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### Assessing Community Residents' Perceptions of Local Registered Sex Offenders: Results from a Pilot Survey

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## Assessing Community Residents' Perceptions of Local Registered Sex Offenders: Results from a Pilot Survey

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Building on a social capital and social control framework that emphasizes the importance of the local neighborhood context for residential action, this research utilizes data from surveys of community residents to examine their perceptions of their neighborhood, their familiarity with sex offender policies, and their awareness of and attitudes toward local registered sex offenders. Results indicate that a majority of residents are unaware of the presence of local sex offenders. However, residents who perceive their neighborhoods as high in informal social control also perceive their neighbors as more likely to report on local sex offenders.

For the last decade, a growing body of research has explored the local consequences of policies designed to supervise and control sex offenders upon release from prison. These studies have considered the implications of policies for sex offender reintegration, rehabilitation, and recidivism, as well as the constraints that such policies put on sex offenders' neighborhood and housing options (for a review, see Meloy 2006). Corresponding studies have examined community residents' awareness of and perceptions of local sex offenders to test the assumption that these laws engender public awareness, empowerment, and safety (Anderson and Sample 2008; Beck and Travis 2004; Craun 2010; Craun and Theriot 2009; Kernsmith et al. 2009a, 2009b; Levenson et al. 2007; Phillips 1998).

Significantly, studies generally find that sex offender policies do not meet their intended goals. Studies find very little effect of sex offender policies on recidivism (Adkins et al. 2000; Barnoski 2005; Meloy 2005; Schram and Milloy 1995; Walker et al. 2005; Zandbergen et al. 2010; Zevitz 2006; for an exception, see Letorneau et al. 2010). Further, research suggests that sex offender policies might actually result in negative consequences such as non-compliance, absconding or even relapse due to the shame, fear, and stigma they generate in released offenders (Edwards and Hensley 2001; Freeman-Longo 1996; Hanson and Harris 1998; Hanson and Morton-Bourgon 2004; Hughes and Burchfield 2008; Hudson 2005; Marshall et al. 1999). Further, local residents are less aware of local registered sex offenders than would be predicted given the impetus for these laws (Anderson and Sample 2008; Craun 2010; Kernsmith et al. 2009b).

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The current study builds on this literature by utilizing data from surveys of community residents, assessing their experiences with sex offender policies. Building on a social capital and social control framework that emphasizes the importance of the local neighborhood context for residential action, this research examines community residents' perceptions of their neighborhood, their familiarity with sex offender policies, and their awareness of and attitudes toward local registered sex offenders.

## BACKGROUND

Currently, all 50 states and the federal government have some form of sex offender community registration or notification statute. These laws generally require sex offenders to register their names, addresses, photo, and crimes; further, this information is made public to local residents through state websites or local registries available in police departments or libraries. These policies are intended to promote community safety and deter sex offender recidivism. They are premised on the assumption that local residents wish to protect themselves and their children by being aware of the presence of sex offenders living in their neighborhoods. Further, it has been argued that these laws provide strong incentive to sex offenders to seek treatment and avoid recidivism (Elbogen et al. 2003). Research assessing the effectiveness of sex offender policies on recidivism is mixed and increasingly suggests that the community context of released sex offenders, including the presence and availability of local social capital and social control, plays an important role in rehabilitation and reintegration (Burchfield and Mingus 2008; Levenson and Cotter 2005a; Meloy 2006; Tewksbury 2005; Tewksbury and Lees 2006; Zevitz and Farkas 2000).

### Neighborhood Social Capital, Social Control, and Sex Offenders

Sociological research examining "neighborhood effects" generally finds a positive effect of local social ties and social capital on social control and residents' quality of life. That is, in neighborhoods with strong social ties, frequent neighboring, and feelings of residential attachment, residents benefit from the resources that this social capital provides (Putnam 2000; Sampson et al. 1997). They may share information about local employment, daycare or housing opportunities, be willing to help out a neighbor who goes out of town, or supervise local children playing in common areas. Residents are thus more likely to take responsibility for the quality of life in their neighborhood, including exercising informal social control, defined as the willingness to engage in cooperative behaviors to keep their community safe (Burchfield 2009). On the other hand, in disadvantaged communities, the flight of economic capital often also leads to a deficit of social capital (Wilson 1987). In these neighborhoods, joblessness and poverty have taken hold, informal neighborhood surveillance becomes less prevalent, and residents become less and less willing to take responsibility in their community.

Upon release from prison, sex offenders attempting to reintegrate into their neighborhoods may be particularly in need of the support that local social capital provides. Neighborhood social capital potentially offers access to local, well-paying jobs and available housing, as well as valuable socialization with local friends and neighbors, to help integrate released sex offenders

into local social networks, provide them with legitimate opportunities for success and deter them from future sex offending behaviors. Although few studies have empirically explored the direct benefits of social capital for sex offenders, in one exception, Kruttschnitt and colleagues (2000) found a positive relationship between job stability and desistance from sex offending (see also Hepburn and Griffin 2004).

