



Voices of Returning Citizens on the Violent Offender Registry

Law and Justice Interim Committee

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VO Focus Group

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Participant Characteristics:

- Participants ranged from 38 to 65 years in age
- All are working and have housing in some form
- Incarceration length: 3 to 12 years
- Years in Community after release: 2 to 16 years
- All are still on the registry

Themes from the VO Focus Group Comments

- It's a life sentence of shame
- Housing: Everywhere is "No, No, No, No"
- Employment: "All they have to do is plug in my name"
- Registration is a family punishment
- Hopelessness and Depression
- I didn't understand what the violent offender thing was
- Value to Law Enforcement
- Confusion with Sex Offenders
- Petition for Removal: Why bother?

“It’s a Life Sentence”

Participants experience the public registry as daily “resentencing” and humiliation over which they have no control.

“It’s a Life Sentence”

It’s a life sentence, because you do your time, you do probation and parole, and it’s never over.

“It’s a Life Sentence”

“Regardless of the changes you make, you’re labelled. You’re handicapped. There’s nothing you can do about it.”

“It’s a Life Sentence”

*“I feel like there is always that brick wall
that I can’t get past.”*

“It’s a Life Sentence”

*“It’s exactly like having a tattoo, a chip in your arm.
When is it going to end?”*

Housing: “Everywhere is No, No, No, No”

As with sexual offenders, housing is the biggest challenge, even when participants are working, not on parole, not violating any terms of probation.

Housing: “Everywhere is No, No, No, No”

“When I first got out of prison, I searched and searched. The only place that actually considered me, as soon as I mentioned it [the registry], it was an immediate “No.” It took me months. Everywhere was No, No, No, No. “

Housing: “Everywhere is No, No, No, No”

“I got turned down from some really nice apartments in my price range. As soon as they found out, they said to my face “The reason we’re not renting to you is because you’re a violent offender.” Like I’m going to go around hitting people.”

Housing: “Everywhere is No, No, No, No”

“With a violent offense, it’s just NO’s everywhere. I was devastated. Everything I was doing in jail --going to programs, trying to rehabilitate myself, was for my son, to be something for him that my dad couldn’t be for me.”

*Employment: “All they have to do is
plug in my name.”*

Public notification affects all aspects of getting a job,
work situations, co-worker relations

*Employment: “All they have to do
is plug in my name.”*

*“I feel horrible, every time I apply for a job,
because the minute I give them my full name, all
they have to do is plug that in. It’s horrible. It’s
humiliating.”*

Employment: “All they have to do is plug in my name.”

“Even if I work as hard as I can, [to] my boss I’m still that substandard employee that he can throw rocks at. It’s easy for him to say, “We’re done!” He can dismiss me anytime without any just cause for dismissal.”

Employment

“It affects my job search. Most places have an immediate NO policy for anyone on the Violent Offender registry. You can fly through the interview -- I was hired at several places, and the last thing I mentioned was the registry, and they were like “Oh, sorry. We have a policy.....””

Employment

“Once you’re labeled a violent offender, and somebody hears about it, they think you’ve actually hurt someone. People at my work knew I’d been to prison, but as soon as they found out I was on it [the registry], they thought I was dangerous, had assaulted someone, and that was horrible.”

Registration is a family punishment

Family members find that they are also publicly identified and stigmatized. Participants spoke of struggling to protect their children from stigma and public shame.

Registration is a family punishment

“My sister works for a federal judge. We love each other...but we do not have any association. She cannot mention my name anywhere--she can't, and she won't. And I agree.” [speaker still on registry 16 years after release from incarceration].

Registration is a family punishment

“So, my son knows [about my incarceration]. He’s seven, a strong, beautiful minded kid. Now he is going to learn about it [the registry]. His friends can look me up ...the second they have any ammunition, they can use it against him.”

Registration is a family punishment

“This violent offender label impacts our family. My brother just moved to a small town, and his friends all know it already. We have the same last name, and all they have to do is type in his name and mine comes up.”

Hopelessness and Depression

The hard work of reforming and rehabilitating your life doesn't count if you're on the registry.

Hopelessness and Depression

“If you are serving time, it takes work not to get in fights, not to get into trouble. Then you get out and you work to be a normal citizen. I’ve worked to get a good job, be a good citizen and it doesn’t matter. It is punishment.”

Hopelessness and Depression

“The stigma and the label that they put on you causes depression and self-worthlessness: ‘I don’t belong in society.’ If there’s no hope, what’s the use of trying? I see that it can lead to re-offenses, drug use, depression.”

“I didn’t understand what the Violent Offender thing was”

Participants were in agreement that they did not understand what the VO registry was, or that they were agreeing to it as part of their plea.

“I didn’t understand what the Violent Offender was”

*“I knew I was agreeing to a charge, and then they said “Violent offender, blah blah.” I wasn’t told what it was or anything. After I was sentenced, I got a letter, and I was like “Holy Cow—what did I **do**?” My probation officer had to look it up to find out why I was even on the VO registry, because it was such a bizarre thing. They really stretched to put me on that list.”*

“I didn’t understand what the Violent Offender was”

“When I went into the courtroom I was off my meds, out of my mind, and the judge asked me, “Do you understand what you’re being sentenced to?” I didn’t understand anything. I felt like I did do something, I was there, but it didn’t warrant that [VO charge.] My public defender just kept nudging me, “Agree, Agree.” If I would have known, I never would have taken that plea.”

“I didn’t understand what the Violent Offender was”

“Well, when I entered my plea agreement, they let me know about it. But I thought it was over after my sentence. I didn’t realize I would have to wait another ten years.”

Value to Law Enforcement

Participants recognized some need for the registry in the justice system, but not the public arena.

Value to Law Enforcement

“I can see the need for it in the justice system. I don't see any need for it in the social arena, because as far as violent offenders go, what's it going to change, what's it gonna do?”

Value to Law Enforcement

“It should only be available to the criminal justice system. Police officers should know if they are going to a violent offender’s house on a domestic abuse call.”

Value to Law Enforcement

“If you’ve proven that you are not violent in nature anymore, I don’t think it should follow you for the rest of your life.”

Confusion with Sex Offenders

VO registrants describe being perceived as rapists or sexual predators

“I don’t know if this would be good, but separate the sexual and violent offender registry. Because when [a name] comes up, it’s listed as sexual/violent offender registry. And it looks like we are extremely violent rapists.”



	LOLO	VIOLENT
	MISSOULA	VIOLENT
	MISSOULA	SEXUAL/VIOLENT
	MISSOULA	VIOLENT
	MISSOULA	SEXUAL
	MISSOULA	SEXUAL

Petition for Removal: Why Bother?

Removal seems out of reach, an unclear process to those on the registry and may not be worth doing, because the label is permanent.

Petition for Removal: Why Bother?

“I didn’t even know that I could get off the registry. My parole officer never said beans about it when I got out [2003]. I found out ten years after parole that you could petition the court to be removed. And I thought, ‘Yeah right!’ So I’m still on it.”

Petition for Removal: Why Bother?

“Who can afford [to petition]? Not many people have the skills-- who can do Pro Se? You’ve got to hire an attorney. And what does an attorney cost? 100 dollars an hour?”

Petition for Removal: Why Bother?

“The main point for me is the social persecution. You serve a life sentence. Even if you get off, you are going to have to move to a new city if you want to get a fresh start, because people know about your past.”

The End

*Thank you for listening to the voices of
individuals whose lives are directly affected
by the Violent offender Registry*