



LAW ENFORCEMENT PERSPECTIVES ON SEX OFFENDER REGISTRATION AND NOTIFICATION

PRELIMINARY SURVEY RESULTS

August 2015

Principal Investigator

Andrew J. Harris
University of Massachusetts Lowell

Co-Investigators

Chris Lobanov-Rostovsky
Colorado Department of Public Safety
Division of Criminal Justice

Jill S. Levenson
Barry University

This project is supported by Award No. 2013-IJ-CX-0028, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

Suggested citation:

Harris, A., Lobanov-Rostovsky, C., and Levenson, J. (2015). *Law Enforcement Perspectives on Sex Offender Registration and Notification: Preliminary Survey Results*. Lowell, MA: University of Massachusetts Lowell.

This document is a research report submitted to the U.S. Department of Justice. This report has not been published by the Department. Opinions or points of view expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.



ABOUT THIS SURVEY

This survey, administered online in the spring of 2015, represents the second part of a two-phase national study to elicit law enforcement perspectives on the functions, utility, and operation of sex offender registration and notification systems in the United States. The study's first phase featured a series of semi-structured interviews conducted in 2014 with 105 law enforcement professionals in five states and two tribal jurisdictions. Items for this survey were developed based on themes, experiences, and perspectives emerging from those interviews.

The survey was administered through the services of Campbell Rinker, a marketing research and survey firm. Participants were invited to complete the survey via targeted email outreach, using a nationwide commercial list of 8,840 police chiefs and command staff and a list of 2,921 county sheriffs obtained from the National Sheriffs Association. Following initial outreach, prospective respondents were contacted through three waves of follow-up. The survey was open for five weeks between April and May of 2015.

The transmittal email included details on the survey scope and purpose, and a link to the survey. Respondents were informed that the survey was intended for completion by agency leadership (e.g., police chiefs, sheriffs), personnel involved in sex offender registration and management, and specialized personnel involved in sex crime investigations. The survey items presented to each respondent varied, with piping logic based on stated agency functions, respondent roles, and jurisdictional characteristics.

For further information about this study, please contact Principal Investigator Andrew Harris (Andrew_harris@uml.edu) or project manager Melissa Wall (Melissa_Wall@uml.edu)

Acknowledgments

The investigators extend thanks to Melissa Wall, for her efficient project management; Scott Walfield for his work organizing, analyzing, and presenting the survey data; Helen Ricci, for her work on the Phase 1 interviews that informed the development of this survey; and Michelle Cubellis and Qurat Ann for their ongoing assistance with the project. Special thanks are also due to Jennifer Spencer of Campbell Rinker for her able management of the survey administration process.

Notes & Disclaimers

This project is supported by Award No. 2013-IJ-CX-0028, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

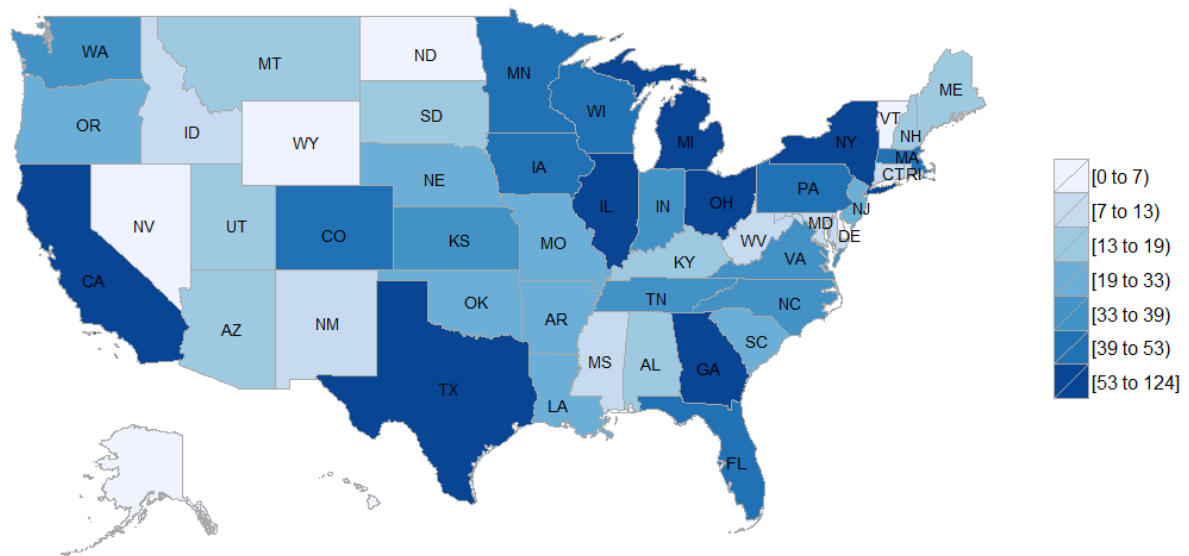
The findings and opinions expressed in this manuscript reflect solely the views of the authors and are in no way endorsed by the Colorado Department of Public Safety and do not represent government policy or views.

