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# NOT IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD

## Assessing Registered Sex Offenders' Experiences With Local Social Capital and Social Control

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Community registration laws requiring sex offenders to register with local law enforcement have become increasingly popular and increasingly restrictive in recent years. Although these laws were passed under the auspices of protecting communities from dangerous and violent sexual predators, little research has addressed their efficacy or their consequences. Building on a social capital framework that emphasizes the resources provided by local ties to family, friends, and the community, data from semistructured interviews with 23 sex offenders were analyzed to explore their experiences with local social capital while being registered and on and off of parole. Sex offenders discuss problems accessing and participating in networks of local social capital, incidents of community residential mobilization against them, and their experiences with formal barriers to social capital, including parole restrictions.

**Keywords:** sex offenders; social capital; social control; communities; reintegration

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During the past 15 years, in response to several high-profile sex offenses and growing public concern about the danger posed by sex offenders released from prison, all 50 states and the federal government have passed some form of sex-offender community registration statute (Meloy, 2006). These community registration laws generally require sex offenders to register their name, address, photo, and crime with local law enforcement agencies. Furthermore, this information is generally made public to local residents through state Web sites or local registries available in police departments or libraries. More recently, several states and hundreds of cities have established residency restrictions, barring sex offenders from living near places where children congregate (Levenson & Cotter, 2005a). In addition to these policies, in many states, including Illinois, sex-offender parole involves the use of a specialized sex-offender parole agent and a period of restricted house arrest via electronic monitoring during which time the offender often cannot leave his or her house except for work, church, and the occasional trip to the grocery store (Unified Code of Corrections, ILCS ch. 730, § 5/3-14-2.5, 2005). In Illinois, this restricted house arrest generally continues for as long as the sex offender is on parole.

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An intended and positive consequence of these laws is thought to be the empowerment of local residents to be aware of and protect themselves and their children from sex offenders living in their neighborhoods. It has also been argued that such registration policies provide strong incentive to sex offenders to seek treatment and avoid recidivism (Elbogen, Patry, & Scalora, 2003). However, recent criminological research has questioned these assumptions by drawing attention to the “collateral consequences” experienced, both by the sex offender and his or her community, as a result of these increasingly restrictive policies (Tewksbury, 2005). Unintended or negative consequences of these policies include, but are not limited to, an invasion of sex offenders’ rights to privacy and further stigmatization, isolation, and alienation of these offenders who have already served their time in prison (Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). Perhaps most important, these consequences tend to exacerbate the very issues that contribute to an individual’s propensity to re-offend, thereby potentially increasing sex-offender recidivism and jeopardizing community safety.

Thus, a growing body of literature demonstrates the need to explore the perceptions of those most impacted by sex-offender policies—the sex offenders themselves. Research has examined sex offenders’ perceptions of the impact of these policies on their abilities to find and maintain employment, relationships, and housing as well as their perceptions of the efficacy of sex-offender registration and punishment (Levenson & Cotter, 2005b; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006, in press; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). Findings indicate that sex offenders feel increasingly fearful, isolated, and stigmatized because of the stringent requirements of sex-offender legislation (Levenson & Cotter, 2005b). Given the community basis of these registration laws, as well as sex offenders’ restricted movement within their communities, it is also important to further explore the local consequences of community registration for sex offenders, including their experiences with social capital and social control.

#### SEX-OFFENDER REINTEGRATION: THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL SOCIAL CAPITAL

Sociologists working in the fields of urban sociology and criminology have long recognized the relevance of social ties and networks for a community’s well-being as well as the that of the individual residents living there. These scholars use the term *social capital*—analogous to financial capital—to describe the value that social networks provide (Putnam, 2001; Rose & Clear, 1998; Rosenfeld, Messner, & Baumer, 2001; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Although it is defined in many ways, social capital can be thought of as a resource that is derived from and facilitated by social ties (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). Social capital emphasizes the information and resources that are transmitted through social ties, such as one neighbor sharing with another neighbor information about a local job opportunity or house for sale, or neighboring parents sharing information about one another’s children (Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003). In communities rich in social capital, children are supervised, residents are happy with their local surroundings, and streets are safer (Putnam, 2001). Conversely, in disadvantaged communities, the flight of economic capital often also leads to a deficit of social capital (Wilson, 1987). In these neighborhoods, higher-income families have fled; neighborhood resources such as schools, churches, and stores have broken down; and joblessness and poverty have taken hold. Role models disappear, informal neighborhood supervision becomes less prevalent, and residents become less and less willing to feel pride or to take responsibility in their community.

Sex offenders released from prison and attempting to reintegrate into their communities are perhaps particularly in need of the community support networks that local social capital provide. Studies of prisoner reentry consistently emphasize the importance of access to local, well-paying jobs and affordable housing as well as the value of socialization with local friends and neighbors in helping to ease offenders back into the community, reintegrate them into local social networks, and provide them with legitimate opportunities for success that do not involve returning to criminal activity (Rose & Clear, 2003; Rose, Clear, & Ryder, 2000; Travis & Waul, 2003). Although few studies have empirically explored specific benefits of access to these community resources for sex offenders, in one exception, Kruttschnitt, Uggen, and Shelton (2000) found a positive relationship between job stability and desistance from sex offending.

### BARRIERS TO REINTEGRATION

On the other hand, several recent studies have explored the difficulties that sex offenders face in attempting to reintegrate into local community life. These studies document the negative consequences of community registration and notification laws, including but not limited to harassment from local neighbors and strangers, problems finding and maintaining employment, difficulties securing quality housing, and problems protecting family members from shame and ridicule because of their relationship with a known sex offender (Levenson & Cotter, 2005b; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000).

