

Law Enforcement Perspectives on Sex Offender Registration and Notification: Effectiveness, Challenges, and Policy Priorities

Criminal Justice Policy Review

1–30

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DOI: 10.1177/0887403416651671

cjp.sagepub.com



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Abstract

Since the 1990s, sex offender registration and notification (SORN) has assumed a prominent place on state and federal crime control agendas in the United States. Although researchers have examined many aspects of SORN policies and systems, relatively little is known about how SORN is used, perceived, and experienced by law enforcement professionals in the context of their work. This article presents findings from a mixed-method study, consisting of face-to-face interviews and a national online survey of police and sheriff agencies. We examined law enforcement views on SORN's general functions and efficacy, barriers to SORN effectiveness, and recommendations for SORN-related policy. Results highlight the challenges associated with SORN's various functions as a law enforcement information tool, as an offender monitoring mechanism, and as a conduit of public information. They also indicate differences between the perspectives of agency leadership and those on the front lines of registry enforcement and management, as well as a range of concerns associated with the reliability and utility of registry information, inter-system communication, registrant homelessness and transience, and the public's capacity to understand registry information. Implications for policy reform and for SORN-related research are discussed.

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Keywords

sex offender registration and notification, sex offender policy, law enforcement survey, sex offenders, sex offender management

Over recent decades, sex offender registration and notification (SORN) systems have assumed an increasingly prominent place in U.S. sex offender management policy and practice. Pursuant to a steady sequence of state and federal legislation since the 1990s, all U.S. states and territories and over 100 tribal jurisdictions operate public Internet sex offender registries, and the federal government has played an increasing role in setting standards for the structure of the nation's SORN systems.

Amid these developments, research interest in SORN policies has proliferated. Dozens of SORN-related studies have been published in the past decades, evaluating such factors as the relationship between SORN and the incidence of sex crimes (Ackerman, Sacks, & Greenberg, 2012; Levenson & Zgoba, 2015; Prescott & Rockoff, 2011; Sandler, Freeman, & Socia, 2008; Vasquez, Maddan, & Walker, 2008; Zgoba, Veysey, & Dalessandro, 2010), the recidivism of sex offenders subject to SORN (Agan, 2011; Barnoski, 2005; Duwe & Donnay, 2008; Letourneau, Levenson, Bandyopadhyay, Sinha, & Armstrong, 2010), the impact of failure to register on recidivism (Barnoski, 2005; Duwe & Donnay, 2010; Levenson, Letourneau, Armstrong, & Zgoba, 2010; Zgoba & Levenson, 2012), the extent and composition of the registered sex offender (RSO) population (Ackerman, Harris, Levenson, & Zgoba, 2011; Ackerman, Levenson, & Harris, 2012; Harris, Levenson, & Ackerman, 2014; Levenson & Harris, 2012), the accuracy of registry information (Hughes & Kadleck, 2008; Office of New York State Comptroller, 2007; Salmon, 2010), collateral effects of registration on offenders and their families (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Mercado, Alvarez, & Levenson, 2008; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2009), public support for SORN policies (Harris & Socia, 2014; Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Mears, Mancini, Gertz, & Bratton, 2008), citizen uses of registries (Anderson & Sample, 2008; Bandy, 2011; Beck & Travis, 2004; Harris & Cudmore, 2016; Sample, Evans, & Anderson, 2011), legislator attitudes (Meloy, Boatwright, & Curtis, 2013; Sample & Kadleck, 2008), and implementation of state and federal SORN policies (Harris, Lobanov-Rostovsky, & Levenson, 2010; Zgoba et al., 2015). Yet despite this extensive research attention, remarkably little is known about how SORN systems are used, perceived, and experienced by law enforcement professionals in the context of their work. This research gap is particularly notable, considering both the potential utility of SORN as a law enforcement information tool and the central role of law enforcement agencies in registry operations.

Addressing this gap in the literature, this article presents the first wave of findings from a comprehensive national study initiated in 2014 to examine law enforcement uses of and perspectives on SORN systems. The study included two phases of data collection: (a) a series of in-depth interviews with 105 law enforcement professionals from over two dozen jurisdictions within five states and (b) a nationwide survey of police and sheriff agencies, gathering the perspectives of agency leadership as well as

line supervisors and staff involved in SORN administration and its related enforcement duties. The current analysis is fairly broad in its scope and orientation, exploring views on SORN's general functions and efficacy, barriers to SORN effectiveness, and recommendations for SORN and community-based sex offender management policy improvement. Subsequent analyses will offer more in-depth perspectives related to specific dimensions of SORN operations and sex offender management practice.

Background and Literature Review

Policy Context

Since the 1990s, (SORN) systems have assumed a prominent place on state and federal crime control agendas. In the two decades since the 1994 passage of Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children Act, the U.S. Congress has passed a sequence of laws designed to improve the public's ability to monitor sex offenders living in the community and to enhance the quality, accessibility, and cross-jurisdictional sharing of registry data. The Wetterling Act (mandating the creation of state registries) and its subsequent amendments, including Megan's Law in 1996 (allowing the public dissemination of registry data), played a major role in requiring the expansion of state-based SORN systems and laid the foundation for a coordinated national registry network. Subsequently, the 2006 passage of the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act (AWA) opened a new chapter in the evolution of the nation's SORN systems. Title I of the AWA—the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA)—set forth federal guidelines for registration durations, offense-based classification tiers, and penalties for failure to properly register. Nationwide implementation of AWA has been stalled by resistance from many states and tribal jurisdictions who cite a range of legal, practical, and fiscal concerns (Harris, 2011; Harris & Lobanov-Rostovsky, 2010).

Nine years following SORNA's passage, 17 states and three U.S. territories have achieved SORNA "substantial implementation" designation from the U.S. Department of Justice. A 2013 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) confirmed that significant barriers to implementation remain and highlighted the need for more focused research to help guide federal policy reform. In its analysis, the GAO (2013) report noted the absence of data regarding the implication of these policies from the perspective of law enforcement and other criminal justice professionals. Since release of the federal SORNA guidelines, the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) listed SORN as one of the leading items on state policy agendas, along with issues such as unemployment, transportation, higher education, and health care coverage (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2007, 2009). NCSL's Sex Offender Enactments Database indicates that between 2009 and 2013, states enacted 340 SORN-related bills—an average of 68 per year.

Amid this shifting policy landscape, lawmakers and implementing agencies have grappled with a range of complex and often contentious issues. Who should be on the registry? What information should be public and what should be confined to law

enforcement? How should offenders be classified in terms of their relative threat to public safety? What requirements should be in place regarding matters such as frequency of verification, monitoring provisions, and the length of registration? How can cross-jurisdictional consistency and communication be best achieved? How can operational, legal, public safety, and fiscal concerns be effectively balanced? These and similar questions are part of the ongoing dialogue underway at the federal level and in state houses across the United States surrounding the future of SORN policy and practice. In considering such questions, the perspectives and experiences of those who use registry information to enforce our laws and protect our communities emerge as particularly vital data for consideration.