STUDY SAMPLE

Excluding “bounce backs” and invalid addresses, the survey was distributed to 9,472 email addresses. 1,485 respondents consented to participate and proceeded to the survey, for a response rate of 15.7%. Of these, 1,247 respondents completed the final battery of survey items. As noted in Figure 1, the final sample included representation from 49 states (all states with the exception of Hawaii), and from the District of Columbia.

59.7% of the sample came from local police departments and 39.6% from county sheriffs. A limited number of respondents represented other types of agencies including state law enforcement agencies. Respondents were fairly evenly divided among senior agency command staff (34.9% of the sample), line-level commanders and supervisors (29.8%), and line-level staff (35.3% total, consisting of 26.6% uniform and 8.7% civilian). Over three quarters of respondents indicated that they had over 15 years of law enforcement experience. Approximately one third indicated that they currently spent 25% or more of their time on sex offender management duties, and a significant majority (over 95%) indicated that they had performed one or more duties related to sex offender management, community notification, and sex crimes investigation during their careers.

Figure 1. Geographic Distribution of Survey Respondents





Law Enforcement Perspectives on Sex Offender Registration
and Notification – Preliminary Survey Results

Respondent Characteristics

	Percent of Sample
Current Position	
Senior Agency Leadership (e.g., sheriff/chief)	34.9
Line Supervision (e.g., command staff/detective supervisor)	29.8
Line Uniform (e.g., patrol officer/detective)	26.6
Civilian Administrator/Staff	8.7
Years in Law Enforcement	
0-15	21.7
16-25	40.1
26+	38.2
Approximately what percent of your time is spent performing duties related to sex offender registration, monitoring, or enforcement?	
More than 75%	10.6
50%-75%	7.1
25%-50%	16.7
Less than 25%	65.6
How often would you say you use or access information contained on your state's sex offender registry?	
Daily or almost daily	18.8
Frequently	16.5
Occasionally	40.7
Rarely or never	24.1
Which of the following functions have you performed over the course of your career in law enforcement?†	
Sexual assault/abuse criminal investigations	73.9
Monitoring/enforcing sex offender registry compliance	60.5
Locating missing/absconded sex offenders	59.3
Child pornography/internet crimes against children investigations	55.4
Updating/maintain sex offender registry information	52.9
Notifying/educating the public about sex offenders	52.7
None of the above	4.8

Note. †Multiple responses allowed.



General Agency Characteristics

	Percent of Sample
Size of Agency (# of sworn law enforcement personnel)	
1-10	17.2
11-25	27.6
26-100	32.8
101-250	11.7
251-500	4.0
500-1000	3.9
More than 1,000	2.8
Region	
South	35.3
Midwest	31.2
West	17.7
Northeast	15.8
Agency type	
Local police	59.7
County/sheriff	39.6
State law enforcement	0.7

Agency SORN-related Functions

	Percent of Sample
Do registered sex offenders come directly to your agency when they need to update/renew their registration information?	
Yes	94.6
No	5.4
Type of staff updating registry information	
Uniformed officer	54.8
Civilian	30.7
Both	14.5
Which of the following functions are performed within your current agency?†	
Sexual assault/abuse criminal investigations	87.7
Child pornography/internet crimes against children investigations	78.4
Monitoring/enforcing sex offender registry compliance	71.9
Updating/maintain sex offender registry information	71.6
Locating missing/absconded sex offenders	67.7
Notifying/educating the public about sex offenders	61.2
None of the above	3.4

