

What is the best way to protect the community from sex offenders?

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Punitive measures alone may not be the best way to make communities safer from sex offenders

Managing sex offenders with punitive measures alone may not be the best way to make communities safer, according to a Deakin University forensic psychology expert.

Deakin School of Psychology professor, Andrew Day, is leading a study to identify the most effective ways to keep communities safe from sexual offending.

"Sex offenders cause a level of harm that not only damages the physical and psychological health of those directly involved, but also adversely

impacts on many others, including family and friends, as well as the law enforcement and health professionals who respond to cases and the community at large. Yet there have been few attempts to draw on the expertise of those working with offenders, such as police, correctional workers and allied health professionals, when it comes to developing [policy](#)," Professor Day explained.

"As a forensic psychologist who has worked in prisons and hospitals providing treatment to offenders, it is clear that practitioners have a lot of expertise in managing risk. It is this expertise that we are looking in at in the current study."

The Australian Research Council funded project is investigating current policies from the perspective of those who enforce them. Professor Day and his research team have conducted interviews and focus groups with police officers responsible for the case management of registered offenders, community correction officers who supervise those on parole, non-government officers responsible for support and accommodation services and psychologists who provide assessment and treatment.

"We have focused our investigations on three policies that attempt to contain and control [sexual offenders](#) who live in the community: offender registration schemes, community notification (or public disclosure) policies and residency restrictions," Professor Day explained.

"Although these policies have been introduced relatively recently, some argue that they do not go far enough and that more aggressive policies are needed. At the same time, there is little evidence to suggest that any of these policies are successful in making our communities safer.

"There are also indications that these policies do more harm than good. Sex offenders can become socially isolated, have limited access to employment, social support and [mental health services](#), which undermine

their chances of reintegrating into the community."

Professor Day believes that the one-size-fits-all policies currently in place to manage [sex offenders](#) living in the community are too restrictive and not as effective in preventing re-offending as more personalised policies that are tailored to the individual needs of offenders.

"We are seeing in our research a need for more sophisticated and integrative systems," he explained.

"Community notification is almost universally regarded as counter-rehabilitative, and there is wide-spread support for proactive case management models that engage offenders. Multi-agency approaches are also imperative to effective risk management.

"Perhaps the most important need identified was to reconnect sexual offenders with community supports. While restrictive policies can lead to social isolation, new programs that encourage pro-social behaviour would minimise not only the opportunity, but critically the motivation, to re-offend."

Professor Day acknowledges that how to best manage offenders living in the community is a polarising issue and one that needs to carefully balance the safety needs of the community and the rehabilitation needs of the [offenders](#).

Provided by Deakin University

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