FAMILIARITY WITH AND USES OF SEX OFFENDER REGISTRIES

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The Texas sex offender registry began in 1991 to provide information about sex offenders living and working in communities throughout the state. Texas has the second largest state registry with over 72,600 active offenders (V. Castilleja, personal communication, October 18, 2012). The registry notifies the public of the presence of convicted sex offenders, and with that information, citizens can take protective action to reduce the likelihood of future sex crimes. In order for the system to prevent sex crimes, residents must access the registry and take preventative measures if offenders are present in their neighborhoods.

There are relatively few studies to date that have explored familiarity with and use of sex offender registries and the information available in them, and there are no known studies specific to the Texas registry. The existing research has indicated that few people access the registry (Anderson and Sample, 2008), individuals who have been victims of sex crimes are more likely to utilize the registry (Kernsmith et al., 2009), but few individuals took preventative action after accessing the registry (Anderson and Sample, 2008).

This report presents results from a project designed to expand on the previous research on sex offender registries by exploring whether individuals access registries and whether they take protective action as a result of the information they have found.

Methodology

An online survey was developed to address these research questions. Recruitment emails were sent to undergraduate students at a Texas university. Students were asked to voluntarily participate in a brief survey about their opinions about sex offenders, the requirement that they register with local law enforcement, and the different kinds of sexual offenses that are committed. A total of 652 individuals completed the survey. The sample was mostly female (74.8%) and White/non-Hispanic (70.2%). The majority of respondents (62.8%) were between 18 and 23 years of age, and 66.8% were single. Figure 1 displays the demographic characteristics of survey respondents.
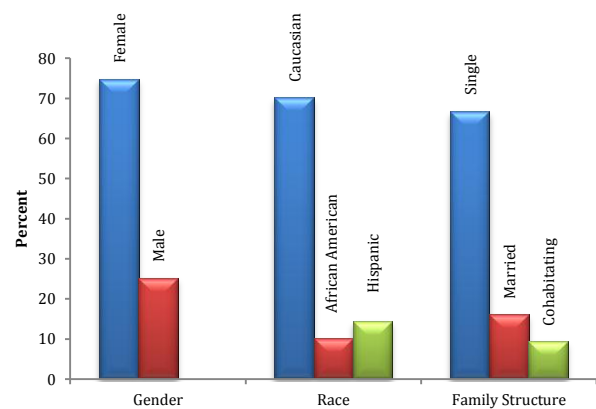

Figure 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Familiarity with and Use of Registry

Nearly three-quarters of the respondents (73.6%) were familiar with sex offender registries, and another 7% were unsure of their familiarity. Respondents' degree of familiarity with the registry was similar for males and females; although, more White/Non-Hispanic respondents reported being familiar (77.3%) with the registry when compared to other ethnicities, particularly African Americans (60.6%).

Less than half (43.4%) of all respondents surveyed had utilized the registry. However, when respondents' familiarity with the registry was taken into account, over 59% of respondents who were familiar with the registry had accessed it.
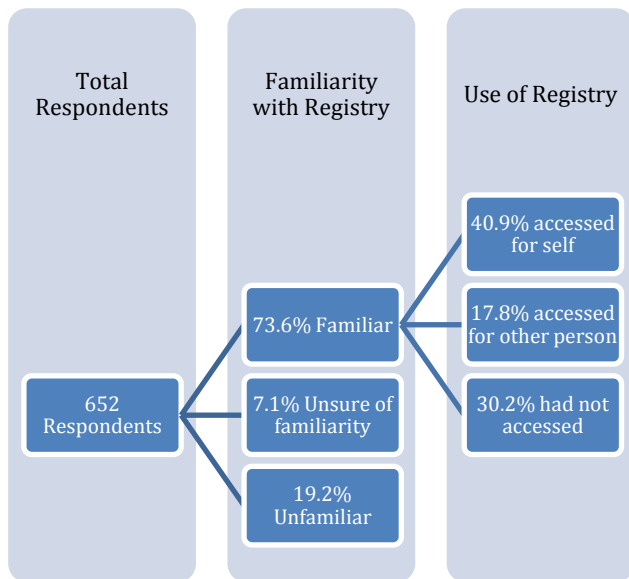
Figure 2. Percentage Familiar with Registry and Use