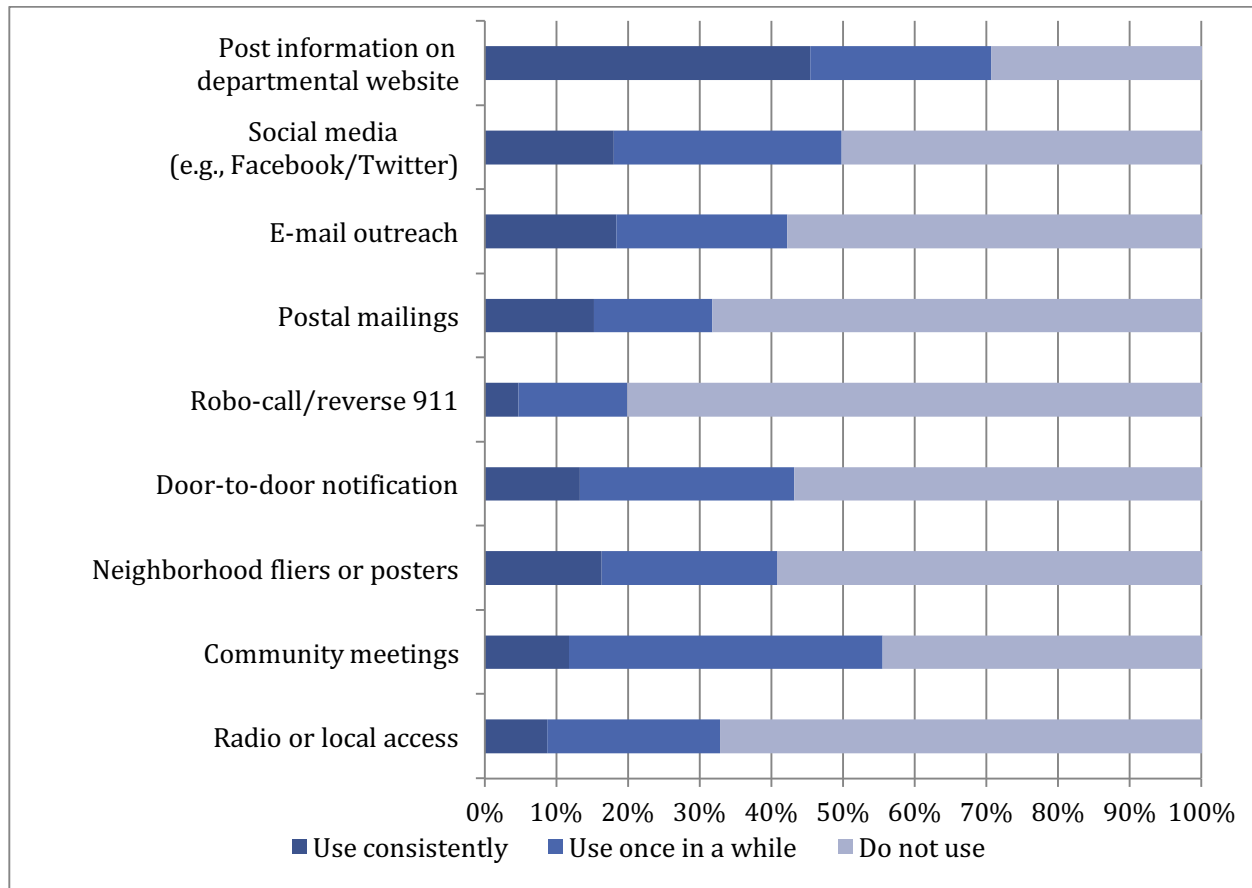
Note. †Multiple responses allowed.



Law Enforcement Perspectives on Sex Offender Registration
and Notification – Preliminary Survey Results

Tools and Strategies to Educate and Inform Public about Sex Offenders in Jurisdiction

	Use consistently %	Use once in a while %	Do not use %
Post information on departmental website	45.4	25.3	29.3
E-mail outreach	18.4	23.8	57.8
Social media (e.g., Facebook/Twitter)	18.0	31.8	50.2
Neighborhood fliers or posters	16.3	24.5	59.2
Postal mailings	15.2	16.6	68.2
Door-to-door notification	13.3	29.9	56.8
Community meetings	11.8	43.7	44.5
Radio or local access	8.7	24.1	67.2
Robo-call/reverse 911	4.7	15.2	80.1





GENERAL REGISTRY PURPOSES AND EFFECTIVENESS

The Phase 1 interviews included an open-ended prompt asking respondents to comment on what they perceived as the primary purposes of sex offender registration & notification. Five major purposes were identified within the data, as noted in the legend below. Survey participants were asked their opinion on the relative importance of each of the five main purposes identified through the interviews, and also asked to evaluate the relative effectiveness of their systems across these domains.

