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To cite this article: Ashley Kilmer & Chrysanthi S. Leon (2017) 'Nobody worries about our children': unseen impacts of sex offender registration on families with school-age children and implications for desistance, *Criminal Justice Studies*, 30:2, 181-201, DOI: [10.1080/1478601X.2017.1299852](https://doi.org/10.1080/1478601X.2017.1299852)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1478601X.2017.1299852>



Published online: 13 Mar 2017.



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# 'Nobody worries about our children': unseen impacts of sex offender registration on families with school-age children and implications for desistance

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## ABSTRACT

The current paper presents findings from a qualitative study using a web-based survey ( $n = 58$ ) and open-ended interviews ( $n = 19$ ) to investigate the impact of sex offender law and policies on family members of convicted sex offenders. Specifically, this paper discusses the impact sex offender policies and 'extra-legal' restrictions made by employers and landlords on housing and income stability, as well as impacts on family dynamics: a far less examined consequence of sex offender laws. Participants described how their children missed out on family bonding activities due to restrictions placed on their registrant parent, such as having their father attend school events, taking their children trick-or-treating, and going on family vacations. Responses indicated that policies intended to protect children and families are in reality tearing these family members' lives apart. As a result, registrants and their families experienced social rejection and isolation, both of which are obstacles in the process of desistance from offending behavior and successful reintegration. Experiences of these family members shed light on the unintended punitive consequences of current sex offender policy and the critical need for reform.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 November 2016  
Accepted 22 February 2017

## KEYWORDS

Sex offenders; registry; criminal justice policy; children; parenthood

## Introduction

Society believes that the registry will protect children, when in essence it is causing great harm to the children of the ones on the registry. (Babs)

The quote above highlights a paradox: sex offender policies are often implemented with the intention of 'protecting children' in a broad, societal sense, but no thought is given to how the policies will impact the actual children of registrants and the relationships registrants have with their families. We use the term 'registrants' to describe people convicted of a sex offense and included in state and federal databases of 'registered sex offenders,' known popularly as 'Megan's law databases.' We choose this language deliberately to avoid the stigma attached to 'sex offender' or 'registered sex offender' and to indicate our support for person-first language.<sup>1</sup>

We use interview and written narrative data ( $n = 19$  and  $n = 58$ , respectively) to explore the experiences of registrant families. Their responses indicated that such children are often excluded from taken-for-granted childhood experiences such as having parents present at school sporting or performance events, participating in Halloween activities, and spending quality time bonding with parents at amusement parks, festivals, and playgrounds. We contextualized these experiences in light of contemporary research and policy.

Sex offenses, particularly those committed against children, have periodically resulted in an intense reaction from the general public and a demand for legislative action (Leon, 2011a). Few people would disagree that serious and repeated sex offending behavior is a severe social problem requiring attention (Wright, 2009). Since the 1990s, this societal response is typically in the form of legislation that outlines sanctions and community-based policy and practices that are aimed at keeping registrants either incapacitated or closely supervised so that they can no longer victimize another child or adult. However, little regard is given to how these policies may impact the families of registrants, particularly children. Respondents in our study challenged the claim that these laws are really protective. As one respondent stated:

Nobody worries about our children. Everybody says the laws are to protect children but the laws do not protect my children, in fact, they harm my children. We cannot decorate for Halloween, cannot give out candy. How do these laws help my children? (Crystal)

Taking Crystal's insight as our title, this article briefly reviews the sex offender policy evaluation and family impact literatures and discusses findings from our qualitative study that examined the impact of sex offender policy on the family members of registrants. Specifically, findings from our study identify several areas of concern regarding the ability for registrants and their families to form healthy family relationships and connect with their communities, potentially creating barriers to long-term desistance from future offending. Areas for policy reform and future research are identified.

## Review of the literature

### *Stranger danger and empirical contrasts*

Contemporary sex offender policies are often developed and implemented as a result of high-profile cases of child abduction, sexual abuse, or murder by a previously-convicted sex offender, unknown to the victim. While these cases are outliers in terms of patterns of sexual violence, they have a wildly disproportionate impact on public views and resulting policies. Studies on public perceptions of sex offending behavior have found that there is a widely held public perception, often fueled by sensationalized media coverage, that people convicted of sex offenses are a homogenous group who are unlikely to respond to treatment and who have a high risk for recidivism (Cucolo & Perlin, 2013; Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Sample & Bray, 2003, 2006). As a result, the public has supported the legislative adoption of policies such as sex offender registries as a strategy to prevent future victimizations (Kernsmith, Craun, & Foster, 2009; Leon, 2011a; Proctor, Badzinski, & Johnson, 2002). In addition to national-level legislation, state and local policies often include community notification requirements (Logan, 2009), residency and employment restrictions (Singleton, 2011), and bans on participating in particular community events and celebrations, such as Halloween activities (Leon & Kilmer, 2013). These policies are often applied to all sex

offenders, with little to no regard to specific offense history. For example, a 19-year old who had consensual sex with his 14-year old girlfriend and is then convicted of a sex crime may discover when he has a family of his own, perhaps ten years later, that he is not permitted to live near a park or school or take his children trick-or-treating.

