Unwillingly Revealed: Registered Sex Offenders’
Attitudes Toward the Sex Offender Registry

by

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to anyone who has been affected by sexual assault.
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ABSTRACT

Sex offender registries and community notification policies were developed to provide the public with information about known convicted sex offenders, in an effort to help parents and potential victims protect themselves from dangerous sexual predators. The purpose of this study was to explore registered sex offenders’ perceptions of the impact of the registry and community notification on reducing rates of offending, on their own emotional and psychological health, and to assess their ideas for registry reform. Ten registered sex offenders in Connecticut were interviewed and qualitative methods were used. The results indicate that registered sex offenders perceived the registry to be effective in enhancing community safety but not successful at reducing rates of offending. Due to being listed, the registrants experienced negative psychological, emotional, and psychosocial effects. When they were unwillingly revealed through the registry, the registrants experienced increased negative effects of their stigmatized status as registered sex offenders. Based on empirical evidence and input from multiple perspectives, recommendations are made to address the consequences of the registry and to develop more effective legislation.
1. INTRODUCTION

Sex offending is a serious social issue that needs to be addressed by effective legislation in order to protect people from sexual violence. In 2006, the U.S. National Violence Against Women Survey found that 1 out of every 6 women will be raped at some point in her lifetime and 1 out of every 33 men will be raped at some point in his lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). In 2009, there were over 125,000 reported incidents of rape or sexual assault in the United States. (Rand & Truman, 2010). In an effort to prevent sex crimes, community notification laws, also referred to as Megan’s Laws, which became federal in 1996, have allowed information about convicted sex offenders to be disseminated to the public (Levenson & D'Amora, 2007). From Megan’s Laws, the registry and community notification were created to enhance community safety through awareness, education, vigilant surveillance, monitoring, and collaboration between law enforcement and citizens (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). These sex offender policies are a distinctive type of legislation because their efficacy depends on the public’s participation.

By January 1, 1999, Public Act 98-111 required the Connecticut Department of Public Safety to develop a central sex offender registry making information about convicted sex offenders in Connecticut available to local and state law enforcement and to the public on the Internet (Office of Legislative Research, 1998). At the end of the year 2010, there were a total of 5,231 sex offenders listed on the Connecticut Sex Offender Registry who lived, worked, or attended schools in Connecticut. On this registry website, information on registered sex offenders can be searched using last name, town, zip code, or by viewing an entire list of registrants. As a testament to its
use, in the year 2010, the Connecticut Sex Offender Registry website had a total of 509,898 hits from people searching registered sex offenders in Connecticut. The information on the registry is publicly accessible and free of charge, and anyone making inquiries does not have to provide any identification (State of Connecticut Department of Public Safety, 2011).

The requirements for registration and the types of registerable sex offenses vary according to state law. In Connecticut, any person convicted or found not guilty by reason of mental disease or defect of a sexually violent offense, a criminal offense against a victim who is a minor, or a nonviolent offense on or after October 1, 1988, is required to register with the Commissioner of Public Safety within 3 days of their release into the community (Conn. Gen. Stat. § 54-251(a); 54-252(a); 54-253(a)).

People who have committed nonviolent crimes and crimes against a minor victim are required to register on the State of Connecticut Sex Offender Registry for 10 years. An exception to this, which requires lifetime registration, is for a conviction of sexual assault in the first degree with a victim under the age of 13, if the offender is more than 2 years older than the victim. Lifetime registration is also required for someone after conviction and release into the community for crimes that are considered sexually violent offenses under Conn. Gen. Stat. § 54-250, or if someone is convicted of a crime requiring registration and has a prior conviction of any such offense.

People who are required to register must update their status every 90 days or incur the penalty for non-compliance, a Class D felony (State of Connecticut Department of Public Safety, 2011), which is punishable by up to 10 years in prison (Sample & Evans, 2009).
Information that is collected by the Connecticut Department of Public Safety includes the offender’s photograph, name and any aliases used, date of birth, registration address, race, sex, hair color, eye color, height, weight, scars, marks, tattoos, registration date, date of last address verification, crime requiring registration, and date of conviction. See Figure 1 (p. 10) for a simulated image taken from the registry website. The website can be searched using last name, city, or zip code (State of Connecticut Department of Public Safety, 2011). Courts have the power to restrict dissemination of registration information for individual offenders (Conn. Gen. Stat. § 54-255), usually to protect the identities of victims of incest.

When examining the literature on sex offender registries and community notification techniques, it is important to note that researchers are only able to conduct studies using a small subset of the population of sex offenders in the country. The majority of people who are required to register in their state and are subject to notification as sex offenders must meet all of the following criteria: (1) have committed a sexual offense recognized by the state or federal law as an offense that requires registration; (2) have been reported to or have been identified by a law enforcement agency; (3) have been arrested by a law enforcement agency for that crime; (4) have gone through legal proceedings including arraignment, pleading or contesting the charges, or a criminal trial resulting in conviction; (5) have committed their crime during the time frame that requires registration (Wright, 2003). According to the numerous steps required to result in registration, in addition to the low number of reports of incidents of rape and sexual assault—only 1 in 5 women and 1 in 7 men, who were raped as adults, reported these incidents to the police (Tjaden & Thoennes,
2006)—it is most probable that a relatively small proportion of people who commit sex offenses are registered.

Figure 1. Simulated registry listing. This image was copied from the Connecticut Sex Offender Registry website (http://www.communitynotification.com/cap_office_disclaimer.php?office=54567) and the information was edited. Permission was obtained to use this graphic from the Connecticut Department of Public Safety.
Prevention of sex offending has not been due to a lack of policy; in fact, more legislation has been created in response to sex offenders than any other class of violent offenders (Meloy, 2006b). However, many recent sex offender legislative actions seem to be the result of emotional public response to violent sex crimes, rather than based upon empirical research that proves these laws will make a difference in reducing the frequency of any one type of violent crime (Freeman-Longo, 1996). While research has shown that the registry and community notification do not have a measurable deterrent effect on sex offender recidivism patterns for offenders who are listed (Sandler, Freeman, & Socia, 2008; Schram & Milloy, 1995; Walker, Maddan, Vásquez, VanHouten, & Ervin-McLarty, 2005; Zevitz, 2006; Zgoba, Witt, Dalessandro, & Veysey, 2008), research has also demonstrated that this type of legislation can have detrimental consequences for offenders (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, & Hern, 2007; Meloy, 2006a; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006, 2007). These policies can also socially stigmatize offenders by publicly exposing their status as registered sex offenders (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Scott & Gerbasi, 2003; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2007).

The purpose of the present study was to examine registered sex offenders’ attitudes toward the registry and community notification. This study focuses on the perceived psychological effects, psychosocial effects, emotional effects, and consequences of being listed on the registry. In addition, I investigated the registered sex offenders’ perspectives on the effects of the registry on victims reporting, the rates of sexual offending, and the registry’s overall necessity. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 participants who were registered on the Connecticut
Sex Offender registry at the time of this study, and I utilized grounded theory method and qualitative analysis to examine the perspectives of registered sex offenders on the effects of sex offender legislation.

The perspectives of registered sex offenders are a valuable source of insight to inform legislators and policymakers in order to create a more effective registry and notification policy (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007). This study is important because it examines the efficacy of the registry from the perspectives of people who are registered. This study could assist policymakers with weighing the costs: the emotional, psychological, and other consequences of being listed, against the potential benefits of the registry: informing the public about convicted sex offenders. Given that the registry and community notification appear to impede sex offender reintegration into the community and have a detrimental impact on the lives of sex offenders, these collateral consequences may ultimately hinder this legislation’s primary goal of enhancing community safety.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sexual Offenses and Offenders

The definition of a sexual offense has changed drastically throughout history and remains inconsistent between jurisdictions in the United States. A sex offense is defined in the *American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology* as a sex act that is prohibited by law. Some crimes are acts of violence involving sex and others are violations of social taboos (VandenBos, 2007). Most jurisdictions agree that a sexual offense includes a lack of consent and generally contains 1) force or threats, 2) a statement implying the desire not to engage in said activity, or 3) an individual who is unable to consent because of age, mental capacity, physical capacity, or an individual who is under the care of the state (Zilney & Zilney, 2009a). However, some jurisdictions consider certain consensual sex acts illegal, such as prostitution and pimping (VandenBos, 2007).

Sexual abuse is defined by the *APA Dictionary of Psychology* as a violation or exploitation by sexual means, including all sexual contact between adults and children, and between people in other relationships of trust. Molestation is defined as the act of making sexual advances toward a person who does not want them and generally implies sexual fondling or touching an individual without lawful consent. Sexual perversion is defined as any sexual practice that is considered by a community or culture as an abnormal means of achieving orgasm or sexual arousal and is defined as a paraphilia by the *DSM-IV* (VandenBos, 2007). As defined by the *DSM-IV-TR*, paraphilias (such as pedophilia, exhibitionism, voyeurism, and frotteurism) are...
“recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors generally involving 1) nonhuman objects, 2) the suffering or humiliation of oneself or one’s partner, or 3) children or other nonconsenting persons that occur over a period of at least 6 months” (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 566).

No one typology fits all sex offenders because they are a heterogeneous group of people. Although sex offenders are a diverse population, some have similar characteristics: the majority of sex offenders are male (Williams, 2009), sex offenders are more likely to be older than other violent offenders (in their 30s), and more likely to be white than other violent offenders (Greenfeld, 1997). According to the Encyclopedia of Psychology and Law, typologies of sex offenders typically divide into those who commit contact sex offenses: child molesters, incest offenders, and rapists, and those who commit non-contact offenses: exhibitionists, voyeurs, and frotteurs (Jeglic, 2008).

Child molesters are sex offenders whose victims include minors (those under the age of 18). Child molesters who are sexually attracted to prepubescent children (those under the age of 13) are referred to as pedophiles, while those sexually attracted to teenagers (those between the ages of 13 and 18) are considered hebophiles. Neither pedophilia nor hebophilia are considered crimes because they relate only to sexual interest and not to the commission of a sexual act (Jeglic, 2008).

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1 For this thesis, I engage in specific rhetoric with reference to sexual violence. I use the term “sex offenders” for people who have offended sexually, although it is imperative to recognize that people who have offended sexually are not solely defined by their past behavior (Zilney & Zilney, 2009b). I use the term “victims” for people who have experienced acts of sexual violence. Although the term “survivors” is also used to describe people who have experienced acts of sexual violence, not all people who have experienced acts of sexual violence survive, and not all of those who survive choose to identify themselves as survivors.
Research has shown that there are various types of pedophilias, which are driven by similar sexual aims: sex with prepubescent children. Each type of pedophilia has different causative processes and different levels of fixation, which result in varying degrees of severity and different prognoses for recovery (Socarides & Loeb, 2004).

Incest offenders are sex offenders who offend against minors who are related to them by blood or minors over whom they have quasi-parental authority (step-parent or parent’s significant other). Inappropriate sexual contact between incest offenders and their victims may occur once, but more often it occurs over a span of several years. Unlike child molesters, incest offenders are generally sexually attracted to adult females, but they often view their minor victims as surrogates for age-appropriate partners (Jeglic, 2008).

Rape is generally considered forced sexual intercourse without consent against adult victims. Rapists are primarily interested in self-gratification, dominance, and control (Jeglic, 2008). Groth (1979) defines rape as a pseudosexual act that addresses issues of anger and power more than sexuality. He asserts that rape is never simply the result of sexual arousal that cannot be gratified. While sexuality is not the only nor the primary motive underlying rape, it is the means through which conflicts surrounding issues of anger and power become released (Groth, 1979). Unlike child molesters and incest offenders, rapists usually offend against the same victim only once (Jeglic, 2008).

There are three types of non-contact or minimal contact offenses that are considered paraphilias in the *DSM-IV-TR*: exhibitionism, voyeurism, and frotteurism. Exhibitionism is the most common form of sex offending behavior (Jeglic, 2008).
Exhibitionists derive sexual pleasure and arousal from the exposure of their genitals to an unsuspecting stranger. If the exhibitionist acts on this sexual arousal by engaging in masturbation, there is generally no attempt at further sexual activity with the stranger (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Voyeurism involves the act of becoming sexual aroused by observing unsuspecting individuals who are naked, in the process of undressing, or engaging in sexual activity (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Most commonly, the voyeur observes the victim(s) to become sexually aroused but does not desire any contact with the victim(s) (Jeglic, 2008). Frotteurism involves touching or rubbing against a nonconsenting person to achieve sexual gratification. This behavior usually occurs in a crowded place (e.g., in a bus or mall) from which the frotteur can more easily escape arrest. In the act, the frotteur usually fantasizes that he is in an exclusive, caring relationship with the victim (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Sex offenders are not compelled to offend because of one single need but rather for many reasons, most of which are nonsexual (Williams, 2009). For example, Groth (1979) originally defined four categories of power and control needs that rapists exhibit. Power-reassurance is classified as non-aggressive behavior, which serves to normalize the attack for offenders and to fulfill the need of restoring their doubts about their own desirability. Power-assertive behavior is defined as aggressive behavior, which is rarely lethal and shows no outward doubt of masculinity but serves to restore inner doubts and fears. Anger-retaliatory behavior is defined as high levels of physical and sexual aggression that serve as an outlet for feelings of pervasive and cumulative rage. Anger-excitation is classified as pain and suffering inflicted upon
the victim in order to heighten the offender’s sexual pleasure (Groth, 1979). This sexual aggression model, outlined by Groth (1979), is part of the most empirically validated rapist typology in use, the Massachusetts Treatment Center Rapist Typology Version 3 (MTC:R3) (Pakes & Winstone, 2007). This model has been adapted by the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) to describe sex offender behavior, which assists in profiling offenders (Williams, 2009).

Sex offenders have been found to have differing patterns for offending. Harris, Mazerolle, & Knight (2009) postulate two distinct trajectories of sexual offending: sexual offenses that are committed rarely as part of a wider range of criminality in which the individual engages, and sexual offenses that are committed by specialized offenders (offenders who commit a particular crime), who rarely if ever engage in any other law-breaking behavior. They found that child molesters were more likely to specialize than rapists (Harris, Mazerolle, & Knight, 2009).

Integrated theories of sexual offending are based on the premise that sex offenses are best explained by previous learning, disturbed sexual and emotional life experiences, and distorted self-perception and cognition, which lead to an identifiable cycle of offending. An integrated theory of influence created by Wolf (1984) suggests that an individual’s early history leads to the development of a type of personality that predisposes someone to develop deviant sexual interests, whereas egocentricity and low self-esteem lead to a poor self-image and result in defensiveness and distorted thinking. Distorted cognitions then trigger obsessive thinking and behavior, which can worsen social alienation and sexual preoccupation. This withdrawal into sexual fantasies leads to planning and committing the offense, which results in guilt,
reinforces low self-esteem, and reaffirms the cycle, which becomes addictive and impulsive (Wolf, 1984).

Sex offenders have been found to have a range of personality types. In a study on psychopathology and personality disorders of incarcerated sex offenders compared to general inmates, Ahlmeyer et al. (2003) found that sex offenders had more varied types of personalities than general population inmates. Sex offenders were more schizoid, avoidant, depressive, dependent, self-defeating and schizotypal, while general population inmates were more antisocial, narcissistic and sadistic, which are regarded as more classically criminal personality characteristics. Sex offenders were found to have more affective psychopathology such as anxiety, dysthymia, PTSD, and major depression than general population inmates. Researchers also found a trend when comparing child molesters to rapists which showed that child molesters were more neurotic, affective, and socially impaired than rapists (Ahlmeyer, Kleinsasser, Stoner, & Retzlaff, 2003).

Many sex offender laws and policies are created in response to sexually violent predators, who do not represent the average sex offender. Sexually violent predators are people suffering from a mental abnormality or personality disorder who have committed an act of sexual violence and are likely to sexually offend due to their mental abnormality or personality disorder. People who are considered sexually violent predators, however, only represent a small percentage of those subject to community notification laws (Williams, 2009). These sex offenders are more likely to reoffend than other types of sex offenders, and if they have a significant degree of psychopathy, are at a moderate to high risk for reoffense (Jackson & Richards, 2007).
Creating legislation with only this type of sex offender in mind and applying it to a heterogeneous population of people who sexually offend is not only inaccurate, but also ineffective.

2.2 Social-Psychological Theories of Sex Offending

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory explains that sexual aggression is initiated through learning from associates and by imitation. Sexually inappropriate behaviors are believed to be learned as a result of being sexually abused as a child or observing sexual abuse (Buss & Malamuth, 1996). According to this theory, people are more likely to engage in sexual offending as adults if they were raised in households where there was sexual abuse, if they were surrounded by people who are supportive of rape myths and are disrespecting towards women, and if they do not have other people in their lives to convey to them that this behavior is inappropriate (Zilney & Zilney, 2009b). Rewards and punishments play a role in social learning theory: if a certain behavior is rewarded among friends or family, one is more likely to repeat this behavior in the future, while if this behavior is punished or simply not rewarded, the individual is less likely to repeat this behavior (Stinson, Sales, & Becker, 2008).

Social learning theorists propose that people who were victimized as children surrounded themselves later on with people who did not support this deviant behavior (Zilney & Zilney, 2009b). Although there is a large number of sex offenders who report being sexually abused as children (approximately 50%) (Craissati, McClurg, & Browne, 2002), there is evidence that most children who are sexually abused do not
go on to sexually offend (e.g., the disproportionate number of women who were victimized as children, Putnam, 2003). However, sex offenders who were sexually abused differ from other sex offenders by offending earlier, having more victims, having both male and female victims, and tending to show more psychopathology and interpersonal problems (Cooper, Murphy, & Haynes, 1996).

Pornographic material including violent pornography or rape pornography, in which people are portrayed in humiliating or degrading positions, can also contribute to the social learning of sexual violence. A meta-analysis of experimental studies shows a positive correlation between exposure to pornography and an increase in rape myth acceptance (e.g., “She was asking for it,” “She liked it”) (Allen, Emmers, Gebhardt, & Glery, 1995). Although violent pornography has been found to have more of an effect, nonviolent pornography has also been found to have an effect on the acceptance of rape myths (Allen, et al., 1995). In violent pornography, if the victims are portrayed as enjoying the sexual violence inflicted on them or seeking out sexually violent abuse, it can reinforce the myth that women are not harmed by sexual violence and actually enjoy sexually harmful interactions (Stinson, et al., 2008). Also, if others viewing the pornographic material are excited by it and approve of the sexually violent behaviors, the individual viewer may be more inclined to interpret the sexually violent messages of the films as positive and rewarding (Sinclair, Lee, & Johnson, 1995). These examples demonstrate the importance of social learning theory in understanding how and why some people sexually offend.
**Rational Choice Theory**

Rational choice theory posits that an individual weighs the pros and cons in a cost-benefit analysis prior to committing a sexual offense. In the mind of the potential offender, if the prospective benefits of the sexual offense outweigh the probable risks, the person is likely to engage in that crime (Cornish & Clarke, 1986). For example, research analyzing 646 cases of rape found that 71% were premeditated and not sudden, impulsive acts (Amir, 1971). Beauregard & Leclerc (2007) examined the offending processes of 69 serial sexual offenders who committed sexual crimes against stranger victims and found that even if sex offenders have been traditionally described as “irrational” and impulsive, they are capable, up to a certain point, of a cost-benefit analysis of their behaviors. The researchers emphasized the importance of situational factors, such as victim resistance, which was found to be more preventative than no resistance, on the decision-making process of sex offenders, (Beauregard & Leclerc, 2007). According to rational choice theory, sex offenders may take into account legal consequences, such as being listed on the registry, as a cost, prior to or during commission of a sex offense.

**Labeling Theory**

Labeling theory asserts that people who engage in deviant behaviors are negatively labeled by the criminal justice system and in turn, by society. Labeling results in stigmatization of the offender, often causing a negative societal response, which can provoke an offender’s return to the behavior (Zilney & Zilney, 2009a). While the criminal sex offender label imposed by the registry and community notification reveals that offenders have committed intolerable acts, it also implies that
they could have controlled their behaviors and that if they reoffend, they will be dealt with even more harshly. This criminal label may be more therapeutic for offenders than the illness label because it implies that the offenders were responsible for their behaviors, rather than attributing their behaviors to an illness (Winick, 2003).

However, if registered sex offenders perceive this label as producing or reinforcing expectancies of failure, the label may hinder the primary purpose of the registry and community notification: to prevent sex offending recidivism through encouragement of responsibility for actions and rehabilitation (Winick, 1998).

