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Poco Kernsmith

Wayne State University, ao1717@wayne.edu

Erin Comartin

Wayne State University, at9766@wayne.edu

Roger Kernsmith

Eastern Michigan University

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Fear and Misinformation as Predictors of Support for Sex Offender Management Policies

POCO KERNSMITH

ERIN COMARTIN

Wayne State University

ROGER KERNSMITH

Eastern Michigan University

This study investigated the public's agreement with sex offender management policies. Respondents (N = 703) were randomly sampled from the state of Michigan, using a CATI system. Two path-analysis models were used to test if personal characteristics, level of fear of sex offenders, and misinformation regarding this population were predictive of agreement with: (a) sex offender registration and community notification policies; and (b) more severe sanctions (life in prison and chemical castration). The findings suggest that greater fear of sex offenders and acceptance of misinformation were predictive of more support of sex offender management policies. Research has found that these policies are costly and ineffective in promoting community safety. Effective and efficient policy development occurs when policy is based on evidence. Community and legislative education may promote thoughtful policy development that holds offenders accountable and promotes successful reintegration.

Key words: *sex offenders, sex offenses, public fear, policy*

The public's knowledge of sex offenders is often times comprised of overgeneralizations and misperceptions. These beliefs are founded upon our shared knowledge of this particular type of offender, which often stem from representations found in the media. In addition, there is a high level of fear towards this population due to the level of harm that is done to victims of sexual crime. To protect the public from these

harms, a variety of criminal justice sanctions have been created to isolate and manage sex offenders in lieu of or following a prison or jail sentence. These range from parole and probation oversight, registration and community notification, to civil commitment and castration.

This research seeks to examine the degree to which support for public policy is influenced by fear and misinformation about sexual offenders. Prior research (Comartin, Kernsmith, & Kernsmith, 2009; Pickett, Mancini, & Mears, 2013) has found a strong correlation between public fear and support for sex offender management policies. This research examines the degree to which misinformation about sex offenders might further explain support for policy, as misperceptions may serve to increase or maintain fear. The goal of the research is to identify potential avenues for advocacy for more effective and appropriate policy development.

Guided by moral panic theory (Cohen, 1972), this study uses a path analysis to investigate the relationship between personal characteristics of the public, misperceptions of sex offenders, and fear, to predict agreement with post-prison sex offender management policies. The primary research question is: Do misperceptions of sex offenders predict the level of fear of sex offenders, which in turn increases the public's agreement with more severe sanctions? As previous research has shown, these policies are highly supported by the public (Kernsmith, Craun & Foster, 2009; Levenson, Brannon, Fortney & Baker, 2007), and politicians are likely to respond to public opinion when it relates to sex offenders (Bottoms, 1995). Thus, it is important to know the predictive factors that drive the public's knowledge regarding sex offenders.

Moral Panic Theory

A moral panic is described as an intense, emotional reaction by a population to an issue or event that is deemed to violate the social order (Cohen, 1972). A moral panic typically develops when one or more people or groups, moral entrepreneurs, take the lead in spreading concern and fear over a social issue. These actors seek to gain support through education campaigns, media, and legislation in order to restore the social order. Although moral panic may develop

or be centered around an actual issue of social concern, moral panic is characterized by exaggerated or misdirected fear, typically fueled by emotion-driven and sensationalized campaigns that result in reactive legislation (Cohen, 1972; Jenkins, 1998). Sexual offending is a fertile issue for the development of a moral panic, as both sexuality and the protection of children are critical issues in the moral fabric of American society.

Sex Offender Misinformation

As previously noted, sex offender management policies may be influenced by public fear and moral panic (Federhoff & Moran, 1997). The Center for Sex Offender Management (CSOM) (2000) notes that the public holds many misperceptions or overgeneralizations about sex offenders, which are the basis of sex offender management policies. Misinformation includes issues related to offenders, the relationship between offenders and victims, recidivism rates, treatment efficacy, conviction rates for sexual offenses, cost effectiveness of community-based sex offender management compared to prison sentences, and trends in national sex crime statistics.

Beliefs about Offenders

Overgeneralizations exist about the gender, age, and substance abuse of sex offenders. One common perception is that all sex offenders are male (Denov, 2001). While the majority of offenders are male, a small percentage are female. Females account for approximately 2-5% of all reported rapes and sexual assaults, although victims may be less likely to report abuse by a female perpetrator (Grayston & DeLuca, 1999; United States Department of Justice, 1999). Grayston and De Luca (1999) report that the typical female perpetrator of child sexual abuse is in her 20s or 30s and typically offends against children in her care. Earlier studies have found that a female sex offender is generally an accomplice to a male offender (Matthews, Mathews, & Speltz, 1991; Syed & Williams, 1996); however, one recent study showed that females were primary offenders (97%) (Ferguson & Meehan, 2005).

