



National Institute of Justice

Research in Brief

Julie E. Samuels, Acting Director

December 2000

Issues and Findings

Discussed in this Brief: The effects of Wisconsin's community notification statute that authorizes officials to alert residents about the release and reintegration of sex offenders in their communities, as perceived by residents, law enforcement, probation/parole agents, and sex offenders.

Key issues: To prevent sexual victimization, States have enacted community notification laws to inform residents when convicted sex offenders are relocated to live in their neighborhoods. However, the effects of such laws on community residents, law enforcement resources, parole and probation officer resources, and offenders have not been studied. Each of these groups was surveyed to ascertain the effectiveness of notification laws, identify areas for further research, and highlight policy development concerns.

Key findings: Three types of notification laws exist: those by which law enforcement agencies alert residents of sex offenders moving into their neighborhoods; those by which relevant data are made available to residents who seek it; and those by which convicted child molesters are required to identify themselves as sex offenders. Findings in Wisconsin, where the law is of the first type, included:

- The public needs additional information about the purpose of notification meetings and the limits of notification laws. Nearly one-fifth (18 percent) of the residents attending notification meetings expected the gathering to be a forum for discussing the removal

continued...

Sex Offender Community Notification: Assessing the Impact in Wisconsin

By Richard G. Zevitz and Mary Ann Farkas

In response to widespread public concern about the release of sex offenders from prison, the Federal Government and all 50 States and the District of Columbia have passed laws collectively referred to as "community notification statutes" that authorize or require communities where such offenders will live to be notified of their arrival. The common goal of these statutes is to prevent sexual victimization by notifying potential victims that a convicted sex offender lives nearby.

Although the statutes vary widely in complexity and the level of State and local bureaucratic involvement, three basic notification types have emerged.¹ Most States authorize local and county law enforcement agencies to decide whether to release information about convicted sex offenders to the public; Wisconsin is one such State. In these States, law enforcement also generally decides the manner and extent of notification, as well as the amount of information to be made public.

Under the second type of notification statute, individual members of the public may request information about convicted sex offenders living in their communities from a government-maintained central registry. Private citizens may access registration information in binders at local

law enforcement offices, through telephone calls to central registry bureaus, by logging onto Web sites, or by requesting CD-ROMs containing relevant information. Most notably, California and Florida use this type of notification process to enable residents to determine if and when they need to access such information. A third type of notification statute, used only in Louisiana,² requires paroled child molesters to identify themselves as sex offenders to residents in the neighborhoods where they will live.

The dilemma associated with community notification is balancing the public's right to know with the need to successfully reintegrate offenders within the community. Wisconsin, along with the 49 other State jurisdictions, has tried to give equal weight to these competing interests through its sex offender community notification statute. In doing so, police chiefs and sheriffs have experimented with various approaches to notifying the community, including community meetings, news releases, and Internet postings.

Until now, research on sex offender community notification has been limited in nature. There has been no in-depth study of a single State's experience from the vantage point of those most affected by

Issues and Findings

...continued

or prevention of the offender from living in the neighborhood.

- A nearly equal percentage of notification meeting attendees left the meetings feeling more concerned about the sex offender as those who felt less concerned about the offender. The most frequently heard concerns at meetings were the attendees' fear of being victimized by the offender, the offender's past, and identifying who placed the offender in a particular neighborhood.

- Law enforcement agencies experienced few problems carrying out tasks prescribed by the notification law. The cost of labor resources necessary for notification, however, was an issue. Many agencies benefited from cooperatively planning meetings with other agencies (e.g., county law enforcement and probation and parole agencies).

- Notification laws increased the workload of probation and parole officers who monitor sex offenders, especially for high-profile Special Bulletin Notification (SBN) cases that require more intensive supervision. Agents averaged at least five SBN cases; the total average sex offender caseload was 25 cases.

- Housing resources for sex offenders released to notification areas were scarce, especially in the case of offenders subject to expanded notification.

- Further research is necessary to ascertain the effects of notification laws on recidivism. Some offenders said the pressure placed on them by the public and the media could drive many of them back to prison.

Target audience: Law enforcement, probation and parole officers, and researchers.

the notification process. This NIJ-funded research sought to fill that gap by studying the impact of community notification on residents, law enforcement agencies, probation and parole agents, and the sex offenders themselves.

The case study reported here focuses on Wisconsin and includes information from:

- Surveys of 704 neighborhood residents at 22 community notification meetings held throughout the State and direct observations of notification meetings. The survey covered these meetings, which were held in large cities, suburban districts, rural townships, and small villages.
- A statewide survey of 312 police and sheriffs' agencies—which yielded usable data from 188 of them—combined with field observations of law enforcement agencies around the State. The survey included all 72 sheriffs' departments in the State and a systematic sample made up of 240 of the police agencies in the State.
- A statewide survey of 128 probation and parole agents and supervisors from units with sex offender caseloads—which yielded a sample of 77—combined with field observations at the unit and regional levels. The survey included both sex offender specialists and nonspecialists, or “comprehensive” personnel, who had a substantial number of sex offenders in their caseloads.
- Face-to-face interviews with 30 convicted sex offenders (from a total population of 44), residing throughout the State, who were the subjects of community notification and/or news media exposure.