The labeling of sex offenders with mental illnesses as “sexually violent predators” can be precarious because people who attribute their lack of control and antisocial conduct to illness can be led to believe that self-control is not possible. This type of self-handicapping can inhibit future self-control attempts (Winick, 2003). Therefore, labeling sex offenders as sexually violent predators may provide these offenders with an excuse to give in to their sexual urges and reoffend. Labels may make it more difficult for these sex offenders to exercise the self-control that is needed to prevent future sexual assaults (Winick, 1998).

**Social Control Theory**

According to social control theory, the deterring factor from engaging in crime or deviance for some individuals is either a high level of self-control or a commitment to a sense of conformity in society (Hirschi, 1969). Before committing crimes, individuals take into account factors such as their attachment to people or institutions, commitment to conventional actions, involvement in non-criminal activities, and a sense of the moral authority of norms (Hirschi, 1969). Regarding sex
offending, social control theorists would suggest that society has deemed some sexual behaviors appropriate and others inappropriate. While the vast majority of individuals follow these social norms, people who sexually offend do not because of lower levels of self-control and/or less social constraints (Zilney & Zilney, 2009b). Being listed on the registry is a mode of condemning sex offending behavior and communicating to offenders that because they do not possess self-control or a commitment to conform to society, they must be subject to public monitoring.

These social psychological theories of sex offending are essential to understand the underlying mechanisms of committing a sexual assault. Social learning theory explains how and why some people come to sexually offend, through learning from associates. Rational choice theory permits evaluation of whether certain sanctions, like the registry and community notification, weigh in as a cost in a cost-benefit analysis prior to a commission of a sexual offense. Labeling theory enables examination of the effects of the public label of “sex offender” imposed by the registry. Social control theory allows for investigation into the effects of community norms and standards, such as active involvement in the community, on sex offenders and their rates of offending. These theories will be considered in conjunction with the effects of the registry and community notification on sex offenders and their offending behavior patterns.

2.3 History of Sex Offender Legislation

Sex offender legislation in the United States developed following the United Kingdom’s introduction of dangerous offender legislation in the early 1900s. These
laws, created primarily for property offenses (e.g., burglary, larceny), allowed for the indeterminate imprisonment of repeat offenders. At this time in the United States, the notion of the “sexual psychopath” was equated with immorality, primarily aimed at homosexual men and other “indecent” offenses. In the 1930s, this term changed, coming to mean perverts whose sexual urges would cause increasingly violent behavior (Zilney & Zilney, 2009a).

In the early to mid-1930s, the media became more focused on sexual violence including many news articles reporting the investigations of murders and sexual assaults of children (Lucken & Latina, 2002). When these stories surfaced in the news, they produced a moral panic surrounding sexual violence. These stories detailed the investigations of sexual offenders like Albert Fish, who was convicted of sexually assaulting, murdering, and cannibalizing a 12-year-old boy, and who was subsequently discovered to have violated hundreds of other children and murdering as many as 15 others before he was arrested in 1934 and subsequently executed in 1936 (Zilney & Zilney, 2009a). Although this case was highly atypical, due to the media exposure, people began to believe that this was a typical type of sex offense and came to associate the term “sex offense” with acts of violence and murder (Zilney & Zilney, 2009a). In a response to this moral panic and public demands for legislation to address sexual violence, head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, J. Edgar Hoover, declared an official “war on sex crimes” (Lucken & Latina, 2002).

Between 1935 and 1965, to address this war on sex crimes, city, state, and federal officials established commissions to investigate sex crimes, passed statutes transferring authority over sex offenders from courts to psychiatrists, and provided
funding for the specialized institutions for the treatment of sex offenders. The issue of sexual offending had flip-flopped from being under jurisdiction of the criminal justice system to the jurisdiction of the medical field. Rather than considering child molestation and other types of sexual acts as criminal, new sexual psychopath statutes treated these deviant sexual behaviors as symptoms of illness and labeled perpetrators, “sexual psychopaths” (Winick, 2003). If determined to be a sexual psychopath, through a hearing process, a person could be indefinitely committed to a psychiatric institution (Freedman, 1987). After the moral panic surrounding sexual violence died down, these sexual psychopath laws came under criticism in the 1950s because of their lack of use, their ineffectiveness (most confined under these laws were charged with homosexuality), and the vagueness and psychiatric inaccuracy of the term “sexual psychopath” (Sutherland, 1950). By the early 1970s, involuntary commitment of sex offenders was made highly difficult unless offenders posed an imminent risk of harm to themselves or others. Eventually, the sexual psychopath laws across the nation were repealed. Those sex offenders who had been committed to mental health institutions under these laws were subsequently transferred to prison (Zilney & Zilney, 2009a).

During the 1970s, sexual violence was again brought to the forefront as a serious social issue, but this time, there was more of an emphasis on the rights of victims. Feminists and women’s groups sought to change the definition of rape to include groups that were denied access to the criminal justice system (males and married women), encompass other offenses that were not considered rape at the time (incest, acquaintance rape, marital rape), and to eliminate barriers to prosecution (e.g.,
“utmost resistance” requirements) (Corrigan, 2006). In response to calls for reform, legislation surrounding sexual violence underwent changes. In 1975, the National Center for the Prevention and Control of Rape was established within the National Institute of Health (Scully, 1990). In 1978, the Privacy Protection for Rape Victims Act amended the federal rules of evidence with regard to the admissibility of testimony on the victim’s sexual history with individuals other than the defendant, leading states to adopt “rape shield laws,” which protect victims as trial witnesses (Greene, Heilburn, Fortune, & Nietzel, 2007).

Child sexual abuse was first considered to be a pressing social issue in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when child abuse received more focus from women’s groups and other social welfare groups, resulting in the passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act in 1974 (Zilney & Zilney, 2009a). The morally conservative atmosphere of the 1980s resulted in a huge influx of literature on rape, incest, and child sexual abuse, and investigations into child pornography (Zilney & Zilney, 2009a). During the 1980s, there were several high-profile cases of alleged satanic and ritualized sexual abuse of children, such as the McMartin preschool case. During this same time, therapists began using “recovered memories” to retrieve repressed memories of past sexual abuse, causing the public to question the validity of reports of sexual abuse due to potentially falsified memories. At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, a string of high-profile cases occurred in which previously convicted sex offenders raped and murdered children, triggering a set of newer and tougher sex offender laws (Zilney & Zilney, 2009a).
2.4 Current Sex Offender Legislation

In the last two decades, in the United States, state and federal legislators have passed several laws in response to several high-profile sexually violent crimes that do not represent the average sexual violence case. While the media routinely links severe violence and sexual assault cases, less than 2% of murder cases involve any sexual assault (Greenfeld, 1997). However, the media may focus attention on stranger-related sex crimes because stranger sex offenses committed by unknown or lesser known assailants are more likely to result in a victim’s serious injury or death than sex offenses committed by offenders who know their victims (Greenfeld, 1997). The expansion of registration laws nationwide can be traced back to three specific crimes of sexually related homicide against children (Sample & Evans, 2009).

In 1989, Jacob Wetterling, an 11-year-old boy from Minnesota, was abducted while riding bikes with his brother and friend. Although his disappearance remains an unsolved mystery, Wetterling’s parents speculated that this crime was committed by a previously convicted sex offender. Due to this belief, Wetterling’s parents advocated for policies that would allow law enforcement to track the whereabouts of convicted sex offenders and enable police to more readily apprehend suspects (Levenson & D'Amora, 2007). Beginning in 1994, Congress passed the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act as part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994. Under this law, states are required to implement a registry for sex offenders and crimes against children ("Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act," 1994).
In 1994, Megan Kanka, a 7-year-old girl from New Jersey, was lured to her neighbor’s house under the pretense of meeting his new puppy, where she was raped and strangled by her neighbor, a previously convicted child molester. Megan’s parents asserted that had they known about their neighbor’s status as a convicted sex offender, they could have prevented her death. Within a week of her murder, Megan’s parents rallied 100,000 New Jersey residents and petitioned the state legislature to create a law requiring that residents be told of the presence of a convicted sex offender in their neighborhood. Three months following Megan’s murder, New Jersey’s Governor, Christine Todd Whitman, signed into effect the nation’s first community notification bill, known as Megan’s Law (Lotke, 1997).

Less than two years later, in 1996, President Clinton signed the Federal “Megan’s Law” into effect. Megan’s Law allows states to publicly disseminate information to residents about convicted sex offenders residing in their area. The goal of this community notification legislation is to increase the ability of the public to protect itself by warning potential victims and parents of potential victims of the whereabouts of sex offenders within their area (Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). States are offered financial incentives to comply with federal guidelines of the law, but registration and community notification still differ from state to state. While some states use risk levels to notify the public of sex offenders according to their dangerousness, other states use broad community notification without an assessment of each sex offender’s risk (Levenson & D'Amora, 2007). In 1996, the Wetterling Act was amended to include the Pam Lyncher Sexual Offender Tracking and Identification Act, which was passed in order to establish a national sex offender
Pam Lyncher, a real estate agent from Texas, was violently raped while showing a house to a prospective buyer who was a twice-convicted sex offender. After surviving the attack, she worked with U.S. Senators to create the bill that established the National Sex Offender Registry (NSOR) (Sample & Evans, 2009).

After these laws were enacted, they were challenged in two U.S. Supreme Court cases. In 2002, the U.S. 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the disclosure of the registry deprived sex offenders of a “liberty interest” and violated the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment because it did not allow for a predeprivation hearing to determine whether sex offenders are considered “currently dangerous.” On March 5, 2003, the Supreme Court, in the case Conn. DPS v. Doe (2002), overturned the ruling of the 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals, deciding that the state of Connecticut’s version of Megan’s Law was constitutional and did not violate a person’s due process rights. The Supreme Court held that the disclaimer on the Connecticut state registry website, which explains that information distributed on the website does not assess risk of reoffense with regard to any individual nor has determined that anyone on the registry is currently dangerous, sufficiently addressed the due process claims of the sex offenders (Conn. DPS v. Doe, U.S. Supreme Court, 2002a).

On the same day, the Supreme Court overturned a decision by the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruling that the state of Alaska’s Sex Offender Registration Act (ASORA) violated the U.S. Constitution’s “Ex Post Facto” clause (Smith v. Doe, U.S. Supreme Court, 2002b). More specifically, ASORA includes registration and notification techniques, which are retroactive, requiring people who had been convicted as sex offenders prior to the state statute to comply with registration. The
“Ex Post Facto” law was described by Justice Chase writing for the concurring opinion in the case *Calder v. Bull* such that, “every law that changes the punishment, and inflicts a greater punishment than the law annexed to the crime, when committed” is “unjust and oppressive” (*Calder v. Bull*, 3 U.S. 386, 1798). Despite the retroactive nature, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that ASORA is not punitive in design and does not violate the “Ex Post Facto” or double jeopardy clause, which prohibits offenders from being tried twice and from being punished multiple times for the same offense. The Supreme Court decided that these regulations do not deprive offenders of any liberty concerns and do not add punishment to their incarceration. Both of these Supreme Court cases, *Conn. DPS v. Doe* (2002a) and *Smith v. Doe* (2002b), indicate that there are no impediments for states to use the Internet as a community notification tool (Wright, 2003).

After the decisions in these two Supreme Court cases, in 2003, the Wetterling Act was revised to include the PROTECT amendment (Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to End the Exploitation of Children Today Act), which mandated the development of Internet registries by all 50 states (U.S. Library of Congress, 2003). In May, 2005, after a succession of child abductions by previously convicted sex offenders, the Internet registry was fast-tracked and was online by the summer of 2005 enabling citizens to search for sex offenders outside of their state (Levenson & D'Amora, 2007). The Dru Sjodin National Sex Offender Public Website (NSOPW), created in 2005, provides a system that links to state, territory, and tribal sex offender registries from one national site (United States Department of Justice, 2011) and is
similar to the National Sex Offender Registry on the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s website (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011).

Subsequently the federal Adam Walsh Act was passed in 2006, which revised federal requirements for disclosure of information about sex offenders on the Internet. The act was named for Adam Walsh, a 7-year-old boy from Florida, who in 1981, was abducted in a shopping mall and found murdered; the perpetrator was discovered to be a previously convicted felon in 2008 (Zilney & Zilney, 2009a). The Adam Walsh Act organizes sex offenders into three tiers (Sec. 111), requiring Tier 3 offenders (the most dangerous tier) to update their whereabouts every 3 months with lifetime required registration, Tier 2 offenders to update their whereabouts every 6 months with 25 years required registration, and Tier 1 offenders to update their whereabouts every year with 15 years of required registration. Failure to register can result in electronic monitoring or felony charges ("Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act," 2006). Although the Adam Walsh Act attempts to federally standardize sex offender registration requirements, registration requirements vary from state to state. Under the Adam Walsh Act, Connecticut classifies offenders by conviction, while systems used in about 15 states classify offenders based on individual risk-assessment (Sample & Evans, 2009). As state and federal initiatives have become more focused on Internet-based registries, registration and community notification have become intertwined and interchangeable (Levenson & D'Amora, 2007).

Community notification policies are undoubtedly an extremely difficult legislative issue to address because of the strong emotionalism surrounding the highly sensitive issue of sexual abuse. Researchers argue that this has confounded
lawmakers’ abilities to assess this type of legislation separating out what is efficacious from what is well-intentioned but unsuccessful (Edwards & Hensley, 2001). Due to the difficulty of separating intricately intertwined logical and moral arguments, there is little critical analysis of the issue. People who question the assumptions that form popular legislation in this area are presented with a convoluted challenge because they are at risk of being considered “soft” or sympathetic towards sex offenders (Edwards & Hensley, 2001, p. 84).

Unlike other types of legislation that are constantly being questioned, reviewed, and revised, sex offender legislation has grown out of core assumptions—that sex offenders are strangers and repeatedly commit sexual crimes—stemming from media and misinformation about sexual violence (Edwards & Hensley, 2001). The public’s inability to see sex offenders as whole persons, to disconnect their behavior from their person and to see them as people “who [have] offended sexually” (Zilney & Zilney, 2009b, p. 20), negatively affects legislators’ ability to enact successful legislation to manage the problematic aspects of their complex human experiences, needs, and behaviors (Presser & Gunnison, 1999). Legislators have not been able to reevaluate these core assumptions about sex offenders due to limited and often biased informational resources, public opinion, and the political environment. Without substantiated knowledge of the most common types of sexual violence and sex offenders, legislators might develop ineffective sex offender legislation, or worse, legislation that exacerbates the issue (Edwards & Hensley, 2001).
2.5 Statistics of Sexual Offending

Contrary to popular belief, the majority of sexual assaults occur between acquaintances rather than between strangers. According to the Bureau of Criminal Justice Statistics, in 2010, for female victims of rape or sexual assault, 79% of perpetrators were non-strangers (41% were intimate partners and 39% were friends/acquaintances) and 21% of perpetrators were strangers to the victims. For male victims of rape or sexual assault, 26% of the perpetrators were friends/acquaintances and 74% were strangers (Rand & Truman, 2010). According to this report, a reported 125,910 victimizations of rape/sexual assault occurred in the United States in 2009, which is a rate of .5 per 1,000 persons age 12 or older, while in comparison, there were 15,580,510 victimizations of property crimes (burglary, theft, larceny, etc.) at a rate of 127.4 per 1,000 persons age 12 or older (Rand & Truman, 2010).

Both females and males can be victims of rape, but the majority of rape victims are female. In the United States, the National Violence Against Women Survey in 2006 found that 85.8% of rape victims were female while 14.2% were male. Of people surveyed, 17.6% of women and 3% of men were raped at some time in their lives. This equates to 1 out of every 6 women being raped during her lifetime and 1 out of every 33 men being raped during his lifetime. Most of the female victims (99.6%) and male victims (85.2%) were raped by a male, while less than 1% of the female victims and 18.2% of the male victims were raped by a female (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). According to these statistics, 97% of the rapes reported were male offenders and 3% of the reported rapes were female offenders, which is consistent
with a 2000 report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, which found that 96% of offenders in reported sexual assaults are male, while 4% are female (Snyder, 2000).

The rates for child sexual abuse are even higher than adult rape. Research has found that as many as 1 in 3 (32.3%) girls and 1 in 7 (14.2%) boys will be sexually abused at some point in their childhood (Briere & Elliot, 2003). Survey studies from the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART) report that in 1999, an estimated 285,400 children were victims of a sexual assault and 35,000 were victims of other sex offenses (typically non-contact offenses). The majority of victims were female (89%), while the minority of victims were male (11%). The majority of victims were between the ages of 12 and 17 (81%), while the minority of victims were age 11 or under (19%). Most of the victims (95%) were assaulted by a male, almost three-fourths (71%) were assaulted by someone they were acquainted with or knew by sight, and a minority (18%) were assaulted by a stranger, or family member (10%). Almost one-third (29%) were assaulted by a youth age 17 or younger (Finkelhor, Hammer, & Sedlak, 2008). Victims under the age of 6 were molested by a stranger in only 3% of known cases (Snyder, 2000). The majority of child sexual abuse cases are not likely to be reported to the authorities, and it is estimated that only between 12% (R. F. Hanson, Resnick, Saunders, Kilpatrick, & Best, 1999) and 30% (Finkelhor, et al., 2008) of cases are reported.

Since the mid-1990s, the Internet has come to play an increasing role in sex crimes against children. Internet sex crimes against minors include a diverse array of offenses including completed and attempted sexual assaults, illegal use of the Internet
to transmit sexual material to and solicit minors (what is known as “grooming”), and
the possession, distribution, and production of child pornography (Wolak, Mitchell, &
Finkelhor, 2003). In the year 2000, the National Juvenile Online Victimization (N-
JOV) study found that law enforcement made an estimated 2,577 arrests for Internet
sex crimes against minors. Three categories of Internet sex crimes against minors
have been defined: Internet crimes against identified victims (39% of all arrests),
Internet solicitation where undercover law-enforcement investigators posed as minors
(25% of all arrests), and the possession, distribution, and trade of Internet child
pornography (36% of all arrests). For the Internet crimes against identified victims,
about half of the offenders (20% of all arrests) used the Internet to initiate a
relationship with the victim while the other half of offenders (19% of all arrests) were
family members or prior acquaintances of the victim (Wolak, et al., 2003).

When examining statistics on rape, sexual assault, and sex offending, it is
important to keep in mind that rape and sexual assault are largely underreported. In
fact, sexual assault is the most underreported violent crime to any authority for both
juveniles and adults (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 1999). According to the Bureau of Justice
Statistics in 1998, adults reported 55% of all violent crimes but only 36% of sexual
assaults, while juveniles reported 44% of all violent crimes and also only reported
36% of sexual assaults (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 1999). Findings from the National
Violence Against Women Survey revealed that only 1 in 5 women (19.1 percent) and
less than 1 in 7 men (12.9 percent) who were raped as adults reported their rape to the
police, usually due to fear of their rapist, embarrassment, and not considering their
rape a police matter (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). Out of the women who reported
their adult rape, only 7.8% reported that their rapist was criminally prosecuted, only 3.3% reported their rapist was convicted of a crime, and only 2.2% reported that their rapist was incarcerated (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). According to these statistics, only .63% of rapes with female victims resulted in someone being convicted and only .42% of rapes with female victims resulted in someone being incarcerated. Of those who are incarcerated, the average sentence for rapists is almost 14 years, with approximately 2% of those convicted of rape serving a life sentence (Greenfeld, 1997). A large percentage of sex offenders go undetected, unreported, and are not convicted.

Other research has found that 75% of victims report stranger rapes to the authorities (Zilney & Zilney, 2009b), but 79% of sexual assaults have been found to be between non-strangers (Rand & Truman, 2010), further exemplifying the consistent underreporting of sexual violence. Therefore, the offenders who are incarcerated do not represent the average sex offender, but represent the offenders who are reported to law enforcement, who are more likely to be the offenders who commit crimes of sexual violence against strangers (Zilney & Zilney, 2009b). Due to rape and sexual assault being grossly underreported, it is highly probable that the number of known offenders is not a representative sample and is only the tip of the iceberg of the sex offending population.

2.6 Effects of the Registry

A spectrum of research has been conducted in relation to sex offender registries and community notification policies. Studies have examined rearrest rates
and effects on recidivism due to the registry, assessed community awareness of notification procedures, evaluated sex offender and professional attitudes towards the registry, and reviewed the latent consequences of the registry and community notification. The following literature will examine research that has been done prior to this study on the effects of the registry and community notification on reducing rates of recidivism. Community members’ knowledge and utilization of the registry will also be taken into account because community members play an essential role in the efficaciousness of the registry and community notification.

