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Sex Offender
Registration and
Notification Policies:
Summary and
Assessment of
Research on Claimed
Impacts on Registered
Offenders

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This research brief summarizes the Federal Research Division's (FRD) review and assessment of literature on the potential impacts of sex offender registration and notification policies (SORN) on adult and juvenile registered sex offenders (RSOs). We provide a summary of research findings and a critical analysis of methodologies underlying those findings in five main subject areas: SORN effects on RSO employment and finances; RSO perceptions of SORN; SORN effects on RSO emotional and physical well-being; SORN impacts to families of RSOs; and SORN impacts to juvenile RSOs. A sixth subject area, impacts to RSO housing from SORN and residency restrictions, is addressed in a separate brief.

For the five included subject areas, we evaluated the strength of the claims found in 18 studies published in academic journals between 2000 and 2018. Ultimately, FRD found that the prevalence of methodological shortcomings in the research body limited its reliability and validity, as well as the applicability of the research findings to individuals other than those included in the respective samples. As policymakers often look to researchers to inform their decision-making, it is critical to not merely rely on conclusions drawn, but to assess the strength of findings and quality of research.

SORN Effects On RSO Employment And Finances

In the area of SORN impacts to RSO employment and finances, FRD evaluated ten studies published between 2000 and 2014, both before and after the 2006 passage of the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act. Metrics addressed by these studies include

Select Statistical Terms And Explanations

Sound practices in maximizing statistical validity include the random selection of subjects, collecting data on all variables with potential impact, the random assignment of subjects to experimental groups and control groups, and collecting data on outcomes before and after experimental treatment.

Internal validity refers to the strength of a study's claim to a cause-and-effect relationship within that study; internal validity can be compromised by a lack of comparison groups. For example, implying a causal relationship between SORN and loss of jobs is unwarranted when one does not also evaluate comparison groups, such as individuals convicted of other felonies, or control groups, such as individuals never convicted of a felony or sex offenders not subject to SORN. FRD used the Maryland SMS scale to measure studies' internal validity.

External validity refers to the extent to which a study's findings can be generalized to other populations. It can be compromised by a number of factors, including employing a nonrandom selection of subjects for study; this is also termed "non-probability sampling" or "convenience sampling." A consequence of nonrandom sampling is that findings can only be applied to the subjects in the sample; inferring such findings to populations outside the study is not sound.

Ordinal data is derived from the assignment of values to variables with natural, ordered categories (e.g., responses such as "Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree"), but distances between the variables are unknown. Generally, calculating averages or standard deviations of ordinal data is not mathematically sound because equal distance between the categories cannot be assumed.

finding and maintaining employment and denials of promotions, bank accounts, or loans. Researchers attempted to tie SORN to RSOs' difficulties in these areas and generally concluded that registrants' prospects are harmed by SORN. However, FRD found that the overall quality of the research is poor due to questionable methodology practices compromising or negating external and internal validity within the studies.¹ For example, the practice of having RSOs answer surveys via self-reporting but not building methods for verifying self-reported data resulted in, among other things, the risk of conflating multiple possible causes for a given effect as a result of interviewees' misattribution.² Additional problematic practices include the failure to use control groups,³ non-probability sampling practices,⁴ low response rates,⁵ uncontrolled covariates,⁶ incorrect uses of ordinal data by calculating its mean or standard deviation,⁷ and other faulty statistical analyses, such as the misuse of linear regression, Pearson correlation, and t-tests.⁸ These practices resulted in an overall failure to adequately support many of the findings and conclusions presented.

RSO Perceptions Of SORN

Regarding RSO perceptions of SORN, FRD evaluated five studies published between 2000 and 2013. All five are based on self-reported data gathered through interviews with and surveys of RSOs themselves, exploring their views of the efficacy and helpfulness of SORN in preventing recidivism and providing other uses to society. Generally, studies reported that RSOs hold mixed feelings about SORN, and that some RSOs "expressed an understanding" of the need for SORN, despite a general "dissatisfaction with having oneself listed."⁹ Like those in the prior sections, the studies within this group are of poor quality: all studies contain multiple methodological or statistical flaws, such as nonrandom sampling (leading to a lack of external validity),¹⁰ self-selection bias,¹¹ uncontrolled covariates,¹² low response rates,¹³ lack of control groups,¹⁴ researchers failing to address multiple confounding variables,¹⁵ calculating averages and standard deviations for ordinal data,¹⁶ and misuses of linear regression, Pearson correlation, and t-tests.¹⁷

