

Public Perception of Sex Offender Social Policies and the Impact on Sex Offenders

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This study examines the public perception of sex offender policies and the perceived impact of sex offender policies on the sex offenders themselves. Specifically, this study explores how the community feels about the effectiveness of policies such as registration and community notification (Megan's Law), and housing restrictions in reducing sexual recidivism. Data are collected from 115 participants from a nationwide online community message board. Results suggest that although most individuals support Megan's Law, they do not feel the policy reduces recidivism. Furthermore, the majority of the participants also do not believe that housing restriction statutes are effective in reducing sexual recidivism. When questioned about the policy impact on sex offenders, the majority of respondents agree that as a consequence of Megan's Law, sex offenders are afraid for their safety; however, they do not believe that residence restrictions hinder sex offenders' employment opportunities. Findings from this study are discussed as they pertain to public policy and sex offender reintegration.

Keywords: *sex offender; policy; registry; notification; community*

Currently in the United States there is continued public pressure to enforce stricter laws that keep sex offenders off the streets and out of their communities (Cohen & Jeglic, 2007). Consequently, various sex offender social policies have been implemented, such as registration and notification laws, and more recently housing restrictions laws. However, there remains controversy about how such legislation can be implemented to find the balance between the rights of sex offenders and the rights of the community.

Registration and Notification Laws

In 1989, 11-year-old Jacob Wetterling was kidnapped and to date remains missing. As a consequence, the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexually

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Violent Offender Registration Act was passed as part of the Federal Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. The law states that “a person who is convicted of a criminal offense against a victim who is a minor, who is convicted of a sexually violent offense, or who is a sexually violent predator” is required to register (Jacob Wetterling Act, 1994). In all 50 states, sex offenders who meet the registration criteria are required to register on release, parole, supervised release, or probation (Jacob Wetterling Act, 1994). The length of registration varies from state to state depending on the characteristics of the offense and type of offender and ranges from 10 years to lifetime registration. As of March 2008, the United States had 636,910 registered sex offenders (Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2008).

Even though the Jacob Wetterling Act was enacted in 1989, it was not until the Law was amended in 1996 that the public became familiar with registered sex offenders following the sexual assault and murder of Megan Kanka by a convicted sex offender. The amended law (known as Megan’s Law) requires all 50 states to establish and maintain a community notification system (Center for Sex Offender Management, 2001). Together, the Jacob Wetterling Act and Megan’s Law have been combined to create the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Acts.

The sex offender community notification procedure is a multifaceted process that includes the collaborative effort between criminal justice practitioners and law enforcement agencies to decide which sex offenders meet the criteria for notification. How such information is disseminated and what type of information is disseminated is decided by local law enforcement agencies (Adams, 2002) or other agencies such as advisory groups and criminal justice agencies (Matson & Lieb, 1997). Many states have adopted a three-tier classification system, or a hierarchy of risk levels that allow for the clustering of certain sex offenders into different risk groups (Matson & Lieb, 1997). However, in 2006, the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act 2006 was passed. The act requires states to maintain and post information regarding sex offenders on their sex offender registry Web sites, linking them to the National Sex Offender Registry Web site. In addition, as part of the act, a mandatory “offense based” classification system has been developed (Adam Walsh Act, 2006). All states need to come into compliance with the act by the year 2009 or they will lose state funding (Adam Walsh Act, 2006).

Housing Restrictions and Buffer Zones

As of August 2007, 30 states have enacted housing restriction statutes (Meloy, Miller, & Curtis, 2008), which prohibit certain sex offenders from residing in close proximity to children. Specifically, these state laws may forbid sex offenders from living in close proximity to schools, daycare centers, parks, and school bus stops (Levenson, Zgoba, & Tewksbury, 2007). In addition to state laws, thousands of local cities, counties, and towns have passed municipal sex offender zoning ordinances

(Levenson & D'Amora, 2007). Such statutes vary among jurisdictions both in distance imposed and terminology. For example, Iowa forbids *any person convicted of a sex crime* from living within 2,000 feet of a school, daycare center, or park, whereas other states restrict only those with minor victims (Nieto & Jung, 2006).

