Evaluating Public Perceptions of the Risk Presented by Registered Sex Offenders: Evidence of Crime Control Theater?

Kelly M. Socia and Andrew J. Harris
University of Massachusetts Lowell

Survey research suggests that many members of the public ascribe to myths about sex offenders. These "mythic narratives" relate to the perceived homogeneity of the sex offender population and the extent and nature of reoffense risk. The prominence of such belief systems in media and policy discourse may contribute to adoption of public policies that carry significant symbolic value, yet may fall short of their ostensible goals of protecting children and preventing sexual victimization—a condition framed by some as *crime control theater*. This study surveyed a nationally representative Internet sample of 1,000 U.S. adults to examine mythic narrative beliefs regarding the risk presented by registered sex offenders (RSOs) who are on the public Internet registry. Respondents estimated the proportion of RSOs who were pedophiles, sexual predators, strangers to their victims, and who were at a high risk of committing 6 types of sexual and nonsexual offenses. Factor analysis revealed high levels of convergence in respondent ratings across these 9 variables, and relatively high estimates of RSO risk, affirming that the public generally ascribes to the mythic narratives underlying crime control theater. Higher estimates of RSO risk were associated with respondents who were female, Hispanic, less educated, more conservative, and less politically knowledgeable. Further, higher estimates of RSO risk were associated with never having used the registry, believing the registry is effective and warrants increased funding, believing sex crimes are increasing, and maintaining that research evidence would not change their views about registry effectiveness. Implications for policy and practice are discussed.

Keywords: crime control theater, registered sex offenders, sex offender registration, sex offenses, sex offender policy

Research has revealed that many members of the public believe a variety of myths surrounding those who are assigned the "sex offender" designation. These include myths related to the perceived homogeneity of the sex offender population, the extent and nature of reoffense risk (Craun & Theriot, 2009; Harris & Socia, 2014; Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007), and the efficacy of treatment and rehabilitation efforts (Mancini & Budd, 2015; Payne, Tewksbury, & Mustaine, 2010). The prominence of such belief systems in media and policy discourse (see Best, 1990; Kitzinger, 2004; Shelby & Hatch, 2014; Simon, 1998), may contribute to adoption of public policies that carry symbolic value, but that fall short of their professed goals of protecting children and preventing sexual victimization (Griffin & Miller, 2008; Koon-Magnin, 2015; Leon, 2011; Levenson et al., 2007). Public policies that provide the *appearance* of crime control, but without actual efficacy, have been framed by some as *crime control theater* (CCT; Griffin & Miller, 2008).

CCT provides a possible framework to interpret public beliefs concerning sex offenders. For instance, one criterion of CCT is that it appeals to mythic narratives (e.g., an innocent child harmed by a villainous predator), which have clear connections to the stranger-danger myths surrounding sexual offenses and sex offenders (see also Budd & Mancini, 2016, this issue, for more on mythic narratives surrounding sex offenders). Understanding the public perceptions reflecting these mythic narratives is the purpose of this study.

Public perceptions of sex offender risk carry direct and practical implications for public safety policy and practice. Specifically, the expansion of public Internet sex offender registries in the United States over the past two decades has enlisted members of the public as agents of community safety. Griffin and Miller (2008) refer to this method of linking the Internet with the media as an "electronic posse." Because registered sex offenders (RSOs) present varying levels of reoffense risk (Ackerman, Harris, Levenson, & Zgoba, 2011; Harris, Levenson, & Ackerman, 2014), public misperceptions surrounding RSO risk may ultimately undermine the registries' utility as a public safety tool.[1]

In this context, the current study examines American public beliefs regarding the risk presented by RSOs who are listed on the public sex offender registry. Many of these beliefs constitute the types of mythic narratives described by CCT, which thus provides a framework to help frame this study. Utilizing a nationally rep-

[1] For more discussion of sex offender laws as CCT, see Armstrong, Miller, and Griffin (2015) and Budd and Mancini (2016) in this issue.

resentative Web based sample of 1,000 U.S. adults, we asked respondents to estimate the proportion of RSOs who met certain risk characteristics, including those who are pedophiles, sexual predators, or strangers to their victims, as well as the proportion who are at a high risk of committing six different types of sexual and nonsexual offenses. Results will indicate whether the public (and what subsets of the public) are most likely to believe the mythic narratives that characterize crime control theater.

Public Policies and Public Perceptions Regarding Sex Offenders

While citizens have been concerned with sex offenders and their crimes for decades (e.g., Best, 1990; La Fond, 1998; Sutherland, 1950a, 1950b), the last 25 years have produced an expansion of public policies aimed at monitoring and managing sex offenders in the community. Common sex offender community management policies implemented since the 1990s have included the expansion of sex offender registration and notification (SORN) systems; the imposition of restrictions on sex offenders' residence, employment, and Internet use; and expansion of mandatory lifetime supervision and GPS monitoring (for reviews, see Bonnar-Kidd, 2010; Cohen & Jeglic, 2007; CSOM, 2008; Socia & Stamatel, 2010).

Amid these policy developments, a growing body of survey research has established several key principles. First, it is clear that citizens strongly support such policies and believe in their effectiveness in making the community safer (Levenson et al., 2007; Mancini, Shields, Mears, & Beaver, 2010; Meloy, Curtis, & Boatwright, 2013; Phillips, 1998). These beliefs have persisted despite empirical evidence that challenges the presumed efficacy of many of these policies (e.g., Ackerman, Sacks, & Greenberg, 2011; Maddan, 2008; Sandler, Freeman, & Socia, 2008; Socia, 2012, 2015). Further, some have asserted that the policies reduce the chances of successful reentry, and may in fact compromise public safety as a result (e.g., Levenson, 2008; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury, 2005).

Second, community surveys suggest that citizens adhere to strongly held beliefs and perceptions about sex offenders and the risk that they present to society—beliefs that are often contrary to research evidence. Notably, surveys have indicated that a majority of citizens view sex offenders as uniformly high risk and resistant to rehabilitation (Levenson et al., 2007). Further, adherence to common sex crime myths is associated with beliefs about the ability of sex offenders to reform, victim harm, and the causes of offending (Mancini & Pickett, 2014). As suggested by prior research, such myth adherence may also be associated with demographic variables, such as age and gender (Caputo & Brodsky, 2004; Katz-Schiavone, Levenson, & Ackerman, 2008; Levenson et al., 2007; Phillips, 1998), marital status (Craun & Theriot, 2009), education (Beck & Travis, 2004), race (Mancini & Pickett, 2014; Mancini et al., 2010), community setting (Mancini, 2014; see also Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010), and political orientation (Mancini & Pickett, 2014; Mancini et al., 2010). Further, being more knowledgeable generally (e.g., political knowledge) and/or more open to university research may be related to public perceptions (and misperception). Other factors potentially associated with sex offender myth adherence include sex offender registry use (Anderson & Sample, 2008; Mancini, 2014), perception of the registry

and sex crime trends (Mancini & Pickett, 2014), and views concerning sex offender policy-specific research. Finally, belief about the importance and/or effectiveness of sex offender policies has been associated with fear of sexual assault (Caputo & Brodsky, 2004), and thus may be associated with fear-based misconceptions.