SORN Effects On RSO Emotional And Psychological Well-Being

On the subject of SORN impacts to RSO emotional and psychological well-being, safety, and social relationships, FRD evaluated nine studies published between 2000 and 2014, all of which, like those in the previous section, are based on self-reported data provided by RSOs through surveys or interviews. These studies investigated the possible impacts of registration on RSO health and well-being, encompassing feelings such as stress, fear, and depression, as well as impacts resulting from the actions of family, friends, neighbors, or other members of the community (e.g., loss of relationships, social isolation, and victimization through harassment or assault).

FRD found that determining the cause of community members' actions toward RSOs is more complex than the researchers in the field claimed. While the authors of these studies attributed all negative social impacts to SORN, this assessment failed to account for numerous alternative variables that may contribute to or directly cause the negative social impacts.¹⁸ This and other methodological shortcomings—such as low response rates,¹⁹ issues with internal validity,²⁰ nonrandom sampling leading to a lack of external validity,²¹ self-selection bias,²² lack of control groups,²³ uncontrolled covariates,²⁴ calculating averages for ordinal data,²⁵ and misuses of linear regression, Pearson correlation, and t-tests²⁶—prevent the literature from supporting replicable conclusions on the possible links between SORN and registrants' emotional and psychological health.

SORN Impacts To Families Of RSOs

On SORN impacts to families of RSOs, FRD looked at three studies published between 2009 and 2017. Similar to the last two topic areas, these studies are based on self-reported data provided in surveys and interviews of subjects—the family members of RSOs. This body of research concludes that family members who live with an RSO may experience similar impacts to their well-being as those suffered by RSOs, such as in the areas of finances or neighborhood discrimination. Researchers found that family members, including children, may experience stress or other negative emotions because of the RSO's registration status, and they may be socially stigmatized via harassment or assault because of their relationship with the RSO. However, some methodological shortcomings in this area include the practice of non-probability sampling: all three studies recruited participants from advocacy and support organizations for RSOs' families.²⁷ This sample is therefore representative only of the experiences of those who choose to join such organizations—individuals who have experienced fewer impacts may have less cause to partake in advocacy or seek support. Non-probability sampling here results in the risk that the full range of circumstances experienced by RSOs' families is not captured.²⁸ Moreover, the studies all lack control groups:²⁹ for example, there is no comparison to the post-release effects on family members of other types of felons convicted of offenses outside SORN's umbrella. These and other flaws, such as low response rates and uncontrolled covariates, mean the studies do not provide conclusive evidence on the impacts of SORN to family members of RSOs.

SORN Impacts To Juvenile RSOs

Last, on SORN's impacts to juvenile RSOs, FRD evaluated five papers published between 2010 and 2018: three research papers, a doctoral dissertation, and a non-profit report. Aside from the studies presented here, FRD found relatively little research on SORN impacts to juvenile offenders specifically. Instead, the existing studies focused largely on juvenile recidivism

and theoretical arguments on the jurisprudential, psychological, and sociological merits of registering juveniles.

As with many of the previous sections, all of the research within this group relied on self-reported data obtained through surveys, interviews, or focus groups of study subjects: These subjects consisted of parents of juvenile RSOs, treatment providers who work with juveniles, and juvenile RSOs themselves. The studies generally reported that juvenile RSOs experience negative emotional and social impacts, may have unstable housing, and may even be at risk for sexual violence by adults as a result of being on the registry. Methodological limitations found in these studies include extremely small sample sizes,³⁰ lack of appropriate control groups,³¹ survey questions that ask respondents to speculate on hypothetical outcomes, non-probability sampling by recruiting participants from advocacy or support groups,³² arguments supported by anecdotal evidence,³³ and other misuses of statistical methods.³⁴ As a group, we find these studies contain too many methodological errors to support any conclusions about the prevalence of collateral consequences for juvenile registrants.

