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Is notification of sex offenders in local communities effective?

From time to time public pressure arises for a public sex offender register similar to those in parts of the USA. The Australian National Child Offender Register (ANCOR) allows police to share information between jurisdictions on convicted offenders, but currently there are no publicly accessible registries. The best known US measure, Megan's Law, aims to promote public and community safety through heightened public awareness of the location of sex offenders (Fitch 2006). Each state is required to provide mandatory community notification when a sex offender moves into an area (Pawson 2006).

Megan's Law has been systematically reviewed by Pawson (2006) and the UK's National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (Fitch 2006). It was found that the evidence base for the law was weak and that it was developed largely as a response to community agitation (Pawson 2006). There were also variations in implementation from policy makers through to the community, leading to a lack of uniformity in decision making between similar cases (Pawson 2006). There was little evidence of impact on sex offending, in particular, of offender recidivism rates being affected by community notification, or of reduced assaults by strangers on children (Fitch 2006). Both studies, however, stressed that program inconsistency made proving the overall efficacy of the measure problematic. The following issues with the law were identified:

- vigilantism is not monitored, with acts being under-reported and under-recorded
- offender compliance varies, and offenders can still 'go underground'
- the focus on a small number of known offenders may distract attention from the more common intra-familial abuse and lead victims of intra-familial violence not to report abuse due to ramifications for the victim and the offender
- there is conflicting evidence on whether community members, informed of an offender's presence, increase measures to protect their families
- it can create a false sense of both fear and security among parents, and exaggerates true levels of offender recidivism
- practitioners often point to increased use of risk assessment, better information sharing, and additional funding for treatment and surveillance as evidence of success, but these can be achieved separately to the community notification function
- the financial cost of implementation is high (Fitch 2006).

The following improvements were suggested:

- standardising decision making on risk assessment at every level (Pawson 2006)
- increasing public awareness of existing systems of sex offender registration
- public education that focuses less on the narrow group of high risk offenders
- treatment for those outside the criminal justice system
- treatment for children who display sexually harmful behaviour (Fitch 2006).

References

Fitch K 2006. *Megan's Law: does it protect children?* 2nd ed. London: NSPCC

Pawson R 2006. *Evidence based policy: a realist perspective*. London: Sage: 105–121