Third, evidence suggests that the above-referenced beliefs surrounding both policies and perpetrators of sexual offenses may be grounded, at least in part, in a homogenized view of sex offenders and their associated risk. A survey experiment conducted in 2014 indicated that levels of policy support and perceived levels of dangerousness were directly associated with the use of the uniform "sex offender" label as opposed to more neutral language (Harris & Socia, 2014). These findings suggest that the very use of the "sex offender" terminology may tap into certain fear-related feelings that may have a direct bearing on levels of policy support and myth adherence.

The Reality of Sexual Offending and RSOs

As just described, the existing research on sex offenses and sex offender recidivism suggests that the public's perception of RSOs' risk rarely reflects reality. Because this study is concerned with public perception of RSO risk, it is important to review, albeit briefly, the "reality" of this risk.

As a population, sex offenders have lower general recidivism rates compared to most other convicted felons. For instance, Langan, Schmitt, and Durose (2003) estimated that almost seven in 10 nonsexual felons would recidivate in the first 3 years of release. In comparison, estimates suggest that approximately 10–25% of those convicted of sexual offenses will recidivate with any crime in the first year of release (Langan et al., 2003), and 30–40% will do so in the first 4–5 years of release (Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Prentky, Lee, Knight, & Cerce, 1997). These estimates suggest that fewer than half of RSOs could be considered high risk for general recidivism.

While RSOs are more likely to *sexually* recidivate than non-RSO felons are, RSO sexual recidivism rates are still quite low. A recently released report from the Office of Justice Program's SMART Office noting that "observed sexual recidivism rates range from 5 percent after 3 years to 24 percent after 15 years" (SMART Office, 2014, p. 1). Individual studies and meta analyses have estimated the sexual recidivism rate at approximately 2% in the first year of release (Langan et al., 2003), 3–6% in the first 3 years (Duwe & Freske, 2012; Langan et al., 2003; SMART Office, 2014), and 5–14% in the first 4–5 years (Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Harris & Hanson, 2004; Helmus, Hanson, Thornton, Babchishin, & Harris, 2012).[2] As such, the proportion of *all* RSOs who might reasonably be considered a high risk to commit a new sex crime of any type is likely under 25%.

When viewing sexual recidivism in terms of risk to specific age groups, prior conviction types generally predict future conviction types (Hanson, Scott, & Steffy, 1995), although recidivism of rapists and child molesters may have some age crossover (see English, Jones, Pasini-Hill, Patrick, & Cooley-Towell, 2000; Heil,

---

[2] While the underreporting of sex crimes has been a long-standing concern (see Catalano, 2006; Hlavka & Uggen, 2008), even providing for low reporting rates still yields fairly low sexual recidivism estimates for RSOs as an aggregate group.

Ahlmeyer, & Simons, 2003; Wilcox, Sosnowski, Warberg, & Beech, 2005). Research suggests that the short-term recidivism rate of those convicted of adult rape is less than 25% (Harris & Hanson, 2004; Langan et al., 2003), with the longer term rate (15 years or longer) likely somewhere between 25 and 40% (Doren, 1998; Harris & Hanson, 2004; Prentky et al., 1997). For those convicted of sexual offenses against minors, research suggests that child molesters have short-term sexual recidivism rates between 5 and 15% (Harris & Hanson, 2004; Langan et al., 2003), and long-term sexual recidivism rates of between 23 and 52% (Doren, 1998; Hanson et al., 1995; Harris & Hanson, 2004). When accounting for potential age crossover, the proportion of RSOs on the registry who would be considered a "high risk" for a new sex crime involving child or teen victims may reasonably be estimated at under 50%, and perhaps as low as 10 or 25%.

Of note, the above-referenced recidivism estimates are generally reflected in sex offender registry data for states that distinguish RSOs on the basis of risk. A 2012 national survey of registry systems found that states utilizing three-tier systems based on risk assessments (classifying RSOs as low-medium-high) placed between 8% and 49% of their RSOs into the high-risk tier, with a median of approximately 25%. This survey also indicated that states utilizing special designations for an especially high-risk group designated as "sexual predators" placed between 1% and 4% into that particular category (Harris, Levenson, & Ackerman, 2014).

Overall, these statistics suggest that the proportion of RSOs that could be considered high risk to recidivate, sexually or otherwise, is relatively low (Sample & Bray, 2003, 2006; Tewksbury, Jennings, & Zgoba, 2012), especially compared to popular beliefs that most RSOs will recidivate. Further, RSO recidivism accounts for only a very small proportion of overall sex crimes (Sandler et al., 2008).

Other research similarly contradicts common myths related to sex offenders and their risk. For example, the proportion of pedophiles among RSOs has been estimated at less than 20% (Sample & Bray, 2006). Across the entire United States, annual child abductions involving sexual assault have been estimated at around 26,000 (Finkelhor, Hammer, & Sedlak, 2002), and this number includes perpetrators that may or may not be RSOs. The number of stereotypical, overnight, stranger child abductions annually in the United States has been estimated at only a few hundred in any given year (Best, 1990; Finkelhor et al., 2002; Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Sedlak, 1992). Considering sex offender registries in the United States contain approximately 750,000 registrants (Harris et al., 2014; National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 2015), it seems reasonable to estimate the proportion of RSOs at "high risk" for abducting children at well under 10%. Further, less than 25% of sex crimes involve stranger victims, and this is closer to 10% when considering child victims (Greenfield, 1997; Maguire & Singer, 2011). Even considering the under reporting of nonstranger sex crimes, it seems reasonable to estimate the proportion of RSOs who were strangers to their victims at well under 50%, and likely closer to 25%.

Yet the way existing sex offender management policies have been designed does not seem to match the reality of offending and victimization. Instead, it reflects many of the myth-based conceptions of RSO risk.

Public Perceptions and the Utility of Sex Offender Registries

Among the various U.S. sex offender management policies, SORN has emerged as perhaps the most universal. Although sex offender registries date back to the 1940s (Logan, 2009), and providing registry information to the general public dates to 1990s, the expansion of Internet registries beginning in the late 1990s has greatly expanded public access to sex offender information. All 50 states, U.S. territories, and over 100 tribal jurisdictions operate public websites containing sex offender information, and the federal government operates a national portal linking to this diverse set of databases. Of the over 800,000 sex offenders contained on the nation's registration systems, approximately 75% have their information publicly available (Harris et al., 2014).

Looking beyond the above-referenced effects of public misperceptions on the general support for passage of SORN policies, the rapid emergence of public Internet registries raises a more practical set of concerns. Specifically, the public registry is ostensibly intended to ensure that the public is furnished with actionable and useful information about sex offenders that can help to promote community safety. As such, registry's effectiveness relies in part on the public's willingness to access the registry, and the ability to appropriately understand and contextualize the registry information. In a recent survey of law enforcement professionals who work with sex offender registry information, 66% indicated their belief that public misperceptions surrounding registry information represented a major or moderate challenge to the effectiveness of their registration systems (Harris, Lobanov-Rostovsky, & Levenson, 2015).

Yet registries contain information on a wide array of individuals, ranging from the highly dangerous to those presenting minimal public safety risks. Despite an ongoing push for uniform national standards, states vary considerably in the extent of registry information available to the public. Some states release information on all RSOs on their public websites, while others provide information only on a limited subset of higher risk RSOs. Some contain detailed information about offenses and risk profiles, while others only provide more basic levels of information (Harris et al., 2014).

