

Summary of Dissertation Research Findings and  
Selected Excerpts from Dissertation on

The Relationship Between Juvenile Sex Offender Registration and Depression in Adulthood

By

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Accounts of sexual abuse appear daily in the media. Rightfully, this issue demands attention. Juveniles may be victims and they may also be offenders who are subject to sex offender registration and notification (SORN) policies. Growing research finds that SORN policies fail to achieve intended public policy safety goals (Batistini, Hunt, Present-Koller, DeMatteo, 2011; Caldwell & Dickinson, 2009; Caldwell, Ziemke, Vitacco, 2008; Letourneau & Armstrong, 2008; Letourneau, Bandyopadhyay, Sinha, & Armstrong, 2009b; Letourneau, Bandyopadhyay, Armstrong, & Sinha, 2010; Stevenson, Najdowski, & Wiley, 2013). For example, recidivism rates of juvenile sex offenders who were required to register and those who were not are similar, indicating such policy has no deterrent effect (Caldwell & Dickinson, 2009; Letourneau & Armstrong, 2008; Letourneau, et al., 2010).

This study contributes to a broader understanding of the effects of juvenile sex offender registration policies. Given the questionable efficacy of registering juveniles as sex offenders, the assessment of whether this policy has adverse unintended consequences becomes that much more important, yet little is known about the impacts of SORN on juvenile offenders.

This study examined whether a predictive relationship exists between sex offender registration for a juvenile offense and severity of depression in current and former registrants after they have matured into adulthood, and whether the relationship persists when there is no longer a duty to register as a sex offender.

Data was collected from 165 adult participants between 21 and 39 years of age that completed a self-reported survey. This included 36 participants that are currently registering for a juvenile offense, 23 that formerly registered for a juvenile offense, and 106 that had never had to register.

Fourteen predictors of depression were evaluated. Seven of these depression-related predictor variables were not found to significantly correlate with depression in this study. The remaining seven predictors were controlled (history of family psychiatric problems, history of substance abuse, history of sexual abuse (as a victim), taking medication for mental or emotional health, having experienced confinement for more than 30 days, criminal history (determined from number of offenses adjudicated and/or convicted), and parent incarceration while participant was a child).

After controlling for seven depression-related predictors, SORN significantly predicted increased severity of depression in adults currently registering for a juvenile offense, with mean Public Health Questionnaire-9 score (PHQ-9) indicating moderate depression ( $M = 11.5$ ), compared to formerly registrants ( $M = 7.4$ , mild depression), and the control group of those never registered ( $M = 4.5$ , borderline minimal/mild depression). As a group, severity of depression decreased significantly when persons were no longer required to register. Findings validate concerns of other researchers that SORN may have iatrogenic effects for juvenile offenders (Caldwell, 2002; Chaffin & Bonner, 1998; Chaffin et al., 2002; Letourneau & Miner, 2005; Trivits & Reppucci, 2002; U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2014; Zimring, 2004). SORN's relationship with depression suggests that it is associated with non-criminal secondary deviance.

## Additional Finding

It is especially meaningful that current registration by a person adjudicated or convicted of a juvenile sex offense was found to significantly predict increased severity of depression compared to that of former registrants that were also adjudicated or convicted of a juvenile sex offense, and persons that have never registered. This means it is probable that current registration will predict increased severity of depression compared to that of never-registered adults who were adjudicated or convicted of a juvenile sexual offense. In other words, it appears that it is not involvement with the court for a sexual offense that is associated with severity of depression, but rather, sex offender labeling and registration for that juvenile offense.