It is also a common belief that sex offenders are adults. Juveniles commit one-quarter (25.8%) of all sex crimes and over one-third (35.6%) of offenses against minors (Finkelhor,

Ormrod & Chaffin, 2009). Greenfeld (1997) reports 18% of rapes and sexual assaults are committed by individuals under age 18. Additionally, Boyd, Hagan, and Cho (2000) note that between 1981 and 1990 there was an increase in rape and sexual offenses perpetrated by juveniles in the United States, increasing from 20% to 28% of all rapes and 25% to 32% of all other sexual offenses. These statistics indicate that a substantial number of sex offenses are committed by juveniles and young adults.

Research has indicated that drug and alcohol abuse is a factor in sexual offenses. Yet, the role is sometimes overemphasized as a cause of sexual violence. In a national sample, intoxication was present in over one-third of all sexual offenses (Greenfeld, 1998). The majority of acquaintance assaults involved the use of alcohol by a male offender (Ullman & Brecklin, 2000). Alcohol consumption increases the likelihood of an assault between acquaintances (Abbey, 2002) and the level of injury involved in the offense (Testa, Vanzile-Tamsen, & Livingston, 2004). Intoxication is a factor in sexual violence, as it reduces inhibitions, increases the severity of injury during offenses, and has been used as an excuse for the offending behavior; however, it is not the key determinant of sexual offending (Parkhill & Abbey, 2008). Alcohol expectancies are an important factor in determining whether an individual will choose to act aggressively or violently, may provide an excuse for an individual to commit a sexual assault, or may use alcohol in a premeditated manner to allow themselves to behave aggressively under the guise of the loss of control attributed to alcohol (Abbey, 2011).

There is also a belief that childhood victimization causes future offending behavior. A review of the literature found that, on average, 28% of offenders had been a victim of sexual violence, with studies showing a range from 0% to 67% (Hanson & Slater, 1988). Among female sex offenders, 80% had histories of having been abused sexually, physically or emotionally (Grayston & De Luca, 1999). A review of the literature comparing adult offenders of sexual and non-sexual crimes showed some support that childhood sexual victimization is related to adult offending behavior. However, a limitation is the need to include a third comparison group

of non-offending adults (Jespersen, Lalumiere, & Seto, 2009), as the majority of victims do not become perpetrators (Wolfe, 2007). The relationship between victimization and offending behavior is far more complex (Grabell & Knight, 2009), with age of abusive experience, as well as attitude and personality traits, impacting the relationship (Knight & Sims-Knight, 2004).

Relationship between Offender & Victim

It is commonly believed that a stranger most often perpetrates sexual violence against children. Sex offender registries across the nation were established so that unknown sex offenders living in the community could be identified through a publicly available list (Malesky & Keim, 2001). This perpetuates a false assumption that potential victims need protection from strangers, when in reality greater danger is posed from family members and acquaintances (Finn, 1997). Greenfeld (1997) notes that 90% of cases involving children occur with someone that the child knows. In 43% of cases involving victims under the age of 12, perpetrators were relatives (Presser & Gunnison, 1999). When cases involve a victim over the age of 12, three-quarters knew the perpetrator (an intimate partner, a relative, or an acquaintance) (Truman, 2011).

Rates of Sexual Re-offense

There is a common belief that those who offend once will do it again in the future (Turner & Rubin, 2002). Recidivism rates of sex offenders have been widely published in the research literature (Adkins, Huff, & Stageberg, 2000; Alexander, 1999; Duwe, Donnay, & Tewksbury, 2008; Hanson, Broom, & Stephenson, 2004; Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Nunes, Firestone, Wexler, Jenson, & Bradford, 2007). Hanson and Bussiere (1998) conducted a meta-analysis of sexual recidivism studies with a total sample of 23,393 sex offenders for an average follow up period of 66 months (ranging from 6 months to 23 years). Overall, 13.4% of offenders sexually re-offended across 61 follow-up studies, with an average length of 4 to 5 years. When non-sexual crimes were included, the recidivism rate was 36.3%. Re-offense rates were higher among offenders who did not receive or complete treatment, those who had deviant

sexual preferences, and those with more extensive criminal histories. Thus, there are smaller subpopulations of offenders with a greater likelihood of reoffending; however, the average re-offense rate for all sex offenders is low.

Treatment Efficacy

The effectiveness of sex offender treatment programs has an extensive research history. One meta-analysis reviewed 79 studies between 1943 and 1996 (Alexander, 1999). The findings suggest that offenders who receive treatment have recidivism rates below 11%, with prison-based interventions showing the greatest success rate. Another meta-analysis of 61 studies (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998) found that failure to complete treatment was a significant predictor for sexual and nonsexual recidivism. In another, offenders who received treatment were 37% less likely to recidivate than those who did not complete treatment (Losel & Schmucker, 2005), showing that treatment can be effective in preventing future offenses. However, some research questions whether these findings are based in strong evidence or are sufficient to support the claim that treatment is effective (Harrison & Rainey, 2013). Controlled clinical trials are needed to accurately assess the impact of treatment.

