

Sex Offender Reintegration: Consequences of the Local Neighborhood Context

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Abstract In this paper we seek to assess the effects of the neighborhood context on sex offenders' perceptions of their neighbor's willingness to support them upon release. We also examine the effect of the neighborhood context on sex offenders' feelings of stress and the need for secrecy, potential risk factors for recidivism. Using survey data obtained from a sample of 333 in-treatment sex offenders, we find that the neighborhood social context exerts an important influence on sex offenders' perceptions of neighborhood support. We also find that offenders are less likely to worry about the negative repercussions of their status as a sex offender when they perceive higher levels of neighborhood support. Despite the limitations of the sample, implications of this research indicate a need for policies that promote public awareness of local sex offenders while also offering education and understanding about potential barriers to successful sex offender reintegration.

Keywords Sex offenders · Neighborhood · Reintegration

Introduction

In the fall of 2011, a woman named Barbara Farris announced plans to create a sex offender community near the small Florida town of Sorrento (Landry, 2011). The response was immediate and visceral. Community members began an on-line petition against the proposal, and many began to push the County Commission to take action to prevent the project from going forward. A self-proclaimed group of "moms" protested against the proposed sex offender community, holding up signs in front

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of the Lake County Administration Building in Tavares (Sorentroue, 2011). A commentator for the Orlando Sentinel summed up the fear expressed by local residents by saying, “rapists and pedophiles also would be among those Farris seeks to house. And who would choose to raise a youngster next door to someone who has raped a child? Would you ever let your daughter play in the backyard alone? Could your son ride his bike to the end of the street without supervision?” (Ritchie, 2011:1). For registered sex offenders looking for an opportunity to reintegrate into society, the message is clear: not in my backyard.

This study examines the ways that perceptions of the local neighborhood context impact the experiences of convicted sex offenders placed on probation or released from prison. Building on a theoretical framework that recognizes the importance of local social capital and social ties, we assess sex offenders’ perceptions of the willingness and ability of neighborhood residents to support them as they attempt to reintegrate and the consequences of that support, or lack thereof, for sex offenders’ feelings of stress and the need for secrecy.

Background

The current frenzy of sex offender legislation began in 1994 in response to the highly publicized murder of 11-year-old Jacob Wetterling in Minnesota (Thomas & Mingus, 2007). The legislative response to this crime resulted in the Jacob Wetterling Crimes against Children Act, mandating that states comply with Federal guidelines to establish registries at state and local levels. In 1996, Congress reacted to another high profile murder, this time of a seven-year-old girl named Megan Kanka, by amending the Jacob Wetterling Act to require states to inform the public of sex offenders living in neighborhoods and near schools (Wright, 2003). Since this time, all fifty states and the federal government have passed some version of what has become known as “Megan’s Law” (Meloy, 2005). Megan’s laws have had a much larger impact on the reintegrative efforts of sex offenders since they require that detailed information about sex offenders, generally including their name, photo, and crime, be posted on the internet in searchable databases (Prescott & Rockoff, 2008). For the first time in U.S. history, anyone with access to a computer and the internet could instantly learn the name and location of registered sex offenders.

In addition to community registration and notification laws, much of the recent sex offender legislation imposes restrictions on where sex offenders can live, where they can work, how long they can be away from home without notifying officials, and their access to social networking sites on the internet (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008; Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Farley, 2008; McAlinden, 2005; Sample & Kadleck, 2008).

Although any criminal conviction carries with it some level of social stigma, sex offenses embody strong social taboos and a tenacious belief in the sanctity of childhood innocence that has grown over the past century (Jenkins, 1998). Compounding this stigma, these laws create an environment that makes it more difficult for convicted sex offenders to reintegrate into society following their conviction (Jennings, Zgoba, & Tewksbury 2012). Thus, along with the stated intents of sex offender legislation, there are unintended, or collateral, consequences. Recently,

researchers have begun to focus on the collateral consequences of increasingly stringent legal restrictions placed on sex offenders.