Thus, recent research has suggested that released sex offenders face numerous barriers to networks of local social capital that would otherwise aid in their successful reentry into local community life (Levenson & Cotter, 2005b; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). What remains unclear is the origin of these barriers. That is, perhaps sex offenders' inability to access and participate in networks of local social capital originates within the sex offenders themselves because of their own feelings of shame and embarrassment (Meloy, 2006). Another possibility is that local community residents in the sex offenders' neighborhoods engage in informal social control, generating barriers to local social capital through their concerted efforts to exclude sex offenders (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). Sex offenders could also be barred from networks of local social capital because of structural deficits—that is, a simple lack of such networks in the communities where these sex offenders reside (Mustaine, Tewksbury, & Stengel, 2006). Finally, barriers to local social capital might originate in policies applied to sex offenders, such as the formal controls exerted over them as a result of their intensive supervision by sex-offender-specific parole agents (Meloy, 2006; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000).

Sex offenders might experience barriers to local social capital because of their voluntary withdrawal from local community life. In recent years, the media have devoted extensive attention to the issue of sex offenders, especially to high-profile crimes representing particularly violent habitual sex offenders. To the extent that public opinion of sex offenders is informed by these media portrayals, it is not difficult to imagine that sex offenders are acutely aware of the stigma attached to their criminal conviction. In response to this stigma, sex offenders might attempt to “pass,” to conceal their criminal conviction and sex offender label, and to appear as normal as possible (Goffman, 1963). As sex offender publicity and public notification become more and more pervasive, this strategy is increasingly difficult, however. Sex offenders might also wish to withdraw from everyday life and isolate themselves, to

retreat from any social interaction in which their conviction might become known. Accordingly, research exploring the psychological and emotional consequences of sex-offender policies reveals that many of the negative effects of such policies, including a lack of job stability, safe and affordable housing, and positive relationships with friends, family, and neighbors, isolate and alienate sex offenders (Levenson & Cotter, 2005b; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). Using interview data gathered from registered sex offenders, these studies suggest that the registration process exacerbates sex offenders' feelings of embarrassment and stigmatization, thus leading them to withdraw and isolate themselves from the very networks and resources that might aide in their successful reintegration into the community and help them to avoid future sex-offending behaviors (Levenson & Cotter, 2005b; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). This isolation may have dangerous ramifications. For example, sex offenders might seek to "disappear" to avoid the shame and humiliation of being a registered sex offender. In addition, the stress, fear, and hopelessness that accompany this isolation might trigger a relapse (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Freeman-Longo, 1996; Hanson & Harris, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004; Hudson, 2005; Marshall, Anderson, & Fernandez, 1999).

Another potential barrier to local social capital originates in the efforts of local community residents to mobilize against known sex offenders and prevent them from engaging in community life. *Informal social control*, defined as the willingness of local residents to take responsibility for the quality of local community life and work together to prevent local problems, is another form of social capital facilitated by local social networks (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993). When communities are socially organized, they are able to transmit and maintain traditional norms and standards of behavior (Sampson & Groves, 1989). Thus, in a stable, integrated, and cohesive community, parents may be more likely to watch over not only their own children but also their neighbors' children. Alternately, when communities are disorganized, social ties are attenuated, anonymity is prevalent, and the willingness and ability of local residents to supervise and take responsibility for local problems is diminished. When a sex offender returns to a community, local residents might engage in informal social control to inform each other of his presence, distribute flyers informing other residents, or even engage in harassing behaviors in an attempt to get him to move. Studies indicate that this type of local harassment and ostracism is fairly common (Levenson & Cotter, 2005b; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). So just as sex offenders might benefit from supportive networks of social capital, they are also particularly vulnerable to the damaging information that can be transmitted through these networks.

Sex offenders might also experience barriers to local social capital because of the limited choices and availability of residential locations for sex offenders; that is, sex offenders could suffer from a simple lack of local social capital based on where they live. Sex offenders often report having difficulty finding housing on their return to the community (Levenson & Cotter, 2005b; Tewksbury, 2005; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). These difficulties could be caused by economic constraints, or they could result from the constraints imposed by sex-offender policies that include residency restrictions, like the now-popular 500-foot rule, which prohibits sex offenders from residing within 500 feet of any place where children congregate, including schools, parks, and daycare centers (Criminal Code of 1961, ILCS ch. 720, § 11/9.3, 2005). Whether the reasons are economic or policy-based, sex offenders could potentially be relegated to predominantly disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Prior research examining residential options for ex-offenders finds that a large proportion of them return to disadvantaged communities (Clear, Rose, & Ryder, 2001; Visher, La

Vigne, & Travis, 2004). In disadvantaged communities characterized by poverty and residential instability, social networks are in continuous flux, and thus social capital is difficult to cultivate and maintain. Accordingly, Mustaine et al. (2006) examined the structural characteristics of neighborhoods in which sex offenders reside and found that “registered sex offenders do tend to live in areas that have characteristics indicating higher levels of social disorganization” (p. 341). Thus, it is possible that many sex offenders, because of their limited financial resources, are returning to these disadvantaged communities that suffer from a lack of social capital.