Among those familiar with the registry, 40.9% had accessed it for themselves, 17.8% had accessed it for someone else, and 30.2% had not accessed it (See Figure 2). The majority of respondents familiar with the registry (43.4%) had accessed it one to two times (of which 18.8% accessed it once and 24.6% twice), and 38.1% had used it three to five times (See Figure 3). When respondents were asked about their reasons for accessing the registry, nearly 40% of respondents accessed it because they were curious, 18% because they were worried for their safety and about 12% because they were concerned about young children's safety. (The low number of respondents who accessed the registry because of concern for children's' safety may be reflective of the age and familial status of the student respondents).
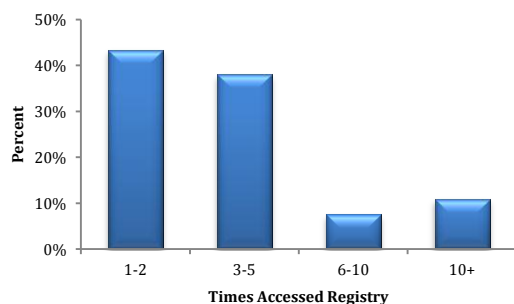

Figure 3. Number of Times Respondents Accessed Registry

Respondents reported a number of ways in which they found out about the registry. The three most common ways respondents learned of the registry were word of mouth (35.9%), internet search (22.4%), and television (13.2%). Respondents who were familiar with the registry and had not utilized it were asked about their reasons for not accessing the registry. The most common reason respondents gave was not knowing what to do with the information/believing there was nothing they could do (11.7%), and the least common response was not being interested (4%).

Protective Actions and Perceptions of Safety

Among those respondents who have accessed a sex offender registry, nearly three-quarters (74.3%) felt either safe or very safe in their neighborhoods before seeing the registry. According to their reports, having accessed the registry had little effect on their perceptions of safety. Yet three-quarters (75.3%) indicated that the information they found in the registry could possibly or definitely help to protect themselves, their family, or friends.

While 17.4% of respondents who had accessed a sex offender registry reported taking no protective measures, the majority reported at least one protective measure as a result of accessing the registry. The most commonly reported protective measures include locking doors regularly (19.4%) and advising others about registered sex offenders living in the neighborhood (20.7%), as shown in Figure 4. Another commonly reported measure was not walking alone in the neighborhood (15.4%). Protective measures involving children were relatively uncommon, but this may be reflective of the general age and marital/family status of respondents.
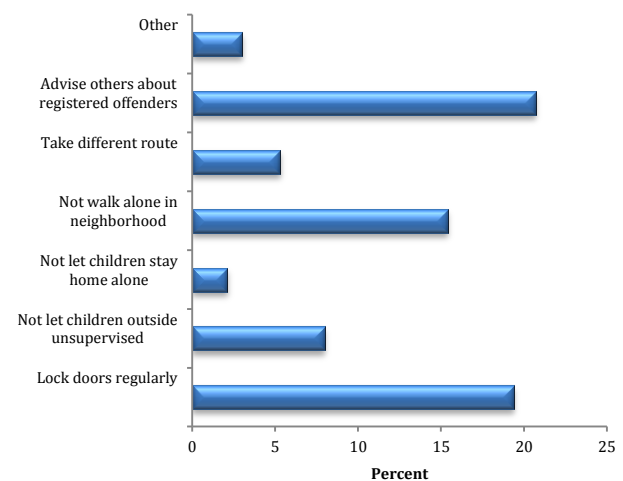

Figure 4. Protective Measures Taken

Respondents who took protective actions were more likely to report feeling safer after accessing the

registry. Forty percent of respondents who took at least one protective action reported feeling much safer or somewhat safer after accessing the registry, while only 26.1% of respondents who had not taken a protective action reported feelings of increased safety.

Knowledge of Sex Offenders in Neighborhood and Registry Use

There was little or no reported difference in registry access when respondents knew of a sex offender living in their neighborhood or a sex crime occurring while they were living in the neighborhood. Registry use was only higher when respondents knew that someone in the neighborhood had been arrested for a sexual offense while they were living there (81.4% compared to 72.9% of respondents who weren't aware of the situation) and remained similar in situations when respondents knew of a sex offender living in the neighborhood or had knowledge of a sexual offense occurring in the neighborhood.

Effect of Victimization and Knowing Victim on Registry Use

Victims were more likely to use the sex offender registry than respondents who had not been victims. Among respondents familiar with the registry, over 67% of victims had utilized the registry for themselves or another person, while only 57% of non-victims had accessed the registry. Registry use was even higher for respondents who reported knowing someone who had been a victim of a sex crime, with 72% of this population utilizing the registry and only 57% of respondents who did not know a victim of a sexual crime using the registry.