Given the above, the manner in which members of the public perceive the risk presented by those on public registries emerges as an important concern for the design and operation of SORN systems. Although researchers have examined public perceptions concerning "sex offenders" generally, none to our knowledge have specifically evaluated community members' perceptions and expectations related to those appearing on the public sex offender registry. Gaining this level of understanding may be integral to SORN system design and community education efforts surrounding the use of the registries.

Misperceptions' Influence on Public Policy

Public misperceptions may be implicated in the promulgation of policies intended to protect the public from sex offenders (Socia & Stamatel, 2010; Wetterling & Wright, 2009). Indeed, research finds that misconceptions regarding RSOs are both prevalent and directly related to support for sex offender policies and punitive attitudes regarding RSOs (Caputo & Brodsky, 2004; Comartin, Kernsmith, & Kernsmith, 2009; Kernsmith, Craun, & Foster,

2009; Mancini & Pickett, 2014). Surveys also indicate that policymakers and the public generally believe in the efficacy of these policies (Meloy et al., 2013; Phillips, 1998).

Yet a wealth of research on these policies finds little justification that they work as intended (e.g., Ackerman et al., 2011; Maddan, 2008; Sandler et al., 2008; Socia, 2012, 2015). Further, research also finds these policies can have severe unintended consequences for sex offenders, which may in turn reduce the chances of successful reentry, and reduce public safety as a result (e.g., Levenson, 2008; Levenson & Hern, 2007; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury, 2005).

This type of policymaking, based on misconception and fear rather than evidence, is consistent with the tenets of CCT, which asserts that this condition becomes problematic when such policies make individuals *feel* safer without making them *actually* safer (Griffin & Miller, 2008). Similar processes have occurred with other "child-protection" policies, such as AMBER Alerts (Griffin & Miller, 2008; Zgoba, 2004) and Caylee's law (Socia & Brown, 2014).

Crime Control Theater

CCT provides a framework that can aid in understanding public perceptions (and misperceptions) of RSOs. CCT refers to ineffective laws that provide simple and popular solutions to serious crimes. There are four components of CCT laws: reaction to moral panic, unquestioned acceptance and promotion, appeal to mythic narratives, and empirical failure (Armstrong, Miller, & Griffin, 2015; Hammond, Miller, & Griffin, 2010). Armstrong and colleagues (Armstrong et al., 2015) outline in detail how SORN laws meet the criteria of CCT. First, SORN laws are based on a moral panic reaction to a "horrifying" crime, such as the kidnapping and murder of Megan Kanka by a convicted sex offender. Second, SORN laws are extremely popular with the public (Harris & Socia, 2014), and quickly spread across the United States (see CSOM, 2008; Levenson & D'Amora, 2007). Third, these laws focus on mythic narrative of dangerous sexual predators preying on young stranger children, and imply that the public can protect children through diligent use of registry data to prevent recidivism (see Armstrong et al., 2015). Finally, empirical research generally finds sex offender registration laws are ineffective at protecting children or reducing recidivism (e.g., Sandler et al., 2008; Tewksbury et al., 2012; Vasquez, Maddan, & Walker, 2008). As such, Internet sex offender registries appear to be a clear example of CCT.

As noted earlier, part of CCT involves mythic narratives, which for the purposes of sex offender policies, involves beliefs that most sex offenders are pedophiles and dangerous sexual predators, and are uniformly high risk to commit sex crimes against strangers, particularly young children. However, it is possible that not everyone subscribes to these beliefs equally, and thus the purpose of this study is to determine what subset(s) of the population are most likely to subscribe to the mythic narrative criteria of CCT concerning sex offenders listed on public Internet registries.

The Current Study

In this general context, the current study aims to shed light on community perceptions of the risk posed by sex offenders listed on public Internet registries. The specific questions being examined are threefold: (1) How do community members view the distribution of risk (i.e., mythic narratives) presented by RSOs? (2) Does the public differentiate different types of risk among RSOs, or is risk alternatively viewed as a single underlying factor (i.e., a generalized construct)? (3) What demographic, political, and social factors are associated with these beliefs and perceptions?

Method

Sample Data

The current study uses data collected from a nationally representative Web-based panel survey of 1,000 U.S. adults, and that have been used in prior research (Harris & Socia, 2014). The survey was commissioned by the Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, and was administered through YouGov on April 2014. A University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the survey protocol and data collection instruments prior to data collection.

The survey data collection process has been previously described by Harris and Socia (2014), and their explanation is reproduced here. Specifically, YouGov utilizes a two-stage sampling process. Surveys are first administered to a nonprobability "oversample" drawn from an opt-in Internet panel, and then the initial sample is reduced to a representative final sample by algorithmically matching respondent characteristics to an established sampling frame (Rivers, 2006). The YouGov system has been validated in election studies within both the United States (Vavreck & Rivers, 2008) and Great Britain (Twyman, 2008), and has been utilized for U.S.-based polling conducted by media outlets including the New York Times/CBS News (Cohn, 2014) and the Economist (YouGov, 2014).

For the current study, the survey was initially administered to 1,172 respondents drawn from YouGov's online panel of more than 100,000 adult U.S. residents. Respondents were matched to a sampling frame based on gender, age, race, education, political party identification, ideology, and political interest. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2010 American Community Survey, with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the American Community Survey public use file). The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores based on age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, and ideology. The propensity scores were first grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame, and then poststratified according to these deciles. Based on the above-referenced matching process, a final sample of 1,000 cases was identified as offering the closest "fit" with the sampling frame. Additional details on the sampling frame are available from the authors on request.

Dependent Variable: RSO Risk Estimate

For the dependent variable, survey respondents were first asked nine questions that involved estimating the proportion of the RSO population that met a given criteria related to risk. Three of these questions concerned estimating the proportion of RSOs that had characteristics associated with being particularly dangerous (i.e., pedophiles, sexual predators, stranger victims), which reflect some of the mythic narrative beliefs regarding "typical" sex crimes and

sex offenders. The other six questions concerned estimating the proportion of RSOs who were at a "high risk" of committing *future* crimes (i.e., a sex offense, abducting children, sexually abusing children under 12 years old, sexually abusing young teens, sexually assaulting adults, and committing a nonsex offense). For each question, respondents could choose one of five estimates: <10%, 25%, 50%, 75%, or >90%. For the purposes of the analysis, the individual answers are initially treated as ordinal variables ranging from 1 (<10%) to 5 (>90%). Table 1 presents the distribution of responses to each of these nine questions.

As the next phase in the analysis, we examined the question of whether the individual responses to these nine questions tapped into a single underlying measure of sex offender risk perception held by each respondent, or rather if they measured multiple unique aspects of sex offender risk that a respondent individually considered. As will be noted in the results section, the nine measures were determined to be measuring a single underlying idea of risk (i.e., a single general construct) held by each respondent. In light of this, the dependent variable represents is a single alpha scale measure consisting of a respondents responses to all nine questions about sex offender risk. While the individual answers were treated as ordinal, the resulting dependent variable can be treated as a continuous variable ranging from 1 to 5, with higher values representing a higher risk estimate of RSOs.

Independent Variables

The independent variables measure three sets of responses that tap into respondents' demographics, views and knowledge, and sex offender-specific beliefs and registry usage. The selection of these variables was informed by the prior literature on public perceptions regarding sex offenders and sex offender policies, as well as ideas related to general knowledge and/or misperception.