Despite the stated intentions of these policies of preventing future sexual victimization, recent scholarship disputes that these policies actually result in less sexual offending, reduced sexual recidivism, or greater community safety (Chaffin, Levenson, Letourneau, & Stern, 2009; Duwe, Donnay, & Tewksbury, 2008; Leon, 2011b; Nobles, Levenson, & Youstin, 2012; Sandler, Freeman, & Socia, 2008; Socia, 2012; Tewksbury, Jennings, & Zgoba, 2012). Recidivism rates of those convicted of sex offenses are much lower than the public often assumes, and current policies are unlikely to result in further decreases to these already low recidivism rates. A meta-analysis with an average follow-up of 5–6 years found an average recidivism rate of 13.7% for sex offenses compared to a general recidivism (any crime) rate of 36.2% (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005). A more recent examination of recidivism during an 8-year follow-up period compared those who had been released prior to implementation of Sex Offender Registration and Notification (SORN) policies in the mid-1990's with a group released following the enactment of SORN. Findings revealed generally low sexual recidivism rates in both the pre-SORN (13.0%) and post-SORN (9.7%) groups and SORN status failed to predict which individuals would reoffend (Tewksbury et al., 2012). These results are also evident in state-specific studies. For example, in a report to the Ohio Sentencing Commission in 2005, it was reported that those convicted of sex offenses in Ohio had a recidivism rate of only 8% for a sex-related offense and 14% for a non-sex offense during a ten-year follow-up period (Office of Criminal Justice Services, 2006). A more recent study from Connecticut of 14,398 men convicted of sex offenses and released from prison in 2005 found that 3.6% were arrested for a sex offense during a 5-year follow-up period (State Office of Policy and Management, 2012). In comparison, offenders with the highest rearrest rates following release were those who stole motor vehicles (78.8%), those who possessed or sold stolen property (77.4%), and burglars (74.0%) (Langan & Levin, 2002). Taken together, the existing literature suggests that current sex offender policies have not had a significant effect on preventing sex offender behavior and that recidivism rates for those convicted of sex offenses are relatively low when compared to other offender groups. Therefore, policies that are implemented with the goal of preventing sex offending behavior may offer little instrumental value in acting as a control mechanism over those convicted of sex offenses. In addition, the stigmatization and social rejection that results from these policies may actually place a strain on registrants' ability to form healthy, strong attachments to their families, a bond that has consistently been empirically related to reduced criminal offending behavior.

### ***Social bonds and repeat sexual offending***

Strong family attachments are one of several key social bonds that individuals can have with conventional society that can reduce the inclination to engage in deviant or criminal behavior (Hirschi, 1969). These bonds act as a form of informal social control over individuals' behaviors. Those who have attachments to individuals who hold conventional values, commitments to pro-social activities such as work or school, involvement in community groups and services, and a belief in the rules and values of conventional society may be unwilling to engage in crime or deviance due to the negative impact that behavior may have on those

attachments, commitments, involvements, or beliefs (Hirschi, 1969). While Hirschi's original theory focused on those who have not yet committed a crime or act of delinquency, social bond theory has been applied to criminal populations to identify factors that aid in the desistance from future criminal behavior. There is consistent, empirical support that social bonds, particularly attachments and commitments, are related to reduced recidivism risk in both a general population of ex-offenders (Breese, Ra'el, & Grant, 2000; Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995; Mackenzie & Brame, 2001; Markson, Lösel, Souza, & Lanskey, 2015; Sampson & Laub, 1990; Wiatrowski, Griswold, & Roberts, 1981) and those who have committed sex offenses (Fox, 2015; Hepburn & Griffin, 2004). Taken together, these findings indicate that the development of strong, positive family relationships could serve as a protective factor against any risk of reoffending.

While these studies almost exclusively define social support in regards to marriage, there is a small body of literature that has studied the effect of parent-child relationships on recidivism. These studies have found that becoming a parent and having quality relationships with their children reduced recidivism in offender parents (Ganem & Agnew, 2007; Giordano, Seffrin, Manning, & Longmore, 2011; Zoutewelle-Terovan, van der Geest, Liefbroer, & Bijleveld, 2014). Unfortunately, much of the discourse about people convicted of sex offenses neglects the fact that these men (and women) may have roles as parents to minor children, and therefore fail to consider the impact that sex offender policies may have on parents' abilities to form healthy relationships with their children. As a result, there is no existing literature on parenthood and parent-family relationships specific to people convicted of sex offenses who have children. The current study addresses this gap in the existing literature by examining how sex offender policies effect the families, including children, of registrants and what implications that may have for registrants and their families to have healthy bonds with one another.

### ***Sex offender policy and spillover***

Those who are convicted of crimes receive a formally applied label from the criminal justice system. This label (offender, convicted felon, sex offender, etc.) has the potential to negatively impact various aspects of their daily lives including the individual's access to employment, housing, and support programs as well as developing positive social networks (Forrest, 2016; Lageson, Vuolo, & Uggen, 2015; LeBel, 2012; Pager, 2003; Raphael, 2011). As a result, these individuals may feel disconnected or isolated from conventional society due to a lack of commitment and involvement in their communities (Kilmer, 2016). This social alienation and stigmatization as a result of a criminal label may actually increase the likelihood of engaging in future criminal behavior (Chiricos, Barrick, Bales, & Bontrager, 2007; Fagan, Kupchik, & Liberman, 2003; Lemert, 1951; Taxman & Piquero, 1998).

Registered sex offenders are a unique offender group in that, not only do they experience the stigma resulting from an 'offender' label, but they are subjected to the negative connotations associated with the 'sex offender' label. Additionally, they often experience the 'scarlet letter' advertisement of their label through the use of sex offender registries and community notification policies. While other offender groups may be able to hide their label from the public, thus reducing their experiences of stigma, sex offenders have little choice but to publicly display their past deviance to all.

