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**PARENTAL RESPONSE TO COMMUNITY  
NOTIFICATION:  
A School-Based Study**

**A Thesis Submitted To  
The Faculty of Graduate Studies  
University of Manitoba**

**In Partial Fulfillment  
Master of Social Work Degree**

**By  
Lisa Ruth Sutherland  
March 1999**

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**PARENTAL RESPONSE TO COMMUNITY NOTIFICATION: A School-Based Study**

**BY**

**Lisa Ruth Sutherland**

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree**

**of**

**Master of Social Work**

**Lisa Ruth Sutherland©1999**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Parental Response to Community Notification: A School-Based Study**

Manitoba was the first province in Canada to develop a Protocol that authorizes Police agencies to provide information to the public regarding high-risk sexual offenders being released into the community. Providing the public with this information theoretically enables them to reduce the potential risk of victimization by informing their children of the danger, teaching them sexual abuse prevention strategies and reducing the offender's access to children by monitoring his behaviour. However, little is actually known about the experience or response of parents who receive a notification.

This study conducted focus group discussions with parents of school-aged children to examine their thoughts, feelings and anticipated behaviours in response to receiving a simulated notification. The goal was to identify and explore a diverse range of parental responses.

Participants described feeling relieved, afraid, angry and anxious as a result of receiving the information. They had many questions about the meaning of the notification information and the type of response that was expected, effective and required. Despite their uncertainty about how to best protect their children, parents were more comfortable with that responsibility than for monitoring the offender's behaviour in the community.

Participants were almost unanimous in their support for community notification. However, although it provides parents with specific offender information the notification does not appear to improve their knowledge or understanding of the issue of child sexual abuse. Most parents thought the notification was a good reminder to review existing child protection strategies, but wondered if there were additional protective behaviours that might be more useful. Participants made a number of suggestions regarding information they felt should be included in the notification, particularly a description of the offender's method(s) of selecting and enticing previous victims.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### **PURPOSE, BACKGROUND AND NATURE OF THE STUDY**

#### Introduction

In February 1995, Manitoba Justice implemented Canada's first Protocol regarding the release of high risk sexual offender information and established a Community Notification Advisory Committee to administer it. " The primary objective of the Protocol is to enhance public protection, through the release of appropriate information either to the public generally, or to individuals / groups within a community, when a high-risk sexual offender is or will be residing in the community " (Cooper, 1995, p. 2). Those receiving the notification are expected to assess the risk to themselves or their families and to take any action necessary to ensure their safety.

There are numerous arguments made in favour of community notification. The John Howard Society of Alberta newsletter, *The Reporter* (1996) recently outlined several of the issues raised by pro-notification advocates who claim that the questionable efficacy of offender treatment, the lack of treatment resources in many communities, "...the need to protect the public, the public's right to know, the perceived higher recidivism rates among sex offenders and the psychological damage often suffered by victims of sexual offenses justify releasing information on sex offenses " (p.1).

Providing parents with identifying information about a released pedophile and his/her previous criminal behaviour theoretically presents them with the opportunity to become actively involved in protecting their children from victimization. It appears logical that warning parents they are living in the presence of a dangerous sexual offender will result in two positive outcomes. First, parents can inform their children about the danger and how to avoid being victimized. Second, the offender will not have a chance to reoffend because the community will be monitoring his behaviour and restricting access to their children (Freeman-Longo, 1996). Although they have not been tested, these assumptions about citizen response to offender information have contributed to the rapid development and implementation of systems of

community notification throughout most of the United States and Canada.

It can not be declared with any certainty that all parents are able to respond in the anticipated positive/protective ways assumed by the Protocol. In a recently published newsletter, The John Howard Society of Alberta (1996) suggests that " the release of offender information to the general public, particularly if the public has not been given appropriate advice on how to interpret and act on the information provided, causes more harm than good and does nothing to enhance public safety " (p.2). Although some systems of notification have been operating for several years, the consequences, positive or negative, are unknown.

### Rationale

Systems of community notification are becoming increasingly institutionalized. In Manitoba the Community Notification Advisory Committee (CNAC) considers whether or not the public should be notified about a specific offender. The Committee then makes recommendations to the appropriate police agency about how information should be shared with the public. When the police agency agrees with the decision to notify the public, officers are responsible for providing the information to citizens. Recently, a new Protocol called Children First (Manitoba Justice,1997a) outlines guidelines for the distribution of notification information to child care providers throughout the Province, using existing lines of communication between the Directors of these organizations and the agencies or departments under their jurisdiction. This adds another layer to the process of distributing information and obligates these organizations to develop their own processes for handling notifications.

In addition to child care and child welfare agencies, Manitoba schools anticipate some degree of direct involvement in the process of community notification as a result of the Children First Protocol. A number of schools within the city of Winnipeg, in areas targeted with a notification, have already been involved in this process by discussing the notification with students and sending a copy of the media release home to parents. Other school divisions are currently evaluating the need for internal policies regarding the distribution of offender information among staff and students.

The value of notifying citizens is based on assumptions about what the public does with information about sexual offenders residing in their neighborhood. In the case of publicizing information about a high-risk child molester, it is assumed that parents will inform their child(ren) of the potential danger and how to avoid it, and/or take action that reduces the offender's opportunities to reoffend. However, there is no empirical evidence to date regarding the accuracy of these assumptions. In fact, very little is known about the response of parents who receive notification.

The Washington State Institute for Public Policy has been evaluating the impact of that state's Community Protection Act, which includes provisions for community notification. In addition to describing and comparing various state and federal sex offender legislation, the Institute conducted the only systematic study of sex offenders who were subjects of community notification. Donna Schram and Cheryl Milloy (1995) studied reoffense behaviour for adult and juvenile sexual offenders who were subject to the notification laws. Data was collected from case file reviews and through tracking re-arrests and convictions during a follow-up period. They found that notification had little impact on recidivism, but may have resulted in the publicized offenders being arrested for new offences more quickly than offenders who were not subjects of a notification. Although they suggested that greater public awareness and attention to the presence of the identified offender may explain these findings, it is difficult to interpret the results without a better understanding of community behaviour. The authors argued that a qualitative study of community response to notification would contribute significantly to understanding the impact of this legislation.

During June and July of 1997, the Institute contracted with the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center to gather information regarding public opinion of Washington state's community notification law. A random sample of 400 adults participated in a brief telephone interview designed to determine citizens awareness of the notification law, their opinion of it, their reaction to it, their understanding of the law's purpose and their belief of the law's importance (Phillips, 1998). The study found that 79% of participants were aware of the community notification law. Approximately 75% felt they knew more about sex offenses and how sex

offenders operate as a result of the notifications they had received. Females and respondents between the age of 30-40 reported greater fear and anger in response to receiving notification than males and participants aged 51-65. The former group also reported a heightened awareness of their surroundings and safety concerns. Based on this study, the researcher suggests that age, gender and level of formal education appear to be significant variables in determining citizens' emotional reactions to notification.

It is important to more fully examine the experience of parents who receive a notification to better understand how parents understand and use the information provided to them. Parents' knowledge and attitudes about child sexual abuse and prevention strategies, their beliefs and feelings about child sexual offenders, and their ability to accurately assess the risks to themselves or family members will all influence their response to receiving a notification.

### Research Goals

This study uses a qualitative approach to examine the thoughts, feelings and attitudes of parents of elementary school-aged children after they read the type of information they might receive from their child's school if a high risk offender notification was released to their community. The goal of this research is to explore, from the perspective of parents, the experience of receiving a notification and the range of parents' anticipated responses.

How does a parent interpret the information provided; what does it mean to them? What emotions and thoughts occur? Do they communicate with others about being notified and if so, what language do they use to discuss the issue? What do they think they are 'supposed to do' in response to the notification? Does being notified influence their parenting behaviour and if so, how?

Findings from this research may contribute to an understanding about the validity of assumptions regarding parental response to community notification. Does notification result in the positive parental behaviours described by notification advocates: to inform and educate their children, to monitor the offender's behaviour, and ultimately to reduce opportunities for the offender to have access to potential victims? If parents aren't responding in these anticipated ways, how are they responding? What are some of the unanticipated consequences of notifying

the community and how does this impact the risk or safety of children or other community members?

In addition to describing specific responses to notification, this project encouraged participants to examine their perceptions, attitudes and opinions that influence their reaction to the notification information; their ideas about child sexual abuse, sex offenders, and prevention strategies. How have these opinions been formed? How open are parents to information from others that challenge some of their beliefs? Are some opinions more susceptible to change than others? What types of information do parents request or require in order to make the best use of a notification? This line of inquiry may identify possible needs within the community for education, support or other resources.

### Summary

Manitoba was the first province to develop a Protocol that authorizes Police agencies to provide information to the public regarding high-risk sexual offenders being released into the community. Providing the public with this information theoretically enables them to take appropriate measures to reduce the potential risk of victimization. However, little is actually known about the experience of parents who receive a notification.

The goal of this study is to identify a diverse range of parental responses to notification, and to examine some of the reasons for these responses. Data collected from parents may identify if and how parents use notification information. It may reveal the type and amount of information parents believe is useful for them to be able to effectively use the notification information. The results may also provide important information to decision-makers that are currently developing school policies, regarding ways they might approach their task.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Development of Community Notification

Washington was the first state to authorize local law enforcement to implement a community notification law, in March 1990. In May, 1996 President Clinton introduced 'Megan's Law', an amendment to existing federal sex offender legislation which resulted in sex offender registration laws for all 50 states and an active community notification process in 47 states (The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1997). In the past two years, systems of community notification have also become popular in Canada. Manitoba was the first province to implement a Protocol in February 1995 and by June of 1997, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Newfoundland and the Yukon were also notifying the public about released sex offenders (Manitoba Justice, 1997b). Despite a lack of empirical evidence to support its effectiveness, many provinces based aspects of their process on the Manitoba model. In addition to the many perceived benefits of notifying citizens, it is possible that other provinces developed their own systems of public notification to avoid becoming the destination of sex offenders trying to escape the unwanted publicity in notifying provinces.

The apparent intention of every notification program is to protect the public. The Manitoba Protocol is aimed at providing citizens "...sufficient information in order to take appropriate measures to keep themselves, their families and children safe..." from identified high risk sexual offenders residing in the community (Cooper, 1995, p.1). However Robert Freeman-Longo (1996) of The Safer Society Foundation points out that community notification is often established in response to emotional public reaction of a rape-murder crime rather than being based on research that these policies actually achieve their goals. Berrick and Gilbert (1991) describe this process of decision making as 'opportunistic planning', which is characterized by,

"...a convergence of public opinion, political considerations, and interest group objectives around a social problem. The joining of these influences creates an immediate call for action and elicits support for a broad programmatic solution that is, by appearances, feasible enough to satisfy the urgent concern that 'something be done'" (p.20)

This process results in the implementation of policy that has neither defined nor addressed all the relevant variables and which is lacking an evaluative component.

Manitoba Justice Minister, Rosemary Vodrey announced the establishment of the Community Notification Protocol on February 8, 1995, following the murder of teenager, Sarah Kelly, by a sexual offender in The Pas, Manitoba. Prior to the murder, a local Probation Officer and members of the R.C.M.P. were concerned about the significant danger the offender potentially posed to the public and requested that information be provided to the community regarding his behaviour. Superiors denied their request. After the murder there was mounting public concern about the safety of women and children and many questions were raised about if, when and how information on known high-risk offenders should be publicized. The Minister's announcement was positively received by the public and demands were made that the Protocol be implemented immediately (MacGillivray, 1995,p.2). However, the Committee did not consider it's first case until June 1, 1995, at which time Committee Chairperson, Jennifer Cooper acknowledged that the committee was "going into uncharted territory" and said she hoped the committee "won't make too many bad mistakes" (Sinclair, 1995, A1).

Provincial Judge, Howard Colleman (1996), in his Inquest Report regarding Sarah Kelly's murder, also acknowledged that the Manitoba Community Notification Protocol was an experiment of sorts, as it had been established without a complete understanding of how the process would impact on either the community or the offender, and no process was in place to evaluate its effectiveness. Justice Colleman encouraged that the Protocol be "...utilized and tested in its present form, and that appropriate feedback be received and monitoring take place before its parameters are enlarged" (Colleman, 1996, p.266).

During the past four years, the Community Notification Advisory Committee has considered a number of cases and made recommendations to the appropriate police agency about whether or not, and to what extent offender information should be made public. The Protocol is applied to adult sex offenders who have been convicted and assessed to be a high risk to reoffend at the time of their release into the community. Formal notification can be made to a specific victim, a class of potential victims, a limited geographic area, or to the general public



through the use of mass media. Offender information is carefully reviewed by CNAC, whose members consider a range of possible responses, taking into account the risk of public alarm, the impact on past victims, and the privacy rights of the offender, in making a recommendation to the police regarding formal public disclosure (Cooper, 1995). Typically, notifications will include a picture and description of the perpetrator, a description of his (all the notifications to date were for male offenders) current sexual offense, details of his criminal history, and information regarding past sentencing, treatment, and substance use.

Community notification systems have not been around long enough for a substantial amount of research or evaluation to occur. Although at first glance one might imagine it possible to learn about this phenomenon by examining citizen response to other perceived threats in the community, such as group homes or halfway houses, the social situation that notification creates is a new one. In the case of a halfway house, community members can be somewhat reassured that the system ensures that the risks to the community are minimal and managed; only the lowest risk clients are placed in the facility. Notifications, on the other hand, are applied to only the most dangerous, highest risk individuals who are fully expected to reoffend, and the message to the community is 'be afraid'.

#### Parental Knowledge and Behaviour

"Although officially recorded cases of child abuse and neglect are more prevalent than those involving sexual abuse, and in many instances more damaging, the sexual molestation of young children attracts greater attention from the media and evokes higher public anxiety" (Berrick and Gilbert, 1991, p.3). Beginning in the early 1980's, numerous school and community programs were established in response to increased public awareness and concern regarding child sexual abuse (CSA), but less is known about how individual families or parents have responded to this issue.

Berrick and Gilbert (1991) cautiously compare the results of their 1988 California survey involving 115 parents of third graders to Finkelhor's 1981 Boston survey of 521 parents with children aged 6-14 years, to demonstrate the general increase in parental knowledge of CSA over time. In 1981, Finkelhor found that only 29% of parents reported having discussed the issue

of CSA with their children, beginning around age nine. Seven years later, 81% of Berrick and Gilbert's sample had spoken to their children about this topic by the third grade. Only 19% of the Boston parents believed one quarter of all girls were abused, and 30% thought only 1 in 100 girls were victimized compared to 51% of parents in 1988 who estimated that one quarter of *all children*, boys and girls, were abused. Boston parents believed a stranger was the primary offender in 50% of cases while only 10% of California parents thought strangers were primary offenders.

Differences in family demographics, methodologies, age of the children, and location of the study makes direct comparisons between these two studies less reliable, however, it does appear that there has been an increase in general knowledge regarding this issue. Finkelhor's study was conducted at a time when child sexual abuse was just beginning to come to public attention, while the California study occurred shortly after the highly publicized McMartin preschool trials. The differences in parental awareness and knowledge is reflected in differences between how the families studied dealt with the issue of prevention education. Boston parents were more likely to emphasize 'stranger danger' while California parents were more likely to be direct and graphic with their children, providing advice and rules emphasizing inappropriate touching and disclosure.

In 1993, Jeanne Elrod and Roger Rubin surveyed 50 mothers and 51 fathers of preschool aged children to determine parental knowledge of child sexual abuse and parents' interest in educating their children and themselves about the issues. Parents overwhelmingly indicated their desire to be the primary educator of their children (92%) while 91% named their spouse as second choice. Besides themselves or their mate, most parents chose a professional in the field of CSA as their third choice, followed fourth by teachers (roughly 60%).

Over half the sample in Elrod and Rubin's study indicated that they planned to discuss some child sexual abuse topics with their child. Despite this desire to educate their children, many of the parents did not know enough about the topic or were so anxious about the issue they would be unable/willing to provide some of the less comfortable but important topics, such as abusers being someone you know and like. These parents were more likely to focus more of the

discussion on 'stranger danger' and present their children with inaccurate and incomplete information. Elrod and Rubin (1993) found that over three quarters of their sample were unable to estimate the prevalence of child sexual abuse, or the age when a child would be capable of disclosing. However, more than half of all parents knew that boys and girls were equally at risk, and that offences were rarely reported to authorities.

Alarmingly, more than 25% of parents in the study named family and friends as preferred sex abuse educators for their children, despite knowing that most often abusers are people in these roles. "There is a pattern to parents' responses indicating that, although they know who abusers are and the seriousness of the risks and consequences, they do not seem to personalize the risks to themselves and their children" (Elrod and Rubin, 1993, p.531).

While a community notification clearly communicates that there is a potential threat to the safety of self and/or family, it does not provide support or suggestions for how to evaluate or respond to this threat. Although the release includes a statement warning against unreasonable conduct directed at the offender it does not include any suggestions for appropriate self-protective behaviour, or a number to call for this type of information. In this regard, sex offender notifications can be compared to early AIDS prevention messages, which were based on a similar strategy of fear; information about the AIDS virus provoked anxiety but offered no solutions. Kenny (1989) argues that fear motivations work with only a small percentage of the population who are realistic about evaluating risks. He refers to these people as 'copers' and contrasts them with 'avoiders' who deny or distance themselves from an identified risk. In the Elrod and Rubin study (1993), one third of parents could be considered to be 'avoiders' as they were "...fatalistic about...sexual abuse, did not care for any more information or did not believe child sexual abuse was or would be a factor in their lives" (p.534).

Avoiders do not respond well to fear motivators and need information that will "...balance that fear with a message that will reduce the fear and provide the person with an action that they can take that is realistic and affirming"(Kenny, 1989, p.78). Simply alerting parents to the presence of an identified offender does not provide them with information, support, guidance or resources that might be needed by some citizens to enable them to respond in an appropriate

manner. Some parents lack knowledge while others lack the vocabulary, comfort, motivation or confidence to discuss the subject of sexual abuse with their children. Many parents assume that a prevention program offered through the school system is enough, or they do not think their children are at risk. In addition to prevention information, many parents require specific information about the indicators of abuse, how to deal with a child's disclosure, and how to talk to children about sexual abuse without scaring them (Elrod and Rubin, 1993)

Where do parents learn about the issue of sexual abuse or the seriousness of the issue? In the Elrod and Rubin (1993) study, 99% of the 101 parents surveyed reported that the media was their primary source of information. This is not surprising since media sources are widely available and convenient to parents in the privacy of their own homes; magazines, television programs, news-features, public service announcements and movies all are potential sources of information about identifying, avoiding and reporting sexual offences. Berrick and Gilbert (1991) reported that 40% of parents in their 1988 survey said television was the stimulus for a discussion of CSA with their children.

Unfortunately, the media often portrays pedophiles as the stereotypical 'sexual predator' or lurking stranger and sensationalizes the issue of sexual abuse instead of educating the public. Jenny Kitzinger and Paula Skidmore (1995) examined all the press and television news coverage of child sexual abuse over a twelve-month period in the UK. They found that coverage was most often case specific rather than presenting information about possible causes or prevention of abuse from a broader, educational perspective. Sensationalized stories of child sex murders/abductions were far more likely to receive attention than other aspects of the topic. Coverage also tended to focus on abuse that occurred outside the home. Headlines referred to perpetrators as monsters, creeps, or perverts, and suggested they were evil.

Most school based CSA prevention programs provide opportunities for parents to attend an information night where more comprehensive and factual information is available. In some cases the parent night is simply to orient parents to their children's curriculum, while in other cases the meeting focuses on providing parents themselves with information and skills they can use to protect their children; information about detecting, intervening and reporting abuse.

Jill Berrick (1988) studied the level and effects of parental involvement in a CSA prevention program for children aged 3.5 to 5 years. She expected a high level of participation amongst parents of preschoolers as they are relatively more dependent on their parents for protection than older children "due to their age, stature, developmental level, and impressionable disposition" (p. 544). Using attendance as an indicator of interest and concern about the issue, she was shocked to find that only 34% of the 116 participants attended the parent meeting. Analysis of pre-post test data revealed that attendance at the meeting did not influence the incidence or content of parent-child discussions following the children's program. Both attendees and non-attendees were equally likely to discuss some of the program concepts with their child, typically information regarding strangers. Only 11% of parents reinforced the child's right to say 'no' to unwanted touches and even fewer (9%) discussed who the child could tell if they were abused. Parents who attended the meeting were no more able to list indicators of sexual abuse than non-attendees, despite this information being specifically provided at the meeting. Many parents claimed they would simply know intuitively if their child was being abused.

Although Berrick's study found little benefit in offering parent workshops, the small sample size, high rate of attrition (19%) between pre and post-test, and the under-representation of fathers (only 2%) makes generalizations of these results risky. However, similar results were found in Berrick and Gilbert's 1991 study, where only 13% of participants attended the parent night. Interestingly, while 84% parents supported the idea of providing a school program, 29% stated that they did not think their children had learned anything that had not already been taught by parents or television. Parents judged their children to possess adequate prevention skills and expected that they would respond appropriately if approached by an offender. Based on this information, it appears many parents will not deliberately acquire information for themselves regarding CSA because they, correctly or incorrectly, do not consider themselves to be uneducated about the issue. However, they continue to support the provision of school based prevention programs despite feeling confident that their own kids are not vulnerable.

Recently, increasing numbers of professionals are advocating that parents and communities take more direct responsibility for protecting children. Researchers have begun questioning the

effectiveness of teaching children 'prevention skills', and suggest that children are incapable and should not be expected to protect themselves from adult sex offenders. Berrick and Gilbert (1991) argue that "Exposing young children to a long list of prevention strategies does little to reduce the superior knowledge, strength, and skill of adult offenders" (p.116). They advocate a move away from the current emphasis on child targeted prevention efforts to a protective model which relies on educated adults who understand how offenders operate, can recognize the early signs of abuse, and know how to deal with disclosures.

#### Impact on Offenders

What is 'known' about the prevention of CSA is based on a 'best guess' of relevant victim, offender and environmental factors (Wurtele and Miller-Perrin, 1992). More must be learned about how offenders operate; how offenders select, entice, groom, victimize and silence children. Several studies have been conducted which solicit information from perpetrators about how they offend and the impact of various prevention strategies (Conte, Wolf and Smith, 1989, Budin and Johnson, 1989, Kaufman, Harbeck-Weber and Rudy, 1994, and Elliott, Browne and Kilcoyne, 1995). However, data has only been collected from convicted offenders who volunteered to participate in the research and may differ from the responses of undetected offenders or non-participatory offenders. Offenders who were studied agreed with many of the prevention strategies currently being taught to children; to identify inappropriate touching, to say "no", and to disclose abuse. The majority of offenders knew their victims and suggested that focussing on stranger danger was not an effective prevention strategy.

Although many perpetrators reported feeling concerned that victims would disclose (Conte, Wolf and Smith, 1989, Elliott, Browne, and Kilcoyne, 1995) most offences are never reported to authorities. The average age of offenders interviewed by Elliott, Browne and Kilcoyne (1995) was 41 years old. All of the offenders in the study had committed their first offence as a juvenile, and one third of them were under the age of 16. However, the average age of first conviction was 31. Some offenders in this study reportedly offended against hundreds of children before being convicted and 55% reported that their offences became worse over time. Wurtele and Miller-Perrin, (1992) advocate for improvements in the way the justice system identifies and

deals with offenders because "...a strong possibility of being caught, apprehended, and punished would likely serve as an inhibitor for potential offenders, as well as an educational function for the general population" (p.44). Currently it is believed that most sex offenders are never caught, and of those that are, few are convicted.

It is significant to note that of all the available data, from CSA prevention advocates and offender informants, no prior study has recommended publicizing the identities of known offenders. Systems of notification have been used for as long as nine years in some parts of the United States, but there has not yet been a great deal of research regarding the effects of community notification on citizens, victims, or offenders.

A 1995 study conducted by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy compared the recidivism rates of high-risk sex offenders subject to the state's 1990 notification legislation with equally high-risk offenders who were released prior to notification. There was no significant difference in the recidivism rate between the two groups. The notification group had a sexual recidivism rate of 19% compared to 22% recidivism in the non-notification group. (Schram and Milloy, 1995,p.ii). These findings have been widely quoted, but dismissed as being somewhat irrelevant and secondary to the main purpose of notification, which is to alert the public and motivate a protective response on the part of citizens.

#### Negative Consequences

There are concerns that community notification may result in a variety of unanticipated or unaddressed negative consequences. Although this is not a complete list of all the potential problems, the following issues are among those that must be considered to understand the full impact of any public alert.

- False sense of security - If parents believe that all of the sexual offenders in their community have been identified, prevention efforts might be limited to teaching children to avoid one particular resident, rather than participating in more comprehensive prevention efforts. Most sex offenders living in communities are undetected and unsuspected. The majority of offenders who are charged and convicted are not subjects of a notification because they are not assessed as a 'high-risk'. Will the public assume that an offender who is not the subject of

a notification has been treated and is cured or at least 'safe'? Studies must be done to determine the recidivism rate for 'low-risk' offenders compared to offenders whose identities are made public.

- Apathy – For a variety of reasons, residents might take very little action in response to a notification. If the mass media is involved in province-wide releases on a regular basis, eventually notifications will have less impact. Some parents may feel that they are not required to take any action because their child(ren) attended a prevention program through school. Other parents may be dealing with personal issues, family dysfunction, or may themselves be abusers and will not respond in the anticipated way to a notification.
- False sense of danger – Despite the constant possibility that an unknown sex offender might be living in any community, being notified that an identified offender is residing in the neighborhood may create an increased and unrealistic sense of danger. In the wake of notification laws in New Jersey, the Real Estate Commission has had to consider proposed rules requiring all agents and brokers to alert clients to a sex offender living in the area, the same way they would inform potential homebuyers of a nearby landfill or hazardous waste dump (Levitt, 1997).
- Vigilantism - In an effort to discourage vigilantism in response to notification, the Manitoba Protocol specifically instructs the Advisory Committee to consider "...recommending that any public notice contain an appropriate warning that the intent of the process is to enable members of the public to take suitable preventative measures, not to embark upon any form of vigilantism or other unreasonable conduct directed at the offender" (Cooper, 1995,p.10). The efforts of both the Community Notification Advisory Committee and The Winnipeg City Police to discourage vigilantism in Winnipeg have appeared successful, but several incidents of public protests and threats made to the offender and his/her family have occurred in other parts of Canada and the United States. Although these incidents are relatively rare, they are highly publicized in the media, giving the impression that this is a common and perhaps effective response. One of the concerns over this type of behaviour is the possibility that the



offender will quietly disappear, moving away from treatment and supervision, to a community that is unaware of his offending history.

- Effect on innocent others – Little is known about how community notification of sexual offenders might impact on the victim(s) of the offender being profiled, or other victims of sexual crimes. It also remains to be seen how the public will respond to the parents, partner, siblings or children of an identified sex offender. It is possible that the stigma attached to the offender will extend to members of his/her family and impact negatively on their ability to live, work and remain actively involved in their community.
- Barriers to reintegration – In his presentation to the Sarah Kelly inquest, Mr. Lawrence Ellerby of Native Clan, suggested that notification might actually increase the risk to the public rather than decrease it. Publicizing the offender's identity might make it more difficult for him to secure housing, employment and social supports, which would increase the dynamic risk factors that can trigger a relapse or reoffence (Collerman, 1996). Groth, Hobson and Gary (1982) explain that "...the child molester is the recipient of the strongest societal anger and disapproval which ironically only confirms his perception of adults as hostile and punitive and reinforces his attraction to children" (p.131).
- Undermines treatment – Offenders who have been publicly identified as dangerous, high-risk 'molesters' may be less inclined to enter treatment at any point following their release, feeling they've been irreversibly labeled. If the public response to identified sex offenders is visibly negative, even fewer offenders will voluntarily seek help early in their offending patterns. This may have a snowball effect and result in less community based treatment programs being established and available to those who need them.
- Misplaced responsibility – Freeman-Longo (1996) notes that a consequence of community notification is that "...safety and appropriate individual conduct become a community responsibility instead of the responsibility of the offender" (p.101). This could result in victim blaming as accusations are made of citizens being warned and then failing to take the necessary action to keep themselves safe.

