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Sex Offenders and Campus-Based Sex Offender Registration: Stigma, Vulnerability, Isolation, and the Classroom as Refuge

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ABSTRACT

Inclusion on the sex offender registration list is well known to produce stigma, collateral consequences, stress, and feelings of vulnerability for offenders. In addition to state-based registries, a number of institution-specific registries are beginning to appear, including those on college campuses. By using in-depth interviews with a sample of sex offenders listed on a campus-specific sex offender registry, this study explores the experiences resulting from this label. Findings highlight the feeling of vulnerability listing imposes, as well as self-isolating efforts designed to manage the possibility of identification, exposure, and confrontation. The interactional limitations, as well as the unintended consequence of heightening perceived vulnerability of actions, are discussed. Perceptions of the classroom as both a refuge from identify management efforts and as a means of reinforcement of vulnerability are explored.

Introduction

Concerns about sex offenders, especially recidivist sex offenders, are one of the primary topics of discussion in the field of criminal justice and public safety. Widespread attention to sex offenders and their offenses has emerged in the past two decades and has led to increasingly stringent sanctions and restrictions. Today, sex offenders are among the most despised felons and are subject to registration, community notification, discrimination in housing and employment, and public ridicule. Among the progressively harsh responses to sex offenders today are smaller, more targeted, institution-specific sex offender registries, including those on a growing number of campuses of higher education.

While recognition of the structural restrictions imposed on sex offenders is widespread, understanding how public and private reactions impact sex offenders remains a largely uninvestigated area (see also Tewksbury, 2012). The experiences of offenders subject to continuous, long-term, highly publicized and close supervision, such as listings on publicly available sex offender registries, are important to understand for multiple reasons. First, knowing how the results of criminal justice practices affect sex offenders advance understanding of the effectiveness of offender punishment. Second, knowing the results of those sanctions on offender life in civilian life allows criminal justice system officials to understand whether particular sanctions are taken seriously and are likely to have any desired effects on recipients. And, third, understanding the results of sanctions may also allow supervising/monitoring officials to better predict which offenders need additional/ different sanctions, programs, monitoring, or other services.

The present study examines the ways offenders perceive and respond to their public listing after they have been listed on small sex offender registries maintained by institutions of higher education. Through an analysis of the experiences of a sample of sex offenders who were subject to placement on

both a state registry and a registry specifically listing only registrants studying/working on a university campus, the present study explores the impact of sanctions on offenders and whether this method of community notification helps or hinders social reintegration.

Background

Popular assumptions about sex offenders include that they are dangerous, predatory, uncontrollable, and highly recidivistic. However, these assumptions are inaccurate or over-generalized (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004, 2005). Accompanying negative views are the imposition of both legal and extra-legal collateral consequences, or “wide-ranging, encompassing limitations on employment, education, housing, travel, immigration status, firearms ownership, political participation, public assistance, and family rights” (Uggen, 2005, 4; see also Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D’Amora, & Hern, 2007; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Mercado, Alvarez, & Levenson, 2008; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2009, 2011; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006b, 2007). Sex offenders are publicly labeled as deviants and individuals who should be completely avoided, closely monitored, and strictly controlled. In addition, sex offenders readily recognize and must manage daily the consequences of these labels (Tewksbury, 2012; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006b, 2007).

Among the collateral consequences for registered sex offenders are difficulties in intimate and social relationships, employment, housing, and mental health (Levenson, 2011; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson & D’Amora, 2007; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Mercado, et al., 2008; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2009, 2011; Mustaine, Tewksbury & Stengel, 2006; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006b, 2007; Tewksbury & Zgoba, 2010). Additionally, residential restriction laws that impact registration in many communities are also stressful for registered sex offenders (RSOs) (Jeglic, Mercado, & Levenson, 2012; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Levenson, Zgoba, & Tewksbury, 2007; Mercado et al., 2008; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2009; Zgoba, Levenson, & McKee, 2009). The families of sex offenders also frequently suffer both the same, and additional, collateral consequences as sex offenders themselves (Farkas & Miller, 2007; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009). The most commonly reported collateral consequence of sex offender registration is a persistent sense of vulnerability arising from anticipation of exposure and possible harassment or attack (Robbers, 2009; Tewksbury, 2012; Tewksbury & Lees, 2007, 2006b).