Much like Lemert's (1972) notion of primary and secondary deviance, current studies suggest that there are primary and secondary collateral consequences of sex offender legislation. Primary collateral consequences are those that diminish opportunities for reintegration as a direct result of an individual's offense. This would include laws that restrict where an offender can live, where he can work, or what activities he can participate in. This would also include potential employers or landlords who refuse to hire or rent to a sex offender because they do not like, or do not trust, sex offenders.

However, there are also secondary collateral consequences of sex offender legislation which thwart efforts toward reintegration, not as a result of a conviction for a sex offense, but as a result of the negative public reaction to sex offenders. Thus, even if a friend, family member or landlord were willing to house a sex offender, or an employer willing to hire a sex offender, fear of how other employees or other tenants might react to having a registered sex offender in their midst often prevents them from extending these opportunities (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008; Mercado, Alvarez, & Levenson 2008). Borrowing Goffman's (1963) concept of a "courtesy stigma," it appears that the negative consequences of the sex offender label can be and often is extended to friends, family, potential employers and others who might attempt to help the offender as he attempts to reintegrate (Farkas & Miller, 2007; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009; Tewksbury & Connor, 2012).

Thus, collateral consequences of sex offender legislation include those that have the unintended impact of making it more difficult for convicted sex offenders to reintegrate into society in any meaningful way, often by isolating them from valuable local social capital, including social ties, meaningful employment opportunities and adequate housing, and relegating these offenders to socially disorganized communities. A number of studies have examined the deleterious structural and social characteristics of sex offenders' local neighborhood context (Hughes & Burchfield, 2008; Hughes & Kadleck, 2008; Mustaine, Tewksbury, & Stengel 2006; Socia & Stamatel, 2012; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2006, 2008). This relegation of sex offenders into "neighborhoods of last resort" generally means the sex offenders are living in neighborhoods lacking the very types of social capital and social control assumed by sex offender legislation (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008; Hughes & Burchfield, 2008; Socia & Stamatel, 2012). However, few studies have examined the local neighborhood context from the perspective of the offenders themselves. Those that have find that many sex offenders report a variety of negative and punitive forms of social control (Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2011); further, these offenders face more serious problems revolving around finding suitable employment and housing, as well as relationship issues, harassment, and stigmatization (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2011; Tewksbury & Connor, 2012).

While the difficulties faced by sex offenders evoke little sympathy from most people, researchers have linked these difficulties to a host of community safety issues. Although the purpose of sex offender registries is to make sex offenders more visible, they can have the opposite effect, ostracizing these offenders from the local community and driving them "underground" in order to avoid the emotional and social consequences of being a registered sex offender (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Farley,

2008; Prescott & Rockoff, 2008; Tewksbury, 2005). The stress and isolation these offenders then face can become potential emotional triggers for relapse (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Levenson & Cotter, 2005). Compounding this situation, as discussed previously, residency and other restrictions have the effect of pushing offenders away from supportive networks, social ties and social capital that could help them to find work and housing, and maintain a successful, offense-free life (Tofte, 2007). Related to this point, recent research has found that homelessness and joblessness can increase sex offender recidivism (Farley, 2008; Kruttschnitt, Uggen, & Shelton 2000).

In addition to problems finding employment and housing, the stigma associated with being listed as a registered sex offender in and of itself is associated with a host of psychological issues and negative emotional responses (Farley, 2008; McAlinden, 2005; Mercado et al., 2008; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Wakefield, 2006). A majority of the sex offenders surveyed by Levenson and Cotter (2005) reported “stress, isolation, loss of relationships, and feelings of fear, shame, embarrassment, and hopelessness” (p. 56). The sex offenders surveyed by Mercado et al. (2008) also described numerous psychological stressors, and those currently in treatment reported even “more isolation, fear, shame, embarrassment, and hopelessness” (p. 201). This is not surprising given results obtained in another study conducted by Mingus and Burchfield (2012) using the same survey data analyzed here; sex offenders who perceive they will be devalued or discriminated against by a community were more likely to try to keep their offense a secret. Studies have also shown that individuals who must constantly expend cognitive resources to maintain such secrets experience negative physical and psychological health outcomes (Oswald, 2007; Pachankis, 2007; Smart & Wegner, 2000).