Results of the study indicate that, in general, community notification was used the way legislative policymakers intended it

to be used, namely to further community protection. However, the decision to notify and involve the public in an informal network of neighborhood surveillance comes at the cost of increased community anxiety, impeded offender reintegration, and drained agency resources. This Research in Brief summarizes the study's key findings and examines several policy implications drawn from observation of community notification from the above-mentioned perspectives.

Survey results of notification meetings

From January 1998 through mid-September 1998, researchers studied 22 community notification meetings in 16 locations throughout Wisconsin, ranging from large cities to suburban districts to small villages; every region of the State was represented. Because the survey targeted those community members who attended a notification meeting, a convenience sample of meeting attendees was obtained. Approximately 800 attendees were handed survey questionnaires, and 704 attendees completed and returned these instruments upon leaving the meetings. Most meetings were held in the early evening at school auditoriums, and attendance (not including official presenters) ranged from 6 persons at one meeting to 108 at another. The purpose of the study and instructions for completion of the questionnaire were explained at all meetings where the survey was distributed. The voluntary nature of participation and the anonymity of responses were emphasized.

The survey found that 27 percent (188) of attendee respondents were alerted to the meeting through the news media (exhibit 1). Fifty-nine percent (412) perceived that the purpose of the meeting was to inform the community about a specific offender slated for release into the community. Twenty-nine percent (201) believed the

meeting’s purpose was to “soften the reaction to placing a sex offender in the community.”³

There was more consensus among respondents about the expected outcome of the notification meetings than about their perceived purpose. In a question permitting more than one response, 80 percent (560) of respondents expected to “acquire as much information as possible to safeguard against the potential threat posed by the offender.” Eighteen percent (130) expected to remove or prevent the offender from residing in their neighborhood. Only five percent (38) of respondents expected “to place the blame on whoever was responsible for placing the offender in the neighborhood.” Significantly, the foremost expectation—to gather useful information—appears to have been met. Fifty-six percent of attendee respondents rated information from the meeting as very helpful, and an additional 36 percent felt it was moderately helpful. Only 5 percent found little or no value in the meeting they attended.

The generally favorable reaction to the informational content of community notification meetings found no parallel in how meeting respondents felt about sex offenders living nearby. Residents who attended a notification meeting were asked about their level of concern about the sex offender in question in their community. Following the meeting, 38 percent of survey respondents were more concerned, the level of concern felt by 27 percent was unchanged, and 35 percent of respondents were less concerned than before.

Whether attendees felt a heightened level of concern following a community notification meeting appears to be closely related to how realistic their expectations were for the outcome of the meeting. Those attendees who came expecting to lay blame on the party or parties who placed the offender in their neighborhood or who wanted to remove or prevent the placement were frequently disappointed. Understandably, these individuals, who cumulatively amounted to nearly

one in four respondents, made up the group with the greatest percentage of respondents who were “more concerned than before” about the offenders. Allowing for overlapping responses, of those attendees who came expecting to place blame on public officials or to prevent or remove the resident sex offender, approximately 67 percent left feeling “more concerned than before.”

Although respondents were generally satisfied with the amount of information presented at the meetings they attended, ample amounts of information appeared to have no effect on their anxiety levels (exhibit 2). This finding was especially true with regard to information about specific sex-offender residents and the limited options provided by law to communities. For example, 71 percent of respondents judged the amount of information presented about the community’s lawful options as adequate, but only 35 percent of respondents left the meetings feeling less concerned than before. Thus, meeting attendees appear to have perceived that the law and its agents—police and parole officials—provide few, if any, legal alternatives for dealing with sex offenders placed in their communities. In one sense, the most significant finding of the notification meetings survey may be the inverse relationship between the factors that make notification meetings successful (i.e., providing ample amounts of helpful information) and the high anxiety levels among those in attendance. Many attendees emerged from such meetings better informed but still feeling anxious and frustrated; however, such feelings now were focused on the sex offender.