**Rates of Recidivism**

Research on recidivism rates is undoubtedly quite complicated when it comes to sex offending because while most researchers measure arrest rates or conviction rates (Sandler, et al., 2008; Schram & Milloy, 1995; Walker, et al., 2005; Zgoba, et al., 2008), the majority of sex crimes may go undetected (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006), and some sex offenders admit to committing many more sexual assaults than those for which they have been caught (English, Jones, Pasini-Hill, Patrick, & Cooley-Towell, 2003; Heil, Ahlmeyer, & Simons, 2003). Self-reporting is seemingly an accurate way to measure offending patterns, but like arrest and conviction rates, there is no way to know the true scope of sexual violence. If sex offenders are incarcerated, information that is disclosed through self-reporting can be strongly influenced by possible negative consequences from the penal or judicial systems, affecting the accuracy of the results (Abel, et al., 1987). If they are not incarcerated, the negative social climate surrounding sexual violence and the question of the
confidentiality of the data can result in the offenders’ reluctance to reveal their deviant interests and behaviors to their true extent (Abel, et al., 1987).

While the sex offender registry and community notification laws are based on the widely held belief that sex offenders are likely to reoffend (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007), sex offenders have been found to have relatively low rates of recidivism for sex offending. In a meta-analysis of sexual offense recidivism, Hanson & Morton-Bourgon (2004) found that, over a five year period, sex offenders were more likely to recidivate with a non-sexual offense (36.9%) than a sexual offense (13.7%) (R. K. Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004). These results are consistent with other studies that found that sex offenders had a lower overall rearrest rate (43%) compared to the rearrest rates of non-sex offenders released from state prison (68%) (Langan, Schmitt, & Durose, 2003), which is supported by other research (Sample & Bray, 2003, 2006).

Rates of recidivism differ between groups of offenders. Studies have consistently demonstrated that exhibitionists have the highest recidivism rates, followed by extra-familial offenders (offenders who offend against children outside of the family), with the lowest rates of reconviction for familial offenders (offenders who offend against children within the family) (Brown, 2005). A study of recidivism rates by category of sex offenses revealed that exhibitionists recidivated at a rate of 41 to 71%, offenders who abused boys outside of the family at a rate of 13 to 40%, rapists at a rate of 7 to 35% offenders who abused girls outside of the family at a rate of 10 to 29%, and incest offenders at a rate of 4 to 10% (Marshall & Barbaree, 1990). Research has found that some of the best predictors of sexual recidivism are factors
such as deviant sexual interests, prior sexual offenses, and deviant victim choices (e.g., boys, strangers) (R. K. Hanson & Bussiere, 1998).

Numerous studies have been conducted measuring sex offending recidivism rates to determine the effectiveness of the registry and community notification to prevent reoffending. Different types of notification, such as extensive (community notification news media releases, posting of flyers, door-to-door dissemination, or conducting community meetings) or limited (information only accessible to area law enforcement), have not been shown to make a difference in rates of recidivism. Extensive notification was found to have no direct effect on recommitment to prison and there was no significant difference between extensive or limited notification groups in rates of recidivism (Zevitz, 2006).

The registry and community notification have been effective in assisting with more rapid arrests of sex offenders. In a longitudinal study in Washington, Schram & Milloy (1995) found that there was no significant difference in arrest rates for offenders released three years before or three years after the implementation of community notification in Washington. Community notification did, however, significantly aid in the arrest of offenders who were registered, and they were arrested faster than offenders who had been released before community notification (Schram & Milloy, 1995).

Arrest rates for various types of offenders have not been found to change since the implementation of the registry and community notification. In a similar longitudinal study conducted in New York, Sandler, Freeman & Socia (2008) found that there were no significant differences in arrest rates for rapists, child molesters,
sexual recidivists, or first-time offenders for 10 years before and 10 years after the enactment of the New York Sex Offender Registration Act. In fact, over 95% of all sexual offense arrests were committed by first-time offenders, calling into question the ability of these laws to target repeat offenders and reduce sexual offending (Sandler, et al., 2008).

Community notification policies have been found to be ineffective in reducing first-time offenses in addition to repeat offenses. In New Jersey, Zgoba et al. (2008) found that there was no significant difference in the rate of sexual offenses (reoffenses or first-time), and there was no reduction in the number of victims involved in sexual offenses in the 10 years before and 10 years after the implementation of community notification. Researchers found the fiscal costs (3.9 million for responding counties in New Jersey for the year 2007) not to be justifiable given the lack of evidence of the efficaciousness of community notification in reducing sexual offenses (Zgoba, et al., 2008). Focusing resources on a small number of known sex offenders, by funding community notification policies, could detract attention from convicting the majority of individuals who sexually offend, leaving people vulnerable to sexual abuse and creating a false sense of security (Sandler, et al., 2008).

The registry and community notification laws have been found to be ineffective in reducing rates of recidivism across multiple states in the United States. In a geographically wide-scale study, using an interrupted time-series analysis of Megan’s Law and monthly rape rates in 10 states, Walker, et al. (2005) investigated the impact of registration on sexual assault. While three states did show a significant
reduction in sex crime rates, five other states showed an increase in sex crime rates (one of those increases being statistically significant), and two states showed no change in sex crime rates. According to this research, registration and notification policies do not appear to have a systematic influence on reducing rates of sexual crimes in the 10 states (Walker, et al., 2005).

When measuring time to recidivate or the rate of recidivism, it is unclear whether this means that there is a better detection of criminality due to community notification, or if it is a sign of notification’s effectiveness when an offender remains in the community for a longer period of time (Zevitz, 2006). This raises the question of whether or not community notification is effective if recidivism rates are higher—demonstrating that law enforcement has been able to arrest and convict offenders more rapidly and more victims are reporting, or if recidivism rates are lower—meaning community notification has enabled sex offenders to remain in the community longer without reoffending. Therefore, recidivism rates, regardless of what is being measured (arrest rates, convictions, or self-reports), are not necessarily an advantageous tool for researchers to measure the efficacy of the registry and community notification.

**Community Member Use of the Registry**

Not only is it important to examine the effects of the registry and community notification on sexual crime rates, it is imperative to understand the public’s role in its efficaciousness. Unlike other laws that require only the enforcement of the police and law enforcement, community notification laws require the proactive involvement of citizens increasing the public’s responsibility for their own safety (Anderson &
Sample, 2008). Anderson & Sample (2008) surveyed Nebraska residents on their knowledge and use of the registry and found that the majority (89.8%) of participants were aware that the registry existed, but despite contrary belief, only a minority (34.8%) had accessed the registry. Of this minority, the majority (88%) reported feeling safer after learning the location of convicted sex offenders in their area. Only a little more than one third of participants (37.6%) claimed to have taken preventative measures by telling neighbors and friends as a result of the information they found on the sex offender registry. These results suggest that the majority of people may not actively seek out information about sex offenders using the Internet-based registry (Anderson & Sample, 2008). Although information provided by the registry may heighten awareness and feelings of safety, it is important to note that the public may not use it as a tool to prevent sexual violence.

The registry and community notification have been found to have a negative impact on community social integration. Disclosure of the residence of a sex offender in the neighborhood through community notification can cause social disintegration for the whole neighborhood. Due to their knowledge of the presence of a sex offender, community members can feel a loss of control, powerlessness, and fear waiting for the next offense to occur (Zevitz, 2004). Not only can community notification put offenders in a place of vulnerability and create a sense of loss of control over their lives, but it can also have the equivalent effect on community members. Despite the finding that this legislation can affect the social dynamic of a neighborhood, community members are still likely to endorse it.
Community members have been found to support the registry and community notification, even if this legislation has not been proven to be effective. Using a community survey, Levenson, Brannon, et al. (2007) found that the majority of participants (76.3%) thought that all sex offenders should be subject to community notification. The majority (73%) also indicated that they were likely to support strategies to reduce sexual offenses such as community notification, chemical castration, restricting where sex offenders can live, and prison, even if there was no empirical evidence showing that these strategies reduce sexual violence (Levenson, Brannon, et al., 2007). Community notification policies may be an example of “feel-good legislation” that gives the community a sense of security but may cause unpredicted collateral consequences (Freeman-Longo, 1996).

### 2.7 Sex Offenders’ Perceptions of the Registry

Sex offenders’ perceptions of the legislation that is meant to restrict them are a valuable tool in examining the success of sex offender legislation (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007). This review will examine sex offenders’ perceptions of the registry’s effectiveness in reducing rates of first-time sex offending and rates of sex offending recidivism. Although sex offenders have not yet been asked about possible effects of the registry and community notification on victims reporting offenses, theorists propose possible negative effects of this legislation on the rates of reporting. Collateral consequences of the registry and community notification, such as the perceived impact of this legislation on sex offenders themselves, will be examined in order to determine the unintended costs of this legislation. Finally, sex offenders’
proposed ideas for changes to the registry and community notification will be taken into account. The following sections of literature are divided according to variables measured and themes found in the present study.

**Effects on Rates of Sexual Offending**

*First-time offense.*

Although the registry was created in order to notify community members of sex offenders who live or move into their area, primarily to deter offenders from reoffending, there is question as to whether or not it deters first-time offenders from offending. Past research has found that the registry is not effective in deterring first-time offense (Zgoba, et al., 2008). This research is important because the majority of sexual assault arrests have been shown to be committed by first-time offenders (Sandler, et al., 2008). However, it remains to be studied through a rational choice model, whether or not the consequences of the registry have an effect on first-time offenders, depending on their knowledge of the registry prior to the commission of their offense.

*Rates of reoffending.*

Registered sex offenders have been found to believe that the registry and community notification are not effective in deterring them from reoffending. In survey studies, researchers have found that about one-third of registered sex offenders, due to being registered, reported that they were more willing to manage their risk factors because neighbors were watching them (36%; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; 31%; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). However, only about one-fifth (22%) of registrants thought that registration and notification helped them to prevent
reoffending (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). Only a minority of registered sex offenders surveyed believed communities were safer because of the registry and community notification (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007) and only one-fifth (20%) believed that they had less access to potential victims due to this legislation (Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). Tewksbury & Lees (2007) found that only a minority of registrants believed that registered sex offenders are less likely to reoffend because they are under careful and constant supervision by community members; whereas, the majority of registrants thought that the sex offender registry is highly inefficient and an ineffective mode of deterring sex offenders from reoffending (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007). These studies demonstrate that registered sex offenders do not think that the registry reduces the rates of sexual offending.

**Reason to not reoffend.**

Although the majority of sex offenders did not think the registry is effective in reducing sex crime rates, research has found that many registered sex offenders believed that the registry is a motivation to not reoffend (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). The registrants viewed being listed on the registry as a reason to not reoffend but not as an effective mechanism to prevent reoffending. In two survey studies, researchers found that the majority of registered sex offenders reported that, due to being listed, they were motivated to not reoffend in order to prove to others that they were not bad people (66%; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; 74%; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). According to social control theory, if someone who has a sense of commitment to conformity in society, they are less likely to engage in
crime or deviance (Hirschi, 1969). Sex offenders who are concerned with being active and involved in their community may be more motivated to not reoffend to prove that they can be productive members of the community. This connection to the community and its values could be a compelling reason for some sex offenders not to reoffend.

**Rates of victims reporting.**

Researchers have expressed concern that the registry and community notification will decrease the likelihood of victims of incest or acquaintance assault to report sexual abuse. This reduction in reporting would ultimately inhibit the goals of the registry and community notification as a child protection system and decrease the chances of sexual abuse victims receiving therapeutic intervention (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Freeman-Longo, 1996; Lotke, 1997). For example, reports from New Jersey (where notification laws were first enacted) have indicated that there was a decrease in reporting of juvenile sex offenses and incest offenses by family members since this legislation came into effect because victims did not want to cope with the impact of public notification on their families (Freeman-Longo, 1996). Less reporting of incest will likely lead to an increase in the “fear of stranger” problem because people will be led to believe that incest is less prevalent than it actually is. Mandated public notification procedures could also exacerbate the shame and secrecy associated with intrafamilial sexual abuse (Edwards & Hensley, 2001). In a study surveying registered sex offenders, in written narrative comments, offenders expressed that the threat of strangers is exaggerated by the media because their victims were family members or acquaintances, and they suggested educating people on the dangers posed
by people they know and trust (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). In Connecticut, courts have the power to restrict dissemination of registration information about individual offenders, which is usually in cases of incest, to protect the identity of the victim(s) (Conn. Gen. Stat. § 54-255).

**Effects on Sex Offenders**

**Stigma.**

The core tenet of stigma is that a stigmatized person possesses an attribute that conveys a devalued social identity within a particular context or culture (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Goffman, 1963). Most stigma scholars view stigma as a social construct—a label created by society—and find variability over time and across cultures for what attributes, behaviors, or groups are stigmatized (Crocker, et al., 1998; Jones, et al., 1984). Due to the varying types of stigma, Goffman (1963) makes a distinction between people who are “discredited” because their stigma is known to others and people who are “discreditable” because their stigma is concealed.

Being a convicted sex offender is a devalued social identity in the U.S. Sex offenders typically possess a discreditable stigma because it is concealed. However, after being convicted and listed on the registry, sex offenders can become discredited due to the exposure of their stigmatized status. Research has found that community notification and the registry have socially stigmatized sex offenders by exposing their offenses (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Scott & Gerbasi, 2003; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2007). In a review of the literature, Jones et al. (1984) found six dimensions of stigma: visibility/concealability, disruptiveness (hinder interactions), course of the mark (change over time), origin/responsibility for stigmatized condition,
peril (perceived dangerousness of stigma), and aesthetics (extent of unpleasantness) (Jones, et al., 1984). The stigma associated with being a registered sex offender can be applied across five of these six dimensions of stigma.

For the dimension of visibility and concealability, being a registered sex offender is a concealable stigma, yet it can be unwillingly revealed at any time through the registry and community notification. Due to the visibility and concealability of the stigma of being a registered sex offender, isolation and fear of prejudice may result. Although registered sex offenders are seen as disrupting social norms and community standards, the stigma of being a sex offender is concealable and may not have an effect on social interactions. However, if this stigmatized status revealed, it may affect registered sex offenders’ relationships with others and with themselves.

The stigma of being a registered sex offender and associated effects may change over time because the offender might adapt to the stigma or it may remain constant. Sex offending is a behavioral stigma, and, therefore, sex offenders bear more responsibility for this type of stigma, unlike other types of stigma (e.g. ethnicity or disability) (Goffman, 1963). Bearing a behavioral stigma that is viewed by others as controllable may incite different negative emotional effects than if the stigma is viewed as uncontrollable. The perceived dangerousness of convicted sex offenders led to the creation of the registry and community notification. Due to their perceived dangerousness, being listed on the registry may cause threats of vigilante violence against registered sex offenders. Using a structure based on the themes found in the data of this study, the following literature will examine the effects of the registry and
community notification using these five dimensions of stigma in addition to other theories and research on the concept of stigma.

**Isolation.**

Sex offending is a unique stigma in that it can be concealable, but there is always a threat of exposure due to being listed on the registry. Stigma cues, that make it more difficult to conceal their stigma, make people feel uncomfortable and feel like they have less control over their stigmatized identities (Golin, Isasi, Bontempi, & Eng, 2002). For example, people who were HIV-positive believed that taking antiretroviral therapy was lifesaving but missed doses because they feared that taking the pills in public would reveal their stigmatized HIV status (Golin, et al., 2002). Stigma cues, such as their listings on the registry, may make registered sex offenders feel like they have less control over their stigmatized status and to whom it is revealed.

Being part of a stigmatized group, the constant awareness of devaluation can make group members avoid intergroup contact to escape exposure to prejudice and discrimination from the majority group (Crocker, et al., 1998; Goffman, 1963). Sex offenders may isolate themselves due to the possibility of contact with prejudice and discrimination through involuntary exposure due to being listed on the registry. Through two survey studies, researchers found that the majority of registered sex offenders reported that they felt alone and isolated because of Megan’s Law (64%; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; 54%; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007).

Because sex offending is usually a concealable stigma, sex offenders can conceal their stigma in public by what is known as “passing.” Concealing a stigma by
passing is a coping response that stigmatized people employ to avoid the stigma-related stressors (Miller, 2006). If their status as registered sex offenders can be unwillingly revealed through their photographs on the registry, they may attempt to pass by concealing or disguising their identities to the public. Registered sex offenders may either isolate themselves or try to conceal their stigma to avoid contact with prejudice and discrimination.

_Fear of prejudice._

The threat that registered sex offenders must face, of being exposed at any time, may also lead to a fear of prejudice. Mendoza-Denton, Page-Gould & Pietrzak (2006), in a review of the literature, noted that direct or vicarious experiences of exclusion, discrimination, or prejudice can lead to prejudice apprehension or anxious anticipation that one will be the target of prejudice in situations where the possibility of prejudice is present (Mendoza-Denton, Page-Gould, & Pietrzak, 2006). Although Mendoza-Denton, Page-Gould, and Pietrzak (2006) were specifically examining prejudice apprehension in relation to race-based rejection, the awareness of potential prejudice may affect the way registered sex offenders perceive people looking at them and behaving towards them. If they have been or know of other sex offenders who have been the targets of prejudice in certain situations, they might anticipate that they will be recipients of prejudice in similar situations.

_Feeling less than human._

Registered sex offenders are seen as disrupting social norms and community standards and their stigma may result in making them feel like they are removed from society. Goffman (1963) describes how stigmatized people, are not seen as not
“normal,” distinguishing between, “the normal [and] the person he is normal against” (Goffman, 1963, p. 6). He goes on to explain how “normals” place the stigmatized in another category that is almost sub-human:

By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption, we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences… (Goffman, 1963, p. 5)

This ideology, of placing others in a subhuman category, dichotomizing the relationship between the stigmatized and the nonstigmatized, may correspond to the potential effects of the registry and community notification on registered sex offenders.

Feeling less than human can take a toll on the self worth of individuals. Exposure to prejudice and discrimination is thought to make stigmatized people perceive themselves as chronically inferior and leave a “mark of oppression” on the personalities and self-esteem of the stigmatized (Crocker & Major, 1989). Registered sex offenders may experience elements of this “mark of oppression” in their own lives due to being registered. Researchers have even deemed the registry and community notification to be equivalent to the use of the “scarlet letter” (Freeman-Longo, 1996; Levenson, 2007).

According to labeling theory, if registered sex offenders feel that this mark of oppression reinforces expectancies of failure, they will be less likely to prevent reoffending (Winick, 1998). Additionally, the label “felon” has been found to further dichotomize the relationship between ex-felons and society, permanently marking
them, communicating that they will be rejected no matter what they do, and lessening their incentive to transition into law-abiding citizen roles (Uggen, Manza, & Behrens, 2004). Not only could this “mark of oppression” affect their personalities and self-esteem, but it could also inhibit sex offender reintegration into the community and affect their recovery.

**Stress.**

The devaluation of possessing a stigma leads to a variety of stressors (Miller & Kaiser, 2001). A stressor is an event in which an environmental or internal demand taxes or exceeds the adaptive or coping resources of the individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stigmatized people face stressors, such as prejudice and discrimination that nonstigmatized individuals do not experience, except in rare circumstances (Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker, et al., 1998). Stigma-related stress will only be detrimental to a stigmatized individual if the individual is unable to cope with it successfully (Miller & Kaiser, 2001).

Civil sanctions imposed on criminal offenders, sometimes called invisible punishments, can make it more difficult for offenders to reintegrate (Travis, 2005). Community notification laws generally result in offenders being ostracized by the community, which can reinforce or even worsen many of the social situational and emotional factors that are known to trigger offense behaviors (Freeman-Longo, 1996). Sex offenders do not just decide to offend but react to one or more emotional triggers that result in a heightened level of anxiety, which can result in a worsening pattern of poor decision making, leading to reoffending. Researchers and therapists have often identified stress and isolation as two of the most important emotional
triggers for reoffense (Schwartz, 1995). Survey research has found that the majority of registered sex offenders reported that Megan’s Law made their recovery more difficult by causing stress in their lives (71%; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; 62%; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). In written narrative responses from survey research, researchers found that registered sex offenders believed that Megan’s Law and the associated probation and parole restrictions made it more difficult to find and secure employment, to live with or visit their minor children, and to be involved in their children’s lives or activities because of the public awareness of their offenses (Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007), which are all factors that can contribute to stress.

