

March 2008

Community Notification as Viewed by Washington’s Citizens: A 10-Year Follow-Up

State and Federal Community Notification Laws

In 1990, the Washington State Legislature enacted the Community Protection Act. The act included a registration law requiring convicted sex offenders who are released from custody or under supervision to register with local law enforcement.¹ In addition, the legislature created the first community notification law, which authorized officials to notify the public when dangerous sex offenders are released into the community.² These measures were intended to “restrict the access of known sex offenders to vulnerable populations, and also to improve law enforcement’s ability to identify convicted offenders.”³

The Jacob Wetterling Act, passed by the federal government in 1994, similarly requires released sex offenders to register with local law enforcement. The act also encourages states to require community notification of offenders convicted of crimes against children or sexually violent offenses.⁴ All 50 states now maintain sex offender registries and have some form of community notification legislation.⁵ In July 2006, President Bush signed the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act, further strengthening community notification requirements and seeking to standardize state laws.⁶

Sex Offenders in Washington State

In Washington State, the Department of Corrections (DOC) uses an assessment tool to assign released sex offenders a risk level of I, II, or III, with level III offenders being the most likely to reoffend. Local law enforcement agencies notify the media, individuals, and/or organizations in the community regarding released sex offenders assessed at levels II and III.

¹ RCW 9A.44.130

² RCW 4.24.550

³ Washington Department of Social and Health Services. (1989). *Task Force on Community Protection: Final Report to Booth Gardner, Governor State of Washington*. Olympia, WA: Author.

⁴ United States Code, Title 42, Ch. 136, Subch. VI, §14071

⁵ L. Morris & M. M. Carter. (2007). *Enhancing the Management of Adult and Juvenile Sex Offenders: A Handbook for Policymakers and Practitioners*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Center for Sex Offender Management.

⁶ H. Res. 4472, 109th Cong., 152 Cong. Rec. (2006) (enacted).

Summary

The 1990 Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to evaluate the effectiveness of the Community Protection Act. As part of this evaluation, the Institute contracted in 1997 with the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center (SESRC) at Washington State University to conduct telephone interviews with a sample of Washington State residents regarding the community notification provisions of the Community Protection Act.

In 2007, the Institute again contracted with SESRC to conduct a nearly identical survey and learn how responses may have changed. The results from both surveys indicate that the vast majority of Washington State residents are familiar with Washington’s community notification law and consider the law very important.

Additionally, these offenders are listed on a website maintained by the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs with information from the Washington State Patrol and DOC. As of February 2008, the website listed information for 2,300 level II offenders and 1,031 level III offenders in the state with valid current addresses, and an additional 574

Suggested citation: Roxanne Lieb and Corey Nunlist. (2008). *Community Notification as Viewed by Washington’s Citizens: A 10-Year Follow-Up* (Document No. 08-03-1101). Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

level II and 626 level III offenders with non-valid addresses (see Exhibit 1).⁷ The most cited reasons for non-valid addresses include incarceration, homelessness, and the offender's failure to verify his/her address.

Exhibit 1
Level II and III Offenders Listed on the Washington State Sex Offender Information Center Website *

	Level II Offenders	Level III Offenders	Total
Valid Addresses	2,300	1,031	3,331
Non-Valid Addresses	574	626	1,200
Total	2,874	1,657	4,531

* February 2008

Telephone Surveys of Community Notification in Washington State

The Institute contracted with the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center in 1997, and again in 2007, to conduct telephone surveys soliciting public opinion among Washington State adults about the state's community notification law. For this most recent survey, 643 residents from both rural and urban regions of eastern and western Washington State were surveyed in September and October of 2007 using a random digit dialing process.⁸ The survey questions elicited opinions in four general areas: respondent's familiarity with, opinion of, and reaction to the law, as well as respondent's beliefs of the law's purposes and importance.

This report summarizes the results of the 2007 interviews and highlights the major differences between the 1997 and 2007 survey results. The sample error for both surveys is plus or minus five percent.

Familiarity With Community Notification

Overall, 81 percent of respondents were familiar with Washington's community notification law prior to the telephone interviews.