Perception of Sex Offender Policies

Although many sex offender policies were developed in response to public pressure and outcry (Sample & Kadleck, 2008), few studies have actually examined the public's perception of these laws and their sentiments on the application and implementation of such laws. Redlich (2001) sampled community members, law enforcement officials, and law students in an effort to examine the community perception of the effectiveness of notification law in preventing child sexual abuse. They asked participants about controversial issues such as sex offender's constitutional rights and the prospect of vigilantism. The results suggested that law enforcement officials held the highest support for notification laws, whereas law students held the lowest support, with community members falling in the middle. Interestingly, when examining community notification measures, law enforcement officials were most likely to believe that regular and "drastic" (i.e., door-to-door flyers) measures of notification would not likely violate sex offender's constitutional rights (Redlich, 2001). Also noteworthy, a small but significant negative correlation was found between knowledge of child sexual abuse and support for community notification, suggesting that less knowledge yielded more support for the policy (Redlich, 2001).

Similarly, Proctor, Badzinski, and Johnson (2002) examined the media's impact on community knowledge, support, and belief in sex offender notification laws by surveying 345 Massachusetts residents via telephone. The authors divided the construct knowledge into general and specific categories, with specific knowledge consisting of knowledge pertaining to the specific provisions of Massachusetts's notification law. Overall, the authors found very low general knowledge of notification law, although specific knowledge was demonstrated better among the sample, with media exposure and attention increasing the level of specific knowledge of community notification laws (Proctor et al., 2002). The authors also found the respondents to be highly supportive of notification laws, as well as maintaining a strong belief in the effectiveness of notification law in protecting society.

Recently, Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, and Baker (2007) surveyed 193 people in Melbourne, Florida, about their perception of sex offender policies and found that 58% of respondents reported that they believed residence restrictions were an effective strategy in reducing sexual offenses. The majority of participants (83%) reported that they believed community notifications were an effective strategy to reduce sexual offenses (Levenson et al., 2007).

Finally, Lieb and Nunlist (2008) utilized a telephone survey to examine 643 of Washington's citizens about their familiarity with the Washington State notification policy, their opinion about sex offenders and community notification, their views on the purpose of community notification, and their reaction to the policy. The authors reported that 81% of respondents were familiar with the law, with the majority of citizens (63%) learning of the law via television or radio. Because of community notification, 78% of respondents reported they felt safer. The majority of citizens reported that they are more vigilant of their surroundings because of community notification and felt the law was very important or somewhat important. Finally, 54% of participants reported that notification "makes it easy for citizens to take the law into their own hands" via verbal or physical harassment, and 78% of citizens reported that "special care" should be taken to prevent such harassment (Lieb & Nunlist, 2008, p. 3).

Impact of Policies on Sex Offenders

Several recent studies have explored the impact of sex offender policies on the sex offenders themselves. Findings from Tewksbury and Lees (2007) suggest that although registered sex offenders see potential for registration legislation to reduce reoffending, they have serious concerns about the efficacy and application of such laws, namely, their application to all sex offenders as a homogenous group. Furthermore, registration and notification policies may actually increase recidivism by stigmatizing, isolating, and alienating offenders. Sex offenders ostracized by angry community members have been found to experience a significant amount of stress, depression, and hopelessness (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006), which could affect their ability to function as successful members of society. Tewksbury and Lees (2006) also found reports of relationship problems, employment difficulties, and persistent feelings of stigma and vulnerability by sex offenders. In a recent review of the collateral consequences of a 2006 Georgia statute that restricts registered sex offenders from residing, being employed, or loitering within 1,000 feet of a school, child care facility, church, park, recreation facilities, or school bus stop, Tewksbury (2007) concluded that registered sex offenders would experience persistent stress because they would be unable to find housing. Furthermore, he postulated that as a result of this legislation, sex offenders may abscond from supervision or fail to register, and in the worst-case scenario, the increasing levels of stress would lead to recidivism (Tewksbury, 2007).

Moreover, some argue that vigilantism, coupled with barriers to employment, and the perception that sex offenders cannot be rehabilitated may actually amplify deviance and hinder protection measures (West, 2000). Levenson and Cotter (2005a) reported that the majority of the sex offenders they surveyed reported experiencing hopelessness (72%), shame and embarrassment (67%), and stress that interfered

with their recovery (71%). In addition, sex offenders described that such experiences hindered them from engaging in activities and decreased their chances to live a normal life. For example, one participant reported, "I went back to school to get a degree. After 3 months of excellent work in a new career I was released because my employer found out about my record. It's absolutely devastating" (Levenson & Cotter, 2005a, p. 60). Experiences such as this have led critics to argue that such policies are doing more harm than good and may in fact be counterproductive.