Stigma can create stress for stigmatized people because others have stereotyped expectations, they harbor prejudiced attitudes, and they behave in a discriminatory way toward stigmatized people (Fiske, 1998). Discrimination from prejudice denies stigmatized people educational, social, and economic opportunities that are needed for effective coping (Uggen, et al., 2004). In addition to parole and probation restrictions, the constraints that discrimination against registered sex offenders poses could hinder access to necessary resources for effective coping, such as housing and employment. However, the stress associated with stigma may change over time. Coping strategies may evolve out of experience with stereotyping incidents (Miller, 2006). People who do not have as much experience coping with their stigma, if it is concealed, may have an added disadvantage when it is revealed (Quinn, 2006). Due to the length of time to adapt, the consequences of stigma may be different for someone who has had a condition for life compared to a person who has acquired a stigma later in life (Jones, et al., 1984). Although the registry and community
notification may contribute to registrants’ stress, this stress may lessen over time due to experience with and adaptation to their stigmatized status.

**Anxiety, depression, and suicide.**

Survey research has found that the majority of sex offenders, regardless of the severity of their offenses, had less hope for the future because they were registered (72%; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; 55%; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). In narrative responses, the researchers found that registered sex offenders experienced anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts in response to Megan’s Law (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). Feelings of loneliness, isolation, shame, embarrassment, hopelessness, or fear may threaten a sex offender’s reintegration and recovery and may even trigger some sex offenders to relapse (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Freeman-Longo, 1996). Emotional responses to being listed on the registry may depend on how much registrants identify with their stigmatizing condition.

While for some individuals a stigmatizing condition may be a core aspect of their self-concept, for others the same condition may be peripheral to their identity (Jones, et al., 1984). Registrants’ emotional responses may vary according to the degree that their stigma is a central feature of their self-concept.

**Loss and gain of support systems.**

One situational factor that affects coping with stress is whether supportive others are present (Lazarus, 1999). Support systems are important in helping sex offenders cope with the stressors associated with their stigma, and a lack of social support has been identified as a dynamic risk factor for sex offender recidivism (R. K. Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004). In survey studies, research has found that about
half of registered sex offenders reported that they had lost friends or close relationships because of Megan’s Law (52%; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; 50%; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007).

One form of coping with stressors may involve trying to obtain social support from nonstigmatized individuals such as mentors, friends, and family (Miller, 2006). However, because of stereotypes and prejudice, nonstigmatized people may be reluctant to form close relationships with stigmatized people, limiting both groups’ opportunities for personal growth and self-expansion (Crocker & Garcia, 2006). Survey research studies have found that a minority of registered sex offenders reported that Megan’s Law had helped them be more honest with people (26%; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; 32%; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007) while the majority of registered sex offenders reported that most people who knew that they were sex offenders were supportive of their recovery (52%; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; 58%; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). Without the help of support systems, sex offenders may find coping more difficult and may be at a heightened risk to reoffend.

_Toll on others._

Whether intentional or not, research has found that the criminal justice system, through the registry and community notification, has extended punishments to a larger population beyond the sex offenders (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009). The involuntary exposure of people’s status as registered sex offenders can also take a toll on their family members and friends. Freeman-Longo (1996) reported,

_It is not fair to nonoffending persons to impact their lives negatively by advertising that their spouse or relative is a sexual offender. These laws have tremendous potential to victimize nonoffending citizens._ (Freeman-Longo, 1996, p. 93)
The indirect victimization of non-offending relatives is a concern that should be taken into consideration when weighing the rights of society with the rights of the offender. Past research has found that family members, even those who do not live with the sex offenders, experienced harassment, threats, violence, economic hardships, difficulties with housing, and psychological stresses simply by being related to a registered sex offender (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009). Researchers found that about one fifth of registered sex offenders reported that someone they lived with had been threatened, harassed, assaulted, injured or suffered property damage due to living with a sex offender (19%; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; 16%; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). The effects of the registry and community notification can extend beyond the offenders to their families and friends.

**Vigilante violence.**

While most stigmas hold an element of threat, behavioral deviants such as criminals can evoke fears of physical harm and social disorders (Katz, 1981). While different types of stigma have differing degrees of perceived responsibility, characterological stigmas that break moral norms, such as criminality, are seen as more voluntary than other types of stigma (Goffman, 1963). Mental-behavioral stigmas have been shown to elicit anger and judgment rather than pity because they are thought to be controllable (B. Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988). The perceived responsibility for the stigma of being a sex offender could contribute to negative public reactions including threats and vigilante violence. Survey studies have found that about half (46%) of registered sex offenders reported that they were afraid for
their safety because of Megan’s Law (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). A small minority of sex offenders reported being physically assaulted or injured by someone who found out that they were a sex offender (5%; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; 10%; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). About one fifth reported that their property had been damaged by someone who found out they were a registered sex offender (21%; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; 18%; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). Interpersonal threats to the stigmatized, including targeting for physical violence, can have negative psychological implications (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995).

**Opportunity to prove themselves.**

The registry is not effective if it prevents sex offenders from feeling like they can change their behaviors. Researchers have found that being publicly listed on the registry makes some registered sex offenders feel hopeless supporting the notion that, “No one believes I can change so why even try?” (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). The registry and community notification are not serving their purpose if sex offenders feel stigmatized, hopeless, and hindered from changing their behaviors. However, when individuals separate their criminal acts from their sense of self, they may reduce the effects of their stigmatized status (Uggen, et al., 2004). If they do not allow their offenses to define who they are, registrants may be more likely feel like they have the opportunity to change.
**Registry Reform**

**Listing convictions.**

The term “sex offender” has created a master status that applies to all who are convicted of a sex offense despite the wide range of possible sexual offense convictions. Sex offender legislation tends to focus on this one-dimensionality of offenders and ignore the other crucial areas of basic human functioning that can be negatively affected by this legislation (Edwards & Hensley, 2001). In a study utilizing interviews of registered sex offenders, Tewksbury and Lees (2007) found that the registrants’ acknowledged the importance of the registry and suggested changes for its improvement rather than called for its removal. Most of their proposed changes focused on providing some degree of categorization or differentiation between offenders to eliminate what one registered sex offender described as the “one-size-fits-all” umbrella standard for all offenders (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007, p. 394). Listing convictions, as the Adam Walsh Act mandates (Sample & Evans, 2009), may be one effective mode of differentiating between registered sex offenders.

**Listing level of risk.**

Another mode of differentiating between offenders listed is using an individual risk-assessment, which about 15 states do (Sample & Evans, 2009). Researchers suggest that a thorough risk-assessment of sex offenders should include an analysis of the offense, application of an appropriate actuarial risk predictor to assess the offender’s global level of risk, identification of stable dynamic risk factors for potential treatment targets, and monitoring of acute dynamic factors that indicate
reoffense is imminent (Beech, Fisher, & Thornton, 2003). Stable dynamic factors refer to more steady factors: significant social influences, intimacy deficits, attitudes supportive of sexual assault, cooperation with supervision, sexual and general self-regulation; while acute dynamic risk factors change over time: victim access, emotional collapse, hostility, substance abuse, sexual preoccupations, and rejection of supervision (Beech, et al., 2003).

Risk assessments are conducted by clinicians using various actuarial scales such as the Rapid Risk Assessment for Sex Offense Recidivism (RRASOR; R. K. Hanson, 1997), which is commonly used in the United States and Canada to predict sex offense recidivism using a small number of easily scored variables, and the Static-99, which is intended to measure long-term risk potential but does not examine dynamic (changeable) factors (R. K. Hanson & Thornton, 2000). The Static-99 has become the most frequently used actuarial procedure for assessing the risk of sex offender reoffending. The Static-99 and the RRASOR only assess static risk factors such as number of previous charges, number of previous convictions, and history of male victims. Because these actuarial risk assessments do not measure dynamic factors, they are skewed toward predicting recidivism rather than ruling it out, and are considered insufficient on their own to measure the recidivism risk of previously convicted sex offenders (I. B. Weiner & Craighead, 2010).

Research has found that some registered sex offenders believed a risk-evaluation while on the registry, to reduce time on the registry, could promote motivation to pursue treatment and maintain a crime-free lifestyle (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007). In narrative responses in a survey study, the majority of registered sex
offenders focused on the need for a risk-level system of classification with differential notification for higher risk offenders (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). Although less than one-fifth of registered sex offenders surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they were at risk to offend (18%; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; 10%; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007), only a minority surveyed thought that it was fair for the community to know their level of risk (25%; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; 33%; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). According to these studies, listing level of risk may be important to differentiate between offenders and to notify the public of which offenders are more at risk to reoffend.

**Listing treatment.**

Sex offender treatment has been the topic of much debate because of the uncertainty of its effectiveness in reducing sex offending recidivism. Varying types of treatments have been used to attempt to deter sex offenders from reoffending. Somatic therapies for sex offenders include surgical treatments (neurosurgery and castration), antiandrogen medications (also referred to as chemical castration), and analogues of gonadotropin-releasing hormones (which decrease testosterone levels and libido) (Grossman, Martis, & Fichtner, 1999). Psychological and behavioral treatment for sex offenders include cognitive-behavioral techniques (aversion therapy and covert sensitization), imaginal desensitization, masturbatory reconditioning, cognitive restructuring, social skills training, victim awareness or empathy, and relapse prevention (Grossman, et al., 1999). While biological treatments focus on decreasing or eliminating sex drive, psychological approaches attempt to change offenders by modifying their behaviors (Williams, 2009).
Research has shown that treatment may be effective in reducing the rates of sex offending recidivism. In a meta-analysis of 12 studies, Hall (1995) found that of sexual offenders who completed treatment, 19% committed additional sexual offenses; whereas, in comparison, over 27% of sexual offenders who did not complete treatment committed additional sexual offenses. Both cognitive-behavioral and hormonal treatments were deemed more effective than behavioral treatments (Hall, 1995). In another meta-analysis of 43 studies and over 9,000 sex offenders, averaged across all the studies, Hanson et al. (2002) found that the sexual offense recidivism was lower for treatment groups (12.3%) than for comparison groups (16.8%). Offenders who dropped out of treatment had higher rates of recidivism than those who completed treatment; however, offenders who refused treatment did not appear to be at a higher risk to reoffend than offenders who attended any treatment (R. K. Hanson, et al., 2002). The studies of contemporary approaches to treatment (cognitive behavioral or systemic) reported a notable reduction in recidivism from 17.3 to 9.9% (R. K. Hanson, et al., 2002). For different types of treatment, in a review of 79 studies with 10,988 subjects, Alexander (1999) found that recidivism for offenders who received relapse prevention treatment was 7.2%, group treatment, behavioral treatment, or other therapy was 13.9%, unspecified was 13.1%, and untreated was 17.6% (Alexander, 1999).

Completing treatment goals within certain treatment programs has been shown to have an effect on lowering reoffense rates. In an eight-year longitudinal clinical trial, California’s Sex Offender Treatment and Evaluation Project (SOTEP) found no significant differences in recidivism rates for offenders treated in an
inpatient relapse prevention (RP) program and the rates of recidivism for offenders in two untreated prison control groups. Individuals who met the treatment goals of the RP group however, had lower offense rates than those who did not complete the goals (Marques, Wiederanders, Day, Nelson, & Ommeren, 2005).

Despite whether or not treatment is highly effective in reducing rates of sex offending, community members have been shown to support its use. In a community survey study, the majority of participants believed that treatment in prison (71%), treatment in the community (65%), and chemical castration (51%) are effective strategies to reduce sexual offenses (Levenson, Brannon, et al., 2007). Almost three-quarters (73%) of the participants claimed that they were likely to support policies of community notification, living restrictions, treatment in prison and in the community, chemical castration, prison, electronic monitoring, and other policies even if there is no empirical evidence that they reduce sexual abuse (Levenson, Brannon, et al., 2007). Public perception is that treatment is a mitigating factor in the risk to reoffend for sex offenders.

Sex offenders on probation are likely to be required to remain in treatment throughout their supervision period (Levenson, Macgowan, Morin, & Cotter, 2009). Levenson et al. (2009) surveyed the views of sex offender clients about their perceptions of their experiences in cognitive-behavioral sex offender treatment. They found that 74% of clients in therapy agreed that they needed to be in treatment, and 80% liked the program better than they thought they would. While 89% of the participants agreed that they gained understanding of their past offenses, 90% agreed that they gained a great deal of understanding about preventing future offenses. The
participants believed that successfully addressing sexual deviance depends in part on fully admitting to and recognizing their problem. The researchers suggest that the acceptance and sense of belonging in group therapy can provide sex offenders with a platform for healthy intimacy and lessen their feelings of loneliness. Offenders were found to value the role of group therapy finding accountability, learning victim empathy, and relapse prevention to be helpful in managing their behaviors (Levenson, et al., 2009). While it has been empirically demonstrated that treatment may be effective to some extent in reducing rates of reoffending, sex offenders perceive treatment to be beneficial to prevent reoffending.

Despite the degree of effectiveness of treatment on deterring reoffending, it is important to recognize that the public and registered sex offenders perceive that treatment reduces the likelihood of recidivism. Methodologically, it is difficult to examine the effects of treatment on recidivism because although most studies use rearrest rates rather than reconviction rates, not all studies use the same definition of recidivism. Even though it is difficult to establish the efficacy of sex offender treatment, the potential public safety consequences of withholding even relatively ineffective treatment from dangerous offenders cannot be risked (Alexander, 1999). Although it has been demonstrated in past research that sex offenders believed that completion of treatment should have an effect on the duration of sex offenders’ listings on the registry (Levenson & Cotter, 2005), it has not yet been explicitly asked of registered sex offenders what they think about listing treatment on the registry.
**Duration of time listed.**

In Connecticut, a convicted sex offender who has committed an offense that requires registration is either listed for 10 years or life and the only way to be removed from the registry is through petitioning the court system, which seldom occurs (Sgt. J. Biela, personal communication, March 20, 2011). Tewksbury & Lees (2007) found that registered sex offenders questioned how it was determined whether people were registered for 10 years or life and called for restrictions of who was provided access to their information and under what circumstances (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007). In written narrative responses in a survey study, researchers found that registered sex offenders thought lifetime notification was unfair and they suggested that notification should be altered after completion of treatment or probation, or that there should be a mechanism to petition the court for removal from the registry after a period of law-abiding behavior (Levenson & Cotter, 2005).

**Registry for others.**

Sex offenders are not at a high risk to reoffend compared to other offenders (Langan, et al., 2003; Sample & Bray, 2003, 2006) and it is unclear why sex offenders are deemed to be subject to public monitoring while other violent convicted offenders are not. Tewksbury & Lees (2007) found a near-universal theme expressed by registered sex offenders: they believed they were different than “those kinds of people” who should be registered on the sex offender registry (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007). Some registered sex offenders have questioned why they are listed on a public registry if they are not considered to be violent or at risk of offending, and they have
questioned why sex offenders, as opposed to all violent convicted felons, are publicly listed.

2.8 Overview of the Present Study

The present study examined registered sex offenders’ attitudes toward the registry and community notification. This study sought specifically to examine the registered sex offenders’ perspectives of the effects of being publicly listed. Similar research examining consequences of being subject to community notification have typically used the written survey method (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Tewksbury & Zgoba, 2010). Few studies have used interviews to assess sex offenders’ perspectives of sex offender legislation (Meloy, 2006a; Tewksbury & Lees, 2007; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). As the method of this study, I chose semi-structured interviews because of the lack of research on sex offender legislation using interviews from registered sex offenders, the lack of in-depth responses to sex offender legislation, and the value of qualitative research in an area that is highly dominated by quantitative research.

For the method of analysis, I chose grounded theory method because it allowed for creating analytic codes in response to the data, rather than a preconceived hypothesis (Charmaz, 1995; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Similar studies examining attitudes toward sex offender legislation using interviews also employed grounded theory method to analyze their data (Meloy, 2006a; Tewksbury & Lees, 2007). While most of past research in this area has examined the consequences of the registry and
community notification from clinical and legal frameworks (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007; Meloy, 2006a; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000; Zgoba, et al., 2008), I also chose to examine this study’s data from clinical and legal frameworks. However, in addition, I examined the data from a social psychological perspective in order to explore how the registry and community notification affected the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of people who are registered, in addition to how it affected their relationships with others and how it affected their relationship with themselves. Not only is the present study concerned with the perceived effects of the registry and community notification, but also with the perceived effects of the willing and unwilling exposure of peoples’ status as registered sex offenders, which has not yet been discussed in past research.

While many of the questions from the interviews were derived from past research (see Methods section), I also developed questions to address themes that have not yet been covered in the literature. The registered sex offenders were asked about their thoughts on listing treatment on the registry, whether or not they thought the registry helped to prevent first-time offense, if they ever had negative thoughts about themselves due to being listed, and whether or not they thought that the registry would have an effect on victims reporting offenses. These questions have brought insight into sex offenders’ perceptions in areas that have not yet been fully explored empirically. These insights from registered sex offenders are crucial to reviewing and reforming sex offender legislation, specifically the registry and community notification.
3. METHODS

The purpose of this study was to examine attitudes toward the sex offender registry and community notification from the perspective of people who are registered sex offenders. This study examined the perceived psychological effects, psychosocial effects, emotional effects, and consequences of the registry for registered sex offenders. This study also examined the registered sex offenders’ perspectives on the effects of the registry on victims reporting, the rates of sexual offending, and the registry’s overall necessity. Finally, this study aimed to examine attitudes toward changes to the registry and ideas for reform.

Data for this study were all qualitative in nature and were collected using one-on-one personal interviews conducted with a sample of registered sex offenders, all of whom were listed on the Connecticut Sex Offender Registry (State of Connecticut Department of Public Safety) at the time of the data collection. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Psychology Department at Wesleyan University reviewed all materials prior to data collection. Data collection was conducted November and December of 2010 and January of 2011.

3.1 Participants

The sampling population consisted of 41 sex offenders residing in the Middletown, Connecticut and Meriden, Connecticut area who, at the time of the study, were in four different court mandated treatment groups in Middletown, Connecticut. Although treatment groups may only represent one subgroup of registered sex offenders, past studies of sex offenders have almost always collected
data from participants who are incarcerated or in treatment (Brannon, Levenson, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Levenson & Cotter, 2005) or from treatment providers or professionals who work with sex offenders (Levenson, Brannon, et al., 2007). Sex offenders are a difficult population to access and may be less inclined to participate in research because of their concerns with anonymity, confidentiality, media exploitation, and stigma, among other reasons (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006).

Because this study was examining attitudes toward the sex offender registry and community notification, I only sought volunteers who were listed on the public Internet Connecticut Sex Offender Registry at the time of the study. For the purpose of this study, the public listing on the registry Internet website is the only type of community notification that will be discussed because no other types of community notification were mentioned during the interviews. However, in Connecticut, a small percentage of sex offenders have been known to be subject to other types of community notification: flyers posted, door-to-door notification by the police, neighborhood meetings, and press releases (Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007).

Although 16 individuals signed up to be interviewed or expressed interest in being interviewed at alternate times not listed on the sign-up sheet, 10 individuals completed the interviews. Out of the volunteers who signed up to participate in the study, four individuals did not show up for their interviews, one individual could not be scheduled, and one individual chose not to participate due to a fear that the information collected would be held against him, highlighting the sensitivity of this issue and the difficulty of having individuals participate in studies of this nature.
A total of $N=10$ participants out of a sample population of $N=41$ represents a 24.4% response rate. Although this is not a high response rate, previous research interviewing registrants has relied on small response rates of 12% (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007) and 24% (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006), while other studies have used officially recorded data, avoiding collection of data directly from registrants (Adkins, Huff, & Stageberg, 2000; Tewksbury, 2002). Previous research using one-on-one personal interviews with registrants has also relied on small samples of 22 participants (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007) to 30 participants (Zevitz & Farkas, 2000) and multiple researchers. Therefore, this study, using data collection methods that require more of an investment from participants and the researcher, is seen as having a respectable sample size and response rate.