SORN Research

Concurrent with policy developments, research related to SORN policies has accelerated in the past decade, with certain aspects of the policies being relatively well studied, and others less so. For purposes of framing the current investigation, two particular lines of inquiry are considered particularly relevant: (a) research evaluating the public safety impact of SORN policies and (b) research analyzing stakeholder perspectives and experiences related to SORN.

SORN impact on sexual offending. Most empirical studies evaluating the impact of SORN policies have focused on the incidence of new sex crimes as the primary outcome of interest. The majority of such studies have failed to find significant effects at either the aggregate level (e.g., population-based rates of reported sexual assault; Ackerman, Sacks, & Greenberg, 2012; Levenson & Zgoba, 2015; Sandler et al., 2008; Vasquez et al., 2008; Zgoba et al., 2010), or when measuring sexual re-offense among known offenders (Agan, 2011; Letourneau et al., 2010; Sandler et al., 2008). Other studies have detected modest effects, suggesting that registration and notification may be associated with offense reduction under certain conditions, for instance, when public notification is reserved for those at highest risk to reoffend as determined by a validated risk assessment instruments (Barnoski, 2005; Duwe & Donnay, 2008; Prescott & Rockoff, 2011).

To place this body of research into appropriate context, two key points should be noted. First, most researchers have focused primarily on the public notification aspects of the laws rather than on registration per se. Although often conflated, especially since the inception of publicly available online registries, *registration* with law enforcement and *notification* to the general public are in fact distinct processes with discrete mechanisms for improving public safety. Indeed, one of the few studies that separately analyzed the effects of registration and the effects of public notification concluded that the former appeared to reduce recidivistic sex offenses, whereas the latter did not (Prescott & Rockoff, 2011). Studies of public perceptions and behaviors suggest that, despite broad-based public support and indications that community notification makes people *feel* safer, few people actually take protective actions on the basis of public registry information (e.g., Anderson & Sample, 2008; Harris &

Cudmore, 2016; Sample et al., 2011). In contrast, it is probable that law enforcement personnel who are engaged in sex crime prevention, investigation, victim services, and related areas may use registry information in the course of their work and that registration may carry inherent value related to these functions.

A second important caveat surrounding the research on the public safety efficacy of SORN involves the distinct possibility of undetected impacts (Bierie, 2016). Quite simply, the failure to find a relationship between SORN policies and sexual re-offense rates among registrants does not lead to the de facto conclusion that no such relationship exists. Factors such as the low base rate of sexual re-offense, high rates of under-reporting, the interaction of SORN with other variables (e.g., treatment, supervision, and other sex offender management policies and strategies), and the fact that aggregate sex offense figures (such as rape rates) are disproportionately driven by first-time offenders (Sandler et al., 2008) all may serve to obscure possible impacts. Moreover, although SORN impacts may not be detectable at the “macro” level, it remains possible that registration and notification may exert “micro”-level impacts related to offender monitoring, case management, and prevention efforts by citizens, particularly when used in tandem with other law enforcement and community supervision strategies (Bierie, 2016). In other words, the ways in which SORN information may serve a potentially complementary role or have utilitarian value at the individual level has generally not been systematically examined within the research literature.

In sum, research findings to date surrounding SORN impacts suggest the need for a systematic investigation of both the *processes* through which registry information might be applied to preventing or investigating sexual violence, and the *conditions* (i.e., SORN system or offender characteristics) under which public safety might be improved. The aim, in other words, is to move beyond an assessment of aggregate level impacts toward a broader understanding of the *operational context* through which the policies are implemented and utilized, as well as the *system characteristics* associated with more effective or less effective registries.

Stakeholder perspectives. Over the years, a growing body of survey research has explored perceptions of SORN and its impacts from the perspectives of various stakeholders, including the general public (e.g., Anderson & Sample, 2008; Caputo, 2001; Levenson, Brannon, et al., 2007; Lieb & Nunlist, 2008), sex offenders and their families (e.g., Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D’Amora, & Hern, 2007; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Sample & Streveler, 2003; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005), legislators (Meloy et al., 2013; Sample & Kadleck, 2008), mental health and treatment professionals (Lasher & McGrath, 2012), and community corrections practitioners such as probation officers and parole board members (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2012; Tewksbury, Mustaine, & Payne, 2012).

In general, these studies have supported a fairly consistent series of narratives surrounding SORN systems and policies. Specifically, survey findings have been fairly convergent on two main points—(a) that SORN policies maintain a high level of support among the public and policy makers (Anderson & Sample, 2008; Levenson, Brannon, et al., 2007; Mears et al., 2008; Meloy et al., 2013; Sample & Kadleck, 2008)

and (b) that SORN is generally perceived by sex offenders, their families, and treatment providers as an impediment to effective community integration and, in some cases, as an unreasonably disproportionate consequence to the offense (Fortney, Baker, & Levenson, 2009; Jeglic, Mercado, & Levenson, 2011; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, & Hern, 2007; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Malesky & Keim, 2001; Mercado et al., 2008; Tewksbury & Lees, 2007; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009).

By contrast, relatively few studies have elicited the perspectives of law enforcement professionals regarding the utility and functions of SORN systems. Research conducted during the formative years of SORN laws, prior to the growth of Internet registries, found that law enforcement officials had mixed reactions to the practice of public notification—for example, while many favored more selective notification procedures, others believed that broad notification would enhance surveillance of sex offenders and would deter future sex crimes (Finn, 1997; Matson & Lieb, 1996; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). However, a study from this period found high levels of support for SORN laws among law enforcement professionals, compared with samples of community members and law students (Redlich, 2001).

In the post-AWA era, there has been little published research focused on the experiences and perspectives of law enforcement professionals regarding SORN systems' functions and operational utility. Studies that have analyzed law enforcement perspectives on SORN have examined issues such as general attitudes toward sex offenders and the perceived efficacy and fairness of SORN policies (Mustaine, Tewksbury, Connor, & Payne, 2015), but have been limited in their exploration of SORN systems' operational dimensions and of how registry information is perceived and used in the context of law enforcement practice.

Perhaps the most comprehensive work that has been done in this domain is the 2013 analysis by the GAO that featured interviews with criminal justice system stakeholders including law enforcement, registry officials, and probation agents as part of its analysis of SORNA implementation (GAO, 2013). In this study, interviewees cited certain benefits of SORNA implementation, including improved tracking and monitoring of offenders, increased public awareness, and enhanced collaboration between agencies. They also highlighted several concerns related to the inconsistency of state practices enabling information sharing and enforcement, the tenuous linkage between SORNA offense-based tiers and offender risk factors, and increased workload requirements.

In sum, the body of research eliciting the perspectives of law enforcement related to sex offender registration has been remarkably sparse. Studies of law enforcement perspectives to date have focused predominantly on wholesale attitudes toward sex offenders and sex offender policies, with some delving into limited structural characteristics of sex offender registries. Of the available studies, only the GAO analysis focused on specific dimensions of the registries, and none has systematically collected and evaluated examples of how registry data are actually used by law enforcement agencies for purposes of investigation, crime prevention, and sex offender management. Gaining such an “on the ground” perspective therefore emerges as a vital link in the effective design of SORN-related policy and practice.

