

# Misperceptions of Sex Offender Perpetration

## Considering the Impact of Sex Offender Registration

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A popular misconception among the general public is that sex offenders most often victimize strangers. To better understand these misconceptions about sex offenders, this study determines the frequency of misperception in the general public and establishes if the misconceptions are related to the policy of sex offender registration. Using a self-administered mail survey, it is found that on average, 3 out of 10 respondents indicate more worry about a child being sexually abused by a stranger than a child being sexually abused by someone known to them. In neighborhoods where registered sex offenders reside, awareness of a local sex offender significantly increases the likelihood that a respondent is more worried about a stranger sexually abusing a child. Interpretations of the findings follow, including discussing if the findings demonstrate an unintended consequence of sex offender registries.

**Keywords:** *sex offender registration; sex offender perpetration; public perception*

Sexual assault and child sexual abuse are among the most feared crimes in the United States. This is especially true for women, who consistently rank sexual assault as the crime they fear more than almost any other. For instance, Ferraro (1996) found that the most feared crimes for women were burglary and sexual assault, whereas men most feared burglary, assault, and vandalism. Williams Reid and Konrad (2004) likewise found that women feared robbery and sexual assault significantly more than men. Yet despite such fear and worry, extensive research shows that the general public holds several misperceptions about sexual assault perpetration and victimization.

Primary among these misperceptions is the belief that strangers rather than someone known to the victim most often perpetrate sexual assault. For

example, contrary to crime statistics, young children report a greater risk of sexual assault from a stranger than an acquaintance (Jacobs, Hashima, & Kenning, 1995), while parents more frequently warn children about sexual abuse perpetrated by strangers (Collins, 1996; Wurtele, Kvaternick, & Franklin, 1992). Among adults, Wilcox, Jordan, and Pritchard (2006) found that women report higher levels of worry about being sexually assaulted by a stranger than by an acquaintance. Furthermore, women also tend to take more precautions and be more guarded against sexual assault by strangers than by someone known to them (Gidycz, McNamara, & Edwards, 2006; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1997).

In actuality, however, the vast majority of sexual assault is perpetrated by a person known to the victim (Vanzile-Tamsen, Testa, & Livingston, 2005). As reported by Snyder (2000), almost 50% of perpetrators of sexual abuse against children under age 6 and 42% of perpetrators against children aged 6 to 11 years were family members. Among sexual abuse cases reported to law enforcement, less than 5% involved perpetrators who were characterized as strangers. Also, in a study involving abused teenage girls participating in focus groups, most girls reported that adult male family members or adult male acquaintances perpetrated the abuse (Buzi, Tortolero, Smith, Ross, & Roberts, 2002). Similarly, in a survey of college students and professionals who work with sexual abuse perpetrators, Fuselier, Durham, and Wurtele (2002) found that less than 10% of respondents in each group reported that the typical abuser would be a stranger to the child. Specific to adult and adolescent victims, 98% of women who reported some form of sexual abuse reported the perpetrator was known to them (Vanzile-Tamsen et al., 2005).

One likely reason for the persistence of such misperceptions is that they contribute to enhanced feelings of safety. Weinstein and Klein (1996) propose the term *optimistic bias* to describe this reaction. Optimistic bias, or an underestimation of the likelihood of negative events happening to an individual, acts as a defense mechanism against fears of being victimized and has been observed in people's responses to various social problems, including adolescents' self-perceived chances of being victims of youth violence and battered women's perceptions of returning to an abuser (Chapin, de las Alas, & Coleman, 2005; Martin et al., 2000). In fact, a meta-analysis of 22 studies found a strong relationship between a perception of control and optimistic bias, with those who felt they had greater control over a situation having higher levels of optimistic bias (Klein & Helwig-Larsen, 2002).

Specific to sexual violence, studies have found that women often believe they are less likely to be sexually assaulted than their peers (Gidycz et al.,

2006). Likewise, many parents perceive their children to be less at risk for sexual abuse than other children. When asked about risk factors for sexual abuse, these parents were also more likely to list factors not present in their own lives than those that were present (Collins, 1996). Such studies support the idea of optimistic bias and the perpetuation of misconceptions about sex crimes as a defense against worries about victimization. Beyond these psychological benefits, however, it is possible that the maintenance of misperceptions and subsequent spread of misinformation actually might increase risk for victimization, because people may be less guarded against true threats as compared to perceived ones. This might be especially true for sex offender registries in that they could convey a false sense of security as residents worry more about the offender down the street than someone closer and more well known to the child.