Tewksbury (2005), in examining the collateral consequences of sex offender registration, found that of the 121 registered sex offenders surveyed, nearly half (47%) reported being harassed in person and 45.3% reported loss or denial of a place to live. Forty-three percent of the sample reported job loss and over half reported they lost a friend as a result of registration.

Zevitz and Farkas (2000) interviewed 30 sex offenders to examine the impact of the notification policy. Results suggest that the majority of the sample reported experiencing difficulties with employment and housing, oftentimes losing a job because of risk status, while being continuously pushed out of neighborhoods by their communities (Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). Similarly, Mercado, Alvarez, and Levenson (2008) surveyed 137 registered Tier II/III sex offenders on the New Jersey Sex Offender Registry on the impact of registration and notification and found that 52% of the sample reported having lost their job as a result of notification. Furthermore, 48% of the sample reported having been physically threatened or harassed. Finally, the majority of respondents reported that notification laws cause more stress in their lives (Mercado et al., 2008).

Findings from Levenson and Cotter (2005b) suggest that buffer zones hinder sex offenders' successful reintegration into society by isolating them from treatment options and employment opportunities and isolating them from an adequate support system, which may be crucial to preventing recidivism. Their study examining the impact of residence restrictions on sex offenders suggested that such statutes increased isolation, affected the financial and emotional well-being of offenders, decreased their chance to live a stable life, and increased stress and triggers for reoffending (Levenson & Cotter, 2005b). In addition, the authors reported that sex offenders perceived that residence restrictions prohibited them from supportive contact with their families, who may live within the residence restriction zone. They also propose that overlapping buffer zones may force sex offenders into high-crime neighborhoods (Levenson, 2008; Levenson & Cotter, 2005b).

Purpose of the Study

Although previous studies have examined the community's knowledge and perception of registration and notification policies, to date only one study has investigated the public's perception of housing restriction policies, perception of their

effectiveness, and support for the policies (Levenson et al., 2007). Currently, there is no research exploring public attitudes toward the impact of such policies on sex offenders, specifically regarding issues such as reintegration, stigma, vigilantism, sex offender rights, and the rewards and consequences of such policies. The following study attempts to fill this void by further examining community perception and attitude toward sex offender registration and notification, and residence restrictions. As the goal of sex offender legislation is to protect the public from harm, they are major stakeholders in the implementation and application of such policies. In addition, because public perceptions and attitudes influence legislators, it is important to gain a better understanding of how these policies are perceived (Sample & Kadleck, 2008). The objectives of this study were threefold: (a) to determine the public's knowledge of sex offender registration and notification policy (e.g., Megan's Law), (b) to assess the public's perception and attitude toward registration and notification policies and residence restrictions, and (c) to determine the public's perception of the impact and collateral consequences of such policies on sex offenders.

Method

Participants

Participants were sampled from several major metropolitan cities in the United States via an Internet-based community message board. Every 7 days the survey was posted in a different major city. Every effort was made to represent each geographic region equally. The sample consisted of 115 community members from 15 states. Demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. The majority of the respondents were female (85%) and between the ages of 25 and 64 (79%). The greater part of the population was Caucasian (81%) and reported no religious affiliation (39%). In addition, one third (33%) reported achieving a 4-year college degree and 38% reported an annual household income of \$50,000 or higher. Participants were also asked to describe their occupation. The majority reported working in the banking, business, administrative, and corporate sector. A second major occupational theme was composed of those who were unemployed, retired, and disabled. The majority (64%) of those surveyed did not report having children.

Measures

Demographic Survey. Demographic information that might have affected the variables of interest in this study such as age, gender, ethnicity, number of children, occupation, and household income was collected.

Megan's Law Knowledge Survey. This survey was constructed by the authors to explore what persons know about sex offender registration and notification laws and from what source they received this information.