The identification and assessment of collateral consequences have been among the major and earliest explored aspects of the registration and community notification experience (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D’Amora & Hern., 2007; Levenson & Hern, 2007, Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2011; Robbers, 2009; Tewksbury, 2004, 2005, 2012; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2009; Tewksbury & Zgoba, 2010). This literature has shown that registration and community notification often result in social, economic, housing and interpersonal losses for sex offenders. However, only a handful of studies have explored the experience of being a registered sex

offender and *how* sex offenders experience collateral consequences and their status as registrants subjected to community notification. Robbers (2009) drew on qualitative interviews with a sample of registered sex offenders to show that the offenders both recognize their status as social outcasts and also use this recognition as a reason to limit their community involvement and social activities. Sex offender registration leads to “decreases in social support, loss of familial ties, loss of civic identity, and increased psychological stress.” Robbers’ (2009) conclusions support the findings of Tewksbury and Lees (2006b, 2007) that registration causes the offender to be socially marginalized and functions to severely restrict their activities, as a result of formal prohibitions and perceived social pressures and responses; sex offender registration is stigmatizing. Restrictions on social activities and community involvement may be a consequence of sex offenders’ receiving informal social control messages from community members (Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2011). In the course of daily activities and interactions, sex offenders experience informal social control in three forms: recognition that they are being observed/monitored in the community, expressions of disapproval from others, and direct sanctioning actions (Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2011). The frequency and intensity of community efforts are also important. As offenders experience increased frequency and intensity of these informal actions, they also experience an increased level of stress (Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2011).

Messages that they are devalued and despised are communicated to registered sex offenders in numerous ways. In addition to obvious and direct methods used by the general public, such as times when offenders are personally told that they are unwanted and unwelcome in numerous settings and circumstances, community members also use informal communications methods, including staring, disapproving looks, ignoring individuals when they speak or enter a location, being rejected by former friends, acquaintances, or family members, receiving harassing phone calls, letters or posted flyers, and being asked to leave a job or place of business (Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2011). As a result of the receipt of these messages, which may occur multiple times per day, sex offenders develop internalized feelings of shame, hopelessness/depression, and fear. Externalized consequences result when they perceive that they are treated more harshly and unfair than others and therefore develop a sense of resentment toward those communicating stigmas (Tewksbury, 2012). In these ways, applications of stigmas to registered sex offenders have numerous, important consequences for both daily life and ongoing efforts to plan and enact behavioral patterns.

Sex offenders on university campuses

In addition to the well-known although not necessarily widely-used state-based sex offender registries, a number of more specialized publicly accessible offender registries have appeared in the past decade (Anderson & Sample, 2008; Kernsmith Comartin, Craun & Kernsmith, 2009; Lieb & Nunlist, 2008). These newly developed registries focus either on new registerable offenses including drunk drivers (Steinhauer, 2007), owners of dangerous dogs (Schoetz, 2007), and in some states, murder, manslaughter, assault with intent to kill and explosives violations (Logan, 2009). Registries

may also be an exclusive list of sex offenders specific to a particular setting, organization or institution, as in the case of a university campus.

Sex offender registries are present on an unknown number of university campuses (although likely fewer than 10% of campuses). When campusbased registries are maintained, they are most often found on the university website (typically via the campus police department) and may include photographs, names, and informational pages for all registered sex offenders who are enrolled as students or employed at the institution. This information may be unique text created for each listed offender or simply a link to the state registry page for the offender. Whereas state registries contain thousands of offenders, university-based sex offender registries rarely list more than a dozen individuals.

Campus-based sex offender registries and the individuals listed on them are a rarely studied set of issues. To date, only two studies (Lees, 2007; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006a) have focused on this variety of registries and registrants. Lees (2007) surveyed 611 undergraduate students at two universities, one with a university-specific sex offender registry and one without. Results show that relatively few students on either campus correctly knew whether their campus maintained a university-specific sex offender registry (9.5% of students on the campus with a registry reporting knowing of it, 21% of students on the campus without a registry reported knowing there was not a registry). As with the general public and sex offender registries, few students (7.8%) reported having ever seen or checked the campus-based registry. Lees (2007, p. 60) concluded that “the university SOR is rarely used by students ... (and) even if they were aware of such a registry, they would likely use it on an infrequent basis or never at all.”

Tewksbury and Lees (2006a) surveyed sex offenders listed on institution-specific registries to assess their experiences. Following a review of the webpage for 579 four-year colleges and universities, they identified 39 institutions with a campus-based registry in 2005. A total of 113 individuals were listed on the 39 identified campus-based sex offender registries, and 26 registrants responded to mailed surveys. Based on these 26 survey responses, Tewksbury and Lees (2006a) reported that 38.5% of the registrants did not know of the existence of the university-specific registry, yet 56.5% reported being at least occasionally recognized on campus as a registered sex offender. Experiences of collateral consequences including denial of a job or promotion, denial of a place to live, loss of friends, public harassment, rude treatment in public, and assault are common, with student registrants more likely to report most collateral consequences than employee registrants. Being listed on an institution-specific sex offender registry introduces greater possibilities for identification, exposure, and receipt of collateral consequences (despite Lees’ (2007) finding that few students use these registries). But, *how* these actions are experienced is the focus of this research.

The present study

The purpose of this study is to expand on the sparse existing literature and understandings of how registered sex offenders experience the results of registration and how its consequences impact day-to-day life for registrants. The focus is on registrants who are subject to both registration on a state-wide sex offender registry and a registry specific to an academic institution; the social, emotional and interpersonal experiences of registrants are explored.