Unfortunately, sex offenders often return to neighborhoods with low levels of social capital, because of the limited housing options and residential locations available to them (Levenson and Cotter 2005a, 2005b; Tewksbury 2005, 2007; Zevitz and Farkas 2000). Due either to economic constraints or to the constraints imposed by sex offender policies that include residency restrictions, sex offenders are often drawn into predominantly structurally disadvantaged neighborhoods characterized by weak or non-existent social ties among residents, limited social capital, and an inability to exercise informal social control (Hughes and Burchfield 2008; Mustaine et al. 2006a, 2006b).

Several recent studies have explored the various structural and social barriers sex offenders face in attempting to reintegrate into local community life. These studies document the negative consequences of the stigma associated with community registration and notification laws and the "sex offender" label, including, but not limited to, harassment from local neighbors and strangers, problems finding and maintaining employment, and difficulties securing quality housing (Burchfield and Mingus 2008; Levenson and Cotter 2005a; Tewksbury 2005; Tewksbury and Lees 2006; Zevitz and Farkas 2000). In addition, family members face "courtesy stigma" (Goffman 1963), including shame and ridicule due to maintaining a relationship with a known sex offender (Farkas and Miller 2007; Levenson and Tewksbury 2009).

In a recent study that qualitatively assessed the barriers to social capital that sex offenders face, Burchfield and Mingus (2008) found that many sex offenders face a variety of difficulties upon release from prison, including problems maintaining relationships, finding employment and housing, and dealing with the stigma that accompanies the "sex offender" label. Importantly, many sex offenders report living in fear for themselves or family members that their sex offender designation will be discovered. In a follow-up survey of approximately 300 sex offenders undergoing community treatment, Burchfield (2010) finds that local social capital is crucial for the successful reentry of sex offenders into a community. For instance, sex offenders who live in neighborhoods with higher perceived levels of informal social control are more likely to report having helpful friends, family, and neighbors; also, those with social ties are less likely to report withdrawing from or avoiding positive socialization due to the shame or stigma of their "sex offender" label.

Thus, the availability and utilization of local social capital and informal social control have significant, generally positive sociological consequences for returning sex offenders and their ability to reintegrate into community life. However, the effects of social capital and informal social control may extend beyond their impact on returning sex offenders, to the local experiences of all neighborhood residents, including their awareness of local sex offenders and willingness to take action against them. It is suggested that neighborhoods characterized by higher levels of social capital and social control will engender more residential awareness and reporting of local sex offenders. So, just as sex offenders might benefit from supportive local networks of social capital and a neighborhood context that encourages informal social control, they are also particularly vulnerable to the damaging information that can be transmitted in this context.

## Residents' Perceptions of Sex Offenders

Misperceptions about sex offenders, lack of awareness about sex offender policy, and increased fear as a result of community notification and registration laws are recurring themes in the literature examining residents' experience with and opinions of local sex offenders and sex offender policies requiring community registration and notification. In one of the first surveys assessing community residents' awareness and knowledge of state community notification laws, 80 percent of respondents indicated that they were aware of the laws (Phillips 1998). Still, only one-third of the respondents were aware of released sex offenders living in their communities. Interestingly, respondents who were aware of sex offenders living in their communities more often indicated no change in their likelihood of leaving children unsupervised. However, two out of three indicated they were more likely to report suspicious behaviors as a result of community notification.

Kernsmith et al. (2009b) surveyed Michigan residents and found that fewer than half had accessed the state's online sex offender registry, citing as reasons a lack of interest, a belief that their neighborhood was "safe," and not having children. Even after viewing the registry, many respondents remained unaware of the presence of local sex offenders, even though sex offenders were located in almost every zip code. These results are strikingly similar to other research examining the use of sex offender registries in Nebraska in which the authors found that, while a majority of residents were aware of the state's sex offender registry, only a third have accessed it; of that third, only about 40 percent had taken preventative action upon acquiring the registry information (Anderson and Sample 2008).

In a survey of residents at a community notification meeting in Wisconsin, many respondents did not seem to understand the purpose of community notification laws or the role that public officials, including the police, played in placing offenders in the community or the ability of officials to remove them (Zevitz and Farkas 2000). Also, one-third of the respondents reported greater, rather than less, concern about the presence of local sex offenders after the meeting.

Additional studies have documented this tendency for community notification to exacerbate, rather than allay, public fears about the threats posed by local sex offenders. In research examining misperceptions of the risks posed by sex offenders, Craun and Theriot (2009) found that knowledge of the presence of a local sex offender increased residents' fear that a child would be sexually abused by a stranger. Related research indicates that citizens' perceptions of sex offenders and their likelihood of recidivism are often inaccurate, perceiving them to be fairly homogenous in terms of offending patterns and to have higher than reported rates of recidivism (Levenson et al. 2007). Nonetheless, the residents surveyed overwhelmingly supported registration and notification policies.

In another study which specifically assessed the effect of community notification on fear, Ohio residents who should have received written notification of a sex offender in their neighborhood reported more personal fear than those who were not notified (Beck and Travis 2004). Notification appeared to increase "altruistic fear" (fear for others) only when it came to sexual victimization. To the extent that fear might increase protective behaviors, then perhaps these results offer preliminary evidence that community notification is effective in protecting children. However, that specific question was not examined.

