

Juvenile registration: ineffective and destructive

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By Rebecca L. Fix . . . Sex offender registration policies were initially developed for adults with sexual offenses, but have recently been extended to include youth with sexual offenses as well. At first glance, sex offender registration and notification (hereafter referred to as SORN) may make us feel safer, produce relief knowing that these individuals are being punished.

However, many of us don't realize that these practices [don't protect our children](#). Required registration of and notification about youth with illegal sexual behavior, in particular, has resulted in [serious economic and psychological burdens](#) at multiple levels, affecting not only the youth who have to register (e.g., increase in suicidal ideation), but also their families (e.g., judgment from others, loss of job), neighbors (e.g., devaluation of home value) and communities (e.g., stress levels, potential changes in reputation).

Mental health providers and child advocates like myself and colleagues at the [Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse](#) who have examined policies concerning sexual offending among youth know that SORN requirements stem from an ill-fitting classification system that has deleterious consequences.

Before I continue, it is important to address a question that may have entered your mind by now: "What is juvenile sex offender registration and notification?" This inappropriate downward extension of policies aimed at adults toward minors began when [President George W. Bush](#) signed the [Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act](#). . . .

While the development of SORN was (and often is) believed to make communities safer, it not only fails to do so, but can also ruin individuals' lives. Consider the case of Demetrius (name changed for confidentiality), who grew up in a rural area of a Southern state and was the star of his high school football and basketball teams. At 15, Demetrius was dating a girl, age 14. When her parents found out they had consensual sex, a rape charge was filed. Demetrius was sentenced to a juvenile correctional facility for sex offender treatment and was sentenced to lifetime sex offender registration.

After returning to his community following confinement, Demetrius was no longer welcome on his high school athletic teams, and anticipates he will not be admitted into college due to his inability to be scouted by college teams. In addition, his family has been impacted by his registration status. Demetrius and his mother are moving to a new town, as their community has ostracized them. Demetrius' mother lost her friends once word spread about his legal difficulties, and they are no longer welcome in their church.

Another boy, who I will call Will, was a youth from a Midwestern state who had difficulties finding a girlfriend due to his awkward social nature. At age 17, he got his first date

with a 17-year-old female. Not long into the relationship, he was feeling hopeful about taking things to the next level. Will and his new girlfriend consensually shared nude photographs of themselves via text.

One day at school, Will's teacher confiscated his cellphone and found the images. Will was charged with possession of child pornography, was mandated to attend sex offender-specific treatment and was required to register as a sex offender. Once he was sentenced and placed on the registry, he was severely bullied by classmates, was dumped by his girlfriend and unable to get a job.

Not only does SORN often [inaccurately categorize adolescents](#) as at high risk for sexual reoffending, there are substantial and widespread monetary costs linked with the implementation of SORN, incurred by governmental agencies and by individuals and organizations including schools. Beyond these consequences, placing children on a sex offender registry assigns them a label. Indeed, [community members](#) often have [negative perceptions](#) of individuals labeled as a sexual offender, as do [legislators](#) and even [the youth with inappropriate sexual behavior](#) themselves.

Generally, these false beliefs include that: 1) punishment is [necessary and effective](#), 2) an individual will [reoffend](#) and 3) individuals who have engaged in inappropriate sexual behavior are dangerous. These concerns are [unfounded](#), developing in the absence of evidence or empirical support.

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