

What do victim/survivors think about 'sex offender registration and notification' policies? A qualitative examination

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Abstract

Sex offender registration and notification policies enjoy widespread public support, but little has been documented on victim/survivors' views about such measures. In particular, there is a dearth of qualitative research into victim/survivor views. However, victim/survivors of sexual violence are key stakeholders and hold unique knowledge about the efficacy of sex offender management policies. To address this gap, the research presented in this article captured qualitative data via semi-structured qualitative interviews ($n=26$) with Australian self-identified victim/survivors of sexual violence. The study is the first detailed, qualitative investigation into victim/survivors' views about sex offender registration and notification policies. Moreover, as research into victim/survivors often privileges the voices of women, the research presented here deliberately over-sampled male victim/survivors. The research documented that victim/survivor views about sex offender registration and notification are complex and diverse, with victim/survivors raising concerns about the ability of sex offender registration and notification policies to cause vigilantism, and to (contradictorily) create both panic and a false sense of security among the public. Where victim/survivors support sex offender registration and notification policies, they do so on predominantly utilitarian grounds, believing that sex offender registration and notification will equip the community to protect themselves. Policy implications of the study's findings are discussed.

Keywords

sex offender registration and notification, victim/survivors, victim/survivor views, sexual violence

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Introduction

Sex offender registers (also called ‘registries’) emerged in the United States in the 1990s following the high-profile sexual assaults and murders of young children. In 1994, the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act was passed into law and required each state to create and maintain a register of people with convictions for sexual offending (hereafter PCSOs; Terry and Ackerman, 2015). In 1996, the federal ‘Megan’s Law’ was introduced as an amendment to the Jacob Wetterling Act, requiring ‘community notification’ (i.e. public disclosure of the information contained in each state’s register; Calleja, 2016; Spoo et al., 2018).

‘Sex offender registration and notification’ (SORN) policies have proliferated and are now part of the criminal justice landscape in many countries (US Department of and Justice, 2016). However, Australian states and territories have mostly resisted the implementation of public PCSO registers. Each Australian state and territory has a *non-public* register to facilitate police investigation and management of PCSOs (Napier et al., 2018); only Western Australia and Queensland have semi-public PCSO registers. Western Australia was the first state to implement a semi-public register (Western Australia Government, 2025), via which residents can request limited information about individuals in their local area or with whom their child(ren) is in contact (Napier et al., 2018). In late 2025, Queensland introduced the Community Protection and Child Sex Offender Public Register (‘Daniel’s Law’) (Queensland Government, 2025), which established a public website listing the details and photographs of PCSOs who have not complied with their reporting obligations. The website also allows Queensland residents to apply for access to photographs of PCSOs who reside in their local area, and allows parents/guardians to apply to find out if someone who currently has or may have unsupervised contact with their child(ren) is a reportable offender (see <https://www.danielslaw.qld.gov.au/>).

SORN policies aim to enhance community safety by deterring PCSOs from reoffending (Duwe, 2015; Thomas, 2011) and equipping members of the public to protect themselves and their children from sexual violence (Duwe, 2015; Levenson et al., 2007). However, it has been well-documented that such policies are based on myths about sexual violence (Lussier and Mathesius, 2019) and do not prevent sexual reoffending (Levenson et al., 2007). A small number of early studies documented modest positive outcomes from SORN policies. For example, Prescott and Rockoff’s (2011) analysis found that community notification in the United States had a small deterrent effect on would-be sexual offenders (although these gains were offset by an increase in recidivism among PCSOs already subject to SORN). Duwe and Donnay’s (2008) Minnesota study found that community notification of high-risk PCSOs reduced sexual reoffending. However, a meta-analysis of the effects of SORN on 474,640 PCSOs found that such policies have no effect on sexual or non-sexual recidivism (Zgoba and Mitchell, 2023). In fact, evidence suggests that SORN may *increase* sexual recidivism; however, it is unclear whether this is a genuine increase due to the adverse impacts on PCSOs or merely a surveillance effect (Napier et al., 2018).

Public support for PCSO registers

Despite the lack of evidence of their efficacy, international studies show that public PCSO registers enjoy widespread community support (Craun et al., 2011; Sparks, 2019). Levenson et al.’s (2007) survey of 193 Florida residents found that 83% believed that community notification was effective in reducing sexual offences and critically, that 73% would continue to support PCSO policies even

in the absence of evidence that they work. Campbell and Newheiser (2019) measured their (mostly American) survey participants' (n=777) support for public PCSO registers before furnishing them with evidence that registers do not reduce sexual recidivism. Critically, they tailored this evidence to participants' stated reasons for supporting PCSO registers. While they found a modest decrease in support after exposing participants to tailored counterevidence about the efficacy of registers, overall public enthusiasm remained high. Campbell and Newheiser (2019) summarise that

[a]fter being presented with counterevidence showing that sex offender laws are empirical failures, people's attitudes towards these laws consistently became somewhat less positive, but rarely negative . . . people continued to agree with statements indicating that these laws are a 'good idea'. (p. 579)

Australian research, however, has produced more mixed findings. Taylor's (2017) online survey of 162 individuals who had accessed Western Australia's semi-public register found that these individuals were overwhelmingly in favour of the register. Puzzlingly, however, less than one-third (32%) agreed that the website protected children from PCSOs and just 14% agreed that it prevented child sexual abuse. Even more bewilderingly, despite these low levels of confidence in the efficacy of the register, nearly two-thirds of respondents (63%) agreed with the statement that '[h]aving information about the identity of convicted sex offenders allows me to be active in protecting the welfare of my children and the welfare of other children'.