Despite the empirical evidence that sex offenders are not high recidivists, and that current policies have unintended outcomes, these policies remain largely intact and local communities continue to enact new restrictions on the lives of sex offenders. Many not only impact the individual directly targeted, but partners and children of these individuals due to their relational proximity to the registrant. The broader literature on the effects of criminal justice involvement on families has documented that parents, siblings, spouses, intimate partners, and children of incarcerated men and women experience considerable emotional and financial distress (Braman, 2004a, 2004b; Comfort, 2009). An estimated nearly 3 million children currently have an incarcerated parent, and over 10 million children have experienced a parental incarceration (Pew Charitable The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010). In regards to people convicted of sex crimes, they must register as sex offenders ('registrants') upon release and numerous local, state and federal laws come into effect that further impact families (Leon, 2011b; Levenson, 2008; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury, 2005). Restrictions on housing and employment aimed at registrants frequently affect the housing and financial support of families as well (Levenson, 2008; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Rapp, 2012). Self-published first-person accounts as well as some journalistic coverage have described the emotional toll experienced by family members of registrants (Davis, 1996; on file with author; Yoder, 2011). But to date, there is limited qualitative analysis of how sex offender policies impact registrants' partners and families. In her interview study of thirty-seven women in relationships with registrants, Rapp builds on Levenson and Tewksbury's (2009) and Farkas and Miller's (2007) quantitative and qualitative research on the social impacts of community notification laws on family members (2012). Rapp focuses on the meanings romantic partners make of their relationships, including techniques used to manage stigma, with emphasis on women's accounts of the benefits of their relationships (2012).

### **Current study**

This study deepens our understanding of the experience of family members and friends of registrants through the use of qualitative data. Specifically, this study examined the way registrant family members made sense of current sex offender policies and laws (such as residency restrictions, registration requirements, and community notification) and the impact of such policies on family members in the areas of social/family relationships, employment, housing, and community involvement. There is at least one known study that specifically examines the impact of SORN policies on family members of registrants which uses close-ended questions and Lickert scales to identify areas of hardship as a result of SORN policies (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009). However, the current study is perhaps the first that allowed family members of registrants to share personal, detailed narratives about their experiences related to these policies. Many of these impacts on registrant families' lives may play a prominent role in the formation and maintenance of registrants' own strong, pro-social bonds with the community, ultimately reducing risks of future deviance or victimization. They are thus important factors for consideration in future research on informal social control and desistance.

## Methods

### *Recruitment*

Family members of registrants were recruited<sup>2</sup> through flyers and direct communication at the national Reform Sex Offender Laws (RSOL) conference in 2014 and through online support groups for sex offenders and their families found through Facebook and internet searches.<sup>3</sup> Since sexual offending is such a sensitive and sensationalized issue, we chose to accept the limitations of a convenience sample skewed towards advocates because of the advantages attached to publicizing our study as well as hearing from people who were willing to share their experiences with others. Prior research on registrants and their family members' use of social media has found that these individuals use the internet and social media as a source of community, support, and empowerment (ten Bensel & Sample, 2016). Therefore, recruitment through these online avenues provided us with access to a greater number of individuals willing to share their stories than we may have recruited using other sampling techniques. While some of our participants likely came to us through RSOL<sup>4</sup>, anyone who identified as a family member, partner, or friend of someone who was convicted of a sex offense was eligible to participate in the study. The initial recruitment strategies resulted in additional snowball sampling; e.g. the link to our online survey as well as contact information was posted on social media outlets. All of our respondents were adults and therefore experiences of minor children (or other family members in the home) were not directly communicated to us, but were shared by the respondents.

### *Data collection & analysis*

The sample included two sources: those who completed an online survey ( $n = 58$ ) with several open-ended writing prompts about their experiences with sex offender policies in regards to employment, housing, social support, emotional well-being, and community involvement and those who completed short interviews by phone ( $n = 19$ ).<sup>5</sup> The survey included the option for follow up contact, and many of our interviews ( $n = 14$ ) came from follow-ups – the remaining five were conducted with people who had heard about the research but preferred to talk rather than to fill out the survey. The total sample was therefore sixty-three respondents, of which 58 provided demographic data through the survey. Table 1 describes the makeup of those respondents, including self-reported race, age, family status, and relationship to registrant; not all respondents answered each question. Respondents were also given the opportunity to share any other comments or experiences regarding the impact of sex offender policy on their lives not explicitly addressed in other sections of the survey. The interviews were conducted while the survey data collection and analysis was in process, allowing us to use the open-ended nature of the interviews to investigate around areas that emerged as we coded the survey data.

The majority of our respondents are women (74%), likely a product of both the sampling frame (most participants in the advocacy groups are women) and of the experience of being a caretaker who experiences the impacts of a loved one's registration. Most convicted sex offenders in the U.S. are men; many of these are heterosexual men who have had relationships with women. Additionally, prior research has focused on female romantic partners of registrants and other offender groups and describes the way female partners may be inclined

**Table 1.** Respondent demographic information.

Demographic variable	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Gender (n = 56)</i>		
Female	41	74
Male	15	27
Other	1	2
<i>Race (n = 57)</i>		
White	51	89
Black	3	5
Asian	1	2
Native American	2	4
<i>Age (n = 55)</i>		
18–25	1	2
26–34	10	18
35–54	27	49
55–64	13	24
65 or over	4	7
<i>Marital status (n = 54)</i>		
Married	35	65
Separated or divorced	10	19
Other	9	16
<i>Children under 18 living in home (n = 58)</i>		
	26	45
<i>Relationship to registrant (n = 58)</i>		
Romantic partner	24	41
Parent	12	20
Child	1	2
Sibling	3	5
Other	18	31

Note: While 58 respondents completed surveys, not all provided information on the demographic questions, therefore the *n*'s and percentages reported are for the total number of respondents who answered that particular question.

to stay in these relationships and advocate for themselves or on their partner's behalf (Comfort, 2009; Rapp, 2012).