## Summary

Accurately predicting human behaviour is a difficult if not impossible task. Based on the available data regarding parental knowledge of child sexual abuse and their use of that knowledge to protect their children, it is difficult to predict how parents might react to a community notification. The common understanding of prevention strategies is limited to 'know-go-tell' models, which emphasize identifying and reporting abuse early to prevent on-going or increasingly more serious victimization. Although parental knowledge seems to have increased over time, it is not clear that this knowledge is fully shared with children, or that it actively influences parents' behaviour. It also does not appear that public identification significantly reduces sexual recidivism, as it has little positive impact on offenders and may even increase the risk of reoffence. Finally, there are many potential negative consequences that could be the result of public notification. Citizens may interpret or use notification information in ways that are ineffective, harmful or even criminal.

It is necessary to better understand the experiences and responses of parents who receive notification in order to anticipate the actual, versus the assumed ways that parents interpret and use this information.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

In order to observe parents' immediate and anticipated responses to receiving notification, and to explore how and why they think and feel the ways they do about this issue, data was collected through the use of focus groups. A focus group is "...a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (Krueger, 1988, p.18). This data collection technique is particularly helpful in gaining understanding of an issue from the perspective of the target population as well as when little is known about the topic.

Asbury (1995) makes it clear that "one has to determine that using focus groups is the appropriate strategy, given the research objectives" (p. 415). This chapter will provide an overview of focus groups as a qualitative research methodology, its strengths and weaknesses and its appropriate application to this study.

#### **Focus Group Dynamics**

It is the "explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights" (Morgan, 1988, p. 12) that distinguishes this methodology not only from other qualitative approaches, but from other types of group based approaches. Focus groups as research are not used for brainstorming, consensus building, planning, problem solving or decision-making. The researcher does not engage participants in an ongoing exchange of questions and answers but provides the topic, nurtures different perceptions or points of view and observes the group discussion, intervening only as required to stimulate discussion.

The focus group uses a socially oriented approach, actively pursuing information about the social influences that affect participants. The phenomenon is viewed from an ecological perspective, consistent with social work principles. The data collected using this methodology reflects not only an individual's point of view, but considers the relationship between the individual and their environment. Jenny Kitzinger (1994) writes,

**\* We are none of us self-contained, isolated, static entities; we are part of complex and overlapping social, familial and collegiate networks...We learn about the 'meaning' of (the phenomenon)...through talking with and observing other people...and we act (or fail to act) on that knowledge in a social context...to explore people's understandings...it makes sense to employ methods which actively encourage the examination of these social processes in action" (p.117).**

Parents respond to the notification information based on the meaning the notification has for them. Their understanding of the notification and their response to it is based not only on their own knowledge and experiences but also on how they see or hear of other parents responding, how they imagine others might respond and how they think others expect them to respond.

When the technique works, a focus group makes it possible to collect a large amount of data about a topic in a relatively limited period of time. It is the group process itself that provides access to data that would likely not be revealed in a one-on-one interview. Crabtree, Yanoshik, Miller, & O'Connor (1993) point out that there is a different dynamic when 6-10 people discuss a topic for two hours compared to 1 person for the same amount of time. Group synergy results in a broader range of opinions, ideas, and experiences as this method "...allows participants to influence and interact with each other..." (Krueger, 1988, p. 46). However the group dynamic which facilitates creative consideration of different perspectives, requires the researcher give up some control over the direction of the discussion and the types of data available. Krueger (1988) saw this as a potential weakness of the focus group method, which could lead to inefficiencies, particularly when compared to individual interviewing methods.

In addition to concerns about having less control, focus groups, like other interviewing techniques rely on "verbal behavior" and "self-reported data" which provides no guarantee that what is reported would accurately reflect social behaviors (Morgan, 1988, p.16). Participant-observation methods would provide more valid information regarding participants' actual responses and behaviours, but was not the most appropriate approach given the scope and exploratory nature of this study.

With any interview technique "...there is always some residual uncertainty about the accuracy of what the participants say" (Morgan, 1988, 21), but unlike other methods, focus group

members are not required to provide a response unless they wish to join the discussion. Responses are spontaneous and could be considered more meaningful and valid than if there was some obligation to provide an answer to every question.

What focus groups offer is access to information not as readily available using other methods. It is a data collection technique that uses the dynamic of group interaction to explore a range of opinions, feelings, attitudes, experiences, perceptions, and thoughts about a particular topic. It can also be used to identify and understand some of the reasons for the diversity and variation among participants' perspectives. Krueger (1988) suggests that an individual, answering the same questions as those discussed in a focus group, would likely provide answers quite quickly, but the group process "sparks new ideas" (p. 60) and reminds people of other points of view. A 'snowballing' effect occurs, where comments from one participant trigger a response from others in the group, which in turn stimulates further discussion.

Krueger (1988) states that directive interview techniques make two assumptions about respondents; that people really know how they feel and that people form their opinions in isolation (p. 23). The emphasis is on the researcher asking the 'right' questions of individual informants. Focus groups emphasize non-directive interview techniques that shift attention away from the interviewer to the respondent. "People may need to listen to opinions of others before they form their own personal viewpoints. While some opinions may be developed quickly and held with absolute certainty, others are malleable and dynamic" (Krueger, 1988, p. 23). Through the process of group interaction participants compare and contrast their points of view, become increasingly aware of the range of perspectives, and begin to identify or make explicit personal attitudes, opinions, and motivations not readily known to them previously (Morgan and Krueger, 1993, p. 17).

Morgan (1988) describes how this process of discovery is observed in a focus group setting. Initially participants are uncertain to what extent others share a common set of perceptions on the topic. As experiences and opinions are shared, members find some common means for representing areas in which they agree or disagree. As this occurs, participants may

also come to some further realizations about the sources of their levels of agreement or disagreement (p. 27-28). The focus group technique encourages discussion until points of agreement and disagreement become apparent. Participants reveal both their differences of opinion and their attempts to understand the opinions of others through the questions they ask others or in how they answer questions. The amount of time spent on some aspects of the topic compared to others reveals how interesting or important those issues are to participants. Participants will naturally attempt to create some understanding of the differences amongst them.

Focus groups also enable the researcher to observe forms of communication that have great social and personal relevance, but might not be collected using other techniques; jokes, anecdotes, or phrases which "mobilize an assertion of group consensus" or shared meaning (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 109) are important pieces of data.

Through observing and recording the process, it is possible to answer more complex questions about how personal opinions are formed, expressed, and changed. Researchers can observe which opinions are most strongly held and which are open to change, what kinds of information people require to alter their perception of the topic, whether some types of information are more powerful than others, and if the source of such information impacts on its influence. This type of data is significant to school notification-policy development, because it reveals not only parental opinion formation and decision making, but the language parents use to consider and discuss the issue. It allows program developers to use appropriate language and to better communicate with parents in a meaningful way. It also enables the anticipation of negative reactions or misunderstandings "...focus groups identify potential problems early so that they can be avoided altogether or so that strategies can be developed to overcome the problems" (Straw and Marks, 1995, p. 442).

The focus group can be conceptualized as a 'communication event' (Albrecht, Johnson, & Walther, 1993, p. 53). It is important to recognize that the group dynamics, which facilitate lively debate, can also place limits on the conversation. Group members may censor their comments or only express ideas that conform to those of other group members because they consider their own position to be wrong, illegitimate, or unacceptable. This can create problems in the analysis

of the discussion because not only can people's perceptions and opinions change as a result of the group process, but 'true' individual beliefs may be difficult to isolate from those expressed as a result of group pressures. (Crabtree et al., 1993). When conformity "...subdues the meaningful discussion of issues and opinions..." (Miranda 1994,107) it can result in a restrictive mode of thinking labeled 'groupthink'.

Kitzinger (1994) is more optimistic about this occurrence and suggests researchers can "...explore what this tells us about social pressures and the construction and the communication of knowledge" (p. 113). However, she points out that it should not be assumed that groups will prevent free communication and suggests group members may actually facilitate the discussion of difficult topics by others. Feelings of mutual support and 'safety in numbers' may provide a very positive opportunity for participants to share 'risky' ideas.

The most desirable and valuable individual responses reflect opinions that are deeply ingrained and personal, which may be the most difficult responses to obtain using focus group methodology (Albrecht et al. 1993). The intent of the focus group then, is to promote interaction and maximize self-disclosure with the intent of facilitating discussion of these personal opinions. Krueger (1988) argues that one advantage of focus groups is that they "...place people in natural, real-life situations..." (44). Although the focus group environment is not as artificial as a quantitative experiment, which might observe people in a laboratory setting while controlling extraneous variables, it is hardly a 'natural, real-life situation'. Kitzinger (1994) points out that it is unlikely that the participants would have 'naturally' assembled to discuss the topic if the focus group had not been formed for this purpose (p. 106).

### Participants

Another factor which researchers believe facilitates interaction and disclosure is the selection of appropriate participants. The literature advocates focus groups comprised of a homogeneous collection of subjects. John Knodel (1993) says the 'intuitive rationale' for homogeneous groups is that members who feel more able to relate to each others experiences will find it easier to participate, resulting in more in-depth data (p. 40) but points out that there is little research to test this assumption.

Based on this assumption, the target population may be segmented into subgroups by age, gender, race, socioeconomic status, or other factors that are considered relevant to the topic or to creating the best environment for discussion. Morgan (1988) explains, "...it is not the actual differences among participants, but whether they perceive each other to be different, that determines their willingness to discuss a topic together" (p. 47). More than one group is conducted for each segment of the target population to ensure that any differences in the findings is not simply reflective of differences in the individual group dynamics. This enables the researcher to confidently conduct an analysis of the similarities and differences across and between groups (Morgan, 1995). Carey (1995) suggests that using these theoretical sampling strategies to segment the target population into homogeneous groups will also enhance the likelihood of saturation of the data, which is necessary for reliable analysis.

Many researchers insist that although homogeneity is important, participants should not know each other. Morgan (1988) advocates screening out friends from attending together as they can rely on a shared history or assume an understanding of the meaning of their comments that may not be readily apparent to the researcher.

In contrast, Jenny Kitzinger (1994) found it beneficial to use pre-existing groups in her focus group study of the effects of AIDS media messages (how media messages are processed and how understandings of AIDS are constructed). By allowing friends or co-workers to participate in the group together, she was able to observe the interaction between people who "might 'naturally' discuss such topics, at least in passing" (p 105). This also allowed her to tap into fragments of interaction which may have occurred between people outside of group and provided a better sense of the social context in which participants' ideas were actually formed.

More recently, Morgan and Krueger (1995) acknowledged that it is not always necessary or even possible to conduct groups comprised of strangers, particularly in smaller communities or in certain target populations.

### Interview Guide

Although the environment and selection of participants is important, Krueger (1988) suggests that "...the nature and sequence of questions may be the most distinctive feature of



these interviews" (p. 76). Questions are the stimulus for discussion, providing topics and encouraging explanation as the moderator exercises "...mild, unobtrusive control" (Krueger, 1988, p. 73) over the group. An interview guide is developed which predetermines four to five main areas of discussion, with associated probes or sub-questions that can be asked as a follow-up. The interview guide provides some structure and ensures that all groups cover specific topics consistently enough to allow comparisons between them.

Initial questions are open-ended and non-directive, but as the group progresses and the moderator "narrows the range of inquiry" (Krueger, 1988, p. 61) more specific questions may be asked. The moderator can probe, challenge, play devil's advocate or use a variety of conflict initiation strategies to encourage a variety of ideas and opinions from the group. Miranda (1994) reports that the use of such techniques improves the likelihood of a lively discussion while reducing the risk of conformity and groupthink.

The group 'agenda' must remain flexible enough to enable participants to articulate what is the most important or interesting aspect of the topic for them. The goal is to reveal "... what is on the interviewee's mind as opposed to what the interviewer suspects is on the interviewee's mind" (Krueger, 1988, p. 60). This process may result in the discovery of topic areas not previously considered.

In some respects the participants determine the flow of conversation, but the focus of the conversation is the topic selected by the researcher. There is disagreement among researchers as to whether or not participants should be informed of the topic prior to attending the group. Morgan (1988) encourages researchers to use a screening questionnaire to gather demographic information from participants, but warns them of the risk of alerting participants to areas of interest in advance.

Krueger (1988), on the other hand, encourages the researcher to provide participants with advance information regarding the purpose of the study suggesting that this will minimize their tacit assumptions, which might then influence their comments in group. The risk would be participants who give responses based on a faulty assumption about what they think the researcher wants to know about or what they think the questions 'really' mean.

Zeller (1993) goes even further and argues that researchers should 'capitalize on subject reactivity' and not fear contaminating the data collected in the focus group session. He states that the use of a pre-group questionnaire can sensitize participants to the issues and will result in a more informed discussion. He suggests this may actually enhance the validity of comments made during the session because, "...our information about their reflected self-appraisal will have more fidelity to what they really think if they have some time to put their thoughts together" (p. 169).

### Moderator

A final key to maximizing interaction and disclosure in the group is the role of the moderator. "The moderator is the data collection instrument in a focus group interview" (Morgan and Krueger, 1993, p. 6) and the lens through which data is viewed and analyzed. The guidance and observation of group interaction replaces the typical interviewer/interviewee relationship, "...leading to a greater emphasis on participants' points of view" (Morgan, 1988, p.18). This shift empowers the participant because it "...ensures that priority is given to the respondents' hierarchy of importance, their language and concepts, their frameworks for understanding the world" (Kitzinger, 1994, p.108).

Some groups are very self-directed, while others require the moderator to take a more active role. A high level of moderator involvement has advantages in that it can encourage interaction and ensure certain topics are covered. An active moderator can probe areas of interest and cut off unproductive discussion. The researcher must be cautious however not to bias the research by imposing their own agenda on the discussion, making it difficult to determine the participants' areas of interest or concern versus the moderator's. The quality and reliability of the data is threatened if the moderator has unconsciously identified 'relevant' discussion or categorized the data in ways that are different from those of group members.

Morgan (1988) warns that it is also detrimental to group discussion for the moderator to be seen as an expert on the topic. Communication may not be as open and participants may begin seeking information from the moderator instead of providing it. He proposes the moderator take a stance of 'incomplete understanding', which allows them to pursue the most accurate understanding of the participant's perception. The moderator is able to probe and challenge while

the participant clarifies and defends their perspective, confirming the moderator's understanding of what they are expressing. Krueger (1988) contends that member's answers are more valid because of this process.

### Ethical Issues

While Krueger (1995) reminds moderators to "...recognize that the purpose is to obtain information and not to teach, preach, or correct the participants" (p.74), this raises a very interesting ethical issue regarding the responsibility of the moderator when faced with misinformed group members. In a group setting, misinformation presented by a single member has the potential to influence and misdirect the thinking of the entire group. While it may be valuable to track the power of some 'myths' within the group or observe whether participants challenge the incorrect comments of another, the moderator should provide correct information to all members following the group. This is particularly important when the consequences of being uninformed could be harmful to participants or others.

A second ethical issue that is particularly relevant to focus groups is the issue of confidentiality. The researcher can take all of the usual personal and professional measures to protect the identity of participants, but can't guarantee that others won't disclose information outside of the group. The researcher must ensure that participants are aware of this, even though they encourage respect for confidentiality.

A third ethical issue relevant to this methodology is the issue of overdisclosure. This is a situation where the synergy or "... momentum in a group leads participants to reveal details of their personal lives that they would ordinarily keep private" (Morgan and Krueger, 1993, p.7). Moderators must take responsibility for maximizing interaction while discouraging disclosures that exceed the aims of the research.

### Data Analysis

Analysis of focus group data is complex and occurs at several levels. Like other qualitative methods, it requires the researcher to become completely familiar with and deeply immersed in the data in order to identify trends and patterns. However, there is some disagreement in the literature regarding the unit of analysis. Crabtree, Yanoshik, Miller, &

O'Connor (1993) state that "...the unit of analysis remains the group - focus groups are not a convenient way to bolster sample size" (p. 144). This view is challenged by Carey & Smith (1994) who identify three levels of analysis in focus group data. First, analysis at the individual level would consider participants' responses irrespective of the group context. Group level analysis would then consider the sequencing, flow, and development of responses, to examine factors which encourages or discouraged varied discussion. Finally, the context of the group would be considered, which includes the individual's relationship to the group, the role they play, and how their individual responses compare to others in the group.

Krueger (1988) conceptualizes the process of analysis as a continuum with raw data on one end, summary description in the middle, and interpretation as the outcome. "Interpretation takes into account evidence beyond words on a transcript and includes evidence from the field notes...the intensity of participant comments, specificity of examples and consistency of statements..." (p. 111).

There is unanimous agreement that field notes are very important in this method as they supplement the audio-tapes and transcripts, providing valuable contextual information about non-verbal data that is relevant to the analysis. Information about who attended the group, the seating arrangement, physical setting, mood, pace and tone of discussion, use of humor, sarcasm, and characteristics that appear to distinguish certain participants from the group or one group from another are all necessary for adequate analysis. Using written transcripts and field notes the researcher can consider how shifts in opinion occur by tracking changes within the group mood and/or discussion.

Field notes play an important role throughout the data collection phase as well as during final analysis. They document the researcher's developing hunches, hypothesis, observations, and feelings, which helps the researcher develop the self-awareness necessary for objective consideration of the data. There is a risk that initial hypothesis may subtly influence the researcher to moderate subsequent groups in ways that confirm early impressions, but "...if note taking explicitly serves the goal of making expectations apparent, then the moderator can use this self-awareness to limit conscious attempts to confirm his or her biases" (Morgan, 1988, p. 64).

### Summary

Focus groups are unique in their use of group interaction to stimulate discussion and generate a broad range and variety of ideas. This methodology empowers participants by providing them with the opportunity to determine much of the 'interview' agenda, name their concerns and identify the issues most important to them regarding the topic. However, this requires the researcher to relinquish some of the control over the type of data collected. There is also no guarantee that what is reported by participants would reflect their actual response in the 'real-world'. The dynamics of group communication and specific ethical issues present challenges which the researcher must be prepared to address.

The collection of data using a focus group technique is appropriate for the purposes of this study because little is known about parental response to community notification, and the results provide the information of interest in this study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESEARCH DESIGN

#### Research Site and Recruitment

All parents of children attending elementary school in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba were invited to participate in this research. This community was selected for several reasons. First, it is where I have lived for a number of years and enabled me to use established community contacts with parents, community clubs and schools during my recruitment efforts. I was also readily available to answer questions of potential participants, conduct the groups at times convenient to parents, and follow-up with group members or other contacts as necessary. Second, the schools are not located in neighbourhoods with distinct socio-economic, geographical, cultural or other demographic characteristics that might theoretically make one group distinct from another. Students attending the various schools represented a blend of urban and rural children, including some that lived on nearby Reserves. This allowed the creation of groups with the potential to maximize the range and diversity of parental responses within each group. Finally, the Portage la Prairie School Division anticipates having to develop a process for the distribution of notification information, similar to what the Winnipeg School Division's experience has been. Administrators were interested in the results of this study and willingly established a research partnership with me in the hopes of acquiring information that will assist them with their task. The Portage la Prairie School Division agreed not only to be the designated site for this project, but also actively encouraged the Principals of the seven public elementary and junior high 'target ' schools to provide access to parents and space in which to conduct my focus groups.

A very intense and comprehensive recruiting strategy was used to inform and invite parents to participate in this study. The Principal of each target school was contacted by telephone and provided with written information regarding the study upon request. Every school agreed to publish a full page 'invitation' in their school newsletter (see appendix) encouraging parents to participate. This newsletter was distributed to 2323 children in grades K-9. I also had the opportunity to give an informative presentation to the Parent Advisory Council at 5 of the 7 schools involved in the research. Amongst the members of these school councils were individuals

who were also very involved with other child-focussed community organizations including two day-care centers, Big Brothers and Sisters, Cub Scouts, 4-H Club and the North End Community Committee. As well, the local newspaper, The Portage Daily Graphic, promoted my study in a feature which included a picture and headline on the cover, in addition to the article and picture on page three (see appendix). This newspaper has a distribution of readers in Portage and the surrounding rural area.

Without exception my personal contacts, group presentations and the feedback following the newspaper article were all favorable. Despite this, recruiting participants was very challenging.

The first discussion was to be conducted with a pilot group to assess the proposed data collection method, test the quality of the interview guide questions and solicit direct feedback from participants about the experience of taking part in a focus group. A special letter of invitation was distributed to the parents of children attending grade three at one of the target schools (see appendix). A follow-up telephone call was made a few days later to introduce myself and determine parents' interest in attending. Eight of the 17 parents contacted agreed to participate, however, of those only 5 actually attended the group two nights later.

It was approximately 6 weeks after my initial recruiting efforts began before I had enough participants to conduct Group 2 (March 25/98) and four more weeks for Group 3 (April 27/98). During this time a woman approached me from the community and invited me to conduct a group discussion with a number of mothers from the school in her neighborhood. We scheduled a date in May (May 13/98) and arranged for space at their school. Throughout these months I continued recruiting efforts through word-of-mouth and posters (enlarged versions of the school newsletter invitation) displayed in a number of community halls and public bulletin boards. A 'snowball' recruiting method was used with Group 3 participants, who were encouraged to invite a friend to contact the researcher and arrange to participate in the group. The usual procedures for ensuring informed consent, as described below, were followed for all participants.

The last parent to volunteer for a focus group discussion contacted me on April 25/98. Recruitment efforts ended May 13/98. Everyone wanting to participate was able to attend one of

the four groups conducted, a total of 22 participants. Both daytime and evening groups were offered. Only one participant was available for a group during the day or the evening, everyone else requested an evening meeting. All four groups conducted began at 6 p.m. and ended at 8 p.m.

Although all parents are stakeholders in the process of community notification it was anticipated that the majority of interest in this study might come from mothers, both single parents and those in dual parent relationships. This expectation was based on findings from other studies of child sexual abuse and sexual abuse prevention (Berrick, 1988, p. 546). Indeed, all but one participant was female. The only father to attend was the husband of a female member of Group 3 who attended with his wife unexpectedly. His presence provided not only an opportunity to observe whether or not there were differences in his response to the notification compared to female participants (there was not), but also a chance to observe how he and his wife discussed the issue and negotiated a response they both supported. I do not consider this single male to represent the 'male perspective' on the subject and as it was not a specific goal of this research to examine the impact of gender on response to notification, no special effort was made to recruit more fathers for this study.

Despite the differences in the way the groups were formed, there were no differences observed in the overall tone or content of their discussions. In an effort to confirm this, transcripts were reviewed several times in different order. I found it impossible to determine the identity of the group simply by reading portions of the text. This observation and the fact that nothing about the research design or procedure changed following the 'pilot' group enabled me, with participant permission, to include data from that initial group in my final analysis.

### Participants

Interested participants were encouraged to contact me for more detailed information regarding the subject and purpose of the study, the methodology and how data would be used, in order for informed consent to occur. Potential participants were told that the project would involve a 1.5 to 2 hour group discussion and advised of the inherent limits to confidentiality. They were



assured that involvement in the project was voluntary and they had the right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

During this initial telephone conversation, parents were asked to provide some relevant demographic information (see appendix). This included their name, mailing address, telephone number, the number, ages and gender of their children, the number of adults in a parenting role, and whether or not they were available if a group was scheduled during the day. Confirmation of the group date, time, and place was mailed to each participant (see appendix) followed by a telephone call one or two days in advance of the group to confirm their attendance.

The common characteristic of all participants in every group is that they were parents of elementary or junior-high school aged children. A number of break characteristics that are sometimes used in focus group research to ensure homogeneity of group members were considered. In this case, the most relevant characteristics seemed to be the age and gender of the child, as parents are likely to respond to a notification differently depending on the age and perceived vulnerability of their child. This was not done however, as it would have been difficult to attempt to impose mutually exclusive 'child age' categories on participants who have children in more than one category. Rather than placing parents in discrete groups, efforts were made to elicit details of how the age of their children might influence their responses to the information; do parents feel or think about the information differently based on the age of their child, and if so, in what ways?

Participants had 1 to 3 school-aged children ranging in age from age 4 years to age 14. One participant also had two adult sons who were living away from home and are not included in the data. Most participants (11), had one child, 9 group members had two children and 2 participants had three children. There were 15 male children and 17 female children amongst all participants.

It is my impression that the level of knowledge and 'expertise' amongst participating parents was somewhat higher than would be found in a truly random sample of parents from this community at large. Almost one third of participants had some specialized knowledge of child sexual offenders as a result of personal experience and/or employment. Group members

included current or former employees of Child and Family Services, The Portage Womens' Shelter, a Victim Services volunteer, a Youth Justice Worker, a Community Activist, a Police Officer, and others who had been exposed to the issue of child sexual abuse through the employment experiences of their husband or father.

Of the four groups, both Group 2 and 4 each had six members while Groups 1 and 3 had five members. This is noted to be an effective and manageable number of participants (Asbury, 1995; Krueger, 1995). Field notes recorded following the first group expressed my concern that group participants may not have enough opportunities to actively participate in the group discussions if a greater number of people attended the groups. Feedback solicited from Group 1 participants also reflected this; parents indicated their comfort with both the physical space available around the discussion table as well as their comfort with the relatively small number of other group members.

#### Procedure

Parents were given a detailed description of the research topic prior to attending the group as a way of sensitizing them to the issues to be discussed. They were encouraged to spend some time reflecting on their feelings or thoughts about child sexual abuse, community based offenders, and how they might respond to a notification, but asked not to speak to others about these subjects prior to the session. It was anticipated that participants would attend the focus group with pre-conceived questions and opinions regarding the topic, and would contribute to the discussion by sharing these ideas with other members.

Focus groups were conducted in a library, computer lab and a meeting room in three of the target schools. The settings all offered a comfortable, quiet, convenient, neutral environment that included adequate parking and washroom facilities for participants. As well, the rooms were all furnished in a style that facilitated 'round table' discussion.

Upon arrival each participant was welcomed by the researcher and asked to read and complete a written consent form (see appendix). After all the participants had arrived, the discussion was opened with a group welcome and introduction. The purpose of the project and how the group discussion would occur was briefly explained. Participants were assured that there

was no right or wrong answer to any of the questions that might be asked, encouraged to take turns speaking, and discouraged from holding 'side-conversations' or criticizing one another. Participants were also asked to maintain confidentiality by not sharing information about other members' responses with people outside of the group.

Given the subject matter of child sexual abuse, victimization and prevention, each participant was informed of the legal obligation to report any disclosure of previously unreported incidents of child abuse to the appropriate authorities. A list of appropriate community services was distributed to each participant at the end of the group in case any of them had unresolved personal issues triggered by the group discussion (see appendix).