Finally, Bartels et al.'s (2020) research found limited enthusiasm for public PCSO registers among the Australian public. They surveyed Australian empanelled jurors (n=337) and reported that only one-third supported information on PCSO registers being made available to the general public. While three-quarters supported access to information by carers of a child who has contact with a PCSO, this is lower than might be expected. Bartels et al. (2020) surmise that their participants 'appreciate[d] the potential problems with allowing open access of register information to the general public' (p. 571).

Victim/survivors' views

Research into victim/survivors'¹ views of SORN is piecemeal and has produced conflicting findings. A few studies (Koon-Magnin, 2015; Levenson et al., 2007, 2010) have found no significant differences in support for SORN policies between those respondents who were sexually abused as children and the general public, although Kernsmith et al. (2009) found that victim/survivors (or those who knew a victim/survivor) were more likely to access public registers than were other community members. Spoo et al.'s (2018) survey of 1173 American undergraduate students, of whom 129 (11%) identified as victim/survivors, found that victim/survivors were less supportive of community notification than the remainder of the sample (Spoo et al. 2018).

Socia et al. (2020) surveyed 384 North Carolina residents and found support from those with a 'victim focus' (i.e. direct victim/survivors, loved one of a victim/survivor or professional in a victim-oriented role such as rape counsellor) for 'containment-oriented' post-custodial measures such as community notification. While this appears to contradict Spoo et al.'s (2018) findings, Socia et al. (2020) caution that the 'victim focus' group supported such policies *relative to* a 'PCSO focus' group (i.e. PCSOs, loved ones of a PCSO, treatment professionals) rather than in isolation. More broadly, Craun et al. (2011) surveyed members of the public in Michigan (n=728) and identified that those who had experienced sexual violence (or knew someone who had) were more

likely than other members of the public to support the use of registers for other types of offending (e.g. violent offending) in addition to sexual offending.

Providing emerging insight into victim/survivors' reasons for supporting or opposing registers, Craun and Simmons (2012) conducted an online survey of 589 American victim/survivors, and found only lukewarm support for the notion that PCSO registers protect the public from sexual violence (p. 319). Only 39% agreed/strongly agreed with this statement, and the mean score on a 5-point scale was 3.1 – slightly above 'neither agree nor disagree'.

Taylor (2017) surveyed 162 Australians who had accessed Western Australia's semi-public register (discussed above). One-quarter of respondents identified as a victim/survivor of sexual violence (mostly child sexual abuse). Taylor (2017) found that slightly more than one-quarter (26%) of respondents who were abused as children thought that the register stigmatised PCSOs, compared with 17% of other respondents.² In addition, the survey found that one-third of respondents who had experienced child sexual abuse agreed that PCSOs have a right to anonymity, while just over half disagreed. Similarly, approximately one-third of respondents who had experienced child sexual abuse did not believe that the community has a right to know the identity of all PCSOs, while slightly over half indicated that they did believe this (Taylor, 2017).

Craun and Simmons (2012) also found that slightly more than two-thirds of victim/survivors agreed/strongly agreed that registers provide a false sense of security (see further Richards et al., 2025). Approximately 11% of their sample reported that the presence of a public register influenced their decision about whether to report their assault to the police. For about half of this 11%, the existence of a register persuaded them to report (since, for example, 'I don't want him to be allowed around other kids'); for the remaining half, it dissuaded them from doing so (because, for example, 'I could not bring myself to ruin his life that way'). Comments of this nature provide further insight into victim/survivors' varied rationales for supporting or opposing public registers.

Richards et al.'s (2023) qualitative interviews with 33 victim/survivors from Australia suggested that those victim/survivors who endorsed public registers mainly did so on consequentialist grounds (see also Death et al., 2025; Richards et al., 2025). In other words, victim/survivors' support 'typically did not stem from a desire for vengeance, but instead reflected pragmatic concerns about preventing future sexual harm. . . . [Registers were]. . . . seen as regrettably *necessary* for rather than *deserved* by this cohort of offenders' (Richards et al., 2023: 427; italics in original).

Victim/survivors (n=26) in Richards et al.'s subsequent qualitative study (Death et al., 2025; Richards et al., 2025) had mixed views about public PCSO registers. Some opposed registers on the grounds that victim/survivors might be identified or 'triggered', shamed or retraumatised by the release of information about PCSOs. Victim/survivors also raised concerns about vigilantes targeting registered PCSOs and the impacts on PCSOs' reintegration prospects. Some victim/survivors thus proposed limiting registers to specific groups (e.g. repeat or high-risk PCSOs) or modified registers that reveal only limited information about PCSOs (Richards et al., 2025).

To summarise, the melange of findings from these studies overall indicates that, while victim/survivors may be about as supportive or somewhat less supportive of SORN policies than the general public, they are more supportive of SORN than are PCSOs and PCSO supporters/support professionals. Victim/survivors' overall tepid support for SORN – including their concerns about the shaming effects on both PCSOs and victim/survivors, and concerns about SORN policies creating a false sense of security – likely stem from the fact that victim/survivors have more comprehensive knowledge about PCSOs than other members of the public (Harper et al., 2017).