Methods

Data for the present study come from semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with nine individuals who are listed on an academic institution-specific sex offender registry. These individuals are all listed on both a state-maintained sex offender registry and a sex offender registry specific to the academic institution where they are students/employees.

Sample

The sample for the present study was identified and collected from a review of the websites of 311 institutions of higher education across the United States. These institutions were selected based on their membership in chosen Division 1 collegiate athletic conferences (Atlantic Coast, Atlantic 10, Big East, Big 10, Big 12, Big West, Conference USA, Ivy League, Mid-American, Mountain West, Ohio Valley, Pac-10, Patriot League, Southeastern, Sunbelt, West Coast and Western Athletic). Review of these 311 institutional websites identified 18 institutions with a campus-based sex offender registry; 5.7% of reviewed institutions have a campus-based registry. These 18 registries listed 92 sex offenders, and all 92 listed offenders were mailed a letter providing an invitation to participate in the study via a telephone interview.

Nine invitations were returned with consent forms, and those 9 were interviewed over the telephone during the summer and fall of 2011, a response rate of 9.8%. However, registered sex offenders are a notoriously challenging population to reach; previous research studies on registered sex offenders have yielded similar response rates. While not ideal, reliance on small response rates is quite common (Robbers, 2009; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006a, 2006b, 2007). Because response rates are low for registered sex offenders, accessing those enrolled in academic institutions where college-based sex offender registries are maintained must also be noted as an equally, if not more, difficult population from which to recruit.

Interviewees were male; five students were either current graduate students or had graduated within the last year. There were three undergraduate students and one faculty member. The mean age of interviewees was 38. For those whose offenses were known, three were convicted of sexual abuse of a minor, one for possession of child pornography, and one for voyeurism. Seven of the interviewees had

been convicted, sentenced, and added to their state's registry prior to coming to their current campus, and two experienced an interruption to their time on campus due to arrest and sentencing.

Research process

All interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide consisting of 18 open ended questions. Interviews focused on offenders' knowledge of the institutional sex offender registry, challenges with and expectations of social and academic activities, community responses to the interviewee's status as a registered sex offender, identified sources of support on campus, and academic activities. All interviews were conducted by a specially trained research assistant who is also a registered sex offender (although not on an institution-specific registry). This was done to maximize the likelihood of establishing rapport between the interviewer and interviewee, in response to past researchers' arguments that registered sex offenders are especially difficult to access and with whom to establish rapport. All interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the interviewee.

Interview recordings were between 30 and 120 minutes in length. Following interview completion, all interviews were transcribed for data collection, analysis, and coding.

All coded data by hand, following principles of analytic induction in multiple readings (Charmaz, 1983, 2006). This approach uses numerous readings of all transcripts, with each reading focused on a narrow range of issues and conceptual categories. Because this was an exploratory study, open coding was used, and findings reflected issues that emerged from the data during the coding for the concepts of primary interest. Prior to data collection, all procedures were reviewed by the author's institutional review board to ensure that ethical standards were met.

Findings

Analysis of interview data reveals that sex offenders subject to institution-specific registration almost universally experience social isolation, intense feelings of vulnerability, and find the classroom setting to be a liberating and empowering refuge. However, this sense of freedom and liberation also serves to reinforce feelings of vulnerability and fear of additional collateral consequences.

Social isolation

One of the most commonly reported experiences of registered sex offenders subject to public registration and community notification is a sense of social isolation; this is also true for registrants subject to institution-specific registration. As members of a campus community, these individuals exert substantial energies to limit their exposure as registrants and in the process avoid many forms of interaction and activities on their campuses.

Randy, an undergraduate student, pointed to the fact that not only does he feel isolated in life due to his listing on the state registry, but he clearly sees his institution-specific registry listing as very

limiting. In his words:

You have the registry as well as your campus registry. It's isolating, and it can make it more difficult to communicate to people. I myself am feeling cut off from people, which is probably one of the more dangerous positions to be in for somebody who is an RSO. Having to constantly worry about it and be on guard is a very difficult thing to deal with.

The use of two registries adds to the stresses Randy experiences, and makes him both more concerned and more likely to restrict his activities.

As a part of their striving to limit knowledge of their stigmatizing status, campus registrants report having few social interactions, few if any friends, and a very limited range of activities beyond the classroom. These restricted social interactions are purposefully and intentionally limited, largely due to fear of exposure and what are thought to be the likely repercussions of exposure. They think that if they simply stay by themselves, interact only superficially (if at all) with other campus community members, and do nothing to draw attention to them, then they will remain anonymous and undetected. This purposeful imposition of self-limitations is explained by Eric, a recently retired faculty member,

I didn't socialize with anyone except a few of my cohorts and you could literally count them on two hands. It was about 10 people total ... That to me was always one of the most difficult things about the experience was who knew and who didn't know?

