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Not in My Neighborhood: Community Residents’ Perceptions of Local Registered Sex Offenders

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Community Residents’ Perceptions of Local Registered Sex Offenders

Keri B. Burchfield

This Research

- Part of a larger project examining registered sex offenders’ experiences with social capital and social control
  - Sex Offender Interviews
  - Sex Offender Surveys
  - Residents’ Survey

Background

- Sex Offender Policy
  - Community Registration and Notification laws
    - Register name, address, photo and crime
    - Publicly available
    - Sex offender parole
  - Positive consequences
    - Residential safety and empowerment
    - Offender accountability
  - Negative and unintended consequences?
    - Invasion of privacy
    - Stigmatization
    - Alienation

Residents’ Perceptions of Sex Offenders

- Residents’ knowledge and perceptions of sex offenders
- Residents’ attitudes about community notification laws
- Community notification and fear of crime
Theoretical Framework of this Research

- Local social capital and social control
  - Relevance for sex offenders
    - Barriers include
      - Withdrawal
      - Neighborhood cohesion and informal social control
      - Parole restrictions
      - Stigma

Research Questions

- Are community residents aware of local registered sex offenders?
  - What individual and community characteristics affect this awareness?
- Do community residents perceive their neighbors as being willing to report suspicious behaviors of local sex offenders?
  - What community characteristics affect this perception?

Sampling Frame and Methods

- Sample of 10 block groups
  - Northern Illinois
  - At least one registered sex offender
- Door to door survey
  - Questions about:
    - Neighborhood cohesion
    - Social ties
    - Awareness of local sex offenders
    - Attitudes about sex offenders

Descriptive Results

- N=95
- Demographics
  - Majority white, married, employed, income over $50K, at least high school graduate
  - Mean age 47
  - Mean length at present address 13 years
Key Variables

- Aware that there are sex offenders living in your neighborhood:
  - Yes = 36
  - No = 57

- If someone has been identified as a sex offender, have you reported to anyone that the person was doing something illegal/suspicious:
  - Yes = 7
  - No = 29

- How likely do you think it is that a neighbor would report to anyone that a local sex offender was doing something illegal/suspicious:
  - Mean = 3.8 (Likert scale: 1=Very Unlikely – 5=Very Likely)

- If a group of kids were skipping school/spray-painting graffiti/showing disrespect to an adult/fighting, how likely is it that your neighbors would do something about it (informal social control):
  - Mean = 3.7 (Likert scale: 1=Very Unlikely – 5=Very Likely)

Initial Bivariate Results

- Correlations
  - Positive correlation between residents' awareness of local sex offenders and familiarity of sex offender notification laws
  - Positive correlation between residents' awareness of local sex offenders and likelihood of reporting SO suspicious behavior
  - Positive correlation between one's perception of the likelihood of their neighbors reporting SO suspicious behavior and neighborhood informal social control

Initial Multivariate Results

- Predicting awareness of local sex offenders:
  - Informal social control - negative
  - Familiarity with Illinois sex offender laws - positive
  - Income - positive
  - Deserving of punishment scale - positive

- Predicting one's own reporting of SO:
  - Awareness - positive
  - Empowerment to remove local sex offenders - positive
  - Education - negative

- Predicting neighbors' likelihood of reporting:
  - Informal social control - positive
  - Secrecy scale - positive
  - Empowerment to remove local sex offenders - positive
  - Length at address - negative

Framing These Results

- Discrepancy between what residents say and what they do
- What residents do or think appears to be a function of what they perceive their neighbors to do
Implications and Directions for Future Research

- Analyses of structural characteristics (Census data)
- Large mail-out survey
- Analyses of sex offender surveys
  - Preliminary results
    - Positive correlations between perceptions of neighborhood cohesion/social control and extent of community support
    - Negative correlation between SOs' reports of community support and voluntary withdrawal