Against this backdrop, this research investigated victim/survivor views about SORN policies via a qualitative study. This is an important area of inquiry since victim/survivors are increasingly recognised as ‘experts-by-experience’ (Domestic Violence Victoria, 2020) and may possess unique knowledge about perpetrator intervention measures (McGinn et al., 2016).

Conceptual orientation

Four primary conceptual perspectives are relevant to understanding victim/survivor views about PCSO registers: equity theory; belief in redeemability; motivations towards punishment; and crime control theatre. These are briefly introduced in this section.

The foundational premise of *equity theory* is that experiencing victimisation leaves victim/survivors in a disadvantaged position in comparison to the perpetrator and therefore that victim/survivors’ sense of inequity can be rectified by either enhancing their outcome (e.g. receiving restitution) or diminishing the perpetrator’s outcome (e.g. through punishment; Kelln and Ellard, 1999). Accordingly, victim/survivors who perceive their perpetrator to have received an adequate sentence – to have experienced ‘compensatory suffering’ (Tamarit Sumalla and Hernández-Hidalgo, 2018: 18) – often feel that justice has been achieved and therefore suffer less distress (Tontodonato and Erez, 1994).

The *belief in redeemability* perspective (Maruna and King, 2009) contends that individuals’ levels of punitiveness are premised on their beliefs about the capacity of perpetrators to change. While some individuals believe that criminality is ‘fixed’, others believe that perpetrators can change their ways (Maruna and King, 2009). This perspective is highly salient given that many members of the public (Thakker, 2012) believe that PCSOs are incapable of change. Belief in redeemability has been found to be a stronger predictor of punitiveness and views about perpetrator post-custodial interventions than demographics or experience of victimisation (Ouellette et al., 2017).

Penal philosophy distinguishes individuals’ *motivations to punish* into two categories: utilitarian (consequentialist) and deontological (non-consequentialist; Orth, 2003). Utilitarian motivations reflect a concern with what might be gained in practical terms (e.g. deterring others; von Hirsch, 2017). For utilitarians, punishment is only justifiable on the grounds that it will give rise to some future good (Duff, 2003). By contrast, deontological motivations are informed by the belief that societies have a moral duty to punish transgressors (Sparks, 2019); deontological motivations are fundamentally retributive and assert that perpetrators simply deserve punishment (Duff, 2003; Sparks, 2019). Recent studies have suggested that victim/survivors of gendered violence often express support for punitive responses to perpetrators to meet utilitarian ends rather than out of a desire for revenge (McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019).

Finally, *Crime Control Theatre* refers to ‘a public response . . . to crime which generate[s] the appearance, but not the fact, of crime control’ – to crime control strategies that are ‘emotionally appealing but empirically questionable’ (Griffin and Miller, 2008: 160). Griffin and Miller (2008) introduced this concept to make sense of the America’s Missing Broadcast Emergency Response (AMBER) Alert system, which ‘accomplishes little . . . [but] . . . enables public officials to dramatically and visibly demonstrate their commitment to child welfare’ (p. 160). DeVault et al. (2016) argue that to be deemed crime control theatre, policies should meet four criteria: (1) arise from widespread fear about a crime type, often stoked by media coverage about a particularly serious (and usually atypical) incident; (2) enjoy unwavering support from legislators and be presented

to the public as commonsense solutions; (3) be informed by myths and/or stereotypes; and (4) be an abject empirical failure. As Campbell and Newheiser (2019) claim, therefore, PCSO registers are an obvious example of crime control theatre.

Study design

The study, which was approved by the Queensland University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval #3906), collected qualitative data from Australian victim/survivors via semi-structured interviews. Individuals were eligible to participate in an interview if they: (1) self-identified as a victim/survivor of sexual violence; (2) were aged 15 years or over;³ and (3) currently resided in Australia.

Sixteen interviews were undertaken one-on-one with individual participants (by telephone or in-person depending on the participant's preference). Two group interviews were also conducted (with $n=4$ and $n=6$ victim/survivors, respectively; in-person only).⁴ Interviews lasted on average just over 1 hour. They were semi-structured, designed to obtain rich qualitative data and were recorded with participants' consent. Participants were asked questions designed to elucidate their support (or lack thereof) for a range of post-custodial interventions for PCSOs. Interview questions were open-ended to allow participants the flexibility to raise matters of importance to them (Herron, 2023). For example, participants were asked: 'Are you supportive of perpetrators being listed on a non-public sex offender register when they are released from prison? Why/why not?' and 'Are you supportive of the local community being notified when a perpetrator is released? Why/why not?' PCSO registration was defined as follows: 'Registration requires offenders to give identifying information (e.g. their address and employer) to the police so that the police can monitor their movements; that information is not available to the public'. Community notification was defined as follows: 'Community notification makes information on an offender register (e.g. their name, their postcode⁵ and their photo) available to the public (e.g. on the internet)'. The provision of these definitions was designed to ensure that participants were discussing the same crime control measure (for more details about the methodology, see Richards et al., 2025).

Participant recruitment

Interview participants were recruited in two ways: (1) via an online survey measuring victim/survivors' views about a range of post-custodial measures for PCSOs (see further Richards et al., 2025); or (2) through social media advertisements and project partner organisations disseminating information about the research to their clients and networks. This latter approach has been adopted in past research with victim/survivors (e.g. Rackley et al., 2021) to address the difficulty associated with recruiting this hard-to-reach population. This was especially important in the current study as most prior research on this topic has failed to recruit male victim/survivors, who are particularly difficult to reach (Weare and Hulley, 2023). Avoiding this pitfall was thus paramount in the current project.