In reviewing the analysis of seven registration-related characteristics as potential predictors of severity of depression (length of registration, age at initial registration, risk tier, public/nonpublic registration information, court of adjudication/conviction, misdemeanor/felony offense type, and subsequent sexual offense), only one of these characteristics was found to be significant. Individuals whose registration information remained nonpublic had higher severity of depression scores than those whose information was made public, either on the internet or through some other form of dissemination such as flyers, letters, or e-mail notifications. This finding was not expected. Those who were nonpublic current registrants had a mean PHQ-9 severity of depression score representing moderately severe depression ( $M = 16.8$ )—the highest mean severity of depression score of public and nonpublic subgroups by current and former registration status. Nonpublic former registrants, however, had the lowest mean severity of depression score ( $M = 6.4$ , mild depression), representing mild depression, amongst the four groups. This provides great promise that potentially iatrogenic effects of registration may be alleviated in the most severely depressed registrants after the sex offender registrant label is removed.

Eight-four percent of nonpublic registrants were adjudicated in juvenile court. The fact that mean severity of depression scores was greater for this group, and at the level of moderately severe depression, may have something to do with the expectations of youth adjudicated in juvenile court. It is possible that these youth expected to be impacted less by juvenile justice interventions for their misdeeds. After all, the basic tenet of the juvenile justice system is rehabilitation and the avoidance of stigma for youthful indiscretions (*United States v. Brian N.*, 1990; *United States v. One Juvenile Male*, 1994). As they mature into adulthood, they may begin to realize how significantly they are impacted by the sex offender registrant label, even when they have demonstrated rehabilitation has been achieved. When state sex offender registration laws include juvenile offenders it is not uncommon that they must abide by many of the same requirements as adult offenders with regards to their duty to register with law enforcement, frequency of registration, information registered, length of registration, residency restriction, travel restrictions/requirements, and other secondary registration-related laws. Depression may also be greater in non-publicly registered juvenile offenders because they live in fear of having their “secret” (their registration status), discovered and disclosed publically. To better understand the reason for increased severity of depression in nonpublic registrants, and to validate this finding, further research is needed.

While current registrants whose information was nonpublic had the highest severity of depression scores ( $M = 16.8$ , moderately severe depression), current registrants whose information was public also had increased mean PHQ-9 severity of depression scores ( $M = 9.2$ , borderline mild/moderate depression), compared to former registrants whose information was public ( $M = 7.9$ , mild depression), nonpublic ( $M = 6.4$ , mild depression), and never registered individuals ( $M = 4.5$ , borderline minimal/mild depression). Increased mean depression scores for current and former public registrants for a juvenile offense are consistent with findings by Jeglic, Mercado, and Levenson (2012) in which public notification of adult sex offenders resulted in increased depressive symptoms over that of the general population. It is noted that the difference between mean severity of depression between public current and public former registrants for a juvenile offense was not significant, indicating that as a subgroup, there does appear to be

a persistent depressive effect in public registrants that were adjudicated or convicted of a juvenile sex offense. This finding is not surprising. Once information about a juvenile offender has been released to the public, “cleaning-up” information about a former registrant’s status that may have proliferated to other non-registry sources (human and media) is often difficult. In addition, these individuals are more likely to face roadblocks when obtaining an education or employment than nonpublic registrants; the fallout of which may continue to persist after a public registrant no longer has a duty to register.

Not surprising, dependency on another person for housing was also found to predict increased severity of depression. Maintaining independence and self-sufficiency are key elements of adulthood (Mahmoud, Staten, Hall, & Lennie, 2012). Emerging adults consider no longer living with parents to be an essential criterion to be considered fully adult (Arnett, 2004; Arnett, 2001). This study did not collect data regarding housing dependency from never-registered participants. It is possible that analysis of that same question for never-registered persons could also predict severity of depression in that population just as it did with the registered population.

Increased severity of depression was not predicted by each of the following: age at registration, years registered, whether the offense was handled in the adult or juvenile justice system, whether the offense was a felony or misdemeanor, whether it required the highest or Tier III registration status, or whether there was a subsequent registerable offense. Exploration of the effects of these specific registration-related characteristics on juvenile offender registrants forges a new path in registration research, and may indicate that simply being labeled a sex offender with a duty to register has more significance to an individual’s severity of depression than specific characteristics of registration associated with it.

