

## Public Perceptions about Sex Offenders and Community Protection Policies

- The purpose of this study was to examine public perceptions about sex offenders and community protection policies. Data were obtained from a sample of 193 residents in Melbourne, Florida. It was hypothesized that the public holds some inaccurate beliefs about sex offenders. It was found that community members believe that sex offenders have very high recidivism rates, view sex offenders as a homogeneous group with regard to risk, and are skeptical about the benefits of sex offender treatment. The hypothesis that public perceptions contradict empirical research was supported.
- Legislative initiatives since the early 1990s have included sex offender registration, community notification, civil commitment, residence restrictions, enhanced sentencing guidelines, and electronic monitoring (LaFond, 2005). Such laws are popular with lawmakers and their constituents (Caputo, 2001; LaFond, 2005; Matson & Lieb, 1996b; Phillips, 1998; Sample, 2001; Sample & Kadleck, 2006; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000; Zevitz, 2006a), although little empirical research has established their effectiveness in preventing sexual violence or decreasing sex offense recidivism.
- About half of the respondents acknowledged the potential for vigilantism and 75% agreed that notification might make it more difficult for sex offenders to reintegrate into communities with regard to housing, jobs, and social support. Interestingly, however, more than half of the parents reported no change in their own behaviors with regard to supervision of their children as a result of community notification.
- However, some residents have reported that notification actually increased their anxiety because information about offenders is not usually accompanied by information about protecting one self or one's children from assault.

- Though the public and lawmakers are supportive of sex offender policies, scholars remain skeptical about the potential of these laws to protect children or prevent sex crimes (Freeman-Longo, 1996; Jones, 1999; Levi, 2000; Lotke, 1997; Prentky, 1996; Zevitz, 2006b). They suggest that community notification laws are driven by emotional responses to sexual violence rather than by empirical data, and that they provide misguided reassurance to citizens. The majority (80%) of mental health professionals surveyed believed that registries would have no impact on reducing the incidence of child sexual abuse, and 70% thought community notification would foster a false sense of security for parents (Malesky & Keim, 2001). Another oft-cited concern is the potential for notification to create unintended consequences that interfere with offender reintegration by limiting opportunities for housing, employment, and social support (Levenson, 2003; Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Levenson et al., 2006; Petersilia, 2003; Tewksbury, 2004; Tewksbury, 2005; Zevitz, Crim, & Farkas, 2000b).
- The earliest study found no statistically significant difference in recidivism rates between offenders who were subjected to notification in Washington (19% recidivism) and those who were not (22% recidivism) (Matson & Lieb, 1996b). In Iowa, 223 sex offenders subjected to sex offender registration were tracked for an average of 4.3 years. Their sex offense recidivism rate (3%) was not significantly different from a control group of 201 sex offenders (3.5%) who were not required to register because they were adjudicated before the law went into effect (Adkins, Huff, & Stageberg, 2000). In Wisconsin, there were no statistically significant differences between 47 high-risk sex offenders exposed to aggressive community notification (19% recidivism) and 166 high-risk sex offenders who were not aggressively identified (12% recidivism) (Zevitz, 2006b).

- An interrupted time-series analysis investigated the impact of registration and notification laws on sexual assault rates in 10 states (Walker, Maddan, Vasquez, VanHouten, & Ervin-McLarty, 2005). Three states experienced a significant decrease in sex crime rates, but five other states demonstrated an increase in sexual assault rates, with one of those increases being statistically significant. The authors concluded that registration and notification policies did not appear to have a systematic influence on reducing sex crime rates across the 10 states.
- The present authors suggest that such laws are not guided by empirical evidence, but are driven instead by myths perpetuated and reinforced by the media (Jones, 1999; Lotke, 1997; Proctor et al., 2002; Quinn et al., 2004; Sample, 2001; Wright, 2003).
- High recidivism rates are often cited in support of sex offender legislation (Sample&Bray, 2003, 2006), despite several studies by both the U.S. and Canadian governments that found sex offense recidivism rates to be much lower than commonly believed
- Although it is believed that sex offenders have the highest recidivism rates among criminals, they are among the least likely criminals to be rearrested for new crimes (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Sample & Bray, 2003, 2006).
- Although the research is not unequivocal, there is evidence that treatment can be helpful for many sex offenders.
- Sex offender policies, often inspired by child abductions and sexually motivated murders, seem to be based on the presumption that children are at great risk from predators who lurk in schoolyards and playgrounds. 93% of child sexual abuse perpetrators are known to their victims. About 34% are family members and 59% are acquaintances.
- In Wisconsin, it was found that none of the recidivistic offenses in the study sample were for predatory sex crimes involving strangers (Zevitz, 2006b).