Data coding and analysis

Qualitative data from the interviews were imported into qualitative analysis software NVIVO 14. To facilitate familiarisation with the data, an immersive process of reading and rereading the data (Liamputtong, 2009) was undertaken. Coding was primarily deductive; excerpts of the qualitative

material were coded for their relevance to each of the four conceptual frameworks canvassed above. However, coding was undertaken flexibly, allowing for the inductive identification of patterns or ideas not germane to these conceptual perspectives (Nowell et al., 2017). Coding was undertaken in two steps. First, the entire qualitative dataset was broken up into ‘chunks of data’ (Liamputtong, 2009: 134) with each ascribed a label. Second, the codes were reviewed and those with overlapping content were combined or disentangled (or eliminated) as necessary; conceptual links between codes were also considered (Liamputtong, 2009).

A reflexive thematic analysis was then conducted; this involved drawing out ‘common threads’ in the qualitative data (Vaismoradi et al., 2013: 400). Themes were understood as ‘patterns of shared meaning underpinned or united by a core concept’ (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 593) and are thus distinct from topics or domains within the data. Nonetheless, the analytic approach involved paying attention to ‘disconfirming evidence’ (Creswell and Miller, 2000) by acknowledging instances in which victim/survivors’ views contradicted those of their peers. The overarching aim of reflexive thematic analysis is to tell ‘the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the validity and merit of your analysis’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 93). As qualitative research, the goal was to provide an insight into the nature of victim/survivors’ support for or opposition to SORN; given the multifaceted and complex underpinnings of their views – and the small sample size – victim/survivor views have not been measured quantitatively.

Sample characteristics

In all, 7 women and 19 men (including 1 trans* man) participated in an interview (total $n=26$). The average age was 51 years ($R=29\text{--}73$ years). All participants who were comfortable sharing their cultural identity were non-Indigenous, except one participant who identified as Māori.

Almost all interviewees had experienced child sexual abuse; one had been raped as an adult, and three had experienced sexual violence as both children and adults. Most reported male perpetrators (including fathers/father figures, intimate partners, teachers, church leaders, other family members and family friends, peers and less commonly, strangers). Only two interviewees reported female perpetrators. Participants have been given pseudonyms in this article to protect their identity (for further details about the ethical conduct of the study, see Richards et al., 2025).

Results

Better the devil you know? Victim/survivors’ mostly utilitarian support for SORN policies

Where victim/survivors endorsed SORN, they did so on overwhelmingly utilitarian grounds (see also Richards et al., 2023, 2025). While a handful of participants oscillated between utilitarian and deontological reasoning, very few expressed support for SORN policies solely or unequivocally on deontological grounds (see further Richards et al., 2025). While one interviewee who endorsed SORN referred to the Old Testament maxim, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’, even that remark was accompanied by utilitarian concern: ‘I don’t want to see another kid [harmed]’ (Dylan). Mostly, however, participants articulated their support in highly utilitarian terms. A few even appealed to the evidence base about SORN. One interviewee’s immediate response to the researcher’s question about their support for SORN was: ‘Does it work? That’s

my first question. If it does [work] and does [work] correctly then yes, we should have that' (Lisa). Another immediately matched the interview question with the query: 'To what end? What advantage would that serve?' (Owen), again highlighting the utilitarian nature of victim/survivors' deliberations about SORN.

A related point that demonstrates victim/survivors' mostly utilitarian perspectives about SORN is that among those in favour, many proposed only very limited information being publicly disseminated. Jayden, for example, was in favour of SORN since 'information is paramount' but nonetheless stated that 'people have said that [home] addresses should be provided and stuff like that as well. I think that's going a bit far'. Along similar lines, Vanessa advocated for 'the police releasing a statement on social media, potentially not naming the person, but maybe the street. Maybe not going into absolute infinite detail'. Other participants queried the utility of detailed information about PCSOs being broadcast: 'If I get an alert on my phone that says a sex offender has been released near where you live, what am I going to do with that information?' (Simon). These remarks underscore the utilitarian flavour of victim/survivors' endorsement of SORN policies; if deontological thinking (such as wanting to shame or punish PCSOs) underpinned victim/survivors' endorsement of SORN, these concerns about utility would be irrelevant.

Critically, for the most part, victim/survivors overwhelmingly did not appear to think that SORN would influence PCSOs' behaviour. Instead, they depicted public registers as equipping community members with the knowledge to enact preventive strategies to protect themselves and their children, thereby tacitly negating SORN as crime control theatre. To this end, the imagined targets of SORN are not PCSOs themselves, but the public (especially parents), including potential victim/survivors. Simon's comment above – 'what am I going to do with that information?' – is instructive in this regard. Other participants in the study similarly positioned members of the public, rather than PCSOs, as the subjects on which SORN policies act:

I think just [public registers are important] so people are more wary of this happening . . . if you have a family and young children and just would like to know that kind of information. (Jessica)

I think it's good for the community to know who's in their community and they can make decisions around where they do or don't live or where they do or don't take their children. (Jasmine)

I think you should know. I think it's fair for people to know. To be like, 'okay, a sex offender lives on my street'. That's fair. You can take steps. (Hunter)

Positioning members of the public as the targets of SORN again underscores victim/survivors' utilitarian reasoning; if deontological logic was adopted instead, PCSOs would be the subjects on which SORN acts.