Table 1
Community Demographic Characteristics

	<i>n</i>	%
Sex (<i>n</i> = 115)		
Female	98	85.2
Male	17	14.8
Age (<i>n</i> = 114)		
Younger than 25	23	20.2
25-64	90	78.9
65 or older	1	0.9
Ethnicity (<i>n</i> = 114)		
Black	3	2.6
Hispanic	6	5.3
Caucasian	92	80.7
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1	0.9
Asian/Pacific Islander	5	4.4
Other	7	6.1
Education (<i>n</i> = 115)		
Some high school	1	0.9
High-school degree	7	6.1
Some college	36	31.3
2-year college degree	14	12.2
4-year college degree	38	33.0
Higher than a college degree	19	16.5
Household Income (<i>n</i> = 114)		
Less than 20,000/year	14	12.3
20,000-30,000/year	21	18.4
30,000-40,000/year	20	17.5
40,000-50,000/year	16	14.0
50,000/year or higher	43	37.7
Children (<i>n</i> = 115)		
Yes	41	35.7
No	74	64.3
State of residence (<i>n</i> = 115)		
Arizona	5	4.3
California	2	1.7
Colorado	15	13.0
Hawaii	1	0.9
Illinois	10	8.7
Maine	1	0.9
North Carolina	4	3.5
Nevada	9	7.8
New Jersey	5	4.3
New Mexico	1	0.9
New York	14	12.2
Pennsylvania	11	9.6
Tennessee	4	3.5
Texas	12	10.4
Washington	21	18.3

A short description of various sex offender policies was provided after the above-mentioned survey as well as several descriptions of relevant constitutional amendments. The goal was to see if participants were familiar with sex offender policies before providing the definitions.

Participants were also asked questions relating to the constitutionality of registration and notification policies (Megan's Law) and were provided definitions of the Eighth (Cruel and Unusual Punishment Clause) and Fifth (Double Jeopardy Clause) Amendments. The aim was to allow participants to "think for themselves" and to respond with their perception regarding the constitutionality of such policies.

Attitude/Perception Toward Sex Offenders and Sex Offender Policies Survey. This survey, also constructed by the authors, asked questions relating to the public perception of sex offender's constitutional rights. In addition, this survey also asked the public's perception on which sex offenders (as defined by risk level) should meet the criteria for sex offender policies.

Megan's Law Survey—Community Based Revision (MLS; Levenson & Cotter 2005a). This survey, originally designed to explore the effect of Megan's Law on a sample of sex offenders, was revised with permission of the authors for a public nonoffending sample. For the purposes of the present study, the questions were modified to reflect public perception of Megan's Law, residence restrictions, stigma-related variables, vigilantism, recidivism, and the perceived effectiveness of sex offender social policies.

Results

Knowledge of Megan's Law

The first objective of the study was to examine if the community was familiar with registration and community notification laws (Megan's Law) and from what source they learned this information. Results indicated three major themes. Although the majority of participants (58%) were familiar with the basic purpose of registration and notification statutes, 32% of participants responded that they did not know of or were not familiar with Megan's Law. In addition, several participants (9%) responded with wrong definitions, with one participant responding, "Megan's Law has to do with Amber Alert." Another respondent reported, "Megan's Law compels violent and/or noncompliant mental patients to commitment to treatment."

Participants were also asked where they received their information regarding Megan's Law (see Table 2). Forty-four percent of the sample reported learning of Megan's Law via television, followed by the Internet (38%) and newspaper (29%).

Table 2
Where Did You Learn of Megan's Law?

	<i>n</i>	%
Television	51	44.3
Newspaper	33	28.7
Magazine	13	11.3
Radio	11	9.6
Internet	44	38.3
Family	7	6.1
Friends	10	8.7
School	11	9.6
Other	9	7.8

Note: Items are not mutually exclusive.

Perception of Sex Offender Policies

The second objective was to examine the public's perception of registration and notification law (Megan's Law) and residence restrictions (see Table 3). Prior to completing these questions, all participants were provided with the definitions of the Jacob Wetterling Act and Megan's Law. Those surveyed were asked their opinion on which type of sex offender they felt should be subjected to Megan's Law. The majority of the sample reported that high (89%) and moderate (82%) risk offenders should be subjected, whereas slightly more than half (51%) reported that low-risk offenders should be subjected. Twenty percent of respondents felt sex offenders posing no risk should also be subjected to Megan's Law.

