

Effects of offender registry on image in the community



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Recent developments focus on how the community emphasizes the use of sex offender registries as a means for safety and protection. One consequence of such efforts is that it can raise public awareness and keep individuals from wanting to reside within these communities where male sex offenders dwell (Beck, 2004, p. 166). The prospective qualitative study draws on data from an online questionnaire presented to 200 students from Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine and is used to assess whether individuals of a certain race who are females, parents, or have a history of sexual trauma are more likely than others to refuse living in a neighborhood where a local sex offender reside. Findings are expected to show that those who perceive themselves as threats (i. e. Caucasian women, parents, those with previous sexual encounters) are more likely to refuse living in an area where a nearby sex offender resides. The age and race of the mock sex offenders are also expected to have a significant difference on the public's response as juvenile African American male sex offenders were viewed as the greatest threat. Implications for current policies and future research are discussed.

Effects of Offender Registry on Public Perception

In the field of social psychology, much of the central focus tends to be related to how one becomes affected by their environmental atmosphere. However research that focuses on the tendency to display self avoidance in relation to the exposure of sex offenders is often minimal. Previous research has suggested that receiving notification that a sex offender has moved into a community can significantly influence perceived risk of victimization and the behaviors individuals engage in to protect themselves and their loved

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ones (Beck, Ramsey, & Travis, 2004). Although this may be predictable, there is an essential need to understand the cognitive factors that may contribute to the onset of one's perception of what a "threat" is.

One of the most common challenges in reintroducing sex offenders into society is not only understanding the mental effect that it can have on the perpetrator but also the effect that it may have on the community. In today's world, the use of sex offender notification is common and has been utilized as a means to alert the community of the necessity for safety precautions. As Herman (2007) discussed, the use of sex offender registration derived from a convicted sex offender named Jesse Timmendequas who lured a young girl named Megan Kanka into his home in New Jersey. After he sexually assaulted and killed her, questions derived as to how the release of sex offenders should be handled for the purpose of reducing recidivism rates. As a result, Megan's Law was created in which notification of sex offenders became important as perpetrators were then ranked into three tiers according to the level and severity of their offense. Such a method is believed to be resourceful in protecting society and taking preventable measures of one's safety.

Although it is sometimes believed that sex offender registry may reduce public fear, Levenson, Brannon, Fortney & Baker (2007) discovered that community members often believe that sex offenders have high recidivism rates, view sex offenders as a homogeneous group with regard to risk, and are skeptical about the benefits of sex offender treatment. In addition it was discovered that females were significantly noticed amongst the population to be more likely frightened or angry about a sex offender moving into their

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neighborhood. Perhaps this may be due to the noticeable victimization within the female population. Although it is possible for a female to be convicted of a sexual offense, there is no need to compare the perception of threat that females have in the community as opposed to males since research shows that women are less likely than men to commit such offenses (Hollin & Palmer, 2006, p. 181). Instead, more focus should be derived on how the community (both men and women) perceives male sex offenders according to the different characteristics that the offender displays.

More research should be conducted on the effects that sex offender notifications have on public perception. Does the age and race of a sex offender have an impact on the public? Will the rates of females, parents, and those who have previously been exposed to a sexual traumatic experience be different from those who do not fall into any of these categories? Will those who reside in disadvantaged communities be more receptive to having sex offenders reside in their neighborhood? Does the nature of one's offense play a role on the public perception or do humans have the tendency to stereotype according to methods of generalization with the belief that all sex offenders are socially deviant? These are all questions that may be beneficial to look at which in turn may reveal several psychological aspects of society.

Furthermore, it is important to understand the concept of how society views sex offenders and why some members of the community are less receptive than others. In a study conducted by Kernsmith, Comartin, Craun, and Kernsmith (2009), Michigan residents were questioned about their use of the sex offender registry publications as well as their belief on whether or not
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sex offenders lived in their community. Interestingly, most of the respondents stated that their nonuse of the registry publication was due to their lack of interest, believing that they lived in a “ safe” area, and not having children. Such information can indicate that one who lives in a “ safe” neighborhood with a higher socioeconomic status would be less receptive of having a sex offender live in their community as opposed to one from a more poverty stricken and area with a lower socioeconomic status. Results from this study indicate that those who have been exposed to crime and poverty may tend to utilize such services for the safety of themselves and their loved ones.