Understanding SORN in these terms may help explain Taylor's (2017) confounding finding, discussed above. To recap, Taylor (2017) found that while less than one-third of those who had accessed Western Australia's register thought that it protected children from PCSOs, nearly two-thirds thought that it would enable them to protect their children. Taken together with the above finding, this may suggest that victim/survivors believe that they individually can implement the information they obtain from the website but that collectively, others cannot (or will not). This is consistent with Kernsmith et al.'s (2009) finding, discussed above, that victim/survivors were more likely to access public registers than other members of the public.

Implicit here is the depiction of PCSOs as irredeemable. If victim/survivors believed PCSOs were capable of reform, they would not need information about PCSOs to inform protective strategies. Accordingly, in victim/survivors' understanding, PCSOs may be destined to reoffend – but not against those equipped with knowledge about them. This may again render Taylor's (2017) puzzling findings sensible; victim/survivors may (implicitly, perhaps even unconsciously) believe that while registered PCSOs will inevitably reoffend (informing lack of belief in the efficacy of the register), such reoffending will not be against *their own children* (informing the belief that the register will help them protect their children). That said, in the current study, victim/survivors' lack of belief in redeemability was by no means monolithic, with some supporting second chances at least for some cohorts of PCSOs (typically, those who have demonstrated remorse): 'Is he fully remorseful, or rehabilitated'? (Joel). In victim/survivors' views, some PCSOs may be redeemable, but those (who should be) subject to SORN (repeat, serious, remorseless PCSOs and/or those with child victims) are not: 'maybe there is some kind of scale for it depending on the severity and how many times they've done whatever [offence]' (Jessica). This allows some victim/survivors to both maintain a belief in redeemability and champion SORN policies on the grounds that such policies equip members of the public to avoid being victimised by registered PCSOs, despite this appearing contradictory on the surface.

Also implicit in victim/survivors' support for SORN policies on utilitarian grounds is the underpinning belief that sexual offending is rare. Victim/survivors' enthusiasm for knowing whether there is a PCSO living in their neighbourhood suggests a belief in neighbourhoods with no PCSOs present (see Kernsmith et al., 2009). Given the high rate of sexual offending in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023), this is very unlikely to be the case. Even if there are no convicted and registered perpetrators of sexual violence residing in a particular neighbourhood, there is almost certainly one or more undetected or unconvicted perpetrators who would not appear on a public register. While victim/survivors held concerns about SORN policies creating a false sense of security among other members of the public (discussed further below), it appears that this may also befall some victim/survivors.

Victim/survivor views about SORN policies and Belief in a Just World

'Belief in a Just World' (BJW) reasoning may also be implicated in these victim/survivor narratives. BJW, developed by Lerner (1971), refers to individuals' tendency to make sense of injustice by believing that people 'get what they deserve and deserve what they get' (Lipkus, 1991). BJW acts as a psychological defence mechanism, allowing individuals to perceive the world as fair and predictable, and thus to maintain the illusion that adversities such as criminal victimisation will not befall them. Victim-blaming is a key technique that individuals adopt to maintain a sense of control over their fate and their belief in a safe, predictable world (Mancini and Pickett, 2017). As Fetchenhauer et al. (2005) explain, victim/survivors of sexual violence may adopt self-blaming beliefs in an effort to maintain BJW (see also Draucker, 2001). While this appears counterintuitive, self-blame enhances victim/survivors' feeling of control and the perception that their personal preventive strategies will enable them to elude future harm (Fetchenhauer et al., 2005: 27).

Victim/survivor comments such as 'I need to know that my neighbour is a paedophile' (Amity), 'If there was a sex offender living in my building, I would want to know' (Hunter), and 'I would . . . want to know if I'm living in an area that's full of like sexual offenders' (Jessica) could reflect

a belief that if the victim/survivor (or their caregivers) had been better informed, their victimisation could have been avoided. Tellingly, Marcus' espousal of SORN stemmed from his belief that '[p]eople these days probably do make their kids aware of what could happen, whereas, when I was a kid, you didn't know'. Participants' adherence to the belief that SORN policies would enable them to thwart PCSOs illuminates victim/survivors' desire for control and the ability to implement self-protective behaviours (see further Draucker, 2001); this may act as a psychological defence mechanism in BJW terms. While BJW was not a conceptual framework that informed the current study, this suggests that BJW may nonetheless be a fruitful topic for future research to investigate.

Dangerous knowledge: Will SORN information help or harm the public?