The sample was exclusively male (100%) because the treatment groups were all male. This is only slightly inconsistent with a 2000 report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, which found that 96% of offenders in reported sexual assaults were male, while 4% were female (Snyder, 2000). The majority of participants were White (90%, $n=9$), while a minority was Hispanic (10%, $n=1$). The participants ranged in age from 23-66 years of age ($M=41.9$, $Mdn=42$). All of the participants had completed high school or received their GED and half ($n=5$) had graduated from or attended some institution of higher education. The participants had been listed on the registry for a period of 3 months to 16 years ($M=3.1$, $Mdn=1.25$). The majority of participants were required to be registered on the registry for a period of 10 years (70%, $n=7$), while a minority of the participants were required to be registered for life (30%, $n=3$). A minority of the participants had actually visited the Connecticut Sex
Offender Registry website and seen themselves listed (40%, \(n=4\)), while the majority of participants had not visited the website nor seen themselves listed (60%, \(n=6\)). The majority of the participants who had seen themselves listed on the registry reported that the information listed about them was true (\(n=3\)) (one participant reported that incorrect information was corrected after 2 months of being incorrect), and another participant was unsure (\(n=1\)). See Table 1 (p. 71) for demographics of the sample. The participants’ offenses included one or multiple convictions of the following: possession of child pornography, risk of injury to a minor involving contact with the intimate parts of someone under the age of 16, criminal attempt to commit risk of injury to a minor, sexual assault in the 4\textsuperscript{th} degree, sexual assault in the 4\textsuperscript{th} degree of a minor, sexual assault in the first degree, and sexual assault in the first degree involving sexual intercourse with someone under the age of 13 (see Appendix A for the full list of convictions).
TABLE 1

Demographics of Offenders

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age (years)</td>
<td>41.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White (%)</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic (%)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration period</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 years (%)</td>
<td>70</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lifetime (%)</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean length of time on registry (years)</td>
<td>3.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visited registry website (%)</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have not visited registry website (%)</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 Materials

I designed interview questions for the purpose of collecting data on attitudes toward the sex offender registry from people who were listed on the Connecticut Sex Offender registry at the time of data collection. The interview was constructed by using 19 questions deriving from previous research, expanding upon previous research, and addressing gaps in the literature. I asked the questions in the order of three categories: level of satisfaction with being placed on the registry, perceptions of effects of the registry, and ideas about how it can be changed.
I asked questions about perceptions of the registry’s effectiveness in ensuring community safety, the perceived effects of the registry on levels of stress, the perceived effects of the registry on isolation, the perceived effects of the registry on fear for safety, and the perceived effects of the registry on level of honesty (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). I asked questions which expanded upon past research with a few changes. I asked questions about the registry’s perceived effect on the overall rate of reoffending (rather than the rate for only the offenders themselves), the perceived effects of the legal restrictions of the registry on jobs and housing, the registry’s perceived effect on motivation to not reoffend for all registered sex offenders (in addition to the sex offenders themselves), and an open-ended question about how the registry and community notification made the offenders feel (rather than providing them with emotion words) (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). I asked a question about the perceived effects of the registry on preventing first-time offense deriving from previous research that found that the majority of registered sex offenders did not believe that they had less access to potential victims due to being listed on the registry (Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). I asked questions about the perceived effects of the registry on loss of support systems and gain of support systems and the perceived impact of the registry on the offender’s social life deriving from previous research, which asked about loss of friends or close relationships due to the registry and community notification (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). I asked a question about how people treated offenders if they knew they were registered, deriving from previous research.
(Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). I asked questions about the offenders’ attitudes towards the current structure of the registry and ideas for changes to the registry, inspired by previous research (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007). More specifically I asked questions about what the offenders thought about listing convictions on the registry, what they thought about listing level of risk on the registry, and how they wanted to see the registry and community notification changed, if at all.

Some questions expanded upon past research and addressed gaps in the literature. I asked a question about what the offenders thought about listing treatment on the registry because past research has indicated that sex offenders believed that completion of treatment should have an effect on sex offenders’ listings on the registry (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). I used a question about the perceived effect of the registry on victims reporting offenses deriving from theoretical research (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Freeman-Longo, 1996) and expanding upon empirical research (Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). In addition, I included two questions asking if the offenders had experienced any negative thoughts about themselves due to being listed, or if they had experienced any positive thoughts about themselves due to being listed, because I was unable to find questions that specifically examined these psychological issues in the research, and it was a gap in the literature that needed to be addressed. For a complete list of the Interview Questions, please see Appendix B.

3.3 Procedure

While most of the research on the sex offender registry and community notification area uses anonymous mailed survey responses (Levenson & Cotter, 2005;
Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Tewksbury & Zgoba, 2010), some of the research on the sex offender registry and community notification uses one-on-one personal interviews (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). A statistical study using data from a conducted survey could not duplicate the range of information and depth of information obtained by talking confidentially with the sex offenders (Scully, 1990). In this study, all data are from one-on-one, in person, semi-structured interviews (Smith, 1995) that I conducted in order to focus on in-depth responses and attitudes toward the sex offender registry. I introduced the study at four different treatment group therapy sessions, and I asked anyone who was currently registered and interested in participating to sign up for an interview slot. Participants were informed of the study’s purpose, its confidential and anonymous nature, and the voluntary nature of their participation with no compensation.

Interviews were scheduled at times when the treatment facility was open and the conference room was available or during group therapy sessions if a participant could not otherwise participate. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interview. The written informed consent contained a statement that the study involved research, an explanation of the research and expected duration of 30 to 90 minutes of the participants’ participation. The consent form also contained a description of the procedures to be followed, a statement of no additional risks associated with the study beyond the minimal ones encountered in everyday life, and a description of the potential benefit of the research to better understand how the sex offender registry and community notification procedures affect registered sex
offenders. I included a statement about the confidentiality of records, assuring the participants that these records would be accessible only to Professor Carney and me and stored in a locked cabinet in Judd Hall 201, an explanation that the data would be anonymous and destroyed five years after publication, a statement that the interview data would be examined in conjunction with public information about the participants’ legal history, and a statement that the treatment center would continue to provide services to the participants whether or not they chose to participate in the study. I also included an explanation to contact Professor Carney or me for answers to any questions about the research or the research participants’ rights and a statement that participation is voluntary and that participants are entitled to refuse to participate or discontinue their participation at any time.

Prior to the interview, participants also completed a demographics and information form that asked questions about their age, gender, race/ethnicity, highest level of education, status on the registry, length of time that they had been registered, length of time they were to be registered, if they had ever visited the Connecticut Sex Offender Registry website, if they had ever looked themselves up on the registry website and if the information listed about them on the registry was correct. Because of a lack of funding, participants were not offered monetary compensation for their participation. Interview length ranged from 6 to 51 minutes. No questions were asked about the participants’ offenses, although many of the participants did discuss their offenses, which is consistent with past research (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007). In order to reduce interviewer bias, the participants’ offenses were looked up on the registry website after the interviews were conducted. After the interview, participants were
given a debriefing sheet, which outlined the purpose of the study and suggested literature for further research on the subject of registered sex offenders’ attitudes toward and perceptions of the registry and community notification.

3.4 Analytic Technique

All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full. Data were coded using the principles of grounded theory method (Charmaz, 1995; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory was used in order to simultaneously collect data and analyze research and to create analytic codes in response to the data rather than in response to a preconceived hypothesis (Charmaz, 1995). Initial codes were created upon a first read through of the data: Positive Effects, Negative Effects, Registry Working Effectively, Registry Not Working Effectively. I took notes on each individual interview, and I took notes on the themes that began to emerge throughout the data. From the 37 themes that emerged, I then began to filter out the themes with the most evidence, deriving from the notes on each participant’s interview. I refined these 37 themes into 19 codes and using these codes, I organized the data in order to check the frequency of these codes. For example, a theme that emerged was “Feeling Removed From Society,” which I filtered out and refined to “Feeling Less than Human” according to the amount of evidence I found in the data explaining this theme.

According to the frequencies of the refined codes in the data, I created 4 conceptual categories: Perceptions of the Registry’s Necessity, Perceptions of the Effects of the Registry on Offending, Perceptions of the Effects of the Registry on
Offenders, and Ideas about Moving Forward & Registry Reform. The codes that emerged were similar to the original interview questions asked and the conceptual categories that emerged were similar to the organizational themes of the original interview questions, but they mainly served as guiding interests that provided points of departure to review the data and develop the analysis (Charmaz, 1995).

With the 4 conceptual categories, I then organized the codes into categories of the conceptual categories. I then specified the conditions under which these categories arose, described how the participants thought, felt, and acted when involved in these processes, described how the processes were maintained and changed, described their consequences, and demonstrated how some categories related to others (Charmaz, 1995; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For example, the code of “Feeling Less than Human” became a category of the conceptual category “Perceptions of the Effects of the Registry on Offenders.” This category of “Feeling Less than Human” emerged when registered sex offenders were publicly exposed by being listed on the registry—they did not feel like people anymore, they isolated themselves, and thought they were labeled for life. This category was maintained when people continued to be listed on the registry, and there was no effect of change over time. Feeling less than human had consequences of feeling labeled, being ridiculed, and leaving a mark of oppression on the registrants.

These categories allowed me to compare different participants to each other and to compare different categories to each other. After developing a conceptual analysis of the data, grounded theory method enabled me to return to the literature in the field and compare how this study fit in with past research (Cutcliffé, 2000), and it
allowed me to find supplemental literature to support new themes that had arisen in the analysis (Smith, 1995), such as the stigma associated with being a registered sex offender. I was able to build on the research as the data emerged instead of having it fully planned out before the data collection (Charmaz, 1995). This literature was then integrated into the developing analysis and into the literature review.
4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Registered sex offenders were interviewed in order to analyze their attitudes toward the sex offender registry. Analysis of the interviews revealed that the majority of registered sex offenders perceived themselves as affected psychologically, socially, and emotionally due to being listed on the registry. While most of the registered sex offenders had lost support systems, feared for their safety, and isolated themselves as a consequence of being listed on the registry, some had gained or improved upon their support systems and did not have negative thoughts about themselves due to being listed on the registry. When they revealed themselves willingly to family members or friends, they were less likely to experience the effects of the social stigma of being labeled as a sex offender; whereas, when they were unwillingly revealed to people (e.g., acquaintances, strangers) by the registry, they were more likely to suffer negative consequences of their social stigma. Although most of the registered sex offenders who were interviewed believed that the registry is necessary, they questioned its structure, form, and effectiveness and offered suggestions for its improvement particularly to differentiate amongst offenders using convictions and risk levels. For a table of the number of participants who agreed or disagreed with interview questions, please see Appendix C.

4.1 Perceptions of the Registry’s Effectiveness

When examining the value of the registry, the majority of participants \((n=6)\) agreed that the registry is an effective tool for enhancing community safety, which
contrasts with past research that found that only about one-fifth (19%) of registered sex offenders believed that the Internet registry helps to protect the public (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). Two participants believed that the registry is not an effective tool in enhancing community safety \((n=2)\), one participant perceived it as both effective and ineffective \((n=1)\), and one was unsure of its effectiveness in enhancing community safety \((n=1)\). Despite the fact that the majority of participants reported that they had never visited the registry website \((n=6)\), the majority of participants agreed that the registry is effective in its purpose of ensuring community safety. One participant stated, “I think it is a necessary thing. People should know if there’s a predator in their neighborhood” (Participant A). Not only did the majority of participants believe that community members have a right to know of their whereabouts, but in the interview, one participant told a story of how he once remarked to another offender in his treatment group who disagreed with the registry:

> Well how about your victims? Doesn’t your victim have the right to know where you are, that you’re locked up? When you’re getting out? Don’t you think your victim is afraid for when the day you get out? (Participant H)

The registry also enables victims, if they wish to do so, to monitor the offenders who assaulted them (if they were convicted and registered) by knowing where they are located.

Not only did the participants note that the registry provides community members information on where convicted sex offenders are living, but they also described other potential benefits the registry may have. Some of the participants believed that the Internet registry may have an educational component, giving the public and potential offenders insight into the repercussions of sexually offending.
Other participants claimed that due to the public exposure of their offenses, they were able to get treatment to learn about why people sexually offend, risk factors, and alternative ways of coping. Through the exposure of his offense, which led to treatment, one participant claimed,

I would never have known these self-control techniques or these dynamic risk factors that I have, what can lead me to reoffending, just besides stress because stress isn’t the only thing that leads people to reoffend. (Participant G)

Although the registry has not been proven to be entirely effective, there might not be a better alternative. One participant acknowledged,

At some point, some branch is saying we can’t justify keeping these people in jail forever. So they’re out here, so the best they can do is put them on a registry and restrict the way they live. (Participant E)

Because there is no known effective alternative, some offenders view the registry as the best option to effectively restrict convicted sex offenders.

Some of the participants argued that the registry is not effective because not enough community members use it, which has been shown in research (Anderson & Sample, 2008). “I think it would be underutilized. I don’t think it would be utilized to the degree they think it is going to be utilized” (Participant C). The registry was also perceived as confusing to the average community member due to the listing of convictions in terms of the statute they violate. The effectiveness of the registry was perceived to decrease as the number of people who are listed increases.

Well I think they should put every single person in the state on it. And now what’s it become worth, see? What’s its value? See what I mean? Whereas if it’s kept kinda small, what’s its value? Big difference you see. You can invalidate it by flooding it. (Participant C)
The effectiveness of the registry was perceived to hinge on how many people utilize it and how many people are listed on it, which has been theorized in past research (Sample & Bray, 2003). Surprisingly, although not directly asked during the interviews, two participants claimed that they would check the registry themselves, especially if they had children and were moving to a new neighborhood, but they would not have thought about doing this until they were listed themselves. Even though they differ on their reasons of why, the majority of registered sex offenders interviewed believed that the registry is an effective tool to enhance community safety.

4.2 Effects on Rates of Sexual Offending

First-Time Offense

Although the registry was created in order to notify community members of sex offenders who live in or move into their area, research has shown that the registry and community had no significant effect on reducing reoffenses or first-time sexual offenses (Zgoba, et al., 2008), and another study showed that the majority of sexual assault arrests were committed by first-time offenders (Sinclair, et al., 1995). Without exception, all of the participants interviewed (N=10) did not think that the registry helped to prevent first-time sex offense. Many participants were not aware that the registry existed before they were listed on it, although even this, they claimed, would not have made a difference. One participant noted,

I never even thought about the sex offender registry, never thought about it at all. I never even thought about sex offenses or sex offenders. None of that. None of it. So I was totally unaware. I think the average person is. (Participant E)
Merely knowing about the consequences beforehand would not have deterred most,
as he went on to explain:

I think if a person is in a place where they’re about to commit a sexual
offense, I don’t think they’re thinking clearly enough about a registry.
I mean you’re talking [about] a point of desperation in a person’s life
where they’re acting out. And I think the threat of being on the registry
is one thing but if you’re that close or if you’re in a desperate situation
in your life, I don’t think you’re concerned at that point until after
you’ve committed the offense. (Participant E)

He believed that the consequences of committing an offense, especially being listed
on the registry, are the last thing on an offender’s mind while committing an offense.

Another participant further explained:

If I knew about the registry before I offended, that wouldn’t have
stopped me. When you commit a crime, you’re not thinking about
getting caught. In the moment, I’m thinking about me, what I want, my
needs. That wouldn’t stop me because I’m not thinking I would get
c caught. (Participant J)

Unlike rational choice theory which posits that an individual weighs the pros and
cons in a cost-benefit analysis before committing a criminal offense (Cornish &
Clarke, 1986), the majority of participants did not think that potential sex offenders
would think about consequences, especially being listed on the registry, prior to or
during an offense. Those who knew about the registry before committing their
offenses did not report that the registry was a factor prior to their decision to offend.

Despite the overwhelming belief that the registry does not help to deter first-time
offenders, some participants hoped that the state would use the registry as a tool to
educate people about the possible consequences of their actions, which according to
rational choice theory could discourage offenders from offending. The participants
admitted, however, that the effects of this education would be highly variable from person to person.

**Reoffending**

Although the participants were unanimous in their attitudes about the registry being unable to deter first-time offenders, they were split in their beliefs about whether or not the registry would be effective in reducing the rate of reoffending, which is consistent with past research (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). The registry and community notification have not been empirically proven to be effective in reducing the rates of sexual reoffending (Sandler, et al., 2008; Schram & Milloy, 1995; Walker, et al., 2005; Zgoba, et al., 2008). The majority of participants \((n=6)\) believed that the registry is not effective in deterring registered sex offenders from reoffending. Some of the reasons the participants perceived the registry as not effective in preventing reoffense are the registry’s inability to affect the following: psychological issues, the impulse to reoffend, self-control and coping techniques. One participant explained how the registry would not have an effect on reoffending,

> If somebody’s going to offend, somebody’s going to offend, regardless of the fact. Just because your name is on a website, it doesn’t really hold any weight. Just because they know who you are, it doesn’t stop you from acting out. (Participant J)

Despite being knowledgeable of the repercussions and dealing with the consequences of public exposure, the registry was perceived as ineffective in reducing the rate of reoffending.

A minority of participants \((n=3)\) believed that being listed on the registry might have a small effect on deterring registered sex offenders from reoffending, and one participant was unsure. One participant suggested that the humiliation of having
your face on the registry, in addition to therapy and habilitation, was a deterrent to reoffending. Another participant stated,

I assume people don’t want to reoffend. I know I’m not going to get myself into the same predicament because nobody wants their name on the registry. (Participant D)

Despite the fact that the majority of participants did not believe this to be the case, a minority did believe that the registry had the possibility of lowering the rate of reoffending.

**Reason to Not Reoffend**

In spite of the fact that few participants believed the registry reduces rates of reoffending, a majority of the participants believed that being listed on the registry was a reason for themselves ($n=7$) and for others ($n=6$) to not reoffend, while a minority thought it was not a reason for themselves ($n=3$) nor for others ($n=4$). Past research has found that the majority of registered sex offenders reported that the registry was a motivator to not reoffend because they wanted to prove to others that they are not bad people (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007).

According to the majority participants, being listed on the registry should be a compelling reason to not reoffend but it ultimately fails to prevent reoffending. The participants provided various ideas of why being listed on the registry was a reason to not reoffend: the humiliation associated with being registered, the negative ways people look at them, the difficulty of finding jobs and housing, and the difficulty of being active in the community. One participant described the humiliation and difficulties in his life due to being listed on the registry:
Everything involved with the registry, as far as having to sign up, having to live with the humiliation of that, [you] have people in the neighborhood look at you in a certain way. You can’t get work because you’re seen in a different light. It’s hard to get homes. It’s hard to be in certain neighborhoods. It’s hard to walk into a store and have someone look at you wondering, you know. So for me, it’s a very big deterrent but unfortunately it’s too late. I just wish that I had learned sooner. (Participant F)

Due to being seen as different, the public exposure was perceived as a compelling reason to not reoffend. One participant believed that the registry is a reason to not reoffend if people are involved in their community:

> You get a 70-year-old man who is back woods type guy and he minds to himself, it ain’t gonna stop him [sic]. But if you’re a young professional and you wanna become active in your community, you go out to eat and you go out to the park, and you have kids who go to soccer games and whatnot. I mean I can’t wait for nine and a half years, I mean I really can’t. (Participant B)

According to social control theory (Hirschi, 1969), being listed on the registry should be a reason to not reoffend depending on how active, involved, and committed to their community registrants are. The stigma of a felony conviction imposes additional barriers to establishing or maintaining successful adult roles, including being an active citizen in the community (Uggen, et al., 2004). People who are more active in the community may have a more compelling reason to not reoffend to prove to others that they are valuable members of the community. Another participant said that being listed on the registry, in tandem with court-mandated treatment, enables the offenders to come to terms with what they have done and provides them with the means to learn coping methods, that they would not have known otherwise, to prevent future sexually deviant behaviors (Participant G).
A minority of participants \((n=2)\) claimed that they did not believe that being listed on the registry was a reason for themselves or for others to not reoffend. One participant remarked, “No, I don’t think the registry does anything, personally, other than, it’s nasty” (Participant C). Rather than being perceived as motivating offenders to not reoffend, the registry was seen as having a negative impact on offenders. Although the majority of participants did not think that the registry lowered the rate of reoffending, the majority did believe being listed on the registry was a reason for themselves and others to not reoffend. The registry was perceived as one reason to not reoffend, but not as an effective mechanism to reduce rates of recidivism.