To begin the 'discussion' phase of the group, participants were asked to complete a very brief, pre-notification questionnaire (see appendix) to capture their initial opinions about aspects of the focus group topic. Each was then provided with a copy of a Community Notification Media Release (see appendix). The media release is typically part of the information schools provide parents in the event of an actual notification, along with some type of covering letter. Parents were asked to consider the notification information and complete a number of open-ended statements such as "I feel...", "This means...", "When I read this I wondered...", and "Now that I know this, I will ...". Although participants were not obligated to share what they had written, this brief exercise had a number of benefits. First, their immediate responses to receiving a notification were recorded and contributed to the data considered during the analysis phase. It was also thought that recording these personal reactions might stimulate some of their responses to questions raised during the group discussion. Finally, it has been suggested in the literature that by comparing responses recorded prior to the discussion with opinions shared during the discussion, the researcher is able to observe the influence of group dynamics that can result in self-censorship or 'groupthink' (Carey, 1995, p.490).

The data collected with these two written exercises was completely anonymous. However, one member of Group 1 left with her pre-notification questionnaire and two members of Group 1 left with their post-notification responses, resulting in 21 pre-notification questionnaires and 20 post-notification sheets being included in the analysis.

The first question asked of every focus group was "Describe the experience of receiving the notification". Parents' immediate individual responses as well as how the group discussed the meaning of this shared experience were observed. Although an interview guide (see appendix) was developed to ensure that specific areas of interest were included in each group's discussion and to enable inter-group comparisons, it was anticipated that the interest level amongst participating parents would result in a thoughtful and lively discussion requiring a minimal level of moderator intervention. The agenda of the groups remained flexible enough to give participants the ability to consider a variety of related topics and determine the issues most relevant to them. Every group was very self-directed; all participants appeared comfortable with the discussion format and actively engaged with one another.

In addition to nurturing, guiding and observing the discussion, it was occasionally necessary to probe for more detail, encourage participants to explore and examine apparent differences in their perspectives, and suggest alternate or opposite points of view. In order to clarify and confirm my understanding of the participant's perspectives I regularly summarized what had been said and reflected this back to the group. Two of the groups included members who were familiar with my academic and employment experiences in the field of child sexual abuse. It was observed in both cases that my opinion or a piece of information was requested, which I believe would have jeopardized my stance of 'incomplete understanding'. This situation was dealt with by simply asking those members what *their* opinion or impression of the topic was. Deflecting 'expertise' back onto the group in this way seemed to remedy the problem.

At the end of each session the main points raised during the discussion were summarized. Each member was given an opportunity to confirm or correct these impressions of the groups' responses and to make a closing statement. Written information regarding the Community Notification Protocol, sexual offender risk assessment, and child sexual abuse prevention strategies was provided to all participants before they were adjourned. This was done to correct any misinformation that might have entered the discussion and to reassure anyone who might worry about what they 'should do' in response to an actual notification as a result of this

study. If participants had wanted additional information about any of these topics, they would have been referred to a number of other relevant documents.

Participants received a written thank you for their involvement in the study. A summary of the findings was prepared and made available to the participants of this study and other interested parties.

### Preconceptions and Biases

This study is highly vulnerable to the introduction of bias or influence by the moderator/researcher during both the data collection and analysis phases. I anticipated that my academic and employment experiences may have resulted in an understanding of the issues that differs from much of the general population. I have worked with both victims and offenders of child sexual assault and have studied the literature regarding community notification and sexual abuse prevention. On the other hand, I too am a parent of a school-aged child in the community where the research was based, and would receive notification information in the same way as any other parent in the Portage la Prairie School Division. Remaining aware of how my perspective might influence my understanding of the experience of others was essential to the process of analyzing the data. In an effort to remain aware of developing hypothesis or bias which might influence how I conducted subsequent groups or viewed the data, a variety of data, including field notes were collected throughout the research process.

### Data Analysis

The data collected and considered in the analysis phase included audio-tapes and corresponding typed transcripts of the focus group discussions, demographic information about participants, the information from the pre-group questionnaire, the written responses to viewing the media release and field notes. All identifying information was coded in the written material to ensure confidentiality.

Field notes included several types of data. Notes were taken during every focus group to capture the mood, pace, and tone of the discussion, to record any major shifts in the discussion and to remind me of any non-verbal observations which would not be reflected in the audio-tape. Immediately following each session, a short written summary of the group provided a description

of the group dynamics, interaction between members, and my overall impression of the major themes identified. Additional personal memos were made throughout the data collection and analysis phase to record my developing impressions, discoveries, questions and interpretations in an effort to recognize any researcher bias. These field notes greatly added to the data as they provided an additional contextual layer; a depth and richness to the basic transcripts.

Krueger's (1988) conception of focus group analysis guided the process of describing and interpreting the data. As Krueger points out, "...the intent of focus groups is not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, and not to make statements about the population but to provide insights about how people perceive a situation" (p. 96). With this in mind, the transcripts of each focus group were reviewed and coded to discover emerging themes and patterns of response among parents in each group and among the different groups themselves. Data was examined for evidence of consensus and diversity as well as to establish the range of parental responses. Particular attention was paid to how participants interpreted and 'understood' the notification information, and how their understanding of what it meant to receive this information influenced decisions about how to respond to it. Analysis also revealed how participants talk about this issue, the words they use and the intensity of their communication. By capturing the details of group discussions it was possible to explore how parents' opinions about the necessary or appropriate response are formed, which opinions were most firmly held and what opinions were most open to change.

The interview guide questions provided broad coding categories as I initially approached the data. Transcripts were repeatedly examined, at first while listening to the corresponding audiotape, later using just the coded typed transcripts. I used a code mapping technique (Knodel, 1993) to identify recurring themes and concepts. After some reflection, an overview grid of related themes was constructed. Using a manual cut and paste method, pieces of the transcript from different groups were brought together under the various conceptual category headings. Further reflection and review resulted in several changes to predominate themes as categories were collapsed or new ones created.

The result was five main conceptual categories: impact of receiving notification, meaning of the notification, assessing the threat of sexual assault, assessing the risk of victimization, and responses to notification. Within each of these main categories are a number of related sub-categories.

### Limitations

The Community Notification Advisory Committee categorizes offenders as sexual aggressors who target mostly adult victims, incest offenders who assault blood relatives, and pedophiles who "...focus on pre-pubescent and/or adolescent child victims" (Cooper, 1995, p.22). This study was limited to the exploration of the experience of parents receiving notification of a released pedophile and therefore was unable to consider the perspectives of potential adult victims or the feelings of community members who are at a low risk of victimization, but who have strong opinions about the notification process and its effect on their feelings of personal safety.

The level of notification provided to the community, the size and cohesiveness of the community, the age and gender of vulnerable children, and the personal experiences of people or families receiving the information may all affect how offender information is interpreted and responded to. This study examined the anticipated response of a limited number of parents, to a hypothetical notification experience. Participants were predominately mothers, with the exception of one father who attended with his wife, lived in 'urban' Portage, and were in heterosexual dual-parent relationships. All of these variables limit the generalizability of the findings of this research.

Generalizability is also limited based on the methodology used. Data was available from those parents willing not only to participate in the research but to also take part in a group discussion, and is therefore vulnerable to self-selection bias. The study also relies on self-reports rather than observations of actual responses to notification. Parents' current or anticipated child protection strategies may have been misrepresented or described with social desirability in mind.

Finally, this study only begins to address questions about parents' immediate responses to notification. I believe that parental response is likely more of a process that develops and changes over time rather than a single decision made upon receiving the offender information. Participants

admitted that the initial shock would compel them to take action but any change in their level of protective behaviour would be time limited. This study looks at how parental response might be initiated but does not capture the process or the end, assuming there is an end, of that response.

Although the findings reveal common themes within and across the various groups, they may only be cautiously generalized to similar groups and are not considered representative of the general population.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### DESCRIPTION OF FINDINGS

#### Introduction

The primary goal of this study is to explore the range of emotional and anticipated behavioural responses of parents receiving a community notification. This chapter will provide a description of participants' responses to the pre-discussion questionnaire and the focus group discussions. Data is categorized under five main headings; impact, meaning, threat, risk and response. Impact captures the thoughts, feelings and perceived consequences of being notified. Meaning includes the meaning or attempt to derive meaning from the notification information. Parents considered the presence of the offender to be a threat for a variety of reasons. Whereas 'threat' considered offender variables, risk assessment is focussed on characteristics that might contribute to a particular child being victimized. Finally, response explores the range of anticipated behavioural responses to receiving notification.

As it is important to understand this experience from their perspective, the voices of the participants have been used as often as possible in describing the findings of this study. Comments made by group members that revealed personal thoughts and feelings are presented as individual statements. However, because data was collected using focus groups, excerpts of the group discussions are presented whenever possible and appropriate, particularly when group members engaged in an interesting discussion, adding to each others comments, questioning the perspective of another parent or contributing an alternate point of view. Participants were very comfortable with the opportunity for self-directed discussion of this topic and frequently two or more speakers are involved in the expression of a single idea. Members also summarized, probed, challenged and questioned one another in a way that reduced the need for ongoing group facilitation. Anytime my comments are included in the transcript I am identified as 'Moderator'. Comments made by different speakers are separated by a single space. Bold type has been used to indicate participant emphasis.

## Impact

### I Feel

Immediately after receiving the notification, prior to the group discussion, participants were asked to complete the written statement: "I feel...". It was anticipated that this exercise would capture a range of emotional responses. However, in addition to describing an emotional reaction to the information, many parents described 'feeling' that the information could not be ignored, that they were obligated to do something and immediately referred to some aspect of their protective behavioural response. Emotions included:

#### Anxiety:

- "...unsure. What does this mean? What should I do?" (Group1-Participant3)*
- "...concerned, where is he?" (G2-P2)*
- "...it's important to know of his release but not sure how to discuss this with my daughter without scaring her." (G1-P2)*

#### Fear:

- "...scared, vulnerable, sickly." (G2-P3)*
- "...threatened and unsafe..." (G3-P5)*
- "...terrified he might move into my community." (G4-P1)*
- "...frightened for myself and my children." (G4-P3)*
- "...frightened and concerned. I need to know the details. I must inform and prepare my kids." G4-P6)*
- "...scared for the kids. Sad their independence will have to be limited." (G3-P2)*

#### Anger:

- "...angry and let down by the court system." (G4-P2)*
- "...angry that my child can't have a normal life now that the offender is in my community." (G3-P5)*
- "...his sentence was not long enough." (G4-P1)*
- "...my daughters free time is at risk if he's in my community." (G3-P4)*

#### Relief and appreciation to receive the information:

*"...pleased that the community is being notified." (G3-P3)*

*"...relieved." (G2-P1)*

*"...that the notification is necessary for the public to be aware and protect ourselves and our kids." (G2-P4)*

*"...the notification is informative and helpful. Does not create panic. Need to share information with kids." (G4-P5)*

Aspects of these written statements were also shared and confirmed in the group discussion.

### Emotional and Physical Reactions

The first question asked of each group was "What was the experience of receiving this notification?" In every group, members described a number of physical and emotional responses to the information provided, or questions that had immediately come to mind. Statements describing the emotional impact were similar to written responses.

(G1)

- *Fear, anxiety, uncertainty.*
- *Somewhat angered that he's high risk and they're allowing him out anyway, a lot of anger... sort of anxious and unsure.*

(G3)

- *I think it's terrifying, simply because he remains at a high risk to re-offend according to the release.... and yet he's out.*

(G4)

- *My first thought was "oh my God, I have to be more protective than before of my children" - scared.*

Several parents described feeling 'ill' or 'sickly' while others described a physical response to the notification information.

(G4)

- *was okay until I read pedophile, and I got a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach, I guess cold sweats like someone hit me, "Oh my God", up until then, I didn't know that he went after children, and now that I do it's a different story.*

(G2)

- *Sickly.*
- *Frightened.*
- *Creepy.*
- *I felt kind of sick when I was reading it, not violated, but just nauseous.*

(G4)

*- I get a headache just thinking about it.*

Group members also thought that a person's emotional and behavioural response to the notification might be more intense if they or a loved one had been a victim of sexual abuse.

(G1)

*- We have talked about the wide range of public responses... you have sex abuse victims out there... I think victims can react very strongly to having this information.*

*- (Agreement)*

*- ...fear sometimes or anger...*

*- You got a parent or a husband of a wife who's a victim or whatever, like I can see them stomping over there.*

*- ...or a father.*

Another participant thought that being a victim of anything would result in a heightened sense of vulnerability that might influence your response.

(G1)

*- I guess once you're a victim you would probably think a little bit differently. Being a victim of anything...with a person like that and say with my husband and son gone, I feel, okay, so I'm alone at home with my daughter...what do I do?*

Often participants voiced a sense of frustration and helplessness:

(G3)

*- ... he's going to go somewhere. That's the worst part of it. He's going to go somewhere.*

*- That's the thing, it doesn't matter ... its going to be around forever*

(G4)

*- Sometimes you know - I would never hurt anybody, but sometimes you just feel so helpless and you think "man if only I could just think of the perfect way to end everybody's fear - it would just - give them the non-violent pills - vent it into their homes, and they don't know it."*

(G3)

*- ... this is someone you know about but you can't get away from it no matter where you move to. You could live out in the middle of the country and your neighbour ten acres away could be an offender*

*- It could be anyone*

### Presence of Identified Offender

Receiving notification regarding the presence of an identified high risk sex offender had an impact on participants even though they all acknowledged the likelihood that unidentified offenders may already be present in their community.

(G4)

- *Even though the danger is already there...*
- *We know it's there... (everyone)*
- *We have a picture right here and we have some printing in front of us - the picture's black and white, but there are people out there who are pedophiles living in the community.*
- *That's right.*
- *A certain % of your population is pedophiles, so it's there already. But just having this information suddenly makes us more aware. (G1)*
- *...how many (offenders) are walking around on the streets as we speak and nobody's doing anything? ...But because they knew that someone was there they got frightened.*

Why does the notification have an impact when the presence of a child sex offender is not really a new threat? All groups referred to the significance of holding the notification in their hands, of it being 'black and white', or 'in-your-face'. Receiving the notification was considered to be more legitimate and factual than hearing the information from a friend or neighbour. Parents contrasted the notification to rumour, which could be more easily questioned or dismissed. Also, the notification appeared to focus parent's awareness of the threat of child sexual abuse or the presence of child sex offenders in the community. It was no longer 'out-of-sight, out-of-mind'.

(G2)

- *If they sent this out with a picture of the guy saying he has a criminal record or she has a criminal record. I don't see how anybody could say that ...it's just gossip.*

(G4)

- *It's kind of like right in your face.*

(G3)

- *I think this makes it a little bit more stark. You have your bare facts, the picture, that's it.*

## Language

Participants also described responding to the language used in the notification.

(G1)

- *I think the word 'predator' is mainly – that word really scares the dickens out of me.*

(G2)

- *... the information 'forcible confinement and three counts of sex abuse' - that frightened me. The details of the offense.*

Another participant, who initially thought her young sons were not at risk, reflected on her changing response as she read more of the notification.

(G4)

- *I have two sons, so my first thought was they would be okay, and then I saw that he was bi-sexual and a pedophile and he was violent. It was like three strikes.*

For many, it was the first time they had been exposed to descriptions of offending or terms like 'forcible confinement' and 'predatory bi-sexual pedophile'. Members of Group 2 compared and contrasted the reactions of those parents reading and considering these details for the first time to those who had experienced this type of information through employment experiences. One woman suggested that the language had been purposely selected by the authors of the notification to elicit a particular emotional response.

(G2)

- *I work at (an agency where we receive information about local sexual offenders), so lots of times I know this. This to me I sort of read, and I went okay, and yeah some of those words, you know the forcible confinement, predatory - they hit me where they're supposed to, and it's sort of like there was lots of missing information, and I didn't get scared with this... this didn't upset me, like I wasn't physically ill – I thought there was lots of missing pieces, but I still don't think I would do anything.*
- *I think it's different. I think you working (there), you know about stuff like this.*
- *I guess the part –'forcible confinement' and 'three counts of sexual interference', well that can mean a lot of things*
- *You mean your reaction to it would be different?*
- *Right*

- *Like I worked a couple of years at (a similar type of job), so I had the same reaction. 'I've seen it before.' Like I remember the first time I looked at a file like this...*
- *Oh yeah, me too!*
- *So for a parent that hadn't has access to this kind of thing...it would be a horrible experience.*

### Want to Know

There was almost unanimous support for the idea of community notification expressed in the pre-notification questionnaire. Eighteen participants agreed that police should disclose offender information to the public, 16 indicated very strong agreement. A slightly greater number (19) indicated their desire to be informed if a sex offender moved into their community (17 strongly).

Participants suggested that the notification be distributed even more broadly, to as many people in the community as possible.

(G3)

- *I think they should do it through everything. Send the notices home through the school, put them on the telephone poles the same way they do when they're going to shut your water off for a few hours - put them in mail boxes, put them up in post offices, on bulletin boards.*
- *I think they should go house to house.*

(G2)

- *You've got community clubs, pools, and the day cares and home day cares, and home babysitting - there's so many people that really should have that information in an area.*

Group members discussed the importance of notifying the public and felt they have a 'right to know'.

(G3)

- *I think especially if they think that this person is going to offend again, I think then that it's especially important because they're sending this person out, and they know darned well what's going to happen, or what he is going to try to do.*

(G1)

- *I don't think it's fair to keep it secret - I don't think it's fair to parents. I think maybe it should be public. Like she said, these people just continue to walk among us. Where do you draw the line?*

(G3)

- *Oh yeah. I'd rather know about it. Then I'd know not to invite this person into my house. No way, I'd rather, much rather learn about it.*

### Confidentiality

Some group participants had experienced situations where they had possessed offender information and were unable to share it with others because of confidentiality. These members discussed their feelings of conflict over thinking that others had a right to this information. Several of them described the creative ways they were able to 'warn' others without technically breaching confidentiality. Everyone who had been in this position spoke of the weighty responsibility of having this type of information and how he or she would feel both guilty and partially responsible if something happened to someone else who did not have access to the information.

(G1)

- *"But I could see a parent coming to you and saying "Lookit, you got this (notification information) why didn't I?" And "I want to know" or "it's your fault that my kid is missing" or whatever.'*

(G2)

- *You almost get to the point where if something happens you want to take fault because you knew... in some ways it makes you feel responsible. Because you know this.*

One participant described how difficult it was for her personally to possess certain information. Even though she disagreed with keeping this type of information secret, she did not feel able to question the obligation to maintain confidentiality.

(G1)

- *I've been working with the school and there's a lot of things that you wish you didn't know; you wish you hadn't heard about... (heard about a young female child being raped by a community member) ...every time I see this person I feel really faint, my stomach feels really knotted; I just have to walk away. I'm thinking I have to be secretive about who this person is because I have to conform to confidentiality and yet I know who this person is. We have to conform to confidentiality.... I'm not too sure why we have to, but we do. I don't think it's fair to the rest of the public, but I feel that I have to be confidential about it, otherwise I could be sued or whatever.*

Others were concerned with the consequences of suppressing offender information:

(G2)

- *I work with young offenders, and it's always a concern that we have a lot of violent sex offenders that we're releasing into the community, but we can't tell - it's all confidential, and yet some of them are as bad as some of the*



*adults that are offending, and then once they turn into adults, once they're 18, we do a criminal record check on them and nothing shows up, ... they're still walking around able to commit offences with no record - they could go and apply for a job at a day care, at school as a teacher's assistant, or whatever, but nothing shows up on their criminal record checks.*

Two of the groups considered the idea that confidentiality can contribute to the problem. These participants described how a lack of accurate, straightforward information can contribute to the fears and reactions of community members whereas a written notification, provided to parents directly might actually reduce panicked or overly negative reactions. One group member provided the example of a public meeting held in 1997 to discuss a treatment house for mentally handicapped men with sex offending behaviours that had opened in a small community. She described how the 'double talk' escalated community anger and fear over what was actually a very positive program.

(G1)

- *At least 40 people showed up, and it wasn't even that there was an offender released into the community. This (secure facility) opened a treatment program for their sexual offenders and I'm telling ya, there were some people swinging from the chandeliers!*
- *Now there's a good example. I mean I work there, and I thought I knew about this, but when they had that community release or whatever, they did that before they even talked to us as staff members. And then, when I went to that meeting they double-talked so much. Instead of just saying... (sigh). Confidentiality, which to me half the time breeds half the problem, if they could have just said, "look these people have lived there all their lives and it's behaviours that have been exhibited while being institutionalised that we are trying to treat." But they did not say this.*

Another parent described how providing accurate written information could safeguard against citizens reacting to misinformation and rumour.

(G2)

- *Last year or the year before something happened at (a local school) that we also knew about at work. When my daughter came home from school she told me what the school had told her and it was wrong - it was very wrong from what we heard (at work). The basic gist was there, but there was a lot of added information. I knew that it was wrong based on the information that I had received earlier. The teachers talked to the kids, which is how my daughter got this information wrong, but then they also sent out a note and that information was right.*

### Negative Impact

Although parents wanted to be told if a high risk sex offender was moving to their community, a number of them worried about the possible negative consequences of receiving the notification information. Some participants wondered if knowing this man was living *somewhere* in the community might result in paranoia and an effort to locate him more specifically.

(G1)

- *The notice provides a sense of panic, but not a sense of... it might make you feel a little more settled if you **knew** he was in your neighbourhood. Other than trying to look over your shoulder **everywhere** you went, I guess you'd be doing it anyway, if you knew okay, that's where he is - I know where he is.*
- *...not scouring the place.*

Others wondered how they would respond if they saw the identified offender on the street. They disclosed feelings of fear and a lack of confidence in their coping abilities. One woman shared with members of Group 1, an experience where she was walking home from work one night, thinking about things she had learned about street safety:

- *I was going to walk down the middle of the street so that if there was anybody on either side I would have a few feet to get away. Then I find out I wouldn't go anywhere anyway now. This little wee black dog was about that far from my heels when he barked. I froze and it felt like I had a brick on my chest and nothing would come out. I went to kick my foot to get the dog away and nothing would come out of my throat and my foot wouldn't move; I was completely paralyzed. So maybe it wouldn't be good to have that kind of information. If I was none the wiser I'd just walk right by and I'd be off in my own little world, where if I did know I'd just be standing there.*

This experience raised her doubts about how she might respond if faced with this man on the street.

- *But if I walk out and see somebody like this, and I would know now, when I'm dead afraid I freeze. I always thought I'd run screaming. It's like a brick on my chest and I'm frozen. I can't even speak.*

Another parent was more concerned that the offender did not see her:

(G3)

- *It's almost like you'd want to hide. I'd almost want to be invisible so that maybe if he doesn't know me or whatever, he'll leave us alone. He'd have no reason - I know it might sound stupid, but sometimes there's things you hope and pray.*

Learning of the offender's presence also resulted in feelings of loss for a community once perceived as a safe place.

(G3)

- *Here I thought that my world was safe and it's far from it...*
- *...your guard was down so low, and now it's up so high and it kind of made you a little paranoid or whatever.*
- *You've lost that sense of security.*
- *...and there's nothing that anyone can say to me that will ever give it back because I keep saying, "You don't understand - it may only take once - sometimes they kill their victims and I don't ever want to be a mother of one of those. I don't care if you think I'm paranoid, I'm going to make sure my son is safe".*

Parents feared that the consequence of feeling that the neighbourhood was unsafe would be a loss of freedom and independence for their children.

(G1)

- *...we all sort of learned who is in our community and allowed our children the freedom to wander from neighbour to neighbour, and now we won't be as easily willing to allow them to do that, knowing that the chances...(trailed off)...he is out there.*

(G3)

- *It just takes away from the freedom that our kids have. You know, you want to go out and play, boom, out the door – now you have to know where they are. It's almost impossible.*
- *They have to be supervised all the time.*
- *It could take away any independence that we're trying to instil in them, almost the fact that just walking home from school, even if it's just a block or two away, they won't be able to do that, because if it's in your neighbourhood...(trails off)*

One participant in Group 2, who had employment related knowledge, shared this example of how knowing the identity of sex offenders in the community had an effect on her child's freedom:

- *My daughter's 11 1/2 and isn't allowed a lot of the freedom of her peers, and this is really sad - we were at a hockey game and all of her friends were going somewhere else and she wasn't allowed to go, and her friends were saying "why not", and she said, "cause my mom knows who all the perverts are". She had to be within eye distance from me because I knew a couple of the guys (offenders) in the stands, and one of the guys on the ice from a different community, and it was just like, "no, you can't do that" and it was a grand date for her when she was allowed to not sit with us at a hockey game.*

*She was sitting on the other side of the arena, so that I knew where she was at all times. This kid hangs out at the arena, this is her home away from home, and it wasn't until she was ten that she could go anywhere outside my line of view - because I knew who all the perverts were, and her friends just sort of looked at her and went "what's that?" My daughter said, "I don't know, but it's not good!" (Group laughter)*

Many parents felt the notification forced them to address the issue of child sexual abuse before their personal time frame. Although they intended to engage in some type of street proofing with their kids, it might not have been 'this soon'. These parents had hoped to 'maintain their innocence' a bit longer.

(G3)

- *I really feel uncomfortable because I realise that I should prepare them more than I have at this point in time, and it's something that I really hoped I wouldn't have to do.*

(G4)

- *I've been looking into programs like that. I was just hoping I wouldn't have to do it so soon*
- *I think the sooner the better. Then it's not something so frightening. If they know that these things happen, it's not as frightening as "you can't go outside anymore". Then, suddenly life has changed and they become angry. I think for them to have their whole routine disrupted in any sense is frustrating for them - they don't know how to deal with it.*
- *Just part of your life.*
- *Just part of life, and if they are informed properly, maybe we can help protect them all the time instead of just when we get one of these papers.*

(G2)

- *You sort of wish you could keep their innocence a little bit more.*

### Positive Impact

Despite the more difficult aspects of learning this information, participants also identified a number of positive consequences to receiving notification. A few parents described feeling relieved and felt the notification information provided them with a greater ability to cope with the potential risk of their child being victimized, even though others stressed the fact that the risk has likely been present all along.

(G1)

- *I am grateful at the police for providing us with this release.*

(G3)

- *I want to know where they are.*
- *But they're out there now, and we don't know where they are.*
- *They could be sitting right ...*
- *You never know.*
- *But the more information I have, the better prepared I feel I am.*

All participants saw the notification as a good reminder that the threat of child sexual abuse is out there and hoped it would promote parents to ensure some prevention work was done with their children.

(G4)

- *As sickening and as horrible as this is, this is good in the respect that it has jolted me to realise that I have done some street-proofing with my kids, I haven't done enough and I've got to do more.*

(G2)

- *I see it as a reminder.*
- *It promotes active parenting.*
- *You know that these guys are out there and you have to be aware, and maybe now is a good time to get back in practice – a reminder.*

(G1)

- *I think one of the things that it definitely **does** is that when it comes out, it makes people a little bit more conscious of where their children are and what they're doing. I mean I know where my child is all the time, though I have to struggle because my children like to play up at the school near us, and I'm at the point where I... I tend not to let them do that unless there's a group of them... but I'm always knowing where they go. So when this comes out all it's going to do is make me revamp what I'm thinking or what my thoughts and feelings were and what freedom I was allowing my kids and to maybe redefine what it is I think is safe for them at that point in time.*

(G3)

- *I think now, for me, it's been many years since (an attempted assault occurred on her child), I've kind of let up because everyone kept saying oh, "you're just paranoid, you're overprotective", so I've kind of tried to let the kids have a bit of a breather, so they'll be able to go more than three blocks from home. Now you see this and it kind of brings that fear back to me, and I think, you know, they're always out there and I kind of let up.*

A lot of attention and discussion was focussed on the picture and description of the offender. The specific details of this offender appeared to challenge unhelpful stereotypes.