Current Study

The current analysis offers the first findings from a comprehensive national study of law enforcement professionals' views and experiences of SORN systems. This initiative's overall goal is to provide data to inform policy and practice recommendations for federal and state policy makers, state and tribal public safety agencies charged with the design and oversight of SORN systems, and county/local law enforcement agencies on the front lines of registering and monitoring sex offenders within communities.

This article offers a macro-level perspective on how law enforcement leaders, uniformed staff, and civilian staff engaged in SORN-related duties experience and perceive SORN, including how they view its major purposes and effectiveness. In service to the study's broader aims, the present analysis focuses on the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What do law enforcement professionals view as the primary functions and purposes of SORN systems?

Research Question 2: How do law enforcement professionals view the efficacy of current SORN systems in fulfilling those functions and purposes, and what are the primary barriers to effectiveness?

Research Question 3: What recommendations do law enforcement professionals have for improving SORN policy and practice?

Research Question 4: Concerning the above-referenced issues, how do the views of agency leadership align with or differ from those who are on the front lines of SORN system operations and enforcement?

Method and Sample

This mixed-method study draws upon data collected in two phases: (a) a series of semi-structured, in-person interviews conducted with law enforcement professionals between February and June 2014, and (b) a national online survey of police and sheriff agencies conducted in the spring of 2015. Data collection and subject recruitment protocols for both phases were reviewed and approved by a university institutional review board prior to implementation.

Phase 1 interview participants were drawn from a convenience sample of five U.S. states (California, Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island) and from two tribal jurisdictions (one based in the Pacific Northwest and one based in the Rocky Mountain region). Participants were recruited through a variety of channels, with the majority of contacts facilitated by intermediary organizations including state public safety agencies and police chiefs associations. Interviews were conducted on an individual basis, with the exception of a two-person interview held with a pair of detectives in a Florida police department, and a five-person group interview held in Rhode Island with police officers and supervisors assigned to sex offender management duties in their respective jurisdictions.

Table 1. Interviewee Characteristics.

Respondent characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Current position ^a		
Civilian	21	21.6
Uniformed	68	70.1
Agency leadership	8	8.2
Years in law enforcement ^a		
0-15	31	35.2
16-25	33	37.5
26+	24	27.3
Access jurisdiction's sex offender registry ^a		
Never	2	2.2
Rarely	6	6.7
Occasionally	11	12.4
Frequently	18	20.2
Daily	52	58.4
Location		
California	24	22.9
Colorado	37	35.2
Florida	15	14.3
Massachusetts	19	18.1
Rhode Island	7	6.7
Tribal	3	2.9

^aData missing for portion of sample.

A total of 105 law enforcement personnel participated in the interviews, including representatives from 26 state, county, and law enforcement agencies, as well as two representatives from tribal law enforcement and one member of the U.S. Marshal Service. Of these, 101 agreed to have their comments audio recorded and transcribed for in-depth analysis. Selected sample characteristics are summarized in Table 1. Approximately half of the sample was drawn from states that were deemed at the time of the study as having substantially implemented SORNA/AWA (Colorado and Florida), and half from states that had not implemented SORNA (California, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island). Approximately two thirds of those interviewed worked in states with sex offender provisions that include statewide laws restricting where sex offenders can live, commonly referred to as residence restriction laws (California and Florida).

Interview data were analyzed utilizing a multi-stage process. Following transcription and quality checks (which included expunging subject-identifying information), transcripts were imported and organized in NVivo, in accordance with the sections and subsections of the interview protocol. This was followed by a series of web-facilitated meetings among members of the research team to identify and explore emergent themes, as well as point of divergence and convergence within the

data. Prior to each meeting, a particular section of the data was designated for review, and between three and four members of the research team independently read through the designated sections, noting the themes and ideas reflected in the interview responses. For purposes of the meeting, one member of the project team served as the lead facilitator, who was charged with developing a master list of themes, concepts, and ideas noted in the discussion. These elements were streamlined and consolidated into a hierarchical set of codes to help categorize and inventory the interview data. Following each meeting, the principal investigator (this article's lead author) worked with two coding specialists who were charged with independently applying these codes to the data within NVivo.

The coding schemes developed by the research team formed the basis for a comprehensive inventory of themes, concepts, opinions, and recommendations related to law enforcement experiences with SORN systems. This inventory, in turn, formed the basis for the second stage of data collection—A nationwide online survey that was designed to build upon the interview findings. 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 5 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. Excluding “bounce backs” and invalid addresses, the survey was distributed to 9,472 email addresses. A total of 1,485 respondents consented to participate and proceeded to the survey, for an overall response rate of 15.7%. After accounting for missing data for some cases, this resulted in a final sample of 1,374 that is used for purposes of the present analysis.

Selected characteristics of the survey sample are summarized in Table 2. The final sample included representation from 49 states (all states with the exception of Hawaii) and from the District of Columbia. About 60.0% of the survey sample came from local police departments, 39.3% from county sheriffs, and the remainder (<1%) from 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 monitoring, community notification, and sex

Table 2. Survey Respondent Characteristics.

Respondent characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Current position		
Civilian	120	8.7
Uniformed	775	56.4
Agency leadership	479	34.9
Years in law enforcement		
0-15	295	21.8
16-25	533	39.4
26+	526	38.8
Percent of time on sex offender management duties (current position)		
<25%	623	66.1
25%-50%	155	16.4
50%-75%	67	7.1
>75%	98	10.4
Functions performed in career ^a		
Sexual assault/sexual abuse criminal investigations	1,024	74.5
Monitoring/enforcing sex offender registry compliance	832	60.6
Locating missing/absconded sex offenders	815	59.3
Child pornography/Internet crimes against children investigations	769	56.0
Notifying/educating the public about sex offenders in the community	724	52.7
Updating/maintaining sex offender information within the registration system	721	52.5
None of above	68	4.9
Agency type		
Local police	815	60.0
County sheriffs	534	39.3
State law enforcement	10	0.7
Region		
South	489	35.6
Midwest	429	31.2
West	241	17.5
Northeast	215	15.6

^aTotal percentage does not add to 100% because respondents could select multiple functions.

crimes investigation during their careers. Additional details regarding the interview and survey samples are available from the lead author by request.

Results

The interviews and survey explored many dimensions of law enforcement experiences with SORN systems and related aspects of non-SORN community-based sex offender management. As the first analysis emerging from this research, the current study

focuses on macro-level aspects of SORN, exploring law enforcement views on (a) the general purposes and effectiveness of SORN systems, (b) barriers or challenges to SORN system effectiveness, and (c) policy priorities and recommendations.

In this section, we present basic summaries of the themes emerging from the interviews, followed by associated survey results and analyses comparing the views of agency leadership, line uniformed personnel, and civilian personnel involved in SORN-related duties. To test for significant differences across position types, we present results from one-way ANOVAs, in addition to corresponding Welch's *t* tests for each intergroup pairing (civilians vs. line uniform, civilians vs. agency leadership, line uniform vs. agency leadership), using mean scores on the various scales as the dependent measure. Due to the issue of multiple comparisons, for the bivariate comparisons, the Hommel adjustment was used (Hommel, 1988). Non-parametric tests (Kruskal–Wallis and Mann–Whitney tests, respectively) were also conducted, approaching the dependent variables as ordinal measures. Results of these latter tests, which comported with the ANOVA and *t*-test results, are available from the authors by request.