Finally, sex offenders may be prevented from accessing local social capital because of the postrelease restrictions associated with current sex-offender policy. As mentioned previously, Illinois is one of many states to use sex-offender-specific parole agents and intensive postrelease supervision, including electronic monitoring and house arrest. For example, all sex offenders on parole in the state of Illinois are subject to electronic monitoring for up to 3 years following release from prison, depending on the seriousness of their offense (Unified Code of Corrections, ILCS ch. 730, § 5/3-3-7, 2007). Under electronic monitoring, these offenders must report virtually all movements to their parole officer. With the exception of predetermined “movement time” for work, these offenders are confined to their home at nearly all other times. These policies severely restrict offenders’ movement in the community and virtually eliminate any interaction (positive or negative) that they may have with family, friends, and neighbors.

Although certainly one of the goals of sex-offender parole—and sex-offender policy in general—is to monitor sex offenders in their communities to aide law enforcement and ensure community protection, it may also be argued that one of the goals of sex-offender parole—and parole in general—is to act as a transition from prison to mainstream society (Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). However, this goal may be undermined if offenders feel that they are under as many, if not more, restrictions on their release from prison as they were in prison. Following from that point, many released sex offenders are simply unable to access and participate in local networks of social support and social capital, including prospects of employment, housing, and reconnection with friends and family on release from prison, primarily as a result of their parole restrictions. Thus, it is important to examine the possibility that policies designed to prevent future sex offending may actually have the opposite effect given the negative impacts these policies have on offender reentry and reintegration. Interestingly, recent empirical research demonstrates little deterrent effect of these policies on future offending behavior in the short term (Meloy, 2005). However, it is unclear how this formal barrier to social capital operates in the long term. Further study is needed to examine whether the absence of social capital during the critical period immediately following incarceration could have a long-term negative impact on an offender’s ability to reintegrate into society even after the formal control of parole has ended.

## PRESENT STUDY

Drawing on the theoretical connections between sex-offender community registration laws and local social capital as well as the significance of local social capital for the successful reintegration of released sex offenders, research has begun to explore the collateral consequences of sex-offender registration and notification policies, many of which operate as barriers to local social capital for these offenders (see Levenson & Cotter, 2005b;

Tewksbury, 2005; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). However, little is known about the origins or root causes of these barriers to social capital. The present study is an in-depth examination of sex offenders' experiences on release from prison as they contend with sex-offender policy, including registration, notification, and parole, while attempting to reintegrate into their communities to access and participate in supportive networks of local social capital. Drawing on the results of 23 face-to-face, individual interviews with registered sex offenders, the current research addressed the following questions:

1. Do sex offenders have access to and participate in networks of local social capital? Are they connected to friends and neighbors in the community? Do these social networks provide support in the form of friendly relationships, neighborly cooperation, employment, or housing information?
2. What barriers to social capital do these offenders experience? Do those barriers originate from individual, community, structural, or formal restrictions?

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

In the summer of 2006, recruitment letters were sent to all sex offenders who were both on parole and on the Illinois State Police Sex Offender Registry in five counties in northern and central Illinois ( $N = 99$ ); in addition, subjects were recruited from an 88-member sex offender treatment group in Cook County.<sup>1</sup> Twenty-three subjects consented to participate, resulting in a response rate of less than 15%. Several techniques were used to encourage and augment participation, including recruiting most participants from sex offenders currently on parole, with the belief that they would be more willing to talk about their experiences with the registry and parole and less likely to be in a position to put the entire experience behind them, as those whose parole had been discharged might be able to do. Envelopes were hand addressed to create a more personal and less institutional look; we felt that this touch was important considering the potential fear and distrust of authority that is characteristic of this population. Finally, we sent follow-up letters to those in the sample who did not respond initially. Nonetheless, the low response rate is not unusual; prior survey research with sex offenders reports similarly low response rates, ranging from 2% to 15% (Tewksbury, 2005; Vandiver & Walker, 2002). Furthermore, an even lower response was expected given that face-to-face interviews were to be held in the offender's home.

The low response rate, though not surprising, is likely because of the highly stigmatized and marginalized nature of the sex-offender population. Many of these offenders do not wish to revisit the negative consequences of their incarceration, registration, and parole experiences. Several potential participants stated rather vehemently in phone calls to the first author that they did not wish to participate in any such study and asked not to be included in follow-up mail-outs. In addition, at least one parole officer in one district specifically informed his parolees by letter that they would not be permitted to participate in this study. Despite our best efforts at damage control, which included contacting the state Department of Corrections (DOC) to inform them of the study, and despite the DOC's subsequent assurance to this parole officer that the study was not a violation of sex-offender parole and this parole officer's follow-up letter to his parolees indicating that they were now

**TABLE 1: Offender Characteristics**

	<i>Interview Sample (N = 23)</i>		<i>State Registry (N = 12,922)</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>%</i>
<b>Age</b>				
Younger than 25	2	8.7	1,037	8.0
25 to 64	20	87.0	11,347	87.8
65 or older	1	4.3	538	4.2
<b>Race</b>				
White	16	69.6	8,324	64.4
Black	6	26.1	3,900	30.2
Asian	0	0.0	66	0.5
Unknown or other	1	4.3	632	4.9
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	22	95.7	12,591	97.4
Female	1	4.3	331	2.6
<b>Married</b>				
Yes	3	13.0	NA	—
No	20	87.0	NA	—
<b>Metropolitan county<sup>a</sup></b>				
Yes	22	95.7	8,966	80.3
No		4.3	2,200	19.7
<b>Parole</b>				
Yes	20	87.0	1,128	8.7
No	3	13.0	11,794	91.3
<b>Most serious charge</b>				
Child pornography	1	4.3	458	3.5
Molestation/sexual assault (£ age 17)	16	69.6	10,520	81.4
Rape (age 18 £)	4	17.4	1,839	14.2
Other	2	8.7	105	0.8
Sexual predator	9	39.1	3,735	28.9
Child murderer	2	8.7	74	0.6

Note. NA = not available.

a. Statistics computed only for those with valid addresses.

permitted to participate, we cannot be sure how many potential participants were implicitly or explicitly intimidated by their parole officer's actions.