Conviction & Prison Rates

There is a common misperception that the majority of sex offenders are reported to police, convicted and sent to prison (Center for Sex Offender Management, 2000). In 2010, half (50%) of all rapes and sexual assaults were reported to the police (Truman, 2011). Reporting rates are thought to be low due to shame and the pervasive stigma and victim-blaming attitudes in society. Among cases reported to the police, between 18% and 44% are referred to prosecutors, and prosecutors issue warrants in 46% to 72% of referred cases (Bouffard, 2000; Campbell, Wasco, Ahrens, Sefl, & Barnes, 2001; Spohn, Beichner, & Davis-Frenzel, 2001). Overall, approximately 14% to 18% of all reported sexual assaults, and less than 10% of all rapes, are prosecuted (Campbell, 2008). Additionally, only two-thirds of individuals convicted of a sexual offense serve time in prison (Turner & Rubin, 2002). It is thought that prosecution rates are low due to a number of factors,

including institutional bias and lack of training of investigating officers, memory difficulties among victims due to trauma and alcohol, and reluctance of victims to participate due to shame, trauma, and a legal system that is described as re-traumatizing due to victim-blaming practices. These statistics suggest that most sex offenders are not held criminally responsible for the crimes and, therefore, could not be detected on the sex offender registry.

Cost of Community-based Sex Offender Management

The trend to manage sex offenders in the community rather than in prison is based largely on cost. There is a belief among citizens and policy makers that it is cheaper to keep offenders in prison than in the community (Center for Sex Offender Management, 2000). Nunes et. al. (2007) report that it costs approximately \$80,000 per year to house an offender in the Canadian prison system, and the cost to manage them in the community was \$20,000. This suggests that management in the community is cheaper than management in the prison system. However, a cost analysis conducted in New Jersey revealed dramatic cost increases associated with maintaining the sex offender registry. When it was initially implemented in 1995, it cost just under \$600,000. In 2006, it cost almost \$4 million (Zgoba & Bachar, 2009). These costs may drive decision-makers to change policies regarding sex offender management. Additionally, some states (Arizona, California, New York and Texas) have decided that the costs to comply with the mandates in the Adam Walsh Act are too high (Caygle, 2011; Greenblatt, 2010; Lui, 2011). Yet, in examining both economic and intangible costs of sex offender management, it has been found that treatment and community management is more cost-effective than incarceration (Donato & Shanahan, 2001).

Trends in National Sex Crime Statistics

There is a common belief that sexual crimes have been increasing, likely due to increased media reporting (Levenson & Hern, 2007). In fact, between 2001 and 2010, rates of rape and sexual assault for victims over the age of 12 decreased by 32% (Fineklhor & Jones, 2004). Furthermore, Finkelhor and Jones (2004) have reported a 40% decline in substantiated

child sexual abuse cases by child protective services agencies between 1992 and 2000.

The way society views sex offenders influences the public's perceptions of this population (Hamilton, Sherman, & Ruvolo, 1990), resulting in the design and implementation of more severe policies to manage offenders (Kappeler & Potter, 2005). What is unknown in the research is if one's belief system about offenders is related to support for current sex offender management policies. Research has previously examined the extent to which the public holds misinformation about sexual offenders (Fortney, Levenson, Brannon, & Baker, 2007; Katz-Schivone, Levenson, & Ackerman, 2008; Willis, Levenson, & Ward, 2010), as well as the degree to which sex offender notification policies are supported. Research has not yet examined the degree to which fear and misinformation jointly influence policy support. Additionally, most research has focused exclusively on registration and community notification policies (Brannon, Levenson, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Comartin et al., 2009). This study explores the relationship between acceptance of commonly held overgeneralizations and misinformation and support for harsh punishments for sex offenders. We hypothesize that a higher level of fear of sex offenders would be associated with higher levels of agreement with sex offender sanctions. A causal model was used to consider the relationship between personal characteristics, fear of sex offenders, and acceptance of misinformation as predictors of sex offender management policies.

Sex Offender Management Policies

Since the mid 1990's, emerging policies have brought attention to the management of sex offenders. These range from registration and public notification to more severe laws, such as lifetime imprisonment and the use of chemicals to castrate an offender. Aside from life imprisonment and civil commitment, which fully remove offenders from the community for protective purposes, the intended goal of these policies is to keep the public safe from potential harm, while reintegrating offenders into the community (Terry & Ackerman, 2009). Some efforts are guided by federal policies, such as registration and notification; others are determined at the state or local

level, such as residency restrictions, electronic monitoring, civil commitment, and chemical castration. The post-conviction policies examined in this research include those that are most commonly implemented (such as registration, notification, and residency) and those that are cited as more severe, sensational approaches to offender management.