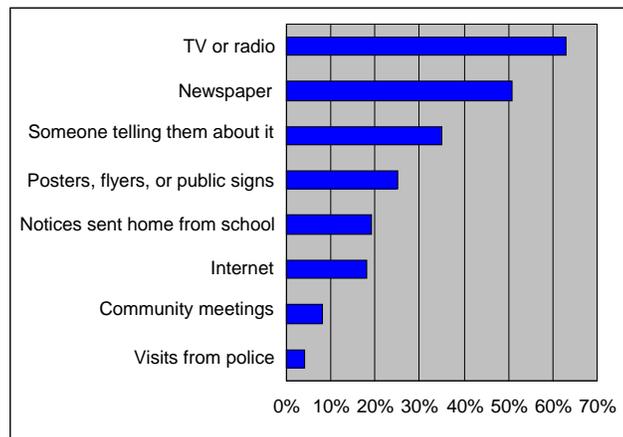
Of those respondents with prior knowledge of Washington's community notification law, 63 percent learned of the law

⁷ Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs. (2008). *Washington State Sex Offender Information Center*. Retrieved by summing county information on February 26, 2008, from <http://ml.waspc.org/>.

⁸ John Tarnai and Thom Allen conducted the survey in 2007. The questionnaire and responses are available from the Institute.

from watching television or listening to the radio and 51 percent learned from newspapers (respondents could choose more than one answer for this question; see Exhibit 2). Other respondents learned about the law from someone telling them about it (35 percent) and from public posters and signs (25 percent). Community meetings and visits from police were the least common means through which respondents learned of Washington's community notification law.

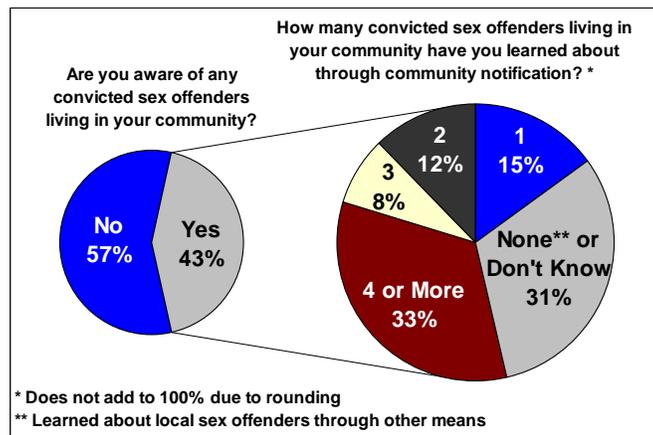
Exhibit 2
How Respondents Learned of Washington's Community Notification Law *



* Respondents could choose more than one answer
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Forty-three percent of respondents were aware of released sex offenders living in their community; 20 percent were notified that a sex offender was moving into their community within the previous year. Exhibit 3 displays details on the number of sex offenders that respondents learned about through community notification.

Exhibit 3
How Many Offenders Did Respondents Learn of Through Community Notification?



* Does not add to 100% due to rounding
 ** Learned about local sex offenders through other means

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Comparison With 1997 Results

Thirteen percent more respondents in 2007 indicated they were aware of at least one released sex offender living nearby. Television, radio, and newspapers were the primary means through which respondents learned of the community notification law in both survey years.

Opinions About Sex Offenders and Community Notification

Sixty-eight percent of respondents reported that they learned more about sex offenses and how sex offenders operate because of community notification.

When asked if they believe police deal appropriately with citizens' reactions to convicted sex offenders being released into their communities, 74 percent agreed with this statement; 58 percent reported they believe police do a good job of notifying citizens about such offenders.

Sixty-three percent of respondents agreed with the statement that community notification makes released sex offenders behave better than if no one in the community knew their background.

Seventy-eight percent of respondents indicated that they felt safer knowing about convicted sex offenders living in their communities even though they could not be notified of *all* criminals who might reside close by. Sixty percent of respondents disagreed with the following statement: "Alerting the community to the highest risk sex offenders will make citizens pay less attention to the risks posed by other sex offenders, such as those who may be known to and trusted by the victim."

Potential Harassment of Sex Offenders

Fifty-four percent of respondents thought community notification makes it easy for citizens to take the law into their own hands and harass, threaten, or abuse the released sex offender. Of those surveyed, 78 percent thought special care should be taken to prevent such harassment.

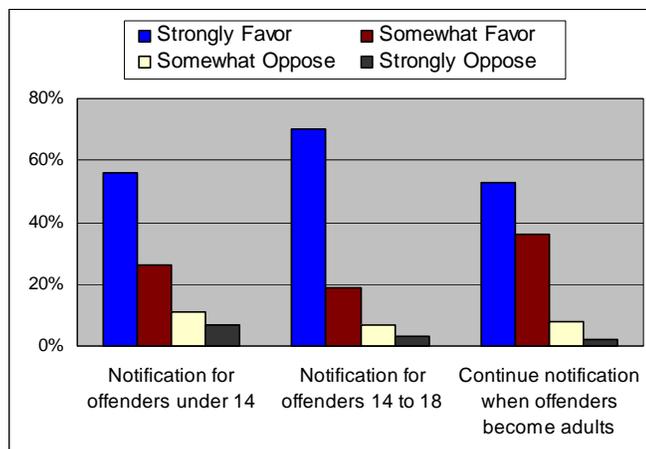
Eighty-four percent of respondents thought notification could make it difficult for sex offenders to establish a new life, find a job, and rent a house. Sixty-four percent of respondents thought such offenders should be given every opportunity for a new start as law-abiding citizens.