Demographics. The first set of variables measured the respondents' demographic characteristics that may influence their perceptions of RSO risk. These variables stem in part from prior research, and included age (in years), gender, race/ethnicity (non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic other, Hispanic), marital status (married vs. not married), college education (vs. less than a 4-year degree), and community setting (urban vs. nonurban). Based on the findings of previous studies mentioned earlier, we expect that RSO risk estimates will be positively correlated with being older, female, a racial or ethnic minority, married, less educated, and living in a nonurban area.

Views and knowledge. The second set of variables measured respondents' views and knowledge about politics, religion, and academic research. Political orientation was measured as Republican identification using a 5-point political party preference question (strong Democrat, weak/leaning Democrat, Independent/unsure, weak/leaning Republican, strong Republican; strong Republican is high), and also as conservativeness using a 5-point political ideology question (very liberal, liberal, moderate/unsure, conservative, very conservative; very conservative is high). Political knowledge was constructed as a summed scale ($\alpha = .73$) measuring the number of "correct" answers from a set of five factual political questions (e.g., knowing the positions of John Boehner, David Cameron, and John Roberts, and knowing which parties controlled the House of Representative and the U.S. Senate; Zaller, 1992). A religiosity scale (alpha .76) was constructed from questions concerning their religiosity, including their frequency of prayer and religious service attendance, importance of religion, and whether they were a "born-again" Christian. The more religious a respondent was, the higher their religiosity score. Finally, one question asked respondents about the believability of university research findings on global warming, racism, and other topics. Responses were based on a 4-point scale (Almost certainly correct, probably correct, probably wrong, almost certainly wrong), with higher scores indicating more trust in university research. We expect that RSO risk estimates will positively correlate with Republican and/or conservative political preference, more religiosity, less political knowledge, and less trust in university research.

Sex offender beliefs and actions. The third set of variables measured respondents' beliefs and actions concerning sex offender policies and sex crimes. Respondents were asked whether they had ever used the registry (1 = yes), and a 4-point question on whether the registry was effective at preventing sex crime (very effective, somewhat effective, somewhat ineffective, very ineffective; higher score indicates more belief in effectiveness). They were also asked 3-point questions on whether funding for the registry should be increased (increase funding, keep funding the same, decrease funding; higher score indicates more funding), and whether they thought sex crimes were more common now than 20 years ago (more common, about the same frequency, less common; higher score indicates more common today). Finally, respondents were asked a dichotomous question on whether research studies that conclude SORN laws have "few or no measurable public safety benefits" would change their views on SORN policies (would *not* change views = 1).

Analytic Plan

The analyses are split into two sections. The first section examines the overlap between respondents' estimates of the various questions pertaining to RSOs' offense types and risks of future offenses. This is done through reliability analysis, using factor scores and examinations of Cronbach's alpha for the set of nine ordinal measures of perceptions about RSOs. The goal of this first analysis is to determine whether respondents' estimates about sex offender characteristics and risk are individual measures with unique variation, or instead are tapping into a common underlying idea of risk (i.e., are manifest measures that tap one or more latent

Table 1
Risk Estimates of the RSO Population

% of RSOs who are . . .	N	Estimated % of RSOs				
		<10%	25%	50%	75%	>90%
Pedophiles	944	10%	19%	34%	21%	16%
Sexual predators	942	8%	16%	30%	26%	21%
Strangers to victims	942	21%	25%	32%	13%	9%
High risk						
New sex crime	942	6%	11%	24%	27%	32%
Abducting kids	941	20%	21%	26%	17%	15%
Child victims	938	14%	21%	26%	20%	18%
Teen victims	940	9%	19%	32%	23%	17%
Adult victims	942	10%	20%	34%	22%	14%
Nonsex crime	938	24%	23%	27%	13%	13%

Note. RSO = registered sex offender.

constructs). The second section examines whether any of these risk estimates are explained by other respondents' characteristics concerning demographics, views and knowledge, and sex offender-specific beliefs and actions.

Results

Of the initial 1,000 cases, 85 were dropped due to missing data on the outcome variable, the independent variables, or both. Of these 85 dropped cases, 28 were dropped solely for not answering *any* of the nine risk perception questions used for the RSO risk perception outcome measure, another 32 were dropped solely for missing data on the independent variables, and 25 were dropped for both problems. As such, the final sample contained 915 respondents, and Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for this sample.[3]

The results in Table 2 indicate that respondents overall have very high perceptions of the RSO population's risk, particularly compared to the (previously noted) statistics supported by research. For instance, over half of respondents thought 50% or more RSOs were either a stranger to their victims, at a high risk of abducting children, having future child victims, or committing a nonsex crime. About seven in 10 respondents thought 50% or more RSOs were pedophiles or at a high risk of having future teen or adult victims. Finally, more than three in four respondents thought 50% or more RSOs were sexual predators or at a high risk of a new sex crime. As noted earlier, this suggests a large proportion of the public has perceptions of RSO risk that do not reflect actual empirical estimates.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics

Variable ($N = 915$)	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Risk perception of RSOs	3.07	.97	1	5
Demographics				
Female	.54	.50	0	1
Race/ethnicity				
Non-Hispanic White				
(comparison)	.73	.44	0	1
Non-Hispanic Black	.11	.31	0	1
Non-Hispanic other	.06	.24	0	1
Hispanic	.10	.30	0	1
Age (years)	48.21	16.00	19	95
Married	.55	.50	0	1
College education	.28	.45	0	1
Urban	.53	.50	0	1
Views and knowledge				
Republican	2.61	1.35	1	5
Conservativism	2.96	1.09	1	5
Religiosity	3.24	1.57	1	5.67
Political knowledge	2.25	1.61	0	5
Believe university research	1.75	.78	0	3
Sex offender beliefs and actions				
Ever used registry	.34	.48	0	1
Registry is effective	2.68	.82	1	4
Increase funding for registry	1.23	.62	0	2
Sex crimes more common				
today	1.48	.62	0	2
Research wouldn't change				
SORN views	.58	.49	0	1

Note. RSO = registered sex offender; SORN = sex offender registration and notification.

Despite the high overall risk estimates, some notable findings emerged that are important for a more nuanced understanding of risk perceptions. For instance, more than four in 10 respondents thought that 25% or less of RSOs were strangers to their victims, or at a high risk of either abducting children or committing a new nonsexual offense. Further, around three in 10 respondents thought that 25% or less of RSOs were pedophiles, or at a high risk of sexually assaulting child victims, teen victims, or adult victims. Thus, a sizable minority of the respondents seem to understand that *most* RSOs are not considered especially dangerous or high risk.

RSO Risk Perception Scale Construction

The next phase of the analysis involved examining the interitem correlations and Cronbach's alpha of the nine risk estimate variables. The Cronbach's alpha of the nine-variable scale was a very respectable .92, and an item analysis of the scale indicated that dropping any of the individual variables would result in a *lower* alpha for the remaining variables. The average interitem covariance was .86. These initial results are the first indication that these nine variables are measuring a single underlying construct (i.e., a single idea) of sex offender risk.