The first registration and community notification policy was instituted in 1990 (Terry & Ackerman, 2009) and soon spread across the country with the passing of the Jacob Wetterling Act of 1994. This law required states to implement a sex offender registry. The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act (AWA) (2006) set national standards, mandating that all states register offenders over the age of 14, regardless of assessed risk to the community (Terry & Ackerman, 2009). Tier 1 offenders (low risk offenders) are subject to community notification and verification of offender information every 12 months, Tier 2 offenders every 6 months (moderate risk offenders), and Tier 3 offenders every 3 months (high risk offenders).

Another strategy is the use of pharmaceuticals to reduce an offender's sex drive, which is called chemical castration. Drugs are continuously administered to reduce hormone levels, which decrease an individual's sex drive. This sanction is legal in some states for offenders convicted of multiple crimes (Farkas & Stichman, 2002). While reviews have shown this intervention to reduce recidivism rates (Meyer & Cole, 1997; Rice & Harris, 2011), there are methodological concerns regarding the equivalency of treatment and control groups, as interventions such as these have not been randomly assigned. Additionally, there are ethical issues with mandating this form of chemical treatment (Scott & Holmberg, 2003), and studies have shown that side effects have led to non-compliance and program dropout (Losel & Schmucker, 2000). This treatment, to be effective, should be accompanied by other interventions, such as psychosocial treatment (Glasser, 2009).

Other states allow involuntary commitment of sex offenders, following the completion of a prison sentence. These civil commitment policies stemmed from the public perception that sentences for violent offenders were too short (Janus, 2000). Civil commitment laws commit sex offenders to long-term mental health treatment facilities (Levenson, 2003), which may go beyond the individual's original criminal sanction. While

some states had civil commitment policies prior to The Adam Walsh Act of 2006, this federal policy encouraged all states to create one (Terry & Ackerman, 2009).

The Goals of Sex Offender Management Policies

Sex offender management policies were designed to protect the public from sexual harm by keeping track of where offenders work and live, increasing an offender's length of confinement away from society, and decreasing an offender's sex drive. The ultimate goal is to decrease the level of recidivism amongst registered offenders and to deter new offenders (Carlsmith, Monahan, & Evans, 2007; Farkas & Stichman, 2002; McAlinden, 2005). The impetus for these policies has been highly publicized and heinous sexual crimes against children committed by strangers (Wright, 2003). These cases, taken up by family members and moral entrepreneurs, garnered media attention, social activism, and policy development. While these crimes are relatively uncommon, with 90% of cases committed by someone the victim knows and nearly half by relatives (Best, 1990; Greenfeld, 1997; Presser & Gunnison, 1999), they have increased the public's fear. Many sex offender policies are named after children who have gone missing or who have died at the hands of sex offenders, such as Jacob Wetterling, Megan Kanka, and Jessica Lunsford. Media coverage of these high-profile cases spurred fear amongst the public, resulting in calls for laws to protect the public from sex offenders (Wright, 2003).

The goal of this research is to explore the extent to which fear and misinformation exist in the general public and the degree to which they impact support for sex offender management policies. Inasmuch as research indicates that these policies are not only ineffective, but also have significant negative consequences for families and financial costs for states, reconsideration of these policies is needed. However, politicians are unlikely to support policy change that is widely supported by constituents. Therefore, research on the relationships among fear, misinformation, and policy support is needed to identify avenues for advocacy.

Methods

We used Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) to collect data from a sample of 703 respondents, using random digit dialing. Sampling was conducted across the state of Michigan, although the Detroit metropolitan area was sampled more heavily. The response rate for the study was 46% of qualifying phone numbers. To qualify, respondents were required to be contacted at a residence, be 18 years of age or older, and speak English. Potential respondents were informed of the study, including their rights as human subjects and provided oral consent to participate. Respondents were not compensated for participation. All methods were approved by the institutional review board for the university.

The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 92 with an average age of 51.44 years, ($SD = 16.16$). The sample was statistically similar to the state (U.S. Census, 2010) in terms of racial composition, with the majority of the sample (81.5%, 78.9% for the state) identifying as Caucasian and 12.1% (14.2% for the state) as African-American. Small percentages identified as Latino (1.4%, 4.4% for the state), Native-American (1%, 0.6% for the state), Asian-American (0.6%, 2.4% for the state) and Arab-American (0.4%). Nearly all (95.9%) had at least a high school education, compared to 83.4% for the state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) and one-third (32.2%) had a bachelor's or graduate degree. The median income was \$40,587, indicating higher levels of education and lower levels of income than the state population (state median income is \$46,291). Nearly two-thirds of the sample (62.2%) was female, over-representing females, compared to the state population (50.9%). More than two-thirds (68.1%) were parents, although nearly half of the parents (48.4%) had only adult children.