Despite some enthusiasm for SORN on the grounds that these policies will equip them with the knowledge to prevent harm, victim/survivors expressed apprehension about the impacts of this knowledge on the general public. Further complicating matters, victim/survivors held contradictory concerns in this regard, fearing that such knowledge would create a false sense of security, and/or cause insupportable public panic. In relation to the former, Liz averred that 'people would be thinking "we're safe now because we know about those guys"' and Matthew likewise noted that 'you only hear [about] the convicted ones . . . I don't know how many percentage are not on those offenders lists' (see also Craun and Simmons, 2012). More commonly, however, victim/survivors worried about the latter (i.e. causing public panic), claiming that SORN policies would make 'everyone way more anxious' (Simon). They argued:

The trouble is some people panic about things for no reason, or they get their knickers in a twist . . . There will always be an element of the community that immediately panics or gets very upset. (Marcus)

I think we've also got to address the consequences of people becoming or being made aware, a community being made aware . . . they have this massive reaction to . . . the term 'sexual offender'. (Lisa)

I think most people are pretty Pollyanna-ish⁶ about the whole thing really and really don't want to think about the possibility of a paedophile living in their street. (Jaclyn)

[T]here'd be outrage. People would be going, 'well, where, what number, how, where, what's his name?' (Vanessa)

A belief in the utility *for themselves* of publicly-accessible information about PCSOs but concern about the impact of this information *on others* suggests that victim/survivors see themselves as 'experts-by-experience' and others as comparatively oblivious. Research by Kernsmith et al. (2009) suggests they may be correct; Kernsmith et al. (2009) found that while 99.5% of their American survey participants lived in a zip code in which one or more registered PCSOs was present, only 27% believed this to be the case. Consider also Jayden's remark in this regard:

I think it could incite a little bit of fear amongst the community as well, which could be problematic . . . Because it's tough, the community thinking that they're living amongst the worst of us. That is scary, but also *it's a certain privilege to be able to think that and there's a certain arrogance and naivety to that as well.* (italics added)

Here, Jayden positions victim/survivors as inured to the problem of sexual violence, while casting other community members as naïve in contrast. Jaclyn put this far more bluntly in explaining her opposition to SORN: ‘I don’t think it should be made available to the general public, because I think they’re stupid’. In victim/survivors’ narratives, non-victim/survivors are cast as ‘muggles’ – ‘a person who does not have a particular type of skill or knowledge’ (*Cambridge Dictionary*) – to adopt *Harry Potter* terminology. Victim/survivor participants appeared to believe that ordinary members of the public would have difficulty coping with the level of knowledge that they themselves possess about sexual offending – that ‘ignorance is bliss’ to quote the well-worn phrase. This may imply that victim/survivors yearn for the time when they themselves were innocent ‘muggles’ and lacked awareness of the problem of sexual violence and its impacts; however, this would require further research to confirm.

Draucker’s (2001) research found that victim/survivors often wanted to pass on to other women their knowledge about the dangers of the ‘real world’ and expressed frustration when others were reluctant to hear their message (p. 78). This appears at odds with the finding that victim/survivors held significant concerns about how non-victim/survivors would react to information disseminated via SORN. However, there are some key differences between Draucker’s study and the current one that may help elucidate victim/survivors’ complex perspectives about the merits of informing others. First, women in Draucker’s (2001) study described alerting family and peers about sexual violence, rather than the general public, reflecting a preference for more targeted dissemination of information than SORN policies would allow. Draucker’s (2001) participants also described circulating information of a general nature (that sexual violence is a threat) rather than the more specific detail about individual PCSOs that would be publicised through SORN policies. The current finding in this regard may thus support rather than contradict Draucker’s (2001) finding.

An eye for an eye, and the whole world goes blind? Victim/survivor concerns about vigilantism

Victim/survivors very frequently argued against SORN policies on the grounds that they would incite vigilante behaviour by members of the public. Indeed, this was the most common argument expressed in opposition to SORN. In some cases, victim/survivors’ opposition centred on the potential for offences they do not deem ‘real’ crimes to be included in SORN policies, creating the potential for those who are not ‘real’ PCSOs to be the targets of vigilantism. For example, a few held concerns about people with convictions for ‘Romeo and Juliet’ offences (i.e. criminalised but normative sexual activity between similar-aged consenting teenagers (Bierie and Budd, 2018) or public urination being included on public registers:

My understanding is that the reason we don’t have those registers is vigilantism, so there’s concern that someone will knock on the door and shoot the guy. There were cases such as in the States where, for example, someone did that because this guy was on a sex offender registry. It turned out he had been 18 and had sex with a 17-year-old. So, you know, stuff like that would happen. (Troy)

[I]n the US where it’s all out of control, my understanding is that there’s people on the registry who are drunk and urinated in public. (Simon)

Strikingly, however, most victim/survivors who opposed SORN policies due to concerns about vigilantism were opposed to vigilante action against *any* registered PCSO – ‘real’ or otherwise. Jayden, for instance, commented that ‘that could incite people to turn up and be vigilantes in their own right. I don’t think that’s appropriate’ and Paul similarly stated that ‘I think there is a bit of a – a little bit of risk there that . . . vigilantes can go and do things which they shouldn’t do and take the law into their own hands’. Consider also the following interview excerpts:

I’d like to know where they are, but there’s a lot of idiots in the world and those idiots would cause more harm than good. I think that could have a detrimental effect on protecting children . . . You’d get people wanting to be vigilantes and wanting to do something about it. (Vince)

[T]here’d be a flurry of vigilante action. What is that going to achieve? . . . [T]here’s a whole other cycle of retribution initiated. It’s terrible. (Rick)

I think that could cause issues around mob mentality . . . [We would have to consider] whether or not people would knock on their doors with pitchforks and torches and take them out with mob justice. (Jasmine)

[A]s soon as a sex offender [is] in my town, someone knows they’re there, and someone that’s in prison that was in there before knows that they’re a sex offender, before you know it, you’ve got an assault, 100 per cent. (Jai)