(G3)

- *Actually dirty old man did come to mind. It was sort of, when my mom was growing up that's what it was thought of, and now for us it's...*
- *It was like a 35 - 40 year old fat guy is what sort of jumps into my mind as I'm reading this.*
- *Somebody no one else would have sex with.*
- *...and as I'm going along I realise no, it's not that way, he's taller than my mental picture was.*
- *For me I just went 21 - oh my God - his life is wasted, I mean it's sad...*
- *But he's 21 now. This happened when he was 18*
- *Yeah, that's sad. That is so sad.*

One mother suggested that in addition to increasing community awareness of child sexual abuse, notification might increase the attention parents give to available information regarding prevention. She used an example of the school giving parents prevention information with and without a notification:

(G1)

- *Without this you could draw up your guidelines and you could attach it to the school newsletter...so I would see them along with tips for parents, **but** you send this (notification) with those guidelines and you can bet they **will** get read, and read thoroughly.*
- *It would certainly be a completely different, **completely different** level of interest.*

This sentiment was also evident in a comment made by a member of Group 2:

(G2)

- *I thought "Right on!" Now the rest of my community knows that there's sex offenders out there, and might teach their children how to protect themselves.*

Another participant predicted that, similar to the effect of a prevention program, the increased community discussion about child sexual abuse following a notification may benefit children currently or previously abused by other offenders.

(G2)

- *When a "Feeling Yes, Feeling No" program is offered at a school, the referrals increase because the kids know that this isn't normal for starters. They might have spent five or six years in this environment and they didn't know that it wasn't normal, that it's not right and who you could go to to tell.*

Other members of Group 2 agreed that this would be a very positive 'secondary' outcome of community notification.

One group member said the notification meant people did not have to feel that child sexual abuse was their private little secret anymore. She saw the notification as a 'voice for victims' and felt it was about time that the crimes against silent victims were publicly acknowledged.

(G2)

- *there's been a couple of stories in the news lately where the abuse even happened years ago, like 30 years ago, and these people are just coming out with their stories now. They carry it with them their whole lives. It just – I don't know what it does to you yet. I just think this is long overdue.*
- *It's a voice for all victims.*

### No Protection

Participants realized that being informed does not, in itself, provide any protection. Some people may deny the problem exists, dismiss the idea of personal risk or focus so much on the 'dangerous stranger' they fail to identify others who might pose more of a threat to their child(ren).

(G3)

- *I guess my thought, one of them, was how many parents do not ever think, no matter how many times they see that or whatever, that it won't happen to me. Not in my neighbourhood - I don't have to worry. I mean how many - just because this came out saying there was one - how do we know there's not 50 already? We have no way of knowing if they haven't been caught. This is just letting us know.*

(G1)

- *I work in an agency where we do get these from time to time. We get notified by the RCMP that somebody is living in Portage who has a history of sex offences against kids, so I do have this kind of information from time to time, but we don't get pictures. Umm, I guess I had a different perspective on it, and it's hard to separate the feelings of a parent and the feelings or having a*

*bit of this knowledge already. Parents really do have to protect their kids, from these guys that have been identified but for the most part the people we work with are the kids who are abused by people that they know really well, that they trust, and family members. Our experience is that these guys have a really good way of connecting with vulnerable families ... in gaining trust (1 or 2 others say "um hmm", heads nod)*

- *It's a little different when you talk about a predator.*
- *Well in a sense it could be predator. So you kind of have high-risk kids out there ... some aren't...*
- *... watched as well as others.*
- *Do you think they would be if parents had this information?*
- *I think that if we are trying to identify the few "monsters" out in the community, it may, but I think we need to be aware that it could be **anybody**. Because somebody's been convicted and has been identified there are others out there who may not be - may not have been convicted. I mean ... pedophiles - what would they often say the average number of victims were before they were finally caught?*
- *It's pretty high.*

#### Risk of Desensitization

Finally, the groups reflected on the differing impact of receiving the first notification compared to the fifth, or the tenth, or...

(G2)

- *You do get used to it and let your guard down - you don't want to overreact. It's like oh no, not another one... What makes me angry is when I pick up a package of bacon or whatever, there was this kid's picture on there - it makes me angry that this innocent child has to go on a carton of milk - it makes me angry that someone has taken those kids... So many people, they see it so much that they won't even look any more - it's a picture - big deal. Whereas me, I pick it up and it freaks me every time.*
- *And I'm looking at it and reading it and so forth to see if I recognise the kid. So I guess this is the same idea. People might get used to it - desensitised.*
- *I think there's a very serious risk of that happening if we are getting these every couple of weeks.*

(G3)

- *When it comes down to something like this, I don't think that... I don't know myself if I'd pay as close attention to this as I did to the first one.*



## Meaning

### This Means

The second written statement participants were asked to complete after receiving the notification was "This means...". Very few respondents analyzed the meaning of the notification itself. Only one participant restated the basic 'meaning' of the notification:

*"This means that a 23 year old male has been released from Stony that has a preference for young children." (G4 - P5)*

The notification appeared to have obvious meaning to most of them as the majority immediately described some aspect of their plans for increased protective behaviour. The notification was a formal, public announcement that a particular threat was present in their community. Many participants wrote about what the notification 'meant' they would have to do. Respondents completed the statement using phrases like:

*"...I must...*

*... inform my family of potential dangers. My neighbourhood has become a zone to be more cautious about." (G1-P1)*

*"...I have to...*

*...be extra vigilant with kids in my care..." (G1-P2)*

*...keep a close watch on my children all the time" (G4-P3)*

*...take some sort of action to decrease my feelings so they don't take over my ability to deal with the situation rationally." (G1-P3)*

*"...I will...*

*...become more protective of my children."(G3-P1)*

*...probably become less trusting of people in general." (G3-P5)*

*...always have to be on my guard..." (G4-P2)*

One respondent used the phrase 'I can' and described how the notification enabled her to take protective action with her children that she could not have done before

*"This means I can share a picture of at least one person whom my child should be sure to stay away from." (G3 – P3)*

Another, (G2-P3) simply stated that the notification meant she did not want this person in her community.

### Making Meaning

Although there was consensus regarding the overall meaning of the notification, a threat requiring some type of protective behaviour, much of the group discussion was spent trying to make sense of the information provided to them. There was a great deal of uncertainty as participants asked each other what they thought certain parts of the notification meant.

(G2)

- *For me, the part that I don't understand is how do you define someone as high risk? I don't understand that classification.*
- *There's a lot of criteria.*
- *Have they committed this offence more than once?*
- *With some of the information I've heard and gathered, high-risk offenders are evaluated depending on what they did to their victims. Like say, you could do many different offences, but if they're really nothing, well something because it's an offence, but say you just kind of slap somebody around, that's really nothing, but I mean if you beat them up until they're bleeding or half dead, those are all high risk offenders, people that repeat say rapes or whatever on kids are high risk offenders.*
- *Another is if they participated in treatment and how they responded to what they were getting.*

Much of the discussion focussed on the apparent contradiction between the expectation that the subject of the notification would offend again and this same person being released into the community. One member stated that it did not make sense to her why this should happen because the risk would always be there and placing the sex offender in a community where children were present would be too enticing.

(G3)

- *I mean that's like putting candy in front of you and saying you can't eat it. I'm sorry - after a little while you kind of want to have some. I think it's the same for anyone. It's like putting your diamond rings in your windows and saying "Now don't rob me". It's kind of silly. It's all the same thing I think.*

The notification did not clarify how fully integrated the offender would be in their community, if there were any restrictions on his freedom or some external but formal monitoring occurring.

Would anyone other than the community be keeping track of him?

(G1)

- *I would like to know what they classify as a high risk, and if he's high risk, why was he given the freedom?*
- *Also, what are the terms of the probation? Is he not supposed to be within a certain distance from school or some distance from children?*
- *Or just to check in so someone can monitor his comings and goings - that would be very important to know. We know that's a bit of a joke...*
- *I would like to know why he was released because of the words "however he is still a predator". Why was he released?*
- *..."because he served his full time" (sarcastically - some laughter)*

None of the groups believed the sentence was adequate for the crimes committed and had little faith in the ability of a probation officer to adequately monitor the offender in the community.

(G4)

- *My thought was that if he's ever going to offend again they shouldn't let him out.*
- *That's what I was thinking too. It's like keep them there. I don't think any of these programs can stop somebody from being the way they are. It's just, like I say, impossible.*
- *He did serve his whole 33 month term...*
- *...33 months! It should have been a lot longer than 33 months!*
- *Yeah, like it was a very short term.*
- *No matter how long they get, they will never change.*
- *It says here he is on probation - whoopee - so you phone your pro up once a week or you go somewhere once a week for a five minute meeting, ooh that's gonna make me not want to do it.*

(G2)

- *The fact that he's on supervised probation, I'd want to know what the probation officer is responsible for monitoring.*
- *We know what supervised probation means, every once in a blue moon - probation sounds good but probation isn't a real good thing at times because they don't see them enough.*
- *It would give the public some confidence or reassurance.*
- *But supervised probation is still better than nothing.*

Questions regarding the effectiveness of treatment were raised in both the written responses and group discussion. Many participants wondered if treatment programs were ever effective:

(G2)

- *... it surprised me that it said that he had participated in programs to deal with sexual abuse, and that he has indicated that he is willing to continue to participate in treatment, so that kind of surprised me. So there is obviously more because usually the number one thing is if they refused to participate in treatment. That's sort of one of the big priorities.*
- *Statistically, and I don't know a lot about sex offenders, but with the recidivism rate is there anything about high risk offenders? ... If this is something that he's done for fifteen or sixteen years he can go to classes and counselling until the cows come home, but in all likelihood, it's still going to continue.*

(G3)

- *I wonder, is rehabilitation ever successful?*
- *Nine times out of ten the offender winds up back in jail for the same thing.*

While some participants were hopeful that the offender's intention to continue participating in his treatment program was a good sign, others were less optimistic:

(G4)

- *It says here that he will continue to participate in treatment for sexual deviation as required by the conditions of his parole.*
- *But he is a convicted sexual offender who is a high risk to re-offend...*
- *Yeah, but he's in one of these programs, it doesn't necessarily mean that it's done anything.*
- *The only reason he's going to these is to get out of jail. I'm sorry, wouldn't you do the same thing?*
- *Yep.*

- *You'd been away for 33 months, don't you think you'd have your little urges, and would say and do almost anything to get out to do what you want to do.*
- *... I would go through all the hoops and I would say all the right things, and from what I've read and what I know of, all these programs don't work.*

### Notification Language

Participants raised many questions regarding the meaning of specific terms used in the notification. The language used was unfamiliar and many parents considered it too "clinical" or "technical". The resulting lack of understanding left room for different interpretations, assumptions, or guesses. One woman reluctantly admitted to other group members that she did not understand exactly what the offender had been convicted of:

(emphasis mine)

(G4)

- *I may be stupid, but what does three counts of **sexual interference** mean?*
- *That's just a nice way of saying sexual assault.*
- *It's just totally like assault?*
- *Well no, that means just the, sometimes fondling and...*
- *It can mean anything.*
- *It can mean them doing things to you, it can be anything sexual.*

A member of another group also struggled to define this charge:

(G2)

- *Sexual interference could be anything from a pat on the butt to actual intercourse where the charge gets reduced. The charges themselves may not mean anything, but it sort of brings it to the front of your mind that they are sexual offences.*

Other terms were equally vague:

(G1)

- *... to think that he has been assessed to be **potentially violent**... what is he violent against? Is he violent generally; is he violent to children? It is very, very vital to know, to see what I could do to protect my kids.*

(G2)

- *I wonder if it's necessary to list all the offences that he has done*

- *I think that's just to keep you on the alert - like forcible confinement could mean taking a kid's hand and walking them down the street, but it could also be ... throw them in a car and take them away.*
- *That's what we would think - what most people would think.*

One participant was frustrated by this use of 'meaningless' language as it resulted in a lack of understanding and provided little useful information. It did not provide any clear picture of what the offender had done or might do in the future.

(G3)

- *What exactly is sexual interference?*
- *That could be any number of things.*
- *I don't want gory details or anything...*
- *Terms like sexual interference make me angry because I think they're just being politically correct! If he raped someone, if he sodomized someone, or if he did whatever let us **know** so that we can... so that we know and maybe it would help us with more information for our children.*
- *It's a criminal code term.*
- *But what does it really mean?*
- *I guess the bottom line is it's sexual and it's with kids. He sexually offends against children.*

Another member suspected that certain words were used purposely to control people's responses.

(G4)

- *Sometimes I wonder if they don't do that on purpose. Because most of us, I mean the only reason I knew was because my husband works at (a jail), so I hear him and I'd say what does that mean? So I found out my own way. But a lot of people don't ever get to know words or whatever, and I just think some - like pedophile - most people, maybe our ages now know. But my mother would never have known what it was. You say child molester and your hair goes up, but a pedophile - what's that - nobody really knows. So sometimes using terms that maybe everybody knows - yes pedophile is that, but it is also a child molester or whatever.*

Members of Group 4 reflected on the many words used to refer to child sexual offenders:

- *It was rape. I can never remember growing up ever hearing the word pedophile. I don't think I ever heard it. You kind of think, well it had to have been out there. I just think it was sort of taboo. We never spoke about those things.*

Moderator - *What are some of the other words that we use?*

- *Child molester, but there are other ones...*
- *Sicko. I mean there's all the derogatory ones.*
- *...skinner or something.*
- *What?*
- *Something like that. Skinners or something. I don't know why.*

*Moderator - That's a jail term*

- *All that sticks in my mind is Skinners Hot Dogs.*
- *You'll never eat another hot dog!*
- *There are other words but I don't remember them.*

### Knowledge and Experience

The meaning of the information was greatly influenced by knowledge of the issue through education and/or employment as well as from personal experiences. This seemed to determine the significance of certain details and identified gaps in the information provided. In a couple of groups the members discussed the implication of having previous knowledge and how this contributed to a different understanding of the notification. Statements were made regarding the differences in 'knowing' that experts had versus the understanding of the 'layperson'. Specifically, 'experts' identified behaviours that would be precursors to offending, such as 'grooming' behaviours that might not be as easily identified by those without a more informed understanding.

(G2)

- *As long as he's inside his house then I'd feel better.*
- *... that little creep is in there - there's this 'dirty old man' sitting up in his room grooming himself and these children, so that he could - there's a reason he's sitting there in front of his window watching these kids go to school. And pretty soon he's going to move to his front porch.*

(G1)

- *If you're going to have a neighbourhood watch, I mean to me you should have that sort of information so that you could notify...*
- *...so that if he's standing there staring at your children then you can call somebody.*

- *I mean, because I have a little bit of background information I know that that is not what they are supposed to be doing. But I mean people that don't know or they think, well that's just watching them, so big deal.*

(G2)

- *The other thing that I really would want to know and I don't know how to find out, is what the terms of his probation are, like how far can he be from a school, what does it take for me to report a breach? I don't know if he's allowed to be on the same side of the street as the school, or if he can be hanging out at lunch time, that sort of thing. I want to know what the terms of his probation are.*
- *You're only asking that because you work with young offenders in the justice system. For most people I think they would just see a guy a block away from the school and would automatically phone and say hey, I saw that guy that you just put out this paper on ...*

### Being Notified

The mere fact that the community would be notified about this offender delivered a strong message. It seemed to mean that there was a reason he must be a greater risk to the public because they don't tell the community about every criminal that is released.

(G1)

- *It may not make a difference to what I'd do but it gives the impression that somehow this is a more serious or worse or more likely to reoffend, or this is a more dangerous offender.*
- *And I tend to agree, because they are definitely not telling us when a murderer comes into our community. It's like that's not such a concern.*
- *Yeah, every time someone is released from prison, they don't send out a form and say this guy murdered so and so, or this guy robbed this many banks so don't let him in a bank, but we get these on this type of criminal. So obviously this is different.*
- *(Lots of agreement)*

### Assess Threat Posed by Presence of Identified Offender

#### Dangerousness

Prior to receiving the notification participants were almost evenly split when asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement, "Sex offenders are more dangerous than other criminals." (9 disagreed, 10 agreed and 2 did not respond). However, group discussion revealed unanimous support for the idea that special attention be paid to high-risk sex offenders



by way of community notification because they posed a specific and in many ways a worse threat than other criminals due to the nature of their crime.

This exchange between members of Group 1 captured sentiments expressed in every group when asked if they thought sex offenders were in some way 'worse' than other types of criminals:

- *I think we do in the sense that their victims are helpless, they're young.... I mean a murderer may have murdered for abuse reasons or tick-off reasons, but they don't particularly go out and murder everybody or defenceless children. So I think most of us right now think of this person as probably the biggest - I think people see sex offenders as more likely to re-offend than others.*
- *Yeah, other criminals are more able to be rehabilitated. Other than the ones like we hear about, like the Jeffery Dalmers and Paul Bernardos. Although there aren't a lot of guys like them out there I think we see pedophiles and sex offenders as like that...that bad. But pedophiles and sex offenders are such a large group...*
- *and it's a whole question of rehabilitation and how successfully it can be done - I don't think it has been very successful in the past, and I tend to think, and I may be totally wrong about this, but when it comes to murder, sentences may be longer - whereas here you look at 33 months, not even 3 years.*
- *And how do you know how many times he offended before he got caught? Most murderers are caught after their first murder. You know, they did it once they got caught. Not that that's an excuse. It would be like you say, a passion killing or you know, whatever.*
- *Right now I'm thinking even people who have no experience of it or no concrete knowledge of it, I think we think of sexual offending as being more ingrained - it's part of that person's makeup - chances of it going away are...*
- *...right - it's not going to go away!*
- *...and especially because the media does make a big point of just how negative it is.*
- *And even among other offenders, they tend to be the ones who are most often attacked.*
- *They even have to be segregated within the prison system.*
- *...so even hardened criminals who have done, as far as some people are concerned, just as bad of things, they aren't the same.*

A couple of group members discussed whether the age of this particular offender made a difference in how much of a threat he is to the community:

(G3)

- *As far as age, I don't think it makes any difference - whether he's 14 or 114.*
- *I do, just simply because of the factor - whether he gets around makes a difference. I mean if he's 65 or 75 and uses a cane you can tell your kids, you know, he's a dirty old man and you don't go near him.*

In addition to knowledge of sex offenders gained through employment or personal experiences, much of what participants 'knew' about offenders was the result of magazine articles, books, television and other media sources. Other participants had been influenced by messages from family members, such as the woman whose husband worked with sex offenders and another who had received very strong messages from her Dad.

(G3)

- *My father worked at a jail for thirty years and I got the feeling from him that sex offenders were different-scarier.*

#### Impact on Victims

Groups also referred to the perception that sexual offences had a greater negative impact for victims. Interestingly when group participants explored these feelings they compared sex offenders to murderers in every case. In every discussion regarding impact the sex offender was compared to an individual who violently ended someone's life. However, unlike murder, participants found it impossible to identify even slightly with the motivations of a sexual offence. Participants could justify killing someone in self-defense, by accident or because you were provoked but there was no understanding for why an adult would be sexually attracted to a child. It was interesting to note the use of humour in the comments made during this discussion between members of Group 4, and in other groups, perhaps because the topic under consideration created feelings of discomfort.

- *To me murderers and sex offenders are both in the same category, I mean it's so horrible - taking someone's life. In a sense they are taking someone's life this way too.*
- *Ruining this person's life.*

- *Exactly. Well, they're taking it and destroying it and shattering it and everything else.*
- *Not all sex offenders are equal because I think sex offenders who prey on children are worse.*
- *I think that all sex offenders are horrible, but that the ones who prey on children are the worst.*
- *They're the scum on the bottom of an earthworm.*

*Moderator - That's pretty low.*

- *They have to look up to touch bottom.*
- *Other people say they have their rights and stuff, but I'm sorry, it's just such a horrible, horrible thing to do some of the things they do - I just want people to know what they do and how to protect yourself. Maybe they have rights, but they took away a whole bunch of other people's rights, and they don't get those back. Anyone that's been murdered - they don't get their rights back. That's my personal feelings.*

The perceived impact of a child sexual assault was also significant in that participants felt it affected not only the victim, but also the entire family and even the entire community.

(G1)

- *Now if this person right here ever terrified my daughter, would she ever come out of that? Would she? Or would we have to go for counselling for the rest of our lives?*

*Group 4 examined this issue at length:*

- *For me, one of my children was approached, and it was like this close, and that changed all of our lives forever.*
- *I think that they take away a part of - it doesn't touch just one person, it's their family, it's their friends, it's their - you know it's a whole neighbourhood that's affected forever. And sometimes the changes are devastating for everybody involved.*
- *I'm thinking it's so sad, it kind of takes away your freedom or your ability to live a happy life.*
- *If you were a child you mean?*
- *It takes away everything. Your children's childhood, your ability (as a parent) to enjoy them completely without having that fear constantly, like every minute your child's out of your sight you wonder. I know people think I'm a little paranoid, but because I've been so close to having something so bad happen, now it's just like I can't help it. You only get one chance sometimes ... Things can be taken away from you awfully fast. My children don't seem*

*to be devastated, they get a little more treatment in the winter - they get their ride and they like that, but they're used to it now. It's been a couple of years.*

### Causes

Each group spent some time discussing the possible causes of sexual offending. Some participants wondered about the offender's childhood experiences and demonstrated some sympathy. Sex offending was conceptualized as a disease or deficiency. One woman spoke about developing offending behaviours as the result of being institutionalized. Others wondered if it was a natural characteristic that some people were just born with.

(G3)

- *What did he go through as a child?*
- *You never know. Some things like that make you wonder if this happened to him, what about the ones that it never happened to. Like what about - what makes them that way - what part of their body or their brain...*
- *Do they have any remorse?*
- *It could have been something that happened when he was growing up.*
- *But what if it's not, what if it's just a gene, like the male or female, like how do we know. Say while you were growing up you had funny feelings, like how would anybody know what those meant. I guess gays and lesbians would go through things like that, not knowing - you know - maybe he had those feelings and he didn't have anybody to turn to, because it is such a disgusting thought to tell somebody. Would you want to tell somebody?*

(G1)

- *... go to Stony Mountain and talk to any one of those guys, that is what you live with, that's what people do even when they exist in same-sex institutions, that's what's happening. You can be deemed a sex offender. If you're in prison for 21 years, chances are you're going to become what lives there - you'll either be predator or prey.*

(G3)

- *Like I said, there's something - you kind of have to wonder if there's some part of their thing that just cannot be changed - it's just - you're male you're female - you're good or bad - I don't know. Sometimes I mean - you've got to wonder.*

### Gender

Most of the groups raised the issue of gender and explored the idea of sexual offending as a male trait.

(G3)

- *One thing I find very interesting is through the whole conversation we have always assumed that the offender has always been male.*
- *You know, I've never even thought about a female sexual offender. And mind you they're not as common.*
- *I find that really interesting. I guess I just always think that they're a "male" prisoner. Not only emotionally, but they're aggressive, they're physical, but I think that if they're female they're going to do it in a different way.*
- *When you think about it, a female sexual offender could be even more powerful because a female would play with a person's head more and probably, and I don't think there would be just physical, a lot of emotional abuse would go along with it.*
- *Yeah. But there's the saying "dirty old men", nobody's ever says "dirty old women".*
- *It's a stereotype we have.*

(G2)

- *Yes, you are sort of saying negative things about males in general, but statistically speaking, you have a better chance of being molested by a male than by a female. You have to be so careful.*

This had implications for the prevention/protection education given to children.

(G2)

- *I watched a program one year, I don't even remember what it was and they were talking about street-proofing your kid, what should your kid do when they got lost in a store. The guy talking said lots of moms tell their kids to go to a security guy and he said no, you go to a woman. Even if there's a security guard standing there in a full uniform, if he's male, you don't go to him, you go to a woman. That's sad but statistically ... like I won't hire a teenage boy to baby-sit.*
- *But if you're telling them not to go to a male security guard, what about all the male R.C.M.P.*

This line of thought also produced an interesting idea for treatment:

(G3)

- *Give them female hormones while they're in jail - in their food - turn them into a woman.*
- *(Group laughter)*

Regardless of the possible causes of sex offending, no one accepted any of these as an excuse for the offender's behaviour. Although the lack of available treatment or supports was acknowledged, the offender's behaviour was still seen to be a choice he made and any of the

negative consequences (public notification, stigmatization, vigilantism) were well deserved. The common sentiment was, "you made your bed, you lay in it!"

(G3)

- *I have no thoughts, and what feeling that I feel, they deserve it. I'm sorry they're that way, but any one of us could choose to be a different way, but we chose to do what's right in our lives, and I think that there's help out there and if they have any of those feelings they should be going to get help.*

### Reintegration

One or two members of every group voiced their struggle with conflicting feeling about whether or not some effort should be made to assist released offenders with community integration.

(G1)

- *...the way we have talked about him, I kind of tend to feel sorry for him now that I think about it because coming back to the community he has to be awfully brave, there's a lot of people there that would hurt him badly.*
- *But then I think, does he have any choices about where he goes, he does have to go into a community.*

(G2)

- *So this is where I feel bad - a person can't change if not given the opportunity either. But yet, if you put yourself in this boat... (picks up the notification)*
- *But does he need to be given the opportunity in my community?*
- *Well, they gotta come from somewhere, and go somewhere.*

(G3)

- *I don't know what you do with them – realistically...*
- *You've got to get them back into society.*
- *Legally there's nothing you can do though because they have human rights, same as everyone else.*
- *Where is he better off? Finding a job somewhere, like pumping gas or whatever, or living off of the system because he can't get a job because of what he did.*
- *Work him! This guy's 21 years old- you think I'm going to pay so he can be on welfare...I don't think so!*

- *But it's like six of one half a dozen of the other - you don't want him in the community, but our tax dollars are stretched thin enough.*
- *The benefits of notification far outweigh any of the negative stuff he'll have to put up with for the rest of his life. I really don't care how he feels. He didn't care how three other people felt-that's his own problem.*
- *Put him out in the field on a hot summer day picking cabbage or something – let him think about that.*

### Restrictions

Many participants wanted some type of external controls to be in place which would limit the identified offender's community integration and hopefully reduce his risk to the community. Groups suggested a number of ways to insulate him from others in the community, to restrict his freedom of movement or to reduce his ability to offend.