Instrumentation

Support for sex offender policy. This study examined patterns of support for sex offender policies, which was measured using eleven items describing approaches to sex offender management, including notification, registration, life in prison, and castration. Respondents were asked how much they agreed or disagreed that the approach would be appropriate (1 = strongly

disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Two constructs from these items, community notification and severe sanctions, were selected, as they represent the most widely supported as well as the most extreme approaches.

As the most widely used, and federally mandated, approach to sex offender management, community notification through the public sex offender registry was measured in three questions, including informing neighbors, notification through a sex offender registration website, and publication in the newspaper ($r = .75$). These items were combined, as they represent various means of notifying individuals of a convicted offender in the community. Although online notification is the most commonly used, it was thought that those who use the internet less regularly might prefer another approach. In contrast, less common and more severe approaches were examined. These included life in prison and castration ($\alpha = .66$). Although the reliability of this scale is somewhat low, both were deemed to represent sanctions that are severe and not rehabilitative. The mean of these two items was taken as the measure of support for severe consequences for sex offenders.

Mediating variables. It was hypothesized that support for sex offender management policies would be correlated with a variety of demographic, emotional, attitudinal, and experiential factors. Specifically, it was hypothesized that fear of sex offenders and acceptance of misinformation about sex offenders would have the strongest correlation with support for both categories of sex offender management policies.

A scale of misinformation about sex offenders was developed, using a list produced by the Center for Sex Offender Management website (CSOM, 2000). This scale included over-generalizations and commonly held myths about sex offenders and victims. An 11-item scale was developed that included items such as "most children who are sexually abused are molested by strangers" and "The number of sex crimes is increasing in recent years" and "sex offenders commit crimes because they are under the influence of drugs or alcohol." Items were measured on a four-point Likert-type scale (1 = definitely true and 4 = definitely untrue). Items were recoded, so that a higher number indicates an incorrect response and a lower number a correct response. Therefore, a higher score indicated higher levels of misinformation.

Fear of sex offenders was measured by two items. The first asked respondents to rate their general fear of sex offenders. The second asked how afraid they would feel if a sex offender moved into their neighborhood. Both were measured on a fourpoint Likert-type scale (1 = Not at All Afraid, 4 = Very Afraid).

Table 1. Sample Demographics and Attitudes

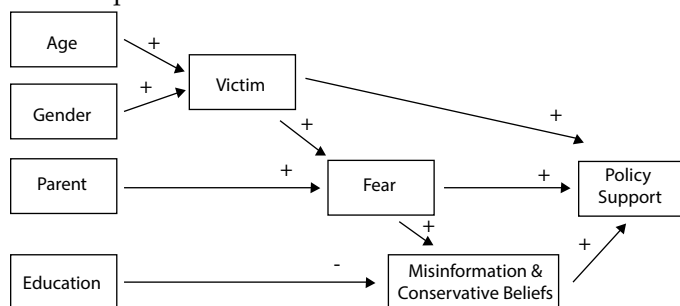
	Mean	SD	Range	%
Fear	2.65	.91	1 - 4	
Misinformation	2.41	.29	1 - 3.45	
Age	51.44	16.16	18 - 92	
Household Income	40,587.28	37,707	0-300,000	
Education				
No high school				4.3%
High school or GED				42.8%
Post high school education				37.1%
Graduate degree				14.8%
Parent				68.7%
Been or know a victim				35.5%
Been convicted of a crime				3.8%
Female				62.2%
Race				
Caucasian				81.5%
African American				12.1%
Other				5.7%
Marital Status				
Married				55.6%
Divorced/Separated/ Widowed				27.5%
Never Married				16.2%

Exogenous variables. We hypothesized that several demographic variables would also be related to support for sex offender policies, including gender, age, parental status, and educational attainment, as these have been identified as related to attitudes toward and use of the sex offender registry (Kernsmith, Comartin, Craun, & Kernsmith, 2009; Kernsmith,

Craun, & Foster, 2009). Crime victimization was asked in one question to determine if they or someone close to them had ever been a victim of a sexual crime. Victimization was expected to have both direct and indirect relationships to policy support, based on previous research (Comartin et al., 2009).

Proposed model. Based on a review of the literature, we developed a hypothesized model. In the hypothesized model, policy support is influenced by misinformation and fear of sex offenders. Each of these is influenced directly and indirectly by demographic factors and a history of sexual victimization.