In fact, much of the crime that occurs has been reported as being in socially disorganized communities which in turn may affect how people who reside in that community respond to sex offenders. Mustaine & Tewksbury (2008) conducted a study which included data from a census of 2, 290 registered sex offenders in five urban counties and assessed the characteristics where African American and Caucasian offenders resided. It was discovered that majority of the offenders resided in poor neighborhoods. After comparing race, African American sex offenders were discovered as being more likely to reside in more of the socially disorganized communities as opposed to Caucasians. This could potentially lead to future research in examining how receptive members of sex offender communities are according to race and socioeconomic status. Overall, the information revealed how race can play a significant role in the experience of criminal sanctions and collateral consequences.

With this information, it is important to gain insight as to the type of vulnerable population living in such risky communities such as single women, parents, youth, elderly, or sexually abused victims. Placing sex offenders in this type of neighborhood could create public fear which is why the issue should be addressed as to where sex offenders will reside once they are released into the community. Mustaine & Tewksbury (2008) continued their study and also found that registered sex offenders were more likely to reside in socially disorganized and disadvantaged communities, but not in locations where large pools of vulnerable populations reside (i. e. women living alone or with children). However, this information does not protect women and children from moving into the community due to ignorance. After all, sex offenders dwell in various places including our school systems.

Although some people tend to focus more on sex offenders dwelling around school settings, one prospective area that many fail to look at is understanding what occurs when sex offenders are actually enrolled in a school environment. Stover (2005) gave several scenarios that occurred in a school environment including a teenager who molested a 13-year old girl in junior high. Here lies the issue in failing to realize that although it does not occur as frequent, the existence of pedophiles and other sex offenders within school settings cannot be ignored. If an individual looks at a 16-year old boy and a 46-year old man, who would display the greater threat? Would the community feel more comfortable having juvenile sex offenders living in their neighborhood as opposed to older adult sex offenders or even locate into an area where such occurs? Does age really make a difference? Most

research fails to compare the perception of threat in the community amongst the various age differences of sex offenders.

Ironically, the characteristics of sex offender crimes and victims tends to vary for both adults and juveniles. In a review of juvenile sex offenders, researchers summarized that juvenile sex offenders were more likely to target victims that are much younger than themselves as opposed to peers, and their victims tend to be females. Craun & Kernsmith (2006) continued to discover in their research that 40 percent of the juvenile perpetrators abused victims under the age of six. In addition, these juveniles were found to be convicted of more aggravated sexual assaults as opposed to adult offenders. Much of this has been due to the use of force that juveniles tend to use against their victim. With this information, it may be interesting to discover how the community would feel about moving into an area where there is a juvenile offender as opposed to an adult offender and whether or not age factors make a difference on public response. However with the exclusion of race factors, it would probably be assumed that adult offenders would be viewed as more of a threat since juvenile sex offenders have the tendency to be overlooked because they are less often seen.

In the prospective study, the description as to the type of sex offense will not be displayed to determine people's automatic instinct of perceptual threat without being told the type of offense that the sex offender has committed. This is important to look at because it will display one's stereotypical tendencies to label one's crime in relation to another based upon their overall appearance. In fact, the issue of labeling occurs in everyday life as most people can picture an attractive individual as opposed to one who

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appears more disheveled and unkempt. One might assume that the unattractive individual has the greater potential of being associated with committing a crime. The tendency to underestimate one's potential for crime and sexual offense is often common but not frequently shared. Social psychological theories regarding utilitarian and retributive concerns have been useful for understanding support of registry laws by revealing the human belief that a sex offender poses an immediate significant threat to public safety. This in turn may help to explain one's retributive motives for sentencing decisions (Salerno, Stevenson, Bottoms, & Pimentel, 2010, p. 80).