(G4)

- *He shouldn't have been able to get out just like that ... in our community.*
- *...a halfway house or something like that?*
- *Like a minimum security...*
- *He's on supervised probation, but that's not enough.*
- *The whole problem is I don't think there's enough money to ever keep someone, to keep all of them watched at all times. There's just so many out there!*
- *See I thought that once you were a sex offender you would have guidelines like you couldn't move near a school, you couldn't move near playgrounds and things like that. I thought there were certain stipulations when they got out of jail they had to abide by. That has something to do with parole doesn't it?*
- *And so what happens when their parole is up? They go right back (to offending).*
- *But I mean, like I wonder how many of these people moved where they're not supposed to. There's children just about everywhere. So like by saying these silly little things, they go two or three blocks and it could be, I mean I don't think in the city you can go very far without a school or a playground, so that to me just seems rather silly to stipulate something that they know they can't regulate. I guess if I was the government, I could have a nice little community with - I mean I know it's not fair, but it's not fair what they do to people either. So I think you do the crime you do the time.*
- *You know, there should be - I know this sounds really bad, but there should be like a community for that, and they should not be allowed anywhere near children or unfortunately sometimes it's adults that they're after, but I think if you have that kind of a problem - if you're mentally imbalanced you go to a*

*mental home. I think if you're sexually imbalanced, or whatever you want to call this, you should go somewhere where they can't hurt people. Look at drunk drivers - they take away their licenses and stuff like that, can't they do something else here?*

- *(Jokes about castration)*
- *But they have these range things - bracelets, too bad they couldn't put them on these guys.*
- *Every time you go near a child - beep, beep, beep!*
- *Or they're only allowed to live in a certain area, and if they go out of that area...*
- *...this thing goes off!*

**(G3)**

- *You know, if a dog bites 16 times he's going to bite again, they put it down. I'm not saying he should be put down, but there should be something done about it. He should have to go to a probation officer once or twice or three times a week to get this drug and then he can't...*
- *Chemical castration like they do in California.*
- *I don't mean really castrate him.*
- *...but the chemical takes away the urges.*

Group 1 even considered a possible financial benefit of assigning 24-hour supervision:

- *We do know that some of our retarded children, the mildly retarded, they have a paid buddy day in and day out, and there is money available for that. And I'm thinking that the funding that government uses to put this person in prison each day is what, \$275 I think.*
- *Plus pay his salary*
- *But if he's in jail, it's \$275/day to keep him there in that room. Why couldn't we use that money to rehabilitate him with buddies, professional buddies? Wouldn't \$275 - cut that in half ...*

A few people thought he should simply be run out of the community. The offender had no place there, was unwelcome and presented such a threat that citizens should actively pressure him to leave:

**(G4)**

- *And do you know how fast those people have moved when they know that they're not going to get away with it? Bang - they're moving to some old hick town where they aren't going to know about it or care about it.*
- *Especially without notifying them.*



- *Exactly. And some of those places put up these, I don't know if it's these exactly, but pictures, where they live - post em - every post, sign, everything. They post them all around and they see them on T.V., and I'm thinking good - if you want to be that way, move somewhere else, we're not there.*

### Risk

Others wondered if ostracizing him might inadvertently increase the risk of him reoffending.

(G2)

- *I saw a program on T.V. last year about high-risk offenders that were released into the community in Alaska or some part of the States, and it sort of gave you the offender's side. You know this guy is really trying to buck up and change his life, and nobody's giving him a break - wherever he goes there's posters all over town, he can't get a job, he can't get welfare, he can't do anything - he can't go anywhere, he can't eat in a restaurant - nothing. And so his gist of it was you know, 'I can't do anything else, no one will have anything to do with me, what choice do I have? I'm gonna have weird friends and reoffend'. So on the one hand have to have a very nice community assigned to you (to be given a chance to reintegrate) but on the other hand, I don't want them serving me my lunch. What that has to do with sex offending, I don't know. But I can see myself not wanting to have anything to do with him.*

Again, group members wondered if offender reintegration should be the responsibility of the community or the role of a 'professional'.

(G1)

- *Wouldn't that be in the hands of his probation officer or whoever he's supposed to report to. I'm not too sure how open-minded some people are, maybe there are some here in Portage more than open-minded, but I think that I would have a very hard time trying to talk to him. I don't think my husband would even consider talking to him.*
- *I don't think I'd have a problem talking with him, but I don't think I'd have him near my home or where my children are. It would definitely be across in his yard somewhere, or on the street passing by would be about the distance I would go. I don't think I'd totally ignore him, I'd let him know I acknowledge him in my community. You know, just to let him know that we're aware he's there, not to be rude or anything. But as for making him feel comfortable in the community... I'm not sure I could do that. Like invite him in for dinner or whatever!*
- *(Laughter)*
- *I'm not sure I could go to that extent!*

A few group members were very threatened and unable to see themselves being able to tolerate any more than a distant, non-personal co-existence.

(G3)

- *I don't think I'd deny him a chance to get back into the community.*
- *Would you have lunch with him?*
- *Would I want to have lunch with him?*
- *Ya, like I wouldn't care if he worked with me, but I wouldn't want to talk with him.*
- *No, I couldn't handle even being in the same room with him. No, I'd want to spit on him. Even the thought of it makes me very angry.*

### Punishment or Rehabilitation

Group 1 engaged in an interesting exchange regarding whether offenders should be punished or rehabilitated. After one member promoted community rehabilitation, another member challenged her by asking:

- *Except that don't we lose the concept of what his consequence was for doing that offence?*
- *You could, but if you were to continue saying "Well, what's the point ... he did this before, he did this before". I think if you start to say, "What can we do to rehabilitate him?" Let's say that it's going to happen, wouldn't it be better to try to rehabilitate him rather than to let him take social assistance, drinking beer, watching pornography, wouldn't it be better to try to rehabilitate him?*
- *But isn't he already getting that in the sentence. I mean it already says here he is getting some therapy, so he is getting that in sentencing that I think is on the right track ... He needs to do his sentence. I strongly believe that there has to be a consequence for your actions, whether it be a positive or a negative. You have to start therapy somewhere; you can't just stick him back in the community and expect him to be okay. So he needs to do his therapy there first in the time he was given for his offence ... when I read that he is a high risk, he is going to end up back there.*
- *Right, he's going to be institutionalised.*
- *Right, they might as well just start putting some money towards someone supervising him and making sure, like a buddy system, but I still think he has to do his time first. I strongly believe that.*
- *Oh, definitely.*
- *But if he is with a buddy system, and he has been institutionalised, if he does reoffend, and he does go back to the institution, how long will it be before the authorities say he has to be institutionalised forever? For all his life? Then on the other hand, maybe the buddy system might work. There are other possibilities.*

Another member of Group 1 commented on the potential consequence of giving a high-risk sex offender a second chance in the community:

- *I guess part of the problem with being open minded is we always tend to think everyone's entitled to a second chance. I very strongly believe that everyone's entitled to a second chance. But people say that once a pedophile, always a pedophile, and that second chance is so easy to give and it allows someone to get hurt before that person is actually stopped. How many people does this have to happen to before people say "that's enough" and something is done?*

A fourth member felt a moral conflict between her religious values, which promoted forgiveness, and her parental values, which promoted her child's well being above all else:

- *I have trouble having any kind of sympathy - a bit of a laugh. I'm not a very good Christian woman.*
- *(Then lots of group laughter and comments - a bit of a release as others offer support for a non-sympathetic response...)*
- *...okay, out you go (smacks fist into hand)*
- *You've made your bed...*
- *It's too bad.*
- *It's somebody's child.*
- *Yeah, but you do think, well what happened to him?*
- *Right, I know... I would never take any kind of action - and obviously I would not support violence towards him, but uh...(pause and the group nods knowingly)*

One parent summarized her thoughts on the matter by stating that there was only so much parents could do:

(G3)

- *That's about the best you can do - educate your children and restrict him as much as you can. Because you can't stop him from getting a job, you can't stop him from getting an apartment; you can't stop him from shopping and going to a movie and so on and so forth.*
- *Unfortunately he still has his rights. There's not a lot you can do.*

### Identity

Perhaps the biggest threat perceived by parents is the fact that sex offenders are difficult if not impossible to identify. Ironically, the 'identifying' information provided to parents in a

notification – the offender’s intended community and a picture/description were thought to be of little help in actually identifying this man.

- Location - Many felt the offender’s location was not specific enough. However, they also acknowledged that a specific address would not help because he could easily get around and really “anywhere is too close”.

(G2)

- *I'd want to know more details - I'd want a district. Northeast, Southeast...*
- *It wouldn't matter to me because Portage is too damn small.*
- *I moved here from (a very large city), and if they were to say to me, and I lived in one area which is on the south shore. If there's a pedophile in another area - that's too close as far as I'm concerned.*

(G4)

- *They can drive from Winnipeg and drive here in an hour.*

Moderator - *Would you feel differently if the offender lived on your block?*

- *Oh, big time!*
- *Well yes.*
- *The immediate risk is there. Out there is more of an, "out of sight out of mind" kind of thought.*
- *He's at an arm's distance.*
- *Yeah, like but when it's in your neighbourhood...*
- *...you get to buy a third dog!*
- *I'd like him to live somewhere where...*
- *...he can't get out. (Laughter)*
- *But he has served his time and even though it's wrong they get out - and in my mind they serve so little time - I would like to have him somewhere that he could be kept an eye on.*
- *Right across the street from the RCMP office!*
- *That's not going to stop them. The police can't watch him, the same as we can't.*
- *I know, but I'd feel a little more secure if I knew that they were somewhere where they were under surveillance more.*

One person considered the increased risk of harassment if a specific address was provided to the public, but only briefly:

(G3)

- *But they're protecting his rights too, because say it said the exact neighbourhood, then all the people there are going to scope him out, they're going to give him a hard time. But that's his problem.*

Ultimately the offender poses a risk for someone, somewhere, regardless of where he is living:

(G4)

- *How far he goes out of his neighbourhood to seek victims. If you read that he lives in one town and find out he goes to another, well it doesn't matter where he lives because he's always going to be in someone's neighbourhood.*

- Appearance - Parents spent a great deal of time in every group discussing the issue of the offender's physical appearance.

(G1)

- *I don't think you can determine, or you can, we can't tell our children what a sex offender looks like, or what somebody who could do them any harm looks like, because there is no look.*
- *You're absolutely right.*
- *It could be anybody.*

The usefulness of the picture provided with the notification was debated in every group. Some participants felt it was a useful tool in child protection as it could be shown to children with instructions to stay away from 'this man'. Other parents were appalled and said they would never show the picture to their children for fear of frightening them, because the child would not remember the picture anyway and the fact that this was not the only person who might sexually assault their child.

All participants felt the picture was unclear, of poor quality and probably not a good method of identification as the offender's appearance could be easily changed. Also, there may be non-offenders who resembled the picture who might be unfairly targeted based on similar appearance. These innocent men might be assaulted or victimized.

(G2)

- *The nice thing with the release is that they usually do have their picture on it, so we can sort of discreetly with younger children say if you see this guy you have to tell somebody right away, no matter where they are.*

(G4)

- *Even in this media release, it says his appearance may have changed since this photo was taken. Why wouldn't they put a current photo in to start with?*
- *He could grow a moustache...*
- *...or a beard, or he could go bald.*
- *You could shave your hair off, put your hair in dreadlocks, or change it enough that nobody would think of it.*
- *But to me if they're going to release something like this they should do it to the best of their ability.*
- *There's no way, because I mean if you're a criminal you're not going to want to look the same as you did when you were in jail.*
- *The day he's released or the next day, he can go and cut it or colour it.*
- *There are a lot of different things. I guess finding out about tattoos, - the things that you can't change without a lot of pain.*
- *...scars, approximate height, approximate weight.*

(G2)

- *Unless the guy's got a big scar down his face or something very distinguishing, it's pretty hard to put together a description. This picture's better than nothing, but there's so many people that could look like this.*

(G1)

- *You don't really know how many guys around town look like him.*
- *(Laughter)*
- *... I can think of about two people when I look at this that do have their hair cut like this, and have big round faces, and they could be walking out of 7-11 some night and end up half beaten because people think that that's who that is.*

### Identifying Offenders

Parents had some creative ideas about methods of identifying offenders. The goal would be clear identification to facilitate awareness and avoidance, and to eliminate the need to be generally suspicious. Group 1 had these thoughts:

- *I think a van, an automobile, is something that kids will sort of be on the lookout for more and remember more than a face, not that it's less threatening - I think that's what it is, it's more easily identifiable.*
- *Taking a step to what's easily identifiable, would it be right to tattoo that person with a yellow star. (Laughter and agreement)*

Some members wondered if that might be taking things a 'bit too far' :

- *No, as adults we can say too far, but when I think about my 5 year old who's playing in the front yard and in her own environment, and this person comes up, how would she identify that person? A brand on that person in a visual spot would make her more aware of that, if she understood what the brand meant.*
- *To take this one step further, I think that a person who has crossed the line of the legal system, I think that they have given up their right to be a citizen for a certain amount of time. I'm kind of wondering if branding is possibly an alternative point for the future - I don't know if that would work.*
- *They used to put a bracelet or something that identified where they were all the time. That might be a bit different. That could be taken off at some point, but a brand is an imprint you can't take that off.*
- *I was reading somewhere about that person who has that bracelet who did cut it off but got ink all over him, so that's even more identifiable because it's all over the place. It kind of explodes on them. That might be an alternative.*

Group 4 had a similar discussion:

- *It's too bad you couldn't arm them, you know like they do with pigeons - put that arm band on them - big fluorescent flashing or something.*
- *Right around their neck so we can see them a mile away.*

The positive aspect of being provided with a picture was that it gave a general idea of what the high-risk offender looked like and might reduce the fear that it could be absolutely anyone. Also, the picture and description confronted stereotypical images of 'the dirty old man' or the guy in the long black trenchcoat. This in itself was an education to parents who had never knowingly seen a confirmed and convicted sexual offender. However, the drawback of identifying a specific offender was focussing on one person rather than finding ways of preventing general victimization.

(G2)

- *I think too that we'd be inclined to look for just this person instead of teaching our children and our community that anybody could be an offender.*

- *No, I want to have a vague idea of what he's going to look like, and I would rather err on the side of caution than not err.*

### Missing Information

When asked what information parents might find more useful, many participants suggested that it might help to know more about how he selected and gained access to previous victims.

(G4)

- *Sometimes if you know what they look like or who they prey on. Sometimes they have their own 'MO's', like maybe they go to parks or school grounds or something. Then you can kind of keep an eye out, and if everybody in your neighbourhood knows that this person goes to parks, then you don't send your kid to the park alone. Or you don't just let your kids walk home alone. You know, we have adult patrols here and stuff like that - it kind of makes you stress a little stronger that you make sure that if they have patrols you walk with them or whatever. You know it's important. Sometimes knowing some of the particulars helps you counteract to change your child's patterns.*

(G3)

- *I'd like to know what's his usual pattern of enticing children.*
- *That's another thing you could warn your children about. If a man comes up to you and says this or offers you this, or does he reach out and grab them from behind the bush, what is his usual pattern?*

(G1)

- *I think that some of their background or whatever to their probation should be there. The lay person doesn't know that they shouldn't be in the school. So what if you are an extremely open-minded community and you have something, like a family potluck, and this person comes in with a dish and would like to join in. And there's 50 kids running around the gym. Some of us might not know that he should not be there.*

### Assess Risk of Victimization

#### Risk Assessment

Prior to receiving the notification, 13 of 21 respondents (62%) indicated they agreed that "The presence of an identified sex offender increases the risk of my child being victimized". Many parents responded to receiving the notification by immediately describing some type of protective behaviour, confirming that there was some degree of personal risk perceived.

Although very little group discussion focussed on risk assessment, parents appeared to believe there are a variety of personal and environmental factors that contribute to the likelihood



of a child becoming the victim of a sexual assault. Risk assessment did not appear to be a distinct process for parents when they considered how best to respond to a community notification.

### Personality

In addition to the basic belief that children by nature are more vulnerable because they are smaller, helpless and defenseless, age, gender and appearance were also thought to be relevant risk factors. Personality traits also seemed to be significant. Parents referred to children being anxious to please, trusting, passive, naïve, helpful, unaware, curious, and rebellious and thought this might make them easier targets.

(G2)

- *Kids are kids - they've got other things on their minds. In grade one, my son brought home a booklet/ pamphlet, saying they were going to go over these things and they talked about all that kind of stuff (street proofing). I'm very grateful, but I still think he would get into somebody's car because he's one of those "I have to please everybody" kind of kids. But you know, he's learning it.*

(G1)

- *I think of times my child has said things about people - pointed or commented and I say "don't be so cruel - you should be nice to all people - and be kind to them." I can tell you, if this happened to anybody it would be my child, because she is so kind to everyone.*

(G2)

- *I think I'm really giving my kid mixed messages too because I'm telling her "A grown-up told you to do that - now you sit down and do it and don't you give them any grief. I don't want to hear you talking like that again. Don't ever let me hear you talk like that to a grown-up again. A grown-up told you to do it, you do it." And then I'm telling her "If a grown-up touches you anywhere anytime..." (some laughter)*
- *Like the guilt trip that you pull on your nieces and nephews when they won't give you a kiss, then all of a sudden one day it dawned on me - I'm guiltting this person into physical affection. This is not a lesson I want to be teaching.*
- *I did that too. Come give auntie a kiss. I need a kiss or I'll cry. Then I thought not very long ago - "gasp!"*

Teaching children to beware of possible abusers was thought to be difficult for a number of reasons. Parents wondered if children really believed it could happen to them, or could even comprehend what it meant to be assaulted by an adult sex offender.

(G1)

- *I think we have to teach our children to be more aware, our children take certain things for granted. I always tell my daughter "are you aware of everything around you? Let's take a look", but she doesn't. They're just off in their own little world.*

(G3)

- *I don't like to always be reminding them. Like I know you have to remind them, but just let them be kids for awhile.*
- *It's not something that you can discuss at the dinner table every day. Because eventually they'll quit listening. If you tell kids something too often they quit listening.*
- *I think for a child who's never been abused, I don't think they could even comprehend what a serious thing this is, and you could tell them again and again and again. But it's like being burned, if you've never been burned you don't know how much it hurts. I don't think you could really explain to a child, maybe a preteen or teenager could understand a little bit better, but a small child - I don't think you could. I could never explain to my daughter - he might do this to you and it would hurt, and it would scare you and it would be bad. There's just no way. Even if I wanted to explain that to her, she just couldn't comprehend it.*

(G2)

- *They're so brave though. Like kids are so brave. I can remember for years I've talked to my kids about abuse. Oh I'll kick them. My kids have been in trouble and they're not all that tough!*

(G4)

- *Children are children though.*
- *Yeah I know - they forget, they don't want to - I know.*
- *Or they're playing and out the door.*

### Relationship

One participant who had significant employment related experience and knowledge of sexual offenders was able to describe what she considered to be the most relevant risk factor and described how she would use that information to determine the level of risk her own child might face. Another parent whose expertise was the result of personal experience was less certain that this reduced the risk for other children.

(G2)

- *My first thought was who were his victims, I don't need to know who they were, but was their relationship to him? Is this a problem for my kid? It*

*might not be, probably isn't, and then, what would I do? Are they his nieces and nephews? Because then, although he's still not a real nice guy or somebody I'd have over to dinner, the risk to my daughter is less then. If he was some guy on the street, and he'd be grooming these kids in the neighbourhood, and abusing who knows how many of them, it's a different story.*

- *He's still got the sexual deviancies and needs a release, so maybe he is going to start plucking kids out on the school grounds.*
- *My experience is he's going to find a girlfriend with kids first.*

### Distance

Proximity to the offender was also relevant to participants. Although all the groups acknowledged the offender could travel anywhere to offend, most felt the closer he lived, the greater the personal threat.

(G4)

*Moderator - At what 'safe' distance could a sex offender live from your home?*

- *Winnipeg.*
- *Even that's not far enough.*

*Moderator- So it wouldn't matter where in the community they lived, you'd feel the risk would be equal?*

- *They can drive from Winnipeg and be here in an hour.*

*Moderator - Would you feel differently if the offender lived on your block?*

- *Oh, big time!*
- *Well yes.*
- *The immediate risk is there. Out there is more of an "out of sight out of mind" kind of thought.*

(G3)

- *I wouldn't like, maybe put the house up for sale or anything, but it would certainly cross my mind. I mean it's crossing my mind right now, he's living two doors down from me and I'm here and my kids were home by themselves, you know. You would never feel comfortable or relaxed.*

### Mine and Others

Despite the majority of parents having indicated that the risk of their child being victimized increases with the presence of a high-risk sex offender, many participants suggested their own

child would be at less risk than other children because of steps they had already taken to protect them. Their own actions were compared to parents who did not adequately supervise their children, and whose children were felt to be at greater risk because of this.

(G2)

- *There are parents out there though who don't have conversations with their kids about safety or rules, and telling their kids things that are going on. Those are the ones I'd be concerned about. I may not be as concerned for my own child as I am concerned for the kids down the street.*

Participants shared stories of children they knew who were allowed to run around without any supervision, or of parents who neglected or actively abused their children, placing them at risk of sexual victimization.

(G1)

- *Well, and that's the whole point. There are vulnerable children in every community - children who are not supervised that well, children of families where there are drug and alcohol problems, where there are single parent families that have lots of kids and are overwhelmed, who don't have a lot of community family supports. There are vulnerable children out there, and I always think there's going to be victims.*

It was suggested that providing those parents with notification information and guidelines for protective behaviour would be very helpful, but then participants wondered if those parents would pay attention or take action anyway.

Members of Group 2 thought most people would use common sense to respond appropriately to the notification:

- *...yes, but what we would consider common sense isn't necessarily common sense to other people. And I think that's why I'm going to feel very strongly about having this power meeting with people to explain it (what parents need to do), and somehow, I don't know how, but those are the ones who aren't going to come to the meeting anyway.*

### Faith and Hope

Some participants stated that it did not matter what anyone did to prepare or protect your kids, it could happen anyway. There was a sense of helplessness and fatalism.

(G2)

- *You can tell and tell and tell them things, but you've just got to hope it just doesn't ever happen. To me that's what it leads down to - you've just got to pray it never happens.*

(G1)

- *I feel you can't assess anything until you actually experience it. We can just educate ourselves continuously...we have to use intuition and hope that this is sufficient enough to get our children by.*

### Range of Responses

#### Obligation

Participants demonstrated an immediate response to receiving the notification in both their written responses and group discussions. Their thoughts, feelings and anticipated behaviours indicate that they view the release of this high-risk sexual offender into their community to be a threat requiring some type of action to protect children, despite their simultaneous understanding that the threat of child sexual abuse in their community was not 'new'. Parents in the study appeared to feel not only that a protective response was appropriate and necessary, but that they were obligated to do 'something-anything' as responsible parents and community members. Even parents who felt their own child was at little or no risk from this particular offender were compelled to increase their protective behaviours. Group 1 reveals some of the feelings motivating this reaction:

(G1)

- *I'd have to do something or it would be like I was ignoring the warning.*
- *If something of this magnitude happened, I would have to do something.*
- *Parents would feel so guilty if something happened to their kid.*
- *With something like this, even maybe more so because you think "I knew that".*
- *That was my reaction.*
- *...I should have done something because I knew this...I'm somehow even more responsible as a parent because I have been given this information.*
- *(General group member agreement)*

Members of Group 2 had a similar discussion:

- Moderator - So we worry. We feel responsible. If something happens, we feel guilty.*
- *Yeah, there's always something we could have done to have prevented it. That's how we're always going to feel.*

Although participants in every group believed that each parent who received a notification had the right to do 'nothing' in response to receiving the information, no one felt this was the responsible thing to do.

(G4)

- *Moderator - Would it be okay to go - well, hmm, that kind of sucks? Do nothing? Throw it away? File it? Say, 'well I think I've told my kids about this kind of stuff'....*
- *No.*
- *I would say no personally, but that is that individual's right to choose. I don't like it, I don't agree with it, but that individual has the right to do that.*

Despite feeling that some type of protective action was called for, participants did not believe there was one specific or correct way to react. They believed there would be a wide range of responses, from apathy to vigilantism.

(G1)

- *I guess it depends on the community and who gets this notification...*
- *Do you think that in Portage a notification would result in a laid-back response?*
- *No, I think there is a wide range of responses.*
- *I think that may be one thing that would get Portage off it's...*
- *(Much laughter)*
- *- "Maybe we need one of these!" (very loud)*
- *Yes, a very wide range of responses!*

The majority of parents in each discussion group agreed with the pre-notification statement "I would know how to respond if I was told a sex offender had moved into my community". (12/21 participants agreed with this statement, 8 strongly agreed, 5/21 indicated

uncertainty and 4 had no opinion). However, group discussion revealed a definite degree of uncertainty regarding how to best respond.

### Speak to Others

One of the first things many parents thought they would do is speak to others about the notification. Reasons for doing this included a desire to ensure others in the community were aware of the information, to seek information and to seek support. Many thought they would call friends, family and neighbours, "...just to find out how everybody is thinking". (G3)

#### ▪ Sharing information and gaining the assistance of others in the community:

(G4)

- *I would try and tell other people that maybe have younger kids that aren't in school or your grandparents, neighbours...*
- *Tell friends because they could tell other people that have small children too.*

(Gr3)

- *If I got this, I would probably talk to my neighbours just to make sure everybody's got the right information.*
- *talk to your neighbours, have block meetings.*
- *visit retirees –they're at home and might be worried or could keep an eye out. They're the ones at home, they're the eyes and ears of the neighbourhood.*

(G2)

- *I think you have to let the other people in your neighbourhood know, like my neighbours, people across the street have little people, they're not in school yet. My neighbours on either side have windows and they keep an eye on things, especially during the day when my husband's away. They keep their eye on me and my kids. I think they need to know too.*

#### ▪ Seeking information and support:

(G2)

- *I would try to talk to a police officer that was familiar with the case.*
- *I think if it was from the school I would certainly get on the phone to the school.*

(G3)

- *I think the first place I'd go would be to the school and find out what information they've received.*
- *I might research the papers and find out about his history, you know like the court hearings – maybe learn some more of the details.*

(G4)

- *My first thought would be to phone the Women's Shelter to find out more from them.*
- *Why the Women's Shelter?*
- *Because they've had more dealings with negative males, or how do I want to put this - they have had more dealings with this and maybe they could...*
- *But most of their males aren't...*
- *I know, I know, but they do have stalkers and stuff like that, and I would feel more comfortable talking to them and saying 'okay, I got this thing - what can I do? Where would I go from here? I'm scared give me a hug' whatever. I would feel more comfortable talking to them than I would be going to the police and saying 'Listen, I heard this guy was released, I want some information from you'. Cause more than likely they'll give me the royal run around and stuff like that, whereas I'll get something more concrete from the Shelter - 'this is what you should do, try this', whatever - I would feel more comfortable calling them.*

(G1)

- *I think I would like to seek more support. I don't really know enough about pedophiles to really talk about them. Just going through this tonight, and knowing that there are people in the community such as he is - like this is a reality! I think when I talk to my daughter I will use case scenarios, but for myself, I don't know what these people are like. I don't think anybody really knows, but at least we could read more information just for her information sake. I think we should be becoming more informed as to what's actually going on. Not to be fear driven but to be educated.*

Some parents thought it would be more helpful in determining how to respond if there was some specific instruction or direction given with the notification. They suggested that a plan or protocol should be in place so parents and others in the community knew what to do.