- The myth of stranger danger may lead to a false security for parents, whose children are at greatest risk of being abused by someone they know and trust (Berliner et al., 1995). The general public tends to believe child molesters are social misfits, strangers, or “dirty old men.
- It was hypothesized that the general public subscribes to many inaccurate beliefs about sex offenders, including myths of high recidivism rates, unamenability to treatment, and stranger danger. Respondents estimated sex offense recidivism rates to be 74%. In contrast, the best available evidence suggests that sex offense recidivism rates range from 5 to 14% over 3- to 6-year follow-up periods (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004, 2005) and 24% over 15-year follow-up periods.
- What percentage of sex offenders commit another sex offense? Public believes 74%.
- What percentage of child molesters reoffend? Public believes 76%.
- What percentage of sex assaults of adults are committed by strangers? Public believes 49%.
- Nearly three quarters (73%) indicated that they were likely to support such policies even in the absence of scientific evidence that they achieved their goals.
- Lawmakers should take note that 70% of our respondents did not feel that employment information would be useful for community protection. Such practices, if implemented, will almost surely result in unintended consequences such as significant decreases in employment opportunities for offenders, since employers will likely be eager to avoid being associated with the sex offender registry.
- Ample evidence suggests that the majority of convicted sex offenders do not go on to commit new sex crimes.
- It might have been interesting to ask respondents about their sources of information, but we speculate that the media furnishes a substantial amount of this type of data to most people.

- Most people subscribe to the myth that all sex offenders pose an equal and serious threat to communities. Research suggests, however, that sex offenders represent a heterogeneous group with regard to recidivism risk.
- Sex offenders in general were seen by our sample as the criminals most likely to reoffend, even though in toto they have lower rearrest rates for their crime of choice than other types of offenders. For example, robbers are more likely to be rearrested for robbery, burglars are more likely to repeat crimes of burglary, and those who have committed nonsexual assault are more likely to do so again than sex criminals are to repeat their crimes (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003; Sample & Bray, 2003).
- Also, there continues to be a perception that sex crime rates are on the rise, probably due to the attention that these crimes receive in the media. In fact, rape arrest rates have decreased steadily since 1991 (Maguire & Pastore, 2003), and child sexual abuse rates have also declined (Finkelhor & Jones, 2004; Jones & Finkelhor, 2003).
- Not surprisingly, those surveyed demonstrated a punitive attitude toward sex offenders, recommending that, on average, sex criminals should serve about 39 years in prison and 42 years on probation. Notably, the most frequent response was 99 years—the largest number that fit into the two-digit box on their answer forms.
- Perhaps most disconcerting was the revelation that the majority of participants would continue to support community protection policies even if their effectiveness remained unproven.
- In sum, these data have important implications for public policy. Our hypothesis that the public is poorly informed about sex offenders was supported. Specifically, myths of extraordinarily high recidivism rates and “stranger danger” prevail, and the public appears to view all sex offenders as posing a similar threat to communities. These widespread beliefs perpetuate the development of increasingly restrictive policies as politicians endeavor to serve their constituents.

- As a result, one-size-fits-all policies are not likely to be cost efficient, nor are they likely to afford maximum protection to the public. In particular, broad policies that include low-risk, nonviolent, and statutory offenders can drain public resources while unnecessarily disrupting the stability of some offenders and diminishing their likelihood of successful reintegration.
- According to the Center for Sex Offender Management (2002) (operated under a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice), prevention of sexual violence requires the development of policies based on empirical research, and limited resources would be better spent if the most restrictive policies were reserved for those who are likely to pose the greatest danger (Hanson, 1998). Some have argued that failing to apply social science data to inform the development of social policy is not only inefficient, but unethical (Grove & Meehl, 1996).
- Specifically, states should develop procedures for assessing risk using empirically derived risk factors and tools that have demonstrated predictive validity and reliability.
- Offense-based classification, such as that initiated in the recently passed federal guidelines (“Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006,” 2006), is unlikely to be as useful as risk-based categorical systems.
- By using risk assessment to identify the most dangerous offenders, supervision and management strategies can be concordant with the level of threat that an offender poses to a community. Risk-based registration and notification policies allow for more efficient use of resources by identifying those who require intense monitoring, treatment, and restrictions while minimizing disruption of stability for lower-risk offenders and their families.

- The media should be enlisted as a partner in educating the public about sexual abuse through the dissemination of accurate and research-based information about sexual violence, sexual perpetrators, and victimization. Rather than sensationalistic journalism, the public would benefit from factual information about recidivism rates, the heterogeneity of sex offenders, the signs and symptoms of sexual abuse, and the common types of grooming behaviors used by perpetrators who gain access to victims by using their positions of familiarity, trust, or authority. The media is clearly influential in shaping public opinion, which affects the development of social policy in this particular arena (Sample, 2001; Sample & Kadleck, 2006). Research has shown that exposure to accurate information can facilitate attitudinal changes about important social issues (Cochran & Chamlin, 2005).
- Media outlets might take note of the inaccuracies that are rampant in the public's perception. The promulgation of more accurate and informed journalism could assist in promoting a more evidence-based approach to the development of community protection policies for reducing sexual violence.