In a study of the individual- and neighborhood-level consequences of community notification, Zevitz (2004; see also Zevitz, 2003) examined the impact of local law enforcement's

placement and publicity of one high-profile sex offender in a neighborhood and found that the presence of the sex offender had several detrimental consequences for neighborhood life, including an increase in residents' fear, reduced social interactions and integration, and a more negative perception of neighborhood social capital and social control.

Finally, in one of the most thorough and empirically rigorous investigations of this topic, Craun (2010) compared residents who lived near sex offenders to those who did not to determine the individual- and neighborhood-level correlates of awareness of local sex offenders. Consistent with prior research, less than one-third of residents living within one-tenth of a mile of a sex offender were aware of his/her presence. Using multilevel models, the author found that individual residents' familiarity with community notification laws predicted their awareness of the presence of a registered sex offender in the neighborhood. At the neighborhood level, the only significant predictor of awareness of a local sex offender was the proportion of Hispanics and immigrants in the neighborhood, with more Hispanics reducing awareness.

Conclusions drawn from this research suggest that sex offender registration and community notification laws are not achieving their objectives. In general, studies assessing the local consequences of these laws for sex offender reintegration and residential safety suggest that the laws are limited in terms of their effectiveness in reducing sex offender recidivism, in increasing residents' knowledge about local registered sex offenders, and in their ability to alter residents' behavior when it comes to the presence of local sex offenders; further, they may in fact, make residents feel less, rather than more, safe.

Thus, a growing body of theory and research has considered the consequences of recent sex offender policies for the sex offenders themselves, as well as for residents' awareness and perceptions of sex offenders. However, few studies have considered such issues by examining the relevance of the neighborhood context, including local social capital and informal social control, and how it affects residents' awareness, perceptions and reporting of local sex offenders. Accordingly, this research seeks to explore the following research questions:

1. Are community residents aware of local registered sex offenders? What individual and community characteristics affect this awareness?
2. Do community residents report local sex offenders who they suspect are engaging in illegal and/or suspicious activity?
3. Do community residents perceive their neighbors as being willing to report suspicious behavior of local sex offenders? What community characteristics affect this perception?

## METHOD

### Sample

The current pilot study is based on a door-to-door survey of 95 respondents living in ten Census block groups evenly split between two suburban Illinois counties. The objective was to survey ten residents in each of ten block groups where at least one sex offender also resided to obtain 100 completed surveys. In this study, Census block groups are used to approximate neighborhoods, as they are relatively homogenous and are the smallest unit of Census geography for which detailed socioeconomic data are available (Iceland and Steinmetz 2003).

The sampling was performed by joining spreadsheets of relevant addresses with Tiger/Line map files in ArcGIS, including maps of census tracts, blocks, block groups, and streets. The first step in this process was to obtain a list of every registered sex offender and his/her address in the two counties from the Illinois State Police Sex Offender Registry; those addresses were then geocoded. Once the registered sex offenders in the two counties were successfully mapped, a list was composed of every block group which contained at least one registered sex offender. The maps of these eighty-seven block groups were visually inspected to ensure that enough residential streets existed to gather the quota of ten respondents per neighborhood.

Next, ten blocks groups were selected based on geographic and socioeconomic diversity, resulting in three university neighborhoods, four suburban neighborhoods, and three rural neighborhoods. Within the block groups, an average of twenty-two blocks was randomly selected from a database that contains street names and address ranges. For each selected block, house numbers were randomly selected based on the range of addresses given. (If those addresses did not exist, then the next highest or next lowest address was selected, based on random assignment of "higher" or "lower.")

### Response Rates

Within each neighborhood, surveys were distributed door-to-door by the author and a graduate assistant; when an eligible participant was found home, that participant was given a business card introducing the author of the study, informed of the nature of the study, the length of the survey, and that they would be compensated with a \$10 gift card.

Response rates were calculated based on the number of residents who answered the door, where a member of the household over the age of 18 was home, and whether they completed the survey or not. Response rates in each of the 10 neighborhoods ranged from 41.2–100 percent with an average rate of about 69 percent. The average response rate in the university and rural areas (79 percent) was greater than that of the suburbs (58 percent).

### Survey Instrument

The survey of community residents assessed awareness and perceptions of local registered sex offenders and sex offender policy. The survey incorporated items suggested by recent theoretical and empirical literature, as well as questions from related research about perceptions of sex offenders (Beck and Travis 2004; Levenson et al. 2007) and questions about neighborhood social capital and social control (Earls and Visher 1997). Demographic information was also collected. Additional data come from the 2000 Census of Population and Housing to describe neighborhood structural characteristics, such as neighborhood disadvantage, residential instability and ethnic composition (Sampson et al. 1997).

