



Housing Sex Offenders

“Finding suitable housing for sex offenders will allow law enforcement to better monitor and supervise all sex offenders even after their parole term has ended.”

— California Department of Correction and Rehabilitation Secretary Jim Tilton¹

“The whole idea of registration is that we know where sex offenders are... When they are homeless we lose track of them, and when we lose track of them we can't tell you where they are.” — Detective Bob Shilling, Seattle Police Department²

Challenges of Housing Sex Offenders

People convicted of sex offenses, commonly known as sex offenders, comprise a significant challenge to communities nationwide. According to a Bureau of Justice Statistics report released in 2003, among 906,000 offenders confined in State prisons, 88,000, or nearly 10 percent, were violent sex offenders.³ Nearly 60 percent of sex offenders under correctional custody or control are under conditional supervision in the community.⁴

Sex offenders tend to recidivate less, not more, frequently than other offenders. A broad-based look at recidivism studies for adult sex offenders found that only 14 percent of all sex offenders will be arrested or convicted for a new sex crime within four to six years, and only 24 percent within 15 years.⁵ By comparison, two-thirds of all individuals released from prison are arrested again within just three years.⁶ Most sex offenses are not committed by former offenders; 87 percent of people arrested for sex crimes have not been previously convicted of such crimes.⁷ Additionally, transition services may help to reduce even these rates: a growing body of research demonstrates that *high-risk* offenders benefit the most (in terms of recidivism reduction) from intensive reentry program participation.⁸

Yet pressure from local residents to prevent sex offenders from being housed in their neighborhoods can be intense. In every state, officials have established policies mandating the notification of community members when certain categories of convicted sex offenders are released from secure facilities to the community.⁹ Many cities and towns have created residency restriction laws to limit where sex offenders can live. There is no evidence, however, that such laws are effective in reducing repeat offenses of sexual violence.¹⁰ Conversely, community notification requirements can sometimes increase tensions and place the offender at higher risk of discrimination and/or violence.

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In Seattle, the University of Washington (UW) requested and was granted the removal of 13 sex offenders living under State supervision in homes near the campus. The UW regents argued that evicting the offenders was a necessary part of a community safety plan, although no complaints from or crimes against neighbors had been recorded over seven years of offender residency.¹¹

When they have no place that they can reside legally, these offenders frequently abscond from supervision or become homeless. A number of funding streams that support affordable housing, including the public housing and Housing Choice Voucher (Section 8) programs administered or funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), prohibit housing individuals who are subject to lifetime inclusion in a state sex offender registration program.¹² These exclusions, combined with the community resistance discussed above, can greatly restrict the housing opportunities that sex offenders have. A survey by the *Boston Globe* found that 65 percent of the highest risk sex offenders in that city listed their address as a homeless shelter.¹³ The Florida Department of Corrections authorized five sex offenders to live under a bridge in Miami under daily supervision when no housing could be found for them that did not violate residency restrictions.¹⁴

Strategies for Housing Sex Offenders

Do not categorically exclude sex offenders from housing units or housing assistance programs. Like other types of people with criminal convictions, not all sex offenders pose the same level of risk in housing. Agencies should consider implementing screening for potential clients, including sex offenders, based on individual risk assessment and appropriate supervision planning. Consider supplementing federal housing funding streams that disallow sex offenders with less restrictive state, local, or private funds.

AT A GLANCE:

MINNESOTA SEX OFFENDER SUPERVISION STUDY GROUP

In 1999, the Minnesota legislature directed the State Director of Corrections to create a Sex Offender Supervision Study Group. This group was tasked with making recommendations to the legislature to increase public safety and reduce recidivism of sex offenders, particularly as related to appropriate supervision levels by probation officers (POs). The report, published in 2000, included these passages in a section on "suitable housing for sex offenders:"

The most glaring problem is the need for approval and construction of new halfway houses, especially in areas of the state which currently do not have this resource ... However, there is also a need for other sorts of transitional housing for sex offenders. This would include "sober houses," where small groups of residents make a commitment to refrain from alcohol or drugs.

The halfway houses with which the DOC contracts have been diligent at responding to both the needs of the DOC and the demands of the communities in which they are located. All of the halfway houses that accept sex offenders have sent key staff to attend DOC sex offender supervision training. This gives halfway house staff the same information available to POs, and assists in facilitating communication and maintenance of a consistent philosophy.

Partner with your local correctional supervision agency and police or sheriff's department. Inform public safety agencies of the resources or services you plan to make available. Work with community corrections officers and others responsible for public safety to ensure that program staff are appropriately trained and informed on challenges to housing sex offenders and appropriate responses to violations of supervision conditions. Collaborate to develop appropriate plans for individuals.

Educate the public on the implications of sex offender homelessness, to build support for inclusion. Inform yourself of basic research on sex offenders and homelessness (including by using the resources listed at the end of this chapter) and share this information with elected officials and partners in the community at the beginning of your development process. Be prepared to address common misperceptions. Listen to stakeholder or community concerns and collaborate to develop ways to address them.

Choose the right housing model. Some communities, such as Colorado (see box) have pursued group living arrangements for sex offenders, because they believe that model facilitates efficient service delivery (such as monitoring visits by supervision officers) and encourages peer support. Research suggests that informal social controls may be the best means of reducing recidivism and improving reentry outcomes.¹⁵ For other communities, implementing a scattered-site housing model to distribute the perceived risk burden and discourage frequent contact among offenders may be the appropriate strategy.