Conclusion

FRD found, after reviewing the literature covering the five subject areas, that the overall quality of research in these areas is poor and generally indeterminate in terms of findings. Researchers should structure future studies to address the methodological limitations in the current body of work. This could include studies that use random sampling methods, comparison groups, and other proper statistical methods. A robust body of research would be useful to both policymakers and the public to inform considerations of how sex offender legislation impacts the individuals who are registered.

¹ See, e.g., Alissa R. Ackerman, Meghan Sacks, and Lindsay N. Osier, "The Experiences of Registered Sex Offenders with Internet Offender Registries in Three States," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 52, no. 1 (2013): 29–45, doi: 10.1080/10509674.2012.720959; Erika Davis Frenzel et al., "Understanding Collateral Consequences of Registry Laws: An Examination of the Perceptions of Sex Offender Registrants," *Justice Policy Journal* 11, no. 2 (2014), http://www.cjcj.org/uploads/cjcj/documents/frenzel_et_al_collateral_consequences_final_formatted.pdf; Jill S. Levenson and Leo P. Cotter, "The Effect of Megan's Law on Sex Offender Reintegration," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 21, no. 1 (February 2005): 49–66, doi: 10.1177/1043986204271676; Cynthia Calkins Mercado, Shea Alvarez, and Jill S. Levenson, "The Impact of Specialized Sex Offender Legislation on Community Reentry," *Sexual Abuse* 20, no. 2 (2008): 188–205, doi: 10.1177/1079063208317540; Elizabeth Ehrhardt Mustaine and Richard Tewksbury, "Assessing Informal Social Control against the Highly Stigmatized," *Deviant Behavior* 32 (2011): 944–60, doi: 10.1080/01639625.2010.538361; John M. Nally et al., "Post-Release Recidivism and Employment among Different Types of Released Offenders: A 5-Year Follow-Up Study in the United States," *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences* 9, no. 1 (2014): 16–34, ProQuest (1557153003); Richard G. Zevitz and Mary Ann Farkas, "Sex Offender Community Notification: Managing High Risk Criminals or Extracting Further Vengeance?," *Behavioral Sciences & the Law* 18, no. 2–3 (2000): 375–91, doi: 10.1002/1099-0798(200003/06)18:2/3<375::AID-B SL380.

² See, e.g., Mustaine and Tewksbury.

³ See, e.g., Mustaine and Tewksbury; Richard Tewksbury and Matthew Lees, "Perceptions of Sex Offender Registration: Collateral Consequences and Community Experiences," *Sociological Spectrum* 26, no. 3 (2006): 309–34, doi: 10.1080/02732170500524246; Zevitz and Farkas.

⁴ See, e.g., Frenzel et al.; Mercado, Alvarez, and Levenson; Richard Tewksbury, "Experiences and Attitudes of Registered Female Sex Offenders," *Federal Probation* 68, no. 3 (2004): 30–33, https://www.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/fed_probation_dec_2004.pdf; Zevitz and Farkas.

⁵ See, e.g., Ackerman, Sacks, and Osier; Frenzel et al.; Mercado, Alvarez, and Levenson; Mustaine and Tewksbury; Tewksbury, "Experiences and Attitudes"; Tewksbury and Lees, "Perceptions of Sex Offender Registration."

⁶ See, e.g., Levenson and Cotter; Mustaine and Tewksbury; Tewksbury, "Experiences and Attitudes"; Tewksbury and Lees, "Perceptions of Sex Offender Registration."

⁷ See, e.g., Mercado, Alvarez, and Levenson; Tewksbury, "Experiences and Attitudes."

⁸ See, e.g., Wesley G. Jennings, Kristen M. Zgoba, and Richard Tewksbury, "A Comparative Longitudinal Analysis of Recidivism Trajectories and Collateral Consequences for Sex and Non-Sex

Offenders Released since the Implementation of Sex Offender Registration and Community Notification," *Journal of Crime and Justice* 35, no. 3 (2012): 356–64, doi: 10.1080/0735648X.2012.662062; Levenson and Cotter.