Information will be gathered to determine whether the age and race of a sex offender will have an impact on the perceived threat of representatives within the community. The question should be asked as to whether or not it is the nature of the crime that the offender commits or if it is really one's perception of threat based on the physical appearance of the sex offender. Stevenson, Sorenson, Smith, Sekely, & Dzwario (2009) focused on the effects of how defendant race, victim race, and juror gender can have on public perceptions of juvenile sex offenders. Results indicated that women recommended registration of the offender more when the victim was White as opposed to Black. Support of registration also increased when the defendant and victim were different races as opposed to the same race (racial bias). Such effects were found to be mediated by retributive goals to punish the offender as opposed to utilitarian goals to protect society. These implications lead to the importance of determining whether a community member would refuse to live in an area where the sex offender is the opposite race as opposed to the same race whether victimized or not. This is

an area that needs to be addressed since it may potentially be the underlying cause of people's aversive racism as a means of perceptual threat.

The next question would be to determine whether one who is a parent will be more likely to refuse living in a neighborhood where a sex offender resides regardless of the race and age of the offender. On the other hand, it is also important to determine whether one who is not a parent will feel more comfortable living in an area where an offender resides with the belief that it does not matter since they are without children. Analyses of public opinion data from a poll of Florida residents suggested that people are significantly more likely to support such restrictions as to where the offender should reside (Mancini, Shields, Mears, & Beaver, 2010). Although the overall goal of many parents is to protect their child, does the level of protection and sense of security vary when the offender is perceived to be less of a threat? Would a parent risk the protection of their child over their own retributive motives? Addressing these underlying issues will help to determine if in fact humans have the tendency to be driven by other underlying motives in response to having sex offenders living in their community.

Another factor to look at is to observe the response of those who have previously been exposed to sexual trauma as a contributing factor for their response to sex offenders living in the community. It is believed that one who has had a personal experience with sexual trauma may be more likely to refuse living in an area where a sex offender resides regardless of their race and age difference. Most often this may be due to the fear of becoming victimized again. Such victims may also have a more harsh view of sex
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offenders overall. On the other hand, there could also be a biased tendency to specifically refuse those of a similar age and race as their perpetrator as previously described. Such measures of personal motives may help to suggest how victims will respond to the nearby presence of other offenders.

Addressing the issue on stereotypes is necessary in today's society. Not only can it lead to false accusations, but it can also allow the perpetrator to avoid detection by remaining undercover. While conducting the prospective study another potential experience may be to see the tendency for community members to display stereotypical behavior when they have not been exposed to the education of sex offenders. In fact, Kiranjeet & Wilson (2006) examined sex offender professionals and school teachers and discovered that experienced professionals gave less stereotype than those who were inexperienced. In this case, personal experience was used as a mediator of sex offender perception. Such participants may then refuse to have any type of encounter with an offender due to their negative associations with the unknown.

What occurs with those who happen to be experienced with sex offenders? How will one who has been previously sexually abused respond to living in a community where they could face the potential of being exposed to another sex offender? Will familiarity vs. unfamiliarity have an impact on one's response when presented with the faces of sex offenders? In one study, women reported higher levels of worry about being sexually assaulted by a stranger than by an acquaintance (Craun & Theriot, 2009, p. 2058). In the prospective study, the disclosure of one's sexually traumatic experience will

be reviewed to determine whether such exposure can affect one's perception of other sex offenders.

Being notified that a sex offender lives in your neighborhood can be a serious potential risk in some cases. For example, a person may have found his or her ideal place of residence and prior to signing the lease, they are informed that a sex offender resides nearby. Would it be more likely for that person to decline the offer of their dream house or would they be more acceptable of sacrificing their life for such a situation? Would one's socioeconomic status leave them without choice but to take the offer due to finances and poverty? These are all issues to look at which are not typically addressed. In some cases, notification of a local sex offender can increase the fear of crime, coping, and locus of control. However, it should be noted that fear does not mediate the revelation between notification importance and coping (Caputo & Brodsky, 2004, p. 251).