(G1)

- *I think that if I didn't do something, no matter even what it was. If we have, and maybe we do have real dangerous people in the community, I would want to do something. Like take turns walking around the school at noon hour or at recess. Like to me you should have like a chain of events. Like first of all you call in four parents to take turns walking the perimeter. You know, I would need to do something like that. I would have to phone the school and say, "Listen, so what's step one? Do you have a step one?" And, is it to supervise the perimeter, or to do something like (a local school) does with a parent on patrol. You know, should we be doing that - is that the next step? But I'd have to do something.*



Even parents who had professional knowledge of sexual offenders and who perceived their own children to be at minimal risk seemed to experience an urge to protect. In this statement, one such participant described her response to a note her child brought home from school regarding a potentially dangerous community member. Although she stated that she did nothing different in response to the information, she actually described a number of protective behaviours:

(G2)

- *I know that I didn't do anything different when that notice came home... I didn't do anything different. She still knew the steps she needed to take to protect herself, and I still knew the steps. We did increase supervision for a while because this house where this was supposedly happening is very close to the babysitter - it wasn't that close to our house, it was closer to the babysitter's house and where we might have been inclined to phone and say "okay, we're home from work, ride your bike". We either picked her up or said "ride your bike three blocks that way so you don't pass that house."*

Others parents were clearly unsure what they should do in response to the information. Many were concerned with how to handle the situation without scaring their child(ren). This parent had professional child care responsibilities in addition to being a parent:

(G1)

- *Every time we get this type of thing (informal notices) from the school we always sort of look at each other and 'Oh no, how are we going to deal with this?' I think our approach has been just to be rather vague, and I'm not sure that's the right approach, but we don't want to frighten children. I mean, I don't think that tomorrow I would remember what this guy looked like. I'm not an observant person, and I likely will not recall that particular face. But I think that what it does is it draws attention to the fact that we need to street-proof the kids. So in general terms we remind them "don't talk to strangers", "don't enter a car".... just in very general terms, without actually telling the kids 'There's this guy, he was just released', and I guess we're all sort of wondering, is that the best approach to take? Should we be more direct? Should we be... you know it's really quite a difficult thing. I think we got one of these just a few weeks ago (informal notification) and there was no picture, and you know again I was thinking in terms of my own daughter. How do I approach this topic with her without frightening her? I deal with kids all the time and I have trouble doing that.*
- *I wrote that I wouldn't know what I would do.*
- *I'd like to think that I could without frightening her (nervous laugh)... unnecessarily, but I don't think that's so easy.*
- *I don't think pointing them out - I know there are pedophiles - for me to sit and talk to my child about some of my reasons I implemented my rules and regulations would be very easy because we've done that before. I'd tell her there are people in our community that are not trustworthy or safe. I'd*

*implement them that way. I don't have a face to the person, and I'm not sure I'd want to put a face to him.*

- *I think you need to protect your children in general.*
- *...because it may not be this person that is a threat to them.*
- *You also need to talk about sexual abuse and personal protection, and not just how this one person is dangerous.*

### Approach

Members in each group spent some time considering the benefits and drawbacks of different approaches to the situation. Some parents promoted an 'offender focussed' approach while others favoured a more comprehensive strategy.

(G4)

- *I think educating our children better.*
- *We can't educate them that someone is out there unless we know that someone is out there.*
- *No. I educate mine on the possibility.*
- *I do too.*
- *I mean (whispers) there's one or two in our neighbourhood right now.*
- *That's true, but I was hoping to wait a little while - he is six.*
- *That's usually when they like to take them.*
- *Cute, blonde, blue-eyed - ya, I know.*
- *But I think there's gentle ways to let them know - don't talk to strangers - there are nice ways to tell them.*

This parent spoke of her residual anger as a child victim of sexual assault and reflected on her initial desire to focus on the offender – then described her more general approach as 'a parent':

(G2)

- *What happened to me as a child might make me want to go and spray paint his head gold or something so that every time he walked out of his house - everybody knew that was him. The adult in me is saying that I shouldn't do that - although the child in me may want to. Well, my parent has kicked in. My child is still protected, in teaching my child the dangers in like, we did do the "Good touches, bad touches" thing and we didn't limit it to strangers in*

*cars. We talked about uncles and aunts, friends' dads, and not just touches of a sexual nature but backhands and anybody could potentially hurt my child.*

### Use of Picture

Group members also expressed a wide range of opinions regarding whether or not to share the offender's picture with children. This discussion in Group 4 is representative of conversations in all four focus groups:

- *Moderator - Would you take your children and point out the house or point out the picture?*
- *No. (several group members at once)*
- *Why wouldn't you want to provide them with the information that could save them? I would.*
- *I would say this is a guy who may hurt you - or something, depending how old they are.*
- *...hurt you - take you away from mommy and daddy.*
- *I'd explain to a three year old that this is a bad guy, or bad man or whatever, 'please stay away from him - run away from him', whatever, but I would give my kids some information that this guy is a potential threat to them.*
- *I wouldn't take them right to the house.*
- *They'd be too curious. My kid would want to go there. Are you kidding? I tell him no, the first thing he does is go check it out.*
- *Don't tell him no. Tell him 'this man hurts little boys'. You don't say 'don't ever go there'.*
- *I know but he would still be curious – 'why, why, why?'*
- *Then that's when you answer his why's.*
- *I keep answering over and over again and he gets...*
- *I have a child just like that and it drives me nuts, but I believe that information is the best...*
- *I would point him out, but I wouldn't necessarily point out the house. I would say 'this is the guy who hurts kids'.*
- *I'd physically identify the guy on the street "see that guy walking down the street - take a good look at him, please remember him".*
- *Yeah, but kids at a certain age, I'm afraid that if they knew, they would go and start mocking, harassing him, and I think that's not exactly fair to the guy either.*

- *(Some laughter)*
- *No - like they might start throwing stones.*
- *(Group comments do not indicate much sympathy at the thought of this occurring)*
- *But according to what the law says now he has served his time, and if our kids harass him, we can get into trouble because our kids are harassing him.*
- *Yeah, but maybe if he's trying to be left alone and then he's constantly being reminded by the kids being around him in the neighbourhood...*
- *I don't think any kids that I know would be standing in front of a sex offender's home going na na na- I don't think so. Do you really think somebody would be stupid enough?*
- *Yep.*
- *Yeah.*
- *You hang around with different kids!*

This parent suggested that while the picture may assist parents identify the specific offender, they should not share it with their children. Instead, parents should take full responsibility for protecting their kids through increased supervision:

(G1)

- *I would never show my child a picture like this and tell them to watch out for this man. I like to always know where my kids are, even though my son's in grade 7. If he's just up the street, they phone me when they're coming home and I watch out the window. These are things that I think parents need to do to protect their kids, or be aware of.*

Other parents felt there was little point in showing their child the offender's picture because they would not remember it anyway.

(G1)

- *I know some people would like to show this to their children, but I don't think I would. I would be careful of this person. If I did she would say "Okay mummy", and that would be it.*
- *And then would she remember that?*
- *Looking at the pictures, by tomorrow or the next day we probably won't remember the face, and we're adults, how are we going to expect our children to remember? I can't remember this tomorrow, but I expect you to.*

However, there was some fear that by not sharing the picture with children you may contribute to the risk of them being victimized.

(G1)

- *What if you didn't show the picture and said, "this thing is going on", and what if your child does meet this person. They might be able to call her by name cause it's on her jacket and she'd wonder "how did you know my name?" because kids don't realise that, and then I'd think why didn't I show her that? Why didn't I do this? You'd really question yourself. The guilt would be so overwhelming. You'd really question yourself.*

### Range of Responses

- Initial Prevention Education - Parents who had engaged in some type of street-proofing activities with their children seemed somewhat more comfortable with the idea of providing reminders or taking some other type of protective action. However, participants agreed it might be difficult to do prevention work for the very first time in response to receiving a community notification. Group 2 discussed this issue at length:

- *Don't you think that before something like this comes in your mailbox, or handed to you by your kids, that you would want your kid to have at least the basic information in their head so it wasn't something new and surprising, then all of a sudden this is - you have to do this?*
- *Mine does.*
- *As a parent you have done that. But what about the other parents that haven't?*
- *All of a sudden this guy becomes three times as bad because they haven't got a clue and all of a sudden all this information is being thrown at them and they have to remember all these things they have to do, and nobody's ever told them that before.*
- *How do parents that aren't comfortable with teaching their kids street-proofing, how do they know what to teach? How do they know if they're telling them the right thing or not? Or if they're telling them how to approach those situations. A lot of people aren't comfortable talking to their kids about that - they don't want them to know about it, and there's either no bad people in the world, or else 'the big bad wolf' is going to get them and you've got your kids so scared they don't want to leave.*
- *You've got to send them to the guidance counsellors. You as a parent should know what you're comfortable talking to your children about and what you are not. If you are not comfortable with the situation, you send them to the guidance counsellor at the school. And they are trained to teach and talk to your children about all situations.*

Similar discussion in other groups encouraged one parent to comment:

(G4)

- *I guess I'm going to have to start pulling down my street-proofing books and start going through them - I'm going to have to start doing more street-proofing with my children than I have before.*
- *Before it's too late.*

- Reminder - Parents agreed that it was important to speak to your child(ren) at an opportune time and to gear the information to their particular age. Many used television programs, books and songs as part of their street-proofing education. For many parents the notification would be the trigger for a 'refresher course'.

(G2)

- *You get something like this and I think it's time to talk to your children again. My kids are 5 and 6, so you give them two days and they've forgotten what you said. So it's time to talk to them again.*

(G3)

- *My kids are 10 and 14. I've talked to them, you know, when they were younger we gave them scenarios. Now that they're older I've stopped giving them the scenarios, just reminders and rules. Hopefully they've retained most of what we talked about.*
- *And I've wondered if this was a real notification would you go back and remind them?*
- *I'm sure I would, given the seriousness of this.*

- Ongoing - Some parents maintained a relatively high level of protective behaviour based on their more general, on-going concern about the possibility of abuse. These parents described their prevention strategies to other group members even though they were aware that other parents might see them as paranoid or overly cautious.

(G2)

- *I drive them, I'm one of those whooses that will over-react, and I only live five blocks from the school, but I drive my kids or I walk them. They have walked alone but not too often, because I'm very paranoid, and because I've been abused, and just many, many things have happened, but I will not leave my kids to do any of that.*

(G4)

- *I don't care if you think I'm paranoid, I'm going to make sure my son is safe. I mean that's my job. I'm not insane about it - he does get to walk to his friend's place and stuff. He has to phone me the minute he gets there and I*

*try to talk to him about - you know if you ever see anybody slow down, you take off running. These are things that happen and hopefully... All I can do is hope for the best, that I've protected him and armed him with enough information to protect himself. Not that that necessarily means anything, especially if a big guy comes out and grabs him.*

### Limits

Participants tried to determine what type of response might be considered excessive or 'too far'. Individual standards differed; what was acceptable to one might be 'crazy' to another. Several parents wondered or worried about how 'crazy' they might get if they actually felt the offender was a danger to their child.

(G2)

- *There's no point in over-reacting, following them with a big stick or something as they're walking home from school. Someone's gonna think you're nuts - that you're some kind of oddball!*
- *That's because you are though (if you did that).*
- *But if somebody hurts your babies, you get pretty ugly.*

(G4)

- *I wouldn't go out looking for this guy and wanting to hang him up by his balls from a tree.*
- *That might come to mind but I wouldn't actually do it.*
- *I'm thinking baling wire...*
- *...a little elastic band - bob that tail...*
- *...some fishing line!*

*Moderator - So we all have these sort of vengeful ideas, but there is a limit that we recognise?*

- *Don't think it could never happen to you - don't say you would never ever act on those - I don't think that's fair because until you've ever been in this position... You think all your life, "I'd do this, I'd do that", but when it happens, emotions take over your normal person and you aren't rational any more.*

Group 3 had a very similar conversation:

- *Even if he might be scum – you have to remember that he still has rights, so you can't go barreling up his doorstep and punch his lights out, or even trespass in his space, as much as everybody would like to. It says right here no vigilantism. So we almost have to take a deep breath and try to calm down and think sensibly.*

- *I can't see myself walking up to his door and saying, "I know who you are. I know what you've done", but I couldn't do that. I might glare at him a bit but I could never see myself speaking to him.*
- *Ya, that would be me too – I'd glare at him!*
- *Whereas I could see my husband doing that. Just break his arm off. But then I look at his size, his weight...I mean this guy is massive! Like let's be realistic here.*
- *I'd be afraid I'd do something crazy like...That would make me afraid that I would even do something like that.*

Some thought the range of appropriate responses was clearly defined by the law.

(G2)

- *I'm going to protect my kid.*
- *All those things are illegal. You have to think of the legalities of it.*
- *A lot of people would do those things thinking they are somehow protecting their children by writing graffiti on his house.*
- *Just brand him on the forehead!*

Other thought he deserved whatever type of response he received.

(G4)

- *What's the difference to what they did? Things like this just make me mad.*
- *I think if it was just something where he approached a child and if your child was okay after that, but if he actually did something personally to your child, I'd want to hunt him down or something. That would be my first thought.*

Some members of Group 1 wondered if a person's idea regarding what was an acceptable response was influenced by how you or others in your life have dealt with problems, conflicts or threats.

- *I think maybe it has a lot to do with how you were brought up in your family. Like if a neighbour did something wrong and your dad went over and kicked his door down ... we would think that was fine. Morals, values, ... are a big part of your decisions.*
- *But if you had a dad that would beat up the neighbour over something, you would think nothing of it. I've seen people do it.*



Others not only felt they were capable of doing something like this, they considered it to be an appropriate and necessary response, even though there were negative personal consequences for doing so.

- *I think I would stomp over there and tell him (very assertively), "Look it, those are my kids are there in that yard, I'm watching you..." As my child's protector who knows what we would have to do.*
- *...and you know how slow the wheels of justice take over. I mean you could phone (the police) 14 times before action is actually taken.*
- *And that is why you take things in your own hands. And then his neighbour beats him up and then his neighbour goes to jail!*

### Reaction of Offender

A member of Group 1 suggested a more organized, community response:

- *Maybe we could come up with a list of things for this man to go through. For example, 'We know you are here and we do respect you as a human being, but please watch these parameters. These are what we're going to allow and what we would not allow. We do care for our children, so please honour these by laws. If you're standing by the street corner at night looking at my window we will do something about it.'*
- *I think that works well, except that when you read this particular one it talks about 'potentially violent'.*
- *That's right.*
- *...and I would tend to think that if the community gave him some guidelines it would set him off. So there's that fine line of how the guidelines affect that person. It might benefit us to set up those guidelines, but when you try to put them into place with that specific person, will it send him off on a rampage.*

This fear of somehow 'enraging' the offender or triggering his offending behaviour also arose in this discussion in Group 3:

- *I tell ya, if we got a bulletin and I saw his face on it and I saw him walking past, I'd let him know.*
- *Oh ya...he would know he's not welcome.*
- *You mean confronting him?*
- *I wouldn't be aggressive to begin with. If he came ... I'd make him very uncomfortable.*

As group moderator, I asked them to explain what might motivate this desire to approach the offender. What was the perceived benefit of this very direct approach?

- *Intimidation.*

**Moderator-** *You intimidating the offender?*

- *Ya.*

**Moderator-** *Or because the offender is intimidating to you?*

- *Just this note to say he's there intimidates me, but I'm not going to sit back and be afraid.*

**Moderator -** *So you're not allowing yourself to be defined as a victim?*

- *Oh no, no way. He's going to know where I stand and where he stands. Yes sir.*
- *I think I would take a different approach. I would fear that he would get bent out of shape or things would escalate if he was confronted – like maybe then he'd target my children.*

### Conflict

Group members had difficulty knowing what was expected of them and what responses would be considered appropriate.

(G4)

- *I think what this is saying is they don't want people to go to all your neighbours and say, "Kevin lives here and we're going to sit outside every day in our cars and we're going to watch and make sure he doesn't get out and hurt our children... and if he does get out - shoot him!"*
- *Or I'll follow him in the morning and you follow him in the evening, and you follow him at night.*

**Moderator -** *Up to the "if he gets out shoot him" part, is that unreasonable? There are communities that have developed parent patrols, and said from 9:00 a.m. until noon I'm responsible for keeping an eye out, after that it's you and then you...*

- *But there's so many of them!*
- *That's the unfortunate part.*

There was also evidence of personal struggles between what individual participants would think of doing and what they thought was acceptable to the community.

(G4)

- *How many mothers have gone into court and shot the person who did that to their child? ... you see it on T.V. - or fathers or whatever - it happens. I wouldn't, I'd think it but I wouldn't do it.... No, I couldn't.*

(G2)

- *The intellectual in me is agreeing with you, the child in me is saying the son-of-a-bitches should be ... you know. I'm fighting with myself inside thinking, you know, I'm a mature adult and what we're saying; makes sense but the child in me is saying ..... I know you can't, but, you know...*

This mother felt that even if your child was sexually assaulted, taking any sort of vengeful action against the offender would simply add to the negative impact on the victims.

(G4)

- *My concern would be trying to help my child to deal with what happened. I think if you live with a vengeance, trying to get back, that what happened is always there in your life, and it's always a reminder to the victim, and the family - I think they suffer bad enough as it is, they don't need to be slapped in the face every day or every minute of the day with that.*

### Maternal Response

In all four groups, mothers consistently referred to themselves when speaking of taking action to protect their child(ren). After watching this occur in the first three groups, I shared my observation with Group 4:

*Moderator - I've noticed as we've been talking that any time we're talking about child protection you've used "I", like you actually said "it's my job". Is it the use of "I" as in me a mother, or are you saying "I" simply because you're here but it's a job that's shared between you and your partner? Is it a mother's responsibility to deal with this stuff?*

- *I think it is a mother's responsibility to protect their children.*
- *Well it's a father's too, but I think males don't look at it the same as females. We give life to them.*
- *They don't have the fear. At our age we are now, our husbands didn't have that fear.*
- *Like I said, they were brought up differently than we were, so they react differently, and they would approach this differently than we would.*
- *The first reaction from my husband (after learning of an attempted assault on their child) was "If I ever see him I'll kill him". First words out of his mouth, and I'm like "that's really good, you're going to go out and kill him and end up in jail and where are you going to be when we need you here?"*
- *What was your first reaction?*

- *When I found out what happened? I wanted him put away and I wanted him put away where there was no chance of ever getting out.*
- *Throw away the key!*

Other mothers also suspected their husband's reaction would be different from theirs. Although the majority felt their husband's reaction would be angry, one mother thought her husband would be quite reasonable about it. However, as she spoke, she too revealed the expectation that street-proofing their child was her job.

(G1)

- *They do tend to overreact when something happens though. (Much agreement)*
- *Oh, for sure!*
- *If it's with their own they over react. We're there to nurture our child if he/she were hurt, but the husband or the male - "who did that?" "I would like to know who did that."*
- *I think my husband would definitely take a more level-headed approach, like he'd be less emotional about this. He would see a need to street-proof, the child and definitely support my doing that (...pause...) or doing it as a family.*
- *But he wouldn't pull down all the blinds and lock all the doors...*
- *Exactly - he wouldn't be following her - driving behind her on her bike...*
- *Yeah, with the headlights off!*

Other mothers believed protecting children was definitely a maternal responsibility:

(G3)

- *It's my job, I don't want anyone telling her, whether it's the school or the babysitter or my mother, whatever. It's my job not anyone else's. And sending home the releases is good, but perhaps they should wait for the school to talk to the children 'til after the parents have had a chance.*

(G1)

- *It's that parental instinct, the motherly instinct that puts Moms in that protection mode that we all tend to get into when it has to do with our children.*
- *I think women generally feel more vulnerable in society.*
- *(Lots of verbal and non-verbal agreement)*

- *I think we can take a look at our group right now and I don't see any men sitting here. I think it is a maternal feeling that we want to protect our young.*

Group 4 explored this common perception that women feel more vulnerable in society. Members described the 'prevention messages' they had received growing up. However, this group also felt things were changing as abuse against males was being recognized and the risk of victimization of young boys acknowledged.

*Moderator - Do you think it's a gender thing, that men and women just think about the issue differently?*

- *Yes and no. It's because he's a guy. He's never had to worry about being alone at night walking down the street, worrying about being raped or whatever, as much as a woman.*
- *But that's not true though. These things as we are seeing now - in our hockey teams, in our schools, in our churches.*
- *I know. I'm just thinking about when I grew up. I as a female child was always told "you've got to be in before the street lights come on because when the street lights come on it's too dark for you to be out". Yet my brother who was a year younger could stay out longer. I always thought it was unfair and I was always told to protect myself and be careful and that kind of stuff. But my brother was never warned like I was, and the anxiety was never put on him like it was on me, so he grew up differently than I did.*
- *Because I think that because they weren't armed with proper information they assumed that it couldn't happen to them.*
- *That was then.*

#### Child focussed strategy

Most parents described having engaged in some type of child protection education or strategy prior to being notified. Much of what would be done in response to receiving a notification would involve reviewing these rules with their children. Specific safety strategies engaged in by parents included vigilant supervision, avoiding certain 'high-risk' situations, limiting children's activities and freedoms and routine questioning.

(G4)

- *It's a certain distance my kids are able to go away from me before I start getting scared like... I always find myself ... there's sort of...*
- *'Radar'.*
- *Yeah! They've gone too far.*

- *Even at our place there are certain places when they go too far I get uncomfortable and I have to either get closer to them or just keep an eye on them until they get back into that 'comfort zone'.*

Child focussed safety education reflected the current 'know-go-tell' approach promoted in school and community prevention education programs.

(G2)

- *We used that song - Never Talk to Strangers, and I'd say things like, "Okay, now what are you going to do if a car pulls up next to you and says come into the car? What are we going to do? We yell NO!"*

(G4)

- *On television they showed a good thing where these kids all went to this one class and they spent like two hours in there and they went through the whole program - do that, don't do this, yell and scream if someone approaches you, kick and all that.*
- *We have code words, and my child does not go with anybody - I don't care if you know them unless they know the code - and I usually phone ahead. If something happened that I couldn't tell him before he left I'd phone the school and I'd talk to him on the phone.*

Parents described establishing touch rules or boundaries with their children.

(G2)

- *I've got one of each and I know I pretty much told them both the same thing at the same time. My daughter is a little bit younger so she doesn't really - she understands it but not to the extreme that my son would, but she also knows. I've never explained it about the penis entering the vagina - I've never mentioned it in detail the penis entering the anal area, like that. I have not. I have said things like, you know, they put the penis in the private parts, whether it be your - we use the words pee-pee and bum-bum, and stuff like that. It's the words they have chosen. But that I've done. They pretty much know that body parts, fingers - you name it they can use that - tools. To watch for any of that, that's how I've described it to my children - just not in direct detail.*
- *For my 5 year old, it's "**Nobody** is to **ever** touch you ever, **anywhere!**" (Engages group in joking about this broad warning)*
- *That's more or less what mine get too! (Laughter, shared understanding)*
- *Mine are told private parts are everything covered by a bathing suit.*

Another popular strategy was to develop a relationship that encouraged children to tell their parents anything, without fear of punishment with the hope that children might share secrets or disclose inappropriate contact before an assault occurred.

(G2)

- *I keep saying to my boys you know you can tell me anything, and if someone hurts you I'll never be angry with you. I said I will be honest and I might be mad at them, but I will never, ever be angry at you because I can remember all the things that went through my head .....*

*Right – 'I'm bad, I caused that, I did that'.*

While one mother agreed that enabling your child to disclose was important, she questioned how much children would actually share with their parent(s).

- *I think the open line of communication is really important. Your kids trust you and you trust them enough that you know they'll come to you if they have a problem. But I thought because of what I've done that my kid was pretty comfortable coming to me. A couple of weeks ago she was not acting like her usual happy self and when I checked in her room, I realised she was crying and I said what's the matter? And she said 'Well, I accidentally broke the head off Ken'. So this was like 2 weeks after the fact. Now if she's not going to tell me that, how can I expect her to tell me (uncomfortable laughter) somebody's molesting her?*

#### School-based Prevention Education

It was interesting to note that while all parents supported the idea of 'street-proofing' being offered through the school, few parents knew if this was currently being done. Participant's believed that the more often children received messages about how to protect themselves, the more likely these rules would be learned and practiced. One drawback to involving the school in child sexual abuse prevention education was the concern that what was taught in school might differ from the type or amount of information parents would be comfortable with their children knowing.

(G2)

- *I think that really it has to be reinforced in the schools. Not just once or whatever they do it. My daughter's in kindergarten and she still hasn't got any child street proofing.*
- *My daughter's in grade six and hasn't - at school.*
- *What the heck is it?*

(G3)

- *Oh, I think if the school had been talking to the students too I'd support that. The more people who talk about it, it's going to sink deeper than it would if it was just coming from the parents. A child is more apt to listen to it from the teacher or the principal, and if the school gets talking about it, the students,*

*the older students get talking about it, then the younger kids are going to hear that too.*

- *I think the problem with that though is, depending on how the parents have described it to the children, and how far in depth they're going. Then perhaps the school or the teachers or someone comes along and go more in depth than the parents ever wanted to go. I think that for me that wouldn't be a really big problem because I've talked to my daughter about, 'people shouldn't touch you in places where your bathing suit covers' and stuff like that. But really, for her age, I don't want to go more in depth and I would be very angry if the school was more graphic.*

One mother expressed concern with how the school would distribute the notification information:

(G3)

- *Would they send this to your child, or would it be stapled shut, or in an envelope? Some parents wouldn't want their child to see that and that's their choice. I don't know whether you'd want your kid to come home and say "Mommy, what does this mean?" If you didn't want to tell him?*

Parents suggested a number of supports that could be provided anytime that the community was to be notified. Some felt that it would be helpful to attach information or guidelines to the media release. Others thought there should be a telephone number, a 'Helpline', parents could call for additional information or support.

(G4)

- *...even some guidelines on what to say to your children, what to teach your children. Like if they have something on hand to release with that (the notification) so the parents know.*

One participant felt very strongly that the notice should not simply be distributed to community members and suggested that community meetings should be organized to help parents determine what kind of response was warranted and to calm their initial fears.

(G2)

- *As far as the school goes, when they give the media release, I don't know whether it's such a good idea to hand it to the kids...maybe to call an emergency parent meeting and they should come and get the information and have a representative from say the R.C.M.P. and the school... so you don't get a bunch of vigilante parents out on the loose...or scared and misinformed kids...*
- *...to calm everybody – because I can just imagine some people just absolutely flipping...somebody has to be there to quell some of the fears and direct them and get them headed in the proper direction. What I'm saying is you don't have to panic about this – we're here, we're going to step up our*



*parent watches and you just have to reinforce with your kids about being safe and being street-wise, and you may want to take these precautions...what to do when you run into him, if you run into him, without setting off a real panic.*

Another participant suggested that the community 'crisis' initiated by the notification might present an opportunity to distribute a petition and encourage parents to lobby for changes in sex offender laws. This, in effect, can act to empower parents at a time when they may be feeling anxious, powerless, and afraid.

(G4)

- *...like if anybody wants to sign a petition to have the laws changed on notifications or something, sometimes you don't think you can do a lot by yourself, but when you are added with a whole list of other people and every town gets involved with signing their name, it's not a lot, but sometimes that can make a big difference.*

#### Duration

Regardless of how parents chose to respond, all participants agreed that the initial reaction to the information would dissipate over time. Although there may be an initial effort to reduce the possibility of the identified offender having opportunities to re-offend with children in the community, the level of protective behaviour is time and context limited.

(G1)

- *It would depend on what more you heard. In a small community you hear things. It would depend on if it kept being refreshed in your mind - if you see him at the mall, or he's working here. I think each instance of hearing about that person or whatever would increase the time. But if it went on and you never heard anything, to your knowledge he maybe even has left the community because you heard nothing and saw nothing - you know within several weeks or whatever it would start to taper.*
- *I guess what we're saying is that we go through the initial shock and maybe it would stay with us for a time - maybe days, maybe longer, maybe shorter. But initially when you are shocked like that you naturally want to stay safe. The words themselves tell you that he is a danger.*
- *So it's not just a short-term thing, and you get used to this person being in the community, and you say oh, he's not that bad.*
- *Maybe...*

(G4)

- *But I think these kinds of things can maybe remind you sometimes you get too busy with other things and you don't stop to go back to what you did. One of the first times these came out, the way everyone's looking around and everything's fine and you don't hear anything in the papers, and you think maybe he's gone away or something, then you start letting up again. That's usually when they attack.*

### Concern and Uncertainty

One mother expressed her fears for responding in the best way possible. She felt completely responsible for saying or doing the right thing, or risk an assault occurring on her children.

