

November 1996

Community Notification in Washington State: 1996 Survey of Law Enforcement

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Washington State's 1990 Community Protection Act included a community notification law authorizing public officials to notify the public when dangerous sex offenders are released into the community. This law was the first of its kind in the country.

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy conducted a survey of sheriffs in 39 counties and police chiefs in the state's 16 largest cities during the months of August and September 1996. Forty-five of the 55 jurisdictions polled responded to this survey (82 percent). This report updates the Institute's December 1993 Survey of Law Enforcement. The major findings of the survey are listed below. The number of notifications and incidents of harassment may be underreported since law enforcement must recall reports from incomplete data sources.

Notifications

- As of September 1996, **942 offenders** have been subject to community notification. From the pool of statewide registered sex offenders, this number represents a rate of about **11 percent**.
- A typical community notification includes a physical description of the offender, offender's photograph, description of past crimes, some form of address, and method used when approaching a victim.
- Law enforcement officials have implemented the law in a manner that emphasizes public education and guards against vigilantism.

Community Meetings

- Almost half of the responding jurisdictions conduct community meetings to augment the release of sex offender information. Some law enforcement jurisdictions have developed techniques for these meetings to increase their usefulness. Audience reaction to these meetings overall, has been rated as positive by law enforcement.
- The meetings are usually structured to include information about the offender, sex offenders in general, and techniques to protect children and the general community from sex offenders.

Harassment of Offenders

Law enforcement report **33 acts** of harassment directed at released sex offenders (and in some cases, their families) since the implementation of the law in 1990. Harassment incidents were reported in less than **4 percent** of all notifications.