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**Community Notification:
A Study of Offender Characteristics and Recidivism**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Community Protection Act was implemented in Washington State in March 1990. One of the provisions of the Act, known as the community notification law, authorizes local law enforcement agencies to disseminate information to the public regarding convicted sex offenders who reside in the community. The community notification law was viewed by its proponents as having two objectives. The first was crime prevention, through the enhanced awareness of potential victims, their families and community agencies regarding the existence of known sex offenders in their neighborhoods. The second objective was to enhance the ability of law enforcement agencies to investigate crime by providing them with information regarding convicted sex offenders residing in their jurisdictions.

Washington State's community notification law was the first of its kind in the nation. Several other states have now enacted similar laws. This report provides the first examination of how the community notification law has been implemented in Washington State, who has been affected by it, and its impact on recidivism among sex offenders who were subjects of the law.

This study provides a descriptive portrait of the offenders who were subjects of the highest level (Level III) of community notification during the first three years after the implementation of the law. It also provides a comparison of the recidivism patterns of adult sex offenders who were subjects of Level III notification with those of similar sex offenders who were released prior to the implementation of the law, and who therefore, were not subject to notification. The two groups were matched on the basis of the number of sex offense convictions and type of victim (adult or child).

The study found:

- Law enforcement officials were selective in their use of Level III community notification. The adult sex offenders targeted for notification usually had extensive sexual or violent offense histories. Most had two or more prior convictions for offenses that typically involved the molestation or rape of female children who were known to the offender. Most of the offenders also had prior convictions for nonsexual offenses.
- In addition, law enforcement officials were remarkably accurate in their identification of high risk juvenile offenders for community notification. All of the 14 juveniles targeted for Level III notification were convicted of felony sex crimes against children, and most had histories of nonsexual offenses as well.
- Most of the juveniles reoffended during the follow-up period—79% were arrested for new offenses of any kind (including sex crimes) and 43% were arrested for new sex offenses.

- Of the 125 adult offenders who were subjects of the highest level of notification, 52 (42%) were arrested for new offenses of any kind (including sex). Eighteen offenders (14%) were arrested for new sex offenses.
- Most of the new sex offense arrests for the adult offenders (63%) occurred in the same jurisdictions where the notifications took place.
- Adult offenders who recidivated sexually were twice as likely (72% compared to 36%) to have injured their victims during the commission of a prior sex offense than those who did not recidivate sexually.

When the offense behavior during a follow-up period of adult sex offenders who were subjects of Level III notification was compared to that of a group of similar sex offenders who were not subjects of notification, the study found:

- At the conclusion of 54 months "at risk" in the community, 57% of the notification group and 47% of the comparison group were expected to be arrested for some kind of new criminal behavior. This difference was not found to be statistically significant.
- At the end of 54 months at risk, the notification group had a slightly lower estimated rate of sexual recidivism (19%) than the comparison group (22%). This difference was not found to be statistically significant.
- Although there were no significant differences in the overall levels of general recidivism, the timing of reoffending was different for the notification and comparison groups. Offenders who were subjects of community notification were arrested for new crimes much more quickly than comparable offenders who were released without notification.

In conclusion, this preliminary assessment found that law enforcement officials were judicious in their use of Level III community notification. Unfortunately, the findings suggest that community notification had little effect on recidivism as measured by new arrests for sex offenses or other types of criminal behavior. However, it may have had an impact on the timing of new arrests. A more definitive assessment of the impact of community notification in Washington State must await more subjects (especially juveniles), a longer follow-up period, and a qualitative study of changes in law enforcement and community behavior as a result of the law.