(G2)

- *When you really think about it, you can only do so much. You hope they follow every word you say, and you hope that you say the right thing, because one slip that you would never even think of could do the damage, and you've got to live with that. So it's very, very scary how you word things or try to encourage your kids to be brave because you want to give them that space, but yet you give them that damn space and you can blow it big-time. If you blow it big-time then you live with it for the rest of your life.*

### Protector Vs Monitor

Although they did not agree on how to respond to the notification, how to behave towards the offender and what prevention messages should be shared with children, all participants seemed to be more prepared to take of the role of protecting children than the responsibility of monitoring the offender. Throughout their discussions group members referred to this idea in numerous ways:

(G1)

- *You kind of share the responsibility in watching for this guy.*
- *But again, it's not telling you what to watch for.*

(G3)

- *Communities can't take responsibility (for the offender) because they can't control another person, but we can take responsibility for our children and each other's children. It shouldn't just be a matter of well, ..... I've done my job, it should be making sure that other kids are safe.*

However, despite their best-intentioned efforts, participants wondered if it was possible to respond in any way that would actually protect their child, or any child, from a determined adult sex offender:

(G4)

- *I think for me if I had a way, if there was other parents doing the watch kind of thing, if I had the time I would. It's been close so now I realise that it can happen to anybody at any time, male or female, and I don't care how prepared they are, if you get grabbed by someone twice your size you*

*generally don't get away. And once something's happened, you can't take it back. I wouldn't want it to happen to anybody else's kids, not just mine, but anybody's kids. That's horrible.*

### Summary

This study asked participants to describe the immediate impact and anticipated effects of receiving information regarding the release of a high-risk child sex-offender into their community. Analysis of both their written responses and focus group discussions reveals a wide range of parental experience. Participants described the emotional and physical impact of being notified as well as a variety of possible protective behaviours. The implications of these findings will be discussed in the final chapter.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

The objective of the Community Notification Protocol in the province of Manitoba is to enhance public protection by releasing information to citizens when a high-risk sexual offender is or will be living in the community. The expectation is that those persons receiving the information will assess the risk to themselves or their loved ones and take appropriate but legal action to prevent victimization. Generally it is anticipated that, as a result of being notified, parents will educate their children about the potential threat of abuse, monitor the identified offender's behaviour and, through these two activities, reduce his access to children in the community.

This chapter will describe what parent-participants in this study said they would think, feel and do in response to receiving a notification. It will also consider these findings in relation to the assumptions made by notification advocates and critics. It is not the purpose of this study to evaluate the form, content or method of the notification itself, nor parents' responses to it. Although some responses might be recognized as being more effective, appropriate, or acceptable, it is not the goal of this study to judge parental response in any way. This discussion will simply examine whether or not the responses described by participants were consistent with the expectations of positive and negative consequences outlined in the literature.

#### **Group Discussion**

Although this study does not propose to measure the specific effect of group discussion on risk perception or response, it is important to recognize the influence of the group format on data collected. First and foremost, the study itself brought participants together in a relatively controlled way to simulate a notification experience. The research design ensured that all parents who received the notification read it and were encouraged to articulate their thoughts and feelings. In the event of an actual community notification this would not necessarily happen. Parents may not receive the notification, may receive it but not read it or might read it but choose not to take any action. While most parents would receive and respond to the notification in the

privacy of their own home, group participants were under some pressure to define some type of response or to clarify their feelings for not having to.

#### Self-disclosure

The first task assigned to participants after receiving the notification was to write down their immediate reactions to the information. Participants took a great deal of time to complete this exercise, between 10 to 15 minutes in each group. I observed parents making an effort to identify and describe what they were thinking and feeling. Although they were not obligated to directly share their answers with the group it is believed that this task sensitized participants to their experience and provided them with some initial responses for engaging in the discussion.

The written work captured anonymous, individual responses but did not differ significantly from what was raised in the discussion. Comments made during group discussion reflected the same range and diversity of emotions, concerns, questions and responses that parents wrote about privately. This suggests that the opinions shared in the group were not strongly influenced by self-censorship, 'groupthink' or social desirability, which supports the validity of the findings. The one exception to this observation of consistency was reflected in participants' comments regarding their knowing what to do if a high-risk sex offender moved into their community. Prior to receiving the notification 57% of all participants indicated they would know what to do, but the questions and discussions of every group revealed a general level of self-doubt regarding the ability to respond effectively. Not only did parents question their own self-efficacy, but wondered if there was actually anything that could be done to protect their child from a determined adult sex offender.

#### Group Cohesion

The literature on focus group research suggests that it is important to create a cohesive group to maximize accurate self-disclosure of personal ideas and opinions. It was reassuring to find evidence of group cohesion in observations of group members' physical and verbal interactions (Jones, Bamlund, and Haiman, 1980).

- Physical Signs - Members spaced themselves around the table as they entered the room.

During the written exercises this space was maintained but the proximity between

participants changed as they engaged in discussions with one another. Active members tended to draw closer together, often leaning forward in their chairs to speak or listen. One or two members of every group tended to sit back in their chairs until they felt compelled to speak, then signaled their participation by leaning forward towards the table. Members made frequent eye contact and occasionally physical contact as well. In more than one group, it was noted that a participant touched another speaker on the arm in a demonstration of agreement or support.

- Respect – Group members were very respectful of one another. Participants listened and allowed others to finish speaking or complete a thought even if they disagreed with the point being made. Members were also respectful of meaningful pauses, when a speaker was searching for the right words to express an idea.
- Synergy – The level of synergy evident in the focus groups was very exciting, although it created some challenges in accurately reflecting group discussions in the typed transcripts. As members of each group began to describe and explore their ideas and responses to being notified, the flow of their conversation became a communal experience. Speakers would add to, finish off, restate, and be reminded of other ideas as the result of an initial comment. This snowball effect sometimes meant that several speakers were involved in the expression of a single idea. Members quickly became comfortable with one another, often referring to each other by name. When summarizing parts of the discussion, members often referred to the group as "we", and "us". They also indicated support for one another through short expressions of agreement and head nodding.
- Trust – Comfort in the group setting was indicated through members sharing personal information. Members of two groups spoke freely about their own experiences as victims of childhood sexual abuse. Others made 'risky' admissions, such as the woman who admitted she did not understand the language used in the notification (G4), and another who wondered if her lack of sympathy for the offender meant she was "not a very good Christian woman" (G1).

- Sharing behaviours – As some members spoke of their reluctance or lack of confidence in educating their child about the risk of child sexual abuse, other members offered encouragement and suggestions. A variety of parenting tips, as well as the names of books and movies that others had found helpful in educating their own children were offered.
- Withstanding conflict – In addition to demonstrations of support and agreement with the ideas of others, group members engaged in a great deal of disagreement and questioning. Although members regularly challenged each other it was never threatening. Balanced with respectful forms of communication and a shared desire to understand their differences, members were able to withstand the conflict and simply agreed to disagree on certain points.
- Reluctance to leave - Participants often remained after the formal group interaction had been completed; after the moderator's summary, distribution of handouts and closing thank-you. Many parents described the focus group experience as interesting, thought provoking and enjoyable. One mother told me that she was initially reluctant to attend but was pleased she had as she thought the research topic was very important.

#### Forms of Communication

All of the groups were very self-directed. Participants were comfortable with the "group discussion" format and often engaged or questioned one-another in a way that reduced the need for active moderator intervention. Most of the ideas identified in the focus group interview guide arose spontaneously in the group discussion, although in a different order, and with different degrees of priority or importance to members. In those cases where it was appropriate or necessary, topics from the interview guide were introduced to ensure that all groups explored similar ideas to some extent.

The same question was raised at the beginning of every group: "What was the experience of receiving this notification?" The flow of conversation in each group followed a similar pattern. Initially participants made short comments about how awful, serious, and scary the notification information was. As they began sharing their feelings, thoughts and questions about the issue, their contributions to the discussion tended to become longer and more detailed.

After exploring the topic each group summarized what had been discussed, offered some suggestions for future notifications and made a few short parting comments.

- **Humour** – Despite the nature of the topic, joking, laughter, comical facial expressions and humorous remarks were present in all group discussions. This appeared to be a way of easing the expression of risky ideas, diffusing tense moments and softening statements that suggested a lack of sympathy or imagined violent act against the offender. It enabled others to vent similar ideas by participating in the joke.
- **Silence** – There were often pauses or periods of time where members would quietly nod their heads or think about a statement made by another. At times the silence would be a meaningful part of what was being communicated as participants would begin speaking and allow their words to trail off, making room for others to 'fill in the blank'. For example, this member of Group 1 expressed an idea others in her group agreed with, even though she did not state it verbally, "I have trouble having any kind of sympathy...I would not support violence towards him but, uh...(trailed off). There was a group pause following this as others nodded in agreement.
- **Storytelling** – In every group I observed members sharing stories about experiences where they felt vulnerable, had been victimized, or had made an effort to increase personal safety in the face of a perceived threat. While these 'stories' initially seemed unrelated to the topic of this study, I now believe these experiences were raised in an effort to understand how members had responded to previous threats and to predict how they might respond to the current threat. It enabled them to relate to the new situation of being notified by making the unfamiliar more familiar, considering a plan, and examining how capable they would be of taking appropriate action.
- **Venting** – Some of the group communication was simple expression of emotion. Feelings of frustration, anger, fear, powerlessness and anxiety were shared by the majority of participants.
- **Language** - Participants used a variety of words to refer to the offender. Only two participants, attending different groups, referred to the subject of the notification by name,



"Kevin". The most common reference to a sex offender was 'dirty old man'. Other words used included creep, deviant, and monster.

Overall I have confidence that the methodology achieved the goal of good communication in a group setting as described by Jones, Bamlund, and Haiman (1980), "...communication flows freely from person to person according to whoever is moved to speak or whoever has relevant information to contribute. Attention shifts randomly around the group..." (p. 103). While there were a small number of parents who were more active in their group conversations than others, all members appeared to feel free to share and participate as they wished.

### Group Roles

Roles played by group members are significant because it was observed that parents tended to engage in the group from a particular perspective through which they responded consistently. Although able to understand and even agree with other perspectives, participants appeared to promote a certain point of view, resulting in an interesting balance of ideas and suggestions.

While the presence of a single male group member presented an interesting opportunity to compare his response to both his wife and female participants in general, it is not possible to comment specifically on his experience of being notified due to confidentiality. However, although he played a role in Group 3 somewhat different from other female members of that group, it was similar to the role played by female members of other all female groups. The description he provided of impact and response was not distinctly different from all other participants.

- Child Protector - A number of parents were relatively task-oriented in their response. They had immediate plans for protecting their child, regardless of the consequences or what others might think. Examples of this include the parents who spoke of confronting the offender, of encouraging him to leave the community or of supervising their child in a way that others might not fully understand. " I don't care if you think I'm paranoid, I'm going to make sure my son is safe. I mean that's my job." (G4).

- **Identified with Victim** – This perspective was most often promoted by participants who self-identified as having been childhood victims of sexual abuse. They expressed anger at the injustice of short sentences and 'early' releases given to child sex offenders. They promoted harsh punishment for the offender and great concern for potential child victims. Although I remained worried about the risk of overdisclosure by these group members, the parents who shared their victimization experiences did it in an appropriate way and seemed empowered to speak freely about both their experience and the after-effects. These group members were assertive and eloquent. Although they normalized their experience as something that they believed many other women had suffered they clearly identified the offender as fully responsible for his behaviour.
- **Identified with Offender as Victim** – In every group there were one or two participants who introduced the element of empathy for the offender. While this was a more temporary role and did not seem to influence every aspect of their participation, it was not a perspective shared by all members. These group members raised questions about the causes of sexual offending behaviours and wondered what might happen to a young boy that would result in his becoming this type of offender. They expressed some hope for rehabilitation and at times sympathy for the difficulty he might experience in the community following his release. However, no one felt him blameless and did not consider any personal experience to be an excuse for sex offending behaviour.
- **Educator** – Generally, those participants with specialized knowledge regarding the issue acted as group educator. These participants provided factual information regarding aspects of the justice system, offender behaviour or victim issues. Some 'educators' were able to participate from this more objective perspective in addition to responding to the notification as a parent. One woman recognized this dual response and commented, "I guess I had a different perspective on it, and it's hard to separate the feelings of a parent and the feelings of having a bit of this knowledge already" (G1).
- **Listener** - In every group there were one or two members who were 'listeners'. Although everyone was encouraged to speak these members typically made only one or two

comments during the entire discussion. However, these contributions were often very relevant. In Group 2 one participant suggested an alternate perspective for the purpose and meaning of the notification, defining it as a "voice for victims". In Group 4 a member provided factual information regarding the Provincial Child Abuse Registry that balanced an emotional discussion about the effects of false allegations of abuse leveled against innocent parents. In both cases these comments resulted in a shift and re-focussing of the discussion, as well as introducing new ideas for other group members to consider.

Although the groups were recruited differently, conducted separately and very self-directed, the group content and context was more similar than different. The consistency of group discussion and interaction revealed strong trends in participant experience and response.

### **Discussion of Findings**

#### **Support**

Parents clearly want to be notified if a high-risk child sex offender is or will be residing in their community. Prior to receiving the notification used in this study 19 of 21, (90%) parents indicated that they would rather be provided with this information than not. Many felt that the previous policy of confidentiality and secrecy had contributed to the problem and existence of child sexual abuse and often enabled offences to continue. The provision of accurate, factual information was seen as a great improvement over the possibility of receiving second-hand gossip from a well-meaning friend or neighbour.

Participants support the idea of notification for all same reasons identified by pro-notification advocates. Parents felt they had a right and a need to know because of the expectation that the identified offender would re-offend following his release into their community. This combined with a lack of community resources or supervision, the lack of effective treatment, and the perceived devastation to potential victims all resulted in parents' desire for this information. Participants felt that child sex offenders are worse than other criminals due to the unique vulnerability of child victims and the sneaky, unpredictable, manipulative, and 'predatory' nature of their crimes. This resulted in support for paying special attention to high-risk child sex-offenders through public notification. Although group members recognized the potential for the

offender to experience a negative or even violent reception in the community they seemed to consider these consequences an appropriate punishment for his crimes.

### Emotional Impact

Although a minority of participants described feeling relieved and grateful for receiving the notification, the majority of readers had a more negative emotional reaction to the information. Most described feeling anxious, scared and vulnerable. It was interesting to note that a number of participants described feeling sick, sickly, nauseous or ill in response to the notification. For some this was a truly physical reaction: "I was okay until I read pedophile...I got a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach...cold sweats like someone hit me..." (G4). When discussing the presence of the offender parents described feeling helpless, afraid, and powerless. In contrast, parents were more likely to describe feelings of anger and frustration as they criticized a justice system that enabled a dangerous, high-risk offender to move into their community. This was a primary theme raised early in all discussion groups – if high-risk why release? The contradiction between these two pieces of information presented a major challenge to parents in their effort to understand the notification. Questions were raised about conviction rates, sentencing and treatment.

Participants felt the offender's presence in the community increased the threat or risk of children being sexually abused, although not necessarily their own children. The notification warned them of a 'new' danger in the neighbourhood, yet all parents acknowledged that unidentified offenders were most likely already living amongst them. Why did being notified about this one offender result in parents feeling the neighbourhood had suddenly become a more dangerous environment? The notification appeared to focus attention on the distinct potential for child sexual abuse to occur in the community, there was no longer a distant awareness of the possibility. The notification provided the name and face of a convicted offender and told parents of his presence. The information provided was considered to be a legitimate, undeniable, stark warning, not an easily dismissed rumour.

The language used was also considered to be very powerful. The notification was the first time many parents had been exposed to any description or details of child sex offences. Although

much of the language was considered too clinical or technical by some parents, others found it graphic and unsettling. Being provided with written information about this subject was a new experience for most participants and some commented on the fact that until now it was considered taboo to refer to such matters publicly. While the use of Criminal Code terms lent some legitimacy to the notification it left parents wondering what the offender had actually done to his victims. This lack of understanding frustrated parents who thought a better understanding of exactly how this man had offended would be valuable information in developing an appropriate child protection strategy.

Finally, the mere fact that the community was being notified about this specific offender suggested that this is a special case; that somehow he is more dangerous than other criminals and even other sexual offenders.

#### Immediate Response

In addition to describing a number of immediate emotional responses to receiving the notification, most parents described some aspect of their child protection strategy within minutes of reading the offender information. There was a definite sense of obligation to do something to protect children from the offender, even when parents were not sure what they could or should do. Parents stated that they would have to 'do something', or it would feel like they were ignoring the warning. Members of Group 1 agreed that there was perhaps a greater obligation to engage in child protection activities as a result of receiving the notification. As one member put it, "I'm somehow even more responsible as a parent because I have been given this information".

As parents began to consider what could be done they raised numerous questions and discussed many different ideas about the type of responses possible. There was a very wide range of responses, from parents who felt it was adequate to simply maintain their ongoing child protection practices, to those who felt it acceptable to confront the identified offender and even pressure him to leave the community. Decisions about how to respond were influenced by employment experience and knowledge, messages from family, friends and media, as well as from personal experience. Individual participants often described responding to the notification as a 'professional' versus a parent, as an adult versus a child, as a protector versus a survivor. This

mother's words reveal her conflicting feelings about how to respond, "The intellectual in me is agreeing with you, the child in me is saying the son-of-a-bitch should be...you know. I'm fighting with myself inside..." (G2). Some thought there should be some type of plan in place to clearly instruct and direct parents in their response to receiving a notification.

Many parents thought one of the first things they would do is talk to others in an effort to acquire support and information. Parents thought they would contact family, friends, neighbours, the school, the media, the police and the local Womens' Shelter. Many participants thought they might be able to find additional details about the offender or his previous crimes, others just wanted to see what others were planning to do.

Although unsure of exactly what could be done to reduce the risk of victimization, parents were far more willing to accept the role of child protector than the responsibility for monitoring the offender. Participants recognized the limited ability of police and/or probation officers to keep tabs on offenders, but felt ill-equipped to carry out this task themselves, " You kind of share responsibility in watching for this guy", "But again, it's not telling you what to watch for" (G1). Participants felt they would be unable to recognize the offender if they saw him and wondered how long they would even remember the descriptive information provided by the notification. They were unsure of what kinds of behaviour would be allowed and what might be a breach of probation and therefore reportable. Parents wondered what they were supposed to do if they encountered the offender on the street, while others worried about what they *might* do if they saw him. One participant was more concerned about not being seen by the offender, "It's almost like you'd want to hide. I'd almost want to be invisible so that maybe if he doesn't know me...he'll leave us alone" (G3). Many were simply 'hopeful' they never saw him at all. This uncertainty regarding their own abilities may actually contribute to their perception of the threat posed by the offender's presence, and increase the anxiety they experience in response to the notification.

Ozer and Bandura (1990) discuss the relationship between perceived coping and level of anxiety over a potentially threatening situation:

"People who believe they can exercise control over potential threats do not conjure up apprehensive cognitions...But those who believe they cannot manage threats experience high levels of anxiety arousal. They tend to dwell on their

coping deficiencies and view many aspects of their environment as hazardous" (p.473).

There is evidence of this phenomenon in the responses of parents with some understanding about sex offender behaviour, possibly as a result of their employment experiences, compared to the reactions of parents with little or no understanding. Group members were far less anxious when they thought that other factors were more significant in assessing the degree of threat represented by the offender than simply his presence in the community. For example, one member wondered if the offender had gained access to his victims by establishing a relationship with a vulnerable family. This was a factor over which she felt she had some control regarding her own child and determined the type of protection strategy she planned to establish. Other parents described feeling a sense of panic, knowing the offender was 'out there' and wondering if he would begin 'snatching children off the playground'.

In an effort to resolve their anxiety parents had numerous, but somewhat extreme ideas for improving methods of offender identification. Clearly distinguishing child sex offenders from other community members would assist parents with their ability to clearly identify and avoid the 'danger'. Parents also thought there should be external, formal, professional controls in place, such as hired supervisors, who would be responsible for limiting the offender's community integration and freedom of movement. They suggested that rules be established to determine where the offender could live, work and with whom he could associate. Others thought that a halfway house or segregated community would be helpful. Forcing the offender to wear an alarm, marking him with a tattoo and 'treating' him with chemical castration were other ideas discussed by parents. The goal of all these methods would be to reduce the offender's presence in the community, thus reducing the perceived threat. All of them also involved some external authority, rather than a community member, to take responsibility for controlling the offender.

### **Potential Positive Consequences of Community Notification**

Community Notification advocates predicted several positive consequences as a result of providing parents with information about the presence of high-risk child sex offenders. The goal of releasing offender information to the public is to reduce the risk of victimization by reducing access and opportunity. Parents were expected to achieve this by informing their children of the identified threat, educating them on how to avoid the danger and increasing parental supervision or other forms of protective behaviour.

- **Inform children of threat**

While the notification provided information regarding an identified offender, there was some parental uncertainty about whether their children should be informed about the subject of the notification specifically or the risk of sexual abuse in general. Parents were aware of the fact that most offenders are known to their victims and acknowledged that the identified offender might not be the person who poses the greatest threat to their child. Participants were also not sure it was a good idea to 'put a face' to the offender for fear of frightening their children. Many advocated a more general, comprehensive approach that included warning children about the possibility of being abused by adult friends or family members.

There was discussion in every group regarding the benefits and drawbacks of sharing the media release with a child, showing them his picture or identifying his house. Parents wondered if children would be able to recall the offender's identity or if it might have the undesirable effect of raising their curiosity. Some worried their children might even engage in harassing the offender. Others worried about the possible consequences of not identifying him to the child as it might provide an opportunity for him to make contact with an unsuspecting youngster.

Ironically, the 'identifying' information provided in the notification was considered to be the least relevant to parents as both location and appearance could be easily changed. Parents were more interested in learning how the offender had selected and enticed previous victims, believing this information could be shared with children and assist them in recognizing potentially dangerous situations.



A study conducted by Elliott, Browne and Kilcoyne, (1995) demonstrates the usefulness of this type of information. The researchers conducted interviews with 91 convicted child sex offenders about the methods they used to select and maintain their victims. Although it is recognized that the offenders who willingly participated in this study may differ from non-participating offenders, the findings are still very significant. It was discovered that 84% of the offenders studied consistently used a particular strategy they found successful in gaining access to victims. More than half (54%), used play or teaching activities such as sports, music lessons, or games to gain access to their victims, others isolated children through offers to baby-sit (48%) or by providing gifts, rides or outings (46%). The majority (72%) had a specific preference for the gender of their victim, and recruited victims in specific ways. Offenders described hanging around video arcades, pools, shopping centers and schools. Only one third of all offenders were strangers to victims, while the remainder had established some type of relationship.

Many participants in this study (Parental Response to Community Notification) seemed to be under the impression that sex offenders often used 'help me' strategies, like asking for directions or assistance with locating a lost pet, and warned their children to avoid these types of situations. However, only 9% of offenders interviewed in the Elliott, Browne and Kilcoyne study found this a successful method. Perhaps knowing more about how the identified offender operated would provide parents and children with helpful information on identifying and avoiding high-risk situations.

- Educate them on how to avoid danger

Most parents demonstrated a good basic knowledge of child sexual abuse. They knew that both boys and girls could be victimized, that offenders could be male or female, and that it was most often a familiar person in a position of trust (not a stranger) who offended against children. The notification was described by many participants as a 'good reminder to review street-proofing strategies with the children'.

Many described having discussed the issue of child sexual abuse with their children already. Typically, these discussions reflected the No-Go-Tell strategy promoted in many school and community based prevention programs. Those who had already delivered this message were far

more comfortable with repeating it than parents who had not yet discussed the matter with their children. The content of messages differed depending on parental knowledge, the age and gender of the children, and the degree of graphic detail parents were comfortable in sharing.

Many used a comprehensive 'could be anyone' approach that focussed on signs of the abusive behaviours rather than specific offenders.

Some parents were reluctant to speak to their children about the offender or the possibility of being sexually abused. The most common concern amongst all parents was how to educate children adequately without scaring them. A few parents felt their children were too young to have to learn these things and resented the notification for rushing them into it; they wanted to preserve the innocence of childhood awhile longer. Although none of the participants openly admitted having any discomfort with the topic themselves, they did wonder how a parent who was uncomfortable or unknowledgeable would educate their child on these matters. It was suggested that guidelines or a telephone number where parents could receive information on 'street-proofing' their children could be distributed with the notification for those who might need it.

Even those parents who were knowledgeable and comfortable educating their children wondered how much information children were able to understand and retain as a result of prevention education efforts. Others wondered how effective *any* child strategy would be if a youngster was faced with an older, larger, aggressive, determined sex offender.

Ultimately, parents admitted to taking a 'best guess' approach, and just 'hoped and prayed' their child was never approached by an offender.

- Increase parental supervision

Many participants felt their own children were at less risk of being sexually abused than others in the community as a result of their regular parenting practices. This perspective is not unusual and is consistent with the findings of Mary Collins study (1994) regarding parents perceptions of the risk of child sexual abuse and the relationship to protective behaviour. She found the tendency for individuals to view themselves at lower risk than others did to be a common response to a variety of threats. She described how participants in her study compared their parenting practices to parents who were neglectful and irresponsible regarding childcare.

Based on this assessment, participants judged themselves to be far better protectors. The majority of parents involved in this study did anticipate that they would increase their current protective strategies through more vigilant supervision if faced with an actual notification, but worried about how the reduction of freedom and independence would impact on their children.

- Other general positive consequences

Participants identified a number of other potentially positive consequences of providing Community Notification. First, it raises the general awareness about the existence of child sexual abuse which might increase the attention paid to available prevention information and create opportunities to teach child protection strategies. As one member of Group 2 exclaimed, "Right on! Now the rest of my community knows there's sex offenders out there, and might teach their children how to protect themselves."

The notification itself is a stark confrontation to unhelpful stereotypes parents may or may not be aware they have of who a sex offender is. Many participants were still restrained by the image of a 'dirty old man', others thought he would be some "35-40 year old fat guy", "someone no one else would have sex with" (G3). Faced with a picture that challenges these images can be a powerful lesson.

Finally, although the notification alerts the public to the presence of a single offender, the increased discussion about the issue may result in disclosures by other victims. Simply acknowledging the existence of child sexual abuse may validate the experience of many secret victims who were unable to disclose or who had previously been met with disbelief.

### **Potential Negative Consequences of Community Notification**

A review of the literature also identified a number of possible negative consequences to publicizing offender information. The findings of this study will be considered in relation to each of them, as listed in Chapter Two.

- False sense of security – All participants acknowledged their awareness that unidentified offenders were probably already present in their community. While some described responding to the notification with an offender specific prevention message aimed at avoidance of one specific threat none of the parents involved in this study appeared to

believe he was the only potential abuser. Most parents considered a comprehensive abuse prevention message, combined with some reference to the identified offender to be the best approach.

