

Myth: Making sex offender registries public will make our communities safer.

Reality: Public sex offender registries do not improve public safety and may create a false sense of security

What types of offences require a person to register?

There are a wide range of offences which require a person to register on the SOR – it is not only those who have committed offences against children. A vast amount of individuals who are not necessarily a threat to the community are also included on these registries.

For example, there has been a lot of media attention lately to teenagers distributing nude images of themselves (or their boyfriend or girlfriend) via text message. In some instances, these teenagers can be charged with possession and distribution of child pornography, even if they too are under age 18. In some cases, they can be required to register on the SOR.

What are “Sex Offender Registries”?

In Canada, the law requires people convicted of certain sexual-based offences to register with police, and periodically update their personal information such as their name, current address, type of offence(s), and to provide a current photograph. Currently, the access to and disclosure of the information stored in the database of registered people is restricted to government personnel only. There has been recent debate about whether Canada should make the sex offender registry (SOR) available to the public.

Public Sex Offender Registries: Do they work?

Although the nature of sexual offences can be very shocking and upsetting, it is important to examine the evidence on what the most effective approaches are to dealing with these crimes, to ensure that we are doing the best we can to prevent future victimization.

Crime on a General Decline - Without Public SORs

Since 1993, police-reported sexual assaults have decreased 35% nationally. In the U.S., a study conducted in the state of New Jersey illustrates a downward trend in sexual offending since 1985. This was the greatest decline in sexual assault rates and reoffending prior to 1995, which was one year *before* a public SOR was enforced in that state. Studies show *no* notable decline in sexual assault arrest rates subsequent to the implementation of a public SOR. There is also no evidence to suggest that knowing the addresses of people convicted of sex offences helps predict the location of future sex offences.

False Security

A public SOR can instill a false sense of security for communities. It tends to reinforce the stereotype of those who commit sexual offences as being predatory strangers, whereas in reality most are known to the victim. Based on 2011 Canadian data, 75% of the perpetrators of sexual offences were known to the victim. Sexual assault is one of the most under-reported crimes; approximately 68% of sexual assaults are not reported to the police. Reported rates of sexual abuse have not significantly increased since the implementation of a public SOR in the U.S. In fact, studies suggest that public SORs would decrease the likelihood of individuals reporting a friend or family member to the police because of the possible stigma associated with a public SOR.

Who are we?

"Effective, just, and humane responses to crime and its causes"

The John Howard Society of Ontario supports our 19 local offices through research, policy and program development. We strive to offer the most effective service possible to our clients and their families and contribute to the health, well-being and safety of communities.

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Public SORs: Counterproductive Impacts

Stigma

Making the SOR public may result in the opposite effect than the one intended. Some argue that individuals who are labeled as 'deviant' internalize this label and ultimately act in accordance with that label. Since people who have committed sex offences would be publically identified, they could be shunned, labeled, and stigmatized. The stigma caused by a public SOR could result in several negative consequences, such as the loss of employment or housing, family difficulties, and mental health issues, which increases the likelihood of future criminal activity. It may also result in individuals being denied the appropriate social support and therapy that they need.



Effective Responses to Sexual Offences

Sexual assault is an issue that concerns everyone. Although the fear and anger directed toward people who commit sex offences is understandable, in order to prevent future sexual abuse we must use approaches that are heavily supported by empirical evidence. A cost-efficient and effective method of preventing these individuals from committing crimes is to use programs that offer treatment, prevention, and rehabilitation in the community. We should aim for:

- Appropriate treatment programs inside correctional facilities delivered by professionals with expertise. Treatment programs should tailor plans for each individual, focusing on behaviour management, risk management, and relapse prevention subsequent to release.
- Community supervision for people convicted of sexual offences who are coming to the end of their jail sentence and returning to our communities.
- Widely accessible and adequately funded community-based treatments for people who have committed sexual offences, which recognizes these individuals as people who can make a meaningful contribution to society.
- Facilitating access to services that address practical needs such as social assistance, employment, and housing.

For instance, evaluations of programs that assist people convicted of sexual offences with reintegrating back into the community can reduce reoffending rates by 70%.

JHSO Says: It is important to use evidence-based strategies that prevent sexual offences, better protect victims and support the rehabilitation of individuals who have committed sexual offences. These approaches are far more likely to result in the long term safety of the community.