Perspectives in SORN Purposes and Effectiveness

The Phase 1 interviews began with an open-ended prompt asking respondents to describe what they viewed as the primary functions of SORN. While varying in both content and emphasis, responses focused on five main thematic clusters:

1. Serving as a public information resource;
2. Supporting law enforcement to monitor offenders;
3. Providing information to support sex crime investigations;
4. Facilitating the sharing and transfer of sex offender information across law enforcement agencies and jurisdictions; and
5. Reducing re-offense risk through the promotion of offender accountability.

Survey respondents were presented with the five general SORN-related objectives derived from the interview data and asked to indicate the overall effectiveness of their current SORN system in meeting each. Respondents rated effectiveness on a 4-point scale, ranging from very effective to very ineffective. Table 3 presents the responses for each of the five survey items, presenting proportional distributions for the entire respondent sample and separately for agency leadership, uniformed line personnel, and civilian registry staff. Table 4 presents these data as mean values, scaled from 1 (*very ineffective*) to 4 (*very effective*), along with ANOVA results and significance levels for corresponding *t* tests for each intergroup pairing.

Across all three subgroups, SORN systems were rated as (a) most effective for purposes of information sharing across agencies and monitoring offenders, (b) moderately effective for purposes of informing the public and supporting sex crime investigations, and (c) somewhat less effective in their ability to reduce the likelihood of re-offending.

Table 3. Perspectives in SORN Purposes and Effectiveness.

	Overall sample	Civilian	Uniformed	Agency leadership
	%	%	%	%
Serving as a public information resource				
Very effective	40.2	47.9	40.2	38.3
Somewhat effective	46.9	43.6	44.9	50.9
Somewhat ineffective	10.6	6.8	12.2	8.9
Very ineffective	2.3	1.7	2.7	2.0
Supporting law enforcement to monitor offenders				
Very effective	45.2	53.8	47.1	39.9
Somewhat effective	44.8	40.2	42.7	49.5
Somewhat ineffective	8.5	4.3	8.9	8.9
Very ineffective	1.5	1.7	1.3	1.7
Providing information to support sex crime investigations				
Very effective	31.1	45.3	32.4	25.3
Somewhat effective	54.9	45.3	52.2	61.8
Somewhat ineffective	11.2	6.8	12.0	10.9
Very ineffective	2.8	2.6	3.3	2.0
Reduce likelihood of re-offending				
Very effective	9.2	13.8	9.5	7.6
Somewhat effective	44.6	46.6	42.8	46.9
Somewhat ineffective	28.3	23.3	29.3	27.9
Very ineffective	17.9	16.4	18.4	17.5
Share information between agencies				
Very effective	45.5	64.1	45.5	40.8
Somewhat effective	47.4	32.5	46.7	52.3
Somewhat ineffective	5.3	3.4	6.0	4.6
Very ineffective	1.9	0.0	1.9	2.4

Note. SORN = sex offender registration and notification.

Across all five of the rated dimensions, civilian staff within our sample reflected the highest overall confidence in SORN's effectiveness, followed by uniformed line personnel, and agency leaders expressed the lowest levels of confidence in SORN effectiveness. ANOVA indicated statistically significant differences across three of the five dimensions—keeping tabs on offenders, $F(2, 1325) = 3.93, p = .020$; supporting sex crime investigations, $F(2, 1319) = 4.82, p = .008$; and sharing information across agencies, $F(2, 1325) = 9.06, p < .001$. Corresponding t tests indicated not only that differences were generally attributable to the higher effectiveness estimates of civilian respondents, but also that uniformed line personnel expressed moderately more confidence than agency leaders in SORN's ability to keep tabs on offenders, $t(977.71) = 1.92, p = .055$.

Table 4. Perspectives on SORN Purposes and Effectiveness.

	Overall		Civilian (A)		Uniformed (B)		Agency leadership (C)		Results of t test				
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	F	p	AB	AC	BC
Serving as a public information resource	3.25 (0.73)	3.37 (0.69)	3.22 (0.76)	3.25 (0.70)	3.22 (0.76)	3.25 (0.70)	3.25 (0.70)	3.25 (0.70)	2.09	.124	*		
Supporting law enforcement to monitor offenders	3.14 (0.72)	3.46 (0.66)	3.35 (0.70)	3.28 (0.69)	3.35 (0.70)	3.28 (0.69)	3.28 (0.69)	3.28 (0.69)	3.93	.020		**	**
Providing information to support sex crime investigations	3.34 (0.70)	3.33 (0.72)	3.14 (0.75)	3.10 (0.66)	3.14 (0.75)	3.10 (0.66)	3.10 (0.66)	3.10 (0.66)	4.82	.008	**	**	**
Reduce likelihood of re-offending	2.45 (0.89)	2.58 (0.92)	2.43 (0.90)	2.45 (0.87)	2.43 (0.90)	2.45 (0.87)	2.45 (0.87)	2.45 (0.87)	1.33	.265			
Share information between agencies	3.36 (0.67)	3.61 (0.56)	3.36 (0.68)	3.31 (0.67)	3.36 (0.68)	3.31 (0.67)	3.31 (0.67)	3.31 (0.67)	9.06	.000	***	***	***

Note. SORN = sex offender registration and notification; AB = significant difference between civilian and uniformed; AC = significant difference between civilian and agency leadership; BC = significant difference between uniformed and agency leadership.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Perspectives on Barriers and Challenges Related to SORN Effectiveness

The interviews offered in-depth perspectives on the issues and challenges related to the public safety efficacy of SORN systems. Analyses of interview data identified 18 commonly referenced issues—10 of these were connected to citizen uses and perceptions of registry information, and eight were connected to SORN utility as a law enforcement tool. These issues were presented to survey respondents in three clusters, as summarized in Table 5. Respondents were asked to rank their concern with each item along a 4-point continuum—major concern, moderate concern, minimal concern, and no concern. The mean ratings of each listed item by respondent role, along with ANOVA results and *t*-test significance levels, are presented in Table 6.

Broadly examining mean ratings across all three categories of challenges, certain findings are fairly consistent across respondent roles. All three groups (civilian staff, line uniform staff, and agency leadership) rated concerns about transient and homeless registrants most highly among all listed challenges (*M* ratings of 3.03, 3.10, and 3.02, respectively) followed closely by concerns about public misunderstanding or misinterpretation of registry information (*M* ratings of 2.96, 2.86, and 2.88). At the other end of the spectrum, survey respondents collectively expressed the lowest levels of apprehension over issues related to the scope of individuals contained on the public sex offender registry—concerns that the reach of the public registry was too broad received the lowest mean rating across all three groups (*M* ratings of 1.81, 1.97, and 2.01), and concerns that the registry was too limited was also rated low compared with most other items (*M* ratings of 2.33, 2.39, and 2.36). Below, we briefly consider some of the key findings and intergroup differences within each of the three categories of challenges.

