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Community Notification as Viewed by Washington's Citizens

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The 1990 Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to evaluate the effectiveness of the Community Protection Act. As part of this evaluation, the Institute contracted with the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center at Washington State University to conduct telephone interviews with a sample of Washington State residents regarding the state's community notification law.¹ The results of the survey indicated an overwhelming majority of respondents were familiar with the law and believed it was very important.

Purposes of Community Notification

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. In addition, state lawmakers enacted a *community notification law*, commonly known as "Megan's Law," which was the first of its kind in the nation. It authorizes officials to notify the public when dangerous sex offenders are released into the community.

Many states have followed Washington's lead by enacting community notification laws. With the passage of the federal "Megan's Law" in May 1996, states are encouraged to include community notification of offenders convicted of crimes against children or sexually violent offenses in their statutes. Currently, 47 states have some form of legislation either authorizing community notification for released sex offenders or allowing access to sex offender registration information.² All states now require released sex offenders to register with law enforcement or state agencies.³

Washington State's registration and notification laws were viewed by the state's legislature as crime prevention measures as well as additional tools for law enforcement. The stated goals of these measures were to "restrict the access of known sex offenders to vulnerable populations, and also to improve law enforcement's ability to identify convicted offenders."⁴

As part of the evaluation of the Community Protection Act, the Institute contracted with the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center to conduct a telephone survey soliciting public opinion among Washington State adults about the state's community notification law. Over a four-week period in June and July 1997, approximately 400 residents from both rural and urban regions of eastern and western Washington State were surveyed using a random digit dialing process. This report summarizes the results of those interviews.

¹ A final report is on file at the Washington State Institute for Public Policy.

² Washington State Institute for Public Policy, *Megan's Law: A Review of State and Federal Legislation*, October 1997.

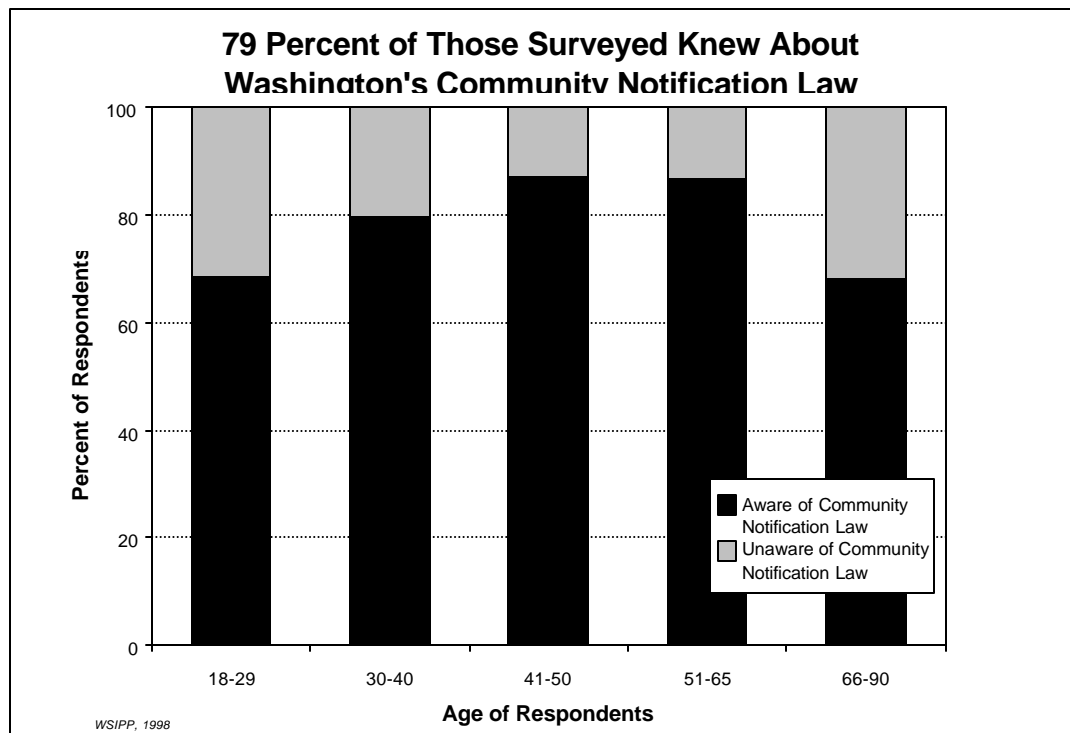
³ Washington State Institute for Public Policy, *Sex Offender Registration: A Review of State Laws*, July 1996.

⁴ Task Force on Community Protection, *Final Report*, November 1989, II, p. 27.

Survey Results

The Social and Economic Sciences Research Center conducted telephone interviews with a sample of Washington State residents regarding the state's community notification law. The survey questions elicited opinions in five general areas: respondents' familiarity with, opinion of, and reaction to the law, as well as their understanding of the law's purposes, and their beliefs about its importance.

Familiarity With Community Notification: Overall, nearly 80 percent of respondents were familiar with Washington's community notification law prior to the telephone interviews. Of those 80 percent, respondents 30 to 65 years of age were more likely than those in other age groups to be familiar with Washington's version of "Megan's Law."



Only about a third of the residents were aware of released sex offenders living in their communities. Those living in rural regions were more likely than those living in urban areas of the state to be aware of such offenders. Also, those respondents who reported prior knowledge of Washington's community notification law were more likely to be aware of convicted sex offenders in their communities.

Opinions About Sex Offenders and Community Notification: Nearly three-fourths of the respondents reported to have learned more about sex offenses and how sex offenders operate because of community notification.