Response Item	Abbreviated Title
Informing the public about sex offenders living in the community	Inform public of sex offenders
Helping law enforcement to keep tabs on sex offenders in the community	Keep tabs on sex offenders
Providing information to support investigation of sex crimes	Support sex crime investigations
Reducing the likelihood that sex offenders will re-offend	Reduce likelihood of re-offending
Sharing sex offender information among law enforcement and offender supervision agencies	Share information between agencies

PURPOSES OF SEX OFFENDER REGISTRATION & NOTIFICATION

Sex offender registration and notification (SORN) may serve a variety of purposes. For the items listed below, please indicate whether you think each is a primary purpose, a secondary purpose (or side benefit), or not a purpose of SORN.

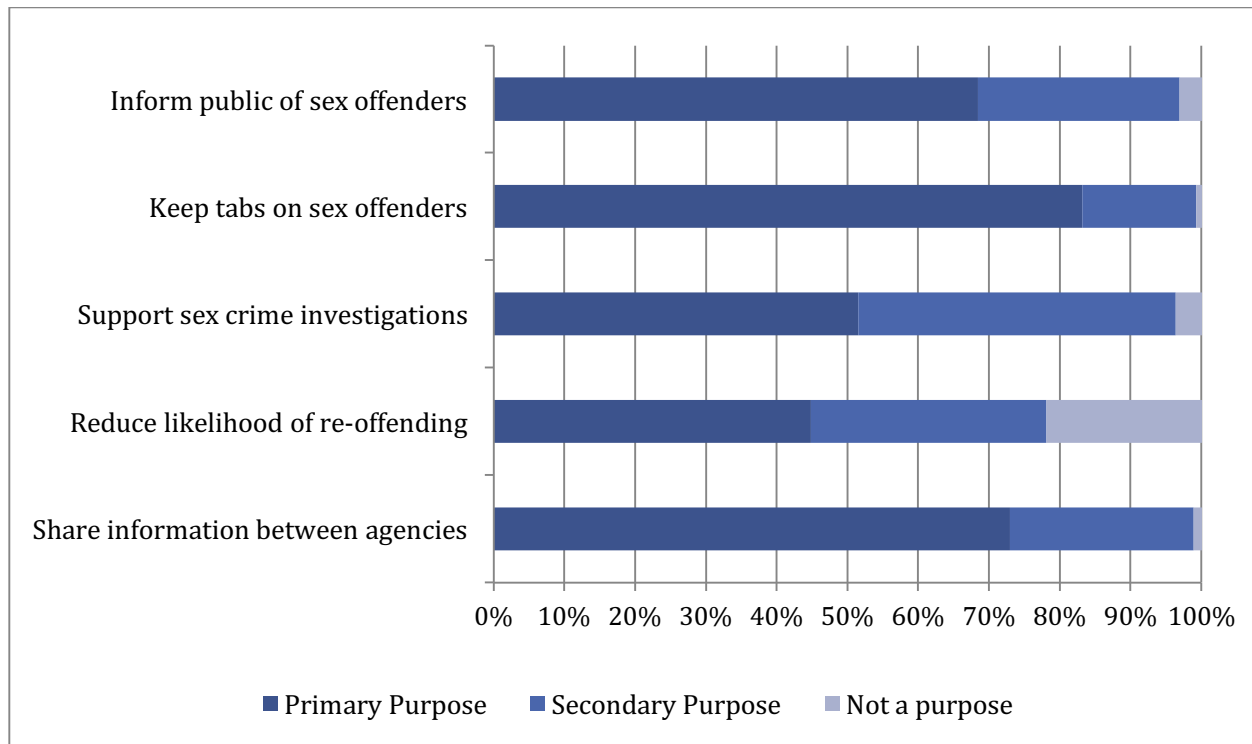
	Primary Purpose (%)	Secondary Purpose (%)	Not a purpose (%)
Keep tabs on sex offenders	83.1	16.1	0.8
Share information between agencies	72.9	25.9	1.1
Inform public of sex offenders	68.4	28.5	3.1
Support sex crime investigations	51.5	44.8	3.6
Reduce likelihood of re-offending	44.9	33.2	21.9



Law Enforcement Perspectives on Sex Offender Registration and Notification – Preliminary Survey Results

Sex offender registration and notification (SORN) may serve a variety of purposes. For the items listed below, please indicate whether you think each is a primary purpose, a secondary purpose (or side benefit), or not a purpose of SORN.