Results suggest that the majority (80%) of those surveyed reported feeling that registration and notification policies are constitutional and do not violate the Eighth (Cruel and Unusual Punishment Clause) and Fifth (Double Jeopardy Clause) Amendments to the Constitution. Similarly, 75% did not believe Megan's Law violates sex offenders' right to privacy. However, it should be noted that 37% of the sample did not feel sex offenders had rights.

Overall, of those surveyed, 43% agreed, and 22% strongly agreed with the statement "Communities are safer when they know where sex offenders live" and 41% agreed with the statement "It is fair for communities to know about sex offenders' risk level." Nearly half of the sample (44%) agreed that registration and community notification helps to prevent offending; however, 57% of the sample felt Megan's Law does not change the rate at which sex offenders recidivate. Furthermore, 41% agreed with the statement "The information listed about sex offenders on the Internet registries helps the public know how to protect themselves."

Participants were also asked to rate what information they thought was fair for the community to know about registered sex offenders. Answer choices included *fair*,

Table 3
Public Perception of Megan’s Law and Residence Restrictions

	<i>n</i>	Percentage Agree	Percentage Strongly Agree
Communities are safer when they know where sex offenders live	95	43	22
Registration and notification helps to prevent offending	95	44	10
It is fair for communities to know about a sex offender risk level	95	41	50
Residence restrictions are successful in limiting sex offenders’ access to children	94	25	5
Residence restrictions help sex offenders to prevent offending	94	30	7
If sex offenders really wanted to reoffend they would be able to do so despite residence restrictions	94	28	60

somewhat unfair, and *unfair*. The majority felt it was very fair for the community to know a registered sex offender’s name (76%), home address (58%), their physical description (83%), photographs (73%), and description of sex crimes (78%). On the other hand, the majority felt knowing the work address (61%), home telephone (76%), employer (59%), and fingerprints (53%) of registered sex offenders was unfair.

Although 28% of the sample agreed, 60% strongly agreed that “if sex offenders really wanted to reoffend, they would be able to do so despite residence restrictions,” and only 30% agreed that “housing restrictions help prevent sex offenders from offending.” Similarly, only 25% of the sample agreed, “housing restrictions are successful in limiting sex offenders’ access to children.” Furthermore, only 27% of those surveyed agreed that “housing restrictions enable sex offenders to manage their risk.”

Public Perception of the Impact of Sex Offender Policies

The third objective was to examine the community’s perception of the impact of such policies on sex offenders. Participants were queried about issues affecting sex offenders such as vigilantism, stigma, employment, housing, and difficulties with reintegration. Community perceptions of the impact of registration and notification policies (Megan’s Law) are presented in Table 4. The majority of those surveyed felt it was unfair for sex offenders to be harassed and threatened (56%) or physically assaulted or injured (65%) by someone who found out they were a sex offender. Furthermore, 72% of the sample felt it was unfair for sex offenders’ property to be damaged by someone who found out they were a sex offender, and 50% endorsed

Table 4
Community's Response to the Impact of Megan's Law on Sex Offenders

	<i>n</i>	No	Yes	Don't Know
Is it fair that sex offenders are threatened and harassed by neighbors after they found out they are sex offenders?	95	55.8%	28.4%	15.8%
Is it fair that sex offenders are physically assaulted or injured by someone who found out they were a sex offender?	95	65.3%	16.8%	17.9%
Is it fair that sex offenders' property has been damaged by someone who found out they were a sex offender?	93	72.0%	16.1%	11.8%

	<i>n</i>	Percentage Agree or Strongly Agree
Sex offenders are afraid for their safety because of Megan's Law	95	56.9
Sex offenders feel less hope for the future because of Megan's Law	95	28.4
Sex offenders feel shame and embarrassment because of Megan's Law and it keeps them from engaging in activities	95	45.3
Sex offenders have lost friends or a close relationship because of Megan's Law	95	50.5
I agree that sex offenders feel alone and isolated because of Megan's Law	95	40.0

the item "sex offenders are afraid for their safety because of Megan's Law." However, only 17% of the sample agreed with the statement "Megan's Law makes sex offenders' recovery more difficult by causing more stress in their lives."

