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Community Notification Policies

J.J. Prescott

University of Michigan Law School, jprescott@umich.edu

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Community notification policies seek to prevent crime, raise awareness, or otherwise educate the public about criminal activity by requiring or permitting the police or other community actors to disseminate information to the public. Policies can focus on potential victims, potential offenders, the community at large, or some combination of these three. Victim-oriented policies seek to reduce the likelihood of victimization by encouraging precautionary behavior on the part of at-risk individuals. Offender-oriented policies publicize information (e.g., the severity of penalties or the likelihood of arrest) with the aim of deterring potential offenders from engaging in harmful activities. Community-oriented policies provide the public with information in hopes of increasing cooperation and communication with law enforcement. Policies are usually oriented toward more than one audience. To be effective at reducing criminal activity or its costs, community notification information must reach its target audience and its content must be clear, salient, and capable of altering behavior. Community notification policies also carry risks of unintentionally exacerbating criminal activity. On the whole, relatively little rigorous evidence exists on the consequences of these policies.

Victim-Oriented Notification Policies

Victim-oriented community notification policies—the largest category of community notification policies in number and importance—fall into two primary categories: criminal offender registries and criminal activity communications. The former is typified by public sex offender registries. Public registries generally require certain types of released criminal offenders to provide current contact and other information to law enforcement authorities and permit or mandate that these authorities disclose this identifying information, along with offender criminal history information, to the public. The latter includes various communications (e.g., fliers, e-mails, or other electronic or media announcements) about specific crimes in addition to aggregated distributions of crime-related activity information, often in the form of crime-related statistics or criminal *hot spot* maps.

Public Registries of Offenders

Publicly available offender registries have a long history in the United States, but the modern form came of age in the 1990s at the state and federal levels through enactments pursuing the reduction of sex offender recidivism. In theory, enactments of this type could require the publication of identifying information about *any* convicted offender (or even any individual determined by the public to be *dangerous*), but, in practice, these postrelease laws apply, with a few exceptions, to convicted sex offenders.

To become subject to such requirements, an individual must be convicted of a *covered* offense specified by statute. If covered, the offender must supply identifying information—for example, name, date of birth, ad-

dresses, and photograph—at regular intervals to designated officials or agencies. This information is or can be made public. Publication can occur in several ways, but the best known outlets are the so-called web registries, which allow members of the public to search for released offenders with particular characteristics (e.g., living near a particular address) or to locate specific individuals previously convicted of sex crimes.

These laws are typically justified on two grounds. First, proponents claim that public registration policies empower would-be victims against recidivism by ensuring that at-risk individuals have access to potentially critical information that will allow them to protect themselves and otherwise engage in effective precautionary behavior. Second, supporters assert that the public identification of potential recidivists effectively serves to deputize the public, providing more intensive monitoring of potential recidivists than would otherwise be possible. This scrutiny, they claim, can deter criminal behavior as well as facilitate apprehension and conviction. A third potential benefit of these laws might be the deterrence of would-be offenders by threatening an alternative sanction in the form of publicity, and therefore notoriety and shame, for the commission of a covered offense.

Critics of these laws question whether the public actually uses community notification information to engage in effective precautionary behavior and whether the plausibly criminogenic collateral consequences associated with publicly identifying released offenders might not exacerbate recidivism. In the case of public sex offender registries, a large fraction of the public does in fact access information about registered offenders, and sex offender registries are well-known and salient sources of information. Evidence that users of these registries engage in genuine precautionary behavior, however, is limited. Moreover, existing social science research indicates that the collateral consequences of being *known* publicly as a sex offender are significant (e.g., fewer employment and housing opportunities), that public registration laws may exacerbate other known recidivism risk factors, and therefore that these laws may not only be ineffective but also be counterproductive.

Several states and other jurisdictions have considered or adopted the public registration of other categories of convicted felony offenders. Examples include registries of a broad range of violent, white collar, methamphetamine, domestic violence, animal abuse, hate crime, elder abuse offenders, among others. Defenders of these registries have cited grounds identical to those used in support of sex offender registries, despite several potentially important differences in the underlying criminal activity at issue. For instance, offenders engaged in market-oriented crimes—like selling drugs—might actually benefit from the availability of publicly provided lists of potential producers, distributors, consumers, or coconspirators. Another difference relates to the potential number of covered offenders. While public sex offender registries are certainly not small, a comprehensive violent offender registry would carry an even greater risk of overwhelming potential victims with so many names and details that its users may be unable to employ the registry's information in socially productive ways.

Despite little evidence that publicly registering offenders reduces recidivism, this category of community notification policy continues to be attractive to policy makers and popular among the broader public. Scholars have rooted this disconnect in the intuitive nature of these policies, in the disgust that the public feels for certain categories of these offenders (e.g., sex offenders), and in basic psychology. Registries may make people feel safer by providing an increased sense of control over sources of risk that seem most threatening to them. People worry most about risks that are unfamiliar and difficult to control, regardless of whether the true level of risk is significant. Crime victimization risk is associated with an acute sense of loss of control that motivates individuals to take steps to regain control over their circumstances. Information seeking is one potential strategy; it is psychologically gratifying even if, objectively, acquiring the knowledge does little to reduce actual risk.