**Effects on Victims Reporting**

Although researchers have expressed concern and theorized that the registry and community notification will decrease the likelihood of reports from victims of sexual assault perpetrated by family members or acquaintances (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Freeman-Longo, 1996; Lotke, 1997), many of the registrants interviewed perceived the registry as encouraging victims to report sexual assaults. The majority of participants \((n=6)\) reported that they believed the registry might compel victims to report assaults; however, two of these participants, as well as one other participant, also thought it might prevent victims from coming forward \((n=3)\). One participant thought it had no effect on victims reporting \((n=1)\), and two participants were unsure \((n=2)\). Those who believed that the registry would aid in victims reporting provided varying reasons for why this would occur. One participant stated, “[The victims] have some place to reach out to now, which before they didn’t have” (Participant A). Some participants thought a victim might be more likely to report if the offender was
already listed on the registry or, as another suggested, if it would result in the
offender being listed on the registry. Another participant proposed that it would
benefit the family of a victim and the community to get an offender listed in order to
prevent future offending and to enhance the safety of a neighborhood.

Of the participants who believed that the registry would decrease the
likelihood of victims reporting, one participant claimed that the registry would not
have an effect on victims because they are unaware it exists (Participant C). Another
suggested that due to the humiliation of being assaulted, a victim might not want to
come forward and admit to being violated (Participant E). Another said that some
victims might be afraid to report due to repercussions for the offender and how it
would reflect upon themselves, claiming that the registry had no effect on his victim
reporting his offense (Participant G). Two of the participants spoke of how victims
who knew about the registry might be more likely to report for vindication purposes
in order to punish the people who harmed them. Although the participants were split
on how the registry would have an effect on victims reporting, the majority \( n=6 \)
perceived it as encouraging victims to report despite researchers’ theories that this
might not be the case.

4.3 Effects on Sexual Offenders

*Isolation*

A majority of the participants \( n=6 \) admitted to feeling more isolated due to
being listed on the registry while a minority \( n=4 \) said they did not feel more isolated
because of the registry. This isolation may be a result of attempts to avoid intergroup
contact to escape the prejudice and discrimination associated with being stigmatized (Crocker, et al., 1998; Goffman, 1963). Many of the participants felt isolated due to losing their housing or being forced to move out of their families’ homes. One participant talked about living on the streets, in the woods, under bridges, in abandoned houses, and in sewer pipes because he had nowhere else to go, associating with the “dregs of society” (Participant F) and turning to criminality in order to survive.

While the stigma associated with being a sex offender is usually concealed, the registry enables this stigma to be revealed at any time. Because it is difficult to conceal, sex offenders may feel uncomfortable and that they have less control over the exposure of their stigmatized identity (Golin, et al., 2002). Many participants claimed self-imposed isolation as a result of the lack of control over revealing their stigma. One participant, who at the time of the study was not allowed to live with his wife, spoke of self-imposed isolation for weeks on end and paranoia at times when out in public. He mentioned that he isolated himself by not going to his 30-year high school reunion because he was afraid that someone might have seen him on the registry and might have informed others of his status as a registered sex offender.

Stigmatized people can attempt to cope by concealing their stigma by “passing,” which enables them to avoid the stressors resulting from stigma (Miller, 2006). One participant spoke of how he hid aspects of himself in order to prevent others from knowing about his status as a registered sex offender when he said,

I only like to show people what I like them to see. I don’t like them knowing I’m on the registry. [They think] I’m this type of person that they portray a sex offender to be. (Participant D)
He perceived the public as categorizing him and stereotyping him as a sex offender, and in turn, attempted to cope by hiding part of himself so people would not find out. One participant mentioned trying to disguise himself and change his appearance due to feeling uncomfortable in public,

> The public, I was afraid to show myself. I was wearing hooded sweatshirts and I would purposely wear the hood and I would wear sunglasses. I thought about altering my image between dying my hair, re-piercing my eyebrow, little things like that just so people wouldn’t recognize me. That’s how afraid I was when I was out because if I was assaulted in prison, what makes you think that may not happen out in public. (Participant G)

The public exposure of his offense took away a barrier of safety of being anonymous and replaced it with the threat that he could be involuntarily exposed to anyone at any time. The participants demonstrated that registered sex offenders avoid contact with others to try and escape prejudice and discrimination because of the constant risk of having their stigma unwillingly revealed. The majority of participants isolated themselves due to being listed on the registry.

**Fear of Prejudice**

The majority of participants \(n=6\) expressed a fear of being judged by others, particularly when they did not reveal their offenses to others but were unwillingly revealed on the registry. Direct or vicarious experiences of exclusion, discrimination, or prejudice can lead to prejudice apprehension or anxious anticipation that one will be the target of prejudice in situations where its possibility is present (Mendoza-Denton, et al., 2006). Prejudice apprehension due to being listed on the registry changed the way they perceived others looking at them. Because they are listed on the registry with their pictures, convictions and no redeeming qualities, they felt, as one
participant put it, “Depressed, I mean hopeless that people will go up there and see it
before they even know me and just judge” (Participant B). Another participant noted
that he thought even other convicted felons would use the registry to look up people
in order to make themselves feel better,

Those type[s] of people have a tendency to be self-righteous and
judge, and say, “Oh that person is worse than me, and thank god there
is someone worse than me.” (Participant C)

He thought that even other convicted felons would use the registry to minimize their
own offenses and deem the registered sex offenders as worse than them. The
awareness of the potential prejudice around them can affect the way registered sex
offenders perceive people looking at them. One participant noted,

I mean you get an eye sometimes. You don’t know if they know, you
haven’t told them I mean, but you know they’ve looked it up.
Anybody can access [the registry]. (Participant D)

Not knowing who had accessed the registry, some participants felt paranoid that
anyone who gave them a certain look knew of their stigmatized status.

Other participants talked about how they believed this judgment resulting
from accessing the registry was unfair and unwarranted. One participant explained
how people should not judge him for his mistakes,

Until people know the details of someone’s criminal offense,
especially if it’s in a sexual assault manner. And like myself, I had risk
of injury to a minor, and I think that nobody should be judging.
Nobody’s perfect. I have made many mistakes in my life and if it
wasn’t for people making mistakes in their lives then obviously
[they’re] not going to be who [they] are today. It takes some mistakes
to learn and to adapt to the ways of living. (Participant G)

He went on to say that even though they know, “Some people don’t care. Some
people judge me by how I act and who I am as a person. Once again, people make
mistakes, you can’t hold that against them” (Participant G). He would not let the offense he committed define him, and he expressed hope for people not to judge him solely for his mistakes. Another participant expressed his prejudice apprehension, “I know I'm going to be judged and all that, but I want to be judged for who I am now, not who I was then” (Participant J). Once again, there was the sentiment that although they were different people than when they committed their offenses, the registry did not reflect that. Rather, the registry contributed to prejudice apprehension, causing the participants to feel that there was the potential for prejudice from anyone at any time because they could not control to whom their status as a registered sex offender was revealed.

Feeling Less than Human

Sexual violence is often concealed by a veil of secrecy and deception. As one participant explained, “It’s a veil there and once they see [you] on the registry, that veil goes down and you’re no longer a part of society” (Participant F). Some participants believed that when this veil was removed and what was underneath was revealed through exposure on the registry, they were removed from society. One participant remarked, “[The registry] is a valuable tool for normal citizens. Normal? What’s normal? You know what I mean though.” Thinking about the registry as a tool for people who are “normal,” as opposed to convicted sex offenders who are not seen as not “normal,” reinforced the dichotomy between “the normal [and] the person he is normal against” (Goffman, 1963, p. 6).
Through this involuntary exposure, when people found out that they were registered sex offenders, half of the participants (n=5) felt like they were treated as less than human. One participant elucidated this sentiment,

Well sure, they put you into a category you’re isolated, you’re like this other person, you’re not like a regular Joe. Hey he’s a sex offender, he’s not like a person anymore. (Participant D)

He also mentioned that people treated him like he was a “psychopath” or “this wild crazy guy.” Not simply due to the crime he committed, but also because he had been publicly placed into another category, he felt as though he had a new status and was not treated like a person anymore. Another participant explained that because he was a sex offender, he was sexually assaulted in prison and constantly ridiculed:

I don’t necessarily have any problems with it but we’re labeled as such heinous people. We’re labeled as one of the most looked down upon people in comparison to what I feel to be murderers or something like that. (Participant G)

Similarly another participant noted,

Someone has to be the worst person in the world…if you have to be judged by the prison caliber people, they would kill you, and fortunately they have someone worse than them. (Participant C)

Convicted sex offenders, unlike other convicted felons, have been deemed as fit to be subject to public monitoring. In turn, some of them perceived that society feels that they are the worst of the worst. If they feel that this label of “sex offender” reinforces expectancies of failure, they will be less likely to be motivated to change (Winick, 1998).

Prejudice and discrimination on the basis of stigma are thought to make stigmatized people perceive themselves as chronically inferior and leave a “mark of oppression” on the personalities and self-esteem of the stigmatized (Crocker & Major,
Two participants spoke of how the registry was a symbol of the stigma associated with their offending. One participant called it the “bar sinister” claiming, “An older man will have the cross to bear until he dies” (Participant C). Even though he was scheduled to get off the registry six and a half years after this study, he felt that mentally and emotionally, he would not be able to escape this stigma. Another participant argued that regardless of the severity of the offense, being a registered sex offender “sort of gives you a scarlet letter” (Participant B). Due to being listed on the registry and being from a small town, he perceived himself as possessing a public mark of shame. If convicted felons, like registered sex offenders, perceive themselves to be outcasts in society and rejected no matter what they do, they will have less incentive to transition into a law-abiding citizen role (Uggen, et al., 2004).

Stress

Almost unanimously, the majority of the registered sex offenders interviewed (n=9) agreed that being listed on the registry added stress to their lives, which is consistent with past research (Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). Only one participant reported that being listed on the registry did not add stress to his life. By having to register, the majority of offenders felt that life was made more difficult by having to “jump through certain hoops” (Participant A). Failure to jump through these hoops can result in failure to comply with the requirements of the registry, which can lead to another felony conviction ("Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act," 2006). Some of the participants expressed stress and paranoia associated with the possibility of not receiving important documentation necessary to register and be in compliance. Many of the participants expressed the sentiment that they were constantly being
persecuted for something for which they had already been punished. These civil sanctions, or “invisible punishments,” imposed on them can make it more difficult for offenders to reintegrate into society (Travis, 2005). One offender described his experience with the invisible punishment of being listed on the registry,

I have no problem with somebody knowing who I am and being notified of it. My problem is the constant persecution. I’ve done my time, I’m getting the programming, I’ve done my parole—whatever, let me try to have a life now. Give me some room. That’s the only problem. People only see the name, the face, and that’s it. (Participant F)

This constant persecution was due to being involuntarily exposed on the registry. Stigma can create stress due to other peoples’ stereotyped expectations of, prejudiced attitudes toward, and discriminatory behavior towards the stigmatized (Fiske, 1998).

For some, especially participants who were newly listed, the harassment from neighbors and other community members was a stressor associated with being stigmatized. One participant does not associate with his neighbors anymore, “Well neighbors, a couple of people I have gotten looks [from]. They don’t talk to me anymore” (Participant D). Due to their stigma being unwillingly revealed to neighbors and acquaintances, they experienced disregard and harassment.

Due to probation restrictions, for some registered sex offenders, there are specific requirements and limitations for their housing location and type of job. Not only can the probation restrictions affect the registered sex offender, but discrimination from prejudice has been demonstrated to deny stigmatized felons of educational, social, and economic opportunities that they need for effective coping (Uggen, et al., 2004). Most of the participants interviewed expressed anxiety about not finding a job and/or the difficulties in finding housing. One participant expressed
helplessness as a consequence of not being able to find a job after losing his previous one due to a clerical error on the registry (listing the wrong conviction), which took two months to correct. Only one participant explained how the registry did not affect his employment because when his employers looked him up on the registry and saw his convictions, they gave him a chance and came to trust him. However, many expressed that no matter what qualifications they had, a sex offense on their record severely hindered their ability to get the jobs they wanted. One participant shared his frustration about having a sex offense felony on his record:

Once they see that felony checked on that application or you disclose that information to them, they’re not giving you the opportunity to prove yourself as a productive member or a somewhat responsible and respectable person. (Participant G)

In addition to probation restrictions, the restrictions that discrimination poses against registered sex offenders could hinder access to necessary resources for effective coping.

Although the majority of participants (n=9) expressed stress and associated effects with being listed on the registry, a small minority of participants (n=2) who had been listed on the registry for two or more years expressed that the stress lessened over time. People who have more experience adapting to their stigma may be better able to cope (Jones, et al., 1984) because coping strategies may evolve out of experience with stereotyping incidents (Miller, 2006). One participant noted that he had become less stressed over time because he had already been listed for five years claiming, “Yes, I’m kinda [sic] getting away from that now. When it first all started years ago, I was freaking out” (Participant E). Another, who has been listed for two years, noted,
I have adapted to it but until the day I'm off probation and until the day I'm off the registry, life is not going to be easy. I'm going to hit so many potholes and I'm going to have to dig myself out. (Participant G)

No one who had been registered for less than two years on the registry mentioned a lessening in stress over time. People who had more experience with the stigma of being listed on the registry might be better equipped to cope with it, and thereby, thereby, their levels of stress may change over time in regards to being listed on the registry.

**Anxiety, Depression, and Suicide**

Although collateral consequences of sex offender legislation have been found to be similar to other felony convictions in the way they affect practical, legal, and social aspects of the offender’s life, research also suggests that the nature and extent of these consequences may be greater for sex offenders than for other convicted felons (Tewksbury, 2005). Researchers have found that the registry and community notification have directly contributed to some registered sex offenders’ anxiety, depression, and thoughts of suicide (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). Participants consistently noted negative thoughts about themselves and negative emotions due to being registered. A majority ($n=7$) of participants claimed to have negative thoughts about themselves due to being listed on the registry while a minority ($n=3$) did not. For some individuals a stigmatizing condition may be a core aspect of their self-concept; however, for others the same condition may be peripheral to their identity (Jones, et al., 1984). Depending on how close the stigma of being a sex offender is to their identity can affect their emotional responses to living with it.
Negative emotions that participants had experienced due to being listed on the registry included embarrassment, humiliation, paranoia, anger, depression, hatred, disgust, frustration, hopelessness and shame, most of which may affect sex offenders’ recovery and possibly trigger some offenders to reoffend (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Freeman-Longo, 1996). As a direct consequence of being registered, three participants mentioned depression (n=3), three participants mentioned anxiety (N=3), and four participants mentioned thoughts of suicide (n=4). One participant described the way he felt when he first registered,

I felt like crap the first-time I signed that paper. I was so mad… It’s like your shackle all over again, total frustration, and there’s nothing you can do about it. (Participant F)

Although most felt frustrated that they could not control their status on the registry, when asked how being listed on the registry made him feel, one participant claimed, “Deserving was the first word that came to mind. I believe it’s a good system and people who offend should be on it” (Participant I). Taking responsibility for his actions, this participant felt that the public exposure of his offense was a suitable sanction.

In addition to negative emotions, a large minority of participants (n=4) mentioned the registry as a direct contributor to their negative thoughts leading to suicidal thoughts or actions. “I mean I’ve contemplated suicide a couple times since my release because I wasn’t feeling like my life was ever going to return back to what it once was” (Participant G). Another participant remarked about the stress of being listed, “I mean there’s times where I think about going for a nice long walk and not finding my way home. You know?” (Participant B). The frustration and stress with
being listed on the registry contributed to negative self-thoughts, influencing thoughts of suicide.

For some participants, the stigma of being registered was peripheral to their identity and there were minimal negative emotions associated with being listed. One participant said being listed on the registry, although embarrassing, did not affect him emotionally and said, “my life isn’t going to change” (Participant H). Another participant claimed when asked if the registry caused him to think negative thoughts about himself,

No, it just gives me a reason to work harder. I'm registered for life. You’re either registered for 10 years or for life, there’s no in between. And I got life so why am I going to think so negative. If that’s the case then I'm going to think so negative for the rest of my life. I can’t think of myself like that, I can’t accept that. (Participant J)

Unlike most who experienced negative emotions due to being registered, this participant, like a minority of others, viewed the registry as a reason to work harder in order to not think negatively of himself. Another noted that the registry even helped him to think positively when he had to sign up:

It opened my eyes…You know, I don’t want to do this no more…[sic] I finally stepped forward and that was the biggest thing I’ve ever done in my life. So because of the registry and because of the way society looks at me, that was a very big part of it. (Participant F)

Due to variations in identifying with the stigma of being registered, participants had differing emotional responses. While a minority did not feel negatively about themselves as a result of being listed the majority of registered sex offenders interviewed expressed negative emotions and negative thoughts about themselves due to being listed including depression and suicidal thoughts.
Loss of Support Systems

Support systems have a major impact on the lives of offenders, and a lack of social support has been identified as a dynamic risk factor for sex offender recidivism (R. K. Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004). One situational factor that affects coping with stress is whether supportive others are present (Lazarus, 1999). The majority of participants (n=7) interviewed reported that they had lost friends or family due to the public exposure of their offenses, which is consistent with past research (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). A minority of offenders (n=3) reported that they did not lose any support systems due to the public exposure of their offenses. One participant expressed that he lost people, but not support systems when he said, “Support systems don’t go away, good ones anyway” (Participant E). He did not blame one of his closest friends for choosing not to associate with him anymore because he claimed he did not know if he would either. Another participant expressed a similar sentiment when he said even though nobody knew about his offense, if they did, “Maybe I would lose some friends like that but they have that right. I can’t get mad” (Participant J). One participant revealed that he lost one side of his family, I’ve lost my father’s side of the family. My father don’t talk to me no more [sic]. So that whole side of the family, as far as they’re concerned, I don’t exist. (Participant F)

Another participant who played on a rugby team was kicked off after being convicted and registered. His teammates explained, “Well we’re sorry, it looks bad for our team” (Participant B). Due to stereotypes and prejudice, nonstigmatized people may be hesitant to form close relationships with stigmatized people limiting both groups’ opportunities for personal growth and self-expansion (Crocker & Garcia, 2006). Due
to the exposure of their offenses, some participants lost support systems, supportive people, and social outlets.

Due to the public exposure of their offenses, not only did people in their lives stop associating with them, potentially affecting their personal growth and expansion, but many of the participants actively chose to stop associating with certain people. Some participants explained the difficulty in associating with friends and family who had children. Many of the participants were restricted from being around minors by probation, parole, or treatment providers, either because their offenses involved minor victims or because they were believed to be a risk to minors. Due to these restrictions, they had to verify with friends and family before social gatherings if minors would be present. One participant explained the difficulty of maintaining relationships with people who had children,

     I mean I don’t have a lot of friends. I don’t talk to a lot of friends anymore because they may know of my offense, and I just don’t want to deal with that. Like I said, a lot of my friends have family or minors that they associate with or [live] in their houses. So I lost a lot of friends that way, or not lost, but I don’t associate with them anymore.
     (Participant D)

Whether or not they chose not to associate with certain people in their lives anymore or whether certain people in their lives chose not to associate with them, the registry, by publicly exposing their offenses, played a role in affecting these relationships.

**Gain of Support Systems**

The public exposure of offenses was not only reported to contribute to losing support systems, but some participants reported improving upon their existing support systems or even gaining support systems. Past research has found that the majority of registered sex offenders reported that most people they knew who knew of their status
as sex offenders were supportive of their recovery (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). Half of the participants (n=5) gained new support systems due to the public exposure of their offenses, whether they had revealed their offenses themselves or they were unwillingly revealed, while half of the participants (n=5) did not gain any new support systems, either losing some or retaining the ones they had. Some of the participants reported they had gained support from people such as clinicians and clergy members due to coming forward and being honest about their offense(s). One form of coping with stressors may involve trying to obtain social support from nonstigmatized individuals such as mentors, friends, and family (Miller, 2006). When asked if he had gained any support systems due to the public exposure of his offenses, one participant said,

Yeah, because of what I’ve done and the fact that I’ve come forward and finally spoke [sic] up and said listen this is what the deal is. (Participant F)

Through the exposure of his offenses, he claimed that the registry had helped him come forward, start talking about what he had done and begin dealing with it. One participant explained that his support system was a source of motivation:

Everybody believes in me…My support system is good, it’s great. That’s why I have to work harder, for me and for them. I owe it to them too. (Participant J)

Not only had he been able to develop a support network at his living facility, but he was also motivated to improve himself because of it. As a coping mechanism, half of the registered sex offenders had reached out to obtain support from others.

*Toll on Others*

Not only did the public exposure of offenders’ offenses affect them, but it also took a toll on those around them. Although they were not explicitly asked, half of the
participants ($n=5$) expressed the negative effects that the exposure of their offenses had on their family and friends, which is consistent with past research (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009). Being listed on the registry had the potential to affect not only people’s perceptions of the registered sex offenders but also people’s perceptions of those who associate with the offenders.