Increasingly expansive sex offender legislation also has the effect of overburdening law enforcement agencies who must spend their time monitoring relatively low-risk offenders rather than focusing on more serious public safety concerns (Farley, 2008). For example, legislation that prohibits sex offenders from participating in Halloween activities, including handing out candy, is enforced by local police officers who must spend their time monitoring sex offenders rather than attending to the safety of children who are much more likely to be hurt in an auto accident at Halloween (Chaffin, Levenson, Letourneau, & Stern 2009). In looking at the impact of sex offender legislation in New York over a 9-year period, Sandler, Freeman and Socia (2008) found that sex offender laws that target the relatively small number of known, registered sex offenders tend to create a false sense of security by detracting attention away from more common types of sexual offenses that occur, such as those committed by relatives or someone known and trusted by the victim. In another recent study comparing rates of sexual assaults with various aspects of sex offender registration and notification laws, Prescott and Rockoff (2008) concluded that, while offender registration may contribute to a decrease in recidivism rates, community notification tended to have the opposite effect. Further, based on the conclusions drawn by several recent studies, much of the general public do not utilize sex offender registries and are unaware of the presence of local sex offenders (Anderson & Sample, 2008; Burchfield, 2012; Kernsmith, Comartin, Craun, & Kernsmith 2009; Craun, 2010). This suggests that community registration and notification laws are not fulfilling their primary goal of empowering local residents with information about potentially dangerous offenders in their neighborhoods (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker 2007).

Thus, a growing body of evidence questions the efficacy of recent waves of sex offender legislation and their implications not only for sex offender reintegration but for public safety. It seems, then, that there is a conundrum for communities intent on creating a safe environment in which to live, work, and play. The empirically demonstrated benefits of helping sex offenders successfully reintegrate into society run head-on into negative public perceptions that sex offenders are beyond rehabilitation, that treatment is ineffective, and that recidivism rates are extremely high (Wakefield, 2006; Levenson et al., 2007). The question becomes, then, is it possible for communities to help sex offenders become useful and productive citizens, while at the same time ensuring the safety of the community? Accordingly, in this study we investigate some of the empirical correlates of sex offender reintegration. Specifically we seek to assess the effects of the neighborhood context and local social capital on sex offenders' perceptions of their neighbor's willingness to support them upon release. We also examine the effects of the neighborhood context on sex offenders' feelings of stress and the need for secrecy, potential risk factors for relapse or recidivism. Research questions to be addressed include:

- a. What are the effects of sex offenders' perceptions of the local neighborhood context on their perceptions of neighborhood support?
- b. What are the effects of sex offenders' perceptions of the local neighborhood context on sex offenders' reported stress and need for secrecy?
- c. Do the effects of neighborhood support mediate other neighborhood effects on sex offenders' reported stress and secrecy?

Method

Sample

Data for this study were gathered over the course of two summers, 2007 and 2008, with a standardized survey instrument administered to sex offenders through various sex offender treatment groups. Using a list provided by the Sex Offender Management Board (SOMB) in Illinois, treatment providers were contacted and asked if they would be willing to allow a member of the research team to attend various treatment sessions for the purpose of administering the survey to their treatment groups. Alternatively, treatment providers were given the option of administering the surveys themselves in their treatment sessions. Almost all of the 24 treatment providers who participated opted to administer the surveys themselves after receiving detailed administration instructions from the principal investigator. Fortunately, we were able to obtain a large number of completed surveys from this research design ($n=333$). However, the lack of a random sampling design does present some limitations, which will be presented in the Discussion.