Of the nine interviewees, Eric reported the largest number of people who he interacted with on campus. Other interviewees indicated perhaps 2 or 3 or at most 5 others they regularly had contact and conversation with outside the classroom; typically those who shared the same studies or campus work assignments that placed them in ongoing, close contact. With time, the regularity of interactions may lead to a loosening of the self-imposed restrictions on interactions, however this may typically be only slight. What is notable is that interactions are almost always only with those a registrant is forced to have contact with, not voluntary interactions or true friendships. When asked if he had any regular interactions with specific others while on campus, David, an undergraduate majoring in a social science discipline replied, "I really don't ... I kind of just talk to the students on either side of me in class, (pause) maybe." Or in the words of Michael, who was 44 years old and had been out of prison and on campus for two years, "I don't run with anybody, I talk to them because they are my peers and we attend classes together."

While knowledge of these registrants' status is publicly available to any members of the community who seek it out, registrants stated that they had definitive knowledge of only a very few individuals who knew of their status. Only two restricted sets of individuals were reported as definitely knowing

their status, institutional officials who are required to be informed of the registrant's presence and for graduate students, perhaps a mentor. When reflecting on whom he knew is informed of his status, Walsh, a recent graduate of an urban planning undergraduate program at a state university, responded, "The campus police, pretty much that's [all]. Well on campus just the campus police." Similarly, Lester, a graduate student in a natural sciences discipline, after thinking for a few moments suggested that "I honestly don't know, the people who read my application? And that's probably it as far as I know." For all of the registrants interviewed, there was a recognition that campus police and perhaps one or two other individuals or offices who might have knowledge of their presence on campus, but no one else.

Graduate students reported a slightly different experience, most had established a mentoring relationship with an individual faculty member having informed that individual, but few if any others. Wayne, a graduate student on the same campus where he had received his undergraduate degree, explained:

At first I didn't really feel the need to tell too many people. But then as I started working with people, especially like Kerry who's my thesis chair, I felt like it was important to tell them because I would be working so close with them, you know and be publishing papers with them. I can remember telling one teacher at X, and she goes, "I don't think you need to tell anybody that, that's not anybody's business." She said, "it makes no difference to me and I don't think that you really need to tell people." So, I took that advice.

In a similar way, Walsh, who earlier reported that he believed only the campus police knew of his status and clarified his comments saying, "there was one professor that I had, he was pretty much my mentor in the interdisciplinary program. I explained things to him and he helped guide me in my degree and everything. We still keep in contact." In the graduate student-mentor relationship, it is believed that bonds are closer, interpersonal relations are stronger, and consequently it is both safer and more important to disclose one's status. None of the registrants reported any negative experiences from disclosure to faculty, and all who did mention ever sharing their information with a trusted faculty member indicated that their trust was upheld and reinforced.

Registrants of institution-specific sex offender registries used self-isolation as a tool to limit the possibility of exposure and their fear of subsequent ostracism. However, even with the restrictions that these individuals imposed on themselves, they did not achieve a sense of comfort or safety on campus. Rather, all reported on-going, near constant feelings of vulnerability throughout their day-to-day activities on campus.

Feelings of vulnerability

David's words provide an excellent overview of how isolating himself, restricting activities, and a constant sense of vulnerability go hand in hand for registrants subject to institution-specific registration:

You just can't allow yourself to feel like you can be a student. You can't just get involved in anything and everything 'cause there are so many different activities and organizations that you would like to be a part of to get the experience or to help build your résumé. And you just know you can't do those things. I think that is one of the harder things is that you feel like you always got to look over your shoulder. You don't know from one day to the next if you're going to be confronted. You really put yourself out there in the public eye, it is not like you are just going from home to work every day.

Despite actively limiting his potential exposure on campus, David continues to feel like he has to worry "if you're going to be confronted." Not only is this worry present, but by working to limit the possibility of being identified, isolating himself serves to merely intensify the feelings of vulnerability.

Concerns about being identified and confronted are distractions for students and serve to further restrict the benefits of immersion in an academic setting that registrants can access. Anxieties associated with possibly being identified are therefore kept front and center in the individual's mind. By being on the lookout for settings and interactions that may enhance risks of exposure, there is less mental energy and focus available for attending to studies and academic relationships and more energy and focus devoted to worrying and feeling vulnerable. Randy reflected on what he calls his "constant stressor" of worrying about exposure when he explained:

I think that being surrounded by a lot of strangers on a regular basis and constantly worrying about being found out, that is probably one of the biggest stressors. And it continues to be a fairly large stressor throughout my life whether it's school, work or anywhere else because it's information that is easily accessible to people. But yeah, just having my personal life put out in front of everybody I think is a constant stressor ... Having to constantly worry about it and be on guard is a very difficult thing to deal with.