No respondents chose to identify as Hispanic, Pacific Islander or Other, though we know some of our interviewees personally identify as non-white—we suspect some chose not to provide demographic information that could lead to identification. Approximately two thirds (65%) of our sample indicated that they are currently married. Just under half of our respondents were between the ages of 35 and 54 (49%),<sup>6</sup> and slightly under half had children under age 18 living in the home (45%). In terms of relationship to registrant, 41% of our sample shared from the perspective of a romantic relationship, with another 20% reporting experiences as the parent of a registrant, two people describing the experience of a sibling, one identified as the adult child of a registrant parent, and the remaining reported 'other' (31%), which, based on inferences from narrative responses, appears to include largely friends. Our 19 interviewees were a subset of the narrative sample, with most interviewees identifying as women (77%), White (93%) and married (57%).

Analysis proceeded in a two-part, iterative process during data collection. Each author independently reviewed the survey data and transcribed interviews in NVIVO 10 with a first review using a set of broad coding themes derived from the literature, such as policy impacts on employment, community involvement, and housing and narratives and interviews were coded 'in-vivo.' This initial coding procedure involved reviewing each narrative or interview line-by-line and coding for concepts, ideas, or phrases in order to find emerging themes in the data (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 2009). The authors consulted after this first review of the data to discuss emerging themes, which led to the creation of an expanded coding



frame that was frequently revised as new themes emerged in the data (Berg, 2007; Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Rubin & Rubin, 1995) and used in a second analysis of all of the data. Using this technique of inductive coding allowed themes emphasized by the respondents to come to the forefront (see Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2008 on hybrid deductive and inductive coding).

## Results

Our inductive analysis revealed several themes regarding the experiences of children and family of registrants. Registrant families frequently reported feelings of stigma and shame<sup>7</sup>, not just experienced by the registrant or their partner, but also by their children or cast upon the family as whole. We found this theme to be so important that we have devoted an entire manuscript to it (Leon & Kilmer, *in press*), so we focus here first on the direct impacts felt in expected places, like housing and employment, as well as unexpected places. We often heard that families were financially burdened and otherwise undermined as a result of decisions made beyond the scope of the law—that is, individuals such as landlords and employers decided to intervene and exclude based on their fears, and not because of legal requirements. Relatedly, family members reported the stress resulting from the experience of multiple consequences or the cross-impact of certain policies (restrictions on employment impacts housing and financial stability). Second, respondents reported social rejection as well as exclusion from common childhood experiences and family bonding opportunities that altered family dynamics. We will discuss each of these themes in greater detail below.

### *Legal and extra-legal restrictions and the impact on registrant families*

Families of registrants reported struggling to maintain their homes and incomes (30 out of 36 respondents, or 83% reported direct impact on housing, (27 out of 37, or 73% reported direct impact on employment).<sup>8</sup> In response to open-ended questions, these struggles were sometimes described as a result of post-conviction laws that restrict where registrants can live, but often because of the ‘extra-legal’ decisions made by landlords and employers, above and beyond what the law may require.

When my fiancé was arrested, we received a two-day eviction notice from our apartment manager. I had just found out I was pregnant on the day he was arrested. While my fiancé was in jail, I was scrambling to find a place to live. No one would rent to me because of my fiancé, and I ended up couch-surfing at a couple of friends’ as well as living at the restaurant that I worked at. After I had the baby I moved out of state to stay with my fiancé’s family. (Rachel)

Rachel reported a tenuous existence resulting from a decision to evict made well before the criminal process was complete. Forced to ‘couch surf’ at a time when she should have been enjoying the kind of ‘nesting’ we expect newly pregnant families to engage in, she highlighted the very anti-family impact of decisions made in the name of protecting children.

Other respondents explained that the financial burdens extended to the costs of maintaining a second household as well as paying for the registrants’ mandated therapy. The unseen costs faced by registrants and their families came up frequently, from people at varying socioeconomic levels. As Laura explained,

He [her significant other who is a registrant] cannot attend the colleges in his town because his ‘victim’ attends her high school courses at one college and her siblings attend the other. He

has to take classes online, which is costing more than five times the amount of local tuition at either of the local colleges. The weekly mandated counseling is costing \$150/mo and the yearly polygraph is socking us for \$260 per year. We have an income of approximately \$850 per month, combined income. It is really difficult to maintain the two separate households as we are having to do. As he lives 350 miles away, I can only visit for a few days at a time every few months due to having a child of my own. Living together isn't an option because my daughter would not even be allowed to visit. I cannot afford to move into a place of my own in or near that city and the commute costs me \$200–\$400 each time. (Laura)

Laura's story illustrates how the compounding financial obligations that she and her partner face can really place a strain on their already low income. When coupled with housing restrictions, Laura and her partner faced substantial obstacles in their ability to spend time with one another. Valerie also described the rippling effects of registrant status on finances and family stability,

After my son was arrested, I lost the apartment we lived in. I was the assistant manager at a housing complex and was told to leave as soon as the arrest occurred, before conviction/plea was entered. I also lost my job as the assistant manager. More recently, in seeking housing I told the potential landlady my son (RSO) would be visiting. I told her because this was an affluent community with an active Neighborhood Watch, and my son is on parole. I expected parole would be visiting also, if my son spent any time at the new home. My potential landlady checked the registry and declined to rent to me. I am a professional, homeowner, credit score of 840, stable employment and residence history. (Valerie)

While Valerie reported from the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum, she lost both her housing and her job because of her son's arrest, and reported believing she was denied another rental because of anticipated visits from a registrant.