Figure 1. Proposed Model



Fear of sex offenders was hypothesized to have the strongest relationship with support for management policies. It was further hypothesized that those expressing more fear would also indicate stronger support for management policies. Fear was also hypothesized to be correlated with acceptance of misinformation about sex offenders. Although it is not possible to determine in this cross-sectional design whether misinformation increases fear or vice versa, it was hypothesized that those expressing more fear will also demonstrate more acceptance of misinformation. Although it is possible that accepting misinformation about sex offenders could cause one to feel more afraid, we hypothesize that it is an increased level of fear that drives acceptance of misinformation. The rationale for this model is that fear may cause an individual to choose to ignore factual information that is contradictory to misinformation presented in the media or by friends and family, as strong emotional states drive attitude development (DeSteno, Dasgupta, Bartlett, & Cajdric, 2004).

We hypothesized that prior victimization is related to

support of management policies. In addition, it was hypothesized that victimization would be related to increased fear. It was further theorized that education was negatively related to misinformation acceptance, meaning that those with higher educational attainment show a lower level of acceptance. Although income has been identified as related to misinformation and policy agreement (Comartin et al., 2009) we excluded income due to a high correlation with education to avoid violating the assumptions of the statistical procedure. A model containing both variables or income alone showed similar results. It was also hypothesized that parents would report higher fear due to the protective role of parenting and the fact that the term "sex offender" generally brings to mind the thought of a child molester. Lastly, it was hypothesized that gender and age would be related to victimization, with females being more likely to have been or have known someone who was a victim, and people who are older would have had a longer time to have been, or to have learned of another's victimization. Gender was not hypothesized to directly impact fear, as it was hypothesized that fear is not caused by one's gender, but instead through increased awareness of victimization risk.

Theorized models were tested using SPSS Amos. The models were specified based on the researchers' causal theory for the constructs, based on prior literature and a confirmatory SEM to test the fit of these models. Path analysis was used to analyze two models, both for community notification and severe sanctions. It was anticipated that the model would be similarly related to both forms of sex offender management. The Maximum Likelihood method was employed to examine the direct and indirect relationships between the exogenous and mediating variables with the two outcome variables. The model presented in Figure 1 contained eight variables with a sample size of 703, allowing sufficient power for the analysis.

Results

We found moderate misinformation acceptance among the sample ($M = 2.41$, $SD = .29$, with 4 indicating high acceptance). Reported fear was also moderately high ($M = 2.65$, $SD = .91$, with a 4 indicating very afraid) (See Table 1). Two-thirds of the

sample ($N = 470$, 68.3%) reported they would feel somewhat or very afraid of sex offenders. A significant correlation was found between misinformation and fear ($r = .139$, $p < .001$). Just over one-third (35.5%) of the sample reported that they had been or knew someone who had been a victim of a sex crime.

Then we analyzed the bivariate relationships with the policy support variables. Fear, misinformation, and education were found to be significantly related to both community notification and severe sanctions. Support for both policies was found to be highest among those who expressed greater fear, higher acceptance of sex offender misinformation, and lower levels of education. No other significant relationships were found (see Table 2).

Table 2. Bivariate Relationships with Policy Support

	Severe	Community Notification
Fear	.231*	.263*
Misinformation	.301*	.258*
Victimization	.013	.024
Parent	.034	- .004
Gender	.056	.008
Education	- .196*	- .133*

* $p < .001$

Severe Sanctions

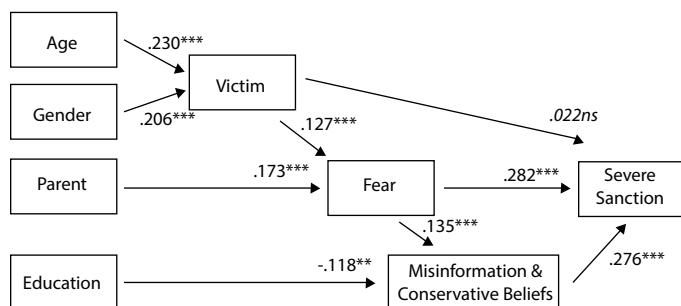
Structural Equation Modeling was used to examine the multivariate relationships. Models were examined for both severe sanctions as well as more commonly supported policies, sex offender registration, and community notification, to assess the similarities and differences in the correlates. Support for more severe sanctions, life in prison and castration, was remarkably high. Approximately half of the respondents (49.9%) reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that life in prison was an appropriate sanction for sex offenders. A slightly smaller percentage (40.4%) supported chemical castration of sex offenders. The mean of these two items was taken as

the measure of support for severe sanctions. On a scale where 1 indicated no support and 5 indicated high support, a mean of 3.13 (SD = 1.13) was found for severe sanctions ($\alpha = .66$).