Item titles abbreviated - refer to legend on page 6 for full text of items





POLICY PRIORITIES

In this final survey item, we are asking for your professional opinion regarding priorities for state and federal policies regarding the management of sex offenders in the community. Evaluating each of the following policy strategies in terms of their overall potential to improve public safety, what level of priority would you assign to each?

Response	Abbreviated Title
Expand penalties and sanctions for registration non-compliance	Expand penalties for non-compliance
Require prosecutors to more aggressively pursue cases of registry non-compliance	More aggressive prosecution of non-compliance
Expand parole and probation supervision for sex offenders in the community	Expand probation and parole supervision
Dedicate more funding to registration enforcement and address verification	Dedicate funding to registration enforcement
Invest in system upgrades to improve integration of the sex offender registry with other criminal justice information systems (e.g. criminal history systems)	Improve integration of registry w/CJ information systems
Improve classification systems to better distinguish higher risk from lower risk offenders on the registry	Improve classification systems
Increase public education with regard to sexual violence prevention	Increase sexual violence prevention education
Invest in quality control systems to improve the accuracy and reliability of registry data	Improve accuracy and reliability of registry
Increase funding and training support for interagency collaboration around sex offender management	Increase interagency collaboration
Develop systems and strategies to reduce transience and homelessness among sex offenders	Reduce transience and homelessness
Re-align registration requirements in a way that redirects resources from lower risk to higher risk offenders	Redirect resources to higher risk offenders
Expand the mandated frequency with which offenders must update and verify their registration information	Expand frequency of offender verification
Redesign the public registry website to make information more accessible and user friendly	Increase accessibility and user friendliness
Expand community-based treatment services for sex offenders	Expand community-based treatment
Invest in campaigns to increase public use of the internet sex offender registry	Increase public use
Expand engagement of community organizations, including churches and faith-based organizations, in sex offender management	Expand engagement of community organizations



Law Enforcement Perspectives on Sex Offender Registration
and Notification – Preliminary Survey Results

In this final survey item, we are asking for your professional opinion regarding priorities for state and federal policies regarding the management of sex offenders in the community. Evaluating each of the following policy strategies in terms of their overall potential to improve public safety, what level of priority would you assign to each?

	High Priority (%)	Moderate Priority (%)	Low Priority (%)
Expand penalties for non-compliance	63.0	30.4	6.6
More aggressive prosecution of non-compliance	61.7	30.3	7.9
Expand probation and parole supervision	60.4	33.7	6.0
Dedicate funding to registration enforcement	51.5	39.3	9.2
Improve integration of registry with other CJ information systems	50.4	40.1	9.4
Improve classification systems	46.9	39.2	13.9
Increase sexual violence prevention education	45.6	45.4	9.0
Improve accuracy and reliability of registry	44.0	43.8	12.2
Increase interagency collaboration	41.8	45.7	12.5
Reduce transience and homelessness	40.0	41.3	18.7
Redirect resources to higher risk offenders	37.0	47.4	15.7
Expand frequency of offender verification	33.1	41.2	25.7
Increase accessibility and user friendliness	31.2	43.2	25.7
Expand community-based treatment	26.5	50.4	23.2
Increase public use	25.8	48.8	25.3
Expand engagement of community organizations	16.4	44.6	39.0

SUPPLEMENTAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Concluding the survey, respondents were presented with two open-ended prompts:

- Beyond the recommendations listed above, please indicate any other policy changes that you feel would have a significant impact on improving the public safety utility of sex offender registration and notification systems.*
- Considering your experiences with sex offender registration systems and with managing sex offenders within your jurisdiction, is there anything else that you would like to share that could be of assistance to state or federal policymakers?*

Responses to these items are undergoing thematic analysis, and will be released as a supplemental report in the final quarter of 2015.