Criminal Activity Communications

Criminal activity communication policies and practices support the distribution of information to the public regarding ongoing or recent criminal activity. The goals of such communications are two-fold. First, fresh information on recent criminal activity—especially at the aggregate level—can warn potential victims of existing risks about which they may have been unaware. Such communications allow citizens to take greater care by avoiding particular locations or taking other precautions. Second, broadly sharing information on criminal activity—particularly at the level of individual incidents—may encourage citizens who have witnessed crimes to report what they know or otherwise assist law enforcement in apprehending perpetrators. Although making the extent and scope of criminal activity public knowledge may have downsides from a policy perspective (e.g., engendering unnecessary or unproductive public fear or inciting *copycat* criminals), the claimed upsides are that citizens will be better able to protect themselves from criminal victimization and that law enforcement activities will be more accurate and efficient in solving cases and ultimately reducing crime.

Community crime alerts may take the form of fliers, listserv e-mails, or media announcements. These alerts often include a vague description of the suspect, a summary of the alleged crime, and, importantly, the location where the incident is believed to have occurred. Typical crimes covered by these alerts include burglaries, robberies, assaults, rapes, and murders. With these alerts, there is always a chance that someone might help law enforcement apprehend the right suspect on the basis of the vague description alone, but the likelihood of this occurring is often thought to be low. Instead, the primary purpose of many of these alerts (and alert policies) appears to be simply to raise awareness of the extent and nature of victimization risk at particular places and times and hopefully prevent future crimes.

Some crime alert policies, however, specifically focus on bringing an ongoing crime to an end. Consider the

design and goals of the well-known America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response Alert System, which comprises a set of community crime alert policies that extend across the country. Under this system, if law enforcement officials conclude that a child has been abducted and all other America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response Alert criteria are satisfied (e.g., risk of serious bodily injury or death, sufficient descriptive information on the victim, and a 17-year-old or younger victim), law enforcement will notify the media and transportation officials of the details of the abduction, which are then disseminated over radio, television, highway signs, etc. These alerts are often rebroadcast by other organizations, including Internet search engines and mobile phone companies. The America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response Alert System may be atypical, however, in that its principal goal is to facilitate the recovery of an abducted child.

With the rise of social media and other online forms of communication, criminal activity alerts have become integrated into social media networks. Thousands of law enforcement agencies have social media accounts; while there are drawbacks to using social media (including the potential for selective and misleading redistribution of particular crime alerts by the public), there are likely to be significant advantages, too. One benefit is that police departments no longer have to work through the media via press releases to issue crime alerts. Law enforcement agencies can theoretically provide accurate, timely, and balanced information on criminal activity and can do so as often as they believe appropriate. Another benefit may arise from the fact that social networks are multidirectional communication platforms and so the public will be able to identify errors in and report confusion about particular crime alerts, which law enforcement agencies can then correct. Finally, because social networks may enhance the quantity and quality of communication from members of the public to law enforcement agencies, the chances that alerts will lead to actionable tips may increase.

At a more general level, social media technology allows law enforcement to engage in open dialogue with the communities they serve in an instantaneous, networked manner and thus may work to improve community-police relations. Where this possibility exists, current policies and practices involving criminal activity notification have the potential to morph into an extension of community policing. An example of this dynamic can be found in the Boston Police Department's successful use of Twitter during the Boston Marathon bombing investigation in 2013 to keep the public up to date on the status of the criminal investigation, to seek community tips and offer support to those affected or concerned, and even to correct false or misleading information being reported by mainstream media outlets.

Criminal activity communications also include law enforcement releases of aggregate crime data or crime maps, both of which seek to give a more complete picture to members of the public of the state of criminal activity in their community over a period of time. Sharing information in this form is unlikely to result in the apprehension of a particular criminal or in solving a particular crime on the basis of a citizen tip. Instead, the goal is to reduce crime by encouraging the public to be aware of particular crimes in particular places at particular

times. Crime mapping is especially increasing in popularity, although as a practical matter, detailed criminal activity maps (relative to direct crime alerts) seem much less likely to reach citizens and affect their behavior in ways that reduce their risk of victimization.

Criminal activity communications also raise a number of significant concerns. For instance, community notification practices may reinforce negative racial stereotypes. Importantly, scholars have found evidence indicating that individuals are more likely to have implicit and explicit biases toward Black people after reading a crime alert describing a Black suspect. Black suspects appear to be overrepresented in crime alerts, and evidence suggests that this overrepresentation is correlated with negative stereotypes about Black people as a group. Another challenge is the government's lack of control over the dissemination of a message once it is released, for example, over social media or by e-mail. A bystander's selective further dissemination or manipulation of this information has the potential to cause significant harm. On the other hand, community notification may serve to correct rumors and misinformation. The public can also put criminal activity information to ill-use. Alerts that identify a particular offender, public offender registries, or even crime maps can enable vigilantism. Finally, policies that circulate aggregate statistics and crime maps must rely on consumers of these resources to understand the limitations of such analysis and of the underlying data. Mapping, in particular, may stigmatize certain neighborhoods as *high crime* when data are presented without appropriate caveats, leading to consequences that can negatively affect communities.

