, for example April 1, 2001, and run through midnight on the last day of the month. At the conclusion of the thirty days I would check the counters for each page and count to see how many times in that thirty day period the pages of Onslow County sex offenders had been visited.

After this first initial thirty-day period of measuring the number of county residents accessing the SBI's website, I would distribute a flyer advertising the state website. The SBI already has a flyer. The Onslow County Sheriff's Office has a copy of the flyer that was included with our initial information packet on the sex offender website. The SBI allows law enforcement agencies to make as many copies of the flyer as they need. I would make enough copies to mail, at a bulk rate, to every household in Onslow County.

After the flyers had been mailed I would again ask the SBI to monitor the Onslow County offenders' pages thirty day period counting the number of times each page was accessed. At the end of the thirty days I would obtain the total number of times the Onslow County pages were accessed. I would compare the number of hits from the first thirty-day period with the number of hits during the second thirty-day period, expecting to see a significant increase in the number of times the pages were accessed after the flyer was distributed.

O1 = Percentage of Onslow County residents accessing website before flyer

X = Distribution of the flyers

O2 = Percentage of Onslow County residents accessing website after flyers

O2 - O1 = positive number (an increase in residents accessing website

Once I know how many, or few, county residents are using this service it will give me a better idea of how large an effort needs to be made to make the public aware of the existence of this service.

Limitations

Due to the very nature of this experiment I do not anticipate many problems. As the researcher I would have no control over selection of the sample and therefore could

not bias the selection. I would have no contact with the sample and therefore could not bias the responses. Since no one would know they were being counted, nor would I have any way of knowing who was accessing the website there should not be any ethical problems.

Works Cited

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