These experiences reflected hardships related to financial and housing stability resulting from a family member's registrant status. While legal and extra-legal employment or residency restrictions target the registrant, it is clear that these policies and practices spill over to those closest to the registrant. As a result, family members or romantic partners face substantial costs (i.e. financial, employment, housing, etc.) for having relationships with individuals on the registry. This can create significant, practical challenges for families wishing to maintain strong, supportive relationships with their registrant loved ones, a social bond that is critical for long-term desistance from crime (Breese et al., 2000; Fox, 2015; Hepburn & Griffin, 2004; Horney et al., 1995; Mackenzie & Brame, 2001; Markson et al., 2015; Sampson & Laub, 1990; Wiatrowski et al., 1981).

### ***Cross-impact of multiple hardships***

A related theme that emerged in our data was the 'cross-impact' effect of multiple hardships on families and children of registrants. The hardships described were directly related to formal restrictions or negative perceptions associated with the sex offender label. Examples included the cross-impact resulting from access to employment and housing, resulting in less-than-suitable or unstable home environments and financial strain in meeting the needs of the family. Susan described her experiences dealing with the cross-impact of the inability to find appropriate housing due to residency restrictions and the accompanying financial strain of paying for two residences:

In 1997 we bought a home that was close to a school. In 2006, the Kentucky legislature passed retroactive residency restrictions that made our home illegal for my husband to live in. I attempted to find us a place to live and ran into many landlords who would not rent to us because of my

husband being on the registry. Luckily, a family friend had a place come open just at that time, and we moved into a tiny, tiny home with our children – the only one we could find. We made our house payment and paid rent, plus utilities on two places, etc, until our house sold and we bought another one. I can't imagine what people who don't have our resources would have done. (Susan)

Anna discussed the impact of the sex offender registry on her partner's willingness and ability to go back to college in order to potentially gain better employment:

Currently he's only able to get work through a temp agency for \$8.15 an hour. It's definitely not enough to support our family on. He looked into going back to college, but that also requires him to notify the college that he's a registered sex offender. It's never ending! And, with the public sex offender registry, there's no guarantee that obtaining a college degree will help him land any better of a job. We don't have that extra money to basically throw away, so he's not bothered to pursue college. (Anna)

Anna also indicated skepticism that putting the time and financial resources into going to college would even result in better employment prospects for her partner due to the stigma attached to his registrant status. Her exclamation of 'It's never ending!' suggests a feeling of constant bombardment with the restrictions, stigma, and hardship associated with her partner's past offending behavior.

In a different variation of cross-impacts, Jean highlighted in her written narrative the often unrecognized crossover when the offender and victim are in the same family. Coupled with the strain experienced by having an incarcerated father, this results in stress that impacts all members of the family:

I now carry full financial burden, children unable to have physical contact with their father. Emotional stress, affecting work and school lives of members of family. The state refused to listen to victim's request for no prison or very little prison time. Victim just wanted abuse to stop. Was forced to testify under duress causing severe insomnia. Victim now wishes they never came forward. (Jean)

Although it was unusual among our respondents to discuss the particular crossover impact created when the offender and victim were in the same family, the prevalence of sexual offending within families suggests that this type of scenario is more common than we may realize: about 30% of offenses against minors are committed by family members (U.S. Department of Justice, *n.d.*). Therefore, the crossover impact of sex offender restrictions on family members of registrants whose victims are within their family warrants additional attention.

Taken together, these findings illustrate the ways in which various legal restrictions and negative public perceptions can interact with one another, potentially exacerbating the financial strain experienced by registrants and their families. These cross-impacts can result in additional challenges for registrants, as well as their families, to forming meaningful ties with their community. The next section on social impacts further identifies obstacles for engagement in traditional family bonding activities and active involvement in their communities.

### ***Social impacts and disruption of family dynamics***

Beyond hardships in the areas of employment, housing, and finances, the majority of respondents reported the direct and negative impact of sex offender laws on their families and support networks (38 of 41 respondents, or 93%). Our respondents shared numerous

stories related to parent-child interaction. These included logistical obstacles regarding access to a child's school as well as challenges to engaging in important developmental and bonding experiences with their children. Even basic activities such as dropping off and picking up children at school were reported by several respondents as logistically problematic. In a few cases, respondents told us that the school was willing to compromise, but other registrant families reported that they were not so fortunate,

My son would love for his father to see his basketball games. The school will not let him in the building. The school told us if our children were sick that my husband could not pick them up to take them to a doctor. No other class of offenders/ex-offenders has that stigma. (Crystal)

As noted by Crystal, restrictions on proximity to school property not only impact a parent's ability to drop off or pick up their child for school, but also prevent parents from participating in their child's lives when children engage in school-related extracurricular activities such as sports.

Another respondent, a father who is a registrant and also primary custodian of his child, reported that although he had been transporting his child to daycare, he unexpectedly received a letter from the daycare stating that he was no longer permitted on the school property and that there would be no appeals or exceptions to this policy. While the laws in his state do not prohibit his proximity to school property, the school district created their own more restrictive policy. The school applied it without any prior notification for parents such as our participant that might have enabled time to make alternative arrangements for his child. He therefore had to remove his child from preschool temporarily until he was able to find a church-based preschool that did not have to abide by the school district's restrictive policy.

Often residency restrictions and other zoning-based policies include not just schools, but any property where children are likely to congregate such as public pools, parks, playgrounds, and even bus stops. Crystal reported that in addition to her husband being unable to attend their children's school activities, he was also unable to engage with his children in other areas in the community:

My husband cannot take our children to a park, swimming pool or even the children's hospital. We have two special needs children so this is a huge problem. (Crystal)

The result of these restrictions is a parent who has limited opportunity to be present in their child's life, as well as placing a huge burden on the non-registrant parent. This is evident in Lynn's succinct answer in response to the question of what motivates her involvement in advocacy around sex offender policy issues, 'My children want to be able to be around their dad when he comes home.'

