

## **Episode 34 - Dr. Sarah Craun: Evaluating the Efficacy of Sexual Offender Registries**

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof. A podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). Celebrating 75 years of excellence in social work education. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Adjoa Robinson and I'd like to take a moment to tell you about a new feature of living proof. In addition to listening subscribing to and sharing podcast you can now rate and write a review of each episode of living proof to rate or write a review of a podcast. Just go to our Web site at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu/podcast](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu/podcast) and click on that create your own review button. We look forward to hearing from you. Hi and welcome the living proof the podcast series at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. I'm your host Peter Sobota. You'd be hard pressed to find a parent who would not be interested in protecting their children. Advocates of Megan's law the federal policy that enables the public to view the names and addresses of convicted sex offenders argue that these registries are a useful way to protect children and communities from sexual offenders. Generally it appears that the public supports sex offender registries and that proportionately large percentage of people see Megan's Law as important and effective in raising awareness and protecting the public. Sexual offender registries have been in place since the late 1990s.

[00:01:47] What does research have to say about the registries effectiveness in raising awareness and protecting the public. In this podcast Dr Sarah Craun addresses these questions in a discussion with Susan Green clinical associate professor at the School of Social Work. Dr.Craun describes her research into sex offender registries policies to prevent sexual violence and the role of the social work profession in this area. Sarah Craun Ph.D. is assistant professor at the University of Tennessee's College of Social Work. Her research interests focus on sexual offender registries preventing sexual violence and domestic violence. Now let's join Dr. Craun and Susan Green who met in person in San Antonio Texas at the C.S. W.E. conference. And we need to think about who might be on this list. This list is for only people who've been convicted of a sexual crime. Granted the laws of who is a sex offender varies state by state. But this list is for only people who've been convicted so it's a very small subset because sex offenders and sex sexual crime in general is very underreported. And then to actually make it from a report to the police through the criminal justice system where someone is convicted of sexually based crime you're reaching a very small subset of people who actually commit sexual violence. And my accurate the age of when folks can be on a registry or on the list varies. It did vary previously. I'll give you a little history of how this policy came about in 1994 the Jacob Wetterling Act was passed at the federal level which established sex offender registries just for law enforcement. They were not available to the public at that time.

[00:03:30] In 1996 Megan's law came about after a young girl in New Jersey was murdered by a sex offender who was on one of these lists. Her parents said if I had known that this person was in our neighborhood if I had access to this list this would not have happened my daughter still be alive. So that's how these registries became public. In 2006 the Adam Walsh Act was passed. He's the son of the famous John Walsh from because most wanted it was named after him and that Hulsey strengthened Megan's Law. It provided some uniformity across the states minimum standards and levels within the registry. The 2006 they also established three tier and how you rank sex offenders tier 1 is the lowest tier 3 is the most significant and that impacts how often you need to register and the length of time that you're required to register. And again those are minimum set by the federal government. States can be more stringent. They want to be what does the research show about registries basically on the overall effectiveness. The research is quite mixed right now more than not. The research is saying OK maybe it doesn't work. Maybe it's not very effective at reducing

sexual violence and recidivist sexual violence in general. There was one study that came out of Minnesota where it looked maybe a little bit more positive but there have been a few studies where it's kind of gone more like this may not be the effective tool that we were hoping. There are various reasons for that. And one study they said five percent of people reported to the police were someone who defended more than once. So 95 percent of first time offenders.

[00:05:11] I've done a study out of Tennessee we're looking at the number of victims who go in for a sexual assault exam. And looking at the number of offenders they've listed and then comparing those two who's on the registry and only 4 percent of the offenders listed by the people coming in for example are on the registry at the time of the offense. So you have some limited potential there. I wanted for another project I wanted to look at a much more basic question of how many people who live near a registered sex offenders are actually aware of their presence. That's the whole point of this policy is that you know the lists are out there so you know who the person is in your neighborhood you avoid them that type of thing. So the basic question was how many people now. And so what I did is I took I did a survey of people living within a tenth of a mile of a registered sex offender had got their addresses I sent them. The Community Safety Survey and one of the questions on there was what types of people live in your neighborhood and are things like drunk drivers embezzlers and one was a person arrested for a sexual assault. When we looked at that data about a third of people living within a tenth of a mile. So they knew that someone in their right in their neighborhood had been arrested for a sexual assault. Now at the time the study was completed this was the time to catch a predator on NBC where it was all in the news of people coming through the Internet trying to seduce our children.