To explore the adequacy of the single-construct solution, we conducted a split-sample analysis. First, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis on a random sample of half of the dataset. This analysis indicated the first factor accounted for over 95% of the variance in the data and had the only eigenvalue above 1.00 (5.14), while the second factor's eigenvalue was only .33. Examination of the scree plot (not shown) also suggested a single-factor solution was the most appropriate, and the individual variable factor loadings for the first factor were all above .60. Next, we examined the second half of the data using similar methods, and found very similar results, with the first factor explaining 94% of the variance and having an eigenvalue of 4.84 (the second factor's was .45). Further, the individual variable factor loadings were similar between the two split samples, with all variables having loadings above .54 on the first factor. The final step in the split-sample analysis involved conducting confirmatory factor analysis on the second half of the data using Stata's structural equation model building (not shown). The one-factor solution yielded excellent model fit after accounting for particular error covariances between variables. As such, these results suggest the nine variables are all tapping a single underlying factor that estimates belief about sex offender risk.

Finally, we examined a factor analysis of the nine questions using all cases in the dataset with answers for all nine variables. Unsurprisingly, the full dataset yielded similar factor results to both half samples. By all reasonable measures, the factor analysis similarly indicated that these nine variables are measuring a single underlying construct of risk perception regarding RSOs. Unrotated factor loadings indicated the first factor accounts for about 95% of the variation in the nine variables, and it was the only one with an

---

[3] While respondents were not given a "don't know" option for the outcome measures, about 8.7% ($N = 87$) skipped at least one of the nine questions. When examining skip patterns by respondent, most of the 8.7% skipped all nine questions ($N = 53$; 61%), while a large minority skipped only one question ($N = 27$; 31%). It is unclear whether results would have changed by the availability of a "don't know" option.

eigenvalue above 1.00 (4.99). The loadings for the variables on the first factor range from .59 to .89, and further suggest these items are tapping into the same underlying construct. More details on the factor analyses are available from the first author upon request.[4]

Given these results, risk estimates are analyzed using a single combined (averaged) scale that taps into the underlying construct of "risk perceptions of RSOs." This scale can be treated as a continuous measure ranging from 1 (*low risk perception*) to 5 (*high-risk perception*). The descriptive statistics of this combined scale are presented in Table 2.[5]

Predicting RSO Risk Perception

The next part of the analysis predicts respondents' risk perceptions of RSOs based on their sociodemographic variables. As noted earlier, these sociodemographic variables were chosen based on the findings of prior research on public perceptions of RSO risk. As the scale measure is a continuous variable with fairly a normal distribution (skewness = .02; kurtosis = 2.64), the analyses used an ordinary least squares regression model with robust standard errors.[6]

Table 3 provides the results of the regression analysis. The individual variance inflation factors were all under 2.00, and the mean variance inflation factor was 1.27, which indicated that multicollinearity was not a concern for the model. The model

Table 3

Predicting Risk Perceptions of RSOs

Variable	Risk perceptions of RSOs	
	B	*SE*
Demographics		
Female	.13*	.06
Race/ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic Black	.12	.11
Non-Hispanic other	.04	.11
Hispanic	.30**	.13
Age (years)	<.01	<.01
Married	−.05	.06
College education	−.15*	.06
Urban	.04	.06
Views and knowledge		
Republican	−.01	.03
Conservativism	.09*	.04
Religiosity	.02	.02
Political knowledge	−.09***	.02
Believe university research	.05	.05
Sex offender beliefs and actions		
Ever used registry	−.14*	.06
Registry is effective	.16***	.04
Increase funding for registry	.30***	.06
Sex crimes more common today	.16**	.05
Research wouldn't change SORN views	.18**	.06
Constant	1.59***	.23
N	915	
F(16, 898)	16.43	
*r*²	.22	

Note. RSO = registered sex offender; SORN = sex offender registration and notification. Presents robust standard errors (*SE*). Race/ethnicity uses non-Hispanic White as the comparison category.
* *p* < .05.   ** *p* < .01.   *** *p* < .001.

overall was significant (*p* < .001), and explained about 22% of the variance in RSO risk perception.

The results suggest that respondents' risk perception is heavily influenced by existing beliefs (and actions) regarding sex offenders, as well as a handful of demographic and general views and knowledge characteristics. Specifically, the demographic characteristics to reach statistical significance (*p* < .05) included being female or Hispanic, which correlated with an increase in RSO risk perception compared to male and non-Hispanic White respondents, respectively. Further, being college educated correlated with a decrease in RSO risk perception. Age, marital status, and urban environment did not significantly influence RSO risk perception.

In terms of general views and knowledge, respondents who were more conservative had higher RSO risk perception (*p* < .05), and those with more general political knowledge had lower RSO risk perception (*p* < .001). Interestingly these two variables had opposite coefficients of a similar magnitude; thus, an individual who was very conservative and very politically knowledgeable would be predicted to have a RSO risk perception similar to an individual who was very liberal but also very politically ignorant. Political party affiliation, religiosity, and belief in university research did not significantly influence RSO risk perception.[7]

All of the measures responding to respondents' sex offender-specific beliefs and actions were statistically significant in predicting RSO risk perceptions. Having ever used the registry was associated with decreased RSO risk perception (*p* < .05). Conversely, believing the registry was effective and supporting increased funding for the registry (*p* < .001 for both), and believing sex crimes increased over the last 20 years (*p* < .01) were all associated with increased RSO risk perception. Finally, believing that research would *not* change an individual's views about SORN was also associated with increased RSO risk perception (*p* < .01).

Discussion

This study examined public beliefs and perceptions of the risk presented by RSOs, drawing on a national community sample. In

---

[4] We thank an anonymous reviewer for their recommendation of the split-sample analysis.

[5] The scale was created for individuals that answered at least one of the nine risk estimate questions (*n* = 947). Of these, 34 individuals answered at least one risk estimate question but did not answer all nine. Given the earlier analysis indicating these measures tap a common underlying construct, the decision was made to include these 34 partial respondents in the scale creation. Results using the listwise scale are presented in the final models, although a total of 915 cases were used in the final models due to missing data on the independent variables.

[6] A weight variable was available in the dataset that would weight individual cases to more closely match the YouGov sample to the American Community Survey in terms of gender, age, race/ethnicity, years of education, and political ideology. However, as the analyses are exploring relationships between variables, rather than generating population estimates, and some of the variables of interest would be incorporated into the weighting process, results report unweighted models. Using weighted data resulted in only a single notable change—belief that sex crimes are more common today became non-significant with the weighted data (*p* = .09). However, all other variables retained both their significance and their substantive interpretations.

[7] Analysis of the correlation between Republican and conservative suggested some overlap, with the bivariate correlation being .64. This overlap, while not reaching the levels of multicollinearity concern, may explain why Republican did not reach significance while conservativeness did.

this sense, it was examining part of the mythic narrative criterion of CCT. Results suggest that most community members expect that a majority of RSOs present a high risk of reoffense for a variety of crimes, despite empirical evidence to the contrary. As noted earlier, the majority of respondents thought that half or more RSOs were pedophiles, were sexual predators, had stranger victims, or were at a high risk of committing six different types of crimes in the future. In other words, a majority of respondents saw RSOs as a one-size-fits-all category that contained individuals who were universally high-risk for future offenses. This perception supports prior research concerning public views of the "typical" sex offender (e.g., pedophile, sexual predator, stranger victims), and their high likelihood of future crimes of both a sexual and nonsexual nature. This also presents a strong example of how CCT laws reflect mythic narratives and beliefs that do not match reality.