Increased severity of depression along with the prevalence of suicidal ideation in currently-registered juvenile offenders, with 53% of participants having these thoughts on several days in the past two weeks, and 11% nearly every day, is consistent with the association between suicidal ideation and depression in the existing literature (Bhatta, Jefferis, Kavadas, Alemagno, Shaffer-King, 2014; Hooven, Snedker & Thompson, 2012; Lamis, et al., 2014; Stokes, McCoy, Abram, Byck, and Teplin, 2015). Issues with social integration can leave young adults without a “blueprint” for the role they assume in adult life and contributes to hopelessness and depression (Hooven, et al., 2012). Isolation is a key factor in suicide risk (Gould & Kramer, 2001; Hooven et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2002). Both social integration and isolation are common issues with juvenile sex offender registrants as they mature into adulthood, so it is not surprising that findings of depression and suicidal ideation in current registrants in this study support the existing literature.

### **Theoretical Interpretation**

Merton’s concept of manifest and latent effects of purposive social action urged researchers to analyze both intended, or manifest, functions resulting from an action, and the unintended consequences, or latent, functions, as well. He stressed the importance of functional analysis to determine both functional and dysfunctional consequences that contribute to the *net effect* of an action such as sexual offender registration of juvenile offenders. Analyzing and interpreting findings in the context of this theoretical framework, results from this study support that a relationship *does* exist between sanctioning juvenile sexual offender registration and latent impacts to a registrant’s mental health, specifically depression, later in the registrant’s adult life. As mentioned previously, a number of researchers have analyzed whether the policy of registering juvenile sex offenders has achieved its intended purpose. Knowledge from these studies, coupled with the findings regarding depression consequences documented here, contribute to a more accurate understanding of the net effects of juvenile sex offender registration policy.

Lemert’s secondary deviance proposition of labeling theory asserts that deviant labeling for a criminal act creates negative consequences for the person labeled that can lead to secondary deviant criminal behavior. Exploring new and different aspects of deviance as Kitsuse (1975) suggested, this study built upon

existing labeling theory by suggesting and testing an *alternate non-criminogenic* secondary deviance proposition. Analysis and findings indicate that the policy of registering a person as a sex offender for a juvenile offense is indeed related to an alternate non-criminal form of secondary deviance--depression. This finding expands the existing knowledge regarding labeling theory and secondary deviance.

## **Conclusion**

In finding that current sex offender registration for a juvenile sexual offense significantly predicts a relationship to increased severity of depression after a registrant has matured into adulthood, compared to adults who have never had to register, and those who formerly had to register for a juvenile sexual offense, this study extends knowledge regarding the consequences of juvenile sex offender registration policy, and contributes to the analysis of the “net effect” of such policy.

Findings suggest that an alternate form of Lemert’s secondary deviance proposition of labeling theory exists, in that deviant labeling, such as that of “sex offender registrant” sanctioned upon juveniles with sexual behavior issues, creates negative consequences for the person labeled that can lead to secondary deviant behavior that is non-criminogenic—depression.

Further, in considering the lack of significance of registration-related variables (length of registration, age at initial registration, risk tier, public/nonpublic registration information, court of adjudication/conviction, misdemeanor/felony offense type, and subsequent sexual offense) to predict an increase in severity of depression, and that current registration significantly increases severity of depression, it must be questioned whether it may simply be the act of labeling a juvenile offender as a sex offender registrant with accompanying duty to register and related restrictions, that causes the greatest harm.

The most important contribution this research may provide, is in answering the question found in existing literature and the U.S. DOJ Sex Offender Management Assessment and Planning Initiative project report regarding whether the policy of labeling and registering a juvenile with sexual behavior issues as a sex offender registrant has potentially iatrogenic effects (Caldwell, 2002; Chaffin & Bonner, 1998; Chaffin et al., 2002; Letourneau & Miner, 2005; Trivits & Reppucci, 2002; U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2014; Zimring, 2004). Findings from this research support that it does.

Findings contribute to a better understanding of the net effects of SORN, informing policy decision makers and having social change implications for future sexual abuse prevention policies that may have greater likelihood of efficacy.

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