Exhibit 1. How attendees were alerted to the notification meetings

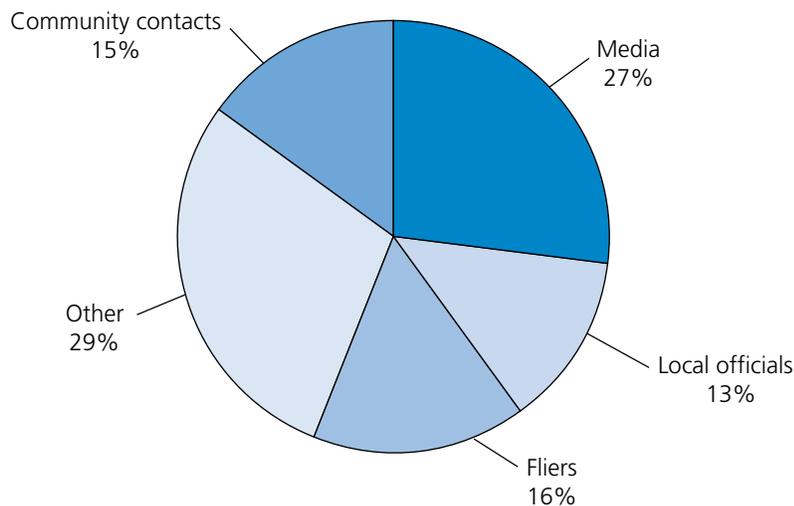
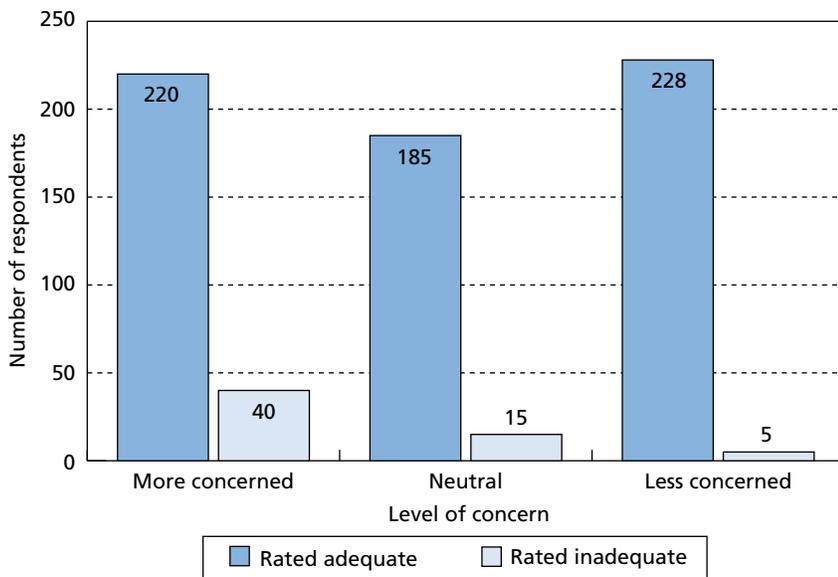


Exhibit 2. How attendees rated the amount of information provided, by level of concern



Implications of the notification meetings survey

Survey results indicate a need to educate the public about the realities of what community notification laws can and cannot be expected to accomplish. The public has the right to be adequately informed of the risks posed by sex offenders but also must understand that the notification law does not offer recourse for residents who seek to remove a sex offender from their neighborhood. Instead, law enforcement warns residents of the penalties for misusing notification information to inflict violence on sex offenders. Unless this message is clearly conveyed, community notification meetings risk becoming staging grounds for further punishment or harassment of offenders. For example, resource materials that explain the notification law’s function and practical limits may be used to spell out the responsibilities of law enforcement and corrections to both the public and sex offenders

released from prisons and jails. Other educational brochures can provide useful information about how the public can guard against sexual victimization. If the public better understands the protective measures used by local authorities and the necessary public precautions, their anxiety and feelings of helplessness may be lessened.

Law enforcement survey results

A sample of 312 local and county law enforcement agencies was selected to receive a law enforcement-related survey; 188 completed and returned the questionnaires for a response rate of 60 percent. The responding agencies consisted of 142 police departments (59 percent of the police sample) and 46 sheriffs’ departments (64 percent of sheriffs).⁴ Of the responding agencies, 34 percent served populations of less than 10,000, and only 2 percent served populations of more than 150,000. More than half of the responding

sheriffs (57 percent) served counties with 39,000 or more inhabitants.

Each agency in the sample was mailed a standardized questionnaire with items designed to assess its attitudes toward the new law and its various provisions. The survey was also intended to identify the policies and practices agencies used when implementing the law’s requirements. Several open-ended questions were included to explore specific problem areas or difficulties the agencies experienced in carrying out the notification responsibilities. Nonparticipant observation at two regional law enforcement training meetings on the law increased the validity of the survey by highlighting the relevant issues and concerns regarding community notification.

Policy and practice. For the most part, law enforcement agencies in the survey were prepared for the advent of sex offender community notification. The Wisconsin Department of Corrections (DOC), in conjunction with the Wisconsin Chiefs of Police and the Badger State Sheriffs Associations, developed “Sex Offender Registration and Community Notification: The Guidelines for Wisconsin Law Enforcement,” which recommends a local or regional team approach to notifying the public about sex offenders. This approach involves collaboration among law enforcement, corrections, and other agencies to review, plan, and make decisions in carrying out the notification process.

Survey data indicated that 86 percent of responding law enforcement agencies were familiar with the Wisconsin guidelines; 66 percent reported that their written policies and procedures reflected these guidelines. Seventy-three percent of agencies used inter-

agency notification teams in their decisions regarding sex offenders (exhibit 3), and 90 percent said corrections officials participated on these teams.

As further evidence of their role in this process, the guidelines recommend—in the absence of statutory directives and when a case warrants notification consideration—that the teams use a three-tier notification system based on risk assessment. Level 1 cases limit notification to law enforcement agencies in a specific area. Level 2 uses targeted notification to schools, daycare providers, and so forth, and Level 3 entails expanded notification through community meetings, news media releases, and so forth. This three-level format for sex offender notification was employed by 82 percent of the Wisconsin law enforcement agencies in the sample.