Crucially, while a few of the victim/survivor participants mentioned fantasising about vigilante action against PCSOs, sometimes apparently in jest, they differentiated between that fantasy and their support for utilitarian policies:

[T]here will be an element of the community that will look them up, and that will be their joy for the weekend is to go out and make sure these people don’t see Monday morning. If you know what I mean? So, I mean, I’d be all for that, that they don’t see Monday morning, but in this day and age, you can’t do it, can you? (Marcus)

One part of me is the loving part of me, which is going to say, ‘if the poor fellow is not going to [re]offend then this is on a public website and you’ve got some aggressive idiots out there, they might just go and take their lives’. But by the same token, that’s death penalty, thank you very much, done. But by the same token I want the child to be safe. The thing though is, if we put their name and address on a public register it’s good in a way, but then society – I don’t know how to answer this one. Because I really want to protect the child, but I can see how society is – the guy is not going to have a life . . . What life are they going to have? (Amity)

These comments illustrate the highly complex nature of victim/survivors’ views about policy responses to PCSOs and their ability to hold two opposing views simultaneously. Importantly, they also underscore that victim/survivors can and do differentiate between understandably vengeful impulses and their rational views about appropriate criminal justice policy.

Such strong opposition to vigilantism against PCSOs is curious in light of the ‘vengeful victim’ (Herman, 2005) trope. One might expect highly vengeful victim/survivors to support SORN – at least for ‘real’ PCSOs,⁷ and especially given that victim/survivors often feel that PCSOs do not receive adequate punishment (Richards et al., 2023). Instead, victim/survivors’ narratives imply a sense that further violence and harm via vigilantism would merely cause more suffering in the

world, in line with the maxim ‘an eye for an eye, and the whole world goes blind’. One might speculate that victim/survivors’ reluctance to create further harm reflects a type of ‘harm fatigue’. Alternatively (or additionally), it may reflect a commitment to the rule of law and to justice and fairness, even though (or perhaps because) they themselves have mostly been denied this. Again, this would require further research to elucidate.

Discussion and conclusion

Theoretically, while victim/survivors’ views about SORN were highly diverse – ‘kaleidoscopic’ to adopt McGlynn and Westmarland’s (2019) terminology – they were aligned with predominantly utilitarian logic. It is noteworthy that victim/survivors’ narratives were rarely embedded in either deontological reasoning or the allied conceptual lens of equity theory. Stronger alignment with equity theory was anticipated here, given that not only would SORN policies reduce PCSO outcomes (by inflicting ongoing shame and stigma), they would conceivably enhance victim/survivor outcomes (through unequivocal public messaging that the perpetrator is blameworthy). Given the common belief among victim/survivors that punishment for PCSOs is rarely adequately reflective of the severity of the offending and its impacts (Richards et al., 2023), a stronger affinity between equity theory and endorsement of SORN might have been expected. One explanation for this is that appeals to utilitarianism rather than to deontology and/or equity theory may be strategically oriented. Victim/survivors may believe (perhaps even unconsciously) that support for SORN on utilitarian grounds will be more palatable in public discourse and thus more influential on government policy than support expressed in emotive, vengeful terms.

Implicit in victim/survivors’ endorsement of SORN policies on mostly utilitarian grounds is a repudiation of SORN as crime control theatre. While a handful of victim/survivors’ comments (e.g. those suggesting that SORN policies will create a false sense of security) were consonant with the crime control theatre perspective, these were overwhelmed by the plethora of comments espousing SORN on utilitarian grounds. Thus, while SORN policies are widely regarded as crime control theatre by researchers (Bartels et al., 2020; Campbell and Newheiser, 2019), this study suggests that victim/survivors do not primarily or uniformly view them as such.

These findings may help illuminate a key paradox documented in previous research: that support for SORN exists even when research participants are aware that they are ineffective at preventing recidivism (Campbell and Newheiser, 2019; Levenson et al., 2007). An obvious explanation for this paradox is that individuals support SORN policies on deontological grounds; that is, because PCSOs simply deserve to be subject to SORN. The practical efficacy of such policies is rendered irrelevant if one adheres to deontological reasoning. This study suggests an alternative (or added) explanation: individuals (in the case of this research, victim/survivors) may believe that while SORN policies will equip them with the requisite knowledge to protect themselves and their children, others cannot or will not elicit and enact this knowledge. SORN policies could therefore be effective in a very targeted, individualised way without being effective in a more general sense. A less optimistic reading would suggest that while individuals believe that SORN will not prevent PCSOs from reoffending (consistent with a lack of belief in redeemability), they may produce a crime displacement effect – that is, PCSOs will inevitably reoffend, but *not against the individual’s own self or their children*.

As noted above, the findings challenge what Herman (2005) labelled the ‘myth of the vengeful victim’. However, it should be emphasised that this does not mean that no victim/survivors hold

vengeful views or that no victim/survivors hold policy preferences based on deontological reasoning. Rather, it means that it is a myth that victim/survivors hold monolithically or uniformly vengeful views, and/or that victim/survivors hold views that are categorically more vengeful than those of other community members (see also Brown, 1999; Comartin et al., 2009; Harper et al., 2017; Sahlstrom and Jeglic, 2008). Collectively, victim/survivors' views about SORN policies were diverse, complex and nuanced, and there was both within-person and between-person variance. Indeed, in some cases, individual victim/survivors appeared to hold self-contradictory views, sometimes oscillating between support for and resistance towards SORN. Participants averred being in 'two minds' (Lucas) and feeling 'torn' (Owen) about SORN, for example.

