



WASHINGTON STATE

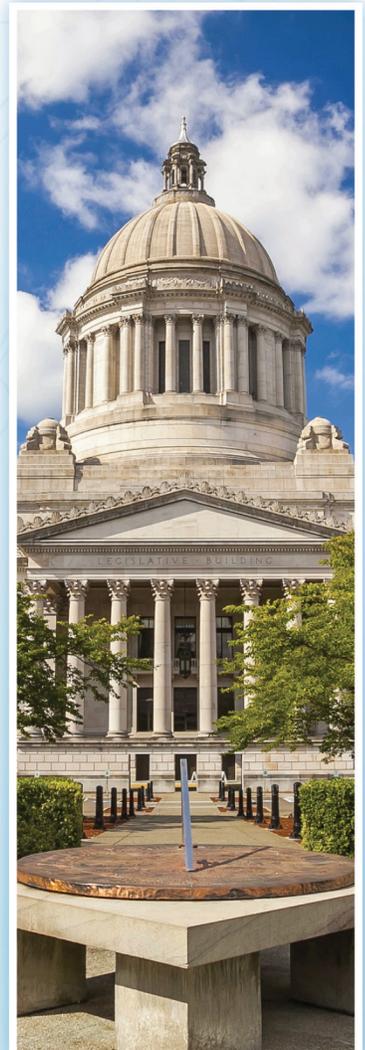
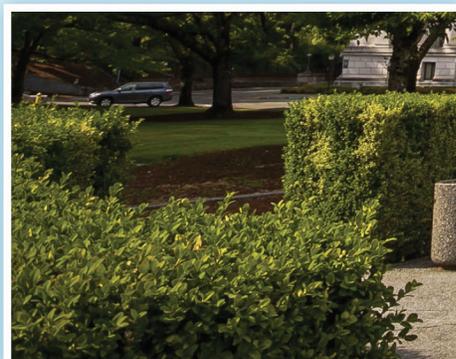
Statistical Analysis Center

Informing a data-driven justice system

Washington Residents' Perceptions of Sex Offenders and Sex Offender Policies

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Contents

Executive Summary	3
Results.....	4
Conclusion	6
Introduction	7
Sex Offender Registries	7
Community Notification.....	8
Residency Restrictions.....	9
Present Study	9
Study Aims.....	9
Methodology	9
Data Collection	10
Sample.....	10
Design and Variables	11
Survey Results	13
Knowledge about Sex Offenders	13
Perceptions of Sex Offender Policies.....	14
Vignettes	19
Effects of Victim Age on Responses	20
Effects of Offender Gender on Responses.....	21
Effects of Victim Gender on Responses	23
Effects of Prior Sexual Criminal History on Responses.....	23
Conclusion	26
References	28

Executive Summary

Largely feared by the public, sex offenders are often seen as some of the most heinous criminals. Throughout the years, this fear has often been met with legal sanctions and legislation at local and federal levels. While well intentioned, these policies have often been found to be based on misinformation and unfounded assumptions, leading to overall ineffectiveness (Cohen & Jeglic, 2007; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000; Zandbergen & Hart, 2006).

The most recent federal legislative response to sex offenses is the Adam Walsh Act of 2006 (AWA); Title 1, the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act, is commonly referred to as SORNA. SORNA regulates the community notification and registration requirement for states to protect further victimization of children. This is done by requiring states to implement and adhere to specific standards outlined by SORNA.

The most widely known SORNA standard is tiering of offenders, which requires that all convicted sex offenders be placed in Tier 1, Tier 2 or Tier 3, based on their offense of conviction. Tier assignment determines registration requirements, and all offenders in the same tier are subject to the same duration of registration and frequency of in-person verification. In many cases, tier assignment will also help jurisdictions determine what level of community notification an offender is subjected to. SORNA requires registration information for all sex offenders to be made available online. It also requires jurisdictions to update registration information within three business days and provide email notices to appropriate parties when an offender moves to a new location, begins employment or starts attending school.

Currently, Washington assigns levels to offenders based on an evidence-based risk assessment. That level then determines *frequency* of in-person verification. Conversely, *duration* of registration is based on offense class, with more serious offenses requiring longer periods of registration. Therefore, the implementation of SORNA tiering would require a major policy change. Washington legislators and policy makers recognize that such a major change in the management of sex offenders would need to be approached in a way that ensures public understanding. To do this, it is key to understand the perceptions of Washington residents that may underlie support for Washington's registration and notification policies. Moreover, it is important to understand the knowledge base of citizens so education can be provided in the most effective way possible. This will make a potential policy transition smoother, allowing convicted sex offenders the opportunity to reintegrate as it leads to a more informed citizenry.

The study aims are as follows:

1. Measure respondents' *knowledge* of sex offender characteristics, their criminal histories, offenses and likelihood to recidivate. This will allow the researchers to determine which, if any, characteristics are associated with inaccurate knowledge of sex offenders.
2. Examine the *relationship* between respondents' level of support for sex offender policies (registration, community notification and residency restrictions), knowledge of sex offenders and respondents' demographic characteristics. This will allow the researchers to evaluate what characteristics influence support for current policies.
3. Assess whether *contextual factors* surrounding the sex offense and offender characteristics affect responses including attributions of sex offender behavior, perceptions of risk/amenability and social distancing behaviors. This will allow the researchers to examine what factors might influence opinions when the offenses are similar, thus determining how to approach a new tiering procedure.

Results

In a 2016 survey of 1,000 Washington residents, a sizable majority (84.9 percent) of participants identified as white, and slightly more than half, 56.3 percent, identified as female. The sample used was composed of Washington residents from 36 counties, with King County being the most widely represented.

Knowledge

Respondents were asked six questions about their knowledge of sex offender characteristics and offending patterns. While respondents were fairly knowledgeable about the relationship between the victim and offender, and about the sex and race of offenders, people struggled to correctly identify patterns in criminal history. Specifically, many respondents failed to accurately answer questions about whether offenders might have a prior criminal history (either sexual or nonsexual). Those who were more liberal and identified as white were more likely to have higher knowledge scores.

Furthermore, participants were asked to estimate an offender's risk to recidivate for both a sexual and nonsexual offense. Overall, the average recidivism estimate for a sex offense was 76.3 percent, while the average recidivism estimate for a nonsexual offense was 49.3 percent.

Policies

Respondents were also asked about their feelings toward three policies: sex offender registries, community notification and residency restrictions. Three of the four questions focused on increased public safety; the fourth question focused on collateral consequences. The same four questions were asked for each policy, and respondents used a Likert Scale (1 being "Strongly Disagree" and 5 being "Strongly Agree") to rate their opinion.

- Participants who were older, female and had lower knowledge scores were more likely to agree with statements that the three policies promote public safety.
- Those who were younger, male, not parents, more liberal and had higher knowledge scores tended to agree that these policies have unintended consequences for the offender.

Vignettes

After completing the initial portion of the survey, respondents were asked to read a short scenario (vignette) about an adult sex offender who had a *child* victim. Respondents were then asked to respond to a series of questions based on that vignette. Questions focused on offender attributions, social distancing, sanctions, and risk and amenability.

Once participants completed that section, they were asked to read a second vignette with an adult sex offender who had an *adult* victim. Participants were then asked to answer the same questions as before, considering the new vignette. In addition, offender sex, victim sex and criminal history were manipulated in each of the vignettes, for a total of 16 vignettes.

Offender Sex

- For female offenders with child victims, respondents were more likely to attribute the sexually deviant behavior to stressful life circumstances or God's will.
- Respondents were more willing to engage socially with female offenders who had both minor and adult victims than they were with male offenders with the same victim profile.
- For male offenders, respondents were more likely to think the offense was serious and deserving of sanctions compared to their female counterparts.
- Respondents believed male offenders with both child and adult victims were more likely to recidivate and less likely to be amenable to treatment than females.

Victim Sex

- Respondents were more likely to think that the offender would engage in future physical violence if the victim was male and a child.
- Respondents were more likely to attribute an adult offender's behavior to how they were brought up when the victim was female.
- People were more likely to believe the offense was severe and deserving of harsher punishment when the offender had a female, adult victim.
- Respondents were more willing to engage with an offender socially if the victim was male.

Prior Sexual Criminal History

- In both adult and child vignettes, respondents were more likely to attribute the offender's behavior to bad character if the offender had previously committed a sex crime.
- In both vignettes, participants were more willing to engage socially with offenders who had no prior sex crimes.
- Respondents found the crime to be more serious and deserving of harsher sanctions when the offender had a prior sex crime.
- In both vignettes, offenders with no prior sex crimes were believed to be more amenable to treatment and were less likely to be seen as at risk to recidivate either sexually or nonsexually.

Conclusion

In short, our survey of Washington residents indicates a gap between perceptions and factual knowledge of sex offenders and their crimes. In addition, respondents had distinct differences in how they view male and female sex offenders. Respondents also indicated how they view offenders with prior sex crimes versus those who have not committed them, as well as how they view those who have male/female or child/adult victims. While more research is needed, it is clear that educational opportunities are necessary to ensure a properly informed citizenry as this may aid in the goal of effective sex offender management and help reduce collateral/unintended consequences for offenders, some of which have been demonstrated to increase risk to reoffend both sexually and nonsexually (Duwe, Donnay, & Tewksbury, 2008).

Introduction

Sex offenses are often considered some of the most heinous crimes, leading to public outcry when offenders are never caught or go free too soon. Several violent and high-profile deaths of American children led to the implementation of the Adam Walsh Act (AWA) in 2006 (Freeman & Sandler, 2010). Title 1 of AWA, the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (SORNA), expanded policies on sex offender management and aimed to further protect children from sexual crimes. It did so by regulating the requirements for community notification and the sex offender registry by listing indicators that states needed to implement to be in substantial compliance.

Since the implementation of SORNA, criminal justice professionals and researchers have collected data and taken a closer look at the effectiveness of community notification and sex offender registries. Many sex offender policies were created on the assumption that sex offenders are homogenous and at high risk for recidivism, leading scholars to question whether there is an underlying benefit to those policies. Monetarily draining, potentially ineffective and misleading, these policies may have unintended consequences for offenders (Cohen & Jeglic, 2007; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000; Zandbergen & Hart, 2006).

The most widely known SORNA requirement is tiering of offenders. This indicator requires that all convicted sex offenders be placed in Tier 1, Tier 2 or Tier 3, based on their offense of conviction. Tier assignment determines registration requirements. All offenders in the same tier are subject to the equal duration of registration and frequency of in-person verification. In many cases, tier assignment will also help jurisdictions determine what level of community notification an offender is subjected to. SORNA requires registration information for all sex offenders to be made available online. It also requires jurisdictions to update registration information within three business days and provide email notices to appropriate parties when an offender moves to a new residence, begins employments or starts school.

Currently, Washington assigns levels to offenders based on results from an evidence-based risk assessment. That level then determines *frequency* of in-person verification. Conversely, *duration* of registration is based on offense class, with more serious offenses requiring longer periods of registration. Thus, the implementation of SORNA tiering would require a major policy change. Many people recognize that a major change in the management of sex offenders would need to be approached in a manner to ensure public understanding. To do this, it is key to understand the thoughts and feelings of Washington residents that may underlie support for Washington's registration and notification policies. Moreover, it is important to understand the knowledge base of citizens so education can be provided in the most effective way possible. This will make a potential policy transition smoother, allowing convicted sex offenders the opportunity to reintegrate as it leads to a more informed citizenry.

Sex Offender Registries

Created to protect children from convicted sex offenders and inform law enforcement, sex offender registries were one of the first policies used for sex offender management. The Jacob

Wetterling Act of 1994 required each state to create and maintain a registry to house information on convicted sex offenders. Meant to provide law enforcement with easy access to information, this system also aimed to be a deterrent for both convicted and potential offenders. Convicted sex offenders were required to provide local law enforcement with their name, address, picture and other information, depending on the jurisdiction (Beck & Travis III, 2004).

Sex offender registries have evolved, resulting in wide variation by jurisdiction. SORNA contains more stringent requirements for registries than the Jacob Wetterling Act, requiring states to immediately transfer information to other jurisdictions as well as to the national registry database (SMART Office, 2016). In Washington, all convicted sex offenders register with local law enforcement. Duration of registration depends on offense class, while the frequency of in-person appearances is based on risk to the community at large (as determined by risk assessment and law enforcement discretion). Upon registering, offenders are required to provide names/aliases used, complete and accurate residential address or where the offender plans to stay, date/place of birth, place of employment, crime of conviction, date/place of conviction, Social Security number, photograph and fingerprints (WASPC, 2016). Washington is not in compliance with SORNA's registry requirements as the state does not collect internet identifiers, passport or immigration documents, or palm prints (SMART Office, 2011).

Community Notification

Following the 1994 sexual assault and murder of a New Jersey child, Megan Kanka, the public began to argue for the right to access information on registered sex offenders, specifically those residing in their communities. Megan's Law was added to the Jacob Wetterling Act to require states and law enforcement agencies to release registration information for offenders. This was thought to increase public safety by allowing citizens to take a proactive approach. In addition, law enforcement was given the ability to personally notify residents about the location and movements of registered offenders when deemed necessary to promote the safety of those in the community (Center for Sex Offender Management, 2008).

Like sex offender registries, community notification varies widely by jurisdiction. Some areas use a more passive form of notification, in which the public has the ability to access a registry website. Other jurisdictions may use a more active form of notification in addition to the website, and mail fliers, knock on doors or convene town halls (Beck & Travis III, 2006).

SORNA requires that each jurisdiction collect and disseminate specific and updated information to certain agencies as well as to other jurisdictions. Additionally, this policy requires that certain information be shared with, and made available to the public. Washington now employs several methods of community notification: media releases, door-to-door notification or mailers, public website and registry, and community forums. Local law enforcement has the ability to determine on a case-by-case basis which notification method will be most beneficial to the community (WASPC, 2016). Washington's community notification policies are in compliance (with a slight deviation) with SORNA's notification requirements (SMART Office, 2011).

Residency Restrictions¹

Now used in Washington for offenders under the jurisdiction of the state Department of Corrections, residency restrictions are also used across the country and have become increasingly controversial. In Washington, some jurisdictions have ordinances or provisions in place that have been grandfathered in. Moreover, there is a “community protection zone” in place for certain offenses. This prevents offenders from being within 880 feet of the facilities and grounds of a Washington public or private school. (Please note, the restrictions discussed in this survey refer to more-comprehensive restrictions some states have in place for the majority of their convicted sex offenders.)

Restrictions on where convicted sex offenders can live were meant to prevent access to potential victims, addressing another common fear. These policies are intended to create a buffer zone around places where children frequent (daycares, schools, parks, etc.). The size of the zone varies by jurisdiction, and can be from 500 to 2,500 feet. For example, in Orange County, Florida, a study was conducted using GIS software which determined that only 5 percent of the potentially available land parcels were eligible for residence by sex offenders (Zandbergen & Hart, 2006). In Miami, Florida, several registered sex offenders have been placed under a bridge as there is no other available housing (Zarella & Oppman, 2007).

Present Study

The policies mentioned above – sex offender registration, community notification and residency restrictions – are widely seen as ineffective in reducing recidivism (Cohen & Jeglic, 2007; Freeman & Sandler, 2010; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000; Duwe, Donnay, & Tewksbury, 2008; Schram & Milloy, 1995). These policies were implemented in response to public outcry with no empirical evidence to support their creation or maintenance, yet remain in effect with public support.

Study Aims

This study examined public perceptions of sex offenders and sex offender policies as used in Washington state. This report is organized according to the study's three aims:

1. Measure respondents' *knowledge* of sex offender characteristics, their criminal histories, offenses and likelihood to recidivate. This will allow the researchers to determine which, if any, characteristics are associated with inaccurate knowledge of sex offenders.
2. Examine the *relationship* between respondents' level of support for sex offender policies (registration, community notification and residency restrictions), knowledge of sex offenders and respondents' demographic characteristics. This will allow the researchers to evaluate what characteristics are related to support for current policies.
3. Assess whether *contextual factors* surrounding the sex offense and offender characteristics affect responses, including attributions of sex offender behavior, perceptions of risk/amenability and social distancing behaviors. This will allow the researchers to examine what factors might influence opinions when the offenses are similar, thus determining how to approach a new tiering procedure.

¹ Residency restrictions are not a policy required by SORNA or AWA.

Methodology

Data Collection

The Washington State Statistical Analysis Center contracted with Washington State University to conduct a survey of Washington residents. The university then contracted with YouGov, an opt-in survey panel that recruits survey respondents nationwide online and through telephone and mail recruitment. This process ensures that hard-to-reach populations are well represented. Respondents who join the YouGov panel are compensated for their participation. YouGov administered the online survey to Washington residents in July 2016.

Sample

YouGov's sampling process comprised two stages. First, YouGov administered the online survey to a nonprobabilistic sample drawn from its pool of participants. The initial sample held 1,164 Washington residents. The second stage involved 1,000 respondents from the initial sample who were selected to be part of the final sample as they offered the closest fit on age, gender, race and education to respondents of the American Community Survey (ACS). YouGov matches sample demographic and other characteristics to the ACS to ensure the sample is representative of the population.

The 1,000 Washington respondents represent 36 counties, with King County being the most represented (28.3 percent). The majority of respondents were white (84.9 percent), and slightly more than half of the sample was female (56.3 percent). On average, respondents were 52.4 years old ($SD = 15.6$) at the time of survey completion. For comparison purposes, the 2010 census indicated approximately 50 percent of Washington's population was female and 80.3 percent white. While respondents claimed a wide range of household income levels, more than half had a yearly household income higher than \$60,000.² Eighty-three percent of the sample reported having completed some college education and 61.6 percent indicated they were a parent. Additionally, 61.3 percent of respondents reported either being married or in a domestic partnership. Approximately half were working either part or full time. Data from the ACS is presented in the third column, titled "WA" to provide insight into the representativeness of the sample.

With regard to political ideology, about one-third of the sample (33.6 percent) reported being liberal, 33.5 percent reported being moderate and 27.4 percent reported being conservative. Respondents were asked to rate their political ideology on a 5-point Likert scale with a value of "1" indicating "Very Liberal" and a value of "5" indicating "Very Conservative" ($M = 3.0$, $SD = 1.3$). For the purposes of our analyses, the following variables were dichotomized: race, gender, parental status and political ideology. Table 1 offers more detailed demographic information.

² 13.8 percent of the sample opted to not report income.

Table 1. Characteristics of Survey Respondents Compared to Washington's Adult Population

	<u>Survey WA</u>			<u>Survey WA</u>	
Race			Education		
White	84.9	82.5	No high school	1.8	---
Other	15.1	17.5	High school graduate	14.7	22.8
Gender			Some college or 2-year	42.3	34.5
Female	56.3	50.1	4-year	27.3	21.0
Male	42.6	49.9	Postgraduate	13.9	12.1
Other	1.1	---			
Age			Parental Status		
18-24	3.5	9.6	Not a parent	38.4	---
25-34	14.4	14.3	Is a parent	61.6	---
35-44	12.3	13.1	Marital Status		
45-54	18.1	13.4	Married	57.2	50.5
55-64	31.3	12.9	Separated	2.5	1.6
65+	20.4	14.1	Divorced	11.5	12.0
Income			Widowed	5.2	4.9
Less than \$20,000	12.7	10.4	Single	19.1	30.9
\$20,000-39,999	17.2	15.1	Domestic partnership	4.1	N/A
\$40,000-59,999	15.1	16.3	Employment Status		
\$60,000-79,999	11.6	13.9	Working	50.4	59.1
\$80,000-99,999	7.4	11.3	Laid off/unemployed	5.6	4.1
\$100,000-149,999	16.1	18.2	Retired	22.1	---
\$150,000+	6.1	14.8	Disabled	8.6	---
Political Ideology			Homemaker	7.9	---
Liberal	33.6	---	Student	3.4	---
Moderate	33.5	---	Other	2.0	---
Conservative	27.4	---			
Not Sure	5.5	---			

Design and Variables

Knowledge about sexual offenders. To investigate the first aim of the study, “Measure respondents’ *knowledge* of sex offender characteristics, their criminal histories, offenses and likelihood to recidivate”), respondents were instructed to read six statements and indicate whether they believed each statement was true or false. The statements were as follows:

- “Most sexual abusers are related to — or know their victims.”
- “Most sexual abusers are male.”
- “Most sexual abusers are older (35+).”
- “Most sexual abusers are nonwhite.”
- “Most sexual abusers have committed other types of violence (e.g., assault).”
- “Most sexual abusers have committed other nonsexual offenses.”

Respondents received a “1” for each correct answer (“true” for items 1, 2 and 6 and “false” for items 3, 4 and 5). A “knowledge score” variable was also computed to represent a respondents’ overall score. It ranged from 0 to 6, with higher scores indicating more accurate knowledge of sex offenders and their criminal behaviors. Finally, respondents were also asked to indicate the risk of sexual and nonsexual recidivism in sex offenders by entering percentages.

Support for sex offender policies. The second part of the study measured participants’ support for three sex offender policies: registration, community notification and residency restrictions. Respondents had to rate their agreement with four statements for each policy. The statements were:

- “I believe [policy] helps protect the public.”
- “I believe [policy] helps law enforcement keep tabs on sex offenders.”
- “I believe [policy] helps the public feel safer.”
- “I believe [policy] could cause unintended negative consequences for the offender.”

Each statement was rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1, indicating “Disagree Strongly,” to 5, indicating “Agree Strongly.” After initial analyses, a factor analysis was run on the four policy questions. Results indicated two factors contributed to the variance, and thus questions 1, 2 and 3 were combined to create a “public safety” variable and question 4 created a “collateral consequences” variable. These two variables are used later to determine support for certain types of policy aims.

Vignettes. To investigate the third aim of the study, “Assess whether *contextual factors* surrounding the sex offense and offender characteristics affect responses, including attributions of sex offender behavior, perceptions of risk/amenability and social distancing behaviors,” respondents were asked to review two vignettes: one describing the sexual abuse of a child and the other of an adult victim (identified as “child vignette” and “adult vignette”). Both vignettes had three dimensions: offender sex, victim sex and offender prior criminal history. Half the total sample received a vignette involving a *male offender* (“John” or “Robert”) while the other half received a vignette describing a *female offender* (“Diana” or “Elizabeth”). Similarly, participants were also randomly assigned a vignette involving a *male* or *female victim*, and to an offender who had *previously been accused of similar crimes* or *not*. Therefore, there were eight variations of both the child and adult vignettes that were randomly assigned among survey respondents.

After reading each vignette, respondents were asked to rank their level of agreement with 24 statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1, indicating “Disagree Strongly” to 5, indicating “Agree Strongly.” The statements encompassed seven statements related to attributions of causes of sexually abusive behavior (e.g., genetics, God’s will, stressful circumstances), five statements measuring social distancing (e.g., willingness to live nearby or socialize with the offender), seven statements concerning the appropriateness of sanctions (e.g., serious punishment, registration requirement) and five statements measuring perception of risk and amenability (e.g., likelihood of another sex offense, likelihood of rehabilitation).

Survey Results

Knowledge about Sex Offenders

To answer the first aim of the study on knowledge of sex offender characteristics, the researchers evaluated respondents' knowledge about sex offenders and their criminal behavior. The mean knowledge score among respondents was 4.4 (SD = 0.8) on a six-point scale. (Additional results are in Table 2.) A large majority of respondents correctly identified that offenders often have a pre-existing relationship with their victim and that most sex offenders are white males.

Additionally, almost 70 percent of respondents knew that most sex offenders are 35 or younger. When indicating whether sex offenders had other sexual or nonsexual offenses, respondents were divided. Incorrect answers occurred at higher rates for these two items (43.5 percent and 54.6 percent, respectively) than for other knowledge questions. When asked to estimate likelihood for sexual and nonsexual recidivism, respondents' answers indicated inaccurate perceptions. Risk for sexual recidivism was estimated at an average risk of 76.3 percent (SD = 19.3) and nonsexual recidivism at 49.3 percent (SD = 24.7). These estimates are grossly higher than those provided by empirical research. For example, a meta-analysis of 61 follow-up studies completed by Hanson and Bussière (1998) found an average recidivism rate of about 13.4 percent.

Table 2. Respondents' Knowledge of Sex Offender Characteristics and Behaviors

	% Correct	% Incorrect
Relationship between offender and victim	90.8	9.2
Sex of offender	86.3	13.7
Age of offender	69.7	30.3
Race of offender	93.8	6.2
Violent offense in criminal history	56.5	43.5
Nonsexual offense in criminal history	45.4	54.6

Next, the researchers examined the relationship between respondent characteristics and their knowledge scores. Results from the correlations are presented in Table 3. Findings show that a respondent's knowledge score was significantly related to race and political ideology. A small, negative association was found between race and knowledge score, indicating that respondents who were white had more accurate perceptions about sex offenders and their behaviors. Additionally, those who were more liberal tended to have higher knowledge scores.

Table 3. Correlations between Respondents' Knowledge and Characteristics

	Knowledge Score
Age	.05
Race (1 = nonwhite)	-.11***
Sex (1 = male)	-.00
Parental status (1 = parent)	-.02
Political ideology (higher = more conservative)	-.11***

Note: *** = $p < .001$

Finally, researchers investigated the relationship between respondent characteristics and their estimates of both sexual and nonsexual recidivism. Several characteristics were found to be significantly related to higher sexual recidivism estimates: being older, female, a parent and more conservative. Additionally, those who were nonwhite and more conservative were found to have higher nonsexual recidivism estimates. Results of the correlations are in Table 4.

Table 4. Correlations between Respondents' Characteristics and Evaluation of Risk to Recidivate in Sex Offenders

	Sexual Recidivism	Nonsexual Recidivism
Age	.14***	.03
Race (1 = nonwhite)	-.00	.13***
Sex (1 = male)	-.13***	-.02
Parental status (1 = parent)	.15***	.01
Political ideology (higher = more conservative)	.20***	.18***

Note: *** = $p < .001$

Perceptions of Sex Offender Policies

To answer our study's second aim – respondents' level of support for sex offender registries – community notification and residency restrictions support levels were measured. Overall, respondents indicated high levels of support for the three policies (see Figures 1, 2 and 3). Survey participants tended to agree that these policies offered several benefits to the public and law enforcement. A large majority of respondents believe that sex offender registries and community notification contribute to community safety ($M = 4.1, SD = 0.9$ and $M = 4.1, SD = 1.0$), help law enforcement ($M = 4.3, SD = 0.82$ and $M = 3.9, SD = 1.0$) and create a sense of safety within the community ($M = 4.0, SD = 1.0$ and $M = 3.9, SD = 1.0$). Of note is that respondents generally felt the same when responding to the questions about residency restrictions. The policy presented in the survey is not, however, the same residency restriction in place in Washington.

Respondents were divided when asked about unintended consequences for offenders, which may be associated with the policies (registration $M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.3$, community notification $M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.3$ and residency restrictions $M = 3.1$, $SD = 1.3$). Results show that only about half of respondents recognized that there may be collateral consequences for the policies mentioned.

Figure 1. Support for Sex Offender Registration

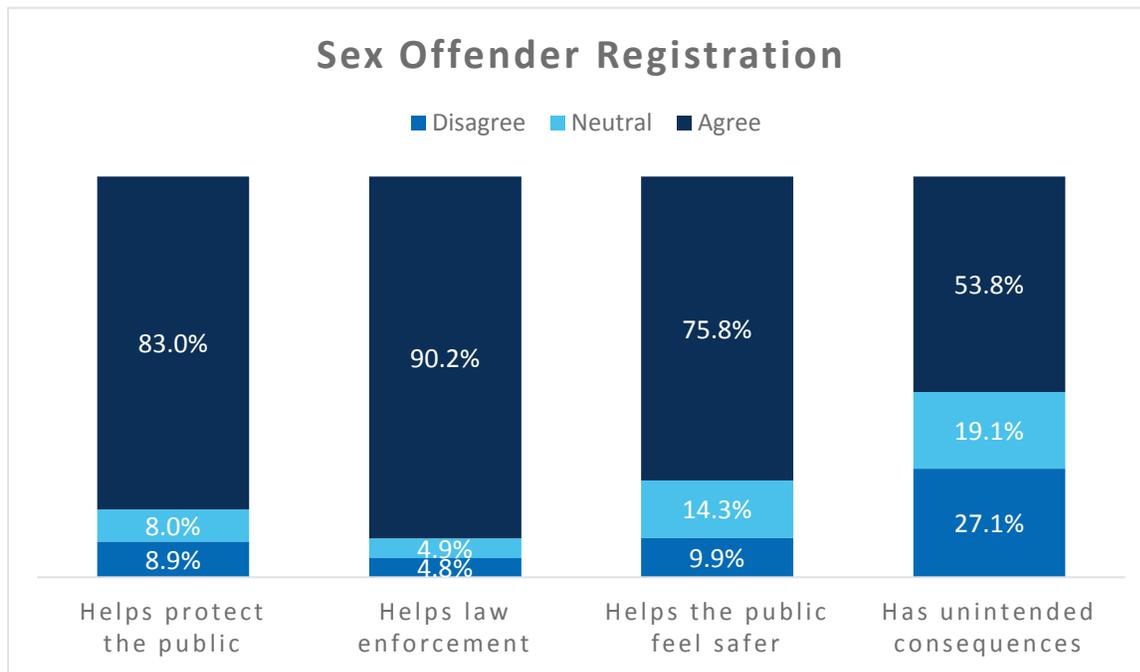


Figure 2. Support for Community Notification

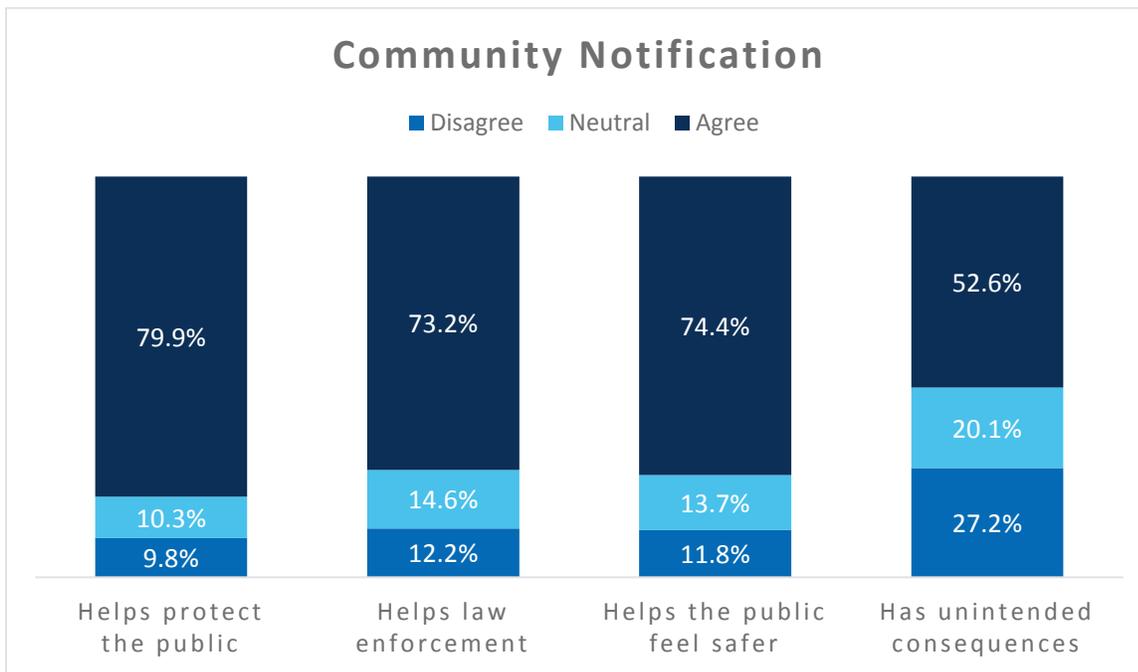
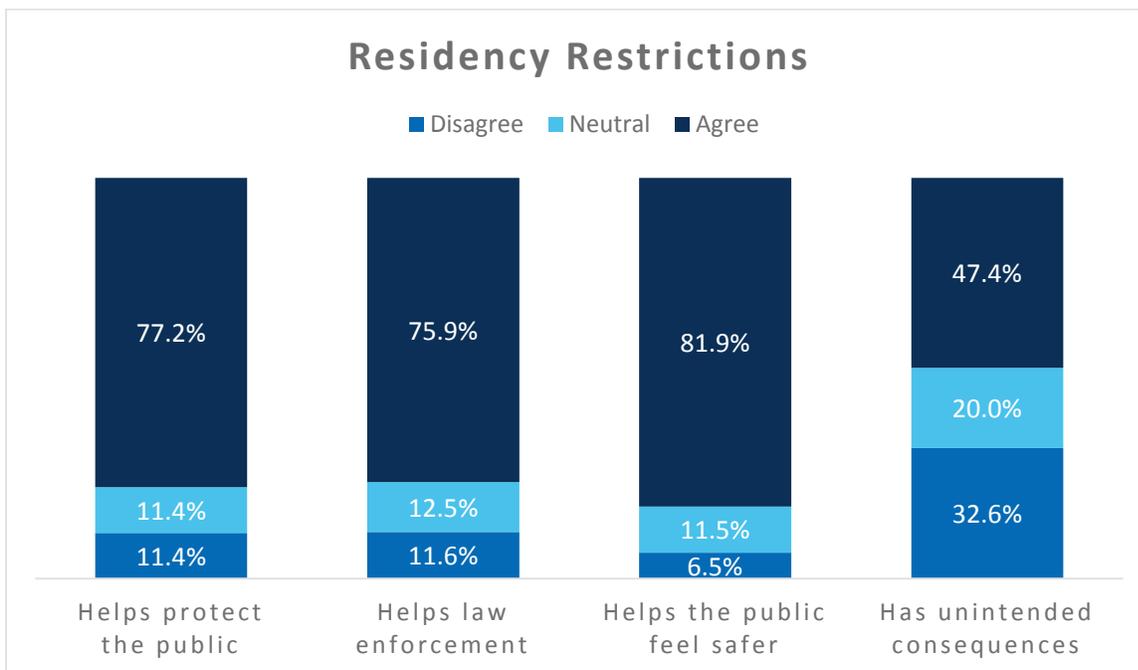


Figure 3. Support for Sex Offender Residency Restrictions



Furthermore, the relationship among respondent characteristics, public safety and collateral consequences were examined. Those who were older and female had high levels of agreement with items that supported sex offender policies. Conversely, those who were younger, male, not parents and more liberal tended to agree with statements that policies may have unintended consequences for offenders (Table 5). Though the factor analysis revealed two factors, there was a significant amount of overlap. Each of the associations was examined independently (Table 6). In short, respondents who agreed that the three policies help protect the public, help law enforcement and help instill a sense of safety in the community generally disagreed that these policies may come with unintended, negative consequences for offenders (Table 7).

Table 5. Relationships between Demographics and Policy Factors

Characteristic	Public Safety	Collateral Consequences
Age	.102**	-.095**
Gender	-.102***	.074*
White vs. nonwhite	.039	.005
Parental status	.056	-.122***
Knowledge score	-.068*	.110***
Political ideology	.112***	-.238***

Note: *= p< .05; **= p<.01; ***= p<.001

Table 6. Correlations between Respondent Characteristics and Support for Policies

	Age	Gender (1 = male)	Race (1 = nonwhite)	Parental Status (1 = parent)
Registration				
Helps protect the public	.07*	-.09**	-.00	.09**
Helps law enforcement	.04	-.06	-.02	-.02
Helps the public feel safer	-.01	-.04	-.00	.00
Has unintended consequences	-.12***	.07*	-.00	-.11
Community Notification				
Helps protect the public	.05	-.11***	.06*	.05
Helps law enforcement	.11***	-.08*	.04	.04
Helps the public feel safer	-.05	-.08*	.05	-.03
Has unintended consequences	-.10**	.08*	.00	-.12***
Residency Restrictions				
Helps protect the public	-.07*	-.11***	.03	.08**
Helps law enforcement	.17***	-.06	.05	.07*
Helps the public feel safer	.07*	-.06*	.04	.06
Has unintended consequences	-.12***	.05	-.01	-.15***

Note: * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$

Table 7. Correlation Analyses between Policy Support and Recognition of Collateral Consequences

Unintended Consequences

	Registration	Community Notification	Residency Restrictions
Registration			
Helps protect the public	-.30***		
Helps law enforcement	-.15***		
Helps the public feel safer	-.11**		
Community Notification			
Helps protect the public		-.36***	
Helps law enforcement		-.21***	
Helps the public feel safer		-.14***	
Residency Restrictions			
Helps protect the public			-.30***
Helps law enforcement			-.23***
Helps the public feel safer			-.11***

Note: ***= p < .001

Vignettes

Lastly, to address the third aim of our study, the researchers examined the influence of factors such as victim sex, offender sex and prior sexual crimes on respondents' attributions of cause, social distancing and perceptions of offender risk and amenability. Table 8 shows respondents' average scores on both child and adult vignettes. Overall, in both child and adult scenarios, three attributional items were selected more often: bad character, the way the offender was raised and a chemical imbalance. Additionally, social distancing scores were relatively low, indicating that respondents were unwilling to be in contact with sex offenders. With regard to sanctions, these items generally received higher scores, reinforcing the belief that the public sees these crimes as being serious. Furthermore, respondents endorsed sex offender registration, community notification and residency restrictions for offenders with both child and adult victims. Finally, respondents indicated that the most probable form of recidivism for offenders would be sexual.

Table 8. Paired t-test: Comparison of Respondents' Mean Responses on Child and Adult Vignettes

	Child Vignette M (SD)	Adult Vignette M (SD)	t-value
Attributions			
Bad Character	3.76 (1.07)	3.74 (1.06)	0.92*
Chemical Imbalance	2.75 (1.05)	2.68 (1.04)	2.94
Rearing	3.17 (1.07)	3.13 (1.06)	1.52
Stressful Life	2.56 (1.17)	2.57 (1.12)	-0.43
Genetics/Inherited Traits	2.54 (1.11)	2.51 (1.12)	1.43
God's Will	1.33 (0.77)	1.34 (0.77)	-0.38
Social Distancing			
Live Next Door	2.19 (1.16)	2.35 (1.18)	4.94***
Socialize	2.03 (1.10)	2.21 (1.14)	6.11***
Friendship	1.94 (1.06)	2.10 (1.10)	5.48***
Work Closely	2.15 (1.13)	2.29 (1.16)	4.88***
Marry into Family	1.53 (0.86)	1.68 (0.94)	5.96***
Sanctions			
Serious Offense	4.61 (0.72)	4.34 (0.90)	10.04***
Serious Punishment	4.37 (0.84)	4.09 (1.01)	9.35***
Local Registry	4.40 (0.87)	4.17 (1.02)	8.06***
National Registry	4.33 (0.95)	4.07 (1.09)	8.35***
Community Notification	4.27 (1.01)	4.04 (1.13)	7.62***
Residency Restrictions	4.26 (1.04)	3.70 (1.30)	14.44***
Treatment Requirement	4.56 (0.77)	4.32 (0.89)	7.56***
Risk and Amenability			
New Sexual Offense	3.92 (0.89)	3.74 (0.94)	5.93***
New Nonsexual Offense	3.01 (0.89)	2.93 (0.90)	3.40***
Physical Violence	3.11 (0.93)	3.10 (0.93)	0.14
Successful Rehabilitation	2.93 (1.03)	3.08 (1.03)	-.07***
Will Never Offend Again	2.37 (0.96)	2.50 (0.96)	-3.88***

Note: *= p< .05; **= p<.01; ***= p<.001

Effects of Victim Age on Responses

The final column of Table 8 reports t-values, which identify statistically significant differences in participant responses between adult and child victim vignettes. Overall, vignettes with a child victim were deemed worse and more serious than similar offenses with an adult victim.

Significant differences were seen in social distancing, sanctions, and risk and amenability. In regard to social distancing, respondents were less interested in having contact with the offender when the victim was a child. Furthermore, respondents indicated that offenses with a child victim were more serious and deserving of harsher sanctions, including registration, community

notification and residency restrictions. Lastly, those who offended against children were more likely to be seen as high risk for both sexual and nonsexual recidivism, less amenable to treatment and less likely to never offend again when compared to offenders with adult victims.

Effects of Offender Sex on Responses

Table 9 shows results from the analyses between vignettes that manipulated offender sex. There were several significant differences between female and male offenders for both adult and child scenarios. In vignettes in which the offender had a child victim, respondents were more likely to attribute the behavior to stressful life circumstances and God's will when the offender was female. Moreover, respondents were generally more willing to associate with female offenders than male, though these averages were still relatively low. Respondents were also more likely to believe the offense was serious and deserving of serious punishment when the offender was male and were more supportive of community notification for male offenders. Finally, male offenders were seen as being higher risk for both sexual and nonsexual recidivism, for future physical violence and less amenable to treatment.

In vignettes where the victim was an adult, respondents were again more willing to associate with the offender on various levels when the offender was female. Additionally, male offenders were seen as having committed a more serious offense and deserving of harsher punishment. Respondents were more likely to endorse registration at both the local and national level as well as community notification for male offenders. Lastly, male offenders were again seen as being higher risk for both sexual and nonsexual recidivism and for future physical violence, while female offenders were seen as more amenable to treatment.

Table 9. Independent t-test: Comparison of Mean Responses with the Manipulation of Offender Sex

	Child Vignette			Adult Vignette		
	Male	Female	<i>t</i> -value	Male	Female	<i>t</i> -value
	Offender	Offender		Offender	Offender	
<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)		<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)		
Attributions						
Bad Character	3.82 (1.10)	3.70 (1.36)	-1.68	3.76 (1.08)	3.71 (1.05)	-0.64
Chemical Imbalance	2.75 (1.03)	2.76 (1.07)	0.07	2.71 (1.02)	2.65 (1.06)	-0.97
Rearing	3.11 (1.06)	3.23 (1.09)	1.62	3.11 (1.04)	3.16 (1.07)	0.77
Stressful Life	2.46 (1.17)	2.66 (1.17)	2.70**	2.55 (1.10)	2.59 (1.15)	0.56
Genetics/Traits	2.56 (1.12)	2.52 (1.11)	-0.55	2.52 (1.10)	2.50 (1.14)	-0.29
God's Will	1.30 (0.69)	1.36 (0.84)	1.49***	1.32 (0.76)	1.35 (0.77)	0.58
Social Distancing						
Live Next Door	1.99 (1.11)	2.38 (1.19)	5.35***	2.18 (1.16)	2.53 (1.17)	4.77***
Socialize	1.88 (1.05)	2.17 (1.13)	4.23***	2.04 (1.09)	2.39 (1.16)	4.87***
Friendship	1.80 (0.98)	2.09 (1.10)	4.35***	1.93 (1.04)	2.27 (1.15)	4.81***
Work Closely	2.01 (1.10)	2.28 (1.15)	3.69***	2.17 (1.12)	2.42 (1.18)	3.38***
Marry into Family	1.44 (0.81)	1.62 (0.89)	3.34***	1.56 (0.89)	1.81 (0.98)	4.09***
Sanctions						
Serious Offense	4.68 (0.65)	4.54 (0.75)	-3.22**	4.51 (0.74)	4.16 (1.01)	-6.18***
Serious Punishment	4.47 (0.78)	4.27 (0.90)	-3.75***	4.25 (0.92)	3.92 (1.09)	-5.11***
Local Registry	4.43 (0.90)	4.37 (0.85)	-1.07	4.26 (0.98)	4.08 (1.05)	-2.85**
National Registry	4.39 (0.94)	4.28 (0.97)	-1.93	4.17 (1.05)	3.97 (1.12)	-2.97***
Community Notification	4.34 (1.00)	4.20 (1.01)	-2.24*	4.16 (1.08)	3.91 (1.17)	-3.50***
Residency Restrictions	4.32 (1.03)	4.20 (1.05)	-1.85	3.73 (1.31)	3.66 (1.29)	-0.87
Treatment Requirement	4.59 (0.77)	4.52 (0.78)	-1.39	4.42 (0.87)	4.32 (0.90)	-1.64
Risk and Amenability						
New Sexual Offense	4.01 (0.89)	3.84 (0.88)	-3.10**	3.82 (0.96)	3.66 (0.90)	-2.82**
New Nonsexual Offense	3.11 (0.87)	2.92 (0.91)	-3.42***	3.00 (0.92)	2.87 (0.88)	-2.30*
Physical Violence	3.23 (0.89)	2.99 (0.95)	-4.12***	3.22 (0.94)	2.97 (0.91)	-4.33***
Successful Rehabilitation	2.79 (1.05)	3.06 (0.99)	4.09***	3.00 (1.08)	3.16 (0.96)	2.52*
Will Never Offend Again	2.29 (0.96)	2.45 (0.96)	2.62**	2.43 (1.01)	2.57 (0.90)	2.39*

Note: * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$

Effects of Victim Sex on Responses

Fewer significant findings were seen upon manipulation of victim sex. Table 10 shows results of these analyses. For those offenders with child victims, there was only one significant difference between male and female victims. This would indicate that overall, respondents found sexual crimes against children to be serious regardless of gender. The one significant finding was for offenders with male victims, who were seen as more likely to engage in future physical violence than those with female victims.

For offenders with adult victims, there were several significant differences between those with male and female victims. First, respondents were more likely to attribute the sexually deviant behavior to how the offender was raised when the victim was female. For social distancing, respondents were more willing to engage with an offender who had a male victim, though these scores were overall relatively low. Finally, respondents indicated that the offense was more serious and deserving of harsher sanctions when the victim was female. In this case, respondents also were more likely to endorse national registration and community notification.

Effects of Prior Sexual Criminal History on Responses

Respondent responses on vignettes that depicted an offender with no prior sex crimes were compared to those with prior sex crimes. Results of the comparative analyses are in Table 11. Results were very similar between vignettes with child and with adult victims. Respondents were more likely to attribute the behavior to the offender's own bad character when they had prior sex crimes. Respondents were more willing to engage with the offender socially if they had no prior sex crimes (in both adult and child vignettes). Furthermore, the offense was seen as more serious, deserving of harsher sanctions (including the endorsement of registration, community notification and residency restrictions) when the offender had a prior sex crime. Finally, those offenders with a prior sex crime were seen as more likely to recidivate both sexually and nonsexually and less amenable to treatment.

Table 10. Independent t-test: Comparison of Mean Responses with the Manipulation of Victim Sex

	Child Vignette			Adult Vignette		
	Male	Female	<i>t</i> -value	Male	Female	<i>t</i> -value
	Victim	Victim		Victim	Victim	
	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)		<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	
Attributions						
Bad Character	3.78 (1.04)	3.75 (1.09)	-0.53	3.78 (1.07)	3.70 (1.06)	-1.17
Chemical Imbalance	2.76 (1.05)	2.75 (1.05)	-0.08	2.66 (1.06)	2.70 (1.03)	0.55
Rearing	3.21 (1.08)	3.13 (1.07)	-1.25	3.05 (1.09)	3.21 (1.02)	2.43*
Stressful Life	2.59 (1.21)	2.53 (1.13)	-0.75	2.59 (1.11)	2.55 (1.13)	-0.59
Genetics/Traits	2.56 (1.11)	2.52 (1.12)	-0.54	2.48 (1.14)	2.54 (1.10)	0.83
God's Will	1.30 (0.75)	1.36 (0.78)	1.07	1.34 (0.76)	1.34 (0.78)	-0.03
Social Distancing						
Live Next Door	2.17 (1.18)	2.20 (1.14)	0.31	2.40 (1.20)	2.30 (1.16)	-1.29
Socialize	1.99 (1.09)	2.06 (1.11)	1.13	2.29 (1.15)	2.13 (1.11)	-2.24*
Friendship	1.90 (1.02)	1.99 (1.09)	1.27	2.19 (1.12)	2.01 (1.08)	-2.54*
Work Closely	2.12 (1.13)	2.17 (1.13)	0.80	2.40 (1.16)	2.18 (1.15)	-2.98**
Marry into Family	1.50 (0.82)	1.57 (0.89)	1.27	1.74 (0.97)	1.62 (0.92)	-2.08*
Sanctions						
Serious Offense	4.62 (0.71)	4.61 (0.69)	-0.30	4.27 (0.95)	4.41 (0.84)	2.44*
Serious Punishment	4.40 (0.82)	4.34 (0.86)	-1.15	4.02 (1.05)	4.16 (0.97)	2.15*
Local Registry	4.42 (0.85)	4.38 (0.89)	-0.85	4.11 (1.05)	4.23 (0.99)	1.80
National Registry	4.37 (0.93)	4.30 (0.98)	-1.22	4.00 (1.10)	4.15 (1.07)	2.19*
Community Notification	4.30 (0.98)	4.24 (1.04)	-0.96	3.95 (1.18)	4.13 (1.07)	2.49*
Residency Restrictions	4.27 (1.01)	4.25 (1.07)	-0.36	3.66 (1.32)	3.73 (1.29)	0.82*
Treatment Requirement	4.56 (0.76)	4.55 (0.79)	-0.36	4.33 (0.92)	4.41 (0.85)	1.45
Risk and Amenability						
New Sexual Offense	3.95 (0.90)	3.90 (0.88)	-0.89	3.71 (0.99)	3.78 (0.88)	1.21
New Nonsexual Offense	3.07 (0.92)	2.96 (0.87)	-1.93	2.93 (0.91)	2.94 (0.90)	0.00
Physical Violence	3.17 (0.93)	3.05 (0.92)	-2.11*	3.08 (0.99)	3.13 (0.88)	0.83
Successful Rehabilitation	2.91 (1.05)	2.95 (1.01)	0.61	3.09 (1.06)	3.06 (1.01)	-0.56
Will Never Offend Again	2.37 (0.98)	2.38 (0.95)	0.19	2.51 (0.99)	2.48 (0.94)	-0.44

Note: * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$

Table 11. Independent t-test: Comparison of Mean Responses with the Manipulation of Criminal History

	Child Vignette			Adult Vignette		
	Prior Sex Crimes M (SD)	No Prior Sex Crimes M (SD)	t-value	Prior Sex Crimes M (SD)	No Prior Sex Crimes M (SD)	t-value
Attributions						
Bad Character	3.85 (1.05)	3.67 (1.08)	-2.69**	3.86 (1.06)	3.61 (1.06)	-3.73***
Chemical Imbalance	2.80 (1.08)	2.70 (1.02)	-1.60	2.72 (1.06)	2.64 (1.02)	-1.29
Rearing	3.21 (1.10)	3.13 (1.04)	-1.25	3.17 (1.04)	3.10 (1.03)	-1.03
Stressful Life	2.55 (1.19)	2.57 (1.16)	0.24	2.51 (1.14)	2.63 (1.09)	1.81
Genetics/Traits	2.60 (1.12)	2.48 (1.10)	-1.69	2.50 (1.12)	2.52 (1.12)	0.21
God's Will	1.34 (0.79)	1.32 (0.74)	-0.54	1.32 (0.73)	1.36 (0.80)	0.85
Social Distancing						
Live Next Door	2.02 (1.10)	2.35 (1.20)	4.47***	2.13 (1.13)	2.58 (1.15)	6.13***
Socialize	1.89 (1.06)	2.17 (1.12)	4.05***	1.99 (1.08)	2.44 (1.15)	6.41***
Friendship	1.80 (0.98)	2.09 (1.11)	4.45***	1.86 (1.03)	2.33 (1.13)	6.78***
Work Closely	1.99 (1.08)	2.30 (1.16)	4.47***	2.09 (1.12)	2.49 (1.16)	5.59***
Marry into Family	1.42 (0.78)	1.65 (0.91)	4.30***	1.52 (0.83)	1.84 (1.02)	5.53***
Sanctions						
Serious Offense	4.69 (0.62)	4.53 (0.77)	-3.67***	4.50 (0.78)	4.19 (0.97)	-5.57***
Serious Punishment	4.46 (0.75)	4.28 (0.92)	-3.41***	4.22 (0.95)	3.96 (1.06)	-4.02***
Local Registry	4.52 (0.81)	4.28 (0.92)	-4.36***	4.33 (0.92)	4.01 (1.09)	-4.99***
National Registry	4.46 (0.86)	4.20 (1.05)	-4.35**	4.26 (1.00)	3.89 (1.14)	-5.42***
Community Notification	4.37 (0.93)	4.17 (1.07)	-3.14**	4.19 (1.05)	3.89 (1.18)	-4.27***
Residency Restrictions	4.36 (0.97)	4.15 (1.10)	-3.21**	3.89 (1.26)	3.50 (1.32)	-4.85***
Treatment Requirement	4.62 (0.74)	4.50 (0.80)	-2.44*	4.48 (0.82)	4.27 (0.94)	-3.77***
Risk and Amenability						
New Sexual Offense	4.19 (0.80)	3.66 (0.90)	-9.73***	4.03 (0.84)	3.45 (0.94)	-10.26***
New Nonsexual Offense	3.12 (0.91)	2.91 (0.86)	-3.63***	3.10 (0.87)	2.77 (0.90)	-5.97***
Physical Violence	3.23 (0.93)	2.98 (0.90)	-4.30***	3.29 (0.91)	2.91 (0.92)	-6.63***
Successful Rehabilitation	2.78 (1.01)	3.07 (1.03)	4.45***	2.85 (1.03)	3.30 (0.98)	7.02*
Will Never Offend Again	2.19 (0.97)	2.56 (0.92)	6.08***	2.26 (0.98)	2.73 (0.88)	8.00***

Note: * = p < .05; ** = p < .01; *** = p < .001

Conclusion

Washington state requires all people convicted of a sex or kidnapping offense to register with local law enforcement. Those determined to present moderate or high risk to the community at large³ are subjected to community notification procedures when they return to the community. As Washington is not in substantial compliance with SORNA, and implementation of SORNA and its policies would lead to a large overhaul of current registration and notification procedures, a survey was conducted on Washington residents to determine what factors may be driving support for policies in place.

The results of this survey indicated there are large opportunities for education, especially when considering sex offender recidivism. While many respondents were knowledgeable about sex offender characteristics, they were less accurate when asked to identify risk for sexual and nonsexual recidivism. Findings indicated that potential for sexual recidivism was grossly overestimated by participants. With respect to policy, respondents reported several advantages to the policies now in place in Washington (registration and community notification). Analyses also found respondents support residency restrictions that are more comprehensive than those found in Washington. In Washington, some jurisdictions have ordinances or provisions that have been grandfathered in. Notably, those who support these policies were less likely to agree they may lead to collateral consequences for offenders.

Additionally, vignette analyses revealed higher levels of culpability associated with offenders who were male, those who had child victims, those with prior sex crimes and those with adult female victims. No differences in offender blameworthiness were observed between child victim genders. Gender differences were present in perceptions of sex offenses against adult victims; it appears that offenses against adult males were discounted when compared to those against adult females. It is possible that this could be attributed to gender stereotypes, in which blame and/or a different standard of power differential is applied to male victims, though more research is needed. Finally, offenders with prior sex crimes were seen as more dangerous, indicating that the public may see first-time offenders as more amenable to treatment.

In summary, while there is mounting evidence from several empirical studies that suggests these three policies – offender registration, community notification and residence restrictions – are ineffective, they continue to be popular with the public (Zevitz & Farkas, 2000; Zandbergen & Hart, 2006; Schram & Milloy, 1995; Duwe, Donnay & Tewksbury, 2008; Freeman & Sandler, 2010; Beck & Travis III, 2004). The disconnect between actual and perceived risk of sex offenders may hinder the ability of convicted sex offenders to successfully reintegrate in the community while also making it difficult for states and the federal government to change policies that are in place but have been demonstrated to have limited efficacy.

It is important that Washington take this opportunity to provide the public with accurate information about sex offenders and their offenses while simultaneously recognizing the harm of their offenses. Three areas for further education are:

³ RCW 4.24.550(6)(b)

- Information on criminal careers of sex offenders and their recidivism rates (for sexual and nonsexual offenses).
- Education on the ineffectiveness of policies such as registration, community notification and residency restrictions, in addition to the collateral consequences they create.
- Information on forms of abuse, red flags for abuse and available resources. While respondents were quite knowledgeable about offender characteristics, including recognizing that offenders often know their victim and are white males, some had less accurate responses for other items.

Finally, survey results also identified demographic characteristics of members of the public who are more likely to have correct knowledge of sex offenders (white and more liberal), those who have higher levels of support for sex offender policies (older, female and parents) and those who fail to recognize the unintended consequences association with these policies (older, a parent and more conservative). It is suggested that educational efforts should be made that target individual group needs. In addition, policy changes should be made with these results in mind.

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