Despite these limitations, the sample is quite similar to the state registry on several characteristics, including age, gender, race, and offense type. As shown in Table 1, the final sample included 22 males and 1 female. The mean age was 42. Sixteen (70%) were White, 6 (26%) were Black, and 1 participant's race was undetermined.<sup>2</sup> Twenty (87%) participants were unmarried. The only noticeable discrepancy is the overrepresentation of urban sex offenders; this is certainly because of drawing one quarter of the sample from a treatment group in Cook County (Chicago). It should also be noted that 17 of the 23 participants were undergoing sex-offender counseling as a condition of their parole at the time of the interviews.

## PROCEDURE AND MEASURES

Interviews were conducted by both authors, working as a team, and took place in the participants' homes, typically lasting from 1 to 2 hours. The interviews were semistructured,

allowing the participants to elaborate on and raise important points when they felt such additions were necessary. In these interviews, offenders were asked to describe their experiences on release from prison, including their relationship with their parole officer, conducting a job search, finding housing, interacting with neighbors, developing and maintaining relationships, and coping with the stigmatization of the sex-offender label. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Analysis was conducted using HyperRESEARCH 2.7. Through multiple readings of the interview data, common themes and concepts related to sex offenders' experiences on release from prison were identified; the findings reflect these common themes and are guided by the research questions described above (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Additional data used to describe the characteristics of the census tracts in which these sex offenders reside come from the U.S. Census 2000. We created three scales to represent neighborhood structural characteristics: Concentrated Disadvantage, Residential Mobility, and Ethnic Heterogeneity. These scales were based on the summation of standardized or z-scores for each item divided by the number of scale items; using factor score loadings as weights to create the scales yielded similar results (see also Morenoff, Sampson, & Raudenbush, 2001; Sampson et al. 1997). Concentrated Disadvantage is comprised of percentage of families in poverty, percentage of families receiving public assistance, percentage of unemployed individuals, percentage of female-headed families with children, and percentage of residents who are Black; Cronbach's alpha for the five items was 0.95. Residential Instability includes the percentage of residents 5 years or older who did not live in the same house 5 years earlier and the percentage of homes that are renter-occupied; alpha for the two items was 0.69. Immigrant Concentration includes the percentage of Latino and foreign-born residents; alpha for the two items was 0.91.

## RESULTS

The main findings from the interviews are presented in order of our research questions. First, we describe these sex offenders' involvement, or lack thereof, in networks of local social capital. Next, we present evidence of the barriers to social capital that these offenders face and discuss whether those barriers are because of individual, community, structural, or formal restrictions.

### PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL SOCIAL CAPITAL

Many of these sex offenders reported the desire to find a job, locate safe and affordable housing, and join a church—resources that networks of local social capital may help to provide and that would aide in the offender's reintegration into the community. Because a primary objective of this article is the exploration of the origins of barriers to networks of local social capital, it is necessary to determine whether those barriers do, in fact, exist. Thus, a preliminary step in the analysis was to assess these sex offenders' access to and participation in these networks of local social capital.

Although several of the sex offenders described positive relationships with friends and family, very few of these relationships were local. Given that these offenders were on house

arrest, seeing friends and family often proved to be difficult, and few of them seemed willing or able to cultivate relationships with neighbors or to otherwise access local social networks. In fact, many of them made the following statements describing the limited interaction they had with their neighbors:

I don't know the neighbors.

I don't know any of my neighbors at all.

It's a little bit more rural; it's just not a lot of people out here.

#### **BARRIERS TO LOCAL SOCIAL CAPITAL**

After identifying sex offenders' apparent lack of participation in local social capital, we examined statements to determine what the sex offenders reported to be the major barriers to local social capital on their release from prison. The sex offenders discussed these four general barriers to social capital: individual, because of stigma and shame; local, because of residential mobilization; structural, because of deficits in community social capital; and formal, because of parole and registry restrictions. They further described the consequences of these barriers to local social capital, including problems finding a job, locating safe and affordable housing, maintaining relationships with friends and family, coping with the stigma of being a registered sex offender, the fear of going back to prison, and effectively managing the demands of parole restrictions and their parole officers.

*Individual barriers.* Almost one quarter ( $n = 8$ ) of the 23 interviewed sex offenders reported that they purposefully and voluntarily limited their interactions with others and distanced themselves from friends, family, and neighbors. The following statements typify this voluntary withdrawal from social and community interactions:

I haven't had a serious relationship since my conviction.

I don't socialize with too many people.

I need to keep a low profile.

For the most part, these respondents indicated that this self-imposed isolation was necessary to minimize risks of other people finding out about their designation and to minimize the stigma that they already felt as a result of being a registered sex offender. This concern was fed by the fear of losing their job or housing and the fear of local harassment and mobilization against them, as described in the next section. One respondent conveyed the fear he lives with on a daily basis, saying,

It's hard to wake up and go to work every morning with that fear of being found out at work or being found out in your neighborhood. To be honest with you, I don't think that I cope with it well. Like I said, I internalize a lot of it, so it really does bother me a lot.