### **Sex Offender Registries and Unintended Consequences**

Born from recent federal legislation, such as Megan's Law (1996) and the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act (2006) that require the tracking of convicted sex offenders and the publication of those offenders' addresses, sex offender registries are a popular crime prevention strategy (Kernsmith, Craun, & Foster, in press; Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007). In 2005, in California alone, there were more than 63,000 registered sex offenders living in the state (State of California, 2006). With a minimum registration time of 15 years under the Adam Walsh Act (or 10 years for offenders with a clean record; Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering & Tracking Office, 2007), the number of sex offenders on the registries will grow. The public is also accessing the information on registered sex offenders. In 1 year in California, the sex offender registry Web site was accessed more than 180 million times (State of California, 2006). Despite such widespread implementation and use, there is considerable debate regarding the effectiveness, benefits, and limitations of sex offender registration. Furthermore, the intersection between sex offender registration and misperceptions about sexual violence remains unclear. Given the large number of residents accessing sex offender registry Web sites, clarification here is critical for crime prevention and a better understanding of the consequences of sex offender registries.

Some researchers have conjectured that evidence about sex offending has been overlooked during the policy's formation and implementation (Farkas & Stichman, 2002; Levenson & D'Amora, 2007; Pretensky, 1996). Others have argued that the availability of sex offender registries to the

public will terrorize the public by suddenly making them feel unsafe (Freeman-Longo, 1996), although empirical research to this point has not supported this notion (Beck, Clingermayer, Ramsey, & Travis, 2004; Beck & Travis, 2004).

On the other side of the debate, there is a belief that sex offender registries can be beneficial in the fight against sexual violence. Berliner (1996) contended that if citizens were able to know of a sex offender in the area, they would be able to protect themselves and loved ones from that offender. However, if sex offender registration allows residents to protect loved ones from a specific offender, who was probably not known to the resident before the registry publicized his or her name, the next logical question would be, does awareness of a local sex offender lead to residents being more worried about strangers than those known to the residents? In other words, is being aware of a local sex offender related to a misperception about who typically perpetrates sexual assault or abuse? One study of residents in Washington state found that residents disagreed with the idea that being informed about a registered sex offender would cause them to discount the possibility of other people who may possibly sexually offend, including those known to them (Phillips, 1998). To combat this possible problem, the state of Washington educates community members about the tendency for family members and acquaintances to be those who typically sexually offend against a child when they notify about a local, high-risk sex offender (Lieb, 1996). However, in many states, passive notification is used, where the onus is on the resident to find out the information about local sex offenders. In these jurisdictions, residents may not be aware of information about who is likely to sexually offend.

In a survey on perceptions of sex offenders and sex offender registries in one county in the southern United States, residents believed over 58% of male and female children are sexually abused by someone they know. The same group of residents disagreed with the notion that community notification of local sex offenders provides a false sense of security (Levenson et al., 2007). The residents also estimated that on average, nearly 50% of adults were sexually assaulted by strangers (Fortner, Levenson, Brannon, & Baker, 2007), which is much higher than actual reported numbers. When asking sexual offenders that same question, offenders estimated that only 32% of offenses on average were committed by strangers; of the sexual crimes of which the offenders had been convicted, only 17% were against strangers, all of whom the offenders met over the Internet.

It is clear that residents do not believe that sex offender registries would cause a misperception in which people would worry more about sexual

abuse by a stranger than those known to them. This study attempts to move beyond looking at opinions and empirically test if awareness of a neighborhood sex offender affects residents' perceptions about children's risks of being sexually abused by a person known to them versus a stranger. Moreover, this study also seeks to determine the distribution in the general public of who has misconceptions about sex offender perpetration.

## Method

A survey, which was presented as a study about community safety, was mailed to 1,600 randomly selected residential addresses in a single county in the southeastern United States. The 2000 Census reports the population of the study county at over 600,000, with the median age of residents being approximately 33 years old, 72% of the population identified as White, nearly 20% identified as Black or African American, and slightly less than 8% of individuals below the poverty level (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2008). The percentage of White residents, residents below the poverty line, and the median age of the residents are all slightly lower than corresponding numbers for the United States as a whole. The sampled county used passive notification, where the residents must search the registry to be informed of a registered sex offender in their neighborhood. At the time of the study, there was no information listed on the Web site about the typical relationship between a sex offender and victim.

