

Voices of Returning Citizens on the Sexual and Violent Offender Registry (SVOR)

Focus Group Rationale and Methodology

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On May 12, Jana Staton and Hannah Fields will present the Committee with the results of the two SVOR focus groups conducted in the fall of 2019. This brief paper outlines the rationale and methodology for the two presentations. We conducted these studies as independent researchers, drawing on our background in organizational assessment and counseling (Staton), and sociology and qualitative research (Fields).

The goal of conducting a focus group of SVOR registrants was to provide the Law & Justice Interim Committee with verbatim testimony from individuals on the registry about their efforts to reintegrate into the community and succeed in leading productive lives. We hope this data will serve as useful information to aid the Committee in discerning whether or not changes in the Sexual and Violent Offender Registry should be made. The focus group and survey were conducted months before the bill drafts now before the Committee. The questions and discussion did not reference or ask participants about any particular actions or legislative changes.

The rationale for providing information to the committee through focus group is an acknowledgement of the stigma of being on the SVOR. Few if any of the participants are likely to give up a day's wages and risk appearing for a public, recorded legislative hearing, in order to provide the Committee with a glimpse of their lived experience. A focus group promotes interaction among participants and encourages deeper explorations of issues and concepts and often more diverse opinions than individual interviews or survey questions.

Sexual Offender Recruitment

The participants were recruited through an MSOTA member, who issued an open invitation to her current and former clients to participate in a discussion, facilitated by an independent leader, not part of MSOTA. The invitation was extended to family members as well. To accommodate employment, the focus group was scheduled for a 90-minute evening session on November 14, 2019.

There were 12 participants in the evening session, 10 men on the registry, and two intimate partners who could speak personally to the impact on family life. An additional participant who was unable to be present was interviewed two weeks later, using the same protocol and his comments were added to the data.

Violent Offender Recruitment

Residents of Missoula who were on the Violent Offender registry were invited to participate in the Violent Offender focus group, through personal connections to the facilitator, Dr. Staton, and by invitation from local Probation and Parole officers. Of the six identified and invited, only 2 came to the evening session October 30, 2019. A third participant was unable to attend but was available for an interview a week later, and his comments were added to the session transcript. Fortunately, the 3 participants represented a range of ages, years incarcerated, and years released to the community, and their comments appear broadly representative of the experiences of other violent offender registrants.

Protocol: The facilitator, Dr. Jana Staton, developed the focus group questions from research on impact of the Sex Offender Registry (Levinson *et al**), personal experience working with returning citizens on the SVOR registry over the past 6 years, and suggestions from MSOTA leader Brenda Erdelyi. The focus group questions were open-ended to promote discussion, with follow-up prompts and probes for more in-depth discussion.

Data Collection: To ensure comfort for the participants and secure their consent, the sessions were not tape recorded. Two University of Montana colleagues brought laptops and took verbatim notes as the discussion flowed. The two transcripts were combined with notes from the facilitator to provide a reasonably accurate transcript in the participants' own words. The additional interviews with the remaining participants were tape recorded with their permission and transcribed by the interviewer.

Analysis: The transcript was systematically analyzed using qualitative coding methods to identify and organize the themes reflecting common, reoccurring experiences provided by multiple participants. Initially, both the Facilitator, Dr. Jana Staton, and Research Associate, Hannah Fields, independently analyzed the transcript for themes. After the initial analyzation, the Researchers met to review the themes independently identified. Based on researcher consensus, some themes were deleted due to a lack of prevalence and consistency. Prominent themes were then reorganized, and clearly defined. After the analyzation process was complete, there were six distinct themes regarding the participants' experiences of reintegration and being on the registry.

*Levenson, Jill S.; Grady, Melissa; and Leibowitz, George (2016) "Grand Challenges: Social Justice and the Need for Evidence-Based Sex Offender Registry Reform," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare: Vol. 43: 2*, Article 2. Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol43/iss2/2>