Furthermore, many of the sex offenders described the stigma of the sex-offender label and reported that they regularly experienced shame, embarrassment, and even disgust as a result of that stigma. Arguably, this stigma plays a part in their desire to keep a low profile.

I would just have to say [the worst part is] having it hang over your head, you know... You could have a normal, interactive relationship with somebody and all of sudden it changes because they find this out. And normally they won't come right out and tell you why.

Honestly, it turns my stomach if I really sit and think about it. It makes my stomach hurt, because as far as I'm concerned, I'd rather have been convicted of first-degree murder. And have society look and say, "Kill the guy," than have society look and say, "He's a pedophile."

Two sex offenders revealed that the stigma has even begun to alter their own self-concept.

It—I don't know, how do I put it—it disgusts me to think that this person that's walking past me might know who I am and might actually be thinking that about me, you know? Sometimes it makes me think bad about myself.

The stigma is there. If the police want to put a poster out there, I can't stop them or on the Internet. It's something that's inside of me and I know.

Until recently, the state of Illinois required any murderer whose victim was younger than 18 to register as a sex offender<sup>3</sup> (Sex Offender Registration Act, ILCS ch. 730, § 150/2, 2004). We interviewed two such child murderers whose crimes did not appear to involve any sexual contact or intent. One of them spoke of the stigma of the sex offender label and how he perceived it to carry greater negative consequences than the label of a murderer.

The sex offender label is such... It's zero tolerance. It's like three things you don't want to be in the culture I was raised in—that's a liar, cheater, and a rapist. You know, you can die from those things, you can die from being one of those three things, quickly.

Not only were the sex offenders concerned with the damage to their own reputations, but several also indicated that they worried about their family's reputation and well-being. The following two statements reflect this sentiment:

I'll have to go to the school and tell [my daughter's] principal, look, I'm an SO. It's not so much how they gonna look at me—it's my kids, my grandkids. So I'm not worried about me, it's my family that I be concerned about... it's my family.

The bottom line is that it bothers me to live with the stigma of having to live like this and having my family and brother who I'm extremely close with. I know it's gotta be difficult for him just to have the same last name... guilty by association. He's carrying part of the stigma that I do just because he carries the same last name.

In addition to voluntarily withdrawing from community life because of the fear and shame of the sex-offender stigma, several also isolated themselves to avoid any potential conflicts with their parole officer or the possibility of a violation sending them back to prison. Many of the sex offenders felt that it was better to limit their "movement time" (the time they request to leave their home) to avoid the possibility that they might miss a curfew and thereby risk a parole violation. One sex offender described it in this way:

Unfortunately, I need to keep a low profile. I don't want to raise any eyebrows. I don't want to create any problems being on parole.

*Community barriers.* As described above, the fear generated by the sex-offender label has important consequences for sex offenders' limited social interaction in their communities. Many of the sex offenders reported being afraid that their neighbors would find out about their crimes. Presumably, that fear is fed by stories of vigilantism against local sex offenders. Also, several offenders mentioned the recent popularity of primetime television news programs depicting sting operations intended to capture online sexual predators. They referenced the hysteria and stereotypes fueled by these news stories, which they believe serve to create a somewhat narrow and distorted view of sex offenders, depicting them all as compulsive and violent sexual predators.

Interestingly, only 5 sex offenders indicated that local residents had taken action against them, in the form of flyers or attempts to pass local ordinances keeping sex offenders out of the community. The following statements illustrate the experiences of 2 sex offenders:

About 6 months ago, somebody put flyers in all the mailboxes in our neighborhood saying "Beware, Sex Offender." They listed my conviction and the details.

They are now trying to pass a restrictive covenant in the subdivision that no registered sex offender can live in here and/or own property.

These respondents indicated that this type of action fuels the fear and anxiety that are a part of their daily lives. In the words of one offender who had experienced local harassment,

I think there could be more attacks against me or my family. I don't want it really publicized a whole lot. Those are pretty much my major fears.

Perhaps one of the most interesting revelations to come out of these interviews is the juxtaposition of these sex offenders' actual experiences on release from prison with their expectations. It seems that many of them expected far "worse" or more negative experiences in attempting to reintegrate into their communities. The fear of local harassment provides a good example of this juxtaposition. Even those who had not experienced harassment reported that they were surprised that it had not happened yet; their comments suggested that they perceived such harassment as inevitable. As 1 offender explained,

There are people that are out there that are feeding upon that. I think putting my face online like that—that's in danger of making me become a victim. I, you know, someone could really try to do harm to me...I'm not making [myself] a martyr, but that's endangering my life at this particular point in time.

Nonetheless, a few offenders also recognized the positive role that the publicity of their registration plays, including the promotion of public safety and awareness, as well as incentive for the offenders themselves to be accountable for their behavior. Two offenders described these positive consequences as follows:

The neighbors? Some of them might not talk to me. They might want me moved...It can cause big problems; at the same time, though, it's letting the neighbors and neighborhood know what's here. If I got a thief living next door, I know I've got a thief. I know to leave my doors locked.

Really, like I said, I haven't had any problems with it. I looked at it as a consequence of what I have done and as an intervention to keep me from doing it again. I try to focus more on the positive sides than the negative.