Survey Instrument

The survey of sex offenders incorporated items suggested by recent theoretical and empirical literature related to sex offender reentry and reintegration, as well as items

from survey-based studies about sex offenders (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Tewksbury, 2005). Questions were designed to assess sex offenders' experiences with reintegration, including access to friends and family, housing, and employment. Respondents were also asked about their knowledge of and compliance with current sex offender policies, their experiences on probation or parole, and the various ways that they cope with the stigmatization of the "sex offender" label. Additional questions about perceptions of neighborhood social capital and social control were included (Earls & Visser, 1997). Finally, demographic and offense-related information was collected.

Variables

The variables used in these analyses come from survey items assessing sex offenders' perceptions of their local community and the challenges they face in reintegrating.

Dependent Variables The two dependent variables are *Neighborhood Support* and *Stress and Secrecy*¹; these variables were calculated as the average of standardized scores of various items measured on a Likert scale. The *Neighborhood Support* scale includes the following items: In my community, people will help me get back on my feet, despite my offense; No one in my neighborhood will care if they find out I'm a registered sex offender; I will not be welcomed in my neighborhood if people find out I'm a registered sex offender (reverse-coded); If people in my neighborhood find out I'm a registered sex offender, I will be harassed (reverse-coded). Alpha for this scale was .80.

The *Stress and Secrecy* scale includes the following items: I rarely feel the need to hide the fact that I am a registered sex offender (reverse-coded); When I meet people for the first time, I make a special effort to keep the fact that I'm a registered sex offender to myself; I worry that people will find out that I am a registered sex offender; I worry that I will be forced to move if my landlord or neighbors find out I am a registered sex offender; I worry about being harassed if people in my neighborhood find out I am a registered sex offender; I worry about people finding out about my offense. Alpha for this scale was .82.

Independent Variables Additional explanatory variables assessing the local neighborhood context were also constructed. The variable *Social Ties* was calculated as the mean of standardized scores of two items asking the number of friends and relatives that residents reported living in the neighborhood; these two items were correlated at .20 ($p < .001$). *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 .82. *Neighborhood Attachment* is the mean of standardized scores of 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

¹ Principal component analysis indicates two factors for the items comprising the "Neighborhood Support" and "Stress and Secrecy" scales. Results available upon request.

these two items was .45. *Informal Social Control* was measured as the mean of standardized scores for several Likert-scale items in which 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, 3) children showing disrespect to an adult, and 4) breaking up a fight in front of a neighbor's house. Alpha for the *informal social control* scale was .75. *Local Harassment* is a scale constructed as a mean of items asking respondents if they have experienced various types of local harassment including negative comments from neighbors, flyers distributed by local residents, petitions circulated to get them to move, vandalism or physical threats; alpha for this scale was .62.

Demographic and Control Variables Several demographic variables were also included: dummy variables for *Employed* (full- or part-time), *Married*, *Black*, *Prior Treatment*, and *Child Victim*, as well as a continuous variable representing *Age* (in years).

Results

Descriptive Results

Table 1 contains frequencies and percentages of demographic and other characteristics from the sex offenders' survey sample and the Illinois Sex Offender Registry (data current as of January 2012). The demographics of the survey respondents were very similar to a snapshot taken from the Illinois Sex Offender Registry prior to conducting the study and are very similar to a snapshot from the Registry taken recently. The one notable exception is the number of individuals on probation or parole, as discussed above. A majority of the sample were on parole, male, 25 or older, employed, single and white. Over 82 % of the sample had only been arrested for a sex crime once, with most reporting that their victims were under the age of 18. Also, over 67 % of these sex offenders had not received treatment prior to the current treatment period during which the survey was conducted.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics of the key dependent and explanatory variables. The dependent variable *neighborhood support* ranged from -1.60 to 1.89. The dependent variable *stress and secrecy* ranged from -1.58 to 1.56. The variables representing social ties, neighboring behaviors, neighborhood attachment, informal social control and local harassment also showed considerable variation. The mean age of the sample was 39 years old and dummy variables representing employment and marital status, race, prior treatment and child victim are consistent with results presented in Table 1.

