"The Chicken or the Egg: What came first, policy or research?"

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This presentation will explore the historical context of sex offender law implementation prior to and/or despite research that has contradicted the efficiency of the law's design. The study compares the nationally recommended Adam Walsh Act (AWA) classification tiers with actuarial risk assessment instruments and existing state classification schemes in their respective abilities to identify sex offenders likely to reoffend ("high risk") as well as to examine the distribution of risk assessment scores within and across tier categories as defined by the AWA. The results indicate the AWA tier was unrelated to sexual reoffending, except in one state, where it was inversely correlated with recidivism. Actuarial measures and existing state tiering systems, in contrast, identified recidivists with marginal to modest accuracy. The results indicate that use of the federal policy, the AWA classification scheme, is likely to result in a system that is less effective in protecting the public than those currently implemented in the states studied, and that substantial revision of the AWA classification system is necessary. The policy and research implications will be discussed.