The majority of respondents believe the police do a good job of notifying citizens about convicted sex offenders and that police deal appropriately with citizens' reactions to such offenders being released into their communities.

More than six in ten residents agreed that community notification makes released sex offenders behave better than they would if no one in the community knew their background. Eastern-rural residents were far more likely and western-rural residents less likely than residents in other areas of the state to hold this opinion.

Most of those surveyed disagreed that telling people about convicted sex offenders makes them less careful about other possible sex offenders, such as those the victim may know and trust. The vast majority felt safer knowing about convicted sex offenders living in their communities even though they could not be notified about *all criminals* who might live there.

While about half of the 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, more than two out of three surveyed thought special care should be taken to prevent such harassment. Those respondents with a bachelor's degree or above were more likely to think that community notification makes it easy to harass the released sex offender.

Though three out of four respondents thought notification could make it difficult for convicted sex offenders to establish new lives in terms of finding a job, renting a house, making new friends, etc., less than half thought such offenders should be given every opportunity for a new start as law-abiding citizens. Males and respondents with a bachelor's degree were more likely than females and those with other levels of education to agree that a convicted sex offender should be given these opportunities.

Reactions to Community Notification: Gender and age seem to be significant variables in several of the residents' reactions to learning about convicted sex offenders living in their communities. For example, more than eight out of ten females indicated they were at least somewhat frightened by learning about a convicted sex offender living in their communities, while males reported the near-opposite reaction. Likewise, almost the same ratio of females reported being at least somewhat angered by notification of a convicted sex offender living in their communities, while less than half of the males reported the same. About 78 percent of 30- to 40-year-olds, but only 53 percent of 51- to 65-year-olds indicated they were frightened by learning about a convicted sex offender living in their communities.

The vast majority of respondents indicated they were more safety conscious and had a heightened awareness of their surroundings as a result of community notification—females more than males and 30- to 40-year-olds more than other age groups. In addition, respondents with only some college or an associate degree were more likely than those with other levels of education to report having a heightened awareness of their surroundings.

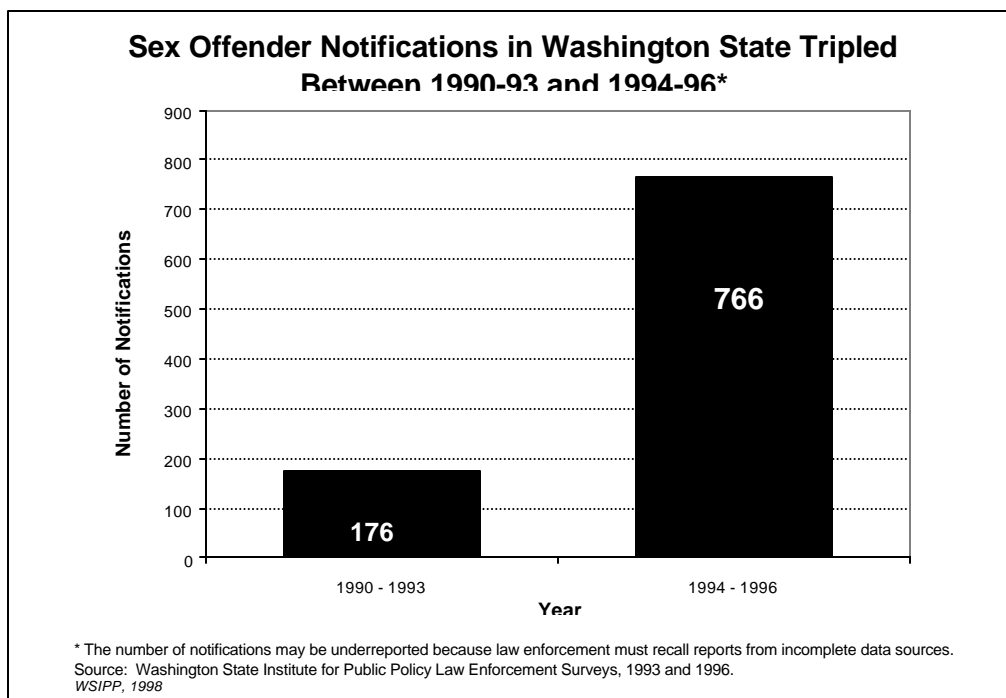
Nine out of ten males, but fewer than six out of ten females indicated community notification had no effect on the likelihood of their going out alone. In addition, more than 80 percent of those 18 to 29 years old reported no change, while over 40 percent of those 30 to 40 years old indicated they were less likely to go out alone.

Over half of the respondents with children reported no change in the likelihood of their leaving children with babysitters as a result of community notification. While not quite half reported they were less likely to leave children unsupervised, almost that many reported no change in the likelihood of their leaving children unsupervised. Respondents who were aware of convicted sex offenders living in their communities more often indicated no change in their likelihood of leaving children unsupervised.

While more than eight out of ten respondents reported no change in the level of their involvement in community activities, two out of three indicated they are more likely to report suspicious behaviors as a result of community notification. Females were far more likely than males to indicate an increased likelihood of reporting suspicious behaviors. In addition, those *not* aware of sex offenders living in their communities were more likely to report suspicious behaviors.

Views on the Purposes of Community Notification: Those surveyed were asked to comment on possible reasons for community notification. The overwhelming majority thought reducing the chances of a convicted sex offender committing another sex offense, as well as increasing neighborhood safety, are major reasons for community notification.

Overall Assessment: Overall, more than eight out of ten respondents indicated Washington's community notification law is very important. Females were far more likely than males to hold this opinion.



For more information, contact Roxanne Lieb at (360) 866-6000, extension 6380.



The Washington 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.