*Structural barriers.* In addition to the barriers to local social capital generated by sex offenders' voluntary withdrawal from their community and residential mobilization against them, it is also possible that these sex offenders simply are not returning to the types of communities that possess a stock of local social capital. Offenders being released from prison typically have limited financial resources and, thus, limited housing options. Sex offenders are now facing further obstacles because of the residency restrictions that are a part of sex-offender registration. As noted earlier, In Illinois and many other states, sex offenders cannot live within 500 feet of places where children congregate, including schools, parks, playgrounds, and daycare centers (Criminal Code of 1961, ILCS ch. 720, § 11/9.3, 2005). When one considers the possibility that these institutions may be concentrated in structurally advantaged neighborhoods, then residency restriction laws have potentially serious implications for where sex offenders can find acceptable housing. Furthermore, sex offenders are restricted by legislation stating that no more than one sex offender can live at a single address, in a single building, or even in a single housing complex such as an apartment building (Unified Code of Corrections, ILCS ch. 730, § 5/3-17-5, 2005). Many sex offenders have even been sent back to prison as a result of their inability to find suitable housing.<sup>4</sup> Although residency restrictions may be seen as a formal barrier to social capital, as they originate from sex-offender policy, we consider them to operate as structural barriers to local social capital because, we suggest, they ultimately restrict sex offenders' access to local social capital by forcing them into disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Offenders also reported difficulty finding safe and affordable housing simply because of landlords who were unwilling to rent to registered sex offenders. One offender described the experience that his girlfriend had trying to find a place for them to rent in a suburban neighborhood, saying,

My fiancée called a couple places—people started yelling at her. I had one guy tell me he was going to get sued because I'm calling. At this point, I pretty much decided to forget about the apartments.

Criminological research exploring the presence of local social capital suggests that structural barriers to such capital exist in neighborhoods that are characterized by high levels of social disorganization—specifically, concentrated disadvantage, residential mobility, and ethnic heterogeneity (Sampson et al., 1997). To assess the presence of local social capital in neighborhoods to which sex offenders were returning, we examined data from the 2000 Census, including computed scales of concentrated disadvantage, residential mobility, and ethnic heterogeneity.

In terms of structural barriers to local social capital, it appears that, generally, the sex offenders in this sample do not live in census tracts that are more disadvantaged relative to the average for all census tracts in their counties of residence or relative to the state average. The only striking dissimilarities are for the individual indicators of neighborhood ethnic heterogeneity, including percentage of Latino and foreign-born residents. These values suggest that sex offenders are likely to live in neighborhoods of greater cultural and linguistic diversity, which is suggested to be an impediment to the realization of common

**TABLE 2: Structural Barriers to Local Social Capital**

	<i>Tracts With RSOs<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>County Average<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>State Average</i>
Disadvantage Index	-0.39	0.00	0.00
Living below poverty (%)	8.77	9.75	13.04
With public assistance income (%)	3.16	2.83	4.60
Unemployed (%)	6.48	5.54	7.75
Female-headed households (%)	12.30	10.75	13.86
Black (%)	13.04	10.95	19.12
Ethnic Heterogeneity Index	0.43	0.00	0.00
Latino (%)	19.11	11.32	11.75
Foreign-born (%)	13.50	10.99	10.89
Mobility Index	-0.15	0.00	0.00
Living in a different house 5 years earlier (%)	44.24	45.85	42.85
Renter-occupied housing (%)	26.39	27.73	32.21

NOTE. RSOs = registered sex offenders.

a. Mean value for the 23 tracts in which we conducted interviews.

b. Mean value for the six counties in which we conducted interviews.

goals and values and, thus, a barrier to local social capital. Furthermore, studies of neighborhood change suggest that, as Latino populations rise, White residents, and their economic capital, flee; thus, neighborhoods with growing Latino populations might be seen as “undesirable” by some and may serve as a last resort for sex offenders (Alba, Denton, Leung, & Logan, 1995; Rosenbaum & Friedman, 2001; Wilson & Taub, 2006).

Our lack of findings regarding the other indicators of structural barriers are surprising given that theory and prior research would suggest that ex-offenders, including sex offenders, would return to structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods (Mustaine et al., 2006; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2006). However, the research by Tewksbury and Mustaine (2006), in addition to exploring the structural characteristics of neighborhoods in which *individual* sex offenders reside, also assessed the ways in which limited housing options may lead to a “clustering” of sex offenders in particularly disadvantaged neighborhoods. Accordingly, neighborhoods with high concentrations of sex offenders also exhibited the highest levels of structural disadvantage (Mustaine et al., 2006). Thus, perhaps our findings would have indicated similar structural barriers to social capital had we chosen to examine neighborhoods in which high concentrations of sex offenders, rather than just one, reside.

Our lack of findings may also be because of our limited sample; perhaps only those offenders who are not ashamed of where they live would be likely to respond to a request for an interview in their homes. Based on the authors’ observations, many of the interviews were conducted in relatively organized and stable communities, including suburban subdivisions and residential neighborhoods characterized by single-family homes. These findings are similar to an analysis of residential locations of sex offenders in Seminole County, Florida, in which the authors examined the neighborhood structures (e.g., bars, strip malls, churches) and conditions (e.g., graffiti, abandoned cars, vacant lots) that were most likely to be present in sex offenders neighborhoods’ and concluded that “sex offenders are not necessarily likely to be found in disorganized neighborhoods” (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2006, p. 71). Only on two occasions did we feel unsafe in the neighborhoods in which we interviewed because of visible criminal activity or were warned by the offender to be careful when walking back to our car after dark.