### Variables

Key dependent variables in these analyses come from survey items assessing residents' awareness of local sex offenders, and their own reporting, as well as neighbors' perceived likelihood

of reporting local sex offenders who are engaged in suspicious behavior. *Awareness* is based on a yes/no question asking residents if they were aware that there are sex offenders living in their neighborhood. *Own Reporting* is based on a yes/no question asking residents if they have reported to anyone (i.e., police, neighbor, friend, neighborhood watch program) that a local sex offender was doing something illegal and/or suspicious (e.g., talking with children, harming someone). *Neighbor Reporting* is based on a Likert-scale (very unlikely to very likely) question asking residents about their perceptions of the likelihood that a neighbor would report to anyone that a local sex offender was perceived to be doing something illegal and/or suspicious.

In order to better understand the social-psychological factors that underlie awareness and reporting, several explanatory variables were constructed. *Familiarity* is based on a yes/no question about residents' familiarity with Illinois' sex offender notification laws. It is suggested that this variable would be positively associated with residential awareness and reporting of local sex offenders. Several scales were also constructed to measure residents' attitudes about sex offenders; the scales were calculated as the sum of various items measured on a Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree then divided by the number of scale items. The *Trust* scale includes the following items: most people would willingly accept a registered sex offender as a close friend; most people believe that a registered sex offender is just as trustworthy as the average citizen; most people would accept a registered sex offender as a productive member of society. This variable should be negatively associated with residential awareness and reporting of local sex offenders. Alpha for this scale was .80. The *Negative Opinions* scale includes the following items: most people believe that being a registered sex offender is a sign of a serious mental disorder; most people would not hire a registered sex offender, even if he or she had been out of prison for some time; most people think less of a person who is a registered sex offender; most women would be reluctant to date a man who is a registered sex offender; once they know a person is a registered sex offender, most people will take his or her opinions less seriously. Alpha for this scale was .77. The *Secrecy* scale includes the following items: if you have been incarcerated for a sex offense, the best thing to do is to keep it a secret; if I had a close relative who is a registered sex offender, I would advise him or her not to tell anyone about it; sex offenders should keep their offense a secret. Alpha for this scale was .85. The *Deserving* scale includes the following items: most sex offenders need to be monitored; sex offenders get what they deserve; sex offenders deserve to be on the registry. Alpha for this scale was .62. The *Sex Offenders in Neighborhood* scale includes the following items: sex offenders are not welcomed in this neighborhood; no one in my neighborhood will care if they find out a registered sex offender lives here (reverse-coded); in this neighborhood, people will help sex offenders get back on their feet (reverse-coded). Alpha for this scale was .67. The *Secrecy*, *Deserving*, and *Sex Offenders in the Neighborhood* three scales are hypothesized to be positively associated with residential awareness and reporting of local sex offenders.

Additional explanatory variables assessing the local neighborhood context were also constructed. *Informal social control* was measured by a 3-item Likert scale. Residents were asked about the likelihood that their neighbors would do something about (1) children skipping school and hanging out on a street corner, (2) children spray painting graffiti on a local building, and (3) children showing disrespect to an adult. Alpha for this scale was 0.73. The variable *Social Ties* was calculated as the sum of two items asking the number of friends and relatives that residents reported living in the neighborhood. *Neighborhood Attachment* is based on two items measuring how satisfied residents are with their local neighborhood and how much they would miss it if



they have to move; alpha for these two items was .81. *Neighboring Behaviors* was calculated as the mean of standardized responses for three items measuring the frequency of the following activities: (1) you and people in your neighborhood do favors for each other, (2) you and other neighbors watch each other's property, and (3) you and people in your neighborhood ask each other for advice. Alpha for this scale was .77.

Three scales were created 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 Sampson et al. 1997; Morenoff et al. 2001). *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; alpha for the five items was 0.75. *Residential instability* is defined as the percentage of residents five years or older who did not live in the same house five years earlier, and the percentage of homes that are renter-occupied; alpha for the two items was 0.55. *Ethnic heterogeneity* includes the percentage of Hispanic and the percentage of foreign-born residents; alpha for the two items was 0.87.

### Demographic Variables

Several demographic variables were also included: dummy variables for *Married/Cohabiting*, *Have Children* and *Employed*, as well as variables representing *Race*, *Age* (in years), *Education*, *Household Earned Income*, and *Length of Residence in the Neighborhood* (in months).

## RESULTS

### Descriptives

Table 1 contains descriptive statistics for the residents' survey sample. Generally, residents who completed the survey tended to be white (81 percent), be married (67 percent), have children in the household (54 percent), employed (80 percent), have at least some college (50 percent), and have an income over \$50,000 (56 percent). The mean age of the sample was 47, and the mean length of residence at the present address was almost 13 years.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics of the key dependent and explanatory variables. Consistent with prior research, a majority of residents were not aware that a sex offender was living in their neighborhood (61 percent). Further, few have ever reported that a local sex offender was doing something suspicious and/or illegal (8 percent). However, a majority of residents think it is likely or very likely that a neighbor would report such activity involving a local sex offender (70 percent). Also, 60 percent of residents considered themselves familiar with Illinois' sex offender notification laws. The remaining explanatory variables, including those measuring neighborhood social capital and social control, and structural characteristics, showed considerable variation across neighborhoods.