Other respondents shared stories of how people in their lives have intervened when they observe registrant families living together. Neighbors or family friends may act on the assumption that any registrant presents an imminent danger to all children. As one respondent discussed in their written narrative, this affects the ability to socialize and even to live as a family without challenge,

My children aren't allowed to have certain friends. Some kids aren't even allowed to come over. I've had DCYF called on me for associating with a known sex offender even though he is in prison and cannot touch my children. (WaitingForD)

Parents also feared that their young children would be held directly accountable for their registrant parent and reported that their children have already experienced harassment as a result of other kids knowing about the parent's registrant status. As Anna shared,

My husband's children have been harassed at school. It got so bad, that they actually had to change schools to one in another town. We constantly worry about how it affects our teenage sons. Will their friend's parents say anything? How about prospective girlfriends ... are they allowed to come over for dinner? Will the parents of any girlfriend(s) accuse our sons of a child sexual abuse crime out of fear/hatred of my husband? It really is a constant worry on us and a burden on the all the kids, especially the boys. My husband's family membership at the YMCA, where he took his son for swimming lessons, was terminated due to him being a registered sex offender. He got a lovely letter telling him he was no longer welcome and that the family membership was terminated. But, of course, no reimbursement of membership fees ever occurred. They were quite happy to keep his money. Though there are currently no restrictions on my husband going to our children's school for events, teacher conferences, etc., we fear it is only a matter of time before the law changes again and we are forced to leave events. (Anna)

People in no way associated with the criminal offense are stripped of their ability to use their community YMCA. These types of restrictions that impact not just the person on the registry but also their families can create significant barriers to involvement in the community.

The experiences discussed above were about the lives of children with registrant parents and how they have been impacted by legal restrictions and negative public perceptions. There were other respondents whose children had not yet experienced any negative impact, but who described a sense of anxiety over looming issues. Given the public perceptions of the 'sex offender' label and the resulting social rejection, registrant parents understandably fear for their children. Such fear has also led some respondents to delay informing their young children about their parent's registration. Susan (quoted elsewhere) and her partner made a conscious choice to withhold this information from their children while they were still young, but recognize that as their children age, there may come a time when they may have to decide whether to confront this issue with their children. Unlike most other narrative respondents, Susan's husband was no longer on the registry, but she feared that their children may find information about their father's offense history or prior registration status through the internet. Susan described uncertainty about how to start the conversation with her children about the impact of registration on their family, understandably fearing the potential cost to their relationship with their father of being honest with them. This is a real problem not only for individuals who committed their offenses as younger adults and are no longer on the registry, but those who committed a sexual offense as a juvenile and may be subjected to lifetime registration. There are only twenty states that have distinct procedures or age limits for how long someone must be on the registry if their offense occurred when they were juveniles (Center for Sex Offender Management, *n.d.*). In these states, individuals may be released from registration requirements once they reach adulthood. However, the majority of states do not provide such relief to those convicted of sex offenses as juveniles, despite evidence that juvenile registrants have low rates of sexual recidivism during adulthood (Caldwell, 2010; Zimring, Piquero, & Jennings, 2007). As a result, many registrants and their families may be dealing with the burdens of SORN policies for offenses that occurred while they were juveniles and who pose little to no threat for sexual offending as an adult.

Parents of children who are on the registry shared stories of the social isolation and emotional toll it took on them to protect and advocate for their registrant children. As RWsMom revealed, the stress of a loved one on the registry impacts even children who are

not directly involved. She detailed how the uninvolved sibling loses out on a caring parent because of the attention required by her other child, a son who is a registrant:

I used to trust people and enjoyed life, not seeming to have much cares or concerns. I used to be happy. Since my juvenile son was arrested, I have become bitter, cynical, afraid, depressed and heartless. Instead of wanting to be a mother that has fun with her children, I have become a mother that is fighting for her son. I neglect my teenage daughter to work endlessly for my son's freedom and happiness. I have become the person I never thought I would. (RWsMom)

Similarly, Jacob, whose son is on the registry described how the choice to keep his son's offense history private has resulted in a loss of substantive relationships with both friends and family. 'Not telling certain friends and relatives creates distance and superficiality in relationship'. This statement suggests that both Jacob and his son have experienced social distancing and isolation, including experiencing distance from other members of their family, as a result of choosing not to reveal information about his son's registrant status.

Additionally, parents of adult registrants described how painful it was for them to realize how pejoratively their children were viewed and treated. Robert described the difficulty his son had, not in finding a job outright, but in convincing the licensing board for his specialty area that he should be allowed to keep his license and job. As Robert explained, 'Knowing he is not a criminal yet being treated as one is constantly troubling to me.' Robert, as well as many of our other participants, was clearly coming from a subject position that views the registrant as at heart a good person, in contrast with the public perception of 'sex offenders'. Therefore, they were more likely to condemn current sex offender policies and practices as being overly punitive and restrictive compared to the general public who may be more likely to view such practices as promoting the safety of children and society more broadly.

When many of our respondents discussed children, they most often referred to their own school age children, however, effects on families were found to be more diffuse. In this case, Karen described feeling as though contact with children in general, as well as with her own grandchildren, was risky. This shows the paranoia of our stranger-danger pervaded culture.