The 1,600 surveys were divided into two groups, an investigational group and a control group. To capture a sample of residents living near at least one registered sex offender, 800 respondents were selected from residences that were located within one-tenth of a mile of the listed address of one of 100 registered sex offenders. The control group, which also had an initial mailing of 800 surveys, was randomly selected from addresses that were at least one mile away from any registered sex offender. The control group represents the perceptions of those who are not affected by sex offender registration, in that they do not have registered sex offenders living in their neighborhoods. After the surveys returned as undeliverable were removed from the total count, a response rate of 45% ( $N = 631$ ) was calculated. This response rate was produced with the procedure of mailing an introductory letter and then the survey with a financial gift of 2 dollars. A subsequent mailing 2 weeks later included a reminder postcard and then for those who did not respond after an additional 2 weeks, they were mailed the same survey again. In addition, there was a financial incentive to return the completed survey.

To determine overall levels of misperception, the binary variable measuring misperception was formed by recoding two survey questions asking about a respondent's worry regarding the sexual abuse of a child. These survey questions were taken from a 14-item Victimization Scale developed and tested by Coulton, Korbin, and Su (1996). The wording of the two survey questions about child sexual abuse was: "On a scale from 1 (*not at all worried*) to 10 (*very worried*), please circle your level of concern for (1) having a child sexually abused by a stranger and (2) having a child sexually abused by someone they know." If the respondent reported higher levels of concern about strangers, it was coded as a misperception, while those who had equal or less levels of concern were indicated as not having a misperception. In addition, variables were created if the respondent reported equal concern about each type of perpetrator of sexual abuse or if the respondent reported more worry about a child being sexually abused by someone he or she knew.

The remaining items from the Victimization Scale were averaged into a score to determine the respondent's overall worry about victimization, which produced a reliability score of  $\alpha = .93$  from the current study's data. The worry of victimization items included: having property damaged ( $M = 3.4$ ), having property stolen ( $M = 4.0$ ), walking alone during the day ( $M = 2.3$ ), walking alone after dark ( $M = 4.4$ ), letting children go outside alone during the day ( $M = 3.6$ ), letting children go alone outside after dark ( $M = 5.9$ ), being robbed during the day ( $M = 2.7$ ), being robbed at night ( $M = 4.1$ ), being raped ( $M = 3.0$ ), having a child kidnapped ( $M = 3.8$ ), being mugged or beaten up ( $M = 3.2$ ), and being murdered ( $M = 2.8$ ). On a scale from 1 to 10, the average score for the entire sample was 3.6.

The main independent variable of interest is awareness of a sex offender in the neighborhood. Awareness of a sex offender is a binary variable taken from the survey item that asked, "if anyone had been arrested for a sexual crime in their neighborhood" (answer responses: yes, no, unsure). The independent variable was transformed into a binary variable (yes vs. no or unsure). This question was placed after the questions on victimization worry, so that answering about someone arrested for a sexual offense did not trigger emotional responses from the respondent before answering questions about worry of victimization. The survey did not specifically ask if there was a registered sex offender in the neighborhood, as there was concern that the question may serve as an intervention where residents would search the sex offender registry Web site before answering the question. Specifically, as appearing knowledgeable is a socially desirable trait (Aldridge & Levine, 2001), if the survey had asked about someone from the

sex offender registry living in their neighborhood, there was concern that the respondents might use the registry to correctly answer the survey questions. This would mean that the act of taking the survey would artificially increase the percentage of people who were aware of a registered sex offender in their neighborhood. Considering this possibility, the question instead was worded so that if a respondent knew of a registered sex offender in the neighborhood, it would require an affirmative answer to the question. As demonstrated by Craun (in press), belief of someone being arrested for a sexual crime is not a universal phenomenon, as only 2.3% of those in the control group answered that there was someone in their neighborhood who had been arrested for a sexual crime. Therefore, as registered sex offenders were only in the investigational group's neighborhoods, the variable for awareness of a sex offender is only included in the investigational group's multivariate model.