Multivariate Results

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models were estimated predicting sex offenders' perceptions of local neighborhood support, and their reported feelings of stress and the need for secrecy. Explanatory variables include those describing the

Table 1 Offender characteristics

	Survey sample		State registry ¹	
	<i>n</i> =333		<i>n</i> =12,922	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Probation/Parole				
Yes	291	87.4	1128 ²	8.7
No	42	12.6	11794	91.3
Gender				
Male	316	95.0	12951	97.4
Female	17	5.0	331	2.6
Age				
Younger than 25	42	12.6	1037	8.0
25–64	277	83.2	11347	87.8
65 or older	14	4.2	538	4.2
Employed				
Yes	220	66.1	N/A	N/A
No	113	33.9		
Married				
Yes	67	20.0	N/A	N/A
No	266	80.0		
Race				
White	248	74.5	8324	64.4
Black	44	13.2	3900	30.2
Asian	6	1.8	66	0.5
Unknown or Other	35	10.5	632	4.9
Prior treatment				
Yes	104	31.2	N/A	N/A
No	229	68.8		
Age of victim for most recent arrest				
5 years old or less	29	8.7	N/A	N/A
6 to 9 years old	36	10.8		
10 to 12 years old	45	13.5		
13 to 17 years old	156	46.8		
18 years old or older	44	13.2		
Missing	23	6.9		

¹ From the Illinois State Police Sex Offender Registry, summer 2006² These numbers represent parole only.

local neighborhood context, as well as relevant demographic and offense-related characteristics.

Results from the regression model predicting perceptions of neighborhood support are shown in Table 3. Results revealed significant positive effects of social ties,

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for analytical variables ($n=333$)

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Neighborhood support	0.00	0.77	-1.60	1.89
Stress and secrecy	0.00	0.73	-1.58	1.56
Social ties	0.00	0.78	-0.68	2.21
Neighboring behaviors	0.00	0.80	-1.24	1.79
Neighborhood attachment	0.01	0.82	-2.75	1.35
Informal social control	0.00	0.76	-1.95	1.34
Local harassment	0.00	0.69	-0.28	4.18
Age	39.15	12.89	18.00	79.00
Employed	0.66	0.47	0.00	1.00
Married	0.20	0.40	0.00	1.00
Black	0.13	0.34	0.00	1.00
Prior treatment	0.31	0.46	0.00	1.00
Child victim	0.76	0.43	0.00	1.00

neighboring behaviors and neighborhood attachment. Sex offenders who report more local friends and family, those who perceive their neighbors as willing to engage in helping behaviors, and those who perceive their neighbors as satisfied with their neighborhood were also more likely to perceive that those neighbors will provide support as they attempt to reintegrate into community life. Though not statistically significant, sex offenders who had experienced local harassment, who had

Table 3 OLS regression model predicting sex offenders' perceptions of neighborhood support

	<i>B</i>	Standard Error	Beta
Intercept	0.378	0.218	
Social ties	0.164	0.060	0.163**
Neighboring behaviors	0.172	0.059	0.179**
Neighborhood attachment	0.164	0.054	0.172**
Informal social control	-0.010	0.057	-0.010
Local harassment	-0.141	0.064	-0.123*
Age	0.000	0.003	0.005
Employed	0.046	0.088	0.028
Married	0.011	0.105	0.006
Black	0.014	0.126	0.006
Prior treatment	-0.163	0.083	-0.106
Child victim	-0.215	0.101	-0.117
R^2			0.191

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

undergone prior treatment, and those with child victims were less likely to perceive their neighbors as supportive, perhaps due to the extraordinary stigma of the “child sex offender” label.