Alpha scores and factor analyses support the notion that perception of RSO risk is a single underlying construct. In other words, members of the public believe that RSOs are at a high risk of doing a *variety* of different things. This finding is consistent with the notion that there is a generalized fear concerning RSOs, rather than a nuanced assessment of the various types of risk.

Results also indicated that being female, Hispanic, less educated, more conservative, and less politically knowledgeable predicted increased RSO risk perception. The observed gender effects, as well as those related to Hispanic identification, are consistent with research on the "White male effect" that is documented extensively within the general risk perception literature. Such research suggests that females and minority groups tend to express higher inherent levels of generalized fear than their White and male counterparts, due to a range of sociopolitical and cultural factors (e.g., Finucane, Slovic, Mertz, Flynn, & Satterfield, 2000; Kahan, Braman, Gastil, Slovic, & Mertz, 2007). However, it is also important to note that both females and minorities *do* have higher levels of sexual victimization rates compared to males and non-minorities, respectively (Catalano, 2006).

Regarding the findings concerning those with less education and political knowledge, explanations may be more rationality-based—for example, that such individuals may be less aware of facts and research concerning sex crimes, and more reliant on the panic-based myths and misperceptions promoted in the media. On that note, those with more conservative ideologies have higher estimates of RSO risk, which could reflect prior research findings that conservative ideology is linked with harsher views of crime and punishment generally (Helms & Jacobs, 2002; Jacobs & Jason, 2004; Levenson, Fortney, & Baker, 2010), and beliefs regarding the prevalence of crime and dangerousness posed by convicted individuals (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010), including sex offenders (Shelby & Hatch, 2014). These potential explanations obviously would require more detailed individual-level research to confirm.

Perhaps most importantly, the questions measuring respondents' beliefs and actions concerning sex offender policy and sex crimes explain much of the variation in RSO risk perceptions. It is notable that those who have experience using the registry seem to attribute somewhat lower overall risk to the RSO population. This might indicate that direct exposure to the registry does help the public better understand the range of offender types who are listed on the registry, and perhaps adopt a more nuanced view of RSO risk. Perhaps most concerning is that respondents who believed research *would not* change their views on SORN had higher RSO

risk estimates. This suggests that those who have the most profound misconceptions about the RSO population are also the ones with the (self-proclaimed) least malleable opinions in light of research evidence. This is also consistent with prior research that finds belief in high sexual recidivism rates predicts lack of belief in research regarding sex offender treatment (Mancini & Budd, 2015).

Belief in the registry's effectiveness, support for increased registry funding, and belief that sex crimes are rising (while they are actually declining) are all highly and positively linked to RSO risk perception. While this is intuitively logical, it may have important implications for policy efforts aimed at refining and reforming SORN systems. For example, efforts aimed at educating the public about the risk profile of RSOs may help the public to understand the promise and limitations of SORN systems as registry tools. Additionally, it may also be important to reorient SORN systems to better differentiate high risk from lower risk offenders, particularly in light of registries' continual expansion. One way to do this may be to publicly list *only* those RSOs who legitimately represent a high risk of reoffending, with the high-risk designation reflecting validated actuarial measures of static and dynamic risk factors (e.g., Static-99R, SOTIPS).

As has been noted by others, SORN laws represent excellent examples of CCT (Armstrong et al., 2015). While not specifically a test of CCT, the present study's findings support this view, in that many members of the public believe in the mythic narratives concerning RSOs as pedophiles and sexual predators who target strangers and are at a high risk of committing future sex crimes against a variety of victims. Further, these beliefs appear to be highly interconnected, and thus individuals ascribe to a "package" of beliefs about sex offenders that, combined, represent a strong mythic narrative.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has some important limitations to consider. First, the study utilized a nonprobability sample of U.S. residents recruited via an opt-in online panel. While the sample was representative of the U.S. adult population across key demographic dimensions due to the YouGov.com matching process, these findings may not be fully generalizable to the broader U.S. population (Harris & Socia, 2014). Second, the study was missing parental status and victimization status, which may be important predictors of public perception concerning sex offenders (King & Roberts, 2015; Koon-Magnin, 2015; Mancini & Budd, 2015; but see Levenson et al., 2007). Future research may want to analyze these factors in addition to the others included in the current study. Missing data resulted in the dropping of a small proportion of the overall sample (8.5%) from the final dataset. It is unclear whether these cases would have influenced overall results had their data been fully available, or if respondents were provided with a "do not know" answer choice. Finally, these results do not test CCT per se, but rather use CCT as a framework to interpret responses to questions that reflect a mythic narrative about sex offenders. Future research may want to test the theoretical predictions of CCT directly by using more targeted questions.

Conclusion

Overall, this study found that the majority of respondents viewed RSOs as a uniformly high-risk group that matches common misperceptions concerning pedophilia, sexual dangerousness, and stranger-danger. Indeed, perceptions of RSO risk seem to tap a single underlying construct, based largely on misconception and fear, and thus support the idea of mythic narratives underlying what is essentially CCT. While some demographic and general characteristics predicted these RSO risk perceptions, the most important set of predictors involved beliefs and actions specific to sex offender policy and sex crimes. RSO risk perceptions were higher for those respondents who had never used the registry, believed it to be effective and worthy of increased funding, believed sex crimes were increasing, and were resistant to changing their views on SORN in light of research evidence. The latter finding presents a particular challenge to the promotion of evidence-based policy.

These findings support at least two key recommendations for policymakers. The first pertains to the demand for investment in public education initiatives that help members of the public better understand the causes and dynamics of sexual violence and abuse, as well as the heterogeneity of the population commonly assigned the "sex offender" label. Beyond promoting public awareness surrounding the limits of the registry and the scope of the RSO population, such educational outreach initiatives should also serve as conduits for expanded community knowledge surrounding around the prevention of sexual violence and abuse. Somewhat paradoxically, the public registry websites themselves might serve as vital conduits for such public outreach initiatives.

The second key policy recommendation emerging from our findings pertains to the extent and nature of the information contained on the public registry websites. As the number of RSOs contained on the nation's registries continues to grow, those charged with SORN systems' design and implementation should remain cognizant of the public's tendency to view risk as a uniform construct based on mythic narratives. One approach—adopted by many states already—is to limit the RSOs whose information is publicly available to those who are deemed to present comparatively higher risk of reoffense. In other words, make the public registry reflect offenders whose profiles match the mythic narratives that the public firmly believes in. In the absence of such limits, public SORN websites should, at a minimum, be designed in a manner that recognizes gradations of RSO risk and effectively communicates the nature of risk to members of the public.

References

Ackerman, A. R., Harris, A. J., Levenson, J. S., & Zgoba, K. (2011). Who are the people in your neighborhood? A descriptive analysis of individuals on public sex offender registries. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry, 34,* 149–159. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlp.2011.04.001

Ackerman, A. R., Sacks, M., & Greenberg, D. F. (2012). legislation targeting sex offenders: Are recent policies effective in reducing rape? *Justice Quarterly, 29,* 858–887.

Anderson, A. L., & Sample, L. L. (2008). Public awareness and action resulting from sex offender community notification laws. *Criminal Justice Policy Review, 19,* 371–396. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0887403408316705

Armstrong, M. M., Miller, M. K., & Griffin, T. (2015). An examination of sex offender registration and notification laws: can community senti-ment lead to ineffective laws? In M. K. Miller, J. A. Blumenthal, & J. Chamberlain (Eds.), *Handbook of community sentiment* (pp. 239–251). New York, NY: Springer.