One participant was prevented from associating with a group because he did not want to negatively affect its image. He expressed his long-term desire to become a Jehovah’s Witness and go door-to-door but feared that because he was listed on the registry, people would ridicule the Jehovah’s Witnesses (Participant C). One participant told a story of how a mother’s coworker noticed him in a grocery store and started yelling obscene things at him: “When you’re with family and something happens like that or you’re with friends, it makes them look bad too” (Participant G). Another participant told of how at the scene of his arrest, the policeman turned to the participant’s wife and told her that she now “wore the pants in the family.” During the interview he said,

> Have some compassion for the victims, not just the victim, but you know, the family of the offender. You know treat me that way. But you don’t go to someone that just died of cancer and go to their wife and say, “Well I guess he shouldn’t have smoked for all those years, haha.” You know, have some compassion. (Participant B)

One participant mentioned how difficult it is to feel like he has affected the people who are closest to him in his life:

> I have a hard time looking at my Mom and being like how can you love me for being who I am? How can anybody care about me for who I am? (Participant G).
The effects of the public exposure of this stigmatized status can extend beyond the sex offenders to their families and loved ones, affecting others’ lives and in turn, affecting their own.

**Vigilante Violence**

While most stigmas hold an element of threat, behavioral deviants such as criminals can elicit fears of physical harm and social disorders (Katz, 1981). Sex offending, as a criminal stigma, is seen as more voluntary (Goffman, 1963) and due to its perceived controllability, evokes anger and judgments (B. Weiner, et al., 1988). The perceived responsibility for the stigma of being a sex offender might contribute to negative reactions from the public.

The participants admitted how the public’s fear of their stigmatized status as sex offenders could result in threats and vigilante violence. A majority of the participants ($n=7$) acknowledged feeling, at some point, fear for their own safety due to being listed on the registry, while a minority ($n=3$) of the participants claimed they had not. Past research has found that slightly less than half (46%) of registered sex offenders had feared for their safety due to being listed on the registry (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). One participant asked the question, “How do you protect the public and protect the sex offender?” (Participant E), which has been debated in U.S. courts numerous times, including in the Supreme Court (see *Conn. DPS v. Doe*, U.S. Supreme Court, 2002a or *Smith v. Doe*, U.S. Supreme Court, 2002b). One participant claimed that people who access the registry probably ignore the disclaimer on the Connecticut Sex Offender Registry website that states, “Any person who uses information in this registry to injure, harass or commit a criminal act
against any person included in the registry or any other person is subject to criminal prosecution” (Conn. Gen. Stat. § Sec. 54-258a), as they would ignore the disclaimer for any other website (Participant B). Another participant claimed that the registry can be “a bad thing also because you have people who go on there looking for people to be a vigilante against” (Participant F). Not only does vigilante violence have physical consequences but threats of violence can have negative psychological implications (Leary, et al., 1995).

Due to vigilante violence against registered sex offenders that the participants had seen in the media, some of the registered sex offenders interviewed were apprehensive that they could be next. One participant explained his fear of vigilante violence,

I guess there is some fear in the back of my mind because I’ve seen many newspaper articles from other states, “Vigilantes hunt him down,” you know they’ve got their address and everything, shot in the dark. I mean if somebody did this to my loved one, phew. But there are some crazy people out there and some of them could want to do that. Yeah, it’s dangerous. (Participant H)

He justified this potential violence by expressing that he might do the same to someone if they harmed his loved one. Another participant also experienced this fear of vigilante violence. After being sexually assaulted while he was incarcerated due to his status as a sex offender, when he was released from prison he tried to hide and disguise himself in public:

That’s how afraid I was when I was out because if I was assaulted in prison what makes you think that may not happen out in public. If people recognize me wanna [sic] get back [at me] and be like, ‘Oh, I hate this MF-er etc. etc., if he ever touched my kid…’ It’s something that I’m sure that a lot of offenders have thought about. (Participant G)
Having experienced vigilante violence before in prison, he became even more fearful of what could happen out in public.

Although he had not experienced vigilantism himself, one participant felt that some people unfairly use the registry, “Some people like to use it as a knife, that’s all I would say, to enhance them, not to protect their family or to protect someone” (Participant C). He perceived people using vigilante violence to put down sex offenders in order to elevate themselves, rather than to protect another. One participant stated that he had mixed feelings about fear for his safety when he explained,

I don’t want my family to have to go through burying me and all that [sic]. They don’t need that. I’ve caused them enough harm already just making them worry about me constantly. But on the other hand, I kind of welcomed it. I did. Every chance I got, I stuck myself out there hoping something would happen but nothing ever did, unless it was me doing it to myself. (Participant F)

On the one hand, he wanted to protect his family from pain and suffering, but because of his past sex offending behavior he had sought violence, and at times, was the vigilante against himself. He also noted how the violence against sex offenders has become “criminal acts against the criminal, and it’s turning everything into a vicious circle” (Participant F). This participant, among others, perceived the registry to perpetuate, rather than prevent, a cycle of violence.

Another participant told of his experience with a threat of vigilante violence, which he confessed he had never told anyone before. His daughter informed him that her friend’s mother had expressed that she wanted to run him over with her car. After this, he feared for his safety and said, “My only thought is that if someone wants to
harm me, please kill me ‘cause I don’t want to be paralyzed” (Participant E). He justified this vigilante violence by saying,

I don’t like being harmed, but I harmed somebody myself…if you’re going to commit a crime like this, you’re putting yourself out there for whatever…[Death] would be a relief because then I wouldn’t have to be on this planet. (Participant E)

Although he did not want to be physically harmed, he tried to justify that if he one day experienced violence, he believed he may have put himself in a position to deserve it. Some of the registered sex offenders had difficulty coping with the stressors resulting from these threats and vigilante violence because some of them felt they deserved it because they had harmed others.

Although they were not explicitly asked, two participants, one who had been listed for a year and a half and the other for three and a half years, mentioned that their fear for their safety had lessened over time. One of these participants, who had been listed for one and a half years said when he first signed up for the registry,

I wasn’t sure what people in my neighborhood would do, if people checked it often, if there would be some negative backlash once I get back into my house and there hasn’t been. (Participant I)

During the interview, he claimed he no longer feared for his safety. Although this might be evidence of fear lessening over time on the registry, possibly due to adaptation a stigma over time, the majority of participants still feared for their safety regardless of how long they had been listed.

**Opportunity to Prove Themselves**

Although they were not explicitly asked, a large minority of participants (n=4) expressed how they felt that being listed on the registry did not give them the opportunity to prove themselves as contributing members of society. Research has
found that the majority of registered sex offenders reported that they had less hope for the future because they were registered (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). Because of difficulties acquiring housing, returning to their homes and/or obtaining decent jobs, some participants reported feeling that they were inhibited from positively contributing to society. After not being allowed to go home for nine years, one participant said,

It’s stopping me from going home and proving to the world that I'm a changed man—I still have a lot to give the world. (Participant J)

He believed the registry was a crucial inhibitor of being able to change and proving to others that he was capable of changing.

Some participants alluded to how their lives would be different if they were not listed on the registry. One participant remarked,

You know possibly I could start my life all over again and not do the things that I’ve done. But because I'm on there, it’s like I said, you're no longer a part of society. I mean you’re there but you’re a ghost of the person you used to be as far as their concerned. (Participant F)

Another participant felt he had lost part of the identity he had before he was registered, “I also do stand-up comedy, but who cares anymore, I’m a sex offender” (Participant E). The new label of “sex offender” had surpassed his old identity.

Many of the participants felt denied the opportunity to change because of their stigmatized status. Despite the prejudice associated with being labeled and defined by others as one of the worst, some of the participants had been able to separate their offenses from their overall sense of self, not allowing their offenses to define them, which has been found useful with other convicted felons in past research (Uggen, et al., 2004). Through this separation, some participants had also been able to detach
their sense of self from their stigma, helping to preserve their sense of self worth. By disassociating his sense of self from his mistakes, one participant reported attempting to battle the identification of sex offender:

I'm not trying to toot my own horn but I feel like if you get to know me, I'm a decent person who just made some bad—I can’t say mistakes, because mistakes only happen once or twice—I made some bad decisions that led to bad urges. Once you get to know me, I feel like I'm a good person. (Participant J)

If people could see beyond the label that is listed on the registry, he felt that they would get to know a good person. Despite his stigmatized status of being listed on the registry and the restrictions that probation placed on him, one participant claimed that his friends still knew him for who he was:

The probation officer doesn’t know me from a serial killer, not trying to make light of it but [my friends] were like, “We know you, we don’t care what probation says, you know if you wanna [sic] be around our kids or we want you around our kids, it’s up to us, not them.”

(Participant B)

Although the “sex offender” label imposed by the registry changed the way new people came to see him, some of the people from his past could detach who he was from his offense.

Only one participant claimed he did not know anyone who knew he was listed on the registry. Another said that people did not treat him differently because, “They know who I am today” (Participant H), and he believed he had changed from the person he was when he committed his offenses. One participant enrolled in school and hoped that things might change: “I’m not trying to change people’s views but have them look at me in a different way and realize that I am trying to change and better myself” (Participant G).
One participant saw the registry as preventing people from getting a second chance to prove themselves when he said,

I mean when a child at home does something wrong, you smack them on the hand and tell them, ‘Don’t do it again.’ They get the opportunity to prove themselves, but in this situation, you don’t get that opportunity. But then again, some of us have screwed up enough to where we don’t deserve [a second chance], but there are people on [the registry] that deserve a second chance. I believe in that. I’ve blown mine three times over, but some people do deserve it. (Participant F)

Even though he believed that he himself did not deserve another chance, he argued that there were people on the registry who did believe they deserved another chance.

Although many of the participants felt that the registry was an inhibitor of change, some of the participants were still motivated to improve themselves and prove to others that they did not deserve the prejudice and discrimination that they incurred from being listed as a registered sex offenders on the registry, which has been similarly found in past research (Levenson & Cotter, 2005).

**Unwillingly Revealed Model**

According to the results of this study, participants were stigmatized due to their status on the registry, which has been shown in past research (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Scott & Gerbasi, 2003; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2007). The negative effects of their stigma varied according to how their status as registered sex offenders was exposed. People could find out about a person’s status as a registered sex offender in two ways: people could be told by the offender, or people could locate the offender on the registry (or be informed through other means such as the media). Almost all of the participants recounted experiences in which they had revealed their stigmatized status willingly (usually to friends and family), and
instances when they had been unwillingly revealed to others (usually acquaintances or strangers), and times when they chose not to reveal their status to certain people.

The Unwillingly Revealed Model, using the data from this study, demonstrates the three processes of how the registered sex offenders’ stigmatized status was revealed and the varying effects associated with each process. See Figure 2 (p. 112) for the Unwillingly Revealed Model. When they were in situations with people to whom they had willingly revealed their status, they could experience negative effects: stress, isolation, frustration, and loss of support. When they were in situations with people to whom they had not revealed their status, due to the threat of exposure, they could still experience effects of and reactions to their stigma: embarrassment, shame, paranoia, concealment, and fear of losing support. In situations with people to whom their status as registered sex offenders was involuntarily exposed through the registry or other means (e.g., media), the participants experienced more negative effects: stress, isolation, frustration, humiliation, anger, paranoia, concealment, loss of support, loss of acquaintances, effects on social life, persecution, public harassment, toll on others, fear for safety, vigilante violence, removal from society, and feeling less than human. Acceptance could also be gained from the exposure of their status, which lead to positive effects of treatment, honesty, and a gain of support. The Unwillingly Revealed Model demonstrates how being unwillingly revealed at any time through the registry led the participants to experience more negative effects than when the offenders revealed themselves willingly.
Figure 2. Unwillingly Revealed Model. This figure illustrates the effects of the stigma of being a registered sex offender, according to how and to whom this status is revealed.
4.4 Registry Reform

The participants were asked what they thought of the structure and form of the current registry and whether or not they had suggestions for its improvement. Almost all of the participants \((n=9)\) made the suggestion to differentiate between offenders in order to demonstrate that there is a spectrum of sex offenses and sex offenses, which is consistent with past research (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007). The majority of participants expressed that the public should be aware that, as one participant put it, “No two people that are on the registry are alike. There is no case that is exactly like [another]” (Participant C). Every participant but one mentioned the importance of listing convictions and/or level of risk in order to dispel the “one-size-fits-all” (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007, p. 394) notion that all sex offenders are the same.

**Listing Convictions**

The majority of participants \((n=8)\) were in favor of specifically listing convictions in order to distinguish between offenders and to clarify offenses. As one participant claimed, “You’re just put into a group of sex offenders” (Participant E). As another participant put it, “People can think the worst when the crime wasn’t as bad as someone else’s” (Participant I). Another participant claimed it did not matter if there were convictions listed because the statutory language was not well understood. “Society doesn’t know what it means. Anybody on there, he’s a bad guy” (Participant C).

The registrants themselves had varying numbers and type of convictions listed on the registry. One participant claimed that there needs to be differentiation when he said,
One participant said, “I wish [convictions] would be done a little more accurately” (Participant E). Another suggested, “I would just like for them to categorize, be a little more detailed about the sex crimes” (Participant G). In an attempt to quell the notion that sex offenders are a homogenous population, most of the participants (n=8) believed that convictions should be listed with detail and accuracy in order to more effectively inform the public.

**Listing Level of Risk**

As with convictions, the majority of participants (n=7) believed that the registry should list level of risk to reoffend, which is consistent with past research (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). One participant did not know if it would be good or bad (n=1), one participant thought it would not make a difference (n=1), and one participant did not answer the question (n=1). Research has suggested that completing risk-evaluations while offenders are listed on the registry, in order to identify registrants who could be removed, could motivate offenders to pursue treatment and maintain crime-free lifestyles (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007). One participant claimed that listing level of risk would make it less confusing for the public (Participant F). Another suggested that either conviction or level of risk should be listed rather than both in tandem, in order to prevent, “a one-stop wreck someone’s life,” where they could find out all the information about a person with one click (Participant B). Rather, he suggested, that if people wanted to know both a registrant’s convictions
and level of risk, they could take an extra step and call the Connecticut Sex Offender Registry and request this information.

Among the participants who did not agree with listing level of risk on the registry, one participant claimed that listing level of risk was problematic because a person had to assign that risk when he said, “No one wants to take responsibility. Oh he’s a good guy but what if he does something…?” (Participant C). Listing level of risk, he suggested, might be dangerous because of its potential subjectiveness. Another participant argued that level of risk was irrelevant because everyone is at risk to reoffend and no one is a higher or lower risk than anyone else: “There’s no better sex offender than the next” (Participant J). Although research has shown that reoffending risk levels vary from person to person (Marques, et al., 2005), he perceived level of risk to be so variable that it could not be quantified from one person to the next. Although a minority did not think it was feasible nor would make a difference to list level of risk, the majority of registered sex offenders interviewed believed that listing level of risk on the registry would be beneficial for both offenders and the public.

**Listing Treatment**

Although it has been demonstrated in past research that sex offenders believed that completion of treatment should have an effect on registrants’ listings on the registry (Levenson & Cotter, 2005), registered sex offenders have not yet been asked what they think of listing court-mandated treatment on the registry. The majority of participants \( n=8 \) thought that listing treatment would be beneficial, while a minority \( n=2 \) did not agree with listing treatment. Participants claimed that listing length of
treatment and treatment completed could change public opinion of sex offenders. One participant highlighted this when he said,

[Listing treatment] would be a positive because if someone is looking on the registry and sees that someone on the registry is doing something about it, it may change opinion. (Participant I)

The majority of participants (n=7) believed treatment could indicate a positive quality among many negatives on the registry. As one participant put it,

You’re already judging somebody so if you see some positive stuff, it gives people the benefit of the doubt like he’s trying to change his life, a little bit of positive in a negative situation. (Participant J)

Not only could listing treatment provide a positive aspect to a negative label, but some recognized that listing treatment could be useful to inform the public of an offender’s compliancy with treatment. As one participant suggested, “Some people just actually split, which is a total violation. I think people need to know this person refused treatment” (Participant E). Listing treatment would inform the public if registered sex offenders were in probation-mandated treatment and trying to change or if they had refused mandatory treatment and were not working on recovery.

A minority of participants (n=3) expressed that listing treatment could provide people with a false sense of security. Because the lengths of treatment programs vary and completion time varies for each individual (Barnes, et al., 1994), listing time in treatment may not be an accurate indicator of where someone is at in the recovery process. One participant expressed disagreement with listing treatment,

I don’t think that it’s gonna [sic] help or if it’s even a public right. I mean, you’ve been driving for 50 years, or you’ve been driving for a month, that doesn’t mean that the 50 years person [sic] drives any safer or is any different than the person who’s been driving for a month. (Participant B)
Another participant agreed that treatment should be listed although he expressed hesitation due to the possibility of a false sense of security when he said, “I mean you still have to be vigilant, but you don’t have to be that vigilant, there is a limit” (Participant F). Another questioned, “Who wants to guarantee him?” (Participant C), suggesting that treatment providers would not want to provide the public with a false sense of security by listing peoples’ treatment, which could be perceived by the public as a guarantee that offenders would not reoffend. Although the minority of participants thought that listing treatment could provide the public with a false sense of security, the majority of participants thought that listing treatment would be beneficial to both registered sex offenders and the public.

*Duration of Time Listed*

At the time of this study, according to Connecticut state law, sex offenders listed on the sex offender registry were either required to be listed for 10 years or life depending on the type of offense(s), age of victim(s), and number of offense(s), with a minimal chance of being removed through the court system. Although it was not one of the interview questions, half of the participants ($n=5$) expressed interest in having the duration of time on the registry changed. Only three of these participants were explicitly asked about the length of time on the registry when they previously mentioned it in one of their responses. One participant believed that length of time on the registry should be determined on a case-by-case basis with longer durations for more severe offenses (Participant A). Another thought that 10 years was too long and suggested a requirement to serve 5 years on the public registry and then 5 years on the confidential registry, which is accessible only to law enforcement (Participant C).
Two participants suggested that due to the long duration of time that people are listed and peoples’ capacity to change, people should be able to be removed from the registry, which has been shown in past research (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007). One participant believed that people should be assigned a level of risk and duration of time according to the severity of their offenses and then be re-evaluated, “If he needs to be on longer, okay, and if not, dismiss him” (Participant D), which other registered sex offenders have similarly suggested in past research (Levenson & Cotter, 2005).

Another participant who was listed on the registry for life said, “If they’re putting their foot forward [and] really trying to change, I think they should be able to get off” (Participant J). There was strong support, among the five participants who discussed this subject, for the idea that there should be some type of reward for law-abiding behavior and change.

**Registry for Others**

Although they were not explicitly asked about it in the interview, a minority of participants (n=3) questioned why there was a registry for sex offenders but not other convicted felons. One participant, who thought that there should be a registry for all convicted felons, stated,

> You know you’ve got people out there who are focusing so much on the sex offender registry, that they’re not seeing the murderers, the arsonists—you know those things—the drug dealers, they’re not paying attention to that anymore. (Participant F)

Another participant, who had used the registry himself, gave an explanation for why he thought sex offenses were different,
But sex offenses are an odd crime, I mean you interact with people all the time, then you find out they’re a sex offender or then you find out 10 years later this person committed a sex offense… ‘I went to high school with [him], he was a good guy.’ It’s almost an undetectable crime and so it happens. It’s the weirdest thing but I think things are getting a little bit better in terms of public awareness. (Participant E)

Due to the concealment of and difficulty in detecting sex crimes, he believed that sex offenses were more worthy of being publicly exposed than other crimes. Both of these participants also indicated that they would like to see a registry for murderers. Another participant claimed that although he should not necessarily be listed on the registry,

…there are guys in that class or guys in the group or guys on the sex offender registry and they should be there. They should be there for a while because they’ve done some crazy things. (Participant D)

Separating himself from the group of sex offenders, he believed that some sex offenders need to be listed on the registry, but not all, which is consistent with past research (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007). A minority of participants mentioned that there should be a registry for other convicted felons and that not all sex offenders should be listed on a publicly accessible registry.
5. DISCUSSION

While the registry and community notification were designed to disseminate information about convicted sex offenders to the public in order to give community members more agency in managing their own safety, this legislation may not be accomplishing its goal. This study sought to examine attitudes toward the sex offender registry from the perspective of people who are registered. This study assessed the perception of the registered sex offenders of the effectiveness of the registry in reducing the number of sex crimes. This study investigated the emotional, psychological, psychosocial effects, and other consequences of being registered on a publicly accessible registry and also examined the registered sex offenders’ ideas for proposed changes to the registry and community notification.

