

Children on sex offender registries at greater risk for suicide attempts, study suggests

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A new study led by researchers from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that children who were legally required to register as sex offenders were at greater risk for harm, including suicide attempts and sexual assault, compared to a group of children who engaged in harmful or illegal sexual behavior but who were not required to register.

The most troubling findings, the authors say, pertained to suicidal intent and victimization experiences. The study found that registered [children](#) were four times as likely to report a recent suicide attempt in the last 30 days, compared to nonregistered children. Registered children were nearly twice as likely to have experienced a [sexual assault](#) and were five times as likely to have been approached by an adult for sex in the past year. Registered children also reported higher rates of other [mental health problems](#), more peer relationship problems, more experiences with peer violence and a lower sense of safety.

The findings, which were published online last week in the journal *Psychology, Public Policy and Law*, highlight the consequences of placing children on [sex offender registries](#).

"The process of subjecting children to sex offender [registration](#) and notification requirements not only conveys to the child that he or she is worthless, it also essentially alerts the rest of the world that a child has engaged in an illegal sexual behavior," says study lead Elizabeth Letourneau, PhD, a professor in the Bloomberg School's Department of

Mental Health and director of the Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse. "Not only is this policy stigmatizing and distressing, but it may make children vulnerable to unscrupulous or predatory adults who use the information to target registered children for sexual assault."

Thirty-eight states subject children under age 18 to sex offender registration for offenses adjudicated in juvenile court while all states subject children to sex offender registration for offenses adjudicated in adult court (i.e., when children are waived to criminal court). This practice has been controversial from its beginnings in the mid-1990s due to concerns about the stigmatizing effects of labeling children—often for life—as "[sex offenders](#)."

For the study, the researchers surveyed 256 children ages 12 to 17 across 18 states who had received treatment services for engaging in harmful and/or illegal sexual behaviors. Of these, 74 had been required to register as sexual offenders and/or subjected to public notification in which law enforcement alerted others to the child's status as a registered offender. Some children were even included on public sex offender registry websites. Five girls were included in the sample, although analyses were ultimately reported only for the 251 boys. Compared to nonregistered children in this study, registered children had worse outcomes on measures assessing mental health problems, peer relationships, safety and exposure to sexual and nonsexual violence.

To identify registered and nonregistered children for this study, researchers obtained referrals from frontline practitioners (e.g., psychologists, counselors, social workers) who treat children for problem sexual behaviors. Children completed surveys by phone, on hard copies or on computers and steps were taken to assure confidentiality. Most of the children identified as male (98 percent) and were on average 15 years old. Half were white, more than one-quarter were African American and 18 percent identified as Hispanic. Most participants, 86

percent, identified as heterosexual.

"Policymakers have argued that if sex offender registration improves community safety it is worth the costs associated with it, which begs the question, does registrations work? Does it make communities safer? The answer is a resounding no," says Letourneau. "On top of that, our study suggests that these requirements may place children at risk of the very type of abuse the policy seeks to prevent, among other serious negative consequences. Our hope is that this study will convince even more policymakers that the time has come to abandon juvenile registration."

Previous research by Letourneau and others demonstrates that less than three percent of children adjudicated for a sexual offense go on to commit another. However, despite numerous studies, including this one, that have evaluated the effects of sex offender registration and notification policies, none have found any evidence that suggests that such policies prevent sexual abuse and assault or make communities safer and, in fact, the results from this study suggest that these policies may be harmful to children.

Previous research has examined the unintended effects of sex offender registration and notification on adults. This is the first study to look at the effects of registration policies on children.

Provided by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

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