**MODEL PROGRAM:
COLORADO SHARED LIVING
ARRANGEMENTS**

Colorado treatment providers use Shared Living Arrangements (SLAs) to house and monitor sex offenders. In the SLA model, two or more people convicted of sex offenses live in a single residence that they either rent or own. As in the therapeutic community treatment model, these living environments can be seen as an extension of both treatment and monitoring. Individuals in SLAs are held accountable for the behavior of their roommates; thus, their behavior can be monitored without the immediate presence of a treatment provider or community supervision officer. Violations must be reported to treatment providers or parole/probation officers in order to preserve the privilege of living in the community.

Three different service providers currently administer SLAs housing sex offenders in Colorado. A study published by the Colorado Sex Offender Management Board in 2004 highlights the fact that individuals living in SLAs did not commit sex offenses at higher rates than those living in other environments, and that they could be managed by treatment providers and supervision officers more efficiently.

Sources: "Report on Safety Issues Raised by Living Arrangements for Location of Sex Offenders in the Community," Colorado Department of Public Safety, Division of Criminal Justice, Sex Offender Management Board, March 2004. Available online: http://dcj.state.co.us/odvsom/Sex_Offender/SO_Pdfs/Full_SLAFinal01.pdf. And: Amy Dethlefsen, Colorado Department of Public Safety, personal communication, November 14, 2007.

Recommended Reading

Minnesota Sex Offender Supervision Study Group Report to the Legislature (2000):

<http://www.corr.state.mn.us/publications/documents/sosupreport.PDF>

Washington State Institute of Public Policy sex offender series:

<http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/topic.asp?cat=10&subcat=55&dteSlct=0>

Iowa County Attorneys Association Statement on Sex Offender Residency Restrictions in Iowa (December 2006):

<http://www.iowa-icaa.com/ICAA%20STATEMENTS/Sex%20Offender%20Residency%20Statement%20Dec%2011%2006.pdf>

“No Easy Answers: Sex Offender Laws in the US,” Human Rights Watch:

<http://hrw.org/reports/2007/us0907/index.htm>

Resources

Center for Sex Offender Management (CSOM):

<http://www.csom.org/>

Re-Entry Policy Council (Council of State Governments) “Reentry and Housing” focus page:

http://reentrypolicy.org/issue_areas/housing_project

Sources

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- ¹ “California Summit for Safe Communities Convened to Discuss Solutions for Housing for Sex Offenders,” press release, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, March 19, 2007. Available online: http://www.cdcr.ca.gov/News/2007_Press_Releases/Press20070319.html.
- ² Christine Willmsen, “Dangerous sex felons: Address unknown,” *Seattle Times*, December 14, 2005. Available online: http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2002677104_homeless11m.html.
- ³ Lawrence Greenfeld, “Sex Offenses and Offenders,” Bureau of Justice Statistics, February 1997. Available online: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/soo.pdf>.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Andrew Harris and R. Karl Hanson, “Sex Offender Recidivism: A Simple Question,” Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, 2004, pp. 3-6. Available online: http://www2.ps-sp.gc.ca/publications/corrections/pdf/200403-2_e.pdf. Quoted in “No Easy Answers: Sex Offender Laws in the US,” Human Rights Watch, September 2007. Available online: <http://hrw.org/reports/2007/us0907/index.htm>. The study used data from 10 follow-up studies of adult male sexual offenders (a combined sample of 4,724) from Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States.
- ⁶ Patrick A. Langan and David J. Levin, “Recidivism of Prisoners Released in 1994,” US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (Washington, DC: 2002), NCJ 193427.
- ⁷ Op. cit.
- ⁸ Faye Taxman, et al., “From Prison Safety to Public Safety: Innovations in Offender Reentry,” University of Maryland, Bureau of Governmental Research, October 2002. Available online: <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/196464.pdf>.
- ⁹ Center for Sex Offender Management (CSOM), *Community Notification and Education*, April 2001.
- ¹⁰ Jill Levenson, “Sex offender residence restrictions: A Report to the Florida Legislature,” October 2005.
- ¹¹ Jennifer Sullivan, “University gets sex offenders booted from area,” *Seattle Times*, October 8, 2007. Available online: http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2003932903_sexoffenders08m.html.
- ¹² Code of Federal Regulations, Title 24, Sections 982.553 and 960.204.
- ¹³ David Abel, “Many sex offenders end up at shelters: Some say state should help house ex-inmates,” *Boston Globe*, June 18, 2007. Available online: http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2007/06/18/many_sex_offenders_end_up_at_shelters/?page=1.
- ¹⁴ John Zarrella and Patrick Oppmann, “Florida housing sex offenders under bridge,” CNN.com, April 6, 2007. Available online: <http://www.cnn.com/2007/LAW/04/05/bridge.sex.offenders/index.html>.
- ¹⁵ “Policy Statement 26: Implementation of a Supervision Strategy,” *Report of the Reentry Policy Council*, Council of State Governments, 2005. Available online: <http://www.reentrypolicy.org/Report/PartII/ChapterII-E/PolicyStatement26/Recommendation26-E>. And: Jeremy Travis, “But They All Come Back: Rethinking Prisoner Reentry,” *Sentencing and Corrections: Issues for the 21st Century* 7 (May 2000). Available online: <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/181413.pdf>.