*Formal barriers.* As mentioned previously, sex-offender policy, in the form of residency restrictions, could potentially force some sex offenders to live in neighborhoods that are socially disadvantaged, thus creating structural barriers to local social capital. In addition to these residency restrictions, however, sex offenders face formal barriers to local social capital in the form of intensive parole restrictions that limit their movement time away from their residences. We explored this issue by asking the sex offenders questions about their relationship with their parole officer, the parole officer's adherence to sex-offender parole policy, and the specific conditions and restrictions that these offenders face while on parole. In addition, there were a few offenders in our sample who had completed parole and were able to speak about how their lives had improved once they were no longer under parole supervision.

Although most sex offenders we interviewed had an amicable relationship with their parole officers, describing the officers as "just doing their job," almost all of the sex offenders we interviewed ( $n = 18$ ) indicated that formal sex-offender parole policy impeded their ability to reintegrate into community life. Most of these problems reflect the intense restrictions that sex offenders face, including house arrest and electronic monitoring, and how little time and movement they have to conduct a job search, to work more than a regular 9-to-5 job, and to see friends and family who do not live locally.

The difficulties faced by ex-offenders trying to find employment are well-documented (see Pager, 2003). However, several of the sex offenders whom we interviewed reported difficulties in even getting movement time from their parole officer to look for a job or to fill out applications, let alone go to an interview. One offender described his experience in the following way:

It's hard because a lot of jobs, I mean, really, it's hard because I really don't get any movement, I gotta call in for movement, which really isn't too bad. And the registry thing, the way it's set up, the ED (electronic detention), you know, like I said, they can call me tomorrow morning or Monday morning and say they've got a job for me and unless I can get through to my PO to get the movement, I can't take it.

In addition to the difficulties in getting movement time from their parole officer to go to job interviews, these offenders also face problems on the job because of electronic monitoring. The following statements are reflective of sex offenders' experiences with employers who were hesitant to deal with the bureaucratic complexities of electronic monitoring:

And I know at least two of them told me that they couldn't take me because of the electronic detention ... which was a result me having to be on the SO list.

Because I'm on [electronic monitoring], they know it takes only the slightest thing and you can end up going back on a violation. They don't want to have to lose an employee for whatever reason. They make it extremely impossible for you to get employment at all.

Perhaps not surprisingly, several of the offenders whom we interviewed described scenarios in which they did not get called back for a job or lost their job because of a coworker or superior finding out about their sex-offender designation. However, even the offenders themselves were unclear about how much of this was caused by being a "sex offender" or simply being an "ex-offender" with a felony conviction.

I've seen it time and time and time again, coming out of the pen with a felony conviction—a registered sex offender, that stigma is...I can't even begin to tell ya...no. I can't get a job, but I'm not going to go out and rob a bank or sell drugs...the bottom line is that it's very, very difficult and something that's fortunate is to have a support system that I can call and say, "Keep your ear to the ground and look for a job."

It was a while—it's not so much sex offenders, it's ex cons. If you lie, and they find out, you're fired; if you tell them the truth, you're not going to get the job. I mean, I don't care—no disrespect to anybody—but I don't care what that line says in the job. Just because you were convicted of a felony doesn't mean you're not capable, you're not going to get the job. You're not going to get the job.

In addition to the negative consequences of parole policy for employment prospects, several sex offenders described the impact that these formal parole restrictions have on their families. One offender described the difficulties that he faces in trying to spend time with their children, as follows:

I mean, certain things like last week when I wanted to take my son to this park help him fly his kite and see the animals and they shut me down. I couldn't go to no park. There's a lot of things I can't even do with my son—that ain't right, you see what I'm saying? They did, and I can't believe they let me take him fishing this morning...but as I said, it's a lot of things, and they make it hard.

Somewhat surprisingly, a common theme emerged from these offenders' statements regarding formal barriers to local social capital versus informal barriers. These offenders reported facing far more barriers to local social capital because of formal parole restrictions than because of informal restrictions, such as local residential mobilization against them or blatant ostracism by former friends, family, or employers. In fact, many offenders stated that parole restrictions were the worst part of the entire sex-offender experience, followed closely by the stigma of the sex-offender label. More specifically, it seems that parole has more of an impact on their daily lives, whereas the stigma of sex offender tends to have more damaging, long-term effects. One offender described the worst part of the sex offender experience for him, saying,

I think it's the restriction that affects my relationship and my relationship with my family. I can't go to my niece's ballgames, I can't take her boys to Sox park, like we did 10 times a year up until I went away. I can't just say, "Let's go to the park and throw the ball around like we used to." Restrictions are hard because I was so involved with so many children in my life; I coached Little League baseball for 7 years.

Those offenders who described parole restrictions as the worst part of their experience also discussed the option of going back to prison to do their parole time in order to cut their parole time in half (a 3-year parole term could be complete in 1.5 years inside prison). Despite the recognition that, in many ways, sex-offender parole restrictions make parole feel like an extension of prison, 1 offender suggested that they are turning the state of Illinois into a prison, and these offenders are not eager to return to prison. The following statement depicts 1 offender's conflicting emotions about the restrictions of parole versus the freedoms they have compared to prison:

What I decided was, even though parole as an SO is incredibly hard...in fact, I would dare say, that it's harder than being in prison, which, I never thought I would think anything was harder than being in prison. Even though it's extremely difficult, I still like the fact that, you know, I can go eat real food, I can have air conditioning, and I don't have a roommate....So even though it's real hard, that's what keeps me out here. But now I understand why people do that, and I can see that. I was seriously thinking about it, and I decided not to.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Building on a growing body of scientific knowledge regarding the implications of recent sex-offender policies, including registration and residency restriction laws, the purpose of this study was to assess registered sex offenders' experiences on release from prison. Specifically, we used in-depth qualitative interviews to explore sex offenders' perceptions of the availability of local social capital and the individual, community, structural, and formal barriers that they faced when trying to access networks of social capital in their communities. These interviews reveal the damaging effects of sex-offender policy, particularly in terms of maintaining relationships, finding employment and housing, and dealing with the stigma that accompanies the sex-offender label. Our findings are consistent with similar research that has been conducted to explore the positive and negative consequences of sex-offender policy, including community registration and sex-offender-specific parole (Levenson & Cotter, 2005b; Meloy, 2006; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000).