Examination of bivariate correlations revealed generally expected relationships among the key dependent variables and explanatory variables (see Appendix). First, residents' awareness

TABLE 1  
Residents' Demographic Characteristics

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Race		
White/Caucasian	77	81.05
Black/African American	5	5.26
Asian	1	1.05
Hispanic	10	10.53
Other	1	1.05
Missing	1	1.05
Married/Cohabiting		
Yes	64	67.37
No	31	32.63
Children in Household		
Yes	51	53.68
No	44	46.32
Employment Status		
Yes	76	80.00
No	14	14.74
Missing	5	5.30
Education		
8th grade or less	1	1.05
Some high school	4	4.21
GED	3	3.16
High school graduate	18	18.95
Some college	21	22.11
College graduate	46	48.42
Missing	2	2.10
Income		
Under \$10,000	2	2.11
\$10,000–\$19,999	3	3.16
\$20,000–\$29,999	7	7.37
\$30,000–\$49,999	25	26.32
\$50,000–\$64,999	14	14.74
\$65,000 or more	40	42.11
Missing	4	4.20
Total	95	100.00
	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	46.87	18.85
Length of Residence in Neighborhood (in months)	151.59	181.23

of local sex offenders is positively correlated with both their knowledge of and familiarity with sex offender notification laws and their likelihood of reporting a local sex offender's illegal or suspicious behavior. There is also a positive correlation between one's perception of neighborhood informal social control and the likelihood that a neighbor would report a local sex offender's suspicious behavior.

Table 3 presents the structural characteristics of the neighborhoods sampled. Descriptive statistics of the disadvantage, ethnic heterogeneity and residential instability indices reveal generally

TABLE 2  
Descriptive Statistics

	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>
Awareness of Local Sex Offenders	0.00	1.00	0.39	0.49
Own Reporting Sex Offender	0.00	1.00	0.08	0.28
Likelihood of Neighbor Reporting Sex Offender	1.00	5.00	3.84	1.24
Familiarity with Illinois' Sex Offender Laws	0.00	1.00	0.60	0.49
Trust	0.27	2.45	1.14	0.71
Negative Opinions	2.20	5.00	3.73	0.71
Secrecy	1.00	4.33	2.53	0.93
Deserving	2.33	5.00	3.80	0.66
Sex Offenders in Neighborhood	2.00	5.00	3.59	0.64
Informal Social Control	-2.73	1.18	-0.01	0.77
Social Ties	2.00	8.00	3.64	1.58
Neighborhood Attachment	-3.00	1.02	0.00	0.92
Neighboring	-1.47	1.59	0.00	0.77
Neighborhood Disadvantage	-1.05	1.28	0.00	0.70
Neighborhood Immigrant Concentration	-0.82	2.43	0.00	1.00
Neighborhood Residential Instability	-1.15	1.81	0.00	0.87

less disadvantage in the university and suburban neighborhoods, less heterogeneity in the university neighborhoods, and less instability in the suburban neighborhoods.

### Multivariate Results

Logistic and ordinary least squares regression models were estimated predicting residents' awareness of local sex offenders, their own reporting of local sex offenders, and their perceptions of a neighbor's likelihood of reporting local sex offenders. Due to the large number of

TABLE 3  
Structural Characteristics of Local Neighborhoods

	<i>University neighborhoods</i>	<i>Suburban neighborhoods</i>	<i>Rural neighborhoods</i>	<i>State average</i>
Disadvantage Index	0.18	0.07	-0.25	0.00
Percent below Poverty	5.02	7.13	4.13	13.04
Percent with Public Assistance Income	2.38	1.54	0.98	4.60
Percent Unemployed	5.51	4.56	4.09	7.75
Percent Female-headed Households	5.79	4.25	6.07	13.86
Percent Black	4.75	5.97	1	19.12
Ethnic Heterogeneity Index	-0.68	0.51	0.06	0.00
Percent Hispanic	2.28	25.07	15.24	11.75
Percent Foreign-born	2.38	14.96	10.87	10.89
Residential Instability Index	0.12	-0.19	0.10	0.00
Percent in Different House Five Years Earlier	47.58	46.07	52.9	42.85
Percent Renter-occupied Housing	41.99	31.04	29.7	32.21

variables, each analysis was comprised of two models; the first model included all theoretically relevant independent variables, while the second model re-estimated the equation after removing all non-significant variables.

The first set of logistic regression models predicting residents' awareness of local sex offenders is shown in Table 4. Results reveal significant positive effects of familiarity with sex offender laws (odds ratio = 8.24), the deserving scale (odds ratio = 2.47), and income (odds ratio = 2.08). Residents who are informed of Illinois sex offender laws, those who generally think sex offenders are deserving of punishment, and those with higher incomes are more likely to be aware of the presence of local sex offenders. Interestingly, local informal social control was significantly and inversely related to one's awareness of local sex offenders. An increase in residents' perceptions of informal social control decreases the odds of awareness of local sex offenders by about 67 percent. There were no significant effects for the other attitudinal scales, neighborhood structural characteristics, or the length of residence in the neighborhood. Somewhat surprisingly, the presence of children in the household did not exert a significant positive effect on awareness of local sex offenders. This is perhaps due to the coding of the variable as dichotomous. Although other analyses (results not presented) examined the effect of the presence of children under thirteen and children ages 13–17 in the household, it is possible that finer distinctions (e.g., children under 5, children 5–13) are necessary to yield any significant effects.