The proposed path model was analyzed for severe sanctions. The goodness-of-fit index indicated that the model was good without revision, ($\chi^2 = 169.534$, $df = 19$, $p < .001$). The standardized total effects indicated that misinformation (.276) and fear (.282) had the greatest impact on support for severe sanctions. As anticipated, fear ($\beta = .19$, $p < .001$) and misinformation ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) were directly related to support for severe sanctions, with those expressing greater fear and more acceptance indicating greater policy support. There was no direct relationship between victimization and support for severe sanctions ($\beta = .02$, $p = .54$), but victimization was significantly related to fear ($\beta = .13$, $p < .001$). The relationship between fear and misinformation was also significant ($\beta = .14$, $p < .001$), with those expressing more fear also indicating greater acceptance of misinformation.

Gender ($\beta = .21$, $p < .001$) and age ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$) were both found to be significantly related to victimization, with females and people who were older being more likely to have been or have known someone who was a victim of a sex crime. Those who were parents reported significantly higher fear than non-parents ($\beta = .17$, $p < .001$). Last, misinformation was higher among those with lower educational attainment ($\beta = -.12$, $p = .002$).

Figure 2. Model for Severe Sanctions



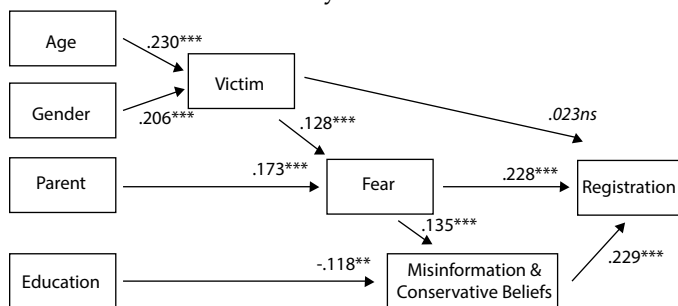
Registration and Community Notification

The highest support was for the publication of sex offender registry information on a website (83.5%) and notifying neighbors when a sex offender moves into the community (85.6%).

Fewer respondents supported publication of registry information in the newspaper (62.1%). Although debates regarding notification through the newspaper have been notably different from those regarding online notification, the constructs were found to be significantly correlated ($p = .000$). When the mean was taken of these three items, support for community notification was high, ($M = 3.93$, $SD = .92$) with 5 indicating strong support for these policies ($\alpha = .75$).

The analysis of the path model for community notification indicated nearly identical results as severe sanctions. The goodness-of-fit index indicated that the model was again acceptable ($\chi^2 = 175.195$, $df = 19$, $p < .001$). Like the previous model, the standardized total effects indicated that misinformation (.229) and fear (.259) had the greatest impact on support for community notification. Fear ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$) and misinformation ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$) were directly related to support for community notification. Greater fear was related to support for community notification, as well as to greater misinformation ($\beta = .15$, $p < .001$). Those who expressed greater acceptance of misinformation about sex offenders were also more likely to support community notification. No direct relationship was found between victimization and support for community notification, ($\beta = .02$, $p = .53$) but victimization was significantly related to fear, ($\beta = .13$, $p < .001$) with a standardized total effect of .056.

Figure 3. Model for Community Notification



Females were more likely to report having been victimized or knowing someone who had been a victim ($\beta = .21$, $p < .001$). People who were older also reported higher victimization ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$). As in the previous model, parents reported significantly higher fear than non-parents ($\beta = .17$, $p < .001$) and

misinformation was higher among those with lower educational attainment ($\beta = -.12$, $p = .002$). The results of this model were similar to those for severe sanctions.

Discussion

The results indicate that support for community notification of sex offenders is high. Support for severe consequences, such as castration and lifetime imprisonment is also quite high, given the harshness of these sanctions. The bivariate analyses and path models indicated that support for these sanctions is largely driven by fear and sex offender misinformation. The relationships between fear, acceptance and policy support were found to be similar for more severe sanctions as they were for the more widely supported community notification policies.

These findings suggest that misinformation regarding sex offenders and the correlate of fear leads to the belief that sex offenders should be more harshly punished, despite research that refutes that approach. Chemical castration has been found to have some impact on recidivism rates among those who are compliant with the requirements (Losel & Schmucker, 2000). However, it is not ethically or economically feasible to require chemical castration or lifetime imprisonment for all offenders. Additionally, research indicates that registration and community notification are not associated with reductions in sexual recidivism (Prescott & Rockhoff, 2008; Zgoba & Bachar, 2009). This research indicated that there is some effect for registration with local law enforcement to assist with monitoring offenders. However, large, inclusive registration of low risk offenders may actually increase recidivism.