[00:06:33] And so I had a control group of people who lived a mile away from any registered sex offenders because I really want to say OK if one third of people who live near said registered sex offender know it maybe a third of people throughout the county believe that they live near one even though they don't people in the control group only about 3 percent thought that someone living in their neighborhood had been arrested for a sexual crime. So there was a difference and we probably can attribute that third to the registry. It's not as high as I imagine some people would have hoped. But it is better than nobody. I also looked at predictors of who knew there might be a good intervention point. So if we know what are the of people who don't know where we can target an intervention towards them having children did not make a difference. And if you knew someone was arrested for a sexual crime things that did make a difference were saying that you're very familiar with Megan's Law policy in general. Another one that I tested for social desirability is that I made up a fictitious policy and asked them how familiar they were this fictitious policy people who said that they were very familiar with this policy were much less likely to now that the offender was in the area. Other things that made a difference. Registered sex offenders tend to cluster in poorer areas. There are many reasons for that more difficulties finding a job cheaper places to live in poor areas.

[00:07:54] And so it's really important to consider the community impact on who knew what we found there is that in neighborhoods that had high concentrations of Latino immigrants that the likelihood of nuim went down. Now what you really have be careful of there is not committing an ecological fallacy in saying that Latino immigrants are less likely to know because in my sample I only had two or three people that indicated that they were Latino. So that wasn't a strong enough sample size to say that we have the power to attack this with only two or three people. Eventually I'd like to look at this Pacific subset of the population to see if the results still hold. What's the intent of a registry. What are we hoping it does. We're hoping that people will use it to find out who lives in their neighborhood. And then we'll take steps to protect themselves from these offenders who live in the area. It kind of makes an assumption about who the relationship between an offender and a sexual abuse victim which the assumption that it makes may not really reflect reality. One of the things that we found in the survey is that when you were aware of a sex offender in the

neighborhood you were more likely to be worried about a stranger sexually abusing your child than someone now to you. And that's actually opposite from what the statistics show the people who sexually abuse children are family members are acquaintances are people that the parents already trust. And that's how they have access to their children. And so it's something really important to consider is this an unintended effect of the registry that we are having people become a little bit more scared of the stranger offender and not so aware of who's really likely to defect.

[00:09:39] Do you think the public realizes what you just described really more assaults do come from folks we know. It's hard to say that there has been some research looking at do people think that the registry provides a false sense of security and basically people the general public does not think that it prevents false sense of security. But registries overall are incredibly publicly popular people love the idea of the registry see it as a great way to protect themselves and their children. I should also point out the registries are not only for people who abuse children. They can be on the registry if you committed a sexual crime against an adult. They're kind of marketed towards let's protect your children with these. But it encompasses both types of offenders. So do they know who's more likely to offend. In my one study I would say the majority said they were either equally likely to be worried about someone offending their child that they knew versus a stranger in them people who had what I call the misperception of a stranger be more likely to abuse that was under 50 percent. But that percentage was still related to knowing about the offender in the area. Are we talking about both males and females are on the registry. It's overwhelmingly male. There are some females on the registry that say over 90 95 percent of offenders registry are bad. So you personally or professionally I should say more so. What are your interests. What are you hoping for in regard to your research to take note of. I don't think these registries are going to go away because they are so politically popular and publicly popular.