Regarding one's own reporting of a local sex offender's illegal or suspicious behavior, eight percent ( $n = 8$ ) report that they have done so. Although it is unknown how many respondents

TABLE 4  
Logistic Regression Models Predicting Awareness of Local Sex Offenders

	<i>Full model</i>		<i>Reduced model</i>	
	<i>Odds ratio</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Odds ratio</i>	<i>Standard error</i>
Intercept	0.00	(2.87)	0.00	(2.30)
Familiarity with Illinois Sex Offender Laws	19.47***	(0.81)	8.24**	(0.61)
Trust	0.76	(0.44)		
Negative Opinions	0.60	(0.57)		
Secrecy	1.14	(0.37)		
Deserving	6.33**	(0.62)	2.47*	(0.39)
Sex Offenders in Neighborhood	0.35	(0.50)		
Informal Social Control	0.26*	(0.60)	0.33**	(0.40)
Social Ties	1.59	(0.25)		
Neighborhood Attachment	0.83	(0.43)		
Neighboring	0.71	(0.48)		
Neighborhood Disadvantage	0.66	(0.83)		
Neighborhood Ethnic Heterogeneity	0.81	(0.42)		
Neighborhood Residential Instability	0.90	(0.58)		
Married	0.53	(0.71)		
Children in household	1.13	(0.72)		
Education	2.12	(0.31)		
Income	1.00**	(0.27)	2.08**	(0.22)
Length of Residence in Neighborhood	1.01	(0.00)		

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

TABLE 5  
OLS Regression Models Predicting Neighbor's Reporting of Local Sex Offenders

	<i>Full model</i>		<i>Reduced model</i>	
	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Standard error</i>
Intercept		(1.57)		(0.63)
One's Own Reporting of Sex Offender	.189	(0.47)		
Trust	.046	(0.22)		
Negative Opinions	-.066	(0.21)		
Secrecy	.234*	(0.15)	0.21*	(0.13)
Deserving	.021	(0.26)		
Sex Offenders in Neighborhood	.134	(0.24)		
Informal Social Control	.237*	(0.20)	0.32**	(0.16)
Social Ties	-.049	(0.09)		
Neighborhood Attachment	.031	(0.17)		
Neighboring	.239	(0.21)		
Neighborhood Disadvantage	.190	(0.33)		
Neighborhood Ethnic Heterogeneity	-.073	(0.17)		
Neighborhood Residential Instability	.020	(0.23)		
Married	.261*	(0.29)	0.09	(0.25)
Children in Household	.071	(0.27)		
Education	.348**	(0.13)	0.14	(0.10)
Income	-.251	(0.09)		
Length of Residence in Neighborhood	-.303**	(0.00)	-0.25**	(0.00)

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

live in neighborhoods where sex offenders may have committed any illegal or suspicious actions that could have been reported, this finding suggests that people are willing to report such behaviors. However, given the small number of this outcome, results of a logistic regression model predicting one's own reporting are not presented (results available on request).

Table 5 shows the final model, which is an ordinary least squares regression model predicting residents' perceptions of a neighbor's likelihood of reporting local sex offenders. Results reveal positive and significant effects of the secrecy scale and neighborhood informal social control and a significant negative effect of length of residence. Thus, residents perceive their neighbors as more likely to report a local sex offender if those residents tend to believe that sex offenders should keep their status a secret and if they perceive their neighborhood as one in which residents are willing to intervene in local problems. Also, residents who have lived in the neighborhood for a shorter length of time are more likely to perceive their neighbors as likely to report a local sex offender.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

With the proliferation of sex offender policy over the past 20 years, scholars have increasingly focused attention on the consequences, intentional or otherwise, of the growing number of laws designed to punish, contain, and supervise registered sex offenders. Much prior research indicates that these laws have a limited effect on sex offenders' behavior, in terms of reducing

recidivism. And because many of these laws proscribe the local conditions for sex offenders upon release, it is also important to examine the effects they might have on the attitudes and actions of residents living in neighborhoods with registered sex offenders. Drawing on a theoretical framework that emphasizes the importance of local social capital and social control, this research contributes to the study of the local consequences of sex offender policy by addressing three research questions: (1) Are community residents aware of local registered sex offenders?; (2) Do community residents report illegal and/or suspicious behavior of local sex offenders?; and (3) Do community residents perceive their neighbors as being willing to report suspicious behavior of local sex offenders?

First and foremost, this research reveals that a majority of residents are unaware of the presence of local sex offenders. This finding is consistent with other research about residential awareness of local sex offenders and suggests that these policies, which are designed to empower local residents with information deemed necessary to protect themselves and their children, might not be living up to their promise. Regression analyses revealed the individual and community characteristics that influence the likelihood that residents are aware of the presence of local sex offenders. In terms of individual characteristics that increased the likelihood of awareness, residents who were familiar with sex offender laws, those who expressed attitudes that sex offenders are deserving of their punishment, and those with higher incomes were more aware. Perhaps residents with higher incomes feel that they have more to protect and are thus motivated to inform themselves of sex offender laws, to justify these policies by concluding that sex offenders get what they deserve, and to then seek out the locations of local sex offenders.