A theory by Bottoms (1995), called popular punitivism, discusses the role that the media, the public, and politicians have in the formulation, and continuation, of criminal sanctions. High-profile media coverage of crime has driven the public to call on politicians for a more punitive style of justice. Politicians have chosen to be tough on crime to meet the demands of their voter/constituents, drafting and passing policies based on the public's fear about high-profile crimes. This theory points out that the missing link in punitive-style justice is the evidence and knowledge of those who study and work with offenders. When such policies are drafted, they lack research evidence

suggesting whether the policy has been, or is likely to result in the desired outcomes (Zgoba & Bachar, 2009).

Sanctions for sex offenders may increase offender stigma, anxiety and isolation that can then stimulate future offenses (Prescott & Rockhoff, 2008). Sex offenders required to register their personal information on the sex offender registry have experienced many unintended collateral consequences, which may be linked to increased recidivism (Edwards & Hensley, 2001), including harassment and stigmatization (Tewksbury, 2005), loss of social support (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008), and loss of employment and housing (Levenson, & Hern, 2007). In extreme cases, registrants have also been the subject of verbal and physical assaults (Tewksbury, 2005). These unintended consequences additionally impact the lives of the registrant's family members (Comartin, Kernsmith, & Miles, 2010; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009).

Popular punitivism occurs when the public's desires for harsh sanctions has a greater influence on the decisions of policymakers. Therefore, the research evidence may not be able to overcome the dynamic between these forces. However, several factors influence policy development, including major judicial decisions, social and economic conditions of the state (Hofferbert, 1990) and public discourse regarding sex offenders (Klugman, 2010), which may provide barriers or opportunities. Advocates for more effective policy approaches may be effective by framing messages that draw upon sympathetic personal experiences of registrants or their family members. Sabatier (1991) suggests that a single piece of research is unlikely to impact policy, but that, over the course of time, and as the research accumulates, policy makers are likely to understand the issue and investigate the causes and consequences of social policies. By supporting personal appeals with research evidence of the costs and ineffectiveness of policy, a message calling for more appropriate and effective sanctions can be developed. Reaching a wide public audience with these messages, in addition to targeted education to legislators, may help support thoughtful policy development.

Limitations

The research is limited in several ways. Longitudinal research would improve the study to better elucidate the

relationship between fear and misinformation over time. In addition, the inclusion of other variables, such as knowing someone who has been convicted of a sex crime, may improve the models and should be considered in future research.

This study, while representative of the state population in many respects, may not be generalizable to the wider public. Inclusion criteria for this study consisted of individuals in one state, who had landline telephones, spoke English, and were over the age of 18. This resulted in selection bias, not only in those who were eligible to participate, but also in those who may self-select to participate in the study. Furthermore, while many strategies were employed to increase response rate, including follow-up mailings and opportunity to complete the survey online, the response rate was low. Thus, those who chose not to participate may have answered the survey differently.

Additionally, the measures may have been limited in the inability to differentiate between child molesters and rapists in the assessment of attitudes. These groups are commonly combined in research, overlooking the important differences between the two and attitudes toward them (Ward et al., 2006). However, in the few studies that have differentiated between offender types, including stranger rapist, acquaintance rapist, marital rape, statutory rape, stranger victim pedophile, or familial victim pedophile (Kernsmith, Craun, & Foster, 2009; Ferguson & Ireland, 2006), few differences in fear and attitudes were found. These studies indicate that all types of sex offenders evoke significant anxiety and fear among the general public. However, by applying strategies to all offenders, regardless of the type of offense or risk level of the offender, it is not possible to attend to the individual needs of various offenders.

Last, the model presented accounted for only a relatively small amount of the total variance. This indicates that additional factors likely play a role in attitudes that support offender management strategies. Further research is needed to further explicate these potential additional factors.

Conclusions

Interventions with offenders and the use of empirically based prevention programs show greater promise in

promoting public safety. Fuselier, Durham, and Wurtele (2002) identified that myths and stereotypes of perpetrators as "social misfits, strangers, or 'Dirty Old Men'" (p. 272) divert the focus from the real dangers and places where potential victims are at greater risk. Public education for children, adolescents and adults on the realities of the risk and protective factors associated with sexual violence is crucial, and ultimately more effective in preventing sexual violence.

Inasmuch as these policies are ineffective, expensive and produce barriers to successful reintegration, it is preferable to ground management policies in research evidence and thorough policy analysis. Sex offender management policies are founded on assumptions that recidivism is greater among sex offenders than among other criminal populations, that treatment for sex offenders is ineffective, and that rates of sex crimes are increasing; each of which are incorrect assumptions (Sample & Bray, 2003). Harsher sanctioning of sex offenders is not based in empirical evidence, but in emotion (Mears, 2007), which defies the original intent of these policies: to make the public safer (Edwards & Hensley, 2001).

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