I no longer want to be anywhere near kids including my own grandkids due to fear of how every touch can be perceived and how anything a child says is now believed as gospel with no further need for evidence. These laws have made children, and in fact all of us, much less safe, not more safe, so I fear for my sons and my grandkids. (Karen)

Additionally, another registrant's wife described the way her immediate family decided to show solidarity with her husband,

My husband could attend no activity where minors were present, so we chose as a family not to attend – grandmothers' funerals, friends' funerals, weddings, vacations, etc. (Hannah)

The restrictions on a parent's ability to participate in their child's school and recreation activities, as well as the fear of causing their family or children any harassment or trouble, has led to registrant parents feeling left out of important aspects of their children's lives. Furthermore, restrictions on where a registrant family member can go also creates obstacles to participating in family-oriented activities such as parties, weddings, and vacations, thus preventing registrant families from maintaining important family bonds.

In summary, respondents shared experiences that have been documented in other studies regarding the impact of SORN policies on employment, housing, and finances, describing how such restrictions create burdens in their own lives, not just the registrant's. However, this study uniquely documents stories of how legal (and extra-legal) restrictions and negative

social perceptions resulted in social rejection as well as disruption of traditional family dynamics. Registrant parents faced difficulties engaging in their children's lives due to restrictions on participation in school-related and social activities. Additionally, children experienced harassment or social rejection because of others' knowledge about their registrant parent. Other parents voiced anxiety about how to explain a parent's offense history to their children and the potential negative reaction of the child to such information. Finally, parents of children who are on the registry shared stories of emotional strain as they try to support their child who is facing the legal and social consequences of sex offender policies and practices.

## Discussion

I understand the primal need to protect our young and the strong emotions the label invokes, but I am shocked at the lack of critical thinking which occurs around this topic, on so many levels. (Valerie)

Our respondents reported various impacts on their family's lives resulting from association with someone labeled a sex offender. While registration and residency policies are not implemented with the intention of targeting the loved ones and children of those on the registry, registrant families reported numerous hardships as a result of these policies. Experiences of stigma, social isolation, disruption in their family dynamics and bonds, as well as the burden of managing multiple areas of impact such as employment and housing challenges were all reported. These experiences highlight the 'spillover' effects that these policies have on the lives of those who had no involvement in the offending behavior that led to the formal restrictions and social constraints placed upon them. Supposedly 'protective' policies have cost children of registrants the ability to have full involvement and support of a parent, isolation from conventional childhood experiences such as Halloween and family gatherings, and the strain of living in a home that is experiencing financial and emotional hardship.

Housing and employment restrictions impact the financial and residential stability of the family, including the location and type of housing available, and even whether a parent can live in the same home as their children. Restrictions on registrants that prohibit them being on or near property where children congregate (often regardless of whether their offense was against a child), limit a parent's ability to attend children's school and extracurricular activities, bond with children at parks and parties, and even pick a sick child up from school or daycare to take them to the doctor. As a result, families feel isolated, children are left without the full experience of having their parent be a part of their lives, and the 'best intentions' of these policies are in reality causing unintended harms to the families and children of the offenders they target.

Our respondents recognized the uphill battle of combatting the emotional response of the sex offender label. Their experiences demonstrate that the rhetoric about protecting families is directly contradicted by the actual experiences of their own children, whether in the cases of the children who were victimized by their parent/registrant, or in the more commonly reported cases of children impacted by the over-zealous application of restrictions.

Many respondents were at least minimally engaged in advocacy work ( $n = 41$ ), and therefore their experiences and perceptions of sex offender policy may have been different than those who do not engage in such work. While this provides a possible limitation to the

generalizability of the impacts documented here, our findings are congruent with prior research (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Tewksbury, 2005). In addition, our sample identified overwhelmingly as white. This is in keeping with the attendees at the RSOL conferences, but is clearly not representative of the population of sex offender family members. This raises its own set of questions for future research about where people in different communities and with varying backgrounds find support, if they find it. We suspect that some participants chose not to report their minority status both for privacy and given the dominant white composition of support groups—to further ‘other’ oneself as part of a racial minority group may be problematic.

## ***Policy considerations***

### ***Roll back registration and residency restrictions***

Many of our respondents added their voices to the call for the reconsideration and reform of registration requirements and residency restrictions. Our respondents stated that if the registry was only used by law enforcement and not publically available, they would feel less fearful in their daily lives and more comfortable participating in community events and activities. Respondents reported fear of vigilantes harassing or physically harming their homes or family members, resulting in the isolation of some families from neighbors and community organizations and events. Respondents also described residency restrictions as having more punitive effects that outweighed any of the protective benefits the restrictions claim to have.

Empirical evidence has consistently demonstrated that these restrictions do not decrease the risk of repeat sexual offending behavior, likely in part due to the fact that the vast majority of sexual offenses are committed against individuals who are known to the victim, not unknown children targeted at schools and playgrounds (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004). In addition, since the baseline of sex offender recidivism is low, no intervention or policy change is likely to show impact (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; State Office of Policy & Management, 2012; Tewksbury et al., 2012). Furthermore, given the empirical data to date that shows no impact of specific policies like residency restrictions (Duwe, 2009; Duwe et al., 2008), it is reasonable to assume that the reduction or repeal in residency restrictions would be unlikely to result in any increase in risk of sexual offending against children. At the same time, repealing such restrictions is likely to increase housing and financial stability in the lives of children and families of registrants, thus facilitating desistance from future offending behavior.

### ***Reconsider school policies that exclude registrant parents***

No matter what state and local policy requires, experiences shared by our respondents indicated that schools must grapple with how to incorporate the children of registrants into the day-to-day aspects of school life, with minimal disruption to family dynamics. This involves navigating insurance policies and public opinion, as well as existing law. Inviting local experts to debunk myths about sexual offending and to empower communities to take preventive measures can enable better outcomes for all families. State and federal agencies could provide compilations of best practices.