[00:11:19] No politician is going to say that we should take these down because they'll be seen as siding with sex offenders. So what I really want the research to show to take the next step is is do almost like a best practices. How can we take this policy and gear it so it really is protective of children and of the public in general. So we don't have these misperceptions that I need to do is look at the registry and as long as you know where the people in your neighborhood have committed crimes before then you're OK. There's not a lot of money available for research in this field because we've looked at this issue of sex offending as undesirable obviously. And so to get funding towards really fighting best practice can be difficult. I'm not sure that we're that close to really understanding best practices with regard to registries right now. I think the information that we have is still in its infancy stage. We've got a ways to go to really understand for example take the next step that I would like to take is looking at people who do participate in email notification systems for sex offender registries. That way you don't have to go to the registry every month and look and see who's moved into your neighborhood in your neighborhood. But if you're updated by I'm interested in the zip code and then they send the updated information. Does that help. Does that just increase fear. Is this just one of many tools used by people who participate in this e-mail notification system.

[00:12:49] Do they still talk to their children about appropriate touching inappropriate touch if they're going out to bars. Do they still you know kind of watch their drinks and for like date rape drugs and stuff like that. So part of what I'm hearing you talk about is OK if we are notifying are we also providing the education or the awareness piece for folks that they can protect themselves or protect the kids. Exactly. Very good. This is just one piece of the puzzle. This should not be viewed as the panacea to preventing sexual abuse. What do you think in regards to the profession of social or not the general public but our profession. How do we need to be thinking about this. And what would you like or what would you like for us to be thinking with the profession. Sure. It's it's difficult on many levels like you say it depends on what your client population is. If you're working with children or with survivors a lot of the things that I brought up about the general public and prevention methods really does apply to your work as social workers you know teaching children

about appropriate touching inappropriate touching teaching parents that this is just one tool in the repertoire. Working with offenders it's a little bit more difficult. The feedback from offenders generally is understandably they're not a big fan of the registry and that there are some unintended consequences for them.

[00:14:06] They feel like they lose social support in their recovery that they're kind of isolated in their communities and there's an argument that if you take away social support of offenders trying to make recovery that you're actually increasing the likelihood that they're going to reoffend and that there are other policies stemming from sex offender registration which makes offenders lives more difficult such as residency restrictions affecting where you can land which again you could argue would make recovery more difficult for offenders. So if you're a social worker on that side the registry presents a whole different type of problems. And if you're a social worker working with a client population of children their parents are survivors. You know I was struck with four ethics or who we are as professional or social workers were to be the voice of those that are voiceless or powerless. And I'm actually very struck with where your passion lives. You know this is a field that often when I'm teaching even to mention this topic there is a visceral and or a pretty obvious reaction from my students or from others in terms of I don't want to go there. You know like even to spend time discerning if you will the various factors to be thinking about. I really commend you in regards to embracing. How do we need to think about this and the neutrality approach that you really are sounding like you have the special being in its infancy. I guess you would have some pushback on this. Yeah and I from the start of the book that I actually teach a freshman seminar course at University of Tennessee just looking at sex offenders and sex and policy and when the freshmen come in they're very much you know sex offenders are the people to jump out of the bushes and steal children and murder them and possibly rape a woman on the sidewalk.

[00:15:48] You you kind of look at the research on who they are and perhaps their past history is really kind of it is a really difficult struggle to realize the pain that they inflict on their survivors. And yet still understand that there are people and we're not generally unless they're civilly committed they're not put away for the rest of their lives and they're going to be back out in the community. So how do we work with that so we can protect ourselves but we can also help them work towards recovery. It is it's a very difficult line. Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you would like to make home alone. No I guess I would just like people to kind of come away from listening to this understanding that in some ways registry's they have potential to help people protect themselves especially from the high risk offenders who may offend you know multiple times but they are not the end all be all they are not the panacea that are going to protect everybody. You have to take other measures to protect yourself from sexual violence or your children sex sexual violence. And I understand both sides of the issue even brain in the personal side which is social workers trying to kind of have our professional self that personal side have the children I understand the desire to know who has been convicted of this before but then have the understanding that you know there's a giant portion of people who offend that never are convicted. There are a lot of first time offenders out there. So it's just it's just one tool and a giant tool box for preventing sexual violence. Thank you so much. Thank you.

[00:17:25] You've been listening to Dr. Sara Craun discuss her research into sex offender registries. I'm Peter Sobota. Join us again next time on living proof that Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. Our school is celebrating 75 years of research teaching and service to the community. With more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do. We invite you to visit our Web site at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). At UB we are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.