Or, as related by Lester, "I guess sometimes you are like, you wonder who knows type of thing, you know? Does someone know and they are not telling you type of thing? Are people going to find out and make a big deal out of it? I have never had any issues with it but I definitely do think about it and wonder."

The fact that concerns and worries are constantly present in the minds of these registrants is a taxing situation, and Eric suggested that the most difficult part of his entire experience was worrying about

being exposed. When asked about his overall experience on campus, and what he found most challenging about being on campus, Eric turned the conversation back to his status as a registrant saying,

I guess for me it was never knowing who knew and who didn't know ... To me that was always the most difficult thing of being in school, never really knowing who knew what and if they knew what they knew. Beyond that I think that pretty much would be the most difficult thing for me.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Brady a graduate student who shared:

I think the biggest issue is, that just subtle paranoia just the way technology and communication is you know, one person finds out and then they tell two of their friends and they Facebook it and then somebody tweets it and I come on campus one day and the entire student body knows. That's a fear that, you know, it's probably irrational, it's probably never going to happen but it's a situation which of course would be devastating and career ending.

As Brady suggested, fears of being identified, exposed, or confronted are at the forefront of registrants' minds on most occasions; however, actually being identified, exposed and confronted is not very common. Almost all of the offenders in this sample were approached on campus by someone who learned of their status. In nearly all cases this confrontation was, in fact, more of a supportive encounter, and not at all what each registrant fears on a daily basis. When confronted either by fellow students, undergraduate students in the classes taught by graduate student/faculty registrants, or others on campus, these situations were initially met with great trepidation and fear, but in almost all cases were quickly recognized as non-threatening and in fact, supportive. Walsh taught large undergraduate classes every semester as part of his graduate program and reported, "I would have students slink up after class and they would say, _____ we think it is awesome that you are up here teaching because my dad or my uncle or brother is in that situation and we think it is kind of neat." Or, also in a non-confrontational manner, Lester related that a very casual female acquaintance on campus discovered his status, and approached him with questions.

I had one person, I guess she was typing my name into Facebook or typed it in Google. So she brought it up. But that is the only person, she wasn't angry about it, she just had some questions about it. I don't even remember how she brought it up but she texted me and was like "hey" on this and "what's the deal?" type of thing. In the end we didn't get a chance to talk about it. I am not opposed to talking about it but it really hasn't come back up.

Not all encounters with people who discover a registrant's status go this smoothly, although in this sample no one reported anything significant of a negative nature. Typically, however, these registrants believed that they might have narrowly missed out on a very bad situation and that weathering a

confrontation that ends positively becomes a concern that now only negative confrontations remain to be experienced. Ned, a 27 year old graduate student, reported that another student he had recently become acquainted with discovered his status, and this led to the end of their interactions. As he explained it,

I don't know how he did it but he took it upon himself to look me up I guess on the net or I don't know. He addressed it to me and he said, you know I understand you're a SO. I said where did you find that? He said, I looked on the internet. I said well, there is not much I can do about it ... It just became easier to drop the friendship.

In a much more dangerous situation, Wayne, who was a graduate student on a campus where a deadly, classroom shooting incident took place, related the story that the shooter had learned of Wayne's status as a registrant on the school's sex offender registry.

The guy who did the shooting was one of the guys in my department. Apparently he found out about my background at some point and all of a sudden he got real nasty. So all of a sudden he was getting like mean and belligerent. He didn't come right out and say: "I know about you." But he made really mean comments that even the professor didn't understand. And then eventually he kind of dropped off the scene and the next thing you know he's shooting up the school.

In retrospect, Wayne wondered whether this discovery had anything to do with the shooter's actions, or whether he simply was lucky and did not end up on the wrong end of the shooter's wrath. Regardless, this situation served to reinforce the idea that although the incident was not as bad as it could have been for him, Wayne needed to be very careful about protecting his stigmatized identity, and he interpreted this situation as evidence of the importance and need for him to continue isolating himself from others, because, as Wayne said, "you just never know who is going to react how."

Most often, however, discovery and confrontation are uneventful and others who approach registrants want to either express support or ask questions, perhaps for helping them to understand their own and their loved one's situations. Brady stated:

I have never been actively approached by somebody that I didn't know or that I haven't previously told about it. On occasion there are people that are aware just within my social network. And they will come more out of curiosity they ask me, "hey how does this work?" and "how is your situation?" They just have questions and I am more than happy to answer them because usually what happens is clearing up the misconceptions that there are about SOs.

Similarly, Eric related that:

I have never been approached in terms of, “I heard you are a sex offender is that true?” or anything like that. I have been approached by students when they wanted to say, “well my dad is one,” or “my brother is one, my uncle is one,” and they say “I told them about you and they thought that was really cool.” It was like well if he is up there doing this, maybe my dad will get a job sometime. It was those types of encounters, I can’t recall a single one, there simply was not a single one because I would have remembered it if individuals confronted me directly.