Beck, V. S., & Travis, L. F., III. (2004). Sex offender notification and fear of victimization. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 32,* 455–463. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2004.06.007

Best, J. (1990). *Threatened children.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Bonnar-Kidd, K. K. (2010). Sexual offender laws and prevention of sexual violence or recidivism. *American Journal of Public Health, 100,* 412–419. http://dx.doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2008.153254

Budd, C. M., & Mancini, C. (2016). Crime control theater: Public (mis)perceptions of the effectiveness of sex offender residence restrictions. *Psychology, Public Policy, & Law, 22,* 362–374. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/law0000083

Caputo, A. A., & Brodsky, S. L. (2004). Citizen coping with community notification of released sex offenders. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law, 22,* 239–252. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/bsl.566

Catalano, S. M. (2006). *Criminal victimization,* 2005 (NCJ 214644). Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Cohen, M., & Jeglic, E. L. (2007). Sex offender legislation in the United States: What do we know? *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 51,* 369–383.

Cohn, N. (2014, July 27). Explaining online panels and the 2014 midterms. *The New York Times.* Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/28/upshot/explaining-online-panels-and-the-2014-midterms.html?smid=pl-share

Comartin, E. B., Kernsmith, P. D., & Kernsmith, R. M. (2009). Sanctions for sex offenders: Fear and public policy. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation, 48,* 605–619. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10509670903196066

Craun, S. W., & Theriot, M. T. (2009). Misperceptions of sex offender perpetration: Considering the impact of sex offender registration. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 24,* 2057–2072. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0886260508327706

CSOM. (2008). *Legislative trends in sex offender management.* Retrieved from http://www.csom.org/pubs/legislative_trends.pdf

Doren, D. M. (1998). Recidivism base rates, predictions of sex offender recidivism, and the "sexual predator" commitment laws. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law, 16,* 97–114. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1099-0798(199824)16:1<97::AID-BSL295>3.0.CO;2-K

Duwe, G., & Freske, P. J. (2012). Using logistic regression modeling to predict sexual recidivism: The Minnesota Sex Offender Screening Tool-3 (MnSOST-3). *Sexual Abuse, 24,* 350–377. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1079063211429470

English, K., Jones, L., Pasini-Hill, D., Patrick, D., & Cooley-Towell, S. (2000). *The value of polygraph testing in sex offender management.* Retrieved from https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/199673.pdf

Finkelhor, D., Hammer, H., & Sedlak, A. J. (2002). *Nonfamily abducted children: National estimates and characteristics.* Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Finkelhor, D., Hotaling, G. T., & Sedlak, A. J. (1992). The abduction of children by strangers and nonfamily members. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 7,* 226–243. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/088626092007002008

Finucane, M. L., Slovic, P., Mertz, C. K., Flynn, J., & Satterfield, T. A. (2000). Gender, race, and perceived risk: The "White male" effect. *Health Risk & Society, 2,* 159–172. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/713670162

Greenfield, L. A. (1997). *Sex offenses and offenders: An analysis of data on rape and sexual assault* (NCJ-163392). Washington: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Griffin, T., & Miller, M. K. (2008). Child abduction, AMBER Alert, and crime control theater. *Criminal Justice Review, 33,* 159–176.

Hammond, M., Miller, M. K., & Griffin, T. (2010). Safe haven laws as crime control theater. *Child Abuse & Neglect: The International Journal, 34,* 545–552. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2009.11.006

Hanson, R. K., & Bussière, M. T. (1998). Predicting relapse: A meta-analysis of sexual offender recidivism studies. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 66,* 348–362. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.66.2.348

Hanson, R. K., Scott, H., & Steffy, R. A. (1995). A comparison of child molesters and nonsexual criminals: Risk predictors and long-term recidivism. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, 32,* 325–337. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0022427895032003004

Harris, A. J. R., & Hanson, R. K. (2004). *Sex offender recidivism: A simple question* (2004–03). Ottowa, Ontario, Canada: Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada. Retrieved from https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrcs/pblctns/sx-ffndr-rcdvsm/sx-ffndr-rcdvsm-eng.pdf

Harris, A. J., Levenson, J. S., & Ackerman, A. R. (2014). Registered sex offenders in the United States: Behind the numbers. *Crime and Delinquency, 60,* 3–33. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0011128712443179

Harris, A. J., Lobanov-Rostovsky, C., & Levenson, J. S. (2015). *Law enforcement perspectives on sex offender registration and notification: Findings from a national survey.* Lowell, MA: University of Massachusetts, Lowell.

Harris, A. J., & Socia, K. M. (2014). What's in a name? Evaluating the effects of the "sex offender" label on public opinions and beliefs. *Sexual Abuse.* Advance online publication. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1079063214564391

Heil, P., Ahlmeyer, S., & Simons, D. (2003). Crossover sexual offenses. *Sexual Abuse, 15,* 221–236.

Helms, R., & Jacobs, D. (2002). The political context of sentencing: An analysis of community and individual determinants. *Social Forces, 81,* 577–604. http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sof.2003.0012

Helmus, L., Hanson, R. K., Thornton, D., Babchishin, K. M., & Harris, A. J. R. (2012). Absolute recidivism rates predicted by Static-99R and Static-2002R sex offender risk assessment tools vary across samples: A meta-analysis. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 39,* 1148–1171. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0093854812443648

Hirschfield, P. J., & Piquero, A. R. (2010). Normalization and legitimation: Modeling stigmatizing attitudes towards ex-offenders. *Criminology, 48,* 27–55. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9125.2010.00179.x

Hlavka, H. R., & Uggen, C. (2008). Does stigmatizing sex offenders drive down reporting rates? Perverse effects and unintended consequences. *Northern Kentucky Law Review, 35,* 347–369.

Jacobs, D., & Jason, T. C. (2004). Ideology, social threat, and the death sentence: Capital sentences across time and space. *Social Forces, 83,* 249–278. http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sof.2004.0115

Kahan, D. M., Braman, D., Gastil, J., Slovic, P., & Mertz, C. (2007). Culture and identity-protective cognition: Explaining the white-male effect in risk perception. *Journal of Empirical Legal Studies, 4,* 465–505. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1740-1461.2007.00097.x

Katz-Schiavone, S., Levenson, J. S., & Ackerman, A. R. (2008). Myths and facts about sexual violence: Public perceptions and implications for prevention. *The Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture, 15,* 291–311. Retrieved from http://www.albany.edu/scj/jcjpc/vol15is3/KatzSchiavoneLevensonAckerman.pdf

Kernsmith, P. D., Craun, S. W., & Foster, J. (2009). Public attitudes toward sexual offenders and sex offender registration. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 18,* 290–301. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10538710902901663

King, L. L., & Roberts, J. J. (2015). The complexity of public attitudes toward sex crimes. *Victims & Offenders.* Advance online publication. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2015.1005266

Kitzinger, J. (2004). *Framing abuse: Media influence and public understanding of sexual violence against children.* Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press.

Koon-Magnin, S. (2015). Perceptions of and support for sex offender policies: Testing Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, and Baker's findings. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 43,* 80–88. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2014.12.007

La Fond, J. Q. (1998). The costs of enacting a sexual predator law. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, 4,* 468–504. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/1076-8971.4.1-2.468

Langan, P. A., Schmitt, E. L., & Durose, M. R. (2003). *Recidivism of sex offenders released from prison in 1994.* Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Leon, C. S. (2011). *Sex fiends, perverts, and pedophiles: Understanding sex crime policy in America.* New York, NY: New York University Press.