Citizen uses and perceptions. As noted above, public misunderstanding or misinterpretation of registry information was expressed as a relatively high matter of concern across the sample. In addition, respondent groups were fairly uniform in their concern that sex offender registries may produce a false sense of security among the public. Respondents across the three groups also expressed moderate levels of collective concern for several other areas in this domain, including the belief that too few citizens access the registry, that citizens often do not take protective action based on registry information, and that the citizens could use more specific information about the risk posed by those on the registry. Within this category, ANOVA results indicated general consistency across respondent groups, with one exception. Specifically, agency leaders were significantly more likely than either civilians or line uniform staff to express concern that information contained on public sex offender registries may provoke unnecessary fear within the community, $F(2, 1130) = 6.29, p = .002$.

SORN as crime prevention tool. This category included several issues that were ranked as comparatively high matters of concern across respondent groups, including those related to transient and homeless registrants, incomplete information related to registrants' prior offenses and charges, and the need for more non-SORN probation and parole supervision. The relatively high ratings for these three items are fairly

Table 5. Definitions of Issues and Challenges Related to the Public Safety Efficacy of SORN Systems.

Variable	Response
Citizen uses and perceptions	
Too few citizens access	Too few citizens access and consult with the public sex offender registry
Little protective action	Among citizens who do consult the registry, too few use the information to take protective actions
Public misunderstanding	Citizens may misunderstand or misinterpret information contained on the registry
False sense of security	The public registry may give citizens a false sense of security by causing them to ignore other risks of sexual victimization (e.g., from family, friends, or relatives)
Unnecessary fear	The public registry may contribute to unnecessary fear within the community
Sex offender harassment	The public registry may lead to citizens targeting or harassing sex offenders in their communities
Needs to be more user-friendly	The public registry website needs to be made more accessible and user-friendly
Needs better risk information	The public registry website needs to provide more detailed risk information on individual offenders
Registry too limited	The list of offenders on the public Internet registry is too limited—the registry should be expanded to include information on a broader range of offenders
Registry too broad	The list of offenders on the public Internet registry is too broad—information on lower risk offenders should be controlled by law enforcement
Crime prevention tool	
Too many RSOs	There are too many RSOs to manage and monitor given our available resources
Issues distinguishing high and low risk	The registry's classification system does not sufficiently distinguish between those on the higher and lower ends of the risk spectrum
Resources used on low risk offenders	Registry requirements related to low risk offenders absorb system resources that could be directed toward managing higher risk offenders
Transient and homeless RSOs	Too few resources are allocated to address the challenges of monitoring transient and homeless sex offenders

(continued)

Table 5. (continued)

Variable	Response
Incomplete offense histories/ charges	Offense histories/charges listed on the registry are incomplete and do not tell the full story
Need for probation or parole supervision	More of the RSOs in our community should be under formal probation or parole supervision
Little integration with critical information systems	The sex offender registry is not sufficiently integrated with other critical information systems (e.g., motor vehicles, criminal history, court records, correctional information systems)
Address information outdated or unreliable	Address information contained in the registry may be outdated or otherwise unreliable
Sex crime investigation	The registry's classification system does not sufficiently distinguish between those on the higher and lower ends of the risk spectrum
Difficulties distinguishing risk (high vs. low)	Address information contained in the registry may be outdated or otherwise unreliable
Unreliable address information	Offense histories/charges listed on the registry are incomplete and do not tell the full story
Incomplete criminal history	The sex offender registry is not sufficiently integrated with other critical information systems (e.g., motor vehicles, criminal history, court records, correctional information systems)
Integration with other information systems	The sex offender registry is not sufficiently integrated with other critical information systems (e.g., motor vehicles, criminal history, court records, correctional information systems)

Note. SORN = sex offender registration and notification; RSO = registered sex offender.

Table 6. Effects of Position on Citizen Perceptions and Uses, Offender Monitoring, and Sex Crime Investigations.

	Overall		Civilian (A)		Uniformed (B)		Agency leadership (C)		F	p	Results of t test		
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)			AB	AC	BC
Citizen perceptions and uses													
Too few citizens access	2.66 (0.82)	2.54 (0.82)	2.66 (0.84)	2.69 (0.79)	1.57	.209							
Little protective action	2.52 (0.75)	2.48 (0.81)	2.50 (0.75)	2.56 (0.74)	1.06	.348							
Public misunderstanding	2.88 (0.83)	2.96 (0.78)	2.86 (0.83)	2.88 (0.83)	0.79	.454							
False sense of security	2.77 (0.87)	2.68 (0.94)	2.80 (0.89)	2.77 (0.83)	0.92	.398				*			
Unnecessary fear	2.42 (0.88)	2.29 (0.92)	2.36 (0.88)	2.53 (0.85)	6.29	.002						**	
Sex offender harassment	2.27 (0.83)	2.33 (0.86)	2.22 (0.86)	2.31 (0.78)	1.70	.184							
Needs to be more user-friendly	2.25 (0.92)	2.13 (0.92)	2.24 (0.92)	2.29 (0.93)	1.41	.245							
Needs better risk information	2.59 (0.90)	2.46 (0.94)	2.61 (0.91)	2.59 (0.88)	1.17	.311							
Registry too limited	2.37 (0.94)	2.33 (0.96)	2.39 (0.95)	2.36 (0.92)	0.22	.804					*		
Registry too broad	1.97 (0.88)	1.81 (0.87)	1.97 (0.91)	2.01 (0.85)	2.24	.107							
Crime prevention tool													
Too many RSOs	2.55 (0.97)	2.38 (1.06)	2.62 (0.97)	2.51 (0.94)	3.43	.033				*			
Issues distinguishing high and low risk	2.62 (0.95)	2.53 (1.04)	2.57 (0.96)	2.72 (0.90)	3.51	.030						*	
Resources used on low risk offenders	2.31 (0.89)	2.14 (0.94)	2.30 (0.90)	2.38 (0.84)	3.25	.039				*			
Transient and homeless RSOs	3.06 (0.88)	3.03 (0.93)	3.10 (0.89)	3.02 (0.84)	1.03	.356							
Incomplete offense histories/charges	2.74 (0.89)	2.75 (0.98)	2.74 (0.93)	2.75 (0.82)	0.00	.996							
Need for probation or parole supervision	2.78 (0.88)	2.66 (0.90)	2.78 (0.92)	2.80 (0.82)	1.08	.342							
Little integration with critical information systems	2.61 (0.95)	2.54 (1.02)	2.52 (0.95)	2.74 (0.92)	6.39	.002					**	**	
Address information outdated or unreliable	2.57 (0.92)	2.44 (1.06)	2.44 (0.93)	2.76 (0.84)	16.37	.000					**	**	
Sex crime investigation													
Difficulties distinguishing risk (high vs. low)	2.65 (0.93)	2.08 (0.76)	2.60 (0.95)	2.73 (0.90)	4.85	.008				*	**	*	
Unreliable address information	2.72 (0.93)	2.15 (0.90)	2.63 (0.94)	2.86 (0.89)	10.20	.000				*	**	**	
Incomplete criminal history	2.79 (0.89)	2.69 (0.85)	2.76 (0.91)	2.84 (0.85)	0.92	.400							
Integration with other information systems	2.74 (0.94)	2.17 (0.72)	2.69 (0.97)	2.81 (0.91)	4.29	.014				*	**	*	