Fourteen percent of responding agencies said they issued at least one Level 3 notification in the 1-year period after the notification law took effect. Of these, 54 percent of agencies held at least one Level 3-type community notification meeting during this

period. In general, the findings revealed that notification meetings were structured around informational presentations on specific topics. At the meetings, all law enforcement agencies reported providing information on the law as it related to sex offenders. More than half (55 percent) of responding agencies reported that public education about typical sex offender behavior and target-hardening precautions were also discussed. According to 92 percent of respondents with meeting experience, correctional representatives were copresenters at their community notification meetings.

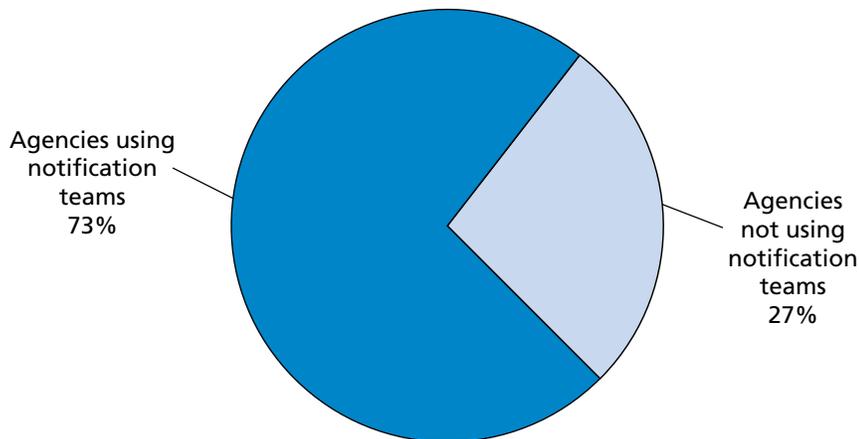
Ninety-two percent of responding agencies with meeting experience identified the three most frequently voiced public concerns as fear of being victimized by the sex offender in question, the offender’s criminal past and current conviction, and pinpointing responsibility for monitoring the offender in the community. Eighty-three percent of those agencies reported attendees’ concern with finding out why a sex offender was placed in their neighborhood. How those common concerns were dealt with at community notification meetings varied by agency. Based

on observations made at the meetings under study, attendee questions and concerns and the presenters’ responses can be crucial to meeting outcomes. Unfortunately, the guidelines offer no assistance on how to conduct community notification meetings, and none of the respondents had developed written policies on this subject.

Reported problems and difficulties. Most law enforcement agencies identified few, if any, problem areas in carrying out the requirements of the notification law. The one exception appears to be labor expenditures, which more than two-thirds of law enforcement respondents identified as a reason for concern. Many respondents considered the work required by community notification to be an unfunded mandate by the State. Fifty-eight percent of agencies said the law increased their workload, and more than one-fourth complained the law created a strain on departmental resources. Roughly one-third of respondents indicated their agency encountered additional problems, such as media sensationalism (16 percent) and overreaction by the public (16 percent). Only 6 percent of agency respondents reported incidents of harassment toward sex offenders since the law took effect. Most of these incidents were deemed minor, involving insults and verbal taunts. Only one overt act of vigilantism was reported and that involved damage to an offender’s vehicle. Of the agencies reporting harassment of a sex offender, 67 percent were uncertain whether the harassment resulted from the community being notified or whether another factor was involved.

Responding agencies that generally believed the additional work created by the new law to be balanced by its

Exhibit 3. Law enforcement use of interagency notification team approach



benefits. Most responding agencies identified specific benefits from the law’s registration provisions, such as increased information sharing. However, agencies were less convinced of the beneficial impact of community notification. Allowing for more than one response, 49 percent of agencies thought notification facilitated the flow of information on sex offenders in a way that assisted with future investigations, 48 percent felt it enhanced surveillance of sex offenders through community information sharing, and only 41 percent believed it improved management and containment of sex offender behavior through greater visibility.

Implications of the law enforcement survey

These findings point to recommendations for local and county law enforcement agencies to consider:

- **Encourage the use of local or regional interagency teams to plan and manage the notification of communities about sex offenders.** This information sharing and problem-solving approach will assist agencies in carrying out their statutory responsibilities. The practice has worked well and should continue.
- **Develop written policies and training protocols for conducting community notification meetings.** Local policy should address matters such as announcing meetings, distributing pertinent information about specific sex offenders (including their release locations), answering questions, and dealing with negative or potentially hostile reactions to a specific offender’s release.

- **Provide Federal or State funds for the training and overtime expenses necessary for law enforcement personnel to maintain the case information on sex offenders and handle registration and notification duties.** Funding that allows law enforcement to take advantage of new technologies to assist with these tasks should also be provided.