Table 4 shows the results from an ordinary least squares regression model predicting sex offenders’ reported feelings of stress and secrecy. Model A includes the same neighborhood, demographic and offense-related variables from the regression model predicting neighborhood support. In this model, social ties and neighborhood attachment were inversely related to feelings of stress and secrecy. Thus, sex offenders who have local friends and family and perceive their neighbors as attached to the local neighborhood are less likely to report feeling stressed about or the need to hide their status as a sex offender. Black sex offenders were also less likely to report feelings of stress and secrecy. To explain this finding, additional analyses reveal that black sex offenders report less schooling and income than white offenders; thus perhaps black offenders feel that they have less to lose in terms of status and reputation, which might mitigate their feelings of stress and need for secrecy (results available upon request). Not surprisingly, sex offenders with child victims reported higher feelings of stress and secrecy.

Model B adds the variable neighborhood support. This variable had a strong inverse effect on sex offenders’ reported feelings of stress and the need for secrecy. Further, it rendered the effects of social ties and neighborhood attachment non-significant. Sobel tests of indirect effects revealed that neighborhood support significantly reduced the effect of social ties by 56 % and neighborhood

Table 4 OLS regression models predicting stress and secrecy

	Model A			Model B		
	<i>B</i>	Standard error	Beta	<i>B</i>	Standard error	Beta
Intercept	-0.338	0.210		-0.106	0.163	
Social ties	-0.177	0.058	-0.185**	-0.077	0.045	-0.080
Neighboring behaviors	-0.099	0.057	-0.109	0.006	0.045	0.007
Neighborhood attachment	-0.144	0.052	-0.159**	-0.044	0.041	-0.048
Informal social control	0.031	0.055	0.032	0.025	0.042	0.026
Local harassment	0.064	0.061	0.059	-0.022	0.048	-0.020
Neighborhood support				-0.611	0.043	-0.642***
Age	0.001	0.003	0.009	0.001	0.002	0.013
Employed	-0.031	0.085	-0.020	-0.003	0.066	-0.002
Married	0.038	0.101	0.021	0.045	0.078	0.025
Black	-0.283	0.121	-0.131*	-0.275	0.094	-0.127**
Prior treatment	0.144	0.080	0.099	0.045	0.062	0.031
Child victim	0.162	0.097	0.093	0.031	0.076	0.017
<i>R</i> ²			0.166			0.501

p*<.05 *p*<.01 ****p*<.001

attachment by 65 %. In this model, the coefficient for black sex offenders remained inversely related to stress and secrecy.

Discussion

Quickly following on the heels of the 1990s' sex offender policy binge, clinical practitioners and scholars began to question the efficacy of these policies, bolstering their skepticism with a growing body of empirical research. Many scholars have documented the failed objectives and unintended consequences associated with sex offender policies such as registration, community notification and housing restrictions. At best, these policies are merely symbolic; at worst, they strain valuable social networks, hinder reintegration and may even exacerbate recidivism. Because much of the impetus for these policies is the safety and protection of the sex offender's local community, this study attempts to elucidate the role of the local neighborhood context on sex offender reintegration. Specifically, this research assesses the impact of the neighborhood context on sex offenders' perceptions of local support, as well as their feelings of stress and the need for secrecy by addressing three research questions: 1) what are the effects of the local neighborhood social context on sex offenders' perceptions of neighborhood support?; 2) what are the effects of the local neighborhood context on sex offenders' reported stress and the need for secrecy?; and 3) do the effects of neighborhood support mediate other neighborhood effects on sex offenders' reported stress and secrecy?