In addition, a control variable was added to the multivariate models to gauge a respondent's familiarity with sex offender registration policy. Specifically, respondents were asked "How familiar are you with the following crime control policy—Megan's Law (sex offender registries)?" The answer choices included *very familiar*, *somewhat familiar*, and *never heard of*. This policy was embedded with questions on other policies, such as Amber Alert and the Violence Against Women Act. The familiarity with Megan's Law variable was transformed into a binary variable of *very familiar* in one category and *somewhat familiar* and *never heard of* combined into the second category. This control variable was added to the equation to account for the finding of Hickman and Muehlenhard (1997) that college women were more likely to take precautionary measures against stranger rape as compared to acquaintance rape. It may be that those who accessed the sex offender registry were more likely to be afraid of stranger rape as compared to the rest of the sample. It was important that the survey not serve as an intervention for the reasons stated previously, therefore we could not directly ask if respondents had accessed the sex offender registry. Consequently, using familiarity with the overall policy was used as a substitute. From the sample, 41.6% reported being very familiar with sex offender registration policy.

In addition to the previous variables, other variables included in the multivariate models were those conceptually related to misperceptions of who perpetrates child sexual abuse. These variables included having children in the house (yes or no), being married, gender, and an experience of violent victimization since the respondent lived in the current residence (yes or no).

The average age of a sample respondent was 48.0 years old (median = 47), which was higher than the median age of 33 provided by the U.S. Census for the county; however, because this survey was only for those residents aged 18 years and older, the higher median age was expected. Participants typically self-identified as White (76.9%), and 66.2% of the respondents were female. A majority of the respondents were married (67.6%) and more than half (57.7%) had graduated college. The sample is slightly overrepresentative of White residents as compared to the county as a whole, along with married residents (56.4% of county residents are married, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2008). Nearly 43% had a child under the age of 18 living with them in the house. Slightly less than 5% of the sample reported that they or someone in their household had been victimized by violent crime while living in their current residence.

Univariate and bivariate statistics, along with logistic regressions determined the likelihood of misperception and the relationship between the variables and misperception. A logistic regression with robust standard errors was run separately for the control group and investigational group, as having a registered sex offender in the neighborhood and therefore being aware of the sex offender's presence was only possible in the investigational group. In an attempt to not overfit the logistic regression models, a maximum of seven variables were included into each multivariate regression. Diagnostics for goodness of fit, multicollinearity, influential observations, and specification were run for each model. For the control group model, two respondents were tagged for influential observations; however, when removing the two respondents from the model, the overall fit of the model, along with the individual predictors, were unchanged. Therefore, the two respondents were kept in the control group model. Also, the control group contained specification error that is discussed in the Results section, as the predictors did not provide a well-specified model for the control group, even though they produced a well-specified model for the investigational group.

Those that had missing variables on any of the variables of interest were removed for a total of 565 respondents for statistical analyses ( $n = 323$  for the control group;  $n = 242$  for the investigational group). Of those who were removed for missing data on either of the two survey questions that were contained in the misperception variable ( $n = 35$ ), only 3% ( $n = 1$ ) indicated they had children in the house, which may denote that even though the question was not worded specifically to ask about their children, they felt the question did not pertain to them.

## Results

Of the participants who responded to the mail survey, 29.7% were more concerned about a stranger sexually abusing a child as compared to someone they knew, 56.7% were equally concerned about a stranger and someone they knew, and 13.5% expressed more worry about someone they knew sexually abusing a child. Of the 168 participants who reported more concern about a stranger, the average difference reported between worry of child sexual abuse by a stranger and worry about someone known to them was 2.86 (mean score/stranger = 5.33, mean score/someone known = 2.47). When examining the misperception percentages between groups, the investigational group had a higher percentage of respondents (33.9%) that were more concerned about strangers as compared to the control group (26.6%); however, the difference between the groups did not reach the level of significance,  $\chi^2(1, N = 565) = 3.48, p = .06$ . Of those respondents who worried more about someone known to them the average difference was 1.95 (mean score/stranger = 3.26, mean score/someone known = 5.21).

When only examining the bivariate relationship between awareness of a neighborhood sex offender and having the misperception, 48% of respondents who stated someone in the neighborhood had been arrested for a sexual crime were more concerned about sexual abuse by a stranger as compared to someone known, contrasted to only 27.5% of those who did not state someone in the neighborhood had been arrested for a sexual crime,  $\chi^2(1, n = 242) = 9.67, p < .01$ . In the multivariate analysis, a positive relationship was found between awareness of a neighborhood resident who has been arrested for a sexual offense and the likelihood of residents reporting more worry about a stranger sexually abusing a child as compared to a person known to the respondent (see Table 1). The logistic regression model for the investigational group illustrated the odds of having a misperception about sex offender risk as 2.56 times higher when the respondent indicates an awareness of a sex offender in the neighborhood ( $p < .01$ ). In addition, for each 1-point increase in the worry about Victimization Scale, the chances of having a misperception increased by 36% ( $p < .01$ ). Being married ( $p < .05$ ) was also significantly positively related to more worry about a child being sexually abused by a stranger as compared to someone known to the respondent. The only variable in the investigational group model to be negatively related to misperception was experience with violent victimization ( $p < .05$ ). Two variables that were not significantly related to a respondent holding a misperception indicated by their self-reported worry levels were familiarity with Megan's Law ( $p = .28$ ) and having children in the home ( $p = .06$ ).