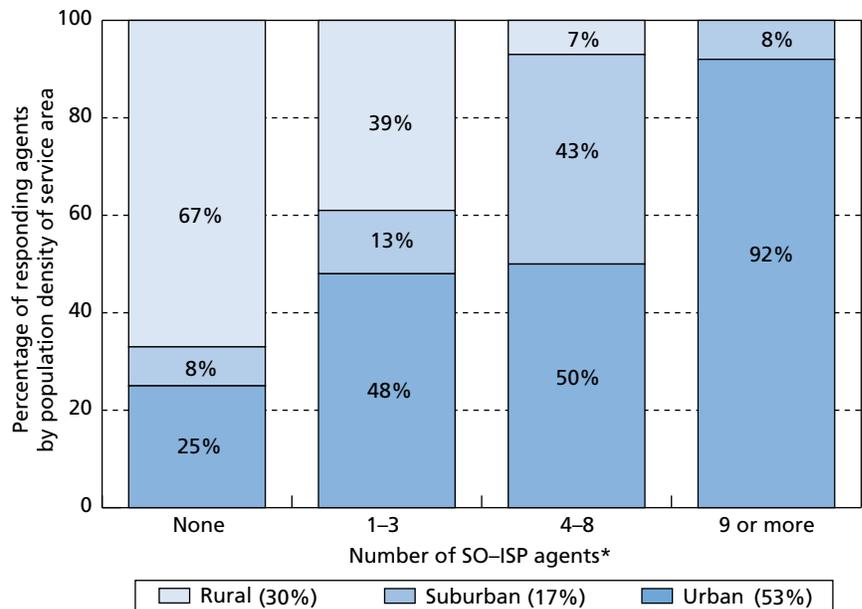
Probation/parole survey results

This survey targeted direct supervision staff as well as second-line supervision staff who regularly handle, or are trained to handle, sex offenders on probation or parole. These State employees work in eight regions within the State. Many are designated Sex Offender–Intensive Supervision Program (SO–ISP) agents and SO–ISP backup agents. Their unit supervisors, a handful of whom filled in as SO–ISP

backup agents, also were surveyed. Nonspecialist or comprehensive agents with substantial numbers of sex offenders in their caseloads were also included in the survey. Of the 128 individuals who received survey instruments, 77 provided data for the study. These respondents’ service locations were representative of the overall population distribution within the State, with 53 percent of the agents working in predominantly urban areas and 30 percent assigned to rural areas (exhibit 4).

Field units represented in the survey differed widely in the number of sex offenders under supervision. Eleven respondents from urban field units monitored 200 or more sex offender probationers and 60 or more sex offender parolees in their units. In contrast, 20 respondents from rural or suburban field units monitored 40 or fewer sex offender probationers and 11 or fewer sex offender parolees in

Exhibit 4. Number of SO–ISP agents by type of community



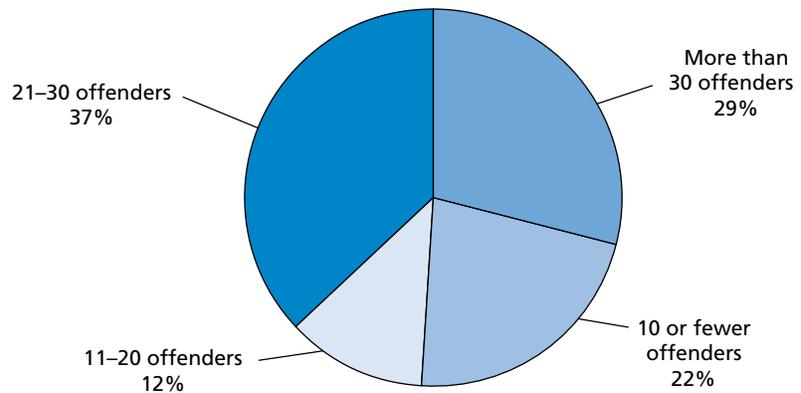
*Four respondents answered “other” or did not answer.

their units. Because SO–ISP agent caseloads are capped at 25 and due to budgetary constraints, field units typically called on non-SO–ISP specialists to supervise varying numbers of sex offenders, particularly in service areas outside Milwaukee and Madison.

Agents and supervisors at several probation/parole meetings helped researchers identify relevant issues and concerns. Their comments and suggestions were then incorporated into the questionnaire. Survey items consisted of questions about the management and supervision of sex offenders and the agents’ specific notification responsibilities and tasks. Several open-ended questions were included to allow exploration of the problems and difficulties in implementing their law-related responsibilities.

Policy and training. The advent of sex offender community notification in June 1997 has directly or indirectly affected all agents who supervise sex offenders in Wisconsin. Eighty-nine percent of the responding agents and supervisors said they had working knowledge of recent written policies, directives, and operational procedures covering the law’s changes. Specifically, these changes include the establishment of a Special Bulletin Notification (SBN) process, which enables local and county law enforcement agencies to receive detailed information from DOC on specific sex offenders to be released to their respective areas. The law also allows the periodic polygraph testing of sex offenders as a condition of probation, parole, or conditional supervision. Seventy-one percent of all respondents conducted special management training for unit supervisors, and 93 percent conducted special training about the law for agents. In actual numbers,

Exhibit 5. Average number of sex offender cases per probation/parole respondent



only 1 of 19 field units in the study did not have at least one agent trained in the provisions of the notification law. Fifty-five percent of respondents said their field units had from one to five agents so trained, and 29 percent reported nine or more. However, a larger majority of respondents, 84 percent, indicated that persons from their field unit had attended preparation sessions with other agency representatives (law enforcement, victim and witness coordinators, and so forth) on how the new law worked. These sessions were frequently conducted by DOC notification experts and ultimately served much the same purpose as the inservice training. In short, these findings show that agents and supervisors responsible for implementing the law are familiar with and trained in DOC policy.