- **Apathy** – Participants believed that parents receiving the notification had the right to do nothing in response, but felt this was somewhat irresponsible. Most participants felt obligated to do something, even though they did not know what they should do. Some parents may appear to do 'nothing' if they feel confident about the protection offered through routine parenting practices. Many wanted more protection education to be done through the schools, but one participant expressed concern that what was taught at school may exceed her personal comfort level. Parents agreed that over time their protective response would likely taper off, especially if there was no contact with or further attention paid to the offender. They also agreed that subsequent notifications would have less shock value and there might be less of a response. One member admitted, "I don't know myself if I'd pay as close attention to this as I did to the first one" (G3).
- **False sense of danger**- Parents certainly seemed to experience an increased sense of danger and anxiety as a result of being notified. They worried that the offender could be 'anywhere' and worried he might start 'snatching kids off the playground'. It also raised some concern about unidentified offenders as parents commented on the fact that 'anyone' could potentially be a sex offender. It was interesting to note that parents in every group compared a sex offender to a murderer when speaking of the impact of abuse on child victims, implying the grave danger of these offences. While I do not question the fact that sexual offences cause some degree of physical and emotional damage to victims, comparisons to death are somewhat extreme. Many factors, including the type of abuse perpetrated on a child, their age, the frequency and duration of the assaults, and the response of others upon discovery all appear to affect both the short and long-term impact on victims of child sexual abuse (Browne and Finkelhor, 1986).
- **Vigilantism**- Parents in every group were aware of others who had engaged in vigilante behaviour towards sex offenders from a variety of media sources. Although some acts

against the identified offender were considered unacceptable because they were against the law, parents did not always agree on what would constitute vigilantism. Some thought it would be acceptable to picket his house while others imagined confronting him on the street and advising him he was being watched. Many participants described having vengeful thoughts but said they would never actually carry them out. Others worried they might do something 'crazy' if faced with the actual offender, particularly if their own child had been victimized.

- Effect on innocent others – Participants imagined that previous victims might experience a more intense emotional impact upon receiving a notification. No one discussed the potential effect on the offender's family of publicizing details of his crime(s). It is possible that participants think of the offender as a lone stranger with no partner, children or extended family in the neighbourhood. He is clearly not considered to be a member of their community.

Group discussion also revealed that men in general might be affected by community notification as many participants spoke of being suspicious of all males. The most tangible example of this would be the possibility of non-offenders who physically resemble the description provided in the notification becoming the targets of assault. Men in general may suffer as parents avoid hiring male childcare workers, become unnecessarily concerned about male group leaders and coaches, or by encouraging their children to seek help only from female adults if they are in trouble. If offending continues to be seen as a male trait, all men will be affected in subtle but significant ways.

- Barriers to reintegration- Many participants felt the offender should be restricted and unable to engage freely with others in the community. It was believed that any difficulty finding a job, a place to live or establishing social contacts was an appropriate consequence for his having offended. The reluctance regarding his reintegration ranged from subtle limitations on community involvement to outright hostility. Parents were not prepared to give the offender a second chance as it meant placing other children at risk.
- Undermines treatment – Although one of the predicted negative consequences of public notification was a fear that fewer offenders would seek treatment for fear of being labeled and

publicized, quite the opposite was a concern to parents. Participants wondered if the fear of becoming the subject of a public notification might result in greater numbers of offenders entering treatment in an effort to avoid becoming the subject of a notification. Most doubted the sincerity of offenders attending these programs and felt that treatment programs were ineffective anyway.

- Misplaced responsibility – While none of the participants in this study suggested that children might be to blame for being victimized, the expectation that parents take some protective action in response to receiving the notification might result in blame being placed on parents who did not take ‘appropriate’ action. Parents certainly indicated they would blame themselves if they were unable to protect their own child from the offender. Some worried they might not do enough or do the wrong thing and leave their child vulnerable to victimization. Others worried about being overly assertive in their protection strategies for fear of triggering the offender’s violence, ‘setting him off’ or attracting his attention and becoming targeted as a victim. The notification itself contributes to the impression that the offender is unable to control his behaviour. Many participants blamed the justice system for releasing high-risk offenders in the first place and for being unable to adequately monitor him in the community.

#### Apparent Effects of Notification

Receiving information regarding the presence of a high-risk child sex offender did not seem to challenge or change the opinions held by participants. The notification appears to provide parents with information but does not improve their understanding of the issue; it increases their awareness but not their knowledge. Although participants were able to challenge, question and solicit information from other parents, including many with specialized formal or personal expertise, individual opinions seemed pre-determined and firmly held.

Because the notification targets a single offender who is not currently a member of the community it may actually reinforce the idea of ‘stranger danger’. By personalizing the threat, it is the man (or woman) described by the notification that is a danger to the community, not their sex offending behaviour. There is no guidance or permission given for engaging with non-offending

aspects of the individual in ways that might actually reduce offending. Individualizing the threat also ensures that absolutely no attention is paid to possible broader social forces or factors that might be successfully addressed in the hopes of reducing the development or recurrence of offending behaviours.

Providing parents with the identity of a high-risk offender does not ensure that effective protective behaviour will be taken. Participants in this study did not know what exactly was expected of them or what they could do to prevent their child from being victimized. Parents recommended that support and guidance be provided along with clearly written, easily understood offender information. Notifications should include more information about how the offences were committed rather than simply describing aspects of the offender's appearance or location, which could both be easily changed.

#### Suggestions for Further Research

While this study was exploratory and descriptive, it has identified some areas that could be studied more closely using other methodologies. Future research could examine the impact of specific variables, such as age, gender, education and personal experience on parents' interpretation and responses to notification information. Direct observations of parental responses or interviews with several family members regarding what was actually done in response to a notification would overcome the difficulty of relying on self-report data from a single perspective regarding anticipated protective behaviours.

There appears to be an obvious need for an increased understanding of effective prevention/protection strategies. Parents and community educators are doing the best they can with what they know but with limited confidence or evidence that these strategies make a difference. It is most likely that different approaches are necessary to protect against different types of sexual offences and offender strategies. It is necessary to gain a much better understanding of how offenders operate in order to learn how to counter their techniques. Without this knowledge, the presence of a child sex offender takes on a 'mythical' danger as parents imagine him stalking them constantly, watching their every move and striking the minute they let their guard down.

## Conclusion

This study contributes to the current literature available regarding the impact and effect of notifying the public about the release of an identified high-risk pedophile into the community. Although it involved a relatively small number of self-selected participants there were similar issues and concerns raised in all four focus groups.

All participants wanted to be notified. It was thought that this would contribute to an increased awareness of both the identified offender specifically and the risk of child sexual abuse in general, for themselves and others in the community. While a very small number of parents felt relief as a result of receiving the notification, most participants described feelings of anxiety and anger. Parents who felt relieved were grateful that at least one offender had been identified and thought they were better able to protect their children as a result. The more common feelings of anxiety and anger were related to the numerous questions raised about the offender, the nature of his crime, the justice system, what parents were able to do to protect their children and what they believed was expected of them as a result of being notified. The data strongly indicates that parents want and need some additional information, along with the description of the offender to address these feelings. Although uncertain about how they might, should or would respond if notified, parents were more accepting of the child protector role than the perceived, implied responsibility for monitoring the offender. Without providing some education and increasing parental knowledge, parents receiving notification may well continue to feel incompetent and unable to properly do what they feel is expected of them. A lack of 'offender knowledge', supervisory skills, authority and resources all contributed to parents' desire that formal and/or external supervision be provided to reduce the offender's access to children in the community. Based on the data, it appears that efforts made to empower parents directly through a better understanding of the issues and an increased sense of self-efficacy would result in decreased feelings of helplessness, fear and anxiety.

While parents acknowledge the negative consequences of vigilante behaviour aimed at isolating or eliminating the offender from the community, all were able to describe or relate to relatively extreme and punitive protective behaviours. Most felt they would not carry out such



forms of offender focussed punishment and would more likely just reinforce previous sexual abuse prevention messages with their children, while increasing parental supervision. Regardless of what action was taken in response to receiving the notification, parents felt their efforts would taper off over time.

Community Notification may be understood as the latest stage in the evolution of the sexual abuse prevention social movement. The effort to prevent sexual offences began with treatment efforts aimed at the offender, then engaged in child prevention education and empowerment. Notification is a shift towards a community protection model where communities are given information in the hopes that citizens will be able to limit the risk of offences by increased awareness, monitoring, and reduced accesses to vulnerable children (Berrick and Gilbert, 1991). However, merely providing parents with identifying information regarding a single offender does not appear to educate them on how to achieve these goals.

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# APPENDIX

## **Data Collection Timetable**

**January/98**

- contact with Mr. Dennis Shindle  
Assistant Superintendent  
Portage la Prairie School Division

**February/98**

- contact with Portage School Principals
- presentations to Parent Advisory  
Committees at 5 schools

**February-March/98**

- Invitation to parent participants  
published in all school newsletters

**March/98**

- 4<sup>th</sup> – Group 1 conducted
- 6<sup>th</sup> – article published in local  
newspaper
- 25<sup>th</sup> – Group 2 conducted

**April/98**

- 27<sup>th</sup> – Group 3 conducted

**April-May/98**

- Recruitment posters displayed in  
schools and community centers

**May/98**

- 13<sup>th</sup> – Group 4 conducted



**A Special Invitation to Participate:**

**Parental Response to Community Notification: A School-Based Study** is a research project that will be conducted in Portage la Prairie during March, 1998. This study will explore how parents of school-aged (K-9) children might respond to being notified that a high-risk, dangerous offender is moving into their neighborhood.

**We are inviting you to participate** in a confidential, small group discussion with other parents to preview the type of information you might receive if community notification were to occur in Portage. We are interested in the thoughts, feelings and questions you have after reviewing the notification, as well as any suggestions you have for other ways parents might be notified. For information about the date, time and place of this discussion, please contact the Researcher at the number provided below.

**As this will be the first discussion group** conducted, you will also be asked for some feedback regarding how the group itself was conducted, the types of questions you were asked and the procedures used for this research. This information is extremely important to the researcher and your suggestions will help fine tune the way the research is carried out with other parents in our community.

This project is being conducted through the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Manitoba and has received the approval of the Portage la Prairie School Division. The **results of this study** will contribute to a better understanding of the experience of parents who receive notification and may influence how schools distribute notification information in the future.

**Your involvement in this research is greatly appreciated.**

For more information about this project, or if you would like to take part in the discussion group:

**Please contact the Researcher  
Lisa Sutherland (Graduate Student)  
239-0668.**

Article appearing in local newspaper:  
The Portage la Prairie Daily Graphic

## Project studying reaction to sex offender notification system

BY ROBERTA MORRIS

The Daily Graphic

It is an issue parents hope they never have to deal with because preparing for the news of a sexual offender coming into the community is something no one wants to think about.

"People never want to think it will happen, but a study like this allows people to think about the issue before they have to face it and deal with it," said Lisa Sutherland, a University of Manitoba graduate student in the faculty of social work.

Sutherland, a resident of Portage la Prairie, is conducting her thesis based on how parents of school-aged children might react to being notified a high risk, dangerous offender is moving into their neighborhood.

"I was interested in finding out how parents would communicate the information to the child using what kind of vocabulary and what amount of information they would use," she said.

She also wants to find out what the impact of that information holds for the parents.

To gather information, Sutherland went to the Portage la Prairie School Division and received permission to send out information through the schools to ask parents to attend a discussion group.

Assistant Supt. Dennis Shindle said the division is hoping to use the information Sutherland has collected to see how people in the community would like to be informed about a sexual offender coming into the area.

"We are looking for ideas on how the division can effectively and efficiently notify parents about a predator living in the community," he said.

"We want to get the facts out, but we don't want to unduly alarm people and set off a panic wave."

Shindle said the division hasn't had to deal with a notification like this, but parents have been notified when there

were reported cases of someone attempting to lure children into their vehicles.

"Our community is not exempt from this, and if a person with a record of abuse moves in, we would like to be prepared for it as much as possible," he said.

Sutherland said the two-hour session is not a group interview, but rather a time when parents can discuss their thoughts and feelings on the issue.

"This is truly a parental discussion. I am not evaluating how people respond because there is no correct way to respond," she said.

Previous research has discovered people react to notification in many different ways including feelings of relief, gratitude, fear and anger, she said.

Sutherland has already completed one of the approximately six sessions and she is looking to set another date.

Anyone interested in participating can call her at 239-0668.

The Daily Graphic, March 6, 1998, page 3.

## A Special Invitation to All Parents:

**Parental Response to Community Notification: A School-Based Study** is a research project currently being conducted in Portage la Prairie. This study is exploring how parents of school-aged (K-9) children might respond to being notified that a high-risk, dangerous offender is moving into their neighborhood.

**We are inviting you to participate** in a confidential, small group discussion with other parents to preview the type of information you might receive if community notification were to occur in Portage. We are interested in the thoughts, feelings and questions you have after reviewing the notification, as well as any suggestions you have for other ways parents might be notified.

This project is being conducted through the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Manitoba and has received the approval of the Portage la Prairie School Division. The **results of this study** will contribute to a better understanding of the experience of parents who receive notification and may influence how schools distribute notification information in the future.

**Your involvement in this research is greatly appreciated.**

For more information about this project, or if you would like to take part in a discussion group:

**Please contact the Researcher  
Lisa Sutherland (Graduate Student)  
239-0668.**

## Group Composition

### **Group 1 – March 4, 1998**

Recruitment: Personalized letter of invitation and follow-up telephone call to parents of children in a local grade 3 class. All two parent families.

- a) One child, female, age 8.
- b) Two children, males, ages 8,11.
- c) Two children, male, age 8, female, age 6.
- d) One child, female, age 8.
- e) Three children, two adult males, ages 20,22, one female, age 8.

### **Group 2 – March 25, 1998**

Recruitment: Invitation in variety of school newspapers, newspaper article of March 6/98. All two parent families.

- a) Three children, male, age 7, female, age 5, male, age 1.
- b) One child, female, age 11.
- c) Two children, male, age 11, female, age 8.
- d) Two children, females, ages 5,1.
- e) Two children, male, age 6, female, age 1.
- f) Two children, males, ages 6,5.

### **Group 3 – April 27, 1998**

Recruitment: Newsletter invitation, newspaper article, word-of-mouth. All two parent families.

- a) One child, male, age 7.
- b) One child, male, age 5.
- c) Two children, male, age 14, female, age 10.
- d) One child, female, age 6.
- e) Other member of married couple in attendance.

### **Group 4 – May 13, 1998**

Recruitment: Group of mothers interested in participating who contacted researcher. One single parent family participant.

- a) One child, female, age 7.
- b) Two children, males, ages 4, 6.
- c) Two children, male, age 12, female, age 9.
- d) One child, female, age 10.
- e) Two children, female, age 11, male, age 9.
- f) One child, female, age 9.

**SAMPLE OF LETTER OF INVITATION TO FOCUS GROUP****(UNIVERSITY LETTERHEAD)**

Date:

Name and address of participant

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for volunteering to participate in the research project, Parental Responses to Community Notification. The discussion you will be attending will be a forum of parents of elementary school aged children, like yourself, who have agreed to participate in this study. We will be taking a look at the type of notification bulletin parents would receive if a high-risk sexual offender was being released into our community. Group members will be asked to comment on the type of information that is provided and their thoughts and feelings about it. You are not obligated to answer any direct questions about your perception of this topic but are free to choose your level of participation in the conversation.

Since I am talking to a limited number of people, the success and quality of our discussion is based on the cooperation of the people who attend. Because you have accepted our invitation your attendance at this session is anticipated and will aid in making the research project a success. If for some reason you are unable to attend, please call the group moderator, Lisa Sutherland at 239-0668 and let me know as soon as possible.

You are a member of the group discussion being held at (location / name of school) on (date) at (time). I look forward to seeing you.

Sincerely,

Lisa Sutherland  
Group Moderator

**PARENTAL RESPONSE TO COMMUNITY NOTIFICATION:**  
**A SCHOOL-BASED STUDY**

**Informed Consent Form**

I have indicated my interest in participating in a research project to study the experience of parents who are notified that a high-risk sexual offender is or will be residing in their neighborhood. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Social Work by Lisa Sutherland, a student at the University of Manitoba.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to examine how parents, like myself, feel about being notified and what the information provided means to me. I understand that the information gathered in this study may be used in the future to :

- Inform decision makers of the type of information that is most useful to me as a parent
- Identify the need for information, resources or support for families who may receive notification

I agree to participate in a small group discussion with other parents of elementary school-aged children. I understand that I am not obligated to answer specific questions about my personal perspective, but will be free to choose my level of participation in the conversation.

I understand that the group discussion will last for approximately 1.5 to 2 hours, and that the discussion will be audio-taped, along with the interviewer making some hand-written notes. Responses will be kept confidential by the researcher, with the understanding that the researcher is obligated to report any disclosure of child sexual or physical abuse to the proper authorities. Names or other identifying information about participants will be disguised in typed transcripts or removed from the transcript completely. The audio-tapes and transcripts will be kept in a locked cabinet separately from this consent form. Tapes will be destroyed at the completion of this study.

Although the nature of a group conversation places some limits on confidentiality, all group members will be encouraged to respect the rights of others in this regard. My participation in this project is voluntary and I understand I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. A final report will be submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the completion of this project and a summary of the research findings will be provided to me upon request.

If I have any questions about the research, the group discussion, or any aspect of my participation, I can contact the researcher, Lisa Sutherland, directly at 239-0668. Alternatively, I may contact the Academic Advisor to this project, Denis Bracken, Acting Dean, Faculty of Social Work, University of Manitoba, at (204) 474-9869.

I have read the material above and my signature indicates that the nature and purpose of this study has been fully explained to me and all of my questions have been answered. I understand and accept the conditions of my participation and agree to take part in the project voluntarily.

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**COMMUNITY RESOURCES**

Central Plains Counseling	857-7654
Community Mental Health	239-3122
Recovery of Hope	239-5008
Child and Family Services of Central Manitoba	857-8751
Portage R.C.M.P.	857-8767



**PARENTAL RESPONSE TO COMMUNITY NOTIFICATION:  
A SCHOOL-BASED STUDY**

**PART I: Pre-Group Questionnaire**

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements, using a 5 point scale ( 1=strongly disagree, 3=no opinion, 5=strongly agree)

Question 1: Police should release information to the public about high risk offenders

Question 2: I want to know if a sex offender moves into my community

Question 3: The presence of an identified sex offender in my community increases the risk of my child being sexually assaulted.

Question 4: I would know how to respond if I was told a sex offender had moved into my community.

Question 5: Sex offenders are more dangerous than other criminals released into the community.

**PART II: Questionnaire Results**

	Group #1					Group #2					Group #3					Group #4				
	disagree ←————→ agree					disagree ←————→ agree					disagree ←————→ agree					disagree ←————→ agree				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
Question 1			1		3			1	2	3					5	1				5
Question 2			1		3				2	4					5	1				5
Question 3		1		2	1	1	1	2		2		1		2	2	1	1		2	2
Question 4		1		2	1	2		1	1	2	1		1	1	2		1	2		3
Question 5		2		2			3	1		2		3		2			1	1	3	1

# Media Release



## COMMUNITY NOTIFICATION

May 22, 1996

The Winnipeg Police Service today provides information to all citizens of Winnipeg regarding **KEVIN RYAN SCHINDEL**, 21 years, a convicted sexual offender who is a high risk to re-offend.

Schindel was released from Stony Mountain Institution today after serving his full 33 month term for offences of forcible confinement and 3 counts of sexual interference.


Schindel has been assessed as a potentially violent, predatory bi-sexual pedophile.

While incarcerated, Schindel participated in programs to deal with his sexual deviancies. However, he remains a high risk to re-offend with both male and female young children as potential victims.

Schindel will be on supervised probation until December 1998.

Schindel has indicated he will continue to participate in treatment for his sexual deviancies as required by the conditions of his probation.

This information is provided to enable members of the public to take suitable measures to protect themselves. Any form of vigilante activity or other unreasonable conduct directed at SCHINDEL will not be tolerated.

	NAME:	SCHINDEL, KEVIN RYAN
	D.O.B.	October 23, 1975
	HEIGHT:	6' 3" (190 CM)
	WEIGHT:	288 lbs (130 KG)
	HAIR:	Brown
	EYES:	Brown
	RACE:	Caucasian
DISTINGUISHING MARKS:	scar on right Wrist	
Schindel's appearance may have changed since photo was taken.		

IF YOU HAVE INFORMATION ABOUT SCHINDEL AND WISH TO SPEAK DIRECTLY TO A POLICE OFFICER PLEASE CALL THE WINNIPEG POLICE SERVICE AT 986-6245 MONDAY TO FRIDAY 7 A.M. TO MIDNIGHT (AFTER HOURS CONTACT THE DUTY INSPECTOR AT 986-6033) OR CONTACT YOUR LOCAL POLICE SERVICE. *This media release is available in French upon request.*

WINNIPEG POLICE SERVICE HOME PAGE

<http://www.winnipeg.freemlmb.ca/wps>

## Post-Notification Responses

### By Question

"I feel ..."

Group 1 - (two group members kept their pre-notification questionnaires, possibly by accident)

1. ...that the public does have a right to this type of information. In terms of dealing with the info the neighbours must meet with each other to discuss our real fears.
2. ...that it is important for me to know that this offender has been released yet I'm not quite sure how to approach the topic with my daughter without frightening her.
3. ... anxious, unsure of what measures I should take. What should we do?

Group 2

1. ...relieved
2. ...concerned – where is he?
3. ...scared, vulnerable, sickly.
4. ... that this type of community notification is necessary in order for the public to be aware and protect themselves and their children.
5. ...that statistics have shown over and over that most offenders re-offend.
6. ...angry (and yet felt some relief that he received and will continue to receive counseling) AND VERY FRIGHTENED FOR MY CHILDREN AND ALL OTHERS IN THE COMMUNITY!

Group 3

1. ...the need to rush home and share this info with my children.
2. ...scared for my children. Sad that some of their independence will have to be curbed.
3. ...pleased that the community is being notified.
4. ...my daughter's free time is at risk if he is in my neighbourhood.
5. ...threatened and unsafe. I also feel angry that my child cannot have the normal life she did because this man is in my community.

Group 4

1. ...terrified that this guy might move into my community/ I also feel that his sentence was not long enough.
2. ...angry, let down by the court system.
3. ...frightened for myself and also for my children.
4. ...scared for my children and myself because he is too high-risk to re-offend.
5. ...notification is informative and helpful. Does not create panic. Needs to be discussed with kids at home.
6. ...sickly, frightened, concerned for children's safety, need to know all particulars, address, etc. I feel I must inform my children and prepare them.

**“This means...”**

**Group 1**

1. ...I must inform my own family of the potential dangers for our neighbourhood has now become a zone to be more cautious of.
2. ...I have to be extra-vigilant about the children in my care and that I have to decide how I will approach the subject with my daughter.
3. ...I will have to take some sort of action to (decrease) my feelings so they don't take over my ability to deal with the situation rationally.

**Group 2**

1. ...no response.
2. ...even if he does complete programming – are sex offenders ever “treated”, i.e. – if put in “high risk” situation how would they cope?
3. ...I would not want this person in my neighbourhood.
4. ...no response.
5. ...that I would want to be notified if a sexual offender was in my community.
6. ...no response.

**Group 3**

1. ...I will become more protective of my children. The freedom that my children once shared ie. Going for a walk or roller blading with their friends will be supervised by an adult or myself.
2. ...they won't be able to just enjoy being kids because of the fear from us as parents. They will always have to be supervised.
3. ...that although there are many unidentified sex offenders in the community – I can now share a picture of at least one person whom my child should be sure to stay away from.
4. ...I almost have to keep both my eyes on her or make sure she stays in my yard.
5. ... that I will probably become less trusting of people in general.

**Group 4**

1. ...the public has to keep a look out for their children if he happens to move into their area.
2. ...I will always have to be on my guard and worry if my child is late.
3. ...that I will have to keep a close watch on my children all the time.
4. ...I have to be more protective of my children.
5. ...a 23 years old male has been released from Stony that has a preference for young children.
6. ...that from now on I pick up and drop off. I will worry if not in my sight. Children's routine gets changed and this will upset them.

**“When I read this I wondered...”**

**Group 1**

1. ... if there may be people such as Kevin in the community presently and we as family members always educate our children of these types of dangers, but now it is very much a reality.
2. ...how effective “supervised probation” really was. Can the authorities really keep tabs on this guy? How long will it take before he re-offends (sounds quite likely that he will)
3. ...what would I do if I did meet up with him? What would I feel about just seeing him?

**Group 2**

1. ...how his treatment had progressed, if he was personally known to victims.
2. ...where is he going to be living (specific area) What are other terms of probation, if he breaches (ie near pool) how long before he is charged on breach – how many breaches before re-incarcerated, will there be notification if he leaves the area.
3. ... what had been done to him as a child.
4. ...no response.
5. ... why just Adults are openly told about and not child perpetrators as well! This too is extremely dangerous to children and can cause a lot of feelings as well.
6. ...why such a short sentence and short probation (also if he is a high risk still is there anything else to be done)

**Group 3**

1. ...could we ever fall victim to this man or become another statistic.
2. ...do the rehabilitation programs really work.
3. ...what particular community Kevin would be moving into – should that particular community/schools in the area receive a special notice.
4. ...I am glad that the community is notified about people like this.
5. ...wh he could have been let out of prison.

**Group 4**

1. ... why they let him out if he is such a high risk to reoffend.
2. ...why let him out if he is such a high risk re-offender.
3. ...what is a person like this living in a community and I wondered will he come after my children.
4. ... why he was not in treatment longer and why such a short sentence.
5. ... which neighbourhood he lives in, what he actually did for “sexual interference”
6. ... how many parents aren’t prepared or haven’t talked to their children about what these people do or can do. How many parents think it can’t happen here or not to anyone I know.

**“Now that I know this, I will...”**

**Group 1**

1. ... contact the Police Service to become more educated on how to deal with this situation.  
Furthermore I do realize that people such as Kevin are undergoing deep rooted problems that may have been instilled in them possibly since birth.
2. ...I will have to somehow find the right time and way to discuss this with my child.
3. ...be increasingly vigilant when my children are out or just when I am in the community (watching others children)

**Group 2**

1. ...(continue to) teach my child how to protect self/not be a victim. I would probably increase supervision if in immediate area.
2. ...be vigilant in supervising children and reinforcing street-proofing – show pic to children to help them recognize him (stating only he’s dangerous and not to go near him or if see him to tell someone)
3. ...be alert and educate myself and my family, keep distance from this person, supervise my children more closely, do even more security.
4. ...be better able to protect my children and will be aware.
5. ...try harder to have my children understand what can happen and what threats can be made to them by their perpetrator.
6. ...be watching very closely for a fellow of his description and speak to my boys.

**Group 3**

1. ...take the necessary measures to protect and make my children aware of the dangers.
2. ... always be on the lookout. Be much stricter with my kids regarding before and after school activities.
3. ... continue to take measures to protect my child.
4. ...also try to talk to my neighbours to see if they are also aware of this.
5. ...talk with my child about the dangers of this man in particular and people in general.

**Group 4**

1. ... more aware of this kind of situation going on in my area.
2. ... not let my child go anywhere without me.
3. ... know what to look and watch out for so my children will not get hurt by a person like this.
4. ... protect my children and become more overprotective than I already am. They will become “street smart” sooner than I had hoped.
5. ... speak to my children and discuss with other adults in community to learn to deal with it.
6. ... explain in a non-threatening way what to look for, what not to do and how to be protected at all times.

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

- Describe the experience of receiving this notification.
  - What would be your first reaction upon reading this information?
  - feelings, thoughts, behaviours?
  
- What beliefs/attitudes support/challenge those responses?
  - Details or examples
  - Explore differences
  - Are there conditions under which response would be different?
  - What responses would not be acceptable in your community? Why?
  
- What does the notification tell you?
  - What is the most helpful/useful part of the notification?
  - What is the least helpful?
  - What's missing?
  
- What do you think parents are 'supposed' to do after they receive this information?
  
- Would you feel/act differently if you read this in paper or heard it from a friend?
  
- How would you feel about your child bringing this notice home from school?