Although most previous research concerning sex offenders has focused on how the community perceives them as a whole, much of the studies fail to examine the underlying motives for one's condition of aversive avoidance. The purpose of the prospective research will be to focus more on the sex offender's race and age and participants' race and gender along with other factors such as if they are parents and if they have ever been exposed to a sexual trauma. In this case the following hypothesis would be that 1. Participants of the opposite gender will be more likely to refuse living in a neighborhood where there is a sex offender of the opposite race. 2. Juvenile adolescents will be viewed as less of a threat than adult offenders with the exception of African American juvenile offenders. 3. Female participants will

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be more likely to refuse living in a community of sex offenders as opposed to males. 4. Participants with children will be more likely to refuse moving into a neighborhood where a sex offender resides as opposed to those who do not have children. 5. Participants who mention that they have previously been exposed to a sexual trauma will be more likely to refuse residing in a community where a sex offender exists as opposed to those who have not been exposed.

Method

Participants

Prospect participants will include a minimum of 200 students from Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine located in the state of Pennsylvania. These participants will be recruited through the college by email and followed up with a research assistant. The email will include the link to an online questionnaire and will be viewable to all of the current students enrolled at the college. Participants will be provided with extra credit on an exam as an incentive for their participation by printing out the confirmation and submitting it to their teacher once the questionnaire is complete. It should be noted that the study will be available to the students only during the Fall semester of 2011 and can be completed any time during the semester.

The participants will include a fairly even number of 80 males and 120 females and will incorporate those from all races (mostly Caucasian middle-class). The mean age of the participants will be 36. Informed consent will be given to all participants and their privacy rights will be ensured. The purpose

of conducting the study online will be to respect the participants privacy in which they will not be asked to share their name or address and can be taken at their leisure. Once the questionnaire is complete, the participant will no longer be able to partake of the survey again due to the one-time submission per college email account. There will also be less of an attrition rate due to the one-time online submission which makes the questionnaire easy to conduct and monitor. Two research assistants will be made available from Temple University's undergraduate psychology program as an independent study and their contact information will be provided online in the event that a participant may need assistance.

Materials and Procedure

The prospective study will be carried out through the college and can be taken at any location where the student can access their school email account. This will be beneficial because it will allow the inclusion of participants who are students at the participating college. It will also be more convenient for the students as they will be able to take the test at any time during the Fall semester of 2011 without having to schedule an appointment and be monitored by a research assistant. The online questionnaire will be created by the primary researcher and the research assistants during the summer of 2011 which will be before the beginning of the Fall semester. Prior to conducting the study, approval from the University Institutional Review Board (IRB) will also be obtained.

A questionnaire will be devised to gather information from college students about their perception of living in a community where a sex offender resides.

The questions on the questionnaire will initially ask the student to click on <https://assignbuster.com/effects-of-offender-registry-on-image-in-the-community/>

their gender (male or female); followed by race (Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, or Not Listed); if they are a parent (parent or non parent); and whether or not they have ever encountered an inappropriate sexual or physical contact (yes or no). It should be noted that sexual contact will be operationally defined as hugging, kissing, touching, grabbing, rape, unwelcoming exposure of another's body, exhibitionism, voyeurism, child sexual abuse, incest, molestation, sexual harassment, or any other contact made in a way that was uncomfortable or traumatic to the participant.

Following the identification questions, participants will be asked to imagine that they have encountered a new home that had all of the features and characteristics of their ideal place of residence. The participant will then be given a series of hypothetical situations and will be asked to respond in the form of " yes" or " no." In the first question, the participant will be given a picture of an African American juvenile sex offender and will be asked, " If this sex offender lived half a mile away from you, would you still be willing to move in the neighborhood?" The following questions will be repeated in the sequence of a Caucasian adult sex offender, an African American adult sex offender, and a juvenile Caucasian sex offender. The picture will include similar features but their race and age will vary since they will both be the manipulated variables.