### ***Support for religious and other community groups***

While not a predominant theme, our respondents mentioned religious communities that functioned as safe spaces, as well as those which banished families in their time of need. Each religious community or social group should be free to make the decisions that best serve their members; we do not mean to call for a one-size-fits all approach. But we do suggest that religious and other community organizational leadership grapple with how such groups can better weigh the risks and benefits of inclusion. At present, most decisions are made based on faulty assumptions about danger or by concerns about liability, often prompted by the insurance industry. As with schools, inviting local experts to debunk myths about sexual offending and to empower communities to take preventive measures can enable better outcomes for all families. There are a handful of groups to look to as mentors; for example, see the recent coverage of, *Light My Way*, a church in Oregon decried in the national news source, the *Daily Beast* (Kelly, 2015). The authors are aware of other such groups across the country, many of which function somewhat quietly to avoid controversy.

### ***Support registrant partners and parents***

Our research also supports a call for increased resources for partners and parents of registrants so that they can better manage the stigma and antagonism experienced as a result of their choice to stay with their registrant loved ones and raise their children with them. As we report in other work, several respondents shared stories of family members 'disowning them' or responding with negative and hurtful comments in regards to raising their children with a registrant, including family members stating that the children should be removed from the home and taken into protective custody (Leon & Kilmer, *in press*). This animosity is not unique to this group of women. Similar accounts of questioning the 'worthiness' of mothers to raise their children have been seen in research with women engaged in sex work (i.e. prostitution) or those who have been incarcerated (Toquinto, *in press*). Many of these women are demeaned by their friends and family, as well as neighbors and co-workers, resulting in harassment, social rejection, and feelings of isolation and shame.

Helping professionals such as psychologists, counselors, and religious leaders should be aware of the unique needs and issues faced by women who are partners of registrants and the support that they may need to face the stigma, negativity, and isolation they encounter. While some women reported incredible support from their family and their religious communities, others described being turned away by their church, shunned by their families, and feeling they had few if any other individuals in their lives whom they could be open with about their feelings and the issues they were encountering. Of these women, many stated that their primary form of support came from online groups consisting of other families in similar situations. But support through internet and social media outlets may not be able to take the place of in-person interactions and relationships.

A related concern of registrant families is the challenge of whether they should discuss the parent's offense and how and when that conversation should take place. Some parents described anxiety surrounding how readily available information is on the internet: a quick search of their parent's name may bring up information about their sex offense or information (or mis-information) provided by third party websites that aim to vilify registrants. Until parents decide to discuss their past with their children (or if they decide to do so), many families skirt around the issue by avoiding school sports or concerts, holiday parties, and

community festivals and events that children attend. Often, the registrant parent missed important milestones and achievements, leaving children confused as to why their parent was unable to attend their school play, soccer game, or take them trick-or-treating. Empirical examination of sex crime rates indicates that there is no empirical basis for heightened concerns around events like Halloween, and that it is in fact a diversion of police efforts that could produce tangible results elsewhere (Chaffin et al., 2009).

## Conclusion

If we truly wish to protect families, we must rethink not only the laws which limit registrants and their families, but also the underlying assumptions about the danger of sex offenders that leads landlords, employers, and neighbors to act beyond the scope of the laws in ways that undermine family dynamics and increase financial and emotional burdens. Resources used to continue to promote misperceptions of sex offending behavior and ineffective policies could be better funneled into support programs and resources for registrants with families who are trying to form healthy, positive memories and bonds with their children and move forward from their past offense history and lead productive lives.

## Notes

1. There is a strand of advocacy, discussed later in this paper, which actively promotes this terminology for much the same reasons. While sympathetic to some of this advocacy, especially as it promotes humanizing, our use of the term does not connote alignment with a particular agenda.
2. This study received approval from the University of Delaware Institutional Review Board; respondents gave informed consent prior to participation and provided pseudonyms. All other identifying information has been removed. When quoting, we use only the pseudonym and do not report race, age or other information, both because our sample does not allow for comparison across subgroups and because we wish to avoid enabling identification beyond that which our respondents have elected to allow. We believe that our respondents deserve the allocation of agency that choosing their own pseudonyms provide some of our sample is skewed towards activists who embrace public identities.
3. RSOL is a national advocacy group with several state branches throughout the United States. The second author has presented at their meetings on several occasions, and thus has developed trust with the leadership and the broader advocacy community, while maintaining independence (no honoraria have been accepted). RSOL Members primarily consist of registrants, family members, and allies who seek to reform or overturn overly punitive or inclusive sex offender policies at the local, state, and national level, while supporting laws and policy that are fact-based and promote 'public safety, safeguard civil liberties, honor human dignity, and offer holistic prevention, healing, and restoration' (nationalrsol.org).
4. We did not ask this directly, but we did ask about RSOL participation as well as involvement in policy advocacy of any kind. The majority of the sample had NOT attended an RSOL conference (42 of 58) but described themselves as involved in policy reform efforts (41 of 58).
5. Please contact the authors directly if interested in viewing the survey and interview protocols.
6. Respondents were asked to select their age range.
7. In keeping with qualitative analysis, we did not 'count' the usage of particular words by respondents, but rather analyzed their responses for both explicit and implicit meaning. This makes it difficult to report the percentages of our respondents who expressed particular themes. (We do so when possible. For example, we coded responses relating to shame and stigma more than 80 times across the respondents.) But each of the categories of themes reported here was salient in almost every respondent.

8. The percentages reported are the number of respondents who provided responses related to the themes identified out of the total number of respondents who provided responses to that particular prompt. Not all respondents provided responses to each question or prompt.

## Acknowledgement

This work would not have been possible without the support of our own family members: thank you to Kevin, Miles, Maggie and Robert. We are deeply grateful to the participants who shared so deeply from their own experiences. In addition, we offer thanks to the anonymous reviewers and editors for excellent feedback.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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