

Short Communication

College students perception and awareness of the North Carolina Online sex offender registry

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Public awareness of the North Carolina sex offender registry website as well as the perceived accuracy of the information posted on this website was examined. Two hundred and sixty individuals participated in this survey. Fifty-seven percent had previous knowledge of the website; however, only 27% of those who were aware of the website had actually accessed the online sex offender registry. Over 90% of respondents felt that the information contained on this website was accurate. Implications for public policy are discussed.

Key words: Online sex offender registry websites, public notification, public perceptions of sex offenders.

INTRODUCTION

Legislatures have implemented various polices to protect the public from sex offenders. In 1994, the "Jacob Wetterling crimes against children and sexually violent offender registration Act" required all states to register convicted sex offenders or risk losing federal funding. Congress increased the scope of the Wetterling Act in 1996 with the passage of Megan's Law, "which required states to publicly disseminate personal information about sex offenders".

The PROTECT Amendment was passed in 2003 requiring all states to establish and maintain internet sex offender registries (ISOR's) as a means of disseminating information about sex offenders to the public (prosecutorial remedies and other tools to end the exploitation of children today Act, 2003).

Although the goal of community notification is well intended the effectiveness of this notification system is not unequivocal. In fact, the results of several studies suggest that notification is not achieving its intended goal of reducing sexual assault (Adkins et al., 2000; Geffner et al., 2003; Levenson and Cotter, 2005; Levenson, 2003; Malesky and Keim, 2001; Tewksbury, 2002).

Although one can argue that there are benefits of an

internet notification system (e.g., the ability to reach a large number of people in a short period of time), there are limitations and criticisms as well. A specific limitation is the potential for inaccurate information to be posted on these websites. For example, Levenson and Cotter (2005) found that only half of the sex offenders in their sample agreed that the information contained on their ISOR record was accurate.

Most states post a disclaimer on the their website stating that the information posted on the site cannot be verified with absolute certainty. Despite these disclaimers, Geffner et al. (2003) suggest that if people check these websites, accepting the information as accurate, and find that no sex offenders live in their neighborhood then they may be less vigilant in protecting their children or themselves. With this said, there has been limited research assessing the public perceptions regarding the accuracy of the information on these websites.

In addition to concerns about the accuracy of the information on the websites, the public's views regarding the effectiveness of these websites have yet to be examined. It is also important to ascertain if the public is even using these notification systems. The answers to these questions can be considered when deciding future policy regarding online sex offender registries. This study attempts to answer these questions.

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METHODS

Participants

Two hundred and sixty students at a public university in the Southeastern United States volunteered to participate in this study. One hundred and sixty-two participants (62.3%) were female and 98 (37.7%) were male. Their mean age was 20.1 years (SD = 3.1). The majority of the sample, 224 participants (86.8%), was Caucasian, followed by 24 (9.3%) African Americans. Two hundred and forty seven (95%) participants resided in NC. Three percent of the sample reported having children.

Procedure

The participants completed a brief questionnaire assessing their knowledge and perceptions about the North Carolina sex offender registry website. Standard informed consent and participant confidentiality guidelines were followed.

RESULTS

The data from the survey indicated that while 57% (148) of participants knew about the registry website, only 27% (41) had previously accessed the site. Of those participants who reported accessing the website, 76% (31) accessed it only once or twice. Graph one indicates the number of times those 41 participants had actually accessed the registry website. Furthermore, over 90% (114) of participants believed the information posted on the website was accurate (Table 1 and Figure 1).

DISCUSSION

This study revealed three noteworthy findings:

- I.) The majority of participants were aware of the North Carolina sex offender registry website,
- II.) Relatively few individuals actually checked this website, (almost none on a consistent basis).
- III.) The information contained on this website is generally considered accurate.

Although the results of this study suggest that the majority of the public is aware of the North Carolina registry website, emphasis should be given to the finding that a relatively small percentage of the participants had actually accessed this website. Furthermore, most of those that did visit the site did so on only one or two occasions. Based on participants' comments it appeared that curiosity was the preliminary motivation for many individuals accessing the website. Therefore, the limited public use of these websites demands a cost-benefit analysis of their effectiveness in notifying the public about sex offenders.

The vast majority of respondents believe the

Table 1. Perceptions and Usage of the North Carolina Online sex offender registry.

Question	Yes	No
Prior to this study did you know about the N.C. sex offender registry website?	148 (57)	110 (43)
If yes, have you ever accessed the website?	41 (27)*	104 (70)*
Do you think the information posted on the website is accurate?	114 (91)	13 (9)

Note. Values enclosed in parentheses represent percentages.
*Results are only for individuals who reported utilizing the website.

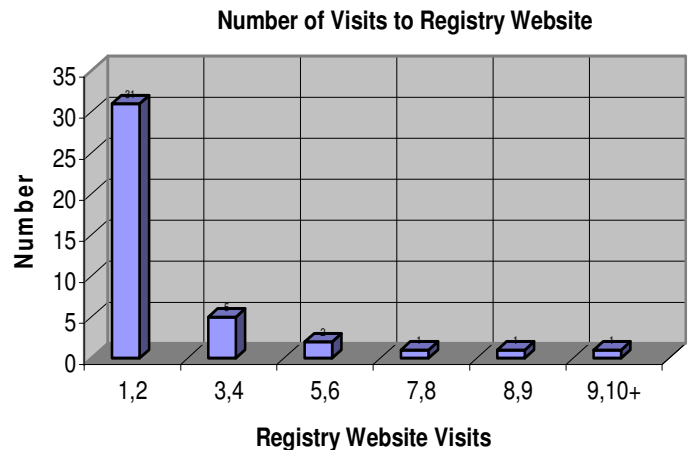


Figure 1. Frequency of Participant Visitation to North Carolina Registry Website.

Note: This graph reflects the number of times the 41 participants who accessed the NC Online Sex Offender Registry visited the website.

information posted on the North Carolina sex offender registry website is accurate. Clearly, the accuracy of the information contained on these websites is imperative for the success of this community notification method. This said, if these sites are to remain operable it is necessary that the information on these sites be correct and updated regularly.

Ultimately, The North Carolina sex offender and public protection registry is not a substitute for sex offender treatment programs and other community monitoring methods. These findings suggest that the public might be placing more faith than is warranted in this system especially considering that the website may not be frequently or effectively utilized. These results further suggest that if this system is to remain operable increased efforts need to be made to encourage public utilization of this notification method. Currently, this method may not as

effective as has been publicly or politically perceived given the relatively low number of people who are regularly accessing this community notification system.

Limitations

A limitation of this study was that the age, ethnicity, and education of the sample were not reflective of the general population. In addition, only 7 participants (2.7%) reported having children. It is possible that individuals with children are more inclined to visit sex offender registry websites than are individuals without children. If this is the case then these websites might be accessed by a larger number of individuals than the results of this study would suggest. Thus, future research should focus on parents and caregivers to see if their responses differ significantly from the responses of individuals without children.

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