Workload. The average sex offender caseload for agents in the survey was 25 active cases, but 9 agents had 40 or more sex offenders to supervise, and 6 of the 9 (mostly urban agents) had 50 or more. Twenty-nine percent of probation/parole respondents had more than 30 sex offenders to oversee (exhibit 5). Thirty-seven percent had an average of 21 to 30 offenders on their caseloads. The intensive supervi-

sion required in many sex offender cases, particularly those designated as SBN cases,⁵ has placed an added workload burden on probation/parole units whose resources are already stretched thin. To maximize surveillance resources, many of these units work closely with law enforcement officers to supervise moderate- to high-risk sex offenders in the community. Because law enforcement shares information and coordinates the monitoring of sex offenders under intensive supervision, offenders are considered less likely to engage in unlawful behavior.

Some of the heavier caseloads contained low-risk sex offender cases (nonviolent offense, no prior felony, and so forth) that did not require the intensive supervision demanded of high-risk sex offenders. Nevertheless, the community notification statute has added considerably to probation/parole units’ workloads throughout the State. When SBNs are received by local and county law enforcement officials informing them of releases to their jurisdictions, the decisionmaking process for determining the level, scope, and method of community notification usually begins.⁶ Probation/

parole agents assigned these SBN cases, together with their unit supervisors, are integral parts of that process and the followup it requires.

Based on survey responses, 64 percent of sex offender agents reported having at least five SBN cases in their caseload. In general, SBN cases are perceived by agents as requiring more supervision contacts than non-SBN sex offender cases of comparable risk that preceded the notification law (the law was not retroactive in making all high-risk sex offender cases SBN cases; therefore, most respondents reported a mixed caseload). According to 74 percent of respondents, even before an SBN offender is released from confinement, the assigned agents are at work with law enforcement and others on various aspects of the case.

The handling of SBN cases not only required more work than pre-June 1997 sex-offender cases but presented a multitude of problems for agents and unit supervisors as well. In response to a question that allowed for multiple responses, the difficulties agents reported included locating housing for offenders (66 percent), dealing with the media (40 percent), getting timely offender information (31 percent), and feeling pressure from superiors because of the high-profile nature of SBN cases (13 percent). In their open-ended comments, many respondents voiced frustration with trying to find residential placements for publicized sex offenders.

Based on survey responses, probation/parole agents with SBN cases were more likely than agents assigned non-SBN sex offenders to devote time to the victims of their assigned sex offenders. A higher percentage of SBN sex offender cases (33 percent) than non-SBN sex offender cases (20 percent)

involved victim contact. Ongoing communication concerning the status of the sex offender, including advising the victim, the victim's family, or victim service providers of significant changes in the offender's status was most typical of contact during postrelease supervision. Given the considerable importance that agents attach to this and other victim-related tasks, such as enforcing no-contact or restitution conditions of probation/parole, compassionate victim relations tended to consume much of the agents' time and emotional energy.

Another workload consideration was the time, paperwork, and agents' and unit supervisors' efforts expended on prerevocation sanctions. Sanctions are commonly used to manage the behavior of sex offenders suspected of non-compliance with the conditions of probation or parole. For example, electronic monitoring is a sanction. Survey respondents reported a higher percentage of electronic monitoring as a prerevocation sanction in SBN cases (58 percent) versus non-SBN cases (44 percent) involving sex offenders.

The final workload consideration bearing on SBN cases pertained to agent and unit supervisor involvement in community notification meetings. Forty-six percent of survey respondents reported that, as part of their job, they attended at least one and, in some cases, more than six such meetings. Sixty-nine percent of agents and unit supervisors who worked these meetings also said they served as one of several presenters, a task that usually required several days of preparation. In addition, 83 percent of these respondents reported they or others in their unit helped local and county law enforcement plan and organize a notification meeting. This translated

into about 40 hours of agent time per meeting.

The large investment of time and energy on SBN cases often meant agents paid less attention to other cases, according to both agent and unit supervisor respondents. As one respondent explained, "[t]he rest of your caseload has to be put on hold ... because your time is totally consumed with the release of the SBN sex offender."

Implications of the probation/parole survey

These findings suggest three issues for consideration by State and local policymakers, as well as by probation and parole administrators, supervisors, and agents:

- **Foster close working relationships between probation/parole agents assigned to supervise sex offenders and law enforcement line officers.** The fact that most field units teamed with law enforcement in planning and organizing community notification meetings was positive, but this collaboration needs to carry over to the demanding task of monitoring and restricting the behavior of sex offenders in the community. Working as a team, correctional and law enforcement professionals can best respond to and resolve existing and potential problems.
- **Provide additional funding to hire and train sufficient numbers of probation/parole agents needed for the intensive supervision of sex offenders.** Intensive, proactive supervision of sex offenders whose risk has been carefully assessed has proved to be an effective and less costly alternative to incarceration. Although commu-

nity notification for sex offenders bolsters the monitoring capabilities of intensive supervision programs, it does so at a cost of increased workload.