Offender-Oriented Notification Policies

Offender-oriented notification policies seek to reduce criminal activity by conveying information directly to potential offenders in order to affect their decision-making regarding potentially harmful or criminal behavior. Examples include the broadcast communication of law enforcement tactics, techniques, and crackdowns; the scope of penalties for certain criminal conduct; and recent changes in criminal law. The underlying assumption of these policies is that potential offenders are aware of and will react to changes in their legal environment. In a traditional economic model of crime, law enforcement activities are assumed to affect the likelihood of conviction and/or the severity of punishment. Notification policies, by contrast, offer the potential to shape an offender's *perception* or estimation of both of these parameters. Offender-oriented notification policies also seek to influence an offender's evaluation of any nonlegal consequences of crime. Examples include a victim's suffering or the disgrace and embarrassment an arrest or conviction causes an offender's friends and family.

Media campaigns against drunk driving may be the most well-known examples of offender-oriented notification policies. These public service announcements concentrate almost exclusively on deterring potential of-

fenders; they rarely seek to educate potential victims about how they can best protect themselves when in close proximity to a drunk driver. Admittedly, these policies are community oriented in that they sometimes encourage third parties to intervene with potential offenders prior to the commission of crimes—for example, “Friends don’t let friends drive drunk.” But generally, these policies impart the message to potential offenders that drinking and driving carries with it a high likelihood of apprehension by law enforcement as well as harsh penalties upon conviction. These policies also seek to shame those who drink and drive by associating their behavior with wrongful risk-taking, highlighting in a more tangible way the potential for terrible harm to victims and their families. Notably, evidence on the effectiveness of these sorts of campaigns is mixed.

Community-Oriented Notification Policies

Community-oriented notification policies seek to educate members of a community broadly about crime, law enforcement, and the law. The goal is to empower citizens to reduce crime directly through their own activities (e.g., monitoring) and by cooperating with law enforcement (e.g., reporting). Community-oriented policies also affect potential victims and offenders but differ in that they communicate information to and affect the behavior of individuals who realistically do not fall into either of these categories. In this sense, public registries of offenders are both victim oriented and community oriented. Not only are potential victims encouraged to engage in precautionary behavior, but other members of the community are given tools to monitor potential recidivists and to report suspicious behavior to law enforcement. Likewise, offender-oriented notification practices like drunk-driving campaigns may also encourage third parties (e.g., bartenders and friends) to intervene and prevent crime. Community-oriented notification policies also seek to educate the public about risky activities that may produce harm and abet criminality (e.g., drug use) and to instruct citizens on how best to work with law enforcement or emergency responders to reduce harm, to interrupt criminal activity, or to facilitate the capture of offenders (e.g., 911 emergency number information campaigns and “See Something, Say Something” terrorist activity prevention campaigns).

A classic example of a community-oriented notification policy is the decades-old “Take a Bite Out of Crime” campaign. The first phase of this campaign was more victim oriented; it offered audiences tips about protecting their homes and other property. But the second and third phases emphasized observing and reporting suspicious activity and pushed neighborhoods to organize and carry out crime-prevention strategies. As in the criminal activity communications context, the future of community-oriented notification practices may be found in the use of social media tools by law enforcement. Social media platforms ease communication with the public. Electronic messaging can keep the public up to date on investigations and encourage community members to report relevant information in a timely manner. Moreover, the two-way nature and speed of social media technology may humanize and legitimize the police in much the way community policing has been

said to improve community–law enforcement relations. The result might well be a greater willingness of some communities to cooperate with police.

Concluding Thoughts

The behavioral consequences of community notification policies are generally undertheorized and understudied. To be successful, notifications relating to criminal activity must be received, salient, and consistent with existing beliefs. Policies that provide specific information are often claimed to be more successful, but message salience varies among subgroups, and so specificity may be immaterial under many circumstances. In some contexts, but not others, notification appears to influence perceptions of crime and victimization risk, beliefs about appropriate responses, and whether individuals engage in precautionary or monitoring behavior. This lack of consistency suggests that the specifics of the policy or practice and the criminal context are critical to accurately predicting the behavioral consequences of community notification policies.

See also [Community Policing](#); [Crime Mapping](#); [Crime Prevention, Policies of](#); [Deterrence](#); [Economics of Crime](#); [Media: Influence on Crime](#); [Megan's Law](#); [Public Offender Registries](#); [Public Perceptions and Fear of Crime](#); [Sexual Offender Registries](#)

J. J. Prescott

- policy community
- offenders
- sex offender registries

Further Readings

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