The authors also examined the community's perception of the impact of residence restrictions on sex offenders. Community perception of the impact of residence restriction policies (Megan's Law) is presented in Table 5. The majority (79%) felt it was fair that sex offenders are unable to return to their homes or apartments because of residence restrictions if their residence is too close to a school, bus stop, park, or playground. Of those surveyed, 66% reported they felt it was fair that sex offenders are unable to live with supportive family members because of housing restrictions, whereas only 26% agreed that because of housing restrictions, sex

Table 5
Community's Response to Impact of Housing Restrictions on Sex Offenders

	<i>n</i>	Percentage Yes
When released from prison, is it fair that sex offenders are unable to return to their home or apartment because it was too close to a school, bus stop, park, or playground?	94	78.7
Is it fair that sex offenders are unable to live with supportive family members because the residence was too close to a school, bus stop, park, or playground?	93	65.5
Is it acceptable for a landlord to refuse to rent to a sex offender?	94	64.9
Is it acceptable for a landlord to refuse to renew a sex offender's lease?	94	63.8
		Percentage Agree or Strongly Agree
	<i>n</i>	
Housing restrictions have led to financial hardships for sex offenders	94	41.5
Housing restrictions make sex offenders feel hopeless, angry, and/or depressed	94	44.7
Because of housing restrictions, sex offenders live farther away from employment opportunities	94	34.0

offenders live further away from supportive family and/or friends. In addition, only 22% agreed that because of housing restrictions sex offenders live farther away from social services and/or mental health treatment.

Discussion

The majority of the sample was knowledgeable about the basic tenets of registration and notification laws (Megan's Law), and almost half of the sample reported having received this information via television. Second, results suggest that although 44.2% of respondents felt Megan's Law helps to prevent offending, the majority did not feel that sex offender recidivism rates have decreased because of Megan's Law. Furthermore, less than 30% of those surveyed were supportive of residence restrictions, both in their potential effectiveness in preventing sexual abuse and in limiting sex offender's access to children. Finally, although the majority of participants appeared sympathetic toward the negative impact that community notification has on

sex offenders such as vigilantism, embarrassment, shame, and isolation, there was still a substantial minority who had very little concern about these effects. Most of those surveyed also appeared less sympathetic toward the negative impact residence restrictions have on sex offenders by way of finding suitable housing, family support, and treatment services.

Previous research suggests mixed results regarding public knowledge of Megan's Law, with some studies (e.g., Lieb & Nunlist, 2008) reporting a high percentage of knowledge whereas others (e.g., Proctor et al., 2002) a low percentage of knowledge among community members. In light of the current results, it would be fair to assume that the majority of community members are knowledgeable about the basic tenets of sex offender registration and notification policies and that the primary sources by which this knowledge was obtained were media outlets such as television, Internet, and newspapers.

Considering such laws target stranger perpetrators, or nonrelated victim-offender dynamics, it is curious that the majority of respondents support registration and notification acts. In other words, requiring an incest offender to register and notify the community will be of little use in preventing further interfamilial sexual abuse. It may be that the public is not knowledgeable about the weight "stranger danger" has in the application of notification policies. In a recent study, Fortney, Levenson, Brannon, and Baker (2007) found that a community sample significantly overestimated the percentage of sexual assaults committed by strangers. Similarly, the majority of the sample also felt that low-, medium-, and high-risk offenders should be subjected to registration and notification. Such results are important in shedding light on current sex offender policies, which also appear to be of the one-size-fits-all kind. Interestingly, results suggest that the majority felt Megan's Law helps prevent offending, which is consistent with previous research (e.g., Lieb & Nunlist, 2008; Proctor et al., 2002) examining community perception of sex offender policies; however, most did not feel sex offender recidivism rates decreased because of Megan's Law.

So why are people supporting a policy that they feel is ineffective in stopping sexual abuse? One explanation stems from a study conducted by Levenson et al. (2007) that found that nearly 50% of community members surveyed endorsed the statement, "I would support these policies even if there is no scientific evidence showing that they reduce sexual assault" as completely true, whereas 24% endorsed the statement as partially true. Consequently, it may be that such contradictory responses are driven by emotion rather than by knowledge of empirical evidence regarding sex offender policies. It may also be that the majority of community members are highly influenced by the media's portrayal of sex offenders as a homogenous group of child molesters, and that research suggesting the contrary will be of little impact on their perceptions. Therefore, it is critical that the media should be enlisted as a partner dispelling inaccuracies and myths regarding sex offenders and sex offender policies to ensure a smoother and more successful sex offender reintegration into society.