⁹ Richard Tewksbury and Matthew Lees, "Perceptions of Punishment: How Registered Sex Offenders View Registries," *Crime & Delinquency* 53, no. 3 (2007): 392, doi: 10.1177/0011128706286915.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Yolanda Nicole Brannon et al., "Attitudes about Community Notification: A Comparison of Sexual Offenders and the Non-Offending Public," *Sex Abuse* 19, no. 4 (2007): 369–79, doi: 10.1177/107906320701900403; Levenson and Cotter; Mercado, Alvarez, and Levenson; Tewksbury and Lees, "Perceptions of Punishment"; Zevitz and Farkas.

¹¹ See, e.g., Brannon et al.

¹² See, e.g., Levenson and Cotter.

¹³ See, e.g., Mercado, Alvarez, and Levenson.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Zevitz and Farkas.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Brannon et al.; Levenson and Cotter.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Brannon et al.; Mercado, Alvarez, and Levenson.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Levenson and Cotter.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Brannon et al.; Levenson and Cotter; Mustaine and Tewksbury; Tewksbury, "Experiences and Attitudes."

¹⁹ See, e.g., Ackerman, Sacks, and Osier; Frenzel et al.; Mustaine and Tewksbury; Tewksbury, "Experiences and Attitudes"; Richard Tewksbury, "Collateral Consequences of Sex Offender Registration," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 21, no. 1 (2005): 67–81, doi: 10.1177/1043986204271704.

²⁰ See, e.g., Frenzel et al.

²¹ See, e.g., Brannon et al.; Frenzel et al.; Levenson and Cotter.

²² See, e.g., Brannon et al.

²³ See, e.g., Mustaine and Tewksbury.

²⁴ See, e.g., Levenson and Cotter; Tewksbury, "Experiences and Attitudes."

²⁵ See, e.g., Brannon et al.; Tewksbury, "Experiences and Attitudes"; Tewksbury, "Collateral Consequences."

²⁶ See, e.g., Levenson and Cotter.

²⁷ Ashley Kilmer and Chrysanthi S. Leon, "'Nobody Worries about Our Children': Unseen Impacts of Sex Offender Registration on Families with School-Age Children and Implications for Desistance," *Criminal Justice Studies* 30, no. 2 (2017): 181–201, doi: 10.1080/1478601X.2017.1299852; Jill S. Levenson and Richard Tewksbury, "Collateral Damage: Family Members of Registered Sex Offenders," *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 34, no. 1–2 (2009): 54–68, doi: 10.1007/s12103-008-9055-x; Richard Tewksbury and Jill S. Levenson, "Stress Experiences of Family Members of Registered Sex Offenders," *Behavioral Sciences & the Law* 27, no. 4 (2009): 611–26, doi: 10.1002/bsl.878.

²⁸ See, e.g., Kilmer and Leon.

³⁰ See, e.g., Erin B. Comartin, Poco D. Kernsmith, and Bart W. Miles, "Family Experiences of Young Adult Sex Offender Registra

tion," *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 19, no. 2 (2010): 204–25, doi: 10.1080/10538711003627207.

³¹ See, e.g., Nicole Pittman, *Raised on the Registry: The Irreparable Harm of Placing Children on Sex Offender Registries in the U.S.* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2013), https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/us0513_ForUpload_1.pdf.

³² See, e.g., Comartin, Kernsmith, and Miles; Sharon E. Denniston, "The Relationship between Juvenile Sex Offender Registration and Depression in Adulthood" (PhD diss., Walden University, 2016), [https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent](https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2986&context=dissertations).

[cgi?article=2986&context=dissertations](https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2986&context=dissertations); Andrew J. Harris et al., "Collateral Consequences of Juvenile Sex Offender Registration and Notification: Results from a Survey of Treatment Providers," *Sexual Abuse* 28, no. 8 (2016): 770–90, doi: 10.1177/1079063215574004; Elizabeth J. Letourneau et al., "Effects of Juvenile Sex Offender Registration on Adolescent Well-Being: An Empirical Examination," *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* 24, no. 1 (2018): 105–17, doi: 10.1037/law0000155.

³³ See, e.g., Pittman.

³⁴ See, e.g., Denniston.