**Table 1**  
**Logistic Regressions Predicting Misperception of Sex Offender Risk**

	Control Group		Investigational Group	
	Odds Ratio	SE	Odds Ratio	SE
Aware of sex offender in neighborhood	—	—	2.56	.81**
Very familiar with Megan's Law	1.05	.27	0.71	.23
Worry of victimization	1.12	.08	1.36	.10**
Victim of violent crime	0.96	1.31	0.28	.18*
Children in home	1.70	.44*	1.78	.56
Married	0.87	.29	1.88	.58*
Female	0.87	.23	1.05	.35
$\chi^2$ score	6.11		32.40	
Pseudo <i>R</i> -squared	.02		.12	
Model <i>p</i> value	.41		< .001	
<i>n</i>	323		242	

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

The overall predictive model for the control group was not significant ( $p = .41$ ). Therefore, even when excluding the presence and awareness of a registered sex offender, the remaining predictors that were significant in the investigational group's model were not sufficiently strong enough to influence the overall significance of the control group's logistic regression model, which led to the diagnostic finding of a misspecification of the logistic regression model.

## Discussion

This study had two primary goals. First, we sought to determine what percentage of the adult population of an urban county in the southeastern United States were more worried about a child being sexually abused by a stranger versus someone known to them. This concept was labeled *misperception*, as children are significantly more likely to be sexually abused by a person known to them rather than a stranger (Snyder, 2000; Vanzile-Tamsen et al., 2005). On average, about 3 out of 10 respondents reported being more worried about a child being sexually abused by a stranger as compared to someone known to the child. Over 50% of the sample expressed equal concern about someone known as well as a stranger.

About 1 out of 8 respondents reported more worry about a child being sexually abused by someone known. It should be viewed positively that 7 out of 10 people in this sample of the general public expressed more or equal concern about children being sexually abused by someone known to them. In other words, this sample of the general public appears to understand not to focus exclusively on “stranger danger” when it comes to sexual abuse. The second goal was to determine if there are unintended consequences to sex offender registration wherein those who were aware of a local neighborhood sex offender would be more likely to fear child sexual abuse by strangers as compared to someone known to them. The data illustrate that awareness of a local sex offender has a strong positive relationship to an increased likelihood of having a misperception—or in other words, being more worried about a stranger sexually abusing a child.

In the investigational group’s logistic regression model, other predictors of misperception were also found to be significant. Being married and the composite worry about Victimization Scale were both positively related to being more worried about child sexual abuse by a stranger than by someone known. On the other hand, being a victim of a violent crime significantly lowered a person’s chances of holding this misperception. It may be that experiencing a violent crime lowers the odds of having a misperception, because a substantial proportion of violent crimes are committed by someone known to the victim, with women being more likely than men to know the offender (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1994; Rand & Catalano, 2007).

The control group’s model, which did not include the question asking if someone was arrested for a sexual crime because no registered sex offender lived near this group of respondents, was not a statistically significant model. In an attempt to determine if the investigational group model would have the same lack of significance if it only contained those variables that were in the control group model, we removed the variable for awareness of a local sex offender. The remaining variables in the investigational group model still remained significant. This indicates that there were differences between the groups that were not captured through the self-administered survey and which cannot be explained by the awareness of a sex offender variable alone. Beyond individual-level factors that were not captured with this survey, there may be community factors that affect individuals’ concerns about who sexually abuses children. For example, registered sex offenders tend to cluster in socially disorganized areas (Mustaine, Tewksbury, & Stengel, 2006); thus, it may be that neighborhood factors affect the investigational group and control group respondents differently.