Note. AB = significant difference between civilian and uniformed; AC = significant difference between civilian and agency leadership; BC = significant difference between uniformed and agency leadership; RSO = registered sex offender.
 *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

consistent across respondent roles, with ANOVA results detecting no significant between-group differences. For the remaining five items in this category, however, ANOVA results indicate significant between-group differences. Concerns that there are too many RSOs to monitor were rated significantly higher by line uniform staff than by either civilians or agency leadership, $F(2, 1074) = 3.43, p = .033$. Agency leaders, for their part, expressed significantly more concern than line personnel (uniformed or civilian) over matters related to SORN system efficiency, completeness, and accuracy, including SORN systems' ability to distinguish between high and lower risk offenders, $F(2, 1075) = 3.51, p = .030$; resources being used on low risk offenders, $F(2, 1074) = 3.25, p = .039$; lack of integration with other justice information systems, $F(2, 1071) = 6.39, p = .002$; and outdated or unreliable address information, $F(2, 1076) = 16.37, p < .001$.

SORN as criminal investigation tool. Evaluating SORN systems' utility as a tool for criminal investigations, all three respondent groups expressed comparatively high levels of concern over the lack of completeness of SORN registrant information related to offenses and charges. Similar to the patterns observed in the domain of crime prevention, agency leaders expressed significantly higher levels of concern than line personnel over matters related to the adequacy of risk information, $F(2, 1010) = 4.85, p = .008$; address information, $F(2, 1007) = 10.20, p < .001$; and information system integration, $F(2, 1012) = 4.29, p = .014$.

Perspectives on Policy Priorities

Interviews yielded a wide range of perspectives on how SORN systems and related non-SORN offender management systems might be most effectively calibrated. These generally fell into four broad categories: (a) enforcement and compliance, (b) operational improvements, (c) offender management, and (d) public-focused strategies. Across all of these categories, issues related to funding and resources and to statutory changes were commonly referenced. For purposes of the survey, the researchers identified 16 commonly referenced policy reform proposals spanning these four areas. These proposals, as presented in the survey, are summarized in Table 7.

Survey respondents were presented with each of the 16 proposals in randomized order and asked to categorize each as a high, medium, or low priority. Table 8 indicates the mean rankings of each policy proposal for the entire sample and for the three respondent subgroups. Table 9 provides a rank-ordered listing of policy priorities for each subgroup.

Enforcement and compliance. As indicated by Table 9, the enforcement and compliance category included two of the three top-ranked priorities for all subgroups, namely, expanded penalties for SORN non-compliance and expanded prosecution of registrant non-compliance. While the three groups were fairly uniform on the former, ANOVA results indicated significant differences in the degrees of emphasis placed on the latter, $F(2, 1204) = 4.82, p = .008$. This finding is consistent with sentiments commonly

Table 7. Definitions of Policy Priority Items.

Variable	Response
<p>Enforcement and compliance</p> <p>Expand penalties for non-compliance</p> <p>Prosecution of non-compliance</p> <p>Funding for registry enforcement</p> <p>Expand frequency of verification</p>	<p>Expand penalties and sanctions for registration non-compliance</p> <p>Require prosecutors to more aggressively pursue cases of registry non-compliance</p> <p>Dedicate more funding to registration enforcement and address verification</p> <p>Expand the mandated frequency with which offenders must update and verify their registration information</p>
<p>Operational improvements</p> <p>Improve information system integration</p>	<p>Invest in system upgrades to improve integration of the SOR with other criminal justice information systems (e.g., criminal history systems)</p>
<p>Improve accuracy and reliability of registries</p> <p>Increase inter-agency collaboration</p>	<p>Improve classification systems to better distinguish higher risk from lower risk offenders on the registry</p> <p>Increase funding and training support for inter-agency collaboration around sex offender management</p>
<p>Improve classification systems</p> <p>Offender management</p> <p>Expand probation and parole supervision</p> <p>Strategies to reduce transience and homelessness</p> <p>Redirect resources to higher risk offenders</p>	<p>Invest in quality control systems to improve the accuracy and reliability of registry data</p> <p>Expand parole and probation supervision for sex offenders in the community</p> <p>Develop systems and strategies to reduce transience and homelessness among sex offenders</p> <p>Re-align registration requirements in a way that redirects resources from lower risk to higher risk offenders</p>
<p>Community-based treatment for RSOs</p> <p>Public-focused strategies</p> <p>Sexual violence prevention education</p> <p>Strategies to expand public use of SOR</p> <p>Engagement of community organizations</p>	<p>Expand community-based treatment services for sex offenders</p> <p>Increase public education with regard to sexual violence prevention</p> <p>Invest in campaigns to increase public use of the Internet SOR</p> <p>Expand engagement of community organizations, including churches and faith-based organizations, in sex offender management</p>
<p>Increase accessibility and user-friendliness of SOR</p>	<p>Redesign the public registry website to make information more accessible and user-friendly</p>

Note. RSO = registered sex offender; SOR = sex offender registry.

Table 8. Recommendations for Policy Priorities by Position Type.

	Overall		Civilian (A)		Uniformed (B)		Agency leadership (C)		F	p	AB	AC	BC
	M (SD)		M (SD)		M (SD)		M (SD)						
Enforcement and compliance													
Expand penalties for non-compliance	2.56 (0.62)		2.65 (0.58)		2.55 (0.63)		2.55 (0.61)		1.34	.261			
Prosecution of non-compliance	2.54 (0.64)		2.70 (0.52)		2.54 (0.63)		2.49 (0.67)		4.82	.008	**	***	
Funding for registry enforcement	2.42 (0.65)		2.46 (0.63)		2.48 (0.64)		2.32 (0.67)		6.94	.001	*	*	***
Expand frequency of verification	2.08 (0.76)		1.91 (0.75)		2.06 (0.76)		2.15 (0.76)		4.97	.007	***	***	*
Operational improvements													
Improve information system integration	2.41 (0.66)		2.40 (0.65)		2.42 (0.65)		2.40 (0.68)		0.19	.830			
Improve accuracy and reliability of registries	2.31 (0.68)		2.34 (0.71)		2.30 (0.69)		2.34 (0.65)		0.57	.570			
Increase inter-agency collaboration	2.29 (0.68)		2.42 (0.65)		2.32 (0.67)		2.19 (0.68)		7.36	.001	*	*	*
Improve classification systems	2.33 (0.70)		2.27 (0.70)		2.32 (0.71)		2.38 (0.70)		1.28	.280			
Offender management													
Expand probation and parole supervision	2.54 (0.61)		2.47 (0.69)		2.54 (0.59)		2.55 (0.61)		0.81	.440			
Strategies to reduce transience and homelessness	2.21 (0.74)		2.44 (0.67)		2.20 (0.74)		2.15 (0.74)		6.78	.001	***	***	
Redirect resources to higher risk offenders	2.22 (0.69)		2.14 (0.74)		2.19 (0.69)		2.29 (0.67)		3.23	.040			*
Community-based treatment for RSOs	2.03 (0.70)		2.08 (0.75)		2.00 (0.70)		2.06 (0.69)		1.09	.340			
Public-focused strategies													
Sexual violence prevention education	2.37 (0.64)		2.43 (0.61)		2.36 (0.66)		2.36 (0.62)		0.66	.520			
Strategies to expand public use of SOR	2.00 (0.71)		2.03 (0.76)		2.02 (0.71)		1.96 (0.71)		0.84	.430			
Engagement of community organizations	1.77 (0.71)		1.84 (0.73)		1.74 (0.72)		1.81 (0.69)		1.72	.180			
Increase accessibility and user-friendliness of SOR	2.05 (0.75)		1.96 (0.80)		2.05 (0.75)		2.08 (0.74)		1.06	.350			