Another potential explanation for the finding that most residents are unaware of local sex offenders is that the residents surveyed did not believe that they lived in “that type of neighborhood.” This possibility seems to be consistent with the finding that residents who perceive higher levels of informal social control in their neighborhoods are less aware of the presence of local sex offenders. That is, residents who see their neighbors as willing to engage in the prevention of local problems are less aware of local sex offenders. Thus, perhaps they see their neighborhood as one in which local social control makes the presence of sex offenders unlikely, or, that, since their neighbors are willing to be vigilant, they themselves do not need to be. In either case, it suggests that these residents are over-reliant on their neighbors to be aware of or control the potential threat of local sex offenders. Accordingly, then, residents who perceive less informal social control are more likely to be aware of local sex offenders, perhaps compensating for their neighbors’ lack of vigilance. As informal social control is an important precursor to the prevention and reduction of local crime, this finding offers important insight into the mechanisms by which this social control might occur and the possible role that residents’ perceptions play in insulating them from local problems.

This disjuncture between community and individual awareness and action is further supported by the finding that very few residents actually report suspicious and/or illegal behavior by local sex offenders, though this is not surprising, given that few residents are even aware of local sex offenders. Thus, while the neighborhood context might be relevant in mitigating one’s awareness of local sex offenders, it is not relevant in influencing individual residents to report local sex offenders.

The neighborhood context does, however, shape residents’ perceptions of their neighbors’ likelihood of reporting local sex offenders. Informal social control is predictive of perceptions of neighbors’ reporting. It is clear, then, that residents who perceive their neighborhoods as high

in informal social control also perceive their neighbors as more likely to report on local sex offenders. This makes intuitive sense, but is also somewhat surprising, given the lack of awareness and reporting behavior of the residents themselves. Again, it suggests that residents may be reliant on their neighbors' willingness to take action, and that they perceive their neighbors as willing to report local sex offenders, even if they themselves are not.

The results from this survey raise many questions. In particular, they suggest that the neighborhood context is an over-looked factor in determining residents' attitudes about and awareness of local sex offenders and may be necessary to examine when trying to ascertain why rates of such awareness are typically low. However, the results presented here demonstrate how difficult it is to sort out individual attitudes and actions in a community context. This research suggests that there are important discrepancies between what residents say (including their attitudes about sex offenders and sex offender policy) and what they do (their awareness and reporting of local sex offenders). Few residents are aware of sex offenders in their neighborhoods, and even fewer have reported them. Further, in some contexts, what residents think (and do) about sex offenders is a function of what they perceive their neighbors are willing to do. Finally, if so few local residents are aware of the sex offenders in their midst, then the fear, shame, and stigma that sex offenders feel as a consequence of these laws and the label they perpetuate may be unfounded. Since prior research indicates that this stigma may act as a barrier to successful reintegration and rehabilitation, then perhaps the ability for sex offenders to maintain a low profile is beneficial for community safety (Burchfield 2010; Burchfield and Mingus 2008). However, if the stigma of the "sex offender" label is implicitly intended to hold sex offenders accountable for their actions and deter future offending, then residents' lack of awareness of local sex offenders, and the unlikelihood that they will play the "stigmatizers," suggests that the power of this stigma to exert social control is limited. Thus, the findings from this research call into question the various obstacles that sex offenders perceive in their attempts to reintegrate after prison (see Mingus and Burchfield forthcoming; Burchfield and Mingus 2008). While certainly salient to sex offenders' self-concept, the stigma, shame, and threat of future sanctions that they fear may not be borne out in their local communities.

Unfortunately, the sampling design of this survey precluded a more thorough investigation of the effects of neighborhood context on residential attitudes and awareness of local sex offenders. The sample was a convenience sample based on only two counties of one state. Thus, generalizability is limited. Also, one must consider the possibility of selection bias; that is, perhaps those residents who completed the survey exhibited particular perceptions of sex offenders and their local neighborhood that were directly related to their willingness to participate in the survey.

Further, the lack of findings in terms of neighborhood structural characteristics, including disadvantage, heterogeneity, and instability, as well as neighborhood social characteristics related to local social capital, including social ties, attachment, and neighboring, is most likely to be due to the small sample size, and the inability to properly empirically model the relationships between neighborhood, individual, and outcome variables. Related to this point, it is possible that variability in residents' assessments of the size and scope of their "neighborhood" and their perceptions of the social processes occurring therein introduced measurement error into the regression models. Additional theory and research is needed to parse out the effects of social capital and social control provided by the sex offender's immediate social networks from the effects of the broader neighborhood context. Future analyses should include hierarchical linear models to assess the separate

contributions of neighborhood-level and individual-level characteristics, as well as to examine potential cross-level mediating and moderating effects (e.g., see Craun 2010).