## Implications

Although it is impressive that only 30% of the current sample are more concerned with a stranger sexually abusing a child than someone known, the relationship between awareness of a neighborhood sex offender and misperceptions has specific implications for understanding how sex offender registration can affect the general public. If the goals of the legislation are to inform the public about sex offenders who have already been convicted of a sexual offense to keep the offenders from recidivating, an unintended consequence then may be that being aware of the local offender can lead to the increased focus on strangers at the detriment of being concerned about those who statistically are more likely to perpetrate sexual crimes against children. In other words, a false sense of security may ensue as the focus may be on watching the local sex offender in the neighborhood, rather than concentrating on those known acquaintances who have regular interactions with a child. As the passage of the Adam Walsh Act in 2006 illustrates, federal legislators are committed to this policy; therefore, effective recommendations should work within the current framework of the policy. Sex offender registries, along with the notifications sent in jurisdictions that have active notification, should clearly provide information about the typical relationship between a sex offender and victim. Although no empirical research to date has explored if this notification on sex offender registries actually affects the level of misperception in those who use the registry, this additional information is expected to weaken the relationship between the misperception of who sexually offends and awareness of someone in the neighborhood being arrested for a sexual crime.

## Limitations

The most prominent limitation for this study stems from the work of Hickman and Muehlenhard (1997), who found that college women were more likely to engage in precautionary behaviors due to fear of stranger rape as compared to acquaintance rape. For this study, that particular finding may have translated into the likelihood that respondents who were more likely to have the misperception were also more likely to use the registry and therefore be aware of the neighborhood sex offender. Furthermore, the survey used here did not ask if respondents had ever accessed the registry, as it was feared that social desirability pressures would lead respondents to view the registry and then answer survey questions differently. In an attempt to control for Hickman and Muehlenhard's finding, we included a

variable in which the respondents self-reported their familiarity with Megan's Law and sex offender registries. This control variable was not significant and did not change the significance of the variable measuring awareness of a local sex offender. As our study did not explicitly control for accessing the registry, it should be kept in mind as an alternative explanation. Nevertheless, even if awareness of a local sex offender is really measuring the concept that those who are more afraid of strangers sexually abusing children are more likely to use the registry and therefore be aware of a local offender, this finding is still imperative information for sex offender registration policy. Either interpretation of this finding makes the case that sex offender registries and notifications about local registered sex offenders need to include information about the typical relationship between an offender and a child sexual abuse victim.

An additional limitation was that the survey's response rate was under 50%. Typically, there is a challenge when using mail surveys to obtain high response rates (Dillman, 1991), but more problematic than the response rate was if those who did not respond were likely to respond differently than the survey responders. Perhaps some people did not respond to the survey on community safety because they did not feel that it was a particularly potent topic in their lives and therefore those respondents were less likely to worry about the sexual abuse of a child. No follow-up was attempted after the second round of surveys to determine if the nonresponders were qualitatively different than the responders with regard to likelihood to hold the misperception of sex offender perpetration. Finally, the present study does not complete the chain by being able to determine if misperceptions in the belief of who sexually abused the child led to differences in protective behavior of children. These limitations lay the groundwork for future empirical research, which will help practitioners and researchers learn about the intersection between misperceptions of sex offender perpetration and sex offender registries.

## **Future Research**

Future research should seek to distinguish if people who use the sex offender registry are more likely to be worried about strangers perpetrating sexual assault than those who have not used the registry. This new knowledge then can be integrated into a model to determine if being aware of a local sex offender continues to be positively related to misperception, even when controlling for use of the registry. It may be that the registry does not present an unintended consequence but rather just serves as an outlet for those who already hold such fears.

Upcoming work should also investigate if misperception of who sexually offends leads to less protective behaviors by parents or guardians. Likewise, it is important to know if this then contributes to more sexual abuse of children by people known to them because parents were concentrating on protecting children from strangers. Finally, in jurisdictions where sex offender registries make an effort to inform those who search the registries about who is likely to offend, does such information actually influence the residents' beliefs of the typical relationship between the offender and the child? In other words, does the relationship illustrated by the logistic regression model hold when residents are informed that most children are sexually abused by someone known to them? Or does the disclaimer posted by some sex offender Web sites produce little effect in the possible misperceptions of those who search the registries?

## Conclusion

In this study, we took the preliminary step in examining if sex offender registration and, more specifically, awareness of a neighborhood sex offender contributes to commonly held misperceptions and worries about those who sexually abuse children. Although this is only an exploratory study, the findings provide insight into a possible unintended consequence of sex offender legislation. Future research should determine if this finding indicates that a policy designed to help parents protect children actually leads parents to let down their guard with those more likely to offend or if the finding can be explained by those who are more worried about strangers sexually abusing children as more likely to use the sex offender registry.

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