The results from this study uncovered a disconnect that exists between sex offenders’ beliefs about the necessity of the registry, its effects on offending, and its effects on the offenders themselves. There were four major findings in this study. First, while the registered sex offenders believed that the registry was effective in enhancing community safety, they did not think that the registry was effective in reducing rates of offending. Second, registrants perceived emotional, psychological, and psychosocial effects due to being listed, which might outweigh the potential benefits of the registry for the public due to the risk that these effects can contribute to triggering reoffense. Third, the threat for registered sex offenders of being unwillingly revealed to anyone at any time had the potential to exacerbate the negative effects of their stigmatized status. Finally, suggestions were made by the
registrants for legislative revisions to the registry in order to enhance its efficacy, while meeting the needs of both the registered sex offenders and the community.

**5.1 Perceived Effectiveness**

The registered sex offenders in this study had a widespread belief that the registry is effective in its purpose of enhancing community safety, which differs from past research (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). They noted that the registry is effective because it allows victims and community members to know of their whereabouts, it has an educational component about the repercussions of sexually offending, it allows offenders to come forward to get support and receive treatment, and it is the best way known to restrict sex offenders. The majority of participants also believed the registry can serve as a reason for themselves and for others to not reoffend. Social control theory can be used to understand the registry as a reason to not reoffend because this theory posits that for some individuals, the deterring factor from engaging in crime is either a high level of self-control or a commitment to a sense of conformity in society (Hirschi, 1969). The registrants demonstrated that the more a person was committed to community norms and standards and being an active member in the community, the more the registry was a compelling reason to not reoffend.

Seemingly contradictorily, the majority of participants did not think the registry is effective in reducing rates of recidivism nor reducing the number of first-time offenses, which is consistent with empirical research that has not found the registry to reduce the rate of recidivism nor the number of first-time offenses (Zgoba, et al., 2008). Most of the participants thought that the registry does not prevent
reoffending because it does not affect the basis of sexual offending: psychological issues, the impulse to reoffend, self-control, and coping techniques. Contrary to rational choice theory, which holds that offenders weigh the costs and benefits prior to an offense (Cornish & Clarke, 1986), the participants who knew about the registry before they were listed, reported that the registry had no effect on their choices to offend. In addition, they believed that the registry would not weigh in as a deterring factor for potential offenders. The registry was perceived as a possible reason to not reoffend but not enough of a motivator to reduce rates of recidivism.

In sum, in terms of the community, participants believed that the registry is effective in enhancing community safety; however, they did not think that the registry would prevent offenders from reoffending. This is important to note because it demonstrates that the registry may be effective in tackling one side of the issue: informing the public, while failing to address the other side: preventing offenders from reoffending. Treatment providers should focus particular attention on the basis of offending and factors that contribute to offending because registered sex offenders believed these issues are what the registry is failing to influence. Although the registry may not be useful on both sides of the issue, the registry in tandem with treatment may reduce the rates of sexual crimes.

5.2 Consequences and Concerns

The goal of community notification policies of reducing rates of sex crimes is at risk due to the registry’s collateral consequences on offenders. The majority of registrants believed that the registry was not effective in reducing rates of recidivism,
but important reasons that they did not provide until asked and that legislators failed to recognize when creating this legislation, were the emotional and psychological consequences of being listed. The majority reported experiencing isolation and stress due to being listed on the registry, which have been identified as two of the most important emotional triggers for reoffense (Schwartz, 1995). The majority of participants also believed that the registry contributed to their ongoing negative emotions and negative thoughts about themselves, which can contribute to stress and isolation, also increasing their vulnerability to reoffend (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Freeman-Longo, 1996; Schwartz, 1995). A minority of participants experienced depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts due to being registered, while a majority had fear for their safety. Feeling lonely, isolated, hopeless, ashamed, embarrassed or fearful might threaten a sex offender’s social reintegration and recovery, and by extension may trigger some offenders to reoffend (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Freeman-Longo, 1996). The significance of these psychological and emotional consequences is that they can increase the risk of offenders reoffending and thus must be considered when assessing the registry’s effectiveness. If the registry inadvertently contributes to increased risks of reoffending, it cannot achieve its goal of preventing repeat sex crimes.

In addition to these negative emotional consequences, half of participants felt that because they were labeled as “sex offenders,” they were the most looked-down-upon people in society, unlike normal people, and less than human. If they internalize the feeling that they are less than human, chronically inferior, and incapable of change, the registered sex offenders may experience less motivation to transition into
the roles of law-abiding citizens (Uggen, et al., 2004) and less incentive to hold themselves accountable for their behaviors. When registered sex offenders perceive the stigmatizing label of “sex offender” as reinforcing expectancies of failure, they may have less incentive to pursue rehabilitation (Winick, 1998). According to labeling theory, publicly labeling people as sex offenders on the registry could prevent the registrants to feel like they can change and could ultimately contribute to offenders returning to their past behavior. While the registry labels and ostracizes sex offenders, a counterbalance of reinforcements could help sex offenders reintegrate and become contributing members of society. These reinforcements could include assisting registered sex offenders find jobs, housing, and community activities that are approved by probation, parole, and treatment providers.

The unintended consequences of the registry exemplify how, in retrospect, this type of sex offender legislation may not be the most effective way to prevent repeat sex crimes. Although the registry accomplishes the goal of making this information available to the public, not many community members utilize this information (Anderson & Sample, 2008). Even if community members actively use this information, the costs to offenders may outweigh the benefits of the public’s right to know. Treatment providers need to be aware of the stress and other emotional and psychological consequences of stigmatization through public exposure on the registry. These issues need to be addressed by mental health professionals as dynamic risk factors, which change over time and according to environment, as part of their continuous assessment and treatment plan. These costs should be taken into
consideration by legislators when revising the current legislation, as well as in proposals for new sex offender legislation.

5.3 Unwillingly Revealed

The registry and community notification enact a threat that one’s concealable stigma of being a registered sex offender could be revealed to anyone at any time. While the stigma of being a sex offender is often a concealable, mechanisms that can reveal this stigma, like the registry, make stigmatized people feel less comfortable and feel like they have less control over their stigmatized identities (Golin, et al., 2002). Regardless of whether or not community members check the registry as frequently as registered sex offenders think they do (Anderson & Sample, 2008), being listed on the sex offender registry affects the registrants’ perceptions of how the community views them because they do not have control over who is aware of their stigmatized status. While it has previously been demonstrated that the registry and community notification have had negative effects on registered sex offenders (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007; Tewksbury & Lees, 2007), that could potentially lead to reoffending (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Freeman-Longo, 1996), and lead to the stigmatization of offenders (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Scott & Gerbasi, 2003; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2007), this study has found that the threat of public exposure through the use of the registry increases the negative effects of the registrants’ stigmatized status because they do not have control over when and to whom their status is revealed (see Figure 2, Unwillingly Revealed Model).
Due to the threat that their status could be revealed at any time, a majority of the participants reported feeling more isolated due to being listed on the registry, in some cases, due to the effects of the stigma associated with being a registered sex offender and attempting to avoid contact with prejudice and discrimination (Crocker, et al., 1998; Goffman, 1963). Fearing that their stigmatized status had been unwillingly revealed to others, participants reported coping by “passing,” disguising themselves in public to avoid stigma-related stressors (Miller, 2006) such as prejudice and discrimination. Most participants also had a fear of being judged by others, a prejudice apprehension (Mendoza-Denton, et al., 2006) due to their status as registered sex offenders. The majority had fear for their safety in response to the threat of being unwillingly revealed, and a minority had experienced threats and/or vigilante violence.

The majority of the participants lost support systems—friends or family—due to the public exposure of their offense(s) on the registry. Although coping with stress is mitigated by the presence of supportive others (Lazarus, 1999), some people are hesitant to form relationships with stigmatized people (Crocker & Garcia, 2006). When their offenses were unwillingly revealed as opposed to willingly revealed, they were more likely to lose family, friends, and social outlets. Public perceptions of offenders’ friends and family were also negatively affected due to the public exposure of the sex offenders’ offenses. Not only could this have a potentially harmful effect on the friends and families of the offender (Freeman-Longo, 1996; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009), but it could also negatively impact the offender’s relationship with them, causing the offender to further lose social support. Regardless of how their
status as registered sex offenders is revealed, given that lack of social support has been identified as a dynamic risk factor for sex offender recidivism (R. K. Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004), it is imperative that sex offenders maintain social support to further prevent risk of reoffending.

While many participants felt that the registry was a crucial inhibitor of change, some were able to separate their criminal acts from their overall sense of self (Uggen, et al., 2004), while taking responsibility for their past behavior. When the participants were able to dissociate their sense of self from the experience of being stigmatized, they were more able to preserve their sense of self worth and more likely to feel like they had more control over their lives. If sex offenders take responsibility for their crimes but do not let their crimes define them, they might be able to decrease the detrimental effects of their stigmatized status and reintegrate more easily back into society.

This study has confirmed that sex offenders are not only stigmatized by being listed on the registry (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Scott & Gerbasi, 2003; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2007) and experience negative psychological and emotional effects, but that through the Unwillingly Revealed Model, the negative effects of this stigmatization are aggravated due to the threat of being unwillingly revealed to anyone at any time. Due to these findings, treatment providers and support systems should pay extra attention by to the potential exacerbation of these negative psychological, psychosocial, and emotional effects in response to being publicly listed. Treatment providers, support systems, and the offenders themselves need to understand how the stigma of being a registered sex offender combined with
the threat of being unwillingly revealed can affect the way offenders relate to others and the way other people relate to them, which can contribute to a risk factor for re offending.

5.4 Policy Implications

Although the perspectives of sex offenders are typically not of major concern for those who implement sex offender registry policies, the views of sex offenders provide valuable insight to develop a more effective and efficient registry (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007). The experiences of registered sex offenders are essential to examine because legislators need to understand the best way to prevent reoffending without contributing to any of its triggers. The registry and community notification were designed to promote public safety through public awareness.

While the registry is meant to protect the public from people who are at risk of repeatedly committing crimes of sexual violence especially against children and strangers, these policies have been applied to the entire population of known sex offenders. These notification policies imply that those who commit acts of sexual violence are strangers to the community and a homogenous population of people (Sample & Evans, 2009), while research has found that sex offenders are a heterogeneous population of people who are usually known by their victims (Jeglic, 2008; Rand & Truman, 2010). Rather than displacing anger towards all sexual violence to a small number of known sex offenders, new legislation and resources could be directed towards educating the public about the most common types of sexual violence and encouraging people to report incidents of sexual assault.
Policy revision suggestions from participants involved what is publicly listed on the registry website. In order to distinguish their offenses from the range of possible sex offenses and to clarify to the public why they were listed, the majority of participants thought it imperative to list level of risk for reoffending, assessed by clinicians, in addition to listing convictions. The Connecticut Sex Offender Registry does list convictions, according to statute, on the registry website (State of Connecticut Department of Public Safety, 2011). Not only could differentiating between types of offenses and risk levels benefit the public by more accurately informing them of the status of each offender, but this differentiation could also help dispel the “one-size-fits-all” notion of (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007, p. 402) that all sex offenders are the same.

Participants also suggested that there should be a way to lessen the amount of time they are listed on the registry due to completion of treatment programs and/or a period of law-abiding behavior, which has been found in past research (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). For those who are at a minimal risk to reoffend, the potential to modify the length of time listed could provide these offenders with more motivation and incentive to prevent reoffending.

The majority of participants believed it would be in both their own interest and the public’s best interest to have their court-mandated sex offender treatment listed on the registry. While treatment is thought to have some effect on reducing rates of recidivism (Alexander, 1999; R. K. Hanson, et al., 2002; Marques, et al., 2005), sex offenders have been found to perceive treatment as beneficial in preventing reoffense (Levenson, et al., 2009). Community members support various
treatment strategies regardless of their effectiveness (Levenson, Brannon, et al., 2007). They noted that not only could listing treatment have the potential to demonstrate that they were trying to change, but it could notify the public whether or not they were in compliance with their court-mandated treatment. From the results of this study, there is support for listing compliance with and length of time in court-mandated treatment on the registry.

Given that sex offenders present less risk to reoffend than other convicted felons (Langan, et al., 2003; Sample & Bray, 2003, 2006), some participants questioned why there was not a publicly accessible registry for other violent convicted felons. One participant acknowledged that sex offenses are different because they are more undetectable than other crimes, reinforcing the fact that sexual assault is the most underreported violent crime (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 1999). Other registries, modeled after the sex offender registry, will inevitably be developed, disseminating information about various types of violent convicted offenders to the public. Yet, in light of the findings presented by this study, discretion should be utilized when weighing the potential costs and benefits of developing other publicly accessible registries.

5.5 Limitations

This study was limited by its reliance on self-reported data from sex offenders, as there was no way to corroborate the factual information provided (except the information on the registry). Despite guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity, it is possible that some participants were not comfortable reporting their
true attitudes towards the registry. Given the difficulty in accessing this population for research, only registered sex offenders who were in treatment were interviewed, which may have biased the sample. Additionally, the voluntary nature of this study may have led to self-selection bias of those who had negative attitudes toward the registry and community notification, and those who wanted to “vent” (Levenson, D'Amora, et al., 2007). Finally, these results may not be representative of other states due to variance of the registry and community notification across states (Sample & Evans, 2009).

5.6 Future Directions

Although there is a small body of research on the topic of the registry and community notification, the effects of this type of sex offender legislation are in need of further research. While the results of this study intimated that there may be a decrease in stress and fear for safety due to how long registrants had been listed on the registry, only a small sample reported that this was the case. The decrease of negative effects over time could indicate that the registry has a higher chance of contributing to dynamic risk factors when offenders are first listed, and that this contribution might decrease over time. A study using a larger sample size that explicitly measures effects of the registry and duration of time of listed could demonstrate that the negative effects decrease over time.

A new finding from this study demonstrated that registered sex offenders believed it would be beneficial to both the public and the offenders to list treatment on the registry. However, one caveat to this finding is if listing treatment would
provide community members with a false sense of security. To address this concern, a future study should ask community members about their knowledge of court-mandated sex offender treatment and to ask treatment providers their views on whether or not the potential positive effects of listing treatment would outweigh the potential false sense of security for community members.

Another gap in the research that should be addressed is the effect of the registry and community notification on victims. One of the potential ramifications of this legislation that needs to be taken into consideration when revising it is whether or not the registry and community notification encourage or inhibit victims from reporting. Despite the fear that researchers have theorized that this legislation might prevent victims from reporting (Edwards & Hensley, 2001; Freeman-Longo, 1996; Lotke, 1997), the results of this study demonstrated that registered sex offenders believed that the registry encourages victims to report. A study on whether or not the registry has an impact on victims of sexual assault choosing to or refraining from reporting their assaults is essential in evaluating the effectiveness of these policies.

While the results of this study indicated that there are emotional, psychological, and sociopsychological effects on offenders, a study on potential unintended emotional and psychological consequences of the registry and community notification on victims of sexual assault is imperative to assess the full scope of collateral consequences of this legislation. Perhaps the negative effects on offenders due to being listed on the registry could provide the offenders with an increased comprehension of the effects of sexual assault on victims. Subsequent studies, using the restorative justice model, which incorporates both the experiences of victims and
offenders into the justice system (Hansen, 1997), could examine whether or not the experience of being listed on the registry gives sex offenders an increased understanding of victim empathy.
6. CONCLUSION

Initially, the goal of the registry was to enable law enforcement to more readily apprehend repeat sex offenders. In 1996, when Megan’s Laws were federally enacted, they allowed for states to publicly disseminate information to residents about convicted sex offenders, offering states financial incentives to comply with the federal guidelines. While the current goal of the registry and community notification is to increase the ability of the public to protect itself by warning potential victims and parents of potential victims about offenders in their area (Levenson & D’Amora, 2007), the ability of the public to easily access information about offenders on the Internet has caused unintentional consequences, which have the potential to undermine the original goal of the registry.

This study has demonstrated that registered sex offenders think that the registry is necessary and effective in terms of the public having more agency over their own safety; however, they believe that the registry does not contribute to preventing first-time offenders from offending or registered offenders from reoffending. The registrants in this study discussed the negative emotional, psychological, and psychosocial effects of being listed on the registry, which can contribute to triggering reoffense. The threat of being unwillingly revealed to anyone at any time was demonstrated to exacerbate these negative effects, as shown in the Unwillingly Revealed Model, because the registrants did not have control over when and to whom their stigmatized status was revealed. Finally, the registered sex offenders provided suggestions for improving the registry including listing more
detailed and comprehensive information that would more accurately inform the public and dispel common misperceptions of sex offenders.

The registry and community notification need to be revised because this legislation has not been empirically proven to be effective, does not target the most common types of offenders, and may even prevent its original goal of enhancing community safety. Even if legislators do not think that the negative psychological, emotional, and psychosocial effects of being listed on the registry have as severe an impact on registered sex offenders as the registrants believe, to remain complacent in response to these consequences is not worth the risk. This study has demonstrated that implementing legislation that is developed in emotional response to such a serious social issue as sexual violence is not effective. Rather, this crucial social issue requires legislation that uses empirical evidence to prove its efficacy, input from mental health professionals, perceptions from community members and victims, and perceptions from the sex offenders themselves, in order to create the most informed and effective legislation possible to prevent sexual violence.
7. REFERENCES


8. APPENDIXES

Appendix A

TABLE 2

Convictions Listed on the Connecticut Sex Offender Registry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Conviction Listed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>53a-73a – Sexual assault 4th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>53a-49/53-21(a)(1) - Criminal attempt to commit risk of injury to a minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>53a-73a(a)(1)(A) - Sexual assault 4th of a minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>53a-196e - Possession of child pornography 2nd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>53-21(a)(2) - Risk or Injury to a minor involving contact with the intimate parts of someone under age 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>53a-70 - Sexual assault 1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>53a-73a(a)(1)(A) - Sexual assault 4th of a minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>53a-70(a) - Sexual assault 1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>18 USC 2252(A) - Possession of Child Pornography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>53a-70(a)(2) - First Degree Sexual Assault involving sexual intercourse with someone under age 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>53a-70(a)(2) - First Degree Sexual Assault involving sexual intercourse with someone under age 13</td>
</tr>
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<td>53-21(a)(2) - Risk or Injury to a minor involving contact with the intimate parts of someone under age 16</td>
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<td>53-21(a)(2) - Risk or Injury to a minor involving contact with the intimate parts of someone under age 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>53-21(2) - Injury or risk of injury to or impairing morals of children</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*Note:* Convictions refer to either Connecticut or Federal Statutes. Statutes are as reported on the Connecticut Sex Offender Registry website. Some participants admitted to being involved in more sexual crimes than were listed on the registry website.
Appendix B

Interview Questions

• **Level of satisfaction with being placed on the registry**
  Do you think the registry is effective in its purpose of ensuring community safety?
  Do you think the registry has an effect on the rate of reoffending, causing it to go up or down or stay the same?
  Do you think the registry has an effect on victims reporting sex offenses?
  Do you think the registry helps to prevent first-time offense?
  Do you think the registry and community notification are reasons to prevent offenders from reoffending? For yourself?

• **Effects of the registry**
  Do the registry and community notification have an impact on your social life?
  How do people treat you if they know that you are registered?
  How do the registry and community notification make you feel? Emotion words to describe how you feel
  Have you experienced any negative thoughts about yourself due to being listed on the registry?
  Have you experienced any positive thoughts about yourself due to being listed on the registry?
  Have you ever felt isolated because you are listed on the registry?
  Have you ever felt stressed because you are listed on the registry?
  Have you ever feared for your safety because you are listed on the registry?
  Do you feel like you are able to be more honesty because you are listed on the registry?
  Has the public exposure of your offense(s) enabled you to develop support systems?
  Have you lost any support systems because of the public exposure of your offense(s)?

• **How can it be changed?**
  What do you think about listing conviction(s) on the registry?
  What do you think about listing level of risk on the registry?
  What do you think about listing treatment on the registry?
  How would you like to see the registry and community notification changed if at all?
Appendix C

TABLE 3

Participant Agreement/Disagreement with Interview Questions

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<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes/No</th>
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<tr>
<td>Should list treatment</td>
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</tbody>
</table>