Almost three-fourths of respondents familiar with the registry that experienced identity theft reported using the registry, which is more than victims of other types of crimes. Victims of sexual assault had the lowest percentage of registry use among crime victims at 66%. Figure 5 displays registry utilization for victims and non-victims by type of crime experienced.
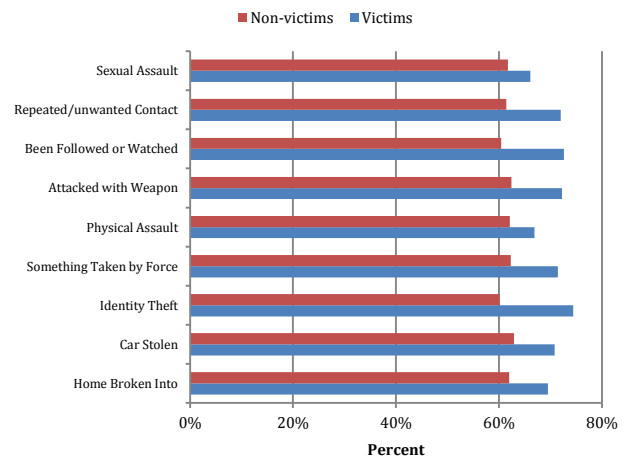

Figure 5. Registry Use by Victims and Non-Victims

Victims and respondents who knew a victim of a sex crime used the registry more often. Over 62% of both groups of respondents who had been a victim and those who knew a victim of a sex crime and were familiar with the registry utilized the registry three or more times, while only 40% of both non-victims and those who did not a victim of a sex crime used the registry this often.

Victims were also more likely to take protective action as a result of what they learned from the registry than non-victims. Over 72% of victims familiar with the registry took at least one protective action in comparison to 59% of non-victims. There were some crimes in which victims were less likely to take protective action than non-victims as seen on Figure 6. Victims who repeatedly received unwanted messages or phone calls reported taking protection action the most frequently and were followed by victims who had been repeatedly followed or watched and those who were sexually assaulted (See Figure 6). The percentage of respondents who knew someone that had been a victim of a sexual crime and took at least one protective action (68.5%) was similar to the percentage of respondents who did not know a victim (63.3%) amongst respondents familiar with the registry.

Figure 6. Percentage Taking Protective Action by Victim Status

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study are consistent with and build upon prior research on familiarity with and use of sex offender registries. These results also raise subsequent questions on usage of the registry and provide two recommended areas for action. It is important to note that caution is advised in drawing conclusions about the use of the sex offender registry from this data due to methodological limitations involved with convenience sampling of university students.

This study revealed two areas in which findings were contrary to the hypothesized results: minimal effect on registry use with sex crimes occurred in neighborhood and sex offenders lived in neighborhood and sexual assault victims accessed the registry less than victims of other crimes. Additional exploration is needed in both of these areas to further understand these findings.

There are two areas of recommended action as a result of the findings. First, strategies to increase awareness of the sex offender registry may increase utilization of the registry. The findings of the study indicated registry use was greater amongst respondents who were familiar with the registry. This finding is intuitive, but supports the idea that registry use would increase if more people were aware of the program. Second, the most common reason respondents gave for not accessing the registry was not knowing what to do with the information or feeling there was nothing they could do. Currently, this information is not readily accessible on the Texas or national sex offender registry websites. Public awareness campaigns which provide information on responding when a registered sex offender is living in a neighborhood have the potential to address these concerns and could result in more people accessing the registry and taking preventative action.

Earlier this month the Texas legislature decided not to comply with the federal requirements of the Adam Walsh Act citing additional costs as the main reason for this decision. This report is not meant to comment on this decision, but rather was solely developed to explore utilization and awareness of the state's sex offender registry. The Crime Victims' Institute would like to acknowledge Texas law enforcement officers and the Texas Department of Safety for their continual work and dedication to the program.

References

Anderson, A. L., & Sample, L. L. (2008). Public Awareness and Action Resulting From Sex Offender Community Notification Laws. Criminal Justice Policy Review, 19(4), 371-396.

Kernsmith, P. D., Comartin, E., Craun, S. W., & Kernsmith, R. M. (2009). The Relationship Between Sex Offender Registry Utilization and Awareness. Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment, 21(2), 181-193.

Information about Sex Offender Registries:

Texas Sex Offender Registry Program
https://records.txdps.state.tx.us/DPS_WEB/SorNew/index.aspx

National Sex Offender Public Website
http://www.nsopw.gov