Sex Offender Registration and Notification
In the United States
Current Case Law and Issues — March 2019

Who Is Required to Register?

Nearly all registration requirements in the United States are initially triggered by a conviction of a criminal offense. Most jurisdictions limit their registration and notification systems to persons convicted of sex offenses and nonparental kidnapping of a minor. Some states also include other offenders in their registration and notification systems, or have separate offender registries for nonsexual offenses.1

‘Conviction’

When a person is found guilty and sentenced for a sex offense, SORNA requires that the person be subject to sex offender registration and notification requirements. However, certain findings other than guilty can also trigger a registration requirement. Withheld adjudications have been held to require registration under SORNA.2 In some jurisdictions, registration is required when a person has been civilly committed, received a withhold adjudication, found “Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity” or incompetent to stand trial, or when ordered to register by a probation officer.3 In addition, some jurisdictions require registration even if an offender has been pardoned for the underlying offense,4 had their underlying complaint dismissed and pleas vacated under a special statutory procedure,5 had their conviction for a sex offense vacated on double jeopardy grounds,6 and, in some jurisdictions, an offender can remain on the public registry website even if that offender no longer has any meaningful ties to the jurisdiction.7

‘Sex Offenders’

Federal courts have interpreted SORNA as directly imposing a duty on a person to attempt to register if they meet the federal definition of “sex offender.”8 SORNA’s standards call for jurisdictions to register all persons who have been convicted of a tribal, territory, military, federal or state sex offense.9 In addition, certain foreign sex offense convictions will also trigger a registration requirement under SORNA.10 In practice, a jurisdiction generally will not register an offender unless that jurisdiction’s laws require that the offender be registered.11 At least one state has concluded that if a person has ever been required to register as a sex offender pursuant to federal law, that person is required to register in the state.12 In addition, at least one state imposes the registration requirements of the originating state, even if the receiving state’s requirements are less stringent.13

Kidnapping

The inclusion of kidnapping offenses in sex offender registration systems is a legacy of the first federal legislation regarding sex offender registration in 1994.14 Inclusion of kidnapping offenses in a jurisdiction’s sex offender registry has been largely upheld by the courts.15

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‘Catch-All’ Provisions

When jurisdictions specifically outline the offenses that require registration, there is little question as to who is required to register. Many jurisdictions also include catch-all provisions, which, in varying forms, require any person convicted of an offense that is “by its nature a sex offense” to register. One court concluded that the state need only prove by “clear and convincing” evidence that an offender engaged in sexual contact to qualify under its catch-all registration provision,16 while another held that such proof must meet the “beyond a reasonable doubt” standard.17

Comparable Convictions from Other Jurisdictions

A more difficult situation arises when a convicted sex offender moves from one jurisdiction to another, and the new jurisdiction has to make a determination as to whether the person is required to register there. Most jurisdictions require registration if a person was convicted of an out-of-state offense that is “comparable,” “similar” or “substantially similar” to one or more of the receiving jurisdiction’s registerable offenses.18 When a state’s registration system treats persons convicted of in-state offenses differently from those convicted out-of-state, equal protection problems may arise.19 On occasion, offenders have had their convictions expunged, but still might face registration requirements in other states; at least one state has issued an Attorney General opinion determining that “out-of-state offenders whose convictions have been expunged must register ...[so long as] they were required to register” in another jurisdiction as a sex offender.20

While most states have a centralized process for determining whether an out-of-state offender is required to register, some do not. In one recent case, a state’s reliance on the determination of a local sheriff as to whether an out-of-state conviction was “substantially similar” to a registerable state offense was held to violate procedural due process, because those determinations could vary from sheriff to sheriff within the state.21

Elements vs. Facts

Determinations of whether an offense is registerable under SORNA, or fits under one of these catch-all or comparable provisions, has led to a great deal of litigation.22 Some jurisdictions look at the elements of the offense of conviction, while others also look at the underlying facts.23 Often, courts take an expansive view of which offenses trigger registration requirements; sometimes, however, the approach can be quite narrow.24

Recidivists

In many states, as under SORNA’s requirements, an offender who has been convicted of more than one sex offense is subject to heightened registration requirements. One court has held that two (or more) offenses do not need to arise out of separate proceedings to trigger increased requirements.25
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2. See United States v. Bridges, 901 F. Supp. 2d 677 (W.D. Va. 2012), aff’d, 741 F.3d 464 (4th Cir. 2014) (withheld adjudication in Florida registerable under SORNA); People v. McCulley, 2018 Colo. App. LEXIS 950 (June 28, 2018) (successful deferred judgment is considered a conviction); Roe v. Replogle, 408 S.W.3d 759 (Mo. 2013) (suspended imposition of sentence is a conviction under SORNA).


9. “Sex Offense” is defined in 34 U.S.C. § 20911(5)(A). For guidance on which persons convicted of UCMJ offenses are required to register, see United States v. Jones, 383 Fed. Appx. 885 (11th Cir. 2010) and the “Military Registration” section of this update.


11. In other words, there will be situations where SORNA imposes a registration requirement directly on an offender, but the jurisdiction where that offender lives, works or attends school refuses to register him, because the jurisdiction’s laws do not require registration for the offense of conviction. See Dep’t of Pub. Safety v. Doe, 94 A.3d 791 (Md. 2014) (state is not required to register an offender if the state’s laws do not require it).

12. Doe v. Toelke, 389 S.W.3d 165 (Mo. 2012) (“the [state] registration requirements apply to any person who ‘has been’ required to register as a sex offender pursuant to federal law. Consequently, even if Doe presently is not required to register pursuant to SORNA, he ‘has been’ required to register as a sex offender and, therefore, is required to register [with the state]”) (offender convicted in 1983 required to register, even though Missouri law only requires registration of persons convicted on or after January 1, 1995).


22 See United States v. Vanderhorst, 688 Fed. Appx. 185 (4th Cir. 2017) (18 U.S.C. § 1592 registerable under SORNA even though it is not listed); United States v. Schofield, 802 F.3d 722 (5th Cir. 2015) (18 U.S.C. § 1470 registerable under SORNA, even though it is not listed); United States v. Dodge, 597 F.3d 1347 (11th Cir. 2010) (same); United States v. Hahn, 551 F.3d 977 (10th Cir. 2008) (probation conditions properly required registration in a fraud case where there was a prior state conviction for a sex offense); United States v. Byun, 539 F.3d 982 (9th Cir. 2008) (conviction for alien smuggling which had underlying facts of sex trafficking properly triggered registration); United States v. Jensen, 278 Fed. Appx. 548 (6th Cir. 2008) (conspiracy to commit sexual abuse is a registrable offense); State v. Hall, 294 P.3d 1235 (N.M. 2013) (California conviction for annoyng or molesting children not registerable in New Mexico without evidence of actual conduct comparable to New Mexico offense, regardless of the elements of the offense). But see United States v. Jimenez, 275 Fed. Appx. 433 (5th Cir. 2008) (where only evidence of sexual misconduct was three unsubstantiated police reports, registration requirement was inappropriate); State v. Coman, 273 P.3d 701 (Kan. 2012) (bestiality is not a registrable offense); State v. Haynes, 760 N.W.2d 283 (Mich. Ct. App. 2008) (bestiality not registerable).


24 See, e.g., State v. Duran, 967 A.2d 184 (Md. 2009) (determining that indecent exposure was not registerable because the lewdness element of the crime incorporated conduct that was not sexual in addition to that which could be sexual).