We find that the neighborhood social context, including local social ties, neighboring, and neighborhood attachment, exerts an important influence on sex offenders' perceptions of neighborhood support. These findings provide evidence that the prevalence of neighborly networks and neighborhood pride contribute to an environment in which sex offenders perceive that their neighbors are supportive and willing to help them reintegrate. Thus, building on decades of neighborhood research demonstrating the benefit of local social ties and social capital for a host of sociological and criminological outcomes, this research offers further insights into the positive resources that the neighborhood may provide; in this case, in aiding sex offender reintegration.

Though we realize that these findings may be met with some controversy or cynicism, in suggesting that neighborhood residents have a responsibility in helping sex offenders to reintegrate, the findings become more potent when considered in conjunction with the other set of results pertaining to sex offenders' feelings of stress and the need for secrecy. We find that these offenders are less likely to worry about the negative repercussions of their status as a sex offender and less likely to try to hide that status when they perceive higher levels of neighborhood support. Conversely, sex offenders living in neighborhoods that do not offer a supportive environment are more likely to report being worried about their sex offender status and feeling the need to hide it. This is significant because studies of sex offender relapse and recidivism point to stress, alienation and withdrawal as potential psychological risk factors (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Freeman-Longo, 1996; R. Karl Hanson & Harris, 1998; R. K. Hanson, Morton-Bourgon, Safety, & Canada 2004; Hudson, 2005). Thus, if sex offenders perceive their neighborhood and neighbors to be hostile and then seek to go "underground" to avoid the stigma and shame associated

with their label, this not only isolates them from valuable local social ties, it might also allow offending activities to go undetected.

Limitations

There are limitations to this survey research that must be discussed. First, the sample was a convenience sample of sex offenders in treatment, almost all of whom were on probation or parole. We cannot know from these data how those offenders are faring who are not in treatment or under the watchful eye of a sex offender-specific probation or parole officer. On a related point, we must also consider the influence of selection bias; that is, perhaps those offenders who completed the survey possessed specific perceptions of their local neighborhood and reintegration experiences that were directly related to their desire to participate in this research. Of course, given that the surveys were administered in treatment groups, there is also the possibility that the offenders felt implicit pressure to complete them and/or that they believed their treatment providers would have access to the completed surveys (despite being assured that the surveys were completely anonymous). Finally, sex offenders surveyed in summer 2008 were offered incentive to participate in the form of a \$10 gift card; funds for this incentive were not available for the summer 2007 survey. Any of the prior considerations might have affected the responses obtained or limited generalizability of our findings. However, sex offenders are a highly marginalized population, and previous studies document very low response rates ranging from 10 to 20 % (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008; Sack & Mason, 1980; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005). By utilizing the sampling frame that we did, despite its limitations, we were able to obtain a sample that was fairly representative of the Illinois State Sex Offender Registry (except for the number on probation and parole, as previously mentioned).

Additional limitations relate to the exclusive reliance on sex offenders' perceptions of the neighborhood context. First, regarding the operationalization of key neighborhood variables, variation in sex offenders' conceptualization of their neighborhood could have introduced measurement error into the regression models. Ideally, sex offenders' neighborhoods could have been identified by Census tract, allowing for an examination of Census-derived measures of the neighborhood context, including disadvantage and residential instability, and their contribution to sex offenders' perceptions of neighborhood support. Unfortunately, but understandably, the participating sex offenders were reluctant to report their home addresses, precluding these types of analyses. Thus, future research should include hierarchical linear models to assess the separate contributions of neighborhood-level and individual-level characteristics on sex offenders' reintegration experiences. Further, because we were unable to measure the most meaningful outcome, reoffending, critics may question the significance of sex offenders' perceptions of neighborhood support and their tendency to feel stress and the need for secrecy. However, scholars have articulated the need to include individual perceptions of the neighborhood context in models predicting criminal offending (Caspi, 1993; Wikström & Sampson, 2003; Wikström & Treiber, 2007) and one recent study has found that perceptions of neighborhood informal social control (or lack thereof) moderated the effects of thrill-seeking and impulsivity on offending (Jones & Lynam, 2009). Thus, perceptions of the neighborhood context can exert an important influence on the relationship between individual-level

characteristics and offending behaviors. Because perceptions are more easily altered than behaviors, sex offender research should further examine features of the neighborhood environment that sex offenders perceive as cues for neighborhood support; these perceptions alone might aid in their successful reintegration and desistance from offending.

