

Adverse Effects of Mandated Juvenile Sex Offender Registration Across Treatment

Elena Gagliano¹ and Kelli R. Thompson²

¹ Undergraduate Student, Department of Psychological Sciences, Auburn University

² Assistant Research Professor, College of Liberal Arts, Auburn University

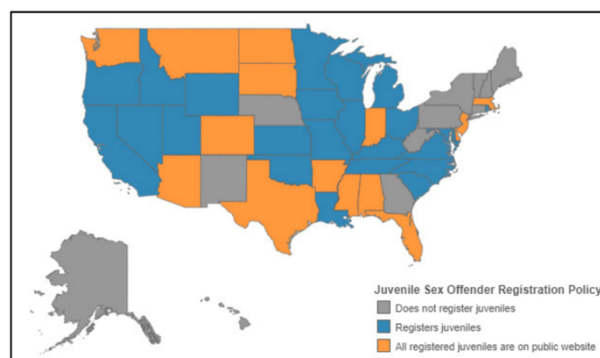
The purpose of this study was to investigate the adverse effects of mandated juvenile sex offender registration and notification laws. Incarcerated juveniles face many challenges; those adjudicated for sexual offenses face additional stressors with registry requirements upon treatment completion. In 2006, the Adam Walsh Act federally mandated sex offender registration and notification laws in the United States. These laws were expanded to include youth adjudicated for certain sexual offenses with some states mandating public notification.

Public juvenile registries are associated with a wide range of unintended negative consequences for youth (Harris et al., 2016; Letourneau et al., 2018). Youth who are required to register report higher rates of harassment, adult solicitation, sexual assault, and suicide attempts than their counterparts who are not required to register (Letourneau et al., 2018). They are also subject to the stigmatized label of “sex offender” which could prove detrimental to healthy identity development (Harris & Socia, 2016). This raises concerns for adolescents navigating their social world after successfully completing treatment (Fix et al., 2020). These public juvenile registries remain in 14 states, despite clear evidence that registries do not reduce incidences of future sexual abuse but do have harmful consequences for youth and families (Chaffin, 2008). See Figure 1 for United States Juvenile Registry Laws by State.

In this study, we followed a group of 35 male adolescents currently in a court-mandated residential treatment program. Youth completed the Concerns About Juvenile Registration and Notification Questionnaire (C-JSORNQ; Fix et al., 2020), a self-report measure on fears and anxieties surrounding registration requirements at three time points across treatment: pre, mid, and post-treatment. It was hypothesized that post-treatment anxiety levels would spike as youth face the reality of registration and notification before re-entering society. A series of independent t-tests were non-significant, indicating youth reported moderate levels of anxiety across treatment without a significant peak at any time point; pre-mid: $t(27) = 0.06, p = .94$; mid-post: $t(33) = 0.46, p = .65$; pre-post: $t(32) = 0.53, p = .60$. See Figure 2 for means across treatment.

These findings further strengthen the current scholarly opinion that there are numerous negative consequences associated with juvenile sex offender registration and notification laws. Additionally, these findings illuminate the need for a specific treatment focus on teaching youth to manage anxieties associated with the registry. This may be especially prevalent as they approach reentry to the community.

The persistence of anxiety in the face of treatment implies the need to further question wide-ranging repercussions and unintended consequences of juvenile registration policies. This is particularly necessary for youth in treatment who present a very low risk for future reoffending (Letourneau & Miner, 2005). Finally, this raises legal policy concerns for youth in states with public registries who face an additional stressor after successful completion of treatment that youth in other states do not. If it is clear juvenile registries do more harm than good, why should some states still be allowed to implement such policies? The need for federal legislation is quite evident.



Source: www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/11/states-slowly-scale-back-juvenile-sex-offender-registries/433473/

Fig. 1. United States Juvenile Registry Laws by State (2015)

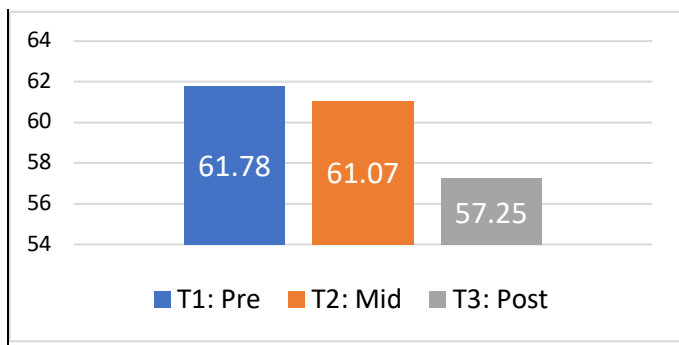


Fig. 2. Mean Registry Fears Across Treatment

Statement of Research Advisor

Elena’s research was supported by a more than 20-year public-public partnership between the Alabama Department of Youth Services and Auburn University Department of Psychological Sciences. Her interest in youth registries highlights the important role science plays in civic engagement and public policy.

– Kelli R. Thompson, Liberal Arts

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Authors Biography



Elena Gagliano is a junior-year student pursuing a B.A. degree in Psychology and a B.S. degree in Human Development and Family Science at Auburn University. She is a 2022-2023 Auburn Undergraduate Research Fellow. Elena has assisted in the identification of gaps in the current understanding of challenges faced by juveniles who have committed sexual offenses.



Kelli R. Thompson is an Assistant Research Professor in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University. She is currently the Director of Research for the Alabama Department of Youth Services’ Accountability Based Sex Offense Prevention Program.