On a more personal note, Walsh recalled that he was approached by another male student who found Walsh’s name on the university’s registry and “he was in the same situation, newly in the situation ... He asked for my advice on some stuff.”

Vulnerability defines much of the experience of registrants on institution-specific sex offender registries, and this vulnerability is seen as enhanced by the small nature of the campus community and the close contact within which campus community members interact. Fears of being identified and publicly outed as a sex offender are frequent, if not constant, experiences for these offenders. Yet, while nearly all of the experiences these men relate regarding identification are generally positive and do not correspond with their expectations and fears, these interactions are perceived as exceptions, and are interpreted as indications that now “only bad possibilities remain.” In this regard, the sense of vulnerability felt by these registrants appears unsupported by experience, yet reinforced and strengthened by both self-imposed isolation and redefinition of positive interactions as exceptions rather than indicators of likely interactions.

While feeling vulnerable and on-guard characterizes the on-campus experience of these institution-specific registry listed individuals, there is one place where these feelings dissipate, and for some even temporarily disappear—inside the classroom.

The Classroom as a Refuge

Registrants of university-based sex offender registries report that class sessions are among the few times they are able to block out and disengage from their continual sense of vulnerability and concerns regarding their status as sex offenders. The classroom is described as a place where these individuals are able to refocus their attentions and energies and where they come closest to being able to fully let down their guard and also interact in a “normal” fashion. In this way, the classroom is a refuge from the pressures and constraints of being a publicly labeled sex offender and one place where attempts to isolate are mitigated. Therefore, classroom experiences are very highly valued and seen as some of the most important times and activities in the lives of sex offenders.

The idea that the classroom is a place where interactions can be (largely) free of concerns or a need for isolation is evident in the words of several sample members. Wayne said that in the classroom he was a very active participant, “Even in the classroom it never stopped me from participating in class. I’ve

always been just as vocal as I've always been." Or, as Michael stated, "With what I have been through I have a perspective that not many people can say, you have the opportunity for a second shot at life. I actively participate in class exercises and group discussions."

All registrants, however, were not able to abandon their self-isolating approaches or to interact without some degree of protective shield. Sometimes, especially for students in the social sciences, classroom discussions can approach issues that may be seen as "too close" or "too familiar" for registrants, and they therefore might self-regulate the participation. Here the words of Eric are instructive. When reflecting on his years of campus activity as a registered sex offender Eric stated, "I was never shy about participating. Now, there were sometimes things that you wanted to comment on but I knew I just couldn't. I just kept certain comments to myself and bit my tongue and just didn't say anything, which is awful." Continuing on, Eric seemed to retract from his position that he was a common participant in any and all gatherings on campus. As he thought about his experiences on the whole, he explained,

Oh god no! Are you kidding? I guess if I really wanted to be cynical I would just say I just played the game. That makes it sound like I am arrogant and I am smarter than everybody else and I am not. There was a certain level of that and it translated into guardedness mostly on my part. For me that's the big difference is I have to always be on guard with regards to this particular issue.

Eric's experiences aside (and they might be unique due to his status as a faculty member), for the most part the rest of the sample reported feeling more comfortable in the classroom than elsewhere on campus, especially during structured activities and discussions that remained focused on class materials. This comfort may in part be a function of care exercised in course selection and specific topics registrants placed at the center of their educational activities. Only one sample member reported avoiding any classes due to his status as a registered sex offender. David reported that as a sociology student, he avoided sexuality and gender classes "because there's like 95% women in those classes" rather than because of the course materials or content. However, outside the classroom activities, he also avoided

the drug and alcohol treatment class. You actually get involved with counseling so you are dealing with clients and stuff like that. The other one is penology class. They actually take a couple field trips out to a couple correctional facilities. I wouldn't want to get out there and get stopped and not let in because of my background. That would be a very embarrassing situation.

Inside the classroom, these students reported being able to relax their focus on identity-protecting efforts and were able to engross themselves in course materials and engage with fellow students and professors "just like anyone else would." In this regard, the classroom served as a refuge; the structure, guided discussions and specific foci that individual courses provided served as an

environment where (in most instances) their status as registered sex offenders was not an issue. Such positive experiences are not common for registrants, and therefore the students saw these occasions as especially valuable and important. Registrants spend significant amounts of time and energy attempting to “pass” in daily life as non-stigmatized persons (largely via isolating themselves). Yet, it is notable that one setting where they feel they are able to do this is a setting where they expend relatively little energy on managing their identities—inside the classroom.

The campus experience, and especially the classroom experience, is valued by registered sex offenders not only because it is a location where they do not have to be so guarded, but also because it is seen as a form of activity that assists them in ensuring that they do not re-offend. This is perceived to operate in two different ways. First, offenders see their educational pursuits as a means to overcome at least some of the material barriers they encounter as registered sex offenders. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the educational experience is valued because it is perceived as an investment in a community that offenders both enjoy and value.