In the prospective observational study, an examination will only be made on African American and Caucasian young and older sex offenders for the purpose of strictly examining the population's preference between the two races. Four pictures will be shown and the nature of the offense will not be <https://assignbuster.com/effects-of-offender-registry-on-image-in-the-community/>

observed to exclude potential extraneous variables. For example, one may feel safer if the nature of the offense was for voyeurism as opposed to child sexual abuse. It also helps to maintain the purpose of the study which will be to strictly observe one's predisposition to avoid sex offenders according to stereotypical threats of their race and age. Women will be excluded as examples in the study for the purpose of observing strictly male offenders and keeping the study more controlled by focusing on the specifics of male sex offenders.

Apparatus

An online questionnaire will be devised by the researcher and assistants through ProProfs database which allows quizzes, surveys, and assessments to be made without costs. Any complications with the database will be handled on a case-by-case situation. The data will be submitted to the primary researcher and will be manually analyzed for a closer observation of the results. For example, a closer observation will be necessary to see the response of those who specifically stated that they were parents in relation to the various presentations of sex offenders. The data collection will be observed as the results become sent to eliminate the future lengthy process of analyzing a large amount of data. This also helps to eliminate any syntax errors along with any validation measures that the database may have.

Results

“ To be determined”

Discussion

Overall, it is expected that results will indicate high levels of support for the given hypothesis and that one's demand characteristics may have an influence on an individual's perception of threat that sex offenders place in the community. Findings are expected to support the first hypothesis in that participants of the opposite race will be discovered as more likely to refuse living in a community where a sex offender of the opposite race resides.

Although majority of the population that will participate in the study are expected to be females, there will be a significant correlation in the response rate of individuals who are females and the rejection of having a sex offender live in the community (Hollin & Palmer, 2006, p. 181). Although it is expected to be true that juvenile sex offenders will be more acceptable within the community, there will be a significant difference amongst juveniles who are African American as opposed to those who are Caucasian. In addition, both parents and those who stated that they had a history of inappropriate sexual contact will be discovered as more likely to refuse residing in a sex offender area regardless of the race or age of the offender.

Although significant information is expected to be discovered, the study is not without limitations. Some limitations of the study include selection bias due to the fact that the participants will be strictly recruited from Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine. By excluding the study to only college students, one is not able to measure whether an individual's educational background has an effect on their attitude towards sex offenders thus making results difficult to generalize amongst other populations.

Although less cost effective, the measurements used in the study may be

difficult for the researcher and assistants to process due to fatigue or simple statistical errors while recording the data from a computer system. Such a process can also be time consuming. In addition, there may also be a concern of low validity with ensuring that the questionnaire in fact measures what it is intended to measure, (i. e. being a female vs. being a female who experienced sexual trauma) therefore making it difficult to interpret results. It is also unknown whether the participant in fact partook of the questionnaire in an honest manner either answering the questions in a way that will allow them to appear fair and impartial or allowing someone else to take the questionnaire for them due to limited monitoring. Such concerns may also be due to demand characteristics where the participant may act as a good, negative, faithful, or apprehensive subject which could influence the results of the study.

Future research could take a closer look at more of a cross-cultural study of offenders by including other races of mock sex offenders in the questionnaire (i. e. Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, etc...). One could also look at the response difference of those who come from a lower as opposed to a higher socioeconomic status as one's limited resources and choice of living may have an impact on their acceptability to live in a community where a sex offender resides. In addition, one may already live in an area where crime rate is high and sex offenders reside so they may feel that there is less of a threat in having a sex offender in the community. A closer analysis as to the psychological tendency to view things as stereotypical threats should be further researched. Addressing the public's fear of sex offenders by increasing their overall awareness can help to identify problematic areas that

we have avoided for years which may in turn heighten one's desire to become educated and develop coping strategies instead of using avoidance methods as a means for cognitive therapeutic purposes.