Note. AB = significant difference between civilian and uniformed; AC = significant difference between civilian and agency leadership; BC = significant difference between uniformed and agency leadership; RSO = registered sex offender; SOR = sex offender registry.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 9. Rank Ordered Policy Priorities by Position Type.

Policy priority	Civilian	Uniformed	Agency leadership
Expand penalties for non-compliance	1	1	1
Prosecution of non-compliance	2	2	3
Expand probation and parole supervision	3	3	2
Funding for registry enforcement	4	4	7
Improve information system integration	5	5	4
Improve classification systems	6	7	5
Sexual violence prevention education	7	6	6
Improve accuracy and reliability of registries	8	9	8
Increase inter-agency collaboration	9	8	12
Strategies to reduce transience and homelessness	10	10	11
Redirect resources to higher risk offenders	11	11	9
Expand frequency of verification	12	12	10
Increase accessibility and user-friendliness of SOR	13	13	13
Community-based treatment for RSOs	14	15	14
Strategies to expand public use of SOR	15	14	15
Engagement of community organizations	16	16	16

Note. SOR = sex offender registry; RSO = registered sex offender.

expressed by registry compliance personnel in the interviews that their efforts are often undermined by insufficient follow-up at the prosecution phase.

Results for the other two items in this category were somewhat more mixed. Regarding funding for registry enforcement, line-level staff (both uniformed and civilian) placed this item near the top of their rankings, whereas it was deemed comparatively less important by those within agency leadership, $F(2, 1204) = 6.94, p = .001$. Concerning the need for expanding in-person verification requirements, all three groups placed this item comparatively low in their policy priority rankings. Of note, this item was ranked significantly lower by civilians and line uniform personnel than by agency leaders, $F(2, 1204) = 4.97, p = .007$.

Operational improvements. Comparatively, policies related to operational improvements were generally deemed across the sample to be moderate to high priorities. Within this category, all three groups placed the highest level of priority on policies and strategies to improve integration and inter-operability between SORN and other criminal justice information systems. The groups were also fairly uniform in their assessments related to measures to improve registry accuracy and reliability, and to improve systems of registrant classification. The groups diverged somewhat in their views related to the relative importance of policy initiatives to promote inter-agency collaboration, with the need for such initiatives viewed as signifi-

cantly more important to line personnel (uniform and civilian) than to agency leaders, $F(2, 1204) = 7.36, p = .001$.

Offender management. Along with the previously referenced items related to expanded prosecution and penalties for non-compliance, the expansion of non-SORN formal probation and parole supervision for registrants was designated by all three groups as among the highest policy priority. At the other end of the spectrum, the groups also converged in the sentiment that expanding non-SORN community-based treatment for registrants should be given less policy emphasis. Results surrounding the other two items were somewhat more mixed, with civilian registry personnel placing significantly more emphasis on strategies to address RSO homelessness and transience than either uniformed staff or agency leaders, $F(2, 1204) = 6.78, p = .001$, and agency leadership expressing more concern than line staff over the need for strategies to redirect resources to higher risk offenders, $F(2, 1204) = 3.23, p = .040$.

Public-focused strategies. Among the four clusters of policy strategies, those related to public education and engagement were ranked most similarly across the three groups, with no significant differences detected. Although taken in tandem, the items in this category ranked as lower priorities than those in other clusters; one item—policy strategies focused on sexual violence prevention education—ranked in the top six for all three groups. Conversely, respondents across the sample deemed the two strategies related to improving the SORN’s utility as a public information tool—campaigns to expand SORN utilization and modifications to make public SORN systems more accessible and user-friendly—as relatively low priorities. The fourth item in this cluster—engagement of community organizations to support sexual violence prevention—was ranked last for all three groups.

Discussion

This study analyzed law enforcement views concerning the effectiveness, implementation challenges, and policy reform priorities associated with SORN systems. Our findings, generated through an extensive set of interviews and a national survey of police and sheriff agencies, capture the perspectives of a geographically diverse sample of agency leaders and uniformed and civilian personnel involved in SORN administration, management, and enforcement.

Both the interviews and the survey yielded a rich array of data related to SORN policies, SORN operations, and non-SORN community-based sex offender management. As noted in the introduction, the aim of the current analysis is not to analyze these data in their entirety, but rather to offer a “macro”-level view of emergent themes, setting the stage for a more in-depth series of analyses. We focus attention on four main thematic areas, discussing study participant perspectives on (a) SORN as a public information tool, (b) SORN as a law enforcement information tool, (c) matters related to sex offender supervision and SORN compliance enforcement, and (d) the distinct challenges related to homeless and/or transient sex offenders. The discussion

is primarily built around the survey results, with interview findings presented to offer context and elucidation. We conclude the section and article with a consideration of study limitations and a review of implications for policy and future research.

SORN as a Public Information Tool

Our interview data suggest that law enforcement professionals generally endorse the public dimensions of registries and that they strongly support citizens' right to know about sex offenders living in their communities. Interviewees also noted the practical and efficiency benefits of having public Internet registries, citing the systems' role in reducing the volume of inquiries that local law enforcement agencies would otherwise need to field from the public about sex offenders living in their communities.

At the same time, however, both interviewees and survey respondents were circumspect in their assessments of SORN's effectiveness as a public information tool, commonly expressing reservations surrounding the ability of citizens to appropriately understand and contextualize sex offender registry information. In our survey results, concerns regarding public misunderstanding or misinterpretation of registry data emerged as the second highest ranked overall barrier to SORN effectiveness, with 25% of survey respondents listing this as a major concern and 42% listing it as a moderate concern. Moreover, 62% of respondents expressed concern regarding the potential for registries to create a false sense of security, and nearly half (46%) expressed concern over the potential for sex offender registries to generate unfounded or misplaced fear within the community. Although respondents expressed relatively low levels of concern over "information overload" that might stem from having too many registrants on the public registry, many (particularly agency leaders) indicated that the public could benefit from more detailed information on the relative public safety risk presented by identified offenders.