These offenders described the individual barriers they put up that limit their access to supportive networks of local social capital. They expressed the shame, embarrassment, and fear that they carry as a result of being a registered sex offender. This stigma often leads them to voluntarily withdraw from positive relationships, including those involving friends, family, and neighbors, to minimize feelings of shame, and to manage the risks of additional people finding out about their designation.

Several sex offenders also discussed problems with local residential mobilization or harassment directed against them, a kind of community barrier to local social capital. Although only 5 sex offenders reported being victims of local harassment, several others described their fear of this kind of action. It seemed that many felt it to be an inevitable consequence of the sex-offender registration and notification experience.

The sex offenders whom we interviewed did not, in general, seem to be facing structural barriers to local social capital based on the census data we analyzed. This is somewhat surprising, and it goes against the assumption that these released offenders would be relocating to disadvantaged neighborhoods because of economic constraints and residency restrictions. Certainly these findings may be a result of our limited sample, as discussed below. Future research should continue to explore the geographic and sociodemographic variation of sex-offender residences as well as the implications of residency restriction laws for sex offenders and the communities in which they reside (see Mustaine & Tewksbury, in press; Tewksbury, Mustaine, & Stengel, in press). From the perspective of the sex offender, residency restriction laws may operate as a structural barrier to local social capital, as described previously; in addition, the relocation of high concentrations of sex offenders to disadvantaged communities may add yet another layer of disadvantage to communities that are already structurally vulnerable.

Finally, these sex offenders reported many problems with formal barriers to local social capital in the form of parole restrictions. These parole restrictions, particularly house arrest and electronic monitoring, effectively served to cut off many people from any positive socializing outside of their homes. Furthermore, these restrictions made getting and keeping a job difficult, a direct result of the bureaucratic complexities of the electronic monitoring system.

The problems inherent in the restrictive, formal social control of parole are exacerbated in Illinois by a recent law that could potentially require lifetime parole of certain sex offenders (Unified Code of Corrections, ILCS ch. 730, § 5/3-14-2.5, 2005). The result of this law is a catch-22 whereby the offender has to prove that he or she has successfully reintegrated into society before being released from parole, while being prevented from reintegrating into society by the lack of access to social capital resulting from parole restrictions.

There are several limitations to this study that must be addressed. First, our findings are based on the sex offenders' own perceptions. We have little way of confirming or validating their responses. Second, and perhaps most important, our sample was quite limited based on the geographic area as well as the low response rate. We only sampled from six counties in the northern part of Illinois, and although we tried to obtain geographic diversity by selecting at least one county with a high proportion of rural housing units (according to census data), we recognize that our sample was dominated by sex offenders residing in metropolitan counties. It is quite likely that sex offenders residing in urban areas like Chicago will have a much different experience than those living in more rural areas. Sex offenders in crowded urban areas could experience more strained relationships with their parole officers and could also have greater difficulties finding safe, affordable, and acceptable housing, according to the sex-offender residency restrictions, including the 500-foot rule.

As for our low response rate, we are not surprised by this, as past research reports similar difficulties (see Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). Furthermore, we must consider the possibility of selection bias in our sample. Perhaps those who responded to our requests for interviews are those sex offenders with particularly bad experiences, who felt compelled to give voice to those experiences. On the other hand, perhaps our respondents have experienced far fewer difficulties compared to those who did not respond; those sex offenders with the worst experiences on release from prison might be too ashamed, distressed, or afraid to discuss them. Nonetheless, even if we have not reached those sex offenders who suffer from multiple, extreme barriers to social capital, we have documented many fundamental difficulties that these offenders face as they attempt to return to society. We consider it a challenge for future researchers to obtain larger, more representative samples of this population.

This study intends to contribute to the growing body of scientific knowledge regarding sex offenders' experiences with community registration and parole and the unintended, and often negative, consequences of such policies. Future research should be attentive to these negative consequences and explore their implications for sex-offender recidivism, a research topic that has, as of yet, been explored by very few in this field (for exceptions, see Hepburn & Griffin, 2004; Kruttschnitt et al., 2000; Meloy, 2005).

## NOTES

1. Because of small sample size after all sex offenders on parole were identified in three of the five selected counties ( $N = 28$ ), we selected an additional random sample of 20 sex offenders not on parole in these same three counties. All sex offenders in the other two counties were on parole at the time of recruitment.

2. Age, race, and gender demographic characteristics were obtained from the Illinois State Police Sex Offender Registry.
3. In 2006, Illinois passed the Violence Against Youth Act, which was intended to move individuals who were convicted of a violent crime against a youth that was *not* sexually motivated off of the Sex Offender Registry and onto a separate Violence Against Youth registry (Child Murderer and Violent Offender Against Youth Registration Act, ILCS ch. 730, § 154, 2006).
4. W. Mingus, the second author and a sex-offender counselor, is aware of several cases of sex offenders being returned to prison because of their failure to find housing.

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