Juvenile Sex Offenders

Exhibit 4 shows respondents' reactions to community notification of juvenile sex offenders. The survey found that:

- 56 percent of respondents reported strongly favoring, and 26 percent reported somewhat favoring, community notification for juvenile offenders younger than 14 years old;
- 70 percent of respondents reported strongly favoring, and 19 percent reported somewhat favoring, notification for juvenile offenders between 14 and 18 years old; and
- 53 percent of respondents reported strongly favoring, and 36 percent reported somewhat favoring, continuing community notification when a juvenile offender becomes an adult.

Exhibit 4
Respondents' Reactions to Community Notification of Juvenile Sex Offenders



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Respondents were fairly evenly split (48 percent and 52 percent, respectively) when asked if they favored or opposed changing the law so that juveniles could be removed from community notification at a judge's discretion.

Comparison With 1997 Results

There was little change between survey years in respondents' opinions about sex offenders and community notification. In 2007, 15 percent more respondents agreed with the statement that released sex offenders should be given every opportunity to establish new lives as law-abiding citizens.

Reactions to Community Notification⁹

Ninety-one percent of respondents indicated they were more aware of their surroundings as a result of community notification, and 88 percent indicated they were more safety conscious (see Exhibit 5). Gender appeared to be an important characteristic in how respondents reported they would react to community notification; for instance, 60 percent of females, but only 12 percent of males, reported that community notification made them less likely to go out alone.

Although 90 percent of respondents reported being more likely to report suspicious behavior as a result of community notification, less than 3 percent indicated they *had* reported to someone, in the previous year, that a sex offender was doing something suspicious. Twenty-four percent of respondents indicated they had reported, in the previous year, someone other than a sex offender doing something suspicious.

Exhibit 5
Respondents' Reactions to Learning of a Convicted Sex Offender Living Nearby

	2007			1997
	Females	Males	Overall	Overall
More aware of surroundings	96%	84%	91%	73%
More likely to report suspicious behaviors	92%	88%	90%	67%
More safety conscious	92%	82%	88%	72%
Less likely to leave children unsupervised*	90%	81%	87%	49%
Less likely to leave children with babysitters*	62%	45%	56%	35%
More involved in community activities	53%	49%	52%	14%
Less likely to go out alone	60%	12%	40%	29%
Angry**	41%	38%	40%	68%
Frightened**	33%	16%	26%	67%

* Includes only those respondents with children.

** Wording of responses changed from 1997 to 2007

⁹ If respondents were unaware of a released sex offender living in their community, they were asked to imagine how they would feel if they learned of such an offender.

Comparison With 1997 Results

The largest differences between survey years emerged in respondents' reactions to community notification (see Exhibit 5). Compared with respondents in 1997, those in 2007 reported being:

- 38 percent *more* likely to be more involved in the community as a result of community notification,
- 23 percent *more* likely to report suspicious behavior,
- 38 percent *less* likely to leave their children unsupervised as a result of community notification, and
- 21 percent *less* likely to leave their children with babysitters.

Views on the Purposes and Importance of Community Notification

Those surveyed were asked to comment on possible reasons for community notification. Reducing the chance of a convicted sex offender committing another sex offense, increasing the chance of quickly arresting such an offender, and increasing neighborhood safety were all seen by the vast majority of respondents as major reasons for community notification.

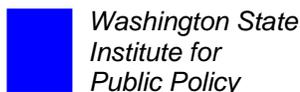
Overall, about 80 percent of respondents indicated Washington's community notification law is very important; females were more likely than males to hold this opinion (87 to 70 percent respectively). Ninety-eight percent of all respondents viewed the law as either very important or somewhat important.

Comparison With 1997 Results

Respondents' views on the purposes and importance of community notification were nearly identical in both survey years.

For more information, contact Roxanne Lieb at (360) 586-2768 or liebr@wsipp.wa.gov

Document No. 08-03-1101



The Washington State Legislature created the Washington State Institute for Public Policy in 1983. A Board of Directors—representing the legislature, the governor, and public universities—governs the Institute and guides the development of all activities. The Institute's mission is to carry out practical research, at legislative direction, on issues of importance to Washington State.