Policy Implications

Additional policy implications of this research highlight the complicated role that the local neighborhood context plays for sex offender reintegration and public safety. On the one hand, sex offender policy is premised on the good intentions of residential awareness and empowerment. That is, residents have a right to know if there are sex offenders living in their neighborhoods, and to take action against them, if necessary. On the other hand, sex offender reintegration and success appears to be partly dependent on the support available in the local neighborhood. That is, sex offenders may fare better psychologically and socially if they feel that their neighbors are not out to get them. To complicate matters further, as other research indicates, residents rarely use sex offender registries, are often unaware of the presence of local sex offenders and are even less likely to take action against them (Burchfield, 2012). Accordingly, it is possible that the shame, stigma and hostility that sex offenders anticipate from their neighbors is greater than what is actually experienced. This is not to say that stigma does not play a very real role in sex offenders' self-concepts, attitudes and behaviors, only that the obstacles to reintegration that they perceive from their local community may be exaggerated (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008).

How do we reconcile the need to protect and empower local residents about sex offenders living in their neighborhoods with the growing body of empirical evidence documenting the unintended and often negative consequences of sex offender policy? The current research suggests that policies promoting public awareness of local sex offenders should be tempered with education and understanding about potential barriers to successful sex offender reintegration and the role that the neighborhood context plays in promoting a supportive and reintegrative environment. Braithwaite (1999) introduced the notion of "reintegrative shaming," which involves both the disapproval of negative or criminal behavior and the ongoing inclusion of the offender as a member of the community. For example, Minnesota, with the assistance of child safety and women's rights groups, has constructed legislation that aims to prevent sexual abuse by assisting sex offenders in safely reintegrating into the community. This legislation is risk-based rather than offense-based, and subjects offenders to the minimum level of community notification required based on individual assessments of dangerousness. Instead of casting a wide net that treats all offenders the same, Minnesota evaluates offenders individually to determine if they should be subject to post-release restrictions, and if so, what those restrictions should be (Tofte, 2007). Similarly, Vermont law requires all sex offenders to register, but limits the disclosure of that information to those most likely to recidivate (Farley, 2008).

Several states have also begun developing programs that offer treatment and support of sex offenders within a reintegrative shaming framework. Two examples of these are 'The Safer Society Program' and 'The Stop It Now Program'

(McAlinden, 2005). One of the most successful and well-known programs, however, was implemented by the Correctional Service of Canada and is known as the ‘Community Reintegration Project’ (McAlinden, 2005). This program establishes a support circle within the community made up of residents and trained personnel who meet with the offender in order to accomplish two basic tasks: first, to express overt disapproval over the behavior that resulted in his conviction, and to let the offender know that he is being watched and is expected to adhere to the rules established as a condition of his acceptance by the community; second, to offer assistance to the offender in obtaining housing and employment, and provide advice and guidance as the offender faces difficulties in his reintegration. This arrangement serves the purpose of helping the offender reintegrate into the community, while at the same time ensuring that the offender is monitored - and is aware of this monitoring - in order to prevent him from relapsing and reoffending.

Human Rights Watch has rightly noted that “protecting the community and limiting unnecessary harm to former offenders are not mutually incompatible goals. To the contrary, one enhances and reinforces the other” (Tofte, 2007:11). In this research, we find that sex offenders’ perceptions of the local neighborhood context exerts an important influence on their perceptions of neighborhood support and their tendency to worry about or try to hide their status. By implementing policies based on the results of empirical research like those contained in this study, it is possible for communities to assist offenders in reintegrating while also providing the requisite level of safety to their residents.

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