There are additional limitations to this research that must be addressed. The use of survey items to assess all but the Census-derived structural characteristics of neighborhood disadvantage, ethnic heterogeneity and residential instability introduces the possibility of shared method bias. Although this should be considered when interpreting these findings, there are reasons why this bias might be minimized. Questions about willingness to report local sex offenders were asked in such a way that one's **own** likelihood of reporting was asked, followed by one's perceptions of his/her **neighbor's** reporting. Thus, it is hoped that respondents considered their own behavior first, and then subtracted this out when considering what their neighbors would do. Further, questions about local social control were asked in such a way to assess residents' perceptions of their neighbors' behaviors, thus tapping a truly collective phenomenon.

Finally, the questions assessing individual reporting behavior may be too limiting. Respondents were asked if they have reported to anyone that a local sex offender was doing something illegal and/or suspicious. Negative responses to this question might indicate that local sex offenders simply are not doing anything illegal and/or suspicious. Thus, future survey research should include additional questions to determine the likelihood of reporting if a local sex offender is doing something illegal and/or suspicious.

However, the findings from this pilot survey offer several theoretical and empirical insights, as well as compelling prospects for future research. First, this study is situated nicely within the growing body of evidence calling into question the effectiveness of sex offender policy. It does so by simultaneously examining the role of neighborhood characteristics, including local social capital and social control, as well as the role of individual attitudes about sex offenders on residential awareness of and willingness to take action against local sex offenders. Additional research should be conducted with larger samples potentially covering multiple neighborhoods and states, to assess variations in the effects of neighborhood context, as well as variation related to different state sex offender policies. Also, because the fundamental issue raised here (and elsewhere) seems to be that residents are often unaware of and unwilling to report local sex offenders, this research suggests that, as sex offender policy has expanded over the past 20 years, perhaps it has reached a point of diminishing returns. Although these laws were intended to encourage local residential vigilance and action—informal social control—it appears that their proliferation might now have led to a kind of “bystander effect” whereby residents are unlikely to take action, instead overestimating their neighbors' willingness to intervene against the potential threat of local sex offenders. Thus, more needs to be known about when the power of informal social control ends, and the need for formal social control (i.e., police intervention) begins.

Although political rhetoric suggests that the impetus for these policies has been public outcry and parents' fear for the safety of their children, there is now a growing body of research suggesting the ineffectiveness of sex offender registration and notification policies for increasing residential awareness. Thus, policymakers might consider more proactive measures designed to inform and educate the general public about the true risks posed by sex offenders, as well as the steps that citizens can take to help ensure the proper enforcement of sex offender laws. Public education efforts might involve elements of a community policing model, or town hall meetings, where local residents could be given information about how various state and local



sex offender laws work, how to use the sex offender registry, and fact sheets about sex offenders and sexual victimization.

To this end, this line of research also offers important implications for connecting theory and evidence regarding the effects of sex offender community notification laws with broader sociological and criminological inquiries into the local causes and consequences of community crime. Future research could begin to clarify the relationship between residents' perceptions of local informal social control and their ability to mobilize against the threat of danger in their community, whether it be a sex offender, a local drug-selling operation, or gang violence.

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## APPENDIX

### Pearson Correlations (*n* = 95)

	Awareness	Familiarity	Reporting	Neighbor Reporting	Trust	Negative Opinions	Secrecy	Deserving	SOs in Hood	Informal Social Control	Social Ties	Attachment	Neighboring	Disadvantage	Heterogeneity	Instability
Awareness	1															
Familiarity	0.256*	1														
Reporting	0.307**	.015	1													
Neighbor Reporting	-.016	-.014	.071	1												
Trust	-.017	.157	-.023	-.007	1											
Negative Opinions	-.037	-.070	-.125	.020	-.462***	1										
Secrecy	-.053	.092	-.018	.198	0.315**	-.101	1									
Deserving	.178	-.081	.191	-.007	-.0416***	0.426***	-.0399***	1								
SOs in Hood	.056	.061	.118	.107	-.0473***	0.408***	-.0203	.499***	1							
Informal Social Control	-.157	.063	-.055	0.328**	-.0276*	.100	-.023	-.033	.249*	1						
Social Ties	.098	-.172	.021	.037	-.110	-.046	-.0228*	.194	.224*	.168	1					
Attachment	-.072	-.018	-.109	.175	-.129	.053	-.045	.006	.123	0.420***	0.250*	1				
Neighboring	-.081	.017	-.026	.177	-.021	.056	-.175	.016	.118	0.458***	0.386***	0.500***	1			
Disadvantage	-.068	.070	.140	-.097	.151	-.167	-.045	.095	-.0211*	-.0394***	-.075	-.0220*	-.185	1		
Heterogeneity	-.042	.045	.199	-.189	0.208*	-.0204	-.028	-.030	-.160	-.0388***	-.015	-.0348**	-.120	0.568***	1	
Instability	-.017	-.045	.109	-.013	.049	.006	-.025	-.024	-.046	-.0321**	-.054	-.074	-.173	0.742***	0.223*	1

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .