

## Factors Impacting upon Attitudes Toward Sex Offenders: The Role of Conservatism and Knowledge

Michelle K. Rosselli and Elizabeth L. Jeglic

*John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, New York, NY, USA*

Sex offender legislation is influenced by public pressure. However, there is evidence suggesting that the public's beliefs about sex offenders may be based upon myths and misperceptions. This study examined the relationship between knowledge of sex offenders in areas concerning their recidivism rates, treatment outcomes, and victim types, as well as current supervision and correctional management directed toward sex offenders and how this knowledge relates to overall attitudes towards sex offenders, sex offender treatment, and community notification laws. Further, we sought to examine how conservative belief systems affect this relationship. Using a sample of 559 undergraduate students we found that knowledge about sex offenders and conservative beliefs were significantly related to attitudes toward sex offenders such that those who had more conservative beliefs and less knowledge were more likely to have negative views toward sex offenders. Additionally, conservative belief systems moderated the relationship between knowledge about sex offenders and general attitudes toward sex offenders. These findings will be discussed as they pertain to the development of evidence-based sex offender policies.

**Key words:** attitudes; conservative beliefs; knowledge; sex offender.

### Introduction

At present there are 747,408 sex offenders registered in the United States. Of these approximately 265,000 are currently under the supervision of a corrections agency (NOMEC, Prevent Abuse Now, Criminal Justice Agency, 2014). The American government has implemented numerous policies and laws that have been designed to manage, monitor, and restrict sex offenders from reoffending, including mandatory sentencing, civil commitment, community notification, and GPS monitoring. However, to date, there has been little evidence suggesting that these costly sex offender laws are effective in preventing future recidivism (Bench & Allen, 2013; Cohen & Jeglic, 2007; Tewksbury, Jennings, & Zgoba, 2012).

Sex offenders are often perceived as the most despised offenders within the criminal justice system, frequently eliciting extreme negative emotional public reactions including fear, disgust, and moral outrage (Oliver & Barlow, 2010). However, this public outcry may be based upon myths and misperceptions about sex offenders, such as the notion that sex offenders have very high recidivism rates and that strangers commit most sex crimes; while in actuality, the contrary is true. Sex offenders have some of the lowest recidivism rates of all offender types (Calleja, 2015; Cortoni, Hanson, & Coache, 2010; Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Harris, 2001; Hanson, Morton, & Harris, 2003; Vess & Skelton, 2010), and the majority of sex crimes are

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Correspondence: Michelle K. Rosselli, William Paterson University 300 Pompon Road, Wayne, NJ 07470.  
Email: [rossellim@student.wpunj.edu](mailto:rossellim@student.wpunj.edu)

perpetrated by someone known to the victim (Meloy, Miller, & Curtis, 2008; Sample & Bray, 2003; Zevitz, 2006). Consequently, many sex offender laws have been heavily influenced by emotional responses to heinous crimes, potentially disregarding factors that are empirically related to community recidivism reduction (Cohen & Jeglic, 2007; Levenson & Cotter, 2005).

### ***Sex Offender Registration and Notification***

Throughout the 1990s numerous sex offender laws were enacted in the United States to address the perceived threat of sex offenders when they are released from prison. These laws usually stemmed from a series of highly publicized sex crimes against children in which the perpetrator had a previous sex crime conviction, and the crime often resulted in the murder of a child (Vásquez, Maddan, & Walker, 2008).

In 1994, Congress passed the Omnibus Crime Bill that included the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against Children and Sexual Violent Offender Registration Act, which mandated all 50 states to create a sex offender registry (Jacob Wetterling Act, 1994). The law states that 'a person who is convicted of a criminal offense against a victim who is a minor, who is convicted of a sexually violent offense, or who is a sexual predator' is required to register on release, parole, supervised release, or probation (Jacob Wetterling Act, 1994). The first amendment to the Jacob Wetterling Act was passed in 1996, which became known as Megan's Law. Megan's Law requires all 50 states to establish and maintain a community notification system, where law enforcement agencies notify community members and agencies of registered sex offenders' whereabouts (Center for Sex Offender Management, 2002). The Jacob Wetterling Act and Megan's Law were later combined to generate the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA). SORNA provides a comprehensive set of minimum standards for sex offender registration and notification in the United

States. Some of these standards require registered sex offenders to register and keep their registration current in each jurisdiction in which they reside, work, and go to school. In addition, SORNA requires sex offenders to provide more extensive registration information, and make periodic in-person appearances to verify and update their registration information (Office of Justice Program, 2016).

Initial community notification procedures generally included press releases, flyers, and door-to-door warnings about the presence of nearby sex offenders (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). Currently under SORNA, states are federally mandated to post sex offender information online such as their name, photograph, home address, work address, and license plate number, making the Internet today's prime source of information about convicted sex offenders (Levenson, D'Amora, & Hern, 2007). These internet registries were created with hopes of increasing public knowledge of sexual offenders, while putting the burden on the public to seek out information about offenders (Boyle, Ragusa-Salerno, Marcus, Passannate, & Furrer 2014).

Research has suggested that there is substantial support for sex offender registration and notification policies, and that having the internet registry, in particular, improves public safety (Caputo & Brodsky, 2004; Levenson, Brannon, et al., 2007; Levenson & Cotter, 2005). Studies that have examined the use of the internet registry have found that a small percentage of the public (17%) had actually accessed the site, and of those who did access the site, approximately 68% took some preventative measures based on the information they obtained (Boyle et al., 2014). Another study that surveyed survivors of sexual abuse found that they were in favor of having a sex offenders register. However, they believed that the registries created a false sense of security and that knowledge of the registry did not impact upon their decision to report to law enforcement (Craun & Simmons, 2012).

While registration and community notification have been in effect in the United

States, United Kingdom, and Canada for several decades now, in other countries, such as Australia, sex offender registries have only been implemented within the past 10 years (Hynes, 2013; Vess, Langskaill, Day, Powell, & Graffam, 2011). Registries currently exist in nine nations, with Singapore hoping to implement registration and notification statutes based on the United States legislation in the near future (Vess, Day, Powell, & Graffam, 2013). There are, however, some notable differences in how these registration and notification policies are implemented outside of the United States. For example, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, France, Ireland, and Japan all maintain sex offender registries; however, they prohibit the general public from freely accessing them (Vess et al., 2013). In 2000, the United Kingdom implemented the Child Sex Offender Disclosure Scheme ('Sarah's Law'), which allows only victims and their family members to be notified about specific perpetrators' whereabouts. This law then advanced in 2009, allowing parents of victims to request a sex offender's status for convicted offenders who have unsupervised access to children (Hynes, 2013). Further, the Canadian federal registry requires that local law enforcement officials get formal permission from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to access the registry, and police will only be granted access after a specific sex crime has been reported (Vess et al., 2013). Additionally, in order for a convicted sex offender to be placed on the registry in Canada, an argument must be made that they pose a significant threat to the community. Thus sex offender registration in countries outside the United States appears primarily to serve to track and monitor sex offenders by law enforcement agencies and those who have been victimized, with little access granted to the general public.

### ***Effectiveness of Sex Offender Legislation***

The purpose and goals of sex offender laws are to prevent the recidivism of sex offenders

and to promote community awareness of convicted sex offenders living in one's community (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). However, evidence suggests that these laws may in fact be counterproductive (Levenson & Cotter 2005). Rather than prevent sexual recidivism, these laws may actually increase the risk for reoffending by destabilizing the sex offenders who are released back into the community (Mercado, Alvarez, & Levenson, 2008). A longitudinal study examining sex offender recidivism prior to and following the implementation of SORNA found that these laws were in fact not a significant predictor of sexual or general recidivism (Tewksbury, Jennings, et al., 2012). Sandler, Freeman, and Socia (2008) conducted a time-series analysis in New York state examining the impact of sex offender legislation on public safety and found no support for the effectiveness of registration and community notification laws in reducing sexual offending among diverse types of sex offenders (i.e., rapists, child molesters, sexual recidivists, and first-time sex offenders). Interestingly, the findings of this study revealed that the majority of all sexual offense arrests (95%) were committed by first-time sex offenders who would not have been subjected to sex offender laws (Sandler et al., 2008).

Sex offender legislation has generated a variety of unintended consequences. For example, in a sample of 138 high-risk sex offenders living in the community, more than half of these offenders reported having lost jobs and having to relocate as a result of Megan's Law (Mercado et al., 2008). Sex offenders who were on the sex offender registry in New Jersey reported mild to moderate levels of depressive symptoms and feelings of hopelessness due to the negative implications of having to register on the sex offender registry (Jeglic, Mercado, & Levenson, 2012). Other studies revealed that as a result of these laws, sex offenders experience difficulty obtaining employment and housing (Tewksbury & Zgoba, 2010) and forming social relations (Mercado et al., 2008;

Tewksbury, 2004), as well as becoming victims in acts of vigilantism such as threats and harassment, property damage, and suffering of household members (Levenson, D'Amora & Hern, 2007; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). Research suggests that most registered sex offenders are relegated to live in areas with great social disorganization (Mustaine, Tewksbury, & Stengel, 2006).

### ***Attitudes toward Sex Offenders and Sex Offender Legislation***

Several studies have examined public attitudes toward sex offenders (Brown, Deakin, & Spencer, 2008; Craun & Theriot, 2009; Kernsmith, Craun, & Foster, 2009; Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007; Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009) in an effort to understand public sentiment about sex offenders and how this impacts the development and implementation of evidence-based policy (Cohen & Jeglic, 2007). Kernsmith et al. (2009) found that although public fear about sex offenders is generally high, the highest level of fear is directed toward those who offend against children. Another study found that individuals report that they would feel more afraid of a known murderer in their neighborhood than of a sex offender, and angrier with a known child molester in their neighborhood than with a murderer (Redlich, 2001).

Other studies have examined attitudes toward sex offenders among community corrections professionals involved in the management of sex offenders (Tewksbury, Mustaine, & Payne, 2011, 2012). Tewksbury et al.'s (2011; Tewksbury, Mustaine, et al., 2012) results revealed that these professionals did not hold stereotypical beliefs of sex offenders and were moderately supportive of the various strategies to control sex offenders; more specifically they felt that the registry contained too much information about sex offenders and that information regarding sex offender whereabouts should only be disseminated upon request from community

members. Another study conducted in the United Kingdom assessed the difference in attitudes between prison officers who were and were not involved in the treatment of sex offenders, and found that prison officers who were involved with the treatment process had significantly more positive attitudes towards sex offenders than those who were not with the treatment process (Hogue, 1993). Fortney, Baker, and Levenson (2009) sampled a variety of professionals employed in the sexual abuse field and found that they had more positive attitudes towards sex offenders than populations that did not work closely with the sex offenders. Similarly, a study conducted in the United Kingdom found that forensic professionals held the strongest positive attitudes towards sex offenders as compared to a community sample and a student sample (Gakhal & Brown, 2011). However, another study of mental health professionals involved in the treatment of victims or perpetrators found that attitudes toward sex offenders played a bigger role in sentencing decisions than either the offenders' intent (spontaneous or planned) or the degree of remorse they exhibited (Hogue & Peebles, 1997). Overall, these findings suggest that those individuals who have contact with sex offenders in a professional capacity generally have more supportive views than community members.

Several studies have examined attitudes toward sex offender legislation. Levenson, Brannon, et al., (2007), who examined public perceptions of sex offenders and community protection policies, found that 73% of respondents stated they were likely to support sex offender policies even without scientific evidence of their effectiveness. Another study examining attitudes toward the collateral consequences of sex offender legislation found that the majority of those surveyed felt it was unfair for sex offenders to be harassed and threatened (56%) or physically assaulted or injured (65%) by someone who found out they were a sex offender (Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009). About two thirds of that sample (72%)

thought it was unfair for sex offenders' property to be damaged or destroyed, suggesting that the majority of those surveyed felt some empathy or compassion for sex offenders subject to these policies. In a larger study of attitudes toward sex offender community reintegration conducted in the United Kingdom, Brown et al. (2008) found that the majority of the participants in their study reported that they believed monitoring sex offenders would be the key strategy when managing the risk of reoffending. Although the public has demonstrated support for these sex offender policies, they are likely to be unaware of the collateral consequences of these laws and how these laws impact their reintegration process.

#### ***Attitudes toward Sex Offender Treatment***

In the last several decades, there has been considerable debate as to the effectiveness of sex offender treatment (Brown, 1999; Jung & Gulayets, 2011; Rogers, Hirst, & Davies, 2011). More recently the general consensus among researchers has been that treatment programs that adhere to the risk, needs, responsivity model (RNR; see Andrews, Bonta, & Howe, 1990, for description) can decrease sexual recidivism (Beech & Ford, 2006; Beech, Mandeville-Norden, & Goodwill, 2012; Looman, Dickie, & Abracen, 2005; Zgoba & Levenson, 2008). However, the public views sex offenders as deserving greater punishment and less treatment or rehabilitation than other criminal offenders (Rogers & Ferguson, 2011). Community members are frequently skeptical of treatment and tend to advocate for longer prison sentences (Rogers et al., 2011). Consequently, funds that could be allocated for treatment may be diverted to the creation and implementation of legislation designed to contain and monitor sex offenders. Therefore, it is important to assess the public's support for such programs.

The examination of juvenile and adult treatment attitudes has varied across studies.

Sahlstrom and Jeglic (2008) found that participants expressed negative views toward juvenile sex offender treatment and were unsure whether treatment would benefit them. Contrary to these findings, another sample unanimously (100%) agreed that sex offenders should receive treatment (Valliant, Furac, & Antonowicz, 1994). Brown (1999) further examined attitudes toward community-based treatment programs, and found that community members had negative responses to these programs being located in their communities. She further investigated public opinions regarding the provision of accommodation and employment to known sex offenders who have completed their sentences, and found that the majority of the sample were in favor of sex offender treatment; however, when asked whether they believed that treatment could be effective in reducing recidivism, only 4% of respondents thought that treatment would 'usually' be effective, while the majority of the respondents (60%) believed that treatment could sometimes be effective in stopping recidivism. Of this sample, 28% thought that sex offenders could not learn to control their behaviors. When questioned about a hypothetical sex offender treatment facility being located in their community, 64% of respondents stated that they would not be in favor of this. Overall, these results suggest that while there is some variability in the public's support of sex offender treatment, overall the public attitudes towards sex offender treatment are generally positive.

#### ***Factors Impacting Attitudes***

As noted, the general public plays a central role in the development of laws pertaining to the criminal justice system. They influence politicians and, through them, the laws themselves. Policymakers have disclosed that public pressure has become one of their influential forces in sex offender law creation (Meloy, Boatwright, & Curtis, 2013). However, it is likely that some individuals have inaccurate information or knowledge about

such topics, while also endorsing specific belief systems that may impact their attitudes.

### *Knowledge and Attitudes*

The relationship between knowledge and attitudes has been investigated across a number of fields, and it has been unequivocally demonstrated that obtaining factual information can change attitudes (Ambati, Ambati, & Rao, 1997; Singer & Cooper, 2009). To date, only one study has assessed the effects of knowledge on attitudes toward sex offenders and sex offender treatment. Kleban and Jeglic (2012) conducted a study whereby they assessed attitudes toward sex offenders and sex offender treatment following a psychoeducational intervention, and found that a psychoeducational intervention dispelling myths could significantly positively influence individual's attitudes toward sex offender treatment. Additionally, Sanghara and Wilson (2006) surveyed experienced professionals who work with sex offenders and found that they endorsed fewer negative stereotypes, had more positive attitudes toward sex offenders, and expressed more knowledge of sexual abuse than the inexperienced group who had never worked with sex offenders. These findings were supported in a study that used thematic content analysis in a sample of professionals and paraprofessionals investigating perceptions toward sex offenders and found that professional training and support significantly influence attitudes. For example, negative attitudes toward sex offenders were most prevalent in police officers who do not receive specialized training in sex offending (Lea, Auburn, & Kibblewhite, 1999). Weekes, Pelletier, and Beaudette (1995) illustrated comparable results among a sample of police officers, whereby sex offenders were perceived as violent, tense, bad, unpredictable, mysterious, unchangeable, weak, irrational, and afraid as compared with non-sex-offenders. Similar studies have investigated the public's attitudes toward the criminal justice system after receiving information

presentations that contained factual information about crime and sentencing, and researchers found that providing accurate information about crime and sentencing increased participants' confidence in the criminal justice system (Hugo, Boshoff, Traut, Zungu-Dirwayi, & Stein, 2003; Singer & Cooper, 2009). Furthermore, McCartan, Kemshall, and Tabachnick (2015) suggest that individuals who obtain research-based knowledge of sexual violence as compared to individuals who obtain knowledge through societal perceptions or the media tend to become more understanding of sexual violence, allowing them to think more critically when forming perceptions. These findings suggest that targeting people's factual knowledge about sexual offenders may increase the likelihood that their decisions would be based upon logic rather than emotion.

### *Conservatism and Attitudes*

Another factor that has been postulated to influence attitudes toward the criminal justice system (Zamble & Annesley, 1987) and offender treatment (Clarke, 1989) is a conservative belief system. Conservatism, like other belief systems, can be seen as an amalgamation of ideas that form a unifying framework of attitudes and beliefs that predict and predicate the future actions and attitudes of those who subscribe to that belief system (Duckitt, Bizumic, Krauss, & Heled, 2010). Specifically, the tenants of conservatism include a resistance to change, a disposition to maintain the existing order, and an acceptance of inequality (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). In addition, other studies have described conservatives as individuals who show greater neurocognitive sensitivity to changes in customary patterns of response (Cacioppo, Petty, & Kao, 1984) and are easily able to express their preferences or opinions, even with small matters (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004). Studies have found a positive relationship between conservative attitudes and harsher sentencing (Bowers & Waltman, 1993; Huang, Finn,

Ruback, & Friedmann, 1996), and negative attitudes toward the punishment and rehabilitation of criminal offenders (Dozier, 2009). These types of attitudes may be particularly salient when it comes to beliefs about the criminal justice system and how offenders should be treated.

### Current Study

Given that many laws are created in response to public pressure and outcry, it is important to understand what the public knows and believes about sex offenders and the factors that influence these beliefs. To date, there have been few studies that have assessed the accuracy of the public's knowledge and attitudes about sex offenders. This area of research can help in determining ways to implement evidence-based sex offender public policy. While the public holds greater knowledge of sex offenders, they can begin to produce more informed decisions regarding such treatment and legislation. The current study aims to investigate factors that impact student attitudes toward sex offenders. Specifically, this study seeks to understand the relationship between knowledge about sex offenders and subsequent attitudes toward sex offenders, sex offender treatment, and sex offender community notification laws. Further, this study seeks to better understand potential moderators of this relationship such as conservative beliefs.

It is hypothesized that: (a) those with less knowledge about sex offenders will hold more negative attitudes toward sex offenders, sex offender treatment, and community notification laws; (b) those who have more conservative beliefs will express more negative attitudes toward sex offenders, sex offender treatment, and community notification laws; and (c) a conservative belief system will serve as a moderator between the aforementioned relationships such that those who have less knowledge and more conservative attitudes will hold more negative attitudes towards sex offenders, sex offender treatment, and community notification laws.

### Method

#### Participants

Participants in this study consisted of 559 undergraduate students recruited from a large urban university. There were 140 males (25%) and 419 females (75%). Students consisted of freshman or first-year students (36.0%,  $n = 201$ ), sophomore or second-year students (35.6%,  $n = 199$ ), junior or third-year students (19.5%,  $n = 109$ ), and senior or fourth-year students (8.9%,  $n = 50$ ), and ages ranged from 18 to 43 years ( $M = 20.40$  years,  $SD = 3.55$ ). Participants were ethnically/racially diverse, identifying themselves as Hispanic (44.2%,  $n = 247$ ), White (20.4%,  $n = 114$ ), African American (19.0%,  $n = 106$ ), Pacific Islander (12.7%,  $n = 71$ ), American Indian or Alaskan Native (2.1%,  $n = 12$ ), and Other (1.6%,  $n = 9$ ). The majority of this sample was single (92.7%,  $n = 519$ ), and they lived in an urban (72.3%,  $n = 404$ ), suburban (24.2%,  $n = 135$ ), or rural (3.6%,  $n = 20$ ) neighborhood. Additionally, 5% of the sample had children under the age of 18 ( $n = 28$ ), and 9.7% of students stated they had been sexually assaulted at some point in their lives ( $n = 54$ ). Approximately 9.3% stated they had a friend or relative who had been convicted of a sexual offense ( $n = 52$ ).

#### Procedure

The university Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved all study procedures. To participate in the study, students had to be enrolled in an undergraduate psychology course at the university, be greater than 18 years of age, and have access to the Research Experience Program, which is a university website designed to recruit undergraduate psychology students interested in participating in research. Students received two credits toward their psychology course research requirement after completing the survey. Informed consent was given electronically prior to participation. At the end of the study, all participants received debriefing and

contact information for counseling services they could call if they felt at all distressed.

### Measures

A series of self-report measures were administered to assess demographic characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, and specific belief systems.

*Student demographic questionnaire.* This questionnaire consisted of basic demographic questions regarding gender, age, class standing, ethnicity, and marital status. Additionally, students were asked whether he/she was a victim of a sexual assault, and whether he/she had a friend or relative who has been convicted of a sexual offense.

*Sex offender knowledge quiz (KQ).* This 26-item true/false quiz was developed by these authors in order to assess the public's general knowledge of sex offenders. The statements provided in this quiz relate to juvenile and adult sex offenders, sex offender recidivism, sex offender treatment, sex offender community reintegration, sex offender victimization and reporting, and the current protocols for monitoring sex offenders. Examples of items include: 'Most sex offenders go on to commit additional sex crimes,' and 'Most sex offenders are in prison.' Refer to [Table 1](#) to view all items on this measure. This test sums up all the correct responses, giving an overall total score. The information provided in this quiz was obtained from the Center for Sex Offender Management (CSOM) website (Center for Sex Offender Management, 2002). The CSOM aims to provide the public with current knowledge and accessible information about the management of sex offenders. The overall scale yielded an alpha of .51.

*Attitudes toward the treatment of sex offenders (ATTSO; Wnuk, Chapman, & Jeglic, 2006).* The ATTSO lists 35 statements that describe different attitudes toward

the treatment of sex offenders in the United States. Participants were asked to rate their opinions on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *undecided*, 4 = *agree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*). All responses were summed, generating a total score – higher scores indicating more punitive attitudes toward the rehabilitation and treatment of sex offenders. Internal consistency among the items was calculated using Cronbach's coefficient alpha retained in the final factor solution. The alpha for this sample was .84, indicating strong internal consistency.

*Community attitudes toward sex offenders (CATSO; Church, Wakeman, Miller, Clements, & Sun, 2010).* This 18-item survey was designed to examine attitudes, perceptions, and stereotypes concerning sex offenders. Participants were asked to rate their opinions and beliefs on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *partially disagree*, 4 = *partially agree*, 5 = *agree*, and 6 = *strongly agree*). The CATSO sums up all items including the reversed scored items, calculating a total score. Higher scores on the individual factors represent beliefs in which sex offenders are considered to be persons who are loners, are unlikely to change, are especially dangerous, commit serious crimes, and are particularly preoccupied with sex. Cronbach's alpha was used to determine the internal consistency for the full-scale CATSO. The alpha level for this sample was .72, which indicates adequate internal consistency.

*Authoritarianism–conservatism–traditionalism model (ACT model; Duckitt et al., 2010).* This instrument measures attitudinal expressions of basic social values or motivated goals on three separate scales. These three construct dimensions of ideological attitudes were named, respectively, authoritarianism, conservatism, and traditionalism. While there are three dimensions to this scale, this study focused on the conservatism dimension, which can be described as

Table 1. Sex Offender Knowledge Quiz (KQ).

Item
1. Most sex offenders go on to commit additional sex crimes. <sup>b</sup>
2. It is not typically a single issue that makes a sex offender more likely to reoffend, but a combination of factors. <sup>a</sup>
3. Once released, all sex offenders pose the same amount of risk to their communities. <sup>b</sup>
4. Medication and treatment can cure sex offenders. <sup>b</sup>
5. Specialized behavioral treatment, and a sex offender's motivation for change will reduce their chances of reoffending. <sup>a</sup>
6. Most sex offenders are in prison. <sup>b</sup>
7. Most sex offenders are released back into the communities once they served their full prison term. <sup>a</sup>
8. There may be restrictions on where a sex offender can live and work once they are released back into their communities. <sup>a</sup>
9. Sex offenders who have served their time and completed their community supervision have no restrictions on where or whom they can live with. <sup>a</sup>
10. All sex offenders remain on the registry for life. <sup>b</sup>
11. Approximately 20% of sex offenders are juveniles. <sup>a</sup>
12. Most juvenile sex offenders are male. <sup>a</sup>
13. Juvenile sex offenders appear to have higher reoffense rates than adult sex offenders. <sup>b</sup>
14. Sex crimes can involve no physical contact. <sup>a</sup>
15. Sex crimes represent less than 1% of all arrests. <sup>a</sup>
16. Most victims report sexual abuse to authorities. <sup>b</sup>
17. More than half of all victims of reported sexual assaults are under the age of 18. <sup>a</sup>
18. Strangers commit most sexual offenses. <sup>b</sup>
19. Most people who have been sexually abused go on to sexually abuse others. <sup>b</sup>
20. Adult sex offenders appear to respond better to treatment than juvenile sex offenders. <sup>b</sup>
21. The sex offender registration and notification laws have proven to be successful in reducing the reoffense rates of sex offenders. <sup>b</sup>
22. The conditions of probation or parole supervision depend on an offender's risk level and risk factors. <sup>a</sup>
23. Sex offender registration is designed to help law enforcement investigate new sex crimes. <sup>a</sup>
24. Community notification providers are able to share information about convicted sex offenders to the public by going door to door, and posting flyers in neighborhoods. <sup>a</sup>
25. Many juvenile sex offenders can be safely managed in the community with specialized supervision and treatment. <sup>a</sup>
26. Electronic technologies such as GPS devices are often used for monitoring the highest risk of sex offenders. <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>True statements. <sup>b</sup>False statements.

attitudes favoring uncritical, respectful, obedient support for existing societal authorities and institutions versus critical, questioning, rebellious, oppositional attitudes to them. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with 12 statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *disagree strongly*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *undecided*, 4 = *agree*, and 5 = *agree strongly*). While the participants

completed the full ACT scale, only the conservative dimension was scored and used in analyses. All items on this conservative dimension were summed up to calculate a total score, with higher scores indicative of more conservative attitudes. This measure has been sampled in three different countries showing that these three dimensions are reliably measured and are factually distinct

(Duckitt et al., 2010). On the conservatism scale, this sample presented an alpha level of .78, demonstrating adequate to strong internal consistency among the items.

*Community notification survey (CNS; Levenson & Cotter, 2005).* This survey asks a variety of questions concerning community notification strategies used in sex offenders' neighborhoods, the effect of Megan's Law (both positive and negative views), and opinions about notification and fairness of public disclosure of particular information presented in sex offender registries. For the purpose of this study, these authors used two subscales within this survey. Participants were first provided with three statements measuring their opinions regarding the impact of community notification procedures on sex offenders themselves on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *I don't know*, 4 = *agree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*). The following scale consisted of three statements, which asked the participant to rate their level of agreement concerning community notification procedures on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *I don't know*, 4 = *agree*, and 5 = *strongly agree*). In this sample, these combined scales provided an alpha level of .77, demonstrating moderate to adequate internal consistency among the items.

### Results

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Version 21) computer software was used to conduct all data analyses. In cases where individual items on a continuous scale were missing, accounting for less than 20% of the total number of items of the scale, mean substitution was used to replace missing values. In cases in which individuals missed individual items, accounting for more than 20% of the total number of items in the scale, deletion was used, and these cases were not included for analyses (41 cases). Descriptive data include only observed data

Table 2. Mean score and standard deviation among the measures.

<i>Descriptives</i>		
Measure	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. KQ	16.64	2.43
2. CATSO	55.03	8.94
3. ATTSO	99.88	12.64
4. CNS	19.74	18.45
5. ACT	53.22	10.75

Note: KQ = Sex Offender Knowledge Quiz; CATSO = Community Attitudes toward Sex Offenders Survey; ATTSO = Attitudes toward Sex Offender Treatment Survey; CNS = Community Notification Survey; ACT = The Authoritarianism–Conservatism–Traditionalism Model.

prior to mean substitution. Means and standard deviations of the measures are presented in Table 2.

### Attitudes

Overall, the majority of responses reflected midrange scores when assessing attitudes, which are comparable to other studies that have used the CATSO (Conley, Hill, Church, Stoeckel, & Allen, 2011; Rogers et al., 2011) and ATTSO (Rogers et al., 2011). The authors have discussed some major findings that we felt were representative from each measure below. Approximately three quarters of the sample (74.7%) believed that sex offenders who commit a sexual offense could learn to change their behaviors with support and therapy, and 43.7% of the sample believed that a small number of sex offenders are dangerous. Additionally, 81.3% of the students did not believe that prison sentences that sex offenders receive are too long when compared to the sentence lengths for other crimes. Consistent with this finding, it was found that 36.1% of the sample stated that sex offenders should never be released from prison. Many of these respondents (41.4%) felt that people who commit sex offenses should also lose their civil rights (e.g., voting and privacy). Most respondents support the most restrictive form of supervision (tracking devices; 65.4%), while understanding that

treatment can be an alternative less restrictive rehabilitation method (58.0%; see Table 3 for CATSO item percentages).

As seen in Table 4, approximately half of the participants believed that sex offenders could be treated (49.9%). Almost two thirds of the participants (64.4%) disagreed with the statement, ‘Sex offenders don’t need treatment since they choose to commit the crimes(s),’ and 80% of the sample did not feel that sex offender treatment should be restricted to offenders whose victims are children. Overall, many of the participants were in favor of treating sex offenders (79.6%). (See Table 4 for ATTSO item percentages.)

Almost two thirds of the sample believed that sex offender legislation is effective in reducing recidivism rates (64.8%). However, less than half of the respondents indicated that sex offenders are more willing to manage their risk due to their neighbors watching them (46.5%). More than half of the students were in favor of the sex offender registry posting information about sex offenders; they were particularly in favor of the offenders’ risk level being public. It appears that the students support the current community notification procedures, believing that these current policies are creating safer communities (see Table 5 for CNS item percentages).

Table 3. Community Attitudes toward Sex Offenders (CATSO) item percentages

Item	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	N
1. With support and therapy, someone who committed a sexual offense can learn to change their behavior. <sup>a</sup>	74.7	25.3	559
2. People who commit sex offenses should lose their civil rights (e.g., voting and privacy).	58.6	41.4	559
3. People who commit sex offenses want to have sex more often than the average person.	49.8	50.2	559
4. Male sex offenders should be punished more severely than female sex offenders.	84.6	15.4	559
5. Sexual fondling (inappropriate unwanted touch) is not as bad as rape.	80.2	19.8	559
6. Sex offenders prefer to stay home alone rather than be around lots of people.	63.7	36.3	559
7. Most sex offenders do not have close friends.	72.3	27.7	559
8. Sex offenders have difficulty making friends even if they try real hard.	70.0	30.0	559
9. The prison sentences sex offenders receive are much too long when compared to the sentence lengths for other crimes. <sup>a</sup>	81.3	18.7	559
10. Sex offenders have high rates of sexual activity.	48.1	51.9	559
11. Trying to rehabilitate a sex offender is a waste of time.	80.2	19.8	559
12. Sex offenders should wear tracking devices so their location can be pinpointed at any time.	34.6	65.4	559
13. Only a few sex offenders are dangerous. <sup>a</sup>	80.9	19.1	559
14. Most sex offenders are unmarried men.	76.7	23.3	559
15. Someone who uses emotional control when committing a sex offense is not as bad as someone who uses physical control when committing a sex offense.	88.4	11.6	559
16. Most sex offenders keep to themselves.	59.2	40.8	559
17. A sex offense committed against someone the perpetrator knows is less serious than a sex offense committed against a stranger.	91.8	8.2	559
18. Convicted sex offenders should never be released from prison.	63.9	36.1	559

<sup>a</sup>Items that were reverse coded.

Table 4. Attitudes toward Treatment of Sex Offenders (ATTSO) item percentages .

Item	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	N
1. I believe that sex offenders can be treated. <sup>a</sup>	14.6	35.6	49.8	559
2. Treatment programs for sex offenders are effective. <sup>a</sup>	12.3	58.0	29.7	559
3. It is better to treat sex offenders because most of them will be released.	8.4	27.8	63.8	559
4. Most sex offenders will not respond to treatment.	24.4	50.8	24.8	559
5. Most who want to work with sex offenders are crazy.	71.4	20.0	8.6	559
6. Psychotherapy will not work with sex offenders.	48.2	45.1	6.7	559
7. I believe that all sex offenders should be chemically castrated.	54.0	30.9	15.1	559
8. Regardless of treatment, all sex offenders will eventually reoffend.	42.2	37.0	20.8	559
9. Treating sex offenders is a futile endeavor.	41.2	47.6	11.2	559
10. Sex offenders can be helped using the proper techniques. <sup>a</sup>	10.3	30.2	59.5	559
11. Treatment doesn't work; sex offenders should be incarcerated for life.	54.5	27.9	17.6	559
12. Only certain types of sex offenders will respond to treatment.	20.7	35.6	43.7	559
13. Right now, there are no treatments that work for sex offenders.	37.2	49.4	12.9	559
14. It is important that all sex offenders being released receive treatment.	5.6	14.8	79.6	559
15. We need to urge politicians to make sex offender treatment mandatory.	5.5	20.2	74.3	559
16. All sex offenders should go for treatment even if they don't want to.	5.4	14.7	79.9	559
17. Sex offenders who deny their crime will not benefit from treatment.	14.9	23.6	61.5	559
18. Treatment only works if the sex offender wants to be there.	19.3	21.8	58.9	559
19. Sex offenders don't deserve another chance.	49.3	36.1	14.6	559
20. Tax money should not be used to treat sex offenders.	35.1	37.9	27.0	559
21. Sex offenders don't need treatment since they chose to commit the crime(s).	64.4	25.8	9.8	559
22. A sex offender whose crime is rape offends because he is violent.	35.2	37.0	27.8	559
23. Treatment is only necessary for offenders whose victims are children.	80.3	14.8	4.9	559
24. Treatment funding should be focused on the victims, not on the offenders.	35.0	35.6	29.4	559
25. Sex offenders should be executed.	62.8	27.2	10.0	559
26. Sex offenders should never be released.	49.2	35.4	15.4	559
27. Most sex offenders serve over 10 years in prison for their crime.	21.4	50.7	27.9	559
28. The prison sentence sex offenders serve is enough; treatment is not necessary.	71.9	21.1	7.0	559
29. Treatment is not necessary because everyone in the community knows who the sex offenders are.	75.0	19.3	5.7	559
30. Civilly committing sex offenders to treatment facilities is a violation of their rights.	57.4	35.8	6.8	559
31. Treatment should be conducted during incarceration.	10.7	26.7	62.6	559
32. Sex offenders are the worst kind of offenders.	28.3	36.7	35.0	559
33. Sex offenders should not be released back into the community.	35.4	39.9	24.7	559
34. A sex offender is like any other offender; no special treatment is necessary.	57.1	27.7	15.2	559
35. Treatment of sex offenders should be completed within a year.	36.4	45.3	18.3	559

<sup>a</sup>Items that were reverse coded.

Table 5. Community Notification Survey (CNS) item percentages .

Item	Disagree (%)	Neutral (%)	Agree (%)	N
1. Sex offenders are more willing to manage their risk factors because they know their neighbors are watching them.	50.3	3.2	46.5	559
2. I think that registration and notification helps to prevent offending.	33.9	1.3	64.8	559
3. I agree that communities are safer when they know where sex offenders live.	37.6	2.3	60.1	559
4. I believe that it is fair for the community to know about sex offender risk level.	15.6	2.1	82.3	559
5. The information listed about sex offenders on the Internet registry is correct.	64.9	2.7	32.4	559
6. The information listed about sex offenders on the Internet registry helps the public know how to protect themselves.	41.3	1.4	57.3	559

*Descriptive Analyses – Intercorrelations*

Pearson product–moment correlation coefficients were performed to examine the relationships between the measures (see Table 6). There were significant negative correlations between knowledge (KQ) and community attitudes toward sex offenders (CATSO),  $r = -.248, p < .01$ ; knowledge (KQ) and attitudes toward sex offender treatment (ATTSO),  $r = -.169, p < .01$ , and knowledge (KQ) and attitudes toward community notification laws (CNS),  $r = .112, p < .01$ . Overall, decreased knowledge of sex offenders was significantly related to increased negative attitudes toward sex offenders, sex offender treatment, and community notification laws. Additionally,

Table 6. Intercorrelations between measures.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. KQ	1.00	-.248**	-.169**	.112**	-.071
2. CATSO		1.00	.595**	-.086*	.218**
3. ATTSO			1.00	-.104*	.133**
4. CNS				1.00	-.010
5. ACT					1.00

Note: KQ = Sex Offender Knowledge Quiz; CATSO = Community Attitudes toward Sex Offenders Survey; ATTSO = Attitudes toward Sex Offender Treatment Survey; CNS = Community Notification Survey; ACT = The Authoritarianism–Conservatism–Traditionalism Model.

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

conservative beliefs (ACT) were found to correlate positively with attitudes toward sex offenders,  $r = .218, n = 559, p < .01$ , and attitudes toward sex offender treatment,  $r = .133, p < .01$ . No significant relationship was found between conservative beliefs and attitudes toward community notification laws.

*Moderation Analyses*

Baron and Kenny’s (1986) moderation procedure was performed for this study. Moderation implies that the causal relation between two variables changes as a function of the moderator variable. Specifically, moderation implies an interaction effect, where introducing a moderating variable changes the direction or magnitude of the relationship between the two variables. Hierarchical multiple regression is used to assess the effects of a moderating variable. Prior to carrying out these analyses, the two predictors *knowledge* (KQ) and *conservatism* (ACT) were centered to avoid multicollinearity. These two centered variables were then multiplied together to generate an interaction term.

Three separate hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed. In the three procedures, all predictor variables (KQ, ACT, and the interaction term) remained constant, while the three dependent variables

(CATSO, ATTSO, and CNS) were changed for each analysis. The KQ and ACT were inputted into the first step of the model, and the interaction term was inputted into the second step of the model. This was done to test which predictor variables were most effective in explaining the outcome of the dependent variable.

The first test examined whether knowledge affects attitudes toward sex offenders and, more specifically, whether conservative beliefs moderate the relationship between knowledge and attitudes toward sex offenders. The regression equation with knowledge and conservative beliefs measures was significant,  $R^2 = .102$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .099$ ,  $F(2, 556) = 31.55$ ,  $p < .001$ . The regression equation with the knowledge, conservative beliefs, and the interaction variable was also significant,  $R^2 = .104$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .099$ ,  $F(3, 555) = 21.51$ ,  $p < .001$ . The percentage of variability accounted for a slight increase from 10.2% to 10.4%, when including the interaction variable. In the final model, knowledge and conservative beliefs were statistically significant, recording a higher beta value ( $\beta = -.233$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\beta = .214$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively) than the interaction variable ( $\beta = -.049$ ,  $p < .239$ ), which did not reach statistical significance. Thus, conservative beliefs moderated the relationship between knowledge (KQ) and attitudes toward sex offenders (CATSO).

The second test examined whether knowledge affects attitudes toward sex offender treatment, and more specifically whether conservative beliefs moderate the relationship between knowledge scores and attitudes toward sex offender treatment. The regression equation with knowledge and conservative beliefs was significant,  $R^2 = .043$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .040$ ,  $F(2, 556) = 12.55$ ,  $p < .001$ . The regression equation with knowledge, conservative beliefs, and the interaction variable was also significant,  $R^2 = .049$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .044$ ,  $F(3, 555) = 9.53$ ,  $p < .001$ . The percentage of variability accounted for increased from 4.3% to 4.9%, when including

the interaction variable. Low  $R^2$  values in studies predicting human behavior are relatively common and do not affect how the predictor values are associated with the changes in the response value. In the final model, knowledge and conservative beliefs were statistically significant, recording a higher beta value ( $\beta = -.158$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\beta = .142$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively) than the interaction variable ( $\beta = -.079$ ,  $p < .066$ ), which did not reach statistical significance. Thus, conservative beliefs did not moderate the relationship between knowledge (KQ) and attitudes toward treatment of sex offenders (ATTSO).

The final test examined whether knowledge affects attitudes toward sex offender legislation, and more specifically whether conservative beliefs moderate the relationship between knowledge and attitudes toward sex offender legislation. The regression equations with knowledge and conservative beliefs were not significant,  $R^2 = .012$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .009$ ,  $F(2, 556) = 3.52$ ,  $p < .030$ . Moderation analyses were not run since knowledge and conservative beliefs did not predict attitudes toward community notification laws.

## General Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between knowledge about sex offenders and subsequent attitudes toward sex offenders, sex offender treatment, and community notification laws. Additionally, this study sought to examine whether conservative belief systems moderate these aforementioned relationships. Overall, findings show that knowledge and conservative beliefs significantly predicted negative attitudes toward sex offenders, sex offender treatment, and community notification. Specifically, the decrease or lack of general knowledge about sex offenders predicted negative attitudes toward sex offenders, sex offender treatment, and community notification. However, conservative belief systems were only found to moderate the relationship between knowledge and general attitudes

toward sex offenders. These beliefs did not moderate the relationship between knowledge and attitudes toward sex offender treatment and community notification.

These results are consistent with previous literature that found that individuals who expressed more knowledge of sexual offending also held positive views toward sex offenders (Sanghara & Wilson, 2006). Further, in a study examining the effects of a psycho-educational intervention on attitudes toward sex offenders and sex offender treatment, those who received more knowledge about sex offenders reported more positive attitudes toward sex offenders and sex offender treatment than those in a control group (Kleban & Jeglic, 2012). This is the first study examining the relationship between knowledge about sex offenders and community notification. However, it should be noted that the mean score on the knowledge quiz was relatively high, indicating that many of these participants were responding correctly to greater than 60% of the items on the knowledge quiz. This suggests that most of the participants were generally aware of the risks that sex offenders pose in society, as well as the policies that they must follow when reintegrating back into the community.

As was hypothesized, conservative beliefs were also found to be a significant predictor of general attitudes toward sex offenders such that those who held more conservative beliefs were more likely to have negative opinions about sex offenders and their treatment prospects. This is similar to existing literature on the role of conservative beliefs and general attitudes toward offenders. Previous literature has found that those who hold conservative beliefs are more likely to want to impose longer sentence lengths than those who do not hold conservative beliefs (Bowers & Waltman, 1993; Huang et al., 1996). However, contrary to expectation, conservative beliefs did not predict attitudes toward community notification. This is contrast to other studies that have found that individuals who have described their political leanings as conservative were

more likely to favor inclusive notification policies and to have more agreement with current laws (Levenson, Fortney, & Baker, 2010). This may be due to the relatively small number of participants endorsing high levels of conservative beliefs, consequently making it difficult for this prediction of attitudes toward community notification to exist.

Finally, as expected, we found that conservative beliefs were found to moderate the relationships between knowledge and attitudes toward sex offenders. This suggests that those who have less knowledge and more conservative beliefs are more likely to have negative attitudes toward sex offenders. Nevertheless, conservative beliefs moderated the relationship between knowledge and attitudes toward sex offender treatment and community notification. This suggests that while attitudes toward sex offenders may be influenced by knowledge and conservative beliefs, these factors hold less influence when it comes to supporting sex offender treatment and community notification. It is plausible that sex crimes provoke such a great deal of anxiety to our communities that most people would prefer to have these sex offender laws in place even though they understand that many of these policies destabilize sex offenders, facilitating them to reoffend.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

There are several limitations to the current study. First, data for this study were gathered from university students in a psychology research pool who were predominantly young females, and thus the findings may not be generalizable to the general population. However, it should be noted that the results of attitudes toward sex offenders and sex offender treatment that were obtained in this study were similar to those of other studies, which did use community samples. Further, since this study used continuous variables to examine these relationships, we can use these findings to generate hypotheses for future research using more representative community samples.

Previous studies have assessed the appropriateness of the CATSO in assessing attitudes toward sex offenders and sex offender policy, and asserted that it was not a highly useful tool for providing a conceptual component-based understanding of the attitudes among corrections officers and parole board members (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2012; Tewksbury, Mustaine, et al., 2012). While it has been noted that the CATSO does not differentiate between attitudes and stereotypes, it is currently one of the most commonly used scales to used measure ‘attitudes’ toward sex offenders and was selected in order that results of this study would be comparable to those of other studies. Future research developing and validating separate scales for attitudes and stereotypes separately would be warranted. Next, the study was limited in its ability to assess attitudes toward community notification. For the purposes of this study, subscales of an established measure assessing impact of sex offender laws were used. While these subscales did tap into some attitudes about certain sex offender policies such as registration, notification, and residence restrictions, these subscales did not have the breadth necessary to assess all facets of the issue. In order to do so, a new measure specifically targeting attitudes toward sex offender legislation needs to be developed. In addition, the questions used in this study were forced choice with the majority of individuals on average scoring around the mean. It would have been beneficial to include some open-ended questions to better assess how individuals were thinking about these issues. Finally, we only assessed a few of the many possible variables that may impact attitudes toward this population. There may be other variables that would better explain these relationships. For example, future research should further investigate alternative personality types or beliefs systems that may be beneficial in understanding the respondent’s thinking approach. A more thorough analysis of what constitutes attitudes versus stereotypes of sex offenders would help explain many of these relationships. Finally,

this was one of the first studies to examine moderator variables in the attitudes toward sex offenders, and future studies may choose to examine further variables, such as age, race, and gender, that may influence these relationships.

### ***Implications***

This study has several implications. As numerous studies have assessed attitudes in a variety of topic areas, this study assessed particular attitudes related to a population that elicits highly emotionally charged reactions, and thus a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between attitudes and sex offenders, treatment, and legislation is warranted. With informed public support, policymakers might enforce more mandated treatment as opposed to specific restriction policies or laws. Furthermore, knowledge of sex offenders was not found to predict corresponding attitudes toward sex offender legislation. This suggests that knowledge does not necessarily influence opinions toward sex offender legislation. Therefore, attempts to influence legislation by providing information may not be the best utilization of resources. It may be better to direct efforts toward primary prevention, such as in schools or at other organizations where the public may be more receptive. Therefore, it stands to reason that it may be a more efficient and prudent use of resources, time, and expertise to educate policymakers, including politicians and subcommittees, regarding sex offenders, and the trend in public opinion regarding them may be a better use of resources than educating the public itself. This may better facilitate the development of just, accurate, and reasonable policies toward sex offenders by targeting those who have experience of digesting public opinions and synthesizing policies from them.

### ***Disclosure Statement***

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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