Reticence about the public aspects of SORN was also reflected in our survey results regarding policy priorities. For example, policy proposals to expand the public accessibility and user-friendliness of SORN systems, as well as those involving campaigns to increase rates of public usage of the sex offender registry, were deemed considerably less important than those emphasizing law enforcement-centric functions such as inter-agency information sharing and RSO monitoring and compliance enforcement. Of note, the public-oriented strategy that was most endorsed by our survey respondents was not directly SORN-related, but focused on the need to expand citizen education surrounding the issue of sexual violence and its prevention.

SORN as Law Enforcement Information-Sharing Tool

In both our interview and survey data, law enforcement professionals generally expressed greater emphasis on matters related to SORN's functions as a tool for law enforcement than on those related to the provision of public information. When asked to evaluate their SORN systems' relative efficacy for specific law enforcement functions, respondents indicated their belief that the systems were most effective as means

of sharing information across agencies and helping law enforcement monitor sex offenders living in the community, and somewhat less effective in supporting criminal investigations.

Study participants also highlighted a range of concerns surrounding the adequacy, reliability, and utility of registry data. Prominent among these was the insufficiency of specific offense-related information within the registries, coupled with concern that registry data do not always provide for an accurate assessment of a given registrant and the nature of his associated risk. Interview participants noted such issues as the imprecision of established statutory offense categories, potential effects of plea bargains on the listed offenses, and absence of investigation reports or other information (such as charge information) that might speak to the modus operandi of listed registrants. The extent of these concerns was borne out by survey results, where over 60% of respondents rated “incomplete offense histories” as a major or moderate concern.

Another emergent theme related to SORN system informational utility involved the lack of integration and uniformity across systems. Study participants commonly expressed concerns over variation in state standards and requirements, as well as challenges of inter-jurisdictional communication and coordination—issues that persist despite the 2006 SORNA legislation and other recent federal initiatives that were intended to address them. Beyond this, there also appears to be fairly widespread sentiment that SORN systems should be more effectively integrated with other elements of the criminal justice information ecosystem, including those related to criminal justice history and community supervision. With the exception of policies focused on supervision and compliance enforcement, policy strategies calling for investment in such system integration achieved the highest rankings among our survey sample.

Monitoring, Supervision, and Compliance Enforcement

Both our interview and survey participants placed considerable emphasis on matters related to SORN’s role in helping law enforcement monitor sex offenders in the community. Notably, survey respondents’ four highest ranked policy priorities focused on areas related to supervision and compliance enforcement. Of these, the three top-ranked items (expanding penalties for registry non-compliance, more aggressive prosecution of registry non-compliance, and expanding the proportion of registrants on non-SORN formal community supervision) all involved actors and processes *outside* of law enforcement. These findings are consistent with ideas and themes that were apparent through our interview data. For instance, many registry compliance officers expressed the view that their efforts were often undermined by lack of sufficient “downstream” follow-up in cases of RSO non-compliance. In addition, many described their roles as residing outside of the typical agency functions, expressing the sentiment that “nobody here really understands what I do.” Such beliefs lend credence to the notion that SORN has generated a form of “mission creep” by placing county and local law enforcement into monitoring roles typically managed through community corrections agencies.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, uniformed line staff engaged in SORN enforcement seemed most concerned with issues related to their monitoring caseloads, whereas those in agency leadership roles seemed less concerned with this and focused more on matters of system accuracy and efficiency. Of note, expanding the mandated frequency by which registrants must appear for in-person verification—a significant element in the federally mandated SORNA standards—ranked relatively low in the list of policy priorities.

Transient and Homeless Registrants

Our data revealed particularly high levels of concern over the challenges related to transience and homelessness among the registrant population. Among all the SORN-related barriers and challenges included in the survey, this item ranked the highest, with nearly three quarters of the sample rating it as either a major concern (36.3%) or a moderate concern (37.6%). These findings were fully consistent with analyses of the interview data, where registrant transience emerged as a theme of high priority, particularly among registry compliance personnel in California and Florida, both states that feature statewide registrant residence restriction statutes. It should be noted that residence restrictions are not required by federal SORN laws, and in fact a recent report by the SMART office cautioned that “residence restrictions may actually increase offender risk by undermining offender stability and the ability of the offender to obtain housing, work, and family support. There is nothing to suggest this policy should be used at this time” (Lobanov-Rostovsky, 2015, p. 4).

Shedding light on the roots of this concern, some interview participants expressed attunement and occasional sympathy related to the housing difficulties faced by registrants and the emergent effects on their well-being and social reintegration of registrants. Moreover, supplemental survey findings (previously reported) revealed a subset of respondents who express high levels of concern with the “collateral consequences” of registration, including those related to housing (Cubellis, Walfield, & Harris, under review). Such sentiments, however, were confined to a relatively limited group of respondents—and it appears that law enforcement concerns over registrant transience and homelessness are reflective of both pragmatic considerations as well as humanitarian or liberty-based ones. Specifically, our interview data suggest high levels of concern that registrant residential instability is largely viewed as a problem insofar as it impedes efforts to effectively track and monitor sex offenders in the community.

Study Limitations

Considering the dearth of prior research examining law enforcement perspectives on SORN systems and their operation, the present study is exploratory in nature, and the presented results should be viewed in this context. In addition, although the survey is based on a respectably sized national sample that is more broadly representative than any previous similar research, its overall response rate of 15.4% is somewhat lower than optimal, and it is possible that the perspectives and beliefs of survey participants are not

reflective of those who did not respond. Finally, any interpretation of the findings presented here should recognize that the study participants did not represent a cross-section of law enforcement professionals, but rather specifically targeted subgroups, many of whom may be highly invested in SORN systems and their perceived success.

Conclusions and Implications

This study's findings suggest some important implications for SORN policy and future research examining policy impacts. First, related to the core functions of SORN systems, our results suggest the need for policy makers to distinguish those functions that are directly related to law enforcement practice from those emphasizing public information needs, and to ensure that the former is not sacrificed at the expense of the latter. Broadly speaking, law enforcement professionals in our sample placed considerable emphasis on SORN improvements that can enhance the quality and utility of sex offender information for criminal justice practitioners, while de-emphasizing those focused on expanding public access to sex offender information. SORN reform efforts aimed at strengthening the systems' public safety efficacy should be prioritized accordingly.

Second, our findings serve as a reminder that sex offender registries do not operate in isolation—rather, they should be thought of as one element of a more comprehensive system of community-based sex offender management. In the words of one of our interviewees, “Registration is just the beginning.” From a policy vantage point, this cautions policy makers to avoid thinking of SORN as a “silver bullet,” and to remain attuned to the need for policies and resource investments that address the complex array of supervision and reintegration needs of RSOs living in the community. As reflected in our findings, policy measures oriented toward addressing RSO transience and housing instability, enhancing coordination with probation and parole agencies, and improving the specificity and quality of registry information, seem to be of particular importance for law enforcement professionals.

Third and finally, our findings suggest the need for a more refined approach to examining the impacts of SORN policies. Researchers should recognize that SORN policy is not a “black box”—There is significant variability in how SORN systems are implemented and how SORN information is used by criminal justice professionals and agencies. By moving toward a more contextual and operationally grounded approach to evaluating SORN policies, we can begin to improve our understanding of SORN's potential role within sex offender management practice.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: 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 publication 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.

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