- **Ensure adequate community support—particularly in the areas of housing, employment, and treatment—to effectively move sex offenders from prisons and jails to society.** With limited placement opportunities for sex offenders, even the most resourceful probation/parole agents find it difficult to perform this highly demanding aspect of the job.

Findings from sex offender interviews

Another aspect of this study was the insight provided by the subjects of community notification meetings and other expanded notification actions. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 30 sex offenders in communities throughout Wisconsin. Interview subjects were selected based on their status as Level 3 SBN sex offenders, their notification exposure in the community, and their willingness to participate in the study. Two incar-

cerated sex offender interviewees were in revocation status due to technical parole violations. The others were under community supervision. They were all males (exhibit 6).

Interviewees were informed of the study’s purpose, its confidential nature, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Written consent was obtained from each interviewee. The interview subjects were asked a series of questions about their experiences with community notification and the impact it had on their lives.

All but one interviewee stated that the community notification process adversely affected their transition from prison to the outside world. Loss of employment, exclusion from residence, and the breakup of personal relationships were frequently cited consequences of expanded notification actions and ensuing detrimental publicity (exhibit 7). Seventy-seven percent told of being humiliated in their daily lives, ostracized by neighbors and lifetime acquaintances, and harassed or threatened by nearby residents or strangers. Although only one interviewee was on the receiving end of what might be described as a vigi-

lante action, all expressed various degrees of concern for their own safety.

Two-thirds of the interviewed sex offenders also spoke of how community notification unfavorably affected the lives of family members, including parents, siblings, and offspring. Several cited emotionally painful examples. One interviewee talked of his mother’s anguish and depression following newspaper accounts stemming from notification. Another spoke of his son’s decision to quit his high school football team because of ridicule from teammates, and a third related how his sister was shunned by former friends. Five interviewees who lived in the same communities as their victims expressed concern for how expanded notification and renewed public attention might affect their victims.⁷

The opinions of sex offenders as to what effect community notification had on how they were supervised were mixed. Nineteen interviewees (63 percent) characterized their relationship with their probation/parole agent as supportive, but the other 11 (37 percent) described dealings with their agents in less favorable terms. Many interviewees deeply resented certain conditions of supervision, and some felt that their agents responded in a punitive way to pressure created by the high-profile nature of their cases.

Several sex offenders complained of being arbitrarily singled out from among hundreds of sex offenders in the State for community notification. They traced their difficulty in finding a place to live and in keeping a job to community notification and media sensationalism. Some of the interviewees were angered that they had to accept residence in minimum-security prisons or correctional centers because

Exhibit 6. *Descriptive statistics of the sample*

Descriptor	Sample N = 30
Gender	
Male	30 (100.0)
Female	0 (0.0)
Race/ethnicity	
European American	21 (70.0)
African-American	5 (16.7)
Hispanic	3 (10.0)
Native American	1 (3.3)
Mean age	40 years

Note: Findings are represented as frequencies, percentages, and means. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Exhibit 7. *Consequences of notification, as reported by offenders*

Problem	Percentage Reporting
Exclusion of residence	83%
Threats/harassment	77
Emotional harm to family members	67
Ostracized by neighbors/acquaintances	67
Loss of employment	57
Added pressure from probation/parole agent	50
Vigilante attack	3

of the lack of alternative housing in the community. Expanded notification has created enormous obstacles in locating housing resources for returning sex offenders.

Those undergoing treatment for deviant sexual behavior indicated that, for the most part, community notification did not interfere with this therapy. The public reaction to their release in the community, aside from drawing initial comments from others in their treatment group, was discounted as a negative influence on their self-esteem and their ability to “open up” in treatment. One interviewee, however, said community notification actually furthered his progress in treatment by helping him to fully understand and take responsibility for his crime.

Only a few of the interviewed sex offenders thought the community notification law would prevent reoffending by making their actions more visible to the public. Most believed the law would have the opposite effect. Many drew from their own embittered experience with community notification to suggest that the tremendous pressure placed on sex offenders by the public and the media would drive many of them back to prison.

Implications of sex offender interviews

- **Develop housing, employment, and treatment resources for sex offenders to enable them to successfully return to the community.** Stable residence, productive work activity, and effective treatment are prerequisites for managing the behavior of this group of offenders in society.
- **Foster cooperation between the news media and those agencies charged with protecting the public from sex offenders released from prisons and jails.** The media need to be correctly informed about the policies, procedures, and actions of law enforcement and corrections agencies regarding sex offenders. Law enforcement and corrections agencies working with the media might avert future misunderstandings and problems, such as sensationalizing or misclassifying a sex offender, which result in public overreaction.