Educational pursuits are commonly expressed as a means to employment and an income—there is the goal of a material payoff. David explained that he believed his pursuits are important because “I have too much to lose. I have a family, I got a home, I am in school to better myself and help others. So, that does keep me grounded because it keeps me focused on what I want to accomplish and what I want to do with my life.” Similarly, Lester saw being in school as important because it provided a structure to his life, which he had learned through his treatment experiences are important for avoiding re-offending. “This keeps me busy. It definitely makes life easier. I know guys who might not have a job or whatever, but this basically is my job.”

The school structure is seen as important to avoid re-offending, an important goal for this sample of offenders. By being involved with their education and their campus, even with internal or external restrictions, these offenders recognized that they have an investment in something that they enjoy and benefit from, and that investment is important for them mentally, emotionally and socially. Such opportunities are rare in the restricted life of a sex offender. When asked whether he saw his being involved in his campus community as related to avoidance of re-offending, Eric replied,

Well, only in the sense that I have worked my ass off to get to a certain place and I don't want that to go away. So, yeah, I guess to some extent it does. It also gives you new roles in society as well as a new status. I consider the SO label to be a primary status because of the way it affects your life. If you have other positive statuses in society, particularly those that are not ascribed to you, but that you've earned, then yeah, I think to some extent it does help to keep you from re-offending.

Also endorsing the idea that being involved in educational pursuits is important for him, Walsh explained that “I think it does because it allows you to learn that you can interact with other people.

You can have a normal relationship with someone. You can participate and you are still part of society.” The idea of education assisting the offender to remain crime free was also echoed by Wayne,

Absolutely! I think that education is critical. I would advise everybody to go back and get more education, yeah. And that is the key to changing the whole mindset. Because here is the problem, when you are stigmatized like we are, and you begin to feel bad about yourself, you begin to believe what other people say about you. That tends to throw you into a cycle, which is where you are in danger of reoffending and when I get into a program like this and I begin to see that what half of what people are saying about me is just rhetoric, I don't have to believe what they are saying, just because they are saying it. It helps me feel better about myself and when I feel better about myself I am at less risk of putting myself in a situation that would put me in danger of re-offending.

By being in school, then, this sample of offenders sees themselves benefitting in numerous ways. Not only is there a material payoff of getting more education, but equally or more importantly for these individuals, there is a value attached to feeling better about themselves and feeling that they are both a part of something and that they have something to lose. Many offenders believe they had nothing to lose when they committed their original offenses; however, in the college setting, the structure, the value of an education, the more positive outlook on life can be lost. Immersion in one's educational program provides a degree of distraction from their near constant recognition of vulnerability; it provides them a realistic hope of being able to overcome their material barriers, and it provides them with something to care about and which they can control. Both of these last two issues are largely absent from their lives, except in this setting. The classroom and possibly the campus itself is experienced as a refuge for registered sex offenders. Here, there is hope; there is a chance for the offender to at least momentarily move away from thinking about his stigmatized status, and there is something he can care for. All of these are important, but only rarely accessible to registered sex offenders.

Discussion

As shown in this analysis, sex offenders who are subject to community notification via both state-based registries and institution-specific registries associated with institutions of higher education experience significant collateral consequences. The most common experiences reported are those of intense and near-constant feelings of vulnerability at a heightened level, essentially the same experience but in a different form and intensity, as was reported by registered sex offenders in community samples (Tewksbury, 2004, 2005, 2012). In response to their experience, these offenders isolated themselves from many campus activities and peers, and through their active attempts to isolate themselves, they intensified their apprehensions of being publicly identified and subsequently

yet further marginalized or sanctioned. In this way, efforts to reintegrate to free society may be inhibited and restricted.

These actions and feelings are an extension of the experiences previously reported by registered sex offenders in general (see Tewksbury, 2012). What this analysis adds to understanding of these experiences is that recognition of one's stigmatization is not only experienced in its own right but also has a direct effect on these individuals' behaviors, views of self, and subsequent social interactions and integration. Additionally, recognizing oneself as stigmatized and working to manage the extent and consequences of stigmatization has important influences on the ways in which an individual develops and manages their public and personal identities. Through their attempts to control the possibility of identification, exposure and confrontation, isolation necessarily reinforces the persistent sense of vulnerability. Ironically, in this respect, registrants' attempts to mitigate their vulnerability instead served to reinforce and strengthen their experience of vulnerability.

