

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this descriptive study was to explore the perceptions of collateral consequences of sex offender registration and community notification among a heterogeneous group of RSO's who were participating in online support and advocacy groups (not mandated by probation or parole).

## **Method**

*Participants.* A non-random sample of RSO's ( $n=72$ ) who were members of national Internet-based Registered Sex Offender Support and Advocacy groups, SOSEN, Inc, Operation Awareness, SOClear, Reform Sex Offender Laws, and CURE/SORT, and SATA was selected to participate in this study. These online organizations are dedicated to offering emotional support to RSO's in an effort to minimize the risk for re-offending or violating terms of Megan's Law and the Adam Walsh Act. In addition, these groups play a large role in advocating for policy change and limiting the proliferation of laws. Only those RSO's who are over 18 years of age were permitted to participate in the study.

*Instrumentation.* Participants completed a 76-item survey assessing (a) demographics; (b) conviction history; and (c) collateral consequences. The questions were developed based on Levenson, et al.'s (2005) survey assessing unintended consequences of being on the sex offender registry and what SOSEN, Inc staff members (comprised of RSO's and their family members) identified as potential consequences of community notification. An initial draft of the questions was then reviewed by three SOSEN, Inc staff members, one a non-RSO and two RSO's, to establish content validity.

*Procedures.* The survey was developed and distributed using SurveyMonkey, an online survey software provider. This survey was designed so that ISP and email addresses, as well as names were not collected. This survey software also used SSL technology so all information was sent over the Internet in a secure manner.

Once IRB approval was obtained, an invitation email along with the link to the survey was sent to the CEO's or other leaders of the Internet-based RSO organizations. The CEO's were asked in this email to forward the invitation and survey link to their members with specific instructions that the survey was only for those who'd been convicted of a sexually-based crime. In one instance, an organization opted to post the link in their online support forum instead of distributing it via email (they did not have an email distribution list for all their members) and another included the survey link in one of their monthly newsletters. All other distributed the survey link via email. RSO's who agreed to participate were asked to follow the survey link, consent to the study then complete and submit the questionnaire. The survey was taken off-line 1 month after it was originally posted (2 weeks after the link appeared in the RSOL digest)

*Analysis.* SPSS 16.0 was used to run descriptive statistics (frequency analyses) on the data.

## **Results**

*Demographics.* Participants from this study were from the United States, and one was from the United Kingdom. Seventy-six percent were between the ages of 35-64, 97% were male and 86% were White. Forty-four percent reported being currently married, 20% divorced, 1.4% in a civil union, 4.2% separated with the rest being single and 57% reported having children. More than 70% of the respondents had education beyond high school but 38% were working full-time. The mean income for the sample was approximately \$38,000/year.

*Conviction history.* All those who took the survey were required to register as sexual offenders. Forty-percent had to register once/year, 20 had to register twice/year, and 39% had to register three times/year. Interestingly, 77% reported their registration requirements had changed since

their conviction. Less than 30% were designated as violent offenders and 78% reported having a victim. Forty-four percent reported their victim was between the ages of 11-15 years, 14% said their victim was between 6-10 years, and 18% reported not having a victim. In this sample of RSO's, none reported having more than 1 conviction for a sexual crime (a 0% recidivism rate). *Collateral consequences.* Results indicated most RSO's experienced collateral consequences of community notification. Reported collateral consequences included: (a) 41% harassed by community members; (b) 16% spouse threatened; (c) 30% spouse harassed; (d) 18% children threatened; (e) 24% children harassed; (f) 20% experienced a vigilante attack; (g) 50% lost friends; (h) 55% lost social support; (i) 72% fear for their safety; (j) 80% felt depressed, sad, and isolated; (k) 58% afraid to be in public; (l) 51% had difficulty finding housing; (m) 71% have difficulty finding employment; (n) 50% have difficulty keeping up with registry requirements; (o) 29% report laws prohibit them from completing daily tasks; (p) 63% say residency & loitering restrictions inhibit their ability to participate in social/family activities (social/familial isolation); (q) 54% suffer more physical illness since community notification laws passed; (r) 71% feel more hopeless since community notification; (s) 71% fear being homeless because of their status as an RSO; (t) 46% are banned from libraries and parks; (u) 26% have had to move/lost housing at least once because of residency restrictions; (v) 13% had to move away from their families; and (w) 91% were employed prior to registration while 30% currently employed full-time. Finally, 42% do not have health insurance.

#### **Discussion/Conclusions**

Exploring the collateral consequences of sex offender registration and community notification is important because research demonstrates the risk for recidivism could increase when a RSO is denied just opportunity to reintegrate into society and in the absence of social support (Centers for Sex Offender Management, 2007; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Wakefield, 2004) . In effect, then, the collateral consequences accompanying these laws may result in laws that are doing more harm than good.