Conclusions

This exploratory study of the impact of sex offender community notification in Wisconsin has provided a rich source of empirical data on the perceptions of and reactions to the process among law

enforcement, probation/parole agencies, communities, and sex offenders. Findings indicated that although the law’s primary goal of community protection is being served, law enforcement and corrections agencies bear a high cost in terms of personnel, time, and budgetary resources. Community notification also carries a personal cost for the sex offenders so identified.

For law enforcement, the manpower needed to gather information and hold meetings to determine the appropriate level of notification is considerable. Periodic patrols in the neighborhood of the sex offender’s residence and occasional calls for service to the residence are additional agency burdens. Even targeted notification to agencies, organizations, and groups is a growing responsibility for law enforcement agencies. In addition, law enforcement often plays a pivotal role in organizing and convening community meetings to notify residents about sex offenders.

Probation/parole field units bear the onus of locating housing in the community for sex offenders, a time-consuming and frequently frustrating task. Supervision; home visits; collateral contacts with landlords, employers, and so forth; and escorting sex offenders also consume a large portion of agents’ workweeks. Finally, agents are now directly involved in community meetings for SBN sex offenders. In short, probation/parole caseloads are already large, and sex offender supervision demands an inordinate amount of time.

For the general public, community notification offers an opportunity not only to acquire information about identified sex offenders residing in their neighborhoods but also to choose whether to become part of the supervision

network. Notification can be used to incite the public concerning sex offenders, or it can be used to educate the public about preventive measures. The importance of community resources in assisting sex offender reintegration and preventing recidivism must be part of this educational process.

For the sex offender, housing and employment are the most immediate needs. Offenders worry about harassment, having to continually move, and the possibility of placement in a correctional facility in lieu of a residence in the community. They also worry about the stress on their families resulting from community notification. The pressure placed on many of these individuals by community notification needs to be further examined as a factor in their success or failure under community supervision.

Notes

1. Bedarf, A.R. "Examining Sex Offender Community Notification Laws," *California Law Review* 83 (3) (1995): 885–939; Matson, Scott, and Roxanne Lieb, *Sex Offender Community Notification: A Review of Laws in 45 States*, Olympia, WA: Washington State Institution for Public Policy, 1997.

2. Ibid.

3. The survey instrument used for notification meetings was an 18-item questionnaire calling for multiple-choice as well as open-ended answers. It was previously tested with a group of residents to assure clarity and relevance and to avoid negative connotations or value-laden terms in its construction.

4. The respondent sample included 116 agencies that had 1–25 sworn officers, 59 agencies that had 26–100 sworn officers, 4 agencies that had 101–150 sworn officers, 8 agencies that had 151–500 sworn officers, and 1 agency with more than 501 sworn officers. Sworn officers assigned to detention or jail duty were not counted because they had only limited involvement with sex offender community notification, even though many of these officers performed sex offender registration tasks. Sample respondents overrepresent larger police departments but are a mirror representation of sheriffs' departments in Wisconsin.

5. Sixty-four percent of sex offender agents in the survey reported having at least five SBN cases in their caseloads.

6. Wisconsin Chiefs of Police Association, Badger State Sheriffs Association, and Wisconsin Department of Corrections, "Sex Offender Registration and Community Notification: Guidelines for Wisconsin Law Enforcement," Madison: Wisconsin Department of Corrections, 1997: 9.

7. As of December 1999, it appears that no crime victim who is a family or stepfamily member of a sex offender, or who lived in the household of a sex offender when the crime

occurred, has been subjected to inadvertent identification through community notification. The *Guidelines* underscore the grave desire that this situation be avoided: "It is important to consider if the victim(s) of the individual were within the household or a family member." Ibid., 17.

Additional references

Finn, Peter, *Sex Offender Community Notification*. Research in Action. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, 1997, NCJ 162364.

National Criminal Justice Association, *Sex Offender Community Notification: Policy Report* Washington, DC: National Criminal Justice Association, 1997.

Poole, Carol, and Roxanne Lieb, *Community Notification in Washington State: Decision-Making and Costs*, Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 1995.

Pullen, Suzanne, and Kim English, "Law Enforcement Registration and Community Notification," in *Managing Sex Offenders in the Community*, ed. K. English, S. Pullen, and L. Jones, Lexington, KY: American Probation and Parole Association, 1995.

Schram, Donna, and Cheryl Milloy, *Community Notification: A Study of Offender Characteristics and Recidivism*, Seattle: Urban Policy Research, 1995.

Dr. Richard G. Zevitz is an associate professor of Criminology and Law Studies at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and former chairman of the California State Advisory Committee on Child Abuse.

Dr. Mary Ann Farkas is an assistant professor of Criminology and Law Studies and director of Graduate Studies in Administration of Justice at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

This research was supported by grant number 98-IJ-CX-0015 from the National Institute of Justice through Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The authors are indebted to James Frinzi for his invaluable contribution as senior research assistant on this project. Anthony Streveler, assistant administrator with the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, is also acknowledged for his generous assistance.

Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

The National Institute of Justice is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

This and other NIJ publications can be found at and downloaded from the NIJ Web site (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij>).

NCJ 179992