Sex offenders listed on institution-specific sex offender registries experience, recognize and work to manage or limit the consequences of their stigmatization, they also experience intensified value regarding their activities and the environments and interactions when there are at least temporary distractions from their stigmatized identity. This research demonstrates that classroom experiences are highly valued interactions for offenders. As individuals experience an increasing sense of investment in this setting/activity, they both enjoy its positive aspects and also sense an intensified degree of vulnerability that arises from the recognition that they are at risk of losing this positive interaction if they were to be discovered. Consequently, their sense of vulnerability becomes deeper and more frequently considered. When this occurs, a cyclical process is set in process; the increasing sense of vulnerability makes the refuge of the classroom more valued, and this enhanced value leads to increasing concerns about potentially losing these experiences. As the refuge of the classroom is experienced and valued more, individuals increase their efforts to isolate themselves in attempts to ensure they are not identified and exposed; an ever-intensifying cycle of valuing experiences and fearing the loss of such experiences is born.

As these individuals invest in their time and place of refuge they are reminded of their lack of control and ability to function freely in the community and therefore exaggerate the value attached to the opportunity to have and enhance desired, rewarding and affirming experiences (e.g. the refuge of the classroom). Efforts to protect that which is valued lead to more isolation as a protective measure. As individuals experience fewer aspects of life where they have control or influence and have less that is considered important (e.g. experience more collateral consequences of registration), that which is valued takes on an even more central role in life. When something is valued, the possibilities of having it taken away are heightened, and efforts to protect and prevent this loss become more important.

While sex offenders on campus or listed on a campus-based sex offender registry experience and recognize significant benefits from their on-campus activities and interactions, they are also limited in their degree of benefits because of their efforts to protect themselves and their access to those valued activities and interactions; sex offenders subject to both state-based and institution-specific registries become caught in a vicious circle. They recognize their devalued, stigmatized status and feel vulnerable; therefore they seek to withdraw from many social settings and interactions (e.g. self isolate) as a way to avoid further negative experiences. Then, as they isolate themselves, they recognize and increasingly value those interactions they define as positive. To continue to experience these positive interactions, they feel it necessary to further act to protect themselves and their possible exposure; this intensifies the experience of vulnerability. Although classroom experiences are seen as a safe refuge for registered sex offenders, it contributes to their ongoing efforts to socially isolate themselves and have persistent feelings of vulnerability.

These findings should be viewed in light of the sparse previous research regarding university-specific sex offender registries and the broader literature regarding collateral consequences. Lees (2007) showed that few students on a campus with a campus-specific registry were aware of it or used it. In the present analysis, sex offenders on campus reported significant collateral consequences (similar to that also previously shown by Tewksbury and Lees, 2006a), and therefore, questions about the specific generators of these offenders' experiences must be raised. One consideration is that university-based sex offender registries are more widely known about and used today than nearly a decade ago. It may be that the university in Lees' (2007) study is unique in its (lack of) use and promotion of its registry. The few students on campus who access the campus-based registry may or may not be active in seeking out and reacting to registered offenders on campus; or, the experiences of offenders listed on campus-based sex offender registries may be due to factors other than the campus-specific registry? These possibilities cannot be considered with the data in the present study but offer interesting and important questions for future research. Even if the campus-specific registry is not directly related to the largely self-imposed isolation, persistent sense of vulnerability, and subsequent perceptions of the classroom as a refuge for these offenders, the fact remains that these registries contribute to stigmatizing experiences and are seen as limits and barriers to community reintegration for sex offenders.

Because of the known collateral consequences in the realm of social life, employment, and housing, the addition of a second publicly accessible registry may be a source of heightened negative experiences, especially one in which typically fewer than a dozen individuals are listed in a community of often-interacting individuals. Or, even in the face of what registrants perceive as a high likelihood of identification and disclosure, as in the case of the registrants interviewed here, there can be supportive structures and activities that may provide a sense of hope and motivation for continuing efforts to move ahead. The classroom as a refuge appears to be one such supportive and rewarding

environment. Despite apprehensions about possible or likely disclosure and resulting stigmatization and discrimination, these offenders found experiences that largely outweighed their apprehensions and provided them with a sense of purpose and reassurances that normal interactions could be (re)achieved.

The present study is not without limitations. The sample is small (as is common in studies, especially qualitative studies of a marginalized population). The data do not address the specific mechanisms by which the presence of a campus-based registry contributes to offenders' experiences, and the veracity of interviewees' accounts cannot be verified. Nonetheless, this study has produced valuable insights into the experiences of a frequently discussed, often feared, yet essentially misunderstood and understudied population of criminal justice system clients. Registered sex offenders on higher education campuses access highly valued additional social supports and positive inputs that registrants outside of this environment may not have. Their presence on a campus-based registry is in addition to registration on a state-based registry; this may not impose significant or substantial additional restrictions on sex offenders, although this status appears to intensify the perceptions of restrictions commonly associated with registration and community notification. Registered sex offenders are subject to social stigmatization, experience collateral consequences, and with the advent of institution-specific registries supplementing state-wide sex offender registries, are provided with yet additional barriers to community reintegration and challenges for remaining crime-free.

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