Policy implications

SORN policies are often enacted in the names of victims – sometimes literally, as in the case of the *Jacob Wetterling Act*, *Megan's Law*, and Queensland's newly-established *Daniel's Law*. This gives the impression that such policies respond to what victim/survivors want. However, as the literature review presented above illustrates, very little research has sought victim/survivor views about sex offender policies generally and SORN policies specifically. Research into victim/survivor views about SORN is patchy and embryonic at best. This suggests that SORN policies enacted in the names of victims reflect what governments think victim/survivors want, or perhaps even what governments think other members of the voting public think victim/survivors want. It is important to note here that the heinous crimes that gave rise to these pieces of 'memorialisation' legislation (Zgoba, 2017) are the most extreme examples of sexual violence in which children are abducted, sexually assaulted and murdered by strangers. Most victim/survivors have of course experienced less extreme sexual victimisation usually perpetrated by a person known to them. It follows then that the views of most victim/survivors may vary from those of the families involved in these extreme cases. In reality, victim/survivors' views are complicated and multifaceted in ways that government policies currently neglect to consider.

Collectively, the research presented above suggests that victim/survivors are less enthusiastic about SORN policies than governments allow. At a minimum, the findings outlined above require that where governments insist on public registers, serious thought should be given to how vigilantism and public distress are to be minimised. Furthermore, victim/survivors supportive of SORN were mostly in favour of the very careful release of limited information about PCSOs. Taken together, their views suggest that in place of information being released about individual PCSOs, governments might instead consider evidence-based community messaging about the dangers of sexual violence generally. Such messaging could, for example, focus on the prevalence of sexual violence, and the fact that most perpetrators are undetected. Providing this education to the community would meet victim/survivors' desire to equip the public to 'take steps' (in Hunter's words) to avoid victimisation while addressing their concerns about vigilantism and stoking public panic, but (paradoxically) creating a false sense of security.

Limitations and future research directions

As cross-sectional research, this study collected data at a specific point in time; however, victim/survivors' views about PCSO policies may change over time (see generally McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019). Shifts in victim/survivors' perspectives may arise from a wide range of

factors including advancing age and maturity, temporal distance from the offending, the effects of therapeutic interventions, and enhanced knowledge of sexual offending, among many others. One of the study's interviewees explicitly acknowledged that his stance against SORN policies had only recently been arrived at: 'I would tend to agree [that public registers are a bad idea]. A year ago, I didn't' (Paul). Longitudinal research would be required to document shifts in victim/survivor views over time.

Much of the existing research on victim/survivor views captures the views of white women, with very little or no attention paid to diverse groups of victim/survivors such as males, young people, First Nations people and culturally and/or linguistically diverse people. However, such groups are likely to have vastly different views from white women; for example, McGlade (2012) discusses the unsuitability of Western feminist models for responding to child sexual abuse in Australian Aboriginal contexts. Future research could thus consider the views of diverse groups of victim/survivors.

The research presented above is one of only a handful of studies that have recruited a substantial number of male victim/survivors (see also Spoo et al., 2018). While research indicates that men are generally more punitive than women (Dodd, 2018), male victim/survivors take far longer than their female counterparts to disclose sexual abuse (O'Leary and Barber, 2008). As an artefact of over-sampling male victim/survivors, therefore, most interviewees in the current study had experienced sexual abuse many years ago, and in some cases, decades ago. A sample of more recently victimised participants may hold different views; such views may be more punitive in orientation as a result of the proximity of the victimisation experience. Again, however, further research would be required to confirm this. In addition, males far more commonly experience sexual violence as children than as adults. By contrast, sexual violence against females occurs across the life course. Over-sampling males thus meant that the majority of participants had been abused as children rather than as adults (as discussed above). Readers should note that victim/survivors of child sexual abuse may hold different views than those who experience sexual violence as adults.

As noted earlier, the speculative concept of 'harm fatigue' experienced by victim/survivors would benefit from further research, as would the contention that victim/survivors' views about SORN policies are underpinned by the BJW reasoning.

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Ethics considerations

The Queensland University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee approved the research (Approval: #3906) on 26 July 2021.

Consent to participate

Interviewees provided verbal consent to participate.

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Notes

1. The term 'victim' has largely been replaced by either 'victim/survivor' or simply 'survivor'. The former has been adopted throughout this article.
2. It appears that for the most part, participants in Taylor's (2017) study viewed stigmatisation as negatively affecting the people with convictions for sexual offending (PCSO) and the broader community.
3. Young victim/survivors of sexual violence are usually excluded from research but may have unique perspectives that could shape policy and practice. As such, ethical approval was obtained to recruit those aged 15 years and above. However, no minors were able to be recruited, and all participants were ultimately aged 18 years and above.
4. Participants in the group interviews were cautioned at the outset about the importance of maintaining one another's confidentiality.
5. Referred to as a 'zip code' in the United States.
6. That is, they tend to focus more on pleasant than unpleasant possibilities.
7. This was the case for one victim/survivor in support of SORN, who proposed a strategy to ensure that any vigilante activity only targeted 'real' PCSOs:

The registry . . . would need to be specific about what the crime was, all the circumstances would just need to be made public The issue with vigilantism and mistaken cases. . . can easily be remedied by simply listing all details of the crimes. (Troy)

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