Levenson, J. S. (2008). Collateral consequences of sex offender residence restrictions. *Criminal Justice Studies, 21,* 153–166. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14786010802159822

Levenson, J. S., Brannon, Y. N., Fortney, T., & Baker, J. (2007). Public perceptions about sex offenders and community protection policies. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy (ASAP), 7,* 137–161.

Levenson, J. S., & D'Amora, D. A. (2007). Social policies designed to prevent sexual violence: The emperor's new clothes. *Criminal Justice Policy Review, 13,* 168–199. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0887403406295309

Levenson, J. S., Fortney, T., & Baker, J. N. (2010). Views of sexual abuse professionals about sex offender notification policies. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 54,* 150–168. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0306624X08327785

Levenson, J. S., & Hern, A. L. (2007). Sex Offender residence restrictions: Unintended consequences and community reentry. *Justice Research and Policy, 9,* 59–73. http://dx.doi.org/10.3818/JRP.9.1.2007.59

Levenson, J. S., & Tewksbury, R. (2009). Collateral damage: Family members of registered sex offenders. *American Journal of Criminal Justice, 34,* 54–68. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s12103-008-9055-x

Logan, W. A. (2009). *Knowledge as power: Criminal registration and community notification laws in America.* Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press. http://dx.doi.org/10.11126/stanford/9780804757102.001.0001

Maddan, S. (2008). *The labeling of sex offenders.* Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Maguire, M., & Singer, J. (2011). A false sense of security: Moral panic driven sex offender legislation. *Critical Criminology, 19,* 301–312. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10612-010-9127-3

Mancini, C. (2014). Examining factors that predict public concern about the collateral consequences of sex crime policy. *Criminal Justice Policy Review, 25,* 450–475. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0887403412473475

Mancini, C., & Budd, K. M. (2015). Is the Public convinced that "nothing works?" Predictors of treatment support for sex offenders among Americans. *Crime and Delinquency.* Advance online publication. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0011128715597693

Mancini, C., & Pickett, J. T. (2014). The good, the bad, and the incomprehensible: Typifications of victims and offenders as antecedents of beliefs about sex crime. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence.* Advance online publication.

Mancini, C., Shields, R. T., Mears, D. P., & Beaver, K. M. (2010). Sex offender residence restriction laws: Parental perceptions and public policy. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 38,* 1022–1030. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2010.07.004

Meloy, M., Curtis, K., & Boatwright, J. (2013). The sponsors of sex offender bills speak up: Policy makers' perceptions of sex offenders, sex crimes, and sex offender legislation. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 40,* 438–452. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0093854812455740

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. (2015, June 1). Registered sex offenders in the United States and its territories per 100,000 population. Retrieved from http://www.missingkids.com/en_US/documents/Sex_Offenders_Map.pdf

Payne, B. K., Tewksbury, R., & Mustaine, E. E. (2010). Attitudes about rehabilitating sex offenders: Demographic, victimization, and community-level influences. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 38,* 580–588. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2010.04.029

Phillips, D. M. (1998). *Community notification as viewed by Washington's citizens*. Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy. Retrieved from http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/rptfiles/CnSurvey.pdf

Prentky, R. A., Lee, A. F. S., Knight, R. A., & Cerce, D. (1997). Recidivism rates among child molesters and rapists: A methodological analysis. *Law and Human Behavior, 21,* 635–659. http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1024860714738

Rivers, D. (2006). *Sample matching: Representative sampling from internet panels. Polimetrix White Paper Series*. Palo Alto, CA: Polimetrix, Inc.

Sample, L. L., & Bray, T. M. (2003). Are sex offenders dangerous? *Criminology & Public Policy, 3,* 59–82. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9133.2003.tb00024.x

Sample, L. L., & Bray, T. M. (2006). Are sex offenders different? An examination of rearrest patterns. *Criminal Justice Policy Review, 17,* 83–102. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0887403405282916

Sandler, J. C., Freeman, N. J., & Socia, K. M. (2008). Does a watched pot boil? A time-series analysis of New York state's sex offender registration and notification law. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, 14,* 284–302. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0013881

Shelby, R. M., & Hatch, A. R. (2014). Obscuring sexual crime: Examining media representations of sexual violence in Megan's law. *Criminal Justice Studies, 27,* 402–418.

Simon, J. (1998). Managing the monstrous: Sex offenders and the new penology. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, 4,* 452–467. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/1076-8971.4.1-2.452

SMART Office. (2014). *Sex offender management assessment and planning initiative* (NCJ 247059). Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from http://www.smart.gov/SOMAPI/pfv.html

Socia, K. M. (2012). The efficacy of county-level sex offender residence restrictions in New York. *Crime and Delinquency, 58,* 612–642. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0011128712441694

Socia, K. M. (2015). State residence restrictions and forcible rape rates: A multistate quasi-experimental analysis of UCR data. *Sexual Abuse, 27,* 205–227. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1079063213509412

Socia, K. M., & Brown, E. K. (2014). "This isn't about Casey Anthony anymore": Political rhetoric and Caylee's law. *Criminal Justice Policy Review*. Advance online publication. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0887403414551000

Socia, K. M., Jr., & Stamatel, J. P. (2010). Assumptions and evidence behind sex offender laws: Registration, community notification, and residency restrictions. *Social Compass, 4,* 1–20. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2009.00251.x

Sutherland, E. H. (1950a). The diffusion of sexual psychopath laws. *American Journal of Sociology, 56,* 142–148. http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/220695

Sutherland, E. H. (1950b). The sexual psychopath laws. *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology, 40,* 543–554. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1137845

Tewksbury, R. (2005). Collateral consequences of sex offender registration. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice, 21,* 67–81. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1043986204271704

Tewksbury, R., Jennings, W. G., & Zgoba, K. M. (2012). A longitudinal examination of sex offender recidivism prior to and following the implementation of SORN. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law, 30,* 308–328. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/bsl.1009

Twyman, J. (2008). Getting it right: YouGov and online survey research in Britain. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties, 18,* 343–354. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457280802305169

Vasquez, B. E., Maddan, S., & Walker, J. T. (2008). The influence of sex offender registration and notification laws in the United States: A time-series analysis. *Crime and Delinquency, 54,* 175–192. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0011128707311641

Vavreck, L., & Rivers, D. (2008). The 2006 cooperative congressional election study. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties, 18,* 355–366. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457280802305177

Wetterling, P., & Wright, R. G. (2009). The politics of sex offender policies: An interview with Patricia Wetterling. In R. G. Wright (Ed.), *Sex offender laws: Failed policies, new directions* (pp. 99–113). New York, NY: Springer.

Wilcox, D., Sosnowski, D., Warberg, B., & Beech, A. R. (2005). Sexual history disclosure using the polygraph in a sample of British sex offenders in treatment. *Polygraph, 34,* 171.

YouGov. (2014). Latest findings in Economist/YouGov poll. Retrieved from http://today.yougov.com/news/categories/economist/

Zaller, J. (1992). *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press. http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511818691

Zgoba, K. M. (2004). Spin doctors and moral crusaders: The moral panic behind child safety legislation. *Criminal Justice Studies, 17,* 385–404. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1478601042000314892