The findings of the study further suggest that the majority of those surveyed were not as supportive of residence restrictions as they were of community notifications,

both in their potential effectiveness in preventing sexual abuse and in limiting sex offender's access to children. This may be explained in part by the fact that the majority of those sampled felt sex offenders will reoffend regardless of residence restrictions. It is plausible that the public feels that housing restrictions do little to prevent sex offender's physical contact with children, if sex offenders can and will migrate to other neighborhoods to perpetrate. Another explanation may lie in the perception of the law as a "feel-good policy" that creates a false sense of security that sex offenders are residing farther away from children and therefore children are protected.

Interestingly, most of those surveyed appeared to be more concerned about the negative effects of community notifications, as compared to residence restrictions. This may be due, in part, to the recent and increasing media attention focusing on stories exposing the effects of registration and community notification on sex offenders, such as vigilantism (e.g., Martin & O'Hagan, 2005; Todd, 2005). However, housing restriction statutes are a recent phenomenon and it may be that although the majority does not generally support the policy, there is less public knowledge concerning the policy and the negative effects it has on sex offenders. On the other hand, it may be that the public *is* knowledgeable about resident restrictions, and such beliefs stem from the not-in-my-backyard phenomenon.

The findings of this study offer important clinical implications for those in the field of sex offender treatment. Clinicians should inform sex offenders about society's perception of them and the policies that surround them, thereby preparing them for what to expect should they be released. Providing such information during discharge planning may foster a more successful and realistic transition back into society without harboring unrealistic expectations for a warm welcome. Such information may also aid in reducing triggers or factors that may predispose or increase the likelihood of reoffending (i.e., anger, depression) associated with registration or notification and residence restrictions. Sex offenders must be prepared to face numerous judgments, rejections, and emotional obstacles should they be released back into the community. Furthermore, through treatment, sex offenders can learn to cope with the ongoing stress of these laws.

There are several limitations to this study. Although it was exploratory in nature, participants comprised a nonrandom self-selected sample. The majority of our sample were female, between the ages of 25 and 64, Caucasian, better educated, more affluent, and without children, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. Although strong efforts were made to reach a more diverse population, this study does not attempt to generalize to the average American. Further research should include a more representative sample of males, differing ethnic backgrounds, broader age ranges, and a larger percentage of those who are parents. Despite the vigorous attempt to represent the general population by using this sampling method, a total of 15 states were included in the final analysis. Further research should include the remaining unrepresented states in gathering data regarding public perception of sex offenders

and sex offender policies while using a random sampling procedure. As well, it would behoove future researchers to use an Internet sampling company to gather data from a more balanced representative sample.

To complete the study, all subjects had to have access to a computer and the Internet. Although this method was cost-effective and timely, further research may include a paper-and-pencil version or telephone survey to include those who do not have access to a computer or are unfamiliar with it.

Conclusions

The importance of community perception and attitudes toward sex offenders and the policies surrounding them may lie in the sustainability of these laws. In other words, it is plausible to assume that it is the public that drives legislators to create and enforce strict sex offender social public policy. It is in our best interest to examine what the public perceives to be factual regarding sex offender legislation to gain a better understanding of how and why such perceptions form. If such laws are to be maintained, the public at large should be informed on both the rewards and, more importantly, the consequences of sex offender policies. It is imperative that sex offender policies be guided by sound empirical research evaluating their effectiveness and consequences and not by the emotional reactions of community members whose perceptions may be based on unwarranted speculations about sex offenders and sex offender policies. We can only benefit from future public perception studies so as to better understand how such policies are born. Similarly, by dispelling common myths surrounding sex offender legislation, reintegration can be less daunting and more successful. Furthermore, because the majority of public opinion is largely guided by the media, it is imperative that researchers partner with media outlets to disseminate research findings. This can be done proactively by providing the media with abstracts describing current findings, in addition to serving as experts and correcting common misperceptions and stereotypes when cases pertaining to sex offending are in the media.

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